

# IN SEARCH OF A REGIONAL FRAMEWORK OF THEATRE: AN ANALYSIS OF SUKRACHARJYA RABHA'S THEATRE

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It is difficult to ascertain the 'mainstream' in Indian theatre. The extremely eclectic developments in Indian theatre has complicated the location of a 'mainstream' which in turn made it difficult to define the 'alternative' theatre practices. However, in Indian theatre, the second half of twentieth century is marked by the 'return to roots' call. It was a call in search of alternatives to the prevailing mode of theatre. This alternative approach to theatre can be best understood in terms of three interdependent ideas - stage/space, text and the actor's body. Following observation of Suresh Awasthi will be enlightening in this context:

The search for roots and liberation from western realistic theatre and its values is an Asian phenomenon. It is roughly during the same period that directors in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan discarded the realistic mode of theatre and utilising the rich theatrical heritage of their respective countries, evolved a style in tune with indigenous values and aesthetics. It is also of significance that the 'theatre of roots' in Asian countries has emerged at a time when the Avant- Garde theatre in the West inspired by Asian theatrical traditions and values has declined. (Awasthi , 296).

Propelled by the 'return to root' movement, Assam's theatrical scenario has seen the upsurge of a new kind of practice. It is new in the sense that there is a conscious effort to break away from the conventional realism ushered in by western proscenium stage.

Efforts have been made in search of alternative modes of enunciation in order to create fresh idioms of theatre. These directors have collected their resources from the diverse ethnic cultures of the Northeast. This paper is an attempt to locate the theatrical practice of one such director, Sukracharjya Rabha, in the context of 'return to roots' movement. Given the plurality of Indian theatre, this paper also seeks the possibility of a 'regional framework' of theatre. The thesis of a 'regional framework' of Indian theatre is still in a nascent stage and therefore a detailed analysis of it will be beyond the scope of this paper. The term 'regional framework', as used here, inevitably draws its context from the richness of regional theatres in India. Regional theatres in India have its origin in the traditional folk and ethnic performances specific to a region. A theatre methodology based on the aesthetics of the performative traditions of each region can make up for the proposed 'regional framework' of theatre. Keeping in view the limitation of space, rather than a detailed analysis of the proposed framework, the paper will attempt to situate it in the context of five key concepts proposed by Richard Gough. Gough, Artistic Director of the Centre for Performance Research, Wales, visited Badungduppa Kalakendra and participated in an actor's workshop conducted by Heisnam Kanhailal and Sukracharjya Rabha in 2008. Gough has encapsulated his experience of the entire workshop in five key concepts. By situating these key concepts in the context of Sukracharjya Rabha's theatre practice, the paper will be examining

the nature of the proposed 'regional framework' of Indian theatre.

Before moving on to the analysis section I would like to propose a genealogy of a few names associated with this alternative theatre mentioned at the outset of the paper. It begins in Gardzienice, a small village of Poland, the place of the influential 'theatre laboratory' of Jerzy Grotowski. Known for his rigorous acting methodology Grotowski's investigation encompasses 'performance space' and the 'spectator-actor' relationship. The next name in this genealogy is Włodzimierz Staniewski, the Polish director, who has earned worldwide fame for his insights into acting and direction. Inspired by Grotowski, Staniewski also worked with the people in remote villages amidst the 'peasant culture'. His insights into the 'raw, dynamic, natural folk cultures' of Eastern Europe have helped him forging a new theatre methodology. Padmashree Heisnam Kanhailal is the next name in the genealogy. Kanhailal founded his own theatre group Kalkshetra Manipur. He and his wife Heisnam Sabitri, a gifted actor, gave the tradition of physical theatre in the Northeast India a rare distinction. The rigour of Kanhailal's theatre methodology is the outcome of his in-depth research into the performative traditions of Meitei culture in particular and Manipuri culture in general. Sukracharjya Rabha who took his tutelage of theatre under Kanhailal is the next name in the genealogy. Sukracharjya founded Badungduppa Kalakendra in 1998 in the Rampur village of Goalpara district of Assam. Badungduppa is devoted to research and appropriation of the performative dimension of the rituals, customs, folk literature and orature of the Rabha community<sup>1</sup> in theatre.

This genealogy is drawn to make a connection among these directors on the basis of the commonalities of their theatre methodology. All the directors named in the genealogy have their workplace in villages.

Speculating on the future of theatre Peter Brooks, in his book *Empty Space*, has raised a doubt ".....whether it is only on a tiny scale, in tiny communities, the drama can be renewed. Or whether it is possible on a large scale in a big playhouse in a capital city?" (69). This paper is also an attempt to partly find an answer for this question. These directors went back to one's own traditions, customs, myths, legends and folk tales in search of objective materials from their subjective experiences. Their theatre methodology has its spring board in the everyday practices of their community life. As for example Grotowski's 'poor theatre' is an attempt to strip off everything superfluous from a performance in order to focus on the actor. For Staniewski also an actor's truthfulness to his / her everyday life is a prerequisite to understand the action and thought of a character. The same is true with Heisnam Kanhailal's theatre methodology. In replying to a question of H.S. Shiva Prakash about the performance theory and practice in relation to ideological modernist theatre, Kanhailal replied -

As far as my performance theory and practice are concerned, I don't draw upon anything modernist. I depend upon or explore whatever is hidden or unknown in my own cultural, ethnic context. So I depend very much on myth. An actor needs to express his inner depth of feeling. How does he/she do this? By harking back to our ancestral tradition, to our myths. Those with a modernistic outlook might question my practice because in their eyes it is very subjective. But I have found it to be not subjective at all. How can we relate to the ancestral tradition of expression from our present point of view? We need a tradition – tradition in the sense of how we work, how we explore – which can lead us in a new direction. (Kanhailal, 197).

Sukracharjya Rabha, after completing his training in *guru-shishya* tradition in Kalakshetra Manipur, did a soul searching into the customs and rituals of his own culture. Emulating the performative dimensions of the Rabha culture he has been able to develop a new form of theatre. His theatre is a vehicle to promote and a means of creating awareness regarding the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Rabhas and other ethnic communities of the North east. Under the Sal Tree Theatre Festival (UTSTTF) is considered to be the most significant contribution of Badungduppa to the world of theatre. The origin of this festival lies in *Nature Lore*, a collaborative project of Badungduppa Kalakendra and Kalskshetra, Manipur. The objective of the project was to bring theatre closer to nature and to explore the ritualistic dimension of folk performances. This project, in subsequent time, took the form of a festival of experimental theatre and research.

Now coming to the concepts suggested by Gough. The five key concepts are disorientation, bewildered, interruption, turbulence, contagion or infection.

Explaining the concept of 'disorientation' that he initially felt in the workshop, Gough said – "I would like to think of a dramaturgy of disorientation. In some ways, I think some of the best theatre is where the audience is disoriented, initially confused, not sure where things are going, but it can be extremely efficacious, and that leads me to bewilderment" (Gough, 148). In UTSTTF theatre groups from different parts of the world are invited. Performances which have larger contents of physical acting based on the folk or ethnic traditions are always given preference in the selection process. In this sense, the space of UTSTTF is essentially intercultural. One can situate the experience of watching an intercultural performance; to use Homi K. Bhaba's term, in 'cultures in-between'. Gough's idea of 'disorientation' can be associated with this 'in-betweenness' of culture.

It's not that all the spectators, mostly from the local Rabha community, understand every aspect of all the plays but the amazing fact is that spectators watch every performance till its end. This initial disorientation initiates a process of self engagement through which discovery can happen. This is a discovery of both the 'self' and the 'other'. For a 'regional framework' of theatre 'disorientation' can be a fundamental component.

The second concept forwarded by Gough is 'bewilderment'. Gough proposed the term in connection to the 'wild' element in Kanhailal's theatre methodology. For Kanhailal, 'wild' refers to the 'vitality' component of folk performances. According to him 'wild' is not what we understand in modern time as something 'out of control' but it implies "a natural life – elemental, pristine, or vital, made manifest as our wild teacher, wild mentor or wild mother giving birth to our lightning sources of creativity and supporting the inner and outer loves of those 'doers' who risks cultural expeditions into the wild space of theatre." (Kanhailal, 9) Gough has used the concept of 'bewilderment' as a mode of journey and subsequent revelation. Following his master Kanhailal, Sukracharjya Rabha has also used this component in his theatre methodology. Loving the *Sal* trees, nurturing and protecting them, talking to them, embracing them is part of Sukracharjya's actor preparation methods. The performance space for the festival amidst a *Sal* tree forest is prepared without cutting down a single tree. All the performances take place in an environment that is free from noise and extraneous sounds and without the aid of any electric sound or lighting system. Music is performed live on stage. The back drop is created by erecting thatched walls supporting the *Sal* trees and the gallery for the audience is constructed using locally available bamboo and betel-nut trees. The plays are performed in a soothing and grasping silence under the trees.

However, a performance outside the proscenium stage, in a natural environment, is not enough to bring about the sense of 'bewilderment'. Nature should not just constitute the settings of the performance but also provide it with performativity, the framework within which one has to address the issues involved in the performance. The 'wild' should be a 'co-text' of the performance as found in the performance space of UTSTTF. For the theatre of a region that has nature's bounty 'bewilderment' can be a key element for its own theatre framework.

The next concept used by Gough is 'interruption'. The performances designed by Sukracharjya Rabha mark a departure from way theatre is perceived or understood. It is an interruption to the verbose performances of proscenium stage. The minimalism that he has used in his plays is evident not just in the number of characters but also in other aspects of 'mise-en-scene'. *Nukhar Renchakayani Gopchani*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, is a classic instance of Sukracharjya's practice of minimalism in theatre. To present his vision he has used only six characters, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Hecate and three witches. Minimalism is evident in the gradually reducing dialogues, prioritisation of body-language and use of music only when it becomes crucial to break the silence. Interruption, as stated by Gough, suggests "that there is an intervention and it is causing an interruption. It is a rupture and through that rupture something new is emerging" (148). The interruption created by these new experiments in theatre can be a significant component of the proposed regional framework of theatre.

The fourth concept proposed by Gough is 'turbulence'. Observing the 'political activism' that affects Kanhailal's theatre Gough brought in the idea of turbulence. The ritualistic dimension that creates disturbance and instability in a performance is the integral aspect of alternative theatre. This destabilising

aspect also endorses a larger philosophy that nothing is constant. Thus, 'turbulence' is that aspect which makes a performance a 'process' and not an 'end'. Sukracharjya's plays are covertly political in the sense that they question the received structures of power that control, govern and at times manipulate human life. Let's take the example of his movementalist experiment *Echo of Life, tuning movement in spatial context*. It has opened up newer possibilities of understanding space in relation to sound and human body. *Echo of Life* is a rhythmic depiction of life, life that exists in the lap of nature, life that exists in such an environment where the essential human emotions get their proper nourishment. *Echo of Life* weaves various episodes with a common thread called 'fear'. It is the fear of the known and unknown, seen and unseen that appears in different forms and engulf the characters from the beginning to the end. The experiences of the three characters are conveyed through carefully orchestrated sounds. With every sound that comes from an unseen place actor's formations changes. The behaviour of the characters, both physical and psychological, is controlled by those sounds. All the three characters respond to the changing sounds. Certain sounds make them happy, some sad, some console, and most of the sounds terrify and few bring hope. Every sound brings with it certain memories. Sounds made by the wild animals terrify them. For men born and brought up amidst nature it is not difficult to overcome these fears. But what about those foreign sounds, like the sound of military boots, shots fired and cries of helpless women who are raped. These sounds slowly engulf their existence. Through sounds the performance has depicted the turbulent history of the state that saw the rise and fall of insurgency. The turbulence created by continuous expansion and contraction of the theatrical space and by constantly destabilising identity *Echo of Life* acquires a ritualistic dimension. For the

theatre of a region that has a long history of political strife for identity, the concept of 'turbulence' can be an effective tool.

'Contagion or infection' is the fifth term suggested by Gough. Gough's use of the term is without any negative connotation. He is actually referring to the quality of getting affected found in the theatre of Kanhailal. Moreover, Kanhailal's theatre itself is 'infested' with the methods and practice of Grotowski, Stanislavsky, Eugeno Bara, Schechner, Peter Brook and Badal Sircar. Yet, it is new and fresh because of Kanhailal's rootedness to his own culture. Gough even felt the need to take this 'infection' to the other parts of the world. Observing the beautiful expositions by the students of Kanhailal, the carving in space and time by Sabitri in the workshop, Gough was fascinated by the "viral transmission, the way that exercises move through and across – bodies, people, time" (Gough, 150). Sukracharjya's performances are also 'infested' by the method and practice of his master, yet it is new because of his rootedness into his own tradition and culture. At the same time his performances have the quality to affect spectators psychologically at different levels. If observed carefully one can notice this 'contagious' element in almost all folk cultural performances. From the performers to the audience it gets transmitted like a magic spell. This magic of contagion can be a crucial component of a regional framework of theatre.

While imagining a regional framework of theatre it would be retarding to be unreasonably unmindful to restrict the influence of the ideas developed and practiced by the theatre community across the globe. There is no wrong in imbibing the best that have been thought and practiced globally. The metaphor of a tree used by Grotowski will be more appropriate in this context. The regional framework of theatre that has the potentiality to contribute to the plurality of Indian theatre must spread its branches and at the

same time its roots must go deeper into the soil of one's own culture. Gough, while making his observations, stated it very clearly that the ultimate objective of a theatre methodology is to achieve transformation. Wole Soyinka rightly opined that a 'return to roots' is energising not when it is an 'ideologically convenient mythology' but when it is a strategy for rediscovering the intrinsic principles by which a society can transform itself in present (123). A deliberately recovered tradition is an ideological construct.

#### Notes :

1. The Rabhas are scattered in the undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang in the state of Assam. The Rabha tribe is divided into several groups. Each group consists of several exogamous clans. See Sen 138 - 139
2. Scientific name *Shorea robusta*.

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