Article

Sunzu Bachaspatimayum

The New Gaze of Manipuri Cinema

Matamgi Manipur (1972)

From the looking glass of society to the gaze of the individual, a new generation is changing not only the stories Manipuri cinema tells, but the way it sees.

When *Matamgi Manipur* was released on 9 April 1972, Manipuri cinema did more than acquire its first feature film. It acquired a looking glass. That glass reflected a society in transition—its customs and anxieties, aspirations and humour, romance and moral dilemmas. More than five decades later, after crossing its Golden Jubilee, Manipuri cinema appears to be holding that glass differently. The society before it has become more complicated. The filmmaker's gaze has changed with it.

The change is not simply technological. Nor can it be measured by the increasing presence of Manipuri films at national and international festivals. It is more fundamental: what filmmakers choose to see, whose lives they place at the centre, and how much they allow the world around those lives to remain unspoken.

Manipuri cinema has never been without experimentation. From *Matamgi Manipur* (1972) and *Brojendragee Luhongba* (1973) to *Imagi Ningthem* (1981), *Sanakeithe (1983), Ishanou* (1990), *Khonthang (1992), Madhabee (1993)*, *Sanabi* (1995), *Kanaga Hinghouni* (1996), Meiree (1998), *Chatledo Eidi* (2000), *Mami Sami* (2008) and *Phijigee Mani* (2011), filmmakers have repeatedly tested the limits of the form available to them.

Yet much of the earlier popular cinema developed within a recognisable dramatic grammar: strong narrative situations, heightened emotion, theatrical performance, songs and clearly articulated social or moral conflicts. Those films gave Manipuri cinema much of its vocabulary.

The generation emerging after the Golden Jubilee seems less concerned with repeating that vocabulary than with discovering what its own syntax might be.

Cinema born in the tension between tradition and modernity

The two films that established the foundation of Manipuri feature filmmaking emerged from a society negotiating a profound transition.

Matamgi Manipur (*Modern Manipur*) may have been the first Manipuri feature film to reach the screen, but its importance goes beyond that historic distinction. Directed by Bengali filmmaker Dev Kumar Bose and produced by Karam Monomohan, it looked at a traditional society increasingly exposed to materialism and modernity. Money and social vices enter the household, and the traditional joint family begins to come apart.

Modernity, in this early cinematic imagination, was therefore not necessarily liberation. It could also mean the erosion of social bonds, inherited values and moral certainty.

Brojendragee Luhongb (PC: Snccam Bw)

Curiously, *Brojendragee Luhongba* (*Brojendra's Marriage*), the first feature directed and produced by a Manipuri—Sapam Nodiya Chand, popularly known as S.N. Chand—was wrestling with a related question from another direction. Its central tension lay between an established social order and the individual's desire to make choices of his or her own.

If *Matamgi Manipur* examined how material desire could corrode the family from within, *Brojendragee Luhongba* turned the question towards personal freedom: how far could an individual exercise choice in a society governed by collective expectations?

There is an almost cinematic irony in the history of the two films themselves. *Brojendragee Luhongba* went on the floor before *Matamgi Manipur*, but financial difficulties delayed its completion. According to the late Swarna Kamal-winning film critic R.K. Bidur, Chand had approached his relative Karam Monomohan, then a prosperous timber tycoon, for financial assistance. Chand wanted his film to become the first Manipuri feature. Monomohan

declined, but the encounter reportedly prompted him to declare that he would produce the first feature himself.

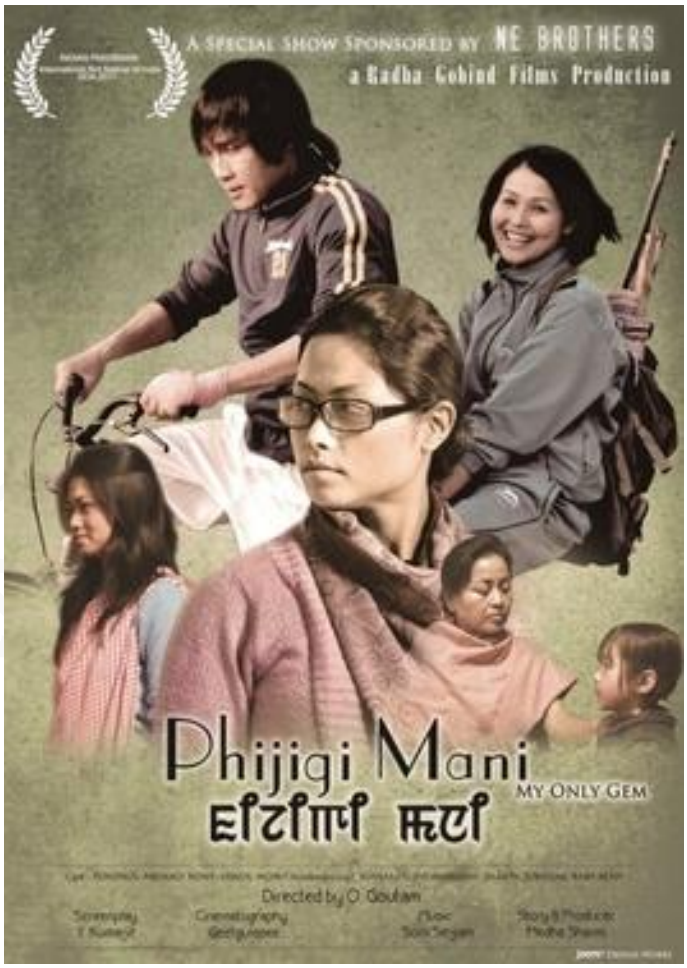
Matamgi Manipur

He did. *Matamgi Manipur* reached the screen on 9 April 1972. *Brojendragee Luhongba*, although begun earlier, followed on 26 January 1973. The rivalry, if it can be called that, ultimately produced something more significant than a contest over precedence. Both films looked at a society standing at a threshold: one foot in an inherited social order, the other being pulled towards individual aspiration, material desire and personal choice. That tension would recur in Manipuri cinema in many forms. Sometimes it appeared as family drama, sometimes romance, sometimes social commentary. Later, it would become more fractured and intimate. The first films were already asking a question that would take decades to unfold: could tradition survive modernity without becoming a prison, and could modernity offer freedom without dissolving the values that held society together?

Perhaps that is where the deeper story of Manipuri cinema begins.

From Society to the Individual

The individual was never absent from earlier Manipuri cinema. What appears to be changing is the direction of the gaze. The individual is increasingly no longer simply being used to represent a social condition; society itself is being understood through the intimate experience of the individual.



An important early movement in this direction can be seen in Oinam Gautam's *Phijigee Mani*. The film looks at migration and the breakdown of the joint family, but its social concerns unfold through the lives and relationships of the people caught within them. Made in the video format, the film won the Best Film in Manipuri Language at the 59th National Film Awards in 2011, while Tonthoingambi Leishangthem received the Best Supporting Actress award. Its recognition was significant for another

reason. At the time, feature films shot in video format were not eligible for consideration at the National Film Awards. Following an appeal by Film Forum Manipur, together with Manipuri producer Suresh Hidang, the eligibility was relaxed, allowing *Phijigee Mani* to compete. The film therefore marked not only a change in the medium through which Manipuri filmmakers could tell their stories, but also a widening of the institutional space in which those stories could be recognised.

The Lady of the Lake

A few years later, Haobam Paban Kumar's debut feature, *Loktak Leirembi or The Lady of the Lake* (2016), carried this movement further. Set around Loktak Lake, the film explores the presence of small arms within an agrarian society, the disturbing attraction of the gun and the consequences of its use. Yet the film does not approach these concerns as an abstract account of a society troubled by violence. They enter through the lives of its characters. The lake is not merely a picturesque setting; it becomes part of the film's emotional and moral landscape.

Its world premiere in the Asian Currents section of the Busan International Film Festival and its National Film Award for Best Film on Environment Conservation/Preservation brought wider attention to a story that remained deeply rooted in its own landscape.

Eikhoigi Yum

Romi Meitei's *Eikhoigi Yum* (2022) takes this movement further into the everyday. Set within a vulnerable fishing community around Loktak Lake, it places a child at the centre of a story involving displacement, poverty and environmental uncertainty. But these concerns are not delivered as propositions. They seep into the child's world. The canoe, the lake, the school and the threat of eviction become parts of the same emotional geography.

That distinction matters. *Eikhoigi Yum* does not simply tell us about a community; it allows us to inhabit its precariousness. Its recognition at the 27th International Film Festival of Kerala, where it received both the FIPRESCI Award for Best International Film and the NETPAC Jury Special Mention, was followed by the National Film Award for Best Manipuri Film and the Best Director award for Romi Meitei at the Kazan International Film Festival. The film also travelled to festivals including the 45th Moscow International Film Festival and the Zlín Film Festival, among others. Its journey beyond Manipur demonstrated that a story deeply rooted in a particular landscape and community need not remain culturally

insular. Its specificity could, in fact, be the source of its wider resonance.

Haobam Paban Kumar's *Nine Hills One Valley* (2021) approaches Manipur's fractured social geography differently. Its use of Manipuri and Tangkhul is significant in itself. The film resists the temptation to treat Manipur as a single cultural voice.

Joseph's Son

His later *Joseph's Son* (2023), based on a short story by Sudhir Naoroibam and featuring musician Rewben Mashangva, moves further inward, towards the private terrain of character.

The scale of the storytelling has changed. Earlier cinema often spoke about society through its characters. Increasingly, contemporary cinema discovers society inside the lives of those characters.

When conflict becomes cinematic form

Dinesh Naorem's debut *Oitharei (Save My Soul)* (2025) takes this development to one of its starkest points.

Conceived and shot amid the violence and uncertainty that followed May 2023 in Manipur, the film unfolds over a single night. Rather than turning conflict into spectacle, it stays close to the experience of living through uncertainty.

Here, conflict is not simply the subject. Darkness, silence, restricted movement and the sense of not knowing what might happen next become part of the film's language.

That distinction is important in a place where political violence has for decades been an unavoidable part of everyday life. A film does not necessarily have to explain the conflict in order to speak about it. Sometimes it can make the viewer feel what it means to inhabit a world shaped by it.

Oitharei was subsequently selected for the Indian Panorama feature section at IFFI 2025, giving this intimate approach to conflict a wider national platform.

Expanding who can be seen

Priyakanta Laishram's *Oneness* (2025) pushes the boundaries in another direction.

By bringing same-sex love, sexual identity, family rejection and social prejudice into Manipuri feature filmmaking, the film expands not merely the range of subjects but the range of people whom the cinema is prepared to place at its centre. Inspired by a real case, it insists that the interior life of a marginalised person is not peripheral to the story of society. It is part of that story.

That marks a considerable distance from the moral universe of much earlier popular cinema. Yet it need not be understood simply as a rejection of tradition.

It is, rather, an expansion of whom tradition permits us to see. And that may be one of the quiet changes taking place in Manipuri cinema: the society being reflected is no longer assumed to have a single centre.

The power of the particular

Lakshmipriya Devi's *Boong* (2024) offers perhaps the clearest demonstration of another possibility.

Its protagonist is a child, and much of the world is encountered through childhood's innocence, curiosity and determination. Beneath that apparently simple story are questions of conflict, borders, separation, identity and belonging.

Boong

The film premiered at Toronto and in 2026 became the first Indian film to win the BAFTA Award for Best Children's & Family Film. But the award is not what makes *Boong* significant in the context of Manipuri cinema. More important is what the film does with its particularity.

It does not need to explain Manipur to an outside audience through suffering. It tells a human story from Manipur. Its politics remain present, but they exist within character, circumstance and the child's understanding of the world rather than becoming an announcement.

There is a lesson here for a cinema emerging from a place that has often been viewed from outside through the lens of conflict. Universality does not require abandoning particularity. Quite often, the opposite is true. The more specifically a filmmaker understands a place, a culture or a human experience, the greater the possibility that audiences elsewhere will recognise something of themselves in it.

When the land becomes a character

Rakesh Moirangthem's *Phouoibee* (2025) enters this territory through the land itself. An agrarian family, a mentally disabled man and the precarious existence of sharecropping bring agriculture, faith, poverty, memory and the sanctity of land into the same frame. The goddess Phouoibee is not simply folklore inserted into the narrative. Mythology becomes part of the psychological and cultural landscape inhabited by the characters.

This is significant because landscape in Manipuri cinema is rarely only landscape. The lake is livelihood. The field is memory. The hill is shelter and sometimes a boundary. A village can carry a history that no character needs to explain.

In films such as *Phouoibee*, the land begins to function less as a backdrop and more as a participant in the story. That may become one of the distinctive resources of a cinema rooted in Manipur: not simply the depiction of place, but an understanding of how place shapes the people who inhabit it.

A Generation Experimenting with Form

The same impulse can be found outside feature filmmaking, particularly among a younger generation working in the short-film form. But this experimentation did not begin with the post-Golden Jubilee generation. Manipuri short filmmaking has its own history of testing what the medium can do.

Kongbrailatpam Ibohal Sharma was among the first Manipuri filmmakers to make short films in Manipur, beginning with *Ningthemcha Ahum* (*Three Princes*, 1960), followed by *Ichel* (*The Flow*, 1965). Shot on 8mm, *Ningthemcha Ahum* adapted a popular play into a satirical narrative about the socio-political life of Manipur under the monarchy. *Ichel*, by contrast, was an anthology of short stories that explored the possibilities of cinematic storytelling with a playful sense of humour.

Kongbrailatpam Ibohal Sharma

Laimayum Surjakanta's *Laman* (*Revenge*, 1975), shot on 16mm, brought another possibility into the form: a romantic story that also engaged with the idea of women's agency. In 1983, veteran filmmaker Aribam Syam Sharma made the featurette *Paokhum Ama* (*The Only Answer*), placing the rapidly modernising society of the valley against the comparatively simple and humanistic traditional life of the hills.

These were sporadic experiments rather than a continuous movement. Yet they established something important: the short film could provide a space in which Manipuri filmmakers could take risks that the conventions of feature filmmaking did not always permit.

If one were to identify a more sustained force in the development of the Manipuri short-film form, the work of Mayanglangbam Romi Meitei deserves particular attention. Since 2009, he has built a body of seven short films, several of them critically recognised, while moving across subjects that are at once social and deeply personal.

Cease Baby Whimpering Cry (2009), his debut short, explored poverty and child rights. *Noong Amadi Yeroom* (*Rock and Egg*, 2011) examined the psychology of fear. *Kangkhada Lin* (*Snake under the Bed*, 2014) and *Karfew* (*Curfew*, 2014) engaged with human rights and the pressures of a society living under restrictions. *Eshingi Machu* (*Color Water*, 2015) turned towards the interpretation of art, while *Yours Faithfully* (2018) addressed patriotism and human rights. *Motsillaba Mingsel* (*The Tainted Mirror*, 2019) examined the corrosive effects of consumerism.

Romi Meitei's body of work is important not because it forms a single stylistic school, but because it demonstrates the short film's capacity to hold serious social questions within compact, often allegorical stories. It kept alive a tradition of experimentation at a time when the feature film remained the dominant measure of

cinematic ambition. The younger filmmakers working today are extending that tradition, but their experiments often begin from an even smaller place.

Toy Gun

Thingnam Parshuram's *Toy Gun* (2025), Tenzing Pukhrambam's *The Nightmare of Bembi* (2026), Dingko Thingnam's *Eche* (2026) and Yengkhom Boycha's *Season of Gooseberry* (2026) approach their subjects through very different doors.

Toy Gun turns the image of a gun into something deceptively small and familiar, while carrying within it the trauma associated with violence. *The Nightmare of Bembi* looks at the long shadow of the 2023 conflict through the experience of children.

Then there is *Eche*, an intimate story of a grandson caring for his sick and ageing grandmother, who mistakes him for her loving elder sister, Eche. The film was selected under the WAVES Doc Bazaar Recommends lineup at the 19th Mumbai International Film Festival in 2026.

And *Season of Gooseberry* takes an apparently simple premise—the search by a farmer for his missing cow—and places it against the highly militarised landscape of rural Manipur.

That last contrast is revealing. A cow may seem an insignificant subject beside the scale of militarisation, but precisely because the story begins with something so ordinary, the larger reality can enter almost unnoticed. The political is not necessarily absent. It is simply no longer required to announce itself.

What connects these films is therefore not a common subject. It is a willingness to trust smaller stories.

These filmmakers have grown up in a Manipur profoundly different from the one that produced *Matamgi Manipur*. Insurgency, the proliferation of small arms, economic uncertainty, displacement, fractured social relationships and the erosion of familiar value systems form part of the environment in which this generation has learned to live.

Yet their response is not invariably polemical. Increasingly, they personalise the enormous. A gun becomes a toy. Conflict is experienced through the vulnerable consciousness of a child. A farmer's search for a missing cow opens a window onto a militarised landscape. An ageing grandmother's confusion becomes a story about memory and care. A political reality can be reduced to a room, a road, a conversation—or a silence.

This apparent minimalism should not be mistaken for a lack of ambition. It may instead reflect a growing understanding of what these filmmakers can do with the medium—and what they cannot.

Sometimes the most confident choice a filmmaker can make is to leave something outside the frame.

What has changed, then, is not the existence of experimentation. Manipuri short filmmaking has been experimenting from its earliest days. What seems to be changing is the direction and scale of that experimentation: from finding new ways to tell stories about society to finding ways of allowing society to reveal itself through the smallest details of individual lives.

Stories waiting in the wings

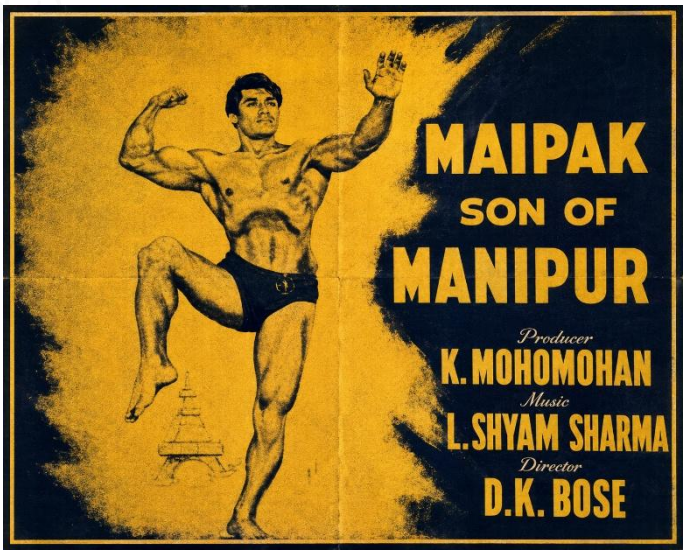
The movement is not confined to films already released. Romi Meitei's *Nason Pikna*, Haorongbam Maipaksana's *Eemaa* and Adhikarimayum Bhubon Sharma's *House of Mr. Benjamin* suggest that the appetite for stories outside established formulas is continuing.

Nason Pikna, which won first prize at the 4th Manipuri Film Script Competition in 2026, returns to the impact of small arms on a traditional society in which art and its practitioners struggle to find their place amid a changing moral and social landscape. *Eemaa* turns towards a young woman whose husband disappears, leaving her to care for two children while confronting the predatory gaze and threats around her. *House of Mr. Benjamin* confines its story to a single house—a society almost trapped inside a time capsule against the backdrop of ethnic unrest.

Their premises could hardly be more different. That may be precisely the point. The next phase of Manipuri cinema may be defined less by a common genre than by a common curiosity about society: a desire to look at familiar realities from unfamiliar distances.

Documentary Discovers the Person

If fiction is changing its gaze, Manipuri documentary cinema has travelled a related path. The impulse to record life on film, however, predates Manipuri feature filmmaking. Maharaj Kumar Priyabrata Singh began filming landscapes and aspects of life in Manipur with an 8mm camera as early as 1936, which he had acquired on the advice of his tutor, Col. Dr. Taylor. Singh's stated intention was not filmmaking as an artistic pursuit but preservation—to leave a record on celluloid for future generations. Those early images mark the beginnings of a documentary impulse in Manipur: the desire to hold on to a world that might otherwise disappear.



Maipak, Son of Manipur, a ten-minute documentary on bodybuilder Nongthombam Maipak Singh, belongs to this early history. Released in 1971, it became the first film from Manipur to be censored.

There is also a curious connection between the documentary and the birth of Manipuri feature filmmaking. According to actress Yengkhom Roma, in an interview

with the SN Chand Cine Archive & Museum, the cast and crew of *Matamgi Manipur* had assembled at a Calcutta studio when the India-Pakistan War of 1971 stalled the shooting. During the enforced wait, the idea of making a documentary about Maipak emerged. Producer Karam Monomohan brought Maipak to Calcutta, and the ten-minute film was made there.

In a sense, before Manipuri cinema had properly begun making fictional worlds of its own, it was already learning to look at one of its people. That impulse would evolve.

Rude Awakening (1996), a video documentary on the Naga-Kuki ethnic violence of the 1990s, marked an early move towards hard-hitting reality-based storytelling. Its selection for the Video Vista section of the 4th Bombay International Film Festival for Documentary, Short & Animation Films demonstrated that Manipuri non-fiction could carry difficult contemporary realities beyond the immediate context of the state.

Heart to Heart (2010) took a very different route. The story of a child with congenital heart disease, treatment and recovery became an intimate human narrative rather than simply a medical subject. Its recognition with the National Film Award for Best Science and Technology Film showed how a specialised subject could be made emotionally accessible through the life of one person.

Phumshang (2014), by Paban Kumar, examined the displacement of a sustainable way of life on Loktak Lake against the backdrop of official attempts to save the lake. The documentary received the National Film Award for Best Investigative Documentary.

Sagolgi Eigi Wari or Pony and Me (2014) went further into the relationship between the endangered Manipuri pony and the people who have lived alongside it. The animal becomes more than a subject of conservation. Its uncertain future begins to echo the predicament of a society undergoing rapid change.

With Bobo Khuraijam's *Ima Sabitri* (2016), the camera moves still closer. Sabitri, known affectionately as “Ima” among theatre enthusiasts, is not treated simply as a representative of a disappearing theatrical culture. The film stays with her as a person, with the texture of a life and a personality. *Ima Sabita* became the second Manipuri non-fiction film to open the Indian Panorama at the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), in 2016. The first was Aribam Syam Sharma’s

Yelhou Jagoi, which opened the Indian Panorama in the 27th IFFI in 1996, exploring the mythology surrounding the creation dance of Lai Haraoba.

Meena Longjam's *Andro Dreams* (2023) continues this movement. Women's football in Andro is the visible subject, but the film is really anchored in Laibi Phanjoubam, an older woman who sustains an all-women football club despite economic hardship, patriarchy and social orthodoxy. *Andro Dreams* also opened the Indian Panorama's non-fiction section at the 54th IFFI in Goa in 2023. Again, the distinction matters. The subject is no longer merely an event. The subject is a person.

Borun Thokchom's *Battlefield* (2025) carries this way of seeing into historical memory. Its examination of the remnants and memories of the Second World War's Battle of Imphal does not treat the battlefield as a museum object. The war is approached through personal stories, inherited memories and the shadows it has left behind.

History, in such a film, is no longer entirely past. It survives in landscapes, memories and silences.

This does not mean that the movement towards the individual has made documentary cinema less political. *AFSPA 1958* remains an important reminder of the opposite. The film, which won the National Film Award for Best Non-Feature Film in 2008, confronted one of the most contentious political realities of its time through documentation of non-violent resistance in Manipur. Its significance lies not only in its Swarna Kamal, but in the fact that documentary cinema demonstrated its ability to confront political reality without reducing it to abstraction.

Taken together, these works suggest a gradual movement in the documentary gaze: from recording a community to finding the person within it; from documenting an event to listening for the memory it leaves behind. The larger reality remains. But increasingly, we reach it through an individual life.

Towards a cinematic identity

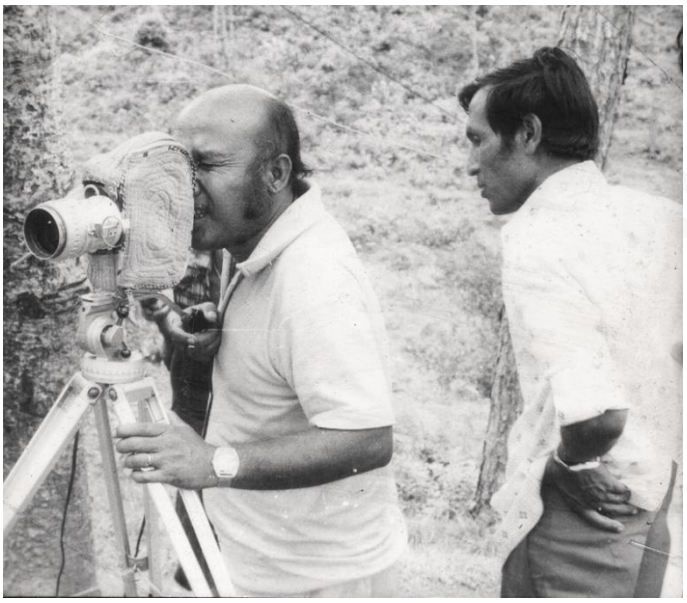
Does all this amount to a distinct Manipuri cinematic identity? The answer should perhaps remain unfinished.

A cinematic identity cannot be manufactured simply by making films in a particular language or in a particular place. Nor can it be established by counting awards, festival selections or international premieres.

It emerges more quietly, when the way a people experience the world begins to influence the way stories are constructed: in the rhythm of a scene, the use of silence, the relationship between landscape and character,

the treatment of memory, the instinct towards understatement, the particular humour, melancholy and resilience that belong to a place. It can also emerge from what filmmakers choose not to imitate.

The older masters built a vocabulary. Aribam Syam Sharma's *Imagi Ningthem* (1981), a poignant story of a wife who comes to empathise with her husband's illegitimate son in his search for his mother, marked a defining moment in the history of Manipuri cinema. Cinematographed and produced by Kongbrailatpam Ibohal Sharma, the film introduced Manipuri cinema to the international film world when it won the Grand Prix at the Festival des Trois Continents in Nantes in 1981.



Making of Imagi Ningthem

Aribam Syam Sharma would carry that cinematic language further with *Ishanou* (1991), which received an official selection in the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival in 1992. More than three decades later, its digitally restored version returned to Cannes as part of the Cannes Classics official selection in 2023, bringing a landmark of Manipuri cinema back into the international frame. Certainly, the emerging generation is testing what can be done with the vocabulary those masters created.

They are looking through children, farmers, mothers, lovers, ageing parents, artists and people living at the margins. They are returning to the lake, the field, the village and the house, but not necessarily looking at them in the same way. They are taking the enormous pressures of a society and locating them in smaller worlds—in a family, a child's journey, a missing cow, a night of uncertainty, an ageing grandmother, a house that seems to have stopped in time.

Perhaps that is where the change in gaze becomes most visible. Manipuri cinema is no longer only asking how to represent its society. Increasingly, it is asking what it means to live inside that society. And that is a more difficult question. It also changes the question of identity. The challenge is no longer simply to prove that Manipur can make films, or even that its films can travel beyond the state. The more difficult question is: What kind of cinema could only Manipur make?

There is no formula waiting in the past to answer it. Nor will the answer arrive simply because more films win awards or travel to more festivals.

It will emerge, if it emerges at all, from the accumulated experience of a society continually changing beneath the camera: its conflicts and contradictions, its memory and mythology, its humour and sorrow, its landscapes and people.

Perhaps Manipuri cinema is still searching for that answer. That uncertainty is not a weakness. It may be the sign of a cinema that is alive.

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