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 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.