

Shumang Kumhei: A Catalyst for Social Change and a Reflection of Manipuri Society

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ABSTRACT

Shumang Kumhei, a traditional courtyard theater rooted in Manipur, India, functions as both a vehicle for social reform and a lens through which the Meitei community's societal dynamics are viewed. Beyond its cultural origins, this art form has been co-opted by the government as an effective medium for public communication and awareness campaigns. This paper examines Shumang Kumhei's dual purpose—promoting social transformation and mirroring Manipuri life—while emphasizing its role in governmental outreach. Through historical context and modern instances, the study underscores how this theater educates, reflects, and informs, solidifying its status as a vital socio-cultural institution.

INTRODUCTION

Shumang Kumhei, also known as Shumang Leela or “courtyard play,” is a centuries-old theatrical practice from Manipur that merges entertainment with social commentary. Originating under royal sponsorship, it has transformed into a popular platform that critiques societal flaws, echoes collective experiences, and conveys governmental messages. This paper explores Shumang Kumhei's complex roles as a driver of social reform, a reflection of Manipuri society, and a tool for public engagement. It addresses three central questions: How does Shumang Kumhei foster social change? In what ways does it depict Manipuri society? And how has the government utilized it for communication?

The MacBride Report underscores the lasting importance of traditional media, even as modern mass communication spreads (UNESCO 141). Such

forms remain instrumental in shaping perspectives, inspiring action, and promoting change, particularly by confronting entrenched superstitions, outdated views, and unscientific beliefs—traditional elements resistant to change when benefits are not immediately apparent.

Furthermore, the interplay between performers and spectators exemplifies a symbolic exchange, resonating with Peirce's theory that meaning emerges collaboratively through interpretation, rendering communication a participatory process (Peirce 56).

DISCUSSION

Shumang Kumhei's roots lie in the Lai Haraoba rituals and oral storytelling of the Meitei people, taking on a theatrical form in the late 19th century under Manipur's monarchy. Initially an elite pastime, it broadened its reach in the 20th century, tackling moral and justice-related themes for diverse audiences. Its trajectory mirrors Manipur's historical shifts—from resistance against colonial rule to navigating post-independence struggles—while its flexibility has kept it relevant. The government's use of Shumang Kumhei for public outreach represents a key evolution, aligning its reformist spirit with state goals.

Scholars largely attribute Shumang Kumhei's beginnings to the Phagee Leelas, comedic performances popular during Maharaja Chandrakirti's reign (1856–1886) and Maharaja Churachand Singh's rule (1891–1941). Yet, some argue it emerged from the ritualistic Lai Haraoba ceremonies, which featured dramatic elements like Tangkhul-Nurabi Thokpa, laying the groundwork for modern Manipuri theater (Jay 310). Phagee Leela, or Thok Leela, used satire to lampoon societal shortcomings, royal missteps, and even British rule, relying on improvisation and wit for its unscripted brilliance (Singh 23).

Ethel St. Clair Grimwood, in her memoir, described the jesters of Manipur's courts under King Surchandra (1886–1890). She noted their shaved heads, painted faces, and colorful attire, highlighting their role in entertaining royalty and audiences with lively humor (Grimwood 78). Before Shumang Kumhei, traditional forms like Shan Senba and Gouraleela existed, but Shumang Kumhei distinguished itself with its focus on contemporary social issues, earning widespread appeal.

Some suggest links to Bengal's Jatrawali folk theater, as early Shumang Kumhei was termed “Jatrawali,” though this is contested by modern

scholars. Its development responded to cultural needs, preserving its distinctiveness while embracing diverse influences, making it a versatile and cherished art form.

RISE OF NUPI SHABI IN SHUMANG KUMHEI

Shumang Kumhei's origins tie to comic plays during Durga Pujas under Maharaja Chandrakirti, with early female roles in works like 'Harichandra' Leela performed by women. Over time, male performers took over due to travel and late-night performance challenges. In a conservative society, female artists faced stigma and familial resistance, prompting the rise of "Nupi Shabi" (male impersonators of women). This shift, solidified during insurgency periods like AFSPA enforcement, showcased adaptability and cemented Nupi Shabi as a hallmark of the theater.

Despite onstage acclaim, Nupi Shabis endure societal scorn offstage, respected only within their artistic circle. Mastering feminine portrayal demands exceptional skill, possibly tied to inherent traits, transforming personal challenges into a celebrated craft.

SHUMANG KUMHEI AS SOCIAL MIRROR

Shumang Kumhei educates and entertains, using satire to spotlight social and political issues, engaging audiences directly (Sharma 45). Playwright G.C. Tongbra enriched it with humor and critique in works like Mani Mamou and Meitei Chanu, encouraging reflection on societal norms. Recent plays, such as Mei Iklaba Thamoi, celebrating Olympian Saikhom Mirabai Chanu, highlight its role as a mirror of triumphs and struggles.

SHUMANG KUMHEI AS GOVERNMENTAL LIAISON

Aligning with Wang and Dissanayake's view of folk media as a pre-mass communication system, Shumang Kumhei excels in community messaging (Wang and Dissanayake 12). Its courtyard performances tackle corruption, dowry, and addiction, using humor and emotion to spark ethical dialogue. As a mirror, it portrays women's resilience, insurgency's toll, and youth aspirations, with diverse performers reflecting Manipur's social tapestry.

The government has harnessed its reach for health, civic, and harmony campaigns, such as HIV/AIDS education in the 1990s–2000s and financial literacy via Senphu Hangba. Plays like Chayam Pokpa and Kanagi Maralno

addressed family planning and immunization, while recent efforts under Chief Minister N. Biren Singh promote peace amid 2023–2025 ethnic strife, backed by a ₹2.5 crore investment in 2025.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND CHALLENGES

The Iboyaima Shumang Leela Shanglen in Imphal anchors this tradition, fostering its community. In 2025, despite conflict, events like the 50th Shumang Leela Festival (2021–2022) affirm its vitality. Digital expansion broadens access but risks diluting its essence, while poverty and violence threaten performers' livelihoods.

CONCLUSION

Shumang Kumhei excels as an accessible, adaptable medium, outpacing static communication with its live engagement. Its governmental role leverages cultural trust, though oral limits and localized reach pose challenges. As a reformist, reflective, and outreach tool, it critiques, educates, and informs, but economic and conflict-related threats loom. Future studies could assess its governmental impact, enhancing understanding of its communicative power.

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