

Aribam Syam Sharma: Recounting the literary history of Manipuri Cinema



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Cinema from the North East has mostly remained on the margins of Indian Cinema. As the most misunderstood region of India, it has always been on the country's consciousness. With a rich 81-year old history of cinema, the region consists of some internationally feted filmmakers like Jahnu Barua and Aribam Syam Sharma ... (Fragrances from the North East, 2016, p.3).

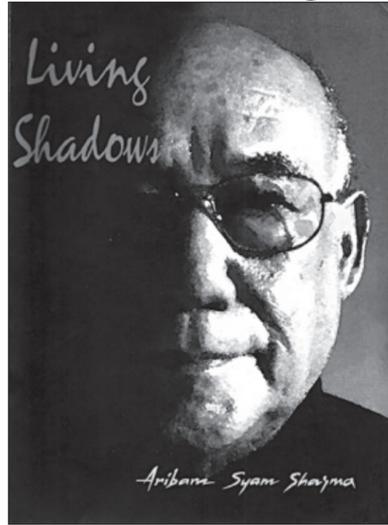
Perhaps, it is in reply to this general conception of neglect through the years that Aribam Syam Sharma has inked two literary works on his experiences with Manipuri cinema since 1972 up to the present times. Best described as memoirs reflecting personal recollections on his association with films and film personalities in Manipur, Syam Sharma through his books had bridged a large gap in information that was missing in all of these years. Assamese cinema took root with the production of Joymati in 1935, and Matmagi Manipur (1972) literally heralded the birth of Manipuri cinema. Whereas, the stories on the pains and gains of producing films in a non-descript state like Manipur, which practically had nothing much to work on with producing films during the 1970s, was largely not told.

Syam Sharma's literary piece

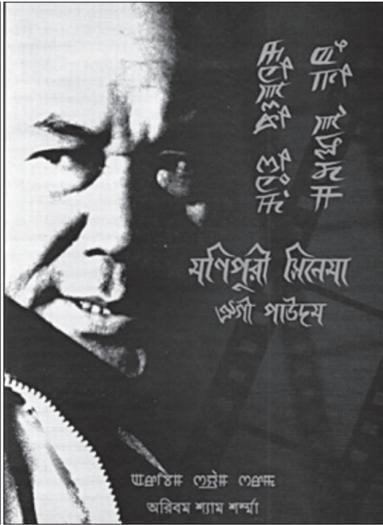
es, "Living Shadows (2006)" and "Manipuri Cinema: Eigi Paadam (2016)" bring back to us those early days in the 1970s and the 1980s in which a few committed film enthusiasts strove against odds to make films. With the minimum available technical support and painstakingly going through the paces without professionals and less of required budget, it was a miracle that a "technically unsound" film like Imagi Ningthem went on to win the prestigious Grand Prix award at one of the most important international film festivals in the world.

Reminiscing his personal associations with various film personalities – producers, directors, actors, and singers, Syam Sharma through his narrative reproduces a literary account of the processes that underwent into moulding Manipuri cinema as we know today. In other words, Sharma's literary pieces are very much integral to documenting the history of Manipuri cinema during these past forty five years. The majority of the Manipuri films, both feature and non-feature, that had received recognition at national and international levels during 1974 up to 2012 have been largely contributed by Aribam Syam Sharma. It, therefore, is understandable that a literary account of his experiences in films during this period is synonymous as scripting a literary history of Manipuri cinema, narrated in the first person by an individual who has been at the centre piece of the story.

Aribam Syam Sharma is one



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Aribam Syam Sharma

of the best known filmmakers from the region in the national context. Excelling in various genres of films – feature, short feature and documentary, Syam Sharma is considered one of the masters in documentary filmmaking in India. National award winning film critic Meghachandra Kongbam writes, "His (Aribam Syam Sharma's) films fabricates with social traditions and cultural practices ranging from ancient to modern times ... His searches for the aesthetic values of every object to understand it thoroughly are reflected in his films. Interlacing

the aesthetics into a story or a subject, he makes remarkable films [Cinema North East, p.31]".

Between winning the Grand Prix at Nantes for Imagi Ningthem in 1982, and showcasing Ishanou at Cannes in 1991, Syam Sharma had established firm footing as one of the masters in filmmaking in India. His class in feature films had also been equally proven in non-features, with national award winning documentaries like Deer on the Lake (1989), Indigenous Games of Manipur (1990), Meitei Pung (1991), Orchids of Manipur (1994), Yel-

hou Jagoi (1995), The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh (2001), Guru Laimayum Thambalngoubi (2006) and Manipur Pony (2012) establishing his forte and calibre in this genre of film. Many of his films were showcased in international film festivals. Koro Kosii (1988) participated at IFFI Calcutta and at the Indian Film Week, Hungary. Lai Haraoba (1991) was selected for the Indian Panorama section of IFFI 1992. Orchids of Manipur participated at IFFI 1995 and at the International Wildlife Film Festival, Morocco (1996). Yelhou Jagoi was the opening film at the

Indian Panorama section of IFFI 1996.

For his significant contribution to films, Aribam Syam Sharma was honoured with Dr. V. Shantaram Lifetime Achievement Award by the Government of India at the tenth edition of Mumbai International Film Festival in 2008. Syam Sharma was also honoured with MFDC Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010 for his singular contribution to Manipuri Cinema.

Ever concerned with the promotion and growth of Manipuri Cinema, Syam Sharma does not mince his words when he says, "... I assert that regionalism in Cinema is relevant more than ever before. The possibilities that it provides are limitless compared to the disadvantages we face. I believe that the fountainhead of customs and social heritage would provide each of us inspirations for individual and original cinematic expressions, and hope that the future would bring a glorious era of cinema for the Northeastern region" (Manipuri Cinema: Eigi Paadam, p.246).

Syam Sharma's concerns and hopes for a vigorous projection of the ethnicity and the cultural values of the people of this region though films amply finds reflection in what film critic Derek Malcolm commented after watching Imagi Ningthem, "... My Son, My Precious seemed to me to mean something quite apart from its technical deficiencies and the exigencies of its simple plot line ... it was about real people and not invented people. About India and not about some East-West

land in-between. It expressed something true and honourable and exciting, for all its faults. And its very differences from the films of the West were what helped to make it fascinating to me" (Living Shadows, p.87).

The pains, and the disappointments, are there too in his books, reflecting the anguish of a filmmaker from a forsaken region, more often than not sidelined by mainstream bureaucracy and the domineering mainstream film industry. In Living Shadows (p.67), Syam Sharma recounts how he was criticized without rhyme or reason by the mainstream film industry for deviating from the trodden path. For instance, in 1997 as Chairman of Jury for the Indian Panorama, Syam Sharma was under fire for selecting only 11 films out of the allotted quota of 21 films, for the reason that the other (mainstream) films did not merit selection.

Reflecting upon himself, and hinting at the sad conditions in Manipur in the present times, Syam Sharma writes, "My films have given me much pleasure as well as pain in the same way my life gave me both; in equal measure... It gave me pleasure when I participated in the making of the first Manipuri feature film Matmagi Manipur and when my film Olangthagee Wangmadasoo became the longest running film in Manipur, but it gives me immense pain in the realisation that there are no cinema halls in Manipur today to screen Imagi Ningthem to commemorate its silver jubilee" (Living Shadows, p.7).

Quote of the day

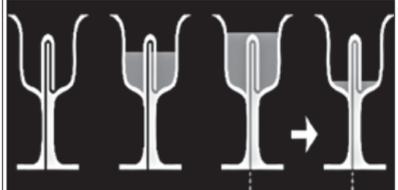
Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that give value to survival.

– C. S. Lewis

☞ If your hair is straw-like, cannot be combed, and won't lie flat, you may have 'uncombable hair syndrome.' Also called 'spun-glass hair', it's a rare hair shaft disorder that causes dry, shiny, and extremely frizzy hair. When examining strands under a microscope, straight hairs are round and curly hairs are round and curly hairs are oblique, but uncombable hairs are heart shaped or triangular.



☞ The Pythagorean cup was designed around 500 BCE to make sure dinner guests weren't drinking too much of your wine. If you pour too much liquid into the cup, it overflows a tiny pipe in the middle column and then spills out the bottom—all over your lap.



☞ The Adulthood School in Portland, ME, has workshops that teach millennials how to do grown-up things. Courses cover subjects like cooking, money tips, time management, and networking. The idea was inspired by the growing number of #adulthood social media posts, where people share moments when they either behaved like an adult, or failed trying.



☞ The Yeomen Warders are the ceremonial guardians of the Tower of London. The reason why we call them 'Beefeaters' hasn't been formally defined, but it's most like because, centuries ago, part of their daily payment was sizeable chunk of beef.



The secrets of Dampa Tiger Reserve

RAHUL ASHEM

Contd... from previous issue

Tourism is carried out in Saithah and Serhumh beats of Teirei and Phuldungsei range of Dampa Wildlife Sanctuary. The area and routes approaching and connecting these areas have been taken as the prime focus areas for the promotion of ecological tourism in this area. The main objective for the ecological tourism and development is to educate the visitors about the significance of conservation of nature and wildlife and to generate awareness and sensitivity about these issues among the general populace. The size of tourism zone is restricted to a common range so that maximum areas are occupied by wildlife for their living and prevent conflict between humans and tigers. Dampa tiger reserve has the potential to serve as the wildlife destination for ecological tourism and visitors of the region as well as visitors from other areas, including the foreign visitors.



Besides the highly endangered Bengal tiger, the reserve also harbors a wide range of faunal species some of which figure prominently in the IUCN Red List. The list includes Malayan sun bear (Helarctos malayanus), Asiatic black bear (Ursus schlegelii), Chinese ferret badger (Melogale personata), Hog badger (Arctonyx collaris), Small clawed otter (Amblonyx cinerius), Yellow throated marten (Martes flavigula), Large

Indian civet (Viverra zibetha), Small Indian civet (Viverricula indica), Himalayan palm civet (Paguma larvata), Spotted linsang (Prionodon pardicolor), Binturong ((Arctictes binturong), Crab eating mongoose ((Herpestes urva), Chinese pangolin (Manis pentadactyla), Himalayan crested porcupine (Hystrix brachyurus), Brush tailed porcupine (Atherurus macrourus), Malayan giant squirrel (Ratufa bicolor) and

Red flying squirrel (Petaurista petaurista) Dholes or wild dogs (Cuon alpinus) and jackal (Canis aureus) form a major part in maintaining the ecosystem services in dampa tiger reserve.

The addition of Thorang Wildlife Sanctuary present in Lengtui district on the southern side of Phuldungsei range has been approved for inclusion inside the Dampa Wildlife Sanctuary. Thorang wildlife sanctuary is the second largest Wildlife Sanctuary in Mizoram covering an area of 198 sq kms with maximum number of floral and faunal diversity including large feline like tigers and leopard.

Dampa's 500 sq kms core is completely inviolate and this is one of the park's key strength offering great potential for long term conservation of its wildlife.

Concluded

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The Anal tribe is neither old Kuki or new Kuki-A review

L. WOLRING

Let this white paper set my people free—Job said, But ye are the forgers of lies – Job 13:4.

Jesus said, And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free – John 8:32.

God said, For he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye – Zechariah 2:8.

Introduction of ethnic identity politics in Manipur

The ethnic identity has become a central issue in Manipur influenced by the politicization of ethnic identity. This identity politics has deeply weakened the earlier inter-ethnic relations. The past decade of 1990s has witnessed the outbreak of ethnic violence between different ethnic communities. It is now conflict between the different ethnic communities themselves. Such recent ethnic clashes include the Kuki-Naga Conflict (1992-97), Meitei-Pangal conflict (1993) and Kuki-Paite conflict (1997-98). The issue of identity is very much complicated and complex phenomenon which needs a deeper understanding and careful analysis because such conflict has led to large-scale displacement and impoverishment resulting to loss of many precious lives. Many cases of severe injuries and burning down of houses have been frequent occurrences despite condemnation and appeals from all angles to end fratricidal war or ethnic conflict after its eruption.

Some hope of peace prevailed only after reconciliation effort of several civil organizations and church bodies. This diabolic ethnic violence divides multi-communities in Manipur to the context of recent trends influenced by the migration, identity and conflict. Now the identity of territory or land movement and autonomy demands have been one of the features of Manipur politics and today we all have witnessed the outrageous political drama in Manipur. Many

scholars have interpreted Manipur State as Sana Leibak (golden land) but today the state is witnessing incessant armed conflicts and is a victim of increasing insurgent groups armed by the rebels from the neighbouring countries. There is no sign of ending to the existence of these ethnic clashes in near future. It is a remarkable fulfillment of Biblical prophecy as foretold more than 2500 years ago by Daniel, the prophet who revealed the forgotten dream of King Nebuchadnezzar about symbolic image that the mixture of iron and clay in the feet and toes was explained as the divided nations and people. The people shall not cleave to one another even as iron is not mixed with the clay. God's hand in world politics including ethnic identity politics is revealed in Manipur State and the recent result of USA election based on racial and immigrants. God forbids! USA is heading towards divided States of America (DSA) like divided USSR.

Manipur is comparatively a small state located in the eastern most part of India covering an area of 22,327 sq km, out of which 2238 sq km constitutes the valley inhabited by Meiteis and Pangals and 20,089 sq km covered the hills inhabited by 33 different tribal communities categorized as Nagas and Kuki-Chin. The Manipur state is indeed a good example of unity in diversity in the past but now it is disgracefully divided by the conflicts of ethnic identity, ethnic politics, autonomy and identity of territory or land. The land which they inhabited is the root of their identities and the main reason and cause of the perpetual conflict. The Nagas considered their lands as gifts of God for livelihood as much as legacy of their identity. Thus, any encroachment or alienation of Naga ancestral or traditional land in any form is viewed as very serious and a threat to their livelihood and identity.

Influx of Kukis into Manipur was a planned infiltration

In fact, there was no major

problem witnessed in Manipur including Chandel District formerly known as Tengnoupal District during the pre-colonial period till 1830s. The successive Maharajas of Manipur and Chiefs of the hills honoured their demarcated traditional boundaries of land. Administratively, their minor confrontations occurred sometimes for the sake of law and order problem and not for land. They co-exist peacefully. However, with the increasing immigration of the Kukis in the Naga Hills of Manipur beginning from 1840s, the conflicts gradually drifted towards land. The accommodative arrangement made by the British political agents and administrators with the permission of Maharaja Nara Singh for the Kukis as tenants in the Naga hills of Manipur has now been willfully diverged into a demand for a Kuki homeland or Kuki nation proposed as Zalen-Gam within Naga hills of Manipur spear headed by the Kuki State Demand Committee (KSDC). Consequently, the identity of the Kukis and their assertion as an indigenous community has now come to the fore in question and become a central burning issue of every day in Manipur ethnic politics which has created the unwanted chapters of the Manipur history to cope with. It has been declared by the International Meitei Forum (IMF) – a rejoinder to Kuki Research Forum (KRF) dated 4/6/2015 point no. 2 & 4.2 published by the Sangai Express stated that, Many historians did not agree that Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Koirao, Koirang, Kom, Lamkang, etc. are Kukis. They were never known as Kukis and also they themselves never agree to be Kuki. Anal and Chiru are furious if they are called Kuki. It is sinister aim of Kuki Nation in the making, that they wanted to amalgamate many non-Kuki tribes as Kukis imitating the Naga Nation in the making, whereas the Nagas are indigenous people of Manipur and surrounding areas like Meiteis and "Kukis are tribals of other

countries like Myanmar (Burma) Arakan, Bangladesh, etc. They settle in Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and other areas of North East as they did in Manipur. They have been nomadic and immigrants who have been creating problems at the place where they have taken shelter". This is the verdict/judgment of the third person like an arbitrator.

There are many documentary evidences or proofs or records maintained by the eminent British Scholars, administrators and historians that the Kukis migrated mostly from the Chittagong Hill tracts of Burma (Myanmar). The signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo on February 24, 1826 between the British Manipur administration and Burma paved the way for remarkable influx of the Kukis in Manipur. "A short history of Manipur" by Rk. Jhalajit Singh stated that during the reign of Nara Singh, the then Maharaja of Manipur (1844 to 1850) permitted the Kuki refugees to settle first at Moirang in Manipur by entrusting their rehabilitation into the hands of Colonel MC Culloch, the then British Political Agent in Manipur. Maj. Gen. James Johnstone (1877-86), the then Political Agent of Manipur in his book "Manipur Naga Hills" page 26 clearly wrote about Colonel MC Culloch's policy of planting Kuki settlement in Manipur. Further, he also clarified about Kuki as nomadic by nature that "The Kukis are wandering race consisting of several tribes who have long been walking up from the south. They were first heard of as Kukis in Manipur between 1830-40". TC Hodson in his book "The Naga Tribes of Manipur" also wrote that "We are like the birds of the air, said a Kuki to me once, we make our nest here this year and who knows where we shall build next year". The explanation pointed out that the Kukis were refugees and a nomadic tribe without any permanent settlement in Manipur. Colonel MC Culloch recorded in his account of the valley of Manipur

and the Hill Tribes regarding Kuki infiltration in Manipur stated that "The Kukis continued their campaign to decimate the Naga population and plunder their wealth with fire arms supplied by the British and the kingdom of Manipur" was a well planned strategy and crusade of invasion into Naga's domain to subjugate them and grab their ancestral lands by using the Kukis. Maj. Gen. James Johnstone (1877-86) in his letter No. 3332/65/CLL/RE-C 11/46 dated 6/1/1845 addressed to Th. Pushkar, President of Manipur State Darbar stated that "a large number of Kukis have left Burma for Manipur via Aizawl". They were armed with countless numbers of Musket guns.

After forceful entry of Kukis into Naga Territories during 1834-1878, the Kukis attacked many Naga villages in Ukhrul and Chandel Districts destroying entire villages and killed many men and women as reported by Sir Alexander Mackenzie in his book "The Northeast Frontier of India (page 205)". They forcefully occupied the territories of Nagas and according to the Census Records of India - Foreign Department No. XXVII of 1859 and No. XXVIII of 1861, the immigrant population of the Kukis in Manipur subsequently touched the number of 17,204 in the 1880s. The accommodation of Kukis in Manipur was a conditional settlement as per mutual agreement of payment lousal or Lampan to the Naga Chiefs by the Kukis settled in Manipur Naga Hills during 1830-1846. However, a number of times, the Kukis willfully violated terms and conditions of conditional settlement agreement. Hence, there were several cases of non-payment of lousal or Lampan which ultimately led to land-dispute in the Court of the Sub-Divisional Officers, Northeast Area: Ukhrul.

To be contd...

The writer is the President of Anal Literature Society, Chandel.