

Mediating Resilience through Folk Ecology: *To Poydom* as a Rabha Drama

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Abstract

This paper centres around the intersection of folk ecology and community resilience in *To Poydom*, a theatre production of Badungduppa Kalakendra, a Rabha theatre group in Goalpara, Assam. It primarily argues that the ecological narrative and setting of a folktale may be posed as instrumental in mediating peace, resilience, and environmental sustainability in the contemporary context of ecoprecarity, exactly what this Rabha play does in the contexts of political unrest and ecological intolerance in the Rabha tribal village of Rampur.

The indigenous cosmovision of the Rabha tribe, a marginalised tribal community of the Indo-Mongoloid origin, is manifested in rituals and customs that centre around Sal forest which provides the community with ecological and spiritual sustenance. This Animist cosmovision is embodied in the worship of forest-deities, often accompanied by prayers, traditional offerings, and ritual performances directed towards various purposes — in all of which the forest plays an integral role. However, the forest ecosystem has been threatened by massive deforestation that followed the infrastructure developments and rubber plantation in colonial and post-Independence India, in which desacralisation of the forest has been a policy. As a result, the more-than-human inhabitants and the ecological-spiritual lifeways of the community were endangered. In turn, the Rabha people have strived to protect them by including the forest ecology in the text and context of their performance by foregrounding their tribal myths, folk narratives, and indigenous lifeways.

To Poydom is one of Badungduppa's most defining productions, incorporating a simple Rabha folktale of a mother bird teaching her children to remain united against all forms of external oppression, extending it to dramatise resilience, care, and environmental sustainability amidst the insurgency movements and ecological devastations in their tribal community in Assam.

Keywords: folk ecology, indigeneity, community resilience, environmental sustainability, ecodrama

Introduction

Sukracharjya Rabha and his theatre group Badungduppa Kalakendra's theatre practice in the Sal forest of Goalpara in Rampur, Assam evince from their Rabha tribal community's material-ecological-spiritual dependence on the forest ecosystem. The Rabha village of Rampur, where the theatre group functions with members exclusively from the local Rabha community—a marginalised tribal community of the Indo-Mongoloid origin, considers the forest an integral part of its community life. The Animist cosmivision of the community is embodied in the worship of forest-deities, often accompanied by prayers, traditional offerings, and ritual performances directed towards various purposes— in all of which the forest plays an integral role. The Sal forest is at the centre of the tribal community's religious festivals, prayers, offerings, spiritual lifeways, folk narratives, and daily material existence, which determine the community's material-ecological-spiritual lifeways. Rabha community's cohabitation with forest ecology is in line with almost hundred other indigenous/local tribes' nature-culture cohabitation with natural resources in Northeast India.

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Conflicts faced by the Rabha community

Northeast India constitutes “64 % of the total geographical area under forest cover,” which has been subjected to a massive depletion (Singha 77). According to Singha, there “has been a decrease of about 1800 sq.km. in the forest cover between 1991 and 1999” (77). Right from the colonial times, Northeast has suffered extreme level of felling, until that was legally banned by the Supreme Court in 1995. In 2003, Assam had “24.04 % forest cover out of its total geographical area of 78,438 sq.km” (77). Among the monoculture plantations, Assam has a vast scale of Sal and rubber plantations. Whereas the rubber plantation is economically more profitable than the Sal plantation, it is environmentally degradable and hence, it is at the centre of the environmental conflict in Assam, especially at Rampur where I conducted my fieldwork in

January 2022. In Rampur, as the Rabha people struggle to protect the Sal forest with which they are historically and mythologically connected, the rubber plantation in the locality continues to create an environmental imbalance. For the community's cohabitation with Sal forest and dependence on forest resources for daily subsistence, they may be called what Madhav Gadgil (2016) terms as ecosystems people. The tribal community's nature culture entanglement has been continuously challenged under "developmental projects, such as building dams or creating industrial belts" and their "access to the forests and water bodies that they are dependent on are threatened" (Bora 502). They are also "susceptible not only to lose their rights of access to the land they occupy but also have limited and marked boundaries allotted to them, in which they have to struggle for their very existence" (502). These environmental challenges that the community has been facing over the years are not a standalone case; it is apparent in many other marginalized communities in the country as well.

In a caste-driven social structure in Hindu-majority India, the Rabhas, through a process of Hinduisation, are included in the Scheduled Tribe section which happens to be the lowest strata of the Hindu caste structure. The socio-political conflicts in the Rabha community in terms of survival only represent the plights of other tribal communities under the mainstream upper-caste cultures across India. Sukracharjya shares how he was always humiliated in his school because of his tribal identity. Some of the traditional recipes of the Rabhas include food preparations such as *Bangkhong* meaning flies or *Bodreng* meaning insects. In school, the students from non-tribal privileged families would insult him by calling him "Bodrengkhowa Rabha" meaning "Rabha the insect eaters" (Baruah 99). Even as a child, he took the insults to his culture with bitterness as he always had a deep love for his community—its food habits, lifestyles, cultures—everything. The Aryan vs. non-Aryan conflict that is at the centre of all socio-economic-political conflicts/hierarchies in India, with its fostering of an oppressive social framework, was something that perplexed and engulfed his upbringing too. However, with time, he started appreciating his own culture and felt the need to be rooted in that, especially through his theatre practice. It was the same with his guru Heisnam Kanhailal as well, who all throughout his life bore tremendous bitterness towards the Aryans for creating this divide. The central question of identity conflicts and attempts to rejuvenate the indigenous identity, which we find in Kanhailal's theatre productions, also got into Sukracharjya's theatre practice and gradually became his central concern. By grounding his theatre in the cultural traditions, rituals, folktales, and customs of his own community, Sukracharjya not only wanted to protect his own cultural heritage but also to deliberately promote that to the world.

The socio-political marginalisation of his community and the overall political anxiety in North-east India had a deep impact upon Sukracharjya and shaped his theatre practice. Independence from the British turned out to be more disastrous for the Northeast as the mainlanders or those in power at the centre started

considering the Northeast as conflict zones. Sukracharjya observes that “Assam and even the entire Northeast had to go through that pain. Conflicts always occur between the marginal and muscular sections... This binary position can be framed in a definition and also translate the same for a performance, but one has to be a responsible flag bearer” (79). By taking recourse to the form of theatre to channelise his political discontents, Sukracharjya became that “flag bearer” in the context of Rabha community in Assam, who faithfully represented various forms of its exploitations through theatrical productions. In fact, theatre became a medium of non-violent resistance for Sukracharjya also a tool for social work, especially to motivate the youth of his community to find a creative form of resistance and voice. In his own words, his theatre is all about “how to use theatre as a tool for social change” (299).

Therefore, the theatre practice of Badungduppa Kalakendra is inherently a community exercise, reflecting the lifeways of the Rabha community they belong to, especially the rituals and folk traditions. The group was primarily formed to provide the community a creative recreation and more importantly, to unite the community that is otherwise culturally, economically, linguistically, and politically marginalised by the mainstream Assamese culture. As with other tribal communities in India, the socio-cultural identity of the Rabha tribe has always been marginalised, especially in terms of getting schemes, opportunities, and attention from the non-tribal majorities in Assam as well as in India. As the mainstream Assamese culture still looks down upon the tribal lifeways of the community, it has come to the fore of the cultural identity of the country with Badungduppa’s theatre practice. The theatre group, with its persistent theatrical engagements, has not only secured a cultural identity in the country, but also has given a voice and identity to approximately seven lakh Rabha tribal population in the country. It may be reiterated that Sukracharjya’s idea of uniting the Rabha community through theatre practice in the Sal forest was necessitated by the threat of imminent deforestation and transformation of the area to a more profitable rubber plantation area. His struggles to develop resilience among the community by dramatizing its rich folk and performance traditions, therefore, served him a twofold purpose— one, to save the Sal forest from deforestation and two, to unite the community through a cultural medium.

Community resilience through theatre

As the Rabha tradition is the foundation of Badungduppa’s theatrical identity, their attempt has always remained to rejuvenate the folk traditions and rituals to protect their cultural identity. While writing a memorial note on Sukracharjya after his demise in 2018, Manabendra Sarma talks about Sukracharjya’s “awareness and responsiveness to his immediate surroundings” and an “artistic response to complex emotional influences and the overall sensitivity of his art” (“From Consciousness” 54). Sukracharjya’s response to his own cultural roots can be seen through his centring all his theatrical exercises around the Rabha community he belonged to. His naming of the group as Badungduppa after an

ethnic musical instrument made of bamboo is also in line with his rootedness in his community tradition. The group's name, as Subodh Patnaik writes, at once connects Sukracharjya's theatre to an indigenous tradition of his own culture (Patnaik 20), thereby signifying his always already rootedness in his own cultural tradition and community customs. Sukracharjya contends:

Badungduppa's attempt is to inherit, interpret, and evolve through immediate context, mother nature and village life. We are trying to hear our own voices and perform our rhythm. Rooted in our own tradition, we are trying to reflect on our own lives through theatre...The performances, we created is just reflection of the own *Rabha* community. (quoted in Baruah 152)

Reflecting on his own community life in his theatre practice, therefore, essentially indigenises Badungduppa's theatre practice. It is how he has made his theatre deeply rooted in his indigenous community, reflecting its cultures and traditions, and presenting them with a theatrical mould to the world. The predominance of nature in tribal lifestyle is also authentically reflected in Sukracharjya's choice of Sal forest as the venue for the theatre festival as well as the centre for their practice.

Sukracharjya's efforts in preparing his local community to engage with theatre practice are exemplary as he had been able to successfully develop an acquired taste for theatre among his villagers. This was something he consciously did to unite the community against various forms of cultural and political marginalisation. In his opinion, involving the villagers in his theatre movement is a long process and requires conscious efforts to make them accept the nuances of theatre arts. Sukracharjya comments that "we need to prepare audience first... We want to teach them timeliness and discipline, which is ideal for any theatre activists. We need audience, who are conscious, disciplined and ever ready" (145). Noted theatre practitioner Probir Guha narrates his experience of performing in front of a packed audience at the festival in 2016: "Presence of such a huge crowd in a winter morning at a remote village was a novel experience for me.... Women along with men, leaving all domestic job and carrying the babies even turned up right at the early morning" (Guha17-18). Bangladeshi theatre director Shuvashis Sinha recalls the engagement of the nondescript Rabha locality as spectators in the festival. Sinha writes: "The people are not only fond of theatre, but they contemplate theatre. They come to watch, walk out silently at the end.... Sukracharjya seemed to have built a heritage of modern theatre in such a remote lonely village in majestic serenity" (Sinha 74). It may be worth mentioning that in a village where a tribal community lives through quotidian hardships, theatre seems to be a thing of distant luxury. In Badungduppa's festival, throughout the three days when the plays are performed twice a day, the seating gallery made of bamboo is occupied by some three thousand spectators with others standing through the performance. The greatest number of attendances of course comes from the local villagers who can connect

with non-Rabha performances which are a majority in the festival, as performers from all over the country and abroad come for performing in the festival. The large scale of his theatre festival with all the thatched tents for guests and aesthetic arrangements are achieved only through the involvement of the villagers, to whom the festival is a kind of a community festival. The community not only engages in the process of organising the festival but also constitutes the majority of the audience with a developed taste for theatre which Sukracharjya could create over time.

Sukracharjya's theatre practice involving his community or taking theatre as a mode of movement to stand by his community is a grassroots theatre movement rarely found in India. His is a very different kind of theatre activism that involved his own rural community in producing a theatre activity that could, in turn, save the community. In Shivaprakash's words, Sukracharjya's "achievements in the last decade have been phenomenal... [he could] convert a tiny village in Assam into an important site for developing a regional theatre culture that could meet both national and international theatre cultures head on" (quoted in Baruah 86). Shivaprakash appreciates the way Sukracharjya carried "a full-fledged theatre movement in a community with no precedence of theatre" (86). In fact, the way Sukracharjya initiated and then blossomed a theatre culture in a nondescript village like Rampur is exceptional and certainly a result of his exceptional hard work and perseverance. He had the talent and capacity to see his guru Kanhailal's teachings into realisation. As Sukracharjya's primary intention was to uplift the status of his Rabha tribal community, his theatre became an all-inclusive tribal theatre group that had actors, musicians, musical elements, and performance elements all belonging to the tradition of the Rabha tribal community. As Sarma writes, Sukracharjya's theatre has become "a vehicle to promote and a means of creating awareness regarding the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Rabhas and other ethnic communities of the Northeast" ("In Search of" 82).

In his words, Sukracharjya celebrates "traditions and rituals" in their theatre (Baruah 214). Even though his group has staged folk themes, that have been presented in a "refined and dramatized form," and not imitating an existing folk performance on stage (214). Badungduppa professedly celebrates "ritualism" in their theatre practice. Even though they perform primarily folk stories culled from their indigenous narratives, which are centred around their ethnic community existence, their performance is refined, experimental, and aesthetically designed to fit into the level of modern experimental theatre. Sarma contends that the idea of organising a festival in the open Sal forest "lies in *Nature Lore*, a collaborative project of Badungduppa Kalakendra and Kalakshetra Manipur... [with an] objective...to bring theatre closer to nature and to explore the ritualistic dimension of folk performances" ("In Search of" 83). Kanhailal first found the forest as a place for performance and performed *Macbeth*, following which, the forest came to be known as Macbeth jungle or Macbeth forest, a phrase that was first used by HS Shivaprakash. The forest was

converted to a performance arena without disturbing its sanctity or violating its greenery. No trees were harmed in the process of the shift. About the sustainable arrangement of the festival, Sarma writes:

The performance space for the festival amidst a Sal tree forest is prepared without cutting down a single tree. All the performers take place in an environment that is free from noise... The backdrop is created by erecting thatched walls supporting the Sal trees and the gallery for the audience is constructed using locally available bamboo and betel-nut trees. The plays are performed in a soothing and grasping silence under the trees. ("In Search of" 83)

Sukracharjya was opposed to the idea of modernisation that comes at the cost of destructing nature. He was opposed to the notion of "breaking the laws of nature as the first step towards modernization" and therefore, resisted such approach to modernisation (Baruah 414). He had deep faith in and reliance upon nature and submitted to nature in a spiritual admiration. His theatre practice amidst Sal forest or cocreating his performance with the active involvement of nature was a step towards this realisation that nature cannot be excluded or undermined from one's progress towards modernity. In fact, his is a modern theatre practice with a different methodology that includes nature, indigeneity, and experiments with sound, body, and space. His simple yet profound realisation that man is "not above nature" constitutes his philosophy and shapes his theatre practices. This was not just facilitated by performing amidst nature but by incorporating nature in the creative process of his group's performance. More importantly, the predominance of the natural environment in the Rabha community life and its rituals and folk traditions are represented in the plays of Badungduppa Kalakendra with an attempt to build resilience and develop narratives of environmental care and sustenance.

To Poydom

To Poydom is one of Badungduppa's most defining productions, incorporating a commonly known folktale of a mother bird teaching her children to remain united against all forms of external oppression to build resilience among the Rabha community. Rooted in the Rabha lifeways, the folktale, and subsequently the play, represents the critical conflicts at the levels of politics, environment, and social security that the Rabha community has been historically subjected to. The folktale centres around the story of a mother bird, five child-birds, and a predatory bird named Poydom. Although the elder bird-children are not fond of their youngest sibling and hence, ill-treat him in every possible way, the mother bird is fond of him because of his loyalty and good nature. One day, as the mother bird was "plucking mustard leaf at the kitchen garden, Poydom bird pooped on the leaf" (Baruah 160), which she washed neatly and on which she served food to her children. Interestingly, the elder bird-children found their food very tasty and thought that "if Poydom's dung can be so tasty, then the meat

would be even more tasty” (160), which eventually made them greedy for the meat of the huge and powerful Poydom bird. Typically, the mother was opposed to their decision, and they refused to take their youngest sibling with them in their greedy pursuit. As the elder children did not come back home for days, the mother and the youngest bird-child became worried and the youngest one decided to go to the forest to search for his brothers. As he was “moving around the jungle, one day the younger brother saw some bows and arrows, lying there. Thereafter, when he saw the giant Poydom, he got certain that his brothers were being gulped by this bird. Younger one fought with the bird bravely and killed with great difficulty. Thus, he saved his brothers’ lives” (161). However, instead of being grateful, the elder bird-children felt embarrassed about their situation and decided to kill their saviour—their youngest sibling. They left their brother unconscious in the forest and came back home telling their mother that they did not come across their brother, and that it was they who killed the Poydom bird. After a few days, the youngest bird-child came back home, “but without revealing anything about his brothers’ deeds, he started living peacefully” (162). In the play, however, the youngest sibling kills the elder ones, saying that those “who do not understand from mistakes and repeatedly commits the same mistake, their death will be good for the region and its people” (177).

In the form of an allegorical folk drama, Sukracharjya conveys a message of unity to his community members. By projecting Assam/Rabha community as the mother bird, he wanted to project that conflicts among the community would inevitably bring disasters. This was a folk story that helped him address various forms of socio-political conflicts going on in the community and the state. With a simple story of birds, which is commonly known to the members of his Rabha community, he addressed the conflicts in his community/state concerning greed, overambition, hatred, and jealousy, and also helped him promote values such as companionship, love, togetherness, sympathy, bravery, and honesty. The setting of the play in a natural environment and using the more-than-humans as characters to represent a narrative of resistance and resilience, establish the play as an important text about the Rabha community’s struggles to remain united and protected against various forms of its marginalisation. As the play ends, the Sutradhar (anchor) appears and tells the audience:

No one knows almighty’s wish
A family has been shattered in an instant work
Even a society can be diminished, like the way it is
A community can also be ruined, in an instant twist
Will lose the region and the lands
Whom to be blamed, who should be blamed
Outsider or us
Think just once. (Baruah 178)

The coming back of the Sutradhar at the end of the performance to convey the moral teaching of the story is a tradition that is found in some of the regional

theatre forms. Sukracharjya's use of this form to address the audience which mostly constitutes the members of his community comes with a greater aim to reach out to his community with a lesson that they must be united, and they must share camaraderie so that the community remains protected and connected. The ecological essence of the play lies in its community-centredness, especially in its attempt to address the conflicts in his indigenous community through an ecological story. The intersections of ecology, birds, folktale, and the narratives of community conflict and resilience make the play an important specimen of an ecodrama that also attempts to disseminate the ecological knowledge of environmental care and sustainability through ecological embeddedness.

Conclusion

Sukracharjya Rabha's use of folk ecology to develop a narrative of environmental care, resilience, and sustainability is cemented through the use of indigenous ecological and cultural expressions, natural performance space, and green dramaturgy. It not only helped him spread resilience in his community but also helped him promote environmental awareness by developing ecological embeddedness among the non-Rabha spectators. His taking recourse to Sal forest for creative impetus as well as the venue for his theatre festival was a deliberate attempt to protect the forest from deforestation, making him the most notable ecotheatre activist in Assam. Unexaggerated performance devising in the midst of Sal forest is the key to Sukracharjya's approach to environmental sustainability. But more than that, it was a necessary approach for him to unite his community and to represent the ecospiritual essence of his community life. Badungduppa's performance mechanism, as well as the arrangements of the festival, very unique no doubt in terms of its ecological grandeur, becomes a symbol of his community life and cultural warmth. Sukracharjya's success in uniting his community through theatre practice is, therefore, a remarkable social movement that he undertook and accomplished to a great extent. The dramatisation of community rituals and folk narratives, besides the predominant use of performance elements belonging to the Rabha community, also helped him achieve a profound community goal—to build resilience among the community against the forms of political, cultural, and environmental oppression. By using the Sal forest as a cocreator and actant in his performance practice and highlighting its importance in the community lifeways, Sukracharjya also protected the ecosystem from being perished under the capitalist forces—establishing himself as an eco-warrior in the form of eco-theatre activism.

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