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Author/s	Namrata Pathak
Affiliation	North-Eastern Hill University, Tura Campus, Meghalaya, India.
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Under the Canopy of Sal Trees: A New Vocabulary of Performance in Sukracharya Rabha's Minimal Theatre

Namrata Pathak

North-Eastern Hill University, Tura Campus, Meghalaya, India.

Email: namratapthk@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper would be structuring and documenting Rabha's theories of performance which are heavily laced with ecological concerns, and also his penchant for body-centric performances that explore the contact point between man and nature, the given and made, public zones and biospheres. The paper aims to capture the nuances of his unique ensemble called "green theatre," something that is akin to a search for roots, a drive to cultivate an "intrinsic rural mechanism", in the words of H. Kanhailal, a renowned theatre exponent and Rabha's mentor. There is an urge to capture the ebb and flow of country life, humankind's vital affinity with nature. Rabha fuses lifeworlds, bio-forms, and landscapes. He gives birth to new grammar and vocabulary of "physical theatre" by weaving the synergy of life into the fabric of performance.

Keywords: Sukracharya Rabha, Theatre of the Sal, Badugdappa Kalakendra, Green Theatre, Body, Space, Ecology

Introduction

The act of situating the oeuvre of Sukracharya Rabha (1977-2018) on the map of contemporary theatre practices requires a thorough inspection of the relationship between theatre and nature. Rabha's attempt at liberating the operations of theatre from the impact of media and its technological strangleholds leads to an interesting re-contouring of dramatic patterns and semiotic principles in regard to the performance text notwithstanding the challenges his unique theatre-aesthetics pose in terms of stage décor, the logic of display and audience-reception. In a world of post-truth, when drama and theatre "rely on the institutions of mass art and the media of mass communication, and examine the rituals of a society in which reality is crucially constructed via its media representation", Rabha's conscious dig at the possibilities of digital and electronic reproduction charts out an alternative grammar and vocabulary of theatre: his penchant for ecological balance further enables him to form a close association with nature, a move away from a world ruled by technology (Potter and Gann 2016, 135). Rabha's theatrical language conjures up local and indigenous elements in favour of a site-specific performance. His plays are staged in the lap of nature and there is a total admonishment of the need for artificial light, sound, stage and technological aids in the mentioned province. Notwithstanding the entanglements and overlaps inherent in the process of representation itself, Rabha's insistence on drawing a line of demarcation between theatre and media finds an echo in Pavis too. In this regard Pavis maintains:

The task would be an arduous one, however, and we will note only that theatre and media tend to move in opposite directions. Theatre tends towards simplification, minimalism and the fundamental reduction of the direct exchange between actor and audience. The media, on the other hand, tend to become more complicated and sophisticated through technological advances and are, by definition, reproducible and multipliable *ad infinitum*. Being part of technological, but also cultural and ideological practices, of a process of information and disinformation, the media can easily expand their audience to become accessible to a potentially infinite number of spectators (Pavis 1998, 207).

Sukracharya Rabha, the man behind the innovative Theatre of the Sal festival in Rampur, Goalpara, (Assam) is always seen interrogating the reliance of theatre on mass media and the latter's nature of repeating and diversifying the 'ready-made', 'immediate' and 'served-up' ingredients of performance (Pavis 1998, 207). In the rural set-up where he performs, Rabha intends to do away with the influence of technology on audience tastes and expectations, not to mention his derision for 'the artificial'. In his performances there is an urge to capture the ebb and flow of country life, humankind's vital affinity with nature. Rabha fuses lifeworlds, bio-forms, and landscapes. He gives birth to a new kind of theatre by weaving the synergy of life into the fabric of performance. In his words, "This can be achieved only by aligning the make-believe world of theatre with the world of nature, by borrowing from the latter its music, rhythm, light, silence, darkness...its elements" (In a personal interview with the author). In the grove of Sal trees where Rabha performs, "theatre is a subsidiary of nature; it is a process of reflection that conjoins the external world with the inner sanctum of the soul, but with varying degrees of freedom and imagination" (In a personal interview with the author). His is a move away from mainstream Assamese theatre, which is more of a consumerist spectacle, an urban hodge-podge, "an unwanted noise, a piercing shriek, a cacophony" (In a personal interview with the author). In Rabha's words:

Amidst the craziness of saleable entertainment, organic traditional media are hardly making sense to the people nowadays. Popular media are now affected by the idea of commerce. This notion of consumerism applies to all...the way processes of de-rooting are emerging in the new world through marketing strategies and consumerism, it is almost impossible for us to look back at the notion of 'belongingness' (Baruah 2019, 50).

Towards a Minimalist Theatre

Sukracharya Rabha's Badungduppa Kalakendra founded in 1998 in Rampur, Goalpara, creates a performance space out of a lush green Sal grove, leaves, tree trunks, stems, branches and roots. In Badungduppa Kalakendra we are ushered into a world of theatre that is pared down to the core. His is a space of minimal propensities, and it is a kind of theatre that "seeks to reduce its effects, representations and actions to minimum" by dispensing away with exaggerated and excessive modes of presentation, verbal overplay, spectacular visual effects and extraneous layers in the plot (Pavis 1998, 215). Roland Barthes traces the origins of theatrical matter to "atoms of meaning" that can be reduced to "the smallest sign transmitted in time" (Barthes 1964, 258, as cited in Pavis 1998, 214). On one hand we have the distinctiveness of sign and its implications in the constitution of overall meaning, and on the other hand there is a relativity of absorption and segmentation that wholly depends on the changing meanings as per the eclectic reception of the audience. However, Rabha's conceptualization of minimalist theatre is neither akin to Beckett's

adherence to what is “ontologically unsayable” nor Vinaver’s chamber theatre whose signature styles are “montage, the spaces in between, silence, the unspoken” (Pavis 1998, 215). Rather Rabha’s strategy is to turn the autonomy of ‘the artificial’ (light, sound, and stage) upside down. The stillness of the performance space is occasionally and rarely penetrated by music, that too when there is an extreme necessity, “otherwise a loaded silence pervades the air” (“A Tribute to a Progenitor of New Ideas”, Pathak 2018).

He dispenses away with the proscenium arch by vouching for a rural, idyllic setting— a modest clearing in the middle of a grove. According to Rabha, there is no need for artificial light. He prefers “the intrinsic, regulatory time of nature with the sun as the only source of light” — accordingly “the performance is attuned to a specific time of a day, be it a warm, scorching afternoon or a not so well-lit evening” (“A Tribute to a Progenitor of New Ideas”, Pathak 2018):

There is an occasional play of light and shadow with the canopy of the Sal trees acting as a natural sieve that filters light. The sky acts as the roof on the head. The twitter of a bird, the rustle of the wind-caressed Sal leaves, a clap here and a footfall there—all add to the rhythmic sound that we get to hear, occasionally spiced up by songs with the accompaniment of musical instruments (“A Tribute to a Progenitor of New Ideas”, Pathak 2018).

Rabha’s site-specific performance creates a kind of “displacement through a wedding of artwork to a particular environment” (Crimp 1993, 16-17, as cited in Collins and Nisbet 2012, 103). As an effect, Rabha not only articulates “an exchange between the work of art and the place in which its meanings are defined” but also underlines “its positioning in relation to the political, aesthetic, geographical, and institutional” (Collins and Nisbet 2012, 102).

There is a close affiliation to Japanese theatre, especially in Rabha’s precision and clarity, his employment of pauses, stillness, and silence in his performance. Moreover, the influence of Barong in Balinese is hard to miss in Rabha’s creation of trance-like moments in which a man is momentarily sucked by the instantaneity of the occurrence. Moreover, the fusion of opera with dramatic arts, popularized by Richard Wagner, the preference of shifting tonal centres, chromaticism and Wagner’s concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total work of art”) found a way to Rabha’s theatre too.

Community Building and the Theatre of the Sal

Sukracharya Rabha’s theatre resists politico-cultural indoctrination by circumventing the stereotypical and accepted. Deeply entrenched in the community-life of his people, his theatre carries at its heart indigenous philosophy, aesthetics and traditions. Usham Rojio, his close aide who happened to witness the genesis of many of his plays, talks about Rabha’s affiliation to the concept of *rasong*, which means ‘the being of existence’. By attaching *rasong* to the precepts of ‘live theatre’ Rabha foregrounds a deep understanding of the ‘lived-world’ or the experiential realm in which he is steeped. In the words of Rojio:

What is important concerning the rich concept of *rasong* is the safeguarding of the community participation and Nature-Human symbiosis. The insistence on performance as a way of creation and *being* as opposed to the long-held notion of performance as entertainment has brought forth a movement to seek and articulate the phenomenon of

performance in its multiple manifestations and imaginings. The concept of *rasing* was more of bringing closer the celebration of life to nature. We share the idea that this concept has a close affinity with the concept of *noiba* in our Meitei tradition... ("Together We Heal: Remembering Sukracharya Rabha (1977-2018)", Rojio 2020).

Rojio further dwells on an interesting intersection of two cultures, Manipuri and Assamese, and this he does by harping on the Meitei equivalence of *noiba*. The word *noiba* translates to 'movement', and its philosophical meaning is "embedded in the cultural practices and day to day lived-world" of the Meitei ("Together We Heal: Remembering Sukracharya Rabha (1977-2018)", Rojio 2020). According to Usham Rojio:

It is believed that just as *noiba* (movement) of the foetus within the mother's womb gives her the joyous anticipation of a new life; the Meitei believe that they are immersed in a womb-like Universe, so god and goddess are pleased when they perform dance. Therefore, body movement is life and thus we celebrate life through dancing in Lai Haraoba ("Together We Heal: Remembering Sukracharya Rabha (1977-2018)", Rojio 2020).

Community participation and a peaceful coexistence with the objects of nature, therefore, form the pulsating life force in both Kanhailal and Rabha's performances. However, alluding to Rabha's initiation of and commitment to a huge cultural movement in Rampur, H S Shiva Prakash mentions that,

"...he (Rabha) has realized over the years that theatre institutions have to be self-supporting to grow in a desired direction. He had hit upon the idea of setting up small-scale industries in the village. This would ensure jobs for the local people, sustenance for the artists and funding for activities" (Baruah 2019, 91).

Rabha maps the aesthetics of rural life in his performances. He also incorporates local ingredients into his theatrical mold by taking resort to folk forms of the Rabha community.

Rampur, near Agia, is a small village, economically backward and far away from nearby urban centres in Goalpara. Even though Rabhas and Bodos chiefly populate this place, the social fabric is multihued because of the ongoing cultural assimilation and harmonious co-existence of micro-communities. In the words of Aparna Sharma, Rabha's theatre has a deep connection with the Rabha community as his theatrical explorations hinge on a balanced representation of the community's textile, architecture, music and cultural heritage. Moreover, the ownership of resources like the Sal groves obliquely teaches the practitioners the essence of performance that is efficacious and ritualistic, and that revolves round the everyday tasks and activities of the Rabha community which is chiefly agrarian in nature:

Specific movements were first studied. For instance, how the body moves while working in a rice field flooded with water; or, how does the body traverse distance while climbing a Sal tree; or, indeed, how we rise from a lying position, say when we wake up at dawn...there is an emphasis on the breath that changes in every step with the movement (of the body). Finally, the studied movement was considered for its narrative potential and then applied to theatrical performances (Baruah 2019, 384).

Rabha's theatre is a consciousness-raising project based on the ethics of harmony, social responsibility and an allegiance to certain forms of community expressions. Moreover, his yearly theatre festival, *Under the Sal Tree*, attracts audience from all over the world. In Rabha's words, the practitioners pick up bits and parts from everyday life, from the synchronized vocabulary of rural life and in the process cleanse and purify these forms and constructions to implant them in a new terrain or locale. This transference is an intrinsic part of his theatrical process as "Badungduppa's attempt is to inherit, interpret and evolve through immediate contexts, mother nature and village life" (Baruah 2019, 152). Such a unique synthesis paves way for an alternative model that maintains a distance from "the ultra-commercial and cheap entertainment gimmicks" (Baruah 2019, 153). Rabha is also against publicity of any sort. In his words, "We have never been anywhere to sell tickets; we have never announced anything loudly. Nor we pasted any banner, poster elsewhere" (Baruah 2019, 153-4). Nevertheless, every year thousands of people from both India and abroad, ranging from scholars, practitioners, theatre exponents to common people, throng Rampur to partake of the spectacle under the Sal trees.

It would not be wrong to say that Rabha envisages theatre as a community exercise, a collective enterprise that takes in its fold the whole village or the entire area. He involves "the whole community—the Rabha community that he belongs to, by giving them back what was their—the theatre" (Baruah 2019, 180). As a performance maker Rabha is adept in creating passageways that help in negotiating, appropriating and admixing multifarious cultural forms. He also slashes the taut line of demarcation between mainstream theatre and regional practices by drawing upon the raw materials and resources of a community's collective memory. Interestingly, he moulds and chisels these ingredients and segments, oral lores and narratives, through a special act of "concentrating" on "the (bodily), mythical and ritual" axes (Baruah 2019, 182). Rabha explores:

...their delicate relationship with nature and finally this relationship underlies how a text is developed. It is this particular attention to break down the text into infinitesimal bits and to blend it with the type of existences mentioned above, and the act of giving it back to the audience with the energy of the soil, and leave the audience susceptible to a performance (to borrow Clifford Geertz's expression) that is "deep" and "thick". (Baruah 2019, 182)

Therefore, the performance text is made up of basic units borrowed from the rich repertoire of community life and also, from the narrative of the everyday which, then, undergoes "tangible manifestations of the intangible experience" in the performance space (Baruah 2019, 182-83).

The Performance Space in Badungduppa

On a small mound of earth Rabha created his stage. It is created on the ground level and the use of wood or iron is discouraged. As intended, the audience and the performers stand on the same level as there is no elevation of the proscenium to draw a line of division between the two. The purpose behind this technique is a conscious debunking of the idea of theatre as a mechanism to create illusion and fantasy. Right from the beginning, Rabha makes an effort not to weigh the audience down with tricks to sustain illusion, an unnecessary endeavour as per his theatre tactics. Rabha narrates how the surreal environment of the Sal grove adds a special charm and ambience to his performance. Of course, the sieved light filtering through the canopy of Sal trees and the southern winds whistling and rustling the Sal leaves create natural light and sound. There is, "A

sudden dappled light. A sudden flight of an unseen bird. A faint echo of the *jilli* in the distance" that add to, supplant and blend with Rabha's performances (Baruah 2019, 188). Due to this strange concoction of natural elements, there is an infusion of a layered semantics in his performances. Rabha reminiscences:

A narrow path passes through the jungle. There was a small open area on the side. We cleared that area, prepared benches and space for the stage. The idea of a gallery made of bamboo was implemented to preserve the ecological balance and it is in tandem with the idea of theatre close to nature. The gallery benches were thus prepared from bamboo and betel nut trees... The cyclorama was prepared with hay. The wings too (Baruah 2019, 188-89).

Sangeeta Barooh Pisharoty in her article, "Under the Sal Tree, A Unique Theatre Festival that Unites the Villages of Assam" (2017), discusses the ingenious stage arrangement, décor and style of Rabha's theatre:

Every December, young volunteers gather to erect a mud stage under the Sal trees. The backdrop is delicately arched with a fence of straws. Bamboo planks are placed around the stage in an ascending order to seat the gathering, like in any open-air auditorium.

Besides being located inside a forest, what makes the venue unique is that the performers don't make use of mics or artificial lights – features commonly associated with proscenium theatre.

The actors typically modulate their voices so their dialogues reach the audience. The Sal grove also acts as a natural receptacle for trapping the sound. The background music is played live and the stage is set up in a way use the sun rays filtering through the trees as the natural spotlight. ("Under the Sal Tree, A Unique Theatre Festival that Unites the Villages of Assam", Pisharoty 2017).

Under the Tutelage of Heinsam Kanhailal

In Rabha's theories of performance which are heavily laced with ecological concerns, there is a penchant for body-centric performance that explores the contact point between man and nature, the given and made, public zones and biospheres. His unique ensemble called "green theatre" is akin to a search for roots. It can be termed as a drive to cultivate an "intrinsic rural mechanism", in the words of H. Kanhailal, a renowned theatre exponent and Rabha's mentor. Kanhailal's Kalakshetra Manipur is situated at the outer-most limits of Imphal, precisely at the foothills of the valley of Manipur. It seems "to have quietly celebrated, over the many years since its inception, this position of silence and liminality as a source of strength, creativity and resilience" ("The Lost Wor(l)ds of Heinsam Kanhailal", Banerjee 2016). In "Ritual Theatre: Theatre of Transition" (2004), Kanhailal elaborates on his art of performance as such:

Believing in the autonomy of theatre, we swallowed the text and absorbed it into our body instead of speaking out the lines through lip movement, facial and finger gestures. We shattered the whole network of illusion on the stage. We were no longer burdened with the heavy light, costume and make-up. We cleaned the stage as an empty space where we began to unfold the autonomy of theatre...(Krasner 2008, 550)

Kanhailal has been a strong influence on Rabha. The latter's definition of theatre as an "inward churning of emotions and feelings", "...a glance at one's own soul and body" has intersections with his mentor's theories of performance (In a personal interview with the author). The methodical minimalism culminating in novel experiments by Kanhailal, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s are noteworthy. Like his mentor who trained the villagers and the market women of the famous *Nupi Keithel* of Imphal, Rabha too worked with the rustic lot, the villagers of Rampur. Both shunned the Western proscenium and the "spatial politics of the city" for community spaces which are more specifically, sites of interactions for the spectators and actors ("The Lost Wor(l)ds of Heisnam Kanhailal", Banerjee 2016). In this regard, Kanhailal's *Nupi Lan* is noteworthy which, in the words of Rustom Bharucha, is "an open-air production involving approximately 70 working women from the Women's Bazaar in Imphal" (Bharucha 1992, 66). Also:

The production created, through improvisations with the 'market women', simultaneously juxtaposed images of women in the festival of *Lai Haraoba* (perhaps especially the *maibis*) and the *imas* of the market, followed by a theatrical representation of the historical *Nupi Lans*. Distinctions between spectator and actor were strangely blurred during performance of this theatre event in the open public space of the city ("The Lost Wor(l)ds of Heisnam Kanhailal", Banerjee 2016).

The aesthetics behind *Nupi Lan* grew out of his disenchantment with the draconian AFSPA, an Act that is much criticized for catalyzing bloody sagas of communitarian suffering. Without any obvious slant towards any ideology, his performance subtly touches upon the hidden, regulatory political force running at the underbelly of Manipur and the regimes of control of the military on the public spaces. The politico-linguistic domination of the India that Manipur battles every day, and also, a lopsided and partial Meitei nationalism that is raising its head slowly in the state creep into the fabric of Kanhailal's performance, thereby impregnating it with issues of identity and citizenship. The complexities of resistance movements and the authoritarian position of the Indian state as a "military-legal killing machine" are not to be ignored:

After *Nupi Lan*, Kanhailal continued his career with similar projects that sought to break down the schism between political theatre and the people it claimed to represent. He worked in a village called *Umatheili* or the Valley of Durga to produce a play called *Sanjennaha* (Cowherd) from a community of rural non-actors, followed by a production that emerged from extensive work with the young men and women of the *Paitei* tribe of Churachandrapur ("The Lost Wor(l)ds of Heisnam Kanhailal", Banerjee 2016).

The overlaps between Kanhailal's and Rabha's theatre are hinted at by Richard Gough when he maintained that the "enchantment" and "bewilderment" that we discern in their art stem from a common place, the magical woods: in Rabha's case, it is the "Macbeth jungle" (the term was first coined by Rabha's ally and a famous theatre exponent HS Shiva Prakash) in which "identities are lost and changed", where there is a "possibility to affect change" (Baruah 2019, 72-74). Richard Gough, artistic director, Centre for Performance Research, Wales, used five words to describe the theatre of Sukracharya Rabha:

Disorientation, Bewilderment, Interruption, Turbulence and Contagion or Infection. These might all seem rather negative concepts but I want to think through the positive

implication and provocations that lie behind these words...Three images, so you all see I'm following a sort of classical structure of three acts and five acts but that actually make it eight which is not a good number in some cultures, too symmetrical, too balanced and so to follow the Japanese aesthetics I must add one, another one which will operate as a sort of sub-terranean theme and that is transformation, not just as a theoretical separation but practical realisation with an apparatus to affect change which I am feeling, seeing here (Baruah 2019, 73).

Gough has first-hand experience of watching 20 minutes of Rabha's performance at Goalpara. In a letter to Kanhailal, he mentions Rabha's act of mobilizing the village women to participate in the theatre movement— he calls it "the power of women combined with a political edge" (Baruah 2019, 75):

I like the sense that what is happening here is that we have all been infected, that we have all been contaminated and that we take this disease, so much like Auto's vision of theatre, that now we take this disease, this viral infection with us to other parts of India and as for me, I will take it back to the UK. But through that it begins to spread and I think that is what I am seeing, I think what I am seeing is the political- with a small 'p'- a project that is happening here. Your (Kanhailal's) work needs to be distributed and diffused and needs to find other emanations, other forms of it. I very much enjoyed the production of Sukra. It was very different from your work but he is clearly taking the inspiration (from you) (Baruah 2019, 75).

The power of the collective in Rabha's theatre lies in the presence of women's bodies on stage— both Rabha and Kanhailal draw upon women's embodied resistance, and thus, negotiates the binaries between inner/outer and private/public to propagate progressive notions of femininity. By moving away from the urban metropolis, Rabha reevaluates the "nation-state's systemic legacy of failure to address issues surrounding women's "visibility" in civil and political spaces" (Purkayastha 2015, 519). How does a woman utilize theatre space is a matter of concern for both Rabha and Kanhailal. Does this space give a woman a possibility to reassess her representation in history? The village women of Rampur whom Rabha ropes in for his performance can see the emergence of a new logic of retaliation; the structural limitations of patriarchal thoughts are exposed and tampered with. Theatre in this way can be an answer to what the Indian nation-state fails to recognize: women's labor or granting her "equal access to civil liberty" (Purkayastha 2015, 519).

The Body that Elongates, Constricts, Moves and Stays Still

When the borderlines between the body and its technological mediations are inflected, how do we frame the immediacy of agency in a site-specific performance? If Rabha's creation of an alternative corporeality hinges on the location and reliance of human conditions on a special spatio-temporal configuration, how do we look at "ontological exhaustion" which is aesthetically linked to "the modern or postmodern age of simulations" (McMullan 2001, 167)? Taking account of the proclivities of self-willed bodies that slip away from the director's hands, and also the bodies-in-performance that are ever "dissolving, redefining or establishing identity", Paula Cooley draws our attention to "the ambiguity of the body as both site for and artefact of human

imagination" (1994: 42, 110). Cooley connects "the phenomenological concept of the lived experience of the body (the body as site) with the body as an agent of its own symbolic creation", contending that we should keep an eye on how a body is normalized, mediated and reproduced in a historical moment (1994:42). Therefore, it is impossible to do away with the "corporeal labour of performance, in terms of the physical discipline which has produced this sign / spectacle" and the body's sustained engagement with the ever-changing norms of perception, truth, and beauty (McMullan 2000, 111). On stage, a body is more than a material, aesthetic and political sign.

Rabha's framing of the embodied experience of a community, chiefly his discourse that extends beyond the material limits of a body, can also be read as a commentary on the connections between theatre space and the bodily 'other'. The systemic assaults on those who are denied entry into mainstream spaces and the larger praxis of life, in Gautam Bhadra's words, point out the "curious complicity" inherent in perceptual modes of representation and historiography. This does not deride the body's vehement resistance to the "signifying economy inscribed upon it" and regimes of political order and ideology by its act of forging webs of instantaneous connections with audience and theatre-environments.

In the plays of Badungduppa, "the body is a prop. A utensil. Something that is elastic, and can be moulded and filled" (Baruah 2019, 236). The regular long walk of the theatre artists in the early morning to the heart of the groves, hills and rivers is necessary to understand the language of nature, to know its soul. Such expeditions coupled with numerous breathing exercises and meditation, "open the doors of our corporeal frames" to the bounty of nature and help mirror it, which eventually leads to a transcendence "beyond our own selves" (Baruah 2019, 236). Rabha is interested in a state that is reached when "the corporeal frame, of flesh and blood, formed out of cosmological happenings cease to exist and we become a part of nature" (Baruah 2019, 236). Every day after the morning walk, Rabha's artists and workers practise "yoga, *maati-aakhora*, Manipuri martial arts, *Kalaripayattu* of Kerela", and various European forms to make the body flexible (Baruah 2019, 237). In Badungduppa, more than the expressive potential of words, an extra emphasis is given on the responses and reactions of the body, its gestures, distinctive movements and the embodiment of "each rasa, each emotion, each stimulus" (Baruah 2019, 237). Rabha describes this process as such:

Most significantly, the objective is to make the body capable and strong enough to elicit any kind of reaction or impulse in a way that leaves an impression on the audience. So that we are able to bury in the depths of our minds waves of thoughts, that when mulled upon, are emitted at once as vibrations transferred, transfused, and transmitted to the audience. The more immediate this process, the greater intensity and pervasiveness of the play. The reverse would mean a weak statement of the play conveyed or weak acting performances (Baruah 2019, 237).

Along with the semiotics of the body, body-art and body-painting, certain formulae and symbols are devised for the special purpose of replacing dialogues and at times, these are either used as add-ons or alternatives to dialogues. More than an abundance of words, a meaningful silence pervades which is loaded with layers of signification at a different level. Linguistic assemblages and verbal excess are sacrificed for distinctive bodily gestures and movements—the power of the non-verbal is foregrounded. By resisting the spectacular and gaudy, Rabha's theories of the body

aim at unmasking and denuding the body by stripping off the extraneous, artificial layers. In this regard H S Shiva Prakash makes an apt comparison between Rabha's practices and his mentor Kanhailal's style, "The theatre expression that Badungduppa developed was no doubt inspired by Kanhailal's 'Theatre of the Earth', which is an orchestration of the movements of the body, breath, mind and rhythms of nature" (Baruah 2019, 89). However, we can rope in both Sabitri and Kanhailal in this regard who as theatre exponents share and disseminate a common belief that "bodies, when stripped bare of urban affectations (inhibitions that restricted the expression of vulnerability, for example) and sharpened by processes of psychophysical training, could release narratives of collective pain in a way that was unmitigatedly political" ("The Lost Wor(l)ds of Heisnam Kanhailal", Banerjee 2016). Both of them speak about the role of the body in the cultivation of empathy, it being a resonator that catches "the reverberations of pain" which is not their own ("The Lost Wor(l)ds of Heisnam Kanhailal", Banerjee 2016). Partly, Sabitri's adept imitation of the sounds and movements of animals stem from a need to "withdraw from the soul-killing noises of the city" and to know "how to become animal, in order that she may not shrink from encountering the horror of the human body in a state of absolute violation" ("The Lost Wor(l)ds of Heisnam Kanhailal", Banerjee 2016). Both Sabitri and Kanhailal quip, "How to embody, and not simply express, another's pain?" ("The Lost Wor(l)ds of Heisnam Kanhailal", Banerjee 2016). This question takes on a totally different colour in the wake of insurgency and counter-insurgency movements in Manipur when communitarian violence has torn the social fabric of the state. The Indian government's employment of repressive tools to silence the entire valley is another example of apathy towards the state. However, the expressive potential of the body is highlighted by Kanhailal in an interview with Naveen Kishore and Biren Das Sharma for the *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* in January, 1996. He states,

"The child, I looked at the new born child crying. I noticed that the whole body of the child cries. But actors only use a certain resonator. Actors do this because we are socially and culturally conditioned. [...] what we need is the creation of a new body culture..." (Katyal 1997, 46).

Creating New Permutations and Combinations

Evelien Pullens, theatre director and puppeteer from Netherlands, after an intensive workshop in Badungduppa, co-created a play with Rabha named *Bijuli* in which she explored the possibilities of physical theatre, music and puppetry. She laced the play with images from Western theatre, but the mould given by Rabha to *Bijuli* was noteworthy, "Sukra showed me how you can express emotions and messages by the body. Body language went hand in hand with the puppets and objects, partly made of natural materials. We used rice bags, leaves, seeds, jute, bamboo and traditional cotton" (Baruah, 2019, 97). Also, her Soul Tree theatre-research-workshop which she did for Netherlands Theatre Embassy is based on a special communication and communion with the trees, like singing from a distance and singing near the trees, calling out commands while climbing trees, "hiding and acting in the middle of the dense green vegetation" (Baruah 2019, 209). The participants explored natural environments like "fields...rocks, hills", fish ponds too and honed "theatre skills such as timing, group-balance, and action-reaction" (Baruah 2019, 209-210). The outcome is quite interesting:

In the second half of the workshop, we started to extend our research to natural objects in theatre. We mainly focused on leaves, sticks, seeds, vegetables and mud. We concentrated on the world of insects. We started to make them out of natural materials without the use of any glue, pins or other artificial help. So we moved into puppetry as we let the insects come to life (Baruah 2019, 209-210).

Some of the unique experimentations by Badungduppa are carried out in the heart of the forest, amidst the lush Sal trees. It is noteworthy that the grove extends an interesting acoustics to the soundscape of the performance and provides scopes for "disparate aural tones, textures and affects" (Baruah 2019, 385). An optimal place for forging "intimacies with other beings" and life-forms, his theatre has a deep ecological understanding of the physical environment and shared materiality (Arons 2012, 567). The democratizing impulse stems from the belief that to a great extent both the human and the non-human are "enmeshed in a dense network of relations" with no "firm, bright boundaries between inside and outside, male and female, life and nonlife, or between and within species" (Arons 2012, 567, 569). Rabha's act of imagining and imaging permeable world/s of nature in theatrical spaces is noteworthy as this leads to an "open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment" (Morton 2010, 275-76).

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Namrata Pathak is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) Tura campus, Meghalaya. An MPhil and PhD from English and Foreign Languages University (formerly, CIEFL), Hyderabad, she is an academic, poet, and a critic. Her latest books are *Indira Goswami: Margins and Beyond* (2022, Routledge) and an upcoming *Reader on Arun Sarma* (Sahitya Akademi, 2022). Her debut collection of poems, *That's How Mirai Eats a Pomegranate* was brought out in 2018 by Red River. Her poems are included in the *Sangam House Monsoon Issue* (July, 2019) and anthologies forthcoming from Aleph and other publishing houses.