

## **Performance and the Myriad Shades of Manipuri Theatre - Analysis of Select Plays of Ratan Thiyam and Heisnam Kanhailal**

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### **Abstract**

The Manipuri theatre of Ratan Thiyam and Heisnam Kanhailal is reminiscent of the rich theatre practices of Manipur. History, politics and the 'Manipuri identity' become extremely important in trying to assess the plays of the two playwrights mentioned above. Coupled with this is also the strong ritualistic tradition, which is exuded through their plays. Manipur's history post-independence has been immersed in conflict and fierce resistance, starting from the infamous merger in 1949 to the introduction of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1958. Thiyam and Kanhailal's plays, therefore, are enacted in a politically charged environment, and it is only natural that politics, history and the question of a unique 'Manipuri identity' in contrast to the broader idea of national identity become a major thematic concern in these plays. Though these plays are deceptively simple on the face of it, the meanings are nuanced and layered with much deeper implications. They not only foreground the historical context and political overtones of Manipur but also satirise the notion of a common national identity. The plays of Thiyam and Kanhailal, thus, cannot be read in isolation without an awareness of the historical context in which it was written or performed. The paper will try to look at some of the plays of Thiyam and Kanhailal while taking into consideration the troubled historical backdrop of Manipur and the ramifications of this struggle leading to a certain alienation from ideas of nationalism vis-à-vis national identity and the nation-building process of the country.

**Keywords: identity, nation, politics, conflict, history, tradition, ritual, resistance**

Manipur is one of the few states in the North-Eastern region of India, which has a rich theatre tradition like that of Assam and has made remarkable progress in the theatrical scene in the past few decades. It has managed to have a huge impact on the post-independent theatre of India, with playwrights like Ratan Thiyam, Heisnam Kanhailal, Arambam Somorendra and the likes being some of the central figures of a new trend popularly referred to as the "modern Indian drama". Maheshwari (2017) writes:

“Rakesh H. Solomon calls this new trend in Indian drama that developed during the eighteenth and the nineteenth century as the "metropolitan genre" because it was created by a bilingual high-caste bourgeoisie, who strategically adapted elements from a gallery of models that included the Sanskrit theatre, traditional theatre and the European theatre.” (p. 6)

Taking the same statement into consideration, it is interesting to note that in contrast to Solomon's opinion of this new form of theatre being a "metropolitan genre", the theatre of Thiyam or Kanhailal is more provincial as the initial production takes place more in the fringes than the mainstream and for an audience which includes people from all sections of society including farmers and villagers. In spite of being modern dramatists, what is interesting is the fact that both these playwrights look inward to the classical Manipuri traditions like the *Lai Haraoba*, which is a traditional ritualistic play performed in Manipur or *Thang Ta*, which is the regional, Manipuri martial art practiced by the Meiteis and incorporate them into their theatre. Manipuri drama post-independence, without any doubt, has been a political theatre where contemporary issues become the focal point of concern for the playwrights. It is interesting to note that Manipur's struggle has always been strikingly different from the national struggles, and this is primarily because of the precedence of the regional interest over the national and an attempt to create a sovereign state. Manipur's

troubled history coupled with the shifting dynamics of the political status of the state has had a huge impact on peace and consciousness of the people who fail to recognise themselves as 'Indians' and believe that they have been cheated by the government to fit into a framework which they believe is not a part of their identity. Rustom Bharucha (1998), in his book, *The Theatre of Kanhailal: Pebet & Memoirs of Africa*, rightly observes:

“In this context, it should be remembered that Manipur regained its status as a Native (or Princely) state in 1947. More ignominiously, it became a Part C State on 15 October 1949, when Maharaja Bodhachandra Singh signed the Instrument of Accession in Shillong. This agreement, by which Manipur became part of the Indian Union, is still regarded by many militants and intellectuals in Manipur as a betrayal. All secessionist movements in Manipur use this Merger Agreement to date the beginnings of India's 'neocolonial domination' in the state.” (p. 12)

Thus, in Manipuri theatre, resistance as a trope becomes a recurrent and an extremely important idea with the political situation that prevails in the state. Ratan Thiyam, at an interview in 2012, identifies with this situation when he agrees that “All good art is political.” Heisnam Kanhailal's plays, likewise, are enacted in a politically charged environment, and it is only natural that politics and contemporary issues of the state become a major thematic concern in these plays. One of Thiyam's most popular plays, *Chakravyuha* (The Wheel of War), which he wrote in 1984, recreates the myth of Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna from the Mahabharata who showed extraordinary heroism in dismantling a masterful strategic formation created by his enemies. However, the play *Chakravyuha* does not merely highlight an event in history or a story from the Hindu mythology but takes a jibe at the contemporary socio-political situation of Manipur. It is worth mentioning that Thiyam believed in using theatre as an effective medium of protest against prevailing socio-political ills. He was also inspired by German theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht and his "epic theatre", which tried to use theatre as a forum for political ideas. Brecht believed that the audience should look at a play critically by identifying the socio-political issues and help in bringing about change in the world around them.

*Chakravyuha*, for the same reason cannot be read in isolation, and one cannot help but find connections between the dialogues of the characters and how they seem to echo the larger political issues that have vexed Manipur since the past few decades. For instance, the

character Shakuni in the play, *Chakravyuha* seems like a mouthpiece of Thiyam (1998) himself when he talks about politics:

“No veteran politician uses that tone or speaks that language. Politics is to be able to deliver the harshest words in the sweetest tones, words so embellished with frills as to melt the hardest heart.” (p. 15)

The lines certainly take a dig at the existing political scenario while highlighting the opinions of the disillusioned Manipuri commoner and his cynical take on political leaders. The songs in the play too can be seen as critical commentaries on the contemporary situation and the political ramifications of such a struggle. It is this differing vision and situation of conflict at home that Thiyam probably tries to capture in *Chakravyuha*. Not only is there a breach of communication between the centre and the state represented by the Kauravas and the Pandavas respectively, there is also a breach of understanding between the young and the older generation represented by Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna and the five Pandava brothers. The play can thus be seen as the trapping of youthful innocence, youthful vigour and vitality. The Kauravas make the *Chakravyuha*, to trap Abhimanyu, and the elder Pandavas, Bhima, Yudhisthira, provoke him to enter it.

In contrast to the mythical Abhimanyu, who is well known for his gallantry and audacious bravery at the battlefield by successfully killing tens of thousands of Kaurava soldiers in the battle of Kurukshetra before embracing his own death, Thiyam's Abhimanyu becomes a mere sacrificial lamb, a scapegoat for the Pandava army. This is further highlighted in Subhadra's dialogue when she says:

“I do not know how the future generations are going to survive this age where fiends operate in human disguise. Are we destined to embark on our last journey after offering our unborn child to the sacrificial fires of the coming age?” (Thiyam, p. 31)

The other characters, too, seem to defy their historical/mythical representations, and we see that Arjuna, Yudhishtira and Bheema are anything but heroic in the play. Arjuna, who is one of the central characters in the Mahabharata, obtains a marginal role in *Chakravyuha* and merely hovers in the background. The mythical Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava brothers and the epitome of truthfulness, is portrayed very differently in the play; he is seen as someone who fails to keep his promise of protecting Abhimanyu. Bheema, on the other hand, in contrast to the valiant Bheema from the Mahabharata, who epitomises strength and confidence, is rather timid and insecure in the play, expecting Abhimanyu to turn the tables

for his army. All these characters can be seen as contemporary figures in a similar situation of struggle for supremacy and justice. It is also perceptible to the readers that Abhimanyu seems to be rather apprehensive about fighting, and the desperation, anguish and anxiety are clearly apparent in him. Perhaps, Thiyam's Abhimanyu is a just representation of the youth of Manipur who is thrust with the idea of violence and bloodshed since their childhood, thus paving the way for a rather bleak future. The "herd mentality" and the constant urge for rebellion has certainly jeopardised any chances of peace in the state where there is neither any effort by the government nor the people to find a feasible solution, and this is what has added to the tension and instability. Ratan Thiyam skilfully describes the situation of Manipur in his poem, "The story of a land turned barren".

“[T]omorrow there’s bandh, day-after-tomorrow something may befall the land... Like it is said, the present time is an awful phase this time, the Kauravas are said to have won the battle of Kurukshetra many a preacher is roaming all over the marketplace which religion is cheaper, which one to buy, I’m in dilemma since I’m a human being, I want to stay alive. May be because of it, whenever I belch, the smell of gunpowder comes. After the Great World War, a monkey, a survivor from the Ramayana, who could not turn into human being, is sitting and crying in front of Darwin’s photograph, with its legs stretched out in front the priest who has been performing puja to nullify the effects of the curse turns out to be a student of Mao Zedong. With unknown ‘ism’ with unknown words, this land full of unknown habits would become like this, would become so terrible unwittingly, because of it...”  
(Singh)

In one of his interviews to Tarun Tejpal, Thiyam seems fiercely critical about the existing situation of his state and explains how a simple road construction takes "15 years in a state like Manipur". He probably wants to hint at the fact that the people are fighting for a lost cause, and it will only lead to further chaos and anarchy. Some of Thiyam's plays, like *Uttara Priyadarshi*, which is an adaptation of Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyagan Agyeya's verse play *Uttara Priyadarshi*, seems to echo the sentiments of the Manipuri people who have suffered several decades in a so called "disturbed region" and have become weary of war and bloodshed. There is a strong willingness to live in peace, and this can only happen if people are ready to self-contemplate and give up on their evil side. Maheshwari (2017) writes:

“[In *Uttara Priyadarshi*] We see that Thiyam uses the story of Ashoka to probe into the psychological conditions of humans where the struggle between the good and the bad happens. Through the play, Thiyam explores the dilemma faced by Ashoka after the Kalinga war. When Ashoka realizes his mistakes he tries to leave his evil side but faces difficulties to overcome his evil side. The challenges Ashoka faced is represented through the character of Ghor, who becomes the symbol of violence, of tyranny and death. Violence disappears once Ashoka confronts his evil side....Thiyam also uses the characters of the Buddhist Monks to represent *Dharma* and peace. Throughout the play, they are a constant reminder to the audience that if one follows the path of *Dharma*, it will lead us to peace. We can also say that the play, through its prayers and chants, gives hope to the audience in this present violent age.” (p. 103-4)

In a way, Ashoka in *Uttara Priyadarshi* becomes a representative figure of the people living in Manipur and Thiyam probably tries to leave a didactic note towards the end of the play where he hints at the futility of the never-ending struggle and tries to hint at a possible reconciliation and coming to terms with the reality by suggesting that there should be a spiritual reawakening within the people, and this could be the only saving grace that could lead to peace.

The Manipuri playwrights like Thiyam and Kanhailal also seem to critique some of the most repressive measures adopted by the centre to curb rebellion and bring peace. One such instance is the extension of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Manipur (1958). The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) is an Acts of the Parliament of India which grants special powers to the Indian Armed Forces in places that are declared "disturbed areas". The extension of the AFSPA in Manipur has, in a way, led to a certain breach of trust by the centre, and this, the natives of Manipur believe, has been a recurrent problem starting from the infamous merger in 1949 to the militarisation of the state in 1958. It is in a situation like these that plays like Kanhailal's *Draupadi*, which is an adaptation of Mahasweta Devi's short story, *Draupadi* finds its relevance. *Draupadi* tries to highlight how the armed forces has forcibly intruded into the lives of the Manipuri commoners and has misused its power. In the '90s, there had been several cases in Manipur where it was believed that the Armed Forces carried out fake encounters, and Kanhailal's *Draupadi* tries to portray a similar situation where the protagonist, Draupadi's husband, is brutally killed in a fake encounter. The army then carries out a search operation to look for Draupadi and when they finally find her, three army men arrest and rape her. In the culminating scene, Draupadi rips off her

clothes, and such an act terrifies the three army men who retract their steps and leave her alone. When *Draupadi* was first performed in 2000, Sabitri Debi, who played the role of the protagonist is believed to have gone completely naked in front of a live audience, which led to a tremendous uproar amongst the critics and audience alike. But what one can clearly understand from this act is the deep-seated hatred and frustration that most Manipuris have for draconian acts like the AFSPA. *Draupadi* borrows the idea of the body as a source of resistance from the original author and places it in an entirely different context; that of Manipur where the dreaded Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), first introduced in 1958, has completely robbed the people of their freedom and has only helped in promoting armed insurgency in the state leading to utter chaos and anarchy. Anjum Katyal (1997) rightly describes this chaotic situation of Manipur in her editorial column for the *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* when she says:

“Manipur today is struggling. With itself, and with the Indian polity...The relationship with the dominant state, India, is wounded, suspicious. Rejection and a desire for rightful recognition war with each other, resulting in internal confusion and conflict...the ‘Machiavellian machinations’ that resulted in ‘annexing’ this state to the Indian union, dismissing the popular government elected through adult franchise, soured the relations between Manipur and India...‘Culturally there is a vital difference between mainstream demands and ground realities because the alienation between Manipur and the mainland has become near-total. This is the situation—how should a conscious, self-critical, thinking theatre person react to it?...This question runs like a swollen vein through all theatre activity in Manipur today. Moreover, Manipur is intensely theatre active.” (p. 5)

It is in this sense of alienation that playwrights like Heisnam Kanhailal find their voice which is primarily that of protest and resistance. It must be noted that Kanhailal was an NSD dropout and feels culturally indebted to his roots in Manipur, which becomes his performing space. Being fiercely anti-establishment, the idea of 'space' becomes a seminal entity in the theatre of Heisnam Kanhailal. It must be noted that being a supporter of ‘theatre of roots’ movement, he attempts and make a paradigm shift in terms of moving out of the confines of the proscenium. Though he is not able to breach the fourth wall completely like Richard Schechner’s ‘Environmental Theatre’ where he made his audience sit on all four sides of the stage, what Kanhailal manages to do, however, is to bring theatre closer to nature and the environment and not restrict itself to the four walls of an auditorium. It is worth noting that

Kalakshetra Manipur essentially developed from a *sangoi*, a “multipurpose shed outside his [Kanhailal’s] house” (Bharucha, 1998, p. 8). This *sangoi*, in a way, also becomes representative of the alienation and isolation that the Manipuris face on a day to day basis as they fail to identify themselves with the national image. Bharucha (1998) talks about the newfound space:

“This was accompanied by a veritable hunt for a performance space in which the plays could be staged in conditions appropriate for photography. A roofed, open-sided *mandap* was eventually found, but then we needed to erect a simple bamboo structure with mud-plastered walls in which the performances could be staged.” (p. 6)

The actors and their performance become the focal point of concern for Kanhailal. Their bodies, similarly, become items of cardinal importance in Kanhailal’s theatre. Coupled with this is also the idea of resistance which, in Manipur, becomes extremely important as the people feel a sense of alienation and cannot associate with ideas of nationalism vis-a-vis national identity and the nation-building process of the country. This nexus can be clearly observed in a play like *Pebet*, which “exposes the savagery of cultural indoctrination through the deceptive structure of a folk tale.” (Bharucha, 1998, p. 17) Bharucha (2016) further opines:

“*Pebet* is a part of the repertoire of fireside stories, which are told to Manipuri children by their grandmothers. It is a folk tale deeply entrenched in the psyche of the people. Kanhailal’s decision to use this story to comment on the political and cultural indoctrination of his time must be regarded as a shrewd dramaturgical strategy.... [Mother *Pebet* along with her children] nest at the foot of a tree. Guarding her brood, Mother *Pebet* circumvents the predatory attention of a cat by flattering him. She continues to boost his ego till her children are ready to protect themselves. Once they are grown up, she resists the Cat who captures the youngest of her brood. Ultimately, through a clever strategy, the mother manages to trick the Cat into freeing her child. The *Pebets* are finally united as the cat disappears from their lives, somewhat dejected.” (Collective, 2016)

Kanhailal’s style is certainly reminiscent of the conventions of the ‘poor theatre’ of Jerzy Marian Grotowsky, specimens of which can also be found in India in the theatre of Badal Sircar from Bengal who was influenced by Grotowski, among others like Richard Schechner’s ‘Environmental Theatre’ and Julian Beck’s ‘Living Theatre’ which were staged

in nontraditional venues starting from streets to prisons. Sircar's theatre movement is often referred to as "The Third Theatre", a term coined by Eugenio Barba. In Barba's book, *Beyond the Floating Islands*, Barba (2006) writes:

“The Third Theatre lives on the fringe, often outside or on the outskirts of the centres and capitals of culture. It is a theatre created by people who define themselves as actors, directors, theatre workers, although they have seldom undergone a traditional theatrical education and therefore are not recognised as professionals.” (p. 193)

In this context, Kanhailal too seems to possess similar characteristics in his Kalakshetra Manipur. Being an NSD dropout, he was someone who was fiercely anti-establishment all his life and this is probably one of the reasons why he wanted to bring theatre out of its conventional bounds in the proscenium and be vividly different from the existing conventions in "Modern Indian Drama".

Thiyam and Kanhailal, thus, managed to create a strictly individualistic and political theatre which had massive ramifications in the theatre of Manipur. In a way, they became "innovator[s] of the alternative theatre rooted in the soil and social reality of Manipur". (Singh, 2016) In conclusion, one can safely state that their theatre “depicts the dialectical antagonism between the oppression and resistance.” (Singh, 2016)

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