

Article

Meghachandra Kongbam

Karam Monomohan Singh: The First Man



Meghachandra Kongbam with Karam Monomohan Singh in Imphal

KARAM MONOMOCHAN SINGH was the man of action who always wanted to be the first man of any kind of new venture in Manipur. He was a timber merchant running the business on the Indo-Myanmar border, a jungle contractor dealing with dalchini and spices. This pisciculturist introduced high-yielding varieties of fish like Rohu, Common Carp, and Grass Carp in Manipur, an exhibitor who ran cinema halls at Moreh, Sugnu, Wangjing and later at Canchipur. He also owned elephants for his timber business. He had good contacts with businessmen based in Guwahati and Kolkata. He was good nature and very positive. He was humorous and always smiled while talking to others. He treated people of all ages as his bosom friends. Son of Karam Toyaima, a timber merchant and Rajkumari Chamusana Devi, he was born on December 12, 1922, at Singjamei Thokchom

Leikai in Imphal. He did his matriculation at Bengali High School, Imphal. He spoke Burmese, Bengali and Hindi fluently.

In February 1991, I had an opportunity to meet him at 18 Rajendra Prasad Road, New Delhi, the official residence of Ningthoukhongjam Tombi Singh, Member of Parliament, during my short stay in New Delhi for a short-term course at the Indian Institute of Mass Communication. Karam Monomohan, who reached there for a business trip, brought a VHS cassette containing two documentary films shot in his firms to entertain the Member of Parliament who carved his niche in Manipuri culture and literature. One was about the newborn calf of an elephant, and another was about the extraction of pearls from oysters. Coincidentally, Aribam Syam Sharma was in New Delhi with a copy of his latest

film- *Ishanou*. One fine morning with the presence of both notable persons, these films were shown to the Member of Parliament using a VCD player over breakfast.

"How did you venture of making the first Manipuri film?" I asked. Karam Monomohan casually answered. "*Ibungo*, the story went like this. We had an evening drink with a few friends in Guwahati. When we got a real kick out of the party, one of my friends disturbed me by saying, ' You couldn't produce even a single Manipuri film till then when you had a rich culture and tradition'. I then told him that I would definitely produce a Manipuri film in a month. Thus the story began."

Karam Monomohan, who always kept his word, never returned to Manipur and went directly to Calcutta by flight to search for a film director through his Calcutta friend J. M Joshi. He chose Debkumar Bose, son of legendary filmmaker Debaki Bose because he had experience making two Assamese films earlier. Monomohan decided that he, who had experience in Assamese cinema, would be the right person to make a Manipuri film.

Returning to Imphal, Monomohan set up the banner of K.T. Films Pvt Ltd. in memory of his late father, Karam Toyaima. He aspired to produce the epic love story of *Khamba Thoibi* and advertised in local newspapers inviting artistes. During the Lai Haraoba festival season in Manipur, Karam Monomohan brought the young Bengali filmmaker Debkumar Bose and his crews to Imphal to study it. They went to see the *Thangjing Lai Haraoba* at Moirang, where the epic love story occurred. In a TV documentary- *Karam Monomohan* produced by DDK Imphal, Karam Monomohan narrated, "When Debkumar Bose saw the Lai Haraoba, he was bewildered and told me to abandon the venture on the historical subject that might have public criticism".

In a booklet published in connection with the Silver Jubilee Celebration of K.T. Films Pvt. Ltd held on 20th December 1995 at Kanchi Cinema, Canchipur; it is mentioned that the impracticability of the project on *Khamba Thoibi* had to think about Dr Kamal (1899-1935)'s *Madhabi*, the popular classic novel written in 1930, which carries the universal values of love, friendship and sacrifice. The exciting

feature of the book is that it is the story of *Urirei* that the readers are told while the title is *Madhabi*, depicting a comparison of worldly love and spiritual love. The director Debkumar Bose wanted to name the film's title *Urirei* if they decided to make the novel into a movie. Some argued about the title change, and the project was also abandoned.

On the advice of G. Rabindra Sharma, the two well-known persons in Manipuri culture and theatre- Aribam Syam Sharma and Arambam Lokendra, both involved with Aryan Theatre were introduced to Monomohan and immediate steam-rolling under adverse conditions began. Aribam Syam Sharma suggested the popular social play *Tirtha Yatra* written by Arambam Somorendra, which was the production of Aryan Theatre, Imphal, to make it into the film. Arambam Somorendra was the elder brother of Lokendra, who lived in a joint family. Debkumar Bose also wanted the story. When a change in the title of the film was allowed in the meeting, the producer Karam Monomohan named it *Matamgi Manipur*.

Maipak-Son of Manipur

Meanwhile, Nongthombam Maipak Singh from Uripok in Imphal, who got the title of Mr India, took part in the International Federation of Body Builders Mr Universe 1971 Contest held in Paris on September 25. In the Mr Universe Contest, Maipak Singh, India's representative from Manipur in his first big international appearance, acquitted himself creditably by coming out amongst the first Ten in the list of 72 contestants from 45 countries, thereby emerging as one of the most novel performances in the history of the muscular sport. On hearing the news, Karam Monomohan wanted to produce a film on Maipak, who brought laurels to the country and thought it was Manipuri's pride.

Immediately on his return to Imphal from Paris, Nongthombam Maipak was taken by Karam Monomohan's team to Calcutta. Debkumar Bose made a documentary on Maipak under the title of *Maipak- Son of Manipur*, capturing his body culture and form aesthetically. Arambam Lokendra gave commentaries both in English and Manipuri in the film. Shankar Banerjee was the cinematographer.

The 340 feet length *Maipak- Son of Manipur* became the first Manipuri documentary film and was first screened at Pratap Talkies, Imphal, on the 9th of November 1971. The film shows Nongthombam Maipak Singh being garlanded by his admirers and fans at the Calcutta Airport. He is then taken to Manipur House, Calcutta, for an informal reception. Then he sees a few Manipuri dolls displayed in the House. At once, he recalls the different poses of Manipuri classical and folk dances he has shown in Paris and London. The audience abroad highly acclaims those poses of Indian style, and he is proud of having introduced those dance poses in the muscle display for the first time. Later at a press conference, he expresses his happiness to represent India and hopes to retake part in which he can do better. Then, he is taken to see some important sites at monuments. At Outram Ghat, he considers the National Flag flying above, and he hopes that more sportspersons will emerge from Manipur to bring glory to India and Manipur in the field of International Sports.

Why had Karam Monomohan produced the documentary film on Mr Maipak? The KT Films answered it at the release of the documentary. It reads, "The achievement on the part of Maipak inspired Karam Monomohan to produce the humble documentary, though hazarding great difficulties on the way so that such a film may impart education to our younger generation and also at the same time help the establishment of a regional film industry in Manipur. With this humble venture, we also begin production of a Manipuri language full-length film named- *Matamgi Manipur* to be released soon, and it is hoped that Manipur also shall not lag in such realms of filmic art and culture from other parts of the country".

Making of *Matamgi Manipur* Continues

During the Fall of Dhaka in 1971, Syam Sharma and Lokendra were sent to Calcutta to prepare the filming background and rework the story of Arambam Somorendra for preliminary scripting work for the film. The initial film script was designed and translated into English by Lokendra, and Debkumar Bose worked on it again to finalise the screenplay. Five songs- *Chatli Chatli Mapham Khuding Eina*

(Aheibam Budhachandra and Arambam Jamuna), *Tha Tha Thabungton* (Chongtham Kamala) and *Eigi Pungsi Nangga Kari Thoknei Eiga* (Aheibam Budhachandra) and *Nanggi Maithongda Ure* (Chongtham Kamala and Arambam Jamuna) from the lyrics of Khurajam Phulendra and a song *Lapna Lotna Leiyu* (Chongtham Kamala) penned by M.K.Binodini were recorded on 16th and 21st November 1971 at Technician Studio in Tollygunge, Calcutta under the direction of Aribam Syam Sharma. Syam Sharma said, "Chongtham Kamala's *Tha Tha Thabungton*, a lullaby, was recorded with great difficulty because the tune was set on Meitei folk music and the non-Manipuri musicians were not familiar with the rhythm of the song".

Karam Monomohan's business partners- Sohanlal Kastiwal and J.M. Joshi, were credited in his film as Chief Production Controller and Production Controller, respectively. Male artists –Gurumayum Robindro, Kangabam Birbabu, Aribam Shyam Sharma, Arambam Lokendra, Amujao and Kangabam Tomba, and female artists- Yengkhom Roma, Kshetrimayum Rashi, Indira and Bedamani from Manipur were in Calcutta during the height of the Indo-Pakistan war in December 1971. All the artists were put together at the guest house owned by J.M. Joshi at Ballygunj in Calcutta. Artistes were already selected through a screen test held at the residence of M.K. Binodini at Yaiskul in Imphal before a screening board consisting of Karam Monomohan, Debkumar Bose and Shankar Banerjee, the cameraman.



In his book- *Matamgi Manipur: The First Manipuri Feature Film*, Bobby Wahengbam wrote, "In Manipur, selection of artistes was not a problem as theatre was happening with artistes enjoying

celebrity status. But as normally done in the Calcutta film industry, team *Matamgi Manipur* comprising the producer, cameraman, writer, music director, and director, conducted screen tests for prospective artists. Also, it absorbed some of the artists involved with the original theatre play of *Tirtha Jatra*. Through interviews and screen tests, artists including Kangabam Birbabu and Amujao from Manipur Dramatic Union, Indira and Kalachand, who were supposed to play the father, were chosen. From Aryan Theatre, artistes involved in the play of *Tirtha Jatra*, namely G. Ravindra Sharma, Ksh. Rashi and Arambam Lokendra were also finalised for important roles. Later Yengkhom Roma from Roop Raag, Kangabam Tomba from Society Theatre and Bedamani was signed to complete casting for major roles, and it looked solid and impressive assembled." A big set was constructed at Calcutta Movietone Studio to shoot the film. Meitei's daily uses, such as *Phak* (kauna mat), *Phaal* (bamboo stool), and *Sanabun* (brass pot), were brought from Imphal to create the Manipuri environment on the set. Lokendra, Robindro, director Debkumar Bose and his assistant Manoj, cameraman Shankar Banerjee and Syam Sharma regularly met on the script. Aribam Syam Sharma, who did his Master in Philosophy at Santiniketan, spoke Bengali fluently and became the interpreter between the Manipuri artistes and the Director and his crews. Though the artistes had zero experience in films, they were cautious to learn the film shooting, studio and camera and adapted it quickly. No doubt, all the artists had very much experience in theatre.

When the shooting continued, an actor Kalachand who would play the role of a father did not reach Calcutta due to unavoidable circumstances. To contact another artiste was impossible. As there was no alternative, Aribam Syam Sharma, the music director, was compelled to play the father's role accidentally. The film was almost shot at the studio in Calcutta. Later in January 1972, the film unit came to Imphal and a few scenes, like song sequences and jail sequences, were shot in Manipur. Karam Monomohan, experienced in the business, managed the shooting satisfactorily to complete it in record time.

Editing was done at Inderpuri studio in Calcutta. The director Debkumar Bose and Aribam Syam Sharma were with Madhu Banerjee while he was at the editing table. The film was processed at United Cine Laboratory under the supervision of Gouri Mukherjee. Both English and Meitei Script were used in the credit title. Music composer and singer Khun Joykumar who happened in Calcutta, made calligraphy of the Meitei script in the title.

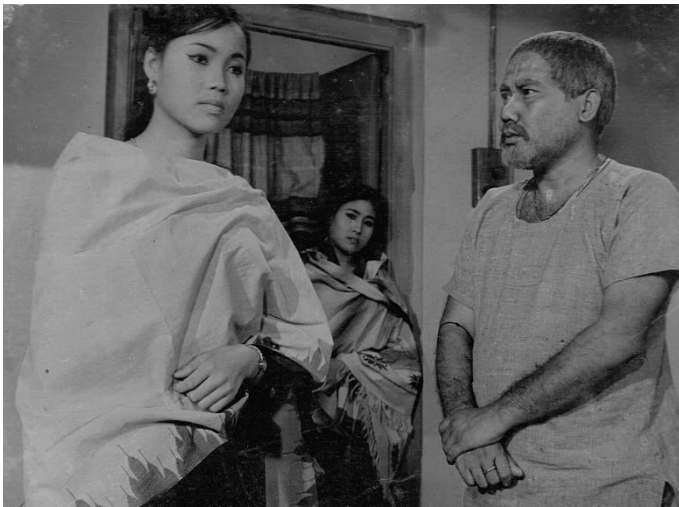
While the film crews were in Imphal, the K.T.Films, under the producer Karam Monomohan and the director Debkumar Bose made a newsreel film in Manipuri- *KT News* having three important events- Statehood Day Celebration of January 21, 1972, The Plan Exhibition of 1972 and The Republic Day Celebration of January 26, 1972. The event of Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, inaugurating the Statehood of Manipur, was shot with a 35 mm camera for posterity.

After obtaining Censor Certificate from the Central Board of Film Certification, Calcutta, on April 6, 1972, *Matamgi Manipur*, along with the three documentaries, was released simultaneously at Usha Cinema and Friends Talkies in Imphal and Azad Talkies in Kakching on April 9, 1972. Thus, it marked the birth of Manipuri cinema.

The film narrates a middle-class family with votaries of the old and young values in society. They drift in different directions, pulled by their diametrically opposite attitudes. Tonsana (Aribam Syam Sharma), a retired Amin, has two sons- Ibohal (G. Ravindra Sharma) and Ibotombi (Kangabam Birbabu) and a daughter Tondonbi (Elam Indira Devi). Ibohal is a fashionable, easy-going and spoilt young man. His wife, Tampak (Yengkhom Roma), wants to live the life of a virtuous ideal housewife. Ibotombi is a progressive young man who challenges all old values and feels angry about why people do not understand the need to change old beliefs. Tondonbi, the sister, is a college girl with ultra-modern life ideas. She wants to enjoy life and, in this pursuit makes the best of a given situation and the circumstance. Tonsana does not take the trouble of guiding them or helping them to adjust to society, which is slowly changing its image. The result is that Ibohal makes a mess of his life; Ibotombi is frustrated

because the world of his existence does change as fast as he would like it to, and Tondonbi also ends up in misery and desperation. The family seems to be destined to disintegrate, but then they begin to understand each other better and decide to live together happily after that.

It was an exciting moment for the Manipuri audience when they heard the Manipuri dialogue from the silver screen for the first time. There was a burst of laughter when the first dialogue –*Kari Inshang thong-i, Iteima*. (What is the menu, Sister-in-law?) of Ibotombi (Birbabu) came into audible while asking his sister-in-law Tampak (Roma).



The first Manipur feature film- *Matamgi Manipur*, was awarded the best Regional Film in Manipur at the National Film Awards in 1972. The producer Karam Monomohan and Director Debkumar Bose received the President's Silver Medal with a cash prize of Rs 5,000/- each from the President of India V.V.Giri in the solemn award ceremony in New Delhi. The leading actor G. Robindra Sharma and actress Yengkhom Roma were also honoured with souvenirs.

The Jury of the Central Committee of the 20th National Film Awards 1972 was headed by Romesh Thaper, and other members were Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Rita Ray, Sheila Vats, Teji Bhagat, Girish Karnad (Not attended), M. Yunus Dehlvi, Teji Bachchan, Phanishwar Nath Renu, Shanta Gandhi, U. Viswaswar Row, I.S. Johar (Not attended) and Ardhendu Mukherjee. The Jury of the Regional Committee, Calcutta, was headed by Shambhu Mitra, and other members were Amina Kar, Suchitra Mitra, Sanat Lahiri, N. K. Ghosh, Bhaben

Barua, Ramesh Chandra Dhall, Anand Shankar, Badal Sircar and B. N. Sircar. Nominated members of the Regional Committee, Calcutta, were Parimal K. Sarkar, Kanan Devi, Subodh Mitra, Elangbam Nilakanta Singh and Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi. In an interview with Debkumar Bose, who came to Imphal in June 2018 to receive the Karam Monomohan Lifetime Achievement Award 2018, jointly organised by the Karam Monomohan Memorial trust and Cine Artistes and Technicians Association, Manipur, he recalled: "In the year 1971, one rainy day Karam Monomohan came to my house in Calcutta after hearing about me from Mr Joshi. I had expressed my desire to make a Manipuri film after seeing some locations for my Assamese film. I fell in love with the beautiful locations in Manipur. Monomohan agreed to produce the first Manipuri film. He was a visionary man who was ready to take the challenge."

"Being a non-Manipuri, people had asked me how to overcome the language barrier. I am a film director who knows the 'film language'. As correctly said by my father, Devaki Kumar Bose, the pioneer of the Indian Film Industry- "Lips only utter, Eyes speak" This advice was my greatest strength. My Manipuri team also helped me a lot. I had no difficulty communicating with my film unit. I will not call this a handicap, but training the actors was challenging. I had to teach them how to face a camera or say a dialogue while keeping within the frame. I was fortunate to get talented people who did a wonderful job; the rest is history. Monomohan, while shooting in Calcutta, kept all the artists in one house and kept strict vigil on them. No one was allowed to leave before the entire film was completed. Shri Syam Sharma also helped to make the film with his wonderful music. He was always there to support me. Everyone associated with this film gave 100 per cent effort to make this dream come true. The film got the National Award in 1972 from the President of India. From a desire to award, the love and affection of the people of Manipur is the true strength that I could make this film".

After *Matamgi Manipur*, Karam Monomohan made another attempt to produce a historical film – *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* (Seven Years Devastation),

an event of 1819- 1926 when the Burmese occupied the Kingdom of Manipur for seven years. The film was to be directed by Arambam Lokendra. Research works on the subject were done. Mutua Bahadur was engaged to sketch the environment of Burma on paper. The project was abandoned.

Vanmanush as *Umangee Mee* in Manipuri

Karam Monomohan did another venture in 1978, a new experience in Manipur. It was a Manipuri dubbing film-*Umangee, Mee*, made from the Hindi film- *Vanmanush*, a Dara Singh and Padma Khanna starrer. His interest in the venture was very amusing. He wanted to show a movie where Dara Singh spoke Manipuri. He would say, "Look, Dara Singh would speak Manipuri in the film". Dara Singh was then a household name in Manipur after a grand challenge show between Dara Singh and Randhwa was conducted at Imphal Pologround in 1974.

For this venture, Arambam Lokendra spent six months in Bombay, and his team of artists N. Mohendra, M. Akshaykumar, Ningthoujam Nabachandra, Aheibam Biren, Shamurailatpam Naba with female artistes Hijam Roma and Laishram Mema did dubbing in 24 days in Bombay. Songs in Manipuri were recorded. *Khutta Jantra Nakanda Yongnao* sung by Naba Volcano and Lashram Mema, *Swargagi Nungaiba Pamjei Thammoina* by Naba Volcano and Laishram Mema and *Eigi Khuttagi Nisha Mayai Kana Thakpiyu* by Laishram Mema were the songs under the same music director Chand Pardeshi of *Vanmanush*. Under the banner Sheishak Lamjing, the film was released at Friends Talkies in Imphal. Manipuri audiences had a new taste in Manipuri-speaking films in colour, whereas Manipuri films in those days were only made in black and white. Criticism from Manipuri film circles emerged, saying that such dubbing films would spoil Manipuri cinema in the bud. K.T. Films described the situation: "The film had adverse moments due to film politics in the nascent Manipuri film industry".

In 1980, he ventured to produce a film on social issues-*Mee Marakta*, under the direction of Arambam Lokendra. Arambam Somorendra was the

scriptwriter and lyricist. Sanaton Sharma was a music composer and singer. It is a story of a village boy (Aheibam Romeo) who encounters different odds in Imphal city for survival, where he meets a city boy (Karam Krishna). Two background songs- "*Leihoure Eigi Apikpa Khungang Ase, Lairaba Kanagi Phadi Maraktagi, Lakle Eidi Sahar Tamna*" and "*Ngammi Khangna Chenbani, Nakhoina Ngamle Pharo Lao, Pakhang Yaitong Kanagi Mayai Leiba Mikupni*" were recorded. It could not be completed.

He also produced a documentary entitled *Kiranmala: Mermaid of Manipur*, directed by Arambam Lokendra, on the achievements of Kiranmala, an international swimmer from Manipur who was the champion of the India-Sri Lanka-Bangladesh Swimming Meet and the first sportswoman from Manipur taking part in the Asian Games. He also made efforts to make a documentary on Asian Boxing Champion Dingku Singh. He wanted to preserve the popular Manipuri theatre- *Shumang Leela*, for posterity. He completed the filming of *Sanagi Machu*, written by MM Manaobi and staged by the Imphal Jatra cum Drama Association.

Kanchi Cinema for Manipuri Cinema

Karam Monomohan's love for Manipuri cinema became apparent when he opened a cinema hall- Kanchi Cinema at Canchipur, exclusively to screen Manipuri films. The then Chief Minister of Manipur R.K.Dorendro Singh, inaugurated the cinema hall in the presence of I. Hemochandra Singh MLA and Ningthoukhongjam Tombi Singh MP on Wednesday, the 20th October 1993.

Arun Studio at Canchipur

Karam Monomohan set up a film studio- Arun Studio, on the campus of the Kanchi Cinema in the year 1998 to extend the needs of film producers for the growth of the Manipuri film industry. It was the first film studio in Manipur. It extended great help to the film producers for indoor location shootings. The studio provided a large hall for the erection of indoor sets—a 16 mm camera with accessories and props was available for the producers.