

Mobile Theatres in Assam: History, Culture and Present

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Abstract:

Theatre has been a cultural recognition of India. It has a glorious past in form of Classical Sanskrit performances, theatrical strategies to illuminate the generations of theatre lovers. The decadence of classical plays in course of time paved a way to folk performances in different parts of the country. There was a concrete bond in these performances even though they were in heterogeneous languages and belonged to different regions. The basis was incidents, stories from the great epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*. The reverence for these epics continued to flow in the veins of the Indians to shape performing culture of the nation.

Assam witnessed a wider acceptance of masses to the folk presentations popularly known as *Jatra*. It was originated in neighbouring state West Bengal but captivated Assamese' minds in course of time. The Mobile or moving theatre, popularly known as *Bhramyaman* is a twentieth century phenomenon, has its roots in *Jatra*. The towns like Pathshala, Nagaon in lower Assam have more than sixty mobile theatre companies which have been luring the artistic minds of the people from more than six decades. The present research paper attempts to explore the historical development, culture and the present condition of this theatrical mass movement. The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly created a mountain of problems before these theatre groups but the survival is unquestionable as it illustrates Assamese identity.

Keywords: Amateur. Culture, Groups, History, Performance

Introduction:

Being a popular performing art, theatre has remained a cultural recognition of India for centuries. It witnessed a glorious past in form of Classical Sanskrit performances and also theatrical strategies to illuminate the generations of theatre lovers from different parts of the world. It nourished Classical culture of the nation for a long period of time. *Natyashastra*, the *magnum opus*, that was written in earlier centuries, has been a codification of dramatic art.

Bharata, the pioneering theatre scholar, has rightly stated in it that “Theatrical spectacle is a total amalgam of all media and genres ranging from the spoken word to vocal and instrumental music, gestures, mime, décor costumes and finally the inner states of being” (Vatsayan: 01). To add further: “Theatre is about representing a certain understanding of interpretation of social life or reported or invented happenings between human beings”(02).

Loss of patronage during medieval age and also language barriers made its way to decadence of classical plays in different parts of the country. The void created due to this decline was filled by folk performances, cultivated further through mass patronage, in diverse parts of the nation. Folk traditions and performances became instrumental to spread religious education and spiritual beliefs. On the other hand, Bhakti movement in different parts of the country paved the way for emergence of diverse folk forms in India.

There was a concrete bond in these performances even though they were in heterogeneous languages and belonged to different regions. Kapila Vatsyayan, a noted theatre scholar, puts it in apt words: “Indian cultural phenomenon that a dramatic form identified with a particular region has often interesting links not only with genres and styles within the region, but also with those which have flourished outside that region” (Vatsyayan: 109).

The basis of these performances was incidents, stories from the great epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The reverence for these epics continued to flow in the veins of the Indians to shape performing culture of the nation. To state further, folk theatres at large unified the nation and elevated community based sentiments. The folk performances continued to attract the rural minds not because they were myth-based only but novelty in them instigated the spectators from nook and corners of the country. When any art arises from basic things of life; it leaves its permanent mark on civilization. It is much true in case of traditional folk theatre.

Objectives: The present research paper sets following objectives to explore core aspects of a mass movement in Assam popularly known as Mobile Theatres.

- i) To elaborate the historical development of this roving theatre in Assam popularly known as *Bhramayaman*
- ii) To state its role in establishing a rich theatre culture in Assam.

iii) To emphasize the present condition of the theatre groups which have been pivotal for socio-cultural and economical transformations in lower parts of Assam.

iv) To state the challenges before the theatre groups more particularly in post covid scenario.

v) To explain how these unorganized theatre groups have contributed for artistic enhancement of Assam.

vi) To study the facets behind actual growth of this theatre in course of time.

Hypothesis: The research is based on the hypothesis that the theatrical movements in Assam remained at the centre of performing culture of Assam in general.

Research Methodology: The researcher is largely relied on the secondary sources like books and articles to undertake present study. Hence the research methodology incorporated here is critical analysis of the available study material.

Significance of the Study: The study will be helpful to apprehend the history and mechanism of almost hundred year old people -centric theatre which has been crucial in artistic enhancement of Assam. It may captivate the researchers taking keen interest in Indian theatre in general and popular theatre in particular.

Limitations of the Study: As it is an earliest attempt to understand the research problem; field based work and actual data collection is missing here. The researcher has not concentrated here on specific theatre groups and actual play scripts. It may be considered one more limitation of the study.

Historical Perspective and Cultural Inheritance:

Edward Hallett Carr defined 'History as a dialogue between the present and the past' whereas Martin Luther King Jr. has a very interesting way to define history. He states that 'When it is dark enough you can see the stars.' The definitions stated here are helpful in discerning the history of performance in Assam.

The impact of folk performances, as stated earlier, continued to entertain and educate the masses for a considerable period of time not particularly in Assam but in different parts of the country. The folk traditions and performances become medium or tool to spread religious education and spiritual beliefs. Adding further, Bhakti Movement in different parts of the country paved the way for the emergence of different folk forms and kinds. Emergence of

Ankia –Nata, most probably in 14th century (ShriSankardeva) remained a very powerful mode to substantiate Assamee culture. Sankardeva's *RukminiHarana* had been the most popular play. He travelled with the troop of this play in different parts. In course of time Assam became a meeting ground of many racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural elements from India and outside. Demarcation of Pre-Vaishnava and Vaishnava culture was keenly reflected in these performances. The linguistic affinities often provided a clue to the mobility among different regions and theatres. Though a mixture of forms like Ramlila, BhagvatMela, Manipuri Dance are found yet *AnkiyaNata* is unquestionably Assamese, coherent and unique having greater cultural and social significance. Traveling of these *Ankiya-Nata* groups from one place to another made it possible to have a travel of ideas and become instrumental in socio-cultural changes. *Rama Vijaya, RukminiHarana, KaliyaDamana* were among the major plays belonged to *AnkiyaNata*. In course time, British colonialism affected the natural speed of *AnkiyaNata* in different parts of Assam. In the later phases, the influence of western theatres and *Yatra*, a popular folk form of Bangal left their mark on theatrical culture of Assam. The *Yatra* or *Jatra* troops performed mainly on festive occasions and more particularly on mythological subjects. The participation of audience and involvement throughout went on evolving with *Jatra* performances. Hence these performances channelized the culture of performance in the region. A parallel to performances like these is found in terms of Sonapur fair of Bihar. In both, involvement of masses is an issue of significant consideration. Somewhere around 1930, Assam originated its own form of moving theatre as the state became a fertile land for theatre and in course of time the roving or moving theatre became the most popular, visible and accessible form of entertainment in Assam. Ina Ross puts on record that "Theatre in Assam is not simply an art form but a complex and rich social event". (Ross:65). It is a mode for community building and also a way to bring community together. If we see the world over phenomenon of Popular Theatre, to which the present theatre in Assam belongs; we find that Grassroots Theatre in Chikwaka, Drama Circle in Bangladesh, PETA in Philipine, Traditional Perfoamcnes in Pakistan and Street Theatre in Sri Lanka are known for their people-centric performances and noteworthy mass responses. It is matter of fact that popular theatre survived through oral transmission in different parts of the world.

On the other hand, to define culture 'it is the sum of total of the learned behaviour of a group of people that are generally considered to be the tradition of that people and are

transmitted from generation to generation’ and also ‘It is a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another’.

Assam has been a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society. Ethnic groups are existed and they have contributed for socio-cultural development of the region. Interaction and interrogation have become a cultural necessity here. Mobile Theatres in Assam should be credited for creating a social consciousness. To put on record, till 2017, Six Thousand Four Hundred and Eighty plays were written and performed. It has become a mass movement that can voice the social issues of people of Assam. The plays are being watched to reinforce social or political consciousness

There is no doubt that the mobile theatre of Assam is a treasure house in terms of cultural arena. It is clear that personal and community action can be found possible only through the performative forms like Mobile Theatre. For theatre, audience and region for all there is something in it. The theatre type is popularly known as *Bhyroman*, the term was coined by Radha Govind Barua, has become a collective consciousness and a responsive system.

Mobile Theatres’ contribution to drama literature (manuscripts), plays (staged), music, songs (lyrics), dance, dance-drama, development of technical craft, light and sound for stage, has been immense. As history connotes Kohinoor Theatre, the first commercial theatre was established in Pathshala, a town in lower Assam and it became medium to reflect social and political ideology. This journey was later continued with Nataraj Theatre of Mr. Achyut Lahkar, the first authentic mobile theatre of Assam that began in 1963 continued non-stop till 2003 for long forty years. In these forty years many mobile theatres were born and perished, but the role played by Nataraj theatre in the history of mobile theatre of Assam stands out in a class apart. In this way, Mr. Achyut Lahkar, started a new era in Assam. The efforts of Achyut Lahkar motivated many others to walk this path of theatrical association for a guaranteed income throughout eight months of a year. His theatre group implemented effect-oriented staging strategy to convey social messages. The response of the audience remained live and participatory.

The actual working of Nataraj Theatre and many other theatres in Assam has been very interesting. A crew of one hundred and fifty members travel all the way from Assam in six trucks and has the record of setting a dual stage measuring sixty feet in five hours. The

audience and performers found a thin line between them as the pioneers of Mobile Theatre always encouraged direct or indirect involvement of masses in actual performances. It catered to certain basic instincts of the crowd, like, i) need for contention, ii) partisanship, iii) credulity, and iv) vulnerability to emotional contagion. The great dramatists usually think of the crowd on all essential questions. The great playwright William Shakespeare tried to think from the common man's position. He understood people and so, he could write and present for them.

Present Scenario:

There are more than one hundred and forty five theatre companies in different parts of Assam at present. The places where most of the theatre groups are located are Tihu, Barpeta, Nalbari, Darang, Goalpara and Pathshala. Public friendly stages have been prepared and the plays are presented on such stages. The subjects of the plays performed today are social issues, family dramas, Bollywood material, dramatization of classical novels and also political events. In certain conditions, singing words are used as mode of communication.

The system for actual performance that has been usually followed is a show of any play is being booked through the committee. It has a good communication with owners of theatre groups. The committees, village panchayat and village council have their share in actual profit. It is 60:40 in proportion. Construction of schools, colleges, halls and religious places takes place with the help of donation received from these theatre groups. In ticket booking instalment plan is also being offered. On the basis of this, it can be argued that the theatre companies have an intimate knowledge of ground reality. There is proper and intense knowledge of regional reality with their theatre groups also. One of the dominant reasons behind tremendous success for this theatre is their overall understanding.

The plays are mostly based on the subjects like romantic, historical, mythological, social and fantastic. The theatre is cultural entrepreneur. In the beginning, smaller shows with least equipment were organized but in the end it was found that it won't work hence theatre house was built for the first time in 1963. Life time pension for the artists was also given. One unit required at least one hundred and fifty employees. The plays like *Jerenger, Sati, Boliya Ramdhenu, Andhakop, Bandisaal, Manikut, Amrapali, Nilakantha, Vishkumbha, Amrit, Janambhumi, Deenabandhu, Pratibimba, Hati, Baghjal, Karbala, Mukhymantri, Surangar Seshat* received praise and love of the audience. It is a matter of fact that the Mobile Theatre is primarily a commercial cultural

enterprise and therefore they have always been trying to satisfy the hunger of entertainment. The travelling theatre groups across the state continue for more than nine months. Revenue generated is close to two hundred crores. Mobile Theatre at large is a unique cultural and business venture and the fact is it is equally responsible to satisfy creative urges of the people.

Devoted amateur artistes who are farm workers, small business men or women are the actual proprietors of this theatre. It should be kept in mind that profit and business have always remained secondary considerations for these theatre groups. Financial risk on different grounds has always been taken. The rehearsal period is usually between June – August and the actual shows run up to mid-April i.e. Assamese New Year. The concept of Show Money is very interesting. It is amount paid for the first show. In 1963 it was almost one thousand rupees. Except Lahakar brothers' theatre group the other theatre groups like Hengool Theatre, Himalaya Theatre, Assam Star Theatre, Ashirbaad Theatre, Baroichila Theatre, Kamrupa Theatre, Nandini Theatre, Abahan Theatre, Bodo Mobile Theatres have contributed to sustain theatre culture in the state. Stating here a loud appreciation of audience received; a mention of 2007-08, Mr. Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay's creation which was presented, scripted by Mr. Abhijeet Bhattacharya as *Sundari Sanyasini* is essential. In 2009-10, a very successful play staged by Abahan Theatre, which, though not directly based on any novelist or writers' work, was, *Bhul Nubujiba Bhupenda*, based on the songs, lyrics and music of the internationally acclaimed Assamese music maestro, Bhupen Hazarika. A mention of the play *Prithibir Prem* is essential because it is the only Mobile Theatre play that won national award. Dharmi Barman gets the credit of introducing a new technique to this popular theatre form in Assam which is widely known as three dimension stage. To add further, Abla Berman is the first ever woman-centric mobile theatre which was established in the year 1977. To precise, The Mobile Theatres in Assam have become socio-political narrative of the time and have significantly contributed for socio-political history of Assam. It has been the history of more than six decades receiving a concern all the way. It was transformation of traditional theatre into mobile theatre. But the difficulties confronted today are not negligible. The Mobile Theatres face challenges like i) Maintaining originality in plays and acting skills. ii) Growing distance between the real audience and theatre houses. iii) Covid-19 impact and iv) Lacking Govt support.

Findings: The foremost findings of the present research are as below:

- i) Mobile Theatre in Assam generates mass-oriented culture.
- ii) The theatre has been a source of economy for more than two thousand families in different parts of Assam
- iii) There are very few theatre groups as such in our country at present except Zadipatti Theatre in Maharashtra.
- iv) Post-covid conditions are quite challenging to keep this performing culture alive.
- v) Certainly, these theatre practices are an integral part of ancient performing culture of the nation.
- vi) There is an urgent need of government assistance to make survival of these practices possible.

Conclusion:

The theatres in Assam today are altogether an integral part of unorganized economy. But there is an urgent need to transform them into an organized economy sector therefore economic welfare of the individuals playing their role in actual working of these mobile theatres may be possible. In the present condition, TV and Cinema stars demand a handsome amount. They are paid huge amount because their presence assures a huge response of the audience. The Mobile Theatre has been a medium of entertainment, cultural propagation and mass communication. It inherits performing culture of the country hence policy initiatives be taken by the government agencies to make survival of this theatre possible. It should not be forgotten that it is responsible in propagating socially relevant messages at large but cheap and vulgar entertainment be discarded from the performances. Safeguard to the interests of artists and workers and specially women artists and workers of mobile theatre be taken into serious consideration. An unexpected stroke in form of Covid-19 has put some serious questions on future of these performing agencies but implementation of proper policies may rescue the art from this disaster.

Not only government but non-government agencies and other individuals should always keep in mind that the role of these theatres has been effective in sustaining economy of Assam. The industry generates employment to the thousands of artists and non-artists. As a matter of its social contribution, the funds for constructing schools, colleges, temples and masjids have always been generated. Actually, Assamese culture is a melting pot of different

ethnic identities. In course of time or through a historical voyage, theatre became an identity of Assam. It can be concluded on a positive note that mobile theatre in Assam confronts a good number of serious issues but it will survive till the Assamese will survive.

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Bio-note:

Dr. Durgesh Bhausaheb Ravande has been working as an associate professor in the Department of English, K.K.M. College, Manwath since January 10, 2006. He has published almost 30 research articles in peer-reviewed/UGC-listed/referred journals and edited books. He is being awarded with **Best Teacher Award-2021** by SRTM University, Nanded. His book on Indian Women's Theatre has been published by Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi. It is being included in Sage's Journal of Commonwealth Literature editorial note-2016. His one more book is in the process of publication. He has completed a minor research project on a theatre agency associated with Zadipatti, a peripheral Theatre in Maharashtra and has been working on one more research project to explore socio-cultural dimensions of this peripheral theatre. He has organised two webinars on theatre related topics and has completed two spells of Associate (June 2019 & May 2022) at Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. He writes for newspapers, occasionally. One researcher has been awarded doctorate under his supervision and five researchers have been working. He has delivered a good number of lectures on various occasions and has been invited as a key-note speaker. He presented research papers in international/ national level events also. Apart from being NSS Programme Officer between 2014-2017 he has been working as IQAC Coordinator. Popular

Indian Theatre, Rabindranath Tagore, Indian Philosophers have been the areas of his interpretation and introspection.