

Book Review

MK Raghavendra

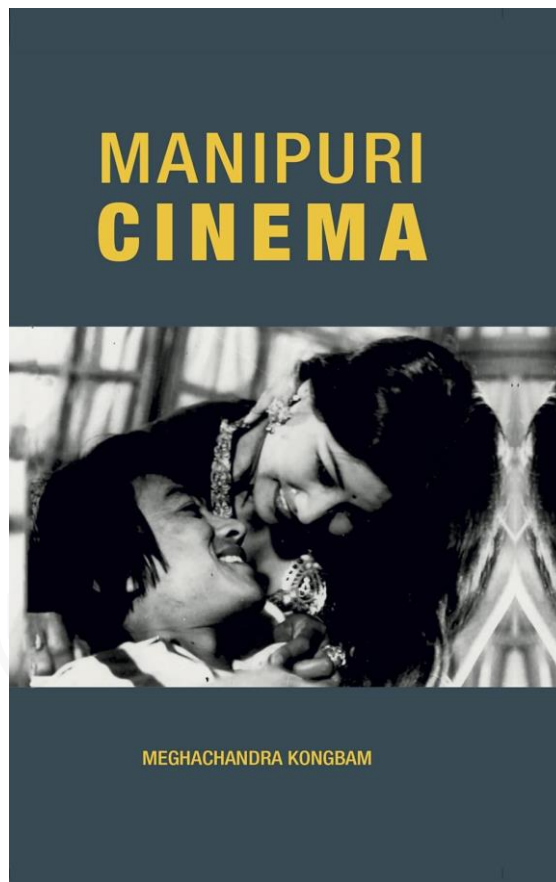
## Film History as Cultural Celebration

### *Manipuri Cinema* by Meghachandra Kongbam

Cinema from the North-East is now gaining importance not only because of the new filmmakers but also because of the film scholars who have emerged. The North-East does not have a commercial cinema of great importance and this means that those interested in becoming filmmakers necessarily choose the idiom of art cinema. In a way this is a good thing but commercial cinema in India, for all the negative things said about it, reaches a larger public than art cinema and has developed an idiom of its own. My own sense of the North-East is that since its commercial cinema has not developed conspicuously, it uses the idiom of pan-Indian art cinema which is primarily immersed in exploring social issues common to India alongside the local issues pertaining largely to militancy or the marginalization of the space in the mainstream. This is a pity because the states in the North-East have distinct cultures of their own with Manipur being particularly

noteworthy since it has a classical dance form, renowned theatre practitioners (Heisnam Kanhailal, Ratan Thiyam) and a writer of fiction of great importance in MK Binodini. In Aribam Syam Sharma Manipur also has a filmmaker whose films do not fit into the ‘social issues’ paradigm of pan-Indian art cinema but strike out on their own. Although Aribam has not received enough support to create a large oeuvre, his *Imagi Ningthem* is a deeply ambiguous work that invites interpretation in a way that art cinema normally does not. In Manipur has a Swarna Kamal winning film critic as well. The fact that he has published a volume entitled *Manipuri Cinema* signals film coming of age in Manipur since a critic has attempted writing a comprehensive history of the cinema from the territory.

*Manipuri Cinema* runs to 576 pages but around 40% is made up of annexures pertaining to various aspects such as filmographies and government regulations.



The actual history portion of the book is in five parts and the first part is largely given to the cultural terrain, the festivals and the folk forms as well as the arrival of proscenium theatre. Given the level of systematic documentation of culture across India it is virtually impossible to write a history that accords each aspect its rightful place – tracing something to its origins - and one senses the difficulties faced by Meghachandra since the section reads like a celebration of the region's cultural richness through a random selection of artifacts and customs.

The remaining parts (or chapters) are dedicated to filmmakers who are located according to the generations they come from, the first being the pioneers among whom is Aribam Syam Sharma. Meghachandra evidently knows or has met many of these figures personally since he reports conversations in which aspects are discovered. One of them is a meeting with Karam Monomohan Singh who produced *Matangi Manipur* the first Manipuri feature which was directed by Debkumar Bose who had previously made an Assamese film.

There is a wealth of information in the book but I was particularly interested in how *Imagi Ningthem* perceived by Meghachandra. Aribam had made two successful commercial films earlier but this was a stark departure in terms of its theme. I myself have written about it as one of the greatest films made in India (in my book *50 Indian Film Classics*) in which I had attempted a political reading that Aribam Syam Sharma was himself smilingly non-committal about - when I introduced myself to him as the author of the book. Megachandra gives a great deal of information about how the film was received

nationally and internationally but declines to give his own view of it or offer an interpretation, which is unfortunate.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meghachandra Kongbam is a film critic, a member of the International Federation of Film Critics-India Chapter (FIPRESCI-India) and a member of Film Critics Circle of India (FCCI). He won the Golden Lotus for the best film critic at the 63rd National Film Awards 2015. Born on December 23, 1957 at Wangkhei Ningthem Pukhri Mapal in Imphal, he did his Post-Graduate Degree in Journalism from Banaras Hindu University in 1979 and retired as Director of Information and Public Relations, Government of Manipur in 2018. He attended the Film Appreciation Course of FTII, Pune in 1985. He founded the Cine Artistes and Technicians Association, Manipur in 1988, became its President in 2000 for two consecutive terms, and also founded the Manipur Film Journalists and Critics Association, Manipur in 2002. Currently he is the President of Film Society of Manipur founded in 1966 which is the third oldest film society of Northeast India. He contributes articles in the publications of FIPRESCI-India and the Federation of Film Societies of India.



Judging from whatever critics like Derek Malcolm wrote about it, the West, although it loved the film, missed what I regard as its most interesting aspect. In the film a married IAS officer seduces and impregnates a chowkidar's daughter who dies in childbirth leaving a son Choichoi to be brought up by his widowed grandfather. In time the childless wife of Choichoi's biological father learns of her husband's illegitimate child but, instead of being shocked, comes to care about the boy and adopts him. What is crucial – although it is never stated so obviously – is that Choichoi's chowkidar grandfather has brought up the boy

but loses him to the stepmother and the biological father, the latter not even particularly caring. Seen from this perspective, the film examines class differences and how it could affect blood relationships with the grandfather tragically losing his only relative in the world.

After the chapter pertaining to the pioneers the book has chapters about the second generation and another about Manipuri cinema in the digital age. The latter contains, expectedly, a section on Haoban Paban Kumar who has been making waves at the national level. Here Meghachandra gives an account of Paban Kumar's *Lady of the Lake*, an intriguing film that uses supernatural

motifs even while dealing with issues like ethnic strife and militancy.

Meghachandra has undertaken a valuable exercise and his book is likely to remain the last word on the subject for quite a while. But a problem it is perhaps that too much attention is given to awards and critical reception, something that film histories normally avoid since awards are decided by juries when the lowest common denominator prevails. The state itself is hardly a reliable judge of artistic worth and it is perhaps ironic that when Manipur has itself had political problems with the nation-state – often alluded to by the filmmakers – Meghachandra Kongbam's *Manipuri Cinema* shows so much faith in its artistic judgments!

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