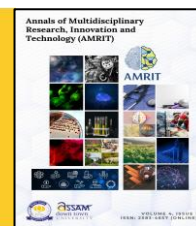




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## A NARRATIVE REVIEW

### ASSAMESE MOBILE THEATRE

#### **‘Bhramyoman’ Theatre of Assam: A Narrative**

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#### Graphical Abstract



#### Abstract

The theatre industry of Assam witnessed a giant leap towards modernization with the process of transformation from Jatraddol to Bhramyoman theatre. Along with uplifting connected theatre groups towards revenue generation, this bright form of art encourages employment in technical, directing, and acting careers. However, in recent times, critics of mobile theatre have opined that, instead of growing commercial success, theatre groups are focusing more on onstage gimmicks and undermining the essence of quality plays. This paper attempts to address the question regarding the confrontations between maintaining the essence of the plays and modernization. The paper is structured as a review paper. Bhramyoman theatre has to embrace modern techniques and narrative approaches while preserving its cultural integrity if it is to succeed in the long run. Modern audiences have to be engaged by a mix of invention and convention. Through cooperative research and inventive experimentation, the gap between heritage and modernity may be bridged, therefore preserving its cultural essence while also guaranteeing its economic and artistic feasibility.

**Keywords:** *Bhramyoman theatre, livelihood, Innovation, Tradition, Cultural heritage*

## 1. Introduction

Assam, one of the north-eastern states of India, is home to a unique form of mobile theatre - the 'Bhramyoman theatre'. This travelling or mobile theatre of Assam is a distinctive blend of art, life, and cultural identity. From the traditional Jatraddol performances, the Bhramyoman theatre has developed into a thriving business that employs hundreds of artists and technicians [1, 2] and is known for its mobility and accessibility. It has been crucial in bringing Assamese theatre to a more general audience in both rural and urban areas [3, 4]. Achyut Lahkar, the pioneer of this entrepreneurial transformation, used innovation and modernization as the main tools for revenue generation. However, in recent times, critics have opined that in pursuit of growing commercial success, theatre groups are focusing more on onstage gimmicks and undermining the essence of quality plays. This has raised concerns over the weakening of artistic value [5, 6]. Achieving equilibrium between artistic depth and general appeal remains challenging [7, 8]. The survival of the theatre in the era of digital entertainment depends on innovation while retaining its cultural core [9, 10]. By examining its background, problems, and possibilities, this study evaluates the relation between quality and popularity in Bhramyoman theatre.

### Sources

The required information for this review is collected from the online databases 'Google Scholar' and 'Sodhganga'. To search for relevant literature, firstly, the terms 'sustainable development Bhramyoman theatre' were used. However, there wasn't any search result. After that, the terms 'Bhramyoman Theatre', 'Performing arts Assam', and 'mobile theatre' were used, which brought about around twenty to twenty search results in different platforms. Fifteen in Google Scholar, five in Sodhganga. Each paper is thoroughly studied to derive the required conclusions.

### Inclusion Criteria

The number of papers in the databases for the required keyword is less; each of the papers relating to the Bhramyoman theatre industry is included in the writing of the paper. The only criterion for inclusion of the papers relating to the mobile theatre industry of Assam is the availability of citations. Additional related search results on mobile performing arts, other than Bhramyoman theatre, are excluded.

## 2. Bhramyoman Theatre

The term 'Bhramyoman' in Assamese means 'to move'; thus, Bhramyoman theatre refers to a theatre group that travels, which can be very simply termed as mobile theatre. 'Bhramyoman' theatre is a distinctive form of theatre where theatre groups travel across the state to stage plays. They carry every essential requirement for staging a play. Apart from artists and other support personnel, these groups possess and carry materials for setting up stages, set designs, lights, sound systems, and seats for audiences. The theatre groups consist of 100-150 persons travelling across the state for a period of eight months starting from mid-September. On

arrival at the location of the play, offered for performance by the organizing committee, the setup begins. The skilled artisans transform a barren plot of land or field into a mystical proscenium within a short span of time, complete with light, sound, and seating arrangements for the audience. Temporary ticket counters are also set up. The plays are being acted out over 3-4 nights in a location with real-time interactions with the audience. After the last show for a particular location, the entire set gets wound up, neatly packed, and the team proceeds to create magic elsewhere. The only matter left behind is a vacuous space, with no trace of the grandeur it witnessed in the days before.

This theme is said to have been developed by Mahapurush Srimanta Shankardev in the form of *Ankiya naat*. Srimanta Shankardeva is an Assamese savant who envisioned communal harmony within the state of Assam (Rajkhowa, n.d.). Another art form that contributed to the development of 'bhramyoman theater' was 'Jatra'. This art form originated in Bengal, where troupes of artists travel to different places to perform. With the foresight and entrepreneurship of some prominent leaders, Jatra evolved into a unique and unparalleled traveling theater with the establishment of the Sila Kalika Opera Party and the Assam Kohinoor Opera Party in 1920, to generate income through theatre [11]. This new combination of performing arts and income led to the development of a very unique form of commercial performing art: The Bhramyoman Theatre.

### Contribution to Society

Bhramyoman Theatre made relentless efforts to uplift the Assamese society at all levels. At times when the youths in Assam were in distress, and the society was in chaos, the Bhramyoman theatre groups travelled across the state inculcating peace and harmony. The theatres performed on various content contributed towards inculcating values and morality in society [12]. The Bhramyoman theatre industry provides a platform for economic gains. Each theatre group consists of around 100-150 employees, of which 20-25 are actors, 10-15 are dancers, and the rest are technicians, cooks, carpenters, managers, etc. The employment type, not being confined to a distinct area of expertise, provides income opportunities for people with different expertise. The use of both skilled and unskilled labour makes it an exhilarating career opportunity, especially to people in rural areas with fewer or no opportunities for skill development. Also, research reveals that the Workers of theatre groups do not face any discrimination on the basis of their job profile. Both actors and non-actors get similar attention [13]. Such an inclusive work culture motivates people towards work and at the same time instills a sense of satisfaction and belongingness within. The Bhramyoman theatre also provides income opportunities to ones who are not directly related to it. When the theatre sets up its stages in a location, it inherently provides income opportunities to the peddlers who sell their goods to the audiences during the show [14]. Thus, the industry helps in the reduction of poverty and promotes decent work and economic growth

Bhramyoman theatre promotes good health and well-being in two ways. Firstly, through its plays, it educates the audience by imparting social messages like the adverse effects of substance abuse. The importance of healthcare has been the plot of many successful plays of Mobile theatre over the years [15]. Bhramyoman theatre is a mass medium of communication. It is cost-effective and hence can be afforded by large masses. Another notable feature of Bhramyoman theatre is that groups travel to the remote corners of the state. Theatre groups often include five- to ten-minute spots on issues such as AIDS, drug abuse, and family planning programmes. These are seen by the public as a government campaign would rarely reach [16]. Also, the constant need to move by the employees of the mobile theatre compels them to take good care of their health and well-being, thereby teaching them and their families to prioritize healthcare, contributing to the development of a healthy lifestyle as a credo.

The CSR contributions of the Bhramyoman theatre groups are noteworthy. The theatre troupes provide 40 per cent of the proceeds to the convening committee. Therefore, traveling theatre troupes in rural areas are popular not only as a source of entertainment but also as a source of income or capital. The theatre groups are distinguished for their financial assistance for the construction of schools, colleges, institutions, libraries, club-associations etc. [17]. Facilitating the construction of schools and colleges in rural Assam makes Bhramyoman theatre an element of Quality education, SDG 4. The Bhramyoman theatre is provided as an element of edutainment in the state. With plays with varied themes such as mythology, classic Greek tragedies, Shakespearean dramas, sci-fi of H. G. Wells, plays based on Assamese and other regional literature, to social evils and accepted social norms, the content of the theatre has been able to bring about social reforms. The Bhramyoman theatre has been an element of preventing terrorism and anti-social ideologies from infiltrating Assamese youth, thereby shaping Assamese society [18].

Bhramyoman theatre groups travel across the state for a period of eight months. About 130-150 people of each theatre group have to travel to different parts of Assam for about eight months of the year and stay directly or indirectly as family members. The members of this family are from different languages, different communities, and different regions. With social interactions at the root level, discrepancies on the basis of caste, creed, etc. are diminished. Removing gender inequality in the state is also a gift of mobile theatre in Assam. Women performers were welcomed into the theatre arena in 1933. It was indeed a giant step towards gender equality. In a society where the role of women was confined to household work, co-acting opened up newer dimensions [19]. In present times, women are appointed to a number of posts within the group, offering a platform to showcase their talent. Also, by depicting strong women characters in the plays, and addressing social evils, the status of women is uplifted [20].

### 3. Product Quality of ‘Bhramyoman’ Theatre in Assam

Performing arts, being a service industry, require strategic product quality management. Physiognomies of services such as

intangibility, inseparability, no transfer of ownership, and perishability make product quality measurement of performing arts challenging. Theatre, having a typical service delivery process, requires carefully customised strategies regarding service quality. Though the importance of measuring product quality in theatre is undeniable, studies in this area are comparatively less. Throsby, in his paper, states certain criteria for the measurement of theatre quality. The management and financial aspects of theatre, as well as its artistic or cultural significance, are two important criteria on which to evaluate the quality of its output. The author proposed six criteria that should be used to assess a play's quality. First, the quantity of theatre companies in the field. Second, an analysis of the theatre's distribution is required. The audience should have easy access to the theatres. Thirdly, an analysis of the industry's diversity is necessary; different theatres should present a range of genres, play categories, and authors. Innovation is the fourth requirement. Innovation ought to be expressed through original works, translations, adaptations, and productions. The market's success falls into the fifth category. This success is related to generating interest, profit, and demand [21]. In the performing arts, traditional metrics for quality include attendance, critical reviews, awards, the standing of directors, theatre companies, and lead actors, as well as success indicators like festival participation, grants, and sponsorships. Recent research on audience values, the quest for authenticity, and personal experience, however, indicates that more empirical study is required to determine whether audience experience can serve as a reliable indicator of the calibre of performing arts [22].

The ‘Bhramyoman Theatre’ industry of Assam has a unique existence in every aspect of its existence. Apart from an exclusive management system, the product offered by ‘Bhramyoman Theatre’ stands out in terms of experience. The plays are acted out in the momentary stages in front of a live audience, laddered with light, music, dance, and background score. The interaction between audience and performers in real time makes the moment of truth mystical.

Baishya [23], in his paper, explained that entertainment content is the "product" of the mobile theatre. Because it has proven to be a successful and useful tool for popularizing a play, the producers invest a great deal of effort into creating a spectacular on-stage. The producers invest heavily in production, marketing, and advertising to make a profit. Their investment in production includes paying artists, lighting, sound equipment, stage properties, auditorium chairs, print and digital media ads, etc. The plays ought to be able to support the legacy attached to their namesake while drawing audiences and making money. However, critics of mobile theatre argue that the current state of the product development industry is unable to build a strong customer base for the future, although it is currently profitable [24]. The industry is challenged with an intimidating need to balance commercial success and preservation of culture simultaneously.

### 4. Popularity of ‘Bhramyoman Theatre’

An existence over a period of 60 years itself speaks about the popularity of this theatre form. The theatre season, of a period of nine months, sparks festive-like enjoyment amongst the people.

For decades, hundreds of people have been drawn to and won over by Bhramyaman theatre, a distinctive performing art form from Assam, at a single performance. With the aid of its theatrical productions, Mobile Theatre leaves a lasting impression on viewers, ranging from information to entertainment, from adaptation to original native scripts. Over time, mobile theater has assimilated into Assamese culture and society [20]. With shows portraying different historical and contemporary stories, with live performances, the audiences get mesmerized. Upgradation of technology, advertisements, and performances by glamour artists are some tactics applied for retaining popularity [13].

During its early years, Bhramyaman theatre was thought to be a local performance activity that only took place in specific locations in Lower Assam. By introducing plays based on English classic novels and enlisting well-known Assamese novelists and litterateurs to write the scripts, it dispelled these conventional notions and popularized Bhramyaman theater. A consistent uprising in Assamese professional theater was made possible by this methodical and well-thought-out approach. In addition, Kohinoor was a pioneer in the development of novel production techniques in the areas of lighting, music, costumes, and set design [11]. The popularity since soared constantly.

## 5. Quality vs Popularity

In his paper, Baishya [23] explained that entertainment content is the "product" of the mobile theatre. Because it has proven to be a successful and useful tool for popularizing a play, the producers invest a great deal of effort into creating a spectacular on-stage. The producers heavily invest in production, marketing, and advertising with the goal of making a profit. Their production investment includes paying artists, buying lighting, sound equipment, stage properties, auditorium chairs, print and digital media ads, etc. The plays ought to be able to support the legacy attached to their namesake while drawing audiences and making money. Critics of mobile theatre argue that the current state of the product development industry is unable to build a strong customer base for the future, although it is currently profitable [24]. The industry is challenged with the intimidating need to balance commercial success and culture preservation simultaneously.

In quest of popularity, the quality of mobile theatres is opined to be degrading. However, the answer to the peculiar phenomena as to how a diminished quality can gain commercial success is yet to be ascertained [23]. A reason that could be attributed to the same is that the same plays are presented by mobile theaters to both urban and rural audiences. Given their lack of prior knowledge about many Hollywood or other productions, the rural audience, like the one in Pathsala, would never comment that the Hollywood movie had been plagiarized; thus, the shows become more enjoyable [12]. This could be true in the case of a varied demographic segment of audiences as well. Since modernization and improvisation are unavoidable for commercial success, market segmentation could be the pondering agent for the Bhramyoman theatre industry.

Product quality measurement is crucial yet critical for the service industry, as the perceived value plays a substantial role in the determination of product quality. Though various factors affect product quality, the primary factor, as suggested by most authors,

is audience expectation [26] states that to achieve a higher product quality, customers should be facilitated to make informed decisions regarding the selection of the theatre. Managing and measuring the expectations of customers contributes to higher customer satisfaction. Reviews and advertising media help audiences to have a product evaluation before the actual moment of truth. This reduces the risk of dissatisfaction at later stages of service delivery. The customers' satisfaction with the quality of the service creates a positive perception amongst the potential customers. As a service industry, the theatre has to accept customers as the co-producers of its product. Their expectation and behaviour directly impact the artists in real time. A customer portraying positive behaviour facilitates better performance on stage. Thus, better quality products at present set the essential climate for quality outputs in the future.

Since modernization and improvisation are unavoidable for commercial success, market segmentation could be the pondering agent for the Bhramyoman theatre industry. The conflict of opinion regarding the quality of Bhramyoman; the acquisitions of the quality to be degrading seems to be due to unmanaged customer expectations. With attempts at Niche marketing strategies, the rift could be defined and mitigated significantly.

## 6. Conclusion

The transformation of 'Jatraldol' to 'Bhramyoman theatre' was envisioned to make theatre a source of livelihood. 'Bhramyoman theatre' has emerged as a significant contributor to employment in the cultural sector, providing numerous job opportunities across various roles such as actors, directors, technicians, and support staff. This vibrant art form not only supports the livelihoods of those directly involved in its production but also stimulates ancillary industries like set design, costume making, and marketing. However, to sustain and expand these employment opportunities, the industry must adapt to contemporary trends and attract a larger, more diverse audience. This requires staying up-to-date with modern technologies and storytelling techniques, while also embracing new platforms for outreach.

At the same time, 'Bhramyoman theatre' must remain grounded in its rich heritage, preserving the unique cultural elements that have defined its identity over centuries. The challenge lies in finding a balance between innovation and tradition—ensuring the preservation of classical forms while engaging a modern audience. The solution to this dilemma lies in more research and creative experimentation, which can bridge the gap between the old and the new. Scholars, artists, and practitioners need to collaborate, exploring ways to update and present the heritage in a way that resonates with today's society.

By fostering such a dynamic approach, 'Bhramyoman theatre' can continue to provide valuable employment opportunities while remaining a cherished cultural treasure, relevant and thriving for future generations.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this reported communication.

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