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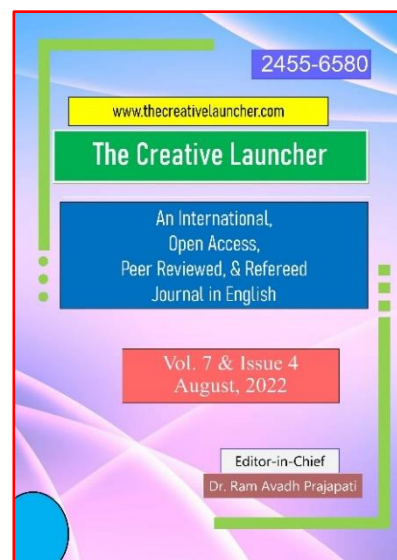
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Research Article



Producers and Construction of the Spectacle in Bhraamyamaan Theatre of Assam

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Abstract

Producers play a major role in creating a spectacle on the stage of Bhraamyamaan Theatre. Their choice of elements to be used on stage largely depends on the expectations of the audience. As Bhraamyamaan Theatre primarily focuses on the commercial aspects and its continuity heavily depends on its commercial success, the producers leave no stone unturned to create a great spectacle on the stage. The present paper examines the diverse methods employed by the producers of Bhraamyamaan theatre to attract the audience. An attempt has

been made to critically analyze the construction of spectacle on stage through the producers of Bhraamyamaan Theatre.

Keywords: Assam, Audience, Bhraamyamaan, Commercial Expectations, Producer, Spectacle, Stage, Theatre

Introduction

Bhraamyamaan Theatre in Assam has a unique identity with a few unique features which are as follows:

- a) Bhraamyamaan theatre has two combined stages instead of one conventional proscenium stage.
- b) There is a makeshift auditorium which can accommodate about 2000 people under its roof.
- c) The theatre troupes move from one place to another in Assam for about nine months without a break, producing multiple shows in an evening, starting its journey from August every year.
- d) Orchestra is played in the beginning followed by a dance-drama and then the main play of the evening which runs for about two and a half hours.
- e) The element of spectacle is highlighted in order to attract the audience as the producers primarily look for profit through theatre.
- f) There are about 150 members in each troupe comprising the producer(s), actors, director(s), musicians, sound artists, technicians, cook, helpers, drivers etc.

In Bhraamyamaan theatre, the spectacle is the most important element. The “appearance it creates” on the 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 artists, producers and members of the organizing committees play a significant role in construction of the spectacle on stage.

Producers as Creators of Spectacle on the Stage

Bhraamyamaan theatre is a classic example of composite art. A good number of stakeholders are responsible for creating a grand spectacle on the stage. The artists, choreographers, directors, musicians, technicians, etc. play a major role in that process. However, all these stakeholders are, in a way, controlled by the producer who constantly works towards understanding the expectations of the audience. Although roles played by actors, playwrights and directors can never be ignored, it is the producers who have the final say in production. It is the producers who invest capital and so they work like a manager of a company, whose concern is to devise strategies to make profit. It is, therefore, essential to analyze a producer’s role in creating a spectacle and shaping Bhraamyamaan as a popular art

form. A few successful producers have been taken up for discussion. The aim is to highlight their methods employed in creating a spectacle on the stage and why such methods have been adopted by them.

Achyut Lahkar

Achyut Lahkar is the pioneer of Bhraamyamaan theatre in Assam. He founded Nataraj Theatre in 1963 with his brother Sada Lahkar in Pathsala, Assam. Through Nataraj Theatre, Lahkar revolutionized the cultural scenario of Assam. He introduced female actors, female background singers, invented a good number of theatrical devices, travelled across the state, minimizing the gap between the audiences and theatrical productions. His innovation and continuous experiments on stage mesmerized the audiences cutting across classes. He made theatre accessible to the masses. Lahkar not only provided entertainment to the audiences, but also tried to enlighten them with plays having serious subjects. He deliberately employed various folk dances and songs of Assam in the plays with an aim to promote Assamese culture. However, he followed the confluence of both local and global cultural elements in Nataraj Theatre. His experience of theatre in Kolkata helped him come up with significant innovative methods that he employed in Assam through Nataraj Theatre. Achyut Lahkar's autobiography *Bhraamyamaan Theatre*, transcribed by Alex Figo, is an account of his life along with the journey of Nataraj Theatre. The autobiography has documented how experiments were made in Nataraj Theatre, keeping in mind the "horizon of expectations" of the spectators. In this section, attention will be drawn on how Bhraamyamaan theatre, in the form of Nataraj Theatre, brought a renaissance in Assamese theatre. In this process, an attempt will be made to find out how Bhraamyamaan theatre has evolved as a popular form of art/entertainment in Assam, through a close reading of Lahkar's autobiography.

The autobiography is an account of Lahkar's consistent effort to offer something new to the audiences. He came up with a new concept, a new method, a new theory of his own, almost every year, starting from 1963. He had to suffer huge losses in the process of spectacle-making, but he revived himself quickly and went ahead with his mission to innovate on stage. Lahkar has recorded both 'diachronic' and 'synchronic' developments of Nataraj theatre in his autobiography.

Lahkar has mentioned that it was his younger brother Sadananda Lahkar's 'Nataraj Opera' that gave rise to Bhraamyamaan theatre in Assam. Lahkar started his work with a fresh vision. He didn't like a few things about opera, such as a man playing a woman's role, wrong pronunciation of language/words etc. The opera plays were written in verse. Lahkar thought of using prose in his plays. He wanted his characters to speak a language that was in use in society (Lahkar, *Bhraamyamaan Theatre* 25).

The plots of the opera plays were mostly based on places outside Assam, except for *Naga Konwar* and a couple of Assamese plays. Most of the plays entered the space of opera through translation. Lahkar brought a noticeable change to theatre in Assam by producing plays such as *Joimoti*, *Miri Jiyori*, *Beula* etc which were deeply rooted in the Assamese culture

and tradition. Besides, he made an attempt to adapt the translated plays into Assamese culture by making necessary changes.

Through Bhraamyamaan theatre, Lahkar had a vision to transform the urban-centred theatre into people-centred theatre by introducing mobility (26). By people-centred, Lahkar perhaps meant, Bhraamyamaan theatre that could bring people from both rural and urban areas of Assam together. To translate this idea, he spent plenty of time in planning to raise a makeshift stage in open air, instead of the permanent proscenium stage in the city, and to move equipments from one place to another. With the help of his technical knowledge, he invented the shape of a stage, sitting place for the orchestra, positions of the lights, time to show the casting etc. What he wanted to do with all these devices was to mesmerize the spectators.

Lahkar talks about the role of media in promoting Bhraamyamaan theatre. He specifically talks about the Lion Man of Assam, Radhagovinda Baruah, who gave Lahkar the opportunity to stage his plays in the first year, and published in his newspaper—“Biswar Sarbapratham Bhraamyamaan Theatre” (World’s First Mobile Theatre). Radhagovinda Baruah was the first person to name Lahkar’s theatre as Bhraamyamaan theatre.

On October 2, 1963, on Gandhi Jayanti, Nataraj Theatre was inaugurated in the makeshift auditorium raised in the Pathsala Hari Mandir premises where the first play *Bhogjara* was performed. The stage was on tyre wheels. There were, in fact, two stages. The second stage was pushed in once the action on the first stage was over. The stage was shaking during the performance but there was no instant solution to the problem. Lahkar, who was controlling the lights, felt helpless. In order to deal with the problem, he decided to announce that there would be no show the following evening. Rather than announcing it at the end, he announced it just before the last scene of the play. This was how the idea of making an announcement before the last scene of the play was introduced and was followed by all other Bhraamyamaan theatre groups. However, due to the demand of the audiences, Lahkar could not stop the show the following day. He went ahead with some improvisation on stage, with the help of his carpenter, Rajani Datta. For Lahkar, the announcement before the last scene was an invention due to necessity (29).

Lahkar’s theatre suffered huge losses in the first year. Most of the artists deserted him. But he revived himself in the second year, encouraged by a few artists, including Gopi Das, a player of instrumental music from Barpeta, who advised Lahkar to take *Beula* for his theatre. *Beula* revived Nataraj Theatre and the play continued to be staged and appreciated by the spectators for forty years. There was tremendous scope of innovation in *Beula* such as ‘snake movements’, ‘snake bites’ etc. which were effectively and successfully shown on stage. *Beula* gained popularity with its mesmerizing spectacle on stage. For Lahkar, *Beula* gave life to Bhraamyamaan and made history.

If there were tyre wheels to move the stages in the first year, Lahkar bought iron wheels from Kolkata in the second year to reduce the jerks during performance. This was an innovation

in stagecraft that helped reduce the time taken between scenes. While the action on one stage was on, the other stage was being prepared for the next scene. Once the curtain fell, the second stage on wheel was quickly pushed in. The spectators couldn't find out the technique as everything happened behind the curtain. They could only see the change in atmosphere on stage. Lahkar went along with the iron-wheeled stage for many years. This, however, created a cinematic spectacle on stage, which was why the spectators, especially those who were unable to access cinema, were overjoyed and loved this form of entertainment.

Lahkar claims, he invented a new technology called "theatre scope", nowhere to be found in the world. Through "theatre scope" he tried to employ cinematic devices such as "intercut", "freeze", "fade in", "fade out" etc. in theatre without using a camera. He had to use about five stages to show these techniques. He produced 3-4 plays using this technique. The most successful among those was 1857.

Inspired by another innovative idea, Lahkar met Bhaben Das, a noted filmmaker of that time, to discuss the possibility of using both cinema and play on stage. He, then, went to Kolkata and purchased a camera. He also printed posters saying that the major attraction of that year would be Cine Theatre. With camera came its caretaker, Shankar Guha. Later Shankar Guha became a renowned cameraperson in the country. Lahkar purchased a Japanese-made projector and learnt the technique to run it in Kolkata. He used a special line in Nataraj Theatre's poster:

*'sokolobor theatre,
kintu Nataraj Cine theatre'*
(Every theatre is only theatre,
But Nataraj is Cine Theatre.) (37)

Lahkar states that it was the audience/spectators who inspired him to think anew.

Lahkar acknowledges that the technique of revolving stage was borrowed from Kolkata's Star Theatre and Minerva Theatre. He used this technique for a couple of years. It helped him add pace to the action on stage (Lahkar, *Bhraamyamaan Theatre* 38).

Lahkar also talks about the use of light, a brief analysis of the success of *Beula*, economic security of the artists through *Bhraamyamaan* theatre, success story of his play *Erina* which was influenced by Marxist ideology, Bhupen Hazarika's love and encouragement for *Bhraamyamaan* theatre, Bihu dance on *Bhraamyamaan* stage, theatre calendar without break, significance of 13th April, contributions of a few committed and powerful actors such as Jiten Pal, contribution of artist Adya Sharma, his experience of moving from one corner of the state to the other, his all India tour with his troupe, inspiration of Bishnu Prasad Rabha, fall of Nataraj Theatre and his proposal of observing 2nd October as the birthday of *Bhraamyamaan* theatre.

But the question to be asked is, in spite of all these innovations and magnificent creation of spectacles on stage, why did Nataraj theatre close down in 2003? Lahkar himself states that he fell sick in the last season and was unable to move along with his troupe. This created a vacuum in terms of a manager or a leader whose presence was essential. It is

pertinent to note here that to run a business of theatre is not an easy task, especially when it involves managing more than 100 members in a troupe. Spectacle is a must. There is no cost-cutting in this area. But spectacle is not enough. It is meaningless without a well-thought-out marketing strategy and management.

Nataraj's debacle also exposes the vulnerability of this art form and its artists. Bhraamyamaan is often criticized for its compromise on quality of work. But this will be a rather negative approach to study and critique Bhraamyamaan. It is not only about the play or its quality. It is more about the play proper. It is above and beyond the play, the text that the artists and producers work upon. It is about the elements that are added to it, the elements that beautify and glamorize the stage, which are observed/ consumed/ watched/ appreciated by the audiences/ consumers/ patrons/ spectators.

Ratan Lahkar

Ratan Lahkar, the producer of Kohinoor Theatre, is considered one of the most bold and creative producers in Bhraamyamaan theatre. He believes nothing is impossible on stage. He realizes his dream of making the impossible possible on stage. He says, "There is no 'No' in my life" (Figo, and Patgiri, *Long March* 21). Therefore, the spectators have witnessed plays like *Ramayan*, *Mahabharat*, *Titanic* etc. with spectacular stage-settings. These plays were successfully staged with marvelous special effects.

An account of Lahkar's experiments and innovations and the challenges faced by him are given in his biography. The book titled *Long March* records the significant moments of Kohinoor Theatre. It also portrays the life of Ratan Lahkar as an artist, a bold producer and a unique creator of art.

The biography, however, is in the form of a few interviews. In one of those interviews, Lahkar says: "Kohinoor and audience are closely linked to each other. If there is no Kohinoor, then there is no audience. If audience does not love Kohinoor, it dies" (my translation) (*Long March*, 14). So, his experiments in theatre were motivated by his audiences.

Ratan Lahkar used unique marketing strategies. During the Tihu Adhiveshan (Annual Session) of Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1976 (the year in which Nataraj Theatre was formed), Lahkar used a huge banner hung with the support of 6-7 tall areca nut trees. The banner was about 60 feet in length and 6-7 feet in breadth. The banner had the following lines:

Ratan-Krishna Prajojito--
Kohinoor Theatre
Pathsala. Barpeta. Assam
(Produced by Ratan-Krishna--
Kohinoor Theatre
Pathsala. Barpeta. Assam) (*Long March* 29)

Here, the banner itself became a spectacle. A successful production depends a lot on its publicity. The banner made the spectators curious. They came in large numbers to watch the plays on Kohinoor stage, with lots of expectations. And Kohinoor did not disappoint them.

There was every element of entertainment in their plays. Besides the huge auditorium, inclusion of renowned artists, expert musicians, set designers, lights men, playwrights, directors, dance artists etc made it possible to create and present a great spectacle in front of the audiences. This validates the point made by Ratan Lahkar in an interview with his biographers that theatre is a collaborative art. Its success depends on teamwork. Lahkar gives credit to his team instead of to individuals for the success of Kohinoor theatre. It is true a producer invests a lot in terms of money and time in the process of spectacle-making in Bhraamyamaan theatre. But the spectacle is not only about showing gimmicks on stage. It is how one works on an idea and realizes it on stage. It is also about selection of artists, plays and playwrights, directors etc. keeping in mind the popular trends and the tastes of the audience of the time.

How and why the producer's role in the process of production is significant, can be underlined through the following example. Kohinoor Theatre, in its season of 1977-78, was going through a crisis. And the crisis erupted at the final stage of rehearsal of a play. Some members from the audience remarked that the play would not be welcomed by the audiences. The producer and actors, too, were unhappy with the way the play was being readied for production. So Lahkar, with his associate producer Krishna Roy, decided that a new play would be produced. The problem was that there was not even a single play that could be staged in such a short span of time. After some marathon discussions with his team, Lahkar decided to order a play from Calcutta. The play had already been staged there. It was an adaptation of Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's novel *Naa* (1961). The script was sent to Kohinoor camp by air in four days. The whole team was excited about it. Lahkar himself took the responsibility of translating it into Assamese. He worked continuously and translated and edited the play in three days (*Long March* 109).

Kohinoor has staged some landmark plays which have created history. Prominent among those are *Mahabharat*, *Ramayan*, *Hemlet*, *Othello*, *Ben Hur*, *Titanic*, *Asimot Jar Herald Sima* etc.

Subodh Majumdar

Subodh Majumdar started working with Theatre Bhagyadevi in 1996. The name Theatre Bhagyadevi might confuse the readers. It should have been Bhagyadevi Theatre. However, this is the only troupe that uses the name in reverse order, i.e., Theatre Bhagyadevi. Majumdar worked as an assistant producer to begin with. Initially he designed the route for the troupe. He says that it is a difficult task to design the route, i.e., the traveling schedule from August to April. Later he started working on the theatre's budget. Majumdar says that a producer must have a working knowledge of all the departments in Bhraamyamaan theatre. Majumdar observes that the contemporary audience has exposure to various sources of entertainment such as cinema, television, mobile telephony, social networking sites etc. He believes that the scope of providing entertainment on Bhraamyamaan stage is limited because it is not scientifically designed for performance. However, spectacle is created with all the limitations

on stage. Majumdar states that a producer has to keep the commercial success of a play in mind. He, however, observes that the plays produced by Theatre Bhagyadevi convey –social messages to the spectators. It is up to the audiences as to how they receive these messages. Majumdar further observes that unlike amateur theatre, Bhraamyamaan produces plays with melodramatic elements. But this is done as part of a process to reach people across classes. He assumes that most audiences in rural areas will not be able to enjoy an amateur play (Personal interview, 7 August 2014).

It is perceived that most producers rely on the hypothesis that leads them towards adopting elements which enriches the spectacle on stage. Therefore, they keep aside ideologically loaded and message-oriented plays to make way for plays that have simple plots, simple dialogues and which portray the fulfillment of desire or a powerful voice of resistance of the masses against a corrupt bureaucrat or a political leader etc.

Mahananda Sarma

Mahananda Sarma started his career in Bhraamyamaan with Purbajyoti Theatre. He formed his own Bhraamyamaan troupe, Aparupa Theatre in 1984. Sarma describes how he expanded Rabindranath Tagore’s short story “Kabuliwala” and wrote a play on this. Sarma observes that Assamese audiences like to watch tragedy on stage. Therefore, he added more tragic elements to the plays, than the original story had. He also wrote *Naag Kanya*, based on a true story. In order to create a realistic spectacle on stage, he hired a snake-charmer and a female circus artist for his theatre. He learnt to rear snakes from the snake-charmer and used fourteen snakes on stage. This was an effort to show action on stage, which was close to reality. The spectacle attracted audiences in huge number. He mentions that the music used by Ananda Narayan Dev and Nanda Banerjee was an addition to the beautiful spectacle shown on stage (M. Sarma, Personal interview, 8 April 2014).

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is perceived that the producers in Bhraamyamaan theatre employ multiple methods on stage to attract the audience. They experiment on stage with new gimmicks, special effects, techniques, etc. that help create a great spectacle on stage. Although they tried to produce plays with social messages sans gimmick in the past, most of them were commercially unsuccessful. This has forced the producers to rely heavily on the elements that entertain the audience. To entertain the audience is the biggest challenge in front of the producers. Due to the hugeness of the auditorium and diversity of the audiences, it is not possible for the producers to choose productions that only cater to the need of a particular group. The producers try to assess the expectations of the audiences and prepare the productions accordingly. They adopt methods that are constantly changing, catering to the need of the diverse groups of audiences, and that help in the process of construction of a spectacle on the stage.

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