



Report

Project Title:

Under the Sal Tree:2011(Performing Identity)

Based on our learning, we are not going with the 'Festival' format of the Under the Sal Tree. We want to focus on the process oriented work where young directors in Assam will be facilitated their creative work. We believe such kind of work will enable young directors to give expression to their voices. However, we will continue focusing on one theme in this format also. This year we have decided to focus on the theme of 'Parichaya/Aatma-parichaya': 'identity'. As we have articulated in the beginning, Assam has been going through different phases these days. These are political as well as cultural phases. Then, the question all of us face is Who are we? Recently, Who are they? How tradition and society suppress them? Day by day, traditional hierarchies are getting stronger though in different forms and newer hierarchies are emerging. How do we, as artist, respond to these changes? What will be role of traditional artistic forms in these changes? How do we associate ourselves (in contemporary times) with our 'own' forms/ our own folklores? How do we have to re-invent new discourses of relationships between parichay/aatma-parichaya and our artistic forms in Assam today? If yes, what will be our methodology?

These are some of the questions we are planning focus on for Under the Sal Tree 2011. We are sure some more questions/concerns will come as we go ahead. As said above, it will not be the festival oriented work but the four months' process oriented work culminating in four performances. Here, performance is only objective. But, as we have been focusing on through our works, we want to get into the process of theatre making through this work. We thought for such work, the multi-stage programming would be needed to concretize the new format for

1. Network Building: Badunduppa has already developed its network. This project will strengthen it.
2. Developing Audience Culture/Decentralising the process: Important aspect of the Under the Sal Tree 2011 is that building viewers. Building performing community. Touring of four shows to their places is wonderful. Many times, some festival authorities give funding. They do a performance in Guwahati. Another performance will happen in Delhi. Over! Jaha naatak kiya hai waha jaayega. Performances will go those places. See, there will be four festivals in a row in Assam! Later, these performances will also be performed on their own.

3. Transferring information from one place to other: One more interesting thing in this project is that it will transform information/creative process from one place to another.

To look at ourselves: One of the important achievements will be, we hope, that it will give us an opportunity to look at each other. Critically. To present contemporary rhythms of life in Assam

I have already mentioned about the socio-political and economic disturbance of Assam. Assam is a multi-ethnic state where people were laced with their own individual culture and lifestyle. Amidst this diversity, there was some peculiar commonality that gave us the identity of being an Assamese. However in these times of political disturbance, imported education and imported culture has created an environment of ethnic mistrust. Finding oneself in this incoherence has become a tough job. Obviously present theatre directors are clueless and in the name of modernity they are just painting themselves with imported hues. As a result they lost the track of the characteristics of our national character or the core values(inner rhythm) that we are made up of.

Amidst such an environment, in our directors' meet, we first tried to know about our directors' experience and their learning from life. During those discussions we become aware of the fact that all of them were concerned with their social obligation without any notion of our cultural foundation or identity. Obviously the level and direction of so-called obligation was not defined.

Therefore before deciding on the theme, we talked with all the directors. We talked about various problems of Assam, our tradition, view about life, expectations, disappointments etc. We talked about how some political opportunist has destroyed the foundation of our society and created an environment of ethnic mistrusts. Thus the first aim of the performing identity project was to make everybody aware of their own identity and express that through theatre. Through this, we wanted to rediscover the interrelations and bonds between various tribes of Assam and promote these values. We want to create a

culturally developed grate nation by understanding each other's uniqueness rather than fragmented by our differences.

Finally to decide on a theme, we explain them about economy and depth of an idea. We also talked about various technical aspects of stage arrangement like stage decor, props, presentation, role of audience etc. After these we asked the directors to decide on their own theme. Again we all took part in the dissection of those ideas regarding their merits, weakness etc. Then the directors were allowed to work with Badungduppa artist to improvise on those ideas. Of course at this level they were influenced by the style and forms of Badungduppa. However we constantly remind them not to be influence by any form, rather than they are to find their own.

All the dramatists worked with the facilitator of Badungduppa for one month. After that, they returned to their own field of work based upon the experience of Badungduppa. Four dramatists hired four Badungduppa artists for their lack of professional actors. They gave training of physical exercise and movement of physique, suitable for performative drama. Here is a brief narrative of how the four dramatists constructed their theatre camp below-

Sarsa- Mr. Ashim Nath ,hailed from Chipajhar , an abode of ongkiya bhaona [a single act play written by the Vaisnava Saints] and the traditional choral songs of Assam[Ojhapaali], took the house of Mr. Hirokijyoti Nath for establishing his theatre camp. His uncluttered bamboo backyard was used as the space for rehearsal. Besides a stage and a gallery was made there. A rigorous labor was done for the said construction. From 4.30 o'clock in the morning, training was given for the proper building of physique and voice for theatre along with "the how to improvise theatre ".

Macbeth Drama- Mr. Pankaj, the since then resident of Dhemaji Town, a haven of the Missing Tribes, builds his theatre camp far away from his rented rural house to a jungle . A winding snaky narrow road through the forest leads itself to the stage of Pankaj. The theatre workshop lasted for a full day amidst the huge and large trunk of trees and wide open field.

Mr. Diganta Hazarika is hailed from a small village namely Garakhiya Dol Gaon, 7 km. away from Jorhat, renown for the traditional "bhaona" culture. Due to lack of sufficient space for rehearsal, he takes a house in rent at Jorhat Town. Besides, he has already built

up an open theatre stage in his village also, painted by the lush bamboo trees with the wide open field platform.

Asspriba- Mr. Dibru Mahanta, a young and energetic dramatist from Upper Assam, Sonajan Dirak area, has converted his residence itself into a theatre camp. He constructs his stage amidst bamboo trees for a one and half month training.

The Totalitarian politics breathing in the democratic sphere of our country is the major blame for the upheaval of all the conflicts. To sustain the so called political power, the centre is always embarking pressure upon the State Govt. and the State Govt. upon the innocent public. It's a long continuity of Assam since the Nation's independence. History of Assam is the abusement of power and of money in the political individual's pockets. Some modern educated youths of small ethnics are seen to engage themselves for the upliftment of their own tribes and their own ethnic culture. These youths have been used by the political power as political agents. Rather, it would be appropriate to address the issue like that they let themselves be used as such for some vainglorious gains of political power. The sacrifice of the greater interest for the individual gain by these youths leads to a scenario of conflict of different tribes. Meanwhile, the political power beholders also strip themselves to the Millioner's pockets. It's the raaj of some particular political miscreant's loot in the name of the development of nation. The contemporary burning example is the " Issue of Embankment ". The Anti-daam Andolan continues still and till now the public have not got any resolution. Hence, there rises the conflict of different tribes and prejudices. In this context, the importance of sound and healthy understanding and communication of ideas and culture among different ethnics immensely rises. All these issues were the main concern regarding our selection of theme till its full-fledged production. How the aesthetics of beauty can be brought out in creative performance was primarily focused and experimented during the rehearsed period. Every play reflects upon of what was our society, of what it becomes in the tide of time and of what it will be in the future.

Black Episode Continue:

A play, directed by Mr. Ashim Kr. Nath, is symbolical. The British left India and India got independence. The Black came to the throne in the place of the Whites. But, the political exploitation and loot have never been withered away. What changes is just the representative of the power. But, the represented are still abused alike. All the revolution seeking changes, transformation are submerged in the dust and Assam, our motherland's tears still ceaselessly flowing out.

Ruddhwa Prabahini:

Mising, a community whose life is centered round river, can't think of living without the river. One day, the king has ordered to construct an embankment upon the river for his personal gain. The voice against his will has been suppressed by power. The embankment has been built with a success. But, one day the river swelled, turned into a monster and washed away the kingly abode by its tide of flood. The play is allegorical reflecting upon the contemporary the state Govt. undertaken Big Dam Project and the imposing threat to the survival of the endangered Mising Tribes.

Xonor Sokhola:

The play is based upon the plot of a family of a woman with her three children. One day they recovered in their palms of hands the hidden secret book, kept out of their reach by their mother. They thereafter read the book and discovered that a different world lies on the other side of their usually sighted hills. The people who reached the world become immortal and a man of merchandise and rich. After the revelation, they strived against all odds and reached the hill. But, they were bemused of the sky reaching height of the hill and fainted into a giving up attitude. Soon, they discovered one ladder of gold and they got to know the harsh reality that only one of them can only climb up the ladder and achieve immortality. The thirst for immortality consumes their soul and they begin to fight against each other in a haste. At last, two brothers jumped out of their life when they got the realization in the last façade of their life while the other one fainted being a witness of the death incidence. This is the allegorical play of Mr. Diganta Hazarika. He endeavored to show through the allegory how some devoted social worker and revolutionist lose their human values falling under the clutch of some power greedy personalities.

Xondhan:

The tale of a tyrant and how a common people, the masses finally resist his whims and overthrows the rule. The strong mother figure and the two sons are driving force in the performance. Displaying the Moran culture, this was initiated by Sri Sri Aniruddhadev of the Shankardev order. As the community is localised in the northeast part of Assam, their culture is not well represented. In fact, this is for the first time most of the members of their team visited other parts of Assam.

The performance is stylized with Moran Bihu songs and movements. The pace in the final section of the play captivates the audience. This group was the weakest in the beginning and gradually gained confidence in performance. This group shows a lot of possibility

Until 2010, the performances of "Under the Sal Tree" were confined to Badungduppa Kalakendra only. We know that our this new experiment was widely accepted by the people (audience) around Badungduppa Kalakendra and limited enthusiast who came all the way to Badungduppa, from other places, to witness the festival. However we always felt that our this new performing identity, such as unique stagecraft, daylight performance without any artificial sound or lighting arrangement etc. are should be taken to the other people also. With that idea in mind, this year for the first time, "Under the Sal Tree-2011" was also performed in the native places of the participating directors.

We started "Under the Sal Tree -2011" with a four month long brainstorming session, where all the directors came to stay in Badungduppa Kalakendra and interacted with each other. After that directors went to their respective places and worked on their individual productions. All of them, along with their team of artists, met again in Badugduppa on 16/12/2011, fine tuned their production here for four days and we had the festival on 20 and 21 December/2011. The festival was inaugurated by the honorable Vice-President of IFA Mrs. Arundhuti Ghosh.

The widespread appreciation of people gave the artists confidence for the next stage of the fistivel. On 22nd December/2011, whole group went to Mongoldoi, a place in Darrang district of Assam, at a distance of about 200 km from Badungduppa Kalakendra. There the performance space was amidst a bamboo groove. On 23/12/2011 we performed all together four plays, two in the morning and two in the afternoon. The audiences were enthralled by

the uniqueness of the experience. For them everything such as performance space, theme, style etc. was new. Their appreciation gave us confidence.

Same evening we moved to Dhemaji district of Assam, a place about 300 km from Mongoldoi. We performed on 24/12/2011. Our performance space there was located in a small forest skirted by paddy field. The presence of unimaginably large number of audience and their applause almost created problem in performance.

That very evening we moved to Jorhat district of Assam, a place about 300 km from Dhemaji. We performed our plays on 25/12/2011. The performance space was a grazing field. We were revitalized by the audiences' enthusiasm.

After the show we moved to Dirak Sonajan village of Tinsukia district of Assam, a place about 250 km from Jorhat. The performance was on 26/12/2011. The performance space was the courtyard of an old Namghar in the middle of the village. We were aptly rewarded by people's satisfaction.

Assam is multi ethnic, multi lingual state. Each of the directors was a representative of a different cultural group. Finding unity among this diversity was one of the main objectives of this performing identity project. During the whole exercise, no one felt the constraints of working with people of other cultural background. Rather all of us become conscious about how little we know about the rich and diverse culture of Assam.

During the interaction after each session one thing became clear that in these days of imported culture and political mistrusts, such programme can help us understand our own culture and strengthen the bond between us.

A qualitative and quantitative void has been observed in the field of theatre in the North-eastern India for last few decades. Experts opined that this is a residual effect of colonial era that shadowed the socio-cultural thinking of modern India, which prevented the people to think independently and creatively.

In this regard Badungduppa is trying to break free from western influence from the very beginning. With due regard to the conventional theatre, we are trying to create a fundamentally new form based on our own socio-cultural elements.

All the participating directors of the workshop represent different ethnic group, though all of them are from Assam. During the whole workshop the main issue that was

stretched upon was “unique individual (ethnic) identity” that was created by ethnic migration, assimilation and individuality. All the invited resource persons aimed mainly in developing a viewpoint among the directors so that they can create a “visual treat” on stage with traditional and ethnic hues, avoiding the drill like precisions aimed in conventional theatre.

Co-operation of public:

one thing needs to be mentioned that the whole project under a new performance scheme developed through a long evolution. The project took 3 to 5 months to complete. With the limited fund, keeping the entire artists involved for such a long period was hard. It become more stressful considering the fact that most of the artists are not financially sound. The scope of the Under the Sal Tree -2011 was quite big, in comparison to that the fund allocated was insufficient. It is only the management expertise of the directors and involvement of the local public is what made the project successful. Particularly the financial and physical support of the public is appreciable. But the question is for how long we could depend on public for such support?

Co-operation of Press:

In Badungduppa's theatrical journey the involvement and support of media is quite appreciable. People form print and electronic media always supporting us. During the Under the Sal Tree -2011, the media has whole heartedly supported us from the director's workshop to performance in all the respective sites. A lot of article was published in various local papers. Even some of the national paper also published. The radio unit of Gauhati University has broadcasted two live interview about the project.

Therefore we can assume that the positive role performed by the media helped to take the project near public. Also their interest proved the justification and importance of the project.


Feedback:

1. "Under the Sal tree 2011" could create audience and network in various places of Assam. I feel it is quite an achievement.
2. The project "Under the Sal tree 2011- performing identity" has created an idea of professionalism among the directors and artists associated with it.
3. The main theme of the project was well absorbed by the common people.
4. The fact that an auditorium is not an absolute requirement has become clear to both artists as well as audience.
5. The directors associated with the project have received a new perspective about theater directing.
6. The audience appreciated the use of their own cultural elements in the play which gave a new dimension to the play. This in turn will create a healthy environment in the field of theatre.
7. The audience appreciated this unconventional taste in theatre.
8. Through this project, in this time of political mistrust, people of different culture and identity got an opportunity to live and work together.
9. The support of local people to all four groups is to be noted.

Demerits:

The lack of professionalism in the part of participating directors and artists has created some problem. For example:

1. The actor training, production etc. were less economic than expected.
2. The directors have failed to create their own style and influence of Badungduppa in their productions was quite evident.
3. As some of the actors were new comer, their performance was not up to the mark.
4. The load of four different shows in a day was a beat heavy on audience. Lesser weight such as two play a day would have let them time to digest and ponder on the plays.
5. The artists could not be paid properly due to the lack of fund.
6. It is regrettable that the last four shows could not be arranged due to lack of fund after the festival.


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