

Book Review

“Matamgi Manipur: The First Manipuri Feature Film”- Best Book on Indian Cinema 2017

-Meghachandra Kongbam

A new chapter in the annals of 45 years of Manipuri cinema preludes with a book in English entitled, “Matamgi Manipur: The First Manipuri Feature Film” by Bobby Wahengbam. The book bagged the Swarna Kamal for ‘the Best Book on Cinema’ at the 65th National Film Awards, 2017. He is the first from Manipur and the second from the North East India to have won the coveted award for the best book on cinema. The first North East Indian writer who has been decorated with the prestigious award is Apurba Sarma for his work in Assamese ‘*Asoumiya Chalachitrar Chaa-Pohar*’ (Light and Shade on Assamese Cinema) way back in the year 2001.

The book provides a vivid account of the socio-political scenario in which Manipuri regional cinema was born. It denotes a compassionate account of the dreams, challenges, preparation, execution and success of the team involved. Critical analysis of the film makes it more praiseworthy and insightful.

The 228-page book published by Angom Ningthou Preservation and Documentation containing 31 photographs is priced Rs. 499/-. It is an in-depth study of the birth of ‘Matamgi Manipur’, the first feature film in Manipuri which starts the journey of Manipuri cinema with the release of the film on the 9th April 1972 in the backdrop of the vast canvas of World cinema. The book contains four main chapters. The first chapter delves into the world cinema and film theories prevailing before *Matamgi Manipur* (1972). The second chapter highlights the Indian cinema as well as the cinema in Manipur till the production of *Matamgi Manipur*. The third chapter is concentrated on the making of *Matamgi Manipur* narrated primarily through the interview of the artistes, singers, the producer and creative people involved. The last chapter deals with the critical analysis of *Matamgi Manipur* from different perspectives.

In the introductory part, the history of Manipuri cinema till the present period is briefly but clearly presented through three distinctive generations of filmmakers. First generation belongs to S.N. Chand, Aribam Syam Sharma, G. Narayan Sharma, L. Banka Sharma, K. Ibohal Sharma, G C. Tongbra, Thoudam Dorendro, M.A. Singh, Moirangthem Nilmani, Sanakhya Ebotombi, Laishram Samarendra, Arambam Lokendra and others. Among the second generation directors, he mentions N. Rajen Meitei, R.K. Kripa, L. Surjakanta, L.Padam Sharma, Ch. Shyamacharon, Makhonmani Mongsaba, Oken Amakcham, K. Bimol Sharma, M. Ashwinikumar, Thouyangba, Thougamba, N. Tomba, Jiban Heisnamba, Kh. Kuleshore, Chan Heisnam, Bishwamittra, Kishorekumar, Em Kay Jeet, W. Ibohal, Rajen Khuman and others. The filmmakers in the digital

video age are clubbed together in the third generation mentioning around 57 filmmakers where names of 256 directors enrolled with the Directors' guild are also provided in the book.

The importance of *Matamgi Manipur* not only in cinema but also in the political and socio-cultural dynamism is also discussed in the introduction. *Matamgi Manipur* is not just a full length first feature film in Manipuri language but it is a film produced in a time where complexities started to gather in Manipur in the fabric of social, political and cultural dynamics. It was the period of strong cultural revivalism; clashes of diversities of thoughts and aspirations in the society; a new kind of political consciousness with the strong movement for Statehood demand; and it was the period the western materialism started to influence some sections of the people.

The first chapter is dedicated to the history of World cinema by providing a brief account on it till 1972, the production of the first Manipuri feature film. It covers a short sketch on the major film schools of thought in the silent era including the Hollywood classic films, German Expressionism (1919-1924), French Impressionism and Surrealism (1917-1930) and Soviet Montage (1924-30). The book also talks about other schools and cinema of some countries that could make a strong impression in the talkie era including films of French Poetic Realism in the 1930s, Italian Neorealism (1942-51), French New Wave, Polish cinema, Czechoslovakia Golden age (1962-69), New German cinema, Swiss cinema renaissance, Latin American cinema, African cinema, Asian cinema and others. It also refers to auteur filmmakers of the 1950s who redefined cinema with their innovative look at cinema as a high form of artistic expression. Such filmmakers include Ingmar Bergman (Sweden), Fellini (Italy), Alfred Hitchcock (America/Britain), Andrei Tarkovsky (Russia) and few others. With regards to film theory, it discusses on two broad ideas of Formalist and Realist film theories by citing appropriate films. From there, it queues to Manipuri cinema.

The second chapter briefly reviews the Indian cinema both popular and parallel as well as regional cinema before the birth of Manipuri cinema. The existence of Manipuri cinema prior to 'Matamgi Manipur' is discussed with authentic sources. It covers Assamese cinema since its birth in 1935; Bengali cinema (b.1913); Bhojpuri cinema (b. 1962); Gujarati cinema (b. 1932); Kashmiri cinema (b. 1964); Kannada cinema (b. 1934); Malayalam cinema (b. 1928); Marathi cinema (b. 1913); Oriya cinema (b. 1936); Punjabi cinema (b. 1935); Tamil cinema (1918) and Telugu cinema (1921). With regards to Manipuri cinema prior to the birth of *Matamgi Manipur*,

it covers the British Imperial films made in Manipur before and during the WW II; topical films of MK Priyobrata; silent films of K. Ibohal Sharma; and the attempt for production of Manipuri feature in Hindi- '*Mainu Pemcha*'.

In the third chapter, the whole process of the realization of the film- *Matamgi Manipur* is retold through the voice of those who were actively involved in the creation of the film. Expressions of the producer Karam Monomohan, music composer Aribam Syam Sharma, actors -Kangabam Birbabu, Kangabam Tomba, actresses- Yengkhom Roma, Ksh. Rashi, play back singer Kamla, dialogue writer and actor Arambam Lokendro and others bring their intimate encounter with the making of the film.

The most important chapter is the fourth one, the in-depth analysis of the film with various interpretations after reviews of different performing arts, theatre and literary traditions of the people serving it as a backbone in the crafting of the film. It briefly reviews different art forms of Manipur- *Rasa Lila*, *Lai Haraoba*, *Maibi dance*, *Khamba Thoibi dance*, the *Pena recital*, *Nata Sankritana*, *Khunung Ishei*, *Khongjom Parva*, *Moirang Parva*, the literary works of the period, proscaenium theatre and traditional theatre-*Shumang Lila*; modern songs and other performing art forms.

In this chapter, *Matamgi Manipur* is discussed with different approaches and interpretations including implicit and explicit perspectives. In the symptomatic interpretation, it covers three approaches of formalist/generic, realist and auteur. It dissects the film to see whether it closes generically to Bollywood style or Hollywood or the Manipuri theatre of the period. Contextually, it discusses the socio-political, historical, traditional, cultural and other situations of the period and how it influences the body of *Matamgi Manipur*. In philosophical and psychological approaches, it refers the social dynamism of the period where traditionalist and modernist overlaps where dualist interpretation is also made between the father and the younger son representing the generation gap of the two extremes. The dualist approach also covers the dedicated traditional housewife and the independent, individualistic, pragmatic and materialistic woman. In the feminist approach, it discusses the well defined distinctive and different female characters including the traditional wife, the materialistic mistress, the confused daughter and the dedicated lover. The writer also cites Marxist elements in the film.

In conclusion, the writer views that Manipuri cinema is privileged to own *Matamgi Manipur* since the film vocally addresses the social and political situations of the period and shows

maturity in image making praising the efforts of the makers to make it ‘cinema of both the Classes and Masses’.

At the end, the book cites 66 celluloid films produced till date with cast and credits. It has referred 51 books, 6 journals, 2 newspapers, 20 souvenirs and 10 compilations. It also provides an 11-page index as well. Bobby Wahengbam’s book is indeed a well researched book constructed through primary sources and reference books while analysing the film through validated approaches and interpretations. It will be a useful book not only for researchers in film studies but also for budding critics.

A decade back, Bobby Wahengbam, a film maker, actor and film critic was making a documentary on the making of *Matamgi Manipur*, the first feature film in Manipur which won the National Film Award in regional language. But, it could not see the light of the day for want of financial assistance. Then, he gave vent to his passion for writing with immense information on standby as most of the personalities involved in the creation of *Matamgi Manipur* had been interviewed and extensive research had undergone in the subject.

At his capacity as director, he was credited with 12 documentaries, two telefilms, two TVserials and a video feature film. He acted as protagonist in Manipuri feature film- *Meichak* (2000) directed by L. Banka Sharma, which the legendary singer Lata Mangeshkar rendered two Manipuri songs in the film.