



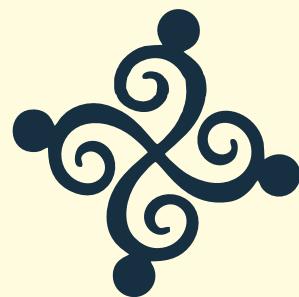
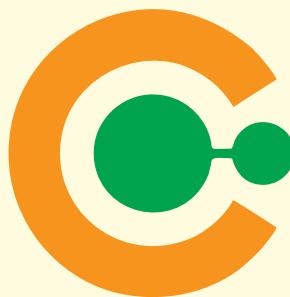
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## Zadhipatti Theatre of Maharashtra and Mobile Theatre of Assam: A Comparative Perception

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### ABSTRACT

The research article with a comparative perspective attempts to unearth the mechanism of Zadipatti Theatre in the Eastern Vidarbha of Maharashtra and Mobile Theatre, in hilly districts of Assam which have become a symbol of social life and cultural richness in two different parts of the country for more than hundred years. These theatres have taken the form of people's movement on a larger scale and have become the symbols of the socio-cultural life of the respective regions. The researcher largely relied on the data collected through personal visits and also selective online literature to formulate arguments and illustrate the findings.

**Keywords:** Mobile, Performance, Theatre, Zadipatti

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## FULL PAPER

Indian theatre has secured global recognition as an ancient, experimental, folk-centric and progressive theatre. The relationship of general social elements, small economic groups as well as social groups outside the mainstream with this theatre has been interesting as well as effective at both the principle and experimental levels. The association of this theatre with the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* is a bond of Indianness irrespective of language, culture, religious and ethnic diversity that binds all Indians together and reinforce the identity of indigenous beings. The exploratory understanding of the diversity, artistry of Indian theatre is seen not only at the national level but also at the global level. Considering the nature of Indian theatre, this theatre is mainly divided into three types namely classical theatre, folk theatre and urban theatre. But ultimately, as the theatre scholar Jacob Sampikal argues that drama aims at interaction and analysis of social problems.

Similarly, the Indian theatre has developed with this central idea, even though there are different stages of its intrinsic development. On the other hand, Indian theatre has repeatedly proved that the type of theatre prevalent in a language or state cannot be confined to that state or linguistic region. Indian drama has often crossed the boundaries of language or region and influenced each other and there are many written evidences of this. For example, one can consider the far-reaching impact of the *Ramlila* and *Raslila* experiments that actually crossed the boundaries of language, region and culture. In this sense, there is no doubt that this basic feature of the development of Indian theatre across the time is noteworthy. Famous theatre scholar Kapila Vatsyayan says “Indian cultural phenomenon that a dramatic form identified with a particular region has often interesting links not only with genres and styles within the region, but also with those which have flourished outside that region” (*Traditional Indian Theatre*:109).

Since ancient times, plays have played a significant role in Indian social life. In course of time, the focus of Indian theatre shifted from the kings and their palaces to the common people and the issues related to their survival. In other words, it was the period of emergence of folk-oriented, folk-centric theatre in India. Considering the contemporaries, theatres such as Zadhipatti in rural Maharashtra and mobile theatres in rural Assam have strengthened the common man's relationship with dramatic performances.

The famous dramatist Brecht through his 'Epic Theatre' gave some ideas of solving contemporary problems by thinking empirically. Direct participation of common people was considered important in it. Thus, Augusto Boal, the originator of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed', focuses on the necessity of action in drama. There are no ready-made answers to the problems of human life, but encouraging the

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audience to find possible solutions or answers is the core of the performance through this theatre. Thus, the active participation of the audience becomes a prerequisite for Boal's theatre. It also ensures the participatory role of ordinary men and women in various aspects of performance. In this research article, a comparative study has been made on the basis of some facts of the Zadipatti Theatre and Assam Touring Theatre, which have become a symbol of social life and cultural richness in two different parts of the country, and which have taken the form of people's movement on a larger scale.

With a history of more than one hundred years, the area of influence of Zadipatti theatre has been the majority of villages, small towns in the four districts of East Vidarbha namely Gadchiroli, Bhandara, Chandrapur and Gondia and some other districts of Vidarbha. Zadipatti Rangbhumi is a theatre that has been built by thousands of farmers and non-farmer families on the strength of their direct participation, on the basis of pure love for theatre and has a glorious history of more than a hundred years. For the common people of this region, the theatre is a source of pleasure, recreation and more importantly it has become a means of livelihood. The centre place for the theatre agencies is Wadsa, Dist. Gadchiroli that connects most of the villages in these four districts.

There is no such an extensive, evolving theatre movement in the other regions of Maharashtra and with an exception like Mobile Theatres in Assam, in the country. The nature of this movement has remained the same as a theatre movement run by the people, for the people. Dr. Shyam Moharkar, a scholar of this theatre believes that this theatre emerged from the traditional folk dance of 'Dandar'. As the dance associated with the agricultural culture of 'Dandar' had a great influence on the folk culture of the region, the drama in general gradually became influenced by it. Dandar was eventually replaced by complete theatrical experiments. The first decade of the 20th century should be the time of emergence of this theatre. Vyankatesh Natya Mandal, of Navargao and Balaji Borkar's early theatrical experiments testifies the beginnings of Zadhipatti. It can be seen that this folk theatre has expanded through *Lokashraya*. The nature of experiments in the region changed rapidly. In the late 1990s, this theatre became more professional and expanded numerically also. At Wadsa, District Gadchiroli, the offices of the theatre groups were set up and the profit-oriented tendency started to grow. Although many new actors got an opportunity to act due to these groups but artistic values were greatly damaged.

On the other hand, it cannot be disregarded that Padmashree Dr. Parshuramji Khune, Dr. Shekhar Dongre, Sadanand Borkar, Kamlakar Borkar, Prahlad Meshram and many other artists have put lot of efforts to assure this theatre a position of reputation. This theatre has become a legend due to the unconditional love and continuous support of millions of fans who have ordinary financial status but extraordinary artistic vision and artistic sense. Overcoming all kinds of difficulties or

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obstacles, this theatre has been flourishing with the participation of writers, artistes, technicians, producers, directors, other small groups and with the strength of the blessings of audience. Today's form of this theatre is a presence of more than a hundred troupes, thousands of artists, technicians and millions of spectators. In midst of many challenges, rapid changes, new techniques, changing tastes, emphasis on professionalism, widening ideological gap; the theatre stands strong only on the strength of unwavering support and positive response from the audience. There is no doubt that this relationship of audience with this theatre is an indication of the centuries-old progress of this theatre. On the other hand, let us see the nature of mobile theatres in Assam.

Assam is an important state of our country which is home to multi-ethnic, multi-cultural elements. Many ethnic groups exist in this state and they have contributed or are contributing significantly to the socio-cultural development of the region. From the perspective of theatre, mobile theatres in Assam have played an important role in public participation for the past few decades. Just as Zadhipatti Theatre has built a theatrical movement through the direct participation and contribution of the people, so too is the common people's unrequited love for the roots of this touring theatre.

Folk art, folk theatres have been entertaining and educating people for a long time not only in Assam but in various parts of the country. It can be said that the folk traditions of our country have become an effective means of bringing education and spirituality to the common people. Further, the Bhakti movement paved the way for the emergence of various folk-art forms in different parts of the country. We notice that the emergence of *Ankia*, a form of folk drama in Assam, probably occurred in the fourteenth century through Sri Sankardeva. Shankardeva's play *Rukmini Harana* was the most popular. He travelled to different areas with the troupe of this play. By this time, Assam became a haven for many ethnic, linguistic and cultural elements from within and outside India. The blend of Eastern Vaishnava and Vaishnava culture was passionately reflected in these theatrical performances. Linguistic affinities often give us an indication of the dynamics between different regions and arenas. *Ankiya*, a form of folk theatre, though a mixture of forms such as *Ramlila*, *Bhagwat Mela*, *Manipuri Dance*, is undoubtedly a form of theatre that is in tune with the original Assamese culture as well as unique and it has more cultural and social importance. Traveling from place to place by these *Ankiya* theatre troupes enabled the travel of ideas and became important in socio-cultural changes. The major plays *Ram Vijaya*, *Rukmini Harana*, *Kalia Damana* were presented through this medium. British colonialism negatively affected the natural momentum of *Ankiya Natya* in various parts of Assam. In a later phase, the theatre culture of Assam is seen to have been influenced by western theatre and the popular folk theatre of Bengal i.e., *Yatra*. It is a form of drama performed mainly on festive occasions and especially on mythological subjects.

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Theatre Scholar Dr Jayanta Sarma mentions: "...the already existing various folk performance traditions in Assam and the events that lead to the transformation of the traditional theatre form into something as magnificent and intricate as the mobile theatre of Assam" (*Theatre on Wheels*:01). In this sense, it is an indisputable fact that traditional folk theatre is at the root of touring theatre.

Around 1930 AD, Assam began to develop its own form of moving theatre, or traveling theatre, and later became the most popular, visible means of entertainment in Assam. Ina Ross notes that, "Theatre in Assam is not simply an art form but a complex and rich social event" ("The Mobile Theatre...":65). Considering the existing theatre in Assam as well as the popular theatres with which Zadipatti Theatre is directly or indirectly associated; it is found that Grassroots Theatre in Chikwaka, Drama Circle in Bangladesh, PETA in the Philippines, Traditional Performance in Pakistan and Street Theatre in Sri Lanka are known for their folk-oriented performances and significant public response. It is a matter of fact that popular theatre has survived through oral tradition in various parts of the world.

Touring theatre in Assam should be credited for creating social consciousness. Till 2017, six thousand four hundred and eighty plays were written and performed for this theatre. In this sense it has become a mass movement which is working to create public awareness on the social issues of the people of Assam. In this respect, the similarity of this theatre with Zadhipatti is found. Through the well-acclaimed play *Suicide* and some other dramas, Zadhipatti theatre has also tried to fulfil its social responsibility. Touring theatre of Assam has given special emphasis on presenting dramas mainly based on historical, mythological, social themes. Initially, small shows were organized with minimal equipment. But in the end, it turned out that it was not going to work so the first theatre house was built in 1963. Much credit goes to Shri Achyut Lahkar and Shri Ratan Lahkar brothers. The contribution made by these two through their Nataraj and Kohinoor theatres became important in the promising progress of this theatre in the future. Because the initiative taken by them from the point of view of building theatre houses was remarkable. The plays *Jerengar*, *Sati*, *Boliya Ramdhenu*, *Andhkop*, *Bandisala* registered unconditional love of the audience. At present there are more than one hundred and forty-five theatre companies in various parts of Assam. Tihu, Barpeta, Nalbari, Darang, Goalpara and Pathshala districts have most of these theatre groups. The theatre groups mainly include Hangul Theater, Himalaya Theater, Ashirbad Theater and Aahan Theater. To add further, *Gram Panchayats* and *Gram Parishads* share in the actual profit from the performance of the plays. This ratio is 60:40. Construction of schools, colleges, auditoriums, religious places is done with the donations received from these theatre groups. Instalment plan is also offered in ticket booking. On this basis, it can be argued that theatre companies have a better knowledge of actual reality.

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Considering Zadhipatti Theatre and Mobile Theatres of Assam from a comparative point of view, there are striking similarities in some respects and striking differences in various respects. The most important similarity is the large mass base enjoyed by both these theatres and due to this they have become popular movements. At the same time, the financial turnover through these two theatres is worth cores of rupees. Both these theatres have opened many business opportunities. Due to which the number of dependents on these theatres is very large. These theatres, operating in two different parts of the country, keep the authentic art of India alive. To some extent, the tendency of the young generation to watch and understand drama has been increasing. Also, these theatres have succeeded in curbing the growing urbanization to a small extent. The impact of the films on both the theatres is remarkably similar. The awareness of social issues that both have is particularly remarkable. Decreasing level of humour, fragmented entertainment are points of concern on both sides.

On the other hand, the traveling theatre of Assam is more organized than Zadipatti theatre. This theatre uses technology in a more sophisticated way. The novelty of the subject is found a little more in the theatre of Assam. This does not mean that Zadhipatti theatre lacks innovation but rather that innovation should be sought more vigorously. But Zadhipatti theatre has a richer legacy. Looking ahead to the future, Zadhipatti theatre looks more promising. But along with this, there are some important challenges in front of both these theatres. Such as 1) maintaining originality and acting skills in plays 2) bridging the growing gap between audience and theatre due to mobile culture 3) impact of covid-19 and 4) lack of government support.

Some important findings of the present research can be summarized as:

- 1) Both these theatres create a folk-centric culture.
- 2) Both theatres have become a major source of economy in the respective state.
- 3) Apart from these two theatres, very few theatre institutions are actually functioning in our country today.
- 4) There is a dire need for government assistance to keep both the theatres alive for the future.
- 5) Innovative subjects, acting skills, acting lessons, modern technology should be given priority.

Theatre institutions in Assam as well as theatre institutions in Zadipatti are an integral part of unorganized economy. But there is an urgent need to transform them into an organized economy sector. Therefore, the persons who play a role in the actual functioning of these mobile theatres can get real financial benefits. Folk theatre

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is a medium of entertainment, cultural dissemination and mass communication. Safeguarding the interest of artists and workers and especially women artists and traveling stage workers should be seriously considered. The unexpected shock of Covid-19 has raised some serious questions about the future of this theatre. But if the right policies are implemented, this art can definitely survive this disaster and future disasters also. Most importantly, theatre, not blood, flows through the veins of the people of these regions.

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