CHAPTER I

SHUMANG LILA: INTERFACE BETWEEN ART AND SOCIETY
Shumang Lila is a touring theatre genre, which has undergone various stages in its history of development. When it started off in the second half of the 19th century it was not part of any categories laden with values. But it came under categorization in the 20th century when it was seen vis-à-vis the proscenium theatre which represented the elite culture in Manipur. Today the gap between the two has reduced due to improvements in the text and style of performance. Nevertheless, this genre has always come under the screening eyes of the hegemonic gaze.\textsuperscript{170}

To start with, we need categories but not necessarily binaries. There have been very long debates on the binaries of classical and popular; high brow and low brow; elite and folk culture, mostly in academic circle. It has been unearthed that they are not really cloistered in watertight compartments. As we know there is give and take between the two. Shakespearean plays have been adapted in popular forms of performances and also pop music has been followed by people with classical music background. In our case, why there should be dichotomy only between proscenium theatre and Shumang Lila? If we look little more closely there are other theatrical categories other than these two. Some would be Rasa Lila (dance drama), Gouralila, Tangkhul Nurabi Loutaba etc. Comparative study between proscenium theatre and Shumang Lila becomes inevitable but studying them as just two halves of a dichotomy would limit our understanding.

In the present work Shumang Lila is being studied as 'popular theatre'. In case of Shumang Lila 'popular' has to be defined with certain qualification. Here, 'popular' does not bear the 'ghettoized' culture, which is followed by the powerless majority, vis-à-vis the 'polished' culture of the dominant minority elites. It is 'popular' across classes, which means it is popular amongst the 'elite' class and also amongst the masses. This may be because it has 'improved' its textual and presentational styles, as perceived by the people who have a comparative sense between this theatre form and the high culture of proscenium theatre. So, it is a mark of recognition from the above which also serves as a milestone to dismantle the dichotomy.

Notwithstanding this new development, the history of culture and cultural analysis is not represented in a smooth chronological form, rather it is a terrain of intellectual dialectics and also uncertainties. Culture in anthropology has traversed a long way from the day of Sir E. B. Tylor’s definition as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge.

\textsuperscript{170} This will be elaborated in this chapter later on.
belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' to its postmodern definition that culture is a resource for tourism 'used as an attraction, an attention grabber and as vehicle for development contracting'. But the concept of culture has always been changing with its ‘multiple meanings’ and ‘multiple sites’. Cultural analysis also has come a long way from the days of L. H. Morgan and H. Spencer when culture was perceived as ‘bounded, specific to groups and places, and could be named’ to the post-modernist conception of culture as ‘unpredictable, incoherent, and inconsistent’.

In the Sociology of reading culture the big changes in the perspectives came in 1970s and 1980s with strong influences coming from ‘literary studies, cultural studies, feminist studies and ethnic studies and … poststructuralist theories in France, the British Cultural Studies group, and Science Studies in Britain.’ One thinker who is highly influential in this paradigm change in reading cultural studies is Raymond Williams. He was also one of those who started the perspective of ‘culturalism’ ‘which insists that by analyzing the culture of a society – the textual forms and documented practices of a culture – it is possible to reconstruct the patterned behaviour and constellations of ideas shared by the men and women who produce and consume the cultural texts and practices of that society. It is a perspective which stresses “human agency” the active production of culture, rather than its passive consumption.’ According to him culture can be defined in three ways. Firstly, culture refers to ‘a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development’. Secondly, it is ‘a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group’. Thirdly, culture can be used to refer to ‘the works and practices of intellectual and specifically artistic activity’. The third definition is especially relevant for the present work as it encompasses such examples as ‘poetry, the novel, ballet, opera, fine art.’ They are

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173 Ibid. p. 352.

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what structuralist and poststructuralist call “signifying practices”. Popular culture can be included in the second and third understandings of culture.

Major change in the cultural analysis came with the shift from seeing culture as ‘implicit’ which is conceived as ‘the values, norms, beliefs and attitudes of the entire population or of subgroups within the population’ to culture as ‘explicit social constructions or products’ which include ‘recorded culture’ like print and electronic media (films included) and artifacts. With this change in the analysis there came the importance given to the media of cultural production which is deeply embedded in the power politics. If we take ‘historical sociology’ into account it has been discerned that a certain cultural production and practice is controlled by the powerful in every historical epoch. It is also important to discern how the powerful creates a ‘cultural field’ which is made congenial to the less powerful and powerless majority. There is an active involvement of political economy in the production and consumption of such cultural items. The cultural market is a place of negotiation between the producers and the consumers where the producers do not simply produce for the sake of their creative satisfaction and consumers do not respond for the products’ sheer exchange value but also for their use value which may include ideological utility. This does not simply mean that cultural field is all economic, an analysis which will suffer from economic reductionism. The dynamics of production and consumption of cultural items is more complex and subjective. But it is also to be seen how subjective tastes of the consumers are guided by the subjective tastes of the producers who are the cultural guardians of that certain historical moment. This may happen irrespective of whether the cultural product is ‘elite’ or ‘popular’.

According to Raymond Williams a given social formation will always consist of three cultural moments – ‘dominant’, ‘emergent’ and ‘residual’. His contention is that the move from one historical period to another does not usually involve the complete collapse of one cultural mode and installation of another. Historical change may simply bring about a shift in the relative place of different cultural modes. In this midst only one will be dominant which will define the course of the practices. There is a tactical execution of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony by this dominant group. Gramsci uses the concept of

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177 Diana Crane. op. cit. p. 2.
hegemony to refer to a condition in process in which a dominant class, in alliance with other classes or class fractions, does not merely rule a society but leads it through the exercise of moral and intellectual leadership. In this sense, the concept is used to suggest a society in which, despite oppression and exploitation, there is a high degree of consensus, a large measure of social stability; a society in which subordinate groups and classes appear to actively support and subscribe to values, ideals, objectives, cultural and political meanings, which bind them to, and incorporate them into, the prevailing structure of power. This way hegemony is always the result of negotiations between dominant and subordinate groups, it is a process marked by both resistance and incorporation. In the cultural study field, the hegemony theory allows us to think popular culture, or for that matter any cultural genre, as a negotiated mix of intentions and counter intentions; both from above and below, both commercial and authentic; and a shifting balance of forces between resistance and incorporation. This allows us to see both producers and consumers with certain power to bargain in this power struggle. Producers are not at their liberty to impose their wills upon the consumers. On the other hand, consumers are not just ‘cultural dopes’ rather they are also producers of meanings when they are given the product in their hand. This is related to what Stuart Hall calls articulation. According to him cultural texts and practices are not inscribed with meaning, guaranteed once and for all by the intentions of the production, meaning is always the result of an act of articulation. There is an inevitable need to understand the relationship between structure and agency in order to understand the working of the cultural texts and practices. Again there is also a braided domain of culture, politics and economy which steers the cultural motor in various historical trajectories.

Shumang Lila has always been a site of protest, contestation and negotiation for the politically conscious parties. Through its historical trajectories it has always been involved in ‘reflective’ politics where it engages itself with the process of self-analysis, self-critiquing and self-assertion in the cultural and religious fields vis-à-vis a dominant force. In this project there is a deliberate employment of agency to subvert the ‘other’ and to eulogize the indigenousness. This does not mean the complete extermination of the dominant force, and it is almost impossible to do so, since there have been diffusions

\[179\] Ibid. pp. 103-108.
happening in lived social experiences and also in cultural texts and practices. It is a negotiation between outwardly visible signs of ‘otherness’ and apparent indigenousness.

1. Shumang Lila and Other Manipuri Performative Genres

Manipur is rich in her cultural performance traditions. There is convergence between what we generally call Religious/Ritualistic and Non-religious forms. In discursive realm, theatre per se has been projected as a category having dialectical relationship with ritual. But it is difficult to put them in this relationship as there cannot be (and is not) a watertight compartmentalization between the two. Nevertheless there are attributes whose higher degree of presence decides whether a performance is theatre or ritual. According to Richard Schechner, if the performance has a higher degree of ‘efficacy’, it is more ritualistic and, if it has higher degree of ‘entertainment’ it is more theatrical. It is more of degree of presence and absence, not one being thesis and other being antithesis. So, theatrical and ritualistic elements, most of the time, co-exist in a performance. They form a braided structure. In history of Western theatre, when the braided structure is tight i.e., when both efficacy and entertainment are present in nearly equal degrees, theatre flourished. When efficacy dominates, performances are universalistic, allegorical, ritualized, tied to a stable established order. When entertainment dominates, the performances are class oriented, individualized, show business, constantly adjusted to suit the tastes of the audience. Ritual and theatre each can not claim to be one another’s source. At one moment ritual seems to be the source of theatre and at another point theatre seems to be the source of ritual. In fact, they are twin system vitally interconnected. There is osmosis between the two. Presently theatre is entering into the avenues, which were once solely occupied, by religion and politics.\(^{180}\)

This debate does not deny the presence of categories of performances which can be either dominantly religious or dominantly non-religious. This takes into account the texts and contexts of performance; the audience structure and behaviour etc. This is not to deny the fact that, especially in most of the traditional societies, the cultural is entwined with the religious. In the light of the characters of texts and contexts of the performances, Manipuri

performing art forms can be loosely grouped into religious and non-religious. The religious genres are mostly constituted by dance dramas. The ritual festival called Lai Haraoba is replete with intricate representations of the mythological events and the nuances of practicality of the community life, predominantly through various forms of dances called Jagoi performed by the Maibis (priestesses). Apart from this there are other Vaisnavite genres like Rasa Lila, Gouralila (drama enacting the childhood years of Gouranga Chatanya Mahaprabhu, mainly by children), Sanjenba (an episode from the Krishna’s childhood when he reveals his true self and played mischief with the Gopis while grazing cows in the Vrindavan), Udukhol (an episode from Krishna’s childhood plays) etc. In the category of Non-religious, Manipur has Phampak Lila or Stage Lila (proscenium theatre) and Shumang Lila.

2. Shumang Lila and Popular Culture

As mentioned above Shumang Lila is ‘popular’ in its own way. But what we call popular culture has its own history of tussle with what is called ‘elite’ culture in their move to outdo each other. Popular culture, according to Mukerji and Schudson, “refers to the beliefs and practices, and objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population.” Raymond Williams gives four meanings attached to it i.e. ‘well liked by many people; inferior kinds of work; work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people; culture actually made by the people for themselves.’ So, this realm is cast in the polysemic strands which involve not just defining the term itself but also finding its ‘others’ against which it is contrasted. So, popular culture has been seen in a dialectical

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181 This is described later in this chapter.
182 Maibis are the presiding priestesses in the Lai Haraoba festival. In this ritual festival the role of the priests (Maiba) is secondary to that of the priestess. Maibi, Maiba and Pena Khongba (Pena player; Pena is a kind of instrument like fiddle which is very much part and parcel of various rituals of Meitei society) are the three indispensable ingredients of this festival. Maibis can be either female or male but male Maibis cross-dress as female ones. The term Maibi is also used for midwives.
183 Rasa Lila of Manipur is a form of dance drama started by King Bhagyachandra (1759-1762 and 1763-1798). It is a depiction of the story of Sri Krishna’s divine love sports with Radha and the Gopis of Brindavan, as explained in the 10th Chapter of Srimad Bhagavata (N. Tombi Singh, 1975 Manipur and the Mainstream, Imphal: Published by N.K. Singh under the auspices of the Cheitrebirentombichand Khorjeirup). It has different categories – Basanta Rasa, Maha Rasa, Kunja Rasa and Nitya Rasa. The styles are taken from the Manipuri dance forms already present in Lai Haraoba ceremonies though the theme is Vaisnavite
185 Raymond Williams, 1983 – Keywords. London: Fontana. p. 87. (Quoted in John Storey, op. cit. p. 5.)
relationship with such ‘others’ as ‘mass culture, high culture, working class culture, folk culture etc.’ which carry ‘a specific theoretical and political inflection.... This is further complicated by the fact that different theoretical perspectives have tended to focus on particular areas of the popular cultural landscape. The most common division is between the study of texts (popular fiction, television, pop music, etc.) and lived culture or cultural practices (seaside holidays, youth subcultures, the celebration of Christmas, etc.’

Instead of a monolithic construction of meaning it is preferable to follow multilateral approaches with the understanding that this institution falls within the category of popular culture. So, John Storey is of the opinion that any definition of popular culture takes into account the ‘complex combination of the different meanings of the term ‘culture’ with the different meanings of the term ‘popular’.’ He finds at least six ways of defining this phenomenon following both the temporal and ideological trajectories followed by the scholars on one hand and the agents of this genre on the other. The first definition regards popular culture as ‘simply culture which is widely favoured or well liked by many people.’ This gives the utmost priority to the ‘quantitative dimension’ or the aspect of ‘majority’ as a denominator. However this becomes ambiguous since it also takes into its fold the ‘high culture’ which commands high popularity. He also sees it as the culture which is not, in fact, high culture. This drives on the plank of value judgment where a certain cultural text or practice is worth calling a high culture only by ‘being difficult’ which demands the exclusivity of the audience structure. This bears into it the deep predicaments of class where it is seen that ‘taste is a deeply ideological category’.

Pierre Bourdieu sees the consumption of culture as ‘predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences’. There is a visible sign of cultural becoming an economic index when there is a division between ‘the rich’ and ‘the thousands’. However this definition also takes into account the changeability of popular and high culture to each other in time and space.

The third definition sees popular culture as an altar of mass culture. According to this ‘popular culture is a hopelessly commercial culture. It is mass produced for mass

187 Ibid., p. 6.
188 Ibid
189 Ibid
consumption.... The texts and practices of popular culture are seen as forms of public fantasy. Popular culture is understood as a collective dream world.\textsuperscript{191} The fourth conceives it as 'the culture which originates from 'the people'.... It is popular culture as folk culture. It is a culture of the people for the people.'\textsuperscript{192} The problems with this definition are 'Who are the people?' and how one can exclude the commercial angle of the production of this culture, since the people do not spontaneously produce such culture with the raw materials of their own making. The fifth definition draws on the concept of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. 'The neo-Gramscian hegemony theory see(s) popular culture as a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups in society and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups in society.... (I)t is terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two; a terrain, ... marked by resistance and incorporation. The texts and practices of popular culture move within what Gramsci calls a 'compromise equilibrium'.\textsuperscript{193} The sixth definition arises from the postmodern discourse, which does not at all recognize the distinction between high and popular culture. It substantiates its argument through the prevalent interpenetration of commerce and culture, which blur the distinction between 'authentic culture' and 'commercial culture'.\textsuperscript{194}

In Shumang Lila we have similar case where the garb of the strict dichotomy of folk/classical; highbrow/lowlow is being torn apart.\textsuperscript{195} This blurring is ushered mainly due to the rise in the level of the 'qualities' of the production – both in terms of techniques and themes – as perceived by the people who are trained in proszenium theatre culture. There is osmosis between Shumang Lila and the proszenium theatre, mostly in the realm of theatre techniques, which also serves to bring in the critically oriented audience of the

\textsuperscript{191} John Storey. op. cit. p. 8-9.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., p. 10.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., p. 12-13.
\textsuperscript{195} Also see, in addition to the above discussed definitions of popular culture, Harrington and Bielby (op. cit. pp. 6-7) who say, "... a discourse emerged in the late 1800s which distinguished elite or "highbrow" culture from the mass or "lowlow" culture. Elite cultural objects and practices are those favored by the socially privileged and well-educated, who are believed to be uniquely capable of understanding and appreciating them. Lowlow or popular culture is essentially everything that is not elite culture. The designation of an object or practice as highbrow or lowbrow depends upon several interrelated variables. First is its degree of accessibility.... A second variable is the degree of emotional "distance" adopted by consumers vis-à-vis the cultural text in question. ... The final variable rests on whether the object or practice is identifiably authored.... The late 1960s marked the beginning of a significant trend: the gradual disintegration of the high/lowlow distinctions. Scholars from all perspectives now agree there is considerable fluidity between elite and mass culture. In other words, culture is a dynamic process rather than a static entity, and high/lowlow distinctions can change over time, as can the social groups that engage them."
proscenium theatre. This means there is also a change in the audience structure. Because of this hybridity, the exercise of strait-jacketing will only limit our study as the categorization itself is also hugely influenced by the essentialist motives of those who are part of the so called elite culture which tries to denigrate genres which do not fall into its schema of oppositions of low or folk, versus classical.

We cannot accept the coinages of 'low' and 'folk' anymore in Shumang Lila. So, the term 'popular' in terms of its acceptability among people across class, status and communities through its commercial acumen would qualify it to be clubbed simply under the 'popular culture' bracket. This is comparatively free from value judgment. Its popularity is again multiplied with its service as the carrier and propagator of the cultural elements, political dynamics, historical and mythological texts, mostly local but recently external ones too. It is now part of the play between local and global to cater to the survivability of its own craft.

3. Theatre and Sociology

The sociological engagement of the cultural performances in general and theatre in particular can take into account four main areas, originally outlined by P. F. Lazarfeld in 1947, which are still valid till date. They are "(1) The study of output and the control of information in the mass media—how are the industries organized economically, who are the people who make decisions, and who create media content? (2) Content-analysis studies—of movies, newspapers, radio programmes, television programmes, drama. (3) Audience research—particularly analysis of the composition of audience. (4) Study of the long- and short-term effects of media on individuals and on the community as a whole."197

Functional approach has been a tested sociological perspective in studying theatre. The simple questions like — why do we organize plays in the community? Or 'why do we enjoy looking at drama?'198 - provoke the faculty in discerning the deeper meanings of drama which effect and affect the lived world of the community. Theatre is the unearthing of the unconscious present in the community to a conscious level so that the seeing public may come to know of it. Then plays are not meant for themselves but are produced keeping in mind the various codes operating in the wider society. The various moods, both

196 This is elaborately discussed in the Chapter IV.
198 Ibid. p. 41. This question will be answered elaborately in Chapter IV.
micro and macro, of a particular society are captured and redressed in the fictional world of drama or ‘drama of reassurance’. So, a play which does not follow this certain convention may not go along with the audience, especially in Shumang Lila where popularity is determined by ‘what is wanted by the viewing public’.

In this and the next chapter there will be specific attention to the content-analysis. Content analysis, generally, takes into account the points delineated by Goodlad: “(a) themes; (b) play types; (c) goals and motives of characters in plays; (d) setting in which play takes place; (e) ending.”

(a) **Play Types**: For the convenience of the present study, the second dimension i.e. play types is picked up first. This will discern the genres of plays which are relevant to us, avoiding the fallacy of crude generalization which does not take into account the local variations. The possible genres would include ‘comedy’, tragedy, tragi-comedy, ‘farce’, ‘war setting’, ‘thriller’, ‘documentary style’ etc. However these types are not mutually exclusive but many are found intertwined in a play, may be to show the varieties of moods present in the social setting. Comedy (from Greek *komos*, ‘revel, merrymaking’), according to Aristotle, in Poetics, “deals in an amusing way with ordinary characters in rather everyday situations.”

The clearer picture came in Dante, in his *Epistle to Can Grande*, when he said “comedy is a form of poetical narrative which is different from any other kind....Comedy begins with harshness but ends happily.” Originally Greek comedy has been associated with fertility rites and the worship of Dionysus, the god of the fields and the vineyards. Types within comedy itself is also numerous but what are relevant for the present study would be ‘domestic comedy’, ‘musical comedy’, ‘romantic comedy’. ‘comedy of manners’, ‘comedy of morals’, ‘comedy of intrigues’ etc. Though Shumang Lila has an admixture of such comedies, romantic and domestic comedies take the dominant place.

Farce is sometimes considered to be a sub-section of comedy. However there is subtle difference between the two. “The object of farce is to provoke mirth of the simplest and most basic kind: roars of laughter rather than smiles. It is a matter, therefore, of humour rather than wit.... The basic elements of farce are: exaggerated physical action.

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199 Ibid. p. 150.
200 Also see Ibid. p. 159.
202 Ibid. p. 149.
exaggeration of character and situation, absurd situations and improbable events (even impossible ones and therefore fantastic), and surprises in the form of unexpected appearance and disclosures.”

Shumang Lila of the Phagee Lila genre can be grouped under the category of farce but the former is laced with wit created by subtle dialogues. Comedies differ from farce in the sense that they “present characters in a little more depth, though their motives are either assumed or explicit. The language tends to be realistic, the situation more probable (if not completely so) than farce, and the humour verbal rather than physical.” In Shumang Lila with the advent of strictly written scripts the mostly extemporaneous and loosely structured dialogue patterns of the previous era came into an end.

Tragedy (Greek ‘goat song) is “a form of drama concerned with the fortunes, and, ultimately, the disasters, that befall human beings of title, power and positions.” Aristotle defines tragedy in his Poetics as, “The imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.” What is significant in the tragic characters or heroes is the inevitable self destruction or destruction brought by others to them, despite their superior qualities. Some of the most famous tragedies are “Oedipus, Agamemnon, Antigone, Hecuba, Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, Hamlet, the Duchess of Malfi, Samson, Phedre, Jaffier and Belvidera, Cato, Don Carlos, Brand, Deirdre.”

Comedy and tragedy share some common grounds though their orientations are different. They take the role to usher in order from disorder. According to Duncan, no social order exists without disorder. “In tragic communal rites disorder is exorcised through punishment, torture, and death. But comedy can be used to face disorder. Through comedy we can express doubt as to the principles that those in power uphold in the name of social order. In comedy, the ambiguities and complicating contradictions that interfere with the smooth functioning of individuals in social interaction can be uncovered and commented upon. In the permissive atmosphere of comedy, it is possible to discuss openly

203 Ibid. p. 307.
204 Goodlad. op. cit. p. 160.
205 Cuddon. op. cit. p. 926.
206 Ibid. p. 927.
what cannot be mentioned in normal social intercourse."\textsuperscript{207} In both the genres the protagonists assume the role of the leaders of the community. "The position of leadership makes the character exceptional and isolated. The nature of the hero's isolation is frequently in terms of some ideals he holds that does not fit in with the norms of his society.... [T]he protagonists of tragedy and comedy alike are deficient in their knowledge of human limitations, of what they can hope to achieve and what it is the better part of wisdom not to attempt. The lack of self-knowledge. The tragic protagonist's lack of self-knowledge typically leads to destruction. The comic protagonist's lack of self-knowledge leads ideally to enlightenment from which he cannot but benefit."\textsuperscript{208}

One genre which comes with mixed amounts of tragic and comic elements is tragi-comedy. Some prefer to group it within comedy itself. However it has its own history when Plautus (254-184 BC) termed his play *Amphitruo* as tragic-comedy which had an unconventional mixture of kings, gods and servants. Tragi-comedy, thus, is a tragedy with happy endings since, as Aristotle remarked, "audiences preferred the kind of endings where poetic justice was seen to be done." Such plays, Giraldi Cinthio, an Italian playwright, would call 'mixed tragedies'. Some of Shakespeare's tragic-comedies are *Troilus and Cressida, All's Well that Ends Well, Measure for Measure, The Winter's Tale, Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*.\textsuperscript{209} Strictly speaking most of the Shumang Lila plays are tragi-comedies, be they of social, political, mythological or historical themes.

Thriller plays as a category are organised often in combination with elements of other genres such as comedy, tragedy, war plays etc. They are laced with 'tense, exciting, tautly plotted and sometimes sensational' elements in which 'action is swift and suspense continual'. "Sex and violence (which includes murder) may often play a considerable part in such a narrative."\textsuperscript{210} The police and criminal tussle, security personnel and insurgents/common people etc. with psychological trepidation may be some of the most preferred themes in later eras of Shumang Lila. War plays, in Shumang Lila, as mentioned above are thrillers. They are not an exclusively demarcated plays which are solely constituted by war scenes only but with considerable amount of comic elements. This is because audience not only comes to see plays to engage in an intellectually/emotionally

\textsuperscript{207} Discussed in Goodlad. op. cit. p. 44.
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid pp. 47-8.
\textsuperscript{209} Cuddon. op. cit. p. 934.
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid. p. 914-15

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charged up environment but also to relieve themselves of the day-to-day routine works. The documentary style plays are primarily those ‘in which events of distant or recent history are dealt with in a realistic fashion, with emphasis on historical accuracy’

However historical plays also essentialize and even fictionalize the documented events and characters to give leverage to the demand of the present. This will be seen in the next chapter. All this underlines the vulnerability of the mixing of the types of plays, particularly in Shumang Lila in its endeavour to produce aesthetically popular plays.

(b) **Themes:** “Properly speaking, the theme of a work is not its subject but rather its central idea, which may be stated directly or indirectly. For example, the theme of *Othello* is jealousy.”

Content analysis of the themes of the plays often employs six major divisions: ‘love, idealism, power, career, outcast, and morality’. The treatment and presence of these major themes may vary from culture to culture taking into account the local significance. In case of Shumang Lila the full-fledged career theme came rather late, though it was present with other themes, may be due to the exigencies of the changing global scenario where achievement is given more priority than ascription. Love and morality themes are the most dominant ones in Shumang Lila, which is embedded, in a social structure where communitarian values are above one’s individual experiments and desires. However, a play registers its popularity mostly when there is networking of various themes within it simultaneously. These major themes have sub-divisions also within them. Love themes may be in the form of: ‘youthful love versus parents’; ‘true love versus unwholesome love’; ‘love versus temporary misunderstanding’; ‘love versus ideals and higher values’; ‘idealists’ love versus social norm’; ‘power conflicts for love’; ‘love versus outcast status’ etc. Idealist themes may be ‘idealist versus external obstacles’ or ‘idealist versus internal obstacles’. Power themes may embody ‘power conflicts in relation to idealism’; group versus individual power conflict; intra-group power conflict; and inter-group power conflict. Outcast themes may be stigmatized people versus normal society: ‘criminal or other socially abnormal persons versus normal society’ etc. Career themes involve a person’s quest for success in her/his occupation or the search for a satisfying and well-paid career. This may be in the form of defying the familial pressure reassuring one’s individual identity vis-à-vis the group dynamics. Morality themes may take the form of

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212 Cuddon. op. cit. p. 913.
‘conflicts resulting from immoral love’; ‘immoral parents versus youthful love’; ‘law or honest folk versus criminals’; ‘ordinary citizens versus the law’; deviants versus social custom etc.213

(c) Goals/Motives of the characters: There can be various goals/motives of the characters of a particular play. However, the smaller characters also work for the realization of the goal/motives of the protagonists both hero/heroine and the villain. There often is the coincidence of or same goals of both the two opposing parties—particularly in plays that involve a straight struggle for power’. Among various motives some can be of importance. a) Success as goal is when the character seeks the ‘prestige’, ‘upward social mobility’ etc. b) Power goal or motives ‘aim at achieving a super-ordinate position’. The characters are involved in both physical and psychological tussle to dominate one another. c) Wealth: both the parties work for gains in the form of money, property etc. but the hero/heroine does so not for his/her self gain but for others while the villain does it for personal purposes. d) Protection/Rescue of others by the hero. e) Affection, love, marriage: the hero or the heroine may work for gaining the affection or love, if not marriage, of his/her beloved. It is also the case that the relationship culminates into marriage. However, the villain does not sit idle being an observer of the romance between the two but work overtime to gain the same from his muse and faces, insults, and even tortures the hero, sometimes head-on. f) Preservation of family, marriage, love: a functional approach when there is fissure in the family, marriage and love. g) Revenge: the revenge of the hero is for others while that of the villain is for his self satisfaction. h) An ideal: the goals of heroes are often idealistic—‘common sense’, ‘the good society’, ‘honour’ etc. i) Thrills: the characters sometimes involve themselves in the sheer excitement of the action. For instance, the villain’s involvement in beating up of innocent persons without any rhyme and reason. j) Acceptance into desired society/group: This is for those who have been outcast for his waywardness. The character works hard to gain respectability in the society or his peer group after correcting his past unwarranted behaviour. k) Justice: this happens mostly in morality type plays where the hero seeks the resurrection of his lost credibility. l) Illicit love: the villain’s motive is to take advantage of the opportunity he gets when his object of infatuation is in his custody. In most of the above listed goals/motives there is

213 For the list and explanations of the themes see Goodlad, op. cit. pp. 152-59.
constant conflict between the good and evil and the integrity of the community is the main
frame. This is basically to bring order from disorder.

(d) **Play setting:** The setting of the plots of the plays often reflect the real social
setting where the audiences are ensconced. The Shumang Lila plays mostly are set in the
frame of the ‘middle class family’. But there are other settings like that of battle field, open
natural space, garden, palace (in case of historical and mythological plays), court rooms,
office, market, street etc. The endeavour of the plays is mostly to duplicate the real
settings. In case of Shumang Lila this is made possible with the help of sign systems\(^{214}\) like
voice, gestures, and sound in the absence of props and lighting system.

(e) **Endings:** Four major categories of endings are often classified in the content
analysis. They are happy; unhappy/tragic; ambiguous/unresolved; and just–whether happy
or otherwise. In Shumang Lila there is predominance of the plays where there is final
resolution of the disorder. There is rarely any space for the further engagement of the
minds of the audience in constructing the story from where the play leaves. The plays serve
as a complete package which can be consumed here and now. It is not to say that there is
no impact of the contents of the play on the minds of the spectators.

The above points mainly consider the texts, which are literary. But there are more
to theatre than just literary attributes of play. In this chapter the focus will be on the era of
Shumang Lila when body was used as texts with the spoken words. This was an era when
orality was the main plank of theatre when literate tradition of scriptwriting was minimal.

4. **Structure of Shumang Lila**

Etymologically the term Shumang Lila is a combination of the words ‘Shumang’
(courtyard) and ‘Lila’ (play or performance).\(^ {215}\) It is also known as ‘Jatra’ or ‘Jatra Wali’,
which is a term that tries to equate it with the Jatra of Bengal.\(^ {216}\) So, structurally it may be
termed as ‘courtyard theatre’. But I will retain the term Shumang Lila in the whole of this
thesis. It is performed in an area of approximately 13X13 sq. ft, though the area depends
on the availability of the space, in the centre of any open space – courtyard of a house or

\(^{214}\) The semiotic analysis of Shumang Lila will be discerned in Chapter IV.
\(^{215}\) See Ksh. Imokanta Singh – Shumang Lila: Presentation and Representation of Culture. In Eastern
Quarterly. Vol 3 Issue 1, April-June, 2005.
\(^{216}\) A brief account of Jatra is given afterwards in this chapter.
playground or mandap (congregation hall) of Hindu temples or complexes of local deities (lais).

Shumang Lila is a highly evolved form of theatre, which is structured under the format of total theatre. The true essence of total theatre lies in the interweaving of many elements. These are poetry, music, dance, song, mime, and pantomime. The intermingling of the epic and lyric poetry with narrative and dramatic elements, freedom from the units of time and space, emphasis on imagination, a highly stylized and choreographic poses and movements of the actors, conventions of speech such as alteration of prose and verse dialogues, a stylized recitative and rhythmic mode of delivery and multiplicity of delivery patterns are also important facets of performance. These multiple levels of conventions in 'total theatre' make the audience enjoy the art over and over again. Composition of Shumang Lila is the articulation and orchestration of all the sights and sounds of its theatrical presentation.

Traditionally the performance is made simple without any raised stage (recently use of raised stage with samiana over it has been adopted for better viewing) or any set designing or heavy props such as curtains, background scenery, visual effects etc., but with only one table and two chairs, kept on one side of the space. They serve as props helping the mimic communications of the messages. This space is surrounded by the audience leaving only one passage, which serves as both entrance and exit connecting with the makeshift dressing room or modified 'green room'.

Shumang is a well-leveled open space in front of every Manipuri house. This space has multiple meanings serving various purposes, both profane and sacred; vaisnavite and non-vaisnavite. Every Vaisnavite Meitei's courtyard is a representation of Vrindavan symbolized by the tulsi (sacred basil) plant, which is located at its centre, with an elevated structure. This alcove is known as Tulsibong. A place named Khanglen pham is earmarked at the extreme right corner of the Shumang. Immediately after the death of an inmate of the house, a temporary hut known as Khanglen Shang is constructed with bamboos and straws.

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218 This is not exactly the type of green room any established theatre house has. Green room, apart from serving as the dressing room for the actors, is a private place for the actors and the people closely involved in the production, which is barred from the outsiders. But in case of Shumang Lila the dressing room can be accessed by anyone who desires to have a peep into the actors who are preparing for the show. So, it becomes semi-private and semi-public space.
at this particular portion of Shumang, into which the dead body is instantly shifted. So, it is considered inauspicious to pass through this portion when one sets out of the house.\textsuperscript{219} Shumang also serves as the venue of all the life cycle rituals of the members of a household such as, Soisti Puja\textsuperscript{220} (a ceremony held on the 6\textsuperscript{th} day of a child’s birth), Cha-oomba (annaprasana, i.e. giving an infant solid food for the first time), Na-hutpa (karna veda i.e. piercing of ears of an infant), Lukun-thangba (upanayana, i.e. sacred thread wearing ceremony), Luhongba (marriage), Shraadha or Sorat\textsuperscript{221} (death ceremony) and Phiroi (death anniversary). So, Shumang Lila took its name from this as it used to be performed mostly at this space.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig1.png}
\caption{Performance space of Shumang Lila}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{219} Ranajit Kumar Saha, 1994 – Valley society of Manipur. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, p. 38
\textsuperscript{220} This is performed in the evening by a Bamon or Brahmin. In the morning a ceremony called Yupanthabu, also known as Lai Ipanthaba, is performed by the Maibi (traditional non-vaishnavite priestess) to ward off the evil spirits. See, Saroj Nalini Paratt, 1980 – The Religion of Manipur: Beliefs, Rituals and Historical Development. Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited. pp.78-87.
\textsuperscript{221} The days of Shraadha are different for different groups. For the Bamons it is held on the eleventh day after the death, for other Meiteis it is the thirteenth day and for the migrant people it is the fifteenth day. This is a ceremony attended by the relatives and other invitees of the householder and is performed with the sankirtan (a form of devotional singing) singing and a Bamon performs the rituals. Before this ceremony one more ceremony called asti is performed, on the third day after the death for Bamons, on the fifth day for other Meiteis and on the sixth day for the death of those who have become sanyasins. This ceremony is the one when the frontal bone of the skull which is kept inside a cut bamboo tube is collected from the bank of the pond where it is placed after the cremation. (See, Ibid. pp. 85-6.)
The Vaisnavite theatre genres, which have been mentioned elsewhere in the chapter, like Gouralila, Sanjenba, Udukhol etc. are also performed in the same way as Shumang Lila. However, they are seasonal and one nightlong performance commanding spiritual devotions in the audiences. On the other hand Shumang Lila is secular in content having no specific seasons of performance. This theatre genre may be conferred the status of the ‘privileged’ amongst other performing art forms including the above mentioned religious ones because of its popularity, which is even more than that of what is called mainstream proscenium theatre, among the people. However it would be wrong to claim that it is better than other art forms including various narrative forms such as Phunga Wari (folktale) or Khunung Eshei (folksong) etc. All of them are essentially woven into the social and cultural fabrics or in other words the very existence of Manipuri society as a whole.

Shumang Lila is performed by a group of around 12-13 artistes, who are invited by an individual, or a group who pays them ‘dakshina’. It is performed the whole year, though the frequency is high during two festival seasons – Yaoshang (Holi) and Durga Puja (October-November). The performances up to early 1970s were usually done in the night and lasted around three hours. Today due to the growth of demand and commercialization they are performed even in day time. Traditionally, the presentation of a Shumang Lila starts with singing of Kouwaj which is the eulogy of the glory of Meitei Leima (mother land), by a few members of the troupe, using a dholok and kartals (small cymbals), marching and standing in the central space of the performance place. Then this is followed by singing Beitha\(^{222}\) which is the address to the audience, sitting at one side of the performance space.

The Shumang Lila troupes may be either exclusively female (Nupi Shumang Lila)\(^{223}\) or exclusively male (Nupa Shumang Lila). In this theatre form there is social sanction for transvestitism. In Nupi Shumang Lila the female artistes dress themselves up as males depending upon the characters. They try hard to look masculine using the masks of heavy costumes and make-ups. But more popular than them are ‘Nupi Shabis’\(^{224}\) (female impersonators) who can be called ‘male actresses’ of the Nupa Shumang Lila. They are feminine par excellence in their looks, bodily gestures and facial expressions

\(^{222}\) Kouwaj and Beitha will be elaborately studied in the Chapter III.
\(^{223}\) See Chapter V.
\(^{224}\) See Chapter VI.
augmented by costumes and make-ups. These Nupi Shabis gained entry into Shumang Lila due to social constraints imposed upon women who were not approved to be a part of secular theatre.

There are similar theatre forms in India and other parts of the world. Kerala in South India has Kathakali which enacts the texts (atta kathas) based on India’s great epics, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Bhagavata Purana, the Siva Purana and the vast body of mythological themes known to Indian literature in their special Kerala versions.225 It is a form of total theatre where nṛtya (mimetic art), abhinaya (acting) and music blend to give an integrated whole. But the most striking element in Kathakali is its overwhelming dramatic quality.226 Another theatre form of Kerala is Kutiyattam, which is 'the most prominent survivor among the forms containing some essential elements of content and structural features of the Sanskrit theatre.' But it also incorporates many elements, which are 'totally regional with tribal or ritualistic roots unique to Kerala.'227 Karnataka has got Yaksagana, which has its foundation on 'the traditions and conventions Sanskrit theatre, particularly of the Purvaranga and Vidusaka, and the purposive denial of the unities of time and space.' It also takes into account Kannada literature and many forms of ritual dancing and music.228 Very much related to Yaksagana are Bhagavatamala of Melattur in Tanjore district, Tamil Nadu and Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh.229

In the western side of India, the theatre form of Tamasa of Maharashtra deserves a mention. It is a theatre form dominated by music and dance which has its roots in 'the contemporary medieval traditions of Kirtaniya, the Pauranika of the oral tradition and the variety of musical forms which were known to Maharashtra.'230 In the northern, central and western part of India there are forms like Nautanki in Uttar Pradesh; Khyala in U.P. and Rajasthan; Maca or Manca in Madhya Pradesh; Svanga in Haryana, U.P. and Punjab. 'The origins of these theatre forms have been traced to the singing of the bards, the caranas and the bhagatas, the narrative recitation of the Kathakaras and the survival of the

225 Kapila Vatsyayan, 1974 – Indian Classical Dance. Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India. p. 37
228 Ibid. p. 33.
229 Ibid. pp.48-64
One popular religious theatre form of North India is the Ramlila. The Ramlila is the enactment of important episodes from the great Hindu epic, the Ramayana. It is performed during Dushahara, a festival which celebrates the triumph of the lord Rama over Ravana of Lanka, which mostly falls in September or October.²³²

In eastern side i.e. in Bengal and Orissa Yatra or Jatra has been a popular theatre form which mainly uses songs, dance and poetry. Its origin is traced in the 15th Century AD when Bhakti movement swept Bengal with devotees singing and dancing in procession. ‘They sang in temple courtyards, narrating the events of their patron god’s life, and expressed their devotion with frenzied acting.... This singing with dramatic elements gradually came to be known as “Jatra” which means “to go in a procession”’²³³ Also in West Bengal there is a theatre form called Chau or Chho which is basically an energetic war dance. The Chho dance is essentially a dance form that acquired a Hindu veneer under the patronage of the local chieftains who had themselves only recently been sanskritised. This dance form is popular in Purulia district of West Bengal. But culturally people of this area are identified with the unified cultural region called Jharkhand. Thematically the Chho is Hindu which revolves around the story of Siva and his children, Ganesh and Kartikeya.²³⁴ Closer to Manipur there are theatre forms like Ankia-nata and Bhaona of Assam. They have roots in the religious and literary movements started in satras (monasteries) during the time of Sankaradeva (1449-1569), the highly revered religious and social reformer.²³⁵

Theatre forms similar to Shumang Lila can also be found in other parts of the world. One form is the Noh of Japan. Noh literally means ‘skill’ or ‘accomplishment’. It is a form of musical dance drama originating in the 14th century Japan. The early Noh are performed in the outdoor. It has a rich use of mask, music, dance and narration. Language is largely poetic. Costumes are rich and heavy; movements, even in dance, deliberate. The performance looks and sounds more like solemn observance than life. The plays are

²³³ Gargi. op. cit. pp. 11-35. Also see Vatsyayan, 1980. op. cit. pp. 136-146.
basically of two kinds – those dealing with ‘real people’ and those dealing with supernatural beings. Both reflect the common Buddhist view of life. With no artifice of stage craft, in strict rhythm (out of music, voice and movement), time and space are created and destroyed.236

Another theatre form is the Barong play of Bali, Indonesia. It is a death and resurrection play. Barong is an animal like the oriental dragon. His back is at the level of the man’s head. His flanks are made of very rich swags of hair or cut strips of material. Plates of cut leather decorate his back. He has splendid arched tail. The most remarkable feature is his vast and elaborate mask with its lavish leather surroundings, all worn in front of the wearer’s breast, instead of wearing it on the face, to give a characteristic of hunched shoulder quality. The barong has human legs below this fantastic animal body. He is made by two men to install four legs. But the appearance of the Barong varies in different parts of Bali.237 Another theatre form from Asia is the Tibetan festival drama which is a theatrical performance having religious themes. These festival dramas are performed in August-September and the site of the performance is a vast plain in the Tibetan mountains. This festival is a five day long affair, which serves as a social event in which people from different villages come and enjoy the drama and social ambience.238

From Europe we have such forms as the Bavarian Wild Men which is a ritual having theatrical elements. It is an ancient ceremony surviving in the Bavarian mountains. On the eve of St. Nicholas’ Day (6 December), certain masked men come out of the snowy woods on skies and approach a village. These ‘wild men’ wear voluminous distorting costumes of animal skins and heavy concealing headdress with horns or antlers. It is also a ceremony invoking fertility.239 Another is the Padstow Horse, a ritual ceremony celebrated in Padstow, a town on the North coast of Cornwall. It contains a significant theatrical element, which is a step forward from the Bavarian wild men. Though the performer wears a mask, the performance contains the double layer of meaning, which is the characteristic of a work of art. In the manifest level the action expresses death and birth but in the latent level there is the expression of the ideal of living. It is a ceremony of good luck and

238 Ibid. p. 90
239 Ibid. p. 37
fertility in the coming year. \(^{240}\) Another example of ritual ceremony showing the theatrical elements is the *British Mummers’ play*. This is a seasonal ceremony celebrated throughout England, in various versions, from Cumberland to Lincolnshire and down to Dorset. The performance season is generally around Christmas, more especially on *Boxing Day*,\(^{241}\) or on *Twelfth Night*\(^{242}\) or on plough Monday. The ceremony is concerned with the turn of the sun towards the ascendant again and the inspiring and immense task of resuming works for a new year after the *solstice* (about 22 December in the Northern hemisphere when the sun is farthest from the earth).\(^{243}\) One more theatre form from Europe is that of the *Medieval Rounds* whose development took place about the 14th and 15th centuries in Western Europe. The performance space is a central plain, which is surrounded either by simple fencing or by earthen mounds. The scripts of the plays were mostly religious and were mainly to spread the new religion (Christianity) in both England and France. Now, the scripts have different kinds of themes. Some are purely religious epic cycles. Some are almost free-thinking, philosophical conceptions of the problems of life; some are normal English Mystery cycles; some are saint’s plays; some are sensational plays which have stunts and horror.\(^{244}\)

After having a brief account of the various similar theatre forms in India and other parts of the world, let us now turn to Shumang Lila.

### 5. History of Development of Shumang Lila

The present day structurally well-organised form of Shumang Lila is the result of generations of trial and tribulations; permutations and combinations. The rise of the secular form of performance can be traced to the ritualistic bases. As mentioned in the Prologue, Manipuri secular theatre was able to come out of the various ritualistic performances, mainly Lai Haraoba festival. It has also been recorded that this festival has its own secular sphere too to cater to the ‘cardinal desires’ of both the ‘otherworldly’ and ‘this worldly’ beings.

History of development of Shumang Lila can be broadly divided into three phases. First, the period preceding the time of Chandrakirti Maharaj (1850-1886); second, the

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\(^{240}\) Ibid. p. 40
\(^{241}\) Boxing Day is the first week day after Christmas Day.
\(^{242}\) Twelfth night is the night before the feast of the Epiphany [held on the 6th January in memory of the coming of the Magi (3 wise men from the East) to the baby Jesus at Bethlehem]
\(^{243}\) Richard Southem. op. cit. p-45
\(^{244}\) Ibid. pp. 98-102
period between the time of Chandrakirti Maharaj and 1950; and third, from 1950 to the present day. The first two can be grouped under the ‘Script Era’ and the third under ‘Drama Era’. The first two fall within the non-literate tradition while the third under literate one. This chronological classification is necessary given the light of the evolving nature of the genre which is still evolving toward perfection. However theatre is not the world of ‘being’ but of ‘becoming’ without any static pinnacle of achievement. The above periodisation has been done keeping in mind how the genre transforms itself from oral to the literate tradition. When plays based on well organised written script was introduced in 1950 it achieved a certain height in its theatrical aesthetics.

Before we come to the main topic, it is deemed pertinent to delve into the nuances and categories/levels of the media in general and performing arts in particular. These may include the concepts such as text, narrative, story, plot, performance, theatre, drama, script etc. This exercise will make the present study conceptually clearer by engaging with the interpenetration of the global (universal) and local (particular) elements.

a) Text: ‘A text is a combination of signs.’ Sign being the nucleus of the text we need to understand what sign is. ‘A sign is a stimulus—that is, a perceptible substance—the mental image of which is associated in our minds with that of another stimulus. The function of the former stimulus is to evoke the latter with a view to communication.’ So ‘a sign is always marked by an intention of communicating something.’ Signs have always been the nucleus of semiology. Ferdinand de Saussure was the one who gave prominence to linguistic science. Saussure sees Linguistics as a part of semiology but Roland Barthes is of the opinion that ‘every semiological system has its linguistic

245 These concepts of script and drama will be discussed later.
246 The third era will be discussed as a separate chapter i.e. Chapter II.
249 Ibid.
250 He was the one who gave coherence to the study and analysis of language, in the sense that if every fact related to language were taken up for study as part of linguistic exercise it would become a confused morass. There arose a dichotomy as a result - language as a system (langue) and the actual manifestation of language in speech or writing (parole). Langue ‘is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that.’ On the other hand Parole is left to the discretion of the individual speaker who may choose his own words from the stock of the system but is not divorced from the social values and norms. Selection and actualization is the main plank of parole. So, both are related to each other in a dialectical manner so that there is ‘reciprocal comprehensiveness’ between the two. See Ferdinand de Saussure, 1960 (translated from the French by Wade Baskin) – Course in General Linguistics. London: New York Library and Peter Owen.
admixture.' So, he inverts Saussure that 'linguistics is not a part of the general science of signs, even a privileged part, it is semiology which is a part of linguistics.'

Sign according to Saussure, is an abstract 'two-sided psychological entity that can be represented by sound image and concept. The former he calls 'signifier' and the latter 'signified'. Emile Benveniste later finds a chink in this formulation of sign. According to him, Saussure left aside a third term, which is the essence of sign itself. Between signifier and signified, which are at the level of psychological, there is this third term which 'is the thing itself, the reality.'

The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, according to Saussure. Here he means that the bond between the two 'is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified.' There can be numbers of signifiers bonded to one signified across time and space. It is also possible that the nature of signified changes while the signifier remains the same. But for a particular given time and space the arbitrariness may be subdued for the certitude to arise between the two. This is where signification through codification comes in through which a text is expressed. This construction of meaning is accompanied by de-codification (or 'deconstruction' in media study parlance) by the 'other' who may be a group of persons constituting an audience (in case of cultural text) or a single person or simply a group of persons engaged in a hermeneutic interpretation of the normal happenings or cultural practices. Most of the signs (or texts) are polysemic in nature instead of monosemic. Monosemic sign is the one which depends on denotation and is more precise. Denotation of sign is the meaning which is 'the most stable and obvious both to the encoder and decoder.' It creates a common sense understanding which is more objective. On the other hand polysemic sign depends on connotation which gives a space for subjective understanding depending on 'time, place, class, gender, ethnicity, age and experience of the decoder.' So the monosemic texts are 'closed' while the polysemic ones are 'open'.

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252 Saussure. op. cit. p. 66.
254 Saussure. op. cit. p. 67 & 69.
256 Ibid.
This exercise of codification can be related to two planes of signs which Saussure called 'syntagmatic' and 'associative relations'. In a syntagmatic relation a sign gets its meaning by the virtue of its difference from its adjacent signs. 'In the syntagm a term acquires its value only because it stands in opposition to everything that precedes or follows it, or to both.' This way this relationship is sequential in nature. In the associative relationship, which is in the mental level, the mention of a certain word brings in a few words which have similar meanings. Later this relationship began to be known as paradigmatic. The syntagmatic relation happens in praesentia while the associative one in absentia. In extension to these two planes of signs, Roman Jackobson applied 'the opposition of the metaphor (of the systemic order) and the metonymy (of the syntagmatic order) to non-linguistic languages.' So, a text can be read in both syntagmatic ('denotational' level) and paradigmatic ('connotational' level) planes.

Other important ingredients of sign are form and substance. Signifier 'constitutes the plane of expression' and signified 'the plane of content'. According to Hjelmslev, 'each plane comprises two strata: form and substance; .... The form is what can be described exhaustively, simply and coherently (epistemological criteria) by linguistics without resorting to any extralinguistic premise; the substance is the whole set of aspects of linguistic phenomena which cannot be described without resorting to extralinguistic premises.' These planes are of much importance also in the non-linguistic sign systems. Most visible is that of theatre where there is extraordinary usage of physical sign system in addition to verbal deliberation.

**b) Narrative, Story and Plot:** 'Man is a story telling animal.' People tell stories about themselves or of others, to others, and even to themselves i.e. both in the empirical and psychic levels. This fundamental habit is in motion wherever they are, perhaps because humans are the only mammals with the natural capability to communicate through spoken language. This means large part of communicating language itself is predominated by stories. This, however, does not debar the possibility of telling stories through other sign systems than the natural language. So, some tell stories through unspoken mimesis or sign

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257 Saussure. op. cit. p. 123.
258 Ibid.
259 Roland Barthes. op. cit., p. 60.
260 Ibid. p. 39.
261 Ibid. p. 40.
262 The semiotic analysis of theatre will be elaborately applied in the present study in Chapter III.
263 Mike Edwards. op. cit. p. 7.
systems; some orally; and some through writing. However stories, simple and complex, are all embedded in a network of relations. Narrative, 'a communicative relation which is often conflated with straightforward understandings of what a story is', becomes the main focus of this network. Narrative, then, becomes a very important 'form of representation implementing signs'.

There could be three approaches, according to Stuart Hall, to what representation actually does. 'The 'reflective' approach sees meaning as residing in the person or thing in the real world; a representation such as narrative 'reflects' that meaning. The 'intentional' approach sees meaning in the control exercised by the producer of a representational form such as narrative; s/he uses representation to make the world 'mean'. The 'constructionist' approach sees meaning neither in the control of the producer nor the thing being represented; instead, it identifies the thoroughly social nature of the construction of meaning, the fact that representational systems rather than their users and objects, allow meaning to occur."

It has been seen that story and narrative are often taken to be one and the same but a close study reveals that they are not but are closely related to each other. Apart from the two there is also one more aspect called plot which is also interwoven with the two. So, Narrative, story and plot are the constituents of a larger mould of communication. 'Story' consists of all the events which are to be depicted. 'Plot' is the chain of causation which dictates that these events are somehow linked and that they are therefore to be depicted in relation to each other. 'Narrative' is the showing or telling of these events and the mode selected for that to take place. 'Narrative links story and plot together. It means the way in which stories are told and the way they construct their meanings to achieve audience understanding. So, in narrative there is the significance of selection and rejection of certain events to tell a story. What is important in narrative are the concepts of sequence, space and time. A narrative grows through the sequence of the events. More than this, if the 'sequence is to consist of meaningful relations it requires human input; it needs to be understood as being made of signs.' 'Narrative space' is when an event A moves to other event B. When the story starts from the beginning till end there is much of delaying and

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265 Paul Cobley. op. cit. pp. 5&6.
266 Mike Edwards. op. cit. p. 7.
lingering through which the narrative occupies its space. Also involved in this movement is the time frame within which the events negotiate their spatial relations.

One more important aspect of the sequential nature of narrative is the concept of frame. Frame of a narrative is a boundary within which some selected signs are sequenced and others are omitted. This is indispensable for the creation of a desired message through these selected signs. In media text ‘(t)he producer will seek to represent their meanings in ways which draw attention to features that are appropriate to the target group.’ Such framing also happens not only in the realm of narrative but also in the social world when people give attention to one or some persons/events by negating others. This is what Goffman calls being ‘out of frame’. He writes, ‘A significant feature of any strip of activity is the capacity of its participants to “disattend” – both in fact and in appearance – here using “disattend” to refer to the withdrawal of all attention and awareness.’ Frame is, then, influenced by one’s interest, ideology, commercial consideration etc.

c) Performance, Theatre, Script and Drama: The range covered by the term performance is amply wide and sometimes confusing. According to Goffman, ‘A performance may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.’ Here he takes all the activities of an individual when he is in the public sphere as performance taking the art of theatre in the day to day interaction in order to emphasise ‘the arts of impression management’. However there is no clear cut distinction between what is called cultural performances and cultural practices. Later he made the definition firmer by making performance as ‘that arrangement which transforms an individual into a stage performer’ taking the art of theatre as the reference point. To make the issue less controversial, and to give cultural performance a distinct face, Dell Hymes defines performance as ‘a particular class or subset of behaviour in which one or more persons assume responsibility to an audience and to tradition as they understand it.’ So, performance can be put into a continuum of human activity starting from “behaviour”–relatively routine, habitual,


unself-conscious, even “natural” activity in which agency predominates over agent–to
“action”–relatively spontaneous, atypical, self-conscious, creative activity in which agent
predominates over agency.’ So, cultural performance lies between the two poles of
performances. Cultural performances adhere to ‘some sort of preexisting script’. However
there can be no static rule that everything will fall into its own way and hence, the agents
and the audience together agree to take the risk. So, ‘to agree to perform is to agree to take
chance.’271

For Richard Schechner performance is a wider category which takes in its fold
theatre, script and drama. They are arranged in a set of concentric circles where drama is
put in the innermost circle, then script, theatre and performance, ‘each of the others resting
on the one immediately larger than itself.’272 Script according to him is ‘something that
pre-exists any given enactment, which persists from enactment to enactment.’ It is the
pattern of ‘doing, not mode of thinking’. It is widely prevalent in rituals where
maintenance of it contributes ‘to the efficacy of the rite; abandoning it endangered that
efficacy.’ So, script is ‘all that can be transmitted from time to time and place to place; the
basic code of the events. The script is transmitted person to person, the transmitter is not
mere messenger. The transmitter of the script must know the script and be able to teach it
to others. This teaching may be conscious or through empathetic, emphatic means.273 In a
way script traditionally falls within the illiterate tradition. Drama then arose as a
‘specialized kind of script’ long after the invention of writing. Drama, then, is ‘a written
text, score, scenario, instruction, plan, or map. The drama can be taken from place to place
or time to time independent of the person or people who carry it. These people may be just
“messengers,” even unable to read the drama. No less comprehend or enact it.”274

Theatre is ‘the event enacted by a specific group of performers; what the
performers actually do during production. The theatre is concrete and immediate. Usually,
the theatre is the manifestation or representation of the drama and/or script.\textsuperscript{275} The widest category which is also loosely defined is the performance which encompasses the above three sub categories. Performance is ‘the whole constellation of events. Most of them passing unnoticed, that take place in/among both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of the performance – the precinct where the theatre takes place – to the time the last spectator leaves.’\textsuperscript{276} So, ‘drama is what the writer writes; the script is the interior map of a particular production; the theatre is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance; the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers (technicians, too, anyone who is there).’ The fact of the matter is that all the elements need not be present in a given event. ‘But when they do, they enclose one another, overlap, interpenetrate, simultaneously and redundantly arousing and using every channel of communication.’\textsuperscript{277}

I shall now turn to the data, which is read through the conceptual lens used in the review of theoretical literature.

5.1 Pre-Chandrakirti Maharaj Era

5.1.1 \textit{Laiharaoba Text and Context}

Shumang Lila as a theatre form can be traced to the text and context of \textit{Lai Haraoba} festival, which is performed in the temples of \textit{lais} (deities). Lai Haraoba is one performance from which most of the performing art forms – both vaisnavite and non-vaisnavite – of Manipur are extracted. It is quintessentially performance in that there is considerable participation of the audience in enactment of some of the parts of the whole script. It symbolizes the epitome of the oral tradition. There is a close link between performance and script which we have discussed above. Its importance lies in its codification of social and cultural messages which are preserved, passed on and delivered by its functionaries. It is a festival of fertility, both societal and reproductive, in which the people of the \textit{Leikai} (locality) or \textit{Khul} (village) appease the deity and his consort for the same. It is also interpreted that the rejoicing by the devotees is the manifestation of the joy of the guardian deity for whom the Lai Haraoba is celebrated. There are six major types of Lai Haraobas – i) \textit{Kanglei Haraoba}, ii) \textit{Moirang Thangjing Haraoba}, iii) \textit{Chakpa Phayeng}

\textsuperscript{275} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{276} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{277} Ibid. p. 94.
Haraoba, iv) Andro Haraoba, v) Sekmai Haraoba, vi) Kakching Haraoba. They differ in terms of the procedures and materials to be offered etc. However the philosophy and purpose for which they are performed is almost the same. The main script of the rituals is constituted by various ritualistic dances, rites, movements (both confined in one place or by moving in lines by the functionaries and participants), hymns etc. This is made almost static, uninfluenced by exigencies of time. The tradition of inheriting the script and bestowing them to the people is in the hands of three functionaries, namely Maibis\(^{278}\) (priestesses), Maibas (priests) and Pena Khongba [player of Pena, (a string instrument)]. Out of them Maibus are the prime functionaries as they are the ones who serve the deities personally with all the rituals and also take the centre stage to perform dances. This unchanging nature of the script is the reason why the efficacy of Lai Haraoba is still maintained with zeal till today.

This festival is a treasure of Meitei philosophy and arts which survive for ages despite various incursions by alien physical forces and values such as Burmese invasions and British colonialism, and Vaisnavism respectively. The ritual script is rendered mostly through the pantomimic representations in the forms of various dances backed by songs and music (mainly pena but today modern musical instruments like drum, clarinet etc are used playing the appropriate folk tune) without the help of any props. Thus mimesis takes the central role in the communication of messages. Generally mimesis ‘does not simply entail artistic or poetic modes of imitation but, instead, refers to a very general act of depiction.’ Mimesis is also ‘concerned with narrative aesthetics. Frequently, mimesis has been considered to be a dramatic imitation of events and characters, which simply ‘shows’ to readers or spectators what goes on in a narrative. This has been opposed to reporting of events and characters, which ‘tells’ what goes on in narrative and is prone to the charge of didacticism.’\(^{279}\) The depiction of characters and events in Laiharaoba is through the various Jagois (dances). The whole philosophy and process of creation of the cosmos, the human body; the performance of daily routine works and other rituals are rhythmically and aesthetically created by the movements of parts of the body, mainly hands of the Maibus. This can be seen in Thougal Jagoi (dance for the invocation of god), Laiching Jagoi (Maibi inviting the deity to enter her body and it also includes Leishem Jagoi, the dance of

\(^{278}\) Maibis will be discussed in detail in Chapter VI.

\(^{279}\) Paul Cobley. op. cit. pp. 57 & 58.
creation of the earth), Laibou Chongba (depiction of concept of cosmology), Hakchang shagatpa (creation of human body), Angang unaba (stages of the birth of a child), Yumsharol (building of a thatched house), Panyanba Jagoi (digging of field for cotton growing), Phisarol Jagoi (weaving), Longkhol Jagoi (fishing), Paton Jagoi (harvesting), Phibul Jagoi (a ball game), Lairen mathek (participants walking in a line following the specific pattern of the Yumjao-Paphal, a symbol of Pakhangba, in snake form). What is important here is the emphasis on the ‘denotational’ aspects of signs where encoded messages have comparatively fixed meanings which are decoded by the audience and participants alike. This dependence on the mimetic art serves as a prologue to the art of Shumang Lila.

Here let us deal with the spatial arrangements and seating patterns of Lai Haraoba. Structurally/contextually Shumang Lila performance space is the slight modification of that of Lai Haraoba space where the entire ritualistic performances, including dances, are performed. The complex of a Lai is divided into sacred and profane spaces. The sacred space consists of the sanctum sanctorum, which is housed in a Laishang (temple) and specified performance space (Shumang or courtyard) just in front of it. During the festival the sanctum sanctorum is accessible only by the Maibis. The devotees may go only up to the threshold for praying and offering but may not wear footwear. The other sacred space, like the courtyard of the temple, is accessible to the participants during the performance of the day’s rituals apart from the functionaries. However, the same space can also be accessed by audiences barefoot, to present gifts and money to the performers (including Maibis), but only at such time when the important rituals are not underway.

This sacred space is the main space where all the publicly seen rituals are performed. Its right side (from the temple side) is occupied by the male Phamnaibas (leaders) of the Leikai or Khul who are also the leading organizers of the Lai Haraoba. The left side is occupied by Phamnaibis (the wives of the Phamnaibas). The side of the temple is left unoccupied. The opposite side of the temple is either occupied by the audience or a small entrance is marked out. When the number of devotees or the audience is large, the right and left sides are also occupied by them in addition to the Phamnaibas and Phamnaibis. In addition to this the corners are left open, especially during the rituals, as

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280 See the Introduction.
they are the abodes of the direction deities i.e. Koubru (North West), Thangjing (South West), Wangbren (South East) and Marjing (North East).

5.1.2 Tangkhul Nurabi Repertoire

The interpenetration of performance, theatre and script is found in the repertoire of ‘Tangkhul-Nurabi Loutaba’ performed on the night of the Lairoi (last day)\(^\text{281}\) of Kanglei Haraoba. This is also a living example of how a narrative is being preserved orally through the generations of expert performers. This event is outside the Lai Haraoba frame and yet within it. It is outside because it is not a ritualistic element connected to the whole cycle of the celebration and appeasement of the deity and his consort. It is within because it is an event, which forms the last part of the narrative space of Lai Haraoba, without which the festival cannot be brought to an end. It is a mythological narrative (a smaller narrative within the larger narrative of Lai Haraoba festival), which is common to all the Meiteis and does not have a particular bearing on the specific deity for which the Lai Haraoba is celebrated.

This cultural performance is an enactment of the repartee between Tangkhul, the incarnation of lord Nongpok Ningthou, who dresses up in the Tangkhul attires and Nurabi, the incarnation of goddess Panthoibi. It incorporates the philosophy of fertility, both reproductive and productive. It teaches the work culture wherein it is understood that human beings need to work in order to maintain sustenance and progress. This has all the elements of a Shumang Lila performance – humour; pantomimic elements; simple but meaningful dialogues from the rites, traditional proverbs, riddles, sayings, singing, dancing etc. Tangkhul, the main protagonist has to be a highly skillful actor.

This event is believed to have been incorporated in Lai Haraoba festival during the reign of King Loiyamba (1074-1112 AD) as documented in Loiyamba Shilyel.\(^\text{282}\) The latter is an authoritative book of historical accounts, which introduced a system of division of labour among the subjects who had to perform their activities according to their capacities.

\(^{281}\) There is stark similarity between this form and the carnivals of the medieval Europe where there was inversion of the officially established norms and hierarchical social structure by the participants in general and clowns and fools in particular. But this was within some specific time and space frame. Bakhtin writes, ‘All these forms of carnival were also linked externally to the feasts of the Church. (One carnival did not coincide with any commemoration of sacred history or of a saint but marked the last days before Lent, and for this reason was called Mardi gras or cereme-prenant in France and Fastnacht in Germany.) Even more significant is the genetic link of these carnivals with the ancient pagan festivals, agrarian in nature, which included the comic element in their rituals.’ Mikhail Bakhtin, 1968 – Rabelais and His World, p. 8

and capabilities. With regard to the bestowing of duties to the Amaibas (priests) and Amaibis (priestesses), the book mentions, “… thou, Amaiba of Salam (name of a lineage), take the charge of worship of God Langmei Ching and take the role of Tangkhul Sharam Pakhangba in the Laiharaoba celebration. And thou Nongtol Amaibi, take charge of the invocation of the god and goddess out of the water, perform your duty in the field and take the role of Nurabi in the Laiharaoba celebration…” 283

Before starting this event, the last rite of Lai Haraoba is performed. This is called Meira, Thang Katpa (offering of fire and knife). Two Maibis dance offering the knives at the four corners, which are already lighted with fire from the burning straws, starting from the South West (Thangjing), then North East (Marjing), South East (Wangbren) and North West (Koubru). This marks the end of the ‘union’ between human beings and gods during the whole festival period. 284 The rite is done to request the deity to take away the evil spirits (laimu, timu, sharoi) from the midst of the human beings and to come next year, so that a new year blessed with prosperity could begin. During this ritual, there is a tussle between the human beings and the spirits, when the latter want to remain with human beings and the former want to bid them adieu. So, nobody is allowed to cross these corners during this time, lest he/she will be afflicted with illness later.

When this rite is over the Tangkhul Nurabi repertory begins heralding the toils of human beings for the fertility. In the first scene a Maibi, who should be a single woman either maiden or divorcee, 285 who takes the role of Nurabi enters in the attire of a Tangkhul tribe woman with a sham (a basket slung at the back from the head) having laphoi (bananas) and a packet of kabok (fried rice) bound in a piece of plantain leaf, which serve as tiffin to be eaten in the farm, and a small spade in her hand. She is accompanied by seven Khutlang Nupii 286 (women accomplices) with one life size yengthou (a kind of plant

283 Ibid. p. 3 of Chapter 6.
284 According to Irengbam Gouradas, (personal communication) a popular Tangkhul impersonator in Ningthoukhong, Bishnupur district. Another authority claims that the dance called Laiching Jagoi done by the Maibis in the four corners is the enactment of the creation of the human body. See, Wahengbam Lukhoo Singh – Lai Haraoba. Imphal. pp. 95-6.
285 Gouradas is of the opinion that it is so because Tangkhul has all the rights to approach Nurabi, sexually or otherwise as he wishes. Since this play is all about fertility which includes the creation of human offspring the Tangkhul can take liberty with the Nurabi even while acting out the scenes. This sounds like the actors living the characters.
286 These seven women are the representation of seven Lai Nurah, the seven nymphet who were also present to protect Pakhangba from the wrath of his brother Sanamahi when the former took the throne of their father Sidaba Mapu. Also see. L. Bhagyachandra Singh, 1991 – A Critical Study of the Religious Philosophy of the
like bamboo) pole each in their hands. Before starting the enactment of work Nurabi sings an invocation song requesting the deity to bless the villagers for their prosperity both in terms of wealth and health. They are now ready to go for *pamyanba* (digging of hill farm).

The whole narrative shows Tangkhul in his dominant attitude, while Nurabi is subdued a little. So, the actor taking the role of Tangkhul has to exude a powerful theatrical effect in each and every plot in order to keep the audience well within the ‘humour index’. The story goes this way. After Marjing (tutelary deity of the North East), an incarnation of Sanamahi, the creator of the cosmos and the son of Sidaba Mapu, the Supreme Being, and his consort Panthoibi got their son Loyarakpa settled down in his marital life, they decided to wind up their present birth and reincarnate in other forms. As decided, Marjing reincarnated as *Nongpok Selu Apanba Tangkhul Hui Top Pakhangba* or *Tangkhul Saram Pakhangba* and Panthoibi as *Tangkhul Saram Nurabi*. Panthoibi told Marjing that she would be found in the place where a two-pronged Gourd was available. As Tangkhul kept on searching for the same gourd through the valley and hills, he finally came to the *Nongmai Ching* (Nongmai Mountain), in the eastern side of the present day Imphal where he found Nurabi in the *pam* (hill farm) with her seven accomplices.

It is this scene of the *pam* which is recreated in the Tangkhul Nurabi repertory. In the first scene Tangkhul enters complete with the Tangkhul attires, buffalo horn shaped headgear, spear in his hand and bow and arrow in his back. Both the protagonists are reluctant to directly disclose their identity as they were not sure of each other’s identity. They indirectly try to know each other by singing out riddles laced with romantic and erotic words. Tangkhul, after being sure that the lady was Nurabi only, thought of playing

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Meiteis before the Advent of Vaishnavism in Manipur. Imphal: L. Jayantakumar Singh. p. 48. The seven number indicates the seven days which are again the creation of the seven *Salais* (clans).

287 Wahengbam Lukhoi Singh. op.cit. pp. 101-8. Nongpok Ningthou is also the manifestation of Marjing. Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi are always together in their reincarnations. So, it is not wrong to say that Tangkhul is the incarnation of Nongpok Ninghtou.

288 Gouradas is of the opinion, as narrated by his teachers, that Tangkhul Saram Pakhangba is the incarnation of San God. One day Tangkhul was sitting on a large stone. When he massaged his left eye with his hand in thoughtful demeanour, he suddenly got a piece of rice. He took it and kept it on his palm and slid it slightly to mix with the dirt (*Nura*) from his body. Suddenly the rice mixed with dirt glittered like gold in the sunlight. When he touched it, it became a little girl. Then he gave her the name Nurabi and told her to take birth as the daughter of Kaina Chingshomba of Nongmai Ching. They then decided to meet there as young bachelor and maiden and perform the *Pamyanba*. But Sanamahi is also regarded as the sun god. So, both the stories have the same source i.e. Sanamahi.

289 One such performance was observed in the *Thangnarel Laiharaoba* of Ningthoukhong Kha Khunou, around 33 km from Imphal, in Bishnupur district, where Gouradas was the Tangkhul. In this performance another young Tangkhul was also acting as Gouradas was too old to do all the energetic movements. However the singing of the lines and delivering the dialogues were done by him.
some mischief while the latter was not still sure of his identity. The former then confronted
the latter and her party that the *pam* they were working on was not theirs but his ancestor’s.
He, thus, prevented them from digging it. This scene of tussle is rendered with panache by
both the protagonists like any zealous boy and girl. Tangkhul is always in the energetic
movement to indicate his masculine prowess. He tries to seduce Nurabi and the seven
women with his words and physical arrogance by chasing them in places in the performing
space. Acting as if he is really angry he swears to strike them with his arrows and pulls and
shoots the arrowless string (a case of mimesis) of the bow to all the direction but not in
Nurabi’s. Then there is food and drink sequence where he snatches the wine and food from
the Nurabi’s party, which he drinks and eats with sheer abandon. In his drunken state he
again chases them to their utter torment. These theatrical anxieties are received and
responded with participation by audience who laugh, clap and offer gifts, mainly money,
which is the essence of any performance.

Thinking that all will go in vain Nurabi now calls out for the Lambu to intervene
and pacify Tangkhul. Lambu is an elderly Meitei who is the manifestation of the Kuru
Nongshaba or Sidaba Mapu, the Supreme Being. He orders that the *pam* is owned by both
the parties and they can farm on it together. This is the real moment of recognizing each
other, at least for Nurabi as Tangkhul has already known her beforehand. When they take
rest they are bit by *Oo-nakhoi* (a species of bee which nests in bamboos) and Tangkhul
creates the scene of gathering the bee hive. After everything becomes peaceful the two
lovers are united in bliss and start digging the *pam* as symbol of fertility.

The whole play is presented with a tinge of eroticism in dialogues and body
movements. It goes on till late into the night with rapt participation from the side of the
audience in the form of applause and whistling. The existence of this play in Lai Haraoba
also documents the close affinity between Hill and Valley people. But it is yet to be seen if
this consolidates today’s estranged relationship between the hill people and Meiteis. It is
also important to note how far it would serve this purpose when the participation of the hill
people in the audience or as actors is negligible in Lai Haraoba in general. In this situation,
the performance, though it has its own deeper meaning, will remain only as a piece of
entertainment, sometimes caricaturing Tangkhul man.

Today there have been inclusions of many secular elements like tunes of the songs,
by the Tangkhul and Nurabi, from the popular Manipuri films, albums etc. but with
changed lyrics which sometimes have erotic elements, to address each other. These have been done due to the increasing trend of turning Lai Haraoba into an entertainment medium, which also serves as the strong carrier of popular culture.

5.1.3 Other Genres
The performances of this era are very hard to be defined in a distinct way since there is a very loose boundary between theatre or cultural performance and everyday life or cultural practice. But they invariably fall into the continuum of human activities discussed elsewhere.

In addition to Lai Haraoba, some forms of entertainment, which has rich elements of foolery and clowning, on the lines of Shumang Lila were believed to have been in existence in the period preceding king Khagemba’s (1597-1652 AD) rule. One of them was known as ‘Chengpak khulou yengdaba huidri padam loudaba toknga makhum hangba’ (it means to speak out whatever one wishes to). The narrative is placed here for the purposes of record.

During Khagemba’s time it was known as ‘Mitou tamba’ (mime). Its emergence has an interesting story. King Khagemba had a brother by the name of Sanongba. On the eve of one Hiyangtanaba (ritual boat race) a servant of the king hired a boat from Sanongba for the same. Unfortunately the boat was broken during the race. The brother was not in good terms with the king and instigated by Pukchao Pangkhamba, his favorite noble, he thought of teaching the king a lesson. He played a clever card demanding that he would not accept either the repaired boat or price of the boat or a new boat but would take only and only the same boat before it was broken. Perturbed by the obstinacy of his brother the king instead countered him by demanding the large amount of money the former borrowed. Sanongba was unable to do the same and was banished to Cachhar (in the present day Assam). This very instance of backfire gave rise to two very popular idioms – Sanongba higaiwa (literally Sanongba’s word of broken boat, but symbolically it means instigation of somebody to harm others, mainly enemy) and Hiyang tanaringeida tumba (tonba) sel thouba (literally to ask for the borrowed money when the boat race is in progress but symbolically it means to interfere somebody when he is engaged in a difficult situation). This real life ‘drama’ (in Turner’s sense) was recreated by some Maichous

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290 Gathering from Ningombam Angouton Meitei.

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(court scholars) including Apoinana macha and Huiningshumba by the order of the king himself to entertain the royal family and nobles. This parody immensely delighted the king and the gathering so that it eased out some of the tensions prevailing in the palace. But this ‘redressive’ of the tension was one sided as Sanongba, the other party of the ‘social drama’ was already banished from the kingdom which means the crisis was not yet solved. This still opened the space for ‘reintegration’ of the two parties, which was, unfortunately, not brought. However this social drama gave birth to a performance genre, which means a benefit for aesthetics.

Other than these secular performances there is also the presence of ‘phagi or improvisatory jokes’ in the primitive rituals of fertility, mainly in Lai Haraoba. One such example which is still alive today is the Lai Phagi (deity’s joke) performed on the last night of Lai Haraoba of Phayeng, a Chakpa (a ‘Scheduled Caste’) village in the western side of Imphal city. ‘At dead of night, before the final rites of ushering the deities into heaven were performed, the village elders would consume ritual wine from the community house, walk naked to the celebration compound at the precincts of the deity with torches in their hands and dance and make fun for the prolonged period. ... Women are now excluded from these festivities and boys would have to keep their heads lowered during the celebration. In ancient times, however, women were present....’

Arambam reports that there is also another such nude dance during the Lai Haraoba of Andro, again a Chakpa village in the eastern side of Imphal. ‘But no outsider was allowed to see or even hear of such festivities.... These rites probably came into existence with intense need of the small tribes to be aware of the necessities of procreation and continuity of the race as part of the natural order of things and hence ritual celebration of the same. Sexual jokes and active sexual gestures were part of this cult.’

Other than such ritualistic performances, Manipuri society also has various institutionalized social/cultural performances, which form the part of pastimes of the people, specially the younger members. One such engagement is ‘Paosa Cheijel (antiphonal song contest)’ which is a socially sanctioned courtship programme between

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292 See the Introduction for Chakpa and Loi communities.
293 Ibid.
295 Ibid.
bachelors and maids held in the night under the supervision of the elders. This includes *te taannaba* (competition *(taannaba)* through *te*, the end syllable of the line of the song) where a participant sings the romantic song and ends it directing towards one participant of the opposite sex who consequently takes up the refrain and starts singing. This whole engagement is the scene of laughter and merrymaking while the participants have the overt way of expressing their emotions towards his/her prospective lover through the covert lyrics. This cultural performance has this deeper structure and meaning of socialisation among young maids and bachelors of the community. This brings us to understand that 'cultural performances are more than entertainment, more than didactic or persuasive formulations, and more than cathartic indulgences. They are occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others.'

One later development from this genre is the *Chin Kangjei* (verbal hockey), a form of verbal repartee between participants of the competition. One very popular pastime of the Manipuris, mainly male members, is the 'Leipung Phamba (sitting on a mound)' during the evening times when they sit huddled in some open space of the village or locality after the day's work. This is the hub of all kinds of jokes including gossip and mockery/mimicry of the local people, and a space for preservation of oral tradition like folktales and folksongs.

Such forms of entertainment were basically without formal theatrical structures and some of them were episodic without regularity in performances.

**5.2 Jester, Jested and Reflective Politics**

Though the first phase served as prologue, this phase ushered in a formal structure of theatre in Manipur. This era can also be categorized as the era of clowns or jesters institutionalized through the above-mentioned genres of entertainment and ritualistic performances. Jesters had a significant role to play in this era to register a critical account of both the political class and masses. In Manipur the era of jesters in popular genres started earlier than the advent of colonialism. However its contemporaneity with colonialism and the still existing feudalism gave further impetus to enrich this art form.

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since the two formidable powers gave an ample amount of situations which it could address and critique through parody. It was a site of contestations, protests, and critiquing of the internal societal imbalances and irregularities, and hegemony of both the internal and external forces. All this was communicated through its seemingly insignificant puns and gestural expressions. In its history it has been actively involved in a reflective politics through its conscious participation in the process of self-analysis and self-assertion in the cultural and religious fields.

This era as a whole consolidated the theatre culture in Shumang Lila. The popular performances of this era did not follow a strict rule of adhering to the written script but the gurus were the ones who composed them time to time, even spontaneously on the performance place. So, one play was not bound to remain the same every time it was performed. The narratives were oral and at the same time beyond that, in the sense that they were different from the traditionally known oral narratives like folktale, folk songs etc. It was a transitional phase between ‘folklore’ and the written script era.

According to Lokendra Arambam this tradition of jester was a culmination of both Sanskritic and native clowning elements. The native elements comprise the above mentioned ritualistic performances and the social institution called phunga nai (house slavery). The latter was a mild form of slave-labour in which the slave was owned by the nobles to do odd jobs, to run errands, to accompany their masters in community dining and social gatherings.... But they were also exposed to the bahaviour and manners of the court elite. They were also known as achanba (court favorite) and performed skits for the royal members and nobles, sometimes imitating the latter’s various behaviors. They, by the middle of the 19th century emerged as court jesters. The Sanskritic elements were the adaptation of the Vidushaka character, such as Balabasu who accompanied Narada in Gosth Lila.

The reign of Chandrakirti Maharaj is considered to be the era when secular theatre with proper structure took its birth. The king’s court had court jesters, like the old English fashion of having court jesters, to amuse the king and the nobles. These jesters were witty, humorous and gifted masters of improvisation, who used the Chin Kangjei (verbal

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297 Ibid. p.127.
298 Gosth Lila is 'a celebration of the tending of cows by the six year old Krishna, accompanied by his brother Balarama and their colleagues. Two demons – Dhenakasura and Bakasura – were killed in this chapter. The story was adapted from the tenth canto and the tenth Chapter of the Srimadhagavad Gita.' (Ibid. p. 128.) This was recorded in the Cheitharol Kumbaba, the Royal Chronicle in 1803.
repartee) to the most effective and aesthetic ways. In the beginning they used to perform skits to entertain the royal family and nobles within the precincts of the palace. One story goes this way. The king was married to two real sisters. The elder one gave birth to four sons, Surchandra, Pakasana, Pheijaosana and Samuhanjaba and the younger one had three sons, Kulachandra, Koireng (Tikendrajit) and Jilangamba. Though they were sisters there were tussles between them to draw greater attention from the king and to give more leverage to their respective sons. Fomented by such discontent there was also bitter competition and power mongering between the two parties of sons. Disenchanted with this petty family upheaval the king called for Oinam Bijando, the reputed master of presence of mind and Irom tampha, both of whom were also nobles in his court, to find some clue to the problem. Bracing up his mind in a fraction of seconds, Bijando, who was like Birbal of Emperor Akbar’s court, cooked up the following lines addressing it to both the queens, ‘Amanbaga ahanbaga onnaraga panba taibangpaalni’ (literally, world is run when the old things are replaced by the new ones, but thematically, someone’s old property is someone’s new one, e.g. someone’s divorced wife is someone’s new wife), and ‘Lairahagi mammal inakkhunbagi khtlai karino haibadi khandraga maharani anina nachagi haakan chanduna saonariba karigino?’ (it thematically, means, if a person is honest, s/he is loved by one and all in the locality and whenever s/he has any problem people would be ready to help her/him out without any hesitation). This means both the queens should be broadminded and should not indulge in petty quarrels. Though the lines made little sense at the outset the seemingly twisted lines, augmented by gestures, created a sudden peal of laughter among the listeners including the two queens. This pacified the tense milieu up to certain extent. Enchanted by the extraordinary wit and talent of Bijando, the king ordered the two nobles cum jesters to reenact the performance for the wider audience in the palace. Enthused by this encouragement, the two started searching for some women performers. In this midst Angangjaobi (from Nongren village), a Ningthemnubi (servant of the queen) offered to take the role of one of the two queens and also informed that a friend of hers would take the role of the other queen. This way, this group of four improvised and performed the episode of the family feud of the palace just before the royal family and nobles. Instead of being offended by their acts the gathering wholeheartedly enjoyed the

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299 Gathered from Ningombam Angouton.
performance which befooled and at the same time educated the two queens of the flip sides of their behaviour.

The king also had other court jesters like Abujamaba Saiton and Kharibam Laishuba. One day they enacted a skit which made fun of one Thokchao, a court favourite who had amusingly large heels. The two enacted the scene where they stumble upon footprints of an elephant and trailed it till they found it. But finally the footprints turned out to be not of an elephant but of Thokchao. Such improvisation of verbal repartee made the jesters so popular that they became part of the royal entourage. Very pleased the king ordered them to give public performances during the Durga Puja festival. The main characteristics of such comic plays were verbal repartee, adducing and cooking up of absurd stories on the spot, the caricaturing of the king and nobles, funny physical contortions etc., all without any specific plot. The caricaturing of the king and nobles was done in a regal manner, keeping in view the royal ambience. But, it was not unusual to dispense with dignity and bring in some obscene jargon in their endeavour to create stories extemporaneously. Nevertheless, the performances of these jesters were so appealing that the king pardoned such minor misadventures, and even enjoyed them. It is said that not a single plot was repeated in the ten day long Durga Puja performances. This performance genre began to be known as ‘Phagee Lila’ (farce). Also its performance in the Durga Puja Festival in the Palace, which was also seen by some of the commoners, marked its emergence from the private space of the king’s court to the public space. As time passed by Phagee Lila began to be performed on the public places like Shumangs (courtyards) on payment basis.

The acceptance of this genre by the palace signified its space of influence uncoloured by the ideology of class difference in the cultural productions. But it became ‘popular’ in the beginning of the twentieth century with the introduction of Stage Lila (proscenium theatre), which represented the ‘elite’ culture. But this divide died down gradually with diffusions of elements from and to each other and with the growth of Shumang Lila’s popularity among the people across class barriers.

The emergence of this genre from the palace did not mean that it was completely shut out from the royal court. But then gradually it started representing the lived world of the people who were in the periphery. Through its folk humour it scaled and inverted the strict hierarchical social structure practiced by the people and patronized by the king. This

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300 Lokendra Arambam. op.cit. pp. 130-31.
conscious effort was also directed towards the British when colonial administration started in Manipur.

Its popularity across the ranks and files of Manipur can be documented from the words of Ethel St. Clair Grimwood, the wife of Mr. Grimwood, the Political Agent (1888-91)\(^{301}\) during her stay in Manipur during these three years. She writes narrating an event of Gymkhana:

to wind up there was a play. The Maharajah had three jesters, exactly like the old English fashion of having court-jesters to amuse royalty. The Manipuri specimens were very funny indeed. Their heads were shaved like the back of a poodle, with little tufts of hair left here and there; and their faces were painted with streaks of different-coloured paints, and their eyebrows whitened. They wore very few clothes, but what they had were striped red and green and a variety of shades. They walked up to the tent where we were sitting to watch the sports, all leaning against each other, and carrying on a lively conversation in Manipuri, which seemed to amuse the spectators very much. On reaching the door of the tent they all fell down at our feet, making terrible grimaces by way of greeting, and then they picked each other up and retired a few yards off and commenced the performance. One disguised himself as an old woman, and another as a native doctor, and the third as a sick man, lying on the ground covered with a white sheet. Someone out of the crowd was impressed into the play, and he had to call the doctor to the sick man, who was meanwhile heaving up and down upon the ground in a very extraordinary manner. The doctor came and poked him about, making observations in Manipuri, at which everyone roared with laughter; and then the old woman arrived and dragged the doctor off home. She was supposed to be his wife, and as soon as she appeared a scuffle ensued, in which the old woman's clothes fell off. We thought best to beat a retreat, as the play was beginning to be \textit{rowdy and the dialogue vulgar}; but I believe that it went on for some hours afterwards, as we heard shouts of laughter proceeding from the direction of the polo-ground, where the sports were held, late at night; and the princes told us the next day that it had been a very good play, and the only pity was that we had witnessed so little of it. (Italics mine)\(^{302}\)


The Gymkhana tradition included games and sports competitions like ‘ordinary races’ and other feats, participated by the well-trained and athletic people of Manipur, mainly from the precincts of Imphal. It is evident that there was presence of a large number of common spectators, along with the royal members. It is also evident, from her statement, of her and other British spectators’ opinion about the ‘rowdy and vulgar’ contents of the play. It clearly bears their categorization of these local cultural forms as ‘inferior’ and theirs ‘superior’. It is latent in this also ‘the ‘white man’s’ burden of educating the unenlightened natives’.  

It's venture in caricaturing the officials and parodying the officially created world of the aristocracy is summed up aptly by Arambam,  

‘The clowns in fact did not follow performance rules or regulations from any theatrical tradition emanating from the royal court. They also departed from the religious plays of the court-supported theatre, starting social plays in the native vernacular while the religious theatres were confining themselves to Brajabuli. Though no long story or dramatic tale was performed, they enacted small categories of nuclear skits highlighting romantic frailties, false ambitions, contradictions of religious spiritualism, the wicked Brahmin, the upstart nobility by-passing collective norms, the over-aged gentleman with young wives, forced marriages and their foibles, etc. Their short plays followed an anarchic style which disrupted established norms and beliefs. The entire foundation of the religio-feudal society was put to ridicule.’  

During this formative era, there was hardly any dichotomy between popular and classical theatres in Manipur. There was no rigid classification between Phagee Lila and religious performances like various forms of Rasa Lilas. Later Rasa Lilas began to be categorized as classical vis-à-vis genres of Phagee Lila.  

The colonial era, which started in 1891 in Manipur, was also responsible for further dividing the two categories. Let us briefly consider the historical events, which served as wedge to consolidate colonial power over Manipur. The relation between

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304 Lokendra Arambam. op.cit. p. 132.
305 See Introduction for this historical event.
Manipur and the British dates back to early 19th century when Burma became a common enemy of both the Manipuris and the British. But a formal relationship was established with the creation of the post of political agent in 1835 'especially to prevent border feuds and disturbances which might lead to hostilities between Manipuris and the Burmese' during the reign of the minor king Chandrakirti. Lieutenant Gordon became the first political agent who functioned with the instructions and correspondence from 'the secretary to the Government of Bengal in the Political Department'. But one year later the post 'was put under the direct control of the government of (British) India. When Assam was constituted into a Chief Commissioner's province in 1874, he was placed under the chief Commissioner.' With the consolidation of this post, the British started interfering in the internal matters of Manipur. This dormant tussle then led to the battle of 1891 when Manipur was defeated by the British. However she was not annexed. 'It became a tributary State and had now to pay an annual tribute of Rs. 50,000 to the British Government.'

The British completely sidelined the more rebellious line of Gambhir Singh and Chandrakirti Maharaj who included the protagonists of the 1891 battle like Senapati Tikendrajit, Kulachandra Maharaj, Angousana etc. They chose Chur Chand Singh, a minor boy of six years as Raja of Manipur. He was from the collateral line of the royalty, who were the descendants of Nara Singh, the regent of Chandrakirti when he was a minor. The motive of the British was clear in selecting this youngest brother and excluding his more capable and experienced five elder brothers. He was just a symbolic king when the administration was completely manned by the British. So, the British kept Manipur under their 'direct rule' from '13 September 1891 to 15 May 1907', known in the history as 'Manipur Under British Management.'

The British knew and implemented the control design that ruling a state is equivalent to ruling its elites. As a starter they sent off the Raja to Mayo College, Ajmere, in 1895 where he was given a modern (British) education and inducted into the English way of life, starting from eating habits, table manners, social etiquette, way of dressing to leisure like sports, theatre etc. so that he could be physically and ideologically sculpted. This moulding of the king's personality would make the British rule in Manipur easier.

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308 Ibid. p. 307.
This era was also the beginning of the ‘profanation’ of the concept of the ‘divine kingship’ starting from the ‘divine’ king Pakhangba whose seat of power was the Kangla. This started with the occupation and turning of this sacred place into an army cantonment. This was a clear sign of controlling the cultural and religious ‘lefeworld’ to control politically. The new masters who also brought in new and ‘modern’ administrative systems dismantled the traditional authority system of king. So, the king was no longer infallible in the eyes of the people. Their loyalty was in a dilemma now – the king or the colonial masters.

The kingdom during the period preceding this new era was similar to what Clifford Geertz \(^{310}\) calls ‘theatre state’, establishing a paradigmatic relationship between the organisation of state and theatre. In Bali, \(^{311}\) like in the traditional state of Manipur, the king was divine by virtue of the divinity of the institution of kingship, which revolved around ‘the myth of the exemplary center’. In Bali ‘(t)he line begins, as all human lines begin, with a god, whose title is therefore Batara. It then descends through various semi-divine figures, who bear the tile Mpu, to the father of the first Javanese king of Bali.’ \(^{312}\) This is strikingly similar in structure as well as the terminology itself with the Manipur kingdom. The line of the Ningthouja clan, the ruling clan, starts with Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, the first historical king of the Meiteis, who again is the son of Shidaba Mapu, (eternal lord) the Supreme Being. \(^{313}\) It is coincidental with the Bali case that the Meiteis also address their kings as Mapu Ibungo (my owner or lord).

According to Geertz, ‘the expressive nature of the Balinese state...was always pointed not toward tyranny...and not even very methodically toward government,..., but rather toward spectacle, toward ceremony, toward the public dramatization of the ruling obsessions of Balinese culture: social inequality and status pride. It was a theatre state in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience.’ \(^{314}\) In this ‘power served pomp, not


\(^{311}\) It is a dazzling coincidence that the Balinese states started crumbling down in 1891 with the defeat of the last king of Mengwi, an inland Balinese palatinate, by his rivals. Later the divinity of the kingship seemed to be over by the conquest of the island by the Dutch in 1906. 1891 also is the same year when Manipur was conquered by the British.

\(^{312}\) Geertz. op. cit. p. 17.

\(^{313}\) It is also a thesis that Nongda Lairen Pakhangba is not the Pakhangba who is the son of Shidaba Mapu, who again is responsible for the creation of cosmos.

\(^{314}\) Geertz. op. cit. p. 13.
pomp power. The Balinese politics oscillated between 'two opposing forces'. The first was the 'cultural element' which was a 'centripetal' force brought through 'the unifying effect of ceremonial under the leadership of this or that lord'. This is both a vertical movement 'from the top down' and horizontal from 'the centre outward'. On the other 'power element' which was 'the centrifugal' force which signified the 'the intrinsically dispersive, segmental character of the polity'. This was effected 'bottom up and the periphery inward'.

This 'state cult' is based on the dictum that 'worldly status has a cosmic base, that hierarchy is the governing principle of the universe, and that the arrangements of human life are but approximations, more close or less, to those of the divine'. This was similar to Manipur of 19th century and the early 20th century when land and people were solely owned by the king and his deputies. The status of a person was measured depending upon how close s/he was to the king who was at the centre. It was a time when people lived for the king and not king for people.

Chur Chand Singh, was again handed over the charge of administration, after he was well equipped with the English education, on 15 May 1907. There are so many angles from which this era can be seen but what is of interest here is the cultural side, which in a way was enmeshed with political and economic undertones. By now the outside cultural elements, mainly Bengali, started influencing the Manipuri elites, through the Bengalis who came with the British as clerks and administrative and judiciary officials. This era of early 20th century was also the time when educated middle class arose in Manipur with the considerable progress of English education. The first batch of students appeared in the matriculation examination at Srihat (Assam) in 1909 recognized by Calcutta University. These new class of educated youth were accommodated to the state services both by the Raja and the British so that they also were ideologically merged to the ruling class.

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315 Ibid. pp.18 & 19.
316 Ibid. p. 102.
317 Manimohan Singh. op. cit. p. 5. Manipur State Darbar was formed on 15 May, 1907 with the Raja as the President, W.A. Cosgrave as the Vice President and other three Ordinary Members – Rajkumar Dumbr Singh, Gokul Singh and Ibungochaoba Singh. This body was entrusted to run the administration of the state. Though the head was the king the majority power was reserved for the British Officer in the post of Vice President. Ibid. p. 8.
318 The English education system started in Manipur in 1885 with the establishment of a school, Johnstone Middle English School, by Sir James Johnstone. But for higher studies people had to go out to other places like Sylhet, Decca (all in the present day Bangladesh) etc. See Jamini Devi, 1989 – Education in Manipur. Imphal: Rai Pravina Brothers. p. 36 & 37.
Chur Chand Singh, by now, was like any English gentleman and he was also responsible for the progress of English education mainly in the valley of Manipur, that too in Imphal area. He had a peculiar mixture of two traits, one of a feudal despot in conjunction with the British and other a cultural traditionalist. The British, in order to control the elites, introduced many English cultural elements which were embraced by these elites. English dressing sense like wearing safari suit accompanied by shining shoes (culture of Bhadralok); eating habits; and importantly the game of cricket were introduced in Manipur.\(^{319}\) It was an attempt to control the political and cultural discourses of the elites through its own hegemony.

This was when the *Stage Lila* or *Phampak Lila* (proscenium theatre) patronized by the Raja and the British, was introduced in 1902 with the first play *Pravas Milan*,\(^{320}\) in the Bengali language but performed by Manipuri artistes. This way Stage Lila began to represent elite culture and as a result Phagee Lila was relegated to the status of popular. The rise of Bengali Bhadralok culture amongst the elites and middle class relegated Manipur into a receiving community of the ‘second hand’ cultural forms and products. This was the case especially in proscenium theatre, which came through the Bengalis who in turn learned it from the British in the nineteenth century.

Patronage of the Stage Lila by the educated people did not really create an exclusivist theatre in Manipur. Though the plays were performed and organised by this educated middle class the viewership was opened to all. Moreover the performers were amateurs who took up acting as part of their recently acquired class status. On the other hand, the indigenous forms like Phagee Lilas still were popular though they were relegated as coarse as compared to Stage Lilas. Understandably, the tradition of jesters and clowns, which were indispensable parts of Phagee Lila, was absent in this new form of theatre. Nevertheless, there were no deliberate attempts to liquidate the popular forms from the side of the middle class, unlike in Bengal of nineteenth century. In case of Bengal, where there was rapid rise of Bhadralok culture, ‘(f)rom the mid nineteenth century, educated Bengali males attempted to rouse public opinion through articles in newspapers, meetings in city halls, and often through books, against these popular forms (*like Jatra*) and against their performers. By the beginning of the present century (*20th century*) they had succeeded, to a

\(^{319}\) Gathered from Lokendra Arambam.

large extent, in driving them away from the precincts of ‘respectable’ urban society....' (Italics mine) In case of Manipur, there was acceptance of popular forms, by the middle class, as a parallel form of theatre. It was still popular even amongst this new middle class.

This period of the first half of twentieth century was also a period when ‘sanskritization’ of the literary language and the spoken language, especially amongst this new middle class, started. The more Sanskrit or Bangla words a sentence has the more the writer or the speaker was considered ‘cultured’ and educated. Let us see, for instance, a sentence – ‘Kulachandrana natakugi nayikagi abhinay toukhi’ (kulachandra took the role of the actress in the play). In this sentence the main words like natak, nayika and abhinay are all Sanskrit words, Kulachandra being the name of the person. Only the suffixes like na, gi, and the verb toukhi are Manipuri words. Again let us examine one more sentence which will also show the health of the ‘high’ Manipuri language. ‘Putrasnehadi pratyek matrihridayada samay-asamay khaktana adhar oiduna leirabani’ (love of a mother for her son is always there in her heart independent of time). Here all the main words like putrasneh, pratyek, matrihridaya, samay-asamay, adhar are all either Sanskrit or Bengali. This was starkly witnessed in proscenium theatre and also in the religious performing art forms. In Manipur, initially, all the plays were performed in Bengali by both Manipuri and Bengali amateur actors. The extreme example of cultural hegemony was witnessed when there was an ideological campaign against the using of Manipuri language in Stage Lila and other vaisnavite religious performances like Sankirtan singing which relegated the language into a status of being impure. This was a clear sign of how the cultural discourses were controlled by the outsiders, the Bengalis, assisted by their British masters. The cultural hegemony was so deep that a new form of dialogue delivery was institutionalized. Manipuri dialogues of the plays were made to be delivered in accented way imitating the way the Bengali directors spoke Manipuri.

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322 Ayekpam Shyamsunder Singh, op. cit. p. 35.
323 Sankirtan singing is a form of community devotional singing and an invocation of gods, performed in temples. It is a combination of dance choreography, songs and music. Traditionally, Rasa Lila is preceded by Sankirtan singing. Also a part and parcel of marriage and death ceremonies, the stories of the eternal love between Radha and Krishna and the life history of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu are rendered in song accompanied by Pung Yeibas (Mridanga players). Its different forms are Nata-Pala, Manoharsai, and Drhumel (Saryu Doshi, ed.), 1989 – Dances of Manipur - The Classical Tradition. Bombay: Marg Publications. pp. 19-29). It was sung mostly in Bengali language but recently the lyrics have been translated into Manipuri language.
Most of the plays of this era were historical and mythological in theme. Some of such plays in Bengali were Rijiya, Bangebarji, Pandav-Kourav, Jaydeva, Rani Durgavati, Anudhvaier Hari sadh, Sita, Itraner rani, Karnarjun, Prithviraj Sangyukta, Biblamangal, Kedar Rai etc. The first play in Manipuri language with various indigenous fervour was Parthaparajay performed in 1918. It was such despite it being a translation from a Bengali play by the same name.\(^{324}\)

The king was already deeply involved in this new cultural form from the beginning. His patronage and concern was evident, in 1905, when he contributed Rs. 300. This was double the amount of Rs. 150 contributed by the then Political Agent, to the few Bengalis who got Manipur Friends Dramatic Union (later Manipur Dramatic Union (MDU)), the first permanent theatre house, constructed in Imphal. The Raja, at the same time was little apprehensive of where the Manipuri theatre was heading to, when all the plays were in Bengali, and the texts and performance had a minimum amount of local elements. So, he turned inward and realized what the Stage Lila was doing to the language and culture of Manipur. Subsequently there was a subtle counter-hegemonic attempt against the Bengali cultural hegemony. He personally advised the artistes to come out with a true Manipuri play, in terms of language, text, context, acting style, dialogue delivery style, costumes, props etc. So, the first true Manipuri play, in all aspects, was the historical play Nara Singh,\(^{325}\) performed in 1925, based on the life of the king of the same name.

The Stage Lila being the cultural space controlled by the middle class, the British considered it as a potential site of political critical engagements against them. This was evident when censorship was provoked when a play became too political against the authority. As a result every play had to go for parvana (permission) from the king who was controlled by his colonial masters. That was why the play Tikendrajit based on the 1891 events\(^{326}\) was performed only in 1950, by the artistes of MDU.\(^{327}\) So, the British had keen interest and attention towards this high culture as to keep the elites under their noose. This fear of the authority of this middle class turning against it was proven true when Irabot,\(^{328}\)

\(^{324}\) Ayekpam Shyamsunder Singh. op.cit. p. 37. Translated from the Bengali play of the same name by Khaidem Nongyai Singh.

\(^{325}\) Ibid. pp. 41 & 42.

\(^{326}\) See the section on colonialism.

\(^{327}\) Gathered from Lokendra Arambam.

\(^{328}\) Hijam Irabot was the Renaissance man. He was a versatile personality: Social reformer, poet, artiste, intellectual, sportsman and revolutionary. During pre-independence era he fought against the double forces of the feudal structure of the then kingdom of Manipur and the British imperialists mainly for the oppressed
an active member of theatrical movement in Manipur, later turned against the combined force of the British and the feudal structure. On the other hand the censorship was relatively relaxed in case of the subaltern performing art forms like Khongjom Parba, a musical genre performed with dholak, which is a narrative of the story of the Khongjom battle of 1891. There was also no strict censorship in Phagee Lila because of its subaltern character.

Apart from his interest in cultural sites Raja Chur Chand Singh also had his interest in religious site also. This was when he revealed his multifarious self of a traditionalist and feudal despot. At the cost of people's respect he carried out some systems which were highly undesirable. In coalition with the infamous Brahma Sabha, the committee of Brahmans and his army of devoted lieutenants, he kept the state cult alive. There were illegal and irrational impositions of taxes and services on common Meitei (the hill people were not fortunately part of this ordeal) who were not related to the king and his nobles. Taxes included Chandan senkhai (tax on using chandan, the sacred mud used to apply the vaisnavite religious marks on the forehead and other body parts) which was the practice of mangba sengba (purity and pollution), Kangthouri (a subscription of half an Aana per house collected from all the Meiteis instead of collecting kangthouri, the rope to pull rath (chariot) during the kangchingba or rath jatra ceremony); Chabok Wangol (collecton of one pice (3 pies) per house from all the Meiteis on the eve of the birth of the king’s child) etc. The services included Yairek Sentry (duty by the villagers to guard the tax money collected by the state officers from the villagers); Peon and Amin Chakthak (free feeding of the visiting state officials by the villagers); Dolaireng (taking of the government peons on the dolai (palanquin) by the villagers during rainy season) etc. This was especially done to establish the king’s hegemony over the people when there was also a competing hegemony of the British. However that was also a reason why people lost their faith on the king whom they used to think as divine.

people of the kingdom. This invited dissents from both sides and was sent to Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) Jail (1942-1943). In the later years he became a staunch communist and rose against the system for a sovereign Manipur. Some consider him to be the pioneer of the insurgency problem in the present state of Manipur. This is the reason why he was seen with suspicion mainly from the side of the legitimately elected government for decades after his death. But the last three decades or so people started realising the importance of his contribution to the wider society of Manipur and started rediscovering him with enthusiasm. He is now fitfully known as jana neta (leader of the people).

See Manimohan Singh. op. cit. p. 30 & 31.
All such misadventures were addressed by Phagee Lila of that time. So, Phagee Lila took the responsibility to, culturally and politically, awaken the masses as the so called elite culture was engaging in their own politics which was both subtle and sometimes overt. It was a moment for the people in general and the artistes in particular to look at themselves in a different relationship between the subject and the object. Here the subject itself becomes object. This can be related to Victor Turner’s idea of ‘public liminality’ and ‘subjunctivity’. He says, ‘Most cultural performances belong to culture’s “subjunctive” mood. “Subjunctive” is defined by Webster as “that mood of a verb used to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, possibility, etc., rather than to state an actual fact, as the mood of were, in ‘if I were you’.”’

Theatre and many other ‘performative genres’ possess these attributes. This mood is in contrast to the ‘indicative mood of culture’ which is ‘viewed as cultural process rather than as abstract systems ingeniously derived from social life’s flow, controls the daily arenas of economic activity, much of law and politics, and a good deal of domestic life.’ There is close involvement of metalanguage and metacommunication in subjunctivity. All propositions are not indicative in nature i.e. they are not in ‘cultural codes but about them’. ‘They are liminal, in the sense that they are suspensions of daily reality, occupying privileged spaces where people are allowed to think about how they think, about the terms in which they conduct their thinking, or to feel about now they feel in daily life. Here the rules are themselves the referent of the knowing; the knowledge propositions themselves are the object of knowledge.’

For him ‘Public liminality is governed by public subjunctivity.’ This ‘reflexivity’ where there is identity of subject and object becomes one of the main attributes of theatre. In the Phagee Lila tradition and later developments, this side has been profusely employed.

Apart from looking at oneself, this genre also was involved in looking at others. One example was that of Chengba Phagee, named after its hero comedian Phijam Bokul who was constricted (chengba) at the odd place of the body i.e. armpits. Chengba’s charm was so appealing that he could caricature literally anybody, even the king and his family.

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331 Ibid. pp. 21 & 22. When he relates cultural subjunctivity with liminality, he finds three stages of ‘passage from one basic human state or status, individual or collective, to another. The stages are: separation from antecedent mundane life; liminality, a betwixt-and-between condition often involving seclusion from the everyday scene; and reaggregation to the daily world.’ Ibid. p. 21.
332 In Phagee Lila tradition the name of a troupe was taken after the leader’s name or leader’s physical appearance. Pangamba Phagee (farce of Pangamba) was after its leader Pangambam Chaoba, Yotshubi Phagee (farce of black Tripod) was known after the leader Phanjaobam Chaoba who was as black as soot on a tripod in hearth.
right in front of them. The story\textsuperscript{333} goes that one day when the king Sir Churchand Maharaja, his elder brother Sanakhwa Ahal (Dumbra Singh) and some of his family members and nobles were seated in a room, Chengba took permission to perform some comic scenes to entertain the gathering. Sanakhwa Ahal, an obese man, gave the permission. Then Chengba emerged from behind with a bulging stomach stuffed with clothes beneath his shirt. When asked where he was heading for by one of his co-performers he replied, with screwed face as if smitten with pain, ‘Sanakhwa ahaldu angang unagadoure, aduna manakta chatlibani’ (Sanakhwa Ahal is giving birth to a child, so I am going to enquire about it).\textsuperscript{334} This unexpected gesture surprised and amused everybody in the gathering. They started laughing, forgetting the possible incursion he had made into the private space of the royal member. Sankhwa Ahal also was left with no wit and remained as a mute spectator as he had already given his consent to him. Later, to keep up the royal dignity, he asked for the former’s pardon. So this was the carnivalesque milieu created by those royal jesters.

Shumang Lila in its various forms scaled its height during this period of first half of 20th century. During this period such plays with religious themes as \textit{Ramlila}, \textit{Sabha Parba}, \textit{Kichak Parba}, \textit{Prahlad Charit} etc. were performed. The language used was mainly Hindi, not the pure one but mixed up with Brajabuli and Maithili which showed how religion (Vaisnavism) also came along with its concomitant attributes e.g. language (Hindi). They were all performed in the fashion of Shumang Lila though artistes were all present on the peripheries of the performing space instead of emerging from the green room. In this midst, side by side with Phagee Lila, when the British colonial power made its presence felt in the social, political and economic spheres, a new form of protest play came up. It began to be known as \textit{Kabul Lila} (Kabul play) or \textit{Kabul Jagoi} (Kabul dance) or \textit{Kabul pala} (chorus of Kabul) which was started under the guidance of one Sanamacha (from Moirangkhom side of Imphal),\textsuperscript{335} a master of Manipuri dance and music. This was predominated by dances caricaturing the behaviours and body language of the Pathans who

\textsuperscript{333} Gathered from Ningombam Angouton.

\textsuperscript{334} Here we can also find an inversion in that the first person (addresser), who is going to enquire the situation also acts as the third person (addressed), the main subject (Sanakhwa Ahal) of the conversation. It is interesting to notice how the plot is crafted in such a way that if questioned for his waywardness towards the royal etiquettes, he had an answer in hand that he was also a pregnant (wo)man going to see another pregnant person. The beauty of this scene lies in the combination (or lack of it) between the spoken text and the subtext, the body improvisation. The text is very clear which directly addresses Sanakhwa Ahal while the body structure is that of another person and yet Sanakhwa Ahal’s.

\textsuperscript{335} Ayekpam Shyamsunder Singh. \textit{op. cit.} p. 12. (Also see Lokendra Arambam, \textit{op. cit. pp.133-34.})
came as part of the British army from the side of Burma. It began as satire of the misrule of the colonizers and the wicked and petty minded Kabuli traders who fixed the prices of their wares according to their whims and let the locals buy them in those exorbitant prices. The verbal text was deliberately made non-sensical to mock the foreigners. It had a mixture of English, Bengali, Hindi, Manipuri and Burmese and even Brajabuli all put together in one sentence. It sounds like deconstruction of the power structure through linguistic tools, at least in the realm of art if not in the real public places like market places. The play made fun of the British, making them tonsured\(^{136}\) which is a sign of insulting or punishing a guilty person in Manipuri society. Even the king let the high ranking British officials who visited Imphal enjoy the play, may be in order to find some personal solace in defacing his colonial masters at least cursorily, irrespective of whether the latter could garner the import of the play or not.

The starting of the play was done with the blowing of bugle. But due to the religious ethnocentrism augmented by the jingoism, patronised further by the power starved monarch, which regarded Vaisnavism as the superior religion to Christianity of the colonial masters or Islam, Manipuris refrained from using any newly imported foreign musical instruments.\(^{337}\) So the bugle was made out of straws and the military tune was created with words in such a way that any listeners would take them as meaningful ones. The words were like this:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nambol kaibol kaibunai;} \\
\text{Jhang Jhang petret petret pinao nao;} \\
\text{Jhang jhang napui jhang;} \\
\text{Guruna naptong guruna naptong;} \\
\text{Phongai phongai, phongai phongai.}
\end{align*}
\]

Apart from this there were various such sentences and words which were rendered in dialogues and songs. For instance – The song:--

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nandi Khela he, Khela he jangee gigi paannaro...} \\
\text{Allabika paannaro, yona yona ro...}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{136}\) Arambam Samarendra – Shumang Lilagi hourakpham amasung makha tana chattharakpa mawong (The Origin of Shumang Lila and its Trend), a seminar paper.

\(^{337}\) This was the confused state of the personality of the king Chur Chand Singh. On the one hand he was die-hard modernist co-operating with his British masters and on the other trying to offend the culture and religion of these outsiders in an attempt to prove the projected superiority of the Manipuri culture and religion. However there were instances of the ‘paradox of modernity’ in that the colonizers considered themselves to be carriers of modernity while they rarely implement its characteristics for the people they colonize. Instead they colluded with the king to further put the people in subjection.
One dialogue went like this—

Amroda aangreji hasking for;
Something hecting fining no;
Shampuro fellow twenty niskalo hecting fining no....

On close line with Kabul Lila was another politically vibrant play called Phadibi Lila (play of tattered rags) during 1907-08. Their specialty was the tattered costumes they wore like potlois (female costume worn in Rasa Lila and by the bride in the marriage ceremony), pheijom (dhoti), Phanek (sarong-like wrapped-around), etc. which symbolized the wretched condition of the land under the colonial rule. Their target was their masters and their zealous Bengali employees, mainly clerks. The play was mainly in dance and songs, mainly Khubak Eshei (a form of community singing with clapping of palms) and mal (acrobats) which was also participated by some well-built and talented persons in the audience to give competition to the actors. The language was Manipuri and had such lines as

_Bom kaappa, bomjao kappa_ (one who fires bombs)
_Wastkat lipa koijomba_ (bearded men in waistcoat)
_Mora phamba ningshuba_ (men with flat and crumpled buttock, who always sit on _mora_, a type of stool)

These lines are a clear indication of the pompous life style of the people who were associated with the colonial power and were an eye sore for the natives who had to live in the fringes in their own land. During this time (1900s) also a play, Moirang Parba Loikaba, an episode from the legendary love story of Khamba and Thoibi of Moirang, a town about forty kilometers from Imphal, in Bishnupur district, was performed. The performance was exemplary in that it was an early form of environmental theatre, at least in Manipur. But its performances were discontinued with the royal order as it was symbolically oppositional to the royal set up. During that time the eldest brother of Chur Chand was the regent during his education at Mayo College. The play had artiste dressing

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338 Ayekpam Shyamsunder Singh. op cit. p-24
339 Arambam Samarendra. op. cit.
340 This will be elaborately studied in chapter V.
as king and traveling on horse back like a real king. This was construed as defamatory and a symbol of two kings in Manipur which was not acceptable.\textsuperscript{341}

Shumang Lila with various rasas (sentiments) was ushered in with the play \textit{Harishchandra} (1918)\textsuperscript{342} under the guidance of Aribam Amubi Sharma, assisted by Lairencham Chaoba. It was based on the extremely truthful and kind mythological Indian king of the same name who even sold out his queen Seivy and son Rohitashva to a Brahman from Kashi to keep his promise. It was the story of courage, truthfulness, dignity, chastity, resilience, and patience which also endeared the strictly vaisnavite Manipuri society. To give some relief from the serious scenes full of \textit{karuna} (compassion) and \textit{veera} (heroism) rasas the play was interspersed with comic interlude (hasa rasa).

Then it was followed, during this period between the two World Wars (1920s-1940s), by such plays as \textit{Sabitri Saitavan}, \textit{Meiraba Charan}, \textit{Chandrajini}, \textit{Chandrahass}, \textit{Seita (satya) charit}, \textit{Thok Lila} etc. The significant element of this era was the addition of interlude to back up the serious plays. In the play Sabitri Saitavan, based on the mythological couple in the Hindu mythology, there was one called Thengu Lila. It was just to cook up anecdotes to keep the audiences in the humour zone. It used a \textit{thengu} (a kind of wooden hammer) as metaphoric tool to mesmerize a person so that s/he becomes the property of the user. In this skit a village simpleton (enacted by Leibakmacha), was pursued by a rich and wise man (enacted by Khomdon), with a \textit{thengu} in his hand. The latter claimed that the former came out of his \textit{thengu} and was his property. The villager was utterly baffled as to how a wooden hammer could be his mother. Resigning to his faith he imagined and said how painful it might have been for the \textit{thengu} to carry him inside it for ten months’ pregnancy. His name became \textit{Thengujam Thokchao} (\textit{Thengu} from \textit{Thengu, Thokchao} = buffoon) and later thanked the rich man for his generosity in effecting his delivery from the \textit{thengu}. Though it sounded superficial, the skit carried deep message of how people with ranks and power were in liberty to exploit the powerless and uneducated for their personal benefits. In another scene Leibakmacha acted as a very old man and delivered this line, ‘\textit{Eepaldi soleda, sonmanduna shibabu ngamni haiba}'

\textsuperscript{341} Gathered from Lokendra Arambam.
\textsuperscript{342} Arambam Samarendra, op. cit. But Lokendra Arambam is of the opinion that the play came in 1930s (See Arambam, op cit. p. 135.)
thajaraktre! 343 (I am too old and weak; I do not think I will be able to die.) Such were the verbal nothings which endeared them to the audiences.

Seita (satya) Charit 344 was a play on how a wise mother can save a truthful son without compromising on his honesty. It was performed by a troupe under Gouro from Nambol, a place about six kilometers away from Imphal city. More popular than this main play was the interlude (or postlude) called Thaomei makhong (lamp stand) which was actually performed when the play was over. After this skit the whole play was named as Thaomei makhong Lila. This showed the liberty of a Meitei woman to choose her groom. In this skit, a Maharaj Kumari (princess), played by Natho Singh, 345 in order to test the intelligence, love and devotion of her lovers who were all friends and to have some fun, called them to her place on the same day and approximately at the same point of time. On the determined day when the first lover came calling she disguised herself as an old woman sweeping the floor, metaphorically with her finger as broom. He was unable to detect the figure and went back disappointed. In the next scene she was herself and romantically talked to her next lover. In the mean time the third lover suddenly came in and they changed the topic of their talk. The second lover, in order to hide, told the third one that they were discussing of how an elephant looked like. He then started mimicking an elephant with his hand as its trunk. But the third lover was not convinced and thought there was something fishy. In the next scene, she disguised herself as a lamp post covering her head and body with cloth. The fourth lover could not detect her and went back. This way she took the upper hand to test their intelligence. In the last scene all the friends met and talked about their experiences on that day. They knew of each other’s presence on that day but did not disclose it. 346

The actors in this group were masters of their art. A single actor could carry the whole play solely by his charisma and entertain the audience without a break with continuous volley of jokes based on very thin or non existent plots. Gouro was such an enigmatic actor that mere sight of him in the performance space was sufficient to create a

343 Ayekpam Shyamsunder Singh. op. cit. p. 16.
344 The description of the play is done in chapter VI.
345 Gathered from M. Binod Singh.
346 Another narration of the skit is given by Ayekpam Shyamsunder Singh (see Ayekpam Shyamsunder Singh. pp. 16-17). According to this, the woman is the daughter of a minister. She makes three of her lovers act like a lamp stand, as an old woman sweeping the floor etc. This was indicative of a woman’s power to use men when they are weakened by her femininity.
riotous wave of laughter. Taking stock of the scene he would then comment “Nok-edai!” (What a laughter!) to the audience who again ruptured into further laughter.

Another very important popular genre of this era was Thok Lila (con-trick play), a self contained comic play, which went on even after the Second World War. It was significant in that it addressed the social and economic problems of the people under the rule of the Maharaja assisted by the British. This was started by Chungkham Ibohal, a gifted artiste from the side of Heingang, in the eastern side of Imphal with his troupe including Khutamacha. Initially they performed a satirical play against the water tax levied on the people who used Imphal River. Hearing this, Sir Churchand Maharaja summoned him and kept him in captivity. Then he was made to perform in front of him. Taking the full advantage of the opportunity he dressed himself up in a torn Khudei (a casual lower garment and shorter version of dhoti), an old and dirty lukun (sacred thread) and dirty urik (sacred necklace of tulsi beads) symbolizing the sorry state of people. He started his performance with his back facing the king. Taking his stomach well inside and frowning with severe pain he delivered his line, ‘papi machagi leinasida leiramdrabadiko’ (Had this cursed disease not been there in me!). This one liner was sufficient to conquer the enthralled king as this clearly expressed the pain he himself went through due to his suffering from piles. Then Ibohal was allowed to perform whatever he wished to.

His plays were mostly political and philosophical. Thok Lila and other popular forms studied above came very close to the carnival laughter which Bakhtin analyses as “ambivalent: gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.” Apart from being pure satire they were parodying the obscurantist social norms apart from criticising the high-handedness of the authority. In this vein “he who is laughing also belongs” to the society. So, there was a clear tendency not only to laugh at others but at oneself too. This was witnessed in such one liner as, “Meitei macha dukan phamhalo....” (Let the Meiteis be traders or vendors). This line is the indication of the decaying economic condition of the people which impacted upon their social lives. Meitei men-folk regard retailing in shops as a sign of degrading status and one takes to this occupation only during the dire situations, though women have been into this

348 Gathered from M. Binod.
350 Ibid.
as their sole occupation. Another parody was of an old man, in his dead bed, who sprang up bracing up all his energy at the mention of his *nupi atonbi* (younger wife) saying, "*Ha! Adudi kadai anok purak-oo*" (Ha! Bring my glasses.) This showed the attention of a polygamous man in Manipuri society toward his younger wife.

During this first half of 20th century the influence of the Bengalis was consolidated in the field of culture, literature and performing arts in Manipur. Though this opening up helped in enriching the knowledge bank, there was also uncritical and un-scrutinized acculturation of various cultural traits, mostly by the people in the capital city and rural masses became just the repository of such diffusion. Thok Lila genre also had to suffer identity crisis due to this eulogizing habit of those educated people who traveled outside Manipur and were exposed to the Bengali culture and milieu. Seeing *Jatra* of Bengal, they, in 1930s and 40s, tried to equate the Manipuri genre with *Jatra* without giving a thought to its unique history and structure. So the Manipuri genres lost their individual names and got them replaced by *Jatra* or the amusing term *Jatrawali* (those who play *Jatra*). Though *Jatra* became an encompassing name for all the popular genres of this era, the individuality of Phagee Lila, Kabul Lila, or Thok Lila, was lost. The politics of name found the name ‘*Jatra*’ un-indigenous. It took decades for the replacement of this name by Shumang Lila.\footnote{This will be discussed in Chapter II.}

One of the most significant accomplishments of 1930s and 40s was the revival of the dramatization of the legends of *Khamba* and *Thoibi* of *Moirang Parba*.\footnote{*Moirang Parba* or *Moirang Kangletrol* or *Moirang Shaiyon* will be dealt at length in Chapter V. See Sarangthem Biramani 2003 – *Moirang Shaiyon* (3rd Edition). Imphal: Published by the Author. pp. i-ii.} Before this the Manipuri audiences relished the taste of Moirang Parba only through *Pena* and *Khongjom Parba* musical genres. But then this form of rendition, which was supposed to be truly indigenous in all respects, was also mixed up with Vaisnavite elements. Imagine *Nongban*, the antagonist of the play, singing a song in Bengali in his muse for his marriage with *Thoibi* and their prospective children playing Krishna and Radha in the *Rasa Lila*! To a modern mind this may seem as a vandalism of the sanctity of the indigenous culture and a clear sign of lack of consciousness on the part of the performers. But it was also pragmatic step taken by the performers who had also seen the banning of the same performances in early years of this century. Moreover, when the social life was deeply merged into Vaisnavism, the arrangement was taken healthily as the symbiosis of two traditions. Such influences were more so due to the royal patronage of Vaisnavism, which the masses readily internalized in their socio-cultural lives.