

Reinventing Identity: Theatre of Roots and Ratan Thiyam

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Abstract

The essay attempts to see how Ratan Thiyam, a major exponent of the theatre of roots movement, constructs a new theatrical form using rich and varied traditions of performance of his native land Manipur, and asserts his socio-political and cultural identity. Thiyam experiments with Natyasastra tradition, Western realistic tradition and Manipuri theatre tradition and amalgamates them with rich Manipuri traditions of performing arts. In so doing, he in a way not only challenges the very notion of a national theatre, but also showcases cultural richness of Manipur as distinct from the main land and asserts his identity.

Keywords: Performance, Culture, Tradition, Myth, Identity, Nationalism.

Modern Indian theatre, which is ‘a product of colonial culture’ (Awasthi, 1989: 48), arose during the middle of the nineteenth century. The first proscenium theatres were built in Bombay (Mumbai) and Calcutta (Kolkata) in 1860s. The plays staged in these theatres and in some other urban locations during this period were mainly Western plays or Indian plays which followed the Elizabethan model. Staging of such plays in proscenium theatres not only changed the concept of traditional theatre and theatre space with all its song, dance, music and mime, but also affected a separation between the cast and the audience

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which was new to traditional theatres of India. The spread of English drama during this period, in the opinion of Erin B. Mee (2007), 'was a part of colonizing Indian culture; it was designed not only to shape artistic activity but to impose on Indians a way of understanding and operating in the world and to assert colonial cultural superiority' (p.1).

Realising that the English plays were alien to the Indian dramatic traditions and were essentially hegemonic in nature, a group of young Indian playwrights and theatre directors emerged just after Independence who completely rejected the Western realism and instead turned to the *Natyasastra* tradition and various regional theatrical and performance traditions of India. In the words of A. B. Dharwadker (2005),

...practitioners of the new drama [that is, 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. (p.2)

The impulse of these playwrights and directors to create an indigenous modern Indian theatre, according to 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. (p. 5)

Western plays or their adaptations failed to reach the common people as they were alien to Indian taste and they failed to express the rich cultural heritage of India. The return to the indigenous culture and traditions brings a distinct voice and identity for them. As quest for identity has been the prominent concern among all postcolonial dramatists of different colonized nations, almost all of them have a craving for, as Brian Crow and Chris Banfield (1996) observe, 'return to roots' (p. 9). This urge is expressed by different

playwrights in different ways. In the Indian context, the 'theatre of roots' movement advocates, according to K. S. Kothari, 'both the need and search for the indefinable quality called 'Indianness' in Indian theatre' (Crow and Banfield, 1996: 9-10). They also point out that such a cultural homecoming is needed as an essential part of the process of decolonization, to rediscover their histories, social and cultural traditions. (p.10).

Suresh Awasthi, the eminent theatre activist and critic, in his pioneering essay, "Theatre of Roots': Encounter with Tradition' published in *The Drama Review (TDR)*, 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 (Awasthi and Schechner, 1989: 48).

The exponents of this movement turned to their roots in folk and classical traditions of performances to create a tradition of modern theatre that was Indian in nature and character. Among the pioneers of 'theatre of roots', Awasthi identifies B.V. Karanth, K.M. Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam to be the most powerful theatre directors who have, according to him, invented a new theatrical form to liberate modern Indian theatre from the Western paradigm of realistic theatre. According to Awasthi, the journey to 'return to roots' began, in India in 1950s when noted director Habib Tanvir produced *Mitti Ki Gadi* (1954), a popular operatic version of Shudraka's Sanskrit classic *Mrichchhakatikam*, and then followed by *Agra Bazar* (1954), his own play on the life and works of a 19th century Urdu poet Nazir of Agra. However, Awasthi considers B. V. Karanth's 1972 production of Girish Karnad's famous *Hayavadana* as an epoch making event in the history of modern Indian theatre. In his 'innovative and improvisatory' production, Karanth used elements of Indian classical theatre along with music, mime, and movements. With this production, claims Awasthi, 'contemporary theatre began

its encounter with tradition' (Awasthi and Schechner p.49). Apart from individual impulses and experiments of these playwrights and directors, there is another aspect of the movement. Mee calls it government agendas. The works of such theatre activists were institutionalised and funded by Sangeet Natak Akademy, an apex body formed by Government of India in 1952 with the initiative of the then Prime Minister Nehru with a view to creating a national theatre reflecting a national identity in the wake of Independence.

Ratan Thiyam, considered as one of the major pioneers of the theatre of roots movement, shows his deep intimacy with native traditions, myths and history in his theatre productions. By revisiting the traditions, myths and history of India in general and of Manipur in particular, and relocating them in the context of present socio-political and cultural milieu, Thiyam brings forth issues both perennial and contemporary, such as war and violence, death and destruction, oppression and exploitation, anxiety and crisis of identity besides others. His rootedness with his native land Manipur with its rich and varied cultural heritage inspired him to construct a new theatrical form and to invent a new theatrical idiom. Speaking about his cultural rootedness, he says:

My roots help me evolve creatively. I am just taking ancient knowledge and presenting it to our future generation, in the form of my art and my art is the constant evolving process of my identity. (*Manipur Trilogy*, p.112)

Assertion of identity, for the Manipuris has been a problematic issue both at the political and the cultural level. In spite of being a part of Indian Union, they find it hard to assimilate themselves with what can be called 'Indianness'. There is a pervading feeling in Manipur that their land has been deceitfully and unlawfully annexed to the Indian Territory in 1947 after almost two thousand years history of independence. Consequently, assimilation to the great Indian tradition and culture has never been a complete process; there has always been a feeling of alienation from the mainstream among the Manipuris.

Feeling of alienation and an existential search for roots in the rich cultural storehouse of Manipur become central to Thiyam's artistic endeavours and enterprises. 'His Manipur', says Kavita Nagpal, 'is eternally present in Ratan's drama, even in those based on stories from the *Mahabharata*' ('The Theatre of Ratan Thiyam'). Nagpal writes:

In Bhasa's *Urubhangam* and *Karnabharam* too Ratan seeks the voice of Manipur and gives it his own tongue within the reality of alienation. The scene where Kunti 'floats' Karna across the stage to be gathered by Radhe, a memorable moment in Indian theatre, echoes the divide between the 'royal' society of the mainland and the Manipuri identity.

Search for roots, search for identity, the experimentations with various dramatic traditions, such as *Natyashastra* tradition, Western realistic tradition and native Manipuri theatre tradition, and their amalgamation with the traditions of native Manipuri performing arts become the core of Ratan Thiyam's productions. The traditions of native Manipuri performing arts used by him are traditional martial art *Thang Ta*; traditional dance forms, such as *Nata Sankirtana*, *Lai Haroba*, *Wari Leeba*, *Rasleela*; traditional narrative singing forms, such as *Pena*, *Lairik Haiba Thiba*, etc. Apart from that, he had an exposure to great Japanese theatre traditions like Noh and Kabuki during his stay in the National School of Drama as a student and they have exerted a strong influence on him.

Chakravyuha, the most celebrated play among his *Mahabharata* Trilogy can be taken up to see how such traditions are used to create a complete theatrical performance vis-à-vis how such traditions are given new dimensions. In the 'Pre-text' of *Chakravyuha*, Kavita Nagpal touches upon the various performance traditions the play assimilates-from *Thang Ta*, *Nata Sankirtana* and *Wari Leeba* to more local effects such as those of *Dol jatra* and *Pena*. Pinak Sankar Bhattacharyya gives a detail account of the nine different kinds of *Thang Ta* as well as the kinds that are used in *Chakravyuha*.

In Thiyam's productions, physicality with the actors' body movements and gestures mingled with the transmission of words with stress and rhythm are the essence of the performance and of stylization. Chorus Reparatory Theatre (CRT) which Thiyam founded in 1976 has actually become training and polishing ground for budding theatre talents of Manipur. All the members of CRT undergo rigorous physical and vocal training in traditional performance arts such as *Thang Ta*, *Nat Sankeertana*, etc. and in traditional narrative forms such as *Wari Leeba*, *Pena*, *Lairik Haiba Thiba* as well as technical training in stagecraft and design. In his interview with North East News Agency in *Oriental Times*, 1999, Thiyam said,

The Repertory apart from staging plays also provides training to young artistes in direction, acting, stagecraft, etc. It encourages theatre workers to experiment on original Indian styles in juxtaposition with modern technique to give a new dimension to contemporary Indian theatre movement. (p.8)

Such qualities in Sanskrit theatrical tradition as physicality and stylization in performance drew Panikkar, Thiyam and Karanth to the classics (Awasthi, p.54). However, Thiyam is inclined to Bhasa because Bhasa challenged the *Natyashastra* and chose for his heroes characters like Karna and Duryodhana who were 'traditionally ignored or denigrated in Brahmanic exegesis' ('Introduction', *Chakravyuha*, p.ix). The geo-political and cultural space which Thiyam belongs to moulds him to question the structures of authority. It is remarkable to note that whatever may be the tradition or ritual, Thiyam appropriates it and transforms it into his own way. As a process of appropriation, he would invite *Gurus* from different disciplines to work with his actors from the very beginning and the transformation takes place according to the need of the performance and the performance space. The consequence of such transformation and reconstruction is -

Rituals and traditions! They are mine. Ratan's rituals and traditions. Neither do they have any direct bearing to any particular Manipuri tradition nor to the *Natyashasatra*. I am creating my own tradition ('Pre-text', *Chakravyuha*, p. xxxvii).

The search for roots also prompts them to revisit and reinterpret the nation's ancient and pre-colonial past through myth and history for thematic concerns which give them a sense of rootedness, a kind of political and cultural identity in the postcolonial Indian ethos. The new theatre movement in India emerges at a crucial juncture in the history of modern India. It was a time of transition, a time of the formation of a new nation. Two hundred years of colonial rule bound together numerous ethno-religious groups of diversified India and evolved a national consciousness among them.

In the context of pre-colonial India and Indian struggle for independence, ancient Indian myths helped the people 'understand the universe' (Levi-Strauss, 1978. p.17) and their position in it and gave them a 'glimpse of the core of reality' (Armstrong, 2008. p.3) as a subjugated nation, and consequently, such myths and memories gave Indian nationalism its power which succeeded in overthrowing the colonial rule. In this context, Anthony D. Smith's formulation of 'historical ethno-symbolism' approach to the conception of the nation can be taken into consideration. Smith in his book *Myth and Memories of the Nation* explores different standpoints which seek to analyse the reasons behind the sprouting ethnic conflicts and the rise of nation and a worldwide appeal of nationalism even in the late twentieth century. He takes up three major categories or standpoints of explanation – the primordialist, the perennialist and the modernist, and rejects them for their failure to offer a valid explanation.

The deficiencies of such approaches led Smith, John Armstrong and John Hutchinson to explore an alternative approach for an understanding of the continuing power of nationalism. Smith calls this alternative position 'historical ethno-symbolism'. He says,

Historical ethno-symbolism emerges from the theoretical critique of modernist approaches, as well as from a different reading of the historical record. For ethno-symbolists, what gives nationalism its power are the myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritages and the ways in which a

popular *living past* has been, and can be, rediscovered and reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsias. It is from these elements of myth, memory, symbol, and tradition that modern national identities are reconstituted in each generation, as the nation becomes more inclusive and as its members cope with new challenges. These cultural and historical elements also form the basis of competing claims to territory, patrimony and resources. (p. 9)

In his approach, Smith emphasises that nations and nationalism may be modern constructs, but the process of nation formation is historical. So, what is important is not to assert the existence of nation in the past, but to determine what the appeal to historical and cultural past means in the present. A.B. Dharwadker uses Smith's ethno-symbolic approach as a theoretical perspective to study the continuity and evocative power of the country's myth, history and tradition with reference to the playwrights and directors of this new Indian theatre who founded their plays on Indian myth and history and treated them with native performance traditions. Indian pre modern past is three thousand years old with its archival, textual and cultural formation. Mythic narratives like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have maintained a continuous presence in Indian culture. In the words of Dharwadker,

The issue, then, is not whether the past is real outside its modern constructions, but how it comes to be imagined during the modern period, and what role these reconstructions play in evolving ideas of nation and nationhood. (p. 169)

During period of struggle for independence, Indian past was idealised and used as a key element to advance the concept of nationalism. A unified collective identity was constructed unifying diverse populace belonging to different ethno-religious and linguistic groups to fight against the common enemy. Following independence, such pre colonial concepts as unified collective identity or nation and nationalism or precolonial representation of myths and history as a source of unity and common cultural values problematizes their postcolonial representation. Postcolonial politics have challenged

the idea of India as a nation. Religious fundamentalism, ethnic conflicts, inter-state border disputes, separatist movements testify it. In a sense, efforts have been on in every nook and corner of present India to decolonize the pre colonized notions of myth and history. The mythic and history plays of the post independence period, according to Dharwadker, 'represent earlier times to 'stage' the nation in the present, but the full complexity of this symbolic identification emerges only in contradiction to colonial views of 'the Indian past'.' (p. 170)

The end of colonialism intensifies the interest in the cultural legacies of the past. Now the citizens of free India get the opportunity to repossess their past which is ethnologically, culturally and linguistically so diversified. And the post independence Indian writing uses myth and history as sources to reassess and de-idealize the past. The mythic and historical plays of Panikkar, Karanth, Karnard and Thiyam take a sceptical and cynical view on heroic nationalist constructions of myth and history. The *Mahabharata* which reflects the full spectrum of Indian life has become a major source of mythic plays of Panikkar and Thiyam. However, performance of the epic in their plays is intertextual with the works of Bhasa, the classical Sanskrit playwright. The *Mahabharata* plays of these playwrights focus on antiheroes, outsiders and victims. These literary reversions register the clearest shift from heroic self praise to ironic self reflexivity and question the power of the past in the mythology of the new nation. (Dharwadker, p.181). Ratan Thiyam's *Mahabharata* plays emerge out of the crisis of cultural and political identity which has been conspicuous in the colonial and pre colonial history of Manipur.

Thiyam considers theatre as a political and moral critique and uses myths and histories of war and violence as vehicles to express his protest. He has produced plays like Dharamvir Bharati's *Andhya Yug*, Sophocle's *Antigone*, Badal Sirkar's *Hiroshima*, and Agyeya's *Uttar Priyadarshi* which primarily deal with war and violence. Again, he is inclined to the *Mahabharata*, particularly to

Bhasas's *Mahabharata* plays because Bhasa, by choosing Karna (*Karnabharam*), Duryodhana (*Urubhangam*, *Pancharatra*) as heroes of his plays, challenges the established *Natyashastra* tradition. The heroes of his Bhasa plays and the hero of his own *Chakravyuha*, Abhimanyu are non-heroes of the great epic. Thiyam discovers an affinity with Karna as well as with Duryodhana. In *Chakravyuha* he shifts his focus from the mature anti-heroes to a young scapegoat/martyr. Abhimanyu stands for the younger generations who have been induced to suicidal acts in the name of patriotism and heroism by the political leaders, the 'power grabbers'.

In Thiyam's *Chakravyuha*, the line dividing good and evil, just and unjust, truth and falsity, *dharma* and *adharma* dissolves. Duryodhana who is conventionally conceived as the epitome of evil, makes a scathing attack on the popular perception of the Pandavas as the embodiment of truth and virtue and on the treachery they have played in the battlefield. He says cynically:

We have never traded untruths. When this war of Mahabharata becomes a legend, the future generations, who survive this age of Kali, will bear witness to what I say: Those who are swayed by the superficial will side with the Pandavas, but those who delve to understand the intricacies of and subtleties of life will opt for the Kauravas. I shall be vindicated, for I have done no wrong. (*Chakravyuha*, p.19)

Drona has to concede to Duryodhana by describing the battlefield of Kurukshetra as a place 'where there is no discrimination between right and wrong' (*Chakravyuha*, p.22). Abhimanyu, too, in his final speech, expresses the same apprehension: 'The search for truth will remain unfulfilled'. (*Chakravyuha*, p.51)

With the enthusiasm and theatrical endeavours of a group of theatre workers across India and with the financial assistance from Sangeet Natak Akademy, 'theatre of roots has come to define modern Indian theatre as a whole' (Mee, 2007. p.12). Thiyam with his mesmerizing theatrical performances drawing upon the rich cultural heritage of Manipur contributes to the formation of a new national

dramatic canon. However, what is conspicuous in his relation to the national theatre but least noticed is that while challenging the colonial paradigm of realistic theatre, he also challenges the very notion of a national theatre representing India's cultural unity. He uses his productions as a means to showcase cultural richness of Manipur and to assert his Manipuri identity. To conclude with Mee's words again, '[Nonetheless], by putting Meitei culture centre stage, Thiyam undermines attempts to establish and promote an uncomplicated 'national culture'. His work serves as an important reminder of the fact that regional theatre is often an articulation of a regional identity that is distinct from, if not in opposition to, a national identity and culture' (p. 253).

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