



Historical Overview Of The Mobile Theatre Of Assam

*Dr. Adish Kumar Verma

Assistant Professor

Central University of Punjab

** Bishal Prasad

Ph.D, Scholar

Central University of Punjab, Bathinda

Abstract:

Mobile theatre is a prominent art form in Assam, its vibrant and extraordinary performance styles play a major role in the cultural and social value of Assam. This paper is a study of the origin and historical overview of the Mobile theatre. It attempts to understand the significance role of Mobile theatre in the development of the cultural aspect of Assam. This paper also deals with the different theatre groups and their contribution to Assamese theatre.

The analysis of the history of mobile theatre brought up some essential points about its contribution to Assamese theatre. Its contemporary and fresh concept attracts local people to watch the performance. The local people are always excited to watch mobile theatre because its larger-than-life performance fills them with energy. It is concluded that mobile theatre plays a great role in the formation and development of Assamese theatre and is a real source of entertainment for the people of Assam.

Keywords: Mobile theatre, folk theatre, Assamese theatre, Ankiya Naat, Jatra, Bengali theatre

Introduction:

Mobile theatre is also known as Bhramyaman Natak in Assam. Due to its vibrant and dynamic nature it become a significant cultural phenomenon of performing arts in Assam. This form of theatre consists all the elements of performing arts such as drama, music, dance and commentary about social issues (Borah).

The Nataraj Theatre was the first modern mobile theatre established by Achyut Lahkar in Pathsala. Studies shows that, the younger brother of Achyut Lahkar, Sadananda Lahkar first established the Nataraja mobile theatre in 1959 and later it took care the Achyut Lahkar. This is the first opera theatre established in Pathasala, Assam (Devi).

Nataraja theatre successfully performed three plays based on folk tales such as Bhogjora, Beula, and Jerengar Soti. At first, these were presented in front of the Hari Mandir, which is situated in Pathasala (Devi). His main objective was to take performances to the audience and entertain them. This theatre changed the course of traditional theatre in Assam, the shifting of fixed performance stage to dynamic stage led to a major movement in the world of theatre.

The origin of modern Mobile theatre can be traced back to early 20th century, but it mainly flourished in the year 1960. The word 'Mobile theatre' was first coined by Radha Govinda Baruah, who was a social worker and reformer. She inspired by the work of Suradevi theatre in Guwahati (Bhamoriya 2017).

Mobile theatre teams majorly consist of variety of artists such as actors, singers, dancers, directors, light designer, make-up artist, set and stage designer and other back stage artists. These groups travel throughout Assam, performing a show that primarily based on the Assamese folk tales, adaptation of English plays and contemporary social and political issues. Some plays are inspired by ancient epics, such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata (Eez. 2019). These stories not only entertain the audience but also teach them moral lessons and cultural values. These stories easily help to make the connection between the actor and the audience and can evoke emotion in the audience.

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva was a saint, philosopher, dramatist, poet, social reformer, and founder of the Vaishnavite movement in Assam. He spread the concept of true worshipping of God all over Assam; earlier, the people of Assam used to believe in superstitious things like tantraism and Bali paratha, etc. His Ek-Dharma-Ek-Sarana concept was the primary objective of the movement. He started writing plays called Ankiya Naat, based on the stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharat, to show the right path to achieving enlightenment or Mukti to the people of Assam (Bhattacharjee).

'Mobile theatre amalgamates art and entertainment, theatre with film, contemporary issues with mythological themes. Its marketing policy combines everyday local practice with innovative communication, a mix that is just as effective and can hold its own in comparison with professional publicity strategies. And, finally, it gets its audience interested in relevant problems and brings people together who otherwise might have little in common. This is an extraordinary achievement in community building in what is in most respects a fragmented society' (Ross 2017).

The origin of Mobile theatre in Assam started from old folk tradition, specifically influenced by Jatra form of folk theatre from Bengal around 15th century. Jatra has unique characteristics that reflected in the mobile theatre, such as vibrant performances by using dance and music, and stories which is based on mythological themes and performed in open spaces (Bora 2022).

For performances, theatre groups build temporary tents in open fields, where large audiences come to watch the play. As many as 2,000 people gather to watch a single performance. The flexible sorts of stages allow them to travel to different locations, including remote areas. The whole tents look like proscenium theatre

which is divided into three part- (1) Main stage, (2) Green room and (3) Audience area. Some theatre groups design the performing stage into two parts; this kind of design helps to change the scene without wasting any time and enables parallel scenes or performances, which keeps the audience engaged.

Mobile theatre performances are focused on different aspects:

1. Entertaining all communities of Assam irrespective of their caste, class, or religion.
2. Spreading awareness among the people for financial support for artists and society.
3. Spreading education and social awareness among the people of Assam on different social issues like health, moral values, political rights, family planning, cleanliness, AIDS, Cancer and etc.
4. Most essential is how to establish unity and integrity among people and live a peaceful life.

List of famous Mobile theatre group:

| Sr.no | Name | Year |
|-------|----------------------------------|------|
| 1 | Nataraj (Pathsala) | 1963 |
| 2 | Suradevi (Chamata) | 1964 |
| 3 | Purvajyoti (Hajo) | 1966 |
| 4 | Bhagyadevi (Marowa, Nalbari) | 1967 |
| 5 | Mancharupa (Pathsala) | 1968 |
| 6 | Assam Star Theatre | 1970 |
| 7 | Mukunda (Makhibaha) | 1972 |
| 8 | Kohinoor (Pathsala) | 1976 |
| 9 | Awahan (Pathsala) | 1980 |
| 10 | Chitralekha (Pathsala) | 1984 |
| 11 | Jatayu Asami Theatre (Sarupeta) | 1987 |
| 12 | Turdom (Dirak) | 1995 |
| 13 | Sakuntala (Nalbari) | 2005 |
| 14 | Bhagyashree (Sapekhati) | 2003 |
| 15 | Anurag Movie Theatre (Belsar) | 2005 |
| 16 | Rajashree (Guwahati) | 2005 |
| 17 | Alakananda (Koniha) | 2006 |
| 18 | Karen Ghar (Hatigaon) | 2006 |
| 19 | Anuradha (Rampur) | 2006 |
| 20 | Himalaya (Khajikhowa, Dibrugarh) | - |

Apart from these group, there are many groups still active in their region. The source of the above list is a research paper (Ezez.).

Assam Mobile Theatre is a prominent source of entertainment, reaching around 50-60 million audiences. The various stories and high costs of production, which attracts and captivates the audience to the theatre. The audience watches the show together beyond the segregation of class, caste, religion, and authority. Even dignitaries and prominent figures such as ministers, celebrities, and high authorities sit with the audience and enjoy the theatre. Most shows usually last for two and a half hours, which are primarily in the Assamese language. Such groups use local folk elements such as folk dance and music, which makes the performance even better.

Conclusion:

Through this paper, it can be concluded that the Mobile theatre combines traditional and contemporary themes. Mobile theatre is the most anticipated theatre in Assam; its performance styles mesmerized the audience. It also contributes to Assam's cultural and social values. The essential aspect that comes through this study is its ability to adapt and recreate old traditional folk theatre such as Jatra, Ankiya naat, etc., and blend perfectly with the contemporary concept of theatre. It also contributes to the economy of Assam. Through this, the artist tries to spread awareness to the audience. Its commercialized production entertained the audience and evoked true emotion among them. Every year, Mobile theatre brings new performances, and the people of Assam gather to show their solidarity and enjoy as well.

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