CHAPTER 5

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5.1: Introduction

Entertainment in simple is as an act of amusement for entertaining people. It is a form of activity or performance that holds the attention and interest of an audience, or gives pleasure as well as delight. Storytelling, Music, Drama, Dance and different kind of performances exist in all cultures are continuously playing as an important source of entertainment for a very long time. The experience of being entertained has come to be strongly associated with amusement, so that one common understanding of the idea is fun and laughter. An important aspect of entertainment is the audience, which turns a private recreation or leisure activity into entertainment. Entertainment can be public or private, involving formal, scripted performance, as in the case of theatre or concerts; or unscripted and spontaneous, as in the case of children’s games.

A theatre is a place where people can receive education, entertainment and recreation. Since the very beginning there are various folk performing arts like Oja-pali, Puppet Shows, Dhulia Naam, Khuliya Naam, Nagara Naam and many others ritualistic cultures were prevailed in Assamese contemporary society which worked as a powerful source of entertainment for a very long time. These folk performing arts had served mainly three purposes; (i) To entertain all sections of people, (ii) To spread religious cum moral lessons among the audiences, and (iii) To bring a sense of unity as well as integrity among the people of Assam.

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva’s Bhaona popularly known as Ankiya Naat, the innovative performing art was a very popular source of entertainment during that time.
Although the chief goal of Sankardeva was to spread Vaisnavite movement through his \textit{Ankiya Naat} type of plays but it worked as a very influential medium of entertainment and done a satisfying job of the Assamese society for a long time. It is unquestionably a pleasant source of entertainment where multi ethnic groups of the land get an opportunity to sit together and enjoy a play. The rising popularity of Sankardeva’s \textit{Bhaona} paved its entry into the royal places. The Ahom Kings and nobles found the plays a welcome means of entertainment. Sankardeva’s \textit{Bhaona} had continued to be performed and enjoyed with enthusiasm as the major source of entertainment and education till the middle of the nineteenth century.

While \textit{Bhaona} as a medium of entertainment and instruction remained quite popular all over Assam, a few enthusiastic people developed a new type of \textit{Bhaona} called \textit{Gayan-Bayan} in South Assam and West Assam.

After the arrival of British, the popularity of \textit{Bhaona} and \textit{Gayan-Bayan} gradually decreases and a new form of \textit{Jatra} developed under the initiative of some people who had visited Bengal and enjoyed Bengali \textit{Jatra}. This new type of \textit{Jatra} first developed in the second half of nineteenth century in Lower Assam. In between 1860-1880, the first commercial \textit{Jatra} party of Assam was established in a small village named Murkuchi in the undivided Kamrup district (now in Nalbari district) under the initiative of Jaydev Sarma.¹

As the time passes, \textit{Jatra} became a very popular form of entertainment in the land of Assam. Compared to \textit{Bhaona} performance, \textit{Jatra} has less didactic but more entertaining elements. It was popular not so much for their dramatic merit but for their entertaining value. Although \textit{Jatra} has less dramatic technique, it played a vital role in molding Assamese mind. On one hand it entertained the people through dance, drama and story,
and on the other hand it spread certain didactic note to remove all social evils. This way, till the middle of twentieth century Jatra was a very popular source of entertainment along with other performing arts among the people of Assam.

To give the financial security to peoples assigned with Jatra parties as well as to enrich the cultural environment of the state, Achyut Lahkar started a new form of entertainment, popularly known as Mobile Theatre in Assam. It was a developed form of Jatra and more commercial in nature. Since its inception in 1963 in the name of ‘Nataraj Theatre’ in Pathsala, Assamese Mobile Theatres have been playing a very effective role as a major source of entertainment. Now a day it is the biggest entertainment industry of the state of Assam.

Till 1963 theatre has not been started in Assam like Kolkata and Mumbai. As pioneer of Assamese Mobile Theatre Achyut Lahkar 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 Jatra. ‘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 as a source of entertainment.

5.2 Elements of Entertainment in Assamese Mobile Theatre

Mobile Theatre of Assam has undergone many changes since its inception in 1963. Many new techniques have taken place in stage craft, dramatic performances, light, sound and music. Change is inevitable and it is natural phenomenon. Development of science and technology is probably the root cause of all the changes.

In 1963 with the initiative of Achyut Lahkar, when Jatra transformed into a commercial Mobile Theatre many changes had taken place in the dramatic
performance. Achyut Lahkar introduced many innovations in his ‘Nataraj Theatre’, viz electronic equipments, revolving stage, moving stage, techniques of theatre scope and projector and transformed the make shift theatre hall into a beautiful Mobile Theatre like temporary cinema hall. Now a day Mobile Theatre of Assam has transformed into a well knit organization. Modern stage, colorful settings, sophisticated light, music and sound and at the same time introduction of glamour artists gave both name and fame to this medium.

In this perspective following are some important elements easily visible which make Assamese Mobile Theatre a very popular medium of entertainment in Assam.

5.2.1: Gimmick

The term ‘Gimmick’ which means something unusual or something which has little value is connected with Assamese Mobile Theatre since the formation of modern Mobile Thetare in Assam in the name of ‘Nataraj Theatre’ in 1963. All theatre may use gimmick which is also known as trick or stratagem to attract the attention of the audiences. In a theatrical performance gimmick is necessary but today it seems that Mobile Theatre of Assam crossing the limit and as a result of this, a noble play sometimes lost its artistic quality on stage. In the initial stage of its growth and development, most of the playwrights write plays based on day to day issues which has an artistic quality. But the playwrights of present time are much more influenced by crude commercialism and sometimes they are pressurized to write plays on fantasy based stories which has less artistic qualities but more gimmick. No doubt these playwrights through their plays can satisfy their audiences but it hampers the growing popularity of this biggest cultural medium of the state. This element has made
Assamese Mobile Theatre a popular medium of entertainment among the people of Assam.

5.2.2: Pesting Dances

Dance is an inevitable part of every artistic performance. In case of Mobile Theatre, it has more importance to describe the situation in a beautiful way. But presently a new trend is developed for which the playwright and the producer include more songs which sometimes lessen the gravity of performance. In many cases dancers, mainly the hero and heroines are seen coming out of stage with the help of trolley specially designed to create a circus like environment to provide entertainment to the audiences. Of course, sometimes this type of pestering dances decreases both the constructive as well as artistic temperament of a play.

5.2.3: Glamour Artist

An industry in its own right with an annual turnover of over Rupees ten crores, the popularity of the Assamese Mobile Theatre is capturing professional actors from the Assamese film industry. Entry of glamour artist to the wide field of Assamese Mobile Theatre has given a new looked to this biggest cultural medium of the state. In its very beginning artist like Natasurjya Phani Sarma, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika and many others worked in Mobile Theatre as playwright, director, music director and singer which ultimately increases the popularity of this medium among the general mass of Assam. With the passes of time, several glamour artists from Assamese film industry entered into Mobile Theatre which gave an alternative platform to those artists for performance before the general audiences. Till the beginning of twentieth century artists like Nipon Goswami, Pranjal Saikia, Biju Phukan, Prashanta Hazarika, Mridula Baruah, Bidya Rao, Ela Kakati and many others contributed a lot which
increases the popularity of this medium as a major source of entertainment and leisure among the people of Assam. After this, various popular artists of Assamese film industry namely Tapan Das, Jatin Bora, Raag Oinitam, Akashdeep, Rabi Sarma, Bishnu Khargharia, Arun Hazarika, Utpal Das, Prasenjit, Prashtuti Parashar, Aimi Baruah, Angurlata, Gayatri Mahanta etc. started their career in Mobile Theatre which gave a new impression to this biggest cultural medium of the state. In the same way, Zubeen Garg and Angarag Mahanta, the most popular singers of present time also entered into the field of Assamese Mobile Theatre which unquestionably assists a lot to make this medium more popular among the people of Assam. In this way, entry of glamorous actors and actresses as well as well-liked singers of Assam finally makes Assamese Mobile Theatre a very popular source of entertainment among the people of Assam.

5.2.4: Dance Drama

Dance drama is one of the most significant features of Mobile Theatre of Assam. Now a day it has become a regular phenomenon for each and every Mobile Theatre parties of Assam. Today almost all the theatre parties prepare at least four dance drama and performs one of them just before the commencement of the main play on stage. In the beginning the themes of this dance dramas were mainly taken from the epics or ‘puranas’ or something from the folk tales, depicting love, separation, meeting, expectance etc. were perform by a group of dancers through appropriate gestures with interludes of pure dance. The song of this dance dramas sung by a team of musician and singer. Usually the dancers are seen in colorful costumes and make up. But with the changing perspectives, the theme of these dance dramas also take a turn from epic to present day problem. Some of these themes are; flood problem, unemployment, rising AIDS in society, witch hunting, deforestation, etc.
In 2007-2008, ‘Abahawn Theatre’ and ‘Kohinoor Theatre’ performed two dance dramas dealing with the theme on agricultural activities. This was of course a novel concept to choose dance drama as a means to create awareness among common mass. The renowned lyricist Kirtinath Bardaloi along with Muktinath Bardaloi first wrote a novel dance drama in Assam named *Basanta Abhisesh* which was well received by contemporary audience.²

Some well known dance drama which became very popular in Assam were *Nimati Koina*, *Son Pokhili*, *Sonit Kuwari*, *Amarapali*, *Sitaharan*, *Prabhati Hengool*, *Sonali Sutar Sadhu*, *Talsara Sewali*, *Jivan Bate Bate* etc.

It is true that dance dramas has provided an aesthetic as well as an artistic environment in the state on one hand and give an exposure to so many hidden talents in the field of performance on other. It also helps the audience in setting up the tone for the main play of the theatre hall.

### 5.2.5: Songs and Music

Songs as well music are two essential elements of every dramatic performance. The main purpose of this two basic elements of every dramatic performance is to entertain the audience and at the same time to give an emotion to a particular situation. A play is likely to use songs and music for atmosphere, settling the audience, scene changes interludes and underscoring emotionally significant moments. In the field of Assamese Mobile Theatre, songs and music are becoming two essential components. In every play performed by Assamese Mobile Theatre now a day uses songs to attract the attention of the audiences. It also seen that most of the mobile theatre parties of Assam in present time use Theme Song as the ‘trailer’ before starting their journey to different nook and corner of the state. The entry of popular singer like Zubeen Garg, Angarag
Mahanta, Tarali Sarma and many others to this biggest cultural industry of the state also make it easier for the Mobile Theatre parties of Assam to explore their popularity among the common people of the state. The glamour, however, brings with it many other elemental changes. For one, the ramp is a recent addition to the ‘Bhramyaman’ stage. The choreographer is a new recruit to the crew. The musician, on the other hand, has lost out. “Pre-recorded songs by well-known playback singers like Papon and Zubeen Garg are used by most theatre groups today. The concept of live orchestra no longer exists”, says Teertha Saharia of ‘Abahan Theatre’.

5.3: Mobile Theatre and Entertainment Trailers

A trailer, also known as a ‘preview’ or ‘coming attraction’ is an advertisement or a commercial that will be exhibited in the future, the result of creative and technical work. The trailer format has also been adopted as a promotional tool for an upcoming theatrical event. Trailers consist of a series selected shots being advertised. Since the purpose of the trailer is to attract an audience, these excerpts are usually drawn from the most exciting, funny, or otherwise noteworthy parts of the main event but in abbreviated form and usually without producing spoilers. For this purpose the scenes are not necessarily in the order in which they appear in the original performance.

With the advent of science and technology, modern techniques are becoming inevitable in every aspect of human life. Thus the elements of new technologies as well as globalization have impacting the lifestyle and thoughts which influence the entertaining industry at a large. The Assamese Mobile Theatre is not an exception of this which is largely influenced by this modern advancement. A best result of this is that Assamese Mobile Theatres are commercialized reveals the major shift that has taken place in their advertisement. Earlier the posters of theatre parties were only painted by local painters,
but now with the coming of the digital technology the actors and actresses are made to appear more attractive and resemble the popular Bollywood actors and actresses.

The other new method that promotes the Assamese Mobile Theatres now is the Bollywood kind of songs and dance sequence that are itemized as the title song of the theatre group. The songs and the trailers from the plays are now uploaded in YouTube and can be easily accessed. The theatre parties have now signed contracts with sponsors Airtel, Reliance, Vodafone, Britannia, Coca Cola etc. promising preservation of folk, regional and ethnic culture. Through these various techniques it tries to make itself popular among the audiences.

In Assam, trailers are becoming a very easily accessible way for almost all the Mobile Theatre parties to make it fashionable among the audience. Now a day, most of the Mobile Theatre group make its trailer and advertised it through various private satellite television channels. Some trailers of play for the year 2016-2017 that are mostly seen in the television channels are *Mahatmar Sakupani* (Rajtilak Theatre), *Maa Kali* (Abahawan Theatre), *Narasingha* (Rajmukut Theatre), *Romanch* (Brindaban Theatre), *Banariya* (Hengool Theatre), *Sangibihin* (Chiranjeeb Theatre) etc.

5.4: Television serials Vis-a-Vis Mobile Theatre

Mobile Theatre parties of Assam have started their journey towards the different parts of the state in the mid-august. Assamese Mobile Theatre has crossed golden jubilee year from its inception and still celebrating a glorious chapter in the entertainment industry of the region. Despite the era of modern technology and advent of highly effective social networking media, the mobile theatre industry is proudly keeping up its journey and touching new heights of success, in case of popularity. Having this confidence and the blessings from masses, they again set off with the determination to
win the hearts of the audience. There are more than forty Mobile Theatre groups in Assam today and all the groups will travel to different parts of the state to enthrall the audience with their plays and magnificent techniques for next nine months.

The concept of Mobile Theatre came into perception in 1963, when noted cultural activist and the pioneer of Mobile Theatre movement in the state Achyut Lahkar took this historical initiative to bring the modern Mobile Theatre to all parts of Assam. He researched and learned a lot on the form of modern theatre and eventually had decided to go ahead with the concept of Mobile Theatre, popularly known as ‘Bhramyaman Theatre’. These Mobile Theatre troupes comprises of about 150-180 members including actors, technicians, make-up artists, cooks, drivers, helpers, dancers etc.

Every year these Mobile Theatre groups select three plays typically and rehearse for one and half months in their camps. Finally they set off to stage these plays all the corners of the state. The local clubs and associations invite the troupes usually for three day event. According to these invitations, the troupes have to make their route and finalize the dates. The journey continues for next nine month and they travel throughout the state and all the necessary equipments, from lights, wires, machines, suitcases, chairs, bamboos etc, are to be loaded in trucks. The glorious journey, started in 1963, has come along a long path and it becomes the major source of entertainment in both the rural and urban areas of Assam. By implementing the newer thought and innovations mobile theatre of Assam is still gaining the overwhelmed response from masses.

For a state like Assam, where all the entertainment industry, including the cinema, are in trauma and facing numerous problems, it is really a big aspect that Mobile Theatre industry still has been garnered and appreciated by all classes of people. In this age of
up-to-date technologies when the entertainment level becomes too high thanking to the internet, social networking media, dish antennas, different kind of television channels etc, the Mobile Theatre industry of Assam is still a popular medium of entertainment.³

‘I really feel privileged to get such a medium in our state and work with it since long. Nowhere in the country has such a popular medium of entertainment exists except Assam. It makes me proud truly whenever I get a chance to talk on this outside and everybody find it hard to believe that such a industry can prevails and run successfully’, says Prostuti Parashar, leading actress of Assam who has worked in huge number of movies and has been associated with Mobile Theatre industry since long.

Now a day, there are lots of Assamese serials like *Borol-Kokai, Khaplang-Kai, Bhara-Ghar* and many others are broadcast through various local television channels which are popular among the general mass. In this respect when it was asked to Ratan Lahkar about the impact of these television serials on Mobile Theatre of Assam, the producer of ‘Kohinoor Theatre’ replied that, “The traditional theatre is located in cities and staged indoors in auditoriums with limited capacity. They don’t go to the villages. More than 70 per cent of Indians live in the villages. The Mobile Theatre starts in a town, then goes to villages and performs before thousands of people in open-air venues. We take our plays to villages where there are no cinemas and no electricity to watch television. People pay to see the plays of mobile theatre. We are invited by local cultural organizations, which sell the tickets. The actors in our plays are successful film stars because glamour helps the business. We offer a variety of plays from adaptations of famous Assamese novels and Greek classics to those based on big Hollywood films. In my troupe’s 1998-99 production *Titanic*, we had to stage an unprecedented matinee show because of public demand. But the commercial success is because we are
committed professionals, who know the art and the craft of the stage like any other urban theatre group. The local audiences influence our productions. After each play in a village, people come and tell us about what they didn’t like and point out defects in the scenes. These suggestions are taken to the director and the playwright, who make the necessary changes. My theatre company has staged more than 100 plays since its launch in 1976. Some of our plays use the stage to educate the villagers about social issues. We talked about the evils of drug addiction in one play and about the relevance of the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi in another. We have also had two productions to dispel the myths about AIDS. The Mobile Theatre has earned a lot of money from rural areas of Assam and we have a responsibility of giving back to the society. This happens at two levels. One, local cultural organizations, which book our plays, channel their profits into building schools, especially for girls, in the villages. There are several schools and colleges in Assam today, which are run from the profits of Mobile Theatre. The mobile theatre groups too individually run schools and colleges to serve the rural community. We are directly or indirectly involved in several areas of social work.”

From the above it is found that although there are lots of popular television serials are available in Assam, but the popularity of Mobile Theatre is not decreasing. On the other hand it is still gaining its popularity as one of the most entertainment medium of the state.

5.5: Mobile Theatre of Assam and NSD

The fifty three year old Mobile theatre of Assam which has been entertaining the masses for the last several decades, ‘Kohinoor Theatre’, a leading Mobile Theatre group of the State, which has a record for attracting the audiences with ground-breaking
technical accomplishments on the stage, has invited by the National School of Drama (NSD) to perform at New Delhi.

‘Kohinoor Theatre’ was invited by the National School of Drama to perform in New Delhi from April 25-29, 2010, at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) premises. In this invitation, ‘Kohinoor Theatre’ staged three plays, namely *Ashimat Jar Heral Sima* written by Prafulla Bora, *O Moi Munnai Koiso* written by popular playwright of Assam Abhijeet Bhattacharya and *Sitare Semeka Rati* by Sevabrat Baruah for six nights with two special scenes of yesteryear’s block-bluster *Titanic* and *Dinosoror Atanka* and also two dance dramas. Besides other audiences, the outgoing students of NSD of the last five years and the Assamese community of Delhi are witnessed the “Carnival on Wheel” on the Indira Gandhi Heritage and cultural centre premises.4

In connection with this on April 28, a seminar on Mobile Theatre was also held and leading theatre personalities of the state like Hemanta Dutta, Garima Hazarika and Tarali Sarma were present as the resource persons. Another important part of the show was the exhibition showcasing various phases of development of Mobile Theatre, costumes, books, etc.5

It is indeed an honour for all the theatre lovers of Assam that NSD has taken the ‘Assamese Mobile Theatre’ as its case study as nowhere in the country does such a popular medium of entertainment exists except in Assam. Producer Ratan Lahkar is hopeful about the initiative of NSD, which gives Assam’s Mobile Theatre a national platform. NSD is also planning to take some of its dramas to stage in other states of the country.
5.6: Mobile Theatre and Cultural Imperialism

The concept of cultural imperialism was propounded by Herbert Irving Schiller, an American media critic in the year 1973. The concept cultural imperialism states that western nations dominate the media as well as culture around the world which in return have a powerful effect on Third World Countries by imposing them western views and therefore destroying their native culture. The cultural imperialism concept interprets that western civilization produces the majority of modern techniques whether it is in the field of media like films, news, comics etc. or in culture because they have the money to do so. The rest of the world purchases those productions because it is cheaper for them to do so rather than producing their own. Therefore, Third World Countries follow the western’s world way of living believing and thinking. Thus the Third World cultures then start to want and do the same thing in their countries which ultimately destroy their native cultures.6

In the field of Assamese Mobile Theatre the concept of cultural imperialism is seen on different aspects. With the advent of science and technologies and passes of time, Mobile Theatres of Assam are using various modern technologies in the performance of a play. Mobile theatre of Assam is now-a-days mostly influenced by the concept of modernization from the western nation which is a serious threat to this industry.7 “Mobile Theatre is only an entertainment industry of the state. It gives more importance on entertaining the people rather than its dramatic performances and publishing consumerism in the name of cultural industry of the state influenced by the concept of cultural imperialism. Again, the entry of ‘glamorous artists’ with insufficient acting skills and lack of serious play writer are the main reasons behind this declination of Assamese Mobile Theatre parties in Assam” 8
“Assamese Mobile Theatre is now giving more importance on their business which decreases the cultural identity of this mass medium. He also said that entertainment is an essential part of dramatic performance and Assamese Mobile Theatre now a day more concentrate on this which make this medium as movie or film and hence lost its dramatic characteristics. Again, Assamese Mobile Theatre as the biggest mass media of communication has a social responsibility and must work for the welfare of the society. It must have to reflect different social issues through dramatic performances and should not concentrate more on eclecticism. Otherwise it will lose its importance as the most popular cultural medium of the state”.\(^9\)

It may also be said that Mobile Theatre parties of Assam had staged various plays of western literature as well as block blaster like *Jurassic Park, Anaconda, Othello, Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Cleopatra, Iliad, Odyssey and Titanic* etc which were a grand success for Mobile Theatre of Assam.

From the study it is found that, as the requirements of the time Assamese Mobile Theatre accept various modern techniques in the performance of their plays. It is also seen that entertainment elements like gimmick and pestering dances are very much presence in almost all of the plays perform by a Mobile Theater parties which decreases the identity of Assamese Mobile Theatre as a cultural medium of the state. During the field study of this research work it was also observed that, Mobile Theatres of Assam in present time are largely influenced by the concept of cultural imperialism. Previously Assamese Mobile Theatre was very successful in performing various social issues of the society through their plays. But some present playwrights of Assam write stories which similar to the story of a cinema or movie and hence it become unsuccessful to fulfill the satisfaction as well as needs of the audiences.
Use of modern technologies are inevitable for a Mobile Theatre party to satisfy the audiences with the passes of time, but at the same time it is very essential for each and every Mobile Theatre parties of Assam to take care about the use of these modern technologies as well as concept so that it can continue its journey as the most popular entertainment medium of the state of Assam. Otherwise Assamese Mobile Theatre will lost its previus glory and identity within a near future if it largely influenced by the concept of cultural imperialism.

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