

BINODINI'S LITERATURE AND MANIPURI FILM

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Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi wrote four original screenplays, and scripted two documentary films. Several of her works for other genres as far apart as radio and dance, were also adapted by her or by filmmakers for the screen. Core to her contribution were the artistic peaks of internationally acclaimed films by Aribam Syam Sharma, and her work to help start the filmmaking careers of young filmmakers Ningthouja Lancha, Oken Amakcham, Makhonmani Mongsaba, Haobam Paban Kumar, and the siblings Thouyangba-Thoungamba. She was active and played a leading role in the establishment of the Manipur Film Development Corporation, for which she served as one of the board members.

As with the music, dance, and theatre of the arts organisation Roop Raag, her residence became a hub for artists' interactions, script meetings, rehearsals, locations for the films, and even rudimentary studio recordings. She was the uncredited designer, doing the costumes of many of the films based on her work. She was frequently on location. Oftentimes, her own spacious residence in

Yaikul served as the films' location. Because they knew they could impose upon me, she used to say wryly.

Three films, Olangthagee Wangmadasoo (1980), Imagi Ningthem (1981), and Ishanou (1990) - represent the peak of her collaboration with Aribam Syam Sharma, with whom she had worked together earlier in theatre. They were milestones in the history of Manipuri cinema. Aribam once said, Sana Ibemma's writing is eminently suitable for film, being very visual. Veritably the 'father of Manipuri cinema', and called Aribam by his peers nationally and abroad, her collaborations with him laid a cornerstone for a fledgling film industry. Binodini's serious entry into the world of film started with her original screenplay for Aribam's Olangthagee Wangmadasoo.

The romantic drama centers on Thadoi, a young doctor who likes to write song lyrics in her pastime. Played by Yengkhom Roma, Thadoi falls in love with Bijoy, a handsome singer of her songs, played by Kangabam Tomba, a local matinee idol since the highly

popular Lamja Parsuram(1974). A lovers' misunderstanding develops between Thadoi and Bijoy that is resolved happily at the end – but not before Thadoi delivers some of the most stinging and empowering lines in Manipuri film as she rebukes the boyfriend she finds wanting. The centrality of the female character, a strong and professional woman who speaks her mind, was Binodini's mark. The film also had a second story line, by way of action sequences and a soundtrack of now-classic songs composed by Aribam, of traditional Manipuri values. It is the loss, degradation, and a disappearing world of Manipur that was a theme close to Binodini's heart.

With the box office success of Olangthagee Wangmadasoo, Aribam next took up, Imagi Ningthem, a highly popular radio play by Binodini. My Son, My Precious (1981), as Binodini herself translated the title, tells the story of Ekashini, a contented housewife who discovers her husband had fathered a little boy in a far-off village. The little boy, played by six-year old Leikhendra, who surely turns in one of the greatest performances by a child actor in

world cinema, misunderstands and takes Ekashini to be his real long-lost mother. Finding herself unable to leave the clinging child behind, she impulsively decides to bring the boy up as her son.

The touching tale of a mother love that transcends all, and the yearning of a child for its mother, was like all of Binodini's work, based on a true story. Her neighbor Keinatombi, a simple, warm hearted, uneducated woman, dropped in one day and Binodini overheard her tell the story of how she brought home her husband's abandoned child.

The film was a landmark in Manipuri cinema history. In keeping with Aribam's experiment to make a fully Manipur-made film with local crew, talent and available equipment, the first rough edit and recording were done upstairs in Binodini's residence, and not in Kolkata or Chennai as with previous films. Little strips of 16mm film curled on her floor mat like so much hair cuttings in a barber's saloon. A makeshift dubbing studio was built in one corner of the room. There, Yengkhom Roma did her dubbing – a common practice in Indian cinema at the time but here used minimally and except where unavoidable. We were all part of the same group, Roma said. It was natural for me to be asked to step in here, as in previous and later films.

In adapting the radio play for the screen, from the very outset, Aribam had Binodini make one important change. In the original, Ekashini had no son. A serious failing in the eyes of traditional Manipuri society, it gave a reason for her adopting the little boy. By making her have a son, away at boarding and off-screen, Aribam

distilled the film's look of the nature of mother love. Long were the discussions between the two about how to end the film. What would they make Ekashini say when the boy's grandfather comes to reclaim the child? Ultimately, whose decision it was to have her say a sharp, short and forceful, "No!" is hard to say. For as Aribam likes to recall, Binodini once said, Syam and I worked together so closely on the scripts, sometimes it is hard to tell now whose idea was what.

But it was Binodini's nature to say, No. All three key women characters of Imagi Ningthem say No; they refuse to accept what society and its prevailing mores hand them. And the New York audience responded to Binodini. Why didn't you publicise this film better? I know so many who would've loved this film! loudly demanded a woman from the balcony at the Q&A after the Museum of Modern Arts screening at the Festival Theatre on 57th Street.



Imagi Ningthem

It was a radical ending. Janet Maslin of the New York Times was not entirely convinced though when she wrote her glowing review of the film.

Accolades streamed in from around the world - such as the screening at the Museum of Modern Art, Grand Prix at the Festival des Tres

Continents at Nantes, and enthusiastic reviews from critics like Elliot Stein, who had scouted the film in MOMA and Derek Elley of Variety. But Imagi Ningthem had opened and closed with little fanfare after a little more than a week in a cinema in Imphal. Aribam's calling card to world cinema was unfamiliar to his fellow Manipuris. Binodini went to the premiere, taking with her Keinatombi, the woman whose story she had based her play and the film on. As Binodini loved to relate, Keinatombi simply said after the screening, not realising it was her story, It was a beautiful story, I cried a lot.

As Aribam placed the Manipuri film alongside the regional cinemas of India, Binodini and Aribam found shared cause in putting Manipur's distinctive culture on the screen. Just as Bijoy's grandfather in Olangthagee Wangmadasoo was written as a practitioner of thang-ta, Manipur's martial arts. Binodini wrote in a scene with Ekashini and her relatives coming back from the Jalakeli, the 19th century tradition of women's sankirtan music for married women of noble birth. For as Binodini said, the pinnacle of a Manipuri woman's beauty is seen in the costumery and manners of the Jalakeli.

She held a great fascination and knowledge of the women shamans of Manipur, called the maibi, the subject of her next major screenplay. Binodini's knowledge of Manipuri culture ran deep. She grew up in the royal court, the apex and core of all that was beautiful, sacred, and meaningful in Manipuri culture, society and history. Binodini interacted as an unconventional artist with the shamanic tradition that she knew since her childhood.

Binodini had talked about wanting to write about the maibis for a long time. Her original

screenplay became Ishanou (1991), variously translated as the Chosen One or The New Self, directed by Aribam. Ishanou was invited at the urging of Pierre Rissient, to screen in Un Certain Regard, a special programme of the Cannes Film Festival of films championed by its individual festival programmers, in its 1990 edition.



Olangthagee Wangmadasoo

In the film, Tampha, a pretty young wife with a loving husband and a young child, begins to behave strangely. Like her previous woman protagonist Ekashini, she breaks free from her comfortable life as wife and mother, feeling not the tugs of a mother's love but responding to an inexorable shamanic calling.

Fourteen real-life maibis rehearsed in Binodini's pavilion at her residence. They were unlike other non-actors, oblivious of the demands of filmmaking; and Binodini responded to them during the shoot like a kindred spirit. With Aribam's use of the footage of real Lai Haraoba processions, and the use of the music and performance of the priestesses, Ishanou comes

to life with an authenticity, a rare and seamless melding of the documentary, the ethnographic and fictional story telling.

Documentary films held a strong appeal for Binodini. She felt Manipur had a wealth of material for good documentary filmmaking. A knowledgeable lover of flowers, she wrote the script for Orchids of Manipur (1994), a half hour film directed by Aribam. Here too, as in her



Ishanou

Keibul Lamjao, a dance drama she scripted and Thokchom Chaotombi choreographed in 1986 for the Ballet Unit of the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy, she drew upon her knowledge of Manipuri folklore. Her other documentary, *La* (1996), was about the uses and crafts of the humble banana leaf in Manipuri society.

The first among the young filmmakers that Binodini worked with was Ningthouja Lancha who shot her radio play *Thengmallabara Radhamanbi* (1986) on VHS. A piquant and witty look at the work life and culture in a government bureaucracy, the script has a delicate air of an unexpressed romantic feeling. In *Ngaihak Lambida* (2006), Haobam Paban Kumar's student film, a hospitalised woman develops feelings for an unseen man she hears visiting the next ward. *Oken Amakcham* worked on Binodini's story with her to direct *Mayophygee Macha* (1994), about a beleaguered family that endured and produces a winner after generations of struggle. Violence against nature, women and corruption in daily life, and more importantly the response to it, were major themes of her screenplays that made Binodini a public intellectual, a woman ahead of her time. The school teacher Dhani, the supporting character in *Imagi Ningthem*, and

Iboyaima, the protagonist of *Paokhum Ama* (1983), also directed by Aribam, both rebel quietly and choose an alternative to paying the customary bribe for a job. Her elegiac 1973 essay *Thoibidu Warouhou'ido* had ignited public awareness of the plight of the sangai, the brown-antlered deer that is now a symbol of the state. The film version of *Keibul Lamjao*, Aribam's dance film *Sangai: The Dancing Deer* (1988), garnered the BFI Outstanding Film of the Year award in 1989, and the sangai entered into the consciousness of the public, achieving its iconic status in Manipur today.

Binodini's contribution to Manipuri film was primarily as a writer and overall godmother to film productions based on her stories and radio plays. In addition to *Sanabi* (1996) and his 2003 television feature *Ashangba Nongjabi*, Aribam adapted and directed her radio play *Nongphadok Lakpada* posthumously. *Makhonmani Mongsaba* adapted and directed her radio plays *Nangna Kappa Pakchade* (2013), about a tough village woman who takes her weaselly husband to court.

But though she was not a writer given to easy sloganeering, Binodini was also a film activist. The themes of her scripts and stories that called attention to issues in society were peopled with common folk from all walks of life. She signed her published work simply as Binodini. The princess Binodini had acquired leftist leanings during her college days at St. Mary's in Shillong, before her artistic vision expanded to the less doctrinaire and more inclusionary humanism when she was an art student at Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan. Binodini was a stalwart supporter and leader in the establishment and functioning of the Manipur Film Development Society. Along with Aribam and close friends

and collaborators Chongtham Kamala, Yengkhom Roma, Kangabam Tomba, and the cinematographer Laimayum Daoji Sharma, she formed *Mellei Leisna*, the production banner under which *Paokhum Ama* (1983) was produced.

Binodini saw early on the potential of video for a small film industry in Manipur. She organised a video editing workshop run by Tomiyo Sasaki and Ernest Gusella, an artist couple she had met in New York. The week-long workshop in 1993 supported by the MFDC, in which Binodini was a board member, produced a significant number of filmmakers and technicians working in video today in Manipur's film industry. And Manipur leapt to the fore to become a fully video-based film industry, annually producing 60-70 video features today.



About the Contributor

L. Somi Roy is the founder and chair of *Imasi: The Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi*. This essay is edited from an excerpt from a monograph on MK Binodini Devi he is currently writing for the *Sahitya Akademi*.