

Manipuri Theatre and Ratan Thiyam

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Manipur, the land of jewels, is a tiny but culturally very rich north eastern state of India. In Manipur, like other parts of the world, theatre and society have evolved alongside each other. The socio-political upheavals characterizing the history of Manipur have considerably influenced the development of Manipuri theatre. As a matter of fact, the prevailing socio-political situation and its geographically difficult and isolated terrain have never been able to detach the Manipuris from their love for theatre. They are culturally enthusiastic people and theatre, as Chaman Ahuja says, “is a way of life there” (272). Anjum Katyal in her editorial note echoes the same love and enthusiasm of the Manipuris for theatre, “...Manipur is intensely theatre active” (5). The ethos of this land is characterised by dance, songs, festivals, rituals and martial arts. As festivals are participatory in nature, so every child learns how to dance, act, play music instinctively without any formal training. Talking about their involvement in theatre and other cultural activities despite the political turmoil and violence, Ahuja remarks:

Indeed, rituals, war-dances, torch-processions, gunshots, heavy music, gorgeous costumes are as integral a part of existence as eating and drinking. For them, visiting Shumang Lila (Courtyard Theatre) or seeing Phagee (Clown) is as common as visiting the market. Naturally, the theatre of this land reflects the festive temper of the community. (270)

Modern Manipuri Theatre, which is the outcome of the

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confluence of various performance traditions, “is as complex as any other established contemporary theatres of different countries” (Devi and Ramthai, 63). The origin of Manipuri theatrical performance can be traced back to the ancient oral ritual of *Lai Haroaba*, a traditional fertility cult and ancestor worship festival. It is a ritualistic enactment of the myth of creation which contains elements of dance, music and theatre. This ritual turned festival gained royal patronage and participation around twelfth century and subsequently it received its formal shape and its socio-cultural significance. Alongside *Lai Haroaba*, there is another predecessor of modern Manipuri theatre called *Wari Liba*, the art of solo storytelling which was institutionalised in the seventeenth century.

The advent of Hinduism in Manipur in the form of *Vaishnavism* under the royal patronage King Pamheiba in the eighteenth century marks a very important phase in the development of Manipuri theatre. Under his patronage, many *Vaishnava* theatre forms such as *Nata Sankirtana*, *Udukhol*, *Raas Lila*, *Gostha Lila*, *Goura Lila* flourished alongside the pre-Hindu rites of *Lai Haraoba* and *Wari Liba*. However, the followers of traditional religion tried to resist the overarching impact of Hinduism. Meanwhile, Manipur faced a series of attacks by the Burmese. *Vaishnava* king Bhagyachandra successfully resisted the Burmese aggression and it gave him an opportunity to try to assimilate both the faiths and the subsequent assimilation of both the cultures. *Raas Lila* is an illustration of such synchronicity where *Lai Haroba* form is infused in its structure and codification.

Another theatre form called *Phagee Lila* emerged in the mid nineteenth century. It was independent of the prevailing *Vaishnava* tradition and was secular in nature. In the *Vaishnavite Lilas*, members of the royal and aristocratic families took part and the minor roles of jesters and clowns were given to the commoners. After their release from the periodic performances, such jesters wandered over the countryside performing their clownish acts, and thus *Phagee Lila* or Clown play or Comic acts arose as a distinct theatrical form. During the early twentieth century, from *Phagee Lila* there emerged

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Shumang Lila (Courtyard play). Simultaneously, another form called *Phampak Lila* (Stage drama) developed. *Shumang Lila* and *Phampak Lila* together are considered to be the immediate predecessors of modern Manipuri theatre. Such developments ascertain that the modern proscenium theatre has made a gradual entry into the cultural landscape of Manipur. As Devi and Ramthai have observed, “*Phampak Lila* performed in the proscenium theatre is similar in form to the Western theatrical model and Indian *Natyashastra* model though its contents are very much indigenous” (63).

When Manipur lost its independence to the British in 1891 and became a protected territory, a new social order was introduced. In the field of theatre, proscenium theatre became the new theatre space. Mythological and historical plays of Bengal became the model for the Manipuri playwrights. Modern proscenium theatre came in Manipur in 1905 with the establishment of Friend's Dramatic Union. Proscenium stages in makeshift theatre houses in residential areas increased in number. Following it, many theatre houses were also set up in the 1930s. Important among them were Manipur Dramatic Union (1931), The Aryan Theatre (1935), The Society Theatre (1937), Rupmahal Theatre (1943). With these theatre houses emerged a number of playwrights. Notable among them are S. Lalit Singh (*Sati Khongnang*, 1930, *Areppa Marup*, 1939), A. Dorendrajit Singh (*Moirang Thoibi*, 1935, *Bhagyachandra*, 1939), A. Minaketan Singh (*Sita Banabas*, 1936), H. Anganghal Singh (*Poktabi*, 1935, *Ibemma*, 1936) (see Irom Robindro Singh, 335). The plays were again mostly historical and mythological. “It was after its merger with India that Manipur witnessed a sea change in its theatre as well in its socio-political life” (Ahuja 271). Even before the merger, the change in Manipuri theatre can be perceived in the works of G. C. Tongbra (1913-96). He was a director and a prolific playwright and was the founder of the Society Theatre. He is credited with almost a hundred plays and is considered as the G. B. Shaw of Manipur. His witty but highly satirical plays target social injustice, corruption, exploitation and misuse of power. He also tried his hands in absurd plays where he attacked political instability and violence.

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Some of his famous plays include *Hingminnaba* (1961), *Mani Manou* (1962), *Matric Pass* (1964), *Upu Baksi* (1972) and *Ngabong Khao* (1978).

The arrival of Western realistic theatre in India in the wake of colonial rule drastically changed the whole notion of theatre in India. In the post 1947 Indian theatrical scene, some playwrights and directors made a consecrated effort to return to the indigenous theatrical and performance traditions in order to evolve an “Indian theatre”. In the words of A. B. Dharwadker,

...practitioners of the new drama [dramatists after Independence] have forged a reactive cultural identity for themselves by disclaiming colonial practices and by seeking to reclaim classical and other pre-colonial Indian traditions of performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization. (2)

The impulse of these playwrights and directors to create an indigenous modern Indian theatre, according to E. B. Mee,

...became known as the theatre of roots movement – a post-Independence effort to decolonize the aesthetics of modern Indian theatre by challenging the visual practices, performer-spectator relationships, dramaturgical structures and aesthetic goals of colonial performance. (5)

However, it was Suresh Awasthi, the eminent theatre activist and critic who baptised this movement as ‘theatre of roots’. In his pioneering essay “Theatre of Roots’: Encounter with Tradition’ published in *The Drama Review (TDR)* he writes:

I am taking the risk of giving a label - “theatre of roots” - to the unconventional theatre which has been evolving for some two decades in India as a result of modern theatre’s encounter with tradition ... It is deeply rooted in regional theatrical culture, but cuts across linguistic barriers, and has an all-India character in design. (48)

In contemporary Indian theatre, theatre of roots has been a significant theatre movement which has enabled Indian theatre to formulate a quintessentially Indian form deviating from the Western mode of realistic theatre. It has a significant resonance of similarity with that of the Off Off Broadway theatre movement of the early

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'60s in America. The pioneers of that movement radicalized the form and content as well as scenography and performance in order to formulate an inherently American theatrical tradition transcending the dominant continental theatrical form that used to hegemonize the Broadway (see Prodhani).

Theatre of roots, which tries to incorporate and assimilate various regional theatrical and performance traditions, also touched theatrically vibrant Manipur. Meanwhile, Manipur's merger with India in 1949 and the consequent dissatisfaction of the people of Manipur mingled with the all India effort to return to roots prompted a group of young Manipuri theatre activists to experiment with the native Manipuri performance traditions. Benil Biswas points out that modern Manipuri theatre grew against the backdrop of growing discontent against the Indian rule and its commercial exploitations of the state. He writes:

By the late '60s there was discontent against Indian rule and commercial exploitation. In the awakening quest for authenticity, and search for an identity, experimental theatre grew in the '70s under directors like Kanhailal, Thiyam and Arambam. They probed anew their cultural roots, generating new theatrical expressions from old vocabularies of performance, and enhancing production values through better use of stage technology (np.).

Lokendra Arambam (1939), one of the pioneers of experimental theatre in Manipur, discusses how there have been substantial changes in the development of Manipuri theatre since the 70s (16). The important aspect of this change, according to him, is the experimentation of the theatre activists with new themes and forms discarding the traditional, conservative, semi-urban, middle-class theatre of that period. Political and economic developments with rapid urbanization ushered in a feeling of marginalization among the Manipuris. The experimental playwrights and directors are, as Arambam writes, "deeply concerned with finding idioms and expressions to reflect this mood of discontent, disillusionment and marginalization." (17). As a playwright and director, Arambam himself raises his voice of protest against the exploitation of the Manipuris.

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He has developed what is referred to as the theatre of resistance at his Aryan Theatre. According to Soyam Lokendrajit , Arambam works with a historical consciousness of the social forces that go into shaping the destiny of the marginalized people of Manipur. He believes that alternative theatre has to grow out of artistic tension, to grapple with the contemporary social reality of the people (27). Notable among his plays are *Irabot* (1976), *Yotpak Yotlei Amma* (*A Spadeful of Earth*, 1979), *Khuman Chakha Moireng Ngamba* (1982), *Numit Kappa* (1984), *Stages of Blood* (adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, 1997) and *Awang-Nongpok Lamgee Nawaa* (*Children of the North East*, 1998).

Heisnam Kanhailal (1941-2016), one of the most respected and acclaimed theatre directors of Manipur, has made huge contributions to the experimental theatre of Manipur. He established his Kalakhetra, Manipur in 1969 and began his experimentation with the art of performance and the art of theatre. His theatre, according to Ahuja, “seeks to liberate the spirit of a human being and to evoke that state of ritualistic ecstasy when body and soul interplay” (277). It is basically non-verbal or physical theatre, remarkable for its movements and playfulness, rich in regional, ethnic, cultural and political meanings. Rustom Bharucha comments, “Kanhailal asserts his culture differently without the overt mediation of those mechanisms that have commodified ‘folk’ and rural performances. His theatre remains small, yet true to itself” (23). His major productions include *Tamnalai* (*Haunting Spirit*, 1972), *Kabui Keioiba* (*Half Man, Half Tiger* 1973), *Pebet* (1975), and *Dopadi* (2000).

The third most important figure of Manipuri experimental theatre is Ratan Thiyam (b. 1948), an alumnus of National School of Drama and subsequently the Director and currently the Chairman of the institution. This versatile genius's fame is not confined to the annals of Manipuri theatre; rather, he is considered to be one of the most influential and respected theatre personalities in the contemporary national and international theatre scene. His brain child, the Chorus Repertory Theatre set up in 1976 at the outskirts

of the city of Imphal has ever since become the centre of Thiyam's theatrical experimentations and innovations. It is now an important regional and national centre for contemporary theatre studies.

Almost perfect and flawless performances, captivating aural impact, mesmerizing visual aesthetic, and potent thematic concerns of his productions place him alongside the contemporary theatre gurus like Tadashi Suzuki, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and Eugino Barba. Thiyam's position in the national and international theatre circuit can best be understood from an observation made by Ahuja, with which he begins the chapter on Manipur in his book *Contemporary Theatre of India: An Overview*:

The eighties of the twentieth century witnessed an unusual scenario: in the international theatre circuits, after the glorious innings of *Ghasiram Kotwal*, it was *Chakravyuha*, *Chakravyuha* all the way. Still revelling in the success of the festivals of India, the mandarins of culture projected Ratan Thiyam's productions as the quintessential representatives of the Indian theatre. Here was, as it were, a vindication of the back-to-roots philosophy— even the culmination of the search for the new identity of Indian theatre. (269)

Among the pioneers of theatre of roots, Awasthi identifies B.V. Karanth, K.M. Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam to be the most powerful exponents who have, according to him, invented a new theatrical form to liberate modern Indian theatre from the Western paradigm of realistic theatre. However, Ratan Thiyam is one of the key figures to have taken up the theatre of roots project at a different dimension altogether. Unlike Karanth and Panikkar, Thiyam belongs to a marginal location. Secondly, theatre of roots demands the incorporation of native elements as the key components of the performance language of the plays. Manipur, in the pan Indian cultural landscape is a periphery; a mysterious location with unique geo-political dimensions. Thiyam has not only initiated a pan Indian theatre movement from the periphery, but also legitimised the potentiality of evolving a pan Indian art movement from the cultural precincts in the margins.

Thiyam, therefore, is significant not only culturally but also

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politically. Being from the North-east, he has not portrayed the commonplace anxiety to seek legitimacy in the mainstream as conscious strategy to incorporate elements from the dominant space. Rather, he has enforced an intrigue in the mainstream to appreciate his interpretations and the performances through the idioms that he has invented taking cues from his native soil. This aspect has turned his theatre into an audacious cultural enterprise.

The repertoire of Thiyam's plays reflects a set of common preoccupations which are basically linked to the lived experiences of his intimate locations. Quite significantly he has gone back to the epics and classical theatres not for any esoteric reproductions of those narratives; rather, he would take recourse to classical texts as the allegorical vantages to address the questions of contemporary times. His early productions like *Karanabharam* (1979), *Urubhangam* (1981), *Imphal Imphal* (1982), *Chakravyuha* (1984) or some of his other powerful plays like *Imphal Karusi* (1993), *Andha Yug* (1994), *Uttar Priyadarshi* (1994), *Macbeth* (2014) have most effectively interrogated some of the fundamental aspects of our present time. Plays in *Manipur Trilogy* namely *Hey Nungshibi Prithvi (My Earth, My Love)* (2004), *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* (Nine Hills One Valley) (2006) and *Wahoudok* (Prologue) (2008) reflect the deeper ambition of Ratan Thiyam to seek answers if not in the pan Indian epics but in the discourses of native lore. This is where history and myth of Manipur resonate in his narratives paradoxically coalescing with the perpetual anxiety of violence. However, Thiyam like many great artists envisages a sense of potential retrieval, hence, despite the turmoil, there lingers a sense of hope.

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