

## ***Bhramyomaan Theatre of Assam: A study of its origin and place within the Popular***

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**Abstract:** *This paper discusses the inception, history and working of the Mobile Theatre of Assam, known as Bhramyomaan Mancha is the most popular form of entertainment available to the people of both rural and urban sector. The performance happens in makeshift stages and tents which the theatre groups carry with them wherever they have to go and perform. The engagement with the word 'mobile' is being focused in the paper. The word 'mobile' carries a feeling/sense of popularity with it. It reminds us of the mysterious and fascinating group of Gypsies, Operas, Jatra companies of Bengal, Tamasha-wallas of Maharashtra, Circus, etc- these popular forms tour from rural to the fringes of urban cape. The Mobile Theatre of Assam is also not an exception to this genre of mobile entertainment. In 2012 this popular theatre form had completed fifty years till its birth. The paper will offer a glimpse of how and why this particular form of theatre is so popular drawing in different performance theories. The focus is also on the influence of new media, emerging technologies, the merging of Assamese film industry with the mobile theatre, the changes of the themes of the plays performed with time, the growing hierarchy within the performers and the positive and negative effects of the same. The paper will discuss media, advertisement and the advent of cinema culture which has changed the face of mobile theatre.*

**Keywords-** Mobile theater, Assamese film industry, Bhramyomaan & Popular

The advent of the season of many festivals, autumn, brings eventful yet joyous days for the people of Assam. Along with preparing to welcome the goddess Durga, people look forward to another source of immense entertainment that begins during the same period and that is Bhramyomaan Theatre or mobile theatre. On one side there are beautifully crafted puja mandapas while on the other there are plain looking huge canvas tents and wooden stages of different mobile theatre groups. Though both the events are not comparable on any scale but the passion the people of Assam possess for these two occasions is astounding. Not a large number of people outside Assam have had many opportunities to experience this 'carnival on wheel' which keeps Assam dazed for more than six months. Though it is very popular within Assam, not much exposure out of Assam has been encountered by these theatre groups. In 1977-78 once Nataraj Theatre travelled to perform in Bihar, Nepal and North Bengal. Though people warmly welcomed and enjoyed the performances but due to lack of publicity and adequate financial planning they suffered loss.

After that they preferred not to step out of their indigenous secured space. However, due to its popularity mobile theatre again stepped out of the state boundary when National School of Drama had taken a case study of Assamese Mobile Theatre and called the Kohinoor Theatre group to perform in New Delhi, at Indira Gandhi National Cultural Association in April 2010 for three days.

This indigenous popular theatre form of Assam is known as *Bhramyomaan Theatre*. The word *Bhramyomaan* means a thing which can move, rove, travel or simply 'mobile'. The use of an equivalent Assamese word for English word 'theatre' is not introduced so far. It is not very common and appropriate, but the word '*Natyamancha*', (stage) is sometimes used instead of theatre. For the people of Assam theatre means only the 'Mobile theatre'. 'I am going to the theatre' does not mean someone is going to watch a film in a theatre or a movie hall rather it implies a performance by certain mobile theatre groups probably not very far from their house. Mobile theatre consists of a group of performers who pack everything needed to put up

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a show loaded in trucks, travel from one place to another reaching every nook and corner of Assam. They carry the props, stage, other equipments, generators, music system, tents along wherever they travel. The theatre groups construct their makeshift tent on an open field with seat capacity approximately for 2000 audiences.

The history of mobile theatre of Assam can be traced back to 1860s. When '*Bor Asom*', i.e. undivided Northeast India was brought under British rule in 1826 through the treaty of Yandabo, a group of literate people from Kolkata were brought to Assam for clerical jobs. These people as recreational activity used to do plays in their language using makeshift stages and it followed by the visit of different Bengali Jatra groups. Because of keen interest of the local people in these plays they were able to get a large cultural base for performances. The first travelling theatre group in Assam was formed by Tithiram Bayan at Barpeta in 1860. He was patronised by Govinda Ram Choudhury and he toured all over Assam with this troupe. As Bengali was the medium of studies then, Bayan also learned Bengali and the first play they had staged was written and performed in the Bengali language (*Bangla*). The plays included *Durjyodhaner Urubhanga (Bangla)*, *Rama Vanabaas*, and *Radhikar Maanbhanjan*. Tithiram Bayan can be called the founder of the first professional theatre group of Assam and he is the pioneer of the present day mobile theatre. This troupe performed for many years and it is not sure when the transition from the Bengali to Assamese plays occurred. Inspired by his astonishing groundbreaking into a form not much explored there came many followers in different parts of Assam who founded their own theatre groups. *Sanatan Sangeet Samaj* by Ambikagiri Raichoudhury, *Shankardev Arun Natya Samiti* by Arun Baishya, and Bhogram Kakoti's *Bhaluki Jatradal* are a few significant ones. Most of these troupes performed their plays in *Bangla*.

The first mobile theatre in Assamese language was started by *Natyacharya* Brajanath Sharma in 1921. The first group he started in Barpeta was *Shila Kalika Opera Party*. After three years this

group concluded their performance and he started another troupe named '*Dakshin Ganak Gari Opera Party*'. These theatre groups brought a cultural revolution against the *Bangla* theatre groups. *Assam Kohinoor Opera Party* was formed in 1930 and the revolt continued. Tithiram Bayan was the inspiration for Brajanath Sharma to start *Kohinoor Opera*. This theatrical movement started in Brahmaputra Valley which attracted people with their astonishing performances. A revolutionary transformation happened with the introduction of Co-acting in 1933. The dominance of male actors/acting was altered by Brajanath Sharma with the help of another famous actor Phani Sharma who is known as '*Natasurya*' which means the Sun of Drama. These two brought female actors to the stage.

This opera also travelled and entertained people of Assam for a few decades but the modern day mobile theatre was given a new identity by Achyut Lahkar. He is called the father of professional modernised mobile theatre of Assam. He was born in 1931 and went to Kolkata in 1949 for higher studies. He was inspired by his friend Bijoy Kanongo and started a magazine called *Dwipawali* in Kolkata and was its editor but had to go back to Assam and this magazine had to discontinue due to financial problems. He had seen *Jatra* performances in West Bengal and questioned himself about the absence of a large scale theatre production which could be the source of income through performance along with entertainment. He was interested in plays and music from his childhood as his father owned a costume and musical instrument shop. His brother Sada Lahkar was groomed by the local cultural pioneers to be an actor. Inspired by his mentors Sada Lahkar founded *Nataraj Opera* in 1959 and started staging plays in his house. Achyut Lahkar was determined to do something grand in this field which could contribute to the culture and socio-economic purposes of Assam. Hence with his younger brother Sada Lahkar without any capital to start with, he founded *Nataraj Theatre* on October 2, 1963. Achyut Lahkar puts his views about the transmogrification of *Nataraj Opera* to *Nataraj Theatre*,

*Due to various reasons I reached the conclusion that 'Jatras' are actually 'mobile'. Their presence is indispensable in the weddings and other village feasts. I used to go and watch plays when I was in Calcutta and in Assam whenever time permits. After watching plays at Bhaskar Stage in Guwahati and Baan Stage in Tezpur I thought theatre is far more refined compared to opera. Girls act in theatres. One thought kept occurring in my mind can we not make theatres mobile like the Jatras and Operas? In Assam at that time theatre had not started like in Calcutta and Bombay. I wanted to open a theatre group of that sort and give it a mobile form.... To start a theatre was not an impulsive decision. When I saw in Sada's Opera without even the use of electricity and microphones audiences crowd to see the performances, so I wanted to use technology and amaze the viewers. Sitting in front of the stage when I switched on the colourful lights on stage audience were spellbound. Mobile theatre can be said was born with solely commercial purpose.'"<sup>1</sup>*

This theatre was different from those of Tithiram Bayan and Brajanath Sharma. Bayan used the plain ground as a performance arena and the other arrangements were minimal too. The props and stages differed because of the use of sound, technology and advance lighting. Through the semblance of these techniques with performance Achyut Lahkar had something newfangled and vibrant to offer to the audience which could stir their imagination. For forty long years, *Nataraj Theatre* travelled throughout Assam, entertaining rural as well as urban space. In the process it has enriched the cultural heritage of Assam with a unique dramatic tradition that ensures a strong foundation for the Mobile Theatre in the national cultural scenario. Right from the start Achyut Lahkar had deep and clear convictions regarding socio-economic issues, political ideas and culture.

*He says, the audience go to watch a play to different corners of the country but bhramyomaan goes to the audience to show the play. Keeping in mind this*

*difference bhramyomaan theatre started.*"<sup>2</sup>

Since the birth of this modernised mobile theatre it has completed fifty years and more than 150 theatre groups have come to existence till date. Since its inception, the ingenuity of the mobile theatre lay in its stagecraft. *Nataraj Cine Theatre* was the first to introduce the 'trolley stage', a development that enabled theatre groups to quickly change the backdrop of the main stage with the help of the trolleys. But the biggest and perhaps the most significant development came in the year 1968 when *Mancharupa Theatre* changed the very face of Mobile Theatre with the use of 'double stage'. The most prominent advantage of double stage was that a performance could be continued without any pause or ruptures. For instance, the props and other things would be taken care of by the crew in one stage for the next scene in advance while the play would go on in the next one. This mode of presentation would keep the audience intact and occupied. In the last forty years over two thousand plays have been staged by Mobile Theatre groups. When *Lady Diana* was staged by *Abahan Theatre* it depicted the changing face of this form by using an internationally sensational topic for a play.

The Mobile Theatre groups are interestingly categorized informally as A, B and C groups on the basis of prominence, infrastructure and sustenance. Usually an A group theatre takes sixty thousand rupees from the committee which invites the group for every first show. At a time when the Assamese film industry is struggling for its survival, most of the top film stars are moving to this form. The popular Assamese film star Jatin Bora is said to have bagged an annual contract of forty lakh rupees from *Kohinoor Theatre*. His signing amount in the films was about one lakh rupees.

The sheer logistics involved in feeding and housing people, transporting them and the heavy equipment as well as large tents and stage props, from one destination to another every third day is truly overwhelming. Everyone, from the stars right down to the helpers in a commune, eats the same food and travels in the same bus. The social

hierarchies are very rare in this cultural form. Everyone performs and sustains the true performer's spirit. My personal interaction with the Kohinoor Theatre artists, from the people who work in kitchen, light and sound crew, to the performers on stage; from the producer to back-stage everyone in unison told me that they are like a family. It doesn't matter if they are paid late despite moving continuously for more than seven months. This mobility helps them to build up a family away from their own families. As if it's a performance within a performance. Perhaps this is the secret behind the stupendous success of this form.

Mobile theatre is different from the traditional theatres which are located in the cities and performed in a closed place like auditoriums and other stages with limited capacity. These theatres can bag audience from a particular class of people. It is different in the case of mobile theatres because they start from a small town and move towards the innermost villages of Assam. A village does not have innumerable population which the 2000 seat capacity makeshift tent cannot hold. Ratan Lahkar, the founder and owner of *Kohinoor Theatre* which is considered to be the most successful theatre group of Assam said in an interview with *The Times of India* (May 5, 2010, page no 22) that,

Mobile theatre is successful because we stage plays in villages.<sup>3</sup>

The plays that are staged by the theatre groups vary from English classics, Shakespeare's plays, and issues like terrorism, popular contemporary novels and adaptations of Hollywood and Bollywood movies. Plays based on *Othello*, *Cleopatra*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Hamlet*, *Taliban* etc are remarkable and are remembered by audience every now and then. People must have been disappointed watching the remake of *Sholay* by Ram Gopal Verma but the adaptation of the same film in a play was a huge success.

Adaptation of ever-new themes and an eye to changing interests have ensured that the mobile theatre genre does not lose its appeal to the young

audience either. With the Assamese film industry in a deep slumber, the plays have also provided the artists another platform to showcase their talent. The glamour quotient in these plays is ensured as Assamese film stars take up lead roles. It thus vindicates the significant place the mobile theatres hold in the media and entertainment industry in the state. Earlier actors were introduced by the mobile theatres and after being famous they could bag roles in the Assamese film industry. Nowadays exactly the opposite is happening. Movie halls are closing down and in the last decade no significant films have released. Barasha Rani Bishaya, an actor says that,

*Cinema halls have shut down but we cannot watch theatres shutting down too because we want to live. We want to act and show our talent. This is the only option we have for survival and we don't want this to close down.*<sup>4</sup>

Looking at one's favourite actor acting on screen is very different from seeing him/her performing a few feet away. Even when the film industry was doing better than of its current state, the stage of mobile theatre attracted various talented actors, directors and writers of the state which had been a reason of its consistent popularity. Actors like Biju Phukan, Suren Mahanta, Bidya Rao, Runu Devi and well known literary figures like Sahitya Akademi winner Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Mahendra Barthakur and Arun Sharma have been involved with mobile theatres.

It was different in the times when there was no electricity, not any other mode of entertainment and mobile theatre was the only large scale entertainment people could afford to enjoy. Time has changed and so has the sources of entertainment. Even if there is no electricity people use chargeable batteries to watch television. Despite various other sources of available entertainments the popularity of mobile theatres has not gone down a bit; in fact it is rising day by day. The journey of mobile theatres is continuing unperturbed and Ratan Lahkar claims because mobile theatre adapts to changes, there is less chance of the popularity being compromised.

The adaptation to the changing times range from using new technologies to the utilization of media. Bringing a dinosaur alive on stage, rowing a boat through both the stages, showing a sinking Titanic, making an anaconda crawl, riding a horse across the stage, setting fire on the stage and showing the twin towers crashing down has been taken care by the new technologies along with the expert performance of the actors. In the films these things are possible because it is done using very high technologies, with many takes, retakes and lot of editing before presenting it to the audience. The same things that happen on screen can be seen on stage which keeps the audience in awe and the huge popularity of these plays like Titanic and Jurassic Park were staged more times than the scheduled plan at places due to public demand. The use of technology and creating ambience according to the scene, for example showing a river, the impression of a storm and using advanced lighting to represent various situations are changing the face of the magnificent stage of mobile theatre.

These technologies have not overshadowed the performances of the actors. A play on the life of Assamese cultural icon *Kalaguru* Bishnuprasad Rabha is equally appreciated so as the portrayal of the fear and insecurity of emigrants in a play staged about the life of Bangladeshi refugees. Another significant play staged by Kohinoor Theatre called "*Abuj dora achin koina*" (i.e. Innocent groom unknown Bride) have shown six feet tall Jatin Borah, the most famous Assamese actor as a dwarf. Wearing custom made heavy costume and performing on stage as a dwarf is definitely a huge challenge for an actor. There is another play which has shown the character of a girl in double role. Making both appear many times on stage at the same time was so acutely performed that people hardly could make out which one is the actual actor. Dr Laksminandan Borah showed concern about the future of mobile theatre in Assam if they do not change the theme of their plays because the unavoidable expansion of electronic based technologies have become an integral part of mobile theatre. He praises this theatre form for making the necessary changes and still continuing to be popular among the audience. He also says that mobile theatre is

popular because audience relate themselves on the stages with the play. It also helps bringing mass awareness among people. He gives example of the play *Daainir Prem* (Witch's Love) which was able to spread awareness about AIDS in a large scale and the state policies could not even do 10% of what the play did.<sup>5</sup>

It can be seen that along with procuring the themes and techniques from the films, mobile theatre is also applying song sequences which can be identified only with films. Earlier the play used to start with a short dance drama with a social awareness theme. Nowadays that part is mostly skipped and there are songs in between the acts of the plays which sometimes do not seem necessary. The way we sometimes criticise films for the unnecessary inclusion of these songs, the same condition applies to the mobile theatre also. It can be looked at in other ways as well. As the film industry is decaying in Assam the choreographers and singers are also losing their field of performance. Inclusion of song and dance has given them an opportunity to be a part of the popular. Nowadays songs are especially being written for specific performances and DVDs are taken out even before the performance happens. There are facebook pages of particular theatre groups who flaunt which big star they have bagged this year, videos of the songs and the already decided schedule for performance of the whole year. They also have websites with the same information. Of course publicity is a necessary part of being popular. Somehow the only poster that contained the faces of all the performers, names of the plays, playwrights, dates, timings and place with two big words on one corner of the poster saying "*Ahibo Dhorise*" which means it is coming, with the name of the theatre group was more appealing than the posters of theatres that look like film posters nowadays. The posters nowadays start with showcasing which film star they are able to rope in for the season which is followed by cut outs of the same film starts and individual posters for each performance of each day. Publicity and advertisement have been able to expose the grandeur of these performances but the suspense of waiting for these theatres to come to a place and perform is somehow lost in all the pomp and

show.

*Nationally and internationally famed actor Adil Hussain sadly remarked that the mobile theatres have killed the soul of performance. Achyut Lahkar does not agree with Hussain and says it is his personal opinion. According to him an enclosed space does not let the art evolve. It is every artist's duty to create a new form of art as searching the essence of an art form within another will be a mistake. Mobile theatres are different and continue to be.*<sup>6</sup>

It seems that the Assamese film industry after its downfall has merged with the mobile theatre and it in various ways has proved beneficial both for the actors and the theatre producers. Adding glamour and making it more alluring to the audience by positioning famous film actors have certainly enhanced its popularity but in a way has closed a door of opportunity for other aspiring actors who are not from a cinema background. The government has turned its eyes towards the mobile theatre groups and been trying to impose the laws that are to be applied in films, for example moral policing and censorship. I would like to conclude my paper with a concern that the

film industry in this state may never revive and despite being popular the mobile theatre may become more cinematic and lose its original charm.

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