



MAHARAJ KUMARI BINODINI DEVI

(1922-2011)



Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi bridged the two worlds of ancient royalty and modern art. Born as a princess into a palace life, which she lovingly recalled in a series of late essays, she made her name in the wider world as a novelist and a writer of short stories, essays, plays and award-winning screenplays, lyrics and ballet scripts.

M. K. Binodini Devi wrote under the single name of Binodini. Her screenplays were made into award-winning feature films (directed by her long-time collaborator-director Aribam Syam Sharma) such as *My Son, My Precious* (1982) and *The Chosen One* (1992) which were screened in the Cannes (*Un Certain Regard*, 1991), London, Toronto and Locarno Film Festivals and in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Her wildlife and environment themed script for a modern ballet was made into *Sangai, Dancing Deer of Manipur*, a performance film that won the British Film Institute's Outstanding Film of the Year Award in 1984.

M. K. Binodini Devi, also known as Princess Wangol, was born on February 6, 1922 in the kingdom of Manipur in the Southeastern Himalaya on the Myanmar border (a state in Northeastern India since 1949). She was the youngest of the five daughters of Maharaja Sir Churachand Singh, KSCI, CBE, and Maharani Dhanamanjuri Devi of Manipur. In 1950, she married Dr. L. Nanda Babu Roy, a surgeon, with whom she had two sons.

Maharaja Churachand, who ruled Manipur from 1891 till 1941, was the first Western-educated monarch of Manipur. His queen, Maharani Dhanamanjuri, played a major role in giving modern education to her children. She had assigned her English companion, Mrs. E. M. Jolly, as her daughters' first English teacher. M.K. Binodini Devi got her formal education at Pine Mount School, Shillong; Tamphasana Girls High School, Imphal; St Mary's College, Shillong; Vidyasagar College, West Bengal; and at Tagore's Viswa Bharati University in Santiniketan. She studied art at the university and was Manipur's first female graduate.

Binodini: The Writer

M.K. Binodini Devi wrote in Manipuri, the Tibeto-Burman language of Manipur. Her last book, *Maharaj Churachandgi Imung*, (2008, translated as *The Maharaja's Household*) is a collection of 34 memoir essays about life with her father, Maharaja Churachand. Some of the earlier essays were written and published in local newspapers since 1997.

It was in the years just before and during World War II – at a time when she lived with her mother in the pilgrim town of Nabadwip in Bengal – that Binodini was introduced to her greatest literary influence: the Bengali literature of Saratchandra Chatterjee, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Michael Madhusudan Dutt.

As early as 1939, while still a student in the tenth grade, M.K. Binodini Devi had made an attempt to publish her first short story entitled *Imaton*. The young writer was scolded by her tutor for her unconventional theme of a relationship between a young man and his stepmother. During her days at St. Mary's College in Shillong, she began writing stories again, but it was not until the early 1960s that she got her story, *Nung'gairakta Chandramukhi*, published, in a Calcutta-based Manipuri journal. Elangbam Nilakanta Singh, the eminent Manipuri literary critic, acclaimed it as the first fully realized Manipuri short story.

Her work is noted for a modernity rooted in Manipur's traditions and for her strong, unconventional female characters. Young women authors especially look to M.K. Binodini Devi, whom they call *Imasi* or Royal Mother, as a role model. M.K. Binodini Devi has published a collection of short stories entitled *Nung'gairakta Chandramukhi (Chysanthemum among the Rocks, 1965)*, about 50 song lyrics, and over 40 radio plays, some of which are published in the collection *Asangba Nongjabi (Crimson Rainclouds, 1966, English translation, 2012)*. Her novel *Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi (The Princess and the Political Agent)* was published in 1979. She has also written a collection of travel essays called *O Mexico! Travel Stories (2004)* and translated the works of Bengali writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Shankar and Badal Sircar into Manipuri.

M.K. Binodini Devi was a prolific writer, with her essays appearing regularly in Manipur's newspapers. These include the series, *Maharaj Churhandgi Imung*, the basis of her 2008 collection of memoir essays of the same name; a series of portraits called *Yaiskul Yai; The Last Saheb*; and *Yengkhom Ongbi Hemabati*, an essay on World War II from the Manipuri perspective. Known for her horsemanship as a young woman, she has also written 16 essays on the Manipur's equestrian culture, commissioned and broadcast by All India Radio.

M.K. Binodini Devi has written scripts – some original screenplays and some based on her own stories – for eight feature films and four documentaries. The films M.K. Binodini Devi scripted in collaboration with director Aribam Syam Sharma had garnered international acclaim at many screenings including the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Cannes, Locarno, London, and Toronto film festivals. A selection of these films was screened at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2000. Their film *Imagi Ningthem (My Son, My Precious)* received the Grand Prix at the 1981 Festival des 3 Continents at Nantes. Their documentary *Sangai, Dancing Deer of Manipur*, based on her wildlife ballet received the British Film Institute Outstanding Film of the Year Award for 1989. And their feature film *Ishanou* was selected for the Cannes Film Festival in 1991. Their last collaboration, a feature-length documentary, *Rajarshi Bhagyachandra*, was screened at the 2007 International Film Festival in India. A selection of their collaborative work was screened at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York in 2000.

As a President and Founder of *Leikol*, the organization of women writers in Manipur, she was also the guiding spirit for its publication of *Nachom (2003)*, an anthology of women writers on love.

M.K. Binodini Devi: Arts and Activism

In her writing, arts and social activism, M.K. Binodini Devi was recognized as a pioneer of a non-doctrinaire thinking that borrows little from conventional modernism and is rooted deeply in Manipur's own traditions.

Although M.K. Binodini Devi was known best for her writing, she was also an accomplished sculptor. While a student at Tagore's Santiniketan, she became the muse for the Indian sculptor and painter Ramkinkar Vaij. Portraits and sculptures of her by Vaij are in the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi.

Her vocal renditions of *Rabindra Sangeet* have aired over All India Radio. She was also a founding member of Roop Raag, Manipur's pre-eminent association of writers, poets, dancers, musicians and dramatists since 1960.

M.K. Binodini Devi, as the first Secretary of the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy, pioneered the incorporation of martial arts into the canon of classical Manipuri Dance and in 1976, took the first all-Manipuri dance troupe on a tour of Latin America, North America and Europe.

She ignited environmental awareness in Manipur with *Thoibidu Warou'houee*, her 1972 essay on the state's wetlands and wildlife. An elegy to the brow-antlered deer, the essay was the basis for her script for *Thoibi* (1972), a ballet she wrote when she ran the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipuri Dance Academy. Other contemporary Manipuri Dance ballet scripts with an environmental message include *Keibul Lamjao* (1984) and *Loktak Isei* (1991), a ballet on the wetlands of Manipur. Her environmentalism often took on an active aspect as with *The Nong'goubi Project*, a series of community actions taken in 2002 to clean up the Nambul River.

She also held elected office as a Member of the Legislative Assembly in Manipur and founded micro-financing for women in Manipur with Manipur's first women's cooperative bank in 1973.

Awards

M.K. Binodini Devi was honored with India's National Book Award (the Sahitya Akademi Award given by India's national arts and letters academy) in 1979 for her novel *Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi (The Princess and the Political Agent)*. The Sahitya Akademi also commissioned *Binodini: A Writer's Life* (2001), a documentary on her literary career, directed by Aribam Syam Sharma. In 2007, the Sahitya Akademi had selected her for their Eminent Senior Writer Award.

Other awards include the Jamini Sunder Guha Gold Medal in 1966 by the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad for *Nung'gairakta Chandramukhi*, her collection of short stories; and the 2002 Kumari Barooah Foundation Award for Culture.

In 1976, she was awarded the Padma Sri (India's national honors list) by the President of India for her contribution to music, drama, dance, film and literature. She subsequently returned the award in 2001 in protest of the government's plans to alter Manipur's historical boundaries.

L. Somi Roy