

Reclaiming Power on Stage: Women's Political Empowerment in G.C. Tongbra's *Emamcha*

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Abstract:

G.C. Tongbra is widely regarded as one of the most influential playwrights in modern Manipuri theatre, known for creating characters who challenge traditional social structures and reflect socio-political aspirations in Manipur's cultural context. Across his plays, Tongbra's female characters are often depicted as intelligent, assertive, and capable of shaping their own destinies rather than being confined to passive roles, thereby embodying early notions of gender equality and women's agency on stage. *Emamcha*, a drama that focuses on women's political empowerment, exemplifies this thematic concern by showcasing female protagonists who navigate the complex interplay between gender, power, and public space. Through characterisation, dialogue, and dramatic conflict, the play highlights women's political consciousness in a traditionally patriarchal society, foregrounding their struggle for recognition and authority within both domestic and political spheres. While Manipuri theatre has historically engaged with broader issues of social justice and political critique, Tongbra's work stands out for its nuanced portrayal of women's aspirations towards leadership and participation in collective decision-making processes. The drama *Emamcha* thus serves not only as a work of artistic expression but also as a medium of social commentary, highlighting the intersection of gender and politics in Manipur's cultural discourse. By analysing the play's thematic elements, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how theatre can reflect and inspire movements towards women's political empowerment.

Keywords: Women's Political Empowerment; Manipuri Theatre; G.C. Tongbra; Gender; Power; Dramatic Representation

Introduction:

Theatre in Manipur has long functioned as a potent medium for social critique and political expression, reflecting the tensions, struggles, and aspirations of its people. Within this vibrant theatrical tradition, the works of G. C. Tongbra occupy a distinctive position for their sharp engagement with issues of power, inequality, and social transformation. Among his many plays, *Emamcha* emerges as a significant text that foregrounds women's political consciousness and agency, situating female experience at the heart of public and political discourse.

G.C. Tongbra's Manipuri drama, *Emamcha*, was published in 1965 as a second edition, alongside his drama *Ani Thokna Chingkhair Thammoi*. The drama comprises three episodes, each of which is also subdivided into three parts. Tongbra refers to the state of Manipur itself in this drama and advocates for women's roles in decision-making bodies. Tongbra creates a unique character called Emamcha (who is

also the title of this drama itself), an educated and beautiful lady free from any traditional or social trap laid on women. She leads a free life of free reasoning. Many young boys who approach her are turned into social workers under her advice and leadership. She makes her votaries join her political party known as “Chak-Phi Party” (Food-Cloth Party). Being a courageous woman, she works against social prejudices, and she becomes the Chief Minister of the state of Manipur. Though she is unmarried, she gives birth to a boy, and when she is asked to disclose the father of the child, she replies that she will disclose the father when the time calls for it. The father of the child is the Secretary Nabakumar, her own bodyguard.

Literature review:

It can be classified into three subtypes:

1. Life and work of G.C. Tongbra
2. A Look into Empowerment and Women’s Political Empowerment
3. Emamcha, as a Woman Politician

1. Life and work of G.C. Tongbra:

Tongbram Geetchandra Singh, commonly known as G.C. Tongbra, who wrote over one hundred plays, was born on Thursday, February 6, 1913, at Sega Road, Konjeng Hajari Leikai (Jailer Leirak), Imphal. His father, Tongbram Ibochouba Singh, was a simple man with no educational qualifications. He had three wives, and Tongbra’s mother, Lukamani Devi, was the second wife. The other co-wives were childless. Being the sole beloved of the family, Tongbra was cared for and protected by these three mothers, growing up as a pampered prince. During his childhood, he was known as Menjor by the local people.

Tongbra began his education under his father’s guidance. He indulged in gambling, playing hockey and wrestling. He stated that he started writing plays at about thirteen or fourteen while in the seventh grade. His career in theatre began in the mid-20th century. He became a leading figure in Manipuri drama, known for his innovative approach and ability to address complex social issues through his plays. Tongbra is the father of Modern Manipuri Drama and Manipuri Radio Drama. He married Huidrom Nayansakhi Devi of Wabagai village in 1937 at around the age of 23. He graduated with a degree in Arts from Guwahati University in 1951 and obtained his B.T. in 1958. He worked as a teacher in four schools and one college, retiring in 1973 as the Vice Principal of Imphal College, Manipur. He was a teacher, dramatist, lyricist, critic, journalist, translator, filmmaker, actor, director and a thinker who never truly retired. Tongbram Geetchandra Singh, honoured with numerous awards, passed away on Monday, June 3, 1996.

In recognition of his literary works, Tongbra has received many prestigious awards including the Jamini Sundar Guha Gold Medal (Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, 1961), Sahitya Ratna (Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, 1973), Padma Shri (National Award, 1975), Sahitya Akademi Award (Sahitya Akademi, 1978), Best Playwright (All India Radio, Imphal, 1990), and many more. He has also successfully written over one hundred plays. Here are some of the famous works: *Mapa Saba* (Like a Father) (1950), *Mani Mamou* (Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law) (1951), *Taibang Gaitrang* (Chess of life) (1963), *Matric Pass* (1964), *Meitei Chanu* (Meitei Women) (1965), *Lamja Parshuram* (Parshuram, the Orphan) (1966), *Leisabi Chithikhella* (Girl as a Lottery Prize) (1970), *Kao Phabi* (The Female Bull-Fighter) (1971), *Chengni Khujai* (The Begging Bowl) (1972), *Taj Mahal* (1973), *Ngabongkhao* (*The Flesh Trap*) (1975), *Nupi Adhikar* (Rights of Women) (1993), etc.

2. A Look into Empowerment and Women’s Political Empowerment:

The term “empowerment” has evolved, with its contemporary usage in social sciences and community psychology being significantly shaped by American psychologist Julian Rappaport. In his 1981 paper, “In

Praise of Paradox: A Social Policy of Empowerment Over Prevention”, Rappaport introduced “empowerment” as a foundational concept for promoting autonomy and self-determination among individuals and communities. He elaborated on this in his 1984 work, “*Studies in Empowerment*”, emphasising the process by which people, organisations, and communities gain mastery over their lives. He describes empowerment as:

Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviours to social policy and social change (Rappaport, 1981, 1984).

Empowerment is a process of acquiring rights by developing ourselves and deciding for ourselves. It may be social, political, economic, educational, psychological, or cultural. Regarding “empowerment,” there are numerous definitions from different scholars and renowned dictionaries. Some of them are as follows:

A) Sarita Jain and Sandeep Jain describe empowerment in their article *Women Empowerment And Poverty Reduction in South Asia* as

Empowerment is an ongoing and dynamic process, which enhances women’s and any other marginalized and alienated groups abilities to change the structures and ideologies that keep them subordinate. It is also a process of making present power structures more inclusive, including all women and men senior citizen, dalits indigenous people and people with disabilities (Sarita & Sandeep, 2007).

B) Dr J.C. Pant and Dr Upasana Sharma describe empowerment in their article *Suggested Measures, for the Empowerment of Women* as:

Empowerment is a multidimensional process, which enables the individuals or a group of individuals to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives, or have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from the stackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practices (Pant & Sharma, 2007).

C) *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* describes empowerment as:

Empowerment is the act or action of empowering someone or something: the granting of the power, right, or authority to perform various acts or duties (Mish [ed.], 2003).

D) *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* describes empowerment as:

The process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you (McLintosh, 2013).

Thus, empowerment is a multifaceted concept that is crucial to personal development and societal progress. By fostering autonomy, confidence, and access to resources, empowerment enables individuals and communities to achieve their full potential.

The year 2001 is recognised as the Women’s Empowerment Year in India, as acknowledged by the Government of India. The 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts of India, particularly the 73rd, mandate a minimum of one-third of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Municipalities reserved for women. Regarding Women’s Political Empowerment, various definitions have been presented by notable academicians. Some of them are:

A) Keshab Chandra Mandal defined Women’s Political Empowerment in his article *Concept and Types of Women Empowerment* as:

Women’s political empowerment implies the decentralization of power and authority in the deprived, oppressed and powerless people who have not been able to participate in the decision

making process and implementation of policies and programs of both government organisations as well as familial and societal matters (Mandal, 2013).

B) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research* defined Women's Political Empowerment as:

Women's political empowerment is rooted in the historical struggle for suffrage and extends to active participation in political decision-making processes. It emphasizes the importance of women having the knowledge, skills, and networks necessary to influence political structures and policies effectively (Coghlan & Miller [ed], 2014).

Thus, women's political empowerment is a foundational pillar of inclusive democracy and sustainable development. It extends beyond the formal right to vote or stand for office, encompassing the real and substantive participation of women in political decision-making at all levels. Empowered women not only advocate for their rights but also contribute to more equitable, responsive, and accountable governance. Despite progress in many parts of the world, systemic barriers such as gender stereotypes, socio-economic constraints, and institutional biases continue to limit women's full political participation. Therefore, advancing women's political empowerment requires a multi-faceted approach, legal reforms, political education, capacity building, and cultural attitude transformation. Ultimately, when women are politically empowered, societies benefit through stronger democratic institutions, more inclusive policies, and a deeper commitment to social justice. True empowerment means not only occupying seats at the table but also reshaping the table itself.

3) **Emamcha, as a Woman Politician:**

In G.C. Tongbra's Manipuri drama *Emamcha*, the central female character Emamcha gradually develops political awareness through her lived experiences. Her understanding of injustice, inequality, and power relations reflects the emergence of political consciousness rooted in everyday life rather than formal political training. There are three points to analyse in more depth for the character of Emamcha as follows:

I) As a leader of the state, Emamcha always think for the betterment of her people and is aware of what she says during her election campaign. Whatever she says during the campaign, she does twice as much as she promises. She also maintains harmony among the people of her state, between the poor and the rich. There should be no discrimination among the people of her state, Manipur.

Naba — Our immediate priority is the fulfilment of basic needs, ensuring everyone has access to Food and clothing. The success of the Food-Cloth Party was built on the foundation of kept promises, especially that of food and clothing, and we must make that same commitment our guiding light and our first pledge to the people.

Emam — But providing rice and clothing is not enough. Our people deserve more than just the bare minimum. A single phanek or pheijom and a bowl of rice do not constitute a living standard. We cannot ignore that while a small elite prospers, the vast majority of Manipuris struggle to access necessities. Bridging this deep-seated inequality is a monumental task, but we must strive for a society where wealth is shared, not hoarded. Our party's agenda must expand beyond providing food and clothing. People should have access to basic healthcare, recreation, sports and other aspects of life too. If we could only achieve this, then the people of Manipur could be united (Tongbra, 1965, p. 81-82).

Emamcha has been highlighted as a politician who, as a leader of the motherland and a Chief Minister, works with a clear vision for the future. Tongbra expresses the desire for her to work for the welfare of the public even beyond the promises made before the elections, once the votes are cast. Furthermore,

Tongbra showcases through Emamcha's character how a woman leader maintains an equal perspective among the people of society and protects the land without any discrimination between the poor and the wealthy

II) As the Chief Minister of Manipur, Emamcha promises to sacrifice her entire life for the betterment of her people, regardless of the situation. She prioritizes the welfare of the nation and its citizens over her personal interests. As a dedicated woman politician, her life is driven by the ideology of public service, committing all her strength, wisdom, and wealth to the cause of human society.

Emam — Even if that moment were today, it would still be considered late. However, the most important promises I hold in my life are to serve the people, to sacrifice my health and wealth for the nation and for humanity. I do not intend to expand my health and wealth for an individual or a small party by taking a one-sided stand. If this promise is safeguarded, then I am free to be used as a vessel in whatever way is deemed fit (Tongbra, 1965, p. 69).

Tongbra portrays Emamcha as a woman politician driven by the ideology of dedicating her entire life to national service. Instead of pursuing personal interests, she expresses a greater desire to focus on policies and activities aimed at the collective welfare of the nation. Tongbra highlights that as a Chief Minister and a leader of the people, Emamcha will live with a sense of integrity and a collective vision, following the positive path led by the public while striving for the betterment of society.

III) Emamcha is depicted as a visionary woman leader committed to the welfare of the people. She carries out her responsibilities with honesty, courage, and dedication, seeking collective progress and social development. Through her resistance to conflict, inequality, and social injustice, G.C. Tongbra presents Emamcha as a politically conscious Manipuri woman who actively challenges oppressive structures and advocates for the betterment of society.

Emam — For me, I desire to work in the unity of both, including myself, and in unity with the whole nation, for the success and betterment of all. Hatred, conflict, and destruction are not the purpose of my life (Tongbra, 1965, p. 73).

In Tongbra's drama *Emamcha*, a vision of a united and progressive Manipur is presented. The drama depicts the possibility of a woman becoming the Chief Minister and leading the state. Through this portrayal, Tongbra clearly expresses his belief that women should not merely be given high positions but should also be entrusted with the responsibility of governing the state as Chief Minister. This reflects his aspiration for greater political participation and leadership opportunities for women. Furthermore, the political party in the drama is named Chak-Phi Party. The term *Phi* (traditional cloth) is closely associated with women and symbolizes their identity and contribution. By using this symbolic name, Tongbra subtly conveys his support for women's active involvement in politics. Through such symbolism, it becomes evident that Tongbra advocates for expanding women's participation and leadership in the political sphere. Thus, *Emamcha* emerges as a progressive drama that challenges patriarchal norms and promotes women's political empowerment as an essential element of social and democratic development.

Conclusion:

Emamcha by G. C. Tongbra thus emerges as a powerful theatrical statement on women's political empowerment within the socio-cultural context of Manipur. By placing women at the centre of the dramatic action, Tongbra challenges patriarchal norms that traditionally exclude them from political discourse and decision-making. The play reveals how power operates not only in formal political institutions but also within everyday spaces such as the family and community, where women's voices are

often silenced. *Emamcha* is not portrayed as an isolated individual but as a representative figure for many Manipuri women. Her strength inspires solidarity and shared resistance, symbolising the potential of women's collective political participation. Through its nuanced characterisation and symbolic dramaturgy, *Emamcha* demonstrates that women's resistance does not always take the form of overt rebellion; instead, it is often expressed through dialogue, moral questioning, and collective awareness. These seemingly personal acts acquire political significance as they contest established hierarchies and redefine authority. Tongbra thus reclaims the stage as a site where women articulate dissent, negotiate power, and assert their right to participate in shaping social realities. Ultimately, *Emamcha* affirms theatre as an instrument of social transformation. It underscores the idea that women's political empowerment begins with consciousness and voice, gradually expanding into collective action and social change. By dramatising this process, Tongbra not only reflects the struggles of Manipuri women but also contributes to broader debates on gender, power, and representation. The play stands as a lasting reminder that reclaiming power on stage is inseparable from reclaiming power in society itself and making *Emamcha* a vital text in understanding women's political empowerment in regional Indian drama.

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