



ISHANOU

Aribam Syam Sharma; India 1990; Second Run; region-free Blu-ray; Manipuri with English subtitles; Certificate 12; 94 minutes; 1.37:1. Extras: interviews with Syam Sharma (2025) and Film Heritage Foundation director Shivendra Singh Dungarpur and actor Kangabam Tonga (2023); booklet.

REVIEWED BY CATHERINE WHEATLEY

One of Indian cinema's most prolific talents – having directed over 15 feature films and over 40 documentaries, as well as acting, singing and composing for many others – Aribam Syam Sharma's name is less well known among global cinephiles than certain of his compatriots, in part because his work is rooted in the culture of Manipur, a small state in the north-east of India. The region only started producing indigenous films in 1972, and its filmmakers are forced to work with small budgets, while lack of infrastructure and continuing ethnic conflicts in the area limit opportunities for distribution.

Which makes *Ishanou* all the more remarkable an achievement. Having premiered in Cannes in 1991 in the Un Certain Regard section, the film returned to the festival in 2023, now painstakingly restored from the original, damaged 16mm negative and two 35mm prints by the Film Heritage Foundation. It follows the crisis that hits a small family when wife and mother Tampha (Anaboum Kiranmala) begins experiencing strange visions, becoming feverish and wild. Her husband Dhanabir, a loving family man who hails from the neighbouring state of Assam, seeks medical help. But a hint has already been dropped in the film's opening titles as to what ails Tampha – a card explains that *Ishanou* is based on the life of the Maibis, Manipuri women who are divinely called to become priestesses. Sure enough, Tampha finds herself drawn to a Maibi temple, where she is initiated into her vocation. When eventually she returns home, she discovers the devastated Dhanabir has returned to his family home, taking their daughter, Bembem, with him.

Syam Sharma lingers over the ordinary details of village life and the significance of the Maibis within it, opening with a tender sequence in which a group of priestesses presides over Bembem's coming-of-age ceremony, and later including a ten-minute montage of Tampha performing various rites. But while the realist style evokes the New Indian Cinema of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and Tapan Sinha, the film's highly saturated colours and taut editing imbue Tampha's story with moments of generic intensity. Her descent from the domestic idyll that she shares with her husband, daughter and mother into apparent madness plays at times like a thriller, or even a horror: yellow-eyed and sweat-soaked, she writhes and cackles as if possessed, while her family looks on aghast. The film's second half, meanwhile, moves towards maternal melodrama, as an early premonition that Bembem might be given to her in-laws comes terribly true, and Tampha must come to terms with what her calling has cost her. The final close-up of a tearful mother watching her former family walk away is equal in poignancy and heartbreak to the indelible closing shot of *Stella Dallas* (1937).

DISC: A beautiful restoration, accompanied by a new introduction by Syam Sharma, a charming interview with the director and Shivendra Singh Dungarpur of the Film Heritage Foundation, and an elegant contextual essay by film scholar Omar Ahmed.