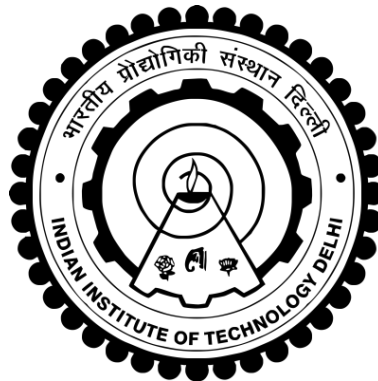


**EXPLORING POLITICS OF IDENTITY THROUGH
THEATRE: “ASSAMESENESS” AND BHRAMYAMAN
THEATRE OF ASSAM**

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INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY DELHI**

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THEATRE: “ASSAMESENESS” AND BHRAMYAMAN
THEATRE OF ASSAM**

by

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Submitted

in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

to the



INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY DELHI

FEBRUARY 2020

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Exploring Politics of Identity through Theatre: ‘Assameseness’ and Bhramyaman Theatre of Assam**” being submitted by Mriganka Sekhar Sarma to the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi for the award of the degree of “**Doctor of Philosophy**” is a record of bona fide research work carried out by him under my supervision and guidance and in conformity with the rules and regulations of IIT Delhi.

He has fulfilled all the requirements for the submission of this thesis which has, in my opinion, reached the required standard fulfilling the requirements for the degree.

The material contained in this thesis has not been submitted in part or full to any other University / Institute for the award of any other degree or diploma to the best of my knowledge.

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how commercial travelling theatre of Assam, popularly known as Bhramyaman theatre has engaged with the Assamese identity question in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Though the emergence of an identity consciousness in Assam can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, the identity issue took a violent turn with the beginning of the Assam Movement against “illegal” immigration from Bangladesh (1979 – 1985) and with the formation of the militant group, United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in the year 1979. My study of Bhramyaman theatre is situated against this background of social and political turbulence.

Bhramyaman theatre is not only a commercial enterprise but also a significant cultural institution. Despite being guided by profit motive, the theatre groups claim themselves to be motivated by a cultural agenda, that is, to promote Assamese language and culture. Due to its mobile nature, Bhramyaman theatre reaches even the remotest village, and hence, it can shape popular imagination. However, the influence of Bhramyaman theatre is restricted to the caste-Hindu, Assamese-speaking population-dominated areas of the Brahmaputra valley. The analytical study of a few selected plays reveals how Bhramyaman theatre has been complicit in perpetuating the hegemonic discourses of the caste-Hindu, Assamese-led civil society organisations like All Assam Students Union (AASU) and Asom Sahitya Sabha. Bhramyaman groups have staged plays based on various socio-cultural and political icons of Assam, and the iconic figures are appropriated in the narratives of subnationalism in such a way that they become instrumental in establishing an exclusive “imagined community”. The melodramatic performance practice and grand spectacles of Bhramyaman theatre are used as convenient ideological tools which complement the dominant political discourses on the Assamese identity question. Though Bhramyaman is populist theatre in the sense that the plays are produced for commercial consumption, the travelling theatre form cannot be defined by commercial considerations alone.

A few Bhramyaman playwrights / directors have included oppositional discourses in their plays in order to problematise the identity question, but all subversive attempts get contained due to the predominance of commercial considerations. However, non-commercial nature does not ensure subversiveness on the part of theatre. Despite not being guided by profit motive, amateur theatre in Assam is also not immune to the influence of the caste-Hindu Assamese-led civil society organisations.

सार

इस शोध से पता चलता है कि असम का व्यावसायिक यात्रा थिएटर, जो भ्राम्यमन थिएटर के रूप में सुप्रसिद्ध है, बीसवीं शताब्दी के अंतिम दो दशकों में असमिया पहचान के प्रश्न के साथ से जुड़ा है। यद्यपि, उन्नीसवीं शताब्दी के मध्य में असम में एक पहचान चेतना का उदय दिखाई देता है, लेकिन बांग्लादेश (1979-1985) से "अवैध" आत्रजन के खिलाफ असम आंदोलन की शुरुआत और वर्ष 1979 में उग्रवादी समूह यूनाइटेड लिबरेशन फ्रंट ऑफ असम (उल्फा) के गठन के साथ पहचान के मुद्दे ने हिंसक मोड़ ले लिया। भ्राम्यमन थियेटर पर मेरा अध्ययन सामाजिक और राजनीतिक विक्षोभ की इस पृष्ठभूमि के प्रतिकूल है।

भ्राम्यमन थियेटर न केवल एक व्यावसायिक उद्यम है, बल्कि एक महत्वपूर्ण सांस्कृतिक संस्थान भी है। लाभ के उद्देश्य से निर्देशित होने के बावजूद, थिएटर समूह स्वयं को असमिया भाषा और संस्कृति को प्रोत्साहन देने के लिए एक सांस्कृतिक एजेंडे से प्रेरित होने का दावा करते हैं। घुमंतू प्रकृति के होने के कारण, भ्राम्यमन थिएटर की पहुंच दूरस्थ गाँव तक भी है और इसलिए, यह लोकप्रिय कल्पना को साकार करने में सक्षम है। हालाँकि, भ्राम्यमन थिएटर का प्रभाव हिंदू-जाति, ब्रह्मपुत्र घाटी के असमिया भाषी आबादी के वर्चस्व वाले इलाकों तक ही सीमित है। कुछ चुनिंदा नाटकों के विश्लेषणात्मक अध्ययन से स्पष्ट होता है कि भ्राम्यमन थियेटर किस तरह असमिया हिन्दुओं के नेतृत्व वाले नागरिक सामाजिक संगठनों जैसे ऑल असम स्टूडेंट्स यूनियन (AASU) और असम साहित्य सभा के विषम प्रवचनों को स्थायित्व प्रदान करने में संलग्न है। भ्राम्यमन थियेटर समूहों ने असम के विभिन्न सामाजिक-सांस्कृतिक और राजनीतिक प्रतीकों पर आधारित नाटकों का मंचन किया है, और अनुप्रतीतात्मक विभूतियों को उपनिवेशवाद के आख्यानो में इस तरह से प्रयोग किया है कि वे एक विशिष्ट "कल्पना समुदाय" की स्थापना में महत्वपूर्ण भूमिका निभाते हैं। भ्राम्यमन थिएटर की नाटकीय प्रस्तुतियां

और भव्य अभिनय का उपयोग सुविधाजनक वैचारिक साधनों के रूप में किया जाता है जो असमिया पहचान के प्रश्न पर प्रमुख राजनीतिक संभाषणों का पूरक है। यद्यपि भ्राम्यमन थियेटर इस अभिप्राय में लोकलुभावन रंगमंच है कि नाटकों की प्रस्तुतियां व्यावसायिक उपभोग के लिए की जाती हैं, लेकिन यात्रा रंगमंच के इस रूप को मात्र व्यावसायिक विचारों द्वारा परिभाषित नहीं किया जा सकता है।

कुछ भ्राम्यमन नाटककारों/निर्देशकों ने अपने नाटकों में पहचान के प्रश्न में शंका उत्पन्न करने के लिए विपक्षी संभाषणों को शामिल किया है, लेकिन सभी क्रांतिकारी प्रयास व्यावसायिक विचारों की प्रबलता के कारण एक सीमित दायरे में बंध जाते हैं। हालांकि, गैर-वाणिज्यिक प्रकृति रंगमंच की क्रांतिकारिता का द्योतक नहीं है। लाभ के उद्देश्य से निर्देशित नहीं होने के बावजूद, असम में शौकिया रंगमंच भी असमिया हिंदू जाति के नेतृत्व वाले नागरिक समाजिक संगठनों के प्रभाव से प्रतिरक्षित नहीं है।

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