

Mobile Theatre of Assam: A Socio-Historical Perspective

Rituparna Patgiri

Mobile theatre groups of Assam (known as '*bhyrmoman natak*' in Assamese) consist of a collective of actors, singers, dancers, directors, action artists, makeup artists, workers, and the producer. The theatre group moves from place to place within the state - from villages to towns to cities as indicated by the word 'mobile.' Mobile theatre has become increasingly visible in Assam as a medium of entertainment and as a part of its public culture. In the present time, almost 60 theatre groups perform their plays all over the state, making mobile theatre widely popular and visible. In this paper, I intend to understand the visibility and popularity of mobile theatre from a socio-historical perspective. I argue that the emergence and popularity of mobile theatre is rooted in the socio-cultural history of theatre in Assam by using a combination of primary and secondary methods. The aim will be to unravel the circumstances and courses that led to the beginning of mobile theatre in the state.

Keywords: Assam, Theatre, Mobile theatre, Public culture, Culture, Public, Visibility, Folk tradition

The Setting

Mobile theatre groups of Assam (known as '*bhyrmoman natak*' in Assamese) consist of a collective of actors, singers, dancers, directors, action artists, makeup artists, workers, and the producer. The total team members of a troop can range from anywhere in between 10-15.¹ The theatre group moves from place to place within the state - from villages to towns to cities as indicated by the word 'mobile.' These theatre groups are invited by organizations and institutions like colleges and schools who loan their field to the group for three days for their performance. The companies are invited by self-governing organizations in the villages, towns, and cities, known as 'committees,' which may be responsible for running schools or colleges, temples, clubs, or NGOs (Ross, 2017: 74).

The plays are written and directed by the same or different people. The theatre parties hire actors for a season, who may or may not be retained in the next season.

Rituparna Patgiri is with Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. [Email: missrituparnapatgiri@gmail.com]

The groups stage new play productions every year - averaging 50-200 shows per year.² The theatre season begins around July/August when the rehearsal of the plays commences. The actors set up temporary residence, travel, rehearse and perform together. After almost two months of rehearsal and preparation, the theatre groups start performing from around September/October; the timing not surprisingly coinciding with important Hindu festivals in Assam like Durga Puja and Deepawali. These are also the months which see relatively less rain.

While the television and video boom may have depressed the market for films in Assam, mobile theatre carries on unperturbed. For instance, the number of cinema halls that screen Assamese films have gone down from almost 120 in the 1980s to merely 20 in the 2000s³. Even these small number of halls are old, and the audience does not enjoy going to these halls. The influence of Bollywood has meant that Hindi films have taken over the majority of the screening space as well as the modern PVRs. Assamese films have not been able to compete with Bollywood's superior marketing, technology, and popularity.⁴ There is also the additional factor that Assamese is not the only regional language spoken in Assam, and hence there is less audience for only one regional language films.⁵

Mobile theatre, on the contrary, is a central part of Assamese public culture. Its importance and visibility make it a pertinent research topic. It reaches out to a wider audience and is commercially very strong (Ross, 2017: 65). Mobile theatre has become increasingly visible in Assam as a medium of entertainment. It has emerged as the most popular form of entertainment in the state eclipsing the Assamese film industry.⁶ Almost 133 mobile theatre groups have existed in Assam at various points of time since the first one was established in the 1930s. In the present time, almost 60 theatre groups perform their plays all over the state.

In this paper, I intend to understand the visibility and popularity of mobile theatre from a historical perspective. I argue that, the emergence and popularity of mobile theatre is rooted in the socio-cultural history of theatre in Assam. What are the circumstances that led to the emergence of mobile theatre? What makes mobile theatre unique as a form of theatrical entertainment? What is the relationship of mobile theatre with society? These are some of the questions that this paper aims to explore and seek answers.

The methods that I have used to understand my field and research objectives better include visual ethnography, content analysis, oral history textual analysis, and interview. Some of the sources that I have used in my research include books, articles, reports, and inscriptions. I have used texts written in both English and Assamese. I will begin by trying to comprehend the historical roots of Indian theatre. The aim will be to unravel the circumstances and courses that led to the beginning of mobile theatre in the state. I have tried to fill the gaps in this literature with the knowledge and data that I have generated from both archival sources and fieldwork.

Drama/Theatre⁷ in India: Historical Roots

Drama has been an integral part of Indian society and Indian theatre is one of the earliest forms of theatre in the world. All forms of art, including theatre, are significant

vehicles of communication within Indian civilisation. It has been the main way of value transmission and representation of culture in traditional Indian civilisation (Sharma, 2003: 79).

The art of theatre in India is termed *Natyaveda* (The Holy book of Dramaturgy) — a synthesis of knowledge comprising the elements of all the existing books, as well as the art forms. The *Natyaveda* consists of the *Natya Shastra* which describes the origin of *natya* or drama. The *Natya Shastra* (The Science of Drama), written by Bharata Muni approximately between 200 BCE and 200 CE, is one of the oldest treatises on dramaturgy (Schramm, 1969). The scholar Panini also mentions the existence of *nata sutras* which are the codification of the dramatic art into aphoristic texts as early as 5th century BCE (Raghavan *in* Kastaur, 2007: 21; Pathak, 2015).

The first kind of theatre/drama that developed in India has been called Sanskrit drama. Sanskrit drama is one of the few forms of drama that had emphasized on a drama-script. This form of drama, however, started to decline with time. There are various reasons behind this waning. Sanskrit drama, as the name suggests, was performed in Sanskrit, a language that was not accessible to most members of the society and was limited only to the learned groups of people, that is, upper caste men. The significant characters spoke in Sanskrit, whereas the minor characters conversed in Prakrit (Pathak, 2015: 19). Also, with the beginning of various dynasties of Muslim rule in northern parts of India, Sanskrit drama lost patronage, which is around the 16th century. With the decline and fall of the ancient Hindu kingdoms, the support and prestige of the Sanskrit stage suffered severely, and it began to lose its importance and position (Schramm, 1969). The change in artistic activities is linked to changes in patron class and socio-religious institutions and ideologies (Desai, 1990: 3).

The relationship between the spectators and the performers have been very significant in the Indian theatrical context. In fact, it is the audience's interest and patronage that has played a crucial role in the development of theatre in India. By their very existence, the performing arts are audience-oriented, and thus keep changing by the social environment and patronage patterns (Trivedi, 1999: 73). For example, *Ramleela* in north India, especially in Varanasi, developed under the patronage of Hindu king of Mansaram Singh and his descendants. Till recently, Anant Narain Singh was considered the religious head of Varanasi who sponsored and managed *Ramleela*, Varanasi's largest, longest, and most impressive religious-theatrical event (Schechner, 2015: 83). The uniqueness of Varanasi's *Ramleela* takes place in multiple locations – almost every day a different place – widely dispersed throughout the city (ibid, 85). Changing patrons and socio-religious institutions means not just the end of existing forms of art but also the beginning of new forms of art (Desai, 1990:3). To cite another instance, the oldest form of theatre in India, classical Sanskrit drama, survived as well as flourished because of the social context of that period. Sanskrit drama was given patronage by royal courts, princes, and aristocrats who hosted these theatre parties and encouraged their performances (Schramm, 1969; Gunawardana, 1971). However, the establishment of the Islamic Sultanate of Delhi at the beginning of the thirteenth century brought a change in the cultural set-up of northern India. Changes in the patronage pattern also occurred as the new elite had come from a

culturally developed region and their traditions were in many ways different from those current in northern India at that point of time (Trivedi, 1999: 77). Sanskrit drama thus faced a decline in its importance as the interest of the audience changed. However, in the southern part of India, for example in Kerala, classical Sanskrit drama managed to survive even if it was on the decline in northern India (Schramm, 1969). Kerala's Sanskrit drama tradition called Kutiyattam has been preserved within the sanctuary of the Hindu temple for centuries till today. One of the primary reasons for the tradition's longevity is that Hindu kings, who donated to support Hindu temples as part of their social and religious duties, ruled Kerala without interruption. Muslim rulers never established control in Kerala as it had happened elsewhere in the north (Sullivan, 1997: 97). Hindu kings patronized theatre construction and Kutiyattam performances in Kerala until the termination of monarchy as a consequence of Independence in 1947 (ibid, 108). Thus, the development, as well as the decline of art forms, depends on the relationship with the audience.

Apart from patronage, the growth of both middle and modern Indo-Aryan languages resulted in the diversion of creative talent in literature to these media forms (Raghavan *in* Kastaur, 2007: 31). Also, the development of regional language theatres, which retained the theme and technique of the classical Sanskrit drama, but used the local language, made the Sanskrit originals less famous (ibid, 32).

Ankiya Naat: The Oldest Form of Assamese Drama

It is in this context that various types of folk drama began to flourish in different parts of the country. Folk forms, while in no small extent filling the void left by the decline of Sanskrit drama, by no means replaced the classical forms completely. The latter survived, divested of supremacy but retaining enough potential to sustain its continuance and to influence other, later forms (Schramm 1969: 36). Most types of Indian folk theatre share some common fundamental attributes. Nearly all of them thrive in songs, dances, pantomime, improvised repartees, imaginative movement, slapstick comedy, stylised acting, even acrobatics. Almost all of them usually cover a large canvas in their stories and denote change of location by movement and word of mouth rather than by a change of sets and decor. They often have a sort of stage manager, a comic character, who opens and establishes the play and provides the link between scenes, and all these are also the very elements upon which classical Sanskrit drama is based in a broad sense.

Audience participation on a universal scale is the hall-mark of Indian folk theatre. The rural audience sits typically on the ground on three or on all four sides of the acting area, usually a simple rectangular platform or a circular clearing in the middle (Tanvir, 1974: 37). Folk theatre does not have any specific authorship (Schechner, 2003; Bhattacharjee, 2011). Folk literature, songs, poems, tales, dances, dramas and proverbs have very wide popularity cutting across linguistic and regional boundaries (Sharma, 2003: 82).

One of the first forms of folk theatre, *Ankiya Naat*, also emerged as an alternative to classical Sanskrit drama in Assam. *Ankiya Naat* is also known as *Bhaona*, especially in upper Assam. They bear no resemblance to the *anka* type of *Rupakas*⁸ of Sanskrit

drama. *Ankiya Naat* is a generic term in Assamese and means dramatic compositions in a single act (Bhattacharjee, 2011). It was a mixed form of theatre, with *shlokas*, *bhatima*, drama, music, and dialogue that made it unique. To locate the origin of theatre in Assam, we have to go back to the fifteenth century as drama took a proper shape within a particular societal context of Assam. During this period, *Ankiya Naat* emerged as one of the earliest forms of folk drama, which was used by neo-Vaishnavite preacher Srimanta Sankaradeva to propagate his idea of religious reform.

Although *Ankiya Naat* was the oldest form of folk drama to have emerged in Assam, other folk forms of art like *Ojhapali*, *Dhuliya*, *Nisukoni Geet*, *Kushan Gaan*, *Bhari Gaan*, and *Putala Naach* were already a part of Assamese culture and tradition (Kalita, 2011; Patgiri in Singh and Patgiri, 2018). In *Ojhapali*, the *Ojha* is the main story teller, who narrates the story of fables incorporating songs, verses, and dialogues. The '*palis*' were his supporters, and the whole performance was only an oral enactment, without any written script (Baruah in Sarma, 2017: 57). Hiuen Tsang records the presence of dance and music in the seventh century Kamrupa (Chaliha in Sarma, 1996: 163). There is a reference of *naat* in the works of Hem Saraswati and Madhab Kandali in the pre-Sankaradeva era (Das, 2018: 5).

During the 15th century, northern parts of India were Mughal ruled. By this time, Sanskrit drama had lost royal patronage and various forms of folk performances had started to gain importance. Sanskrit drama had never been popular in Assam as the Ahom rulers were not very familiar with the language. Just like in rest of India, *Ankiya Naat*, a folk form of drama had emerged in Assam during the 15th century. Traditionally *Ankiya Naats* were performed only by men.

It is within the neo-Vaishnavite movement that full-fledged drama took shape within Assam. In this context, it is crucial to argue that despite having a rich dramatic tradition, Sanskrit drama did not flourish in Assam. Although Aryan origin languages are predominant in Assam now, this was not always the case. It was the Mongoloid race and the Indo-Chinese linguistic family that were dominant in Assam in the pre-colonial era. In fact, the Ahoms wrote their historical chronicles in their Tibeto-Chinese language before they had adopted Assamese (Kakati, 1941: 14).

In the age in which Sanskrit drama was at its peak in northern India, the Indo Mongoloid presence in the Assamese population outweighed others, and thus, Sanskrit drama could not take shape in Assam. The fact that the Ahoms retained their language and religion till the mid-17th century (Guha, 1984: 72) also meant that Sanskrit drama did not receive any patronage from the rulers. Without getting an audience and especially royal patronage, it is difficult for any art form to survive. This, however, does not mean that Assam did not have a Sanskritic tradition, but it was a language of upper castes and classes as discussed in the previous section.

It was Sankaradeva's idea to promote neo-Vaishnavism through theatre, and *Ankiya Naat*⁹ was one of his choices of instrument to promote the principles of neo-Vaishnavism. In doing so, Sankaradeva was not alone as Bhakti saints in other parts of the country have also used theatre and other forms of performing art to promote their ideology (Karnad, 1989; Trivedi, 1999).

Since neo-Vaishnavism was a relatively new religious doctrine in Assam at that

time, Sankaradeva thought that it would be better to use a performing art like theatre to promote his philosophy rather than written texts. It has been considered a brilliant idea by scholars as most of the Assamese¹⁰ society was illiterate at that time and the masses found theatre much more accessible and relatable than written works. This is why the announcement that there is a change of scenes is made by the *Sutradhar* (narrator) or by an orchestra with singing. As most of the audience were illiterate at that time explanation was required at every succeeding stage of the drama (Bhattacharjee, 2011).

Unlike in classical Sanskrit drama, the *Sutradhar* in Sankaradeva's plays remained on stage all throughout the performance (Mahanta in Singh and Patgiri, 2018: 49). This also made *Ankiya Naat* more real and relatable. A theatre is a live performance and thus has the potential to attract audiences easily as they see it as real. It makes the spectator feel intimately and immediately connected to the actors. Thus, began the dynamic tradition of theatre in Assam in the form of *Ankiya Naat*.

The originator of drama and theatre in Assamese, Sankaradeva, created one of the first forms of plays in a regional Indian language with dramatic dialogue in prose. His plays were the only theatrical works in any Indian vernacular before the coming of the British to have any extended and eloquent dialogue in prose (Gohain, 2010: 37). But before composing *Ankiya Naats*, he wrote one of the first plays in medieval India called *Cihnnayatra* as early as CE 1468 (Pathak, 2015: 36; Kalita, 2011).¹¹

It was *Cihnnayatra*'s success that propelled him to compose more plays. Therefore, apart from that, Sankaradeva wrote six *Ankiya Naats* – *Patni prasada*, *Rukmini Harana*, *Keli Gopal*, *Kaliya Damana*, *Parijat Harana* and *Rama Vijaya*¹² (Mahanta in Singh and Patgiri, 2018: 47). Out of these, *Patni Prasada*, *Keli Gopal*, and *Kaliya Damana* have minimal dialogues and can be considered basic plays. *Parijat Harana*, *Rukmini Harana*, and *Rama Vijaya*, on the contrary, are full-fledged dramas with definable plots, characters, and dialogues (ibid). Sankaradeva's innovation successfully blended religious philosophy with creative use of indigenous, folk dramatic forms, and selected conventions of Sanskrit (Sarma and Dutta, 2009: 307). The freedom that was taken by Sankaradeva in presentation and description of the scenes relating to details of fighting, eating, tempting, abducting, eloping, etc. in these *Ankiya Naats* would be considered a taboo in classical drama (Mahanta in Singh and Patgiri, 2018: 48). The Sanskrit classical drama dealt with chastity, faithfulness, courage, exceptional presence and grandeur of noble characters, and aimed at satisfying the imagination and ennobling the soul. It can be said that *Ankiya Naat* has elements of classical Sanskrit drama like the presence of the *Sutradhar*, but Sankaradeva also added innovations of his own to make it different (Ahuja, 2012: 262).

But taking this liberty to do something different meant that he was able to reach out to more people. Of the various mediums used to propagate this new faith among India's villagers, theatre became one of the most successful, owing in no small measure to its ability to draw large audiences together to watch entertaining stories with didactic messages (Richmond, 1974: 145).

Ankiya Naats were traditionally performed inside the prayer hall of a temple

which is known as a *manikut*. The prayer hall is used as a theatre hall and an assembly hall. Temples were a vital centre and a promoter of the performing arts during the medieval centuries and continued to sustain this activity even today. In many temples throughout the country from the eleventh century to the eighteenth, theatre and dance halls were built for the presentation of dance and dramatic shows (Bhattacharya, 1958: 75, Awasthi, 1974: 39).

These plays are mostly written keeping in mind Ram and Krishna, the two most popular incarnations of the Hindu deity Vishnu. According to Hindu mythology, he has incarnated himself nine times so far in different ages to rid the world of evil — like a fish, a tortoise, a boar, a man, a lion, a dwarf, a Brahmin warrior, Rama, Krishna, and Buddha. Rama and Krishna figure most prominently in the stories performed in traditional theatre (Richmond, 1971: 125).

While Sankaradeva began writing the *Ankiya Naats* for the masses, the most honoured spectator was the deity, and hence the plays were dedicated to him. Similarly, in the classical Sanskrit theatrical form of Kutiyattam, the dramas are often presented as devotional offerings during religious festivals (Sullivan, 1997: 98). Apart from *Ankiya Naat*, *Ramleela*, and *Raasleela*, two very popular theatrical forms; also emerged as part of the Vaishnavite movement, albeit in other parts of the country (Karnad, 1989: 345).

However, *Ankiya Naat*, *Ramleela*, and *Raasleela* are not considered forms of modern Indian theatre. These are forms of folk theatre. The decline of classical Sanskrit drama began with the emergence of traditional or folk styles that attracted more people as Sanskrit was known to only elite sections of society. The classical tradition requires high degree of sophistication and systematisation and is generally seen as an upper caste and class tradition (Sharma, 2003: 81).

Folk forms used regional languages as opposed to classical drama that relied on Sanskrit. *Ankiya Naat*, for example, was performed in Brajavali, a mix of Assamese, Maithili, and Hindi. The Bhakti saints in other parts of the country also began to compose in regional languages (Trivedi, 1999: 84). The Bhakti Movement is a pervasive cultural movement which appeared in various forms of cultural expression including religion, philosophy, language, art, and literature. As a result of the Bhakti Movement, the process of building up of various regional languages quickened, and the foundation was laid for the growth of modern Indian languages (Pandey and Tyagi, 2001: 129).

In Sanskrit drama, characters like that of the king and the priest would speak Sanskrit, whereas the servants would converse in Prakrit language. In *Ankiya Naat*, on the other hand, all characters spoke in Brajavali. It is argued that Brajavali was an 'artificial' language created by Sankaradeva to promote his religion that was influenced by both Hindi and Maithili (Bhattacharjee in Das, 2018: 29). Sankaradeva felt that the audience would have difficulty in understanding Sanskrit and therefore, he used Brajavali in his *Ankiya Naats* to reach out to the masses. It was a more attractive language as it was a mix of Assamese, Hindi and Maithili. This is quite similar to Bhakti literature from other parts of India. The people-oriented literature of the Bhakti period is different not only in form and contents. It is quite novel and free from classicist literature of Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, and *Apabhramsha*. The essence of the

Bhakti poetry stems from experiences of common people and their culture (Pandey and Tyagi, 2001: 130).

Sankaradeva's most cherished and accomplished disciple Madhavdeva continued the tradition of *Ankiya Naat* with the help of *Satradhars* – the heads of the *Satras* and patronage of Ahom kings (Mahanta in Singh and Patgiri, 2018: 51). Madhavdeva also wrote plays of his own, which are called *jhumuras* (ibid, 56). He had composed a total of twelve *jhumuras* (Das, 2018: 5).

The bedrock of Sankaradeva's religious movement was the *Satras* that he had established to further his *Eka-Sharana-Nama-Dharma*. These *Satras* had members from all sections of the Assamese society, every caste and religion. The popularity of Sankaradeva's religion increased rapidly as it gave the people of Assam an alternative; it was more liberal in nature and people-oriented. Both Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva preached in the vernacular so that their thoughts and ideas could easily be understood by everyone (Bhattacharyya, 1991: 1115).

Within these *Satras*, Sankaradeva had established the *Naamghars* (houses of prayer) and the *Manikuts* (jewel huts) that contained the seat of the *Guru* (Saint), which is worshipped. There are no other idols, keeping in mind his rejection of idol worship. The *Satradhars* are the heads of *Satras* who look preside over all the critical activities. The Ahom kings would invite *Satradhars* from nearby *Satras* to perform *Ankiya Naat* for their entertainment. *Ankiya Naats* were performed in the courts of Ahom kings Rajeswara Singha and Kamaleswara Singha amongst others (Patgiri in Singh and Patgiri, 2018: 71).

While *Ankiya Naat* flourished during Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva's time and continued to be a popular form of entertainment until the early eighteenth century, drastic changes took place at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Their disciples tried to continue the dramatic tradition but were not very successful. With the advent of British colonialism and Burmese invasion of Assam¹³, folk traditions like *Ankiya Naat* were negatively affected (Mahanta in Singh and Patgiri, 2018: 51).

As Assam was annexed by the British in 1826, the region became better connected with the rest of the British invaded India and people from other parts of the country started touring the country in more frequency. This meant that other forms of theatre such as *jatra* and modern theatre also came to Assam with the people. The dramatic performances of *Ankiya Naats* were very long, sometimes lasting the whole night. As audiences became familiarized with plays that lasted for a shorter duration, *Ankiya Naats* ceased to captivate audiences for entire nights (Phookan in Kastaur, 2007: 43). The influence of this cultural contact can be seen in the declining status of *Ankiya Naat* and the beginning of modern Assamese drama.

Modern Assamese Drama

All the *Ankiya Naats* share a commonality. Their theme is religious, depicting scenes and episodes from Hindu mythology, mostly related to the two incarnations of Lord Vishnu - Rama and Krishna. For instance, many Indian traditional theatre performances are connected with different Hindu religious cults and deities and performed by devotees. Drawing upon a common body of religious literature - the Puranas, the

Mahabharata, and the Ramayana - these theatres enact individual episodes especially meaningful to a given deity, cult, and, sometimes, region (Richmond, 1971: 123). Many other South and Southeast Asian traditional theatres also use stories from these Hindu epics, especially the Mahabharata and the Ramayana (ibid). For example, in Clifford Geertz's study of Balinese culture, he mentions how the shadow-puppet plays in the Javanese setting dramatize stories from both these epics (Geertz, 1976: 132).

While Sankaradeva began writing the *Ankiya Naats* for the masses, the most honoured spectator was the deity, and hence the plays were dedicated to him. Similarly, in the classical Sanskrit theatrical form of Kutiyattam, the dramas are often presented as devotional offerings during religious festivals (Sullivan, 1997: 98). Ancient Indian drama, like the Greek or early English drama, is inextricably linked with the religious life of the people. Secularization of Indian drama has been a late starter (Pathak, 2015: 18). The 'medieval' outlook with an emphasis on spiritual and supernatural themes was replaced by secular subjects and 'rational' outlook (Barpujari et al., 1977: 136). However, it is not that secular aesthetics was not altogether unknown to the Indian tradition, both classical and folk, but it had not been able to make any significant impact before (Deshpande, 1987: 2170).

In the year 1857, Gunabhiram Barua departed from this trend of writing religious dramas with his play '*Ram Navami*' which is called the first modern Assamese play. Inspired by the most famous playwright of all times, William Shakespeare, *Ram Navami* was modelled on the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*; it was concerned with a social issue – widow remarriage (Pathak in Singh and Patgiri, 2018: 57). This was also the first case in which tragedy as a concept was used in Assamese theatre.¹⁴ Influenced by Shakespeare's writings, there was also the introduction of five scenes in Assamese theatre like his plays and abundance of visuals (Sarma in Bordoloi et al., 2017: 5). During that period, *Ankiya Naat* was the dominant form of drama in Assam, and *Ram Navami* introduced a new genre – tragedy, which was a type of Shakespeare's influence.

Barua's play was followed by those of Hem Chandra Baruah (*Kaniyar Kirtan* - 1861), Rudraram Bordoloi (*Bangal Bangalani Natak* - 1871), Padmanath Gohain Barua (*Joymoti* – 1900, *Lachit Barphukan* – 1915) and Lakshminath Bezbarua (*Chakradhaj Singha* – 1915, *Belimar* – 1915) (Pathak in Singh and Patgiri, 2018: 58). These plays were social, historical and patriotic keeping in mind the context of multiple invasions in Assam. Similarly, Phani Sarma's *Kio*, *Kola Bazaar* and *Naag Pash* were plays that focused on corruption, social disorder, and inequality. Though theatre has existed in India from the Vedic era, it would not have accommodated protest, political or social theatre, in the classical period of Sanskrit drama because of the conventions of dramaturgy by which it was bound (Sundar, 1989: 125).

Scholars have argued that during this period, the audience was not yet ready for 'heavy' content in dramas and hence writers like Hem Chandra Baruah, Padmanath Gohain Barua, and Lakshminath Bezbarua used a satirical way of writing to communicate their message. Although Bezbarua did not write tragedies, Shakespeare's stimulus is very much visible in his historical plays (Sarma in Bordoloi et al., 2017: 7). Instead of writing about the 'other world,' the playwrights began to focus on 'this

world.’ It has also been argued that most of these people who were writing plays during this era were not playwrights. They had started writing plays to raise awareness and start a social reform movement against superstitions and social evils (Bharali in Sarma, 2017). Therefore, they did not pay much attention to the acting abilities of the actors or the stage but to the content. The fact is although Assam’s dramatic tradition is old and can be historically traced to the 15th century, it was novels, poems and short stories that were the preferred modes of literature in the succeeding centuries.

Apart from Shakespeare, other playwrights whose influence were monumental in early Assamese modern drama were Henrik Ibsen and Bernard Shaw. It was particularly evident in the plays of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, who started using screen direction, long arguments full of logic and character description in his plays like Shaw and Ibsen. Like Ibsen, he was interested in exploring the mental part of a character (Sarma in Bordoloi et al., 2017: 9). Agarwala is an exception in the Assamese drama scene as he had been associated with theatre since childhood and was aware of technicalities related to theatre. Unlike the others of his time, he paid special attention to character development, screenplay and acting abilities of actors.

In the pre-independence era, a lot of cultural activities were happening that were also means to protest against the ruling classes. Places like Nagaon, Dibrugarh, and Tezpur became the hub of cultural events in upper Assam, whereas, in lower Assam, Pathshala was the hub for the same. It is known as the *Natya Nagari* (city of theatre) and the centre of drama of Assam. The two *Satras* of Akaya and Bamakhata near Pathshala (located in Barpeta district) regularly staged plays that were inspired by *Ankiya Naat*. Apart from the two *Satras*, the town of Pathshala and Barpeta district had a culture of performing silent plays, *Devadasi* dance and instrumental music (Goswami in Talukdar, 2018: 1). The *Kamrup Natya Samiti* (Kamrup Drama Association) organized plays almost every month in Guwahati, especially during festivals like Kaali Puja and Durga Puja.¹⁵

The *Ankiya Naats* were not based on social or political themes. But the colonial experience made Indians conscious of their identity, culture, and traditions which they consider to be of universal significance (Singh, 2012: 152). By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Indian intellectual climate began to assume a more realistic outlook on topics of socio-political nature (Schramm, 1969: 38). The English educated dramatists took to secular themes and the stage-techniques introduced from the West. The dramatis personae were chosen from the immediate social milieu, the stage was constructed realistically, and acting was made more human and natural. The new urban stage pushed the old familiar world of Assamese drama to the backwaters of rural life (Bhattacharya, 1958: 75).

Modern Assamese drama was a local offshoot of the contemporary theatre movement that had begun in the whole of India. Modern Indian theatre as we recognize it today is a product of British colonial culture (Awasthi and Schechner, 1989: 48). With the decline of Sanskrit as an instrument of cultural expression, several things had died. The most notable casualty of that phenomenon had been the decline and eventual eclipse of Sanskrit theatre (Deshpande, 1987: 2170). The British colonialists made full use of this opportunity to change the Indian theatrical scenario. Folk forms

of theatre were unable to offer much challenge to modern English theatre as the latter was much more advanced and took over the public.

The first proscenium theatres were built in Bombay (now Mumbai) and Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the 1860s. The populations of these cities had benefited from British education and had prospered financially under British rule. Therefore, it was only logical that modern Indian theatre had its beginning in these two cities (Karnad, 1989: 334, Mee, 1997). The Parsi community had a crucial role to play in the development of modern Indian theatre. More Westernized than others, their productions always have capitalized on the slick and spectacular techniques borrowed from the West (Schramm, 1969: 38).

As evident from the growth of classical Sanskrit drama, folk theatre and modern theatre in India, the form that theatre has taken is very much dependent on the culture and social background of that historical period. Theatre is a part of culture, and its evolution is reliant on the people that constitute this culture.

The proscenium theatres changed the traditional concept and character of Indian theatrical space, from the points of view of both the actor and the spectator.¹⁶ It brought about a separation between the two, critically affecting their traditional intimate relationship (Awasthi and Schechner, 1989: 50). Most of the traditional theatre performances were open air events, organized on the level ground, a platform stage, or as a mobile processional spectacle (Awasthi, 1974: 36).

The audience was now separated from the stage, which discouraged active participation and response. The second innovation, far more important in its impact, was the sale of tickets, which changed the relationship of the theatregoers to the theatre itself. Once it has to pay to see a show, an audience begins to demand its money's worth. The run of the play in the competitive market decides its worth and freezes it, and it cannot change without affecting its saleability (Karnad, 1989: 335). Ticket sales emphasized theatre as a commodity, making it available to a smaller, and wealthier, group of people (Mee, 1997: 1). Habermas also makes this point about music. In the eighteenth-century European context, admission for a payment turned the musical performance into a commodity (Habermas, 1962: 39). The relationship between the Indian audience and the performers hence changed from being an informal one to a formal one based on saleability.

This is not to say that folk theatre has completely been wiped out from the Indian theatrical context. There has not been a smooth transition from classical to folk to modern theatre. There have been overlaps, and each form of theatre has existed within the societal whole. Folk theatre has managed to survive even with the advent of modernization because of its adaptive quality. Yogendra Singh argues that traditional Indian institutions successfully adapted their traditional mode of thinking and institutional practices to bring them in tune with the demands of modernization (Singh, 2012: 153). The 'traditionalism' of Indian civilization lies in its capacity to incorporate innovations into an expanding and changing structure of society. This is reflected in a series of adaptive mechanisms and processes for dealing with the novel, the foreign and the strange (Singer, 1971: 163).

For instance, most folk forms of theatre successfully adapted to the needs of modernization. For example, *Raas leela* of Assam which is a major rural based folk

festival that happens all over the state during the month of November has changed its original form to survive in today's times. Originally a rural based festival, *Raas leela*, has also gained popularity in Assam's urban areas today as organizers have incorporated elements of modern theatre like light, sound and technology to present the original story of Krishna's divine dance with *gopis* of Vrindavana. Instead of just being confined to open stages, *Raas leela* is also performed in proscenium halls, just like the one that was organized in Srimanta Sankaradeva International Auditorium, Kalakhetra of Guwahati from 23rd to 25th November 2018. Not only has *Raas leela* managed to survive, but it has also gained popularity in cities through adaptations. Another folk form of theatre that has stood the test of time is *jatra*, a popular form of folk drama that originated in Bengal in the 15th century and later spread to the other Eastern Indian states like Assam and Odisha. It has managed to survive because of acclimatising to changing socio-cultural practices in society.¹⁷ *Jatra* is an audio-visual derivative of the essentially oral *Mangal-kavya*¹⁸ tradition (Sarkar, 1975: 87). Historically, the theme of *jatra* has revolved around projecting a war between good and evil, mostly in the mythological context (Das, 2013: 8). The *jatra* season stretches between September and late May or early June since this is the period which is comparatively free from rain (Sarkar, 1975: 92).

Jatra is theatre in the round, and it's very loud. Everything is influenced by sightlines, visibility, and audibility. *Jatras* are frequently performed in villages without electricity. The carbide gas lamps which are used don't give much light, but the actors have to make themselves visible to a large audience, so the make-up is very heavy, and the costumes are very colourful (Gunawardana and Dutt, 1971: 230). *Jatra* had to rely mostly on songs. It is much easier to project song than speech, and continuous acting would be very strenuous in a play lasting from early afternoon until midnight (ibid).

It became popular as a form of entertainment during the Vaishnavite movement in Bengal during the 16th century. However, in the 19th century, its subject matter became more secular, and political themes were incorporated. Along with the changes in content, there were several changes in the presentational form: the all-night performances were abbreviated to three to four hours, and the number of songs was drastically cut down (Gunawardana, 1971: 55). The main audience was the working class and not the peasants - tea garden workers, railway workers, steel workers, etc. They pay well, and the *jatra* is oriented towards them. They won't sit and listen to a *jatra* for twelve hours - they have a work shift the next day - so the plays were shortened (Gunawardana and Dutt, 1971: 230).

Folk forms of theatre, therefore, had managed to survive even when Indian theatre as a whole was changing. The assumption that assimilation of the scientific worldview would lead to the demolition of traditional values and institutions is only partly correct. This assumption primarily affected the instrumental cultural forms but could not make an impact on the fundamental values that individuals and societies cherished (Singh, 2012: 154). Indian 'traditionalism' is a built-in adaptive mechanism for making changes. Mostly it is a series of processes for incorporating into the culture validating innovations (Singer, 1971: 184).

Although various forms of folk theatre have existed in India, what is common in most of them is the source of content, which is mostly drawn from the Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. One of the purposes of folk theatre was to create feelings of togetherness and belongingness in the community, and stories derived from these epics had the power to do that. Therefore, in community festivals, singing, dancing, and drama were performed (Mahanta *in* Singh and Patgiri, 2018: 45).

Epics build narratives around a series of devotional tableaux that present themselves to the devotee. This not only blurs the line between devotion and entertainment but also involves dramatic techniques such as formulaic speech that prolong ritually significant moments but does not sit well with modern proscenium theatre. Viewing a mythological play is itself an act of worship, and folk theatre like *jatra* and *Ankiya Naat* with mythological themes is part of this aura (Chatterji, 2014: 9). Therefore, apart from providing entertainment, folk theatre also played a role in harnessing ‘community’ based sentiments.

This is also a reason why folk forms of theatre have managed to survive even with the advent of modern Indian theatre, film, and television. The folk tradition as an alternative discourse of knowledge became primarily redundant to most aspects of social change that are characterised as modernisation. However, despite this shrinkage in space for folk culture and the oral tradition in India, it retains its resilience in several areas of culture like graphic and plastic art forms, music and theatre (Singh, 2012: 162).

Mobile Theatre of Assam: Blurring Categories

As already stated in the previous section, with the process of colonisation, theatre underwent significant changes in its form and structure both in Assam as well as all over India. Cities like Bombay and Calcutta were the amongst the first ones to be influenced by British theatrical culture. As Assam is geographically intimately connected with Bengal, the influence of the latter is very noticeable on Assamese theatre history. The process which began in the closing years of the Ahom rule has continued until today. The activities of missionaries and the Bengal renaissance had a profound impact on Assamese society (Barpujari et al., 1977).

The Balgachia theatre in Calcutta was built in 1857, and almost twenty years later, the first modern theatre hall was constructed in Guwahati in 1875 (Patgiri *in* Gogoi, 2000: 110). Followed by Guwahati, proscenium theatre halls were constructed in Tezpur and Pathshala respectively in 1897 and 1912 (Kalita, 2011: 16). The British brought with them a group of Bengali labourers as well as an educated Bengali populace who entertained themselves by organizing and staging various kinds of theatre (*ibid*, 15). The Baan theatre hall that was constructed in Tezpur has an interesting history associated with it. The Bengalis who were settled there staged Bengali plays in their areas. In one such enactment, some members of the Assamese elite were denied seats in the front, which angered them and after that, they had formed the historic Baan theatre hall (Barua *in* Sarma et al., 2017: 55).

Many *jatra* parties like *Natta Company*, *Bhola Nath Opera* and *Sailabala Opera* also started touring Assam, especially parts of lower Assam as it is close to the Assam-Bengal border in the nineteenth century. However, it would be wrong to say that

jatra came to Assam only from Bengal. There was a tradition of *jatra* in Assam even before the Bengali form came. For instance, Sankaradeva's first play *Cihnnayatra* has the word *yatra*, which is synonymous to *jatra* and means movement (Patgiri in Goswami and Haloi, 2017: 30).

In fact, folk forms like *Ojhapali* also have an element of travel in them, as the performers move from place to place to entertain people (Patgiri in Goswami and Haloi, 2017: 30). Therefore, the momentary nature of *jatra* was not new to Assam. Perhaps the form of *jatra* prevalent in Assam and the one that came from Bengal were different; the Bengali *jatra* was more organized.

Jatra was very popular in lower Assam but could not make many inroads into upper Assam. Therefore, it is in Murukuchi, a village of Kamrup district in lower Assam, that Jaydev Sarma formed the first 'business *jatra*' party in between 1868-70. Consequently, many other *jatra* parties like *Sila Kali Opera*, *Kohinoor Opera Party*, *Rampur Jatra Party*, and others were formed (Patgiri in Gogoi, 2000: 111). People gradually lost interest in *Ankiya Naat* and other folk forms of entertainment and became *jatra* oriented (Patgiri in Deka and Das, 2016: 18). Interestingly, initially, the language that was used to perform these plays was Bengali. These *jatra* parties performed in festivals like Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja and marriage ceremonies of well to do families (Barpujari et al., 1977: 127). It is only later that Assamese began to be used. *Nala-Damayanti* was the first play that was translated into Assamese by Dhanesar Sarma, which was performed by a *jatra* party (Patgiri in Deka and Das, 2016: 18).

Early colonial administrators regarded the Assamese language as an offshoot of Bengali. Assamese public intellectuals argued that they were a distinctive people with a unique language and a culture and managed to convince British colonial officials of their case. Thus, Assamese became recognized as the official language of Assam (Baruah, 1999: 39). This does not mean that Bengali was not in use in any public activity as shown by the language used in the *jatras*.

The influence of *jatra* is crucial to understanding the beginnings of mobile theatre in Assam, the subject of this study. These *jatra* parties were mobile in nature. The first mobile theatre like groups, called the *Sila Kalika Opera Party* and *Assam Kohinoor Opera Party*, was started by Brajanath Sarma in the 1920s¹⁹ in Barpeta district of lower Assam after his return from Bengal. He was a freedom fighter, social reformer, and artist. Sarma is considered to be the founding father of mobile theatre in Assam. *Assam Kohinoor Opera Party* marks a landmark moment in Assam's theatre history as it saw the co-operation of Brajanath Sarma and Natasurya Phani Sarma. The latter was bestowed with the title of Natasurya for his contribution to Assamese drama.

However, contrary to the all-night performance of *jatra*, the *Sila Kalika Opera Party* and *Assam Kohinoor Opera Party* finished their performances within three hours. This would prove crucial in keeping audiences interested in this folk form as a three-hour performance is a much more audience friendly format than an all-night one. The basic difference between the two groups was that *Sila Kalika Opera Party* performed in open areas, whereas the *Assam Kohinoor Opera Party* performed in halls (Patgiri in Devi Sarma, 2018: 182).

Apart from initiating a theater movement, the *Assam Kohinoor Opera Party* introduced co-acting in the stages of Assam. In 1933, female roles were played for the first time by women in Assam in the play *Moran Jeeori* that was performed by the *Assam Kohinoor Opera Party*, revolutionizing the nature of Assamese theatre.²⁰ This was a departure from the traditional practice of only men performing in *Ankiya Naat*. Jatra inspired Sarma after his stay in West Bengal in the 1910s where he had acted in various Bengali plays. *Jatra* means movement. Inspired by Kohinoor Opera Party, other parties were also formed like *Helena Jatra Dal*, *Gobindapur Jatra Dal*, *Navamilan Opera*, *Anandamoyi Opera Party* and *Shri Shri Sankaradeva Opera* in different parts of lower Assam like Tihu, Barpeta, Nalbari, Hajo, Darang, Bongaigaon, Goalpara and Pathshala (Thakuriya Baniya in Das, 2018). It is interesting how *jatra* spread to almost all parts of lower Assam, but there is no record or mention of it in upper Assam.

From the very beginning, *jatras* were designed for the rural, ‘non-citified’ audience (Sarkar, 1975: 93). Modern Indian theatre, being the product of colonialism, urban culture, and literary traditions, could never spread to smaller towns and always felt shy of using dialects and other non-urban material (Awasthi and Schechner, 1989: 68). Mobile theatre in Assam, on the other hand, had started in the rural context and gradually spread to urban areas. Mobile theatre did not emerge in a city of Assam. It began in Pathshala, a rural town, about 110 kilometres from the city of Guwahati, the capital of Assam and then gradually spread to other parts.

Sankaradeva had a conflictual relationship with the Ahoms and was given refuge by the Koch kings in Western (lower) Assam. While he was born in Eastern (upper) Assam and the tradition of *Ankiya Naat* began there, he found patronage in lower Assam. *Jatra*, too, came to Assam through lower Assam and therefore, it is no surprise that mobile theatre was a product of this part of Assam.

Although the *Assam Kohinoor Opera Party* did not run for long, the idea of mobile theatre had spread in Pathshala and adjoining areas of lower Assam. In 1963, Achyut Lahkar, a pioneering figure in the history of mobile theatre in Assam, along with his brother Sada Lahkar, started the Nataraj theatre group inspired by Brajanath Sarma’s idea of *Assam Kohinoor Opera Party*. Sada Lahkar had worked with Sarma and was inspired by both Sarma and *jatra* and had formed a mobile theatre like group, which his younger brother Achyut Lahkar revolutionized. This group was the *Nataraj Opera* which the elder Lahkar had formed in 1959.

In its first year, Nataraj faced financial loss but that did not deter Lahkar’s spirit. In many of his old interviews, Achyut Lahkar has said that without his brother, mobile theatre would not have been born in Assam. It also helped that Sada Lahkar was an actor and had a passion for acting.

Achyut Lahkar had studied in Kolkata and after his return to Assam, spent his time thinking about how to popularize mobile theatre all over the state, and therefore, experimented with many innovations. Lahkar was not just the producer of the group, but also an actor and playwright. The younger Lahkar thought that if double stages are created, it will save a lot of time as after one scene ends, the performance can start in the other. Therefore, the preparation and transition time from one scene to the other can be saved. His prime aim was to make mobile theatre *gonomukhi* (public

friendly). Because of the technical knowledge that he possessed, he used a wheel stage, separate seating for orchestra and light people in mobile theatre in the very first year itself which attracted audiences.

One of his most interesting innovations was “Theatrescope.” He used five stages in this concept, and there was a stage in front of the curtain in which dance and war scenes were performed. The first play that was staged in this way was *1857*, which is one of the most popular plays in the history of mobile theatre. The audience was spellbound after watching a play without breaks, just like a movie. Some scenes were shot earlier with a movie camera and then added to the play at the time of staging it. In an old interview, Achyut Lahkar reminisces how he came up with the idea of ‘theatrescope.’ *“In cinema, we have techniques like freeze, intercut, fade in, fade out. I thought why we cannot use the same techniques in theatre?”* (Kalita, 2011).

Lahkar’s group had gone to Bihar to perform in 1977-78, but faced financial losses there; but in Bengal, his group did well, which encouraged him. Nataraj group also travelled to Nepal. Interestingly, in Bihar and Nepal, the plays were performed in Hindi; whereas in Bengal they were performed in Bengali. Apart from Nataraj, many other theatre groups like Purbajyoti, Mancharoopa and Amar theatre also made their presence felt during this period. Subsequently, Achyut Lahkar’s nephew Ratan Lahkar started the Kohinoor theatre party in 1976, which has become one of the leading and most popular mobile theatre groups in the country.

The name ‘*Bhyrmoman*’ was coined by renowned Assamese social worker Radha Gobinda Baruah who was very impressed after seeing these theatre groups perform all over the state. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, when mobile theatre was at its growing stage, the local media did not pay much attention to mobile theatre. It received very less recognition as a form of theatre by local newspapers and magazines (Kalita, 2011). It is not so the case today. Today newspapers devote extensive coverage to mobile theatre; news channels give them ample space, there are numerous signboards, posters, and hoardings all over the state that promote upcoming theatres.

As a form of medium, mobile theatre today has extensive reach in Assam. The plays staged by these theatre groups highlight all kinds of issues, ranging from socio-political to economic and cultural ones. There are also plays that are purely commercial. Current affairs also influence some plays. In fact, it has emerged as the most popular form of entertainment in the state eclipsing the Assamese film industry.²¹ Almost 133 mobile theatre groups have existed in Assam at various points of time since the first one was established in the 1930s. In the present time, nearly 60 theatre groups perform their plays all over the state.

However, categorising mobile theatre as a form is a difficult task at hand. The study of the modernization of non-Western culture has been dominated by the metaphor of the ‘take-off’ introduced by the economists and by the assumption of incompatibility between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ cultures (Singer, 1971: 160). The modernization debate in India is especially a complicated one, as India is seen as a traditional country with modernization considered a Western influence (Sheth, 1969; Singer, 1971).

The idea of the modern is necessarily entangled with the concept of the Western.

This is not surprising given the history of modernity that emerged in the West and therefore was necessarily culturally constitutive of the Western context. This connotation of the “modern” with the “Western” was increased by the fact that the “Western” was inextricably linked with the “colonial” (Chaudhuri, 2012: 279). Eminent Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas, for instance, uses the term modernization synonymously with Westernization and has argued that it has affected traditional Indian society at four levels – technology, institutions, ideology and values (Srinivas, 1966: 50-52). However, the case of Assamese mobile theatre proves that it is not a black and white case. The boundaries of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ are inefficient to understand this particular form of theatre. The limitations of local and global, traditional and modern and non-Western and Western have become obsolete and inefficient in studying contemporary societies (Mosse in Sivaramakrishnan and Agarwal, 2003: 329).

Therefore, instead of looking at mobile theatre in binary terms, I argue that there is an encounter between the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional,’ the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’ and the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ within it. Scholars have tried to understand such encounters by using the conceptual category known as hybridity. Contemporary writings on globalization and culture suggest the demise of the modern notion of a universal culture. Taking their place is a growing agreement in the social and human sciences that global culture is hybrid, mixing heterogeneous elements into recombinant forms (Kraidy, 2005: 45).

Hybridity is a concept that confronts and problematizes boundaries, although it does not erase them completely (Ang, 2003). It means fusion and defies binary oppositions and understands reality as a fluid rather than a series of solid, separate boxes (Doniger, 2009: 57). The idea of cultural hybridization has been applied to a range of phenomena such as music, art, and literature, religious and spiritual life (Holton, 2008: 149). Many scholars favour the term hybridity over other terms like creolization and syncretism (Kraidy, 2005: 1). There is a growing acknowledgement that hybridity is a *prima facie* global condition caused by voluntary and forced migration, wars, invasions, slavery, intermarriages, and trade (ibid, 46).

However, there is also a counter argument that argues how debates on hybridity fail to locate themselves in everyday practices and contexts. It can be argued that those who herald a global condition of hybridity uses the explicit power dimension of a uni-polar world (Chaudhuri, 2003: 377). What is common to most understandings is the feeling that no culture is an isolate, and there cannot be a homogeneous culture (ibid, 387). According to Chaudhuri, the concept of hybridity blurs the structures of global power and creates a simulated space of global togetherness (ibid, 397) which is problematic to understand all contexts and societies. Hybridity is controversial.

Multiple and often antithetical uses have created a dispute over its meaning, implications, and usefulness (Kraidy, 2005: 2). For a critical theory of hybridity, a foregrounding of the historical trajectory of terms of the cultural mixture can help illuminate the role of power in the transcultural processes that weave the hybrid fabric of transnational culture (ibid, 47). Therefore, considering this argument, it can be stated that mobile theatre brings the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ together but is

not necessarily a cultural hybrid.

Mobile theatre is not a form of classical Sanskrit drama. The language that is used by these troupes is Assamese and not Sanskrit. No deity is addressed before the performances; there are not any fixed themes or scenes. Although *jatra* influenced its beginning, one cannot call mobile theatre a form of folk theatre either. Unlike in other types of folk theatre, Assamese film actors play a critical role in mobile theatre. The active involvement of Assamese film stars in various activities related to mobile theatre merges the gap that otherwise exists between film and theatre. In fact, film actors have contributed to mobile theatre gaining popularity.

Also, the technology used by these theatre groups is very different from conventional folk theatre. For instance, there is the use of extensive props, sound, lighting, and music by these troupes. A mobile theatre troupe keeps ready some of its successful productions of the yester-years to meet instant demands. They mix background music and pre-recorded effects with live performances to perfection. The companies have their projectors and generators (Ahuja, 2012: 264). There is also no active participatory relationship between the actors and the audience.

This does not mean that mobile theatre can be considered modern Indian theatre. Modern Indian theatre has been situated mainly in cities, with its audience being mostly of urban origin and the plays are staged inside proscenium theatre halls. Although mobile theatres have stages, those are make-shift and keep moving with the group. It originated in Pathshala, a town that is almost 110 kilometres from the capital city of Guwahati and is very rooted in rurality. Today there are more than 100 organizing committees that invite mobile theatre parties to perform in Pathshala itself (Figo and Patgiri, 2013: 98).

Jatra in Bengal underwent a radical transformation after the first proscenium theatre was established in Calcutta in 1872. It entered a new, lustreless era. It started assimilating ideas of plot construction, characterization, etc. from the popular plays of the time, most of which followed the European model (Sarkar, 1975: 88). *Jatra* fell out of favour with the educated city audience as modern theatre was introduced in Bengal. However, this was not the situation in Assam. Mobile theatre began much after modern theatre started in Assam and continued to be very popular amongst both rural and urban audiences. Even as late as the year 1941, the urban population of Assam was less than four percent of the total population of the region (Goswami, 2012: 3).

Thus, the case of mobile theatre shows that it is important to situate this research in between boundary zones where polarities become less meaningful (Mosse in Sivaramakrishnan and Agarwal, 2003: 330) and in engaging in identifying the distinctive and creative ways in which people tend to blur categories. After the birth of mobile theatre, Assam's stage-based theatrical tradition has seen a clear division – proscenium theatre and mobile theatre but the latter has permeated through categories, and it is difficult to categorize it into one form.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Assam's mobile theatre shows that it is a product of Assam's socio-cultural structure. The emergence and success of Assamese mobile theatre have

been intricately connected to both internal and external processes that have influenced Indian societies at large and Assamese societies in specific. It would not be an understatement to say that mobile theatre is one of the most popular, visible and accessible forms of entertainment in Assam. It has managed to survive and prosper in the face of an onslaught from various kinds of print, electronic and social media. This visibility and popularity is rooted in Assam's history and culture and ability of mobile theatre to break categories of rural and the urban, the modern and the traditional, and the folk and the classical.

Notes

¹<https://www.wishberry.in/blog/bringing-big-stories-to-the-small-stage-exploring-assams-mobile-theatre/>, accessed on 15th November 2017.

²<http://www.sify.com/news/famous-assamese-mobile-theatre-takes-centre-stage-news-national-kevu4cjecgsi.html>, accessed on 15th November 2017.

³<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/a-mobile-hope-for-cinema-in-assam/article5840820.ece>, accessed on 13th January 2018.

⁴<http://himalmag.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-assamese-film/>, accessed on 13th January 2018.

⁵<https://www.dailyo.in/arts/mobile-theatres-in-assam-othello-illiad-bollywood-shakespeare-superman-odyssey/story/1/9094.html>, accessed on 20th February 2017.

⁶<https://www.dailyo.in/arts/mobile-theatres-in-assam-othello-illiad-bollywood-shakespeare-superman-odyssey/story/1/9094.html>, accessed on 15 November 2017.

⁷The terms drama and theatre have been used interchangeably in this paper.

⁸*Rupaka* is the Sanskrit term for drama, which means that which gives form (Patgiri in Singh and Patgiri, 2018: 69).

⁹Sankaradeva did not call his plays *Ankiya Naat*. It was Ramcharan Thakur, the nephew of Sankaradeva's disciple Madhavdeva who named them as *Ankiya Naat*. Sankaradeva himself called his plays as *nat*, *natak*, *yatra* and *anka* (Pathak, 2015: 33, Pathak in Goswami and Haloi, 2017: 18).

¹⁰It is important to keep in mind that the term Assamese does not represent one language, culture and community. It is a generic term.

¹¹There is no written or pictorial remains of the play left but there are references to it in the writings of Sankaradeva's disciples known as Charitputhi (Pathak, 2015: 44). It is believed that *Cihnnayatra* became so popular that it was staged consecutively for seven nights (Kalita, 2011: 140).

¹²There is a debate on whether *Patni Prasada* or *Kaliya Damana* was written first, but it is widely considered that the former is Sankaradeva's first full play after *Cihnnayatra*.

¹³There were three invasions of Assam by the Burmese, with the first one taking place in 1817.

¹⁴In 1880, Assamese rendering of Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors, *Bhramaranga*, was staged by the Assamese residents in Kolkata. This book was translated into Assamese by four different people which shows its influence on Assamese literature.

¹⁵<https://www.guwahatipius.com/article-detail/changing-times-of-assamese-theatre->

movement, accessed on 27th February 2019.

¹⁶Before the advent of proscenium theatre in Indian cities, there was no strict division between the performers and the audience in folk theatre. The audience was very closely seated to the ‘stage area’ and there was engagement between the audience and the performers. This was not specific to Indian folk theatre alone. Geertz, for example, argues that the audience plays the roles of minor supporting characters in village dramas in Bali (Geertz, 1977). This engagement and proximity of physical space between the performers and the spectators reduced with the establishment of proscenium theatre halls where boundaries between the two are clearly demarcated.

¹⁷Although the popular argument is that *jatra* originated in Bengal and later spread to the other Eastern states, some scholars argue that *jatra* in Odisha existed much before than it did in Bengal. *Jatra* of Odisha is not an imitation of the Bengali *jatra* (Das, 2006: 170). However, this is a different debate and is outside the purview of the scope of this work.

¹⁸*Mangal-kavya* is a type of eulogistic verse in honour of a popular god or goddess in Bengal. The poems are associated with a local Bengali deity, Manasa, the goddess of snakes, or Shitala, the goddess of smallpox. These poems vary greatly in length, from 200 lines to several thousand. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mangal-kavya>, accessed on 15th November 2017. The *Mangal kavyas* have a presence in rural Bengal due largely to forms of folk theatre and narrative performance (Curley, 2008).

¹⁹Because of lack of historical records and written sources, accurate dates and years are not available.

²⁰http://indpaedia.com/ind/index.php/Assamese_theatre#Assam.E2.80.99s_mobile_theatres, accessed on 15th November 2017.

²¹<https://www.dailyo.in/arts/mobile-theatres-in-assam-othello-illiad-bollywood-shakespeare-superman-odyssey/story/1/9094.html>, accessed on 15th November 2017.

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