

**ECONOMICS OF MOBILE THEATRES IN ASSAM:
GROWTH, INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT
PERSPECTIVES**

THESIS

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CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE OF FURTHER STUDIES

7.1 INTRODUCTION

It is a widely held opinion that children should learn a foreign language in primary school and not in secondary school. There are several reasons why it is better for children to start learning a foreign language in primary school. In this research paper, we have already discussed about the financial mobile theatre of Assam and its journey since its inception. These discussions in the previous six chapters make it clear that this unique cultural platform has no parallel in the contemporary theatre scenario of this country and the uniqueness of the mobile theatre of Assam is itself an amazing fact. Though in its initial years, mobile theatre was considered as a rudimentary theatre performance for the village people, especially in the Lower Assam region, within a short span of time it has emerged as the most attractive and lucrative part of the performing arts in Assam. The mobile theatre of Assam, popularly known as “Bhramyoman”, is now considered as the most popular medium of entertainment in Assam, cutting across all social strata and geographical boundaries. The most surprising fact is that this unique form of theatre has survived despite hundreds of hurdles and unforeseen obstacles. Amidst the sea of the digital world, mobile theatre has successfully absorbed all the latest techniques and has been able to sustain itself commercially while most other platforms including digital serials and cinemas produced in Assamese have remained unsuccessful.

This chapter has attempted to review the research questions raised in the introductory chapter and analyse whether they have come true or not. In this

chapter, the author also tries to find out a whole range of problems that the mobile theatre has been facing for a long time and would like to make some recommendations in terms of financial management and commercial viability in order to develop the strength of the mobile theatre and ensure a sustainable economic model for its better future. This study is based on two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that the mobile theatre industry contributes significantly in generating employment opportunities and income in various categories in Assam and the second hypothesis is that the profitability of mobile theatre is higher than Assamese Film Industry.

7.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The first introductory chapter of this research work has wanted to establish the relevance of the subject of this research work titled, 'Economics of Mobile Theatre in Assam: Growth, Employment and Income Perspective'. The very introductory chapter of this research thesis gives a comprehensive idea about the development of mobile theatre and an overall historical perspective of world theatre right from the beginning of Greek and Roman theatre to the summer theatre, community theatre and various roving theatre of the twentieth century. The development of Indian theatre since the era of Vedic tradition to the contemporary stages along with the role The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) that stimulated new a theatrical experiment has also been discussed in this chapter. The chapter gives an idea about the role of Mahapurush Sankardeva who had developed Assamese theatre in real sense and how such tradition influenced Mr. Achyut Lahkar to invent a new theatrical tradition in Pathsala, in 1963. The Objectives of the Study, hypothesis, literature review, the research questions to be explored, along with the methodology adopted, and limitations of the study has been established in the second chapter Literature review and third chapter: Data Collection and Methodology

The 4th chapter, 'Growth of Mobile Theatre Industry in Assam and its Economic Perspective' elaborates the development of mobile theatre in a small township Pathsala in the very beginning of the sixth decade of the twentieth century.

The historical and cultural influences that contributed upon such development and the role of Yatras that originated along with the Neo-vaisnavite movement but received huge popularity in Assam after the annexation of this territory with the British Empire through the *Yandaboo treaty* signed between East India Company and Burmese emperor in 1826 AD has also been discussed in this chapter. The process of emerging the first “*Bhramyoman*” ‘Nataraj Theatre’, Economic and Financial perspective of developing Mobile Theatre at Pathsala and financial sources as well as lost and profit of a mobile theatre is the core content of this chapter. From a theoretical perspective, this chapter also establishes the working of mobile theatres under the conventional market structure of monopolistic competition while finding reduced consumers’ welfare due to market imperfections.

In the 5th chapter, ‘Structure and Employment Opportunities in Mobile Theatre’ includes elaborate discussion about the scale, operation and business structure of the mobile theatre. How this distinct cultural platform with its inherent struggle of existence and without having any organisation support from both the state authority and organised private capital has sustained for long six decades has been discussed in this chapter. Identifying itself as exclusive professional theatres that have been generating employment for thousands of families and that is the secret behind the formation of almost one hundred and fifty mobile theatre groups since the days of Nataraj Theatre in 1963. The financial structural of a mobile theatre is undoubtedly exceptional and a comprehensive perception of the expenditure and income generation of a mobile theatre is very much needed to understand the operation of mobile theatre that prolonged for nine months in a year and entails a huge preparation and logistics for boarding, rehearsals, food, travelling, performances and many unseen situations. There are inequalities in wage structure and high inequality within the category of ‘actors’ wage structure. This chapter explains the employment opportunities of mobile theatre which now become a source of financial security for hundreds of artistes and others involved in a creative medium.

The 6th chapter is titled ‘Comparative Analysis of mobile theatre Vis-à-vis Assamese Cinema’. As the title suggests, in this chapter an attempt has been made to understand the historical journey of Assamese film industry right from the avant-

garde initiative had taken by Late Jyotiprasad Agarwala in 1935 when he made the first Assamese film ‘Joymoti’. It has been noticed that though more than 300 films were produced in the state since 1935 but from the perspective of commercial viability the condition of Assamese film as a whole is quite pitiable. According to one of the prominent film critiques of the state and former Director General of Assam Police Harekrishna Deka, Cinema produced in Assamese has not emerged as a capital-intensive entertainment industry to generate confidence amongst the potential investors. Here in this chapter a sincere effort has been made to discover the reasons for failure of Assamese film industry as an entertainment industry. Differing to such an embarrassing scenario of Assamese film industry, the mobile theatre on the other hand has been sustaining itself as one of the most popular medium of entertainment and mass media. This chapter exemplifies many instances by taking personal interviews from a number of actors who are unhesitant to express the view that an actor can earn incredibly much in mobile theatre compared to any other entertainment media including films. That is why most of star actors of Assam prefer mobile theatre for better financial earnings. It further looks into the effects of COVID 19 lockdowns on mobile theatres.

After the elaborate discussion in the previous four chapters, the researcher has come to the conclusion that the research questions have yielded the following findings:

In regards the first hypothesis the researcher it has been noticed with sufficient data’s that mobile theatre has already developed a sustained the trend of professional theatre which was the basic dream of Mr. Achyut Lahkar. The pioneer of this platform wanted to develop a theatre group which could provide financial security for the whole year that eventually would generate a stable avenue for those people who wanted association with theatre. His most significant contributions were to bring folk artists like flute player, Actors engaged with Jatra, dancers, Drummers, etc. to the stage and has made the profession remuneratively viable. Now days, it has surpassed even the film industry in terms of its popularity and even in employment generation in Assam. There are more than 20 active mobile theatre groups in Assam today (Mobile Theatre Producers’ Association, 2012). Each group holds near about 100 members — a mix of technicians, cooks, helpers

and of course, the acting crew. It has been estimated that every Theatre Season more than 2000 artists and other workers get direct employment opportunities like the actors, directors, producers, technicians, cooks, helpers, drivers etc. Besides, some other career options related to mobile theatre also may opt. They are: Play Writer, Music Director, Choreographer, Artist, Painter, Costume Designer, Tailor etc. While taking interview with different artists of the state many have made unhesitant statement that unlike the film industry of Assam the mobile theatre groups on the other hand pay huge sum of remuneration to their artist amount of which may be unimaginable for an Assamese film producer. Actors like Jatin Bora, Prastuti Parasar charge more than INR 30 lakhs for a theatre season. This may be the sole reason for which a large number of contemporary artists of the film and television industry of the state regard mobile theatre as the most viable carrier option. The second hypothesis is also tested in this part of the study.

In regards the third hypothesis it has been proved in chapter 5 that there is inequality in the wage structure and specifically among the wages of the actors.

In the 6th chapter it is found that the profitability of mobile theatre is higher than that of Assamese Film Industry. Moreover, the socio-economic impact of mobile theatre is strongly perceptible in different parts of the state where we can see a large number of social, cultural and religious institutions like school-college buildings, Namghar, sports or cultural clubs etc. have been built with the money that are generated by inviting mobile theatre in those respective localities. Such noble causes never ever have been taken by the film industry not only in the state of Assam but anywhere else within our country. Though we may mention about a few Assamese films that have received acclamation, rewards and moreover commercial success, but considering the overall financial viability of Assamese films the success of these movies could be presumed as exceptions. Although the cinema industry provides the entire entertainment industry with principal ingredients anywhere in the world but in Assam the situation is quite pathetic. The people of Assam by and large, have lost interest in dropping at cinema halls and simultaneously satellite television channels have already penetrated in every household. Moreover, the digital entertainment that has radically changed the whole narratives of entertainment in the last one decade has been gradually making the traditional cinema, television and music irrelevant. While the Industry like cinema, television and music industry has been struggling with many

shortcomings, the mobile theatres on the other hand has been striving and indeed have succeeded in attracting the masses.

7.3 PROBLEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on discussions with various mobile theatre stakeholders during the period of this study and thoughts and ideas shared by mobile theatre enthusiasts, I would like to highlight here some problems and suggestions for improving this most popular art form in Assam:

Problems:

- 1) It is a fact that most of the mobile theatres that have come up in the last six decades do not have an organised financial structure by nature and these groups live on the whims of a particular person or a group of small investors. Rather than develop a sustainable financial structure to operate mobile theatre in a transparent manner, mobile theatre producers have always preferred a loose way of doing things.
- 2) In the absence of an organised financial structure, the management of a mobile theatre is also very informal. Because of this flexible nature in both administration and funding, there is always some uncertainty about the survival of individual mobile theatre groups.
- 3) For mobile theatre as a commercial enterprise, there are no specific rules/regulations or set norms for the payment of workers and artists. While a few receive very high salaries compared to their fellow artists, most members of mobile theatres are paid a minimum wage, which in turn is set by the owner/proprietor of the group. Moreover, since there are no legal or administrative guidelines, these wages are paid irregularly. There are many instances where wages are not paid, which is a common occurrence in almost all mobile theatre groups. Since the owner always gives priority to the glamour artists, many workers/artists have to struggle to get their wages on time.
- 4) Though most of the unorganised sectors have introduced a host of welfare schemes like provident fund, medical insurance, ESI, EPF etc. for the benefit of

their employees, mobile theatres do not have such schemes for their employees so far.

5) In the absence of any statutory scheme to control and manage the affairs of the mobile theatres, irregularities, financial mismanagement and moreover invisible insecurity are observed in the operations of the mobile theatres. Moreover, in the absence of statutory provisions, many theatre groups have been formed in different parts of the State whose capital investment may not be white as alleged by a number of persons associated with this platform. Though the Assam government has enacted a law Assam Mobile Theatre (Regulation & Artists' Welfare Fund) Act 2010 to regulate the activities of mobile theatre, but unfortunately the law has not been implemented due to unknown reasons.

7.4 SUGGESTIONS:

1) Mobile theatre should be recognised as an organised sector and to this end the Assam Government should enact a law regulating the registration and operations of this cultural platform. Such a law is essential to ensure financial help, support and promotion. Otherwise, the fate of each group will be determined by a particular individual and the government would stand as a silent spectator to the personal whims of each owner.

2) The government, with the help of the Mobile Theatre Producers Association and also with the theatre community, should draw up specific guidelines for the management and financial/commercial operation of this cultural enterprise. Such guidelines will certainly help in fixing logical and reasonable wages for each member of a mobile theatre group.

3) The Government of Assam should earmark a certain amount in each financial budget for the upkeep of mobile theatre groups. This amount will be used to provide financial support to groups that have to go out of business due to financial constraints. Also, a larger amount could be used for the welfare fund set up for the benefit of the employees of the mobile theatres.

4) Every mobile theatre group should at least make certain welfare schemes like provident fund, ESI and medical insurance compulsory.

- i) The Government of Assam should immediately implement the Assam Mobile Theatre (Regulation & Artists' Welfare Fund) Act 2010 to alleviate the financial difficulties of the employees of mobile theatres who have already lost their wages in the last two years due to COVID.
- ii) Mobile theatres may consider videotaping their best selected plays and broadcasting them through TV to improve profitability.
- iii) The nine-month working structure of the mobile theatres can be extended if the theatre companies play the remaining three months of the year in halls located in areas where the infrastructure is available. This will enable them to extend provident fund and group insurance for their employees, which in turn will help them to register as an organised business.
- iv) Last but not the least, mobile theatre groups that existed before March 2020 should be protected as Assam's cultural heritage and the state government should set up a body to take over the management of a mobile theatre if it could not survive due to financial losses or mismanagement.

7.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is subject to several limitations, which are explained below.

First, the income data used in the study came mainly from the lists and questionnaires and personal interviews conducted during the study. It should be noted that all payments to workers are in the form of wages in cash. Therefore, this research is not based on any verifiable data as far as income is concerned.

Secondly, since the entire industry is not organised, it is difficult to ascertain the true value of income earned (both direct and indirect). Therefore, the part of indirect income generated by mobile theatre in a particular location has been completely ignored.

7.6 SCOPE OF FURTHER RESEARCH

Despite the careful attempt to include as many aspects of mobile theatre as possible, there are still some areas for further study, which can be outlined as follows:

First, the concept and work of mobile theatre began in 1963 and since then many people have devoted their lives to its growth and as a source of income. A socio-economic study of their lives and contribution to the whole category of performing arts over the years could be a future area of study.

Secondly, a comparative study of mobile theatre in comparison to other forms of performing arts like Jatra and Ojapali could be another area of study.

Third, the nature of investment in mobile theatre and the return on investment could be compared with that of the Assamese film industry. In addition, the role of advertising in both cinema and mobile theatre could be further studied.

Fourth, as we learned during the COVID19 disaster, the operation of mobile cinemas is not protected from shocks, nor is there any mechanism in the structure itself to absorb shocks. Further studies could be conducted to explore possible ways to reduce the uncertainty related to the income of people associated with this industry.

From the above discussion, this study concludes that the mobile theatres, which are unique to Assam and operated as a monopolistic competition with great inequality in the wage structure, offer immense potential to increase employment opportunities and income if the government restructures to protect the security of the employees and the economic viability of the theatre group owners.
