CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

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Assam, a constituent state of India is situated in the extreme North Eastern Part of the country, between lat.24°3 N and 27°58 N and long. 89°5 E and 96°1 E. The state is bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh on the north, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur on the east, Mizoram and Meghalaya on the south and Bangladesh and West Bengal on the west. The State is open to the main land of the country on the west through a narrow corridor (35 kms. wide) between Bangladesh and Nepal. It has an area of 78,433sq kms, representing 2.39 percent of the total area and a population of 26,655,528 in 2001, accounting for 2.59 percent of the total population of the country.

Down the ages the state receives a large number of populations of various ethnic affiliations, having disparate socio-cultural heritages. These people entered Assam through different routes from different directions at different intervals of time. The people of Assam can be divided into several groups mainly on the basis of racial element, religion and language.

Anthropologists believe that the Austroloids, also known as Pre-Dravidians and Proto- Austroloids were the earliest people to reach
Assam. After that, the successive waves of migration from the North, the East and the North East brought the Mangoloids to Assam. *Baros* or *Bados, Kacharies, Deories, Rabhas, Sanowals, Tiwas, Mising, Karbis, Dimasas, Ahoms, Chutiyas, Garos* and other tribes of this area are Mangoloids origin.

Another group of Tibeto-Burma speakers migrated towards South from North West China to arrive the North Western part of Myanmar, where they split up into two groups. One group moved towards further south and the other towards west along the foothills of the Himalayas to reach Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet and North Eastern part of India. These people came to Assam in successive waves and settled in different regions. They were the ancestors of the present day tribes of the state namely – *Bados, Kacharis, Rabhas, Tiwas, Dimasas, Ahoms* and others.

The Caucasoids are a major race of mankind. They have several divisions and sub divisions, namely: Alpine, Indo Aryan, Mediterranean and so on. The Caucasoids migrated into this region through west and settled in the valley of river Brahmaputar and Borak. Generally speaking, the Assamese caste Hindu populations as well as the Muslims are Caucasoids in origin.

However, the timing of migration of these populations remains uncertain.
In ancient days, Assam was known as *Pragjyotisha* and later as *Kamrupa*. By these two names Assam has often been referred to both in epigraphs and literature. The modern state of Assam is but a part of the extensive kingdom of *Pragjyotisha* or *Kamrupa* of ancient times. Though the extent of the kingdom varied from time to time, there is no doubt that its northern and south western limits extended much beyond present state of Assam. However, the origin of the name 'Assam' is not certain. Several theories are being forwarded to establish its origin. According to some, it is derived from the word *asoma* means uneven. Noted scholar, B. K. Kakati suggests that the word *asama* means peerless may be a later Sanskritization of an earlier form *acham*¹. In Tai *cham* means to be defeated. With the prefix 'a', *assam* would mean *undefeated*. If this is its origin then the name once applied to the people was subsequently applied to the country as well.

However the historians believe that the name Assam is connected with the *Shan* invaders, who entered the Brahmaputra valley in the beginning of the 13th century as the term occurs nowhere prior to the *Ahom* occupation.

The *Vansawali* of the Koch Kings, the *Yoginitantra* and the Vaisnava Literature apply this term to the Shan conquerors rather than to

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¹ Banikanta Kakati: *Assamese: Its Formation and Development* (Guwahati: Lawyers' Book Stall, 1972) p.4
the country which they occupy. Therefore it appears reasonable to conclude that the word Assam was a later development occurring after the coming of Tai-Shans.²

Assam has often been called a museum of variety of caste and tribes. It has been a mating ground of all branches of human race and of cultures of both hills and plains. In the process of assimilation of these diverse elements, a composite culture grew up and that culture is later known as Assamese culture. In the context of a transitional social pattern, a rigid account of caste and tribes is difficult to find out. However same castes and tribes inhabiting in the state may be discussed as follows:

The Brahmins

Historical documents reveal that the Brahmins have been inhabiting in Assam since 6th Century AD. But there are enough reasons to believe that the migration of Brahmins to Assam began long before that date. Traditional accounts indicate that Parasuram settled Brahmins near the present Parasuram Kunda. The Assamese Brahmins originally came from Mithila, Orissa, Banaras, and Kanouj. There are also a few Bengali Brahmins who came from the Nabadeep or the northern Part of Bengal. The Brahmins of the state in spite of their pride in social superiority, are liberal in there observance of other social laws. Most of the Brahmins

maintain a family deity. They do not plough the land themselves but work with the spade and constitute the priestly section of the Hindu society.

The Kayasthas

The Kayasthas are believed to be Kshetriyas. It is believed that the Kayasthas had come to Assam from places like Mithila, Kanouj and Bengal. Like the Brahmins, the Kayasthas also maintained a higher social status and never engaged themselves in ploughing land. Many of the Sattradhikars are Kayasthas. Sankardeva himself was a Kayastha.

The Kalitas

History tells that the Kalitas had come to Assam during the reign of Dharmapal around 12th century AD. Some scholars believed that the Kalitas are originally from Alpine, where as some others opined that they are from Aryan stock.

The Keots

The Keots are included among the caste Hindus. In lower Assam Keots are generally called Komars or Blacksmith. The Keot of the state are also seen engaging in agricultural field. Sometimes they also engaged in other trades.
The Bariyas

The children of a Brahmin girl, married to a non Brahmin boy, are called Bariyas. The term Bariya is said to have derived from 'bari' meaning a widow. It is said that the Bariyas are originated from an offspring of a Brahmin widow. But this is not happening in present day.

The Suts

The term Sut is said to have been derived from Sut, the expounder of the Puranas, who was himself the son of a Brahmin widow. But some people of Bariya sub caste also called themselves Sut.

The Yogis

The Yogis of the state are known as Naths, Nath Yogis and as Katanis a sub caste of the Yogis. They claim that they are descendants of Gorakshanaths, who is said to be an incarnation of Siva. The original profession of the Yogis was drum beating but during the Ahom rule they were mainly associated with the rearing of Pat Silk worms and spinning of silk thread. The Yogis wore the holy thread but unlike the Brahmins they take to ploughing themselves.

Nadiyas, Jaluwas and Kaibartas

The main occupation of these castes is fishing. Some of them have now taken to agriculture and other trades. The constitution of India included them among the Scheduled Caste.
Mali, Kumar, Sonari and others

However, there are some other sub castes like Mali, Kumar, Sonari, Hira, Napit and Dhoba in Assam. Among these Dhoba, Napit and Kumar are included among other backward classes, while the rest under Scheduled Caste.

Kochas, Chutias, Bodos, Morans, Ahoms and others

These tribes were the ruling dynasties of Assam at some periods of history. These tribes were the descendant of Mangoloids or Indo-Mangoloids.

Khamties, Phakiyals, Turungs, Shyams and Khamjans

These tribes are originally from Tai-Sham, who have immigrated to Assam at different times and settled mainly in eastern Assam.

The Miris

The tribe is also known as Mising, originally a hill tribe living in the hills between the Nisi and the Adi territories. This tribe settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra and Subansiri river and their tributaries during the Ahom rule. Their main occupation is agriculture. However some other tribes namely Manipuries, Singphoes, Adies, Garos and Nagas are also found in the state. After the inauguration of the British rule in the state,
Marowari and Panjabi traders and bankers, Bengali clerks, doctors, lawyers and businessmen and in course of time some migrated people from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh also permanently settled in the state and merged with Assamese culture and tradition.

**The Muslims**

Considering their ancestors the Muslims of the state can be conventionally divided into four categories. These are the descendants of the Muslim soldiers, taken as prisoners by the *Ahom* kings, the local converts, the Muslim religious preachers who came from time to time, and the Muslim artisans who came during *Ahom* period. However a section of immigrant Muslims from Bangladesh has also merged with the native in different times.

The Assamese society was and has always been by and large an open society. The process of assimilation and fusion has always make people of this region active and helped in coping up with different ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious groups. Though the Aryanization of the land in the remote past developed a society fundamentally based on Aryan ideas, the other non- Aryan tribes who existed there were readily absorbed or got themselves assimilated in this general pattern of the social structure. Much was retained of its tribe of its custom and traditions,

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3 Bhuban Mohan Das:  *Anthropological identity in Assam Land and People* (Guwahati: K.C.Das Commerce College, 2009) p-88
but at the same time much more was sacrificed. The process of mutual assimilation and appreciation gradually developed one Assamese culture. Moreover these different people while assimilating without making any distinction with the earlier inhabitants and in fact its wave of influx of immigrants has brought in its train the staple of its own culture, only to be woven into the general texture of the culture of the soil.  

NORTH KAMRUP AREA: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Geographically North Kamrupa Area indicates the northern part of the undivided Kamrup District of Assam. At present as the old Kamrup District is divided into five districts namely Kamrup, Barpeta, Bagsa, Chirang and Nalbari, the North Kamrup Area will cover mainly Barpeta, Bagsa, Chirang, Nalbari and northern part of Kamrup district. In the field of performing art North Kamrupa Area has its own significance. The people living in this part of the state are mainly Kalitas, Bodos, Kacharies, Brahmins, Kayasthas, Kochas, Kumar, Keots etc. These people of different castes have their own performing arts which, they have been performing for ages. Performing arts like ojapali, putula nach, nagaranam, dhulia, khulia, have given a new identity to this area. Besides, the formation of yatra as well as mobile theatre in this area brought a new horizon. Moreover, Nataraj Theatre, the first mobile theatre of Assam

4 Dr. Durgeswar Doley: Assamese Liberalism in Assam and the Assamese Mind (Ed.) Nagen Saikia (Jorhat: Asom Sahitya Sabha, 1991) p-29
was also formed in this area. Theatre troupes like Kohinoor, Awahan, Mancharupa, Suradevi, Devadashi, Bardoisila, Sakuntala, Bhagyadevi, Ranghar, Apsara, Aparupa, Purbajyoti, Makunda, and many others were formed in this area. For all these reasons North Kamrupa Area bears a special significance in the field of Mobile Theatre of the state.

OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESIS

The main objectives of the study may be placed under the following heads –

a) to study the origin of Drama in Assam

b) to study the growth and development of mobile theatre in Assam, specially in North Kamrup Area

c) to study the impact of mobile theatre on the socio-cultural life of Assam

d) to study the role of mobile theatre in solving unemployment problem of the state

The hypothesis of this study work is a tentative solution of the objectives. Here we try to depend upon the under mentioned sources –

a) Facts which are established by the previous investigation in the related areas.

b) With the help of self observation and experiences.

c) Through reasoning insight and logical derivation.
METHODOLOGY

The method of this study is a case study method. But in some cases of investigation historical method, with critical analysis, is also adopted.

COLLECTION AND TREATMENT OF DATA

Datas are collected from different sources. It is mainly collected from Primary and Secondary sources. The Primary Source may be classified under two broad categories –

a) Consciously transmitted information in the form of oral or written testimony or the records kept in the forms of research reports or published articles.

b) Unconscious testimony in the form of relics.

The Secondary Sources include the sources of information transmitted by one who was neither a participant nor an eye witness of the original event.