

CHAPTER-II

EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF MOBILE THEATRE IN ASSAM

The *jatra* groups that acquired great popularity in Bengal found their way into Assam with the coming in of the Bengali *babus* who were employed by the British administration. Local *jatra* groups, modeled upon the Bengali visiting *jatra* groups, began to emerge. Sarma (1962) mentions three points about how *jatra* took the form of drama: at the first level, the basic meaning of the word was to travel from one place to the other particularly on a special occasion or festival, for example, *Rasajatra*, *Rathajatra*, etc. In such group travels, different kinds of entertainment and acting was done to help the travelers relax and enjoy. At the second level, it means festivity and here, the travel per se is not important. At the third level, *jatra* came to mean drama or acting. Generally, in festivals some kind of dramatic performance was organized (p.123).

Nowadays, in festivals like Durga puja, etc., play/theatre presentation has become an integral part of the festivities. Similarly, centuries earlier too, such performances were probably a special part of the festivals. As that happened, the meaning of *jatra* also became concise and primarily stood for drama or dramatic performance. According to Bannerjee (1989), the term itself denotes literally a travel, a journey or the start of a journey, but the etymological meaning is

unknown. It is said to originate from the rituals of songs and dances which formed part of the religious festivals in villages (p.103).

2.1 Assamese *Jatra* Groups Emerge

Bezbarua (1968) writes, pioneer among these is said to have been the group of Mr. Tithiram Bayan of Barpeta who, with the patronage of Mr. Gobindaram Choudhury organized a *jatra* group, and travelled as far as upper Assam (p19). Hazarika (1967) corroborates, this *jatra* group organized by Mr. Tithiram Bayan in around 1860-65 had Mr. Gobindaram Das Choudhury, an advocate, as its supporter who wrote two plays in Bengali, *Ram-banabash* and *Radhikar Manbhanjan*. Bayan's group conquered not only the Barpeta region but went on a voyage up the Brahmaputra and reaching Sivasagar, in upper Assam, won the hearts of the people there as well. Bayan is said to have been an expert violinist (pp.250-251). Bhattacharya (1964) also writes on the same lines, around the same time between 1860-65, a *jatra* party was formed under the patronage of Mr. Jaidev Sarma in Murkuchi village in then Kamrup. Similarly, between 1870-1900, two Assamese brothers, Katiya and Ahina, hailing from the Kamakhya hills formed a *jatra* troupe and began to exhibit some performances here and there. Likewise, Mr. Garga *Ustad* and Mr. Radha Satola performed manuscript dramas translated from Bengali (p.70).

Though at first the *jatra* troupes performed only Bengali drama, later Assamese translations were done and after that original Assamese plays found

place on the stage. In this regard the role played by Mr. Ambikagiri Raichoudhury, who was a poet, radical thinker and nationalist, to wipe out the trend of performing Bengali dramas or in Bengali in the Barpeta region needs special mention. It was he who first wrote the Assamese play *Jayadratha-badh* and performed it on stage in 1910 thus rooting out the tradition of Bengali *jatra* performance in Assam. In the preface of the play *Jayadrath-badh*, Ambikagiri Raichoudhury (Q.I Hazarika, 1967) wrote thus-

The Assamese *giteenat* (musical drama) *Jayadratha-badh* was hailed everywhere. The public began to sing praises in my name as well. From that day onwards performing Bengali *jatra* in Barpeta began to wane four months later I completed another Assamese play *Bhaktagaurav*.... both dramas were equally popular and led to wiping out of the Bengali dramas not only in Barpeta, but Assam. These two dramas were performed in the sessions of Asam Association and Assam Sahitya Sabha, Durga puja, Laksmi puja, Saraswati puja, as well as in weddings, etc., in Barpeta, Dhubri, Gauhati, Dibrugarh, Doom dooma, Bijni, Tihu, Jania, Senga, Nalbari, etc., for the next 20 years till 1930 (p.266).

This was the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Assamese dramatics. The Assamese *jatra* troupes performed mythological and historical dramas and this led to the creation of original Assamese plays like *Purushottama*,

Maya Nari, Debala Debi, Prayachitta, Nagakonwar, Madan-Basanta, Nal-Damyanti, Harischandra, Sri Ramchandra, Kalapahar, etc. Unfortunately lack of proper preservation led to the manuscripts as well as the names of many playwrights being lost with time. This had indeed been a huge contribution to Assamese dramatic literature.

2.2 Contribution of Brajanath Sarma: The Revolutionary Artist

A personality whose name shines apart in the history of theatre in Assam is none other than the legendary Brajanath Sarma. He was the pioneer who established professional theatre in Assam. His greatest revolutionary contribution to the field of theatre in Assam was the initiation of co-acting in 1933 in a society where the space of women was within the confines of the house. A letter written in reply to the queries of renowned litterateur Mr. Atul Chandra Hazarika on 31st October 1957 is a valuable source about this artist who challenged everything that stood on his path. This letter has been incorporated in Appendix-IV.

The life of Brajanath Sarma itself was no less than fiction. His love for theatre and his zeal to do something new, his courage to defy society and its norms, his patriotism and his indomitable spirit, all combined to make him a legend in the history of Assamese stage. In his own words (Q.I Sarma, 1990)

There are many talented artists spread out across the villages and cities, hills and vales, nooks and corners of Assam. My only aim is to search out these talents who will wilt untimely

due to the want of opportunity, embrace them into my Kohinoor Opera Party and give them a scope to develop their latent potentiality and show them a path to earn a livelihood through the practice of Art and culture (p.32).

Sarma (1990) further mentions, sixty years after Mr. Sarat Chandra Ghose, a theatre enthusiast and organizer in the dramatic circle of Bengal in the 19th century, who, on the advice of Mr. Michael Madhusudan Dutta, the popular 19th century Bengali poet and dramatist, had introduced co-acting in Bengal by bringing three ladies, viz., Ms. Jagattarini, Ms. Elokeshi and Ms. Shyamasundari on stage, Mr. Brajanath Sarma took this revolutionary step that etched his name in golden letters forever in the history of Assamese drama (pp.43-45). This was certainly not an overnight achievement, and Mr. Sarma had to work hard for more than three years to make his dream successful. His initial attempt to rope in two *devadasis* (*temple dancer*) from the Parihareshwar temple in Doobi near Pathsala, viz., Savitri and Sajani had failed. The days rolled by and Mr. Brajanath Sarma's search went on.

Sarma (1990) further narrates, how finally, after a lot of hard work, from Puranigudam, in Nagaon district of central Assam, was found Ms. Sarbeswari Das and Ms. Golapi Das, from Samuguri in Nagaon was found Ms. Phuleswari Das, from Jorhat in upper Assam was found Ms. Sailabala Devi, from North Gauhati came Ms. Labanya Das, and from Nazira in Sivasagar in upper Assam, Ms. Binoda Gogoi. Considering the plight of education, particularly for females,

it was not surprising that these girls had not seen beyond primary school, though it is said Ms. Sailabala had completed Middle Vernacular (MV) schooling. As such, it was not possible to present them on stage immediately. A lot of stage, diction, pronunciation, etc., training had to be given before they were ready. Brajanath Sarma himself tutored them in all these aspects. At last, in November 1933 *Maran Jiyari* was staged which inaugurated co-acting in the history of Assamese stage (pp.44-45).

The backlash of this daring endeavour was not surprising. Brajanath Sarma expressed the bitter experience thus to Mr. Phani Sarma (Q.I Choudhury:1983),

You know very well how I have managed to bring out these girls to the stage from within the interiors of a conservative patriarchal society. By introducing co-acting on stage I have suffered so much humiliation, criticism and bitterness even my own brother and nephew deserted the theatre party. The newspapers have criticized that I am trying to push the society towards destruction by inaugurating co-acting. I am propagating evil. Today, they are not being able to understand what I am doing but one day, the people of Assam will understand. I am not destroying the society instead I have taken the culture of Assam and the drama movement fifty years ahead (p.12).

Eminent stage actor Uday Bhagawati has mentioned in his book *Jatrar para Bhramyamanalai* (1987) how, a strong protest was staged against Brajanath Sarma and his experiment of co-acting, in Nalbari (p.35).

Sarma (1990) mentions, this revolutionary step of Mr. Brajanath Sarma was not without appreciators. Assamese intellectuals like Mr. Chandradhar Barua and Mr. Hemchandra Goswami encouraged and inspired him to bring about social reform through the stage. But the societal criticism of co-acting coupled with other management problems saw the closing down of the *Kohinoor Opera Party* in 1936. With that came to a standstill co-acting on the stage of mobile theatre. Twenty years later in 1957, co-acting was seen on the mobile theatre stage for the second time when, Ms. Tulika Das acted in *Surjya Opera* produced by Mr. Surjya Das of Rangamati in South Kamrup. After that, it was in 1960-61, that co-acting was continued by Mr. Purandar Talukdar of Nityananda, near Pathsala, and since then, the trend of co-acting has been continuing without any break (p.53).

Das (2002) writes about Brajanath Sarma's talent as a dramatist and litterateur. Between 1930-40 he wrote four plays in Assamese meant for the stage namely, *Manomati*, *Barjita*, *Urvashi* and *Varuna*. *Urvashi* was staged in the schoolweek celebration of Gopinath Bordoloi High School, Barpeta Road in 1958, while *Barjita* was performed on the stage of Kohinoor Opera Party. One among his several articles included *Jatra aru Abhinay*. He composed songs also, in fact, seven such compositions of Brajanath Sarma have been found. These

songs have been incorporated in appendix II of this study. Though he retired from the field of dramatics after 1936, in 1954, Sarma joined the Mairamara Chaturbhuj Opera in Howly, Barpeta, as the director and later in 1956, joined the *jatra* parties of Singimari and Kerkhabari in Goalpara (pp.77-79).

In an interview with this research scholar, Brajanath Sarma's daughter, Ms. Hiran Devi (66 yrs) shared valuable information about her father. To quote her,

Father was a fearless man who lived life on his own terms.

He was extremely hard working and never spent an idle moment at home. He even worked in the fields with our engaged labourers and that is why he would not allow us children to waste our time. He was a rebel and encouraged us, daughters to take part in all public functions through dance, drama, etc. He kept an eye on everything in the household.

He was a patriot to the core of his soul

(H. Devi. Personal communication, January 8, 2018).

Ms. Devi lamented the fact that many false stories have been spread about Brajanath Sarma by people who have not bothered to collect the right facts. She refuted that Brajanath Sarma was financially broken and as such, had died without any medical care. Ms. Devi recounted how they had an affluent life with huge land property that yielded more than sufficient crops. She reminisced,

When father had gone to Guwahati that last time, it was not for medical reasons but for the impending case regarding our property that had been confiscated by the Government. Yes, he did suffer from asthma and probably fell ill, and was admitted to the Hospital. In fact, my Brother-in-law had gone to meet him in the Hospital. He was given a bed in the hospital verandah because they did not have any vacancy and not because of lack of money. Communication in those days was not like today and that is why we came to know about his demise two days after his cremation. And we will never know how and why he expired on that fateful night. He was not a serious patient. But these stories of his penury and death in loneliness really hurts us a lot, because it is not true

(H. Devi. Personal communication. January 8, 2018).

Talukdar (2003) adds, there is no denying the fact that the rise and development that mobile theatres have seen today can be largely attributed to the pioneering steps taken by Brajanath Sarma. His Kohinoor Opera was the first completely commercial theatre group of Assam. The very idea of establishing dramatics in a commercial way and providing payment to the people associated led to a new age in the history of Assamese cultural arena. No wonder, many mobile theatre connoisseurs argue that it was actually Brajanath Sarma who is the real father of mobile theatre in Assam (pp.267-72)

The tables 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 given below establishes the fact *jatra* groups were primarily organized centering around lower Assam, particularly in undivided Kamrup and undivided Goalpara districts but the huge popularity of this performing art took it to upper Assam also.

Table: 2.1 Some of the *jatra* groups formed in South Kamrup

Sl. no.	Name of the Jatra party	Year of establishment	Producer / Director
1	2	3	4
1.	<i>Kamakhya Jatra party</i>	1870-90 Probably	Katiya & Ahina
2.	<i>Palashbari Jatra party</i>	1907	Ganeshwar Sarma with support From <i>Ustad</i> Nandiram Kalita.
3.	<i>Pranay Sanmilani Jatrparty</i>	1913	Amritla Thakuria(Manager)
4.	<i>Kholjatra Natyadal</i>	1913	Urpu Satra Raj Gairah
5.	<i>Khidirpukhuri jatra party</i>	1912-1915	Basudev Goswami (Producer)
6.	<i>Sadilapur Natya Parishad, Palashbari</i>	1915-1916	N.K
7.	<i>Palashbari Bandhab Sanmilan Jatra Party</i>	1915-1916	N.K
8.	<i>Sri Sri KaliathakurJatra Party, Sikarahati</i>	1917	Public Enterprise
9.	<i>Solesala Jatra Party</i>	1918-1919	N.K
10.	<i>Sri Sri Chaturbhuj Jatra Party</i>	1919	Sanjay Choudhry & Nabin Choudhury
11.	<i>Sri Sri Chaturbhuj Jatra Party,</i>	1919	Sanaram Mahajan, Kirtan Das, Uma Sarma, Madhab Pathak <i>et al.</i>
12.	<i>Gopinath Natya Parishad, Nahira</i>	1920	Girish Medhi (Producer)
13.	<i>Sri Sri Chaturbhuj Jatra Party (Choudhurypara, Barihat)</i>	1921	Sukhuna Das, Seharam Gaonbura, <i>et al.</i>

1	2	3	4
14.	<i>Sri Sri Chaturbhuj Jatra Party (Soru Heramdu)</i>	1920	Seharam Das, Chinti <i>Ustad</i> , Maniya Manager, <i>et al.</i>
15.	<i>Bhalukghata Jatra Party Boko</i>	1923	<i>Ustad</i> Suryakanta Sarma (Director)
16.	<i>Chamaria Jatra Party</i>	1923	N.K
17.	<i>Jagannath Opera Dal (Rampur-Amudpur)</i>	1925	<i>Ustad</i> Suryakanta Sarma (Producer/Director)
18.	<i>Sri Sri Bangsigopal Jatraparty (Talukdarpara Barihat)</i>	1926	Bogaram Das
19.	<i>Nowapara Jatra Party (Chaigaon, Nowapara)</i>	1926	N.K
20.	<i>Shaktidas Natya Sangha (Chaigaon, Nowapara)</i>	1926	Shakti Das
21.	<i>Sri Sri Burhagosain Natya Parishad</i>	1929	Nandiram Kalita, Gahin Ch. Das
22.	<i>Sri Sri Chaturbhuj Jatra Party (Bor Heramdu, Barihat)</i>	1930	Krishnakanta Mahajan
23.	<i>Kamrup Newsouth Opera Party (Khidirpukhuri Rampur)</i>	_____	Chidananda Goswami (Producer)
24.	<i>Dakkhin Jhangkakata Natyadal (Alookhunda)</i>	1931	Maniram Kakoty
25.	<i>Mathpara Sankar Jatra Party (Chaigaon)</i>	1933	Kamalakanta Goswami
26.	<i>Kaliathakur Jatra Party (Amranga)</i>	1936	Laksmiram Mahajan, Khargeswar Das, <i>et al.</i>
27.	<i>Majirgaon Jatra Party</i>	1938	N.K
28.	<i>Dharapur Jatra Party</i>	1940	N.K
29.	<i>Sadilapur BandhabSanmilian Jatra Party</i>	1940	Jogen Bharali (play director)
30.	<i>Uparhali Jatra Party</i>	1941	Ramdas (play director)
31.	<i>Naradpara Burhagosain (Ashrita Jatraparty)</i>	1944	Prabhat Sarma, Krishna Sarma, Manik Deka.
32.	<i>Sarpara Jatra Party</i>	1944	N.K

1	2	3	4
33.	<i>Sri Sri Mahalaksmi Jatra Party (Barihat)</i>	1944	Sanjay Choudhury (Producer, Director, Playwright, Lyricist)* From this year, the party travelled as a complete commercial party.
34.	<i>Gowalhati Jatra Party</i>	1944	Mamat Bhakat, Bharat Kalita.
35.	<i>Palli Jatra Party</i>	1945	Gahin Ch. Das (Producer)
36.	<i>Garhgarha Jatra Party</i>	1945	Rameshwar Kumar, Soneshwar Kumar, Chandrakanta Mahanta, et al.
37.	<i>Jajir Jatradaal</i>	1945	Jaji Barduar Raij Gairah
38.	<i>Kalikachyut Bhurapara Opera Party (Bhagawatipara)</i>	1946	Bhogewar Kalita (Producer)
39.	<i>Majkuchi Jatra Party</i>	1947	Homeshwar Das
40.	<i>Nahira Nabajagaran Natya Parishad</i>	1949	Bhabadev Goswami, Shyamdev Goswami (Producer)
41.	<i>Rampur Jatra Party (Khidirpukhuri)</i>	1950	Suren Das (Producer)
42.	<i>Nowapara Jatra Party (Chaigaon)</i>	1950	Hari Sarma (Producer)
43.	<i>Karbhangha Jatra Party (Karbhangha-Boko)</i>	1952	Paharu Boro (Producer)
44.	<i>Dakkhin Kamrup Kohinoor Opera (Borphulguri)</i>	1954	Nabin Das, Maniram Das, et al.
45.	<i>Nahira yuvak Natya Parishad (Nahira)</i>	1955	Bhabadev Goswami (Producer)
46.	<i>Sujanpara Jatra Party (Sujanpara)</i>	1955	Shiba Kalita (Producer)
47.	<i>Kukuriya Jatra Party (Kukuriya)</i>	1956	Public Enterprise
48.	<i>Kendurtala Jatra Party</i>	1956	_____
49.	<i>Dharapur Jatra Party</i>	1956	_____
50.	<i>Champak Natya Parishad (Chaigaon)</i>	1956	Public Enterprise
51.	<i>Surjya Opera (Rangamati)</i>	1957	Surjyamali (Producer)
52.	<i>Bangsigopal Jatradaal</i>	1958	Jatia Raij Gairah (Bamunpara)

1	2	3	4
53.	<i>Hakrapara Jatra Party</i>	1960	Bhudev Sarma
54.	<i>Palli Jatra Party(Palli)</i>	1960	Madan Mahanta
55.	<i>Batarhat BandhabSanmilon Natya Samiti Batarhat</i>	1960	Naramohan Goswami
56.	<i>Kukurmara Jelijun Jatrparty</i>	1963	Hiren Bora
57.	<i>Samabai Natya Parishad (Amranga)</i>	1963	Rajani Kalita, Umesh Das, <i>et al.</i>
58.	<i>Barhihat Jatradaal</i>	1967	Dharmeswar Das (Manager)
59.	<i>Chitrajyoti Natya Parishad (Dakhla)</i>	1967	Bhubanewar Sarma, Prabhat Sarma (Producer).
60.	<i>Natarupa Natya Parishad</i>	1968	Dr. Haladhar Das
61.	<i>Angipaar Jatrscope Theatre</i>	1969	Brajen Das (Owner)
62.	<i>Binapani Natya Parishad (Sikarhati)</i>	1969	Rajen Das, Puspa Kalita, Purnima Das, <i>et al.</i>
63.	<i>Barkuchi Jatra Party (Barkuchi)</i>	1970	_____
64.	<i>Rupjyoti Natya Parishad (Maniyeri Teeniali)</i>	1970	Barkat Ali (Producer)
65.	<i>Sri Madhab Natya Parishad Bijohnagar, Dak</i>	1971	Prabhat Sarma
66.	<i>Singra Jatra Party (Singra)</i>	1972	Khirod Nath (Producer)
67.	<i>Rajlaksmi Natya Parishad (Rampur)</i>	1975	Jagadananda Choudhury (Producer)
68.	<i>Nahira Basumilan Natya Parishad, (Nahira)</i>	1978	Paresh Bhagawati
69.	<i>Sikarhati Jatra Party(Sikarhati)</i>	1980	Naren Das (Producer)
70.	<i>Mancharupa Natya Parishad, Bijohnagar</i>	1981	Azim Barua, Sultan Sheikh (Producer)
71.	<i>Kamrup Natya Parishad (Dakhla)</i>	1982	Anantaram Deka (Producer)
72.	<i>Sarpara Bhangragosain Natya Parishad</i>	1984	Ananda Das (Producer)
73.	<i>Mahalaksmi Natya Parishad, Satarapara</i>	1984	Lohit Nath (Producer)
74.	<i>Srikrishna Natya Parishad, Rampur</i>	1986	Suren Das (Producer)

1	2	3	4
75.	<i>Ajanta Natya Parishad (Sikarhati)</i>	1986	Public Enterprise
76.	<i>Jugashree Natya Parishad Sikarhati</i>	1987	Suren Mahanta (Producer)

Source: *Jatra party* (May 29, 2015). *Sadin Bises*, pp.1-13.

Table: 2.2 Some of the Jatra groups formed in undivided Goalpara district

Sl. No	Name of the party	Year	Place
1	<i>Pachania Gaon Jatradal</i>	N.K	Pachania
2	<i>Marnai Gaon Jatradal</i>	N.K	Marnai
3	<i>Barbhita Gaon Jatradal</i>	N.K	Barbhita
4	<i>Dubapara Barowari Jatra Party</i>	N.K	Dubapara
5	<i>Dakaidal Barowari Party</i>	N.K	Dakaidal
6	<i>Dahikata Jatra Party</i>	N.K	Dahikata
7	<i>Bhujmala Jatra Party</i>	N.K	N.K
8	<i>Lalabari Jatra Party</i>	N.K	Lalabari
9	<i>Probhat Adhikari's Jatradal</i>	1925	Dalguma
10	<i>Binapani Opera</i>	1932	Duhnoi

Source: Hazarika, R. (May,1989). *Aglati*, (p.172)

Table: 2.3 Few of the jatra groups formed in undivided Kamrup district

Sl.No	Name of the group	Year	Place
1	<i>Palashbari Jatradal</i>	1903	Palashbari
2	<i>Maruwa Jatradal</i>	1919/1941	Maruwa, Nalbari
3	<i>Sualkuchi Jatradal</i>	1920	Sualkuchi
4	<i>Gobindapur Jatradal</i>	1923	Gobindapur
5	<i>Piplibari Jatradal</i>	1925/1947	Piplibari, Nalbari
6	<i>Lakhminarayan Opera party</i>	1927	Barkhala
7	<i>Sri Sri Sankaradeva Opera party</i>	1930	Bamakhata

Source: Information collected from Mr. Atul Mazumdar.

Hazarika (1967) says, although *jatra* travelled to upper Assam as well, with Mr. Bhadra Gogoi forming the All Assam Ideal Dramatic Party in Jaypur, Naharkatiya, in 1935 and Mr. Guru Prasad Borthakur's All Assam Star Theatre in Sivasagar in 1938 (p.277), its huge popularity in lower Assam could not be touched. This craze for *jatra* in lower Assam can be attributed to certain reasons, like, one, *jatra* was free from the religious-ritualistic shackles that bound *bhaona* and it could be performed anywhere anytime. Two, *jatra* performances were not confined to the serious presentations of *bhaona* and no artificial language like *Brajabuli* was used. Three, people could draw a parallel between the *jatra* and the indigenous popular performing arts in lower Assam like (cited from Sarma, 2013), (a) *Dhuliya naas*, a popular folk dance-cum-act which has been traditionally performed by many ethnic communities of Assam. The *dhuliya* group comprises of about 60-70 members and they perform song and dance along with the dhol (drum) recital coupled with acrobatic acts. The style of performance varies according to the locale, and (b) *Ojapali*, a very popular semi-dramatic performing art of Assam where the *Oja* (leader) and his *pali* (group) narrate stories through dancing to the beat of cymbals. *Ojapali* is of two types: *Byah Ojapali* (narrating tales from the two epics, *Ramyana* and *Mahabharata*) and *Suknani Ojapali* (narrating tales from the *Shakti* (mother goddess) cult, particularly about *Manasa*, i.e The Serpent goddess (pp.62,81). Four, *jatra* was a novel experience for the Assamese masses and it was only natural that people were attracted to it. .

With the passage of time *jatra* became an integral part of the cultural scenario of Assam. No festival or public event was complete without a *jatra* performance. For the rich and elite, a *jatra* was a must for personal celebrations like wedding, childbirth, etc. Kalita (2011) writes, as time went by many new *jatra* troupes continued to be formed in various places. Among these were *Laupara Jatradaal*, *Tihu* (1931-56), *Tihu Natya Samitee* (1949), *Murkuchi Milan Natya Samitee* (1950), *Basudeb Opera Party*, *Ghagrapar* (1957-62), *Chaturbhuj Opera Party*, *Howly* (1955), *Bogoriguri Jatradaal* (1953), *Bagna Jatradaal* (1954), *Amrikhuwa Basudeb Jatra Party*, *Udayan Natya Gusthi*, *Sarthebari* (1975), etc.(p.18).

2.3 A New Era is Born

The gigantic leap from *jatra* to mobile theatre was first initiated by popular actor Mr. Sadananda Lahkar, when he established a modern *jatra* troupe, Nataraj Opera, in 1959 in Pathsala. Had he not established Nataraj Opera, mobile theatre would have never been born in Assam. Figo (2010) transcripts, the architect of this transformation was Mr.Sadananda Lahkar's elder brother, Mr. Achyut Lahkar, who wanted to bring in something new into the scenario. He did not like certain aspects of opera, like, male actors enacting female roles, delivery of dialogues through singing, wrong pronunciations, misrepresentation of social issues in translated dramas, lack of drama based on the settings of Assamese society, etc.(p.25). Mr.Ratan Lahkar, (70 yrs), producer-proprietor of Kohinoor theatre explained in his interview, the other reason that led to creation of mobile

theatre was pure commerce, because Mr. Achyut Lahkar wanted to provide financial security to the artists, technicians and workers associated with dramatics. The *jatra* troupes performed only one or two dramas in a year on invitation. This income was hardly sufficient for them to sustain. Moreover, they sat idle for the rest of the time. To change both these scenarios Achyut Lahkar worked out such a plan by which *jatra* would be presented in a new modern way and financial security would be provided to the artists (R.Lahkar. Personal communication. May 22, 2014). This was the moment when Nataraj Theatre: the first mobile theatre of Assam was born in 1963, a unique concept unprecedented in the history of theatre.

Nataraj Theatre was to be 'mobile' in every sense of the term. Every required paraphernalia was to be movable. A proscenium stage made of wooden planks that could be set up and dismantled, an auditorium in the form of a huge tent that could sit at least a thousand people- basically a set up that would travel all over and take theatre to the masses instead of vice-versa. The performances presented would be modern drama and not *jatra* or opera. Nataraj Theatre would have its own light and sound equipments, generator for power supply, everything necessary for music and acting, like, instruments, costumes, Makeup, etc.

Mr. Dasarath Das, veteran singer and music director of mobile theatre (70 yrs) narrated how the best of artists were gathered from various parts of Assam- Director: Mr. Chandra Choudhury; Dance Director: Mr. Kalawanta Singh, Mr. Robin Das; Music Director: Mr. Prabhat Sarma and Mr. Chandra Choudhury; Set

Design: Mr. Achyut Lahkar; Art Design: Mr. Adya Sarma; Lighting Direction : Mr. Achyut Lahkar; Lighting Control : Mr. Tushar Dasgupta and Mr. Rajani Das; Sound Control : Mr. Paresh Sarma and Mr. Jiten Das; Set Design : Mr. Sarbeswar Das; Publicity : Mr. Akshay Patgiri and Krishna Roy; Actors : Mr. Sada Lahkar, Mr. Chandra Choudhury, Mr. Dharani Barman, Mr. Rudra Choudhury, Mr. Bhola Kotoki, Mr. Baldev Saikia, Mr. Netrakamal Barthakur, Mr. Haren Deka, Mr. Akshay Patgiri, Mr. Nagen Sarma, Mr. Jiten Pal, Mr. Praneswar Kakoty, Mr. Krishna Roy, Mr. Uday Das, Mr. Mukul das, Mr. Khagen Das, et al; Actresses : Ms. Anupama Devi, Ms. Banita Borthakur, Ms. Jyotsna Devi, Ms. Manjil Bordoloi, Ms. Swarnalata Bora, et al; Playback singers : Mr. Rajkrishna Barhoi (male) and Ms. Renu Phukan (female). The plays selected for the maiden stage of Nataraj theatre were Mr. Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Tikendrajit*, Mr. Uttam Barua's *Jerengar Soti*, and Mr. Phani Sarma's *Bhogjara*, as well as the translated version of *Haider Ali*. The maiden presentation on the evening of 2nd October 1963 was *Bhogjara* in the courtyard of the Pathsala Harimandir, where the makeshift auditorium was set up. The atmosphere was alive with excitement. (D. Das. Personal communication. July 09, 2014).

Figo (2010) transcripts, Mr. Achyut Lahkar used a revolving stage (trolley) in this maiden presentation to facilitate uninterrupted performance. A revolving stage basically used two stages. While the artists performed on one, the other was readied with the settings behind the curtain. As soon as the scene ended and the curtain dropped, the new stage would be pushed into position and the other

pushed out. The use of vehicle tyres to support the stage created problems in the first year, and as such, next year the vehicle tyres were replaced with iron wheels. Initially the auditorium was shaped like an inverted 'V' where the frontage had a breadth of about 40 feet while the backside expanded between 90 to 100 feet. It was later on with experiments, that the present shape and set up of the auditorium came about. Folding wooden chairs were used to seat the audience. The concept of the gallery was also not there initially. It was from the Diamond Circus of Mr. Haren Das of Bajali in Barpeta district that Mr. Lahkar picked it up, and introduced the gallery in the third year of Nataraj Theatre (p.25)

This journey of Nataraj Theatre, the first mobile theatre of Assam, that began in 1963, continued non-stop till 2003 for long forty years. In these forty years many mobile theatres were born and perished, but the role played by Nataraj theatre in the history of mobile theatre of Assam stands out in a class apart. Mr. Achyut Lahkar took Nataraj theatre outside the state to Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and even Nepal, but due to the financial loss incurred in these ventures, tours outside the state had to be given up. The path that was shown by Mr. Achyut Lahkar has been treaded upon by many in this half a century. It is interesting to note that mobile theatres have never lost their commercial value and that is the reason why new mobile theatre groups have consistently been set up in spite of many being unsuccessful ventures. This fact can be seen in the table given below:

Table 2.4: List of mobile theatres with the integral data

Sl. No.	Year	Place	Name of Theater	Producer
1	2	3	4	5
1	1963	Pathasala	Nataraj	Achyut Lahkar
2	1964	Chamata	Suradebi	Dharani Barman
3	1966	Hajo	Purbajyoti	Karuna Mazumdar
4	1968	Pathsala	Mancharupa	Hemkanta Talukdar
5	1968	Barpeta	Rupanjoli	Prangopal Das
6	1970	Pathsala, Guwahati	Asom Star	Kumud Prasad Sarma
7	1972	Makhibaha	Mukunda	Atul Bhattacharya
8	1972	Pathsala	Nataraj Silpa Niketan	unknown
9	1973	Abhayapuri	Rupalim	Nripen Sarma
10	1973	Nalbari	Rupkonwar	Biren Kalita
12	1975	Nitai Pukhuri	Jyotirupa	Golap Borgohain
13	1975	Morowa	Bhagyadebi	Sarat Mazumdar
14	1976	Pathsala	Kohinoor	Ratan Lahkar
15	1977	Chamata	Bishnujyoti	Abala & Hiranya Barman
16	1977	Goalpara	Lakshimi	Nripen Barua, Ratneswar Das
17	1977	N. Guwahati	Manchakonwar	Prabhat Bora
18	1977	Belsor	Kalpana	Jadavsen Deka

1	2	3	4	5
19	1978	Nalbari	Biswajyoti	Haren Deka
20	1979	Pathsala	Aradhana	Sadananda Lahkar
21	1980	Pathsala	Abahan	Krishna Roy
22	1982	Pathsala	Anirban	Subhash Choudhury
23	1982	Guwahati	Indradhanu	Indreswar Bujarbarua
24	1984	Pathsala	Chitralekha	Rajani Patgiri
25	1984	Pathsala	Kalpataru	Dulal Talukdar
26	1984	Panikhaiti	Aparupa	Mahananda Sarma
27	1984	Chamata	Apsara	Jiten Sarma
28	1984	Chamata	Rangghar	Robindeb Barman
29	1985	Dibrugarh	Suruj	unknown
30	1985	Patasarkuchi	Indrani	Harekrishna Das
31	1985	Morioni	Hengul	Prasanta Hazarika
32	1985	Chamata	Moon	Abala Barman
33	1986	Pathsala	Debadaxi	Nagen Lahkar
34	1987	Boniyakusi	Giriraj	Girin Das
35	1987	Singra	Radhikadebi	Upen Kalita
36	1987	Sarupeta	Joyotu Oxomi	Bipin Chetia
37	1987	Mangaldoi	Abhijan	Unknown
38	1987	Guwahati	Meghdoot	Kalyan Dey
39	1990	Pathsala	Natasurya Bishnujyoti	unknown
40	1991	Moran	Samannay	Rohini Changmai
41	1993	Morigaon	Borluit	Edhani Deka
42	1993	Sarthebari	Binapani	Ramdas Barman
43	1993	Pathsala	Pallabi	Gopesh Talukdar
44	1993	Hanhsora kujibali	Srimanta Sankaradeva	Biswa Saikia
46	1994	Sualkusi	Monalisa	Ramen Das
47	1995	Dirak	Tarangam	Gunadhar Konwar
48	1995	Makhibaha	Jai Jawan Jai Kisan	Unknown
49	1995	Guwahati	Anirban	Surya Mahanta, C.Deka
50	1995	Borbhag	Manchajyoti	Trailokya Sarma

1	2	3	4	5
51	1996	Gohpur	Srimanta Sankara Madhab	Tilak & Pulin Phukan
52	1997	Dudhnoi	Meghali	Somen Das
53	1997	Nahoroni	Amaltara	Unknown
54	1998	Nalbari	Bordoisila	Nazrul Islam, Upen Deka
55	1998	Bokota	Godapani	Mrigen Mohon
56	1998	Jajori	Saraighat	Krishnananda Tamuli
57	1999	Balipara	Madhabadeba	Naren Das
58	2000	Dibrugarh	Ma Jonaki	N.K
59	2000	Nazira	Sewali	N.K
60	2003	Sapekhati	Bhagyashree	N.K
61	2005	Belsor	Anurag Movie	N.K
62	2005	Guwahati	Rajshree	Narayan Deka
63	2005	Nalbari	Sakuntala	N.K
64	2005	Nalbari	Chitalekha	N.K
65	2006	Hatigaon	Karengghar	N.K
65 .a	2006	Bagsa	Sandaw Bawdia (Bodo)	Anjana Basumatary
66	2007	Nalbari	Debraj	N.K
67	2008	Guwahati	Rajtilak	Sushanta Biswa Sharma
68	2009	Guwahati	Rajmahal	N.K
69	2009	Guwahati	Itihaas	Robin Neog
70	2009	Baniyakuchi	Shraddhanjali	N.K
71	2009	Hajo	Rupantar	N.K
72	2009	Guwahati	Brahmaputra	N.K
73	N.K	Cinnamora, Jorhat	Purbabani	N.K
74	N.K	Morioni	Pratiddhwani	N.K
75	N.K	Gohpur	Dibyadhwan	N.K
76	N.K	Dibrugarh	Bhadoi	N.K
77	N.K	Bokakhat	Bhaskar	N.K
78	N.K	Tinsukia	Samrat	N.K
79	N.K	Guwahati	Pragjyotish	N.K

1	2	3	4	5
80	N.K.	Diksou, Sibsagar	Panchanan	N.K.
81	N.K.	Lanka, Nagaon	Barnali	N.K.
82	N.K.	Jamuguri	Panchajanya	N.K.
83	N.K.	Koliabor	Mahabharat	N.K.
84	N.K.	Baihata	Udaiyan	N.K.
85	N.K.	Dakkhinpat	Nabarun	N.K.
86	N.K.	Arikusi	Asamjyoti	N.K.
87	N.K.	Sapekhati	Natasurya	N.K.
88	N.K.	Naharkatiya	Srimanta	N.K.
89	N.K.	Bongaon, Tihu	Kalpataru	N.K.
90	N.K.	Sarupeta	Bandana	N.K.
91	N.K.	Morioni Tiniali	Dhrubataru	N.K.
92	N.K.	Sonitpur	Monikut	N.K.
93	N.K.	Agiya	Chitrabon	N.K.
94	N.K.	Sonitpur	Dibyabani	N.K.
95	N.K.	South Singra	Nandini	N.K.
96	1974 1975	Dalgaon Pathsala	Sowza Phaoni Apat Sourang Manju	Haricharan Muchahary C.K Muchahary
97	N.K.	Goreswar	Bordoichila	N.K.
98	N.K.	Sonari	Binandini	N.K.
99	N.K.	Dibrugarh	Meghdoot	N.K.
100	N.K.	Dibrugarh	Himalaya	N.K.
101	N.K.	Pathsala	Parihareswar	N.K.
102	N.K.	Dergaon	Eagle	N.K.
103	N.K.	Pathsala	Indrajeet	N.K.
104	N.K.	Nagaon	Manchatirtha	N.K.
105	N.K.	Nagaon	Sri Madhabadeba	N.K.
106	N.K.	Jorhat	Ma Agnigarh	N.K.
107	N.K.	Duliajan	Swagatam	N.K.
108	N.K.	Jorhat	Rangghar	N.K.
109	N.K.	Chamata	Rajlakshmi	N.K.

1	2	3	4	5
110	N.K	N.K	Rajmukut	N.K
111	2015	Rowta	Surya	Munindra Barman
112	N.K	N.K	Binapani	N.K

Source: Information collected from Mr. Atul Mazumdar

2.4 Love of Mobile Theatre

Once the idea of the mobile theatre caught on it led to the mushrooming of the same all over Assam but definitely the majority was in lower Assam. As can be seen in the table given above, in Pathsala alone, more than two dozen theatres were born. Of course, it is another story that most of these theatres, as elsewhere, could not sustain themselves. The reasons will be discussed in Chapter IV, which focuses on ‘Problems and Prospects of Mobile Theatres’. Certain factors obviously were there, that has led to the huge success and popularity of this medium. Assam has a strong historical background as far as performing arts is concerned. Be it *bhaona* in upper Assam or *jatra* in lower Assam, people were very much attracted to these performances. When mobile theatre emerged as a new and improved *avatar* (incarnation) of the earlier *jatra*, it was only natural that people loved it. As admitted by Mr. Achyut Lahkar, in his interview, “the idea behind mobile theatre was to take theatre to the common people” (A. Lahkar Personal communication, July 09, 2014). The social issues taken up in the dramas were such that simple villagers could connect to the mobile theatre. Initially, the major audience used to be the village people. It was much later that the urban audience caught on, and one of the most important reason for this is the

almost extinct state of the Assamese cinema industry. In fact, the field research has shown, today, mobile theatres are as popular in a metro like Guwahati, as it is in the muffed towns like Nalbari, or Chamata, that cater to the rural populace. One cannot help but observe that this popularity today is largely for reasons like the presence of glamour artists, Bollywood style of song, dance and action, cinematic stories, technological gimmicks, and so on.

It is a complete entertainment package that seeks to cater to a widely varied audience. Another reason, perhaps was, when mobile theatres first came up, there were very few cinema halls in the state and obviously majority of the rural people did not have access to any. So, when mobile theatres came to them, it was only natural that it was a rage. People in the villages used to save money the year round to be able to enjoy the mobile shows. One more reason for the popularity of mobile theatre was that very talented artists who were totally devoted to the stage were engaged. Original plays were written by renowned playwrights keeping in mind the taste of the audience as well as the social relevance. Actors and actresses, knew the stage, how to deliver dialogues, the modulation and voice pitch required, how to move on stage, and how to connect with the audience. Good stories and good actors were the secret of success. With time things changed and 'glamour' artists (meaning film stars) were first introduced in mobile theatre by Purbajyoti Theatre. This brought more popularity to mobile theatres, as the attraction of the common people towards the stars of the silver screen was quite natural. Unfortunately, the negative impact of the

glamour culture has been seen on the deteriorating acting quality, except a few, of the so called 'stars', who are not trained for the stage. Previously, it was seen that actors from the stage went to the screen but in Assam, particularly in mobile theatres, an opposite trend has set in. Untrained novices, who feature in a couple of VCD (Video compact disc) movies, land up on the stage with practically no knowledge about it. As mentioned earlier, on stage, performance is live and unless an actor or actress understands what live theatre acting demands, they cannot deliver. Unlike cinema or television, here one cannot fall back on retakes. The audience, too, is sensitive enough to grasp the capacity of an actor or actress.

2.5 A Well-Coordinated Set up

The 'season' of the mobile theatres begin from mid-August till mid-April, a continuous road show of full nine months. Prior to that, for about a month or more, intense rehearsals are done in the respective camps. Light, sound, music, actors, technicians, everyone must be in perfect sync because it is a live performance and no retakes can be given. Each camp is situated in a campus that has an office and provide lodging for all associated with the particular theatre. A well-managed kitchen caters to the food. The earlier trend was, at the end of a season the theatre groups announced their next season's plans and preparations started accordingly, but now, it is seen that the next years plans are announced much earlier with the process of roping in artists, technicians, playwrights, and most importantly the 'stars', midway of one season. Nowadays the advertisements through television, you-tube, Facebook, etc., has also increased

the competition level. VCD (Video Compact Disc)'s featuring the songs of the mobile theatres, shot in a cinematic style are also released much earlier in an elaborate style to attract viewers.

The smooth management of the mobile theatres can be a lesson for students of management. Ironically people who manage the theatres are no management graduates. Right from the moment the inaugural sacred ritual of a theatre group is held on an auspicious day in July, the rehearsals begin, and so does the management responsibilities. Catering to around a 100 people on a daily basis is not an easy task. Lodging, food, any kind of problem, not to speak of emergencies, etc., has to be taken care of. Then, when in mid-August the travelling starts, the entire set up has to be moved. Right from the auditorium in a gigantic tent that can seat 1500-2000 people, the same number of chairs, wooden planks and bamboos to set up the stage, stage settings, costumes, lights, sound equipment, music instruments, the entire kitchen paraphernalia, bedding, etc., are loaded on 4 to 5 trucks which belong to the theatre group, or are hired. The people travel by bus to the scheduled destination. It is amazing that in spite of the long distance between two venues there is no break in the schedule of the theatre group. This is because most of the established theatre groups own two sets of stage-auditorium settings which can be sent off earlier for the required preparations. The others fix up dates keeping all logistics in mind. Everything runs on clockwork precision.

As written by Paul (2013), when producer Mr. Ratan Lahkar's Kohinoor Theatre was invited by the National School of Drama (NSD), New Delhi, in 2010 to stage plays in the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi, Ms. Anuradha Kapur, then Director of NSD, was overwhelmed by the kind of discipline and management that the people working in mobile theatres of Assam follow (p.24).

To quote from Mr. Lahkar's interview ad verbatim,

She stated before the media, a crew of 150 members travel all the way from Assam in six trucks and has the record of setting a dual stage measuring 60 feet in five hours. That is incredible! Ms. Kapur also mentioned that NSD had plans to interact with the Assamese actors to learn the tactics of running the whole scene and, they were trying to archive and document the plays for reference material. The three plays Kohinoor theatre presented were, *Asimat Jar Herai Sima*, *O' Mai Munnai Kaisu* and *Sitorey Semeka Rati*

(R. Lahkar. Personal communication, May 22, 2014).

2.6 The Inviting or Organizing Committee

Mobile theatres perform all over Assam on the invitations received. The inviting or organizing committees that invite mobile theatres are usually local socio-cultural organizations and clubs or during Durga and Kali puja, the puja committees of an area, etc. The purpose behind inviting the theatre groups, apart

from entertainment, is to fulfill some social requirement of the area like establishment of schools, colleges, *Namghars* i.e. Vaishnavite community prayer hall, cultural or sports club, etc. There are numerous such examples of how funds generated through mobile theatre shows have been utilized for social development.

Earlier, the invitations to the mobile theatres used to come in from organizing committees of different places around April. However, that trend has changed now and become preponed depending on the ‘stars’ in the cast. The moment a mobile theatre can announce their ‘star’ artists for the season, the invitations pour in. Every season, the theatre producer signs a contract with each inviting committee on one hand, while on the other hand, he signs a contract each, with the various individual artists, technicians, workers, etc., engaged by the theatre. Once all preparations are complete, the theatre group sets out for the season to perform all over the state, as per the invitations. In each station the group performs for three to four days. Two shows, first and second, per evening is the common norm which sometimes can be extended to a third show depending on the popularity of a particular drama. To quote Mr. Ratan Lahkar (70 yrs) producer of Kohinoor Theatre, “there has been instances of 4 shows in a day also” (R. Lahkar. Personal Communication. May 22, 2014). One can imagine how gruelling this routine can be, since these are all live shows we are referring to. Any personal problem or even sickness, unless very serious, has to take a backstage for the people involved in a theatre. Commenting on such situations,

former mobile theatre actress, Ms. Moni Bordoloi narrated how, when popular actor Mr. Jatin Bora was under contract with a particular mobile theatre group, he had to honour it even when the news of his father's demise reached him (M. Bodoloi. Personal communication, October 05, 2012). Once the theatre group reach their scheduled destination, the role of the inviting committee becomes visible. All this while also, they had been working, but from a distance. We must understand the very important role played by the inviting committees in the story of the mobile theatres. It is because of these invitations to perform that the theatre groups are sustaining themselves. Das (2015) explains, according to the traditional norm, the inviting committees make an agreement with a particular theatre group almost one year earlier by paying a booking amount of not less than Rupees One Lakh. From then, till the time of the show, that is the next nine months, the committee does a lot of homework like putting up posters for the publicity of the theatre, selling season tickets, arranging for the venue to pitch tent, getting the permission of the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police, setting up of counters to sell tickets, and most important, arrange for the accommodation of the theatre group, etc. (pp.38-39).

Nowadays the star performers are accommodated in hotels and Inspection Bungalows or, if near home, they travel to the venue themselves. Once the shows are over, comes the time of complete payment to the theatre group. If the shows are successful and the collection is good no problems arise. There is a ratio of division of the collected amount between the mobile theatre group and the

organizing committee. All these details have been discussed in the subsequent chapter. The inviting committee also has to meet expenses amounting to almost a lakh for organizing the theatre. This money also needs to come out from the ticket collection. In Assam there are many structures constructed by the organizing committees from profits of organizing theatres. In fact, many times it is to fulfill such social needs of a particular area, that mobile theatres are invited. Therefore, in an indirect way the mobile theatres contribute to the social benefit. The inviting committees are the sustainers of mobile theatre in Assam. Without these committees, the entire business will come to a stop.

A few Organizing Committees selected on the basis of Simple Random Sampling (SRS) that the research scholar approached for information are:

Table 2.5: Mobile theatre organizing Committees in various parts of Assam

Sl.No.	Name of Committee	Location	Contact person	Association with mobile theatre
1	2	3	4	5
1	Everest Club	Azara, near Guwahati	Mr.Abani Barua 65yrs	Since 1997
2	Hari Mandir Committee	Baharghat, Demow	Mr.Munindra Lahkar,58 yrs	Since 1988
3	Vibyor Sports Club	Phulaguri, Nagaon	Mr. Jonmoni Sarma,45 yrs	Since 2002
4	Sports Star Club	Jagi Bhakatgaon	Mr. Mintu Bora 42 yrs	Since 1999
5	Ganeshguri Barowari Puja Committee	Ganeshguri, Guwahati	Mr. Jatin Das 58 yrs	Since 1977

The interviews with the contact persons mentioned in the foregoing table revealed that around numerous organizing committees are there all over Assam. This fact can be corroborated from the travelling schedule of the mobile theatre groups published in their yearly souvenirs. This has been given in appendix III of this study. These committees and the mobile theatres share a very special relationship. They depend on each other.

As mentioned by Mr. Jatin Das (58 yrs) of Ganeshguri Barowari Committee, 'we do not even need a formal contract to be signed with the mobile groups and a lot of things happen verbally because that is the credibility we have managed to establish'. He elaborated how the booking amount (show money) is collected from committee members and patrons, as well as, the well-wishers. Thereafter, the major collection comes from sale of tickets during the shows. The ticket rates, currently-Rs.300/, Rs.200/ and Rs.100/, are decided by the committee. "We do not need to go for pushing sale or season tickets", he also added (J.Das. Personal communication, July 05, 2017).

Mr. Abani Barua (65 yrs) of Everest Club, Azara, near Guwahati explained,

It is a wrong perception that the organizing committees rake in huge amount of money as profit by inviting mobile theatres every year. Mobile theatre is business and like all business, here also, the dynamics of profit and loss works equally. Sometimes we see profit and sometimes it becomes a struggle to even clear payment of the contractual amount to the theatre

party. Natural calamities can happen anytime. Then, we have to renegotiate. Things are worked out because both the mobile theatre parties and we, the organizers, understand that this is business

(A. Barua. Telephonic interview. July 05, 2017).

Mr. Jonmoni Sarma (45 yrs) of Vibgyor Club, Phulaguri, Nagaon admitted to, and lamented the fact that it is true that organizing committees today invite mobile theatres based on the ‘star’ actors,

We are compelled because the crowd pulling factor is the presence of the ‘stars’. When we invite a particular mobile theatre party, we, as the organizers, have certain duties and responsibilities which entail certain expenses. Where will we meet those from, plus the payment to the party itself, if the show is not successful? ‘Star’ presence ensures that success

(J. Sarma. Telephonic interview. October 22, 2016)

2.7 The Audience

One of the most important dimensions when we are discussing any performing art, is the audience. A performance is presented for the audience. Naturally the importance of the audience is immense. Relationship between the audience and the actors is equally important. Capturing the audience’ interests and not simply soliciting their goodwill was presumably the concern of everyone

involved in the theatre industry, from stage-property managers to star actors. To quote Roselli (2012),

The audience is, then, not a mere object of information and amusement, but it is always engaged in real social interaction, overt or imaginary. One of the most common phenomena is the vicarious experience of the audience in the drama. We live in the play in a way which we do not live in a lecture. The more complete our identification, the more intense our satisfaction (p.24).

Children often construct their own day-dreams, and work them out into dramas but adults do not do such things very often. So, it is the theatre that provides them such fantasies in socially acceptable emotional and esthetic forms. Drama provides an imaginary expression of all our desires. An interesting part of theatre is the reaction of the actors to the audience. It is said that most actors can feel the responses of the audience. They sense whether the audience is connecting or not, and are influenced by the slightest noise of the audience. They are certainly affected by the laughter or tears of the audience. (Theatre Psychology:2015)

In his article, Walmsey (2011:14-15) lists below what needs and motivation drives audiences to the theatre:

Table 2.6: Factors that drive audiences to the theatres

Audiences' needs and motivations	Driver & type of engagement
1	2
Feeling part of a special community of interest. Ritual Escapism and immersion Reflection Access to creative people and development Passing on a legacy to children & grandchildren Quality me-time.	Spiritual
Tingle-down-the-spine-moments Having a visceral response Feeling the chemistry and buzz	Sensual
Empathy Getting an emotional hit Being moved Being drawn in and engaged Mimesis and personal relevance Explaining human relationships Nostalgia Celebrating cultural identity Story-telling	Emotional
Developing world view Being intellectually challenged Self- improvement Learning about history/current issues Stimulating others	Intellectual

1	2
Enhanced socialization Quality time with friends and family Partaking in a live experience Entertainment: “a good night out” Dinner with a show Comfortable seating & good sight lines Good customer service & venue facilities	Social

The above table 2.6 makes it clear that the audience is driven by different factors to go to the theatre ranging from spiritual, to sensual, to emotional, to intellectual, to social. Every person could have a different need or motivation.

Richmond (1990) writes, ‘Why do people attend theatre?’ Without probing the complexity that such a question raises, the standard answers to this question, found elsewhere in the world, also apply to Indian audiences. People attend modern plays in India to be entertained, a social occasion, and perhaps for prestige (one of the amenities of modern life), and to reinforce social or political convictions (p.423).

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 psychology of the crowd was little understood until late in the nineteenth century, when a great deal of attention was

turned to it by a group of French philosophers. The subject has been most fully studied by M. Gustave Le Bon, who devoted some two hundred pages to his work, *Psychologie des Foules*, first published in 1895 (Theatre Psychology: 2015).

Hence, drama, to interest at all, must cater to certain basic instincts of the crowd, like, i) need for contention, ii) partisanship, iii) credulity, and iv) vulnerability to emotional contagion. The great successful dramatists always thought of the crowd on all essential questions. Shakespeare tried to think from the common man's position. He was neither radical, nor progressive. He understood people and so, he could write for them. He never tried to play the role of a reformer, and simply accepted the religion, the politics, and the social ethics of his time without trying to question them.

A theatre audience is composed of heterogeneous individuals. It contains the rich and the poor, the literate and the illiterate, the old and the young, the native and the naturalized. The same play, therefore, must be liked by all these people. Therefore, the dramatist must have a broader appeal. He cannot confine his message to any single section of the society. In that one creation of his, he must put in elements that will interest all classes of humankind. One of the most important differences between a theatre audience and other gathered crowd lies in the 'reason' for which it is convened. The audience does not come to be edified or educated; it has no desire to be taught, what it seeks is recreation. It

wants amusement through laughter, sympathy, terror, and tears. And these these are the very emotions on which the great dramatists play upon.

Mobile theatre is also no different. It is the audience who ultimately decides whether a show is a success or a failure. Mobile theatres cater to an audience that cuts across all barriers between the classes and the masses. This, by itself is no mean feat. From the educated to the illiterate, mobile theatre has attracted all. As against this, the amateur theatre presents drama for only one section of the society, usually the intelligentsia, where serious thought provoking issues, and not entertainment, is the priority. Mobile theatre on the other hand, focuses mainly on entertainment through which social issues are presented. It aims to be a complete *masala* (spice) package, because the major part of the audience comprises of the masses. Once, when Bengali *jatras* were in vogue people loved the mythological and historical stories which were usually sung. With the passage of time the social dramas became more popular and so did the Assamese dramas in prose. When mobile theatre came about, the audience welcomed it with open arms. Where once, women were as invisible in the audience as on the stage, today, they have gradually come to form an equal proportion of the audience. It is alleged by the producers that the changing taste and choice of the audience has compelled them to take up very 'filmy' scripts nowadays. The counter allegation from a section of the audience is that they are compelled to see whatever is dished out by the producers in the name of mobile theatre. This section says that mobile theatre has lost the earlier glory where the

story and acting used to be the main focus unlike today, when the technological gimmicks and song-dance sequences have taken the limelight. Renowned veteran actor-director of mobile theatre Mr. Mahananda Sarma (76 yrs) lamented in an interview with this researcher that he, as a part of audience, could not connect with the dramas anymore because everything has become too artificial. To quote him, “I have stopped watching *bhramyaman* because I cannot connect anymore to what is shown” (M. Sarma. Personal communication. June 04, 2014).

A question that arises here is, if we take the above opinions to be true, then how is it that mobile theatres every year produce such ‘superhit’ dramas to packed auditoriums? Is it true then that the tastes of the audience has really changed? Everything changes in due course and the composition of the mobile theatre audience has also undergone change. Today, a substantial section of the audience is the semi-urban/urban youth who flock to the theatres with expectations of being entertained in the ‘filmy style’. This section also has to be captivated by the producers if their shows are to be ‘hits’. Organizing committee Secretary of Vibgyor Club, Phulaguri, Mr. Jonmoni Sarma (45 yrs) agreed, “The audience today is the young generation and their taste is different, very filmy. Producers have to cater to this taste to have a successful run” (J. Sarma, Telephonic interview. October 22, 2016). While doing so, the easy way is to resort to the typical filmy approach. Nothing heavy to poke the grey cells but loads of songs and dance, with technical gimmicks thrown in. The entire focus is

on how to be commercially successful. Having said so, a social message is attempted at, but how much importance is given to it is a different story.

Then, another question emerges as to how the actors shall carry the meaning towards the audience. Herein comes the role and importance of communication. Bhattacharya and Dasgupta (2013) explains, communication refer to the act of transmission of ideas between individuals through the use of significant symbols. Thus, communication essentially refers to the process of establishing commonness among the participants involved in the act of communication through the act of information sharing. Emphasizing the importance of communication in building up of relationships, Raymond Williams asserts that men and societies are tied together to relationships in describing, learning, persuading and exchanging experiences. This exchange of experience is facilitated by communication. Thus, it is only fair that theatre is seen as a medium of establishing a relationship of commonness between the actor (communicator) and the audience (communicated) that hinges on the art of communication (p.3).

A brave experiment set to test by Mr. Achyut Lahkar in a small town in Assam led to a revolution in the field of theatre in Assam. Everything changes with time and new things take the place of the old. Mobile theatre being a product of the society, for the society and by the society, also has had to go through the changing process. What is important is the way it has sustained itself. Positive and healthy criticism will help correct the mistakes made and improve it

better. What needs to be appreciated by everyone connected with mobile theatres, that is, producers, playwrights, actors, technicians, convening committees and the audience is that, it is upon us to keep the mobile theatre of Assam alive. It should not be allowed to deteriorate into a cheap consumer product only. Mobile theatre should be a strong and distinct signature of the cultural wealth of Assam.