

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The discussion in the previous five chapters of this research work has made one fact clear that mobile theatre of Assam, since its very inception, has been holding fort on its own. It has managed to carve out a very special place in the arena of Assam's performing arts. As mentioned previously, once, looked down on by the elite drama connoisseurs as the 'poor man's entertainment', today mobile theatre is the most popular medium of entertainment in Assam, cutting across all social classes. Mobile theatre has gone through its share of trials and travails, but it has survived. The interesting thing is, in this age of digital media, with all its facilities and easy access, mobile theatre is still going strong. It is true that there is a whole lot of allegations against mobile theatre today, like loss of originality, over-commercialization, dependence on technical gimmicks and 'filmy' presentation, rise of ticket price, etc., but one must understand the struggle that mobile theatre has had to face with the changing times and tastes, to sustain itself.

Performing arts is for the audience. If the mobile theatre presentations are to be accepted by the audience today, they must cater to their expectations. The older generation of mobile theatre people, as well as theatre lovers lament that mobile theatre has lost its original character. While the producers try to refute

this allegation and claim that they are simply adapting to the changing socio-economic environ. The question has often been asked- who is correct? Looking at the success of the mobile theatres every season, one has to admit that there is no doubt about its popularity in Assam today. It is an undeclared industry that is doing business in crores. In spite of all its negative aspects, pointed out by the critics, there has to be something positive in this medium, that it has still managed to attract the masses in huge numbers.

The first **introductory** chapter of this research work has sought to establish the relevance of the subject of this research work titled, '**Dimensions of the Mobile Theatre of Assam**'. It gives an idea of what mobile theatre of Assam is all about. This is one performing art that can claim the distinction of being unique in the world because, though a lot has been written and said about travelling theatres around the globe, nowhere is there something akin to the mobile theatre that was devised by Mr. Achyut Lahkar in Pathsala, in Barpeta district of Assam in 1963, following in the footsteps of his preceding adventurers like, Mr.Tithiram Bayan, Mr.Santa Ram Choudhury, Mr. Brajanath Sarma and his own brother, Mr.Sadananda Lahkar. The literature review, the locale of the research work, the objectives of the work, the research questions to be explored, along with the methodology adopted, and limitations of the study has been established in this chapter.

The second chapter, '**Emergence and Evolution of Mobile Theatre in Assam**', while searching for the history of mobile theatre, tries to follow the rich

history of performing arts as a whole in Assam. The importance of Barpeta as a cultural hub since the time Srimanta Sankaradeva arrived and resided there, is a well-established fact. The historical and cultural influences upon Barpeta, and the contributions of this place as the birthplace of mobile theatre, has also been explored in this chapter. Thereafter, the changes in the political history that is, the end of the Ahom dynasty and how it impacted cultural history, coming in of the British rule and with them, the import of the Bengali *babu*, who brought the *jatra* performances into Assam has been explored. The changing content of the *jatras* from Bengali mythological *geetinaats* (song-based drama) to translated Assamese presentations and, thereafter, the original Assamese dramas, the historical moment when Assamese women stepped on stage for the first time, and the ensuing journey that led to the birth of Nataraj Theatre, the first mobile theatre of Assam in 1963, has been the content of the second chapter.

In the third chapter, '**Structure, Technique and Management in Mobile Theatre**', the entire set up of the mobile theatre that includes the producer, director, playwright, actors, technicians, etc., has been elaborated along with the structural details of how the mobile theatres prepare and perform in a nine-month long journey across the length and breadth of Assam. The techniques of presenting the plays on a double stage with no intervals at all, with helicopters landing, trains running, ships sinking, dinosaurs roaring, double-acting by one actor and more, that are reflections of the changing business as well as taste of the audience have been delved into. A season of nine months entails a huge

preparation and logistics for boarding, rehearsals, food, travelling, performances and many unseen situations. The superb management of the mobile theatre groups is a model that can be studied separately. These dimensions of mobile theatre have also been explored in this chapter.

The fourth chapter is titled '**Problems and Prospects of Mobile Theatre**'. As the title suggests, in this chapter the various problems and challenges that the mobile theatre of Assam have encountered right from the beginning have been taken up. The problems and challenges have also changed with the changing times. One allegation that has dogged mobile theatre since the last decade is that the quality of the plays presented has lost their ethos, which, according to the Oxford dictionary means, 'the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature or guiding beliefs of a person, group or institution'. Connected with this, are various issues like dearth of playwrights, the 'star-culture', lack of growth of acting talent, increasing influence of cinema, changing character of the audience, competition among the mobile theatre groups, mushrooming of too many new mobile theatre groups, consequent lessening of audience, gradually vanishing space in the urban areas, etc., have been discussed here. The role of the State Government as well as the Central Government, rather the lack of it, and its necessity in the development and preservation of this medium, unique in the world, has also been taken up. Apart from that, the future prospects of this 'industry' is also being imagined here. Importance of preservation of the manuscripts, publication of the dramas written for mobile theatre, digital

preservation of the plays as well as songs and music and the importance of an archive, has also been taken up in this chapter. No doubt there are problems, but the larger section of theatre lovers opined that mobile theatres will continue its journey gloriously.

The fifth chapter has been an attempt to look into the '**Impact of Mobile Theatre on the Assamese Society and Culture**'. This popular medium of mass communication, that has completed 54 years, could not have done so without some amount of impact upon the society. The impact measure has been sought by dividing the areas into social, economic, cultural and others. The economic impact of mobile theatre of Assam that cannot be denied is the fact that, it has provided direct employment to hundreds of people, both skilled and unskilled, some even illiterate. Indirectly, this employment has helped to sustain the families and dependents of these employees. Apart from that, the mobile shows during their nine month roadshow help the people of a particular area, especially in the rural locations, earn a few dollars more. The social impact is a very broad arena and an attempt has been made to cover aspects like, the importance of theatre, how literature is being reflected on the mobile stage, and how it can be a tool for social change, if mobile theatre has been a trendsetter in any way, etc. The cultural impact has been analyzed keeping in view the historically assimilating character of the Assamese society. How in the post-globalization era, various external and commercial factors are impacting upon mobile theatre.

Apart from this, the important issue of the space of women in mobile theatres also has been discussed here.

The final chapter, '**Summary and Conclusion**' is a collective summary of what has been discussed in the previous five chapters. This final chapter has tried to revisit the research questions which were taken up in the first chapter and analyze whether they have been proven true or false. This chapter is also the platform to put forth certain recommendations which may help this mass medium of communication unique to Assam, not only strengthen its position but also ensure its future. The research questions that were taken up in this research work were: (1) The commitment to the original idea with which mobile theatre had been born, to enrich Assamese culturally along with the establishment of a well-organized professional theatre has been sidelined, (2) class difference within the mobile theatre set up is increasing and this is not a positive change, and, (3) mobile theatre is a male dominated arena where women have been invisible as decision makers, (4) Has mobile theatre impacted the society, culture and economic arena of Assam, and (5) the future prospects of mobile theatre. After the elaborate discussion in the five previous chapters, the researcher has come to the conclusion that the research questions have yielded the following findings:

Taking up the first research question, apart from the fact that mobile theatre has sustained the trend of professional theatre which was the primary objective of Mr. Achyut Lahkar to provide financial security and stability to people associated

with theatre, its other main objective to enrich Assamese culture has been overshadowed by the commercial demands. Today, the plays staged are hardly reflection of the Assamese society or ethos, rather, Bollywood blockbusters are stitched and tacked and passed off as original Assamese drama. The justification being, this is what the audience wants to see. Adaptations of great literary creations are also dwindling just as original plays that once was the hallmark of mobile theatre.

As for the second research question, though the producers and ‘stars’ do not like it when the issue of class difference is brought up, the junior artists, workers, technicians, even inviting committee members and people closely associated with mobile theatres agree that the ‘one family’ concept that once existed in mobile theatre, has changed to a large extent. Sri Jonmoni Sarma (45 yrs), Secretary, Vibgyor Club, of Phulaguri in Nagaon, in his interview stated that, ‘class difference is a fact. Earlier, even the lead actor-actress used to be accommodated in the same place as the other people. Mr. Pranjit Das, one of the most talented actors of the medium has spent nights on school benches just like the other boys. Similar examples can be cited about people like, Mr. Mahananda Sarma, Mr. Upakul Bordoloi, Mr. Robin Neog, all stalwart actors of mobile theatres. Even the leading ladies back then, had no qualms about sharing accommodation with junior artists. Will the ‘star’ artists of today agree to do that? Separate special accommodations have to be arranged for them. Is this not class difference? Disparity in the payment scale is definitely the cause of this’ (J. Sarma.

Telephonic interview. October 26, 2016).The fact of class difference was corroborated by many junior artists and workers of the medium on conditions of anonymity.

Coming to the third research question, as far as mobile theatre being a male dominated arena is concerned, the earlier discussions, particularly where the space of women in mobile theatre has been explored, and the economic impact of mobile theatre has been taken up, it becomes quite clear that this fact is true. Probably because of the nature of the set-up of the medium, and its emergence from a history when women had no space at all in performing arts, the change that is happening has been very gradual. Women are still missing from the decision-making positions. As opined by celebrated film and mobile theatre star, Ms. Prastuti Parashar (43 yrs), (Parashar, P. Personal Communication. July 07,2017) and producer of Kohinoor theatre, Mr. Ratan Lahkar (72 yrs), (R. Lahkar. Personal Communication. May 22, 2014), “women will have to come out themselves”. Though such statements are very easy to make, reality is often not as easy. The question remains- will women be given the opportunity? But, for that to be answered, women will really have to come out and try to make themselves visible. Simply portraying ‘strong’ female characters that has been imagined, conceptualised and directed by men cannot be the end of women empowerment within mobile theatres. The day the reins are equally handled by women, a new chapter will begin in the history of mobile theatre of Assam.

The fourth research question regarding the impact of mobile theatre on the social, cultural and economic arena of Assam there can be no two ways that each of these arenas has seen an impact of mobile theatre. The social impact is strongly visible through the various welfare works done by the mobile theatres in the form of construction of school-college buildings, *Namghar*, sports or cultural clubs, monetary help to budding sportstars, etc. In the cultural arena, mobile theatre has carved a very special place for itself by taking theatre to the masses. It is no exaggeration to say that the passion for theatre in Assam is alive only because of mobile theatre. Moreover, the career opportunities that it offers is immense. The economic arena also been impacted in the sense that in these times of unemployment, as described earlier, the mobile theatres provide employment to a substantial number of people thus sustaining them and their dependents.

The fifth research question took up the future prospects of mobile theatre in Assam. Mobile theatre has traversed more than half a century. It has seen its fair share of trials and travails, and survived. The current successful roll that mobile theatre is on, is definitely a cheerful sign, but having said that a lot of introspection, future planning, and sincere effort would be necessary to keep the good times on. Assamese people identify themselves with mobile theatre. As such, the language, traditions, rich heritage and history of Assam must find place on the mobile theatre stage.

During the entire period of this research work, interaction with people within the mobile theatre as well as people from different backgrounds and walks

of life, but with one common love-mobile theatre, was a very positive experience. The common man, who is the real connoisseur of this medium, had many things to say about how they want to see mobile theatres become world famous. On the basis of those thoughts and ideas shared by these lovers of mobile theatre, a few suggestions are being put in here with the hope that somewhere this research work will contribute a tiny drop in the study and development of this most popular art form of Assam:

- Preservation of manuscripts, plays, songs, dance-dramas year wise by the AAMTPA centrally. The lack of scientific and technically sound preservation has resulted in the loss of the major portion of historical data of the last 50 years.
- For preservation, a state- of- the- art- Archive in Assam, like the National Film Archive where the renowned films of the world are preserved, is the need of the hour. Not just the drama- literature, but the actual theatre presentations through digital technology should be preserved. This will not only be a great treasure for posterity, but will also inspire and facilitate further research work in the field.
- With regard to the above mentioned archive, government support, either state or central, is a must. As discussed earlier, goodwill of the government can do a lot. The pressure needs to be built up and here, the mobile theatre producers, both mobile and amateur drama workers, bodies

like the *Asam Natya Sanmilani* and *Bhramyaman Theatre Dasak Forum*, as well as all mobile theatre lovers have great responsibility.

- Each mobile theatre group must realise the importance of preservation of the manuscripts, songs, souvenirs, income-expense details and other documents yearwise in a systematic manner.
- The annual souvenirs brought out by the mobile theatres should be taken more seriously, with better contents published, which are not repeated after a couple of years. Moreover, the editors of the souvenirs must be careful in monitoring the information given through the articles.
- Another recommendation is that mobile theatre groups should coordinate with the inviting committees of the urban areas and take steps to ensure that open space will be available in the future to present their shows, considering the fact that such open spaces in the urban sphere is fast disappearing. If need be, petitions can be presented before the government in this regard.
- As mentioned in the last part of the fifth chapter, examples like the Chinese Dramatic Association are great inspirations and should be considered, if it can be emulated in any manner.
- The *Bhramyaman Theatre Darsak Forum* (Mobile Theatre Audience Forum) should play a more active role in monitoring what is being dished

out by the mobile theatre groups, and raise its voice with opinions and suggestions accordingly.

- We, the Assamese people, must realize and understand our own responsibility to help preserve and sustain our mobile theatre. Simply turning away, because we are not liking certain things about it is certainly not any solution of rectifying the loop holes that has crept into mobile theatre. As mobile theatre lovers, audience or simply as a layperson, it is our duty to voice our concerns and do our bit to keep the flag of mobile theatre of Assam

There are no two ways about the fact that mobile theatre is a commercial venture. Having said that, the producers should never misuse or under-utilise the potential of this hugely popular medium in contributing to the betterment, information and reformation of the society at large. At the same time, it must keep its identity as a unique performing art of Assam, intact. This research work is a humble attempt to look into the various dimensions of mobile theatre of Assam but it may have overlooked aspects that should have been and could have been incorporated here. It is therefore hoped that this endeavour will encourage other researchers in this field which will bring out more and more information, raise more questions and find answers to those questions and thus help contribute to the future journey of mobile theatres in Assam.