

An Exclusive Interview With Dr. S. Thaninleima

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I. Introduction

Dr. Sanabam Thaninleima (16 Sept 1974-) is a dynamic human being, a scholar, a playwright and one of the most promising female directors of Manipur theatre. Borne to lower middle class family, where her father is a simple junior high school teacher and her mother is a home maker. Thaninleima is the last child of the four children. Her doctoral thesis was on “Contemporary Manipuri Theatre”, which is under the process of publication. She has acted in many plays before she could become a director herself. She had done a three years Diploma course in Dramatic Arts with specialization in Design and Direction from National School of Drama (NSD), New Delhi. She took up the career as a director from 2001. In 2003, Thaninleima went to Japan to pursue a one month course in Japanese popular art form and another six months course in Korea to study theatre design. She runs her own production house called Khenjonglang which was established in 1992, where she direct and produce the plays. She is a very dedicated artist who at the cause of her life will not give up theatre. She has undergone lots of difficult phases in her career and she has always triumphed back with a bang. Manipur is a conservative society, where there are certain laid down rules for women. In spite of many hurdles she is able to fight with the existing conservative society and carve a niche for herself. The following interview was conducted in Manipur language. The interview was conducted on 24th December 2015, 11:30 am at Rupmahal Theatre, one of the oldest theatre houses in Manipur. The abbreviation (AN) is for Dr. Anuradha Nongmaithem the interviewer and (ST) is Dr. S. Thaninleima the Interviewee.

The extract from the interview are as follow:

Anuradha Nongmaithem (AN): How did theatre happen in your life? Please take us to the journey.

S. Thaninleima (ST): To me it is a Destiny Profession. I have never in my dream thought that I will be acting in drama and someday I will become a director myself. The journey was not an easy one. My parents were very skeptical and never supported me when I told them that I want to join theatre. They were against my decision. They do not have a good opinion about artist. Manipur was a different society not so a broad minded in early 60s. Artists were look from a very cynical view. Somehow I was stubborn and wanted the things as I desired. I fasted for more than five days and was adamant to put my idea in front of my parents. Truly speaking I also never had good opinion about artist at that time. My journey in the field started with joining Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union as a part of chorus team which was to be performed in Allahabad. That journey has open up different avenues for me. There I met lots of theatre personalities which had a great impact on my concept about theatre and artist. The impact was so strong that I started joining the Dramatic Union for their production against my parents’ wish. I received my initial training in theatre from Loitongbam Dorendra with whom I have worked for almost eight years. And there was no turning back for me. The transition for a timid girl to a confident girl was all because of theatre. So, here I am happy and self contended with my Destiny Profession.

AN: What is your main focus in your plays?

ST: The main focus of my play is social issues. It’s about family. My play talks about humanism. I portray the confused state of mind in Manipur society. There was confusion and chaos everywhere. Every day on the front page of the news paper we could see someone or the other killed in encounter. And there used to be procession every now and then. I am talking about the late 80s and early 90s. It was too much for me. I wanted to give alternate solution to my people. That’s how I took up pen and started writing for my own plays. My plays are not of extraordinary people. It’s a story about you and me, a common human being.

AN: From where do you get inspiration for your creative writing?

ST: Actually, I am not a writer, I think the society I live in gives me inspiration. I draw the theme of my play from the things that are existing in Manipur society. I want to tell to the society that something is wrong in our society. But I know that nobody will listen to me so I took up pen to vent out my frustrated feelings. And I knew that writing is the only option left for me, and I have utilized that power of pen to voice out my inner feelings.

AN: How do you manage your production house?

ST: I don't face much of the financial problem. Now my family also supports my work. I do have creative problem sometimes. The problem I am facing is from our society. Man is a big problem for me now. Where ever I go, I faced lot of discrimination. I hate man now. I should say. They ignore me and my production house. They never used to invite me for any theater workshop or seminar. I believe man hate women who are at par with them. There is lot of gender bias in our society. Our society is still having a very primitive outlook. They cannot bear to see any woman in higher post or equal to them. The mentality of man in Manipur should changed.

AN: Should I say it's a professional jealousy?

ST: No it's not like that; some men cannot digest the fact that a woman can also be a good director like them. They believed that woman should look after the household chores. And since I am not married, the situation is worse. They have that typical concept that spinster cannot be good at anything. Why Thanin is still not married? Typical chauvinistic attitude, the problem is deeply rooted in their psyche. This outlook needs to change from the mind of some men. I am not contesting with the other existing Directors. I don't want to depend on anybody. People think I am egoistic. To survive in today's Manipur society I feel I am compel to act like a man. I started hating man. It's a very difficult world to survive. I have to fight and have to keep on proving my credentials. I think I am a woman so they take me likely. All man are the same they will never change I believed.

AN: How will you define yourself?

ST: A simple woman who works hard to survive and I am very dedicated to my professional and I will not compromise on anything.

AN: What inspire you to go for higher research in Manipur Theater?

ST: When I was studying in National School of Drama, we used to study Indian drama. There was no written work in Manipur Theater. I felt very bad when my friends and faculty used asked me about Manipur Theatre since I don't have any answers to their queries. From that moment I decided myself that I will do research on Manipur Theater and write a book for future generation. Thus the journey of my research started which has open up a better avenue looking from the nearer focal point of Manipur Theatre. I had a wonderful Research Supervisor who has given a better insight to Manipur Theatre. I started working on contemporary Manipur Theatre. And I have chosen Dr. Ratan Thiyam's theatre as my study for my Doctoral Thesis.

AN: Is there an impact of your research work in you plays?

ST: Tremendous impact. With my research it has help me to go deeper inside the root of Manipur culture. It has also had me to evolve my style of presentation having all the sensibilities of contemporary issue, thus shaping up my signature play.

AN: How many female directors are there in Manipur?

ST: Five female directors and only two are actively involves is theatre activities currently. I don't want to be called as female director. I am a Director. That's how I want people to acknowledge me not emphasizing on my gender.

AN: Are you a feminist?

ST: NO... I am not a feminist. I want equal treatment for men and women. We cannot compare ourselves with the western concept of feminism. There is a vast difference between western and Manipur feminism. I am not into all these technical terms, my plays are about human being and the message is of equal existence between man and woman. My feeling is not against to man. I feel that I should try to empowered women so that they can fight for themselves. Empowerment is more important. I don't believe in the philosophy that just because man is drinking woman should start thinking. I believe in letting woman free to do what they like. They should be given space to think and do what they like. In Manipur we have not experienced the exploitation that the western women had faced.

So it's difficult to compare with the western concept of feminism. Looking from the western perspective I am cannot be term as a feminist, but considering the situation and development from in our society people term me as feminist.

AN: What would you like to tell the young aspiring women directors of Manipur?

ST: The treatment towards women is pathetic in Manipur. I want more learned young women to engage in creative work. I want them to work hard and should be dedicated in whatever they do in life. I wish more young women directors to come out from their cocoons and try to shape up a better society to live in through art.