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Bhraamyamaan Theatre in Assam and the Politics of Choice of Plays

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Abstract

Keeping in view the hugeness of the makeshift auditorium in Bhraamyamaan theatre which can accommodate about 2000 spectators under its roof and the need to consider the commercial viability of a production the playwrights of both full-length play and dance drama follow a few time-tested methods while writing the plays. Despite having the willingness to produce serious, message-oriented plays, the producers of Bhraamyamaan theatre failed in the past to attract sizeable audience to the auditorium as a result of which they adopted methods that would generate interest in the audience. In that process, following the direction of the producers, the playwrights write plays that are pregnant with most of the modern entertaining elements. The present paper closely examines the politics of choices made by playwrights to write full-length plays and dance-dramas.

Keywords: Bhraamyamaan theatre, choice, play, politics, popular

Introduction: Selection of plays in Bhraamyamaan theatre is a difficult process. A good number of factors influence the process of selection. One, the commercial viability of a play has to be kept in mind while choosing the play. The producers cannot afford to produce a play on stage which is not commercially viable. Two, the play should be written with an adequate length, ideally about two and a half hours. Three, popular elements of entertainment such as action, songs, special effects etc. should be incorporated to the play. Four, the plot/story of the play should be able to capture the imagination of people across classes. Five, the dialogues should be written attractively. Six, the playwright has to be innovative in creating the characters. Seven, plays with didactic approach hardly becomes successful in Bhraamyamaan theatre. Eight, the popular trends suggest that social plays, adaptation of English or Hindi movies, adaptation of popular Assamese novels, mythological plays with lots of gimmicks etc. are the most successfully produced plays on Braamyamaan stage. Similar factors are responsible for the choice of dance-drama, duration of which is about 20-25 minutes, and produced just before the full-length play. Beautifully choreographed dance-drama has been a major attraction in Bhraamyamaan theatre since its inception. Dance-dramas are not usually performed during multiple shows in an evening. However, the choice of both the dance-drama and the full-length play is dependent on the popular parameters that influence the playwrights, directors and producers. Therefore, it is

essential to understand the politics of selection of plays. For this purpose, the present paper extensively studies the opinions expressed by the critics, playwrights, producers etc. The popular parameters used by the producers to choose a play have been commented upon. The paper also examines how the politics of popular culture influences the playwrights to choose their themes and write the plays accordingly.

Playwrights and Choice of Plays in Bhraamyamaan Theatre: Usually a producer depends on established and popular playwrights. But each troupe needs about three plays every year. There are about forty troupes in Assam. In all, they need about 120 plays. There is a paucity of playwrights. So, the producers contact them well in advance and discuss the themes. As current practice goes, the producers give the list of artists from their troupes and request the playwrights to write plays based on their potential. Sometimes, themes of the plays are also suggested by the producers.

Veteran Assamese playwright and critic Basanta Kumar Bhattacharya observes that despite the serious lack of quality plays on stage, Bhraamyamaan theatre has played a significant role in giving continuity to theatre and making it people-oriented. The producers, influenced by commercial motive, look for plays enriched with comedy, tragedy, conflict, emotion and melodrama. The producers collect Bengali plays with such elements and get them edited/translated for performance on the Bhraamyamaan stage (B. K. Bhattacharya, “Bhraamyamaan Theateror Prasangat” 8).

Bengali plays have long influenced the stage in Assam. The practice was justified by the borrowers as the producers were able to produce commercially successful plays. Selection of plays was an essential part of the process of spectacle-making. Melodramatic elements along with gimmicks created an attractive spectacle on stage. However, there has always been a debate around the concept of ideal drama in Bhraamyamaan theatre. For most producers, an ideal drama is the one that draws audiences in large numbers. This has been stated by Krishna Roy, the producer of Awahan Theatre (Personal Interview, 22 December 2013).

Popular Trends and Selection of Plays in Bhraamyamaan Theatre: Interestingly, no trend has permanence in popular culture. It is essential to remember that popular theatre cannot always be measured through the parameters of aesthetic theatre. Popular theatre has to be analyzed keeping its own nature and identity in mind. Despite severe criticism, the producers of Bhraamyamaan theatre are convinced that serious, message-oriented, dramatically correct plays are not commercially successful. Therefore, they adopt methods fit for this cultural practice, mostly motivated by the aesthetic dimensions of popular theatre. The audiences, for the producers, are not serious theatre critics who watch plays for intellectual debate or enlightenment. The expectation of audience is to watch something that fulfills their desire to relax and be entertained. It is primarily this need of the audience that the producers bank on and try and fulfill.

Eminent filmmaker, playwright and director Munin Barua observes that a playwright has to expand some parts of the play looking at the requirement of stage-setting or the entrance and exit of the actors despite realizing it is not essential for the play, but required by Bhraamyamaan stage, which is termed by theatre critics as “dragging”. But “dragging” becomes essential in the process of spectacle-making. It is done keeping an ideal length of

the play in mind. Barua cites an example from his first play *Ghar*, which was written for Hengul Theatre in 1989. The length of the play was about one and a half hours. Prasanta Hazarika, the then producer of Hengul Theatre, expanded it following the unique style of Bhraamyamaan theatre. The ideal length of a Bhraamyamaan play is about two and a half to three hours. That is why there is a paucity of playwrights who are able to write stage-worthy plays for Bhraamyamaan. This is a problem frequently cited by producers. Most producers argue that they have to rely on a handful of playwrights. They rely on popularly known playwrights who are used to writing plays following the established or accepted principles of Bhraamyamaan. Sometimes, potentially weak scripts are rejected at the time of rehearsals. It is during rehearsals that all elements to enrich the spectacle are analyzed. Experiment and innovation, guided by experience, are essential tools. But there is no lack of inconvenience in the process, as some actors are not found suitable for the roles assigned to them. Barua, however, acknowledges that the biggest reward for a playwright is the opportunity to stage plays in front of millions. He invites critics, who call Bhraamyamaan a disease, to get acquainted with this art form, closely watch it and then criticize it (Barua, "Bhraamyamaan Theatre Aaru Moi" 15). Barua's statement strikes a serious note as he has not only written and directed Bhraamyamaan plays, but also worked with amateur groups and written and directed a good number of Assamese popular films.

Politics of Choice of Plays in Bhraamyamaan Theatre: Assamese playwright and organizer Jiten Sarma states that first allegation against Bhraamyamaan is its choice of plays. The usual practice in Bhraamyamaan till a few years ago was that the producers of a troupe would go to Kolkata with a couple of friends, watch the popular plays performed there, collect the plays and adapt or translate them into Assamese. This, for Sarma, was a dangerous and destructive practice that became a hindrance for new playwrights and the plays, in course of time, started losing their local flavor. Sarma adds that the gimmicks of popular Jatra or theatre troupes of Kolkata influenced Bhraamyamaan theatre to such an extent that many producers went bankrupt in that race. The producers took part in a competition to show attractive songs, dance and imitation of action scenes from Hindi cinema to attract the masses. However, Sarma observes that playwrights such as Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Mahendra Barthakur, Arun Sarma and directors such as Kulada Kumar Bhattacharya broke away from old traditions and did their best to produce original plays on stage (17).

A theatre-lover from Assam Priyanku Borah states that being a commercial theatre, Bhraamyamaan has to select a play which has possibilities of commercial success. There is nothing wrong in writing plays based on stories from cinema. Kahinur has successfully staged a good number of plays based on short stories, novels, plays and cinema from other languages. However, Bhraamyamaan is likely to lose its identity if playwrights continue to write plays on Bollywood and South Indian cinema. Borah observes that Kahinur Theatre has successfully staged plays with original stories and that have the Assamese flavor (28). His argument can be seen as a refutation against the belief that only gimmick oriented plays are successful in Bhraamyamaan theatre.

The borrowings, imitations, parodies which are commonly used in Bhraamyamaan make it a postmodern art form with a lot of intertextual elements. In postmodern context, nothing is original and every text is an intertext. Bhraamyamaan as an art form reflects this

postmodern sentiment. An important dictum of postmodernism is the destruction of binaries such as high art/low art, mainstream/popular etc. Transport of ideas from one art to other is a common practice in postmodern culture industry. The fixity or definiteness of norms is always challenged in cultural practices. This postmodern principle applies to Bhraamyamaan as well. It provides both free and controlled space for performance. Free in the sense that it is not bound to follow strict classical norms of drama as it is primarily used as a means of entertainment. And controlled in the sense that a play has to be written keeping in mind two combined stages, its settings, lights, sound, and size of the auditorium. Moreover, a playwright is often instructed by the producer to write a play based on the potential of star artist(s).

Eminent Assamese cine-journalist, columnist, playwright and critic Pabitra Kumar Deka states that there is a paucity of good plays in Bhraamyamaan theatre. The difficulty lies in the fact that the audience of Bhraamyamaan theatre is spread across Brahmaputra valley. Regular audiences spread across towns and villages range from educated to the illiterate. Therefore, it is not easy to satisfy such diverse groups of audiences. Trying to give a definition of a good play, Deka says that a good play should have a good subject. An expert playwright will write a play on that subject, experienced directors will rehearse the play with talented new or old actors and the talented actors will aptly portray the characters. Music, sound, light, stage-setting etc. will also have to be adeptly used. The play will be popular if all these elements are effectively coordinated. Deka says that a successful play in Bhraamyamaan is that which is received by a huge number of audiences (9). Therefore, the theatre troupes keep commercial success in mind. Reiterating the point made above, he says that it is easier said than done that playwrights should write plays with original subjects which are able to entertain audiences across the Brahmaputra valley. He observes that there are a handful of playwrights who are able to understand the audiences as also the technical aspects of Bhraamyamaan (Deka 10).

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 essential elements of Bhraamyamaan theatre, theatre critic Naranarayan Dev Sarma talks about the requirement of an original play that is suitable for performance on twin stages, in which there are seamless movements of action from one scene to the other. This form of theatre requires a play with a length of about two and a half hours stage-time. The playwright has to add a couple of sub-plots to the central plot of the play. A play of a shorter duration or with a complex or absurd theme is hardly successful on the Bhraamyamaan stage. The audience likes to watch plays with simple stories/plots. The playwright has to carefully design the scenes so that the audience does not sense any obstruction. There should be natural and spontaneous movement from one scene to the other. Moreover, Sarma believes, the people behind the screen and their well-organized function are essential for successful production of a play. Sarma highlights the role of dialogue in Bhraamyamaan theatre. In order to reach the spectators sitting at the far end of the auditorium, the expressions on the faces of artists are not sufficient. Therefore, to express various sentiments (Rasas) such as happiness, sadness, fear, wonder etc., the actors take recourse to dialogues. The playwright has to emphasize on creating dialogues that can powerfully express the mood of performers on stage (Sarma 25). Commenting on Bhraamyamaan as a composite art, Sarma underlines the need for a combined effort from artists, technicians, dancers, workers, directors, producers and audiences towards constructing this as a beautiful art form (27).

Dance-Drama in Bhraamyamaan Theatre: Although dance-drama is gradually losing its relevance, it is still practiced as an essential part of theatre. A separate director takes responsibility of directing dance-drama. In an interview, Jatin Goswami, the veteran writer and director of dance-drama in Bhraamyamaan theatre, states that earlier dance-drama was revered by both producers and organizers. But now, it has become a formality. He observes that it is a programme of about 20-25 minutes to settle the audiences before the start of the play. He proposes to do away with it as it has lost its relevance now. In his time, he states, dance-dramas were produced in sync with the main plays. Thus, dance-drama with religious theme was performed before a religious play; historical dance-drama was followed by a historical play and social dance-drama followed by a social play (Goswami 32). Such practice no longer exists. Goswami observes that Assamese Jatra parties were modeled on Bengali Jatra. Whatever was practiced in Kolkata got imitated in Assam. Jatra started with Chokra Gaan followed by Cutting and then dance-drama. Dance dramas were initially directed by Gajen Barua, Kalawanta Singh, Robin Das etc. About 10-12 boys danced wearing the attire of girls, which was called Chokra Gaan or Fast Gaan (First Gaan). It was followed by the performance of a small story accompanied by musical instruments, which was called Cutting. There was no song or dialogue in this part. Later this transformed into dance-drama in Jatra parties in Assam. Dance-drama was a transport from Jatra to Bhraamyamaan (Goswami 32-33). Goswami observes that dance-drama today is of much

inferior quality. He suggests that the producers should either try to improve its quality or do away with it (Goswami 33).

Conclusion: The concept of a good play in Bhraamyamaan theatre is not limited to the discourse of aesthetic drama/theatre. The discourse demands inclusion of debates centred round popular theatre and popular/trash aesthetics as well. A good play, in that sense, would be a play that is widely accepted by the masses. The concept of a good play cannot be restricted to mere adherence to theatrical grammar and age-old theatre theories. Rather, there is a resistance to the established norms and traditional theories. Most elements in Bhraamyamaan theatre are different from the traditional theatre discourse and theories. Symbolic sets, mime etc. are not popular in Bhraamyamaan theatre. Construction of attractive and strong visuals is an essential requirement in Bhraamyamaan theatre. The whole team in Bhraamyamaan theatre contributes towards creating a spectacle that draws audiences in large numbers.

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