

The Popular and the Spectacular: A Study of Bhraamyamaan Theatre in Assam

Sanjib Kumar Baishya

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Zakir Husain Delhi College (Evening)
J. L. Nehru Marg
New Delhi-110002
sanjibzhcassam@gmail.com

Abstract

Taking recourse to a few Western concepts of popular theatre under the rubric of popular culture, this paper examines Bhraamyamaan theatre not only as a commercially viable product, but also as a consistent and successful cultural medium of bringing theatre to the people. The paper highlights some of the elements of popular culture which are pertinent to Bhraamyamaan theatre. It examines how the element of spectacle contributes towards construction of Bhraamyamaan theatre as popular culture in Assam. An attempt has been made to analyze some of the essential and time-tested methods used by the producers to create a spectacle on the stage. The concept of spectacle is discussed with reference to 'the sentiment of wonder', 'gimmick' 'dhamaka' etc in Indian contexts. The role of the audience in shaping Bhraamyamaan theatre as popular culture has also been discussed. Bhraamyamaan theatre's accessibility to the masses has given it a unique identity. Contesting the idea that Bhraamyamaan theatre should be undermined as lowbrow culture, the paper underlines the need to explore the dimensions of popular aesthetics keeping its unique characteristics in mind.

Keywords: Bhraamyamaan; popular; theatre; spectacle; audience

A brief introduction to Bhraamyamaan theatre is essential as it is assumed that many readers are not familiar with this art form. Bhraamyamaan has come from the word 'Bhraman' which means 'to travel' in Assamese. It is a significant part of the culture industry in Assam. There are about forty troupes of Bhraamyamaan theatre in Assam which travel across the state for about nine months starting from August every year. Some of the unique features of Bhraamyamaan theatre are as follows:

(a) It has its own makeshift auditorium with all the essential equipment such as stage, props, sound system, lights, loudspeakers, kitchen etc. The auditorium can accommodate about 2000 people.

(b) It has two performing stages which are attached to each other. When performance continues on stage 1, stage 2 is prepared behind the screen. Once the action is over on stage 1, curtain of stage 2 is quickly raised and vice versa.

(c) The performance begins with the orchestral music. The orchestra sits in the orchestra pit in front of the stages, separated from audience by a waist-size curtain.

(d) It is followed by a dance-drama. Name-casting is shown after this.

(e) The main play begins after the dance-drama.

(f) The organizers have their own mobile announcers who move in and around the place of performance in a taxi or an auto equipped with microphones and loudspeakers. Earlier the announcers used to move in cycle-rickshaws.

(g) Each theatre troupe has about 100-150 members that include the producer, secretary, playwrights, directors, actors, musicians, singers, sound-artists, light-men, dancers, instrumentalists, technicians, cooks, helpers etc.

(h) Each troupe stages three plays in three evening shows at a place. Then they move to another place to perform. Usually trucks are used to carry the equipment. Most producers have their own trucks. The artists are moved by buses and cars/taxis.

Morag Shiach, Professor of Cultural History at Queen Mary University of London, discusses “the popular” in cultural context and states that “popular” refers to a “cultural form” which is “intended for ordinary people”, whether in terms of accessibility, of “mode of address”, or of the “facts of reception” (27). Her concepts are useful in studying Bhraamyamaan as a popular “cultural form” which is accessible to and “intended for ordinary people”. In Bhraamyamaan, the ordinary theatre-goers are the real patrons. The involvement of the masses across time has ensured the desired mobility and success of Bhraamyamaan theatre. Shiach further observes that the term “popular” connotes “a particular mode of address identified within the text” with an assumption “to appeal to the ‘common people’ ” (28). In Bhraamyamaan, constant efforts are made to appeal to the “common people” through “a particular mode of address” on stage. Multiple methods are used to attract the audience. The artists and the producers are oriented towards production of a cultural product that is attractive and visible to the masses. Shiach moves to a definition of popular in terms of reception and says that “popular”

is “finding favor with, or approved by ‘the people’ ” (29). In Bhraamyamaan, there is no denial of the fact that it is a popular form of theatre that has been approved by “the people”. Shiach refers to an interesting definition of “popular art” and states that it is a “creative work that measures its success by the size of its audience and the profit it brings to the maker” (30). It is quite symptomatic of the view that Bhraamyamaan theatre succeeds as a popular form of theatre due to the involvement of a large number of audience and the profit that they bring to the producers. Thus, the role of audience, its size etc are important to examine while looking at Bhraamyamaan as a popular form of theatre. Some of these definitions of “the popular” are contextualized in critical examination of Bhraamyamaan as a popular art form in this paper. Shiach’s is a historical study of the term popular, across different discourses. Some of her observations are quite relevant to the discourse of Bhraamyamaan theatre as a popular art. Some of the unique features of Bhraamyamaan theatre are akin to what Shiach has discussed as “the popular”.

The term “popular theatre” comes from the French “theatre populaire”. According to Joel Schechter, Professor of Theatre Arts at San Francisco State University, the reference to people’s theatre and popular theatre in France dates back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Luis-Sebastien Mercier. Schechter goes on to discuss the contributions of Rolland Romain, Firmin Gemier, Jean Vilar and Bertolt Brecht and examines their effort to create popular theatre, influenced by the principles of “affordable” and “educational” theatre, “recreation, energy and intelligence in people’s theatre”, “caution against excessive preaching and empty amusement”, “plays available to the working class in a subsidized cultural centre” and its association with “democratic, proletarian, and politically progressive theatre” (3). Schechter further observes:

For several thousand years, popular forms such as mime, pantomime, shadow puppetry, and clowning have been available to diverse populations including urban lower classes and villagers across Europe and Asia. The names of these popular forms vary from one continent to another. They may be called folk art or traditional entertainments, rather than popular theatre; and India’s jatra should not be equated with France’s melodrama, although they share characteristics. In general, popular theatre performances were and still are publicly supported, highly visual and physical, portable, orally transmitted, readily understood, not flattering to wealth or tyranny; and for these reasons, as well as and for low or no admission cost, they have been widely appreciated. (3)

While commenting on the features of popular theatre, Brooks McNamara, the American theatre historian and the editor of *The Drama Review*, says:

Many showmen chose plays that provided opportunities for trickwork, fantasy and spectacle. It was on these aspects of their productions that they lavished money and attention since it was the sensational and the spectacular that invariably brought crowds into the theatre. (16)

McNamara further observes that “trickwork” and “spectacle” were very popular among the nineteenth-century audiences. He mentions that “hundreds of plays were written solely as vehicle for magic, special effects, or elaborately trapped settings” (16).

These examples hint at a continuing tradition of popular theatre in Asia and Europe that takes recourse to special effects, fantasy, etc. Bhraamyamaan, too, adopts a similar style. It is not in isolation that producers of Bhraamyamaan invest a lot of money on special effects, elaborate settings, spectacle etc. Bhraamyamaan borrows techniques from television and cinema because of its adherence to “scenography”. McNamara observes that the “traditional popular forms are influenced by the scenography of the newest popular entertainments, television and film” (12). Bhraamyamaan is frequently criticized for its imitation of film and television techniques. It is essential to note that Bhraamyamaan is popular theatre and ‘what it does’ or ‘what it should do’ is influenced by principles of popular theatre. Therefore, Bhraamyamaan has followed a tradition that popular theatres in Europe, too, have adhered to. This could be validated through examples of popular theatre cited by McNamara which are mostly from the West.



Figure: Pamphlet of Nataraj Theatre (Courtesy: Achyut Lahkar & Kiran Lahkar)

When Achyut Lahkar and his brother Sadananda Lahkar founded Nataraj Theatre in 1963, their intention was to entertain, to mesmerize the audience. Earlier, Sadananda Lahkar had an Opera party called Nataraj Opera. Achyut Lahkar and his mother objected to Sadananda's venture as he was doing something that was quite monotonous. There was nothing new in it. But Nataraj Opera received overwhelming response from the audiences across the state. Nataraj Opera, in a way, was a traveling troupe. But, unlike theatre, it had only male artists. Female roles too were played by male artists. When Achyut Lahkar was in Calcutta, he received adequate training in theatre. Technical knowledge facilitated his idea of transforming Nataraj Opera into a fully equipped traveling theatre. When he came back from Calcutta, Achyut Lahkar started working on his project. A few things that he found inappropriate in Opera were—female roles being played by male artists, incorrect pronunciation by actors etc. He also disliked the poetic language used in Opera. It looked artificial. Lahkar wished to do away with it and wanted the characters to speak a language that is spoken by people in society (26). Opera was vastly influenced by plays mostly translated from Bangla. But the quality of those translations was not up to the mark (Hazarika 278). Achyut Lahkar tried to modify the plots and contexts of those texts on several occasions. Achyut Lahkar had clear objectives in mind while making Nataraj Theatre. He states his objectives in his memoir titled *Bhraamyamaan Theatre* in the following way:

My objective in Bhraamyamaan theatre was to transform city-centred theatre into a people-centred art with a more dynamic contour. Bhraamyamaan theatre was an innovative creation of my resolve. Over day and night, I kept on thinking how we would build makeshift hall, stage instead of the permanent hall in the city or how we would move those settings from one place to another over the day. I think, whenever I felt a necessity, I found a path to invention. Sometimes, I drew pictures on papers. Each necessity led me towards inventing a new thing. As I had some technical knowledge, I was able to invent how the stage would be, where the orchestra would sit, where the lights would be, when to show the castings etc. Using all these in theatre, I tried to mesmerize the audience. The audiences were surprised to see blue and red lights blinking on the stage. The love and response from the audience gradually increased. (26-27) (My translation)

The 1960s brought remarkable change to the cultural scenario in Assam. The introduction of professional traveling theatre (Bhraamyamaan theatre) in 1963 by Achyut Lahkar added some important dimensions to the reach and popularity of art forms in Assam. Achyut Lahkar's idea of bringing theatre to the people was revolutionary. The distinction between the

rural and urban audiences diminished. The major reason was the mobility of the troupes that traveled across the state making it easily accessible to both rural and urban audiences. Another important factor was the ticket rates that were kept very low, especially for the rural audiences. Bhraamyamaan theatre gradually established itself as a popular art form across the state. However, it hardly posed a challenge to cinema, which was running successfully as the most popular art form in Assam. Both were running successfully and parallel to each other. Cinematic techniques, however, were used in Bhraamyamaan theatre although Bhraamyamaan had its own unique features and methods of production. Mutual exchanges were seen on many occasions. Some artists were involved in both cinema and theatre. Traditionally, they were glamorous artists. For instance, Phani Sarma was a renowned artist who was conversant in both cinema and theatre. Prasanta Hazarika, Ila Kakati etc were artists involved in both cinema and Bhraamyamaan theatre. In course of time, however, Assamese cinema lost its commercial viability. But Bhraamyamaan consolidated its base and it never lost its grips on the culture industry of Assam.

Nataraj Theatre, in its journey of forty years, from 1963 to 2003, staged more than a hundred plays that include *Beula*, which was continually staged for more than thirty years; *Jerengaar Sati* for about fifteen years. It is interesting to note that apart from plays written by noted playwrights of his time, Lahkar himself wrote a good number of plays, the prominent among them being *Black Money*, *Erina* etc. As a result of his continuous experiments on stage, the audiences could see theatre scope, cine theatre, Alsom or round-shaped stage, moving stage, three stages, two stages etc. in Nataraj Theatre. He followed the idea that theatre is a dynamic art and it perishes if there is no innovation. The reason behind the closure of his theatre was his inability to manage its affairs due to illness, not because his troupe lacked innovation. Forty years of sustenance as a professional troupe is reason enough to say that Lahkar was successful not only as the pioneer, but also the unparalleled practitioner of the popular traveling theatre in Assam. Lahkar was a true avant-garde artist. His theatre in 1963 was a revolution, considering the fact that he made theatre a profession at a time when it was looked down upon as an inferior art form and inclusion of female artists was considered a taboo in Assam.

Since its inception, Bhraamyamaan theatre has been facing severe criticism from the Assamese intellectuals. The most common allegation levied against it is its adherence to spectacle rather than plot, theme, script etc. But this is a deductive approach taken by the critics, as it is not sufficient only to talk about aesthetic drama/theatre if we are to talk about Assamese theatre in its entirety. One must recognize the existence of the folk and the popular, freeing

oneself from a blind adherence to mainstream arts. The realization that popular theatre exists alongside aesthetic theatre will make the critics analyze Bhraamyamaan theatre in its own context with its own merits. There are different dimensions that need to be considered while discussing this popular art form. Some of the dimensions of popular theatre mentioned by the theatre historian and professor emeritus of drama at the University of Manchester, David Mayer come in handy. He states:

... when we accept the possibility that for every literary, philosophic, and consciously artistic theatrical piece there are some dozens of inartistic, energetic, mindless, unliterary dramatic genres which enjoy a vast popularity and which appeal, not necessarily to persons of refinement and educated taste, but to the greater part of the population, perhaps to the entire population, do we begin to see the theatrical expressions of an age in a more accurate perspective. (259)

Interestingly, some of the points mentioned by Mayer such as “inartistic”, “energetic”, “mindless”, “unliterary”, no appeal to “persons of refinement and educated taste” etc. are the major points of criticism against Bhraamyamaan theatre. Besides, Bhraamyamaan theatre appeals to “the greater part of population” in Assam. Therefore, one should not get carried away by the parameter that we must “accept literary merit as the paramount test of dramatic excellence”.

While analyzing popular theatre, for Mayer, one should not be ‘rigid and doctrinaire’. Mayer suggests that while discussing popular drama we should be ‘flexible and imaginative, open to suggestion, to perception, even impetuous’ (260). While discussing Bhraamyamaan theatre, too, these dimensions have to be taken care of. Mayer also identifies some of the central characteristics and limits of the adjective “popular”. For him, popular means something “of the people” and popular drama is “principally concerned with the widest reach of audience available at a given moment or place”. Mayer observes: “popular drama is that drama produced by and offered for the enjoyment or edification of the largest combination of groupings possible within that society” (263). Mayer’s ideas can be aptly applied to Bhraamyamaan theatre which has a wide reach, cuts across classes and is an established popular theatre form in Assam. Despite its popular nature, Bhraamyamaan theatre is often criticized by a few critics who are influenced by their “aesthetic critical dicta”. But it has to be remembered that “the literary is antithetical to the popular”, so the popular has to be commented on its own merits. Its unique identity and nature must be respected.

Bhraamyamaan theatre is also seen as a part of lowbrow culture. In this context, American sociologist Thomas J. Scheff's distinction between highbrow and lowbrow is interesting:

The designation of an object or practice as highbrow or lowbrow depends upon several interrelated variables. First is its degree of accessibility: the more accessible the object or practice the more likely it is to be labeled lowbrow. A second variable is the degree of emotional "distance" adopted by consumers vis-à-vis the cultural text in question: a hyper-rational or "over-distanced" experience indicates highbrow cultural consumption whereas an overly emotional or "under-distanced" experience signals lowbrow status. (67)

Because Bhraamyamaan theatre is accessible to the masses, it is seen as belonging to the category of lowbrow art. If we look at performances, we find that the experience of audiences is not "over-distanced", but overtly emotional or "under-distanced", signaling that it can be categorized as lowbrow art. This lowbrow status of Bhraamyamaan theatre is projected as a marker of an inferior art form, which does not seem to have any aesthetic value. But it is to be understood that popular theatre should not necessarily have to follow standard aesthetic principles. This does not imply that Bhraamyamaan does not have any aesthetic value. It has its own set of aesthetic principles that are unique. Mere demarcation between highbrow and lowbrow is not sufficient to put these in two clearly distinct compartments. There were times when plays such as *Saraguri Sapori*, *Baghjal*, *Matir Garhi* etc. were produced. Although the plays were not commercially successful in Bhraamyamaan theatre they made their mark as significant aesthetic plays.

Bhraamyamaan theatre is often criticized for being trash. At the same time, it is difficult to understand why the masses consume it willingly. Noted director and playwright of Bhraamyamaan theatre, Abhijit Bhattacharya says that the reason is unknown why audiences watch trash, even though they do not have much appreciation for the play (14). Maybe the aesthetic of the popular subconsciously works behind reception by the audiences. Or, maybe, due to continuous advertising in newspapers, television etc., the spectators become curious to see a performance.

Social scientist V. Ramakrishna observes, "In any society, elite and popular strands are two streams of culture that exist simultaneously as parallel forms with different levels of mutually influencing interactions" (183). Parallel existence of elite and popular strands in Assamese theatre is clearly visible. On the one hand, there is the practice of amateur and

government sponsored theatres; on the other hand, there is popular Bhraamyamaan theatre, which functions according to its own principles. But, theatre critics have mentioned on many occasions that amateur theatre is never threatened by Bhraamyamaan theatre as both have different objectives. Both have different principles and different audience reaches. Depending on their tastes, the audiences can see performances in both categories and are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes, it is observed that the forms complement each other. For instance, Arun Sarma is a renowned playwright and director in amateur theatre practices in Assam. But, his play has been performed on Bhraamyamaan stage that received glowing reviews from the critics. The artists, directors and playwrights as well as the plays are not mutually exclusive in the so-called elite and popular theatre practices in Assam.

The most attractive element of Bhraamyamaan theatre is that it has got the scope to create spectacle on stage which draws the masses to the auditorium. Since the beginning of its journey the producers have been putting more emphasis on creating a spectacle on stage than other elements. The scholar of Sanskrit and Tamil Literature A. V. Subramanian states, “The sentiment of wonder is spectacular, demonstrative, showy: it has nothing of the shrinking violet about it: it is dramatic, it is domineering, it demands individual attention, shutting out all other rival voices” (1). “The sentiment of wonder”, as it is “spectacular”, is the prime sentiment in Bhraamyamaan theatre. Other sentiments, too, are judiciously used. But the reason why the “sentiment of wonder” plays a major role is its ability to draw audiences. The theatre troupes bank on reception of the plays by the masses. Most troupes put efforts and money in creating a circus-like spectacle on stage. The commercial viability, being the prime consideration for producers, it becomes pertinent that they invest a huge chunk of their capital in producing plays that have entertaining, popular and at the same time, unusual elements, that easily draw audiences to the theatre.

Examining the role of technical gimmick in Bhraamyamaan theatre, Shivanu Borah states that the widespread popularity of television helped audiences get used to watching movies with advanced technological gimmicks which in turn influenced their taste. Leaving television at home, the audience started to find a similar viewing experience in Bhraamyamaan theatre. The producers, too, started to emphasize on technical gimmicks, realizing that it was not enough to rely on performance by actors/artists alone. Today, every theatre troupe, small or big, produces at least one play with technical gimmick. This happens due to the changing taste of audiences. Borah observes that most audiences wish to relax in the evening after spending a day filled with problems and struggles. Perhaps a spectacle play with technical gimmick fulfils their need. Borah cites examples of helicopters, ships, water, river, accident scenes, dangerous animals, snakes,

destruction scene of the World Trade Centre etc, which have all been shown on stage at different times by different troupes as gimmicks to avoid losses (17).

Assamese writer Ganesh Kalita observes that the producers of Bhraamyamaan theatre have to invest a lot of money in production due to a competition of *dhamakas* (spectacle). Most plays are devoid of a story. The only objective of the producers is to create circus-like, explicit gimmicks/spectacle to attract the young audiences. Commenting on the effect of glamorous artists, Kalita observes that a producer has to shell out about 40-50 lac to the artists every year. There is a significant disparity in remuneration between glamorous artists and regular theatre artists. This, for Kalita, has led to a significant decrease in the number of actors in each troupe. Kalita, however, clarifies his position by stating that he is not opposed to inclusion of glamorous artists. He opines that there is a need to recognize the importance of regular theatre artists and says that there should be no discriminatory treatment against them. A theatre troupe succeeds not because of an individual, but because of an organized team effort. Kalita has emphasized the importance of teamwork in Bhraamyamaan, where contribution from each individual should be recognized. He opines that the practice of using recorded music should be avoided as this has led to a denial of space for regular musicians and singers (31).

Producers try to employ the most effective and viable mode in Bhraamyamaan, keeping a practical and time-tested approach in mind. Recording of music was a costly affair earlier. But due to technological advancements, it has become affordable and convenient for the producers to do so. The producers take a professional approach leaving little or no scope for error in their performance. Use of recorded music is convenient. It is also a part of cost-cutting measures taken by producers.

Describing the spectacle in Bhraamyamaan theatre, Jatindranath Goswami observes that the makeshift auditorium transforms into a great spectacle when realistic as well as fantastic elements, such as moving trains, sinking ships, cars, flying birds, water gods under the water, movement of human skeleton etc are shown on stage. He believes that scientific and technological development towards the end of twentieth century influenced the changes in theatre which is reflected in Bhraamyamaan as well (J. Goswami 9). Due to such developments, it was possible to stage mega-budget plays such as *Titanic*, *Dinosaur-or Atanka* etc, in which spectacle surpassed everything else. Emphasis on spectacle is a popular practice in Bhraamyamaan theatre. Special effects and techniques used as part of spectacle are often highlighted while publicizing the plays.

Conclusions

Bhraamyamaan theatre, adopting the norms of cultural capitalism or consumer culture, does its best to present its products/plays to potential consumers/audiences. Gimmicks are used by most of the troupes but none can claim that it can help produce commercially successful plays. Glamour is an important element but no glamorous artist can claim that he/she alone can draw audiences to the auditorium. Doing average business is one thing and getting extraordinary and remarkable success in producing a popular play is another. Popularity of a play is dependent on a few assumptions. But there is no surety that these assumptions will work. The methods and strategies based on assumptions, sometimes, turn out to be counterproductive. Therefore, experiments go on as part of a continuous process in Bhraamyamaan theatre. The methods and strategies keep on changing. Success or failure of a play depends on intuition, observation, experience and execution of a plan by the producers. The producers must have a sense of the market and mood of audiences. These are again based on a few assumptions. There is no scientific method of making a popular and commercially successful production.

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BIO- NOTE

Sanjib Kumar Baishya is working as an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Zakir Husain Delhi College (Evening), University of Delhi. He has published a good number of poems and research articles in some of the renowned literary journals and magazines such as The Blue Nib, The Criterion, Lapis Lazuli, Rock Pebbles etc. His poem titled 'Discourse of the Diaspora' has been published in The Indian Weekender, a popular weekly published from Auckland, New Zealand. He writes in three languages: Assamese, English and Hindi. *Truths in the Market*, a collection of his short poems, was published in January 2019.