CHAPTER IV

“FIELD” OF ANXIETY AND RITUAL
OF HOPE
Chapter: IV

“Field” of Anxiety and Ritual of Hope

Ratan Thiyam’s major productions happen to be adaptations from folklores, epics and writings of great masters. For instance, he has produced Dharamvir Bharati’s *Andhya Yug*, Sophocle’s *Antigone*, Badal Sirkar’s *Hiroshima*, Agyeya’s *Uttar Priyadarshi*, Bhasas’s *Mahabharata* plays *Karnabharam* and *Urubhangam* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. For his own *Chakravyuha*, he explores the great epic the *Mahabharata*. The three plays incorporated in *Manipur Trilogy* are his own creations based on the native Mietie myths of creation and evolution of human kind. However, the world depicted by him in almost all his plays is a world devastated by war and violence, crippled by man-made evils. Ratan Thiyam’s concern for the human predicaments in contemporary time finds resonance in his comments on his own play, *Uttar Priyrdashi*:

I (try) to say that the world is changing. We exist in a world where questions are often raised- what is this world? How should human kind and society be shaped? The more we advance, the more we lose our mental and spiritual balance. Both good and evil spirits exist in the conscience of modern man. But (it) seems to be dominated more by evil. (in *Oriental Times*, np.)

Thiyam has a perennial apprehension that since the world is essentially dominated by evil, men are no longer in a position to control their minds. This inevitably makes it an imperative for man to gain, what he calls “lasting mental strength and contentment”, which, according to him, the “source of real peace and equanimity of mind” (ibid).
As a theatre activist Thiyam is sensitive to the incidences of violence and
destruction of life and property that have become an everyday reality of Manipur as
well as every part of the world. As a matter of fact, he is greatly disturbed over the state
of self destructing course of violence all over the world. Therefore, he makes a search
for a reified experience of “peace” and “equanimity” through his theatrical enterprises.

Though the sources of his plays have different contours, Thiyam always tries to
imbibe into them a local Manipuri aura by treating them with various native Manipuri
performance traditions and by making them open to interpretations in relation to present
socio-economic and political state of Manipur. It is worth mentioning here that he has
been branded as one of the major exponents of “theatre of roots” movement in India
which is deeply rooted in the regional performance traditions of India and at the same
time has a pan Indian character. Though the plays are set in Manipur, they encapsulate
the whole of the universe and they discover one common point of resemblance among
different parts of the world and that is death and destruction of man by man, “They
[human beings] are fighting among themselves and killing each other like wild beasts.”
(Manipur Trilogy, 56) His plays are, in fact, an attempt to reveal the destructive instinct
of man in search of power and wealth in an ethically decaying world.

Despite the universality in theme and appeal, and despite the variety of sources
of his historico-mythical productions, Ratan Thiyam is primarily concerned with the
state of affairs of contemporary Manipur, and it is in no way a healthy state. After its
alleged merger with the Indian Union in 1949, this otherwise a peaceful and culturally
rich tiny hilly state has passed through a phase of social turmoil. Insurgency and ethnic
conflict with resultant violence have become the order of the day. Manipur is a
territorial entity having multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi religious
identities with more than thirty communities and tribes. They together joined the newly emerged Indian nationalism in order to achieve a common object, that is, independence from the British. After the war of independence, the Manipur Constitution Act 1947 established a democratic form of government with the Maharaja as executive head and an elected legislature. However, the Maharaja signed a Treaty of Accession with the Indian government under controversial circumstances and Manipur became a part of Indian Union in 1949.

As a matter of fact, because of certain politico-historical factors, Manipuris could not assimilate themselves to the Indian nation; they have never felt any affinity or kinship with Indian state and the feeling of “other” has become more intense. The so-called socio-cultural invasion of India has changed the whole social fabric of Manipur. Now they began to relook at and rediscover their identity, the process which gave rise to insurgency and ethnic conflict in the valley. Bhagat Oinam in his study on the pattern of ethnic conflict in Manipur comes up with two patterns of conflict which he calls “expansion of nationalism” and “fraternity feelings”.

Communities living in Manipur never accepted the merger of their territory to India whole heartedly. A section of the Meiteis, the Nagas and the Kukis (they are the larger communities), equipped with an emerging political consciousness and a sense of newly born nationalism, started separatist insurgency movements with a view to forming a new independent state seceding from India. This section of the Meiteis wants an independent Kangleipak. As many as six Meitei insurgent groups are waging proxy war against India for an independent Kangleipak. A section of the Nagas dreams Nagalim and they want the Naga dominated areas of Manipur to be a part of proposed Nagalim. Similarly, the Kukis are keen to form Zalengam, an independent state of their
own covering the areas of their habitat. On the other hand, smaller units like Hmar, Paite, Gangte etc. all demand regional autonomy within the territory of Manipur (see Oinam).

The reasons behind the ethnic conflict between different ethnic groups of Manipur are attributed by Oinam to the demographic composition of the land which has given rise to a fear of loss of identity among these communities. In his words:

> The series of ethnic conflicts in the state; first the long years of Naga-Kuki clash, followed by the Kuki-Paite clash, and currently the much covert Meitei-Naga tension, find causal reference to the type of demographic configuration giving rise to different identity formation and subsequent clash of interests. (2032)

The conflict is not confined to one place but spreads over all other areas where both the conflicting tribes cohabit. To quote Oinam again, “The state boundary does not operate in such a conflict . . . [it] is ethnically defined and marked by a sense of fraternity” (2023). For instance, Kukis in Senapati district extended the Naga-Kuki conflict from Chandel district to their area of dominance. Oinam also discusses the fate of the smaller tribes: “The fate of those tribes who prefer to maintain their distinct identities, not to be called Nagas or Kukis, has to face threats and at times severe atrocities in the hands of those who want to encompass them into the larger folds of ethnic identity” (2031).

In this manner, in the process of asserting their identity, they come into conflict with the nation. At the same time, conflict arises among different ethnic tribes leading to ethnic conflicts. The dynamics of power relations in the society have changed. Majority of the population are listening to the minority section of their community, that is the leaders. They are ready to sacrifice their lives at the exhortations of these leaders (martyr/scapegoat dichotomy in Thiyam’s *Chakravyuha*). The majority become pawns
in the power game played by the minority. All of a sudden, the members of the communities discover themselves in a completely new world. The complacency they have enjoyed after two thousand years of independence is suddenly jeopardised. They have to struggle and are struggling hard to adapt themselves to the ways of this new order.

The world depicted by Ratan Thiyam in almost all his plays, irrespective of their sources and treatment, is a world which symbolises and, at times, duplicates the contemporary Manipuri society. This Manipuri society is altogether a new structure influenced and moulded by various factors such as, its assimilation to India, intrusion of ‘Indianness’ in all forms into Manipuri life, construction of ethnicity and search for an identity; and the consequent conflict and violence. The newly emerged Manipuri society with individuals assigned with new and different roles and individuals enacting new and different roles, which is the core of Thiyam’s productions, can be analysed and interpreted in terms of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological approach to society.

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), the renowned sociologist and French intellectual, offers an analysis of the mechanisms of reproductions of social hierarchies. According to him, class and ideology are not fundamental determinants to define a society. Opposing Marxist analysis of a society in which economic factors play a major role in determining the structure of the society, Bourdieu stresses that the capacity of social actors to actively impose and engage their cultural productions plays an essential role in the reproduction of social structures and dominations. He sees power as culturally and symbolically created, and constantly re-legitimised through an interplay of agency and structure. By expanding the scope of the term “society”, he expunged the term “class” and instead re-conceptualised society as a “field”, an idea which has become a dominant concern in the contemporary research in social sciences.
Bourdieu first uses the concept of “field” in an article entitled “Champ intellectuel et projet créateur”. He provides extensive analysis and application of this construct in a collection published in 1993, *The Field of Cultural Production*, and especially in the title chapter. Here Bourdieu is primarily interested in literature and art. However, it seems that the approach can be applied fruitfully to a wide range of cultural phenomena all over the world. It gradually assumes a significant aspect of his work, and much of his later writings are concerned with specific investigations of the field. He is of the opinion that to understand interactions between people, or to explain a social event or phenomenon, it is not enough to consider what is said or what happens. It is necessary to investigate into the social space in which interactions, transactions and events occur (see Patricia Thompson). Such social spaces occupied by individuals in a society are the fields into which modern social world can be divided. Thompson quotes Bourdieu who, writing about the field of television, defines a field as:

... a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies. (74)

Within a field, people compete for desirable resources or capitals which mark the cultural, educational or social distinction of the individual. Each field in a society is structured according to what is at stake within it (educational, cultural, economic, etc.) and is composed of antagonistic elements who struggle to acquire and preserve capital – economic, cultural and others, that is, the dynamics of fields arise out of the struggle of
social actors trying to occupy the dominant positions within the field. That is, the field is competitive with various social agents, using different strategies to maintain and improve their position, to accumulate capitals. As such, capital is a part of the structuring process of the “habitus” and used by individuals within the relative field as a tool for gaining dominance and power.

Bourdieu talks of four forms of capital: social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital. Social capital can be defined as the circles of friends, groups, family and social networks. Economic capital is the money and assets held. Cultural capital includes forms of knowledge and experience, academic background, aesthetic and cultural preferences, language narrative and voice. Symbolic capital, on the other hand, refers to the things which stand for all of the other forms of capital, for instance, honour, prestige, recognition, credentials, etc. Social and economic capitals contribute to the formation of cultural and symbolic capital. However, he emphasises the dominance of cultural capital by stating that “... differences in cultural capital mark the differences between the classes” (1984, 69). In a way, cultural capital and symbolic capital are crucial sources of power and domination.

In a situation when a holder of symbolic capital uses power generated by it against an agent who holds less and seeks to alter his/her action, the holder exercises, what Bourdieu calls, symbolic violence. Symbolic violence is basically the imposition of categories of thought and perception upon the dominated social agents who then take the social order to be just. It is in some senses more powerful than physical violence in that it is implanted in the individuals, and imposes the vision of legitimacy of the social order. Bourdieu who sees male domination in a society as a manifestation of symbolic violence, defines it in the Prelude to his *Masculine Domination* as:
Another key concept put forward by him in his analysis of society is the concept of habitus which is intricately linked with the social structures within a field. Habitus, according to Karl Maton, “is probably the most widely cited of Bourdieu’s concepts, has been used in studies of an astonishing variety of practices and contexts, and is becoming part of the lexicon of a range of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, education, cultural studies, philosophy and literary criticism. Yet habitus is also one of the most misunderstood, misused and hotly contested of Bourdieu’s ideas” (49).

Bourdieu defines habitus as:

The habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes. (1984, 170)

Habitus is “structured” by one’s past and present circumstances, such as family background, upbringing and education. It is “structuring” in that one’s habitus helps to shape one’s present and future practices. It is a “structure” in that it is systematically ordered rather than random. The “structure” comprises a system of dispositions which generates perceptions, appreciations and practices. (See Maton. 51)

Kirsty Hawthorn explains habitus as “the cognitive/mental system of structures which are embedded within an individual (and/or a collective consciousness) which are the internal representations of external structures. Habitus consists of our thoughts,
tastes, beliefs, interests and our understanding of the world around us and is created through primary socialisation into the world through family, culture and the milieu of education” (np.). To put it in a simple way as Maton does, habitus focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others. Effectively, habitus is both a noun and a verb.

The habitus alone does not generate practices, beliefs or perceptions. That means, human beings do not act in a pre-programmed manner following the implications of their upbringings. Rather, practices are the result of an intricate relationship between habitus and field which can be stated as follows:

. . . practice results from relations between one’s dispositions (habitus) and one’s position in a field (capital), within the current state of play of that social arena (field) . . .

Practices are thus not simply the result of one’s habitus but rather of relations between one’s habitus and one’s current circumstances. (Maton. 52-53)

Field and habitus are homologous – they are the representations of the same logic. However, they both are evolving, so the relations between them are ongoing and dynamic: they do not match perfectly, for each has its own internal logic and history. Consequently, the relationship between the structure of a field and the habituses of its members are one of varying degrees of fit or mismatch.

Shaping our habitus may provide us with a practical skill to feel at ease in a field or the rules of a field. Our choices, actions and decisions are not natural but conditioned by our habituses and therefore are a mediated form of arbitrary social structure. This is the internalisation of the objective possibility as subjective expectation, what is likely
becomes what we actively choose. Agents or actors are attracted towards those social fields that match their dispositions and try to avoid those fields which involve a field-habitus clash (Maton. 59). In some situations, the field changes more rapidly than and in different directions to the habituses of its members resulting in such field-habitus clash. When one’s habitus matches the logic of the field, one is attuned to the doxa which is another key concept in Bourdieu’s approach.

Bourdieu first uses the term doxa to explain natural practices and attitudes in traditional societies. He wants to give an understanding of the practical reasoning of the groups of people studied based on their experience of the real world and their expected imaginary world. He says:

One of the most important effects of the correspondence between real divisions and practical principles of divisions, between social structures and mental structures, is undoubtedly the fact that primary experience of the social world is that of doxa, an adherence to relations of order which, because they structure inseparably both the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-evident. (1984, 471)

According to Cécile Deer, in modern societies too doxa refers to pre-reflexive but unquestioned opinions and perceptions mediated by fields which determine natural practice and attitudes and habitus of the social agents in the fields. Deer quotes Bourdieu’s saying that doxa is “a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma” (120). It refers to the natural beliefs and opinions that are intimately linked to field and habitus. That is, it is the fundamental, deep-rooted, unthought and unstated beliefs – the taken for granted assumptions behind the distinctions we make. Doxa, in a sense, favours the arrangements of the field and thus sides with the dominant and takes their position of dominance as self-evident and universally favourable.
Bourdieu has used an analogy of a football field to explain his field theory as well as the complex yet fascinating relationship among field, capital, habitus and doxa. His analogy is reused by Patricia Thompson, Kirstya Hawthorn and others to elaborate on Bourdieu’s field theory. A football field where the game is played is a site with an outer boundary with internal divisions. Each player occupies the set position in the field (the field) which is determined by the player’s past performance and skill (the habitus). The game has specific rules which are to be adhered to during the match (doxa). What players can do and where they can go during the game depends on their field position. When the players’ experience and skill match with the position they occupy, they can work together and score a goal (when habitus of an individual matches the social field, everything runs smoothly). However, if one player decides to change the rules and play with his hands, a struggle erupts and the referee intervenes and decides the course of action. Knowledge (cultural capital) of the referee is used to regain the equilibrium.

As the football field, the social field consists of positions occupied by social agents (people or institutions) and what happens in the field is consequently boundaried. There are thus limits to what can be done, and what can be done is also shaped by the conditions of the field. Just like a football field, the social field does not stand alone. Field, capital, habitus, doxa – none of them is primary, dominant or causal. Each is integral to understanding the social world, and the four are tangled together.

Ratan Thiyam arrives at the Indian theatrical scene at a very critical period of the history of modern India. It was a time for the consolidation of the concept of the nation, for the formation of a new nation state after two hundred years of colonial rule. During the freedom struggle, numerous ethno-religious groups of diversified India were
bound together under one umbrella, called the Indian nation. However, this unified collective identity was challenged by post colonial politics at a time when Indian society was being reorganised and reoriented. Disturbing post independence phenomena, such as, religious fundamentalism, separatist movements, ethnic conflicts, inter-state boarder disputes, linguistic disputes, etc. sprouted all around to endanger the very notion of a nation. Thyam’s home land Manipur, from where he operates and which provides him with the setting for almost all his productions was too in a state of utter chaos in the wake of independence. Conflict and violence became a day to day reality of Manipur. Thyam is so disturbed by the ongoing violence in his native state, in India and around the world that it becomes the most significant concern of all his productions.

Contemporary Manipuri society, which furnishes the background for Ratan Thyam’s plays, consists of fields in the Bourdieuan sense. In these fields the most disturbing phenomena of conflict and violence occur. When one tries to investigate into these social spaces, one discovers that they are changing rapidly in the given socio-political context of Manipur. Prior to coming under British rule in 1891, Manipur had had a long two thousand years history of independence. Habituses of the agents in such fields suddenly came into conflict with the changing fields. After a short span of colonial rule, it again became independent in 1947. Then, all of a sudden, it became a part of Indian Union in 1949 losing its independent nature, though, the new set up is democratic. Consequently, the field of interaction changes very rapidly. New socio-economic structures and hierarchies and power structures are forming. Along with the changes in the fields, the rules of the fields, the doxa, are also changing. Within the new fields, the agents try to acquire as much capital as they can and occupy a dominant position in the field. Agents with capital try to legitimise the new rules of the new fields resulting in the eruption of conflict and violence.
The anxiety raised by all the three plays of Thiyam’s *Manipur Trilogy* is basically concerned with conflict and violence engulfing present day Manipur and rest of the world. In *Wahoudok (Prologue)*, the first play of his *Manipur Trilogy*, Thiyam uses the native myth of the creation and the transition of the created universe towards modernity with a view to analysing the reasons behind the transformation of the peaceful society into a violence ridden one. At the time of creation the universe was like a paradise, with an atmosphere of calm and serenity. Human beings were also with all humane qualities. However, the present world is completely different. Human beings forget the duties and responsibilities entrusted upon them by the Lord at the time of creation. They themselves have destroyed the paradise. War and violence, conflicts and corruption have become the order of the day.

In the first scene *Ojha Sheishakpa* (master singer) narrates how Almighty Lord created the universe out of nothing. Then He created the celestial bodies with the help of other gods and goddesses. Upon His instructions His sons created fish, frog, monkey, and so on. God released them on earth with specific duties assigned to them. Finally, they created human beings following their Father, the Almighty’s image in minute detail. The newly created man *Ningthou* (king) thanks God for creating him and the beautiful land:

```
Born as human beings,
A rare and precious birth,
You have given onto us

. . .

You have created the golden land,
Encircled by ranges of hills,
Guarded by natives, (*Manipur Trilogy*, 25)
```
Then he calls upon the seven Maichous (the Wise Men), the messengers of God to advise him on the affairs of the world. Their advice, as a matter of fact, constitutes the ethics for a better living. 6th Maichou’s advice is worth quoting here which is the gist of the whole thing:

Fortunate king of Kanglei
You’re an incarnation
Sent by god
Who looks after the birth of living beings,
Don’t forget the rationale
behind your birth. (ibid. 27)

In the second scene, Lairembis (Seven Divine mothers) bless the newly created human being and advise him:

Living world, it is the play of gods, perform your duties keeping your mind under control, don’t forget your obligations and responsibilities, when the words of truth are sung gods and goddesses residing above and below would be pleased . . . (ibid. 29)

Human beings lived in peace and tranquillity enjoying the beauty and bounty of nature. However, the third scene depicts the modern world as an antithesis of the mythic universe created by the Lord. Now things begin to change as civilization enters its modern phase. Population increases and at the same time food and natural resources begin to shrink. Disaster and destruction, suffering and death become a common sight. The whole world is gradually annihilated by war and violence. The Maichous give a commentary on the appalling situation prevailing over the contemporary world in general and over Manipur in particular. The “golden land” transforms into a killing ground. First they lament the rift between the old and the new generation and the loss of tradition in the contemporary society. The 5th Maichou avers:
Ancestors and the new generations; a fissure has started developing in the bond between them. (ibid. 37)

It has gone to the extent that their “Eating habits and living styles have changed”. (ibid. 38). According to the 4th Maichou’s observation, the young generation goes astray because:

During the course of history, groups of aliens with the thought of devastating our society have inflicted serious diseases on the future generations and poisoned their minds . . . (ibid. 37)

At a metaphorical level, in the context of present day Manipur, the Maichous’ disturbing observations can be related to the alleged merger of Manipur and the consequences thereof. “Groups of aliens” are, metaphorically, none other than the Indians who have “invaded” their land and occupied it. This invasion and subsequent occupation of the land has created a kind of a convulsion in every sphere of Manipuri life – be it social, political, economic or cultural. Prior to the so called invasion, the land was a golden land “guarded by natives”. The imperialistic manoeuvre of India to Indianize Manipuri life is also echoed by the 4th Maichou:

Fire breathing out from the mouths of the rich nations with sufficient arms and military power has started burning the weaker nations. (ibid. 38)

It leads to a drastic change in the constitution of the society. In Bourdieuan sense, it has created completely new and different fields of interaction for the social agents. Social hierarchies, social distinctions and power structures have changed. The agents, that is, the members of the society have discovered themselves in a strange environment because of the mismatch between their habituses and the newly formed fields. They have not been able to attune themselves to the doxa of such fields. The
conspicuous outcome is the conflict and violence witnessed by the Manipuri society. A section of the agents have endeavoured to adapt to the changing fields. For them traditions or traditional knowledge have no utility at all. On the other hand, another section is adamant and prefers to retain and preserve the old fields, and so the fissure between the two generations. On the other hand, various social agents have now used different strategies to maintain and improve their position, to accumulate capitals of all sorts to be used as a tool for gaining power and dominance. Conflict and violence creep in such manoeuvres. The 3rd Maichou anticipates this:

Man has turned into beast, man will stop loving another man, man will devour man. (ibid. 38)

In the fourth scene, the narrator has expressed same apprehension:

Common people have to spend their lives, sandwiched between a group of people who consider traditions as outdated and another group who mix traditions with religion and politics for their personal gain. (ibid. 40)

Chinhlon Mapan Tampak Ama (Nine Hills, One Valley), the third play of Manipur Trilogy, too centres round the same thesis: conflict and violence. However, Thiyam is a bit more particular here in defining the place and time of the action and the nature of the conflict. As the name Nine Hills, One Valley suggests, the place of action is obviously Manipur, the land of jewels, comprising nine concentric ranges of hills encircling a valley. Time is contemporary, to be more precise, after the land’s merger to India into 1949, when Manipur has experienced an undaunted upsurge of separatist movements and ethnic conflicts destabilising the whole land with unmitigated chaos everywhere, with unabated death and destruction of both life and property. The 7th
Maichou’s dream in scene one of the play mirrors the prevailing situation in a subtle and precise manner:

The sound I hear is that of a mournful voice, children were swimming in the river of blood, with no one to save them they were calling for their mothers before being drowned. (ibid. 88)

In the Prologue, the playwright very suggestively refers to groups of aliens inflicting serious diseases with an intention of “devastating our society”; and in this play, in scene one, the Maichous are awaken by nightmares which they consider bad omens for their beloved land and people. The 3rd Maichou dreams of strangers trying occupy the land:

*Hei! Hei!* Who is the stranger who has come to occupy the land? Don’t they know, we, the enlightened ones, are there. (ibid. 88)

In the same scene, the 5th Maichou also perceives the intrusion of alien forces into the land in his dream, “I have heard sounds of wrong footsteps in the land” (ibid. 88).

The unhappy consequences of the intrusion of alien forces are conflict and violence in the Manipuri society. As has been stated earlier, the society is essentially restructured and reoriented. Restructuring process leads to, in Bourdieuan sense, formation of new fields with its new set of unstated rules (doxa), a field-habitus clash, and struggle to accumulate capitals and occupy a position of dominance. In these newly created fields, the natives who hold capitals, particularly capitals of that of the “invaders”, are in a privileged position to further increase their capital and consolidate their dominance over those who do not hold; and they turn the land into a land “where might is right” (ibid. 86). The Mother’s prayer in the prologue of the play to the supreme God to rescue the suffering humanity reflects this condition of the society:
. . . in this world, when there is chaos, ‘when wrongs have subdued the rights’, when the close ones have turned betrayers, and when might has become right, please carry us, Your progeny, on the deck of Your boat and lead us to the land where there is truth, beauty, love and no suffering . . . (ibid. 87)

In such new fields, social and cultural capitals of the old fields which contributed to the structuring of the habituses of the agents have been redefined. The entire phenomenon of changing the values of cultural capital is rendered a material manifestation, though at a highly symbolic level, in a scene where Matam the demon, amputates the hands of the dancers performing exquisite Bhangi dance in intricate but delicate dance movements. The Bhangi dance is an important part of the Manipuri Rasa Dance which itself is a form of Manipur’s cultural identity. The spectators of the Bhangi are transported to dream land in ecstatic joy and sublime peace. In the words of Jamini Devi, “. . . while Bhangi Pareng is performed, the audience is not allowed to stand up; they are forbidden to do so. This is due to consideration that the noise around might disturb the peace, and might offend devotees who are partaking the rasa.” (55). Matam symbolizes the alien cultural forces (a tool of social dominance) trying to destroy Manipur’s native culture and tradition which means destroying the atmosphere of overwhelming peace and tranquillity. The 4th Maichou in the second scene laments:

The traditions . . . our dance forms and music that we were so proud of, our showpiece in the world, have been discarded like Kyamlikphang, the traditional gold necklace, lying neglected on the ground. (ibid. 92)

In the conflict between the two cultures and the subsequent change of fields where field-habitus clash occurs, the young generation is the worst sufferer. About its effect on the young generation, the 1st Maichou says: “Our ways and traditions do not
agree with that of the new generation” (ibid. 90). As a result, they become vulnerable and can easily be trapped, used and exploited in the power games.

Some people, very apprehensive of the new society and its constituent fields which do not match their habituses, vow to preserve the old order and structure, the old fields. In the new society, they feel:

The land has become a garden neglected by the present dignitaries. After nurturing it with a meagre amount of manure, they are saying they will make it bear fruits abundantly. (ibid. 92)

The erstwhile paradise turns into a land of sheer chaos heading towards complete annihilation. The 1st Maichou says,

There is chaos in the land. Before the land is completely devastated, we have to save it by following the prophecy of the Almighty. (ibid. 94)

And what is the condition of human beings in such a situation of chaos, domination and exploitation? In the Epilogue, the 1st Mother observes:

The humans, living without souls, have turned into black oak trees standing on the hillside after the wildfire, unable to express their pent-up sorrows with heartrending wails. (ibid. 105)

The group of natives who hold capitals in the newly constructed fields and consequently occupy a place of dominance, in pursuit of more capital and power, often use “symbolic violence” on the majority of the population and engage them in such activities which can be termed as ethnic conflicts. The majority is unaware of the symbolic violence exerted upon them by the minority and believes the social order as legitimate. In a destabilized and chaotic structure, the minority of the population has had
enough opportunity to accumulate capitals of all sorts and raise their position in the power structure. In the first scene, the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Maichou relates his bad dream in this manner:

> I have heard, there are some who are instigating the brothers to create chaos in the land. (ibid. 88)

The hint here is, apparently, to create tension and conflict among brothers. The 4\textsuperscript{th} Mother in the Epilogue is more specific:

> How worried are the ranges of hills at the thought of separation from the valley for a single night. (ibid. 106)

*Chakravyuha*, manifests in a very subtle albeit symbolic manner, the mechanism of symbolic violence. The majority operate it in a society in order to persuade the minority to sacrifice their lives in their (the minority) tactic to acquire and accumulate more capitals of all sorts. The play dramatizes an episode from the great epic, the *Mahabharata*, where Abhimanyu, the young son of Arjuna and Subhadra is entrapped and inhumanly killed by the *Saptarathis* inside the *chakravyuha* in the holy war of Kurukshetra. The core issue of the epic is the dynastic struggle between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* for the throne of Hastinapur which culminates in the great war of Kurukshetra. A throne symbolizes power, material possession and an eventual position of dominance. It is as well a source of capital – both cultural and symbolic. This “mimetic” desire (René Girard) for power and capital is always destructive and causes violence. The power motif pervades the whole play right from the Prologue itself. Even Abhimanyu who sacrifices his life in the war, is aware of the power game played by the elders which snatches his life.

When the play opens, the *Kaurava* warriors led by Duryodhana are in Dronacharya’s camp provoking the latter to create the cosmic battle formation,
chakravyuha, the next day to destroy the Pandava army. Drona, to prove his loyalty to the Kauravas, vows to create the vyuha the next day. Drona is, in fact, in a dire dilemma. He oscillates between duty and loyalty on the one hand, and untruth and injustice on the other. In spite of knowing that the Kauravas epitomize evil in this holy war, he has to take their side as he is bound by his duty to protect the throne at any cost. He regrets his precarious position in the war:

I, the stupid scum of a Brahman, who chose the life of a Kshatriya by taking up arms and standing between truth and untruth, I, Dronacharya, the son of Bharadwaja Muni, holding the sacred tulasi leaves in my sinful hands, offer this prayer. (Chakravyuha, 13).

Notwithstanding, he has to take charge of the Kaurava army and finally to create the vyuha as he succumbs to the symbolic violence exerted upon him. By virtue of his being the crown prince of Hastinapur, Duryodhana holds more symbolic capital than Drona, and he uses the power given to him by his symbolic capital to influence Drona. He agrees to create the vyuha: “I, the son of Bharadwaja Muni, take the oath in your presence, O King! that forming the wondrous cosmic military Chakravyuha”; and is ready to give up his life in order to prove that “I am on the side of the Kauravas” (20-21). However, the tone of cynicism, helplessness and self-pity cannot be missed in Drona’s soliloquy at the end of the scene:

Oh Ganganandan Bheeshma, grandfather of the Panavas and the Kauravas, you handed over this duty to me in the battlefield of Kurukshetra where there is no discrimination between right and wrong. Oh Friend, in this hour I remember you, after giving my word to the Kauravas that I will build the Chakravyuha. (ibid. 22).

In the second scene, young Abhimanyu is allured to the suicidal act of entering the chakravyuha by the elder Pandavas Yudhishtira and Bheema in the pretext of
protecting the honour and prestige of the dynasty. They approach Abhimanyu seemingly for two reasons. First, they know that he knows the secret of penetrating the *vyuha*. Secondly, they also know it very well and are confident that if they approach him he will never retreat even though it means death for him. When he says that he knows the technique of penetrating the *chakravyuha*, Yudhishthira himself flatters him like this:

> O my son Abhi (*embraces him*), you are so daring, so brave. I am pleased. In fact I am overjoyed. (ibid. 28)

A flashback follows which shows how his mother fell asleep while his father was whispering the cosmic secrets of the *chakravyuha*. Consequently, Abhimanyu, who was in his mother’s womb, could not learn the secrets of coming out of it. He tells them:

> O Maharaja, I was told by my father Arjuna the method of entering the Chakravyuha (*Yudhishthira and Bheema are elated. Sumitra holds out a restraining hand.*), but not how to come out of it. (*Yudhishthira and Bheema ignore this.*) (ibid. 28; emphasis mine).

The use of the two verbs “*elate*” and “*ignore*” in the stage direction is quite interesting. They not only indicate the plan of the *Pandavas* in a clear manner, but, at the same time, they also indicate how less concerned the *Pandavas* are for the life of their young but valiant nephew Abhimanyu.

Abhimanyu who stands for the young generation of contemporary world, is made to believe that honour and prestige of the elders as well as the dynasty or the clan to which one belongs, is above all considerations. It is injected into his mindset that he should be ever ready to lay down his life for the sake of the honour of his clan. Abhimanyu is a victim of symbolic violence exerted upon him by his elders and accepts
the resultant social arrangement as legitimate. He readily agrees to enter the *vyuha* without any question or any doubt:

> Like the insect that jumps into the wild fire, I will leap on the army deployed by Dronacharya. Though I may be young and alone, I swear to kill all the major and minor charioteers of the enemy force to save the honour of the dynasty of my parents. (ibid. 35-36)

Like Abhimanyu, the younger generation around the violence ridden world is made sacrificial victims in the power games played by the elders. They are tempted to suicidal acts glorified as martyrdom in the name of protecting and preserving the honour of the group, but in reality they are serving the interest of a few. They are totally unaware of the fact that they are simply victims of symbolic violence. The affairs of the world are such that even before the birth, the infants are destined to be sacrificial victims to be offered at the altar of honour, prestige and power. They are born into a state of symbolic violence and from their birth they learn to accept the social order as just and legitimate. In the flashback scene, Subhadra expresses the same apprehension concerning the fate of the baby (Abhimanyu) in her womb when she asks Arjuna:

> Are we destined to embark on our last journey after offering our unborn child to the sacrificial fires of the coming age? (ibid. 31)

The mythic content apart, the play is, at a symbolical level, an enactment of the present crisis of Manipur in particular and the world in general where individuals are reduced to inescapable victims. Abhimanyu is killed by the *Kauravas* in the battlefield. He is their enemy, very strong, rampaging the *Kaurava* warriors inside the *vyuha*. So he has to be killed by any means – fair or foul. And they kill him using foul means. *Pandavas* are no less responsible for the tragic end of Abhimanyu. If the *Kauravas* kill him physically, the *Pandavas* kill him symbolically by provoking him to penetrate the
vyuha in the name of prestige of the dynasty. He is swayed by their flattery, by their extravagant deliberations on heroism and martyrdom.

Ratan Thiyam is primarily concerned with the self-destructing course of conflict and violence in Manipur, but he is equally concerned with the spurt of violence all around the world jeopardizing the very existence of human civilization. As a humanist and a conscientious artist, he is greatly perturbed by the present trend of violence and destruction. His art which translates his experiences of violence and destruction on stage in the form of performances is exploited as a powerful medium of propagating his vision of peace and harmony in a universe raven with strife and violence. He is not obsessed with violence as it seems; rather, his obsession is with peace and tranquillity. He has not any doubt at all in his mind that if the present state of violence continues unabated, a very grim and gloomy future awaits us. He asks:

…But where are we standing now?...Can we predict a better future for ourselves? Are we trying to imagine that when the present situation continues where will we be in the next century? (*Oriental Times*, np.)

He expresses the same fear in his conversation with Pallavi Kharade of *Daily Bhaskar*:

My question is, if we go on playing the game of violence then what are we leaving for our younger generation? A dark age or beautiful garden of truth and peace? We have to make a choice. (np.)

Ratan Thiyam is not a pessimist, he is hopeful that humanity will make a right choice. His plays invariably betray a deep seated faith in the possibility of redemption. He is confident of the redemptive capacity of theatre as an art form despite having its linkages with strife and conflict. He believes:
Conflict will always persist...sometimes it becomes unbearable...there is just too much of it. I can put it all in a pamphlet and get people to read it, but that is not art and that is not my journey. At the end of the day, everything has to be artistic; and aesthetic must be involved. Art has to go deeper and question why something is happening. And I have to find a way out for my own journey. (with Ravindran and Saple)

He emphatically reiterates the fundamental potentiality of man to transcend all human limitations and frailties. Thiyam’s hope for a better future and a better place to live in is dramatized in the hope shown by Puwari, the personified figure of history in My Earth, My Love, who proclaims:

I, Puwari, have been made a weakling
By the selfish nature of human beings.
But, I will continue to write
History on my chest
With blood as ink.
Hey birds, lets meet again. (Manipur Trilogy, 79)

Hope, which is an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life or the world at large, is defined by Charles R. Snyder, the American psychologist and his colleagues as:

‘. . . is a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy), and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)’ (Snyder, Irving, & Anderson, 1991, p.287; qtd. in Snyder, 2002, 250).

The definition contains three components associated with hope: (i) having goals or goal-oriented thoughts; (ii) pathways, that is, developing strategies to achieve goals; and (iii) agency, that is, being motivated to expend effort to achieve goals. An individual’s belief in his/her ability to realise these components, that is, the agency thinking determines the
likelihood that the individual will develop a sense of hope. Pathways and agency thinking together provide us with the tools we need to pursue our goals.

Snyder’s guiding assumption behind the formulation of hope theory is that human actions are goal directed. Such envisaged goals give the targets of mental action sequences. Goals vary in accordance with the time frame – they fall between short term and long term goals. They also vary in terms of degrees – some goals are specific and some are vague. Vague goals are less likely to occur to those who show high hope thinking. Articulating the specific goal is the first step in hope theory.

Next is the identification of routes or pathways which are effective and can be used to achieve those goals. In the words of Snyder:

Goals remain but unanswered calls without the requisite means to reach them. Accordingly, people approach particular goal pursuits with thoughts of generating usable routes. (251)

Pathways thinking leads to the discovery of one possible route to achieve the goal for a high hope person pursuing a specific goal. In case of a low hope person, the pathways thinking is weaker and so the route is not well articulated. Again, people with high hope are able to produce possible alternate routes beyond the primary route to achieve their goals, which is an impossibility for low hope people.

Agency, according to Braithwaite, “refers to a self-perception that we can move along the pathway to goal achievement – we have the willpower to start something and to persevere in the goal journey” (130). Agency thought is the motivational component in hope theory. Snyder says:

These self-referential thoughts involve the mental energy to begin and continue using a pathway through all stages of the goal pursuit. (251)
Agency thinking is important in all goal-directed thought, but it takes on special significance when people encounter impediments. During such blockages, agency helps people to channel the requisite motivation to the best alternate pathway. (251)

In an atmosphere of utter hopelessness and anxiety, Ratan Thiyam, with his scintillating productions, stands tall emitting streaks of hope amidst the ruins all around. He is not such an individual to be dejected by the moribund environment where death lurks everywhere in any form and where despondency reigns supreme. Rather, he is such an individual who displays high hope thinking in Snyder’s sense, and with his sheer optimistic zeal articulates his goal which is not vague but a specific one. He not only uses traditions, myths and histories of war and violence as a vehicle to express his protest, but also reinterprets them in search of a solution to the evils inflicting the society, in search of peace and tranquillity in a world devastated by war and violence. The reinterpretation of traditions, myths and histories help him set his goals. At the same time, it also provides him with a clue as to the ways and means of achieving such goals and makes him confident that his art has the power to transform the world.

Thiyam’s goal as exemplified by his productions and more specifically by the three plays of his *Manipur Trilogy* is to regain the lost paradise. However, his paradise is not an ethereal one dwelt by Gods and Goddesses and other divine entities, but the mortal world with divine virtues. According to the Meitei myth of creation, the world is created by the Lord and His sons created other living beings in their attempt to create an intelligent being. Mother Goddess was closely watching their vain attempts and advised them to create human beings imitating Lord Almighty’s image. So they created human beings in the image of God. The newly created man *Ningthou* (king) thanks God for:
Born as human beings,
A rare and precious birth,
You have given unto us.

... an enchanting land,
You have created the golden land (*Manipur Trilogy*, 25)

The Narrator rightly observes at the end of the play *Prologue*:

Paradise is this. There is no paradise better than the earth. Eyes never tiring to behold, making the mind restless only at smelling, filling the heart with joy only at touching, immensely satisfy the tongue only at testing, once captivating melody to hear, words fail to describe it.

Look, isn’t the earth beautiful? (ibid. 42)

Such a beautiful creation of the Lord is destroyed by human beings themselves. In the second play of *Manipur Trilogy*, *My Earth, My Love, Puwari*, the personified figure of history laments the scene of the world:

... where on the Earth will cool breeze blow when there is no love, kindness and respect and while superficial glittering, enjoyment and greed have subdued the pure unembellished faith? (ibid. 67)

That human beings themselves are responsible for the dismal situation is clear from the conversation of the Nymphs in the same play:

*FOURTH NYMPH.* Vanished are the humans of yesterday, their hard-earned wealth, love, righteousness, beauty, benevolence, humility and respect.

*FIFTH NYMPH.* The smell of blood is in the air; dead bodies sans clothes are piled up in whichever direction one looks. (ibid. 54)
As such, Thiyam’s goal is to bring back the lost virtues of the world by driving away the evils of the society and to leave a world for the future generations which is a liveable one. In the prayer of the mythological Mother to the Supreme God of humans in the play *Nine Hills, One Valley*, the desired goal gets surfaced:

... please carry us, Your progeny, on the deck of Your boat and lead us to the land where there is truth, beauty, love and no suffering... (ibid. 87)

Similar desire for a better place to live in is echoed in the same play by the third *Maichou*, who after completing the writing of *Puya* (Book of knowledge) along with other *Maichous*, for the benefit of coming generations, makes a prayer to the Almighty:

With prayer to the Almighty  
let’s make a beautiful new ideal world,  
manured with goodness and love,  
where gentleness and peace prevail. (ibid. 103)

Ratan Thiyam, with an artist’s intuition, discovers the ways to restore the world to its initial state of creation, to regain the lost paradise on earth. He reinterprets and reanalyses native myths, traditions and history in order to rediscover the storehouse of knowledge which would lead humanity to the right path in the pursuit of the desired goal. In fact, he is convinced that only knowledge and wisdom scripted in a society’s myths, traditions and history can help in the exercise of inventing a new discourse of emancipation and in achieving a beautiful new ideal world. Mythological figures such as the Mothers, the nymphs, the *Maichous* (Wisemen), *Puwari* (history) etc. have a very dominant presence in all the plays of *Manipur Trilogy* propagating the message of love and peace and at the same time showing the ways of achieving it. The fourth *Maichou* avers in the first play of *Manipur Trilogy, Prologue*:
The stream of thought, tradition and ethics built up by men of the bygone era during the last thousands of years is a flood of knowledge. (ibid. 41)

The Narrator continues from where the Maichou stops:

The stream flowing down from the high mountain of history crashes with the socio-eco-religio-political rocks of the contemporary world and then flows to the future after changing its course. The flow of knowledge is perennial but the group who cannot drink the “water” in the flow cannot become civilized and it would be difficult to show their identity. (ibid. 41)

In the third play *Nine Hills, One Valley* the Maichous are disturbed to discover that their beloved land has been destroyed completely while they were asleep. They come forward to save the people from their miseries. They compose a book of knowledge which also contains the wisdom of peace and happiness to guide the future generations to live a better humane life. Following is an excerpt from what they have written on peace:

3\textsuperscript{RD} MAICHOU. But if a society wants to be an independent society it has to do away with murder, loot, torture, violence, illiteracy . . .

6\textsuperscript{TH} MAICHOU. . . . Even though people speak about it [peace] quite often, not many are working to bring it into reality. A man who is not endowed with compassion and forgiveness will never get peace of mind.

3\textsuperscript{RD} MAICHOU. Only when we can rout out completely from our minds the feelings of revenge, anger, envy, arrogance and over-ambition, we will get peace.

4\textsuperscript{TH} MAICHOU. One who is truthful is beautiful both physically and mentally. If one is compassionate, then his character is good. If his character is good then his family is peaceful. If each one of the families is peaceful then a society or a nation can have peace. (ibid. 101-102)
Thiyam’s plays ritualise this sense of hope as the moment of embarking on a journey towards a new horizon of peace and tranquillity. Such rituals of hope as executed in his plays are created by him; they are his own rituals, “Rituals and traditions! They are mine. Ratan’s rituals and traditions” (‘Pre-text’, Chakravyuha, xxxvii). As a matter of fact, he appropriates native rituals and traditions and transforms them into his own in accordance with the need of the performance and the message he wants to convey.

The play *Uttar Priyadarshi*, as Mee puts it, “is a ritual – or at least an attempt to create a ritual for a modern world” (239). The production, which begins and ends with a prayer, is his invented own ritual – a ritual which is a blend of many native Manipuri ritual performances. The opening prayer uses the ritualistic beat, rhythm and movement from *Lai Haroba* but with a different *bol* (rhythmic syllable) which ends with the chanting of *Buddhang Saranang Gachhami* in the same beat and rhythm. The ritual, enriched by his subtle and effective of use of light and colour, design and costume, invites the audience on a journey through a history based tale of war and violence finally to meet a row of luminescent Buddhas glow upstage and Ashoka fades into the darkness symbolizing his transformation from militarism to the Buddhist eightfold path of enlightenment.

The play *My Earth, My Love*, which is again a plea for peace, itself is a ritual created by Thiyam blending and mixing various native song and dance rituals. The play begins with the singing of *Shikaplon Ishei*, a prayer song in distress followed by a ritualistic war dance. The seven mythological nymphs are seen ritually weaving a cloth, the traditional symbol of love and peace, in a loom for offering to the Almighty. Throughout the play the cloth is being woven when death and destruction caused by war and violence all over the world occur in the foreground. The play ends with the nymphs
ritually cutting the cloth from the loom and offering it to the Almighty with a prayer for peace and harmony:

Offering this cloth to our Father,
the Creator of living beings’
the Almighty,
let’s pray to Him for putting a stop to war
and bring peace and prosperity in perfect
harmony on the Earth. (ibid. 76-77).

In *Nine Hills, One Valley*, the setting is a bit more definite – the mystical land consisting of nine concentric hills encircling a valley moves from a state of paradise to utter destruction. The play as a whole is conceived as a ritual experienced by the audience to regain the lost paradise. Like the other play in reference, it also begins with a ritual *Saroï Khangba* performed by Seven Old Women to appease the evil spirit. Finally, the mythological Mothers affirm in unison the journey towards peace by ritually enkindling the lamp of peace heralding a new dawn:

In the vast spherical world
to make human beings live in harmony
to put an end to war
to let the dwellers of hills and valley coexist
in this land
encircled by nine concentric ranges of hills
let us place lamps as offerings for peace. (ibid. 106-107)

And the final moving image of the nine hills twinkle with lights and the valley filled with lamps conveying rays of hope in a time of utter darkness.

As an experienced and accomplished artist, Ratan Thiyam knows the responsibility of art and the artist at the time of crisis besetting the society. He is aware that when the
society is in peril, the artist’s duty is not only to set a goal and indicate the right way to emancipate the society from the vicious grip, but also to have confidence in himself and in his art to motivate the people to desire for the goal set by him and follow the routes discovered by him. Discharging the duties of a conscientious theatre activist, Thiyam has, through his art, warned the members of the society against the evils of self-destructing war and violence, and at the same time he articulates a mission for peace to be followed by everyone through the paths discovered by him if one wants to live peacefully in a world of disturbance and restlessness. He is also confident that his theatre has the power to transform the society by instilling into the minds of its members his visions of peace and the ways and means for achieving it. The new knowledge derived from myths and traditions, he believes, will enlighten us and help us build a land of peace and happiness:

But, we, enlightened with a new knowledge, will be able to build a land full of happiness, with a bright future. (ibid. 105).

WORKS CITED


Hawthorn, Kirsty. “Outline the concepts of habitus and social field in Bourdieu’s Sociology. How valuable are these concepts for the sociological analysis of social life?” https://kirstyahawthorn.wordpress.com


