

Article

Meghachandra Kongbam

S.N. CHAND

The Father of Manipuri Cinema

Making A Film in Manipur was then considered a distant dream owing to the poor economy, the meagre population and the limited audience. It needed colossal investment, workforce and all the resources, besides engaging crew members and equipment from outside the state. Finding its market was beyond imagination. Bollywood movies had also flooded the state's cinema halls numbering less than 15. The

Manipuri audience was already engrossed by the Bollywood movies- its story, stars, and songs.

During the later part of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s – when the Indian film industry flourished to its zenith and the New Indian Cinema also emerged- there was a strong feeling and urge among the

people of Manipur who were in the field of theatre and allied arts to have their films.

There was a strong film movement in Manipur created by the Film Society of Manipur, established in 1966 and registered in 1969, the only organisation in the state and the third film society in Northeast India after Shillong Film Society and Guwahati Cine Club in Assam. And among the eminent personalities of theatre and allied arts, Sapam Nadiachand (1935-1989), aka S.N. Chand, belonged to that era.

A multifaceted personality, S.N. Chand was the first Manipuri film director in Manipuri cinema when

he completed his feature film *Brojendragi Luhongba* (Brojendra's Marriage) in 1972. Armed with the knowledge of Italian neo-realism and the 'New Wave' of Indian Cinema, he picked up the short story penned by Dr Lamabam Kamal (1899-1935), the yesteryear's great poet of Manipur, to make the film. And he sowed the seed of the 'New Indian Cinema' in Manipur.



Like Dhundiraj Govind Phalke in making the first Indian film- *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913 and Jyoti Prasad Agrawala in making the first Assamese film- *Joymati* in 1935, S.N. Chand was also a one-person army shouldering various essential responsibilities of producer, director, screenplay writer, dialogue writer, lyricist, playback singer, music director and the leading actor when there were no basic amenities available to make a film.

Early Life

Born on August 8, 1935, at Singjamei Mayengbam Leikai in Imphal, to Sapam Marei and Sapam Ibemcha, S.N. Chand inherited an abiding interest in music and performing arts from his parents, who were in their own right, patrons of Manipuri traditional culture. But music was his first love. He studied classical music at Bhatkhande Sangeet Vidyapith, Lucknow, from where he passed Sangeet Visharad and Sangeet Nipun. His interest in the performing arts led him to association with premiere Manipuri theatre

groups like Rupmahal Theatre, Manipur Dramatic Union and Leimayol Arts Centre.



A Scene from Ngak-E-Ko Nangse

He served as a Hindi Translator at the Imphal Station of the All India Radio in 1965. He wrote lyrics, sang modern songs, composed music for several classical and contemporary songs, anchored many programs, and rendered background dialogues for AIR and Imphal. He was established as a good anchor in the 'Fauj' program. In this musical program format, songs are played only at the request of military personnel in Hindi of the All India Radio, Imphal. He was a man of many faces and a real artist.

Venturing Into Film

Though engaged in other art forms and promoting Manipuri culture, his only dream was to make films. An active member of the Film Society of Manipur founded by Hijam Romani in 1966, S.N. Chand learned filmmaking from great movies and books and visited film studios in Kolkata and Mumbai. While serving at AIR, Imphal, he went to Bombay to do cosmetic surgery on his face to suit the leading man in the film.

Screenplay writing is not an easy task. Apart from having a thorough knowledge of film craft, they must know the intricacies of developing characters, creating plots, and coming up with dialogues and actions. S.N. Chand took on the challenging task and made a fantastic screenplay of *Brojendragi Luhongba* adapted from the 800-word short story. He added two main characters, his maternal uncle and the bride's father, in his screenplay, which was not found

in the original text of the short story. He developed an essential scene of Churachandpur, the place of posting of Brojendra. He established contemporary situations in his screenplay to suit the audience.

He sold his commercial properties and even mortgaged his homestead property. He left the Government job. Hijam Romani, President of the Film Society of Manipur, opposed his decision to quit the permanent post of AIR, Imphal. But, he always dreamt of making a Manipuri film. And his only dream was accomplished in 1970 when he launched his film production house – Sajatiya Pictures Private Limited – at his home Singjamei Mayengbam Leikai in Imphal. He engaged technicians and hired film equipment from Calcutta for the production.

In the summer of 1971, along with his crew members, he took shots for three necessary sequences of his film at the historic Ningthem Pukhri, the big royal pond dug out during King Pamheiba (1709-1748). During the whole day of shooting, the crews took the panoramic shot of the pond where lotuses were blooming for credit titles. The shot continued with Brojendra's maternal uncle coming toward Brojendra's house after meeting an astrologer to fix the suitable date of the marriage ceremony. This was the opening scene of the film. The other sequence was Brojendra's arrival at his home after getting posted in Churachandpur. There were two shots – a long shot of a lighted jeep coming towards Brojendra's house and a mid-shot of Brojendra getting down from the jeep. The last sequence at the location was Brojendra's Point of View shot at a double-storied home illuminated inside, which revealed where 'Bashok' (a popular form of Nata Sankirtana) performance took place. The last two sequences were captured during the night. People from distant places and nearby areas thronged the place to glimpse the Manipuri film's outdoor shooting. This writer was also in the audience. 'The shooting of the film was of the first Manipuri feature film', and 'the nose of the hero of the film had a cosmetic surgery' were the talks of the audience during the shooting.

With great difficulties and against all odds, he continued with the process of making the film. However, he could not complete his film within the scheduled time due to financial problems. Some of

the prominent locations he featured in his movie include Churachandpur to depict the hill station and the tribal lifestyle, the old palace of Canchipur, the Khaidem Family's residence at Uripok other sites of historical significance and cultural importance.

Meanwhile, Karam Monomohan, an exhibitor who owned his theatre house at Moreh and also an entrepreneur in pisciculture, produced his Manipuri feature film- *Matamgi Manipur*, engaging Debkumar Bose (son of noted filmmaker Devaki Bose) from Calcutta as director in a short period and released the movie in three cinema houses namely Usha Cinema, Friends Talkies in Imphal and Azad Talkies in Kakching on April 9, 1972, which was marked as the birth of the Manipuri cinema.

With tireless efforts, S.N. Chand completed his film- *Brojendragi Luhongba* during the calendar year 1972, and the Censor Board passed his film on December 30, 1972. S.N. Chand scheduled the film's release for Friday, January 26, 1973. And it was released simultaneously at Usha Cinema, Friends Talkies in Imphal and Thoubal Cinema at Thoubal. The then Chief Minister of Manipur, Md Alimuddin, was the Chief Guest for the film's release at Usha Cinema.

During the premiere show, S.N. Chand submitted, "It is not a successful business if we treat filmmaking in Manipur as a business. However, being a devotee of arts and artistic skills, and with a thought that the rich Manipuri culture would shine in the world through this medium, I have taken the whole responsibility of making this film, sacrificing all I have possessed."

With few shots in Calcutta showing the protagonist as an MBBS student, the film was set at the backdrop of unique historical places, enchanting landscapes of plain and hill areas, beautiful tribal dance and typical traditional performing arts- *Pena* (A traditional stringed instrument used in the narration of the Epic of Khamba Thoibi legend) and *Bashok* of Manipur. It was a true Manipuri film made by the first son of the soil.

Based on the short story with the same title as Dr Kamal's work, which appeared in a monthly journal 'Lalita Manjuri Patrika' in 1933, the 122- minute feature film depicts, among other things, the religious and cultural life of people dwelling in the hills and

plains of Manipur. The thematic concept of this social story seeks to establish that honesty of purpose shall be maintained in every sphere of life to achieve success and honour in life. The film also revolves around a conflict between modernism and traditional values and reveals that conventional values are worthy of one's identity.



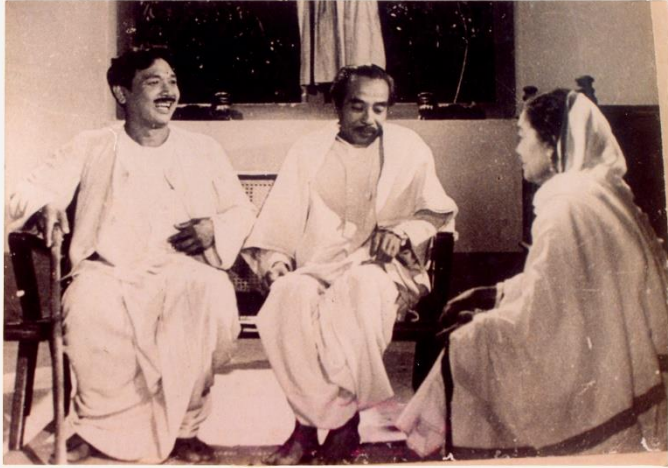
Bobby Bhattacharjee as Anita and Wangkhem Basantakumar as Ravi in Ngak-E-Ko Nangse

Brojendra (S.N. Chand) returns home with a medical degree from Calcutta Medical College. When he reaches home, he learns that his marriage has already been scheduled. It was a bolt from the blue to a young man with a modern outlook like Brojendra. He thinks marriage should not be treated lightly; at least he shall see eye to eye before they are wedded. So, he argues with his mother (Ibemhal). His mother replies that she gets married to his father as arranged by her parents. Brojendra's maternal uncle (Oinam Birmangol) also tries to convince him to fulfil the elders' decision.

Brojendra dislikes the idea but being an obedient boy to his parents and good nature, he obeys. But he decides not to even look at the face of his would-be wife (Romola). He does not spend the wedding night in the bride's room. He gets a government job with a posting at Churachandpur, a hill station and leaves home before *Mangani Chakkouba* (Marriage feast on the fifth day after marriage). Days pass, and the agony of the innocent girl increases daily.

Later, Brojendra realizes his fault after experiencing a few incidents. In the meantime, his boss calls him to Imphal for some important

assignment. He reaches home but cannot enter his house. He takes a turn and visits a *Bashok*, a Manipuri Nata music concert in a nearby Mandap. The singer is performing the Birha song of Radha – “*Vrindabangi amuba thadu amuk thoklamkhini*” (The black moon of Vrindaban would have appeared). This Sringara Rasa has submitted to Brojendra’s heart. When he glances toward the audience, he sees a beautiful woman. She is so lovely that Brojendra is fully attracted to her.



Brojendragi Luhongba

His conscience pricks him as he rejects his innocent wife. He makes up his mind to go straight to his wife and apologize for his mistake. But to his great surprise, he finds at his home the wonderful woman whom he sees at the Mandap. He stands speechless. At this moment, his wife falls at his feet, sobbing and beseeching his love. Brojendra takes her in his arm and embraces her with love.

Anil Gupta was the Cinematographer, and Rasbehari Sinha was the film’s editor. Songs were recorded at Technicians Studio, Calcutta. In the film, renowned Bengali playback singer Aarti Mukherjee who later shot to fame in Hindi films such as *Geet Gata Chal* (1975), *Tapasya* (1976) and *Masoom* (1983), sang a Manipuri song- *Nil Khonglaba Nonggi Mapei Mapei* (Noisy Thunder of Black Clouds) in semi-classical style.

S.N. Chand’s multifaceted talents flowered in his production. The film bagged the Best Screenplay Award in the First Manipur State Film Festival, 1984, organised by the Government of Manipur. But the film missed the National Award of the 20th Edition of the National Film Festival 1972 because the film

scored the same marks as Debkumar Bose’s *Matamgi Manipur* (Present Day Manipur). The President’s Silver Medal for the Best Feature Film in Manipuri was given to *Matamgi Manipur* being the first-ever Manipuri Feature Film. This was revealed by eminent writer and critic Elangbam Nilakanta, who was associated with the jury as an invitee. However, Elangbam Nilakanta praised the film- *Brojendragi Luhongba* for its reflection of the vivid identity of Manipur, capturing the beautiful ways of lives of the people in the real spots. It was not a studio-made film. M.K. Binodini, an eminent writer on the Jury as an invitee, opted out from the Jury for being associated with *Matamgi Manipur* as a lyricist. The Regional Jury, Calcutta, was headed by Sombhu Mitra.

If we study S.N. Chand’s *Brojendragi Luhongba*, it may not be an exaggeration to say that the film emerged as a product of the New Indian Cinema wave, which was prevalent from the later part of the 1960s to the 1980s. S.N. Chand himself was an active member of the Film Society of Manipur. The film was a complete departure from mainstream cinema. It was made with a realistic approach to dissecting the then trends of Manipuri society, which was about to be blown away by an alien culture. It was a wake-up call for the masses to identify and realise one’s ethos.

During the emergence of the new Indian Cinema, many regional films from different parts of the country also found a unique premise with striking glory and achievement. Under the initiatives taken up by the Government of India, such landmark films were produced. The period heralded a shift from mainstream cinema to a new direction where films were based on social issues with a realistic approach. The films generated a new wave of thinking and discussions amongst the masses.

Funded by the Film Finance Corporation of the Government of India, films like *Bhuvan Some of Mrinal Sen* (1969), *Uski Roti* of Mani Kaul (1969), *Sara Akash* of Basu Chatterjee (1969) were considered the birth of the movement of the New Indian Cinema.

It was preceded by films considered as Parallel Cinema, like *Pather Panchali* by Satyajit Ray (1955) and *Ajantrik* by Ritwik Ghatak (1958). The films were based on realistic humanism. The New

Indian Cinema also focused on socio-political consciousness. The establishment of the Film Institute of India at Pune in 1960, the National Film Archives of India in 1964, and the Film Finance Corporation in 1960 helped financially and logistically in producing a new genre of films. Other films of the New Indian Cinema wave were Kumar Sahani's *Maya Darpan* (1972), Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1973), M.S. Sathyu's *Garam Hawa* (1973), Jabbar Patel's *Samna* (1974), Saeed Akhtar Mirza's *Arvind Desai Ki Ajeeb Dastaan* (1978), Muzafar Ali's *Gaman* (1978), Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980), Ketan Mehta's *Bhavani Bhavai* (1980), Nirad Mahapatra's *Maya Miriga* (1983).

John Abraham's *Vidyarthikale Ithile Ithile* (1972), Adoor Gopalkrishnan's *Swayambaram* (1972) and G. Arabidan's *Uttarayanam* (1974) were the Malayalam films emerging out of the New Indian Cinema wave. Pattabhi Rama Reddy's *Samskara* (1970), B.V.Karanth and Girish Karnad's *Vamsha Vriksha* (1971) and Girish Kasaravalli's *Ghatashradha* (1977) were Kannada new wave films. Gautam Ghosh, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, and Aparna Sen spearheaded the movement in Bengal. Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Jahnu Barua also emerged in Assam. After S N Chand, Aribam Syam Sharma, M. A. Singh, and K. Ibohal Sharma came forth to make new wave films in Manipur.

S.N. Chand wrote the script and directed yet another Manipuri film- *Ngak-E-Ko Nangse* (What a wonder you are), produced by Wangkhem Basantakumar under the banner of Poonam Pictures. It was the fourth Manipuri film made in 1974. The film depicts the impact of a growing alien culture in the Manipuri society, its crisis and the realisation of one's identity after getting into trouble.

The film opens and ends with a traveller (Irom Nabakanta) driving a jeep on the serpentine road in the hills of Manipur. He describes the uncertainty of life through a song-

"Punsi! Ngak-e-ko Nangse
Khangdeko Nangse
Karamba Nangi Lipunna Chetna
Pullibano Taibang Meeoiba

Haiyu, Eikhoise Nangi Sannapotla ..."

(Oh, life! You are amazing

Don't understand you

Which thread of yours binds us?

We human beings, so tight.

Tell us, are we your toys ...)

The film has seven songs- two romantic songs, a ballroom song, a sad song, a traveller's song, a lullaby and a devotional song. All songs are penned by noted writer and lyricist B. Jayantakumar Sharma and composed by legendary singer Nongmaithem Pahari, who sang four songs. The film is a trendsetter which depicts the social turmoil in an elite Manipuri family.



A scene from *Brojendra Gee Lugongba* (1972)

In a story of joy and tears, the eldest son Binoy (Manish Ningthouja), a Forest Officer of a wealthy family, meets a vulnerable girl, Shanti (Rajani Yumnam), accidentally and saves her. A traveller picks them up and provides shelter at his place. They fall in love and get married in a temple. The social fallout of the relationship between the two is intense as she is not accepted by her mother-in-law (Binokumari). But her father-in-law (Laishram Netrajit), whom his wife dominates, accepts Shanti's simplicity and devotion. The film is "A fresh and stimulating family drama of modern family" depicting the story of two girls who dream of a "happy life and romance". However, the mother-in-law encourages her daughter Anita (Bobby Bhattacharjee) to be involved with a rich Casanova Ravi (Basantakumar), who exploits both of them later. A man breaks in and attempts to molest Shanti, taking it as an opportunity; the mother-in-law sends her off. Her husband is shocked when his mother tells him that his wife has gone on her own after discovering her illicit relationship. The husband and wife search for each other, and Shanti finds solace in the hills and gives birth to a child.

Meanwhile, Anita, who gets pregnant, fails to convince her boyfriend to marry him and rather than

accepting her, he turns her away. The traveller, an old gentleman, unexpectedly finds Shanti, who disguises herself as a tribal woman in a hill village and helps Shanti and her husband Binoy reunite.

Binoy searches for Ravi and brings him to unite with his sister. His mother also realises her past misdeeds and arrogant nature. The traveller hands over Shanti, her husband and their little child to their family. And he moves away, singing the traveller's song. The film closes on a positive note. The film was made with S.N. Chand's previous team- Anil Gupta as Cinematographer and Rasbehari Sinha as Editor. The film was released on 20th September 1974 at Usha Cinema, Imphal.

Without any credit, S.N. Chand extensively helped G.C. Tongbra, a distinguished dramatist, make his directorial debut film- *Khutthang Lamjel* (1979). He also acted in R.K. Kripa's *Ingallei* (1990). He expired on December 12, 1989.

On Film Promotion

S.N. Chand was actively associated with the Film Society of Manipur, established in 1966 to promote a good film movement in Manipur. As a resource person, he presented research papers on '*Recent Trends in Contemporary Cinema*' in the Seminar on Trends in Contemporary Cinema jointly organised by the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, the Film Society of Manipur and the Manipur Film Development Council at JN Manipur Dance Academy in Imphal on April 24, 1982. In his paper,

he elaborated on the trends of silent and talkie films and the emergence of the Italian neo-realism wave, which influenced Indian filmmakers like Satyajit Ray. He indicated that regional filmmakers should have adequate knowledge of the film medium and its social significance while making films.

In another Seminar held on August 23, 1983, at JN Manipur Dance Academy, Imphal, organised by the Manipur Film Development Council in connection with the Eastern Indian Film Festival, S.N. Chand presented a paper on 'Problems in Making Manipuri films' which highlighted the revolution of regional cinema in 1955-65 in India, the importance of Manipuri cinema in the small State of Manipur, lack of facilities in the production, distribution and exhibition sectors of Manipuri cinema, film policies of Assam, Bengal, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab and its positive impacts in the promotion of regional film industry, and the need of a Film Policy in Manipur.

S.N. Chand was a member of the Governing Council of the Manipur Film Development Council from September 1981 to April 1987 and one of the Directors of the Board of the newly converted Manipuri Film Development Corporation Ltd. from May 1987 to 1988-89.

The Manipur Film Development Corporation Ltd. and the Cine Artistes and Technicians Association, Manipur paid rich tributes to S.N. Chand by organising functions for his dedication to the Manipuri cinema.

Mr. Meghachandra Kongbam is a Member of Fipresci-India, based in Imphal.