



SHUMANG LEELA AS A LIVING MEDIUM: A HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF PERFORMANCE AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Shumang Leela, Manipur's traditional courtyard theatre, has historically functioned as a critical medium for social critique, cultural preservation, and political discourse. This study traces its historical evolution and examines its significance through the lens of key media theories. Historically rooted in oral traditions, Shumang Leela served as a medium of moral instruction before evolving into a form of resistance during the colonial period. In the post-independence era, it has continued to engage with contemporary socio-political issues such as corruption, gender discrimination, insurgency etc. Shumang Leela's role as a ritualized space as well as a 'public sphere' where social realities are enacted and contested is highlighted. Beyond its performative function, this study highlights Shumang Leela's pedagogical significance in fostering moral education, reinforcing cultural heritage, and facilitating critical social discourse. As an enduring communicative practice, Shumang Leela remains an essential medium for shaping public consciousness and preserving indigenous knowledge systems in Manipur.

Key words: Manipur, Shumang Leela, Media Theories, Moral Education, Social Discourse

Shumang Leela: Form, Structure & performance

Shumang Leela etymologically combines two words: 'Shumang' means courtyard, and 'Leela' means play or performance. It may be termed a courtyard theatre. It was known as "Jatra" or "Jatra Wali" from the early 20th Century till 1976. The name Shumang Leela was adopted on January 15, 1976.

Shumang Leela is a structured form of total theatre with elements such as poetry, dance, song, music, mime, and pantomime. It is an itinerant theatre form in which troupe members and musicians travel to various parts of the state to



perform upon receiving an invitation from an individual, group, department, or organisation. During peak seasons, specifically from March to May and September to November, a troupe may perform up to five shows based on demand. Before a play's public premiere, it is performed at the Shumang Leela competitions organised by the Manipur Shumang Leela Council, where a jury evaluates and ranks the performances. Participation and success in these competitions indicate a play's popularity and likelihood of being invited for future performances.

The space for performance may vary according to the space available in the centre of any open area, be it the courtyard of a house, a community hall, mandaps or local grounds. The play is performed in a 13X13 sq. ft area or 16X16 sq. feet area. In the early days of Shumang Leela, petroleum or hand lamps were used, but now electric bulbs are used as the light source. A bamboo pole or a wooden pole carrying a lamp is placed in the centre of the stage to light it up. Earlier, the performers delivered their dialogues without the help of any technology, but for the last few decades, around 4-5 microphones have hung in a downward position from the top of the makeshift stage to aid the performers.

Earlier, there was no raised stage or space, but nowadays, the stage is raised and decorated. However, unlike proscenium theatre, the audience can view from all four sides, as it offers a 360-degree viewing gallery. The audience surrounds the stage except for a small passage for the performers' entry and exit, which connects the stage to the dressing room or the Green Room. The only props on the stage are two chairs, a table and sometimes a flower vase. During the performance, this space can be anything according to the scene's requirements or the plot—an operation theatre, a foreign locale, a village hut, a mansion, a garden, a jail, etc.

Objectives of the Study:

- a. To examine the historical evolution of Shumang Leela and its role as a performative medium for social critique in Manipur.
- b. To analyse Shumang Leela through key media theories, including Medium Theory, Public Sphere Theory, Performance Theory, and Agenda-Setting and Framing Theory.
- c. To explore the pedagogical significance of Shumang Leela in educating society on moral values, cultural heritage, and contemporary socio-political issues.



Origins and Early Development of the Shumang Leela

Many experts opine that the performance culture started in Manipur with *Lai Haraoba* (festival of appeasement of the sylvan deities). The festival is a treasure of Meitei history, philosophy, and arts and has survived for ages. It is a festival of fertility in which the people of the *leikai* (locality) or *khul* (village) appease the deity. The characters and events in *Lai Haraoba* are depicted through songs and rhythmic movements of the body parts. Scholars believe that the custom of performance originated with the *Tangkhum Nurabi* episode on the last day of *Kanglei Haraoba*. It is a mythological narrative, and the performance enacts the banter between Lord Nongpok Ningthou and goddess Panthoibi. The repartee discusses the philosophy of fertility – both productive and reproductive. There are elements of Shumang Leela in this enactment, such as humour, riddles, dialogues from the ritualistic rites, singing, dancing, etc. The *Tangkhum Nurabi* repertory, as documented in the *Loiyamba Shilyel*, was incorporated into the *Lai Haraoba* festival during the reign of King Loiyamba (1074-1112 AD).

A section of researchers believes that Shumang Leela originated from the king's court during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti from 1850-1886 AD. According to Ningombam Iboi Singh, a scholar of Shumang Leela, this form of performing art originated from *Phagee Leela* (farce plays or comical skits) during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti.

According to Haorokcham Ibotombi, the Moirang Parva (saga of Moirang) performed in 1894/95 at Panjeemayum Lampak in Wahengbam Leikai, Imphal West, is the first Shumang Leela performance of Manipur. The performance is based on the legendary tales of Khamba and Thoibi from Moirang, a principality of Manipur situated 45 km from the state capital, Imphal. The play was banned after 4-5 episodes by the then-royal family of Manipur within that year, citing that crack had developed in the premises of the Thanging Temple in Moirang because of this performance.

Impact of British Rule on Shumang Leela: Emergence of Political Themes

The British colonial rule started in Manipur in 1891, and slowly and steadily, the colonisers made their presence felt in the social, political, and economic spheres. During this period, alongside the *Phagee Leela*, a form of protest theatre started in Manipur by the name of *Kabul Leela* (Kabul play)/*Kabul Jagoi* (Kabul dance)/*Kabul pala* (chorus of Kabul). This form of theatre started under the aegis of one Sanamacha, a master of Manipuri dance and music, and it was staged as a protest against the Kabuli traders for pricing



their goods at exorbitant rates. These traders came along with the British from the Burmese side. *Phadeebi Leela*, or the play of tattered clothes, followed the *Kabul Leela*. This form of play highlighted the miserable conditions of the common mass.

Cultural Imperialism: Suppression of Indigenous Cultural Expressions

The British administration brought a sea change in the socio-economic and cultural setup of the erstwhile royal kingdom. When the colonisers came to Manipur, they brought along Bengalis as clerks and for other works. This period was a saga of Sanskritization of both the literary and spoken language, not only in the royal *darbar* but also amongst the middle class. The new wave of Sanskritization and the use of Bangla in literature and spoken words relegated the vernacular language to an impure status. The dialogues and songs of that period were an assimilation of Sanskrit, Hindi, Bangla, Maithali and Brajubali. This cultural imperialism left no room for the indigenous theatre form, Shumang Leela. During those years, the performance was centred on stage theatre or the proscenium theatre, hence the gap from 1895 to 1918 for Shumang Leela's plays. It was also a clear sign of how outsiders controlled the cultural discourses; the Bengalis controlled it with the assistance of their British masters.

Ethical Dimensions:

According to Haorakcham Ibotombi, the royal family banned the Moirang Parva performance out of fear as the kingdom was under the British colonisers. For the first time, a full-fledged Leela was performed in the vernacular language, and the songs were also sung in Meiteilon. In the play, the dialogues and the songs indirectly hint at the British colonisers and the mis-administration of the king.

The *Kangla Vichaar* episode of Moirang Parva shows the world of politics and the king's administration lapses. This episode teaches or educates the people on where the administration of the royals was going wrong. It is a form of indirect protest against the British administration and the royal family. *Thengu Leela* sounded superficial as the performance was artificial and disconnected from reality; the story's underlying theme depicted how the rich and the elite exploited the simple and powerless people for selfish gains. In *Thok Leela*, the protagonist criticised the royal family and also talked about the moral values of the royal family, reflecting the practice of polygamy by people in power and how women were looked down upon by their male counterparts.



Another protest theatre was *Kabul Leela*, where the performers sang in nonsense syllables and made fun of the Pathans who came with the British officials from Burma. In the play, the characters who played the role of British officials had tonsured heads. In Manipuri society, it means insulting or showing that it is a punishment for somebody who has committed a crime.

By 1907-1908, the *Phadibee Leela* (play of tattered rags) was performed, and a distinguishing feature of the play was that the performers wore tattered clothes. They wore tattered clothes to represent the society of that period—how the commoners suffered under colonial rule and the Bengali employees brought by them. It symbolises the condition of the sufferings of the natives, while those associated with the colonial power led a pompous life.

The first full-fledged play, *Harishchandra*, performed for the first time in 1918, also indirectly attacked the British and the royal family of Manipur. Although the play was based on *Ramayana*, Vishwamitra's role can be identified with that of British colonisers. *Sabitri Seityaban* was about a woman's sacrifice. Also, she protested for oppressing the oppressed, which depicted the rule of the British colonisers and the anarchy in the society. The play *Meiraba Charana* showcased social problems, especially corruption. It showed the tussle between two ministers and how the king sided with the minister who bribed him.

Social and Political Influence of Shumang Leela

It can be rightly said from the first Shumang Leela performance that this art form has been performing the duty of being the watchdog of society. It has taken up a myriad of roles, from social awakening to tracking cultural roots, to sending a message to those in power about the wrongs they are doing, promoting national integration and communal harmony, exposing the evils happening in society, educating the public on a variety of topics, evoking nationalism, etc. From various angles, it reflects upon the prevailing conditions and sends the message of what is right and wrong. It fought the battle for language and cultural revivalism and revolted against those in power.

The Manipuris began to experience a new era after Independence from the British. Earlier, the themes of the plays were mainly based on religious and mythological stories and comic plays, which did not have a storyline, as most of them were improvised and created on the spot to make people laugh. The new era also brought in a wave of modernity.



The year 1950 witnessed the introduction of scripts in the history of Manipuri theatre. *Puya Meithaba*, the first scripted play, was performed in 1950. This play may be counted as a performance that evoked religious revivalism. It was a manifest attempt to revisit the past and show the Meitei identity. The state government banned it, but within a few months, the name of the play was changed to *Kangla Phambalda Thambal*, which means Thambal in the Palace (Thambal is the name of the queen whom Garibniwas forcibly married) and the performance continued.

In 1952, *BA Mapa Lamboiba* (Renunciation of the World by the Father of a BA) by Nongmaijing Sharma was performed. The play showed the tussle between tradition and modernity and how it has changed social relationships. This is the first social-conscious play in the history of Manipuri Shumang Leela. The play *Fifty Thousand* is about polygamy problems, and *Awoonpot* (Stridhan) addresses the issue of the dowry system. In the 1960s, another famous play, *Mahaprabhu Phita Onba* (The measurement of God with Measuring Tape), also evoked religious revivalism by making “fun” of Hinduism. *Mani Mamou* (Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law) was a play that talked about the intricacies of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships.

Abir Khan was a play based on national integration—the relationship between the Meiteis, the hill people and the Pangals (Manipuri Muslims). The play *Halakhidraba* (The One Who Never Returned) is about the excesses committed by the state armed forces. *Eegi Nong* (Rain of Blood) was about state violence against civilians. *Eegi Mahao* (Taste of Blood) is about how powerless people are muted by the powerful. The futuristic play *23rd Century* showed the public the future of Manipur. *Lanpungi Pungkhol* (The Sound of the War Drum) is about the state’s insurgency problem and analyses the Merger Agreement. It tells the people to revisit history and introspect where the leaders have gone wrong.

Keishamthong Thoibi (Thoibi from Keishamthong) dwells on the divide between the Meiteis and the hill people over the concept of purity and impurity. *Seiren Chankhraba Thawai* (Entombed Soul) is an environmental play that talks about the hazards caused by the government’s implementation of developmental projects. The play *Laan Loiba Numit* (The Day War Ended) is about national integration.

Chatledo Akhoidi Nakhoigi Hayenggidamak (Leaving Today for Your Tomorrow) discusses the armed conflict in Manipur, the atrocities committed by



the central forces, and whether we should revolt. It also talks about abortion—is it morally right to kill a life just because the father raped the mother?

The play *State vs Meira Paibi* (State vs Women Torchbearers) dwells on the mob culture or a group of people taking the law into their own hands before reaching the court of justice. It educates people on the wrongs of mob culture. *Adhikaar* (Right) is a play that talks about the value of education. *Ningol Chakouba* (A ceremony where Married Women are invited for Lunch at her parents' home) also talks about communal harmony. The play *Meigi Ching* (Mountain of Fire) is based on the ethnic clash between the Kukis and Nagas of the early 1990s in Manipur. The play *Chayam Pokpi* (Mother of Many) focused on family planning. It is about a couple who has 10 children and faces the economic constraints of being a big family.

Singareina Kenkrabada (When the Singarei Flowers Withered Away) and *Kanagi Maraalno* (Who's Fault Is It?) were plays based on polio immunisation and *Anouba Mangal* (New Ray of Light), *Anouba Lambi* (New Path), and *Amambada Meingal* (Light in the Dark) were performed to spread awareness on sanitation and *Anouba Yenning* (New Bud) for environmental education.

Makhong Taragi Cheingak (Rule of Ten Legs) is a play that tells the public to revive the domestication of poultry at homes for self-sustenance. *Naitom Satpi* (The Lone One) is a play that deals with leprosy disease, and *Senphu Hangba* (Opening of the Piggy Bank) was produced to generate awareness of national savings. The play *Mou Ama Mangkhre* (A Married Woman Has Got Lost) talks about the misuse of mobile phones by young married women who are getting lured and distracted by mobile phones.

Ahingda Numit (Sun at Midnight) focuses on environment preservation and urges the public to shun the race for city life and come back to develop their homeland by increasing agricultural production and planting trees to save the environment.

In *Yenningtha Amagi Wari* (The Story of One Spring Season), the play's theme is communal harmony and tries to narrow down the divide between the hill and the valley people. The play *Wari Loidri Ngaikhini* (Waiting as the Story is Yet to End) brings on stage the bandh culture in the state. How do the bandh mongers disturb the day-to-day activities, and what considerable impact does it create on the socio-economy of the state? *Thawaiigi Thawai* (Heart of Heart) dwells on mob lynching or violence.



Role of *Nupi Shabis* in Shumang Leela

As is the case with English theatre, the Peking Opera of China, Noh of Japan, or world theatre, the role of the females in Shumang Leela is played by males. Those who enact the role of females are known as *Nupi Shabis*. *Nupi* in Manipuri means woman, and *shabi* means impersonator. *Nupi Shabi* means those who impersonate or enact the character or take up a woman's role. The *Nupi Shabis* carry much weight, and it can be rightly said that they are the foundation pillars of Shumang Leela. A society cannot evolve without the right mix of the male and female gender; likewise, in Shumang Leela *Nupi Shabis* play a crucial role in a particular plot or storyline. The tradition of males enacting the role of women started from the first performance of *Moirang Parva* in 1894/95. Phurailatpam Gourarai Sharma played the character of Thoibi. Some of the *Nupi Shabis* are beautiful and feminine, even more so than their female counterparts. When Lourembam Ibomcha enacted the role of a woman in *Thok Leela*, Churachand Maharaj thought he was a woman and later named him Ibecha Devi. From then on, people came to know him as Ibecha Devi.

Government and Institutional Support for Shumang Leela

The All Manipur Shumang Leela Council, an apex body, started functioning on April 12, 1984. At present, the Council's office is situated at the premises of the Iboyaima Shumang Leela Shanglen at Palace Compound in Imphal East. The *shanglen* (office) is a hub for Shumang Leela, and the All-Manipur State Shumang Leela Festival is held at this *shanglen*. This hub also hosts seminars, symposiums, and workshops related to Shumang Leela and other performing arts of Manipur.

Shumang Leela Across Multiple Media Platforms

As in most other states or countries, traditional-media based programmes are broadcast over different media such as radio, television, and digital platforms. Shumang Leela programmes are broadcast over All India Radio Imphal station, Doordarshan Kendra Imphal as well as private television channels like ISTV, Impact TV and Times of Manipur TV- a satellite channel. All India Radio was the first to start broadcasts of Shumang Leela in their *Khunganggi Thowram* (The Village Programme) in 1967. Doordarshan Kendra, Imphal, started telecasts of Shumang Leela in 1997, on the Regional Language Satellite Channel. ISTV started telecasts of Shumang Leela on January 27, 2003, the day the private television network started operation in Manipur. Impact TV started telecasts of Shumang Leela's plays from the year 2015.



Perspectives on Shumang Leela

Shumang Leela has evolved in form and meaning over the years. In pre-colonial Manipur, Shumang Leela was an oral tradition integrated with religious and moral teachings. In the colonial period, it evolved into a medium of resistance. And in the post-independence period, Shumang Leela evolved to cater to contemporary socio-political issues like corruption, gender discrimination, and insurgency.

Shumang Leela, though perceived as popular entertainment for the masses, may be encoded with layers of themes and social messages. Using comic effects, satire, puns and metaphors, playwrights, and performers of the Shumang Leela present a wholesome form of mass entertainment on the surface. However, viewing it from the tradition of Stuart Hall's cultural theory would reveal different interpretations from audiences based on their social, cultural, and political positioning. Viewers' decoding of the performance varies based on their education, political conviction, and social circumstances. Some see a play that critiques political corruption as harmless theatre comedy, while others view it as a disruptive political statement. Men's portrayal of female characters might be looked upon as preserving tradition while feminist critiques may regard it as a continuing act of reinforcing gender discrimination.

Shumang Leela may be considered as a form of Habermas' 'public sphere' as it is an effective space to address modern social issues including corruption, communal conflicts, societal disorder, gender discrimination, insurgency, war etc. Richard Schechner (2002) considers performance a ritualised space for acting out and negotiating social realities. Shumang Leela's performances operate within this framework by creating liminal spaces which blurs the boundary between artifice and reality, wherein audiences may safely critique power structures without confrontation. Characters symbolize known political figures while the plot, theme and dialogues represent historical and real-life societal struggles. Humour and irony allow for indirect critiques of authority while safely sustaining audience participation.

Shumang Leela is a powerful medium capable of setting the agenda in the Manipuri society through the employment of various framing devices. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argued that media can determine the agenda of a society and over the years, Shumang Leela has proven to be a powerful folk medium for highlighting certain issues over others and influencing people about "what to think about". If Goffman (1974) suggests that an issue is understood and interpreted according to its frame, then Shumang Leela may be viewed as



strategically framing social themes and issues to evoke strong emotions and responses. For instance, Shumang Leela performances may influence how the audience views social issues and events like corruption, gender inequality, insurgency, war etc. Dramatic tools like acting, soliloquys, dialogues, music, and songs etc. may be employed to arouse intense emotions and muster up an acute sense of injustice while comic and satirical methods may be used to defuse emotions and achieve entertainment value over urgency. How Shumang Leela frames social issues influences audiences' various emotional and cognitive responses, affecting public perceptions of morality and justice.

Conclusion

Shumang Leela, as a traditional yet dynamic performative medium, serves as a powerful platform for social commentary, cultural preservation, and political discourse in Manipur. By applying established media theories, this study underscores the multifaceted role of Shumang Leela in shaping public consciousness and collective identity.

Shumang Leela, as an oral and interactive performance, fosters a communal communication experience, reinforcing traditional knowledge systems while adapting to evolving socio-political realities. Unlike modern mass media, which often presents information in a one-directional flow, Shumang Leela maintains an immediate, reciprocal relationship with its audience, allowing for real-time interpretation and feedback.

Since its inception, Shumang Leela has functioned as a mirror to Manipuri society, addressing various socio-political and cultural issues. It has played a pivotal role in exposing societal ills, from oppression under British and Bengali imperialism to corruption, insurgency, drug addiction, communal conflict, and climate change. It has also actively promoted honesty, righteousness, communal harmony, family values, and self-sustenance, making it one of the most comprehensive indigenous educational tools available to the people of Manipur. This highlights how Shumang Leela foregrounds pressing social issues that demand public engagement.

The diversity of themes explored in Shumang Leela—from preserving cultural roots and indigenous language to warning against the harmful effects of modern technology—suggests that its messages are multi-layered and subject to varied audience readings. In this way, Shumang Leela operates as a non-institutionalised but influential ‘public sphere’ where critical social discussions unfold outside mainstream political and media structures. However, Fraser's



critique of exclusivity in public discourse is relevant when examining gender representation and power structures within Shumang Leela's performances.

Shumang Leela emerges as a liminal and transformative space where societal norms are challenged, reinforced, or redefined. The framing of its narratives, whether addressing insurgency, corruption, or moral decay, can be examined to explore how specific issues are structured and presented to influence public perception.

Sustained audience engagement with Shumang Leela over the ages prove that people turn to it for entertainment, moral education, historical consciousness, and social awareness. Other studies have recognized Shumang Leela's unparalleled ability to educate, inform, and guide the people of Manipur across multiple generations. It has functioned as a teacher, a historian, and a visionary, imparting lessons from the past, reflecting on the present, and predicting future challenges.

As Manipuri society undergoes rapid technological and cultural transformations, Shumang Leela must navigate the complexities of digital adaptation. While its traditional form fosters immediacy and communal interaction, its transition to recorded or online formats may alter audience reception and participation. Future research should examine how this transition affects the interpretative frameworks, performative authenticity, and communicative efficacy of Shumang Leela in a digitally mediated environment. However, given its historical resilience and ability to evolve, Shumang Leela will likely retain its relevance as a critical medium of public engagement, cultural continuity, and socio-political critique in Manipur.

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