

Performing Sustainability: *Phumdigi Tantha* as Cultural Intervention

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ABSTRACT

Phumdigi Tantha is a dance drama from Manipur in Northeast India. Directed by Wangkhem Lokendrajit Singh, a Sangeet Natak Akademi awardee, the production premiered at the Chorus Repertory Theatre, Imphal, on 20 April 2018. The name, *Phumdigi Tantha*, combines phumdi (floating biomass of soil, vegetation, and organic matter unique to Loktak Lake) with tantha (a narrative, tale, or drama in Manipuri usage). This dance drama re-imagines indigenous narratives within a contemporary theatrical framework. It draws significantly on mythic motifs of water goddesses, folklore, and community life to depict the ecological crisis affecting Loktak Lake. While dance drama itself is a modern art form, its creative strength lies in how it mobilizes traditional idioms, cultural myths, and ritual resonances to interrogate present realities. This raises a critical inquiry: *In what ways can culturally rooted performance practices be reimagined to generate ecological consciousness in the face of the ecological disruptions of modernity?*

Keywords: Manipuri theatre, Phumdigi Tantha, Ecological Crisis, Loktak Lake, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Manipur is one of the northeast states of India. It is especially noted for its freshwater lake called Loktak Lake. This Lake is in the southern part of Manipur in the district of Moirang. It is the home to the endangered brow-antlered deer, locally known as Sangai. Loktak Lake has *phumdis* or the floating biomass. Interestingly, phumdis are unique. They are not found elsewhere. Only in Manipur, these naturally growing phumdis are seen in Loktak Lake. The phumdis cover almost half of Loktak Lake and provide a natural habitat to Sangai deer.

Both Loktak Lake and Sangai deer have been a presence in the myths of Manipur. The Lake is considered to be the abode of Water Goddess and the bountiful sustenance that people receive from the Lake in the form of fish and others is regarded as the divine grace of the

Goddess. People perform rituals and make offerings to get the divine blessing. Sangai deer is associated with the story of Kadeng Thangjahanba and Tonu Laijinglembi. In the story, Kadeng waits eternally for his beloved Tonu. This has inspired the storytellers of Manipur to relate the eternally waiting of Kadeng with Sangai by calling it “the animal in waiting”. It has become a symbol of love and sacrifice.

The Sangai is often called the “Dancing Deer of Manipur”. The name has come from the graceful movement of the Sangai across the phumdis of Loktak Lake. The deer has to maintain a soft and delicate step while navigating across phumdis because the phumdis are not hard and stable like the ground in the forest areas. At one point, Sangai was thought to be an extinct species but fortunately in the 1950s, it was rediscovered and from then onwards, the conservation and protection of Sangai has been a priority for the people of Manipur. At present, Sangai is the State animal and with Loktak Lake, they have been the insignia of cultural tourism.

Despite the efforts of the government to protect the lake and the deer, there is a lack of awareness among the people, especially the modern generations. They often view the place and the animal with curiosity but without concern. The uniqueness and the beauty of them has collapsed amidst the amnesia of their cultural past and the enforcement of modern life that ignores ecological sensitivity.

Dance Drama of Manipur

It is in this context that the Manipuri dance drama, *Phumdigi Tantha* becomes relevant. The history of dance drama in Manipur can be traced back to the ancient time when the ritual of *Lai Haroaba* was performed for the prosperity of the people and the land. In this ritual, the *maibis* (ritual specialists) enact the creation myths. Later, dance drama is also evident in the *Ras Lila* ritual where the story of Radha-Krishna is enacted by the *Rasdhari*. In modern Manipur, dance drama has shifted from the ritual space to the secular one. It is often associated with theatre personalities like Ratan Thiyam and Rajkumar Singhajit Singh. Dance drama as a genre in modern Manipur has been a vehicle for socio-political issues. It encourages people to reflect about their conditions of living in society. Furthermore, the elements of bodily performances especially dance and song have been a prominent form of expression in cultures of India.

In the West, the Greek philosopher, Aristotle is considered an important figure for the study of theatre because of his detailed analysis of tragedy. In his book, *Poetics*, Aristotle considers spectacle the least important element of tragedy, and song though it contributes to the embellishment, it is not as vital as plot, character, or thought. For that reason, he devoted comparatively little space and discussion to them in the text. According to him, a good dramatist primarily focuses on plot and then pays attention to character and diction. In India, the dramatists have understood the significance of dance, song and the overall

aspect of spectacle. The enduring popularity of dance drama as a genre in theatre is a signpost of this emphasis that Indian cultures have shown for generations.

The rise of the theatre of roots in modern India finds its Manipuri expression in the dance dramas of Ratan Thiyam. Dance drama, as theatre of roots, brings together the tradition and the modern elements in the performances. The dance drama captures the attention of the audience because of this unique blend of the traditional values and modern aspirations. The audience feel connected to the past while moving ahead into the modern world. The question remains, can the knowledge of the past help resolve the problem of the present? The dance dramas of Manipur in the hands of theatre personalities like Ratan Thiyam, Rajkumar Singhajit Singh and Wangkhem Lokendrajit Singh have sought to answer this pertinent question in the most relevant manner – through *tapasya*. The human body is put to the task of constant inquiry for the realisation of the highest Truth.

Phumdigi Tantha

Phumdigi Tantha is a dance drama from Manipur, choreographed and directed by Wangkhem Lokendrajit Singh. It premiered at the Chorus Repertory Theatre in 2018. The title of the dance drama, *Phumdigi Tantha*, translates into the tale, narrative or drama (*tantha*) of the floating biomass (*phumdis*). *Phumdi* represents the ecosystem of Loktak Lake. The dance drama is about Loktak Lake, the *phumdis*, the Sangai and the people of Manipur. *Phumdigi Tantha* opens with a captivating prologue. A familiar sound of bell ringing introduces us to a young boy and we immediately recognise the sound as that of the school bell. The young student *remembers* the words spoken by his teacher. The teacher narrates the beauty of Loktak Lake and draws the attention of the young mind towards it. The scene with the young boy and the teacher emphasises the role and significance of a teacher in the act of learning. A teacher is someone who shapes our perspective of life around us. Interestingly, the thought of Loktak Lake came to the mind of the young student as he is haunted by the differences he sees in front of him regarding the present condition of the lake. There is a gap between what has been described by his teacher and what he has seen of the lake. There is deterioration and destruction of the very beauty that his teacher has exalted in his lecture.

Sacred Geography of Loktak Lake

As the first act begins, Loktak Lake is shown with the seven goddesses – the water spirits. They are the guardian of the lake. They protect and nurture the lake. The mingling of natural (lake) and supernatural (Goddess) is to disrupt the false demarcation that people at present have developed in terms of sacred and secular. In cultures of India, such demarcation is understood as *mythya* – a false illusion. When the veil of ignorance falls and the illusion gets removed, the person comes to face the reality that every place is sacred; every being is sacred. The presence of seven goddesses indicates the sacredness of

the lake itself. These water spirits do not exist solely as separate and independent entities. They are immanent in the lifeworld of the lake. They take the form of birds or fish that are found in the lake. As if by divine grace, the leaves on the lake transform into the unique biomass or the *phumdis* and they float and drift on the surface of the lake. In short, the life processes on the lake seem to be guided by the divine force.

Within the discourse of nature/culture, the human being has put himself at the centre claiming growth and progress to the world. Now, man is the master of nature and the creator of culture. In this dance drama, the actions of the goddesses disrupt the centrality of the human in the processes of nature. Nature responds to larger and complex dimensions and not only the narrow human needs. The human, too full of himself, has become oblivious of this condition.

Legends and Loss

In the second act, the mother of the young boy tells him about Loktak Lake. There is a parallel drawn between the teacher and the mother in these two acts. They are shown as guiding figures of our society. The mother tells her young son about legends and folklore of gods, goddesses and ordinary people associated with the lake. The mother figure is shown as a guardian of traditional truths. She teaches the young ones by sharing these truths. In this way, the young ones are shown the proper way to live with nature. The birds that were once seen in abundance on the lake have disappeared now. The legends and folklores are almost forgotten. In *Lai Haraoba* ritual, there is an occasion where *Laisna* (the mother figure) tells the *pena sheishak* (the traditional fiddle player) that people have forgotten the names of their fathers and that they should be reminded. She entrusts this task to remind people to *pena sheishak*, who sings songs and tells stories with music.

In modern times, a similar task has come upon those who still carry the traditional truths. They can be the storytellers, the poets and the dramatists. It also means that traditional truths are never *completely* erased from the social memory of the people. In this dance drama, *Phumdigi Tantha*, the school teacher through his academic and traditional knowledge ignites the interest of the young mind and then, the mother expands the interest through her traditional knowledge. The teacher and the mother, as shown in the dance drama, are not echoes from the past but they are lively voices of the present. They belong to the modern time. Nonetheless, the traditional truths are with them. And they passed on their knowledge to the next younger generation.

The Modern Time and the Modern Mind

It should be a matter of concern as to what has been taught to the younger generations at school and at home. These two spaces have been strongly influenced by modern thought that perceives the world and its beings as objects for commercial benefit. Human being is

separated from the world precisely by the rationale that the world is in existence for him and subsequently, any form of exploitation of the world is inherent in the nature of this relation. This way of looking at the world, even if it has come from a particular school of thought, has now become universal owing to the event of colonisation and globalisation.

The modern mind is guided by the principle of profit and many a time, this profit is earned by ignoring the ethical benchmark. A huge support system is built to enhance the modern idea of progress through the development of science and technology. Unfortunately, the field of science and technology comes with a lesser value based critical approach (as in when compared to Humanities). Martha C Nussbaum in her *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* argues that Humanities inculcates critical thinking among students, which in turn helps in developing diverse perspectives, a sense of inclusivity and moral imagination. According to her, philosophy can foster empathy and ethical reflection. Undoubtedly, ethics is an important element of philosophy. Still, there are philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas who argue that the entire Western Philosophy has an egological approach and therefore, it fails to give proper attention to the Other. In short, Levinas claims that Western Philosophy alienates the Other in its engagement with the world.

As such, for long, the exploitation of nature through science and technology in the name of modernity and progress continued in a quick pace without much hindrance from the ethical ground. We do not pause to reflect on what we have done. In fact, we are living in an era defined by the term – “burnout society” – coined by the philosopher Byung-Chul Han to indicate how people of today are obsessed with achievement. They are driven endlessly in the pursuit of maximising productivity. It leads to exhaustion of the mind and erosion of the ability to reflect deeply in a sustained manner.

Timeless Traditional Values

In contrast to the Western Philosophy, the Indian knowledge system has been devoted to the dissolution of the boundary between Self and Other – seeing oneself in the Other. Our ancestors were closer to nature because they were taught that human beings share a similar life force – the *jiva atma* – as others. As such, they approached nature with reverence. When they “used” something from Mother Nature, they exhibited a sense of gratitude and not the ego of exploitation. In fact, this sense of gratitude comes with an understanding that the gift of nature can never be fully appreciated. These timeless traditional values of reverence, gratitude and care have been nurtured within a system of knowledge where practices promote these values and vice versa. For instance, an event is narrated about a king called Luwang Ningthou in the *Lai Haraoba* ritual of Manipur. For the purpose of making a royal boat, a big and beautiful tree is cut down, a ritual is performed before the act of cutting the tree and through this ritual, an expression of gratitude is shown towards

the tree. However, the traditional understanding of the entire event goes even beyond this “expression of gratitude” and a ritual song called *Hiching Hilao* is sung when *Lai Haraoba* is performed as if to remind the people of how the expression of gratitude is not enough; that the expression of gratitude cannot be the closure of the act of “using” the other. One can never fully repay the debt owed towards the other.

The traditional knowledge system has been kept alive by the cultural custodians for generations. Earlier, they were patronised by the royal families and the people. However, the scenario is different at present. Slowly, cultural custodians are dwindling even the *maibis* who are supposedly chosen by deities. In this condition, learning centres – school, college and university – play a significant role in upholding the timeless traditional values. Even family spaces share the role in sustaining these values.

Two Sides of Progress

In modern times, the measurement of growth and progress in a society is done primarily through the scale of scientific advancement. Human beings have finally managed to create “the brave new world” for himself. This new world is apparently the source of his comfort and convenience but unfortunately, the same world turns out to be for himself *alone*. It isolates and alienates him from all others in nature. The migratory birds which frequent the lake have now stopped coming over. Even the local ones, *kakyen* (kite) and *wainu* (heron), are no longer seen in abundance. Such changes have happened due to multiple reasons and the prominent ones among them are climate change and environmental degradation.

A recent report highlights the extreme weather conditions in an unprecedented manner in Manipur. The report also mentioned that the last one decade from 2015 to 2024 had been the warmest on record. The Director, Environment and Climate Change, Dr T. Brajakumar Singh says: “Manipur is among several places around the globe which have seen consistent increase in surface temperature. The State is projected to experience an increase in annual mean temperature above 1.7 degree Celsius by mid 2030s.” (Staff Reporter, 2025)

These changes are not natural rather they are forced ones due to human activities. The large-scale deforestation in both hills and plain has contributed to the climate change in Manipur. Many wetlands (or *pats*) in the plain areas of Manipur have disappeared and only their names as markers of the places have remained, evoking a sense of nostalgia of the bygone days.

Furthermore, there is an upsurge in the mindless pollution of the rivers which then come to the lake bringing along the pollutants in large amounts. People have ceaselessly used and dumped non-biodegradable items without paying attention to the harmful effects. Despite repeated calls for curbing the use of them by the government and other bodies,

people have continued using and misusing them. The irony is that even educated people are involved in the continuation of the environmental degradation. The gift of sciences can also be a curse for humanities if we cease to be critical of what we do and how we do.

The dance drama, *Phumdigi Tantha*, in its third and the final act, employs plastic as a symbol of double-faced science. Plastic is one of the remarkable inventions of human beings. The credit for it goes to the advancement of science. It has become a popular household name. Right from the birth till the last moment of a person, plastics serve his need in many forms. This reveals the stark dependency of human beings on plastic. Unfortunately, plastic is also a significant source of pollution and our mindless use of it has only added the pollution factor. It is clear that we cannot do away with plastic use but what we can do is alter our practices.

It is our traditional knowledge system that can assist in changing our practices for a better sustainable environment. Alienated from nature, man in his isolation fails to comprehend the larger impact of his activities. First and foremost, man has to learn or in fact, re-learn that every being around him is connected in one way or another. Like an intricate structure, when a single building block is removed, the entire edifice collapses. This concept of interconnectedness comes in the profound Vedic concept of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* or the world is one family. Often scholars have seen this concept to efface differences among human beings in terms of caste, class and religion. However, in a deeper sense, it can be extended to indicate that all the species on earth are related as members of a single family. There is a spiritual bonding among all of us.

This idea is reiterated by Rachel Carson in her 1962 text, *Silent Spring*. She writes about ecological interdependence. Her central argument is that no species on earth can be considered in isolation. The fate of even a single species has an impact on the whole system. Our own survival therefore depends upon respecting this interdependence. There will be a fatal ecological collapse if this interdependency is ignored. Overall, she is speaking for an ethical responsibility towards others.

In Search for an Epilogue

Phumdigi Tantha includes an epilogue which instead of closing the drama opens a dialogue about the future of Loktak Lake, Sangai and human beings after all. What will be the destiny of Loktak Lake if humans continue to dump waste into it? A lake where phumdis are gone and overtaken by plastics. Where will the dancing deer, Sangai go? This endangered deer is one among the only three species found in Southeast Asia and the number of them is still very small. The conservation efforts are working hard but if people at large do not understand and participate in sustaining the ecology, it will not be far when Sangai will merely be a symbolic presence. The Manipur government organises the

cultural and tourism event called Sangai Festival every year. Indeed, Sangai represents the culture of Manipur and invites people to come over to Loktak Lake. This invitation is also a reminder for ecological reflection. If only, people could do so besides the merriment of the Sangai Festival.

The dance drama, *Phumdigi Tantha*, has a serious tone. The dance and the song elements in it are solemn without embellishment. All these are meant for the audience to sense the stark realities of what is happening in Loktak Lake. The construction of the dam around the lake has improved the power supply of Manipur and neighbouring States. It has made the lives of people more convenient. The use of plastic too has made our lives more comfortable. But all these at what cost? *Phumdigi Tantha* asks this relevant question.

The remedy for the modern malaise lies within – in self-disciplining. The Indian tradition speaks of *sanyam* which translates as “self-control, restraint, discipline over one’s senses”. *Sanyam* is achieved by balancing pleasure of desire and pain of duty. In pursuit of unwavering desire, without a sense of duty towards others, human beings have been responsible for the extinction of numerous species on earth. Our tradition teaches each one of us to practice *sanyam* in our thoughts and practices, and more so when the element of desire is involved. When this is transgressed, the traditional stories remind us, the person faces karmic downfall, and suffering.

The modern mind might be deluded to think that with scientific advancement, we can escape these “karmic downfall, and suffering”. This has not been the case so far. Nature has shown its overpowering strength over us many times. Consider the recent floods in Nepal. This disaster has left hundreds dead and many more missing. Many families have been displaced as their homes are swept away. Communities are grappling with widespread loss and destruction. This tragic event underscores how vulnerable human life becomes when confronted with the forces of nature.

***Phumdigi Tantha* – A Responsibility**

The proponents of dance drama have used this medium to put across the important message of eco-sensitivity. Dance drama, as mentioned earlier, focuses on dance, music and song. It does not have dialogues or a good plot development. It plays with a concept and takes labour in *showing* the concept. Therefore, dance drama comes out to be different in terms of experiencing it. The present generation is heavily exposed to the western plot-based drama with ample dialogues for exposition to the audience. It does not feel comfortable with dance drama. The symbolism of dance drama appears vague; the song and dance, estranged. The meaning is lost in the medium. Nonetheless, the proponents have not deterred from more production of dance drama. *Phumdigi Tantha* is one such untiring effort in the long list of dance dramas from Manipur.

Dance drama or, for that matter, any drama associated with theatre of roots has a future in the context where the traditional knowledge system is meaningfully incorporated into the educational system. In other words, the ecosystem of dance drama needs to be nurtured so that the audience is better trained to appreciate it. This task is challenging. The persistence of colonial consciousness has blocked our minds and actions – our insight – to perceive anything else than what it dictates. It has deprived us of the critical thinking required for reclaiming one's own space. Decolonisation is the task ahead. It comes through incessant unlearning and relearning the mode of thinking and doing for a more inclusive world.

Phumdigi Tantha, therefore, is a task – a responsibility towards ourselves and others for a sustainable future by embracing the wisdom inherited from the past in fencing off the present malaise.

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