

Theatre of the Spectacle: A Study of Bhraamyamaan Theatre in Assam

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Abstract

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. It is primarily a theatre of the spectacle. The producers invest a lot on creating a spectacle on stage. The continuity and popularity of Bhraamyamaan theatre ensure that the popular and time-tested methods of production are retained. However, experiment is frequently done on stage not at the cost of commercial enterprise. Bhraamyamaan theatre is often criticized for its adherence to hollow dramatic themes. It is rejected by some theatre critics as trash. However, they are unable to answer why such trash is consumed by the audience. The paper comments on the process of spectacle-making on Bhraamyamaan stage and to what effect these methods have been used by the artists/producers.

Keywords- *Theatre, Bhraamyamaan, Spectacle, Glamour, Audience*

The spectacle is used as the most effective and popular element in Bhraamyamaan theatre. The “appearance it creates” on stage determines the success of a play. Multiple scenes in a play are arranged in which spectacular elements are added. Multiple elements such as costume, light, music, dance, dialogue, special effects, gimmicks etc are added to create a spectacle on stage. The process of spectacle-making is an important area of study in Bhraamyamaan theatre. The methods, techniques of spectacle on stage have undergone sea changes across time. Gimmick becomes the success mantra whereas artistic or aesthetic dimensions do not control/dominate the stage. Melodramas are popular and serious plays are hardly successful.

Is spectacle only about special effects and strong visuals on stage? This is a pertinent question in performance studies. There are plenty of examples to prove that spectacle is not only about special

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effects or strong visuals. A spectacle can be created with the actors and ordinary props. One can actually create a spectacle using a symbolic set. But the question is, is it successful in Bhraamyamaan? Given the size of the auditorium, it is difficult to use a symbolic set as it will not be visible or understandable to the spectators sitting at the far end of the auditorium. There have been innumerable experiments in designing sets and using props keeping the convenience of audiences sitting at various parts of the auditorium. Instead of symbolic sets, realistic sets are effectively and popularly used in Bhraamyamaan. The effort is to create a strong visual on stage. Usually, bright colour is used in the settings. For instance, if it is a kitchen, almost all utensils are kept to give a realistic look.



Figure 1: Kitchen-cum-dining scene from Abhijit Bhattacharya's play *Smashan Jatra* in Brindaban Theatre at Marowa, Nalbari, October, 2010.

If it is a drawing room, sofa sets, tables, chairs, curtains etc are beautifully arranged.

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Figure 2: A drawing room scene from Abhijit Bhattacharya's play *Devdas* in Kohinoor Theatre, at Nalabari Raas Festival, 2013.

If it is a park, the bench, the flower plants, trees, fence etc are beautifully arranged.



Figure 3: A park scene from *Gunda* in Rajashree Theatre, Nalbari Raas Festival, 2014.

In a scene of police station every care is taken to keep the table, chair, picture of Mahatma Gandhi on the wall, the lock-up etc.

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Figure 4: A scene of police station in Champak Sarma's *Badshah*, Theatre Bhagyadebi, Guwahati, November, 2014.

Ensemble is used as a popular dramatic element in *Bhraamyamaan* theatre. Most ensembles take place towards the end of the play.



Figure 5: An ensemble in Samarendra Barman's play *Police-Giri*, Itihaas Theatre, August, 2014.

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Figure 6: An ensemble in Champak Sarma's play *Badshah*, Theatre Bhagyadebi, November, 2014. Special effects are used as effective tools in creating a spectacle. Some instances of special effects are sinking ship, moving train, running horse, burning house, running cars etc.



Figure 7: Scene of a burning house in Abhijit Bhattacharya's play *Ma Ami Olalo*, Hengul Theatre, December 2013.

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Mahananda Sarma once used real snakes on stage for his play *Naag Kanya* (Personal Interview, 8 April 2014). In Hemanta Dutta's play *Mahabharat*, the 'apsaras' were shown flying in the sky (Personal Interview, 26 March 2014). There are plenty of examples of such special effects in Bhraamyamaan theatre.

The spectacle in Bhraamyamaan theatre is not confined to using strong visuals and gimmicks on the stage. It connects the auditorium, the backstage artists, directors, producers and thus expands its horizon to the whole process of preparation throughout the year. This paper analyzes all possible agencies/elements contributing to the construction of spectacle in Bhraamyamaan. Each element is significant. Bhraamyamaan as a culture industry involves a lot of people working in various departments. No department can be ignored by calling it less effective than the others. Bhraamyamaan is like a widespread spider web that connects all the elements. Weakness of one agency has adverse effect on Bhraamyamaan theatre.

Artists, especially from cinema, are an effective tool in creating spectacle on stage. Their presence on stage works as a gimmick as they are usually not reachable to the masses. The curiosity to watch them perform live on stage draws a big audience. The producers rely on this psyche. It is interesting to mention here that the contemporary Assamese film industry is going through a declining phase. Assamese cinema is hardly commercially successful. Ironically, artists working in such films still get viewed as glamorous and are in great demand on the Bhraamyamaan stage. However, not all of them have become successful on stage. Yet there are actors who have gained popularity in both cinema and Bhraamyamaan theatre.

Assamese journalist Mrinal Kumar Borah highlights the importance given to glamorous artists from television and cinema by the producers. Bora believes glamorous artists are hired because of the commercial needs of the producers. He however opines that there is a need to give equal importance to original stage artists as glamorous artists do not remain on stage for long. For Bora, the central element of commercial success is not glamorous artists, but a selection of an original play. He believes the audiences come to watch a play, not the artists alone (Borah 9).

For me, Borah's views are inconclusive as there are audiences who only go to watch glamorous artists on stage. This is perceived through an analysis of the audience responses collected in Nalbari, Assam. Most respondents responded positively to the inclusion of glamorous artists on stage. There are a few who, however, do not like this practice. The opinion is however divided. But

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the practice of hiring glamorous artists continues and remains an effective and popular tool in Bhraamyamaan theatre.

Usually a glamorous artist is paid an amount that eats up a large share of investment by the producer, which adversely affects the remuneration-structure of other artists. Since there is no concrete and effective measure to monitor this process, the producers adopt independent commercial strategies to fulfill their needs. A glamorous artist, in this process, becomes a much desired object for the producer and he in turn projects the artist as a desired product to the audiences.

Eminent playwright Abhijit Bhattacharya says that “mobile stage has been dominated by the starry gimmick, not by the quality-production”. He says that “star system” cannot be rejected in mobile theatre. He believes that in any commercial show, glamour is the “most wanted” ornament. “Stars” and “technical gimmick”, for him, attract the audiences. However, he believes, “the ultimate glamour would be generated from the story line, the characterization and the comic or tragic side of the play”. In line with other critics, Bhattacharya, too, points out the problem of paucity of playwrights. There are about forty theatre troupes which require 120 plays every year. But, due to the paucity of playwrights, one writer has to “shoulder the burden of writing six or seven plays”. Therefore, the quality of plays has degraded. Bhattacharya suggests that there should be an effort to create professional dramatists, which is not an easy task. Those playwrights must have the knowledge about “the infrastructure”, “the parallel set-designing on the two stages” and “the entertainment values of the stories and the characters” (Bhattacharya, “Sorry for the Interruption” 39).

It is ironical that Bhattacharya has been criticized for the same allegations that he has leveled against Bhraamyamaan theatre. It is alleged that Bhattacharya writes about 10-12 plays every year. Most of his plays are written keeping in mind the star artists of the troupe. He himself is criticized for writing ordinary plays, mostly influenced by Hindi or South Indian (dubbed) movies. But, he is the same playwright, who wrote an original play *Bhul Nubujiba Bhupen Da* which was based on the songs of Bhupen Hazarika and received accolades from the audiences. The reasons stated by Bhattacharya for degradation of quality of plays apply to him as well. However, it is interesting to note that every year Bhattacharya’s plays become popular in spite of severe criticism against his plays. In Bhraamyamaan, entertaining plays are written every year. But such plays, usually, are in demand for only one season. If a troupe continues to stage the same plays every year, they will fail to draw the attention of their audiences.

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As popular theatre, Bhraamyamaan is dependent on plays that are attractive, entertaining and suitable for the double-stage. The producers cannot compromise with the basic structure of the auditorium and stage equipments, convenience of audience etc. A playwright has to keep in mind the technical aspects as well. Therefore, instead of looking at what classical and traditional theatre practices have offered, a playwright of Bhraamyamaan has to consider the aesthetics of popular theatre and write a play that fits into its existing structure. If playwrights from amateur theatre wish to write plays for Bhraamyamaan, they have to adapt themselves to the style and technique of Bhraamyamaan theatre. For instance, Bhabendranath Saikia and Munin Barua came from amateur theatre and adapted themselves to the style of Bhraamyamaan theatre. A common challenge faced by both of them was the duration of play. The first plays of both these playwrights did not last more than an hour each. But an hour is not acceptable in Bhraamyamaan theatre. The duration of play has to ideally be two and half hours to three hours. Later, Barua and Saikia added scenes to their plays, expanding the plot and thereby gradually adapting themselves to the Bhraamyamaan style. It is an established notion that Bhraamyamaan theatre cannot survive without commercial success and therefore, symbolic plays etc. are not successful in Bhraamyamaan theatre. However, Saikia's plays were popular due to their strong message, original story, powerful characterization and beautiful dialogues, without having to show any gimmick on stage. Munin Barua has also succeeded in writing plays with strong story and powerful dialogues. However, there are playwrights such as Abhijit Bhattacharya who exclusively write plays for Bhraamyamaan with more emphasis on gimmick and glamour rather than other dramatic elements. The efforts of such playwrights are limited only to producing a spectacle on stage.

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

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etc, which have all been shown on stage at different times by different troupes as gimmicks to avoid losses (17).

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

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

The audience in Bhraamyamaan theatre is an essential part of spectacle-making process. An auditorium can accommodate about 2000 people. Participation of audience in such a large number itself becomes a spectacle. Trends in Bhraamyamaan keep on changing. Most of these changes take place due to changing tastes of audiences. Audience, in a way, influences the process of spectacle-making in Bhraamyamaan by directly participating in the process on the one hand and influencing it through reception or rejection of a particular play/theme/trend on the other. Moreover, survival of

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Bhraamyamaan depends on its audiences. Therefore, all other elements and agencies put forth their collaborative effort to create a spectacle that connects with the audience. This connection is essential. The audience becomes the most essential element in the process of spectacle making. Absence of one or two other elements may not disturb the process of spectacle-making. But the absence of audience disturbs and sometimes destroys the whole process.

All the elements discussed above contribute towards making a spectacle on stage on the one hand and project Bhraamyamaan as the spectacle itself. When we discuss the process of spectacle-making in Bhraamyamaan, we discuss the role and significance of all the elements, such as selection of plays, selection of artists, etc. whereas while discussing Bhraamyamaan as a spectacle itself, a larger framework is designed under which agencies such as the producers, artists, organizing committees etc. and their roles and association with each other, mediated by the “images” of theatre are taken into account. The essential elements are the “images” that create a framework within which the agencies connect with each other.

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