

Assamese Theatre

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Abstract: *India is rich in cultural heritage with its varied traditions preserved through different forms. One of these forms is unmistakably folk art. Theatre being one of such art forms reflects our culture through its time and captures the society we live in. Theatre is a form of performing art that helps people to express themselves and teach self-knowledge while being the source of entertainment. Different forms of theatre exist in different parts of the nations, often standing on its own and sometimes even going cross-cultural. Theatre has seen numerous varieties and went through several changes in itself, influenced by societal changes. The paper is a humble attempt to study the trajectory of theatre traditions available in the state of Assam.*

Keywords: theatre, performing art, culture, bhaona, mobile theatre, modern drama, proscenium

1. Introduction

Theatre is a performing art form that portrays an imagination or a real life event in front of a live audience using live performers – such as actors, musicians, dancers - in a specific area preferably a stage. It is a major part of cultural economy sector that involve immaterial labour and contribute in cultural production. India is rich in cultural heritage with its varied traditions preserved through different forms. Theatre is one such art form that reflects our culture through its time and helps people express themselves and teach self-knowledge while being the source of entertainment. There are several forms of theatre traditions in every part of the country like ‘Jatra’, ‘Baul’ in Bengal, ‘Yatra’ in Orissa, ‘Tamasha’ in Maharashtra, ‘Nautanki’, ‘Ramleela’ in parts of North India, ‘Ankiya Naat/Bhaona’ in Assam and so on (Konwar, 2016).

The history of theatre in Assam can be traced back to 15th century with the saint Srimanta Sankardeva trying to preach his principles of Neo-Vaishnavism among the masses through the use of Ankiya Naat/Bhaona. It grasped the general masses and ruled the hearts of people by the portrayal of deities and supernatural in the form of plays that roused religious sentiment and imparted moral wisdom. With the passage of time due to colonialism and foreign influence, new forms of theatre like Jatra entered the region which brought several changes and transformation in the theatre tradition of Assam.

This paper attempts to study the trajectory of Assamese theatre and highlight the changes and transformation that theatre in Assam underwent due to various factors at the time. The paper relied on secondary sources such as journals, books, articles, published and unpublished dissertations to study how theatre took different forms in Assam from its inception.

Ankiya Naat/Bhaona

The history of Assamese drama can be traced back to 15th century when the Vaishnavite saint Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva started a religious movement based on the principles of ‘*Ek-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*’ i.e devotion to one God based on spirit of humanism and equality thereby surpassing all barricades of caste and tribe. He was a social reformer who propagated his doctrine based on the idea of universal brotherhood to caste ridden society and tried to build an egalitarian social order. He did it by integrating theatre, literature and dance in the process to spread Neo-

Vaishnavism among the masses of Assam. His aim was to convey religious messages to the people through the process of entertainment, possibly with an aim to reach people with no education. Those plays were termed as Ankiya Naat and the performance of it is known as Bhaona. His disciple Mahapurusha Sri Madhavdeva also played a role in enriching the Assamese drama movement by writing a number of plays which became a source of entertainment for the people of Assam in that period. His religion spread rapidly as it was more people-oriented and liberal in nature and it accepted people from all sections of Assamese society.

Sankardeva’s primary idea was to promote the principles of Neo-vaishnavism to the masses through Ankiya Naat. He believed that it was better to promote its philosophy through theatre rather than written texts considering most of the Assamese society was illiterate. The main theme of Ankiya Naat is religious, based on Hindu mythology mainly related to Lord Vishnu and his incarnations of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, and generally performed by devotees (Patgiri, 2019). Bhaona consists of different characters, each assigned with a specific role to perform. Firstly, the Sutradhar who is an integral person in Bhaona recites, sings and narrates to the audience. Secondly, the Bhaoriyas who are the actors playing different roles in Bhaona. Thirdly, the Gayan who is the singer, and the Bayan who is the person playing musical instruments like Taal, Khol during the entire performance. These individuals are often recruited from nearby villages or towns and after rehearsals for long; they perform in the final act.

Initially Ankiya Naats were performed in Satras which include houses of prayer named Naamghars and Manikuts which contained the seat of the saint who is worshipped. Towns like Nagaon, Tezpur, Dibrugarh became the hub for cultural events in Upper Assam and Pathsala in Lower Assam. Pathsala also became the centre of drama in Assam and is often called as Natya Nagari. The two Satras - Akaya and Bamakhata near Pathshala (in Barpeta district) staged plays inspired by Ankiya Naat (Patgiri, 2019). Bhaona is an old folk theatre dance-drama form of entertainment prevalent in Assam constituting an important part of Assamese culture.

Culture has often been considered as a driver of sustainable development. In 2010 Millennium Development Goal Summit it was stated that, “culture can be a powerful driver for development, with community-wide social, economic

and environmental impact.” Bhaona, a traditional art form of North-East India constitutes an important role in Assam Vaishnavism. It contributes to a proper understanding of the culture of people who are the followers of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam by reflecting the faith and practices of the community. Although Bhaona a dance-drama theatre form was started by Sankardeva in 15th century, but unlike other theatre forms like Bhramyamaan in Assam or Jatra in Bengal, it has tried to retain and hold on to the religious theme. Other than its cultural importance, Bhaona constitutes a part of Neo-Vaishnavite movement which Sankardeva started to create an egalitarian society with secular ideals and free from discrimination based on caste, creed, religion and tribe. It is not just a form of entertainment, therefore many artists who are recruited from villages to enact roles in performances or become a part of Bhaona, are inclined towards it not for economic purposes but because they feel a cultural bonding and social attachment towards it. Even though Sankardeva recognized and worked to minimize the distinctions and uplift the backward classes and castes, women who constituted a major part of the population did not get their equal position in terms of representation and participation. Bhaona was only performed by men.

Rather than giving in to the popular ideas and effects of globalization, Ankiya Naat has survived through the upheavals of modernization and held on to its religious-cultural ideals. In the present times, Bhaona is reaching out to several platforms outside the state of Assam to different parts of the country and internationally. Sangeet Natak Academy conducts yearly performances of Bhaona in different parts of Assam and nowadays NGOs and other local organizations in cooperation with Department of Culture, Assam started to organize staging of Bhaona in other states as well. In 2019, Bhaona was staged in Mumbai in English language to reach the masses unfamiliar with the ethnic language but the theme, musical instruments- khol and taal, compositions and dramatic feelings of it were kept intact. Bhaona also made its debut on a global stage as it headed for Dubai and performed in English language while retaining its originality, so as to highlight the rich treasure of Assamese culture globally. Bhaona is a creation of Vaishnavism in Assam and Sankardeva’s vision for this religion in the fold of Hinduism was universal and secular. Therefore popularizing it among all communities would help in keeping up with his idea of universality. Other than Ankiya Naat, there were other folk forms of art in Assam which were already a part of Assamese tradition - Dhuliya, Ojhapali, Putala Naach, Bhari Gaan etc (Singh and Patgiri, 2018). But with Ankiya Naat/Bhaona, the dynamic tradition of theatre began in Assam.

During 17th-18th centuries Ankiya Naat started to be staged in religious festivals and fairs in Assam. Several playwrights started to come up in the end of 18th century and contributed to the drama scene as they brought several changes to the type of plays created before that time. Soon after British arrived in Assam, they contributed to changes in the cultural scenario with the entry of Jatra in Assam, a folk art form of Bengal (Sarma, 2017). Initially it acted as an obstacle to the growth of Assamese modern drama but later contributed in the formation of Jatra party in Assam. The end of the 19th

century saw a number of plays based on social issues along with historical and romantic dramas.

Mobile theatre

The concept of famous Mobile Theatres of Assam “Bhramyomaan Mancha” came into being and contributed to the modern Assamese drama movement providing a source of livelihood to many artists and a source of entertainment to the audience. Mostly performed in open areas and makeshift stages, the mobile theatres of Assam moved on from mythological themes to several range of secular and political themes, even adapting Shakespearean tales, Greek tragedies, plays based on novels by famous writers, historical events like sinking of Titanic etc. Theatre underwent major changes in its form and structure in Assam and other parts of India. Bombay and Calcutta were majorly influenced by British colonialism and Assam being closely connected with Bengal geographically experienced certain influence too. The activities of missionaries and the Bengal renaissance had a significant impact on Assamese society (Barpujari et al., 1977).

Jatra, a popular form of folk theatre originated in Bengal during 15th century and spread to other Eastern states of Assam and Odisha. There were changes in content, all-night performances were shortened to 3-4 hours and number of songs was lessened (Gunawardana, 1971: 55). Jatra influenced the conception of mobile theatre in Assam. Mobile theatres are mobile as their stages are make-shift and the groups keep moving from one place to another to perform. The first mobile theatre was formed by Brajanath Sarma, also considered as the founding father of mobile theatre, in the 1920s in Barpeta district of Assam. The start of Kohinoor Opera Theatre Party marks a critical point in the theatre history of Assam. The performances of Kohinoor Opera Theatre Party and Sila Kalika Opera Party lasted for around 3 hours and it proved to be a more audience-friendly format than the all-night ones. Sila Kalika Opera Party performed in open areas and the Kohinoor Opera Party performed in halls (Devi Sarma 2018 in Patgiri, 2019). New parties started to form inspired by Kohinoor Opera Party. Achyut Lahkar, a pioneering figure in the history of mobile theatre in Assam, with his brother started the Nataraj theatre group in 1963. It is considered to be the first proficient mobile theatre group of Assam. Mobile theatre received an extensive reach and they dealt with issues ranging from economic, cultural to socio-political ones often assimilating ideas from the West like Jatra did. Co-acting in stages started in Assam along with female actors being hired to play female roles for the first time in the state in 1933 (Patgiri, 2019). That was a huge change as only men were allowed to perform in Ankiya Naat. There was also a shift in the audience from peasants to working class who paid well and enjoyed this form of entertainment.

Mobile theatre became one of the most popular forms of entertainment even surpassing the Assamese film industry. It contributed to a huge number of plays which were rich in artistic, performative and literary values. Along with entertainment, it also deliberated on economical, cultural, political, psychological and societal aspects. It initiated the idea of technical experimentations, time management,

commercial success, production changes etc in the concept of dramatic performance (Gogoi, 2020).

The chief aim of mobile theatre is the entertainment of the audience. They are the primary target and everything from story and theme selection to choosing actors to play the roles is done to fulfill the expectations of the audience. Over the time the mobile theatre industry became more and more commercialized which led to the commodification of art. The theatre houses started to hire movie actors who could attract more spectators, even if it came at the expense of artistic sensibility. These movie stars often charge huge sum of money and their lodging and fooding are also priced higher than other crew members. The theatre houses go through huge investments with hiring such stars and marketing strategies which hamper other artists who take their art seriously. They are often the sufferers in this ordeal, getting underpayment or nonpayment and even loss of work. It also affects the audience as they have to buy tickets to these plays at a higher price (Gogoi, 2020).

Modern Assamese Theatre

Modern theatre in India has an urban origin and the plays are staged in proscenium theatre halls. Proscenium stages are usually sloped rising away from the audience. The front stage moves past the proscenium into the auditorium i.e also known as an apron or forestage. Also called as proscenium arch theatres, it often includes an orchestra pit for live music and a fly tower for scenery movement and lighting¹. The idea of proscenium theatre began in Europe (Italy) in 17th century and it managed to dominate the theatre world of the West till mid-20th century. Colonialism managed to incorporate it in the culture of the Indian subcontinent by the end of the 18th century with the start of 'Bengali theatre' in 1795 in Calcutta (Biswas, 2020). Proscenium theatre became a vital part of Indian culture and became the most popular theatre genre in all Indian provinces. In the mid-19th century, proscenium theatre made an entry into the theatrical scene of Assam. The famous playwrights of proscenium followed western theatrical trends to fashion their plays based on these traditions. The fusion of east and west became popular among the Bengali masses and Bengal being the cultural influence of North-eastern region at the time influenced several playwrights of Assam. Jyotiprasad Agarwala brought a change in 1930s by adapting the Ibsenian model (Biswas, 2020). Similarly other playwrights were influenced by European traditions and incorporated it into their work. Several Western plays were adapted into Assamese. Bhramaranga (1888), an Assamese drama was adapted from Shakespeare's 'Comedy of Errors' and Runumi (1946) was adapted from Henrik Ibsen's "The Warriors at Helgoland" (Barua, 2017). Since then a good number of plays including the Greek tragedies were translated or adapted into Assamese.

The English-educated dramatists started to write on secular issues and adapted several ideas like stage-setting from the West. The concepts of gods were slowly discarded as the focus was given more on ideas of social reform. Acting

became more authentic and the stage became more realistic. Proscenium theatre came along in Assam during 1875 but modern playwriting started years before. Dramatists named Gunabhiram Barua wrote Ram Navami, first modern Assamese play in 1857 which marked as the beginning of modern Assamese drama. It was modeled on the Shakespeare's famous tragedy Romeo and Juliet highlighting the social issue of widow remarriage (Singh and Patgiri, 2018). Another dramatist Hemchandra Barua wrote the first comical play Kaniar Kir in 1861 which denounced opium consumption. This tradition of social criticism was continued by later dramatists like Laxminath Bezbaruah and Padmanath Gohain Barua. Drama became an instrument to refine political and social urge for freedom as there was a rise in patriotism and national consciousness among the masses (Bhattacharya, 1958). The idea of realism influenced Assamese drama and the plays of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Atul Chandra Hazarika and his peers borrowed several of their characters from real life. Modern ideas of modern men can be found in plays of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala like in Karengar Ligiri (1937). There was use of modern dress in this drama that captivated the audience (Barua, 2017). Since then more pronounced conflict situations were portrayed in plays of modern era. Dialogues and portrayal of characters became realistic and natural with lesser scenes compared to before. Rational and concise demonstration started to be considered as one of the proper features of modern Assamese drama.

Assamese theatre evolved into a new era departing away from Bhaona and other folk forms of drama and celebrated Western trends. Modern theatre lessened the influence of Jatra in Bengal after the establishment of first proscenium theatre in Calcutta in 1872 (Patgiri, 2019). But in case of Assam, the situation was quite different. Bhaona was pushed back to rural Assam but it still continued to act as a separate tradition. Non-proscenium theatres such as commercial mobile theatre in Assam and folk theatre continued to coexist along with the modern proscenium theatre. There were also attempts to fusion traditional and modern in the plays. The playwright Jugal Das wrote the drama Bayoner Khol which attempted to bring the ethnic roots of Assam into the world of modern theatre by bringing traditional conceptions of Bhaona into it (Biswas 2020, Barua 2017). Before the start of proscenium theatres, the performers and the spectators were in close proximity as per the seating arrangement which placed them together. The boundaries between the two were undefined before, but with the advent of proscenium the demarcation between the two was clearly marked.

2. Conclusion

Theatre in Assam evolved through different stages from folk dance-drama to the popularized mobile theatre and the modern proscenium Assamese drama influenced by Western ideals. It changed the dynamics of the story-telling process along with the content of the stories and brought technical alterations. The proximity between the audience and the performers also changed with proscenium parting the two. But that did not stop the non-proscenium theatres in the state.

¹ <http://www.theatretrust.org.uk/discover-theatres/theatre-faqs/170-what-are-the-types-of-theatre-stages-and-auditoria>

Unlike other theatre forms which are mostly affected by the wave of modernization in the present times, Bhaona has tried to retain and hold on to the religious theme even now. People still have religious and emotional attachment to it which has helped to maintain its cultural relevance in the city. Even though there is lack of political aid but Bhaona has reached other places nationally and internationally and people are becoming aware of this age-old art form of Assam. Mobile theatre has managed to surpass the video films of Assam in terms of entertainment and popularity among the masses and managed to keep many livelihoods afloat. It employs numerous workers who otherwise lacked jobs due to the failing Assamese film industry in the present times. Proscenium theatres are commercial and sought-after by the urban population due to its staging of natural and humanistic experiences through the plays.

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In case of Assamese theatre, the traditional theatre did not simply transit into modern theatre but both of them coexist and remain alongside overlapping each other, be it in proscenium or non-proscenium form, or religious, fusion or modern form.

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