

CHAPTER 6

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MOBILE THEATRE VIS-A-VIS ASSAMESE CINEMA

6.1 INTRODUCTION:

The journey of Assamese Cinema begins with Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwala. A poet, playwright, songwriter and music composer, man of letters and also a freedom fighter of India who made the first Assamese film 'Joymoti' in the year 1935. It was a historical film about a courageous young woman of Ahom era and surprisingly this avant-garde film was released just four years after the release of Alam Ara and 45 years after the historic invention of cinema in 1890. The theme of the film was based on a historical figure of the Ahom dynasty and Jyotiprasad adapted it from 'Joymoti Kunwari', a play by the Assamese writer Lakshminath Bezbaroa. As the filmmaker and critic Altaf Mazid notes: *“Till then no other film had portrayed a woman as a valiant humanitarian as Joymoti. There were portrayals of stoical womenfolk more concerned with the edification of mythological goddesses than social responsibilities, illustrious instances of the past round divine love or undaunted leadership against antagonism.”*¹

Having had previous exposure to the European style of realist storytelling and having gained academic experience while living in what was then Germany, Jyotiprasad Agarwla experimented with a realist treatment off the beaten track in his debut feature. In contrast to the theatrical style of filmmaking that was common

¹ <https://www.himalmag.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-assamese-film/>

in other parts of India at the time, Jyotiprasad developed a new tradition of sensitive and empathetic cinema right at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which was later continued by a host of Assamese film directors. But Assamese cinema has experienced bitter consequences in terms of financial gain from the very first day of its journey. 'Joymoti' was released in March 1935, first in Calcutta and then in Guwahati. Despite the praise that the pioneering Assamese language film earned from large sections of society, it failed to achieve commercial success. Jyotiprasad had to invest around 50,000 rupees to produce Joymati and eventually could not recover even half of the production cost. To recoup some of the loss, Jyotiprasad had to sell his camera and other equipment and abandon the idea of opening a film studio in Assam with the profits from 'Joymati'. He made his second and last film 'Indramalati' in 1939 by renting the camera and studio space of a studio in Calcutta. (D.N Chakravarty(ed).1987, P. 32)

The noted film director and critic of Assam Altaf Mazid tells about the beginnings of cinema in Assam, "The history of cinema began in Assam in the twenties of the twentieth century when the people of Guwahati had the novel experience of witnessing silent films launched by a South Indian named Menon. His main customers were people who came from the village to do business or go to court. The name of the temporary cinema hall was Kamrup Cinema. The screen mainly showed films by Mc Sennet and Chaplin. In course of time, as talkies came up, Kamrup Cinema disappeared and Menon left Assam for good. Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1901-51), a talented poet, musician and artist, pioneered the production of the first talkie in Assam, 'Joymoti', in 1935. Assam is one of the few countries where silent films were not produced. Film is a medium imported from the West and Jyotiprasad practically introduced the medium directly from Germany."² The film critic Apurva Sarma said, "A comparative survey of the history of Assamese and Indian [mainstream] cinema ... reveals a significant difference between the two, at least in the early days. While ... Indian cinema ... was a form of pure

² Mazid, A, 'Sixty years of cinema from Assam Close up of the socio-political image', seminar on "North East through the eyes of the film directors and film critics", Deep Focus, Vimochana & Bangalore Film society at Bangalore, 8th September, 1996, p. 1

entertainment based on religious or mythological stories from the epics, Assamese cinema began on a serious note....." (Sarma 2001, p. 3).

After Rupkonwar's untimely demise in 1951 at the age of 48, Assamese cinema experienced a temporary hiatus of about two years. But with the onset of World War II the spirit had rejuvenated and in 1941 Rohini Kumar Baruah made the film *Manomati*. This was followed by other films like Parvati Prasad Boruwa's *Rupohi*, Kamal Narayan Choudhury's *Badan Barphukan*, Phani Sharma's *Siraj*, Asit Sen's *Biplobi*, Prabin Phukan's *Paarghat* and Suresh Goswami's *Runumi*, all released in the 1940s. The next decade saw some important Assamese films - *Piyali Phukan* (1955) by Phani Sarma - a highly acclaimed film that brought laurels to the state for the first time by receiving a Certificate of Merit in the National Film Awards of India. Similarly, it was *Puberun* (1959) by Prabhat Mukherjee, which was given the honour of being screened at the Berlin International Film Festival. (Deori&Bora, 2020)

The emergence of the great maestro Bhupen Hazarika in the Assamese film industry in mid 1950 is considered a landmark and his directorial debut *Era Bator Sur* established his musical acumen and skill. Some of his films are *Pratiddhani*, *Latighati*, *Chikmik Bijuli*. It is important to mention that a group of Assamese tea planters took initiatives to produce Assamese films early in the fourth decade of the last century. One of the most important factors for this effort was their deep affection for Assamese nationalism, which developed after the annexation of Assam by the British colonial rulers. Their main aim was not to make money from film production; on the contrary, they were determined to develop Assamese art and culture through modern means and technology. But unfortunately, the trend of film production by the Assamese tea planters came to a halt and the planters gradually slackened their interest in film production. Had the tea planters of Assam consistently and continuously invested a part of their profits in the production of Assamese films, then Assamese film would have blossomed incredibly both artistically and economically.

Therefore, from the very beginning, the Assamese film industry was neglected by some core industries of the state like tea, coal and petroleum and these sectors could have supported the art of filmmaking. But in reality, nothing of the

sort has happened in the last nine decades. Apart from some dedicated Assamese tea planters who tried to enrich Assamese culture by producing Assamese films in the late 1940s and 1950s, the entrepreneurs and the industry paid no attention to promoting Assamese cinema and its infrastructure.

The six decades of the last century can be called the golden decade for the Assamese film industry. About 25 films were made during this period, nine of which won national awards. The 1960s saw the release of Sarbeswar Chakraborty's *Lachit Barphukan*, Bhupen Hazarika's melodious *Shakuntala* and Chik Mik Bijulee, Nip Barua's *Narakasur*, Anil Choudhury's *Matri Swarga*, Brajen Baruah's *Itu Situ Bahuto* and *Mukuta* and Anwar Hossain's *Tejimola*. This period also saw the emergence of a younger generation of promising directors. These include Saila Barua, Abdul Mazid, Amar Pathak, Indukalpa Hazarika, Dibon Barua, Amulya Manna, Gauri Barman, Atul Bardoloi, Nalin Duara and Prafulla Barua. Dr Bezbarua, the highly successful crime thriller, was released in 1969. Then in the period of 1970-82, 57 films were made. More and more enthusiastic and skillful directors started making films such as Samarendra Narayan Deb's *Aranya* (1970), Kamal Choudhury's *Bhaity* (1972) Deuti Barua's *Bristi* (1974), Pulok Gogoi's *Khoj* (1974) Padam Barua's *Ganga Chilanir Pakhi* (1976) and Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia's *Sandhyarag* (1977) are noteworthy films. (Deori&Bora, 2020)

The noted film critic Utpal Barpujari has described the evolution of Assamese cinema in these words, "Dada Saheb Phalke Award The award-winning singer, lyricist and composer Bhupen Hazarika, who was nurtured as a child by Jyotiprasad himself, was also one of the major players in Assamese cinema, making films like *Era Bator Sur* (The Tune of the Deserted Path), *Pratidhwani* (The Echo), *Latighati* and *Chikmik Bijuli*. But it was in 1976 that Padum Barua made *Ganga Chilanir Pakhi* and gave a new direction to Assamese cinema. It was Barua's only film and the first film after *Joymoti* to treat the subject realistically, eschew melodrama and present a story that reflected society in rural Assam. The following year, Bhabendra Nath Saikia came to prominence with *Sandhyarag*, based on his own novel. The film caught the world's attention for Assamese cinema. Saikia, a physics professor, writer, screenwriter and director, made an international name for

himself through his simply told stories in Anirbaan, Agnisnaan, Kolahal, Sarathi, Abartan, Itihaas and Kaalsandhya.”³

In his article 'Assamese Cinema: Dreams, Reality and Dichotomies' (2013), Manoj Borpujari, categorizes the history of Assamese cinema into four distinct eras according to film phenomenology as -

(a) an indelible mark of a radical auteur

(b) the Jyotiprasad era

(c) the post-Jyotiprasad era of copycat stories and melodrama

(d) mainstream, territorial and the era of regional realism, and survival against all odds and the contemporary era.

6.2 ASSAMESE CINEMA IN LATE TWENTY AND THE 21ST CENTURY

In the seventies of the twentieth century, the Assamese film industry underwent a significant transition and audiences came to enjoy a fresh new cinema, the credit for which undoubtedly goes to the famous academic, man of letters and filmmaker Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia. Dr Saikia created a sensation in Assamese film history with his debut film Sandhyarag (1976). This highly acclaimed debut work was followed by other equally acclaimed and popular films like Anirbaan, Agnisnaan, Kolahal, Sarathi, Abartan and Itihaas. The films produced in the post-Assam movement period (1979-85) also reflect a kind of radical Assamese nationalism. Another well-known filmmaker Jahnu Barua, who also succeeded in bringing Assamese cinema to a national and international audience, had made his first film Aparoop in 1982. Jahnu Barua is considered one of the best filmmakers in the country for his wonderful works like Halodhiya Choraye Baodhan Khaye (1987) and Xagoroloi Bohudoor (1995). He won a number of international awards for the first film as well as the National Award for best film. The latter film also earned him critical acclaim across the world. Barua continues his journey with films

³ Barpujari, U, “Assamese Cinema: 75 well- traversed years”, Deccan Herald, 04.04.2010. p. 11

like Papor (1986), Banani (1990), Firingoti (1991), Khushal (1998), Pokhi (2000), Konikar Ramdhenu (2002), Tora (2003), Baandhon (2012) and Ajeyo (2014) and some of his Hindi films are (1984), Meine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara (2005) and Mumbai Cutting (2010).

It is estimated that about 300 films were produced in the state between 1935 and 2004 (Deka&Das.2015). It can be easily observed that the emergence of a new type of cinema from the 1970s onwards in Assamese cinema, which is rightly classified by film critics as a parallel film, did not yield any profit, so quite a number of producers and directors produced films that mimicked the commercial module of the Mumbai film industry. However, there are some filmmakers like Hemanta Das, Hemen Das, Sanjeev Hazarika, Santana Bordoloi, Bidyut Chakravarty and Manju Borah, who made some films of the so-called middle class cinema. However, this period also saw the making of some super hits like Joubane Aamani Kore, Bukur Majat Jole, Nayak and Hiya Dia Niya, which did well at the box office. In the following years, it failed to attract the attention of critics and viewers, though there were a number of productions.

In 2018, Village Rockstars won the best feature film award 'SwarnaKamal' at the 65th National Film Awards in Delhi, making it the second Assamese film to win the award after Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai. The film was also selected for India's official entry at the 91st Academy Awards, making it the first film from Assam to achieve this. On July 28, 2018, another Assamese film Xhoixobote Dhemalite won three awards for Best Film, Best Actress and Best Music at the 3rd Love International Film Festival in Los Angeles, USA. Four commercially successful Assamese films, namely Raamdheni, Mission China, Kanchanjangha and Ratnakar, which grossed over ₹2 crore each at the box office, were released in the 2010s. Kanchanjangha, which released on September 5, 2019, was the fastest Assamese film to cross the ₹1 crore mark in 4 days. The film also crossed the ₹2 crore mark within 1 week of its release. It grossed a total of 7 crore rupees.⁴ Ratnakar, another superhit among Assamese films, released on October

⁴ Joshi, Namrata (14 November 2019). "Vijay's 'Theri' inspires Assamese cinema's biggest-ever blockbuster". *The Hindu*. ISSN 0971-751X. Retrieved 28 January 2021. "Asomiya Pratidin ePaper : 20-10-2019 Page: 4"

11, 2019 and grossed ₹90.5 lakh in 2 days. After a week, it grossed ₹3.31 crore rupees, which is the highest grosser for an Assamese film in a week. After two weeks, it grossed a total of ₹6.63 crore rupees, breaking all box office records for Assamese cinema.⁵ After six weeks, it grossed a total of ₹ 9.25 crore. Two other successful films Tumi Aahibane and Priyaar Priyo have also crossed the one crore mark.

6.3 ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF ASSAMESE CINEMA

The last paragraph does speak of a few Assamese films that have received acclaim, awards, and, moreover, commercial success, but considering the general financial viability of Assamese films, the success of these films could be considered exceptions. The implicit reasons for such assumptions arise from certain facts which can be summarised as follows:

1) Though the box office collections of Kanchanjangha and Ratnakar are very low compared to Bollywood films like Houseful 4, which grossed Rs 46.5 crore in its opening weekend, both films have proved that Assamese films can generate both mass interest and revenue through aggressive marketing. "We conducted motorcycle tours and visited all sorts of educational institutions to promote it, apart from the traditional methods of marketing a film - trailers, posters, etc," says Navanita Sharma Bora, the co-producer of Ratnakar ⁶. Unfortunate fact is that contrary to the Bollywood and South Indian films, Assamese film industry is still struggling for capital investment for film making. Those who are trying to produce films with zeal are lacking sufficient amount of investment that may be invested for aggressive marketing.

2) Manimugdha S Sharma in his article 'Assamese cinema has finally learnt to make money and go national' in the Times of India has mentioned that though the Assamese film industry in its heyday produced many award winning films like

⁵ *"Asomiya Pratidin ePaper : 20-10-2019 / Asomiya-Pratidin e-batarikakat Page: 4". epaper.asomiyapratidin.in. Retrieved 28 October 2019*

⁶ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/assamese-cinema-has-finally-learnt-to-make-money-and-go-national/articleshow/75142476.cms>

Agnisnan, Kokadeuta, Naati Aru Haati, Halodhiya Choraye Baodhan Khai, Bowari, Aparupa and Chameli Memsaab, these films were not able to make money at the box office. He notes, "Without any respectable revenue, the industry has somehow stayed afloat. Hence, it could never build an infrastructure like Bollywood, Kollywood or Tollywood had. As a result, Assamese films lacked technical sophistication and were perceived to be slow"⁷.

The prominent Assamese Actress Barasha Rani Bishaya, whose debut film Joubone Aamoni Kore (1998) and the recently made Ratnakar enjoyed unprecedented success, stresses the need for technical sophistication as a key factor for commercial success, "We never imagined that my debut film would do such a good business. Similarly, we never imagined that my latest film would be so spectacular. We thought it might gross Rs 1-2 crore at best. It has crossed Rs 6 crore and might even reach Rs 8 crore. Content is always important, but our film also scores high on technical soundness"⁸. In all the recent films that have enjoyed great commercial success, much emphasis has undoubtedly been placed on technical sophistication and soundness.

3) The third reason is the ability of these films to reach global and national audiences who are aware of and to some extent receptive to Assamese film and culture. As the films are now released in the big cities, the Assamese can afford to watch films and such a new phenomenon is very fruitful in attracting viewers all over the world. The said successful Assamese films have taken such initiatives and have done a remarkable job, especially in terms of enlarging the audience. Delhi-based entrepreneur PR Anuj Baruah agrees. "I watch all Assamese films that come out here at PVR with my family. It's often an opportunity to see something in my own language and also hear familiar Assamese voices in the cinema, recreating the home environment far away from home"⁹.

⁷ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/assamese-cinema-has-finally-learnt-to-make-money-and-go-national/articleshow/75142476.cms>

⁸ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/assamese-cinema-has-finally-learnt-to-make-money-and-go-national/articleshow/75142476.cms>

⁹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/assamese-cinema-has-finally-learnt-to-make-money-and-go-national/articleshow/75142476.cms>

As mentioned earlier, with the exception of a few films that have been released recently, the overall state of Assamese cinema is quite deplorable. According to Harekrishna Deka, "cinema produced in Assam has not developed into a capital-intensive entertainment industry that could win the confidence of potential investors" (Deka, 2007, p.23).

For him, "there is not only a lack of attempt to professionally organise a niche market for this regional cinema, but there is also a gross failure of this cinema to create its own identity that is recognisably different from the offerings of the Hindi film industry - the one that can provide wholesome entertainment" (Deka, 2007, p.23)

Another important reason that has hampered the development of Assamese film industry is the existence of various insurgent groups that wanted to drastically change the socio-political, economic and cultural scenario of Assam. Due to regular bomb blasts and other terrorist activities, the Assamese audience feared to go to the cinema hall, so the Assamese film producers suffered losses. On the impact of counter-insurgency on the industrial growth of the state, Borpujari (2007) notes, "The problem has worsened in recent years as 70 to 80 cinema halls have been closed due to the social unrest that began in the late 1980s with the advent of the Anti-Foreigner Agitation and the formation of the United Liberation Front of Asom" (Borpujari, 2007, pp.14-15).

Moreover, the immigrants from West Bengal, Nepal, Rajasthan, Bihar and other neighbouring states of Assam are also causing problems. As the number of these non-Assamese increased, cinema owners also preferred to show mainly Bollywood films. Even the first Assamese film 'Joymoti' was badly affected by such preference. Noted film director Padum Barua, who is credited with the incredible film 'Ganga Chilanir Pakhi', remarked, "The reasons for 'Joymatis' failure at the box office were mainly two. First, the number of cinema-goers in Assam in 1935 was vanishingly small. In the entire Assam Valley, there were only two permanent cinemas in Guwahati. In the other urban areas, films - mostly in Hindi and Bengali - were shown from time to time in mobile cinemas. Thus, barely five per cent of the

adults in Assam came in contact with this modern medium of mass communication. Secondly, Jyotiprasad, who had trained in filmmaking in Germany, conceived 'Joymoti' in an appropriate cinematic form and directed it accordingly, discarding the theatrical-operatic style of Indian films not only of the time but to a considerable extent of the present day. The vast majority of the viewers of 'Joymati' did not appreciate the cinematic merits of the film - its overall visual quality, realistic style of acting with a minimum of dialogues, limited use of songs and dances etc. - with which they were not at all familiar.¹⁰

Unfairness can also be observed in the distribution of broadcast slots for Assamese films during their release. In 2016, representatives of the Assamese film fraternity commented on this problem as follows: "There is a huge bias in the distribution of broadcast slots for Assamese films in the state. This has a huge negative impact on the promotion of a film. Most regional films are usually screened either during the day or in the early morning hours with only one screening per day" (G Plus, 2016).

Another factor directly related to the failure of Assamese cinema as a commercial venture is the demographic structure of the state. Assam has 45 languages and 23 tribes, which together account for 12.5 per cent of the population. Assamese speaking people constitute only about 48.81 per cent of the total population. Therefore, more than fifty percent of the state's population has no emotional or nationalistic inclination towards Assamese films. While in states like Tamil Nadu and West Bengal about 89 and 85 percent of the people speak a common language respectively, in Assam less than half of the population speaks Assamese with different dialects. In this context, Devajit Datta makes an important observation, "Assamese cinema cannot be Bollywood: a film industry whose audiences are scattered far and wide across India, surpassed in popularity only by Hollywood, which produces many hundreds of films a year and provides actors with costumes worth a million dollars (such as Shahrukh Khan's in Ra. One). In Assam, we now produce an average of six films a year, an improvement from the earlier 3.5, but the urban audience is very small, we do not have the funds to reach

¹⁰ Chakravarty, D.N(ed) (1987) *Jyotiprasad Agarwala*, Guwahati: Janasanyog, Assam, Pp-32-33

rural audiences, and films are produced on small budgets of INR 40-50 lakhs. The critically acclaimed films of Jahnu Barua, Manju Bora and Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia rarely reach their financial targets and are unknown to the majority of the state's population whose attachment with them does not go beyond newspaper articles published a day after the National Awards".¹¹

Raj Kumar Mazinder noted in his essay that Assamese filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s not only invested money to recoup their investments, but they also expected to make a profit from the venture. He writes, "People in the "industry," if you can call it that, even though it is really more the passion for cinema that drives a number of people to indulge in filmmaking, are discussing how to get local cinema out of the rut, back to what was once a relatively healthier situation in the 1970s and 1980s, when filmmakers could hope to not only get their investments back, but probably also make some profit to fund their next".¹²

6.4 PROFITABILITY OF MOBILE THEATRE IN COMPARISON WITH ASSAMESE CINEMA

There is no doubt that Assam mobile theatre has proved to be one of the most popular entertainment media and mass media as compared to Assamese film industry which survives due to lack of financial gains and viewership. Kakoty, Sangeeta. (2018) observes, "Though not comparable because both mediums are different, mobile theatre has filled the gap left by the absence of a thriving cinema industry in Assam. It has provided a lifeline to hundreds of artists, technicians and workers who faced a bleak future when the Assamese film industry began to

¹¹ Datta ,Debojit. "The Rise and Fall of Assamese Cinema" Himal South Asia, 15th September, 2013, <https://www.himalmag.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-assamese-film/>

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259865476_Contemporary_scenario_of_film_art_practices_in_Assam

dwindle. Apart from this, the contribution of mobile theatre to the socio-economic arena of the state is undeniable. Like all things, mobile theatre has also undergone many changes, some for the better and others that are controversial. The earlier generation of people associated with the medium, either as staff or audience, lament that mobile theatre today has lost its former glory. They even doubt the survival of the medium. The new generation of producers and directors and lovers of mobile theatre, on the other hand, feel that the medium will always flourish in Assam."

Bhattacharya (2015) supports the viability of mobile theatre and says that in the age of Hi-Fi technology where people's demands for entertainment are very high due to the availability of internet, social networking, satellite dishes and various television channels, the fact that mobile theatre groups in Assam have not only survived but also surpassed the popularity of motion pictures and VCDs (Visual Compact Discs) is really worth applauding. Though the film industry in Assam was started long ago, in 1935, and has received several recognitions at the national level, it is still struggling to survive (p.208)

Without any financial support from corporate or sponsors, the Assam Mobile Theatre has survived till March 2020 with financial viability and success, an example that may be rare in Indian theatre history. It is an important source of entertainment in both urban and rural areas of the state and undoubtedly most of the actors in the state survive by engaging in mobile theatre and a good number of artists are well paid. Biplab Borkakoti, NSD researcher in the field of mobile theatre, believes that Assamese language has paved the way for the success of mobile theatre and has proved to be the more efficient medium of entertainment - financially as well.

"In the last three years, only six films have been made in Assam because producing films in the local language is not economically viable. Assamese is not the only language spoken in North East. There are several regional languages and

dialects, so it is difficult to target only one class that can understand Assamese. Producers have to fight hard to get their money back," says Borkakoti.¹³

The noted screenwriter and one of the most eminent freelance Assam Chandan Sarmah critics observes that though the film industry is providing all the essential ingredients to the entire entertainment industry all over the world, but in Assam the situation is quite pathetic. According to him, the entire scene has become quite disappointing in the last five to six years. "People have by and large lost interest in going to cinema halls, mainly because the plight of the local film industry has led to some disenchantment with cinema. Satellite television channels have come up in a big way at the same time to enable the common people to watch commercially successful or ordinary Hindi films - at least five channels showing Hindi films simultaneously," he observes.¹⁴ He further argues that while the other components of the industry such as cinema, television and music industry face many shortcomings, mobile theatre is the main component of the country's entertainment industry. He writes, "There is no denying the fact that people in Assam are more in the habit of enjoying plays staged by mobile theatre troupes than cinema. An interesting, rather ironic incident may justify the contention that the family culture of common people is to see mobile plays rather than going to the cinema hall... Without commenting on the quality of the productions of the mobile theatre troupes, it must be admitted that most of the over 40 mobile theatre troupes currently performing in Assam have indeed succeeded in attracting the crowds. The main reason for this unmatched popularity of mobile theatre is the content of the plays, which usually deal with very topical socio-political issues. Other reasons include the starting cast, the ability of the troupes to reach out to the people almost at their doorstep and the relentless efforts of various socio-cultural and educational organisations to organise performances in various rural areas, suburbs or small and big towns of Assam. Mobile Theatre industry in Assam enjoys some added advantage. Earlier, mobile theatre performances used to last for four days, but now

¹³ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/assams-mobile-theatre-source-of-rural-and-urban-entertainment/articleshow/5881707.cms?from=mdr>

¹⁴ <https://www.thehillstimes.in/featured/entertainment-industry-in-assam-with-special-reference-to-mobile-theatre/>

they have been reduced to three days. As a result, the troupes are able to explore more options and the business has expanded a lot as a result. Most of the roads in the rural areas of Assam are now well maintained, which has helped the troops to reach the interior without such travel hassles.”¹⁵

Like Mr. Sharma, many intellectuals of the state of Assam often express positive views about mobile theatre while comparing this cultural component with the other cultural fields like films, television and music. According to Chandan Sharma, the Assamese film industry has to follow the norms of the entire cinema business, while mobile theatre has the freedom to change the business norms according to the common will and desire of the theatre owner and the promoters. "For example, if a certain play is very popular, the organisers can perform that play twice or even three times on the same night. Moreover, the same play may be performed again two or three times on the next night. In this case, the troupe does not have to perform the other two plays once. In this way, the organisers generate more revenue and make a good cut after paying the performance fee to the troupe owner," he notes.¹⁶

Though the Assamese film industry has been in existence for 85 years, it is still unable to provide a sustainable livelihood to actors and other workers, as is the case in Hindi, Bengali and other South Indian languages. In contrast to this dismal situation, each of the mobile theatre troupes could employ more than a hundred workers, ultimately providing livelihood to over 40,000 families. Apart from providing employment and livelihood, mobile theatre also serves as a platform for talents from various fields of art in different corners of Assam to work professionally in their respective fields such as acting, music, set and object design, setting up galleries etc. Interestingly, most Assamese actors use the opportunity to work in films and TV serials as an entry point into the world of mobile theatre industry.

¹⁵ <https://www.thehillstimes.in/featured/entertainment-industry-in-assam-with-special-reference-to-mobile-theatre/>

¹⁶ <https://www.thehillstimes.in/featured/entertainment-industry-in-assam-with-special-reference-to-mobile-theatre/>

A regular actor Sanjib Sarma says that for someone who wants to make a living out of acting, there is no other alternative but mobile theatre. "An actor can earn an incredible amount in mobile theatre compared to all other entertainment mediums, including movies. That's why most of the star actors from Assam prefer mobile theatre to earn better. Take the example of prominent Assamese film star Jatin Bara, who spends most of his professional career in mobile theatre. Same is the case with other actors like Utpal Das and Ravi Sharma. Financial security is the main reason for the migration of Assamese film artists to mobile theatre. Compared to the annual income of a mobile theatre, an actor earns a very small amount from a film. It is also no comparison as a star actor usually gets a maximum of two rupees per film. Since the Assamese film industry produces an average of four to five films a year, a star actor hardly stands a chance of getting more than one film a year. But the same actor can earn more than forty rupees or more in a year with a reputed mobile theatre company. Apart from financial security, there are other reasons why the star actors and actresses and other artists prefer mobile theatre. In mobile theatre, we regularly have more than thousands of audience members in every performance. This means that an actor can reach more than two lakh audience per year by performing in a mobile theatre. Secondly, compared to the artists who come from the scene (both films and television), the actors of amateur theatre prefer mobile theatre because it is easier for them on stage. Moreover, although mobile theatre is not yet recognised as an industry, the basic infrastructure of a mobile theatre is far better than that of the Assamese film industry. In a mobile theatre, there is a good relationship between the staff and the management, and the management always maintains a good relationship with the committees that invite the theatre to their respective regions. There is no such relationship in the Assamese film industry and the film producers have to go through an unbearable crisis to release a film. There are few instances in Assam where an Assamese film producer can hope for a financial return on his investment in a film. But a producer usually invests money in his cinema with the confidence that along with the investment, he will get a good profit in a particular financial year. If that is not the case in a particular year, he can

continue to hope that he will get both the return and the profit in the next financial year. This is completely absurd in the case of the Assamese film.¹⁷

Himangshu Prasad Das , an NSD graduate and film director of two successful films 'Sakira Ahiba Bakul Talar Bihuloi'(2017) and Garu (2021), observed in a phone conversation that like the Assamese film industry, mobile theatre too survives without having a sustainable base. "I completed my first film with financial support mainly through crowdfunding and the estimated budget was around forty lakhs. However, I spent only about twenty-seven lakh rupees and apart from crowdfunding, I also received non-monetary support from many well-wishers and friends. My investment was lower than the estimated budget because most of the actors and actresses who acted in the film were from my own theatre group 'Guernica' and were volunteers. I also hired amateurs and members of the village community in many roles. That's why I did not spend any money on paying the artistes. My second film 'Garu' on the other hand was professionally produced and the producer hired professional artistes and staff whom he paid adequately. Out of these two films, 'Garu' proved to be a commercially successful film and made a good profit for its producer within a short period of time. My debut film, on the other hand, became very popular but took a long time to recoup the amount invested. Moreover, when the film became popular among the masses, it was pushed out of the cinema halls, which was a real misfortune for Assamese cinema. I do not think mobile cinema created any kind of financial security for Assamese artists. Rather, it can be said that except for a few lucky actors/actresses who prefer the mobile platform to make a lot of money, the rest are struggling with a pitiable life on this platform."¹⁸

Noted film director Pravin Hazarika, who won a national award for his debut 'Hastir Kanya' in 1997, directed the 2014 feature film Shringkhal, based on a short story by Late Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia commented that the entire Assamese population is not enthusiastic about an Assamese film, which is why Assamese film always lacks an audience. "My last film Shringkhal, which was jointly produced by

¹⁷ Telephonic conversation with Sanjib Sarma on 20th July ,2021

¹⁸ Telephonic conversation with Himangshu Prasad Das on 27th July ,2021

Assam State Film (Finance and Development) Corporation Ltd and Silverline Production, could not make money in theaters. Even the so-called commercial Assamese film cannot attract audience to the cinema halls. We do not have such glamorous stars in the Assamese film industry to attract the audience for Assamese films. Moreover, we do not have enough cinema halls to show Assamese films. We have very limited capacity in terms of audience, infrastructure and expertise. In a competitive market where Assamese films have to compete with big budget Hindi films that spend incredible amounts of money, we obviously cannot sustain ourselves for long. In contrast to this depressing situation, Assam mobile theater has the ability to attract people's attention by hiring glamorous artistes".¹⁹

6.5 ECONOMIC LINKAGE BETWEEN MOBILE THEATRE AND ASSAMESE CINEMA:

As components of the overall entertainment industry, the mobile theatre and the Assamese cinema industries are closely related, with the mobile theatre industry extracting "raw materials" from the Assamese cinema.

A first glance at these two industries may suggest that they are interchangeable, but careful consideration leads to the fact that neither mobile theatre nor Assamese cinema are substitutes for each other. In contrast, mobile theatres are heavily dependent on the Assamese film industry in two respects.

The main actors on whom a theatre company bases its publicity, and sometimes the actors for whom a particular play is written, come from the film industry. This trend of sourcing skilled labour from the cinema is not new, as can be seen from Table No. 6.1

¹⁹ Telephonic conversation with Pravin Hazarika on 28th July ,2021

Table- 6.1				
List Of Some Famous Actors Migrated to Mobile Theatre from Assamese Cinema*				
Sl No	Name Of Actors	Famous For Movie	Name Of Theatre Migrated	Year
1	Anupama Bhattacharya	Nimila Anka	Nataraj Theatre	1963-64
2	Phani Sarma	Jaymati	Purbajyoti Theatre	1966-67
3	Pabitra Barkakati	Sakuntala, Opar Mahala	Kahinoor Theatre	1977-78
4	Bina Barubati	Ganga Chilonir Pakhi	Kahinoor Theatre	1977-78
5	Nipon Goswami	Dr. Bezbarua And Many Movie	Suradevi Theatre	1977-78
6	Biju Phookan	Aranya And Many Movie	Suradevi Theatre	1992-93
7	Prasanta Hazarika	Sonar Harin And Many Movie	Kahinoor Theatre	1976-77
8	Ila Kakati	Sikmik Bijuli And Many Movie	Kahinoor Theatre	1976-77
9	Bhabesh Barua	Man Prajapati	Awahan Theatre	1980-81
10	Bidya Rao	Sakuntala And Many Movie	Kahinoor Theatre	1984-85
11	Runu Devi	Sandhya Rag	Kahinoor Theatre	1982-83
12	Pranjal Saikia	Ajali Nabou And Many Movie	Awahan Theatre	1987-88
13	Tapan Das	Sendur And Many Movie	Kahinoor Theatre	1993-94
14	Purabi Sarma	Ajali Nabou And Many Movie	Kahinoor Theatre	1993-94
15	Nikumani Barua	Bukur Majat Jwale	Kahinoor Theatre	1998-99
16	Jatin Bora	Uttar Kal And Many Movies	Hengul Theatre	1994-95
17	Mridul Bhuyan	Bukur Majat Jwale	Hengul Theatre	1995-96
18	Sima Biswas	Bandit Queen Khamochi. Etc.	Hengul Theatre	2000-01
19	Prastuti Parashar	Maharathi And Many Movies	Bhagyadevi Theatre	2007-08
20	Gayatree Mahanta	Anjana, Janmoni Etc	Awahan Theatre	2006-07
21	Rabi Sarma	Hiya Diya Niya And Many Movie	Hengul Theatre	2007-08
22	Aimee Barua	Prem Aru Prem And Many Movie	Hengul Theatre	2006-07
23	Angurlata Deka	Jon Da Iman Gunda	Awahan Theatre	2007-08
24	Sanjib Sarma	Rajneeti	Surjya Theatre	2019-20
25	Himangshu Prasad Das	Sakira Ahiba Bakul Talar Bihuloi	Hengul Theatre	2019-20
*Only First Entry of the Actors to The Mobile Theatre Are Mentioned Here.				

From a purely economic point of view the remuneration paid for these artists are not only for their work but also for the glamour and popularity they have earned over the years among common people so in that sense this remuneration is a combination of wage and part of advertisement expenses (selling cost) from the theatre group.

Not only the actors but also other silver screen personalities made their entry as may be viewed from table no. 6.2

Table- 6.2
List Of Some Famous Director, Music Directors Migrated To The Mobile Theatre From Assamese Movie

Sl. No	Name	Theatre	Role Played
1	Phani Sarma	Purbajyoti Theatre	DirectorActor
2	Bhupen Hazarika	Purbajyoti Theatre	Music Director
3	Abdul Majid	Awahan Theatre	Director
4	Mahendra Barthakur	Awahan Theatre	Dramatist
5	Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia	Awahan Theatre	Director
6	Munin Barua	Hengul Theatre	Director
7	Tarali Sarma	Kahinoor Theatre	Music Director
8	Zubin Garg	Music Director	Awahan Theatre
9	Manas Robin	Music Director	Awahan Theatre
10	Dikshu	Music Director	Bhagyadevi Theatre
11	Nanda Benarjee	Music Director	Kahinoor Theatre

Second, the entire film industry, both Assamese and non-Assamese, serves as a source for another important ingredient: plot. It is not uncommon for certain plays by a theatrical company to be taken directly from the cinema, as you can see from Table No. 6.3

Sl. No	Name	Year Of Making Movie/ Serial	Director	Name Of The Mobile Theatre Staged Drama	Year Of Staging The Drama
1	Cleopetra(English)	1963	Joseph L. Mankiewicz	Kahinoor Theatre	1982-83
2	Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde (English)	1931	Samuel Hoffenstein Percy Heath	Kahinoor Theatre	1986-87
3	Tarzan (Hindi)	1985	Babbar Subhash	Kahinoor Theatre	1989-90
4	<i>Beder Meye Josna</i> (Bengali)	1989	Tojammel Haque Bokul	Kahinoor Theatre	1991-92
5	Ben Hur (English)	1959	William Wyler	Kahinoor Theatre	1992-93
7	Hkhagoroli Bahu Dur (Assamese)	1995	Janhu Barua	Kahinoor Theatre	1996-97
8	Titanic (English)	1997	James Cameron	Kahinoor Theatre	1998-99
9	Bandit Queen(Hindi)	1994	Sekhar Kapoor	Hengul Theatre	2000
10	Jurasik Park(English)	1993	Steven Spielberg	Awahan Theatre	2004-05
11	Suren Surar Putek	2005	Chandra Mudoï	Bhagyadevi Theatre	2006-07
12	Dinabhandhu	2004	Munin Barua	Awahan Theatre	1988-89

Before a story is adopted from the cinema, several points are usually taken into consideration, including the feasibility of the story on the stage, its popularity in the cinema and also its success at the box office. But basically, the only goal that guides it is its marketability.

Looking at the nature of the audience and their origin, there is a big difference between the customer base (audience) of cinemas and mobile theatres. For a place in rural Assam, where other entertainment options are not readily available, theatres can be a breather in their hectic and boring lives. The three-day performances by the mobile theatres, whose dates are announced much earlier, are also an additional source of income for the people in the area, in various forms. Be it in the form of a temporary bike stand, small food stalls, additional demand for

transportation for short distances, etc. Thus, a completely different ecosystem is created in the area during these three days. Moreover, it can be said that mobile theatres not only earn money by riding on bikes from one place to another, but also bring secondary employment opportunities.

Another important characteristic for moviegoers is the presence of alternative sources, and moviegoing does not necessarily lead to a source of revenue for the producer of the film. The existence of internet-based video sharing services such as YouTube can be used as an example. An ordinary viewer faced with the problem of choosing between a mobile theatre and a cinema with a limited budget should rationally prefer the cinema to the theatre. But in reality, Assamese cinema struggles to fill houses and mobile theatres are forced to perform the same play several times in one evening because of audience demand.

The consumers of mobile theatre and cinema are in reality two different genres from the same population with different cognitive functions to maximise utility. Regardless of the higher price per ticket compared to the cinema, this unique experience attracts more viewers to the theatre pandals. Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia, who was closely associated with Awahan Theatre for decades until his death, had a different fan base that appreciated his extraordinary ability to portray everyday trivia with artistic intellect.

In short, mobile theatres do not compete with Assamese cinema neither for viewers nor for market shares but thrives hand in hand as a different art form within a different ecosystem. Not only earning profit but also offering income sources wherever it goes.

The nature of products supplied by cinema and theatres are appears to be different from fundamental economic point of view. Basic economics distinguishes between goods and service based on the characteristics: tangibility, transferability, storage and possible time gap between point of production and point of consumption. In that sense and growth of electronic devices to store and transfer data the products from cinema industry may be termed as goods in loose terms. The plays presented by mobile theatres are services with no real time gap between the point of 'production' and the point of 'consumption'.

It is one of the main reasons why mobile theatres experienced more adverse effect during Covid 19 lockdown in 2020-21. In the following part of the chapter, we discuss the impact of Covid 19 on mobile theatres.

6.6 IMPACT OF COVID19 ON MOBILE THEATRE:

The unprecedented global medical emergency in the form of COVID19 (Corona Virus Disease, 2019) originating from China in the year 2019 led different governments around the world to impose economic lockdown during the year 2020 and again in 2021. Assam, as a component state of India has also gone through this policy in order to contain this deadly disease. Economic lockdown and restrictions on movement of people, in one hand, have somewhat succeeded in containing the spread of COVID19, but on the other hand, it has adversely affected the income opportunities of people to a large extent in various spheres of occupation.

In its long history of around sixty years the wheels of mobile theatre never ever stopped for a longer period of more than one year like it happened in 2020 due to catastrophic effect of lockdown. In March,2020 when the Assam Government declared the shutting down of educational institutions, theatres and some other public places and mass gatherings it posed an uncertain future for the mobile theatre. As the guideline of lockdown primarily means to restrict any mass gatherings such a direction definitely had created a frustration among the artist and workers community of the entire mobile theatre industry. Assam has around fifty existing mobile theatre groups and each of such group is offering employment to 100 to 150 people, including artistes, and technicians. In addition to this direct employment, the whole mobile theatre industry generates secondary employment to many people wherever it goes. In a way, mobile theatres create a symbiosis creating a different economy as a whole on the wheel opening income opportunities to many.

Usually, a mobile theatre starts the rehearsal from the month of May to July every year and presents the dramas before the audience from the month of August.

So, it needs around three months for preparing itself for staging dramas and dance-dramas. During this period the theatre group apart from rehearsing drama and dance drama finalise contracts with employees and do every technical work for preparing setting ready stage, light and sound. Bookings of a major portion of the shows are also done during this period. After the completion of the first shows in its native place, where the group rehearsed; a mobile theatre starts its journey and presents its show without resting a single day. As a tradition each mobile group prepares itself in the first week of August every year for set out on a nine-month journey, reaching out to people in every nook and corner of the state. Initially mobile theatre groups travel and perform in lower and middle Assam region and from January onwards, they move to upper Assam and the season draws to a close with Rongali Bihu.

But in the year 2020 the most unfortunate incidents occurred in the mobile theatre groups. The mobile theatre artistes and workers who were touring the districts in upper Assam had to face an experience for the first-time to stop their journey immediately after the declaration of lockdown and almost trapped in those places where theatres groups took decisions to close down temporarily. The situation drove to hit the livelihood of thousands of families just before Rongali Bihu in 2020. As a complete lockdown could have possibly devastated the whole mobile theatre industry; these groups initially urged the government to allow them to screen people for corona virus before letting them in for shows. *“We appeal to the government to allow the mobile theatre groups to perform. They should be allowed to screen people from the audience, wherever required. But the shows shouldn't be stopped by issuing a blanket ban. Mobile theatre shows are planned till Rongali Bihu. If we are asked to wind up almost a month before the end of the season, the technicians will badly suffer as they won't get the payment”* said renowned Assamese actor and one of the existing producers of Awahan Theatre (Times of India, 2020). In a news conference a good number of producers appealed to the state government that if the mobile theatre shows are suddenly stopped, then the producers would not be able to pay the monthly remuneration to the artists and other workers and therefore state government should provide appropriate compensation to the technicians-the grassroots' workers who are comparatively paid less and whose income depend on the number of shows staged.

But the state administration did not pay any attention to such appeals and as a result of lockdown the mobile theatre which was supposed to end its journey on April 2020 and to re-start its usual journey in May-July 2020 could not set in motion in 2020. It means that thousands of artists and technician-workers engaged in and around 32 mobile theatre groups totally lost their avenues and nothing financial support was offered to the member of mobile theatre industry from government. Facing such acute crisis theatre workers in Assam urged the then Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal on August 2020 to extend financial assistance to people engaged in the profession as they are facing hardship in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. One of the members of the delegation revealed before media that as the coronavirus pandemic has been unsparing to the community and has cast a shadow on the careers of many theatre artistes and workers, making sustenance difficult, the theatre workers are facing an acute financial crisis as they have had no work for almost four months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. *“The lockdown restrictions have been eased and life is limping back to normalcy in most parts of the State but the function of the theatre groups seems to be a difficult task as people are continuing to avoid large gatherings.”*- he said.

In the memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister of Assam the Association of Theatre Works mentioned that due to financial hardship and non-availability of any alternative avenue most of the theatre workers had to choose the vending of vegetables, while some have turned daily-wage labourers. Some had even sold their prized possessions used in theatre productions. *“In such a situation, we do not have any other option but to seek your support and assistance in our battle for survival. Therefore, we request you to kindly support and assist us for at least the next six months...”* the theatre workers said in their representation (The Hindu, 2020).

Depicting the situation as unimaginable one of the prominent personalities of mobile theatre industry Krishna Roy, established producer of Awahan Theatre, one of the oldest and prominent theatre groups commented before the media that because of Covid 19 they had to close their performance from March 16 for the last season. *“At this stage, it is impossible to think about preparing for theatre. Mass gathering is the core idea of the mobile theatre. If lockdown or social distancing*

norms continue, then starting mobile theatre is impossible.” (The Telegraph, 2020). Referring the financial loss, he specifically mentioned that losing a day’s performance means financial loss of around Rs 1 lakh for a theatre group, which ultimately hits the entire team. *“We are now indebted to those who had booked us and given advance money but we could not perform because of the pandemic. We will perform in their areas this year if it became possible at all”* he said.

Awahan theatre had to cancel thirty pandals in the year 2020 leading to loss of thirty lakhs directly. In addition to this, the usual income from advertisement also stopped. In the year, advertisement from government amounted Rupees Ten lakh for Awahan Theatre from Government of Assam. Advertisement from private parties including the one at local level which is around twenty thousand rupees per show multiplied by total number of cancelled shows went down the drain. It may be added that although theatre parties are booked much earlier from different corners of the state, festivals generate added income to the producers as they need to stage extra shows during this time. Lockdown cancelling all festivals stopped this possibility too. An added cost of higher depreciation to the properties of each theatre group due to lying idle during this period is another effect. Now it requires simple arithmetic skill and some imagination to calculate how far the whole industry has been affected. The complete loss is much more than the primary loss that can be directly calculated.

Table- 6.4 Some Facts about Awahan Theatre during COVID19 Lockdown	
Total Number of Average Shows per Year	75 to 80
Income earned per show	Rs. One Lakh
Number of shows Cancelled during 2020-21	30
Income from Advertisement received from Govt. of Assam during 2020-21	Rs. Ten Lakh
Income lost from Advertisement at local level	Rs. 20,000.00 per cancelled show (Approximately)
Added Cost	Higher Depreciation cost to the properties lying idle
Other loss	Cancelled Festivals stopped the flow of added income
Most affected employees	Daily wage earners
For the year 2021-22	a. Grimmer situation
	b. Partial loss of 2020-21 tending to total loss of 2021- 22 due to looming uncertainty of the situation
Source: Primary Interview on May 9, 2021	

Among the employees the one with daily wage level basis are at total loss.

How the impact of lockdown has already devastated the entire mobile theatre industry that could be easily understood by various news published in different newspaper of the state. One such news published in the Dainik Asom (2020); a vernacular daily published from Guwahati reads as- *“the corona virus affected of Bhramyaman artists staying in various places in the state have faced substantial problems and, in these times, Brindaban Theatres owner/ producer Ganesh Raimedhi has come forward with some assistance to the artists. It is noteworthy that after providing assistance to artists of Guwahati on 2nd may The plan was undertaken to assist the severely affected lockdown stricken artists said the owner/producer Ganesh Raimedhi. It is laudable that right from the beginning of the lockdown the owner producer has been helping the artists”*. Similarly, the Sankardeva Kalakhetra Samaj, a pioneering cultural institution of the state also distributed food item among the mobile theatre artists on 17th April, 2020 at Khanapara, Guwahati.

Now the question is how the mobile theatre could rejuvenate itself amidst a universal crisis which is occurring repeatedly in most part of the world including

India and what would be the specific consequences if the state machinery does not take it seriously? In last year when the Kohinoor Theatre had to close its show the Producer of Kohinoor Theatre, Tapan Lahkar remarked very negatively about future prospect of mobile theatre. *“Even if we start performances, the question remains whether we will be able to get the kind of response from people we usually get. Excepting a few, accommodation for most artistes of mobile theatre groups is arranged in the residences of people close to the place of performance. We are apprehensive whether people this time will be willing to let the artistes stay in their houses”* he said.

It may be added on a positive note that the government of Assam, acknowledging the gravity of the situation, offered in the year 2020 an ex-gratia amount of Rs. 50,000.00 per person to nine hundred employees of mobile theatres whose annual income was below Ten Lakh per annum.

The Economic Times on the 5th May, 2021 reports *“A third Covid-19 wave is inevitable but the timing could not be predicted, the Centre said on Wednesday. “Phase 3 is inevitable, given the levels at which the virus is circulating. But it is not clear at what time scale this will occur. Hopefully when it occurs, we would be prepared for the virus,” said principal scientific advisor K Vijay Raghavan. The government maintained that though scientists had predicted a second wave, the high Covid-19 numbers being reported to the tune of 4 lakh per day were never expected.”* (The Economic Times, 5th May, 2021)

If the government report is to be believed there is a huge challenge to the mobile theatre industry amidst the fog of uncertainty in the near future. For the workers who are still waiting for better days to resume the shows of mobile theatres would be forced to find an alternative occupation very soon. The problem of adaptation in a new job and coming back to mobile theatres once again would be a huge problem to its workers and artists pushing the future of the whole industry to the brink.

It becomes apparent that the present scenario is bleak – the future is even darker. Once the chain is broken it’s near impossible to revive the mechanism of production. That’s going to have chain reactions leading to a vicious cycle of joblessness, poverty and loss of initiative: quite an ominous possibility. That can be

avoided only by an enlightened patron – has to be government, in this context.

The covid19 lock down during 2020-21 first wave was the first blow to the mobile theatre industry, the second wave almost knocked it down except some government assistance but the looming third wave may prove to be the hammer on the coffin of it unless some serious effort is not initiated to revive it. From an alternative point of view many new faces to the industry come in the long run if somehow it survives this threat.