CHAPTER -V

CHANGING TREND IN MOBILE THEATRE
Mobile theatre of Assam has undergone many changes since the formation of first mobile theatre at Pathsala in 1963. Many experiments have taken place in stage craft, dramatic performance, light sound and music. Change is inevitable as it is a natural phenomenon. Development of science and technology is probably the root cause of all these changes.

In foregoing pages it is discussed that Assam is a land of different folk performing arts. These indigenous performing arts like ojapali, putula nach nagara nam and others are being performed in this land for ages. Later on in the sixteenth century Sankardeva innovates ankiya bhaona to preach the Neo-Vaisnavism. Sankardeva, along with his disciple Madhavdeva composed a number of ankiya bhaona and performed it either in the satras or in the namgharas. Deriving its subject matter from the epics or puranas, and having a technique which was a blend of elements of indigenous folk dances, these ankiya bhaonas were a well developed form of dramatic art.

The tradition of writing and performing plays on the model of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva continued till late into the eighteenth century and even the nineteenth century but the drama gradually degenerated as the writers were mostly imitative.
After the successive attacks of the Burmese, when Ahom monarchs lost their kingdom, Assamese drama suffered seriously. And after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, when Assam came under the control of the East India Company, the whole state was in a chaotic situation, and all the artistic, literary and dramatic pursuits were almost at a stand still.

The arrival of the Bengali along with the British inspired the native to form Assamese yatra. Yatra was quite popular specially in Lower Assam. People enjoyed yatra sitting on a natural carpet, made of straw from dusk to dawn. It is amazing to think that the players of a yatra had to perform for the whole night, till the morning. Of course the producers introduced dances like Gandharaba, Kinnara, Apeswari, Nartaki, Baiji, Chokra dance, Bibek gaan, Kathak, Miri dance, Dafala dance, Gypsy, Jumur and so on within the main play. Problem of proper stage light, sound and transportation and communication system always create troubles both for the players and the audience. But they have developed an immunity to cope up with all these troubles and performed shows one after another. The actors delivered their dialogue as loudly as possible and tried to catch the attention of the audience sitting at a distance from the stage. As acting by women, during that time, was strictly prohibited, female roles were being performed by male. But the actors who played the role of female wore costumes and make up so perfectly that sometimes it was difficult for one to identify whether the actor was a male or a female.
In 1963 with the initiative of Achyut Lahakar when yatra transformed into a commercial mobile theatre many changes had taken place in the dramatic performance. Achyut Lahakar introduced many innovations in his Nataraj Theatre viz. electronic equipments, revolving stage, moving stage, technique of theatre scope and projector, and transformed the make-shift theater hall into a beautiful mobile theatre. Today mobile theatre of Assam has transformed into a well knit organization. Modern stage, colourful settings, sophisticated light music and sound and at the same time introduction of glamour artist give both name and fame to this dramatic organization. Recent trend of staging of James Cameron’s Oscar winning movie Titanic or Hollywood blockbusters Anaconda or Superman has given an extra aroma to mobile theatres. Today mobile theatres of Assam occupy a respectable position in the socio cultural field of the state and silently forced to recognize it as a national cultural programme.

In this changing perspective if one looks at mobile theatre, one may witness the following phenomena:

Gimmick

Gimmick, which means something unusual or something which has little value, is a popular term connected with mobile theatre since the formation of Nataraj Theatre in 1963. To attract the attention of the
audience all theatres may use gimmick which is also known as trick or stratagem. In performance gimmick may be necessary, but presently it seems that the mobile theatres of Assam is crossing the limit. Today all the producers are running after gimmick and as a result a novel play lost its artistic quality on stage.

Ten or fifteen years ago, mobile theatres staged plays by Pradullha Bora, Mahendra Barthakur, Bhaben Barua or Bhabendra Nath Saikia. Almost all these plays, written by these playwrights were successful on stage. Because they had a very good vision of life, accompanied by social sentiment and dedication. But today the whole scene is changing. New playwrights have been badly affected by crude commercialism. They are often being pressurized by the producers of mobile theatre to write ‘pattern’ plays, which have neither an artistic temperament nor any dramatic quality except gimmick. This will definitely hamper the growing popularity of the mobile theatres of the state in the days to come. The playwrights are also bound to write these plays just to satisfy the demand of the producers and to keep their existence intact in the wide field of mobile theatre.

Pestering Dances

Dance has an artistic temperament. It occupies a special position in every dramatic performance all over the world. Sometimes dances are
interwoven with the main play so tightly that removing it may damage the artistic edifice of the play. But presently a new trend has developed among the playwrights and the producers to introduce unnecessary dances inside the play. Sometimes dancers, mainly the hero and the heroine are seen coming out of the stage with the help of a trolley specially designed to create a circus like environment. These pestering dances will damage both the structure and the artistic temperament of the play.

Advertisement

"When ads can't go to the people, let the people come to the ads. At least that's what's happening in rural Assam, where, companies have tied up with mobile theatre groups to spread their messages on a platform that draws thousands of people"¹, says Rahul Jayaram, reporter of Telegraphs in connection to the recent trend of mobile theatre in advertising multinational companies. Presently all the mobile theatregoers will witness not only a play and a dance drama in the theatre hall but posters and banners of multinational companies like mobile operator Airtel, liquire brand Officer's Choice and first moving consumer goods Cavin Care. The mobile theatres of the state are being used by the companies as an advertising board because of several factors including insurgency that make it difficult for them to open business in interiors.

¹ Rahul Jayaram: The Telegraph, Guwahati, Sunday, 19th October, 2008
Soumik Chakraborty of Cavin Care says, ‘instead of us going to the North East and setting up base from scratch, this is a cost effective way of establishing a presence’. It is true that putting a poster or a banner of a company inside a theatre hall both the producer of that theatre as well as the company may receive benefits, but before its tie up with a company every mobile theatre should think twice on the effect of that company on the mass people. If it is harmful the producer should not proceed. Otherwise this trend of advertisement may deviate mobile theatre from its main objectives. However it should also be mentioned that many theatre parties are also advertising various welfare schemes launched by the government or the health department for the benefit of the people. For example in 2008 Theatre Bhagyadevi advertised a programme based on sanitation and hygiene and this type of advertisement definitely helps the common masses.

**Glamour Artist**

Keeping a glamour artist becomes a fashion in mobile theatre. Just before finishing a session almost all the producers of mobile theatre run after the glamour artists and bargain with them for the next session. As the number of these glamour artists is few compared to the total number of mobile theatres, they often exploit the producers demanding a huge amount of money. It is unquestionably an unfair competition. Besides, these glamour artists often create tension among the true spirited mobile
theatre artists. These artists, who used to think mobile theatre as their home, bread and butter, are forced to think otherwise. Because in presence of the glamour artist, these people often feel neglected inside the theatre hall. If unity is not maintained inside mobile theatre it will certainly create discrepancy, resulting to a darker future.

Now if we look at the causes for this changing trend in mobile theatre, we can blame neither the producers nor the playwrights. The people of Assam are living in an age of globalization now a days. Globalization has coloured all the people in such a way that consciously or unconsciously everybody is running after it. *Globalization has changed our taste, habit, thinking and even our emotion and feelings. We are now compelled to change even our attitude towards life and somehow we are in search of materialistic benefits*, says Najrul Islam, the producer of Bardoisila Theatre. If the mobile theatres have to cope up with this changing materialistic environment, they are bound to change a few of their traditional method of presentation. Mobile theatres today dare to perform – the sinking of the Titanic, crawling of Anaconda or burning of the twin tower of USA on stage and all become possible for the change of traditional technology. Audiences of all classes like it because it satisfies their taste. Gimmick is necessary for dramatic presentation. It is used by multinational companies for commercial purposes. As
the taste of people has changed rapidly, the producers are also trying to cope up with it. ‘People like the big colourful hoardings of big companies or sensuous colourful TV advertisements. We don’t have any option but to satisfy the taste of the common man. So we are also using colourful hoardings of our play as well as our actors and actresses’, says Ratan Lahkar, the producer of Kohinoor Theatre.

Regarding glamour artist, most of the producers of mobile theatre opine that the tradition of glamour artist is not a new thing. Natasurya Phani Sarma worked on the stage of Brajanath Sarma’s Kohinoor Opera, and then he acted in Chiraj and Emuthi Chaol on the stage of Purbajyoti Theatre. If Natasuiya Phani Sarma is being considered as a glamour artist the tradition had started from the time of Brjanath Srama’s Kohinoor Theatre. After that many glamour artists joined either as actor or actress in mobile theatres. Kalaguru Bishnu Rabha and Dada Sahib Phalke award winner Dr. Bhupen Hazarika also acted on the stage of Purbajyoti Theatre and Suradevi Theatre respectively. Similarly Assamese film stars like – Ila Kakati, Prasanta Hazarika, Bidya Rao, Biju Phukan, Rabin Neog, Nipan Goswami, Pranjal Saikia, Purnima Pathak, Tapan Das, Purabi Sarma and Upakul Bardoloi worked on the stage of mobile theatres for many years. Presently Jatin Bora, Rabi Sarma, Akash Deep, Joy Kashyap, Prastuti Parasar, Gayatri Mahanta, Barasarani Bishaya, and Angoorlata have been performing on stage. It is quite natural – Assamese people have developed a weakness for the acting of these glamour artists of TV
or VCD on the stage of mobile theatre, says Achyut Patowari, renowned journalist of an Assamese daily.

Another important factor for keeping these glamour artists is the inviting committee's continuous pressure. *We can not perform one theatre in one place for the whole session. So we have to think for the demand of the inviting committees or organizations. As they prefer glamour artist we do not have any alternatives,* says, Najrul Islam, the producer of Bardoisila Theatre.

Though the producers' interpretation is true in one sense, drama can not be accepted simply as an entertaining medium. It also demands certain ethics closely connected with human values. Besides, mobile theatre can not ignore its social responsibilities.

Introduction of glamour artist can not be a faulted step from the point of view of the producer. By casting a glamour artist a theatre can earn both name and fame. Besides, a glamour artist is also an artist and none can deny his or her artistic capability. But in the name of glamour artist the producers or the playwrights often mix Bollywood masala and Hollywood extravaganza. It definitely reduces the artistic temperament of the glamour artist as well as the play.

It is painful to see that most of the producers of mobile theatre in present time tried to manage their business entirely on commercial basis. They seldom care to spend any money on any progressive experiment.
or innovation so long as they succeed in attracting large crowds to their latest venture in traditional style. Plays are selected not for their literary merit, social significance or aesthetic values but for the opportunities they afford for scenic display for songs and dance sequences. The policy behind their choice is nothing but financial benefit. In selecting a play every producer of mobile theatre has to give primary importance on the social significance as well as the aesthetic values. The producers of mobile theatres must be united in selecting their plays to perform on stage. No producer can tell that their will be a scarcity of audience if they will perform plays like *Ramdhenu, Saraguirir Sapari, Matir Gari, Emuthi Chaol* or *Ramyabhumi*. Trend may be changed but the popularity of these plays will remain the same. Imitation is necessary but blind imitation of any art may damage the native culture. New playwrights have to keep in mind about the artistic edifice produced by the yesteryears playwrights. In composing a play, a playwright should not forget the moral ethics of Assamese social life. S. Radhakrishnan says *We can not make people good by Acts of Parliament. Nor it is possible by constitutional provisions to remove deep seated social prejudices. We influence social behaviour by creating public opinion. I have known many playwrights and actors who have worked hard at the task of raising standards of behaviour in our country.* It is true that a good play can lead a good number of people towards the real zeal of life.

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S. Radhakrishnan: *Inaugural speech in Indian Drama in Retrospect* (Gurgaon: Sangeet Natak Academi, Hope India Pub., 2007), p. 16
In many cases it is seen that the audience come out of the theatre hall with a painful feeling for the absence of plays written by the playwrights like Mahendra Barthakur, Pratfulla Bora, Bhaben Barua or Bhabendra Nath Saikia. This is unquestionably a bleak sign for the future of mobile theatre: New playwrights like Abhijit Bhattacharya, Dhruba Sarma or Samarendra Barman have no doubt an artistic mind to compose novel Assamese plays. They are more alive to the spirit of the changing times and have an altogether fresh and modern mind. But they are not being provided the proper environment for dramatic composition. Abhijit Bhattacharya's *Samiran Barua Ahi Ase* or *Rangdhal Chowali Moi*; Dhruba Sarma’s *Saponar Ghar* or *Misaliyar Mitha Maram* and Samarendra Barman’s *Son Saparilo Bahudur* or *Maramar Nabou* may be considered as good plays. They have qualities but the pressure created by the producers make them helpless and they take the easy way to compose gimmick dominating cheap plays. Unless the producers encourage new playwrights, mobile theatre can not recover from these troubles and that may bring doom to the whole mobile theatres of Assam.