



Reinterpreting Myth and Memory in Alternative Theatre Spaces: A Tale of Heisnam Sabitri and Teejan Bai

Divyangana Mondal

Independent Scholar

Abstract: This paper explores two alternative theatre practices developed by Heisnam Sabitri and Teejan Bai to assess the community memory that resonates through their body and performance. Through critical analysis of Teejan and Sabitri's performance, this research will investigate the questions of cultural identity, autonomy, and socio-communal history. How does an ethnic performer hold assertion over a semiotic space by integrating collective memory in her artistic expression? Given the abundance of spectacle in consumer culture, can ethnic performance create an alternative paradigm by restructuring the nature of spectacle? How do the ethnic performers, Heisnam Sabitri and Teejan Bai, uphold the language of theatre transcending the differences in language and cultures? This study will critically map the configuration of alternative theatre spaces, in Manipur and Chhattisgarh respectively. It will further examine how the two performer-activists, Teejan and Sabitri, use their ethnic subjecthood as the means of liberation and empowerment.

Keywords: Community memory, healing, improvisation, living theatre, spectacle

Theatre of Roots: Indian Theatre in Post-Independence Era

John Berger in the foreword of *Bhimayana* explains, that art needs to get out of the shackles of conventional proscenium type of representation and must be replaced with the history of a community - with its struggles and resistances - to challenge capitalistic authority (10). Although Berger was trying to make his argument on behalf of a graphic novel, I find it completely relevant to other forms of visual representations. The proscenium theatre came to India after the British occupied the subcontinent. Proscenium theatre in India basically started as a colonial practice, in the metropolis centres of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. This was mainly introduced to India for British immigrants who settled here. Eventually, it also reached to English educated Indian audiences, who lived in the colonial cities. Besides, this practice, catered to urban audiences, and was dominated by western traditions. This Eurocentric proscenium theatre is an arch shaped enclosed structure, contrary to the Indian traditional and indigenous folk theatres. Apparently, this colonial practice had a huge polarity both in form and content with traditional theatrical aesthetics of India. During the 1960s in the post-independence period of India, a number of young stage artists emerged; they were willing to counter this colonial enterprise by going back to their cultural traditions. Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, K.N. Panikkar, Girish Karnad, Ratan Thiyam, Mohan Rakesh, Sombhu Mitra and many more names are engraved in this legacy. They integrated their regional art forms, mythologies and folktales in theatre. Moreover, Badal Sircar deconstructed the entire idea of the proscenium arch itself by embracing street theatre which is performed in open spaces. This theatrical revival is often known as the "Theatre of Roots" movement that is constitutive of regional practices, and folklore, rituals - like *Jatra*, *Yakshagana*, *Tamasha*, *Nautanki*, among others. Similarly, Heisnam Kanhailal is another such theatre exponent who took his Manipuri traditions through folk ritual theatre. Sabitri and Kanhailal together built a theatre that exceeded local and global boundaries by going back to ethnic roots. Teejan Bai independently took Pandavani to the world stage. Both the women in their distinct theatrical genres upheld their regional traditions through theatrical representations.



In my critical observation of their performances, I have identified the predominance of the “vertical movement”, within a confined site and space - that intensifies the indigenous theatre narratives in the performative culture. This technique challenges the “horizontal movement” of a mainstream theatre, preserving the autonomy of the alternative, ethnic art medium.

Archetypal Memory Traces in Alternative Theatre through the Art of Two Female Performers

Sabitri and Teejan hail from peripheral parts of India, where women are subjugated and marginalised. Amid the regional tension and gender politics, these two women marked their art not only in the regional but also at a global scale. Manish Mitra writes for Teejan, “In spite of her immense popularity, she always recalls the days of her childhood in the Adivasi belt of Chhattisgarh where the Pardhi community women existed as mere male counterparts whose only identity lay in their reproductive capacity” (30).

On the other hand, Sabitri’s theatrical approach upholds her indigenous Manipuri Tribal culture and its horrors. The body of the artist is the central element in her performances; the same body which has been the object of shame in Manipur. Sabitri turns the body into an active subject of rebellion. Trina Nileena Banerjee writes about Sabitri on the 2001 production of *Draupadi* in the context of enforced bodily shame upon Manipuri women:

It was impossible to effectively distance ourselves from Draupadi the Character’s experience and leave theatre in relative safety, because the real body of Sabitri the Actor stood unmistakably naked before us. Our discomfort and humiliation were no longer once removed from ‘the real’; this rested on our perception of the shame that we were convinced Sabitri the Actor must necessarily be feeling in these circum-stances. Yet, we were forced to witness a willing and acutely painful; performance of the shame. (Banerjee 154)

In Draupadi’s performance, the actor and the victim were no longer separate, Sabitri’s body completely internalised the shame that Manipuri women have suffered for centuries.

The emphasis on “body” is a unique theatre style focusing majorly on the physical movements that has been developed in Kalakshetra Manipur, under the tutelage of Heisnam Kanhailal and Sabitri. Sabitri embodies the collective memory of her *Meitei* culture that is archived in the performer’s body - reflecting *Meitei* rituals, simplicity of ethnic people, communal harmony, and theatre ecology. She preserves the collective memory that is transmitted through her ancestors. This creates a trance (Maibi) element in her performance. One could call this mystic overflow as “catharsis” (Shivaprakash and Rojio 146), which makes the audience aware of the ethnic presence of an indigenous community (Shivaprakash 148). In the words of Kanhailal, “My theatre appeared through the autonomy of the body that speaks and thereby solidifies our social experience in a haunting effect.” (9).

Teejan Bai, on the other hand, inherits the narrative culture of Chhattisgarhi folk tradition. Her enactment consists of her *tambura*, decorated with peacock feathers. In the *Kapalik Pandavani Shaili*, she performs eighteen parvas of the *Mahabharata*. In *Kathagayak*, Teejan enacts the local reinterpretation of stories from *Mahabharata* in a vernacular narrativisation. Thus, Teejan Bai’s art represents the narrative memory of Chhattisgarhi folk culture. As observed by Mitra, “Her stories are interestingly interwoven with colloquial slangs which in a way democratizes the text which once was considered to be the text of the upper class - and this colloquial and rustic use of language invariably makes the performance rooted to the life and sagas of common folks” (Mitra 47).



Heisnam Sabitri has developed a kind of theatre that represents archetypal memory of a living community - archived in a performer's body. She uses her body or "hakchang"¹ to form an intense communication with the spectator. Her style is developed through influence of indigenous practices like *wareeliba*, *thangta*, *maibi* cult of the Meitei community of Manipur (Shivaprakash and Rojio 126).

The Theatre of Kanhailal

"In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation." (Debord 2). Manipuri theatre, under the tutelage of Kanhailal and Sabitri Heisnam, has created a theatrical space that critiques the commodified nature of spectatorship. It does not rigidly follow the doctrines of the overtly political propagandist theatre like that of Safdar Hashmi or Badal Sircar, or Augusto Boal, to mobilise a mass audience. It is an overlapping paradigm between rough and immediate theatre that Peter Brook refers to in his book, *The Empty Space*. Their theatre implicitly bears political overtones to mobilise the mass into active viewer-participants. Kanhailal and his troupe use the mainstream proscenium as a site to critique commercial nature of theatre practices. The contemporary political overtones are interwoven in the plots of their plays, but the form of the theatre aesthetically challenges the conventional ways of seeing. Kalakshetra Manipur creates a different type of spectacle through the body of the performer that ruptures the enchantment of a commercial spectacle. The body of the performer can turn the empty stage into a living spectacle, that is free from ornamentation of external props or instruments, similar to the tradition of Grotowski's poor theatre. The body transforms into a space in itself and connects series of communicative threads that spread among the audience. They seek a language of theatre that is not restricted by linguistic barriers. As in Rabindranath Tagore's adaptation of *Dakghar*, Kanhailal uses actors from different linguistic backgrounds like Assamese, Bengali, Manipuri to Bodo and Rabha to merge linguistic divisions and reconstitute cultural identity within the troupe itself (Kanhailal 227).

Heisnam Sabitri and Kalakshetra Manipur: In Search of Ritual Theatre

Adorno explains in *The Culture Industry*:

But if works of art have only intermittently been perceived as such, then mass art has taken that alienation of the masses from art, blindly sustained in life by society, up into the process of production as its presupposition, lives from it and deliberately reproduces it. The work of art becomes its own material and forms the technique of reproduction and presentation, actually a technique for the distribution of a real object. (64)

Interestingly, an alternative theatre emerged alongside this urban paraphernalia. Works of Antonin Artaud and Grotowski resolutely critiqued such spectatorial gaze. It curated a language of theatre that is articulated through the performer's body. A performer can turn the bare stage into a living spectacle. The empty space on a stage can be transformed into the body of the theatre, eventually provoking new ways of seeing.

Bramha Prakash argues in his book *Cultural Labour* in the context of ethnocentric folkloric performances - "Ritual and performance in their affective turn produce corporeal values in the form of impulses, feelings, sensations, and passions. Deeply rooted in the ritualized context, the performance reveals the most vivid exemplification of formation of cultural and aesthetic values in society." (7). Ritual practices



make and transmit cultural values, and create collective impulses, as the critic states. Kalakshetra integrates community rituals, traditional music, folk art, and myths. Sabitri Heisnam's methodology of acting focuses on finding "inner-outer" balance, that she calls "nung-paan" (Shivaprakash and Rojio 117). It is a process of going deeper into one's roots to unearth inner impulses "nungdaphaonaba" (Shivaprakash and Rojio 147). This process creates an encounter with the actor and the spectator, where the inner impulses are evoked, shared, and absorbed actively during the course of the performance that is deeply immersed in the *Meitei* ritual practices.

Sabitri's intense performativity often explores features of a *maibi* (Kanhailal 84-85). In Manipuri culture, *maibi* is a priestess or Shaman who performs mystical religious rites. Sabitri's audience often find a similar trance in her performances. During the cult of Kanglei Thokpa, *maibiis* possessed by Khoriphaba (Kanhailal 84). The entire ritual is an intense exchange of internal resonances. She is not a *maibi*, and does not acquire any prophetic quality – but there is a controlled trance element that overflows from the performer to spectator in her performances. Yet, Sabitri is not possessed by an external force who controls her, rather she is completely in control of her senses (Kanhailal 85). The intense motion in her physical movements originates from her minute observation of bodily experiences and intrinsic relation to her *Meitei* culture and rituals as H.S. Shivaprakash observes (Shivaprakash and Rojio 148). In *Dakghar*, Kanhailal uses a mystical incantation to revive Amal's sleeping body, through hypnotic mimesis (Rojio 171). It is a *maiba* cult called *thawai mi koukhatpa*, mentioned in multiple *Meitei* myths. By using such ritualistic element, Kanhailal has created a healing effect that is intrinsic to *Meitei* community and cathartic to a larger audience (Rojio 171). Sabitri's performance radiates an elemental energy that is vital to Manipuri tribal/ethnic cults. It slowly affects the psyche of the spectator. Kanhailal calls it "haunting effect" or "healing effect" interchangeably (Kanhailal 9-228). By incorporating community practices in her performances, Sabitri recreates cultural memory as part of an alternative performance tradition. The cultural memory, thus, is archived in her own body. "Now she incarnates the spirit of the community in her own being" as Rustom Bharucha observes in context of her performance in *Pebet* (136). Through this alternative form, cultural memory is set free beyond the confinements of a particular regional space integrating communities across, thus building the scope for a universal language of theatre.

Contesting Spectacle

In Kanhailal's *Dakghar* – Sabitri plays a ten-year-old Amal. As Amal, she establishes a fluid communication with the audience that starts sharing Amal's instincts. She is completely uninhibited while playing a little boy in her sixties. She applies her mental, physical and vocal faculties to manifest a healing effect. Sabitri combines fluidity of gestures with dance movements, synchronised songs along with rhythmic verbalisation, screams and silences (Rojio 166-172). The confinement of Amal within a small room with a window opening up to the world, has been reconstructed on a small podium, where Sabitri performs through "vertical movements", evoking the confinement. Audience gets arrested by that vertical sight which influences the audience to observe minute details of the performer's body, rather than just focus on the language of the text.

The spectacle generated here is not to induce pleasure, as often used in commercial theatres, but to confront our ways of seeing, that is constitutive of both remembering and forgetting. The most relevant example comes from Kanhailal's production of *Draupadi*, a dramaturgy based on Mahasweta Devi's short story (Spivak 381-402). Sabitri who plays the rebel protagonist Dopdi Mejhen, undresses herself on stage to contest the nature of male gaze (Mulvey 438-448). Her critique is rather implicit. She latently weaponises her body as a tool of resistance. This is to evoke our memory of the nude protest in Manipur against Armed



Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958, after the brutal rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama in 2004 (Sirur 2021).

Sabitri removes the white cloak from her naked body. Standing fearlessly in bare body, she cries out: “*come on, counter me -?*” This is an epiphanic journey for both the performer and the audience. A world of life in theatre-activism breaks the institution of objectification of body in Indian Stage, intertwined with the cultural history of resistance of Manipur, the ethnic voice through the language of theatre. Stripped to utter vulnerability, Dopdi uses her own vulnerability as strength, transforms the body from a site of oppression to a weapon of resistance. Mahasweta Devi writes: “for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.” (Spivak 402). The Senanayak, a figure of oppressive forces, is taken aback by the sheer ingenuity of the apparatus for resistance. This act of counter militancy is influenced by Charu Majumdar’s praxis on Naxal movement which clearly urges the activists to rise up to the occasion during most vulnerable circumstances. Naxal Movement has been silenced long back, but the praxis carries deeper implications even today. In Kanhailal’s play, Sabitri decides to act deliberately and uses proscenium stage to articulate the nature of trauma caused by justifying violence and subverting the terror through a memory of resistance. This particular aspect of justifying violence over innocent citizens is in direct violation to our Constitution and takes us back to mid-19th century 2nd Fugitive Law (Caldwell 2024). This particular law imposed in 1850 in America considers the body of a slave as an object of possession for the master and anyone who “conspires” to liberate one’s own self from the terrorising clutches of the master is seen as a criminal, and corporal punishment is bestowed upon them. Since it was sanctioned by law, the federal agents had the law to support and legalise their violence upon any fugitive or conspirators. The slaves had no agency of their own. The wound of the trauma that emerges out of this law is still fresh in many Afro-American writings; Tony Morrison’s *Beloved* bears testimony to the fact. Our world has progressed radically in the last one and half century, yet such imposition on common lives raises multiple questions that still remain unanswered. In the context of the paper, Sabitri’s resilience to confront the supposed progressive audience with these perennial questions could be explored. The very moment of the rupture (in the text, and for the spectator) merges performer-activist Sabitri with Devi’s character Dopdi. Sabitri’s act not only establishes autonomy over *body* or “*hakchang*” but also takes the audience to Manipur’s historical trajectory of oppression and resistance. Sabitri’s intervention breaks down the disturbing chain of body-as-object-on-stage to a more empowering body-as-a-pertinent-question-on-stage. This moment of intersection between stage and real-life praxis is the core of this current research.

Kanhailal states the primary objective in context of *Dakghar*:

The sensible audience does not perceive my theatre as ‘public exhibition’ but as an experience of the theatre of catharsis that does not lie in its message, in educating the people, in creating amazement and so on. Where Tagore transcends conventional literature, I succeed in overcoming the challenge of ‘how to see theatre’. (Kanhailal and Das 230).

The objective of Kalakshetra is to open up more queries through the space of theatre, persistently critiquing the methods of production of theatre and as its perception, thereby configuring an alternative paradigm.

Art as a Reflection of Life

It is inspiring to see how in 2004, after four years of Sabitri’s performance of *Draupadi*, twelve Imas came out in naked march in front of Kangla Fort holding banners painted red with slogans: “Indian Army Rape Us”, “Indian Army Take Our Flesh”; to protest against the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama by Indian Army. She was severely shot in her sexual organs after being raped (Sirur 2021). In Amar



Kanwar's documentary Sabitri describes, she cried that day! Though, the Imas reported they didn't know about Sabitri's performance of *Draupadi* at that time (which was mostly in protest of rape of Ahanjaobi, the first reported case of rape by the army), but it is true that art and life follow each other. After the protest of Imas, people started calling Kanhailal *Chingngu* (Shivaprakash and Rojio 77-79), who could foresee the future. Sabitri's nude protest on the stage was not commercialisation of art, as many people criticized it to be, at the time. Rather, it was resistance against the brutality that was choking the Manipuri community every day. Sabitri's art transcends from theory to praxis. She makes her nude body the medium of revolt, which makes the predators sense the reverse horror. Through her body, she overturns the power dynamics. Sabitri makes her art the medium of resistance which represents the sufferings and traumas of her indigenous society. Thus, it is apt to assert that Sabitri, through her artistic intervention has produced an alternative form of Indian theatre. This alternative theatre practice not only provides a space for indigenous communities, but it also drifts away from the rising commercialisation of contemporary urban theatre.

Sabitri's living theatre presents a theatrical language of its own. Sabitri establishes a fluid communication with the spectator through her body dynamics, and minimal usage of spoken language. This makes her performances globally more acceptable, as it is not confined to any particular linguistic form. It further helps Kalakshetra in portraying indigenous struggles and resistance in front of a more dynamic audience. The epiphanic moment between the performer and the spectator creates a unique aesthetic language by itself. The community theatre is enacted in its regional languages, without any translation. They try to communicate through the body of the performer, incorporating certain sounds and words, that preserves authenticity of the performance. Simultaneously, they are also aware of not imposing any obstacle due to the language barriers. This unique language of theatre forces the audience to rethink the Indian stage. This provocation of thought counters the sublime spectacle of the commercial visual art. It triggers questions about the psyche of spectators, who are otherwise passive onlookers of spectacles. Therefore, it is a moment of illumination for the cultural history of Indian theatre art forms. It takes us back to Charu Majumdar's core objective of Naxal praxis for immediate change. Sabitri-Kanhailal's theatre continues to carry this notion of change through artistic intervention on stage. However, it remains challenging to break communal binaries through art in the north-east, a region which has such diverse ethnicity. It becomes more difficult, especially in the case of such a turbulent state like Manipur. Hence, Kalakshetra's persistent negotiations would continue to find newer forms of art and activism. Eventually, it is plausible to influence more methods of representation. These negotiations would inevitably provoke newer ideas and methodology in academic discourses as well.

Teejan Bai, Pandavani: Revision of Canon

Performance cultures have often been the prerogative of male folks. When Teejan Bai entered into the performance culture of *Pandavani*, women were completely forbidden from participation. She was born in northern Bhilai, into a Pardhi community of hunter tribes. In her community, a woman's attachment towards performance culture was perceived as a matter of shame and hence she was initially outcasted (Singh 56-62). Nevertheless, she introduced a paradigm for female performers that challenges androcentric notion of Pandavani, thereby revising the canon. Anita Singh states:

As the performance unfolds, with her boisterous and overpowering voice and her tribal identity, she shuttles in the stage space, making free use of it as she plays her tamboora, sings, dances, delivers dialogue and, in between, comes forward to communicate with the audience and then moves back to interact with her accompanists. The theatricality of her performance, her own inimitable style, her



large presence – she is a tall and well-built woman – and her uninhibited movements on stage render her presence even larger and more powerful. (64-65)

Her vertical presence on stage creates a spectacle in itself through an evocative journey for both the performer and the spectator often breaking the fourth wall and addressing the audience, as an integral part of her improvised text.

Pandavani is a musical ballad that involves storytelling from *Mahabharata*, usually associated with Pardhan Gond tribe of Chhattisgarh. Teejan Bai has pioneered *Kapalikpandavanishaili* which is considered to be the vulgarised version, in contrast to *Vedamatishaili* that follows the tradition of Vedas. *Kapalik* style is unscripted, raw, and vernacular performed through memorisation or *smriti* (Singh 75). It is closer to indigenous myths, legends, tribal oral traditions, and folk music (Singh 49-52). She takes reference points from Sabal Singh Chauhan's *Awadhi* version of *Mahabharata* (Singh 51), and primarily focuses on oral traditions. Her autonomy over the already established popular narrative provides her the authorial agency to reintegrate a text for her audience, thus producing a text in the process.

Recreating Cultural Memory

It is Teejan's improvised live inputs on stage, both in form and in content, that create variations in her performances in either proscenium stage or in the dynamic open stage. A striking example perhaps is Draupadi's *Cheer-Haran* episode performed with different intensity, in front of Kolkata's small-scale elite audience (in 2019), compared to a dynamic audience in Varanasi's *Assi Ghat* (in 2018), (Singh 63). She can instantly adapt according to situational demands and improvise on stage by understanding the pulse of her audience. As Draupadi, Teejan resists the narrative of female shame and uses rhetoric that questions the male agency in power. In the episode when Draupadi is dragged to the assembly, confronting humiliation, while Dushasana is trying to strip her – the men in the assembly watch silently. Teejan contrasts a momentary silence with a rhetoric: "Yahan koi kuchnahikahnevala?" - "Aapbhinahibologe?" - "Koi kuchnahibolega?" ["Is no one going to say anything here?" – "You won't speak either?" – "No one will say anything?"] (Singh 66). Similarly, she subtly brings an intervention through Rukhmani into the context when Draupadi calls Krishna for help, saying "Jaldi ja jaldi ja aur Draupadi ki laj bacha, aajdraupadi ki lajnahibacchitohsoch le ki bharat ki nari ki lajbachna bahut mushkilhai" ["Go quickly, go quickly and save Draupadi's honour. If Draupadi's honour cannot be saved today, then remember – protecting the honour of the women of India will become very difficult."] (Singh 66). She breaks the fourth wall to directly launch the pertinent yet perturbing queries for her audience. Teejan intervenes into the popular memory through improvisatory method and creates rupture in the conventional understanding of the canon. Her performances are intrinsically based on oral performance culture, which allows her space for creative improvisations, thereby reconstituting cultural memory.

Towards a Language of Living Theatre

Teejan Bai's performance becomes expansive to the global audience, despite being strictly bound to the Chhattisgarhi dialect. She uses fixed vertical movements in her performances with a limited use of horizontal movements, that transfers the attention of the audience to the approach of the narrative rather than the language of narration. Similar to Sabitri Heisnam, it is her evocative presence that establishes communication with different audience base irrespective of linguistic differences. Through the layers of vertical movement, both Teejan and Sabitri have created alternative paradigms of theatre practice, that contest spectacle bound perspective of commercial theatre. This vertical movement enhances the spectacle



where the gazes are arrested within a limited space. This does not imply that the audience does not have liberty to experience the whole stage.

Both, Sabitri Heisnam and Teejan Bai, through their distinct performative genres create a language of theatre that is not restricted to mere words or linguistic differences. Their theatrical impact is experienced through non-verbal forms, consisting physical, vocal and mental faculties. Sabitri uses fluid bodily movements, gestures, voices, tones and silences to communicate with the audience. On the other hand, Teejan's empowering tribal presence speaks for itself. There is an inherent simplicity in Teejan's performances that establishes communication with the spectator. Their alternative theatre form takes one beyond the linguistic confinements, reconstituting the gazes through rooted vertical presence on stage, thereby creating a universal language of "living theatre". Each performance demands an active participation and provides a "healing effect" for the audience who are transposed into an evocative journey of critical thinking.

The Transgressive Draupadi: An Iconographic Representation

Draupadi's presence is inevitable to the diegetic space formulating the *Mahabharata*. Draupadi not only disrupts *dharma*, she also reinstates her own authority by asserting it, where she affirmed her autonomy by asking a pertinent question, when put on stake (cf. Game of dice). Draupadi, born as a transgressive woman and yet asserting her autonomy over her own body and mind provides her the freedom to reintegrate *dharma*.

Teejan Bai's narrativisation of Draupadi asserts her own authority as means of a performer and revisits the question of docility surrounding women in general. Teejan states, "Mahabharata is not another separate story. It is all related to our life. All that is happening to us has happened in Mahabharata and all that has happened in Mahabharata is happening to us know. It is duty of the artist to look into it with love." (Mitra 44). She questions the limits of patriarchy and its order through her rhetoric. Her improvisation evolves the narrative of Draupadi by incorporating contexts of contemporary times of crises. Thus, she creates a didactic encounter both in form and essence. Teejan Bai's iconography of Draupadi asserts her autonomy as a performer and revises functions of patriarchy by reinstating various forms of lapses across societies. She takes part in a form of popular culture to create the spectacle of empowerment, while subverting the very forms of patriarchy that pertains in the arena representation.

Sabitri's *Draupadi*, is based on the adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's figure of the oppressed - Dopdi Mejhen. An Adivasi woman, who is deliberately involved with her political mission. Sabitri's recontextualisation of the tribal narrative of Dopdi, persistently reflects upon the transgressive icon of mythological Draupadi. She is the symbol of common people, vigorously alert, and always subverting the power dynamics of oppression. For Dopdi, retribution is a long road ahead. It is her transgression that provides her the will to find a retribution in the very process of struggle. The body that is itself seen as vulnerable, as a space that could be violated, transforms into a space of resistance. Sabitri uses myth to demystify the figure of Draupadi. Her objective is not essentially didactic. However, the pedagogy of resistance placed symbolically through her performance, creates more resonance without providing a teleological closure to the text of Draupadi (the icon, the epic and the contemporary versions).

The binary icon of Sita and Draupadi, similar to Artemis and Aphrodite in Greek myth, are based on the notion of docile and transgression. Where one is seen as the direct antonym of the other, and within this spectrum of docility and transgression, women are often mapped within societies. The docile are valourised and worshipped (cf. *Devi* by Satyajit Ray or Kannagi in Tamil Epic *Cilappatikaram*) and those who transgress



are seen as threats. (In *Cilappatikaram*, Kannagi was not hailed as a martyr owing to her protest against the king, but deified because of her 'virtue' as a faithful wife.

Both Teejan and Sabitri try to redefine the binary by deflating and asserting more questions within this restricted spectrum. By redefining the space, we become more alert as readers/spectators to rethink the methods through which the generic meanings are produced. Today, when India is shaken up by macabre memories of Nirbhayas and Abhayas, with hope and hopelessness persistently voicing up against injustice - these performances allow us to pursue new meanings and interpretations. In our persistent protests they are brought into dialogue and continue to contest the grand narratives.

Endnotes

¹"Hakchang" is the Meiteilon/Manipuri term for body

²*Draupadi* (1978) is a short story by Mahasweta Devi. Later, it was translated into English Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, with an additional foreword. It depicts a tribal woman's revolt against the exploitation of her community and her eventual rape by the Indian military during the Naxalite revolt. Theatre director Heisnam Kanhailal converted the story into a Meiteilon play, creating an analogy to Manipuri context, first production in 2000. Kanhailal's analogy between *Draupadi* and Manipuri realities is very evident to the audience.

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Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021.

Author Bio: Divyangana Mondal is a researcher and citizen historian whose work explores memory, community narratives, and contemporary performance cultures. She completed her MA from Lady Brabourne College, where she developed a deep interest in visual ethnography and community-based knowledge production. As a Citizen Historian with the 1947 Partition Archive, her oral history contributions are housed in the Stanford University Library. Divyangana is a faculty member at the Centre for Corporate and Career Advancement (CCCA), Sister Nivedita University. Her academic and training practice focuses on communication, soft skills, and interdisciplinary learning, while her research continues to engage with community theatre, women's experimental performance in India, and memory archives.