

Article

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M.A. Singh: Believing in Neorealism



M A Singh in the set of Langlen Thadoi with Chandrasakhi, the main protagonist

Manipuri cinema, in its initial stages, drew significant strength from literature. Films predominantly revolved around family dramas, with a heightened emphasis on dialogue-based narrative structures to convey messages. In its first decade from 1972 to 1981, Manipur only produced ten films: *Matamgi Manipur* directed by Debkumar Bose, *Brojendragee Luhongba* and *Ngak-e-ko Nangse* by S. N. Chand, *Lamja Parshuram*, *Saaphabee*, *Olangthagee Wangmadasoo*, and *Imagi Ningthem* by A. Syam Sharma, *Khutthang Lamjel* by G.C. Tongbra, *Khonjel* by Moirangthem Nilamani, and *Wangma Wangma* by

L. Banka Sharma. These films were centred around individual narratives within Manipuri society and did not provoke the audience much for a certain cause. Themes of integrity, morality, and identity took precedence in their approach. However, Manipuri cinema gained worldwide recognition with A Syam Sharma's *Imagi Ningthem*, which diverged from mainstream cinema by embracing realism as its cornerstone.

When the film industry's emergence in Manipur seemed distant, an individual from this small state already harboured grand dreams for

Manipuri cinema. This visionary ventured to study at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune, the sole film institute under the Indian Government at the time, to bring his aspirations to life. This trailblazer was Maibam Amuthoi Singh, popularly known as M.A. Singh, hailing from Kwakeithel Akham Leikai in Imphal.

M.A. Singh joined as an editing student in 1969 and completed the diploma course in film editing in 1971. Not content with honing his editing skills, he applied for the film direction course at the institute and finished the program in 1974. Consequently, M.A. Singh etched his name as Manipur's first native to undergo film education at this prestigious institute, which ranked among the premier film schools in Asia.

During the 1970s, individuals from neighbouring Assam, such as Dulal Saikia and Mukut Bhuyan in film editing and Indu Kalpa Hazarika in cinematography, graduated from FTII. Their achievements ushered in a new era for Assamese Cinema.

M.A. Singh embraced Neorealism, a film movement characterised by narratives set among the impoverished and featuring non-professional actors. Originating in Italy during the mid-1940s and continuing into the late 1950s, Italian Neorealism emerged after World War II and the downfall of Benito Mussolini's regime, which left the Italian film industry in disarray. This movement signified a cultural shift and social progress within Italy. Its films showcased contemporary stories and ideas, often filmed on the streets due to the extensive damage suffered by the Cinecittà film studios during the war. Notable neorealism filmmakers included Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, Cesare Zavattini, Luchino Visconti, and Giuseppe De Santis.

Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1943) marked the inception of Neorealism. The film was entirely shot in the remnants of war-damaged houses and confined spaces, working with a limited budget and available resources. The story revolves around two men, including a Catholic priest, who sacrifice their lives to protect their homeland from Nazi forces. The film also underscores the collaboration between Communists and Catholics in resisting Fascism's

expansion, highlighting the repercussions of disunity during times of crisis.

One of the most renowned Neorealist films of its time was Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). This film portrays the issue of unemployment and post-war social conditions. It follows a destitute father pursuing his stolen bicycle after WWII. The bicycle is crucial for his job, which sustains his family's livelihood. The narrative exposes the detachment of societal institutions such as the police, workers' unions, and churches, leaving the struggling father to battle for survival alone.

French film theorist and critic André Bazin contended that Neorealism encapsulates truth, naturalness, and the authenticity of society and governance. Rossellini even advocated for a semi-realistic approach to be more potent than pure artistic expression. He believed Neorealism encapsulated the appropriate contemporary portrayal of humanity, shedding light on situations and providing a clearer understanding of present reality. This movement, alongside the distinct German Expressionism and French Poetic Realism, arose within European cinema around the same period, setting them apart from Hollywood films.

Indian cinema was also significantly influenced by these cinematic movements, impacting luminaries such as Satyajit Ray. He drew profound inspiration from films like Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and Jean Renoir's *The River* (French: *Le Fleuve*, 1951), shot in India. The echoes of these movements resonated in Ray's debut feature film- *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road), in 1955. Ray endeavoured to encapsulate the lives of the impoverished, focusing on the living conditions within Bengal's society—a region devastated by a famine during that period.

The Manipuri feature film- *Sanakeithel* (1983), directed and edited by M. A. Singh, portrays the erosion of human values and the gradual decline of society. The film is based on a radio drama, *Sanakeithel*, written by the legendary singer Nongmaithem Pahari. With a realistic approach, the film was shot at Khwairamband Keithel, the world's only known women's market. This market was once referred to as *Sanakeithel* (where "Sana" means Gold

and "Keithel" means Market), located at the heart of Imphal city. The name signifies the market's superiority, as gold is considered a precious metal.



The filmmaker positions the focal point - Sanakeithel - as a symbol of a society that demands scrutiny. Manipur's traditional culture, society, and governance from that era find a distinct and innovative representation in this meticulously crafted editing work by the master. The film delves into social and political concerns, prompting the audience to confront the deteriorating systems. In the annals of Manipuri cinema, *Sanakeithel* was the pioneering film that depicted truth, naturalness, and the authenticity of society and governance. This aligns with Andre Bazin's definition of neorealism. Bazin believed that responsible filmmakers have a duty to reveal the truths of society to the people, enabling them to comprehend their living standards.

The film commences with the resonant sound of a temple bell from Shri Shri Govindaji Temple, wafting through the serene imagery of Imphal Valley, enveloped by majestic hill ranges. The camera sweeps from left to right, bestowing the audience with a captivating visual panorama. As it continues panning, it uncovers the origin of the sound—the Shri Shri Govindaji Temple and the Royal Palace. The lens then focuses on a grand mango tree before extending its view to encompass the vast, fallow paddy fields of

the harvest season on a sloping hillside. Finally, the camera's gaze settles upon Loktak Lake.

A close-up shot shows a woman's hand in motion as she tidies the courtyard. Zooming out slightly, the film's protagonist, Nungshi, comes into view. Subsequently, a traditional large house (*Meitei Yumjao*) is presented, with Nungshi cleaning around the *Tulasi* plant at the courtyard's centre.

Nungshi, a young widow, struggles to raise her two-year-old son, Ibungobi, singlehandedly in their village. Despite her brother's persistent pleas to return to their family home, she remains steadfast in her resolve to make her way. Her sole aspiration is to wait until her son grows up and assumes the family's responsibilities.

Tragedy strikes when she returns home one day after purchasing provisions and toys for Ibungobi. She is confronted and subjected to a brutal gang rape by criminals. This horrific incident shatters Nungshi's will to live and her mental stability. She even forgets that she has a son in her small, lonely house. She doesn't recognise all the goodies she brought for her son, which lie scattered around. Lost and unhinged, she roams through the streets of Imphal.

The director introduces the film's title and credit sequence at this juncture. In a long shot, the statue of a wild elephant being tamed by King Chingthangkomba (also Rajaarshi Bhagyachandra, Jai Singh Maharaja) (1748–1799) is shown at the heart of Khwairamband Keithel, offering a glimpse of the essence of Sanakeithel. Alongside the credit titles, the film presents images of various parts of the Keithel. As the sun sets in the west, the Keithel transitions into darkness. The night watchman arrives with a torchlight, announcing "*Sab Thik Hain*" (Is everything okay?) and ensuring the vendors have secured their wares. In the nocturnal obscurity, Ebai, who lives in the Keithel, finds 12-year-old Ibungobi crying alone by the side of the statue. The little boy lives with his aunt. His aunt treats Ibungobi as a useless brat of an insane mother and uses him as an enslaved child. Then, he leaves his aunt's home after an incident where his aunt slapped him.

Ebai brings Ibungobi to his home in Sanakeithel. His home accommodates three other

boys: Ali, a Muslim; Khansa, of Nepali origin; and John, a tribal member. These youngsters coexist under the same roof. Ebai himself arrived in Sanakeithel after a significant incident involving an overbearing woman. Ali is skilled at pilfering bicycles, Khansa is adept at shoplifting, and John sells stolen merchandise. Their livelihoods are sustained within the confines of Sanakeithel.

In Sanakeithel, Ibungobi encounters two individuals. The first, Babu, leads a homeless existence and wanders solo through the city. He has a stammer and is a physically challenged person navigating with the aid of a bamboo staff. Through him, Ibungobi gains insights into the concept of a nurturing ‘Mother’ who cares for her children. The other person is a woman afflicted by insanity, seemingly struggling to recollect something whenever she encounters Ibungobi. One day, when Ibungobi witnesses his maternal uncle conversing with her, he realises that she is, in fact, his long-lost mother.

Ali, Khansa, and John, who have engaged in a life of crime for survival, meet their demise one after another in the face of challenging circumstances. One night, Ebai spots his former lover driving joyously in a car with another individual. Overwhelmed by fury and restlessness, he attempts to strangle Nungshi, who is sleeping by the roadside, treating her as if she were his wife. In the nick of time, Ibungobi intervenes to rescue his mother. An emotive Ibungobi doesn't know what to do. He beats his mother, calling her, -“*Angaobi, Angoubi*” (mad woman, mad woman), and chides her why she has become like this. When his passion subsides, a poignant scene follows, and he calls her- “*Ima*” (mother) and embraces her, weeping inconsolably. His insane mother just gazes blankly at the sky. In the enveloping darkness of the night, the watchman's call echoes—“*Sab Thik Hain*” (Is everything okay?).

M.A. Singh divides the 131-minute-long film into two distinct parts. The first part focuses on depicting the uncomplicated life of Nungshi's village. In contrast, The second part is striking, showcasing the disorderly and senseless struggle for survival at Sanakeithel. The film also exposes inept Ministers

characterised by their immoral conduct and unreliability.

One sequence unfolds in the bustling market, where a Minister addresses the significance of cleanliness during the National Cleanliness Day celebration. He promises the construction of additional market sheds and ample toilets for the market's populace. Simultaneously, a marketgoer experiences sudden discomfort due to loose motions and urgently seeks out a lavatory. He stumbles upon a three-room bathroom: one closed with a door and two without doors. Desperate, he opens the closed door for swift relief, only to discover a man already occupying it. Left with no alternative, he hurries into the doorless lavatory, using his umbrella for privacy.

In another sequence, a middle-aged woman accompanies a young lady to a Minister's office, seeking a job for the latter. The concerned MLA arrives, approaches the Minister on her behalf, and subsequently departs. The Minister calls the Superintendent Engineer and asks him to appoint her to a suitable job. Seizing the moment, the Superintendent Engineer also requests the Minister for his promotion. The middle-aged woman entrusts the required documents for the job to the Superintendent Engineer and requests him to drop her off at Sanakeithel on his way to the office while she leaves the young woman in the Minister's care. The Minister's lecherous desires become evident through close-up shots while the young woman grapples with discomfort. The following frame features the mad woman, Nungshi, traversing a street in the market, creating an impression that the young woman could become the next victim, akin to Nungshi's fate.

Conducting a film shoot in a crowded location while concealing crew members and cameras from the public presents a formidable challenge. This challenge is compounded when considering the role of Memi, a young woman tasked with portraying the character of Nungshi, a madwoman in the bustling heart of Keithel. This endeavour proves challenging, especially considering Memi is not a professional actor. Similarly, Master Tony, portraying Ibungobi, and other actors like Anwar Ali, Shahwaj Khan, and Holkhomang Haokip, who respectively take on the roles of Ali, Khansa, and John, are all newcomers to

the acting scene. Coaxing these non-professional actors to embody realistic characters, especially amid a bustling market, undoubtedly demands significant courage from M.A. Singh.

However, the effort paid off. At the 31st National Film Festival in 1983, M.A. Singh's film - *Sanakeithel* was awarded the Best Film in the Manipuri language category. The film was lauded for its "*Sympathetic portrayal of human relationships in the context of a social tragedy*," as stated in the citation. Additionally, the film secured a spot in the Indian Panorama of Filmotsav 1984, held in Mumbai. Thoudam Doren, the film's producer, once mentioned that the film had been invited to the Berlin Film Festival. However, it was subsequently declined, possibly due to its technical shortcomings.

M.A. Singh's second film- *Langlen Thadoi* (1984), is predominantly filmed around Loktak Lake and its environs. The movie premiered at Shankar Talkies in Imphal on June 29, 1984, marking the first occasion where audiences were treated to a colour Manipuri film in cinemascope. Similar to his previous work, this film also underscores the actualities of the lives of the people residing near the lake.



A scene of Langlen Thadoi

The narrative revolves around Thadoi, a young orphaned girl on Karang Island within Loktak Lake, a location solely accessible by boats. She dedicates herself to an NGO named Women's Society in Torbung village, an initiative founded by her aunt Leihao to uplift impoverished communities. Thadoi confronts the harsh realities of life head-on and perseveres relentlessly to rejuvenate the society, eventually achieving success. The film vividly

portrays the village's arduous existence and a woman's determined struggle to enact transformative change.

Following this endeavour, MA Singh embarked on the launch of another film- *Chekla Paikhrabada*, based on a short story from the Sahitya Akademi award-winning book of the same title by Lamabam Viramani. The primary characters were Dr. Nandalal, Kamalini, and Benu. To finance this project, he secured a loan of Rupees eight lakhs from the National Film Development Corporation in 1988. As was customary, film crews and equipment were procured from Calcutta. Indu Kalpa Hazarika, an FTII graduate from Assam, assumed responsibility for cinematography. The film was shot using a 35mm camera in colour. After completing the pre-production stage, a rough cut was assembled at Jyoti Chitraban Studio in Guwahati.

However, unforeseen circumstances disrupted the filming schedule, leading to increased expenditures. Confronted by a substantial financial crisis, M.A. Singh faced challenges meeting his obligations. Consequently, the Film Development Corporation demanded the repayment of the loan amount, regardless of the circumstances. Regrettably, the project could not reach completion. A news story published in the *Screen Film* magazine on June 19, 1998, detailed that M.A. Singh's film encountered severe financial difficulties.

A delegation from the Cine Artistes and Technician Association, Manipur, led by myself as the Association's President, visited M.A. Singh on one occasion. During this visit, our team inquired about the potential for completing his unfinished work. An emotional M.A. Singh, weighed down by his heartache, responded, "You must have seen countless abandoned trucks left by their owners on the roadsides of the National Highway between Bombay and Pune. I am one of those trucks."

Before venturing into the realm of feature films, M.A. Singh directed six Manipuri newsreel films, each comprising one reel in 16mm format. These included -*Events in Manipur 1971-2*, *Events in Manipur-1973*, *Events in Manipur 1974-A*, *Events in Manipur 1974-B*, *Events in Manipur 1975*, and *Events in Manipur 1975-76*, all produced under the

aegis of the Publicity Department, Government of Manipur. Additionally, he created two Manipuri newsreels, *Manipur News 1978* and *Manipur News 1979*, each consisting of two reels in 35mm format. These films documented the prevailing events in their respective years.

M.A. Singh also directed two Manipuri documentaries in 16mm format, titled *Visit of Shri V.V. Giri, President of India in Manipur 1972* and *Ariba Pala* (Bangladesh, Pala), with a duration of 10 minutes each. These films received censor certificates from Calcutta's Central Board of Film Certification.

While at the film institute, M.A. Singh undertook editing responsibilities for two Hindi films. One was a short fiction titled *-Jeevan*, and the other was a documentary titled *-Bhajiwala*, directed by Baba Majgavkar in 1971. In 1973, M A Singh ventured into scriptwriting and directing, presenting a 29-minute Hindi short fiction titled *-Man Apman*, featuring M M Beig, Pawan Dutta, and Sunila Bedi. The narrative revolves around a young man who encounters a former friend. The friend, impoverished and ailing, has journeyed to the city in search of medical treatment, which he fails to secure. Promising assistance, the young man invites his friend to the exact location the following day, intending to arrange medical care. However, he arrives to find his friend deceased.

M. A. Singh's creative pursuits extended to another 11-minute Hindi documentary titled *Citizen*, which he both scripted and directed. *Citizen* delves into civic responsibility, underscoring that while citizens possess certain obligations, some remain indifferent. The documentary unveils the apathetic behaviour of an irresponsible citizen.

His enthusiasm for the cinematic arts also led him to share his expertise with aspiring young filmmakers. In 1993, he introduced a two-month comprehensive media course called *-Media and Media Personalities*. Running consistently until 2005, the study aimed to nurture new talents in news reading, public announcements, public speaking, interviewing, and the art of acting and filmmaking. M.A. Singh's dedication to realism over speculation and illusion earned him a reputation as a distinguished scholar.

M.A. Singh's Early Life

M.A. Singh was born on October 18, 1941, in the village of Maibam Lotpa Ching, located in the Bishnupur district of Manipur. The village held historical significance as the site of a World War II battle between British and Japanese forces. His father, Maibam Mani, was a renowned Meitei Pung player who regularly performed for the Royal Palace. Additionally, he served as a Sanglakpa for the palace and earned accolades, such as the Khamenchatpa and other medals from King Churachand for his contributions to art and culture.

As the sixth child among four sisters and four brothers, M.A. Singh's mother, Keisam Ningol Maibam ongbi Bidhumukhi, passed away in 1948, a few years after the birth of his youngest sister. To ensure their education, his father, Mani, sent his children to his wife's uncle's place in Haobam Kollup of Kwakeithel Akham Leikai in Imphal, providing access to a better school. Following his father's acquisition of a piece of land nearby in 1957-58, the family relocated from their ancestral village and settled in Kwakeithel.

Enrolling at Ram Lal Paul High School in Imphal, M A Singh completed his matriculation. His passion for cinema ignited during his early years, around 14 to 15, while still in school. His childhood friend, Elangbam Tomba, recalled, "We used to watch movies simply, but from then on, he was different. He engaged in discussions about various aspects of cinema and shared stories with friends and other kids. Victory Cinema and Friends Talkies were among our favourite theatres. We watched films like '*Awara*,' '*Arzoo*,' and others together. These are the moments when he was drawn into the world of cinema."

After passing his Matriculation examination in 1961, he briefly pursued boxing before returning in 1965 with an unwavering determination - something unprecedented from Manipur - to study Cinema. Following a four-year hiatus, he resumed his studies, completing his Intermediate course at Imphal College and obtaining a BA in Social Works from Visva-Bharati, Sriniketan, West Bengal.

The 1960s marked a vibrant era for India's Film & Television Institute. M.A. Singh's aspiration

to become a filmmaker finally materialised in 1969 when he was selected as an editing student at FTII, Pune, emerging victorious among thousands of applicants. He successfully earned his editing diploma in 1971. However, his artistic drive was not satiated by the editing diploma alone. He applied for the direction course, which he completed in 1974.

He briefly worked in the Mumbai film industry and Mumbai Doordarshan before returning to Imphal in 1976. He created numerous documentaries and newsreels for the Publicity Department, the Government of Manipur, Manipur State Kala Akademi, and other governmental bodies. Alongside these endeavours, he played a pivotal role

in establishing the Manipur Film Development Council and the Imphal Cine Club. Furthermore, he extended his support in film technology to various first-generation filmmakers and cinema enthusiasts. He spearheaded several workshops and film appreciation courses in the late 1970s and early 1980s, collaborating with renowned film personalities such as Satish Bahadur, Amol Palekar, and others from FTII, Pune. He was also a member of the Eastern India Motion Pictures Association in Kolkata. M.A. Singh's journey concluded on March 9, 2013.

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