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## Book Review

<b>Title:</b>	<i>Heisnam Sabitri: The Way of the Thamoï</i>
<b>Author:</b>	H.S. Shivaprakash and Usham Rojio
<b>Publisher:</b>	Niyogi Books
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The annals of Manipuri theatre have had no shortage of its share of enigmatic characters, doyens who disrupt saturated flows and create anew. They become not the builders of world-shifting paradigm; instead, they deny soddy mimicry of their practices and are always on the move, always escaping stasis by becoming carriers of creative potential. Heisnam Kanhailal and Heisanam Sabitri are two such figures.

A lot has been written on Kanhailal's directorial works and their philosophical underpinnings (see Barucha; Kanhailal, eds. and others). Much less can be said about his actor-collaborator and an equal contributor to his theatrical productions as well as being his wife, Heisanam Sabitri. Although when speaking of Kanhailal's theatre, it is impossible to go on without acknowledging Sabitri's presence in all of it. However, this presence is only of an obumbrated nature. This is where Shivaprakash and Rojio's work finds its rationale, a book entirely dedicated to Heisnam Sabitri and her theatrical deeds. However, similarly to Kanhailal's, this book cannot in toto scrub itself of his presence. In their theatre, they are each other's part and soul. If Kanhailal is the mind, Sabitri is the "thamoï" or heart of this theatre.

The book opens with a poem by Shivaprakash which succinctly captures the one hundred seventy-odd pages of the book. The main body of the text is divided into three parts: a short biography of her life and artistic journey, a philosophical exposition on her acting methods and an interview with Sabitri herself. The book closes with a list of her works together with Kanhailal and a series of images depicting her stage life. The one main thrust the book tries to push is that acting is the heart and soul of Sabitri-Kanhailal's theatre. However, this is not an act of the usual imitation and repetition. It is an acting driven by body-breath, and soul-spirit, which at once transforms the actor as well as the audience. In this method, as

Shivaprakash and Rojio argue, acting is governed by three planes – body, breath and spirit. Here the bodily movement of acting depends upon the rhythms of the breath. The coordination of these three planes puts emphasis on the imaginative or psychic aspect of acting much against the dominant methods (Western-inspired), which disproportionately favours the physical aspect. Kanhailal envisaged a new practice of theatre along with its own philosophy and aesthetics, but it was Sabitri who expressed this in the palpable form of acting. It is Sabitri who treads from the virtual to the actual.

Within Sabitri-Kanhailal's spectrum of acting methods, the book draws out another point of interest: Sabitri's child-like approach to acting. This is an approach which plays on the intensification of the imagination. It invokes the "free", "spontaneousness", and "naturalness" of a child's play. As the authors argue, "Because of this principle that Sabitri, a 60-plus actor then, could play the role of Amal, a six-year-old boy." (Shivaprakash & Rojio 32). This doesn't imply that the actor (or Sabitri) imitates the behaviour and cadence of a child. Instead, it implies the taping of the *nung* (inner core) of the self, opening it up and expressing through it, making it flow from the inner to outer expression (*nung pan phaonaba*). A child has no inhibition of channelling the flow of energy from the inside to the outside, unlocking potentials for novel configurations of the multitude of feelings and energies, while an adult's flow is blocked and diverted by social conditionings.

Sabitri conveys this in the interviews while talking about what Kanhailal said to her, "Learn to be a child. Play like an innocent child. There is a *thamoi* (heart). I don't know the size of it, whether it is big or small. There is a *thawai* (soul/life). The actors and audience communicate through the *thamoi*. You, as an actor, can communicate effectively when you open the doors of your *thamoi*...To be able to reach what I say, be like a child. Open all the doors of your *thamoi*." (ibid. 127) To open the doors of your *thamoi*, to be like a child. This conceptual development has philosophical potentialities beyond the stage of the theatre, although the authors didn't pursue it, and understandably so, as they write within a certain boundary. "Be like a child" escapes the cage of boundaries and clearly felt identities which compress, contort and filter out our emotions through the mirror image of the subject and the other. It is to be incorporeal to it and to let our affect and flows become transgressive.

These two interrelated themes emerge as the significant contribution of the book, which has ramifications beyond theatre. The authors manage

to draw a map of the cultural and social geography upon which the Sabitri-Kanhailal's theatre was built upon. For instance, Sabitri's acting method of body-breath-spirit continuum takes inspiration from the rhythmic movement and breath techniques of *Amaibis* (priestess of the native faith), *thang-ta* techniques (the native martial art performed with swords), *wari leeba* culture (a one person, exclusively male, story-telling performance), etc. while the actors training methods accounts from even mundane everyday life practice of an agricultural society. However, it is also in this mapping that the book begins to stand on shaky legs. Sweeping statements gloss over uncertainties. "The body-breath-spirit continuum," they argue, "...is the bedrock of the pantheistic worldview of tribal societies, including the Meitei tradition" (ibid. 30).

It is not known neither explained how this triadic practice is an essence of 'tribal societies.' This is troubling as the anthropological category of tribal still remains a dubious concept. It seems that this uncharacteristic statement from the authors may be an overflow of enthusiasm in their Cartesian posture. In the language of Meitei cosmology, the body occupies a central location. The *Hakchang Saba* performance of Lai Haraoba by *Amaibis* and the fact that phonetic sounds and the script of *Meiteilon* are based on human organs attest to the centrality of the body. This is not to slash and burn the claim of the book but to tease out the multiplicitous and often contradictory nature internal to a worldview or cosmology of any traditions (or that of the Meitei's).

In a brilliant passage, the authors observe that the Sabitri-Kanhailal theatre was the one that could survive only at the margins. "It was marginalised not by choice, but by necessity." (ibid. 20). However, it may also be by choice. Margins are where the seeds of experimentation and transmutations are sown; it's on the lines of boundary, a non-space, where laws begin to break down and creativity governs. Margins gave birth to their theatre and infused it with constant movement.

One such of this movement was the significant shift in the motive of their plays. Earlier, the form and content of their plays were rooted in the local, redeploying folktales in a creative yet bounded manner to speak only of the social and political situation of Manipur. Regarding the character of Houdong Lamboiba in the play *Pebet*, Sabitri says, "Initially, when we conceived the play, it was Shantidash Gosai. Later, we remade the play in a way that every exploited community relates to it. Today, we can read Houdong Lamboiba as one of the bigger outside forces" (ibid. 130). This move is further visible in the 1985 play *Memoirs of Africa*. It is a movement of immanence where the struggles of one's life doesn't lead to reclusiveness but open one to empathise with strangers and heighten the bondedness

brought by a shared struggle. "Though rooted in the grammar of a regional culture, it does not shirk the responsibility to explore the trans-regional continuities" (ibid. 38). It's not 'imperialism for you but not for me', but 'imperialism for no one'. Given the socio-political climate of the time, their theatrical work could have easily slipped into the hellhole of identity politics (or of Meitei nationalism masked as anti-imperialism), but it's its location in the margins which allows it to take flight from it. Thus, the significance of the margin is much more in the Sabitri-Kanhailal's theatre than what the book conveys.

Despite these certain limitations, if it can even be called so, the book achieves much beyond what the authors humbly set out to do. It takes a life of its own and walks its own path. The title bears the name Heisnam Sabitri, but it goes beyond Heisnam Sabitri. The authors do a great service to Kanhailal himself and his works. The book steers far away from restricting his vast corpus of work to a narrative of resistance as the influential Rustom Barucha did. The play *Pebet* has particularly succumbed to this dominant frame of interpretation of a marginal theatre of a marginal community. It is not a theatre of protest and propaganda nor something that pits itself against the apparition of an other. Said otherwise, it's not a theatre of resistance. As the author makes it clear, this theatre was instead the site of possibilities. It's the theatre of possibilities and transformation; it's also the theatre of immanence. In this theatre, Sabitri *acts* its aesthetic and philosophy.

The book, although short in stature, labours an immense contribution to the growing interest in the Sabitri-Kanhailal's form of theatre. As we say in the local vernacular, "*pikcharasu heikhruni!*" (it may be small, but it packs a lot of punch!). For what it lacks in thoroughness and exhaustiveness of description, it makes it up for it plenty in its ability to offer new interpretations. This is the first in the English language academic writing that Sabitri is treated as the main subject. With the recent meiteilon language poetic-biography of Sabitri, *Ima Sabitri: Nongthangleima Langol Langdaibi* by Oja Yumnam Rajendra we are realising the importance of Sabitri in the Indian theatre lore. And this book is a fitting contribution.

**Rajkumar Jackson Singh**