

Title- The Mobile Theatre of Assam –Tradition and evolution

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ABSTRACT

Mobile Theatre is one of the unique cultural heritages of the state of Assam. The term Mobile theatre refers to the dramatic tradition of repertoire theatre groups that travel from place to place to stage dramas for a period of almost eight months in a year. Such groups consist of actors, producer, director, musicians, choreographers, technical experts in the fields of light, sound, stage properties, setting, cooking etc. Throughout the decades, the mobile theatre of Assam has been evolving as an exclusive cultural industry of the state. Mobile Theatre stands for both commercially and aesthetically successful distinctive dramatic heritage of this state .The present article deals with the origin, history, problems and prospects of this distinctive cultural tradition of Assam

Key Words – Assam, cultural, tradition, audience, entertainment

MAIN PAPER –

The history of dramaturgy in Assam dates back to the 15th Century when Saint Srimanta Sankaradeva started the journey of regional drama by composing and staging *Chihnayatra* .From that glorious moment ,the dramatic tradition of Assam has gone through numerous changes and has reached the present stature .Even before Sankaradeva ,Assam was enriched with native /local traditions of dramatic and performing arts like *Putola Nach* ,*Dhuliya Bhaona* ,*Ojapali* ,*Pasati*,

Kushan Gan, Dhepa Dhuliya etc. The *Ankiya Nat* of Srimanta Sankaradeva was a synthesis of selected elements of all these local dramatic traditions which was used by him to propound his religio-philosophical teachings. Gradually, there comes the western influences of the specified dramatic compositions like tragedy and comedy. Under this new influence, a group of enthusiastic dramatists started writing such plays which is considered to be the beginning phase of modernism in Assamese dramatic writing.

Mobile theatre is an entirely different dramatic tradition as it is a complete package of art and management, entertainment and aesthetics. During the third decade of the twentieth century, Brajanath Sharma, one of the visionary cultural legends of the state, started a new tradition of dramatic enactment in Assam. In the year 1930, Brajanath Sharma started Kohinoor Opera Party – a mobile drama company which was inspired and influenced by the Yatra tradition of erstwhile West Bengal. Later on, Achyut Lahkar followed the similar track and started Nataraj Theatre in 1963, which is considered to be the first full-fledged mobile theatre group of Assam. Lahkar is conferred the title of Father of Mobile theatre of Assam. Since then the mobile theatre developed the identity and professional, aesthetic and management practices that define it today. The small town of Pathshala of Barpeta thus became the historic site of the origin of the unique cultural tradition of the state which has now almost twenty five active mobile theatre groups. The history of global drama and performing arts do have references of such mobile dramatic enactments. The ancient Greek Literature also talks about such mobile dramatic troupes. The plays of William Shakespeare were also staged by his contemporary dramatic companies. But the existence of such full-fledged, autonomous and long lasting dramatic tradition is very rare.

Objective –

Every art form has to face the test of time. Globalisation and its consequent phenomena have brought numerous changes to the world of art and entertainment. This paper aims at examining and analysing such issues that has been influencing upon the nature and characteristics of the mobile theatre of Assam. The main objective is to look into the issues that have put new challenges before this historical dramatic tradition and how the industry has been coping with the changing scenario.

Methodology –

It is a qualitative research based on participatory observation research methodology. Both primary and secondary sources of data are used for the research findings.

Discussion and Findings-

Mobile theatre of Assam has been considered as the most powerful full-fledged mode of mass media .In this film crazy, technique driven world of entertainment, theatre often gets a raw deal. But even amidst the marginalised status of theatres, mobile theatre of Assam has managed to break free from the constraints that usually confine Indian Theatre. The mobile theatre in Assam has achieved the status of a well managed company where we find the long list of skilled professionals ranging from actors ,producer, directors ,dancers, stunt men ,prop men ,musicians ,instrumentalists ,makeup artists ,drivers to tailors or cooks to name a few. They have their make shift tents , own vehicles and keep staging dramas from one place to another almost for eight months a year .Before the final staging ,the artists go through rigorous rehearsals of three to four dramas that are going to be performed by them for the next eight months without any hiatus.

These companies stage dramas in their own stages that are temporarily developed in an open space for three to four days .Popularly known as “pandals” ,such performances are done for three to four days in a place. The mobile theatre companies have their own tents, musical instruments, props, chairs, sound system as well as the cooking arrangements. The audience can enjoy these performances by paying a certain amount of money. The Mancharupa Theatre introduced a double-stage system in 1968, two stages that can be used for dramatic performance without any break. Each and every dramatic moment is accompanied by relevant props, setting and music. These companies travel each and every corner of the state irrespective of rural or urban localities .Such groups are invited by organisations, clubs, schools or local committees for paid performances.

The Mobile theatre of Assam has acquired the status of a well managed industry as it offers the scope of direct and indirect employment avenues for almost one lakh people of the state. Each of the mobile theatre groups has eighty to hundred members of different fields .For these people, this is their sole source of livelihood. Thus, the industry has been playing a strong and responsible economic role for almost sixty years .It is undoubtedly a matter of utmost importance that this industry has been contributing so much for strengthening the economy of a developing state like Assam.

Drama and dramatic performances are the soul of Mobile theatre. So it is a matter of urgency to check their contributions to the treasure of Assamese drama. Being one of the most popular forms of mass media, mobile theatre chiefly aims at the entertainment of the audience. But, even keeping the entertainment principle in focus, they have contributed a large number of Assamese plays which are very rich in their literary, artistic and performative values. Such dramas are not only entertaining pieces of temporary gimmick, but prolific deliberations on different aspects of society, politics, economy, culture or human psychology. Among such classics, mention must be made of plays like *Jerengar Sati*, *Ajak Jonakir Jilmil*, *Soraguri Chapori*, *Boliya Hati*, *Tejal Ghora*, *Baghjal*, *Asimat Jar Heral Sima*, *Karbala*, *Mukhymantri*, *Surangar Seshat*, *Prajnma* etc. The stage of the mobile theatre has become the most successful platform of dramatic experimentation both in terms of technical fusion or inter cultural adaptations. The audience of Assam has enjoyed the staging of technically enriched plays like *Titanic*, *Dinosaur*, *Mahabharat*, *Jurassic Park*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Hijack*, *Cleopatra*, *Kargil*, *Lady Diana* etc. The Assamese adaptations of Shakespearean plays, Greek Tragedies, Works of Kalidasa, novels of authors like H.G. Wells, Thomas Hardy were also historical initiatives taken up by this industry. Renowned dramatists like Phani Sharma, Brajen Baruah, Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia, Mahendra Barthakur, Hemanta Dutta, Sewabrat Baruah used to write plays for the mobile theatres. In short, mobile theatre revolutionised the concept of dramatic performance through its progressive and innovative contributions in all possible fields like production, acting, time management, commercial success, technical experimentations etc.

Audience is the prime target of the mobile theatre. Everything related to their production – selection of the stories or themes for their annual productions, the final play, selection of the actors to play the roles – is done keeping in mind the taste and the expectations of the audience. Other than oratory and certain forms of music, drama is the only art that is designed to appeal to a crowd instead of to an individual. The mightiest masters of the drama, recognized the popular character of its appeal and wrote for the multitude. The crowd, therefore, has exercised a potent influence upon the dramatist in every era of the theatre. The mobile theatre is primarily a commercial cultural enterprise and therefore they have always been trying to cater to the hunger of entertainment of its consumers. For a certain period of time, mobile theatre was the solely available medium of entertainment for the rural folk of Assam. Therefore, the theatre companies, while scripting or staging their dramas, always took care of both entertainment as well as education. This education

was not about formal or curriculum based education, rather it refers to messages on different socio-political, socio-cultural issues that was disseminated under the guise of dramatic enactment.

Most of the dramas were based on social and human value based contents. The language used in these dramas was simply and easily comprehensible for the common mass. There was hardly any scope of technical or content based experiment in those dramatic compositions. The dramatists were aware about the emotional attachment of the audience and accordingly the stories and the characters, their acting, their dialogues were designed. The beautifully choreographed dance dramas, popularly known as *Nrityanatika*, were also integral parts of the wholesome entertainment provided by the mobile theatre groups. Sometimes the popular lends ,mythological or scriptural stories were also retold (For example –*Mahabharat ,Bhakta Prahlad,Beula-Lakhindar* , in an attractive manner in the stages of mobile theatre Mobile theatre has great reach and popularity in rural and suburban areas. It has thrived on the feeling of 'community' and 'collective' that is still present in villages and towns of Assam. For instance, when theatre troops travel from one part of the state to the other, many artists and technicians are housed by the natives of that place in their homes. There is little separation between the performers and the audience Thus mobile theatres were able to ensure their unique niche in the socio-cultural sphere of Assam.

But the mobile theatre industry of Assam has gone through drastic changes during the last few decades. It is a universally accepted fact that change is a natural process and everything has to accept the demand of time .Due to the consequences of globalisation, free economy and unimaginable development of science and technology, the concept of entertainment has completely been redefined. As a result of this changing scenario, the mobile theatre groups of Assam are found to go for typically commercial and melodramatic dramatic compositions which hardly have any originality. The mobile theatre industry has been criticised for lowering the artistic standard of its plays and performances. It has been seen that the dramas, staged by the mobile theatre companies turn out to be mere commercial ,soulless pieces of imitated melodramatic elements. Inclusion of unnecessary songs, dance sequences, action scenes and un-credited imitation of popular Bollywood and South Indian films for its story content make the plays of mobile theatre very cheap and artless. The idea of entertainment is confined to melodrama and gimmick which takes away the artistic sensitivity of such productions .Therefore, majority of the

audience still fondly remember the appeal and the gorgeous simplicity of the old plays by Bhabendranath Saikia, Mahendra Barthakur, Sewabrat Barua, Hemanta Dutta etc.

Here matter the interrelated issues like changing demand and notion of entertainment, creative originality, expectation of the audience etc. While one group of critics consider it to be a deviation from the original track of Mobile theatre that Achyut Lahkar dreamt of ,another group of well wishers consider it as a natural process of transformation. They believe that if the mobile theatre industry wants to survive in this competitive world ,it obviously has to go for some compromises in its approaches. They believe that it is good to be updated and changed to survive in this transformative phase of history. If examined closely, the following problems are found to be the major problems of the mobile theatre industry of Assam.

Theatre and drama are nothing but the two sides of the same coin. Mobile theatre is nothing but an organised setup to perform dramas .Therefore maintaining the originality of its plays and acting skills of players or actors is the first and foremost priority of this enterprise .But in comparison to the former scenario of the mobile theatre productions ,the contemporary productions are often criticised of being imitated products of least originality .Entertainment becomes the focal aim of the productions which make the dramas mere cinematic narratives full of songs ,dances and unnatural acting accompanied with lighting and sound effect .In such a situation ,the contribution of such theatrical productions to the enriched history of Assamese theatre is a matter to be seriously examined. Commercialization is found to overshadow the artistic sensibility .It is a very pitiable sign for a culturally rich tradition like mobile theatre.

The industry has also been suffering from the issue of Branding and commodification of art .Instead of concentrating on the artistic qualities of their dramas, the theatre houses are now more interested in hiring film actors (Here comes the STAR factor ,the image of HERO /HEROINE) for a huge amount of annual contract .Such so called stares have to be paid a lot and their lodging or food arrangement are also found to be different from others. The producers have to invest a large amount of money with such stars which hampers the remuneration of the other serious actors or artists .Most of the times; they are found to be underpaid though their acting skills and dedication are always very strong. Moreover, most of the stars, due to their lack of stage acting skills, often fail in impressing the audience which hampers the artistic quality of the production. Now-a-days , just to retain the star image , many of the plays of the mobile theaters are presented more in a filmy

and superficial manner .The gradual glamorization thus leads to a state of artistic breakdown of the mobile theatre industry of Assam. This gradual transformation of mobile dramas to cinematic productions is one of the major charges that serious audiences have been repeatedly raising.

Due to the huge investments with the stars and marketing strategies , the budgets of the theatre houses have become very huge.It now affects the price of the tickets that audiences have to buy to enjoy such dramas .Now-a-days ,buying a ticket needs at least two hundred to five hundred rupees which was an unimaginable matter in 1995 Or 2000 .The mobile theatre industry is basically dependent on the rural people of lower economic stature .So the hike in tickets results in the gradual detachment between a group of interested audience and the theatre companies .

Marketing of the mobile theatre productions is also going through drastic changes as advertisements of the dramas are now made available even on the electronic media .There is hardly any difference between the posters of a big budget Bollywood film or a mobile theatre production. But the saddest part is that, in majority of such promotional artefacts, only the hired filmstars are projected. But it should always be remembered that the mobile theatre of Assam has its proud legacy of evergreen and prolific actors who have their unique position in the hearts of the Assamese audience .

For the last few years , a good number of artists have been victim of underpayment or nonpayment .There are many cases where the owner or the producer of the theatre companies do not pay the contracted amount to the respective artists .In some cases ,some artists even have to go to the court to claim their due remuneration. Such incidents make it clear that such producers hardly have any cultural or social responsibility. They simply consider it as a business and do not have any respect for art and artists. With this mentality, they cannot contribute to the enrichment of the art and culture of the state .We cannot expect anything progressive from such money minded cultural mafias.

The ongoing epidemic of Corona also has a major impact upon the mobile theatre of Assam. Since the month of, March, all the mobile theatre groups have to suspend their shows which lead to economic crisis of the people associated with this industry. A good number of mobile theatre groups are already closed because of this situation. All the artists and the technicians of these companies have to look for alternative livelihood resources for their survival

Mobile theatre is always projected as the unique cultural heritage of the state of Assam. The industry is known worldwide for its technical experimentation in the stage (For example – the staging of *Titanic* in the stage of Kohinoor theatre is still considered to be one of the most difficult theatrical experiments where the entire ship was shown on the stage without a single drop of real water). Mobile theatre has given birth to immortal artists and playwrights. But, there is hardly any Governmental empowerment or welfare scheme to support this industry. The State Government hardly initiates any scheme to raise the standard of this distinctive cultural tradition of the state. This lack of Government support also hampers the desired growth of the industry.

Conclusion

While talking about the uniqueness of Assam, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika once said that mobile theatre is the identity of the state of Assam. But, in the recent years, the industry is found to be suffering from so many issues that its survival is also under question. In such a situation, the concerned intellectuals of Assam should go for constructive feedback and recommendation so that the industry can be brought back to the real track. In this process, the government should play an active role and should support to empower the industry both financially and culturally.

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