



CINEMA
REBORN
2024

Sydney 1–7 May 2024

Melbourne 9–14 May 2024

Ishanou

Aribam Syam Sharma

Aribam Syam Sharma, the acclaimed filmmaker from Manipur, has done it all. Actor, singer, composer, theatre director, filmmaker and champion of Manipuri cinema – he is a true Renaissance man who displayed a mastery over every genre of filmmaking, from blockbusters to arthouse cinema to documentaries. In a career spanning close to fifty years, Syam Sharma has directed 15 feature films, over 40 documentaries and scored the music for 25 films. He also played a key role during his three-year stint at the Manipur Film Development Council and as the first Managing Director of the Manipur Film Development Corporation towards improving the infrastructure for film production and the creation of avenues for the appreciation of cinema in Manipur.

‘I believe that as filmmakers, we need to return to our roots again and again

to make films, which stand as works of art’, said Aribam Syam Sharma, whose films put Manipuri cinema on the world map. Known for his simple, poetic narratives about ordinary people, rooted in the culture of Manipur, Aribam Syam Sharma’s body of work has stayed true to this belief.

Born in 1936, Syam Sharma came to the world of cinema through music and drama. He composed and sang songs and acted in plays right from his school days. In college, he formed the Amateur Artistes Association along with some friends, which became the forerunner of Roop Raag, the oldest musical association in the state founded in 1960 to promote modern Manipuri music. Syam Sharma graduated with a Masters in Philosophy from the storied Vishwa Bharati University in Santiniketan, where he also studied Rabindra Sangeet [Tagore



songs]. His time at Santiniketan had a profound impact on his artistic outlook and creative philosophy.

Syam Sharma's first foray into film was as an actor and composer in the first Manipuri feature film, *Matamgi Manipur* (1972). His debut feature was *Lamja Parshuram* (1974), which became the first film to run in the cinemas for over 100 days in Manipur. His second film, *Saaphabee* (1976), won him the first of many National Awards. The film *Olangthagee Wangmadasoo* (1979) marked the beginning of a long and successful creative collaboration between Syam Sharma and M.K. Binodini Devi, one of the daughters of Maharaj Churachand of Manipur and one of the greatest writers in the history of Manipur. The result was a film that continues to hold the record as the longest running Manipuri film so far in the history of Manipuri cinema, with the record run of 32 weeks. Having directed a blockbuster and feeling confident that he had done his part in Manipuri cinema making a mark at the box office, Syam Sharma decided to leave the mainstream behind. The result was *Imagi Ningthem* (1981) that made the world sit up and take notice. With *Imagi Ningthem* (1981), Syam Sharma became the first Indian recipient of the prestigious *Montgolfière D'or* at the *Festival des Trois Continents*, Nantes. His film *Ishanou* (1990) was selected in the *Un Certain Regard* section at the 44th *Cannes International Film Festival*. He has won multiple National Awards over the years for his films, *Saaphabee*, *Olangthagi Wangmadasoo*, *Imagi Ningthem*, *Ishanou*, *Sanabi* and *Leipaklei*.

Each of his documentaries explored an aspect of the rich Manipuri culture.

His National Film Award winning documentaries are: *Deer on the Lake* (1989), *Indigenous Games of Manipur* (1990), *Meitei Pung* (1991), *Orchids of Manipur* (1994), *Yelhou Jagoi* (1995), *Thang-Ta: Martial Arts of Manipur* (1991), *The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh* (2001), *Guru Laimayum Thambalngoubi* (2006) and *Manipur Pony* (2012).

Sangai: The Dancing Deer of Manipur was declared as the 'Outstanding Film of the Year' in 1989 by the British Film Institute and won five awards at the 12th *International Wildlife Film Festival* in Montana, USA.

A doyen of Manipuri cinema, Syam Sharma was honoured with the Padma Shri [civilian award] in 2006 by the Government of India. Two years later, he was awarded the Dr. V. Shantaram Lifetime Achievement Award for his contribution to documentary filmmaking. His works have been screened at several international forums, like the British Film Institute, the Museum of Modern Art and *Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival*. In 2015, Syam Sharma was conferred with the Jewel of Manipuri Cinema award by the Manipur State Film Development Society and the *International Film Festival of India* held a special retrospective of his works.

Biographical note from Cannes Film Festival press release, 2023.

The film

A bus arrives on a village market street. A young couple and their daughter get off and the wife's mother, a vendor in the women's market, greets them affectionately. They discuss preparations for the child's ear-piercing ceremony which is imminent. Aribam Syam

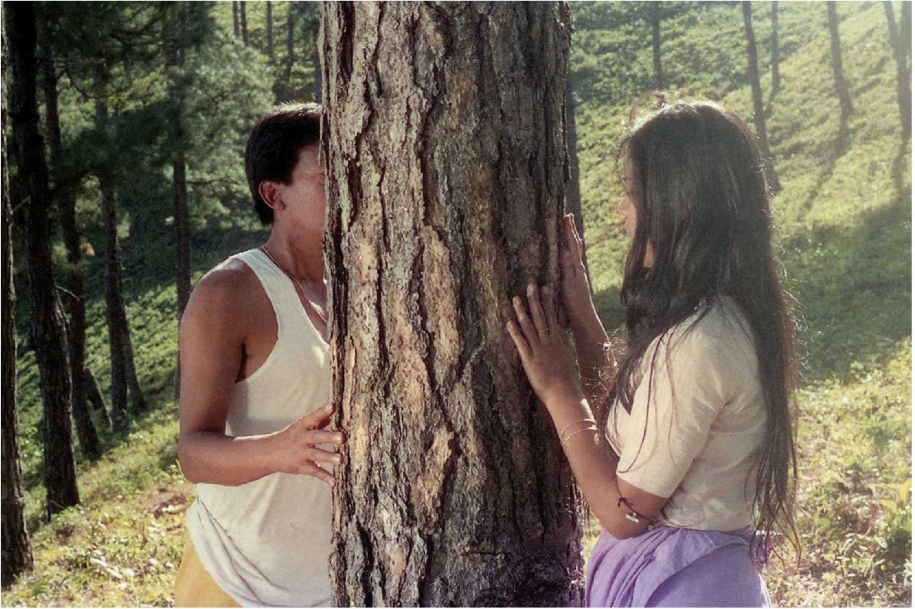
Sharma's *Ishanou* (*The Chosen One*, 1990) opens thus, to the quotidian rhythms of a Manipuri village, with a deceptive quietude that belies the eddies of grief and turmoil that await this family and, thus, the viewers. As Tampha, the young wife, is drawn to the 'sacred feminine', her family initially seeks medical treatment for what appear to them as strange and inexplicable symptoms. They eventually realise that she must follow her divine calling and leave the family to become a *Maibi*, a priestess with shamanic powers. The family is rent asunder, with Tampha joining her Maibi guru-mother, leaving her husband and daughter behind. This quintessentially Manipuri narrative, where Tampha is torn between her will to feminine power and her love for her daughter, has no happy ending. Suffused with the lyrical and poignant beauty of the sacred music, dance and rituals performed by the Maibis, *Ishanou* represents a significant milestone in Manipuri cinema.

Manipur, in the north-eastern part of India, bordering Myanmar, is on the margins of the national imaginary and, like many other states in this region, has been historically in conflict with the post-colonial Indian State. In recent times, it has been riven apart by politically instigated internecine conflict between the majority Hindu Meitei community in the valley and the Christian hill tribes such as the Kukis. This tumultuous history coexists with the composite culture of the Meiteis, which is an amalgam of indigenous beliefs and Vaishnav Hinduism.

As a filmmaker, Syam Sharma is deeply inserted into Meitei cultural and social life, and his remarkable *oeuvre*,

represented by *Ishanou* and other films such as *Saaphabee* (1976) and *Imagi Ningthem* (*My Son, My Precious*, 1981), seeks to affirm these precarious and marginal modes of being. *Ishanou* was the outcome of his long-standing collaboration with the acclaimed writer M.K. Binodini Devi. Her close association with the Maibis, along with Syam Sharma's previous work on *Lai-Haraoba* (a festival celebrating the gods through music, dance and rituals performed primarily by the Maibis) shaped this narrative that explores the Maibi lifeworld. In a recent film, *Aribam Syam Sharma: Laproscopic Cinemascesapes* (dir. Joshy Joseph, 2023), Syam Sharma points to how Manipuri forms, whether the *Raas* dance style, the flower arrangements, or the costumes, are very subtle. His project is to explore the 'Manipuriness' in all these forms, for he fears their increasing marginalisation: 'Once it is lost, it is lost forever,' he says. Along with this, he speaks of his search for an indigenous language of cinema that embodies the minimal, almost invisible expressive energy of Manipuri dance, and in parallel brings out the beauty of the everyday 'dusty Indian scenes,' as he calls them.

Closeups are used sparingly in the film and sometimes in counter-intuitive ways. There is a climactic scene towards the end of the film, when Tampha returns home from her guru and looks for her daughter Bembem, going from room to room and calling out to her. When she fails to find her, she falls on her bed, face down and sobs bitterly; the camera focuses on the back of her head and as viewers we are pulled back from invading her grief. This shot is characteristic of the quiet dignity,



equanimity, and grace with which Syam Sharma handles liminal moments in the film. In many other instances, he pays scant attention to the face/head of the performer, thereby decentering the human subject away from the head to the corporeal — the bodily performance of the protagonist. As he points out, this is in keeping with the stylistic registers of classical Manipuri dance: 'In Manipuri dance (...) there's no expression on the face. That is not allowed. There's even a veil. With a veil how can you express?' *Ishanou* is an invitation to go beyond the obvious, the spectacular, and to enter the realm of the unspoken, the veiled and yet deeply affective space that Syam Sharma creates through the layers of his own music compositions, dance and embodied performances of the protagonists.

Film note by Anjali Monteiro and K. P. Jayasankar

The restoration

Presented and restored by Film Heritage Foundation at L'Immagine Ritrovata laboratory and Prasad Corporation Pvt. Ltd.'s Post – Studios, Chennai, in association with the Producer and Director, Aribam Syam Sharma and Manipur State Film Development Society. Funding provided by Film Heritage Foundation with the support of Dr. Richard Meyer and Susan Harmon.

Director, Producer and Music: Aribam Syam SHARMA; Production Company: Aribam Syam Sharma Productions; Script: M K Binodini DEVI; Photography: Girish PADHIAR; Editor: Ujjal NANDI; Sound: Durgadas MITRA // Cast: Anoubam KIRANMALA (Tampha), Kangabam TOMBA (Dhanabir, Tampha's Husband), Baby Molly (Bembem, Tampha's Daughter), Manbi (Tampha's Mother), Soraisam DHIREN (Tampha's neighbour)

India | 1990 | 93 mins | 4K DCP | Colour | Manipuri with English subtitles | UC15+

Film Heritage Foundation, India

Film Heritage Foundation is a non-profit organisation based in Mumbai, set up in 2014. It is dedicated to supporting the conservation, preservation and restoration of the moving image and to developing interdisciplinary programmes to create awareness about the language of cinema.

A member of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) since 2015, Film Heritage Foundation is the only non-governmental organization in the country working in the field of film preservation.

The foundation preserves a growing collection of about 700 films currently on celluloid and has an archive of about 200,000 objects of film-related memorabilia, including cameras, projectors, posters, song booklets, lobby cards, books, magazines, etc. The foundation's programmes span the entire gamut of film preservation activities, from preservation of films and film-related memorabilia, film restoration, training programmes, children's

workshops, oral history projects and exhibition to festival curation and publication. Film Heritage Foundation has built an international reputation for excellence. It has been restoring forgotten gems of Indian cinema, including Aravindan Govindan's *Kummatty* (1979) and Thampu (*The Circus Tent*, 1978) and Aribam Syam Sharma's *Ishanou* (*The Chosen One*, 1990). The restored films have been screened at festivals, museums and universities around the world. The foundation's most recent restorations, *Thampu* and *Ishanou*, were selected for red-carpet world premieres at the *Cannes Film Festival* 2022 and 2023. Since 2015, in association with FIAF the foundation has been conducting annual film preservation workshops across India that have become the template for FIAF's global training and outreach programme. Until 2022, these workshops were open to applicants from India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Bhutan and Myanmar, while the most recent one was open to participants from across the world. These workshops have had a tremendous impact, training close to 400 participants over the years. They have created a movement for film preservation in India and the subcontinent and built a worldwide community of film archivists.



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