



## POPULAR MOBILE THEATRES OF ASSAM: AN AGENCY OF GLOBALISATION AND TRANSCULTURATION

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### ABSTRACT

In an era where globalisation and multiculturalism have ubiquitously touched all the edges of human life, Assam a state in India's northeast affected by these phenomenal changes over the recent years dramatises various aspects of human life simultaneously pushing forth its desire for creating a space of its own within the country. Amidst the most unstable situations where bloodshed and terror are the image builders of the region, Assam stages the multifaceted problems in the lives of men and women in its unique dramatic style. Acting in the stages of Assam is a metaphor for reclaiming the space of one's own gender, community and class. However, the dramatic performances in Assam have acquired much less recognition in the realm of modern Indian theatre as a distinctive category. Starting from the bhaona to the bhramyaman or the popular mobile theatres of Assam, the dramatic performances have many similarities with the other drama performances found across the country. Not only this, the popular mobile theatres of Assam have adopted Hollywood classics like Jurassic Park, Titanic and many of the plays of Shakespeare. Attempting to cut a way across in the era of modern Indian drama, the popular mobile theatres of Assam experiment with great risk and reproduce the work of their Western colonial counterpart to an audience that is not only the colonised other of the West but also the hierarchical other in its own place in terms of economy. This paper attempts to highlight the ways in which popular mobile theatres of Assam act as an agency of globalisation and transculturation in the region bringing incomprehensible changes.

**Key Words-**Mobile theatres, Assam, jatra, Nataraj Theatre, Abahan Theatre, Kohinoor Theatre, stage on the wheels.

At a time when the world outside identifies Assam as a region shrouded with the dark smokes of serial blasts and the resonance of the thundering bullets coming across the unprotected fields of the villages, one would be surprised to know about a set of people skilfully investing more than nine months of the year preparing for a colourful carnival popularly known as the bhramyaman mancha or roughly translated as the stage on the wheels of Assam. This antagonistic existence of fear and frolic perhaps, attributes to the unique identity that Assam has been recognised with over the years following the nation's independence.

Amidst such a circumstance where insecurity and threat of life permeates the conscience of the public in the urban areas as well as the rural pockets of the region, the mobile theatres of Assam stand up

performing plays depicting a wide range of issues covering themes from domestic lives, relationships, politics and entertainment. The performance of the mobile theatres symbolise the resistance towards the violence that occasionally petrifies the society with the violent turbulences of bloodshed and terror. The story of the modern Assamese theatre is as old as the British advent to Assam in and around 1838. The first form of modern Assamese theatre was the *jatra* form influenced by Bengal. Eighteen years after the establishment of *jatra* theatre in Kolkata, *jatra* in Assam came into existence in 1875.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, *jatras* were common in the districts of Jorhat, Golaghat, Tezpur, Mangoldai, and various other places in Assam. A few *jatra* groups from Bengal were then providing entertainment to the people of Assam. These groups were the *Nattya Company*,

*Bholanath Opera* and the *Sailyabala Opera*. Not much later under the influence of these *jatras* from Bengal, Jaydev Sharma of Murkuchi village in the district of Kamrup gave impetus to the commercial Assamese *jatra* performances most likely in the period between 1868-70 (Patgiri:2005). People loved these performances in lower Assam and there were several *nattya dals* established in the Kamrup district of Assam at that time.

Some of the popular *jatra* groups of the time were *Shilakalik Opera*, *Ganagadhi Opera*, *Assam Kohinoor Opera Party*, *Rampur Jatra Dal*, *Shalugaon Binapani Natya Sangha*, *Hajo Nattya Kala Kendra*, *Bamunkuchi Jatra Dal*, *Bhaluki Jatra Dal*, *Helena Jatra Party*, *Dumuria Jatra Party*, *Asom Nattbani*, *Bamakhata*, *Kamrup Arya Opera*, *Bholanath Opera*, *Mudhikuchi Jatra Dal*, *Banhbari Sanjivani Opera*, *Dubi Parishareshwar Jatra Party*, *Nataraj Opera*, *Mugkuchi Natya Sangha*, *Marua Sankar Sangha*, *Nattya Samiti* and the *Assam Union's Kohinoor Opera*. Initially, the language they adopted for performance was Bengali.

The first *jatra* play in Assamese was *Nal Damayanti* by Dhaneswar Sharma. Following this, the other famous *jatra* plays which came up were *Rana Pratap*, *Shakti Singh*, *Baji Rao*, *Jayadeva*, *Dhatri Panna*, *Avaja Devi*, *Basaspati*, *Kalapahar*, *Prameela*, *Mewar Kumari*, *Jai Bharat*, *Kundil Kunwari*, *Harischandra Smashan Milan*, *Baan Parajoy*, *Chandragupta*, *Surath Uddhaar*, *Tilottoma*, *Taravati*, *Dewla Devi*, *Pan Mukti*, *Niyati*, *Akalor Desh*, *Manuh*, *Dhorar Devata*, *Nagakunwar*, *Jatiya Pataka*, *Manik Mala*, *Milan Mala*, *Khelaghar*, *Ashrusagar*, *Swarnamoyee*, *Muktitirtha*, *Krshsakata*, *Raktamukut*, *Bandir Santaan*, *Basundhara*, *Bikramaditya*, *Mayur Singhasan*, *Aei Prithivi Tokaar Gulam*. Braja Sharma one of the actors, directors and producers of the *jatra* form in Assam devoted his whole life for the development of drama in Assam but could not sustain it due to economic limitations. The *jatra* form was also responsible for uniting men and women for the nationalist cause to a great extent.

Under the influence of the *jatra* in 1930, *Kohinoor Opera*, the first mobile theatre group of Assam, was started by Natyacharya Brajanath Sarma. From Dhubri to Sadiya, from the north bank to the south bank of the Brahmaputra River, *Kohinoor Opera*

performed its dramas, attracting thousands of spectators who came to see Sarma perform on the stage. Apart from initiating a theatrical movement, the *Kohinoor Opera* introduced co-acting on the stages of Assam. In 1931, Brajanath Sarma, with the help of Phani Sarma introduced female actresses for the first time to appear in their drama productions at a time when male acting was completely dominant, revolutionizing the nature of Assamese theatre.

Sri Sada Lahkar of Pathsala established the *Nataraj Opera* a *jatra* in the year 1959 and later his brother Achyut Lahkar transformed it into the form of mobile theatre and named it **Nataraj Theatre** in 1963. This is how the first mobile theatres in Assam came into existence.

The year 1963 is considered the golden year in the theatre history of Assam. There followed about more than forty mobile theatre groups performing in Assam in the forthcoming years inspired by the *Nataraj Theatre*. Some of these were *Suradevi*, *Nataraj Silpi Niketan of Pathsala*, *Purbajyoti Theatre*, *Asom Star Theatre*, *Rupkonwar Theatre*, *Manchapura*, *Rupanjali*, *Kohinoor*, *Awahan*, *Anirbaan*, *Pallavi*, *Devadasi*, *Parisareswar*, *Kalpana*, *Rupalim*, *Radhikadevi*, *Apsara*, *Lakhimi*, *Maa Lakhimi*, *Bhagyadevi*, *Mukund*, *Manchajyoti*, *Bishnujyoti*, *Rang Ghor*, *Aparooopa*, *Indradhanu*, *Panjannya*, *Hengul*, *Monalisa*, *Srimanta Sankardeva*, *Moon*, *Joytu Asomi*, *Indrani*, *Chandravanu*, *Udayon*, *Jyotirupa*, *Sahajatri*, *Binapani*, *Anyatom*, *Madhavdev*, *Bordoichila*, *Monikut*, *Meghali*, *Turangam*, *Gadapani*, *Sri Guru*, *Borluit Theatre*.

Most of the theatre groups start their tour from mid-August and wind up by April every year with a crew of about 75-125 members including cast, crew and cooks. The rehearsals start from June and after that a group of performers pack everything needed to put up a show loaded in a truck and travel from one place to another reaching every nook and corner of Assam. They carry the props, stage, other equipments, generators, music systems and the tents. The theatre group construct their makeshift tent on an open field with seat capacity approximately for 2000 audiences.<sup>ii</sup> They perform for roughly 210 days, visiting about 75 villages and performing about 150 shows.<sup>iii</sup> Two stages are placed adjacent to each other. The props on the

stages are put in such a way so that within seconds the setting can be changed and if necessary they could be converted in to one stage.

Some of the famous theatre groups of Assam today are *Kohinoor Theatre*, *Shankardev Theatre*, *Hengool Theatre*, *Awahan Theatre*. Where on the one hand, in villages we can see such religious dramatic performances as the *bhaona*; on the other hand, we see the popular mobile theatres displaying sophisticated shows on the so called *stage on the wheels*. They have experimented with the diverse themes from both Hollywood and Bollywood movies but doing them on stage needs greater skill and precision. *Kohinoor*, the leading group has an enviable record for enchanting the audience with innovative technical feats on stage. It has experimented with the appearances of dwarfs and double roles of actors appearing at the same time on the stage. In 2009, the group had staged a play with an actress in a double role, with the actress even appearing 'together' several times on stage. In its banner play of 2010, *Abuj Dora, Achin Kainya (The Stubborn Groom and the Strange Bride)*, the group staged the tale of a dwarf and his two look-alikes of normal physical heights. To transform a six-foot-tall actor to a dwarf for one of the three characters is no mean feat. The play has similarities with the Kamal Hassan starrer *Appu Raja* (1990), but the producers maintain that the similarities are only to the extent that both have the main actors in the role of a dwarf. From lighting effects to specially tailored clothes with Mumbai's help, the producers of *Kohinoor* have spared no cost to ensure that the effect is complete. And it has paid off well too. The mobile drama company from Assam renowned for taking mega-stage adaptations of blockbusters like *Titanic* (1997) to remote villages stepped out of the state for the first time in 2010. The troupe staged three of its signature productions - *Asemat Jar Heral Seema*<sup>iv</sup>, *O' Moi Munnai Koisu*<sup>v</sup> and *Sheetare Semekarati*<sup>vi</sup> - in a three-day theatre festival at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA) during April 25-27. This venture marked the first official journey of the 50-year-old Assamese mobile theatre out of the state. The festival was presented by the National School of Drama and IGNCA. The initial *Kohinoor* plays were based on folklore and mythology and were mostly influenced by Bengali

drama.

But gradually, the travelling drama company broke out of the mould by adapting classical English plays, popular Assamese literature and Hollywood movies. It has also staged plays on drug addiction and corruption over the last few years. The proprietor of the theatre company once mentioned, "We took local dramatic versions of the *Titanic* and *Jurassic Park* to remote villages across the state even before the movies arrived on Assamese screen from Hollywood. Such was the popularity of our productions that when viewers in Pathsala watched *Titanic* in English on screen, they remarked that the movie had been lifted from the *Kohinoor* play," Lahkar told IANS<sup>vii</sup>. The troupe is known for its adaptations of *Cleopatra*, *Mrichchakatika*, *Iliad-Odyssey*, *Ben Hur*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Mr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* besides *Titanic* and *Jurassic Park*.

The proprietor of the *Kohinoor Theatre*, Achyut Lahkar remarks on the essential class difference that could be seen in the audience watching these plays, "Earlier the affluent sections of the society looked down upon the *Bhramyaman* (travelling) theatre, but villagers kept it alive. Tickets now sell for ₹50 - ₹700 and each performance accommodates nearly 2,100 visitors in four categories. *Kohinoor* was also the first repertory company to have availed of a loan from the Central Bank of India in 1979."

An industry in its own right with an annual turnover of over Rs 10 crore, the popularity of the Assamese theatre is capturing professional actors from the Assamese films for which the market of the films have gone down in the recent years. More and more Assamese cine artists are making their presence visible on *the stage on the wheels* of Assam. Stories range from across the world on political icons like Benazir Bhutto, Saddam Hussain, and historical events like September 9/11, and classics like *Ben Hur*.

*The Abahan theatre* staged the story of Benazir Bhutto, spanning from her birth, her student days at Oxford University, her role in Pakistan politics to the end of her life.

The playwright Dhruba Jyoti Sharma claims that it is the first attempt of dramatising Bhutto's life as no form of cinematic documentation or drama on Bhutto's life had by then existed in India. The play is

developed on the basis of the information available in newspapers and the internet on Bhutto's life. A single song sequence for the play cost Rs 4 lakh. There were nine sets being used and each cost almost Rs 30,000 and the costumes were tailored in Mumbai while a make-up artist was hired from the South for the actor who played Bhutto as the playwright informed to Kaushik.<sup>viii</sup>

Other kind of experimentation that the mobile theatres have been doing for years together now are the adaptations of Hollywood movies like *Ben Hur*, *Titanic*, *Jurassic Park*. This displays the latent desire of the local theatre producers to get merged into the mainstream. The show began with the adaptation of the Shakespearian canon and today it has diverged itself adopting popular films. There are two interesting analyses which can be made out of the adaptations done for the stage. Firstly, the presentation of the *Titanic* or the dinosaurs is undoubtedly the work of imitation as the basic script is left unaltered to a large extent. Secondly, it can never be denied that the act of imitation is a construction indebted to the skills and talents of the crew that never appears on the stage and for most of the time remains behind the stage. This act of imitation indicates the dissemination of the Western imagination in Assam through the stage. The staging of the *Titanic* or the dinosaurs of the *Jurassic Park* is a strong metaphor for the phenomenal changes that have permeated down the society due to globalisation. The imitation on the stage is a reflection of the imitation of the ways of living now found in the society.

However, the adaptations of the Hollywood movies have not been able to cover up the disparities that globalisation has brought in with it. For example, the woman acting the character of Desdemona in the *Othello* of a mobile theatre represents the racial other of Shakespeare's Desdemona. Firstly, she is the racial *other* of Desdemona, then the sexual *other* of Othello as well as the white male characters in the play. She is performing her racial/colonial counterpart in a language that is non English and local and at the same time trying to do justice with the character of Desdemona—a character with whom her identification itself is problematic because she is geographically and hierarchically distanced as a colonised non-Western *other*. This

desire to come out of the private sphere and perform in the public sphere resembles the "fantasy of the native to occupy the master's place". The female actor imitates the White Western female actor who was once able to break the limitations of the domestic lives and come out and perform (1994:44).

Another noteworthy thing to see is how the dominant tastes of the bourgeoisie authenticated by the transmission of the elements of globalisation impacting the lifestyle and thoughts dissipates to the proletariat through the stage of the mobile theatres. A closer look at the way the mobile theatres are commercialised reveals the major shift that has taken place in their advertisements. Earlier the posters were only painted by local painters but now with the coming of the digital technology the actors and actresses are made to appear more attractive and resemble the popular Bollywood actors and actresses.

The other new method that promotes the theatres now is the Bollywood kind of songs and dance sequence that are itemised as the title song of the theatre group. The songs and the trailers from the plays are now uploaded in *YouTube* and can be easily accessed. The theatre companies have now signed contracts with sponsors like New Delhi Travel Guide Vacation Rentals, Airtel, Britannia promising preservation of folk, regional and ethnic culture. Malini Bhattacharjee rightly points out how theatre performances in Bengal have a dominant tendency towards producing a performance as a commodity with wide circulation. (1998:22) Familiar is the case with Assam's production of the mobile theatre. Through the various techniques it has tried all through one to make itself popular, theatre in Assam also display the fetish of the large working class audience who frequent the theatre profiting it with the turnover of 10 crores every year.

Mobile theatres perform the same plays in front of the urban and the rural audience of the region. In both the places, the performance is taken remarkably differently. For example, the urban audience aware of the Hollywood film would never comment that the film had been lifted from the theatre but the rural audience as exemplified by the audience in Pathsala mentioned above, as they have no preconceived knowledge about many Hollywood

productions. It shows their tendency of being impacted by the savour of globalisation off guard. The villages of Assam where the mobile theatre groups perform are ignorant about a performing world outside their region of which the Assamese mobile theatre is just a small configuration that hardly has even found a category for itself in the genre called "modern Indian drama".

However, the urge of placing the popular mobile theatres of Assam in the category of modern Indian drama cannot be forfeited altogether. Anuradha Kapur, the director of National School of Drama was overwhelmed by the kind of discipline and management that the people working in the mobile theatres of Assam follow. She stated with surprise once before the media, "A crew of 150-members travels all the way from Assam in six trucks, and has the record of setting a dual stage measuring over 60 feet in 5 hours. That is incredible." Kapur further added that they had a plan to interact with the Assamese actors to be able to learn the tactics of running the whole scene and those they were trying to archive and document the plays for reference material. Amal Allana, chairperson of the National School of Drama praised the way they switch off to other stage setup; speak fast dialogues and present cinematic variety remarkably. The use of video technologies and visualisation is quite appealing. Allana complimented on the comprehensive nature of the plays despite language being a bar.

<sup>i</sup> *Balgasia Theatre* was the first Bengali Theatre, 1857.

<sup>ii</sup> *Mobile Theatre of Assam*. Wednesday, November 11, 2009. NEV News Service. <http://manipurijournal.com/>

<sup>iii</sup> An example of the tour made by the *Hengool Theatre* of Assam has been attached as Appendix I, Pp-15 to 16 of this paper.

<sup>iv</sup> Translated as *Lost in Infinity*, this play is about 5 friends who embark on an exciting boat journey

<sup>v</sup> Translated as *Yes, I Munna Speaking*, this play is about the relevance of the teaching of Gandhi in today's world.

<sup>vi</sup> Translated as *On a Cold Winter Night*, this play illustrates the conflict between good and evil.

<sup>vii</sup> *Famous Assamese Mobile Theatre takes Centre Stage*. An IANS report. Saturday, April 24, 2010. 09:09 IST Accessed from

[http://www.siliconindia.com/shownews/Famous\\_Assamese\\_mobile\\_theatre\\_takes\\_centre\\_stage\\_-nid-67392-cid-29.html](http://www.siliconindia.com/shownews/Famous_Assamese_mobile_theatre_takes_centre_stage_-nid-67392-cid-29.html)

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

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