An excerpt from Rituals and Performances: Studies in Traditional Theatres of Manipur

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This book ‘redefines the concept of theatre and broadens its scope to accommodate ritualistic forms of performances which were earlier regarded more as rituals or dances or festivals and not so much as forms of theatre’, according to the text on its jacket. ‘Rituals and Performances will be of interest not only to theatre practitioners and scholars of theatre and performance but also to social scientists, folklorists and lovers of Manipuri culture,’ it adds. Published by Cultural Resource Centre, Yaiskul Hiruhanba Leikai, Imphal, Manipur, the book has been priced at Rs.250.

Introduction:

If we go by the concept of theatre as defined by the West, which is more or less secular and entertainment centred in approach, we may not find any theatre indigenous to our context. We may find rituals, dances or festivals but not theatres. And, we may come to a wrong conclusion that theatre came from the West to Manipur via Bengali theatre in 1902 during the British rule. This is a problem troubling the scholars who have been brought up under a Western knowledge of education and who take theatre to be, strictly, a translation of written drama into action on the stage. This is an idea which grew out of a text-centred and literature bias concept of theatre. On the other hand there is a group of scholars well-versed in the Indian schools of thought, and who desperately try to define or re-define theatre in the context of Manipuri culture using parameters drawn from the intricacies of Sanskrit poetics enshrined in the Natyashastra. Both schools of thought, either the western or Indian which are enveloping our mind represent a very constricted or reductionist view of theatre which considers the art of theatre to be the sole enterprise of a small group of elites. Again, the strict adherence of our local scholars to these dominant canons of narrative reveal a chronic sense of dependency of knowledge, of decision making process and of politics on their part. This calls for the need of re-defining theatre and freeing it from the shackles of the ongoing intellectual bondage, and accommodate traditional ritualistic performances in the overall discourse of theatre.

One will find that, freed from the shackles of the Western concept and subjected to a process of analysis, the essential features of the art of theatre are the same all over the world even though multifarious forms of theatre have been seen flourishing in different social and cultural contests. Perhaps, this analysis has helped scholars in their attempts to re-define theatre in order to enable them to make an objective assessment of the various forms of theatre existing in different parts of the world. This has also helped the scholars and practitioners of theatre to evolve new approaches for a fresh examination of their own performance traditions. The important point to be noted here is that the essence of theatre remains the same everywhere throughout the history of mankind and that under different social and cultural conditions different forms of theatre made up of the infrastructure of the intrinsic spirit and the essence of theatre and the super-structure of the language, the style and mode of expression dictated by regional, political, social and cultural imperatives, have been seen flourishing all over the world. These aspects of the unchanging essence and changeable features in the whole structure of any form of theatre are discussed in the First Chapter of this book. At this point, I am reminded of what Peter Brook said that theatre is a ‘self-destructive art’, thereby hinting at the changes which have taken place in the forms of theatre available in the world. In the First Chapter I have tried to discuss this aspect with particular reference to the post-Stanislavsky scene. I have referred to the theatre of the West and the theatre of the East. I have also discussed some forms of African ritual theatre and the views of some black scholars. In this way, I have, in this chapter, carved out the way in which the essential features of theatre in general and the various forms of theatre will have to be examined in order to arrive at a substantive understanding of theatre.

From the Second Chapter onwards I proceed to an argument that in Manipur there has been a distinct trend of traditional theatre. This trend began with Lai Haraoba and that it has continued even in the contemporary forms of Manipuri
theatre like Shumang Lila. This development or the changes which have taken place in the history of traditional Manipuri theatre were the outcome of the changes in the social, political and cultural milieu of Manipur through the ages. Thus, while dealing with the grammar of the theatrical performances I have tried to draw attention to the background or the milieu of these performances. The history of development or changes from Lai Haraoba to Shumang Lila has been dictated by the changes which have taken place in the life of the Manipuris, starting from the days of pre-Hindu indigenous religion continuing to the days of Hinduism and finally to the era of secularism.

My effort in this book is to chart a map of the process of development of traditional theatre from Lai Haraoba to Nata-Sankirtana, to Gostha Lila, to Udukhan Lila, to Gour Lila and finally to Shumang Lila in a historical frame of time. The forms of theatre which emerged at every stage of this process of development had distinctive qualities. I also refer to the various elements like dances, songs, chants, music, gestures, body movements etc. which have contributed to the total structuring of the various forms of performances. An analysis of these theatrical dynamics of traditional Manipuri theatre has led me to raise the basic contention that almost the same structural framework has been used in Lai Haraoba, Nata-Sankirtana, Ras Lila, and other forms of traditional Manipuri theatre, even though the rising wave of realistic presentation in the style of production has increasingly diminished the importance of the traditional framework. This structural framework has transcended the barriers of religion and culture. The same framework has been used to give theatrical expression to different themes growing out of different religions. One can even say that there is hardly anything religious in this framework, which has brought about a creative fusion of subjects or themes from Hinduism with local and indigenous materials and sensibilities – a fusion which has given rise to a distinct form of theatre.

The way in which this indigenous structural framework has been used for the Hindu theatre of Manipur can best be observed in the Nata-Sankirtana, which is one of the earliest outcomes in the creative interaction between the pre-Hindu performance traditions and the Hindu-religion and culture which has been introduced in the eighteenth century Manipur. I discuss the form and content of Nata-Sankirtana in the Fourth Chapter of this book. Here, I refer to the fact that the use of the indigenous structural framework has made Nata-Sankirtana a performance charged with remarkable theatrical potentials. In the Ras Lila, which can be regarded as an extension or continuation of the Nata-Sankirtana, one can observe that the sequence of hakchangshaba of Lai Haraoba has been transformed into a beautiful sequence called bhang-gi achouba. The same sequence will also be found used effectively in a Gostha Lila performance. The point is that the same sequence or the same structure or the same tradition to which the sequences of the structure belong, has been used in the various forms of the traditional theatre of Manipur.

This non-religious indigenous structure, which is composed of the elements of music, song, dance, body movements, costume, space and even the relationship between the performance and the audience, is the backbone of the central nervous system, which has transcended barriers of culture or religion, and which has drawn all the foreign materials into a process of interaction and final fusion with local Manipuri conditions and sensibilities. We may say that Lai Haraoba, Nata-Sankirtana, Ras Lila, Gostha Lila, Udukhan Lila, Gour Lila and Shumang Lila have clear genetic relationship because of their structural dependence on the indigenous structural framework.

At this stage I would like to refer to the use of Hindu religious scriptures like the Srimad Bhagavatam, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Git Govindam and the Chaitanya Charitamritam as the sources of text for the Hindu theatre of...
The Penakhongba provides musical accompaniment to the Laiharaoba ritual.

Manipur. The texts based on episodes from these religious scriptures were theatrically presented through the use of the existing non-Hindu performance structures, which are abstract, non-realistic and ritualistic in character. Gradually the presentation became more and more realistic, particularly from the stage of Ras Lila onwards. The style of presentation became more sophisticated, common dialogues became to replace the chants. The unfolding of the performance text in the scheduled frame of time became more like the dramatic presentation of a written text with a carefully designed structure of plot.

Involvement of a text in the form of Hindu scriptures brought about many qualitative changes to the growth and development of the traditional Manipuri theatre. The oral behaviour which dominated in the early stages of performance came to be gradually replaced by the laws of a written text which imposed some kind of rigidity and a principle of coherence. Texts are grounded in the form of written words on papers of some kind and, here written words are laws which have to be strictly followed while giving enactments to it. In fact, the tradition of a prompter in the western model of theatre indicates the dominance of the text or the authorial power because actors cannot delete or interpolate any word or a sequence of action other than the textual prescriptions. But this does not mean that a written text was strictly followed with a sense of maintaining its sanctity in the theatre-making process or while unfolding a traditional form of theatre. Epic-reciters, story-tellers and balladeers who did monodramatic performances amidst big congregations at mandaps and other secular spaces were the chief functionaries who popularised the texts. While giving enactments these artistes brought in many changes to the texts, and it was always the contexts which affected the texts. The traditional Manipuri theatre, the Hindu theatre in particular, although founded on written texts, were subjected to oral tradition and many local features were brought into the narrative. But, in spite of all these interpolations and changes the dominance of a text is still discernible when we consider the linearity of the performance, the gradual development of actions, the characters and the overall meaningful structure of signs which govern the performance.

This is true of the secular traditional theatre called Shumang Lila. Scholars may trace its origin to the period the king Chandrakirti (1850–1886) or to a more distant historical past. But Shumang Lila in its full form came to be born when a written text intervened the earlier forms of performances like the comic skits called Phagee Lila and other forms of performances prevalent during intervening period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. So, many qualitative changes were brought to the growth and development of the traditional Manipuri theatre with the intervention of written texts.

Theatre Reconsidered

Wide misconceptions of the idea of theatre exist among many theatre-workers, theatre-lovers, playwrights and various sections of people including scholars. Some take theatre for a playhouse, others take it to be equivalent to the drama of popular acceptance, and many others take it strictly to be the translation or realization of a written play into action on the stage. Again, ritual performances of Hindu origin like Ras Lila, Goshta Lila, Udukhal, etc. of Manipur can be studied as genres of theatre. Thus, before we go into an exhaustive study of these traditions of performance it will be helpful to examine some observations on what theatre actually is and on the range of traditions and styles of performances which fall within its perimeter.

Etymologically speaking the word ‘theatre’ comes from the Greek work ‘theomai’ which means to see. In Greek, the spacious gallery carved out on the rocky hill slopes is also known as ‘theatron’. But, ‘theatron’ refers to only the area meant for the spectators. Then, the word theatre has been used liberally in various contexts, for example, phrases like ‘cinema theatre’, ‘operation theatre’ are quite common. Cinema halls where moving pictures are shown are also known as theatre. Well-equipped hospital room where surgical operations on human bodies are carried out, is known as the operation theatre. The playhouse where live performances are staged are also known as theatres. In such theatres the area is divided into two spatial units by a proscenium arch. The two units are the auditorium where the audience sit and the box-like area called the stage, facing the auditorium. Behind the unopened three walls of the stage we have the lighting booth, the green room and other areas where tricky manipulations to create an illusion of reality on the stage are carried out.

The etymological connotations and the implications given rise to by the liberal use of the word theatre will, however, be of no great help in understanding the distinctive features of
the art of theatre. We are concerned with this art manifested through its time-and-space paradigm. Theatre in its essence is an action performed by some agents within the limits of a time-and-space framework. This is, perhaps, the reason why most critics and theatre experts call theatre a living art. The English theatre director Peter Brook has rightly said:

I can take an empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, this is all that is needed for an act of the theatre engaged.\(^{11}\)

II

A wide-spread and more or less deep-rooted misconception is that theatre is an art based on the exact translation or realisation on the stage of a fictitious play written under certain established norms. This, of course is a global phenomenon and has its origin in the Aristotelian concept of tragedy encapsulated in his Poetics. Most of the die-hard students of this school of thought are not willing to accept the fact that there was and is a wide stream of non-literate theatre forms in which conservative values and norms are retained but no written texts are referred to. This trend of taking theatre exclusively as an enactment of a written play has been popularised by educational institutions like colleges and universities where the texts of plays are taught as a separate genre of literature like poetry and novel, a play is ultimately based on the action that would come into life on the stage. Thus, a full impact of a play can be felt only when it is enacted on the stage, and not merely by reading it. As action is the living centre of a play the full realization of the structure of actions envisaged by the playwright will take place only during performance. That is why a playwright like Eugene O'Neill who was involved in the practical problems of the theatre, could write theatrically successful plays. His plays will show that he has a keen sense of the actions he wanted to enact on the stage.

Now, by action we do not simply mean action in its physical manifestations. It also implies intellectual, emotions and verbal actions, which grow out of a centre of conflict, as we have seen in the plays of G.B. Shaw. Poets like Browning, Shelley and Tennyson attempted to write plays but they could not achieve success in this field. Because of the lack of a well-planned structure of action their plays remained as mere pieces of literature. However, Shakespeare’s plays were successful both as literature to be read and as plays which could be performed effectively on the stage. This is because Shakespeare was fully acquainted with the Elizabethan stage-craft and intricacies involved in an event of theatre. In addition to this he was in full knowledge of and full command over the actions to be exploited on the stage during performance. In this context it will be necessary to point out that at the time of evaluating the potential of indigenous forms of theatre we are generally inclined to use such old yardsticks as dramatic structure, character, plot, conflict, dialogue etc. This, in fact, is a hang-over or a prejudice inherited from an exposure to the Aristotelian model of theatre. One can simply say that this orthodox way of looking at theatre will not yield any positive result. Because the two streams of theatre mentioned above have different natures and structures. In addition to this the social involvement and social environment, which is a very important factor in the promotion of theatre, will be found to be quite different. For example, the Aristotelian model of theatre is popular in the West, but in the East theatre is found growing out of a kind of co-
existence or interaction between the Aristotelian and indigenous forms.

Theatre is, in fact, a central human activity which manifest itself in multiple forms and contents under different social, cultural, political and geographical conditions. In addition to this theatre is one of the most recalcitrant and fluid art form which undergoes changes. Thus, the right approach for one to make a systematic study of a certain form of theatre is to identify its distinctive features in relation to the milieu in which it draws it nourishment. To establish a formula and try to use it in the evaluation of any form of theatre cannot be a correct approach. This does not, however, mean that theatre in general has no basic characteristics common for all the forms. It has its own laws and characteristics which remain unchanged in all forms of theatre. This point will become quite clear only after some forms of indigenous theatre and modern schools of theatre are examined systematically.

III

We may, for example, take up the case of some indigenous theatre forms of Africa. Penina O. Mlama, a Tanzanian theatre scholar wrote:

The person who looks for theatre that merely entertains will find it difficult to discover examples in Africa. But to conclude that there is no theatre because of that is to refuse to understand the peculiarities of African theatre.\textsuperscript{vi}

The remark of Penina has struck the key note. He has, further stated that in Africa ‘entertainment is, in most cases a means of fulfilling another function of theatre’. Penina has called Digubi, an African initiation rite a theatre. Digubi is basically a Tanzanian rite of initiating girls into the adult status. It has two stages. The first stage of Digubi is performed at the first menstruation of a girl, and the second stage is carried out on the eve of a girl’s wedding ceremony. The ritual performance consists of mime, antiphonal song, dance and patterns of movement produced by groups of people. The point to be noted is that Penina’s comment on theatre has posed a serious challenge to the entertainment-oriented concept of theatre popular in the West.

Nyau dance of Zambia, Intsomi of Xha tribe and Ingnekwone of the Zulu tribe are other forms of African theatre. Another black scholar Robert Mshengu Kavanagh has also seriously questioned the usual way of interpreting indigenous forms of theatre in Africa from the Western perspective. He has challenged the definition of drama in accordance with the European concept of theatre:

What is important is to describe as accurately and scientifically as possible the theatrical forms to be found in traditional African societies and allow definitions.\textsuperscript{viii}

What the Africans want is a re-definition of theatre, a re-definition which can embrace a large variety of forms of theatres or traditions of theatrical performance. Apart from a rejection of the Western concept of theatre the black people have come out with a positive and confident assertion that they have their own native forms of theatre to be considered seriously.

The existing forms of theatre in Asia also do not conform to the concept of the Western theatre. The Asian theatre has a lot of resemblances with the African theatre in respect of the anthropological background. Faubion Bowers, one of the experts of the early generation of western scholars on Asian theatre found some underlying principles in all the forms of theatre in Asia. He said,

There is a kind of uniformity in motivation, in aim, in style, in execution of dance and drama which connects it altogether and makes it ‘Asian’ theatre rather than European.\textsuperscript{ix}

We have all observed that in the Western theatre the spoken word is the primary medium of communication. But, in Asian theatre words are not enough; a fusion of dance, music and poetry gives rise to an intense form of aesthetic communication. In this connection it will be relevant to refer to the thinking of Beril de Zoete who wrote a useful book entitled Dance and Drama in Bali. Zoete writes:

Drama is not the telling of a story, but action, dancing, the same word applies to both, for drama is only conveyed through the heightened rhythm of dance never at a flat pitch of actuality.\textsuperscript{x}
This comment on Balinese theatre is also true of other forms of theatre in Asia. Almost the same idea was expressed by another theatre expert called A.C. Scott. In his book The Theatre in Asia he wrote:

One could generalize by saying that in Asia the high purpose of theatre has been to induce a personal communication, an immediate experience, a mood raised through the combination of dance, music and poetry drawing a response beyond the limits of empirical time and place in the onlooker’s mind.\(^i\)

This creative fusion of dance, music and poetry becomes a more effective means of communication than the spoken words used in Western theatre. It effects not merely a realistic actualization of dramatic tension; it produces an abstract and non-realistic but aesthetically effective realization of the essence of the drama. Even obscene human behaviours which cannot be decently presented in realistic Western theatre is successfully shown in abstraction with artistic finesse...

\(^i\) Brook, Peter: The Empty Space, p.18.
\(^iii\) ‘Theatre, Arts of’ in The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol.18, p.212
\(^x\) Zoete, Beryl de Spies, Walter: Dance and Drama in Bali (Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1938) p.18.

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