

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON BHRMYOMAN THEATRES OF ASSAM

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Abstract

The unprecedented world medical emergency within the variety of COVID19 Pandemic (Corona Virus Disease, 2019) originating from China in the year 2019 led totally different governments round the world to impose economic internment throughout the year 2020 and once more in 2021. Assam, as a part state of Asian country India, has conjointly knowledgeable this policy so as to contain this deadly disease. Economic lockdown and restrictions on movement of individuals, in one hand, have somewhat succeeded in containing the unfold of COVID19, however on the opposite hand, it's adversely affected the financial gain opportunities of people to an oversized extent in numerous spheres of occupation. during this paper a shot has been created to debate the impact of COVID19 pandemic on Bhrmyoman Theatres that is one terribly distinctive narrative artform of this state. supported each primary survey and secondary data, this descriptive study has been divided into 2 parts: half A and half B. half A includes Introduction, Background of Bhrmyoman Theatre, Objective and Methodology and half B includes Discussion and Conclusion of the study.

Keywords: COVID19, Bhrmyoman Theatre, Assam, Unemployment.

INTRODUCTION

The history of epidemics in Assam is in many respects different from that in other parts of the country. Especially in the colonial period, there were many cases where a series of epidemics devastated one village after another without any medical precautions or treatments. Most epidemics were not documented and due to the geographical location of the region, little attention was paid to them by the colonial administration. Among the various forms of epidemics, kala-zar (visceral leishmaniasis) is a fatal disease caused by the protozoan parasite *Leishmania donovani* and transmitted by the female sand fly *Phlebotomus argentipes*. These Kala Zar epidemics occurred between 1875 and 1950 and resulted in thousands of deaths in Kamrup, Garo Hills, Goalpara and Nagaon districts (Rogers, 1898). The disease gradually disappeared from Assam because DDT was

extensively used as part of the national malaria elimination programme. Later entomological surveys revealed that *Phlebotomus argentipes* sandflies were no longer present in this region after the use of DDT (Kaul et al., 1994).

During the Indian colonial period, large urban centres such as Kolkata (Calcutta), Mumbai (Bombay), Chennai (Madras) and many small towns suffered massively from influenza, smallpox, plague, malaria and banthia cholera (Hill, 2011). Mumbai was hit by a deadly plague in 1896 and influenza in 1918. Hill observed that an influenza epidemic arrived in Mumbai in September 1918, sweeping through northern and eastern India. In 1994, a major plague epidemic broke out in western India with its epicentre in Surat.

The spread of the Corona virus from the epicentre in Wuhan in China to the entire world has already changed the entire world economy and human behaviour. The entire scientific community as well as medical professionals fundamentally believe that control of this infectious disease is possible through immobility and containment such as confinement and social distancing. Based on this fundamental belief, unprecedented confinement was imposed in most countries of the world in the first quarter of 2020, leading to an unprecedented collapse of our economic and social system.

The first case of COVID -19 emerged in India on January 30, 2020, and following the outbreak, a complete lockdown was announced for the entire country on March 24 for a period of 21 days. With the announcement of a nationwide lockdown on March 25, 2020 due to the Covid19 pandemic, workers of the unorganised sectors, especially the migrants, faced the toughest phase of their livelihood. The closure of industries and shops left these workers, who do both skilled and unskilled work, without any source of income in places far away from their native places.

People working in the unorganised sector have always been most vulnerable to disasters and epidemics. With both the Union and State Governments announcing a complete lockdown for an indefinite period, except for essential services, borders were closed, traffic stopped, factories, shops, restaurants and all kinds of economic activities shut down. This proved to be a nightmare for hundreds of thousands of workers working in the various sectors of the unorganised sector who lost their livelihoods and became unemployed overnight. The immediate impact of the shutdown affected the migrant workers who not only lost their livelihood overnight but also had to struggle for food and shelter as the state administration completely ignored the consequences that this group of workers may have faced. As a result of the loss of daily wages, fear of contagion and fear of death, thousands of them began to flee to their homes from various cities. Many migrants lost their lives either due to hardships on the way, hunger, accidents or co-morbidity

and some even committed suicide. A telephone survey by Jan Sahas of more than 3000 migrants from North Central India shows that majority of the workers were daily wage labourers and at the time of the lockdown 42% had run out of rations, one third were stuck in the destination city without access to food, water and money, 94% had no workers' identity card (Jan Sahas 2020).

BACKGROUND OF BHRAMYOMAN THEATRE

In Assam, one of the most vulnerable sectors that has come to a complete standstill due to the Covid 19 epidemic is Bhramyoman theatre. This form of theatre, considered unique and unparalleled in the contemporary Indian theatre tradition, was founded in 1963 by Achyut Lahkar and SadaLahkar. The pioneering Bhramyoman theatre group 'Nataraj Theatre', which started its journey on October 2, 1963, combined the basics of dramatic art - dance, music, drama, stagecraft - with cutting-edge technology and became an institution itself, paving the way for artists of drama and state drama to make a living from their performances. For forty years it moved all over Assam entertaining the people in urban and rural areas. This process enriched the cultural heritage of Assam with a unique dramatic tradition that secured a strong foundation for Bhramyoman theatre in the national cultural scenario (Sarma and Kalita, 2020).

The idea of this unique theatre platform was conceived by Achyut Lahkar and was similar to western proscenium theatre with an auditorium; the only difference he envisioned was that it would be Bhramyoman - transportable from one place to another. Originally, this form of theatre was not known as Bhramyoman (Assamese word for Bhramyoman). The name was coined by the late Radha Govinda Barua, founder of the Assam Tribune Group, in 1963. The Nataraj Theatre was performing at the Judges' Field in Guwahati for the benefit of the Gauhati Town Club when R. G. Barua enjoyed the performance one evening. The next day he wrote in his newspaper Dainik Asom, " ... it is

something which has its own sound system, its own electrical equipment to enhance the performance, its own stage, its own auditorium. There is no such unique theatre anywhere else in the world. It should be called the first Bhramyoman theatre" (Sarma and Kalita, 2020).

The Bhramyaman Theatre in Assam, for the first time in the history of performing arts, brought professionalism and a business perspective to the traditional form of theatrical performances and created means of permanent income for numerous amateur artists and also introduced something like a norm for remuneration of artists and other non-performing employees. Since this artistic venture required more financial investment for its maintenance, the financial structure and overall operation differed significantly from other traditional and amateur theatre groups. The pioneer of this Bhramyoman theatre, Achyut Lahkar, explained this apprehension. "I started Nataraj Theatre at my own risk. At that time, no one was convinced that this form of theatre could work better, so everyone was reluctant to support me financially. I had to take everything into my own hands. As you know, producing a professional theatre show can be expensive and sometimes risky. There is a huge financial commitment before the performance begins: auditions and rehearsals, designing and building sets, designing and making costumes and props, etc. And there is some risk in terms of the popularity of the show. A well-known classic or musical is usually a less risky venture than a new play by an unknown author. If the show is a success, there could be a financial return, but if it is a flop, the losses can be catastrophic" (Lahkar, 2004).

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY:

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of the freeze imposed by the Assam government to control the spread of COVID19 disease in 2020 and 2021 on Bhramyoman theatre in general and in particular the impact

on employment and income in the sector under study.

This study is based on both a primary survey and a face-to-face interview, as well as the use of various secondary data sources, and is descriptive in nature. Primary data was collected from various individuals associated with Bhramyoman theatre and face-to-face interviews were conducted with two significant theatre producers. Secondary data sources include books, magazines, newspapers, news portals and various websites.

IMPACT OF COVID19 ON BHRAMYOMAN THEATRE:

The unprecedented global medical emergency in the form of COVID19 (Corona Virus Disease, 2019) emanating from China in 2019 prompted various governments across the world to impose an economic shutdown in 2020 and again in 2021. Assam, a constituent state of India, has also taken this measure to curb this deadly disease. The economic lockdown and restriction on movement of people have somewhat curbed the spread of COVID19 on the one hand, but on the other hand, it has severely affected the earning potential of people in various occupational fields.

In its long history of around sixty years, the wheels of Bhramyoman theatre has never stood still for a prolonged period of more than a year, as it did in 2020 due to the disastrous impact of the lockdown. When the Assam government announced the closure of educational institutions, theatres and some other public places and mass gatherings in March 2020, it meant an uncertain future for Bhramyoman theatre. Since the directive of closure primarily means that any mass gatherings will be restricted, this directive has definitely caused frustration among the artists and workers of the entire Bhramyoman theatre industry. There are around fifty Bhramyoman theatre groups in Assam and each of these groups provides employment to 100 to 150 people, including artists and technicians. In addition to these direct jobs, the entire Bhramyoman theatre

industry provides secondary employment to many people wherever it performs. In a way, Bhramyoman theatres create a symbiotic relationship that wheels a different economy as a whole and provides income opportunities for many people.

Typically, a Bhramyoman theatre starts rehearsals from May to July every year and performs the dramas in front of audiences from August. So it takes about three months to prepare to perform dramas and dance dramas. During this time, the theatre group not only rehearses dramas and dance dramas, but also contracts with collaborators and does all the technical work to prepare the stage, lights and sound. The bookings for a large part of the performances are also done during this time. After completing the initial performances at their home venue where the group has been rehearsing, a Bhramyoman theatre sets out on the road and performs its show without resting for a single day. Traditionally, each year during the first week of August, each Bhramyoman group prepares for a nine-month journey to reach people in every corner of the state. Initially, the Bhramyoman theatre groups travel and perform in the lower and middle regions of Assam. Then from January, they move to Upper Assam and the season ends with the Rongali Bihu.

But in 2020, the most unfortunate incidents happened to the Bhramyoman theatre groups. The Bhramyoman theatre artists and staff who were touring the districts in Upper Assam experienced for the first time that they had to cut short their journey immediately after the imposition of lockdown and were almost stuck in the places where the theatre groups had decided to temporarily shut down. Just before the Rongali Bihu in 2020, this situation has shaken the livelihood of thousands of families. As a complete shutdown would have potentially destroyed the entire Bhramyoman theatre industry, these groups have first requested the government to allow them to screen people on Corona virus before admitting them to the shows. "We are appealing to the government to allow the Bhramyoman theatre groups to perform. They should be allowed to screen people from the

audience wherever necessary. But the performances should not be stopped by a blanket ban. The Bhramyoman theatre performances are scheduled till Rongali Bihu. If we are asked to stop almost a month before the end of the season, the technicians will suffer a lot as they will not get paid," said the noted Assamese actor and one of the previous producers of Awahan Theatre (Times of India, 2020). Addressing a press conference, a large number of producers appealed to the state government that the producers would not be able to pay the monthly fees to the artistes and other workers if the Bhramyoman theatre shows were suddenly stopped. Therefore, he said, the state government should pay adequate compensation to the technicians - the grassroots workers who are comparatively poorly paid and whose income depends on the number of performances.

But the state administration paid no heed to such appeals and as a result of the lockdown, the Bhramyoman theatre, which was supposed to complete its journey in April 2020 and resume its usual journey in May-July 2020, could not start moving in 2020. This means that thousands of artists and technicians working in and around 32 Bhramyoman theatre groups have completely lost their opportunities and the government has not offered any financial support to the members of the Bhramyoman theatre industry. In view of this acute crisis, the theatre practitioners in Assam requested the then Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal in August 2020 to provide financial assistance to those working in the profession as they were facing hardships in the wake of the crisis COVID -19. One of the members of the delegation told the media that the coronavirus pandemic has relentlessly hit the community and cast a shadow on the careers of many theatre artistes and workers, making their livelihoods difficult. The theatre workers are facing an acute financial crisis as they have been out of work for nearly four months due to the COVID -19 pandemic. "The lockdown measures have been relaxed and life is returning to normalcy in most parts of the state, but the work of theatre groups seems to be a

difficult task as people continue to shun large gatherings," he said.

In the memorandum submitted to the Assam Chief Minister, the theatre workers' association mentioned that due to financial hardship and lack of alternatives, most of the theatre workers were forced to sell vegetables while some became daily wage labourers. Some have even sold their prized possessions which they use in the theatre productions. "In this situation, we have no choice but to seek your support and assistance in our struggle for survival. Therefore, we request you to support and help us at least for the next six months," the theatre workers said in their statement (The Hindu, 2020).

Krishna Roy, a prominent figure in the Bhramyoman theatre industry, the established producer of Awahan Theatre, one of the oldest and best known theatre groups, described the situation as unimaginable and told the media that because of Covid 19, they had to stop their performances from March 16 for the last season. "At this stage, it is impossible to think of preparing theatre. Mass gatherings are the core idea of Bhramyoman theatre. If lockdown or social distancing norms persist, it is impossible to start Bhramyoman theatre." (The Telegraph, 2020). In terms of financial loss, he specifically mentioned that the cancellation of one day's performance for a theatre company means a financial loss of about Rs 1 lakh, which ultimately affects the entire team. "We are now in debt to those who had booked us and given us an advance but could not perform because of the pandemic. We will perform in their areas this year if at all possible," he said.

Awahan theatre had to cancel thirty pandals in 2020, which means a direct loss of thirty lakhs. Besides, it also lost the usual revenue from advertisements. This year, Awahan Theatre's advertising revenue from the Assam government amounted to ten lakh rupees. Advertising from private parties, including those at the local level, which amounts to about twenty thousand rupees per performance, multiplied by the total number of cancelled performances, went down the drain. It may be added that while the theatre parties are booked

much earlier from various corners of the state, the festivals provide additional revenue to the producers as they have to put up additional shows during this period. The closure of all festivals has also prevented this possibility. Another effect is higher depreciation on each theatre company's property, which is not being used during this time. It takes simple arithmetic skills and some imagination to calculate how far the entire industry has been affected. The total loss is much greater than the directly calculable primary loss.

Total Number of Average Shows per Year	75 to 80
Income earned per show	Rs. One Lakh
Number of shows Cancelled during 2020-21	30
Income from Advertisement received from Govt. of Assam during 2020-21	Rs. Ten Lakh
Income lost from Advertisement at local level	Rs. 20,000/- per cancelled show (Approximately)
Added Cost	Higher Depreciation cost to the properties lying idle
Other loss	Cancelled Festivals stopped the flow of added income
Most affected employees	Daily wage earners
For the year 2021-22	Grimmer situation Partial loss of 2020-21 tending to total loss of 2021-22 due to looming uncertainty of the situation

Source: Primary Interview on May 9, 2021

Among the employees the one with daily wage level basis are at total loss.

The extent to which the effects of the lockdown have already shaken the entire Bhramyoman theatre

industry can be easily understood from several news items published in various newspapers around the state. One such news item published in the Dainik Asom (2020), a Guwahati daily, states, "The Bhramyoman artistes affected by

the Corona virus, who are at various places in the state, are facing considerable problems and at this time, the owner/producer of Brindaban Theatres, Ganesh Raimedhi, has offered help to the artistes. It is noteworthy that after supporting the artists in Guwahati on May 2....A plan has been chalked out to help the artists badly affected by the lockdown, said owner/producer Ganesh Raimedhi. "It is commendable that the owner/producer has been helping the artists since the start of the lockdown. The SankardevaKalakhetra Samaj, a pioneering cultural institution of the state, also distributed food items to the artists of the Bhramyoman theatre on April 17, 2020 in Khanapara, Guwahati.

The question now is how Bhramyoman theatre can rejuvenate itself amidst a universal crisis that is recurring in most parts of the world, including India, and what would be the concrete consequences if the state machinery does not take it seriously. Last year, when Kohinoor Theatre had to stop its performances, Kohinoor Theatre producer TapanLahkar was very negative about the future prospects of Bhramyoman theatre. "Even if we start performing, the question remains whether we will be able to get the kind of response we usually get. With a few exceptions, most of the artists in the Bhramyoman theatre groups are housed in the homes of people close to the performance venue. We are worried whether people will be willing to accommodate the artistes in their homes this time," he said.

On a positive note, the Assam government, realising the gravity of the situation, has offered compensation of Rs. 50,000/- per person to nine hundred employees of Bhramyoman theatres whose annual income is less than ten lakh in 2020.

The Economic Times of May 5, 2021 reports, "A third Covid-19 wave is inevitable but the timing is unpredictable, the Centre said on Wednesday. "Given the scale at which the virus is circulating, phase 3 is inevitable. But it is not clear in what time frame this will happen. We hope to be prepared for the virus when it occurs," Chief Scientific Adviser K Vijay Raghavan said. The government claimed that

while scientists had predicted a second wave, the high figure of 4,000 covid-19 per day was never expected." (The Economic Times, May 5, 2021)

If the government's report is to be believed, the Bhramyoman theatre industry faces a major challenge in the near future in the fog of uncertainty. This is because the workers who are still waiting for better days to resume the shows of the Bhramyoman theatres would be forced to look for alternative employment very soon. The problem of adjusting to a new job and returning to the Bhramyoman theatres would be a big problem for the workers and artists and would put the future of the entire industry in question. From the month of September, 2021, 5Bhramyoman theatre groups have started their work under the directives of the Covid SOP of government. But they failed to make any impression on the audience.

It becomes clear that the present scenario is bleak - the future is even bleaker. Once the chain is broken, it is almost impossible to get the production mechanism going again. This will set off chain reactions leading to a vicious cycle of unemployment, poverty and loss of initiative: a rather ominous possibility. This can only be prevented by an enlightened patron - in this context, that must be the government.

CONCLUSION:

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the first wave of Covid19 blocking in 2020-21 was the first blow to the Bhramyoman theatre industry, the second wave almost brought it down barring some government aid, but the looming third wave may prove to be the hammer on the industry's coffin unless serious efforts are made to revive it. Looking at it from a different angle, there will be many new faces coming into the industry in the long run if it somehow survives this threat.

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