

“Beyond the Lens:
Neorealism and the Representation of
Cultural Memory in *Brojendragee Luhongba*”

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of Italian Neorealism on the evolution of Indian cinema, particularly through the lens of the Indian New Wave or Parallel Cinema movement. Emerging in post-independence India as a response to the commercialized and escapist tendencies of mainstream cinema, the Indian New Wave embraced realism, social critique, and the aesthetics of everyday life—hallmarks of Italian Neorealism. Directors such as Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen pioneered this movement at the national level, while regional cinemas began to reflect similar tendencies. Within this framework, the Manipuri film *Brojendragee Luhongba* (1973), directed by S.N. Chand, and represents a critical moment in the cinematic history of Manipur. While *Matamgi Manipur* (1972) is officially acknowledged as the first Manipuri feature film, it was directed by a non-Manipuri filmmaker. In contrast, *Brojendragee Luhongba* stands as the first full-length film by a Manipuri director that consciously engages with the realist mode. This paper argues that *Brojendragee Luhongba* reflects the regional manifestation of Indian Neorealism, drawing from the broader influences of Italian cinematic traditions while simultaneously negotiating local narratives of identity, tradition, and modernity. The film, therefore, occupies a unique position in both Manipuri and Indian film history as an early articulation of cinema as a tool for cultural expression and social introspection.

Key words : Neorealism, parallel cinema, identity,
tradition, modernity.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Indian Neorealism³² in the mid-twentieth century marked a significant departure from the escapist narratives that had dominated mainstream Indian cinema. Influenced deeply by the aesthetics and ideological commitments of Italian Neorealism—epitomized by landmark films such as *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Rome, Open City* (1945)—a new generation of Indian filmmakers sought to represent the lives of ordinary people with honesty, compassion, and emotional complexity. Directors like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen pioneered this movement, grounding their works in social critique and regional specificity while reflecting the socio-economic challenges of post-independence India. Neorealism, in this sense, was not merely an aesthetic strategy but also a political gesture: it aimed to bear witness to lived realities often marginalized or romanticized in mainstream cinema.

However, much of the scholarship on Indian Neorealism remains centred on Bengali and Hindi-language cinemas, often overlooking the rich and nuanced contributions of regional film industries³³. Regional cinemas, rooted in distinct linguistic, cultural, and socio-political contexts, have engaged deeply with questions of realism, modernity, and identity, albeit through local idioms and narrative forms. Among these, Manipuri cinema offers a compelling yet underexplored site for understanding the diffusion and localization of Neorealist aesthetics in India. This paper argues that *Brojendragee Luhongba* (1973) represents an early and significant

32 The term *Indian Neorealism* is used here not to suggest a cohesive or formal cinematic movement, as in post-war Italian Neorealism, but rather to describe a set of aesthetic and thematic tendencies in Indian cinema that mirror its emphasis on location shooting, non-professional actors, and narratives focused on ordinary people and everyday struggles. Films like *Pather Panchali* (dir. Satyajit Ray, 1955), *Do Bigha Zamin* (dir. Bimal Roy, 1953), and *Bhuvan Shome* (dir. Mrinal Sen, 1969) are often cited as foundational examples. *Brojendragee Luhongba* (1973), while emerging from a vastly different cultural and geographic context, aligns with this Neorealist impulse through its rejection of melodrama, use of authentic locations and non-actors, and focus on the lived realities of Manipuri society. However, it also extends Neorealism into new territory by foregrounding ritual practices and gendered labor, offering a regionalized variant of Neorealism that is rooted in the cultural specificity of Northeast India.

33 Indrani Bharadwaj, *A Study of Neorealism in Assamese Cinema* (PhD diss., Tezpur University, 2014). Bharadwaj argues that regional cinemas like Assamese have engaged with Neorealist aesthetics in significant ways, yet remain marginalized in mainstream discourse.

articulation of Indian New Wave cinema in a regional context—one that anticipates many of the formal strategies and thematic concerns that would later define contemporary Indian independent cinema. Like the films of the Indian New Wave, *Brojendragee Luhongba* embraces realism not just as an aesthetic strategy but as a mode of socio-cultural engagement: it employs non-professional actors, location shooting, and narrative minimalism to foreground the lived experiences of ordinary people. In doing so, the film aligns with a broader Neorealist and Parallel Cinema tradition, while also foreshadowing the narrative and visual grammar of more recent works such as *Court* (2014), *Thithi* (2015), and *Village Rockstars* (2017), which similarly negotiate local specificity within broader social critiques³⁴. Thus, S.N. Chand's film should not only be viewed as a foundational text within Manipuri cinema, but also as a culturally rooted expression of Indian New Wave cinema whose aesthetic innovations remain resonant in today's cinematic landscape³⁵.

This research analyses *Brojendragee Luhongba* (1973), directed by S.N. Chand, as a significant example of regional Neorealism within Indian cinema. *Matangi Manipur* (1972) is recognised as the first Manipuri feature film; however, it was directed by a Bengali filmmaker and primarily shot within the restricted setting of a theatre. *Brojendragee Luhongba* is also important for Manipuri cinema history, being the first full-length film directed by a Manipuri. It consciously relies on realism to depict the vagaries of cultural transition and social evolution. This is indicative of the shift towards a unique native cinema, and hence leaving it open to aesthetic and cultural relevancies. Chand constructs a filmic space, which, while following the principles of Neorealism, is also rooted in the Manipuri sociocultural context.

The film thus suggests that regional cinemas have adopted the Neorealist project to do creative work in their local idioms, and the process has generated works that are rooted in the local and yet speak to the world. Here, the movie shows that realism can be achieved through both technical

34 Noveena Chakravorty, "Indian New Wave Cinema in Today's Perspective - A Comparative Analysis of Storylines," *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, Vol. 10, no. 7 (2022), <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361729460>.

35 See Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

choices and the responsibility for authenticity in portraying lives lived. Through analysis of crucial scenes such as the preparation for the wedding in Ema Market, the Hajingpotas transaction, and the actual witnessing of the marriage between them, this analysis interrogates how S.N. Chand employs cinematographic techniques to represent the everyday lives of Manipuri people while reflecting larger societal changes. These moments are not just narrative events, but a testament to the film's engagement with the cultural and social fabric of 1970s Manipur. *Brojendragee Luhongba* stands as an early and significant articulation of cinema as a tool for cultural expression, social introspection, and the preservation of community memory in Manipuri society. S.N. Chand's contribution to Manipuri cinema has been widely recognized, with *Brojendragee Luhongba* (1973) being considered a pioneering work in regional Neorealism. As Sunzu Bachaspatimayum notes, Chand's approach to cinema aimed to capture the socio-cultural essence of 1970s Manipur, combining realism with a deep cultural consciousness³⁶. By choosing to shoot on location and using local traditions, Chand effectively bridges the gap between the universal principles of Neorealism and the particularities of Manipuri cultural life, allowing his film to resonate both locally and beyond.

LOCATING REALISM IN BROJENDRAGEE LUHONGBA: NARRATIVE, SPACE, AND RITUAL

The story of *Brojendragee Luhongba* unfolds when Brojendro, the protagonist, returns home only to find himself unexpectedly engaged to a woman he has never met. Despite his strong resistance, he is compelled to go through with the marriage ceremony under the emotional pressure of filial duty imposed by his mother. Brojendro, unable to reconcile with the concept of an arranged marriage devoid of personal autonomy, departs from home shortly thereafter and secures a position as a Medical Officer at the Churachandpur District Hospital, located 48 kilometres away. This physical departure symbolises his internal struggle and desire for independence: by leaving the family home, he seeks to forge an autonomous identity, challenging the traditional frameworks that have limited him.

36 Sunzu Bachaspatimayum, "SN Chand: Through the Lens of *Brojendragee Luhongba*," *KRC Times*, October 20, 2024, <https://www.krctimes.com/guest-column/sn-chand-through-the-len-of-brojendragee-luhongba/>.

One thing that should be brought to your attention is that the movie does not represent this departure as a clean break. Brojendro embarks on a journey of self-discovery by way of a succession of emotional and personal transformations that occur during the course of the story. Along the journey, he faces his emotions of solitude and guilt, and in the end, he is forced to address the deeply rooted emotional connections he has to his hometown and to my family. It is not only a straightforward submission to tradition; rather, it is a more nuanced negotiation between personal desire and membership in the community. His final return home and acceptance of his wife are signified by the fact that he eventually accepted his wife. In this way, *Brojendragee Luhongba* presents a profound meditation on the conflicts that exist between modernity and tradition, as well as between individualism and community. Thematically speaking, this is a worry that is crucial to neorealism all over the world, and it rings especially true in the context of a Manipuri society that is going through a period of fast transition. Furthermore, the film's intricacy lies in the detailed description of Manipuri cultural life and the social realities that it represents. Although the tale may appear to be straightforward at first glance, it is actually rather complicated. Under the direction of S.N. Chand, who also plays the main role, the film makes a deliberate and earnest effort to portray the socio-cultural ethos of Manipur in the 1970s in a manner that is both breathtakingly realistic and emotionally honest. Chand also plays the main role. *Brojendragee Luhongba* is positioned within the greater discourse of Indian Neorealism as a result of the fact that it mixes a human tale with a dynamic cultural context. This placement is due to the fact that *Brojendragee Luhongba* is a pioneering regional work that embodies both individual agency and collective tradition.

EMA KEITHEL AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE

While the wedding preparations are taking place, there is a scene in the movie that perfectly captures the socio-cultural reality of the time. The bride-to-be, Malti, has two female relatives who go shopping for the wedding at the same time. This particular sequence, which was shot on location at the well-known Ema Keithel (Mother's Market) in Imphal, is not only a functional component of the narrative; rather, it is a meticulously designed representation of the way of life shared by the Manipuri community. Ema Keithel possesses a major historical and social backdrop because it is the

only market in Asia that is administered solely by women. No other market in Asia does this. Despite patriarchal standards that exist in Manipur to marginalise women, they serve as a testament to the significant role that females play in the economy, society, and public life of the entire state.

By choosing this location as the film's setting, the filmmaker offers a glimpse into a life rarely seen in mainstream Indian cinema. The director achieves this objective by situating the story within a gendered social context that resonates with the local community. In this instance, we portray the activity of shopping, which is frequently disregarded as commonplace, with a sense of quiet dignity and special attention to cultural particularities. A variant of the dowry system that stands in stark contrast to the more exploitative and expensive practices that are prevalent in other regions of India is brought to the forefront by the fact that the women engage in haggling and picking practical items, such as household items for the bride's new life. This is because the women are the ones who are responsible for the dowry. As depicted in the movie, the dowry is not a burden or a demand in Manipur; rather, it is a culturally rooted and pragmatic gesture that is designed to set the bride up for her new life as a housewife.

This interaction is captured by the camera in a plain and observational fashion, which lets the viewer take in the sounds, rhythms, and textures that are present throughout Ema Market during the experience. The scene does not have any background music or theatrical framing since the Italian neorealist movement places a strong emphasis on naturalistic language, non-professional performers, and taking place in natural settings. Not only is realism a choice of aesthetics in this context, but it is also a decision of politics. Specifically, it focuses on the day-to-day obligations of women who are caretakers and social mediators, emphasising the importance of describing reality as it occurs. Not only does *Brojendragee Luhongba* utilise this scenario to highlight the resiliency and agency of Manipuri women, but she also questions the current depictions of women in cinema, which typically portray women as being submissive or ornamental. *Brojendragee Luhongba*'s use of this moment is a significant piece of work.

CINEMATOGRAPHY AND THE ETHICS OF REALISM

Another significant element that contributes to the neorealist sensibility of *Brojendragee Luhongba* is the deliberate choice that S.N. Chand made to

shoot the entire film on location in various parts of Manipur rather than relying on studio sets that were developed before the film was shot. In addition to the fact that it firmly establishes the picture inside the cultural and geographical environment in which it originated, this option increases the film's visual authenticity, which results in an overall improvement. In the 1970s, the viewer was allowed to observe the natural landscapes, marketplaces, and home spaces defining elements of Manipur's way of life. The film skilfully integrates familiar, everyday visuals—such as the uneven surfaces of rural, unpaved roads, the continuous murmur of market activity, and the understated intimacy of domestic environments—into the broader fabric of its narrative. Even though it may appear to be nothing more than background scenery, such as the swinging of trees, the weathered roads, or the worn-out beauty of buildings, these elements play a significant role in determining how the audience feels and what messages are conveyed in the film. These components are not inactive in any way. They contribute elements to the narrative. Even with the obvious budget limits and outdated gear, Chand's camera work is clever and brave.

One of the most significant shifts he introduced was the use of moving shots—like filming scenes from a car in motion—which went against the norm at the time when most Manipuri cinema kept the camera still. And the change wasn't just about showing off a new trick. These moving shots carried weight. They reflected Brojendro's inner restlessness and his social struggles. You feel his unease and tension in how the camera follows him—rarely still, constantly shifting.

Another factor contributing to the film's restrained visual style is that it only uses artificial lighting, relies on natural soundscapes, and avoids unnecessarily dramatic camera movements. This approach is in line with the ideas of Italian Neorealism. *Brojendragee Luhongba* creates a world that feels lived in, current, and tactile. It is clear that Chand is committed to depicting life with honesty, intimacy, and respect for its daily rhythms, as evidenced by the technical judgments he makes, which reflect his preferences in terms of style.

In light of this, the cinematography of *Brojendragee Luhongba* becomes an indispensable instrument for the narrative, which contributes to the strengthening of the film's thematic relationship with realism, tradition, and the transformation of society. Not only does it establish the film as

a documentary of Manipuri life, but it also places it as a cinematic act of witnessing—a gesture that aims to recognise the daily as something worthy of artistic and social attention.

RITUAL, GENDERED LABOR, AND THE NEGOTIATION OF MODERNITY

One of the most evocative scenes in *Brojendragee Luhongba* that captures the film's ethnographic depth is the depiction of the pre-wedding ritual known as *Hajing Kharai*—now more commonly referred to as *Heijingpot*. This ceremony functions as a formal exchange between the families of the bride and groom, affirming social consent for the marriage through the presentation of gifts, the sharing of snacks and fruits, and the exchange of *Kuthi* (horoscopes). More than a ritualistic formality, *Heijingpot* acts as a cultural locus where gender, tradition, and collective memory intersect.

The film represents this ritual with understated beauty and cultural fidelity. A procession of married women, adorned in traditional attire, carries gifts in *Phingaruk*—special handwoven bamboo baskets reserved solely for marriage ceremonies. The image of women bearing these baskets on their heads as they walk in rhythmic unison toward the bride's home conveys both the aesthetic grace and the socio-cultural symbolism of the ritual. This moment foregrounds the gendered labor embedded in Manipuri rituals, where women are not merely participants but custodians of cultural continuity.

Importantly, *Heijingpot* is a female-exclusive domain. It is women—never men—who are entrusted with the ceremonial task of carrying the *Phingaruk*. Yet this role is further stratified: only women deemed “auspicious” are eligible to participate. As Vinita Prabhudesai argues in her study of Indian ritual practices, gendered roles in rites are often shaped by notions of female purity and symbolic fertility³⁷. Widows, women without sons, or those considered inauspicious are deliberately excluded from such roles, reflecting a deeper cultural logic where a woman's social value is closely tied to her reproductive and marital status. This selection of “fortunate” women for public ceremonial performance is not incidental—

37 Prabhudesai, Vinita. “Theme-Gender in Rituals Title of the Paper : Role of Indian Women in Rites and Rituals : A Historical Review,” n.d.

it is a form of ritualized gendered labor that maintains the symbolic order of the community.

Seen through a Neorealist lens, this scene serves multiple purposes. It functions as a documentary gesture, preserving a rapidly vanishing tradition. It also becomes a cinematic meditation on the quiet resilience and social labor of women in upholding communal bonds. The film's observational style—free of melodrama or didacticism—resonates with Neorealist ethics, allowing the viewer to witness how everyday acts, often coded as feminine and domestic, carry immense cultural weight.

Adding further texture, the ritual is accompanied by a performance of the *Pena*, a traditional Manipuri string instrument. Historically, *Pena* music marked the culmination of *Heijingpot*, though it is seldom performed today. By including this detail, the film does more than archive a dying custom; it stages a moment of cultural transition. As Joseph R. Gusfield notes, the interplay between tradition and modernity in Indian society is not one of simple opposition but of continuous negotiation and reinvention³⁸. The ritual of *Heijingpot*, as portrayed in *Brojendragee Luhongba*, embodies this very negotiation—continuity infused with change, memory shaped by the present.

Thus, what appears on the surface as a picturesque ritual scene unfolds into a complex commentary on gender, tradition, and social structure. In foregrounding women's roles not just as bearers of ritual items but as symbolic anchors of communal cohesion, the film reclaims the cultural labor of women as central to both cinematic realism and social continuity.

CONCLUSION

Brojendragee Luhongba (1973), directed by S.N. Chand, stands as a landmark in Manipuri cinema, not merely for being the first feature film in the Meitei language but for articulating a distinct regional cinematic voice grounded in Neorealist aesthetics and local cultural experience. Drawing from the global movement of Neorealism, the film adopts its hallmark features—location shooting, non-professional actors, natural lighting, and a focus on everyday life—while infusing them with the textures of Manipuri society, tradition, and landscape.

38 Joseph R. Gusfield, *Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change*, *American Journal of Sociology* 72, no. 4 (1967): 351–362.

Chand's work is remarkable for how it mediates between the pressures of modernity and the persistence of tradition. Through its careful depiction of social rituals, familial negotiations, and gendered labor, the film captures a society in transition—where the modern and the traditional do not simply oppose one another but coexist, conflict, and reshape each other. The representation of rituals such as the *Heijingpot* (or *Hajing Khurai*) ceremony, for instance, not only preserves a fading cultural practice but also foregrounds the labor, agency, and symbolic significance of women within these public performances of tradition. In doing so, the film becomes a powerful site of cultural memory and gendered historiography.

The significance of *Brojendragee Luhongba* lies not only in its aesthetic accomplishments but in its role as an archival and affective document of Manipuri life in the early postcolonial decades. Its narrative is not driven by grand plots but by the small, intimate dramas of social expectation, economic hardship, and generational tension. By anchoring these experiences in the rhythms of everyday life, Chand extends the project of Neorealism into the realm of the regional and the ritualistic, crafting a cinema that is both universally resonant and deeply rooted in the specificity of Manipur's cultural landscape.

In conclusion, *Brojendragee Luhongba* is a pioneering testament to regional cinema's capacity to reinterpret global cinematic languages in locally meaningful ways. It challenges the dominant narratives of Indian cinema by offering an alternative grounded in realism, ritual, and gendered subjectivities. As a film that documents, critiques, and celebrates its cultural



Women procession with phigaruk for the ceremonial ritual of heijingpot

milieu, it remains an enduring piece of cinematic memory—illuminating the nuanced ways in which tradition and modernity, gender and labor, continue to shape the lived realities of Manipuri society.

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