

Aribam Syam Sharma: A Genius of Indian Cinema



Aribam Syam Sharma on the Set

India is a vast country where diverse culture, traditions and languages have flourished. In this beautiful country, the spirited and erudite film makers from different regions have created a great history of Indian Cinema. With the adoption of emerging new film technologies over time, the history of Indian film has been a compounding catalogue of new chapters.

Language defines the identity of a film. Indian cinema cannot be represented alone by Hindi films although Hindi is the lingua franca of the country. The films produced from different regions of the country in different languages have contributed a major share in painting a comprehensive picture of the Indian cinema.

Significant contributions made by Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, Chetan Anand, V. Shantaram, Shyam Benegal, Mani Kaul, Saeed Mirza, Ketan Mehta while naming some of the eminent film makers in Hindi Cinema; Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Goutam Ghosh, Aparna Sen, Rituparno Ghosh among film makers in Bengali; G. Aravindan

and Adoor Gopalkrishnan in Malayalam; K. Balachandra and Mani Ratnam in Tamil; Girish Karnad and Girish Kasaravalli in Kannada; Jahnu Barua in Assamese and Aribam Syam Sharma in Manipuri have put efforts in bringing glory for the Indian Cinema. Their undeniable roles have heralded the unique chapters of the film movement in India, which earned them a name and berth in the international landscape.

The globalisation of Indian film industry, which began in the late 20th Century, has also accelerated the movement of Indian cinema. Every Indian filmmaker is now eyeing for world premiere in many major international festivals. Year after year, many regional filmmakers have brought distinguished laurels for the country.

Three major language groups are used in India for communicating with each other in their territories. Indo-Aryan, Dravidian and Tibeto-Burman are the principal language families in India. In the International arena,

the Cinemas of Malayalam, Kannada, Tamil and Telugu mainly represented the Dravidians and the Cinemas of Bengali, Marathi and Assamese introduced the Aryans. But, Aribam Syam Sharma of Manipuri cinema was the pioneer film maker of India who introduced the Tibeto-Burman languages in Indian cinema. He added a new flavour of cinema featuring remarkable stories of the colourful Mongoloid people settled in North Eastern India.

It is the pride of the nation that a film maker, hailing from a small state and a small community where there were no adequate paraphernalia and technicians for making films, has brought glory to India by introducing Manipuri Cinema in the international arena.

It was a great victory for Indian cinema that Syam Sharma's *Imagi Ningthem* (My Son My Precious) (1981) bagged the Grand Prix (Golden Montgolfier) at the Festival of Three Continents, Nantes in France in the year 1982. He was the first Indian to receive the Best Film Award in the festival.

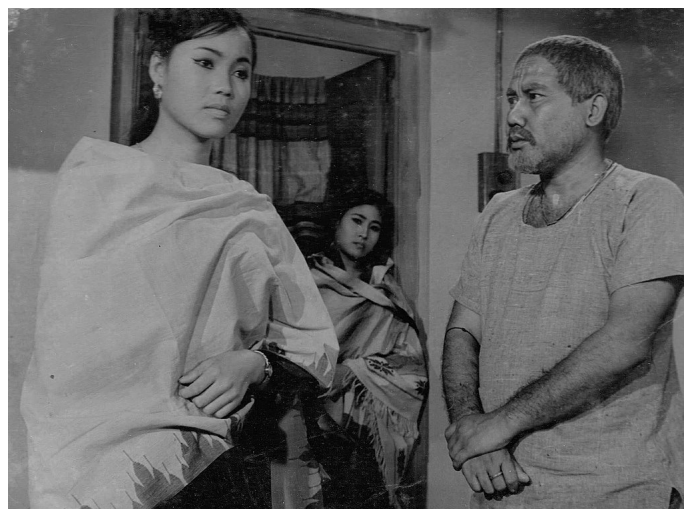
LAURELS FOR INDIAN CINEMA IN THE GLOBAL STAGE

Major international film festivals recognised by the Government of India are the ones held at Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto, Locarno, London, Karlovy Vary, Nantes, Rotterdam, Freiburg, Munich, Busan, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Rome and Sydney. And only the Indian films invited to these festivals were eligible for telecast in the Best of Indian Cinema programme of the Doordarshan.

Aribam Syam Sharma's *Imagi Ningthem* bagged the Grand Prix, the Best Film Award of Nantes in 1982. He was the fifth Indian film maker who received the top prize in a major international film festival. Very few Indian film makers have received the top prize in the major festivals held abroad although many Indian film makers have received various consolation prizes.

The first Indian film, which bagged the Best

Film of Cannes, was Chetan Anand's *Neecha Nagar*. The Best Film Award of Cannes is Golden Palm, which was earlier known as



Syam Sharma in the role of Tonsana, family head in Matamgi Manipur

'Grand Prix du festival du film'. It was shared with ten other films from different countries in 1946. In 1957, Satyajit Ray's *Aparajito* won the Golden Lion, the Best Film Award of Venice Film Festival. Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* also received the same title in 2001. Sambhu Mitra and Amit Mitra's *Jagte Raho* received the Best Film Award of Karlovy Vary Film Festival –Crystal Glove in 1957. In 1981, Rabindra Dharmaraj's *Chakra* was awarded the Best Film Award - Golden Leopard of Locarno International Film Festival. Dharmaraj was credited to be the fourth Indian film maker who received the top prize in a major international film festival.

SYAM SHARMA'S VERSATILITY

It will be difficult to find a film maker like Syam Sharma who can make all varieties of films with significant success. He has not only made blockbuster films in the mainstream cinema but also great art films of international repute. In the field of documentary, he has made films on diverse subjects carving out a niche for himself as a reputed documentary filmmaker.

Each and every one of his films has significant content for academic discussions. His films fabricated with age-old social traditions and cultural practices ranging from prehistoric era

to modern times delves into the socio-cultural values of the people with a fine touch to reach a larger common audience.



Syam Sharma as Music Composer in Matamgi Manipur

Born on March 21, 1936, he obtained his Master's Degree in Philosophy from the Viswa Bharti University, Santiniketan. He is a philosopher whose thought reaches unfathomed depth. His quest for aesthetic values of every object leads him to a thorough understanding of what he aims to make. And finally, the end product profoundly reflects his creativity in his remarkable films.

Besides the mastery of film making, Syam Sharma also excels in the field of modern Manipuri music as a composer and singer; in the field of theatre as director and actor; and in the field of literature as a short story writer and lyricist. A multi-faceted personality possessing multiple qualities! All these qualities make him a great film-maker.

So far, he has directed 15 Manipuri feature films and 31 non-features. His films, though rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of Manipur, have found flavour globally due to the universal appeal of the subjects of his films. He earned six awards for his features and nine awards for his non-features in National Film Awards.

SETTING HIS FOOT ON FILM

Syam Sharma learnt the complete knowledge of film making during the making of *Matamgi Manipur* (1972), the first Manipuri feature film directed by Debkumar Bose. He was the

Music director and played the role of Tonsana, a father in the film. He composed four songs for the film. The musicians, especially the percussionist of Kolkata, while recording the songs in Technicians' Studio, Tollygunge, had difficulty following the rhythm of the song-*Tha Tha Thabungton*, a lullaby in traditional tunes of the film.

THE JOURNEY ON FILM MAKING

The film which deeply impressed Syam Sharma was Ritwik Ghatak's *Ajantrik*; he saw it at Bolpur while he was studying in Santiniketan. He has deep affection for his native place and motherland. "*Ho Ima, Poknapham Ima, Nangumbi Leite Ima*" (O Mother, O Motherland, there is none like you Mother) is the voice of his soul. He set out to discover his own identity before venturing into filmmaking. He was sanctified by converting his name as 'Aribam Syam Sharma'. He said, "I am not the 'Shyam' of outside, and I am the Meitei 'Syam' of Manipur". The unique aesthetics of Manipuri culture are absorbed into his films.

HIS FIRST FILM

His first Manipuri feature film *Lamja Parshuram* (Orphan Parshuram) (1974) was based on the drama- *Lamja Parshuram* written by distinguished dramatist G. C. Tongbra, Padmashri and Sahitya Akademi awardee. The structure of the film followed the trend of Indian mainstream cinema. Syam Sharma attempted to deliver a new taste of Manipuri mainstream cinema to the Manipuri audience who were obsessed with Bollywood cinema. It was a great challenge for him to vanquish the great flood of Bollywood which submerged people of Manipur. It was the period when the Bollywood cinema was at its peak in the 1960s and the 1970s. The youths at the time were crazy with the formula of romance, song and dance, crisis in love, separation, reunion and fight of melodramatic Bollywood films. Binaca Geet Mala of Sri Lanka Radio and its counterpart Vividh Bharati of All India Radio broadcast old, new and forthcoming

ing Hindi film songs abundantly. This made the cinegoers engrossed and addicted to Hindi film songs.

Songs of *Lamja Parsuram* were brought out on disc record before the release of film. Syam Sharma was also the Music Director. All the songs- the title song of *Lamja Lamja Kougene Nahakpu* rendered by Aheibam Shyam in the tune of the ballad of Khongjom Parva (a singing performance narrating the episode of Khongjom War of 1891 Anglo-Manipuri War with use of Dholak), the romantic duet song of *Ngaorehe Eidi Shumhatlehe Nangna* by Khun Joykumar and Chongtham Kamala, the sad song of *Nangdi Chatle Taklamdana*, *Eigi Thawai Oiriba* by Chongtham Kamala and the comic song of *Imagi Mamou Eihakpu Thajou* of Khun Joykumar and Rashi were superhit. Everyone memorized the songs and hummed it. Before this, there was only one film whose songs garnered such popularity- the songs of Manipuri film- *Uirei Madhabi* (unreleased) composed by Syam Sharma himself with Aheibam Budhachandra. Khun Joykumar came into the limelight as a playback singer of romantic voice from *Uirei Madhabi*.

The theme of *Lamja Parshuram* is about an orphan, a self made person. His maternal uncle sells his mother to a cruel rich man. He perceives that all these tragedies are caused by his father who neglects them. And he takes a vow to kill his estranged father when he finds him. It is a heart touching journey of an orphan who always encounters hardship. Use of flashbacks, negative images and still photos in the narration are some impressive features of the film. It was released at Pratap Talkies in Imphal on April 24, 1974. Kangabam Tomba in the role of Parshuram and Bedamani in the role of Indrani became the stars after the release of the film. Kangabam Tomba came to be popularly known as Lamja Tomba. Huirem Manglem emerged as the conventional film comedian from the film. During the period, Raj Kapoor's super hit film-*Bobby* was

screened at Usha Cinema in Imphal, but could not get the momentum of *Lamja Parshuram*. Thus, *Lamja Parshuram* snatched the Manipuri audiences away from Bollywood cinema. It ran for 15 weeks with the celebration of 100 days of screening.

FILM ON GLORY OF THE PAST

Aribam Syam Sharma's second feature film- *Saaphabee* (1976) is a period movie from a different era. It reflects the past civilization of Manipuri society. It explores the rich, typical culture and traditions, and ancient literature of the past. It depicts that the great treasure of Manipuri culture came into existence since the time immemorial when the Gods and the humans used to live together. The film was based on the folk drama- *Haorang Leishang Saphabi* written by Sarangthem Bormani and staged by the Manipur Dramatic Union



Tomba and Bedamani in *Lamja Parshuram*

(MDU) which bagged the best play in folk category in the National Drama Festival, New Delhi in 1954. G. Joykumar Sharma scripted the film. Syam Sharma as Music director composed four songs- *Mapok Langon Khudingda* of Aheibam Shyam and Arambam Jamuna, *Khoiyumgumna Shaklotpa* of Arambam Jamuna, *Eidi Pakhang Sareeni* of Khun Joykumar and *Ngasi Korou Nongjada* of Khun Joykumar and Arambam Jamuna. All the songs were a big hit and became household numbers.

It is the immortal love story of Loya Naha

Saaphaba son of Thongnang, the king of Khuman region and Haorang Leishang Saaphabee daughter of Tabung, king of Kege region. The film focused on the Kege and the Khuman region settled on the opposite sides of Loktak Lake, the biggest fresh water lake in North East India. The two kings are good friends and even decide for matrimonial alliance of their unborn son and daughter.

Tabung does not recognize Saaphaba and kills him, mistaking him for an intruder. Saaphabee also kills herself. Heartbroken Tabung and Thongnang decide to kill themselves in a spear fight to follow them. *Khamnung Kikoi Louonbee*, the goddess of death concealing her appearance in the sky with a thunderous voice stops them in the midst of lightning and thunder. Saaphaba and Saaphabee are seen in the sky proceeding towards the feet of the Almighty God.

The dialogues are in archaic language with rhythm in ballad form. *Shapharol* (Ancient art of hunting), *Tenkaplon* (Art of shooting arrow), *Hueiyen Lallong* (Martial arts), folk songs of adolescent youths throwing lovely words each other, folk songs on husking the rice, folk songs on driving away the birds in paddy field, folk songs on riddles, and *Helloi*, an elusive beautiful lady who takes away young man are few unique features of the film. It was the first Manipuri folk film. It was released at Usha Cinema in Imphal on July 13, 1976 and was a hit film. *Saaphabee* received the Rajat Kamal Award for the best Manipuri film in the National Film Festival. This was Syam Sharma's first award winning film in the National Film festival.

ALL-TIME BLOCKBUSTER

Aribam Syam Sharma's third feature film- *Ol-anthagee Wangmadasoo* (Even Beyond the Summer Horizon) (1979) became the all-time blockbuster and longest running Manipuri film in the history of Manipuri cinema. It was released at Friends Talkies in Imphal on January 18, 1980. It was made on the first original

screenplay of renowned Manipuri writer M.K. Binodini, Padmashri and Sahitya Akademi awardee. It was a well-crafted film with box office elements infused with regional flavour. It contained eight songs composed by the duo Joy Shyam. Surprisingly, the disc record of



Syam Sharma film director with Tomba & Bedamani at the shooting of *Lamja Parshuram*

the song soundtrack went out of stock just after it was released.

The film is about the love between two city bred youths of different classes- Bijoy (Kangabam Tomba), a singer of modern Manipuri music brought up by grandparents in a traditional family and Thadoi (Yengkhom Roma), a medical student pursuing MBBS in Delhi and sister of Kamaljit, a contractor who believes in modernity and wants her marriage to Jiten, a wealthy man. Old human values perish as the time changes. Betrayal comes to the fore to maintain the status. When Bijoy elopes with Thadoi, Kamaljeet agrees to the marriage and asks for sending his sister back home. On the contrary, Kamaljit keeps Thadoi under his custody. The crisis is deepened when Bijoy's grandfather who comes to meet Kamaljit has been killed by Kamaljit's men. Bijoy leaves the city and joins a timber farm owned by his relative in the border town Jiribam. He meets Leirik (Kshetrimayum Rashi), a woman who has been always disturbed by her ex-husband Kumar. When Kumar attempts

to kidnap Leirik, Bijoy comes to rescue her. Fight takes place between Bijoy and Kumar. Bijoy is wounded by Kumar's gunshot. Leirik brings Bijoy to a hospital for treatment. Bijoy is operated upon by Thadoi who is posted at the hospital. Unsettled weather of summer prevailing upon Bijoy and Thadoi thus ends after reconciliation. But this does not happen to Leirik.

Police cordoned off the theatre premises as long queues thronged the pavements every day. In the scramble for tickets, a young man's desperation cost him his life. Film stills of the leading duo- Kangabam Tomba and Yengkhom Roma were selling briskly. The script of the film published during the running of the film was also sold out. The film had a tough competition with Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay*, the blockbuster Hindi film for a long run. *Sholay* was screened at Usha Cinema in Imphal. With the attraction of the cinegoers by adding one and two reels during the running, *Sholay* achieved to run 28 weeks record in Imphal, but could not compete with the Manipuri film. *Olangthagee Wangmadasoo* marked the longest running Manipuri film so far in the history of Manipuri cinema with the record of 32 weeks celebrating its silver jubilee. 'The latest film, *Olangthagee Wangmadasoo* had broken Imphal's box office record held by *Sholay*' was the intro of the article-Manipuri Films "The Country's Youngest Cinema" by I.Nahama in the popular film magazine -*Filmfare* (February 16-28, 1981). The film also bagged the National Film Award in the regional film category. It was a kind of magic created by the film maker Syam Sharma.

STEPPING INTO SERIOUS FILM

Having proved that he could make a blockbuster film, Aribam Syam Sharma then moved in yet another direction to make significant films. Based on the popular radio drama- *Imagi Ningthem* written by M.K.Binodini, the writer herself developed the film script. Film Society activist and film maker K. Ibohal Sharma voluntarily came out to produce and

to handle the camera of the film that would be a different kind of cinema in Manipur under the direction of Syam Sharma. Thus the birth of the Manipuri film- *Imagi Ningthem* (My Son, My Precious) took place in 1981.



A scene from Saaphabee

It is the strange love of a stepmother-Ekashini (Kshetrimayum Rashi) for an illegitimate child -Thoithoi (Leikhendra). The film explores a strong human relationship between the two. Thoithoi's mother who is the daughter of the chowkidar of a Dak Bungalow in a little village is seduced by Ekashini's husband Dinachandra (Sagolsem Indrakumar) while being posted at the village. Dinachandra leaves her after he gets transferred elsewhere. Thoithoi's mother is pregnant and dies in childbirth of Thoithoi. The story unfolds when a school teacher-Dhani (Jamini), the cousin of Ekashini is posted in the village school, meets Thoithoi in the school. The director absorbingly narrates the story with analysis of the issues arising out of the situation in the film. The film was released at Usha Cinema in Imphal on

May 8, 1981.

Imagi Ningthem bagged not only the best regional film award in the National Film Awards 1981 but also the best child artiste award to Master Leikhendra who played the role of Thoithoi. It was the first Manipuri feature film which got an entry into Indian Panorama. The film was screened at the International Film Festival of India (Filmotsov of the particular year), the biggest film event of India in 1982 held in Kolkata. The date- 'January 7, 1982' decided the fate of *Imagi Ningthem* when it was screened at New Empire Cinema. Though there was a thin audience, a few film personalities of foreign countries had witnessed the film.



Tomba and Roma in Olangthagee Wangmadasoo(1)

Three days later, Philippe Jalladeau and his brother Alain Jalladeau, Co-director Nantes Film Festival looked for the Producer of *Imagi Ningthem* and handed over the invitation to the producer for participation in the Nantes Festival to be held in November in the year. The film bagged the Grand Prix in the Festival of Three Continents, Nantes in 1982 and became the first Indian film to receive the prestigious top honour.

Capturing the exciting moment of the grand event, film critic Iqbal Masud in his article- *Indian Summer at Nantes* published in *Indian Cinema* 82/83 wrote: "But the stage was not monopolised by the classics. *Imagi Ningthem* had the distinction of being the first Indian film to win the top award at Nantes. There was stiff competition from some excellent films from Latin America and Africa. But the Jury

chose Sharma's film unanimously. I think the film's innocence, the spontaneous independence displayed by its women, its charming music, gave it an edge over its rivals. It was a famous victory and Sharma fully deserved the thunderous acclaim he received at the formal presentation of the award. As he walked the streets of Nantes with me, he was congratulated by its citizens on the humanity of his film".

Imagi Ningthem was first shown abroad at the New Directors/ New Films Festival in New York organised by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art, New York in April, 1982. It was the Indian entry at the festival and was screened on April 21, 1982. *Imagi Ningthem* was first reviewed in *Variety*, the American weekly magazine on entertainment media. Gene Moskowitz wrote of the film, "This is a small gem of a film which is touching without being sentimental, and makes a statement about human relations that transcends its place to make a human impact". The film took part in major international film festivals held at Denver, Locarno, Montreal, London and Hong Kong. After the film received the Grand Prix from the Nantes in 1982, the Manipuri cinema and Aribam Syam Sharma came into limelight in the world of cinema.

Observing the society in the West where there was a lack of deep human relationships and taking into account of what *Imagi Ningthem* had shown; the film scholar and critic Derek Malcolm wrote in the *Guardian* on November 25, 1982, "In those parts of the world where the traditional mother and child relation had been badly shaken by uncontrollable plague of divorce and where pre and extra-marital sex have become common practice, *Imagi Ningthem* was a discovery of conservative values. The film came as refreshing departure in a country like the USA which rated the highest record of divorce in the world and because of which the resultant problem of 'bastard child' had become a national issue". The interesting dimension of the success of *Imagi Ningthem*

is that it has won the West.

His fifth feature film- *Paokhum Ama* (The Only Answer) (1984) made in 16mm colour exposes the various social issues on unemployment, corruption and insurgency which were prevalent in the society. Besides, it explores the healthy and strong relationship between the Vaishnavite Meiteis living in the plains and the Christian tribals in the hills of Manipur with sincerity and conviction. The film was screened at the Tyneside Film Festival in UK in 1984. The script is penned by M.K. Binodini.

Syam Sharma's sixth feature film- *Ishanou* (The Chosen One) (1990) bagged the best feature film award in Manipuri under the category -Best Feature Film Award of a language other than those specified in Schedule VIII of the Indian Constitution in the 38th National Film Awards 1990 and its protagonist Anoubam Kiranmala in the role of Tampha got a consolation award- Special Mention for her debut performance. At the International Film Festival of India held at Madras in 1991, *Ishanou* got plaudits from the foreign critics. It caught the eye of the authorities from the Cannes, who promptly invited it for the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes International Film Festival 1991. The film was favourably received at many major international film festivals held at Nantes, Montreal, London, Seattle, Locarno, New York, Hawaii, Singapore, Freiburg and Toronto.

Brilliantly scripted by M. K. Binodini, it is about the story of a happy married young woman Tampha (Anoubam Kiranmala), living in her mother's house with her husband and a daughter, who is suddenly possessed by a benign spirit and enters into the life of a Maibi. This distances her from the family. Maibis in Manipur are women who suddenly respond to some higher call, abandon their normal lives and join the cult of Maibi under a Guru. They are priestess and principal performers in the annual Lai Haraoba festival. As there is a belief that a Maibi's daughter becomes a Mai-

bi, the space has been created in between the mother and the daughter. The daughter even fails to recognize her mother in the later part.

In the *Guardian* published from London on January 24, 1991, film critic Derek Malcolm described *Ishanou* as, "*Perhaps the best film in the panorama, largely because it tells a good story with great honesty and lack of guile, came from the State of Manipur, where two or three directors have worked against all odds for a decade or more*". Former director of Sydney Film Festival and Film Critic David Stratton also wrote in the *Variety* published from New York on April 11, 1991, "*One of the best Indian films of the past year, The Chosen One looks though it'll make its way on the international film circuit. Specialized art house release also is possible*".

His seventh feature film-*Sanabi* (Grey Pony) (1995) received the National Film Award and was also entered into Indian Panorama. It was shown at the Cairo international Film Festival. The film bagged V. Shantaram Award for best direction in 1997 presented by the Rajkamal Academy of Cinematic Excellence instituted by Shantarams. Mangi, a wayward youth loves Sakhi, a dance artiste of the same locality. Sakhi refuses his proposal. The film ends with Mangi stealing the pony reared by Sakhi's father with great affection and care, to fulfill his love with Sakhi. The film explores a concept of purity of values and frequent attacks by alien forces which try to pollute and vitiate it. This was the fifth film of Aribam Syam Sharma and M.K.Binodini duo.

His short feature -*Shingnaba* (Challenge) (1998) deals with HIV and AIDS issues. He also made a children's film- *Paari* in 2000 under the banner of Children's Film Society. His feature film-*Leipaklei* (2012) tells the story of Leipaklei, a woman named after the flower-Leipaklei, a symbol of patience and strength, whose life is surrounded by hard trials of fate. She gets separated from her husband and is burdened with sustaining herself and her young daughter. The film won the Na-

tional film award in the regional category and participated at the 14th Jeonju International Film Festival in South Korea in 2013.

His feature films which bagged the National film awards are *Saaphabee*, *Olangthagi Wangmadasoo*, *Imagi Ningthem*, *Ishanou*, *Sanabi* and *Leipaklei*. He also created a history for receiving two National Film Awards in both feature and non feature in the same year thrice. He received Rajat Kamals for *Ishanou*



Tomba and Roma in *Olangthagee Wangmadasoo*(2)

and *Deer on the Lake* in 1990 and *Sanabi* and *Yelhou Jagoi* in 1996 and *Leipaklei* and *Manipuri Pony* in 2012.

ON DOCUMENTARIES

Aribam Syam Sharma made 31 documentary films. All his documentaries are made by significantly identifying and highlighting the important aspects of a subject, tracing it from its origin and coming down to the contemporary situation. His National Film Award winning documentaries are- *Deer on the Lake* (1989), *Indigenous Games of Manipur* (1990), *Meitei Pung*(1991), *Orchids of Manipur* (1994), *Yelhou Jagoi* (1995), *Thang-Ta: Martial Arts of Manipur* (!991), *The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh* (2001), *Guru Laimayum Thambaln-goubi* (2006) and *Manipuri Pony*(2012).

His ballet film *Sangai-The Dancing Deer of Manipur*(1987-88) produced by the Sangeet Natak Akademi was awarded five merit awards during the 12th International Film Festival

of Wildlife, Montana, USA in 1989. The film received the citation, 'Outstanding Film of the Year 1989' from the British Film Institute, London.

His *Koro Kosii* (1988) participated at the International Film Festival of India in Calcutta, Indian Film Week in Hungary and Bombay International Film Festival. The film captures the ritual of pulling and erecting the village gate of the Mao tribe in northern Manipur.

His *Lai Haraoba* (1991) was selected in the Indian Panorama of the IFFI in 1992. In *Lai Haraoba*, it depicts the creation of earth followed by human beings, and all the flora and fauna and so on, drawn from Manipuri cosmology.

His *Orchids of Manipur* (1994) not only participated at IFFI 1995 but also at the International Wildlife Film Festival, Morocco in 1996. The film blends with Manipuri folk and classical music with unfolding the chapters of *Leinol* (Oral folk literature describing flowers).

Yelhou Jagoi (1995) was the opening film of the Indian Panorama of the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in 1996. Syam Sharma describes 364 hand gestures of Lai Haraoba in *Yelhou Jagoi*. It would be interesting to analyse it, comparing with the hand gestures of other Indian dance forms.

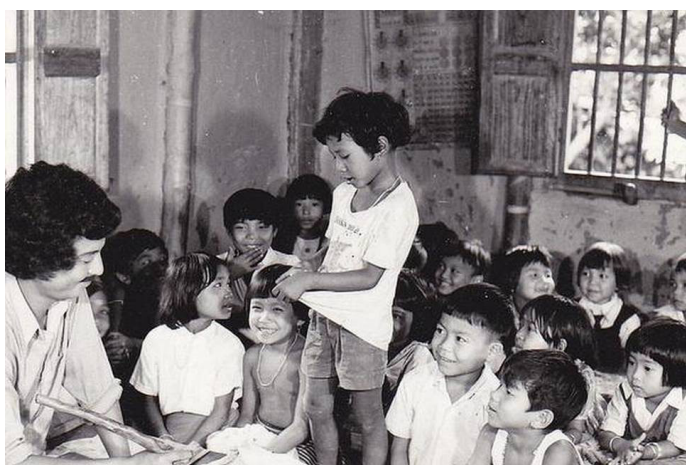
The Marams (1999) participated at Indian Panorama of IFFI, 2000, Mumbai International Film Festival 2000 in competition section and Kathmandu International Mountain Film festival, 2000. The film depicts the monolithic culture of the Maram Naga tribe of Manipur.

In *The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh* (2001), Syam Sharma captures an invaluable record of the daily lives and ways of the Monpas people who practice Tibetan Buddhism deep in the mountainous region of Arunachal Pradesh.

Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (2006) was screened at Indian Panorama of IFFI in 2007. The film

produced by the Films Division is all about the story of Bhagyachandra who was one of the greatest Vaishnava kings of Manipur. A versatile person of immense qualities, he was an expert strategist who wielded his sword to defend his land and people, and yet an artistic genius of divine sensibilities who gave the world the classical dance of Manipuri Ras.

In recognition of his contribution to the Indian documentary cinema, the Government of India conferred him Dr. V. Shantaram Lifetime



Leikhendra in the role of Thoithoi in *Imagi Ningthem*

Achievement Award in the 10th Mumbai International Film Festival, 2008 organised by the Films Division.

SPECIAL RETROSPECTIVE ON ARIBAM SYAM SHARMA

The Government of India organized a special retrospective of the films of Aribam Syam Sharma in the International Film Festival of India 2015 at Goa. Red Carpet was rolled out to receive him while coming to attend the screening of *Imagi Ningthem*, the inaugural film of the retrospective at Maquinez Palace Theatre. He was accompanied by renowned veteran film artistes of Manipur Yengkhom Roma, Ksh. Rashi, who were leading actresses in Syam Sharma's films and T. Leikhendra who acted as a child artiste in *Imagi Ningthem*.

Five feature films- *Imagi Ningthem*, *Ishanou*, *Matamgi Manipur*, *Olangthagi Wangmadasoo*

and *Paari*, and nine documentaries-*Koro Kosi*, *Lai Haraoba*, *Manipuri Pony*, *Meitei Pung*, *Orchids of Manipur*, *Deer on the Lake*, *The Marams*, *The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh* and *Yelhou Jagoi* were screened. It was for the first time that a large number of films of an Indian film maker were screened in a retrospective of the International film Festival of India, which had never happened before. It was a special retrospective in recognition of Syam Sharma's immense contribution in Indian cinema.

Retrospective of his non-features was also organized by Films Division in Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF) 2000. Another retrospective- "...And Miles to Go", a tribute to Aribam Syam Sharma's cinematic journey took place in the International Film Festival of India 2007. The Government of India later conferred him Padmashree in the year 2006.

TWO CLASSICS IN INDIAN CINEMA

Aribam Syam Sharma has contributed two classic Manipuri films to the Indian cinema.



Rashi in the role of Ekashini and legitimate son Thoithoi in *Imagi Ningthem*

His *Imagi Ningthem* has been featured in 50 Indian Film Classics, a book of essays penned by film critic M. K. Raghavendra, published by Harper Collins in 2009. His other classic- *Ishanou* was among 27 selected Indian films screened in the 43rd International Film Festival of India in 2012 during the celebration of Centenary Indian Cinema.

RECALLING THE PAST

"I have always loved films. In my youth, I was introduced to films. I repeatedly saw some of the movies just to listen to the songs. My first



A scene from Sanabi 1

love was music. Later, I had the chance to see films of Akira Kurosawa, Ritwik Ghatak, and Satyajit Ray, to name a few, much later. The film which deeply impressed me was Ritwik Ghatak's Ajantrik; I saw it at Bolpur while I was studying in Santiniketan. By then I realised the possibility of the medium but I never dreamed that I would one day be making films. My initiation into the world of filmmaking came accidentally".

"The first Manipuri film had been made. This was in the year 1972. I never had any formal training in filmmaking. The making of the first Manipuri film was an on-the-job training for me. The process of filmmaking that I saw and observed fascinated me and gave me invaluable knowledge about the technicalities of filmmaking like studio works etc. Shortly after this experience, I made my first feature film called 'Lamja Parshuram'. In relatively quick succession there followed other films. All this while, I was faced with questions on the form and content of the film medium".

"Making films in the initial stages in Manipur had significant creative challenges apart from the technical and financial ones. The cinema audience had already seen and experienced movies of Hindi and English since the first cinemas were built before the Second World

War in Manipur. The effect, in the absence of a film from the region, was that the audience had been impressed by these films about what movies are".

"And the repeated impressions to the public mind posed a challenge to create cinema peculiar to the region. Content had to be altered beyond the reality of the society to fit a pre-conceived, pre-impressed cinematic idiom foreign to the artistic sensibilities of the people of the region. As a filmmaker, working against these challenges needed a conscious effort to create cinema true to me. It was a huge challenge that needed time, failures and success and three films to convince myself, to create a form that would be true to me and my vision".

"My first three films- Lamja Parshuram, Saaphabee and Olangthagee Wangmadasoo



A scene from Sanabi 2

were a compromise to meet this expectation within the context or the culture and history of my people. I was fortunate to find stories rooted to the ethos and folkways of my society. And the tremendous success of these films in terms of box office returns, to my belief, was due to the content of the cinema and not much to the form that met the audiences' expectations."

HIS BELIEF IN CINEMA

"I believe that as filmmakers, we need to return to our roots again and again to make

films, which stand as works of art. Only then we are able to bring both commercial and art house films that are true to our sentiments and beliefs.

I believe that cinema, a western invention and development with its schools of what should be and can be, should take root in the social milieu of the region for it to bear its flowers and fruits. It cannot be grafted or transplanted”.

TO THE YOUNGER GENERATION

“I would like to address the younger generation that they should have the courage to push the envelope of creativity. But an effort without clear vision borne out of conviction and faith would make it harder to reach the goal. Experimentation has to be done to keep the creative spirit alive but I recommend that the experimentation has to be made with a purpose.”



Roma in Paokhum Ama

AT THE RIPE AGE, STILL YOUNG

Aribam Syam Sharma has crossed 84 years of age, but is still full of vigour and vitality. His latest feature film- *Nongphadok Lakpa Atithi* (The Guest) (2019) had the world premiere on November 1, 2019 in the third edition of the Guwahati International Film Festival (GIFF) 2019 organized by Jyoti Chitraban, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Regional Film and Television Institute and Assam Government.

The film depicts the story of a woman named

Tamubi, who was determined not to visit her estranged husband. But, one day, against her own will, she decides to visit his place to attend her daughter's wedding, during which her husband pleads her to start life afresh. But, Tamubi sticks to her stand.

Based on a short story- *Atithi* penned by Sahitya Akademi awardee Lamabam Viramani, he wrote the screenplay and scored the music of *Nongphadok Lakpa Atithi* as well. It was the 15th feature film of Aribam Syam Sharma's career.



A scene from *Nongphadok Lakpa Atithi*

A TRIP TO JAPAN

For the first time in its history, the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF), Japan showcased a selection of films from North East India from October 10–17, 2019 and hosted events welcoming five of the directors of these documentary films. Aribam Syam Sharma was among them. The special program, “Rustle of Spring, Whiff of Gunpowder: Documentaries from Northeast India,” organized in collaboration with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF), ran for four days beginning on October 11 and featured 16 documentary films focused on this theme. Documentary fans were rewarded with fresh insights into the diverse cultural landscape and complexity of North East India.

The special program included three works by Aribam Syam Sharma- *Orchids of Manipur*, *Yelhou Jagoi* and *The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh*. In an interview conducted by Jackie

Enzmann, Chief Editor Chief Editor, Sasakawa Peace Foundation; Aribam Syam Sharma



Syam Sharma at YIDFF, Japan

said, *“Film making started from documentary films, so I believe documentary films will always*

exist. In many ways, we filmmakers are trying to express ourselves through filmmaking the same way poets are trying through poems and musicians are trying through music. It may be appreciated or it may not be appreciated, but there’s always an idea, which is very important. At the end of the day, human beings want to create, and I believe that this will continue. “

The octogenarian film director, known for vivid portrayal of realism in his movies that has brought him international fame, has completed 46 years in the career in filmmaking, bagging 15 national film awards to date. All the films made by Aribam Syam Sharma will remain a great treasure of Indian cinema for many generations to come.

Mr. Meghachandra Kongbam is a Member of FIPRESCI-India.