

CHAPTER V

IMPACT OF MOBILE THEATRE ON THE ASSAMESE SOCIETY AND CULTURE

The popularity of the mobile theatre of Assam, among the masses, cutting across all classes and sections of the society, is phenomenal. No doubt, the first and foremost objective of the producer is to entertain, and the audience also comes seeking the same. Through entertainment, mobile theatre has been able to leave its impact on various important fields, which can be broadly divided into social, economic and cultural. One particular fact that needs to be kept in mind here is that 'impact' in this context has been both ways. If mobile theatre has impacted on the society, economics and culture of Assam, the changes and developments in these spheres have impacted mobile theatres also. This becomes crystal clear when one looks at the mobile theatres before and after the coming in of globalization.

5.1 The Assamese Society

As has been said by Konwar (2006), Assam is a land of varied socio-cultural elements. It has a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual society. Linguistically, the Assamese society contains diverse linguistic people, both tribal and non-tribal, such as Assamese, Bengali, Nepali, Bodo, Rabha, Mishing, Tiwa, Karbi and such other linguistic groups (p.8). Hussain (1995) opines, a wide range of ethnic groups are also present in the region and

they have contributed a lot towards the socio-cultural development of the state. A good number of these ethnic groups belong to the tribal community. The tribal population living in the state can be widely divided into the Hill tribes and the Plain tribes. The Hill tribes are Chakma, Dimasa, Garo, Hajong, Hmar, Karbi, Khasi, Lakher, Mizo, Maan, Naga, Pawi, Synteng, etc., while the plain tribes are Bodo, Barman, Deori, Hojai, Mech, Mishing, Rabha, Sonowal, Tiwa, etc.(p.46)

Sharma (2014) mentions present day Assam has a total area of 78,523 square kilometres. According to the 2011 census, its population is 3,11,69,272 consisting of the Assamese speaking population and the ethno-linguistic communities living in the hills and plains. Assam's historical contact with Bengal has also led to the existence of a sizeable Bengali population, predominantly, in its western and southern parts. Assam also has a considerable presence of religious minorities whose existence can be traced to the early thirteenth century. The contribution of such minority groups towards the socio-cultural environ of Assam is significant. This heterogeneous composition of the population of Assam has led to the development of a unique, distinctive composite culture which is based on interaction, assimilation and integration (pp.2-3).

Thus, as opined by Dasgupta (2000), the story of the formation of Assamese society is essentially a story of the continuous flow of migrants into the region. A varied population from different ethnicities, topographies and histories, speaking different languages came together to form the core of an Assamese society, making diversity an important constituent.....It is impossible, therefore, in a

dialogue between the plural and the singular, to brush aside the first term.....Assam is not one society then, but many 'societies' whether one analyzes them 'vertically' in the usual way, or 'horizontally' (p.41).

As has already been traced in the second chapter, the history of Assamese theatre is a glorious saga with its roots firmly embedded in the folk traditions of this remote part of India. What is sought now, is to look into the impact of a mass medium like mobile theatre, over the years, on the Assamese society. Theatre is a primordial aesthetic practice. All existing evidences point to the fact that theatre existed in the Indian subcontinent from the beginning of civilization. According to Kurtz (1988), the *Rig Veda* suggests that dramatic theatre in India came into being around the eighth century B.C. *Jataka* stories illustrating Indian life between 600 B.C. and 300 B.C. contain evidences of theatre (p.66). However, according to Kane (1994), for a number of reasons the *Natyashastra* of Bharata, an exhaustive memoir on the art of performance which is an earliest form of Indian drama is to be considered as the oldest extant work on the Sanskrit poetics of drama (p.10) As put by Brecht (Q.I Willet 1964), "theatre is about representing a certain understanding or interpretation of social life or reported or invented happenings between human beings"(p.180).

5.2. Impact of Mobile Theatre on the Society of Assam

It is a fact that to a large extent the entertainment industry shapes our social structure. It influences our way of thinking, behaving and doing things. Many

revolutionary innovations have been experimented with in the recent times to entertain various segments of society, but this has also led to a lot of undesirable trends coming in. This has definitely impacted society in some way or another, especially because of the accompanied upsurge in media. Herein lies its significance.

As said by Kasturi and Vardhan (2013), in-depth insight into the rich heritage and culture of the country is required in order to understand the prevailing social evils in India. The gravest social problems faced by India, at present are poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, caste discrimination, dowry, child labour, drug abuse, forced prostitution, domestic violence, female infanticide, and so on. This list is augmented by other social evils like corruption, urbanization and illiteracy. The prime scenario where these evils are rooted is in rural India. One fact is that, despite the vast opening out of the electronic media, theatre remains the predominant mass medium. Hence, in addressing the social evils, this medium can play a very important role. The message that needs to be disseminated to the target audience should be scripted and narrated well in a simple manner, so that it makes the rural audiences think about the problem presented. Theatre is often the perfect vehicle to provide education about current social issues and to inspire social and political change (p.1). The Assamese society today, more or less is prey to the same social evils mentioned above. These issues require a careful analysis and rational solution to help the society

grow in all ways. And what better means to do this than to communicate through theatre?

Another impact of cinema and theatre which is often undermined is the therapeutic impact. Well known Bollywood film maker, Mr. Mahesh Bhatt says,

How often has one heard people say that sometimes the answers to life's problems are in good movies? In the United States of America, a psychotherapist, Dr. Gordon Solomon, has been successfully prescribing movies for his mentally disturbed clients for over five years. Solomon believes that a right story which shows us how others have coped with life's challenges helps us heal. In his *The Motion Picture Prescription*, which has become a landmark healing guide to the movies, he says that everything from addiction, abuse, abandonment, alienation, bigotry, marital conflicts and physical illness can be magically resolved by watching movies which effectively deal with these living issues (Bhatt: 2001).

Mobile theatres have impacted the society through the social responsibilities they carry out. As mentioned earlier, mobile theatres are invited by the inviting committees to fulfill certain social needs, like construction of a school building, temple, *Namghar* (community prayer hall), cultural-sports club, etc., of the local area, from the expected profit. That apart, many times the

mobile theatre themselves also contribute to help for such social causes. To quote Mr. Tilak Baishya (54 yrs), editing advisor of Brindaban theatre ad verbatim, from an interview with this researcher,

Brindaban theatre takes its social responsibilities very seriously. Mr. Ganesh Raimedhi, the producer had announced at the launching of this theatre in 2010 that he will establish a home for children and the aged in Morua, Nalbari. For that objective, a multipurpose eco-social organization called 'Rainbow' has been established, through which Mr. Raimedhi has purchased a plot of 4 bighas of land at the cost of about 8 lakh rupees from his theatre profits. Not only that, he has also handed over a sum of 3 lakh rupees to the officials of Rainbow for the home to be called 'Brindaban Ashram'. In 2014-15 Mr. Raimedhi donated a sum of 1 lakh rupees to the Nalbari Hari Mandir Committee at the conclusion of the Raas festival. He also contributed a sum of 50 thousand rupees to the Deputy Commissioner's Fund, Nalbari for the *Swachh Bharat* Mission. Through Rainbow, the under privileged meritorious children, the crisis ridden farmers, and the financially weak patients are also being offered respite (T. Baishya. Telephonic interview. September 14, 2015).

Similar sentiments were expressed by Sri Jatin Das (58 yrs), president of the Ganeshguri Baruwari Puja Committee, that has been inviting mobile theatres since the last four decades. He narrated how, the committee has been trying to contribute to the society by doing charity work for the BPL families, encouraging sports personalities like internationally reputed pugilist from Assam, Mr. Shiva Thapa by a felicitation of rupees 50,000/, construction of the Laksmi Mandir in Ganeshguri, etc. (J. Das. Personal communication. July 10, 2017). Sri Junmoni Sarma (45 yrs) Secretary of Vibyor club, Phulaguri, in Nagaon informed about how the various organisations in the area like the High school, Lower primary school, the youth club, Nehru club, etc., has formed a *Samannay Sammitte* (Harmonious body) and decided to invite mobile theatres by rotation each year. (J. Sarma. Telephonic interview. September 26, 2016). Sri Abani Barua (65 yrs) of Everest Club, Azara, near Guwahati, that has been inviting theatres since decades, also emphasized that mobile theatres did contribute indirectly through the inviting committees, whose objective was always a social cause (A. Barua. Telephonic interview. July 05, 2017).

While discussing the social impact of mobile theatre from its popularity point of view, a question that comes to mind is, has mobile theatres ever been able to set any trend in Assam? For example, when the Assamese superhit movie *Ajali Nabau* hit the screen in the 80's, it created a stir and the *Ajali nabau mekhela-chadars*, the traditional attire of the heroine, became a craze among Assamese ladies, much like the *Chandni Sarees*, when superstar Ms. Sridevi

starrer Bollywood superhit movie, *Chandni* had taken India by storm in the early 1990's. Another Bollywood blockbuster, starring superstar, Ms.Madhuri Dixit, *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* introduced the *Purple Madhuri Saree* that became a rage. Even in the 60's, the *Sadhna Haircut* named after the popular Bollywood film star Ms. Sadhna, caught the fancy of young girls all over India. The two superstars of Bollywood, Mr. Dev Anand's *Dev Bouffant Hairstyle*, and Mr.Rajesh Khanna's *Guru Shirts* were no less. It is interesting to hear from the earlier generation how in their hey days when Mr.Dilip Kumar and Ms.Meena Kumari, both superstars, were the heart throb of Hindi films, people actually named their children after these stars. In fact, 'Dilip' and 'Meena' were the most preferred names at that time. Talking about setting trends, Bollywood superstar Ms.Rekha was the pioneer who brought in a revolution with the concept of physical fitness and wellbeing through yoga, with her amazing transformation from an ugly duckling to a beautiful swan, in the early 80's. Megastar of Bollywood, Mr. Amitabh Bachchan also brought in a hairstyle, the *Amitabh Cut*, during the 70's-80's, which took the country by storm. However, it is interesting to note that in case of the mobile theatres, no such trend setting examples can be found in spite of its huge popularity.

An interesting incident recounted by Das (2016), is how in 1993-94 when, a particular insurgent groups' activities were at its peak in Assam, Dr.Bhabenrdanath Saikia's play *Swargar Duwar* depicting the contemporary social scenario, was creating ripples everywhere. Two members of the Nalbari

unit of the said organization came to Saikia and asked for the CD (Compact Disc) of the above mentioned play, for those members of their unit who could not get to see it. This incident has been mentioned by Dr. Saikia in the pages of *Prantik*, an Assamese monthly magazine which he edited once. Can there be a better example of how theatre impacts society? (p.28).

(a) Literature and Mobile Theatre

During the course of the research work for information on the various dimensions of mobile theatre, one aspect caught the eye of the researcher and that was the connection of literature and mobile theatre. In fact, when we are talking about the impact of mobile theatre on our society, one of the most important contribution is how mobile theatre introduced the common man, comprising of both literate and illiterate people, to the world of literature and the literature of the world. There is no doubt that creation and presentation of original drama is one of the prime objectives with which late Mr. Achyut Lahkar had established the first mobile theatre, Nataraj Theatre. Having said that, it cannot be denied that facilitating the presentation of renowned literary creations from regional, national and international level, for the common masses who do not or cannot have access to such literary creations is one of the most significant contributions of mobile theatre to our society. Many people cannot afford to buy books for the pleasure of reading, many others are not literate and so, cannot enjoy reading a literary creation. For such common people, the mobile theatre presentations based on

famous and popular literary creations open up a whole new world of knowledge and information through entertainment. A look at the past years brings out how literature has been a part of this long and successful journey of mobile theatre.

This connection with Assamese literature was first established in the very first year 1963 by Nataraj theatre when they took eminent Literrateur, Mr. Atul Chandra Hazarika's drama *Beula*, which is a famous Hindu mythological tale that has been passed from one generation to the other. Such was the appeal of this presentation, that *Beula* went on to create the unsurpassed record of being staged continuously for the next forty years, by Nataraj theatre. This play fascinated the audience in such a way that, *Beula* was never taken down from the itinerary of Nataraj Theatre. *Beula* can, therefore, be compared to longest running Broadway musicals like, *The Fiddler on the Roof*, *Grease*, *A chorus Line*, and, the topper, *The Phantom of the Opera*. Figo (2010) quotes Mr. Achyut Lahkar's confession that 'it was the instrumentalist from Barpeta, Mr. Gopi Das, who had convinced me to take up *Beula* in the maiden venture of Nataraj' (p.30). In 2003-04, Natraj Theatre took up the novel penned by journalist-writer, Mr. Nilesh Misra, *End of the Line*, staged as *Kathmandu'r Debojani*. It was scripted and directed by Mr. Sebabrata Barua.

Theatre Bhagyadevi in 1970-71, presented a dance drama based on the renowned creation, *Miri Jiyari*, penned by Mr. Rajani Kanta Bordoloi, one of the most revered stalwarts of Assamese literature. In 2001-02, they presented the dramatic version of noted Assamese writer, Dr. Rita Choudhury's novel,

Jalapadma, which was scripted by Mr. Kannauj Baishya with the same title. In 2003-04, a new experiment with literature was seen on the stage of Theatre Bhagyadebi, when, Mr. Seabrata Barua scripted and directed *Soisabatey Dhemalitey*, a play based on some of the immortal lyrics of internationally acclaimed music maestro, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. In 2004-05, they presented *Mamatar Chithi*, the famous creation of Mr. Hem Barua, a doyen of Assamese literature.

In 1976-77, Kohinoor theatre, in its very first year presented *Tejimala*, the legendary creation of Mr. Lakshminath Bezbarua, one of the most revered Assamese litterateur. In fact, Kohinoor took up this healthy trend and continued it in the following years. In 1980-81, popular Assamese novelist, Mr. Kanchan Barua's romantic thriller, *Asimat Jar Herai Sima* was a superhit presentation of Kohinoor. The playwright was Mr. Mahananda Sarma and director was Mr. Hemanta Dutta. In 1981-82, they presented the stage adaptation of the Bengali writer, Mr. Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay's novel, *Devi Sanyasini*. In 1982-83, they presented the first ever foreign literary adaptation on the mobile stage. This was Mr. H.R Haggard's *Cleopatra*, which was scripted by Mr. Padma Barkotoki, eminent litterateur of Assam. In 1986-87, this theatre took up two stories from different parts of the globe. One, was R. L Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which was named *Kal Shatru* by the playwright and director of the play, Mr. Atul Bordoloi. The other, was the world famous creation of Greek poet Homer, *Illiad-Odyssey*. Once again, it was Mr. Atul Bordoloi who scripted and directed the

play. Eminent Assamese litterateur, Dr. Laksminandan Bora's novel *Patal Bhairavi* was presented in 1987-88 with Mr. Atul Bordoloi's script and direction. The following year, in 1988-89, Kohinoor took up the sensational storyteller, Ms. Agatha Christi's creation and staged it as *Rakta Adalat*, with Mr. Atul Bordoloi's script and direction. Another play, this very year was *Prarthana*, which was the mobile stage adaptation of world famous writer, Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. This play was scripted and directed by Mr. Sutradhar.

In 1989-90, Kohinoor presented on stage the world famous *Tarzan*, created by American writer, Mr. Edgar Rice Borroughs. It must be mentioned here that this play was inspired more by the Hollywood version than the book itself. This play was also the first direct impact of Hollywood on the mobile stage presentation. In 1992-93, *Ben-Hur*, the renowned creation of American author Mr. Lewis 'Lew' Wallace was scripted for Kohinoor by Mr. Mahendra Barthakur and directed by Mr. Hemanta Dutta. The very next year, in 1993-94, the same duo presented William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* on Kohinoor's stage. Consecutively, 1994-95 saw Mr. Seababrata Barua script the play *Pabitra Paapi*, which was adapted from the Greek tragedian Sophocles' creation, *Edipus the King*. It was directed by renowned NSD alumnus actor-director of Assamese stage and cinema, Mr. Baharul Islam. In 1996-97, this theatre took up Assamese writer Mr. Manuram Gogoi's famous novel, *Sagoroloi Bahu Dur*, which had already been made into an award winning movie by the renowned film maker of Assam, Mr. Jahnu Barua. The mobile stage version with the same title was

scripted by Mr. Mahendra Barthakur and directed by Mr. Atul Bordoloi. Then, in 2000-01, in its silver jubilee year, Kohinoor took up two Assamese literary works, one, writer Mr. Phanindra Kumar Dev Choudhury's popular novel *Anuradhar Desh*, which was scripted and directed by Mr. Hemanta Dutta, and two, writer Mr. Ranjeet Sarma's story, *Priya Shatru*, which was scripted by Mr. Mahendra Barthakur and directed by Mr. Hemanta Dutta.

The next year, in 2001-02, Kohinoor presented Dr. Pranabjyoti Deka's novel *Tejpiya Gosani*, which was scripted by Mr. Pankajyoti Bhuyan and directed by Mr. Hemanta Dutta. An adaptation of renowned author, Mr. Thomas Hardy, which was scripted as *Abelir Rang* by Mr. Mahendra Barthakur and directed by Mr. Hemanta Dutta was staged in 2002-03. This play had created quite a stir in the society. Then, in 2003-04, they not only staged writer Mr. Kanchan Barua's popular novel *Ashanta Prahar*, scripted by Mr. Mahendra Barthakur and directed jointly Mr. Hemanta Dutta and Mr. Suren Mahanta, but also presented two dance-dramas, based on famous literary creations of revered Assamese litterateurs. These were, Mr. Rajanikanta Bordoloi's *Miri Jiyari* named as *Ghuna Suti'r Sokulu*, and the renowned poet, Mr. Raghunath Choudhury's composition, *Bohagi'r Biya*. In 2005-06, this theatre presented William Shakespear's *Othello*, which was scripted Mr. Mahendra Barthakur and directed by eminent theatre personality of Assam, Mr. Kulada Kumar Bhattacharya. In 2009-10, writer Mr. Kanchan Barua's *Asimat Jar Heral Sima* was restaged to packed houses with Mr. Hemanta Dutta's script and direction.

A mobile theatre, that eventually could not survive, was Radhikadebi Theatre. In 1977-78 this theatre presented the famous German playwright and poet, Bertolt Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*. Eminent theatre personality of Assam, Mr. Dulal Roy had already created the Assamese version of this play. The mobile stage script was done by Mr. Prafulla Bora.

Aradhana Theatre, which was established by Mr. Sadananda Lahkar, the man who was the original brain behind Nataraj Opera, and the inspiration for his brother, Mr. Achyut Lahkar, took up Mr. Rajanikanta Bordoloi's renowned creation *Miri Jiyari* in 1978-79. It was scripted by Mr. Mahesh Kalita and directed jointly by Mr. Bhabesh Barua and Mr. Rudra Choudhury. In 1981-82, this theatre presented Assamese writer Mr. Phani Talukdar's novel *Prithibi'r Prem*, which was scripted and directed by Mr. Sujit Singha. This play went on to win the AICA (All India Critics Association) Award for the best play of the year. It must be mentioned that this is the only mobile theatre play to have won this award. That same year, another treasure from the Assamese literary basket was staged by Aradhana Theatre, and this was renowned Assamese litterateur, Mr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's Gyanpeeth Award winning novel, *Mrityunjay*, which was scripted by Mr. Phulen Barman and directed by Mr. Rudra Choudhury.

The next year, in 1982-83, Aradhana Theatre continued their connection with literary creations and staged Assamese novelist Mr. Kumar Kishor's novel, *Kabar aru Kangkal*. Scripted by the novelist himself, the play was directed

jointly by Mr. Rudra Choudhury and Mr. Prashanta Hazarika. The other play they staged was *Manthan*, based on the Bengali writer Mr. Ashutosh Mukherjee's novel, *Aar Ekjan*. It was scripted by Mr. Prafulla Bora and directed by Mr. Rudra Choudhury and Mr. Prashanta Hazarika jointly.

Chitralkha Theatre, which was subsequently closed down, had staged the famous Charles Dickens creation, *Oliver Twist* in 1985-86. Information could not be gathered as to who scripted and directed this play. Similarly, Pragjyotish Theatre and Jyotirupa Theatre, in 2001-02, presented plays adapted from literature. The former staged Assamese writer Mr. Kumar Kishor's novel, *Emuthi Tarar Jilmil*, scripted by Mr. Mahendra Barthakur and directed by Mr. Sanjiv Hazarika, as well as, another play, *Gaonor Manuh*, adapted from writer Mr. Hitesh Deka's novel, scripted by Mr. Reba Bora.

In 2003-04, Nandini Theatre, subsequently closed down, staged writer Mr. Kanchan Barua's popular novel, *Puwati Tara*, for which, the script and direction was done by Mr. Umesh Sarma.

Mention must be made of the special contribution of Abahan Theatre to the society when producer, Mr. Krishna Roy convinced one of the most revered literateur of Assam, Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia, also a renowned film maker and dramatist, to join their group in 1981. Dr. Saikia remained with Abahan Theatre till he breathed his last in 2003. He undoubtedly scripted and directed some of the best plays staged by Abahan theatre. In 1981-82, Abahan also staged a play,

Preyasi, which was adapted from Bengali writer Mr. Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay's novel. In 1984-85, Abahan Theatre again took up another Bengali literary figure, Mr. Tarun Bhaduri's creation, *Bilkis Begum*, for which the script was done by Mr. Mahendra Barthakur and direction was done Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia.

Das (2016) writes, with Dr. Saikia's entry on the mobile stage, it was established that, with a unique thinking capacity and, as much importance given to light and sound, as to the actors, with the correct pronunciation of dialogue, Assamese literature can be presented on the commercial stage of mobile theatre. People who bought Bhabendranath Saikia's literary creations and people who bought tickets to watch his plays were now on the same plane. From 1981-82 to 2003-04, Saikia scripted 24 plays for Abahan, namely, namely, *Ramdhenu*, *Andhakop*, *Bandisaal*, *Manikut*, *Amrapali*, *Nilakantha*, *Vishkumbha*, *Amrit*, *Janambhumi*, *Deenabandhu*, *Pratibimba*, *Digambar*, *Gadhuli*, *Brindaban*, *Swargar Duar*, *Paramananda*, *Samudra Manthan*, *Pandulipi*, *Swarnajayanti*, *Barnamala*, *Ramyabhumi*, *Shatabdi*, *Subha-Sangbad*, *Aranyat Gadhuli* and *Jonak Rati* (incomplete). Kohinoor theatre was the only other mobile theatre, for which he scripted, two plays, *Gahbar* (1991-92) and *Maharanya* (1992-93) (pp.25-30). It must be mentioned that in the 22 years of his association with mobile theatre, all his plays were directed by Saikia himself. The aesthetics reflected in his plays appealed to one and all. As quoted in Das (2016), Saikia said,

I believe that even in the plays created for entertainment and business, the beauty and original character of the plays can be secured. Drama written for the commercial stage can be considered as literary work (Q.I. pp.25-30).

As a mark of respect to this great doyen, in 2003, on his demise, Abahan theatre staged his last script, the incomplete (only eight scenes) *Jonak Rati*. This is probably the only instance in the history of mobile theatre of Assam, where an incomplete play was staged.

In 2000-01, Abahan theatre presented on stage Assamese writer, Mr. Manoj Goswami's famous creation, *Samiran Barua Ahi Ase*, for which Mr. Abhijeet Bhattacharya was the playwright and Mr. Hem Bhattacharya was the director. In 2001-02, based on Assamese writer Mr. Bhubaneshwar Deka's literary creation, *Arabinda Kalita Zindabad*, Abahan Theatre presented the play with the same name, for which, the script was done by Mr. Abhijeet Bhattacharya. In 2002-03, they staged Bengali writer Ms. Sushmita Bandopadhyay's creation, *Kabuliwalar Bangali Bau*, scripted by Mr. Abhijeet Bhattacharya as *Kabuliwala'r Bidexi Kaina* and directed by Mr. Hem Bhattacharya. 2004-05 saw Abahan stage Mr. Bimal Mitra's famous story, *Saheb Bibi Ghulam*, scripted by Mr. Abhijeet Bhattacharya and directed by Mr. Pranjit Das. Thereafter, in 2007-08, Mr. Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay's creation was presented, scripted by Mr. Abhijeet Bhattacharya as *Sundari Sanyasini*. In 2009-10, a very successful play staged by Abahan Theatre, which, though not directly based on any novelist or writers

work, was, *Bhul Nubujiba Bhupenda*, based on the songs, lyrics and music of the internationally acclaimed Assamese music maestro, Bhupen Hazarika.

The presentation of famous literary works was also taken up by the now extinct, Indradhanu Theatre. In 1983-83, they staged William Shakespeare's *Othello*, which was scripted by litterateur, Mr. Padma Barkotoki and directed by Mr. Abdul Majid. The other play presented that year was writer Mr. Kanchan Barua's novel, *Ashanta Prahar*. Again, in 1984-85, this theatre took up one of ancient India's renowned litterateur, Kalidasa's magnum opus, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* as well as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for their stage.

One of the most successful mobile theatre group since its establishment is Hengul Theatre. This theatre has also taken up stage adaptations based on famous literary creations. In 1986-87, they presented renowned Assamese litterateur, Mr. Homen Borgohain's novel, *Haladhiya Charaiye Baodhan Khai* (with the same name) for which, the script was written by Mr. Mahendra Barthakur and direction was by Mr. Prashanta Hazarika. Thereafter, in 1988-89 they staged *Priya aru Police*, which was the stage adaptation of Assamese poet-storywriter Mr. Harekrishna Deka's novel, *Mukta Bandi*. Once again, the script was done by Mr. Mahendra Barthakur and direction, by Mr. Prashanta Hazarika. In 1989-90 they staged a dance-drama, *Champabati* based on an Assamese folktale from the famous folktale collection entitled *Burhi Air Sadhu* knitted by renowned litterateur, Mr. Lakhsminath Bezbarua. The songs and dance drama form was composed by eminent dance exponent, Mr. Jatin Goswami. In 1990-91, another

creation of Mr. Lakhsminath Bezbarua, *Nachani Saliki* was staged as a dance-drama, which was composed by Mr. Guneshwar Bhuyan. Along with it, the adaptation of a Greek story, *Barasa Rani* was also presented as a dance-drama, composed by Mr. Guneshwar Bhuyan. In 1992-93, they took up the popular Assamese folktale *Latkan* as a dance-drama which was composed by Mr. Babul Das. Then, in 1995-96, Hengool theatre took up journalist Mr. Parag Das' controversial political novel *Sanglat Phenla*, for which, the script was written by Mr. Mahendra Barthakur and direction was Mr. Sanjib Hazarika. This play was restaged the next year also. In 1998-99, a dance-drama, *Unnesan*, based on the original story of Assamese writer, Mr. Dharma Singha Deka was presented. 2000-01 saw world famous author, Mr. H.G Wells' renowned creation, *The Invisible Man*, which was scripted by Dr. Sushil Goswami as *Adrishya Manab* and *Alibaba aru Chollis Chor*, adapted from the famous *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves* from the Arabian Nights, which was scripted by Mr. Bipul Barua, on the stage of Hengool theatre. In 2002-03, they presented renowned Assamese writer Ms. Anuradha Sarma Pujari's novel, *Kanchan*, which was scripted by Mr. Utpal Dutta. In 2004-05, renowned litterateur Mr Lakhsminath Bezbarua's story *Bhadari Bai*, was presented as a dance-drama, with Mr. Niranjana Das as the composer. The next year, in 2005-06 also, Mr. Niranjana Das composed two dance-drama's, based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Mr. Lakhsminath Bezbarua's *Panesoi*.

Yet another theatre group, Bordoichila Theatre, had also established connection with literature when they presented on stage, Assamese novelist Mr. Ranju Hazarika's novel, *Hant*, scripted and directed by Mr. Seabrata Barua in 1999-2000. The next year also, in 2000-01, the same author's another novel, *Eta Dwip Satta Kabar*, scripted and directed by Mr. Seabrata Barua, was presented.

From the information gathered above, it is laudable that mobile theatre has played a great role in uniting literature and stage, bringing world famous literature to the simple common man, who is the main audience of mobile theatre. Once, ignored as the 'poor man's entertainment' by a section of the elite connoisseurs of theatre, it is ironical that mobile theatre, from the very beginning had been blessed by renowned cultural and literary stalwarts of Assam, like, Mr. Bishnuprasad Rabha, Mr. Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Mr. Phani Sarma, Mr. Atul Chandra Hazarika, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia, Mr. Ratna Oja, Mr. Padma Barkatoki, Mr. Arun Sarma, et al. The literary creations from across the world, which were adapted and presented on stage refutes the allegation that mobile theatre was only about cheap entertainment. However, reality cannot be denied and the truth is, today, gradually this association of mobile theatre and literature is fading. The trend of plays now is Bollywood *masala* (spice) cinema inspired. Popular English, Hindi, Bengali, even South Indian cinema is quite often reflected on the mobile stage. It is unfortunate that world famous literary creations are being ignored by the mobile theatres in

favour of light, frivolous presentations. Commerce seems to have overshadowed the sense of aesthetics in mobile theatre.

(b) Mobile Theatre among the Ethnic Communities

Another question that comes to mind as far as social impact of mobile theatre is concerned is- has it been able to make any inroads into the ethnic population of Assam? Sarma (1991) informs, among the various ethnic groups of the state, only the Bodo's were found to have attempted to establish mobile theatre in their language, when Mr. Harikanta Muchahary and Mr. Chandrakanta Muchahary established two mobile theatres, *Sowza Phaoni Aphant* at Dalgaon in 1974, and *Shourang Manju Theatre* at Lechra, Pathasala, in 1975. The latter performed for 16 years. The other Bodo mobile theatre groups, more like the *jatra*, were *Lembro*, *Hemshree*, *Maina*, *Anchi*, *Nirmali*, *Angfaury*, et al., could not survive for long due to financial crises. Producer of Kohinoor Theatre, Mr. Ratan Lahkar contributed a lot in making *Shourang Manju Theatre* successful. Mr. Padmadhar Basumatary was the most successful actor-director of this theatre. Mr. Haren Daimari, Mr. Aniruddha Basumatary, Mr. Gajen Baro, Mr. Golok Brahma, Ms. Basanti Brahma, Ms. Nilima Daimari and Ms. Rupahi Basumatary were the other popular artists (pp.36-38). Deka (2009) mentions in his thesis that in 2006, Ms. Anjana Basumatary opened the *Sandaw Bawdia Theatre* in Masalpur, Baga district (p.88). The fact that Bodo mobile theatres were limited to these few was but natural, because the arena of performance was limited, sustainable income from the shows was not always guaranteed.

Moreover, the bigger popular Assamese mobile theatre groups were too strong a competition to face. No information has been found regarding any other ethnic community of Assam ever having formed any such mobile theatre groups. Though some people say that a Nepali mobile theatre had been formed, no detailed information could be found about it.

5.3 Economic Impact of Mobile Theatre

Konwar (2006) has pointed out, the pre-colonial economy of Assam was semi tribal and semi feudal in nature. The economy was largely traditional economy which did not witness any sort of modern economic development such as industrialization, trade and commerce and currency. Therefore the mode of exchange was based on barter system (p.20). Again, as Barua (1985) points out, the economy of Assam was mainly rural- agricultural and villages were largely self-sufficient. In course of time, however, there grew a class of wealthy people, who carried on considerable amount of trade, both internal and external. Apart from the wealthy few, the rest of the people lived neither in plenty nor poverty because their wants were very few and the existing social conditions stunted their economic conditions (p.432).

Radical change was brought into the economy of Assam through colonization. Colonial Assam saw many significant economic changes like the transformation of mode of exchange from barter to money economy, discovery of local resources, and establishment of industries, introduction of new mode of

communication like railways and roads, etc. Konwar (2006) writes, after the discovery of tea, the British started plantations in Assam, particularly under the Assam Tea Company, to capture the international market and to break down the monopoly of China in the tea market (pp.40-42). Two other important discoveries during the colonial period were that of coal and petroleum which changed the economic scenario of Assam.

One of the most important cause of slow economic growth in post-colonial Assam was the constantly increasing population. Apart from natural growth, migration was a very strong factor that impregnated this picture. To quote Barua (1994), “As South Asia’s last frontier, the area has attracted exceptionally high immigration from other parts of South Asia, especially from the densely populated region of East Bengal that now constitutes the sovereign state of Bangladesh” (pp.649-671). There is no denying the fact that the massive unemployment and lower living standards in Assam is a direct consequence of the illegal immigration in millions. As such, the reasons that can be counted for the lack of economic development in Assam in the post colonial period are, location of the state in the periphery; growth of population, naturally, as well as due to illegal migration; insurgency problems; lack of able political leadership; drainage of wealth; natural calamities (like annual floods) which has resulted in poor infrastructure development and slow pace of Industrial growth thus leading to unemployment. Mr. Chandra Mohan Patowary, Minister, GoA himself

admitted on the floor of the assembly that today, there are 15 lakhs educated unemployed in Assam (*The Hindu*, 2017:7).

(a) The Male-Female Equation in Employment

In such a scenario, an enterprise that provides employment to people, that too, to uneducated, but skilled people, is like god's gift. The positive role that has been played by mobile theatres as far as the employment is concerned, is unquestionable. As mentioned earlier in chapter II, each mobile unit employs from 80 to 100-150 people. This is all the more important because these people who get employed are mostly indigenous people of Assam. One may belong to any corner of the state and can be employed in any one of the mobile theatre groups. Since it is about livelihood, it is only natural that the employees of the mobile theatre groups shift from one group to the other. A greener pasture always is more attractive.

While discussing the employment offered by the mobile theatres, one fact catches attention and that is the wide disparity in the ratio of male and female employees.

The table in the following page explains the situation clearly:

Table 5.1: Employment status of male and female employees in mobile theatres (2012-2017)

Sl.No.	Name of mobile theatre	Year of employment	Total no. of employees	No of male employees	No. of female employees
1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Rajshree	2012-13	110	98	12
2	Bordoisila	2013-14	123	112	11
3	Rajtilak	2014-15	104	92	12
4	Bhagyadebi	2015-16	109	96	13
5	Hengool	2015-16	120	100	20
6.	Itihaas	2015-16	126	110	16
7	Surya	2015-16	175	158	17
8	Abahan	2016-17 (1st year)	179	169	19

Source: Field Study Work

The table:5.1 above, with the graphical representation in fig.1, (in the following page) clearly shows that mobile theatre is basically a male domain. Female employment, though increasing, is happening at a snail's pace as compared to the male employment. The producers say, that the kind of work in mobile theatre entails very hard physical labour and long hours of work, particularly for the people behind the stage, which cannot be expected from women. Moreover, the security aspect is also of prime importance as far as employing women goes. It may be mentioned that the time period 2012-2017 has been taken since it was during this period the research scholar conducted this research work.

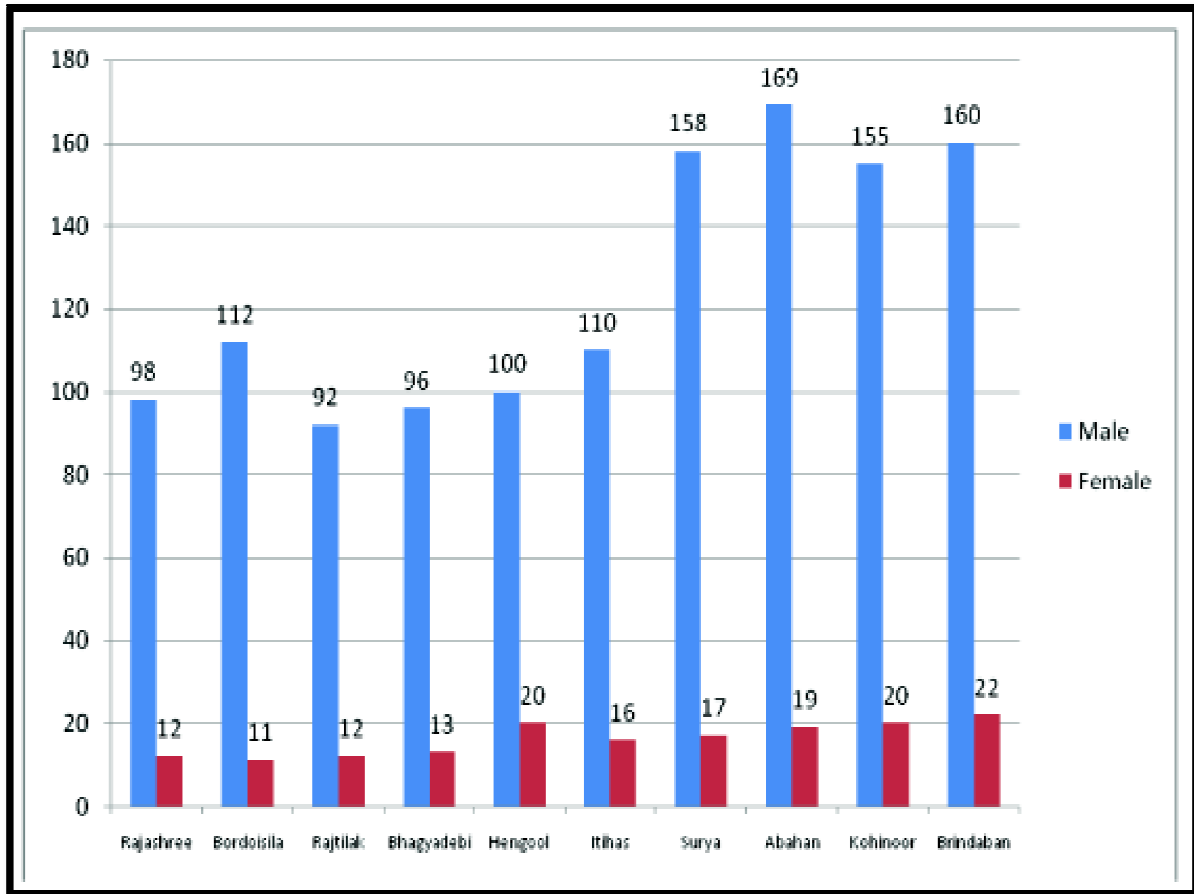


Fig 1: Graphic representation of employment status of male and female employees in mobile theatres (2012-2017)

(b) The Industry Status: Why Yes and Why Not

Another important issue that has dogged this medium is, should it be given an industry status? Mobile theatre has travelled a glorious journey to reach where it is today. Down the years, scores of people have found livelihood in mobile theatre. Today, it has become a huge entertainment industry in Assam but, an ‘industry’, which is not run on any industrial policy. That is why there is no security of livelihood in this industry. The inequality that exists in the salary

structure of the artists, technicians, workers in the mobile theatre scenario is actually a blatant reality. If a new trend of thinking comes into this medium which provides entertainment to hundreds of people across the state, then the sky would be the limit for the mobile theatre industry in Assam. Mobile theatre can become the envy of many other countries if developed properly. Unfortunately, the Government of Assam has never drafted any policy for it. The government could have utilized this industry, which can provide employment to hundreds of people in the state, to solve unemployment issues. If the government takes the responsibility of developing this industry, the perpetual job insecurity of the artists, technicians, and workers will be minimized to a large extent, and a demand can be placed before the government to create a fund for the assistance of the artists in times of necessity. Moreover, life insurance, accident insurance, medical allowance, pension, etc., are facilities that are not feasible, and hence missing, in this current set up of mobile theatres.

Regarding the industry status conundrum, Kalita (2013) states, it will bring relief to the producers and owners of the mobile theatres plagued by the fear of loss because availing bank loans on minimum rate of interest for the theatres will also become easier (pp.21-22). Government help can also be sought if and when required. Ironically, it is said that many producers actually do not want that the government should give industry status to mobile theatre. Their arguments being, (a) government rules and regulations will be clamped on the theatres and (b)

some profit-driven businessmen will easily avail bank loans and open new theatres which will harm the essence of the medium.

These arguments lead to two questions, first, what is the harm in running a theatre on government rules and regulations? Second, has the essence of mobile theatre not been harmed already by people (producers/owners) who are doing things whimsically only for commercial gains? If the mobile theatre producers give a strong united stand, the government will, in due course of time, take the necessary advice from seasoned and experienced producers. Moreover, the experienced mobile theatre groups facing financial crisis will be able to avail loans from nationalized banks in low rate of interest or even claim help from the government. On the other hand, once industry status is declared, welfare measures for the artists-workers will automatically have to be brought in.

Renowned cinema, theatre and mobile theatre superstar, Ms. Prastuti Parashar (43 yrs), as well as cultural activist and journalist, Mr. Pulu Kr. Sarma (58 yrs), seem to have different views as far as industry status for mobile theatre goes. Ms.Parashar opined that

For an industry status, mobile theatre will have to undergo some reforms because in its present *avatar* (incarnation), considering the fact that it is a very temporary nine-month contract system on which the entire set up is functioning, an 'industry' status seems unfeasible. No one is a permanent employee here. For an industry and its benefits to be availed,

certain reforms and changes will be required and that will not really be an easy task. This is because, since its birth, mobile theatre has made its own system of functioning

(P. Parashar. Personal communication. July 07, 2017).

Mr. Pulu Sarma also expressed his views on, stating,

Who wants an industry status for mobile theatre? Maybe, those artists and workers who are hoping that such a move will bring them greater job security and benefits. The people who do not want the running system to change are, of course, the producers. How can one blame them? This is professional theatre and its reality is ultimately commerce. Profit and success sustains this business of performing art. The huge money involved here, with producers calling all the shots, naturally makes them abhorrent towards the idea of an Industry, wherein government interference will come in

(P. Sarma. Personal communication. July 07, 2017).

There seems to be a lot of farce as far as the issue of an industry status for mobile theatre is concerned. The producers say one thing in support of industry status, but their actions convey the opposite.

Bhattacharya (2015) has charted the options available for mobile theatres in the following manner-

Table 5.2: Industry status versus social enterprise for mobile theatre

Sl. No.	Industry Status	Social Enterprise
1	2	3
1	Purpose will be maximum profit	Profit will be for social benefit
2	Stiff competition will lead to huge advertisement costs	Social purpose will lure viewers
3	Competition will lead to cultural degeneration	Cultural and social values will be protected
4	Discrimination among artists will be there	Discrimination and exploitation of artists will be discouraged.
5	Profit and social responsibility are two sides of the same coin	Investment of 2% of profit on social responsibility will be a legal obligation
6	Increase the managerial efficiency and specialization	Increase the managerial efficiency and specialization
7	Lose identity in the long run	Identity will be retained and protected
8	Commercial Bank investors will come forward to provide funds	Funds from private investors, International N.G.O's, and Social Enterprise will be available

Source: Bhattacharya, 2015: 211

5.4 Cultural Impact of Mobile Theatre

Culture is the flow of life. It reflects the thoughts, imagination and actions of a particular society. A person's personality is shaped by the culture he or she bears in. Culture includes the language, literature, rituals, religion, knowledge,

art, sculpture, customs, morals, beliefs and any other habits and capabilities acquired by man as a member of society. Assamese culture is the melting pot of the various ethnic communities, who have coexisted since yore. In this journey of the development of Assamese culture, a significant part was played by the six hundred years of the Ahom rule. However, there is no doubt that the contribution to Assamese society and culture by Srimanta Sankaradeva was unprecedented and stands unparalleled even today. Centered around neo-Vaishnavism that he propagated, a new age was brought in by Srimanta Sankaradeva through his revolutionary contributions to the Assamese society, religion, art and culture. He gave a new meaning to Assamese song and dance, music including instruments, acting (theatre), sculpture, painting, etc. It was Sankaradeva who gave a new life to Assamese culture and put it on a high pedestal.

To quote Agarwala (1986)

Assamese culture is the eastern Indian expression of the great Indian culture. Assamese culture is nothing but the development of the medieval Indian tradition reflected in the eastern Indian culture. The fullest moulding of this Assamese culture had been brought about by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradev. Assamese culture grew out of the medieval cultural movement as reflected in the genius of Srimanta Sankaradeva, and out of that reflection Assamese culture has developed with leaves and buds (p.469).

One can love or hate mobile theatre but no one can deny its very strong presence in the cultural scenario of Assam. As such, the impact of mobile theatres on the cultural scenario of Assam cannot be denied. Though there has been a lot of controversial discussion and debate about mobile theatre, it cannot be negated that this medium has contributed immensely to the theatre movement in Assam. The very idea with which Mr. Achyut Lahkar had started Nataraj Theatre, was to 'take theatre to the people' and thus, create a rich cultural consciousness among the common man through theatre. Apart from strengthening the financial status of the artists-workers, he also felt that this was one of the best means to educate the masses about the different cultures, be it, Indian or even European. It was also the means to promote a culture of unity because people from various walks of life, different social status, from different religion sat down together in the mobile theatre tent to enjoy a play together.

There is no refuting the fact that mobile theatres have established themselves as the most popular medium in the cultural scenario in Assam today. In the absence of a healthy cinema industry, mobile theatres have filled up that void, though as opined earlier, it is absolutely unfair to compare these two mediums. If one tries to assess the impact of mobile theatre on the cultural arena of Assam, one will have to agree that it was mobile theatre that started a theatre movement in Assam. Though at one point of time mobile theatre was looked down on by the elite intellectuals as the 'poor man's entertainment', in due

course of time that has changed. The lines that strictly demarcated cinema, amateur theatre and mobile theatre have now overlapped.

When one looks back at the fifty-four years of the history of mobile theatre, the number of plays that has been written is staggering. If we assume that at any given point in time, from 1963 to 2017 (2nd October), an average 40 mobile theatre units have been performing consistently, that means, $40 \times 3 = 120$ plays per year. Thus, $120 \times 54 = 6480$ plays have been written so far and presented through the medium of mobile theatre in Assam. If investigated, this would probably turn out to be an unheard of, unprecedented record in the world. Ranging from mythical, historical and social to adaptations of world classics and Hollywood, not to speak of the Indian movies, mobile theatres have done it all. Does this mean that in Assam, we have a huge treasure of the mobile theatre plays? Unfortunately, no. Though these plays were written and staged, they were never published. The mobile theatre units have never realized the importance of the collection and preservation of the manuscripts of these plays, many of which are now lost. If every mobile unit had taken this responsibility to publish their plays each year, one can imagine what a collection it would have made. The stock of drama literature would have been very rich. Add to that the annual souvenir collection of the mobile units. A central library would have been a treasure house. But who will take the initiative?

Like the plays, the songs penned exclusively for mobile theatres has been a great contribution for enriching the cultural field of Assam. Many songs

composed for mobile theatres have become very popular, for example, the song *Chandra O Chandrawali*, sung by renowned singer and music director of mobile theatre, Mr. Dasarath Das (75 yrs), for the play *Milan Mala* in Bhagyadevi Theatre in 1971-72, had created quite a stir. Then, the song from the play *Sneha Bandhan*, staged by Abahan in 1980-81, *Snehabandhan chingi jai* rendered by Mr. Dasarath Das, was a superhit. As mentioned earlier, acclaimed literateur and film maker, Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia's lyrics and music for his own plays carved a special niche. Similarly, the song *Kiyano patili kamanar mayajal* from the play *Samrat aru Sundari* by Kohinoor Theatre in 1988-89 gained great popularity. Even now, some songs attain great popularity, like the song *Lipstick kajal ani dibi* sung by popular singer Ms. Priyanka Bharali (33 yrs) in the play *Rangkukur* staged by Rajtilak theatre in 2014-15. This year, in 2017-18, the song *O'ma* rendered by the heart-throb celebrity singer-composer-musician of Assam, Mr. Zubeen Garg (45 yrs), for the play, *Mai Mar Suwali* staged by Abahan Theatre has caught the fancy of the audience, thanks to the social media promotion.

Like the plays, the digital preservation of the mobile theatre songs had not been thought of. Now, of late, a change is seen here, as some the plays and songs of mobile theatre can be found on Youtube, a popular internet vehicle. This, of course, is more for publicity than preservation. The preservation system will have to be more organized and chronological. Same is the story of the dance numbers choreographed for mobile theatres. The dance- drama, unique to the mobile

theatres, has been a very popular means of disseminating relevant social messages through music, dance and drama. The trend of beginning the theatre show with a dance-drama is now just a ritual. The theatre units probably do not realize that they have given up a part of what makes them unique. Their argument is the audience do not have the time, so they prefer to concentrate on the main drama. What happened to all the dance- dramas that had been staged? Do we have a chronological record of them? Were they not a rich contribution to the cultural scenario of Assam?

There is no doubt that the mobile theatre of Assam is a treasure house as far as the cultural arena is concerned. Its contribution to drama literature (manuscripts), plays (staged), music, songs (lyrics), dance, dance-drama, development of technical craft, light and sound for stage, has been immense. It is our misfortune that we have not been able to preserve the creations of the past half a century of mobile theatre due to the want of a proper archive. A museum to showcase the journey of mobile theatre can be a part of this archive, showcasing the various artifacts that had created history, like, the dynamo used by Mr. Achyut Lahkar in Nataraj, the model of *Titanic*, replica of the dinosaurs, model of revolving stage, etc. Once again, the producer's association and the government will have to take the key initiative in this direction, if proper scientific and digital preservation of mobile theatre history and record is at all wanted. Another important impact of mobile theatre on the cultural arena of Assam is the platform it provides to the new talents in all fields be it acting, music, dance, playwriting,

etc. If one has the inclination and dedication, mobile theatre provides great career prospects.

5.5 Other Relevant Issues Integral to Mobile Theatre:

Women in the Mobile Theatre Arena

Apart from the impact areas discussed above, there are several other relevant issues connected to mobile theatres. One such issues that the research scholar felt, needed to be taken up in this research work is, the space of women in mobile theatre in this journey of half a century that has been traversed by mobile theatre of Assam.

As said by renowned theatre personality Augusto Boal (Quoted in, Schechner, 2002), “perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution” (p.154).

Talking of revolution, in the light of this statement by Boal, another dimension has been sought to be explored here, and that is, women’s space in mobile theatre. An interesting fact that caught the attention of this research scholar during the various field studies conducted was, the position of women in the arena of mobile theatre right from its inception. This led to the exploring of this particular dimension of mobile theatre of Assam. Nataraj Theatre pioneered a journey that has completed 54 years. Among the many questions that automatically come up like what developments took place in this half century? What has changed in the most popular Assamese form of theatre? What has been the socio-economic impact of mobile theatre on Assam? One particular question

that this research work seeks an answer to is, what is the space of women today in mobile theatre vis-à-vis fifty years back?

When Nataraj Theatre, the first mobile theatre of Assam, was established by Mr. Achyut Lahkar, women had already made their foray into the Assamese stage and cinema. So, finding actresses and female dancers was not a challenge that Mr Lahkar had to face unlike Mr. Brajanath Sarma, who introduced co-acting in Assam, and Mr. Jyotiprasad Agarwala, the pioneer of Assamese cinema. In fact, when he advertised for artists in the newspapers in 1963-64, the first female playback singer of mobile theatre, Ms. Renu Phukan, who later on went on to become the first lady police officer of Assam, came out from a remote village of Sivasagar, in upper Assam, to join Nataraj Theatre in Pathsala, in lower Assam, in its second year. As was narrated by Ms. Phukan, this was not as easy as it sounds back then. (R. Phukan. Personal Interview. March 15, 2014). Kalita (2011) informs, in that historic first venture of Nataraj Theatre, the female cast, in alphabetical order, included names like Ms. Anupama Bhattacharya, Ms. Banita Borthakur, Ms. Bina Borthakur, Ms. Jyotsna Devi, Ms. Manjil Bordoloi, Ms. Pabitri Kakoty (dancer), Ms. Swarnalata Bora, et al. (p.31)

The path that was shown by Nataraj Theatre has been followed by almost a hundred mobile theatre groups in the next fifty years of its existence, though not all of them survived the vagaries of time. It needs mention here that the participation of women in three departments only, viz., acting, dancing and singing are still largely the norm in the mobile theatres. It is not only surprising,

but sad that only one female director, and one female playwright can be named in this entire history of mobile theatre of Assam. The production scenario is as poor, though one saving grace, if one may call it that, was when in 1977, an all-female mobile theatre named 'Moon Theatre', was established by Ms. Abala Barman under the patronage of her husband Mr. Dharani Dhar Barman, renowned actor-director and proprietor of Suradevi Theatre. Kalita mentions (2011), on 8th June 1977 Moon Theatre presented their maiden performance. The direction of the four chosen plays *Maju Baideu*, *Ilar Binani*, *Kanikar Sapon* and *Pushpalata*, was done by Ms. Pushpa Devi, the first graduate actress in the mobile theatre of Assam and the only female director till date in the history of mobile theatre. She was also the female playback singer. Interestingly, the single male character in the play *Pushpalata* was enacted by an actress (p.31) This was the antithesis of what had been going on in Assamese drama since ages, males portraying female characters but unfortunately 'Moon Theatre' never lived to see a second season.

Kalita (2011) further informs that the only other such attempt of an all-female mobile theatre named 'Kalpana Womens Theatre' was made by producer Mr. Jadab Sen Deka in Nalbari town of lower Assam, where Ms. Mukta Barman was a director along with Mr. Bhairab Barman. Here too, the male character of King Dushyanta in the play *Sakuntala*, and Ahom Prince Gadapani in the play *Jerengar Sati*, was enacted by Ms. Bhagyabani Pathak. The theatre did not survive for a second year (p.120).

These, it must be admitted, had been daring ventures way back in the seventies, something producers today, have never dared to try. It is ironical that if one goes through the list of plays performed on the stage of mobile theatres in the last fifty years, or at least whatever is available, there are many plays based on strong female protagonists. Mr. Achyut Lahkar (84 yrs) in his interview, had proudly mentioned how the play *Beula* created records as the longest running show in the history of mobile theatre and that, it was staged by Nataraj Theatre for 40 years (A. Lahkar. Personal communication. July 09, 2014). But the question is what was the lens through which these female characters were looked at? Obviously, the male directors in a male dominant medium sketched the parameters of the female characters to suit the existing norms of the patriarchal society. Here one can draw a parallel from Sarkar (2012), who writes about the Indian cinema industry that, in an industry that has very few women working behind the camera, the portrayal of women onscreen by male directors and other male professionals will naturally have constraints and be gender biased. Moreover, such portrayal may not always convey the world views, the subjective realities or perceptions of the women. The roles portrayed by women onscreen are mostly the male director's notion of what role women 'ought' to be playing, and it is based on the director's beliefs, attitudes and values, plus his perception of the viewers' demand (p.3).

The Huffington Post in association with *The Times of India Group* focused on work written and, often, also performed by women at the 2015 Fringe Festival

in New York City. Here, some of the playwrights who featured included Ms. Tessa Keimes, Ms. Christine Howey and Ms. Ann Starbuck. Reacting to the question, how to combat the gender gap in the field of theatre, each of these ladies had their say. Keimes mentioned, the way to go about it is giving women the chance. It's not often women are given the opportunities. There are tons of actresses out there, but in terms of taking the reins, we are definitely way behind. So, in the community called 'Shooting Jane', women will be given the chance to do that, i.e, tell stories that women want to hear, but it will speak to everybody. It's not anti-men, it's just about the quality of work that is produced. Similarly, Howey, who changed sex to become a woman, opined, that many men who run theatres don't take female playwrights seriously. They often can't relate to stories told from a female perspective. Commenting on the reality of the gender gap in theatre in the US, Ann Starbuck added that in the writer's rooms, the ratio of men to women is a joke. It's probably one of the most sexist businesses out there (*The Huffington post*, Gender gap in Theatre :2015).

If this is the scene in the US in 2015, then, is it surprising that we are in the same boat? Women playwrights, directors and producers across the world probably will have similar stories to share. Here we can look into some case studies which were taken up during the research for this paper-

Ms. Pakiza Begum (45 yrs) renowned award-winning actress of Assam, who has experience in both amateur and mobile theatre, radio, as well as the

screen, and has also ventured into direction in her own proscenium theatre group *Ba* (breeze) in an interview with this researcher opined that,

Changing the mindset of a society is not an easy task. We, women, got our opportunity quite late in time, so no wonder it will take time for us to get there. Change is taking place, no doubt, but very gradually

(P. Begum. Personal communication. May 09, 2016).

Another prominent female director in the amateur theatre scenario in Assam today, is Ms. Rabijita Gogoi (45 yrs), who has carved out a space with her distinct style of work. In an interview with this research scholar, on the issue of the gender divide, she accepted the fact that theatre is a male dominated sphere in Assam and as in most areas of work, a woman has to make that extra effort to prove her worth and talent. She narrated her own experiences about how she had to 'act like a male' to make the people she was working with, listen to her and take her seriously. Ms. Gogoi opined that, "gender division in the arena of theatre is as much a reality as in any other field of work. The mindset of the society at large must change" (R. Gogoi. Telephonic interview. May 12, 2016).

Veteran Odissi dance exponent, Ms. Garima Hazarika (74 yrs), who was associated with mobile theatres as dance director, settings director and costume designer, in her interview with the research scholar, also stated that, "Gender

division is there in mobile theatre. The reins are never given in the hands of women” (G. Hazarika. Personal communication. June 10, 2014).

When questioned about the gender division by the research scholar in an interview, acclaimed Assamese film maker, Ms. Manju Borah (62 yrs) replied that,

Gender division is there in every field, so why single out cinema and theatre? In spite of being an independent woman working on my terms, I am also bound by the social terms and conditions. For example, I try that much more to be a good wife and mother also. Our entire conditioning is such that it is very difficult for us to break out. On the question of very few women in decision making positions in Assamese cinema and theatre, Ms. Borah explained, see, in Assamese films my predecessors were Ms. Suprabha Devi, Ms. Kuntala Devi and Ms (Dr.) Santana Bordoloi. This is a very time consuming field of work with no fixed working hours. Add to that the fact that it is a male dominant scenario. How many women get the support from their spouse to venture into and sustain in this line of work? Let us be realistic. Look at the field of politics also, the thirty-three per cent reservation which has been given to us, is it utilized? Ground reality is very harsh. The patriarchal mindset is there, no point denying it. Even in Bollywood and Hollywood, in the big league, how many

women producer-directors can you count? However, if a woman wants to make herself visible, she will have to take up the challenge and never compromise on anything on the pretext of being a woman. From physical fitness to indepth study about her field is a must. Otherwise she will not be taken seriously

(M. Borah. Personal communication. May 22, 2016).

Ms. Prastuti Parashar (43 yrs) the current superstar of Assamese cinema and mobile theatre, who is also seen on the amateur stage, however, had a different version. In her interview with the research scholar, she opined that,

Women need to be confident and sure of themselves. Yes, ours is a patriarchal society but I refuse to believe that women can be kept down against their will. Even in the case of cinema, stage and mobile theatre in Assam, if women want to, they can make their mark as playwrights or directors. Maybe, the effort is lacking somewhere. Where there is a will, there is a way

(P. Parashar. Personal communication. July 07, 2017).

It is heartening to see that with time several women have ventured out to make a space for herself in the arena of direction of cinema and theatre in Assam. Apart from the established names, arranged in alphabetical order for convenience alone, like , Ms.Bhagirathi , Ms. Manju Borah , Ms.Pakiza Begum , Ms.Prerona

Barbarooah, Ms. Rabijita Gogoi and Dr. Santana Bordoloi, a new generation of female directors have come up like (in alphabetical order) Ms. Bidyabati Phukan, Ms. Enisha Sarma, Ms. Dipika Deka, Ms. Kismat Bano, Ms. Manimala Das, Ms. Moni Bordoloi, Ms. Papari Medhi, Ms. Pari Saraniya, Ms. Pranami Bora, Ms. Rayanti Rabha, Ms. Rima Das, Ms. Sanchita Talukdar, Ms. Ujjala Barman, et al.

Gender disparity is a fact, and the real challenge is how to wipe it off. Almost all male producer/directors prefer to shy away from this topic. Replying to the question about women missing as decision makers in mobile theatre, Mr. Ratan Lahkar (72 yrs) producer of Kohinoor Theatre, pushed the ball onto the women's court by saying, "Women themselves will have to come out" (R. Lahkar. Personal communication. July 09, 2013). This is precisely what 'The Kilroys', a Los Angeles based group of women producers and playwrights, which was formed in 2013, feel, that, they are done with talking about gender parity and are taking action. They have opted to funnel their distaste with the industry into an annual project titled *The List*, that brings together the names of female and trans playwrights who have written plays in the past year. To do so, the Kilroys' survey artistic directors, literary managers, professors, producers, directors and dramaturges who nominate plays they have seen, specially works written by female or trans-authors, that have yet to be produced. *The List* (2015), which narrowed down a field of 755 suggested plays to 53, is meant primarily as

a tool for those contemporary producers who claim they want to showcase under-represented writers, but believe female playwrights are hard to find.

In the course of their interviews mentioned previously, both Ms. Pakiza Begum (45 yrs) (Personal communication. May 09, 2016) and Ms. Rabijita Gogoi, (42 yrs) (Personal communication. May 12, 2016) lamented about the lack of a common platform like the ‘Kilroys’, for women producers, directors, dramatists, scriptwriters, music directors, singers, dancers and actresses, in Assam, where various issues related to these arenas may be voiced. The idea of ‘The Kilroys’ stated in the preceding paragraph is a fine example that can be adopted here in Assam also. While talking of women playwrights in mobile theatre, Mr. Krishna Roy (72 yrs) proprietor-producer of Abahan Theatre informed that the only name that can be mentioned is that of Ms. Minoti Acharjee, who wrote the play *Lakhimee Bowari* for Abahan Theatre in 1991, directed by Mr. Sebarata Barua. (K. Roy. Personal communication. May 11, 2014). The question that automatically comes up is, when we have so many prolific female litterateurs in Assam, why this dearth of female playwrights? No doubt, that writing literature and scripting a play are two completely varied fields, but if we have had male litterateurs like the Bhabendranath Saikia, who took up playwrighting, what has stopped the ladies, litterateur or not, from venturing into this area? Mr. Krishna Roy (72 yrs), opined that,

Writing a stage fit play is a very time consuming job and one must have the knowledge of the stage. Maybe this

could also be a reason that we do not find women playwrights in mobile theatre

(K. Roy. Personal communication. May11, 2014).

This opinion of Mr. Roy brings up another question, if scripting plays for mobile theatre is so tough and time consuming, how is it that today a single male playwright has almost monopolized the mobile theatre scenario, churning out dozens of plays each season? Is it humanly possible? Is that the reason why now most mobile plays remind us of some or the other Hindi, Bengali or south Indian movies? This can probably be another study in itself.

Talking about women in mobile theatres as a whole, few names, apart from the long list of actresses and dancers, can be counted for leaving their indelible mark. This include, in alphabetical order for the sake of convenience alone, Ms.Abala Barman (first producer), Ms. Arati Das Bairagi (playwright and director of dance drama), Ms.Garima Hazarika (dance director/ settings designer/costume designer), Ms.Pushpa Devi (only director), Ms. Renu (Dutta) Phukan (first female singer), and Ms. Tarali Sarma (music director). But the question remains were these women decision makers in the real sense of the term? Or did they simply adhere to the norms set by the male producer/director of whichever mobile theatre group they worked with? In our society the female has always been defined through the 'male gaze'. Mulvey(1989) has elaborately explained about the 'male gaze' in her work and argues that 'scopophilia' which means, 'taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and

curious gaze’, is one of the numerous pleasures offered by cinema (p.16). Consequently, the self-sacrificing silent (voiceless), dependent, virtuous ‘heroine’ versus the bold, self-confident, independent (with a voice), bold ‘vamp’. Theatre, too, is no different. As Sarkar (2012) mentions, commercial Hindi films have constantly glorified the image of the ideal Indian woman as accepting the injustice and violence meted out towards her by men and society (p.4).Who,then,sketches these images of the female?

It may be mentioned here, that while there is this visible absence of women playwrights in the mobile theatre scenario, it is interesting to note that we see a long list of original Assamese plays penned by women playwrights/dramatists in the drama section of All India Radio Guwahati.

Given below is a list that has been compiled by Saharia (2015):

Table 5.3: Plays written by female playwrights for All India Radio, Guwahati (1948-1973)

Sl.No.	Name of the Playwright	No. of plays	Name of plays written
1	2	3	4
1	Anuradha Medhi	03	(a) <i>Ashru Hanhi'r sangamat</i> (b) <i>Dongson</i> (c) <i>Sighason</i>

1	2	3	4
2	Arati Das Bairagi	08	(a) <i>Janani</i> / (b) <i>Baidehi</i> / (c) <i>Apotya</i> / (d) <i>Durbeen</i> / (e) <i>Phul Jodi Bhul hoi</i> / (f) <i>Boja</i> / (g) <i>Brindaban</i> / (h) <i>Sendur</i>
3	Arati Devi	01	(a) <i>Prajapataye Swaha.</i>
4	Bina Das	02	(a) <i>Jala-Kata</i> / (b) <i>Sat Bhai.</i>
5	Bhon Saikia	01	(a) <i>Dutiya Morar Kena</i>
6	Hemalata Barua	01	(a) <i>Shes Upahar</i>
7	Kusum Bora	01	(a) <i>Kheli Meli (Natika)</i>
8	Lalchyahira Das	01	(a) <i>Agnidagdha</i>
9	Nalinibala Devi	02	(a) <i>Janmastami</i> / (b) <i>Puberun.</i>
10	Nilima Das	02	(a) <i>Eri Aha Gaon</i> / (b) <i>Tripitak</i>
11	Nirupama Borgohain	02	(a) <i>Jul chain Dam</i> / (b) <i>Rupahi.</i>
12	Nirupama Barua	02	(a) <i>Bikramar Swarga Prapti/</i> (b) <i>Jonaki Desh</i> (probably)
13	Nirupama Hazarika	01	(a) <i>Amrit Prabha</i>
14.	Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi	01	a) <i>Chandra Kumar</i> / b) <i>Daktar Surya Kumar Bhuyan.</i>
15	Priti Barua	02	(a) <i>Sowarani Bhetiba Koney/</i> (b) <i>Fill up the Gap.</i>
16	Premalata Barua	02	(a) <i>Jibanar Khala bama/</i> (b) <i>Shes Upahar.</i>
17	Preeti Bhattacharya	02	(a) <i>Mai Pakhilee/</i> (b) <i>Baliya Burhar chahmel</i> (probably)
18	Pratibha Barua	02	(a) <i>Jonalir Arat Sonali</i> (b) <i>Deshar Katha</i>

1	2	3	4
19	Senehi Begum	01	<i>(a) Dighal Nak</i>
20	Sneha Devi	01	<i>(a) Shes Tripti</i>
21	Suchibrata Rai Choudhury	01	<i>(a) Herowa Sapon</i>
22	Suchitra Barua	01	<i>(a) Daworar Duwari Bhara</i>
23	Usha Rani Devi	01	<i>(a) Saponor Saja</i>

Source: Saharia (2015, pp.244-253)

The table, 5.2 above is a source of inspiration for women wannabe dramatists. If this was possible then, what is stopping the women writers now? However, an interview by this research scholar with Mr. Nayan Prasad (58 yrs), who was the producer of the drama section of All India Radio, Guwahati for a long time, revealed that now, the conditions have changed. To quote Mr.Prasad, “With so many means of entertainment available now, people are not really attracted to radio plays anymore and that is why dramatists/playwrights, male and female, are very difficult to find. Among the handful of currently writing female dramatists in AIR, Guwahati are, in alphabetical order, Ms.Arati Das Bairagi, Ms.Arupa Patangia Kalita Ms. Jimani Choudhury, Ms.Manikuntala Bhattacharya, Ms.Rehana Hussain, and Ms. Subhadra Devi Bhattacharyya. New talents are hard to find” (N.Prasad. Personal Communication. May 15, 2017).

Mobile theatres of Assam have come a long way. It is time that new concepts, ideas and perceptions are experimented with. Feminist theatre can also be such an experiment. But the question is will the producers dare to take up such

experiments? As Ms. Rabijita Gogoi, (42 yrs) amateur theatre director, mentioned in her interview, “mobile theatre of Assam is a topic of great curiosity for theatre lovers outside the state” (R. Gogoi. Telephonic interview. May 12, 2016). As such, it is the duty of the producers to keep up its standards and what it has to offer to society at large. If earning profits become the only motive of mobile theatre (the trend nowadays), will mobile theatre of Assam be able to preserve its unique identity? Will it be able to claim to be the reflection of Assamese society? Thus, the social relevance of mobile theatre in Assam is definitely there because they entertain, educate and inspire the audience. They have become a part and parcel of the Assamese society and culture. Like films, plays which give out a strong social message and comment on important social issues leave an impact on the people. It is true that the ‘star’ culture in mobile theatre is not a very healthy trend but on the contrary, it cannot be negated that it is because of the presence of these cine stars that mobile theatre has reached this height of popularity among the masses.

In the last few years, many stalwarts of mobile theatre, including the man who is said to have given birth to mobile theatre Mr. Achyut Lahkar has passed on. The other noted names in alphabetical order being, Mr. Adya Sarma, Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia, Mr. Dharani Dhar Barman, Mr. Mahananda Sarma, Mr. Mahendra Barthakur, Mr. Prasanta Hazarika, Mr. Ratan Lahkar, et al. With these stalwarts gone, the generation that gave birth to, and established mobile theatre of Assam on an elevated pedestal, has now almost passed on. It is now the duty of

the second generation of producers to shoulder the responsibility of sustaining mobile theatre as the most popular medium of entertainment and bring back its glory that is being questioned. It is also the duty of this generation to train the future generation of producer/playwrights that mobile theatre is not merely business, rather, mobile theatre is a powerful mass medium that has, and can play a significant role in voicing the society's issues. It is truly a unique treasure of Assam.