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BHRAMYAMAN OF ASSAM: THE MOBILE THEATRE

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Abstract

Amongst many performing art of Assam, the Mobile Theatre which is also commonly know as *Bhramyam* can be considered as the most widespread mean of entertainment in the contemporary time. The Mobile Theatre is the brain child of Late. Achyut Lahkar (9th July 1931-12 June 2016). While other performing arts have its own limitation and boundaries, especially geographically and in that situation Mobile Theatre breaks all the boundaries by travelling on wheels from every nook and corner of Assam. Not only this, *Bhramyaman* has its contribution in the social development of the Assamese society also. This particular form of art is the result of a man's dream and aspiration to make Assam immortal in the field of art and culture.

Key-Words

Achyut Lahkar, *Bhramyaman*, Assam, Theatre, Mobile Theatre.

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Aims and Objectives:

This paper endeavor to provide a gist of the birth and growth of the popular performing art of Assam which is widely known as Mobile Theatre and locally famous as *Bhramyaman*. This paper aspires to give an introductory to the working pattern of this particular art form.

Introduction:

Assam, situated in the north-eastern part of India is basically an agricultural based society. The habits and ambiances are simple along with its native inhabitants. Along with other assets, it has a rich hertiage of art and culture and among the various performing art like *Bhaona*, *Oja-pali*, *Ankia Naat*, *Putula Naach*, *Kushan-gan*, *Khuliya-bhaoriya*, *Dhulia-bhaona*, *Kamrupi-dhuliya*, *Dhepa-dhuliya* or *Darangar-dhuliya*, *Jatra etc.*, Mobile Theatre can be counted as the unique performing art among all. The term 'unique' will be apt to describe this form of art because the term 'mobile' itself describes that this form of theatre is not static in nature. Mobile Theatre keeps travelling from one place to another throughout Assam: rural and urban. Mobile Theatre has been an influential medium for both information and entertainment, especially in communication and entertainment in rural part of Assam as Mobile Theatre travels with such interior parts where even the govt. of Assam does not have its reach.

Mobile Theatre in Assam:

Assam, a North Eastern state of India, is covered with the sheet of greenery, blessed with immense natural beauty and vast resources. The accurate etymology of Assam is mysterious. It is said that in the classical period and up to the twelfth century the region

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east of the Karatoya river, largely matching to present-day Assam, was called Kamrupa, and on the other hand, Pragjyotisha. In medieval times the Mughal's coined Asham (eastern Assam) and Kamrup (western Assam), whereas Assam was used by the English in British colonialism. The habitant residing are gifted with beauty of innocence. Since 1970, the Govt. of India, which has one-sided power to change the borders of a state, divided into several states to convince national aspirations of the tribal inhabitants existing within the North-East states of India. Comprising of seven state's Assam is among which is traditionally a hybrid one developed due to assimilation of ethno-cultural groups in the past. After India's Independence, this reshuffle of Assam continued to witness communal tensions. Unfortunately, time brought clouds of violence and hatred under which spread disturbance in major areas. The hard feeling of violence seemed like finding a undying place in the valley. The historical development of the state and the gradual evolution of the Assamese as a community and culture were determined by the Caucasian, Austric and Mongoloid influx in the ancient times. The Mongoloid consisted of Bodo, Garo, Karbi, Rabha, Kuki, Hmar, Naga, Mizo, Deori, Mishing, Khamti and many other different plain tribes in Assam. The Ahoms and the Aryans were also among the strong penetrates into the land. In context of language, evidence shows that the earliest dwellers of Assam spoke an Indo-Chinese language of the Mon-Khmer group. There are many sub-groups of these tribes today.

But still Assam never let its culture and beauty to fade away, its deep rooted believed stood firm. Vaishanava Movement¹, the fifteen century religio-cultural movement under the leadership of great Srimanta Sankardev² (1449-1568) have delivered additional measurement to Assamese civilization. A reintroduced Hinduisation in native form took place, which was originally significantly reinforced by the Koch³ and afterward by the Ahom Kingdom. This belief resultant social institutions like *Namghar* (prayer house) and *Sattra*⁴ (the Vaishnava Monasteries) and these were nurtured under the guidance of *Satradharikar* in Assam. To hold the position as a *Satradhikar* of one *Sattra*, one has to create atleast one *Naat* as a quilification. This belief was and is followed by many and has become part of Assamese life and culture. The movement added significantly towards language, literature and performing and fine arts.

Historically, it is not difficult to understand that on one hand, during the strong politico-economic systems under stronger dynasties, greater cultural assimilation's created common attributes of Assamese culture, while on the other hand during smaller politico-economic systems or during political disintegration, more localised attributes were created with spatial differentiation. Time-factor for such integrations and differentiations has also played extremely important role along which the position of individual events in the entire series of sequential events. It is stated that the period between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries was the most unrest and turmoil in Assam. In between, the fourteenth

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century was addressed as the 'dawn' of the medieval renaissance in Assam as it witnessed the translation of the *Ramayana* and some stories of the *Mahabharata*. The development of Assamese literature can be awarded to this period. Further in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries the Assamese literature mostly flourished under the support of the Vaishnava saints and poets.

It is said that time does not remain the same, no matter it is good or bad, so is with Assam. At present, Assam is viewing the peak of changes and development; name it in matter of concrete buildings, high-ways, bridges, schools and colleges or multiplexes etc. On emotional context in the city of Guwahati no childhood memories can be seen now, neighbourhood houses has been reconstructed into flats, small grocery stores has been changed into malls and multiplexes, uneven stony roads are polished to smooth roads and highways, streets are no more dark as moonlight has been replaced by powerful streetlights and the best part is now when one drive in the city, they have to wait for the traffic light to approve their speed as earlier the traffic light in Assam could be seen only in books and papers. Among these changes one more dynamic change has taken place silently, i.e. change in the development of women in Assam, creating their own identity and path for development. There are a set of creative and skillful people who prepare themselves investing their major time of a year for a powerpack performance on 'stage on the wheels' .i.e. the Mobile Theatre of Assam which are active for nine month throughout a year as mentioned above.

The Birth of Mobile Theatre:

After forty-nine years of the British annexation of Assam, in the year 1875 the Western theatre with proscenium⁵ stage and Anglo-European dramatic structure made its first appearance in Guwahati. The English language and the Bengali theatre influenced the new generation of Assam. Mostly plays were presented during the festivals or on significant events. But it was the Mobile Theatre troupes which travelled and performed for nine months for which it is also known as "stage on wheels". On 2nd October 1963, Late Achyut Lahkar created this particular performing art but the path was not so easy. In the foundation days non believe and supported Lahkar, he had to borrow and take favor for groceries, raw materials for the theatre etc. However, later he successfully run the show in support of numerous artistes, technicians and others associated to bring this medium to the fore. The troupe stays in one location for about three days and performs about three shows as per the public demands. In this manner the troupe stages new productions every year: about 200 shows averagely. The troupe begins their rehearsal in the month of July for about a month or so and after that the troupes are all set to travel round the road with their new productions. In term of its uniqueness it is worth to mention that round the globe Mobile Theatre is the one and only performing art which travels in trucks carrying each and every elements required for the performance. The troupe carried hundreds of charis

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for the audiences, sets, props, tents, electric generators, cooking utensils, actors, helpers, cooks, and every minor and major stuff required.

In Assam until the year 1949 men were the sole dominator in the stage: men portrayed female characters. There was not much to encourage women's participation in stage, only a hand full of efforts to cast women was seen in the 1930s. And among the name who made this efforts can be mentioned as Braja Natha Sarma who tried this in *Kohinoor* theatre. The challenge were also tried by the playwright, actor, director, scholar like Satya Prasad Barua in his *SundarSeviSangha* and by Rohini Barua in Dibrugarh. Nonetheless the trendsetters had to wait till the year 1948 when All India Radio (AIR) launched its twin stations at Guwahati and Shillong. At that point of time the radio drama required female's for female voice-overs and these grew upto acting along with men, therefore simplifying their appearance on stage. By that time the Assamese society had developed liberally enough to accept all these changes, especially accepting the actresses performing alongside men.

Achyut Lahkar along with Sada Lahkar took hold of the Mobile Theatre in Assam in 1963 by setting up the very famous *Nataraj Theatre* and wrote his name in the history of Assam forever. The *Nataraj Theatre* wears the crown of credited for introducing the use of mikes, lights, cinematic effects and an extremely organized arrangement of staging plays into the Mobile Theatre movement. With great effort Lahkar introduced and promoted this professionalism in the culture of Assam. Along with him it is the tireless attempts of many of the successors that have fetched Mobile Theatre to today's position of popularity. And to mention Ratan Lahkar, the producer of the famous *Kohinoor Theatre* troupe is one among them. It was in *Kohinoor Theatre* (1975) that many world famous plays, novels, epics and films had their adaptations in the stage being performed in the native language. *Kohinoor* made a record of staging dramas like *Mahabharat*, *Ramayan*, *Illiad-Odyssey*, *Cleopatra*, *BenHur*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Titanic* etc.

The initial days of Mobile Theatre had two stages for performances, while in one the performance is going on in front of the audiences, in the mean time the other stage is being prepared for the next scene. And when the first stage scene is over than the second stage is pushed and in this manner the swapping of stages goes on during the performances and this swapping was possible because the stage had tyres fix at the bottom of the stage which helps the stage to be flexible. Also during those days, theatres were litted with candles and than gradually with hanging rows of kerosene lamps, gaslight, or pressure lamps of the brand name Petromax and after this came the portable power generators. Electricity came to Assam in 1920s, but only in a few important towns. The process of electrification in the state started only after 1947. Before 1930, decoration of stage meant rolled-up hand painted screens and drapes and afterwards flats were used along with painted screens. Few attempts were made for using three-dimensional set pieces. Nevertheless, realistic

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scenography marked its everlasting entry in the late 1940s, replacing the painted backdrops. In contexts of costumes and props, they were generally hired. However, by 1950s this exercise was almost abandoned especially when mythological and historical dramas found ways to realistic social drama and costumes began to be particularly designed for every production.

Mobile Theatre as a Mass Communicator:

The canvas of history believes that human communication first began with sign than with symbols and was revolutionized with the origin of language and speech approximately 500,000 years ago, whereas symbols were developed about 30,000 years ago. Among various means of communications, the use of art and culture to communicate and carry on culture from one generation to another is a vital device. And Mobile Theatre act as one amongst such vital devices. Assam is yet to develop much, especially in the rural areas. There still exist areas where the modern means of communication has not reached successfully or is not a common device to use. In such areas and also Assam as a whole is still very much being influenced by Mobile Theatre. Mobile Theatre is not only restricted to dance and music but also includes performing art and craft. Mobile Theatre initiated with a motive to express themselves. Mobile Theatre as a performing art pound with life and gradually changes through the instability of time. It signifies the people in their natural inhabitation, with all their paradoxes and diverse events.

Mobile Theatre is a treasure of performing art, music, dance, technology and skills. The Mobile Theatre as a communicator for the masses satisfies the innate need for self-expression, especially for the local people to reach our hundreds at one time. Assam as a whole is divided into many districts but Mobile Theatre as a mass communicator is common in all. Mobile Theatre being a 'mobile' form of art is free from geographical and linguistic bondage, so its understanding level is direct and personal with the native people of Assam. Above all Mobile Theatre as a mass communicator is uniformly popular, irrespective of its large audience being divided with education, social status, financial background or any other factors. Various research scholars have found Mobile Theatre as an effective means of mass communication and various government projects like NRHM etc. along with NGO's like CRY opted for Mobile Theatre as a vital means of mass communication. Largely in the being stage of Mobile Theatre, it was used as a mean of entertainment, social communication and influential communication but gradually Mobile Theatre has been used as an effort to be used for conveying developmental messages, especially as a live performance medium.

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Some of the vital characteristic of Mobile Theatre as a mass communicator is as follows:

- Mobile Theatre has withstood the blitz of time.
- It has sustained by altering with the changing times
- In Mobile Theatre any individual is always a participant, and not an audience
- As a mass communicator this form is flexible and 'mobile'
- It is cost effective and hence can be afford by large mass
- As a mean of communication it has immediate feedback and enlarged attention
- Common language is used to communicate
- It is direct and personal.

Conclusion:

Bhramyaman is a unique form of performing art from Assam which has been successful from decades to attract and win the heart of hundreds of audience at one single show. From adaptation to original native scripts, from information to entertainment, Mobile Theatre delivers a long lasting impact in the mind of audiences with the help of its theatrical performances. Mobile Theatre with time has becomes a part of Assamese society and culture. With time it has accepted changes but somewhere or the other these changes has lost the original charm of the Mobile Theatre.

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Notes

- ¹Vaishanava Movement a period when followers of the Vishnu, lead a way of life for promoting the central importance of Vishnu and His ten avatars.
- ²Srimanta Sankardev was an Assamese saint-scholar, poet, playwright, social-religious reformer and also a great contributor in the field of Assamese culture and religious history. He is widely known in Assam for his new form of music (*Borgeet*), theatrical performance (*AnkiaNaat, Bhaona*), and dance (*Sattriya*), literary language (*Brajavali*).
- ³The Koch dynasty of Assam is named after a Koch tribe during the 1515. The first Koch King was Viswa Singha after whom his son Nara Narayan conquered the western portion of the erstwhile Kamrupa Kingdom along with some region of South Assam.
- ⁴*Sattra*'s are institutional center's connected with the Vaishnavism tradition. These center's are independent bodies controlled by *adhikaras* (known as *Satradhikars*). These *Sattra*'s comprises of a *namghar* (prayer house).
- ⁵A proscenium is the symbolic vertical plane of space in a theatre, generally enclosed on the uppermost and sides by a physical prosceniumarch and on the bottommost by the stage floor itself, which serves as the frame into which the spectators watches from a more or less unified angle the performance taking place upon the stage.

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