

XIV Safdar Hashmi Memorial Lecture

IDENTITY, VIOLENCE AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN THE NORTHEAST

Dr. Lokendra Arambam

Lokendra Arambam is one of the foremost personalities in Manipuri theatre. He has also served in various capacities in institutions engaged in the field of art and culture in India.

I am deeply grateful to the Jana Natya Manch for giving me this opportunity to pay my respect to the late Safdar Hashmi, the doyen of People's Revolutionary Theatre in contemporary India. Because of the sheer pressure of the problems of mundane life at particular historical moments and different geo-cultural settings, we, the peoples of the Northeast are not well exposed to the struggles, triumphs and tragedies of the people's theatre movement led by this great revolutionary.

In fact, people's theatre with a conscious ideological backing to emancipate the poor and the marginalized, to show peaceful democratic transformation of the lot of suppressed classes through struggle, and to help design the processes of social and economic structures with the desired objective of a free, equal and classless society is absolutely absent in the Northeast. I shall try to explain this phenomenon later. I shall be privileged to take the opportunity of presenting some concerns on the character of cultural productions of the Northeastern peoples, the fate and destiny of artists in the fast changing relations of production, narrate the historical experiences of these people in modern times and problematize the issues of popular theatre and the arts in some special areas of the Northeast, especially Manipur and Tripura. I would like to reflect on the unique characteristics of these two states, whose peculiar historical experiences have affinities and processes of cultural and political development from ancient Asiatic kingdoms to contemporary states of social and political turmoil. I need to speak with some restraint and reservations on reflecting on the polity formation of neighbouring states, though I have had personal experiences and physical contact with the region. At the moment, I note that at this historical moment Tripura is ruled by the progressive Communist Party of India (Marxist), where theatre is very vital amidst the Bengali community. For the indigenous tribal populations, notably the Bodo peoples, there is a strong undercurrent of political theatre whose profile is absolutely invisible in the cultural circles in India. Manipur had experiences of the Communist movement since the forties, and the Communist Party of India has a credible share in the running of the contemporary government. Incidentally, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has very little influence in electoral politics in Manipur, though they had a strong following till the seventies. I mention roughly these political aspects in brief, just to reflect that the support base of these parties which had common origins is virtually ignorant of cultural movements as motivators of socio-political change.

The late Hijam Irawat, who founded the Communist Party of Manipur (August 1948) was a member of the Indian People's Theatre Association, and his struggles for the establishment of a Peasants' Socialist Republic (era of Left Adventurism) in Manipur in 1949–51 was an outstanding historical event. He was in fact one of the greatest cultural figures of early twentieth-century Manipur whose role in the cultural

awakening with patriotic and anti-colonial outpourings in theatre, poetry, music and journalism are fondly remembered today. His work in the pan-Indian Communist movement in the wake of the post-World War II period is, however, now mired with controversy when differing socio-political forces are interpreting in diverse ways his contribution to revolutionary struggles. The official Communist party of India owns his image as the representative of the non-violent revolutionary who founded the people's movement against feudalism and monarchy when contemporary non-state actors (insurgents!) regard him as the pioneer of armed struggle against the Indian state! More about this would be revealed in this discussion when past issues and primordial human activities in the usable past are re-appropriated for contemporary ends.

The important aspect I would like to emphasize at the moment is that the activists behind the Communist Parties in Manipur today have no cultural movement associated with societal problems while the attempts by party workers to have power sharing in government is strong (CPI has a coalition with the Congress). A few stalwarts of the CPI have personal connection with the mobile professional theatre called Shumang Leela (Courtyard Plays) which is often assumed as the 'popular theatre' of the state. However, the intimate issues of people's real struggle for change and transformation in society is absolutely absent in the visible environment in the arts.

I am deeply obliged to the Jana Natya Manch for enabling me to reflect on this particular concern related to contemporary politics, culture and nation formation in post-colonial India from the eyes of a Northerner. The politics of armed violence which now embroils societies and politics in the Northeast, and their impact on cultural productions is what I propose to humbly present before this distinguished assembly.

From Unity and Diversity to Hegemony

As an initiatory exercise into the realm of cultural transformations through structural changes in capitalist development I would like to ponder at the phenomenon of changes in the character of the Indian People's Theatre Association in mainland India. We are faintly aware of what happened to the deep social and economic crisis that led to the strong liberating impulse in creative expressions of the working class peoples all over India in the early forties. The Indian People's Theatre Association released an intense surcharge of creative tensions to resurrect the suppressed energies of the people at a time when colonial and imperial socio-economic order in collaboration with the comprador bourgeoisie created the conditions for human suffering through artificial manipulation of the economy. The Bengal famine is too well known to be reiterated again for public memory. What concerned the culture researcher was how the IPTA movement had substantially transformed itself after the first flush of revolutionary energy in the forties and fifties. The post-Ranadive experience of revolutionary violence, the structural changes subsequent to the Telengana episodes and the suppression of left adventurism could have had an effect on the collectivity of the revolutionary struggle. The sheer exhaustion and frustration of the 'failed revolution' could have led to an internal collapse of the ideological moorings which released the national collective struggle, and intellectuals and Communist Party cadres who worked together in an all-India basis became divided to seek independent, individualistic, regional efforts for the same revolutionary expressions. Though the internal dynamics of the basic linguistic and cultural divides that were released by the

tensions of suppression by the Indian state over party cadres have not yet come out sufficiently in print, the Northeasterner enquirer of culture and behaviour under stress is bound to suspect that severe heaviness of oppression could create disaccord amongst the revolutionaries themselves who resisted the oppressor, and internal differences in perceptions and approaches to the revolutionary struggle would undergo profound changes which disrupt the unity and collectivity of the struggle. The assimilation of many IPTA workers in Western and Northern India by the nascent Mumbai film industry and individual disappointment over the collective struggle amidst Bengali revolutionaries perhaps resulted in an accentuation of regional and provincial divide in the Communist cultural workers' engagement with the Communist credo itself, and hence the emergence of individual revolutionary outpourings in regional languages from Utpal Dutt in Bengal, Gursharan Singh in Punjab and other Communist writers in Kerala and elsewhere in the country. The pan-Indian struggles were perhaps subsumed in regionalistic expressions for an universal predicament.

What I try to suggest is that formation of linguistic states and the search for independent capitalist development by the ruling Indian bourgeoisie, and the shift towards non-alignment, from the Soviet Union for India's development path and the rift in the Communist Party in 1964 could have had profound impact on the imaginative geography of the cultural workers in the party. The issues of the major differences in the assessment of class character of the Indian state, and differing perceptions on the nature of subordination to US imperialism and Soviet social-imperialism from the virulent Communist Party of India (ML) etc, would have perhaps stirred the cultural workers to search for independent paths for revolutionary expressions, which led them to increasingly identify the language of expression as the center of discourse, rather than the universality of the revolutionary philosophy of emancipation. Linguistic identities became sharper even within the universal umbrella of communism, which was perhaps the result of the hegemonistic pressure of the new monopoly capitalism of the Indian state. Regional aspirations became more enhanced due to the exercise of the concept of 'Bargaining Federalism' (Paul Brass, 1991) under the Nehruvian dispensation, and hence greater impetus to regional identities, rather than qualitative enhancement of the altruistic pan-Indian collective class efforts in the pre-independence IPTA model. Hence the hegemonistic pressure of Indian state capitalism perhaps structured the emergence of strong linguistic movements, most solemnly exemplified by the Dravida Kazakham mobilization in the South. Strong anti-Hindi aspirations in the southern region, structures of state arrangement of power-sharing under pro-regional predilections and greater centralization of the federal character of the Indian state under intense pressure from 'disruptive' grassroot organizations like the Naxalites etc. must have led to profound changes in the politics of culture, in the development of identities of groups, communities, ethnicities and the like in different regions of India in the seventies. An impartial study of the constitutional amendments through parliament which led to increasingly bigger restraints on provincial autonomies would remind one of the hegemonistic character of the contemporary Indian state, and the emergence of particular resistance philosophies to counter state hegemony as markers of regional identities, linguistic, ethnic or otherwise.

The purpose of this discursive diversion was to reflect on the cultural production of Marxist theatre in Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam and Hindi etc. Perhaps, the Jana Natya Manch as a representative of the revolutionary culture in the Hindi

language became constrained, through their networks and interactions with grassroots populations and through studies of their performance geography, as a cultural symbol of Northern Indian characteristics, in spite of its universal aspirations of a strong left movement. We see it as an unavoidable pain of the strong impulses of cultural identities that became associated with the intrusion of disruptive state capitalism amidst diverse linguistic formations in contemporary India. Cultural and linguistic groupings tend to be manifest, rather than be a sustained eruption of class nature of cultural enterprise itself in post-colonial India. The Huntingtonian paradigm seems to be working in South Asia as well.

Ethnicity and Identity in the Northeast

Contemporary North East India is a product of British imperialism and early nation formation of modern India. The British Empire in the nineteenth century impacted heavily upon the subject peoples of the Northeast, and its supposed dissolution in the post Second World War period through global developments, released new aspirations, new awakenings and new challenges amongst the imperial subjects. On the other side, the successor state (modern India) attempted to restructure the shape of their imagined nationhood, and in the nation formation processes began new relationships with the tribes, communities and nations of the Northeast, with the concept of the nation state as a given, not needing structural changes in its character, and as wielders of power vacated by the empire.

The modern historical experiences of the indigenous peoples therefore were attempts to respond to two major influences in history. One was the structural transformation in society and polity in the wake of imperialism and colonialism and the other was the response to the relationship in the context of the development of the modern Indian state, to which varying fluctuations were noticed, according to subjective transformations in character, attitudes and self image of the ethnic societies under colonial and post-colonial encounters.

Imperialism and colonialism rapidly intervened amidst pre-colonial societies whose equilibrium was based on values of a different kind. It created discontinuities, ruptures and fissures in tribal and ethnic polities, whose earlier relationships were based on natural organic laws of blood, kin and face to face interactions in society and polity. New structures through economic integration to the overweilding imperium where impersonal laws based on capitalist transactions created new forms, new relationships, exploitation of resources, commodification of land and people, and divisions in society through class, groups and sections with differing perceptions on the world. The succession to this colonial project was organized by the modern Indian state without much structural changes. New world outlooks however were shaped by elite stakeholders in the modernity project, who emerged in the cultural and social transformations in the light of rapid decolonization movements in the global world. The processes of modernization through education, economic transformation and mobilization of group resources, acquisition of wealth, power and territory became new engagement thereby rupturing old relationships. An undefined individualism nurtured by the capitalist transformation and democracy was also shaping up, and at the same time the new challenges thrown up by the economic and social processes paved the path for the formation of an elite, who would soon utilize 'primordial and collective

symbols' in the race for power, resources and status in the decolonizing world. These modern elites were different from the blood and kin traditional aristocracy (who were merged into the new social structure in the process of democratization), and they started renegotiating their historical and political space in the modern context. The issues of identity, for reinvented groups and collectivities, and for the new individuals were to become features of the modernity project. The response of different ethnic societies and the texts of these responses differ due to the environment, culture and subjective experiences of the people themselves. All the ensuing disequilibria, social and political unrests therefore are complex interplays of the changing character of these ethnic societies in vital relationship with the hegemonic and pre-dominant presence of the new Indian state negotiating their own self-perpetuation as a South-Asian global power, whereby the Northeast is subsumed to the status of a periphery in the new 'pan-Indian imperialism'. These issues are, however, not to be reduced to a simple opposition between two entities, the core and the periphery, but also between the peripheries themselves, a set of complex dynamics created by the system.

A brief flashback into ethnic formation and ethnic assertion in the Northeast is discussed here. In spite of spontaneous balances in plural life, the history of conscious ethnic arousal and ethnic assertion was succinctly noticed when the network of metropolitan capital had substantially re-structured the pre-colonial social formations. The near dissolution of the British Empire and the World War II had internationalized the geo-political realities of the Northeast. Many political and social elites who were embroiled in the international struggle were becoming conscious of their identities, the need for active action for themselves in relationship with the colonial power. The need for elite intervention in socio-political movements was instilled by imperial agents. The Naga political consciousness emerged due to the exposure of many Nagas in the First World War. Christian education, unofficial relationships and networking and social contact with British administrators were important influences in the development of separate subjectivity and self-consciousness of difference amongst the indigenous hill peoples. In the Manipur hills other alternate experiences developed when the hill peoples themselves retaliated against imperial penetration through organized resistance and confrontations. The British took nearly two years to quell the Kuki war of Independence 1917-19, and in 1932-34, they suppressed the indigenous religious armed resistance of Jadonang and Gaidinlieu in the Tamenglong hills of Manipur.

In the Manipur valley, after the takeover of the native state in one of the most stubborn engagements in battles in 1891, imperial tutelage towards modernity began. Strong secular but Hindu oriented democratic movements began to feature in the thirties with distant models of Gandhian anti-imperialist struggles for democratization and popular empowerment. The war dislocated the economy and stirred the placid social structures to new orientations of greater mobility and more thrust towards self-empowerment. At the near end of the British imperial power, the traditional monarchical principles declined and the rise of the democratic aspirations as against the feudal dynastic system heightened as a result of the Hinduized association with the mainstream. Manipuri experience within colonialism and imperialism is complicated and more critical. The pattern was that while in the valley there were rising anti-monarchical and democratic movements, a wider contextual experience, the surrounding hills were progressively getting into the form of ethnic selfhoods, with difference from the others, and the passion for renegotiation of their economic and

political privileges on the basis of difference and ethnicity. Tighter ethnic consolidation was effected amidst various groups. These trends were renegotiated by the late Maharaja Bodhchandra (1941-1955) through conciliation and compromise. The indigenous political experiments failed due to the hasty intervention of the Government of India in 1949, when Manipur was merged into India with methodologies of deceit and force, which the non-state actors of today still rue with vehemence.

As for the Tripuri indigenous peoples, who had historical experience of governance over ancient polities, dependence for ritual and administrative needs to other racial categories from the Indian mainland, a protected status under the expanding British power and native generosity was taken advantage of by severe neighbouring cataclysmic events of war and partition to experience a complete displacement of the indigenous populations and alienation of their own land and territory to outside migrants. Cultural and civilizational experiences between the Meiteis of Manipur and the Bodo of Tripura as original peoples, with long periods of polity functioning had sheer affinities of historical experience. Two kinship states, with mutual blood relationships of exchange of princesses in marriage amidst the ruling clans, had been configured under the same constitutional arrangements of the Indian state, that in the larger plan of integration of Indian princely states, both were reduced to the same category of Part 'C' states on the 15th October 1949. Both were similarly given statehood under the new re-organization of states on 21st January 1972. Both as fertile and powerful demographic sources of peasant societies under monarchical rule had experience of violent peasant movements of an all India character under the left adventurist umbrella, where Hijam Irawat in Manipur and Dasarath Dev Barma in Tripura left abiding contributions. However, these class eruptions were later gradually transformed into ethnic nationalisms in the post integration periods. Incidentally the first armed strikes by radical insurgent outfits from Manipur in 1978 were synchronous with the virulent explosion of the language agitation in Assam in 1979, and in the 1980's Tripura also joined with intense and violent communal riots between Bodo and migrant Bengali communities. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958, which had been dubbed recently by the Jeevan Reddy Commission as 'a symbol of oppression, an object of hate and an instrument of discrimination and high handedness' (2006) had been in the Northeast for some fifty years. Under this Act, a havildar in the Indian Army could decide how much life and dignity a Northerner is worth. Ethnic assertion and ethnic mobilization or emergence of ethno-nationalisms must have resulted from complicated dichotomies and contradictions between the 'oppressive' national imagination of legal India and the rapidly emerging 'other' people in history from the Northeast.

No doubt, in the processes of India's rapid development as a South Asian power, there had been modernizing networks and manouvres between the rising elites of the modern Indian state with the political, social and business elites of the ethnic communities in varying levels of collaborations, or confrontations, or even sinister partnership activities on sharing of spoils behind the scenes. The official discourse is the powerful concept of Unity and Diversity. But in the words of Sankaran Krishna 'it was understood (and resisted, as the violence that has accompanied the effort to unite India reveals) that diversity was appreciated only in so far as it embellished Indian unity or as long as it was a recognizable variation on the central theme The central attitude to peripheral aspirations for linguistic, or cultural or economic or fiscal or any

other form of state autonomy was underlain by a suspicion that such aspirations were the entering wedge for the unraveling of the nation. Buttressed by a discourse of danger whose genealogy was traced over millennia, national unity was a *sine qua non*. Any attempt at imagining a community outside the claustrophobic embrace of the nation-state elicited a charge of an anti-national separatism or at best, chauvinistic provincialism. It is these suspicions that has shaped a country whose constitution is ostensibly federal but whose actual political dispensation is highly centralized and a poor facsimile of any such federalist blueprint over the years consequently, nation building in India (as everywhere else) has left a long and bloody trail in an endless quest for the perfect citizen (S. Krishna 1999).

The post-haste integrationist manouvres of the Indian state, hegemonic opening of the virgin lands of the Northeast to a silent demographic invasion as a traumatic result of the partition tragedies (which enhanced feelings of self-arousal as against the other), intense geographical violence to exploit the natural resources of the ethnogens who had psychological associations with nature and its endowments, thereby creating alienation and disjunctures of the equilibrium between land and people, were perhaps responsible for the rise of ethno nationalisms in the Northeast. Quoting geographer Neil Smith, Edward Said writes ‘capitalism historically has produced a particular kind of nature and space, an unequally developed landscape that integrates poverty with wealth, industrial urbanization with agricultural diminishment. The culmination of this process is imperialism, which dominates, classifies, and universally commodifies all space under the aegis of the metropolitan centre’ (E. Said 1993).

For India, in relation to the Northeast then, a hideous form of domestic imperialism is revealed. Sinister transformations and ruptures created in the workings of the successor economy was associated with an intense ideological stance for the state as given, that there was the irreplaceable and irrevocable nature of the polity created in the wake of succession to the territorial acquisitions of the disassembling British empire. To counter the process, howsoever amorphous or ill-designed the theoretical stances, there was then the emergence of ethnicity based armed movements, with polities and entities uprooted by the new structures, who disputed the founding principles of the modern Indian state. The search for the becoming of the Naga nationhood, the demand for the restoration of Manipur and Assamese independence, and restoration of tribal lands of Tripura were all part of the entire awakening ‘to reclaim, rename, and re-inhabit the land’ (Said, 1993). The anvil was identity, the methodology – violent armed struggle, no doubt. Dichotomies, contradictions, disputations in behaviour, character and beliefs, conflictual setting of targets and goals, irreconciliabilities and tension were all worked out in an atmosphere of political violence which has subsumed the region for nearly fifty years. During the course of these conflicts, different armed groups had emerged with conflictual sets of demands for formation of ethnic states, for protection of identities and cultures, for homelands within the Union or without, and other such claims within an explosive array of violence and strife.

Character of Cultural Production in the Northeast

Given these objective realities in the Northeastern world, enlightened contemporary artistic production should have had some ‘realistic’ reflection of

society's own 'inner structure and dynamic' (Lukacs). Unfortunately this was not so! Under the Lukacsian paradigm, to quote Terry Eagleton, 'a realist work is rich in complex, comprehensive set of relations between men, nature and history; and these relations embody and unfold Marxist analysis of particular phases of history. By the 'typical' Lukacs denotes those latent forces in any society which are from a Marxist view point historically most significant and progressive, which lay bare the society's inner structure and dynamic. The task of the realist writer is to flesh out these 'typical' trends and forces in sensuously realized individuals and actions; in doing so he links the individual to the social whole, and informs each concrete particular of social life with the power of the world-historical-the significant movements of history itself.... The realist writer, then, penetrates through the accidental phenomena of social life to disclose the essences or essentials of a condition, selecting and combining them into a total form and fleshing them out in concrete experience' (Terry Eagleton 1989).

Reflecting on the condition of contemporary alternative theater in Manipur, the author of this paper wrote in an article published in *Rasa* 1995, 'The transformation that was effected in the character and physical shape of the alternative theatre was a fall out of the overall change, with the advent of a Manipuri middle class, growth of social and political aspirations leading to regional and ethnic identification movements, and development of an urban elite supposedly freed from traditional mores. Yet the regional theatre as developed during this quarter of a century revealed flashes of brilliance in form and structure, idiom and expression, without a corresponding confrontation with the dynamics of life which gave it birth. The evolution of contemporary theatre of Manipur therefore reflects contradictions in itself, contradictions posed by the ontological transformation in the creative life of its stalwarts, and unable to grapple with the problems of a traditional society coming to terms with processes of change and modernization'. (Ananda Lal 1995)

In another article for a national seminar in the Adi Rangacharya centenary in Bangalore, the author took the opportunity to elaborate on the theme and hint on the patron-client relationships between the centre and periphery, and the nature of hegemonic art-patronage by New Delhi on culture workers, especially of Manipur. 'The national institutions of culture ushered in by the state reflect exclusivist tendencies which encourage only sub-national aspirations within the structure of society based on the ideology of the ruling classes, and the need for support in their effort to self-perpetuate their rule over the nation. The system of patronage that exist therefore in the national institutions of culture produce a system of thought and practice which would only support adherents and collaborators and distance those who presume to critique over the system. A hegemonic principle pervades in the culture establishments which help to canonize art and literary productions and critically dependent minor nationalities are deeply divided over this affiliation. Surprisingly, due to the intuitive and sentimental nature of the artists, many personalize this distance and differentiation, and the stalwarts of contemporary alternative theatre are not in talking terms among themselves. The state's patronage is of such pervading influence that rivalries are generated amongst recipients. Collectivity which was the guiding principle in the beginnings of alternative theatre movement is now shattered beyond repair (Arambam 2004).

As a measure to support counter-insurgency operations in Manipur and wean away the citizens from sympathizing with the so-called insurgents there is a quantum jump in the nature of patronage of the arts, letters and sports. Large scale support system are established by the center in recent years to reward artists, men and women of letters, media personnel and sports persons. Grants are generously extended to deserving individuals and theatre and dance institutions, and salary grants are extensively given to artistic organizations and groups. In fact artistes in performance have almost become government servants without pensions. Poets, writers in the local language, and so-called intellectuals are exposed to various regional conventions and national gatherings. Media personnel are shuttled around national and international seminars, and there is substantial investment of funds for projects undertaken to support the unity and diversity theme. University teachers are given more support for research and extension activities. What was not possible in the eighties and early nineties, substantial transformation had taken place in the abundance of largesse from the centre in the 21st century. On the other side of the social divide, human rights groups and individuals from the international arena are barred from visiting the region. Foreign funding for human rights activities are stopped. Security measures and internal surveillance are strongly organized not to publicize rights violations to the international arena, and national newspapers are stingy on reporting human suffering in armed conflict, arbitrary killings and enforced disappearances. Strict measures are undertaken in the security establishment not to punish personnel who committed rape of native women, for the morale of the troops in the border regions should not be lowered, whatever the circumstances. Local police forces are progressively modernized with arms, equipment, training and rewards, so that they should be able to effectively meet the threat of insurgents, and that the military presence in the sensitive, disturbed region could be minimized. Empowering the police had an inadvertent effect, that their violent reprisals and excessive hostility had created further divide among the locals themselves. Grassroot interactions by the security personnel with village populations and their civic action activities to supplement development activities of the government had become the site for subtle political influences to create ruptures in the ethnic equilibrium. Ethnicity and ethnic division which was rarely visible in pre-colonial formations are now hideously enlarged to create irreconcilable fissures in the multi-cultural polity.

Critical dependency on the centre and its associate behavior of self-censorship and self-suppression of dissent and opposition - a peculiar behaviour pattern of non-self-reliant economies are then undermining healthy growth of people's theatre in the Northeast. Other social and cultural factors of conservative tradition and inborn networks of orthodox behaviour hamper the emergence of radical departures in social thought and practice. Tribal behaviourism and customary egalitarian values (where communities share familial oneness) also hinder development of modern discourses like class, apart from the absence of a proper working class in a non-industrialized environment. The 'popular' theatres of today are mobile itinerant groups who eke out their livelihood from grassroot support, but are absolutely dependent on filmic cultural motifs for commodification of their art and utilization of violent expressions and actions to impress de-sensitized, vulnerable mass audience.

On the other side of the spectrum, alternative regional theatres had reached an excellent arena of international recognition, acceptance and circulation in various international festivals. Artistic achievements in the national march towards fulfillment

of the Indian dream had also been considerably high in terms of individual creativity and finesse. Yet at the same time there is a hurried emphasis on hyper-aesthetization and exotification without leaving much room for audience contemplation and bettering of the human condition. Materialism and non-satiated drive for increased consumption seem to dominate artistic efforts in theatre. National theatre festivals are often hyped up for values of communicative splendour and grandiosity of theatre craftsmanship and execution, rather than search for profound insights into critical human predicaments embroiled in the process of change. Manipuri artists and others in the regional cultural environments are drawn into the vortex of national euphoria without a self-critical reflection on deep human issues afflicting their respective societies. Showcasing of Manipuri products have a tangential focus on cultural expertise rather than on critical probing of socio-political reality.

All these symptoms in the change in cultural reproduction activities may have something to do with tremendous recent developments in the wake of liberalization, globalization and proliferation of free market ideologies or what Joseph Stiglitz terms 'Market Fundamentalism'. The transition from industrial to consumer capitalism perhaps became a global trend affecting tastes, habits and purchase patterns of the national bourgeoisie who control the workings of national institutions of culture. This nouveau-riche and affluent middle class in India (of some three million in number!), who have intricate networks of contact, exchange and liaisons, share leisure values throughout the institutional structures of the media, films, theatre, fashions, cosmetics, costumaries, entertainment industry and cricket etc. which they control, and their consumption needs are instant gratification, voyeuristic delight and immediate satisfaction. To please this powerful constituency in order to enhance patronage, largesses and recognition and support cultural producers and artists are now engaged in the culture of Hyper-aesthesia - a veritable logic of late capitalism, in the phrase coined by David Howes. (2005)

Theorizing on the organization of cultural pursuits under capitalism or attempting to build on the material history of the senses which Marx left unfinished, David Howes elaborates and excavates the sensorial subconscious (Jamesonian term) in order to define and delineate the character of consumer capitalism. Walter Benjamin's thesis of art in the age of mechanical reproduction when with regard to art, what imitation goods in mass reproduction lose in authenticity, they gain in mobility; 'fine' art, 'fine' furniture, 'fine' clothes can now go anywhere and everywhere as mass production finds its match in mass consumption. Howes writes 'capitalism has evidently come a long way since the days when production was the keystone of the economy and reproduction of capital seemingly depended on stripping the senses of the laborer and curbing those of the bourgeoisie. Now the focus appears to be on seducing the senses of the consumer in the interest of valorizing capital. This sea-change in the sensual logic of capitalism is what lies behind the transformation in 'values' whereby work discipline, thrift and moderation have been replaced by self-fulfillment, impulse buying and conspicuous consumption. It was the new modes of implanting the body and senses of the consumer in the world of goods that brought about this mutation in attitudes, not vice-versa (see Bauman 1983; Clarke 2003) The concern here was that marketers were once again circumventing the consumer's conscious awareness, or 'rational faculties', by targeting messages directly to the most primitive part of the brain, the limbic system, seat of the emotions and memory. In other words, consumers

were being led by the nose instead of being addressed through the more legitimate (read rational) channels of visual and verbal communication' (Howes 2005).

Identity, Location and Politics of Co-option

Modern India's conscious patronage with artistic needs for an 'intrusive' modernity in the environment of near pre-capitalist socio-economic formations in Manipur and the Northeast were laying the foundations for a changed character of artistic production which does not necessarily correspond to general development of society. The beginnings of International Theatre Festivals during the Rajiv regime and the growth of interculturalism in art and theatre was also to help change the internal profile of regional artists.

Writing for the Adi Rangacharya seminar, the author added – 'The vast structural changes in the pattern of sponsorship and patronage, and the underlying logic of a target audience and their pre-conceived expectations of variety and diversity affected the work of regional artists of the state. The earlier, light, simple, moving presentations of short plays on which regional theatre created a space for itself was appropriated with larger, more powerfully crafted designs and with accent on universal principles. The earlier penchant for the particular historical moments were abandoned with the necessity for more universalizing, homogenizing constructs, which propelled Ratan Thiyam's productions as one of the best illustrations of regionalistic flavour in the mainstream. The career of Ratan Thiyam plummeted in the social ladder too. His best productions in the *Mahabharata* trilogy since the 80s were circulated in the inter-cultural arena with accomplished market expertise and with assistance from collaborating individuals and agencies.

Something worrying about the space in the public sphere Ratan occupied, was not the particular locality or region which laid the foundations of his art, but rather the adopted mainstream geography and environment which provided sustenance to his labour. Particular contradictions about discourse, history and political economy had to be subsumed in the overwhelming dynamics of the newly revealing power configurations of the Rajiv Gandhi era. New interpretations on the regional character, with particular significations of the cultural product in the adopted history had to be rationalized by well established mainstream critics. The Abhimanyu tragedy could now be situated in the larger context of mainstream complexities in the power struggle, when Indira Gandhi as Abhimanyu could be placed on the pedestal of sacrifice, when existential questions are to be asked as to whether 'she/he has to be sure to what extent she/he is being manipulated/controlled by a power formation operating only too often through cultural/rational/ethnic constructions mistaken for national sentiments like heroism or patriotism, and to what extent she/he is deciding in historical/civilizational terms – on behalf of humanity, or of a class or a community, in a given historical context (S. Bandopadhyay 1998).

Could this rationalization be stretched to encompass the local particularities in the sense of placing the existential anguish of Abhimanyu as outsider to the power formations in the center, that his sacrifice could have been situated to the existential condition of Manipur's place in the new post-merger history, and the entire Pandava-Kourava conflict could have been staged in the contemporary struggles where

marginalized nationalities would have had no voice, no space to assert their individuality and dignity? Unfortunately, this canonical counter discourse was not in Ratan's agenda, in order to subvert mainstream perceptions about post-colonial politics or culture. Incidentally, when Ratan was feverishly preparing for his *Mahabharata* adaptations, the public sphere in the state was deeply engaged with the controversy of whether Manipur in the *Mahabharata* was really Manipur or not, and claims of a small Orissan village was rather accepted as the true domain of the Mahabharata story, and the myth of Babrubahan and Chitrangada was displaced from the narratives of Manipuris. Also at the same time, the counter-insurgency operations reached fever pitch in the eighties to suppress armed opposition groups, in the process of which women came to the forefront as defenders of the innocents, and the women-torch holder movement (termed Meira-Paibee) were born. Local dynamics was of no importance to the universalizing pretensions of this great theatre director, and the question one often asked is whether Ratan had been appropriated by the mainstream Indian establishment with himself a willing object of the enterprise. This fundamentally raises questions about the placement of the artist in history, the nature of his subjectivity and the basic motivations that engender his art, no matter how beautiful the work may be.

This twisted sense of belonging and dependency to values and meanings alien to the self, proliferate in the creative realm of the artists and writers. Thus in the realm of theatre or literature all award winning books and plays are not read or seen by the people but could only subsist in the mainstream circuit, at regular national festivals/seminars and events abroad. Then the alternative theatre has its logic or relevance for another transformed audience. Thus its *oeuvre* changes to artistic prettification or beautification of the product through selective exploitation of the rich cultural resources. It thus loses its relevance in the place of its birth. Manipur's contemporary alternative theatre has changed beyond recognition. It has not emphasized new concepts, ideas or values, but has only emphasized structural modification of forms to self-perpetuate hegemony.

Not much of contemporary reality or lived experience is highlighted in the alternative Manipuri theatre, but the cultural veneer, the homogenizing and alluring images could represent another reality, which mainstream India identifies as their conception of Manipuri reality. There is an understood collaboration of minds amongst stalwarts, critics and art managers in projecting theatre's representation of reality, as being of Manipur, since the auteur and his expression is basically Manipuri. The question of identity, alterity or difference is only of structural diversification in the homogenizing discourse. Oppositional positioning is irrelevant. Co-option is the main principle.

This contradiction is a result of a false modernity project, which does not grow from the genuine needs of the people, but from a larger need of co-option and acceptance of the truth of adoption which however distorts the character of the original subject. It thus reduces Manipuri alternative theatre to an adornment or ornamentation to the prevailing aesthetic of Indian theatre, and not a rigorous dissection of Manipuri reality. According to Rustom Bharucha, these *auteurs* of alternative theatre live in a world of self-denial. (Arambam 2004)

Shall there be People's Theatre in the Northeast?

The author cites Ratan Thiyam's special contribution to modern Indian theatre as an example of the 'new modernity' that has emerged in Manipur as a product of the integration of Manipur into India in 1949. Many mainstream Indian scholars, theatre practitioners and culture enthusiasts find Ratan's work absolutely powerful, innovative and worthy of respect as a symbol of India's creativity and regional diversity. Nothing is wrong with that notion since Manipur as a part of Indian history and culture had been in the contemporary imagination of Indians, even though many simple citizens of north, south or west India could be unaware of even the geographical location or racial components of the Manipuri people for a start. The struggle that had developed about a new modernity as an alternative discourse through insurgent culture and attempts at de-Indianization as a result of the repressive presence of the state, and enforced nationhood through the armed might of military dominance and force is not well-known in the academic, intellectual and cultural circles in India. The discourse on identity, therefore, is developing in conflictual terms in the sense that many sections of Manipuris are discovering injustices and untruths committed in the process of Indianization of Manipuris. Even the term 'Manipur' as geographical name found in the *Mahabharata* is now rejected by the non-state actors and many citizens, since the acceptance of the region's name as an Indian toponym is considered a geographical violence, and a sign or surrender of indigenous locality to the outsider. Feverish attempts are made in the public sphere to rename Manipur under ethnonyms coined by the elders of old traditions, though there is at the moment no convergence of opinion. However these are indicators of psychic and emotional states of common people, sensing in vague, hazy terms the nature of their existential location, agonizing in doubt about their loyalty to their own community or to the larger nation. There is then a split in their personal life, a cleavage in consciousness or conflict about being Manipuri and Indian at the same time. These are manifestations of the internal crisis in people's response to domination.

Ratan Thiyam may not sense this conflict, since he was born and brought up in the orthodox Hindu tradition at Nabadwip, in Bengal, and his cultural training and graduation from a central institution of strong ideological nuances and source of power and patronage had induced in him an abiding affiliation to the great Indian nation, class and state. His work, his establishment of a theatre estate in suburban Imphal, his state-of-the-art proscenium auditorium, meaningfully named 'The Shrine', reminds one of a strange, creative, beautifully and 'artificially designed but very deliberately isolated' complex absolutely unconnected with the anarchic, dynamic pulse of the common village location surrounding his estate. The placement of a monument of India's culture and power through 'sheer hard work, sacrifice, sweat and achievement' with recognized patronage through centrally sponsored and internationally invested capital, in a semi-rural location stand in stark contrast to the people's throbbing life around, who feel the near physical sensation of fear and distaste in the proximal relationship with military pickets, watchtowers, and encampments of the Indian security forces. A simple rural housewife in Mataikhul village, where Indian security camp was stationed suffered the ignominy of rape by a drunk Indian soldier, who broke into the house one night, beat up the husband, took the wife away with an AK47 at her neck and raped her near a pond. The infuriated husband rushed out and kicked the soldier and in the process both wife and rapist fell into the pond, naked. The commotion in the peaceful village at the incident provoked widespread demonstrations in 2001. In another

episode, during the combing operations one night, a housewife was raped in front of her polio stricken child. Another tribal housewife in the mountain village of Lamdan was raped by an Indian security official in front of her father-in-law, with the sepoy's deliberately helping the act by pulling her limbs apart, the husband taken away in captivity outside!

These are instances which ordinary people often physically experience during counter-insurgency operations. They are in fact stories of a part of humanity embroiled in struggles of identity and violence, and their unprobed manifestations. Art, theatre and films are not in a position to reflect these human essences in conflict, since the presence of a silent powerful state is strong, and its symbols of 'gracious' patronage control discourse and circulation of truth. A certain twice-removed representation of reality emerges in the collaborating neighbourhood, whose brilliance in form and virtuosity then help proliferate an atmosphere of aesthetic awe at the invisible hegemony of thought. To quote Mary Hamer in her apt words. 'In such a process, the colonized is typically (supposed to be) passive and spoken for, does not control its own representation but is represented in accordance with a hegemonic impulse by which it is constructed as a stable and unitary entity' (quoted by E. Said 1993).

Alternative theatre in Manipur is now at the mercy of New Delhi. Severe economic pressure in the domestic economy of groups and individual artists had led to seeking funds from the center, and because of the change in cultural policies to support counter-insurgency, huge largesse in the form of central salary grants are being extended to as many theatre groups as possible since the nineties. Production grants given by the center are now the only means for presentation of plays in local and national festivals. Theatre culture is not able to provide economic benefits nor is able to develop non-economic cultural enterprises aimed at the people's welfare themselves. The more mobile professional courtyard enacted plays (Shumang Leela) are incapable of entering into radical, dialectical modes for understanding social dynamics. Since their existence, patronage by politicians and business classes enforces them to routine re-production of sentimental melodramas for their yearly circuits amidst an entertainment starved clientele. A lot of contemporary issues are highlighted however in these productions, only to be subsumed under the aegis of a statusquoist comprador existence.

Language and Identity in Tripura

Contemporary Tripura provides a peculiar predicament when indigenous cultures and peoples were submerged through sheer forces of history, when war, partition, and huge displacement of populations from the neighbouring regions of a different culture through communal clashes in the India-Pakistan divide resulted in a massive exodus of Hindu Bengali communities who later outnumbered the indigenous owners of the soil. The indigenous peoples led by the Bodo, who in past history ruled and owned vast areas of land and forests in the Eastern Himalayan sub-region later within a few years of modern history became displaced from their own cherished homes. The loss of land and territory left a historical wound in their psyche, which modern progressive and 'enlightened' politics in the principle of numbers had not healed. Some nineteen indigenous communities were now reduced to a minority, being ruled by migrants from outside. Though the progressive Communist Party of India

(Marxist) ruled the state, giving some thirty two per cent share of power to the indigenous peoples, the emotional and psychic divide of the insider and outsider syndrome were enhanced by the cultural fissures in their imaginary attachment to land, territory and home. Memories of a proud socio-culturally fulfilling polity being overwhelmed by cataclysmic events which were not of their own making left a deep imprint on contemporary generations in the minoritized population. The resultant disequilibrium under modern arrangements of power and control over resources organized under modern India's dispensation made the Tripuri people bitterly experience this loss of locality to the outsider. One of the oldest Asiatic polities in South Asia ruled by as many as 184 kings from the Bodo tribe became victim to momentous events – the Naokhali riots of 1946, the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, and the legitimization of transfer of tribal lands to non-tribals in 1974.

Insurgency affected all areas of Northeast discontent. This reemergence of 'tribal militancy' after penetration by modern India's state capitalism however was different in character from the post-World War II emancipatory struggle against feudalism and class, when the great Bodo leader, (earlier mentioned) Dasarath Dev Barma, participated in the armed struggle against monarchy in 1949. Dasarath was sixteen years junior to Hijam Irawat, and his political career as a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) left vital imprints on the changing character of the Northeasterner India's identity struggles in contemporary times. Dasarath as a member of the Communist Party did not accept the new awakening or self-consciousness of the Bodo peoples, with intense and passionate affiliation to recognition of the Kok-borok language, which they wanted to write in the roman script. Dasarath stood against this linguistic nationalism and wanted desperately to use the Bengali script for the expression of Bodo identity within the Communist movement, which his Bengalissssss comrades supported and encouraged. However, his own people disowned him much later (inspite of Chief Ministership of Tripura), through purely ethnic, cultural and political logic which the Marxist movement could not contend. The Bodo language movement, however, was not necessarily co-operative towards the simmering insurgency of two outfits the NLFT and ATTF, who still found it difficult to cope with the vulnerable hilly terrain of Tripura. The intrusion of the cultural element in the location of self and its expression within history therefore varied according to particular historical conditions of the Northeast. This panorama of ethnic arousal in diverse dimensions is something class emancipation philosophy possibly missed in the ethnic maze of the Northeast.

In such dichotomies and contradictions within the purview of 'directed modernity' ushered in by state sponsored nationalist discourse, cultural expressions lend a typical air in the kaleidoscope of ethnicity and colour, for which B.G. Verghese termed the Northeast a Rainbow Country (Verghese 1996). Proper Northeasterner reality then shall have to be re-excavated and retrieved from the subaltern debris submerged through hegemonic national discourse.

A certain Borok language play *Longtoraini Eklobya* which was popular amongst the indigenous Bodos, but which was treated with hostility by the other majority community, the Bengalis in the 90s reminds the author of the subaltern existence seeking natural justice against majoritarian repression. The play by the Bodo author Nandakumar Deb Barma used the mainstream narratives of the Mahabharata for

the indigenous subject's needs, not like Ratan Thiyam who uses indigenous culture to cater to the needs of the metropolitan audience. Nandakumar used the episode of Guru Drona's asking for the thumb of Eklobya to be cut off in order to protect Arjuna and the Aryan race. In a conversation between Bhism and Drona, the former questioned Drona's action and asked him why he was discriminating the imparting of knowledge to his pupils on issues of caste, community and identity. Drona explained that his innate Brahminical sense could estimate the talent, power of the tribal boy Eklobya, who was sure to rise in revolt, as the strongest opponent of Arjuna. So he cut off the thumb of the tribal boy to make easy passage for the continuity of the administration of the ruling dynasty. The acceptance of the hegemon's logic by Bhism himself was the moment for theatrical intervention by the chorus of Bodo boys and girls who performed a folk dance, disagreeing with the verdict, singing the song of the Chethuang tree (chhatim) that wants to touch the sky!

The contemporary linguistic nationalism started by Arindralal Tripura (1921-1997), had given a new sense of direction to the retrieval of the identity of the Bodo peoples, not in terms of 'insurgent' actions like the others in the Tripura hills, but in terms of a sonorous, non-violent, nostalgic and homogenous evocation of the pride, dignity and grace of the Bodo people. Powerful concerts, songs and dances and celebrations as are noticed in cultural events in Agartala are not in the same mould as one notices at Imphal, where one finds too much imitation and reproduction of Mumbai and Bollywood styles. The Bodo cultural awakening is simple, warm, and unadulterated facilitation of the identity of their own indigenous people. The present trend of cultural production does not indicate any pretensions to violent paths in the near future, but certainly touch a warm chord in the hearts of historically displaced peoples, who first attempt to recover their lost land through the imagination.

Notes & References :

1. Paul Brass 1991. *Ethnicity and Nationalism*. Sage Publications, New Delhi. The term 'Bargaining Federalism' was used by Morris Jones in 1964 to describe the Centre-State Relations in India as a form of cooperative federalism. Haqqi and Sharma 1977 describe this as Centralized Federalism also. Morris Jones referred to a pattern of Centre-State relations in which neither Centre nor States can impose decisions on the other.
2. Justice Jeevan Reddy Commission was constituted by the Manmohan Singh Government in the wake of massive anti-AFSPA movement in Manipur after the alleged rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama Devi by Indian Security personnel in July 2004. A delegation of the Apunba Lup who spearheaded the agitation went to New Delhi to talk to the Prime Minister in November 2004. The delegation was led by this author. The Commission was formed to review the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 as a result of this meeting. The Commission submitted its report to the government in June 2005.
3. Sankara Krishna 1999. *Post Colonial Insecurities – India, Sri Lanka and the Question of Nationhood*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
4. Edward W. Said 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, London.
5. Terry Eagleton 1989. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Routledge, London.
6. Anandalal 1995. *RASA*. Padatik Publications, Kolkata.

7. David Howes 2005. *Empire of the Senses*. Berg, USA.
8. Lokendra Arambam, 2004. 'Critical Moment in Manipur's Alternative Theatre'. Paper presented at Adi Rangacharya Centenary seminar, Bangalore, August, 2004.
9. B.G. Verghese 1996. *India's Resurgent Northeast*. Konark Publications, New Delhi.
10. *Lontoraini Eklobya* was written and directed by Nandakumar Deb Barma, now serving as Editor – Debates in the Tripura Assembly. Sampili Theatre Centre is his group.