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THE POPULAR DIMENSIONS OF BHRAAMYAMAAN THEATRE IN ASSAM

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Abstract : *With a history of more than fifty years, Bhraamyamaan theatre in Assam is the most vibrant cultural form with a lot of unique features. The professional troupes travel from one place to another with a makeshift auditorium that can accommodate about 2000 people under its roof. About 150 artists and workers are associated with each troupe. There are more than forty troupes which are producing commercially successful plays every year. Bhraamyamaan has all the required elements of popular theatre and it needs to be discussed through the prism of popular culture. The paper attempts to discuss the various dimensions of Bhraamyamaan theatre through the prism of popular culture. The paper also examines the important aspects of Bhraamyamaan theatre through some of the Western theories of popular culture and popular theatre.*

Keywords: Bhraamyamaan, popular, culture, commercial, theatre

Bhraamyamaan has come from the word “Bhraman”. In Assamese, “Bhraman” means “to move” or “to travel”. Bhraamyamaan means “mobile” or “traveling”. Bhraamyamaan theatre is the most popular and vibrant form of theatre in Assam. It is also the most commercially successful form of performing art in Assam. With no government funding or subsidy, the proprietors of the troupes employ highly commercial methods with a lot of spectacular elements in it to entertain the audience. The audience looks for entertainment which is provided on two combined stages (unlike the single traditional proscenium stage). The producers try to reproduce cinematic effects on stage. The shift of action from one stage to another is spectacular. Gimmick and technology take the centre stage in this popular theatre. Although Assamese cinema is not a commercially successful industry, a good number of cinema artists are hired to perform on stage popularly known as glamour artists. Then there is a banner play for each troupe. Each troupe stages three plays every year of which one is projected as a banner play. A banner play is the one on which a producer invests the most in terms of its publicity and production. The commercial enterprise was visible when the troupes put up adaptations of popular Hollywood and Bollywood movies such as *Titanic*, *Jurassic Park*, *Sholay*, *Bandit Queen* etc. When plays such as *Beula*, *Ramayan*, *Mahabharat*, *Lady Diana*, *Naag Kanya* etc were staged, the spectacle was the most celebrated element on stage.

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”.

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.

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.

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” (Schechter 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 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” (McNamara 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 England/Europe.

When Achyut Lahkar and his brother Sadananda Lahkar founded Nataraj Theatre, their intention was to entertain, to mesmerize the audience. Achyut Lahkar had clear objectives in mind while making Nataraj Theatre. He states his objectives 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/form. And 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)

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. It never remained static. 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. In the postmodern context, he was able to “cross the barrier” and “close the gap” between “high art” and “low art”, between the “aesthetic” and the “popular”, “mainstream” and the “popular” etc. by significantly moving ahead of his time.

Marcel Danesi’s observation on popular culture is very interesting:

In the history of human cultures, pop culture stands out as atypical. It is culture by the people for the people. In contrast to historical (traditional) culture, it rejects both the supremacy of tradition and of established cultural norms, as well as the pretensions of intellectualist tendencies within contemporary artistic cultures. Pop culture has always been highly appealing for this very reason, bestowing on common people the assurance that cultural trends are for everyone, not just for an elite class of artists and cognoscenti. It is thus populist, unpredictable, and highly ephemeral, reflecting the ever-changing taste of one generation after another. (4)

This reflection of the “ever-changing taste of one generation after another” has been a salient feature of Bhraamyamaan theatre in Assam. Many critics opine that Bhraamyamaan has drastically moved away from its original form. But in saying so, they have probably failed to notice the paradigm shifts in the dimensions of its popularity across time. As reception of any art form is dependent on the taste of the present generation, as the generation changes, so does taste. The challenge of an art form such as Bhraamyamaan is to cater to its spectators that cut across classes. In this context, Marcel Danesi aptly mentions American composer Stephen Sondheim, for whom “popular trends in culture quickly grow quaint”. In Bhraamyamaan, a producer is not looking to produce a classic. Rather, the producer is trying to present something which is a complete entertaining package, and can attract a huge audience. So, a producer cannot bank on a singular method/technique of making a play popular. He/she has to keep changing the ingredients of popularity, keeping the expectations of the audience in mind. The experiments on stage are subject to the changing expectations of audiences. For instance, the young generation is fond of modern Western and Bollywood style songs and dance. Therefore, to attract the youth, the producers of Bhraamyamaan theatre invest a lot in choreography and music (especially recorded music). Today’s youth are also fond of watching action movies and they expect similar elements on stage. The producers study the psyche of this group of potential audience and execute their plan accordingly. Keeping profit as the prime motive, the producers hire artists from cinema with attractive remuneration. Majority of audiences wish to watch popular cinema artists on stage; they wish to see them perform ‘live’. This desire to watch live performances of artists makes the

producers bring in stars/glamorous artists into their troupes every year, resulting in huge cost of production and hike in the price of tickets.

The legendary Assamese singer Bhupen Hazarika says that he does not agree with the fact that the stage has been controlled by the exploiters (Kalita 194). The producers, who have created this theatre which helps poor artists, cannot be categorized as exploiters of culture. An art in which the actors, playwrights and light men earn more than the producers cannot be considered an art which exploits. He further says that if any troupe tries to mislead the audience, then that particular troupe should be criticized. It's not fair to criticize all troupes.

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. Therefore, they play with the spectators' "dissociation of sensibility" and "willing suspension of disbelief". 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, hair-raising, eye-catching, popular and at the same time, unusual elements, that easily draw audiences to the theatre.

There are many other elements that have made Bhraamyamaan a popular art form. If we consider analyzing the reception of plays, it appears that the plays have appealed to the masses making them into commercially successful drama. This has happened due to audience-response, healthy collaboration between artists and audiences, an intimate partnership between producers and patrons. Community participation gets highlighted while examining the process of production and consumption/reception in Bhraamyamaan theatre, in both rural and urban areas in Assam.

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