

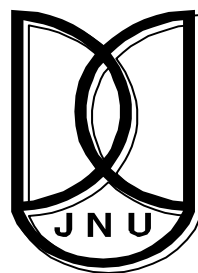
**THE TRAVELLING STAGE AND ITS TALES:
A Critical Study of the Bhramyomaan Theatre of Assam**

Thesis submitted to
Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Date: 21/07/2016

Certificate

This thesis titled “**The Travelling Stage and Its Tales: A Critical Study of the Bhramyomaan Theatre of Assam**” submitted by **Violina Bora**, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree, diploma of any university or institution.

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Declaration by the Candidate

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Acknowledgements

It was 2010 and for the first time after Achyut Lahkar's attempt to take Bhramyomaan Theatre out of Assam, NSD had invited Kohinoor Theatre for a performance which happened in IGNCA. I have been staying away from home for almost nineteen years now and out of which a major part is spent in Delhi. Celebrations of festivals like Bihu, Durga Puja, Saraswati Puja and recently the North East festivals are times I eagerly wait for. During such celebrations food, music, people and a chance to reconnect with something that reminds me of home keeps me excited. Kohinoor's arrival was one such joy. This feeling was just like the arrival of any such theatre troupes to a village where everyone finds a festive fervour. I was studying in Sahitya Akademi library where I met one of our seniors Benil da who was equally interested in going to see the plays Kohinoor was bringing to Delhi. We reached the venue even before the tents were raised. I want to thank Benil da for initiating the journey. I was too conscious to go alone.

I interacted with the workers as well as the producer Ratan Lahkar who was supervising the work there. I saw the props of Titanic and a dinosaur on the back stage and was very excited for the performance to begin. I went for all three nights and dragged my non-Assamese friends along so that they can witness which I could not explain in words. Watching a play of Bhramyomaan theatre is an experience in itself. When I have to begin the list of me being thankful, it has to begin with Kohinoor's arrival in Delhi. The exhibition and pamphlets for each show added knowledge about the form that that existed only in curiosity. During this show I met Sanjib Baishya who was working on Bhramyomaan theatre for his PhD and he helped me with a lot of valuable study materials which I was unable to procure otherwise. I would like to thank him for sharing his resources. During the three days show I decided to write a term paper on it as we were doing a course on popular culture with Prof. Saugata Bhaduri. I could not invest much on writing the term paper as I fell severely ill. I want to thank Gourab da for helping me with the term paper that later on shaped up to be this thesis. I decided I shall invest more in it and make it a bigger project as our centre gives us the opportunity to go beyond the comfort zone of doing research on canonical literature. I am thankful to Centre for English Studies for shaping our thought process to attempt more than what is obvious.

During my field work I reached a place I had never been to, depending on someone I had never interacted with during my entire school life, yet he happily helped. I want to thank Dipjyoti da and Priyanka for hosting me during my field work. I would like to extend my gratitude to his whole family where his father Bhupen Kalita was previously involved with Bordoisila Theatre. Bhupen bordeuta is a living encyclopedia of facts about Bhramyomaan theatre. He said theatre is in his blood and even if his physical limitations do not allow him to be as involved as he used to be, he can't keep away from it either. He is the only person who helped me with the script of a play he kept treasured. He introduced me to Nazrul Islam, the producer of Bordoisila Theatre who despite his busy schedule during the performance gave me time and answered my questions. He also initiated the interaction with Subodh Mazumdar, the producer of Bhagyadevi Theatre. I would like to thank Subodh da for giving me the freedom to access any part of the theatre before and during the performance. Interaction with actors, workers, costume designers and many others from theatre Bhagyadevi helped me unconditionally and I am thankful to them. Here I have to mention two families who I had no association with, yet helped me out during my field work by letting me stay in their homes. I would like to thank the families of Bhrigupati Talukdar and Naren Baishya. Everyone in the family of Baishya is involved in *Ahbayok* Committees and had imparted with lot of valuable information. I thank Golap sir for bringing me to that family. I would like to thank Abhijit Bhattacharya for his interview and Utpal Dutta for his honest opinions and interview in a very short notice. I would also like to mention the name of Hemanta Boruah, the manager of Rajasri Theatre who at the last moment gave me the opportunity to record Goonda in its second show of the night. I thank Mrinal da for giving me his contact, who himself was an actor with Manikoot Theatre at one point of time. I would like to thank Arindam for being a constant companion during my stay at Guwahati making it bearable and driving me around at crucial moments. I did not have to ask for help from him, it was always offered and for that I am utterly obliged.

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After my field work, my laptop was stolen in a burglary. I am thankful to the people who gave me the same space again with equal interest as the first time. I am glad to have finished it despite all adversities. I am grateful to all the people I have interacted with during the entire duration of research who in one way or the other have helped me through this incredible journey.

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Introduction

Theatre as a tradition in India dates back to over five thousand years. It started during the Vedic era with dialogic hymns mentioned in Rigveda. *Natyashastra* is considered to be one of the earliest doctrines of dramaturgy all over the world. This holy book on theatre was scripted by Bharata Muni approximately between two thousand B.C and the fourth century A.D. Known as the fifth Veda, *Natyashastra* furnishes comprehensive discourse on drama, performance and visual art form. It gives the nine *rasas* through the kinaesthetic approach to the human body in performance. A work on drama of this stature is remarkable for the extensive study that has been employed in it. This signifies the presence of Drama in India for a prolonged duration. In India theatre was perhaps a narrative form in the beginning with specific storylines. Recitation, music, dance etc. accompanied acting as integral elements of a performance. All types of art and literature were encompassed in theatre as physical presentation. *Nritta*, *Nritya* and *Natya* are three pillars of Indian Classical dance. All these three elements complement each other. *Nritta* being the illustrated rhythm of graceful body movements, beats, footwork, and poses are the essence of it. No poetic meaning is exemplified through *Nritta*. *Nritya* on the other hand is the demonstration of poetry through movements or performance of *Nritta*. *Natya* is achieved through the use of dialogues/speech, music, *Nritya* and *Nritta*. All the known human emotions can be expressed through *Natya* as it is also equivalent to imitation. “A mimicry of the exploits of gods, the *Asuras*, kings as well as of householders in this world, is called drama. And when human nature with its joys and sorrows, is depicted by means of Representation through Gestures, and the like (i.e. Words, Costume, and Temperament or *Sattva*) it is called drama.” (*Natyashastra*, 120-121)

Aristotle believed art to be an act of imitation. Cicero later reaffirms saying “Drama is a copy of life, mirror of custom, a reflection of truth.” (Courtney, 36) Movement, painting, mime, dance, music, literature are contained in Drama. The easily malleable nature of performing arts and the emphasised narrative elements define Indian theatre as a sensual one. There are two practices of presentation of drama according to the Bharata, 1. *Lokadharmi* - Realistic, which depicts the common people through their behavioural pattern- a folk form. 2. *Natyadharmi* - Theatrical, stylised, symbolic representation- a classical form.

Periodically Indian theatre can be divided into three overlapping yet distinctive phases: Classical, Traditional and Modern period. The classical period can be approximately dated till the eleventh century AD. It followed the rules and regulations set for drama by *Natyashastra*. Kalidas, Bhasa, Bhavabhuti etc. were noted playwrights of that time. Most of the dramatic creations were in the Sanskrit language and everyone involved with theatre were scholars of their field. This type of drama was meant for and understood by the people who are well versed in the language as well as the art. Mostly epics and heroic tales from all the *Shastras* were picked up for performance and as the story is known or expected to be known by the spectator, the use of the three elements mentioned above are used in a performance.

The second phase lasted from the late eleventh to the eighteenth century AD. The discontent with the exclusivity of classical theatre, changes in the political scenario of India, increasing importance of the regional languages, and the inquisitive and aware people of the country revived the treasure of oral tradition usually neglected in the field of highbrow culture. Most of the regional languages cannot boast of a rich documented cultural tradition because of their affinity to orality. Without being shackled to the rules of dramaturgy, traditional folk theatre aimed at unrestrained entertainment. It was simplistic, spontaneous with scope of improvisation without the burden of aestheticism. While the methods of presentation for classical drama were similar throughout the country, traditional folk took elements from the native region and with the local flavours the presentational modes varied. This is the period when India saw the Bhakti Movement which paved ways for various modern theatres through traditional folk performances which are equally cherished today. Various folk forms like *Jatra* (Bengal, Odisha, Assam, Bihar), *Yakshagana* (Karnataka), *Bhavai* (Gujarat), *Tamasha* (Maharashtra), *Nautanki* (Uttar Pradesh) *Bhaona* (Assam) to mention a few emerged and prevailed after the decline of Sanskrit Drama. Folk drama became popular as it was closer to the masses than the classical drama. Chapter one is going to be a detailed comparative study of select folk theatre forms to further the queries of the research.

The third phase of Indian theatre was associated with another political change in the landscape. Colonisation and the British rule changed the ways of theatre in India with direct influence in subject matters, stagecraft and methods of acting. From the spiritual, religious, mythological, legendary and heroic narratives, theatre moved towards a realistic

approach. The British brought their theatre and introduced Indians to it and to some level involved them in productions. Theatre was a huge affair in Kolkata at that time. After learning the tricks of the trade Indians started using theatre as a medium of protest. It became the voice of the people against corruption, feudalism, oppression etc. A more realistic picture through the portrayal of the common man in his immediate reality had taken theatre to the next level. The western influence was a major catalyst in the changes brought to Indian theatre. Chapter two includes an analysis of the influence colonisation had in Indian theatre.

Assam has a rich and variegated tradition of performance. Even prior to Sankaradeva's introduction of *Bhaona*, there were several other traditional folk performances that triumphed in Assam. In recent era the most popular form that dominates the realm of theatre in Assam is the travelling troupe that is locally known as *Bhramyomaan* theatre. The specific representation of theatre that is embodied, shaped and enunciated by this travelling form is the area of my research. Though scholars have always seen Srimanta Sankaradeva as a link to the modern day *Bhramyomaan* theatre, this study is going to delve deeper into it as ostensibly it does not fit well to call *Bhaona* a former version of the mobile dramatic form. Undeniably the saint had been the pathfinder in the sphere of dramaturgy in Assam, *Bhramyomaan* can be studied as an independent form after *Bhaona*. *Bhramyomaan* shares more similarity with the *Jatras* of the neighbouring states of Assam that entered Assam through the intervention of British in Assam's rule in the late 1920s. Bengali language dominated Assam and the borrowed theatrical form became dearer to the people than the indigenous forms. Plays were performed in Bengali, translated from Bengali and in doing so disregarding their own culture and tradition led to a major setback in the dramaturgy and theatre of Assam. Usually a provocative stance is seen among the people involved with theatre that there is nothing new across the border and this sense of cultural superiority was not seen in Assam. Instead the foreign matters were appreciated even more than the indigenous. This research intends to discuss how it was the discontent of a few conscious intellectuals which led them to start writing and performing plays in their own language (Assamese), instead of Bengali, but later modern mobile theatres have started performing plays directly adapted from films of different regional, national and international film industries. Since translated Bengali plays faced criticism, how this deviation of performing adaptations of films and books etc. of different languages have returned as a trend and how can these be justified in the current scenario? It undercuts

the basic idea of initiation of performance of plays originally written in Assamese. Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Culture Industry* talk about how ideology just remains a pretence after the framework in which culture is being offered to people starts to show. Ideology is just used to justify the production. Since modern *Bhramyomaan* Theatre was formed with a capitalist idea, we can call it a part of the 'Culture Industry' which is producing commodities in abundance and seducing the customers by showing more pomp and show through technology or banner artists and providing something new always in the competitive market. Can *Bhramyomaan* Theatre be called a diffuse spectacle, the way Guy Debord puts it?

The diffuse form of the spectacle is associated with the abundance of commodities, with the undisturbed development of modern capitalism. Here each commodity considered in isolation is justified by an appeal to the grandeur of commodity production in general -- a production for which the spectacle is an apologetic catalogue. (Debord, 19)

Taking forward the already established fact that *Bhramyomaan* Theatre had been and is still a popular form of entertainment for the people of Assam; this thesis is going to be about investigating in detail about the art form focusing on its various aspects including performance, stagecraft and material of staged plays. While calling it a popular form, the focus will be on *how* it falls into the genre of popular. Raymond Williams says "popular meant being seen from the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking favour or power over them" (1983, 237). Popular is also seen as something inferior to the culture of quality (*maanya*). In a modern sense it can be something which is liked by the majority. While placing *Bhramyomaan* as popular a few questions are to be asked, like: Where does it come from? Who controls it? What is the connection between *Bhramyomaan* and other '*maanya*' cultural establishments? How far has commercialisation influenced it? Is marketability the main concern or artistry, integrity and social responsibility precede over it? Is it only giving public what they want? Does it follow any ideology which the plays try to indoctrinate in the masses? Does it stand for political/social rebellion against the present dominant order? I would like to ask these questions about *Bhramyomaan* as a popular art form in my research.

In the course of my trial for gathering materials for the project, I became aware of the condition of available documents; it paved the way to look into this art form in a

different way than others who have produced these materials. These are not only repetitive but are documentations of who founded it and when it was founded. There are long lists of artists of different groups and the plays they acted in. In the introduction to the book *Bhramyomaan Theatreor Itihaas* by Kishor Kumar Kalita, a few lines appear saying *Bhramyomaan* Theatre has faced many criticisms from various critics. Sadly there are no quotes or names of these critics or on what ground the criticism was made. It is mentioned as a speculation that *Bhramyomaan* does not follow the aesthetic theories of performance as even the classical plays are not performed as it is expected by the critics which can be the cause of their displeasure and criticism and non-acceptance of the form. It shows flashbacks, shifts time with enormous gaps, there are dream sequences and various other techniques usually witnessed in films. It does not comply with the unity of time and space. Apart from this there have been audience responses about whether the form was good or bad which are not found in documented forms. Criticism about the form, about presentation of a certain play, performance of a particular troupe or an actor is not easy to obtain, though there have been attempts to historically document it. In the book *Bhramyomaan Theatreor Itihaas* Kishor Kumar Kalita mentions in his introduction how there was no response from various troupes when he tried to question them. Hence the book comprises the history of only the known or the responsive troupes.

My objective in this research project will be to document *Bhramyomaan* Theatre as a form. It is inevitable to mention the pioneers of this form while tracing its history but continuing to do so even after completion of 50 years in the domain is to disrespect the form. I would like to focus not on the people who started it and made it big, but how *Bhramyomaan* Theatre as a form has flourished and how is it continuing to mesmerise thousands all over the state. I would like to draw the changes that have happened on and off stage of *Bhramyomaan* theatre studying texts of the form. According to Ratan Lahkar, *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is popular because plays are staged in the village. It is also said that people do not have to go to entertainment but the entertainment comes to them. How are these changes accepted by people? Is the industry able to fulfil the audience's need? There have to be more reasons for its popularity apart from these. I would like to explore what allows us to call it a popular form and how it is continuing to be so. Is it auteuristic? Do people go to see the plays because of the name of the theatre group? Do they judge it by the actors the particular troupe has roped in? Or is it the playwright who has produced good plays in the past? This matter can be contested as plays like *Anaconda*, *Jurassic Park* and

Titanic too have been popular because of their visuals which are operated by the crew members who are behind the screen. It started at a time when there were limited sources of entertainment. Nowadays almost every household has a television set along with affordable satellite discs. Even though some people are figuratively glued to the idiot box, there has been no fall in the numbers that go to watch *Bhramyomaan* Theatre, in the way people wait for a festival. A similar enthusiasm is seen in the wait for a theatre troupe's arrival.

I would like to bring into comparison the Assamese film industry while discussing the popularity of *Bhramyomaan*. Almost all cinema halls have closed down in Assam. The reasons for their downfall are a matter of discussion. Is it because they ran into loss? Or is it Piracy? Or it is the transition from celluloid to digital form? Everyone is a film producer nowadays. These films are released in DVDs and some are sold for ten rupees. A trend was set by Rajkumar in Assam of extremely low quality digital films which he produces, dances, acts and sings in. Nowadays negligible numbers of multiplexes are becoming popular again among moviegoers but the entire state still has to boost its lost glory. Or it needs to be found out whether there was any popularity ever for newly released Assamese films? Film actors are becoming the main attraction nowadays in mobile theatres. Advertisements say that this year a certain popular actor will be with a particular theatre group. The mobile theatres prove to be a saviour for these actors who do not earn much through films. Since cinema halls are closing down and piracy taking a toll on the very few productions that see the release dates, *Bhramyomaan* offers a lucrative platform for the actors. I would like to study the degradation of the film industry and its reasons in contrast with the growing popularity of *Bhramyomaan*. Since it is not a new phenomenon to use film actors in theatre, I would like to analyse the differences in the acceptance, glamour quotient and changing attitude towards *Bhramyomaan*. Some believe that because of the intake of film actors, a sense of hierarchy has entered the theatre industry. Playwright Mahendra Borthakur clearly mentions in one article, an award winning Assamese film *Haladhar*, which as a comic relief used a dialogue by the village nitwit in order to impress his ladylove – “either handyman¹ or *Bhramyomaan*”. This simply means that *Bhramyomaan* is one of the easiest ways to find work which does not require any specific skill like the handyman of a bus. If *Bhramyomaan* was seen in that light, what made it alluring to the actors later?

¹ A helper in public buses who helps with repairs, cleaning and calling passengers.

Achyut Lahkar considered the stage of *Bhramyomaan* as his workshop to experiment with the various ideas he had. He used a round stage which he named 'Alsom'. He had rented a movie camera to show certain sequences on screen in between performances. He called that version 'Cine Theatre'. In recent times such experimentations have become even more elaborate in certain theatre groups. It is difficult to differentiate between the ways a film shows its scenes and a play of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre does. To make nine sets for only one song sequence in the play *Benazir Bhutto* by Abahan Theatre, they spent more than four lakh rupees. A major shift can be seen in the ways of commercialisation in the *Bhramyomaan* Theatre industry. Instead of posters painted by local painters, printed posters can be seen which are not different from any film poster mentioning the attractions of a particular season. Along with posters, life size cut-outs of the star actors are placed near major street corners. Advertising plays an important role in making a commodity popular. Advertisement is not done only through posters and notices nowadays. Almost all the theatre groups have their own websites, though most appeared to be obsolete when I checked them up for this research. Facebook pages of a few troupes are fairly active with sharing of new videos, interviews, schedules and still photos. The planner for the whole year is already decided in the running season and can be followed in their sites. A few other online portals have also shared this information about the most popular troupes.² Recordings of the teaser trailers and song sequences are released beforehand and uploaded on YouTube and other media sites for public viewing. The use of different types of media has changed the face of *Bhramyomaan* theatre and the videography is making it look more like films than theatre. For the season of 2017 Kohinoor theatre has decided to bring in 3D technology to the show. For a five minute show of the casting they have spent forty lakh rupees. I would like to talk about the changes in *Bhramyomaan* from the time when technology meant a lit stage with electricity, to the sinking of a ship on stage today and to 3D glasses in the makeshift tents.

Finally linking all the approaches of my study I would like to conclude with whether, given its popularity, its enormity within the state, the welfare and reform it has been taking up in rural areas how much longer will it take to be recognised as a National form?

² axomiya.net/dramas-of-assamese-mobile-theatre-season-2016-17 this site has all the information about which plays are expected to be 'hits' for the next season.

This research project is going to undertake a layered study of the theatre posing the following questions:

- How does *Bhramyomaan* Theatre fall under Popular Culture? Where did it originate and how is it controlled to have the current form? How do we distinguish it from theatre of quality?
- How far the commercialisation of art has affected this form in terms of originality, veracity and the social responsibility it claims to undertake? How much influence the advent of newer technologies helped change the face of this form?
- Is the form simply auteuristic? Is it the banner artists, the playwright or the name and fame of a theatre group that draws crowds and makes it popular? Does the downfall of Assamese film industry have a role in the increasing popularity of *Bhramyomaan* theatre?
- Since translated plays and plays from other languages such as Bengali were the cause of discontent among intellectuals of the theatre world in Assam, can the adaptation of films, translated plays and borrowed ideas presented today be justified? What are the themes and topics chosen for a particular troupe? Has it become a gimmick instead of being a social statement?
- Is it possible to take *Bhramyomaan* out of the state boundaries and represent it at a national level? What are the possibilities and difficulties in this approach?

Formal academic research work, directly based on *Bhramyomaan* Theatre, is not much, though of late some projects have come up in different universities. In the Department of Communication and Journalism of Gauhati University, according to their online records, three students are doing research in different aspects of this form. Anup Hazarika's topic is "Role of NSD in formation of Modern Assamese Theatre", Rabindra Sarma is working on "Modern Assamese Mobile Theatre as a means of Mass entertainment" and Sailen Das is working on *Kamrupi Jatra*, which is closer to the original form of mobile theatres that was started by Tithiram Bayan and Braja Sharma. His topic is "*Jatra* of South Kamrup as a means of Mass Communication". Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami's doctoral thesis is on contemporary Assamese Theatre and the title is "A Study on Contemporary Assamese Theatre in the Light of Social Realism and its Performativity". Sanjeeb Kumar Baishya is doing his research in Jamia Millia Islamia on "Theatre

and the Popular: A Study of the Bhramyamaan Theatre of Assam”, primarily based on audience response in *Bhramyamaan* Theatre.

Beyond formal research in universities, Kishor Kumar Kalita’s *Bhramyamaan Theatreor Itihaas* (2011) is the first research oriented book which gives the historical background of this form. His book also includes interviews with the father of modern *Bhramyamaan* Theatre, Achyut Lahkar, with Dr Bhupen Hazarika, and a few pre-published articles on the form. Atul Mazumdar’s *Ei Jatra Joi Jatra, Bhramyamaan Theatre: Pratyasha, Prapti aru Oprapti* (2012) and *Bhabendranath Saikiar Bhramyamaanor Naatok* (2003) are also early research oriented publications. Anasuya Paul’s E-journal essay on *Bhramyamaan*, titled “Popular Mobile Theatres of Assam: An Agency of Globalisation and Transculturation”, promises to place *Bhramyamaan* Theatres in the global scenario, but is unable to do so as she sticks to tracing only the plays performed in New Delhi when Kohinoor Theatre was invited by NSD, a one-time venture outside the state, which cannot be the marker of reaching a global market. Satya Prasad Boruah has been writing on different forms of theatre, both Indian and Western, which are published as a compilation of short essays – *Natya Nibandha*. His works attempt to find connections between different dramatic forms and how they influence each other. Along with many of his works written in the Assamese language, “Assamese Theatre” is an article written in English. While books that characterise Indian mainstream or folk theatre encase Assamese Theatre in a miserly way mentioning its limitation of being restricted within the State, Boruah’s book gives the readers a new outlook towards it. On a broader scale, *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*, edited by Farley P Richmond, Darius L Swann and Phillip B Zarrilli looks at Indian theatre starting from rural festivals, urban contemporary forms, ritualistic and devotional performances, dance drama and other colourful traditional dramatic forms, including those from Assam. There are also other collections of essays and books that talk about Indian theatre in general, which I have exploited in the course of my research.

Some instances of what can be classified as ‘creative works’ can also qualify as research in this area. For instance, Dr Bhabendranath Saikia’s autobiography *Jeevan Rekha* incorporates many incidents and his experiences while writing plays for various *Bhramyamaan* groups. Similarly, the award-winning Assamese writer Manikuntala Bhattacharya’s *Moi Desdemona Hobo Khuju*, translated as *I want to be Desdemona*, is a novel which traces the history of *Bhramyamaan* Theatre till the present day, and in which real life drama of the actors is depicted in a fictional form. She has done her research

touring with two prominent theatre groups, Kohinoor and Abahan, learning their ways and struggles to be what they are. The prominent documentary maker from Assam Merajur Rahman Boruah has a documentary to his credit titled *The Nine Months* about this theatre form and its endeavours on road while staging performances all over Assam. In his work he tries to bring out the themes of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre and the changes it has gone through and its relation to social reality of Assam. It is not a critical view on the plays or performance but a presentation of the form as it is to the viewers.

Media pieces also comprise a major portion of ‘existing research’ on *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. Before and after a season of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre, newspaper articles regarding the popularity of particular plays feature. Nowadays web journals and blogs too have come up with information about these. Facebook pages of theatre groups help on the publicity front as well as in popularising significant plays. They share videos, photos and newspaper articles related to their group and performance. The group Theatre Bhagyadevi’s page has been the most active from this perspective. These media sources – both print and electronic – has provided important research resources in the area.

Given the limitations of the very few formal academic works in this field, this research is going to bring a new pathway to this area on four counts.

- First, the existing books portray an auteurist view of the form. These works do not give a theoretical scrutiny of the form. I would like to look into it from a critical as well as theoretical approach. Since it has been already embraced by the audience all over the State and various troupes have flourished in the field, the focus shall be shifted from documentation of the history of the origin of the form and particular groups and biographies of their founders to what innovations have been brought to it through experiments on stage. I would thus like to include the study of stagecraft and direction while discussing the form and its structure, which has got very little focus in existing research in this area.
- Secondly, in existing research, only the most popular groups get the focus of media or academics. Kohinoor Theatre had come to Delhi in collaboration with the National School of Drama in 2010. Other theatre groups are dissatisfied with the fact that the project was supposed to be a case study of the form, not only of one particular group. Instead of targeting one particular famed troupe, I have selected

for my study troupes that are from different places and differ in the time they have spent on field.

- Thirdly, my focus will also be to establish how Assam's *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is different from other folk theatrical forms. In doing so I would like to study different local popular and folk theatre forms of other Indian states which are similar to *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. I would also like to draw out the reasons behind calling it a 'popular' form of art. I would like to use Raymond William's three definitions of popular culture and categorise it accordingly. Unlike other forms of theatre in Assam and other parts of India, *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is a mass production industry as it produces and markets its products for profit to mass public consumers. To support these I will use Adorno's "The Schema of Mass Culture", especially his theories of commodity fetishism and culture industry. I will move on to the use of technology and the changing face of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre.
- Lastly, and taking a cue from the 'technology' question mentioned above, my research also puts forth a comparative study of the Assamese Film Industry and *Bhramyomaan* Theatre in the last chapter.

In putting all these four supplementations together under one study, I believe my research can be significantly different from existing research in the area.

My primary source materials include existing documentations on *Bhramyomaan* Theatre, including some sources already mentioned above, as well as scripts, performance texts and data about some select *Bhramyomaan* troupes that I will procure in the course of my research.

Thus, *Bhramyomaan Theateror Itihaas: A comprehensive history of the mobile theatre of Assam* by Kishor Kumar Kalita, which is a historical documentation of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre since its inception which contains the detailed description of various theatre groups of Assam, and Achyut Lahkar's biography written by Alex Figo, titled *Bhramyomaan Theatre*, will be important sources. Another important biographical work by Alex Figo and Purandar Patgiri is *Long March* which talks in detail about Ratan Lahkar's life, who is the founder of Kohinoor Theatre. Similarly, Atul Mazumdar's *Bhabendranath Saikiar Bhramyomaanor Natok*, which gives a critical review of Dr Bhabendranath Saikia's plays which were performed by various troupes, his *Ei Jatra Joi*

Jatra, which includes reviews of hundred plays of *Bhramyomaan* along with historical documentation of the art form, and his *Bhramyomaan Theatre: Pratyasha, Prapti aru Oprapti*, which contains his personal opinions about the achievements of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre, his discussions with various people related to it and how the form is being abused by certain people, will also be part of my primary sources. As also will be *Manchalekha* by Atulchandra Hazarika and the yearly journal of Kohinoor Theatre, *Karani*.

Selected plays from the past as well as the productions of the current year will also be part of my primary sources. Since these plays are not published or archived, I would base my research on direct observation of performances touring with few selected troupes of *Bhramyomaan*. This season of *Bhramyomaan* is continuing with another set of sensational plays. Most plays are written by Abhijeet Bhattacharya as he has been with the industry for a considerable amount of time now and a troupe seems incomplete without one of his plays. Certain troupes produce more than one play written by him in a single season. Bhattacharya's *Devdas* produced by Kohinoor Theatre will be considered for analysis. Young playwrights like Raj Dweep are also gaining popularity; his play *Akou Edin* which has the theme of dementia; produced by Hengool Theatre is being highly talked about and will be included in the research. Theatre Bhagyadevi is praised for its production of *Baadshah* written by Champak Sharma who is also acting as the lead on a double role. His play *Manuhe Manuhor Babe* will be discussed in the chapters. Bhagyadevi Theatre, Bordoichila Theatre, and Rajashri Theatre are the troupes that I have completed my fieldwork with, and it is few of their plays of the season 2014-15 that will form my primary sources. I will also look into older plays performed by various theatre troupes for not limiting my analyses to the plays mentioned above as my chapters are divided in order to include older themes and genres adopted by the troupes.

In view of the fact that my research has been performance based, my primary method was field study of the form. I have toured with different troupes during the theatre festival in Nalbari during *Raasleela Mahotsav*³ to analyse their methods of selection of

³ Nalbari Raas Mahotsav starts in November on the new moon day which continues for a fortnight till the full moon appears. Raasleela – Sri Krishna's renditions with the Gopis – is common as a festival in India. In Assam two types of Raasleelas are seen. One festival endorsed by all the Sattras of Majuli and the other in Nalbari that are great touristic festivals. The basic difference between these two festivals is that Majuli's festival is performance based and Nalbari's festival has exhibition of idols in various scenes that depict Sri Krishna's adventures. It is important to mention Raas Mahotsav of Nalbari because during this festival *Bhramyomaan* theatres do maximum business in Nalbari as at the same place close to fifteen troupes are invited by the same Ahbayok (Inviting) Committee. The festival happens in the premises of Nalbari Hari

plays, actors and their schemes of various productions. Along with evaluating the existing interviews, I have interviewed playwrights, critics, actors and producers to get diverse opinions from different perspectives. I have selected theatre troupes from different regions of the state in order to look into the differences they might offer. Most importantly I will analyse select plays staged by these troupes and study the form and its popularity through the same. Since documentation of the plays performed are rare to find I only have recorded shows and the same transcribed into texts. Questionnaires will be used during the process. Along with my primary sources I will also analyse different theatre forms of other States for a comparative study. In doing so, I have also used existing recordings, videos, transcripts and interviews regarding these theatre forms along with news clippings available about different troupes and plays. Analysis of the methods used in advertising *Bhramyomaan* Theatre will be another medium of research.

The chapter-wise framework of my research is specified in the following paragraphs.

Chapter One: The Known, Unknown and Lesser Known: A comparative study of different forms of travelling theatres in India

There have been claims that Assam's *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is one of a kind and there is nothing like it either in India or the world. This statement often features in almost everything written about this particular form of mobile theatre. However there have been no comparative studies stated in order to support it. I would briefly like to analyse various forms of locally popular mobile or folk theatre forms in India like *Jatra* of Bengal, Odisha, *Nautanki* of the Northern part of India, and *Tamasha* of Maharashtra etc. In doing so I am going to draw the similarities and differences of these forms with *Bhramyomaan* Theatre and state the results, if they can be validated. In doing so, the stagecraft of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre will be analysed. The journey from open air theatres, performance in the courtyards of temples and *naamghars*⁴ to proscenium and how it has taken the shape of today's tents that can accommodate more than two thousand people at once, technicalities involved in the show to captivate the audience will be examined. It will trace the earliest history of performance on stage in the 15th century where Srimanta Shankardeva built a seven storied

Mandir and the theatre troupes raise their tents around the same place. Because Nalbari Raas is not performance based, Bhramyomaan becomes the main attraction of the festival.

⁴ The place of prayer and worship for Assam's Vaishnavites. Vaishnavism is against idol worship, so in the Sanctum Sanatorium one *asana* (seat) is set up where it is believed that the formless God rests.

stage to show seven *Vaikunthas*⁵. Wheeled stages, triple stage, round stage, introduction of galleries etc. will be discussed. This will also include the ways in which properties are built, transported and decorated, the use of lights, special effects, and use of technology in modernization of the art. In this chapter the origin of *Bhramyomaan* theatre, how it got its unique name will be scrutinised in a conterminous study of the other traditional folk theatres mentioned.

Chapter Two: Assamese Plays: History and Transition

The second chapter is a prelude to the third chapter. This chapter traces different forms of drama that existed and their passage through time to reach the present time. Even though other folk performances graced the entertainment arenas of Assam, it is only after Srimanta Sankaradeva that documented forms of the dramaturgy started to appear. The chapter begins with an account of the folk performances that existed before Sankaradeva's time and how they influenced his creations. Different trends and influences on Assamese plays are highlighted in two major parts – influence of *Ankiya Naats* and the Bengali influence. The influence of Bengali is an important phase as it delivered both positive and negative impacts on the domain of Assamese literature, especially drama. It influenced the people of Assam to the point of making them hate their own brand of literature and in turn have them produce low quality translations and original plays in Bengali. This regressive phenomenon had helped revive what was lost with the initiative of a few concerned intellectuals. The influences emphasised are not limited to only these two divisions, as the traditional folk plays, plays of the pre/post-independence of India, Western influences that include theatre of the Absurd, Stream of consciousness etc. and translation as a trend in Assamese plays are also discussed in the chapter. The themes, plots, subject matters chosen and their changeover through time is also concentrated upon. Significant playwrights like Lakhminath Bezboruah, Jyotiprasad Aggarwala, Bhabendranath Saikia, Atulchandra Hazarika, Satyaprasad Boruah and many more playwrights and their contributions in shaping the territory of drama in Assam are included in the chapter. The chapter ends with establishing a connection with *Bhramyomaan* theatre as many of the well-known fundamental plays produced by distinguished playwrights have found their ways into its stage, it being the most popular form of entertainment of the state.

⁵ Eternal and supreme abode of Lord Vishnu. Vaishnavites consider Vaikuntha as the destination to attain salvation.

Chapter Three: Something Old, something New, something Borrowed Arriving near you

The third chapter is divided into two parts. The first part will analyse original plays.

The Originals

Two plays of season 2014-15 are selected for this chapter in order to analyse, which are *Goonda* from Rajashree Theatre and *Manuhe Manuhor Babe* from Bhagyadevi Theatre. The first one written by Abhijeet Bhattacharya comprises of issues like unemployment, how the corrupted and opportunistic police department uses vulnerable youths as pawns in order to satiate their greed for power, a brother sacrificing his ambitions to educate his younger brother and a girlfriend waiting to be united once the protagonist gets employment. This social drama is about dreaming big and growing out of those dreams as they get shattered. The latter written by Champak Sharma is a family drama of which the title is borrowed from Bhupen Hazarika's famous song with the same title. The song translates as, if human beings do not think well of fellow humans, who will? As the play unfolds the audience is presented with a story that tells how goodness still prevails among all evil. In the course of the play various songs of Bhupen Hazarika are used as references according to the situations within the play. This play can be seen as dedication to the great singer. Social and family based stories have been a popular choice of the theatre groups and have been the first choice of theme for playwrights, producers and audience alike. This chapter is going to discuss the various traits that make it a preferred theme. This section is not limited to the mentioned plays as the predecessors of these playwrights like Bhabendranath Saikia and their plays are also brought under scrutiny for a better understanding of it.

The Plays adapted from Literary Sources

This section is going to discuss two forms of adaptations. The first one is going to analyse the plays of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre that are borrowed, translated or adapted from existing literary texts. From Shakespeare's plays like *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar* to popular Assamese novels like Kanchan Borua's *Aseemot Jaar Herai Seema*, Lakshminath Bezboruah's famous short story *Mukti* and even Hem Boruah's renowned poem *Mamatar Sithi* also have been scripted and performed in various theatre groups. Classical texts like *Iliad* and *Odyssey* also found their way to *Bhramyomaan*'s stage. In

choosing the texts to be scripted as plays for a diverse audience one has to keep in mind that the text is well known and majority of the audiences shall understand it. As the popularity of the plays does not depend on performance alone, addition of special effects and use of elaborate properties become equally important. But all the texts do not give a scope to do so. This chapter will analyse how these texts are adapted, changed or modified to suit various tastes. I have chosen *Aseemot Jaar Heral Seema* as my primary text that is interpreted in this section.

Action/Romance/Thrill/Melodrama: Bringing Cinema to the Stage

It appears that a trend starts and ends and sometimes reappears over time. While social plays are considered to be the constant favourite of all types of audience throughout *Bhramyomaan* theatre's history, plays adapted from films made it big on stage for few seasons. Visuals and special effects are the main attraction for these plays as stories like Jurassic Park, Anaconda and Gorilla were shown. Playwrights and producers believe that popularity of these adapted plays from adventure, science fiction, and thrillers are only temporary. It cannot keep the audience thrilled year after year. Hollywood films are not the only source to be adapted into a play, Bollywood and other regional films have been scripted as plays too. Various plays like *Titanic*, *Dr. Bezboruah* etc. will be discussed in this section.

Chapter Four: *Bhramyomaan* Theatre: The Place within the Popular

This chapter is a discourse on the role of media, advertisement, and sponsorship in changing the face of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. Recently the troupes have started association with radio channel, newspapers and T.V channels as media partners but the role of the 'Ahbayok Committee' is greatest as it depends entirely on them how many tickets they could sell prior to the performance and convinces the people to come and spend money on a show. Every show of *Bhramyomaan* theatre is a charity based event as 40% of the income from a show goes to the committee which invites them for the welfare of the place where it is called to. The theatre troupes can't put up shows without being invited. This chapter also examines the dilapidated condition of the Assamese film industry and make a comparison with *Bhramyomaan* Theatre as the latter being continually popular. The film industries rise and fall and the reasons behind it are also discussed to supplement the comparison. The focus is on whether the film industry's downfall has proved beneficial for *Bhramyomaan* through ingress of film actors or whether it has changed the original appeal it had.

Downfall of an industry indeed is a state of sorrow but at a time of crisis, *Bhramyomaan* supported the actors and it has become a trend to cast film stars to increase the attraction ever since, though it was not a new phenomenon in the field of *Bhramyomaan*.

Conclusion:

This chapter is the summation of the discussions of the previous chapters to support the hypothesis and an attempt to justify the unanswered questions. It also explores whether the reasons given for the continual popularity of the form is maintained or not. It includes the problems faced and solutions found in the course of the research in the way this industry operates. This also comprises a discussion about whether *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is ready to venture out of the state and the measures that can be taken while doing so.

The **Appendix** at the end includes interviews and photographs taken during the field work in support of the research.

Chapter 1

The Known, Unknown and Lesser Known:

A comparative study of different forms of travelling theatres in India

A play need not be a source of cheap entertainment for two to three hours where gimmicks overpower aesthetics and neither shall it be social obligation. Be it professional or amateur theatre there are certain responsibilities that the actors, writers, producers as well as the audience are expected to practice. The predetermined framework within which there is an attempt to fill the gap of time and space between the audience and the performers through verbal exchange, music, rhythm and images of experience is perceived as theatre. A performance is the temporal reality that is put in front of the audience. Here one can find chronology, alienation, epics, farce, tragedy, naturalism, surreal images, depiction of the society long gone or that which continues to name a few. While these performances are never an exact depiction of outer reality that signifies stability, but a version of the reality that one believed in or lived through.

An Indian village life introduces various forms of entertainment in the society which still may or may not hold significance for today's generation, but have certainly made the history of Indian performances richer. Theatre is a medium of communication and it has been continuing the process of interaction with the audience through various means. As a medium of communication, theatre's strength is in its buoyant and dynamic nature which allows it to reach the masses more proficiently compared to any other expressive form of art. Mulk Raj Anand writes,

In our villages the performance of a play, usually called *Ras* or *Nautanki* or *Tamasha*, though more vigorous and unpretentious, is often a jumble rather like the European revue, consisting of scenes from a religious or a historical play, interspersed with humorous sketches which are based mainly on satirical narratives about the evil landlord, the money lender or the Sarkar, and replete with songs, songs and more songs. The relieving grace of a village play is that in it we get a simple survival of the most ancient theatrical principle: the players and the audience are one, forming a unity through the circles in which they sit round the improvised booth of the stage while the actors walk up, to and from

the dressing room, through the clearing which the audience obligingly affords as and when necessary. (Anand,12)

The performers in these forms have a distinct identity of a 'community' like any other which are denoted through their profession. Just like the potters, smiths and weavers they are called *Bhands* in many places, *Nakals* in some, and in Assam *Nat*, *Natua*, *Oja*, *Gayan* and *Bayan* etc. These performances are almost always specific to celebrations. It can be any celebration which brings joy to a household or a whole community. It can be before ploughing and sowing or post-harvest jubilations for the agrarian society, childbirth in a household, auspicious '*tithi*', the date of a saint's birth or death, astrological positioning of the stars and so on. In many communities these performers were kept at a distance considering them lower in the social strata. It is only after the influence of Western drama that a new affection for theatre arose in the public. The period before this saw degradation of the Classical threshold built by eminent scholars like Bharat Muni, Bhasa etc. It was probably because *Natyasastra* propagated highly structured and courteous conventions of performance which catered to only a select section of the society, that the folk forms remained with and cherished by the common people. Such hierarchies are not seen in the folk forms because usually the audience becomes a part of the performances which are solely for the purpose of entertainment where boundaries are often obliterated. Among all the art forms that are observed by people in villages, which include ritualistic dance, songs situating God in everything incomprehensible, drama remains more realistic. It aptly shows the good and evil of the society than indicating something personal or supernatural. It changes with the period of time, yet it remains connected to the people. Drama is rhythmic movement of instinctive emotions which is spontaneously related to life. One cannot specifically decide from which date drama emerged among people but can be assumed that impersonation of an animal during a hunt, signalling through rhythmic beats, victory shout or invocations to pagan gods could have been the first few performances which took various folk forms according to the time and space of their practices which in turn became an extension of the life lived. The instinctive gestures were over ridden by conscious movements of limbs in expression that changed into the drama that one knows how it is now. The performance varied from invocation of god for a bountiful harvest to the celebration of a heroic deed by an individual or the society. From these pagan ritualistic or celebratory performances of our ancestors the remnants formed *Raasleela*,

Krishnaleela, *Ramleela*¹, *Bhaona* and various other forms of drama and later the borrowed western forms, especially comedy have left their mark in the middle class, who are scattered among the audience as well as the performers. The intrinsic quality of such performances are that one cannot remain aloof of them. It may happen on one street corner fulfilling the open air requirements of festivities in a bold and flamboyant manner. Many call such performances Rough Theatre, Community Theatre and sometimes Opera. Rough, because it is not confined within a set space and it can happen anywhere. Theatre that is performed by, with and for a community, i.e. community theatre and Opera because all such performances prioritise the use of music- songs, rhythms, instruments etc. Juli Hollander points out,

Folk theatres are operatic because they take music for granted as part of their entertainment value, their accessibility. Live musicians are an integral part of the ensemble, mixing together all sorts of musical influences, but there is always a local flavour to instruments and folk songs, tunes that come out of well-known texts and are part of a common regional culture. Music is a constant presence; no show can be performed without it, as it is part and parcel of characterisation and narrative. (Hollander, 73)

With most of the folk theatres the idea of carnival is inherent. Most commonly such performances have melodramatic acting style with fast and forceful dialogue delivery. There is no concept of the fourth wall. Actors mostly focus on the audience throughout their dialogues. There is rarely any use of technology apart from amplification of sound. Untouched by puritan censorship, these theatres remain close to nature and people. Most of the theatrical panaches are unique and independent forms basing their executions on the local tradition and customs. They are different from each other in terms of stagecraft, make-up, costumes, performing style, and acting regardless of certain stark similarities. While certain forms like *Krishnattam*² and *Kathakali*³ can be considered as dance-drama, *Tamasha*,

¹ Leela - play, playful action, activities or adventures. Raasleela is where Krishna dances, plays the flute and ensnares the gopikas of Vrindavan. In Ram Leela and Krishna Leela performances, stories are picked up on the lives of these two avatars of Vishnu and enacted. This includes triumphant victories over demons to amorous dances and various other escapades.

² Presentation of the stories of Krishna in a series of eight plays. The Zamorin ruler of Calicut in the 16th-17th century created this form. A peacock feather is symbol of this performance. The eight plays are Avataram, Kaliyamardanam, Rasakrida, Kamsavadham, Swayamvaram, Banayuddham, Vividavadham and Swargarohanam

³ A classical dance form of India originated in Kerala performed with elaborate bodily gestures to the beats of percussions, known for larger than life costumes and makeup.

*Nautanki*⁴, *Swang*⁵ etc emphasise on dialogues along with the music and songs. While some performances are serious in nature, others accentuate comical satires.

One such form is *Jatra*⁶ which is one of the most popular modes of folk theatre of the Eastern regions of India, particularly Bengal, Odisha, Tripura, and parts of Assam and Bangladesh. India is rich in its oral narratives and the very same reason remains a drawback when one tries to trace the origin or the beginning of such folk forms. Most of such stories of origin have a touch of myth in it and no accurate dates of documentation. *Jatra* however is a relatively newer form and its beginning was linked with Vedic rituals, tribal festivities and other ancient forms of folk drama; but until the time of Chaitanya and the Bhakti movement of sixteenth century Bengal, *Jatra* did not have a definitive form. As mentioned earlier, like any other folk forms of drama *Jatra* also comprises of sequences of dance and songs without any operational plotline. There used to be at least fifty to sixty songs per performance. Which was lessened to six to eight per show in modern *Jatra*. Many have different views on how *Jatra* originated. Many a times it has been linked to Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra* and one such contentious view is given by Phani Bhushan Bidyabinod, a well-known writer-actor-director. He says concept of *Jatra* grew out of an audio visual enactment of an episode of Sri Krishna's life. The story is well known to all and sundry. Sri Krishna's disguised life at his foster parents' had to be outed one day by punishing his evil uncle Kamsa. The journey from Vrindavan to Mathura is celebrated even today with performances. The march or journey is literally translated as *Jatra*. This separation of Krishna from his foster parents and his childhood playmates have been a favourite of singers and performers. Later on any play about Lord Krishna's life or other mythical legendary heroes were termed as *Jatra* as well. (Gargi, Folk Theatre of India) The pre British era in Bengal also did not preserve much of what was considered to be a part of the oral culture. Hence, the way one knows *Jatra* of today has started taking its shape only after sixteenth century. Chaitanya and his followers brought performing arts to the already popular form of entertainment. Not only the Krishnite but the Shakta and Shaivite too tried using this form to propagate their faith but they were not as successful as the Vaishnavas. Likewise in Assam during the Bhakti movement Srimanta Sankaradeva had started the lyrical dance drama form *Bhaona*. Which can be called

⁴ These folk performances will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

⁵ Also known as Saang, Svang, a folk theatrical performance of Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh. Mimicry based performance mostly through dialogues and less bodily gestures, performed in the open air by a group of ten twelve people.

⁶ Originated from *Yatra* which means journey. It is a popular folk theatre form of Bengal which is spread across the different Bengali speaking areas of Indian Subcontinent – both West Bengal and Bangladesh – and also Orissa, Assam, Tripura, Bihar, etc.

similar to the Krishna *Jatra* that was started in Bengal by Vaishnava saints like Chaitanya, because of the purpose they were used for, the subject matter and the priority given to the lyric and the music more than the body of the play. Stories of our epics or other religious texts were chosen and most importantly the *JatraPalas* and the *AnkiyaNaats* of Sankaradeva shared titles too, e.g. *Kaliya Daman Jatra*, *Rukmini Haran* etc. Two scholars, Harichandra Bhattacharya (1988, 28-29) and AsitkumarBandopadhyay (336) mention that the play *Kaliya Daman* had crossed the border of Assam, reached Bengal and became extremely popular. From sixteenth to the mid nineteenth century the period is known as the *Kaliya Daman Yatra* era. *JatraPalas* are also considered to be a dramatic depiction of the *MangalKavya*⁷ tradition.

In Odisha too *Jatra* is considered to be one of the most prominent folk theatre forms. It is believed that the birthplace of *Jatra* is Bengal but many scholars including KapilaVatsyayan says that the debate on the origin of Odia and Bengali *Jatras* is controversial and somewhat hazy. She has traced Odia *Jatra* back to Jayadev and his *Gita Govinda* as the sources of the initial *Jatra* performances in Odisha. A.B Keith finds lyric songs, music and a literary form of expression in *Gita Govinda* which he considers the main substance of *Jatra*. (1951, 272) M.L Varadpande on the other hand mentions certain *Dev Yatra* which is mentioned in *Vishnu DharmottaraPurana*.⁸ He also mentions that *Jatra* owes its existence to the Bhakti cult that worshipped Krishna in Bengal but Jaydev's *Gita Govinda* and *Krishna Kirtan* of Chandidas contributed to the background of it. (1992, 173) BalwantGargi says, "though *Jatra* is equally popular in Orissa and eastern parts of Bihar, it originated in Bengal." (1962, 13)

In performances like *RathYatra* or *DolJatra* the deity is taken out for a procession and troupes of music, dance and theatrical dialogues follow. *RathYatra* is one such celebration which is eminent even today. However it is mostly assumed that *Jatra* in Odisha was started by the Vaishnava or Krishna followers during the bhakti era. One aspect common in all three types of religious dance drama is that they were started primarily by Vaishnava saints to preach their spirituality. Subject matters and the form of the drama is also very akin to each other. While there have always been an attempt to prove in which of these states *Jatra* originated, scholars claim it to be Bengal and some others claim it to be Odisha with documentation for validity. In Odisha it is believed that *Gita Govinda* has been performed in

⁷ Long poems emerged during fourteenth century that attempts to create cohesive plots depicting the exploits of a deity according the cult followed.

⁸ An encyclopaedic Hindu text considered to be an appendix to Vishnu Purana which deals with the studies related to the cosmos, for e.g. division of time, astrology, astronomy etc.

temples of Puri since the twelfth century before Chaitanya's *Jatras* in Bengal, hence it could be considered original than a follow up. M.L. Varadpande states that SrimantaSankaradeva was influenced by the Krishna *Jatras* of Odisha and that is how the *Bhaonas* came into existence. He says,

Shankar Deva seems to have been influenced by the earlier Krishna Theatre that flourished particularly in the Utkala and Mithila regions. Puri was a great centre of Vaishnava Theatre in Eastern India. Apart from the Gita Govinda, Parijat Haran Natak by Gopinath Sandhi Bigrahik, Pravabati and Parijat Haran by Kavichandra Ray Divakar Mishra were being performed in the Jagannath temple on festive occasions. He must have seen these performances during his one year sojourn at Puri around 1490. (1994, 76)

HarichandraBhattacharya also believes that "Gita Govinda of Jaydeva, though not a drama, also seems to lend materials in some respects to the *AnkiyaNats*; traces of the same are noticed especially in some songs and *Bhatimas*." (1964, 6) Even the idea of *Naamghar*⁹ is claimed to be borrowed from *Bhagwat Ghar* of Odisha. It can be said that Sankaradeva's *AnkiyaBhaona* was influenced during his pilgrimage, but his first production of *ChihnaJatra* was performed first in 1468, when he was of nineteen years of age in Bardowa. (R. Thakur, 315-316.) So, it is clear that the idea of such a performance was already conceived even before he witnessed performances in Utkala or Mithila. Sankaradeva's first pilgrimage was from 1483 to 1495 and his return witnessed the greatest period of creativity in Assam. His second pilgrimage was in 1552. His observation of the philosophy, literature and culture of the places he visited gave him enough materials and new skills to introduce Assam to the arts he developed. *AnkiyaNaats* were also called *Jatra* in the beginning as his first play itself has the word *Jatra* in it. Critics believe that this play has set several world records in terms of being innovative on the field of drama. Use of drop scenes, construction of a seven layered stage above the level of the audience and it being the first play in any modern Indian language. (Borkakoti, 1997) KapilaVatsyayan says,

A single Bhaona performance thus combines harmoniously diverse elements of culture, which is why it is difficult to apply to it readymade classifications like Margi or Desi, or Natyadharmi or Lokadharmi. As we have repeatedly stated, it is typical of the Indian cultural phenomenon that a dramatic form identified with

⁹ Vaishnava prayer house without any idols.

a particular region has often interesting links not only with genres and styles within the region, but also with those which have flourished outside that region. ... And yet, it is by no means a mixture of all these: it has a distinct personality of its own, which is unquestionably Assamese, coherent and unique. (109)

Oriya *Jatra* has been a dramatic tradition primarily drawing its sources from *Gita Govinda* and is carved out of a very rich traditional heritage that the Utkal region takes pride in. Various art forms are attributed to this region which include several forms of *Jatra* like *ThakuraniJatra*¹⁰, *DhanuJatra*, *RathYatra* etc. Historians opine that approximately from 1st century B.C Odisha has had a varied cluster of dramatic performances. The emperor of that time Kharvela was a patron for such performances of which he himself was a pronounced admirer. He advocated regular performances for which tents were erected in different parts of his kingdom. Theatrical activities were called ‘*Samaj*’¹¹ and it is known from the deciphered inscriptions that are found in *Hatigumpha* clearly states that *Ranigumpha*¹² has been used as an arena for various performances since before it could be dated. *Samaj* is synonymous to theatrical performances even today in Odisha. *Charyapadas*¹³, also record other folk theatrical forms of Odisha, such as *Krishna Leela*, *Ram Leela*, *Rahasa*¹⁴, etc. during ninth to twelfth centuries. However *Mughal Tamasha*¹⁵ originated much later. Even before the advent of Vaishnavism in Odisha, *Jatra* performances prevailed. The elite and the common divide was there in such performances and due to the prominence of oral literature such plays were not documented. The modern day Oriya *Jatra* is believed to have emerged towards the end of nineteenth century from the folk plays called *Suanga*¹⁶. These plays had dialogues in blank

¹⁰ Biennial nocturnal procession in Northern Odisha. It is considered to be Goddess Budhi Thakurani's journey to her natal home. Women participate in these processions as representation of the goddess herself.

¹¹ The literal meaning though in many Indian languages is society, in this particular context any theatrical activity in Odisha. Perhaps the use denotes the gathering of a community for celebrations, rituals and other such collective activities which are the sources of folk performances today.

¹² Hatigumpha=Elephant cave, Ranigumpha=Queen's Cave, Gumpha=Cave. The open air theatres had caves as stages in Odisha.

¹³ A collection of Buddhist mystical songs, poems and realisation of Tantric Buddhism. Charyapadas are considered to be the first written documents in Assamese, Oriya, Bengali and Maithili. The language of Charyapadas is Avahatta, which is considered to be the source language of the mentioned languages.

¹⁴ A variety of Rasleela performed by young boys and girls popular in the Puri and Cuttack areas. This performance can go as long as seven days depending upon the episodes included in the plays.

¹⁵ A form of satirical folk play that emerged during the Maratha-Mughal struggle in early eighteenth century, prevalent in Northern coastal Odisha. Usually performed in the premises of a Shiva temple in the month of Chaitra (March-April)

¹⁶ A folk drama form mostly popular in coastal Odisha comprised of singing, dancing and acting. Can be seen as a form emerging from the various Leelas famous in Odisha. This form was overtaken by *Jatra* and have almost died out. It is also used as interludes between two *Jatra* plays.

verse, elaborate dazzling costumes, use of local dialect with the hint of rustic humour and as all folk forms are known to have used, plenty of music. As mentioned earlier *Jatra* plays were mostly audio-visual depictions of the mythologies picked from the Indian religious texts and Oriya *Jatra* is no exception. Modern Oriya *Jatra* too averted from using only historical or mythological plays in their performances. Patronized by the landed richer class of the society Oriya *Jatra* too started portraying social themes and popular folklores. Modern professional *Jatraparty*¹⁷ for the first time in Odisha was formed in 1878. Playwrights who used to write *Suanga* plays started writing for *Jatra* performances. Gopal Das, JagannathPani, BaishnabPani etc. are prominent figures of Oriya *Jatra*. BaishnabPani is known for modernising the old form of *Jatra* and making it a form of popular mass entertainment. His play *MeghnadBadh* was immensely successful in his maiden attempt. He did not engage in proscenium stage theatre because of massive monetary involvement. In recent times Oriya *Jatra* also has been influenced by the films and their performance and it is not limited to only the rural audience, they have been mesmerising the small town viewers as well. In recent times one of the most famous forms of *Jatra* in Odisha is *DhanuJatra*. It happens for eleven days that starts in Pausha Purnima (full moon in December) in Bargarh where entire town is transformed into an open air stage. This festival depicts the lives of Krishna and the fate of his maternal uncle Kamsa. One region is decorated as Mathura and another as Gokula or Gopapura. For the entire duration actors playing the characters remain in their costumes and roam around the town playing their part without any scripted narratives or dialogues. This has been called the largest open air theatre in the world by scholars.

However no matter where the origin of *Jatra* is allocated to, there is no denial that *Jatra* of Bengal, Odisha and *Bhaona* of Assam have unembellished resemblance. *Jatra* changed over a period of time and a clear division could be seen in the 'Prachin' and 'Nutan'¹⁸ *Jatras* in Bengal. It is not a chronological division but the types of *Jatra* that are divided according to their text. The old *Jatrapalas* are like the Bengali versions of Morality and Miracle plays based on mostly religious tales which were mostly performed by professional troupes managed by the head singer or performer. The new *Jatras* came away from the religious depictions and are more secular in nature. It is lyrical and more opera like compared to the old *Jatras*. The New *Jatras* considered entertainment as their main motive behind the

¹⁷ A group or troupe is usually referred to as a party in Assam, Bengal and Odisha hence a *Jatra Party* or *Theatre Party* is common in use.

¹⁸ Prachin-Old, Nutan-New

performance. Another deviation that can be noticed is that unlike the professional troupes of the Old *Jatras*, the New *Jatras* are performed by the young amateur children of the new rich class of Bengal usually for their own entertainment. After the British implemented the Permanent Settlement Act in 1795, the affluent landlords lost touch with the peasantry which is the hub of folk traditions and culture. These Nouveau Riche settled in Kolkata, popularly known as '*BhadraLok*' developed a city culture to their liking which was easily influenced by the Western ways. While English theatre already existed in Kolkata, after the implementation of the new education system glorifying the West had given even more priority to Western theatre over the folk. The intellectuals claimed that the form of *Jatra* has been deteriorating because of the use what people considered 'impurities' as the taste and composition of audience changed when Kolkata became a significant trading city. KironmoyRaha writes, "...*Jatra* became subject to the influence-impurities if you like-of some lowly forms of entertainment having a fair share of coarse humour, bawdy songs and crudities like *Kheur*, *Kabigan*, *Akhrai*¹⁹ etc."(6) A change was seen in the *JatraPalas* with the poetry of Bharatchandra Ray. His *AnnadaMangalKavya* tells the legendary love story of *Bidya* and *Sundar*. Sensational and unsophisticated as it was erotic though religious, became popular among the masses and marked changing societal values and the viewership. Some say that with *BidyaSundar Pala*, the 'New' *Jatra* started though there have been other secular *Jatra* performances by amateur groups before that too. This brought *Jatra* under the scrutiny of the intellectuals and it became an object of condemnation. It was deemed as a cheap form of entertainment fit for only the lowly people of the society. The devotional dedication was replaced by rudimentary vulgarities and repetitious song sequences. An attempt to copy the theatre format of having a few act divisions was made and failed. People like RamnarayanTarkaratna, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee condemned *Jatra* stating its harmful impacts on the viewers and lack of morality. Asit Kumar Bandopadhyay writes, "During that time the common understanding of the audience and *adhikari* about *Jatra* was easy going entertaining music and dance along with some light dialogues. The play starts with *Kalua*, *Bhuluwa*²⁰, scavengers, sweepers, water carriers and other lower class characters singing, dancing and making a comic scene. Gradually language, gestures, dance-music and dialogues were not even checked for vulgarity." (445)

¹⁹ A form of 'battle of the poets'. Sung by two groups of poets, led by a *Kabiyal* or *Sarkar*. *Kheur*, *Kabigan* and *Akhrai* are also interchangeable terms. They are called as such in different places and period of times.

²⁰ The names *Kalua* and *Bhulua* denote the randomness of the characters on stage as common names.

In the city when *Jatra* was facing such criticisms, in the rural areas it continued to be as popular as it had been and when the new phase of *Jatra* started, writers tried to revive its lost glory by linking the religion with the folk and gave it a new colour. Writer Motilal Roy is remembered for his usage of stories from the Hindu epics like the coronation of King Yudhisthir at the end of Battle of *Kurukshetra*. Another playwright Mukunda Das is known for using *Jatra* to spread nationalism among the masses when it was the new political sensation. Both these writers are admired for restoring the lost glory of *Jatra* and using it as a tool of communication and education in the rural societies. The first public stage was set up in Kolkata in 1871. After that *Jatra* has seen a very dull period. Even though a few playwrights have borrowed elements from *Jatras*, at the end it was *Jatra* that started following and copying various things from the stage theatres including songs, themes, dialogues, character sketches, dramatic situations etc. The rural audience to whom it caters to was incapable of criticizing the only form of entertainment they had access to. *Jatra* has mobility while regular theatre is limited and fixed. If one compared the number of audience, *Jatra* definitely has more access to it. The ratio of audience in *Jatra* and regular theatre has a vast gap. Most importantly *Jatra* can reach the poor population who has less or no access to other forms of entertainment. It won't be wrong to call the professional *Jatra* troupes private business ventures. All the members of a *Jatra* troupe including actors and other contributors are employed by the company. It is interesting to note that the owner of the troupe reserves right to discontinue the employment of any of the participants of his troupe but nowadays it has been made official with rights that protect an actor's employment at least for a season. The virtual disbanding of the troupe after every season helps the actors to decide whether they will renew their contract, be rehired or joining another company with lucrative offer.

Assam has been rich in its folk cultures which include *Ojapali*²¹, Puppet Dance, *Bayan Party*,²² *Notua Nritya*²³, Songs of *Charak Puja*²⁴, and *Dhulia Naas*²⁵ etc. since the pre Shankardeva era. These folk forms can be called predecessors of *Ankiya Bhaona*. In late

²¹ It is believed to be the oldest folk dance of Assam. It consists of narrative singing and dancing along with dramatic dialogues and action. The singing is mostly in Sanskrit. *Oja* means leader and *Pali* are his assistants while performing.

²² An act of singing praises of Vishnu or other devotional stories using *Ragas* accompanied by various instruments with rhythmic feet movements.

²³ A form of dance used as interlude between longer performances of *Bayan Party*.

²⁴ A festival observed by Hindus to offer prayers to Lord Shiva. It is believed to be performed in order to diminish sorrows and bring prosperity. It is prevalent mainly in Bengal, Assam and Tripura.

²⁵ Male dancers dance and act accompanied by drums (*Dhol*) and cymbals (*Taal*). It is like miracle plays.

fifteenth century, Srimanta Shankardeva started the traditional dance drama form *AnkiyaBhaona* which was based on the six *Ankiya* plays he wrote himself. *Anka* means act, hence *AnkiyaBhaonas* are one act plays. The incorporation of music and instruments were also his innovation. These plays were written in *Brajawali* language and he had borrowed ideas from Sanskrit plays for their performance. Shankardeva's idea of performance of these plays was to get the attention of the common masses and spread religious ideas of Vaishnavism through *EkasharanaNaama Dharma*. He believed entertainment is the best way to make people understand the complex teachings of a religion. *Shravana* (to hear) and *Kirtana* (chant the name of God) were his ways of reaching God. He established *Sattras*²⁶ in order to carry on and spread his spiritual message through dance and drama about God's (Vishnu's) greatness. Even though his preaching through *AnkiyaBhaona* made a great impact on people of the upper region of Assam, lower Assam was influenced very little by the same. Munindra Chandra Sharma is mentioned in *Manchalekha* expressing his views on the trend that engulfed lower Assam. Towards the late nineteenth century Kamrup was influenced by the revolution that happened in Bengal. The Bajali area was affected most. The society demanded change. *Bhaona* became the imitation of *Geetabhinay*. They named it *KhuliaBhaona* or *Gayan Bayan Bhaona*. Point to be noted is that *Gayan Bayan* is already a part of *Bhaona* performance, but there was an attempt on making the whole performance based on the players of the instruments. Not only the traditional Khol and Tal but Violin, *Tabla*, Harmonium etc. Along with it came the '*Chokora*'²⁷ dancers. Sharma mocked that this form is like *Narasimha*²⁸, neither a lion nor a man.

It is apparent that the Bengali *Jatra* was more popular in the undivided Kamrup area. As stated earlier *Jatra* is the most popular traditional theatre form of Bengal, which is believed to have emerged from ancient folk drama. *Jatra* found a definite form after the Chaitanya movement of sixteenth century Bengal. The earliest documented *Jatra* plays date from the late eighteenth century, though the form probably had existed along the oral traditional literary forms of pre-British Bengal and was lost because of lack of documentation. The plays of *Jatra* are called *pala*-s and they used to be in a lyric form instead of being a well-structured play. Chaitanya and his associates, in order to propagate their faith among people,

²⁶ Institutional monasteries exclusive to *EksharanaNaama Dharma*.

²⁷ Reference to young boys dancing in between acts while rearranging the props to keep the audience engaged, not related to the main play. During the changes that occurred to *Bhaona*, using these dancing boys instead of *Gayan Bayan* was a trend in Lower Assam. After Brajanath Sharma introduced co-acting, the popularity of *Chokora* lessened.

²⁸ An avatar of Vishnu with a lion's head and human body

initiated the use of dance, drama, music and play acting. (Sarkar, 87) *Jatra* travelled to Assam and became a part of traditional performances as well. As both the states share a border, overlapping of culture and tradition is a common phenomenon. For SatyendraNath Sharma “It is not definitive when did *Jatra* enter Assam, especially the lower regions. A fixed date or time is not certain, though it can be said that towards the end of nineteenth century, for the entertainment of the migrant Bengalis it came in Bengali form. During festivals Assamese people too enjoyed hired Bengali *Jatra* performances.” (110)

Tithiram Bayan’s *Jatra* during 1860-65 can be called the first *Jatraparty* formed in Assam by an Assamese person apart from the ones that had arrived through the Bengali population that came with the British as clerical aides. Though an Assamese formed *Jatra* party, it performed only Bengali plays for which Bayan has been critiqued as many considered him the main influence on Assamese people who blindly followed him and disregarded native art forms.

It can be concluded that Bengali and Oriya *Jatra* along with Assamese *Bhaona* are offshoots of the same tradition. Even though the sources, materials and purpose of *Jatra* and *Bhaona* seem similar, there is a huge difference in terms of the *Bhaona* of Assam. There is *Jatra*, as well as *Bhaona* in Assam and both are considered to be two different forms of performance and never been associated with each other vis-à-vis presentation of the forms. Newer ways of writing ascended in case of the *Bhaona* performances. The language changed from *Brajawalito* the lingua franca of Assam and the prefix *Ankiya* was removed from it, but these performances new or old were never professional or with a monetary motive.

Following the model of *AnkiyaNaat*, towards the later part of Neo Vaishnavism in Assam a new trend of plays and art of acting began which were called *Dhuranaat* or *Bhaonanaat*. These plays and performance are only the folk form of *AnkiyaNaat*. It was created solely for the purpose of entertainment of the common folk. These plays are closer to the way a life is lived in the rural areas of Assam. *AnkiyaNaat*’s main purpose was to preach Vaishnavism and it reflects Southern trends in performance. On the other hand *Dhuranaat* or *BhaonaNaat* does not prioritise on preaching *Bhakti* or religion. It rather focuses on bringing *Hasya Rasa* to life. In this case the impressions of Magadhi techniques of performance. (N.C. Sharma, 24; Translation mine)

Bhaonas do not have a fixed troupe, they do not have to be mobile, their sole purpose is not entertainment, a management system or involvement of money is not a concern. Even today

these performances are done by the people of a village only on occasions and in a *Naamghar*, not anywhere else. It is for the village people, by the people themselves, no 'star' needs to perform on these to attract viewers. Although instances are found in history that the popularity of *Bhaona* had taken it to the royal courts of Ahom kings usually to entertain and enlighten foreign envoys and kings during their visit about Assamese culture. *RavanBadhBhaona* was performed for the king of Manipur during king RajeswarSingha's reign. Sometimes these performances were long enough and continued for four days. (N, Das, pp 54) It is always devotional, religious and ritualistic. Music and instruments have not changed since the first *Bhaona*. One most important and very recent patriarchal challenge to have been overcome is the inclusion of women in *Bhaona* as performers. Women and men take part equally in other folk traditional performances of celebrations like in all the three Bihu festivals but till now in Barpeta Keertan Ghar²⁹ women are not allowed post puberty. Hence, participation of women in *Bhaona* has been a revolutionary step forward. The involvement of women artists in *Bhaona* questioned the masculine space within which this form of theatre had been flourishing. It is wonderful that a group of female film and television actors from Assam had taken the initiative of performing *RamBijoyBhaona* with a full female cast where women play the male characters. Designed and directed by the exceptional Madhurima Choudhury, it is not only an empowering step for the women performers but it challenged the very form of it by bringing it out of Assam, performing on a stage with elaborate props. The play was performed in *Brajawali* language and *Sattria* dance form was used. It assumed a mobile form when their initiative was appreciated and they were invited to perform in various places within Assam. In Delhi it was performed in Mavalankar Hall in the presence of various noted dignitaries. It was an initiative from Assam Tourism Development Corporation to promote tourism through introduction of Assamese culture and tradition in the capital. It is revolutionary that a form of theatre that is only associated with men was chosen as representative with an all-female cast.

Nevertheless, it has been noted that Sankaradeva himself used the word *Jatra* for his plays along with *Naat*, *Natak* etc. even though this form is not mobile. This is where the influence of the *Jatras* on Sankaradeva's work reflect. The changes in Oriya and Bengali *Jatra* in today's time is not seen in terms of *Bhaona* as it still continues to be what was originally

²⁹ Barpeta Keertan Ghar is one of the oldest Naamghars established by Srimanta Sankaradeva's chief disciple Sri Madhabdeva in 1585 which is believed to be modelled after *Vaikuntha*– the adobe of lord Vishnu. The lamp inside the sanctum sanctorum is considered to be the continuation of the first lamp lit by the saint never letting it extinguish. This lamp is known as *AkshayaBanti*.

conceived. Hence a comparison is not conceivable while studying the forms, however Assamese *Jatra* is considered to be directly influenced by the Bengali *Jatra*. As already discussed earlier this form of popular entertainment has been predominant in Bengal, Odisha, Bihar and parts of Assam.

Jatra troupes travelled to Assam along with the people who emigrated from Bengal to Assam. Watching the performance of these *Jatra* troupes, Assamese people too started forming troupes that started mainly in the lower Assam area. These performances were also known as *Geetabhinaya*. Such performances were only seen as something apart from the *Bhaonas* but like a destructive entity they have diminished the value of *Bhaona* and in some places of lower Assam replaced *Bhaona* entirely. Not much has been recorded about these troupes but some information can be extracted from *Manchalekha* where Atulchanda Hazarika has managed to trace a few of them. Important point to be noted here is that these early *Jatras* in Assam were performed following the AnkiyaBhaona model with *Gayan*, *Bayan* and the *Sattriya* dance form even though they staged Bengali plays. Jaydev Sharma of undivided Kamrup district (now Nalbari) started the first commercial *Jatra* troupe of Assam from a small village called Murkuchi around 1860-80. (H. Bhattacharya, 1988, 107) Nothing much can be found about this maiden troupe. Tithiram Bayan's *Jatra* party on the other hand is usually known as the first professional travelling *Jatra* troupe. It was formed around the same time. LakshminathBezboruah recalls in his autobiography watching this troupe perform in Sivasagar district of Assam. During that time travelling was not feasible by road as the bridges on Brahmaputra river were constructed much later so this troupe travelled on boats from Kamrup to Dibrugarh which is a lot of distance to cover. Yet these obstacles were overcome with enthusiasm and dedication to the form of art. Gopal Ustad in Kamakhya and Bhogi Ram Kakati were also known for their interest in the field and spreading it to the masses. SankaradevaArunNatyaSamiti from Maroa was formed by ArunchandraBaishya who is famously known as Uro Bayan. His form of *Jatra* is significant because he borrowed elements from several folk theatre forms including *AnkiyaBhaona*. In a *Bhaona* the performance of *Gayan-Bayan* at the beginning is inevitable. His *Jatra* also started with an invocation through *Gayan-Bayan* and then characters like *Borkandaz*³⁰, *Jamadar*³¹ and *Bhauriya* enter. Characters like *Jamadar* are seen in both Oriya and Bengali *Jatra* and the character of *Bhauriya* is the 'fool' of the performance who enters solo or with any other

³⁰ A messenger

³¹ A sweeper

performer to make people laugh with his japes and with his anecdotes about the play. He is similar to the *Sutradhar* of *AnkiyaBhaona* too. While analysing this one has to notice that there is a character called *Bibek*³² in *Jatra* plays. *Bibek* translates into conscience and the character acts as a catalyst in carrying forward the play giving moralistic views to a character's action, criticising another or providing with an alternative point of view to the whole situation. This character can appear on stage unannounced and exit the same way. All of this is done through songs and music. Kapila Vatsyayan says, "He could appear when he liked, where he liked, and could stand apart and comment on the dramatic action, enter into dialogue with the actor as if in reply to the actor's internal questionings and conflicts, and was the voice of justice, moral order and conscience." (145) *AnkiyaBhaona* does not have the idea of a figure that is conscientious and which is literally called so. Rather there is the character of the *Sutradhar* who is an omniscient character present all throughout the performance. He begins with a prologue introducing the play and comes in between as interludes to string the whole play by reminding the audience what has happened as it isn't possible to incorporate every single detail of a story. *Sutradhar* fills that gap and hints at what the series of events will lead to in the next episode to come. This too is done through dance and song with a particular kind of music played only for the performance of the *Sutradhar*. Both the *Sutradhar* and *Bibek* appears to be like the chorus of Greek theatre. The appearance of the character as *Bibek* also changed overtime. Later *Jatras* portrayed *Bibek* as the character of fool in Shakespeare refashioned to fit the Indian subjects. They are the characters which are not to be taken seriously. This type of a character was first introduced by Girish Chandra Ghosh with the character named Karim Chacha³³ in his play *Siraj-Ud-Daula*³⁴ in 1906. He is one of the renowned playwrights of Bengali commercial theatre. Like Shakespeare's fools these characters are most insightful philosophers and devoted to the 'cause' in the play. Their disguised allegorical prominence is always disguised with the gear of fools the characters project. Partha Chatterjee writes,

Irony is a major rhetorical mode utilised by Karim in his comments on political events. Perhaps the most famous of them-to the point of having passed into common parlance without anyone ascribing the source-is his exclamation when

³² Conscience

³³ Can be seen in the play *Siraj-ud-Daula* where his presence is almost parallel to that of the Nawab. His comments are mostly slapstick irony. The character has been constructed as an outsider in the affairs of the court but is the embodiment of the idea of popular.

³⁴ Last independent Nawab of Bengal.

the conspirator, seeking to precipitate a confrontation with the British, advise Siraj to attack Calcutta once again after Clive had retaken the town. In an aside, Karim says: “*Elomelokare de ma, luteputekhai*” (Oh Mother, turn everything topsy-turvy, so I can plunder to my heart’s content). (257)

This concept was borrowed by *Jatrasoon* after in 1911 in the play *Padmini*³⁵. The character of *Bibek* in *Jatra* was fashioned having freedom and mobility to appear whenever and wherever in the play. He has access to court, bed chamber, street, cremation ground unrestricted. *Bibek* appears and warns a character of his mistakes through a song. The character can be that of a king who does injustice, *Bibek* turns up to point out that the king has erred. He is often dressed like a mad person. Tangled hair and beard, uncovered head, bare feet and expressionless eyes. He can wear a robe of saffron, black or white colour. The fixed dramatic function of the *Bibek* is to comment through his songs. Gargi mentions “The *Vivek* has a definite dramatic function. He comments on the action by his song, externalizes the feeling of the character, plays his double, and puts questions to him. He is everybody’s shadow, a running commentary on actions and events. He lives in the past, present and future.” (Gargi, 2002,)

A female character also appeared on stage as ‘*Niyati*’-Fate, with the same purpose as *Bibek* which was also discontinued and other characters with names started appearing. As mentioned above such characters in *Jatra* had to sing in order to convey the message intended, but audience was more eager for action than music. As it can be seen that this model of fool is perhaps borrowed from the European model of plays which were performed after the construction of the public stage in Kolkata, the singing and dancing has also been changed to dialogues to keep up with the theatricality which made it easier for the philosophical dialogues to make sense. It makes the *Jatra* performances more like the proscenium stage plays with more theatricality and less music. UtpalDatta sums up his understanding of *Jatra* as such,

1. Its content was closely associated with mythology.
2. It was also a morality play, setting forth good and evil in terms of black and white.
3. It relied on community of emotions between actor and audience, on predisposed sympathy of the audience for the mythological hero it knows so well and its hatred of the Asura.

³⁵ This play is about the self-immolation of queen Padmini of Chittor to save her honour from the victorious army of AlauddinKhalji.

4. Thus, though the actor wore no mask, he was bound by such predetermined norms that individual conflicts and emotions played no part in his behaviour He was in effect wearing a mask
5. During the great anti-imperialist struggle of the people, new plays adapted the mythological pattern and the Englishman became the new fixed evil and the Indian revolutionary a rigid Good
6. Though songs and dances and stylised gestures did play some part, the Yatra has always been essentially spoken theatre even its prose had to be poetic
7. Perhaps the most exciting thing about it was its clowns and their horseplay free of religious code, its *Bibek* and *Juri*³⁶. (Datta, 7-8)

It was BhogiramKakati'sBhaluki*Jatra* troupe that had introduced the character of *Bibekin* Assamese *Jatra*. This troupe came into existence in 1888. Brajanath Sharma's contribution towards modern mobile theatre is significant. He had travelled outside India, during the First World War He was posted in Karachi, Baghdad and later in Basra. During his service he came across various people of Indian origin who had an interest in keeping the art and culture alive. He trained under one Mr.George for a year on music then when he was posted in Basra he joined a Bengali dramatic club where he could learn dance, music and acting under Hrishikesh Mukherjee. Within three months he became a regular actor in all their productions after he mastered the Bengali language. He came back to Assam in 1921 and started ShilaKalika Opera Party. This troupe sustained on translated plays done mostly by Sharma himself. After this troupe was disbanded, he started a professional theatre troupe in 1930 named Assam Kohinoor Theatre Party. Many renowned actors became a part of this troupe and in 1933 he started co-acting by including six girls in his troupe. This was a revolutionary step which opened up opportunities for otherwise oppressed women. The first play with women actors was staged on Doomdooma stage.³⁷ It was brave of him to experiment with co-acting in a place far away from his home without gauging the temperament of local audience. Co-acting on stage started even before the films started in Assam. In 1935 first Assamese feature film *Joymoti* was released and the actor AideuHandique was forced to live the life of an outcast all throughout her life for acting with men. It was a daring and challenging act for

³⁶ Juri means double. It is introduced by Madan Master had introduced the Juri system in Jatra noticing the complex singing in the middle of nineteenth century. The BidyaSundarpalas were degraded with only erotic singing and dancing as performance. Good actors were left behind in popular plays as they were not able to sing. It is kind of a playback system where a singer sings on behalf of the actor who can't sing. Four singers are seated on four corners of the stage to sing on behalf of the actors portraying various characters.

³⁷ From a letter written by Brajanath Sharma which is included in *Manchalekha*. (273-275)

female actors who came forward and the ones who braved the odds to promote them. During their performance in Jorhat, the party changed its name to Assam Kohinoor Theatre. (D.Sharma, 24) In 1936 his troupe went in lost and was disbanded.

Tithiram Bayan, Brajanath Sharma and AchyutLahkar can be named as the pillars on whose strength today's *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is thriving. Tithiram Bayan popularized the Bengali *Jatra* form in Assam. Though his influence is deemed negative by scholars, it is his initiative that gave the theatre mobility to move all over Assam. These criticisms about disseminating an alien form perhaps pushed the people to start something native.

Comparison of the form and Stagecraft in various travelling theatres of India

In case of *Jatra* the immediate environment of the place where *Jatra* is performed has to be taken into account. The performing area is called Asar which is the most significant feature of the form. Traditional *Jatra* performances have a space cleared which is usually circular or four-sided usually at the ground level. It depends upon the prosperity of the sponsors what they want to cover the grounds with for the audiences. It is usually mats, plastic sheets, carpets, canvas or plastic chairs and benches that is spread for their convenience surrounding the performance area. Galleries are not very common in use. Sometimes *Jatras* performed on the courtyards of people's houses too, where the audience accommodates itself in the way they have been provided with. An erect wooden platform in the cleared area for performance is also seen. The border is sealed with bamboo or wooden poles tied with strings or strips of bamboo. A very conventional set rule of seating is followed in the rural areas during the performance which in a way helps the audience have a clear view of the stage. Usually the children occupy the front of the seating area and behind them the adults sit. There are separate seating areas for men and women. With the recurrent use of chairs during a show there are mixed sitting nowadays especially in the urban spaces, but in rural areas it is still rare where men and women sit together to enjoy a show. This is changing as *Jatra* is now performed in urban theatre halls as well. In the conventional *Jatra* stage one important feature is that of a gangway. Since it is performed on plain ground or a makeshift stage, the green room is built a little further from it. The gangway runs in between the seated audience for the entry and exit of actors. Many a times an actor enters singing and performing through the gangway. The gangway is considered to be an extension of the main stage. Most of these stages are open in all sides traditionally but with the beginning of the use of proscenium stage and their performance in the theatre halls allow them to have a drop curtain which usually

displays the name of the *Jatra* troupe. Before the actual performance begins, the orchestra starts playing music that continues for a long time until the audience is sufficient enough to begin the show. The stage of *Jatra* is never empty. Since the first actor enters and till the last scene in which all the actors exit from the stage, *Jatra* goes on. A conventional *Jatra* play goes on for about four hours. The continuity is maintained by sudden appearance of the next set of actors through the gangway not to break the action. While exiting from the stage for the new entrants to perform, the previous action is disbanded on stage and is continued in the gangway till the green room. The *Jatra* does not follow the pattern of acts after acts, it rather is divided into actions which are interspersed with several songs. There is no particular way of signalling of entry and exit of the actors, neither is there a fixed timing.

The orchestra of *Jatra* consists of traditional instruments like drum, cymbals, harmonium and tabla and occasionally a violin but nowadays popular modern instruments are also in use. As mentioned earlier the orchestra starts playing even before the performance starts and they start with an evening *Raga* and later goes on to play popular tunes from stage plays and films. The tempo of the music starts from slower to faster beats which in a way is a signal for the audiences to rush for the performance. This technique was used in Sanskrit plays which is known as *Purvaranga* (preliminary actions) in *Jatras* the same is known as ‘Concert’. In Assamese *Jatra* the same was known as ‘Extra Scenes’. There is no provision for amplification, or lighting for special effects. Usually a loud bang of the instruments denotes the magnitude of the action. The musicians occupy the central performing area along with a prompter. The orchestra’s role in gathering audience is seen in other folk performances like *Nautanki* and *Tamasha* as well. The sound of *Nagara* and *Daph*³⁸ travels a long distance which brings people to witness the performance. *Nautanki* and *Tamasha* also depend upon the mythological stories, folktales and historical accounts for the text of their performance. While *Nautanki* is more about singing and dancing to the beat of *Nagara* the entire time, *Tamasha* has some scope for acting in between the music too. What distinguishes *Tamasha* and *Jatra* performances in the beginning is that *Tamasha* always begins with an invocation or chanting prayers to Lord Ganesha. Ganesha has been ever present in *Tamasha* performances since ancient times.

Julie Hollander articulates about the traits inherent in the word *Tamasha*, “There is a clue to this dynamic in the meaning of its name: ‘*tamasha*’. A word originating in the north (both

³⁸ *Nagara* - A single or double drum in kettle shape made with wood or clay with a hide covering played with hands or sticks. *Daph* - Tambourine.

Hindi and Urdu) meaning ‘fun’ or ‘play’, it is used nowadays across all the languages of India, often pejoratively, to describe an escapist entertainment, a farce, a ludicrously extravagant political rally or chaotic public event.” (74) In Maharashtra it is a very specific Maharashtrian way of identifying with *Tamasha*, the traditional folk theatre form. The *Tamasha* stage is erected at the end of the open ground and built like the proscenium stage at the back of which the green room is constructed. Both the forms have different production styles. Earlier the feudal lords were patrons for *Tamasha* troupes which changed after the independence of India. Now like the *Adhikary* of a *Jatra* troupe, the owner of a *Tamasha* troupe takes care of everything. In a *Tamasha* troupe also there are stage managers, assistant stage managers, artists, and musicians. Most important similarity of *Jatra* and *Tamasha* is the moving nature. Both *Jatra* and *Tamasha* are mobile folk forms that tour from village to village for performance. They are closer to the rural audience than the urban ones who have access to other modes of entertainment. Socio-economic conditions of the artists of both the forms appear to be similar. *Nautanki* has a similar stage structure like the *Tamasha* stage and a seating arrangements like that of a *Jatra*. In all three performances the orchestra stays on stage as a part of the performance. Sometimes an extension of the stage a little lower than the main performance area serves as the place for the musicians.

Like the other mentioned folk forms, *Nautanki* also is operatic and these operas are based on popular folklores, local heroes, mythological stories and more recently the social themes. The story of Raja Harischandra³⁹ is a popular one. Devendra Sharma, who is a researcher, writer and performer of *Nautanki*, has written scripts about the impact of HIV/AIDS in today’s society along with other social problems like dowry, immigration, women’s empowerment etc. Voice against the feudal lords and sentiments against the British rule are found among the popular themes of *Nautanki*. The intervals between scenes are also packed with dances, songs and skits as there is no concept of break in the performance. Most of these serve as a comic relief. Instead of having patrons, the *Nautanki* troupes depend upon the community to provide support in every aspect starting from economic to the provision of stage. The audience have a role of active participation in such performances as they can stop a performance in between to ask for a repeat of a favourite scene, skit or a dialogue or a song. The plays are mostly chosen by the audience to be performed. All three mentioned

³⁹ Popularly known as Satyawadi Raja Harischandra for his truthful nature. He forsook his kingdom, sold his family and became a slave to fulfil a promise to Sage Vishwamitra. His story appears in Mahabharata and MarkandeyaPurana etc. This story found its way into popular culture in the form of the first Indian feature film made in 1917 and the scene of the king selling his family is a famous painting by Raja Ravi Verma.

performances take place at an open ground or a specific space in a village which is used for all kinds of activities from a fair to a market or wedding. The traditional *Nautanki* performances start at night around ten which can continue till the next morning. While a *Jatra* performance continues for around four hours, *Nautanki* takes double the time. Although the newer themes that have been taken up by *Nautanki* troupes in current times have performance time of around two hours. Since these troupes also perform in different parts of India, it is easier to appeal to different kinds of audience with contemporary issues who are not familiar with the local themes. Like the *Ragas* in *Jatra* and Ganapati invocation of *Tamasha*, every *Nautanki* starts with a *Vandana*⁴⁰ and *Bhent*⁴¹.

It can be seen that many folk forms originated with a spiritual motive, it has been clear that some remain spiritual and some mould itself according to the changing times. The forms like *Tamasha*, *Nautanki* and the modern *Jatra* are secular forms of folk theatre that do not hold the regality, rigid nature and sophistication of the classical form of theatre. They are mostly spontaneous, simple and not embarrassed to portray the naked truth as it is. Without using symbols, metaphors and talking in riddles, the speech is simplified for everyone. As the classical performances and texts are accessible to a select few, in folk performances everyone can take part. Without having a prior knowledge about the text of the performance which is expected of the viewers of classical forms, audience in a folk form can enjoy a performance. “The folk theater is impolite, rude, vulgar. It shocks prudes. The secular forms –*Tamasha*, *Nautanki* and *Naqal*– dominating the northern and western parts of India are replete with sexual jokes. It is considered improper for women to watch these plays. In the city of Poona, many professors and intellectuals, champions of culture, refuse to see a folk play because of its ‘vulgarity’.”(2002, Gargi) This moral question that is posed by the intellectuals about the acceptance of such folk forms does not hinder the inherent essence of the performances, which is entertainment. The impenetrable nature of the classical forms always resist the admittance of a varied audience on the basis of class, caste, religion, but on the other hand folk forms welcome all. Although different from each other, these two forms co-exist and have been borrowing ideas from each other. From the above discussion it is clear that all the folk forms have certain practices which are there in classical forms too. The most important feature that is noticed in all three folk forms mentioned above is the ‘*purvaranga*’. The

⁴⁰ A devotional prayer song mostly with the description of the deity it is sung for. It is also an invocation so that the gods help the performance to run smoothly.

⁴¹ *Bhent* in Hindi and related languages is an offering. These songs are offering to gods. Instead of offering material things, it is music the gods are offered to. The *Bhent* songs are specific to a *Nautanki* performance.

concept of *Sutradhar* also can be seen in both the folk and classical theatre. BalwantGargi says,

The Sutradhara (Stage Manager) of Sanskrit drama appears in vernacular folk forms as the Ranga, the Bhagavatha, the Vyas, or the Swami. The Buffoon, the counter part of the classical Vidushaka, is the darling of the folk theatre. He appears under different names in various regional forms: Konangi, Komali, Hanumanayaka, JoothanMian. He speaks in rustic prose or dialect. He has the freedom to connect the past with the present and relate the drama to the contemporary scene. He also acts as liaison between the audience and the players. The *purvaranga* (stage preliminaries) is an essential feature of both Sanskrit and folk theater. The musicians take their positions on the stage, tune their instruments, and play a melody; the dancers perform a few dance numbers; the cast sings a *mangalacharana* (a vernacular form of the classical invocation). Some of the folk theaters also use a benediction at the end of the play. They employ music, dance, stylization, verse dialogue, exaggerated make-up, and masks with the same lavishness as the classical drama. Scenes melt into one another. The action continues in spite of changes of locale and scene. Asides, soliloquies, and monologues abound. (Gargi, 2002)

Folk culture and its theatrical tradition has been an inseparable part of every human civilization. In India, the idea of folk performances is very open, in the sense of being out in the open just like the lives Indians live. A community lives like a family, a whole village may not have doors in their houses, and there are more living out in the open than within the boundary of the walls. Therefore most of the folk performances happen in the open spaces that can accommodate as many people as required. The concept of closed stage is very recent and it is still alien to rural forms of performances. With the introduction of British education system, the proscenium stage came to India too and it became popular in the urban set up which were decorated luxuriously and it continues to be so, but all the villages still enjoy the inviting open air theatres along with performances just anywhere available without even a raised platform. There are several types of setting for a stage of folk performances that include stages with multiple settings, round, square, rectangular, with or without gangways. Most of the folk performances use minimal props. The expressions and motions of the actors move mountains, create battle scenes, flow rivers, ride horses and create magic for the audience. Essentially, these performances cannot be boring. The long durations of

performances are supposed to be captivating enough for the audience to stick around for such a long duration. These performances are never dull.

The settings, stage and other arrangements in Assamese *Jatra* are different from Bengali *Jatra*. A clay or wooden stage with all the elements that have been mentioned earlier is present in *Jatra* of Assam. A night long performance sometimes ends earlier than expected and as the demand of audience is taken into consideration in all folk forms, the actors are forced to perform even two plays per night. This exhausting affair was ended by Dani Haloi of *Piplibari Jatra Dal*. He started an agreement between the invitees and the performers that in one night only one play will be staged so that the actors are rested for a better performance the next night. (Bhagawati, 36-38) Assam is a diverse land and different communities have different folk forms, which found place within *Jatra* even though they were not part of the main production. Missing, Karbi, Nishi⁴² folk dances and *Jhumur*⁴³ were common in *Jatras*. Classical forms like Kathak and other folk dances from various states of India were not rare too. Bhojpuri dance was a common phenomenon. Props were negligible, make up was very distinct as masks were also used during performances. Assam has a rich history of making and using masks in *Bhaona* performances. The artists in Majuli⁴⁴ still continue the legacy.

A modified form of one such *Jatra* was the first modern *Bhramyomaan Theatre* of Assam. It was a more realistic, sophisticated and commercialised form of *Jatra* that the talented Achyut Lahkar had given to the people of Assam. Brajanath Sharma shaped his passion into what is a heralded form of the kind of theatre that Achyut Lahkar fashioned. Known as the Father of modern Assamese Mobile Theatre, Achyut Lahkar always remembered to credit his brother Sadananda Lahkar who was groomed as a child actor by his teachers who were involved with drama. He formed a troupe called *Nataraj Opera*. This troupe proved to be a fresh site of entertainment in the newly formed town areas. This troupe travelled to upper Assam and was popular among the tea garden workers. It became a full-fledged commercial troupe and continued to entertain people till 1962. Achyut Lahkar wanted to do something that will help preserving the tradition as well as open a way to employ artists at least during the period when they are engaged with the troupe. It's important to point out that till then all the *Jatra* or Opera troupes used to perform a select number of times on invitation and stay idle the rest of the year. Achyut Lahkar wanted a solution for that. Modernisation of *Jatra* and economic security for the

⁴² Tribes of Assam. Earlier known as Missing-Miri, Karbi-Mikir, and Nishi-Daphala.

⁴³ Folk dance form of tea garden labourers in Assam.

⁴⁴ Largest inhabited river island where alone there are sixty eight Sattras (Vaishnava Monastery)

artists was the main motive behind forming *Nataraj Theatre*, the first mobile theatre of Assam. Achyut Lahkar puts his views about the transmogrification of *Nataraj Opera* to *Nataraj Theatre*,

Due to various reasons I reached the conclusion that ‘Jatras’ are actually ‘mobile’. Their presence is indispensable in the weddings and other village feasts. I used to go and watch plays when I was in Calcutta and in Assam whenever time would permit. After watching plays at Bhaskar Stage in Guwahati and Baan Stage in Tezpur I thought theatre is far more refined compared to opera. Girls act in theatres. One thought kept occurring in my mind, can we not make theatres mobile like the Jatras and Operas? In Assam at that time theatre had not started like it was in Calcutta and Bombay. I wanted to open a theatre group of that kind and give it a mobile form....To start a theatre was not an impulsive decision. When I saw in Sada’s Opera without even the use of electricity and microphones audiences crowd to see the performances, so I wanted to use technology and amaze the viewers. Sitting in front of the stage when I switched on the colourful lights on stage audience was spellbound. (qtd. in K. Kalita 19-20; Translation mine)

A short detail of this innovation is necessary not because of it being a pioneer in the field of mobile professional theatre, but this troupe had been a workshop that experimented with several new techniques. AchyutLahkar claims that as his theatre grew old he learnt and discovered new dimensions about stage craft, music and texts of the theatre as well. They staged the first play on 2nd October 1963 in the courtyard of PathshalaHarimandir. They staged the famous play of Phani Sharma, *Bhogjara*. Now all the theatre troupes have a journal exclusive to their troupe. In the first year of the formation of *Nataraj Theatre* it was started with an appeal and a foreword about the play *Haider Ali*. It says that the stage performances are an amalgamation of history, literature, art as well as science. When people everywhere in the world specifically work for the enrichment of this craft, Assam has been pitifully behind. The artists do not get enough recognition or remuneration for the efforts put in it. Though acting is their passion, it does not serve them as a profession. The appeal was for the audience to support this cause of making it a professional troupe where the actors and other artists do not have to divert their attention from following their passion in this field in order to earn their livelihood. The attempt is to bring this form closer to the public than making it fancier to suit the Nouveau Riche of the growing towns.

Even though there have been many such small ventures in this field by several, of which a few are mentioned earlier, the title *Bhramyomaan* had not been used until Nataraj Theatre came into existence. In 1963-64 when Nataraj Theatre performed at George Field in Guwahati, Radhagobinda Boruah was overwhelmed with the immensity of the form. He wrote in his newspaper next day about it saying, “a theatre of this scale that has its own sound control equipment, provision of electricity, own stage, auditorium, in fact shovels for digging and a mobile functioning kitchen too, considering such a form is not to be found anywhere else, it can be named world’s first *Bhramyomaan* Theatre.”(qtd. in K. Kalita,29) While many may contest this statement saying there have been other mobile theatres all over the world including Jatra along with other forms like *Nautanki* and *Tamasha* in India which have been known to be mobile in nature,a comparison to state what makes Assam’s *Bhramyomaan* theatre stand apart from its equivalents has to be made scrutinising their form, craft and text.

How can *Bhramyomaan* Theatre be defined? Is it a folk form or can it be categorised as modern popular theatre? Raymond William’s definition of Folk begins with its old Teutonic spelling, folc. The general meaning of this word ranges from ‘nation’ to ‘people’. When used in plural it is a friendly way to address someone who belong in the same plane without any hierarchy. In the seventeenth century it was mostly used in plural which gave way for it to be used in the commercial culture too.

A significant specializing use began in mC19. W. J. Thoms, in a letter to the Athenaeum in 1846, wrote: ‘What we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature (though . . . it . . . would be most aptly described by a good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore - the Lore of the People).’ Lore, fw lar, oE, had originally been used in a range of meanings from teaching and education to learning and scholarship, but especially from C18 it was becoming specialized to the past, with the associated senses of ‘traditional or ‘legendary’. Thoms’s suggestion of folk, instead of popular, belongs to the same cultural tendency as the suggestion by a correspondent in the Gentleman’s Magazine of 1830 that lore should be substituted for Greek endings in the names of sciences: starlore for astronomy, earthlore for geology, and so on. (Williams 1983, 136-137)

Folk and popular can be interchanged or one element can have both the aspects. *Bhramyomaan* theatre, though did not originate in the long past, it has proved itself to be legendary. As discussed earlier it did not originate from the longest, still ongoing traditional

theatre of the masses, *Bhaona*, as it is more inclined towards a classical approach than being the source of entertainment for the common 'folk'. While tracing the antiquity of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre we reached *Jatra*, a comparable form with *Bhaona* that shares a similar history. *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is a form that has both folk and popular in it. As mentioned earlier it was formed keeping in mind the commercial side of entertainment. The other reason why Achyut Lahkar deemed it important was the divide in the society which was becoming very prominent. Post-Independence, the Assamese society was clearly divided into the Rural and Urban. In the urban areas the proscenium stage was already introduced and was considered elite. In various cities like Kolkata, the proscenium stage was commercial too. In Assam, as a city only Guwahati existed and it wasn't a favourable place for the growth of such art and culture. For example, the first proscenium stage, Baan Mancha, was constructed in Tezpur in 1906. It is the first modern theatre hall of Assam. Likewise various other cultural centres came up, but in the areas which still can't be called cities. So such stages also didn't fulfil the commercial criteria. Lahkar's plan was to have the proscenium stage along with the auditorium, but it should be mobile. In the time where there is lack of transportation and sources of entertainment for the people in rural areas, he decided to carry the entertainment to them. For the first time the make shift stage was made with wooden planks, bamboo and other easily available materials, a tent was raised as the auditorium with chairs for the audience. There was generator for electricity, sound system, all musical instruments – traditional and modern – moreover elaborate props for every scene. Usually *Jatra* or *Bhaona* have negligible or no props at all. In *Jatra* stages a chair may serve as a mountain, a throne or a staircase. In *Tamasha* and *Nautanki* painted drop scenes are seen. In *Bhaona* the costumes are elaborate along with bows, arrows, maces, and swords, but there is usually not even a chair to use as a throne. However nowadays sets are seen in *Bhaonas* too. There is no elevated stage. The performance happens in the middle of the audience. *Bhramyomaan* theatre uses painted scenes and life like props that appear close to reality. While symbolic gestures are used in abundance in traditional folk performances, *Bhramyomaan* theatre does it with props which in a way simplifies the actions of the actors. It shocks the audience that instead of using a drop scene of a train going, *Bhramyomaan* theatre uses a prop train that runs across the stage. Because of the growing love for films during the sixties, the people associated with theatre realised that the rural audience is attracted more towards something entertaining. Sexual scenes, action, fights and songs where the actors romancing each other was getting popular. Before *Nataraj Theatre* was formed, there were thirty three Assamese films. There weren't enough cinema halls to bring these films to the people. In fact there

aren't enough halls yet for the current films and it has a direct connection to the mobile theatre world, about which there will be a detailed discussion in the coming chapters. Due to the lack of other forms of entertainment, *Bhramyomaan* theatre could come closer to the people, and *Nataraj Theatre* was an instant success amidst the people of lower Assam as *Jatra* was already loved and appreciated by many.

The differences that can be seen between amateur and *Bhramyomaan* theatre are listed below:

- Ownership is the main difference between the two forms. *Bhramyomaan* theatre is formed under private ownership. The person who owns the company is responsible for all the people employed in the troupe. Amateur groups may have appointed managers but are not under sole ownership. People interested in the art get together to form a troupe.
- The main motive for both is the production of a play. Amateur groups perform occasionally without having a prior schedule for the whole season. *Bhramyomaan* on the other hand has the whole itinerary planned for the entire season at the end of one successful year.
- Everyone in a *Bhramyomaan* theatre company is salaried. From the person that lifts the curtain to the one that cooks including the artists have their duties prioritised. Despite being such a massive organisation there is no hassle in a production. In amateur groups everyone has to take up several duties during a production from props, costumes to transportation and acting.
- The audience is a major factor here. It is very apparent that only a niche crowd is seen in the theatres for amateur plays, while *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is open for all strata of the society and its tent can accommodate approximately two to three thousand people.
- The fixed stage of a closed theatre cannot accommodate the immediate changes that are needed for continuation of the scenes. The actors use and replace the same props during performance to denote different items, sometimes symbolically. *Bhramyomaan* theatre has twin stages. While performance goes on in one stage, the other is ready with the sets of the next scene. The continuity is never disrupted.
- *Bhramyomaan* theatre is prone to natural disasters as it happens in the open and Assam gets a lot of rains, often the performance gets disrupted during the rainy season.

These theatre troupes are large industries whose strength lie in their organisational skills. According to the money invested, these troupes can be divided into low and high budget troupes. Every troupe has two sets of stage and props so that one set reaches the next destination while the performance goes on in the current location. It saves time as well as

gives everyone time to rest. It is a carnival for the people of rural area. Where the tent gets constructed, around it temporary stalls get erected and the festivities start even before the actual performance begins. The stage is higher than the auditorium, though the audience sit on the area which is not elevated from front to back, audience do not have hindrance in viewing the performance. The seating system is simple. The higher the price of the ticket closer to the stage the seating will be. The orchestra here is not a part of the stage. They sit on the level of the audience but covered with a sheet that doesn't let the audience see them. The electronic signal of starting of the performance is followed by the dimming of light in the auditorium. Just like the *Ganeshastuti*⁴⁵ or the Ragas of *Jatra*, a devotional tune is played invoking Shiva (Nataraja). This is followed by a dance drama where the dialogues are delivered by the designated people sitting in the orchestra. This will be discussed in the forthcoming chapters in detail. Earlier there used to be intermission in between performances which was followed by comic or musical interludes before the main performance restarts. During the late eighties this system was eliminated. Just before the last scene begins, the announcement for the next day's program is done and the gratitude towards the audience is expressed. Sometimes the demand of a hit play is so much that immediately after a show the troupe has to perform it again for the audience waiting outside. Sometimes a play goes for three shows per night. A less popular play among the three chosen for a season does not get performed if the audience demand is for the more popular one.

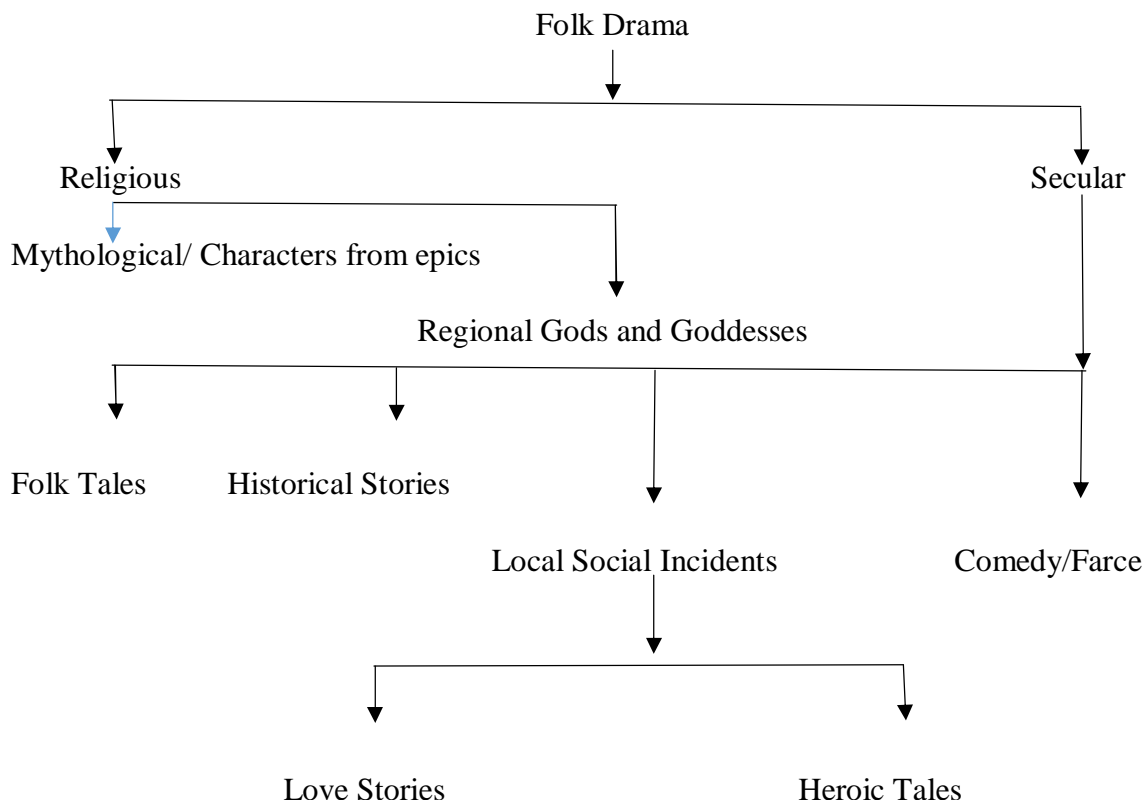
The next chapter will trace the history of the various forms of plays written from Sankaradeva's time and the changes the plays have gone through over a period of time. The second chapter will also look into the discourse of plays with relation to theme, style, and presentation. The chapter will be analysed from different perspectives such as how the themes and styles have been and how they are at present. Furthermore, how these forms of presentation facilitated in the proliferation of the present day plays of *Bhramyomaan* theatre will also be examined in the chapter.

⁴⁵ Singing praises of a deity

Chapter 2

Assamese Plays: History and Transition

India's North Eastern region is often identified as a place of unrest with serial blasts and different militant outfits shrouding its existence from mainland India. Amid all the agitation and innumerable problems faced by the people of North East India, the people of this region are trying to push forth and create their own space in this age where everyone is embracing globalisation and multiculturalism as new ways of life. Even though the changes witnessed here are not phenomenal, people are able to raise their voice and reclaim the space of their class, gender and most importantly their community. One such phenomenon which has been able to blend everything and stand tall as a beacon of hope for the people of the state of Assam in terms of economic, social and cultural values is *Bhramyomaan*¹ Theatre or Mobile Theatre of Assam. Before going into details about the plays performed in *Bhramyomaan* Theatre it is important to learn about the folk forms and the kind of plays the audience in Assam has witnessed. There are different subject matters which are dealt with in Folk drama.



¹ Literally, 'of a roving nature'. This word comes from *bhraman* which means to travel. The word *Bhramyomaan* will be used throughout the work instead of alternating between Mobile and *Bhramyomaan* to mean the genre and not the nature of this particular form of theatre.

Assam has been rich in its folk cultures which include *Ojapali*², *Putola Naas*³, *Bayan Party*,⁴ *Notua Nritya*⁵, Songs of *Charak Puja*⁶, and *Dhulia Naas*⁷ etc. since the pre Sankardeva era. These folk forms can be called predecessors of *AnkiyaBhaona*. In late fifteenth century, Srimanta Sankardeva started the traditional dance drama form *AnkiyaBhaona* which was based on the six *Ankiya* plays he wrote himself. *Anka* means act, hence *AnkiyaBhaonas* are one act plays. The incorporation of music and instruments were also his innovation. These plays were written in *Brajawali* language and he had borrowed ideas from Sanskrit plays for their performance. Maheswar Neog, indicated the influences of local dramatic folk performance like *Putala Nas*, *Oja-pali* etc. on *AnkiyaNaat*, and stressed upon the influences of Sanskrit dramas like Hanuman Nataka or Mahanataka and Prabodha Chandrodaya of Krisna Mishra. (M. Neog 1988, 247-251) Sankardeva's intent behind the performance of these plays was to claim attention of the common masses and spread religious ideas of Vaishnavism through *Ekasharana Naama Dharma*. He believed entertainment is the best way to make people understand the complex teachings of a religion. *Shravana* (to hear) and *Kirtana* (chant the name of God) were his ways of reaching God. He established *Sattras*⁸ in order to carry on and spread his spiritual message through dance and drama about God's (Vishnu's) greatness. Even though his preaching through *AnkiyaBhaona* made a great impact on people of the upper region of Assam, lower Assam was influenced very little by the same. Instead, the Bengali *Jatra* was more popular there. The earliest documented *Jatra* plays date from the late eighteenth century, though the form probably had existed along the oral traditional literary forms of pre-British Bengal and was lost because of a lack of documentation. The plays of *Jatra* are called *pala-s* and they used to be in a lyric form instead of being a well-structured play. Chaitanya and his associates, in order to propagate their faith among people, initiated the use of dance, drama, music and play acting. (Sarkar, 87) *Jatra* travelled to Assam and became a part of traditional performances as well.

² It is believed to be the oldest folk dance of Assam. It consists of narrative singing and dancing along with dramatic dialogues and action. The singing is mostly in Sanskrit. *Oja* means leader and *Pali* are his assistants while performing. It is broadly classified into two varieties- *Biyah Goa Oja Pali* and *Suknani Oja Pali*. The former belongs to the Vaishnavism and the latter to Manasa Cult.

³ Puppet dance.

⁴ An act of singing praises of Vishnu or other devotional stories using *Ragas* accompanied by various instruments with rhythmic feet movements.

⁵ A form of dance used as interlude between longer performances of *Bayan Party*.

⁶ A festival observed by Hindus to offer prayers to Lord Shiva. It is believed to be performed in order to diminish sorrows and bring prosperity. It is prevalent mainly in Bengal, Assam and Tripura.

⁷ Male dancers dance and act accompanied by drums (*Dhol*) and cymbals (*Taal*). It is like miracle plays.

⁸ Institutional monasteries exclusive to *Eksharana Naama Dharma*.

The Burmese invasion of Assam in 1817 heralded the downfall of the Ahom kingdom and the seven years of atrocities compelled the state to seek help from the British. Though reluctant at first, the British did not leave this opportunity of colonising the then undivided Assam and annexing Burma. When ‘*Bor Asom*’, literally ‘Greater Assam’, i.e. undivided Northeast India was brought under British rule in 1826 through the treaty of Yandabo, a group of literate people from Calcutta were brought to Assam for clerical jobs. As recreational activity they used to do plays in their language using makeshift stages and it was followed by the ingress of different Bengali *Jatra* groups. Because of the keen interest of the local people in these plays, they were able to get a large cultural base for their performances. The first travelling theatre group in Assam was formed by Tithiram Bayan at Barpeta in 1860 as mentioned earlier. Govinda Ram Choudhury was the patron of this troupe and he toured all over Assam with this troupe. As Bengali was the medium of formal articulation then, Bayan also learned Bengali and the first play they had staged was written and performed in Bengali. The plays included *Duryodhaner Urubhanga*, *Rama Banabaas*, and *Radhikar Maanbhanjan*. Tithiram Bayan can be called the founder of the first professional theatre group of Assam and he is the pioneer of the present day mobile theatre even though he is criticised for imitating Bengali *Jatra* instead of setting out something original or indigenous. This troupe performed for many years and it is not sure when the transition from the Bengali to Assamese plays occurred. According to Sahityacharya Atulchandra Hazarika, people of Assam were mesmerised by the vibrancy of everything that was not indigenous. The large-scale cultural imports made people disregard their own heritage and consequently led to a sense of self-disdain, “*neechatmika*” (Hazarika, 249). The performance of *AnkiyaBhaona* in lower Assam totally vanished and the tour of Tithiram Bayan to upper Assam also made some impact there too. (Hazarika, 251) If someone talked about staging of an Assamese play it was laughed off. It was said that there is no Assamese play which is enjoyable enough to be performed and such plays will never emerge (Hazarika, 268).

Inspired by and embarrassed about this astonishing trailblazing form in an intruder’s language, there came many followers in different parts of Assam who founded their own theatre groups. Natyacharya Brajanath Sharma brought a revolutionary change with his *Shila Kalika Opera Party* by staging translated plays. He translated and staged the plays *Rana Pratap* by Dwijendra Lal Roy and *Bajirao* by Manilal Banerjee in 1921. A ground-breaking transformation happened with the introduction of Co-acting in 1933. The dominance of male actors/acting was altered by Brajanath Sharma with the help of one of the most famous

actors/playwrights of Assam, Phani Sharma, who is a recipient of the title 'Natasurya'. Till then these plays and theatre troupes were not established as an industry to generate income. It was non-professional. Brajanath Sharma was the first to give it a professional platform by appointing actors full time with a monthly wage. Phani Sharma himself said "even edible weeds near a stream have more value than artists in Assam." (C. Goswami, 14. Qtd in P. Sharma, Translation mine). A pursuit that pays was a blessing for the artists interested in acting, singing, dancing or playing any instrument. Brajanath Sharma provided this platform.

As mentioned earlier, the modern day *Bhramyomaan* Theatre was given a new identity by Achyut Lahkar. He is called the father of professional modernised mobile theatre of Assam. He had seen *Jatra* performances in West Bengal and questioned himself about the absence of a large scale theatre production which could be a source of income through performance along with entertainment. He was interested in plays and music from his childhood as his father owned a costume and musical instrument shop. His brother Sada Lahkar was groomed by the local cultural pioneers to be an actor. Inspired by his mentors, Sada Lahkar founded *Nataraj Opera* in 1959 and started staging plays in his house. Achyut Lahkar was determined to do something grand in this field which could contribute to the cultural as well as socio-economic grounds of Assam. Hence, he, with his younger brother Sada Lahkar, without any capital to start with, founded *Nataraj Theatre* on October 2, 1963. Since then more than a hundred theatre troupes have been formed but most of them could not thrive. Some were unable to even complete a year of their tours. However, without any entrepreneurial capital, government sponsorship, many among these troupes have survived and successfully completed more than forty years in this domain.

In the cultural industry of Assam amateur theatre and mobile theatre run parallel. Both these forms are considered to be modern forms of theatre. While it remains a common approach to start writing about Assamese theatre with Sankaradeva's *Chihna Jatra*, there is barely any trace left of the ritualistic, religious or folk forms of theatre in the modern Assamese theatre forms. Comparatively both amateur and mobile theatre have their own set of rules of performance. The difference between these two forms are very distinct. Stage, audience and subject of presentation are the primary differences which one notices. These differences need to be discussed from the point where they started changing, how and why? *Ankiya Naat* has been revolutionary in the field of Assamese culture. Dimbeswar Neog in *New Light on History of Asamiya Literature* says,

The history of the Assamese drama is very long and old indeed. Older surely than the drama of any Indian modern language and older than even the regular English drama at least by a century. The first Assamese drama is certainly Chihna *Jatra* (literally a play with painted scenes) and first theatre is the performance of it in 1468. As a matter of fact, neither introduction of scenes nor the regular drama in Europe in general can be ascribed to a period earlier than the seventeenth century and in England in particular regular dramatic work really began in the latter part of the sixteenth century with such predecessors of Shakespeare as Marlow, and the Globe theatre which Shakespeare had immortalised was actually established in 1599. (215)

After British occupied greater Assam in 1926, under the influence of western art and culture, the dialogues and development of folk and indigenous culture came to a halt. Youths started going out of the state for higher education and the nearest and ideal place for it was Kolkata which was already immersed in western ways in terms of art, music, and literature. Stages were constructed in the model of western theatres, plays were written with newer perspectives and formats in Kolkata. The history of western influence in Bengal's theatre scenario is not very recent. When Job Charnock founded Calcutta in 1690 along with fort, armoury and other necessary trading centres, a playhouse was also built 1753. It was closed during the battle of the fort with Siraj-Ud-Daula. Under the Governor Generalship of Warren Hastings, in 1775 the New Playhouse of Calcutta Theatre was built. Famous Emma Bristow's performances dazzled Kolkata in her Mrs Bristow's Private Theatre. Her departure in 1790 was a fatal blow to the theatre world in Kolkata. There were other short-lived Dum Dum Theatre, Athenaeum and Wheeler Palace Theatre etc. One of the most famous theatres was Chowringhee Theatre opened in 1813 and was associated with Mrs Esther Leach, who was a prominent figure in the theatre scene on Kolkata. Various other distinguished personalities were also linked to the foundation of this theatre namely, Sanskrit scholar Dr H N Wilson, a teacher of Hindu College – D L Richardson, Civil servant Henry Meredith Parker and most importantly Dwarakanath Tagore. The changes that had taken place in the relationship between India and Britain can be seen in the association of an Indian in their activities. This was further seen strengthened in occasions when Baishnab Charan Auddy was cast as Othello in a production of Sans Souci theatre. This incident had seen the eagerness of Bengali upper middle class people when Bengali and English newspapers published about the 'unpainted

Othello'. The scenario in Bengal of the English theatre was a reflection of theatre in London. Apart from Shakespeare, other comedies, farces, tragedies were frequently staged. Kironmoy Raha writes,

Spread of English education, growing affluence of trading families, absentee landlordism, the rise of the middle class and the exploding growth of Calcutta; the strong pull of traditional *jatra* among the common people on the one hand and, on the other, reaction against it amongst the intelligentsia, acquaintance with English dramatic literature and English theatrical forms in the playhouses of Calcutta-all these fertilised the soil for Bengali theatre to grow and take in many ways the shape it did. (17)

Youths from Assam exposed to the theatrical culture of Kolkata longed to start doing the same in their state. Something entirely new had started which left no place for the older traditional plays to contribute in their compositions. Hymns, songs, stringed dialogues of characters are the main characteristics of these one act plays which are primarily religious. To establish theocentric ideals of life was the objective of these plays as all writings during Bhakti movement were laden with such spirits. Neo Assamese plays which have borrowed traits from western plays especially following Shakespeare's writings, show the real life scenarios, portraying struggles of characters that the reader or audience can relate to. Depiction of reality through multiple acts and scenes in the play is their central theme. Opposing to the *Ankiya Naats* having one story, the new plays sometimes had multiple stories with linear/non-linear plots and sub plots that framed the story. The *Ankiya Naats* invoked spirituality and the new plays made the readers/ audience aware of the problems or revels of our society.

These new plays emerged in the nineteenth century, but scholars often overlook the plays that were written after Sankardeva and his disciples. Seventeenth and eighteenth century Assamese dramas belong to *Sattriya* tradition. Apart from the birth and death anniversaries of the saints, Srikrishna's birth anniversary, *Raasleela*, *Dol Jatra* and various other religious festivities were incomplete without performance of such plays. When new *Adhikars* take charge of a *Sattra*, it was mandatory for them to write a new play and put up a performance. Innumerable plays that have been written and performed have no accountability today. Religious they might be but these performances graced courts of various kings as well. A war won, coronation ceremony or to host an ambassador are few occasions where these

performances were sponsored by the kings. Narayan Das gives examples from *Tungkhungia Buronjee*,⁹ various records of said performances and their reviews as well. Maheswar Neog notes the characteristics of such plays written following Sankardeva's dramatic layout,

- Even though these smaller plays do not follow the *Jhumura* pattern and are written following Sankardeva's completed models the features are not adequately followed.
- The shlokas written in Sanskrit have wrong rhyme scheme as well as grammar. Some shlokas are left out and some are unnecessarily added without it being related to the subject written.
- The dialogues are extracted from Madhab Kandali's *Ramayana*, Assamese Bhagwat, Ram Saraswati's *Mahabharata* or Sankardeva's *Keertan-Dasham*. These dialogues though written in verse form are delivered in prose. Sankardeva or Madhabdeva's plays did not have such customs.
- Addition of *Bilaap*¹⁰ to heighten emotional connection of audiences.
- The music and songs for the new plays mostly remained the older ones except a few new ragas.
- The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* became popular sources for stories rather than *Bhagwat Purana*.
- *Brajawali*¹¹ language was used loosely and new plays were written without the use of this language. These new plays were written and performed only through songs.
- Later considering the perception of the audience, crude humour and unrehearsed *Shringar Rasa* was used.(1962, 222)

Original plays were scarce, hence abundance of plays could not hold on to the qualitative values of these compositions. The changes had already started during that time yet it did not take the form of what the latter playwrights produced. These were not the edited, adopted, changed versions of religious plays. Reform plays had taken the place of religious plays which was an entirely new genre. Sanskrit, *Brajawali* and such other languages remained within the ambit of the masterworks and further study or their uses in literature was constrained. As mentioned earlier new plays were written being inspired by the Bengali plays

⁹ Tungkhungia- an Ahom clan, Buronjee- historical chronicles first written during the Ahom King Sukapha.

¹⁰ Grief expressed by characters through verse. Attributed to female characters but male characters were sometimes given such dialogues too. Lament.

¹¹ Artificial language developed during Bhakti Movement with mixture of local linguistic flavour. Considered to be the language used in Braj, Sri Krishana's abode.

written during the reform movements of Iswarchandra Bidyasagar. A play titled *Bidhoba Bibaho* by Umesh Chandra Mitra in 1856 was the inspiration for Gunabhiraam Boruah's *Ram-Nabomee* (1857). The theme of this play is the problems of child marriage and early widowhood. The 1880s saw a shift from the reform plays when archaic plays had taken their place. The subject matters again changed to that of stories from Indian epics. *Seetaharan* by Ramakanta Choudhury is considered to be the first modern archaic play. Within the same decade another significant thing had taken its course. Basantakumar Bhattacharya has categorised the plays according to their timelines as well as the themes and stories adopted by the writers. He sums up nineteenth century plays with the age of comedy plays which started late 1880s as Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* was translated as *Bhramaranga*. (1888) (2011, 9) This play was a revolutionary step forward as it was written in Kolkata and performed at first in Kolkata at a house in Beniatola. This play was translated as a challenge to the people who were trying to suppress the progress of Assamese language. A committee called *Asomiya Bhashar Unnati Sadhini Sabha* (Committee for the Progress of Assamese Language) was formed in 1888 in Kolkata by a few aware students. A collective effort resulted in *Bhramaranga*. Atul Chandra Hazarika writes, "Audience were mesmerised with the performance of a superior quality play. The actors playing twins Kaliman and Niranjan were able to impress the audience in various stages." (95, Translation mine) Twentieth century had seen more varieties and could be demarcated easily from each other due to their varied subject matters. Farce, social and archaic plays were introduced to the readers in nineteenth century itself but it continued till twentieth century along with new trends like historical, fantasy, absurd drama etc. These plays with borrowed elements from the western writers could not impress the audience while being performed. For the common audience a play always had been religious plays like *Ankiya Bhaona* or other plays with warfare, Sri Krishana's *leela* (adventures) where there was no need of a stage for performance. These used to be performed in *Naamghars*, courtyard of other religious establishments or King's court. To perform the modern plays, stages well equipped like it was in the western world were not yet constructed. The audience were not ready to be amazed with only the content of the plays. This period proved to be less inspirational to the writers to produce more or better. Twentieth century has seen more experimentation in plays. A play based on *Meghnad Badh Kavya* of Michael Madhusudan Dutta with the same title in 1904 by Chandradhar Boruah can be called milestone in mythical plays. Historical plays were written during the same time starting with Padmanath Gohain Boruah's *Joymoti* in 1900. Social plays did not achieve much applause until 1950s even though these were written alongside mythical and historical

plays. Out of all social plays *Grihalakshmi* by Nabin Chandra Bordoloi in 1911 is well known. The social plays also included comedy plays which did not use farce, satire or dark humour but simple ways to make the audience laugh with portrayals of simple characters from villages. Stories that were mythical, social or historical were laden with fantasy during 1930s. Jyoti Prasad Aggarwala is a pioneer in this form of plays which were highly poetic in nature. The forerunner of Assamese films, Aggarwala is also famous for his songs which he primarily wrote for his plays like *Sonit Kunwori*, *Karengor Ligiri*, *Rupalim* and *Nimati Koina* etc. Most of his plays are musicals where dialogues are delivered through songs or verse. Modern though his plays were with inclusion of inter-tribe alliances across greater Assam, he borrowed highly from myths of our scriptures as well which were sprinkled with supernatural phantasmagoria. Aggarwala said “The amalgamation of modern and traditional *Shankari* dramatic techniques will bring a unique characteristic to Assamese drama.” (Handique, 181). These plays were one act plays with the omniscient *Sutradhar* present from the beginning to the end. While it was intentional to create a mixture of the old and the new in a few playwrights, in some other it just featured as *Bhaona*, which is the only form of plays experienced by them. All these plays can be called experimental keeping in mind the reasons for these plays being written, and most of these experiments were transitory. A sudden change came to the subject of plays after the independence of India. The comedy and tragedies written in Shakespeare’s models were replaced by a realistic approach. The playwrights followed Ibsen, G.B. Shaw, Becket, Ionesco, Brecht et.al. Class struggle, economic inequality, unemployment, middle class lifestyle, generation gap, struggle of the working class etc. became the primary themes. Post-independence plays were shorter and one act plays were preferred due to time constraint of long rehearsal hours or the time that audience could spare for entertainment. The way British Drama League sponsors the one act play festival All-England Theatre Festival, different organizations in Assam started doing the same. Moreover it became an important activity in college and school festivals all over the state. At first most plays were farcical and later they started addressing serious problems of the society of that time. Not many people were well versed with the English language, hence translated plays were a constant favourite of the readers/ audience. Among many others Ibsen remains the most translated playwright in the post-independence Assam. Plays selected for translation do not follow a pattern as Shakespeare, Beckett, and Lorca along with several Sanskrit plays like *Malvikagnimitram*, *Vikramorvashiam* etc. were also being translated at the same period. Even other Indian playwrights like Mohan Rakesh and Badal Sarkar were introduced through translation to Assamese readers/audience. It becomes difficult to place

these plays within categories as they do not follow a pattern. One can only conclude saying that it was an attempt to familiarise the readers/audience with diverse genres, themes and plots and newer ways of staging these plays.

History of Assamese plays and their performance indicate that their composition and production is not a new phenomenon. It is important to point out that lot of these plays have borrowed ideas from plays of other languages as well as literal translation of plays. Writers educated in Kolkata, or the Bengali population brought to Assam by the British had influenced the plays written. *Bhramyomaan* theatre's initiation with Bengali, and translated from Bengali plays can be rationalised thus.

North Kamrup being the centre of the mobile trend in theatre has a few reasons. Firstly North Kamrup could be easily influenced by the dramatic movement that started in Bengal geographically, easier transportation and Sankardeva's Bhakti movement. Even though the impact and expansion of Bhakti movement was strong in Barpeta, it could not gain much authority in Pathshala to Nalbari area. As a result influence of Satriya culture such as *Bhaona* were not practiced much in this area. Because of it one can see a strong influence of Bengali *Jatra* in *Bhramyomaan* theatre and at the same time *Bhaona* has almost no influence on the same. Another matter is that Bajalee and Bornagar of North Kamrup were distinguished for their involvement in India's independence struggle. During that time in Bengal to motivate people with patriotism Mukunda Das's *Jatra*, *Neeldarpan*, *Nabanna* etc. had highly influenced these two regions. For this reason Braja Sharma started his Kohinoor opera in Sarbhog and mobile theatre groups in Pathshala had emerged. (Patgiri, 166, Translation mine)

Around 1860-65 Tithiram Bayan started the first *Jatra* group in Barpeta. The plays *Ramabanabas* and *Maanbhanjan* were written and performed in Bangla. Tithiram Bayan is infamous for importing the Bangla *Jatra* form to Assam. Many followed his trend and various Bangla *Jatras* appeared all over Assam. Even though in upper and middle Assam *Jatra* could not flourish, in lower parts of Assam such as Kamrup, Goalpara, Dhuburi etc. it was rooted and the traditional forms like *Bhaona* received no such vigour and were hampered by the fast growing popularity of *Jatra*. The folk and religious performances were never competitive towards each other and were enjoyed in different times and occasions. Once *Jatra* became

popular in some places *Bhaona* performances diminished or became totally extinct. Satyendranath Sharma questions and tries to understand while emergence of one form rose to popularity, how the other was affected by it in *Natya Sahityar Buranjee*. He says that probably *Ankiya Bhaona* could not fix its position in the villages of lower Assam as they already had their folk forms like *Ojapali* and *Dhuliya Naas*. The popularity of *Bhaona* was anyway less which gave way to the new form of *Jatra* quite easily. A very significant point usually seen ignored is the fact that the spoken language in lower part of Assam is very much similar to Bangla. As one goes from middle Assam towards Kamrup and the districts that follow towards the boundary of Bengal the linguistic changes are very distinct. It is closer to Bangla than Assamese in pronunciation, intonation and usage of a vast number of words. Even though linguistically Assam cannot be divided according to the geographical location as there are numerous other dialects and languages are in use, but no one can deny that the official language of Barak Valley¹² remains Bangla till date. Banikanta Kakati writes “Western Assam was never for a long period under any dominant power. It was the cockpit of several fighting forces – the Koches, the Muhammedans and the Ahoms, and political fortunes passed from one power to another. A steady commanding influence that gives homogeneity to manners as to speech was never built up by any ruling power in Western Assam.” (17) When policies were made, remade and changed about implementing Assamese language as medium of instruction it was confusing as only a few upper Assam districts had as less as 36000 speakers of the language. It was also proposed that Assamese should cease to exist as a language and Bangla should take its place. (Kar, 58) It was as late as 1873 when Assamese came to be an official language. Thereafter too spoken languages in lower Assam remain closer to Bangla in their nature.

Hemchandra Boruah’s *Kaniar Keertan* was published in 1861. This play is about awakening of opium induced Assam. However Gunabhiram Boruah’s *Ram-Nabomee* is considered to be the first Assamese play. There are instances of plays being performed in Dibrugarh in 1885. *Abhimanyu Badh* by Bharat Chandra Das was one of the most remembered performances. The plays were written on demand for an occasion such as festivals like *Durga Puja*, *aan* etc. They were seldom or never published. Wherever there is a mention of these plays, the words ‘*Haatelikha*’ i.e. handwritten is mentioned. In 1872 the first proscenium stage was erected in

¹² Assam has two major rivers, Brahmaputra and Barak. While Brahmaputra dissects the state through the middle, the areas on either banks of Brahmaputra are called Brahmaputra Valley and the geographically lower region of Assam that consist of the districts Karbi Anglong, Kachar, North Kachar Hills etc. around the Barak river are called Barak Valley.

Dibrugarh and the organization was called Bangali Amateur Theatre, where both Bengali and Assamese community used to perform. There was a need for a separate theatre group when Bengali population increased and people started living in the particular area mostly inhabited by their community. The instances of performance in Assamese language is not unstated, yet the feeling of displacing Assamese by Bangla plays is seen in a very negative light.

Ambikagiri Raichoudhury in the introduction of his play *Jayadratha Badh* had written that every educated, semi educated, uneducated youths, and grown-ups from Barpeta were hooked to performing in Bengali. The singers and actors used to train aspirants in Bangla songs and acting. When requested by Raichoudhury to adapt Assamese language instead for performance he was told by various troupes that “in Assamese language there are no songs or plays which we enjoy saying the dialogues of, meaning there are no such suitable Assamese plays.” (qtd. in Hazarika, 268, translation mine) Promotion and reinstating of one language lead to the hatred of the other. Tithiram Bayan is mentioned as a pioneer of roving dance drama troupe but his contributions are not celebrated the way Brajanath Sharma is remembered for his contributions. The mocking tone of Laksminath Bezboruah when he writes recalling the days in his autobiography when Bengali *JatraPalas* were becoming popular shows how the critics welcomed its foray in Assam.

Probably looking at the *JatraPalas* of Tithiram Bayan from Barpeta, Sivasagar’s gentlemen were excited to perform Bangla *Jatragaan*. With the help of a few Bengalis and Muktanath Khajansee *Radhar Maanbhanjan Pala* was rehearsed in full swing. The overwhelmed city became topsy-turvy with the waves of such songs. Few boys became ‘singers’ and other middle aged Assamese became ‘expert violinist’. The audience were thrilled to see Assamese boys dancing and reciting in bangla saying ‘*dekho ja go Chandravali, Konja (kunj) duware (dware) Banamalee*’. Only for a few years the tiny waves of this trend touched the docks of cities like Sivasagar, Jorhaat and Golaghat and suddenly it was shifted to the supervision of clerks from tea gardens which led to the formation of numerous Pala troupes and killed both Bangla and Assamese songs in their immature attempts and faded away. (qtd. in Hazarika, 250, translation mine)

The point Bezboruah here was trying to make was, neither the attempts to perform Bangla *Jatra* was flawless nor were they proficient enough to master a performance in their own

language. The discrepancy in spelling of the words was most notable mistakes the performers made. Their short lived popularity is considered to be the ignorance and the feeling of self-loathing among the Assamese audience as everything new was considered better than the traditional one. If the process of adaptation and presentation was properly practised, it would have created probably a perfect trend with harmony among the people of both ethnic roots. Brajanath Sharma says, “*Jatra* or Opera are not our ancient heritage. These are imported from Bengal and spreading its roots all over Assam. In every village in Assam, especially in Kamrup an Opera party is seen to be formed. But the technicalities and adornments of the art betrays easily the lack of experience.” (qtd. in Hazarika, 248, translation mine)

Acting in theatre was not considered noble. Writing a play for a performance was considered even less than that. Purnakanta Devasharma had to burn his play *Madhumalati* (1872) when he was ridiculed for writing it. Eminent poet Raghunath Choudhary was punished for watching a play. Indreswar Borthakur who is known as Natyacharya had to hide from people while learning Tabla in a cobbler’s house. If such was the adversity towards any art during that time, why the advent of Bengali song, dance drama was criticised in almost every page of *Manchalekha*, which is considered to be the greatest work of history of Assamese Art and Culture. Critically looking at documentation enhances the spirit of discovering or rediscovering one’s indigenous neglected treasures or inventing new ones to support old forgotten arts. Not only Bengali songs and writings but other arts like dancing and singing of courtesans, Manipuri dance etc. were also looked down upon. It is illusory to state that Assamese people lost themselves in things that were not their own. When the playwrights are copying dramatic techniques from Brecht, Beckett, Ibsen, Shakespeare and others it was not criticised but considered to be a new trend, translations were enjoyed as well as the other original plays. This selective inclusiveness in fact paints a wrong picture of the connoisseurs of arts, especially the ones related to the dramatic field. This in a way shifts the focus from the important factors of such original or imitated plays which make them different and unique. Lakshminath Bezboruah’s *Joymoti Kunwori*¹³ (1915) proves to be one such experiment which he claims to have scripted after reading plays of Shakespeare. Giving examples of the way Shakespeare presented the old historical anecdotes, he tried just that. Instead of painting a historical skeleton of olden times, he created imaginary characters to support the actual ones.

¹³ Joymoti Kunwori was the wife of Ahom prince Gadapani. She was tortured by the boy king Sulikpha on the counsel of his minister Luluksola Borphukan. According to Ahom doctrines any worthy prince of any clan can claim the throne unless they are physically handicapped. Sulikpha raided the kingdom and injured all the princes. Gadapani was sent to Naga Hills by Joymoti. To gather information of his whereabouts Joymoti was tortured and killed in Jerenga Pothar. Her son Rudra Singha succeeded his father Gadadhar Singha.

This play has five acts and twenty nine scenes where space, time and descriptions of the characters are detailed in every scene. The inclusion of songs bear a picture of the Vaishnavite society of that time, yet it appears to be out of place many a times when a character Seuti sings Meerabai's bhajans while begging and a Naga girl Dalimi speaks dialogues in fluent Assamese. He introduced several characters like Sharma Pandit, who can be perceived to be like the 'fool' in Shakespeare's plays who criticises the king and the minister's politics with humorous dialogues. Like the grave diggers, witches and porters in Shakespeare, Bezboruah created characters like Monai Kaanri, Jolohu Serabolia etc to hint at future events through the play's progress. The main characters also add to the nature of the characters, information on the plot and the flow of the story with various soliloquies as well as dream sequences.

During the time when Bezboruah wrote his plays, Assam as well as India was under the colonial rule. The glorious six hundred years of Ahom rule had faded by then. Majority of the population was uneducated peasants. They were hardly ready for battling such a powerful enemy physically or mentally. To enlighten the common folk about the magnificent past to invoke love for their land was the motive behind writing such historical plays. He says, "needless to mention that the main purpose behind writing this play is to show how Bhaskarbarma, Chakradhwaj Singha and Rudra Singha's Assam has turned into a crematorium." (Mahanta, 1998, 55, Translation mine).

The folk elements portrayed through local songs, dances and other festivities make such plays stand out. Folk Lore evolves out of people of the society mostly from the rural areas, who are closer to the land and who are carriers of customs and traditions. Anthropologist Robert Redfield articulates that the domain of folk society is primitive in its nature, mostly consisting of peasants and folk traditions. The new town societies can identify these as something different from their traditions based on certain features. As the state of Assam is mostly rural and the urban societies are not far removed from the cultural traditions, literature produced inducing folk elements do not seem alien to them. Again, the readership mostly belonged to the educated city bred people. Even though modern Assamese literature was influenced by western thoughts and elite senses, the basis of their creations are rooted to the soil. Their imagination and the implementation of their intellect is socially influenced in their writings which is easily noticeable by their use of folk culture and tradition. Their creations are based of Assam's social life.

Influence of Ankia Naat:

19th century sees the beginning of modern Assamese plays. Primary inspiration is the writers' converge with Western literature. As the time passes Assamese modern plays are able to present themselves conglomerated with various unique features of their own in the realm of world literature. While waves of new changes were trying to take away the originality of the Assamese plays, the vigilant playwrights felt the need of redefining their rootedness. Hence, modern Assamese plays were incorporated with local folk elements. Even before the modern Assamese plays started including inputs of *Ankiya Naats*, the practice was prevalent but only where it was unavoidable and permitted through traditional spheres.

13th to 14th century can be seen as the golden era of Assamese literature. Vaishnava devotees and other writers produced complete works that enriched Assamese literature. Pioneer of such writings was Srimanta Sankardeva who brought a revolution through his new ways of writing under the influence of Bhakti movement. Even though the purpose of his writing was religious preaching, no one till date has surpassed the position Srimanta Sankardeva holds in Assamese literary domain. His disciple Sri Madhabdeva followed his guru's style of composing and created something new with inclusion of his ideas and approach. Profound religious thoughts were simplified by their writings for the common illiterate masses. The simplification was done through the use of songs, dances, drama, verses etc. The inspiration for Sankardeva's plays came from three main factors, first the already existing folk theatre and dramatic forms like *Ojapali* and *Putola Naas*, secondly his observation of various dance and drama forms all over India and lastly Indian classical literature. According to *Katha Guru Charita* (1952), *Chihna Jatra Bhaona* was the result of his experiences of pilgrimage. It is assumed that this play did not have dialogues, hence no written form is available today. A seven layered stage to signify seven *Vaikunthas* and seven Vishnus on each *Vaikuntha*¹⁴ were seated. All the scenes were crafted, weaved and drawn. He made instruments designed after other instruments he had seen in his journey. He played, acted, directed and sung in this play and taught his disciples the same. It proved to be very tedious to draw each and every scene to signify spaces and props, which led to the later plays with dialogues. This new visual attracted the attention of common people and Sankardeva adopted it as his key tool for preaching. The main features of *Ankiya Naat* are:

¹⁴ Celestial supreme abode of Vishnu.

- Significance of *Sutradhar*. The *Sutradhar* is singer, dancer as well as the conductor of the play.
- Poetic songs, Shlokas and verses were used in abundance.
- Rhythmic prose dialogues
- Use of *Brajawali* language.
- Music and Dance.

Post Sankardeva era started to see less and less of *Ankiya Naats* performed and were written with lot of changes, which towards the end of 18th century almost faded from the scenario in most places. Apart from a few Sattras *Ankiya Naats* became too scarce and towards the end on 19th century Bangla *Jatra*, Pala and such other models of play acting had taken over the domain of theatrical performances. After getting influenced by Western trends and construction of Proscenium arch stage the popularity of *Ankiya Naats* had gone down tremendously. *Bhaona*, which used to be performed only in *Brajawali* language and *Ankiya* format were replaced by modern Assamese language. Most of such plays are stories from religious texts and handwritten which are never published. These plays are specifically written for *Bhaona* performances and never get printed. Various adaptations and changes are done according to the comfort of the writer as well as the ones who act. As these are simple villagers, mostly illiterate and for them remembering dialogues by listening to the director/prompter or someone who reads for them becomes difficult if it is ornate language such as *Brajawali* which was solely created for the purpose of producing literature.

Premises of adopted themes, physical technicalities of direction etc. emerged with modified fervour. Plays became symbolic, experimental and characters did not burst into a song and dance mode every time there was a need to signify specific emotions. Plays were written about livelihood. It moved from religion to society. Adorned with new enhancements the experiments were able to entertain audiences/readers through audio, visual as well as with the content of the text. Post-Independence performances have unsealed a way for artists to make it a profession too. Even though themes, context, subject and derivations are all modern some traits of the older form still exists in modern plays. Gunabhiram Boruah's *Ram-Nabomee* has the Sanskrit words *Iti Niskranta or Iti Sarve Niskranta*¹⁵ after every act. (Handique, 179) The *Sutradhar* used to say it in *Ankiya Naats* after his description of a character's entry or the next scene. Even though there is no *Sutradhar* in the modern play, because of the habitual usage it

¹⁵ Everyone exit

appeared there too. Again in Ramakanta Choudhury's *Seetaharan* and *Ravanbadh* (1870-80) and Purnakanta Devasharma's *Harichandra Natak* and *Haradhanu Bhanga* (1893) has influences of *Ankiya Naat*. In fact in *Haradhanu Bhanga*'s fourth act the dialogues spoken by Seeta's companion Kanakawati describing Sri Rama's beauty and valour is almost identical to that of *Rama Bijay Ankiya Naat*. The ending of fifth act has *Apsaras*¹⁶ singing a song of blessing which is not unlike *Muktimangal Bhatima*¹⁷ used in *Rama Bijaya Naat*. Even the description of the *Swayamvara*¹⁸ scene is similar. Another playwright of the same era Kanaknath Gogoi's *Subhadra Haran* (1904) has a characteristic mixture of Sanskrit, *Ankiya* and Bangla plays. The beginning of the play has two *Stutis* (odes) for Sri Krishna and Saraswati. Dialogues between the characters through songs and the acting also reflected the influence of *Ankiya Naats* during this time.

It is interesting to note that this is the same period when Assamese drama was highly controlled by the great admiration for Bengali plays and dramatics of Shakespeare, *Ankiya Naats* were abandoned as a source of entertainment almost entirely. This threatening foray of foreignness and the neglect of indigenous art forms stirred few of the intellectuals who had taken up the task of mixing the western drama with *Ankiya Naats* and create something new so that it appeals to the people who were solely devoted towards the western forms of drama. Considering the great variance in both the patterns it was a near impossible task, though many who have tried were much appreciated. Critic Pona Mahanta wrote about such an attempt by playwright Mitraddev Mahanta – *Boli-Chalan* – “A disappointed Mitraddev Mahanta has written on the foreword of his 1946 play ‘*Boli-Chalan*’, Once Assam was addicted to opium and now Talkies¹⁹. Because of the abundance of these Talkies, dramatics promoted by the Mahapurush is now at a very sad state. To recover the Assamese plays this is an attempt where a play has been produced keeping in mind both *Bhaona* and Theatre.” (1998, 106)

¹⁶ Nymphs or fairies believed to reside in Heaven, particularly in the court of the King of Gods Indra.

¹⁷ A series of prayers song written by Sankardev and Madhavdev. Sankardev had written mainly three types of songs called *Deva bhatima* (panegyrics to God), *Naat bhatima* (for use in dramas) and *Raja bhatima* (panegyrics to kings) and Madhavdev had written *Guru Bhatima* (panegyrics to the teacher, in this context Sankardeva).

¹⁸ A ceremony organised for a princess to choose her husband where princes and kings are invited to show their valour or appear in competitions to win her favour.

¹⁹ Motion pictures with sound.

Influence of Bengali:

The history of Assamese drama remains incomplete without analysing the influence of Bengali. It's at that significant point of conjecture of tradition and modernity in Assamese plays, when Bengali plays entered and acted as a catalyst. As mentioned earlier during this transition Assamese plays had drifted away from the *Ankiya* pattern slowly because of the exposure to western literature and for the entertainment of the British officers Bengali plays were staged by the clerics they brought along from Bengal. Slowly they became extremely popular and became a part of the Durga puja celebrations too. It is the last few decades of nineteenth century when innumerable Bengali plays and drama troupes were overflowing in every nook and cranny of Assam. The effect was so immense that even the *Sattras* started producing Bengali plays instead of using *Brajawali* or the spoken Assamese language which was a matter of concern for the intellectuals fearing the decay of the indigenous forms. Lakshminath Bezboruah was the prominent critic in this matter who in his farce *Nomal* (1913) has mentioned this. Two characters Gosain and Kehoram Gayan are having a conversation about writing Bengali plays.

Kehoram: Of course His Holiness Jagannath, Bengali plays are fierce. They are not as fragile as the *Ankiya Naats*.

Gosain: You are absolutely right. If you compare the *Ankiya* play *Dodhimothon* by Sri Madhabdeva and my own Bengali *Dodhimothon*, you will get to know the difference. Let me sing a few couplets from my recent creation;

*Are Nanda aailo/ Nanda ailo/ Nanda ailo hua/ are dujon lok/
daraye ache/ khai ki nakhai gua/* (Nanda has come/ has come/ has
come/ two people are standing/ I wonder whether they chew betel
nuts or not)

Kehoram: How beautiful! Splendid! Such intense words! That is the reason why this time during the Seeta Swayamvar *Bhaona* scripted by you had seen such a large audience. Where have we seen such great audience in any Mahapurushia *Ankiya* 'Seeta Swayamvar'. (A. Hazarika, 69, 1967. Translation mine).

The Gosain is the head of the *Sattras*, and *Sattras* are still cultural centres of Assam. Gayan is traditionally trained authority of the singers who is in charge of training the younger generations. If the cultural supremoes of a society suffers from inferiority complex and promote meaningless productions for the sake of popularity, it not only hampers the cultural holds but it is injustice to another culture and language which they are trying to imitate inanely. Jyotiprasad Aggarwala in his foreword of *Sonit Kunwori* wrote,

During that time Assamese dramatics and music was highly influenced by Bengali form of drama and music. Our stages were showcasing mostly translated Bengali plays, songs and music. Elemental plays that came out of the writings of Padmanath Gohain Boruah were performed but the actors often claimed that his dialogues were not dramatic enough for a performance. Though Bezboruah's plays depicted the ethnicities of lives and characters of Assamese people which were laden with native cultural symbols, they were not considered adaptable for stage. The monopoly of Bengali plays continued all over Assam. (Handique, 197. Translation mine)

In *Manchalekha*, Atul Chandra Hazarika expresses his concern for the same, pointing out that translation is an inevitable phenomenon in the field of literature but the way it had been done during that period is incorrigible, as no one paid much attention to the command over source language and target language. The finished product does not justify language either and appear more like gibberish which were still considered to be of high value than the other fundamental plays of the native language. The plays were translated by any and every one having no basic knowledge of dramatics or translation. These playwrights used to be in a haste to translate a play just after witnessing its performance on stage in Kolkata.

Among all the apathy towards the Bengali influence, critics have not denied the good that has been derived from it. Basantakumar Bhattacharya said that even though Assamese modern dramatics was moulded on the basis of western knowledge, this knowledge itself came to Assam through Bengali literature. (2008, 62) The first translated Assamese play *Bhramaranga* can also be seen as not directly inspired from *Comedy of Errors* but Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's *Bhrantibilas*. Gumabhiram Boruah through his dialogues in *Ram-Nabomee* clearly shows that he closely was inclined towards the reform movements of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. In the play, recently widowed Nabomee's distraught mother says that in Kolkata some Iswar Vidyasagar has promoted a view about widow remarriage, which could

be followed in Nabomee's situation too. (*Ram-Nabomee*, Act five, scene one) As discussed earlier, songs were an integral part of the dramas but the inclusion of external (*Bohirongo*) songs and dancing as interludes were an import from the Bengali plays. (S. Sharma, 120) Use of Blank Verse in Mythological plays was a specificity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Assam. Ramakanta Choudhury welcomed Blank Verse with his play *Seetaharana*. Dayananda Pathak claims that 'Blank Verse' entered Assam not through Western literature but Bengali Literature, such as the writings of Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Later Gairishi Chhanda²⁰ became more popular than Blank Verse. Chandradhar Boruah's *Meghnad Badh*²¹ has Gairishi Chhanda instead of Blank Verse. There are several pieces of dramatic literature in Assamese which are outstanding and are translated from Bengali, like *Chirakumar Sabha*, *Muktodhara*, *Roktokorobi*, *Daakghar* etc. Post-Independence the Bengali influence was reduced due to direct access to the domain of Western literature in Assam.

Post-Independence Assamese Plays: It was a responsibility that was taken up by the writers to elevate the regional literature in every aspect once all the hurdles imposed by the British in language itself had wrecked. Deployment of realistic societal problems found space in the plays which the playwrights attempted to style fit for stage performances. The Mythological stories became less popular and Historical plays came into prominence. Nagaon Natya Samiti's *Piyoli Phukan*²² (1948), Pravin Phukan's *Maniram Dewan*²³ (1948), and *Lachit Borphukan*²⁴ (1948), Atulchandra Hazarika's *Tikendrajit*²⁵ (1959), and Jugal Das's *1857* were

²⁰ Metrical scheme used and popularised by Bengali playwright Girish Chandra Ghosh.

²¹ *Meghnad Badh Kavya* is the magnum opus of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and the translated/inspired Assamese text deviates from using the same rhyme scheme and adopts a new one.

²² Piyoli Phukan is the son of infamous Badan Borphukan who conspired with and brought in the Burmese army to overthrow the rule of the Ahom kings which led to the entry of British in Assam. The aristocracy submitted to the British rule and the treaty of Yandabo was signed in 1826. Piyoli Phukan did not follow suit, instead he organised the first uprising of the Assamese people against British and was hanged on July 26, 1830. Though physically handicapped, Piyoli Phukan was indomitable in his courage and patriotism.

²³ Maniram Dutta Dewan Borbhandar Boruah was an ally with the British East India Company. He was later hanged by the British for conspiring against them during the first war of independence. He is the first Assamese man to establish tea estates in Assam. In Upper Assam he was known as Kalita Raja. Kalita is a clan in Assam

²⁴ Lachit Borphukan is the son of the first Governor of Assam Momai Tamuli Borborua. Lachit Borphukan himself was a councillor in Swargadeo Pratap Singha's court. He was a commander in the Battle of Saraighat in 1671 against Mughal commander Ram Singh and was victorious. He is known for decapitating his maternal uncle for resting during the time of duty. His famous dialogue before the beheading his uncle "Dexotkoi momai dangor nohoi"- An uncle is not greater than the motherland is used as a phrase to stimulate honour, courage and duty even today.

²⁵ He was prince of the Independent kingdom of Manipur. He is known for the palace uprising he administered against the British which led to the Anglo Manipur war in 1891, also known as Manipur Expedition. He is also known as Bir Tikendrajit. He was hanged on charges of mutiny on 13 August 1891.

few of the significant ones. These plays were based on historical facts and all these plays show uprisings against the British. The heroic characters are highlighted as suggested by the titles mentioned, but they also created certain imaginative characters for the flow of the play equally significant. For example the character of a dancer in *Piyoli Phukan* becomes crucial as she is the one to give a statement at the end against the protagonist. The plays also bring out the simple lives of the villagers and show that their presence in the play is indispensable. (S. Boruah, 2001a, 141) The distinctive difference between the spoken language of the villagers and the aristocrats are beautifully portrayed. Not only the first war of independence in India, but Second World War and the Quit India Movement of 1942 also were subject of several plays. Quit India movement becomes important in the history of Assam as Kanaklata Boruah and Mukunda Kakati were shot during a procession in Gohpur. Jyotiprasad Aggarwala wrote *Lobhita* (1948) incorporating the struggle of the INA too. Suren Saikia's *Kushal Konwar*,²⁶ (1949), Ripunath Gohain's *Tezor Aahuti*²⁷, and Satyaprasad Boruah's *Jyotirekha* (1958) are few of the noteworthy plays. In the play *Kushal Konwar* apart from introducing the philosophy of his life, the playwright has in detail described about the society during the time of the movement. The playwright had overcome the difficulty of portraying the contemporary society in the dramatic form and brought forth the truth of that time. Satyendranath Sharma has written about *Jyotirekha*, "this play is a tragedy without a hero. The playwright has illustrated the exact scenes of the mass movement. The spectre of the mass movement is the hero/protagonist of this play." (S. Boruah, 2001a, 141)

After the phase of historical and patriotic plays the new trend that cropped up was of communal harmony. After the divide and rule policy, India-Pakistan divide, India and East Pakistan's separation it was emphasised that Hindu and Muslim still live together happily. There are a very few numbers of literary works that highlight the hardships of Muslim communities in Assam. During the Vaishnava Bhakti period because of the monotony of the mythological subject matters for both prose and poetry, people had ventured to look for fresh materials. A writer called Dwija Rama had written *Shaha Pari Upakhyān*, which is also known as *Mrigawati Charita*, in Assamese language perhaps during the sixteenth to seventeenth century. This literary piece has similarities with that of Hindi poet Kutuban who graced the court of Sultan Hussain Shah (1493-1519) of Bengal. (M. Neog, 1958,

²⁶ Kushal Konwar was an ardent follower of Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence. He was wrongfully accused of derailing of a railway line which resulted in the death of British and American soldiers. He was hanged by the British in 15 June, 1943

²⁷ Literally, Sacrifice of Blood

Introduction, 68) Since then the Islamic themed writing is also going parallel with other literatures in Assam and there still haven't been any unison to mention everything under one umbrella term. A village life and love between childhood friends growing into responsible adults has been portrayed in *Magribor Azaan* (1948) by Sharada Bordoloi and Krishnananda Bhattacharya. In this play they have shown characters from different communities, Bodo, Assamese, Hindu, Muslim who belong to the lower class, and how the opportunistic society tries to use the religious and cultural difference to malign the friendship and disrupt the tranquillity of a simple society. Karim is a Muslim, Lothou an Assamese, and Roopsingh is a Bodo in this play. Their belief in each other and the power to challenge the decision of the panchayat, prove the innocence of the sacrificing Karim in the end. The play moves from playful innocence to a conspired tragedy and that was exactly what the society was becoming during that time. *Meenabazar* (1958) is another such play that shows how a society gets divided because of economic disparity. This play too reflects how a Muslim family struggles to survive in these hardships. Communal tension between the tribe and non-tribe or hill people and valley people are not unfamiliar topics of discussion. Various plays tried to bridge these gaps through portrayals of inter community love stories. One play is called *Saanko* (1968) which literally means a trip of wood or bamboo used to cross a small stream or river. This is symbolic of the connection that the communities are expected to have for peaceful endurance at the time of disturbances. Realism was prominent in the writings of this period and many of the playwrights were influenced by Ibsen and few attempted at the theatre of the absurd too.

Arun Sharma is considered to be a successful playwright to have penned a few absurd plays, *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* (1967) is one of the critically acclaimed plays. The story is about a sixty year old failed playwright/actor who could not succeed in life the way he expected. He wrote a play for his sixtieth birthday and invited all the eminent people of for his last performance. No one comes and he performs in front of an empty auditorium, walks off the stage climbing a staircase. This play reflects the elements of Ionesco's *The Chairs* (1952). This tragic farce implicates a post-apocalyptic world where the characters of the 'Old Man' and 'Old Woman' expect a gathering where the Old Man's greatest discovery would be orated. This discovery is implied as the meaning of life by the Orator. The exit of Nibaran Bhattacharya through the door and the old couple's exit denotes suicide. Lack of communication, rejection of rational thought, merged boundary between reality and fantasy and stagnancy of life are some elements seen in Sharma's plays. As a form Absurd drama wasn't one of those to have survived long in Assam. Pona Mahanta says, only a select few

educated audiences living in the urban areas actually understand such concepts. Absurd plays could not stir them. Most of the Absurd plays remained closet plays rather than being performed. (1985, 255)

Once the trend of societal problem plays were over, playwrights went back to indigenous folk forms amalgamated with western dramatic forms. Plays like Satish Bhattacharya's *Maharaja* (1981), Jugal Das's *Bayanar Khol* (1982), Akhil Chakravarti's *Uttar Purush* (1980) etc. are such plays which tried to recreate native forms without disrespecting the content but modifying it at the same time for the consumption of the informed reader/audience of modern society. These plays have incorporated *Oja Pali*, *Ankiya Bhaona*, *Nagara Naam*²⁸, *Bihu dance*²⁹, *Mohoho Geet*³⁰ and other folk performances. Dulal Roy, the director of the play *Maharaja* says,

I thought if this play could be brought to the audience through the medium of folk culture, it will be exceptionally attractive. The success of folk art as a medium of communication is well known. Conglomeration of dance, music and dialogues have moulded *Ojapali*. This is a very strong communicative art. *Ojapali* has potential to exhibit the art of acting. For this reason, when the play was performed through the framework of *Ojapali*, it directly touched the hearts of the audience. (B. Bhattacharya, 2011, 126. Translation mine)

The period after that was dominated by *Ekankika* (one act) plays. All Assam One Act Play Congregation was established in 1959 which later became Assam Drama League. This organisation played a pivotal role in enhancing the platform for producing and performing one act plays. There are two types of one act plays, single scene and multiple scene plays. One act one scene plays are in abundance in today's date. The person who revolutionised Assamese *Ekankika* is Bhola Kotoki. His play *Bibhrat* won the best play award in Inter University Youth Festival in 1955 in Delhi. An old man's dilemma of getting entangled between the love he bears for his married daughter and the rigid rules of the society constitutes the body of the

²⁸ Nagara is a twin musical instrument like the Tabla which is played with two sticks rhythmically. Devotional songs are sung. One person starts the intro and the chorus is repeats it while he who starts continues the verse. The tempo of the song gradually increases along with the beats of the instrument.

²⁹ Assamese folk dance. Observed during Rongali or Bohag bihu during the month of April. This is an agricultural festival and the dance involving both male and female dancers is considered to be a fertility dance.

³⁰ Mohoho Geets are observed in Lower Assam areas in the month of *Aghon* (Nov-Dec). A group gathers and sings songs about driving away mosquitos while collecting alms from door to door. It is believed that after this there won't be mosquitos in the village for a year. This is a cowherd festival.

play. Harichandra Bhattacharya's *Ankiya Naatmala* (1955) (part one and two), *Ankiya Naator Xorai* (1961) and *Natya Beethika* (1979) are a few remarkable collections of *Ekankika* plays with multiple scenes and comic elements. Initially farce dominated the *Ekankika* sphere which was later taken over by serious problem plays. Newer trends are still getting adapted by the *Ekankika* plays. Folk arts are included in these plays and presented in the format of *Ankiya* plays. This attempt has proved fruitful in drawing attention towards it.

It appears that roots of modern Assamese plays can be traced to the Mythological plays with Sanskrit influence, undoubtedly the *Ankiya Naats* but with a major approach through the Western methods of drama absorbed through Bengali stimulus. Not only the subject but the forms of drama, control of limbs in acting and use of stage and props have seen various makeovers over a period of time. The current Assamese plays and the performances that the audience is exposed to are like any other contemporary play in any language across India, every one unique in their own ways. While talking about Assamese plays, it is necessary to mention the hundreds of plays that get written every year for the *Bhramyomaan* theatre groups of Assam. These plays never get printed, yet these are the plays that get the maximum number of views all over Assam unlike the professional or amateur stage plays.

The plays mentioned and discussed in this chapter have been adapted to *Bhramyomaan* Theatre's stage too. The renowned playwrights like Bhabendranath Saikia, Phani Sharma, Mahendra Borthakur are well known for their mainstream literature as well as their contribution towards the *Bhramyomaan* troupes as well. Drama is a composite art, its appeal is incomparable. It can stimulate the senses of the viewers through the way it is presented. It is necessary to scrutinise, be innovative and aware of the changing times to make a play successful. Some plays remain evergreen which can be related to every age it is being presented to, in a time when daily new forms, techniques and subject matters are emerging, it is challenging to endure without diminishing the essence of the play. While adapting it to suit the twin stages of *Bhramyomaan* theatre, the kind of audience they cater to, keeping in mind that it is thriving only on how much they can entertain, what changes these plays go through, how much critical appreciation is due to the content of the plays rather than the gimmick that dominates the stage will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed Arriving near You

Within the ambit of performance, the subjects it deals with shall not be branded as mere commodified objects of art. A performance recreates and reformulates the ideas of identity and self through various processes of presentation/representation. Performance is a fluid phenomenon which emphasizes a shift to the event from the object. In performance, the audience is a part of the creation process. Especially in the plays of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre, there is no readership to the text as most of the plays produced are solely for the purpose of performance and they don't usually get printed too. Anyhow the viewers are much larger than the readers in number in Assam as *Bhramyomaan* directs its target to the audience who are usually the 'non-intellectuals'. Within the space of performance there are different forms of signs and representation that is different in insinuation compared to the reading of the same play. The events within the performance may represent semantic dynamism and unpredictability. Performance texts are different from the others produced for only reading as drama is not complete without performance. The essence of drama completely comes out through the portrayals of fluidity of both constructed and relational identity, and culture. In this era of specially stylized performances the analyses of it is extensively critical of time and space within performance. Aristotle's three unities of drama,

- Time: The duration of the performance shall cover the events of no more than twenty four hours. Past events are usually recounted during performances by the characters. Those events should not be performed.
- Place: The performance of a play should cover a single physical space. The compression of geography is not suggested as it is not possible to represent various spaces on a single stage in a short duration of time without interruption.
- Action: Only one course of action shall encompass the play without or very few sub plots.

The unity of time as it is only a single day limits the action of the play, the unity of space limits the movement by designation of a general locality and the incidents are limited by the unity of action as they depend only on cause and effect. The plays observing the three unities will have the beginning, middle and end of a play well marked. Aristotle though did not suggest that these unities aren't obligatory, these in a way have made performance easier with minimal props. The architectural, geographical and a social environment is easily webbed through the use of these unities. New methods of theatre have performed through the use of abstract ideas

and made the physical and social spaces more productive through performance. Performance is a temporal as well as a spatial activity. The analysis of theatre is studied not only through the actions of performance, but through the effects/relations the audience may have with the performance/performers. The production can be studied through the relative analysis of the producer, presenter and the consumer. In *Bhramyomaan* theatre the use of space, time, and action unity is seldom in use. Unlike other professional and amateur theatres, *Bhramyomaan* Theatre has twin stages. There are more number of people to rearrange the decorations and props on stage than the people acting. The space is always shifting from one to the other. In continuous scenes a living room, a railway station, a market and another's house can be seen on the same stage. It is easier because of the twin stages when action continues on one stage the other gets prepared for the next scene. People grow old, from the present time it can flashback to the past, from rowing on a river one may suddenly see a palace emerging, dream sequences are acted out and more than the use of dialogues to reveal plot twists and vital information, it is shown on stage through acting. For example the story of Kanchan Boruah's famous novel *Aseemot Jaar Heral Seema* was adapted to a play which was shown in Delhi too when Kohinoor Theatre was invited by NSD. The story of the novel as well as the play opens up with a few friends going on a journey via a river on boat. A storm and a surreal dream, one character reveals that the place they have reached looks familiar to him. While recounting what used to be there, as he points out to a rock where he used to sit with his cousin, a tiny river which bordered their village etc. these appear on stage. The rock, the river, a person on horseback riding right across the stage to show the time frame of the flashback. Thereafter the whole story is performed, not narrated by the protagonist. The whole stage and the audience is taken to a bygone era. Several places of the province were shown with different settings. A war, festivals, buffalo fight etc. was shown on stage. It was not abstract, it was not symbolic; it was just the pages of the novel acted scene after scene without the unity of time, space and action.

Plays written specifically to suit the twin stages of *Bhramyomaan* theatre can be termed as the plays of *Bhramyomaan*. According to the medium of production, the plays are usually seen specifically named. For example plays broadcast through radio are called Radio Plays, the plays shown on television are known as Television plays¹ or telefilm, plays performed on Jatras are called Jatra Pala, AnkiyaNaat for AnkiyaBhaona etc. Harichandra Bhattacharya said,

¹ In the United Kingdom this genre was popular from 1950s to 1980s. These are usually realist social drama also known as kitchen sink realism. The issues of working class families were the subject matters of these plays. These T.V dramas also framed the Golden Age of Television -1947-1960.

From the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, there have been lot of Bengali plays translated and openly performed. These performances were called Jatra. These plays are not written following the format of AnkiyaNaats, these are common plays when performed on modern proscenium stage are called drama, if performed in the open are called Jatra. (1988, 67)

According to this reasoning, surely it won't be a mistake to call the plays written for the stage of *Bhramyomaan* theatre can be analysed in a different light. Amateur theatre is non-professional. They do not need a play specially written for them. They do not face the restriction of choosing a subject matter to present. The audience that the amateur theatre targets have their interests and choices alike. Rational and perceptive presentation is focused upon along with entertainment. Unlike *Bhramyomaan* theatre they do not need to emphasise on moving emotional presentation to stir the audience. *Bhramyomaan* too have produced dense intellectual plays that leave the audience matters to ponder upon, but instead of mentally burdening them with thoughtful subjects, easily perceptible entertaining plays are chosen for momentary pleasure. The main characteristic of such plays is entertainment and through entertainment do a profitable business. In the first chapter of *Natyashastra*, Bharata analyses the involvement of audience/spectator in a performance/drama. Even though the spectator may belong to any section of the society, it is anticipated from him to be at least nominally commended into appreciation of the performance as not every spectator can be expected to be empathetic towards theatre. *Bhramyomaan* theatre reaches every nook and cranny of Assam and performs in front of all kinds of audience. Unlike amateur theatre, it therefore has a much larger group of audience. The audience of *Bhramyomaan* theatre can also be divided into the following categories- 1. Educated, 2. Uneducated and Semi Educated. In the same way 1. Urban/ Sub urban 2. Rural. All these categories come to watch the plays and keeping in mind all their interests the easier mode of representation is chosen. In Amateur theatre everyone in the audience will understand satire, farce, symbolism, alienation etc. easily compared to the select few among the audience of *Bhramyomaan* theatre. Just to present a simple issue it needs a lot of explanation. *Bhramyomaan* Theatre as mentioned several times earlier is equivalent to any festival. The performance happens among all the festivities. It is not only in places like Nalbari *Raasleela* ground where altogether there are at least fifteen *Bhramyomaan* theatres set their stages along with circus tents, *Raasleela* performance, daredevil games, bike and car stunts. In fact in most rural areas the three days

of a troupe's stay is as festive as any other celebration. The excitement is shared by everyone alike. In a situation like this profound humourless plays do not complement the need of the people. Nevertheless the growth of Assamese drama has been exceptionally slow because of the lack of appropriate and sufficient permanent proscenium stages. There are very few people who can afford to make drama their profession. The initiation of *Bhramyomaan* theatre changed that for the people who could consider acting as a profession.

The categories that the subject matters of plays chosen for *Bhramyomaan* theatre can be divided are 1. Mythological 2. Historical 3. Social and 4. Imaginary/Fantasy. Stories of gods and goddesses, legends, myths and mystical subject matters adorned the stages in folk theatres and continued in the initial days of performances of *Bhramyomaan*. Usually such stories are already known to the audience as these are part of the oral culture that is passed on to generation after generation. The lives of the gods and goddesses and their endeavours are trivialised with plots revolving around love-hate, jealousy-revenge to give it a human touch to bring it closer to the audience in such plays. It has secured a unique place in Assam's dramaturgy. Taking any historical event and dramatizing it also serves as one of the favourite of the audience. Satyendranath Sharma says, "Historical plays are artistic depiction of human emotions through a past event. The carcass of the past event needs to be filled with creative representations to bring it alive and make it a success." (210-11, Translation mine)

Historical plays are sometimes written without making any changes to the original event to keep it authentic. Sometimes the people who are involved with such events and their lives are chosen as subject for historical plays. The third category of plays are based on social events, mostly regional and sometimes the society of the past is also portrayed. Individual and collective conflicts of a family, a community, a village or a person are preferred plots for such plays which shows a realistic picture of the society. Within the social plays there are some plays which only centre on domestic activities, which is the most popular trend that has been appreciated throughout the journey of *Bhramyomaan* as most people can relate to familial bittersweet experiences. In the beginning of twentieth century till the post-independence period, Mythological and Historical plays were popular. After that there were heroic plays about the people involved in the freedom struggle because the playwrights romanticised Indian war of independence. To influence the common people towards the cause, along with other art forms drama also plays a significant role. During the same time a stream of social plays also came into existence. These plays, bore strong messages against casteism, untouchability, women's education, economic equality etc. were the themes of

plays like *Nirmala* of Lakhidhar Sharma, *SansarChitra* by Lakshmikanta Dutta, and Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Kalyani*. The hold of social plays became stronger after Second World War and India's independence. The aftermath of the war, new scientific discoveries, preference of nuclear family over joint family, awareness of being a democratic citizen were preferred themes of this era. After India got independence, the playwrights instead being focused on similar subject matters had shifted their views towards other socio-political problems in a new democratic state. Citizens started enjoying more rights, the liberty to comment upon any political agenda had given escalation to the writings produced. Class struggle, capitalism, imperialism, the causes of the downtrodden, exploited, labour laws, significance of the family name, unemployment, dreams and desires of the middle class, free expression of love, societal hindrances are some of the major themes that attracted the playwrights. (Sharma, 1986, 322)

Every year one theatre troupe produces three to four plays. For that they need new materials every season. In the beginning of the remarkable journey of *Bhramyomaan* theatre the audience accepted it as a mode of entertainment. During this period historical and mythological plays were preferred. Slowly the number of audience increased, the number of *Bhramyomaan* troupes increased, so there was a high demand for plays. The fundamental plays produced in a year by the prominent writers were not adequate enough as well as some were not suited for the kind of audience *Bhramyomaan* aims to entertain. Nataraj theatre chose historical play *Hyder Ali* and social play *Bhogjara* for its first show. During this time the love for *Jatra* was not yet diminished. So the theatre troupes selected many famous plays from Kolkata and translated them to perform. One such plays was Utpal Dutt's *Angaar*. Various theatre troupes both big and small were formed and the unsaid competition made them aspire for something better than the others and to offer something more than the last season. Playwrights emerged, the form moved towards the suburbs from the villages and most importantly the intellectuals highlighted the positive aspects unlike the recent times. Newspapers and magazines continually wrote about the progress of *Bhramyomaan* theatre and made it a topic of discussion among people. This helped the already established playwrights to be involved in this new venture. The number of audience increased and the involvement of famous playwrights along with their thoughts, knowledge and valuable inputs changed the face of *Bhramyomaan*. BhabendraNathSaikia, Arun Sharma, MahendraBorthakur etc. were few of the noted ones.

Drama entertains through audio-visual methods. Though the plays can give equal pleasure while reading, but the plays specially written for *Bhramyomaan* are not always loaded with literary anecdotes for pleasurable reading. Therefore it depends on the misc-en-scene as well as elements of surprise, suspense and conflict. Mythological plays have had a special place in *Bhramyomaan* theatre and the idea of suspense and surprise does not work in their presentation as the stories are already known to the audience. But the reliving of the same experience while looking at the gods and goddesses with human flaws again and again makes the masses connected to the myths. The riches of Indian mythology has been narrated and passed on to generations through orally for a long time and enactment of such narrations never go out of fashion. That is why a play like *Beula* ran continuously for fifteen years on the stage of Nataraj Theatre. Even today the story of *Beulaas MaaManasais* performed in the sporadic appearances of dance dramas. During my field work I witnessed the same dance drama on the stage of Theatre Bhagyadevi. No matter how well likes plays laden with gimmicks and other technical manifestations, no one can deny the popularity of a fundamental domestic drama. The following section is going to discuss two original plays presented in 2014. *ManuheManuhor Babe* was staged by Theatre Bhagyadevi and *Goonda* was a production of Rajashri Theatre. The section that discusses plays adapted from films include *Titanic* and *Dr. Bezboruah*. The last section talks about plays adapted from other genres of literature and *AseemotJaarHeralSeema* is selected for it. Apart from the recorded original plays I have chosen the other plays for the significance they hold. *Dr Bezboruah* is the first Crime Thriller made in Assam, *AseemotJaarHeral Seema* is the most popular Assamese novel till date. The new adaptation was staged in Delhi too and about *Titanic's* popularity almost everyone is aware of. Moreover adaptation of *Titanic* on stage was one of the first attempts made by a *Bhramyomaan* Theatre troupe on such a magnanimous scale.

The Originals

ManuheManuhor Babe:

This play is written and directed by Champak Sharma who also acted in the play. This is the story of rich Chaliha family and their tragic experiences. This story is of love and sacrifice, plotting and jealousy, selflessness and utter selfish behaviour. Moreover it has everything that questions the government to class differences, mental illness and of course with the inevitable singing and dancing it was a full package of entertainment. The title of this play is very

significant as it has been taken from a song by Bhupen Hazarika which is about the selflessness of people. The song goes like this,

With a little sympathy if Man does not think for Man,
Then who will friend, tell me?
If humanity is being bought and sold,
If others' lives can be bargained for,
Won't it be wrong to recall our glorious history?
Tell me friend!
If your courage helps the weakling
To cross the rapids of life
What can you possibly lose?
If humans cannot be humans
The devils can never be so too.
If the devil can be more humane
Who but we shall be ashamed.
Isn't it so my friend? (Translation mine)

It has been discussed earlier in folk theatres how important the character of *Bibek* used to be. This character has unhindered movement everywhere in the scenes. It can appear in a king's bedchamber as well on streets, the court, and kitchen, basically he is omnipresent. This character has knowledge about what is right and wrong, it has crucial information and has freedom to criticise anyone, give advice and share opinions. The character of Champak Sharma in this play is like the *Bibek* whose omnipresence carries forward the plot. He is a fan of Bhupen Hazarika and is an ascetic who has left all his property in Majuli to serve humanity and music. He stays with the homeless people, he cleans the grave of Bhupen Hazarika and lights a lamp on the grave. He considers the songs of Bhupen Hazarika to be his philosophy in life. He gives example by quoting the songs while explaining matters. He is really passionate about the great singer. People consider him mad and sometimes insult him for his behaviour but he always defends himself with a few lines from a song. The character called Bitupan calls him Bhupenda. He says, "Do not use that name as mockery. People like you do not do anything for him and probably cannot. But using his name as an insult will not do any better too." In the course of the play through him all the crucial information is revealed. His character could influence the drug addict Bitupan to come back to the right path through music. The first scene where his character is introduced, a major problem in Guwahati is highlighted, i.e. eviction. It is

true that the massive Deepor Beel² is suffocated with illegal constructions of big contractors, but whenever the eviction notice comes the poor people suffer. He quotes another song of Bhupen Hazarika which goes like, “many ascetics are aimless/ but I have a goal/ wherever I see ores of happiness/ I want to share it with all/ I have seen rows of skyscrapers/ below these I have also seen the homeless suffer.” He says, “It is only heard that the government is giving money to artists, building shelters for them, but in reality they are evicting them. They are even trying to destroy my mandolin. That is the respect artists get. Even Bhupen Hazarika’s grave was promised to be maintained. It is all in vain.” He is not related to any character in the play. He only belongs to the same village as Papori’s but has unrelenting access to everyone.

The story begins with the envy of the daughters-in-law of the house that the child of the family-Mamu - loves her aunt more than her mother. The antagonist Mamoni has pride that she is the daughter-in-law of a rich family. Her mannerisms betray it and she doesn’t consider others to be her equal including her husband Pabitra who from the very beginning is shown to be soft in the mind, easily gullible and childlike. The head of the family is the widowed matriarch who considers the family of her servant as her own and calls the son of the servant Basanta as her eldest. Hiyamanu and Pabitra also consider Sanjeeb as their elder brother. The family of the brother of the deceased owner of Chaliha estates stay in the same house too. There is a parallel story that runs. It is evident that Sanjeev takes care of the family business and the mother depends on him a lot. The jealousy of Mamoni for her daughter’s love for the other couple, their hold in the family business and her superiority complex leads to the conspiracies done along with the uncle to overthrow the servant family and revelations of these plans and restoration of faith are the contents of the story. Mamoni questions the right of Basanta to call her daughter in law³,

Mamoni: I don’t think I am the daughter in law of a servant. I wouldn’t have you call me that. A servant should know his place.

Basanta: I know my place and if it suits you I will call you ‘*Memsahab*’ from now on. The British left India but left their culture of fork and spoon. If possible people like you will eat *khaar*⁴ also with fork and spoon. (Translation mine)

² A big lake in Kamrup district. Apart from dumping trash in the lake people are filling it up with soil and constructing houses there.

³ ‘Bowari’ is the term for daughter in law and it is used as a term of endearment

⁴ It is an Assamese dish made using the alkaline substance extracted from burnt banana peel. People call themselves as *KhaarkhuaAxomiya*(*Khaar* eating Assamese) considering it a part of the Assamese identity.

Basanta, Sanjeeb and Papori are constantly reminded of the fact that they are servants of the house by Mamoni and BedabrataChaliha, the brother of the deceased owner as mentioned above. He is the villain of the story who manipulates people, plots against the entire family and becomes successful in many incidents until he was busted at the end. Through the sub plot of the story of BedabrataChaliha various issues are brought to light. His son Bitupan is a drug addict. The scene where both appear together for the first time, the nature of this person is somewhat revealed. The son asks for money from the father to buy more drugs and when he question the habit the son replies,

When I used to ask for ten rupees you used to give me a hundred. You had a lot of money. Corrupted that you were, stole money from uncle's industry, it was easy for you to show off. I didn't know what to do with the remaining ninety rupees. I found my own ways to spend it. Now you can't deny me the means to continue what started because of you.

Later it is also revealed that because of the negligence of the father, Bitupan lost his mother and being aware of this fact made him guilty and he immersed himself in drugs to deal with the loss. A childhood trauma, bad parenting and the problem of drug addiction with the new generation is dealt with through the character of Bitupan who later on recovers, goes back to practice of music, and acts as a catalyst in unmasking his father. Nowadays in Assam too the housing complexes are coming up. People are selling their lands to construction companies in lieu of promised flats in the building. BedabrataChaliha wanted to sell the land where their industry is for five crores and he had convinced Mamoni to be on his side too. To make their plan a success they needed to overthrow Sanjeev by proving him unworthy in front of Mrs Chaliha.

It has been discussed earlier that *Bhramyomaan* doesn't follow the time, space and actions' unity. Here too in a flashback is shown that in an accident Mr Chaliha dies and he makes a teenage Sanjeeb promise to take care of his family as well as the business. Sanjeev leaves his studies to handle the business and becomes an inevitable part of the household much to the dislike of BedabrataChaliha. This also reveals later that because of the same accident Pabitrabecame mentally disturbed. BedabrataChaliha made Mamoni believe that Sanjeeb one day will take over everything. It only fuelled the already existing jealousy that her own daughter loves her aunt more than her mother. The first attempt is made by Mamoni plotting with her domestic help to defame Basanta

by accusing him of sexually harassing the domestic help. When this matter was resolved and the faith was restored, another plan was hatched.

Through the characters of the domestic help Lalita, driver Raghav and Bitupan's drug addict friend BabulalBaishnaba love comic relief is inserted. But later these three characters become the main tools in the plans. In the second plan the little girl Mamu is kidnapped with the help of the driver and Babulal through the instruction of BedabratChaiha and the child's own mother. The ransom calls mention the name of Sanjeeb demanding for the entire property to be written in his name. This scene appears too emotionally driven and illogical as immediately after the phone call everyone in the family including Mrs Chaliha accuses Sanjeeb and his entire family, beats them up and tries to throw them away. She says, "I sheltered monsters who I considered my own, but they were just waiting for the right moment to strike." Not only she but the daughter and the son of the family too say accusingly that they considered him their own brother and he did this in return. Instead of getting concerned about the kidnapped child this melodrama seems too unrealistic.

Meanwhile the omniscient Bibek character approaches Bitupan where he reveals that he had heard the entire plan that BedabratChaliha made to kidnap Mamu and he knows where she is. They rescue Mamu and reach the scene where melodrama still continues. Crushed by the humiliations Sanjeeb and his family decide to go away. Throughout the play it had been mentioned that Papori cannot have children. It was also said that Mamoni had miscarriages and hence Mamu is really precious to both the women. Mamoni was excused of her ill behaviours because of her mental state when she was childless and tried stealing babies. Sanjeeb arranges for her treatment and all this is remembered as sacrifices by Mrs Chaliha when they were about to depart. But Mamoni still believes that these were their duty as servants. This was the final blow that makes the Bibek reveal a lot which surprises the audience. He says that he considers humanity to be his religion and when human beings are not treated appropriately he gets hurt. He excuses himself saying that it is not his place but he must say it. His omniscience makes him the aware of all the facts and he acted as a secret keeper too.

Furthermore, Papori and Mamoni went into labour together and in the same hospital Mamoni gave birth to a dead child. Sanjeeb didn't want her mental instability to recur so he picked up his child from the bed of unconscious Papori and puts it near

Mamoni. All these revelations make Sanjeeb the epitome of sacrifice and his sacrifices continue when he decides to leave Mamu with the Chaliha family and go away from them. Among lots of tears they leave and the little girl sings the song from which the title of this play is borrowed, *ManuheManuhorBabe* to persuade them to stop. In the end the message delivered by the play is common to all social and familial plays when the evil is punished, good prevails and the wrongs are righted with repent. In the end it is a happy ending with the restored love and trust of the family.

Goonda:

The play Goonda is written by Abhijeet Bhattacharya for Rajashri Theatre's 2014-15 season. One of the problems of a family that has been mentioned earlier- unemployment is the main theme of this play. It is a family of two brothers who belong to the lower middle class and their struggle to survive and aspiration to go higher in the social ladder is woven in the story. Assam has a high rate of unemployment compared to the number of educated eligible people. It is also known for the corrupt policies in the field of employment in various sectors. The older brother Dibakar has a small shop and with his meagre income he manages to educate his younger brother Ajay. He has a dream of living a luxurious life after his brother becomes a high ranked 'officer'. It shows the innocence and ignorance of the elder brother who is not educated and has minimal idea about the struggles of the outside world. In various instances Dibakar mentions his dream of just living a life of abundance to the helper in his shop and his wife who questions the chances of Ajay becoming an officer. He says, "Let him become an officer first after that who can stop me from just sitting and eating and living happily." It is not only his brother but his girlfriend too was dependent on the job that Ajay was going to get soon. She claimed that she has told her father not to look for any marriage proposal because she has waited for him and will marry when the times get better. Through the character of this girl the stereotypes of a girl being dependent on her father and after marriage her husband. Her character is only there as an extra burden that Ajay has to deal with. His desperation to secure a job increases because of the pressure that was put on him by the expectation of the people around him.

The story deals with a reversal of fortune when Ajay encounters a group of goons extorting money from the local shopkeepers. In an intense fight with them he is able to overthrow them and becomes the messiah of the shopkeepers. At this point the audience is

introduced to the arch-rivals, the don of Guwahati Syndicate ManmathSaikia and the Superintendent of Police Akhilesh Barman. Through the characters of police it has been shown that the police is sometimes powerless in front of the goons. Ajay comes to report the incident and the SP is seen screaming his inability to diminish the growing presence of antisocial elements in the city. While reporting Ajay mentions the presence of police on the spot of the incident and accused them of doing nothing. He says that because of the inefficiency of police a common man like himself had to go against the law and get involved in a physical skirmish. Already aware of the passion, innocence, and will to fight for the rights in Ajay, the SP offers him a contract to fight crime anonymously. According to him to fight crime one needs to invest in other criminals. The idealist Ajay refuses and comes to know that his brother's shop was burnt by the goons of ManmathSaikia. This compels him to choose the only path open to him which will help restore his brother's shop, end his unemployment status and take revenge on the don and his goons. He begs the SP to give him the opportunity to work for him. Here Ajay is given a pseudonym Abinash Choudhury. Abinash means indestructible and this is hoped from his service to end the reign of the don and not get destroyed himself. Ashamed of the work he is doing, yet wish to fulfil his brother's dreams made him a liar. His family happily receives the money he is bringing home. The innocent brother believes that his dream of a luxurious life has come to reality and in a comic yet touching scene he is seen wearing a shabby suit saying, "my brother is an officer now, by extension I am no less so from now on you will see me prim and proper always." Meanwhile Abinash Choudhury becomes invincible and while eradicating evil from the society he becomes drunk with the power and starts enjoying being a 'Goonda'. He was supported by the local shopkeepers and eventually he murders a pawn of ManmathSaikia. This has sealed the mark of a Goonda on Abinash Choudhury. This transition from being a good boy to a goonda is shown by change in the way he dresses, from formal shirt pant to sleeveless tee shirts, boots, jeans and a bandana on his head with a gun on his belt. As a typical character of the villain ManmathSaikia's appearance with big moustache, red vermilion mark, bright coloured satin kurtas and of course jeans and boots. As mentioned earlier he has the maniacal laughter and the catchphrase 'faaantastic'. The actor's performance was enjoyed by the audience who always scream from their seats to say 'faaantastic' and he improvises and makes everyone laugh again and again. During their confrontation very skilfully Abinash Choudhury defeats ManmathSaikia in an elaborate fight sequence where two models of trucks were shown onstage and people jump on and off from them during the fight. After this victory the respect and remuneration that was supposed to be

in Ajay/Abinash's fate had come in a different form. A recorded video of Ajay/Abinash was shown to his brother by a constable, who knew about the agreement and was a part of the plan. Meanwhile newspapers confirm that Abinash Choudhury is actually Ajay Hazarika. This ruins the prospect of his wedding with his girlfriend who had made clear before that she will marry him even if he is poor but now if he is a goon.

The last revelation happens when Ajay/Abinash goes to seek clarification from the SP. In his house he meets the SP's mad wife. The character of this woman is shown a few times and the appearance always gives the impression of a mad woman who is always locked inside with a few caregivers. Her dialogues are always violent and directed towards her husband who she does not believe, accuse him of corruption, and threaten to kill him. The SP is seen lamenting the situation and giving explanation that no matter how much he tried she did not get well despite consulting experts. When in the second last scene Ajay encounters her she in her mad fury bursts out with several facts about the SP. She is actually not his wife. Her husband and the SP had been friends and he killed her husband and kept her as a captive all these years. With medicines and electric shock to make her mad. She also talks about how he has been using Ajay to fulfil his wishes to rise high, making him do all the dirty work.

The last scene shows SP Akhilesh and ManmathSaikia are dancing and drinking and talking about Abinash Choudhury. Through their conversation it appears that whatever the woman had said was true. Ajay/Abinash reaches and confronts them. They confess that the SP and the don had been good friends and because of a rift between them the SP wanted to teach him a lesson. Ajay was made a pawn in this war of power stripping him from his identity and exposing him to be the culprit. The play ends with a monologue by Ajay/Abinash where he talks about how a faulty system, corrupt officials, and corruption in the job market and growing poverty leads the youth to negative paths and it is like a black hole from where there is no escape.

Action/Romance/Thrill/Melodrama: Bringing Cinema to the Stage

Titanic:

Titanic

James Cameron took years to make Titanic, then won a few Oscars and yelled. "I'm the king of the world." Really? In just a month, producer RatanLahkar of

the Kohinoor Theatre Company has an Assamese stage version up and running.

Check them out:

The Cast

Leonardo DiCaprio as Jack, Kate Winslet as Rose, Gloria Stewart as the older Rose.

KuntalGoswami is Jack, NikumaniBaruah is Rose Jr, with a mask also Rose Sr.

The Size

Cost \$200 million, used a 775ft model, filmed in 17 million gallons of Mexican seawater.

Cost a few lakhs, uses three models (the biggest: 20 ft by 7 ft), can be staged anywhere.

The Result

Grossed close to \$2 billion worldwide; 25 weeks gone and still running in India.

With 2000 people a show, is a full-fledged hit; ends after 31 weeks in April'99.

The winner is... Lahkar. Could Cameron recreate a maritime disaster without water? ("Watershed Works" India Today, 14/09/98)

On 14 September 1998, India Today published this review of Kohinoor's endeavour on staging the popular film Titanic successfully. The undeniable popularity of this film had reached the remote corners of India too. It was so popular that for many people it was the first Hollywood film they had watched. English films are considered to be vulgar by many people and was forbidden in many middle class households. This film had paved a way for such people to venture in the world of English cinema. A teacher in our school was suspended for showing the students Terminator 2, but the same school had shown Titanic on the 'Movie Day' of the month, the popularity of this film was such. Hemanta Dutta had given the film a dramatic form. The set designer for this play was Adya Sharma who used props that covered the whole stage. If not as big as the ship used in the film, the prop used as the ship in the play was big enough to mesmerise the audience. More than sixty people were shown on the deck of the ship during the scene of the ship breaking in the middle and sinking. In an interview with INAS RatanLahkar said that someone from Pathsala said after watching the film later that it was copied from Kohinoor's play. Films do not get released in Assam at the same time with other cities. The play was produced even before it was shown in cinema halls of Assam. Recreating a maritime disaster without water on a stage is remarkable and remembered by everyone till now. This play had taken Kohinoor Theatre to the pinnacle of popularity.

This play though adapted from the film in Assamese language, portrayed the characters as white people. This has been a trend before *Bhramyomaan* Theatre came to existence that white characters are given dialogues in a language other than Assamese. AchyutLahkar says in his autobiography that India's fifth President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed graced his green room once to point out this mistake. The play they watched was *SipahiBidroh* (Sepoy Mutiny). Ahmed told him,

This play has various characters from different part of India. I noticed that Hyderabad's Nizam talked in Assamese, Rani of Jhansi also talked in Assamese even Bengali characters talked in Assamese. The British officials delivered their dialogues in a broken Assamese, a mixed language to be precise, but why? (qtd in Figo, 34)

Lahkar explained that it is a trend that has prevailed from the older times. Ahmed gave the example of adaptation of Shakespeare's plays into Assamese that in an adaptation, how despite the western costumes, the characters interact in the adapted language. Since it had been pointed out as a mistake, Lahkar claims that he did not repeat it again.

The actors who played the main characters are not well versed either in English or Hindi. Their sound bites in AP Archive shows that KuntalGowasami couldn't even complete one sentence in Hindi. For such characters keeping a mixed language also may appear incomprehensible. It has been noticed that even if the dialogues are in Assamese the actors have tried an accent which may be alien to the common audience yet fascinating. The play might not have done well if the characters were shown like any other character from a social/familial fundamental play. It became popular because of the foreignness of the characters that was made possible through make-up and costumes. Loud make up is necessary in the plays because of the distance between the audience and the stage to make it more strikingly noticeable. In *Titanic* it was done even more than usual because the characters had to appear 'white'.

Kohinoor Theatre has several records in the domain of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. It was the first financially sound troupe to come up in Pathsala which was able to secure financial aid from Central Bank of India. It was also the first troupe to stage a play adapted from a novel written outside of India. *Cleopatra* by H. Rider Haggard was adapted to an Assamese play by Padma Borkotoky. The directors Hemanta Dutta and Mahananda Sharma worked incessantly to reflect Egyptian customs, traditions and music too. (K.Kalita, 2011,

89) *Titanic* too remains one of the first to become a tremendously popular play, a few parts of which was shown in IGNC, Delhi in 2010.

Dr. Bezboruah

Dr. Bezboruah was the first Assamese crime-thriller film. This film is written and directed by Brajen Boruah which bagged silver medal at the 17th National Film Awards as the best Assamese feature film. The news of this film to be remade into a Hindi film titled *Shivam* featured in newspapers, though it is not known whether it has been released till now. *Dr. Bezboruah* also featured the most popular actors of that time including Brajen Boruah himself along with Biju Phukan, Nipan Goswami, Renu Saikia etc. This film was adapted to a play by Pabitra Kumar Deka for Bordoisila Theatre in the season of its inception, 1998-99. The play was probably not as popular as the other plays of the season or the film because that year the play *Dakhal* (Encroachment) was the most discussed play. (K. Kalita, 182) The songs of this film are still extremely popular, and the singer Dipen Boruah stepped into his musical career through this film.

The manuscript of *Dr. Bezboruah* is the only written play I could collect apart from the plays I have recorded. This copy too looks like a tentative rough copy of the play, but it actually was the final copy from which the actors had taken their dialogues. It is important to mention it because I have mentioned several times about the unavailability of materials and lack of preservation of scripts.

The play like the film is a crime thriller which opens with an encounter of the police and a man where he is hit by a bullet on the shoulder. The second scene takes the audience to the vast living room of Dr Bezboruah who is smoking a pipe and watching news, where the news of the encounter plays. In the news the man hurt in the encounter is introduced as Parama Hazarika who escaped despite the injury. Through the entry of Mr and Mrs Duwara, it is revealed that Dr Bezboruah studied abroad and constructed a hospital along with a research laboratory. An inspector comes for a duty call and through their conversations it appears that Dr Bezboruah is a reputed benevolent member of the society. On questioning the couple the inspector finds out that the criminal had taken a lift in their car on the way to Dr Bezboruah's clinic. The police inspector warns caution and says that the criminal is known by various names as Parama Hazarika, Dinen Bagchi, Jaswant Singh, Ismail Khan etc. When shown the picture of the criminal everyone notices including Dr Bezboruah that there is

astriking similarity of looks between him and the criminal. Two poor people come with their son to thank the doctor because of his efforts they were blessed with the child. The scene ends with a tragic accident of the seven year old son of Mr and Mrs Duwara, Monty who fell from the fourth floor and died on the spot. In the next scene the son of the poor couple is kidnapped. He has a tattoo on his arm of his name Deep.

After this incident the audience is shown a completely different Dr Bezboruah. He is as benevolent as ever but sometimes his extreme behaviour shocks the audience as well as his acquaintances. Mystery and suspense is a common feature of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. Even in a social play there will be plot twists to amaze the audience. Anxiety, apprehension, pleasure derived from fascination and unpredictable situations keep the audience hooked. In this play already the idea of the criminal's face being similar to the doctor had already been told at the beginning and there is an element of doubt that if the criminal has numerous pseudonyms, Dr.Bezboruah could be one of them too. It also has been mentioned that he studied abroad, so his absence from his home for a significant amount of time could also be related to the other life he lived/lives. When certain information is already with the audience, the level of suspense and prediction is always higher. For example Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* reveals that there is a corpse concealed in the room in the very beginning. Is it or isn't, is a tried formula which works in such cases. The henchman (Renching) of the criminal is seen in the doctor's chambers taking orders as a butler, and another man (Ahmed) is appointed as a doctor in the clinic. These appearances make the doubt even stronger about the doctor's identity.

There is a significant amount of gap where the son of Mr and Mrs Duwara completes his studies in Lucknow University and comes back home. There is a noticeable difference between the rich parents and the son Pradeep. It is mentioned that after the accident of the first son they had gone away and Pradeep was born that time. He likes music, he likes villages and his best friend is from a village where he wants to travel to spend some time despite the mother's cautions about the problems in a village. Meanwhile Dr Bezboruah's negativity becomes more apparent where his butler on his orders kills his fiancée and several other girls are brought to the mysterious red room from where they are made to disappear/killed. Pradeep goes to his friend's village and falls in love with his sister. Here he encounters an old lady and her daughter who became really close to him during the stay. The butler Renching reveals a secret to the doctor that Pradeep is actually Deep who was sold to Mr Duwara by the kidnappers. Renching himself had added a *Pra* in front of Deep to make it 'Pradeep' during his hideouts. Dr Bezboruah starts blackmailing his old friend Duwara about

it. This is a big revelation in the story where the audience could relate to Pradeep's fondness for the village, his simple ways, and relate it to the kidnapping of the poor couple's child. A fold drives the people Pradeep knew in the village to the city and his friend secures a job in Dr Bezboruah's clinic. The doctor manages to rape and dispose of the body of the girl he met in the village and left her mother somewhere remote. Pradeep's intended also was about to become the prey of the doctor but was saved by his associate Ahmed who is shot in the process. People rejoice at such moments in *Bhramyomaan* Theatre where the evil finds a path of salvation and does the right thing. Ahmed's efforts and Pradeep's courage had revealed that the present doctor is indeed the criminal imposter Parama Hazarika who had locked the doctor inside a secret chamber and carried on his illegal trades and his debauchery in disguise.

The ending of the play remains tragic. Even though the culprits are punished, peace restored, the loss of many lives left many of the audiences dejected. NarenBaishya from Nalbari mentioned watching it and said many people did not have access to films during that time and in *Bhramyomaan* Theatre also they were used to historic, mythological and social plays. This experiment with the new genre did not stop after this. The thriller *Raangkukur* in Rajtilak Theatre in the year 2014-15 was very popular, where veteran actor Tapan Das was much appreciated for his role in disguise for revenge. The way the film *Dr. Bezboruah* set a trend for the thriller genre in commercial cinema, the play did just the same for *Bhramyomaan* Theatre.

The Plays adapted from other popular literature

AssemotJaarHeral Seema:

This popular novel is written by Bhuban Mohan Boruah who is popularly known by his pen name Kanchan Boruah. This novel is undoubtedly the most popular among the youth. Though Boruah has authored several other novels such as *Puwoti Tora*, *UrmilarSokulu* etc. his magnum opus is *AseemotJaarHeral Seema*. Published in 1945, this novel remains a favourite of many. People have confessed reading it several times continuously. The popularity of this novel has not dimmed a bit amongst the newly available novels. It contains a wonderful utopic setting, fantasy, horror, conflict, a love triangle, rebirth, older traditions and a war. The beautifully laid novel is truly mesmerising. The undoubted popularity of this novel made it a choice selection for a play.

Prafulla Borah dramatized this novel for Kohinoor Theatre in 1980-81. Just like the novel the play too was tremendously popular in that season. The music played an important role in the play's popularity too. The music directors Nanda Banerjee and Ananda Narayan Dev's work was much cherished. Amina Dewan is remembered for her role of Champa in the play. Renowned actor Nipan Goswami appeared in the role of Chandan. It was his endeavour away from the film world, though his acting was somewhat not up to the mark of *Bhramyomaan*'s stage. Ashok was portrayed by Mahananda Sharma and Uma was played by Minati Das. (K. Kalita, 88)

The same play was performed in the grounds of Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, on invitation by National School of Drama in Delhi. The main characters of Champa and Chandan were played by Aisengfa Boruah and Jatin Borah respectively. After Nataraj Theatre's journey outside of Assam, it was a significant point for Kohinoor Theatre as well as in the domain of *Bhramyomaan* theatre. The blueprint for this journey was laid in 2008 and their intention was to take *Bhramyomaan* theatre as a field study and look at the loopholes for improvement and familiarize this form to the artists of NSD. Kohinoor was selected after watching various troupes in Assam. This plan of training NSD students in Assam was not successful because of the conflicts between the various troupes. Many claimed that NSD will steal the form, or they were being partial by selecting only Kohinoor Theatre for the project. This failure had cost the *Bhramyomaan* theatres an opportunity to be known properly outside of their state and country. Kohinoor was successful in capturing the hearts of the audience in the capital.

The story can be considered as a dream sequence. It starts with a broken dream of the narrator who was woken by his friends to go on a trip by sailing through the river Burhi Dihing. On the way they find an island inhabited by people unknown to the mainland. After this point their boatman refused to go forward as he got to know that the lands ahead are full of black magic. The word used is '*Maya*' to denote the magical, which means that the place is illusory. Despite warnings they go forward and are faced with a storm where the narrator becomes unconscious where he hallucinates about a girl sitting beside him to remind him of something. On waking up the narrator is a changed man. He claims that he has been to this place before and he recognizes everything. Doubt of the friends was dismissed when he could point to the existence of a river, a rock beside it and other marks in the forest without even looking towards it. In the play the moment the narrator mentions something that appears on stage, for example when he talked about the rock beside the river, a flowing rivulet and a

rock appears on stage. The boat that rows across the stage is shown stuck in the middle on stage and on the other the props appear. Suddenly the narration takes the flashback form where the audience is taken to the past with interjection of the story of the narrator's life from a previous birth. It was easier for the change of settings because already they were in the middle of a forest so despite the scene was from a few hundred years back, it didn't need much changes.

It is during the rule of the Ahom kings, the story is set in a small province where everything is happy and joyful, everyone is prosperous, and the audiences are introduced to Ashok, his wife Uma and their children. Ashok's best friend was coming back from the capital after finishing his training to hold an official position in the province. Chandan is shown riding a horse across the stages on his arrival and it was the time of Magh Bihu⁵ when he arrived. Buffalo fights, nightingale fights, cock fights and other traditional sports were part of the Magh Bihu celebrations. In a buffalo fight arena we are introduced to Gauri. Gauri is the daughter of the minister Lakshminarayan and from the very beginning Chandan and Gauri are seen to be fighting even before knowing each other properly. These fights of course are shown as typical courting rituals where eventually they are supposed to fall in love. There is another character Champa, who is the most beautiful and talented girl of the province who grew up with Chandan. They are inseparable and the rock near the rivulet is their abode where they pretend it to be the boundary of heaven. The vivacious Champa has feelings for Chandan which no one understands. Everyone including Chandan considers her to be sister to him. Her actions, dialogues and sacrifices tell otherwise. Chandan and Gauri keep teasing each other without expressing their love and Gauri gets jealous that Chandan loves someone named Xukula and continues to be scorned. It turns out to be his horse. It is interesting that even though the audience is very much aware of Champa's love towards Chandan, choosing between Gauri and Champa becomes difficult. Both the characters are equally interesting with different characteristics. In one way they are pained to see Champa suffer but on the other enjoy Chandan and Gauri's courtship too. Champa is shown as someone who has understanding of anything and everything apart from her feelings towards Chandan. Without her no festival is enjoyed, in her absence it becomes gloomy, not only the peers but the elders too heed her suggestions. She had done a very good job of hiding her feelings from everyone. Her only confidante is the idol of Sri Krishna to whom she pours her heart out. Jubilant

⁵ Assam has three major festivals, one of which, Magh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu happens on January 14-15, where a stake of woods are burned to worship fire. It is the festival of abundance after harvest.

Champa always laughs in front of people and cries to her 'Mute Murlidhar'⁶. She compares her life to a coin which on one side is dark and the other light, and darkness and light coexists in her. In the play Champa is seen dancing with her friends, jumping on Chandan to scare him, climbing trees and taking the principal responsibility in any matter. Inside she always yearns for Chandan and this aspect makes her mysterious for Chandan to understand her. She says the way on mud roads the bullock carts leave a deep mark permanently, her feelings for Chandan has left a mark just like that in her heart and her heart too has a lighter and darker side. This heavenly place did not remain peaceful for long. A war approached and everything changed for the little place. To fight the outsiders everyone fought equally. Ashok and Chandan being officials had to lead everything. Champa on the other hand had gathered all the girls and started ration, medicine and all other necessities that are usually forgotten in the crisis. She not only kept people balanced with her positive attitude, she also fought in the war and in the end she is shot by an enemy arrow which fatally wounded her. Chandan himself was severely wounded on one hand which was supposed to be amputated. Only in the last moments of her life Champa confesses her feelings to Chandan, again with signs and symbols. She said that all these years Chandan did not understand her, now that the enemy has opened the door of her through the arrow she hopes that he could see it and understand. She succumbed to the wound and at this point all the others including Gauri understood Champa's feelings but no one was in a state physically or mentally to react to anything around them. The story ends with Chandan and Gauri sitting on the rock near Kanchanmoti river and cherishing the good old times stroking the paralysed hand which remained as a reminder of the event that altered all their lives.

Kohinoor's adaptation of the novel in the play form was remarkable but there were definite mistakes in the choice of music and costumes. Saree had never been a part of Assam's traditional attire. Uma is seen wearing a saree in one scene. Champa and her friends in dance sequences are shown wearing a piece of cloth tied around their body without a blouse. The tradition of wearing blouse in India had come much later. The costumes of Champa did not represent any other tribes of Assam either. There should have been consistency and a bit of research about the clothes of Ahom era. The detailed descriptions in touching words in the colossal novel can't be justified in a few minutes of stage performance. Even then the all-time favourite novel of many had touched the audience once more through the stage of Kohinoor Theatre.

⁶Murlidhar is another name for Krishna for having a flute. Muruli/Murli= Flute. Mute, because it is an idol.

As mentioned several times earlier adaptation happens from every possible source available. Film, literature, real life incidents etc. are easily adapted for *Bhramyomaan* theatre. The attack on twin towers, the life of Lady Diana, Benazir Bhutto's assassination, Saddam Hussain's execution, a play on the life of ULFA chief Paresh Boruah and various other real life incidents are also given a dramatic structure and these had been popular too. Shakespeare, just like any other part of the world is popular in the field of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre too. At least one play each season can be seen in the posters of various theatres. Rupkonwar Theatre for the season of 2014-15 had staged *Julius Caesar*. *Othello* was chosen for the first performing year of Indradhanu Theatre in 1983. Padma Borkotoky had adapted the play into Assamese and made it suitable for the twin stages. The same theatre troupe had staged *AbhijnanaShakuntalam*, *Mughal-e-Azam* and the complete Ramayana too. These are only a minuscule portion of the vast domain I attempted to shed light on in a hope to make it comprehensible for the people outside of Assam.

The next chapter analyses the technicalities of bringing *Bhramyomaan* Theatre to the people through the media. The ways of advertisement and the role of media in making *Bhramyomaan* Theatre popular will be discussed in detail. The changes in the trends of advertising in the age of media and its accessibility has changed the face of *Bhramyomaan* theatre. Advertising about the troupes, and advertising of products in the troupes will be conferred on in this chapter.

Chapter 4

***Bhramyomaan* Theatre: The Place within the Popular**

Entertainment has a bad name. Serious people learn to mistrust and even to revile it. The word wears spandex, pasties, a leisure suit studded with blinking lights. It gives off a whiff of Coppertone and dripping Creamsicle, the fake-butter miasma of a movie house lobby, of karaoke and Jagermeister, Jerry Bruckheimer movies, a *Street Fighter* machine grunting solipsistically in a corner of an ice-rink arcade. Entertainment trades in cliché and product placement. It engages regions of the brain far from the centres of discernment, critical thinking, ontological speculation. It skirts the black heart of life and drowns life's lambency in a halogen glare. Intelligent people must keep a certain distance from its productions. They must handle the things that entertain them with gloves of irony and postmodern tongs. Entertainment, in short, means junk, and too much junk is bad for you-bad for your heart, your arteries, your mind, your soul. (Chabon, 1)

Entertainment and art have been seen in different light in every society. Scholars are often seen critiquing certain expressive art forms for focusing more on entertainment than aesthetics. Cultural hierarchy is widespread in almost every culture and aristocratic and folk culture have seen oppositions for a very long time. Culture creates a way of life with principles that scholars have divided as high or low. The origin and development of various art forms clarifies the process that devices such hierarchy. From Sanskrit dramas to today's theatre forms, a lot of changes and comparisons have been developed. While certain forms are able to retain their regality, some have lost their vigour and deteriorated over time. More than the content of a play, the shock factor is at work. What has been shown and seen already does not sell anymore. Newer methods are being adopted by theatres to keep up with various popular modes of entertainment. Songs and music were the ways to present a play for older dramatic forms, but use of songs and dances are only a means of making it more appealing to the audience. Modern *Bhramyomaan* theatre's foundation was laid keeping in mind the income for sustenance. Audience nowadays get bored easily with limited factors of entertainment. There is technology at everyone's fingertips. While technology takes over the fun from playing outside, sitting together and laughing heartily at jokes, discussing matters face to face, making plans to go out and spend time constructively, the *Bhramyomaan* theatre

troupes are trying to do the same, keep up the pace. When asked about serious plays, taking up societal issues, glorifying the older ways, most producers, playwrights and actors answer that the audience does not want to see something that makes them go out of their ways and ponder upon it. Everyone after a hard day's work come out to spend some relaxing time. They want to see something that amazes them, something that is overwhelming and if not that, something they can relate to. As discussed in the previous chapter, apart from the outlandish tricky presentations, social plays are a rage. It is a matter of concern whether the audience is the only responsible factor for the abominations that are seen in the name of theatre these days? While researching for different forms of folk or travelling theatres in India, I came across certain appalling truths about the current scenario of these forms. It is not possible to trace and experience each and every theatre form of India as these are many in numbers and some are not even known to all. However, as enslaved as we are to technology we tend to resort to it as a last stroke of attempt to find anything that might have been missed. Nowadays all types of videos are uploaded in the public domain through YouTube for unrestricted consumption and anyone can do it. Without blaming the technology used, further research had me encounter Bengali *Jatra* performances. If one knows the names of the plays or the name of the *Jatra* troupe it is easier to locate them. If not, one is exposed to a kind of stage activities that clearly disregard the basic form of *Jatra* as we have known and analysed in these chapters. A striptease by a single woman or a group of women is seen on stage or an open arena where spectators are only men of various age groups. These men are allowed to inappropriately 'touch' the women performing for a paid amount of as less as ten rupees. It is not only the case of *Jatra*, but other folk forms like *Karagattam/Karakattam*¹ of Tamilnadu is also seen practicing such degeneration. Traditionally this dance form is performed to invoke the rain goddess where the dancers carry decorated pots wearing shiny skimpy clothes, but has now become a midnight erotic extravaganza.

While these videos may be recorded only with the intention of 'entertainment', using the name of a particular form of dance or theatre makes it unacceptable. For a person unaware of the specific form will invariably be exposed to these atrocities instead of the authentic or original recordings through such videos. It is important to note that this is happening across states and cultures. Why this is important to note is that, the folk theatre forms discussed in the previous chapters cater to the audience mostly belonging to the rural areas or socially

¹ Karakam means water pot and Karakattam literally translates to water pot dance. The decorated pots symbolise joy and happiness. This dance is performed to praise the rain goddess Mariamman.

lower classes. While the taste of these people have changed to the level of performing and watching live pornographic dances, the theatre groups have been modified to their needs. After all in the age of competition among the troupes that are emerging like mushrooms everywhere some might take the easier way to survive. Entertainment is twofold, human culture and a growing industry are its dimensions. In various cases it has been noted that entertainment has taken over the element of human culture in *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. AchyutLahkar had expressed his disappointment saying, it's not only in *Bhramyomaan* Theatre but T.V, cinema, folk and amateur theatre also witnesses the degeneration of the interests of audience. AtulMazumdar, an eminent critic of *Bhramyomaan* theatre had published a series of satirical pieces where he has pointed out what is wrong with today's trends of *Bhramyomaan* theatre. In a Mock Heoric style he portrays a character called UmanandaGharfolia who had risen from owning a general store to a producer, actor, director and writer. His accomplishments include making *Bhramyomaan* 'popular' as his theatre troupe's title itself is 'Jonopriyo Theatre'. Bringing glamour artists from different film industries of India, giving importance to only dance, modification of the tent and stage of the theatre to look like a circus arena where these imported glamour artists will do the tricks needed for entertainment etc. are his contributions to the form.

When NSD had invited Kohinoor Theatre to Delhi for a production many people had raised the question that if this form of theatre is exposed to the outside world someone is going to steal the 'patent'. Mazumdar has pointed this out about the ignorance of the shallow 'so called' producers who instead of feeling happier about the fact that it's getting the exposure it had craved for and needed in many levels, through the character of UmanandaGharfolia. The ideologies of veteran artists about *Bhramyomaan* Theatre are considered to be obsolete, instead the people who don't have any knowledge or experience in the field of theatre get recognition. The form of Assam's mobile theatre has changed overtime. It was a known phenomenon to announce the arrival of a particular theatre troupe and their attraction of the show. The inviting committee roamed around the town or village in an auto or van with loudspeakers attached announcing the productions calling each and every play as stirring, moving and hit in every town and village. The play used to be the focal pull for the audience. It has changed into the announcement of this particular play shows winged horses on stage, the bride enters on an elephant in the other one, there will be an extension of the stage in the midst of the audience where the film stars will perform sensational dance, for the first time females will play male roles etc. just to take a few examples. The stars nowadays

come and go. They don't dedicate their whole life to the art like their predecessors used to. Whichever troupe pays more money the stars flee towards them. So the system of agents also have started. While performing in one troupe the offers for some other comes and the decision entirely depends upon the amount of money. Translation and adaptation were a trend, but stealing stories to pass as their own is the ongoing tendency of the playwrights. Mazumdar writes about the experiences of watching a play sitting towards the gallery of the auditorium where he watched plays among the whistles and ululations of the audience, especially the young ones who wait for the one or two stylised 'Bollywood' dance sequences. He questions whether this kind of mentality exists in the audience or it has been cultured into them. The producers are equally responsible for propagating such plays and so are the inviting committee. Atul Mazumdar writes,

A producer comments that now the third generation audience is maximum in *Bhramyomaan* auditoriums. Keeping in mind their interests and choices the plays are produced. The older generations are superseded as audiences.....what about social responsibility then? If one expects a businessman to have social responsibility and question the adulterated food sold by him, why not the people involved with theatre. Should it be inconsequential in this case? (2012, 122,)

Famous comedy actor of Assamese film industry, Chetana Das has said at the inaugural ceremony of a theatre troupe that *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is the 'luxury of the elite' which after all the discussions on this form appears to be entirely incorrect. Inclusion of a glamorous artist does not make the status of a particular theatre troupe higher. It may gather more audience, bagging more revenues but it does not make it a symbol of elite luxury. *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is first and foremost a people's theatre. Whatever state it is in currently is because of the people. There is a lack of critical thinking about this form and the existing criticisms hardly impact the larger number of audience that frequent the productions. So, can we really blame the playwrights or the producers for the changing trends in *Bhramyomaan* Theatre? Gimmick and glamour artists have been the biggest setbacks in the domain of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. A lot has been changed and refashioned in the name of entertainment. As Richard Dyer says, "Entertainment is a type of performance produced for profit, performed before a generalised audience (the public), by a trained, paid group who do nothing else but produce performances which have the sole (conscious) aim of providing pleasure." (19) Unlike other industries that produce goods, entertainment industry's workers have authority in turning the product into what they wish it to be.

Entertainment is usually defined by the dominant professional entertainment industry. This industry grows on the demands of the consumers who either want wish fulfilment or a way to escape reality. This world that appears better than the lived reality is created by the performers to entertain the eager consumers. Some people are loyal to a form of entertainment or they become a fan because of the ongoing trend. More than individual it becomes a social domain. Usually individuals incline to consume service products as sports and other forms of entertainment with other customers, an emotional relationship is formed via social identity of an individual with a brand of service which in a way helps building brand equity. (Underwood et al. 2001)

Everything that gets advertised in today's world visually or by any other means is hard to decipher as to exactly they are trying to sell. While some of these advertisements are innovative, some just cry for attention. The inception of Nataraj Theatre had started the gimmick. The comparison of Nataraj Theatre was with Nataraj Opera of his brother where people used to flock despite having minimal means for production without electricity. Use of electricity was first the spectacular gimmick that people experienced. Electricity had not reached the rural areas of Assam, when generator lights were used on the stage of Nataraj Theatre. People's attention automatically tend to divert towards something they haven't experienced before and be awestruck. Cinema has changed a lot overtime. There is only a limited possibility of making the changes on a stage performance which can offer new manifestations. Other stage performances of similar kind have innovated the way of acting, projecting and mode of expressions. Amateur or other professional plays have become more symbolic with the message delivered. Such changes are rare in *Bhramyomaan* theatre. Modernisation is only seen in terms of the change of stagecraft, make up, use of technology in using life like props, projection, lights and the techniques of advertising. Producers claim that they dare to show performances based on the tricks of the props today because of the need to keep up with the changing world and its people. The inclusion of glamour artists is also not a current trend.

NatasuryaPhani Sharma was considered to be one of the most promising actors of that time. He was equally involved in amateur theatre and had starred in films as well. His play *Bhogjara* was the first play staged by Nataraj Theatre. Even if there were doubts about staging a serious play, names like Phani Sharma, Bhupen Hazarika and Bishnu Prasad Rabha worked as tools of attracting audience, because these were known people. Naturally a person who has become renowned in non-professional and amateur theatres won't be a very popular figure among the masses who are the mainstay of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre as such plays are

staged only for the consumption of a select few of the society. Television is a mode more familiar to them. Even if there is no electricity in a village, projected films were a trend in villages through generator or battery operated electricity. Names like Biju Phukan, Bidya Rao, Purnima Pathak, NiponGoswami, UpakulBordoloi etc. were known to them. The very few films that introduced these artists to the rural folk had etched a desire to see these people live on stage doing whatever they did on T.V just in front of them. These audiences are loyal to the form of *Bhramyomaan* theatre as they did not limit their units of entertainment to the 'curtain films' and frequented the *Bhramyomaan* tents, but their predilection for the stars make them fans of the stars. These two types of audiences are usually seen today too, only with the difference that these actors these days hardly get to act. Melodrama, fight sequences, operation of the props and the pestering song and dance sequences take over the stage timing, so it is hard to define this fanaticism is for the acting of the stars in *Bhramyomaan* theatre of is this adoration an extension of their performance in some films and they remain loyal fans in the other domains as well. It has been noted over time that the latter category of audience is greater in number than the former ones who were and have remained to the form of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. Naturally it has forced the writers, producers and the inviting committee to opt the options available for maximum profit. After all this form was started with the motive of economic security for the artists.

One of the changes that has been witnessed is the diminishing popularity of the Dance Drama form that opens every show of the performances. As mentioned earlier, just like the 'concert' or the invocation in *Jatra*, *Tamasha* and *Nautanki*, Dance Drama is an integral part of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre which is known as *Nritya-Natika* in Assamese. As earlier dramatic forms are concerned, Natya denotes both dance and drama and it has been noted that earlier forms of drama was vastly based on music and dance with soulful singing. This particular type of dance drama may be categorised as the *Uparupaka*² type. These dance dramas are the preliminary actions or *purvaranga* before the main performance begins. Earlier there used to be four well-rehearsed dance dramas to be staged before every production of a play in

² Sanskrit Drama is divided into Drishya and Shrivakavyas. DrishyaKavyas include all the visual performances which include both Rupaka and Uparupaka. Rupaka is used synonymously as Natya (Drama) which is further divided into ten subcategories which include different types of plays including one act plays to farce. Uparupaka is not mentioned in Bharata's *Natyashastra* as it is considered to be minor works compared to the Rupakas. Uparupakas are predominantly dance drama forms, features of which were traced in *Abhinavabharati*. Though considered to be a lower form than Rupaka, Uparupakas also had scope for serious dramatic prowess. Some also claim that there might have been an eleventh addition to the Rupaka called Natika from which Uparupakas emerged. Bodily gestures along with music predominate Uparupakas which feature sub themes isolated from the Rupakas, hence occupying a secondary position. Rupaka performances focus on Rasa, while Uparupakas feature Bhava.

Bhramyomaan Theatres. A mythical story is usually preferred for such performances. The story of *Beula-Lakhindar*³ used to be a popular one. Puranic stories, popular folk tales, heroic tales extracted from our epics, the musicals written by Jyotiprasad Aggarwala and other modified plays to suit the shorter time frame of the performance are dominant themes in the dance dramas. Adorned with stylized rhymed dialogues delivered by the people from orchestra is lip synched by the dancers accompanied with mime and gesticulations on stage.

Usually it is a large group of dancers that perform coordinated dance sequences. Many theatre troupes perform a dance drama based on the name of the troupe. Short plays were written to suit the purpose. For example in Shankardev Theatre a dance drama called *Shankardev* was performed, based on the supernatural accolades attached to his name. Similarly Jyotirupa Theatre had a personified Jyotirupa that symbolises the *Natya/Nritya* that is frozen in time because of carelessness. Invocation through beautiful dance and singing is the only way to revive 'her'. With the blessing of *Saraswati*, the goddess of learning, dance and music a troupe of dancers led by a young dancer is able to revive her. This *NrityaNatika* was one of the few that I had witnessed as a child which remained with me for the innovative way of presentation instead of picking up a story that is already known to people.

The way themes of the plays staged changed overtime, these dance dramas also saw a change in them. Problems of insurgency, the societal problems, drug addiction and diseases like AIDS and cancer that need awareness among people were picked up as themes for these. Incidentally such themes had been popular in *Nautanki* and in recent times these have been preferable over the traditional, mythological and legendary stories. Witch hunting is another issue that rural areas are infected with. Lower rate of educated people and superstition give way for continuation of such inhuman practices. When Indian mainstream television is currently showing soap operas where the protagonist becomes a fly, who later gets impregnated by the demon, a 'skinchanging' teenage assassin and *icchadharinagin*⁴ without a mythological setting in the current timeline, dance dramas in *Bhramyomaan* Theatre had tried portraying them since a long time but as a means to reform the societal evils. The aimed general awareness is easily achieved through the dance dramas as it is appealing to all types of audiences, old and young. The short duration, the musical nature and the gestured performance is easier for people to remember and not get distracted. People who are not cut

³ This is a story full of revenge, love, dedication and repentance where the goddess of snake kills Lakhindar, and Beula travels with the corpse of her husband and faces various trials by the goddess to test her dedication. This story was once a popular play that moved the audiences of Assam and Bengal.

⁴ A snake that can take the shape of a human at will.

out for acting but are good dancers also get employed full time in a *Bhramyomaan* Theatre because of the existence of this feature. It also serves as the time given to the audience to settle down for the main feature. Usually the performers of *NrityaNatika* are young who are groomed to be actors during the period they serve as dancers. AchyutLahkar appointed trainers of different folk and classical forms of dance to train his actors and dancers but in many cases not a particular form of dance rituals are followed. It is kind of a mixture of various forms or innovative steps and gestures formulated by the choreographers. Not to mean that it disrespects the traditional ways of dancing as various troupes also used indigenous folk forms like Bihu or classical forms like *Sattriya* in their performances.

The aesthetics of classical and folk dances are appreciated and revived which had given a boost to the Dance Dramas after a period of negligence. Contemporary stagecraft with its gamut of picturesque props, modern lighting, flashy costumes have changed the face of Dance Dramas and it has become apparent that they are losing the traditional touch and creativity in terms of performance. Such inadequacy is being covered up by the modern devices of lighting technology by creating illusory effects where the audience is hardly focused on the performance. Pitifully poor performances are garbed under the showy exterior of showmanship. The disinterestedness of audiences these days about the dance drama or their realization about the inferior quality of the production these days, unfortunately many theatre troupes do not open the plays of *Bhramyomaan* theatre with a dance drama anymore. Some might still present it on the first day first show at a particular place, but the next two days plays start without these preliminary activities. The step taken of discontinuing is a decision that rather hampers the motive of why these were presented in the first place. Instead of finding a way to train the dancers or incorporating proper dance forms, discontinuation seems like an escape route and nothing more. This did not hamper the dancers much as the introduction of cinematic dance sequences in between the plays keep them employed but the playwrights who were involved only in producing the dance dramas are at a loss. Garima Hazarika and JatinGoswami who are veteran *Sattriya* dancers had scripted various successful dance dramas for different troupes. Continuous involvement of such people would surely have improved the status of the dance dramas than discontinuation.

Regardless of all the changes in trends of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre, most of which are frowned upon by the conscious audiences it continues to be popular among the masses. Considering the growing popularity despite the pitfalls mentioned it is necessary to put *Bhramyomaan* Theatre in the ambit of Popular Culture. After questioning the aesthetics,

politics and history of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre where can we position it? Morag Shiach points out, “Popular is not simply a cultural or aesthetic term. It exists in a range of political and legal discourses, and has been constantly redefined, refined and fought over.” (19) The most problematic area about popular culture is its definition. While defining what is popular both negative and positive aspects are highlighted by different scholars. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites it as a legal term- an action that is open to all people under a particular government. The equation between the interest of the state and interest of its people is included in this legal use of the word popular. Sometimes the word is used in association with chaos and vulgarity, sometimes with people of lowly birth, easily accessible, most importantly it denotes ‘people’. OED also gives another obsolete meaning of popular - the populace as a whole. It can be said that popular culture means a cultural form meant for common people, approved and favoured by them. This merely does not mean what is popular is meant for only consumption, a culture that represents the spirit of the people or a nation is also called popular. Many a times although approved by the ‘people’, what is popular is excluded from the institutes of cultural validation because of the negativities attached to the term as it is considered to be lowly, ordinary and has its foundations on ignorance. Samuel Johnson lists five meanings of popular in his dictionary,

- Vulgar, plebeian
- Suitable to the common people
- Beloved by the people, pleasing to the people
- Studious of the favour of the people
- Prevailing or raging among the populace (Shiach,32)

Slowly the definitions changed from being hierarchical like use of the terms like something ‘suitable’ for ‘common people’, ‘vulgar, etc. to commonly liked, and for/of the general public. (Longman’s New Universal Dictionary) Towards the late eighteenth century the term popular seems to be concomitant to different streams of studies, arts, science, fiction and music etc. The notion of this term lay outside of the institutions of legitimation as its approachability still relies on simplicity. In all these concepts of ‘popular’ the recurring element is the ‘people’. In the simplistic understanding of the term popular, one can say that ‘popular’ is something that has been accepted and approved by the masses, or a large number of people in a society, state, nation or worldwide. It also has the choice factor as one has to be voluntarily captivated by something to have chosen and approve of it and not coerced into liking and accepting it. In order to understand popular culture, one needs to understand culture first.

Raymond Williams divides culture into three broad categories namely, Ideal, Documentary and Social. The Ideal culture refers to the perfect human lives-particularly the evolution of it, activities and universal values that composes a timeless order within culture through discovery and depiction of such values. The second category as the title suggests is about recording the experiences of the past values which can be followed, analysed and respected. It is the body of scholarly and creative work that he refers to. The documented records help the action of criticism about the historical description of the society in relation to culture. Social culture describes a particular way of life conveying specific principles and meanings in art, knowledge, institution and everyday behaviour. According to Mathew Arnold culture is, "(i) the ability to know what is best; (ii) what is best; (iii) the mental and spiritual application of what is best, and (iv) the pursuit of what is best." (Storey, 1998,19) Implied and unequivocal meanings of this particular way/ways of life is analysed through the social culture. Understanding of culture need to incorporate all three aspects in order to comprehend it clearly. Particular activities are needed for emphasis out of individual, organisational and social structures. 'Popular' as a concept has a lot of empty spaces to be filled according to the context it has been used in.

Culture has always been a process to create observed differences considering it being exclusive or inclusive. It depends upon the societal structure to assert ones hierarchical structures by defining it culturally. High/Serious against Low/Popular culture is nothing but mere differences that a modern society despite being egalitarian or democratic, is structured hierarchically. Liking a particular kind of music, preferring a specific genre of films, frequenting a certain kind of performances may position one with the elite or the crass section of the society. These hierarchies are labelled as being a cultural, economic and social elite as rising or sinking parts of a middle class society. Traditional folk culture is different from contemporary mass culture and popular culture. The traditional/secondary cultures survive in smaller areas unspoilt by the global mass culture but these cultures are vulnerable enough to be invaded by global mass culture or any other external culture which in turn gives them adulterated new identities. Manipulation remains a key feature of Mass Culture, and it finds creative ways to allure the masses into succumb to it. One may question the choice of the consumers in a free society to whether or not choose a particular asset of the popular, as not all the consumers are passive to be manipulated, but in many cases they are left with no choice at all. The choices are objects that are offered by commercial systems where one partakes involuntarily sometimes and in an obligatory way most of the times.

Bhramyomaan Theatre is not only a mode of entertainment within the traditional popular culture but it has the interests of both the producers as well the consumer. *Ahbayok* (Inviting) committee profits equally from the incomes of a show. Behind this earning is the greater objective of developmental work for the region and the society. The incomes are usually intended for the building or repair of temples, mosques, schools, roads, libraries etc. The advance that is paid to the theatre troupe is tried to be doubled by any means so that the profit is greater than the money already collected and paid to the troupes. So in many ways the consumers are not naïve people manipulated by the culture industry, but they are also the part of the agenda of the limited choices that are available. In a way they too take part in the popular culture forms and derive satisfaction through entertainment. While the 'elites' abstain from participating in it, their criticisms do not blemish the popularity and durability of such forms despite their ephemeral, merchantable and flashy packaging.

To analyse Popular Culture a quantifiable approach is necessary as it can be determined by the number of that approves of or likes a particular culture. Though it is not the single dimension of studying it as it is not enough to furnish an acceptable definition of popular culture. Another way to describe what popular culture is the residual cultures that did not qualify as 'high cultures'. The best that have ever been produced in world, endangered or lost due in the mass society is high culture. The traditions which have been produced by and for the elite and ruling classes with limitations of accessibility which guarantees exclusivity to the audience are high cultures. More often than not these definitions or qualities that make a culture high or popular are flawed because of the neglect of the realities of a contemporary society. High culture is exactly opposite to what is popular. It is complicated, hence not easily understood by common masses, if not understood it becomes exclusive to only a certain portion of the society and it gives the exclusive nature that high culture enjoys. Pierre Bourdieu associates socio-economic class with the reproduction of culture, where education and educational institutes play a pivotal role. (56-57) As discussed earlier the idea of 'high' and 'low' culture existed in Assam but somehow the definitions of high culture fall flat in terms of the cultural activities that are practiced in Assam. It is only assumed that in older times kings were patrons to theatrical performances, but it is known that such performances happened in Sanskrit and *Prakrit*. But for the entertainment of the common masses there were performances in abundance. (D. Pathak, 1999, 65) Assam is mostly populated in the rural areas. According to 2011 census 86% of the population still live in rural areas. Even though the literacy rate has increased from 63.25 to 73.18 from 2001 to 2011 census many people are

not exposed to the variety of high cultures that education may provide. Many folk performances that existed like *Putola Naas*, *OjaPali*, *NotuaNritya* etc. are not available for common consumption anymore. By the definition of Raymond Williams about 'high' culture and its rarity these mass cultures have become 'high' culture and the society has evolved to produce newer means of entertainment for the ordinary people. MaheswarNeog says, "When there was no regular drama in the country, the performance of *OjaPali* provided the common people of village and court circles with edification and amusement in the *natghar*." (D. Pathak, 1999, 66) High culture is not something that is limited to a particular society. Its context is much larger than the definitions may indicate. Raymond Williams points out,

"High culture" in any particular society is not only a selection from universal high culture, but a selection that relates, explicitly or implicitly, to wider elements of the society. Thus high culture, the work of more than one's own class, society, period or even epoch, is commonly incorporated into a particular contemporary social structure.(1974, Web)

Bhakti Movement in India had paved the ways for performances that were available and accessible to common people by keeping aside Sanskrit Drama which was considered to be reserved for the ones learned in the Sanskrit language, precisely the Brahmins and other upper castes. It has been discussed in the earlier chapters how the dramatic and literary forms that emerged during the Bhakti period overlap in their origins and share numerous elements. This developed culture was not area specific as various parts of India was influenced by it. Starting from the *Alvars*⁵ in Tamil Nadu, *Vaishnavas* in Bengal, Assam and Odisha, and several lower caste people were inspired by the idea that devotion towards god is not the rights reserved for only a section of the society and had produced countless forms of literature and performances. This movement proved to be revolutionary and in time the performances related to the faiths can be considered as 'High Culture'. While *Bhaona* is one of such performances that may be categorised as 'high' art during the time of its inception because of the new artificial language involved, but the reason behind the foundation of this culture was to unite everyone through this mode of entertainment. The idea was to provide something for everyone in the society. For the scholars there are *shlokas*, the wise learned lot will enjoy different forms of songs and musical endeavours, the *Brajawalilanguage* for keeping the poetic elements unusual yet not as incomprehensible as Sanskrit for the villagers, and at last if

⁵ Tamil Vaishnava poet saints. Vaishnavism is believed to have started with their veneration of Lord Vishnu. The word Alvar (Alvar, Azhvar) means immersed in god. Andal, Thiruppan Alvar are famous Alvar saints.

one does not have any knowledge about any of the dramatic features, they can be mesmerised by looking at all the masks, make up and elaborate presentation of the play. (D. Pathak, 1999, 87) It has been noted that though SrimantaSankaradeva has used the word *Jatra* in his plays and performances, the *Jatra* that Assam knows and from which the origin of *Bhramyomaan* theatre can be traced, is not evolved from it. *Bhramyomaan* stands aloof from other modes of entertainment in Assam and slowly from being a part of the ‘popular’ it is shifting towards becoming a ‘mass’ culture. Adorno talks about the changing needs of the consumer. *Bhramyomaan*’s foundation was laid with a commercial purpose which now has the benefit of modern ways of achieving its goal. The consumer’s needs are transformed gradually through the methods of imparting information, advertising and command. *Bhramyomaan* has become a commodity that is supplanted in the imagination of the consumers (audiences) through relentless repetition. In order to keep up with the modern ways of consumerism a standardised product needs to be put forth. Just like the soap operas put the viewers on an edge, just like the teaser trailers of films keep the viewers informed only sufficiently to be more curious about what the entire product might hold inside, *Bhramyomaan* theatre is also keeping the audiences continually uninformed but motivated with the basic know how.

Through several ways of keeping the consumers on loop, the culture industry is able to manipulate the common consciousness of the people. The changes in the film industry and *Bhramyomaan* theatre in Assam offers a platform for analysing the various ways the culture industry operates in Assam. Raymond Williams points out that everything that is produced has to be sold. Production is proportional to the demand of the consumers and ultimately the products are always what the consumer actually wants. (1973, 104) This is what all the producers assert yet Mass Culture is believed to express standards and tastes of ordinary people, though the contradiction about generalising the tastes of all the people in a society is often seen. In this case most of the times instead of producing something new the existing trends get accentuated. The makeover of *Bhramyomaan* theatre from serious plays to Gimmick is a result of the same. New interests among the masses are created through mass communication, but according to Williams it appears inadequate for the following reasons-

- The masses are always talked about without any sense of growth, respect and responsibility towards them.
- Masses are always grouped into ‘classes’ according to social or educational status. These divisions hamper having a flexible notion about ‘the masses’, hence the culture gets divided too.

- With mass culture the idea of profit is always attached and because of this the producers attempt only the areas which are known to be safe and well acquainted with. New experimentations always come with a lot of apprehensions.
- While using different channels as medium for advertisement one has to manipulate the masses to want what is being sold whether it is necessary for them or not. While advertising it is often seen to be diverted from the real problems to the irrelevant ones just to make the ready products sell. (1973,108-109)

We are living in a society where more than rationality fanatic obsession drives the consumers. One significant example can be given about some films that are produced today and are grossing high revenues but they are as illogical as it can get. A story that depicts reality can be critically acclaimed but usually do poorly at the box office. Mainstream Hindi film actors have a huge fan following which makes their films collect as much in a day which other serious films can only hope for in the entire duration of its screening. It's stupid, yet they sell. A question I asked during interviews with the playwrights and producers of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is, why is it a spectacle or sensationalisation that they are after? The answer is always directly related to the demand of the consumers or which is a polite way of saying that it sells. Guy Debord believes that spectacle is not to be used as a negative term. It is only a representation of what has been lived. Modern life conditions are accumulations of spectacles. He says,

The Spectacle presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as part of society, and as instrument of unification. As a part of society it is specifically the sector that concentrates all gazing and all consciousness. Due to the very fact that this sector is *separate*, it is the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness, and the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of generalized separation. (67)

Popular culture has been seen as the 'other' by the ones who prefer high culture, but in case of *Bhramyomaan* when it's majority of the society who are a part of it, it automatically makes the 'unrealism' of the real society and 'the present model of socially dominant life'.

In an interview with playwright Samarendra Barman, theatre critic AtulMazumdar, producer Nazrul Islam, and retired actor Pushpa Devi for the newspaper *Janasadharan*, lots of issues were discussed about the degeneration of the form. Changing trends are discussed regarding the plays written, modes of advertising and presentation of the performances.

Ideology and social responsibility of the playwrights and producers are the keywords of their discussion. Ideology is a driving factor of the cultural studies. Out of various meanings of ideology, sometimes it is used with culture interchangeably. To understand the nature of popular culture it is necessary to know the concept of ideology. John Storey opines,

- Ideology can be referred to as an organised body of ideas enunciated by a specific group of people. 'Professional ideology' is one example where different professional groups function under the practices of different sets of ideas.
- Sometimes texts and practices may present misleading pictures of reality. Ideology is used for such distortion, masking and concealment. By producing false consciousness, the powerful benefits against the powerless.
- Consciously or unconsciously the texts (films, fiction, pop songs etc.) take sides in the conflicts of a society while presenting a picture of the world. This definition depends upon the previous concept of ideology. The notion that this definition depends on is the society which is structured around oppression, inequality and exploitation. These are the conflicts that the ideology takes side with in the texts.
- The next concept of ideology borrowed from Roland Barthes is that Barthes argues that ideology functions primarily at the level of implications, the secondary, often hidden meanings that different texts and practices carry, or can be prepared to carry.
- The last definition is Althusser's indication to see ideology as a material practice and not only as a body of ideas. The practises of everyday life encounters ideology, for example the ritual and customs that bind people to the social order. This social order too is manifested with inequalities of status, power and wealth. (2009, 2-5)

Everyone in today's society is an active participant in the production culture. Everyone has the choices to select, reject, assign values, make meanings, resist, accept and more often than not manipulate. *Bhramyomaan* Theatre has a committee of the producers. This committee decides the minimum/maximum budget for a year for the troupes. While fixing the budget they handle the issue of the price of tickets, how far one can go in a particular area. NazrulIslam in the above mentioned interview gives the data of 2011 that maximum 72000 rupees was fixed per show. Otherwise it becomes difficult for the audience to afford the tickets. Though these are decided by the producers themselves, they do not comply with the rules and to fulfil the demands of the glamour artists who are signed with the amount of 40-60 lakh per season. The way there are regulations for film, there is nothing like

that for the theatre troupes which makes the competition unhealthy and the performance suffers. (A. Mazumdar, 2012, 151) In the interview the issue of glamour artists are also discussed. As mentioned earlier it is necessary to see *Bhramyomaan* Theatre's changing trends with respect to the alterations of Assamese Film Industry.

Assamese Film Industry: Growth and Downfall

It has been a growing trend to sign glamour artists in *Bhramyomaan* Theatre as the main attraction or feature of a performance. Many film stars who have been a part of the theatre as well as Cinema are greatly appreciated by all kinds of audiences. As mentioned earlier Phani Sharma was one such who could pull people for a serious performance where the producers feared loss due to the selection of the play and its content. He was famous not because of his roles in films but his performance in every field he ventured into. He was known for his acting. It was not because he wanted to earn a livelihood but his passion for acting that dragged him everywhere he sensed opportunity. RatanLahkar in his biography recalls Phani Sharma distributing his earnings amongst the kid artists of the theatre troupe. Nowadays just after appearing in one or two digital films actors become stars and they become banner artists soon after in *Bhramyomaan* Theatres. The actors are often seen blaming that there are no good films getting produced and they are forced to move to *Bhramyomaan* theatres because they have no other means of earning their livelihood. However many claim that because of their entry into the field of theatre, it has started degrading.

The name of JyotiprasadAggarwala has been mentioned earlier as a playwright and pioneer in various artistic ventures including film. He had taken the story of JoymotiKunwori by Lakshminath Bezboruah and made it into the first Assamese film. It was released on 10th March 1935 in Raunak cinema hall in Kolkata. Assam did not have a film theatre yet so it was first shown in KamrupNatyamandir for a fortnight. Jonaki cinema hall was constructed in Tezpur in 1937. In Bholaguri, Tezpur the makeshift studio was set up and the entire film was shot until JyotiChitraban was constructed in Guwahati. It is the first film studio to be established on a land provided by the government. *Joymoti* is the fourth talking picture of India. Bengal has a significant role to play in the cultural front of Assam which in various issues have already been discussed, but with Assamese films Kolkata was the only place accessible for producers. Films were shot, edited and produced there. Not only was it used for the shooting location or technical knowhow of the studios, technicians of sound, light, editing

etc. were also experts from Kolkata. Sound engineer Prabir Mitra, film editor Shiba Bhattacharya and Pranab Ghosh are fondly remembered. This city was also the hub of the pioneers like Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy, Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray etc. who started a new era in the field of aesthetic cinema. It was a revolutionary step for Jyotiprasad Aggarwala to dare to venture out in a field from a state like Assam. It was a mere interest in the field that had led him to study filmmaking. From Assam before Aggarwala, Pramathesh Boruah had studied in Fox Studios, Paris in 1924. Aggarwala followed suit and reached Berlin's UFA Studio. While Pramathesh Boruah joined Kolkata's New Theatre and produced several films including *Devdas*, Aggarwala returned to Assam and presented the people with *Joymoti*.

In 1960 when FTII, Pune was founded a score of students learnt filmmaking, direction, photography etc. and marked their presence in the domain of Assamese films. Indukalpa Hazarika, Jahnu Boruah, Nipon Goswami are a few prominent names. Jahnu Boruah has won many accolades and Nipon Goswami is still an inevitable choice for a loving grandfather, strict father, funny husband or a patriarch in films. Assam had produced various award winning films like *Halodhiya Choraye Baodhan Khai* (1987), *Sagoroloi Bohudur* (1995), *Haladhar* (1993), *Raag Birag* (1996), *Adahya* (1996) etc. In recent times also young producers have achieved critical acclamation and awards with films like *Anya Ek Jatra* (2001), *Laj* (2004) *Adieu* (2009), *Jetuka Pator Dore* (2011) etc. On 10th March 2015 Assamese film Industry completed 80 years of existence. It is unfortunate that despite all the achievements and efforts Assamese Film Industry did not turn out to be a profitable 'Industry'. The cinema halls had closed down. Filmmaker Sanjib Sabhapandit says "Most of the cinema halls are dirty, poorly lit, give out a foul smell and have an obsolete sound system. Besides, the hall owners pass on the entire burden of publicity on the producer. As the Assamese cine-lovers do not go to the halls because of poor ambience." (qtd. in Sushanta Talukdar, Web) Challenges in the commercial front, shaky technical knowledge, lack of collective effort of the producers, promoters, directors and actors and absence of proper directives of running the industry has still kept it in a withered state. There is hardly any cinematic excellence seen in whatever is being tried to be offered as films. (H. Bhattacharya, 289-298) The way Atul Chandra Hazarika talked about Assamese people's lower self-esteem (*neechatmika*) in terms of producing fundamental, original plays and everything became imitations, the same became the case of the film industry. It is not only the Assamese film industry but Hindi Film Industry is seen copying from Tamil, Malayalam and English films, Hindi films are getting imitated by other

regional film industries and in truth everywhere this trend of imitation is going on which is hampering the originality of any production. In Assam the pioneers who started the film industry were learned in the field of film making and they presented the stories that the target audience could relate to. In the time of mass media where everything is available for consumption, the consumers as discussed earlier have become conscious enough to select among the choices. Instead of have the same product served with different packages they can stick to the best among all.

A large number of people live in villages in Assam where there are no roads, no electricity, and no modern facilities of entertainment. In these places construction of a cinema hall is not feasible. Even where there were a few, they existed only till television became common in every household. These halls could not make profit out of the few moviegoers. If it is calculated in a rural area how many people actually like going to the movies the ratio will be really less. Moreover not a lot of women venture out of home for entertainment purpose. Going and sitting in a dark cinema hall at night may be considered a taboo by most people especially for women. Films are not considered to be 'high art' consumable for the entire society. Walking for a long distance, travelling by bus, reaching the destination where there are movie halls is a lot of effort, wastage of precious time and money. Moreover watching a film only benefits the owner of the hall and the producers. Unlike *Bhramyomaan* Theatre which comes to the doorstep, the profit comes back to the society almost always doubled which is used for the benefit of the society. It is once, twice or thrice to the maximum in a remote area per season where different *Ahbayok* Committees invite the theatre troupes. It is not every Friday that a new theatre troupe frequents without invitation. The choice factor works here as only those theatre troupes are invited by people which they can afford and hope to make profit out of. The films may not be of their choice of the means to make profit.

In this phase of Assamese film industry it is not even the question of competing with other film industries of the country but only of survival. There is no lasting impression that this industry has been able to mark in the domain of film despite the artistic excellence of the past. There are various factors listed below responsible for the status of Assamese film in current times.

1. **Budget:** No sufficient budget for production of a film has been a constant complaint. People are scared to invest because of the scenario of no profit. Cinema halls are not operational, moviegoers are less than expected, the choice of language, and apparent

inexperience of the people who are actually engaging with making these films. Most families are agrarians or officegoers. They are usually not motivated for business ventures. Moreover the losses incurred by past ventures demoralise people to attempt another time. Recently a film by new writer/director Bhaskar Hazarika, *Kothanodi: A River of Fables* (2015) was released. It is based on four folktales popular in Assam. This film has won the Best Feature Film in Assamese award in 63rd National Film Awards. This project was taken up by Mr Hazarika but was not able to complete because of the lack of budget. He could complete it by collecting money through crowdfunding and proper use of new media. People appreciated a newer approach in this film hence the aware citizens helped him bring it out. It is not possible to appeal to all the sections of the society because of the language barrier. Apart from Assamese and Bodo- the two major languages in Assam, there are several dialects that include *Missing, Karbi, Tiwa, Rabha, Rajbongshi* etc. When regional film industries like Bengali, Tamil or Malayalam is seen flourishing because of the uniformity of one spoken language, in Assam it becomes the major drawback of not having one. In recent times it is very apparent in Assam that one community is becoming hostile to the other because of the non-recognition of their own languages. When the people are divided in revival of their languages sometimes through films, the market place shrinks for the films produced.

2. **Lack of marketing policy**: Without any marketing plan including target audience, cost of production, distribution, advertisement, promotion and the expected profit. Audience never gets to know about the release date as there is no certainty about it on the part of the filmmakers, hence no promotional activities are seen. Only a few posters appear before its release in a month's time. There is no proper use of new media either. Three hundred and fifty cinema halls and more than a hundred touring screens existed. The touring screens used to be called "*Parda*" (curtain) films. By 2003 it reduced to only 240 cinema halls which were registered and among them only 49 halls are with satellite in good condition. Militants bombed a few cinema halls in 2004 to ban the screening of Hindi films for the promotion of indigenous cinema but it had an adverse effect on the entire industry and the loss is very apparent today.
3. **VCD/Piracy**: Before the home theatre, USBs, MP3 players; people had pride in owning a tape recorder. There used to be series of Bihu songs under particular titles were released during every *Rongali/Bohag Bihu* every year. *Jaanmoni, Jonali, Anjana, Rangdhali* etc. are a few common ones. After digitalization of films overmastered the

celluloid form, it was easier for people to acquire equipment necessary for recording videos. Canon 5D mark II, mark III got introduced in Assamese Film Industry. The new media in film making was embraced. Because of the use of new medium the cost of production got lowered to a certain extent. One could have hoped that other elements of filmmaking could be concentrated upon, but it in a way proved to be negative as everyone without talent but with a camera started producing films. The audio cassette tapes mentioned earlier contained only songs, with the new age technology the songs were videographed and to make it sequential a story is usually framed around the songs. These are now called VCD films which can be bought from a store for as less as ten rupees and provide cheaper entertainment. Every year with the same title, similar stories are being produced and they are easily available through internet too. These kind of poor quality, easily available 'films' are lowering the standards of Assamese films manifold.

4. **Lack of Knowledge and Research:** As mentioned earlier anyone with a camera is making 'films' in Assam. Weak storylines, copying them from other film industries and no knowledge about the presentation of the film is noticed. One does not have to be a film critic to know what is wrong with these films. For example, there is a certain way people of a particular place speak. The language may be the same, but the accent varies. If an illiterate person from a remote place is given polished sophisticated way of speaking, and the employee of National Geographic cannot pronounce the word Geographic then there are certainly some serious problems which need to be addressed. Native Assamese speakers are cast as Hindi speakers who deliver dialogues in accents in ways that serious scenes appear comical. It has been mentioned many times that most of the viewers belong to rural areas who are shown an unrealistic picture of the world they only hear or dream about. Overacting and melodrama betrays the lack of knowledge of the actors and directors without proper training in the field.

Regardless of all the negativities Assamese Film Industry is ridden with, recent times have seen a milieu of critically standard films. Jahnu Boruah's *Ajeyo*, RajniBasumatary's *Raag: The Rhythm of Life*, Rajiv Borah's *Hiya DibaKaak* etc. to name a few. *Ajeyo* won the Rajat Kamal Prize for best regional film. *Raag* was released in Delhi and Mumbai as well. Financially all these films could not do well. These films ran hardly for two weeks even after proper publicity, distribution and having the auteurist value. Good films are being made but the added numbers are not helping the industry grow. These films do not

reach the common people like the VCD films and pirated copies easily do. Even if it did, it is ideologically as well as economically against the values. Hence, the VCD film actors rising to stardom and popularity are monopolising the market, both in the Film as well as the *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. Padum Boruah wrote in his book *ChalachitraPrasanga*,

To make Assamese films popular producer-directors should concentrate on three basic components: subject matter, storyline and technical expertise. They should remember that majority of the audiences in Assam are middle class people and they have a progressive sense of interests. Therefore it is necessary to choose the subject and story carefully to suit the taste of the general audience and it should be attractive and comprehensible. Stream of consciousness might not be a greater choice in this, no matter how beautifully the film has been made. But, the personal or social hardships and struggles of middle and lower middle class people are portrayed through a practical approach and presented using the modern methods, it surely is going to be popular. The films must focus on the indigenous lives to make it popular. Most importantly one needs to have practical knowledge of the art of filmmaking to achieve commercial success in the film industry. (qtd. in M. Kalita, 303, Translation mine)

The drawbacks listed about the Assamese films have surely hampered the reputation and standard of the film industry but the exact same things have not diminished the popularity of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. Assamese writer Utpal Datta believes that *Bhramyomaan* is nothing but commercial circus. Having written a few hit plays for the form he didn't even keep the manuscripts. He said those plays are not worth treasuring because it was created for cheap entertainment and that kind of plays become hit. What is hampering films in a way is proving beneficial for the *Bhramyomaan* theatre. There is no need of a storyline but thrill, action, melodrama and sensation. By looking at the same parameters used to analyse Assamese films *Bhramyomaan*'s success can be scrutinised too.

Mass culture is mass produced, distributed and marketed, popular culture is the process of culture being consumed. Mass culture is a set of cultural ideas and values that ascend from the same exposure to common cultural activities, communications, music, art and media. Mass media is the collection of ideas that permeates the everyday activities. It is a part of everyday enculturation. The masses are exposed to popular culture via means of mass media like the television, radio, advertisement, internet and other means and help fashion their

views about it through the publicity. Historically mass media has been associated with popular culture as a means to introduce the introduction, encouragement and adoption of particular trends. Media mediates as catalysts in influencing people or institutions that mould the way one thinks, reads, dresses, listens to the kind of music, follow a particular form of entertainment and many more. A review column in a newspaper that reviews films, literature or food makes people aware of what has been written about. Great examples are the talent shows hosted by various television channels which prove to be a platform for dancers, singers, actors, comedians and other talents to be recognised and appreciated by the public and then be professionally engaged by the specific culture industry they belong to. Apart from encouraging the mass audience to be in the lookout for films, T.V. shows, books, games and fashion etc., media introduces new products and help enhance or reduce the demand for it. Media helps to keep culture dynamic through the introduction of new ideas and products. Promotion of projects need a lot of money and all the companies keep aside a huge sum for the same purpose.

Bhramyomaan theatre spends maximum of its collected money on advertisement and promotion. The audiences need publicity to be manipulated to have the requirement of consumption. While performance of a season goes on, posters for the next season are already seen everywhere. Life size cut outs of the star attraction of the troupe can be seen in various places in the state. Majuli, the largest inhabited river island is difficult to commute to without boats and ferries. Even inside such ferries posters of *Bhramyomaan* theatre can be seen. All the big theatre troupes have a website of their own. If not website they have a facebook page dedicated for the troupes. Songs are recorded beforehand for promotion. News channels do interviews with producers and actors, F.M Radio channels play the songs pre-recorded for the productions. Just like the requests of songs of an album or a film can be made through a phone call, a *Bhramyomaan* theatre's song can also be requested to play. Radio itself used to be one of the entertainment mediums where people used to crowd around for particular programs broadcast for different sections of the society. Radio plays were a rage. People recognised the radio artists as stars when they appeared in films and *Bhramyomaan* theatres for their performance in the audio plays. The television has made the radio only a mode of information system. Even though not as popular as it used to be, entertainment through Radios, commonly known as F.M. (the use of frequency modulation system) have returned with multiple channels dedicated to entertainment. The information about hit plays come through the radio and television too. The teaser trailers and snippets of hit plays are shown in

commercial breaks in T.V. The very idea of showing the trailers as commercial products have proved how consumerist the whole industry of *Bhramyomaan* has become. Newspapers and magazines carry reviews of plays. Though most of the websites of these theatre troupes do not function properly, easily available mobile phone internet has given them the opportunity to maintain the individual pages where the songs, videos, news items, interviews about the troupe, still pictures of practice, information about any interviews on T.V. or radio and performance are uploaded. I myself have contacted various producers through their facebook pages which is the newest mode of social media widely famous everywhere. Earlier these modes of publicity through media were rare.

The information about which theatre is 'coming' to a particular area is spread by the *Ahbayok* Committee while collecting fund through the selling of seasonal tickets. One or two colourful posters with the faces of the actors, names of plays and playwrights along with many small informative posters used to appear on tree trunks and the site of the future performance. Nowadays pictures from photoshoot, artificial settings etc. appear on posters. On the websites or their facebook pages, the itinerary is already published for public view. While talking about publicity, it has been noticed that nowadays there are sponsors that pay money to the *Bhramyomaan* troupes for advertising their products. While watching a Bengali *Jatra* play available on the internet, I have noticed that on the backdrop of the stage posters of products are displayed. Even in the tent where the audience sit, every pillar, every cover for the lights had posters stuck to it. Moreover one of the leading actors performed an advertisement just like it happens on television mentioning the name of the product. She was asked about the secret behind her beautiful hair, she said her hair is so black and shiny because of the use of 'Super Vasmol Kesh Kala'.⁶ Other actors join in and agree to use the product. Think Tank Media World has taken an initiative to make these theatre forms a market through different systems of branding and advertising. It is considered the biggest rural activation platform. They have title sponsors, co-sponsors and activation partners which are mentioned in scene branding, outdoor communication, through contests, and product sampling. Teams of experts from Think Tank manage the ground operations for advertising. Their website helps the clients to keep a check on the promotional activities. Not only in Bengal but they have reached out to the troupes in Assam and Orissa as well. Stage Branding, Product Standees, integration in scenes, banners on buses, billboards, product jingles, newspaper ads, leaflets, special cards and branded tickets are few ways to reach out to the

⁶<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUGSIkTWWac>

people.⁷After all “popular culture is what we make from the commodities and commodified practices made available by the culture industries.” Raymond Williams says,

The extremely damaging and quite untrue identification of ‘popular culture’ (commercial newspapers, magazines, entertainments, etc.) with ‘working-class culture’. In fact the main source of this ‘popular culture’ lies outside the working class altogether, for it is instituted, financed and operated by the commercial bourgeoisie, and remains typically capitalist in its methods of production and distribution. (qtd. in Storey, 1998,48)

Such advertisements are not very common on the stage of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. A very detailed decoration on stages are used and the props are not disrupted with stage branding of various products. Although hoardings, cut-outs, the posters, ticket counters etc. mention their sponsors. Cosmetics, cement, mobile phone connection providers, TMT bars and some liquor brands are also seen in posters. Though the means of promotion are same in Jatra and *Bhramyomaan*, brand jingles are also not heard in the announcements through the villages on a van through mics. Nowadays recorded or TV commercials are shown on screen and product pushing also has slowly began. In 2014 Britannia was a major sponsor for several *Bhramyomaan* troupes an on stage of SrimantaSankardev Theatre there is a conversation mentioning how healthy Britannia Marie biscuits are.⁸ Not only the consumer goods are advertised but health and hygiene issues on the request of the health department is also sometimes seen adorning some posters. Theatre Bhagyadevi once did an advertisement on sanitation and hygiene. Bordoloisila Theatre in 2014-15 had advertised about Guwahati Neurological Research Centre and the kind of facilities the hospital provides. GNRC is one of the best hospitals of North East.

As mentioned earlier there is a lack of infrastructure in planning, budget and marketing strategy for the films, on the other hand even before one season ends one theatre troupe is ready with the whole itinerary for the next season. Producers may not admit but the agents in the hunt for the next glamour artist is ready with the star names. Huge banners are put up everywhere. It is interesting that in films most of the times it is the star attraction that helps grossing the maximum revenue. The major festivals in India Diwali, Eid and Christmas are monopolised by Hindi Film actors; Shahrukh Khan, Salman Khan and Amir Khan respectively for the release of their big banner films. As mentioned earlier these stars make a

⁷https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmpXrI-W1CA&list=PLtiQcfgSEGW_JrXspMXysy0aTBqzHtPEB

⁸https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNF_WQqKf8I

film hit by their presence and persona on screen even if the film itself is not admired artistically. These three actors are only used as an example because of their huge fan base in India. This is not the case with Assamese films. The film industry caters to a very small market and the fan base for the actors are extremely trifling. Their names do not make the film a hit in Assam, ironically these are the people who have a star status in *Bhramyomaan* Theatre and make a particular troupe popular over others. Pushpa Devi says that such glamour artists are also a cause of the degrading of the aesthetics of *Bhramyomaan* theatre. Without having any respect for the form they are just in it for the money. (A. Mazumdar, 2012,150) This statement somehow proves right as a news item done by the newspaper Janasadharan on the mysterious death of an outstanding actor and producer of Ashirbad Theatre Robin Neog. His corps was found on a highway. A ‘famous’ actor was signed in a packaged deal that she will act only with her partner while the *Ahbayok* committee decided against it. He lost his money and the actors sued him for the unpaid amount of money. He as a result had to disband his theatre troupe and was tricked by several other such ‘stars’ and suspected to be killed by one. (27/06/2015) His depression and death/murder is an eye opener for all the producers and the insanely high demand of the glamour artists. The hierarchical payment system led to the bankruptcy of a prestigious theatre troupe resulting in a death.

Here the question of the medium comes. It has been mentioned several times that *Bhramyomaan* takes the performance to one’s doorstep. No matter how remote an area in Assam, they reach out. If the cinema halls are mobile will it work? As mentioned earlier there used to be the curtain films that used to tour, but it failed too. There was a new project started by DebaBorkotoky of N.K. Productions of Assam in March 2014. It has seating capacity of five hundred people with a screen fifteen feet high and thirty five feet wide, generator and other necessary equipment. Borkotoky told *The Hindu*,

One of the reasons behind the crisis gripping Assamese film industry is that the number of cinema halls in the State have declined from 160 about 20 years back to 38 halls. Assamese films are screened only in 23 halls. However, cine-goers do not like to go to these old cinema halls because of the poor ambience. As a result the producers of Assamese cinema fail to recover the money spent in making one film. It is in this backdrop that we have introduced this touring cinema hall to take Assamese cinema to the viewers. (qtd. in Sushanta Talukdar, Web)

The first film released in the mobile cinema hall is *JeeyaJurirXubaax* (2014). Eminent actors like Victor Banerjee and BishnuKharghoria acted in this film. Despite the attempt to bring films to the doorstep of people, it seems to have failed.

Commercialism is the foundation on which *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is based. Profit is the goal of every production. Times change, modes of presentation change along with the selected subject matter for the texts of theatre. Criticism is ostensible, yet *Bhramyomaan* theatre grows popular with each passing day. While talking about media, everything has become available to everyone who has at least one way of keeping themselves updated to the latest trends. Media is interdependent. It gives as much as it receives. Film Industry in Assam is not thriving because of the reasons that *Bhramyomaan* is. Copying a film and remaking it is considered a delinquency but adapting it to another form is appreciation. Technologically Assam's film industry is not as advanced as the other famous ones in India, in films the audience has experienced much advanced filmmaking through Hollywood films too, as these films are easily available for consumption. Majority of the moviegoers are of the age group who appreciate different varieties of films available for consumption. Assamese film industry fails to match up to it. In *Bhramyomaan* theatre the audience is from every class of the society of all age group and majority are not exposed to the diversities of cinema. The trick is that these troupes apart from picking up the fundamental social dramas that everyone can relate to, have something which is already popular, so that the aware audience can recount it in a different form, and fascinate the others. The techniques used in *Bhramyomaan* theatre to make a dinosaur eat a person alive, make a ship sink on stage, Anaconda crawling on stage, trucks, cars, helicopters and everything else appears magical. Along with it has the stars that they see on T.V doing actions, dancing, singing and a bit of acting live. This is a carnival that everyone is a part of. It is not an aesthetically splendid dramatic presentation, but it's not vulgar, it's pleasurable for the whole family. Unless it offends someone, if these troupes are able to do what their chief purpose is, it will remain popular.

Conclusion

On the basis of the research done it can be noted that,

- Assam has a history of rich dramatic arts and from the olden times. *Jatra* has been a foundation of mobile theatre trend in Assam.
- Though the inception of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre finds roots in *Jatra* performances, it is not one and the same.
- Amalgamation of old *Jatra* performances, new amateur and stage theatre and the experimental thought process formed this post-independence dramatic form.
- *Bhramyomaan* theatre has contributed a lot towards the domain of drama in Assam and is able to establish a unique identity of its own.
- *Bhramyomaan* theatre is completely profit based commercial venture that provides for the financial needs of all the people involved in a troupe which does not happen in amateur theatre. To break away from the stagnancy of the fixed stage and make this art more accessible to common people it has been a tremendous effort put in by the members of the *Bhramyomaan*'s world.
- A lot of experiments regarding the stage and the plays depending upon the taste of the audience is made possible through the make shift stage of *Bhramyomaan* theatre.
- It has been a witness to the changing times of Assam and has managed to skilfully portray the same throughout its journey.
- It has also shown the changes of Assamese language.
- It has been noticed that the changes in the form of production of plays in *Bhramyomaan* are not always positive. In order to imitate and reproduce, many a times the essence of the society it tries to represent gets blurred. The audience, as mentioned earlier are mostly from the rural areas and lower/lower middle and middle class people. For them getting influenced through the portrayals are easy.
- It has also been a catalyst in bringing awareness through discussing issues like AIDS and Drugs and various other societal problems.
- It has managed to diminish the demarcation between films and theatre. It is a live film without cuts, retakes and body doubles for stunts. Working with the actors who also act in films have made it more attractive for the common people to see their favourite actors in front of them.

- Thought this trend has proved harmful towards the actors who are not glamour artists who have appeared on film and T.V, but have been involved with theatre their whole life, as there is monetary disparity in paying the glamour artists much more than the ones who actually work harder to make a play success. This has been admitted by everyone (actors, directors, producers) who have been interviewed but no measure has been taken to solve it.
- Despite its immense popularity within the state, it is not able to mark its presence in the national or global scenario. It is because of the number of employees in one theatre group and the cost of transportation that hinders it to venture out.
- No matter what theme is chosen for a play, it is always moralistic. The good always triumphs over evil, the bad ones are punished, they repent and there is mostly a happy ending. The honest people are rewarded at last, corruption is revealed, the romantically involved protagonists always end up in a happy reunion or it ends in sacrifice, separation and death in a tragedy however it is very rare.
- There are almost always contrast characters and some comic relief in every play performed.
- The *Ahbayok* committee plays an important role in the success of a particular theatre troupe. It depends upon their power of convincing the people in their area for the cause the troupe has been invited for. The profit of the show is divided among the troupe and the *Ahbayok* committee and it is used by them for developmental work in that area.
- *Bhramyomaan* theatre does not pay taxes as it is considered to be a charitable fundraising avenue. Though the annual turnover of these troupes are in crores, it has been noticed that the producers are not the richest people in the state and it is seen that many a times famous theatre troupes also incur loss and have been disbanded. The greatest example is that of Brajanath Sharma who was the first person to introduce co acting on stage had died unattended on a hospital veranda. In 2004 Nataraj Theatre of Achyut Lahkar, the first modern *Bhramyomaan* theatre in Assam was disseminated and all the materials were sold off at half the price. Lahkar passed away on 12 June 2016 without the needed recognition from the government as well the people. Achyut Lahkar was the one who after repeated requests to all the chief ministers of Assam was able to convince Prafulla Mahanta to make *Bhramyomaan* Theatre tax free.

- Scores of plays written for *Bhramyomaan* are not preserved, printed or archived anywhere. Only a select few plays of playwrights like Bhabendranath Saikia are published. Most writers themselves do not keep a record of these plays. This I have experienced during fieldwork as none of the writers and producers were able to provide me with materials. This is a sheer waste of valuable research material as well as important elements of the dramatic sphere of Assam. This also reveals the lack of responsibility towards making the form better and known. The passion is seen in a very few about archiving but they claim the lack of interest of the publishers, and the publishers blame the low quality of the plays produced. Which isn't completely untrue as nowadays due to the use of gimmick and spectacle the text of the play takes a backseat.
- The most important feature of *Bhramyomaan* is that it is 'Janamukhi' (favours the public). It reaches the remotest places in Assam to entertain where commute is not easy. It brings a community together by providing aids that the community needs.
- The schedule for an entire season is already confirmed in the previous season. This shows the great organisational qualities of the troupes as the planning has to be done well in advance so that no two theatre troupes have to stage together in the same place as it is extremely competitive as division of audience in a small place may result in extreme loss.
- As a form of entertainment *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is the most popular one in the state. This is because other performative forms of entertainment are mostly area specific, community based, spiritual or religious, festival oriented etc. *Bhramyomaan* provided an ambit including all.
- The popularity continues as the forms are changing with time. It is keeping it up with the global scenario of entertainment and while recreating those on stage they are selective of only the most popular incidents, personalities, films and literature. Recreation of something already popular makes it more so among the masses who are keeping up with the trends too or they are fascinating the others who are unaware of it. Selection of films like *Jurassic Park*, *Titanic*, *Sholay*, personalities like Benazir Bhutto, Princess Diana, incidents like the 9/11 attack, Saddam Hussain's death, Shakespeare's plays, novels like *AseemotJaarHeralSeema*, etc. prove their enthusiasm and knowledge to make it a product saleable to all.

There are many more points that could be narrowed down about *Bhramyomaan* theatre and this research provides only a snippet of the vast ground it covers. Bidyut Kotoky has made a documentary titled *Where Othello Sails with Titanic*. He also claimed the main problem about *Bhramyomaan* Theatre is the lack of resource material due to disinterest in preserving it as an art form. He writes in his blog,

Unfortunately, our lack of respect towards history and preservation as a race is very much evident in mobile theatre movement as well. The people we interviewed, especially the old timers, were literally like treasure houses of anecdotes and fascinating stories of mobile theatre down the ages but ask them for some reference materials about the play, well, they draw a blank! There is simply no evidence or any kind of archival material at time, not even a simple 'still photograph' for reference of many of mobile theatre's legendary plays – except in people memories!! This was also one of the major difficulties we faced while filming the documentary- a huge dearth of research material to fall back upon!! No, I am not ready to accept lack of finance as an excuse for the same – for example, how much money would it cost for a mobile theatre group today to video-graph their plays live? And how many theatre groups do this exercise even today?? (Kotoky, Web)

The answer is none. Nothing is attempted and it is sad that no one has the answer to it. This documentary also focuses mainly on the positive side of *Bhramyomaan* theatre that it is still popular, still earns a lot of money, employs many people, using newer ways to capture the attention of the audience etc. The research works completed on *Bhramyomaan* Theatre seldom talks about the darker side to it. In my research I tried doing so by analysing plays and the form as a whole, but lack of inputs from scholars and people involved in the form makes it based on my observation only. This research is restrained as most of the arguments I have tried is based on my analysis and assumption. Like any other witness of this form, my opinion as a viewer was as limited as a production being good or bad, until started looking at it critically from a scholar's point of view. Barpeta and Nalbari districts in Assam are sprinkled with *Bhramyomaan* theatre troupes or people involved in them in every turn of a road. The people there even without being involved with the form have endless knowledge about it. From memory they have recalled incidents related to *Bhramyomaan* theatre, they can name plays which became extremely popular and who were the good/bad actors etc. in casual conversations over dinner. There is no proper way of verifying such facts and mentioning the

names of these informants is the only way to document it. This is the older generation of people who have seen the growth of *Bhramyomaan* from its grass root level. The younger generation is the one who are supposed to carry forward the legacy but in many ways failing to do so and the form is losing its genuineness somewhere. Instead of using it as a workshop to train actors who are actually interested in drama (this was the intention of Achyut Lahkar when he formed Nataraj Theatre) the current shows are promoting a branded commodity that is popularised by only the faces of glamour artists. This is a fact that because of the lack of dedicated playwrights the form is witnessing the abominable phase of gimmick. Per year approximately 200 plays are written for all the troupes. Most of the plays are written by Abhijit Bhattacharya. He is the most popular playwright of the current times. Despite his popularity, the auteurist presence of him is not like that of Bhabendranath Saikia or Mahendra Borthakur's used to be. Just an observation after looking at all the posters of various troupes during my field work and otherwise all over Assam, seventy five percent of the plays are written by Abhijit Bhattacharya. He told me in an interview which is included in one of the Appendices of this work that he gets paid around 1 to 1.5 lacs per play. Even after earning such great amounts of tax free money, only a handful of his plays are published.

Just like the enjoyment of watching a play nowadays in *Bhramyomaan* theatre is momentary, the lives of such plays produced specifically for *Bhramyomaan* meet the same fate. They are not considered scholastically admired work of literature. Writing any piece of literature need a lot of research, a year is not enough for researching and collecting materials to produce the amount of plays written by one playwright for a season. Yet the plays are inscribed, acted, praised and lost forever after the lived moment. To be professionally involved in writing plays for *Bhramyomaan* can be beneficial for both the writer and the theatre troupes. There will be variety, new subject matters and better work if more time can be dedicated for one play. Such plays are tolerated with the trend of inserting dance numbers unnecessarily just to keep the thrill going or to bring the audiences' attention back to the stage, ignoring the break in continuity of the text of the play.

However, as discussed earlier, nowadays a play becomes commercially successful only if there are elements that are seen in a film. Fight sequences, hero and heroine dancing around trees, a lot of sexual tension but never coming too close to each other to maintain the moral code, the vamp opposed to a docile protagonist, maniacal laughter of a villain, who somehow always has one or the other physical gesture (a limp, twitchy face, turning of his head in a crooked way etc.) that he repeats along with a catchphrase that he repeats often, and

the use of lifelike props, like a three dimensional model of a truck on stage from which the hero can jump off during a fight etc. have become necessary features of a play.

It is noticed that professional and amateur theatres are not as successful in Assam and the dramatic movement is extremely slow. The reasons for it can be the lack of professional actors, properly equipped stages, unavailability of the select few good stages when needed etc. Once both the movements ran parallel to each other and the artists were seen performing in both. Phani Sharma, Gajen Boruah etc. are examples of it. Only when *Bhramyomaan* was seen as a lowly form of art, the division became clear and neither of the forms are seen to be doing anything to make the drift go away for the sake of the state's artistic interest. The amateur and professional theatres are getting more aloof from *Bhramyomaan* and the latter is becoming closer to the films than drama. The people involved in both the forms are aware of it, yet one is bound to look for only profit through entertainment, the other a respite from the regular forms of entertainment available to the privileged class.

The producers of *Bhramyomaan* theatre are fully aware of the criticisms regarding the use of gimmick and glamour to boom their profit, yet they can't do without it for the competition is higher than ever with new troupes emerging each and every year and luring the audience away with something even more glamorous yet culturally unacceptable to some in the society. Everyone gives in despite knowing that it may be short-lived or trending to stay as it has to bring in profit. When there is more profit, it is an achievement for everyone as the extra income than the promised from the second or third show of the same play in the same day goes to the *Ahbayok* committee too but if it is a loss and the expected amount is not collected, it is a personal loss for the producer as the promised money must be paid. Though drama is education, recreation and entertainment, sometimes one or the other aspect gets highlighted more than the other and a balanced show is not put in front of the audience.

There are several drawbacks of the *Bhramyomaan* theatre which are listed as the key features of it. More often than not it has been mentioned that it reaches the remotest of places in Assam where people have never seen electricity or a newspaper. Many such places do not have proper roads. I had mentioned Majuli before. Where commuting as a passenger even can be dangerous. The ferries are not well equipped to carry as many passengers as they do. There is no proper ramp for the vehicles to bring on board. The ferry can carry people only to a point and thereafter another stream of the Brahmaputra needs to be crossed on boats. Two boats are tied together with bamboos to carry cars and bikes along with people. These boats

are paddled manually and crowded just like the ferries. There is no other way of reaching this river island. Several trucks that a troupe owns for carrying the equipment definitely cannot commute through the mode of transport available in Majuli. Yet the troupes do go to Majuli and perform there braving all the odds. This is only one example and there are many more villages where the commute is done through makeshift bamboo bridges renewed every season and sometimes only one or two bamboos put across the stream. Poor road conditions cost the theatre troupes a lot of time and labour as everything that a troupe requires, needs to be carried manually. Being mobile and carrying everything along appears to be a hindrance in this case. It also is disastrous during natural calamities like a simple rain shower. The canvas tents are not furnished to function under such circumstances. Even a strong gust of wind can blow off the settings as most of it are lightweight to make it easier to carry around. Due to nature's unforeseeable interventions the troupes incur irrecoverable loss. Which again is a loss to the Ahbayok committee too which is linked with the loss of the entire region for the profits would have been put to any developmental work in that area.

Assam is known for declaring '*Bandh*' (closed days) at any moment throughout the year. Jokingly it has been called '*Bandha Pradesh*' in political cartoons because of this ill repute. There are student organisations and numerous insurgent groups. Every disappointment, demand and protest is demonstrated by declaring closed days and road obstructions which sometimes last up to seventy two hours. This makes commuting difficult as the protesters become violent and stone pelting, vehicle burning and other forms of harassment become a pattern. If a troupe doesn't reach a particular destination on time, the whole itinerary gets disrupted and loss is evidently very high in such cases. Such activities also make the footfalls of audiences sporadic. Some insurgent groups demand money from people who they believe to be affluent and the producers along with other sufferers have to sustain tremendous loss. Also, there is a contract between the *Ahbayok* Committee and the theatre troupes about the payment per show. Many a times the *Ahbayok* Committee is not able to collect the amount of money payable through the selling of season tickets and this breach of agreement is a matter of deficit in the estimated income. This creates unpleasantness between the producer and the committee and makes future endeavours awkward.

The *Bhramyomaan* Theatre troupes are exempted from paying entertainment tax. Apart from it there is no financial aid that is provided by the government. The troupes register themselves under the societies act. The debate about granting *Bhramyomaan* an industry status was going on though it was refused by the organisation of producers. This would have

made getting aids from the government easier but the co-dependency of the public and the industry would have been hampered. As mentioned earlier it works both ways when there is profit and an industrial status would have benefitted the government more than the public. The decision of remaining a social enterprise than a government sector industry seems to be beneficial for the status and popularity of this form of entertainment. Having an industry status may make them more competitive than they already are and in the market of commodity fetishism the social responsibility will be considered less significant. Not that it already hasn't become a market selling a typical brand of products, yet the analyses show that the audience is made to be loyal to the form through the social promotional activities and despite being laden with gimmick and technological spectacles, social/familial plays are never discontinued as a trend, which as mentioned earlier have been the most popular kind of plays in *Bhramyomaan* Theatres. Having a social industry status might prove better financial planning for the employees as currently it is not possible because none of the troupes have a permanent status and neither are the employees. Along with the artists, the managers, stage workers, musicians, and even the costume makers get shuffled between troupes depending upon the payment offered. Previously it has been discussed that financial aid from sponsors come through advertisement, but it is minimal as it is limited to only publicity. Conversion to a social industry may increase the chances of getting more private funding from investors as it has a base of profit making which may be beneficial for the investors and producers.

The domain of art and culture have always been disappointed with the neglect and disinterestedness shown by the government. For cultural and artistic development it's the common masses that have been investing their interests and efforts. Bhupen Hazarika said in an interview taken by Phulen Barman for the mouthpiece published on the Silver Jubilee of Nataraj Theatre in 1982-

What can I say about this government? They never do anything that is required. Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra¹ and Kaviguru Rabindranath's Shanti Niketan soared to the level of their state's as well as the nation's cultural hub with the help of the government. In Assam it doesn't even have to be built from nothing. Long ago established by Srimanta Sankaradeva and which are still standing tall as the centres of Assamese art and culture, Majuli, Barpeta and Bardowa have never been considered for development with recognition from the government.

¹ Officially known as Kalakshetra Foundation, it is an art and culture academy. It is dedicated to preserving Indian art, crafts and culture. Specialises in the field of Bharatanatyam and Gandharvadeva music.

Only holding a few competitions of one act plays seem to be all the responsibility the directors are taking up. The artists closely associated with the common masses have been neglected by the government. The cultural sector gets lacs of rupees from the central government which are returned instead of being utilised. This money could have been utilised to buy at least a *dhhol* for our local *dhulias*. To be precise government is the most harmful thing that has happened to the cultural sphere of Assam. (qtd. in A. Mazumdar, 2004, 111)

Subsidies and loans shall be approved by the government for enthusiasts based on proper examination of such troupes because troupes are coming up like mushrooms of late and adding fuel to the already existing competition between troupes.

Another important thing to be taken care of is proper training for actors and other technical helps of troupes. The way Achyut Lahkar experimented with various aspects including the stage, dance and music along with acting, the same shall be done by troupes today. Already the texts of the plays are suffering from inexperienced playwrights just trying to meet the demand. Just appearing on a VCD film is considered talent today, hence good actors are not able to showcase their talents. Techniques of performance explained by scholars are barely seen used on stage. Training of direction, production and proper promotion also shall be added to the system. Workshops, seminars, courses on acting or drama, special camps etc. shall be organised for better performance instead of focusing mainly on technological commotion. Proper research in every aspect is much needed.

Local musicians and singers used to be employed in *Bhramyomaan* Theatres and many of such people stick to one troupe. Nowadays famous singers are brought under contract for recorded music as these renowned singers cannot be present in every theatre troupe for live performances. The tradition of live music is getting discontinued because of the growing demand for playback singers. This is also adding a star quotient to the troupes. There are various news items that publicised Angarag Papon Mahanta reciting a poem for Hengool Theatre's *Akou Edin*. Other singers like Joi Boruah, Tarali Sharma, Zubin Garg etc. also have lent their voices to *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. Angaraag Mahanta, commonly known as Papon, is going to be a music director for Hengool Theatre. Association of famed artists have on the other hand increased the popularity of the troupes.

This time, Papon will add another feather to his cap by being associated as a guest music director in Hengool Theatre. This will be the first time that Papon will be

associated as a music director in mobile theatre. The play is Rajdweep's 'Bonoriya' which will be staged by Hengool Theatre in the upcoming 2016-17 season. (P. Deka. Web)

Among countless other queries I could not find a solution to is the child artists of *Bhramyomaan* theatre. Children have been popular in many plays including the one analysed earlier in this research, *Manuhe Manuhor Babe*. The concept of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre as a full time employment makes everyone associated to be present the whole duration since the practice season begins. Many artists are recruited from all over Assam. People who come from far off places stay in the rehearsal arena. I was curious about the schedule of the child artists. In films, the shooting does not involve the artists continuously. Hence child artists in films are able to continue with their studies. Apart from granting a few days break during festivals or special occasions, there is hardly any break for the artists in *Bhramyomaan* Theatre. In such cases the child artists do not have time to go to school and many such children are below fourteen years of age. Many producers do not want to talk about it and I have never seen anyone question it in the literary works I have found about this form. Nazrul Islam, the producer of Bordoisila Theatre, told me that most of the times a child from a very poor family is chosen who probably would not have sent the child to school anyway, or the child has dropped out of school already or sometimes these children may be related to the people involved in the theatre troupes who can take care of them. It is considered a good deed as the child earns, supports family, or otherwise they would have been labouring in other odd jobs inevitably. As suggested earlier if there are proper arrangements for financial, health and other benefits of an employee can be introduced in *Bhramyomaan* theatre, a lot of hierarchical mistreatment that go unaccounted could be managed well.

There are various forms of folk theatres like *Yakshagana*, *Jatra*, *Ramleela*, *Bhavai*, *Tamasha*, *Swang*, *ShumangLeela* etc in India. Many such forms are mobile in nature. This research tried analysing the form of *Bhramyomaan* Theatre by comparing it to other itinerant forms of theatre like *Jatra*, *Tamasha* and *Nautanki*. Not much work has been done on *Bhramyomaan* theatre and the little that has been done including mine is only an attempt to make it known amongst scholars so that other aspects of the form can be taken up for further research. The question of its popularity still remains to be concluded. Currently gimmick is in vogue, if they are able to adapt to the changes like they have been till now, better things can be expected that suit everyone alike, which can still keep trending.

APPENDIX 1

Picture Documentation:

Banners



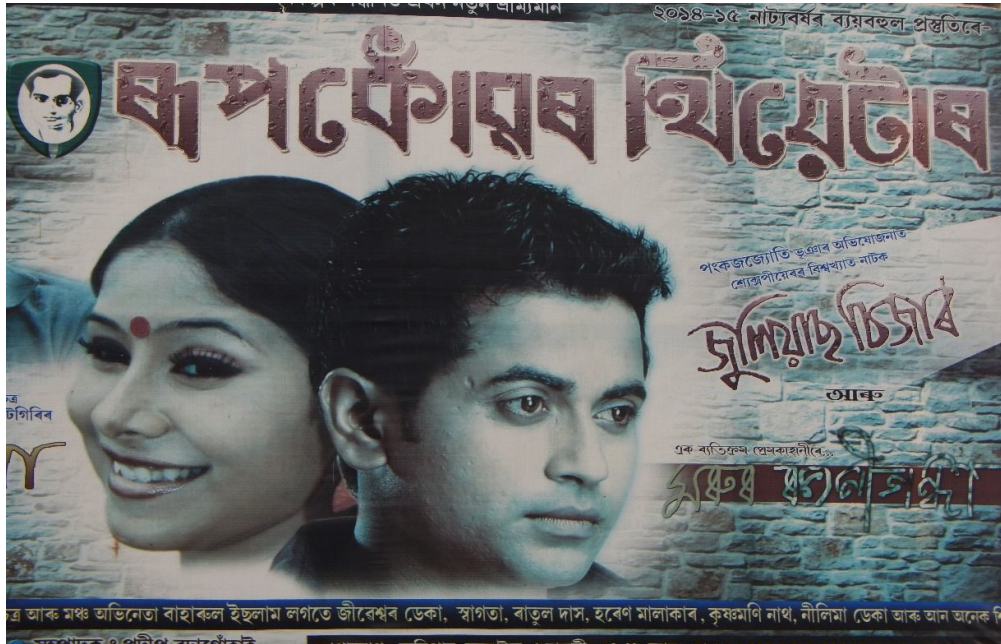
There are several entries to the arena where the tents of various Bhramyomaan Theatres are hoisted on the field near NalbariHarimandir. The entrances are decorated with posters of the troupes welcoming the audience. This gate is sponsored by Brindaban Theatre boasting of signing the most popular actor of Assamese cinema, Jatin Borah, for that season. They dramatized an old hit Assamese film called *Bowari* for that season. Through the gate can be seen banners of Kohinoor Theatre and Itihaas Theatre.



This is a banner of Rajashri Theatre for the season of 2015-16. Banners for next season are put up during the current season to publicise the glamour actors and the plays.

Asha Bordoloi(below) bagged the award of best actress for the critically acclaimed role in *Devdasi* in 2015-16. Big F.M. and News Time Assam is seen in the corners of the banner as media partners.





This troupe is named after Jyotiprasad Aggarwala who was an actor, director, playwright, composer and the first filmmaker of Assam. Rupkonwar Theatre's banner for 2014-15 includes Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.



Bordoisila Theatre's banner for 2015-16. As star attraction it has Raag Oinam. In the current year Rabi Sharma was signed, whose *Goonda* was going for three shows per night.



Another entry adorned with banners of Bordoisila Theatre flanked with posters of Theatre Bhagyadevi and Hengool Theatre.



Bordoisila Theatre's banner shows sponsor Surya Cement at the bottom of its banner for the season 2014-15.



Ravi Sharma in a poster for Rajashri Theatre. Media partners News Time Assam (News Channel), Bernali (Magazine) and Big F.M and advertisement for the flex printers Destiny also can be seen in the poster.



A poster of Theatre Bhagyadevi for the season 2014-15



The carnival that contains numerous forms of entertainment including a festival of *Bhramyomaan* Theatres.

Construction of the stages:



The frames and the stage are constructed using wooden planks and bamboo. This is the stage of Theatre Bhagyadevi being constructed.



The wooden swing like frames are called *Howda*. The people operating lights sit on these frames all throughout the performance as machine operated lights can't be used in the makeshift tent theatres. When there are three shows per night, they sit there for more than six hours.



Construction of gallery. Till two years after the inception of Bhramyomaan Theatre there were only chairs in the tent for the audience. Once famous Diamond Circus's owner hailed from Bajali. AchyutLahkar observed the system minutely before introducing it to Nataraj Theatre. It was for the benefit of the audience sitting in the last row. Among two thousand or more audience sitting on plain ground made it difficult for unobstructed view. Since then it has been an indispensable addition to Bhramyomaan Theatre. Many people prefer the gallery seats because of the elevated positions and cheaper ticket rates. The stage and the auditorium of Bhramyomaan theatre had changed overtime and AchyutLahkar is one of the innovators of such changes including the addition of galleries. Earlier the auditorium used to be V shaped. The stage being the smallest and gradually the hall spreads out. He introduced stage on wheels so that the set could be ready and pushed in during the changes of scenes. He also introduced round stage that could be rotated, which he imported from the permanent stages. He attributes this addition to his visits to Minerva and Star theatre in Kolkata. He named the round stage Allsome. He also introduced fade in, fade out, intercut and freeze etc. techniques of film in theatre and named it Theatre Scope. He also used playback of dialogues and called it Cine Theatre where shot videos were also shown.



Continuation of construction at Rajtilak Theatre's stage and posters of Rajshri Theatre's play *Goonda*.



Every theatre troupe owns five to ten trucks to carry the equipment, stage, props and people. This one belongs to Rajshri Theatre.



The auditorium before the entry of the audience.



The audience at Rajasri Theatre's tent for the second show of Goonda for that night. It staged a third show of the play, the same night.



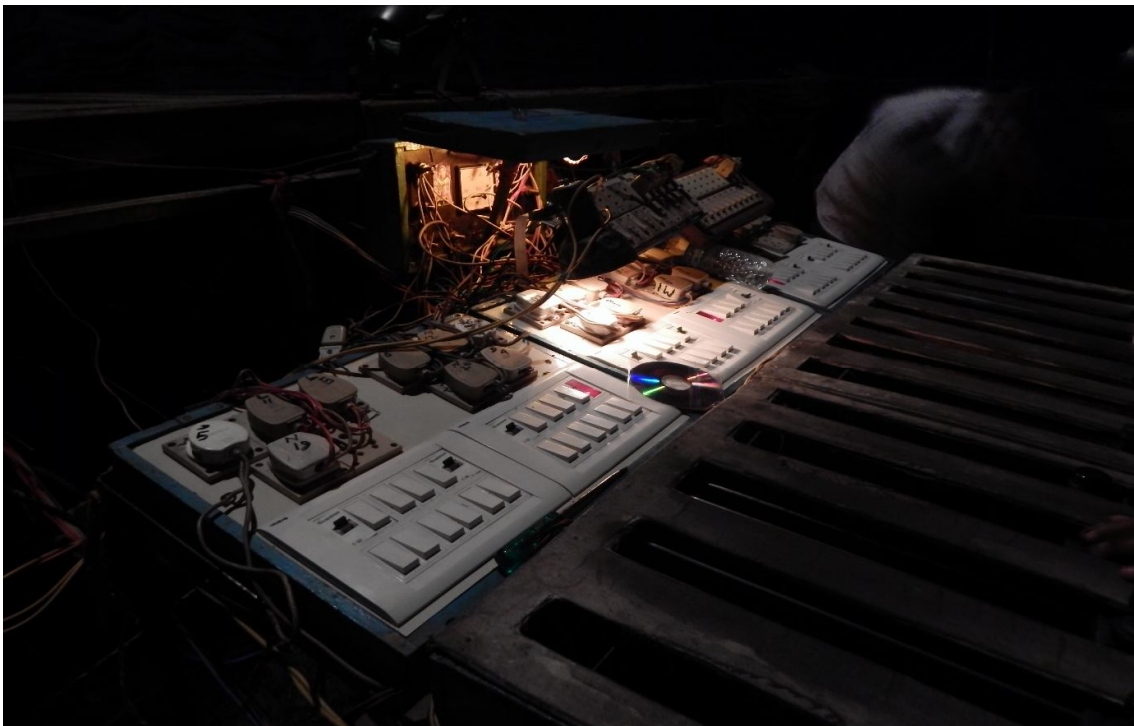
Advertisement from the Ahbayok Committee placed where the town starts. The display also includes the announcement of sell and prizes of lottery, which is another attraction of the festival and a means for the committee to earn more money.

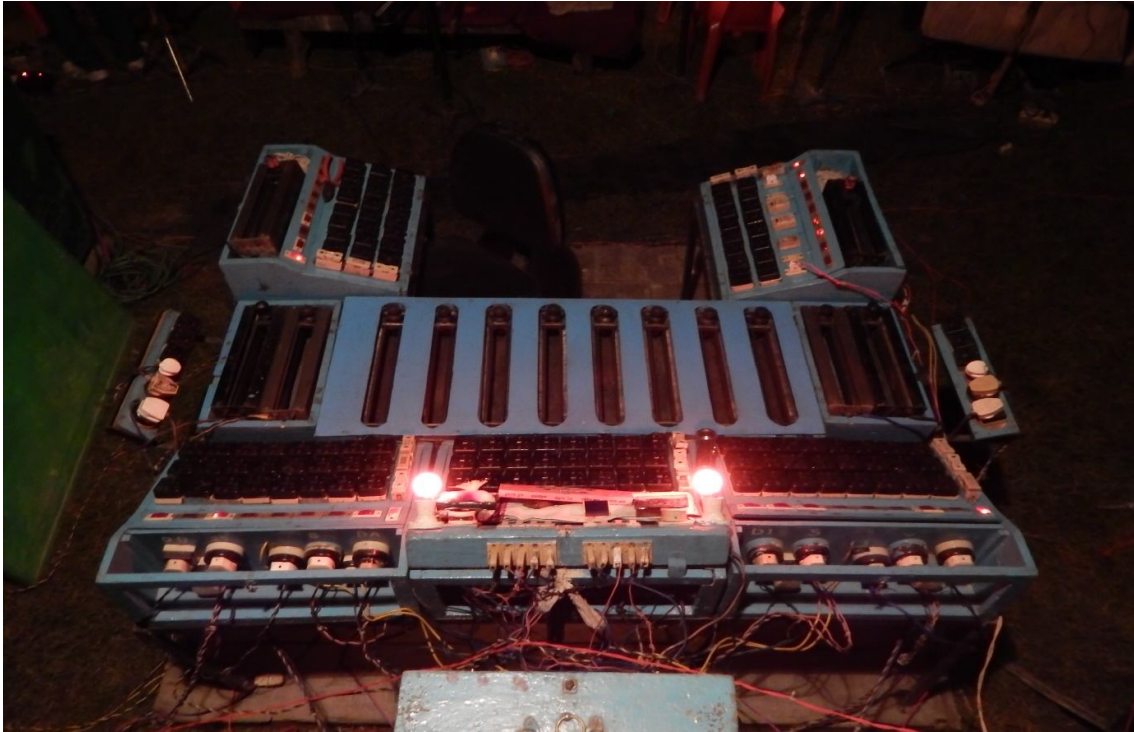


Makeshift counter to pre-sell tickets. This counter belongs to Rajashree Theatre.



People queueing up outside Rajtilak Theatre. In 2014-15 season the play called *RaangKukur* was very popular. Bingo Tangles was a sponsor for this theatre as it can be seen on the title banner.





Light and sound controlling system. Since there is live music for the special effects people operating the sound need to be alert. Sometimes it's funny when on stage the action of slap is over and the sound travels a moment later. Avoiding such mistakes is important and when it happens it becomes a comical instead of a serious moment and the audience roars in laughter.





The 'Orchestra' sits below the stage in an enclosed place in front of the seating arrangements for the audience along with the technical operators.





The artists of Bordoisila Theatre in the green room getting ready for performance.





Scenes from the dance drama of Bordoisila titled *Bordoisila*. Bordoisila is the wind that brings monsoon to Assam. It is also known as Kaal Baisakhi in West Bengal. This dance drama showed Bordoisila as a symbolic representation of the positivity that destroys all evil and restores peace, progress and happiness in society.

Scenes from *ManuheManuhor Babe*, Theatre Bhagyadevi







Scenes from *Goonda*, Rajashri Theatre:





Scenes from *MatalRoja*, Bordoisila Theatre:







Rehearsal Camp of Theatre Bhagyadevi



Logo of Theatre Bhagyadevi



APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEWS

1. Interview with playwright Abhijit Bhattacharya

Nowadays no Bhramyomaan Theatre seems complete without the plays of Abhijit Bhattacharya. Almost every troupe has at least one play written by Bhattacharya and sometimes all three plays of a troupe are also scripted by him. It is not essentially his auteurist presence that draws crowd to the Bhramyomaan Theatres, but his popularity has definitely been working for it in advertisement posters. This interview was taken on 29 November 2014, in his office of *NiyomiyaBarta*, an Assamese daily where Bhattacharya is a senior journalist.

Q: Since you produce the maximum numbers of plays performed in a season of Bhramyomaan Theatre, do you consider your profession to be a playwright or a journalist?

A: Professionally I consider myself a journalist. I am the executive editor of *NiyomiyaBarta*. Writing scripts is only because of my interest in drama.

Q: Is it journalism that has led to the writing of scripts? Since when have you been involved in writing?

A: My days as a playwright started long before I ventured into the field of journalism. Moreover I have been a very good organiser. I used to organise plays, I was involved with amateur theatre and used to organise such performances. I used to be part of some recitation groups as well. Later I started writing plays for such amateur groups and with the help of few others formed Theatre Guild. My first play was performed under the banner of Theatre Guild. Likewise there is another organisation I am involved with called *AsomNatyaSanmilan*. Through this organisation we have staged plays written by me as well many others.

Q: Have you ever acted in these plays?

A: No acting was never of my interest. I have never acted in any plays but I was engaged with every other activity if required. I have managed music, lights, and many a times was a prompter too. Except acting I could multitask off stage whenever it was needed.

Q: How did you enter the world of Bhramyomaan Theatre from amateur plays?

A: I was attracted to Bhramyomaan Theatre since the very beginning when I started watching its plays. And to be honest I have watched a lot of these productions. My father himself was a director and a playwright for various Bhramyomaan troupes. I was inspired by him and initiated to the world of Bhramyomaan theatre through his experiences. It was in 1999 when my first association with Bhramyomaan began. A play called *Lady Diana* on the life of Princess Diana was conceived and I was given the responsibility of collecting the data and facts about her life to put it in the play. Through the research I became a part of Bhramyomaan. Then in the year 2000 I dramatized the famed short story of Bharat Kumar Goswami, *Samiran Boruah Ahi Ase*. This was my first play written for Bhramyomaan theatre.

Q: Do you translate from other languages too?

A: I don't really translate anything. I dramatize other forms of literature from any language. For example I made Susmita Mukherjee's *KabuliwalarBangaliBou* into a play. This book has been translated into Assamese too, but I have given it the drama form.

Q: Beula in Nataraj Theatre ran for fifteen years continuously. Do you have any such play that has remained popular for a long period of time?

A: Usually one play becomes redundant after a season but *NachMayuriNach* ran for two seasons. Another play called *BhulNubujibaBhupenda* was a story based on the life of a fan of Bhupen Hazarika. This play also ran for 18 months. Awahan Theatre was in the news for completing 150 productions in 49 shows only in 2009. Without the use of gimmick this play could touch the audiences' hearts. This was a big achievement for me.

Q: How many plays do you write per year? Sometimes a troupe has all three plays written by you.

A: At least 15 to 16 plays per year. The demand is high.

Q: How do you select the themes for your plays?

A: The themes are usually chosen based on the relevant problems in the society. Sentiments of the families are given more importance. The society is portrayed through the hardships of families. The audience consists of families mostly. The problems they can relate to are picked up. For example how a family deals with unemployment, generation gap etc. If my neighbour is rich, the middle class mentality forces me to keep up my standards and the problems faced during the game of 'keeping up appearances' sum up the themes preferred.

Q: With the passing time what are the changes in themes?

A: Of course they do change. During the earlier years of Bhramyomaan Theatre people in Assam were really poor. Having two meals a day was a luxury. The theme chosen during that time was poverty. Having one meal and starving otherwise was common. The plays do not deal with poverty anymore. The problems have changed. Terrorism, corruption, generation gap, unemployment etc. have taken its place.

Q: The actors for the mobile troupes are pre-selected. Do you have to choose your subject matters to suit the actors?

A: There are three main differences between amateur theatre and Bhramyomaan theatre. First of all Bhramyomaan's plays are performed on twin stages. Secondly, they run for 9 months continually. And lastly the casting is already done. For amateur plays, the script is already written and casting is done on the basis of the characters written. It is exactly opposite in Bhramyomaan Theatre as we write the plays after the casting is done to match the actors with the characters. Not everyone can survive this rigorous schedule on which it operates.

Q: Do you have to consult with the producers or you sometimes have to write according to the chosen themes given by the producers?

A: Bhramyomaan is terribly commercial. At least a hundred families depend upon one troupe for their livelihood. The question of the inviting committee is another matter altogether. A play's success is directly related to the lives of these people. So a lot of discussions happen prior to choosing a subject. Discussions happen between artists, directors, producers and

playwrights alike. Sometimes the playwright has to convince others to go with a script if he is confident. For example I chose a concept of a protagonist who is a bastard child. The play is called *MaaKasam* which is produced by Brindaban Theatre and it is doing really well commercially. No one was willing to use that play, yet I was confident that it will run well.

Q: Nowadays Bhramyomaan's plays have sequential song and dance that appears abruptly. Do the playwrights mention it in scripts or that is producers' addition for more glamour to the show?

A: Yes the song sequences are very much mentioned in the script but the kind of songs, dances and music to be used are chosen by the choreographer, director, producer, music director etc. During rehearsals all of us sit together to finalise such things.

Q: What is your opinion about the linking of degradation of Assamese Film Industry to the increasing popularity of Bhramyomaan theatre?

A: I don't think this has any relation with one's downfall leading to the other's rise. Assamese films were doing good business till ten years ago. Simultaneously both the forms were successful. The routes taken by both are very different. A film is released only in the halls which are in cities and towns. People from villages can't afford to travel only to watch a film while *Bhramyomaan* goes to their doorstep. It was only when ULFA released a rule saying the halls cannot play Hindi films anymore, started attacking the halls which scared the hall owners and halls were closed. We need to focus on the market too. Assamese films have only the Assamese people as audience. Hindi films have a larger market. There is a time gap between the films' release. In between the screening of Hindi films, the Assamese films used to fill the gap. Nowadays films are getting released every week. There is no gap to be filled. So, the degradation started from there. Piracy is again an issue from which it is suffering.

Q: How important is the role of a playwright in making a play popular?

A: The first step towards popularity of a play is taken by the playwright. Audiences are more interested in the story than in the artists. Earlier the fascination was there to watch their favourite actors act live, but that has passed now and they are interested in the acting of these

actors than just their appearance. So it is important that a playwright makes the story interesting enough. I think the director has a bigger role to play in making a play successful. Director presents the final product of the blueprint that the writer provides. The director has to decorate the play to the audiences' liking. I can say it because I direct too and out of both the jobs directing takes more effort.

Q: Like the other artists and workers does the director have to be with the troupe for the entire duration?

A: Only during the beginning of the rehearsals for one and a half months I direct the plays. It is difficult to give a lot of time to one troupe as I direct plays with multiple troupes and this period is very difficult to manage. Every troupe has at least one experienced artist who has a lot of responsibility in continuing the rehearsed parts the way it has been directed. I depend a lot on such actors.

Q: How about the payment? Some banner artists get lacs of rupees per season. Is the playwright paid through a contract or is it paid per play?

A: I get paid per play. There is usually no contract as such. I get paid more than one lac per play and if a troupe has more than one play written by me, the payment will still be on the basis of per play.

Q: Why do you think Bhramyomaan is so popular?

A: The most prominent reason is that it goes to the audience. Just like we are curious about any incident happening just outside our house and be a part of it (in rural areas specifically), the theatre troupes in front of one's doorstep provide that similar excitement and curiosity. The second reason would be its nature of adaptability. It changes according to the changing time. The new generation seems to be busy with internet and the virtual world than being interested in what is happening around them. But Bhramyomaan hasn't lost that section of audience too. It could provide something that the new generation can enjoy too along with the simplicity that attracts the other section of the audience.

Q: Since you have mentioned Internet here, it is seen that even though internet is available on fingertips these days the troupes have not been able to take advantage of it for more publicity. Most of the websites do not even open. Why do you think it is like this?

A: *Bhramyomaan* theatre is a one man show. The producer is everything. Others are only temporary members of the show. He has so much to maintain from managing the employment of a hundred families to publicity, rehearsal, and production. So he may not have that much time to invest in internet too. But it is merely a lack of good interest. It is an individual business prospect. There is no proper united organisation among the troupes to do something collectively. Even I have suggested many times to have a website where details of all the troupes can be uploaded timely. But no one cares.

Q: Since you script so many plays within a year, have you been satisfied with the results? Do you manage to give your best effort in every play?

A: It is not about quantity. Producing fifteen to sixteen plays in a year I think is not very difficult for me. Even if I write only one play I can't be sure that it will be good enough. If one day I can say that I have given my 100% in a play, I will stop writing.

Q: How much research is required for a play?

A: It depends upon the subject matter. There are certain themes which are very familiar to us. So it doesn't need much research. For example, in a family among brothers if one had a good job and others are trying to make ends meet the envy, enmity and problems that may rise are known to us. But when I scripted *Devdas* for Kohinoor theatre in 2013 it needed a lot of research. It was shown as a play in Assam for the first time. I even watched the Bhojpuri version of *Devdas* and talked to the people involved in making the film.

Q: Materials for research on Bhramyomaan are not easily available. Even the plays written are not to be found anywhere. Have you thought about archiving your plays?

A: This is a very serious problem. I have even suggested that the producers should take initiative in publishing at least the most popular play of the season. But they haven't taken it up. Bhabendranath Saikia's plays have been published, and

MahendraBorthakur's *Mukhyamantri* has been published too. Apart from that I haven't heard about any other play being published. I don't have the scripts of the plays of my initial days. The producers too have no clue about their whereabouts. It is a relief that nowadays I can keep multiple copies in my computer. Bhramyomaan has not reached the academic circle for a processed research. I have come across two research projects in Gauhati University which also will not be helpful for someone else's research. They appeared to be very superficially filled with information.

Q: Have you taken any step yourself to preserve your work?

A: If someone wants to publish I can give my scripts which are with me, but it is not only about me publishing my plays. I have been in this field for fifteen years. Sometime later someone else will take my place. This shall be a renewed process of preserving the scripts. It shall be a collective effort. It belongs to everyone who acts, directs, dances, sings and gets profit out of.

Q: Which play do you consider to be the most popular among all that you have scripted till date?

A: There are many which became popular but one play which I have mentioned before, *NachMayuriNach* has seen the fanaticism of audiences. It is based on a novel called *Naa* by TarashankarBandopadhyay.

2. Interview with writer UtpalDatta

Q: The idea of glamour or banner artists is a rage in Bhramyomaan theatre. Does the popularity of such theatres depend upon the glamour artists?

A: Yes. It works. Perhaps you know that 'advance booking' is a normal practice for touring theatres, they (the theatres) announce the name of the plays, playwright's name and the names of so called star actors. The organisers, who invite the theatres to their places, book a theatre based on such elements. The theatre groups fix (to be more accurate 'hike') the performance tariff based on such elements. Those so called glamour artistes are known to all touring theatre lovers via VCDs or TV serials. The audience prefers to watch those popular images in live action.

Q: Many such 'glamour' artists claim that they have to move to Bhramyomaan theatre because of the degradation of Assamese film Industry. How far this claim is relative?

A: If they earn their livelihood by acting, they hardly have any other option. But, the truth is that, Assamese Film Industry cannot offer a decent amount of money to the actors, reason is known to all. Even the serials also tell the same story. But Film (shown on TV) and small screen serials can make an actor popular in rural areas. The ground reality is Film can offer so called glamour to an actor but can't offer money and the reverse is touring theatres, which offer money not glamour. No film director is willing to cast a Touring theatre actor in his film as a first choice. There are some actors who can manage both the world with good PR work and publicity.

Q: What does the current situation of Assamese Film Industry imply? Is there hope? What are the changing trends that fuelled the degradation/change in the film industry?

A: Assamese Film Industry?? Till date it is regarded as an amateurish work. Any work of Art or business needs proper planning, dedication, knowledge support and ambition of the creator to reach the destination. Assamese Film lacks all those vital ingredients.

Q: Is the audience solely to be blamed for the kind of productions the theatre troupes are presenting today?

A: Do you know the famous quote – ‘which came first – the egg or the hen?’ Same is applicable to touring theatre – Producer says – audiences like such presentation, so we present, the audience says – theatre brings such package, so we watch.

Q: Why is there no concrete step taken to preserve the numerous plays produced every year? Having produced ‘hits’ for Bhramyomaan, what is your opinion about the plays produced?

A: Most of the plays are live shows only. Some of the authors and producers took initiative to publish plays in book form. To tell you the truth, most of the plays contain no literary value.

Q: Despite grossing so much of revenue per show, why is there disparity in income and economy of the theatre troupes? Who profits most?

A: Disparity hardly depends upon the income of the producer. It depends upon the work. Hierarchy is everywhere in every profession. The same way that a peon of a college doesn’t get paid the same amount as the principal, payment varies here too. The glamour actors are crowd pullers, so they can demand more money.

Q: What is your opinion about the Dance Drama that used to initiate every show, but not anymore?

A: Time changes everything so has the theatre. Few producers always try to add something new to their presentation. In this process, they have to eliminate something to accommodate new items. Someone planned a musical drama with dance, so he dropped the dance drama for that play and people liked that innovative presentation. Next year other two or three parties included dance as a part of the main play and dropped the dance drama and one fine evening we found the dance drama is no more. I wrote two plays for touring theatre and I told the producer to drop the dance drama. I took that decision to avoid dance drama because I designed the plays with an unusual opening which might have been clashed with a dance drama. But in some areas the producer had to include the dance drama to meet the requirement of the organiser committee.

Q: How important is Ideology and Social Responsibility for a playwright, producer and the actors?

A: I believe, Ideology and sense of Social Responsibility should not be dominated by market forces. I believe, no playwright writes such plays which can destroy social fibre. The art and craft of playwrights may differ from one to another, success rate may be different, yet, most of the playwrights are cautious in their writings as they write for the masses.

Q: Despite being considered so lowly by the intellectuals, Bhramyomaan Theatre is growing popular each day. Why?

A: Because, some producers are really innovative, risk taker and master in 'audience and committee management'. An intelligent producer can make a play SUPERHIT if he wishes to do so.

Q: What do the critics expect from Bhramyomaan theatre at present and for the future?

A: Nothing.

3. Interview with producer SubodhMazumdar

This interview with SubodhMazumdar was taken on 25/10/2014. Mazumdar is the producer of Theatre Bhagyadevi. In 2014 this troupe had completed its 47th year. His father SaratMazumdar started Theatre Bhagyadevi in 1968 with the capital of only hundred rupees. He was involved in various theatre troupes such as ArunNatyaSamiti, Bagna, Bungaon Party, Jugkusi Milan NatyaSamiti etc. He was a 'chokora' dancer in some troupes, manager with Nataraj Opera and a booking manager in NatabaniSamaj. It was an open air theatre troupe like other existing Jatra parties initially and in 1973 they initiated 'BhagyadeviJatrascope' where the introduction of generator for lights and use of stage was started. After his passing away in 2002, SubodhMazumdar took over the responsibility of running Theatre Bhagyadevi which he was already engaged with from 1996. He is an avid reader who keeps his shelves well stocked and updated. He dropped out of engineering to invest more in his interest, which is theatre.

Q: What are the problems faced by Theatre Bhagyadevi in its initial days? Do the problems still exist?

A: Earlier it was considered a taboo for women to go out of their house to work. Theatre was seen as something that is too lowly to be present in the society. No one allowed their daughters to be away from home and stay with unknown men. Men used to play the roles of women. Times have changed and theatre is considered to be a noble profession and women are more outgoing nowadays who can overthrow societal bondage to do something they desire. Earlier the producers had to be responsible for women artists as families expected it from them and there were restrictions in closeness of male and female artists. Later the rules loosened up and it was supported if two artists fall in love and want to be together.

Q: How is the selection of plays and playwrights done?

A: This is a tough question because there is no proper process to do so. There are new theatre troupes getting formed but the ratio of playwrights according to the troupes is distinctly minimal. We are forced to use the same playwright in different troupes and all the plays written by the same playwright for one troupe. I think the way new troupes are formed, new playwrights shall experiment. But the way a new troupe is trusted, a new playwright is thought to be a risk. Sometimes such risks may prove beneficial. For selection of the themes

of plays it is very evident that audience in Assam like familial plays. So a subject matter is discussed with the playwright and director and a play is produced with combined effort. Sometimes the playwright offer their choice of themes too.

Q: Writers become famous according to the genre of their produced literature. In Bhramyomaan the same playwright is writing all the genres. Thriller, Crime, Translated/adapted, Melodrama, Family drama etc. Doesn't it hamper the quality of the plays?

A: Everyone writes thinking that they have given their best in it. I can't judge it as I have already mentioned the lack of playwrights and the difficulty to choose an appropriate one. Out of all the plays written some turn out to be bad too. We can't question them on it. Not everything will be perfect.

Q: What about archiving the plays? Published plays are very few and the scripts are sometimes not even found with the playwright.

A: This is a serious problem. We are also partly guilty of it. As you know we do not get any monetary help from government or non-governmental organisations. So it is considered an extra burden or way of expenditure by the producers. Similarly no publisher comes forward to take this step. They have in fact denied requests of publishing of Bhramyomaan's plays. The playwrights are also amateur who do not keep multiple copies and the troupes forget to return it. If the play is not very popular it is forgotten after the season is over. We are doing a play this season called *Badshah* which is about rhino poaching. This is not only a problem of Assam but a worldwide one. Still no one is showing any interest in publishing that play.

Q: How do you select the actors? Is there a process of audition for the actors?

A: There is no audition for the actors or anyone who plays instruments or sings. Usually the actors are experienced and known. There is no need to audition them. Their experience is enough. If someone entirely new comes then their bio data is asked to see if they have any prior acting experience. If there is a video or any such record of their work, it is examined.

But if someone who is inexperienced then from an old script they are asked to enact certain scenes to show emotions like anger, happiness, sadness etc.

Q: What is the main attraction of Bhramyomaan Theatre? The play, the actors selected or just the name of the troupe?

A: It is definitely the play.

Q: It is seen that more than the publicity of the story, banner artists are seen more in advertisements. So it appears that they are the main attraction.

A: I will still say that no matter which banner artist we are keeping, if the storyline is bad even they can't do anything about gathering audience.

Q: How important do you think is the presence of glamour/banner artists in it?

A: I don't think it is indispensable that glamour artists shall be signed for more popularity. I have kept glamour artists as well as sometimes I go with the artists who have been in the theatre business but not from the glamorous world of films. I have done good business both ways. I like to offer something that suits my interest. It is not always that whatever we produce will be liked by the audience. Experiments continue.

Q: The technicians for operating lights and other special effects are trained persons or they are also appointed without examining their expertise?

A: There is a lack of trained technicians. Usually there is an advisor who instructs the workers to operate at the specific moments. These are improvised at rehearsals. Most of the workers learn things on the go. It is practice and habit that makes them what they are.

Q: It is said that the intellectuals are very critical of Bhramyomaan theatre. What kind of criticisms do you face?

A: We are criticised from every angle possible. But it is still incomprehensible for me that what stops the intellectuals from embracing this form of theatre. To be honest they don't even

watch the plays. They may watch plays that have been publicised enough to grab some attention and they may not turn out to be good plays. So on the basis of that they pass their judgements. I don't not want to name them but I had invited many such intellectuals to watch *Badshah* when it was running in Ganeshguri, no one came, but I know given the chance they are going to criticise it all the same.

Q: Why haven't the troupes made use of mass media for publicity? Except a few the websites don't even work. In this age of internet why this opportunity is not properly used?

A: The problem is the people who design such websites in Assam seem unaware of the Assamese culture that Bhramyomaan propagates. When my website was done I found so many silly mistakes that I didn't feel like getting a new website anymore. As I have to manage everything alone there is not much time to sit with the website designers to look at every word they write. Once it is done it can't be corrected. For example I staged a play called *Ayushand* it should go on the website as it is. But the designer literally translated it to 'age'. This is only my personal experience but this I think is a genuine problem for everyone for not being able to make it perfect. The spelling errors irk me and I never felt like going back to the website.

Q: Has Bhramyomaan given another platform to the film actors after the degradation of the Film Industry? How do you see this connection?

A: It is really sad that nowadays Assamese films do not run successfully. The actors who have already chosen the profession of acting had to choose another platform to earn their livelihood. I believe Bhramyomaan had provided them with it. It is true that people yearn to see their reel favourites in real life and it in a way changed the face of Bhramyomaan Theatre. With retakes and cuts whatever is produced in films has been shown on stage and it is definitely more appealing. The money to be paid has increased but they have helped earn equally and in the process of improvement of the form as a whole they also have a role to play. It is seen that these actors nowadays act in anything that can help them earn. The same actors are seen in cinema, soap operas, VCD films as well as in Bhramyomaan.

No matter what other factors have made Bhramyomaan a popular form, but they are still running because of the Ahbayok Committees. They are part of the society unlike the owner of

a cinema hall or the producer and distributor of a film who earns the money. The earnings are used in social development. Once something connects itself to the society and development it is going to be inevitably popular. Till the time these social organisations keep calling us, the journey of Bhramyomaan Theatre will not stop. Without the invitation of these committees staging is not possible. So it remains a social event always.

Q: Can it be taken out of Assam? Instead of it being a state art form can it become national?

A: If it can be done it will be overwhelming. First problem is language barrier. People of Assam are not well versed in other languages. Even it can be overlooked as it is an art form and language barrier shall not affect the aesthetics of it, but accommodation and conveyance becomes a serious problem. Here Ahbayok Committees arrange for everything but if we go uninvited to an unknown place everything will have to be managed by the troupe and it will be very expensive. When Nataraj theatre went to perform in Bihar, Bengal and Nepal they were well received but they too faced problems with accommodation and it was a matter of loss instead of profit which we cannot afford. If the government helps we can think about such a venture but without it we are helpless. The government somehow considers involvement with art forms a burden.

Q: How is the pay-scale decided for the actors?

A: The experienced actors always have a demand that they will work for a specific amount. We can keep the ones we can afford. There is a scope for negotiation too. Only to the newest actors we can say that we are willing to pay only a certain amount.

Q: Do you think the popularity of Bhramyomaan theatre will continue?

A: As I have mentioned before till the time Ahbayok Committees keep calling us, it will run as it is right now. It will not have any hindrance in remaining popular. If it remains connected with the schools, colleges, temples, mosques and clubs for some developmental work it shall be unstoppable. Schools in some regions do not have any other way of collecting money for developmental work. Government grants are also sporadic. People usually do not want to give donations but do not hesitate to pay a larger sum in lieu of entertainment. So due to this connection with common causes of the public it has a future that I believe will not be interrupted.

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