

Ina Ross

The Mobile Theatre Movement in India: a Success Story in Assam

Taking mobile theatre in Assam as an example, Ina Ross questions in this article how professional, contemporary theatre can be successful in India, where it is considered to be a niche culture and economically precarious. She examines what would be needed for contemporary theatre in India to appeal to all segments of the population and asks how the theatre can compete with its omnipresent big brother, the cinema. A brief historical introduction to the mobile theatre movement is followed by an analysis of recent performances, complemented by interviews conducted with the major players in Assam's mobile theatre movement. The article shows that the success of mobile theatre is not to be found on the stage alone: it is also a social and societal model that is lived and experienced with the audience, and this ultimately is the key to its success. Ina Ross is a cultural manager with a focus on the performing arts. She has held the position of Associate Professor at the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Art in Berlin, and since 2015 has been teaching arts management at the National School of Drama (NSD) in Delhi. She is the author of *Wie überlebe ich als Künstler? (How to Survive as an Artist, 2013)*.

Key terms: revenue-shared model, audience development, theatrescope, theatre-film, Indian village theatre.

AN INSCRIPTION embossed in gold in his house reminds Ratan Lakhar of the people to whom he owes everything. In Assamese, the inscription reads 'To my audience', and is placed under four masks symbolizing theatre.

'All that we have achieved, this house, the plot of land, the training camp for the actors – we owe everything to our audience. It has remained loyal to us for forty years,' explains Lakhar, who is now almost eighty years old.¹ Ratan Lakhar is the director and producer of the Kahinor Theatre, one of the oldest of the Bhramyoman (mobile theatre) companies in Assam.² His son took over the business long ago – even today, mobile theatre companies are often family enterprises.

In cinema-crazy India, with its Bollywood mania and its many regional film industries, theatre often gets a raw deal. It is dominated by amateurs, its institutional structure is fragile, and no sooner has talent been spotted in an actor or script writer, it is poached by the film industry.³ Given film budgets, no theatre can hope to compete. In addition, 'modern theatre in India . . . is urban, not rural. It is created by and primarily for people who

may be regarded as middle and upper-middle class.'⁴

In the north-eastern state of Assam, however, mobile theatre has managed to break free from the constraints that usually confine Indian theatre. It reaches out to a wider audience, is commercially stronger, and has greater social relevance than is otherwise the case in this nation. In outlining and discussing what mobile theatre is, I shall seek to look also in this article at the reasons for its extraordinary success. In addition to the aesthetic aspects, I shall pay attention to mobile theatre from a culture management point of view and with regard to how it fits into everyday life, to show that theatre in Assam is not simply an art form but a complex and rich social event. It is as intertwined with traditional village life (right up to the local infrastructure) as it is with the new economic and social aspirations that took shape during the modernization process under way in twentieth- and twenty-first-century India.

Mobile theatre amalgamates art and entertainment, theatre with film, contemporary issues with mythological themes. Its market-

ing policy combines everyday local practice with innovative communication, a mix that is just as effective and can hold its own in comparison with professional publicity strategies. And, finally, it gets its audience interested in relevant problems and brings people together who otherwise might have little in common. This is an extraordinary achievement in community building in what is in most respects a fragmented society.

On Tour with the Mobile Theatre

The mobile theatre season starts in August and continues until mid-April. For almost eight months, trucks criss-cross the villages and cities of Assam. Loaded not only with actors, costumes, and props, they also carry the entire makeshift theatre or tent. It is a mobile and autonomous set-up; the companies even come with their own generators – a necessity given the unreliable power supply in Indian villages. Thus equipped, they can also perform in remote areas; all they need is an open space. According to Violina Borah, for villagers in Assam theatre is synonymous with mobile theatre.⁵ Weeks before the trucks start arriving in the villages, their coming is anticipated on large billboards, the local shop is decorated with posters of the plays, and even the village road gets an arch with a hoarding.

The theatre tent used by mobile theatre companies comprises a bamboo structure covered with tarpaulin, which can hold up to three thousand people. And since the Mancharupa Theatre introduced a double-stage system in 1968, two stages have been part of the standard equipment in each tent.⁶ As the stages can be used simultaneously, locations in the play can be changed without a break. Each and every movement on stage is accentuated by loud sound effects to ensure that those sitting in the cheap seats at the back of the tent can also follow the performance. A fist fight on stage also becomes an acoustic exchange of blows.

Mobile theatre operates with impressively large sound systems and the requisite control booth. The orchestra pit is located in front of the stages and accommodates not

only all the technical equipment but also the musicians. The background music produced for each performance is a mix of live music, played by a small orchestra using traditional Indian instruments, and previously recorded playbacks. Although much use is made of technology in the orchestra pit, the focus here, too, is on doing things manually. To observe a technician in the control booth during a fist fight is like watching a dancer gone wild. There is a good deal of dashing between lighting and sound controls, and switches are pushed up and down with lightning speed to synchronize with movements on the stage in a choreographic masterpiece of coordination and harmonization.

Shows are held over three days at every venue, which means that each company has three different plays in its repertoire. Several renowned Assamese authors like Atul Bar-doloi, Prafulla Bora, and Arun Sharma have written for mobile theatre.⁷ While initially there was a strong element of mythology in the plays, the repertoire today includes social issues, family dramas, Bollywood material, and dramatization of classical novels and political events.

Hijack (Bhagyadevi Theatre) was inspired by the hijacking of an Indian plane on its way from Kathmandu to Kandahar in December 1999. *Usama bin Laden* (Sankardev Theatre) brought the events of 9/11 in New York to Assamese villages. A production was dedicated to Lady Diana (Abahon Theatre), based on Andrew Morton's book about the Princess. Material from Hollywood has also been adapted, as in *Titanic* (Kahinoor Theatre) and *Anaconda* (Srimanta Sankardev Theatre). Shakespeare plays and *The Invisible Man* (Hengool Theatre), based on H. G. Wells's novel, have also been part of the repertoire.⁸

The advertising sector has recognized the potential of mobile theatre and the authority it commands in a socially aspirational rural target group. Consequently, over the last few years, the promotion of products has become another key source of income for the companies. The country's large mobile phone providers are among the sponsors, as are local private clinics. Their names are displayed on posters, tent facades, and

hoardings. Particularly effective, however, are the commercials shown by the sponsors before the start of the show. While similar to the commercials shown in the cinema or on television, the slots are considerably cheaper for the corporates to buy. For a well-known group like Kahinoor, revenue from advertising now accounts for 30 per cent of a production budget.⁹

Once a year, in November or December, an arts festival is held in Nalbari district in the west of Assam. Row upon row of tents and ticket booths are set up by the major mobile theatre companies, and truck after truck is brought in. Hoardings and posters advertising the upcoming productions line the dusty roads to the festival site. This is the only opportunity to see the major companies in the same place at the same time. For the theatre people themselves, the festival is something of a trade fair at which they can watch rival performances, recruit actors for the coming season, meet with authors and colleagues, take bookings, and promote their business.

The mobile theatre companies are invited by the *Raasleela* organizing committee, *Raasleela* being the traditional dramatic portrayal of the life of Lord Krishna and comprising songs as well as spoken passages. It is Assam's most important theatre festival,



Above: trucks being prepared to transport a mobile theatre. Photo: Ina Ross.

Below: on site, starting to set up the tent. Photo: National School of Drama.

held at this time of year at festival grounds and venues throughout the region. Visitors to the mobile theatre performances in Nalbari District pass by the richly decorated and illuminated arch at the entry to the *Raasleela* festival ground. *Raasleela* and mobile theatre could not be more different in their aesthetic, choice of subjects, and dramaturgy, yet no one seems to feel that the clash between tradition and modernity is problematic.



Beginnings of Mobile Theatre

Violina Borah dates the beginnings of mobile theatre in Assam to the late nineteenth century when the first theatre groups were formed and started to go on tour. They used Bengali, the language which enjoyed the highest prestige in India's literary culture at the time. In this context, Borah, as well as Kaushik Kr. Deka, highlight the role of the 'yatra' movement.¹⁰ The yatra groups performed in Bengali or used Assamese translations of Bengali plays.¹¹ Their stages were set up in the open, only under the shelter of the trees. The material was usually inspired by the great Indian epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Deka sees today's mobile theatre 'as an upgraded version of yatra' with new, sophisticated technologies and of far greater cultural and social significance.¹²

But it was not until Achyut Lahkar founded the Nataraj Theatre in the 1960s that mobile theatre developed the identity and professional, aesthetic, and management practices that define it today. In the 1960s, Assam was a backward province with regard to modern theatre as found in the cities of Calcutta or Bombay.¹³ Lahkar, who came from an area close to Pathsala in Assam, had published a magazine in Calcutta. In the early 1960s he returned home and founded the Nataraj Theatre in 1963. In his biography, he recalls:

My prime intention in the line of drama improvement was focused on how fast to make urban-born stage art move closer to the heart of rural rustics. My second attempt was to discover the mechanism of converting fixed stage to mobile.¹⁴

Lahkar had the plays performed exclusively in Assamese. The decision to take the theatre to the audience and not to bring the audience to the theatre was inspired by Assamese opera, particularly by the Nataraj Opera Company founded by Lahkar's brother Sada in 1959, which moved with its performances from place to place: 'I thought that the distinguishing feature of the operas is that they are mobile. They can meet people's demand, going to their own places.'¹⁵

Right from the start, Lahkar introduced technical innovations in light and sound,

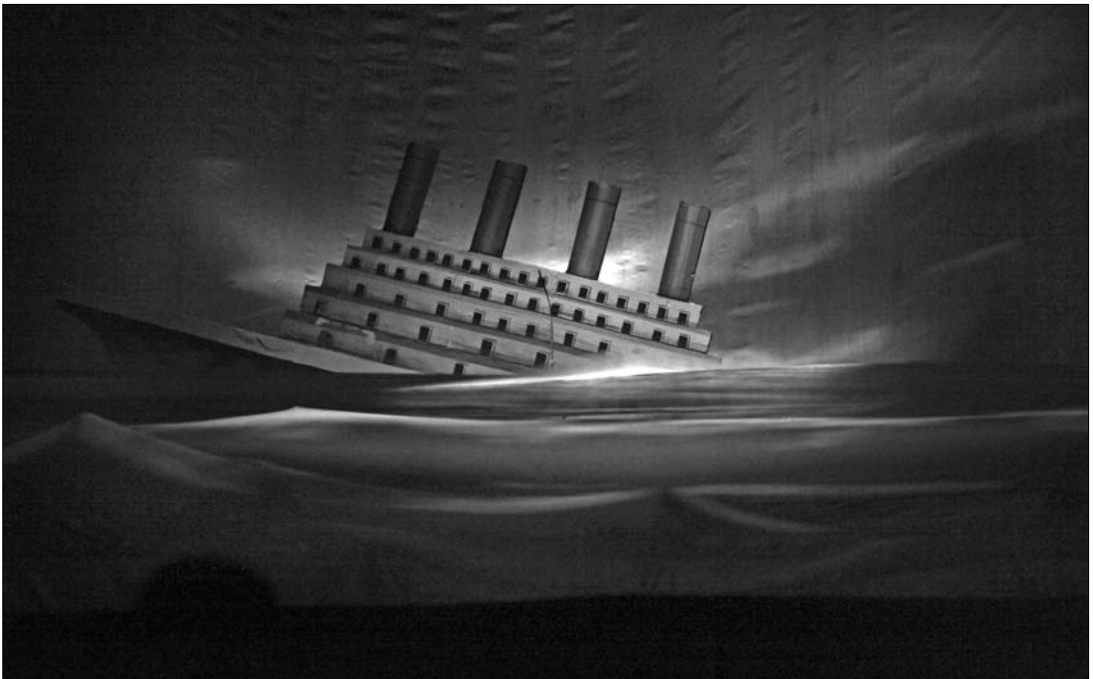
which continue to be characteristic of mobile theatre and which guarantee suspense and variety on the stage. Achyut Kakhar, who went on to win prestigious state awards, is not just a highly regarded artist but considered the founder of an entire theatre movement.¹⁶ Nataraj Theatre closed down forty years after its establishment, but many of its successors keep up the tradition. Today, there are an estimated thirty to forty mobile theatre companies in Assam.

Between Stage and Screen

Ever since it started, mobile theatre has looked in various ways towards the cinema, going for adaptations of films from Hollywood and Bollywood, the most prominent example being *Titanic*. That production was being talked about even beyond the borders of Assam and it established the Kahinoor Theatre Company as one of the key exponents of this type of theatre. When it was produced in 2002–03 (directed by Hemanta Dutta, a stage actor), the Hollywood blockbuster was already an international success. News about it had made its way to the villages of Assam, where there was tremendous curiosity about the dramatic love story. But few in the Assamese backwater could afford the expensive cinema tickets for the foreign film import, and few in the villages understood English. Furthermore, the region did not have enough cinema halls equipped with the technology required to show the film.¹⁷

This is where the theatre saw its opportunity, and its market. The story was translated into Assamese and the expensive sets were cost-effectively localized. A model of the ocean liner was replicated in wood, as were the details of the ship such as the upper deck, which is the scene of enthusiastic dancing. The stormy waves were created by lengths of blue fabric and involved assistants shaking it to create the effect. Instead of Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, local stars stood at the ship's railing.

As in the case of the 'original' *Titanic*, the aim of the Assamese version was also to entertain a mass public with imposing visual and acoustic effects, although of course with-



Titanic for mobile theatre audiences. A model of the ocean liner in wood sinks amidst stormy waves created by lengths of shaken blue fabric. Photo: National School of Drama.

out the gigantic budget and the illusionistic perfectionism of Hollywood. It was a performance based on the Indian principle of 'jugaad', where solutions to complex problems are found by the creative use of limited resources and with affordable local alternatives being developed to replace expensive international products.

Mobile theatre is inspired not only by stories and characters from cinema but also by its aesthetics, particularly the aesthetics of Indian cinema. Songs are a key element in many plays. Many of the current plays deploy 'item songs' (a Bollywood expression for a set-piece song and dance number) – a clear reference to a film equivalent. Beyond the theatre tent and away from the performance, these songs are often promoted on YouTube using the company's own music videos. These help publicize the production in advance, and the songs provide an additional source of revenue through CDs and downloads from music platforms. Personal computer penetration is low in rural India, but most of the younger generation, at least, possess mobile phones, which help circulate the songs rapidly.

The economist Rama Bijapurkar has established that the rural consumer represents a new economic factor in India: 'There is a new and expanding rural India . . . [which] is prosperous, mostly self-employed, and with fairly non-agricultural, urban-like tastes.'¹⁸ This is the group targeted by the music videos with their modern, western outfits, urban sets, and uninhibited acting by the protagonists.¹⁹ They address the longings and aspirations of rural youth, their new cultural orientations, and their social ambitions.

One of the innovations introduced early on by Nataraj founder Achyut Lakhar himself was what he called the 'theatroscope' – a combination of film and theatre craft.²⁰ He deployed classical film techniques such as the freeze, fade-in, fade-out, and intercut on the stage. Recorded film sequences incorporated into the action on stage served as an additional tool for providing the action with chronological depth or for strengthening emotion. The aesthetic of the 'item numbers' is borrowed from Bollywood films.

As on the screen, special effects are also among the stylistic devices used in mobile theatre productions, particularly in those of

large companies. In a collage of genres, previously produced and technically perfected effects are combined with traditional forms of local entertainment and are 'assembled' on site in the ongoing performance.

The role played by stars and the star system for mobile theatre is also reminiscent of the film industry. As analyzed in detail by Valérie St-Jean Larouche and Johanne Brunet, successful Bollywood films largely depend on the prestige of a few highly prominent stars.²¹ This is also the case with mobile theatre. According to the co-producer at Hengool Theatre: 'It is important that in addition to younger actors we also have names on stage that the audience knows and loves.'²² Mobile theatres have managed to recruit well-known Assamese film stars such as Tapan Das, Jatin Bora, Jupitara Bhuyan, and Jintu Sarma for their productions.

The mobile theatre is unique in the national theatre scene in paying salaries that match or may even exceed what is paid to film actors. This has much to do with the problems of the local-language film industry in Assam. In comparison with other regional film industries such as that in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the film sector in Assam faces creative as well as financial problems and suffers from a lack of technical innovation. Several cinemas that depended on local productions have had to close down – a vicious circle that further reduces the infrastructure for Assamese films, and ultimately shrinks the market.²³ Thanks to mobile theatre, the actors have a welcome second labour market that offers them a regular income for almost eight months a year.

A look at the aesthetics of marketing the two genres also reveals a close relationship. It is virtually impossible to distinguish the posters, hoardings, and banners for a theatre production from those for a new film, not only because the stars are often identical, but because both cinema and theatre are star-centric, and presented as such.

Contemporary Theatre for All

Mobile theatre is often the only accessible and affordable form of entertainment in

Assam, particularly in the rural areas where it caters to a wide range of tastes and age groups. But what all mobile theatre performances have in common is that they are contemporary and modern both in theme and execution. Even when mobile theatre is inspired by ancient myths or uses traditional characters, these are given a contemporary makeover before being presented on stage, as, for example, in *Boliya Krishna* (*Crazy Krishna*), a 2015–16 production by Hengool Theatre (next to Kahinoor, one of the established mobile theatre companies, headed by Prasanta Hazarika together with his younger brother).

Lord Krishna, always recognizable in graphic representations because of his blue skin, and much loved for his lust for life and charming impudence, is portrayed as a cool urban youngster, with long, wild hair and dressed in jeans. The songs and love scenes are not overly restrained. This Krishna is a far cry from the figure one can see in traditional *Raasleela* performances or from the Krishna in the popular Ravi Varma motifs commonly found in calendars in Indian households.²⁴ Yet the manner in which the figure is developed and modernized is, in a way, still consistent with the classical type: a legendary age of heroes is transformed into the cool of the early twenty-first century, and this is precisely what reflects the timeless vitality of the mythological material.

In the production, impressive light, music and video technology were combined with more economical, local entertainment traditions. Real fireworks were used, and two fire-eating artists in the orchestra pit blew fountains of fire on to the stage. (In the performance I witnessed, dry grass surrounding the orchestra pit caught fire. Only swift action by the theatre owner prevented a disaster; emergency exits at the venue would not have sufficed.)

Mobile theatre uses its effect-oriented staging strategy also to convey social messages. Many stories testify to a keen awareness of pressing problems in today's India, and of how they can be effectively dramatized, even if the dramatization is sometimes crass. An example is *Chokrobehu*, a Kahinoor Theatre



Above: the audience at a mobile theatre production. Below: cross-section in close-up. Photos: Kahinoor Theatre.

production in 2015–16 concerning a generational conflict. *Chokrobehu* (which can be roughly translated as ‘a tightening net’) tells the story of a young man who wants to marry a pretty girl from his village. He (and the tightly packed audience in the tent) do not at first understand why his father is so vehemently opposed to this alliance, since the girl seems to possess all the virtues of a wife. But the audience guesses that something is not right, thanks to the disconcerting flashbacks – fragments of memory that come

home repeatedly to haunt the young man. A dark scene from his childhood, which he is unable to interpret, seems to be evoked. However, what these obscure reminiscences have to do with his bride or his father’s rejection remain a mystery.

The story is narrated on the two adjacent stages and the action shifts from one to the other. The first stage represents the family home, the facade of life that is intact. Family members gather in the cane-chair ambience of an Indian middle-class home. The events



of the past are presented on the second stage. When the lights come on, the audience and characters are transported back in time, and only then are they able to comprehend the events and action on the first stage.

The reasons for the father's opposition to the marriage of his son slowly become clear: the girl is his daughter, the offspring of an illegitimate relationship. There had, however, been a quarrel and the father had killed his lover, the mother of his daughter. The son, as a young boy, had hidden in a tree in front of the woman's house from where he first heard them arguing and heard her being murdered. And he also saw vague images, a kind of shadow theatre in the house. Although he did not recognize his father at the time, these memories have haunted him ever since.

Viewed from the second stage, the intact world on the first now seems to be increasingly exposed and precarious. The action that goes back and forth from one stage to the other is accompanied each time by sound and light effects (sudden darkness, accompanied by a drumbeat on one of the stages), a dynamic effect that holds the attention of the audience. Such effects are also used to provide dramatic emphasis for sentences or gestures. *Chokrobehu* relies largely on dialogue and a few item songs – otherwise so popular in mobile theatre – which would interrupt the action on stage and, from time to time, would animate the audience.

The full truth of this cross-generational four-way relationship is gradually revealed in the course of the play. Believing he has the authority and is entitled to respect, the father tries to suppress the truth, but is ultimately unable to prevent it coming out. The climax occurs in the penultimate scene, as the son understands the extent of his father's transgressions and, above all, what this means for his own future and his own happiness. He shouts at his father and then into the audience: 'You killed me, you just killed me.'

This scene, as all key moments in the play, is set to its own music (another stylistic element borrowed from film). The sounds from the orchestra pit rise to a crescendo, particularly the drums played by a host of music-

ians. The actor is required to throw his voice and to use expansive body language so as not to drown in the immensity of the music.

Techniques for Reaching the Audience

Mobile theatre is not a theatre of small gestures or subtle nuances, the kind performed under studio conditions in Delhi, Kolkata, or Mumbai, often sponsored by a foreign cultural institute. In Assam, the story must also reach the audience in the back rows of a large tent. This is achieved with the help of the loud, rhythmic music and the use of exaggerated gestures. In this scene, where he is screaming and crying, accusing his father directly or turning to the audience, the son is on his knees, arms outstretched, seeking help from heaven.

The actor's turning to address the audience is typical of mobile theatre. He ends the scene with an inconsolable 'Why?' and the spectators react: answers are shouted out, some women cover their faces with their hands, the young men in the crowd laugh. There is a spectacle-like atmosphere, something between a circus and Shakespeare's Globe, quite unlike the usually quiet ambience of modern western theatre.

For the final scene, the musicians in the orchestra pit raise the pitch once more. The son has committed suicide, leaving behind a farewell note. Read offstage by a sepulchral voice, this is again accompanied by dramatic background music. The scene with mourning women is not quiet or intimate; it is an outburst of despair and emotion in which the mother and bride throw themselves on the dead bodies of the son and the lover. The father stands there, tearing at his hair.

There is much in the play that must be familiar to the audience: the violence between men and women in the village, the overbearing authority of the father, and the unbreakable, often limiting, and occasionally disastrous inter-generational ties. For in an Indian village an individual's social status and life chances are still largely determined by family relationships – by one's father or grandfather, and to whom one's siblings are married. How *Chokrobehu* presents the audi-



The cast of *Crazy Krishna* in the green room. Photo: Hengool Theatre.

ence with this aspect of its own world is intensely emotional, yet it is also conducive to developing greater awareness of the problems. Even though the subjects addressed are serious, the music and effects make for an entertaining evening. The audience experiences a story that could have happened in their village here and today, but in a form that amazes them.

Entertainment with Social Side Effects

H. K. Ranganath, in his study of types of communication in rural India, finds that, despite the presence of new media, the old forms of communication like theatre and puppetry have lost none of their importance because only these forms satisfy the need 'for something different, something intimate, something personal and culturally oriented with the rural man, in order to bring conviction towards personal and community action'.²⁵ This observation fits in with the fact, notwithstanding the new and increased media consumption in rural areas, that the popularity of mobile theatre is not on the decline but, on the contrary, increasing.²⁶

This opens up possibilities of using theatre as a means of communication to raise awareness of contemporary problems. Irrespective of its entertainment qualities, mobile theatre also has a social and educational side, which, perhaps, is not completely independent of its business interests, eventually establishing a win-win situation for all involved – the theatre, the audience, and the region.

Besides the commercials, many companies also include five- to ten-minute spots on issues such as AIDS, drug abuse, and family-planning programmes. These are seen by a public that a government campaign would rarely reach – and more than anything else, theatre communication commands the kind of authority and credibility that government bodies lost long ago vis-à-vis their 'public'. This is acknowledged even by the government itself, which provided funds for the production of *Dainir Prem (A Witch's Love, Kahinoor Theatre, 1995–96)*, which dealt with the issue of AIDS, with Assamese theatre and film star Tapan Das in the lead role.²⁷

Most importantly, as far as social context and effects are concerned, mobile theatre plays a part in community-building, not just

by embellishing the seasonal festivities, but also by helping to fund the infrastructure of local organizations and institutions.²⁸ The state, as a provider of social services, is weak and sometimes close to non-existent in rural areas. Here mobile theatre can step in.

The companies are invited by self-governing organizations in the villages, known as 'committees', which may be responsible for running schools or colleges, temples, clubs, or NGOs. The theatre companies may also be invited by the *panchayat*, the village council, which is the elected body operating at the local level of the official political and administrative structure. Invitations are often extended to theatre groups when there is a specific need for funding, say, for replacing the roof of a school, or for the reconstruction of a temple or community hall.

The committee issuing the invitation pays the theatre company a fixed amount in advance as an appearance fee. In return, the committee acquires the right to a share of the revenue from ticket sales and can use this amount to pay for local community needs. Under this revenue-sharing model, 60 per cent of the revenue from ticket sales usually remains with the theatre troupe while 40 per cent goes back to the inviting committee.

These committees are mobile theatre's most important clients. At the annual festival, each company has set up its own room backstage for committee representatives where they can have a cup of tea without being disturbed and can talk about future productions, actors, financial conditions, and generally exchange news from the villages. Ultimately it is the committees that decide on which productions are to be invited to their respective villages the following year. Of importance here is the content, the popularity of the actors and the innovative effects, and the reputation of the company.

That the mobile theatre companies sell tickets at all and how they do it (with staggered pricing, depending on the quality of the seats) is no trivial matter in India. In rural areas, the norm at all kinds of shows is to present the artists or performers with a gift after the performance. And in the large cities, where one buys tickets prior to the perfor-

mance as in the West, there are usually only two price ranges. In comparison, the mobile theatre ticketing policy is professional and differentiated. In addition to the individual tickets for the middle rows in the tent, there are cheap gallery seats at the back, VIP tickets for the front rows, and a season ticket offering a package of three performances.

An expensive donor ticket is also on offer, with which the buyer specifically supports the social concerns of the inviting committee. So it is probably no exaggeration when the journalist Jaideep Mazumdar comprehensively describes the social impact of mobile theatre activities: 'Bhaymmaman helped the construction of hundreds of schools, colleges, community halls, religious places, and other public facilities all over Assam.'²⁹

The committees in the villages sell the tickets by retail, going from house to house and approaching the people individually; in some cases they offer the option of paying in instalments (particularly before the harvest) or of paying later. The whole system gives the theatre as well as the local dignitaries and population, with all the stakeholders, an interest in keeping it alive. The leading actors and the directors are always hosted by prominent or affluent residents or by key figures from the organizations that extend the invitations. Not only does this help cultivate relationships, it also offers theatre practitioners the opportunity to engage in informal exchanges on problems, issues, and the experiences of their audiences. This helps to generate an intimate knowledge of ground reality, one of the key reasons for the success of mobile theatre.

The Unifying Power of Mobile Theatre

Ratan Lakhar sees the 'most significant characteristics of the mobile theatre in . . . its unifying power'.³⁰ In contrast to provocative political activist theatre that takes sides on controversial issues (and ultimately remains marginal), mobile theatre tends to be more consensual than polarizing and is therefore able to operate in the mainstream. Creating greater awareness of a health-related problem, for example, is socially relevant but, in

contrast to the caste issue or inter-communal relations in India, it does not touch upon any fundamental and explosive conflict. Mobile theatre does not separate, it integrates – and ‘integration’ is a key word for the theatre at many levels. It integrates by uniting different groups of audiences and by being a unifying force in its own organizational culture.

Mobile theatre brings stories from many places to many places. Members of different religions, castes, tribes, and social groups sit next to each other to watch a show. In the multi-layered reality of India in which population groups tend to live in parallel universes religiously, socially, and culturally, in a society that is more inclined to separate than to unify, and where the cosmos of the affluent is fundamentally different from that of their servants or the poor; in a world like this it is not common for the poor and the well-heeled, different castes, and both genders to come together for a joint cultural event.

Why exactly mobile theatre is successful in this context cannot be answered definitively, since no audience survey or study has yet been undertaken. One of the reasons could be that India’s north-eastern region has a strong, independent regional identity, which, however, has also often found political expression in separatist tendencies. With its local stars, its involvement in the functioning of local communities, including financially, and consistent use of Assamese as its language, mobile theatre both serves and exploits this intense feeling of ‘us’.

Just how much it is a part of public life in the region is reflected not only in its social engagement, but also in the fact that Ratan Lakhar ran for political office in 2006. His fame and his reputation as a social benefactor for the region as well as a successful businessman were the strengths on which he relied when entering the political arena.

Mobile theatre is never made with only one community in mind, since it unites diverse communities. And it is intended for the entire family. Men, women, children – all are well represented in the audience. One notices the large number of children, even though, frequently enough, neither the content of the play nor the late hour appear to be

suitable for them. But their presence is an indication of a safe venue, for the inclusion of women and children is anything but trivial in a country in which the public sphere, as well as audiences at public performances, are often dominated by men. The audience is exclusively Assamese, all speak Assamese, just like the actors on the stage, but different groups and communities together make up the audience for mobile theatre.

This unifying power, which Ratan Lakhar emphasizes with reference to his own audience, works not only where the people are seated, but also behind the stage. Mobile theatre companies are business enterprises, which, while ensuring many jobs in the region, are primarily theatre families or, as one would probably say in the western world, theatre teams. All belong together, all travel together, and, as noted by the founding father of the movement, Achyut Lakhar, in his memoirs, all work in different positions together for the benefit of the audience and for the success of their team.³¹

Programme brochures therefore include not only the portraits of the actors but invariably also pictures of the technical personnel, the backstage workers, costume tailors, and even the kitchen helpers³² – who, to supplement their income, are allowed to sell sweets to the public in a personal capacity, a bonus of sorts for many years of loyalty.³³ And so, before a performance, one can see mounds of sweets attached to poles making their way between the rows of seats, accompanied by the loud cries of the vendors peddling their wares. Business savvy belongs to all levels of the mobile theatre enterprise.

‘Only an Affirmative Spectacle’?

Even though the influence of mobile theatre on social life in the region has been acknowledged by several writers (Kaushik Kr. Deka, Violina Borah), there are some sceptics. Mobile theatre is sometimes seen simply as an affirmative spectacle that amuses the masses or, indeed, diverts their attention away from serious contemporary issues. Critics dismiss it as aesthetically irrelevant because of the primacy of business interests.

The Assamese author Sailen Bharali is particularly harsh in his criticism. He draws a clear distinction between popular – that is, mobile – theatre in Assam and intellectual theatre by amateur groups.³⁴ According to him, mobile theatre practitioners ‘have not been able to do much for the development of the theatrical art as the artistic side is often sacrificed by them for commercial ends’,³⁵ and mobile theatre companies have failed ‘to create an atmosphere to make people theatre-minded’.³⁶

From this point of view, a theatre that goes for a broad impact, that targets a large audience, and that works towards commercial success cannot be considered ‘genuine’ – and the thousands of people who flock year after year to the performance tents cannot be considered ‘theatre-minded’. Assamese writer and journalist Manoj Goswami sums up the reservations neatly: ‘While the form and format are unique, the content is poor.’³⁷

Indeed, mobile theatre seems unaware of clear distinctions between the theatre on the one hand and the fair, circus, or festival on the other. While one may see this as aesthetic immaturity, it may not be the most perceptive way of looking at ‘works of art’ that are simply not meant for experts, or even for an educated middle class. The world of amazement and wonder, along with the spectacle, are as much a part of mobile theatre as its trucks. The theatre is firmly embedded in seasonal rhythms, in festivities, in the lives of the village or small-town dwellers. It does not define itself on the basis of the position it occupies in theatre discourse but always in relation to its audience.

As for Anasuya A. Paul’s criticism that theatre, under capitalist conditions, tends only to produce plays as ‘a commodity with wide circulation’, and that mobile theatre is an example of just this, in India it would leave amateur theatre as the sole legitimate and worthy representative of the performing arts.³⁸ This would be so because a largely public-funded theatre, which does not operate as a business, simply does not exist here, as opposed to, say, in Europe.³⁹

Even if all productions in Assam are commercially motivated, mobile theatre has a

remarkable social and educational role to play. Only because of its entertaining qualities can it have such an impact on such a cross-section of people. With its revenue-sharing model, it fulfils its public task in a very specific manner, but it serves the population in much more general ways. One could, in fact, discover a utopian element in the mobile theatre performances and audiences, a pilot experiment with a society coming together without too much display of caste, gender, religion, or social status, united in a common longing for marvel and wonder. It allows for an egalitarian community experience, otherwise a virtual impossibility in everyday life in India.

Mobile theatre may not make its audience ‘theatre-minded’, as Bharali claims, but it makes the theatre ‘audience-minded’. Art purists may be dissatisfied with this kind of theatre, or may even take exception to it. Yet it is not without its high-profile advocates even in classical theatre literature. In the prologue to *Faust*, Johann Wolfgang Goethe has his theatre director recite what is quite literally a hymn to the magic of the mass spectacle and its curious, wide-eyed public:

Ich wünsche sehr der Menge zu behagen,
 [I wish the crowd to feel itself well-treated,]
 Besonders weil sie lebt und leben lässt;
 [Especially since it lives and lets me live;]
 Die Pfosten sind, die Bretter aufgeschlagen,
 [The posts are set, the booth of boards
 completed,]
 Und jedermann erwartet sich ein Fest.
 [And each awaits the banquet I shall give.]
 Sie sitzen schon mit hohen Augenbraunen,
 [Already there, with curious eyebrows raised,]
 Gelassen da und möchten gern erstaunen.⁴⁰
 [They sit sedate, and hope to be amazed.]⁴¹

A poet who writes something like this would enjoy mobile theatre in Assam.

Notes and References

1. Interview with Ratan Lahkar, 5 December 2015, in Pathsala, Assam.
2. ‘Bhramyoman’ means something which can move or rove, which is ‘mobile’. From this point in the text, the term ‘mobile theatre’ is used.
3. Nemichandra Jain, *Asides: Themes in Contemporary Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: National School of Drama, 2003), p. 13; Sudhanva Deshpande, K. V. Akshara, and

Sameera Iyengar, *Our Stage: Pleasure and Perils of Theatre Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009), p. 12.

4. Farley Richmond, 'Characteristics of the Modern Theatre', in Farley Richmond, Darius Swann, and Phillip Zarrilli, ed., *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 387.

5. Violina Borah, 'Bhramyomaan Theatre of Assam: a Study of its Origin and Place within the Popular', in Delhi College of Arts and Commerce, ed., *Intellectual Resonance: DACA Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, II, No. 3, (New Delhi: University of Delhi, 2014), p. 120.

6. Borah, p. 122.

7. National School of Drama (NSD) and Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), ed., *The Journey of the Mobile Theatre*, booklet on the Kahinor Theatre Festival 25–29 April 2010 (New Delhi: 2010), p. 6.

8. In Sanjay Maharishi's 60-minute film on the visit on the Kahinor Theatre to Delhi in 2010, commissioned by the National School of Drama, the protagonists are asked about the success of the *Titanic* production. The film will probably premiere in 2016.

9. Interview with Pranab Lahkar, co-manager Kohinor Theatre, 5 December 2015, Nalbari, Assam.

10. In Sanskrit, *yatra* means 'journey' or 'procession'.

11. For a detailed description of the *yatra* movement in Assam, see Anusuya A. Paul, 'Popular Mobile Theatres of Assam: an Agency of Globalization and Transculturation', *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, I, No. 3 (2013), p. 22–3.

12. Kaushik Kr. Deka, 'Mobile Theatre of Assam and its Impact on the Social-Cultural Life: a Study in North Kamrup Area', unpublished thesis, University of Gauhati, 2009, p. 155.

13. NSD and IGNCA, ed., *Achyut Lahkar: the Pioneer of Bhramyoman (Mobile Theatre)*, p. 12.

14. Alex Figo, *Mobile Theatre. a Biography of Achyut Lahkar* (Pathsala: Writers' Forum, 2013), p. 28.

15. Mobile Theatre Producer Association, *Achyut Lahkar: the Doyen of Assam's Mobile Theatre*, Jubilee publication, Pathsala, 28 October 2006, p. 9.

16. *Assam Tribune*, 17 June 2013 <<http://tinyurl.com/zohaqyl>>. For the history of mobile theatre, see: Kalita Kishor Kumar, *Bhramyomaan Theater or Itihaas: a Comprehensive History of Mobile Theatre of Assam* (Guwahati: All Assam Mobile Theatre Producer Association, 2011).

17. In addition to the crisis in the film industry that has already been mentioned, in the 1970s Assamese separatists carried out several attacks on cinemas that did not screen local films but showed international or Bollywood films in Hindi. Cinemagoers stopped coming and many of the large, well-equipped cinema halls were forced to close down.

18. Rama Bijapurkar, *We Are Like That Only: Understanding the Logic of Consumer India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009), p. 224.

19. A relevant and successful example of this sort of merchandising is the title song of the Hengool Theatre, *Boliya Krishna* (music: Palash Gogoi; text: Rajdweep), from the 2015–16 production of the same name; the music video was made specifically for the song and was filmed in different theatre venues in Assam. <<http://tinyurl.com/hlgcl9>>.

20. Figo, p. 35.

21. Valérie St-Jean Larouche and Johanne Brunet, 'Excel Entertainment: a Reflection of Contemporary

Bollywood', *International Journal of Arts Management*, VII (2015), p. 66.

22. Interview with Joon Hazarika, co-producer Hengool Theatre, 6 December 2015, in Nalbari, Assam.

23. In their study of the Assamese film industry, Deka and Das establish that there were still around three hundred and fifty cinema halls and one hundred touring cinema companies in Assam in 1990; today there are only forty-nine. See Girin Deka and Sailendra Das, 'Assamese Film Industry: Growth, Challenges, and Future Prospects', *Dimorian Review*, III, No 1 (2016) <<http://tinyurl.com/z4z5f7z>>.

24. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the painter Raja Ravi Varma put his paintings of Indian gods – lovable and popular portrayals – on the market. His motifs were quickly reproduced in print and continue to have a strong influence on the visual mainstream interpretation of Hindu gods. In this regard, see Jyotindra Jain, *Indian Popular Culture: the Conquest of the World as Picture* (New Delhi: Apeejay Press, 2004).

25. H. K. Ranganath, 'People's Performances: a Perspective in Rural Communication', in Ratan Parimoo and Indramohan Sharma, ed., *Creative Arts in Modern India* (New Delhi: Books and Books, 1995), p. 337.

26. Deka and Das, p. 205.

27. Interview with Ratan Lakhar, 5 December 2015, in Pathsala, Assam.

28. In his dissertation on mobile theatre, Deka compiled a record of the occasions when mobile theatre troupes in the North Kamrup Area of Assam were invited. They include religious festivities like Durga Puja, or Rash Mahotsav, as well as anniversaries of organizations. See Deka and Das, p. 159.

29. Mazumdar Jaideep, 'Staging the World, from Playing out Shakespeare's Classics in Remote Areas to Generating Funds for Charity, the Bhaymmaman Theatre of Assam is a Unique Phenomenon', *Open*, 13 June 2009 <<http://tinyurl.com/zyv9hho>>.

30. Lahkar, Ratan: *Upwardly Mobil*, in NSD and IGNCA, ed., p. 15.

31. Figo, p. 30.

32. 'Bhramyamaam, a Ten-Minute Documentation', thesis submitted by Swikrita Dowerah and Hirmani Dass, students of mass communication at Tezpur University, Assam. Not only does it allow the backstage crew to have a voice but it also reveals the familiar, community atmosphere characteristic of mobile theatre <<http://tinyurl.com/jo345ry>>.

33. Interview with Pranab Lahkar, 6 December 2015, in Nalbari, Assam.

34. Sailen Bharali, 'Assamese Theatre', in Ananda Lal and Chidananda Dasgupta, ed., *Rasa: the Indian Performing Arts in the Last Twenty-five Years*, Vol. II (Calcutta: A. Kala Sangam Publication, 1995), p. 117.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

37. Jaideep, *Staging the World*.

38. Paul, p. 25, quotes Malini Bhattacharya, 'Performance as Protest: Cultural Strategies in the Era of Globalization', *Social Scientist*, XXVI, No. 302–3, 1998, p. 22.

39. The sole exception is the repertory company of the National School of Drama in Delhi.

40. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust* (Frankfurt am Main; Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 2003), p. 15

41. Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Bayard Taylor (Project Gutenberg, 2005). <<http://tinyurl.com/zt2wxme>>.