

*Shumang Leela – A Platform For Cultural And Development Communication  
Discourse*

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**Abstract**

Shumang Leela which means ‘Courtyard performance’ is a Manipuri theatrical art form considered to have developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The paper discusses how the theatrical art form broke the monopoly of art as being accessible only by the upper caste, the so called elite sections of the society and began acting as a community development media having the role of entertaining, enlightening, instructing, educating and sensitizing the public on various issues relevant to the society within the cultural context and space of the Manipuris. Though secular in nature it has found its ritualistic space as the theatre form is integrated in different life cycles of a person in the Manipuri culture. It is a medium of development communication to spread social awareness to people through its meaningful themes and enactments which portray the socio-politico-economic issues of the people not only in Manipur but also globally. Shumang Leela is popular for its ‘Nupi Shabis’ who are actually male actors performing female roles. The paper further explores the important issue on Transgender identity of the performers known as ‘Nupi Shabis’, as the theatre form is their platform and community. Shumang Leela is a stage for cultural communication of the Manipuri society. It is also a model for development communication using traditional media, a communication system embedded in the cultural context. Even where mass media has penetrated, Shumang Leela has proved its validity to sensitize people’s thinking to promote change.

Key words: Development and Cultural Communication, Courtyard play, Transgender identity

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## Introduction

Shumang Leela which means Courtyard performance is a theatrical art form of the Manipuris. Manipur is a state in the North-eastern part of India with an area of 22,327 square kilometres. The theatrical art form has the role of enlightening, instructing, entertaining, educating and sensitizing the public in various issues relevant to the society within the cultural context and space of the Manipuris. Shumang Leela is considered to have developed from the comic plays termed as Phagee leelas, which gained popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Chandrakirti Maharaj (1856-1886) and Churachand Maharaj (1891 – 1941). Another school of thought believes that Shumang leela originates from the ritual ceremony of Lai-haraoba (pleasing god). Some scholars credit its emergence to the expedition for a temporal space, an unofficial art form accessible to the common public as opposed to other Manipuri theatrical performances which could not break the cultural dominance of the elites and were constrained and restricted to religious and royal receivers of the medium. Like all art forms the world over, theatrical performances in Manipur was also accessed only by the upper caste, the so called elite sections of the society. This scenario began to change in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of formulation of a more secular and egalitarian space. Hence, depending on the media text, theatre can be categorized as Devotional or Temporal.

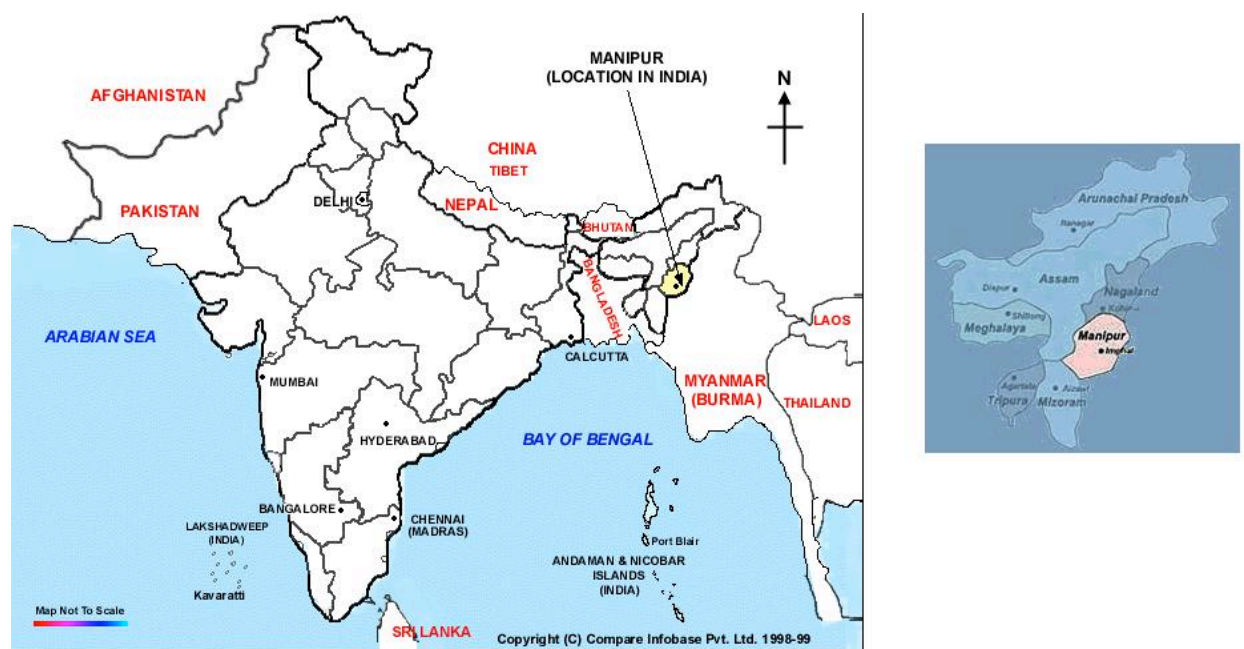


Figure 1: Manipur, India

## Premise of Shumang Leela Plays

Shumang Leela is mainly performed to entertain people. However, it also acts as the major medium of development communication to spread social awareness to people through its meaningful themes and enactments which portray the socio-political-economic issues of the people not only in Manipur but also beyond. Theatre is entering into the avenues, which were once solely occupied, by religion and politics (Schechner, 1983). The focus of Shumang Leela semiotics is the signs found in its texts. For example, a play 'World Trade Centre' was enacted in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 attack to depict human suffering and loss. Plays also revolve around themes like environment issues, insurgency problems, unemployment, corruption, HIV and AIDS etc. The theatre acts as a platform which compares the actual situation

of social structure to an ideal construct to sensitize the society at large. Shumang Leela is in line with Wang and Dissanayake's (1984) definition of folk media as a communication system embedded in the culture which existed much before the arrival of mass media, and which still exists as a vital mode of communication presenting a certain degree of continuity, despite changes.

People-centered development model look for newer concepts of development such as self-help, grassroots participation, the two-way communication, development support communication etc. Traditional media like Shumang Leela serve as vehicles of information, education, persuasion and entertainment. This art form through its narratives addresses issues in the light of development context related to development of quality of life for all through education, health, nutrition, housing; development of poor, marginal by creating employment opportunities, development of rural population who live in rural areas and have limitations of economic resources. For example, Family Planning Bureau's Shumang Leela "Chayam Pokpa" and Chana Lukhoi's "Anouba Mangal" carried family planning messages; "Kanagi Maralno" was on Polio Immunization. The Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Government of Manipur used the medium to bring awareness on sanitation through plays like Anouba Mangal and Amambada Meingal. The Science and Technology Department also produced play on environment entitled "Anouba Yenning". Shumang Leela "Senphu Hangba" was produced for generating awareness on national savings insurance; "Makhong Taragi Cheingak" was produced under the State Veterinary and Animal Husbandry Department, Manipur for awareness generation on animal husbandry services. "Naitom Satpi" was a successful Shumang Leela based on leprosy disease.

The traditional art form is generally executed by a touring group of 12-13 performers. These groups are either exclusively female (Nupi Shumang Leela) or exclusively male (Nupa Shumang Leela). Creation of *Mise-en-scène* in Shumang Leela is very simple with minimal props. Table, chairs, orchestra, poles for dangling microphones and tube lights are the common set ups used. Intricate use of actor's voice, body and mime is the most important element of performance. Using the Multimodal analysis which involves the analysis of communication in all its forms, the interaction and integration or 'modes' of semiotic resources in Shumang Leela for communication can be seen to function at a simplified level yet serving the persuasive communicative functions of the text, by reflecting the society and educating the Manipuris with constructive information.

Shumang Leela begins with the mandali puja which takes place with offering of fruits, betel nuts and leaves and lighting of incense. This ritual makes the performance space sanctified, wherein both the performers and the audience have to remove their shoes if they step on the stage. The performers also offer prayers to Khangoplemjeng Lairembi, the goddess of theatre seeking her blessings. This is followed by the Actors' march (Kouwaj) which is accompanied with playing drums (dholak) and cymbals (kartal). The ritual is performed to give respect to the god. Although Shumang Leela is categorised as a theatre in the Temporal space, a lot of influence of the religious theatrical performances as conducted in the temples can be seen in its symbolic rituals. The theatre form also follows a ritual of conveying reverence to the audience by singing a song called Beitha. One interesting shift that has also been noted is that earlier god (Krishna) and goddess (Radha) were invoked with the singing of Kouwaj

to consecrate the performance space. However, this has been replaced by secular songs and themes in the orchestra playing to better engage the audience. Multimodal forms of communication which is central to any form of human communication, be it theatrical, can be seen in this evolution of Shumang Leela with the conjuring of abstraction and material in semiosis.

### **Nupi Shabis – the transgender performers of Shumang Leela**

Shumang Leela is popular for its Nupi shaabis who are actually male actors performing female roles. Owing to the nature of the theatre form, actors had to travel to different places for performances. Manipuri society being conservative in nature, did not find it conducive for women performers travelling with men to distant locations. Hence, there was a dropout in the number of women performers and men had to step in to play the female roles. Nupi shaabis have to undergo rigorous training in the practice of physicality and vocal skills. The practice generally was that the Director of a troupe would look for suitable boys and seek the parents' permission to train the boy as Nupi shaabi. Upon getting the consent of the parents, the boy would be consecrated on an auspicious day at the teacher's residence. The induction would first start with habituation of household chores done by women so that they are type-casted into the feminine nature. It is only after they have perfected themselves in this role that the real acting in terms of dialogue delivery and feminine movement are taught. Throughout this grooming stage, the future Nupi Shaabi is treated as a daughter. Here again, there is the power play of a patriarchal notion of how an "ideal" woman should be. This "ideal construct" of feminine disposition as perceived by a patriarchal society leads into the transformation and construction of a Nupi shaabi.



Figure 2: Nupi shaabis (source:epao.net)

Herein, a psychological change also takes place which is reflected in the trainee's demeanour. As Swar Thounaojam states, "This image-making of a woman in Shumang Leela comes with its own share of problems. The aim of actor training for nupi shaabis till date has been to maintain a neat male/female binary, not blur or question it. Generations of male directors have codified the feminine gestures, appearance, physicality and costume in such a way that the audience's heterosexual (and of course patriarchal) expectations from a woman character are met by the nupi shaabis". There have been instances when Nupi shaabis have not been accepted by the audiences because of their looks as not being beautiful enough to be a woman. Such non acceptance deeply hurts them and leaves an emotional scar in them as failures.

Many of these Nupi shaabis carry on with their feminine roles off stage, as transgender. Some are so popular for their looks that they get marriage proposals from men. Whereas some Nupi shaabis are very specific about their identity as men and that they are men performing female roles. They would not want to be identified as Transgender. However there is a more complex identity issue which is emerging for the Nupi Shaabis:

“A new generation of self-identified nupi maanbis (trans-women) have joined Shumang Leela to perform as nupi shaabis. Their entry has complicated the gender queerness of Shumang Leela and challenged the internalised homophobia and trans-phobia that still exist within the Shumang Leela community. Bishesh Huirem, 24, is an emerging nupi shaabi. She identifies herself as a nupi maanbi and within theatre where body is key, her transition from nupi maanbi into nupi shaabi for a Shumang Leela raises many interesting questions. Bishesh asserted her identity as a nupi maanbi when she was a pre-teen. She took part in many transgender beauty contests and won quite a few. She got her first role as a nupi shaabi right after her Class 10 exams. Her family was quite against it, but they came around after a lot of persuasion. She performed for three years and left Imphal to study fashion design at Garden City College in Bangalore. She did the college fashion circuit...

... She returned to Imphal in 2009 to open the Bishesh Institute of Fashion and Design and began performing as a nupi shaabi since 2011. The roles she plays in Shumang Leelas has nothing to do with her life experience. Directors give her straight women roles, which would actually have been a fabulous gender bender if Shumang Leela didn't have such a poor track (or non-existent) record of engaging with transgendered experience and performances. Interestingly, in an incredible casting choice, Bishesh has played the role of a trans woman in a 2002 film called *Ang Tamo* which traces the life of a nupi maanbi. The film is shaped by autobiographical elements collected from many nupi maanbis living in Imphal but due to its lack of craft, it fails to create a trans narrative that examines the limits of gender regulation. Trans performers in contemporary theatre often use their bodies to tell their stories because such autobiographical performances challenge and confront the audience with transgender femininity or masculinity. However nupi maanbi artistes like Bishesh are yet to experiment and critically explore their own and societal understandings of gender using the arts they practice as a medium for it. When I ask Bishesh about the possibility of using Shumang Leela to explore gender identity, she is cautious. Yes, I think it is important. It will take some time. I have been given an opportunity to work as an artiste. Whatever be the role, I look at it as a service to my society. And slowly I hope that nupi maanbi will also get the space in Shumang Leela to tell our stories. I think what we really need are writers who will be able to tell our stories with care. I am not a writer. I am an actor. I would love to work with a good writer if I want to tell my story” (S. Thounaojam, 2014).

It is in this context that Shumang Leela can raise an important issue on Transgender identity as it has been their platform for many years. Some Transgender join Shumang Leela because they find a community here, they find acceptance. As in their daily walk of life they are treated as second class citizens or sex objects. The very moment, they came out of the stage; they are ridiculed as a second class citizen, and treated as

sex objects. No other art form in Manipur gives so much importance to Transgender. Many people watch Shumang Leela because of the Nupi Shaabis.

### **Ritual and social construct of Shumang Leela**

Performance in Shumang Leela involves ingenuity where the artistic representation of the actor must synchronize with the thought process of the viewers. These 'modes' of semiotic resources include aspects of speech such as intonation and other vocal characteristics, the semiotic action of other bodily resources such as gesture (face, hand and body) and proxemics. A symbolic communication process takes place between the audience and the performers, as Peirce argued that interpreters have to supply part of the meanings of signs (Peirce, 1880). Different semiotic resources used in Shumang Leela thus bring with them their own practicality and limitations, both in isolation and in permutation, as well as challenges in terms of the natures of the media, the detail and scope of analysis, and the complexities arising from the integration of semiotic resources across the theatrical media. Shumang Leela performances is particularly challenging as the actor is directly in front of a large audience without the usage of any screen or curtain. The performance space is open to the audience without any barrier. For example, in general stage performances darkness can be realistically constructed with the usage of lighting system whereas in case of Shumang Leela the seclusion and shadows are constructed with the actor's gesture and kinesics, accompanied by background music in some cases.

Shumang Leela is a theatre of the people both in terms of its 'form', 'content' and its community social relationship. The audience are mostly seated on floor as per their seating preferences with the men folk on one side and the women on the other. The audience structure is representative of the societal milieu. Shumang Leela unifies the audience as they are fully engrossed in the play by the actors and they are taken to performance space through its content and form; prevalent social stratifications are forgotten as free intermingling takes place. Demand of Shumang Leela performance has increased in local events and festivals because it caters to the popular taste with its secular elements. Some feel that the sanctity of certain religious festivals like Laiharaoba is diminished with the inclusion of Shumang Leela which incorporates secular components viz. film music, dances, etc.

The theatre form is integrated in different life cycles (birth, marriage and death) of a person in the Manipuri culture. Shumang Leela is associated with marriage ceremony. The groom's side funds a play from a theatre group of the bride's choice. The play is staged in the bride's courtyard a couple of days prior to the wedding. Shumang Leela is also performed on the eve of Soisti Puja of a new born baby. It is a birth ritual performed on the sixth day after the birth of a child. In some cases the Leela is also performed on during Sorat which is a death ceremony held on the thirteenth day after a person passes away. Shumang Leela in this sense also attains a ritualistic fervour, seeing very less departure from devotional theatre forms. Some political parties also use the theatre art for political campaigns. Thus, the art form is multifaceted in nature. Kidd (1984) mentions: "the plays grew out of the situations, experiences, and analysis of the actors ... They create their own dramas out of their own collective analysis of their immediate situation and the deeper structures in which they are embedded. This is a genuine expression of the people".

## Conclusions

Though the market of Shumang Leela is small, it is slowly expanding by finding a platform reaching out to global and national audience. There are challenges from other forms and medium of entertainment like cinema, digital and electronic medium which appeals more to the youth. Shumang Leela enjoys more popularity than stage shows owing to its mobility as it can be performed in any courtyard. However, electronic reproduction of the theatre form through video recording and live telecast of the same has brought about a different counterbalance in the performance and revenue generation arena of Shumang Leela. This can be in the line of arguments raised by postmodernist social theorists that reality has been replaced by hyperreality, which suggests that the sign is now more important than what it stands for. Hyperreality, a term associated with the effects of mass production and reproduction and suggesting that an object, event, experience so reproduced replaces or is preferred to its original: that the copy is “more real than real” (Baudrillard and Brooker, 1992).

MacBride report (1980) states that, “even where modern media have penetrated isolated areas, the older forms maintain their validity, particularly when used to influence attitudes, instigate action and promote change. Extensive experience shows that traditional forms can be effective in dispelling the superstitions, archaic perceptions and unscientific attitudes that people have inherited as part of tradition, and which are difficult to modify if the benefits of change are hard to demonstrate. Practitioners of the traditional media use a subtle form of persuasion by presenting the required message in locally popular artistic forms. This cannot be rivalled by any other means of communication.” For over a decade now, there has been a movement in the Manipuri society to conserve the Manipuri culture. It is in this light Shumang Leela brings a blend of cultural preservation by also being socially relevant with its strong community oriented messages. Semiotics of Shumang Leela constructs meaning of the Manipuri society and culture that it depicts through its powerful texts and narratives. These representations of Manipuri signs are understood to be combinations of signifiers. Crucial codes and conventions which make the signs into a narrative performance generate meanings which have been used for development communication.

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