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The Culture of Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of Bhraamyamaan Theatre in Assam

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Abstract:

Bhraamyamaan has come from the word “Bhraman”. In Assamese, “Bhraman” means “to move” or “to travel”. Bhraamyamaan means “mobile” or “traveling”. Bhraamyamaan Theatre is the most popular and vibrant form of theatre in Assam. It is also the most commercially successful form of performing art in Assam. Due to its commercial methods of production, Bhraamyamaan is frequently criticized by theatre critics. However, the commercial methods are dependent on a market economy based on the consumer culture.

This article discusses Bhraamyamaan Theatre through the prism of consumerist culture and the ideas of “capitalism” and “quantification” proposed by social scientist Chris Jenks. Sustainance of Assam’s mobile theatre depends on “potential profit” or “surplus value” of the plays produced on stage, as they are entertainment packages for audiences/consumers. The plays, as commodities, therefore, become a part of the capitalistic culture and the practices involved are purely market-driven. The concepts of popular culture proposed by Marcel Danesi, Alan McKee etc and the observations made by a few theatre critics of Assam are also discussed underlining the significance of Bhraamyamaan Theatre as a popular and viable commercial theatre in Assam.

Keywords: Bhraamyamaan, capitalism, popular, commercial, quantification

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This article discusses Bhraamyamaan theatre through the prism of consumerist culture and the ideas of “capitalism” and “quantification” proposed by social scientist Chris Jenks. The concepts of popular culture proposed by Marcel Danesi, Alan McKee etc and the observations made by a few theatre critics of Assam are also discussed underlining the significance of Bhraamyamaan Theatre as a popular and viable commercial theatre in Assam.

Jenks observes that “the modern world is *capitalistic*”. He says that “commodities”, “ideas”, “people” etc. are analyzed through their “potential profit” or “surplus value” (127). Sustainance of Bhraamyamaan theatre depends on “potential profit” or “surplus value” of the plays produced on stage, as they are entertainment packages for audiences/consumers. The plays, as commodities, therefore, become a part of the capitalistic culture and the practices involved are purely market-driven. The plays that are popular on Bhraamyamaan stage may not be critically acclaimed but that is not a concern for the people involved in this industry, since for them it is the quantity, the large number of people that watch the plays that are important and not the small number of critics who abhor them. So, the producers are more concerned about popular demands, expectations of the audience than the quality of drama and critical attention from theatre critics. Rather, for them, it is important to explore ‘potential profit’ or ‘surplus value’ of their products as Bhraamyamaan involves investment of huge capital/money by the producers. Highlighting the need for quantification in a capitalistic culture, Jenks observes:

All forms of human expression have to be quantified. Quality is hard to assess and different qualities are difficult to judge in relation to one another, so they must therefore be reduced to a single standard, that of number. In this way quality becomes quantified and value must be transformed into fact. (127)

Talking about the need to generate profit in culture industry, Chris Jenks states, “Objects are produced on the basis that they will generate more value than was invested in their original production, or they will not be produced” (127). This is a theory popularly and effectively used by the producers of Bhraamyamaan theatre. This is a dictum that gives direction to the troupes. A play is presented as a commodity, using all possible marketing strategies. Spending a lot on production, investing huge amount in publicity, paying handsomely to the artists, a producer /proprietor turns into a propagator of capitalistic culture. Whenever one discusses the popularity of Bhraamyamaan, one has to consider its capitalistic nature and as part of an established consumer culture. The consumerism and cultural populism demand a structure that caters to the need of the popular audience. The idea of “the popular” is determined by reception of a play produced on stage. The masses are its popular audience and they play a significant role in establishing Bhraamyamaan as an element of popular culture. The popularity of a production depends on active and continuous participation of audiences/patrons.

The 1960's brought remarkable change to the cultural scenario in Assam. The introduction of professional traveling theatre (Bhraamyamaan Theatre) in 1963 by Achyut Lahkar added some important dimensions to the reach and popularity of art forms in Assam. Achyut Lahkar's idea of "bringing the theatre to the people" was, perhaps, an echo of socialism that was a dominant discourse in the West as well as the British colonies in the East. In his autobiography titled *Bhraamyamaan Theatre*, Achyut Lahkar states that while studying in Calcutta, he was influenced by the revolutionary ideas of the West (122-27). The modernist and Socialist discourse impressed him. He, therefore, came up with an art form that reaches the masses. Like other forms of popular culture, Bhraamyamaan, too, was not taken seriously by the intellectuals considering it to be a form catering to inferior taste. It was at a later stage that the critics seriously started writing on Bhraamyamaan theatre. Lahkar's *Erina* was a classic example of his socialist thoughts (*Bhraamyamaan Theatre*: 46).

Lahkar's initiative in traveling theatre troupes reflects how he tried to make theatre an art form accessible across classes. He achieved his aim to cut across classes successfully. It is to be noted that Bengal had a huge influence on Assamese society and its literature and culture. Rise of socialism in Bengal found its echo in Assam and many Assamese intellectuals were influenced by such ideologies. The mainstream art was accessible only to a selected audience; the aristocrats and the elites were the consumers of high/mainstream arts. Theatre in its initial stage hardly got the status of popular art, as the audience participation was limited. The popular must involve large number of people as spectators. Ease of access makes an art form possible to reach the masses, or else it is confined to the consumption by the aristocrats, the high class. To deal with this problem, the producers and artists had to think about methods through which they would get larger audience, reach the masses.

It is assumed that the target audiences, the potential customers, of Bhraamyamaan theatre, are the masses. Therefore, Bhraamyamaan, in order to please popular audiences, takes recourse to gimmicks, melodrama, glamour, special effects etc. However, it is detested by a few critics as they allege that the producers compromise on originality and quality of work. However, they are outnumbered by popular audiences, who do not usually have any didactic or educative expectations from a play. Instead they watch a play for entertainment and expect a production that comes in a package of value-for-money product. Bhraamyamaan takes great care and invests a lot in packaging and presenting itself to the masses.

The marketability or salability of a product, i.e., the popularity and reception of a play, determines the sustenance of Bhraamyamaan theatre, its producers and artists. This does not, however, mean that Bhraamyamaan has always taken recourse to popular entertaining elements. Bhraamyamaan has staged many plays such as Arun Sarma's *Baghjal* and *Matir Garhi*, Mahendra Barthakur's *Saraguri Chapori* etc. that have been critically acclaimed but commercially unsuccessful (*Long March* 45).

The postmodern, techno-savvy Bhraamyamaan theatre of Assam has continued its journey through various barriers, closing the gap between high and low cultures. Even though mobile theatre is constantly criticized for its adoption of film music, dances, scenes from films etc., the spectators have not stopped watching plays on stage. The spectators too have defined the “popular” and somehow influenced the directors and producers of the theatre troupes to come up with something different and new. In this process, we have witnessed how popular Bollywood and Hollywood movies have been successfully adapted, how Osama Bin Laden, Saddam Husain have been portrayed, how a high-drama of hijack is staged etc (*Bhramyaman Theatarar Itihas. Vol. I*). Bhraamyamaan theatre has not stuck to a few themes. Every year, a theatre troupe tries to come up with one or two plays that create awe in the mind of the spectators. This was something which Achyut Lahkar, the pioneer of mobile theatre in Assam would do. In this context, the comment of Marcel Danesi, Professor of Semiotics and Linguistic Anthropology at the University of Toronto, is very interesting:

History records that popular forms of entertainment have always existed. In his *Historia*, Herodotus (circa 485-425 BCE) wrote about amusing performances and songs that he encountered as he traveled the ancient world that seemed rather odd to him. Today amusing spectacles, popular musical trends, and the like are everywhere. They make up what is called *pop culture*, a culture that is everywhere, having largely replaced traditional forms of culture and lifestyle. How did it come about? What is it? Why do we hate to love it and love to hate it? What has happened to “high art”? Is high art hidden away in the record libraries of a few aficionados or stayed for an exclusive group of people in the few remaining opera houses and symphony halls? (Preface vii)

The questions posed here are intriguing. Like the dichotomy between the aesthetic and the popular theatre in the West, Assam’s theatre tradition, too, can be divided into two categories—the amateur and the professional. Though a good number of amateur theatre troupes are involved in professional theatre practices, the professional in its real sense, refers to Bhraamyamaan theatre in Assam. The activities of the amateur troupes are limited to sending across a social message to the spectators. The reception of such performances is, therefore, limited to a small group, as thematically and structurally, such performances are intelligible to a group of spectators, whereas in popular Bhraamyamaan theatre, spectators are the masses which cut across classes and divisions. The spectators are not expected to have shared experience/knowledge with the performers. The intentions of the producers in Bhraamyamaan theatre are, usually, to entertain/please the spectators. The popular dynamics precedes the aesthetic dimensions, although, occasionally, both are merged. Commercial success becomes the prime objective of the producers, since they have obligations to pay the artists and workers in the troupe. Commercially unviable projects will probably lead to the closure of the theatre troupe.

Keeping this motive in mind, the producers rely heavily on popular entertainment and elements that can please the audiences. The masses, being the spectators, look for some entertainment. Their aim is to relax and be entertained. They want a good value-for-money package of entertainment as they buy tickets to see the performance. They may not be the proprietors but the proprietors are helpless without their participation, for they believe the spectators are also participants. So, the spectators can significantly influence Bhraamyamaan theatre. The producers must acknowledge the contribution of the spectators and consider their demands seriously.

Veteran Assamese actor Girish Chaudhury observes that Bhraamyamaan provides refuge to a good number of artists. Unlike other businesses, theatre business attracts a handful of investors as challenges involved are plenty. This is significant as it is unusual to find established businessmen in theatre across the world. It is easy to understand business in cinema. But it is difficult to apply the same to theatre. The idea of commercial theatre is quite alien to theatre critics and audiences in most parts of the world. In this context, Bhraamyamaan, as a continuous commercial and popular theatre tradition in Assam, has a unique place in the history of world theatre.

Chaudhury observes that the producers invest money in Bhraamyamaan theatre for two reasons—one, their interest in this art form; two, their willingness to contribute to art and culture through this media. Chaudhury also states that the plays are a part of the cultural tradition of Assam and reach people across classes, educated-uneducated divide etc. The expectations of the masses have to be kept in mind. Chaudhury believes that both commerce and culture have to be kept alive so that artists can survive (19).

About the popularity of Bhraamyamaan, freelance Assamese journalist Kamal Kumar Bhagawati observes:

Bhraamyamaan theatre has established itself as the most popular cultural medium in the state by reaching out to the masses through production of plays. The number of Bhraamyamaan theatre is increasing every year due to its ever-increasing popularity. (240)

(My translation)

The demand for Bhraamyamaan theatre is increasing every year. And to cater to the growing need, a number of new troupes are coming up each year. Bhagawati's statement validates the claim/theory that participation and reception by the masses help construct an art form as "popular". It is, therefore, essential to study popularity of Bhraamyamaan theatre in terms of its reception. A common criticism against Bhraamyamaan theatre is its ever-changing themes and methods of production. It is, however, the change in terms of presentation, use of music and dance, gimmicks etc. that have been frequently attacked by the critics. Bhagawati, however, has a different take on this issue. He says, "Bhraamyamaan has not been able to ignore the demands

of time as the transition in time has resulted in changes in different areas/fields” (My translation) (241).

Bhagawati highlights the influence of globalization on Bhraamyamaan theatre in his article. He observes:

Today, the whole world has transformed into a village. The whole world can be seen sitting inside a house. Therefore, the dramatic trends in Bhraamyamaan theatre, too, have changed, following the footsteps of time. The presentation style of contemporary Bhraamyamaan theatre has, naturally, hurt the sentiments of the audience of the past. Family drama attracted the audience before television and VCD reached the villages. But, the present generation does not welcome family drama of the past because the present social systems and incidents/events occurring in families have changed a lot. Now drama that can attract the youth reaches the zenith of success in Bhraamyamaan theatre. However, originality has also been embraced by the audience. (241)

(My translation)

The subjective tastes of the audience vary. But there are common observations that can be made about the target audience of Bhraamyamaan theatre. Bhraamyamaan employs methods and techniques that easily attract the young audience, as most of the producers and critics believe them to be the target audience. Ultimately, it is the number that matters. Use of contemporary music, dance etc. is part of the capitalistic market structure that forces the producers to adopt them without being bothered about quality. Globalization has much to do with the practices adopted by the producers of Bhraamyamaan theatre.

Introduction of television and VCD in the households of the villages was a major paradigm shift towards transformation of tastes of the audience. Until then family drama dominated the Bhraamyamaan stage. The rise of television and VCD posed a challenge to the Bhraamyamaan troupes and they had to come up with something that was new and unforeseen. The producers, therefore, looked for different techniques on stage. Techniques used on television and VCD were imitated, which became popular on stage. However, the 80’s, the age of television in India, saw the emergence of social playwrights such as Bhabendranath Saikia etc. in Bhraamyamaan theatre and who generated a wave of reception.

The major threat the producers face is from Hindi, not Assamese cinema. Therefore, contemporary playwrights and producers heavily bank on methods, styles and techniques that can match Hindi cinema. Cinematic techniques have always influenced Bhraamyamaan theatre (for instance, Nataraj Theatre transformed into Nataraj Cine Theatre). But, nowadays, due to rising competition in the market, most of the troupes have taken recourse to plays with special effects, modern choreography, action etc.

The present criticism against Bhraamyamaan has been aptly recorded by Kamal Kumar Bhagawati in his article “Bhraamyamaan Theateror Sonali Jayanti Borsho: Paribortonor Sotat Bhraamyamaanor Natak”:

The conscious audiences allege that Bhraamyamaan has lost its unique identity in the last few years in an effort to follow in the footsteps of electronic media in the age of transition. Bhraamyamaan has failed in satisfying spectators from all classes the way it used to do in the past. It seems the Bhraamyamaan troupes have started producing plays to please only the young audiences, by imitating ideas and stories from VCD. About 8-10 songs have been added to a play. And there are group dances with accompaniment of songs. Stories of plays are borrowed from Hindi cinema. The plays are loaded with dance and songs to attract the youth, but they are moving away from simple-living people/audiences of the villages. (235)

(My translation)

The paucity of plays is a serious concern for the fraternity of Bhraamyamaan theatre. There are about forty troupes that need 120 plays each year. There are not too many playwrights who can write according to the demands of producers. Therefore, some playwrights end up writing 15-20 full-length plays in a year. The problem is, most of these plays lack originality. Most of them are criticized for imitating popular Hindi movies or South Indian movies dubbed into Hindi. This is a serious allegation. But this truly holds water.

If one is to consider Bhraamyamaan only as a commercial venture, then most of the methods employed by the producers are justified. But it is important to note that many theatre-persons, critics and theatre-goers are of the view that Bhraamyamaan has the potential to play a significant role in contributing towards reform in society. Occasionally, there are some initiatives taken by some producers to produce original plays and plays of good quality with a team of good actors.

Australian university professor and researcher of sexuality media Alan McKee makes some interesting observations about the aesthetic systems of popular culture. He says:

The everyday consumption of popular culture involves the use of popular aesthetic systems. And yet—amazingly—the intellectuals whose job is to understand and comment on the cultures in which they live continue to know very little about these systems. Indeed, when it comes to understanding how the masses decide what examples of popular culture to consume, many intellectuals assume that it is in fact the *producers* of popular culture who make the decision—that consumers simply accept whatever is offered to them. (2)

This is absolutely true in case of Bhraamyamaan theatre in which the producers make the decision about what to offer to the audiences/consumers. So, the choice of audience is controlled by the producers. The producers do not have any formal or informal mechanism/system of

getting audience feedback. It is a top-down approach that is adopted by the theatre producers. They bank on assumptions and these assumptions are chiefly based on commercial enterprises. Most producers invest much on creating a good spectacle on stage, since it has been a successful and effective tool for making a play popular. The producers, keeping business as their prime motive, invest a lot in production, advertising and marketing. Their investment in production implies payment to artists, purchasing stage properties, sound systems, lights, chairs in the auditorium, advertisements in print and electronic media etc. They have their intention specified in business terms, to entertain the audiences and earn money. They use the stage, the auditorium, as a medium of entertainment. They have their expectation that the performances would draw the masses. On the other hand, the audiences come to the auditorium with their own varied expectations. But the 'horizon of expectations' of the audience is never taken too seriously. So, the top-down approach prevails.

McKee further observes: "Some branches of intellectual thought—the much maligned "cultural studies" for example—have acknowledged that popular aesthetic processes exist" (2-3). Popular culture has its own aesthetics or aesthetic dimensions. Bhraamyamaan theatre is no exception. It is run by its own aesthetic principles. Major emphasis in Bhraamyamaan theatre is on entertainment. It does not, however, mean that it lacks aesthetic value. Within the discourse of the popular, a popular art form follows certain rules governed by the dynamics of popular culture. This, however, cannot be paralleled with aesthetic drama or amateur dramatic troupes and their productions. They are governed by a different set of principles. Their emphasis is more on the play proper than the spectacle.

Bhraamyamaan theatre is often criticized for being trash. At the same time, it is difficult to understand why the masses consume it willingly. Noted director and playwright of Bhraamyamaan theatre, Abhijit Bhattacharya says that the reason is unknown why audiences watch trash, even though they do not have much appreciation for the play ("Jonopriyotar Jadudanda" 14). Maybe the aesthetic of the popular subconsciously works behind reception by the audiences. Or, maybe, due to continuous advertising in newspapers, television etc., the spectators become curious to see a performance.

Laxmi Narayan Kadekar makes significant observations in a book titled *Performers and Their Arts: Folk, Popular and Classical Genres in a Changing India* edited by Simon Charsley and Kadekar:

Hopes and aspirations, joys and sorrows, travails and tribulations of the popular classes of society are embodied in vernacular folk literature. Similarly, performing art forms, as part of popular culture, are also seen as offshoots of life and its struggles. (183)

Bhraamyamma theatre, undoubtedly, embodies the “hopes and aspirations”, “joys and sorrows”, “travails and tribulations” of the popular classes of Assamese society, and, it has established itself as a popular performing art form reflecting “life and its struggles”.

Marcel Danesi’s observation on popular culture is very interesting:

In the history of human cultures, pop culture stands out as atypical. It is culture by the people for the people. In contrast to historical (traditional) culture, it rejects both the supremacy of tradition and of established cultural norms, as well as the pretensions of intellectualist tendencies within contemporary artistic cultures. Pop culture has always been highly appealing for this very reason, bestowing on common people the assurance that cultural trends are for everyone, not just for an elite class of artists and cognoscenti. It is thus populist, unpredictable, and highly ephemeral, reflecting the ever-changing taste of one generation after another. (4)

This reflection of the “ever-changing taste of one generation after another” has been a salient feature of Bhraamyamma theatre in Assam. Many critics opine that Bhraamyamma has drastically moved away from its original form. But in saying so, they have probably failed to notice the paradigm shifts in the dimensions of its popularity across time. As reception of any art form is dependent on the taste of the present generation, as the generation changes, so does taste. The challenge of an art form such as Bhraamyamma is to cater to its spectators that cut across classes. In this context, Marcel Danesi aptly mentions American composer Stephen Sondheim, for whom “popular trends in culture quickly grow quaint”. In Bhraamyamma, a producer is not looking to produce a classic. Rather, the producer is trying to present something which is a complete entertaining package, and can attract a huge audience. So, a producer cannot bank on a singular method/technique of making a play popular. He/she has to keep changing the ingredients of popularity, keeping the expectations of the audience in mind. The experiments on stage are subject to the changing expectations of audiences. For instance, the young generation is fond of modern Western and Bollywood style songs and dance. Therefore, to attract the youth, the producers of Bhraamyamma theatre invest a lot in choreography and music (especially recorded music). Today’s youth are also fond of watching action movies and they expect similar elements on stage. The producers study the psyche of this group of potential audience and execute their plan accordingly. Keeping profit as the prime motive, the producers hire artists from cinema with attractive remuneration. Majority of audiences wish to watch popular cinema artists on stage; they wish to see them perform ‘live’. This desire to watch live performances of artists makes the producers bring in stars/glamorous artists into their troupes every year, resulting in huge cost of production and hike in the price of tickets.

Taking recourse to fantasy, special effects etc., Bhraamyamma Theatre has defined its space in the cultural industry of Assam as a popular art. The popularity, however, is based on the

production-consumption dichotomy which fits into a capitalistic structure, in quite opposition to the original design of presenting it as part of a socialist agenda.

The commercial elements of Bhraamyamaan Theatre have resulted in its increasing popularity. Despite severe criticism. Commercialization in mobile theatre has turned out to be a necessity because the sustenance of a theatre troupe depends entirely on its commercial success. Commercialization, thus, has given a positive direction to mobile theatre in Assam. One can take an idealistic position by saying that commercialization of culture should not be encouraged. However, keeping the practical necessity of the producers in mind, Commercialization is also essential in ensuring the continuity of this art form.

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