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### About the Article

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## Kanhailal's 'Theatre of the Earth' as Political Allegory

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### Abstract

Playwright and director, Heisnam Kanhailal (1941-2016) was an eminent theatre personality from Manipur. He began as one of the exponents of the 'theatre of roots' movement, like his compatriot, Ratan Thiyam. He was influenced by Badal Sircar's politically motivated 'Third Theatre' in the early 1970s who had introduced him to the 'Poor Theatre' of the Polish director, Jerzy Grotowski (1933-99). However, Kanhailal gradually developed his unique concept of theatre, which he later called 'The Theatre of the Earth' with which he had tried resist the ideologies like aggressive nationalism, which was found to be rather oppressive. He retained deeper faith in art and restricted his theatre from becoming overtly propagandist by privileging its poetic, allegorical, and 'transcendental' appeals. The present paper is an attempt towards critical evaluation of Kanhailal's 'Theatre of the Earth' and to compare his works with that of Grotowski, Sircar, and Thiyam as well as with two contemporary theatre directors from Assam, Gunakar Deva Goswami (b.1969) and Sukracharya Rabha (1977-2018). The paper also takes up his significant plays like *Pebet* and others in order to closely read his poetics of theatre.

**Keywords:** Poor theatre, resistance, theatre of rituals, theatre of the earth, the third theatre.

### Introduction:

Modern Indian theatre, which was set in motion in the British colonial cities in India in the late eighteenth century, assumed a postcolonial stance in the fifth decade of the twentieth century. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker (2008) point out that *Nabanna*, written by Bijon Bhattacharyya in 1943 and staged under the direction of Bijon Bhattacharyya and Shombhu Mitra for the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in 1944, was the first postcolonial Indian play. She has regarded *Nabanna* to be so as it mounted stiff resistance to the British fiscal policies (Dharwadker, pp. 31-32). Earlier, Kiranmoy Raha (2001), in his book on Bengali theatre, brought out its anti-colonial stance while discussing how its first production resisted the European performance ideals (Raha, p. 155, p. 169). Bhattacharyya (2004) described the play in the following words:

As mass movements began in reaction to the imperialist power throughout Asia, India also got dispirited by it.... After ceremonial partition, insubstantial independence came with a curse of destruction.... The writing of *Nabanna* fell into the first phase of this blood-spattered history. (pp. 26-27; translated from the Bengali by the first author of the present paper).

Postcolonial Theatre has two distinct features — one of them involves resistant cultural representations, which have become a means of asserting the richness of the indigenous culture by thwarting the dominant colonial cultural ideals, and the second is a tendency for highlighting the contemporary situation with the help of parallelism found in the indigenous histories and mythologies from pre-colonial period. *Nabanna* and the other productions of the IPTA in the fifth decade of the twentieth century, without doubt, looked for anti-European ideas of performance, but not so seriously. It emphasized content-related matters in the light of the leftist ideology, leaving artistry aside. Several theatre activists broke up with the IPTA towards the end of the decade with objections to this negligence of artistry. They formed individual theatre groups to begin a 'Group Theatre Movement' in India. These activists included Bijon Bhattacharyya, Shombhu Mitra, Habib Tanvir, Utpal Dutt, and Arun Mukherjee (Dharwadker, 2008, pp. 85-89). Consequently, the theatre groups began experiments on thematic novelty and artistic originality. A few independent playwrights like Dharamvir Bharti joined them from outside.

Two plays, both written ten years after the first performance of *Nabanna*, bear early evidence of such experiments. One is *Agra Bazaar* ("The Bazaar at Agra"; Urdu; 1954) by Habib Tanvir and the other play is Dharamvir Bharti's *Andha Yug* ("Blind Age"; Hindi; 1954). *Agra Bazaar* takes the audience back to eighteenth-century Agra and critiques the twentieth-century scenario of capitalist coercion on creativity while depicting the poetic achievements of the eighteenth-century Urdu poet, Nazeer Akbarabadi. It exposes the class difference between the elites and the plebeians of old Agra by using two variants of the Urdu language. The elite characters in the play speak the urban variant, whereas the plebeians use the rural one. Later, Tanvir established the 'Naya Thatre' group in Chhattisgarh in 1959 and experimented with improvisation and different dialogues to find a more reliable indigenous dramaturgy. Dharamvir Bharti's *Andha Yug* is a critique of human violence (expressed during World War II and at the time of the partition of India in 1947) through the use of a mythological story that tells about the futility of violence in the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*.

These plays demonstrated that stories from the histories and mythologies of the Indian past could help the playwrights and directors take critical stances against the ills of contemporary India. Plays like Mohan Rakesh's *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* ("One Day in Ashadha"; Hindi; 1958) and *Lehron Ke Rajhans* ("The Swans of the Waves"; Hindi; 1963) Girish Karnad's *Yayati* (Kannada; 1961) and *Tughlaq* (Kannada; 1964) took such experiments forward in the late 60s and the early 70s.

Indian theatre between 1970 and 1990 became so experimental that it seemed as if it had completely severed itself from the earlier tradition indicating the postcolonial epoch of Indian theatre that entered a new phase of theatre movement. Suresh Awasthi (1989) has called this experimentalist theatre the 'theatre of roots' (p. 48). Here is what Awasthi says in this regard:

I am taking the risk of giving a label— "theatre of roots"— to the unconventional theatre which has been evolving for some two decades in India as a result of modern theatre's encounter with tradition. Theatre of roots has finally made its presence felt. It has compelling power, it thrills audiences, and it is receiving institutional recognition. It is deeply rooted in regional theatrical culture, but cuts across linguistic barriers, and has an all-India character in design. Never before during the past century and more has theatre

been practiced in such diversified form, and at the same time with such unity in essential theatrical values. (p. 48).

Erin B. Mee (2008) has observed that the 'theatre of roots' movement "challenged colonial culture by reclaiming the aesthetics of performance and by addressing the politics of aesthetics." (p. 5). The movement determined a new theatre idiom, which has become a means of resisting the colonial theatre framework. For that purpose, it looked for extra-communicative traditional forms and novel visual aesthetics by exploring the 'roots' of the Indian people in the indigenous folk, traditional, and classical cultural heritage (Raut, "Indianizing", p. 7). Thus, the new theatre emerged as a synchronization of modern contents and traditional folk forms. Playwrights and directors adapted forms and elements of folk tales, legends, myths, epics, and history to enhance the potentialities for visual representation. It looked like going back to the past, but it facilitated explorations of the contemporary Indian realities. It also contributed to the construction of an identity of modern Indian theatre. The playwrights and directors of this new experimental theatre included Habib Tanvir, Badal Sirkar, Girish Karnad, B.V. Karanth, K. N. Panicker, and others. This list was enriched from the north-eastern region of India by two legendary figures Manipuri playwrights-cum-directors Heisnam Kanhailal (1941-2016) and Ratan Thiyam (b. 1948).

### **Kanhailal's Departure from the 'Theatre of Roots' Movement:**

The 'theatre of roots' movement in modern Indian theatre by and large asserted a kind of 'Indianness' ("an all-India character in design"; Awasthi, 1989, p. 48) with its use of elements from the indigenous cultural traditions of India. The movement influenced young Kanhailal, and he began his theatre career as one of its exponents. However, he gradually evolved as a playwright and director with a unique 'poetically political' stance. He started to represent the socio-political realities of North-East India, especially Manipur, and more especially his Meitei community. However, he preferred not to be overtly political. He remained truthful to art and began to represent these realities poetically. As a result, his plays became politically resilient and poetically allegorical.

To represent these realities properly, Kanhailal enriched his plays with relevant folk (as in *Pebet*; 1975), mythological (as in *Karna*; 1997), and literary (as in *Dakghar*; 2006) elements. His plays have highlighted the pains and struggles of those communities in the North-East region that have been subjected to repressive nationalist paradigms of post-independent India. He drew attention, especially to the identity crisis of the traditional Meitei community of Manipur, which he belonged to. His plays also uphold the cultural strength and the associated spirit of the community for freedom from all kinds of nationalist oppression. It is evident in the following comment made by him:

I remember my meeting with Eugenio Barba in Calcutta in 1987. He asked me why the Manipuri productions demonstrate so much nationality. He was right, for he did not know that our national culture was fighting a struggle for existence between the dominant forces of a big culture and complicated politics. We do not have the objective of creating a national hullabaloo. But our theatre contains the happiness and sorrows of some people who are fighting for maintaining their identity. (Kanhailal, 2007, p. 30; translated from Hindi by the first author).

### **The Formative Influences on the 'Theatre of the Earth':**

In contrast to the 'Theatre of Roots', Kanhailal preferred to call his genre as the 'Theatre of the Earth'. Three distinct factors played pivotal roles in shaping Kanhailal's 'Theatre of the Earth'. First, unlike his contemporaries, such as the Manipur University Professor Lokendra Arambam or the National School of Drama (NSD) product Ratan Thiyam, Kanhailal did not have any institutional affiliation. He was expelled from the NSD as he could not follow Hindi and English, its languages of instruction (Bharucha, 1998, p. 22; Ahuja, 2012, p. 276). He felt "humiliated and angry" (Bharucha, 1998, p. 22). The incident alienated him from mainstream urban theatre and inspired him to discover an alternative (Ahuja, 2012, p. 276). He also became resolute in upholding Manipuri culture to the whole world. The following words summarize the effects of the incident on Kanhailal's mind and works:

My hopes of becoming a trained theatre activist evaporated when in 1968, I was expelled from the school before the classes began. I was psychologically affected but did not lose hope. I followed the way of self-education in my hometown Imphal. I established [the theatre group] 'Kalakshetra Manipur' in July 1969 with the love and assistance of my wife Sabitri and a few unfailing friends. We had the objective of studying, determining, and uplifting the Manipuri culture to such a standard level that would be regarded as the best not only in India but also in the drama scene of the whole world. (Kanhailal, 2007, p. 30; translated from Hindi by the first author).

Sabitri Heisnam (b. 1946), Kanhailal's leading actress since 1961 and wife since 1962 (Bharucha, 1998, p. 21) exerted the second significant formative influence on his works. Sabitri Heisnam was a rurally trained accomplished actress even before their first meeting. Yet, it is only in the folk-related productions of their theatre group 'Kalakshetra Manipur' (established in 1969) that the best in her came out. They had their own home in 1970 (Bharucha, 21), and after that, they became closer than ever before. She eventually became the body and voice for his folk-based theatre ideas (Ahuja, 2012, p. 276). In the words of Rustom Bharucha (1998),

It is only mandatory that any description of Kanhailal's theatre should acknowledge the contribution of his wife. Sabitri is the centre of his work. Indeed, it is difficult not to idealize this diminutive, unpretentious, unfailingly cheerful woman, who happens to be one of the greatest actresses that I have ever seen. In her temperament, Sabitri exemplifies the resilience and commonsense of a peasant. And I use the word not in any derogatory sense, but after John Berger, in his viewing of the lives of agricultural communities. (p. 20).

The third notable formative influence on Kanhailal came from the Polish playwright and director Jerzy Grotowski via the Bengali playwright and director Badal Sircar. Kanhailal met Sircar in a workshop in Imphal in 1973 (Katyal, 2015, p. 171), where Sircar shared his viewpoints about space and physicality in his 'Third Theatre' and Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre'. He "was very inspired by Badal Sircar's work, but then he went another way." (Singh, 1997, p. 22). In-depth discussions on the influences of Grotowski and Sircar on Kanhailal and the distance that Kanhailal maintained from them can make out several important features of the 'Theatre of the Earth'.

### **Grotowski, Sircar, and Features of Kanhailal's 'Theatre of the Earth':**

The points of similarity and difference between Grotowski and Sircar are striking. Sircar negated any direct impact from Grotowski, but his rejection of the colonial theatre elements— such as the proscenium stage, costumes and make-up, lights, sounds, set property, and others— has a striking similarity with that of the 'Poor Theatre' of the Polish playwright and director (Ahuja, 2012, p. 251). According to Grotowski, these elements are not essential but supplementary. It means that theatre can exist without them. Grotowski, therefore, minimized the stage property to highlight the core ingredients of theatre. He held that the living relationship among the actor, audience, and space was the organic power that constituted the life of theatre (Grotowski, 1968, pp. 28-32).

In Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre', the 'holy actor' communicates to the audience on a sensory level about his inner self by removing his outer self or 'life mask'. He compels the audience to get rid of their masks also. Consequently, the actor and the audience confront a new truth, which inspires them to change individually (p. 37). The change is personal and spiritual, though this spirituality is not religious. It uplifts an individual to a higher level of humanity.

Like Grotowski, Sircar felt the need for "a harmonious union of the body with the mind" (Sircar quoted in Katyal, 2015, p. 170). In the 1973 workshop in Manipur, he "[began the morning class] with a series of psycho-physical exercises, not so much for muscle-building as for developing the strength and flexibility of the spinal system." (p. 172). However, Sircar's minimization of theatre elements, such as set property, costumes, make-up, and others, was not meant for deciphering the core ingredients of theatre. He had little to do with spirituality. He was interested in the political possibility of theatre, and this he did assert emphatically through overtly leftist subject matters and dialogues.

An actor in the Poor Theatre ("holy actor") does not play a character in the way the actors of the conventional realistic theatre do. He disregards Stanislavsky's theory of character-building, which tells of a definite motivation or recalling sense/ emotional memory in a given circumstance. He does not try to represent outer life as it is, nor does he try to manifest real-life actions in his movements. He moves inward: he sacrifices his persona to dissect his inner self and expose it before the audience. Grotowski (1968) puts it in the following words:

But the decisive factor in this process is the actor's technique of psychic penetration. He must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon's scalpel, to dissect himself. It is not a question of portraying himself under certain 'given circumstances', or of 'living' a part; nor does it entail the distant sort of acting common to epic theatre and based on cold calculation. The important thing is to use the role as a trampoline, an instrument with which study what is hidden behind our everyday mask— the innermost core of our personality— in order to sacrifice it, expose it (p. 37).

Thus, it is like portraying his true deeper self rather than portraying an imaginary character. The sacrifice of his persona is painful, and to reach the self is no doubt a spiritual act. The actor expresses his deeper self through various body movements, gestures, postures, and vocal sounds. These expressions are some psycho-physical acts to communicate some emotion. Thus, finally, one can observe a series of impulsive body movements of the character:

The education of an actor in our theatre is not a matter of teaching him something; we attempt to eliminate his organism's resistance to this psychic process. The result is freedom from the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction. Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses. (Grotowski, 1968, p. 16)

Sircar experimented with this approach to 'holy acting' in his 'Third Theatre' productions, where the actor explored his present-day truth in place of the situation faced by the character. Yet, in his conception of theatre, Sircar stressed more on political content. As a leftist theatre activist, he made theatre more politically motivated after the fashion of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht.

The unique stance that Kanhailal's 'Theatre of the Earth' maintained compared to Grotowski and Sircar's theatres is understandable from a close look at Sabitri Heisnam's way of performance. Kanhailal felt that Sabitri Heisnam's acting demonstrated her own experience, what she had perceived or realized in her society. Instead of doing any logical cause and effect characterization, she went on to transcend the situation and portray her experience. About the process of her acting Kanhailal said:

Sabitri's process of acting is a way towards self-discovery, privileging herself over the character— the otherness.... Her way of controlling emotion and self-discovery is worked out by the inner action— a single vital force impregnated with a type of cathartic and psychic process, ... [which] reveal[s], say, a Sabitri underneath— her true self. (Kanhailal, 2008, p. 3)

Like Grotowski, Kanhailal regarded the bodily movements of the actor as the core part of his theatre construction: "The idea of resistance in my theatre is incarnated by the body of the actor and represents a collective and communal vision" (p. 3). The inner journey to the self-found expressions in Grotowski and Kanhailal's theatres through body movements and sounds made in a dream-like or trance-like situation, which is spiritual by nature.

An actor in Kanhailal's theatre does not follow the conventional way of the '*Actor-Text-Character*' journey. Rather, he/she takes the '*Actor-Character-Text*' approach (p. 11). For such an actor, the character is an extended part of the actor's body and mind. Thus, this process provides more artistic freedom instead of repeating or imitating the superficial day-to-day life. As in the holy actor of Grotowski's theatre, here also one can observe impulsive body movements in a 'transcended' way. Here also, the actor's body vanishes. The point can be highlighted with the example of the 70-year-old actress Sabitri Devi's portrayal of the 9-year-old boy Amal's character in the play *Dakghar*. Here, the spectators witnessed a journey to Amal's dream world despite the point that the performer was an elderly lady. (Raut, 2019, p. 139).

A second point is notable here. Grotowski's is "poor" theatre as it held on to theatre's essential elements without which theatre could not exist. Kanhailal's theatre was "poor" due to his financial scarcity in his early career. Therefore, instead of expensive sets and costumes, lights and sounds, and a decorated stage, he started his theatre only with a few actors, their bodies, voices, and minds. He gradually focused on the cultural materials, rituals, lifestyles, and behaviour of his native community and tried to derive his language of communication. Kanhailal also experimented with the actor's body (p. 137). Besides, like K. N. Panicker, he developed some theatre exercises based

on indigenous folk forms of martial art and dance. For example, he took up elements from Thang-Ta, a Manipuri martial art form, and Lai Haraoba, a type of Meitei dance. Thus, the actor's body became the central element in his theatre experimentation. He even did not prioritize the written text or words of the playwrights (pp. 143-44). The minimization further intensified with influences from the 'Third Theatre' and 'Poor Theatre'.

Thirdly, as in Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre', Kanhailal's actors also communicate with the audience at the spiritual level. Communication is comparable to the spiritual unification of the devotees in religious or cultural rituals (Raut, 2019, p. 144). Due to this similarity, Kanhailal's theatre suits the label of 'a Ritualistic Theatre'. One needs to remember that his spirituality and ritualism were also not religious. Here, the theatres of Grotowski and Kanhailal become closer, but still, Kanhailal's theatre remains distinguishable for his altruism. His actor is different from that of Grotowski. Grotowski's actor sacrifices himself to change morally or spiritually, while Kanhailal's actor wants to induce the change on the societal level. He uses impulsive body movements to raise various socio-political issues (p. 144). Here lies the altruism that is the basis of Kanhailal's plays.

At this point, a comparison between Badal Sircar and Kanhailal becomes obvious. Sircar's Third Theatre also wanted change, but this was not a spiritual but social change. His theatre was more politically vibrant, as it hoped for a structured political revolt as per the leftist ideology. It advocated for the liberty of the common masses against all kinds of oppression. It aimed to eradicate illiteracy, poverty, and others in the post-independence scene. In this sense, Kanhailal's theatre was also political but slightly different. It did not uphold any existing political ideology. It dealt with the same societal issues but suggestively and allegorically. Thus, he was different from both Sircar and Brecht (Kanhailal, 2008, p. 3).

There are more points of difference between the theatres of Sircar and Kanhailal. Like Sircar, Kanhailal rejected the dramatic text, though for a different reason. Sircar took the help of improvisation to enhance the realistic appeal of his productions. Kanhailal preferred to take up folk forms. He noticed that traditional folk theatre forms rarely demanded a written text. These forms were more flexible and mouldable. Therefore, with his anti-colonial and anti-nationalist position, during the early part of his career Kanhailal preferred simple Manipuri folk tales to readymade plays. He found that the Manipuri folk-tales had contemporary significance (Kanhailal, 2008, p. 2). He added additional/ allegorical meanings to these expressive folk tales to raise contemporary social issues. He gave his performance a poetic dimension by using other folk theatre elements, such as sound, movement, mime, dance, song, music, and stylization. The familiarity and the immediacy of these elements helped his Manipuri audience be aware of their crisis in terms of their identity, environment, colonial history and oppressive nationalism.

### **Thiyam's 'Theatre of Roots' and Kanhailal's 'Theatre of the Earth':**

Being the two stalwarts of theatre from Manipur belong to the same period, comparisons between Kanhailal and Ratan Thiyam is quite inevitable. This is also helpful in understanding the similarities and the differences between the two. Thiyam, an exponent of the 'Theatre of Roots' movement, has brilliantly delineated a kind of 'Indianness' with his plays like *Chakravyuha* ("Army-Circle Formation"; 1984). The play uses episodes from the *Mahabharata* and evokes a sense of solidarity among the Indian audience. On the contrary, Kanhailal found the concept of 'Indianness' too comprehensively and dominantly 'nationalist' to accommodate the regional realities and issues.



He, therefore, used episodes from the epic not to evoke a nationalist feeling but to highlight the socio-political issues of his immediate society. Kanhailal (2015) in his interview with Jyotirmoy Prodhani described his distinctiveness from Ratan Thiyam in the following way:

Ratan Thiyam's plays are fantastic; they make majestic theatrical presence and are superbly spectacular. It is a mindboggling visual treat. But for me theatre is not only about copious extravaganza, it is essentially about the intimate nuances, the raw earthy immediacy of experiences. This is what "Theatre of the Earth" is all about. I strongly believe that theatre is essentially grounded with ideology and a deep-rooted social commitment. (para 2).

### **The Legitimacy of Kanhailal's Relation to 'the Earth':**

Kanhailal was right to call his theatre the "Theatre of the Earth", for it was down-to-earth. It was against the elaborate and decorative 'nationalist' theatre of his contemporary Manipuri playwright Ratan Thiyam. Kanhailal's theatre was not ethereal; and it was not about fairies and farishtas. Rather, it was grounded on the 'earth'. It was real, contemporary, and politically aware. It related the contemporary burning problems of his own people. He connected it to the contemporary North-Eastern, especially Manipuri, socio-political realities and cultural milieu. His theatre was deeply committed to the land and people of his Meitei community, their aspirations, pains, oppression, and frustrations. It took inspiration from their life and culture. According to him, this connection could make sense: "Even the social experiences of the individual and the community are actually solidified through its intimate linkages with the earth" (interview with Prodhani, para 1).

It is true that, had Kanhailal been direct while dealing with the bitter realities of the North-East, he could have become more successful in propagating his political ideas. Yet, he preferred to go with allegorical themes. Did it not limit the possibility of his theatre? The point remains that a direct delineation of the political themes would have made his theatre overtly propagandist. Kanhailal was a political playwright but never allowed his work to degenerate into artless propaganda. Theatre was art for him as 'modern' poetry is for a modern political poet. It is through art that he tried to raise his voice of resistance.

### **Elucidating Examples of the Plays of the 'Theatre of the Earth':**

His *Pebet* (1975) exposes the ideological dominance of the Brahminical faith. For this purpose, it focuses on the indoctrination of the ethnic people of the Meitei community to Brahminism. The exposition occurs through the use of a Manipuri lullaby. Similarly, his 'Memoirs of Africa' (1985) is based on a poem that likens Manipur to the once colonized continent of Africa. Thus, Kanhailal's theatre is political allegory. It does not make any direct statement on social issues. Sircar's primary aim was to impart political lessons to the audience, as are the cases with the German playwrights-cum directors like Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht (Kanhailal, "H. Kanhailal and Sabitri" 4). Kanhailal believed in making them aware of their crises and inspiring them to bring in social change. He did so by evoking awareness and not by propagating any established political ideology. His theatre raises the voice and represents the pain and agony of the common masses under ideological oppression. The collective and communal vision gets expressed in his theatre through the actor's movements and non-verbal sounds. His actor becomes the voice of the oppressed.

Kanhailal (2015) revealed that his *Karna* (1997) re-interpreted the consequence of Karna in the *Mahabharata*. Karna was abandoned by Kunti, his mother, soon after he was born. Kanhailal shows Kunti claiming his body after her younger son Arjuna kills him in the Kurukshetra war. However, she does not claim the body out of her motherly feeling. She claims it to save this 'Aryaputra' ("Son of the Aryans") from being cremated by Radha, his non-Aryan (and therefore outcaste) foster mother. The re-interpretation, therefore, highlights the Aryan people's negligence and oppression of the non-Aryan people. Kanhailal (2015) maintained that he had used this re-interpretation "to raise the question of social segregation and politics of caste and marginalisation." (n. pag).

The resilient attitude of Kanhailal is reinstated very powerfully in his *Draupadi* (2000). Inspired by Maheswata Devi's story, the play demonstrates its female protagonist, Dopdi, played by Sabitri Heisnam, challenging an oppressive army officer, the Senanayak, by being starkly naked in front of him. Her acting disturbed the audience, but it was also lauded by critics as one of the boldest enactments on the Indian stage. After four years, an incident occurred in Manipur where women came out for public protest against the oppressive Indian army (Hariharan, 2017, p. 18). It is an example of inspiration taken by life from art. In this way, Kanhailal tried to awaken the fighting spirit of the common masses through his plays.

#### **Kanhailal's Later Experiments:**

In the last two decades of his career, Kanhailal did more theatrical experiments. His concept of 'The Ritual of Suffering' further enriched his 'Theatre of the Earth'. He explained the concept in his *Theatre for the Ritual of Suffering* (1997). It made his theatre more humane, poetic, and 'transcendental'. Chaman Ahuja (2012) has explicated it in the following way:

All great plays display human misery and exploitation of man by man; it is this experience of suffering that provides one with a sense of sacrifice, or martyrdom, of heroism.... Being a proof of the human spirit, suffering is holy and that is what makes it a healing agency—a catalyst in lifting a finite human being to the higher realm of infinitude. Such being Kanhailal's aim and assumptions, he regards actor as a medium. The way Sabitri goes into immediate trance is a ritualistic transformation. (p. 277).

Kanhailal's group, 'Kalakshetra Manipur' took up 'The Nature Lore Project' in 2005. The project had the objectives of embarking on a new kind of theatre practice with cultural adventure and expedition, doing a collective search for indigenesness, removing racial and linguistic biases, giving up city-centric theatre, and addressing the rural audience ('Kalakshetra Manipur' 4). These objectives reflect a clear postcolonial standpoint with a more tuned form of his earlier ideas. These objectives were detectable in his productions like *Sati* and *Dakghar* (Kalakshetra Manipur, 3).

The nature-lore project emphasized a kind of community theatre of an ethnic group in a rural or remote environment. It tried to develop a naturalized and ritualized theatre. This theatre tries to find the original power that only live theatre possesses. It abandons the city-based rich conventional theatre tradition and negates 'method acting' or realism or the psychological approach of character building. On the contrary, it emphasizes the 'physical-psychic' approach of characterization. The actors create the theatre idiom with their instinct and intuition. The identity of a naturalized actor of a particular community reflects through their instinctive and intuitive

body expression, which has its base in folk performances. The process of such a performance is thus a 'renewal of ancestral tradition' (p. 12). Naturalized actors learned this through their livelihood in a particular geo-ecological system:

For them ethnicity is a way of life and expression of an ancient tradition orally transmitted from generation to generation in case of a specific people live in a specific geo-ecological system. The ethnic identity is thus shaped by the body vocabulary which the people learn and evolve from the ecological system through generations. (p. 11).

Multilingualism is another feature of this project. Under this project, Kanhailal's theatre tries to break all the racial and linguistic barriers of various ethnic communities. It does so as it wants to challenge the supremacy of one 'nationalist' language and culture over these communities. In this way, the theatre tries to overcome the dominant politics of culture and identity. A real challenge lies in collaborating with artists from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Kanhailal solved this problem by accommodating multiple languages together. He reconstructs a conventional text like *Dakghar* into a multilingual Text. The process creates a language of images, impulsive body movements, and sounds (Kanhailal, 2008, p. 2).

### **An Analysis of *Pebet*:**

'Pebet' (1975) is a non-verbal play constructed from a Manipuri fireside folk story. It was performed without a dramatic text, i.e., in the same way as Kanhailal performed many of his plays. In it, Pebet, a bird of an almost extinct species, gives birth to her fledglings, nurtures them, and teaches them how to fly. A cunning cat comes to eat them up. The mother bird manipulates the cat and rescues the innocent ones.

This simple storyline of the Manipuri folk tale unfolds some allegorical meaning in Kanhailal's theatre. It illustrates how the rulers of Delhi dominate the Manipuri people with their divide-and-rule policy. The cat, shown wearing a dhoti and holding a rosary in hand and bells around the neck, stands for the aggression of the Vaisnavite culture over the indigenous ethnic cultures of North East India (especially the Meitei culture of Manipur) (Bharucha, 1998, p. 34). The play has been regarded as "anti-Hindu" and "anti-Indian" (p. 34). The point that the bird is nearly extinct suggests that the traditional culture is under severe threat from Brahminical aggression.

The second author of the present paper had the privilege of watching 'Pebet', produced by Manipur Kalakshetra, at Nazira in the Sivasagar district of Assam on 06 February 2005. The play unfolded in a temporary auditorium lit by two halogen lights, but there was almost no stage property except a small platform on one side of the stage. The actors who played the roles of the fledglings wore light brown dresses, meaning that they were birds of the same feathers, i.e., similar sufferers unified by the 'Ritual of Suffering'.

On the contrary, Mother Pebet, played by Sabitri Heisnam, wore a blue dress. The blue colour of her dress reminds one of Siva, who once drank poison benevolently to become blue-throated. In this light, the mother Pebet's blue dress suggests centuries of torture on the indigenous communities. Again, the sky and the seas are blue. Therefore, despite her tiny appearance, her blue dress can suggest the grandeur of the indigenous cultures. Against the timidity and vulnerability of the birds are the aggression and violence of the cat. All these qualities found expressions through physical movements and non-verbal sounds. They held the audience

spellbound. In December 2021, the authors sat together to study a few YouTube videos on different enactments of the play. The videos gave them the same semiotic suggestions and expressive emotions.

The challenges of the construction process lay in concretizing the dream-like images evoked by the lullaby-like story. The dramaturgy was constructed from point to point. Rhythmic body movements and non-verbal sounds like screams, wailing, hummings, and others added audio-visual splendour to the action. According to Sabitri, her inner journey evoked by the story took the form of dream-like impulsive physical actions and sounds. Sabitri termed the physical manifestation of her inner emotions as psychical. It was reflected even in her breathing pattern (Kanhailal, 2008, p. 8).

### **Legacies of the 'Theatre of the Earth':**

Kanhailal has been a strong influence on the next generation of playwrights and directors of India in general and the North-East in particular. Two such playwrights-cum-directors are Gunakar Dev Goswami and Sukracharyya Rabha from Assam. Dev Goswami, a disciple of Kanhailal, learned to use rare Assamese folk cultural elements, such as folk tales, myths, and historical episodes after the fashion of his Guru. He has also used folk and classical theatrical forms and elements from Oja-Pali, Ankia Bhaona, and others to construct his visual aesthetics, movements, and music. Moreover, like the plays of Kanhailal, his productions like *Jerenga*, *Birangana*, *Sati*, and many others have expressed strong protest against women's oppression in contemporary society. His production of *Santras*, based on a *Panchatantra* story, took inspiration from Kanhailal's *Pebet*. Its rigorous physical movements, ups and downs of voice and music, and the allegorical way to deal with a postcolonial subject matter strongly remind one of Kanhailal's play.

Sukracharya Rabha, who met an untimely demise a few years ago, was one of the most brilliant young playwrights-cum-directors of the region. He recognized Kanhailal as his Guru and tried to grasp the actual essence of his theatre. He arranged the "Under the Sal Tree" theatre festival regularly in a completely natural environment. The productions of his group, Badungduppa, discard all artificial theatre elements, such as lights, sounds, heavy sets, costumes, and make-up. The plays are performed in daylight in front of the audience seated under the Sal Trees. As a talented playwright and director, he also constructed his theatre basically from the folk tales and myths of his community, with all folk actors. Through his theatre he tried to explore the cultural heritage of his own Rabha community. *To Poidan*, *Rupalim*, *Tikhar*, *Changkoy*, and *Madaiah Muchi* were some of his well-known productions.

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