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## **A Study on Economic Significance of Moving Theatre of Assam**

**Dr. Suchitra Das**, Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Karimganj College, Sribhumi, Assam, India

**Dr. Ritumani Haloi**, Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Karimganj College, Sribhumi, Assam, India

**Mr. Gadapani Sarma**, Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Karimganj College, Sribhumi, Assam, India

**Ms. Hema Hazarika**, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Karimganj College, Sribhumi, Assam, India

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### **Abstract**

The Moving Theatre of Assam, also known as "Bhramyamaan Natak" or " Travelling Theatre", is a unique and traditional form of theater that has been an integral part of Assamese culture. This concept of this 'Moving Theatre' was initiated by Achyut Lahkar in Pathsala (Bajali District) of Assam. He founded the 'Natraj Theatre' with his brother Sada Lahkar in 1963. This form of theater is characterized by traveling troupes of actors, musicians, and technicians who perform plays and other forms of entertainment in various towns and villages across Assam, which reflects the social and cultural life, historical phenomenon of the region and across. Though this theatre is engaged in uplifting socio-cultural happenings but it also has a deep economic significance in the economy of Assam, specifically to employment and revenue generation. At present more than 50 theatre groups are actively performing in Assam where not less than hundreds of families in each group are depended for their livelihood. Using secondary data sources and necessary statistical tools we will try to analyse the economic significance of these moving theatres of Assam.

**Keywords:** Moving Theatre, Socio-Economic- Cultural, Employment Generation, Livelihood

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### **Introduction:**

The state of Assam, with its rich tapestry of culture, language, and tradition, has nurtured various forms of art. Among them, Bhramyaman Theatre stands out for its wide popularity and grassroots impact. More than a source of entertainment, it serves as a livelihood for thousands and stimulates local economies wherever it goes. This paper examines the economic contributions of moving theatres in Assam, exploring both direct and indirect benefits.

The state of Assam, nestled in the northeast corner of India, is a melting pot of diverse ethnicities, languages, and cultural practices. Among its vibrant cultural expressions, theatre holds a special place as a medium of storytelling, social commentary, and artistic innovation. Over the decades, the people of Assam have nurtured several forms of theatre – from traditional folk dramas like *Ankiya Naat* to modern proscenium theatre. However, one of the most dynamic and economically impactful formats to emerge in the latter half of the 20th century is the *Bhramyaman Theatre*, or moving theatre.

Bhramyaman Theatre refers to mobile theatre troupes that tour towns and villages across Assam during the theatre season, typically from August to March. These troupes travel with their own crew, performers, equipment, and large makeshift tents that serve as temporary auditoriums, capable of seating up to 2,000 spectators. Unlike stationary theatre companies, these groups bring drama directly to the people, especially in rural and semi-urban areas where cultural infrastructure is often limited.

This format emerged in the late 1960s, with early pioneers like Nataraj Theatre and Kohinoor Theatre paving the way for what would become a full-fledged cultural industry. With its roots in both entertainment and social engagement, moving theatre quickly gained traction across Assam. Over time, it evolved not only as a popular art form but also as a powerful economic engine that sustains a wide ecosystem of artists, technicians, support staff, and local businesses.

Despite its popularity and cultural relevance, the economic significance of Bhramyaman Theatre has received relatively little academic attention. Most analyses tend to focus on its artistic merit or its social messages. However, the economic dimension is equally compelling. Each season, dozens of troupe's tours across the state, generating substantial revenue through ticket sales, creating seasonal employment for hundreds, and stimulating local economies wherever they perform.

In this context, the present paper aims to investigate the economic impact of moving theatre in Assam. It seeks to explore how this unique cultural industry supports livelihoods, boosts rural economies, interacts with other sectors, and adapts to changing audience preferences in the digital age. By highlighting the economic underpinnings of a cultural institution, this study hopes to contribute to a more holistic understanding of how traditional art forms can sustain and enrich regional economies.

### **History and Evolution of Moving Theatre in Assam:**

The history of moving theatre in Assam, known locally as *Bhramyaman Theatre*, is a fascinating story of cultural innovation, grassroots engagement, and artistic resilience. It emerged out of a need to decentralize access to theatre and provide quality entertainment to people living beyond the urban centers, particularly in the remote towns and villages of Assam.

#### **The Birth of a Cultural Movement (Late 1960s):**

The seeds of moving theatre were sown in the late 1960s, a period marked by political unrest, socio-economic changes, and a growing appetite for accessible entertainment among the masses. At that time, theatre in Assam was largely confined to urban proscenium stages and seasonal festivals. There was a distinct cultural gap between rural audiences and mainstream theatre performances.

This gap inspired pioneers like Achyut Lahkar, regarded as the father of Bhramyaman Theatre, to experiment with a mobile format that could bring drama directly to the people. Lahkar established the Nataraj Theatre in 1963, which is widely considered the first organized mobile theatre troupe in Assam. Shortly after, troupes like Kohinoor Theatre, Rajtilak Theatre, and Abahan Theatre followed suit.

These early ventures were modest in scale but rich in vision. They combined folk elements with modern theatre techniques, presenting plays that reflected the hopes, fears, and realities of the common people. Importantly, these troupes were self-contained units—equipped with their own tents, stages, lighting systems, and transport—which allowed them to set up shows in any open space.

### **Growth and Popularization (1980s–1990s):**

The 1980s and 1990s were a golden era for moving theatre in Assam. As rural literacy improved and audiences became more engaged with storytelling forms beyond cinema and folk traditions, the appeal of mobile theatre skyrocketed. Troupes began to expand their scale and professionalism. During this time, moving theatre performances became grander in scale—both in terms of stagecraft and content.

Several innovations took place in this period:

- Use of elaborate lighting and sound systems, enhancing the production value.
- Incorporation of mythological, historical, and contemporary themes, allowing a mix of tradition and modernity.
- Introduction of film and TV actors into the theatre space, which drew massive crowds.
- Experiments with special effects and rotating stages, making the format even more engaging.

These developments contributed to the rapid spread of mobile theatre culture throughout Assam. Audiences from both rural and semi-urban areas flocked to the performances, often turning theatre nights into festive, community-wide events. For many, it was not just about watching a play—it was about experiencing a rare moment of collective joy and social interaction.

### **Format and Operational Model:**

The unique format of Bhramyaman Theatre sets it apart from traditional theatre groups. These are fully mobile units that tour for 6 to 8 months a year, covering up to 100 destinations during a season. The troupes travel in large convoys—comprising trucks, buses, and trailers—that carry everything from stage equipment and lighting to tents, props, costumes, and sleeping quarters.

Key features of the format include:

- **Temporary Infrastructure:** Large tents capable of seating 1,000 to 2,000 people are erected at each location, often within a day.
- **Self-sufficiency:** Most troupes have their own technical staff, cooks, electricians, and mechanics, making them independent of local resources.
- **Seasonal Planning:** The theatre season typically begins in August or September and continues till March or April, avoiding the monsoon months.
- **Script Rotation:** Each troupe prepares 2–4 new plays every season, rotating them based on audience preferences at different locations.

This model allows theatre to reach places where permanent theatres do not exist, making it one of the most inclusive cultural formats in the state. Moreover, the mobile nature of these troupes ensures that they are constantly in touch with diverse audiences, allowing for rapid feedback and adaptation of content.

### **Direct Economic Contributions:**

The Bhramyaman Theatre industry in Assam is a vital driver of economic activity, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where employment opportunities in the formal sector may be limited. While its primary identity is artistic, the economic functions of mobile theatre are wide-ranging and deeply embedded in local economies. This section highlights the key direct economic contributions made by the moving theatre industry in Assam.

#### **Employment Generation**

One of the most significant contributions of moving theatre is its role as a seasonal employment generator. Each troupe operates as a fully self-sufficient unit, requiring a variety of skilled and semi-skilled personnel to ensure smooth operations throughout the touring season. From table 1 we can see that on average, each troupe employs between 80 to 150 individuals. These include:

**Performers:** Lead actors, supporting cast, dancers, and singers.

**Technical Crew:** Sound and light technicians, set designers, and special effects experts.

**Logistics and Support Staff:** Stage hands, drivers, cooks, cleaners, and security personnel.

**Marketing and Administration:** Ticket sellers, local agents, PR personnel, and financial managers.

In this type of theatre although the employment is primarily seasonal (6–8 months per year), it offers a stable and often repeatable source of income for many workers. In regions with limited industrial or service sector jobs, mobile theatre provides a dependable livelihood. Many workers gain hands-on experience in live event management, stagecraft, and performing arts. Some technicians and actors have built long-term careers solely through this platform, later transitioning into film, television, or urban theatre. While traditionally male-dominated, recent years have seen an increase in female actors and backstage crew, contributing to gender inclusivity within the cultural workforce. In essence, Bhramyaman Theatre acts as a decentralized micro-industry, promoting local employment and skill-building in areas where formal opportunities may not be easily accessible.

Moving theatre in Assam also plays a major role in creating lucrative earning opportunities for artists, especially during the off-season in other entertainment sectors. Leading troupes often hire well-known film and television actors on seasonal contracts. These contracts can range from ₹5 lakh to ₹20 lakh per season, depending on the actor's popularity and the troupe's budget. For many artists, this income rivals or even exceeds what they earn from film or television projects. For up-and-coming actors, moving theatre serves as a launchpad. The exposure to live audiences and the intense touring schedule help actors hone their craft and gain recognition across the state.

**Diversity of Roles:** Artists often perform in multiple genres and roles—from mythological characters to contemporary social figures—expanding their artistic repertoire and marketability. Composers, lyricists, costume designers, makeup artists, and choreographers also benefit from these seasonal productions, often taking up parallel assignments in music albums or films.

Thus, the economic impact on artists extends beyond salaries – enhancing visibility, skillsets, and career prospects in the broader entertainment ecosystem.

**Revenue from Ticket Sales**

Ticket sales constitute the primary source of income as shown in table 2 for moving theatre troupes, and they generate substantial seasonal revenue, especially when compared to conventional theatre formats in India.

- **Audience Attendance:** Each show typically attracts between 800 and 2,000 spectators, depending on the popularity of the play, the troupe’s reputation, and the location.
- **Ticket Pricing:** Prices usually range between ₹100 and ₹300, with premium seats sometimes going as high as ₹500 in popular shows. Many troupes adopt tiered pricing to cater to a wider demographic, ensuring affordability for rural audiences.
- **Daily Revenue Potential:** On average, a well-attended show can earn ₹1-3 lakh per night in ticket sales.
- **Seasonal Earnings:** Over a full season of 6-8 months, a successful troupe may perform 150-200 shows, leading to estimated revenues ranging from ₹1 crore to ₹2 crore or more.
- **Pre-Booking & Sponsorships:** In some locations, advance bookings and local sponsorships from small businesses add to the revenue. Popular troupes are sometimes invited by local committees or clubs to perform during regional festivals or public events.

The consistent audience turnout, combined with relatively low overhead costs (compared to film production), makes moving theatre a profitable cultural enterprise with strong grassroots support and from table 2 we can find that on an average the income generation of a theatre ranges from ₹3.5 - 4.2 crore.

Heads	Economic Contribution
<b>Employment</b>	80-150 people per troupe per season
<b>Employment Type</b>	Seasonal (6-8 months), skilled & semi-skilled
<b>Artist Contracts</b>	₹5-20 lakh per actor (lead roles), ₹1-5 lakh for support staff
<b>Daily Attendance</b>	800-2,000 spectators per show
<b>Ticket Price Range</b>	₹100-₹300 (sometimes ₹500 for VIP seats)
<b>Daily Revenue</b>	₹1,00,000 to ₹3,00,000 per show
<b>Seasonal Revenue</b>	₹1 crore to ₹2+ crore per troupe
<b>Total Troupes (est.)</b>	35-40 active troupes across Assam
<b>Local Spending</b>	Tent rentals, electricity, water, food, logistics, hiring local services

Areas	Estimated Income (INR)
Ticket Sales	₹3 – 3.6 crore
Local Sponsorship & Ads	₹20 – 30 lakh
Food/Merchandise Concessions	₹5 – 10 lakh
Digital Rights & Recordings	₹2 – 5 lakh
Govt. Grants/Subsidies	₹1 – 5 lakh
Special Shows	₹2 – 10 lakh
<b>Total</b>	<b>₹3.5 – 4.2 crore</b>

### **Indirect Economic Benefits of Moving Theatre in Assam:**

The economic footprint of Assam's Bhramyaman Theatre extends well beyond the operational revenues of the troupes themselves. As a dynamic cultural enterprise that physically moves across the state, the mobile theatre acts as a **stimulus for local economies**, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions. This section examines the indirect economic benefits, focusing on how this unique form of entertainment revitalizes small businesses, generates temporary employment, and contributes to the broader cultural economy of Assam.

#### **Local Business Boost:**

One of the most visible economic impacts of Bhramyaman Theatre is the temporary surge in economic activity that it generates in the locations it visits. Local food vendors, refreshment stalls, and souvenir sellers benefit directly from increased foot traffic. On performance nights, vendors report a two- to three-fold increase in sales, particularly in areas where entertainment options are limited (Baruah, 2021).

Restaurants, tea stalls, and small eateries (locally known as *dhabas*) near the venue experience higher demand before and after shows. In addition, public transport operators, including auto-rickshaws, shared taxis, and cycle rickshaws, observe increased ridership as spectators travel to and from performance locations. The short-term demand for services and goods translates into higher earnings for local business owners, enhancing community-level economic resilience.

#### **Rentals and Local Services:**

Troupes typically rent open grounds, school fields, or community spaces to set up their performance infrastructure. These rentals provide direct financial benefits to landowners, municipal bodies, or school committees. Rental rates vary by location and venue size, with payments ranging between ₹10,000 and ₹50,000 per stint.

In addition to land use, troupes hire local electricians, plumbers, and water suppliers for essential services such as lighting, power connections, and sanitation. These transactions inject liquidity into the informal service economy.

Moreover, local labor is often engaged for erecting tents, constructing temporary seating, handling logistics, and providing security. Workers are usually hired on a daily wage basis, with pay ranging from ₹500 to ₹800 per day. These opportunities are significant in regions where seasonal unemployment is prevalent, especially during the agricultural off-season.

### **Contribution to the Cultural Economy:**

The mobile theatre also plays a pivotal role in enriching Assam's cultural economy. Each new season brings a demand for original content, creating opportunities for regional playwrights, lyricists, and composers. These artists often derive their stories from local folklore, historical events, or contemporary social issues, thus nurturing Assamese literature and oral traditions.

Furthermore, the inclusion of indigenous music and dance forms – such as *Bihu*, *Ojapali*, and *Ankiya Naat* – within theatrical productions helps in reviving and recontextualizing traditional art forms. Costume designers, folk musicians, and set artists are frequently sourced locally, contributing to the monetization of artistic skillsets that otherwise remain underutilized.

This content production cycle ensures that local creative workers remain engaged throughout the theatre season. It also leads to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage by adapting traditional performance styles to modern narratives (Deka, 2020).

### **Economic Multiplier Effect:**

The cumulative effect of these interactions results in a substantial, though often underreported, economic multiplier effect. For every rupee spent directly on theatre operations, several more circulate through the local economy via spending on food, lodging, transport, and services. In towns that host multiple shows over a week, the theatre's presence can contribute upwards of ₹5–10 lakh to the local economy (Assam Cultural Affairs Department Report, 2022)

### **Government Role:**

The Bhramyaman Theatre industry, though privately managed and rooted in grassroots cultural entrepreneurship, operates within a socio-political ecosystem where government involvement can significantly enhance its sustainability and growth. Despite being a vital cultural asset and economic driver in Assam, the mobile theatre sector has historically received limited institutional support. This section evaluates the current governmental engagement with the industry and outlines policy recommendations aimed at strengthening this cultural economy. At present, the Government of Assam, primarily through its Department of Cultural Affairs, engages with the mobile theatre sector on an ad hoc basis. Occasional grants, cultural awards, and logistical assistance are extended to theatre groups, particularly for:

- Commemorative productions,
- Participation in state festivals,
- Showcasing Assamese culture in national or international events.

Some troupes also benefit from access to government-owned performance grounds, although these allocations are not formalized or uniformly distributed.

Additionally, organizations such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Ministry of Culture (Government of India) provide funding for the preservation of traditional art forms, under which some mobile theatre projects qualify. However, the lack of a dedicated policy framework means that most support is inconsistent, inaccessible to smaller troupes, or heavily reliant on individual bureaucratic facilitation (Gogoi, 2021).

### **Challenges in the Existing Framework**

Several challenges persist in the integration of mobile theatre into formal cultural policy, including:

- **Absence of Regulatory Recognition:** Mobile theatre companies are not classified under a distinct category for cultural industries, which limits their access to institutional finance, insurance, and legal protection.
- **Lack of Infrastructure Support:** Despite being a seasonal industry, mobile theatre lacks designated performance zones, subsidized equipment, or storage infrastructure.
- **Unequal Access to Subsidies:** Larger troupes with political or media connections often monopolize access to grants, leaving smaller or rural troupes under-resourced.
- **No Skill Development or Capacity Building:** Actors, technicians, and support staff operate with limited formal training. The absence of a structured curriculum or workshop series restricts professional development.

These systemic gaps underscore the need for comprehensive policy intervention to ensure the viability of Bhramyaman Theatre as both a cultural and economic institution.

### **Suggestions and Policy Recommendations:**

To address the limitations and unlock the full economic and cultural potential of Assam's mobile theatre, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- The state government should formally recognize Bhramyaman Theatre under the "Cultural and Creative Industries" sector.
- Establish a licensing or registration system to enable better policy delivery and regulation.
- Provide legal backing for copyright protections, performer rights, and insurance schemes tailored to the industry.
- Develop state-owned portable infrastructure banks—sound systems, lighting rigs, stage components—that can be rented at subsidized rates.
- Allocate dedicated land parcels in major towns for seasonal use by touring theatre troupes, with water, electricity, and sanitation facilities in place.
- Offer transportation subsidies to reduce logistical expenses for remote tours.
- Expand access to low-interest cultural entrepreneurship loans through state banks and microfinance institutions.
- Institute annual grants based on transparent metrics such as show count, audience reach, and employment generated.
- Provide tax exemptions on inputs like costumes, musical instruments, and construction materials for stage setups.
- Launch a Mobile Theatre Training Program under the Assam Skill Development Mission (ASDM), focusing on:
  - Acting
  - Set design
  - Sound and light engineering
  - Scriptwriting and direction
- Collaborate with universities and performing arts institutes for certified short-term courses and workshops.

- Create an official digital archive of performances, scripts, and oral histories to preserve the legacy of Bhramyaman Theatre.
- Encourage troupes to explore digital distribution platforms (e.g., Doordarshan, OTTs) through financial and technical support.
- Promote cross-border cultural exchange with other regions and countries, showcasing Assamese theatre at global festivals.
- A multi-stakeholder governance framework is essential for policy success.

### **Conclusion:**

The Bhramyaman Theatre of Assam represents far more than a mobile form of entertainment. It is a living cultural institution that travels across the state, weaving together narratives of tradition, innovation, and local identity. Embedded deeply in Assam's socio-cultural fabric, it has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to blend artistic expression with economic dynamism, reaching audiences across rural and semi-urban geographies that remain underserved by mainstream cultural industries.

Throughout this study, it has been demonstrated that the moving theatre industry contributes significantly to the state's economy – not just through direct revenue via ticket sales and employment generation, but also through its robust indirect impact on local businesses, microenterprises, and the cultural economy at large. From providing short-term employment to rural artisans and vendors to supporting local writers, musicians, and technicians, the mobile theatre system fosters distributed economic participation while preserving and reinterpreting the cultural heritage of Assam.

Despite its potential, however, the sector continues to operate in a precarious policy vacuum. Existing support mechanisms are fragmented, often reactive rather than proactive, and insufficiently aligned with the real operational needs of theatre troupes. The lack of formal recognition, access to finance, training infrastructure, and digital modernization poses serious constraints on the long-term viability of this culturally and economically significant industry.

To transform Bhramyaman Theatre into a sustainable cultural enterprise, what is needed is a strategic, multi-tiered policy framework that recognizes the unique operational model of mobile theatre while supporting its evolution in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. This involves not only financial and infrastructural investment but also capacity building, digital integration, and legal safeguards for content and performers.

Moreover, the theatre's touring model – bringing culture to the people rather than waiting for people to come to culture – offers a replicable blueprint for decentralized cultural entrepreneurship across other regions in India. In an era where rural depopulation and urban migration are pressing concerns, Bhramyaman Theatre proves that cultural industries can thrive outside urban centers, and even serve as engines of community resilience, identity preservation, and economic development.

With collaborative governance, meaningful public investment, and community engagement, the Bhramyaman Theatre industry has the potential not just to survive – but to thrive – as a national model for inclusive, grassroots cultural economies. Investing in its future is not merely a matter of preserving tradition; it is a step toward crafting a more equitable, creative, and economically vibrant rural India.

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