Theatre in Manipur Today

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Editorial

APRIL 1996; IMPHAL. Everywhere, on the roads of this town, rickshaws are being driven by young men with hidden faces, cloths wound and firmly knotted over the head, with just a slit for the eyes. This insistent image disturbs. Why the masks? There is the ubiquitous military presence on the streets—are these youths protecting themselves from being pulled in for random 'questioning'? But if so, wouldn't the dramatic masking invite the wrong kind of attention? Almost, it seems a statement. Defiance, then? 'Come, get me if you dare?'

The answer lies elsewhere. The parameters here are pride and shame. A pride that cannot bear the shame of being recognized—young college students, forced by poverty to earn their living as rickshaw pullers, protect their honour by hiding their faces. In solidarity, others join them. Simultaneously a cry of anguish and a gesture of protest, the hooded faces remain with me as the confusion and pain of this deeply troubled, deeply riven, society.

I

Manipur today is struggling. With itself, and with the Indian polity. Within the state there is friction between the mainstream Meitei community and the tribes, between different tribes, rival insurgent factions, civilians, state military forces and the insurgents. Drugs and AIDS spread tentacles of dread through the society. A culture whose strength lay in its traditional structures finds itself being shaken by the roots.

The relationship with the dominant state, India, is wounded, suspicious. Rejection and a desire for rightful recognition war with each other, resulting in internal confusion and conflict. Soyam Lokendrajit, a contributor to this issue, says, the 'Machiavellian machinations' that resulted in 'annexing' this state to the Indian union, dismissing the popular government elected through adult franchise, soured the relations between Manipur and India ('An Artist's Response to Contemporary Reality'); now, as Lokendra Arambam says, 'Culturally there is a vital difference between mainstream demands and ground realities, because the alienation between Manipur and the mainland has become near-total. This is the situation—how should a conscious, self-critical, thinking theatre person react to it?' ('Experimental Theatre in Manipur').

II

This question runs like a swollen vein through all theatre activity in Manipur today.

And Manipur is intensely theatre active. The performance arts traditions of this state are rich and varied. The Sankeertana and Lai Haraoba, for example, though religious ceremonials, contain dramatic and performative elements. Several spheres of theatre, each a complete system in itself, overlap and coexist: the older traditional performance forms, particularly the Sumang Leela or 'courtyard' theatre; the established proscenium theatre; and the 'modern' experimental, alternative theatre. It was impossible to cover the entire spectrum in this special issue; inevitably, certain personalities, aspects and features await their due attention.

The central focus of this issue is the experimental theatre that, in the early 70s, emerged as a strong presence, emphasizing the exploration of traditional forms, reshaping techniques, themes and training methodologies, often incorporating thang-ta (the martial arts form of Manipur), and folk and classical dance. This theatre also engaged directly with the urgent social issues and problems the young directors saw around them. This movement of the 70s found its expression mainly in the work of four directors: Ratan Thiyam, Heisnam Kanhailal, Haorokcham 'Sanakhya' Ebotombi and Lokendra Arambam. They became, although highly diverse in style and signature, the pivot of a new phase in the experimental, alternative theatre, posited equally against the established mainstream proscenium theatre, and the still popular Sumang Leela.

Now there is a new generation of directors, anxious to establish their difference from, even as they acknowledge their debts to, this older generation, striving to discover their own identity and their role in a vastly changed, violence-ridden and chaotic socio-political situation. With them is a band of highly talented, highly trained, actors, of both sexes. Their keen commitment to theatre is evident, as are the anxieties: about how, as creative persons, they can intervene in the current socio-political situation; how they can generate an audience for their kind of theatre; how they can reconcile their nationalist pride and beliefs with the cultural demands of a larger India; how they are to negotiate funding without compromising their creativity.

The first section of this issue attempts to enter their world: moving from commentaries written by those close to the process, to the voices of the more established directors, to interviews with the subsequent generation of directors, to an exciting exchange between peers in which they confront their situation with moving honesty, to the actresses who talk of what it means, as women, to be part of this theatre world.

III

A separate note on the actresses is important here.

As is common in our tradition-bound societies, the status of women is a complex of diversely nuanced truths. There is a strong tradition of activist women's interventions in Manipuri history, especially in the struggle for independence; women run the markets, and there are several all-women Sumang Leela, opera, and touring performance troupes (unfortunately, we were unable to see any of these perform). But women are equally bound by the rules of domesticity that a traditional social environment enforces. They are expected to lead circumscribed lives within given parameters, and are censured if they transgress the accepted social norms. It is important to balance the contradictions and overlaps between the militant activist tradition and the constriction and disapproval the women still face in their personal and social identities. A too easy valorizing of the former can lead us far from the ground reality of their day-to-day lives; and yet, respect for and recognition of a heroic history of protest is important to fuel any movement towards change.

Theatre, even now, lies outside the pale. So the generations of actresses who talked to us emphasized the stigma and struggle they faced—less now than previously—in entering the world of theatre. It was interesting to see the thread of continuity emerge, linking the generations. The elderly actresses of the proscenium stage, now retired, talked of the resistance and opprobrium they

Courtesy *Huiyen Lanpao*. Photo: N. Basantakumar

faced in their choice of profession (what remained largely unvoiced was the pressure on their private lives). Sabitri, standing between their world—she started her career as a performer with a travelling troupe—and that of experimental theatre, echoed this in her own history; and the young women who are members of the theatre groups today emphasized these same social pressures even as they acknowledged their debt to the generations of brave women who, by opening up paths and attitudes, had made things much, much easier for them. This consciousness of a connectedness, of a history, was palpable.

Our meeting with the retired prima donnas was a high point of our trip to Manipur. Once we had expressed our desire to record the presence and contribution of women to theatre in Manipur, Arambam Somorendra, scholar and revolutionary, went to a great deal of trouble to arrange a meeting with these actresses of the 30s and 40s. It was not easy. Most of them lived in total or near-total retirement; many were elderly and infirm, and moving about was difficult; they were scattered over different parts of Imphal. With remarkable dedication and affectionate respect, Somorendra went about organizing a meeting. He arranged to have them all gather at one place, except Tondon Devi, who was semi-paralysed, and whom we visited instead.

The encounter was heartwarming. A gathering of one-time grande dames, each carefully dressed for the occasion, impeccably groomed and made-up, excited at meeting each other (they had all been rivals and peers) and at the prospect of the outing and the interview. Apart from Manipuri (carefully interpreted on the spot by Somorendra), several of them spoke fairly fluent Hindi and some Bengali—a reflection of an era when a more cosmopolitan culture prevailed. They reminisced about the inter-war years, when foreign soldiers thronged the theatres, the time when they sang and danced their way into the hearts and memories of a loyal audience, often becoming synonymous with folk and mythological heroines in the popular mind. They had been courted and shunned, adored and censured, won accolades and awards, before slipping into retirement; and as they recalled their triumphs, traded memories, sang snatches of songs and rendered bits of dialogue remembered from the past, the atmosphere warmed and came alive. As the session drew to a close, one of them said to me gently, 'Come and spend a few days with me, then we can talk freely. My biodata alone is 40 pages long—how much can I tell you in half an hour?'

Sabitri, one of this country's most sensitive and powerful actresses, speaks only Manipuri, though, once she is performing, she needs no language other than her talent. Married to H. Kanhailal and an integral part of his theatre, she has been a gifted medium for his theories and methods, demonstrating in practice what he wishes to communicate, and at the same time infusing it with her own genius. Straddling in a lifetime the transition from the world of the professional travelling theatre to that of the experimental, alternative theatre, she foregrounds many of the tensions and pressures that actresses in the amateur theatre face. Hers is a voice rarely heard—fluent only in Manipuri, she usually lets her husband speak on her behalf at interviews. It was, therefore, a real privilege to find her relaxed and forthcoming; and with the interpretive help of journalist Salam Rajesh, an important voice has been heard for perhaps the first time.

Just as Sabitri is central to Kanhailal's productions, the young actresses play an important role in the groups of which they are a part. Most of the productions we saw, performed by various experimental theatre groups, revolved around

Courtesy *The Freedom*

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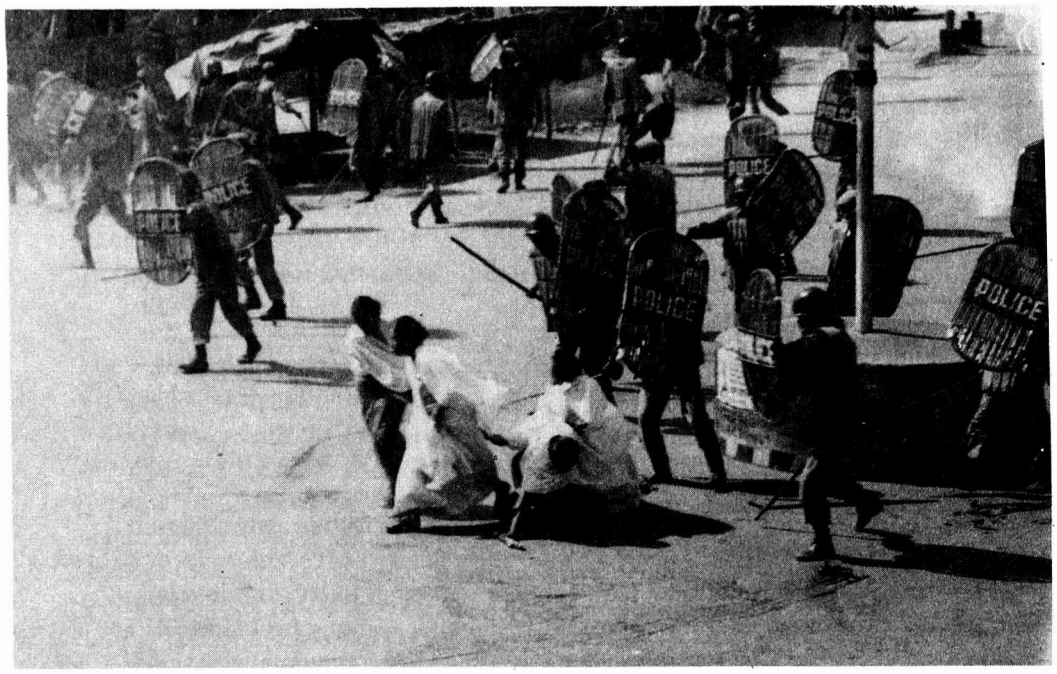


Courtesy *The Freedom*

the central figure of a woman: mythic, heroic, symbolic. In fact, I felt a sad recognition of a similar projection of concepts of nation and motherland onto the bodies—in this case, literally—of the women as had occurred in another period of intense nationalism and identity-formation, the struggle for Indian nationhood. In play after play, Woman became land, country, heritage, history.

The actresses did more than justice to the dramatic expectations focused on them. They were impressive: sensitive, expressive, poised, graceful, competent. Yet, in the presence of their—mostly male—co-actors and all-male directors, they were silent. It was only in separate sessions of just the actresses (requested by them) that they opened up and and discussed poignantly what it felt like to be women in the world of experimental theatre.

We discussed the subject of how women were represented in the plays they had performed for us. They showed an awareness of the irony that though most of the plays could be described as woman-centric by virtue of privileging a female figure in the narrative, in fact they were simultaneously and curiously blind to the real-life, three-dimensional woman. Woman as mother, as sister, woman as suffering body-politic, abounded. Yet they felt that the theatre wasn't really *seeing* the woman in a more nuanced way. Shades of another history, as I said earlier.

This session was ably and sensitively interpreted on the spot by Khilton Nongmaithem.

IV

An interesting counterpoint to the experimental theatre is the vastly different Sumang Leela or 'courtyard' theatre. This traditional non-proscenium form, said to have begun early this century, is hugely popular even today, drawing large audiences—very much, in fact, a community theatre. Sumang Leela troupes are hired for an evening's performance, to mark a social or ceremonial occasion. Performances take place in the host's courtyard, and the neighbourhood watches free of charge. Social and family dramas predominate, usually highly moralistic in tone, with liberal doses of melodrama.

The second section of this issue focuses on the Sumang Leela today, progressing from an introduction to the form, to interviews with a director, playwright and actors. A remarkable feature of the Sumang Leela is that all roles are played by men. The female impersonator is a venerable tradition here, fertile ground for studying social and psychological gender construction. One of the most telling moments was when actors spoke about their 'transformation' into women—the point at which they began to feel that they were women: the final finishing touch of the lipstick, for example.

As is clear from the various interviews, those who are part of the Sumang Leela are very aware of the pressing necessity to change with the times. Although there is a mutual dismissiveness between the worlds of experimental theatre and the Sumang Leela—the former scoffing at the form and content of the latter, the latter emphasizing the lack of audience for the former—there is no doubt that the Sumang Leela still attracts the people, while the experimental theatre is largely performing for its own small, elite circle of enthusiasts, mostly students and the intelligentsia. It seems, therefore, that each has something to learn from the other.

V

The third section of this issue turns to the proscenium theatre of Manipur, which established its presence and popularity in the 30s. The main older theatres in Imphal have been Manipur Dramatic Union or MDU (estd. 1931), Aryan (estd. 1935), Society (estd. 1937), Rupmahal (estd. 1943), and Paradise (estd. 1944). Rural Manipur has its own theatres, such as Kha-Manipur Dramatic Union, Kakching Dramatic Union, Khoriphaba Artistes Association, Leimayol Arts Centre and Langmeidong Dramatic Union.

In the early years this theatre focused largely on popular legends, myths and folklore, peppered with music, songs and dances. The influence of the Bengali stage of the 30s on this theatre is an established fact, as comes through clearly in the pieces included in this section. Arambam Somorendra's overview of Manipuri playwrights begins the section. G. C. Tongbra, one of the proscenium theatre's most prolific and popular playwrights, who passed away last year, is represented here; as are the actresses who fuelled that theatre with memorable performances, and who recall the golden era of proscenium theatre in their interviews.

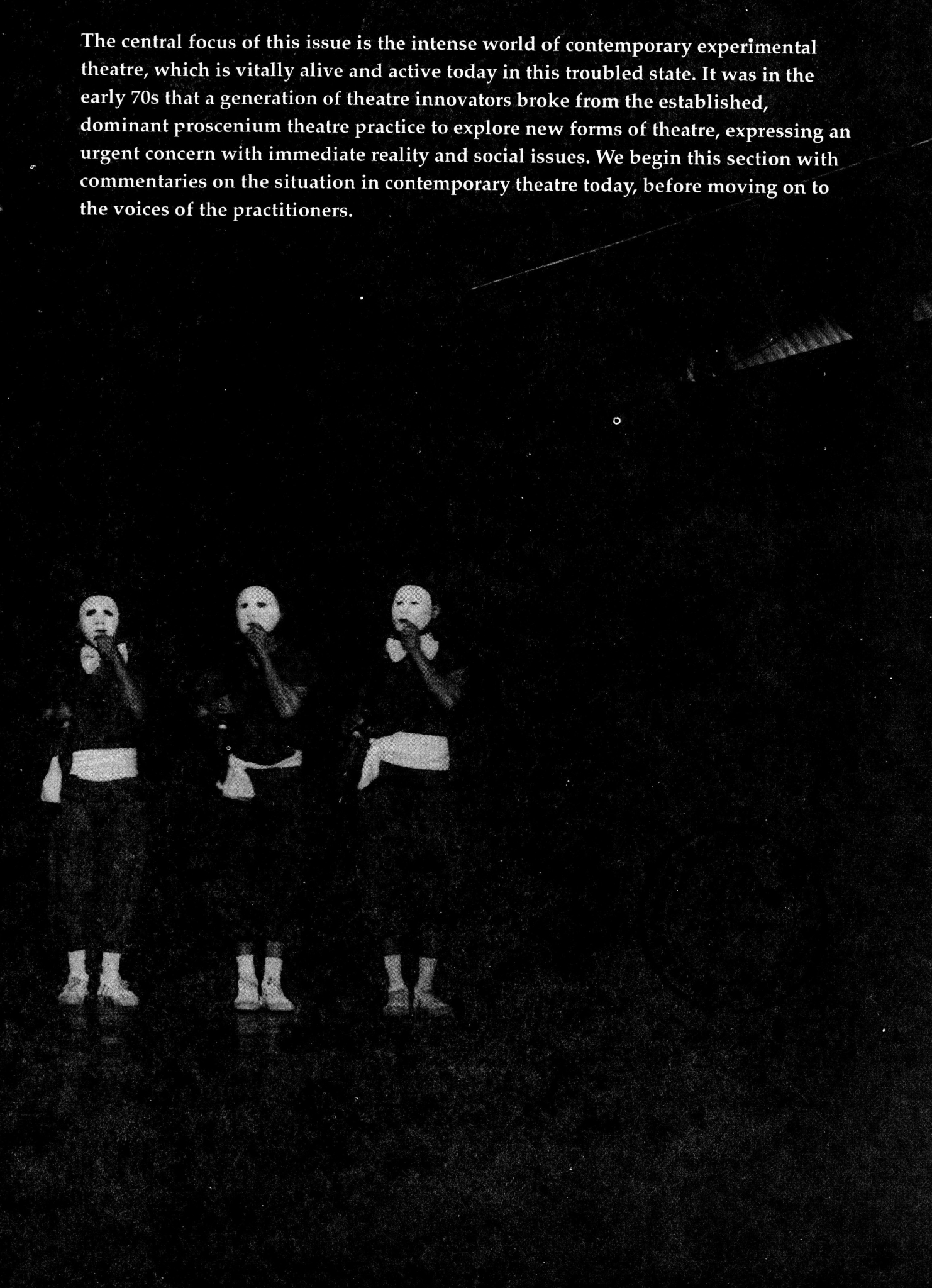
VI

The voices in this issue are aware; conscious; articulate. They speak from the experience of living within a situation of uncertainty and frustration. Theirs is a world being continuously ruptured by all kinds of conflict. Violence and anguish are omnipresent; they erupt everywhere: on stage, in their speech, in their personal lives, on the streets. Unsurprisingly, what emerges from their combined voices in this issue is the sense of a theatre at the crossroads: a sense of searching; of no clear answers. I find myself unable, in the face of this genuine self-questioning, to sit in judgement and dismiss it all, like Samik Bandyopadhyay does, as 'a decline of the emancipatory passion and its subsidence into a more mundane struggle for survival and visibility' ('The New Karnas of Manipur'). He continues on a warning note: 'The new politics, holding out the promise of support in and from a national—and consequently global—resource bank, imposes on the Manipuri sensibility the obligation of legitimation, the persistent demand that it explain and justify its choices/positions to a supposedly universalist mainstream, to ensure a steady supply of support.' The quoted comments come from a concerned and sympathetic observer. It is ironic, however, that this attitude seems to impose a similar 'obligation of legitimation' on the Manipuri 'sensibility', for a 'supply of support' which is the paternalistic approval and acceptance of the critical establishment, rather than grants or funds. Thinking theatre persons in Manipur are highly conscious of the contradictions and complexities of their situation; as is clear from their own statements, they are under no illusions about either the powerplay or the more insidious effects of outside funding, whatever be the source, governmental or otherwise. I would prefer to believe that compulsions and motivations are not always as simple as they may sometimes appear to be; and to trust to the honesty of the genuine creative impulse in negotiating its own contract with ground realities.

There is tremendous talent, tremendous potential, in Manipuri theatre today; its restless energy is bound to forge its own path, to come to terms with itself, to find its own balance, even if this means accepting and living with inner contradictions.

Anjum Katyal

The central focus of this issue is the intense world of contemporary experimental theatre, which is vitally alive and active today in this troubled state. It was in the early 70s that a generation of theatre innovators broke from the established, dominant proscenium theatre practice to explore new forms of theatre, expressing an urgent concern with immediate reality and social issues. We begin this section with commentaries on the situation in contemporary theatre today, before moving on to the voices of the practitioners.



Experimental Theatre in Manipur: At a Critical Juncture

Lokendra Arambam

This article has been constructed from an interview with Biren Das Sharma for *STQ*, subsequently revised and updated by Lokendra Arambam in August 1997.

There is a need for some soul searching on the character, identity and purpose of contemporary theatre in Manipur. During the last 20 years or so, since the 70s, there have been substantial changes in the development of Manipuri theatre.

Some of the important aspects of that change were in the realm of how individual directors, authors, followed by their own groups, experimented with new themes and forms. There was definitely a process of breaking free from the traditional, conservative, semi-urban, middle-class theatre that was prevalent at that period. The 70s was the period when there was an overall desire for change, an accent on youth and the power of youth to change the world.

At the same time we witnessed a big movement for redefining the identity of the Manipuri people as a whole. The reason behind this social and intellectual change was that in 1947—after 80 years of colonial rule—Manipur became free and at almost the same time, in 1949, it was politically integrated into the big Indian state that was emerging in the postwar period. The rapid urbanization, the onrush of economic and political development, were supposed to have influenced the minds of the decision makers. There was a certain shift, in the sense that most of the people in Manipur were gradually realizing their own historical position, their own problems, realizing that development as it had been imagined by the policy planners was going haywire, society was becoming more and more corrupt, the leadership in politics and in economic development was not concerned with the desires and aspirations of the people as a whole. There was an increasing realization of the marginalization of the Manipuri people. Their decisions, their aspirations and their desires did not matter in the so-called process of development.

So in the late 60s there was a growth of youth power, youth influence, along with an increasing awareness by the people of their own identity, in the entire northeastern region. They were becoming aware of their roots, their own identity. There was a genuine search for certain aspects of life which the people could hold on to as representative of their own character and civilization. So there was a vast change taking place.

During this period youth groups and non-government organizations working for the development of Manipuris as a distinct ethnic community, were also becoming aware of Manipuris settled in regions other than the state, becoming aware of the people of Cachar, Manipuris in Bangladesh, Manipuris in Tripura and even in Burma (now Myanmar).

This process of self-assertion had actually started in the early 20s with the social and political movements of that period. There was a search for identity which had been started by people like the late Hijam Irabot and Naoria Phullo, who were very important in the movement for identity in the early 20th century. Irabot was the first modern revolutionary of Manipur. He came to Calcutta in the 40s and took part in a conference held under the Fourth Comintern as a communist revolutionary. Communist revolutionaries like Than Tun from Burma, all came to Calcutta, where P. C. Joshi's line and Ranadive's line were fought over. Ranadive said that there must be a struggle, the bourgeois government of Nehru should be removed, and the industrial workers should take the lead in the revolutionary struggle with peasant support. That was how the 1948-49 struggle began. Dange was arrested in Mumbai.

Irabot came back to Manipur and assessed the situation, which was distinct from the social situation in the rest of India. He felt that the indigenous environment was

different, so the social and political movement in Manipur would have to be different. Though he supported the revolution, he was not taking part in it. He was waiting for certain things to develop. The Communist Party in Silchar, part of the Communist Party of India, asked him to undergo self-criticism. He was taken to task for not building up a Marxist base in Manipur, for dillydallying on issues, and he was charged. He did his self-criticism like Tito did, and took up the revolutionary line in December 1949. There was a great struggle, like there was in Telengana. It was a peasant struggle for change, a struggle to form a new society. The movement was suppressed.

But in the 60s, the movement registered a shift and the youth took up arms against the Government of India in order to fight for their independence and a separate identity. We also witnessed the struggle of the Nagas in 1956 under the leadership of Phizo and Laldenga in Mizoram in the 60s. Underground insurgent movements were developing in the late 60s, which became predominant in the 70s and still remain a major problem for the Indian polity. In Manipur, alienation from the Indian mainstream had become near-total. In every club, every college, there were debates on the legality of the 1949 merger of Manipur with the Indian Union. The legality of it, the constitutionality of it and the kind of political intrigues that went into it—all these things were debated. The debates continue till today. Some of the insurgent groups ask people to observe one month's protest against the merger. This is the kind of situation in which a conscious theatre person finds himself now.

Earlier, in the 60s, theatre people followed the general trend of identity politics. Young theatre workers were coming out of the universities, serving as teachers in colleges, working in the students' movement, working in the students' theatre—during this time our generation came into the limelight in Manipuri theatre and grew concerned with issues of exploitation and oppression, with the general feeling of discontent in the minds of the younger generation in Manipur at that time. H. Kanhailal, Ratan Thiyam and a few others including myself were deeply concerned with finding idioms and expressions to reflect this mood of discontent, disillusionment and marginalization. The theme of protest came through subtle symbolic expressions which were not very overtly political compared to other parts of the country, where the protest was more dynamic and open. But the Manipuris worked with different idioms, with subtleties of expression, with nuances—through the use of myths, through the use of other experiences—and the focus was on aspects of ethnicity. There were thematic experiments revolving around the struggle for assertion of people's concerns. But these were overladen with ethnic symbols, cultural idioms taken from folktales, and intricate aspects of life in Manipur.

There was a romantic dramatic tradition in the proscenium theatre of Manipur which emphasized folklore and the native vernacular, narrating the experiences of the semi-urban agricultural communities. But after the 60s, there was a general change in format, and the search for identity became a kind of conscious exercise. Kanhailal, Ratan, Ebotombi, myself and a few other directors of the late 60s and early 70s were concerned with these issues.

After the 70s, over the last 20 years, it was felt that ethnicity alone, self-consciousness alone, was not adequate, because life had become much more complex. Social tensions, disturbances, unrest, violence, have actually become objective realities of life in Imphal and Manipur as a whole. The entire rural region was activated and disturbed by insurgence and encounters with security forces. There were widespread disturbances everywhere, and as a result, tremendous tension became a feature of everyday life. At the same time the awareness of ethnic identification affected not only the majority communities but also marginal communities. Small tribes like the Kharam, Purum, and Tarao were also affected and there was tremendous debate on issues like their identity and roots.

At the same time the tensions of life, the conflicts in resource sharing, the increasing burden on land, expansion of population and demographic tension, resulted in inter-ethnic strife. The polity of Manipur as a whole was thus critically affected during the last decade. At such a critical period, issues of ethnicity and searching for roots cannot be enough. One has to be completely aware of the dynamics of social tensions, of the issues

now affecting the lives of the people as a whole.

But the contemporary theatre of Manipur has another problem. What Kanhailal, Ratan and people like me started in the 70s was a theatre reflecting on some of our internal tensions and issues of exploitation etc. But the situation has become more demanding. A young group of theatre workers has come up in the 80s, who want to express what they are feeling and experiencing. Unfortunately, they have been affected by the anxiety of a polity in tension. At the same time they want their theatre to be recognized, to be known and accepted both by their people and by the general theatre community at large. They want to be seen outside Imphal, they want to be featured in national festivals. Here issues of patronage, access to the channels of communication etc. become important. At present, a host of young people—some 13 to 15 groups—are constantly in the circuit. Most of these directors' works are seen at the Akademi festivals, in the multilingual drama festivals organized in Allahabad, Cuttack, etc. The themes that they have tried to confront are all concerned with struggle and discontent. It still needs to be seen how far they are able to politically and socially analyse the issues of today.

Most of these directors work in isolation in their peer groups. Their theatre is shown in certain community pavilions—they work within a community of extended households, a traditional feature of urban Imphal. In Imphal, traditional communities gather into households which have a ritual unity in the sense that in terms of death, marriage or any other traditional community activity or rite they come together and work together. They have a face-to-face interaction with one another as individuals and as a community. One can see that a certain traditional culture has developed from these pockets of humanity. Each community has some kind of distinctive culture of its own and a distinctive place in traditional Manipuri life.

Most of the young theatre directors work within their own communities and have their own small clientele. These theatre groups very rarely come out, except at secular festivals like that of the State Kala Akademi. So there is a kind of isolation, and they continue to work in this isolation. They have their own methods of training, their own methods of developing idioms. Though they share the same Manipuri experience, they have their own ways of reacting to the environment, reacting to the cultural and political scenario. In this way, a few young theatre directors are coming up in different pockets. They participate in the festivals organized annually by the State Kala Akademi, with some support from the Department of Culture. Recently, 15 theatre groups were invited to show their plays at the 20th State Kala Akademi Festival. Most of the plays were about discontent, struggle, violence and bloodshed. Universal experiences of conflict, of tension and struggles, were also brought into, reworked into, local life, into our own social milieu.

The younger generation of theatre directors are trying to relate to their contemporary existence, to the social tensions and political inequilibrium faced by the young people as a whole. There has not been much of an aesthetic departure from the theatre of the 70s. Younger directors work with the same idioms, with ethnic designs and costumes; and at times this intrusion of colour and spectacle undermines the very sense of tension they want to create in their plays. One often notices that problems of ethnicity, roots, and the demand for a stronger statement have been diluted by their own desire for patronage and recognition.

Contemporary theatre workers are facing a very important critical period. They are uncertain as to how to react to the contemporary situation, and then there are these matters of patronage, festival circuits, recognition. Mainstream channels of theatre patronage do not necessarily desire the reflection of contemporary realities. There are two streams of contemporary Manipuri theatre. One is a theatre of aesthetics, of great design, representing the culture of Manipur, but not necessarily the tensions and dynamics of a marginal people trying to assert themselves. The other is a theatre concerned with unrest, but at the same time unable to rise, to be recognized, not able to assert itself by its own efforts.

Contemporary theatre thus stands at a very critical historical juncture, when the whole tension of the resurgence of Manipur, the alienation of the people from

mainstream India, is affecting the arts, lives and activities of the young generation. It is not a question of 'pro' or 'anti' this or that theatre. There is a kind of human tension, a great sense of alienation, which the younger theatre people want to reflect. But they are not able to actually confront these issues. For example, Brecht has not been done at all in Manipur, though there were some experiments with Brecht earlier. But even then, the aesthetics of Brecht were emphasized over the issues. So, in our theatre we have a problem of over-exuding culture, suppressing the realities of life, of culture becoming an impediment to the understanding of the realities of life. This is a crucial problem of contemporary Manipuri theatre today.

We have three or four playwrights who have been writing for quite some time, not very well understood, increasingly isolated from what is actually happening. Their plays are taken up by a few directors. One could name the late Brajachand, Kshetri Sanajaoba, Somorendra, the late P. Shamu, and the late G. C. Tongbra, who has written more than 70 plays. They contributed to the expansion of critical activities and gave a playwright's response to the situation of that period. G. C. Tongbra himself was a pioneer of the modern theatre movement in Manipur, though he was influenced by Bernard Shaw. He worked in the Absurdist idiom in the 70s; he experimented with Beckett, with some of the Absurdist playwrights of that period and wrote a few Absurdist plays in the 70s. His plays looked at critical issues of today—they are socialistic and idealistic in the sense that he believes that theatre should change the world. He responded to violence, corruption, political instability, ministerial fumblings—all these were satirized by him. He was the doyen of Manipuri playwriting.

Somorendra depicts the gradual alienation of the young people, a sense of disturbance in the individual trying to cope with daily life. He has also written certain plays in the conservative genre. He hasn't written any experimental plays. He focuses a lot on the problems of women, on the ruptures of middle-class life. These things were part of the experience of playwriting in the 60s and early 70s.

Some of the young playwrights like Brajachand and Sanajaoba reflect a more internalized kind of writing. The late P. Shamu's work was taken up by Ratan [Thiyam] in his early days. Shamu's plays were absolutely what he called a 'theatre of inner truth' in which he expressed things in a very internalized manner. He has an important place in Manipuri theatre and recently there have been a lot of seminars and discussions on how he should be placed, because he has been almost forgotten by the contemporary theatre workers. We need to recognize our playwrights as contributors to modern Manipuri theatre. Unfortunately, many of these plays are not in print. Manipur has no theatre journal. A lot of poets have come up and their poems are being read, translated, presented in conferences. Storywriters and essayists' works are being published. Certain magazines of literature including those patronized by institutions, the government, the academies—they all emphasize poetry, the novel, the short story; but hardly any plays appear in their pages.

Theatre people work very much in isolation. There has been no input from painting, architecture, poetry—this lack of interaction with other performance arts people is really unfortunate. The young playwrights also are not open, they find it extremely difficult to interact even with people in theatre who are experimenting with forms. They give their texts to theatre people, but speaking about their experiences, attending study circles and presenting what they have in mind—these things are never done. The playwrights are very isolated. A few of them have been exposed to outside literature, but critical exposure, critical interaction and critical association have been lacking.

Nor has the alternative theatre been able to secure a strong audience willing to pay to see it. Much of their work and experimentation is done without any returns commensurate with the effort they put into it. So a lot of them depend on subsidies, grants, small sums doled out by the Sangeet Natak Akademis. The state government also sometimes encourages a few theatre groups to travel outside the state. The Eastern and North Eastern Zonal Cultural Centres have certain schemes, under which they subsidize mainly dance and music, and very little theatre activity. The Human Resource Ministry also has certain policies by which it encourages scholars to undertake individual research projects. They have senior and junior research fellowships, and salary grants are

also given to some groups by the Ministry. The issues of funding and subsidies have their own problems—there is a lot of rivalry and competition to secure the funds available.

Now a situation has arisen where money has become an important requirement for many groups. They have started writing, requesting and doing all sorts of things for grants and subsidies. This creates a certain atmosphere of dependency, an ambience where you feel that money is coming in and you don't need to work. So there is very little challenge to these groups to secure their own audiences. They are not expanding their audiences. The grants are being routinized. They rely on money from benevolent institutions and from the government. The money that is coming in will be used for productions, no doubt. But they are satisfied with that. On the other hand, professional Sumang Leela groups may not worry much about aesthetics, but they fight for their livelihood, they take up bold subjects. However, they are not committed to social change. They are more committed to entertainment. This is a contradiction in professional groups, which are flourishing. The alternative theatre wants to promote change, but the workers themselves have become dependent on institutional patronage. As a result their works are becoming more and more routinized. There is no attempt to expand, draw more audiences, get more people to support their cause. This is also a contradiction. It is all because we have entered a period when dependency and underdevelopment are becoming more and more manifest. Critical dependency has affected the arts, affected the quest for new things. It has become a syndrome and it has a dulling effect on the actors and actresses working in the alternative theatre.

As the leader of a group interested in research in the dynamics of change, I have been thinking of how the personal development of the actors has become more important than the search for form or things like that. The Ford Foundation has given us funds to organize some activities in the realm of research. But this has its own difficulties. A few groups are negatively affected by the intrusion of funds and it creates unnecessary tensions in the society of theatre, among the young theatre workers and a lot of other people who do not get funds. So the whole issue of subsidies, the whole issue of theatre and subsidies, theatre and audience, of paying people—these dynamics have to be reworked, reassessed and restructured for Manipuri theatre to evolve to a better, more organized stage of development.

How far are our contemporary theatre workers alienated from their audience? How far are they captivated and trapped by the system of subsidies in which they are working? These are very important questions which we should answer. In spite of doing good work, these young workers are absolutely dependent on subsidies or grants. It is a sociological syndrome. It is an absolutely critical dependency, in which for any action, for any decision, for any option, you become dependent on something bigger and larger, on whose pleasure, on whose love and sympathy, you depend. It completely limits your choices, limits your options, to look out, react, respond to issues. Many work with texts and subjects which are historically important for an alienated people. They work on such themes, yet, at the same time, they depend on subsidies. It is a contradiction which they haven't resolved. That's why they are not able to get an audience. They are not confronting our audience with the new things they have. They are not putting their plays amidst them. At the same time they are becoming a kind of willing pawn, a pliant commodity in the big 'circuit'. Because they believe that those who participate in the circuit increase their chances of funding. But facing the audience, opening their plays to them, is something which is not done, and this is a mistake.

These are the contradictions in contemporary Manipuri theatre. But except for a few, the younger directors are not aware of these contradictions. As a result there is a general dependency on forms handed down to them by their elders. They work on the same forms, same patterns, same designs. For them, myths are important. They depend on the mother figure as a symbol, for example. If they were really modern, if they were dynamic enough, they would be able to expand and explore further. But this is something which is not taking place. This is the tragedy of contemporary Manipuri theatre because we—myself, Kanhai and Ratan—have not set a good example. We have become products of the mainstream, we have become willing partners in what is

happening elsewhere in the world. We are not reacting to situations in our own environment. This is the contradiction.

So the situation of the 90s is a new phase of alienation between contemporary theatre people and our own audience. The internalized experience gathered from the struggle is being expressed, but its expression remains to some extent alienated, isolated from our own people. We have to scrutinize the images we are creating, the subtexts we are creating; we need to find out if we should be a little more direct and confrontational to inspire a new vitality. We are yet to seek out the means by which we can have a dynamic theatre related to our audience, and have it accepted by people who want to sympathize with our struggles. Or we may become pawns in the great circuit of the mainstream, we may be subsumed by it, consumed by it.

Manipuri theatre at the fag end of the 20th century can never be the same as that of the 70s and 80s. The rapidly changing dynamics of life, progressively impinging on aspects of human dignity and freedom, increasing the threats against individual security and territorial integrity; the wanton destruction of life, property and community; the crisis of the self as against professed identities; the contradictions between appearance and reality in contemporary times, set forth new paradigms for looking at life and art. But a dependent culture, dependent worldview and the underdeveloped individual—noncritical, complacent, and happily associated with the general trends and slogans of growth and development—produce another stream of art totally related to ground realities, yet with an identity, a form, subversive of bitter truths, yet assuming an existence with a structure of its own, driven by the logic of the establishment. The subversion of the naked self, as demanded by the external logic of recognition and patronage, denies the Manipuri theatre worker a critical struggle against himself in his own history. The inability of the contemporary actor to feel the strands of a polity in crisis, the complexities of his troubled psyche in his own self-expression, represent a very unusual dilemma of an essential inadequacy within an aggressive facade and a pleasing veneer, proclaiming the identity and beauty of culture, but without the communication of vital realities.

Theatre director Lokendra Arambam is now the Director of The Forum for Laboratory Theatres of Manipur, a network of directors dedicated to experimental, alternative theatre.