



The Journey Of Nupishaabi- A Case Study Of 'Shumang Leela'

Ms. Sanchi Jiwane Assistant Professor B. Voc Department (Acting, Theatre & Stagecraft) VMV Commerce, JMT Arts & JJP Science College, Nagpur
sanchitombay@gmail.com

Abstract

'Shumang Leela' stands for 'Open Air Theatre Performance' generally in the courtyards of residential houses of Manipur, India. It's a Manipuri theatrical art from seems to develop in the 19th and 20th centuries. The unique feature of this art form is yet male actors are playing the role of female characters called "NupiShaabi", this paper discusses the life journey of these NupiShaabi's from their childhood to old age and also the analytical observation of their psychological, social and the physical aspects based on the various facts in this theatrical journey. It's a comparative study of society and NupiShaabi's in the context of Shumang Leela, social acceptance, grey thinking of society towards transgenders community, feminine male behaviour, and their life style. It also discusses the prodigious importance of NupiShaabi's in Shumang Leela. Shumang Leela is the strongest medium in Manipur to convey the message and to acknowledge and influence various issues of socio-politico-economic to messes, it is also a way to promote the cultural and educational communication to the Manipuri society. The paper further explores the struggle of NupiShaabi's after finishing the career in Shumang Leela, remaining working options, acceptance by the family and society.

Keywords: Shumang Leela, NupiShaabi, Transgenders, Theatre, Identity Crisis, Manipur

Introduction of Shumangleela

The literal meaning of Shumang Leela is "Courtyard theatre", performed in the courtyard of the household. It's popular dramatic performance art of local peoples of Manipur, India. The word Shumang means courtyard and Leela is a Sanskrit word which convey its meaning as play/performance in Manipuri language.

Arambam Somendra notes, "Sumang Leela is enacted in an open space play without any stage or heavy props. An open space of about 18 ft. sq. is sufficient for performance. A bamboo pole is placed in the middle to hold the lights and this arrangement is usually done by the host the locals who invites a group to perform. The roles of women are portrayed by men, who speak in a falsetto voice (female voice) during the time of play. A troupe/group is a self-sufficient unit with actors and musicians because all the members perform the assigned roles with their full dedication, and almost all the actors can play the musical instruments, which mostly consist of a Dholak (Drum) and two or three Ramkartals and Harmonium, which are small cymbals widely used in folk music."

The main objective of this theatrical art form is for entertaining, enlightening, instructing, educating and informing the people regarding the various issues related to the society in the context of social culture of the Manipuris.

Source and development

The source of Shumang Leela is from the comic skits of clowns performed in public, these jesters were loyal attendant of Chandrakirti Maharaj (1856-1886), they were humorous, witty, and gifted masters of improvisations. They used to perform these comic skits as per the order of the king during the festivals of Duga puja and other social gatherings, these comic skits were called "Phagee Leela" (Phagee means comedy specially to make people laugh). It was continued till 1930s. The characteristics of Phagee Leela were mostly oral banter, wordplay, comical looks of the actors, funny body movements and gestures, foolish clothing and dresses design. Around 1910s, two new groups of comedians came up in the frame called themselves as Kabul Pala and Fadibee Pala, these groups give a new dimension to Phagee Leela and promote this art from into next level, they cleverly bring a fine drawn hint of exception and impudence directed towards the British officials and their bureaucratic servants in the form of performance and influences the public. The development of Shumang Leela can be further divided into three different phases, Rangitabali Waikhom accredited, "The first phase was roughly started from the reign of Chandrakirti Maharaj till the reign of Sir Churchand (1891-1941). It was believed to be the time when Phagee Leela that came up during the time of Chandrakirti Maharaj shaped into the form of Shumang Leela. Phagee Leela with some transformation in the content and the structure which later came to be known as Shumang Leela. The second phase started alongside with the starting of the Second World War till 1955. The third phase was started from 1955 and lasted till 1970's.

Actors

The unique and extraordinary feature of this art form is that, still here the male actors are performing female characters, commonly known as Nupi Shaabi. Unlike other folk forms of India. The majority of actors who worked in Shuman Leela are from rural or semi-rural areas, they are the practitioners of Manipuri performing arts, majority of the artists earn their living from Shumang Leela as their main profession. There are minimum 12 and maximum 15 actors in a Shumang Leela group troupe including 3 to 4 singers. The songs sung by female characters on the stage are sung by male musicians only in the female voice, the actors lip sing on the stage and also it is a great risk worth taking that there should be synchronization between the singer on back stage and the actor performing live on stage. A particular group has to travel a lot of places for performances at distinct locations. This was the biggest reason of dropping the number female artist and men had to step up into the female roles. And also, they started playing their plays from 8 am in the morning to till 11 pm at night.

The concept of Nupi Shaabi

NupiShaabis are the performing male actresses in Shumang Leela, they are the centre of attraction of Shumang Leela plays and they have given a massive impact and command among the audiences. The word so called NupiShaabi is a combination of Nupi (female) and Shaabi (impersonator). Grammatically both the words Nupi and Shaabi are in female oriented. In its true depiction should be 'Nupi Shaba' (female male imitator) rather than 'Shabi' because they are being personated as female. The ladyboy (NupiShaabi) age 18 to 25, imitates the female mannerism, gestures, dresses and even dialogues in falsetto voice on high tone. Manipuri society being conservative in their nature, it is very difficult to accept this action. Hence this was also a reason for dropout in the number of woman performers and man had to step into the female role.

It's a difficult journey to become NupiShaabi, actors have to undergo hard training in the practice of physicality and vocal skills. This training of NupiShaabi is totally based on "ideal construction of woman" leaving your men behind and moving forward in being a female because throughout the grooming stage. He has to observe the household woman, their movement, gesture, posture, voice, feminine nature etc. after completing this process and getting the approval of director, his real actor training in terms of dialogue delivery, stage performance, feminine movements on stage, makeup, costumes are taught. One such example is that how Oja Birjit Ngangom, a very accomplished director of Manipur, professionally shaped R.K. Sanaton (popular and most beautiful NupiShaabi) into a very 'beautiful' NupiShaabi, among the different department of theatre group of feminine impersonation. (Machunwangliu Kamei, 4), it's a very difficult stage for a NupiShaabi's, when they have been rejected by the audience because of their looks as not as beautiful enough to be woman. This kind of situation stamp a deeper impact on them and leaves an emotional scar in them as failures.

Socio-Cultural Aspects of the practice of NupiShaabi

The study about NupiShaabi conducted in March-May – 2005 in Imphal and rural areas and according to Kshetrimayum Imokanta Singh, it is quite interesting to see the responses of the people to the surveys. Two questions are formed for the purpose of survey one's related to NupiShaabis and other to the cross-gendered people in general just to enquire to them.

The first question has two parts.

- A) How do you notice about Leela NupiShaabis?
- B) When you interact with them personally, what do you feel?

The second question is - Do you agree with the concept of man behaving like a woman and woman behaving like a man in the society of Manipur? Reason?

70% of the respondents are from in and around Imphal and the remaining 30%'s is from the rural areas. The number of male respondents and the female are of equal i.e. 50%. The ages group of the respondents ranges from 20 to 50 years who represent the younger generation Manipuris. Most of them have the light of knowledge from modern

education system, ranging from class X to post graduation and so on. The profession is also ranging from student to self-employment, business, teaching, government service, homemaking, football coaches and players.

The result of that study is as follows:

The responses that we get from the first questions are positive: - Almost all of the respondents look at NupiShaabis as artistes and encourages their extra creativity and character which makes them later consider as real women during performances is going on. Some of the NupiShaabi take recourse to the destiny that the NupiShaabis have been given feminine characters by god and there is nothing wrong in that they accept who they really are. The most significant is creating a sense of gender equality in Manipuri society as it was clearly reflected in some of the responses. Some plead others to respect the NupiShaabis for their contribution, dedication and sacrifice made for the society. There is not much difference in the responses getting from the urban and rural respondents as the difference is only at the level of geographic condition not in the cultural location.

The Response of the second question stimulates the respondent's minds and there are countless responses both in affirmative and negative. The respondents are categories into the 'Yes' and 'No' sides with 60 – 40 ratios in each side respectively. Some in the favour accepting the fact that they are agree with man behaving like a woman also, mention that the cross-gendered members are acceptable as long as they are within the 'tolerance level' of the societal norms. In this category, some of the respondents also express the 'scientific' reason responsible for their behaviour that it is due to the presence of male hormones in female and vice-versa. Some take the biological or 'godly' explanation that nothing can altered since these persons are born that way. Some accept them because they allow and love the art of transvestism live in theatre.

Some Important Incidents Had Been Recorded In Newspapers

Times of India (Sep 16, 2016, 06.12 AM IST)

Transgender actor thrashed by cops unable to perform

IMPHAL: Popular transgender actor from Manipur BisheshHuirem son of HuiremManglem a famous comedy artiste, who was beaten up by the security team of a state minister, was unable to perform in theatre form Shumang Leela on Wednesday night on account of her injuries.

Police personals of rural development and Panchayati Raj minister MoirangthemOkendro beat up Bishesh and a friend in the Yaiskul area of Imphal on Monday night following an argument over right of way in a narrow lane.

Times of India

Furore over attack on transgender daily wager in Imphal

IMPHAL: A daily wager from the transgender community was strike by locals in the area of Sagolband of Imphal city and the video of the incident was uploaded on the social media, causingdispute among the community. That hurt the people of the transgender community who are still tolerating the public humiliated and hatred.

These kinds of incidents leave the unvarnished remark on NupiShaabis psychology and they started behaving like a victim while in public and lose all self-respect and confidence and scared of going out of their house because of afraid of being humiliated by the public. As an artist, being in this kind of situation often causes depression and restless, also they are not able to perform on stage well, which affect their profession of acting, resulted in fired from the jobs. Mostly they retired from their acting profession at the age of 30-35 with no future because society is not ready to accept a feminine 35-year-old man.

Conclusion

The Shumang Leela, as a performing art facing so many challenges in this technical word. Cinema, digital and electronic medium are giving tough competition and it is not able to get the audience, result in fewer shows for troupes and fewer payments to artists. This study tries to explain the situation of NupiShaabi's on various levels like social and psychological and wanted to prove that it's an art, they are the performers and we should give all the respect they deserve as an artist. The span lifetime of NupiShaabis are at the risk and usually they died of young ages. The main reason behind this bitter truth is due to their dedication toward their profession. This effects their health as well as they need to maintain their voice and body structure that of a feminine because people don't want to watch a performance play act by a manly muscular NupiShaabiand they are not allowed to be part of the theatrical tropes.

Throughout their entire journey all they face is hardship, disrespect and humiliation until they become a renowned artiste. They received the respect they deserve only after are become famous, beauty, delegate and descend are the characteristics they need to possess to grab public attraction. No one will know the efforts they put and the struggle they faced to reach that level. This uniqueness art form of Manipur known as Shumang Leela contribute a huge share in the development of Manipur theatre and in the field of performing arts and acting as a platform to educate the new generation in terms of culture and the behaviour of the cruel society they are living

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