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“Theatre is not a casual engagement, it is a daily ritual”: Imphal and the Chorus Repertory Theatre as the Sites of Performance

An Account of a Visit to the Chorus Repertory Theatre (CRT)

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Abstract:

The paper contains an exclusive interview of Ratan Thiyam (1948), the famous theatre director from the Northeast and one of the major protagonists of the *Theatre of Roots* movement in India. The paper also provides the authors' experience with the place, Imphal, (capital of Manipur state), its people, and its milieu which intimately informed the creative self of Thiyam and his theatre abode—the Chorus Repertory Theatre (CRT). Manipur is a state of an enigma for many outside the state, not only in the mainland but even in other parts of the Northeast as well because Manipur is seen as a place that has been a theatre of political turmoil and unrest following protracted militancy, ethnic anxieties and the tumults of identity assertions besides being subjected to the draconian AFSPA for the longest period of time. Against such a backdrop life continues to thrive in Imphal which provides elaborate nuances and contradictions turning the cityscape itself into a space of performance. The interview was taken on the sidelines of the National Theatre Festival 2017, at the CRT where some of the significant contemporary Indian plays were also performed including Thiyam's *Urubhangam*. The paper attempts to look at Thiyam's theatre against the cultural and spatial context of Manipur and to see how theatre can evolve as an organic form of artistic expression.

Keywords: Performance, Ratan Thiyam, CRT, Theatre of Roots, *Urubhangam*

Richard Schechner (2006) says 'anything' and 'everything' can be part of 'performance' (p.1). He describes performance as a "broad spectrum" or "continuum of human actions" (p.2) ranging from sports, popular entertainment, performing arts (theatre, dance, music) media as well as everyday activities like the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and even the acts of healing—from shamanism to surgery. The range of performance has further expanded now with the proliferation of digital platforms. Notably, performance is determined not only by the performers but also by its surroundings, its social milieu and also by the history of the place. Therefore, the same play by two different directors from two different locales would differ from each other. K.N. Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam's productions of Bhasa's *Urubhangam* are completely different from each other in terms of their performative forms and theatrical executions, as they have designed their performances based on their respective cultural as well as historical contexts.

Thus, performance is not only a composition implemented through the conscious acts of the actors on stage and the accompanying musicians in the background alone; the passive aspects of performance are equally important without which performance cannot be complete, not even possible. Such aspects would include the lights, settings, props, audience, and also the whole space, for they together form the syntax of semiotic totality of a performance. Performance space is generally understood as the space where the actual performance takes place. However, this space has a culture-specific dimension which is informed and determined by the cultural geography of the place giving it its distinctive character, historicity, and also its identity. Therefore, every culture has its own exclusive performance tradition and modes that are distinct and different from the other. *Ankia Naat*, developed by Srimanta Sankardeva in the 16th century Assam, could only be possible against the geographic, cultural and historical context of the place and time that it belonged. The same is true for other traditions such as Kutiattiyam of Kerala, Yakshagana of Karnataka, Kuchipudi of Andhra Pradesh or Jatra of Bengal.

Time is another key aspect that plays a seminal role in providing a connotative dimension to performance as it is time that assigns fresh significations and meanings to a performance. The Off-Off-Broadway theatre movement of America could emerge as a reaction against the robust capitalist exigencies of postmodern America, it could have never happened at any other time. Similarly, the *Theatre of Roots* movement of India could only emerge in the aftermath of India's independence as a result of its desperate search for a form that was quintessentially Indian to assert a claim for a modern theatrical form of its own, free from the colonial cultural baggage. The evolution of a theatre tradition cannot be in an empty space, rather it invariably happens in the wake of the cultural, political, historical as well as day-to-day exigencies of a given place and time.

The Setting: Imphal and CRT

When we reached Imphal on 29 March 2017, by an Indigo flight from Guwahati, we were actually clueless about the place. The image and ideas about Imphal that we carried were mostly shaped by the media, hence we anticipated a war-ravaged town with the gun-trotting armed personnel patrolling the streets against heaps of ruins. The few things we knew about Imphal were that there was an all-women market, *Ima Keithel*¹ (Mother's market) where all the shops were owned by women and that it was a dry state². Manipur is known for the dance tradition of *Raas Leela* as well as *Lai Haraoba* and also the indigenous martial art, *thang ta*. Quite significantly these traditions are integral to the theatre productions of Ratan Thiyam. However, Manipur has always been there in the news as a militancy hotbed, known all over as the state having the uncanny distinction of being under the longest imposition of one of India's deadliest anti-terrorism Acts called the AFSPA or the Armed Forces (Special Power) Act³ which turned citizens of Manipur, in the age group from nineteen to ninety, as they say, into potential candidates to be halted, questioned, picked up or even killed at will by the armed forces virtually whenever they wished to. It reached a flashpoint with the alleged brutal killing of Thangjam Manorama by the Armed forces in 2004 which led 12 *Imas* (mothers) to disrobe and carry out the historic protest in front of the Kangla Fort⁴ which was the Headquarters of the Assam Rifles. Significantly, the protest turned into almost a live enactment of the famous sequence of H. Kanhailal's play, *Draupadi* (2000), based on Mahasweta Devi's *Dopdi*, where the protagonist, Draupadi, subjected to sexual threats and mutilation,

vanquished the aggressive masculinity of the Senanayak with the banal power of her naked body by challenging him to rape her. Kanhailal once said that following the KAngla Fort protest, people used to call him a seer as if he had foreseen almost with a prophetic vision what was to come four years later (in his interview with Prodhani, 2015). Life in Manipur against such backdrops seemed like a tightrope walk holding a precarious pole of faith that keeps oscillating between hope and a mess.

In 2017 Manipur was yet to come under the ILP (Inner Line Permit)⁵ regime unlike Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh in the Northeast. Therefore, after having arrived at the small but well-decorated airport, we came out of the lounge without having to show our permits and credentials. Coming out we saw several taxi drivers standing in front of the gate expecting passengers. In the Northeast, there are at least three similar airports – Aizawl, Agartala and Imphal—the three state capitals with small airports of similar sizes. The arrival lounges of these small airports would typically feature the billboards of the state tourism departments showcasing the picture-perfect scenes of the landscape and some historic monuments of the states, dancers in gorgeous ethnic costumes and also stalls selling exquisite ethnic wares at high prices for the travellers to pick up their souvenirs as the last-minute picks. But Imphal airport has one difference—it is an international airport, which we did not know until we had arrived there. Bir Tikendrajit International Airport. The borders of Manipur are the final lines of India's map in the Eastern extreme, hence Imphal in the common imagination in the mainland is the end of the world, a Shangrila, beyond that exists a frontier with fading horizons and a void.

As we drove in a Maruti 800 towards the Manipur University Guest House, we were in for a big surprise. Contrary to our premonition of frequent halt by the armed personnel in combat fatigue, there were hardly any in the street and more surprisingly, unlike the streets from the airport to the city in the other similar airports of the Northeast, the road to Imphal from the airport was unexpectedly wide and straight like an arrow, running through the assured stretches of the plains on either side dotted with well-appointed showrooms of premium cars and bikes that included TATA, Mahindra, Honda, Toyota and several other billboards including that of the Sangai Festival. The festival was over last winter, but the boards were still there. The driver, an enthusiastic and stylish man in his early thirties, informed us that the Sangai Festival was one of the biggest annual festivals of Manipur and the sangai, an endangered antler and the mascot of the event, was found only in Manipur. As we drove down, he informed us that it was Tiddim Road, the Indo-Myanmar international road that went right into Tiddim in Myanmar. This road seemed one of the widest in any city in the Northeast. Manipur has a sense of space. Wide and vast, plain and fertile. No wonder when, just before India's Independence in 1947, a section of the British officials proposed a Crown Colony⁶ comprising the Northeastern states including the Chittagong hill tracts (now in Bangladesh), and also parts of Burma, they wanted to develop Imphal with an international airport as the capital of that dream, to turn the city into the gateway to South East Asia. Imphal might well have turned into the Hong Kong of Northeast had the plan for the Crown Colony materialised. Being so close to Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos and the other South East Asian countries, Imphal, in fact, still has the geographical edge to become, with the right policy and planning, a major economic hub, a veritable 'Mumbai of the Northeast'.

At the university we were the guests of Prof. Gambhir Singh of Manipur University who had arranged a three-wheeler tempo, a popular mode of transport in Imphal, to take us to CRT situated

on the outskirts of the city. Our vehicle would take us to the CRT and bring us back after the show at around 8 pm at night, which was, by Imphal standards, rather quite late at night. The tempo rickshaw drove us through Imphal town. Our driver, Ranjit, a Meitei boy, who was also on a contractual job at the university, showed us the gate of the famed Kangla Fort. The roads in the central junction of the city had fancy cast iron railings like the ones one comes across in some parts of Calcutta. Contrary to our anticipation, downtown Imphal was not a sleepy pad, but rather a bustling city with a busy throng.

But as we proceeded, one thing struck us—the residential buildings had some common characteristics. Most of the multi-storied buildings were large, straight, and in terms of visual appeal quite banal, and noticeably, they mostly looked incomplete for most of them were not coloured as the outer walls were left without the final coat of plaster and the red bricks of the walls were left bare to tackle abrasion of weather by their own. Could it be the impact of protracted militancy that none wanted to be too visible in the vicinity? Coming from Shillong, where exquisitely designed houses are a common feature, Imphal looked rather plain in this respect. As we left behind the main city and entered the outskirts of Imphal, the landscape looked familiar, quite like that of the small towns in Assam—full of greenery, sprawling household campuses, betel nut groves and a pleasant but a bit humid climate. From the main road, our vehicle diverted to a gravel path that ran through the green fields on either side. Right at the junction, there was a Gate welcoming visitors to the All India Theatre Festival at the Chorus Repertory Theatre (CRT), one of Northeast India’s most legendary abodes of theatre. They call it the CRT Shrine. CRT is spread over a sprawling campus fortified by walls and many of the structures were still under construction. Entering through the first gate of the compound one comes across the first CRT building, an Assam-type, single-storeyed long structure. The compound was well-curated with several artistically designed artefacts and wood crafts including the publicity boards of the earlier productions of the CRT which were painted on the iron sheet boards signed by Ratan Thiyam. One could see the great artistic skill of the legendary theatre Director. There were boards of *Macbeth*, *Chakravyuha* and also of *Chinglon Mapan*, *Tampak Ama (Nine Hills One Valley)*. The last play is the part of the *Manipur Trilogy* along with *Wahoudok* (Prologue) and *Hey Nongshibi Pritihivi* (My Earth, My Love), which were competently translated by our friend Bijoykumar Tayenjam which is also part of the course that we teach in our university.

Before coming to Imphal we were constantly in touch with Mr. Dolendra, the Manager of CRT. He took us to his office and gave us the brochures and cards to watch the plays. When enquired about the possibility of meeting Ratan Thiyam, Mr. Dolendra, a thin bespectacled gentleman, was not quite sure when ‘Oja’ would come to the venue. He had introduced us to his son instead, Thawai—a handsome, energetic man with a smile. He showed us the compound, the CRT shrine where the festival was underway and also showed the tea stall if we wanted a break. When we asked him how to meet Ratan Thiyam, he was also a little evasive. He advised us to watch the play first and assured us of a possible appointment. He got busy with the arrangements. Suddenly there was a spell of rain, so we took shelter under the Shrine. But the CRT people were moving about with the usual pace from one building to another with their hats on without at all bothering about the rain. None even took an umbrella.

Just before the show began, Ratan Thiyam, the legend of Indian theatre, entered the venue. He came in a dark suit with a red silk square on his breast pocket. He was the most distinctive presence in the venue. Everybody approached him with veneration and greeted him with namaskar to which he responded just by his nodding head. He went toward the open tea stall and sat under a shed. Dolendra hastily went to him with a bunch of files and papers and they discussed for quite some time when we were cooling our heels to get a chance to introduce ourselves. But before we could go near him, he got up and moved towards the Shrine. He went in and disappeared. We noticed that somehow everybody maintained a respectable distance from him, everybody would become self-conscious if happened to cross his path, after all, he was such a towering presence in the theatre shrine.



Image 1: The Chorus Repertory Theatre (CRT) at Imphal

We went inside the hall. It was an amphitheatre where the audience was to sit in the permanent gallery and the play was to be performed on the floor down below. The entire hall was covered with screens in Thiyam's favourite colour—black. One of the major creative ambitions of Thiyam, as he said once, was to create the colour black in his productions (see Das, 2018). The scheduled play that evening was *Panchajanya*, a production by Nandikar of Rudraprasad Sengupta, another legendary figure of contemporary Indian theatre from Kolkata. In the play, Sohini Sengupta, daughter of Rudrapradad, was in the lead role to enact the role of Radha. Indian theatre in Eastern India is slowly making a transition from one generation to another. The play reinterpreted Krishna

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and his evolution from a pastoral hero to a major protagonist of grand politics and his subsequent entanglement with a devastating moral crisis. Here, Krishna is a humanised individual rather than a divine figure. This was an energetic, vibrant performance with a lot of interplay of colour and lights.

Sohni Sengupta, while speaking about the play confided that when they were preparing the play for the theatre festival at CRT, they were particularly attentive to infusing a lot of energy into the play, therefore they had improvised their performance with several elements from Ratan Thiyam’s poetics of theatre. The inclusion of the martial arts based on Manipuri *thang ta* to enact the fight sequences was one such improvisation.

After the show, we could meet Ratan Thiyam, who advised us to come the next day in the evening for the interview.

We also met Thawai before leaving CRT for that evening. He was happy that we could get an appointment with his father. He also informed us that the closing play of the festival would be a CRT production; it could be either *Urubhangam*, one of the legendary productions directed by the Master, Ratan Thiyam or a new production, *Dumb Waiter* of Harold Pinter, directed by Thawai. But our preference was *Urubhangam*. He also told us that he had got his theatre training in Japan under the legendary theatre director of Asia, Tadashi Suzuki.



Image 2: On the entrance of CRT the boards of two famous plays are on display- *Nine Hills One Valley* and *Chakravyuha*

Coming out of the CRT we saw the tempo rickshaw of Ranjit waiting for us in front of the gate. It was about 8 pm at night and the roads were deserted. As we entered the city thoroughfare, most of the shutters were down barring a few medicine stores and other odd shops. But the empty roads looked fully decked up. In many places, they put up barricades on one side of the road and lit up the venue with bright lights, played loud music and the young boys and girls in their gorgeous *phanek* and traditional wear overtook the streets to dance. We stopped our vehicle and got down to watch the programmes. Ranjit informed us that the soiree would be on for long because it was a special time; it was time for the *Sajibu Cheiraoba* or the *Sajibbu Nongma Panba* festival. In between March and April, they celebrate the Manipuri or the Meitei New Year festival and organise programmes of dance and music in their respective localities. The overall mood all around was like that of Rongali Bihu in Assam when thousands throng the venues to celebrate the spring festival. Given the festive mood and the spontaneous community participation in the cultural programmes, it was difficult to imagine that this was one of the most 'disturbed states' of the country. *Sajibu Cheiraoba* is part of the indigenous faith of the Meiteis, the *Sanamahi* religion though Vaishnavism is the main religious order in Manipur. But in recent times there have been serious efforts to revive the rites and rituals of *Sanamhai* among the new generation. The cultural revival in Manipur has its impact on the script of Manipuri language too. The king of Manipur, Garib Nawaz (King Pamheiba) adopted Gaudiya Vaishnavism in the early 18th century under the influence of Shanti Das Gosain. This was the time when a large number of *Puyas* written in Manipuri script were burnt and the Bengali script was adopted for the language. However, the ancient script of Manipur, the Meitei Mayek, has been retrieved and restored in recent times.

The next morning, we went to the famous *Ima Keithel*—the Mother's Market- also called the *Nupi keithel* or the Women's Market. It was literally an all-women market. The huge market had only women shopkeepers who were selling an assortment of stuff and wares, from household implements to attractive Manipuri dresses, ornate puja items, exotic handicraft pieces, imported blankets, T-shirts, jackets and also the famous Manipuri mosquito nets. Most of the tourists while browsing through the market would get stuck with the mosquito nets as an unexpected discovery. Those shops were crowded with tourists and also families of army officials who were on a spree binge buying the mosquito nets. Some even called home to get the right count to pick up nets for each bed, as it were. Those mosquito nets were not ordinary ones; they looked straight from a royal bedroom. Those were so rich and luxuriant that it was almost impossible to avoid them. In fact, we saw such mosquito nets mostly in interior decoration magazines. Prices ranged from rupees one thousand to five thousand apiece and even more if it was customised for special occasions like weddings etc. We also ended up buying a couple of nets for ourselves. Manipur is also famous for blankets and many other foreign brands which were directly imported from Myanmar through the Moreh market at the Indo-Myanmar border. No wonder, the Manipuri youths are known as the brand-conscious fashionistas flaunting their imported haute couture.

Imphal is also the place where everything related to Govinda puja and Krishna *samkirtan* is greatly available. In fact, Imphal looks like a temple town where devotion to Krishna is quite evident in public spaces as women and young girls would sport *tilak* neatly drawn from the foreheads reaching to the tips of their noses. This was not meant only for some religious occasions but it was a part of the everyday formal dress code. One can feel that in public places without

that *tilak* they might well feel a little awkward. There were plenty of shops selling high-quality brass wares. That part of the market looked like an extension of a temple compound where one could pick up assortments of puja items—ornate dresses for idols, brass lamps, bells, *mandiras* and so on. The city of Imphal has its own rhythm as an abiding site performing life.



Image 3: *Ima Keithel* (Mother's market) or *Nupi Keithel* (Women's market) in Imphal

The Interview

As we reached the CRT a little early that day. Ratan Thiyam arrived at the venue in his trademark black suit and sat in his usual spot under a cottage-like shed when Mr. Dolendra came to him with files and papers. In the midst of their conversation, we proceeded to him. As Mr. Dolendra made room for us, we set up our camera and switched on the recorder to go ahead with the session.



Image 4: Ratan Thiyam at CRT (2017)

Subhash Das: Indian theatre has come a long way. There have been major experiments in contemporary Indian theatre, especially in the form of *Theatre of Roots*,⁸ a movement of which you have been one of the major pioneers. How do you look at the contemporary theatre in India, including your own theatrical repertoire?

Ratan Thiyam: Well, I believe theatre is a continuous process; it is a laboratory where we as individuals, associated with theatre, keep exploring varied dimensions of the art form which, of course, keep evolving with the change of time. Therefore, you see, it cannot get stuck anywhere, it cannot be like stagnant water; it has to be always fresh and flowing.

Jyotirmoy Prodhani: How do you accomplish that?

RT: Theatre is not a casual engagement; it is a daily ritual. In order to keep theatre fresh, to bring in that fresh dimension and attitude, one needs to make it happen from within—one needs to keep the very thought process associated with theatre ever alive and dynamic. Theatre evolves through our sustained attachment to it, which does not get over at one particular juncture. One

thing or one production, or one kind of exposition is not really enough to depict my ideas or can really portray my notion of theatre. So, you have to keep renewing your mode of engagement, you must have the agility to adopt and adapt to the changes. And I firmly believe in the changing dimensions of theatre. After all, theatre by nature is a medium of constant experimentation.

SD: How do you think the other components of theatre have led to the changing dimensions of its form?

RT: Theatre is a composite art form; a composite totality and every component here has its own modes of evolution and changes. You can see how, throughout the world, various art forms are undergoing changes and transformations. Theatre by default becomes a part of that dynamism, that mode of transformation. In fact, many other composite art forms are changing the world over, and theatre, as one of the composite art forms, is no exception. So, naturally, theatre reflects and *will* reflect, or any art form for that matter, those dynamics of changes. I mean, it strives to reach out to the elements of aesthetics all the time. For me, it is not really one kind of exposition or description that one should think of in terms of theatre. At least I don't think so.

JP: Sir, how do you look at the Indian theatre now? After all, you Panikkar, Habib Tanvir, Badal Sircar, and others have been the pioneers in evolving a new kind of experiment in Indian theatre.

RT: I think technology has really come into Indian theatre though it has come very slowly, gradually; but now it is a sudden kind of advent of technology. And it has affected us in a big way. It is, I would say, a good thing, you know, and also a bad thing. I mean, merits and demerits of it, because, so far as the creativity in theatre is concerned, there may be technological advent with creativity; but at the same time, I believe, there should be a balance; there we need to work out to draw a balance between technology and human(e) qualities. That's very important in order to understand art because art is all about, particularly in theatre and performance by human beings. It cannot be overshadowed by technology.

SD: In your plays violence is a recurring motif that keeps coming back to your plays, to your interpretations of experiences where Manipur is also one of the major recurring images. How do you think, over the years, your plays could affect this very consciousness, i.e., the Manipuri consciousness vis-à-vis the lived realities of the place and the people...

RT: It is not really only Manipur; it is about the entire human race, you see. The turmoil is everywhere, in any portion of this world, which is really violent. And one has to think about it because it is not something that is happening far away from us, at a distance, somewhere in another country. It is not. It affects us with its impact, the kind of vibration, the violent vibration, that we are getting around is very dangerous. So, one has to be very much aware and alert (and) which would naturally find reflections in various productions, in various art forms, and in cultural expressions. In fact, everywhere. If it is not, it is not like the time when entire Europe or even the oriental factor in the Orient had expressed common concerns. The impressionist or expressionist painters were coming up. The kind of paintings that artists like Pablo Picasso did were something to protest against the war. They reflected the time in their paintings irrespective of whether something was good or not very good at that point in time but they tried to reflect their anxieties and experiences in their art, in their paintings, in various expressions of culture. They also came to

the theatre, opera...., in everything, you see. Therefore, it is very natural that it automatically finds its reflections in our minds which is also an expression of the time.

JP: Epic is one of the most powerful and profound metaphors in your plays as you keep reinterpreting the epics, the epic motifs. How do you relate your experiences of the epic to that of modern theatre?

RT: See, epic is a very big thing It carries many dimensions. So, when you work with an epic that means you can work with the multifaceted dimensions that unfold layers after layers. Therefore, it is exciting and you try to portray its varied nuances and aspects through the portrayal of its characters. These characters are really very, very strong. They are a powerful lot of characters that emerge in the epics, whether it is in the *Mahabharata* or in the *Ramayana*. All these aspects are enormously interesting. Human beings or human civilizations though often thought to have changed a lot, I don't think the human mind has travelled that far. It remains a kind of mind that dwells in many aspects of the epics. Therefore, we enjoy the epics; they make such an impact upon us. It talks about morality, high moral values, it talks about philosophy, it talks about arts, it talks about everything. So, it becomes an important imperative to explore the idea of an epic. If one is exploring that, I think it's a beautiful thing.

He stood up as one of the CRT guys came and informed that the play was about to start. He politely took leave, "I think I have to leave now. The play is about to begin. Don't forget to watch our play tomorrow, if you are around."

The play that evening was *Tumhara Vincent* directed by Satyabrata Rout of Rangakalpa from Hyderabad. The highlight of the play was the recreation of the yellow sunflowers of Vincent van Gogh all over the stage through the use of light and cloth props that depicted not only the creations of Van Gogh but also the artist's intense struggles against the dehumanising tentacles of capitalism. After the play, Prof. Rout informed the audience that there was a major glitch as one of their actors could not come beyond Guwahati and failed to arrive at Imphal that morning. Therefore, her part was enacted by one of the actors from CRT who was prepared barely a few hours before the show and she acted impeccably. Prof. Rout praised the rigorous training regime in the CRT developed by Ratan Thiyam.

As we came out of the show, Thawai informed us that the next day, as the closing act, it would be *Urubhangam* and not his play, *The Dumb Waiter*, as he was too busy to be with the team to prepare for the play next evening. So, they had settled for *Urubhangam*, which the actors knew by heart, like the back of their hands to pull off the play at any time.

Urubhangam

It was the sixth and the last day of the Theatre Festival. We were inside the packed CRT Shrine. The thespian arrived. It was his play today. Bhasha's *Urubhangam*. This play by Thiyam is an iconic play in the history of modern Indian theatre. This is one of the major plays often cited as an example of what the theatre critics Suresh Awasthi and Richard Schechner defined as the *Theatre of Roots* – post-independent India's most significant theatre movement. Ratan Thiyam, Ebrahim

Alkazi, K.N. Panikkar, Habib Tanvir, B.V. Karanth and others were the major exponents of this movement that had picked up in the '70s. This was a movement in search of a form of its own as the Indian theatre was in an urgent need to invent an indigenous theatrical form by liberating itself from the dominant Western mode of theatrical representation. Theatre could have been one of the most effective discourses to achieve post-independent India's cultural goal of decolonisation.

The last show of the festival was dedicated to another legendary theatre director from Manipur, H. Kanhailal, who had expired the previous year in 2016. The opening play of the festival was Kanhailal's one of the most celebrated plays, *Pebet*. The play was one of his early productions, first performed in 1975. Theatre critic Rustom Bharucha (1999) had described the plays of Kanhailal as 'Poor Theatre' However, Kanhailal preferred to call his theatre the 'Theatre of the Earth' (qtd. in Prodhani, 2014). *Pebet* is a rare bird found in Manipur, smaller than a sparrow. The director used the bird as a metaphor to depict the contemporary social and political crisis of his state. The most striking aspect of the play was the unique mode of theatrical narrative that Kanhailal had developed through this play which eventually turned out to be the hallmark of his theatre. Kanhailal was everything what Ratan Thiyam is not. Though intense and evocative, unlike Thiyam, Kanhailal's plays are stark and spartan, distinctively marked by the conspicuous absence of the luxurious play of lights or elaborate costumes. His theatre abode, Kalakshetra Manipur, is another important theatre school of contemporary theatre in Imphal.

Urubhangam of Thiyam, on the other hand, represents the quintessential creative vigour of Ratan Thiyam. The classical Sanskrit play by Bhasha depicted the last few days of Duryodhana after he was defeated by Bhima through an unfair battle. The invincible Duryodhana was hit below the belt by Bhima at the instigation of Krishna, violating the rule of the game. In the duel with maces, at the instigation of Krishna, Bhima had hit Duryodhana on his thighs, which was against the basic principles of war. Unprepared for such an enormous violation of the fundamental ethics of battle by his adversary, Duryodhana fell to the ground. With broken thighs, he was lying in a remote corner of the vast Kurukshetra battleground. His young son, Durjaya, his wives and his parents, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra, would come looking for their father, husband and son. Every dramatic moment was intensified by the beating of the drum, the only musical instrument used to complement the moods of the scenes as the background score, be it the fights, moments of melancholy, despair, anger and also joy and divine solace. The actors not only used the traditional costume but extensively incorporated the *mudras* and gestures from the classical Manipuri dance, *Raas Leela*. The fight sequences were enacted through the prolific display of *thang ta*, an indigenous martial art tradition of Manipur. This is one of the signature plays of Ratan Thiyam in terms of its stylistics—particularly the use of light, colour and costume. As opposed to Kanhailal, the productions of Ratan Thiyam are visual extravaganzas, which he achieved not by using opulent settings but through its poetic plasticity—subtle manipulations of lights. In fact, his son Thawai had confided that he had learnt the art and trick of using light from his father. From him, he had learnt to be audacious enough to break 'the grammar of lighting'. The last scene of the play, when Duryodhana, along with his other brothers, would travel to heaven in a chariot flown by swans, was a visual treat, superbly enduring; it looked like an VFX illusion of a film, though Thiyam had used just blue shades and the arms of the actors. The performance constantly underlined its innate recalcitrance to be re-created in another location without the cultural hinterland of Manipur. This

is one of the fundamental achievements of the *Theatre of Roots* movement that could attain an essentially Indian identity by incorporating its roots as an integral component of the poetics of performance.



Image 5: A scene from Thiyam's *Urubhangam* (2017)

After the play, when we met Ratan Thiyam, he asked us how the play was. We told we lost our words when we watched the final scene of the play, it was mesmerising, like a dream. Ratan Thiyam smiled in response and quipped, "This play I had designed thirty years ago. The play is still fresh. This is the magic of an epic."



Image 6: The last scene of Thiyam's *Urubhangam* (2017)

When we left Imphal the next day, we felt like just having completed a pilgrimage. As our flight took off, we looked down from above and was wondering how this land of nine hills and one

valley nurtured such great cultural figures who were so renowned all over the world yet so rooted in their native land.

Notes:

¹ *Ima Keithel* (mother's market) or *Nupi Keithel* (women's market) is a unique market in Imphal where all the shop owners are women. This market has been there since the 16th century when it was mandatory for the male members to serve in the royal army. Since the husbands were away for months on the battlefields, the women had to take over the economic activity to keep their hearth burning. This is ironic in the present context that following militancy and the repressive regime of the armed forces, the male folks are away when the women are taking charge of their households. The market has a symbolic significance in the present context as well.

² In several states in India alcohol is prohibited which are known as the 'dry states' where consumption of alcohol is seen as an 'immoral' act. But in the Northeastern states, prohibitions are mainly imposed to curtail alcohol abuse. However, in states like Manipur substance abuse has become a major concern now.

³ The Armed Forces (Special Power) Act is an Act promulgated in 1958 in the form of an ordinance and was imposed in Manipur on 22 May 1958. Later it was passed as an Act by the Indian parliament. As per the provisions of the Act the armed forces are equipped with extraordinary power to maintain order in the areas designated as 'disturbed areas' without being accountable to any state authority including the state governments. There were several allegations of massive human rights violations. One of the most controversial incidents was the alleged rape and killing of Thanjam Manorama by the Indian Armed forces on 11 July, 2004 on the sheer suspicion of being a cadre of a banned militant outfit, People's Liberation Army (PLA).

⁴ On 14 July 2004, 12 *imas* (mothers) disrobed themselves in front of the Kangla Fort, which was the Assam Rifles headquarters, holding banners that screamed "Indian Army Rape Us" as a desperate protest against the alleged killing of Thangjam Manorama and atrocities on other women by the armed forces, which Simrin Sirur described as the incident that "shook India and transformed the state forever". (<https://theprint.in/india/17-years-since-their-naked-protest-against-army-mothers-of-manipur-say-fight-not-over-yet/700093>.)

⁵ Inner Line Permit (ILP) is a special permit required by an Indian citizen to travel to the protected areas within India. It is required for three Northeastern states- Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram. The ILP for Manipur was introduced in 2018 and became duly operational in 2020. Another Northeastern state, Meghalaya, is also demanding ILP protection.

⁶ In around 1941, just about six years before India's Independence in 1947, four top British Indian Civil Service officials proposed at the highest level the formation of a Crown Colony after India's Independence. The colony was proposed to comprise the tribal states of Northeast India including Arunachal Pradesh (which was then known as North Eastern Frontier Agency or NEFA), Nagaland, Mizoram (Lushai Hills) and also Manipur, Tripura, Chittagong as well as the tribal areas of Burma or present Myanmar. They proposed to make Imphal, the capital of Manipur, the capital of the colony with an international airport. (see *On the Edge of Empire: Four British Plans for North East India, 1941–1947* by David Siyemlieh, 2013)

⁷ Chorus Repertory Theatre (CRT) was established by Ratan Thiyam in the year 1976 at Imphal on a two-acre sprawling campus. CRT is known for having developed a specific theatre tradition that has incorporated several indigenous elements including native Manipuri dance forms (*Lao Haraoba*, *Raas Leela*, *Mridhangam et al*) Manipuri martial arts (*Thang ta*), several aspects of the *Sanamahi*, the indigenous spiritual order of

Manipur and so on. The theatre tradition developed by Ratan Thiyama has become one of the abiding examples of the *Theatre of Roots* movement.

⁸ The term *Theatre of Roots* was first introduced by the drama critic Suresh Awasthi in his celebrated essay published in the *TDR*, "Theatre of Roots: Encounter with Tradition" (1989). About the movement, the noted theatre critic Erin B. Mee writes, "After Independence in 1947, in their efforts to create an 'Indian' theatre that would be aesthetically different from the Westernized theatre established during the colonial era and prevalent in urban areas at the time, Indian theatre practitioners 'returned' to their 'roots' in classical dance, religious ritual, martial arts, popular entertainment and Sanskrit aesthetic theory." (see her essay, "The Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage") The theatre directors associated with the movement were Ebrahim Alkazi, K.M. Panikkar, Habib Tanvir, Badal Sircar *et al.* (see Awasthi, 1989)

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