Growth of Modern Manipuri Theatre and its Importance in Manipuri Society

Yunnam Nirmala Devi & *Ramthai
Ph. D Scholars
Dept. of English
Pondicherry University- 605014

Abstract: Modern Manipuri Theatre has its origin from native primitive fertility-cults and an ancestral-worship ritual form called Lai Haraoba (Pleasing of gods) which were performed at around twelfth century. Such festivals gained royal recognition when the monarchs patronised them. Then, these rituals were merged into a form of performing art which we call it Shumang Leela (Shumang means courtyard and Leela means play or performance). Etymologically, the seed of Shumang Leela was sown in Phagee Leela (a farce) performed during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti (1850-1886), though the evidences of it were already found in the rituals of Lai Haraoba festival. Another adaptation of Shumang Leela is the Eabei Leela with its background music and playback singing. With this came the Phampak Leela (a stage drama) performed in the proscenium theatre imitating the Western theatrical model. The so-called Modern Theatre was first conceived with the performance of Pravas Milan (1902) under the fervent patronage of Sir Charuchand Maharaj (1891-1941). Manipur had its first established theatre house in the early years of first decade of 20th century in the form of Manipur Friends Dramatic Union. The tempo of theatrical movement was geared up with the establishment of various institutions. These theatre groups started experimenting with various types of plays depicting the realities of its society, disseminating new ideas, discussions on various contemporary issues, and giving message to the masses. The paper deals with the growth of Modern Manipuri Theatre and its relevant to Manipuri society.

Manipur and its theatre:
Manipur is a land of exquisite art and culture. The custom and tradition of Manipur is so rich that redefining the intensity of its magnificence will ever remain underachieved. Since theatre represents society, it could be rightly observed that Manipuri has a committed relationship with its theatre. Manipuris, in fact, are a culturally fervent people: the cultural will has never been restrained despite many influences from the outside world. This is the main reason why theatre is flourishing intrepidly bringing its theatre culture to the world level. However, the occupation of the colonial rule followed by the merging with India gives a great setback to retain its originality. The quest of identity makes the region a highly conflict zone in every spheres of life. Because of this, the theatre enthusiasts of Manipur are unable to express their feelings independently yet undergoing several stages of evolution instead. In the midst of all these chaotic circumstances, the talented actors are tirelessly entertaining the masses throughout the generations. The dramatists of Manipur are uncompromisingly employing theatres as a sharp tool to showcase their expertise and in disseminating message to the masses.

Origin of Modern Theatre in Manipur
Manipuri drama has always been a part of the Lai Haraoba festival since time immemorial. The origin of Modern Manipuri theatre could be traced back to the ancient oral ritual of Lai Haraoba (Appeasing the gods), with an aim to attain blessing of fertility, prosperity, longevity and so on. The ritual is performed only by the Maiba and Maibi (Priest and Priestess) having certain meaning attributed to various events. The ritual turned festival, Lai Haraoba is slowly followed by the oral tradition of Phagee Leela (a farce), which sole intention is to entertain, delight and points out the irony of the society concern. Manipur Theatre can be broadly divided into religion and secular, based on its depiction. The religious play is an adaptation of religious epic or some partial episode from it; performed with rites and rituals or ceremonies, mainly in the sacred places such as temples or mandaps, intended to command spiritual devotion among the audience. Gouralila (childhood days of Gouranga Mahaprabhu), Udukhol (Krishna childhood) are two famous religious plays. Secular theatre, on the other hand, is mostly confined in themes, which are not religious and is performed in the secular or sometime profane spheres. Though the religious genre is loved profoundly by the moral upholding audience, the secular theatre such as Sumang Leela and Phampak Leela (stage drama), is being seen responsible for the growth of modern theatre. Etymologically Shumang Leela is the combination of “Shumang” (courtyard) and “Leela” (play or performance). It is performed in an area of 13/13 feet in the centre of open space-courtyard or playground or Mandap (pavilion), without a raised stage, set design, or heavy props such as curtains, background scenery, and visual effects, etc. With only a table and chairs, its claim as the "theatre of the masses" can be exemplified by its performance in the middle of an audience,
leaving only one passage that serves as both entrance and exit connecting the green room. Shumang Leela achieves a huge popularity among the rustic audience because of its community-based themes and styles. It is performed by a touring band of 12-13 professional artists on invitation basis.

These troupes may be exclusively male or female whose most intriguing fact is enactment of the roles of opposite sex by the actors. In case of Nupa Shumang Leela, the male characters are enacted by the female artists and vice versa in Nupi Shabi (male actress). These male actresses are popular and are the main attraction of every Shumang Leela. The major themes of Shumang Leela is to entertain and educate people on various issues. Phagee Leela was comic in nature, cooking up absurd stories on the spot and mimicking King and the Nobles. Then comes social dramas depicting various socio-political and economic crisis of the period. However, Stage Leela finds it difficult to move out of Imphal and the audience behaviour seeks politeness and their participation to its process is limited. Today Manipur is witnessing the entrance of theatrical related performances into ritualistic sphere as it is allowed to perform into marriages, death ceremonies etc., replacing the old age tradition of Sankirtana singing. Etymologically, the actual seed of Shumang Leela was sown in Phagee Leela (farce), performed during the reign of Maharaj Chandrakirti (1850-86), though the evidences of it were already found in the episode of Tangkhul Narabi Loutanba of Lai Haraoa festival. Then it was succeeded by such plays as Ramlila, Sabha Parba, Kabul Leela etc. But the real Shumang Leela with its various rasas (sentiments) was ushered in with the epic play Harichandra (1918). Followed it were Sabitri Satyavan, Meiraba Charan and Thok Leela. One of most successful plays of this era was Moirang Prabha, an epic play based on the legendary lovers Khamba and Thoibi of Moirang. Rasa Leela is a celebration of Hindu deity Krishna, in Manipuri dance style. Phampak Leela (stage drama) performed in the prosenium theatre is similar, in form, to the Western theatrical model and Indian Natya Shasra model though its contents are very much indigenous. The so-called modern theatre descended on Manipuri theatre culture with the performance of Pravas Milan (1902) under the enthusiastic patronage of Sir Churchand Maharaj (1891–1941). The pace of theatrical movement was geared up with the institution of groups such as Manipur Dramatic Union (MDU -1930), Arian Theatre (1935), Chitrangada Natya Mandir (1936), Society Theatre (1937), Rupmahal (1942), Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union (1968), and the Chorus Repertory Theatre (1976). These theatres started experimenting with plays apart from historical and puranic ones. Today Manipuri theatre is well received because of its excellent productions shown in India and abroad. Manipuri plays, both Shumang Leela and Stage Leela, have been a regular feature in the annual festival of the National School of Drama (NSD), New Delhi. The Shrine: The Main Theatre is a classical form of Manipuri dance inspired by the theme of Lord Krishna- Radha love story and Gopis’ devotion toward Krishna. The graceful and slow movement of it is one of the most acclaimed classical performances in India. The elegant costume of nicely embroidered clothes gives lustre to the beauty of the art. ISCKON under Bhaktisvarupa Damodar Swami has put Manipuri Rasa Leela on global map like World Conference on science and religion, United Religions Initiative conference, Kumbha Mela, etc. with its performance in many prestigious events of universal importance. In 1950 when scripts were introduced with the plays like Puran Meithaba and B.A. Mapa Lamboiba, a big leap in Manipuri theatre came up. Another major impact was seen in 1970's with the introduction of Eshei Leela with background music and playback singing. Some of them were Krishnabal Leela (1975), Thadoi (1976) and Chakthekpi (1977). At present, only the Eshei Leela genre survived with ever expanding wings, having competitive zeal of performing troupes, which kept burning by the annual Shumang Leela festival that started in 1972. Manipur had its initial established theatre company in the first decade of the 20th century in the form of a Manipur Friend's Dramatic Union. During this era, plays were predominantly Manipuri's adaptation of Bengali plays, 1925 saw the beginning of original Manipuri plays with "Narasingh". By and by, theatre started disseminating to different parts of Manipur. At present every medium of entertainment involved hard work to keep pace with other genres. Commercialization and globalization started seeping into Manipuri theatre. Lack of financial assistance, wider space and audience has certain loopholes in both Sumang and Stage Leelas.Despite all these challenges, the show must go on. How can we engrave the obituary of theatre when there is no dearth of talent and the fires to excel in this field are still raging? Hence, prospects and challenges lay a fresh before Manipuri theatre, in which audience plays a crucial role, since it is audience’s tastes and preferences which will decide the fate or fortune of the future theatre.

Relevance to Manipuri Society:
The Modern Manipuri Theatre which is a result from various performances is as complex as any other established contemporary theatres of different countries. It works on various issues both local and global. It depicts various socio-political and socio-economic issues of Manipuri society. It not only entertains the masses but also educates people through its intricate performances and depictions. Through many talented and creative theatre personalities, Modern Manipuri Theatre now
received a world-wide recognition. Mention may be made of some talented and prolific dramatists like Sorokhaibam Lalit, who was the father figure of Manipuri prosenium theatre and introduced Manipur Dramatic Union in 1931. Lalit's direction of Haorang Leishang Saphabi took Manipuri Theatre in the Indian mainstream of 'unify in diversity'. It depicted the legendary folklore based on love stories and poor-boy-rich-girl encounters of Manipuri society. How poverty was considered a taboo was shown in his drama. Maibam Ramcharan was also a prolific and popular dramatist of seventy six plays in his credit and over twenty Shumang Leela scripts. His writings concentrated on sentimental, romantic, human suffering family crisis, etc. From the fine strokes of G.C. Tongbr, Arambam Somorendra, Athokpam Tomchoy and Pukhrambahon Samu, critical social drama started flourishing. G.C. Tongbr also popularly known as G.B. Shaw of Manipur wrote in satirical style that protested the repulsive and abhorrent society of his time. Rapid urbanization, new economic structures, decline in moral and community values gave an opportunity for the dramatists to showcase their expertise to include these themes in their plays. By the late 1960s, discontent against Indian administration and commercial exploitation by outside traders and agents and merchandisers led to the upsurge of youth power, search for identity, and revival of indigenous spirit can be seen in the works of artists like M. Biramangol. Search for identity and indigenous faith started spreading amongst the masses. Manipur, an erstwhile independent kingdom, was trapped in the cruel clutch of Indian Union in 1949. This controversial merger agreement between the King of Manipur and the Indian government in 1949 is still very fresh in the minds of Manipuri people. Manipuris strongly condemn this forcible merger and therefore the artists often take this historical event vehemently and depict in their works critically. From the beginning of the 70s, a new movement of absurd drama was started led by Shri Biren. 1970s not only brought absurdism in Manipuri theatre, but there were also other theatre movements that came, some of which were highly individualistic and unique. The state of affairs of the then Manipuri society was thoroughly discussed by these playwrights. These precursors paved the way for the upcoming new artists to carry on their legacy in a more experimental way. As a consequence, separatist ideology based on experimental theatre grew in the late 1970s under directors like Heisnam Kanhailal, Ratan Thiyam, and Lokendra Arambam. Kanhailal started the 'non-verbal' or 'physical theatre' in Manipur. He uses popular Meitei folktales as the base of his narrative while exposing the 'plight of the underdogs.' He founded Kalakshetra Manipur in 1969 and is known to have given a fresh leash of life after having learnt experimental theatre for 15 years from his mentor Badal Sircar in early 1960s. His theatrical language was unique among all the other contemporary directors. He emphasized on bodily, nonverbal, rhythmic and lyrical expression. His play, Nupi-Lan (Women's War), is an open-air production involving approximately 70 working women from the Ima Keithel (Mother's Market) in Imphal. This war is known as Nupi Lan in the history of Manipur when Manipur was almost facing a famine due to the unlimited export of rice from the valley by Marwari traders. It took place in two phases- in 1904 and in 1939. It sowed the seeds of a radical political and economic transformation for a new Manipur. Kanhailal used this historical event as a medium in his play to express Manipuri people's anguish and frustration over the Manipuri Government's negligence and Indian Government's unheeded policies and step motherly treatments against the citizens of Manipur. Whatever used is expressed in a very minimal bodily gestures as well as in the use of muted dialogues. To quote his own words, 'actors only use certain resonators, as we are socially and culturally conditioned. What we need is a creation of new body culture.' Draupadi and Dakghor are two classical plays of Kanhailal based on a short story by Mahasweta Devi written in 1978 and Rabindranath Tagore's Dakghor (Post Office) respectively. In the first play, Kanhailal's own wife Heisnam Sabitri, a veteran actress appears nude on stage discarding her clothes one by one in protest against her rapists which correlates with the recent struggle against the AFSPA. The potency of such message was evident in Manipur in 2004, when 12 middle aged Meitei women stood nude in front of Western gate of Kangla (the royal seat of Meitei Kings) in broad daylight where the 17 Sector Assam Rifles men were stationed. The courageous act was a protest against the brutal rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama, one of the numerous ‘suspected insurgents’ of Manipur. Here, the body becomes the site of resistance. Similarly, in the latter's play, sixty year old Sabitri played a role of a young boy, Amol who is a victim of social dogma and rigidity. The play depicts the boy's quest of freedom exploring new social relationships. Sabitri as Amol represents every individual of Manipur who has been subjected to accept the authoritative rule of the society. For Kanhailal, theatre should be grounded with ideology and deep-rooted social commitment. Theatre is not a detached art, it must become a voice for the voiceless, a means that gives power to the disempowered to resist. Kanhailal picked up the story of Pebet (1975) from a Manipuri folk tale which he improvised to tell a story of contemporary relevance. Pebet is a rare bird of Manipur, smaller than sparrow and the story is all about the mother pebet (performed with poetic grace by Sabitri) and her struggle to protect her chicks from the brutal clutch of a snooping cat. The play becomes not only as one of the most momentous and influential critiques but also an extended allegory of the internecine
political violence and ruined beliefs that have taken the entire Northeast region in general and Manipur in particular. One who has suffered the gruesome brutalities of militancy and its diabolic consequences can instantaneously recognize with the characters and understand each move as it leads to a terrible deterioration of the very essentials of human values, the crumple of reason and the catastrophic disintegration of the age old philosophy that used to guarantee the sense of belongingness of the communities living here. Memoirs of Africa is based on a poignant poem by L. Samarendra's Africagee Wokhanda Gee. The play depicts the most demoralizing experiences of human history across civilizations where Africa transforms into a deep allegorical trope to relate the account of universal human encounter with misery and shattering tyranny. It vividly narrates man's most cataclysmic encounter with the chaotic age of brutalities, immeasurable atrocities, treachery and terrible butchery that infected the rural purity of life. All these depictions link to the contemporary sorry conditions of his homeland, Manipur. Kanhaiyalal's plays are a testimony of his own people, his own motherland. It deeply furrows down to the core the heart in projecting the various issues faced by his own people, his own motherland. Lokendra Arambam, in 1939, developed 'theatre for resistance' at Aryan Theatre. Lokendra's tour de force, Macbeth- Stages of Blood (1997) won the heart of Londoners at Watermans Art Center, located on the banks of the River Thames in West London. It marked the celebration of 50 years of India's Independence. It brought one of this year's major international theatrical events to the capital. Presented on a floating stage on the River Thames, the play promised to be an enchanting sight. Previously it was performed on the banks of Loktak lake in Manipur. It is not, however, this play's setting that makes it unique. Fusing Shakespeare's original texts with the history of the troubled state of Manipur has produced an utterly novel version of this repeatedly performed play. Its relevance is unique in the context of Manipur in the sense that the years of conflict which have left their mark on this largely ignored state of Northeast India in general and Manipur in particular draw parallels with the conflict within "Macbeth", finding an innovative connotation of contemporary importance. His recent production, Awang-Nongpok Langlee Nawal (Children of the North-East), depicts the political unrest prevailing in North East India and its effect on the youth. The youths are at crossroads and some of them started taking drugs and resorted to taking arms. The play critically shows the predicaments of these youths and questioned the efficiency of the government. Ratan Thiyam is known for writing and staging plays that use ancient traditions and forms in a contemporary context. He is proficient in direction, design, script and music. He is often considered as one of the leading contemporary theatre gurus. He graduated from National School of Drama, New Delhi in 1974. Even, he was the director of the National School of Drama from 1987 to 1989. He went on to set up a theatre group called Chorus Repertory Theatre in Imphal, Manipur in 1976. His works profess a deep concern for social welfare and spiritual yearnings in the midst of the political chaos in the modern world. His plays depict his political ideologies and his use of theatre as medium of political protest is very much conspicuous. Thiyam believes that every play embodies some form of protest- whether or not it's political. To quote his own words, 'Even in my recent production, Macbeth, the protest is against human greed and desire for power.' War and a craving for peace have been a recurring theme in most of his plays. 'If you as an artiste get involved in party politics, then you are indulging the system. If you are inside the system, you can't protest. And theatre is all about protest, with the highest involvement of aesthetics,' says Thiyam. Macbeth is the name of a disease spreading out with the greatest speed in the contemporary world and in Manipur, according to him. This play is pertinent to the contemporary socio-political situations of his homeland. Thiyam's first notable production, Chakravyuha (Army Formation, 1984), depicts a similar analysis of power, greed and violence.

It has been performed several times around the globe due to its merits. Uttar Priyadarshi (The Final Beatitude), an adaptation of Hindi verse play by playwright and poet Agyeiya in 1996 is based on a story of redemption of king Ashoka, a man's struggle against his own inner dark side and a soul search for peace. The play has since been performing to many parts of South Asia, Australia and the US. His plays are universal yet draw inspirations from the intricate traditional Manipuri culture and conventions like martial art Thang-Ta, Nata Sankirtana(a aishnavite folk dance form), Rasa Lila, Lai Haraoba, etc. His plays stick to the roots of Manipuri culture. In 1986, he adapted Jean Anouilh's 'Antigone' as Lengshonnie. It depicts the corrupt behaviour of politicians, their inability to handle political situation in his homeland. Andha Yug (The Blind Age), a play by Dharamvir Bharati is known for creating an intense and intimate experience around a universal theme and it was performed at Tongba, Japan, on 5th August 1994, a day before the 49th anniversary of Atomic Holocaust in Hiroshima. It depicts human suffering and the insatiable greed of human power. An adaptation of Ritusamharam, a play by Sanskrit playwright Kalidasa shows human search for solace and sanity amidst chaos and violence of today's world. His plays though universal in theme unmistakably connotes Manipuri people's predicament and sufferings among chaos and violence. Norwegian playwright Ibsen's When We Dead Awaken (2008) was adapted into Ashibogee Eshet in Manipuri. It depicts thematically a concern for life, how the
people of Manipur are leading their life defying the atrocities meted out to them. *The King of Dark Chamber* (2012) based on the play *Raja* by Rabindranath Tagore was marked by the scenic brilliance and design aesthetics. It depicts the predicaments of the marginalised everywhere.

Theatre in Manipur is equivalent to Ratan Thiyam, Kanhaiyalal, and Arambam. With their subtle and intricate experimental mode of depiction, theatre in Manipur gained a momentum not only in India but also in abroad. India is represented by their performances several times. The colonial experience during British Raj, the controversial merger agreement with Independent India, the upsurge of claiming freedom from the neo-colonial clutch of Indian rule, the AFSPA issues, the insurgency movements have to be dispelled from Manipur and these are the recurrent themes these giant artists always indulge with.

**Works Cited:**