

**RABHA THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE:
TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE AESTHETICS
IN THE POST 90'S PEOPLE'S THEATRE OF THE NORTH-EAST**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
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MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation entitled **“Rabha Theatre And Performance: Towards An Alternative Aesthetics In The Post 90’s People’s Theatre Of The North-East.”** submitted by Benil Biswas in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** is an original work and has not been submitted before in this university or any other university to the best of our knowledge.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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DECLARATION

I, Bénil Biswas, hereby declare that the study entitled **“Rabha Theatre and Performance: Towards an alternative aesthetics in the post 90’s people’s theatre of the North-East”** submitted by me for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is an original research investigation carried out by me. This dissertation has not previously formed the basis of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship, or other similar title or recognition at any university, institution, or research centre here in India or abroad.

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O...Aayamarina Sewayinuaanteh! Rongbudina Sewayinuanteh!
(Rabha)

Obeisance O... great ancestral Mother Figure!

Obeisance O...great ancestral Father figure!

Acknowledgements

An M Phil is a long process- starting from research orientation to grappling up with coursework, dangling between methodologies, scratching in and out the synopsis, the field trips, library work and finally coming up with the dissertation and during that course of action, much has changed. This was confirmed when I took a look at the first project description and the first drafts, which I must say, were rather ambitious and to be frank, quite idealistic in their practical implementation.

We all know that there is always a basic ontological difference between a *Performance proper (a finished product)* and a '*Performance as a display of work in progress*'¹ In that sense there are affinities with what I refer to in this work as *alternative aesthetics and its articulation*, on the one hand to what it actually looks like today, and on the other hand to what those initial drafts referred to. What you are reading is my Dissertation *proper*. My Dissertation *as display of work in progress* will remain as obscure ideas and drafts, which from an environmental point of view would best be described as an ecological calamity² as scores of scribbled prints ended in the rubbish bin. In this process the cyber-society was not totally unaffected as the *dissertation in progress* leaves a range of sketches, colours and bits skidding on its information highways and concealed on some secluded servers.

This is, however, the sport. 'When inspirations materialize, they tend to shrink.'

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¹ Kanhailal refers to this in his conception of performance.

² In lighter vein, remembering the pristine village of Rampur, Assam with all its ponds, rubber plantations and Sal forests.

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Schematizing the need for an Alternative Aesthetics in India: An Introduction

The Nature and scope of the study:

At a time when it has become fashionable to analyse anything and everything in the name of performance, it is all the more difficult and challenging to take up and stay on the ethical way to study a performance in its absolute 'pure form'. A form, which itself explores and advances the study of performance as a social, communicative practice; as a 'technology' of representation and expression; and as a hermeneutic. I understand that Performance and the performative can be approached from a wide range of perspectives and methodologies, but I believe the most pertinent approach would be to unravel performances, to document performances and to situate and critique them within enduring and emergent issues in performance studies praxis. All the more important is the study of a performance from the point of view of an insider as artist-scholar (Kanhailal calls it to be '*Sympathetic¹ Observer*') seeing the performance from inside as a method of inquiry for the sake of performance itself.

Well, it seems that there is an apparent obsession with the concept of the 'people', and this concern is obviously very recent. In one of the largest working democracy-India, the fixation is a quite fresh, where nowadays it is always a 'people's budget', 'people's government', and 'people's representative' even a 'people's university'. This over emphasis on the term 'people', obviously will lead the masses, so called 'people' to view

¹ I would personally prefer *Compassionate* to *Sympathetic*.

this motive with a pinch of salt and deep suspicion. Here, I believe the manner in which the word 'people' is coined and referred to, there is an inherent presumption that the so called 'people' is in discontent with the state of affairs, so it is mandatory to provide the picture of '*Thou art good*' and '*WE are with You*', labelling different schemes in the name of people. Yet at a different level, the very act of 'labelling' different factions itself is very performative. It is performative of identity- the identity of the 'power'ful through the prism of the 'power'less. Therefore, power exists not as an essential thing or elementary force, but, rather as a relation. If power is everywhere, it is not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. Power is self – replicating and infectious and it cannot be stripped off of social relation. Power is the point on which convergence is taking place. Culture as emergent from social relations of power and domination, culture as a form of power and domination, culture as a medium in which power is both constituted are resisted: it is around this set of issues that an interesting body of thought has been rediscovered in academia.

The predominance of issues of identity, which negotiate through Indian scenario, seems to justify the pre-occupancy with national paradigms and further more, the capacity to subsume identity markers such as class and gender. As post-colonialism has tended to uphold a resurgent nationalism which convalesces colonial structures and the method of the Subaltern Studies Group offers possibilities to trace affiliate concerns within the socio-cultural archipelago. Concerns such as class and gender permit the establishment of affiliations between writers that seem to circumvent the naïve equation of nations as by now approved concepts, but in reality can not.

When we look beyond the boundaries of the history of democracy called India, the first name that comes to our mind is Michel Foucault. His work is historical as well as epistemological. He analyses the way world is mediated and meaning is constructed, resulting in articulation of the understood meaning and then multiplying them again through further dissemination. He has studied the bases of social structure of power, the distribution systems and perpetuation of power in discourse and symbolic system. David Cannadine and Simon Price in *Rituals of Royalty*², and Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley and Sherry B. Ortner in *Culture /Power/History*³, have tried to understand the concept of power and culture in different historical societies, and shown how they are shared by all members of society. In their view power is productive and inciting and it cannot be stripped away from social relations and without it history cannot be understood. Edward Muir, gives somewhat the same picture in *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*⁴. In order to grasp the social philosophy, one must not forget that the relations of communications par excellence – linguistic exchanges – are also relations of symbolic power between speakers or their respective groups. In *Language and Symbolic Power*⁵, Pierre Bourdieu postulates that religion and politics achieve their most successful ideological effects by exploiting the possibilities contained in social ubiquity of the legitimate language.

To explain the working of politics and its inter-relation with society there are some purely theoretical works, which without giving any specific examples just inform us a

²Cannadine, David and Simon Price *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)

³Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, & Sherry B. Ortner (Eds.) *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993)

⁴Muir, Edward. *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

⁵Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1991)

lot about the operations of state machinery. Norbert Elias in *Involvement and Detachment*⁶, studies the neglected aspects of human action – their emotions and tries to explain why people act in a particular way only. The issues of authority and legitimacy, the ideology and its articulation, and symbols and their impacts have been dealt very seriously by Eric A. Nordlinger in *Politics and Society*. Maurice Bloch in *Ritual, History and Power*⁷ examines the network of political, economic, and ritual ties linking the local communities to the larger society. He examines the state from its very inception to its full-fledged evolution and identifies various stages of its developments and different actors required to stimulate its forward progress. As far as the masses and communities are concerned the rituals have been definite areas of identity and power ascertain. The performance of these rituals and folk tales through songs and dances and story telling helps them to create their own genealogies of power. And because theatre is the most public form of art and medium of communication, it is especially responsive to the political climate of its day, thus used further more in reiterating the alternative histories and alternative genealogies of power. In fact all rituals are theatrical in nature, theatre tends to be ritualistic. Ritual is one of the many roots of theatre⁸. Not surprisingly, therefore, the social discontent in twentieth century India during the 1940s, 1970s, and even nowadays found and find its way to the stage, both in the form of manifestos and productions.

⁶Elias, Norbert. *Involvement and Detachment: Contributions to the Sociology of Knowledge*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.

⁷Bloch, Maurice. *Ritual, history, and power: Selected papers in anthropology*. London: Athlone Press, 1989.

⁸Eli Rozik. *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002.

The project of recuperating alternative histories (people's histories) through cultural texts also necessitates discussion of modes of representation of those histories as well as the ideological function of form⁹, a context in which the representational apparatus of theatre acquires special relevance. Theatre's visual focus, emphasis on collective participation and representation of shared manoeuvrability impart yet another layer to the cultural investments of colonial and postcolonial texts in framing, organizing, and presenting alternative stories. It is precisely the attempt to reach the subaltern populace and solicit its involvement through the efficacy and force of theatre that led Ngugi Wa Thiong'o to organize a "people's theatre" in Gikuyu.¹⁰ The power of performance to capture public imagination and sway public opinion, thus, cannot be minimized. After all, even Plato's *Republic* works against the power of performance to shape opinion, as opposed to the written word. And the now burgeoning attention to theatre movements in colonized societies further attests to key role of theatre as a powerful tool of political engagement. Nandi Bhatia asserts, "to ignore theater, therefore, is to ignore a large piece of subaltern history."¹¹

Of course, the researchers in critical history of theatre in India – concerned with privileged avant-garde or with the theatre of the people (from orientations both left and right) after-construct their subject rather closely as the archives uncomplicatedly order their route and consequently development. For them, the nature and structure of politics

⁹Habib, Irfan. *A People's History of India* series started in 2001 by The Aligarh Historians Society is dedicated to the cause of promoting the scientific method in history and resisting communal and chauvinistic interpretations. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2001 to till date.

¹⁰Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Theatre*. Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986.

¹¹Bhatia, Nandi. Introduction, *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. New Delhi: OUP, 2004.

is considered axiomatic. However, they ignore the nature of political economy that influences these theatre processes on ground and consider it as irrelevant. The fortuitous survival of documents/evidences may guarantee the future immortality but it is not necessary signal of their real historical, political significance. Much that has been of greatest importance in the past lacks adequate archival evidence. The same phenomenon continues till date, as we tend to wait for the happening events to turn into fossilized history; to be qualified as an object of study, and by the time they become so, much of them has been already forgotten, or wrongly jotted down into archives.

Indeed, scholars from history and other disciplines have after stressed on the need for a much broader conception of political action. A contextualized study of power and society is necessary to comprehend a system of relation. Politics is not just limited to the doings of those in authority and the responses of those who are subordinate. It should be treated more wisely as the valued means whereby, the hierarchies of dominance and deference are created, maintained and overturned. Viewed in this light, the study of power is not limited to asking questions about who governs and who is governed, but it involves an investigation of how it is possible to keep important issues off the agenda of public discourse altogether and perpetrate violence and oppression on all levels. Thus, in particular, our concern should be to study the ways in which in reaction to the power holder's mode of oppression, how the wretched and-oppressed try to create alternative modes of thought that may seem off limit and even unthinkable, yet strive to present that particular way of ordering and organizing society, as a last hope to bring back 'normalcy' to their troubled existence.

Analysis of the multiple ways in which act of oppression was and is deployed in the community of famine stricken Bengal, the Meiteis of Manipur and in the Rabha dominated district of Assam in the contemporary time engages us to study the various cultural aspects of the phenomenon that not only addresses issues pertaining to the oppression of the communities, but through performance address issues that has global relevance, as it tries to mitigate the violence that endangers our whole existence in these times of terror through community based art practices, which portrays and evokes the shared memory of pain, oppression and act of violence.

Theatre for Change/Theatre of the Oppressed

Of course, there is a huge discourse available on the theatre for social change i.e. to lead these oppressed people out of their state of being oppressed on theoretical ground ranging from Marx, Lenin, then proper theatre people like Brecht, Piscator, right up to Boal via Grotowski and Barba. Theatre academicians across the globe have even tried to understand the phenomenon based on the parameters of form, content style of execution etc. Hans Theis Lehmann admits, the capacity for the communal reception of live performance foregrounds possibilities for “the mutual implication of actors and spectators in the theatrical production of the image”¹² On this logic, live theatre’s capacity for and generation of social interactivity in the co-production of meaning offer productive possibilities for political engagement. The political function of theatre is also reaffirmed by feminist theorists including Janelle Reinelt and Jill Dolan. Reinelt writes, “[t]heatre

¹²Karen Jürs-Munby, ‘Introduction’, Lehmann. Hans-Thies, *Postdramatic Theatre*. Karen Jurs-Munby,(tr.) London: Routledge, 2006.p.165

and performance, seen as an institution whose chief function is the production of the social imaginary, can play a potentially vital role in shaping social change.” (2001:p.7).¹³

The discourse of Third beat of theatre is one such dialogue, that was also popular in India with the presence of Badal Sircar, a maverick playwright, who completely shunned his glowing-flowing art of playwriting and went to create performances that itself would speak to the audiences. Barba’s Odin Theatret was one such international attempt to pedagogically understand this third beat of theatre. As Ian Watson, in *Towards a Third Theatre: Eugenio Barba and Odin Theatret* points out,

[t]he social value of theatre for Barba is in the way those who make it go about their work, rather than in the socio-political content of the productions. Even though several of the Odin’s pieces have had their origins in political themes, the major socio-political thrust in the group’s work comes from the contact made between its members and those who host them on tour (1993: p.31) ¹⁴

This is a useful intervention, where the contact between the actors and the audience is mentioned, thus leading us to get a hint of what is happening between the articulation and reception of the performance. Thus, in the procedure what becomes important to know is how expressions are articulated. Furthermore, third theatre is itself articulated in terms of its location with respect to the ‘institutionalized theatre’ and ‘the avant-garde’ (p.18). Referring to third theatre phenomenon Barba observes,

¹³Dolan, Jill. *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*. Middleton: Wesleyan UP, 2001.p. 7

¹⁴Watson, Ian. *Towards a Third Theatre: Eugenio Barba and Odin Theatret*. London:Routledge,1993.

The Third Theatre lives on the fringes, often outside or on the outskirts of the centers and capitals of culture. It is a theatre created by people who define themselves as actors, directors, theatre workers, although have seldom undergone a traditional theatrical education, and therefore are not recognized as professionals...But they are not amateurs. Their entire day is filled with theatrical experience, sometimes by what they call training, or by the preparation of performances for which they fight to find an audience (p.19)

This almost explains the working of the so called theatre for social change, but it lacks a fundamental issue that is how to make the text meaningful for others, not just claiming to be different make things different. An analytic intrusion is warranted in the understanding of this theatre so that we could decipher the mechanics of that theatre and the ends achieved in the process. Brazilian director Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* obviously does bring in a radical change in the notion of such a theatre for social change, and through his experiences of 'Forum theatre', 'Image theatre', 'Rainbow of desires' and subsequently 'Legislative Theatre', he seeks to bring about a social change by rehearsing the social change through theatre as the oppressed envisaged. The theatre for Boal becomes a gradual ground of transformation leading Spectator to become actors themselves as they are also actors in their own life in their own life as live drama, incorporating acts of oppression thus tragedies. Thus Boal in a comprehensive approach critiques even Aristotelian Poetics as 'Poetics of oppression'. Boal asserts, "In forum theatre no idea is imposed: the audience, the people, have the opportunity to try out all their ideas, to rehearse all the possibilities, and to verify them in practice; that is, in theatrical practice." (p.141)

Thus, underlining the process he defines that these people, the so called oppressed need a different poetics to lead them out of the situation of oppression. The poetics of catharsis would not suffice, but they require a catharsis to give them impetus for revolutionary change and not the catharsis that purgates people out of the impetus of a change. According to him, "...[if] we want to stimulate the spectator to transform his society, to engage in revolutionary action, in that case we will have to seek another poetics." (p.47)

Hence, *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*¹⁵ could then be the model of such a theatre of the oppressed. Augusto Boal, apart from being, perhaps, one of the most significant theatre theorists and practitioners of the last fifty years, is also a master raconteur. As Paul Dwyer (2004) argues in a *New Theatre Quarterly*¹⁶ commentary on the 'origin' story of 'Forum Theatre', Boal has long had a spectacular penchant for invoking the poetic realms, through narratives and anecdotes, to address the problematic space between practice and theory. In this way, the central paradigms of the practice we are acquainted with as 'Theatre of the Oppressed' have been articulated, established and debated. While formulating the *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, Boal reflects upon more than thirty years of practising and theorising the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO as it is popularly called), From a story about a 2002 workshop in Middle England, he weaves a brief account of the development of various strands of TO techniques, using the metaphor of a tree and genealogy to visually articulate the growth of this tradition. This is followed by a series

¹⁵ Augusto Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

¹⁶ Dwyer, Paul. 'Augusto Boal and The Woman in Lima: A Poetic Encounter' in *New Theatre Quarterly* Vol. 20, No. 2 (May), 2004: pp. 155-163.

of essays under the title of 'A Theoretical Foundation', Borrowing notions from semiotics, linguistics and cognitive neuroscience, Boal constructs an aesthetic rationale for the practice of TO, principally by presenting an argument for its necessity. This argument is based on the notion that human perception occurs on three different levels- 'information - the receptive level'; 'knowledge and tactical decision-making and 'ethical consciousness - the human level' (34-6).

For Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* achieves this through the way it approaches the four fundamental elements that are identified in the 'tree' as the roots and the immediate earth from which it grows. These elements are referred to as the Word, the Image, the Sound, and the Ethics; In the first three of these elements, Boal revisits the principles of games and exercises described in his earlier books, with a view towards developing the aesthetic rationale of TO in employing these approaches. Here the poetic nature of this rationale is further revealed. Boal makes a claim for TO as 'an ethical theatre' and a Humanist project in which "nothing can be done unless we know why and for whom it is being done" (p. 50), Here the problem of this poetics as a 'theoretical foundation' gets delineated. Moreover, it does not define how this thesis- Aesthetics of the Oppressed (AO) seeks to create the expression of oppression that always seeks to evade our grasp or dodge the attempt to define it and turns too futile if we act it out in its original proportion, even though with a urge to change that reality. The depiction of that act of oppression in its real proportion might not be full proof to the possibility of that such a vivid exact remembrance of that act of the same ground as an instance that might lead to the perpetuation of that act of oppression. Thus, the formulation of aesthetics of

the oppressed or people's aesthetics and its manifestation as it is today are in its basic rudimentary form. I strongly feel that Boal's theorizations can and should be read more effectively as a manifesto, in the traditions of Artaud¹⁷ and Grotowski¹⁸, than they do as articulations.

However, with the ensuing age of violence of every kind, the situation of the oppressed are deteriorating, hence what is required is a comprehensive approach to not just arts but whole life cycle and the aesthetics of it, so that we can surely hope for a better future for all. To begin with one should redefine the premise and try to understand how the aesthetics of the oppressed could be formulated in articulation. But before doing so I must point out that there an apparent 'disconnect' between the reality of the empirical facts related to condition of the oppressed, theatre of the oppressed, aesthetics of the oppressed and the analysis of that theatre as a life force and tools of analysis thereof.

Of course, I further believe that for a proper aesthetics of the oppressed, we cannot take in to account the dominant paradigms. As we are talking of the people who are oppressed and intend to construct the aesthetics of their existence and how that flows into art, we must change our epistemological approach or paradigmatic approach. There should be in our approach the search for a new episteme, which will all together negate the foundations of the existing paradigms, enabling the oppressed to shirk the burden of

¹⁷One illustration of the energized manifesto style Artaud's work would be: "The Theatre of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theatre a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigour and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood. This cruelty, which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can thus be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid." Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre of Cruelty*, in *The Theory of the Modern Stage* (ed. Eric Bentley), Penguin, 1968, p.66

¹⁸Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Eugenio Barba, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.

oppression off their shoulders. To define this epistemological change we must first define our people, the oppressed. As we have earlier pointed out and of course would subsequently be a part of our argument, performance has played a vital role in narrating the acts of oppression. Thus to begin with we must explore community based art practices to have a concrete grip over the subject of the people, as per the focus of my immediate study would primarily begin within the socio-political frame work of the country India.

Community Performances/ performing Community

“The first essential point of definition is that community arts practice is based on the belief that cultural meaning, expression and creativity reside within a community, that the community artist's task is to assist people in freeing their imaginations and giving form to their creativity.”¹⁹ This is one of the most widely accepted definitions of the community based art practice. But before we get into and try envisaging the meaning invested in this definition, one needs to understand the fundamental notion of the word *Community*. There are a number of ways to categorize types of community. One such breakdown is:

1. Geographic communities: range from the local neighbourhood, suburb, village, town or city, region, nation or even the planet as a whole. These refer to communities of *location*.
2. Communities of culture: range from the local clique, sub-culture, ethnic group,

¹⁹ Community Performance, 30 August. 2009. URL:
<<http://www.communityperformance.org/community_performance/3019>>

religious, multicultural or pluralistic civilization, or the global community cultures of today. They may be included as *communities of need* or *identity*, such as disabled persons, or frail aged people.

3. Community organizations: range from informal family or kinship networks, to more formal incorporated associations, political decision making structures, economic enterprises, or professional associations at a small, national or international scale.

However, 'Communities' are nested; one community can contain another—for example a geographic community may contain a number of ethnic communities.²⁰ This is quite true in terms of a multi community country like India.

Thus, here the community based art practice too varies from the opening quote which needs to be critiqued and opened up for community to community with their invested variations in the meaning creation and perception. Possibly the most common usage of the word "*community*" indicates a large group living in close proximity. Thus, when one tries to look closely into the opening line of this piece, one has to be likewise aware of all these problems alike and then tackle them from an objective point of view. In view of the multiculturalism of a country like India, it would be pertinent and quite well in place to now talk about a community that is an admixture of geographical communities and the communities of culture. The Rabha, the Mech, the Bengali, the Rajbanshi, the Tripuri and the Manipuri communities in the North-East of India are illustrations of this unique cultural admixture. In this context a successful model of this community based arts

²⁰Rothman, Jack, John E. Tropman, and John L. Erlich (eds). *Strategies of Community Intervention*. (5th ed.) Itasca, IL: Peacock Press, 1995.

practice in India, which is quite different from the 'Western' conception of 'Community Art' is The Theatre of Kanhailal in Manipur. We all know that Kanhailal has been rooted in Manipuri culture, which is in itself a conglomeration of many cultures. Kanhailal's works resonate with the distinctness of all the cultures, galvanising the theatre he creates as a union that is essentially 'Manipuri'. It is through his community's culture that he traces his way back, in order to discover the "psychic power and archetype, [which] is related... [to] the 'eternal human', transforming itself into a powerful expression of silent but inarticulate feelings of the oppressed people" (Kanhailal: 2004, p.16). However, most of us do not know that his attempt to 'evolve a consistent philosophy of theatrical performance' is now not just limited to the precincts of Manipur. It has flowed into many adjoining cultures; Rabha being one of them. Badungduppa²¹ becomes the platform where different cultures in the region interact. In the process, they create meanings and articulate their silences, tracing their way back to their roots. Thus, here in Badungduppa, one observes that the cultures of the Rabha, the Mech, the Bengali, the Rajbanshi, and the Tripuri in the North-East of India may differ in the exterior, but many a time, at many a place would they share a basic similarity in performing their experience. Here, it would be pertinent to understand what yields this similarity. The specific relationships that humans share with the supernatural, material culture and society brings in this experience of similarity. The concept of the supernatural is the same even though the specific religion might be different. Materiality of a culture can be specific and different, whereas its essence is universal.

²¹Badungduppa is the name of a Rabha theatre group. The group is based in Rampur Village of Goalpara District. Sukracharjya Rabha is the visionary, founder and artistic director of the group.

In the 1960s Victor Turner adapted the word “communitas” from Paul Goodman’s usage, which connoted the earlier explanation in a well placed manner. He asserts, “Communitas is, existentially speaking and in its origin, purely spontaneous and self-generating”.²² It is individuals who are in conflict with one another, not cultures. Thus, the study of community culture – the integral part of the culture of human race and sharing of the experiences, the beliefs, the customs, the traditions, the manners, the songs, the tales and the myths- would certainly one day solve the most difficult of the problems of ethnology. In a different, but relevant context, Appadurai finds the use of traditional techniques and folk knowledge as significant for survival of Indian farmers (Appadurai, Arjun: 1990)²³. Similarly, playwright H.S. Shiva Prakash sees continuity in indigenous Indian dramatic forms and finds a sense of energy in folk theatre (Shiva Prakash: 2007)²⁴. For H.S. Shiva Prakash, the past coexists with the present in a parallel form. If we look to origin and evolution of folk theatre, we have to admit that this theatrical tradition is interlinked with human civilization. This leads one to understand that in reality every culture has ingested foreign elements from exogenous sources through time, with the various elements gradually becoming ‘naturalized’ within it. This is proved in the case of the ‘folk’ as it is ever-changing. So, it is living and it has not developed into a tradition (tradition here is used in the sense of codified practices of the past, which is starkly different from living folk traditions). As we have already pointed out earlier, a

²²Turner Victor, ‘Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas’ in (Joan Vincent ed.) *Anthropology of Politics*. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2002, p.99)

²³Appadurai, Arjun. ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’ in Featherstone, Mike (ed.) *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, London: Sage, 1990.

²⁴Shivaprakash, H.S. *Traditional Theatres*. New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2007.

relationship between community performance and how it serves in the manifestation of material culture, so, a change in material culture obviously has an impact on the performances of the community. Taking cue from Kanhailal's proposition- in an extreme situation, if the dominant material culture becomes oppressive, the community logically develops a way to resist it and performs that resistance.

Political Performances/ Performing Politics

In Indian context, the existing and academically accepted model of political or people's theatre was initiated in the 1940s by IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) and gradually that marked our politico-/people's theatre scenario during 70's and 80's. "Drawing heavily from the folk, community forms of each region, IPTA became a powerful tool to spread nationalist and socialist ideals."(Srampikal: 1994, p.47)²⁵ From the very inception of this form, the philosophy of social justice propelled them to thrive on the notion of 'Oppression' and manifest itself on stage in the form of physical pain. The lack of basic amenities for the body, Roti, Kapra and Makan (Food, Clothing & Accommodation) led one to the angst or the pain of portraying that in theatre (example:- *Nabanna*²⁶ by IPTA). After the disintegration of IPTA, Political theatre still has often relied upon community idioms and popular farce- satire to make a veiled but effective critique of political trends. Thus, came into being the popular 'Agit-Prop' plays. In contemporary India, however, political theatre is facing a new challenge in trying to find ways to "out-farce" a political arena that already has become inherently farcical. There

²⁵Srampickal, Jacob. *Voice to the Voiceless: The power of people's Theatre is India*. (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1994)

²⁶Nabanna staged on 24th October, 1943, by IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) at Kolkata.

are many problems and challenges faced by the established mode of political theatre. Two primary challenges as elaborated by Darren Zook are-- first one from the state of Kerala in southwestern India, where a self-styled progressive state government in the hands of the Communist Party has come under attack by critical playwrights for ossifying into orthodoxy and complacency.²⁷ The second challenge centres on the difficulties faced by playwrights who have turned toward so-called indigenous or folk models of theatre to voice their critiques. Utpal Dutt condemns this attitude:

By knocking out content and using only the score is to replace a vision with a slogan, to misuse folklore, to descend to formalism. Form and content are thoroughly integrated in folklore; to divide them is to kill them. The score by itself is so simplistic, repetitive and even crude, it is probably boring. (Dutt: 1982, p.142)²⁸

Furthermore, Dutt's assertion holds good as the national government in Delhi has tried to utilize the symbols of an invented indigenous past to establish its legitimacy. Critical theatre often finds itself applauded and even co-opted by the very political forces against which it has directed its dissent. At this point it is pertinent to examine the difficulties of establishing a 'pure' space and concept for political theatre in contemporary India and offer as a conclusion a possible path toward resolution.

²⁷ Zook, Darren C. The Farcical Mosaic: The Changing Masks of Political Theatre in Contemporary India: *Asian Theatre Journal* 18.2, Fall 2001. 24 June 2009, URL:

<<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/asian_theatre_journal/toc/atj18.2.html>>

²⁸ Dutt, Utpal. *Towards A Revolutionary Theatre*. Kolkata: M.C.Sarkar & Sons Pvt Ltd, 1982

As in India, one harmony, across indigenous cultures is the notion of community based physical theatre. The physical theatre or the dominance of a strict code of the body was quite a feature of the classical- folk- traditional theatre, so directors like Habib Tanvir, H. Kanhailal, Prasanna and Bansi Kaul, etc. found the need and sites of practice of a kind of theatre in our modern theatrical domain that would project an alternative model, and in the process bring into being elements of the traditional performances rejuvenating in our times, liberating it in both senses. First, this step liberates 'modern Indian theatre' as it breaks free from already fixed expressions, verbosity and creates new ways of expressions, and on the other hand it introduces the new generation to the traditional community performances, where they could connect themselves with their own past. G. C. Behera in his study of the use of various elements of folk culture, folk tales, songs, theatres, dances, rituals, practices and beliefs in the plays in Indian Languages written after the independence, for representation of contemporary situation. He sees it as a reaction against the hegemony of western culture and a need for the use of indigenous knowledge system for the present need.²⁹ Adequate attention has to be given to communities from different regions and languages in the multilingual, multicultural mosaic of India to project the vital diversity of Indian society and to understand how this communities project the angst of being oppressed.

²⁹Behera, G.C. *Appropriating Folk Culture: A Study of the Post-Independence Indian Drama* (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2008)

Rabha theatre

Currently, I want to draw your attention to a tribe in South Assam, called the Rabha. This community which is rich in tradition and has a colourful culture³⁰ is now demonstrating on political grounds and demanding the status of sixth Schedule for the district of Goalpara in Assam under the Indian Constitution.³¹ This political motif is definitely created out of the pain of being neglected. The *Badungduppa* theatre finds its basic ingredients in the stories, dance and music of the Assam tribal culture. The group also has many interchanges with actors and musicians from other tribes and cultural communities such as, Boro and Manipuri. The theatre workshop is situated in the country-side Rampur village, in the area of the Rabha-community. The artistic director, Sukracharjya Rabha, has in recent years produced different performances which were shown throughout Assam and further areas.

On the cultural front, among many initiatives the work of Badungduppa is unique in their expression. *Badungduppa's* activity is one such case study and a vital case study to begin with as here the focus is on body i.e. the psychological representation of existence, is presented through the deep rhythmic manifestation of the physicality. Sukracharjya Rabha, the mentor of *Badungduppa* honed his skills under H. Kanhailal and has embodied Kanhailal's philosophy about theatre. Sukracharjya says, "His theatre people put so much effort into everything. They take a couple of months over one dialogue!"(The Hindu: 21.04.2008). We all know about Kanhailal's theatre, whose most

³⁰24 May 2010, URL:<< <http://www.andhranews.net/India/2010/March/27-Rabha-Tribe-jewel-8457.asp> >>, 24 May 2010. URL:<< <http://www.himalayan-adventure.com/eco/rava.htm> >>, 28 September 2009. URL: << http://www.lisindia.net/Rabha/Rabha_cult.html >>

³¹24 May 2010 << http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100329/jsp/northeast/story_12274575.jsp >>

TH-19187

recent presentation was the haunting interpretation of Tagore's classic *Dakghar* (Post Office). This production and his complete repertoire baffles us with its uniqueness, and leads us to ponder that it cannot be interpreted with any of the western frame of references, or even dominant Indian ones. So, the academic works on his theatre by Scholars like Rustom Bharucha have not done proper justice to the vision and whole corpus of work by Kanhailal. Kanhailal himself defines his theatre to be a "theatre in transition", 'which invents personal value of own theatre' (Kanhailal; Theatre India, Nov 2004: pp. 3-16). His theatre invokes the collective cultural memory and proposes an alternative approach to text and meaning creation. While talking about his style and actor preparation, he stresses that while "Awakening the energy within and outside of one self, the intention-action is seen at work." Here in *Badungduppa*, we can envisage that the essence of the knowledge of the within and without is being gradually perceived. Further it is developing a platform for other cultures to come and interact with each other in the form of an annual theatre festival called *Under The Sal Trees*. In this festival practitioners from different cultures perform, interact, and learn. Thus, in spite of having many established theatre groups in Assam, doing political theatre or rather community theatre, *Badungduppa*, is a vital case study to begin with, as one would find how Kanhailal's conception about theatre is expanding its horizons beyond the limits of Manipur. It also gives a new sense of importance to the special act of concentrating and negotiating the culture and modernity on the bodily (physical), mythical, ritual existence exploring their delicate relationship with nature and finally how that becomes our text.



The theatre of pain: the ab-initio of a methodology

The discussions in both the preceding rubrics have established the intrinsic relationship between the community, self and the political. Partha Chatterjee reinstates this in form of the 'imagined communities', which relates to the formation of a sense of belonging. Elaine Scarry (Renault & Roach, 1992:250)³² says that it is almost unfeasible to consider the innumerable ways in which the nation state "penetrates the deepest layers of consciousness, and manifest itself in the body itself.... The political identity of the body is usually learned unconsciously, effortlessly, and very early." She further stresses on the habituation of the body in particular and establishes the conception of body politics. Thus, according to her, our conscious politics, social commitments, strivings for change may be undermined and betrayed by the life of our bodies.

Of course, one may have serious reservation about the national reconstruction and notions of nation etched on body, but that is beyond the purview of this paper and will need a whole new frame of reference and arguments. What is of importance here, drawing in from the above statement is that the representation of the practical entity of the body alone in its form, divorced from the relationship to ritual and cultural existence is a limiting one. While we just tend to understand it in terms of culture; in fact, the body has to go through the renovation with respect to the transformation in the social order.

³²In Reinelt, Janelle R. & Roach Joseph R. (Eds.). *Critical Theory and Performance*. Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1992. Scarry develops this argument extensively in *The Body in Pain: The making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Hence, while creating a political theatre, it is all the more important to redefine and re-invoke the relationship of our body with that of the culture, nature. At this stage one can safely deduce that the body in performance and the performance as a body of knowledge is also in a fragile relationship with the culture or in more organic terms the nature around them.

If the body and its relationship with nature is the prime site in performance and in the manifestation of politics, then the usage of that very act of performance to subvert the erstwhile dominating politics is all the more organically possible. Such a theatre that redefines the relationship between the body, culture and nature, developing a new language in theatre will definitely give a new lease of life to someone who is stranded by the notion of the Brechtian- Piscatorial political theatre model in India. This understanding becomes much clearer, when we see that over time the notion of politics has already changed, and so are the goals of politics and political theatre. Now we are in the 'age of identity politics' (Fraser, Nancy.1997)³³. So, in *medias res*, we find that economic viability is no longer the only understanding of politics. At this point it would be quite pertinent to problematize the notion of economic viability and the emerging norm of identity politics. One would seek to understand what the root of identity politics is and also what are its ends as on the wake of identity politics; politics itself has taken a mammoth shape that changes its colour like chameleon responding to the situation at hand. Furthermore, the broad framework of class division of the oppressed in the society is aggravated in terms of type and proportion and is much more difficult to locate in our

³³Fraser, Nancy. *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Post-Socialist" Condition*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

times. Nowadays, it is always a group as a body among many other groups as a whole and each one has its own politics. Thus, the groups, the communities, and the identities formed in the process somehow or the other want to be heard or seen.

At this vital juncture, one would ponder why this notion of being in the circuit of visibility and audibility. One possible response would be that these identities want to be accepted in the so-called 'society' and be allowed to pursue their needs-basic, secondary and tertiary needs. And all these in diverse ways relate to the fundamental notion of 'capital' coming into the equation.

The notion of identity formation is the locus of the how and why capital/money comes into the equation. The so called 'oppressed identities' have been oppressed and suppressed over a certain period of time in some or other fashion. They were not invited to be at par with the so called 'norms/normals' and these identities were referred to as 'others'³⁴. Obviously it can be a psychological ostracization, but that in some form or other, it melts down to one single point that is 'economic ostracization'. When these identities feel economically ostracized, it is quite evident that they would definitely try and render their victim narratives, rendering their pain visible to us, so that along with recognition of their identities, they also get an equal playing ground with so called 'norms'. Thus, their 'otherness' is rendered as a tool to counter this psycho-socio-polito-economic ostracization.

³⁴ Othering: A Definition. URL: << <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~ulrich/rww03/othering.htm> >> 28 June 2008.

Thus, political/people's theatre or a theatre that hopes for a social change, which would enable the people with that lack, gain equality out of it, tried hard to portray that pain in theatre, but lacked a proper notion of healing. Well, as I have pointed out earlier that the very notion of political has changed, and therefore, the Bakhtinian equation of the "Centre-Margin" is not just on the broad economic lines, as just economic crisis is not the heart of political moves now, it has multiplied as veins and capillaries, creating this complex matrix of multiple marginalities. Starting from categories of marginality like anthropological marginalities of the tribes, through socio-cultural marginalities of religion, caste and of course nation to the much closed marginal space of that being a woman, gay, etc. So, this deluge of multiple marginalities would lose its apparently specific strength, if our parameter of studying them is just the base of broad economic equality, or at most an attempt on the political lines to club together many sub cultures within the rubric of a dominant culture that might provide them with the tools to shirk off their marginality. Though this might seem to be a very illuminatory proposition, it is just a theoretical possibility. The only practical similarity across these exploited communities is the collective memory of the pain of being on the margins or even beyond it. David B. Morris while talking of the *Book of Job*, draws in contemporary references and observes,

Yet the Book of Job also leads to a very different understanding by which we can see how human leads to a very different understanding of how human pain is saturated in politics. Pain, in this political reading, belongs especially to the powerless. It is the poor and powerless who most often find themselves in pain. Why? Because poverty, ignorance, overwork, bad diet, wretched shelter, and nonexistant, is not simply the result of floods or bad harvests but ultimately has

political causes. Surely, if they possessed political power, the children of third-world countries would not choose to starve. They live on an insufficient diet because they were born in impoverished lands-lands often split by civil wars, ruled by corrupt factions, exploited by foreign banks and corporations and governments who leave them at the mercy of each new natural disaster. The pain felt by a starving child (or adult) results from the almost invisible distribution of political, social and economic power. (1993:p.145)³⁵

Case studies on these portrayals of pain can be many, for example all the marginal communities that I have named earlier are visible as they have consciously rendered their pain visible to us. Or even if the theatre/performance that they create is not for the outsiders to propel them into action, it is a healing experience for them. Thus, we see that pain, and the ways to heal it, is the ultimate expression towards the building of the *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*. Now, we have a more concrete entry point, that might lead us to develop a proper methodology into that realm of theatre or the so called people's theatre that has been quite dominant across the vast Indian theatrical landscape, where distinct genres of theatre are produced by distinct marginalized groups, portraying their own pain and the healing measure with a force that has its own vector.

The depiction of the ritual existence, developing performances out of folklore in the theatre of Badungduppa is certainly emerging out of the pain of being neglected and it is different from that of the so called 'Agit Prop' theatre. In Agit-prop theatre, the notion of pain had a direct relationship with the body i.e. material existence as argued in the last paragraph, but here in marginal context the pain is definitely a material existence, but

³⁵Morris, David B. *The Culture of Pain*, Berkeley. University of California Press, 1993. P. 145

more so a philosophical entity. It is the pain of the whole community being pushed to the margins. It is a pain that is discursivised by the whole community, which bears the angst of being pushed beyond the margins. So, their theatre is an attempt to experience that pain followed by the experience of healing as a purgatory - a way out. Thus, the proper portrayal of the pain in theatre, and theatre as the healing experience can now be the locus of the power and politics.

Thus, with above mentioned presumptions, the following study seeks to understand:

1. How it is possible to develop a proper methodology to study the shift in the aesthetics for the People's Theatre in India to understand its significance in present performance scholarship and practices?
2. Can a language born out of experience – memory/pain/shared oppression- become a tool for a process of theatre which in turn helps in the healing process of the community?
3. Can the case study of Badungduppa and their theatre practices be taken as an alternative form of political theatre and whether it gets reflected in the larger "Indian Tradition"?

The chapters are designed to gradually mark the contours of people's theatre in India starting from the first movement³⁶ in the form of IPTA, the promise of reviving the

³⁶Both in the sense of a social upheaval and a shift. An extensive study of theatre in the changing political scenario in India, with respect to rural and urban centres, that is slowly slowly turning to be a farce is required. The importance of the issue and epic volume of concerns definitely merits to be a detailed separate study, hence it is not accommodated here.

folk and classical forms and addressing the socio-political economic problems of the people, particularly concentrating on the formation days of IPTA in the North eastern region of India.

The second chapter concentrates on Theatre of Kanhailal, his understanding of theatre as a healing act voyaging through the physical and ritual theatres and how that has its bearings on the material condition, transforming the expression of that akin to 'universals'

The third Chapter deals with Badungduppa, A Rabha theatre group that that is informed by both the IPTA movement and Kanhailal's theatre and hence create its own expression of aesthetics as a silent scream of the oppressed, situating it within the sacred and profane in Assam and analyses how the only practical similarity across these exploited communities is the collective memory of the pain of being on the margins or even beyond it and in the works of Sukracharjya Rabha, who felt the need of exploring the expressive physical language of theatre, conscious/unconscious depiction of this pain, but not at the cost of the message or the ideology that propels him and many others to do theatre.

The fourth and final chapter -Performance Text: To' Poidam (incorporating the mythical background, process of the production, actor experience and audience realizations), is an illustration of the arguments that I have placed in the introduction, and the three preceding chapters. The improvised text, gets a shape in form of a performance text that can hopefully speak for itself, and validate the arguments of the dissertation.

As I had mentioned earlier that there is a dearth of scholarly work on the area of

my proposed research, so it took me long through an lengthy introduction to create the arguments and the premise of my study. Many of the arguments you find here are have been analysed and elaborated upon in the chapters that follow.

Of course, this research had the requirements of both theoretical and fieldwork case studies. For my case study I have taken up Rabha performances of South Assam due to some important relations with my research, for instance

1. The present political upheaval in the North-East in general.
2. This area has still remained backward, illiterate, divided on religious and cultural lines but full of rich artistic performances.
3. Last but not the least-- my familiarity with language and culture of this area.

Since it was difficult to find secondary resources for these tribal performance except for the highly orientalist, packaged ethnographic documentaries on the ritual and performances of these people; and on theoretical grounds nothing significant could directly fit into the frame of my study so, as an observant and participant I had embarked upon collecting and organizing my primary resources in the North East and consequently formulated my own postulates from personal first hand findings, observations and recollections creating an entry point towards the alternative Aesthetics not just for North-East of India, but for the whole world.

Chapter/Act I

Life and Times of the People's Theatre in India: Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)

The people have been gradually conquered by the bourgeois class, penetrated by their thoughts and now want only to resemble them. If you long for a people's art, begin by creating a people!

Romain Rolland, *Le Théâtre du peuple/ The People's Theater* (1903).

I

In Indian context, the existing and academically accepted model of political or people's theatre was initiated in the 1940s by Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and gradually that marked our politico-/people's theatre scenario during 70's and 80's. "Drawing heavily from the folk, community forms of each region, IPTA became a powerful tool to spread nationalist and socialist ideals."(Srampikal: 1994, p.47) From the very inception of this form, the philosophy of social justice propelled them to thrive on the notion of *Oppression*¹ and manifest itself on stage in the form of physical pain. The lack of basic amenities for the body- *Roti, Kapra* and *Makan* (Food, Clothing and Accommodation) led one to the angst or the pain of portraying that in theatre (example:- *Nabanna* by IPTA). After the disintegration of IPTA, Political theatre still has often relied upon community idioms and popular farce- satire to make a veiled but effective

¹As mentioned in the *Introduction*, it is the unjustifiable placing of a burden on someone or some group, by interfering with their powers, interests, or opportunities. Oppression may be deliberate, or an unintended outcome of social arrangements; it may be recognized for what it is, or may go unremarked even by those oppressed.

critique of political trends. Thus, came into being the popular 'Agit-Prop' plays. In contemporary India, however, political theatre is facing a new challenge in trying to find ways to "out-farce" a political arena that already has become inherently farcical. There are many problems and challenges faced by the established mode of political theatre, which we will gradually take up.

This chapter examines the ways in which the IPTA participated in the socio-political process before independence in 1947 and in the post-independence years. It also seeks to explore how through a pioneering and experimental way of creating art that derived its stimulation and ideas to a certain extent from the Western practices, but was rooted in India's own cultural and social customs, IPTA developed a new kind aesthetics of this new art 'the art of people'. Finally, an in-depth analysis of a classic play from the IPTA repertoire *Nabanna [New Harvest]* (a thrill that IPTA itself could seldom repeat with its other productions), to specifically delineate the creation and development of the aesthetics formed out of the angst and pain of common people.

However, before doing so one has to study- what IPTA was, and what was the vision it stood for. Rolland's noteworthy contribution to the theatre lays in his encouragement for a 'popular theater' in his essay *Le Théâtre du peuple/ The People's Theater* (1903), published in India in 1980². "There is only one necessary condition for the emergence of a new theater," he wrote, "that the stage and auditorium should be open to the masses, should be able to contain a people and the actions of a people." The essay

²Not published until 1913, but most of its contents had appeared in the *Revue d'Art Dramatique* between 1900 and 1903. Rolland attempted to put his theory into practice with his melodramatic dramas *Danton* (1900) and *Le 14 Juillet* (1902), but it was his ideas that formed a major reference point for subsequent practitioners.

is part of a more general movement around the turn of that century towards the democratization of the theatre. The *Revue* had held a competition and tried to organize a “World Congress on People's Theater,” and a number of People's Theatres had opened across Europe, including the *Freie Volksbühne* movement ('Free People's Theatre') in Germany and Maurice Pottecher's Théâtre du Peuple in France. Commenting on the political nature of the play, Erin Piscator mentions, “The excessive stress on the political angle - and it is not our work, but the disharmony in current social conditions which makes every sign of life political - may in a sense lead to a distorted view of human ideals, but the distorted view at least has the advantage of corresponding to reality” (“Basic Principles of Sociological Drama: 1929, p.244). Lest one should feel the citation of Rolland’s work at very prompt of this section as a prelude to a hagiographical piece of research, I need to point out that such a reference is significantly important to trace the genesis of the thought of people’s Theatre. Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) central squad activist Sudhi Pradhan mentions in the ‘Foreword’ to the Indian edition of Rolland’s book ‘*The People's Theater* (1980),

... [They] are still carrying on the principles, drawn from this book as their ultimate source of inspiration. Someone like me, who has been connected with the People’s Theatre movement from its very inception, cannot overlook the need for communicating to the theatre workers of today and tomorrow, the ideals which led our involvement in this movement. For me it is a sort of declaration of faith... (Pradhan (ed.): 1980, pp. iii-iv)

Well, for us here from the point of view of a researcher, it is not the question of ‘faith’ but rather an attempt to understand the very root of the people’s theatre movement in India, so that a proper genealogy of the thought, practice and finally the aesthetics involved that developed in the course of action could be mapped. Mapping of these practices and thought processes are even more imperative because these would finally be

our underpinning on which we would gradually build the structure of contemporary people's theatre.

II

While tracing the beginning of the People's Theatre movement in India, as we jog our memory and facts to outline a time that was utterly turbulent. Fascist battery had invaded the Soviet Union, Gandhi raised the slogan of Quit India, the Muslim League had passed the 'Pakistan Resolution', a massive famine hit Bengal, one could hear rumblings from Telengana, it was not clear which way the war would go. The IPTA was born in such a cauldron. The name itself seems to be suggested based on Romain Rolland's book, either by the scientist Homi Bhaba or by Anil D'Silva, a Sri Lankan person who was the first secretary of the Bangalore unit of IPTA formed in 1941. D' Silva helped form the Bombay branch of IPTA in 1942. The all-India organisation was formed in May 1943. Some of the initial members of the groups were Prithviraj Kapoor, Bijon Bhattacharya, Ritwik Ghatak, Utpal Dutt, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Salil Chowdhury, Niranjan Singh Maan, S. Tera Singh Chan, Jagdish Faryadi, Khalili Faryadi etc.

One might wonder why such a long ode to the IPTA. The reason is because even though there was a sense of cultural awakening in Indian intelligentsia like Bharatendu Harishchandra, Dinabandhu Mitra, Jayshankar Prasad, Bankim Chandra, etc., they were working individually with a limited sphere of influence. However, it was the IPTA (along with the PWA, Progressive Writer's Association)³, which provided the first model of

³PWA was formed in 1936.

organised cultural activism in India extending to the farthest corners of the undivided sub-continent. Combining an emphasis on realism with the need to revitalize the traditional arts, the PWA-IPTA perspective produced some fine and stirring revolutionary art, almost redefining the aesthetics in the progression. According to Malini Bhattacharya, the thrust was two pronged:

- a) To develop through indigenous forms an alternative mode to West oriented colonial theatre that dominated the urban cultural scene, and
- b) The attempt was to widen the purpose and audiences of theatre by taking to the people, short direct lays dealing with contemporary issues and problems, with specific attacks on Imperialism and Fascism (Sangeet Natāk No.94, pp.3-6)

The primary aim of the IPTA, as its organisers identified it in the “All Indian People’s Theatre conference Draft Resolution,” was to mobilize

a people’s theatre movement throughout the whole of India as the means of revitalizing the stage and the traditional arts and making them at once the expression and organiser of our people’s struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice (Jana Natya Manch, July 1999- September 200, pp. 373-74).⁴

Certainly, the delineation with the manifesto, the thought process and the desired goal is constantly discussed whenever a treatise on IPTA initiates. No doubt, luminous scholars like Samik Bandhopadhyay, Rustom Bharucha, Vasudha Dalmia, Nandi Bhatia, and of course, Malini Bhattacharya have discussed the politics and vision of IPTA at length with sheer passion and a brilliant critical acumen. Even further playwright, critic and Marxist like Utpal Dutt, G. P Deshpande and Habib Tanvir had rigorously commented on and analyzed the later stage failure of IPTA finding the loopholes in the

⁴Indian People’s Theatre Association Bulletin 1 (July 1943).

manifestation of the manifesto. Nevertheless, the consequences though not wanted created a “boomerang effect”. The IPTA was fossilized as a prized catch, an extinct species from the bygone era, which has to be now mummified, museumised enroute. It is gradually transformed into the shadow of its original figure, which is presently to be looked upon with reverence and awe in remembrance of the glorious past. However, what is left untouched or just slightly hinted upon is the aesthetics developed in the process by IPTA all the way through its thoughts and practices.

Now it the time to let see how this happened and how an organisation came into being from various rooted regional acts of awakening, and also in and for the indigenous people’s culture.

Accordingly, the IPTA activists described it not as “a movement which is imposed from above but one which has its roots deep down in the cultural awakening of the masses of India,” not “a movement which discards our rich cultural heritage by re-interpreting and adopting and integrating it with the most significant facts of our peoples’ lives and aspirations in the present epoch”(Pradhan: 1979, p.129).

In order to seek the “widest possible mass basis for its activities,” the IPTA turned to indigenous popular traditions of different regions such as the *jatra* of Bengal, *tamasha* of Maharashtra, and *burrkatha* of Andhra Pradesh.⁵ “Given the linguistic, cultural, and geographical diversity of the Indian Subcontinent, choices about language, theatrical space, and stylistic devices were important, involving, as they did, questions of viewership and audience”(Bhatia: 2004, pp.77). For instance, an audience in a working-

⁵Abbas , K.A., “India’s Anti Fascist Theatre,” in *Asia and the Americans*, December 1952,p.711.

class district of Bombay and Calcutta might appreciate a play in Marathi and Bengali respectively instead of English, or a peasant population in a distant Assam Valley village might need to see a play about the famine in a familiar dialect and surroundings.

One must resist the urge to go on with this narrative of IPTA's work⁶, which might lead this research to end up being one more of the many descriptive pieces available well. Examples could be numerous, but I will focus on the area of our primary concern (North- East) and see how regional and much localized approaches strengthened the foundations of which became later the IPTA and contributed in the development of the practiced model of art and thus the aesthetics too. In fact, the organization would not have been formed if the rousing of a movement had not been felt.

III

Long before the formation of IPTA, in around 1941, Chittagong and the easternmost districts of the then Bengal was bombed by Japanese troops. The Japanese prospect of a fascist aggression seemed imminent, and the communists were faced with the urgent need to popularize the people's war thesis. A report from Barak valley of Assam describes the Surma valley Peoples's committee as spreading the anti- fascist message by 'singing songs and staging plays' in Silchar (*Janajuddha*, 24 June 1942, p.4). A tradition that had been in the making in 1942 and was later taken up by the IPTA was that of touring squads and touring cultural workers. A student squad from Calcutta visited the easternmost districts of Bengal in 1942 and another one visited the district towns of

⁶For further an extensive information on IPTA, please consult Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker (2005), Malini Bhattacharya (Sangeet Natak, 1989), Nandi Bhatia (2004), Vasudha Dalmia(2006).

Assam in 1944. The reason of the trip was to enhance the spirits of the people in areas, which had come under Japanese intimidation: the second squad was collecting money for the famine ravaged Bengal. The performances mostly covered middle –class audiences, but sometimes it reached out to remote areas and peasant audiences; the second Squad also performed among railway factory workers at Dibrugarh, and the workers enthusiastically helped the squad to set up a makeshift stage and collect funds (*Janajuddha/Janayuddha*, 5 July 1944, p.3)⁷. This squad picked up Assamese songs while in Assam and added these to their programmes. Local talent may have been recruited occasionally, at least on the first trip; thus, at Noakhali, some Moulavis initially opposed the programme because local girls were being recruited to sing in public. But the resistance subsided when the performances were shown (*Janajuddha*, 29 July 1944, pp.2-8; 5 August 1942, pp.4-6).

Around the sametime, in the Barak Valley of Assam, talented singers from Sylhet like Nirmalendu Choudhuri, Gopal Nandi, Prasun Roy, and Khaled Choudhury were going around in the district towns and villages singing songs about the anti-fascist war, about anti-colonialism, and about the Bengal famine.⁸ IPTA as an organisation was not formally founded in Assam until 1947; but from the touring squad in Sylhet the Surma Valley Cultural Squad was born in 1945 and it went on a tour of Barak valley and Brahmaputra valley in June-July 1946, again preparing the ground for the organisation.

⁷ *Janajuddha/Janayuddha* : This periodical was an official organ of the Communist Party of India, publishing political writings in Bangla. It was in circulation at the time of the infamous famine of Bengal of 1943. Day to day reports of the famine were published in this periodical. The sluggish response of the British Government in India to the famine was exposed by the party workers. This periodical is also important for understanding the impact of the war in Bengal and the activities of the Communist Party. The early days of the Tebhaga Movement are also recorded here. The CSSS, Kolkata, Archive has v.1-3 [1942-45]. Roll no. CSS55. 35mm negative.

⁸ 'Gana Sangit Shilpi Hemanga Biswas,' Khaled Choudhury, *Pratikshan* (Bengali) January 2-17, 1988, p. 45.

Harendra Nath Borthakur recalls while talking to me about his illustrious brother Mahendra Borthakur, that in Surma valley and later in Barak Valley in early '40s the touring squad often led the formation of local cultural units comprising of the local artists.⁹ Drawing upon the local talent, but new songs either composed by Hemanga Biswas and his associates or brought over from Bengal were also taught to them by occasional visitors. Malini Bhattacharya corroborates and further asserts from the Khaled Choudhury's work that "during a Kisan Sabha conference at Patharkandi in Karimganj subdivision in Barak valley, hemanga Biswas wrote a song on the theme of famine using a local *Jari*¹⁰ tune and Khaled Choudhury, picking up the simple movements of dance from a local peasant, taught it and the refrain of a song to some young peasants in the Manipuri belt so that they could sing it in their own language." At the time Irawat (Irabot) Singh, the great political and cultural leader of Manipur, was working among the Manipuri peasants in barak valley. He rendered two of the songs composed by Hemanga Biswas into the Manipuri language while retaining the original tune. These two songs, '*Tangol adu maya thangu thouna, he lou-uba*' (*Kastetare dio jore shan*') and '*Houro awaba ahingi*' (*Jago dukhero ratero ghor tamash bhedi*') become very popular in these areas. Therefore, we see a conscious effort on the part of the cultural activist to outreach to these far off lesser known places to connect to the people, experiment with forms to reach the hearts of one's own people.

⁹In an informal interview with me on May 30, 2010 at Rampur, Goalpara, Assam.

¹⁰ Jari (Jari Gaan) is a kind of sad song. Its origin is the tragic events of Medina and Karbala and the death of Hazrat Imam Hassan and Hussain. The shia community of South Asia commemorate the events of Karbala in the month of Muharram by singing marsiyas or dirges in Urdu, in Bengali it is called Jari Gaan. Today Jari Gaans are found especially in Mymensingh district of Bangladesh. 20 May 2010. < <http://jbpv.wordpress.com/tag/jari-song/> >

The traditional *Jari* comprises of refrains and the repetitiveness of the tune makes it more evocative. Another loved tune was of the *Bhatiyali*, which are traditional boat song of eastern Bengal along the course of Brahmaputra, sung in a specific mode, noted for its long-drawn notes. In Bangladesh and India, on the banks of Brahmaputra, boatmen spent a lot of time in their boats. While sailing downstream, they had plenty of leisure to sing comfortably. The drawn out and elevated notes are the characteristic of the *Bhatiyali*. In course of time, this song gained popularity particularly in Mymensingh and Sylhet districts. A famous *Bhatiyali* song of Bangladesh -

<p>“Amay Vashile re Amay dubaili re Akul doriar bujhi kul nai re Sabdhane chaliao majhi amar vanga tori re Akul doriar bujhi kul nai re”</p>	<p>[You’ve set me adrift You’ve sunk me The endless waters have no shore Limitless, with no shores, the waters have no banks O row with care boatman, my wretched boat The endless waters have no shore.]</p>
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Their simple, repetitive motifs, their painfully honest lyrics, had made folk songs since the very beginning into a continuous string of crystallized humanity. They echo downright internal, deeply meditated thoughts and fleeting feelings of love and pain. IPTA learned a lot from these, and could identify the potential of these tunes in communicating with the peasant population. Later, the Central squad of IPTA adopted these tunes and many more, when it went across the country with performances that spoke of *oppression* soaked in the ether of familiar folk tune and energy.

The peasants and worker population could relate to these songs not only because it illustrated their plight, but the rhythm too had something in it that they could relate. The

rhythm was not based on some classical tune for which these illiterate village people had to develop a taste for, but these songs were tuned up in a manner that were their own.

It was on IPTA's part to create awareness among the people between the ongoing modes of oppressions and the ways to resist it. Consciously or unconsciously, this was slowly building up a community that does not share linguistic or cultural similarities, but they shared basic aspects that is, of being oppressed and being marginalized. IPTA through its mobilization, songs, dances and drama later concretized this sense of the community of the oppressed, where the pain and angst of the oppressed people, be it stranded Chittagong people bombed by Japanese aggression, famine ravaged Bengal. Their cry was not only heard but also felt thoroughly across the country.

We have been discussing the projects of the touring squads at length, the usages of songs, tunes, etc. However, did we realize that in the course this discussion we are already talking about a new vocabulary of art creation as initiated by IPTA? This new vocabulary is the usage of people's tune to sing songs highlighting the plight of the changing times. This new lexis is a step towards a new aesthetics of the new emerging people's theatre in India.

IV

In October and November of 1944 IPTA presented *Nabanna* (Harvest Festival). This four-act play by Bijon Bhattacharya, a playwright and one of the initial members of IPTA, was written in reaction to the Bengal famine of 1943. The author and Sambhu Mitra produced the play, with both of them performing as actors in the play. The author's

role was “very important,” Mitra adds, and “he was great in it.” *Nabanna* put in the picture the life of Bengali peasants during this traumatic period of the famine. Pestered and floored by poverty, the characters are as well sufferers of the human voracity around them. The Play got its name from the final scene in which the harvest festival takes place, the play ends on a note of hope and belief in the collective strength of the peasantry. It was produced not only in the Bengali language but also in Hindi and was made into a film. Its success was overwhelming and its impact on Indian theatre phenomenal. The first responses to the play seemed like they are literal manifestations of the theories of Erwin Piscator:

The Proletarian Theatre must be run on these lines: simplicity of expression and construction; it must have a clear and unambiguous impact on the emotions of the working class audience; any artistic intention must be subordinated to the revolutionary purpose of the whole: the conscious emphasis and propagation of the concept of the class struggle. (1920, p.41)

Nabanna is clearly a milestone in the history of Indian theatre. It was the first time since Dinabandhu Mitra's play *Nildarpan* (lit. *Blue mirror* or *The Tale of Indigo Planters*) was produced in the 1870s, that a truly peasant drama had hit the Bengali and national arena. *Nildarpan*, which dealt with the crushing exploitation of the indigo plantation workers by their British masters, is considered the first play of social protest in Bengali literature. On at least one instance, the play had to stopped midway because of the infuriation of the primarily British audience when a peasant worker attacked a white planter who was going to rape an Indian woman; it was in due course banned by the British government. The Dramatic Performance Control Act of 1876, passed purportedly

to control obscenity, was actually aimed at censoring plays such as *Nildarpan* that exposed foreign misrule. The Act put a lid on the further creation of Indian plays with a social conscience until *Nabanna* burst forth on the scene.

Nabanna had an astonishing impact on audience because the traditional heroes of Indian drama were replaced with famine, strife-wrecked village folk. The language of the play, in keeping with the characters, was another exodus from the convention; for the first time village dialect was used all through the play to adapt for the stage the actual social reality.¹¹ Mitra also broke away from elaborate staging and used an extremely simple set with a plain jute cloth backdrop and against this silhouettes- a *modus operandi* then still novelty in Indian theatre. He used idiosyncratic choreography and stage composition, using silences in dramatic moments and disjointed significant small scenes put together in an epic form. His use of sound effects was imaginative and startling, but perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the play was the flawless acting. At the time of its production it was said that never before had theatre goers seen the production of a director like Mitra who had such insight into and mastery of all the details that went into a performance.¹²

Although the subject matter was a “non-popular” one, *Nabanna* played seven successive houseful nights at the Srirangam Theater in Calcutta. An extraordinary occurrence at the time. *Nabanna*, however, continued to be performed on makeshift stages before large audiences in the countryside as well as in the city across the country.

¹¹Samik Bandyopadhyay (“*Activist Theatre: Recovering a Tradition*”. XVII *Safdar Hashmi Memorial Lecture 2009*. Friday, 23rd October) recalling a personal interview with Bijon Bhattacharya about the script, composition and staging of *Nabanna*)

¹² Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation. 28 May 2010.

< <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/Awardees/Biography/BiographyMitraSom.html> >

There was something fresh, something new about this play, it cried for and literally brought on stage the famine stricken, weakened, oppressed people, but not as a melodrama. But as a stark analytical text about people writhing in severe pain, that unsettled the audience and urged them to move up from their cosy audience seats and do something to lessen the pain and the angst of these people.

It is the story of the anguish of deprived peasants with the central character, Pradhan Samaddar, a peasant in the devastating Bengal famine of 1942-43, a man made catastrophe created by the British who used the harvest of these years to feed the troops fighting in Europe and Japan. Being a full-length play in four acts, it demanded a greater individuation of character, which made it more difficult 'to present the historical topicality of dramatic situation' (Bhattacharya:1983, p.9). Illustrating the scene details Vasudha Dalmia quotes:

The abrupt ending of the scene breaks up the single track movement of narrative, and transfers the audience with great flexibility from one aspect of social life to another, from relief kitchen to charitable dispensary, from the wedding feast to beggar's scrounging for food near the dustbin, from the child dying of malnutrition to the village wife being approached by the city tout, so that, although the main focus is on Pradhan and his family, the approach to their problems is a multi-layered one and sensationalism of individual scenes gives way to an analytical linking up of the different segments of social reality.(2006: p.165)

However, does this new dramaturgy, again define how they followed the Piscator–Brechtian instruction of the ‘self-effacement’ that is ‘never to follow is the ultimate way to follow.’ Piscator says:

It has probably become clear from what has already been stated that technical innovations were never an end in themselves for me. Any means I have used or am currently in the process of using were designed to elevate the events on the stage onto a historical plane and not just to enlarge the technical range of the stage machinery. [...] This elevation, which was inextricably bound up with the use of Marxist dialectics in the theatre, had not been achieved by the plays themselves. My technical devices had been developed to cover up the deficiencies of the dramatists’ products. (1929: p.244)¹³

In the preceding paragraphs, Mitra has already shown the new ways of execution that brought about a new language of theatre making. Balwant Gargi hints up the new emerging vocabulary and the new aesthetics while depicting that he was a first hand witness to a production of *Nabanna* in Punjab:

The lights went down. From the middle of the audience a man suddenly rose to his feet, gave three beats on a drum and made his way towards the stage. Three men and two women seated in the audience bustled and shoved to follow him. They howled like beggars, “We are hungry! We are hungry! We come from Bengal, the land of plenty, the land of hunger. We are hungry!”

The audience buzzed, annoyed. Who were these people? What are they doing? Why were they causing a disturbance? What did they want?

¹³ Piscator Erwin, 1929. "Basic Principles of Sociological Drama." Trans. Hugh Rorrison. Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents. Ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998. 242-245.

The broken voices merged into a song as the six mounted the stage. They formed themselves into a group and sang, their eyes burning. All the suffering of famine and poverty was expressed in their voices and strained faces.

Their movements, gestures, expressions and speech had no theatricality; it was real as the street scenes we experience daily. These faces were familiar to us in poor quarters of Lahore....[T]hey mirrored Indian life, the poverty and the suffering under the heel of a foreign power.

Women in the audience sobbed; the eyes of the men misted; two college girls who had wrinkled their noses at the players now wiped their tears....People and players, the two halves of the theatre, kept apart for so long, joined and became one whole. (1962: p. 188-189)¹⁴

Rustom Bharucha critically responds to the effects of *Nabanna* on the audience:

Enacted with fierce commitment and burning sense of injustice by young members of the Bengal I.P.T.A. (including six Communist Party organizers with no theatrical experience) the first performances were revelations for Bengali theatre audiences, who had reconciled themselves to the sensationalism and melodrama of the professional theatre. They discovered for the first time in *Nabanna* the extraordinary impact of realism in dialects and the street cries of the actors, the minutiae of their gestures, movements, and responses, and the stark simplicity of the set and the costumes. (1983: p.49)

As Malini Bhattacharya points out, this was using the naturalistic stage for a totally new purpose, giving 'dramatic form to what was appearing as new political reality' (1983: p.8)

¹⁴Gargi, Balwant. *Theatre in India* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1962).

Further Vasudha Dalmia goes on to point three different strands in the art works of IPTA. First strand consisted of traditional folk-theatre forms that were remoulded for contemporary purposes; the second was constituted by experiments on the urban stage, [t]he third and final form generated by IPTA could be viewed almost as the beginning of modern 'epic' theatre in India. (Dalmia: 2006, pp.163-167) The ballet *Immortal India* is an example of the new genre. Ravi Shankar composed the music for this ballet, which depicts the modern history of India from the beginning of British occupation. The production was rehearsed in one large space with all of the musicians and dancers living communally. (2006: p.54)¹⁵In the ballet, a worker was the narrator, who is awakened up from his dream, grumbles but relates to his lamenting associates the wonderful dream he had of poverty, and of exploitation and hoarding, but also with the darker side he saw the people happy and contented. In his dream the people finally unite together in the determination to become free, to mould their own destiny. (Pradhan: 197, p.386)

Here one needs to note, the passion that the IPTA generated, the campaign it launched on oppressive structures, and the hope it aroused. These are suggestive of the initiation of a process that could help the 'people' conceptualize the turning upside down of their world. Moreover, the "people's participation as spectators, as actors, as storytellers, and as donors of money became a seal of their approval of defying the authorities. Their attendance and applause were testimony that the events on stage, the acting out of history, had gone beyond the stage itself to the hundreds of 'people' to whom the IPTA had intended to take its message"(Nandi Bhatia:2004, p.87).

¹⁵ Lavezzoli, Peter. *The dawn of Indian music in the West : Bhairavi* .(New York : Continuum, 2006)

The testimonies of the scholars regarding the performance being the testimony of the reality of the people definitely indicate that this art practice and the manner of its creation was absolutely new to the then India. Here we have a play- *Nabanna* that is an ‘absolute performance’ to the core of its word as the text of the play is a mundane story of suffering, but what makes it live is the connection that the spectator and the audience create when they watched the performances. Reviews by Balwant Gargi and Rustom Bharucha definitely points towards a sheer masterpiece that is a ‘pristine’ ‘pure’ performance at its best. In *Nabanna*, the starving woman would not give out a silent cry like Helen Weigel in Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, on the contrary stretch the emotional level to the farthest point and would cry out acutely “Bhaaaaaat daaaaooooo, Faaan daaaaaoooooo” [give rice, give rice water]. The total effect sends in writhing sensation down your spine, not making you a consumer of melodrama, but into an analytically charged observer who is face to face with practical reality.

To drive home my point, I would like to mention how creative narratives can be unleashed from the emotional, implicit memory of the survivor for collective sharing in order to mitigate noxiousness in individual and initiate others to come and help. Knuuttila¹⁶ while commenting on Duras work mention “Duras’s thesis speaks of her insistent intention to render unaccountable phenomena in a symbolic form for listening-witnessing others despite inner obstacles. But to transform a self-shattering experience into aesthetically enlightening works requires two kinds of audacious experimentation: to express the symptoms of trauma, and to refrain from a mimetic repetition so as to

¹⁶Knuuttila, Sirkka. *Fictionalising Trauma* (Unpublished PhD Thesis)(Helsinki: Helsinki University, 2009)

transcend conventionalised, tautological representations.” The performance of *Nabanna* positively renders such an effect. While depicting the famine, it expresses the trauma of famine to the minutest detail, again in performance it saved itself from the tautological representations, creating a new taste and new aesthetics. Unfortunately, we do not have any documentation of the play except for play script, few reviews, and personal accounts, which is very limited in terms of providing us with the complete experience of the event that was *Nabanna or India Immortal*. A serious non-seriousness towards documentation looms largely over the Indian tradition, and initial IPTA production went through such a crisis. One could argue, technology was not available too. However, I would suggest technology is doing no better to document performances especially theatrical one. A performance text should be created with an attempt to catch a glimpse of what by its nature as a performance piece is an extremely protean entity, at least by formalizing some expressions, if not all.

V

With the end of the war in August 1945 and the independence of India in August 1947, IPTA soon became, quite clearly, an arm of the Communist Party of India and dogmatism began to characterize its work. By 1948, [many] felt that they could no longer belong to an organization which confused drama and the arts with political ideology. In 1957, finally IPTA had its last national conference. After the disintegration of IPTA, Political theatre still has often relied upon community idioms and popular farce- satire to make a veiled but effective critique of political trends. Thus, came into being the popular ‘Agit-Prop’ plays performed both on stage and on streets. Several amateur theatre groups

came up dominating the political arena. In contemporary India, however, political theatre is facing a new challenge in trying to find ways to "out-farce" a political arena that already has become inherently farcical.

Two primary challenges as elaborated by Darren Zook are-- first one from the state of Kerala in south-western India, where a self-styled progressive state government in the hands of the Communist Party has come under attack by critical playwrights for ossifying into orthodoxy and complacency[that could be true of any place in India] (Zook, Darren C. ATJ: Fall 2001). The second challenge centres on the difficulties faced by playwrights who have turned toward so-called indigenous or folk models of theatre to voice their critiques. Utpal Dutt condemns this attitude:

By knocking out content and using only the score is to replace a vision with a slogan, to misuse folklore, to descend to formalism. Form and content are thoroughly integrated in folklore; to divide them is to kill them. The score by itself is so simplistic, repetitive and even crude, it is probably boring.(Dutt: 1982, p.142)

Furthermore, Dutt's assertion holds good as the national government in Delhi has tried to utilize the symbols of an invented indigenous past to establish its legitimacy. Critical theatre often finds itself applauded and even co-opted by the very political forces against which it has directed its dissent. Of course, the analysis of the gradual changes in aesthetics of people's theatre and its manifestation in the groups and association with direct linkages to IPTA in post independent India is required. However, given the detailed and extended nature of the study and its importance in political history, analysis for such an area deserves a total project onto it and will be taken up as a separate

exhaustive process later. So, at this juncture, what is pertinent to the discussion is the examination of the difficulties of establishing a "pure" space and concept for political theatre in contemporary India and offer as a conclusion a possible path toward resolution.

Most of the IPTA artists have only a nostalgic association with it. Even Rustom Bharucha falls in this trope and writes, "The IPTA, I would suggest, is better read as a utopic movement in our cultural history, rather than as a disintegrating movement- though the lessons of its disintegration need to be absorbed in the formulation of an ongoing cultural praxis. (1998:p.50) However, the question that arises now is, are the lessons taken? G.P. Deshpande answers:

Some Mumbai film people do some theatre once in a year or so in the name of IPTA. It goes without saying that its very economics prevents it from reaching people. One should not be glamorizing theatre in a way this film star theatre ends up doing. Our nostalgia makes us accept the travesty of the notion of 'people's theatre.' But people are not cheated because for them it is film star theatre or glamour theatre rather than 'people's theatre.' Here is the case of two failures, one being the failure to read (cultural) history politically and the other being, of course, the failure to read the political culturally. (2009:p.8)

Hence, we find an apparent breach in the neo-tradition that emerged with IPTA as it was well conceived but deficiently implemented. Therefore, latter day practitioners being exposed to the IPTA experience, ventured into the domain of creative arts in India in a bid to search something that would be more consistent. The search was on for that building block in art, which could pass the ravages of time and also could find an echo in

the hearts across this land rendering the souls full with songs of oppression, and strengthened to face it.

One harmony flows across the indigenous cultures in India is the notion of community based physical theatre. The physical theatre or the dominance of a strict code of the body was quite a feature of the classical- folk- traditional theatre. Therefore, directors like Habib Tanvir, H. Kanhailal, Prasanna and Bansi Kaul, etc. found the need and sites of practice of a kind of theatre in our modern theatrical domain that would project an alternative model, the foundation of which was long ago laid by the IPTA. In the process they directors and many more tried to bring into being elements of the traditional performances rejuvenating in our times, liberating theatre on two facets. First, this step liberates 'modern Indian theatre' as it breaks free from already fixed expressions, verbosity and creates new ways of expressions, and on the other hand it introduces the new generation to the traditional community performances, where they could connect themselves with their own past.

Year 2000, nearly a half a century after the performance of the IPTA's iconic *Nabanna*, Kanhailal's *Kalakshetra Manipur* performed Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*¹⁷. The performance came at a time when the day-to-day state in the state of Manipur has turned extraordinarily turbulent¹⁸. Subsequently barely three years since the performance,

¹⁷'*Draupadi*' the name takes us in long back in a hall, where the enemy chief begins to pull at her sari. Draupadi silently prays to the incarnate Krishna. The idea of sustaining law (dharma) materializes itself as clothing and as the king pulls at her sari, there seems to be more and more of it. She is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly stripped. It is one of Krishna's miracles. However, Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*, a 'naxalite' peasant woman, gang- raped by police, refuses to be clothed by men again. In *Draupadi*, what is represented is an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between (hetero) sexuality and gender violence beings to blur.

¹⁸Manipur, the state in North- East of India, would seem to be like a flash -back sequence from colonial India. At least, I felt so when I visited Imphal, the state's capital for the first time in my life on June 9, 2010. The

the failure of the nation to recognise Irom Sharmila's¹⁹ historic Satyagraha is a symptom of all sorts of lethargy that is eroding the Northeast. She had already been fasting against AFSPA for four years when the Assam Rifles arrested Thangjam Manorama Devi, a 32-year-old woman, allegedly a member of the banned People's Liberation Army. Her body was found dumped in Imphal a day later, marked with terrible signs of torture and rape. Manipur came to a spontaneous boil. Five days later, on July 15, 2004, pushing the boundaries of human expression, 12 ordinary women demonstrated naked in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters at Kangla Fort, Imphal. Ordinary mothers and grandmothers eking out a hard life. "Indian Army, rape us too", they screamed. The State responded by jailing all of them for three months. After this event the performance of *Draupadi* became all the more significant, where on stage one could see how the trauma, pain and angst that was someone else's from a different time period, different social reality can always have an reverberation to become the unforeseeable apparent reality, taking the people's theatre to a new height.

visual imagery of Imphal town gives you a sense of eerie suffocation with gun-laden paramilitary 'jawans' standing at every nook and corner of the city. For whose safety and security?

¹⁹"*Menghaobi*" Irom Sharmila Chanu (born March 14, 1972), also known as the *Iron Lady of Manipur*, is a civil rights activist, political activist, journalist and poet from the Indian state of Manipur. Since November 4, 2000, she has been on a political fast demanding the Government of India to withdraw the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, also otherwise known as AFSPA, from Manipur and other areas of India's North-East. Ten years since it began in 2000, Irom Sharmila Chanu's fast is unparalleled in the history of political protest.

Chapter/Act II:

En-route/Enroot to the Thesis of People's Theatre:

Kalakshetra Manipur

[In] its most archaic sense, theatre is the capacity possessed by human beings – and not by animals – to observe themselves in action. Humans are capable of seeing themselves in the act of seeing, of thinking their emotions, of being moved by their thoughts. They can see themselves here and imagine themselves there; they can see themselves today and imagine themselves tomorrow. This is why humans are able to identify (themselves and others) and not merely to recognise.

Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992, p.xxvi)

I

In spite of the economic prosperity, India enjoying now- regional, social, political and economic discrepancies inside the nation state persists unabated. Within free India, there are compartments of colonial decree where people are subjected to a type of neo-colonial servitude and where people are struggling to set themselves liberated from the manacles of a kind of bondage different from the British experience. Theatre in Manipur is synonymous with Heisnam Kanhailal, who have already been on his journey long before the opening remarks of this chapter by Augusto Boal. Kanhailal, as a theatre director from Manipur needs to be seen within the framework of the above-mentioned points, because, as of now, life in Manipur is certainly a kind of life very different from the life people are leading in other parts of the country. Even though the process of decolonization in the post- independence period affected all levels of activity throughout

India. The colonial experience, breeding a sense of subjection in Indians, had been gradually removed as a result of the Independence struggle. 'Along with the restoration of national self-respect, efforts for 'self reliance', 'progress' and modernization' reached the nerves and veins of the country, but not in Manipur, or in fact in the whole of North-East. As for theatre, it always extends beyond what one sees on stage. Social and personal relationships, economic problems, sexuality, politics, struggles within group, dreams and disillusionment, all these factors (and many more) contribute to making of theatre. Unfortunately, most writers never address this messy backstage of theatre life. More often than not, they are ignorant of its realities, if not smugly convinced that 'the play's the thing'. But for Kanhailal and his wife Sabitri Devi (who is also a consort in his creative endeavours), all these daily realities, struggles, joys, sorrows, situating them in the larger political and economic problems of the state, ethnic drive, etc. contribute to the formation of a theatre. This is Kanhailal's impression on Rustom Bharucha, as felt in the early 90's, while preparing the performance texts of *Pebet* and *Memoirs of Africa*.

In past two decades, Kanhailal and his theatre both have developed into a much more incisive insightful mechanism, which '...can see themselves here and imagine themselves there; ... see themselves today and imagine themselves tomorrow [and]... are able to identify (themselves and others) and not merely to recognise.' Consequently, this chapter deals with his perception and vision of theatre, that creates hauntingly true a theatre, which is the manifestation of his keen, ardent and passionate observation of the life itself -life within and life without. Thus, rather than being mere descriptive in nature of the social condition in question, it is utmost analytical to help us grasp the developing theoretical pattern in Kanhailal's works.

Subsequently, one would journey through the 'physical' and 'ritual' theatre and finally attempt to comprehend the aesthetics developed 'en route.

II

Manipur as we have seen in the last chapter is the modern version of the mythical land, the 'jewelled land.' There are many mythical stories about the origin of the name Manipur. Some scholars and local people narrate its link with the Mahabharata. They say the name is from Mani, a jewel. This jewel was formerly in the possession of the Rajas of the country ages ago. The country was at one time named Mohindrapore but the Raja named Buba Baha changed the name to Manipur. According to the *Mahabharata*¹, the name Manipur was in existence before the birth of Buba Baha and Mahindrapore was the name of a high hill, which is situated a short distance to the east of the capital.² At a less exotic level, Manipur is the state near the North- Eastern border (i.e. dangerous and suspicious territory), the breeding ground of insurgency and age-old feuds with Nagas, moreover it has taken a dangerous turn as the centre of drug trafficking and AIDS, which has already infected hundreds of addicted youths. Most recently, it has received media attention with Muivah's³ visit plans to his birthplace in Manipur. All these images, partially true, partially coloured, have created a myth of Manipur that needs to be dismissed. However, if there were one image that I would like to refer. Rustom Bharucha

¹The *Mahabharata* (Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*) is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the other being the *Rāmāyana*. The epic is part of the Hindu *itihāsa* (or "history"). The epic is traditionally ascribed to Vyasa, who is also a major character in the epic. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahabharata>>

²<<http://www.webindia123.com/manipur/land/land.html>> accessed on June 20, 2010

³Thuingaleng Muivah is a Tangkhul Naga who joined the Naga National Service only in 1965 and was given the post of General Secretary by the Naga National Council. After a few years he was sent by the Federal Government of Nagaland on a goodwill Alee mission. While in the foreign country, he was given a lot of honour because of his association with the Naga National Council (NNC). 20 June, 2010.

<<http://www.nagalandpost.com/ShowStory.aspx?npoststoryiden=UzEwMjY0ODI%3DKkud%2BLAesPg%3D>>

went through in 1990s an experience. I too went through the same experience during my visit to Manipur in June 2010. He observes:

[T]he sight of youths driving cycle-rickshaws, their faces swathed in cloth, accentuated by dark glasses and improvised hats. These 'faceless' youths are not protecting themselves from air-pollution. There is no industry in Manipur to worry about that problem. Quite simply, the boys cover their faces because they are ashamed of them-selves. They do not want to be seen by others.⁴

Almost two decades after his visit, I too found young men wearing scarf on their faces and paddling cycle rickshaws across the city. Appropriately, Rustom Bharucha rightly mentions that there is no industry in Manipur to worry about air pollution, but where he hints and hits at, there is no industry in Manipur, and so the youths are driving cycle- rickshaws. That is the abject reality of Manipur- '*the Jewelled land*'. Excuse me! Did I hear anybody saying- what an irony?

Lokendra Arambam, an authority on Manipur and North-East of India feels that due to independence, the old habits, ideas and thought-processes had to undergo a rapid change. However, being neglected on every term, Manipur was not able to cope with the change because opportunities were not created for a planned change. Moreover, as for arts generally and theatre specifically in Manipur gained little from the rest of India and

⁴ Bharucha, Rustom. "Politics of Indigenous Theatre: Kanhailal in Manipur" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 11/12, Annual Number (Mar., 1991), pp. 747-749+751+753-754 (article consists of 6 pages), Published by: Economic and Political Weekly, 24 June 2010. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4397431>

the whole world. “Indian theatre was fortunate enough” Arambam adds, “to be led by men of vision and socially committed intellectuals.” While portraying Manipuri theatre, he explains:

The Indian Peoples’ Theatre Association and its stalwarts were perhaps the pioneers in attempting to bring about a new awareness. Though the organization has long ceased to function, artists and intellectuals have individually struggled to preserve this new sense of *identity*. The result of their work is now easily recognized.

In geographically isolated semi-feudal Manipur, whose historical evolution was of a different character and momentum from the rest of India, social and cultural had a different orientation. Ethnic and social differentiation from the rest of India produced different strands of intellectual perception, action and goals. Under the leadership of Hijam Irabot⁵, the communist revolutionary, IPTA activity in Manipur in the fifties influenced the traditional Nupi-Pala (women’s opera) and Manoharsai (a genre of *Sankirtana*⁶) performers to induce a *revolutionary awareness* in the peasantry. Yet IPTA could not capture the capital of Imphal, from where cultural movements emanated. Imphal was controlled by the newly bourgeoisie, who succeeded the departing colonial masters. They helped suppress the proletarian revolution of 1949-51. (Sangeet Natak, No.77-78, July –December, 1985, p.67)[Italics mine]

⁵Hijam Irabot Singh (30 September 1896-26 September 1951), also known as Jana Neta Hijam Irabot, was an active political and social activist during the British rule in Manipur. During his eventful life, he has written journals and composed poems, wrote plays and played in them, participated in various sports activities, but he is best remembered for his chairing the 4th Session of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha and his leadership roles against social injustices during the Second Nupilal, 1939.

⁶When a person loudly chants the glories of the Lord's activities, qualities, form, etc., his chanting is called sankirtana. Sankirtana also refers to the congregational chanting of the holy name of the Lord. 18 June, 2010. < <http://www.harekrsna.com/practice/sadhana/harinam/sankirtana.htm> >

Of course, Arambam talks about *identity*, if at all theatre as a work of art that has something to do with the society where it is rooted, we can in no way avoid seeing this art in the context of the brutalities taking place in the Manipuri society in the context of the *identity* (imposed and self conceived).

As an outsider both to culture and language of Manipur, I am conscious of the precincts in my understanding the ethos of Manipur as an insider nor can there be complete detachment to the what is happening in the state of Manipur. All I could do is to cross the threshold into a vicinity, where I am at least in a better position to elucidate for what I am viewing, comprehending. The vicinity that I intend to inhabit is theatre, theatre that depicts present social realities to envisage a silver lining for the future.

Once the great American art critic, Bernard Berenson (1865-1959) said, "All of the arts, poetry, music, ritual, the visible arts, the theater, must singly and together create the most comprehensive art of all, a humanized society, and its masterpiece, free man". I am not sure how far the great critic could stick to his saying when towards the end of his life; he must have seen Jews being massacred by the Nazis, the 'Art' of the whole Europe being hoard down into the concentration camps and out of all scalding realities of WW II, with an artistic bent soaps, mattress and brushes made out of human remains and the gift to an Atom bomb each to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Of course, in his very last days he must have also admired (intended irony) the beginning of a painting that America was going to paint in the theatre of South East Asia in the coming years- it is the ultimate work of *art* etched in the memory of human civilization - the Vietnam War. Having cited these elaborate instances of art, I would not improve the above mentioned quote, but would like offer an example to illustrate the possible change. There is a popular proverb:

'practice makes a man perfect'. But if the proverb is closely reflected upon, one would realize that 'practice', it could be both good and bad. Bad practice will make the man perfect in bad practices. Good will result in good. Therefore, this value addition is required in the earlier quote by Berenson to envisage a theatre or arts that would create an 'ideal humanized society' and 'free man' or in matter to envisage a silver lining for the future.

Hence, with examples of art from across the globe, comments of ideal utopia in our mind and grim realities knocking down faces, it is quite impractical to expect the law-and-order situation to turn out to be healthier in ensuing future except for a twirl from awful to nastiest; also, there is a aggravating sense of incredulity and suspicion amongst the populace. This sense of trepidation and apprehension is crippling almost the whole of society not just in Manipur but whole of North-East of India, in such a situation how can art and artist be away from this garb. This sense of fear or insecurity has again creates the 'Cop in the Head', to recall Augusto Boal, and of course does impede all processes of development and creativity. For the art of theatre which is inherently forceful, immediate and at the same time vulnerable, the theatre practitioners must not envisage an utopia out there in the future somewhere, but should believe that the act of theatre as a 'gestus' itself encapsulates the change, the *utopia* that it envisages. If this happens in theatre, then the theatre practitioners who want to sing, 'the times they are changing', would definitely overcome the form of indolence, lack of sensation, state of being mute and loss of vision as faced by them now.

"Kanhaulal's long silence, his textualism in the practice of theatre," Nongthombam Premchand says, "... his intermittent sojourn to Delhi and other parts of

the country can be located in these complex realities happening in the Manipuri society for many years.”⁷ He refers to ‘*Textualism*’, as meant by Edward Said, and also mentions that textuality is not simply how the journalistic critics or scholars view theatre but also how the theatre director as an artiste not simply engage in the production of plays but how far they engage in the textuality of theatre which means ahistorical approaches and pure textual ventures like actor training, scenography, etc. His keen observation holds good for a majority of the portion. Nevertheless, I would suggest a few adds-on that might have significant impact on the understanding of this phenomenon. Though, Premchand mentions Edward Said, but a close study of the two significant thinkers Derrida and Foucault, who have distinctive approaches to the problem of *textuality* and who have influenced Said’s work significantly would illuminate us further on the area of our concern. At one level, Derrida and Foucault stand at opposite poles on the continuum of the theory of post-structuralism. Yet, at the same time, each of these theorists shares a commitment to a form of strong textualism. The approach to textualism found in each of these thinkers effectively challenges the conventional division between text and context essential to virtually all traditional forms of historiography, but does not negate history altogether. Rather it reinstates history with possibilities of multiple narratives, multiple interpretations and multiple manifestations (Said: 1978, p. 673-714).⁸ Therefore, if we take an account of how theatre of Kanhailal came into existence and how it is manifested, then we find that it is deeply embedded in history.

⁷Premchand, N. *Kanhailal as I know him*. 15 June, 2010. <<
<http://www.kanglaonline.com/index.php?template=kshow&kid=1178> >>

⁸ Edward Said, “The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions,” *Critical Inquiry* 4 (Summer 1978): pp. 673-714.

III

The early of 1970s was period when sections of people, the youths in particular started feeling disillusioned with the relationship between Manipur and India after twenty years of experience as Part 'C' state of the Indian union. Manipur came to be part of India in 1949. When Hinduism came to Manipur in the seventeenth century and got entrenched in the Meitei society in due course of time it took the form of a kind of religious imperialism. To make Hinduism rooted among the people numbers of manuscripts treasured by the natives were burnt and native religious practices and ritualistic performances were banned. The native script use for writing was banned and replaced by Bengali script, which is still in use. New myths and lores were constructed to firmly position the indigenous people and their faith within the structure of the Aryan civilization and their perception. Hills, rivers, dales, routes, stars and planets were transformed according to Sanskrit nomenclature. Local mythic poets had to reweave the local myths of origin of the universe and the state of Manipur in consonance with the Hindu mythology. The mythical heroes and entire 'mleccha'⁹ world were awarded with Hindu names. The Gotra system was introduced and each and every individual had to define themselves with one of the Gotras. So the entire scheme of things generated by the Hinduism was considered as a step to obliterate the ethnic Meiteis of their past.

⁹ Mleccha — of the lands known as Mlecchadeśa (where Vedic civilization was not present); **SB 9.23.16**, mleccha — of the outcaste meat-eaters; **SB 10.40.22**, mleccha — with barbarians; **SB 10.50.44**, mleccha — of barbarians; **SB 10.52.5**, mleccha-prāyāḥ — mostly outcastes; **SB 12.1.38**. *Bhaktivedanta VedaBase: Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*. 12 July 2010 URL :<< <http://vedabase.net/m/mleccha> >>

Therefore, in seventies, when the Meiteis started looking back to their past, these things came out to be a shocking revelation. They were at a loss, unable to find an authentic cultural positioning of their own. And, they started a journey of questioning their authenticity, searching for their identity as a nationality. Theatre was the first to respond to this kind of an absurd situation. Led by theatre persons like Kanhailal, Shri Biren, W. Kamini and a host of young Turks, started questioning on stage, in front of the audience composed of their own community members, the authenticity of their own political and cultural life, and meaning of their existence in absence of an identity which could be a befitting reply to others. And, since these theatre persons came out, theatre in Manipur has never been the same both in form and spirit. As we have already pointed out the different strands of community based art practice, here too it varies from the quote in the introductory chapter, which could to be critiqued and opened up for community to community with their invested variations in the meaning creation and perception. Possibly the most common usage of the word '*community*' indicates a large group living in close proximity. Thus, when one tries to look closely into the opening line of this piece, one has to be likewise aware of all these problems alike and then tackle them from an objective point of view. In view of the prevalence of multiculturalism inherent in a country like India since ages, it would be pertinent and quite well in place to now talk about a community that is an admixture of '*geographical communities*' and the '*communities of culture*'. The Rabha, the Mech, the Bengali, the Rajbanshi, the Tripuri and the Manipuri communities in the North-East of India are illustrations of this unique cultural admixture. In this context a successful model of this community based arts practice in India, which is quite different from the 'Western' conception of 'Community

Art' is The Theatre of Kanhailal. By now based on the foregoing arguments, we know Kanhailal has been rooted in Manipuri culture, which is in itself a conglomeration of many cultures. Kanhailal's work resonates with the distinctness of all the cultures, galvanising the theatre he creates as a union that is essentially 'Manipuri'. He is deeply dipped in Meitei culture without making an issue of it. It is through his community's culture that he traces his way back, in order to discover the "psychic power and archetype, [which] is related...[to] the 'eternal human', transforming itself into a powerful expression of silent but inarticulate feelings of the oppressed people" (Kanhailal: 2004, p.16). However, most of us do not know that his attempt to "evolve a consistent philosophy of theatrical performance" is now not just limited to the precincts of Manipur. It has flowed into many adjoining cultures, Rabha being one of them. *Badungduppa*¹⁰ becomes the platform where different cultures in the region interact. In the process, they create meanings and articulate their silences, tracing their way back to their roots. Thus, here in *Badungduppa*, one observes that the cultures of the Rabha, the Mech, the Bengali, the Rajbanshi, and the Tripuri in the North-East of India may differ in the exterior, but many a time, at many a place would they share a basic similarity in performing their experience. Here, it would be pertinent to understand what yields this similarity. The specific relationship that humans share with the supernatural, material culture and society brings in this experience of similarity. The concept of the supernatural is the same even though the specific religion might be different. Materiality of a culture can be specific and different, whereas its essence is universal.

¹⁰Badungduppa is the name of a Rabha theatre group, which is at Rampur Village of Goalpara District. Sukracharjya Rabha is the visionary, founder and artistic director of the group.

In the 1960s Victor Turner adapted the word “communitas” from Paul Goodman’s usage, which connoted the earlier explanation in a well placed manner. He asserts, “Communitas is, existentially speaking and in its origin, purely spontaneous and self-generating” (Turner: 2002, p.99). It is individuals who are in conflict with one another, not cultures. Thus, the study of community culture – the integral part of the culture of human race and sharing of the experiences, the beliefs, the customs, the traditions, the manners, the songs, the tales and the myths- would certainly one day solve the most difficult of the problems of ethnology. In a different, but relevant context, Appadurai finds the use of traditional techniques and folk knowledge as significant for survival of Indian farmers (Appadurai: 1990). Similarly, playwright H.S. Shiva Prakash sees continuity in indigenous Indian dramatic forms and finds a sense of energy in folk theatre (Shiva Prakash: 2007). For Shiva Prakash, the past coexists with the present in a parallel form. If we look to origin and evolution of folk theatre, we have to admit that this theatrical tradition is interlinked with human civilization. This leads one to understand that in reality every culture has ingested foreign elements from exogenous sources through time, with the various elements gradually becoming ‘naturalized’ within it. This is proved in the case of the ‘folk’ as it is ever-changing due to its dynamism. So, it is living and it has not developed into a tradition (tradition here is used in the sense of codified practices of the past, which is starkly different from living folk traditions). As we have already pointed out earlier, a relationship between community performance and how it serves in the manifestation of material culture, so, a change in material culture obviously has an impact on the performances of the community. Taking cue from Kanhailal’s proposition- in an extreme

situation, if the dominant material culture becomes oppressive, the community logically develops a way to resist it and performs that resistance.

In the early stage of his career as a theatre practitioner Kanhailal came in close contact with well-known theatre director and playwright G.C. Tongbra and his theatre group the Society Theatre. He was fond of writing social comedies but with a local touch of humour as different from his mentor G.C. Tongbra. In 1961, he wrote and produced a play titled *Layeng Ahanba*. Some of his plays were a farcical and hilarious kind of comedy, which was very popular among the people. Kanhailal has always been a free spirit, who identified with the exploited and downtrodden. His play *Tamnalai* (Haunting Spirits) appeared around the year 1972. Dr. Premchand observes that *Tamnalai* dealt with the theme of the 'goons' problem in the society and how the innocents suffered in their hands, was a breakthrough in the art of writing drama in Manipur, which was otherwise bound to a long habit of writing plays in linear narrative and on trite themes. Since *Tamnalai*, Kanhailal has stopped writing plays and the habit of staging well-made plays. Spoken language was not enough for him and many other directors of those days. For a brief period in 1972, he was exposed to Badal Sircar and his third theatre, the syntax of which was acquired from the West's avant-garde theatre. Nevertheless, when it came to Kanhailal it came out to be a dissimilar kind of body, which is not *neutral* but has all the regional, ethnic, cultural and political meanings, turning his theatre into one which is a 'localized theatre of identity, difference, nationalism', which he develops into a 'strategic' position and not the 'obviously political' one. [Theatre India, no.10, 2004]

This is the magic of Kanhailal, who transforms, repositions and transcendences the things that come to him into an articulation that at once becomes the repository of a

sense of 'universality.' Stuart Hall's definition of articulation provides the most helpful guide to this approach. As a concept, articulation has been defined more formally by Hall as:

[T]he form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? So the so-called 'unity' of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness.' The 'unity' which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain conditions, but not necessarily be connected. (1996: p.141)¹¹

Articulation means the process by which cultural elements can be joined together. However, it is important to recognize the contingent nature of these linkages. A critical approach based in articulation need not be an exercise in voluntarism, negating historicity. Following Raymond Williams, Hall has insisted, "[material] circumstances are the net of constraints, the 'conditions of existence' for practical thought and calculation about society."¹² Therefore, the important work to be done by theorizing, lies not in predicting outcomes, but in establishing what action to take (or what action could have been taken) given a set of circumstances. The concept of articulation can also be applied to the way in which Kanhailal while talking about 'Theatre for the Ritual of Suffering' combined elements of his own culture in a given circumstances, the way a body reacts to an event and the gesture it makes both inside and out. Kanhailal's use of

¹¹Hall, Stuart. "On Postmodernism and Articulation," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*.

¹²Hall, Stuart. "The Problem of Ideology," p. 44. Raymond Williams makes a related claim in "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. pp. 31-49.

articulation involved a masterful linkage of political as well as popular concerns, however, the ingredients that Kanhailal put into combination (faith, oppression, victimhood, self-awareness) soon becomes available for reinterpretation and re-articulation i.e. resulting in several aesthetics responses by the audience.

When such a text is performed, the audience would always try to re-articulate the gesture in the play on their terms, according to their sphere of experience. Thus, only after these adaptations and re-adaptations of the text on theatrical grounds that the performances of *Pebet*, *Draupadi* and *Dakghar* begin to play a coordinating role in the public sphere and subsequently become available texts which could be used to make sense of current controversial issues across the civilization. I think that this theorization by Kanhailal and the ability of his actors, exemplified by Sabitri Devi to extricate a text to its primal immediacy of articulation; gives it an apparent 'universality', while expressing the sense of oppression, victimhood and pain. This phenomenon could be more clearly explained taking a position similar to that taken by Chomsky¹³ (1965: pp.15-18) on language and its articulation. If there is a universal structure to the articulation of pain, then we can regard it as due to a deep structure. The different cultural forms of expressing the sense of oppression of pain, with their particular socio-cultural materialization can then be regarded as surface structures manifesting the rules set by the deep structure. So, his 'theatre' is stripped of from any kind of appendages with almost bare minimum use of not simply the words, but also set, props, lighting and with no make-up comes out to be a fertile platform of multiple meanings. Therefore, the theory

¹³Chomsky, Noam. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge. (Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press. 1965)

and aesthetics in practice, leads the audience to confront a very unusual situation in the performance, which engages them in a serious challenge of searching for meanings in his productions, and in the process articulating it on their own terms.

IV

In Seventies, Kanhailal directed most of his great plays. *Pebet*, *Kabui Keioiba*, *Khomdon Meiroubi*, *Imphal 73*, *Memoirs of Africa* and *Laigi Machasing-ga* were all created during this decade. The first three productions are reinterpretations of folk tales and the last three are representations of two poems of two Manipuri poets, Shri Biren and L. Samarendra respectively. All are Kanhailal's passionate responses to the plights of the Manipuri people, their question of cultural, political and ethnic identities; demographic threats caused by an influx of non-Manipuri outsiders, traders and daily wage earners and after all cultural imperialism, as it is taken to be, done in the name of Hindu religion. However, Kanhailal resists such crude interpretations. In a personal discussion, he told me that though the primary ingredients in his play are based in the socio-economic-cultural sense of history in Manipur among the Meiteis, but significance is in the context of the entire human race.

Pebet is Kanhailal's response to the politics of authority over the mind by the device of culture. *Pebet* is a part of the repertoire of fireside stories, which are told to Manipuri children by their grandmothers. It is a folk tale deeply entrenched in the psyche of the people. Kanhailal's decision to use this story to comment on the political and cultural propaganda of his time must be definitely a smart dramaturgical strategy. One interpretation could be how the *Pebet* children represent those who have been swayed by

the new imperialist culture. The play shows the sufferings of the Pebet mother at the hands of oppressor represented by the cat and her own children who have loyalty to the cat and converted themselves to the cat culture. There is no stronger way of igniting consciousness in theatre than by subverting the familiar. In one reaction about this play Kanhailal asserts:

When we did Pebet for the first time we were searching for our Meithei roots. But the form through which we projected our search is false from our point of view to day. It was much too sentimental, relying on a kind of spectacle. The play was more a cry to ourselves as we searched for our identity...Now we wanted to let the people know who we were... Theatre should not be rigid. It should be flexible. (Bharucha, 1992: pp.37-38)

In this context, the very flexibility of Kanhailal's theatre has enabled him to stage *Pebet* fifteen years after it was first produced. Of course, I have already pointed out how his method of disintegrating a text almost to the level of its quark matter, bestows his art with a sense of trans-historicity. Trans-historicity itself could be defined as a basic configuration that can fit in any existing structure and help us create meaning out of it. That is why the play, for all its ingenuousness and minimalism, continues to be astoundingly spanking innovative. I myself found the performance of *Pebet*, on 9th June 2010 at Manipur Dramatic Union (MDU), Imphal, Manipur still fresh. (Chapter II: Plate 1)

Kabui Keioiba (Half Man-Half Tiger) is another such play that I personally have been requesting Kanhailal to rejuvenate and create performances. This play was performed very less, but it has immense possibility, perhaps even better than *Pebet*. I

could only envisage the play through the eyes of Samik Bandopadhyay, as he depicted it to me recalling its first production in Manipur, way back in 70's. It was the first and the last time he saw it at a theatre conference. The play is the popular folk tale in which a half-man half -tiger character as a protagonist chance upon a young woman and forcibly taking her as his wife. Kanhailal subverted this tale with the idea of sacrificing the young woman to save the clan. Where again- again a motif song is sung by different characters in the play with different connotations and tune for different emotions and different occasion. His wife Sabitri Devi acted as the protagonist who teaches the *Kabui-Keioiba*, the song. The role of a mother figure was a leitmotif which ran across many productions, not simply of Kanhailal but of others also, staged during the decade of Nineteen Seventies. The performances were filled with different body movements, compositions made of one single body or made of bodies organized to give an idea or a concrete thing like a prop. Bodily presentations were metonymic, but at times it could also go beyond and give a very enriching field of symbols and metaphors. Rape scenes, violence, agonizing contortions of body, shrieks, cries, shouts were the medium apart from the few words which tried to communicate to the audience. All in all, one could feel the experience of a people having the agony of the mind and body, and of longing for freedom. Though every play by Kalakshetra Manipur is a masterpiece in itself, but one has to prioritize for many limiting reasons, the helplessness, lack of knowledge and ignorance of the scholars and researches is one of them. Thus, one worth mentioning play among many other equally brilliant ones is the *Ucheklangmeidong*, the Meitei folk tale of *Langmeidong*, the bird. It is a tale of torture of a maiden by the step-mother leading to the transformation of the maiden into a bird that flies away fleeing from the

claws of the torture. Kanhailal calls it 'a work-in-progress of research theatre'. This play is also an example of how the ideas about disrupting the text and re-articulating are crystallizing in practice. So the narrative about torture- oppression in the process of re-telling and re-narrating attains a mythic proportion and consequently the performance diverts to a therapeutic course of actions in presence of the Meibi.¹⁴ 'This may well, may be a process of *provoking* with its objective impact, to create a perception in the spectator in between experience and reflection.' It is a way of justifying the efficacy of art too through the sensory manifestation of the sheer sound and movement, the specific powers of live theatre that is conceived as '*ethnic-neutral*', i.e. without any clear linkages belonging to any specific ethnic community, hence Universal. As actors and acting disappear, uncovering the over painted and illusory layers of the psyche, to identify with the conjuror who privileges the self over the character. Accordingly, here in 'its most archaic sense' we see how Kanhailal explore the uncharted terrain, where his endeavours show us that 'theatre' is indeed 'the capacity possessed by [only] human beings – and not by animals – to observe themselves in action.' Augusto Boal theorizes:

...Humans are capable of seeing themselves in the act of seeing, of thinking their emotions, of being moved by their thoughts. They can see themselves here and imagine themselves there; they can see themselves today and imagine themselves tomorrow. This is why humans are able to identify (themselves and others) and not merely to recognise. (1992, p. xxvi)

¹⁴ Prakash, Ved. (Col.Retd.) Encyclopaedia Of North-East India (Vol. 4). New Delhi: Atlantic, 2007 , p. 1556.

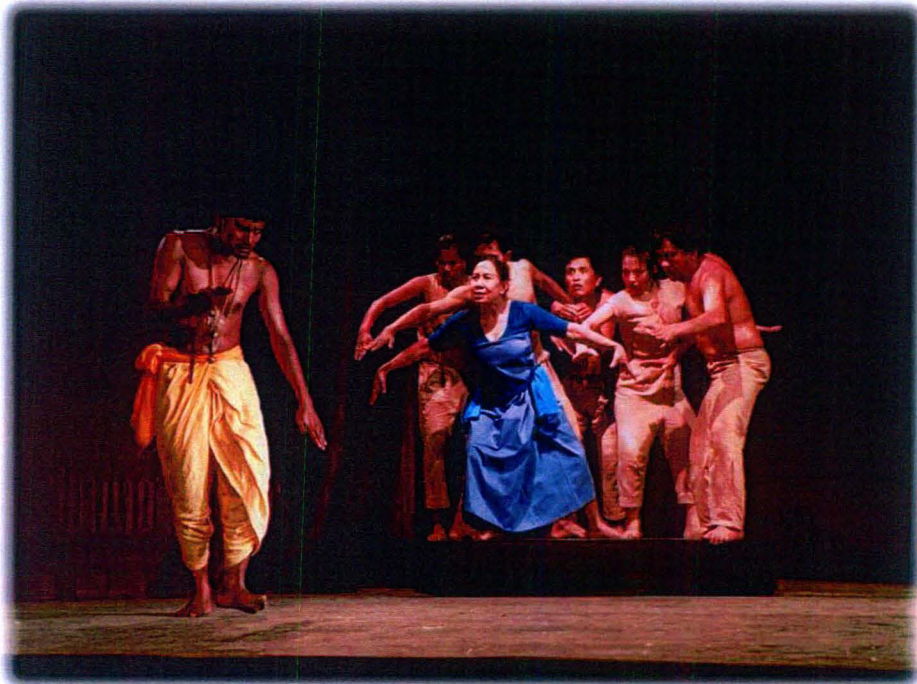
Hence, essentially Kanhailal's theatre is 'live theatre' that not only rejects, but confers a new dimension to the legitimate theatre of academic and intellectual exercise. The performance is drawn from ancient Meitei ritual almost blurs the boundaries between performance and life, though it is extremely stylized, it uphold the stylization available in our daily existence creating a shamanistic aura of healing people out of the writhing pain of sheer oppression of the body and the psyche.

Turner¹⁵ (1967: p.392) perceives symbolic healing amongst the Ndembu as a feat on the society rather than on the patient. He writes: "The sickness of the patient will not get better until all the tensions and aggressions in the group's interrelations have been brought to light and exposed to ritual treatment." Dow¹⁶ points out that Munn (1973: pp. 595-597) also takes this Durkheimian point of view. Turner's and Munn's observations reflect the importance of social relations as a cause of psychological problems. Restructuring of social relations seems to be one of many patterns in symbolic healing.

This play, *Ucheklangmeidong* along with all other plays in discussion not only lead us to understand that it is possible to resist the most painful oppression of daily life through spirit and sheer creativity, but also attempt to create a paradigm of aesthetics, an approach to the 'aesthetics of the oppressed' that would lead us to create many more us text and sing the 'song of despair' across civilizations and heal the communities out of the situation of despondency.

¹⁵Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967.

¹⁶Dow James, 'Universal Aspects of Symbolic Healing: A theoretical Synthesis' in S.M.Channa (ed.) *Medical Anthropology: Health, Healers and Culture*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1998.



Note: (The photo on top) The Cat plotting to get hold of Pebet children, mother Pebet protecting them. (The photo below) notice the juxtaposition between stillness and motion. Mother Pebet in dream like stupor and the imagination manifested in the cat and children pebet vigorous movements. During the staging of Kalakshetra's *Pebet* at *L. Bhagyachandra Festival 2010*. [9 June 2010 at MDU Auditorium, Imphal, Manipur, India] (Photo Courtesy: Benil Biswas)

Plate 1

V

However, now question lies, how will this articulation be possible? What are the ingredients of such an articulation? The ingredients as Kanhailal mentions in his expository project book called *Theatre for the Ritual of Suffering*, the articulation that he aims at can only be achieved by the perception of 'a state of revelation'. In the creative domain, this kind of a revelation or experience could be the experience of one to whom the invisible, creative world becomes vivid and real when the emotional stirring occurs to one's being. As I have seen in the practices of Kanhailal and Sukracharjya Rabha, both of them train and help their actors to go through this emotional stirring, so that they can understand in which emotion in what manner the body reacts. It is somewhat a state of trance that they go through. However, to understand this we need to understand what and how this state of revelation can be put to use in creative art, as this moment if revelation is also the moment of all our true instincts to surface with no logical order of explanations to it. Of course, "when we utter the word 'trance'," Kanhailal asserts:

the civilized world becomes strange, feels irritated and allergic because of our presumption with its negative aspect of madness...Right from animism to the highly developed religion trance has been playing an important role in inducing mystical phenomena. The primitive conceptions of medicine-men help the later physicians develop a principled theory.(1997: p.24)

Thus, he is suggesting a kind of 'mediated' and 'controlled', thus this occurrence of mediate-ability or 'the ability to mediate' brings in a scientific angle to what was

probably considered irrational primitive practice. Sabitri Devi truly exemplifies the working of this method. She testifies:

...in every performance, what I was used to concentration was rather the impulsive call of overwhelming sense of a 'presence', regularly spontaneous, really tender but strong. It was a call of presence to invade on my body to break through all preconceptions, and experience the consciousness of 'beauty and power' as revealed to me. (1997: p.54)

These comments go some distance towards explaining the theoretical assumptions that we examined above. Further, in reality, Elaine Scarry argues, pain is not simply a biologically rooted experience that humans naturally and necessarily wish to overcome. (Renault & Roach: 1992. p.250) To the contrary, it is also shaped by and rooted in particular social contexts, some of which can make it profoundly meaningful: what a subject experiences and how are the modes of living in an 'oppressed' social relationship. The discussions in both the preceding rubrics have established the intrinsic relationship between the community, self, the political and aesthetics. Partha Chatterjee reinstates this in form of his critique of Benedict Anderson's 'the imagined communities'.¹⁷ He raises raising issues regarding the formation of a sense of belonging. The ability to live such relationships with a sense of belongings forced over a period of time transforms pain from a passive experience into an active one. It does not follow, of course, that one cannot or should not seek to reform the social relations one inhabits, still less that pain is intrinsically a valuable thing. "[However] the progressive model of agency diverts

¹⁷Chatterjee, P. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993)

attention away from our trying to understand how this is done in different traditions, because of the assumption that the agent always seeks to overcome pain conceived as object and as state of passivity”¹⁸ In other words, “*as a social relationship*, pain is more than an experience. It is part of what creates the conditions of action and experience.” (Asad: 2003, p.85, italics mine) Along with that, I like to add, ‘identity’. Among the indigenous population, as throughout North-East of India, certain types of pain and suffering are absolutely condemned—particularly that suffering caused by other people’s selfishness, thoughtlessness or greed. However, in other situations, painful struggle is seen as a normal, even normative, aspect of a life; indeed, it is through certain types of suffering that the adult feminine subjectivity is produced. Here this is true too that all deprived categories are considered feminine.

For the society, a *Dalit* or a tribal person irrespective of the gender is considered weak, hence feminine, where the social male, the caste or dominant person again irrespective of gender plays the male. Tribe/caste declaration —the active practice of forging or reproducing social relations— is a socially, morally and materially subjectifying event, a juncture where the force of power becomes objectified and thus resulting in a power structure. Thus, aesthetics of the oppressed should feature the portrayal of the pain of being ostracized on emotional level to liberate and transcend the consciousness of that angst.

“There is pain at each and every creative move of our self.” Rabindranath Tagore emphasizes, “But if we say that it is pain alone, then its description remains incomplete,

¹⁸Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2003, p. 84.

because it is in this pain that there is beauty, there is delight.”¹⁹ (Biswas,1995: p.45)

Hence, what he is suggesting is the hidden potential of pain to transform oppressed situations into states of being happy, but that can only happen if one is totally immersed in the concoction of pain, savouring its sense in the truest expression. In several of the preceding paragraphs, one has argued and cited examples from the works of Kanhailal that this is what ensues in the art of Kanhailal, which forms the foundation of this thought. Certainly this articulation emerges out of the pain of being neglected and it is different from that of the so called ‘Agit Prop’ theatre. In Agit-prop theatre, the notion of pain had a direct relationship with the body i.e. material existence as argued in the last paragraph, but here in marginal context the pain is definitely a material existence, but more so a philosophical entity. It is the pain of the whole community being pushed to the margins. It is a pain that is discursivised by the whole community, which bears the angst of being pushed beyond the margins. Therefore, their theatre is an attempt to experience that pain followed by the experience of healing as a purgatory way out. Hence, the proper portrayal of the pain in theatre, and theatre as the healing experience can now be the locus of the power and politics.

Thus, Kanhailal’s deep felt art of theatre making and as a foundation to that- the natural actor training method along with Sabitri Devi liberates Modern Indian Theatre in two broad terms. One, he creating the need of developing an alternative language that would be more organic, and be universal and on the other hand, save theatre from the paralyzing influence of the language based verbal theatre that of course has social cause

¹⁹Biswas, Goutam. *Art as Dialogue: Essays in Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, New Delhi: IGNC, 1995. Rabindranath Tagore, ‘*Atmaparichaya*.’ Shantiniketan: Viswabharati, 1969. p.45. [in Bengali].

but tends to be didactic and furthermore is limiting and limited as it cannot cross the language barrier. One more stake is to initiate the Audience to get involved in it, and start thinking, questioning it and not just be a mute observer. Of course, we see these all happening towards a thesis of people's aesthetics or aesthetics of the oppressed, when the pain and its healing is depicted in performance. Kanhailal sums it up quite poetically,

...in theatre I need not tell about love. Instead of talking about love we need to love each other. How do we share our pain and suffering? We began to learn from feeling pain and suffering under joy. How can I share your pain, how can I share your anguish? Pain and anguish are the bases. If I am unable to feel your pain then how can we love each other. (Theatre India no.10 November 2004, p.21)

Chapter/Act III

People's theatre back to its people:

The Badungduppa Experiment

If the theatre loses its mass-audience, it loses its life, its meaning, its *raison d'être*. To alienate the theatre from the masses is to alienate oneself still further from the social activity of men, and end in an intellectual madhouse.

Utpal Dutt, *Towards A Revolutionary Theatre*

I

When Shankardeva, the 15th Century Vaisnavite saint in Assam explored in drama, theatre and performance as a popular form of art along with other art forms, he put across his unique offerings including songs and literature to spread his messages of neo-Vaishnavite movement to vast pastoral masses. He pioneered the matchless conception of the Namghar institution in village to stage dramas and perform other religious activities. The purpose was to gather rural masses in one place to enjoy the flavours of his message.

Centuries later, Sukracharjya Rabha a well known drama personality in Assam and founder director of Badungduppa Kala Kendra, the only theatre group of the Rabha tribe of Agia in Goalpara district, has made another challenging attempt of staging dramas inside the dense

forests of remote pockets so that rural mass enjoy this powerful art - form in an extremely serene environment which ensures total submission to nature¹.

This is how Ratna B. Talukdar addresses this phenomenon while reviewing the festival *Under the Sal Trees 2009: Celebrating Rituals through Theatre*. Indeed, when I visited Goalpara and subsequently to Rampur for the first time in June 2009, I began to have an unambiguous perception of what he was thinking and my multiple visits to Rampur, Goalpara, Assam hence, have further crystallized them. Of course, I have been fortunate enough to go through a wide-ranging exposure to 'performances', 'performers' and 'performatives' not just in rural and metropolitan India, but also in rural Kawachi-nagano to world theatre at Osaka, Minneapolis street performances to legendary *Guthrie Theater* as a passionate observer, practitioner and researcher, both inside and out. Thus, as a learner and performer myself, I ponder that it is a matter of immense guts to be creative, innovative and yet to be one with the desire to stay back in one's own village among the people at a time when most of the contemporaries are migrating to the city to display their creativity and aptitude. Sukracharjya Rabha along with his team *Badungduppa*, has determined to walk the path seldom or never travelled. He is in every respect alike the kids of this generation - 'disillusioned' to the hilt of the word, but contrary to his generation, he always has this push in himself, which leads him to urge for something new, afresh leading to progress. But when he envisages progress he does not see it just for himself but for the whole community- the Rabha community that he belongs to, by giving them back what was theirs- the theatre. Thus, this chapter will try to 'read' *Badungduppa* as a movement or a

¹Talukdar, Ratna Bharali. *Sukracharjya Rabha gives theatre in Assam a whole new look*. 26 June. 2010 <http://easternpanorama.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=887:acting-natural&catid=45:web-special&Itemid=24>

moment in history with proper reference (which intends to be a bit descriptive to arm us with the proper knowledge of the situation) to the circumstances, that initiated such a shift before we start analysing it. This shift will encompass the dominant theatre scenarios in Assam from ritual to the secular, sacred to profane, urban to rural and then situate *Badungduppa* as an unique experience, where all the pre-existing categories blend, merge and amalgamate to be forged into a performance, so ‘distill’ that it is bound to illuminate our understanding of the delicate dialectics marked between so called, 1950's ‘Agit-prop’ political theatre and the organic nature of politics emerging as a dialogue between powerful and powerless nowadays.

II

It is quite important to do a quick voyage through the long performative tradition of Assam, so to have a clearer grasp over the context before we zoom down to Badungduppa, Rampur, Goalpara, Assam. The extensive performative history stretches right from the ancient Vaishnavite performances to the modern day *Vramyomaan Theater* (mobile theatre). The history of Assamese drama starts with *Ankia-Nat* of the ‘Vaishnavite’ saint-poet Srimanta Shankardeva - dated back to the 15th century, who initiated a religious movement in this area integrating the expressions of literature, theatre and dance. In Assam, primordial performative practices like *Putala-natch* (puppet-dance), *Ojapali*, *Dhullia-naach* (dance with drums), *Kusangan* dramatically describing the stories from the great epics and popular legends had a great appeal. Shankardeva brought together all these art-forms, eventually resulting in *Ankia-Nat*, which became the earliest form of Assamese stage-drama.

The stories and legends of *Bhagawatpurana* and *Ramayana* – constitute the plot of *Ankia-Nat*. Shankardeva wrote as many as seven *Ankia-nats*, out of which the text of ‘*Cihna-yatra*’ is lost and only six *Nats* are available now; these are ‘*Kaliya-damana*’, ‘*Patni-prasada*’, ‘*Keli-gopala*’, ‘*Rukmini-harana*’, ‘*Parijata-harana*’ and ‘*SriRam-vijaya*’²

As Shankardeva established *Sattras*³ and built *Namghars*⁴, which remain the centre of religious activities in villages of Assam, he also started a religious movement, which came to be known as *Sattriya*. The *Sattriya* or *Shankari* culture became popular as the number of Shankardeva’s disciples increased. A dance form that was initiated by Shankardeva and later developed within the *sattras*, and thus called *Sattriya dance*, is one of the eight classical dance forms in India. The essential elements of the religious practices of this sect are intricately linked with performative practices as mentioned.

In the performance of the *bhaktas* of the *Kamalabari Sattra* (on *Majuli* island), the *Bhaona* part of the performance with active participation of the *gayans* (singers) and *bayan* (musicians) play a very crucial role. Displaying a series of dances like *Saru-dhemali*, *Bar-dhemali*, *Ghosa-dhemali*, *Na-dhemali*, the *gayans* and the *bayans* initiate the actual performance

²Srimanta Shankardeva. 24 June. 2010. < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Srimanta_Sankardeva >

³*Sattras* are socio-religious institutions in the Assam region of India that belong to the Mahapuruxiya Dharma. Monks, called *bhaktas*, live in *sattras* under a *satradhikar*. In some orders of the religion, the *bhaktas* are celibate (*kewalia bhakat*). The *sattras* are not merely religious institutions but play cultural and historical roles in society. A tribute to Sankardeva. 24 June. 2010. < <http://www.tributetosankardeva.org> >.

⁴*Namghar* is a prayer hall used by Vaishnavite Hindus in Assam. The Vaishnavites are devotees of Lord Krishna who assemble in *namghars* regularly to offer prayers. They recite verses from holy books like *kirtan*, *bhagwat*, *Naam Ghosa* and others, accompanied by rhythmic clapping and sometimes with ethnic musical instruments. Though its function is limited to religious activities, it is also used as a community hall where various educational, political, cultural and developmental activities are discussed and undertaken in a democratic manner. It is considered to be a contribution of the neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam. *Namghars* were introduced in Assam by the Vaishnavite saint Sri Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1569). *Namghar* contains a ‘*singhashun*’ (throne) at its one end, opposite to the main entrance. This throne, containing a holy book for worshipping purpose, is usually supported by the idols of 4 elephants, 24 lions and 7 tigers. The hall also contains idols of mythical figures like ‘*Garoor*,’ *Hanuman*, ‘*Nagar*’ and ‘*Ananta*.’ 24 June. 2010. < <http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/8095894> >

of Bhaona.(Neog:1993)⁵ Maheswar Neog further describes the Ankia-Nats as musical dramas, incorporating different categories of songs created by Shankardeva and Madhabdeva. The principal accompaniment is in the form of the musical instruments of *Khol* (the barrel shaped drum) and *Taal* (cymbals). With *Khol* and *Taal* the musicians conduct the Bhaona from beginning to end reciting many verses. Before the actual performance starts, the gayans and bayans enter the stage with two persons holding a white cloth screen (aar-kapor) in front of them, and the same is withdrawn as soon as they are seated in the respective positions. The performance uses Cho (effigies) and Mukha (life size of grotesque type masks such as Ravana, Yama, Kumbhakarna, Hanuman, Kali-Nag, Garunda-pakhi etc). These are made by Khanikar, the specialized village artisans who are experts in making wooden and earthen images of God. These effigies and masks are essential elements of Bhaonas. Elaborate make-up is used by the actors to acquire appearances befitting their roles.

This rich musical heritage serves to preserve the devotional elements of the Vaishnavite tradition – as a part of *Sattr*a heritage. However, if someone studies these meticulously rehearsed now classical practices of performances in comparison to the folk performances of the area, it will definitely be a revelation for anyone the enormous drawing upon the folk elements. The folk forms the back bone of any classical tradition anywhere in the world and Assam was no exception. Of course, there were many disciples of Shankardeva and Madhavdeva, but the works of none of them had the great literary value as their masters. Gradually the *Sattr*as began to flourish with the works of these great masters, but no significant work was produced until very recently late nineteenth century.

⁵ Neog. Maheshwar, *Early history of the Vaisnava faith and movement in Assam: Sankaradeva and His Times*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publication, 1993).

In 1857, the groundwork of the Assamese drama was laid by Gunabhiram Barua afresh. He wrote the first socio-tragic play called *Ram-Navami*, influenced by the social reformative movement started by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar in Bengal. G. Barua had written it to promulgate widow marriage in Assam. The drama published serially in the first Assamese news-magazine *Orunudo* was later published in the form of book in 1870. To free the society from the clutches of opium, Hemchandra Barua, the doyen of Assamese language also wrote a socio-comic play called *Kaniyar-Kirtan*. However, it is pertinent to mention here that neither Gunabhiram nor Hemchandra wrote dramas for stage performance. They used drama only as a tool for reforming the society. Their dramas carried a message to the society. While *Ram-Navami* carried a message in favour of widow marriage, *Kaniyar-Kirtan* sarcastically warned the society against opium. (Natarajan: 1996, p.25)⁶

In 1888, a group of Assamese students studying at Kolkata set up a socioliterary organization called '*Asomiya Bhasar Unnati Sadhini Sabha*' for the upliftment of the Assamese language and literature. The Sabha also brought out a monthly magazine called *Jonaki*. By incorporating western thoughts and ideas *Jonaki* heralded the dawn of romanticism in Assamese literature. Lakshminath Bezborna, one of the pioneers of modern Assamese literature emerged as the most successful playwright in the pages of *Jonaki* with his satirical drama *Litikai*, Ratnadhar Barua, Ramakanta Barkakati, Gunanan Barua and Ghanashyam Barua translated Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* into Assamese as *Bhramaranga* and laid another milestone in Assamese theatre. It brought the Shakespearean- style of writing into the Assamese drama. *Bhramaranga* also known as the first Assamese drama was successfully performed on the stages of Assam.

⁶Natarajan, Nalini; Emmanuel Sampath Nelson. *Handbook of Twentieth-Century Literatures of India*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996. p. 25

In a conversation with the Padmashri Arun Sharma, who was instrumental in modernising Assamese drama, I came to know about what is considered to be the 'golden age' in Assamese theatre. It was in the last part of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century. Many theatre halls established during this point in time in various parts of the State aided in accelerating the theatrical movement in Assam. The temporary stage of *Kamrup Natya Samity* was upgraded to a full-fledged stage at Guwahati in 1923 with a new name Kumar Bhaskar Natya Mandir. In 1907, a number of stalwarts in Assamese theatre set up Ban Stage at Tezpur. Similarly, Sivasagar Natya Mandir at Sivasagar, Amolapatty Natya Mandir at Dibrugarh, Jorhat Theatre at Jorhat, Nagaon Natya Samaj at Nagaon set up during this time also created a congenial atmosphere for regular performance of Assamese drama. Apart from producing many reputed actors they gave birth to a number of Assamese playwrights. Padmanath Gohainborua, Indreswar Borthakur, Saradakanta Bordoloi, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Jugal Das, etc. emerged as the most successful playwrights in Assamese theatrical world. Most of the dramas written during this period were based on historic events or pertaining to mythologies and legends. The only exception is Jyotiprasad Agarwala who paid equal emphasis to acting and literature, incorporated both romanticism and realism reflecting the ideals of both Shakespeare and Ibsen. In post-independence era Arun Sharma along with many of his contemporaries is trying once again to raise the standards of Assamese drama in a bid to revive the lost glory.

An important event in the post independence era for the upliftment of Assamese drama and theatre was the formation of *Asam Akak Natya Sanmilan* in 1959 at Dibrugarh. While Bishnu Prasad Rabha was the founder president of the Sanmilan, Tafazul Ali was selected as its general secretary. Later, expanding its branches all over Assam, it was reconstituted as *Asam Natya Sanmilan* (Assam Dramatic Society). Its regular one-act play competition has helped in the

development of this form. Some notable one-act plays are Durgeswar Borthakur's *Nirodesh*, Satyaprasad Barua's *Anarkali*, *Kunaal-Kanchan*, *Ranadil*, *Saswati*, and *Bhaswati*, Prabin Phookan's *Tritaranga*, Bhabendranath Saikia's *Putola-Nas*, Tafajjul Ali's *Nepati Kenekoi Thako* and Bhupen Hazarika's *Era Bator Sur*. The subjects of this drama range from the historical to certain contemporary themes and issues. Apart from creating a congenial atmosphere for the growth of Assamese drama and theatre, the Sanmilan during last the 50 years of its glorious existence has been relentlessly fighting for the rights of actors, playwrights and theatre loving people of the State.

This rudimentary cursory tedious repetitive description of the different phases of theatre in Assam is a valuable exercise in the context of leading us to observe the stark surfacing of an Assamese linguistic identity. In the preceding paragraph, we have perceived how during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the proponents of this movement, drawing from the colonial linguistic project as well as from indigenous cultural reserves started to create a political community for the enrichment and mobilization of Assamese language and culture. Many a times such a mobilization threatens and subsumes imaginings of smaller regions, lesser dominant but distinct culture. Of course as I have already stated earlier that in an extreme situation, if the dominant material culture becomes oppressive (even unconsciously), the oppressed community logically develops a way to resist it and performs that resistance. Thus, it would be quite pertinent to look at some of the ways in which resistance to the imposition of a standardised language and culture upon the vernaculars in Goalpara (being a site for our specific study), resulted in a kind of identity manifestation, which was styled on the model of many such materializations from the recent past (Karbi- Bodo etc).

III

Ethnicity and Identity manifestation is a pervasive force in world politics so much so that Esman noted in the late 1990s:

Glance at the headlines in early 1990s: pitched battles between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in Bosnia, between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka, between Muslims and Christians in northern Nigeria. Read of IRA bombings in London, of threatened genocide by Arabs against Dinka in Sudan, of riots involving African-Americans, whites, and Koreans in Los Angeles. The Ethnically defined successor states of defunct Soviet Union contain restive minorities whose competing claims and status must be confronted and managed. Canada is threatened with the peaceful secession of Quebec, led by the French-speaking majority, now “masters of homeland”, India is coping with a violent Sikh secessionist movement in the Punjab; the minority Sunni Arab regime in Iraq struggles to maintain control over rebellious Kurds and Shia Muslims; Belgium has periodically been without a government for weeks at a time pending tedious negotiations between representatives of its Walloon and Flemish Peoples; French and German Public affairs are roiled by conflicts over the large immigrant diasporas. The catalog of brutally violent and of more or less civic manifestations of ethnic conflict includes all continents.(Esman, 1994, p.1)⁷

Re-contextualizing Esman’s propositions, Suranjan Das observes the problem, analyses a cause and effect relationship and describes it on Indian terms, trifurcated under three main headings:

⁷Esman, Milton J. *Ethnic Solidarity as a Political Force: The Scope of the Inquiry. Ethnic Politics* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press:1994)

- First, there is not much evidence to show that smaller states would be either administratively well governed well or would be more accountable to people. On the other hand, larger units like West Bengal, which have seen grater decentralization of power, have tended to fare better in the matter of governance. The issue, therefore, is not the size of the state. The key factor lies in the type of political leadership whose class interests the ruling party is keen to serve.
- Secondly, suspicion has been voiced that smaller federal units might strengthen the already existing authoritarian structure of Indian federalism. For, smaller states will not have the same bargaining power as larger states in negotiations with the federal government. They would be constantly dependent on the Centre for developmental activities. This would lead to an extension of strong arm of center to the provinces. Besides, splitting up of the existing structure of federal policy would endanger the unity of India based on the recognition of diversity, and fuel separatist and fissiparous tendencies.
- Thirdly, the politics of small states fails to identity the main distortions in India's body polity, which are uneven development, serious regional imbalances and class polarization. One doubts if new administrative boundaries would be able to undo this process. On the other hand, even in the case of the newly created state of Jharkhand the adivasi population constitutes only 30% of the population, and hence it is doubtful if their interests would be served by the formation of this new state. Besides, the politics of small states diverts public attention from broadbased democratic movements, which could alone guarantee the sustenance of a democratic polity in India.⁸

Thus, Esman and Das both are adeptly hinting at the prevalence of the political-economy in these identity assertions. Where the modes of production and consumption become very important and whenever these interests are hampered there is an identity assertion i.e. an attempt to come in the circuit of audibility and visibility so that they are allowed to share the space with

⁸ Das, Suranjan. *Ethnicity and Nation-Building in India: The Naga Experience*, Presidential Address, Section III: Modern Indian History, Indian History Congress 2003, Mysore. Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 2003

other so call 'equals' in the political economy. I have already stated previously that the act to making oneself heard or be seen is a performative born out of the situation of being oppressed by some way or the other. B.G. Karlsson helps us to magnify the problem and focus our attention to understand the region and people of our concern at the moment i.e. how Rabhas of *Rabha Hasong* in and around Goalpara district of Assam fit in this design. He expounds:

Though in many respect a failure, a tribal policy [marker of government initiative, in the wake of tickle up theory] - including positive discrimination in the field of education and a system of reserved employment quotas in government institutions- has produced a category of well-off tribals and thus created(if you like) a tribal elite. But the position of this group of people is rather insecure; still discriminated against the mainstream, Hindu middle-class society and at the same time finding it hard to adjust to the life and rules of their own community, they end up belonging nowhere. Against this background, it is understandable that they are the ones who seem most occupied with questions of identity and culture,...This does not mean that identity or belonging is a problem only for tribal middle class, or that the problem of little relevance to the mass of tribals struggling with the down-to-earth problems of poverty and exploitation. I would argue that any struggle for better life also implies a project of reclaiming or constructing a positive self-identity. (2000: p.18)

Thus, these instances and arguments quite reinstate the emergence of identity politics along with self reference to the culture. Karlsson quite articulately puts in the dilemma that creates a void, which give rise to the assertion of identity through cultural manifestations. Hence, Goalpara, Assam –a unique cultural entity in itself with its songs, dances and specialized musical instruments was such a ground of identity confrontation. One gets a mesmerizing smell of soil

flooded with mighty Brahmaputra in its songs about Elephant, *Mahout*⁹ and the River. Hence, as a reaction to what was done by Asom Gana Parishad on the Assamese Language side, the traditional elite and the newly emerging Rabha intelligentsia transformed the language into a symbol for these sections of society, while also becoming associated with other social roles and group identities. This almost fits the performed cultural expression in the frame of speech, political culture and identity of the region and its people, focusing on the tensions involved in the relocation of the boundaries starting off from the language-the edifice of linguistic autonomy to the extent of a total transformation or rather assertion of indigenous culture, recurrently in antagonism to dominant Assamese manifestations and manifestations of other cultures.

Particularly in Goalpara district and adjoining area, the last decade, which was really happening has in store for us many events that could directly lead to the thesis of 'emphasise on the relevance of regional history, its perception and manifestation'. In the demand for 6th Schedule to *Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council*¹⁰ area, one would definitely read not just the transference of governance, but also the market driven mentality to tap the economic resources, of course for the betterment of the 'have-nots'. We understand how the economic forces determine the discursive practices in an attempt to challenge the dominant narratives within the context of both the emergence (read as 'reassertion') of a lost vernacular print culture, a

⁹ Mahout, or Mahoot, is an Indian word for an elephant rider, trainer or keeper. 25 June. 2010. < <http://www.elephant.se/mahout.php> >

¹⁰ An Autonomous Council has been constituted under the style - Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council with its head quarter at Dudhnai town. The jurisdiction of this council extents upto Rani area of Kamrup district and except some parts of Matia, Balijana and Lakhipur revenue Circles, it embraces almost the entire district of Goalpara. The autonomous council has been created to fulfill the longstanding demands of the Rabha people of the area. However, as the council is constituted only for the Ravas, the Tribals like the Bodos, the Garos, the Kochs, the Rajbongsis and others who constitute more than half of the population of Hasong area have been left out from the benefit of the council. As a result of this, there is a growing demand for Autonomous district council comprising of all Tribal groups of these areas. 26 June. 2010. << http://goalpara.gov.in/rabha_hasong.htm >>

vernacular public space (oral, hence performative), and the revolutionizing of the material culture, in Goalpara, in the context of Rabha in particular and Assam in general.

IV

The preceding rubrics form the socio-politico-cultural milieu which has informed the art, Sukracharjya seeks to perform. Born in Rampur village of Agia panchayat, Golapara in a poor but cultured Rabha family, Sukracharjya had a bent towards the village rituals and performances and always was a loved performer in all these occasions. Sukracharjya's father, Nilkanta Rabha, now a retired-government staff, used to write poems during his prime. Thus, he supported the child's bent towards arts. Amidst the culture of violence with United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) all around, Bodo extremists demanding their rights, around the turn of the nineties is what he grew up with. Crossing the fence of Agia High school, he reached Goalpara College, where he consolidated the Rabhas students into a Union, to voice their own problems amidst representatives of AASU, ABVP and SFI¹¹. When All Rabha Students Union was founded, he was invited to be a part of the district committee at Dudhnoi. After a brief stint at the student's politics, Sukracharjya felt that it lacked the cultural goal that it initially envisaged to fulfil. He asserts, "We are demanding 6th schedule, definitely we will have political power in the hands of our people who would help us in our progress- Rabha community's progress, but what progress is it if we cannot save the community. The community is lost if its culture is lost, then there is no point in getting power." He left the student's union and concentrated working on the cultural side. He was guided by Rabha ideologue and a

¹¹AASU stands for All Assam Students Union, a student wing of AGP (Asom Gana Parishad). ABVP stands for Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, affiliated to BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and SFI stands for Students Federation of India with their affiliation to CPIM (Communist Party of India- Marxist).

committed activist Prakash Rabha from Maladhora. Prakash Rabha is also instrumental in forming the first Rabha Museum at Maladhora¹². He urged Sukrachryja to start off creating new performances so that Rabha people could rejuvenate and know their forgotten customs and culture. In that period, few videos and productions were shaped while he was at Dudhnoi. Some of the remarkable performances of the Badungduppa the Dudhnoi, Maladhora phase include the Rabha version of Jyotiprasad Agarwala's *Rupalim*, the Nepali version of his other drama *Labhita*, the Bodo version of renowned Mahendra Barthakur's *Hati Aru Phandi*, among others. These performances were styled in the popular mode of prevalent theatre in Assam. The turn in the style only came after Badungduppa's exposure to Kalakshetra Manipur.

In 2004, he went to Manipur as a trainee under Heisnam Kanhailal and learned the art of theatre at Kalakshetra Manipur for two years. He was production manager for significant performances like *Dakghar*. He was trained ad infinitum in the creative training process of Kalakshetra, under the guidance of Kanhailal and Sabitri Devi. When he returned, he brought along with him the spirit of making some extraordinary efforts, which is, going to the deep roots of human life, concurrently researching on how to utilize folk elements in a manner that have significance in the contemporary state of affairs, in theatre.

Sukracharjya remembers- the meeting Heisnam Kanhailal was the turning point of his voyage. As I have mentioned earlier, during the ab-initio period of his step into this world of performance, he was confused, perplexed and confounded as to how he could bring into play local elements in drama and give meaning to his theatre, which could then be read by audience in the context of the present day socio-political situation. Then in 2004, a month long theatre

¹²This museum houses texts prepared by Rabha Sahitya Parishad in Rabha Language, Rabha traditional handloom, Rabha musical instrument, and artefacts collected from all over Rabha Hasong.

workshop in Assam was jointly organised by Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre (EZCC), Cultural Affairs and Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakheta. This was the occasion when Sukracharjya met Kanhailal for the first time. Witnessing his dedication, Kanhailal instantly invited him to go to Manipur. That was the beginning of the expedition, which has now gradually transformed into Badungduppa experiment. Sukracharjya definitely had a vision; however the vision was crystallized in the company of the sage like guru, and his art.

As a result, in 2007 when Badungduppa first staged *To-Paidom*, which is a fine interpretation of a Rabha folk-tale to the contemporary situation, they instantly received wide-spread appreciation from all sections of the people. The *Badungduppa* theatre is firmly grounded on the stories, dance and music of the Assam tribal culture. The group also has many interchanges with actors and musicians from other tribes and cultural communities such as, Boro and Manipuri. On the cultural front, *Badungduppa*'s activity is a vital case study to begin with as here the focus is on body i.e. the psychological representation of existence, is presented through the deep rhythmic manifestation of the physicality. Sukracharjya Rabha, has embodied Kanhailal's philosophy about theatre. Sukracharjya says, "His theatre people put so much effort into everything. They take a couple of months over one dialogue!"(The Hindu: 21.04.2008). Kanhailal himself defines his theatre to be a 'theatre in transition', 'which invents personal value of own theatre'.¹³ His theatre invokes the collective cultural memory and proposes an alternative approach to text and meaning creation. While talking about his style and actor preparation, he stresses that while "Awakening the energy within and outside of one self, the intention-action is seen at work." Here in *Badungduppa*, we can envisage that the essence of the knowledge of the within and without is being gradually perceived. Further it is developing a platform for other

¹³Kanhailal; Theatre India, Nov 2004: New Delhi, National School of Drama, pp. 3-16

cultures to come and interact with each other in the form of an annual theatre festival called *Under The Sal Trees*. In this festival practitioners from different cultures perform, interact, and learn. Thus, in spite of having many established theatre groups in Assam, doing political theatre or rather community theatre, *Badungduppa*, is a vital case study to begin with, as one finds how Kanhailal's conception about theatre is expanding its horizons beyond the confines of Manipur and Meitie.

As I have mentioned earlier that the only practical similarity across these exploited communities is the collective memory of the pain of being on the margins or even beyond it. Thus, though not self proclaimed, the notion of pain is very evident in the works of Sukracharjya Rabha, who felt the need of exploring the expressive physical language of theatre that consciously/unconsciously depicts this pain, but not at the cost of the message or the ideology that propels him and many others to do theatre. It also gives a new sense of importance to the special act of 'concentrating' and 'negotiating' the culture and modernity on the bodily (physical), mythical, ritual existence exploring their delicate relationship with nature and finally this relationship underlines how text is developed. It is this particular attention to break down the text into infinitesimal bits and to blend it with the types of existences mentioned above, and the act of giving it back to the audience with the energy of the soil, leave the audience susceptible to a performance, (to borrow Clifford Geertz's expression) that is 'deep' and 'thick'.¹⁴

¹⁴ A detailed analysis of the genesis and execution of performed texts and practices, along with performance aesthetics developed in the process is dealt with in the Chapter IV *Contexts, Subtexts and Performance text: To Poi'dam*



Note: (The photo on top) Depicting the three priests clad in white, the ritual place on the left and Benil Biswas with locals during *Baikho* Festival [7 June 2009 at Paham, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya] (Photo Courtesy: Badungduppa)
 (The photo below) During the staging of Badungduppa's *Madiyah Muchi* (Madiyah the Cobbler) at *Under The Sal Trees* festival 2009, [18 December 2009 at Rampur, Agia, Goalpara, Assam] (Photo Courtesy: Badungduppa)
 Mark the costume of the priest akin to the character in the play by Badungduppa. This is how Badungduppa creates a link between the sacred and the profane, contemporizing indigenous culture with the issue of social importance.

Plate 1



Note: (The photo on top) The sacred ritual space deep inside a forest predominantly of Sal trees, during the *Baikho* Festival. A mound of soil and long grasses in visible on the left side of the photo is the Baikho - (Ayatamai) Goddess & God (Singra Buda Hosangbra) [7 June 2009 at Paham, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya]. (Photo: Self.)

(The photo below) The performance space of Badungduppa inside the Sal forest. Note that the gallery is made of betel nut trees trunks and not a single tree is cut down. One can even find trees on the stage which is on the far end in the photo. A rehearsal is in progress during *Under The Sal Trees* festival 2009, [18 December 2009 at Rampur, Agia, Goalpara, Assam](photo courtesy: Badungduppa) **Plate 2**



Note: (The photo on top) Sukracharjya Rabha the festival director is introducing a director (Tarali Das) to the audience before the performance of her play. [20 December 2009 at Rampur, Agia, Goalpara, Assam]

(The photo below) Inauguration of the festival, introduction and felicitation of the guests. (from Left) Gaon Bura (Village headman of Rampur), Caroline Esther van Leerdam (Netherlands), Tshering Gyeltshen (Bhutan), Jayati Bose(Kolkata), Prof. HS Shiva Prakash(JNU), Kanhailal, Sabitri Devi(Manipur) and Benil Biswas [18 December 2009 at Rampur, Agia, Goalpara, Assam](photo courtesy: Badungduppa)

Plate 3



Note: (The photo on top) a performance in progress during *Under the Sal Trees 2009* [18 December 2009 at Rampur, Agia, Goalpara, Assam]

(The photo below) after the closing ceremony of the festival, all the artists from Assam, Manipur and Tripura [22 December 2009 at Rampur, Agia, Goalpara, Assam](photo courtesy: Badungduppa)

Plate 4

V

Thousands of people comprising the audience (predominantly rural from neighbouring villages, semi-literate or mostly illiterate), theatre experts and critics ecstatic and energized by the awesome, finely tuned and vibrant performances of those artists, delivering dialogues and expressions through their body-movements and neatly curved steps- without any make-up, artificial sound and light system, as if blending with the surrounding Sal trees. If the sun's rays were sufficient to dazzle body-movements of those (rural) artists, the tranquillity of nature and pin drop silence of the (rural) audience were ample for the artists to spread their powerful dialogues to every audience even the farthest one; spell bound expression of audience with little children in their stillness trying to savour the expression with intermittent burst of glee and laughter. They admire the beauty, skill of the artists who engage in long hours of regular physical exercise sessions and meditation periods adequate to accentuate their bodies devoid of any artificial make-up.

This is not the description of a Robert Wilson, Peter Brook, Pina Bausch or *Ariane Mnouchkine*¹⁵ production that you must have thought of, but this event definitely has all the facets to stand parallel to the production of these stalwarts. It is the performance by Badungduppa artists, in their performance space deep inside a forest of Sal trees with local villagers as audience in their loved natural setting. Save for the urban and "informed" audience, even the actors have never heard of these makers and theories of so called 'modern theatre'. The only knowledge that they have is the consciousness of self and the audience. This sheer presence

¹⁵Each one of these masters has created a distinct style in their works. Robert Wilson is known for his acidic comment on Language. Peter Brook for liberating the space of theatre, Pina Bausch brings in the dynamics of movement and Ariane Mnouchkine pushes forward the conception of indigenous folk performances becoming core, thus destabilizing the foundation of the so called 'modern theatre'.

of the actors, on and off the performance space armed with only their basic tools of acting- the body, making it into a mode of language apart from spoken words to create these awesome performances is something to be closely looked at. Every muscle has a different story to tell, as the chill runs through the spine of the actor in a scene of high suspense, a sudden twitch of an eye lash, leads the audience too into that chill mode. That's the intensity of the performance they create.

To attain this intensity, Sukracharjya has not only taught these artists the rudiments of acting, but he also took the responsibility of creating an assemblage of a sensitive audience in this remote pocket. He envisaged *Badungduppa* as an experiment to create a commune of artists in residency, which would equip them to stay in an environment that has twenty four hours access to learning tools suited for making theatre and create performances. Moreover the development of these performance spaces among the peoples of the community empowered the people to watch and admire theatre that essentially draws elements, echoes and intervenes into their own life. A close study of the texts and how performance elements are gathered from people's daily existence would shade more light on to what are the tangible manifestations of the intangible experience, which these actors and the audience go through in such performances. "Besides giving artists the necessary guidance, I have also had regular conversations with the rural people, imparting to them the knowledge of how to enjoy a drama during the time of performances," he says.¹⁶

¹⁶ Sukracharjya Rabha. Personal Interview. 21 December 2009. Rampur , Goalpara, Assam. All Interviews, if not mentioned otherwise is conducted by Benil Biswas. The interviews were in a mixed medium of Hindi, Bengali, Assamese and Rabha. The act of multilingual interview itself shows the inability on our part to articulate and derive meanings through the handicapped tool of 'language'. Translations into English are by Benil Biswas.

To bring every artist's excellence at par, Sukracharjya, apart from constructing the performance arena inside the Sal jungle, also established the Badungduppa Kala Kendra with hostel facilities, separately for boys and girls. The hostel now accommodates 21 regular artists and makeshift arrangements are made to accommodate more during a workshop or festival. Artists residing there take part in different activities apart from the regular rehearsal. The premise also has an office, a *Mandapa*¹⁷ (permanent arena for rehearsals), a small intimate theatre stage with Sal trees sprouting amidst the gallery and sheds for guests. For this, Sukracharjya got a plot of land of five Bighas as donation from his father Nilkanta Rabha in 2005. "The initial days were too difficult," recalls Sukracharjya, "when I planned to create Badungduppa along with my actors (the local youths), it was easier said than done to convince the village elders and relative to share the vision these youths had in mind." Of course, Sukracharjya defends as says, "Time is such, Benil Da!"¹⁸ (As he often addresses me) with the overarching shift towards the city nowadays who would have understood what the hell are you going to do here in the village. But now things are changing."¹⁹ Badungduppa is now a name that is creating national news headlines²⁰. Badungduppa now shows how sustainable development is possible with close coordination with nature, and that also gives on the one impetus to create an art that rings with the resonance of 'universality'. In this techno-cratic age, people do not pay attention to the wonders of creation and they contaminate natural resources. In 'Sustainable

¹⁷Thapar, Binda (2004). *Introduction to Indian Architecture*. Singapore: Periplus Editions. P.143. A mandapa (in Hindi/Sanskrit, also spelled mantapa or mandapam) in Indian architecture is a pillared outdoor hall or pavilion for public rituals.

¹⁸'Da' is shortened form of 'Dada', which means 'Brother' in Bengali, Assamese and in many other vernaculars in India.

¹⁹Sukracharjya Rabha. Personal Interview. 21 December 2009. Rampur, Goalpara, Assam.

²⁰It features in National News papers. 25 June. 2010. -24 Dunia << <http://www.24dunia.com/english-news/search/badungduppa.html> >>, The Telegraph

<http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100506/jsp/northeast/story_12415630.jsp>, Eastern Panorama <http://easternpanorama.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=887:acting-natural&catid=45:web-special&Itemid=24>, The Hindu < <http://beta.thehindu.com/arts/article69045.ece>>, The Assam Tribune < <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/details.asp?id=oct2709/City10>>

Development and Religion: Towards an economic-Eco-Socio-Spirituality,' Anand Amaladass (2007) highlights the sad condition of the modern world. Though people are aware of the worth of the nature for their sustenance, they fail to safeguard it owing to their artificial life. They 'emancipate' themselves from their environment due to their selfishness and spoil it. Amaladass stresses that human beings are 'only guests on Earth' and they do not have the right to loot resources. On the other hand, humans should focus on sustainable development that means "the use of resources without endangering the whole environment and well-being of all human beings".²¹ This brilliant and significant insight into the relationship between human beings and nature, quite reasserts the importance of experiments like Badungduppa. The title of an article about Badungduppa in news daily rightly says, "Acting Natural". Ascribing to this philosophy, the structures of Badungduppa Kala Kendra are also made of environment-friendly thatches and bamboo, which is in common usage in the villages. The whole environment is build to provide the artists with avenues of close association with nature. Along with regular rehearsals, a walk in the early morning inside the village, and hours-long physical exercises, are a routine course of the artists. Explaining the rehearsal scenario at Badungduppa, Sukracharjya says, "

The walks in the morning provide them with an opportunity to get attached to nature and village life. The physical exercises are important for a healthy body. I never go for heavy clothing and artificial make up of my artists while they perform. I let them to feel the role from their heart and express it through their bodily expressions. The characters are strong as I often pick them up from myths, rituals or folk tales to relate to a present day crisis

²¹Amaladass, Anand: "Sustainable Development and Religion: Towards An Economic Socio-Eco-Spirituality". In: Nirmal Selvamony, Nirmaldasan et al. In: Nirmal Selvamony, Nirmaldasan et al. (eds.), *Essays in Ecocriticism* New Delhi - Chennai 2007: OSLE-India - Sarup and Sons, 32-43. (Eds.), *Essays in Ecocriticism* New Delhi - Chennai 2007: OSLE-India - Sarup and Sons, p. 32-43

situation. I cannot demand a good performance from them, until and unless they themselves understand the roots of our culture²²

Thus, here is a person and his team who strive to stay in close contact with nature and its people, but by no means it is a luxury that he and his team is up to. They cannot afford luxury. It is not a luxurious ride 'far from the madding crowd', a picnic for a city dweller, a laboratory for research by some avant-garde pass out of any internationally acclaimed theatre institute of repute. Here, the nature, the people and the sense of be marginalized is the force that forged these young theatre practitioners to develop a way to showcase their creativity, which is now recognised world over. Of course this conviction of creating own language, to tell own stories was initially fuelled by the sense of being ostracized on different levels culture, economy, language, etc. and slowly it gained its own momentum. Recollecting his visit to Badungduppa, Dr. Keval Arora states that there is a deliberate attempt to aestheticism, deliberate attempt to create a 'theatre language' (in the sense of communication) that supersedes/dismantles the so called 'barriers of language'²³. He further believed that it is the case for whole of North-East. I would like to point out that it will be a case in any and every context around the globe, wherever there is a sense of insecurity, a sense of ostracization, a sense of not being seen or heard. Thus, to come into the circuit of visibility or audibility, any oppressed identity will perform the 'the sense', 'the pang' of being oppressed, for within and without the community.

He feels that this is not a tough job. Neither does it require a high degree of so called 'qualification' of 'pen and paper'. Rather, it requires a different kind of qualification- 'a high

²²Talukdar, Ratna B. The Eastern Panorama, 25 June 2010 <<
http://easternpanorama.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=887:acting-natural&catid=45:web-special&Itemid=24 >>

²³In a personal conversation with him about his experience of at the Badungduppa's *Under the Sal Trees 2008* theatre festival.

degree of sensitivity'. It is important to understand and feel the subject matter with ones complete existence. I have already analysed the rehearsal and text formation process in the chapter on Kalakshetra. The intense realization of self and then to disenchant oneself in order to perform is something that comes from within. This engaging and disengaging with the self and the environment is the education or qualification required to perform the texts with an intensity of making it 'universal', outreaching to people, so that these audience from self and without can understand their ways better and could appreciate not just the performance but whole of their existence, thus incorporating them in the entire cycle of political economy. Sukracharjya avows, "Most of the Rabha people are still uneducated". To elucidate the arguments in this paragraph one interesting anecdote is enough- *Some of Sukracharjya's artists having no formal education perform the best roles of his plays. There cannot be a better example of Theatre of the Oppressed.*²⁴

Alas! Badungduppa's endeavours and efforts have proven to be fruitful, as now the audience gathers in the thousands, enter the venue, take their seats silently in a disciplined way, enjoy the play and come out from the forest- calm and quiet. It was in 2005 when for the first time Kanhailal organised a workshop at Rampur and underlined the potential of Sukracharjya's visualization.

"Since then, the blessings of Kanhailal have been vested on me. Even this venue of these performances was selected by him during his first visit to this place. In fact, he guided me completely on how to develop an open-air stage inside the forest, without cutting a single tree. (as seen in plate 1). The stage and the seating arrangement have been made on space that existed

²⁴ Considered in terms of the empowering *Theatre of the Oppressed* as defined and practiced by Augusto Boal and also in the manner I tend to expand the argument and apply it as a very organic and a generic concept as explained in the 'introduction' to this study.

naturally among the Sal trees. He named it Macbeth Jungle. The serene beauty of nature under the trees provides both the performing actors and audience with the feeling of an attachment to nature,” he states.²⁵

In 2007, he met puppetry experts from Netherlands, Evelien Pullens in Manipur in a workshop. After having a discussion with Sukracharjya, Evelien Pullens was interested to see his group and came to Assam. During the same year Badungduppa organised a workshop at the North-Eastern level. After the workshop, it staged a series of puppetry shows, specializing on the body movement of the puppets. The theme of the puppetry show was the present unrest situation in North-eastern states. It organised a total of 24 shows throughout the North-eastern region. In 2008, the Director of Theatre Embassy²⁶, Netherlands Berith Danse, visited Badungduppa Kala Kendra. Viewing the amazing effort of Sukracharjya in bringing drama to the vast rural masses, the Director promised him his co-operation in terms of financial assistance and artistic guidance. The Director also made him the co-coordinator in India, which has a tie-up with 35 countries. Sukracharjya says, “Since then, there has been no looking back.”²⁷

²⁵ The Hindu, article dated. 23 Dec 2009, 25 June 2010. << <http://beta.thehindu.com/arts/article69045.ece> >>

²⁶ Theatre Embassy is Amsterdam, Netherlands based international NGO, whose objective is to achieve global sustainable development. Their Mision statement states: we focus our attention on socio-cultural development and human forms of expression. Theatre Embassy believes that the magic, power of expression, historical awareness and innovative capacity of the theatre contribute to the development of the world's societies and civilisations. The universal language of the theatre unites people in their hopes, dreams and ideas: it offers them new perspectives for viewing the world. This in turn contributes to their well-being and happiness.

Our creative encounters and cooperation with our partners are based on equality. Our joint creation of theatre pivots on diversity and reciprocity. We enter into creative cooperation with artists who have the courage to stick their neck out in societies in which the political or economic conditions complicate the realisation of certain forms of art expression. These artists engage with their social surroundings and often operate in communities with restricted access to artistic schooling and other forms of incentive and inspiration for their work. In view of our unique focus and efforts we can justifiably be referred to as an innovative development organisation which is active at the level of the development of creative network links.

Theatre Embassy works with partner organisations in Africa, Latin-America and Asia with the objective of enhancing the cultural infrastructure and developing a global cultural network. 28 June 2010. < <http://www.theatre-embassy.org/en/news/overview.htm> >

²⁷ Ibid.

While starting off with the festival of folklores-2008 in its basic first edition, 2009 saw the second edition of a four - day long drama festival titled, *Under The Sal Tree - 2009 (Celebrating Rituals through Theater)* in collaboration with the Theater Embassy of Netherlands which was staged deep inside the forest in his ancestral village of Rampur December 18-21, 2009, constructing the stage and the gallery with cost- effective and environment-friendly material such bamboo and betel-nut trees; he could really establish his commitment and devotion for the art form as well as for the common masses. The idea was so unique that not a single tree had to be cut while constructing the stage and the gallery. On “Celebrating Rituals through Theatre,” the theme of the four-day festival, Sukracharjya said, “Rituals are the core of our cultural heritage. The present project is about attempting an in-depth study of rituals and traditions and exploring the possibilities of modeling them in theatrical expressions for creating awareness among the people on their preservation.”²⁸

The festival show-cased six plays including the *Madiah Muchi* (Madiah, The cobbler) by Badungduppa, which is a Rabha adaptation of a work of renowned the drama personality of Karnataka Prof. H. S. Shiva Prakash based on a folk-epic; the Assamese version of Habib Tanvir’s *Charan Das Chor* of Mrinal Kr. Bora’s *Rangalaya* group of Nagaon, *Searching of Dipak Maibam’s Deal Repertory Co.* group of Manipur, *Samandraba Mami/Disjointed Image* of Heisnam Tomba of Kalakshetra Manipur, *Sacrifice* of Bidyujit Chakraborty’s *Kalabhumi* group in Tripura, *Jagaran* of Jayanta Dutta’s group in Upper Assam, and *Sristi* by Tarali Das’s group. Prof. H. S. Shiva Prakash himself was present during the entire festival.

Following the huge success of the festival, which was digitally documented, Sukracharjya has now been invited to showcase the video show of the festival by *International*

²⁸ Ibid.

Drama/Theater and Educational Association (IDEA), a combined body of four countries including Spain, France, Brazil USA in its 7th IDEA Congress, 2010 to be held in Brazil from the 17th to the 25th of July. Stating that drama specialists from different countries in the world are likely to gather and discuss the present crisis faced by them, Sukracharjya says that artists from the third world countries can surely show the path of progress both in arts and society, while learning from many such initiatives across the world at the IDEA Congress.

Heisnam Kanhailal, who was there during the 2009 festival, while appreciating the approach of Sukracharjya, said that the main idea behind the conception of such a space and festival was to give rural people the opportunity of getting pleasure from plays of good quality, sensible thought and taste. The modern theatres, within confined spaces of auditoriums and stages painted with artificial light, sound and make up habitually rob these rural people of sensible drama, as they cannot afford the cost and moreover they cannot appreciate the context too. Meanwhile Sukracharjya claims that his dramas are equally compatible to be performed in any sophisticated auditorium. Thus, such a theatre has many advantages because it can adapt to different environment because it is a purely actor, musician based 'live-theatre' (to borrow Kanhailal's term). For instance, *To-Paidom* has been staged 14 times in different auditoriums after his first show in the open air stage in his native place. However, the mega multimillion budgeted technically²⁹ marvellous plays can only performed at Sydney Opera House or Esplanade auditorium, the Broadway or even the popular 'mobile theatre' of Assam to needs its crude mechanical appendages to create those popular melodramatic stuff, but they cannot

²⁹Often relating to, or involving technology, especially 'modern' 'scientific' 'technology'. Of course, 'modern' 'scientific' and technology with the vested contested definition are themselves very problematic categories. These categories need an altogether separate discussion, where we could open up issue like is the theatre they create without the so called 'modern technological appendages' not modern? Well, it is may not be! And as it may not be, and yet it is relevant and contemporary, then this theatre, this consciousness is definitely something, and if we can get hold of that something, we could say we have found the 'alternative' to modernity.

performed here under the Sal trees, that's the limitation of the so called academically approved model of 'Modern Theatre'.

Theatrical model of communication have fascinated social scientists including folklorists to use the theatre analogy or a very wide encompassing term like 'performance' in their study of patterns of social behaviour and expressive forms, for example Erving Goffman's 'performance in everyday life'³⁰, Victor Turner's 'social drama'³¹ or Clifford Geertz's 'theatre state'³², Richard Bauman or Dan Ben-Amos³³, all have used theatre/drama framework beneficially. This, on the other hand, its type of analogy has benefited theatre directors and theoreticians of theatre like Richard Schechner, Jerzy Grotowski or Eugenio Barba³⁴ in theorising their ideas of theatre and has helped in generating new academic disciplines like Performance Studies and Theatre Anthropology.

Performance approach to the study of folklore, myth, and even anthropology is inherently context-centred and it helps in ascertaining the meaning of a text, which is always illusive, in different ways according to the changes in performance context or situation. The locally defined culture-specific-meaning is brought into an area of discussion along with the social, cultural, political and historical dimensions of the particular folk group. Taking into consideration these facts, I ponder and propose that further fruitful would be a research oriented performance, which keeps in mind all the preceding stakes of locally-defined-culture-specific meaning and then strive

³⁰Goffman, Erving. *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1959)

³¹Turner, Victor. Essay "Social Dramas and Ritual Metaphors", in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.)

³²Geertz, Clifford. *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

³³Philip M. Peek, Kwesi Yankah *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, (New York: Routledge, 2004).

³⁴Lisa Wolford, and Richard Schechner, *The Grotowski Sourcebook* ed. by, London: Routledge, 1997, Eugenio Barba, *The Secret Art of the Performer*, (in collaboration with Nicola Savarese), (London, Centre for Performance Research: Routledge, 1991)

to create something that has the same echo across different frames of references. This is something easier said than done. However, it always sets a beautiful target one may try to achieve. In future, this target will help us to define a new 'aesthetics of the oppressed'

At a time when unending violence literally paralyses the whole region stretching from Karbi-Anglong in the east to Kokrajhar in the west, Brahmaputra valley in the north to Goalpara in the south (the region of Badungduppa's concern), and generally in the whole of north east, and for that matter any part in the world, it is very difficult to be creative and, very vital to make a feasible intervention in the so called happenings of distraught in the society. Badungduppa is precisely doing that being both creative and intervening. With the re-emergence of National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)³⁵, and the possibilities of the formation of (RNSF)³⁶-an armed Rabha extremist faction parallel to the 6th schedule demand committee, the role and vision of Badungduppa can be viewed as an eye opener for the outsiders- a model to reckon for, but for the Rabha people themselves, it is a matter of erudition, experience and pride, as if looking into an oracle orb that not only shows the present but reminiscences of the past and prophesies of the future.

³⁵The Telegraph, Gossaigaon, July 8, 2010: The anti-talks faction of the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) today triggered a powerful blast that flung the locomotive and two coaches of the Calcutta-bound Garib Rath Express from the tracks, killing a six-year-old boy and injuring 23 others at Gossaigaon in Kokrajhar district. 10 July 2010. << http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100709/jsp/frontpage/story_12663210.jsp >>

³⁶Rabha National Security Force (RNSF) - Assam, India. 14 July 2009 << http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/rnsf.htm >>

Chapter/Act IV

Context, Subtext and A Performance Text:

To' Paidom

Chang bhabibamun ekhre changi rengo
Sansar gocha biye ringjo
Samaj gocha biye rengo
Jati gocha mae rengo
Mae rengo hasong.
Khechakaebe chaangi? Khechakaebe
chaangi ?
Bahirani jentha na chingi majarini
Narong bhabichi narong bhabichi narong
bhabichi

Who thought this would happen?
-One family is totally destroyed
One society would also perish likewise
One race would also be lost
Lost would be a Land/Country
Whose mistake is it? Whose...whose
mistake
Of the outsiders or ourselves
Think for yourself, think for yourself,
and think it on your own.

I

The formation of Badungduppa came at a time when few disenchanted Rabha youth realized that their culture was depleting. Their argument was that North-East of India is very rich in cultural diversity. The indigenous communities are prosperous in rituals and cultural tradition. In the wake of cultural erosion, rapidly continuing in the name of modern education, globalization, competition of living and civilization, they thought that the so called 'progress' was rather hasty in nature. As a result of this not properly cooked version of modernity, now-a-days people reject their own cultural heritage and get attracted to the so called 'rootless modern culture'¹.

Of course, this is a question not just for them it is question for us too- how and where we are standing, how we are identifying ourselves on the basis of our own cultural

¹ The modern culture has its own roots, given its specific context, however in comparison to these indigenous communities which has a substantial oral history and heritage, which they definitely consider do be modern in itself in contrast to the 'Modern' that invades in to their domain.

context. The answer would be 'we cannot, or we should not'. People would say- what is the harm in modern culture? I personally do not have reservation with modern culture, but only argue that let that happen at its own pace, and we should be intelligent enough to read both and prioritize and choose and not blindly follow 'modern culture'. In such a situation of dilemma, Badungduppa was formed to draw the attention of the Rabha people towards their own culture to protect the cultural erosion and develop an appeal for their own culture.

Madan Rabha, a member of Badungduppa explained,

We were faced with many questions like- How we popularize our own cultural tradition among ourselves? How we preserve our cultural heritage? How we develop our culture in modern context? Thus, Badungduppa was conceived to renew our traditional culture in modern context, to revitalize our rituals, to create this in theatrical aspect.²

Since Badungduppa's inception in 1998, they have regularly organized various workshops on traditional culture. They also produced plays of contemporary meaning showcasing Rabha and other tribal tradition (so far 12 plays have been produced as mentioned in the last chapter). One of the most important works was Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's "*Rupalim*" in Rabha language and set in Rabha tradition. The shows of the play were done in many places of Assam including in "*Swarna-Rang Prativa*" festival organized by SNA at Sibsagar in the year 2004. It received wide appreciation.

As I have mentioned earlier, in 2005, the Badungduppa started taking the present shape. North-East of India has been ravaged with violence, intra-and inter community

² Madan Rabha, Personal interview in mixed language- Hindi, bangle and Assamese. Translations mine. All Interviews if not stated otherwise are taken by me. 18 December. 2009

rivalry, a national-separatist view point; at such a stage, it becomes all the more important to study the activities of Badungduppa. Badungduppa's concerns are not for just Rabha, but to extend this way of reinventing self to other communities in the area.

One of Badungduppa's project document mentions,

...[S]ome initiative towards the preservation of our tradition is the urgent need of the hour.

The present project is our humble attempt for sensitizing the young generation in particular and mass people in general on our cultural heritage.³

This thought is materialized in the theatre that they create blending ancient ritual into performance, in form of a presentation loaded with contemporary meanings. Badungduppa understands that 'change' is an integral part of development. However, here the catch is -'change' does not mean the destruction of the tradition. It is rather the reinvention of the tradition in present context. It is this understanding which propels them to generate this new kind of theatre and performance. Sukracharjya emphasizes,

Rituals are the core of our cultural heritage and the backbone of our cultural identity. We have to take up an in-depth study of rituals and traditions. A thorough analysis and justification of the rituals of their importance can help us to face many difficult contemporary situations. This can be more crystallized if the possibilities of modelling these rituals in theatrical expression for sensitizing the general people can be explored.⁴

If I can rightly feel their pulse, then what they are suggesting is, the onslaught globalization and information technology resulted in a shrinking world. Dominant

³ Badungduppa project document 2008. Unpublished. Collected from office files, Rampur, Agia, Goalpara, Assam

⁴ Sukracharjya Rabha, Personal interview in mixed language. 18 December. 2009

economic and socio-cultural groups are influencing the minor groups so much that they are losing their identity. Reinvention and revitalization of the rituals and narratives that shape their existence can be a way to showcase their cultural individuality and bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. These are the thoughts that gave Badungduppa the impetus to do this 'off-the-track' work in the tribal village of Rampur, and also contribute to the development of the whole of North East.

II

Among many such endeavours, Badungduppa organized a "*Rabha Sonoskritir Adhayan Mulak Kormasala*"- 'An Workshop to study the Cultural heritage of Rabha' in the year 2007. The workshop had many speakers from different villages and clans presenting views and illuminating the village population about many unheard, forgotten, unthought-of issues about themselves. Badungduppa found the right expression in "To Poidom" based on Rabha folk tale and Rabha tradition. The shows of the play were done in many places of Assam including in "*Purvottor Natya Samaroh*"- a festival organized by NSD at Guwahati in the year 2008 and "*Nattya Mela*" organized by SNA at Guwahati in the year 2009.

The first edition of Under the Sal Trees was based on Folktales in Performance and was named "*Under the Sal Trees: a festival of folk tale in performance*" in Badungduppa Kalakendra in the year 2008 where performer from Assam, Manipur and Tripura participated. The second edition of the festival was in 2009, where it was called "*Under the Sal Trees: a festival of rituals in performance*" and altogether new approach was planned. For this context under the guidance of Kanhailal, Badungduppa planned an

innovative approach, they selected eight directors from different part of North –East India and organized five days workshop on rituals at Badungduppa Kalakendra, Rampur village, Dist. Goalpara, Assam. Two experts were invited to guide the participants in this workshop - H. Kanhailal from Manipur and Ms. Diana Martinez Moralez from Bolivia. The idea was to invite some talented directors of the region for a workshop. In the selection process preference was be given to those directors who are already working in this field, and their skills would be guided by some eminent theatre experts. After the workshop the directors would go to their respective places and work on a production. After two month they would meet again for a festival where their productions would be presented in front of distinguished theatre personalities.

In the festival a thorough discussion on each production would be done by the assembled experts and feedback be given for creating an authentic theatrical expression of rituals. It happened likewise, and after the workshop the directors went back to their own places and prepared new play. They came back to Badungduppa with their plays at the four days theatre festival *Under the Sal Trees: a festival of rituals in performance* in December 2009 and then toured extensively in their own regions, reworking on the inputs by experts during the festival. There were directors from remote places of Assam, Tripura and Manipur, who work at the grass root level, and attempts were also made to connect to theatre activists from Mizoram and Nagaland too.

III

From thought to space, intention to performance creation, from intangible to tangible might be the trajectory of any performance activity. But here in these

performances of the Rabha people these categories are smeared into each other. This can well be illustrated if we take a look at the performances by Badungduppa in the last few years. Of course, the creation of this brilliant performance space, the residential campus as 'an artist in residence' commune is the important as an act in the aspect of the performance. And it also contributes to the actor being trained strenuously to deliver the kind to 'primal immediacy' as I have earlier pointed out in the case of Kanhailal. Badungduppa has many performances and a study of a few will surely place us in a position from where we can survey the design of the activities of Badungduppa.

A study of the play in performance with Badunduppa will be helpful in understanding the emergent aesthetics of creating such a text in performance. For example, HS Shiva Prakash's *Madaiah Muchi (Madaiah the Cobbler)* is picked up from the folk epic of Karnataka about Male Madeshwara. The epic is about the heroic journeys of Madaiah of Madeshwara, the saint deity of the downtrodden classes of Mysore, Mandya and other parts of Karnataka. This is based on the Samana Dore Section of the epic.

King Sravana is the archetypal icon of tyranny, who enslaved all the god and goddesses. The people of his kingdom reel under his brutal reign. Madaiah the Cobbler rescued the people from Sravana arrives at Bankarupa, the capital of Sravana, meets the king and promises to present him a pair of unique foot wear. He then travels back in time to the city of his ancestors where Adi Kalyan Haralaiah and Kalyanamma of the cobbler's caste live. Upon Madaiah's request the couple makes a pair of footwear from the skins of their thigh. With this footwear Madaiah travels back to Bankapura and present it ti

king Sravana. The moment Sravana wears the footwear he is engulfed in flames. The people of Bankapura then free the God and Goddess held captive by him.

The festival brochure provides a powerful context to the play and also indicates the subtext.

King Sravana of this play represents the tyrannical forces of history and human consciousness. In today's uni-polar world this play assumed particular resonance. In the past greatest challenges to such tyrannizing forces have come from the most humiliated and tortured sections of mankind as in case of struggle of Vietnamese people against the militaristic superpower.⁵

Though I personally feel that such a straight reference most of the time snatches away the enchantment of the performance, loading it with didactic contextualization. However, this production, as I felt, has its own pace and direction, creating an intensity in performance. The original play has been fervently edited to bring out the essence, which hits the observer with its naive exterior but profound depiction of a situation of oppression. This play by Badungduppa was an approach to the condition of the depiction of the state of oppression, which I refer to as an expression has the ring of 'universality'. The Rabhas on the south bank of Brahmaputra are influenced by Hindu religion and believe themselves to be a part of the religion. Even their traditional gods and myths are co-opted in the Hindu canon of the region. In this play, the protagonist, Madiha is a cobbler, which is an oppressed category on the basis of caste. The cobblers being a part of the Hindu caste system are considered to be *Untouchables*, even lower than *Sudras*. Here in Rabha

⁵ Brochure of *Under the Sal Trees: a festival of rituals in performance* in December 2009. Rampur: Badungduppa

context, Badungduppa dressed Madiah as a priest of the Rabha community. The dress is quite same with the Rabha Priest or ceremonial man, with minor added frills on the costume for stage. (Plate 1: there is an apparent visual resemblance between the dress of the priest in Paham and the actor in Badungduppa doing the role of Madiah). Thus, this visual similarity subverts the notion of caste barrier in dominant Hindu community, but further more important because it creates a kind of social healing as mentioned earlier. As Madiah, (wearing a Rabha priest dress) rescues his fellow men from the oppressive King Sravana, the audience from Rabha community after watching the play, feels at one with the character who leads the Rabha people out of the misfortune. They emerge out of the performance with a hope, with a sense of power that somebody among them can help them out of any situation of oppression.

Adapting story with its primary structure intact but editing the original 2 hours play into a play of one hour only, and creating a diverse, intense performance through spectacular use of body and visual poetry is the merit of Badungduppa. As for example there are three god and goddess, Sun, Moon and Mother Earth. These are the idioms from their daily life and has value and resonances for them. They get light from Sun, cool night from the moon and Mother Earth harnesses and provide them life.

Thus, at one level, the manner in which the narratives are stitched together with the tradition, it reflects the practice of recording events from everyday life undertaken by 'unlettered' societies replete with vibrant oral culture. At another, as beliefs, customs and reality merge, the apparent similarity between the ritual character and the character on stage represented here in the plays blend then the performances not just serve only as

arena of narration to time-honoured stories, folk epics and values, but also situate the audience in the history and mythologies. One yet another level, this play also transcends the domain of the creative and the innovative, hitting the right chord inside one's being, while it resonates the sacred, as a ritual performance.

IV

Before finally embarking on my field trip to Assam and Meghalaya, I did my map plotting and studied material available on Badungduppa. Over phone I had long conversation with Sukracharjya about the ingredients of his plays, the rituals etc. He asserted with deep regret that the Rabhas in Assam do celebrate their traditional festivals but they do it in a manner which is somewhat like a 'pastiche' - with the ritual on one side and on the other side you have *Traditional Fashion Show*, popular Assamese songs being jockeyed by a DJ. He precisely detests such fusion and told me that there are still places where the old pristine ways of worshipping are followed. These are the places that inspired him to create Badungduppa. I visited Badungduppa for the first time in June 2009, and that was the time of Baikho festival. Baikho is the festival of Earth Goddess. Evocatively Lovita J R Morang portrays Baikho and Dodan in the poem, '*On the eve of baikho utsav of Rabhas*':

... with the fall of the Rain
The sky kissed gently the earth
The day unfurls its sacredness
The day is breathing the morning wind
Wind still blowing and breathing
Seoman Rabha seoman
Hail rabhas
Today is celebrated
Dodan raja enliven
Rejoiced in the joyous existence
Here is the baikho utsav...

Namfarsong namfarsong
A sacred calling move on unto
Highest mission
A great dream of humanity.⁶

Poem brings in the energy of the festival and the associated myth. I got lucky and Sukracharjya took me to this village called Paham in West Garo Hills, Meghalaya. However, as we reached on the day of the festival and the ritual had already started, we were not allowed to enter the ritual space which is deep inside the forest. We waited for around Five hours and then after the ritual was over we were allowed to enter the space and soon we were friendly with everybody. The ritual space⁷ (Chapter III: Plate 1 and 2 the photos on top) is around ten minutes walk from the main road, the space is a cleared rounded up space with rock block on the outer perimeter of the circle used to serve edibles (sacred food). We documented the closure of the ritual with performance of men dressed as warriors with mock weapons slaying tiger and pigs (part played by some other men). Only men are allowed to do this ritual of Baikho in the forest. The women join them in the evening part of the ritual in the village. In the evening we went back to the village, where we saw the whole village literally on a small courtyard, singing young girls and boys and dancing which is called *Chathar Dance*. The dance continued whole night with the food and drink running thoroughly. I found feeling dead drunk, but still danced to appease the gods. Sukracharjya has the minute eye to watch every detail and

⁶ Morang, Lovita J R *On the eve of baikho utsav of Rabhas*- 10 July 2010. URL: <<
http://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks/pdf/lovita_j_r_morang_2009_7.pdf >>

⁷ Plate 2 shows the ritual space in *Paham* comparing it to the performance space in *Rampur*. Both these places have striking similarities in terms being circular amidst the Sal trees.

that is where he draws his inspirations from. The invigorating tuned up dances with songs of tease and taunts between adolescent boys and girls, who are probably choosing their mates in the process, the calm and composed dance of the elderly ladies, and mubbling of village men and priests carrying out the rituals at the dead of the night. These are the ingredients of Sukracharjya's plays. That was an experience and this year, we went back for more to document the ritual with a proper documentation team from *Doordarshan Kendra Guwahati*. This year, we found many new facets and felt the need to write about these amazing phenomena and promised to return year after year to study it properly.

Recently the newest play, 'A work in progress' as Sukracharjya puts it, Badungduppa is working on a play called *Dumukshi*, which is based on the love story of *Dodan Raja* and *Dumukshi*, takes into account many popular folk myths and lores. Even at Baikho festival there are songs dedicated to Dodan's valour, the poem in the last paragraph too refers to Dodan in context of Baikho. As the performance begins, we see many people visiting a mausoleum, and offering their prayers to their ancestor. The mausoleum is incidentally of *Dumukshi*. Then the visitors have a vision of these great ancestors and their lives. Then the story goes to the flash back and we see Dodan and *Dumukshi* in love with each other. Dodan was the king of the Rabha, who had great respect and admiration for Mother Nature. He cared for Mother Nature so much that he used to hang guava on his moustaches. He was a great king who led a very simple life and denounced his pompous generals who only wanted to revel, get intoxicated and want only war. Dodan believed that war is never the solution of anything.

As the story unfolds we find Dumukshi admiring Dodan's love for Nature. However, Dumukshi's Brother Kashi Raja (King of Kashi) is infuriated when he gains the knowledge about the affair. He imprisons Dumukshi and plots to kill Dodan. Dumukshi dodges the prison guard and runs away. There is a meta-theatrical heart wrenching chase sequence. When asked Sukracharjya explained that he himself have heard in child hood that many years back a woman was chased to death nude through forest and fields near this village as she refused to marry the person chosen by the family. "That imagery stayed on my memory, and of course the peoples too" said he.⁸ In this case too, there earlier analogy can be applied as it blends both myth and archived history. And one is unaware when what flows into each-other.

The story continues. When Kashi Raja could not catch her, he ordered the preparation of an army to kill Dodan. At that very moment, Dodan too arrives looking for Dumukshi. Kasha Raja and Dodan has a clash of ideas. And then finally Kashi raja attacks Dodan with his sword but in the clash both Kashi Raja and Dodan's arch General are killed. Dodan expressed a sense of extreme pain within. He never wanted this. The bowmen of Kashi Raja shoot two deep penetrating arrows into Dodan. Dodan understands this is the end of him and wishes for the goodwill people and asks Mother Nature to forgive these fools as they don't know what they are doing.

When he died, the place is converted into a lake. And Dumukshi in the course of waiting for time immemorial is transformed into a stone slab. The pilgrims visit this slab as a scared mausoleum. The last image is of Dodan and Dumukshi meeting in the heaven and the visitors visualizing this event. There is a strong sense of 'lyricality' in almost all

⁸ Sukracharjya Rabha, Personal interview in mixed language. 30 May, 2010

of his plays, may it be To' Poidam, Dumkshi, *Dangai (Stick): The Awakening* or even the adaptation of HS Shiva Prakash's *Madiah the Cobbler*. The way narratives are weaved and portrayed, they encompass this ringing sense of 'lyricality'⁹. Of course melody is quite inherent in the community's activity, which is always reflected in the manner they speak, the way they work, as if their whole existence rings of the apparent 'lyricality' of the whole community. With slow movements, accentuated expressions interspaced with scarce sharp dialogues, the performances by Badungduppa create a sense of urgency deep inside our psyche. The urgency is the aesthetics that this whole study is trying to underline, creating a universal expression of the sense of victimhood, of being oppressed, so that the oppressed people can realise the power within and overcome the oppression that intrigues them.

V

Given the ground work, inspiration and the manner in which the plays by Badungduppa are created, articulated and performed, now we are in a position to be in undeviating contact with a play by Badungduppa. This play will also serve as an inference to the arguments which I have been building across this study, on the structure of execution, appearance and the emergent aesthetics.

⁹ My ideas about lyricality have been significantly influenced by Elder Olson (1952) and Ralph Rader (1975), members of the first and second generations of neo Aristotelian critics. Rader's essay "The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms" offers a highly insightful way to think about the relations among (implied) author, the "I" of a poem, and the (authorial) audience. For further reference on lyric and narrative, one can look up Friedman 1989; Gerlach 1989; and Dubrow 1999, 2000. I am especially grateful to Saugata Bhaduri for his delightful insights about the intersections of lyric and narrative.

The play is **TO'POIDAM**, which was staged for more than fourteen times across Assam, and this year it is invited to be a part of the performances scheduled to happen during Commonwealth Games 2010 at New Delhi.

Sukracharjya was reminded of the folk tale, he heard during his childhood. He planned to go on board with a project to make this folk tale into a play. For that he meticulously searched for various versions of the folk tales. And then he evolved his own take on them, reflecting upon the contemporary situation in Assam and the whole of North-East.

However, this was the matter of late 2006. I wanted to understand what the real folklore was. But it was very difficult to get those people now in 2009. I along with Badungduppa members sat through many versions the folklore, but most of them had many digressions.

The only folklore that fairly had a sense of continuity and rooted ness to the context of the narrative was the one by Binoy Rungdung. A resident of Magho, Balachari, Goalpara Assam, aged 42, Binoy Rungdong is a school teacher by profession.

He has flair of narrating stories. While he was narrating the story, it was as if we ourselves the watching the events happening in front of our eyes. The folktale goes:

Once upon a time a mother lived with her seven sons. One day mother collected lai vegetable from the garden and prepared traditional dice "*bamsikkhali*". When seven sons ate this 'bamsikkhali' and they were surprised, as the curry was so tasty compared to other days. They asked her mother, what was the reason for this taste. The mother explained that a big unknown bird flew past leaving behind its droppings on the vegetable, when she was collecting the vegetables. She was intrigued as she had washed it very well before the preparing. After hearing this, brothers were surprised and they decided to hunt the bird for meat. Elder brother had ordered the youngest one to preparing all needs for hunt. Though

youngest one helped them whole night to prepare for the hunt next day, the elder brothers left him saying “ You are younger ! Don’t go with us.

They went to hunt taking arrow and bow weight of two mon (80 kg) and two and half mon (100 kg) respectively. On the path they met seven person carrying bundle of straw for making a marriage camp. The brothers asked them about the path of the bird. But street people asked them if they could break bundle of straw by the arrow then only they will give the right answer. But six brothers failed to break the bundle of straw, so they refused to answer them.

Again these brothers met seven women carrying bundle of banana leaves and asked them the same question. As the brothers failed to break the banana leaves bundle, the women folk left without answering. Lastly they met girls taking water pot on the way and asked them about the To Poidam bird. Again girls told them to break the water pot. Here also the six brothers failed to break the water pot. Girls insulted them telling “ You are all unable to break the simple pot then how can you hunt the Poidam bird ?”

So we¹⁰ couldn’t give the right answer. Nevertheless Six brothers went on to searching bird and spent one night in the hut of an old woman. Next they entered the main jungle where Poidam bird was. In the moment, they faced widely opening mouth of the Bird and try to kill the bird but the bird captured the six brothers and ate them.

On the other side, youngest brother and mother feared and thought of the possibilities of a dangerous situation that the six brothers might have fallen into. So, youngest brother went to save his brother taking bow (Dhenu) and arrow (Kar/Teer) which was 10 times his weight.

In the path he met straw carrier persons; banana leaves carrier women and water pot carrier girls and succeeded in all tasks that they requested. Then they all helped him to find the direction and location of the Poidam bird and wished him to be successful in his journey. He

¹⁰ I believe as a normal logic of English it should have been ‘they’, however here we can also be valid as if the narrative time and the narrated time quite coalesce. As if in the process we become ourselves become the performer taking active part in the performance. I have tried to retain the sentence structure to bring out the poetry of narration and narratives even though it might at times falter the rules of English language.

also stayed one night in the old woman's house where his brother stayed. Likewise after completing seven day seven nights he confronted the bird and killed it and saved his brother. Badungduppa took the essence of the text, and articulated it in their terms reflecting upon the problems of the contemporary time. The bloodshed, brothers killing brothers. Hence contemporanising the tale to have echoes in our times.

Note: The performance text would not have be possible without active participation of Badungduppa members and Sukracharjya Rabha. I also greatly indebted to Badungduppa's music director Nayan Rabha who prepared the notation for the text and all the people who contributed to make me understand the complex Rabha dialogues so that I can formulate my takes and prepare the text from the view point of a speaker of Rabha as a first language.

Before getting into the text, we need a bit of a background and nothing could be more apt than a short Summary.

To' Paidom is based on a Rabha folk-tale and the literal meaning of the term is 'the bird named Paidom'. The story revolves around a mother and her five sons. One day while collecting vegetables from her kitchen- garden the mother notices the droppings of an unknown bird. When the vegetable is cooked, it turns out to be extremely delicious. After hearing about the indications of the presence of a strange bird, the four elder sons decide to hunt it, assuming its meat will be exceptionally tasty and might even make them immortal. Despite the warnings of the wise younger brother and mother, they go to hunt it. The bird, which is an evil presence, takes over their minds completely, consuming

their souls and making them dance to her tune¹¹. Meanwhile, the mother has a dream and forces her youngest son to go to the rescue of his brothers. He does so and manages to save their lives. However, one of the brothers strikes him and the others lie to their mother on reaching home, saying that they never met their brother. When the youngest son regains consciousness, he returns home and kills his eldest brother.

- Technique: Minimalist (Essential)
- No scene changes and fade-outs in-between

To Poi'dam: A Performance Text

Performance: Badungduppa

Cast(in order of appearance):

Mother : Rayanti Rabha

Narrator : Kamil Rabha

Eldest Son : Muktilal Rabha

Second Son : Bijoy Rabha

Third Son : Udhab Rabha

Fourth Son : Mudit Rabha

Youngest Son : Dhananjay Rabha

To poidam : Bijoy Rabha

¹¹The imagery of the bird and the brother being eaten by the bird are very useful as it clearly depicts the culture in question in the age of globalization. Where the brothers being in tune with the new culture, the new culture slowly eats up your existence and you cannot leave it as you are used to it. You can easily replace the bird with alien culture and will still have the story intact with all its action and it will give you new meanings

Co actress : Radhika, Kanika, Nirmali & Bembem

Credits:

Setting : Ananda Rabha, Dibakar Rabha, Dharmeshwar Rabha

Make Up
and Costume : Cheena Rabha & Madan Rabha

Music : Nayan Rabha, Dahananjay Rabha, Binanda Rabha & Madan Rungdung

Production
Manager : Ananda Rabha and Dharmeshwar Rabha

Concept, Design & Direction: Sukracharjya Rabha

(Fade in) **prologue:**

A narrator enters from the left (downstage) and churns out a tune on his flute, moves towards the centre.

He turns to the audience and sings: (Tune as given in the notation)

O...Raiji raja na, urgimen, Sastar Gosaosse kanina naameta gok

O... Tokankali tolaasa chabra musao rai, jibra be raari donga baandi
dongba khsaaye kutunye khrihare naasiye kaay khaare chokay
rabayitamon gok

O... Attakharno bhai-bhaiyen mapakcha

Oua rai jibra mani duk

O... Chaanga uno, chaanga garayeno

O... Mulkayi bayo nasidongba chungbaa bhai bejanse neken susua gok

Oua rai jibra mani duk

Chi tebe nekenhujuriyan, narangi khutakangiyan

(O...The people, the real beholders of authority, obeisance to you, I want to tell you all one folktale

O... Long-long ago, five brothers lived with their mother, though she was a widow, she fed them, reared them up with love and affection into a real human being

What to do... the brothers had terrible relationship among themselves

The mother is unhappy due to the quarrel between the brothers

O... whom to mend, whom to punish

O...when the mother loves the youngest son, other brothers grow jealous (*don't want to see face*)

The mother is very sad in the wake of these events

Now see for real with you own eyes in front of you]

Then slowly-slowly, the actors (A Lady and Five Sons) enter and freeze in the Upstage Centre (UC). The Lady looks straight; meanwhile all her children are lying on her lap.

The flute flows in (tune given in the notation 2, based on elongated Dadra tune in traditional form). The mother hums the tune and sings a lullaby for her sons:

Eng moina eng eng eng	Sleep Mayna sleep sleep sleep
Kami haba raba na, kaan kaiba sayita	When the work is over, the body is
Eng moina eng eng eng	drenching with pain
Eng moina eng eng eng	Sleep mayna sleep sleep sleep
Rampar chari japeta	Sleep mayna sleep sleep sleep
Neka niju kringyita	Soothing breeze blows
Chingi moina rong	Small and big honey bumble Bees
Eng eng eng	singing
Hmm...hmmm... hmmm	My Maynas sleep

Sleep sleep sleep

Hmm...Hmmm...hmmm

The sons slowly-slowly go to sleep, followed by the mother and after they slept enough the Mother wake up and then awaken her children:

Mother: Faar nayijoo.... [*Darkness has subsided/light has come*] , wakes her children up.

All of them were in deep sleep, so they somehow wakeup... the youngest being the active of all of them, wakes up first. After waking all her sons, the mother leaves for her household work. As soon as the mother leaves, all except the youngest again fall asleep. The youngest is irritated but seeing the beauty of morning sun, he forgets the irritation and is mesmerized by the bounty of nature.

The youngest son concentrates on the nature around and does '*Surya Pranam*' in yoga method. Off late other brothers wake up after a morning dream. They see the youngest brother exercise and plans to make fun of him.

The youngest is busy doing exercise. All the other brothers encircle the youngest without drawing his attention and then one of the brothers slowly pulls his leg by literally pulling his leg.

The youngest brother falls down and others make fun of him.

Well, others are taken aback when the youngest obviously does not like to be a butt of the joke...

Youngest Brother (YB) is angry and goes to the Leftside Downstage Corner (LDC). The three other brothers- Eldest (EB), Third (3B) and Fourth (4B) move to the Rightside Downstage Corner (RDC) and foolishly starts discussing why the youngest got angry. They thought that he should also have enjoyed the joke.

In the meantime, the Second Brother (2B) sneaks to the Left side Wings (LW) and brings in some food (goes straight to UC). He at once gestures towards other brothers to continue with their fighting and act of foolishness and he alone will enjoy the food.

He goes on to eat and making a good-bye gesture towards the audience as if telling that audience: "You are not going to get the share of my food/ go on with you fight you fool! Let me eat alone"

Meanwhile while the three brothers are discussing younger brother's anger, they get the smell of food. The Eldest brother inspects the mouths of the 3B and 4B asking if they have eaten something. They answer in negative. Gradually they go on to track the smell of the food.

Finally, Third brother (3B) suddenly notices the Second Brother (2B) and goes towards him to find out what is happening. In the meantime, the brother who is busy in eating lets loose his belly a bit and releases the gas.

The approaching person (3B) withstands the worst of it and still approaches and finds him to eating. He snatches away the food plate and rushes to towards the Centre of the stage.

In the intervening time, the 3B goes to the 2B and tries to snatch it. 2B takes huge interest and gleefully watches this duel between his brothers to get the ownership of the food. He is highly amused and results in laughter:

Ha...ha...ha... Ha ha...Ha...ha....ha

It gradually transforms into an orgy of feasting and fight. The Eldest Brother (EB) too joins the fighting band.

The Eldest Brother pushes away the mouth of the two brothers who are holding the plates, and he tries to reach the plate to gobble something. Seeing this brothers leave the plate. It falls flat on ground.

The Eldest Brother misses no time and starts licking the ground gobbling some left foodstuff.

The Third Brother is agitated and pours mud in the food plate of EB. EB snaps back at the 2B, starts a fight

The 3B shouts at the 2B: “the food is in your belly, so I’ll rip it off and have it.”

The youngest brother runs in to stop the brawl. He pushes the fighting brothers in order to detach them.

He pushes them hard. Now they hit back at him, all set to teach him a lesson.

A choreographed battle movement: the brothers arming themselves, fabricated in encircling motion

The youngest brother is on the verge of being thrashed by the elder ones. All are ready to strike a heavy shot and the youngest brother is crying on the brink of collapsing. At that very moment: mother/image of mother intervenes, but retreats helplessly.

The initial lullaby flows again (motif tune but at a slower pace, Appendix II, notation 2)

Text (multi-vocal/resonating), but this time as an ethereal voice from the background, symbolizing the inner voice of the brothers:

Eng moina eng eng eng

Eng moina eng eng eng

Kami haba raba na, kaan kaiba sayita

Eng moina eng eng eng

Sleep Mayna sleep sleep sleep

When the work is over, the body is Sleep *Moina* sleep sleep sleep

drenching with pain Sleep *Moina* sleep sleep sleep

The brothers realize their relationship and the importance of a family, and all disarm themselves, raise the youngest with love, and take him to the mother. Then everybody surrenders to the mother and she sermonizes.

The mother: If you all stay together as you are now, then in future you all will definitely have good times. Now, go and do whatever you all wish.

Youngest Bro: *Dada* (Brother)!

All other Bro: What...?

Youngest Bro: I have seen a huge Monitor Lizard!

All other Bro: Where...? Where?

Younger Bro: There...!

All: *Ni* (Let's Go)...!

The youngest brother then tells them about the location of the Monitor Lizard. They set out on the hunt.

The mother now contained love and sense of unity among her children, goes on with his usual household work. She goes to collect the twigs/vegetable (*Lai- Patta*) from the garden. (This *Lai- Patta* is abundantly in Indian terrain).

Suddenly she heard the cry and wing flaps of a strange bird (To' Paidom). The bird has a jarring tone and flies lowly. The mother crouches scared stiff. The bird before leaving leaves behind its dropping on the vegetable and on the mother's head.

She recovers and finds her head filled with the stinking shit of the bird. She wipes it off, takes the vegetable and moves out.

Meanwhile, the brothers have reached the spot of the hunt. The youngest shows the hideout. Everybody is engaged in the hunt except the fourth brother (4B). 4B is thinking about something. He goes to UC, sits there pondering for a while.

The other people are busy working out a plan to hunt the Monitor Lizard, digging up here and there.

The 4B goes to them and asks:

What was that mom asked us to do today- to stay together... Er... good times...what was that for?

EB: Don't you be a bugger and disturb our hunt with such philosophical outpourings...!

The 4B steps aside and goes on to unravel the meaning to mother's saying. The other three brothers get agitated, as they don't find the hunt. The EB goes straight to the YB and slaps him tight:

2B: This for you who misguided us about the hunt.

3B: Should ever tell lies to your elders!

4B: Brother, are we together/ are we united?

EB: What nonsense are you talking about? If we weren't together...we wouldn't have come here to hunt together.

EB: But why did you hit youngest Brother? Do you remember mother told us to be together is it now or in future?

The three elder brothers stay motionless with shame.

Just then, the youngest brother hears the cry of a strange flying thing and then terrified he calls in the fourth brother and points towards it.

Then the three senior approaches these two brothers to see that flying object, with an air of gravity about them.

The *To'Paidom*...flies in...

They all are afraid and collapse in a attempt to run

After the bird has left, they recover and start discussing about this strange awesome bird.

EB: Wow... such a huge bird! I have heard from wise men that this huge bird has been to big cities [so called centres of Civilization] and I have also heard that is the even the shadow of the bird falling on the body of a ill person and cure illness.

All other: Wow....w! Woo....w! (Physically expanding their stature along with the expression)

3B: SHUT UP...!! (This short-circuits the energy in the other brothers)
Hey listen (with a sense of anxiety and awe in his tone) I have... heard... that this bird is coming to many villages too and it eats up human.

Once again, the bird flies in. They are terrified and three of them run out. Only the youngest runs to save the Elder brother. They cling to each other and the bird flies by.

The bird is gone; the EB now hides his initial fear, bullies on the youngest and leaves.

Narrator sings (Tune given in the notation 1):

Baap jugi nachakaye, baap jugi nukhchakaye

Maranga na Mathanga

Maya na sapan

Aato ube aato

Bijagaini para, bihadamini para ribajo

To gandaba nukyun nukyun nama

Dakra purie ribayi zite tamazo ube gok

One one dongba To'paidom

O Lai chakise kanchik-binchik oni zinpake ringzo

Kaami habase raita raita moon gok

O... lai chakse daketa daketa

O me-tongsa bana u layon gulli mane zigrabay rumzo-rozo gok

U on saabra bijaabay chana chonjo

O chi tebe siyomani yan

[Never heard, never seen.

Is it *maranga* na *mathanga*.

Is it *Maya* (magic) or *Sapan* (dream)?

What is that...what? ... what?

From which place? which land, it came?

It seems like-like a bird...

It might be 'the bird called Paidom'

Collecting *Lai Patta*, *Patta* being collected.

Doing their work, their work being done.

Suddenly came that bird flying,

Left it's dropping on *Lai Patta*. The shitty-shit stuck in *Lai Patta*.

No other vegetable they had, so, they had to clean it, cook it and blow it.

Now the children are having their food,

O lord people see what happens then...]

After the narrator has retired from stage, we find the mother serving food to the brothers

After tasting the food –

All: Woowwww...

Mother: what happened?

All: *Lai Bambchikhali mi nimin dhonata* (Lai Bambchikhali is very tasty)

3B: The vegetable never ever tasted as good as today

2B: How is it so tasty today?

Mother: Oooo...one thing happened

All: What?

Mother: *Hapoi khare* -a huge bird flew in

All: So...

Mother: Its droppings were left on *Lai Patta*.

All: Left on *Lai Patta*

Mother: I have washed it carefully

EB: Wow...after washing too, it is of such a taste... definitely, the meat will be much tastier...it will make us *Amaar* (Immortal)!

Immortal? Immortal...Immortal

All brothers, by any means we have to hunt that bird!

Mother: Don't go....

YB: Don't go....

All brothers are afraid

EB: Noo.No..No.. If we eat the meat of the bird we'll be definitely be immortal

The Three brothers join the elder brother, dreaming of the would be immortality.

The brothers (except for the youngest): *Amar...Ammmmaaaaaarr* (In a tone of exuberance)

Mother & Youngest Brother: *Amar! Amar...*(In a tone of remorse)

All except the youngest starts to dream about the sweet meat of the bird and how they will attain immortality.They dream of immortality, of bounty, of fulfilment, of pleasure...etc....

Four girls as manifested passion comes in their imagination and dances a dream like luring Dance calling out: *Hamandai... hamandai...* and the brothers singing : *Amar... Amar ... Amar....(tune in the notation 3)* The dance reaches its pinnacle with the blending of these two voices in luring seductive tune on the girls side and 'ritualistic urgency' in tune for the boys... the ending is a complete blend and the brothers are taken out of the stage by the girls.

Mother and the youngest brother resist, but the brothers decide on go hunting the bird.

EB: Are you all ready? Are you all ready? (Three brother except the youngest nod their head respectively, in response. But the youngest brother resist and urges him not go on the hunt)

YB: Brother, please don't go, it might be *Maya*

EB: (Brother) you don't know anything. (In a violent tone) Mother, please tell him to stop.

Mother: Please don't go... don't go!

EB: You too are stopping us?

YB: Please *Dada*... don't go..

EB: *Haan*... what do you know? (He trashes him followed by the other three brothers on the threshold of thumping him. The mother somehow saves the youngest. Then the brother immediately sets out on the hunt.)

The mother and the youngest brother stay back in the house. They have a premonition of the ensuing danger. Then follows a captivating venture into the forest... into the darkness with nothing literally on stage but as if everything is there on stage. It is captivating. It is gripping session while the brothers try and cope up with the nervous situation in the deep dark forest. Then they see the bird...

The bird gives in an initial deafening cries... the brothers are scattered in the dense forest separately searching for the bird. As the bird's cry is heard, they fall down frightened

3B: *Dada*... (Searches his brother and subsequently meets the 4B and 2B)

3B: Where did it come from? (to 2B)

3B: Which direction? (EB)

EB: That direction...let's go!(shows the direction of the bird's cry and they rush towards that direction.)

And they run out of the performance space. This is immediately followed by the entry of the bird. It takes cunning steps, explores the space and slowly calms down sitting at the centre stage. In the meantime, the brothers get in position to shoot it dead with an arrow. The bird realizing its apparent death seizes to react and hits upon a new plan. It stays immobile. The brothers when encountered by the bird's indolence decided to catch it live and they all join in together. They all jumped together at the bird and finally succeeded in capturing it.

All: Tie it strong! Tie it strong! (Tying the bird)

All: Manjo... O... Manjo... he...he...he...

 Manjo... O... Manjo he... he... he...

(They are intoxicated by the success of their hunt and begin the Dance of Celebration)

All: Manjo... Manjo...Manjo...Manjo...Manjo...

The tempo of the dance slowly-slowly increases encircling the prize catch. The bird in the meantime watches them and slowly-slowly unties itself and joins them in dance... it has its own kind of dance.

4B: I liked its dance

EB: This is better than ours'... Let's dance in its style.

It flies away but does not go far as this flight and dance is a measure to just lure them.

All: Hey... it's flying away (pointing at the flight path)

Bird goes to a different spot and dances there. The brothers run to that spot to touch the bird. But the bird flies away they too gesture that the bird looks so beautiful in flight. Finally, they start copying the bird's style of dancing, encircling it (music is any popular western beat). Then the bird finally gobbles them up one by one. (Music of Cymbals clanging)

The Narrator comes in and sings(notation 1):

Atta marang bujore, atta maya bujo

What kind of evil spirit got in, what kind of *Maya*

Atta soni burjo gok, attoto ube

What kind of *Soni* is here, what kind of bird?

Baap jugi na chakaye, baap jugi nukh chakaye

Never heard, never seen

O... Monogjo gok manogjo

O... swallowed up swallowed up

Sesa bahyo sajo re

Ate up four brothers

O...eng jibrabe mulkai chabra pakeche

On the other, side the mother with her youngest son

moni dukhi goritamon gok gorita

With a sad heart is sleeping, is sleeping

kryrsing barsing jumangse nugjo gok nugjo

She saw strange dreams

Mulkar bhayna dakra dikra chokay

She woke up the youngest son and stated telling him

Kanijomun gok kanijimun gok, jibra be kanijomun gok

Mother told him, mother told him what has happened

O... saba mulykaiba renga namchabana

The youngest brother resisted to go

Jibra be khapeta gok, khapeta gok

So, the mother is now crying, crying.

O chi tebe siyomani yan

O lord people see what happens then. (The narrator leaves the stage)

After he leaves, we find the mother and the youngest sons sleeping in the house. The mother has a kind of dream/premonition and tells the youngest son about the images that she saw Mother: *Pichu... pichu ...* you elder brothers have been gobbled up!

(Terrified)

YB: Huh...

Mother: I was dreaming.

They must be in some danger. Please, you go... you go to save them.

Hurry... hurry [she tries persuades the youngest son to go in search of his brothers]

YB: [in a stubborn tone] I will not go!

Mother: See... see...if they are not alive then whom will you live for/with. Go...go
please go.

YB: (with utter force) I shall not go!

Mother is taken aback the tune of the flute flows. She is sad and utterly distressed. Seeing the mother is distress, the Youngest brother slowly walks up to the mother at UC and promises:

Ang ringo (I will go), *Aya ang Ringo* (mother, I shall go)

Mother: *Ah...Nema nema* (Nice)

The Youngest goes to downstage centre and prays to Mother Nature and draws his energy remembering the ancient wise ones.

He tells his mother: If this *Tulsi* stays alive then I am alive, if it dies don't wait for my return

He gathers strength and does a martial exercise

Back ground chants: *Heyi... heyi*

Kansana hazar kanni, Foyi bul foyi rasong

Let in one body a thousand body's strength come, aura come

Woyi ...oyi...oyi... (mystic encantation)

Heyi... heyi...

Finally pays his obeisance to the mother and leaves for the forest. He explores the forest carefully saving himself from traps, getting through the deep forest.

Meanwhile the bird (Enters from the right side) has already savoured the brothers. They all move behind the bird in a manner as they are a part of his body.

The youngest brother making his way through the dense foliage finally finds the bird and kills it. Then he rips off its belly freeing the brothers. Brothers recover as if breathing after a long time. Then at the sight of the dead bird... They jump off that place.

YB: *Dada...* (But he doesn't get any response, so he drags off the dead body of the bird out of vicinity. He comes back and asks) *Dada...* what has happened?

EB: The bird felt very weak and immobile, so we caught it... then it gobbled us up ...then what happened we don't know... Momo...

Meanwhile the Third Brother gets a weapon and hits the youngest hard and he collapses (vigorous cymbals cling.) Other brothers are taken aback at this gory sight, "The youngest brother is dead? !!", they thought...Everybody freezes (a melancholic tune flows in from the back ground for the moment). The third realising the wrecked situation was about to escape, The Eldest Brother asks:

Why do you kill him? (With a tone of angst)

3B: (gestures him to be silent) When we came to hunt, we had slapped the youngest. At this moment, he has saved us. Now how can we show our face to mother?

2B: But still then, you shouldn't have killed him. We will never tell mom about what has happened. We tell we did not meet him.

EB: we can't take the responsibility of your heinous act. We'll tell mother that you have killed him.

3B: you will tell mother, I've killed him?? !(with a tone of anxiety) then all
 right..I am going to tell mother that we all have killed him together. (He
 rushes out of the stage)

Then they leave chasing the 3B, leaving the youngest brother dying.

However, the youngest brother is not dead. He recovers and gives out a cry of anguish.
He thinks that this time the brothers have crossed the boundary. He is fully stimulated up
and now he wants to settle the score with the brother. He charges back towards the home.
Back at home the mother is waiting for her children, she gazes for long towards the forest
road. Occasionally she also observes the *tulsi*. Suddenly she finds the sacred plant
writhing. She is scared as she feels that her youngest son is dead. She is in extreme grief,
is reminded of the young, and sings the song(tune in notation 3):

O baba angi O baba sona

O loved son, *O baba sona*

Praoeta praoeta foi

I am calling you, calling you, come

Baba re O angi sona

O loved son, o my loved one

Praoyeta praoyeta foi

I am calling you, Calling you, come

Baba re... baba re... (tune in the notation)

The four brothers reach home. The mother is both happy and sad because she could not see the youngest brother.

Mother: your youngest brother had followed you to the forest. Where is he?

All (chorus): No, we seen our youngest brother.

Then the mother runs to look at the forest road, to see for the youngest son and comes back (centre stage) with a heavy heart. Suddenly she notices a new life in the erstwhile writhed *tulsi*.

Mother: Coming coming...your brother is coming. (with happiness)

She runs to see his youngest son coming. She comes back to inform the brothers but finds them terrifiedly crouching in a corner...

The youngest brother comes in infuriated as if wanting to burn down everything, other brothers are afraid of him and the mother trying to understand what is the problem

Mother: What happened between you ... what happened? (Stressing each word)

She waited for the answer, but rather she finds the 2,3 and 4th brother escaping and youngest brother ready to kill the Eldest brother because he felt that he is the one who started all this series of instigated unfortunate events.

The mother: No...No...No...Don't do it...Don't do it (she comes screaming and stands in between the YB and EB)

YB: One who doesn't learn from his mistakes and goes on to do the same mistake again and again, one should kill such a person to save nation, to save society and to save human being! Mother... please, move from that place... PLE...ASE....MOVE!

The mother collapses crying to save her son, but alas, she is undone.

The Eldest brother is shot dead by the youngest.

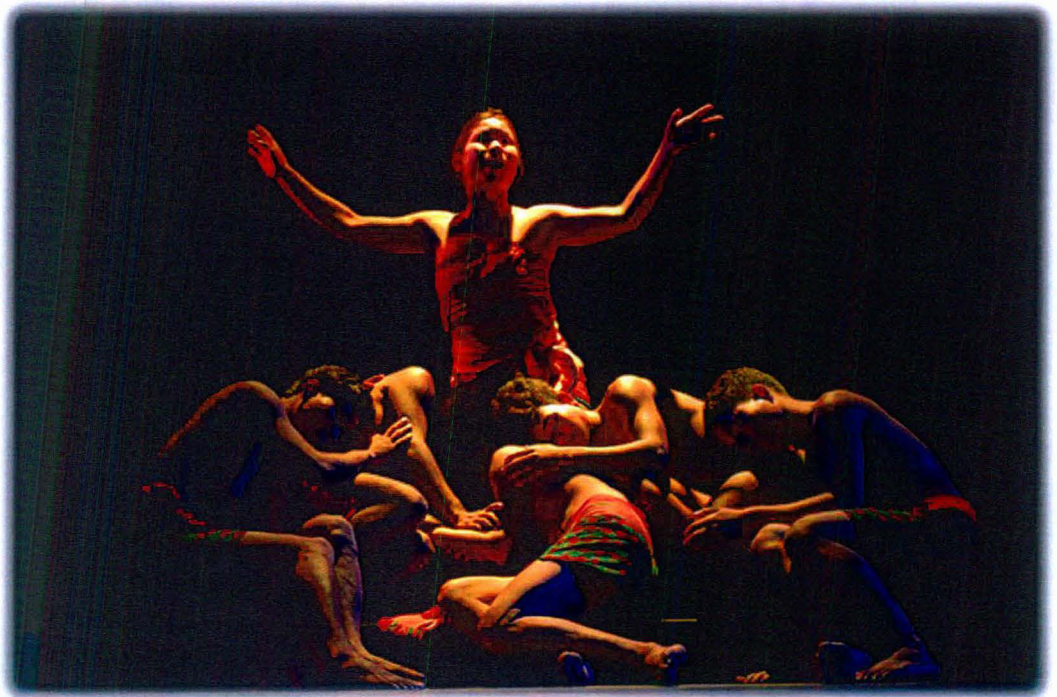
All the figures on the stage freezes at this moment and the narrator comes in (tune in Notation 1, same as the beginning song.)

He says:

Hamandai.. Atto changi ringjo
Chang bhabibamun ekhre changi rengo
Sansar gocha biye ringjo
Samaj gocha biye rengo
Jati gocha mae rengo
Mae rengo hasong.
Khechakaebe chaangi? Khechakaebe
chaangi ?
Bahirani jentha na chingi majarini
Narong bhabichi narong bhabichi narong
bhabichi

Who thought this would happen?
One family is totally destroyed
One society would also perish likewise
One race would also be lost
Lost would be a Land/Country
Whose mistake is it? Whose...whose
mistake
Of the outsiders or ourselves
Think for yourself, think for yourself,
and think it on your own.

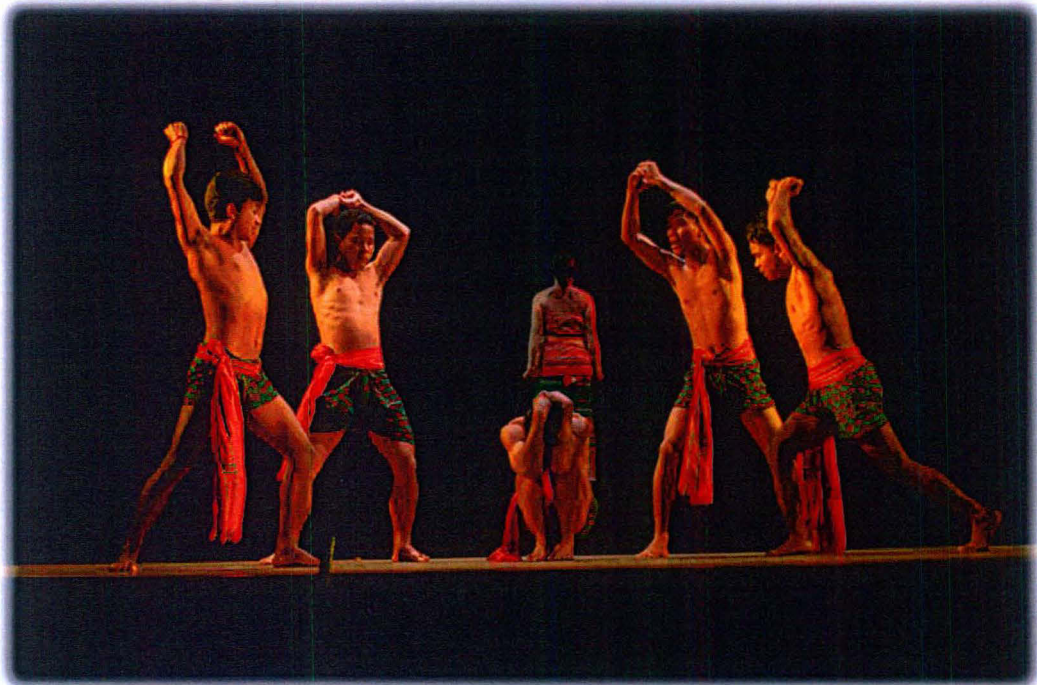
The characters on the stage softly shakes in rhythm as if they are trees, leaves brushed in by a gentle breeze telling the audience as the folklore, folk tales were real events and these were, are and would always be witness to such stories....



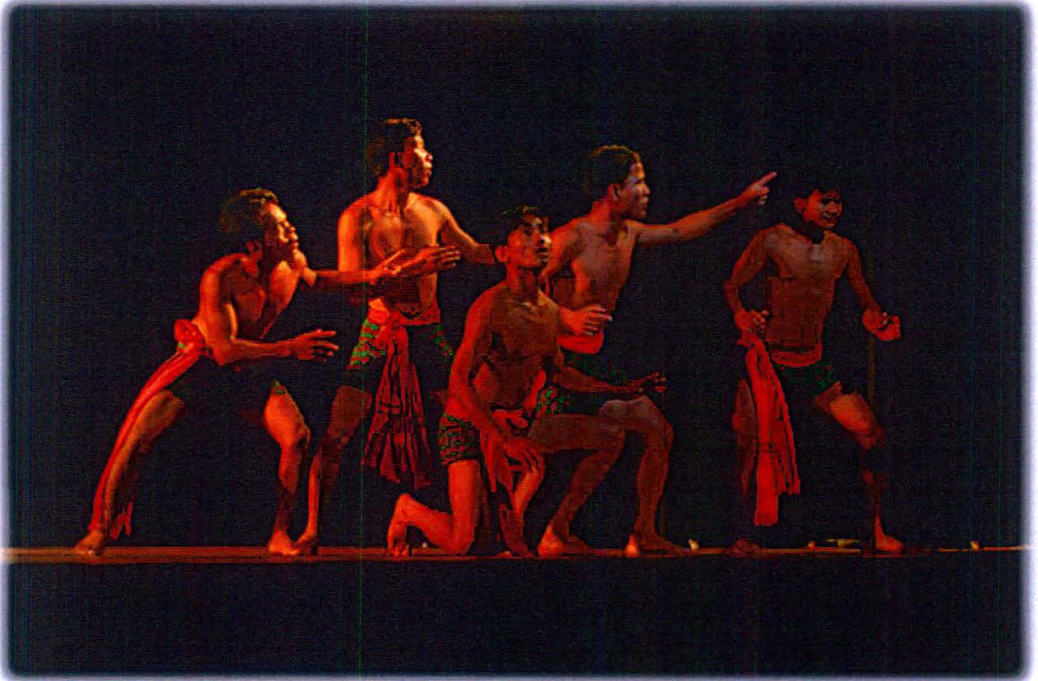
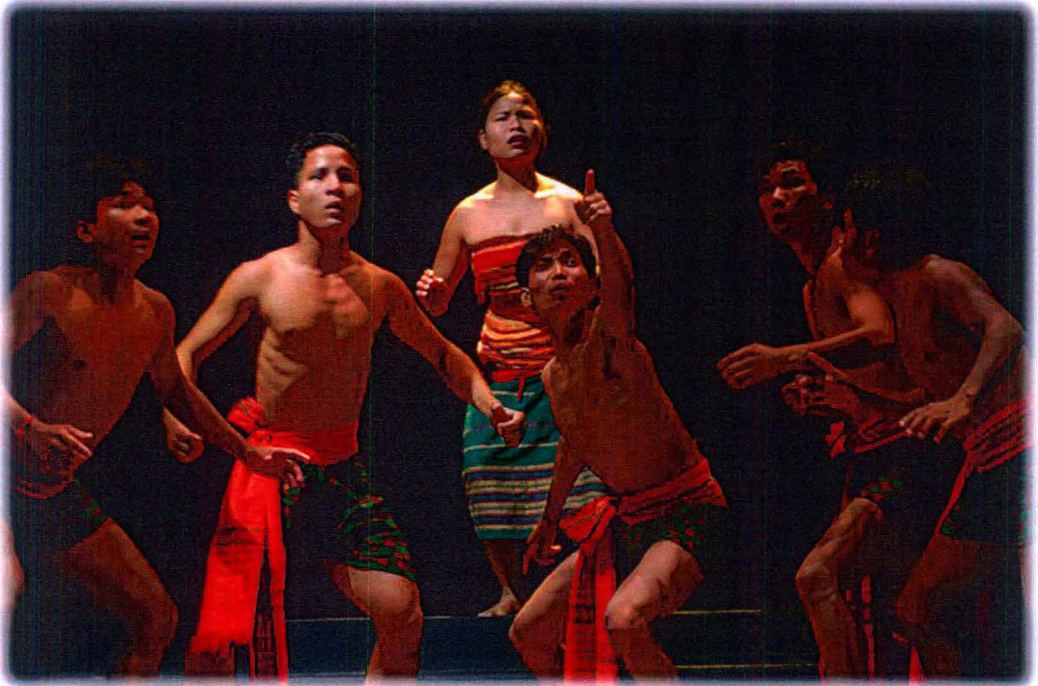
Note: (The photo on top) Beginning of the play, the mother is singing a lullaby. (The photo below) The brothers are fighting among themselves to snatch away the food. Photo courtesy: Badungduppa) **Plate 1**



Note: Both the photos: A follow up of the same sequence the brothers are angry on the youngest and prepare to hit him as he pushed them down while trying to stop them from fighting. (photo courtesy: Badungduppa)



Note: (The photo on top) on the verge of hitting him, mother at the centre, lullaby follows from background
(The photo below) The brothers realize their mistake and supports the youngest with care. Photo courtesy: Badungduppa)



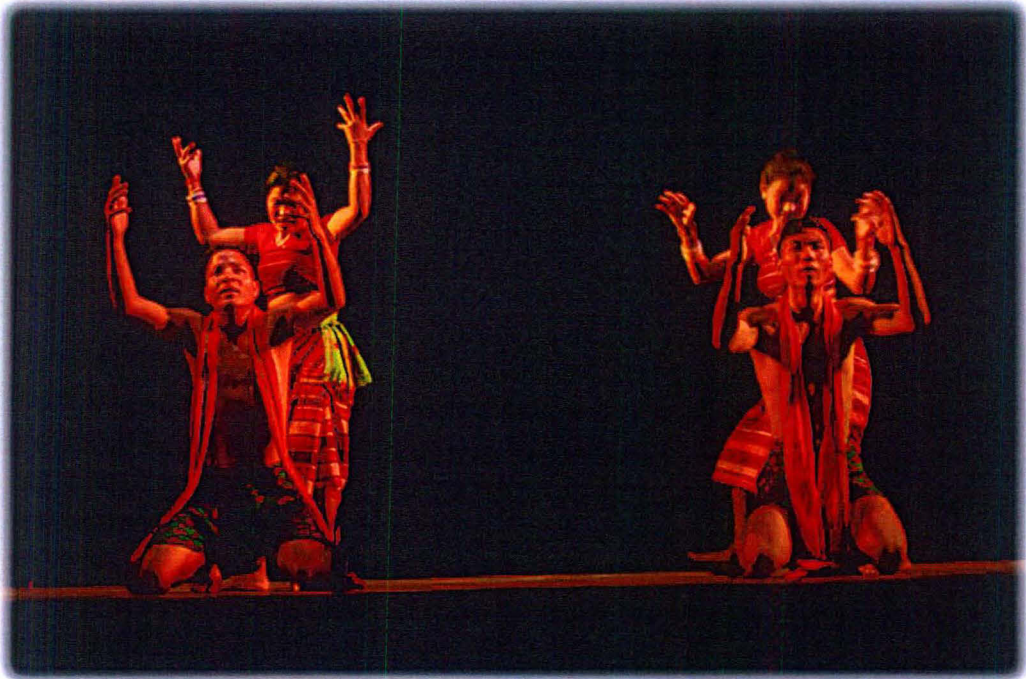
Note: (The photo on top) The youngest shows them the direction of the hunt- Monitor Lizard. (The photo below) The brothers in action: searching the lizard. (Photo courtesy: Badungduppa)

Plate 4



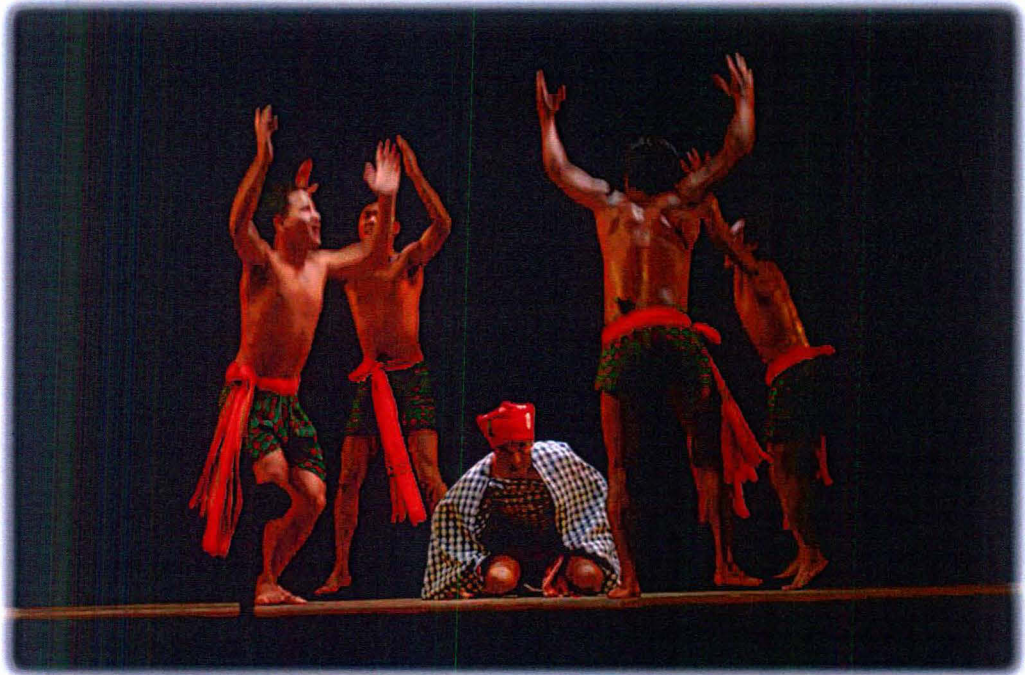
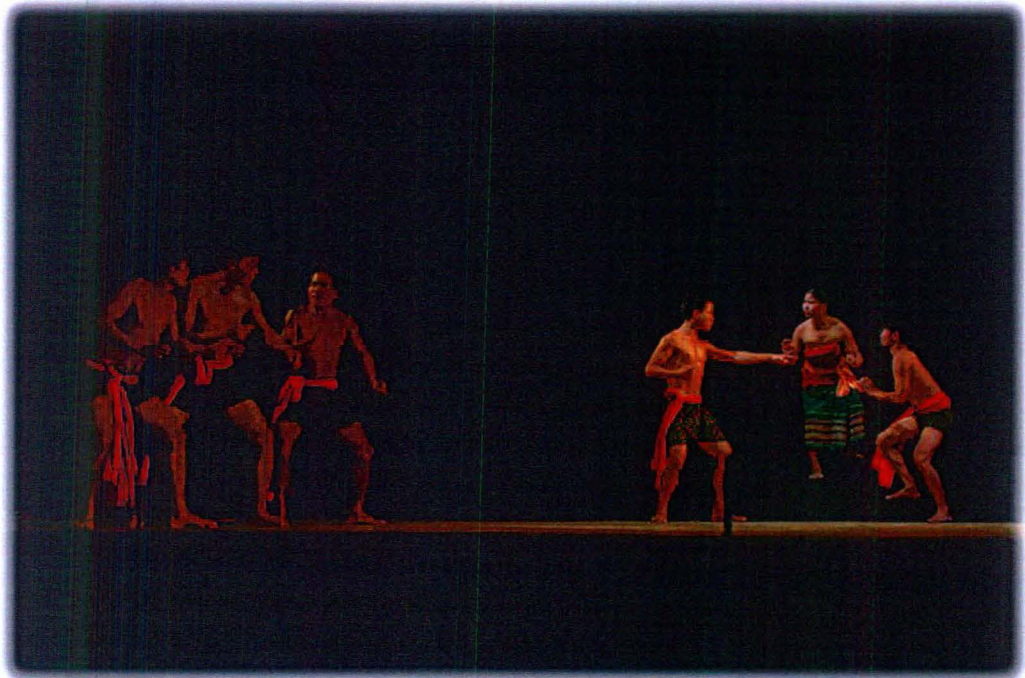
Note: (The photo on top) The brothers enjoyed the taste of the curry, mother explaining the reason of the taste. (The photo below) The eldest starts dreaming about an immortal life, on the otherhand mother and youngest apprehensive about it. (Photo courtesy: Badungduppa)

Plate 5



Note: (The photo on top) All the four brothers start imagining of immortality. [Note: the immortality manifested as young girls on the centre piece behind] (The photo below) Goddess of immortality manifested as beautiful girls seduce her in their dreams. The song *Amar! Amar!* happens now. (Photo courtesy: Badungduppa)

Plate 6



Note: (The photo on top) The eldest asks permission to go on hunt the bird, mother and youngest tells him not to go. Eldest scolds the youngest. (The photo below) Brothers rejoice after the hunt, *To Poidam* is tied at the centre. (Photo courtesy: Badungduppa)

Plate 7



Note: (The photo on top) To Poidam gobbling up the brothers (The photo below) To poidam contended after the feast, sit to brood, with its stomach full. (Photo courtesy: Badungduppa)

Plate 8



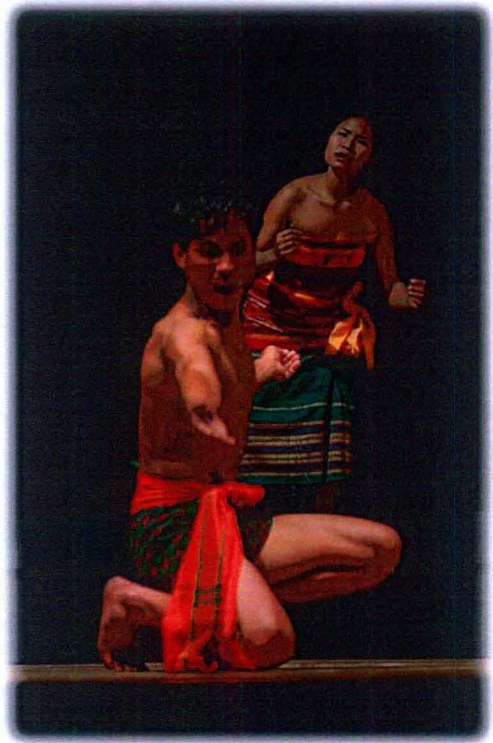
Note: (The photo on top) Meanwhile, the mother and the youngest back in their home. Mother dreams full of promotions. (The photo below) Mother is very concerned and narrates what she saw in the dream and urges Youngest to go in search of his brothers. (Photo courtesy: Badungduppa)

Plate 9



Note: (The photo on top) initially the brother denies to obey mother's urges, the concerned mother then goes on to narrates the dire consequences of what she saw in the dream. (The photo below) finally the brother agrees to go in search of the brothers and mother is happy. Photo courtesy: Badungduppa)

Plate 10



Note: (The photo on top) Before leaving for the search, the youngest pledges a sacred plant in the courtyard and tells his mother that if the plant withers, then think that he is undone and dead. Mother keenly watches. (The photo below) The youngest kills the bird and rips off its belly and saves the brothers. (Photo courtesy: Badungduppa)



Plate 11



Note: (The photo on top) the penultimate sequence, the brothers are terrified because the youngest is coming back from the search and the brothers know that he is going to unravel many of their heinous acts. (The photo below) Final frame of the play. Narrator is singing to the audience. All characters seems to be frozen, if trees and their leaves, rustling in the winds. (Photo courtesy: Badungduppa)

Plate 12

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Conclusion-Initiation:

Towards An Alternative Aesthetics

To be a painter one must know sculpture

To be an architect one must know dance

Dance is possible only through music

And poetry therefore is essential

(Part 2 of Vishnu Dharmottara Purana, an exchange between the sage Markandya and King Vajra)¹

The section has to begin with Nicholas B. Dirks observations remembering his dilemma while asked to convene an interdisciplinary conference on 'Culture' at the University of Michigan. This observation can not only lead us to unravel the meaning of the opening quote of the section placing it in the right context with a proper subtext, but also answer the larger question of developing an aesthetics of the oppressed which is the main stay of this study:

...culture was leaking out of anthropology and high literary studies, leading to curious collision of used ideas and new programs: from historical studies of popular culture to new sociology of culture, from anthropological claims about cultural systems to exploding genres of film and media study, from the academy in general to new forms of cultural politics around ethnic, racial, and sexual identities.²

What Dirks underlines is the presence of culture in every sphere of our existence. It brings into reference the quote that initiated this section as that quote also depicts the interrelationship between arts and crafts. Given these two observations from altogether different

¹ *Past Forward: The future of India's creativity, 2006. pp-9-10*

² Dirks, Nicholas B. preface in *In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the end of the Century*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press:1998)

time period in history, as a response to different social cultural manifestations, we find an echo of universality along with the sense of a problem i.e. – the notion of interlink. I can imagine the working of culture and the linkages between arts as a huge structure constitutive of each of these elements. Of course, none of the elements are dispensable and are required for the smooth functioning of the structure. This observation is a result of a new kind of consciousness, which is quite epiphanic³ in nature. We also find that this structure is reflected in our study of IPTA, Kalakshetra and Badungduppa as podiums of art where it is not just an art but an art that blends with our existence, quite blurring the line between the art performed for performance's sake and life as an 'art' and a 'performative' in itself. Social unrest gives rise to unrest in expression through arts (here theatre). Hence, study of this cross section enables me to qualify the 'Theatre' in our study and the resultant 'aesthetics' as an expression that belongs to the oppressed only because they feel at one with the represented narrative and draw inspiration out of it.

This assumption of noticing IPTA, Kalakshetra and then Badungduppa, leads us not only to redefine but also re-construct an alternate historiography of theatre in particular and arts in general as a medium of articulation of the state of being oppressed, creating ruptures, moments of social realizations. These ruptures, moments of social upheaval and the pregnant trance that follows can be considered as 'moments of epiphany' in history. In the history of the world, we have Renaissance as an epiphanic moment that is no doubt a rupture but that rupture legitimizes the rupture as a repeating event- happening that occurs time and again. We all know the Renaissance meant re-naissance (re-birth), which led many philosophers to conclude that there

³Derived from Epiphany (from the ancient Greek *epiphaneia*, "manifestation, striking appearance") is the sudden realization or comprehension of the (larger) essence or meaning of something. The term is used in either a philosophical or literal sense to signify that the claimant has "found the last piece of the puzzle and now sees the whole picture," or has new information or experience, often insignificant by itself, that illuminates a deeper or numinous foundational frame of reference. 15 July 2010.

URL < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_%28feeling%29>

was 'naissance' - a birth already long back, likely to be the classical period. Subsequently in 15th century, there is Renaissance (re-birth). The same analogy can lead us to the established concept of Romanticism in 1798 onwards. In this case too it is considered to be the romantic revival i.e. romanticism pre-existed. This temporality and plurality of the cosmological time and its distinction with phenomenological time, is lucidly and adequately dealt with by Paul Ricoeur. He mentions that diverse variations of time are produced by the interplay of a three tiered structure of time: the time of narrating; the narrated time; and the fictive experience of time produced through 'the conjunction/disjunction of the time it takes to narrate and narrated time' (Volume 2: P.77)⁴

Narrative configuration has at hand a rich array of strategies for temporal signification. The concept of Renaissance as re-birth, romantic revival and all such ruptures in the narrative of history is a result of this multi-tier configuration of time. Thus, the aesthetics, the life force of the victims, the oppressed can be considered a rupture that happens involuntarily as a response to the act of violence, which is significant to disturb all three tier of time as delineated by Ricoeur. For example, The Bengal famine which resulted in the IPTA's production *Nabanna*, merged the time of the narrating, the narrated time and the fictive experience as an entity itself, while depicting famine, hunger, death as a point of oppression. The play was performed at a time when real people were dying elsewhere, the actors of stage were re-enacting the graphic simulacra of the event of famine as the narrated time, and the fictive experience was also immediate in the audience responses to such acts, as quoted in *Chapter/Act I*. Similar and much more in-depth analysis can be drawn in the case of both Kanhailal and Sukracharjya's theatre. Thus, whenever the scale of oppression overflows the dam of patience and ability to withstand, there are ruptures

⁴Ricoeur. Paul, *Time and Narrative: Volumes 1-3*, Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. (trans.) (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984 -1988)

and material manifestation of that disgust. Consequently, time and again these ruptures would take place in form of socio-cultural manifestations and attain a sense of 'universality'.⁵ Hence, depiction of pain in performance and the study thereof as a rupture will not only enrich our knowledge of social movements but will also help us to search for such elements which are 'universal' in performance and which could be the basis of an alternative aesthetics.

To sum up and further crystallize the arguments of this thesis, one needs to answer the fundamental question: What is a performance? Goffman definition for *performance* would be: all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.(1990:p.22).⁶ Marvin Carlson too describes it as a phenomena that leads up to,

...The recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior raises the possibility that all human activity could potentially be considered as "Performance," or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself.(1996: pp.4-5)⁷

The above mentioned definitions of performance certainly declare that sometimes in social interaction, which so generic in performance and more so in theatre, the audience-actor sphere of influence is blurred, but in IPTA's initial attempts, in Kanhailal's search within for articulation and Sukracharjya's theatre deep inside forest of the Sal trees amongst his people, this blurring is quite a deliberate attempt. Thus, here is a conscious effort to cross over the boundary and create new results that could take the message across. In this endeavour to intentionally supersede the edge, the performances as intangible of all prevailing art forms-quite reinforce the fact that whenever the expression of the oppression is manifested, the boundaries blur

⁵For further reference, please consult: Cottom, Daniel. *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, and Betrayals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991)

⁶Goffman Erving, (New York: Doubleday, 1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (reprint London: Penguin Books, 1990)

⁷Carlson, Marvin A. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 1996, 2004)

dismantling all theorizations. The only thing that stays behind is the experience and thus the aesthetics that is taken back to the life after the performance as life is interpreted as an extension of the performance. Observers might argue that this postulate can be a mere possibility in case of arts. I agree, but with a word of assertion that in case of the oppressed it always does.

“The domination of theory for its own sake is coming to an end in academia,” Schechner comments, “Theory is secondary to something one does based on experience, on data, on fieldwork and on experiment. Performance Studies as an academic discipline is extremely open to new theoretical constructs that try to bridge and narrow or eliminate the gap between theory and practice.”⁸ This is what Boal did, when he put forward his concept of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* and *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*. He created a movement that was based on unpolluted human experience of suffering, of those who tried to sustain and adapt through hard times but could not. This study inspired by Boal formulations searched for the voices of the beings who suffered and tried to understand how setbacks, mishaps and silent screams could be articulated into the creative process to help generate new ideas to resolve this unwanted state of oppression in every form of its manifestation. Stephen Duncombe nods quite in compliment with our point of view and comments:

This is praxis, a theory arising out of activity... An embodied theory of mass activity is competing against the idealized theory of capitalism that celebrates the self-gratifying individual... Direct action groups... consciously try to create these theory-generating, lived experiences as part of our politics... Protest becomes a breathing, dancing example of what a liberated public space might look like. A lived imaginary. (2003) pp.15-16⁹

This lived imaginary is the sphere that is created in theatre of IPTA, Kalakshetra and

⁸Schechner, Richard URL.<< <http://www.news.cornell.edu/chronicle/02/1.31.02/Schechner.html> >> 16 November 2008

⁹Duncombe, S. “The Poverty of theory: Anti-intellectualism and the value of action,” *Radical Society: Review of Culture and Politics*, 30: no.1: 11-17.

Badungduppa that presents a new approach to the category called *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, thus, evolving a theory out of practice, which encourages us to contemplate over the mature set values and also to aspire to create new paradigms through the depiction of the pain and the healing in performance as an experience. Jill Dolan would corroborate that the moments of liminal clarity and communion, fleeting, briefly transcendent bits of profound human feeling and connection, spring from alchemy between performers and spectators and their mutual confrontation with a historical present that lets them imagine a different, putatively better future.(2005:p.168)¹⁰

The study of these three cases IPTA's initial days in NE region, Kalakshetra, Manipur and Badungduppa, Rampur was my proposition to understand a phenomena of global importance at the age of violence. These spaces become arena or melting pots where one could grasp the essence of the performance that sings of the essential human emotion, not making you melodramatic but all the more concerned. The process of articulation and the manner of narrative strategy is so graphic that it does not only enable us to comprehend and to be in tune with these melody of suffering, but we also feel empowered critically to unravel the connotation of any such performance using the analogies drawn here, based on the underlined traits of the alternative aesthetics/aesthetics of the oppressed.

For example, when Rustom Bharucha observes that the same production at different points in time could stimulate radically different performance texts in accordance to changes in political climate and attitude. A performance text of Utpal Dutt's *Barricade* in 1972, for instance, would be substantially different from a performance text of the same production seen today. When the play was first produced, it attacked the Congress Party for rigging the West

¹⁰Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance, Finding Hope at the Theater*, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2005.

Bengal state elections. Now with the left Front government of West Bengal ensconced in power and accused in turn of rigging elections, the oppositional energy of the earlier production would have to be viewed in an ironic context. Though true to a large extent, Bharucha misses or deliberately ignores one blatant thing- the act of 'rigging' in performance as a site of oppression being the same in both the situation. That expression of oppression would have an echo in the same manner as it had in the 1972 performance text. The only problem is that the political inclination of the practitioners and scholars have turned, where to be political is to be a follower of a particular stagnant ideology like a zombie transforming oneself to be so called cadres. This so called 'political inclination' leads them to act blind to this organic understanding of politics, which is to situate oneself for the cause of social justice, equilibrium and to always stand with the have-nots.

This is what a production by Kanhailal does. It analyzes the expression of the suffering, victim-hood and angst to its infinitesimal details, disentangling it to the last bit and expressing that suffering in its 'purest' idiom that almost immediately felt by the audience. The audience find their own equivalences within this distil expression leading it to become a resonance that may sound apparently 'local' for some, but gradually becomes a 'universal' one. That is the power of performance and the kind of aesthetics that Kanhailal creates and practices. Obviously, this aesthetics can be implemented to comprehend, interpret and construe any great performance in the world across the ages, from the ancient Dionysian ritual cycles to Split Britches, from Aeschylus to Augusto Boal.

Bertrand Russell elucidates,

The problem should not be insoluble, for; after all, the main appeal can be to self-interest. There are very few who are the happier for what is wrong with the world. Among those few, it is true, there are some who have great power; but they have power largely because

men are blind. It is intelligence, accepting our passion as unalterable, which has brought the world into its present perilous condition. But our passions are not unalterable. Less skill is required to alter them than has in some directions shown such extraordinary skill, is in other directions so unalterably stupid as to insist upon its own torment and destruction. Our age is gloomy, but perhaps the very fears that it inspires may become a source of wisdom. If this is to happen, mankind must throughout the dangerous years to come, avoid yielding to despair, and keep alive the hope of a future far better than anything in the past. This is not impossible. It can be done if men choose to do it. (1992: p.158)¹¹

I chose to make an attempt to collate the three different regional experiences of what I term, the 'theatre of the oppressed', in order to conceive a definition towards the challenging concerns and embryonic aesthetics of the alternative theatre in India, which I entitled- the *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*. Although vis-à-vis the process of selecting groups/practices necessitates an alternative which reveals a cognisant exclusion of the passionate practices against oppression from the southern, western, northern and central part of India as in MPhil I have tried to provide a case study and the blue prints to the aesthetics underlined here can further illuminate us to study these form at a later stage. It might be further significant to acknowledge that the barriers of language, deficiency of academic material, financial support such an endeavour requires and the limited nature and scope of an MPhil, has worked as an obstacle more than anything else. One's own location becomes an impediment as well as an advantage, and caught as I am in these two opposing forces, what I can best say in my defence towards a commitment is that the present work is merely an initiation in the thoroughfare that I have chalked out for myself to academically explore. And hence what is absent here, would be the motivation to pick the threads up to see how entire gamut of the 'aesthetics of the oppressed' not just in Indian

¹¹Russel, Bertrand, *Human Society in ethics and Politics*. London: Routledge, 1992.

context but also in international trends, proving and probing further into my thesis of the 'creation of an aesthetics of the oppressed'. Creation of an alternative aesthetics, which is rooted in the angst of the oppressed, and is conveyed across to whosoever feels at one with them in their own meandering experience and manifestation of it. It is rooted, thus peripatetic and a universal phenomenon.

I would like to conclude by saying that this kind of theatre and manifestation of the 'aesthetics of the oppressed' not only redefines theatre, but also refines politics as a very organic concept, not a didactic propaganda, but something that is dynamic and is dialectical. Thus, study of Rabha Theatre at Badungduppa, drawing in elements from IPTA and Kalakshetra Manipur, as a movement or a moment in history illuminates our understanding of the delicate dialectics marked between 1950's 'Agit-prop' political theatre and the organic nature of politics emerging in the form of an epiphany, as a dialogue between power and powerless nowadays. This will definitely help us to develop an aesthetics in this tangible domain of theatre that lives on the vision of bringing about a social change or at least lead the "witness" to engage in the organic act of rethinking that liberates them from their passivity, and inspires them to be in direct contact with the actors, and the issues in concern. The movement for a strong 'Alternative Theatre' and the search for the 'Alternative Aesthetics' will grow in future and the study of this phenomenon across the globe at the sites of oppression would unquestionably bring in many new perspectives, and of course more true and apt models to extend the frontiers of performance.

Appendix I

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Photo courtesy: UB Photos (Through Badungduppa)	

Appendix II

Notation 1: The song of the *Sutradhar* (Narrator)¹.

Scale: F, Taal (rhythm): Traditional

O ato sange reng jo s s s s
 ga pa mama ga ga re re ni pa ni pa

O sang vabitamyum Akhese sango Une
 ga ga ga ga ga re ni re re re ni pa ni pa

O samaj gosa Bee reng jo s s
 ga ga ga ga ga ga ga ga ga ga re

O samaj gosa Bee Rengo
 O jati gosa Bee Rengo
 re re re re re re re re re ni pa

O May Mai rengo Hashong s s
 re re re re re ni pa ni pa ni pa pa pa

This song mentioned in the notation begins the play, the same tune is repeated in the concluding song of the lay.

Notation 2: The song 'Eng Moina Eng' (Sleep Moina Sleep)

Scale: A, Taal (rhythm): Dadra² (Traditional)

Eng Moina Eng Eng Eng SS
 ga re ga re ni dha pa dha ga dha ga dha S

Eng Moina Eng Eng Eng SS
 re ni re re ni dha ga dha ga dha ga re ga ga ga

Kami Haba rabana Kan kaiba Saita Eng Moina
 dha dha ni dha dhadha gadha dh dh nn dh dh ga dh re n re re ndh ga

Eng S Eng S Eng SS S S SS
 dh ga S dh ga S re ga SS SS SS

Rampas Sari Japeta Neka Nijung Coingeta Singi Moinarang
 dh dh ni dh dh ga dh dh dh n dh dh dh ga dh nn re re n re ndh ga

Eng SS Eng SS Eng SS S S SS
 dh ga SS dh ga re ga S S S SS

² six or three beat, which is extremely common in the the lighter forms of music in India classical music.

Notation 3: The song 'Amar Amar (Eternity, eternity)

Scale: A Taal: Traditional

Amar Amar Amar Amar | Amar Amar Amar Amar | Amar Amar Amar Amar
ga ga ga ga pa pa pa pa Ni Ni Ni Ni

Amar Amar Amar Amar | Amar Amar Amar Amar | Amar Amar Amar Amar
Dha Dha Dha Dha pa pa pa pa ma ma ma ma

Amar Amar Amar Amar
ga ga ga ga

Ha Mandai Ha Mandai | Ha Mandai Ha Mandai
pa pa ga pa pa ga pa pa ga pa pa ga

Ha Mandai Ha Mandai | Ha Mandai Ha Mandai
ni ni pa ni ni dha ni ni pa ni ni dha

Ha Mandai Ha Mandai | Ha Mandai Ha Mandai
pa pa ga pa pa ga pa pa ga pa pa ga

Notation 4: The song 'Fui Baba Fui (Sleep Child Sleep)

Scale: C, Taal: Traditional

Fui Baba Fui | Fui baba Sona
ma dh ma re m m re | ma dh m re m m re
x | x

Praoeta Praoeta Fui | Praoeta Praoeta Fui
dh n dh dh m re m re | dh n dh dh m re m re
x | x

Ba ba re s s | O' Angi Sona " ~~Name~~
m re re n dh n dh n | dh m re m re m m re
x | x

Praoeta Praoeta Fui

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