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Ban Theatre of Tezpur and the Development of Modern Assamese Theatre

Dipankar Saikia

PhD Scholar,
Dept. of MIL & LS,
Gauhati University.

&

Dr. Sukdev Adhikari

Principal,
LOKD College, Assam
Research Supervisor,
Dept. of MIL & LS,
Gauhati University.

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Abstract:

Modern Assamese theatre is basically amateur in nature and the permanent playhouses erected by various amateur theatre societies of Assam played the pivotal role in the development of western-style Assamese dramaturgy. Ban Theatre of Tezpur in the Sonitpur district of Assam occupied the central place in the development of modern Assamese theatre. The playhouse gave birth to the greatest Assamese dramatist Jyotiprasad Agarwala and raised stellar performers like Bishnu Rabha and Phani Sarma. It introduced the first theatrical orchestra in the State, standardised native Assamese songs and music and employed innovative styles of playwriting and play-production. The present study makes an analytical attempt to trace the history of performance at Ban Theatre and situate its vibrant tradition of theatre practice in the context of the development of modern Assamese theatre.

Keywords: Ban Theatre, Assamese theatre, drama, performance, playhouse, actor.

Introduction:

Ban Theatre of Tezpur, one of the glorious theatrical and cultural institutions of Assam, is also the oldest playhouse in Sonitpur district having over 110 years of performance history. The playhouse has attained the rare prestige of giving birth to colossal figures of modern Assamese theatre and cultural icons like Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Phani Sarma. If any parallel is to be drawn, the Ban Theatre has been to Assam, what the Belgachhia Theatre was to Bengal. Scholars are unanimous about the contribution of Belgachhia Theatre to Bengali drama. It was unparalleled in the contemporary Bengali theatrical scene with “the graceful stage, the superb sceneries, the stirring orchestra, the

gorgeous dresses, the costly appurtenances, the splendid get up of the whole concern”¹ and it inspired the “intelligentsia of Calcutta with a genuine love and desire for national drama and for a national stage.”² Belgachhia Theatre produced the first great genuine master of Bengali drama, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, with whom “Bengali drama went forward as much as Elizabethan drama did with Marlowe.”³ Similarly, Ban Theatre produced Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, who “made Assamese drama original and free from influences besides making it stage-worthy and highly literary.”⁴ While Belgachhia Theatre introduced the first orchestra in Bengal⁵, Ban Theatre introduced the first musical orchestra on an Assamese stage.⁶ In the same manner with Belgachhia Theatre, the playhouse of Tezpur also inspired the theatre-lovers of different parts of Sonitpur district in Assam to establish their own playhouses.

Theatre Trend at Ban Theatre before Independence:

The Swadeshi spirit arising out of partition of Bengal in 1905 made an impact in Assam too. As theatre was a forceful medium to vent anti-colonial sentiment, the nationalist spirit of the time might be said to be the driving force behind the establishment of Ban Theatre in Sonitpur district. The Ban Theatre came into existence in 1906 under the auspices of the Tezpur branch of Assamese Language Improvement Society (ALIS) and later the charge of maintenance of the playhouse was taken over by the amateur dramatic society called Ban Theatre Society. Though the playhouse was inaugurated with the performance of an Assamese ankiya bhaona *Karna Vadh* in 1906, actual theatrical journey of Ban Theatre started on the Saptami night of Durga Puja in 1907 with the performance of *Ban Raja* written specifically for the playhouse by Padmanath Gohain Barua.⁷ The next two plays taken for enactment were *Bhramaranga*, the Assamese rendition of Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*, and *Mahari* (The Clerk) by Durga Prasad Majindar Barua. Since its inception, the playhouse had a musical orchestra with Lakshmiram Barua as its leader. It was the first Assamese playhouse to use orchestra in dramatic performance. In absence of stageable original Assamese plays, Ban Theatre had to mount a host of dramas translated from Bengali during the second and third decades of the 20th century. Thus the translated versions of Girish Ghosh’s *Jana*, *Kalapahar*, *Sirajuddulah* and *Ashok*; Dwijendra Lal Roy’s *Mewar Patan*, *Pratap Singha*, *Shahjahan* and *Chandragupta*; Kshirode Prasad Vidyavinode’s *Alibaba*; Barada Prasanna Dasgupta’s *Missar Kumari*; Manmoth Roy’s *Karagar*; Nisikanta Roy’s *Debala Devi*; Manomohan Roy’s *Rejia* and Aparesh Mukhopadhyay’s *Karnarjun* adorned the stage during those days. Bengali dramas were also preferred for their action-filled stories, expressive power of language and declamatory speeches.

Padmanath Gohain Barua published his plays—*Gaonburha*, *Jaymati*, *Gadadhar*, *Sadhani* and *Lachit Borphukan*—between 1897 and 1915 and these plays were repeatedly mounted on the Ban Theatre. As a decisive gesture towards encouraging original Assamese playwriting, the playhouse mounted the manuscript play *Nilambar* by Prasannalal Chaudhury of Barpeta during the Durga Puja in 1921. Again two years later, Nakul Chandra Bhuyan's historical play *Badan Barphukan* was put on stage for the first time in its manuscript form. Atul Chandra Hazarika of Guwahati made his debut as a playwright with *Beula* enacted on Ban Theatre in 1928.⁸ Further, Mohan Lal Chaudhuri's *Manar Din*, Chandradhar Barua's *Bhagya Pariksha* and Shekhar Das's *Laila Majnoo* were also launched first on the Ban Theatre.

The turning point in the theatre practice of Ban Theatre came in 1924 with the performance of Jyotiprasad Agarwala's *Sonit-kuwari* (The Princess of Sonitpur), a comedy of romance based on the well-known mythological story of love-affair between Usha and Aniruddha. The poetic language of the play, elaborate settings and stage-directions, the indigenous musical tunes affixed to the songs, the beautiful character of Citralekha, reminiscent of Shakespeare's Ariel, combined to make the performance an immediate stage success. The success of *Sonit-kuwari* may be said to have changed the course of modern Assamese theatre with a thrust on native playwriting. The play moved from one playhouse to another throughout the State. Theatre artistes of Assam gave a fine performance of the play in Sangeet Natak Akademi's maiden drama festival held at Ramlila Maidan, Delhi in 1954 and brought laurels to the State by winning the best drama group award. Agarwala's next play *Karengar Ligiri* (1934), the tragedy of an eternally revolutionary mind in conflict with society, proved to be a masterpiece. With this play, Agarwala introduced the dramatic techniques of Galsworthy, Ibsen and Shaw in Assamese theatre. According to Maheswar Neog, "The social challenge, complicatedly developed characterization and long stage-directions combined to make this wonderful piece of drama almost an unwelcome challenge to the Assamese theatre."⁹ Ban Theatre, however, accepted this challenge and successfully enacted the play. Agarwala's *Rupalim* (1938), with admitted influence of Maurice Maeterlinck's *Monna Vanna* on it, was another remarkable production of this playhouse.

Lakshminath Bezbarua's *Jaymati-kuwari* (1915) was mounted several times on the Ban Theatre in the 30s of the last century. Jyotiprasad Agarwala made the first Assamese film *Jaymati* (1935) based on the story of this play. Nakulchandra Bhuyan's *Chandrakanta Singha* and *Bidrohi Maran* also had their heydays during this period. Dandinath Kalita was an exclusive playwright for this playhouse. He contributed the mythological play *Agni Pariksha*,

the historical plays *Chilarai* and *Satir Tez*, and the light comedies *Abhijan* and *Nagarar Bihutoli* which were performed at Ban Theatre with consummate success. Benudhar Das contributed *Nal-Damayanti*, *Daksharaja* and *Yamdanda* which were repeatedly mounted on Ban Theatre but the plays were lost in manuscript form.¹⁰ Other successful productions of the 30s were Chandradhar Barua's *Meghnad-vadh*, Durgeswar Sarma's *Partha-parajay*, Ambikagiri Raichaudhury's *Urvasi-uddhar*, Indreswar Barthakur's *Simhasan*, Atulchandra Hazarika's *Nandadulal* and *Chatrapati Shivaji*, Ganesh Gogoi's *Sakunir Pratisodh* and Kamalananda Bhattacharya's *Naga-kowar* and *Maran-jiyari*. The mythological and historical plays written for and enacted by Ban Theatre had been able to infuse a nationalist spirit and a sentiment of patriotism among the people. The interest of the audience turned towards light comedies and farces in the 40s in response to which the playhouse enacted mirthful plays like Padmanath Gohain Barua's *Teton Tamuli* and *Bhoot ne Bhram*, Padmadhar Chaliha's *Kene Maja*, Mitradev Mahanta's *Kukurikanar Athmangala*, Benudhar Rajkhowa's *Ashikshita Ghaini*, Lakshmidhar Sarma's *Prajapatir Bhool*, Pajiruddin Ahmed's *Abak Jalpan*, Bishairam Medhi's *Guru Bhakat* and *Nari Jagaran*, Bishnuchandra Goswami's *Kuber* and Kumudeswar Barthakur's *Dhorok Pandit*.

Performance history after Independence:

Freedom from foreign yoke gave rise to new-found confidence and patriotic fervour among the Assamese people in the 50s. Therefore in the post-Independence era there was a sudden spurt of historical plays written in new light. Prabin Phukan's *Maniram Dewan* and Nagaon Natya Samiti's *Piyali Phukan*, depicting the ideals of these pioneer revolutionaries, stormed the theatres throughout the State. Jyotiprasad Agarwala produced his revolutionary play *Labhita*, set against the background of Second World War, Quit India Movement and Indian National Army (INA) of Subhashchandra Bose, during this period. Noted actor-playwright of Ban Theatre, Phani Sarma displayed in his *Bhogjara* the decline and degradation of 600-year-old Ahom rule. Apart from the above plays, Ban Theatre also produced successful dramatic works dealing with the revolutionary theme such as Atulchandra Hazarika's *Tikendrajit*, Surendranath Saikia's *Kushal Kowar* and Abdul Malik's *Rajdrohi*. The enthusiasm aroused by the new identity in free India did not however last long. New hopes and possibilities gradually yielded place to new problems and life-struggle of the downtrodden and the lower middle-class. Ban Theatre captured the anguish of the common people by mounting new social plays dealing with contemporary issues. Already Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna*, reflecting the life of the proletariats, had created a new idiom of

Indian theatre. Repertory groups of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) started roaming throughout the country with the performance of *Nabanna*. Phani Sarma translated this play into Assamese as *Emuthi Chaul* and mounted it on Ban Theatre. He also formed a mobile group with a few committed artistes for state-wide performance of the play. Besides, his *Siraj*, *Kola Bazar* (Black Market), *Kiyo* (Why) and *MLA*, written in the form of protest-plays, became popular among the masses not only on Ban Theatre but all over Assam.

A remarkable event of the post-Independence period was the entry of female artistes into the stage of Ban Theatre. Against the orthodox will of the old vanguard, the young members of the playhouse under the banner of Tarun Asam Sangha initiated co-acting by enacting the play *Sirajuddulah* in 1957. In the same year, the Ban Theatre Society also created a new epoch of theatre practice by introducing co-acting in the performance of the play *Sita* on the Saptami night of Durga Puja.¹¹ On the following two nights, Phani Sarma's *Bhogjara* and Satyaprasad Barua's *Shikha* were also successfully staged with participation of female actors. The pioneer female artistes of these performances were Hira Patangia, Rani Barua, Kalpana Tewary, Mira Bhuyan, Nijara Barkakaty, Amiya Chakraborty, Bhanu Padmapati, Kironmoyee Das, Rekha Dutta Phukan and Bandana Majumdar.

Experimental *avant garde* plays made entry into Assamese theatre in the 70s and 80s. In Bengali theatre Badal Sircar inaugurated this trend with his *Evam Indrajit* (1965). Arun Sarma's *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* (1967), depicting the tragedy of an artist whom the world fails to understand, was the first attempt in Assamese at such kind of plays. This play shows perceivable influence of Western masters Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. Ban Theatre welcomed the new theatrical trend by mounting *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* and other plays by Arun Sarma written in new style and technique such as *Ahar*, *Purush* and *Jinti*. The playhouse also mounted a host of English plays in the form of translations and adaptations, notable among them being Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*, Maeterlinck's *King Oedipus*, Miller's *A View from the Bridge* and *Henry the Fourth*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Sartre's *Man without Shadow*.

Possessed with a state-of-the-art stage and auditorium now, Ban Theatre continues to thrive with theatrical activities. Thanks to the prestige attained by the playhouse, the theatre-goers of Tezpur had the opportunity to enjoy a national theatre festival from January 3-9, 2019. The week-long theatre festival sponsored by the Ministry of Culture was organised by Jangam in memory of Kartik Hazarika, former secretary of Ban Theatre. Altogether 14 quality dramas including one *ankiya bhaona* (traditional Assamese drama originated by Sankardeva) were performed by different theatre groups of national and international repute

at the festival. The star attractions of the event were presentation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in Manipuri language by Chorus Repertory Theatre, Manipur under the direction of Ratan Thiyam, and Motley Group of Mumbai's *Ismat Apa ke Naam* (Urdu) directed by Naseeruddin Shah. Other notable productions included *Apne Paraye* (Hindi) by Theaterwala, New Delhi directed by Himani Shivpuri and Ramji Bali; *Khamoshi Sili Sili* (Hindi) by National School of Drama Repertory, New Delhi directed by Suresh Sharma; *Panchali* (Kannada) by Spandan, Bengaluru directed by B. Jayashree; *Chanakya* (Hindi) by Dharmajan directed by Manoj Joshi; *Kabeer* (Bengali) by Shekhar Sen Production directed by Shekhar Sen; *Kafan-Kafan Chor* (Hindi) by Three Arts Group, New Delhi directed by M.K. Raina; *Sons of Mother Earth* (Rabha) by Badungduppa Kalakendra, Goalpara under the direction of Sukracharjya Rabha; *Mukhamukhi* (Assamese) by Surjya, Guwahati directed by Nayan Prasad and *Kola Aina—the black mirror* (Assamese) by Jangam, Tezpur directed by Alok Nath. The festival concluded in a befitting manner with the performance of Sankardeva's ankiya play *Rukmini-haran*.

Development of stage techniques:

At the initial phase of theatre practice, no curtains or drop-scenes were used at Ban Theatre and performances took place on the open stage. Sardar Bahadur Gopalchandra Rabha sent a drop-scene from Dhaka to Ban Theatre in around 1912. This drop-scene containing pictures of battles and battle-ships on it was the first curtain imported from outside.¹² In the 30s noted actor and artist Indreswar Barthakur also painted a large number of scenes for the playhouse. With the advent of solid settings, however, the use of sceneries became obsolete though wings on both sides of the stage are used even in present-day practice. Initially, the stage was lighted with big earthen lamps and indigenous innovative lamps made of hollow gourds that were filled up with mustard oil. Petromax lights substituted this indigenous lighting technique at Ban Theatre towards the end of 1908. During the performance of his *Sonit-kuwari* in 1924, Jyotiprasad Agarwala made temporary arrangement of electricity by installing a dynamo generator. In the same year Ban Theatre attained the prestige of becoming the first playhouse in Assam to perform dramas under electric light.

Stellar performers of Ban Theatre:

The first talented performer of Ban Theatre who raised the standard of acting from the casualness of amateur performance to a professional level was Bodhnath Patangia. During his college years at Calcutta, he was immensely influenced by the acting talent of master

performer of Bengali theatre Surendranath Ghosh (Dani Babu). Within his short span of life (1887-1919), Patangia scaled great heights in acting and developed the theatre-art of this new playhouse to an outstanding level. Despite being a busy practitioner of law, he took part in rigorous rehearsals till late midnight before mounting a play at Ban Theatre. He played the main parts in most of the plays performed at the playhouse in the first two decades of the 20th century. According to Atulchandra Hazarika, “His performance in the role of Chanakya in *Chandragupta* was a masterstroke.”¹³ He translated Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* into Assamese as *Chandravir* and also acted the title role in the play.

Dr. Kaminikanta Das was a versatile actor who played the serious, comic and female roles equally well. He exhibited his innate talent in portrayal of characters as varied as Karna, Daksha, Kuber, Kalapahar, Purnananda Buragohain and Chandrakanta Singha. If occasion demanded, this reputed actor of Ban Theatre did not hesitate to play minor roles of servants and sedan-carriers.¹⁴ Dr. Lalit Mohan Chaudhury made entry into Ban Theatre by playing female roles. However, his eye-catching histrionics soon promoted him to the roles of heroes. He enthralled the audience of Ban Theatre performing characters such as Jahanara, Jana, Sri Ramchandra, Sakuni, Mingimaha Tilowa, Badan Barphukan and Gadapani. Annada Kumar Padmapati, another brilliant performer of Ban Theatre, was the first M.A. in English of undivided Darrang district. He was appointed the Head of the English Department at St. Paul’s College, Calcutta but the lure of Ban Theatre impelled him to leave the post halfway and start practice of law at Tezpur.¹⁵ Specifically adept in blank verse dialogues and long soliloquies, he was an excellent performer of Puranic and historical characters.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala (1903-1951) was a real gem not only of Ban Theatre but of the whole gamut of modern Assamese theatre. He played a multi-dimensional role in the theatrical arena of Assam: a committed dramatist, an innovative actor, an experimenter with stage techniques and the initiator of indigenous Assamese orchestra on stage. With the assistance of long-time motion master of Ban Theatre Piyari Mohan Chaudhury, Jyotiprasad completely refurbished the stage of the playhouse and gave it a new look. His creative and aesthetic ideas touched every aspect of theatre practice at this playhouse including form of presentation, style of acting, methods of direction, music, stage-setting and lighting. His wider exposure to modern theatre in Calcutta, London and Germany helped him to develop methods of acting and directing. As a director, he laid emphasis on natural and spontaneous acting of the performers, and in his own acting the same ideology was reflected. He left the imprint of his acting talent in the roles of Citralekha (*Sonit-kuwari*), Shahjahan (*Shahjahan*),

Aban (*Missar Kumari*), Niyati (*Karnarjun*), Srikrishna (*Jana*), Jogeswar Singha (*Chandrakanta Singha*) and Khanikar (*Khanikar*).

Jyotiprasad experimented with the tunes of Assamese folk songs in dramatic representation of his plays with outstanding results. The age of Jyotiprasad was a crucial period for Assamese national life. According to noted critic Hiren Gohain, “The life-period of Jyotiprasad Agarwala was contemporaneous with the historical phase of progress of Assamese society to modern era.”¹⁶ In conflicting situations, Assamese culture started neglecting its own heritage considering it as old and outdated and a tendency grew up among the literate section to follow blindly the neighbouring Bengal as a model. The same thing happened with Assamese music. Jyotiprasad wanted to free Assamese society from the ongoing cultural trend and ushered in a new era of Assamese music by infusing native folk tunes to the lyrics of his drama. With his original creative genius, Jyotiprasad had been successful to effect a fusion of the elements of classical music, folk music and modern western music in his songs. He also tried his best to liberate contemporary Assamese songs, dances and indigenous musical instruments from deformity and misrepresentation. He formed a musical orchestra for Ban Theatre in 1924 with a fusion of Western and indigenous instruments. It may be mentioned that Bharat Ratna Bhupen Hazarika honed his musical talents at Ban Theatre as a child artiste under the affectionate tutelage of Jyotiprasad and Bishnu Rabha.

Phani Sarma (1910-1970) was the most prolific actor of Ban Theatre in the post-Independence period. Noted playwright Arun Sarma observes, “If life is a play, Phani Sarma was its real player.”¹⁷ Since the by-laws of Ban Theatre Society did not permit the stage-appearance of an actor under the age of 18, from the age of nine to sixteen Phani Sarma was associated with the playhouse as the gate-keeper of the women’s gallery. For the next two years, he was in charge of the stage-sceneries at the playhouse. At 18, he made his debut on Ban Theatre playing the role of Gadapani in Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s *Jaymati-kuwari*. It is known that he was the youngest artiste blessed with the opportunity to act in a major role alongside such great kushilavas as Dr. Kaminikanta Das, Annada Kumar Padmapati and Indreswar Barthakur.¹⁸ At a time when the stage was not equipped with microphones, the voice of Phani Sarma could be heard to the last row of the gallery.¹⁹ This offered him the versatility to impersonate young and old, serious and comic, plain and complicated roles with equal ease. From the 30s up to the 60s, Ban Theatre resonated with his histrionic arts in such varied roles as Narakasur, Banraja, Ravan, Shahjahan, Sirajuddulah, Maharaj Nandakumar, Mirkasim, Tipu Sultan, Shivaji, Lachit Barphukan, Lakshmi Singha, Teton Tamuli,

Kukurikana, Siraj, MLA and the like. That he had a unique perception about the entity of an actor becomes clear in his expression, “When I enter into the stage to play a role, I split myself into two personae. I am the creator, the one who acts is my creation. One is the judge, the other a worker.”²⁰

Bishnu Rabha (1909-1969), an artiste with revolutionary ideology, completes the triumvirate of Jyoti-Bishnu-Phani of Ban Theatre. He was a poet, playwright, lyricist, singer, dancer, painter and actor, all rolled into one. He was a cultural activist for whom the interest of the mass people was above everything. A staunch supporter of Marxism, he wrote several plays with the definite propaganda of forming a classless society. His play *Krishak* (The Peasant) dreams of a socialist country where the farmers and labourers would have equal rights with the landlords and the factory-owners. The story of the pitiable downfall of an idealist doctor runs parallel with the main plot. In *Sapon Kuwali* (The Misty Dream) he advocates for the Ram-rajya dreamt of by Mahatma Gandhi, but Bishnu Rabha speaks through the character Cherry, a widowed nurse, that Ram-rajya would come not through the non-violent method of Gandhi but through the revolutionary method applied by Lenin. Another play *Sonamua Gaon* (The Dear Village) also deals with the similar theme of liberation of common people from the exploitation of money-lenders, zaminders and black-marketeers. Bishnu Rabha debuted as an actor of the Ban Theatre at the age of twelve in the role of young Marjiana during the performance of *Alibaba*.²¹ He played the part of Kansa in the mythological play *Karagar* while in the historical plays such as *Shajahan*, *Nadirshah* and *Missar Kumari*, he performed the roles of Aurangzebe, Nadirshah and Aban. However, his own favourite role was that of the tribal servant Gethu in Phani Sarma’s *Kiyō*. The simplicity of this subaltern character impressed Bishnu Rabha the most. In Rabha’s own words, “Whatever be my performance, good or bad, I like to play the roles of suppressed, oppressed and neglected people.”²² For similar reasons, he preferred to play the role of servant Aghona in Phani Sarma’s *Siraj*, the characters of Bhujlung Kaka and Gaonburha in Dr. Bhupen Hazarika’s films *Era Batar Sur* and *Mahut Bandhure*.

In addition to his histrionics, Bishnu Rabha also contributed to modern Assamese theatre in respect of its dance and music. He collected the rich variegated tunes from Assamese folk-life and coloured the modern Assamese lyrics with these tunes. The plays mounted on Ban Theatre throbbed with life because of the songs and music rendered by Bishnu Rabha. He was also an integral part of the orchestra formed by Jyotiprasad in 1924. He took charge of directing the dance items connected with dramatic performances of the playhouse for quite a long period. He was an expert in different dance forms such as

Tandava, Satriya nritya, Bihu nritya, Kamrupi nritya and other dance forms of the ethnic tribes. He made these dance forms integral parts of the dramatic presentations and produced them with the help of his most favourite pupils Saranan Barthakur and Deben Sarma. Accompanied by Phani Sarma, Bishnu Rabha moved from one end of the State to the other performing socially committed plays in an effort to create people's consciousness about exploitation and injustice. He also set an example by distributing about a hundred acres of inherited landed-property among landless farmers and living the life of a bohemian artiste at the close of his worldly journey.

Conclusion:

The inception of Ban Theatre coincided with the growth of nationalist consciousness in Assam. With passage of time, the playhouse has evolved from a wooden stage under thatched roof to a concrete structure with elaborate stage paraphernalia. Rolled scenes were gradually replaced by solid settings; electric lighting took the place of petromax and menthol lights; borrowed songs and music were substituted by native tunes of the soil while experimental use of the theatre space marked the recent dramatic practice at this playhouse. Credited to be one of the oldest and most vibrant playhouses of the State, the Ban Theatre of Tezpur became the model for others to follow. Apart from creating great dramatists and stellar performers, the playhouse of Tezpur made new experiments with dramatic form, stage setting and lighting techniques. The foregoing survey may help one to surmise that the Ban Theatre has played the role of navigator in the journey of modern Assamese theatre.

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