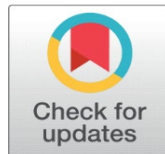
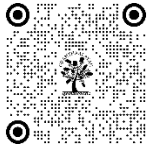


PENA PHAMSHAK: LOCATING THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF FOLK MUSIC IN MANIPURI CINEMA

Johnson Rajkumar ¹  , Dr. Gurumayum Deepika ²  

¹ Guest Faculty, Department of Mass Communication, Manipur University, Canchipur, Manipur, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, G.P. Women's College, Imphal, Manipur, India



Corresponding Author

Johnson Rajkumar,
rajkumarjohnson@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.1674](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.1674)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Music has played a significant role in film narratives since cinema exhibition started in theatres. This paper explores the influence of traditional folk music, specifically Pena Phamshak, on the narrative and cultural history of Manipuri cinema. It highlights how traditional folk music of Manipur transcends its conventional role to become an integral storytelling device, enriching the cinematic experience by embedding cultural context and emotional depth to the film. Focusing on S.N. Chand's film Brojendragee Luhongba (1973), the study examines how the incorporation of Pena music enhances the narrative and emphasizes the tension between tradition and modernity in the film. The film uses traditional folk music performance of Pena Phamshak not merely as background score but as a symbolic element that underscores cultural identity. This unique narrative performance has its historical significance and role in preserving Manipuri oral traditions, particularly the epic of Khamba-Thoibi. The film draws symbolic parallel between the film's love story and that of the story narrated through the folk performance which illustrates the thematic resonance and cultural continuity that Pena music brings to Manipuri cinema. It also highlights the transformative power of traditional folk music, demonstrating how it serves as a vital tool for cultural preservation and storytelling in the context of Manipuri cinema.

Keywords: Folk Music, Pena Phamshak, Traditional Performance, Tradition, Narrative, Manipuri Cinema

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the first public screening by the Lumiere Brothers in 1895, music has played an important role in enhancing the visual experience of cinema. The auditory dimension of music enriches the emotional impression of the moving pictures and establishes the mood, contributing to the coherence of the film's narrative structure. Even though sound film came only in 1927 with the release of Jazz Singer, music usually accompanied silent film in the form of live music during the exhibition of the films. As Matheisen (1990) observes, "the silent films were never really silent: they were always accompanied by at least a piano or small ensemble, and in the larger theatres, by an orchestra or an organ." With technological advancements, filmmakers started experimenting with the sound element of film narratives as

“extensive musical score could greatly improve the overall film” (Slowik, 2013, p.450). The use of music in cinema not only creates emotional impact and mood, but also serves as an important tool that provides the film narrative with a cultural context by employing specific musical styles and genres (Xu, 2019). By incorporating music representative of a particular time period, geographical setting or cultural milieu, filmmakers weave layers of meaning into their narratives. Through the use of musical motifs and compositions, filmmakers situate the narrative within a distinct socio-historical framework which resonates with audiences. This multifaceted use of music not only enriches the cinematic experience but also underscores its ability to transcend being mere auditory accompaniment in order to assume a pivotal role in shaping the filmic narrative.

Music also plays a crucial role in giving films a strong sense of cultural significance across different national cinemas. In the diverse landscape of Indian cinema, filmmakers skilfully utilize a wide range of musical traditions to evoke a feeling of cultural diversity and identity. They incorporate folk music, songs, and dances in films to portray the multicultural landscape of the nation. Whether it is through the classical sounds of Hindustani and Carnatic music or the moving melodies of Ghazal, Qawwali’s rhythmic energy, or Bhajan’s spiritual depth, each musical genre not only entertains but also serves as a conduit for representing culture. (Siddiqi, n.d.).

Similarly, in Manipuri cinema, traditional music plays a crucial role in adding cultural authenticity to film stories. By seamlessly blending folk musical customs into cinematic narratives, filmmakers are able to form a strong sense of connection with and rootedness in their culture. Thus, the use of folk music in Manipuri cinema not only provides entertainment but also represents the values and emotions of the people from this region. Consequently, the incorporation of folk music in Manipuri cinema goes beyond just adding background music to become a powerful aid in storytelling.

2. ROLE OF MUSIC IN FILM

In cinema, there are two types of sound— diegetic and non-diegetic. Diegetic sounds are those that originate within the narrative of the film. In other words, these are sounds that the characters themselves can hear and interact with within the story. Non-diegetic sounds, on the other hand, are sounds that originate from outside the narrative of the film. These are sounds that are not heard by the characters within the story. According to Sonnenschein (2001), diegesis encompasses the characters and the narrative universe depicted within the film, which is different from the non-diegetic elements that exist outside this narrative space. A typical example of non-diegetic sound is music, which assumes an interpretive role by guiding the audience towards specific emotions or themes that extend beyond the visual components of the film. This non-diegetic musical accompaniment operates as an additional layer of meaning which enhances the audience’s emotional engagement and enriches their interpretation of the narrative. By transcending the boundaries of the characters’ immediate reality, non-diegetic sounds influence the viewer’s perceptual experience and highlights the interplay between auditory and visual elements within the cinematic medium. According to Burt (1994), non-diegetic music is not meant to be heard as it should complement the underlying meaning of the film narrative. The function of music thus transcends the image on the screen by adding layered meanings to the moving images. Lipscomb and Tolchinsky (2005) notes, “One of the most effective ways in which a

musical score can augment the narrative is to express the unspoken thoughts and unseen implications that underlie the drama.”

The impact of music on the viewer’s experience is to evoke authentic emotional states. From a psychological point of view, extensive research has shed light on this aspect citing music as a primary tool for eliciting emotional responses. As noted by Cohen (2013), “emotion produced by the film music is a real emotion.” Besides evoking emotions, music in cinema operates as a multifaceted tool for shaping meaning across various dimensions. Audience reactions to music in cinema, much like their responses to the film itself, may vary in terms of the awareness. Yet, music in film possesses the inherent ability to immerse audience in layers of significance and elicit emotional responses (Kalinak, 2010). In Indian cinema, music has always played a prominent role in functioning as a narrative tool as well as giving significance to the film form. Indian film music usually has a fusion of classical and modern genres which complements the images on the screen. This fusion of Indian and Western musical elements in Indian cinema soundtracks is a unique blend of instruments and genres in Indian film music which serves a storytelling function of the music (Rehman 2016). Music is used in cinema to convey subtle emotions and help evoke different moods, feelings, and personalities for characters. This close connection shows how important it is to blend these two types of art (Zhuang, 2023). Thus, music plays multiple roles in cinema to facilitate the narrative of the film and interpretation of meanings.

3. MANIPURI CINEMA

Manipur is a small state located in the north-eastern part of India, with a population of 36.29 lakhs according to the 2011 census. It covers a total geographical area of 22,327 square km and shares an international boundary of approximately 355 km with Myanmar to the east. Manipur is home to a variety of ethnic groups each with its own distinct traditions, languages, and practices. Some of the prominent communities are the Meiteis, Nagas, Pangals, and several smaller tribes. As observed by Mahato (2023), this rich blend of cultures has deeply enriched Manipuri society making it dynamic and diverse. These unique cultures of Manipur’s ethnic groups combined with the fusion of their traditions and practices, have endowed the state with a vibrant culture characterized by a wide variety of arts and music. This is prominently reflected in Manipuri cinema, particularly through the portrayal of various art forms including folk music.

The development of Manipuri cinema was relatively late compared to other Indian states. The first film *Matangi Manipur* was directed by a Bengali filmmaker and released in 1972. It was only in 1973 that Manipuri filmmaker S.N. Chand directed the film *Brojendragee Luhongba* making it the first Manipuri film directed by a Manipuri. Despite this late start, Manipuri films have garnered critical acclaim with several films being featured at prestigious international film festivals. For instance, *Imagi Ningthem* (1981) directed by Aribam Syam Sharma won the coveted Golden Montgolfière at the Festival des 3 Continents in 1982 in Nantes. Aribam’s film *Ishanou* (1990) also made a significant impact on the global cinema stage when it was selected for the *Un Certain Regard* category at the Cannes Film Festival in 1991. Overall, the narratives of Manipuri films are deeply rooted in their cultural identity, and the thematic and aesthetic values of Manipuri cinema are profoundly inspired by the state’s dance and music art forms (Kongbam, 2021). This rootedness is also observed in Aribam whose films “typically situate the narrative within the cultural context of Manipur, with music playing a crucial role in establishing this cultural framework” (Rajkumar, 2023). The same can be noted of *Brojendragee*

Luhongba, where the filmmaker uses folk music to symbolise traditional cultural values. The incorporation of these elements not only enhances the storytelling but also serves as a vital medium for preserving and celebrating the rich cultural heritage of Manipur.

4. FOLK MUSIC AND MANIPURI CINEMA

Folk music is a genre of music that is deeply ingrained in the customs and traditions of a community, and reflects their shared experiences, beliefs, and histories. Indian folk music is fundamentally a community-centered genre that addresses social narratives, personal emotions, and situational contexts (LotusArise, 2023). It is usually passed down orally from one generation to another, and encompasses a wide variety of styles that are closely linked to the social and cultural aspects of a community. Renowned for its vibrant culture, Manipur has a wide variety of folk music that holds significant importance in the region's ceremonies, rituals, and narrative traditions. These musical traditions are representative of the community's cultural history rather than just being a means of entertainment. Building on this rich heritage, Manipuri cinema skilfully employs folk music to enhance narrative depth and lend cultural authenticity.

The first film from Manipur directed by a native filmmaker, Brojendragee Luhongba (1973), serves as a prime example of how director S.N. Chand integrates elements of folk music to add layered meanings to the narrative. While the film's surface narrative focuses on a family drama revolving around an arranged marriage, the sub-text delves into the broader clash between tradition and modernity. The film's use of traditional folk music not only enriches the emotional landscape of the film but also underscores the cultural tensions at play. By embedding folk music in the cinematic narrative, the film creates a poignant contrast between the enduring cultural heritage of Manipur and the encroaching influences of modernity, thereby enhancing the film's thematic complexity. In the film, the protagonist Brojendra returns home after studying medicine in a metropolitan city and finds himself in conflict with his mother, who has arranged a marriage for him. He confronts her, citing examples of modernity and accusing her of being overly traditional. However, as he comes to understand the importance of respecting his elders and listening to his mother, a key sequence unfolds in the narrative. During this moment of realization, traditional folk music is performed within the context of the film, rather than merely serving it as a background score. This choice emphasizes the symbolic representation of cultural and traditional identity through the use of folk music. The particular piece of music featured in this sequence is called Pena Phamsak, a rendition of traditional Manipuri folk music. This integration of folk music within the narrative underscores the film's exploration of the tension between tradition and modernity, highlighting the enduring value of tradition in the face of changing times.

5. PENA PHAMSHAK

Pena Phamsak is a narrative driven performance with a traditional folk instrument of Manipur, Pena. The Pena is a bowed, mono-string instrument which can be classified under chordophones. This traditional folk instrument with ancient origins is used in various occasions including rituals, festivals such as Lai Haraoba, wedding ceremonies, and royal services to the Meitei King (Chanu & Sargam, 2024). The uniqueness of this traditional folk instrument is noted by Byron Aihara who explains that Pena is different from the one-string bowed instrument family even

though the design is similar. Aihara (2016) further notes that Pena has its own distinctive playing style and musical theory. According to him, “The ancient Manipuri Pena was literally a homegrown product. The original bow was fashioned from the branch of a native species of plant, flexible when green then becoming stiff after shaping and dried. The strings came from the tail hairs of the indigenous Manipuri Polo pony.” The music of Pena is an integral component of Manipuri culture and encapsulates the history, values, and experiences of the community. The people use its expressive tunes to share their distinct narratives and viewpoints, safeguarding their cultural heritage for generations. Singh notes that Pena is a source of transmission of oral tradition as well (Singh, 2021). The tradition of Pena thus plays a role in nurturing a feeling of belonging and solidarity within this ethnic group, further solidifying their collective identity (Panthoi Devi, 2024).

Even though there are a variety of traditional folk instruments, the Pena holds a unique and esteemed position among them. As the central element of Manipuri folk music, the Pena is not only a prominent instrument but also a symbol of the region’s rich musical and cultural heritage (Achoubisana, 1997). Its significance extends beyond mere musicality and is deeply embedded in the cultural and social fabric of Manipuri society. Devi (2024) identifies distinct compositions within Pena music that are tailored to evoke various emotions and atmospheres. For instance, Hekali-Pabot is associated with themes of courage and valour, creating a mood of bravery and strength. Shikaplon, on the other hand, conveys a sense of mourning and sorrow, effectively expressing grief. Leimaron Sheiron is used to express joy and to describe beauty, capturing the essence of happiness and aesthetic appreciation. Lastly, Panthoibi Sheiron is associated with prayers, reflecting a spiritual or devotional atmosphere. Each of these compositions demonstrates the versatility and emotional depth of this folk music in conveying a wide range of human experiences.

Among its variations, Pena Phamshak holds a particularly significant role as it encompasses narrative performance in addition to music. This culturally important art form in Manipur involves playing the Pena while seated, a style distinct from the more common standing performances. The seated method serves as a more formal setting for showcasing both the Pena and the rich oral traditions of Manipur, where traveling musicians would recount different stories through their music. Historically, Pena Phamshak performers travelled across various localities, presenting storytelling performances that narrate Manipuri folklore. These performances were predominantly held in the courts of royalty and king, and is believed to have started during the reign of King Chandrakirti who ruled from 1834 to 1886 (Nongmaithem, 2021). Over time, they became more widespread and began to be commissioned by local communities for entertainment as well as to celebrate their cultural heritage. This shift enabled the tradition to flourish beyond the confines of royal patronage, deeply embedding itself in the social fabric of Manipuri society. The narratives performed in Pena Phamshak are often drawn from the epic of Khamba-Thoibi, a heroic love story set in the Kingdom of Moirang in erstwhile Manipur. This episodic recitation is an extensive undertaking, typically lasting between 70 to 100 days, with performances stretching over days and even months (Mongsaba, 2010). This storytelling form of Pena music is dedicated exclusively to the telling of the Khamba-Thoibi story, which is regarded as “the undisputed cultural epic of the Meitei” (Aihara, 2016). It can be noted that the Khamba-Thoibi epic is more than just a tale of romance and encapsulates the values, beliefs, and societal norms of the Meitei community— “it shows this nation’s i.e. the Meitei nation’s will, likes and dislikes, customs and traditions, nature of worshipping gods and goddesses, ways of justice, heroic tradition, romance, human relationships,

amusements and sports, political systems, aesthetics, sociology and ethical values clearly" (Nongmaithem, 2021). Through the characters and their journeys, the epic reflects the collective consciousness and identity of the people.

The Pena Phamshak performance thus becomes a medium through which these cultural narratives are preserved and transmitted across generations. The peculiarity of the interplay between music and storytelling in Pena Phamshak not only entertains but also educates, offering insights into the historical and cultural context of Manipur. The performance of Pena Phamshak requires a high degree of skill and dedication from the musicians. They must master the technical aspects of playing the Pena while also embodying the role of Pena artist as performance. The emotional depth required to convey the epic's themes demand a profound understanding of both the music and the narrative. This duality of role highlights the unique nature of Pena Phamshak as a performance art that seamlessly blends musical prowess with storytelling artistry.

6. CONCLUSION

In Manipuri cinema, folk music, particularly the tradition of Pena Phamshak, plays a vital role in enhancing narrative depth and cultural resonance. The elements of Pena Phamshak in films like Brojendragee Luhongba exemplifies how traditional folk music can be used not merely as background score but as an integral part of storytelling that reflects the community's cultural identity and values. The narrative tension in the film where there is a clash between modernity and tradition is mirrored through the strategic use of Pena music, particularly during the scenes where Pena Phamshak is performed within the film's narrative. This use of Pena music underscores the symbolic representation of cultural identity, while also emphasizing on the protagonist's realization of the importance in valuing his cultural roots. Thus, the use of Pena Phamshak in Manipuri cinema not only enhances the emotional and cultural layers of the film but also serves as a medium for celebrating Manipuri tradition. By integrating this traditional form of music and performance into the cinematic narrative, the film resonates deeply with the audience, thus fostering a greater appreciation for the folk music of Manipur. Such amalgamation of music and storytelling in Manipuri cinema reiterates the transformative power of folk traditions and folk music in contemporary cultural expressions.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Achoubisana, R. (1997). *Pena Anoi. Manipur State Pena Asheiba Loishang*.
Aihara, B. (2016). *Dance Music and Ritual in Manipur (I)*. Vajra Publications.
Burt, G. (1994). *The Art of Film Music : Special Emphasis on Hugo Friedhofer, Alex North, David Raksin, Leonard Rosenman*. Northeastern University Press.
Chanu, S. M., & Sargam, K. (2024). *Pena Performance : Assessing The Ritual Among Meitei of Manipur. Educational Administration : Theory and Practice*, 30(4), Article 4.

- Cohen, A. J. (2013). Film Music from the Perspective of Cognitive Science. In D. Neumeyer (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies* (p. 0). Oxford University Press.
- Kalinak, K. (2010). *Film Music : A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Karthic, S., & Hemmige, D. B. (2023). Evolution Of Music in Indian Films and Its Psychological Impact On Audience : An Analysis Of Indian Music And Its Evolution In Film Over The Years. 12(6).
- Kongbam, M. (2021). Manipuri Cinema. Ningthoukhongjam Ranjana Devi.
- Lipscomb, S. D., & Tolchinsky, D. E. (2005). The role of Music Communication in Cinema. In D. Miell, R. MacDonald, & D. J. Hargreaves (Eds.), *Musical Communication* (pp. 383–404). Oxford University Press.
- LotusArise. (2023, June 24). Folk Music of India—Art and Culture Notes | UPSC.
- Mahato, A. S. (2023). Reflection of Mythological Motifs and Cultural Contours in Manipuri Folklore. *Pratidhwani the Echo*, XII(I), 239–246.
- Mathiesen, T. J. (1990). Silent Film Music and the Theatre Organ.
- Mongsaba, M. (2010). Manipuri Sanskritida Pena. Angomningthou Preservation and Conservation Center.
- Nongmeithem, T. S. (2021, May 22). The Philosophy in “Khamba-Thoibi Sheireng” : An Amalgamation of Meitei & Hindu Thoughts – Part 1. *Imphal Review of Arts and Politics*.
- Panthoi Devi, R. (2024). Pena : A cultural bridge in the Meitei Community’s music, heritage and society. *Naad Nartan Journal of Dance and Music*, 12(1), 64–66.
- Rajkumar, J. (2023). Beyond Domesticity and Women’s Agency In Manipuri Cinema : An Analysis Of Female Characters In Aribam Syam’s Film. *Shodhkosh: Journal Of Visual And Performing Arts*, 4.
- Rehman, S. (2016). The Role of Music in Hindi Cinema. *SYNERGY*, 12(2), 314–329.
- Siddiqi, J. (n.d.). The Evolution of Indian Film Music : Mixing East and West, North and South. Darbar Arts Culture and Heritage Trust. Retrieved 12 May 2024, from
- Singh, S. R. (2021). Pena : The Traditional Musical Instrument of Manipur. *Voice of Research*, Article 2021-39–07.
- Slowik, M. (2013). Experiments in Early Sound Film Music : Strategies and Rerecording, 1928–1930. *American Music*, 31(4), 450–474.
- Sonnenschein, D. (2001). Sound design : The Expressive Power of Music, Voice, and Sound Effects in Cinema.
- Xu, R. (2019). Analysis of the Role of Music in Film Narrative. 368.
- Zhuang, C. (2023). The Roles of Music in Films. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 23, 596–600.