

Unveiling the Richness of Indian Theatre:

Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela

Chitaranjan Taorem & I Gambhir Singh

ABSTRACT

India is a country renowned for its rich culture and traditions. The country is also endowed with a diverse theatrical heritage, with various drama and performance art forms that have evolved over centuries, such as Nacha of Chhattisgarh, Tamasha of Maharashtra, Kallariyattu of Kerala, and Shumang Leela of Manipur. Such culture, arts, and traditions have the potential to be analysed and subsequently contribute to the betterment or refinement of any society or individual. These art forms, especially Shumang Leela and Naya theatre, embrace the darker aspects of society, societal issues and maladies, political upheavals, and the dynamics of society and showcase them through their art, awakening the masses and making them aware of what is happening in society. The study aims to compare and analyse these two forms of Indian theatres, Naya theatre and Shumang Leela, juxtaposing them to highlight their roles in society.

Key Words: Theatre, Shumang Leela, Naya Theatre,
Society, Socio-Political and Culture.

INTRODUCTION:

Naya Theatre was founded by Habib Tanvir in 1959, following his return from London, where he gained experience at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. He realised that the Western theatre theory he had learned could not be applied to modern Indian theatre.

Though he was not pursuing any particular folk form, he was well aware that there were so many unused or unexplored talents in the rural areas where folk forms of theatre were found in abundance. By introducing them Naya Theatre, he provided a platform to showcase their skills, and thus, he blended classical and folk forms, preserving many forgotten folk traditions, including “Nacha”. He also promoted the oral cultural tradition and revolutionised the theatre world by allowing his folk performers whom he discovered during his Nacha Workshops including Fida Bai Markam, Madanlal, Thakur Ram, Lalu Ram, Govind Ram, Bhulwa Ram, and Deepak Tiwari, among others to present their skills in their own dialect

The Manipuri Folk Theatre, known as “Shumang Leela” (Courtyard Play), is a traditional Manipuri play that has played a crucial role in entertaining and spreading socio-political awareness to the masses, as well as educating people in Manipuri society. Shumang Leela was officially recorded by the State for the first time in the year 1918, with the play ‘*Harischandra*’ Leela. However, the concept of the Shumang Leela was started much earlier during the reign of King Chandrakriti (1851-1886) in clown form, though some research scholars opined that Shumang Leela descended from a ritual ceremony of Manipur called ‘Lai Haraoba’, which is being translated as a pleasing of God by men in Shakespearean terms, going up to the mythological period. Shumang Leela is typically performed in an area of approximately 13 feet by 13 feet. However, the area depends on the availability of space, ideally located in the centre of any open space, such as a courtyard or playground. According to the Manipur State Shumang Leela Council, the Moirang Parva performed at Wahengbam Leikai Panjee Mayum Lampak in 1894/95 at Imphal West district was the first Shumang Lila performance. Some of the earliest Shumang Leela performances included *Harishchandra* (1918), *Meiraba Charan*, *Thok Lila*, and *Sabitri Seitaban*, among others. Shumang Leela since its beginning always concerned itself about what is happening in the society, for instance- when a gifted artist called Chungkham

Ibohal and his troupe performed a satirical play against the water tax levied on the people using the Imphal River during the reign of King Churachand (1891-1941), the king on hearing this arrested the artists and made them perform the play in front of him.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NAYA THEATRE AND SHUMANG LEELA:

Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela, both forms of performing arts, share some similarities and differences in their forms and styles. The analysis includes their themes, performance, origin and the kind of actors or actresses they have. For instance, unlike proscenium theatre, both Naya theatre and Shumang Leela can be performed anywhere, even without a stage. It can be performed in the middle of the field, the courtyard, or the playground, surrounded on all four sides by the audience, so that the performance will be visible and audible. However, they do leave some small passage on one side of the field, which connects the performance area and the green room and which also serves as an entrance and exit for the artists.

The performance of these actors can be seen not only on the main stage (in the middle of the courtyard/playground) but also in the small passage that connects the green room, which makes the audience feel like they are watching a real-life situation. Additionally, both Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela have become platforms for entertainment, addressing various themes such as comedy, farce, folklore, legends, humanity, culture, education, and socio-political issues in our contemporary society. Even today, in the 21st century, the magic of the Shumang Leela goes upwards to touch the sky, as in Habib's Naya Theatre. So, there is a tremendous increase in the number of audiences. Due to its popularity and demand, many television service providers cover these plays and make them easily available on the internet. Another important fact about these two forms of theatre is that the performers in the play are paid actors. In Naya Theatre, it's the Chhattisgarhi folk artist, whereas in

Shumang Leela, it's the professional theatre troupe like Peace Maker Association, Sanaleipak Nachom Artiste, and others, which has been a part of the Manipuri Shumang Leela Council. These days, however, owing to the bandh and strike culture in Manipur imposed by various organisations against any kind of entertainment, the livelihood of these artists has been affected. The same problem occurred when Naya Theatre presented *Ponga Pandit* to the audience, and many right-wing organisations came and banned the plays in the 1960s. One of the most interesting facts about these two forms of theatre is that almost every play performed by these troupes consistently portrays how upper-class society ill-treats the lower caste and speaks about the downtrodden, and so, somehow, knowingly or unknowingly, there is an influence of Marxist ideals. Another interesting aspect is that both of these theatres employ the non-literary elements of epic theatre, as practised by Bertolt Brecht, such as music, stagecraft, décor, and external aids like facial expression and body language.

Both Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela are examples of Brechtian views on theatre, which is of a simple human voice talking to a human audience. The Brechtian views on theatre are supported by the performance of Sanaleipak Nachom Artist in Manipuri language at the Bolshoi theatre in Moscow (Russia) in 2001, and the performance of *Charandas Chor*, which was performed in Edinburgh and won the Fringe First Award, despite being played in Chhattisgarhi language. The importance of folk music has been effectively portrayed through the use of folk music and instruments in both Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela. Another similarity between these two theatres is that there is not a single full-time paid actor. Naya Theatre artists are paid by Habib Tanvir from the revenues he collects while performing his plays, whereas Shumang Leela artists receive dakshina from the local club that organises such plays, or from well-wishers or patrons as a token of appreciation for their performance.

On the contrary, Habib uses both the actor and the actress in his play, in Shumang Leela, only the male artists are allowed to take the

role of both the male and female in the play, although in its early stages, some groups of women did participate in this folk play. However, the 1950s saw the emergence of the Nupi saabi - a male actor who performs a female role in Shumang Leela, since female artists were forced to drop out due to the conservative Manipuri society, which did not take kindly to its women travelling and performing with men in far-flung neighbourhoods. Since then, the Nupi Saabi- a male artist acting as a female, occupied the places of the female artist and with the help of costumes and make-up, they appeared far more feminine than the female herself. The seriousness of these Shumang Leela actors can be reflected in their performances, as they train themselves and produce their voices in a feminine chord, but when it comes to the scene of songs, the male background singers who sits in the front row with the audience usually sing in both male and female voices as per the requirement. The most interesting parts of Shumang Leela these days are the performance of the “Nupi Saabi” (male actress), and the presence of Nupi Saabi in the Shumang Leela holds the popular imagination of the audience. A striking contrast lies in these actors’ lives: on stage, as Nupi Saabi, they adorn feminine attire, embody delicate mannerisms, and modulate their voices to a tender, womanly pitch—yet offstage, they seamlessly return to the unassuming demeanour of ordinary men. The absence of women folk in the Shumang Leela plays due to the patriarchal society gave a platform to the transgender with an artistic zeal to perform as actress according to their heart’s wishes and its content, so in a way the theatre brings these transgenders under the limelight and in the gaze of the society out of their seclusion and marginalisation. An ironic point this paper highlights regarding the patriarchal Manipuri society is that, although the society removes the platform for female artists to perform in the Shumang Leela, the audience of the Shumang Leela is mostly women, despite the plays being performed until midnight. A uniqueness of Shumang Leela is that there is no opening or closing of the curtain, and, in fact, there is no curtain altogether.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion this study establishes that unlike cinema, a kind of entertainment where the audiences are usually absorbed in the constructed nature of the films which is being shown in the screen, these folk theatres i.e Naya theatre and Shumang Leela conveys the message towards the audience to be intellectually aware of the issues raised in the performed play rather than becoming emotionally immersed in it or forgetting the constructed nature of what they are watching and instead thinking for oneself about the issues raised in the plays. Therefore, they possess the quality to enlighten and develop an intellectual debate in the minds of the people; similarly to the oral cultural tradition in North East India, where the elders of the villages or towns narrate traditional folk tales towards the younger generation in their spare time, so as to absorb the morales and values and to pass down their past history of intellectual activity in order to preserve their culture and bridge the gap between the generations, and also an invitation to how one can participate and contribute towards it. Naya theatre or Shumang Leela or any other kind of traditional theatre which preserves one's culture is as important as any other official document which has been kept in the briefcase, since there is not even a single point to deny the statement that 'when people forget the past, its future is dim'. Therefore, these theatres become the most effective medium of Media, as they are more preferred by the locals and are especially designed for them. These folk theatres, which serve as a form of traditional media, are also well accepted by those who still lack educational opportunities due to various societal factors. Also, it must be mentioned that both Naya Theatre and Shumang Leela consistently portray the picture of the poor's helplessness and their way of life. Therefore, these theatres are, in a way, realistic, but not the kind of removed form of existence that is being produced by mainstream Bollywood cinema, which a downtrodden person cannot relate to. The motives of the realistic plays in these theatres are not only to mirror society but also to create curiosity in the audience,

prompting them to learn more, and hence, the audience's inclination to learn further is maintained in these theatres. Therefore, the government should take the initiative to promote and protect these kinds of theatres by introducing more institutions like the National School of Drama, rather than collaborating with industrialists or the upper class.

Lastly, it is a matter of deepening regret that even in the 21st century, many people influenced by the bourgeoisie's thoughts think that being a theatre artist in society is useless and consider them as mere fools. So, it is our duty to wipe away such notions and ideas which the upper class propagates and bring up the voice of the common man. It is also sad to realise that many talented artists have left the theatre due to financial problems or due to political influences making their way into the theatre, whether by influencing it for their own gains or subjugating it to create a hostile environment for plays to be performed. Additionally, the wages for the theatre artists, which they receive for their performance, are very low, and many theatre artists cannot even maintain their own families. Though initiatives like Kala Sanskriti Vikas Yojana, Performing Arts Grants Scheme, under the government of India and Manipur's Chief Ministergi Artiste Sing Gi Tengbang (CMAT) are being taken up, many remain insufficient. These rewards are frequently inaccessible to grassroots theatre artists due to bureaucratic obstacles, urban bias, and limited outreach. Long-term artistic production is not supported by intermittent funding and meagre annuities under the Artistes' Pension Scheme. Their impact is further diminished by delayed payments due to the gaps between officials and artists. More regular and comprehensive support is required to encourage the arts and maintain cultural history, particularly for artists who use performance and conversation to define collective identity.

Comparing the wages of the theatre artist to the mainstream cinema, on the other hand, like Bollywood in India, actors and actresses are paid an exorbitant amount for a film, much more than

they can actually spend on acting and performance, which will make Habib Tanvir turn in his grave.

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