



# ‘De-centred Stage’: Looking Select Alternative Theatres of Assam

Dr. Gunajeet Mazumdar

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Manikpur Anchalik College, Manikpur, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam, India

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**Abstract**— *The present paper attempts to look at the contemporary alternative theatre movement of Assam which debunks the traditional notion of theatre in terms of altering with open stage theatre amidst a rural and natural landscape. It was way back in late 1998, late Sukracharjya Rabha, a theatre activist started a genre of theatre performances under the banner of Baddungdupa Kala Kendra at his village Rampur, Agia of Goalpara district in Assam. In fact, the group has been organising a theatre festival in the village every year in winter amidst a natural landscape of deep Sal Forest thereby terming the festival as “Under the Sal Tree Festival” since 2008. This new form theatre deviates from the traditional structure of theatre as it decentres the traditional stage which is supposed to be situated at the centre with high position (in terms of height) from the audience and it explores a new kind of open-ended stage in an ecological atmosphere where the seats of the audience are arranged in a rounded and open way and with the same position (in terms of height) without no hierarchy. In fact, this new theatre of Badungduppa Kal Kendra also uses minimalistic setting and costume on the stage and in terms of performance, they emphasis more on gesture than on exaggerated dialogue. The main objective of their alteration of theatre is to connect theatre with the folk and the mass. Following “Under the Sal Tree Theatre” festival, many theatre activists come up to experiment new forms of theatres with open stage in the natural landscape with variations and consequently an alternative theatre movement is developed in contemporary Assam. The paper will look this theatre movement from Postmodern contexts.*



**Keywords**— *decentre, stage, theatre, alternative, gesture, setting.*

## INTRODUCTION

Assam is one of the culturally and ecologically rich states of the Northeastern region of India. The state is also geopolitically very important as it shares international boundaries and it is one of the important locations of the South East Asian regions. Besides these, multiethnic component of the state provides various cultural experiences in the state. The dramatic and theatrical tradition of Northeast is such a unique tradition of the state which is different from the rest of the world. The theatre tradition of the state is lured predominantly by the ecology and socio-cultural ethos of the Assamese society.

### Evolution of Assamese Theatre: A Brief Overview:

The history of Assamese theatre goes back to the Ankiya Nat and Bhaona performance of 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>

century Assam. The Ankiya Nat and Bhaona performance tradition was pioneered by saint Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva long back in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. Under the charismatic and great teachings of Mahapurush Sankardeva and his disciple Mahapurush Madhavdeva, Ankiya Nat and Bhaona became an important cultural performance tradition of Assam bearing the Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy towards life.

In the era of 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new theatre movement appeared on the performance history of the state of Assam and this theatre movement can create a kind of charisma among the theatre audience of the world having a great and big commercial mobile theatres. It was way back in 1930s, Natyacharjya Brajanath Sharma, a veteran actor, activist, and freedom fighter of Barnagar region of undivided

Kamrup district of Assam through his Union Kohinoor Opera theatre started a new kind of theatre- that is mobile in nature. In fact, in this theatre Union Kohinoor Opera Theatre, Brajanath Sharma initiated for the first time co-acting on stage in the state Assam (Mazumdar, 1). However, this unique idea of mobile theatre was not expanded very rapidly and widely at that time as there were many problems at that time like poor road and other communication issues. Again, at that time the province of Assam was also under the British rule and conflict was going on between the ruler and the freedom fighters. One of the main objectives of these theatre movements initiated by Brajanath Sharma was to make consciousness public regarding the freedom struggle against the British imperialism. In the wake of progress of time, another veteran artist from Pathsala, Achyut Lahkar expanded and lift forwarded these mobile theatre movements in true sense of the terms through his 'Nataraj Cine Theatre' in 1963. He gave a new momentum to mobile theatre and commercially expanded it and accordingly, in the hands of forerunners mobile theatre activists, the mobile theatre got a wide expansion in the contemporary Assam.

#### **De-cantered Stage:**

The present paper attempts to look at the contemporary alternative theatre movement of Assam which debunks the traditional notion of theatre in terms of altering with open stage theatre amidst a rural and natural landscape. It was way back in late 1990s, Sukracharjya Rabha, a theatre activist started a genre of theatre performances under the banner of Baddungdupa Kala Kendra at his village Rampur, Agia of Goalpara district in Assam. In fact, the group has been organising a theatre festival in the village every year in winter amidst a natural landscape of deep Sal Forest thereby terming the festival as "Under the Sal Tree Festival" since its inception. This new form theatre deviates from the traditional structure of theatre as it decentres the traditional stage which is supposed to be situated at the centre with high position (in terms of height) from the audience and it explores a new kind of open-ended stage in an ecological atmosphere where the seats of the audience are arranged in a rounded and open way and with the same position (in terms of height) without no hierarchy. In fact, this new theatre of Badungduppa Kala Kendra also uses minimalistic setting and costume on the stage and in terms of performance, they emphasis more on gesture than on exaggerated dialogue. The main objective of their alteration of theatre is to connect theatre with the folk and the mass. Following "Under the Sal Tree Theatre" festival, many theatre activists come up to experiment new forms of theatres with open stage in the natural landscape with variations and consequently an alternative theatre

movement is developed in contemporary Assam. The paper will look this theatre movement from Postmodern contexts.

#### **Theatrical Pedagogy of Badungduppa Kala Kendra:**

Debunking the conventional theatre movements of Assam, it was way back in the 1990s, late Sukracharjya Rabha initiated a new theatre movement amidst a forest in the Rampur village of Agia, Goalpara. Through his theatre group, 'Badungduppa Kala Kendra', Sukracharjya Rabha rejects the conventional mode of theatre stage and he argues in favour of an open stage amidst the forest in a circular set up. His innovative concept of stage can be looked at from the outlook of Postmodernism. Just as Postmodern thinker Jaques Derrida deconstructs centre and opines in favour of plurality of mini centres (Cited in Glendinning, 30-31), Rabha also debunks the centrifugal concept of stage and proposes a stage with a proximity with the audience deconstructing the hierarchy between actor and audience. Sukracharjya Rabha's theatre organization makes a theatre festival in every winter named as 'Under the Sal Tree festival'. Under this banner, the theatre group Badungduppa Kala Kendra' organises various theatre acts in semicircular stage surrounded by audience. The stage is set up in a completely ecological and green environment surrounded by the green lushes. This shows the objective of this theatre is also to showcase the co-existence between Nature and human beings specially with the Rabha folk of Rampur village. This mode of theatre does not only debunk the traditional stage hierarchy in stage performance (Stage in height with audience in the low seats) and prescribes a semi-circular stage where an equality can be maintained with the audience. Not only in terms of stage and setting, this experimental practice of Badungduppa Theatre also depicts various themes rooted in folk memory and culture with the touch of modern drama practices. However, in terms of performance, they deviate from the Eurocentric norms of theatre performance and provides much importance on performance based on 'body gestures and movements' rather than concentration on dialogue or speech. Once in an interview with Late Sukracharjya Rabha way back in 2011, with I and my friend Anshuman Bora, in one of our question regarding the acting pedagogy of Badungduppa theatre and National School of Drama, Rabha replied that he deviated from the Eurocentric style of acting as well as the dramatic methodology of National School of Drama and attempted to establish a new unique pedagogy of acting with much emphasis on bodily gesture and the performance of plays with the touch of folk contexts, lure, and music in a co-space of nature. Namrata Pathak opines,

"The act of situating the oeuvre of Sukracharaya Rabha (1977-2018) on the map of contemporary theatre practices requires a thorough inspection of

the relationship between theatre and nature" (Para-1)

### Other two cases of Alternative Theatre:

Following the root of Sukracharjya Rabha's minimalistic theatre, many armature groups of Assam have been engaging themselves in various kinds of alternative theatres. In the Barnagar region of Barpeta District Assam, many groups are doing these kinds of experimental theatre practices following the path of Badungduppa Theatre. An amateur theatre group of the region named as "Kala guru Artist Society and Bonsai Assam have been organizing a kind of theatre performance every year winter in the open paddy field after the harvesting season. This theatre group also focuses on minimalistic setting. In the leadership of a young drama activist of the region Dhruba Raj Pathak initiated this 'Pothar Nat Mela' in open paddy field after the harvesting season. This 'Pothar Nat Mela' is a carnival like situation which dismantles the hierarchy among the mass. However, this trend of 'Pothar Nat Mela' was first took place in the Nalbari District of Assam.

The Adingiri Theatre Festival is another alternative mode of theatre practice in Assam. This theatre movement has been pioneered by Abhigyanam, a theatre group based on Guwahati. This theatre group has been organising Adingiri theatre festival consecutively for many years in a ecofriendly set up amidst the hum drum of Guwahati City of Assam. This festival generally takes place in the slopes of hills of Adingiri, Maligoan, Guwahati. The setting of the theatre stage is generally minimalistic natural setting with an eco-friendly vision.

### CONCLUSION

After observing and studying select alternative theatre practices of Assam, it can be argued that Sukracharaya Rabha pioneered an altogether new mode of theatre pedagogy challenging the traditional definition of theatre. His pedagogy of theatre does not only debunk the Eurocentric norms of theatre but also centralised style of traditional acting of India and he established an altogether innovative theatre and acting pedagogy rooted in indigenous culture thereby focusing on the close relationship between Nature and people which he imbibed in his psyche from the Rabha community's close co-existence with Nature. It is also evident that providing a semi-circular stage, Rabha also deconstructs the traditional hierarchical stage system in theatre and he argues in favour of a proximity between the audience and actor. Following the root of Sukracharjya Rabha's eco-theatre, there are other experiments of theatres with certain variance and uniqueness. However, these new alternative theatre

experiments also deconstructs the traditional concept of central stage and hyperbolic expressions of performance.

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