

**CHAPTER IV**  
**PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF**  
**MOBILE THEATRE**

Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next, and in this process a culture discards some of the elements and acquires some new traits. Mobile theatre has become an integral part of Assamese culture and in this art form also we can see many additions and omissions. In its journey of more than fifty years, this popular form of performing art has seen many changes. From the trend of mythological and historical plays, to social plays, to staging of plays based on stories from foreign land and cinema screenplay, from use of minimum technology, to this age of technical gimmicks, from a time when ‘glamour’ did not mean costly movie stars to this day, when the invitation committees first check on the ‘star’ artists before inviting a theatre, the changing attitude of the audience, etc. ‘Nothing but change is true’- we have all heard this saying and keeping in mind this truth, it is only natural that with time changes have come into mobile theatre as well. But, the question is, the kind of changes that have come in, are they positive or negative? Are these changes taking mobile theatre forward? Have these changes contributed in developing the aesthetic quality of mobile theatre or reduced it to a mere money making commodity? This chapter seeks to look into the problems and challenges that are being faced by mobile

theatre in Assam today and how these are being dealt with as well as the prospects on which it can bank upon for a secure future.

To conduct the study of this chapter, the SWOT framework has been put into use

#### **4.1 Globalization and its impact**

Barua (2015) opines that plays are of two types- one, a couple of hours time pass which has no impact on our thoughts and two, those plays which compel us to think, brings up many questions and issues and stays with us for a long time after we exit the auditorium. It is sad truth that today, most of the plays staged by the mobile theatres belong to type number one- a complete package that has all the ingredients for full entertainment and the value for money (pp.14-18).

This trend came into mobile theatres post 1990 with the concept of globalization. Acharya (2004) has stated globalization refers to the growth in international flows of goods, services and especially capital that has taken place since the 1970's. Between

1990 – 2000 some important developments took place as a result of globalization that changed the world forever are-

1991 : Cable and satellite television comes to India following the Gulf War.

1991 : Free market restructuring carried out under the tutelage of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

1992 : The launch of Zee TV and Star TV.

1992 : The government greatly liberalized the requirements, resulting in a great increase in foreign films being released domestically.

1994 : North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed.

1995 : VSNL introduced Internet services in India.

1998 : India conducts nuclear tests (p.15)

As a result of these developments mobile theatres post 1990 has had to face a threat from satellite television and cinema, which became easily available. So, it was felt by some that the package now offered to entice the mobile theatre audience had to be a complete entertainer.

#### **4.2 Challenges to Mobile Theatre**

Based on the above background, we will discuss the challenges faced by these mobile theatre groups emerging in the post globalization times. In fact, solutions and challenges will be considered both from the point of view of the society and the theatre groups. Bhattacharya (2015) says, in this age of Hi-Fi technology when peoples' aspirations regarding entertainment is becoming very high due to the availability of internet, social networking media, dish antennas, different kinds of television channels, the fact that the mobile theatre groups of Assam are not only surviving but has also surpassed the popularity of cinema and VCD (Visual compact disc) movies really deserve acclamation. Though started

long ago, in 1935, and though it has earned several recognitions at national level, yet the Assamese cine industry is still striving for survival (p.208)

The mobile theatres of Assam are running successfully, no doubt, but in the long run, how will they deal with the threats arising from

- presentation of the current type of 'filmy' adaptation of plays with no new experimentation;
- stiff monopolistic competition;
- over-dependence on glamour stars;
- growth of a 'Syndicate syndrome';
- unchecked emergence of new mobile theatres;
- entry of black money;
- lack of emergence of new acting talent;
- lack of adequate playwrights;
- constraint of space;
- non-industry status.

Challenges are not new to mobile theatres. They have adapted themselves accordingly. The variation in subject matter of the plays chosen over the years, shows how they have tried to keep in mind the changing taste of the audience. Bhattacharya (2015) further adds, that when the *jatras* first came into Assam from Bengal, they staged stories from mythology and history (p.209). Mobile

theatres, as the new improved *avatar* (incarnation) of *jatra*, initially followed suit and then, gradually with time, shifted to the social plays, which became very popular. Some such plays were, *Rana Pratap*, *Shakti Singh*, *Baji Rao*, *Jayadeva*, *Dhatri Panna*, *Avaja Devi*, *Basaspati*, *Kalapahar*, *Mewar Kumari*, *Kundil Kunwari*, *Chandragupta*, *Niyati*, *Akalor Desh*, *Dharar Devata*, etc. As time flew, and the classics became hugely popular in television, mobile theatres also experimented with adaptation of classics like *Mrichchakatikam*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Cleopatra*, *Illiad*, *Odyssey*, *Ben-Hur*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, etc. With globalization coming in, they started staging hollywood and bollywood adaptations like *Titanic*, *Dinasarar Atanka*, *Abuj Dara Achin Kaina*, etc.

**(a) Lack of Dramatists/Playwrights**

There was a time when only a few mobile theatre groups were there in Assam and just four or five playwrights wrote plays for these groups. One or two plays were written that gave the audience a fine taste because it reflected a sense of social responsibility through the story, the characters and the dialogues. Since the target audience was the rural masses, these plays could establish a connection with the viewer who found their own society and life on stage. Times changed and new playwrights came out who, on the plea of changing interest of the audience, began to dish out copies of Hindi, Bengali or South Indian movies or other translated works, in the name of plays. This has become the norm in mobile theatre now.

An even more dangerous and unfortunate fact is that today, the entire mobile theatre scenario has come to depend on, basically, one dramatist, Mr. Abhijit Bhattacharya. We acknowledge Mr. Bhattacharya's hard work, but is it possible for one man to write 15 to 20 plays in a year, and that too, every year in succession? This must be an unprecedented feat anywhere in the world in the history of drama and theatre. Every mobile theatre worth its salt must have one play written by Mr. Bhattacharya. The question is-why?! Has the Assamese cultural world become so poor as far as dramatists/playwrights are concerned? No wonder the quality of mobile theatre plays staged has plummeted so badly. If a person works under this kind of pressure where he has to churn out more than a dozen plays, where is the time to even think about any kind of quality? As remarked by a particular producer, on the request of anonymity, "today if Abhijit Bhattacharya decides to stop writing plays for mobile theatres, the entire set up will come to a standstill". Mr. Abhijeet Bhattacharya penned 18 plays for 10 mobile theatre groups during 2016-17.

**Table 4.1: Abhijeet Bhattacharya's plays written in 2016-17**

<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Mobile Theatre Group</b>	<b>Name of the Play</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
1	Sudarshan Theatre	<i>i. Badmas Suwali</i>
2	Rajashree Theatre	<i>ii. Kalangkini Nayeekaiiii. Jeevan Sangram</i>
3	Brindaban Theatre	<i>iv. Romancev. Raj Attalikavi. Rajanigandha</i>
4	Bordoisila Theatre	<i>vii. Koydi</i>
5	Chiranjeeb Theatre	<i>viii. Dhuniya Suwalijoni</i>

1	2	3
6	Itihaas Theatre	<i>ix. Circusor Suwalix. Duranta Premik</i>
7	Kohinoor Theatre	<i>xi. Radha ebar hanhi de</i>
8	Rajtilak Theatre	<i>xii. Mahatmar Sokupanixiii. Dangor Dada</i>
9	Abahan Theatre	<i>xiv. Ma Kalixv. Morom Diya Muk</i>
10	Theatre Surya	<i>xvi. Bodyguardxvii. Tejyoputraxviii. Mantri Mahoday</i>

Source: file:/// D: Mobile Theatre Season 2016-17\_Complete Guide-Axomiya.html

The above table, 4.2, is proof of the unholy trend that has come into mobile theatres, the monopoly of playwriting clubbed with direction. Is this humanly possible for one single person to churn out 18 original stories in one season? No wonder the mobile theatre plays have become the cut and paste ground from Hindi, south Indian and Bengali movies. In the SWOT analysis, this can be counted as a major weakness of mobile theatres.

Recently in an interview in a private local television channel Mr. Bhattacharya himself announced that in the coming season, that is, 2017-18, the number of plays that he has taken up to deliver in various mobile theatre units, has gone up to 24. (Television Programme. May 05, 2017.8 p.m).The question that automatically arises here is, is it really the dearth of playwrights or is it a lobby system which is managing things in their own way for their own gain? Is this a positive trend? A noticeable fact here is, as mentioned in the discussion of the connection between literature and mobile theatre, a stalwart of Bhabendranth Saikia's stature, penned 26 plays in his entire career of 22 years with mobile

theatre, while Mr. Abhijeet Bhattacharya writes 24 plays in one year. In connection to this trend that has come into mobile theatre, Bora (2017) has written that, the mobile theatre of Assam has been shadowed by the 'syndicate' system. Since the last couple of years, we have been hearing about this from the various artists and workers associated with mobile theatres. But lately, the matter is being openly brought out in the various discussions as well as write-ups and articles on mobile theatre. Who is running this 'syndicate'? Where and how is it being run? It may sound unpalatable, but some producers are responsible for this. They shoulder the responsibility of the mobile theatre's yearlong budget in crores of rupees, but they cannot take independent decisions on how to plan and go ahead. This is done by the 'third party'. From the so called 'star' to the cook, the salary of the artists-workers, which play will be staged on the second evening, etc., everything is decided by the 'third party' (p.14) .

In the last few years, some people of doubtful credentials are emerging in the arena of mobile theatres as producers. Among them, if someone is related to land-mafia, someone is a corrupt police officer or a former extremist. These are people who never had any connection with mobile theatre or the cultural field as a whole. They are not here to earn more from the mobile theatres, it is a means of turning black money into white and, to gain a status in the society. Since they do not have any knowledge about mobile theatres, they have handed over the reins to the 'third party'. This is how the syndicate reign is now running. It is important to note that some of the so called 'star' artists are contributing to, and



instigating this syndicate system indirectly. These people, for their own benefit, resort to unethical means by towing the lines of the syndicate mafia. An established cine actor, who had been in mobile theatres for three years earlier, wanted to go for mobile theatres again and went to meet some producers in this regard. But, apparently, he was told, 'please go and talk to 'so and so'. He knows everything'. This actor, (on conditions of anonymity), lamented, 'after working for so many years in cinema, serials and drama, now, to work in mobile theatres again, I will have to request 'someone' else ?!'

This is apparently the real picture of the mobile theatre world now. Just as the syndicates for various commodities has led to the benefit of only a certain few, while weakening the economy of the state, similarly, the syndicate in mobile theatre will benefit only a certain section of spineless opportunists, while ruining this industry. The mobile theatre ticket prices are rising rapidly. The producers are under immense pressure to stay in the run. While the 'stars' have nothing to lose, the other artists, technicians, workers etc., are mostly neglected. Forget about an increase in salary, many at times they do not get even their proper dues. There is no one to raise voice for them. This is not a very good sign for the mobile theatres.

It is high time the producers realize the consequences of this trend, which they will have to face very soon. This has led to staging of plays which people cannot connect to. Assamese literature is a treasure house. Why cannot our playwrights script play's from that treasure house? Of course, here, one would

need to understand literature which again, is not everyone's cup of tea. Another solution could be re-staging old original Assamese popular plays. This will not only revive the old plays but also stop the plagiarism from English, Hindi, Bengali and the South Indian movies. There are several other names in the current list of dramatists/playwrights in the mobile theatre arena. Arranged in alphabetical order for convenience alone, it includes Mr. Avtar Singh, renowned veteran playwright, Mr. Champak Sarma, Mr. Hemanta Dutta another veteran stalwart, Mr. Hillol kr. Pathak, Mr. Mridul Chutiya, Mr. Pranabjyoti Bharali, Mr. Pol.ch. Azad, Mr. Rajdweep, Mr. Satish Das, Mr. Shyamsundar Jalan, et al. The problem of shortage of playwrights is directly connected to the fact that too many theatre groups have come into existence now. It is a classic example of demand and supply. Plays will have to be presented if a theatre has to live, and that too, plays that will be commercially successful. so, naturally, the bet is put on the best horse.

Put into the SWOT analysis, this lack of dramatists/playwrights can be termed both as a weakness and a threat, because, lack of dramatists will mean more 'cut-paste' stories lifted from various sources. This will obviously weaken the quality of mobile theatre further, while the threat will be to the very survival of mobile theatre.

## **(b) Where are the Play Directors**

Bhagawati (2015) has said that a dramatist with his creative thinking writes a drama while a director presents that creation on stage by, one, understanding the emotions of the dramatist and two, adding his own vision as a director. Both are people who remain behind the scene. There is a lot of difference between the presentation of amateur theatre and mobile theatre. The dramatist and director of the mobile theatre is answerable not only to the audience, but also to the theatre group. In mobile theatre, a director has to complete 3-4 plays within one and half month time for presentation. Although this sounds impossible, this is what is going on in the mobile theatres (p.13)

Once, the most important post in a mobile theatre was that of a director. It was the director who used to discuss every aspect of the play with the dramatist, producer and the actors. Every theatre group had a regular director. But nowadays this trend has changed- it has been replaced by the dramatists/playwrights directing their own plays in spite of the fact that they do not have much knowledge about the art of direction. Moreover, since most of these dramatists churn out plays for the theatres, where is the time to concentrate on direction? These dramatists-cum-directors take it for granted that since the actors in mobile theatre are professional, they will understand everything themselves, once the rehearsals begin. In a couple of such rehearsals, as soon as the actors mug up their lines, the direction work is over. The result of such a

trend is also becoming clear. Acting is taking a backstage because powerful theatre performers are not being brought out. Those actors and actresses who are talented may be able to deliver from their experience but what about new artists who come to the mobile stage? Who will teach them the fine nuances of stage acting other than a director? A major share of the plays time is, therefore, killed with unnecessary song and dance sequences which is neither required in the story nor of any appreciable standard. This unholy trend is leading to the fact that today, a director's importance has gone down in the mobile theatre. The dramatists have become self-proclaimed directors. If the ability to 'act' as a major requirement is being compromised on, what will the director do anyway, in the mobile theatres?

Once again, according to the SWOT analysis, the gradual disappearance of the exclusive play director is a major weakness as well as threat to mobile theatres and is probably one of the prime reason of some very poor presentations.

### **(c) Dearth of Acting Talent**

In an interview taken by this researcher, Mr. Jon Barua, 45 yrs, Secretary, Chiranjeev Theatre, 2016-17 said that, the mobile theatre arena today has become hostage to a handful of 'star' performers on whose name the business is being run. The inviting committees insists on the presence of these 'stars' to invite the theatre groups since their version is that, otherwise the audience cannot be attracted. This dangerous trend has benefitted only these 'stars' and no one else

in the mobile set up because now they can demand atrocious amounts as remuneration, which the producers are not only willing to pay, but are even competing with each other every year, so that business is successful (J.Barua. Telephonic interview. December 17,2016). This reminds one of the words of Sardana (2012) who has written, in the star-centric Bollywood films, for a particular time a handful of male and female star actors had been and have been playing a dominant role in mainstream cinema than in contemporary Hollywood system. The fees charged by the handful of stars have been on the rise continuously and in today's mainstream films, such salaries account for well over half the production budget (p.10)

What the producers should try is to hunt out new acting talent for mobile theatre because this is a performing art which is completely based on acting. A new generation of stage actors is a very important necessity for the sustenance of mobile theatre in the long run. A strong story can be shouldered only by experienced and talented actors. Even a mediocre plot can be taken to another level if the actors know their art completely. Today, one allegation against mobile theatre is that playwrights are compelled to write plays keeping in mind the ability of the actors. Unfortunately, those actors who belong to the mobile theatre world, but are not glamorous 'stars', are accorded a secondary position and this has naturally created an invisible line of demarcation, which, of course the producers deny.

Chakraborty (2015) opines for an actor three 'D's are very important, namely, determination, dedication and discipline. Moreover, it must be a passion, not a job. Only then will an actor have the inclination to educate oneself with the *Natyashastra*, the ancient Indian treatise on drama, and the various other literature on theatre, to delve into language and grammar, understand various cultures, read up Rabindranath Tagore, Stanislavski, Brecht and Shakespeare, et al. An actor must keep in mind some duties like, understanding the play properly before trying to portray the particular character given, to by-heart the dialogues and understand every word with the correct pronunciations, avoid any unnecessary stammering and pause, clean one's teeth properly, exercise facial expressions as well as other free hand exercises. It is absolutely essential for an actor to have good health, a flexible body, a strong clear voice, realization, and observation capacity along with sincerity and good concentration power. A good actor may not be a good director, but a good director must be a good actor, only then can he teach the actors what is actually required. World famous director-actor Stanislavski opined that actors are of three kinds, the creative, the mimic and the over-actor. The creative actor looks for inspiration to improve himself, the mimic basically blindly does whatever is shown by the director and the over-actor just does that, over-acts unnecessarily (p.16).

Analysed through SWOT, the fact of the dearth of actors is again, both a weakness and threat for mobile theatres, because actors bring to life a script

penned by the playwright and envisioned by the director. Theatre is an actor's medium. If the actor fails to deliver, mobile theatres will gradually fade away.

### **4.3 Gimmicks Galore**

Saikia (2015) writes that nowadays, more importance is laid on technical gimmicks than the strength of the story of the play - flowing rivers, flying helicopters and airplanes, ships sinking, rains and vehicles running, dinosaurs romping all over the stage. This has led to the difference between cinema and mobile theatre becoming lesser. But, can only technical gimmicks Makeup for weak plays filled up with filmy song and dance sequences that has no connection to, or necessity in, the plot? (p.23)

Mobile theatre cannot become cinema. Cinema is a completely different medium. The two cannot, and should not even be compared. But in their race to present 'super hits', the mobile theatre producers are borrowing too much from cinema. The stories portrayed have no connection to the Assamese society and culture, because they have been taken from somewhere else, simply using Assamese names cannot bring in the ethos of the society. It fails ones understanding how the irritating and absolutely unnecessary song and dance sequences stolen from cinema contributes to the play at all. Technological gimmicks are fine as long as the story has such needs. A ship sinking in *Titanic* or dinosaurs running in *Dinasarar Atanka*, adaptation of the Hollywood blockbuster, *Jurassic Park*, had justifications in using technological illusions. But most plays on the mobile stage are infused with gimmicks just for the sake of

gimmick, which is quite funny, and it contributes in no way to the aesthetic quality of a play. As mentioned earlier, Kohinoor Theatre is planning to use 3-D technology in the coming season. It needs to be seen how it will be done for stage production.

Looked through the SWOT framework, this can be analysed as a weakness, because clearly, poor story, poor acting, and poor quality of overall presentation, has to be made up with something that will surprise and shock the audience while keeping them curious enough to sit through the play. This is why gimmicks are being relied upon.

#### **4.4 Method of Publicity**

Mazumdar (2015) has opined that a strange trend which has come into mobile theatre is in the method of publicity. Earlier, a play gained popularity after it was staged. The audience and critics gave it the certificate of being successful or a failure post-performance. All three or four plays taken up by the theatre group was of equal importance. But now, the producer declares which play will be a hit with the audience and that too, while it is still in the rehearsal stage. One particular play is the focus of all publicity. The 'records' created by the mobile theatres are blatantly advertised on both print and electronic media to attract audience. If entertainment tax had been levied on mobile theatres, will this kind of 'records' be advertised? (p.21) This kind of publicity has deprived the audience from being able to choose which play to enjoy. For example, in 2014-



15 season, Rajtilak Theatre staged two plays, namely, *Maharani* (The Empress) and *Abhinetri* (The Actress). For reasons best known to them, the producer hyped up *Maharani*, which had nothing much to offer, so much, that people missed out on *Abhinetri*, which comparatively, was a far better production from all sides.

A huge amount of money is spent on publicity by the mobile theatre groups to attract the audience. Promotion, like in cinema, and videos of songs are shown through the satellite television channels and the social media. As a result, the ticket prices have also gone up. Every theatre claims to have created ‘unprecedented records’ in the same year through their publicity. Once again, the entire publicity is centered around the ‘star’ performer with no mention of the other artists. Another change that has been noticed is the coming in of the corporate houses with products like alcohol and *pan masala* (mouth freshner) being advertised as sponsors before the show.

The SWOT analysis of the publicity methods and results of mobile theatre shows that inspite of the criticism that has been done, it is a strength, which has been utilised well to the maximum benefit. This is the age of publicity and advertisement, so, to attract the common people through glamour and media is but very natural. The tool of publicity is being utilised in the same manner for all sectors, be it entertainment, product endorsement or even politics.

#### **4.5 Keeping the Audience Enticed**

Das (2016) says that since the last few years the advance booking system of the theatre shows has undergone a change in the sense that many times this booking is not confirmed. The reason being, fewer audience. As such, the inviting committee collection is lesser compared to their expenses. A committee has to pay a fixed sum of Rupees 70-80 thousand to the mobile theatre group for the first show of each evening. In this scenario, the committees are becoming reluctant to invite the mobile theatre groups. The theatres have to send their representative to search out new venues for performance and in many cases have been compelled to perform without any advance payment. Non-payment or less-than-agreed payment by many committees have financially harmed the theatre groups (p.5)

An associated cause for the above scenario is the mushrooming of mobile theatre groups all around. With no knowledge of theatre management, new theatres are being established by people with money. As mentioned earlier, persons of dubious background or those who want to convert their black money to white, have started theatre groups. The increase in the rate of tickets is another reason of fewer audience. This hike in ticket price is basically because of the huge amount that the mobile theatre has to spend on the glamour artists as well as on publicity. Another factor now, is the easy availability of the satellite television channels for just Rupees 200/ to 300/ per month in the rural areas also.

Devchoudhury (2011) states that a factor in this regard is that, in the present times the producers of mobile theatre claim that it is the audience who wants these 'circus' type of plays and that is why they are compelled to stage them (p.33). But is this true? Have the producers been able to assess what the audience really wants? Immense publicity leads people to see a particular play but most times they come out with great dissatisfaction. Media, and the so-called critics, for their own interest, project a low standard play in such a way that the audience is misled. And then, to label this as the 'taste of the audience' is not acceptable at all because even the young generation has loved plays like *Asimat Jar Heral Sima*, *Rudrasagar*, *Swarnajayanti*, and *Astapath*, etc. Another issue is that of remuneration of the 'star' artists. It has become an open bargaining game. Whoever can bid the highest gets the most bankable star. A 'star' artist is paid a huge amount and the audience has to suffer the consequence in the form of enhanced ticket price. On the other hand, the same mobile theatre employs many people for whom making two ends meet is still a headache.

Yet another trend which has come into mobile theatre is use of cine-scope and playing recorded songs and music. Theatre is different from cinema and its essence lies in it being 'live' in every sense of the term. Why else would one go to a mobile theatre? Producers must realize that these new additions are in fact harming the medium more than helping it. The producers will have to give special importance to understand what the audience really wants and not make blind assumptions. Mobile theatre should not be presented like cinema. It has its

unique identity and that should be kept intact. The new generation of the audience should be taught to appreciate theatre and not look for replicas of cinema. In the current trend of plays that is being staged, this danger is becoming evident.

As per the SWOT analysis, the danger of losing the audience on account of the various factors discussed above, is of course a big threat that mobile theatre face today. The producers need to address the issues and take care to find means of attracting more and more audience of all age groups towards mobile theatre.

#### **4.6 Government's Role in the Development of Mobile Theatre: Has there been one**

Richmond (1990) mentions, relatively little is known and virtually nothing is published about the government support of theatre, or for that matter, of any of the arts in India. Considering the vast population of India, the multiple demands of contemporary and traditional theatres, India's political complexity and limited financial resources, it is no wonder that the public has little information about the extent to which central and state governments support the arts (p.435).

Talking about government blessings, it may be mentioned here, that Bollywood too, has had to face the government's apathy for a long period. As Acharya (2004) states, despite its popularity among the masses for its entertainment value, for a long time it did not receive any encouragement from the government and leadership so much so that it had to traverse a period of eight

decades before it was recognized as an industry eligible for availing loans from financial institutions. The state targeted it as a source of revenue by imposing excessive entertainment tax and other taxes including on raw stocks and essential imports. Consequently, the industry had to fend for itself. (p.18).

Today, the unique mobile theatre of Assam has established itself as one of the best means of mass communication. Through hard work and discipline, it has taken drama, which is recognized as one of the most effective socio-cultural tool, to the various nooks and corners of the society. Apart from that, mobile theatre has been playing a crucial role in the economic arena of Assam, with each theatre providing means of livelihood to not less than 150 families, thus contributing to social development. Consequently, mobile theatre has carved a special niche in the cultural world of Assam. However, in the last few years this medium has become the focus of a lot of discussion and criticism. To put it in another way, it is seen that certain theatre groups and a section of artists-technicians have lost the sense of values that should be there in a strong medium of mass communication. As such, maybe the time has come that the government of Assam should interfere in mobile theatre. The theatre groups have also been complaining that the government has always neglected them and this complaint is not totally baseless. Though it is true that former Chief Minister of Assam, Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta had exempted the mobile theatres from the entertainment tax, but thereafter, no help or assistance has come from the government for the development or improvement of the medium. In the last few years it has been

noticed that a couple of mobile theatre groups have gained the benefit of some advertisements and too, through some agencies who act as middlemen. Naturally, the lion's share of any profit is taken by these agencies. In 2012, the then Assam government had supported the implementation of a new Act, The Assam Mobile Theatre (Regulation and Artist Welfare Fund) Act, 2010, which had been incorporated in the Gazette notification as on 7th September 2010, bearing the No. LGL/174/2008/13. A copy of the Gazette Notification has been attached in the appendix III. Containing 25 sections in all, this elaborate Act has provisions that would lead to better regulation of the mobile units, curtail the mushrooming of mobile units, establishment of an Artists Welfare Fund for mobile theatres. But how far this Act has been implemented is, of course another story.

Mr. Pulu Kr. Sarma (58 yrs), cultural activist and journalist, informed that in 1987 the state government announced two awards, one, *Sahityacharya* Atul Chandra Hazarika Award (exclusively for mobile theatres) which was won by Sri Mahendra Barthakur for the playwriting of *Mukhya Mantri* (Chief Minister) staged by Hengul theatre and, two, *Natasurya* Phani Sarma Award (General) for the best actor-actress, which was won jointly by Sri Jibeswar Deka (Mukunda theatre) and Sri Suren Mahanta (Kohinoor Theatre) (P.K.Sarma. Personal communication. August 10, 2014). However, the directorate of Cultural Affairs, GoA, sources officially states that it was from 2004 that the *Natasurya* Phani

Sarma Award has been given by the state government. The stalwarts associated with mobile theatre who won this honour include:

**Table 4.2: Recipients of the *Natasurya Phani Sarma Award*(2004-2017)**

<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Year of Award</b>	<b>Name of the Recipients</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
1	2004	Tulsi Das
2	2005	Ratna Oja
3	2006	Dharanidhar Choudhury
4	2007	Jnanada Bora/ Mahananda Sarma
5	2008	Bidya Rao Nayar
6	2009	O. P Nayar
7	2010	Indra Baniya
8	2011	Hasan Sharif Ahmad
9	2012	Bishnu Khargharia
10	2013	Uday Shankar Saikia
11	2014	Nipon Goswami
12	2015	Bholanath Kalita
13	2016	Bhola Kotoki
14	2017	Not given

Source: Directorate of Cultural Affairs, GoA.

Similarly, the Cultural Affairs official status is that the *Sahityacharya* Atul Chandra Hazarika Award (exclusively for mobile theatre) has been awarded since 2008 and the recipients from the mobile theatre arena till 2017 are:

**Table 4.3: *Sahityacharya* Atul Chandra Hazarika Award**

<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Year of Award</b>	<b>Name of the Recipients</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
1.	2008	Achyut Lahkar
2.	2009	Hemanta Dutta
3.	2010	Ratan Lahkar
4.	2011	Bina Prasad
5	2012	Krishna Roy
6	2013	Not known
7	2014	Not Known
8	2015	Dharani Barman
9	2016	Not known
10	2017	Not given

Source: Directorate of Cultural Affairs, GoA.

Apart from the award mentioned in table 4.4, the state government has also been providing artists pension to people connected with various art, craft, music, cinema and theatre, etc., since 1988. Some of the renowned personalities of mobile theatre who has received the artist pension from the government of Assam are:



**Table 4.4: Recipients of GoA Artist Pension for mobile theatre, 1988-2017**

<b>Sl.No.</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of recipient</b>	<b>Name of the recipient</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
1	1988	01	Karuna Kanta Mazumdar
2	1989	01	Kalawanta Singh
3	1990	01	Ratna Oja
4	1991	01	Jatin Goswami
5	1992	N.K	N.K
6	1993	01	Anupama Bhattacharya
7	1994	01	Adya Sarma
8	1996	02	a. Dharani Barman b. Sadananda Lahkar
9	1997	N.K	N.K
10	1998	02	a. Prabhat Sarma. b. Uday Bhagawati
11	1999	N.K	N.K
12	2000	01	Sarat Mazumdar
13	2001	N.K	N.K
14	2002	N.K	N.K
15	2003	02	a. Abdul Majidb. b. Ila Kakati
16	2004	01	Mahananda Sarma
17	2005	01	Nipon Goswami
18	2006	01	Ugra Mena
19	2007 to 2009	N.K	N.K

1	2	3	4
20	2010	01	Brajanath Sarma
21	2011-12	N.K	N.K
22	2013	01	Hemanta Dutta
23	2014 -15	N.K	N.K
24	2016	01	Towfiqur Rehman
25	2017	07	a. Jyoti Lahkar . b. Hariprasad Barthakur. c. Rina Bora. d. Kamala Kalita. e. Nanda Bannerjee. f. Kartik Bora. g. Parul Bora.

Source: Directorate of Cultural Affairs, GoA

**Table 4.5: Recipients of other grants/pension by the artists of mobile theatre (2011-2017)**

Sl.No	Year	Ex-gratia grantwith name of recipient	Special financial Assistancewith	Family pensionwith name of recipient
1	2	3	4	5
1	2011	Dasarath Das	_____	_____
2	2012	a. Boroda Mena b. Geetanjali Ahmad Nayar	_____ _____	_____ _____
3	2013	_____	_____	Bharati Devi
4	2014	_____	_____	_____
5	2015	_____	a. Heera Neog b. Preeti Saikia	a. Prabha Devi b. Khiroda Sarma.

1	2	3	4	5
6	2016	Upakul Bordoloi	_____	Kiran Lahkar
7	2017	a. Renu Dutta Phukan. b.Heera Neog (family).		a. Pakhila Das b. Kamini Das c. Kiran Lahkar

Source: Directorate of Cultural Affairs, GoA

It is heartening to see that social organizations have been keeping up the effort to encourage mobile theatre artists, time and now, by announcing certain awards and honours. Two such organizations that may be mentioned are the ‘Y’s Men’ and ‘Nebcos’. Dalmia India (Bharat) Cement has taken up a laudable step as a part of their Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR), by starting ‘Udiyaman Bhramyaman’ an annual award ceremony exclusively for the recognition of the artists of the mobile theatre of Assam. For the first time held a glittering function was held in Guwahati on 23rd June 2017 to felicitate mobile theatre artists in twenty-three different categories. Mr. Dasarath Das, veteran singer and music director, was conferred the Aditi Sarma Memorial Lifetime Achievement Award for his contribution to mobile theatres (*Amar Asom*,2017:13). In its second edition held on 20th June 2018, apart from awards given away in twenty-eight various categories, the Aditi Sarma Memorial Lifetime Achievement Award was conferred on veteran playwright, director and lyricist, Mr Hemanta Dutta (*The Assam Tribune*,2018:5)

If the government so wishes, it can do a lot the development and progress of mobile theatre. As pointed out by Saikia (2013), we can take up the example of the Chinese Dramatic Association, CDA (renamed in 1953), which was originally named National Theatre Workers Association and formed in 1949 with the blessings of the Chinese government. Since the last 60 years, this association has been working to strengthen the socialist literature and arts in the country by associating the playwrights and theatre workers with the government. With its main objective of guiding the common man towards the ideals of socialism, the CDA has adopted the theme, 'Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend'. The CDA works to enrich creation of plays; healthy criticism of theatre; bring together theatre associations and professional theatre workers to take theatre forward; work for the welfare, security and interests of the theatre workers, and educate people about this; create drama literature like books, magazines, journals, etc., along with the plays; and, strengthen theatre exchange programmes with foreign countries. CDA has also been bringing out a monthly magazine titled, *The Script* since 1952 with the main purpose of publishing selected manuscripts and screenplay, apart from encouraging new playwrights (pp.14-16).

Thus, if such political patronage in the real sense is there, then there is no limit to how the theatre can be utilized for the betterment of the society. Mobile theatre of Assam is a special identity in the cultural arena of the world. If this treasure is to sustain for generations to come, it is the duty and responsibility of

the entire Assamese society as well as the State Government to help, support, criticize and guide the future path of the most popular medium of mass communication and entertainment of Assam. One day, history will definitely measure mobile theatre of Assam on a different scale.

#### **4.7 Future Prospects of Mobile Theatre**

In this half a century of its existence mobile theatre has been able to establish itself as one of the most popular medium of entertainment and mass media. Though not comparable, because both mediums are different, mobile theatre has filled the void left by the lack of a flourishing cinema industry in Assam. It has provided a lifeline to hundreds of artists, technicians and workers who faced a dark future when the Assamese cinema industry began to dwindle. Apart from that, the contribution of mobile theatre to the socio-economic arena of the state is something that cannot be denied. As in case of all things, mobile theatre has also seen a lot of changes, some for its betterment and some, debatable. The earlier generation of people associated with the medium, either as worker or audience, lament, that today, mobile theatre has lost its previous glory. They even doubt the survival of the medium. But, on the other hand, the new generation of producer-directors and mobile theatre lovers feel that the medium will always thrive in Assam. One mobile theatre enthusiast went on to say, 'as long as Assamese society is there, mobile theatre will live on (R.Choudhury.

Personal Communication. September 13,2014). Here, one wonders if this is true. In this age of hi-fi technology, what are the future prospects of mobile theatre?

As written by Goswami (2015), certain important points can be noted with regard to the world of Assamese theatre, like, (a) Assam has a long and ancient history of Assamese drama; (b) Assam has a huge treasure house of folk-drama and a rich tradition of music and dance; (c) Assam has a strong dramatic base on which modern Assamese theatre can be developed; (d) Assam has a significant force of dramatic-societies and theatre enthusiasts (workers), which is the most important factor; (e) Assam also has innumerable audiences who love theatre and with whose support Assamese theatre will live on (p.264).

Putting this picture into the SWOT analysis, the opportunities that can be explored by the mobile theatres include:

#### **(a) Workshop for Playwriting and Acting**

Keeping in mind the scarcity of playwrights for mobile theatres in relation to the number of mobile theatre groups mushrooming all over, it is of great importance that workshops to find people with potential to be trained up as playwrights, are organized. Talents, that have not been tapped or even found, will also find a platform. Similar workshops for finding and honing acting talents is also the need of the hour, as far mobile theatre is concerned. Acting on the stage, which is live, is very different form acting in front of the camera. Though new actors are foraying into mobile theatres attracted by its huge popularity and heavy

pay packet, they are hardly acquainted with the knowledge of the stage, and as such fail to deliver the goods. Proper training and experience will go a well way in filling the void.

### **(b) Industry Status for Mobile Theatre**

The controversial question of whether mobile theatre should be declared an industry by the government with an official stamp has been going on since years. This question can be best answered by people within the mobile theatre scenario and one must understand that every situation has its positives and negatives. All pros and cons will have to be chalked out before any decision in this regard can be taken. Moreover, every person associated with mobile theatre must understand the full implications of an industry and only thereafter vote for it. Mobile theatres have survived all these years without an official stamp of being an 'industry' and flourished well. In the future also, this successful roll will continue, provided, the producers think for the benefit of mobile theatre as a whole and not just one's 'own' theatre while taking decisions about plays, playwrights, artists and 'stars'. Keeping in mind the current status of mobile theatre in Assam, its prospects are bright no doubt, but in the coming years who knows what is in store? Did anyone imagine this pathetic condition of Assamese cinema back in the 80's? The question of industry status for mobile theatre must be preceded by strong policy decisions by the government.

### **(c) Importance of Digitization**

This is the age of digitization. Every available data can be saved electronically. Mobile theatre is a cultural icon of Assam. But is all information and data related to it, like, its presentation style, record of presentations, details of the plays and songs, etc., available on the internet? Is it not necessary for us to tell the world about such a theatre industry? Moreover, this is very important for our own future generations. Lack of an initiative to preserve has led to the loss of more than 50% of our Assamese cinema prints which is a huge loss for the Assamese people. Mobile theatres have led to the creation of thousands of plays but have we been able to preserve them? We have never given much importance to preservation of the manuscripts of the plays or video recording the performance of the plays. Of course, one thing must be admitted that this was not possible till the 80's or early 90's, but now, in the last decade information technology has soared to an unbelievable height. We must make the most of it. Unfortunately, the will within the mobile theatre community seems to be lacking in this direction. Certain steps can be taken by the theatre groups in this direction, like-

- i) Each theatre group must have its own website where apart from the history of mobile theatre, all information about the group itself, past and present, shall be put up.
- ii) Data of all plays, old (as available) and new, should be digitally preserved.



- iii) If possible, the video recorded version of the plays should be uploaded by the theatre groups on their own website.
- iv) Keeping in mind the commercial side of mobile theatre, internet platforms like Youtube, Facebook and Whatsapp can be used for business purpose. This will, of course, require proper planning and commercial research.

**(d) Space**

A mobile theatre is makeshift and therefore, needs space to put up its auditorium(tent). The problem of space is sure to confront the mobile theatres in the future. The fast depletion of open spaces for putting up the mobile theatre tents, not only in the urban, but also in the rural areas, is already a major concern. The mobile theatre community should get together with the local bodies of an area and preserve the available space (open field) for future. This should be done now, even if it entails some monetary donations, otherwise a day will come when lack of open space will sound the death knell for mobile theatres. Mobile theatre is the most coveted medium of entertainment in Assam and its future should be the concern of all the stakeholders, producer, artists-technicians as well as the audience (public).

**(e) Publication of Plays Staged**

It is very surprising that the mobile theatre producers have never given importance to the publication of plays they stage. The manuscripts of the plays are hardly available in any theatre. Had a concerted effort been made by each

theatre to publish the three-four plays they staged every season, a huge treasure house of plays would have been created by now. Another sad fact is, even the souvenirs brought out every season by the mobile theatres are not preserved by the theatre groups themselves. This scholar had to run from pillar to post to gather the souvenirs, particularly old copies.

#### **(f) Intellectual Acceptance**

In Assam, whatever has been written about drama or mobile theatre or ,if any film has been made on these subjects, it has been done by people who have been associated in some way or the other with amateur or mobile theatre. If we wish to give a different shape to mobile theatre through intellectual acceptability, then, the first step will be to organize seminars, lectures, and discussions to find the means and ways to help guide mobile theatre tread in the correct path, wherein active participation will be taken by the intellectuals, thinkers and researchers, who are generally, from outside the world of mobile theatre. A well established mobile theatre group or any other association of mobile theatres (if there is any), can organize such seminars, lectures, etc., in the name of an eminent personality from the mobile theatres every year. Such an endeavour may not give immediate results, but its effects will definitely be seen in the long run. This will not only bring about the intellectual acceptance of mobile theatre, but also create pressure on the mobile theatres to move on the right track, so that its historical character remains intact. This pressure will not be like the current trend

of irresponsible criticism, but it will be like a helpful hand extended by a well-wisher.

A laudable step in this direction has been taken by the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Assam from 2017 by organising a 'drama evening' on 12th June every year, to commemorate the death anniversary of Achyut Lahkar, the father of modern mobile theatre in Assam.

Problems will always be there for any enterprise. Mobile theatre of Assam in, with all its share of problems and struggles, has survived and flourished. The dream project of M. Achyut Lahkar has today, acquired for itself a special niche in the theatres of the world as a 'one of a kind' theatre. The future prospects of this enterprise depend on all the stakeholders of mobile theatres, namely, producers, artists, workers, organizing committees, audience and, also on the attitude of the government. Heathy criticism is very important for anything to be improved. The producers and playwrights must have the mentality to listen to criticism and go for introspection. The media too, should refrain from unnecessary hype when advertising for the mobile theatres. Mobile theatre is truly a cultural asset of Assam and this fact must be appreciated by every Assamese and, considering its popularity even today, hopefully, we will be able to celebrate the centenary of mobile theatre of Assam in a grand and befitting manner.