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Mobile Theatre of Assam: Its Challenges

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Abstract:

Mobile theatre of Assam has a long heritage in the field of performing Art. The term Mobile Theatre was first used by the renowned social worker RadhagovindaBaruah in the remark book of Suradevi Theatre after seeing the performances in Latasil playground of Guwahati. The first mobile theatre group of Assam was established in 1963. It was Nataraj theatre founded by veteran theatre organiser AchyutLahkar. In fact mobile theatre took such an organised form after a long journey of more than 30 years in which it was in the form of Yatra and Opera in the initial stage. There is no other theatre in the world like Assamese mobile theatre. It has given Assamese culture an unique identity. Revolutionary drama worker BrajanathSarma's Kohinoor Opera was the pre indication of mobile theatre of Assam of 60's. He was the pioneer of Assamese commercial mobile stage. AchyutLahkar introduced several new things to the mobile theatre movement of Assam. Mobile theatre has been playing two roles - one promoting drama as an art and one promoting drama as a product. Mobile theatre is a mixture of art and commerce. It has also immense contributions to socioeconomic and educational upliftment of Assamese people. It always performs its social responsibility by enacting a dance drama either on socio-cultural issue or on mythological theme before the performance of the main drama. It is a medium that has great impact on the viewers. The plays enacted by the theatre groups offered a veritable analysis of multifarious social evils. From the highly qualified spectators to illiterate villagers, all get the point to think on enjoying the performance of Mobile Theatre. Mobile theatre also contributes to the cultural environment of the state. Music and dance of mobile theatre is essentially of folk flavour. Over the years they have managed to capture and use the myriad tunes of the people of Assam, leading to the preservation and spread of folk forms, be it tunes or dance form. Mobile theatres have also great contribution to Assamese literature. They have created some new playwrights and offered many scripts to Assamese literature. Though it is not their purpose yet the mobile theatres help in the educational upliftment of the people indirectly. The very functioning of mobile theatre resembles to modern day's social enterprise. Globalization has brought changes to the cultural taste of the people. Commercialization of culture has been started. It has created a market for drama in which Mobile Theatre groups are becoming sellers of drama. In fact, taking the challenges of globalisation they have changed themselves while this change itself has brought new challenges to them. In the process drama has lost its artistic value. So, these changes are not always positive. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse these challenges as well as to provide solutions to it. In this study transformation of mobile theatre to social enterprise was found as a viable alternative.

Keywords: Heritage, Mobile Theatre, Playwrights, Socioeconomic, Challenges, Globalisation, Artistic Value.

1. Introduction

Mobile theatre of Assam has a long bright heritage. Before the starting of the proscenium theatre in Assam, it was the Bengali Yatra Party that satisfied the people's zest for drama in rural Assam. Seeds of later days mobile theatre lied hidden in this yatra started particularly at the initiative of migrant Bengalis. The very word Yatra carries the meaning of travel and mobile. The scholars of the mobile theatre of Assam have been maintaining the identity of a separate type of Yatra in Assam since the very beginning. Tirtharam Bayan of Barpeta started the first Yatra party of Assam at the initiative of Govindaram Choudhury. After the formation of Siva Kalika Opera Party by BrajanathSarma in 1921, this artistic pursuit got a commercial goal. The style of performance also changed along with this. Later he established Assam Kahinoor Opera Party. Co-acting was also started in this party. In 1959 SadanandaLahkar of Pathsala formed Nataraj Opera. In the growth of mobile theatre of Assam he and Pathsala contributed a lot. Pathsala is called Hollywood of Assam. In 1963 Nataraj Opera was re-established as Nataraj Theatre by AchyutLahkar. Since then mobile theatre has kept its winning trend uninterrupted. The term mobile theatre was not used previously. It is known that renowned Assamese social worker RadhaGovindaBarua first used this term in the remark book of Suradevi theatre to refer to this particular type of theatre after seeing the performance in Latasil field in Guwahati. It was in 1969. Since then it has been named as Mobile Theatre. Since 1963 almost two hundred mobile theatre groups have been entertaining the Assamese audience. Today there are 32 groups of mobile theatre in Assam. It is noteworthy that there is no other theatre party in the world like Assamese Mobile Theatre. It has given Assamese culture a unique

characteristic. The mobile theatre has undergone tremendous change from its initial days as far as the themes, acting standard and production qualities are concerned. Throughout this period, it has contributed a lot to the socioeconomic, educational and cultural upliftment of Assamese people. It has faced and fought with a lots of problem too. After globalization some new challenges have come up. At the changed cultural environment, mobile theatre groups are compelled to bring some changes to their productions. In this paper an attempt has been made to focus on the challenges faced by the mobile theatre of Assam and to find out their solution.

2. Methodology of Study

It is an analytical study based on both the primary and secondary data. Primary data are collected through personal interviews and secondary data are collected from books, journals and web sites.

3. Analysis

Since 1963 several theatre groups have been established in Assam. Every year average 32 mobile groups perform in the state.

Sl No.	Name of the Mobile Theatre Group	Year of Establishment
1	Nataraj (Pathsala)	1963
2	Suradevi(Chamata)	1964
3	Purvajyoti(Hajo)	1966
4	Bhagyadevi(Marowa, Nalbari)	1967
5	Mancharupa(Pathsala)	1968
6	Rupanjali(Barpeta)	1968
7	Assam Star Theatre	1970
8	Mukunda(Makhibaha)	1972
9	NatarajSilpaNiketon (Pathsala)	1973
10	Rupalim(Abhayapuri)	1973
11	Jyotirupa(Nitaipukhuri)	1975
12	Vishnujyoti(Chamata)	1977
13	Kohinoor(Pathsala)	1976
14	Awahan(Pathsala)	1980
15	Anirbarna(Pathsala)	1982
16	Aradhana(Pathsala)	1979
17	Chitrelekha (Pathsala)	1984
18	Kalpataru (Pathsala)	1984
19	Aparupa (Panigaon)	1984
20	Apsara (Chamata)	1984
21	Rang-Ghar(Chamata)	1985
22	Indradhanu(Guwahati)	1985
23	Indrani(Patacharkuchi)	1985
24	Devadasi(Pathsala)	1987
25	Giriraj(Sarthebari)	1987
26	Radhikadevi	1987
27	JayatuAsami Theatre (Sarupeta)	1987
28	Hengul(Mariani)	1985
29	Samanwaya(Moran)	1991
30	Pallabi(Pathsala)	1993
31	Turdom(Dirak)	1995
32	Saraighat(Jajari)	1998
33	Madhabdev(Balipara)	1999
34	Bordoichila(Nalbari)	1999
35	Manchakonwar(Nalbari)	NA
36	Abhijan(Mongaldoi)	NA
37	Bhadoi(Dibrugarh)	NA
38	Bhaskar(Bokakhat)	NA
39	Samrat(Tinsukia)	NA
40	Surujmoni(Tingkhong)	NA
41	Malakhmi(Golaghat)	NA
42	Lakhimi(Goalpara)	NA
43	Monalisha(Suwalkuchi)	NA

44	Pragjyotish(Guwahati)	NA
45	Purbadhwani(Cinnamara, Jorhat)	NA
46	Panchanan(Dikhow, Sibsagar)	NA
47	Pratidhwani(Mariani)	NA
48	Bornali(Lanka)	NA
49	Igal(Dergaon)	NA
50	Panchajayna(Jamuguri)	NA
51	Borluit(Mariani)	NA
52	NatasuryaVishnujyoti(Pathsala)	NA
53	Udayan(Baihata)	NA
54	Navarun(Dakhinpat)	NA
55	Asomjyoti(Nalbari)	NA
56	Jai Jawan Jai Kisan(Tihu)	NA
57	Natasurya(Sapekhati)	NA
58	Shrimanta(Naharkatia)	NA
59	Gadapani(Sepon)	NA
60	Sankar- Madhav(gahpur)	NA
61	Ma Jonaki(Rajgarh)	NA
62	Manchajyoti(Barbhag)	NA
63	Theatre Mahabharata (Kolabari)	NA
64	Kalpataru(Bongaon, Tihu)	NA
65	Bandana(Sarupeta)	NA
66	Dhubratara(MarianiTinali)	NA
67	Monikut(Howajan, Sonitpur)	NA
68	Chitraban(Agia)	NA
69	Divyabani(Dubia, Sonitpur)	NA
70	Nandini	NA
71	SoarangManju Theatre(Pathsala)	NA
72	Bordoisikha(Oauguri, Goreswar)	NA
73	Vinandini(Sonari)	NA
74	Biswajyoti(Nalbari)	NA
75	Meghdoot(Tingkhong, Dibrugarh)	NA
76	Himalaya (Khajikhowa, Dibrugarh)	NA
77	Sakuntala (Nalbari)	2005
78	Bhagyashree (Sapekhati)	2003
79	Anurag Movie Theatre (Belsar)	2005
80	Rajashree (Guwahati)	2005
81	Alakananda(Koniha)	2006
82	KarengGhar(Hatigaon)	2006
83	Anuradha(Rampur)	2006

Table 1: Mobile theatre Groups with their Year of Establishment

Source: Primary Data NA=Not Available

Till 1963 theatre has not been started in Assam like Kolkata and Mumbai. As pioneer of Assamese mobile theatre AchyutLahkar had some technical knowledge so he could find out the type of stage, where the orchestra would sit, when the name casting would be started etc. Mike, lights were not used often in Yatra. Nataraj theatre introduced these into mobile theatre and transformed this artistic pursuit into a commercially viable venture of entertainment. Mobile theatre has immense popularity in rural areas not only as a source of entertainment but also as a source of income. For a good many years health of village schools and colleges has been depending on mobile theatres. Dergaon Kamal DuarahMahavidyalaya is an excellent example of it. It is then famous Nataraj Cine Theatre, which was invited by the college authority long back in sixties. At that time people even sold their goats and cows to purchase tickets. Huge sum of money left from the sale of tickets (after paying the groups their contractual amount) was utilised by the college authority to construct the building. This arrangement is perhaps only one of its kind. In the world. Mobile theatre groups fulfill their social commitment, even through the plays performed by them. They helped to spread social message from AIDS to terrorism through their plays even though it is wrapped in a package of entertaining gimmicks. The plays enacted by the theatre groups offered a veritable analysis of multifarious social evils, orthodox approach, lapses in governance, are laced with the crisp dialogue with rural sensibility. Contemporary mobile theatres experimented with different technical and methodical styles to attract audiences to their shows. Cine theatre technique introduced by the Nataraj Theatre gave cinema like character to the theatre. Staging of plays like Titanic, Anaconda, Gaisal etc. were experiments that prove successful. Though mobile theatre can experiment with technique yet it is

not possible to experiment with drama just like amateur theatre. Amateur groups do that earnestly as they believe that it is their sole responsibility to proceed the drama revolution of the state forward. Mobile theatres neither consider it their responsibility, nor the aim. So they do not go for expressionistic drama, symbolic drama, absurd drama, etc. Of course, sometimes they use elements of folk drama and that is for unavoidable reason. Dramas of mobile theatre cannot go parallel to the emerging trends of world drama. No doubt, it has developed an interest in drama among the alien over and above the intellectual class. It is not a trend setter, but offers a footpath for the small passerby of the drama movement. But the music and dance of the mobile theatre is essentially of folk flavor. Over the years they have managed to capture and use the myriad tunes of the people of Assam, leading to the preservation and spread of folk forms, be it tunes or dance forms. Bihu dance of different tribes of Assam, other forms of dance like Satriya, Ojapali, Jhumur, Bagarumba, RabhaNitrya etc. have been aptly used in dance drama. Dhol, Banhi, MadalMridang, Khol, Kanh, Doba, Sankha, Pepa etc. in use for several years. Modern and electronic instruments like drum set, keyboard, etc. are also in use side by side in the same group. Many well established singers of today once adorned the stage of several theatre groups. BhupenHazarika, JayantaHazarika, RameswarPathak, DhanadaPathak, Dasarath Das and lately popular singers JubinGarg, Manash Rabin sang for several theatre groups. So, theatre groups have at least contribution in the career of these singers. Most recently, songs having little or no literary value have been seen to throng the stages of the mobile theatre. Mobile theatre contributes a lot to the economic upliftment of the people. Mobile theatre is not a small business. Budget requirement of a group varies between Rs. 20 lakhs to Rs. 1 crore. Different departments of a mobile theatre groups are-

- i. Direction of drama
- ii. Decoration of stage
- iii. Auditorium
- iv. Sound and music
- v. Light
- vi. Set and property
- vii. Decoration and make up
- viii. Green room
- ix. Food
- x. Transportation
- xi. Publicity

People's involvement in all these departments varies between 70-80 to 100-150. Out of these, 20-25 numbers are actor actress, 10-15 numbers are dancers and the remaining numbers of people are technicians, cook, carpenter, management people etc. Employment status in mobile theatre group is shown in table-

SI No.	Name of the Posts	Numbers
1	Producer	1 or more than one
2	Arranger	1-2
3	Secretary	1
4	Representative	1
5	Actors	10-12
6	Actresses	5-8
7	Dancers(Male and Female)	12
8	Fourth grade workers(Helpers)	40
9	Instrumentalists	5-6
10	Singers	2-3
11	Directors-dance, drama, music	Generally 1 in each
12	Playwright	1-4
13	Lyricist	2-3 or depends on needs
14	Truck Driver	2

Table 2: Employment Status in Mobile Theatre

Since 1963 to till date atleast 200 groups have been formed in Assam. Of course, only 32 groups are active at present. Actors and technicians make an annual contract with the group. From the month of August to April these groups perform at least 10,000 shows. Mobile theatre is a business of 60-70 crores. Half to three fourth of this amount is spent to give remuneration to director, playwright, music director, actors, actresses and the excess amount is considered as profit. One-fourth amount goes to the organiser. A sample account of mobile theatre is given below---

Annual Income	
Total number of shows	200 days
Average show per day	2
Total number of shows per year	400
Total Income per show	Rs.35,000
Total income in 400 shows	Rs.35,000x400=
Total	Rs. 140,00000
Annual Expenditure	
Salary	Rs.50,00,000
Honorarium to the playwrights(for four plays)	1,25,000
Honorarium to the directors, music directors+ Art directors	Rs.1,00,000
Choreographer	Rs. 2,00,000
Food	Rs. 1,50,000
Transportation	Rs.80,00,000
Make up+ Costume	Rs.1,00,000
Bamboo	Rs. 25,000
Pendal+ Light+ Sound System+ Chairs+ Timbers	Rs. 5,00,000
Poster and Publicity	Rs. 1,00,000
Others	Rs.2,00,000
Total	Rs. 87,50,000

Table 3: A Sample Account of a Mobile Theatre Group (in 2008)

Necessary expenditure on set, stage decoration, tent is made only once, but the truck carrying materials of theatre has to run 70 times in 7 months to 70 different places. Though some theatre companies have their own trucks some have to hire truck. On the basis of above information we have seen that the greatest contribution of mobile theatre is in generation of employment. It gives employment to 4160 persons directly if we consider average employment of 32 groups as 130. In the field or playground where mobile theatre group establishes its temporary tent for 3-4 days, some people open their pan shop for those days. Similarly, it creates some small vendors of cardamom, Kaju, Channa and Green Battle Nut. Honorarium obtained by the playwright for the play written by them is a source of income for them. As while giving employment in mobile theatre only talent is considered irrespective of educational qualification, so it provides employment to some such people who won't have got employment otherwise. Only two-three movies are produced in Assam. So, it is providing an alternative source of employment to these cine stars. Organisers of the mobile theatre use the money left out after making payment to the theatre in the socioeconomic infrastructure development of the concerned area and institutions.

3.1. Challenges to Mobile Theatre

On the above background, we will discuss the challenges faced by these mobile theatre groups. At the same time challenges brought to the society by these challenges of the mobile theatre in turn will be discussed wherever required. In fact solutions and challenges will be considered both from the point of view of the society and the theatre groups. Their challenges are coming from their changed role in the post globalisation era. In this age of HiFi technology when the peoples' aspiration regarding entertainment is becoming very high due to the availability of internet, social networking media, dish antennas, different kinds of TV channels, the fact that the mobile theatre groups of Assam are not only surviving but also has surpassed the cinema and CDs really deserve acclamation. Though started long ago in 1935 and has earned several recognition at national level, yet Assamese cine industry is still striving for survival. Video CDs are losing market due to piracy and declining quality. Against all odds, mobile theatre companies of Assam are running successfully. But how long? Will they be able to fight with the challenges brought in by globalisation. Challenges are-

- i. Will they be able to survive with the same set up--Should they opt for industry status or transform the mobile theatre group into social enterprise?
- ii. Will they be able to survive in the long run with the present set up by staging only traditional social drama and classics?
- iii. By inviting more and more glamour artists to the group, won't their condition be similar to Assamese cine industry one day? Should they try to become a substitute to Assamese Cine industry?
- iv. How can they be able to save theatres from stiff monopolistic type of competition?
- v. How can their problem of funds be solved?

These challenges are not independent in character and each has a bearing on another. So, they cannot be considered one by one. Challenges are not new to mobile theatres. They have faced challenges time and again and changed themselves accordingly to fight with the challenges. The very selection of drama and artists prove it. Variation in subject-matter of drama till date reflects how they have tried to cope up with the changing interests of the spectators. If we consider Yatra as the origin of the Assamese mobile theatre then we see they took the story from the mythology, history, social life and life of the social and political leaders at the first stage. Names of some such plays are Rana Pratap, Shakti Singh, Baji Rao, Jayadeva, Dhatri Panna, Avaja Devi, Basapati, Kalapahar, Mewar Kumari, Kundil Kunwari, Chandragupta, Niyati, AkalorDesh, DhararDevata etc. When the classic like Mahabharat received

popularity in television, mobile theatre experimented with adaptation of classics like Mahabharata, Ramayana, Cleopetra, Mrichakatika, Illiad, Odyssey, Hamlet, Ben Hur, Othello etc. in the second stage. In the third stage, retaining the challenge of globalisation, they started the stage performance of Hollywood and Bollywood pictures as well as imitation of Bollywood movies like Titanic, Jurassic Park, Abuj Dora AchinKoina, etc. Now-a-days it is the media and technology that shape our taste and interests. All the viewers of the mobile theatres may not have the access to all the media, but from whatever media to which they have access they can guess the current trend of the entertainment industry. So on 24th February, 2015 they may accept Sati Beula as a dance drama, but not as a main play of two hours. But this attitude raises some questions—Are the mobile theatre groups moving away from our culture and tradition? Won't they lose their identity if this trend continues? Won't they be compelled to take the character of the modern day company in the long run?

At present mobile theatre companies are registered under societies act. Though the Government once gave the proposal of granting them industry status, they themselves objected to it. They have not received any assistance from the Government except the entertainment tax relief. While the conferment of industry status will increase their payment obligation to the Government it will decrease their social obligation. As a result, they may indulge in cut-throat competition. Hiring glamorous cine artists and staging Masala drama they have already shown this kind of attitude. This attitudes creates a threat to the cultural environment of the state. Not only that the changing tastes and interests of the people influences the selection of drama, but also the dramas of the mobile theatre influence the tastes and interests of the people. Mobile theatres realise it well. Therefore, they have been enacting a dance drama on social issue or mythological theme just before the main play to fulfill their social interest. The main market of the mobile theatre group is in the rural areas. What is the prestige of the mobile theatre groups in the rural areas can be assessed from the following example.

The proprietor of the Kohinoor theatre company, once mentioned

“We took local dramatic version of the Titanic and Jurassic Park to remote villages across the state even before the movies arrived on Assamese screen from Hollywood. Such was the popularity of our production that when viewers in Pathsala watched Titanic in English they remarked that the movie had been lifted from the Kohinoor play.”

It cannot be denied that this industry status will push the social motive to behind the scene. Besides, mobile theatre groups perform social service by generating funds for the development of village and educational institutions. Generally, mobile theatre groups are invited by educational institutions, clubs or social organisations. Money collected through the sale of tickets become only source of funds for both the parties. Theatre groups put away almost 40% of their funds for the development of schools, colleges, clubs or social organisations. On the contrary, if the theatre groups change themselves to social enterprise, then they will be compelled to stick to their social goals. It should be made clear that social enterprise is itself an industry of social sector. While with the conferment of industry status, they will become same as the producer of commodities like lipstick, transformation to social enterprise will give them status, same as the social activist. In the existing scenario, they will have to be registered as a private limited company. Of course, whether given industry status or transform into social enterprise they have to fulfill certain obligations related to insurance, provident fund and tax. But it is the society which will be benefitted. Persons with extremist background have also started theatre groups against which voice is raised even from the mobile theatre groups. Authenticity is not checked before giving them the permission to operate. Mobile theatre groups can be used as a communicator of various welfare schemes in rural areas. Mobile theatre groups in their social enterprise form can make it their goal. Painters, actors, musicians, writers and all other cultural professionals always look beyond the usual, they create and take action, use their imagination to make something new. It is important to state that entrepreneurs are those who not only invest and implement an innovative idea, but bring it to an economically successful end, considering the market viability and the financial impact on community members. Mobile theatres which combine business with social goal can easily be converted into social enterprise. The main benefit associated with this conversion is that they will be able to get funds from the private investors. In the present scenario, commercial banks are not interested to give loans to them. At the same time as they will have to perform to satisfy certain social goal, it will forbid them to pollute the cultural environment of the state as well. United Kingdom's Tap the Table Theatre is a social enterprise. Mobile theatre groups of Assam have been receiving sponsorship from companies like Airtel, Aircel, Britannia, CavinKare etc. But sponsorship is related to publicity only. It cannot be denied that they are giving employment to a large number of people including artists. Long ago, BrajaNathSarma said,

“A number of famous and unfamous artists scattered in every nook and corner of Assam. The main aim of Kohinoor Opera Party is to give an opportunity to these artists to develop their hidden talent and earn a livelihood with the help of it.”

Transforming into social enterprise, the mobile theatre groups will not lose their identity. Because their unique characteristic of doing business in an artistic product with a social goal will be retained. Now the goal is in their court.

SINo.	Conferment of Industry Status	Transformation into Social Enterprise
1	Purpose will be to earn maximum profit	Purpose will be to earn profit and invest it for the benefit of the society
2	Stiff competition will lead to huge advertisement cost	Social purpose itself will lure the viewers
3	Competition may lead to cultural degeneration	Protection of culture and social value
4	Encourages discrimination among the artists	Discourages discrimination and exploitation of the artists
5	Investment of 2% of profit on social responsibility is a legal obligation	Profit and social responsibility are two sides of the same coin.
6	Increase the managerial efficiency and specialisation	Increase the managerial efficiency and specialisation
7	May lose their identity in the long run.	Identity will be retained.
8	Commercial bank investors will come forward to provide funds.	Funds from private investors, international NGOs and Social Enterprise Funding Agency will be available.

Table 4: Advantages and Disadvantages associated with the Conferment of Industry Status and transformation into Social Enterprise

Above table shows that benefits associated with the transformation to social enterprise outweigh the benefits associated with the conferment of industry status. Each of the theatre group will be unique in character as a different set of artists will be associated with each group. The future of the artists as well as other employees will be secured. Nobody will have to suffer like Adya Sarma.

4. Conclusion

From the above mentioned analysis, we have arrived at the following conclusions–

- i. Challenges of the mobile theatres are arising from their thought of changing the role in the post liberalized era.
- ii. There is the need to change the structure of the mobile theatre so that no theatre party can wind up their business at the face of challenges of globalisation.
- iii. Transformation of mobile theatre into social enterprise will serve the interest of the society and the theatre group even at the post liberalised era.

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