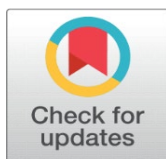


# WE ALL BECOME THE OFFERING: RATAN THIAM'S CHAKRAVYUHA AND CONTEMPORARY MANIPUR

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## ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the subtext of the chakravyuha episode in the Mahabharata and examines how Ratan Thiyam transforms it into a play that mirrors the socio-political landscape of Manipur across time. Thiyam's Chakravyuha undeniably offers a political commentary on Manipur, metaphorically portraying the struggles faced by Manipuri youths, akin to the fate of the helpless Abhimanyu. He illustrates how these young individuals are ensnared by powerful forces, forced into violence not as conquerors or victims, but as sacrificial pawns. In this light, the play serves as a poignant reflection on the entrapment of youth in cycles of conflict, providing a powerful critique of contemporary realities which have become notorious in recent times. The depiction of violence on the Manipuri stage is not a recent phenomenon. Political dramas have long captivated Manipuri audiences, resonating deeply with their experiences. This paper examines the factors that made this politically charged play significant in the 1980s, and why it remains even more relevant today. Furthermore, it delves into the interconnected themes of violence, human suffering, sectarianism, ethnic divisions, and other critical issues that are pivotal in shaping Manipur's future.

**Keywords:** Ratan Thiyam, Theatre, Violence, Politics, Manipur

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the Prologue of Ratan Thiyam's renowned play *Chakravyuha*, the flagbearers proclaim, "We all become the offering" (Nagpal 11). This line establishes the tone for the play, where the protagonist becomes a sacrifice in Thiyam's retelling of the episode from the Indian epic Mahabharata. *Chakravyuha* is told from Abhimanyu's perspective; it is his sacrifice, his story, where he becomes the offering. This story feels familiar because Abhimanyu's fate could easily be the fate of any person in Manipur.

Manipur's history, both pre- and post-independence, has been marked by incessant violence. Constant wars with neighbouring Burmese kingdoms, British colonisation, internal strife, its merger with India, and the insurgency that escalated in the 1970s have all contributed to the state of turmoil Manipur faces today. Years of animosity and distrust among its ethnic communities have led to the current deadlock. In the midst of the chaos and deep-seated hostility that has engulfed the valley and hills of Manipur since May 3, 2023, one is reminded of the Kurukshetra in the *Mahabharata*,

where brothers fought brothers, friends betrayed friends, and students rose against their teachers. Perpetually haunted by the spectre of ethnic fault lines, Manipuris appear to have unknowingly encountered yet another deadlock; each clash has a clear beginning, but no end is in sight. Blood-thirsty young adults, drawn into battles over clan and territory, wield guns and *daos*, becoming modern-day head-hunters. Educational institutions, where they should be, are disrupted, while the trauma of death and anguish imprints lasting hate and resentment in their minds. As so much unravels in Manipur, we are once again brought back to Ratan Thiyam's *Chakravyuha*, where the harsh reality of precarious ethnic divisions is laid bare. *Chakravyuha* of the past resonates with the present, as Manipur itself becomes a *chakravyuha* today.

In the early 1960s, amidst impending political turmoil and contentious historical developments, a remarkable surge of theatre productions in the Manipuri language emerged, fuelled by passion and fervour. This theatrical renaissance can be viewed as both a movement and a distinct period in theatrical history. It represented a profound shift towards a theatre grounded in lived experiences rather than escapism, coinciding with the tumultuous rise of the insurgency movement in the region. Consequently, theatre took on a more confrontational and visceral tone, mirroring the violence of the times. Concurrently, Manipur's literary landscape underwent significant transformations. Theatre, in the Manipuri sense, is inherently connected to its politico-historical context, extending beyond mere entertainment and artistic performance which the ritualistic performances have demonstrated. In this context, the volatile small state of Manipur is no exception.

The play premiered in 1984, at the height of the state's armed insurgency. Over time, this insurgency has taken many twists and turns, adopting various modes and political twirls. Abhimanyu in *Chakravyuha* mirrors the experience of Manipuri youth, who must navigate perilous paths and entrapments. The Mahabharata story is reimagined with a Manipuri touch, filled with vibrant colours and striking spectacle. Such an alteration is possible because "A theme [from the Mahabharata] becomes relevant and right in a performance not by virtue of the complication of the plot, but by the strength it generates in communicating the meaning of the text into action" (Panniker 193). That is the nature of Indian epics when parts of them are performed for an audience in a certain environment and context. The 'theme undergoes a rebirth' which give the audience a whole new taste and context. Similarly, Ratan Thiyam transforms this episode with his messaging in the play, exploring why the Abhimanyu trope resonates with a state like Manipur. In an interview, Ratan explains his intent for the play:

It's very difficult to understand this world for the younger generation. We cannot blame them much, because the problems that they are facing are inevitable because of political situations and historical factors. It became more important for me to find a collective approach to understand our own problem: My productions are mainly made after giving thought to the process of these factors. (Sen 229)

Ratan draws upon the experiences of a young individual trapped in a system beyond his control, highlighting the specific challenges of contemporary Manipur. The post-independence period he inherited was marked by administrative, economic, historical, and cultural complexities. Manipur's evolving artistic and performance landscape became a vital medium for expressing frustration and vulnerability. Theatre or rather performance, has been used by Manipuris to mock, reflect, and respond to antagonistic forces or entities beyond them.

If we take into account of Mahesh Dattani's notion of performance spaces, we can safely say that Ratan Thiyam's theatrical space is a blend of tradition, evolution, and, above all, radical (472). While Ratan stays firmly rooted in his cultural heritage and seeks to preserve continuity, his plays also exhibit a keen awareness of capturing the spirit of the contemporary Manipur. Ratan inherited a wealth of religious and ritual performance traditions that are either trained or participatory. The introduction of Western-style proscenium theatre in Manipur dates back to 1903 when Bengali officials working under the British Raj staged the first recorded drama in Imphal (Toijamba 2). Although these early performances were in Bengali, it was Lairenlakpam Ibungohal's *Narasimha* (1925) that marked the debut of a play performed in the Manipuri language on a proscenium stage. The introduction of modernism in Manipuri theatre is credited to G. C. Tongbra (1913-1996), whose unconventional plots and dialogues captivated an audience grappling with various political, social, and historical challenges.

The poignant and unsettling realism introduced by post-independence theatre pioneers like G. C. Tongbra, Arambam Somarendra (1935-2000), Heisnam Kanhailal (1941-2016), Athokpam Tomchou (1944-2021), Ratan Thiyam (1948 -), and others offered Manipuris a crucial platform for self-exploration, amidst the harsh socio-political realities that impeded their aspirations. The pre-independence Manipuri theatre tradition, which focused on high-ranking figures, characters, and events from myths and legends, persisted through the 1940s and 50s. However, in the 1960s and 70s, there was a notable shift in themes, with plays beginning to depict contemporary realities. By the 1980s, major themes

included grotesque poverty, rampant corruption, and individuals trapped in utter despair. During the same decade, theatre took on a more political tone, reflecting the intensifying armed insurgency, as Manipur became engulfed in smoke and fire from the burning hills and valleys.

## 2. WARRING TRIBES: THE PRICE OF THE PIE

Manipur is home to some thirty-three to thirty-four tribes grouped broadly under the Meitei, Naga, and Kuki categories. Each of these groups holds distinct ethnic aspirations and territorial ambitions, shaped by their unique communal experiences over the decades, often positioning them as adversarial forces. It is also a state known for its beauty and culture. But today's Manipur is deeply scarred by ethnic conflicts, misinformation, and atrocities. While avoiding the specifics, it is clear that violent clashes have occurred sporadically over the years. The root causes of these ethnic divides are both complex and multifaceted. Beyond ethnic tensions, there is also a rift between the hill and valley regions, fuelled by uneven development and centuries long mistrust. Ratan is all too familiar with why peace remains elusive in his homeland. Therefore, his plays have highlighted Manipur's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, as well as the looming threats these differences have posed. It is fair to say that the socio-political instability, fuelled by pervasive violence and recurring ethnic conflicts, profoundly influenced his artistic vision and dramatic style. Although some of his plays depict violence, much of his work reflects a profound search for enlightenment, reconciliation, and peace. His plays explore the harsh realities of the human condition, the risks of conflict, and the complexities of power struggles. As a true son of the soil, Ratan boldly confronts the grotesque and murky reality of Manipur, using theatre to bring these harsh truths to light rather than shying away from them.

A striking example of the real picture of Manipur is found in the dialogue of the seven celestial nymphs from the Manipuri myth Khongjom Nubi Taret in Ratan's play *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi or My Earth, My Love*:

Second nymph: In this gruesome age of savages, we, the weaker section, women and children, would become their beast of prey.

Third nymph: Amidst the frightening and unfathomable tortures and extermination.

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 can look at.

Sixth nymph: Dying while standing upright, sitting, lying prostrate, face up, sideways and upside down, before one could shout, after shouting, after moaning unable to bear the excruciating pain... (Thiyam 57-58)

Death without purpose or meaning casts a shadow over every part of Manipur. The common discussion in town revolves around the frequent violation of the most fundamental human right—the right to life. People talk, cluelessly and without any respite, about torture, loss of values and culture, extermination, genocide, and every possible ill that a society in turmoil can cook up. This is the price Manipuris pay for descending into this turmoil, with minimal resistance, for reasons known only to them. The nostalgic and glorious past continue to haunt them. There has been little peace as the kingdom transformed into a frontier defending against marauding tribes from Burma (Myanmar). Recent memory offers no tranquil times. Human values have eroded, and corruption has ravaged society like cancer. The threat of extermination is palpable. Given these circumstances, to overlook the pervasive presence of violence and conflict in Manipuri theatre would be both historically inaccurate and politically insensitive. The extraordinary problems that the Manipuris face are often viewed as unsolvable which throw them into a pessimistic worldview. They seem to lie beyond the scope of political theories or beliefs in human agency and instead belong to the realms of destiny, tragedy, and illusion.

Through *Chakravyuha*, Ratan underscores the human cost of imposed heroism and prolonged conflict. He also draws attention to the physical and psychological scars endured by the Manipuri people due to political machinations in their underdeveloped and impoverished border state. Ratan subtly weaves elements of political situations and historical factors into the broader narrative. While some critique the play for prioritising spectacle over substance and its accessibility for those unfamiliar, this does not diminish its overwhelmingly important political message. Thus, Ratan's intent with *Chakravyuha* goes beyond merely recounting an ancient epic. The play is truly Manipuri. It is Manipur's own story.

The two camps in the play represent two warring tribes. Abhimanyu is only a young man who becomes a sacrificial pawn for the greater objective. Is the sacrifice necessary? Ratan sees Abhimanyu in every Manipuri youth because they are mere collateral damage, exploited despite their sufferings and pushed into playing a fatal game. Consequently, Ratan poses the following questions:

But what is important is why the Chakravyuha was created and when. Why are so many tricks employed by both sides to entrap a boy? What is the truth of the situation? This was my concern. Dharmaputra Yudhisthira stands for truth, but did he tell Abhimanyu the whole truth about the Chakravyuha? Did Bheema the strong Pandava uncle warn his nephew, or did they just want to solve the problem, save the situation by [exciting] valour in the young man? They urge him to become a hero. Yudhisthira pretends to dissuade Abhimanyu, but his words and gestures are designed only to spur him on (Nagpal, "Pre-Text", xxx).

There is a powerful political force in Manipur that manipulates the concept of heroism and sacrifice. Characters like Yudhisthira and Bheema symbolise this force. As a result, Abhimanyu makes reckless decisions based on the Pandavas' agenda. This virtual suicide mirrors the daily struggles faced by Manipuri youth, caught between powerful forces pushing sectarian agendas. Truth, inadvertently, is distorted. Narratives are peddled. History is constructed. And the war takes the shape of opinions, views, and propaganda. Ratan's *Chakravyuha* not only depicts the coercion and forced heroism of already tragic Manipuri youths but also exposes the larger political games orchestrated by unseen forces that plunge the state into recurring chaos and bloodshed. This turmoil reflects the cost of the pie every ethnic group seeks to claim, driven by the relentless pursuit of sectarian agendas.

### 3. PERFORMING THE IMMUTABLE CHAKRAVYUHA

Ratan is no stranger to counter-narratives or alternative perspectives, offering informed audiences new ways to interpret familiar subjects. Manipuri audiences appreciated his adaptation of Bhasa's *Urubhangam* (1981), which became part of his Mahabharata trilogy, along with *Chakravyuha* (1984) and *Karnabharam* (1989). Ratan completely reimagines these plays, transforming their design, visuals, and other performance aspects. A thematic thread uniting these works is the struggle of less powerful individuals against overwhelming challenges or an external force that corners the protagonist. Thiyam masterfully achieves this by blending various classical and folk performative traditions, highlighting his unique style and artistic craft. In my view, his Manipur Trilogy, *Wahoudok (Prologue)*, *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi (My Earth, My Love)*, and *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama (Nine Hills, One Valley)*, is just as significant as the Mahabharata Trilogy. These works deeply reflect the rich culture, myths, and legends of Manipur, as well as its resilient mothers and hardworking men.

Bandyopadhyay observes that, "the Abhimanyu story offers him [Ratan Thiyam] an opportunity to attack the cult of heroism which is only too often held up to the Manipuri youth by political forces playing for sectarian stakes, to drive them to senseless acts of virtual suicide" (73). As stated above, the main storyline centres on the entrapment and extermination of Abhimanyu, drawing from chapters 34 – 40 of the "Drona Parva" of the great epic Mahabharata. Before the performance begins, something unique takes place. Ratan captivates the audience with three characters – possibly reflecting on the present as they witness the great war unfolding in front of them. These three characters, the Sutradhara and his two Pariparshvikas, comment on a range of topics, including Natya Veda, theatre in general, politics, and, most importantly, divisions among nations, and groups. They serve as the play's chorus, reminiscent of the traditional invocations found in Manipuri rituals and *kritans*. As the performance unfolds, we learn that the war has been fought for eleven days, and on the twelfth day, the Kauravas urge Guru Drona to form the chakravyuha in order to trap and kill a maharathi from the Pandava side. A similar story we get to hear time and time again in Manipur.

In the Prologue, Ratan introduces a rich array of rites and rituals typical of Manipuri Vaishnavism. The stage is kept simple, yet the chaos and unrest of the time are palpable. The air is filled with the sounds of cymbals, traditional *pung* (drums), and chants, while operatic *kirtan* is sung in the background. The three actors use symbolic gestures that evoke a sense of fear and anxiety with the lights giving the perfect ambience of terror and awe. Flagbearers enter the stage from all the wings, each carrying flags of various colours. The Sutradhara explains the meaning behind the colours and insignias of the flags carried by the *maharathis*. It is a very detailed explanation characteristic of a skilled *wari leeba* artist. The flagbearers move in a serpentine formation known as *lairen mathek*. It is a movement inspired by the Meitei Lai Haraoba festival, an appeasement festival which honours local deities. This motion represents an infinite, unending

motion. By incorporating this into the play, Ratan symbolises the struggle for political dominance, reflecting the endless power struggles that persist in the world.

From what the Sutradhara says we can infer that trenches have been dug, bunkers built, weapons stockpiled, and the call to arms has been sounded. The great war is imminent and inexorable. The same sense of inevitability of the current ethnic war in Manipur was felt for a long time as ethnic groups were arming themselves for the possible showdown. As said, when the current ethnic conflict erupted, there was a widespread sense that "it is only a matter of time." If it is so inevitable, why did no one attempt to prevent it? Should we accept it as a natural progression of events, or is it a deliberate, manmade outcome? Whatever the cause, no one anticipated the conflict to reach this level of intensity, and it seems this surge of hatred and resentment will soon lead to a point of no return. Should not there be any convergence of ideas, emotions, and minds?

Sutradhara reminds us of the lines which have been drawn and the divisions already made when he quips, "National flags conceptualize politics. In this modern battlefield on the holy plains of Kurukshetra the power game has already started. This is a war of flags... This is a war of power grabbers..." (Nagpal 10). Towing the line of the Sutradhara, the flagbearers sing:

In this Mahayagna [a great sacrificial ceremony]  
 With the great sacrificial rites of grappling for power  
 We all become the offering.  
 The great power-hunters have already let loose  
 Their Ashwamedha horse for sacrifice. (11)

The phrase "We all become the offering" conveys three important ideas. First, it establishes the tone and mood of the play. Second, it reflects the feelings of those who must fight, kill, and sacrifice for the flag. Lastly, it implies that the audience, as ordinary people, are also part of the offering, swept along by the decisions of their leaders. The song is undoubtedly about Manipur, past, present, and future. The Mahayagna is the constant fire burning the land unstoppably. The great power-hunters release their Ashwamedha horses while fighting from inside the Constitution or outside of it. Furthermore, people of Manipur still continue to carry the weight of their past. The baggage of the past frequently resurfaces in violent ways. We can discuss the reification of the subject and object, where the insurgent movement in Manipur represents the subject, and the common people, suffering as collateral damage, represent the object—or vice versa. A strong undercurrent of ethno-nationalistic aspirations (or sub nationalism) is fuelling the violence in the state. The power struggle within Manipur is unmistakable. Different groups are vying for greater ethnic representation and territorial influence. Dominant ideologies are expressed and absorbed. No one knew that the collective unconscious would be so violent, so bloodthirsty.

Abhimanyu, as a young, idealised warrior in his prime, is an asset for the Pandavas. However, when he is sacrificed, Ratan poses a poignant question: what inflicts a deeper wound—being trapped by enemies or by one's own kin? The dual nature of Abhimanyu's entrapment becomes evident in Scene II, where he has a nightmare of being torn from his mother's embrace and enticed to heaven. Yudhishtira and Bheema inform Abhimanyu of Drona's plan to destroy the entire Pandava army using the cosmic battleplan called *chakravyuha*. In response, Abhimanyu shares that he had overheard his father, Arjuna, explaining the secret technique to break through the *chakravyuha* while he was still in his mother Subhadra's womb. The flashback takes us to a poignant moment between Arjuna and Subhadra, where Arjuna gently explains the strategy to defeat this almost undefeatable war formation to her. This scene is shown from the perspective of the unborn Abhimanyu, nestled in the tranquil, innocent world of the womb; a sharp contrast to the looming fears of the impending war. Yet, Abhimanyu's tragic fate is already sealed within his mother's womb. This moment brings to mind Khwairakpam Anandini's poem, "The Promise of an Embryo," which poignantly reflects on children fated to be killed and aborted promises made to them:

Embryo soldiers  
 Embryo promises  
 Embryos destroyed in the wombs  
 Promises aborted in the wombs. (Premchandra 87)

After the flashback, Abhimanyu reminds his uncles, Yudhisthira and Bheema, that while he can enter the formation, he does not know how to exit. However, in their eagerness to defeat the Kaurava army, they push him to create an opening for them to follow which they never did. In the final scene, the seven Kaurava charioteers, Drona, Ashwathama, Kripacharya, Karna, Shakuni, Dushasana, and Duryodhana surround Abhimanyu's chariot and fatally wounds Sumitra who is Abhimanyu's charioteer. Together, they force the young warrior onto open ground and, after a fierce battle, kill him. In this moment, a hero is made. His sacrifice is destined to be celebrated in eulogies. Abhimanyu becomes the embodiment of filial devotion and dharma. But what of the one who makes the ultimate sacrifice? What about his views regarding his own 'offering'?

In a short epilogue, the dead Abhimanyu ponders over the meaning of his sacrifice and poses this question to the audience, "I set out on this last journey with an unanswered question in my heart – am I a scapegoat or am I a martyr?" (Epilogue 51). He listens to the cruelty of society, as revealed by Arjuna to Subhadra, and feels a powerful desire to escape and confront it. But at what cost?

Abhimanyu's line of questioning forces us to confront our futile efforts once again. And Ratan's portrayal of Manipur as a chakravyuha – a labyrinthine trap for ordinary people with no clear escape serves as a powerful political statement. The play uses theatre as a tool of dissent, capturing the Manipuri narrative of chaos, intimidation, coercion, betrayal, and anarchy. *Chakravyuha* only emboldens the notion that "the idea that violence is rooted in human nature is difficult for many people to accept" (Fukuyama 73). However, Fukuyama's statement is continually validated by the senseless cycle of violence in Manipur.

The aim of *Chakravyuha* is not to educate the people of Manipur about the *Mahabharata*, but to draw a parallel between Abhimanyu's fate and their own struggles. *Mahabharata* has been a part of Manipuri culture as the episodes from this great epic find expressions in many performances and storytelling traditions. Efforts have been made to connect Manipur with the Mahabharata through the romance between Chitrangada and Arjuna. The version of Chitrangada's story told in Manipur demonstrates the epic's adaptability, allowing for additions and omissions that align with local tastes, integrating the state or community into this grand narrative. It's widely accepted that both the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* began as oral traditions in Manipur. During the reign of Maharaja Garibnawaz (1709-1748 CE), both epics were translated into Manipuri, infused with local flavors and expressions. Manipuri historians note that these translations were made from Kritibash's *Ramayana* and Gangadas Sen's *Mahabharata* (Singh 124).

From the intention of the dramatist irrespective of the political and ideological spectrum Ratan leans on, the notion that "[...] all theatre exists in a certain socio-economic context" holds so true in the context of *Chakravyuha* (Kirby 129). The play contextualizes the socio-political and historical factors that have plunged Manipur into its current state of impasse. What if the Pandavas had been granted the five villages they requested? Could those five villages have averted the great war? Why are the hills and valleys of Manipur do not believe in peaceful co-existence anymore? What if there were no ethnic and religious divisions? What went wrong and why brothers are killing brothers?

Art and life frequently does reflect one another in Manipur too. In the 1970s, Manipur experienced a surge in performances that portrayed "lived experiences" and engaged in the "art of witness." However, these plays should not be viewed merely as emotional reactions or outbursts in response to the state's tragedies. Instead, they should be examined and revisited as reflections of sociopolitical realities, emphasizing the difficulty of escaping or resolving these challenges. Thus, Ratan knows the importance of political theatre and the impact it can have on his audience because he knows that "abandoning the [political] theatre would be to succumb to complacency and complicity" at least in the context of the politically charged and volatile Manipur (Zook 177). Besides, the state's typical circumstances called for theatre that he does, as any unrealistic portrayal of joy and harmony on stage would fail to resonate with an audience grappling with intense political unrest and emotional turmoil.

Ratan frequently highlights his portrayal of Abhimanyu beyond the 'text' to provide context for both the audience and readers, ensuring that Abhimanyu's sacrifice is fully understood, particularly how it ultimately saved the day. But it is hard to find Ratan speaking about the extravagance shown on the stage. Ratan's stage is filled with pomp and grandeur, reminiscent of the 'theatre state' described by Clifford Geertz in his analysis of nineteenth-century Balinese culture. Geertz portrays court rituals as displays of power, stating, "Power served pomp, not pomp power" (13). The lavish costumes, vibrant flags, grand gestures, and ceremonial movements witnessed in the performance of the play evoke the ritualistic state of Manipur where elaborate rituals and other performances illustrated the health and strength of the reigning king. Duryadhona's entrance, accompanied by an umbrella bearer holding a canopy high above his head, highlights his elevated status. His walk, adapted from the Lai Haraoba but accelerated to convey anger and urgency,

exemplifies this. Each gesture is meticulously choreographed, and every dialogue is thoughtfully chosen. Political theatre, which explores ideas and concepts to critique or support particular political positions, becomes apparent as we delve into the play's themes of sacrifice, deceit, entrapment, coercion, and other political symbolisms.

Ratan's *Chakravyuha* is quite literary despite it being called political. The unmissable literary quality is underlined by Kirby when he calls political theatre a "[...] literary theatre, not because it necessarily involves words and/or a script but because all production elements are subservient to, support, and reinforce the symbolic meanings. Political meaning is "read" by the spectator" (130). The play employs the elevated language once used in the courts of Manipur. Therefore, we encounter a graciousness of expressions, music in the spoken words, and even anger and frustration conveyed through the sweetest of expressions without dropping respect and manners. However, as difficult as exporting etiquette and formal language in translation, this courtly Manipuri is somewhat lost in the English version. Besides, commentators rarely discuss the language used in the play, as the political messaging tends to overshadow its literary qualities.

The dramatic text can only ever be provisional as Brecht would put it. This is because its interpretation is always contingent on the manner of its performance, when the set design, costumes, movement, gesture, and line delivery all interact with the words to produce meaning (White 2). White further posits that the "Interpretations of a dramatic text also change in response to the performance context, which affects the theatre's approach and the audience's reactions" (2). Brecht's observation holds true for Ratan as well. In *Chakravyuha*, the text takes a backseat as the performance dominates. This is especially apparent in the 'womb scene,' where the tender lines of love, the dance of togetherness, and the affectionate glances shared between Arjuna and Subhadra are overshadowed by the stage execution. While technically complex, this masterfully performed flashback symbolizes the fading remnants of individual love and care within society. However, there is an underlying fear that the prevailing chaos and despair could overwhelm the fragile sense of love and belonging. As a result, Arjuna mentally braces himself for the difficult future awaiting his unborn child — a sentiment that reflects the uncertain fate of every child yet to be born in contemporary Manipur. Therefore, Arjuna prophetically proclaims, "The noble soul will arrive in this cruel world to participate in a fierce struggle for survival. That day is not far away" (Nagpal 30). He also adds further, "Where there is no affection amongst brothers, relatives and kinsmen; where corruption and selfishness are consecrated; in this world of disfigured human nature, he will be another addition" (30). But Arjun is sure that his son "will be the bearer of the flag of truth amongst the flags of falsehood." But does Abhimanyu truly become the 'bearer of the flag of truth'? What truth, and whose truth is he representing? And at what cost? Should the 'common good' override individual choices? Abhimanyu is born into a vicious world of half-truths and incomplete knowledge, a fate shared by many young people in Manipur, manipulated into fighting and sacrificing.

Ratan repeatedly intertwines the message of his play with political and social themes, yet he does so without taking a definitive side. I do not believe he aligns with either the Kauravas or the Pandavas. However, some performances are shaped by historical contexts where the dominant ideology is reinforced. The prevailing narrative is that the Pandavas have been wronged and are justified in taking up arms. Dharma is on their side, and their victory is seen as inevitable. Ratan's *Duryodhana* questions the historic and dharmic conditions under which the common people have accepted the ideological dominance and righteousness of the Pandavas over the Kauravas. *Duryodhana* takes a dig at Shree Krishna by calling him "the embodiment of truth and the personification of justice" but according to him Shree Krishna is 'untruth' personified. Therefore, he makes the following statement in Scene I:

Where were the so-called torchbearers of truth when the grandsire Bheeshma (*gestures bow and arrow*), who is more capable than any guarding the directions and who had been annihilating the Pandava armies, like a wild elephant in a banana garden, and in whose presence the great Pandava generals, charioteers and warriors were running helter skelter, was killed in a game of foul? Where is *dharma*? (16)

*Duryodhana* enters a war of words and narratives when he cynically declares that "Thirty-three crore gods, goddesses, *munis*, *rishis*, *acharyas*, philosophers, scientists, farmers, workers, labourers blatantly declare in one voice that the Pandavas are the harbingers of truth (*laughs cynically*) and the Kauravas are the sinners" (16). Dharwedker also observes that "At a more complex thematic level, Thiyam rejects the simple binarism of good and evil in political conflict by making *Duryodhana* a vocal critic of his adversaries [...]" (213). *Duryodhana* challenges the widespread perception held across time and space, suggesting that the concept of dharma, referred to here as the 'transcendental signified,' is biased when applied to the Kauravas. In his view, dharma should be free from prejudice and preconceptions, allowing it to be self-referential and self-determining. This highlights the way narratives are constructed in conflict situations, where multiple truths exist, or we enter a post-truth era.

Domination and inequities of power and wealth are perennial facts of human society (Said 19). Anyone who enjoys *Chakravyuha* is overwhelmed by Abhimanyu story. However, Ratan tactfully inserts the *dharma* of the Duryodhana as the leader of the Kauravas to defeat the Pandavas. But he knows that the Pandavas have already won the war of narratives. Edward Said's observation here is particularly valid as we confront similar situations and narratives in present times. What we see in contemporary Manipur is what Said calls 'appalling tribalism' which is "fracturing societies, separating peoples, promoting greed, bloody conflict, and uninteresting assertions of minor ethnic or group particularity" (21). The 'us and them' dichotomy runs deep in Manipuri society because of the socio-economic factors as well as religious.

What else can we explore in Ratan's plays beyond the themes of entrapment and violence? Ratan's *Chakravyuha* mirrors Schechner's "broad spectrum" approach to performance, which views it as a continuum of human actions, including rituals, performing arts, social roles, healing practices, and more (2). Ratan combines everything to heal the wounds of Abhimanyu which remain fresh in the mind of his audience. Even though we know it is just a play unfolding before us, we find ourselves echoing the same question Abhimanyu asks in his final moments. Abhimanyu looks at us seems to be saying, 'you could be next.'

The group particularity and bloody conflict which are now closely associated with Manipur, stem from struggles over power and resource sharing, though ethnic divisions are often blamed as the main cause. This mirrors the core issue of the Mahabharata war. Ratan's unconventional and antirealistic portrayal of the *Chakravyuha* episode serves as a stark reminder to every Manipuri that false patriotism, ethnic chauvinism, religious divisions, and racial hatred can lead to mass destruction. It represents mutual destruction at its core; no one wins in this zero-sum game. We ultimately become mere "offerings" to forces beyond our understanding and control.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

It is obvious that every Manipuri youth would see himself in the dying Abhimanyu. He would notice the flags speaking different languages and ambitions. He would perceive the unseen forces pulling and pushing him into doing things beyond his strength and endurance. He would understand the crises that have been eroding Manipur's conscience and threatening its very existence. He would see himself sacrificing for the cause created by others.

It is difficult to determine whether Ratan Thiyam glorifies death, but he unmistakably questions its necessity. His play serves as a desperate call for peace, presenting a counter-hegemonic narrative that challenges the prevailing belief in the *dharma* of "kill or be killed"; a mindset deeply ingrained in many groups with adversarial cultural practices and political ambitions. Ratan seeks a deeper meaning from the *Chakravyuha*, not as a mythical war formation but as a dystopian agenda or control mechanism that risks leading today's youth into a futile struggle. While there is a global tendency to manipulate public opinion through performance, Ratan's play deliberately portrays weak and desperate characters, destined to become sacrificial victims of their era's questionable demands. His ultimate aim with this work is purgation and collective healing. For this reason, *Chakravyuha* remains timeless and deeply relevant today, as the valleys and hills of Manipur are still populated by Sakunis and Duryodhanas, compelling Dronacharya to construct multiple *chakravyuhas*. Meanwhile, Bheema and Yudhisthira are pushing Abhimanyus into this relentless cycle of violence, while the glory-driven Arjun and Krishna wage their war elsewhere.

#### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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