

# Tracing the roots of theatre performances in rural India: reasoning with the histrionic styles of Dr. Ratan Thiyam, the exponent of the modern Indian theatre

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## Abstract

*The paper deals with the theatrical movements of Dr RatanThiyam, the theatrical connoisseur and the doyen of modern Indian theatre. His form of expression is supposed to have ushered a distinct form of movement that have pervaded the length and breadth of Indian social polity since the post-independence. The paper looks at the biography of Thiyam and how he got attracted towards the theatre culture of modern India. The institutionalisation of the performing arts precipitated the growth of the modern Indian theatre and gravitated him towards the dramaturgical culture. In this context, the special techniques of Thiyam had been discussed and how he merged rurality with the urban motifs to create the contemporary form of theatre had been much delved upon. Therefore, the objective of the paper is to show how Thiyam can be identified with a distinctive form of theatre culture and how he dispensed it with the concurrent use of the traditional and modern forms of performance, to weave the magic on the Indian minds.*

*Key words: Theatre, roots, rural, movement, culture and protest.*

## Introduction

RatanThiyam, as the name skims on our mind, what comes first to our thought are his rich skills of dramatics peppered with ethereal magic and a strong sense of activism. It is not a boot tromping activism, often echoed through guns and ammunition, but it expresses itself silently through one of the most ancient and classic forms of mediums of communication, viz. theatres and staged renditions. Rattan Thiyam is often identified with the movement circumnavigating around theatres of roots, that came to define much of the modern Indian stage.

He was born on January 20, 1948 at Nabadwip, a place in the Nadia District district of West Bengal and reared in HaobamDewan lane, Imphal. He was born in a family of artists and therefore, grew up to tow their line of creativity and zest. His father, Shri ThiyamTarunkumar was one of the most revered mentors or 'gurus' of the classical Manipuri dance, while his mother, Bilasini Devi, was a renowned danseuse. RatanThiyam is a multifaceted and versatile artist not only from the view point of theatre, but also from the field of creative art and science. He works as a designer, music composer, choreographer, lightningexpert, costume designer,

architect and also a playwright, painter and poet. The notorious boy that he was, few could assume that he would grow up to be such a prodigy. As he steeped the threshold of adolescence, he went on to show his rich talent and potentialities in art and culture. By the age of 23, he has joined the Cultural Forum in 1960s which initiated much of his embarking on the literary voyage. By this time, he had started publishing his poems and lyrics and possibly, in a journal named, *Ritu*, he had published his first series of poems and short stories. He was pregnant with vibrant ideas and soon dreamed on to become a professional writer. He tasted his brush with authorship with his first novel, *UnnsadsNungsiba*. He thereafter made notable literary contributions like, *Chakravyuha* (The Wheel of War) (1984), *Uttar Priyadarshi* (The Final Beatitude, by Hindi playwright Agyeya) (1996), *Urubhangam* and *Blind Age*. His compositions are yanked from the bottom of his heart, and somewhere down the line, there is a strong sense of melancholy and loneliness, often echoed in his poems and proses, but nevertheless, his renditions are beamed by a strong alacrity and briskness, which lights up the show. It is this joviality and animation which not only takes his performing art back to its roots but he also uses this medium to draw a silent revolt.



(Pic courtesy: <http://gradestack.com/blogs/daily-gk-update-2nd-march-2016/>)

### Theatre of the roots

Thiyam is often associated with the legacy of ushering a silent movement especially, in the rural heartland, using the traditional myths, mythologies and narratives as the rightful strategies of silent encounter. He spoke of the poor denizens and addressing their issues became readily possible for the faculties he diligently developed. He speaks in myriad languages like Urdu, Bengali, Hindi, and English including Manipuri with incredible eloquence and readiness. His linguistic skills must have played a crucial role in bringing him closer to the wretched and the unkempt. He spoke of the marginal communities and used dramas as a useful instrument to express the grievances and groans of the underclass, whose mainstream possibilities had been overlooked and forcibly pushed to the dark alleys of the society. He started his own creative production unit in the name of, *Chorus Repertory Theatre Company* at Imphal in 1976, which is often termed as a watershed development in the historical trajectory of new theatre movements in post-independent India.

### New theatre movements: spearheading the de-colonization of theatres in modern India.

Modern Indian theatres, started their journey in Calcutta and Mumbai from the latter half of the nineteenth century, but they were largely drawn in the image of the European model, following the steps of the Elizabethan canons. There was hardly any indigenous nuance in such art forms and they followed blithely the colonial path. Subhas Chandra Das said, 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' (Das:2016:106).

It was thus understood that the kind of theatrical productions that saw their ascent in colonial India was cloistered with a strong utilitarian tendency. The idea was to send strong signals of submission among the general mass so as to cajole them to go along

the tide without defying the western ideals. This, however, had created a cauldron of repression, fuming in the minds of a group of young rebellious theatre directors, dramatists and playwrights. They were groaning for a creative vent to let out the unrest that had begun to unsettle them. They wanted to showcase the distinction of the Indian theatrical forms and their concomitant issues. They no longer wanted to be trapped by the foil of the western culture and their underlying concerns which starkly bore contrast from their Indian counterparts. It was a kind of urge for the 'theatre of roots' movement, probably a term coined by Suresh Awasthi, and quoting Awasthi, Das said:

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). (Das: 2016:107).

Thus it is well evident that the tide of an evolving movement was tip-toeing up the society and challenging the existent forms of expression. The movement was neither an advocacy of the traditional forms of arts nor did it show a visceral antipathy for the modern forms of arts. The new emergent forms of theatres thus took an ambidextrous form, in the sense that it mixed and merged traditions with modernity. Among the pioneers of this trend were B.V. Karanth, K.M. Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam. Awasthi thus identified them as 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" (ibid:107). Das, in line with Awasthi, however felt that the trend had already begun long before, with the Habib Tanvir's production of *Mittiki Gadi* (1954), a popular rendition of Shudraka's Sanskrit classic *Mrichchhakatikam* (The Toy Cart), soon to be succeeded by *Agra Bazar* (1954), one of his own wrights based on the biography of an Urdu poet, hailing from Agra (ibid:107). Therefore, a new epoch was on the way of making, thus marking the foreground for the birth of this new form of movement. What perhaps augmented the process was yet

another factor, perhaps an institutional one. Government grants started flowing in and especially with the inception of the Sangeet Natak Academy, the first ever nodal government funded institute for culture and art, the process never had to turn back. Built up soon after independence at the behest of the then prime minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the institution swore by its urgency to bring about national identity thus paving the ground for nation building in post independent India. Das, too felt, that the premiere institute was motivated in "creating a national theatre reflecting a national identity in the wake of Independence" (ibid:108).

This situation was vastly different from the pre-independence times when the cultural performance was largely conducted under the auspices of royal patronages and individual benefactors who happened to be an art connoisseur or one who was passionate about culture. The situation changed drastically after independence, when it was no longer an individual venture of leisure and voluntary pursuit, but strictly included within the garb of the central schemes and policies. The government had changed its stand and in pursuit of its propagation of the theme for "unity in diversity", it had banked well on the cultural and the aesthetic front. The government astutely used the cultural programmes as a propagator of its underlying theme, and designed its policies to befit its latent interest. Thus the cultural performances were brought under the fold of the government establishments only to ride upon the tide of national awakening and upliftment. The planned growth of the country saw the concerted efforts of its government to open its own institutes of cultural grooming that legitimized the sheer acts of dance, drama and music like never before. Especially in Bengal, the Hindu social reform movements had run down the status of the dancers. They suffered from a deep sense of stigma and hatred. The society took them as fallen women, and the situation turned macabre during the turn of the nineteenth century. According to Pallabi Chakravorty,

North Indian nautch, which evolved from the royal courts of the Mughals and Rajputs from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, and later in the music rooms of the Bengali zamindars (landlords), became associated with low culture and women of loose morals towards the turn of the century. Much of this was a direct result of Hindu

social reform movements of the nineteenth century, especially the anti-dance or anti-nautch movement of the in 1890s (Chakravorty:2006:117).

The situation changed drastically with the ascent of the cultural institutions duly funded by the government and this resulted in a steep rise in the status of such performances. The initiation of SangeetNatakAcademy was a seminal contribution in this direction which radically altered the cultural backdrop of the post independent India. In line with this change, there was created a chain of such bodies like the 'The ICCR or the Indian Council for Cultural Relations; a separate administrative hub financed by the Ministry of External Affairs; Kathak Kendra (1964), as one of the constituent units of SangeetNatakAkademy; a separate Department of Culture in the Ministry of Human Resources (1985); Zonal Cultural Centres for each states and union territories of India and much more. Chakravorty, added to this the following establishments:

The Eastern Zone of Culture, consisting of Assam, Bihar, Manipur, Orissa, Sikkim, Tripura, West Bengal, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, was established in 1985-86 (Coorlawala 1994, 209). 'The West Bengal State Music Academy was established in 1982 as a special section of the Information and Cultural Affairs Department of the Government of West Bengal (in its capital city Calcutta) (ibid:122).

All these must have precipitated the advent of a new form of movement in arts and performances that emboldened the directors, playwrights and performers to initiate a new kind of change that would enlighten the post-colonial cultural space. This space was used by RatanThiyam copiously to inaugurate his distinct form of expression to address the concerns of the contemporary society and its paradoxes.

### **Thiyam's forms of drama: an ensuing movement to endear the roots and rurality.**

Thiyam's maiden project, The **Chorus Repertory Theatre**, was established in 1976, in his native home state in Manipur to introduce his own distinct forms of performance and stage craft. The significance of Manipur as a neglected state need not be forgotten, since Thiyam had recurrently expressed

his insular and pensive approach while stating the political status of the place and his burgeoning sense of being left out. Probably the doldrums in the state and its incapacity to get merged with the mainstream politics had always relegated Manipur to the backburner of the Indian polity. This perhaps had suspended a deep sense of gloom and despair in the air, which found its expression in the works of Thiyam. He tried going back to his roots and nativity to interpolate this forceful exclusion of his state from the national politics as well as to give it a contemporary touch. The sad plight of the Manipuri people and their inability to juxtapose themselves thoroughly with the core Indian culture and politics had plagued Thiyam, like most of the Manipuris. He used his dramaturgical forms as a powerful weapon to showcase this disconcerted situation. Das quotes KavitaNagpal, who wrote the following lines about Thiyam's production of dramas based on the stories of Mahabharata:

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 (Das:2016:109).

Thus it is pretty evident that Thiyam even when portrays the traditional epics and folklores has his mind in the contemporary scenario and the seething unrest which had strained the present society. He tried mixing together the Manipur forms of theatres based on *bhasa* with the more classical tradition of theatre. He used various regional forms of Manipuri arts like *Thang Ta*, *Nat Sankeertana*, etc. as well as the traditional structures like *Wari Leeba*, *Pena*, *Lairik Haiba Thiba* fused with stage crafts, design, lighting and technological updates. Das again quotes Thiyam from an interview with the North East News Agency published in the Oriental Times (1999), when he says,

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) (ibid:110).

### Conclusion

Thus it can be said that Thiyam was instilling a new form of movement through his staged dramas and performances to drive a concerted kind of protest among the people not just of Manipur but of all over the state to instigate their search for identity. Having started from the colonial days to the present, he always believed in giving a just space to all the sections of the society and fighting for them had been a visionary mission for him. He can be termed a messiah for the under dogs in the sense he recognised their problem of identity crisis and fought hard to give them their legitimate share. He worked not only among the Manipuris, but his tribal festivals organized in various remote parts of India, especially in Chaibasa (Jharkhand), Dwaronda village (Birbhum), Andaman and Nicobar Islands etc, reverberate the fact that he wanted to champion the cause of identity formation and empowerment. Not just the folk ways, he also used the contemporary urban ways to uphold his views of sustenance of the Indian unity in diversity, thus trying to bring concord and equilibrium in a severely coloured society.

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