

Manipuri Theatre: A language of protest

Shawni Bhattacharjee

Legendary actor-playwright Dario Fo once said, “A theatre, a literature, an artistic expression that does not speak for its own time has no relevance”. The reverberation of his words has found no better expression than in the contemporary Manipuri Theatre Art. The association of the word “contemporariness” with Manipuri theatre may sound a little absurd to most of us who fondly link the Manipuri theatre to images of graceful artists adorning the stage in their elaborate traditional attires. However, the ones closely associated to the world of theatre can tell us that with changing times, the Manipuri theatre has also adopted a new idiom to narrate its story and most importantly to protest against the growing unrest which has become the face of reality in Manipur today.

Manipur is immensely theatre active with a rich and varied performance art tradition. The origin of the theatre in the state traces back its roots to the traditional festivals such as the *Lai Haraoba*, where dance and drama pertaining to the Creation Story were (and are still) performed to appease the ancient deities. But as Hinduism gained prominence in the state, performances such as the *Saankertanaor* the Raas- Leela were adopted to appease the taste of both the Court and the crowd. It is this Raas-leela which earned the Manipuri stage immense popularity and appreciation world-wide. The once renowned state finds its name in newspapers even today, though the place of art and culture has been ironically taken by drugs, diseases and incessant violence. Manipur is struggling today- with itself, with the Indian polity. Within the state there is friction between the tribes, while relations outside have been shrouded in suspicion and wounded by the enforcement and ruthless implementation of acts such as the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Power Act) which declares Manipur as a “disturbed area” and gives the armed forces unchecked power to “arrest, shoot and kill” people without any warrant.

Even as activists such as Irom Chanu Sharmila spent the greater part of her life, fasting and protesting, there has been little improvement in ground realities. Commenting on the present situation, Lokendra Arambam, a major name in the Manipuri theatre says “Culturally there is a

vital difference between mainstream demands and ground realities, because the alienation between Manipur and the mainland has been near-total. This is the situation- how should a conscious, self-critical, thinking theatre person react to it?” The answer was found in the experimental theatre, which has emerged as a strong presence since the 70s. The use of theatre as a means of protest is not a novel idea. Dramatic performances and literature has long been used as a means of expressing and communicating protests against injustices, exploitation by those in power as well as for creating new perceptions of social reality. In fact with its avenue for live contact, which makes for a more intimate and intense communication, theatre has emerged as a more potent medium than books and television, to deliver such message. But while protest theatre is often used as a synonym for political theatre, the Manipuri stage clearly shows us that it has scope for more.

Developed during the late 70s and mid80s, the experimental theatre emerged as a strong presence, emphasizing the exploration of traditional forms, reshaping techniques and techniques, incorporating elements such as martial art form-Thang-ta and folk and classical dances. More than all, this theatre also engaged directly with the pressing social realities that baffled the people on street and thus became a mirror of Manipur’s reality. RatanThiyam, OjaHeisnamKanhailal and LokendraArambam became the three pivotal figures who spearheaded this movement. Diverse in their individual styles, what tied the three figures together were their socially relevant themes of the alternative, experimental theatre which stood directly against its established mainstream counterpart. Over the years, the experimental theatre presented us with a number land-mark plays. However, while theatre often takes the language of protest from real life, OjaHeisnamKanhailal created history on stage, when his play gave the “vocabulary of protest to real life”. With his theme of the “big dominating the poor” OjaKanhailal’s plays had always been a strong clap-back to the political games of power. But little did Oja himself know the kind of stir his play *Draupadi* would create when it was first performed in 2000. Resonating the name of the Kaurava queen who was stripped naked in a royal court, Kanhailal’s play is an adaptation of Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi*, in the modern political context of Naxalite movements.

The play follows the story of a young tribal couple on the run. The two have murdered a rich man in their village and the army is looking for them. Uniformed men have surrounded the

village and the forest, where the couple is hiding. Before long, the man is hunted out and shot in the back. She is caught too. The army captain orders his boys to "do the needful". The soldiers rape her through the night, but in the morning, throw her clothes back at her. To appear before the captain, she must be "respectable".

What happens next is both miraculous and terrible. The woman, almost a corpse, pulls herself up and throws her clothes back at them. She will show herself to the captain naked. The very men who had raped her the previous night, tearing her body into shreds, recoil from the sight. The captain cowers, but she walks steadily up to him, with utter contempt, and throws her body at him with all her might. There is nothing more powerful in theatrical expression than a woman's body that refuses to be the "sexual objects" that men would want. Although she discards her clothes, there is no shame for her naked body is now a weapon against the brutes of power. Her name is Draupadi Meihen. Draupadi's part is played by Oja's wife, the renowned actress Sabitri Heisnam. As she bares her body on stage and asks the Captain to "counter" her, she is no longer Sabitri, but Draupadi Meihen, in flesh and blood before our very eyes.

Following the first performance in Imphal, wide spread criticism including charges of indecency and vulgarity were hurled on Sabitri for appearing in nude before the barterers of social norms. But did it stop Kanhailal Sabitri? No person can hold back an idea whose time has come said Victor Hugo. In 2004 the Indian Army stationed in Manipur raped and killed the young woman Thangjam Manorama, shooting her sixteen times on her genitals, charging her of militancy. In protest, twelve Manipuri mothers appeared naked before the Kangla fort with only a red inked banner that read "Indian Army Rape Us". The scene of Kanhailal's play was recreated on the streets and he was instantly raised to the stature of a prophet and Sabitri a seer.

Later in life, Kanhailal's contribution has also been felicitated with Padma Bhushan and Sabitri's with Padma Shri. Oja Kanhailal Heisnam passed away in October, 2016 and the last performance of Draupadi was given by Sabitri, who is now a septuagenarian in the following year. A rich legacy has passed away but what may be seen as a specific victory of Oja's protest, the army has been moved out of the Kangla Fort and today Imphal is the only part of the state free of the Armed Forces. The experimental theatre of Manipur today stands in the crossroad of time. While some feel that with the passing away of such legendary figure, the sage faces a grave danger of falling

from the heights it achieved, the more hopeful ones wait for the new generation to unfurl a new story of their own protest. But what has been beyond doubt is the potency of theatre as the olive branch that can even win over wars of blood and baton.

References

1. Dipanita Nath. The Indian Express. 19 March 2017. 5 January 2019
<https://indianexpress-com.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/the-spirit-is-alive-4575122/lite/?usqp=mq331AQECAFYAQ%3D%3D&_js_v=0.1#referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com&_tf=From%20%251%24s&share=https%3A%2F>.
2. Katyal, Anjum. "Theatre in Manipur Today." Seagull Theatre Quarterly June/Sept 1997: 5-16.
3. Samon, Thiangnam Anjulika. "The Wire." 07 oct 2016. 3 January 2019
<<https://thewire.in/uncategorised/heisnam-kanhailals-draupadi-will-remain-one-vivid-examples-theatrical-defiance>>.
4. Sundar, Pushpa. "Protest through Theatre- The Indian experience." Indian International Centre Quarterly (1989): 123-138.

Shawni Bhattacharjee studies M.A. at the Department of English, Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata, India. Email: shawnibhattacharjee023@gmail.com