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## Idiom of identity

*Ratan Thiyam's evocative Nine Hills, One Valley dealt with the crisis in Manipur*



***HOLDING A MIRROR*** Ratan Thiyam's play was a document of a restless society and political turmoil where the sufferers are only the poor people

The North East was well represented at the Bharath Rang Mahotsav with two plays each from Manipur, Assam and Calcutta, one from Bangla Desh and another from Nepal. It was inevitable that one of the Manipuri plays was by Ratan Thiyam's Chorus Repertory Theatre, for no National Theatre Festival is complete without a Ratan Thiyam play in it.

The renowned director was here with his latest production *Nine Hills One Valley*, his

response to the recent upheavals in his State. Thiyam describes the play as "a collage of many thoughts and a presentation of contemporary ideas... a document of a restless society and political turmoil where the sufferers are only the poor people." Often accused by fellow theatre activists of not taking a political stand on issues, Thiyam communicates his thoughts in language characteristic of him - with a theatre language which is so characteristic of him – using exotic spectacles, powerful images, haunting sounds and symbols and beautifully choreographed movements.

Though the play does not have a conventional plot, it has a thin, but evocative storyline. The seven mothers of the land who guard the culture and traditions of this earthly paradise surrounded by nine hills, wail over the way evil has traumatized their land and hampered artistic and intellectual expression.

Thiyam conveys the plight of the artist through a stunning visual in which Manipuri dancers have their hands cut off and the severed hands continue to dance. The women appeal to the Seven Wise Men to wake up from their sleep and save their people. The wise men are shocked by the violence and bloodshed that rack their land, and the decay that has crept into the art forms. They drive away the evil spirits and rewrite the book of knowledge in a simpler language so that the common people are able to follow their words of wisdom, before sailing away in their dragon boat. The play ends with yet another beautiful spectacle, of lamps being lit on top of the nine hills symbolizing the ray of hope for the future. Through a series of surrealistic, dreamlike experiences, Thiyam probes the sickness that ails his land and looks for a solution in the soul, rather than in political terms.

- Laxmi Chandrashekar

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