

Understanding Theatre: A Study of Actors in Assam

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by
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“UNDERSTANDING THEATRE: A STUDY OF ACTORS IN ASSAM”

submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur
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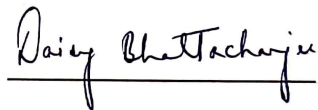
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ABSTRACT

Theatre is a powerful performing art form that serves as both an expression of creativity and a reflection of society. This study explores the professional lives and experiences of theatre actors within the Indian cultural landscape, emphasizing Assam's regional theatre industry. By portraying imaginative or real-life events, theatre actors contribute to the cultural economy and perform immaterial labour that influences social, economic, and environmental development. Theatre's sociological significance lies in its deep-rooted connection to culture, where it has historically functioned as a mirror of societal values, norms, and tensions. It plays a crucial role in identity formation, community-building, and the promotion of social cohesion. As actors embody various characters, theatre becomes a space for audience members to gain insight into diverse perspectives, offering a unique exploration of human consciousness, empathy, and social reality. The collaborative process of theatre highlights the shared experiences and cultural values that define societies, revealing the norms and social structures that shape individual and group interactions.

The research identifies key challenges and phenomena associated with the profession, particularly focusing on three major aspects. First, the study examines the nature of work in theatre, investigating the multifaceted dimensions of theatre acting, including its economic constraints, artistic demands, and structural organization. This analysis includes an exploration of the demands placed on actors who work under precarious employment conditions and rely on intricate collaborations among cast and crew members. Second, the thesis delves into the emotional labour of actors as they develop and sustain emotions to bring roles to life. This process, essential to their craft, requires both personal and professional investment, often resulting in psychological and emotional repercussions. The concept of emotional labour provides a framework to understand how actors manage the affective demands of their work, drawing on their own experiences to create authentic, resonant performances. Third, the study investigates gender dynamics within the theatre industry, highlighting how gendered experiences affect the roles, opportunities, and treatment of actors. Gender not only shapes the allocation of roles but also influences how actors are perceived and valued within the industry, revealing power imbalances that affect career trajectories and access to professional resources.

The study employs a qualitative methodology, gathering data through in-depth interviews and participant observation to gain insights into the personal and professional lives of Assam's theatre actors. Building rapport with participants was a critical step, allowing the researcher to engage openly with the actors, and gaining their trust to facilitate honest, reflective discussions about their experiences. Observations of rehearsals and performances enabled a closer understanding of the actors' craft and their on-stage dynamics, while pre-interview conversations provided an opportunity to clarify the purpose of the study and establish a comfortable environment for dialogue. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and intricacies involved in theatre acting as a profession.

This research contributes to the field by providing a nuanced understanding of the professional landscape of theatre in Assam, a region where cultural heritage and traditional theatre practices play a vital role in society. By examining the unique intersection of work, emotional labour, and gender within the theatre, the study reveals the complex reality of actors' lives and the socio-cultural factors shaping their profession. The findings offer valuable insights for theatre practitioners, cultural policymakers, and scholars interested in understanding the intricate dynamics of the theatre industry in India, contributing to the broader discourse on the socio-cultural significance of performing arts.

Keywords: Theatre, Emotional Labour, Gender Dynamics, Cultural Economy, Assam, Actor

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Theatre is a performing art form that portrays an imagination or a real-life event in front of a live audience using live performers - such as actors, musicians, and dancers - in a specific area preferably a stage. It is a major part of the cultural economy sector that involves immaterial labour and contributes to cultural production. Culture has often been considered as a driver of sustainable development. In the 2010 Millennium Development Goal Summit it was stated that culture can be a powerful driver for development, with community-wide social, economic and environmental impact. India is rich in cultural heritage with its varied traditions preserved through different forms. Theatre is one such art form that reflects our culture through its time and helps people express themselves and teach self-knowledge while being a source of entertainment.

The sociological relevance of theatre is deeply rooted in its rich history and profound connection to the cultural fabric of society. Theatre has always been more than just a form of entertainment; it has served as a mirror reflecting societal values, norms, and conflicts throughout history. This enduring relationship between theatre and society makes it a vital area of study for understanding the complexities of human social life. From ancient rituals to contemporary performances, theatre has provided a space where communities come together to explore and express collective identities, confront social issues, and negotiate meanings. Theatre allows individuals to step into the shoes of others, experiencing different perspectives and emotions in a controlled environment. This immersive experience fosters a deeper understanding of human consciousness and the ways in which individuals make sense of their world. Actors engage in the phenomenological act of embodying a character, bringing to life the subjective experiences of that character in a way that resonates with the audience's own lived experiences. The rules, norms, and conventions that guide social life are often highlighted and sometimes subverted in theatrical performances, offering audiences new perspectives on the social order. In the theatre, the stage becomes a microcosm of society, where social interactions are enacted, observed, and interpreted. Through the collaborative process of creating and performing a play, theatre practitioners engage in the ethnomethodological work of constructing and maintaining a shared reality. The shared

experience creates a powerful space for reflection and meaning-making, where both the performers and the audience can explore the nuances of human existence. The process even reveals the underlying social structures and practices that govern our interactions, making theatre a powerful tool for exploring and understanding the social world. By examining theatre through a sociological lens, it can help understand how it both shapes and is shaped by the cultural, economic, and political forces of its time. This exploration enhances our understanding of social realities while linking individuals and communities to the rich history of theatre, in this case, the Indian theatre where diverse traditions reflect the intricate tapestry of India's cultural heritage. There are several forms of theatre traditions in every part of the country like "Jatra" and "Baul" in Bengal, "Yatra" in Orissa, "Tamasha" in Maharashtra, "Nautanki", "Ramleela" in parts of North India, "Ankiya Naat/Bhaona" in Assam and so on (Konwar, 2016).

1.1.1 Research Problem

The professional landscape of theatre is multifaceted, involving various kinds of work including theatre acting, scriptwriting, direction and production, technical crew, costume designing, and set designing among others. Theatre acting being a vital part of this art form not only entails the development of craft but also significant emotional engagement. Actors must navigate the challenges of artistic livelihoods while also creating and sustaining emotions to bring their roles to life, which can have profound physical and emotional consequences. Additionally, the theatre industry is influenced by gender dynamics that affect how actors experience and approach their work, as well as the opportunities available to them. Understanding these intertwined aspects—professional demands, their livelihoods, role-taking, emotional labour, and gender dynamics—is crucial to gaining a deeper insight into the realities of theatre as a profession, which encapsulates the research problem of this study. This study aims-

- a) to determine the nature of work in theatre and investigate various dimensions involved in theatre acting as a profession,
- b) to interpret how stage actors work to create emotions to inhabit a role and the emotional consequences this work can induce,
- c) to analyse the gender aspect and understand the dynamics of gender within the theatre industry.

1.2 Indian Theatre

Theatre has evolved through several formats throughout the history of time. It has been through various ups and downs but has managed to stand its ground. Indian theatre can be dated back to a time when Bharata Muni wrote books of *Natyashastra*, likely compiled in the 3rd century CE, which paved the way for the Sanskrit theatre and its philosophies, laying out different types of plots and performance traditions. The roots of theatre were established from that time and moved onto theatrical performances being held in the courts of various dynasties, bards, and in the contemporary world where theatre is seen to take different forms.

Indian theatre passed through three different periods: the classical period, the traditional period, and the modern period. The *Natyashastra* and Sanskrit dramas dominated the classical period. Physical components and movement were significantly included in the discourse and performance since plays were based on stories that the audiences were familiar with, such as histories, folk legends, and epics. Traditional refers to recurring patterns of conduct, beliefs, and practices passed down through generations within a society or group. It serves as a cohesive force, linking people through a continuous, inherited culture that shapes collective identity and values (Shils, 1971). In the traditional period, regional dialects and improvisation were introduced in Indian theatre. Rather than having written scripts, the plays were delivered verbally. Traditions and stories were passed down orally throughout this time, and the theatre reflected the same. The traditional period's drama also incorporated narrative recitation and singing. Modern, as we understand it, refers to a historical period or style marked by a change from the traditional forms, emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is characterized by an embrace of new techniques, perspectives, and expressions in response to rapidly changing social, technological, and intellectual landscapes (Harvey, 1990). The modern period of Indian theatre was influenced by Western theatre. With the arrival of the British in India, the proscenium stage entered Indian theatre, leading to a distinction between what was perceived as sophisticated, English, urban, and modern theatre from what was labeled as indigenous, Indian, rural, and traditional performance (Mee in Das, 2014). It also brought commercialisation which turned theatre into a "commodity." Western theatre styles, such as realism and the everyday life of the common man, were introduced to Indian folklore theatre. The evolution of theatre happened over the centuries and presently the

modern instances of theatre through Broadway and musicals exist alongside classical and folk forms and their experimental fusion forms.

1.2.1 Theatre in Assam

The history of theatre in Assam started in the 15th century with the saint Srimanta Sankardeva trying to preach his principles of Neo-Vaishnavism among the masses through the use of Ankiya Naat/Bhaona. It grasped the general masses and ruled the hearts of people by the portrayal of deities and the supernatural in the form of plays that roused religious sentiment and imparted moral wisdom. Over time due to colonialism and foreign influence, new forms of theatre like Jatra of Bengal entered the region which brought several changes and transformations in the theatre tradition of Assam. Eighteen years after Jatra was established in Kolkata, it emerged in Assam in 1875, spreading across various districts. Eventually, under their influence, commercial Assamese Jatra started around 1868-1870. The performances became popular in lower Assam, leading to the establishment of several *natya dals* (drama groups) in Kamrup. Jatra paved the way for the very first kind of modern Assamese theatre, the advent of commercial mobile theatre in Assam (Paul, 2013; Patgiri, 2019).

1.2.1.1 Ankiya Naat/Bhaona

The history of Assamese drama can be traced back to the 15th century when the Vaishnavite saint Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva started a religious movement based on the principles of “Ek-Sarana-Nama-Dharma” i.e. devotion to one God based on the spirit of humanism and equality thereby surpassing all barricades of caste and tribe (Konwar, 2016; Borooah & Begum, 2014). He was a social reformer who propagated his doctrine based on the idea of universal brotherhood to a caste-ridden society and tried to build an egalitarian social order. He did it by integrating theatre, literature, and dance in the process to spread Neo-Vaishnavism among the masses of Assam. He aimed to convey religious messages to the people through the process of entertainment, possibly to reach people with no education. Those plays were termed Ankiya Naat and the performance of it is known as Bhaona. His cherished disciple Mahapurusha Sri Madhavdeva also played a role in enriching the Assamese drama movement by writing several plays which became a source of entertainment for the people of Assam in that period (Mahanta in

Singh and Patgiri, 2018). His religion spread rapidly as it was more people-oriented and liberal in nature and it accepted people from all sections of Assamese society.

Often called the father of Assamese drama and stage, Sankardeva's primary idea was to promote the principles of Neo-Vaishnavism to the masses through Ankiya Naat (Goswami, 2007). He believed that it was better to promote its philosophy through theatre rather than written texts considering most of the Assamese populace were illiterate. The main theme of Ankiya Naat is religious, based on Hindu mythology mainly related to Lord Vishnu and his incarnations of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, and generally performed by devotees (Richmond, 1971; Patgiri, 2019). Bhaona consists of different characters, each assigned a specific role to perform, who enter and exit the stage with music and dance. Firstly, the Sutradhar who is an integral person in Bhaona recites, sings, and narrates the backdrop to the audience. Secondly, the Bhaoriyas are the actors playing different roles in Bhaona. Thirdly, the Gayan is the singer, and the Bayan is the person playing musical instruments like Taal, and Khol during the entire performance. These individuals are often recruited from nearby villages or towns and after rehearsals for long; they perform in the final act (Richmond, 1974; Gayan, 2010; Sentinel Digital Desk, 2023).

Sattras are the type of institutions that hold a special place in Assamese culture and community. Sattras are socio-religious and cultural institutions of Assam, associated with the Vaishnavism's Ekasarana tradition. In Sattras, the principal house is called Naamghars where prayers, dramas, and discussions take place. This prayer house often is divided into two sections- the main hall and the Manikut. Manikut contains the seat or scripture of the saint who is worshipped (Bhattacharya, 1958; Goswami, 2007; Borooah & Begum, 2014). Ankiya Naats were primarily performed in the main hall of the Sattras. Towns like Nagaon, Tezpur, and Dibrugarh became the hub for cultural events in Upper Assam and Pathsala in Lower Assam. Pathsala also became the centre of drama in Assam and is often called Natya Nagari. The two Sattras - Akaya and Bamakhata near Pathsala (in Barpeta district) staged plays inspired by Ankiya Naat (Patgiri, 2019). Bhaona is an old folk theatre dance-drama form of entertainment prevalent in Assam constituting an important part of Assamese culture.

Being a traditional art form of North-East India, it constitutes an important role in Assam Vaishnavism. It contributes to a proper understanding of the culture of people who are the followers of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam by reflecting the faith and practices of the community.

Although Bhaona a dance-drama theatre form began centuries ago, but unlike other theatre forms like Bhramyomaan in Assam or Jatra in Bengal, it has tried to retain and hold on to its basic features and religious themes.

The classification between classical and folk forms of art persisted due to caste, class, and patronage systems. While classical forms transitioned to modernised methods of training, folk traditions continued to rely on inherited practices and remained subject to control by the caste hierarchy. The practices often entail ritualistic elements, closely linked to festivals, seasonal occurrences, or significant life events, and have maintained a consistent form over time (Hansen, 1983). Bhaona, a prominent folk form in Assam, continues to be performed in religious spaces with specific caste regulations and rules governing its practice. These regulations not only dictate who can participate in the performances but also shape the content and themes explored within the art form. This adherence to caste-based rules underscores the deep-rooted social structures that continue to influence folk traditions. However, when Bhaona moves out of the traditional settings, such as into urban areas or onto larger stages, the strict adherence to caste-based rules may diminish or become less relevant. Outside of their original environments, folk forms like Bhaona undergo adaptations to accommodate diverse audiences and to fit into contemporary performance spaces. As a result, the emphasis may shift towards the artistic and cultural significance of the performance rather than the adherence to traditional caste and class hierarchies.

Other than its cultural importance, Bhaona constitutes a part of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement which Srimanta Sankardeva started to create an egalitarian society with secular ideals and free from discrimination based on caste, creed, religion, and tribe. It is not just a form of entertainment, therefore many artists who are recruited from villages to enact roles in performances or become a part of Bhaona, are inclined towards it not for economic purposes but because they feel a cultural bonding and social attachment towards it. Even though he recognised and worked to minimise the distinctions and uplift the backward castes and classes, women who constituted a major part of the population did not get their equal position in terms of representation and participation. Bhaona was only performed by men, with female roles being played by young boys with feminine looks.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Ankiya Naat started to be staged in religious festivals and fairs in Assam. Several playwrights came up at the end of the 18th century and contributed to

the drama scene. They brought several changes to the type of plays created before that time. However, rather than giving in to the popular ideas and effects of globalisation, Ankiya Naat survived the upheavals of modernisation and held on to its religious-cultural ideals. In the present times, Bhaona is reaching out to several platforms outside the state of Assam to different parts of the country and internationally. Sangeet Natak Academy conducts yearly performances of Bhaona in different parts of Assam and nowadays NGOs and other local organisations in cooperation with the Department of Culture, Assam started to organise staging of Bhaona in other states as well. In 2019, Bhaona was staged in Mumbai in the English language to reach the masses unfamiliar with the ethnic language but the theme, musical instruments- khol and taal, compositions, and dramatic feelings of it were kept intact. Bhaona also debuted on a global stage as it headed for Dubai and performed in the English language while retaining its originality, highlighting the rich treasure of Assamese culture globally (Bahn, 2019). Bhaona is a creation of Vaishnavism in Assam and Sankardeva's vision for this religion in the fold of Hinduism was universal and secular. Therefore, popularising it among all communities would help keep up with his idea of universality. Other than Ankiya Naat, there were other folk forms of art in Assam that were already a part of Assamese tradition - Dhuliya, Ojhapali, Putala Naach, Bhari Gaan, etc. (Singh and Patgiri, 2018). But with Ankiya Naat/Bhaona, the dynamic theatre tradition began in Assam.

When the British arrived in Assam, they contributed to changes in the cultural scenario with the entry of Jatra in Assam, which was a folk art form of Bengal (Sarma, 2017). Initially, it acted as an obstacle to the growth of Assamese drama but later contributed to the formation of the Jatra party in Assam around 1868-1870. The beginning of mobile theatre in Assam was influenced by Jatra which led to the start of several drama groups and the first form of modern theatre in the region (Patgiri, 2019; Paul, 2013). The end of the 19th century saw several plays based on social issues along with historical and romantic dramas.

1.2.1.2 Mobile Theatre

The concept of the popular mobile theatre of Assam "Bhramyomaan Mancha" came into being and contributed to the modern Assamese drama movement providing a source of livelihood to many artists and a source of entertainment to the audience. Mostly performed in open areas and makeshift stages, the mobile theatres of Assam moved on from mythological themes to several ranges of secular and political themes, even adapting Shakespearean tales, Greek tragedies, plays

based on novels by famous writers, historical events like the sinking of Titanic, etc. The theatre underwent major changes in its form and structure in Assam and other parts of India. Bombay and Calcutta were majorly influenced by British colonialism and Assam being closely connected with Bengal geographically experienced certain influence too. The activities of missionaries and the Bengal Renaissance had a significant impact on Assamese society (Barpujari et al., 1977).

Jatra, a popular form of folk theatre originated in Bengal during the 15th century and spread to other Eastern states of Assam and Odisha. There were changes in content, all-night performances were shortened to 3-4 hours and the number of songs was lessened (Gunawardana, 1971: 55). Jatra influenced the conception of mobile theatre in Assam. Mobile theatres are mobile as their stages are make-shift and the groups keep moving from one place to another to perform. The first mobile theatre was formed by Brajanath Sarma, also considered the founding father of mobile theatre, in the 1920s in the Barpeta district of Assam. The start of the Kohinoor Opera Theatre Party marks a critical point in the theatre history of Assam. The performances of Kohinoor Opera Theatre Party and Sila Kalika Opera Party lasted for around 3 hours and it proved to be a more audience-friendly format than the all-night ones. Sila Kalika Opera Party performed in open areas and the Kohinoor Opera Party performed in halls (Devi Sarma 2018 in Patgiri, 2019). New parties started to form inspired by the Kohinoor Opera Party. Achyut Lahkar, a pioneering figure in the history of mobile theatre in Assam, with his brother, started the Nataraj theatre group in 1963. It is considered to be the first proficient mobile theatre group in Assam. The mobile theatre received an extensive reach and they dealt with issues ranging from economic, and cultural to socio-political ones often assimilating ideas from the West as Jatra did. Co-acting in stages started in Assam along with female actors being hired to play female roles for the first time in the state in 1933 (Patgiri, 2019). That was a huge change as only men were allowed to perform in Ankiya Naat. There was also a shift in the audience from peasants to the working class who paid well and enjoyed this form of entertainment.

Mobile theatre became one of the most popular forms of entertainment even surpassing the Assamese film industry. It contributed to a huge number of plays that were rich in artistic, performative, and literary values. Along with entertainment, it also deliberated on economic, cultural, political, psychological, and societal aspects. It initiated the idea of technical experimentation, time management, commercial success, production changes, etc. in the concept

of dramatic performance (Gogoi, 2020; Ravande, 2022). A significant part of Assamese culture, mobile theatre companies have transformed the lives of numerous artists and evolved into a self-sustaining industry.

The chief aim of mobile theatre is the entertainment of the audience. They are the primary target and everything from story and theme selection to choosing actors to play the roles is done to fulfill the expectations of the audience. Over time the mobile theatre industry became more and more commercialised which led to the commodification of art. The theatre houses started to hire movie actors who could attract more spectators, even if it came at the expense of artistic sensibility. These movie stars often charge a huge sum of money and their lodging and food are also priced higher than other crew members. The theatre houses go through huge investments in hiring such stars and marketing strategies that hamper other artists who take their art seriously. They are often the sufferers in this ordeal, getting underpayment or nonpayment and even loss of work. It also affects the audience as they have to buy tickets to these plays at a higher price (Gogoi, 2020).

1.2.1.3 Contemporary Assamese Theatre

Contemporary theatre in India has an urban origin, introduced in the Indian scene with the coming of the British. The plays are staged in proscenium theatre halls. Proscenium stages are usually sloped rising away from the audience. The front stage moves past the proscenium into the auditorium i.e., also known as an apron or forestage. Also called proscenium arch theatres, they often include an orchestra pit for live music and a fly tower for scenery movement and lighting. The idea of proscenium theatre began in Europe in the 17th century and managed to dominate the theatre world of the West till the mid-20th century. Colonialism managed to incorporate it into the culture of the Indian subcontinent by the end of the 18th century with the start of 'Bengali theatre' in 1795 in Calcutta (Biswas, 2020). The audience watches the performance through a picture frame on a proscenium stage, which is created with an arch separating the stage from the audience. Proscenium theatre became a vital part of Indian culture and became the most popular theatre genre in all Indian provinces. In the mid-19th century, proscenium theatre made an entry into the theatrical scene of Assam. The famous playwrights of proscenium followed Western theatrical trends to fashion their plays based on these traditions. The fusion of east and west became popular among the Bengali masses and Bengal being the cultural influence of the North-eastern region at the time influenced several playwrights of Assam. Jyotiprasad Agarwala brought a change in the

1930s by adapting the Ibsenian model (Biswas, 2020). Similarly, other playwrights were influenced by European traditions and incorporated them into their work. Several Western plays were adapted into Assamese. Bhramaranga (1888), an Assamese drama was adapted from Shakespeare's 'Comedy of Errors' and Runumi (1946) was adapted from Henrik Ibsen's "The Warriors at Helgoland" (Barua, 2017). Since then, a good number of plays including Greek tragedies have been translated or adapted into Assamese.

The English-educated dramatists started to write on secular issues and adapted several ideas like stage-setting from the West. The concepts of gods were slowly discarded as the focus was given more to ideas of social reform. Acting became more authentic and the stage became more realistic. Proscenium theatre came along in Assam during 1875 but modern playwriting started years before. A dramatist named Gunabhiram Barua wrote Ram Navami, the first modern Assamese play in 1857 which marked the beginning of modern Assamese drama. It was modeled on Shakespeare's famous tragedy Romeo and Juliet highlighting the social issue of widow remarriage (Singh and Patgiri, 2018). Another dramatist Hemchandra Barua wrote the first comical play Kaniar Kir in 1861 which denounced opium consumption. This tradition of social criticism was continued by later dramatists like Laxminath Bezbaruah and Padmanath Gohain Barua. Drama became an instrument to refine the political and social urge for freedom as there was a rise in patriotism and national consciousness among the masses (Bhattacharya, 1958). The idea of realism influenced Assamese drama and the plays of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Atul Chandra Hazarika, and his peers borrowed several of their characters from real life. Modern ideas of modern men can be found in plays of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala like in Karengar Ligiri (1937). There was use of modern dress in this drama that captivated the audience (Barua, 2017). Since then, more pronounced conflict situations have been portrayed in plays of the modern era. Dialogues and portrayals of characters became realistic and natural with fewer scenes compared to before. The rational and concise demonstration started to be considered as one of the proper features of modern Assamese drama.

Assamese theatre evolved into a new era departing away from Bhaona and other folk forms of drama and celebrating Western trends. The influence of modern theatre lessened the influence of Jatra in Bengal after the establishment of the first proscenium theatre in Calcutta in 1872 (Patgiri, 2019). But in the case of Assam, the situation was quite different. Bhaona was pushed

back to rural Assam but it continued to act as a separate tradition. Non-proscenium theatres such as commercial mobile theatre in Assam and folk theatre continued to coexist along with the proscenium theatre. There were also attempts to fusion traditional and contemporary in the plays. The playwright Jugal Das wrote the drama Bayoner Khol which attempted to bring the ethnic roots of Assam into the world of modern theatre by bringing traditional conceptions of Bhaona into it (Biswas 2020, Barua 2017). Before the start of proscenium theatres, the performers and the spectators were close as per the seating arrangement which placed them together. The boundaries between the two were undefined before, but with the advent of proscenium, the demarcation between the two was marked. The first modern theatre hall was built in Guwahati in 1875 (Patgiri in Gogoi, 2020), followed by the construction of proscenium theatre halls in Tezpur and Pathsala in 1897 and 1912 respectively (Kalita, 2011; Patgiri, 2019).

Theatre in Assam evolved through different stages from folk dance-drama to the popular mobile theatre and the contemporary proscenium Assamese drama influenced by Western ideals. It changed the dynamics of the story-telling process along with the content of the stories and brought technical alterations. The proximity between the audience and the performers also changed with the proscenium parting the two. But that did not stop the non-proscenium theatres in the state.

Unlike other theatre forms which are mostly affected by the wave of modernisation in the present times, Bhaona has tried to retain and hold on to the religious theme even now. People still have religious and emotional attachment to it which has helped to maintain its cultural relevance in the state. Even though there is a lack of political aid, Bhaona has reached other places nationally and internationally and people are becoming aware of this age-old art form of Assam. The mobile theatre has managed to surpass the video films of Assam in terms of entertainment and popularity among the masses and managed to keep many livelihoods afloat. It employs numerous workers who otherwise lacked jobs due to the failing Assamese film industry in the present times. Proscenium theatres are commercial and sought-after by the urban population due to their staging of natural and humanistic experiences through the plays.

In the case of Assamese theatre, traditional theatre did not simply transit into contemporary theatre but both coexist and remain alongside overlapping each other, be it in proscenium or non-proscenium form, religious, fusion, or modern forms.

1.3 Theatre as Work

In the post-industrial world, there has been a shift in the economy- moving from industrial to service economy. Daniel Bell highlighted the decline in industrial employment due to the advent of technological innovations but that did not affect the industrial output leading to continued creation of wealth (Bell, 2006). This continuous creation of wealth gave rise to new needs thereby creating a never-ending supply of new job opportunities in services- tourism, entertainment, hospitality, psychiatry, and so on. The transition from manufacturing to service economy in the present economic scenario has led to the growth of interactive jobs which includes direct interaction with clients. The demand for “aesthetic” skills has increased in the post-industrial world as the new global economy focuses on business, retailing, hotels and catering, and financial services, where having just “technical” skills won’t fulfill the agenda. The employees have to look good and sound right thereby presenting themselves in ways that will engage the customers or clients. There is a consistent pressure on how bodies and emotions are to be managed to meet corporate ends.

Cultural industries emerged in connection with power dynamics influencing the creation and dissemination of cultural products and texts, such as movies, music, literature, theatre, and art. It highlights the economic and social significance of cultural production, as well as the power dynamics that shape it, including issues of access, ownership, and representation. Similarly, creative industries refer to sectors that are primarily driven by creativity, innovation, and intellectual property, encompassing areas such as design, advertising, and fashion. It potentially shapes how creativity and cultural production are perceived and valued within society (Mayer, 2018).

The theatre industry is a part of the cultural sector that occupies a vital place in the post-industrial world. It involves a range of occupations starting from directors, producers, playwrights, stage technicians, actors, singers, dancers, and so on. Actors hold a pivotal role in the theatre space. They are involved in a working process that is always laden with emotions, generated from working with one’s own body and feelings. Actors are emotional managers and they have to deal with feelings in a professional manner on stage.

Emotions play an integral role in the service sector, how employees function in their work and continue their interactions. Emotional labour describes the things these workers do that go beyond physical and mental duties. Emotional labour is the management and regulation of feelings and expressions by workers to satisfy their customers and their employers (Hochschild, 1983). As many roles require interaction with the public in a service economy, the workers are expected to regulate their emotions while at work. However, in the case of stage actors, their management of feelings and regulation of emotions stand differently than conventional service workers.

The service sector employees have to carry the burden of appearing in an aesthetic way that would be appealing to the clients, managing their emotions, being polite, smiling, and positively maintaining eye contact while showing genuine concern for clients' needs, which are critical aspects of their employment. The growth of a service labour sector predominantly comprised of women, who were compensated for conducting "emotion work" as described by Hochschild, workers in the creative industries relied on social connections to secure consistent employment and participate in various self-promotional endeavours. Immaterial labour was indicative of a societal transformation into a social factory, suggesting the erasure of distinctions between public and private domains, as well as the blending of personal emotions' intrinsic value and their value within the economic exchange (Negri, 1983; Mayer, 2018). However, the work of stage actors involves the enactment of a story by taking up the role of a character and connecting to the audience via body gestures, reciting dialogues, and verbal and non-verbal expressions. It is a requirement for the actor to reach an emotional balance, understand the characters, and experience the emotions associated with the role in an inward manner. Stage actors are "emotional labourers par excellence" (Bergman Blix, 2010). They use their voice, body, and feelings to role-play and bring their characters to life on stage for the audience witnessing them in live-action. Their work process and dealing with feelings and emotions place them on a different level than any other job in the consumer world.

While the portrayal of emotions is undoubtedly central to their craft, the physicality of acting is equally indispensable. Actors must possess physical agility and stamina to execute various movements, gestures, and actions demanded by their roles. Whether it is performing intricate dance sequences, engaging in staged combat, or simply maintaining posture and physical presence, actors rely on their bodies as instruments of expression. Moreover, the physical demands

of acting extend beyond the performance itself. Rehearsals often involve rigorous physical activities to refine movements, vocal projection, and overall stage presence. Even offstage, actors may engage in fitness routines and conditioning to sustain their physical capabilities for demanding roles.

Theatre acting as a profession involves immaterial labour which is defined as labour that “produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity.” It involves a series of activities that are not usually recognised as work, the kind of activities that define and fix cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and more strategically public opinion in our societies (Lazzarato, 1996). The significance of such work often goes unrecognised, leading to a lack of comprehensive studies in this area.

Actors must seamlessly intertwine emotional depth with physical prowess to deliver compelling performances that captivate audiences and breathe life into the theatrical experience. To understand their work processes, it is essential to provide actors with a platform to articulate and share their narratives. This allows for a deeper understanding of their perspectives on work, employment, and the intricacies of character development and portrayal. The representation of gender through theatre and cultural constructions that spectators may use to connect with the character roles can show how they are interpreted by audiences belonging to different gender groups. As these actors’ performances entail a spectrum of emotions, gaining insight into their approach to role enactment could offer valuable perspectives. This understanding extends beyond the theatre setting to shed light on social contexts where emotional management is paramount. It unveils the intricacies of how individuals navigate everyday situations, performing and influencing their actions, and the subtle dynamics of emotion regulation that often escape notice.

1.4 Chapter Outline

Chapter One provides a comprehensive overview of the background and context of the study, while exploring the trajectory of theatre, focusing on its evolution in India and Assam. It examines theatre as work, including the physicality and emotional dimensions involved. Chapter Two focuses on the review of relevant literature that encompasses creative livelihoods alongside the actor’s process. The use of emotional labour by trained actors in the case of role portrayal was examined to understand the emotions at work and their professionalisation. The theoretical

approach regarding gender dynamics in theatre was explored in the literature review. Chapter Three highlights the methods and procedures used in this study are described and justified. The research design of the study is introduced with the justifications on why certain methods were used and applied. Lastly, ethical concerns related to data collection and analysis of the research problem were discussed.

Chapter Four explores the findings of Research Objective One intending to highlight the nature of theatre work and creative livelihoods associated with it. Chapter Five takes up Research Objective Two which focuses on the actor's process of enacting different character roles, the employment of emotional labour which impact their performances, and the resulting consequences of it. Chapter Six focuses on Research Objective Three which analyses the gender dynamics in the theatre industry including gender representation and involvement, encompassing all the nuances involved in it.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by presenting a conclusion with a focus on the three research objectives of the study. Lastly, the limitations of the study and contributions of this work towards future research work are identified and acknowledged.

1.5 Conclusion

This introductory chapter has laid the foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of theatre, not only as a performing art but also as a significant cultural and economic entity. Theatre serves as a powerful medium through which individuals and communities reflect, express, and challenge social realities, making it a vital area of sociological inquiry. It has outlined the significant ways in which theatre serves as a mirror to society's values, conflicts, and cultural heritage. The exploration of theatre's historical, cultural, and professional dimensions highlights its role in shaping and being shaped by societal forces. By establishing the context of theatre's historical evolution, particularly within India, and highlighting the complex dynamics of theatre work—including emotional labour and gender issues—the introduction sets the groundwork for the detailed exploration that follows. This sets the stage for a deeper examination of the intricate processes involved in theatre acting, the emotional labour it demands, and the gender dynamics at play within the industry. The insights gained from this study will contribute to a broader understanding of how theatre functions as both a mirror and a maker of social realities while

delving deeper into the professional challenges faced by theatre practitioners and the broader implications of theatre in contemporary society.

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CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the existing literature that provides insight into several aspects of working as theatre actors, focusing on three key areas essential to understanding their work environment and challenges. First, it explores the nature of work within the theatre industry, delving into the structural and operational dimensions that shape the professional experiences of the actors. This includes examining aspects such as job instability, work conditions, and the complex relationships within production teams that influence both artistic expression and career longevity. Second, the chapter investigates the actor's process, emphasizing the implications of emotional labour in their work. It reviews how actors create, sustain, and modulate emotions to inhabit roles, drawing on theories of emotional labour to understand the psychological and performative demands they encounter. Lastly, the review addresses gender dynamics within the theatre industry, with a focus on how gender affects opportunities, roles, and the overall treatment of actors. Here, the chapter engages with studies on gender bias, the male gaze, and power structures in theatre that contribute to unequal experiences for male, female, and queer actors. By examining these three aspects, the literature review seeks to build a foundation for understanding the broader socio-cultural, psychological, and structural factors that impact theatre actors' work lives.

2.2 Creative Livelihoods and Economic Survival

The cultural economy encompasses the economic activities that are a part of creative industries, including arts, fashion, films, music, performing arts, photography, and design amongst many others (UNCTAD, 2019). The UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions emphasises the importance of creative diversity and recognises the sovereignty of nations in safeguarding and advancing cultural expression. It aims to address policy challenges and foster the development of cultural and creative industries (UNESCO: 2006, 2013). Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) constitute 3 percent of the world's GDP, creating revenues exceeding USD 2.25 trillion per year and giving employment to around 30 million individuals (UNCTAD, 2019; UNESCO, 2018). The industry is one of the

significant employment sectors, including a large number of artists, technicians, and creative people belonging to various fields.

Theatre provides a platform for depicting stories and narratives from multiple viewpoints, promoting cultural understanding and sociocultural development along with providing entertainment at the same time. The impact of India's knowledge systems, including in the area of performing arts, continues to resonate in various cultures, leaving a lasting imprint evident in contemporary art forms, architectural designs, well-being practices, and more. Indian epics have found adaptation and integration into the literature, theatre, and performing arts of numerous Southeast Asian countries (Gupta and Anandaram, 2022). The performing arts account for 18.4% of India's creative economy and cultural sector's market size (British Council, FICCI, AartX, 2022).

The creative industry, encompassing various mediums, is a domain filled with passion and hard work, alongside its set of unpredictability and risks. Creative livelihoods have emerged as an important area of inquiry, particularly within the sphere of artistic occupations. A study conducted by TBR's Creative & Cultural Team, The Artists Information Company, and James Doeser (2018), reveals a significant dependency of artists on non-art-related sources of income, with nearly half (48%) of their earnings originating from such endeavours. This reliance on supplementary employment underscores the economic challenges prevalent in the artistic labour market, where opportunities for sustained artistic practice are limited by unstable payments and a dearth of viable work options. Alper and Wassall (2006) highlight the precarious financial landscape that is further compounded by factors such as the high cost of materials and insufficient remuneration.

Uncertainty looms large in the creative labour market, posing formidable challenges to the economic stability of artists. Menger (1999) elucidates the inherent risks associated with creative occupations, advocating for flexibility and individual adaptability as means of mitigating these uncertainties. Despite the allure of creative professions, disparities in earnings and employment persist, as noted by Alper and Wassall (2006). Their earnings present more variability than those of other professional workers. The precarious nature of artistic work is particularly evident in the experiences of young artists, many of whom grapple with short-lived job opportunities and fluctuating income streams. Throsby (1992) highlighted how the employment opportunities for performing artists are uncertain and below par. Bille and Jensen (2016) emphasised the multitude of factors influencing the survival of artists in an industry characterised by fleeting employment.

Particularly for actors, experiencing intermittent unemployment between roles is commonplace. They underscored the pivotal role of artistic education in enhancing the prospects of artists for economic survival, emphasising the need for expanded access to relevant training programs in performing arts. Despite the presence of esteemed institutions like the National School of Drama and the Film and Television Institute of India, along with numerous private and public institutions offering acting courses, alumni from these establishments frequently find themselves dependent on networking and lobbying efforts to secure desirable opportunities.

Government initiatives and programmes play a crucial role in nurturing theatre as an art form and in supporting the livelihoods and artistic aspirations of theatre practitioners nationwide. The Government of India has certain schemes to bolster the creative arts. However, the Government of Assam has yet to adequately acknowledge the significant contribution of this industry to the region's economy and livelihoods, as it has not formulated any acts, guidelines, or rules to safeguard and promote these establishments (Devi, 2016).

The global COVID-19 pandemic and governmental responses have swiftly disrupted livelihoods worldwide, particularly impacting performing arts professionals due to their precarious nature and exacerbated by prolonged austerity measures. Collaborative efforts with performing artists reveal the fragility of earning a livelihood in the creative industries, intensified by the economic crisis, leading to long-term insecurity, inequality, and mental health challenges within the performing arts sector. The COVID-19 pandemic caused an unparalleled disruption to the arts, evidenced by empty theatre venues and a projected £74 billion revenue decrease and 400,000 job losses, as estimated by the Creative Industries Federation (Langston, 2022). The closure of productions led to permanent job cuts and forced many self-employed actors and technicians into an involuntary hiatus. Theatre performances in Assam were halted for a year and a half due to the pandemic. However, theatre adapted by shifting online, demonstrating the power of modern technology to reach broader audiences despite the absence of traditional venues or financial support (Fitzgibbon, 2020; Langston, 2022; Pietrzak-Franger et al., 2023). Even then virtual performances present unique challenges, notably the absence of direct audience interaction, essential for performers. Nevertheless, a performance lacks authenticity without its requisite elements of blocking, physicality, improvisation, and screen presence, essential for both live and virtual theatre productions (Gowri, 2020).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the vulnerabilities inherent in artistic livelihoods, as witnessed by the unprecedented disruption to cultural events and performances. It dealt a severe blow to Assam's traveling theatre troupes, compelling numerous artists to seek alternative means of income. This exacerbation of security risks underscores the urgent need for regulatory interventions to safeguard the economic well-being of artists and foster a conducive environment for sustainable artistic practice. Apart from offering relief in the form of entertainment tax, the government has not extended any financial support to this sector (Sarma, 2016). Durgesh (2022) highlighted that theatre is the source of the economy and there is an imperative requirement for government support to ensure the survival of culturally rich theatre practices, especially in the wake of the pandemic. However, during the pandemic, Assam's cultural industry has seen multiple initiatives provided by the government for the welfare of the arts and artists (Karmakar, 2021; The Economic Times., 2022).

It is imperative to conduct in-depth studies on the livelihoods of artists, analysing their work life, opportunities, and hurdles, to better understand and address the challenges they face in sustaining their artistic practices.

2.3 Emotional Labour: Role-Playing and Actor's Process

The role of emotional labour and its intricate processes within the context of theatrical performance, particularly in the domain of stage acting, represents a significant area of scholarly inquiry. As underlined by Hochschild (1983), emotional labour entails the regulation of feelings to align with prescribed display rules, with actors serving as quintessential practitioners of this phenomenon. In theatre, stage actors are tasked with managing their emotions to embody their characters effectively and connect with audiences on a visceral level. This process involves a delicate balance between personal emotions and the portrayal of character emotions, as highlighted by Konijn (2001), who introduced the concept of the "theory of task emotion," suggesting that actors undergo emotions in response to their live-performance circumstances that may not necessarily align with the emotions they portray as characters. Put differently, actors may not feel the exact emotions as their characters while on stage, but they are not devoid of emotion altogether. Instead, actors encounter "task emotions" such as tension, excitement, and challenge, which may stem from various personal contexts. These emotions, often predominantly positive, are typically experienced with a certain level of intensity by most actors.

Akopian (2011) highlighted the dichotomy on stage between the narrative world of the play and the actor's portrayal. She stressed the relevance of an actor's physical attributes to character depiction, echoing Stanislavsky's emphasis on truthful performances. Actors are encouraged to employ imagination to understand the circumstances and motivations of characters, drawing from personal experiences for authenticity. Through verbal and non-verbal expressions, actors connect with audiences, striving for emotional balance by immersing themselves deeply into their characters' emotions.

Actors draw upon their personal life experiences to infuse authenticity into their character portrayals, as underscored by Bergman Blix (2010), who describes stage actors as "emotional labourers par excellence" who utilise their bodies, voices, and emotions to breathe life into characters on stage. Understanding the nuances of acting involves exploring how actors leverage their personal experiences to inhabit character roles, as well as how knowledge of a character and the setting influences both their professional and personal lives. MacDonald and Sirianni (1996) discussed the management of emotions as a crucial aspect of an actor's craft, both during rehearsals and performances. This necessitates the deliberate suppression of certain emotions, offering insight into actors' intricate processes of emotional regulation that extend beyond the stage and into other facets of social interaction. In contrast to interactive service workers, actors are often perceived to possess greater autonomy in managing their emotions, underscoring their privileged status in this regard.

Furthermore, the rehearsal process and training available to actors play a pivotal role in honing their emotional management strategies, with actors often internalising these methods to achieve a sense of naturalness, as noted by Orzechowicz (2008). As actors continually adapt to and internalise various roles, each with its emotional intensity, their accumulated experiences contribute to their adeptness in managing emotions over time. Goffman's notion of "impression management" provides a theoretical framework for understanding the dramaturgy of social interactions, where actors navigate between backstage authenticity and front-stage performances (Goffman, 1990). While individuals can regulate external displays of emotions to conform to societal norms, managing internal emotions remains beyond their control. Hochschild, building upon Goffman's ideas, critiques this notion, highlighting that the self must be a subject of "emotive experience" (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labour involves conforming to 'feeling rules' and

‘display rules’ dictated by organisational demands, where individuals must portray expected emotions in their interactions (Hochschild: 1979, 1983). In theatre and film production, interactions extend beyond individual performances to encompass collective efforts in adhering to established display and feeling rules. Hochschild views dramaturgy as a two-dimensional concept, encompassing both the self and the audience’s perception (backstage and front stage). Collective emotional labour contributes to creating relational atmospheres involving the self, audience, cast, and crew. While Goffman’s dramaturgy focuses on impression management, Hochschild emphasises the role of emotional labour in shaping others’ state of mind, rendering it a two-dimensional process for both the audience and performers. Watson et al (2018) explores the relationship between emotional labour and atmosphere, highlighting how directors, cast, and crew collaborate in individual and collective emotional labour to cultivate specific moods on sets.

Hochschild’s exploration of emotional labour delves into how individuals manage emotions to meet organisational expectations, with “feeling rules” guiding social actions, and “display rules” governing behaviour in work-related contexts (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Actors, for instance, must maintain composure and embody characters regardless of their true feelings to fulfill their role obligations to the audience. Emotional labour, encompassing surface acting and deep acting, offers insights into the mechanisms by which actors regulate their emotions to meet organisational demands (Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting involves the expression of emotions that are not genuinely felt by the workers, implying a pretense of feelings. Deep acting involves an inward change of feelings rather than merely displaying them outwardly. Various occupations necessitate different degrees of surface acting and deep acting. Hochschild’s distinction between passive and active deep acting sheds light on the nuanced ways in which actors internalise and enact emotions onstage, with potential implications for their psychological well-being (Hochschild, 1983). However, emotional labour, especially deep acting, can have positive effects as it can result in authentic performances, fostering genuine connections between performers and audiences for a meaningful experience. Ashforth & Humphrey (1993) highlighted the repercussions of emotional labour on actors’ identities, stress levels, and authenticity underscoring the need for a comprehensive understanding of the emotional processes inherent in theatrical performance.

Aesthetic labour, body management, and emotional regulation are vital components of the culture industry, even in the case of theatre. These aspects are pertinent to investigate among stage actors, whose emotional labour is frequently overlooked and needs to be addressed.

2.4 Gender in Theatre

Theatre serves as a mirror reflecting societal norms, including those related to gender, power, and identity. Caste or ethnic affiliations began to diminish in their influence on theatre as the participation of individuals from diverse social backgrounds became apparent. Women's engagement in theatre has emerged relatively recently and it encompasses various complexities. Understanding the sociocultural dynamics of any society involves examining the gender interventions embedded in its cultural fabric both in form and content. The historical exclusion of women from specific theatrical forms exposes how societal expectations regarding gender identities are not only mirrored but also contested within the theatrical space. By tracing the evolving participation of women in theatre, valuable insights into the shifting dynamics of gender norms can be gained along with the corresponding changes in women's societal roles. While acknowledging the undeniable influence of class and caste on individual experiences within theatre, focusing on gender offers a sharper lens for examining the complexities of power, representation, and access. Furthermore, the inclusion of women in theatre signifies a broader cultural shift towards gender equality, where women's voices and perspectives are increasingly valued in artistic production.

Butler (1988) refers to gender as a performative act, an individual constantly constructing an identity throughout their life with their words, actions, and choices. The act of performing gender can be likened to an actor's performance on stage. Given that gender is culturally constructed and tied to societal expectations, individuals essentially "perform" their gender roles. Thus, the performance of gender can be likened to a theatrical performance, as individuals conform to cultural expectations, essentially acting out their assigned roles akin to being observed by culture. Butler's seminal work on gender performativity posits that gender is not an inherent trait but rather a socially constructed identity enacted through repeated performances. Individuals "do" gender through their actions, gestures, and behaviour, reinforcing societal norms and expectations (Butler, 2006).

Thomas (2017) highlights the way by which our socially constructed notions of gender affect the ways of seeing theatre. The dominance of Victorian morality in colonial India significantly influenced gender dynamics and performance. The presence of women in public spaces as objects of scrutiny was considered disrespectful. Sharmila Rege highlights how caste dynamics shaped the performance of women for the male gaze in Maharashtra (Singh, 2010). In Assam, traditional forms of theatre like Bhaona traditionally depended on male performers to portray all characters, including females, owing to societal norms and religious customs (Sarma and Dutta, 2009). In various forms like Jatra, Yaksha Gana, and Kathakali, the tradition of male performers impersonating female characters persists.

Many theorists contend that the creator of any art often assumes the spectator to be male, mirroring the prevalent use of masculine pronouns in language to denote universality (Berger 1972; Brand, 2007). The portrayal of women on stage, the limited presence of female characters resulting in fewer opportunities for female actors, and the linear narrative structure that favours a male-centric storytelling approach are all aspects of concern. These elements shed light on how gender representation is perceived by the audience and the cultural constructs used to interpret visual imagery. The female character enacted by the actor is defined by her sex, gender, or sexuality, which influences her interactions with other characters in the narrative. By presenting her body to the audience, the concept of the male gaze is reinforced, implying that spectators are encouraged to view actors in a socially acceptable manner, even fostering an acceptance for women to be perceived through this lens (Berger, 1972).

Performers embody various gender roles on stage, challenging fixed notions of masculinity and femininity and creating space for the exploration of diverse gender identities. Butler's theory provides a framework for interrogating traditional gender norms and envisioning alternative narratives that disrupt established binaries. The sex workers' movements and queer movements have expanded the understanding of gender to encompass sexuality. Simultaneously, they have reinforced the longstanding principle of feminist theory that accentuates gender as a performative concept. The concept of gender performativity helps in analysing how heteronormative norms are reinforced within theatre, categorising queerness as aberrant or abnormal (Butler, 2006). Throughout history, queer individuals have been systematically excluded from representation in mainstream literature, films, and theatre, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and marginalisation

(Hazarika, 2022). This pattern of exclusion is evident in Assamese theatre, where queer characters are often depicted in predictable and stereotypical manners, thus perpetuating societal biases and impeding inclusive representation. Moreover, the absence of openly queer actors in Assamese theatre further exacerbates the marginalisation and invisibility of queer experiences on stage.

Actors conform to societal expectations regarding body image and behaviour, sustaining cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity on stage. Bordo's work highlights the body and the role it plays in reinforcing gender norms. It serves as a site for the display and enforcement of gendered norms, shaping audience perceptions and interpretations of gender representation in theatre. Bordo's analysis underscores the significant role of the body in reinforcing gender norms, a concept particularly relevant in the context of gender representation in theatre. The body becomes a crucial site where societal expectations and norms are displayed and enforced, influencing how gender is portrayed on stage and how audiences perceive these representations (Bordo 1993, 1999). The portrayal of bodies on stage, including the emphasis on appearance, conformity to ideals of femininity or masculinity, and the reinforcement of the male gaze, contributes to the reproduction of gendered norms within theatrical performances. Bordo elucidates how cultural images dictate societal standards for women, normalising daily practices such as dieting, fashion choices, and cosmetic use. The body is portrayed as compliant, submissive, and mouldable, striving to conform to an idealised image. She demonstrates how patriarchal structures perpetuate the male gaze by focusing on weight and appearance. The emphasis is that women often internalise the notion that being objectified can be empowering and pleasurable, leading to a consensual surrender to the gaze. Bordo analyses societal constructs of femininity, positioning women as passive objects and men as active subjects (Bordo, 1999).

Foucault's idea of docile bodies is trained, disciplined, and regulated by societal norms and power structures. It also encompasses the idea of bodies being subjected to surveillance and control. In theatre, female characters may be subjected to the gaze of male characters or the audience, reinforcing power hierarchies and societal expectations. This can also be seen in the way female characters have often been depicted as submissive, passive, compliant, and fragile in need of protection, which aligns with the concept of docile bodies. Historically, women's roles in theatre have often been limited to supporting or secondary characters. Women may still find themselves confined to stereotypical portrayals that reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations, such

as the nurturing mother, the seductive temptress, or the helpless damsel in distress. These limited and often one-dimensional roles reflect broader societal attitudes that seek to restrict women to certain archetypes, thereby reinforcing gender norms and marginalisation of women's experiences and perspectives in theatre. Bordo's examination of how cultural images and norms regulate women's bodies and behaviour provides valuable insight into the dynamics at play in shaping gender representation in theatrical performances.

Shilling (2003) delves into how the body serves as a crucial instrument through which gendered norms and expectations are both enacted and challenged. One of his key insights is the notion that the body is not merely a passive vessel for conveying gender, but rather an active participant in the performative process. He argues that through their bodily movements and actions, actors actively contribute to the construction and reinforcement of societal understandings of masculinity and femininity. How performers navigate and negotiate societal expectations regarding body image and behaviour, sheds light on the complex interplay between individual agency and cultural scripts. The performative nature of gender emphasises that gender identity is not fixed but rather continually negotiated and enacted through repeated behaviour and actions. The fluidity of gender performances, suggests that actors have the agency to challenge and subvert traditional gender norms through their theatrical expressions. The body functions as a site for the display and interrogation of gender within theatrical contexts, contributing to broader discussions about the intersection of performance, identity, and power. In theatre, as in other cultural contexts, the body acts as a canvas upon which gendered scripts are enacted and negotiated. Actors' movements, gestures, and expressions not only portray characters but also reflect broader cultural narratives surrounding gender roles. By critically examining the performative aspects of gender embodied in theatrical performances, it can be understood how theatre shapes societal understandings of gender identity and expression. In the theatre industry, the body emerges as a vital locus for the manifestation and enactment of gender and sexuality (Shilling, 2003). Performers actively construct and reinforce societal norms and standards related to gender through their physical presence and movements on stage. Both male and female actors frequently adhere to prescribed gendered norms concerning bodily appearance and conduct, as per the cultural standards of masculinity and femininity (Shilling, 2003; Bordo, 1993).

Foucault's conceptualisation of power, dispersed and enacted through discourse, is crucial for deciphering the hierarchical dynamics in the theatre industry. Within theatre, power flows through intricate social networks, with directors, producers, and societal norms shaping the production process. These hierarchical structures play a significant role in determining gender representation and opportunities within the industry. His perspective highlights how power is negotiated and contested within the theatrical domain, providing insight into its complexities and challenges (Foucault, 1977).

Power dynamics are not confined to top-down structures but rather permeate through societal practices, influencing everyday behaviour and interactions. It converges with feminist efforts to scrutinise power structures within personal relationships and challenge gendered hierarchies, particularly in intimate domains (Foucault, 1978; Sawicki, 1998). Gender representation in theatre is intricately intertwined with power dynamics, as directors and other creative members influence how gender is portrayed on stage (Foucault, 1977). The directors wield significant authority over performers and crew members and shape performances through casting decisions, script interpretation, and rehearsal procedures, aligning productions with their vision and societal standards.

This concentration of power in the hands of predominantly male directors can perpetuate gender biases and reinforce traditional gender roles in casting and storytelling. Female playwrights and directors often focus on stories that challenge gender norms and highlight women's experiences, contributing to a more diverse and inclusive theatrical landscape (Singh, 2009). However, power disparities persist, as evidenced by the underrepresentation of women in key roles within the theatre industry in Assam, reflecting broader societal power imbalances. The lack of female representation in positions of authority limits the diversity of perspectives and experiences portrayed on stage, as well as the opportunities available to female performers and creatives. Despite efforts to challenge these norms, the underrepresentation of women and queer individuals in positions of power within the theatre industry reflects broader societal inequalities. In Assam's theatre industry, the ratio remains disproportionately low, upholding marginalisation and limiting diverse perspectives in theatrical productions. Foucault's insights prompt a critical examination of how power operates within the theatre industry and shapes the positions of influence and authority.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Research is an original contribution to the existing body of knowledge, aimed at advancing our understanding in a particular field. It involves the pursuit of truth through study, observation, comparison, and experimentation, making it an objective and planned process of seeking knowledge and finding solutions to issues. Research methodology refers to the systematic approach used to solve the research problem. The philosophical framework adopted in research significantly influences the procedures used, making methodology the overall structure that guides the entire research process (Creswell, 2003). It can be understood as the science of studying how research is conducted in a structured and scientific manner. When discussing research methodology, it is significant to consider the specific methods used and the rationale behind choosing them in the research context. This involves explaining why certain techniques are employed and others are not, ensuring that the research findings are solid and reliable (Kothari, 2004).

This chapter deals with the nature and significance of the research, methods, and approaches used for data collection. It highlights the objectives of this study, approaches, sample, and methods employed in the study.

3.2 Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- to determine the nature of work in theatre and investigate various dimensions involved in theatre acting as a profession,
- to interpret how stage actors work to create emotions to inhabit a role and the emotional consequences this work can induce,
- to analyse the gender aspect and changing dynamics related to it within the theatre industry.

3.3 Nature of Research

The primary objective of the research was to explore the theatre artist's perceptions of their occupation and understand the multifaceted nature of their occupation. As little attention is paid to the subjective experiences of the people associated with such a form of work, the aim is to explore how stage actors experience and make sense of their unpredictable creative livelihoods and the different forms of labour they engage in. In qualitative methodology, the researcher looks at settings and people holistically; people, settings, or groups are not reduced to variables but are viewed as a whole (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Employing a qualitative methodology that views settings and individuals holistically helps in acknowledging the interconnectedness of people, settings, and groups within the theatre industry.

To explore this, qualitative methodology that has been undertaken in this research is rooted in the principles of phenomenology and ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology, as elucidated by Harold Garfinkel, offers a unique lens through which to explore the social order embedded in the routine and everyday activities of theatre artists (Garfinkel, 1967; Liddicoat, 2020). Additionally, this study incorporates elements of phenomenology, which emphasises understanding the lived experiences of individuals and how they perceive and interpret the world around them. Alfred Schutz introduced phenomenological concepts to the social sciences, arguing that the conceptual frameworks developed by social scientists to understand social reality must be based on the everyday, common-sense thinking of individuals navigating their social world (Schutz, 1962; Bryman, 2012). By integrating phenomenology, the research further acknowledges the significant role that community and audience demand play in shaping the experiences and perceptions of theatre artists. This phenomenological perspective complements the ethnomethodological approach by examining how the everyday practices of theatre artists and experiences are shaped by their interactions with their social environment, including community and audience demands. By integrating these approaches, the study captures not only the subjective experiences of theatre artists but also the social processes that underpin their professional lives. This dual focus allows for a more nuanced understanding of how theatre artists navigate and make sense of their creative and professional contexts, addressing the complexity of their work in response to external expectations and internal experiences.

Although the study did not involve formal participant observation, it is informed by ethnographic principles through a deep engagement with the theatre community. Ethnography is a qualitative research method that involves the immersive and detailed study of people and cultures within their natural settings. Through thick description, it not only documents behaviour but also interprets the context and cultural meanings behind those actions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the social world being studied (Geertz, 1973; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The research draws on the rich cultural context of theatre in Assam, capturing the lived experiences of artists through detailed interviews and observational analysis of performances. The researcher spent significant time with the participants, understanding their routines, and capturing the essence of their work environment and practices. Alongside that, the qualitative analysis of the study involves thick descriptions, which provide nuanced, context-rich accounts of the practices, interactions, and emotional experiences of the actors within the broader social, cultural, and professional dynamics of the theatre industry, offering insights into how these are shaped by the cultural and social environment of the theatre industry.

This meticulous approach allows for an exploration of the experiences of theatre artists and gives a deeper insight into the research problem while addressing the research objectives of the study.

3.4 Significance of Research

This research is of considerable significance as it addresses a notable gap in the literature by focusing on the subjective experiences of theatre artists, an area that has received relatively little attention. By focusing on the nuanced perceptions of stage actors and the complex nature of their profession, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how theatre artists navigate the unpredictability of their creative livelihoods and engage in various forms of labour.

The methodological framework offers a robust approach to examining both the individual and social dimensions of theatre work, focusing on an in-depth exploration of how theatre artists perceive and interpret their roles, capturing the emotional and psychological ramifications of their profession. Concurrently, it provides valuable insights into the social order and routine practices within the theatre, highlighting the influence of community on the artists' experiences. It enriches

our understanding by connecting personal experiences with broader social processes, rendering an ethnographic component to the study.

Furthermore, the study's focus on gender dynamics and evolving industry trends contributes to a discourse on the changing landscape of theatre, which is a major part of culture and society. By focusing on gender aspects and shifts within the industry, the research expounds on the challenges and transformations faced by theatre artists, thereby offering important implications for understanding and addressing the evolving conditions of the profession. In sum, this research seeks to enhance our comprehension of the theatre industry's complexities, informs academic discussions on industry practices, and provides insights for improving the professional environment for theatre artists.

3.5 Sampling

Snowball sampling is followed here to collect data for the study. Here the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others (Bryman, 2012). Initially, two theatre artists were contacted who provided further access to other people relevant to the research study.

3.5.1 Sample Size and Information of the Participants

The sample of participating theatre artists is acknowledged as being small and justified by the approach of qualitative research. The sample for the study was drawn from 25 theatre artists who are working in the industry (all three forms of theatre) as novice or semi-professional artists in and around Assam. Here novice includes those who are newcomers in the industry or are engaged in the industry on a part-time basis whereas the latter implies those individuals who are/were mainly engaged with theatre as a primary job. Out of the 25, 14 were females, 9 were males and 2 were queer individuals.

(Table 1.1: Profiles of the participants at the time of the interview)

*¹Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Ethnic community	Duration of time in the theatre industry	Other information
Mrigakshi	27	Female	Assamese	12 years	Works in web series and Assamese films apart from theatre. From Dibrugarh, based in Guwahati. Masters in performing arts and cultural studies.
Misha	28	Female	Assamese	16 years	Exposed to performing arts since childhood. From Dibrugarh originally. Trained in Sattriya dance and performed multiple forms of theatre.
Harsha	23	Female	Assamese	3 years	Bachelors in Performing Arts from Delhi. New to Assam's theatre circuit as spent her time outside the state for many years. Born and brought up in Guwahati. Performed in both traditional and contemporary theatre.
Heena	26	Female	Assamese	4 years	Guwahati-based but born in Nagaon. Pursuing higher studies. Not a formal member of any group but works with two different theatre groups.
Rinky	31	Female	Assamese	20 years	Associated with theatre since class VI. Full-time stage actor, but also have side gigs for fixed income. From Tezpur, based in Guwahati. Performed in different fests and shows nationwide. Always active in theatre circuit.
Roma	34	Female	Assamese	26 years	Full-time theatre actor. Was a child artist too. Was associated with theatre groups in Delhi. Also works in other acting mediums.
Danish	22	Male	Bengali	2 years	College dropout and a newcomer in the industry. Part of a theatre group.
Luna	28	Female	Bengali	7 years	From Guwahati, NSD graduate. Entrepreneur and stage actor. Experienced in mobile theatre and contemporary theatre. Also

¹ *To protect the privacy of the participants, anonymity has been maintained throughout the study. Identifiable information has been excluded or altered, and pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality and safeguard their identities.

					worked in Assamese film industry.
Farah	27	Female	Assamese	9 years	Full-time actor. Budding playwright and director. Originally from Tezpur.
Barsha	25	Female	Assamese	4 years	Part of theatre group in Delhi. Performs in different circles. Mostly engaged with contemporary theatre forms. Originally from Jorhat but spends most of her time in Guwahati.
Chiranjeev	32	Male	Bengali	11 years	NSD passout. Was part of theatre groups, currently freelancing. Also does theatre workshops and takes drama classes for a source of income.
Rashi	30	Female	Assamese	23 years	From Guwahati. Working in the theatre industry from childhood. Started as an actor, and currently she is a facilitator, scriptwriter, producer, and director and has her own theatre space.
Kunal	35	Male	Assamese	18 years	NSD graduate. Associated with theatre for many years. Also produces and directs plays.
Jayanta	31	Male	Assamese	11 years	Theatre actor who is also a photographer.
Vikas	34	Male	Assamese	16 years	NSD passout. Associated with a repertory company for two years at the time of interview. Also takes drama lessons in free time.
Palak	29	Female	Assamese	9 years	Worked in theatre for many years but left the industry during covid-19 pandemic. Worked in mobile theatre and contemporary theatre forms.
Mansi	30	Female	Assamese	11 years	From Golaghat but based in Guwahati. Working in theatre from university days. Also has experience as an art director and an assistant director.
Himashri	24	Female	Assamese	3 years	Newcomer in the theatre industry. From Guwahati.
Renu	30	LGBTQIA	Assamese	15 years	Engaged with theatre since teenage years. Joined an international organisation recently for a permanent source of income.
Ritu	32	LGBTQIA	Assamese	11 years	Full-time actor since teenage years. From Guwahati, also write plays.
Richa	26	Female	Assamese	14 years	From Guwahati, works in theatre, Assamese serials, and regional films.

Deborshi	28	Male	Assamese	7 years	From Majuli originally. Have been a part of Bhaona from teenage years. Also acted in contemporary Assamese theatre. Now associated with theatre during free time.
Deep	27	Male	Bengali	8 years	Working in a corporate job. Part-time actor.
Rohan	30	Male	Bengali	10 years	Experienced in all forms of theatre. From Kaliabor. Working as a scriptwriter for Assamese TV shows alongside stage acting.
Arnab	29	Male	Assamese	8 years	Part-time theatre actor. Working as a government employee for a permanent source of income.

3.6 Timeline and Study Site

The research aims to be first-hand and small-scale, with multiple collection phases that took place over three years (2021-2023). The study was conducted in Guwahati, the capital hub of Assam. Guwahati being the gateway to Northeast India attracts many young people who relocate to the city to start their careers. Interviews and discussions were held in cafes and restaurants with quiet ambiance and in participants' workplaces as per their convenience. The interviews lasted for around two hours each and the opening questions in each interview focused on compiling profiles of the participants and their duration in the theatre industry.

3.7 Primary Source of Data Collection

The study relied on qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews and observation methods. However, to obtain rich and nuanced data, building rapport with the theatre actors was essential to facilitate open communication and trust. Pre-interview conversations, explaining the purpose, and attending rehearsals helped create a comfortable environment, encouraging participants to share their experiences more freely with the researcher. This rapport-building process is crucial in any form of qualitative research where the focus is primarily placed on the participants and their encounters.

3.7.1 In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants which helped in laying greater emphasis on the interviewees' perspectives and exploring the issues through their insights. The goal was to look at the process or the meanings the participants attribute to their given social situation (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007). In-depth interviews are based on non-directive, unstructured, and open-ended questions.

The interviews were mainly unstructured but the researcher had a few main questions in hand to guide the interviews with a focus on the research objectives. The participants were asked questions that centered on identifying (1) theatre actors' perceptions of their work and experience as performing artists; (2) their understanding of the power dynamics and hierarchy in the theatre industry; (3) the acting process and interplay of emotions between their characters and real selves; (4) the meaning they attribute to their actions and how it affects their experiences; (5) blurred boundaries between personal and professional lives; (6) representation of gender and associated attributes in their line of work.

Initially, to establish a conversation, the participants were asked about themselves and their employment as theatre actors. The researcher had to formulate spontaneous questions throughout the interviews to elicit relevant data from each participant and was careful not to impose her own opinions or close off dialogue early. The conversations led to a breadth of questions that surfaced as the discussions deepened (for example, what is it like to be an artist/actor; what kind of skills are required to enter the field; have they ever had to face criticisms for their physical attributes? If yes, how did they deal with it; do the industry people normalise the power dynamics and how does it work; how did this profession affect their personalities; what kind of comments do they get to hear from outsiders for working in this field; how do women, men, and other genders shape their performances, and if their experiences differ).

3.7.2 Observation

The researcher got the opportunity to study the field situation firsthand by being in the workplace of the theatre actors. The researcher attended three proscenium plays in Guwahati, Assam- "Mother's Courage" staged at Rabindra Bhawan in December 2021, "The Random Project" performed at BA Theatre in January 2022, and "Gandhari" staged at Sankardeva

Kalakshetra in June 2022. The researcher witnessed two mobile theatre plays namely “Moi Natok Kora Suali” staged by Abahan Theatre Group in Guwahati, Assam in 2022, and “Captain Avinash” by Itihaas Theatre Group in Chechamukh, Sesa, Assam in 2023. The researcher attended three Bhaona(s) named “Rukmini Haran” organised by Gauhati University, Assam in 2023; “Shakuni Protixudh” in Latashil field, Guwahati, “Mochya Avatar” in Rajohuwa Naamghar, Maligaon in 2023 and “Ram Parajay Sitar Pataal Gaman” in Dergaon, Assam in 2024.

By attending the shows, the researcher gained direct knowledge about the respondents’ work conditions and the environment of the front stage and backstage. The researcher also attended the rehearsals of a Bhaona performance “Rukmini Haran” in Guwahati, and modern contemporary dramas- “The Random Project” and a Greek adaptation “Prometheus” in Guwahati. The performances on display, the actors on stage, the stories presented along with the portrayal of characters, and behind-the-scene scenarios during rehearsals, alongside the final performance provided a rich account and feasible insight into the industry. As the researcher’s participation in group core activities was minimal, so as an observer she interacted with people and made field notes based on the observations she gathered during rehearsals and the main performances. Photographs were captured to enhance the research process.

3.8 Data Analysis

The analysis of qualitative data comes after field access has been found, sampling decisions have been taken, and data have been collected, recorded, and elaborated (Flick, 2007). The process of thematic analysis was adopted in my study. The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). It helped the researcher to identify patterns and themes involved in the data collected.

3.9 Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, ensuring validity and reliability is essential to uphold the credibility of the study. Given that this research focuses on the experiences and work processes of theatre actors in Assam through an ethnographic approach, validity is concerned with accurately representing the participants’ perspectives and experiences. At the same time, reliability pertains to the consistency of the research processes and interpretations.

Validity pertains to the soundness and accuracy of the conclusions drawn from a research study (Bryman, 2012). It has been approached through strategies that enhance authenticity and depth in data collection and interpretation. First, thick descriptions allow for a rich portrayal of the participants' experiences, capturing the subtleties of their work, emotional labour, and gender dynamics within the theatre industry. Thick descriptions enable readers to connect with the context and lived realities of the participants, adding to the study's interpretive validity. Second, triangulation is employed by cross-verifying data from multiple sources, including interviews, observations, and field notes, to corroborate findings and minimize biases.

Reliability in qualitative research, particularly in ethnographic studies, is maintained by establishing transparency and consistency in data collection and analysis methods. This study employs systematic fieldwork procedures to maintain consistency, using an interview guide to ensure that all participants are asked similar questions while allowing flexibility for probing deeper based on individual responses. Detailed field notes document each stage of data collection, analysis, and decision-making, creating a transparent record that can be reviewed to verify the reliability of the research process. Additionally, the use of thematic analysis provides a structured approach to data interpretation, ensuring that the themes are derived consistently and systematically. The study strives to achieve both validity and reliability, ultimately aiming to provide a credible and trustworthy account of the lived experiences of theatre actors in Assam.

4.0 Ethical Concern

Ethical standards have been maintained by the researcher to ensure that participants were not put at any risk or harm. Before beginning the data collection, the researcher thoroughly explained the purpose, objectives, and implications of the research study to the participants, ensuring they had a clear understanding of their involvement. Consent was actively sought and obtained at every step, from initial participation to the use of data in the study, allowing participants to make informed decisions about their participation. All the names of the participants have been changed and the researcher used pseudonyms to identify them. All the distinguishing details that could provide some disclosure regarding the participants have been carefully removed. Audio recording of the interviews was done with prior permission of the participants, and the interviews

were recorded in MP3 format on a mobile phone. Photographs were taken with prior permission from the organisers and the people involved.

CHAPTER 4: THEATRE ACTORS AND THEIR CREATIVE LIVELIHOODS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the perceptions of theatre acting as an occupation. It concentrates on the artists' livelihoods, with a focus on how they regard theatre acting as an area of work and employment. The underpinnings of this specific cultural field are explored to understand the cultural profession as well as the work lives of those who are involved in it, with an emphasis on the nature of their employment and working conditions such as compensation, skills, and training, performance, social security, and different schemes. It explores variances in the perceptions of actors about the theatre sector and their work, as well as various facets that may impact their interpretations.

4.2 Nature of work

4.2.1 Artistic Expression and Creativity

The theatre industry presents a myriad of roles for individuals to explore and engage in. From actors and directors to producers, playwrights, designers, and technical teams, each job carries distinct responsibilities, shaping the dynamic and multifaceted nature of theatre work. Theatre professionals operate within a hierarchy and ensemble, emphasising collaboration and leadership. The theatrical collaboration process occurs in stages: preparation, planning, production, and presentation. Directors, producers, and playwrights shape the story in the preparation stage, while the planning stage involves creative idea-sharing about the story, set design, sound, and other production aspects. In the production stage, actors are introduced, and rehearsals commence with decisions on costumes, dialogues, and props. Finally, in the presentation stage, all the pieces are put together and the final performance is presented to the audience (Cohen, 2011).

Theatre actors may find themselves working in a diverse range of settings, including local and regional theatres, theatre groups, touring troupes, or modern theatrical productions. There are three main forms of theatre in Assam that presently exist alongside each other - Ankiya Naat

(performance of it is called Bhaona), Bhramyomaan theatre (also known as mobile theatre), and the contemporary Assamese theatre. Ankiya Naat is one of the oldest forms of theatre organised in the Sattras and performed mostly by the nearby villagers. The stories revolve around religious themes and mythology. Bhramyomaan conducts their performances in different places moving around in troupes and gathering many viewers. It is one of the success stories in the entertainment industry of Assam employing a huge number of people and gaining immense popularity (Gogoi, 2020). Assamese proscenium theatre incorporates Western ideas and themes in its dramas and plays and has managed to gain popularity among the urban population attracting a crowd who find it more relatable with its grounded form of storytelling compared to other forms.

Ankiya Naat has evolved over the years and moved from rural areas to urban centers as well, even moving out of the region reaching national and international platforms. It has presented females with a chance to get involved as opposed to what is still prevalent in the rural centers where women are restricted when the plays take place in prayer halls in Sattras called Naamghars (Saharia, 2016). Although we have witnessed several evolving features in this oldest form, they have still managed to retain their central theme of spirituality and cultural affinity. People associated with Ankiya Naat/Bhaona are attached to it more due to religious sentimental value rather than financial reasons. Bhaona does not necessarily recruit professional actors but the nearby villagers are cast as performers, thus making it a work of amateurs. The main characters of Lord Rama or Lord Krishna and their consorts are given to handsome young men belonging to higher castes as they have to be obeyed by the other actors and the audience. A certain form of caste discrimination is often witnessed in this form of theatre even though Srimanta Sankardeva's preachings have always aimed for a caste-free society (Richmond, 1974). These actors have to keep fast for the whole day before the Bhaona is performed. The female roles are played generally by young boys having feminine appearances. The performance of Ankiya Naat usually begins in the evening and continues through the night. Later in time, Srimanta Sankardeva's disciple Sri Madhavdeva wrote smaller plays that took a short duration of time and ended before nightfall. Bhaonas are usually organised during the winter months of every year after the harvesting season and before the start of ploughing season.

Proscenium theatre often experiments with folk, modern, and even classical themes. It has different styles incorporated in it and often comes with some kind of moral lesson even if it is a

simple love story. People hired in proscenium plays come from different age groups and their acting skills are more humanistic and believable as compared to Bhaona artists who are mostly inexperienced and simple villagers. For instance, someone who may resemble the simplicity of Lord Rama may be recruited to play his role in Bhaona without looking much into his skills. Again, in the case of mobile theatre, the focus is more on the grandness of stories adapted from the Western world and the exaggeration of acting with extreme dramatics and entertainment. The participants shared how the acting skills in Bhramyomaan theatre are often neglected as the aim is to entertain the audience and high melodrama helps the cause.

Vikas, a graduate of the National School of Drama (NSD) with 12 years of experience in the theatre industry, has had a diverse background. He began his theatrical career with a mobile theatre group and later pursued higher studies at NSD. Subsequently, he joined a repertory company under a limited-time contract and also became part of a cultural society comprising like-minded individuals. He highlighted, 'Mobile theatre is focused on entertainment with morally-driven themes, even in the case of love stories. But Bhaona is rooted in religious narratives without significant economic motives. It serves as a spiritual theatre form and is often carried out by villagers living nearby as a cherished cultural tradition.'

Bhramyomaan operates as an industry-driven entity, emphasising group organisation and commercial appeal. Hence, this form prioritises attracting larger audiences by leveraging glamour and featuring popular faces, sometimes at the expense of acting skills.

4.2.2 Employment Patterns

Theatre acting has multiple patterns of employment and work, starting from freelance actors to contractual ones. There are repertory theatre companies that hire artists under them on a contract basis conducting several shows annually. Repertory theatre is a theatrical setting where a troupe or company prepares and offers a range of plays, dances, songs, operas, and more, often changing them periodically for limited runs or based on current needs. This may involve an in-house resident theatre that presents a preplanned repertoire of several plays, musicals, and dance productions, all prepared and available for performance during the season (Lasisi, 2022). The repertory company has various productions lined up for staging in theatre festivals and tours they organise, on a regular basis. It comprises some regular artists they hire on a contract basis with a

fixed salary. Repertory grants are also given by the Ministry of Culture to certain theatre groups based on their consistent and quality performances. Other than people engaged in repertory companies, many become members of different theatre groups while some prefer to work as freelancers. Freelancing often proves to be good for theatre artists as it is flexible and gives creative freedom to them. They are not bound by any restriction and can work with anyone. Some earn good money working on different projects while retaining their independence at work.

Two of the participants passed out from the National School of Drama (NSD), Sikkim branch. They were associated with a repertory company under NSD. They worked on fixed-term contracts that were annually renewed based on their performance. In their interviews, the participants explained that they were bound to work exclusively within the repertory company, but if their schedules permitted, they occasionally engaged in freelance shows. These repertory companies typically produced theatre productions, averaging around 3-4 shows per year, and were also involved in organising tours, festivals, and other events. Normally, these artists participated in a total of 7-8 plays per year, with each play often repeated 15-16 times during regular times. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown brought their activities to a standstill for a period of two years.

A male participant, Vikas who has been associated with a repertory company for two years during the interview, remarked,

Within the repertory company, I hold the designation of an artist as indicated in my ID, which doesn't specify a fixed role or position. Being a full-time employee of the repertory company, my payment terms are better compared to freelancers, specifically during the pandemic. Our scheduled festivals were canceled because of the lockdown. We didn't have any work but were left with only discussions regarding potential shows once the situation improved.

The theatre setting involves a hierarchical order in which the producer and the director occupy the top position from which he/she can instruct the cast and crew. Even though the artists have basic autonomy in their work process, they are always under the surveillance of the director who notices everything minutely and guides people as per his vision. One of the female participants shared how the director of her play observes them during rehearsals and scolds them if they act

shy around other artists. However, she commented that it is usually a friendly kind of supervision that helps them thrive better.

4.3 Training and Rehearsals

4.3.1 Formal Education vs. Practical Training

Several acting and performing arts courses help students gain theoretical and practical knowledge about theatre as an art form. Many universities have started basic courses in this field as well. People from different backgrounds take up these courses to indulge in their acting passion and take it up professionally. Three participants of this study graduated from the National School of Drama Sikkim branch and started working as professional theatre artists but they believe that the true essence of it is hard to grasp from such courses alone. 'Practical experience in the field matters as it helps to relate to the industry and the art on a firsthand basis. The learning curve in this art form is an ongoing process, an ever-evolving part of our culture, so whatever I have learned from the National School of Drama, I use it in practice,' stated one of the participants.

Apart from the academic courses, many theatre groups and acting schools offer different classes and workshops that help actors know various trends and techniques of acting along with honing their skills in the industry. Beyond the theatrical setting, the theatre community extends its influence through the facilitation of acting workshops conducted by experienced professionals. These workshops cater to individuals driven by a passion for theatre, offering limited enrollment capacity, unrestricted by age or eligibility criteria, typically spanning a duration of 15 days to one month. At the end of the workshops, there is usually a theatrical production where the participants get the chance to demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have acquired into practicality. One of the female participants shared her experience of how she got into theatre through one of these acting workshops. The workshop served as a foundational platform where all the acting enthusiasts received necessary lessons, instruction, and training in different acting techniques and skills requisite for the field. After the completion of the workshop, they spent another 15-20 days in the rehearsal phase where they rehearsed on a script prepared by the organisers. With extensive long hours in rehearsals, the preparation eventually led to the final performance where the actors got the opportunity to demonstrate their acting abilities.



(Figures 4.1 & 4.2: Theatre workshops witnessed by the researcher)

(Source: Primary data)

The rehearsal process for a theatre production is a crucial part where every actor invests a lot of time and energy. Their craft gets improved and polished as they connect to their characters, the story, fellow artists, and teammates during the rehearsals of a play. They learn about various stage movements, and transitions and put their learned skills into practice.

In Bhramyomaan theatre, the common practice is to involve established actors from the mainstream Assamese film industry. This inclusion significantly boosts the popularity of the shows, captivating a broader audience. These actors already come with experience and fame and typically participate in rehearsals for a brief period before their final performances. Conversely,

emerging artists joining the cast often bring their own theatrical experience and training, but they frequently face challenges and receive lower compensation compared to well-known personalities.

Bhaona performances, on the other hand, primarily feature amateur performers from simple village backgrounds. These individuals lack formal training but acquire their skills through practical experience and time. Bhaona is often referred to as the “theatre of amateurs.” Selection for Bhaona roles is not solely based on acting prowess but also hinges on various factors such as religion, gender, caste, community, physical appearance, and other considerations. One of the participants, Rohan who hails from Kaliabor, has experience in all three forms of theatre. He shared,

Caste discrimination is witnessed in Bhaona, contradictory to Srimanta Sankardeva's preachings. Certain individuals are preferred over others based on caste, community, or gender and not their acting. Bhaona performed at Naatghors in Sattrra still features only male actors like before, but on a broader stage, female performers are now included.

4.3.2 Ongoing Professional Development

As actors remain involved in the theatre community, they learn and grow through their performances and participation in various productions. From working with different directors, producers, and fellow actors to design teams and technicians, they handle varied roles and styles while performing in front of diverse audiences, gaining invaluable experiences along the way. Young actors often seek out mentors within the theatre community who can provide guidance, and support, and help them build not only their acting skills but also their social capital.

Acting is a continuous journey involving professional growth where actors acquire and refine their abilities with new opportunities and experiences. Actors find themselves immersed in distinct cultures, and languages, having to develop specific dialects and accents. They get involved in the intricacies of language and culture as well as non-verbal communication through gestures expressions, and physical conditioning. Learning to effectively use body techniques and gracefully engage in different movements to authentically convince the audience is a fundamental aspect of an actor’s toolkit. Be it the graceful movements of a dancer, the musings of a singer, or the vulnerability of a distressed character, portraying a role that leaves an impact, goes beyond mere

words. They aim to convey emotions, intentions, and character traits authentically, leaving a lasting impact on their audience. Actors are constantly evolving and a work in progress, always seeking to enhance their craft.

One of the female participants shared how she had to learn Brajavali to fit into the skin of the old character of Bedonidhi and it was an interesting learning experience for her.



(Figure 4.3: In the Bhaona named Rukmini Haran, Lord Krishna with an old character of Bedonidhi)

(Source: Primary data)

4.4 Workplace

4.4.1 Physical Venue and Spaces

The workplace of actors is not confined to a single, consistent setting. Instead, it adapts based on the particular production they are engaged in or their affiliation with theatre groups in different locations. Actors in traditional theatres might find themselves performing on permanent stages or within religious venues, while others may involve different settings like galleries or outdoor environments.

Ankiya Naats/Bhaonas are traditionally done with a religious motive rather than for secular enjoyment. They were mainly staged in Sattras, the socio-religious and cultural institutions of Assam which include houses of prayer named Naamghars, and the rectangular-shaped prayer halls that serve as places for worship and hold religious meetings. Naamghars play a major role in the religious, cultural, and social life of Assamese folks as local topics and disputes are discussed by the villagers and they also gather there for evening prayers. Again, during festive occasions, it transforms itself into a public theatre for Ankiya Naat. Manikut is a small house, garbhagriha of a Hindu temple that is built on one end of Naamghar and contains the seat of the saint who is worshipped. Only certain important people are allowed inside the Manikut. The side near the Manikut is kept for the Adhikar, the chief guest who usually presides over the performance, and for the Brahmins, and the other side is reserved for the actors. The side close to the entrance acts as the general auditorium where the audience sits on the ground. The space between the two rows of pillars makes the stage or rangabhumi with no raised platform. No special arrangement is made on the stage other than an arkapur i.e., a white curtain that is used when the main actors come out from cho-ghara better known as the green room, and enter the scene when the sutradhar (the narrator) announces their part in a particular scene (Patgiri, 2019; Das, 2018; Dutta, 2021).



(Figure 4.4: A still from Bhaona- Ram Parajay Sitar Pataal Gaman in Dergaon, Assam)

(Source: Primary data)

Due to the limited presence of Sattras in many rural areas, Naamghars have taken it upon themselves to independently host Ankiya Naats on their premises, creating venues that closely

resemble the traditional structural settings. Often, in rural areas, donations are taken from village members to conduct these religious plays. Over time, these religious dramatic performances began to be showcased at festivals and for entertainment, rather than only for spiritual purposes. To replicate the traditional ambiance, temporary sheds in open fields or dedicated houses were constructed to stage Bhaonas (Richmond, 1974), aiming to evoke similar emotions and establish strong connections between the performers and the audience. As the popularity of Ankiya Naat grew locally and beyond, it found its way into urban areas, attracting diverse audiences to its performances. It started gaining recognition on both national and international platforms, with presentations ranging from improvised setups to formal proscenium theatre stages, reflecting its evolution and adaptation to different theatrical settings.

Rohan said, ‘Bhaona has evolved and expanded to urban areas and beyond, providing opportunities for young individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate, with females taking on feminine roles, a shift from the past. The primary emphasis has also shifted towards entertainment rather than catering solely to a spiritual audience.’



(Figure 4.5: Audience attending Bhaona performed in a field in Guwahati city)

(Source: Primary data)

In the case of Bhramyomaan theatre, the theatre troupes travel from one place to another like a jatra party. The stages are mostly temporary make-shift high platforms that are made for the staging of plays. The seating is composed of loose chairs on the front of the stage that can be moved conveniently. There is a green room that is constructed backstage for the actors to dress up and get into their character roles. The work conditions in such a setting depend on the production

houses mostly. Like for instance, a production house with a good budget allocation can provide better facilities to the artists. One of the female participants asserted that when they perform in a reputed production, basic amenities like a green room, proper washroom, clean water, air-conditioning, or fans are made available to them in a suitable manner. But if the production budget is low, they often go through difficulties especially for the female artists as they need privacy to change into different attires or to use a safe and clean lavatory. When mobile theatre comes to urban centres, auditorium halls are also sometimes hired for the staging of plays but that is a rare instance as these shows generate a huge crowd and it becomes difficult to accommodate all of them in a closed setting.





(Figures 4.6, 4.7 & 4.8: Audience gathered to watch Bhramyomaan shows in temporary settings created by mobile theatre groups in Guwahati and Sesa, Assam)

(Source: Primary data)

For contemporary theatre forms, the setting is similar to Bhramyomaan but the stages are mostly permanent structures. There are different kinds of theatre stages for modern theatre productions, that are not just limited to proscenium style. Proscenium stages feature a distinctive architectural proscenium arch, often with deep or gently sloped, raked stages, sometimes including a forestage. Thrust stages position the audience on three sides, with a flexible stage area that can take on various shapes, fostering intimacy between actors and viewers. In-the-round stages have a central performance area surrounded by the audience, often with square or polygonal seating arrangements, and actors enter through aisles or vomitories. Black-box or studio theatres are versatile spaces, typically black-painted rooms with flexible seating setups for diverse productions. Platform stages involve a raised rectangular platform at one end of a room, with audiences seated in rows facing the stage, commonly used in multi-purpose halls (Theatres Trust, n.d).

The researcher attended three contemporary theatre plays in different venues in Guwahati. All three were performed in permanent spaces but had different kinds of stages.



(Figure 4.9 & 4.10: A play titled ‘Random Project’ performed at BA studio theatre in Guwahati)
(Source: Primary data)



(Figures 4.11 & 4.12: 'Gandhari' performed at Sankardeva Kalakshetra's platform stage)
(Source: Primary data)



(Figures 4.13, 4.14 & 4.15: Proscenium setting at Rabindra Bhawan where 'Mother Courage' was performed)

(Source: Primary data)

4.4.2 Basic Necessities and Safety

The basic necessities and safety precautions are a part and parcel of every workplace. In the theatre industry, actors, directors, crew members, technicians, and other personnel have different roles to play and contribute to the production. Depending on different situations and roles, there could be unforeseen emergencies or sudden risks that require safety precautions and proper maintenance to be in place. Theatre artists have to work with various lighting, stage floors, costumes, and props, and when it is a makeshift stage in an open area, the facilities may get uncertain and questionable.

The availability of safe, proper, hygienic amenities is a basic need in any industry, including the theatre industry. As theatre artists do not have one designated workplace and have to move from one venue to another, sometimes from permanent to temporary structures, the well-being of the performers and crew, particularly females have to be taken into serious consideration. Females involved in theatrical production, especially actors frequently face challenges due to potential inadequacies in proper hygiene facilities, from quality to quantity. Lengthy queues for a restricted number of restrooms, unsanitary toilet facilities, and a lack of essential toiletries are common issues shared by a few female participants. However, in permanent stage settings, cast and crew members typically have access to essential amenities, creating a sense of security and convenience for the performers as shared by the participants.

The backstage serves as the primary area where actors spend their time before taking the main stage. Here, they prepare for their performances and often rehearse their lines in a designated space known as the green room. Green rooms serve as vital spaces where actors immerse themselves in their roles, prepare mentally, and unwind. However, there are instances where these spaces may not offer the desired comfort or accommodations. Insufficient facilities or limited space, especially for female performers, is an issue that hinders their ability and enthusiasm to prepare effectively.

Theatre venues can become excessively warm due to large audiences and stage lighting, making it crucial for actors to have a comfortable working environment, particularly for women who need to wear heavy makeup and change costumes. Moreover, privacy is a significant concern, as actors often need to change quickly between scenes. In situations where individuals of different genders share the same space, maintaining privacy and personal space, especially for women, can pose challenges as highlighted by the participants.

Participants have mentioned that it is a common practice to change in front of fellow actors and crew members due to the chaotic atmosphere backstage before and during performances. 'In such moments, we often have to set aside our sense of shame and the concept of personal privacy because we are pressed for time and are entirely focused on the task at hand,' a female participant remarked. This underscores the fact that the scarcity of private spaces in various types of theatre productions can lead to uncomfortable situations, which actors do not even have the opportunity to contemplate or assess. The issue of privacy and modesty applies to all individuals involved in backstage activities and raises concerns.

Other than this, long working hours are commonplace for theatre artists as they remain involved in high-pressure situations with physical and mental stress leading to burnout. They often miss out on a healthy work-life balance that hampers their overall well-being. One of the participants expressed, 'I remember getting very stressed with erratic shoots, delayed schedules, portraying negative characters, and numerous challenging aspects that were difficult to manage. My romantic life was in disarray as well.' Another participant conveyed that she experienced a sense of disconnect from social events and family, which was truly challenging. She was so exhausted by the end of the day that she did not find the zeal to socialise, often leading people to judge her without understanding the demands of the work. Apart from this, one of the female participants working in different modes of the acting field including theatre, voiced a different concern as a female actor. 'Being a woman working long hours, and returning home at a late hour invites negative comments from family, relatives, and neighbours which is emotionally detrimental,' asserted Palak.

4.5 Wage Determination and Social Security

4.5.1 Income Disparities in Theatre Acting

In the cultural industry, there is a notable disparity in income among theatre artists. The earnings of theatre artists can vary significantly. The entire field is filled with uncertainties with no regular pay or fixed job. Those who are employed by the Ministry of Culture or repertory companies receive a consistent monthly salary, regardless of the number of performances they participate in. Theatre groups that receive repertory grants also provide their members with a fixed income, typically ranging from 5000-6000 INR per month, which may not be substantial. Members of these groups also have limited opportunities to work outside of their respective groups, unless the group leader is flexible in allowing such arrangements. On the other hand, freelancers who perform independently receive payment in diverse and often variable ways.

Newcomers in the theatre industry often find themselves not receiving any compensation for their initial performances. One of the participants shared her experience as a college student who was offered a role in a play she admired. Despite her talent and effort, she performed without any monetary compensation but gained valuable recommendations and established connections in the field. Subsequently, she participated in numerous shows across Kolkata, Sikkim, and Guwahati, including plays featured in national and international festivals. In these festivals, she and her fellow artists received a payment of 500 INR per day, and their accommodation and meals were covered by the organisers. However, when performing in her home state, particularly in the capital city of Guwahati, she and other artists often went unpaid. In local and regional performances, they frequently had to cover their expenses for food and lodging. If they request payment, it is typically subject to extensive negotiations, resulting in minimal compensation. However, during drama competitions organised by Axom Natya Sabha and other cultural organisations, winning teams get substantial prize money which they divide among the members.

In contemporary theatre, individuals often pursue their passion for the cultural field while also striving to earn a living. They fully commit themselves to their profession, but unfortunately, this dedication often leads to compromises involving insufficient income, excessive workload, and meager compensation. Payment delays are a common occurrence, causing considerable hardship for those involved. Due to these payment discrepancies, individuals in the industry cannot rely

solely on this work to support themselves financially. As a result, they engage in other income-generating activities to make ends meet. When comparing the artists' substantial hard work and dedication to the industry, the returns they receive are often woefully undervalued.

In Bhramyomaan, there is a stark contrast in the way artists are compensated. General artists receive extremely low pay, while well-known, popular figures are often overpaid regardless of their performance quality. This imbalance arises because the names of these popular artists are used to promote and sell the shows, resulting in them being paid more than they deserve. Irrespective of the form of theatre, this behaviour is prevalent in the theatre as well as the cultural industry as a whole where well-known artists are paid more compared to newcomers who often end up working for free.

During one of her shows, a female participant recounted an incident where they had a well-connected senior theatre actor from Assam in their production. After the performance, the production house did not provide compensation for an extended period. Several months later, a message was sent to the WhatsApp group comprising all the show's members, requesting them to share their bank account details with the organiser. Almost immediately, a response appeared in the group chat, and it was from the senior actor who asked, 'So, will I be paid again?' with a wink emoticon. Many of the young actors in the group saw the message, and after a while, the senior actor deleted the message from the group himself. This exchange strongly indicated that he had already received his payment a long time ago, while the rest of the participants had been made to wait for months. As of the interview, the other participants still had not received their payment whereas the senior actor mentioned by the participant had received a payment ten times higher than what the other participants were supposed to get, simply considering his well-known status in the industry. It highlights how the actors who have made a name in the industry can quote their own pay demand, a stark contrast to the new ones who have to settle for whatever the production decides for them.

The economic situation differs significantly in Bhaona compared to these two commercial theatre forms. Bhaona is primarily associated with emotional and religious sentiments rather than economic motivations. People involved in this religious art form typically come from villages, with some having agricultural lands and others holding regular jobs. Their primary focus is on the emotional fulfillment they derive from participating in this spiritual art, rather than seeking

financial gain. However, when Bhaona performances take place in urban areas or outside the region, professional artists are often involved, and in such cases, they are compensated by the event organisers.

Deborshi hails from Majuli, the cultural centre of Bhaona in Assam. He has been performing Bhaona since his teenage years. He opined on this area, ‘Bhaona is not limited to our state or region anymore. It has been altered and commercialised as it moved to national and international platforms. Just like proscenium theatre, it employs professional artists and the transaction has become economical along with cultural.’

In the field of theatre, certain groups often do not provide compensation for their shows, which can be challenging for professional artists who expect to be paid for their work. Some production companies, however, have established resources and channels that enable them to consistently provide timely payments. Disparities in pay scales are a prevalent issue in this field, where one artist may earn between 3000-3500 INR on occasion, while another might earn only 1000-2000 INR for similar work. The economic aspect of this profession is marked by significant unpredictability, as an artist who earns well in one play may struggle to even earn 1000 INR in the next.

Uncertainty also extends to artists who are often required to engage in long rehearsals, including weekends, but without any additional compensation. The economic dynamics of this industry are rife with unreliability, with some production houses consistently meeting payment obligations, while others do not. A newcomer among the respondents shared her personal experience, explaining that once she earned 300-400 INR from Baat Natak (street plays), but when it came to stage shows, she did not receive any compensation. She refrained from blaming the organisers because they themselves faced financial constraints. Additionally, local shows typically adopt a no-ticket policy, as people may be unwilling to pay to watch the performances. One significant contributor to the financial struggles faced by theatres, across different parts of India, is the prevalent practice of offering performances for free or at a low cost. While the intention behind this approach is often noble, it inadvertently fosters a culture where audiences come to expect theatre as a cost-free experience (Molshree, 2023). This habituation poses a significant challenge for artists and theatre organisers, ultimately devaluing the art form.

The participants displayed a profound passion for theatre and a genuine love for their craft. However, they expressed deep concern and dissatisfaction with their circumstances. Their profession offers no guaranteed income or job security, leaving them in a precarious situation where they could be employed one day and unemployed the next.

4.5.2 Ticket Sales and Promotions

Ticket sales are a pivotal element in the financial success of a theatrical endeavour, serving as a major source of revenue. These sales contribute significantly to covering production expenses, compensating artists and crew members, and sustaining the overall theatrical production. It also sheds light on critical aspects such as marketing and promotional strategies, audience engagement, and the intricate dynamics of pricing, all of which are integral to the overall sales process.

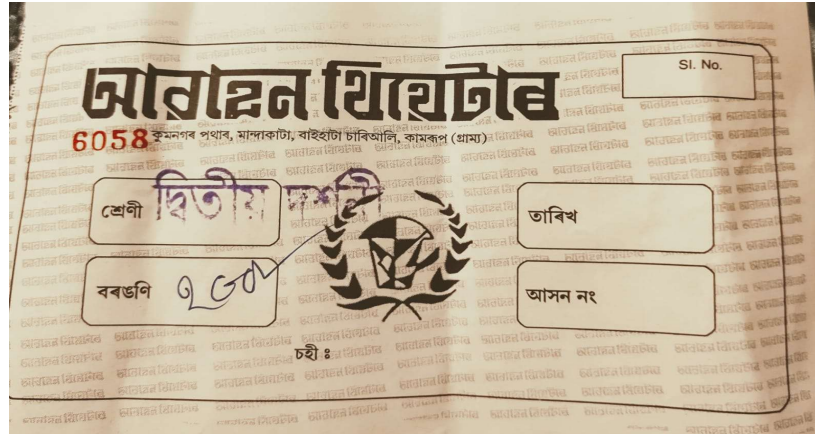
Ticket pricing is one significant feature of sales management. Ticket sales indicate that the theatre has turned into a commodity, enabling its access to an exclusive demographic (Mee 1997 in Patgiri, 2019). Determining the appropriate ticket price requires a nuanced approach that finds a delicate balance that is not only economically viable but also attractive to theatre-goers. This involves considering various factors such as production expenses, market demand, venue capacity, and the specific targeted demographics. Different forms of theatre may cater to distinct audience segments, resulting in varied pricing structures to accommodate these diverse audiences. In the case of Bhaonas, a ticketing system is absent, primarily because these performances are intended for the public for spiritual reasons while also serving entertainment purposes. On the other hand, Bhramyomaan, a form of mass theatre, does offer tickets to the public, with a pricing structure to accommodate diverse audience segments from various social classes. Achyut Lahkar, the pioneer of the Natraj Theatre group, commented on the significant class distinction evident among the play's audience. He noted that in the past, the wealthier segments of society used to hold a condescending attitude towards the travelling theatre, while it was the rural population who sustained its existence. Tickets are sold at prices ranging from 50 to 700 INR, and each performance can accommodate approximately 2,100 attendees across different categories (Paul, 2013). Again, contemporary theatre form typically caters to a niche crowd, often comprising individuals from the middle and upper classes. Shows within this genre offer varying ticket pricing, with rates typically starting at 100 INR.

The three plays that the researcher attended in Guwahati, Assam had low ticket pricing. The price of two show tickets was 100 INR each, whereas one was free entry. In the case of mobile theatre shows, the ticket prices ranged from 150 INR for the gallery to 400 INR for the VIP circle. The researcher bought the first-class circle tickets priced at 200 INR.



(Figures 4.16 & 4.17: Ticket passes for the proscenium theatre shows attended by the researcher)

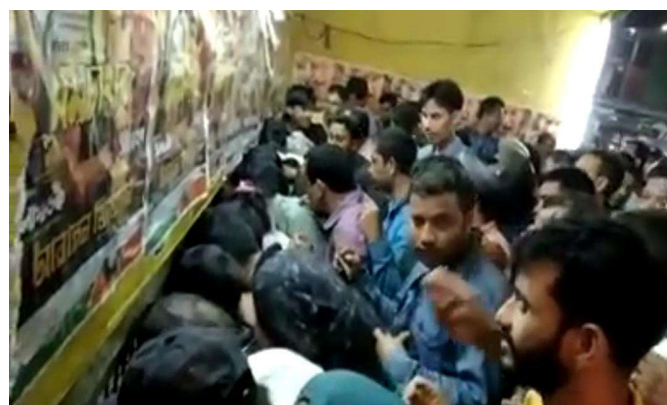
(Source: Primary data)



(Figure 4.18: Ticket for the Bhramyomaan show by Awahan Theatre attended by the researcher)

(Source: Primary data)

Amid a digital age inundated with audio-visual entertainment, attracting audiences to traditional drama, plays, and theatres has become an uphill battle. Promotions for theatre shows and festivals act as an essential factor in generating interest and excitement among people about different productions. Promotions and advertisements through various methods like hoardings, social media posts, flyers, posters, newspaper advertisements, and online ticketing platforms can popularise an otherwise unknown show into a must-see event. It not only entails the sale of tickets but also creates a loyal audience base and increases engagement.



(Figure 4.19: Bhramyomaan ticket sales in Guwahati)

(Source: Primary data)



(Figure 4.20: Online ticket sales for Assamese Bhramyomaan shows in Bangalore, India)

(Source: Primary data)

Promotional and advertising approaches for theatre shows in Assam exhibit a wide spectrum of strategies. In the case of Bhaona, which is primarily performed in rural regions and during specific festivals, its reach is limited to nearby areas, typically drawing attendees from neighbouring villages. However, Bhramyomaan productions, owing to their popularity, employ diverse promotional approaches. These include the circulation of numerous hoardings, social media posts featuring renowned actors and show posters, and the release of trailers on platforms like YouTube and various social media channels to bolster the reach and visibility of mobile theatre troupes.



(Figures 4.21, 4.22 & 4.23: Hoardings and banners for Bhramyomaan shows in and around Guwahati)
(Source: Primary data)

However, for contemporary theatre shows in Assam, promotional efforts have much room for improvement. It primarily relies on word-of-mouth communication within the theatre community to disseminate information about upcoming shows. A few hoardings are strategically placed outside the venue in the days leading up to the performance to capture the attention of passersby. A participant, associated with the theatre scene of Assam for a long time, aptly remarked, ‘In our case, our primary audience comprises individuals residing in the vicinity of venues like Rabindra Bhawan and Sankardeva Kalakshetra. Our ticket prices are also notably low.

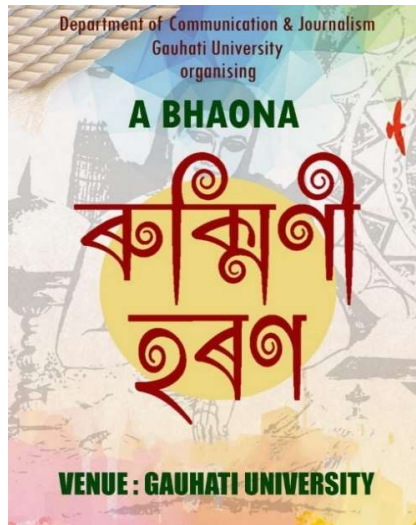
To attract a larger audience, we need to enhance our promotional efforts and outreach, akin to how people are drawn to movies and other leisure activities.’



(Figures 4.24 & 4.25: Hoardings outside Rabindra Bhawan a few days before the final show)

(Source: Primary data)

For Bhaonas when they were conducted, the promotional poster was only seen on the Facebook page of Gauhati University and shared by the cast and crew members. For another play, a poster was seen outside the field venue where it was going to be conducted. The local news published about it because a prominent female Assamese actress played the main role in it. When Bhaona moves to other platforms in different states, many national media portals post about the news.



(Figure 4.26: Poster for the staging of Bhaona in Gauhati University)



(Figure 4.27: Poster for Bhaona outside Latashil field, Guwahati)

(Source: Primary data)

There is a pressing need to amplify promotional efforts to substantially increase attendance and attract more individuals to the theatre, maintaining its cultural and commercial value. Collaboration between cultural organisations and various theatre parties is imperative, as these synergistic partnerships can play a pivotal role in improving the situation, boosting visibility, and enticing fresh audiences to engage with theatre.

4.5.3 Impact of COVID-19

Theatre work entails unpredictability in the lives of stage actors during regular times and with COVID-19, their situation worsened. The pandemic changed the entire discourse of the normal that was known for a long time. Other than the primary health concern of the world population and the lack of medical facilities to handle the ever-growing population, the pandemic has had a far-reaching effect on the global economy. The world went into lockdown thereby affecting the workforce everywhere. The unemployment rate rose to 23% leading to a significant fall in jobs in India (India Today, 2020) as major industries such as airline, tourism, hospitality, sports, and entertainment industries witnessed a crucial decline in their businesses and revenue. While most of the world started to come back up, the sports, cultural, and entertainment industries remained in the hole for a long time and struggled to get back up.

The theatre industry suffered a significant downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a lack of shows and employment opportunities for artists and crew members. This extended period of hardship had a profound impact on everyone involved. It disrupted livelihoods globally, particularly impacting performing arts professionals due to their precarious nature, worsened by prolonged austerity measures. Artists, who already faced the uncertainties of their profession and often struggled with income gaps between their jobs, were hit particularly hard. The vulnerability of earning a livelihood in the creative industries, exacerbated by the economic crisis, leads to long-term insecurity, inequality, and mental health challenges (Pietrzak-Franger et al., 2023).

The theatre community is an integral part of our culture, fostering connections among people through workshops, imparting craftsmanship, and educating audiences through drama and storytelling. The pandemic caused unprecedented disruptions in the arts, a projected £74 billion revenue decrease, and 400,000 job losses, forcing many self-employed actors and technicians into hiatus (Langston, 2022). However, the pandemic introduced numerous obstacles to its revival. Aside from the challenge of implementing social distancing measures, which are difficult given the close working conditions required for theatre and the need for large audiences to gather in a confined space, the general public faced financial constraints and did not have money to spend on tickets after enduring the hardships of the pandemic. Freelancers found themselves without work and income, while those affiliated with repertory companies were fortunate to have stable monthly

paychecks despite not working for an entire year. Even as the industry began to recover, many theatre professionals moved on to different jobs to make ends meet.

Despite the absence of physical venues or funding, theatre slowly adapted by shifting online, showcasing modern technology's potential to reach broader audiences (Pietrzak-Franger et al., 2023). The participants shared their engagements throughout the pandemic period with many of them searching opportunities online. Mansi, an enthusiastic theatre actor said, 'During COVID-19 I engaged in online theatre workshops to upskill myself and remain busy.'

Ritu, a performing artist and also a playwright, said, 'I was applying for foreign grants to do some online immersive theatre and it was an enthralling experience. But other than that, we couldn't rely on the theatre industry blindly. I took up a permanent job with an international organisation to sustain my livelihood.' Regardless, a performance's authenticity hinges on the essential components of physicality, improvisation, and screen presence (Gowri, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted Assam's theatre scene, prompting many artists to pursue alternative sources of income. Theatre activities in Assam came to a halt for eighteen months due to the pandemic (The Economic Times, 2022). During that time, a delegation comprising Professional Theatre Workers approached the Chief Minister of Assam, submitting a memorandum requesting his intervention and support. The devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic on this community left many theatre artists and workers grappling with uncertain career prospects, making their livelihoods increasingly challenging. A member of the delegation highlighted the severe financial crisis faced by theatre workers who have been without work for months due to the pandemic. Some have resorted to selling vegetables, while others have taken up daily wage labour to make ends meet. In some distressing cases, individuals have been compelled to part with cherished possessions used in theatre productions. The memorandum was endorsed by office-bearers from various professional theatre groups, including the Assam chapter of the India People's Theatre Association (IPTA). IPTA is a theatrical collective that unites artists from various regions of India, intending to use drama, street performances, and theatrical productions to depict and address political and social concerns (DU BEAT, 2019; PTI, 2020). They raised concerns about how theatre professionals are not part of any proper welfare schemes despite their contribution to Assamese culture and society. However, following the onset of COVID-19, the

cultural sector in Assam has witnessed numerous government initiatives aimed at supporting the well-being of artists and the arts (Karmakar, 2021).

4.6 Schemes and Policies

4.6.1 Schemes in India

Theatre artists form a pivotal part of the creative industry but they are majorly unorganised and unaccounted for. They are frequently perceived as being underpaid and overworked. In the cultural industry, there is a notable disparity in income among theatre artists. Government schemes and initiatives to promote and support performing arts in the country are vital for theatre artists as they provide essential resources and opportunities for their creative endeavours. Financial support ensures that theatre productions can come to life, even in the face of budgetary constraints, enabling artists to focus on their craft. The UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions focuses on creative diversity and respects nations' sovereignty to protect and promote cultural expression, along with solving policy challenges and supporting the growth of cultural and creative industries (UNESCO: 2006, 2013). The Government initiatives and schemes contribute not only to the growth and sustenance of theatre as an art form but also to the livelihoods and artistic aspirations of theatre artists across the country.

The Government of India has initiated various schemes and initiatives to promote and support performing arts in the country. These initiatives aim to preserve and promote India's rich cultural heritage and provide opportunities for artists to exhibit their talents. Under the Ministry of Culture, the Government of India initiated the 'Award of Scholarships to Young Artists in Different Cultural Fields' scheme. This programme is designed to provide support to exceptionally talented young artists, enabling them to pursue advanced training within India in a wide range of cultural disciplines. These disciplines include Indian Classical Music, Indian Classical Dance, Folk Arts, Visual Arts, Theatre (excluding playwriting and research), Indigenous Arts, Traditional Arts, and Light Classical Music. Within the field of Theatre, specialised aspects such as acting, direction, and related areas are eligible for scholarship assistance (Ministry of Culture, n.d.-a).

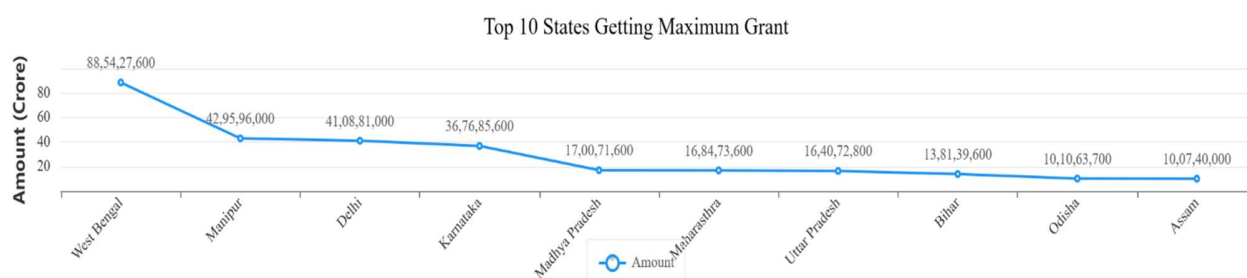
The Cultural Talent Search Scholarship (CTSS) Scheme, administered by the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Culture, aims to nurture and support exceptionally talented young children in various cultural fields. These

fields encompass traditional music, dance, and theatre, as well as visual arts like literary activities, painting, crafts, sculpture, etc. Initially, the scholarship is awarded for two years and can be extended until the recipient reaches the age of twenty, provided they continue to demonstrate satisfactory progress. The scholarship recipient is entitled to receive an annual stipend of INR 3600, in addition to reimbursement for the actual tuition fees paid to their Guru or Teacher, capped at a maximum of INR 9000 per year (Centre for Cultural Resources and Training, n.d.).

The Scheme for Financial Assistance to Promote Art and Culture encompasses five integral components, each serving a unique purpose. Among them, the Repertory Grant is designed to support artistic repertories; Financial Assistance to Cultural Organisations with National Presence is aimed at bolstering cultural institutions on a national scale; and Cultural Function & Production Grant aids in the execution of cultural events and productions. The Repertory Grant Scheme Component extends financial assistance to a wide spectrum of performing arts activities, encompassing dramatic groups, theatre troupes, music ensembles, children's theatre, and more. Furthermore, it facilitates the continuous training of artists under the guidance of their respective mentors, following the revered Guru-Shishya Parampara tradition. Under this scheme, support is extended to one Guru and a maximum of 18 Shishyas for Theatre, and one Guru along with 10 Shishyas for Music and Dance categories. The financial assistance is provided at a rate of INR 10,000 per month for Gurus and INR 1,000 to 6,000 per month for Shishyas (Ministry of Culture, n.d.-b).

The Government of India has established seven Zonal Cultural Centers (ZCCs) headquartered in Dimapur, Patiala, Prayag Raj, Kolkata, Nagpur, Thanjavur, and Udaipur to safeguard, endorse, and conserve diverse forms of folk art and cultural heritage across India. The Zonal Cultural Centers (ZCCs) regularly host a wide array of cultural events and programmes throughout the nation including several schemes and workshops. The ZCCs involve the organisation of a variety of performing arts festivals, exhibitions, tours, and similar events in different member states (PIB, 2019).

4.6.1.1 Support and Initiatives for Theatre Actors in Assam



(Figure 4.28: Financial Assistance for Promotion of Guru-Shishya Parampara- Repertory Grant: 2015-16 to 2022-23)
(Source: Secondary Data)

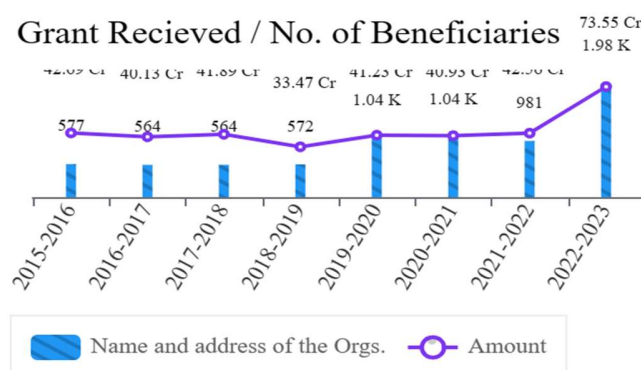
The Department of Cultural Affairs under the Government of Assam, established in 1987, has been dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Assam's rich cultural heritage. Over time, it has expanded its scope to include several organisations such as the Directorate of Cultural Affairs, Directorate of Library Services, Directorate of Archaeology, Directorate of Museums, Assam State Film Corporation, Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra Society and Jyoti Chitraban Society. This collective effort aims to conserve and celebrate all forms of art and culture within the region. The Department plays a pivotal role in promoting the indigenous cultures and ethnic groups of Assam. It has initiated various programmes to safeguard our cultural history and foster cultural exchanges, both nationally and internationally (My Gov, n.d.). Much effort has been made to identifying and nurturing talent in various creative disciplines such as acting, music, dance, and fine arts from all corners of Assam. Through providing a platform and exposure to these talents, the Department seeks to instil appreciation and awareness of traditional art forms and culture among the younger generation. It also aims to facilitate employment opportunities by effectively harnessing talents in the cultural sector and developing the entertainment industry in Assam.

The Government of India has established two autonomous organisations under the Ministry of Culture, namely the North East Zone Cultural Centre (NEZCC) located in Dimapur and the Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre (EZCC) based in Kolkata, as part of their efforts to promote the diverse ethnic traditions of the Northeastern region. NEZCC in Dimapur includes all eight Northeastern states – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura,

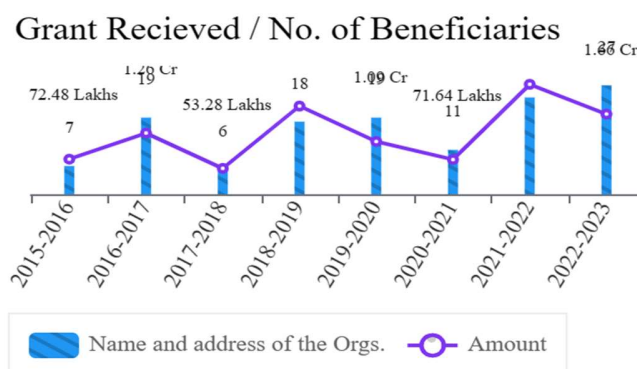
Nagaland, and Sikkim as its member states. EZCC in Kolkata includes Assam, Manipur, Sikkim, and Tripura among its member states. These ZCCs regularly organise a wide range of cultural programmes in the North East Region, featuring artists from the region and highlighting its rich cultural heritage. ZCCs also implement multiple schemes such as Guru Shishya Parampara, Award to Young Talented Artistes, Research & Documentation, Theatre Rejuvenation, etc. 93% of the budget allocation accessible to the ZCCs is incurred on the folk and tribal art forms (Ministry of Culture, 2021; NEZCC, n.d.).

The ‘Award to Young Talented Artistes’ initiative under NEZCC, Dimapur, is designed to support and promote young, talented artists aged 18 to 30 in various fields such as folk music, dance, theatre, and creative arts like painting, within the North East India region. Each recipient is paid INR 5000 per month for two years to incur living expenses (Directorate of Cultural Affairs, n.d.).

The Guru Shishya Parampara Scheme, in operation from 2003-2004, has the primary objective of preserving and promoting rare art forms within the Northeastern region. Under this initiative, an accomplished Guru is selected to provide training to four Shishyas (trainees) in their chosen art field. The NEZCC is responsible for implementing this scheme, which offers aspiring youth in the region the opportunity to receive specialised training. As part of this scheme, the appointed Guru is allowed to nominate one accompanist and four Shishyas (trainees) for a one-year training period. The participants receive monthly honorariums, with the Guru receiving INR 7500 per month, the accompanist receiving INR 3750 per month, and each of the four Shishyas receiving INR 1500 per month (Directorate of Cultural Affairs, n.d.).



(Guru Shishya Parampara Scheme- Whole India)



(Figures 4.29 & 4.30: Guru Shishya Parampara Scheme- Assam)

(Source: Secondary data)

In the fiscal year 2022-23, total funding of INR 73.55 Crores was allocated, benefiting 1977 recipients, while the cumulative beneficiaries from 2015-16 to 2022-23 amounted to 7309 individuals. Specifically for Assam, grants amounting to INR 1.66 Crores were allocated, resulting in only 27 beneficiaries for the year, contributing to a total of 131 beneficiaries spanning the years 2015-16 through 2022-23.

4.6.1.2 Funding and Grants

The Ministry of Culture provides financial assistance to individuals and organisations with various financial schemes aimed at preserving and advancing diverse forms of art and culture, including the North-east region. The North Eastern Council (NEC) General Guidelines 2020 emphasise the importance of promoting the North Eastern Region (NER) as a key aspect of the ‘Schemes of NEC’ and it extends support to projects related to the art and culture of the region. Over the past five years, 10 projects, amounting to INR 36.40 Crores, and three tribal festivals, costing INR 0.34 Crores, were sanctioned under this scheme. The progress and effectiveness of these projects and events under the ‘Schemes of NEC’ are closely monitored and evaluated by both state governments and implementing departments, as well as by NEC through periodical meetings (Indian Education Diary, 2021; Ministry of Culture, n.d.-c).

Another scheme set up by the Government of Assam was the Artiste Welfare Fund in 2010 which aimed to offer financial aid to ailing or handicapped artists of the state. An allocation of ten lakh Indian rupees was made to the Assam State Film (Finance and Development) Corporation Ltd to manage this fund for the welfare of artists. The state government instituted an advisory board for the proper allocation of funds among the beneficiaries. The first recipient of this grant was the late Bikram Hazarika who was granted an amount of INR 20,000 in 2011 when he was in critical health (Department of Cultural Affairs, n.d.-a).

The state government introduced the ‘Assam Award of Pension to Artists and Special Pension to their Families Rules – Silpi Pension’ to provide pensions to the artists and technicians of Assam as a token of recognition and support them for their contribution in various theatrical forms of Assam while enriching the culture of the state. Under this initiative, 125 artists are granted a monthly pension of INR 8000 each, while 12 beneficiary families receive a monthly pension of INR 4000 each. The state government has taken the step of offering a one-time ex-gratia grant of INR 50,000 to 95 artists, and it has earmarked a special financial assistance of INR 50,000 to 20 families of deceased artists (Sentinel Digital Desk, 2021; Umang, n.d., Department of Cultural Affairs, n.d.-b).

These financial assistance schemes were initially announced in December 2019. Additionally, the state government decided to provide one-time financial assistance of INR 50,000 each to 2,000 artists and technicians under the ‘Silpi Sambardhana’ scheme to promote Assam’s rich traditions and the mobile theatre industry (Gplus News, 2019). Another policy named ‘Bhramyamaan Theatre Silpi Aur Kala-Kushali Achoni’ was launched by the state government and reportedly covered more than 2000 artists and technicians in Assam (Sentinel Digital Desk, 2021).

While there are indeed some existing schemes to support artists, they often fall short of encompassing the broader spectrum of artists. Additionally, a significant number of artists remain unaware of these schemes. Furthermore, the fixed monetary benefits provided under these schemes tend to be outdated and inadequate for present-day needs and expenses.

The participants expressed that they have no knowledge of any such initiatives and have never benefitted from them. However, they have come across information in newspapers regarding

the implementation of various schemes and support after they have already been distributed. This has raised questions about the selection process for these beneficiaries among the participants. However, one of the female participants shared about one grant by a foreign organisation that she received for an original script and immersive virtual performance during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. She applied for it online and her proposal was selected.

One of the male participants mentioned that he is aware of the repertory grants provided to certain theatre groups because he is currently involved in a repertory company. Before this, he had no awareness of such grants.

4.6.1.3 COVID-19 and initiatives

The COVID-19 pandemic inflicted a severe financial crisis upon the entire artist community across the country. The thespians are already in a line of work that is unreliable and the COVID-19 situation magnified the issues further. They went through the loss of work, shutdowns of production, a dearth of income, and a lack of support measures during the trying period. In response to this unprecedented challenge, the Ministry of Culture undertook a series of commendable initiatives to alleviate the distress faced by these artists during the pandemic. One significant step was the organisation of online programmes and the documentation of artists' performances by Zonal Cultural Centers (ZCCs), which were then broadcast on various social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. These virtual performances not only provided a creative outlet but also enabled artists to receive remuneration for their contributions. The Ministry of Culture issued guidelines in October 2020 to further support artists and organisations that had already received grants under various components of the 'Kala Sanskriti Vikas Yojana (KSVY)' (Ministry of Culture, 2021). These guidelines allowed for the transition to virtual events, ensuring that beneficiaries could continue to avail of benefits under the schemes even when physical programmes were not possible, thereby offering vital financial assistance during these trying times.

In consideration of the pandemic, the Repertory Grant scheme also provided organisations with an exemption from mandatory inspections for the release of their yearly grants. During the initial lockdown, ZCCs played a pivotal role by organising a staggering 881 virtual programmes, benefiting 22,070 artists. These artists received a total of INR 2.82 Crores as honorarium, with groups receiving INR 25,000 to 50,000, and individual artists receiving amounts ranging from INR

500 to 5,100. Moreover, the ZCCs demonstrated their unwavering commitment to the well-being of artists by facilitating medical care, consultations with doctors, and even procuring emergency lifesaving medicines and injections for artists admitted to hospitals or nursing homes through the Health Departments of State Governments. This comprehensive support system was planned to help artists navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic and ensure their continued contributions to the rich cultural tapestry of our nation (Ministry of Culture, 2021).

However, the majority of the participants of the study seemed clueless and unaware of the existing schemes or the temporary support launched for them during COVID-19. They were surprised to know about these schemes and initiatives taken up by the government, highlighting that they never got to avail any of them nor did they know anyone else who ever got them. One of the participants shared, ‘We do not get any information about these in Assam specifically, even though the theatre community is close-knit. We believe that these benefits probably go to those artists who are in close connection with people working in those departments. It is not wrong, but it takes away the chance from many individuals who deserve it or need it.’

The traditional Bhramyamaan, mobile theatre, which had faced the threat of closure in the two years of the pandemic, received a new opportunity for survival when Assamese NRIs in the United States rallied together and raised \$17,000 (approximately INR 13 lakhs) through a virtual fundraiser in 2021. The charitable group, known as ‘Shilpi Sewa,’ was established in 2020, and the raised funds were intended to provide much-needed support to the artists, helping them overcome the challenges they were facing and offering some relief during these difficult times (Kalita, 2021). Chief Minister of Assam, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma took the initiative to offer INR 10 lakh in financial assistance to each of the 17 mobile theatre groups in the state, to help them navigate the economic hardships triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the fiscal year 2020-21, the state government also demonstrated its appreciation for the invaluable contributions of 974 artists affiliated with mobile theatre groups by providing them with financial aid amounting to INR 50,000 (Chief Minister’s Public Relations Cell Dispur, 2021; PTI, 2021).

While these funds undoubtedly provided crucial assistance to the struggling artists, it is worth noting that their impact may have been more pronounced among the theatre groups associated with renowned names in the industry, further underscoring the importance of collective support during challenging times as shared by a few participants.

The participants mentioned that they regularly visit government websites to search for information about various schemes, but they often struggle to find comprehensive and useful details. Regarding the COVID-19 situation, they noted how theatre artists united to request assistance from the government, and although many promises were made, it seemed that only individuals with connections to influential figures within the industry or those who had worked directly under the cultural department were able to benefit. 'For freelancers like us, opportunities for support and benefits remain elusive,' shared a female participant who is not associated with any theatre group.

Even after the gradual return to normalcy in 2021, 30 mobile theatre groups decided not to perform due to the uncertainty regarding recouping their investments while adhering to COVID-19 protocols raising a significant concern for them (Das, 2021). One of the participants who has her own theatre space in Guwahati said, 'The pandemic disrupted normalcy and it took time for theatre to regain its space. Maintaining social distancing measures posed challenges for both performers, who worked in close distance, and audience members, who had to sit in close proximity. Also, the public hesitated to spend on these activities during uncertain times.'

4.7 Future Plans

Theatre professionals, despite their creative endeavours, often face significant challenges in terms of aspirations and expectations. While many enter the field with plans to make a significant impact through their craft, the reality often falls short of their hopes. The unpredictable nature of the industry, coupled with the lack of financial stability, presents hurdles for those seeking upward mobility and making theatre acting a full-time occupation. Unlike conventional career paths with clear trajectories for advancement, theatre artists often find themselves navigating a landscape where success is subjective and opportunities are scarce.

Theatre actors often rely on personal relationships and networking to access opportunities, whether it is landing roles, or collaborating on projects. Cultivating meaningful connections within the industry becomes essential for advancing one's career, as recommendations and referrals frequently determine job prospects. However, the reliance on connections can exacerbate existing inequalities within the industry, as those with access to influential networks may have a competitive advantage over their peers. Moreover, the lack of transparency and accountability in

hiring practices can perpetuate nepotism and favouritism, further hindering upward mobility for marginalised artists. One of the participants shared, ‘In the cultural industry as far as I have seen, it is not just about talent and hard work; it is about who you know. Connections often determine your trajectory, from landing roles to advancing your career, which is again unfair.’

One of the critical concerns for theatre artists is the irregular income streams and lack of employment benefits which make it challenging for them to set aside funds for emergencies or retirement. It is not an organised profession like other traditional ones with pension plans, retirement benefits, or medical schemes. Theatre actors often find themselves financially vulnerable, especially during periods of economic downturn or unforeseen circumstances such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The lack of organisational structure and formal regulations or standardised income frameworks is a common factor in the case of creative livelihoods. Individuals in the creative sector often find themselves in a situation marked by ambiguity and instability. This absence of clear guidelines and support systems complicates the process of building financial resilience. Without the security of regular income or employment benefits, creative professionals including theatre actors must rely on their resourcefulness and ingenuity to weather economic uncertainties which becomes fairly difficult. Jayanta, a male participant who has 11 years of experience in theatre stated, ‘As a theatre artist, I pour my heart and soul into every performance, but the financial instability often leaves me anxious about my future. It is a constant struggle to balance my passion for the stage with the practicalities of the profession.’

Globally, unions for actors exist across various acting domains, serving as advocates for the rights and well-being of performers worldwide. The necessity for such associations arises from a multitude of reasons, serving as vital guardians of professional standards and protections within the creative industry. Such organisations uphold a universal standard of professionalism regardless of an actor’s place of employment, mitigating exploitation and ensuring fair treatment, benefits, safety, and rights for all performers. In the United States, the Actors’ Equity Association and SAG-AFTRA stand as prominent examples; in the United Kingdom, the Equity formerly known as the British Actors Equity Association existed since 1930 for the performing arts and entertainment industries (Ates, 2023). However, in India, the Federation of Western India Cine Employees (FWICE) serves as a representative body for professionals within the entertainment film industry

including actors, directors, choreographers, and technicians (Sandeep, 2023). In the case of theatre, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) established during British rule in 1943, stands as India's oldest association of theatre artists, championing themes aligned with the freedom struggle of the country aimed to foster cultural awakening across the nation. In 1947, the Assam chapter of IPTA emerged, dedicated to promoting humanity through cultural endeavours, boasting collaboration with esteemed figures (DU BEAT, 2019). However, despite its venerable status, IPTA's influence in addressing grievances or advocating for improved working conditions within Assam's theatrical sphere and nationwide remains limited. This highlights the dearth of a strong support network for theatre artists in India, leaving them with nowhere to turn for assistance in addressing their issues, thereby amplifying their challenges.

Despite their passion for the craft, many stage actors struggle to maintain a decent standard of living, grappling to meet basic needs such as housing, healthcare, and education expenses. The disparity between the demanding nature of their work and the financial rewards they receive can lead to a diminished quality of life for these artists. While theatre work offers intrinsic fulfillment and creative satisfaction, the financial realities of the profession can pose significant challenges to the livelihoods of practitioners. The lack of stability and security, coupled with limited avenues for savings, underscores the need for proper support and advocacy for the welfare of theatre artists. One female participant named Palak who quit the industry during the pandemic highlighted, 'I loved theatre, but the reality is that passion alone cannot pay the bills. Many of us are forced to take on side gigs or compromise our standard of living just to pursue our dreams. I had to quit during the pandemic and take up another job because of no work and no money. There is a need for acknowledgment and necessary support systems to ensure that artists can thrive both artistically and financially.'

The majority of the participants expressed a strong desire to pursue theatre as their primary passion, however, they admit that they cannot depend on it for their livelihood. Even artists employed by repertory companies find themselves engaging in independent projects during their off hours and collaborating with various creative groups and projects to generate additional income needed for their sustenance. The pursuit of creative fulfillment remains a driving force, but the reality of navigating financial insecurity and limited opportunities casts a shadow over their capacity to make decisions about their future in this field.

4.8 Chapter Conclusion

Theatre work is both fulfilling and demanding, taking into account the physical and emotional experiences of the artists involved. Theatre acting requires unwavering dedication and a high level of commitment, as stage performances are typically performed in real-time before a live audience without any opportunity for do-overs or retakes. Collaboration and proper communication skills both are essential for bringing a production to life.

The creative industry, encompassing various mediums, is a domain filled with passion and hard work along with unpredictability and risks. Theatre professionals are frequently perceived as being underpaid and overworked. They grapple with uncertainty as they lack a steady source of income and the ongoing challenges of securing their next job persist due to the absence of regularity and job security. Most of the theatre actors in the region get their next work based on their previous performances or through recommendations. Consequently, cultivating relationships and establishing connections becomes an integral aspect of their profession. The repertory artists still receive a fixed stipend even if it falls short of their needs. However, freelance stage actors consistently contend with an unreliable income situation. They can sometimes find themselves juggling multiple work projects simultaneously, while other times, they have no work at all. The thespians do not receive any kind of employment benefits and protection like other job workers. Their workplace often involves long and irregular hours, as they engage in rehearsals and performances at night and on weekends with no extra pay. Instead, they may find themselves covering expenses for travel and other miscellaneous costs.

The participants shared how they lack financial and social security in this line of work which often curbs their future plans in the industry. Several participants emphasised their desire to fully commit to this profession but found it impractical due to the meagre compensation relative to the demanding workload. It becomes essential to seek supplementary income sources for sustenance. It obstructs their ability to concentrate on pursuing their passion, developing their skills, and enhancing their craft, often affecting their professional development and long-term career growth.

The absence of a proper authority to address concerns and discrepancies is a significant drawback for vulnerable artists who lack the support of unions to voice their complaints and

grievances. Despite efforts to create an umbrella organisation aimed at uniting theatre actors of different forms, a lack of unity among the individuals involved hindered its successful establishment. This challenge is particularly pronounced in the Indian context, specifically in Assam, as evidenced by the narratives of participants. In this region, the theatre industry is not as structured or financially robust as it is in other parts of the world.

India receives relatively limited support for the arts, although funding for the arts is generally scarce worldwide. While there exist government schemes and initiatives to help theatre artists, they lack consistency and many are unable to access the benefits. The implementation policies are flawed and a significant portion of the theatre community remains unaware of the various schemes. None of the participants could mention a government financial scheme specifically intended for theatre and the artists involved in it. The number of beneficiaries benefitting from these initiatives is considerably smaller than the total number of artists involved in the industry. Moreover, due to the absence of official records documenting the number of artists engaged in this occupation, it is challenging to monitor and unite them under a single umbrella organisation.

The thespians are already in a line of work that is unreliable and the COVID-19 situation magnified the issues further. They went through the loss of work, shutdowns of production, a dearth of income, and a lack of support measures during the trying period. Many artists banded together and appealed to the government for assistance when they could not sustain their livelihoods. Those who had the option to do so looked for alternative sources of income.

In the context of traditional theatre forms like Bhaona, the situation differs as most of the villagers who participate in Ankiya Naats do it for spiritual satisfaction rather than financial gain. However, when Bhaona extends to various platforms and professional artists get involved to portray the roles, a similar issue arises. The situation depends on the organisers and the production houses. In the case of Bhramyomaan as well, the popular and well-known actors receive higher compensation than the general artists irrespective of talent and hard work, leading to a form of injustice. The emphasis on a name that runs the show often takes precedence, hindering the struggles of other artists. Nonetheless, during the pandemic, individuals associated with these performances suffered due to the cancellation of shows, affecting them financially and mentally.

Despite not having any retirement age in this field, most artists cannot afford to continue this career as a full-time profession due to the precarious nature of the work. Creative livelihoods come with numerous challenges, yet thespians continue to pursue their journey whether as freelancers or part-time artists, driven by their passion. Stage actors embrace the opportunity to bring different characters and their stories to life, establishing connections with audiences through their performances. As one participant aptly remarked, ‘You live your life in theatre so you cannot simply walk away from it.’

CHAPTER 5: THE PRESENTATION OF EMOTIONS ON STAGE

5.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to demonstrate how stage actors work to create emotions to embody a role, as well as the emotional implications of such work. Acting in theatre involves bodily capital and regulation of emotions which the actors have to adhere to stay true to their characters and engage the audience. It is crucial to understand how stage actors construct emotions to embody a character and the challenging emotion-management processes they go through. This chapter explores the concept of emotional and artistic labour that goes into this line of work and how it affects their performances.

The interview data were focused on understanding- (1) how the actors communicate their experiences about their acting responsibilities, (2) how they create their character roles and inhabit them, (3) the various facets of emotional labour they expend, and (4) the undefined bounds of work and its eventual effects on their personal lives.

5.2 Stage Acting

Acting is about bringing a character and a play to life in front of an audience in a spontaneous manner. Years of preparation and work help an actor reach the state of spontaneity that involves a culmination of theoretical study, research, and classroom training rehearsals along with physical and mental activities before the final performance. To be a good actor, the indication that one is aware of their actions on stage should not be present. The character is not merely passing through the stage, it is coming from somewhere and returning somewhere and that has to seem authentic. Once onstage the actor needs to express themselves as the character role they are portraying rather than simply pretending and to do so rightfully, preparation plays a vital part.

Being an actor is not just being exceedingly emotional and pushing all sorts of energy. It is an amalgamation of play and technique that allows for a free flow of impressions along with the components that can help reach the required emotional depth. Being grounded in the body and the enunciation of physical and vocal plays a vital role to reach that depth and transmute the actor into

a multifarious character (Morones, 2015). Also, it is a sign of a true actor if he can expand beyond the stage and connect with the audience by displaying an authentic performance, moving and inspiring them along with providing them entertainment. An actor tends to perform with a passion that involves expressions and emotions on stage to enthrall the audience by adhering to the character role.

5.2.1 Stage Actors and Their Character Roles

Daniel Day-Lewis, a renowned award-winning method actor would immerse himself into his characters so deeply that at one time he managed to conjure up the spirit of his father on stage during a performance of Shakespeare's Hamlet. As he got to the part where the character had to speak to his father's ghost, he broke down in tears and went off the stage. It eventually led him to take a break from acting and become a shoemaker.

Acting is a profession that enables creative identity shifts and makes actors think that they transform into someone else throughout a performance while they prepare and experiment with their character roles. Actors must associate with the core of a character to portray them accurately. This identification process with a character establishes a relationship between the emotional lives of both the actor and the character (Nuetzel, 2000). Bandalj in one of his essays on Method acting outlined how actress Jennifer J. Leigh maintained a personal journal written as her character role, essaying the character's memories and encounters, all envisioned by Leigh herself (Bandalj, 2003). Similarly, Jessica Lange while describing her character of Cora in *The Postman Only Rings Twice* shared that she manufactured a complete historical background of her character role, and in her made-up world; she would live out every particular component of her life starting from childhood memories to the experiences up until that point.

One of the participants Rashi, who has been associated with the theatre field since childhood, has opened an art and culture space in the heart of Guwahati city. Started as an actor, and she is now a facilitator, scriptwriter, producer, and director. While talking about actors and their embodiment of a character, she highlighted, 'I give my characters background sketches, story, emotions as if they are me. That helps while enacting a character and when writing one. I tell my actors to think of someone who isn't you but sculpt the character as you.'

Acting is defined as the exploration of a new identity or the creation of an alter ego to depict a character. In his book *The Psychology of Acting*, Kjerbuhl-Peterson (1935) stated that Goethe who was a playwright and novelist urged the actor to eliminate his inherent self to create a role. The actor must travel into the subconscious mind to discover the essence beneath the character's feelings. This essence would connect with both the character and the actor, resulting in a more realistic performance. The actor is true to his role if he surrenders fully and lets himself get consumed by the role. The authentic performance is one in which the actor's self-identification is successfully replaced by the character's identity. This concept is rooted in Stanislavski's idea of Method acting. Originating from Russia, this theory believes that actors need to live within their roles forsaking their native to feel and learn the emotions of their characters. Stanislavski believed that when an actor amalgamates with his/her character role, it leads to the birth of a new entity. Actors involved in method acting use memory exercises to live and re-live formerly experienced emotions which help them generate genuine emotional responses to embody a role (Hagen & Frankel, 1973). While embodying a role authentically, actors may manifest the role to such a degree that it exerts severe influence in their everyday lives (Stanislavski, 1936).

5.3 Acting Work: Embodiment and Emotional Labour

Hannah et al. (1994) argue that the actor does not construct a role in a vacuum, but rather brings his or her personal history and experiences into the role including their emotions, memories, and motivations. The actor identifies with the role and establishes a link between the emotions of the character and his own. The two identities - one of the actor and the other of the character – are merged in the creative process. Throughout the production process, the scenes are infused with mingled emotions.

As Stanislavski's acting process highlights, method actors perform memory exercises that help them recollect a previously experienced emotion that can trigger realistic emotional responses for role embodiment. Actors in this approach learn to feel the emotions of their roles by practically living within the part. Oppose to that, Denis Diderot who was a French philosopher in his book *The Actor's Paradox* talked about acting styles and paved the way for modern acting theory. Acting, according to Diderot, is a three-stage process in which the actor observes powerful emotions, focuses on how these emotions are expressed behaviourally, and tries with varying tones and gestures. This technique helps the actor to achieve the ideal combination of acts that accurately

represent the character's reality. Diderot claimed that the best actors follow these processes throughout rehearsal and performance and as a result, can achieve authentic realism without involving themselves emotionally (Diderot: 1952, Goldstein & Winner: 2010). Emotion and cognition are supposed to be kept distinct under Diderot's acting theory. He believed that the actor's purpose was to be able to elicit tears without feeling any emotion. On a similar note, Bertolt Brecht - the pioneer of Epic theatre - believed that audiences should remain objective and detach from the play so that they do not lose themselves in the narrative (Hecht, 1961). For Brecht, theatre is political as it shapes society. Therefore, it is not necessary to make it an immersive theatre. The distinction between the actor and the character must remain so that the spectator can remain as an active critical observer rather than be engrossed in the emotionality. It does not necessarily mean that actors do not get involved with their characters but they must know when to retrieve.

Lev Vygotsky, a psychologist addresses this issue in his work *The Psychology of Art*. He argues that to create an effective replication of intense emotional situations that produce catharsis², the technique alone is inadequate. To create emotive performances based on a theatrical script and deliver them effectively to elicit an emotional response from spectators who are aware of the stage's artifice is a complex task (Vygotsky, 1971).

The psycho-physiological aspects of performance, according to Vygotsky, should be directed at the actor and his psychology. These aspects are culturally placed as the creative efforts of the performers shift from theatre to theatre and from period to period. Vygotsky (1999) believes that the actor embodies the social ideology of his time and it changes in the process just like how forms of theatre, its style and substance alter over time, the idea resonating with Stanislavsky's dramatic philosophy. He argues that this line of thought aids in resolving problems about the extent to which emotional performances rely on the actor's true emotions.

When asked about different acting techniques and what they employ, one of the participants, Mrigakshi who has been in the theatre industry for 12 years shared her views:

There are different styles of acting to go about. I often switch from one to another, mixing different acting techniques depending on the role. For an actor

² Catharsis, according to Aristotle, is the purification of the emotions of pity and dread evoked in the audience by a tragedy. It is used in dramatic art to delineate the impact of tragedy, and even comedy and other artistic genres, on the audience. (J Lear, 1988)

knowing who we are is important because the distinction often gets blurred. As an actor, we play characters for so long, and with practice, we get involved with them. Therefore, we need to know who we are so we can come back from it. But again, it is easier said than done.

Another participant Harsha has a bachelor's degree in performing arts. She highlighted:

There are several schools of thought on acting. Like method acting where we need to immerse ourselves into the character completely and that can be taxing. It is not a casual exercise because, at the end of the day, it can take a toll on us. When I immerse into a character, I am practically giving a part away from myself. When I take up a character, I prepare for a long time and get into a process, and eventually cannot get out of it. Even if we do not set out in a rigid process, it becomes a habit over time. It is hard to switch off from that and it certainly takes a significant amount of time to break the zone.

The actors and directors who belong to different epochs have varied psychologies, thus making actor psychology a social category rather than a biological one (Vygotsky, 1999). Thus, when an actor creates different emotions, feelings and impressions on stage, those become the emotions of the audience too. When the theatrical audience emotionally reverberates with performance; it is based on shared social consciousness, social understandings of sorrow, contentment, pity and other emotions as well as how to express them properly within established sets of conventions (Smagorinsky, 2011).

The *Natyashastra*, a seminal text in the realm of Indian theatre, holds the distinction of being the first to explore the intricate workings of the performers' minds in the annals of Indian drama. It bestows significant emphasis on the crucial aspect of acting which plays a vital role in satisfying the audience (Richmond et al., 1993). Effective communication between the actor and the audience was believed to be achievable only by a skilled actor. In ancient India, theatre practitioners relied on the audience's judgment to assess the quality of acting. When the audience, profoundly influenced by the actors' portrayals, would erupt in laughter or be stirred to intense emotion, expressing their feelings vocally or physically, it signified a remarkable triumph for the actors, a success in connecting with the spectrum of human experiences. Furthermore, the

Natyashastra delineates that a performance ascends to divine accomplishment when the auditorium is brimming with an attentive audience, free from any distraction or disturbance (Chattopadhyay, 2013). Central to its discourse is the notion of Rasa, a profound exploration of the psychological impact of theatre. Rasa scrutinises the myriad emotional states that can be evoked, experienced, and shared by both the actors and the spectators, illuminating the intricate interplay between the artistic creation and the profound resonances within the human psyche.

5.3.1 Application of Emotional Labour

Emotional labour refers to what service industry employees undertake in addition to their physical and mental tasks. In a service economy, workers are expected to regulate their emotions while at work as many roles in the industry demand public engagement. They must shoulder the burden of presenting themselves attractively to clients, managing their emotions, and remaining polite at all times. Therefore, they need to demonstrate genuine concern for the needs of clients, smile, and maintain positive eye contact, all of which are crucial elements of their job (Hochschild, 1983).

Goffman in his work of dramaturgy highlights that roles and role-playing are based on stage acting and the theatrical stage. He employs theatre as a metaphor to examine everyday behaviour. He asserts that when children, stage performers, or others imitate a character; they do it for the goal of pretending; and here “doing is not being” (Goffman, 1959). The stage actor, according to him, does not have to take responsibility for her or his character's actions because they are performed in a make-believe world. He/she does not need to show a distance from the role as the audience is aware of it. The actor can embrace it, thereby focusing on “playing at” and distinguishing it from other types (Bergman Blix, 2007). Stage performers, as per Goffman, become overly invested in the feelings linked with the character because they can portray them without the risk of negative consequences that can arise in everyday life.

Hochschild was critical of Goffman as she believed that he failed to distinguish between acting that involves managing outer expressions and acting that involves managing emotions (Hochschild, 1979). For Goffman, people have emotions, and stage acting does require emotional expression, but the feelings just seem to exist without any work on the part of those who express them.

Hochschild's assessment of *The Managed Heart* includes an examination of theatrical acting which she uses to critique Goffman's work. She grounds her depiction of theatre actors on a work by the most well-known acting pedagogue, Stanislavski (1936). Hochschild distinguishes between two acting techniques: English and Stanislavski. The English style is known as "surface acting," in which the actor meticulously controls his or her actions and facial expressions to persuade the audience that he or she is a specific character. The Stanislavski style, on the other hand, represents "deep-acting," in which the actor portrays a character using his or her own emotions, therefore enacting the role in a more personal, deeper way. These various ways mirror how people in other occupations deal with their emotional appearance.

Hochschild relates to how people engage with emotions to display them to the appropriate degree and at the appropriate time. She contrasts emotion work, which alludes to our emotional management in the personal sphere, such as attempting to express happiness at an event, and "emotional labour," which refers to the same type of effort in the professional sphere, such as attempting to be pleasant to customers or sympathetic towards patients.

An independent theatre artist and one of the respondents Heena, said:

Most of the time when I take up a character, I first jot down my similarities with the character. Suppose I am a jolly person, but my character is soft and timid, I adapt and tone down my real personality traits to match my character role. As currently I am doing a character from a period drama, it is from a different world and is demanding a lot from me, affecting my personal space and psyche. I am researching and thinking about it all the time, therefore, manifesting it to full effect.

Surface acting, according to Ashforth and Humphrey (1993), does not imply a lack of feeling; rather, the projected emotion may differ from the actual emotion. Nevertheless, while these concepts are empirically and intellectually valid, there is no obvious distinction between surface and deep acting, or between "playing at" and "playing," in acting schools or acting practice. Instead, depending on the situation and their personal preferences, stage performers swing between and deploy various representations of these modes.

Mrigakshi has acting experience for many years within and outside Assam. Portraying different roles on television and theatre, she shared:

I draw insights from real-life experiences. I rely on emotional memories, i.e., when I go through any experience, I make a mental note of it and refer back to it depending on the performance I am giving. There is a mental dictionary of emotional experiences and memories from which we draw. It is an easy reference point. But not all performances need or deserve in-depth involvement. Sometimes only a surface job is enough. At that point when we are on stage, I do not go back to old experiences instantly as the things on stage happen too fast. Here I refer to muscle memory along with the props and backdrop on stage that works in our favour.

5.3.1.1 Surface and Depth

Hochschild's emotional labour has been expanded by different researchers to understand work that needs one to induce or repress emotions to maintain the outward visage that generates the correct frame of mind in others (1983). Research studies examine emotions in professional life from a variety of viewpoints, including the idea that barriers between personal and professional are vanishing (Hochschild, 2001; Rafaeli & Worline, 2001).

Surface acting is a form of impression management, just like Goffman's dramaturgical analysis (Goffman: 1959, 1990) of daily encounters. It is directed toward an individual's outward behaviour. Hochschild's explanation uses facial expressions as instances of surface acting (Hochschild, 1983) that emphasise deliberate manipulation. The actions, gestures, and mimics are consciously performed in the initial phase; all of it is a part of surface acting but gradually that display gets habitual and happens mechanically without effort (Bergman Blix, 2007). According to Ashforth and Humphrey (1993), outward behaviour does not necessarily indicate a lack of feeling; however, it implies that the perceived feeling does not match the expressed sentiment. Thus, suppressing felt emotions as well as acting out emotional manifestations, are examples of surface acting. Simulating good feelings while concealing negative emotions is quite typical in this case, however, this can differ by profession. For instance, flight attendants seek to maintain their image by training to smile, act with poise, and have excellent customer service skills; even sympathising and dealing with passengers with aggressive behaviour in a calm and sophisticated manner. There can also be a dual consciousness lingering in such professions wherein a flight attendant might hide their feelings from a passenger while considering the latter's predicament in

private. In such a circumstance, surface and deep acting may be combined in the process. When such emotional synchronisation occurs in the service sector, it is not surface acting but rather labour on the part of the employees to build a genuine and meaningful engagement (Huynh et al., 2008).

Deep acting involves suppressing feelings or producing an emotion by evoking specific ideas or experiences, as opposed to surface acting, which involves acting out emotions to comply with workplace standards. It accomplishes this by encouraging individuals to experience these self-inflicted emotions (Hochschild, 1983). Initially empathising with others in their workplace, the employees then justify their actions concerning their position. They consciously alter their feelings, then act accordingly (active deep acting). However, as people continue to see and respond to the social world around them regularly, their emotions begin to unconsciously conform to their work norms as they invest more time in the field (passive deep acting).

Because the actor must deliberately elicit thoughts, images, and memories to be able to turn on the proper emotions, deep acting involves more work than surface acting (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). They contend that the results of these efforts may be detrimental since they think deep acting may skew innate reactions and diminish the employee's sense of being their true selves. Generally speaking, explanations of deep acting place more of an emphasis on the impact it can have or how individuals deal with performing it than on how it is created (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1990; Rafaeli & Worline, 2001; Guerrier & Adib, 2003; Korczynski, 2003).

5.3.2 Emotions at Work: Interplay of Surface and Depth

Between the presentation of executing a task and its actual performance, dramaturgical theory draws a crucial contrast (Goffman, 1959). A teacher is trained to be unbiased towards the students, but the presentation of neutrality is deeply significant for providing a supportive environment in the education system. While the former is typically the focus in professional life, Goffman demonstrates that the latter is about as important. Stage actors' primary responsibility is to present, analysing daily role-playing a suitable parallel to the theatre and actors' labour in presenting roles (Goffman, 1959, 1974).

Contrary to the people who have to control emotions at work with little to no training; stage performers receive professional training, continual practice and the opportunity to embody various roles, making them exceptionally competent at managing their emotions. In addition, stage performers can indeed be thought of as “privileged emotion managers,” thus allowing them to explore the act of professionalising emotions in a setting that fosters feeling management (Bergman Blix, 2014; Orzechowicz, 2008).

While talking about her experiences, Harsha shared:

I am playing a character in a Greek tragedy adaptation. I have been watching plays, and reading about that period to understand the world differently than mine. I was a closed person and suppressed my emotions in real life. During one workshop, I realised that it directly impacts how I sound. While working on stage, voice matters a lot and it comes under a technical process. So, I attended workshops where they teach methods and exercises to work on it. I noticed that the teachers can go from being loud to soft with a snap of a finger. Similarly, we are taught to alter emotions, and physical presentations in an instance. Even if it is not authentic, it should come off as real on stage.

Surface acting is defined as working from the “outside in,” emphasising expressive behaviour to alter emotional experience, while deep acting is defined as working from the “inside out,” centering on experience to synchronise expressions (Hochschild, 1990). Our propensity to feel emotions, such as happiness or sadness, is shaped by feeling rules, but how we portray that happiness or sadness is shaped by display rules. Emotions are often regulated without much conscious thought, with emotional socialisation playing a vital part in the process. Here, experience and display of emotions are intertwined, like when the experience of grief due to the loss of a loved one is connected to specific ways of expressing the loss.

However, Hochschild highlighted that there may be differences between personal and professional standards for how one should feel and behave, and in the workplace, it is frequently necessary to use more purposeful emotion regulation techniques (Hochschild, 1983). Therefore, emotions are always regulated, and the ideas of habituation, double agency, and decoupling help to understand emotional experience and presentation on a more basic level. Repetitive

manipulation and practice can help to learn how to exhibit complex emotional expressions. They eventually develop into habits, and we do them without realising it. A polite smile is a prime example of such a habit that happens in a work setting without trying hard. It is one essential aspect of surface acting. When emotional displays are repeated over time, it leads to habituation. It is a critical component of how emotions are socialised and on a degree of awareness, a requirement to be able to perform emotional displays in a professional capacity. Since habitual emotional displays are socially generated, they are adaptable and can be modified both temporarily and over time. For stage actors, rehearsals play a major role in helping them develop certain habits with their characters. Continual practice and performances help them to learn emotion regulation techniques and aid in their learning how to display profound emotional expressions.

5.3.2.1 Rehearsal Space

Theatre aims to be a transparent process; yet, the human aspect of things can be often overlooked owing to personal issues, stress, and several other factors. The rehearsal space serves as both a crucial safe area of practice for artists to work on intimate and vulnerable scenes as well as a place to relieve pent-up energy.

When rehearsals begin, the director collaborates with the performers to explore and unravel the complexities of the character interactions and the play's ideas. Making staging decisions based on the relationships between characters on stage and the 'props' they require involves thorough work on the playscript. The structure of the play becomes more obvious throughout rehearsals, with additions and cuts in scripts that can occur as the actors' performances start to take shape. The creative team's continuous work is evaluated and discussed at length in production meetings where the director participates. Understanding how each character's role works, communicates, and relates to the theme of the play is essential. Determining the role's purpose in advancing the plot of the play is a significant portion of the actor's job during early rehearsal days.

The production process for films and television calls for a distinct form of rehearsal contrary to the theatre. Rehearsals for films and television are typically conducted on set, with performance and technical factors being equally important. They get multiple chances to reshoot the scene and go through a lot of editing processes before being telecasted for the audience. But in theatre, the goal of the rehearsal process is to practice the performance so that it is error-free when

it is presented to an audience. The theatre actors get one chance to perform it in front of the spectators without any retakes or editing. Hence, rehearsal is a vital step for them to prepare for a role physically, mentally, and emotionally before they enact it for the wider public. Rinky has been associated with theatre since she attended an acting workshop in class VI. With her theatrical experience in the proscenium and mobile theatre, she shared:

Rehearsal space becomes the biggest motivation because we are constantly trying to innovate different ways of exploring our characters. In that space where we are constantly wondering whether we should move now, react now, or not? Sometimes the emotions we are trying to depict come with assistance and sometimes in a natural way. When we realise what works, we try to hone it by rehearsing that moment again and again, so that it becomes believable to ourselves and comes naturally on stage.

During one of the rehearsals, the researcher was present in the scene and she saw how each performer was attempting to identify with their character role. Their parts were read out by the director as his vision of the play was shared with the cast and crew. The members of the production team were there along with stage technicians, who were in charge of all the production's technical details such as set designing, equipment procurement, and general planning.

A significant portion of an actor's work during the rehearsal phase is spent on determining how their character contributes to the play's narrative. Remembering the lines and blocking any unwanted distractions is a basic requirement, but understanding how a character progresses during the play is a more abstract assignment. The play's conditions and how they could cause the character to react during any given instant of his/her stage time will occupy a great deal of an actor's time as well as thoughts. The actor must gradually reach a stage where he/she understands how his/her actions are influenced by those of the other actors. He/she ought to feel confident enough to start responding impromptu to cues from other performers. Heena shed some light on the rehearsal phase before the final performance. She said,

During rehearsals, we learn the physical attributes of our character and figure out the key times in the performance so we can completely inhabit them. Along with that, we need to focus on establishing our connections with the other

characters depicted in the play. Understanding the core of our connections with others from an acting perspective is just as important as knowing who we are in the act. We need to have a solid rapport with every fellow character we encounter.

The researcher witnessed how actors were trying to set up the other performers throughout different stages of rehearsals, which refers to understanding both what they intend to achieve in the scene as well as what other actors require from them to fulfill their roles.

Every technical component of the production, including actor entries and exits, sound and light cues, any plot changes, music, and special effects are handled along with wardrobe trials that serve as the show's run-through and are displayed in the final act. The technical rehearsals and costume rehearsals form a crucial part of the whole process. The costume often highlights any aspect of the categorisation that needs to be strengthened or weakened. The set setting has the power to immerse the performers, aiding them in the last stages of preparation. Harsha who was preparing for her role in a modern adaptation of a Greek play stated how her costume during rehearsals helped her enact the role in a much more fruitful manner.

My character was partially created by the outfit. We need to be mindful of our appearance and the clothing we are wearing. The set instructs us and our roles are frequently guided by the props. We are currently rehearsing for a play named Prometheus Bound. It is a Greek adaptation and the costumes and the set help me to relate to the character of that time and mentally place me there.

Other participants also shared their immersive experiences of taking on roles from the past. Vikas, an experienced actor, transformed into Lord Ram, embodying the divine personality and valor of the character in a Bhaona. Through research and rehearsals, he brought the character's virtuous and polite demeanor to life on stage. The intricately designed attire and wielding a prop bow and arrow helped him embody the role, in a way that the audience could feel the energy and connect to India's heritage. Mansi, a stage actor who is also experienced as an art director and an assistant director, meticulously researched fashion and etiquette for her role as a noblewoman in a play. 'In one particular scene, I found myself gracefully descending a staircase in an elaborate gown which added to the authenticity of my performance, allowing me to fully embrace my character's elegance and poise,' she added.

The extensive rehearsal process in theatre is due to the essence of the form. A sequence may be reenacted by an actor in a movie or on television until it satisfies the vision of the director. The objective is to get one ideal shot, which may require more than one take. The requirements for rehearsal are substantially different for a stage performance, where actors act in the presence of live spectators without the option of reshoots and repeat their performances day in and day out. Because stage performances must be repeated in multiple shows and be credible each time, it is necessary to comprehend the character roles and the conditions they encounter in great depth.

A group's common sets, tones, and emotional patterns are referred to as the emotional climate and play a key role in the development of social identities and group behaviour. Emotional climates serve as a basis for sentiments that have an impact on both individual and group behaviour. Depending on one's position and level of authority, a group's members may have different experiences, which makes their inputs to the climate distinctive and complementing (Barbalet, 1995 in Bergman Blix, 2010).

The researcher witnessed that the actors performed their lines with varying degrees of emotion, and those who shared roles nodded and exchanged glances. The atmosphere in the room was tense and dense. There were just the performers who were practicing a certain scene. In addition to emphasising the value of concentrating on the scene's topic to the actors, the director was cordial with the performers. Although they were seasoned professionals, it was clear that their anxieties collided as they tried to define their respective positions as director and actor. The director snapped at one of the actors at a certain point. When asked later, the actor remarked 'Initially, I become more circumspect. I feel uneasy so I guess it is obvious that the director may get annoyed at one point.'



(Figure 5.1: Thespians rehearsing inside the auditorium, days before the final show)



(Figure 5.2: An actor wearing a costume and using props during rehearsals)

(Source: Primary data)

Reading for the upcoming scene was the first step in every rehearsal. While rehearsing the scenes, the actors monitored their fellow companions, shared laughs, and attempted to establish an

upbeat atmosphere. All of the actors read their lines, however, they briefly sat for the initial read-through before beginning work on the floor. Establishing a productive workplace atmosphere is the main goal in the initial phase of the rehearsal period. The actor must identify with his/her character role in the play as well as with his/her role in the ensemble.

The director and performers form a tight-knit inner circle to create efficient intra-group interactions that facilitate their synergy onstage and foster an environment that encourages character exploration. Everyone else is either excluded or takes part in silence. The actors can rely on the director to assist them with a creative grasp of a character's motivations during the rehearsal period, but they must then embody these motivations to achieve an emotional understanding that is grounded in them from before. They repeatedly enter and exit such an emotional grasp of the character role throughout rehearsals.

Actors are not able to link the emotions of their roles to their personal experiences until they begin rehearsing. After rehearsing for a couple of weeks, they can acknowledge how and why the character feels as they do, and they may then move on to further explore it. The mind absorbs the fiction like it is true when the actors practice with full concentration and work their way through the story's intricacies in a step-by-step process. Their bodies react as though the story were truly occurring to them when they can mentally immerse themselves into the narrative. Emotional comprehension cannot be attained just via creative understanding, but the road must be prepared to accomplish so. In our conversations, the actors revealed that during the first few performances, they had to both act on stage and reflect on their acting. It took a substantial amount of time to adjust to the situation and get a hold of it.

Even when faced with a variation of theme or role, stage actors adapt and adjust their approach to effectively portray the character and convey the intended message. They begin by analysing the script, researching the context, and exploring the character's motivations and relationships. Through collaboration, they experiment with physicality, voice, and emotions to find the most suitable portrayal. Rehearsals provide an opportunity to refine their performance while remaining open to feedback and continually exploring new ideas. By combining these techniques, actors bring authenticity, depth, and nuance to their performances, ensuring a compelling and engaging experience for the audience.

One of the male participants, Jayanta, initially performed in light-hearted roles. He shared how he got a chance to play a dark role in an intense drama. In adapting to this new theme and role, he started by analysing and researching the context of the play along with delving into the character's background, motivations, and emotional journey. During rehearsals, he would experiment with his physicality, body language, and speech to match the intense nature of the role. From working on his posture, facial expressions and vocal tone to conveying the character's inner turmoil, he would collaborate closely with the director and fellow actors, and incorporate suggestions to refine the performance. To connect with the character's emotional depth, he even drew upon personal experiences and used imaginative techniques to evoke the necessary emotions. Through these processes, the actors can adapt and adjust while successfully conveying the complexities of the character and providing a gripping performance to captivate the audience.

The term "stage fright" is commonly used to describe the unease and dread of failing that performers have before acting in front of an audience. However, in my discussions with stage performers, anxiety was more frequently brought up in reference to rehearsals, mainly at the start of practice. 'I feel that there is a whole lot more sweating that goes on during rehearsals than the actual performance,' said one performer, describing how common it is in the rehearsal period. Roma, one of the participants who has been in the field for a long time, stated:

Muscle memory, emotional memory, and rehearsals are very important as they prepare you for a long time. In rehearsals, insights, nervousness, remembering, forgetting and everything happens. Here long rehearsals play a major part as it helps when we get involved in strong characters. It eventually starts leading you automatically. On stage, we need to be in the zone already.

Danish, a college dropout and a relatively new young actor, has joined a theatre group in Guwahati in the hopes of learning the intricacies of acting and building some connections. He has managed to perform in some independent plays and display his acting skills. He highlighted:

On stage, it becomes a challenge as we have no freedom of time and have to switch emotions instantly. We use our past experiences and memories but we rehearse and practice with them for a long time to internalise those emotions and

convert them to sense-memory. So, when we are on stage, it tends to come to us automatically.

Interviews with seasoned performers revealed that they still experience an initial apprehension and that their increasing expertise comes from their capacity to accept and react to it. In a sense, accomplished actors may be more afraid of embarrassment than newcomers. While beginners can be excused due to their inexperience, the experts have greater standards to meet and are required to be good. Misha, a 28-year-old professional theatre actor, has been in the field of performing arts for very long. 'I am trained and experienced in the field of theatre for a long time, so I am expected to not hesitate and be always on my feet. If I hesitate then I am not considered to be good at it,' she said.

5.3.3 Professionalisation of Emotions

Stage actors must be able to portray their emotions while controlling them to do their jobs, such as while expressing anger, they should not lose control and hurt anyone. The definition of double agency refers to the concurrent observation and management of bodily actions, notably gestures, to examine and partake in different activities. It is the capacity to perform an action while also observing oneself performing it (Hastrup, 2004).

Rinky said,

If we need to give an angry shot, we need to think of something that makes us angry. So, it becomes necessary to keep our personal feelings suppressed and focus on the character's emotions. The mind needs to be strong and active to switch to the next scene. We should think and reflect about other team members, cast and crew, to not hamper their performances by keeping our emotions in check.

Stage performers must partially separate their personal emotions from their professional displays on stage to work with emotions effectively. The process is known as decoupling. The actor must choose emotional channels that are consistent with the character on stage. Personal scripts must be transformed into professional character scripts and modified to adhere to appropriate feelings and display rules (Bergman Blix, 2014). Stage actors are adept at managing their emotions but with every character they portray, they tend to grasp new standards of

appropriate emotional displays. They start with their own unique emotional states but gradually alter them into stage-appropriate mannerisms and emotions through rehearsals.

An effective performance is emotionally sincere. A skilled actor does the acts specified in the script while also gaining the expertise that comes from performing them, rather than just feigning to acquire the experience. But there is some pretense at work as the actors do act as if they are in the situation themselves as their character when they are not. Although they are performing in front of an audience on a stage, they are acting as though they are not. One actor said, 'Being authentic in situations your character is in leads to effective acting. Some things are impossible to imitate. It may include generating your suffering or exposing your ineptitude; either way, it is done within the realm of pretending in theatre.'

When the habituation of emotions is induced by deep acting, it leads to an instinctive response. The mechanised aspect of emotional responses is hard to regulate but with continuous repetition, some facets of the responses may become undetectable with time. The emotional expressions are often thought out in advance, but they usually appear organically as the actor places himself in the character's position and stays open to how that circumstance might feel.

These expressions are the result of emotional encounters; hence have their own gravitas. The emotional engagement and display that emerge from deep acting are practiced and worked out throughout rehearsals to ensure that they fit the character. On an initial level when expressions are deliberately altered and repeatedly done, the outer expressions and display of emotions on the surface tend to become habitual. For instance, if the actor is meant to show anger at a particular moment in an act, he will do it every time, and after a point, an angry expression will start coming naturally to him as soon as he gets the cue. It happens irrespective of the fact that he must be feeling quite contrary in actuality. Roma asserted,

Suppose my character is heartbroken so I know how that feels because I have experienced it at least once in real life. So, when playing a character i.e., heartbroken, we can take inspiration from our real-life experience and relate it to the character and repeat the same in rehearsals. I believe taking away from personal encounters subconsciously or consciously is always a part of acting. There is a lot

of suppression and expression of emotions that occur backstage while training for a role and which prepares them to appear naturally on stage.

Stanislavski focused on telling the truth to the spectators. The actor must simply be there on stage, not perform (Stanislavski, 1961). When an actor takes on a role, they may find it crucial to delve into the character's inner world. This involves delving into the character's past and understanding their motives beliefs, and values, which often goes beyond what is written in the script. This exploration is an essential part of creating a believable and compelling character, as it adds depth and authenticity to their portrayal. In different situations, people have various ways of dealing with their emotions, some of which are more helpful or harmful. One may either choose to accept, another may choose to suppress their emotional experiences. It has been found that effectively managing emotions is connected to a wide range of outcomes related to mental well-being, social interactions, and physical health (Noice and Noice, 2013; Gross, 2002). This means that the way we handle our emotions can have significant impacts on different aspects of our lives.

While attending a play, the researcher witnessed a particularly emotional and intense scene where the character lost everything she had. There the actor immersed herself fully in her character's sorrow and grief. As she unleashed a powerful display of raw emotion, her body responded in tandem. Her palms grew clammy and tears seemed to flow naturally. The convergence of her emotional commitment and physical response created an unforgettable performance that left a lasting impact on both the actor and the audience including the researcher who got goosebumps at one point. After the show when she tried to meet the actor, the latter seemed too irritated to talk and made an excuse to leave. A few days later the actor contacted the researcher to apologise and meet her. She mentioned that after the emotionally charged performance, she found herself grappling with the lingering effects of deep acting. As she returned home, a profound exhaustion settled into her bones, as if every ounce of emotional energy had been drained. She lay awake, had a migraine, and was unable to shake off the heaviness. The lines between her character's experiences and her own began to blur, leaving her feeling emotionally vulnerable and mentally drained. It served as a poignant reminder of the immense toll that deep acting can take on an actor's well-being, both physically and psychologically.

The performers need a talent that can enable their capacity to create the experience and bring it to life on stage while being in the present rather than going through intense situations

personally (Hastrup, 2004). Actors require the ability to tap into their artistic talent and skills to authentically portray emotions and experiences on stage without personally going through intense situations, allowing them to stay present in the performance. 28-year-old Luna talked about her experience on how she deals with scenes when there is no similar experience to relate to. 'We cannot draw insights from personal experiences always. If I have to enact a scene and no similar incident occurred in my life before to draw insight from, then I have to create and enact by feigning emotions,' she added. When actors encounter scenes that they cannot draw personal experiences from, they rely on their talent and creativity to feign emotions and bring the scene to life on stage. It highlights the importance of their ability to create the experience rather than relying solely on personal experiences and rehearsals play a major role in this.

The theatre industry is set in a situation where stage actors have to face the audience and perform under the public gaze. They are expected to interact and behave in a certain manner no matter what their true emotions are. The actors must perform emotional labour for the management of their feelings, and create a publicly observable facial and bodily display that is demanded from them. Rehearsals play a vital role as it is through repeated practice sessions, that they learn to regulate their emotions on stage. Erving Goffman's idea of the presentation of self highlights how individuals orchestrate their appearance to present a particular kind of self when they encounter other people (Goffman, 1959). Much like Goffman's idea of the presentation of self, Hochschild's surface acting is defined as when an individual fakes an emotion to meet work rules. On the other hand, Hochschild's deep acting is either done when one tries to suppress an emotion or induce a particular emotion by invoking certain thoughts or memories. The memories are used by the individuals to stimulate them emotionally and legitimately feel those self-induced emotions to present a specific kind of self (Hochschild, 1983).

In an interview, renowned actor Michael Caine claimed that while performing a sad scene he recounts a certain experience from his past to ensure that tears will flow during that moment. As per his memoirs, he has a collection of unhappy memories to which he refers. Naturally, every performer may employ various techniques in their acting approach. One participant stated that it was contingent on the depth of writing. He shed a few tears during some plays because they were so masterfully crafted, much like he might from reading a sad book or seeing a tragic movie. In others, he would typically imagine something incredibly tragic, such as the loss of the person he

loves the most. 'I would imagine that incident while we prepare for the moment where I need to weep, sort of in conjunction with the acts that were taking place, and thereafter transfer my emotion of that internal image into my outward behaviour,' he shared.

Another participant talked about the management of feelings in place of work, and how she believes that they comply with the display rules. Rinky stated:

The process of acting is learned. The person won't be a good actor if he is doing a scene and crying, and even after the scene is done, he continues to cry. Emotions are real, but ultimately, we are feigning only. If somebody dies on stage, I will cry but not because the person really died. It is part of my acting process. I have to switch emotions in the next scene. We need to control emotions, and it is done through practice, training, and workshops at different levels. There is a need to balance authenticity and feigning emotions or else it would look phony.

Apart from managing their emotions in alliance with their character roles, the participants also have to manage their feelings while working with senior artists, directors, or their peers. A full-time stage actor as well as a budding playwright, Farah shared, 'We have to build our social capital and continue impressing our directors and producers. We need to be on good terms so even if we do not like someone, we need to pretend that we like them.'

In this area of employment, maintaining social capital is a crucial component. It is part of the work to gain validation from superiors or influential members of the industry and socialise to make contacts. An essential part of the work, which is carried out through emotional labour, includes strategic flattering and interacting with people who might often have questionable motives. Barsha, one of the participants, was part of a theatre group in Delhi and has performed in and outside of Assam since her college days. She affirmed,

This is how the cultural and entertainment sector operates. I could be mean to someone behind their backs, but I have to be kind to them in person. Keep them happy by being nice to them and flattering them. That is essential to establish and maintain our connections in the field. They can tarnish our image.

The directors, who are at the top of the theatrical hierarchy, frequently subject the actors to reprimands and beratements. They must endure any kind of ridicule or rudeness by maintaining a courteous smile. Misha shared along similar lines:

Industry in Assam still works on contacts. If you cannot build contacts, you are out of your game. There are aged pervert men who are famous names in the industry and you need their validation. So, to be in the game you have to be sweet and friendly to the people you dislike as well.

A few participants had some unflattering things to say about certain prominent figures in the theatre field. The way these individuals treated them at theatre workshops and rehearsals stayed with them long after the work was done. They could not do anything about it then and even now if they tend to cross paths, the actors manage to feign a cordial response toward them.

Surface acting is a form of impression management, just like Goffman's dramaturgical analysis (1959) of daily encounters as illustrated in above mentioned instances on how the actors comply with the use of this mechanism. It is directed toward an individual's outward behaviour. The other way the actors meet the work rules of the display is through deep acting. They initially empathise with others in their workplace and justify their actions concerning their position. They alter their emotions consciously and act accordingly (active deep acting). Barsha shared:

On stage or off-stage, during performance or backstage; an enactment of a play depends on a lot of people working together. We have to understand they are stressed too so even if we are frustrated, we cannot throw tantrums at them. I understand their predicament and respond appropriately.

The process of double agency helps the actors to simultaneously observe and carry out an action by allowing them to explore and engage in various tasks while also witnessing one carrying it out. But with their investment of time in the industry, the emotions start to comply with their work norms unconsciously (passive deep acting) as they continue to perceive the social world around them and react to it on a similar basis regularly. Heena lamented:

We must consistently do the same actions, conceal our genuine emotions, and act in a way that is required of us. People see me in action and offer me advice

on how to improve my appearance, movements, gestures, presentation, and other aspects. But to be effective performers, we must be able to adjust to any situation. My personality has adapted to it over time, and now everything seems to flow effortlessly. Over time, it naturally begins to manifest as a result of the emotional load we bear.

Given how long they have worked in this field, actors have developed a certain sort of habitus that causes them to take their work for granted as it happens without effort (Bergman Blix, 2007). Luna's experience helps us to understand how embodied dispositions and skills become ingrained in a person over time, often without their awareness. As the manipulation of feelings begins to happen organically, the transition to passive deep acting occurs. In the process, their sense of self is undermined, and the repercussions extend from their workplace to their private sphere. One of the participants grimaced saying. 'I am not as brave as I believe in terms of emotions. It takes a toll and emotions get the better of me.'

There are a select few actors who are conscious of the underlying impact it has on their self, but because their jobs need them to carry it out, they instead try to channel it positively. The actors work in an environment where their flow of emotions is placed in a vulnerable manner. They have to undergo various situations of scrutiny, criticism, and humiliation but have to bear it with a passive attitude more than often. Some may take it as a hard pill and others may try to spin it as a learning experience. Like in the instance of one participant, Barsha continued to affirm her work by stating that all the criticisms or remarks she receives inspire her to work harder. She justified by saying:

Even though I may feel down after receiving harsh instruction, I can pick myself back up by thinking that I am acting in my own best interests and it will benefit me in the long run. If I put in the effort and stand out, I'll get more employment.

The industry is fraught with politics. People talk and remark on one another behind their backs and spread rumours. In the cultural sector, where pretense and flattery may be used to advance, everything appears to be a façade. Danish said, 'My short experience has taught me that this place is full of hypocrisy. Even those who are considered intellectuals do it. Many things are

justified as part of the learning process. I often recognise the circumstance and even with such feedback and pay, I try to comfort myself by saying that it will help me develop my talents.’

The researcher’s presence at three contemporary theatrical plays allowed her to study the front stage on how the actors put on their performance in front of so many eyes and lenses eager to capture them. Everything that transpires on that stage is an act intended to captivate the audience’s attention and convey a story. Nothing is overlooked while the spotlight is on them as they ‘act’ their part. The actors performed on stage with confidence and flair while donning appealing outfits, a range of accessories, makeup, and hairstyles as the audience and media watched them from varied angles. The researcher sitting in the front rows at all three times could observe everything in detail, just like the other people present there. Their gestures, expressions, and emotions - all trained and rehearsed - seemed quite natural. They were able to entice the audience, including the researcher, and leave a lasting impact.



(Figure 5.3: A theatre performance ‘Gandhari’ being staged in Kalakshetra, Guwahati)



(Figure 5.4: Mother Courage - 'Xahoxi Maa', staged in Purbaranga Festival, Guwahati)



(Picture 5.5: 'Random Project' being staged at BA Theatre Studio, Guwahati)

(Source: Primary data)

The immediate response of a live audience can profoundly impact an actor's performance, creating a symbiotic energy that fuels the artistic exchange. When an audience responds positively, expressing their appreciation through applause, laughter, or engaged silence, actors often experience a surge of confidence and a deepened connection with their character and the narrative.

This positive reinforcement infuses a sense of assurance and allows them to fully embody their roles. The presence of an appreciative audience can elevate an actor's performance, leading to increased emotional intensity, nuanced delivery of dialogue, and a heightened level of immersion. Conversely, the disapproval or lack of response from an audience can also significantly influence a theatre actor's performance. The absence of applause, muted reactions, or even negative feedback can have a dampening effect on an actor's confidence and creativity. The vulnerability of a live performance means that actors are acutely attuned to the audience's reactions, and a disapproving or disengaged audience can cause self-doubt and a loss of connection to the character, leading to a lackluster performance that falls short of their artistic potential. It is worth noting that negative audience reactions can also spur actors to introspect, reevaluate their choices, and strive for improvement in subsequent performances. However, finding a delicate balance between adapting to audience feedback without compromising artistic integrity remains a challenge for theatre actors. Rashi highlighted,

As the stage lights are switched on and I am on stage under everyone's gaze, I can feel the buzz of anticipation from the audience during every performance. When I deliver my opening lines, their laughter echoes through the auditorium, it fills me with a surge of confidence. Their appreciation fuels our performances; it helps me to embrace my character's quirks with unbridled enthusiasm.

Constructive criticism from the audience plays a crucial role in the growth and development of stage actors. It provides them with diverse perspectives and insights, enabling them to refine their craft and deliver more nuanced performances. By receiving feedback on their portrayal of a complex character, actors can adapt their approach and deepen their understanding, resulting in a more authentic and captivating depiction on stage. One participant said, 'Once a member of the audience kindly suggested that I work on my enunciation during intense dialogue scenes. I took their feedback to heart and focused on improving my vocal clarity for a more impactful performance.'

The researcher observed the backstage situation, which demonstrated that there is greater responsibility behind the scenes and everyone should work with the technicalities. The cast and crew cannot jeopardise the hard work of others. They must be familiar with the plot, understand

the mechanics of the play, and maintain increased alertness. There was a shared conscience and co-actors supported each other with positive suggestions, feedback, and group hugs.

One of the participants shared, ‘On stage, we can improvise. Off-stage, we need to be on our toes so it doesn’t affect the play. We need to be aware and responsible. But when on the front stage, we need not worry about backstage.’



(Figure 5.6: Backstage scene before a performance)



(Figure 5.7: Crew members behind the stage before the final performance)



(Figure 5.8: Group hug among the actors in the backstage before the performance)

(Source: Primary data)

5.4 Blurred Bounds of ‘Work’

Theatre requires the artists to be live on stage, acting and expressing with an adrenaline rush to give a performance and improvising in a single take. When portraying a character role, an actor tries to empathise with the feelings and patterned behaviour of the written character. Lev Vygotsky believed that the most crucial component of acting was embodying a character. When portraying a role in a movie, an actor tries to empathise with the feelings and patterned behaviour of the written character. He believed that the most crucial component of acting was embodying a character. To induce intense emotional intensities that prompt character catharsis, according to Vygotsky, technique alone is insufficient. According to him, the purpose of acting is to “become” rather than duplicate the character, and the hub of the acting process is the actor’s inner state throughout a performance (Smagorinsky, 2011).

It is important to comprehend the real-life experiences of actors who have discovered that certain aspects of the characters they portray or respond to while performing (such as feelings, thoughts, or actions) inadvertently affect their attitudes, actions, and behaviour. The effect lingers both whilst they are performing a character role and after they have left it.

5.4.1 Psychological Implications of Theatre Acting: Shifting Self-Identity

Performance is a process that involves reshaping and redefining our existing understandings of gender, race, and culture. It encompasses various aspects such as the body, language, identity, and sense of self (Pathak, 2015). Acting promotes creative identity transformation and calls for performers to feel as though they transform into someone else throughout a performance as well as during rehearsal and role-playing. It is customary for an actor to change or adapt their personality to create the roles they play. Stanislavski symbolically described what transpires when an actor unites with the character stating that our form of creativity is the birth and creation of a new entity (Stanislavski, 1936). Additionally, according to Stanislavski, performers who genuinely inhabit their roles may be so profoundly affected that it has an impact on their day-to-day lives. One of the participants Mrigakshi shared, ‘Personal stuff should not be carried to the workspace and vice-versa. At one point I was acting aggressively in real life as my character was going through similar feelings. There isn’t a clear-cut boundary between personal and professional space in acting.’

The actor’s character study, acting method, social environment, discourse, prior experiences, romanticised or flawed self-conceptions, and frequently traumatic events all have an impact on the actor’s imagination for role formation. The character’s perspective on the world emerges from the actor’s substitution of his or her actual self for the role. Every person has multiple inner selves (Moreno, 1978). An actor’s natural self may be impacted by a specific persona or character role they inhabit during rehearsals and the final performance, which might lead to anxiety or other issues. When an actor becomes completely immersed in a character role, an extreme form of negative role embodiment might happen. In that case, the actor’s life starts to be impacted throughout and beyond the performance by the character’s negative mindset. Chiranjeet, an actor who has been actively involved in the Assam theatre scene for the past 11 years, recalls how disconcerting it was for him to portray a negative role.

In a past performance, I took on the character of a child abuser. But how does one portray such a wicked role? I realised that I could not just portray the character outwardly. To adjust, I had to be focused and in control of my personality, which was utterly at odds with this. It was necessary to repress my views and the way I perceive the world. My contribution was only a small portion of the overall

portrait, but it was critical to the story's fulfillment. It is stressful and challenging to portray a deeply distressing character, especially during repeated rehearsals and it can take a toll on you. The inner wicked self must be directed or pushed to think that we are capable of evil. It can disrupt the mind.

An actor's innate identity and personality may alter with each new character they portray. The Method Acting approach makes use of both the actor's recollection of prior experiences and an enactment technique (Chaiken, 1972). Enactment is the depiction and investigation of the emotions that the written script provides to create and inhabit a role (Nuetzel, 1995). Actors research their characters' emotions using enactments, which draw on memories to activate the character's behaviour during rehearsals with other actors. An actor has to feel like the character's physical and emotional realities are their own to play that role convincingly (Brown, 2019).

The actor uses his/her resources to explore the interior of a fictional character. Character limits are set forth by the play's textual framework and are restricted to a certain, condensed period during the performance. Nevertheless, one of the participants who had been performing for a long time felt that in a theatre setting, boundaries were harder to preserve. She said that the intensity of blurring the lines between self and character roles increased while repeating the entire emotional journey of a character over and over in a theatrical play.

As personal experiences and emotions entwine with those of the character, the recurring emotional journey of a character can result in emotional exhaustion and identity confusion. This may lead to physical exhaustion, strained interpersonal connections, and stress disorder from repeatedly reliving tragic situations as their character roles. Although not all performers suffer these effects, they serve as a reminder of the necessity of upholding boundaries and giving mental and emotional health priority in the demanding field of theatre.

Taking on a role caused participants to detect changes in their self-identity, especially if the work had a profound personal impact on them. A sense of duality between oneself and the role was described by the participants as something that occurred throughout rehearsals and the actual performance. They admitted that occasionally, they felt more committed to a part than to their actual life. The experience of having their core self or identity eclipsed by a character once they had been emotionally invested in a role was a common topic among all participants. This indicates

good acting which is aimed to make the character seem both credible and sympathetic to the spectator. Roma said:

You try to be yourself as real as you can to be a good actor. You have to know yourself. When we rehearse, we do our homework, adapt traits just as the character-role demands - aggressive or polite - and when we aren't similar to the character, it does affect a lot but we still got to do it.

To portray a character realistically, an actor must be able to relate to the character's core traits (Nuetzel, 2000). Rashi explained that she does not act like herself normally and does whatever the character requires in a scene to capture the spirit of that character. Once she had to portray a character who was a drug addict and smoker. When she had to get into a character so different than herself and hold a cigarette which she has never done in her real life, her hands were shaking. Chiranjeet admitted that he truly believes he is the character while he is performing on stage and always makes an effort to actually feel the emotions that he needs to display.

An actor's personality and natural identity alter with each new part they portray (Chaiken, 1972). At first, Misha insisted that it never occurred to her and said, 'The role is not actually me. I am very hung over the fact of knowing who I am or it may get difficult. We need to draw boundaries otherwise things will spill over.' Later on in the same interview, she clarified her earlier statements and said that occasionally, playing a character allowed her to access untapped aspects of herself that she never noticed before. Even other people have often observed and pointed out a certain thing about her that she otherwise did not realise before.

When playing a role in which she felt emotionally committed, Heena claimed to have felt a profound sense of loss following the performance. 'Initially it used to be a problem during an intense scene. When I don't get a chance to release emotions, I have to carry them home. It is difficult but over time we learn, sometimes we can distinguish, sometimes we cannot,' she shared.

There may be grey zones where an actor loses their natural selves in a character and where the role has an impact on their personality. Frequently, the actor gains knowledge of this experience throughout the performance and after it is done. Based on the interviews, it was understood that for certain performers, this fluctuates and lasts for varying lengths of time. Participants in this study admitted that there were times during rehearsing and performing when

they felt lost in the character, losing their true selves. Mrigakshi and Luna both discussed roles that fully obscured their own identities, giving them the impression that they were unaware of their true selves.

Roma was living the life of the character, and she found it difficult to let go of the character role. She said,

I would find myself speaking and acting in the character's mannerisms in normal conversations, confusing people around me. Even when I hung out with friends and other actors, my gestures and movements were influenced by the character's body language. I tried to have lighthearted discussions, but my words were tainted by the accent and tone of the character's voice. Even a few of the folks near me started to notice and eventually pointed it out.

Most participants had some experience with this scenario and spoke of times when a character lingered with them even after they departed the set. Chiranjeet viewed some characteristics that persisted from his former roles as beneficial facets of his developing personality. Although he believed that the characters, he portrayed did improve his empathy and perception of people, he was unwell for a few days after portraying the role of a molester. Misha described various situations of role residual and said that roles gradually become a part of you. Kunal, a 35-year-old performing artist and National School of Drama pass-out claimed that on occasion it was hard to tell where a character stopped and he began: 'Sometimes the acting pretense is so believable and convincing that people give in to that performance. Daniel Day-Lewis once said that he lost so much of myself in the methods of portraying different characters that he decided to retire from acting.'

Every time an actor takes on a part, he or she must consider how to embody the character and what drives that character. He/she does not always adopt the extensive method and spend months living on the streets to comprehend how a homeless person could feel, but he/she does give a lot of attention to their characters and their circumstances. An actor cannot avoid absorbing some of that intense empathy. It may not completely alter them, but it does offer them a deeper insight into mankind and consequently, of themselves. Actors are on an ongoing, in-depth journey to understand themselves. Identifying facets of themselves from which they can infer allows them

to enter the fictional self when they portray a role. Suppose a certain actor is a little self-centered and is required to portray the role of a sociopath. In the process, the actor will discover some traits and draw parallel lines between him and the character. Actors, like any other human, are the culmination of their own experiences.

In interviews, stage actors have stated that they believe the roles they have performed have had an impact on their personalities and shaped their own lives. Some of them claimed to give their characters prologues and epilogues, which are events that take place before and after the play concludes. One actor shared that in the life he envisions for his characters after the production is completed, they invariably have happily-ever-after endings with no challenges and difficulties anymore. The personalities of the characters are molded and impacted by the actors since to them, these characters embody real life. In turn, the actors' personalities are largely affected by some of the roles they play. It is especially relevant for performers who immerse themselves in their character roles.

Actors are required to know as much as they can about themselves. They are supposed to revert to their authentic selves as laypeople, as regular folks, and not as actors. But it is not as easy as it sounds when the boundaries of work are blurred. Harsha and Mrigakshi shared that since entering the industry, they have become more conscious about themselves and how they present themselves to people. Harsha said,

I pay attention to how I am in front of other people and make a distinction between how I behave on stage and in other settings. That takeaway will always be there and will keep adding to the process of knowing oneself. I do not know how much of it I reveal to the world, because one may be six different persons in six different environments. However, it is challenging since too much awareness frequently suffocates the essence.

Being the centre of attention deprives one of their authenticity and privacy, and it is challenging to maintain it because, despite one's best efforts not to, one inevitably succumbs to it.

5.4.2 Body and Physical Toll

Theatre necessitates a unique form of work that goes beyond the traditional boundaries of labour. Stage actors are not merely performers but individuals who embody complex emotions, invest their energy and dedicate themselves to eliciting emotional responses from audiences. Theatre acting is inherently embodied, where the body serves as the medium through which emotions are expressed and communicated to an audience. Actors often draw upon their own emotional experiences and engage in physical techniques to convey authentic emotions. The intersection of emotion and physicality in acting adds a layer of complexity to the work, contributing to the strain experienced by actors.

Actors in theatre serve as vessels for emotions, embodying and expressing the inner lives of the characters they portray. Through their understanding of human emotions and their meticulous craft, actors become containers that hold and convey a range of feelings on stage. They delve deep into the psyche of their characters, tapping into their own emotional reservoirs and drawing from personal experiences to infuse authenticity and depth into their performances. By internalising and projecting emotions, actors create a powerful connection with the audience, allowing them to experience the joys, sorrows, and complexities of the character's emotional journeys. To fulfill this role, actors employ a variety of techniques and skills. They undergo significant training to develop their emotional range, body language, and vocal delivery. Through exercises, improvisation, and the use of memory, actors master the art of emotional transformation, enabling them to channel and express emotions convincingly. This process is a collaborative endeavour, with actors building relationships with their fellow performers and working closely with the director and production team to ensure a cohesive and impactful portrayal of emotions.

Actors become vessels that contain and transmit the rich tapestry of human emotions, creating a captivating and transformative experience for both themselves and the audience. They engage in emotional labour for extended periods which can result in physical strain and exhaustion for them. The intense emotional demands placed upon actors can lead to muscular tension, vocal strain, and overall bodily fatigue. Examples include actors performing emotionally charged scenes night after night, resulting in physical discomfort and the potential for health issues. Actors may experience headaches, stomachaches, or other physical ailments as a result of the stress and

emotional intensity associated with their performances. These bodily reactions further exemplify the intricate connection between emotional expression and the physical body.

Ritu, a queer, and an 11 years-experienced stage actor recounted her experience of performing in a tragedy where her character endures immense grief. She describes the toll it took on her body, expressing how her back and shoulders felt constantly tense, and her voice became strained from crying night after night. She emphasises the necessity of self-care and physical therapy to mitigate the physical strain she experienced. Another participant Jayanta, shared his journey of preparing for a challenging role that required him to embody a character dealing with intense anger and aggression. He explains how he observed changes in his behaviour offstage, feeling more irritable and drained due to the emotional labour he engaged in during rehearsals and performances. This instance highlights the permeability of emotions from the stage to an actor's personal life.

Theatre acting demands a unique form of labour that extends beyond the confines of the stage, necessitating the navigation of emotional territories that impact actors' bodies. The actor's body becomes a conduit for character portrayal as they employ various techniques to embody the physical and vocal qualities of their characters, including the rehearsal of different bodily gestures, voice modulation, and the manipulation of physical attributes. These practices allow actors to immerse themselves in the character's world and create a convincing and authentic performance.

The voice plays a crucial role in theatre acting, as it conveys emotions, nuances, and the essence of a character. Actors often undergo voice training and rehearse specific vocal qualities to accurately portray their characters. This transformative process involves adjusting pitch, tone, accent, and other vocal elements to align with the character's personality, social status, or historical context.

The body is not merely a biological entity but is deeply intertwined with cultural and societal norms, values, and expectations (Bordo, 1993; Shilling, 2003). Through physical training, techniques, and modifications, actors engage in a process of reconfiguring their bodies to conform to the cultural ideals associated with the characters they portray. This process involves altering not only the physical appearance but also the posture, gait, and gestures of the actors. By meticulously manipulating these bodily elements, actors strive to create a more convincing portrayal, aligning

their bodies with the cultural codes and expectations associated with the character's identity. Makeup, costumes, and prosthetics further contribute to this transformation by facilitating the modification of actors' physical appearances. These embodied performances enable actors to transcend their physical selves and immerse themselves in the realm of the character, enhancing the authenticity and believability of their portrayals. Bordo's theory underscores the cultural significance of the body and highlights how actors' physical transformations are shaped by and contribute to the complex interplay between body and culture in the field of performance. Harsha said,

A lot of voice alteration and changes are required to be true to a character role. During a workshop, we were taught about NavRasa and KarunRasa, which involve a range of activities aimed at exploring different emotions. These activities are essential in addition to physical appearance when it comes to achieving the desired glamour. Everyone strives for glamour and, therefore, we resort to various regimens to conform to the ideal standards.

The participant, Himashri, a 24-year-old girl joined the theatre scene in Assam after the COVID-19 pandemic. She shared her experiences and reflections on the process of rehearsing her voice and shaping her body to align with her character. She detailed her vocal training, where she practiced modulation, intonation, and accentuation to capture the character's distinct voice qualities. She even engaged in physical exercises and movement rehearsals to assume her character's physicality and adjust her gestures to convey the character's elegance. The process of rehearsals can exemplify the commitment and skill required of stage actors to bring their characters to life while also imposing physical strain on actors. Engaging in repetitive vocal exercises or adopting physically demanding postures may lead to muscular tension, and vocal fatigue and leave some kind of permanent change. 'During a 15-day workshop, I participated in intensive training sessions that focused on theatre exercises, movement exercises, and voice modulation. It was so rigorous that a few students fell ill by the end of it,' she added.

Harsha spoke along similar lines about her experiences in theatre workshops and the bodily and emotional changes she noticed in herself.

In a workshop about theatre and acting, I learned about chakras, which are energy centers in our body. The voice chakra is connected to expression and how we speak. When we have repressed emotions, our voices may become muffled and unclear. When I practice for a play, I noticed that it used to be difficult for me to speak loudly, but with time it has changed. I never cared about my appearance, but after entering this field, I became conscious about how I look and my voice has become louder and clearer.

While the transformative practices employed by actors are integral to their craft, ethical considerations come into play. Actors must balance the pursuit of authenticity with the maintenance of their physical well-being. Actors must be mindful of avoiding cultural appropriation, perpetuating stereotypes, or engaging in practices that may harm their own or others' well-being. The participant's account highlights the need for self-reflection and sensitivity when approaching transformative techniques.

5.4.3 Social Perceptions and Expectations

Beyond how it affects the actors and their identities along with the physical and emotional toll, it can cause a lack of work-life balance that has a bearing on the stage actors' engagements and relationships. When committing to a role, actors frequently face the challenge of having to juggle competing demands on their time from several individuals and activities, which has an impact on their personal lives. Mrigakshi shared, 'People outside the industry frequently do not understand the gravitas of it, and explaining it to them is tiresome. I have seen instances when somebody had to do a show immediately after her mother's demise. The work entails doing such things.'

Maintaining relationships outside the theatre industry may prove challenging, as the irregular working hours and emotional demands of the profession can strain personal connections. These irregular hours can disrupt the typical routines and schedules of non-theatre partners, leading to difficulties in coordinating social activities and spending quality time together. Moreover, the emotional demands of theatre acting, such as the need to delve deeply into characters' emotions and experiences, can take a toll on actors' mental and emotional well-being, potentially affecting their ability to fully engage in personal relationships. Consequently, theatre actors may find it

challenging to strike a balance between their professional commitments and the nurturing of meaningful connections outside the theatre industry, thereby placing strains on their personal lives.

Chiranjeev said, 'At one point in my life, I was spending more time with my fellow actors than with my girlfriend. From rehearsals to the performance, in between, so many days, I spent with my female co-actor than with her. It led to a strain on my personal relationship, and my co-actor and I became emotionally dependent on each other. We even started spending extra hours rehearsing because others did not understand our work, and we wanted to avoid any further arguments. My relationship ended soon after.'

Emotional strain caused by intense acting and pressure to perform can manifest in various ways, such as exhaustion, emotional depletion, heightened sensitivity, and difficulties in regulating emotions. When actors experience such emotional stress, they may unintentionally convey negative emotions to their loved ones, resulting in heightened emotional states within the relationship. Acting, particularly in demanding roles that require intense emotional investment, can lead to emotional exhaustion, characterised by a depletion of emotional resources. This exhaustion can hinder the actor's ability to provide emotional support, engage in effective communication, and maintain relationship satisfaction. It may also increase the likelihood of emotional detachment and withdrawal, potentially putting strain on the emotional bond between family members, friends, peers, and partners. Mansi said,

I was once playing a character consumed by negativity, I found myself unintentionally mirroring their aggressive and violent behaviour in my personal life. Typically, I am calm and composed, but the emotional stress, disorganised schedules, and overwhelming circumstances took a toll on me. Consequently, my romantic life suffered as I became emotionally unavailable.

Theatre actors, being a part of the culture and entertainment industry, often invite increased scrutiny and judgment, potentially impacting familial relationships and partnerships. Despite its rich cultural heritage, the theatre has struggled to gain acceptance as a viable career option. Many families perceive acting as an uncertain and unstable profession, resulting in a lack of support. The absence of familial support can lead aspiring actors to face numerous obstacles in pursuing their dreams, including limited resources, lack of mentorship, and societal pressure to conform.

Female actors, in particular, often face criticism and judgment for working late hours, participating in rehearsals, and collaborating with male actors. These prejudices arise from deeply ingrained gender biases, traditional societal expectations, and a lack of understanding of the professional nature of the industry. Such unfair scrutiny can cause emotional instability and dissatisfaction among the stage actors. Renu like many other female participants sounded frustrated while sharing her thoughts on it. She said,

We hear so many things from family, kin, and neighbours- *Gaan raas bahut hoi gol, etia biya patibo lage* (enough of singing and acting, now time to get married). Even for coming home late from rehearsals, as a female, I am schooled by everyone. My father does not like it and gets easily influenced by others. It ruins our emotional and mental state.

5.5 Chapter Conclusion

It is the actor's responsibility to convey to the viewer what is happening within the character's psyche. The audience has no reason to know what is genuinely going through an actor's mind when they are performing. Although actors are aware that they are acting, their emotions and bodily reactions can feel very real, similar to how a strong narrative may make a spectator laugh or cry. The ability of humans to naturally identify with other people's emotions is what makes this magnificent art form possible. The actor must devote a lot of time to freeing his/her visage and body from his/her own instinctive emotions and habits to naturally portray a character and its associated sentiments. Emotional labour helps them in regulating their emotions onstage as part of their work process.

For an actor weeping like a regular person cannot always suffice; sometimes they have to weep like a king. Although the actor may feel the same way in both situations, the protagonist of the actor's crafted narrative could convey the experience differently. One must either try to express or repress their sentiments in line with their character. The creative build-up to the performance that an actor assumes before entering the scene i.e., the background narrative is very significant. He/she takes the stage fully immersed in the role and the scene playing out onstage, envisioning every little detail before making the entry.

All the participants agreed that they may think about feigning emotions and pretending on stage while playing a character but they always make an effort to genuinely feel the emotions that they need to display. They often hide their true feelings about the situation and resist expressing them. They try to feel and experience the emotions that they have to show as part of their work and eventually cannot just pretend and express emotions that they do not have. It could be understood that the actors enter the field trying to “act” their part as authentically as they can but with time it does not remain an act anymore. It spills over into their actual personalities and personal space affecting their lives for good or bad. From their personalities to their bodies and relationships, emotional strain and exhaustion caused by deep acting can have a massive impact on actors’ lives.

Understanding the influence of the audience on actors is crucial as it allows for a deeper appreciation of the intricate dynamics at play in the art of live performance. The impact of audience appreciation and disapproval on theatre actors’ performances is multi-faceted as positive audience responses catalyse enhanced creativity whereas negative audience feedback can stifle an actor’s performance. Good impactful performances can leave a lasting impression on audiences and fill their minds and hearts with ecstatic feelings. It is a two-way implication with both actors and the audience involved in a dynamic exchange of emotions and storytelling.

CHAPTER 6: GENDERING THE THEATRE

6.1 Introduction

Gender is an essential aspect of theatre productions and stage performances. It has a major impact on how actors shape their performances as well as how spectators react to them. While influencing character development, narrative choices, and the portrayal of identities on stage. It shapes the way stories are told and received, reflecting and often contesting societal expectations and norms. This chapter aims to expand on the dynamics of gender with the help of theatre which often serves as a prism for understanding society. By examining the interplay of gender, power, and representation, it explores how theatre becomes a space for both reinforcing and resisting cultural constructs.

The interview data were focused on understanding- (1) how gender is represented in Assamese theatre and the changes that have occurred over time, (2) how power relations are set in the theatre industry, (3) the way gender shapes the performances, (4) the different facets of societal and cultural impact on the bodies of performers along with the gendered vulnerability found in the industry.

6.2 Gender and Theatre

Gender is a diverse and intricate aspect of the creative form. It may have an impact on plays, performances, and actors in a range of ways. The characters and the narrative of plays are profoundly influenced by gender, which also has an effect on how the story is portrayed and the ideas it conveys. The gender of the performers influences the way they mold their performances and how they interpret their roles in the theatrical scene. Gender standards and stereotypes have historically shaped the approach of male and female performers to their roles, and these conventions and prejudices continue to influence their performances today.

Depending on their gender and the gender of the role they are portraying, the actors have different ways of approaching their characters. This may have a bearing on how the character is depicted as well as how the audience views and reacts to the performance. Female actors, for instance, may confront different challenges and expectations than male performers, and their

appearance or femininity may be appraised in ways that male actors are not. This can influence their capacity to completely inhabit a character and create new challenges for them as actors.

Gender can affect the way actors approach their performances in addition to influencing the plays' themes. It may be utilised in a play with a predominantly male cast to examine themes of masculinity and masculine identity. In contrast, a play with a female-dominated cast can examine issues related to femininity and female empowerment. Playing a female role may require male performers to embrace a distinct gender identity and acquire habits and mannerisms that are often associated with women. When portraying a male role, female performers may need to adopt stereotypically male mannerisms, as well as subvert conventional notions of femininity.

The audience's perception of the actors may differ depending on their gender. Female actors may be perceived as more caring or empathetic, whilst male actors may be perceived as more demanding or authoritative. These perceptions may alter how the audience reacts to the play and may change the play's overall impact.

6.2.1 Gender Representation in Theatre

Gender has been depicted and performed in theatre in many ways across time. This might involve depicting gender roles and expectations, gender identities, and the influence of cultural norms and expectations on how gender is portrayed in theatre. Ancient Greece and Rome served as the foundation for the Western theatrical heritage. Tragic plays were the basis for the Greeks' first theatrical performances, which began around 532 BC. The issue was that Greek culture saw women as inferior to males, which severely constrained women's roles in many aspects of life. Gender roles in ancient Greek and Roman drama were rigidly defined and performed by societal standards and expectations. The stage was off-limits to women because it was deemed dangerous and by having men play their roles, the danger was reduced (Gewertz, 2003). Society had the belief that theatre was something more suited for males than for women; hence men portrayed both male and female characters.

Gender representation in Indian theatre has been a perennial topic of study. Theatre, in general, depicts social ideas on gender norms and Indian theatre is no exception. Indian traditional theatre has been significantly impacted by the religious and cultural traditions of the nation. It is based on ancient texts like the *Natyashastra*, which lays forth the norms and tenets of Indian

theatre. Men are described as occupying a lot of space in *Natyashastra*, the first Indian book on dramaturgy, whereas women are shown as withdrawing from and confining themselves. The position of women as it is described in the *Natyashastra* is illustrative and even reflective of their social standing. It codifies the female protagonists as male-defined ideal women. To mention a few, the woman's dilemma in *Natyashastra* falls within the line of longing, hesitation, sorrow, loneliness, anxiety, fear, parting, pleading, forgiveness, faithfulness, shame, grief, dependency, deception by lover and insults by family (Sharma, 2013).

The public sphere was predominantly male-dominated and within that domain, women were compelled to portray roles predetermined by male practitioners. The female characters were crafted and defined by male playwrights and directors, neglecting entirely the women-centered perspective (Pandey, 2016). Gender roles were tightly delineated in traditional Indian theatre, as the representation of women on stage perpetuated conventional gender roles since they were frequently restricted to that of a daughter, wife, or mother. The *Ramayana*, a classic Hindu epic, depicts women as subservient and docile. Lord Rama's wife Sita is presented as a devoted and caring wife who goes into exile with her husband voluntarily in the storyline. While her freedom and agency are rarely acknowledged, her loyalty and obedience are praised. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is also presented as a patriarchal victim who receives punishment for her alleged transgressions. In the historical drama "Jaymati Kunwari" by Lakshminath Bezbarua (1915), an oral narrative is adapted to produce imagery that became the setting of a vital revisiting of the past and an effort to mythologise within the gendered structure of rhetoric. An Ahom princess named Jaymati leads the rebellion against a despotic monarch, but her uprising is couched in the framework of being a devoted parent and wife. Jaymati was taken into custody and subjected to torture but she never revealed any information about her husband or his whereabouts. Jaymati eventually succumbs to the punishment, and her demise represents the selfless act of an ideal woman for the sake of her husband, the future king, and the kingdom (Baruah, 2021).

6.2.1.1 Portrayal of Women in Traditional Theatre

The portrayal of women in theatre has been an ongoing topic of interest since it symbolises cultural conventions and ideals. Cultural variations have led to varied representations of women in traditional Western and Indian theatre. Women were frequently represented as docile, subservient, and inferior to males in classical Western theatre. Frequently, female protagonists

were identified as love interests or damsels in distress of their male counterparts (Dolan, 1991). Shakespeare's plays frequently presented women as dutiful spouses or lovers who were eager to perish for their loved ones. In *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, Juliet disobeys her family for Romeo and ends up giving her life for him. Besides, women's roles were restricted to particular categories, such as the femme fatale, the humorous accomplice, or the malevolent antagonist (Barranger, 2012). The patriarchal culture, where women were expected to fit into predetermined gender roles, frequently influenced how women were portrayed in traditional Western theatre.

Women's roles in traditional Indian theatre were more varied, and female characters were frequently presented as strong, brilliant, and assertive (Bharucha, 1993). Ancient Hindu mythology and the idea of the divine feminine are the foundations upon which Indian theatre depictions of women are built. Here, female characters were commonly characterised as powerful and formidable goddesses, queens, or warriors (Bharucha, 1993). For instance, Shakuntala, the lead female character in Kalidasa's drama "*Abhijnanasakuntalam*", is shown as upstanding and intelligent, and her relationship with King Dushyanta is depicted as a union based on equality (Mukherjee, 2021).

Despite the powerful and diversified representation of women in traditional Indian theatre, women's roles were confined to particular sorts, such as loyal wives, righteous mothers, or strong-willed queens (Bharucha, 1993). The patriarchal culture, in which women's positions were determined by their relationships with males, had an impact on how women were portrayed in Indian theatre as well. The traditions and cultural standards of each region had an impact on how women were portrayed in traditional Western and Indian theatre. Women were frequently represented as passive and secondary in the former, whereas they were depicted as courageous and resilient in the latter. In contrast to the traditional Western theatre, which mirrored the principles of a patriarchal culture, Indian theatre offered a more nuanced representation of women that was based on classic Hindu mythology and the idea of divine femininity. Both Western and Indian theatre, characterised by their phallocentric nature, predominantly centered around men and view the world from a male perspective (Pandey, 2016). That restricted women's roles to particular kinds that were determined by their relationships with males. Harsha who has performed in traditional as well as contemporary theatre said, 'There are women-centric characters like Mahabharata's Draupadi but they are shown in the pretext of a patriarchal context. Also, the female

independent characters are comparatively lesser than the males. There are stories depicted with women being underestimated and pulled down.'

The researcher attended a play "Gandhari" in Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Guwahati. In the play, from the very beginning when the main female character Gandhari discovers that her husband is blind, she decides to blindfold herself as a sign of solidarity with her husband. She believed that if she could share her husband's blindness, it would help to alleviate his suffering. Her brother Shakuni came with Gandhari to Hastinapura because he saw an opportunity to manipulate her and use her love for her husband and sons to achieve his goal of revenge upon the Kuru dynasty. The play opens with Gandhari feeling helpless while trying to stop the war. She is surrounded by powerful men who make all the decisions, including her husband, sons, and brother. The play highlights the patriarchal society of ancient India, where women had little or no say in important decisions. In the play, it is depicted that Gandhari's husband had an affair with the maid. Despite knowing about it, she confronted him only when she was frustrated with him for not being able to stop the war. Her son was also headstrong and refused to back out from the battle, despite her pleas. Along with all of it, her brother manipulated and initiated the war to destroy the Pandavas and the Kuru dynasty. The play sheds light on the life of Gandhari, who is often overlooked in the Mahabharata. From her perspective, it shows her as a helpless daughter, sister, wife, and mother who is caught in a patriarchal society and suffered due to the actions of the men around her.



(Figure 6.1: A still from the play 'Gandhari' staged at Sankardeva Kalakshetra)

(Source: Primary data)

The patriarchy present in Assamese society had an impact on how women were portrayed in traditional Assamese theatre form, also known as Bhaona. Women were frequently represented as inferior to males and only capable of doing domestic chores like caring for the family and managing their households. As women were formerly prohibited from participating in theatre, male actors often took on female roles in Bhaona. Female melodies or *raginis* are also noticeably missing from the music of these plays (Saharia, 2016). The female character roles were often simple, secondary, and deferential to those of their male counterparts. To illustrate, Sankardeva's first play *Patni-Prasada* tells the story of the failure of Brahmanas to feed the starving cowherd companions of Lord Krishna and their wives' devotion to him. In the *Rama-Vijaya* play, Sankardeva depicted Rama's victory at Sita's *swayamvar*³ and how he beat all the other powerful rulers present there. The plays presented a woman's role as a virtuous, obedient, yet submissive wife. Nonetheless, the dialogues of the male characters in the plays were quite forceful and dominant, reflecting their valiant and domineering attitude (Saharia, 2016).

The roles of female characters in Bhaona were primarily that of a wife or mother, and they were frequently portrayed as epitomes of virtue and purity. Bhaona's portrayal of women was inspired by ancient Hindu mythology, in which women were viewed as subordinate to males. Like in the early stages of the Vaishnava faith, women were not even inducted. Though women were initiated in their later stages, the rite was conducted by placing a veil between the lady and the celibate who initiated her. But even the initiated ladies were not permitted to visit the Sattras' main prayer hall called Naamghar which serves as a place for worship (Saharia, 2016). Women enjoyed the barest amount of religious and spiritual freedom, which is mirrored in their representation in theatre as well. Sita's plea of fidelity to Lord Ram was depicted in one of the plays attended by the researcher, where the plight of women in front of men was observed, highlighting themes of loyalty, sacrifice, and the struggles women face within patriarchal expectations.

³ As per Vedic literature, Swayamvar is a kind of marriage where a woman chooses her groom from a group of suitors.



(Figure 6.2: A scene showing Sita's plea of her fidelity to Lord Ram and other men folk from the bhaona "Ram Parajay Sitar Pataal Gaman" in Dergaon, Assam)

(Source: Primary data)

6.2.1.1.1 Gender Reversal in Theatre

Gender reversal or swapping, commonly referred to as cross-gender casting, is the process of casting actors in characters of a different gender. This technique has been used frequently in theatre since the beginning of time. Greek theatre is the first known instance of gender swapping in Western theatre. Male performers played every role, even those of female characters. This tradition persisted throughout the Medieval Ages when women were forbidden from performing on stage (Normington, 2004; Wright, 1999). A good woman is seen as a virtuous wife with discreet loyalty for just one man, which stands opposed to the acting work that necessitates her to subject herself to the sight of numerous unknown men. (Seizer, 2000). One main reason attributed to the lack of women in theatre is society's deliberate exclusion of them from the public space that theatre represents, maintaining it as male-centric (Pandey, 2016). Therefore, the representation of women on stage was affected by the patriarchal culture of the period, and male performers frequently took on the role of women.

Gender swapping decreased as modern theatre emerged in the 19th century and women started taking part in theatre. Nonetheless, until the mid-twentieth century, male performers often played female characters, particularly in Shakespearean plays. Boy actors were trained specifically as female impersonators to play feminine roles (Slights, 1997; Wells, 2009). In contemporary

Western theatre, gender swapping is used in a wider range of roles by actors of various genders. Cross-dressing in the theatre has a long history, with various goals and motivations at various times. Before, it was thought unsafe to have women act on stage, thus males were hired to play female parts. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, representations of sexuality became more allowable with plays having female performers. There was increasing acceptance of female performers on stage that not only signaled a changing landscape of gender relations but also positioned them as icons within the burgeoning feminist movement of the time. They explored diverse roles, including those reserved for male characters, thus challenging and subverting the binary compositions of femininity of the period (Buszek, 2006).

In Indian theatre, gender reversals have been a common occurrence for decades with male performers frequently playing female roles (Arasu, 2023). This practice persisted until women began to take the stage in the contemporary period. The traditional conventions and norms of the time, when women were not permitted to make public displays, had an impact on how gender swapping was used in Indian theatre. The societal prejudices against women resulted in the gendered segregation of the public and private spheres and prevented women from participating in public demonstrations. Young men with appealing figures and exceptional voices were trained to play female roles on stage. These female impersonators, who represented the societal standards of femininity, were crucial in the development of new conventions of Indian womanhood (Hansen: 1999, 1998).

In classical forms of Indian theatres, such as Kathakali, male performers were the only performers, enacting female roles while wearing heavy makeup and costumes. This dance-drama form constitutes different elements from classical Sanskrit drama, folklore drama along with ancient martial arts of Kerala (Freis, n.d). Similarly, in Assamese theatre, such as traditional Bhaona, male actors portrayed all roles, including female ones. Because women were prohibited from participating on stage, males assumed the roles of female characters that were presented as chaste and innocent based on religious and old traditional themes. In Bhaona performances, the practice of gender reversal remains prevalent within the context of Sattras and rural regions, where organisers often cling to traditional ideologies. Remarkably, it is predominantly men, irrespective of their religious backgrounds, who are permitted to partake in these reversed roles, while women continue to be excluded (Sarma and Dutta, 2009).



(**Figure 6.3:** The female character in Bhaona enacted by a male)

(Image Source: Secondary data; Deepak, 2017. Retrieved from Dancing in Assam⁴)



(**Figure 6.4:** The character of Sita portrayed by a male actor)

(Image source: Secondary data; Pooja Sonowal, 2017. Retrieved from Abhijna e-museum⁵)

⁴ Deepak, S. (2017). <http://kyabaat.blogspot.com/2017/03/dancing-in-assam.html>

⁵ Sonowal, P. (2017). <http://www.abhijna-emuseum.com/articles/bhaona-origin-tradition-and-aesthetics/>

The pioneer of the mobile theatre group, Kohinoor Opera, Brajanath Sarma, introduced the practice of co-acting on Assam's theatrical stages. Aided by Phani Sarma, he ushered in a transformative era in Assamese theatre by introducing female actresses to their drama productions in 1931, challenging the prevailing male-dominated acting landscape (Paul, 2013). Bhramyomaan or mobile theatre witnessed female actors portraying their own gender roles, even though there are instances of cross-dressing but mostly that intends to serve a comical purpose.

For traditional theatre as well, the landscape is gradually shifting in modern settings, particularly in urban centres, where women now actively participate in Bhaona, assuming their own distinct roles and contributing to the performance. Other than playing their own roles, they sometimes even enact male character roles.

The researcher attended a Bhaona in Guwahati, Assam. The play named "Rukmini Haran" depicts the love story of Lord Krishna and Rukmini which is an excerpt from the Bhagavad Gita. The theme perfectly matched the traditional mythological time and transported the audience to that era. The actor who played the role of Lord Krishna was a female and the role of Rukmini was played by a female actor belonging to a different religion.



(Figure 6.5: A Bhaona named ‘Rukmini Haran’ staged in an auditorium in Guwahati city)

(Source: Primary data)

On being asked by the researcher after the performance, the female actor who played Lord Krishna’s role said, ‘It was such an enthralling experience to play such a divine role. This Bhaona was staged in an urban city so you could see diversity in casting choices. Otherwise, I do not think it could have been possible.’

The tradition of theatrical female impersonation can be witnessed in different forms of theatre in India, but over time we also tend to see a new phase of role reversal with more women tapping into their animosity to construct masculinity that is their own. Historically, female actors playing male roles have been considered as anomalies, however, there have been significant instances in other theatre forms where females have played male character roles. This gender reversal has been a common practice mainly in the case of child actors. For instance, the famed Binodini Dasi played the role of Chaitanya in Chaitanya Lila (Biswas, 2018).

Through this phase, female artists can be perceived from a new angle where they are not defined by their gender and are instead able to convey universality that has been attributed to their male counterparts.



(Figure 6.6 & 6.7: A Bhaona named “Shakuni Protixudh” in Latashil field, Guwahati. The role of Lord Krishna played by a female actor)

(Source: Primary data)

As women have reclaimed their agency in different domains, gender reversal is less common or done by both. However, it is often seen that male performers frequently assume female roles for parodical and laughter purposes. Such performances serve as a satire or parody highlighting harmful stereotypes and prejudices about people belonging to the third gender. It can reinforce the idea that non-binary and queer identities are worthy of ridicule rather than respect.

6.2.2 Evolution in Portrayal of Women in Theatre

Gender representation in theatre grew increasingly flexible and dynamic throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, reflecting a larger acceptance of gender identities and expressions. Actors began to question established norms and expectations via their performances. Similar to Western theatre, Indian theatre lacked substantial female representation till the 19th century. From anti-British narratives during the freedom struggle to addressing the grievances of marginalised

castes and groups, the theatre provided a medium for individuals to interact with each other at the societal level.

Before the 1970s, there were plays written by women with a focus on female issues, such as Swarnakumari Devi's *The Wedding Tangle* (1904), which examined the agency of a woman in the setting of significant issues like class conflict and widow marriage (Srivastava, 2022). However, women entered the traditionally male-dominated domain of theatre with the rise of the feminist movement in India. Indian women's theatre gained prominence alongside the women's liberation movement in the West. During the 1970s, socially relevant stories about women's struggles began to infiltrate Indian theatre, which helped the feminist ideology and movement's appeal among the general public. The feminist theatre movement promoted women's participation in the theatrical industry as creators, playwrights, and artists in addition to raising awareness of women's struggles. There was an emergence of sensitive writers who addressed the marginalised segments of Indian society (Pandey, 2016). Being the unparalleled wellspring of empowerment, from adeptly navigating the intricate tapestry of social inequities through incisive critique while concurrently fostering self-discovery and unabashed expression, feminist theatre stands resolute at the intersection of artistic creation, activism, and social relevance working towards bringing real change in women's lives (Singh, 2009). Female voices progressively merged with mainstream Indian theatre during the subsequent decades.

Traditional gender norms have been questioned in contemporary Indian theatre, which was progressively offering women a voice on stage. Women were no longer restricted to performing stereotypical characters, and female writers and directors were developing plays that examined questions of gender, sexuality, and identity. Aspects of gender inequality, domestic abuse, and sexual harassment that were once forbidden are now being addressed in contemporary Indian theatre. For instance, "*Bravely Fought the Queen*," a play by Mahesh Dattani, is an illustration of a piece that sheds light on the confinement and exploitation of women within their homes, revealing that this mistreatment is not solely perpetrated by men but also by other women. In Indian society, women are often viewed as uncivilised, unimportant, and in need of refinement. This play portrays the plight of women who experience exploitation within their own families. It also addresses the sensitive topics of extramarital relationships and homosexuality (Sonker, 2021). The Navarasa Dance Theatre's production "*Encounter*" combines theatre and dance to explore the

violence faced by women in India's impoverished tribal communities. By depicting the brutalisation of women on stage, the performance engages audiences as active witnesses, evoking profound emotional responses such as hope and outrage. These powerful representations catalyse social consciousness and action towards addressing injustices beyond the theatre (Katrak, 2014). Another drama, "Jatinga" by Purva Naresh examines the life of a group of women in a far-off hamlet in Northeast India. The play discusses topics of poverty, prostitution, and the difficulties faced by women in societies that are dominated by men. It emphasises that women are not just victims, but are also resilient and empowered individuals (Wrong, 2017).

The way that gender is portrayed in Indian theatre has changed throughout time, and modern theatre is challenging established gender stereotypes. Women are now represented on stage in a variety of ways other than as the stereotypical wives, mothers, or daughters due to the efforts of female playwrights and directors. Indian theatre is a significant force in the struggle for gender parity and challenging social conventions. The portrayal of women in traditional Assamese theatre has significantly changed as a result of women's involvement in the performing arts. In contemporary times, Bhaona has moved beyond Assamese villages and small towns and is being staged on national and international platforms taking on a more modern approach. The involvement of women in Bhaona has also broadened, with women performing their own character roles in contemporary society. A female participant, Rashi, who is an actor, director, and playwright said,

We can see a change in women's character representation from before. Now a lot of character analysis and context changes in period dramas happen along with new ways of adaptations of old plays, hence making them more grounded. New more women-oriented plays have also come up with more impact of feminism as they present women's desires and highlight their side of the story. Like the character of Sita from Ramayana- "*abla nari, pati vrata*" etc. But now when character analysis is done, Sita is understood as strong, not weak. There are certain issues with Lord Ram which are noted even though he is worshipped. Now if Ramayana is depicted on stage, then adaptation should be grounded on reality and in context to the modern contemporary world so that it can reflect real society. I played a few women-centric roles on stage.

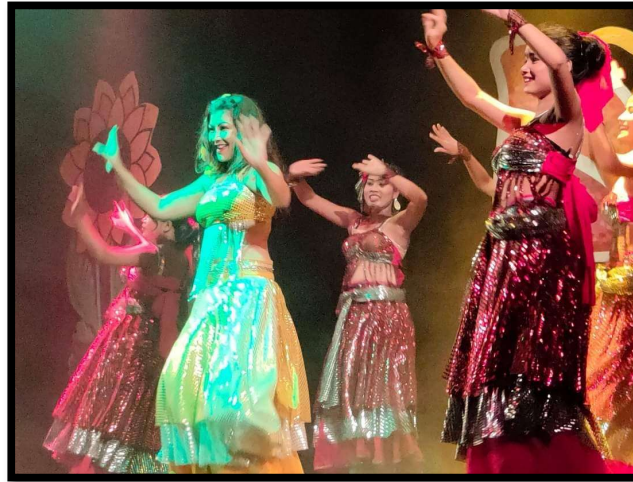
Notwithstanding these developments, traditional Indian theatre still upholds conventional gender roles. Women's roles in traditional Assamese theatre are still affected by a patriarchal society, in which women's positions are often categorical and determined by their connection to males concerning the traditional theme of the plays.

The researcher observed a theatrical performance of Bhaona titled "Rukmini Haran" held at the auditorium of Gauhati University. This bhaona, performed at an urban centre, featured the participation of both female and male actors. Notably, the character of Rukmini was portrayed by a female actor belonging to a different religious background, reflecting inclusiveness in the casting choices. However, it is important to note that the roles depicted in this traditional narrative adhered to conventional storytelling, perpetuating the notion that women's destinies were determined by the actions of men.

Contrary to it, in the mobile theatre of Assam, also known as Bhramyomaan, commercialisation can be seen as a result of the growing demand for entertainment that caters to popular tastes and preferences. Starting from the stories, acting, dressing, props, and environment to the full crowd, there is a shift towards incorporating elements from Bollywood which is a highly influential film industry in India known for its flamboyant and larger-than-life style. The outlandish and loud portrayal of characters, including female roles, within the bhramyomaan is often common and a deliberate artistic choice aimed at engaging the audience and creating an entertaining spectacle. This approach might resonate with certain audience members who enjoy vibrant and exaggerated performances.

The researcher attended a houseful show of mobile theatre play in Guwahati organised in a field with a makeshift stage and removable chairs. The play called "*Moi Natok Kora Suali*" featured a prominent Assamese film actress playing the lead role. The story set in contemporary society showed the female character trying to establish her position as an actor and the hurdles she goes through in relation to that. Her role was similar to that of heroines in contemporary popular movies, both outgoing and strong-headed. While the use of exaggerated characters can be a theatrical convention, Bhramyomaan is a mass-oriented theatre where the stories and characters including female roles are quite similar to the ones depicted in mass films. Looking glamorous and visually appealing is an exciting aspect of mobile theatre as the stories involve elements like romance, music, and dance, all of which can add to the glamour of the performance. As and when

the storyline demands, their graceful movements, expressive gestures, and synchronised choreography add beauty, energy, and a visual spectacle to the performances.



(**Figures 6.8 & 6.9:** The female lead and backup dancers performing in a mobile theatre play “Moi Natok Kora Suali” -top and the lead actors in a romantic sequence in “Captain Avinash” -bottom)

(Source: Primary data)

Rinky, who has always been active with performing arts, said,

There is a break in the kinds of stories that are being told now where the portrayals of women have transformed. But what percentage are we talking about? Like maybe 2-3% of the work probably has changed. We see and talk about it more

because it is different. We are moving towards it but I think there were similar stories that were told in the past, which are forgotten because they are less. Bhramyomaan is a different ballgame altogether as it caters to the masses. Even now same storylines draw huge crowds. More importantly, even the stories told from women's perspectives have certain stereotypical archetypes attached to them so that we tell them in a certain way. Women-centric stories are told from a perspective where it has to be a certain way; women have to be strong in a certain way, built in a certain way, feel a certain way, and look a certain way.

A full-time theatre artist, Roma spoke along the same lines:

There are still so many dos and don'ts associated when a female is portraying a character. Like anger is a strong emotion. We often shy away from it because it is considered ugly. But how we show anger differs from one person to another just like sadness or happiness. When you look at women-centric work, you often see that when a woman gets angry, she is seen as a monstrous woman highlighting what anger makes a woman do. A revengeful woman is a bad girl and the forgiving kind is a good girl. It is ridiculous. Why can't the revengeful woman be a good person? Anything and everything remotely out of place with women is always related to some trauma. We don't give this kind of explanation for a man who turns out to be a serial killer. Why do women need to have trauma for them to do something bad or to rebel?

The researcher observed a play named "Xahoxi Maa," an Assamese adaptation of Brecht's play "Mother Courage" where there are three primary female characters, all with different shades of persona but falling within the gender norms. One of the characters is the mother who is practical and resourceful, relying on her skills to navigate through a patriarchal environment. She is determined to survive and defend her children despite various challenges and tragedies. The second is the daughter who is mute and stands in for innocence and vulnerability in the face of the brutal realities of war. She undergoes a lot of suffering throughout the war, gets deformed, and eventually passes away. The third female character first made an appearance as a camp prostitute and was initially an adversary of the mother but later became an ally. Although she was left

destitute by the war, she is nevertheless determined to protect her interests. She represents female sexuality and the commercialisation of women throughout the conflict.

The portrayal of Xahoxi Maa- the brave widowed mother emphasises her maternal instincts as well as the sacrifices she makes for her children. She may have an enterprising perspective, but her primary motivation is to defend her family. This fits with the conventional idea of a mother figure as being caring and altruistic. The mute daughter is kept in check out of concern for her safety. It is important to note that while her character develops during the play as and when she exercises agency and bravery, she nevertheless works within the limitations placed on her. The third character is sexualised and frequently portrayed negatively. Her persona helps to perpetuate multiple misconceptions about sex workers. This representation might be considered as a reflection of societal attitudes and again relates to trauma that is given by a male which shapes her motives and entire life.



(Figure 6.10: A glimpse from the play Xahoxi Maa staged at Rabindra Bhawan)

(Source: Primary data)

These female characters collectively contribute to the exploration of gender roles, female agency, and the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. Their stories shed light on the resilience and sacrifices demanded of women in such circumstances. When women are not given

a chance to divert away from the preconceived assumptions, by dismissing their varied experiences and ignoring their perspectives, an unjust cycle of demonisation perpetuates, leaving their nuanced reality unseen and misunderstood.

The perception of theatre has changed over time, primarily affecting middle-class and upper-class women but not bringing much change to the lower class. One participant shared an incident that took place in Morigaon district in Assam which is a rural setting, where a lead woman in a theatre performance faced significant difficulties in finding women willing to take on roles. She shared, ‘The reluctance was attributed to concerns about fulfilling marital and familial obligations. “*Husband ae beya pabo, in-laws ae beya pabo* (My husband will feel bad, my in-laws won’t like it)’” Thus, the shift in perception has not permeated to that extent among different social classes. However, in more privileged social strata, albeit to a lesser degree, noticeable changes have occurred. This sudden transformation is particularly pronounced, leading to a heightened sense of its impact.

The power dynamics within the theatre industry remain predominantly in the hands of cisgender males. Another participant stated that even if they were to stage a play at Rabindra Bhawan, seeking the approval of the theatre community in Assam, they would still require male actors and directors, whom they would have to invite to bestow their blessings. In competitions, male judges hold sway, and when applying for grants from the government or other entities, the prevailing route is often dependent on male involvement.

The researcher observed instances at prominent theatre events where panels consisted of a single female guest against a majority of five or six male counterparts. Additionally, this lone female representative was frequently subjected to belittlement by others, attributed in part to language barriers and other factors. Consequently, the prevailing power structure in the theatre industry remains largely intact.

6.3 Power Relations and Hierarchy

Foucault believed that modern power is encoded in a network of social relationships and practices rather than being possessed by individuals or groups (Foucault, 1977). In the case of the theatre industry, power is dispersed through numerous entities such as theatre groups, producers, playwrights, and directors alongside societal norms that influence the industry. Power functions

through a network of connections and is wielded through different practices that include surveillance, discipline, and normalisation.

The director who is placed at the top of the hierarchy has significant authority over the performers and crew members in the theatrical production, even molding and steering their behaviour in the process. He or she may employ this power through a variety of practices, including casting decisions, script analysis, and rehearsal procedures. These approaches generate a certain sort of performance, one that corresponds to the director's vision as well as the larger societal conventions and standards of the theatre industry.

6.3.1 Directorial Hierarchy on Actors' Gender Performances

The way actors represent their roles, particularly how they express their gender, is highly influenced by directors. The variety of gender expressions that should be depicted in a production may be constrained if a director has a conventional perspective of stereotypical gender roles. In this case, the director can demand performers to adhere to certain roles and stereotypes. Male actors, for instance, may be anticipated to perform in a more masculine style, whilst female actors can be expected to act in an increasingly feminine manner. On the contrary, directors with more liberal and inclusive perspectives on gender may inspire performers to experiment with gender-fluid performances. As a result, the production may represent gender in a more varied and complex manner.

The gender expression of a character can be interpreted differently by actors, and if they believe that the director's intentions do not match their perception of the role, they may disagree. The views and opinions of other creative members of the group, including the playwright or producers, might also have an impact on how gender is portrayed in the final performance. Power, as per Foucault's analysis, is not absolute or set; rather, it is continually negotiated by individuals and groups participating in the production process. For instance, actors can question or oppose the director's authority by emphasising their creative input or suggesting other interpretations of the script. It is crucial to understand that, despite the director's vision playing a significant part in moulding the ultimate representation of gender in theatre; it is the consequence of a dynamic interplay of factors. Nevertheless, the director's power is validated by the theatrical industry's norms and practices which place him or her as the last arbitrator of creative decisions. At the core

of this power dynamic is their capacity to determine what constitutes proper or normal behaviour for the performers.

Heena, born and brought up in Nagaon and only shifted to Guwahati during college days said,

Most actors come from small towns with no experience. They have very positive and often conservative outlooks. But if a female actor is not familiar or friendly to work with a male actor, the director opposes that thinking by calling it regressive. We are supposed to be *Maatir Manuh* - grounded, democratic, and work for the people. However, it is very patriarchal, even female directors have to work in a patriarchal environment.

Theatre is an effective platform for artistic creativity and social commentary. Yet, like other creative endeavours, it is not exempt from ethical questions, particularly those about the hierarchy of authority and decision-making in the theatre industry. One of the female participants, Mrigakshi shared:

I was in class 8, doing a workshop in Seagull theatre, and was spotted by a famous director for a play - which tells a man's story looking back at his lifelong relationships. I was cast to play his teen romance. After 2 days of rehearsals, my father saw that I had to romance a middle-aged person so he stopped me from participating any further. I was not even 15 years old then. Physical affection and everything were there in the script. But when a child actor is involved, especially a female, what are the ethics? It is unethical for a 40+ man to romance a minor. There were no ethics involved, and even now, no effort is made to look at the ethical side of theatre in Assam.

The ethical parameters of performances in Assam are a necessary point of discussion, especially concerning the depiction of sensitive topics and the portrayal of people on stage. The situation of the above participant who was chosen to play a youthful romantic interest to a middle-aged actor poses concerns about the ethics of such portrayals, particularly where minors are included. This was a play penned by a male director who replaced the female actor with another female minor rather than altering the story. If individuals in higher structures and power positions

do not use their decision-making authority responsibly and realise the moral ramifications of their choices, it might become a problem. Like in this instance, the casting decision was made without consideration of the possible distress or damage that may result from such a representation. These people have a responsibility to provide a secure and comfortable space for their performers. Such instances make it clear that the ethical ramifications of theatre practices in Assam require a more thorough and critical analysis.

Mansi shared details from her own experiences over the years,

The director decides everything. He is considered elite, most important, and the main star of the production. The autonomy of an actor depends on the director again. Actors are also judged and often not treated with dignity or respect based on their background. They are like pieces of the chessboard that are placed as per what the director wants.

Few directors allow performers the leeway to enhance roles on their own. Others are rigid and impose stringent roles with no room for improvisation. Mrigakshi added,

Art via theatre or screen is mainly to sell to the audience. Some directors give open access to actors to use their creativity, while others control the whole thing as per their vision alone. I have done one play with a rigid director. There was no room for actor creativity but to follow their script blindly. Most directors who were themselves actors might give partial creative freedom to make the roles our own.

Stage actor Rashi has her own theatre space in the city. Being a theatre artist herself, she highlighted that she provides creative freedom to her actors to alter minor things but majorly tries to retain her vision of the story.

In theatre groups, the hierarchy mostly exists. In that hierarchy, the actors are placed at the bottom. It is not a bad or good thing. The actors have autonomy over the work they do. The directors also have similar autonomy so do the producer and the playwright. The actor has to sort of follow it from the get-go incorporating the budget given by the producer for the production, what the writer has written,

what the director has envisioned, to how he or she has interpreted it. If I direct a play and the actor goes completely off-track, then it is a problem. That's not supposed to happen. But that's how the machine works and it works well. However, I believe there should be some room for discussion, communication, and room for negotiation.

Directors, specifically, males often form a bond with male actors, partially attributable to gendered power dynamics within the theatre industry. Traditionally theatre has been characterised by a male-dominance with men occupying influential roles including that of a director. As a result of their shared experiences and viewpoints, male directors and actors may develop esprit de corps, shared pride, and brotherhood. Furthermore, male directors may tend to experience a greater sense of affinity and ease when working with male actors due to shared cultural, social, and behavioural norms, as well as similar modes of communication and interests. However, this dynamic may foster a sense of insularity and gender bias while perpetuating a lack of inclusion. Female actors may experience a sense of marginalisation and exclusion leading to hindrance of their ability to perform effectively. Misha has been proactive in the theatre scene of Assam for many years. She highlighted,

A shared camaraderie between male directors and actors is a common scene in most productions. The males hang out after rehearsals or performances, sharing a cigarette, forming some kind of brotherhood bonding. With men holding positions of power, male actors benefit from that same gender association. With us, the situation is not the same at all.

The “old boys’ club” mindset that has persisted in many fields, including theatre, can foster a culture where males are more likely to support and elevate other men, which can make it more difficult for women to enter the field and establish similar kinds of connections.

In the case of female directors and female actors, a bond may develop. Female directors are well-established with failures so they may share a connection with some other female peers who went through similar hurdles. Luna, a 28-year-old actor with experience in theatre and the Assamese film industry, stated,

An emotional connection may develop due to similar experiences shared between us, maybe because of our gender or anything. But if they are young or the same age as the cast, there is a possibility of favoritism or a sense of camaraderie. But it is not bad or exploitable like in the case of male directors. Even if a male director is a person of repute or incredible talent, they can have a dark side we may not know. There is often a fear or doubt which is not there in the case of females.

Despite progress toward gender equality, gender disparity is still common. Even though women do hold powerful positions within the profession, their capacity to advance the chances of female artists is frequently constrained. This is mostly because mobility is dominated by men.

Along with the ingrained gender prejudice which impedes their professional advancement and limits their influence, theatre strongly depends on interpersonal connections and networks. These networks are frequently created through unofficial connections, mentorship, and referrals. Due to their historically low representation in positions of power, it can be detrimental to females as their ability to secure better opportunities can get restricted. Misha affirmed, ‘Here networking plays a crucial role in securing opportunities. Individuals who express grievances are often labeled as difficult to work with. Moreover, the scarcity of women holding positions of authority further amplifies their vulnerability, burdening them with excessive weight.’

6.3.1.1 Women in Leadership Roles in Theatre

Women and art are two important components that play a necessary role in connecting different generations to their cultural heritage. Women’s character roles have always been a part of the history of drama but their participation in the appearance of feminine roles has been a recent development. Like many other art forms, theatre has historically been dominated by men. When considering renowned playwrights, their list typically features numerous male figures, ranging from Shakespeare to Bertolt Brecht. Female dramatists, however, have been notably scarce in literary history (Pandey, 2016). A research study conducted by the Guardian in collaboration with Elizabeth Freestone of Pentabus Theatre in 2012 affirms persistent gender inequalities, with a consistent 2:1 male-to-female ratio prevailing across the industry. Among the ten theatres analysed, women accounted for merely 33% of directors on the boards, underscoring the ongoing underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Despite these disparities, women constitute

the majority of theatre audiences, as evidenced by Ipsos Mori data commissioned by the Society of London Theatre in 2010, which indicates that approximately 68% of theatregoers are women. Freestone's prior research further underscores the entrenched male-dominated nature of the industry, yielding notably low findings (Guardian & Freestone, 2012). Moreover, Purple Seven conducted a survey in 2015 to find that female customers account for 65% of ticket revenue, but only 39% of actors, 36% of directors, and 28% of writers of plays performed are women. Male playwrights write 37% of parts for women, while female playwrights write for 62% of female casts (Hope, 2015). Despite more women entering directing, theatre remains male-dominated globally including in Asia. In North America, women constitute around 69% of ticket buyers, but only 17% of plays were written by women, and 16% were directed by them (Chance, 2014). Similarly, British stages reflect male experiences, with women accounting for just 37% of artistic directors in Arts Council-funded theatres, dropping to 24% for higher-funded organizations (Gardner, 2014). In Nigeria, only a few women have made it as directors on major stages (Ilo & Owobamirin, 2021). Leiva Filiho (2022) in his study of women in theatre in São Paulo found that when considering the number of performances, the gender gap widened with women typically working less in higher-paying roles.

Males have traditionally held the bulk of leadership roles in the theatre, including those of playwrights, directors, and producers. Theatre directing has historically been male-dominated, reflecting the gendered nature of professional theatre. Although more women have recently entered the field and proven their capabilities, female directors remain underrepresented globally and locally. As per Ilo & Owobamirin (2021), this disparity stems from socio-psychological conditioning regarding career choices and perceptions of leadership. As theatre mirrors societal roles, its practices align with the gender norms that society upholds (Ilo & Owobamirin, 2021). The demand for gender parity in the industry, meanwhile, has lately gained increasing attention, and more women have been nominated for leading roles. In recent times, women have made tremendous advancements in attaining leadership positions in the theatre industry. Notwithstanding recent strides toward promoting gender parity, the majority of playwrights and directors are still men. A few popular examples from Assam include Seagull Theatre, a prominent theatre group in the state established in 1990 by a group of dedicated theatre activists. The organisation is led by a popular National School of Drama (NSD) alumni male director Baharul Islam. Located in Guwahati, Assam, another well-known theatre group named BA Studio hosts

performances, workshops, and theatre festivals. The group is led by Anup Hazarika, who plays a significant role in its leadership, alongside co-director Pakija Begum. Samahaar Natya Goshtee, founded in 1984, has been guided by Lalit Chandra Sarma, a distinguished theatre activist who has served as the president since the organisation's inception, and his leadership has shaped the group's vision and activities (StageBuzz, 2019; Samahar The Team, 2019). The participant Mansi said, 'Directors are mostly males, old and experienced in our industry. There is no one to question them. They will be friendly and sweet talkers but there are problematic things that are normalised here. This doesn't signify a healthy work environment.'

Theatre has benefitted from the fresh perspective that women leaders have offered as it opened up opportunities for different narratives and viewpoints to be portrayed on stage. Further, they play a significant role in expanding the opportunity for women to work as writers, designers, creatives, and technicians. Their approach is very different from their male counterparts. Women playwrights frequently concentrate on stories that focus on female experiences and standpoints which more often highlight themes like gender inequity, parenthood, and relationships. They are more prone to challenge stereotypical ideas about gender in their stories and characters. They can even offer a fresh take on staging and theatrical standards by utilising unconventional settings or multimedia components. Conversely, male playwrights usually work more on macro areas like history, politics, or general social issues. Unlike patriarchal traditions, which supported power structures, feminist theatre emphasises collaboration and writings focused on women's journey toward agency and empowerment, addressing intricate themes and issues that deeply impact their daily existence with greater depth (Singh, 2009; Pandey, 2016).

The approaches taken by male and female directors to their jobs also differ significantly. The cooperation and fostering of relationships with the members of the cast and crew is more important to female directors than to their male counterparts, who may lay greater emphasis on their own creative vision and authority. Rashi said, 'In my directorial venture or theatre space, I believe we are friends during and after rehearsals and if you have something that you would like to bring up, either personal conversation or professional suggestion, everyone is welcome to do so.'

In the world of theatre, where the stage is filled with creativity and expression, females involved in the theatre industry face a distinct set of challenges. Women in the theatre have to

overcome various obstacles including sexism, and underrepresentation in upper-tier positions. Due to the transient and project-based nature of theatre work, many provisions typically applicable to women lose their relevance within the industry. For instance, maternity leave, a hallmark of many formal workplaces, finds limited applicability in the theatre industry, leaving women to navigate the absence of this fundamental support system. Moreover, the demanding nature of theatrical productions frequently entails late-night rehearsals and performances, leading to extended work hours, which can subject female artists to societal judgments and expectations, often exacerbating their professional and personal lives. Navigating parenthood within this industry, with its demanding schedule, also poses considerable challenges mainly for females. As Rinky shared, ‘The challenges we face often cause disturbances in our lives, navigating between commitments and societal expectations and often hampering our personal space significantly, be it female actors or directors.’

However, a notable distinction observed within the industry, setting it apart from other professions, is the absence of gender-based pay discrepancies. Instead, disparities tend to emerge between senior and junior theatre performers and leaders, rather than along gender lines as seen in Assam’s theatre industry. Roma, who has experience on both ends of the spectrum, remarked, ‘In my experience, regardless of gender, pay discrepancies are more evident between senior actors demanding higher compensation and newcomers facing exploitation due to their novice status in the industry.’

Nevertheless, the gender ratio remains imbalanced within the upper echelons of the theatre industry which is a significant worry that needs to be tackled. Women need better encouragement and support, especially for those who want to advance to the top positions in the industry and gain exposure and acknowledgment for their work. The need for structural change to establish a fairer industry for women and other underrepresented groups is becoming more widely recognised in contemporary times as more women have started voicing their opinions and trying to bring about positive change.

The progress of female leaders within the theatre is hampered by gender discrimination, which is a pervasive issue in the industry. The treatment of female directors by male performers is a blatant example of the gender prejudice that still exists in this sector, despite significant advances toward gender equality. While some may convey their support and regard for their female peers,

others might show a lack of respect for the leadership and decision-making skills of women. This could involve challenging their decisions, denying them the same amount of authority, or not giving credence to their knowledge and expertise. Mansi said,

I was an assistant director in a play in my early days with theatre experience. The majority of the actors in the production were older than me, in their 40s. If I was given the duty to read lines with the actor and he wasn't able to, the lack of respect was seen which was quite palpable. Maybe it is an age or gender thing. But the attitude was so obvious, like *'I know more than you. Why are you here? I can do these lines; I have been doing this forever now.'* They would casually boast in a conversation that they are experienced and have done 25 plays. I am like I get it but you are still not getting this part right so what am I supposed to do with your 25 plays?

Another participant Farah, a budding playwright and director, shared her experience of working with male actors and female actors.

We have done a piece with two men and I was directing it. That dynamic was different. I have noticed men are very vocal about what they want to do. Not like a suggestion but most of the time, they would say like *'I believe this is the right way to do it.'* It is a gender thing, not a capability. In my opinion, it is because men think they can be more vocal. But when I have directed women, the dynamic changes into a more cohort. With a woman, you go into a more brainstorming session as it becomes more of a suggestion. Maybe because these women have also faced male directors there is a sense of unsureness about how they convey their opinion. Like male actors come and tell me, *'This scene just doesn't work.'* Women actors more often ask *'Do you think this scene works?'*

This interview shows a vital pattern of how men and women approach and put forward their opinions very differently. Women tend to adopt a questioning tone, often asking if changes are necessary, while men assert themselves directly by making demands. This observation highlights deep-seated gender norms that pervade our society. The socialisation of women is done in a way that they tend to seek permission or validation before expressing their preferences, while

men are taught to assert their requirements confidently. This contrast stresses the pressing issue of challenging and dismantling such biased gender norms so that everyone can have equal agency and empowerment, not only within the theatre industry but also beyond.

6.4 Gender and Sexuality in Theatre Work

Gender and sexuality are intricate and multidimensional facets of the human experience that are influenced by a range of biological, social, and cultural variables. They may be shaped and reinforced by cultural practices such as norms, social conventions, beauty standards, and dressing styles. Gender norms specify ways men and women must act, look, and communicate in different cultures. They are often perpetuated by social conditioning, including group pressure, or through codified procedures such as segregated lavatories or dress codes. McDowell highlighted that one's sexuality, body, and gender performance are a necessary part of the work, indicating the connection between the aesthetic and gendered nature of work (McDowell, 1995).

Gender, according to Judith Butler, is a social role that individuals perform that is acknowledged and recognised by society. Butler argues that since gender is a continual act that transforms with every repetition, it is not set or fixed and has multiple meanings based on the cultural context in which it is done. Gender is a social construct that is constantly played and replayed via our behaviour and actions rather than being an inherent biological aspect. Gender is therefore not a trait we possess; instead, it is something we do (Butler, 2006). She describes gender as a performance that people develop in their way of belief and scripted out as an act. Similar to this, sexuality is not an intrinsic characteristic of the body; but it is a collection of cultural practices, habits, and conventions that are exhibited and acted through our bodies.

Butler's performative theory provides a helpful framework for comprehending how gender and sexuality are produced and portrayed in theatre, especially regarding the body. The body serves as a crucial stage for the display and embodiment of gender and sexuality in the theatre industry. Performers embody various gender roles, be they male or female along with the portrayal of varied sexual identities including gay, straight, and queer. Actors shape and uphold gendered societal standards and norms via their performances.

Theatre performances that question conventional gender roles and standards, such as a male actor performing a typically female character, are one way to illustrate Butler's idea of how norms

and conventions are not static but continually renegotiated and reenacted by daily acts. Furthermore, these performances are not just isolated acts but address and react to larger social issues and act as a component of a wider discourse about gender and sexuality. A play that deals with issues focusing on gender identity or sexuality can help facilitate broader cultural discussions on these sensitive subjects. Theatre plays a significant role in questioning and defying typical gender and sexual conventions through its representation, portrayal, or participation of various individuals in its domain.

6.4.1 Role of Body in Shaping Gendered Performances

The body and physicality greatly impact how men and women behave and act. Shilling claims that the body not only serves as a product of biology but is also influenced by cultural behaviour and customs. Bordo contends that cultural factors, such as gendered norms and standards, continually shift and transform our bodies, allowing them to be regarded as ‘work in progress’ at all times (Shilling, 2003; Bordo, 1993). This implies that amid the setting of male and female performances, gendered ideals and preconceptions are formed and enforced through the use of the body. For instance, it is common for people to anticipate male performers to be muscular and athletic while expecting female performers to be delicate and petite. The societal behaviour of dieting, fitness, exercising, use of makeup and cosmetics, plastic surgery, etc. serve to reinforce these ideals.

As per Bordo’s view, these gendered norms and behaviour are not only the result of personal preference but rather are a component of a wider cultural discourse about gender and the body. The portrayals of male and female bodies that frequently appear in the media lead to cultural expectancies and benchmarks around how an ideal body or physique should be. The body posture, gestures, and movements of male and female actors in theatre frequently reflect these standards. Male actors may express power and authority with their bodies, whereas female performers may convey fragility and subjugation with their bodies. The societal expectations regarding gendered physicality are supported and strengthened by these displays. Just like Butler, Bordo also maintains that these gendered performances are continuously altered and reshaped through our cultural practices.

Richa who started as a theatre artist but now venturing into television and web series said,

Physical appearance, including good looks and body shape, often plays a significant role in casting decisions as popular and glamorous individuals tend to have an advantage in getting jobs. Women are particularly subjected to discrimination based on their appearances. Once for a role of a village woman that requires a realistic portrayal, the director was looking for someone with an attractive, glamorous appeal. This bias stems from producer's focus on selling their product and attracting viewers by featuring dazzling and beautiful actors.

The theatre is an exceptional form of art, characterised by its progressive and thought-provoking nature. It serves as a cornerstone of cultural movements, transcending insignificant biases and prejudices. Regardless of gender, body type, race, or ethnicity, individuals have the opportunity to participate and breathe life into diverse characters on stage. However, it is regrettable that women and other marginalised genders continue to face gender inequality within the industry, as consumer culture often shapes our choices and perpetuates such disparities.

6.4.1.1 Gendered Differences in Representations of the Body in Theatre

The body is a powerful tool for communication in theatre. It can be used to express emotions, convey ideas, and create a sense of realism. However, the way that the body is represented on stage can also be shaped by gender norms and cultural standards. In many traditional theatrical productions, women's bodies are often sexualised and objectified. They are often portrayed as being weak, emotional, and dependent on men. This can be seen in the way that women are often costumed, the way that they move on stage and the way that they are spoken to by other characters. For example, in Shakespeare's plays, female characters are often forced to wear revealing clothing and are often subjected to sexual violence.

In the play *Xahoxi Maa* witnessed by the researcher, three female characters were prone to violence in some way or the other. The mute daughter went through physical violence in the form of sexual assault by the soldiers which enhanced her vulnerability and trauma. Her act of bravery to save the town from an impending attack underscored the physical and sacrificial violence she endures. Her death showcased the atrocities of wartime. Another female character named Yvette underwent heartbreak from the love of her life, a soldier who promised to marry her but then abandoned her. It led to such disheartening circumstances that she went into prostitution and

became a perpetual victim of sexual, mental, and emotional violence. Her relationship with soldiers and her lifestyle reveal the predatory and abusive dynamics that women face during war. Her struggles for survival attached to her shredded dignity illustrate how women are one of the most vulnerable groups in any situation. Another woman, the titular character of the mother had to undergo severe emotional violence by witnessing the death of all her children one after another. She is trapped in the war with her means of survival that contribute to a cycle of systemic conflict and loss that has caused her immense suffering.

Performative violence is not merely about the enactment of violence but rather the conveyance of a message to an audience. Juris notes that performative violence functions as a mode of communication, where activists stage symbolic confrontations to drive social change (Juris, 2005; Manzi, 2014). Similarly, when female actors engage in roles that involve symbols of violence, they experience a complex interplay of emotional and physical challenges. This experience is further intensified by the societal expectations placed upon them. The symbols and signs of violence used are closely connected to the presence of an audience, making them inherently performative and opening up channels for communication (Manzi, 2014).

To authentically portray the emotional turmoil and resilience required by the script, it becomes necessary to delve deep into the characters' psyches which may involve intense emotional labour for the actors. Through application of it, they convincingly depict fear, sorrow, anger, and defiance in scenes of physical confrontation, abuse, or struggle. These scenes require choreography to ensure safety while maintaining realism, which can be physically exhausting and potentially risky. The play's setting may also compel actors to reflect the gender norms and societal roles of the time, which can highlight the systemic oppression and violence faced by women in the real world. It can add a layer of authenticity to their performances but also requires careful navigation to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

While having a short discussion with the actress who played the role of Yvette in the play Xahoxi Maa, she shared her views on how she prepared herself to do justice to the role of Yvette. She shared:

I practiced mindfulness and meditation to decompress after rehearsals and performances. Having a supportive cast and crew also made a significant difference.

When Yvette's character recounts her past love affair with the soldier who abandoned her, it is a pivotal moment where her emotional scars are laid bare. I spent time reflecting on personal experiences of betrayal and loss, and I channeled those emotions during the scenes. Yvette's experiences of violence are multifaceted and I invested time in understanding her physicality and worked on the body language that changes with her feelings, be it her vulnerability, or defense.

Men's bodies, on the other hand, are often represented as being strong, powerful, and in control. Mostly being portrayed as the heroes of the story who save the day, in line with the theme of the story male characters are typically shown to be muscular and often act as saviours.

Costumes and makeup are two common ways through which the female body is frequently shown distinctively. While male performers are asked to put on more concealing outfits that represent their toughness and virility, female performers are frequently required to wear form-fitting costumes that accentuate their figure and sexuality. Women even apply makeup to draw attention to their attractive features such as eyes, lips, or long eyelashes.

Male performers are often asked to act in masculine ways like appearing sturdy and powerful, whereas female performers are required to perform and express in ways that are perceived as feminine, such as being elegant and sensitive. Male characters are portrayed as strong and domineering, while female ones are frequently docile and subservient. This is evident in a vast number of stories and narratives as female characters are more or less depicted as desirable objects or as victims, but male characters are placed opposite to that, presented as warriors or victors. Ritu, a 32-year-old participant has been acting since her teenage years. She has performed in different places nationally and internationally. She shared that in her years as a stage actor, she played a wide range of characters but she recalled reading a script recently where the role she was offered lacked agency and depth. She said, 'It is disappointing to see that even in the modern age with so many different stories being shared from various standpoints, such stereotypical views persist for some.'

She also shared how often the male directors treat women as delicate fragile beings who are incapable of handling their emotions. She added, 'Once a female co-actor was told

by the director that her emotional scene needed to be toned down because he believed women couldn't handle intense emotions and it might overwhelm her.'

6.4.1.1.1 Managing Body Consciousness for Actors on Stage

Performing on stage places heavy physical demands on theatre performers. They must take care of their body while under continual inspection, in addition to successfully portraying a character. Being on stage, theatre artists are acutely aware and conscious of their bodies and the way they are seen by the spectators. Actors often carefully evaluate their posture, mannerisms, and nonverbal cues to accurately represent the emotions and motives of their characters. They can employ several strategies to manage their body while subjected to the spotlight on stage. From collaborating with choreographers or mentors to employing breathing techniques, stretching, and relaxation exercises, they can use any of these to create gestures or motions that depict the appropriate physical and emotional aspects and keep their bodies and emotions in balance. The pursuit of aesthetic perfection often demands significant effort and persistence from women, as they undertake long-term body projects that involve managing their weight and investing considerable time to sculpt a physique that aligns with societal beauty standards, especially to keep up appearances at work (Shilling, 2003). The *Natyashastra* also focused on physical fitness and highlighted how actors should engage in regular exercises to maintain their bodies. Alongside this, it specifies various items like ornaments, garlands, and costumes to decorate the actors and prepare them for the performance (Richmond et al., 1993).

Harsha was doing rehearsals for a play that was a Greek adaptation during the time of the interview. She asserted:

Our costumes and makeup give us more control over our characters and how they can be presented to our audience. The costumes frequently boost our confidence by accentuating or concealing physical features or attributes that we are not confident about. We as actors also engage in warm-ups, yoga, and other physical exercises to unwind our bodies and assume the control required to fulfill the physical demands of the role.

Female actors may be subjected to pressure to conform to societal expectations of femininity, which can include wearing revealing clothing, performing sexualised scenes, and

catering to the male gaze. They may experience embarrassment or unease when performing in revealing attire. This phenomenon can be attributed to the cultural norms and expectations that women are subjected to, which often dictate that they should conform to certain standards of beauty and sexuality. These expectations can manifest in various ways, such as the pressure to maintain a certain body type, wearing bold outfits, or engaging in intimate scenes on stage.



(Figure 6.11: A glimpse from the play *Moi Natok Kora Suali*)
(Source: Primary data)

The media and advertising channels of consumer capitalism often project a narrow and unrealistic standard of beauty, featuring slender physiques, fair complexions, toned abdomens, etc., effectively shaping cultural notions of the ideal body. Exposure to such sexualised media images can lead to increased body dissatisfaction and negative self-perceptions among women. This can be particularly relevant for female actors who are most often required to highlight their femininity and perform in various costumes, further reinforcing the idea that their worth as performers is tied to their physical appearance and boldness. Harsha stated,

I have never had any insecurity about myself, never analysed my voice, looks, or how I appear or sound in front of people. But being in this space has made me aware of how I present myself in front of others. People tend to scrutinise and objectify in this space. They comment on how slim or fat I am, which is harmful

but normalised in the cultural industry. Now I have joined the gym to reduce weight. Once when I was rehearsing for a role, I was told that I was heavier. But as per my BMI, I am already thin. So, even though I was underweight, I was asked to lose weight to fit the role.

The issue of female actors experiencing hesitation or embarrassment when performing in tight or revealing attire is complex and multifaceted. In addition to cultural norms and expectations, family and values also play a vital role in it. In some cultures, wearing revealing clothing or engaging in intimate scenes may be considered inappropriate or unacceptable, particularly for women. This can lead to female actors feeling ashamed or embarrassed about performing in such roles, as they may fear judgment or disapproval from their social or familial circles. Family members may have different values and beliefs regarding the appropriateness of certain types of clothing or behaviour and may express disapproval or shame if they feel that a female actor is not adhering to these standards.

The impact of social norms and family standards on female actors can be significant, as it can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, or anxiety about their choices and behaviour. This can hurt their mental health and well-being, and may also affect their ability to perform their roles effectively. Himashri, a newcomer in this field, recalled,

I remember one incident in a theatre workshop I participated in, where a male authority figure told a woman artist to not wear shorts but to wear something long with a covered neckline while allowing men to wear whatever they wanted. Instead of telling women how to dress, why not tell men to remove that inappropriate gaze? It is frustrating to see this double standard, where only women are subjected to unwarranted scrutiny.

Female actors may not always find themselves comfortable in certain situations, but they are consummate professionals who comprehend the requisites of their craft and adeptly navigate the expectations placed upon them. In such circumstances, actors must voice their worries to the director or designer and cooperate with them to reach a compromise that will meet their needs while upholding the production's quality. In such a scenario, directors who are the head of production have the power to allow the requests or reject them. Whether changes in costumes or

making the costume more comfortable, it often depends on the director to allow the actors to make any changes.

6.4.1.1.2 Gendered Vulnerability: Objectification and Sexualisation of Female Actors

Directors have the responsibility to recognise the impact of their behaviour and the power dynamics at play in the theatre industry. It is essential to ensure that they provide a pleasant and inclusive environment during the entire production. However, some may abuse their power and use it to objectify and sexualise the actors, specifically females. This can create a toxic work environment for the actors, leaving them feeling vulnerable, and uncomfortable and causing emotional distress. They may also foster a culture of sexism and objectification in the theatre industry, subjecting them to intense scrutiny and criticism of their appearance. This can lead to body shaming and other harmful behaviour that contribute to a culture of misogyny. Female actors may feel compelled to follow societal standards of beauty and may experience a range of negative emotions, including shame, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

Directors objectifying and exploiting female actors in theatre is one serious problem that involves power dynamics, gender relations, and representations of femininity. At the heart of this issue lies the power imbalance between directors and actors, particularly female actors. These individuals often have the power to make decisions about casting, production design, and artistic direction, which can impact the actors' experiences on stage. When this power is wielded inappropriately, female actors may be subject to sexual harassment, exploitation, and objectification. It can range from directors scrutinising their physical appearance, to making inappropriate comments and demanding sexual favors in exchange for roles or opportunities.

Female performers frequently find themselves subject to a distinct kind of insecurity when working under male directors. This vulnerability stems from a pervasive tendency to sexualise and objectify female bodies, often overshadowing their artistic contributions. While male actors also face difficulties, the experiences of female artists are compounded by the heightened risk of exploitation. One of the participants shared an instance that is quite commonly seen:

There is this famous director with his own theatre group, popular in the Assam theatre circuit. A new girl joined his group, and she is being taken advantage

of by him. He is married with kids. Being a female performer, it is difficult and always worrisome when working with male directors.

Male actors encounter distinct challenges, often divergent from those faced by their female counterparts, including conflicts with directors or producers overseeing a production. These challenges primarily manifest in physical or verbal altercations, devoid of any sexual connotations. For instance, Kunal, a 35-year-old experienced stage actor, recounted an incident where he witnessed a male director engaging in a heated confrontation with a male actor. The altercation escalated to physical violence, with the director resorting to slapping the actor in a public setting. Consequently, the actor experienced a profound sense of shame and humiliation, compounded by his tears, attributable to the director's perception of his lack of commitment to the work at hand.

The presence of males in various settings can contribute to feelings of insecurity among women, as some men may attempt to gain unwarranted access to women. In certain cases, female artists may agree to advances from directors to secure better opportunities, while others find ways to navigate such situations. A personal experience from a participant exemplifies this issue. She recalled an incident from her initial days in the theatre industry.

As a newcomer at the age of 15, I observed that the male director in a theatrical production exhibited touchy behaviour towards the female cast members, who, despite feeling uncomfortable, responded with giggles. Speaking out against this behaviour would have potentially resulted in others dismissing my concerns, deeming me as an inexperienced troublemaker, and jeopardising my position within the production. To safeguard myself, I opted to associate more frequently with the male members of the team and started sitting with them. By doing so, I strategically minimised opportunities for the director to engage in inappropriate behaviour.

This approach allows the female actors especially the young and vulnerable newcomers to protect themselves without openly confronting the situation. After the participant decided to tactfully handle the situation, the director could not do anything due to the changed dynamics of the social interactions. It illustrates the pervasiveness of gender discrimination in the performing arts from a larger cultural viewpoint. When it comes to access, participation, and acknowledgment, women are frequently misrepresented in theatre and face several difficulties. Directors who

objectify and take advantage of female actors serve to uphold damaging gender stereotypes and power imbalances in this field. Mrigakshi highlighted,

As a female actor, I often find myself vulnerable and constantly need to be cautious during rehearsals and performances, as instances of physical assault by directors are unfortunately common. These issues should be addressed and discussed openly, but due to the hierarchy in the industry, renowned directors often go unquestioned and unchallenged. It is disheartening that actors aren't always respected and don't have the same social status.

Mansi added that many a time, family status, class, and background of the cast and crew impact the treatment they receive from the seniors. She shared,

As an individual with a good command of English, diverse city experiences, and a solid education, I have experienced differential treatment due to my background. However, I recall a female coworker from a small town who was physically active and engaged in gym and yoga and wore clothing like tights and crop tops. Unfortunately, she received criticism for her attire and asked to change during a physically intensive play. In another troubling incident at Kalakshetra, a senior artist and instructor from Assam pulled a female artist's tank top during rehearsals, claiming it was inappropriate for a theatre setting. These incidents reveal a problematic sense of morality within the theatre industry, where we inadvertently perpetuate problematic attitudes in our approach to theatre.

The participants even shared certain instances where directors may resort to extreme measures, including the utilisation of physical force, as a means to accentuate their hierarchical power and establish their authority on set. Such actions, although infrequent, may manifest as intimidating or aggressive behaviour directed toward both cast and crew members. Misha recollected one distressing incident:

Five years ago, a group of actors and one renowned director were gathered in a circle, when the director said something to one of the girls. Due to either the girl's inability to hear or her lack of reaction, the director resorted to an extreme act of violence by kicking her in the back, causing her to vomit blood. The horrifying

incident left everyone present in shock and fear, as the individuals involved held significant power and influence within the industry. They later managed to take the girl to a doctor and got the necessary medical treatment.

This shocking episode sheds light on the unfortunate reality that some esteemed directors can be extremely difficult to work with, prompting them to strive for an independent career path as Misha did. Such incidents often go unspoken of, with physical assault being a concern for male artists as well, even though emotional assault is more prevalent. It is crucial to acknowledge that these extreme actions do not serve as a testament to effective leadership and have the potential to cultivate a toxic work environment. Such sexualisation of female actors along with unrealistic expectations and pressure to engage in compromising situations can generate a hostile work environment and undermine their agency. Their ability to make independent choices, exercise control over their actions, and have a voice in their professional careers within the context of the entertainment industry is eroded. Agency encompasses the freedom to make decisions regarding roles, script choices, performances, ability to assert boundaries and negotiate terms, and actively shape their artistic trajectory. Recognising and respecting the agency of female actors is crucial for fostering an inclusive and empowering environment that allows them to express their talents, pursue their artistic vision, and contribute to the creative process on their own terms.

The art and entertainment industry, renowned for its allure and glamour, frequently encounters biased perceptions. A prevalent belief is that women involved in the acting profession are more readily available and prone to engaging in unprofessional relationships with directors. However, these misconceptions persist despite their inaccuracies. Sounding disappointed and annoyed, Richa shared,

As a female actor, I have observed persistent gender prejudices in the cultural field, specifically in theatre and acting. There is a regressive belief that women in these professions are easy, assuming that they work with males, and stay out late for rehearsals, hence they engage in personal relationships with directors and influential people. I have been the recipient of the same. Even the success of female actors is often attributed to such scandals rather than their talent, unlike male actors who do not face such assumptions.

6.5 Staging Identity: Queer Actors in Theatre

The term Queer is a comprehensive term encompassing diverse sexual and gender identities that deviate from heterosexual norms and practices. Queer representation has been constrained to what may be described as restrictive tolerance in the theatrical sphere. Each step of advancement has been greeted with a new limitation, from stereotyped caricatures to legislative discrimination (Ries, 2020).

While queer theatre gained traction in the West over time, in India, theatre artists have started asserting themselves and sharing their stories post-Section 377. However, queer narratives in theatre have traditionally struggled to find an audience among the general public, despite theatre being a diverse platform in performing arts. Queer individuals have been systematically excluded from representation and overlooked in historical and literary documentation. In mainstream literature, films, theatres, and other spaces, queers are intentionally marginalised, and subjected to ridicule and mockery (Hazarika, 2022). Consequently, these negative portrayals shape the perceptions of individuals within a heterosexist society.

Queer representation in theatre has become a subject of growing significance, as it encompasses the freedom of queer performers to assume roles that either explore their identities or portray characters distinct from themselves. While contemporary theatre has made strides in representing diverse perspectives, queer actors may still encounter challenges such as typecasting or being offered roles that do not align with their sexuality or gender identity. Such limitations can be restrictive and demoralising for performers seeking to explore a wide range of characters and roles.

As more LGBTQ actors take on significant roles on and off stage, there has been an increasing push in recent times for greater representation of queer identities in theatre. As a result, awareness and acceptance of the diverse spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations have improved, thereby fostering a more inclusive and open cultural environment but it remains more on theory rather than practice. Although there is a growing presence of queer representation, artists and playwrights continue to encounter challenges in staging their work. Renu is a 30-year-old queer theatre artist who travelled across the world for her higher studies. She moved to her hometown, Guwahati to continue her passion for theatre. She shared,

As an artist, when I entered the theatre scene here, I witnessed that intersectionality is kind of missing. There is a lack of representation for queer people like me. It is as if our stories and experiences are not important enough to be told on stage. My queer identity is but a whisper lost in the echo of heteronormative narratives. I wish there was more diversity and inclusion, where everyone could see and appreciate it and come out of the age-old regressive portrayals.

The dominant focus on heterosexual ideology in Assamese literature marginalises non-heteronormative individuals, leaving them occupying marginalised spaces without a clearly defined position (Hazarika, 2022). The portrayal of queer characters in Assamese theatre often falls into predictable and stereotypical patterns, reinforcing prevailing societal perceptions and biases. This tendency to typecast queer characters restricts their representation to narrow and often exaggerated portrayals, failing to capture the diverse and authentic experiences of queer individuals. Consequently, the theatrical landscape in Assam perpetuates stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding queer identities, hindering the advancement of a more nuanced and inclusive representation.

The presence of openly queer actors in the region remains notably scarce. This dearth of openly queer performers suggests a reluctance or fear among individuals to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity due to prevailing social stigmas and potential professional repercussions. Butler's concept of gender performativity challenges the fundamental assumptions of the heteronormative gender system, suggesting that the enforcement of such norms labels queerness as deviant or abnormal (Butler, 2006). The lack of openly queer actors reinforces the marginalisation and invisibility of queer experiences in Assamese theatre, exacerbating the challenges faced by those seeking authentic and meaningful representations. Renu added,

As a person who has been in this field for a long time and who has stayed in other parts of the world, I have witnessed a glaring absence of fellow LGBTQ+ artists in our theatrical landscape in Assam. The truth is that many talented individuals are hesitant to embrace their true selves and showcase their artistry, fearing the repercussions of coming out. It is disheartening to witness this struggle, as diversity and inclusivity should be the pillars of any creative community.

While contemporary modern theatre in Assam has shown some progress in attempting to diversify perspectives and narratives, traditional forms of theatre and popular mobile theatre, have been slower to adapt and evolve in terms of queer representation. These theatrical practices often adhere to established conventions and themes in the case of the former and consumer demand in the case of the latter, lagging in embracing and reflecting the lived realities of queer individuals, impeding the development of a more inclusive and progressive theatrical landscape. A queer participant with 11 years of experience in theatre shared,

I did a theatrical performance, where I portrayed a character that identifies as queer and considered a humiliation for her family and religious community. The piece served as a reflection of the society we live in. While contemporary theatre continues to provide a platform for such narratives, traditional theatre is very regressive on such matters.





(Figures 6.12 & 6.13: Stills from an immersive theatre performance where the queer actor played the role of a gay character caught in the traumatic setting of a gay conversion therapy clinic)

(Source: Primary data)

Theatre may serve as rehabilitation for community people who have faced stigma throughout their lives. In addition to giving us exposure, it may help in the quest for social equality and self-acceptance. But the representation of queer characters remains trapped in stereotypes, while the presence of openly queer actors is limited. Though contemporary modern theatre attempts to explore diverse perspectives, other forms of theatre in Assam continue to be regressive in adequately representing and acknowledging the experiences of queer individuals. By depicting queer individuals as comic relief, tragic characters, or villainous, these theatrical expressions have strengthened negative and flat images of the queer community. Further, the marginalisation and exclusion of minority voices have been facilitated by the dearth of different queer experiences and queer artists. Addressing these shortcomings is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and authentic representation of queer identities in Assamese theatre.

6.5.1 Exploring the Challenges Faced by Queer Actors

In the theatre industry, queer actors encounter various obstacles that are specific to their gender or sexuality. Unfortunately, prejudice and discrimination against queer individuals persist in numerous aspects of society, including the theatre world. This discrimination can manifest in biased treatment from casting directors, producers, and other industry professionals, thereby limiting career opportunities and hindering the success of queer performers. Moreover, queer

actors are already underrepresented in the theatre industry of Assam, resulting in a scarcity of peers or role models and intensifying sentiments of exclusion and alienation. Ritu, a queer participant and theatre actor settled in Guwahati, shared,

I have often found myself navigating an artistic landscape devoid of role models and peers who share my experiences. I remember attending theatre auditions and feeling a profound sense of alienation as if my own identity was an invisible barrier. Without visible representation, it becomes challenging to envision a future where my voice as a queer artist would be embraced. This absence only intensified my feelings of isolation and self-doubt. However, now it fuels my determination to be a catalyst for change.

Queer actors in the realm of theatre encounter various challenges, prominently encompassing safety concerns and hostile environments. Safety issues persist due to the potential for physical harm or discrimination directed towards queer individuals, both within the theatrical space and beyond. The presence of prejudice, bigotry, and homophobia can create a hostile atmosphere, hindering queer actors' ability to express themselves freely and authentically. This hostility may arise from fellow cast members, directors, producers, or even audience members, thereby intensifying the psychological strain on queer actors.

The inadequate representation of queer characters remains a prevalent issue in various media forms, including theatre, film, television, and even literature. Queer individuals getting underrepresented or portrayed stereotypically, perpetuates harmful tropes and reinforces societal biases. This lack of accurate and authentic representation can lead to feelings of marginalisation and alienation within the queer community, as well as contribute to the perpetuation of misconceptions and misunderstandings among the wider public. Rashi highlighted,

When we do not accurately portray the diverse experiences and identities within the LGBTQ+ community, we run the risk of perpetuating misconceptions among the wider public. By providing nuanced and authentic portrayals, we can challenge stereotypes, promote empathy, and ultimately foster a greater understanding and acceptance of the queer community.

The safety concerns faced by queer actors, particularly about their public and online presence, can have a detrimental impact on their personal and professional lives. Instances of hostility, threats, or discrimination directed towards actors based on their gender or sexual orientation are not uncommon. These experiences pose significant challenges, causing emotional distress and potentially impeding career advancement. The intersection of personal and professional identities further complicates matters, as actors may feel compelled to navigate a delicate balance between authenticity and self-preservation.

The power hierarchy in theatre embodies a complex web of relationships, with directors, producers, and influential people exerting influence over the selection and portrayal of characters. This hierarchical structure frequently operates within a predominantly heteronormative framework, wherein queer identities may be overlooked or subjected to discriminatory practices. This exclusionary dynamic can stifle the creative voices and contributions of queer actors, preventing them from fully embodying their roles and authentic selves on stage.

One aspect that particularly suffers within this power hierarchy is the distinct and vibrant personalities that queer actors bring to their craft. The theatre has long celebrated the exploration and representation of diverse characters, but the prejudices ingrained within the industry often hinder the acceptance and appreciation of queer individuals' inherent uniqueness. The rigidity of traditional notions of gender and sexuality, which can permeate casting decisions and artistic visions, restricts the breadth and depth of representation, and the invaluable perspectives that queer actors can bring to their performances. The use of ridicule is often employed to mock individuals who deviate from traditional gender norms, particularly those who are identified as queers. This ridicule serves as a means to enforce societal expectations of appropriate gender behaviour. When someone steps outside these boundaries, they become vulnerable to interpersonal retaliation in the form of overt or subtle attacks, which can cause emotional pain (Marx Ferree, 2004).

Harsha shared an incident from her own experience where she witnessed a female director humiliating her queer assistant-cum-actor now and then:

I vividly remember a particular director who would publicly humiliate her assistant due to his eccentric personality. This mistreatment deeply affected everyone involved, and it was especially tough for him. He was a nice and unique

person, but the director would mock him for being the way he was. The hurtful words used by the director made him feel isolated and disconnected from others. He would sit alone for lunch and would not make friends with anyone. Sadly, this kind of mistreatment is not uncommon in and outside the theatre industry.

The consequences of this disappointing reality are manifold. Their rich and multifaceted personalities may be disregarded or, worse, suppressed to fit within the confines of societal expectations, perpetuating a cycle of erasure and systemic discrimination. Many become cautious and attentive toward their own personalities and behaviour. As a form of self-defense, individuals navigate societal expectations while trying to protect themselves from ridicule and negative social consequences. The emotional toll of being forced to hide or suppress one's identity can be overwhelming, and the damaging effects on mental health and self-esteem cannot be overstated.

6.6 Chapter Conclusion

Several industries, including the theatre industry, struggle with the ubiquitous issue of gender inequality. Although there has been a steady advancement in recent decades toward gender parity, there are still many instances of discrimination against women in the theatre field. The underrepresentation of women in executive roles, such as directors, producers, and writers, is one of the key issues. Male-dominated production teams are still prevalent, and women are frequently passed over for these positions. It causes a lack of differing perspectives in the creative process and a dearth of stage representation for the experiences of women.

The pervasive influence of societal ideals promoting a specific body image, especially for a female exerts a profound and detrimental impact on women stage actors, leading to the emergence of self-doubt, diminished self-esteem, as well as various physiological and psychological afflictions. The industry's intricate power dynamics, executed through mechanisms such as discipline, control, gaze, and shaming, actively govern and shape the behaviour and choices of individuals, imparting a sense of necessity for conformity, self-improvement, and the attainment of an elusive pinnacle of perfection. These observations and distinctions might not be absolute, as there is a lot of diversity among male and female directors. Recognising these variations, however, may encourage more plurality and inclusion in the theatre community and open doors for differing opinions and voices to be represented on stage.

One of the main issues in the cultural sector, including theatre, is sexual harassment and abuse. A hostile and hazardous work atmosphere results from harassment or abuse directed at performers and crew from coworkers or superiors. New theatre artists are often the victims as they have to get close to people to create their network. As theatre is a very hands-on, physical performing art, it emphasises the importance of clear communication including seeking permission and respecting personal space. In the context of scene work and physical theatre, it is vital to create an inclusive and safe environment for all actors.

The prevailing public discourse, evident both on stage and among the audience, accentuates a societal landscape primarily governed by men, wherein women were relegated to the periphery, confined to obscure corners, or objectified for the gaze of male spectators. Similarly, in the field of theatre, a disheartening reality persists for queer actors as they are often marginalised and shunned for their unique persona and behaviour. This profound issue strikes at the very core of their artistic expression and reinforces the challenges they face while navigating the theatrical landscape.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a comprehensive conclusion to the study on theatre actors in Assam, focusing on the multifaceted nature of work and exploring different aspects of theatre acting as a profession. Reflecting on the various aspects that define the profession, the research delved into theatre acting, a profession that demands a high degree of versatility and skill. It offered a holistic understanding of the challenges and nuances involved in this creative field. The cultural context of Assam's theatre industry plays a crucial role here, as local traditions, folklore, and narratives deeply influence the themes and expectations within the theatre community.

Actors are required to embody a diverse range of characters, each with unique emotional landscapes and physical demands. This aspect of the study underscores how critical it is for actors to master voice modulation, physicality, and emotional expression to portray the characters authentically. The study highlighted the significance of embodying emotions to bring characters to life, how stage actors evoke emotions, and the emotional toll it can take on them. The emotional labour inherent in theatre acting implies that breathing life into a character is more than a technical skill; it is an emotional journey that can profoundly impact actors. The emotional investment can be both rewarding and draining, leading to discussions about the psychological impact of sustained emotional performance on stage actors.

Moreover, the study explored gender dynamics within the theatre industry, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of female and queer actors. It examined how these actors navigate the challenges of representation and visibility in a field that has traditionally been male-dominated. The research shed light on the opportunities and obstacles these actors face, both in terms of the roles available to them and their treatment within the theatre hierarchy. The study also addressed issues of representation, inclusivity, and equity, questioning how far the industry has come in providing equal opportunities for all actors, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

These areas of study provide a comprehensive view of the complex and dynamic nature of theatre acting in Assam and beyond, offering valuable insights into the profession's emotional, cultural, and social dimensions.

7.2 Dynamics of Theatre Work

The exploration into the perceptions of theatre acting as an occupation revealed a diverse landscape characterised by various forms, each with its unique attributes. From traditional Ankiya Naat rooted in religious themes to the Assamese proscenium theatre incorporating Western ideas, the theatre industry offers a tapestry of roles and genres. The collaborative nature of theatre work, involving actors, directors, producers, playwrights, designers, and technical teams, emphasises the dynamic aspects of this profession. The process, spanning preparation, planning, production, and presentation, highlights the intricate teamwork required for successful theatrical endeavours.

Theatre actors find themselves working in a range of settings, from local and regional theatres to touring troupes and modern productions. The existence of different forms of theatre in Assam, such as Ankiya Naat, Bhramyomaan theatre, and contemporary Assamese theatre, underscores the cultural diversity within the field. The study revealed that the perception and execution of theatre work vary across these different forms, with factors like religious sentiments, economic motives, and entertainment value shaping the nature of performances.

Differences in perception were evident among theatre actors, especially concerning the various forms of theatre. Ankiya Naat, deeply rooted in spirituality, relies on amateur actors from the local community, reflecting a connection based on religious sentiments rather than financial motives. In contrast, modern contemporary theatre recruits actors with diverse skills, emphasising relatability and humanistic portrayals. Bhramyomaan theatre, driven by commercial appeal, sometimes neglects acting skills in favour of entertainment and glamour, highlighting the tension between artistic expression and economic motives.

The rehearsal process emerged as a crucial aspect of theatre production, serving as a transformative period where actors invest time and energy to polish their craft. The study uncovered diverse practices in different forms of theatre, such as Bhramyomaan and Bhaona. In Bhramyomaan, the involvement of established actors from mainstream Assamese cinema contributes to the popularity of shows, while emerging artists face challenges and receive

comparatively lower compensation. Bhaona relies on performers from simple village backgrounds who lack formal training but develop their skills through practical experience and time. Caste discrimination in the casting of Bhaona roles and the preference for certain individuals based on factors beyond acting prowess point to the complex socio-cultural dynamics within the theatre industry. The study sheds light on the evolving nature of Bhaona, with a shift towards inclusivity in terms of gender and a broader stage.

The process of training and rehearsals in the theatre industry explored the dichotomy between formal education and practical training. While academic courses on performing arts, provide a theoretical foundation, the consensus among the participants was that the true essence of theatre is best grasped through hands-on involvement in the field, where the learning curve is an ongoing and ever-evolving process.

The theatre community plays a vital role in facilitating learning through classes, workshops, and acting schools. These avenues offer actors exposure to various trends and techniques, allowing them to hone their skills in an industry that demands both theoretical knowledge and practical application. Learning and development occur through varied performances, collaborations with different professionals, and exposure to diverse roles and styles. It highlights the multifaceted nature of an actor's toolkit, encompassing language proficiency, body techniques, and the ability to authentically convey emotions and character traits. The participants shared personal experiences, such as learning different languages and adapting varied quirks for character roles, emphasising the dynamic and evolving nature of an actor's craft. Young actors, seeking mentors within the theatre community, build not only their acting skills but also their social capital.

The exploration of the physical venues and spaces in the theatre industry revealed a dynamic and adaptable work environment for actors. Unlike conventional workplaces, the setting for actors varies based on the specific production or affiliation with different theatre groups. Theatre artists operate in ever-changing venues, often from permanent to temporary structures, which presents challenges in ensuring consistent well-being. The examination of the theatre workplace unveiled a dynamic and diverse environment shaped by the nature of performances and the traditions embraced by different forms. The spatial characteristics, ranging from religious

institutions to temporary stages and permanent structures, reflect the adaptability of theatre to various settings.

The challenges related to necessities and safety underscore the need for attention to the well-being of theatre artists, particularly in terms of hygiene facilities, privacy concerns, and comfortable working conditions. The study emphasises the importance of recognising the unique challenges faced by female actors and the impact of societal judgments on their professional and personal lives.

The hierarchical structure was identified within the theatre setting with producers and directors at the top. While artists maintain basic autonomy, directors play a crucial role in guiding and supervising the creative process. The employment patterns in theatre acting exhibit a spectrum, ranging from freelance actors to contractual ones. The flexibility of freelancing allows some theatre artists to explore various projects while maintaining creative freedom. However, the examination of income structures within the theatre industry uncovered significant disparities among theatre artists.

The economic challenges faced by theatre artists include delayed payments, insufficient compensation, and the prevalence of unpaid performances. Bhramyomaan theatre exhibited a stark contrast in compensation, where well-known figures often received disproportionate pay compared to their less-known counterparts. There are incidents involving senior actors receiving prompt payment while others waited underscoring the existing imbalances in the industry. While Bhaona, rooted in cultural and religious sentiments, may not primarily be economically motivated, its move to national and international platforms has introduced economic considerations. Nevertheless, a significant portion of theatre professionals, regardless of the form, face uncertainties in terms of compensation, with some struggling to secure even minimal earnings.

Ticket sales emerged as a critical aspect of the theatre industry's financial viability. The pricing strategies for tickets varied across different forms of theatre, reflecting the diverse audience segments they catered to. Bhramyomaan, designed as a mass theatre, offered varied ticket prices to accommodate audiences from different social classes. In contrast, Bhaonas, deeply rooted in spiritual and cultural traditions, often do not involve a ticketing system.

Promotional strategies for theatre productions showcased a wide spectrum, from comprehensive campaigns for Bhramyomaan to limited promotional efforts for modern theatre. The research emphasised the need for enhanced promotional activities, collaboration between cultural organisations and theatre groups, and the adoption of modern marketing techniques to attract larger audiences and maintain the cultural and commercial value of theatre.

The unforeseen and profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the theatre industry led to a significant downturn in the theatre sector. The pandemic, with its economic and social repercussions, served as a catalyst for introspection within the theatre community. The resilience displayed by artists in adapting to online platforms and seeking alternative employment reflects their commitment to the craft despite the challenges. The pandemic underscored the need for greater support and recognition of theatre professionals, with concerns raised about the lack of proper welfare schemes for those contributing to Assamese culture and society. While the government has established several schemes aimed at promoting and preserving cultural heritage, fostering young talent, and providing financial assistance to artists, there are significant challenges and gaps in awareness, accessibility, and equitable distribution. The lack of awareness raises questions about the effectiveness of communication channels and outreach strategies employed by government bodies. Many participants expressed a sense of disconnect, stating that they only learned about these schemes through post-implementation news coverage. Participants raised concerns about the selection process for beneficiaries, suggesting a potential bias in the distribution of benefits. Some artists felt that opportunities might be more accessible to those with connections to influential figures or those directly associated with cultural departments. This perceived bias raises questions about the transparency and fairness of the selection process.

Geographical disparities are also evident in the distribution and impact of government schemes. While initiatives like the North East Zone Cultural Centre (NEZCC) and Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre (EZCC) aim to promote the cultural heritage of the Northeast, the allocation of funds and the number of beneficiaries vary significantly.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the vulnerability of the theatre community and the inherent instability of their profession, prompting commendable efforts from the Ministry of Culture including online programmes and documentation of performances. External efforts, like fundraising initiatives, showcased the importance of collective support in sustaining the theatre

community during a crisis. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives was hindered by a lack of awareness among artists. The return to normalcy post-COVID-19 posed challenges for theatre practitioners. Social distancing measures disrupted traditional performance dynamics, affecting both performers and audience engagement.

7.3 The Actor's Journey through Theatre

The intricate world of theatre acting unfolds as a profound journey that intertwines the psychological, emotional, and physical realms of performers. The actor's ability to seamlessly embody characters on stage relies on a deep understanding of emotional expression, character background, and the cultivation of a character's experiences. This process involves a dynamic amalgamation of theoretical study, research, rehearsals, and mental activities.

The study delves into the nuanced aspects of emotional labour, drawing insightful parallels with Hochschild's concepts of surface and deep acting. It recognises the privileged position of stage performers as skilled emotion managers, equipped with continuous training and exposure to diverse roles. Their professional training, continuous practice, and exposure to diverse roles equip them with exceptional competence in managing and presenting emotions effectively. The various approaches highlight different perspectives on the relationship between the actor and the character, ranging from complete emotional immersion to maintaining a critical distance.

The actor's emotions become intertwined with those of the audience, creating a shared social consciousness that resonates with established conventions. Even referenced in the *Natyashastra*, an ancient Indian text, which underscores the importance of effective communication between the actor and the audience. It explores the profound impact of theatre on human experiences, emphasising the significance of emotional resonance and evoking and sharing various emotional states.

Rehearsals serve as a space for actors to hone their skills, emphasising the importance of altering emotions and physical expressions effectively, even if authenticity may be compromised for the sake of presentation. It serves as both a safe area for practice and a venue to release pent-up energy. The collaborative nature of rehearsals, where actors and directors work together to explore characters, relationships, and play themes, contributes significantly to the development of emotional understanding and expression. The study uncovers the prevalence of anxiety, often

surpassing stage fright, during rehearsals. Seasoned actors attest to the importance of muscle memory, emotional memory, and extensive rehearsals in preparing for performances. When actors encounter scenes without personal experiences to draw from, they rely on their artistic talent and creativity to feign emotions and bring the scene to life on stage. Rehearsals play a crucial role in enhancing this ability. The initial apprehension experienced by actors eventually transforms into a valuable part of their expertise.

The emotional climate within the rehearsal space is crucial for effective intra-group interactions. The interactions between directors and actors reveal the tensions and collaborative efforts involved in creating a conducive environment for character exploration. The emotional climate influences the actors' ability to connect with their roles and co-actors. The findings highlight the adaptability of stage actors in adjusting to varying themes and roles. The process involves script analysis, research, exploration of character motivations, and collaboration.

Emotion regulation is complex in professional settings, where individuals are not only expected to manage their outer expressions but also navigate their internal emotional experiences. Hochschild introduces a valuable framework for distinguishing between different forms of emotional labour. The concepts of surface and deep acting offer a lens through which to examine how individuals in various occupations manage and present their emotions to conform to workplace standards. Real-world accounts from theatre practitioners highlight the practical application of emotional labour in the field of acting. The participants' experiences reveal the conscious effort invested in altering emotions for a professional presentation, mirroring the principles of emotional labour. The interplay between personal experiences, memories, and the portrayal of characters underscores the multifaceted nature of emotional engagement in the performing arts.

The research sheds light on the complex interplay between personal emotions and professional displays, emphasising the significance of techniques such as double agency, deep acting, and emotional professionalisation. Deep acting, particularly in emotionally intense scenes, can take a toll on actors' well-being, causing physical and psychological exhaustion. The lines between the character's experiences and the actor's own emotions may blur, highlighting the challenges of managing the lingering effects of deep acting. It underlines the challenges actors face in maintaining authenticity while managing the emotional toll, particularly in emotionally

intense scenes. The process of double agency also helps them navigate the social world, and over time, emotions may unconsciously comply with work norms.

The psychological implications of theatre acting extend into self-identity, role formation, struggles with boundaries, emotional exhaustion, and the enduring effects of role residual. Real-life examples, such as a participant's struggle to separate personal emotions from on-stage aggression, highlight the blurred boundaries between personal and professional life in the theatre.

Actors need to maintain social capital by impressing directors, producers, and peers. This involves managing emotions while working with others and strategically flattering to establish and maintain connections in the industry. It emphasises the importance of maintaining social capital, networking, and navigating the delicate balance between authentic emotions and impression management. The theatre industry's environment requires actors to adapt to various situations and manage their emotions under public scrutiny. The development of a *habitus* over time, where emotions comply with work norms, adds a layer of complexity to the emotional experiences of stage actors, both on and off-stage.

The actor's journey is shaped by a myriad of factors, including character study, social environment, prior experiences, and traumatic events. The theatrical setting, with its repeated emotional journeys, presents challenges in maintaining boundaries. The emotional entanglement with characters, as revealed by participants brings forth issues of emotional exhaustion and identity confusion. It recognises the need for performers to prioritise mental and emotional health in the demanding field of theatre.

The experiences of the participants elucidate the duality actors often navigate, feeling more committed to a role than to their actual lives. This duality is not merely a consequence of good acting but depicts the authenticity and depth demanded by the craft. The study focuses on the lingering effects of character portrayal, both during and after performances. Instances of actors feeling lost in characters emphasise the enduring impact of the theatrical experience on one's true self and the challenges actors face in balancing personal and professional boundaries, dealing with negative role embodiment, and coping with emotional exhaustion. As performers embark on a continuous journey of self-discovery, the study underlines the lasting effects of role residual and the potential impact on the personalities of actors.

The exploration of the physical and emotional toll of theatre acting reveals a unique form of labour that surpasses traditional boundaries. Stage actors, far more than mere performers, intricately weave complex emotions into their roles, investing energy to evoke profound emotional responses from audiences. This inherently embodied nature of theatre acting underscores the interplay between emotion and physicality, intensifying the strain experienced by actors. Personal narratives from the participants highlight the tangible physical repercussions of their roles, accentuating the importance of self-care and physical therapy to mitigate the strain. Beyond the immediate performance context, the permeability of emotions from the stage to an actor's personal life becomes evident, revealing the profound impact of their work on their overall well-being.

The demands of theatre acting extend beyond the stage, necessitating the navigation of emotional territories that leave a lasting imprint on actors' bodies. Techniques such as voice modulation and bodily adjustments are employed to embody characters authentically, contributing to the transformative process. The body, seen not merely as a biological entity, becomes a conduit for character portrayal, with actors meticulously aligning themselves with cultural ideals and expectations. Cultural and societal norms further influence physical transformations, involving alterations in appearance, posture, gait, and gestures. Makeup, costumes, and prosthetics contribute to this metamorphosis, enabling actors to transcend their physical selves for a more convincing portrayal.

The transformative practices integral to the craft raise ethical considerations. Balancing authenticity with physical well-being, actors must navigate the fine line between genuine portrayal and potential harm. The personal accounts highlight the need for self-reflection and sensitivity in approaching transformative techniques.

7.4 Gender Constructs and Power Structures in Theatre

The research underlines the profound impact of gender on the world of theatre, encompassing both historical and contemporary perspectives. The portrayal of gender in theatre is a complex interplay of societal norms, cultural traditions, and individual performances. It emphasises that gender not only influences the characters and narratives within plays but also shapes the approaches and interpretations of actors. Historical gender standards and stereotypes persist in influencing actors today, presenting challenges and expectations that vary based on

gender. This, in turn, affects how characters are depicted and how audiences perceive and respond to performances.

The examination of gender representation in theatre, both in Western and Indian contexts, provides insights into the enduring influence of cultural and societal beliefs on artistic expression. The historical roots of Western theatre, with men traditionally playing both male and female roles, reflect entrenched gender norms. In Indian theatre, the impact of religious and cultural traditions has contributed to the delineation of gender roles on stage.

The portrayal of women in traditional theatre, reveals the nuanced differences between Western and Indian depictions. In classical Western theatre, women were often relegated to passive roles or specific categories such as love interests or damsels in distress, reflecting patriarchal norms. In contrast, traditional Indian theatre offered a more diverse portrayal of women, showcasing them as strong, intelligent, and assertive, albeit within predefined secondary roles, drawing a parallel between the two. In the traditional Assamese theatre form, Bhaona, gender roles are influenced by the prevalent patriarchy in Assamese society. Female characters in Bhaona are often confined to simple, secondary roles, reflecting societal expectations.

While women have increasingly reclaimed their agency in theatre, the persistence of gendered power dynamics and hierarchical structures in the industry remains evident. The study notes the evolving portrayal of women in theatre, especially in contemporary Indian settings, where female voices have gained prominence. The feminist theatre movement has played a crucial role in addressing women's issues, challenging stereotypes, and broadening the scope of female representation on stage. However, despite these positive shifts, there are persistent challenges, such as the influence of patriarchal norms on traditional forms of theatre and the prevalence of stereotypical portrayals in mass-oriented performances. The unequal power dynamics within the theatre industry, primarily favouring cisgender males, continue to shape the narratives and opportunities available to female artists.

In the context of power relations and hierarchy, the director emerges as a pivotal figure, wielding significant influence over the creative process. The findings align with Foucault's perspective, emphasising the dispersion of power through social relationships and practices within the theatre industry. The director's perspective significantly influences how actors express their

gender roles. Directors with conventional views may enforce stereotypical gender roles, limiting the diversity of expressions. However, more liberal directors encourage gender-fluid performances, resulting in a richer and more varied representation of gender. Experienced actors can challenge or oppose the director's authority, indicating their creative input. The views of other creative members, such as playwrights and producers, also contribute to the dynamic interplay of factors shaping gender representation. However, gender disparity persists among playwrights, directors, and producers. Despite progress, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles in the theatre even though female leaders bring fresh perspectives, focusing on narratives that challenge gender norms and emphasising collaboration and relationships within the creative process. The "old boys club" mindset with male directors and male actors reflecting historical male dominance can perpetuate gender bias and exclusion, making it challenging for women to establish connections and succeed in the industry.

Theatre serves as a platform to question and defy conventional gender roles and norms, offering a space for diverse expressions. However, the male-dominated hierarchies impact the industry, influencing relationships and opportunities for women and queer individuals. This imbalance aligns with Butler's concept of gender performativity, which helps analyse how heteronormative norms are reinforced within theatre, categorising queerness as aberrant or abnormal. The research underscores the intricate relationship between the body, gendered performances, and the theatre industry. The body, as influenced by both biology and cultural behaviour, plays a pivotal role in shaping gendered ideals and reinforcing societal norms. The centrality of the body in theatre, as theorised by Bordo and Shilling, reflects societal norms dictating physical presentation and gendered behaviour, reinforcing expectations of femininity and masculinity. Cultural expectations surrounding physical appearance, body shape, and behaviour contribute to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, impacting casting decisions and reinforcing biased representations on stage. In the context of theatre, gendered differences in body representations persist, with women often being sexualised and objectified, subjected to specific costumes and makeup expectations that reinforce societal beauty standards which Foucault would view as an extension of societal surveillance and power dynamics. The experiences shared by theatre artists reveal the challenges faced by female actors in navigating societal expectations, body consciousness, and vulnerability to objectification. The directors, wielding significant power, may contribute to a toxic work environment by objectifying and exploiting female actors. This

abuse of power, coupled with gendered expectations, can lead to emotional distress, body shaming, and the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. Female actors often find themselves navigating a complex terrain, balancing the demands of their craft with societal pressures and the potential for exploitation. There is a need for agency for female actors, emphasising their requirement to make independent choices, assert boundaries, and shape their careers on their own terms. Narratives shared by participants include extreme actions, such as physical violence, which stresses the need for a shift towards an empathetic and empowering environment within the theatre industry.

There are persistent challenges and limitations faced by individuals whose sexual and gender identities deviate from heterosexual norms. While queer theatre has gained momentum in the West, the scenario in India, particularly in Assam, reveals a struggle for recognition and acceptance. Post-Section 377, queer theatre artists have started asserting themselves, yet they grapple with a lack of representation and inclusion in mainstream narratives. Negative portrayals and stereotypes in literature, film, and theatre further contribute to the marginalisation of queer individuals within a heterosexist society.

Queer representation in theatre becomes crucial for allowing performers to explore their identities authentically and portray diverse characters. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including typecasting, limited opportunities, and the reluctance of queer actors to openly disclose their identities due to social stigma. The lack of visible queer representation exacerbates feelings of alienation and hinders the envisioning of a more inclusive future in the industry. In Assamese theatre, religious forms of theatre and popular mobile theatre lag behind contemporary modern theatre in embracing diverse perspectives and queer narratives. Queer characters are often trapped in stereotypes, and openly queer actors remain scarce. The challenges faced by queer actors include safety concerns, hostile environments, and inadequate representation both on and off stage. Discrimination and prejudice from industry professionals can limit career opportunities, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and reinforcing societal biases.

The complex intersectionality of personal and professional identities for queer actors steers a delicate balance between authenticity and self-preservation. The power hierarchy within the theatre industry, operating within heteronormative frameworks, often overlooks or discriminates against queer identities, hindering their full creative expression. The ridicule and mistreatment

faced by queer individuals further contribute to emotional distress and the suppression of unique personalities.

7.5 Concluding Remarks

The theatre industry serves as a vital cultural hub, shaping societal narratives and reflecting diverse human experiences. Despite its significance, various challenges persist within the sector, particularly in regions like Assam, India. This analysis investigates the manifold dynamics of the theatre industry, highlighting the interplay of multiple factors, and the need for inclusivity and sustainability while addressing the challenges.

Theatre, as a performing art, offers a unique blend of immediacy and interaction that distinguishes it from other art forms like painting, sculpture, or even film. Unlike visual or static arts that allow for solitary creation and interpretation, theatre is inherently collaborative, requiring real-time engagement between actors and the audience. This dynamic nature of theatre places it in stark contrast with film, where performances are captured and edited, sometimes leading to a loss of the raw energy and spontaneous creativity that characterises live performances. Moreover, while other performing arts, such as dance and music, can also evoke strong emotions, theatre combines narrative storytelling with performative expression, making it a powerful medium for exploring complex social issues and human experiences. The live aspect of theatre creates a communal experience, where each performance is a one-of-a-kind event, further deepening its impact on both the performers and the audience.

In comparison to conventional labour, the work of theatre actors involves a different kind of labour intensity and emotional investment. While traditional labour is often associated with physical exertion and repetitive tasks, theatre acting requires a deep emotional and psychological engagement. Actors must immerse themselves in their roles, often drawing on personal experiences to convey authentic emotions, which can be both mentally exhausting and emotionally taxing. This form of emotional labour, while rewarding in terms of artistic expression, is less recognised in traditional labour metrics. Additionally, being part of a largely unorganised sector, theatre actors often face significant challenges related to job security and working conditions. There is no fixed pay structure or proper guidelines in place regarding essential aspects like maternity leave, standard working hours, or social security. Unlike conventional jobs that may

offer benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, and fixed employment contracts, theatre professionals often work without these safeguards, leading to financial instability and a lack of support during critical life events. This comparison underscores the need for greater recognition of the unique challenges faced by theatre professionals which are majorly overlooked and the importance of developing supportive structures and legal frameworks that address the specific demands and vulnerabilities of this labour-intensive yet deeply fulfilling profession.

As a microcosm of society, theatre reflects and reinforces gender norms and power dynamics. Female performers often face heightened vulnerability due to ingrained biases and unequal power relations. A critical examination of gender dynamics is imperative to foster inclusivity and empower female performers within the industry. The portrayal of sensitive topics and the involvement of minors necessitate a nuanced ethical analysis of theatre practices. It also accentuates the urgency of creating an inclusive and accepting theatrical landscape that challenges stereotypes and promotes authentic portrayals of queer identities. Ethical casting decisions and representation not only uphold professional integrity but also contribute to a more equitable and representative theatrical space.

Collaborative efforts among policymakers, industry stakeholders, and theatre practitioners are crucial for addressing systemic issues and fostering a supportive environment for artists. Collective action can lead to the establishment of ethical standards, promotion of diversity, and implementation of inclusive policies. Moreover, industry-wide initiatives can mitigate the adverse effects of power imbalances and promote a culture of mutual respect and collaboration.

Due to the inherently different consumption patterns and accessibility, the promotion of theatre events is crucial, mirroring the impact of marketing efforts on audience attendance. Unlike films, which benefit from mass distribution and often sustained marketing campaigns, theatre productions typically rely on localised marketing efforts and targeted promotions to generate audience awareness and engagement. By strategically emphasising the distinctive experiential and cultural attributes of live theatre, promoters can stimulate audience interest and incentivise ticket purchases, thereby bolstering the financial sustainability of theatrical ventures and narrowing the popularity gap between theatre and other leisure pursuits. It not only fosters industry self-sufficiency but also sustains the livelihoods of professionals involved in theatrical production and presentation.

Theatre is a significant art form connected to the cultural roots of any society. Every individual in a society is a member of many groups and possesses multiple identities. Investigating the triumphs and struggles of women and other genders in the theatrical sphere contributes to ongoing conversations about gender equity and the necessity of diverse representation within the arts. The recent rise of women taking on roles traditionally reserved for men exemplifies the transformative potential of theatre to challenge established gender norms and foster a more inclusive artistic environment. It also paves the way for inclusivity and diversity in the coming times.

In Assam, the theatre industry is not as structured or financially robust as it is in other places. The theatre industry in Assam and beyond faces multifaceted challenges related to gender dynamics, ethical considerations, and the well-being of performers. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach encompassing governmental support, industry-wide initiatives, and stakeholder collaboration. There are government initiatives that include various activities, from the promotion of indigenous cultures and skill development to providing financial aid to artists. However, there are vital gaps and challenges with the implementation process of these schemes. Many theatre performers are unaware of these initiatives and the monetary benefits often seem inadequate and outdated. In addition to that, the COVID-19 pandemic brought severe financial challenges to the artists and even though the government on national and state levels took certain steps to assist the helpless theatre workers in Assam, it is evident that its impact is unevenly distributed considering the unorganised nature of the industry. Therefore, awareness campaigns and transparent communication strategies along with regular assessments are essential to ensure that support schemes reach those in need. The theatre community can thrive as a vibrant and equitable space for artistic expression and cultural enrichment by fostering inclusivity, promoting ethical practices, and overall, leading to a better situation.

7.6 Contributions to Knowledge

This study provides an in-depth understanding of the nature of work and various dimensions involved in the profession of theatre actors in Assam. The research uncovers the complex processes of work and labour involved in creating theatrical performances, thereby adding to the existing body of knowledge on theatre labour which is limited. Secondly, by exploring the emotional consequences of acting, the study contributes to the literature on emotional

labour transcending from the service industry to the performing arts. The analysis of gender dynamics within the theatre industry also provides valuable insights into the existing power relations in the cultural industry particularly theatre, experiences of female and queer actors, contributing to the broader discourse on gender equality and representation in the arts.

A key aspect of this study is the link between performance and academics, exemplified by institutions like The Majuli University of Culture (MUC) in Assam. Established by the government in 2017, MUC promotes education, research, and training rooted in local cultural traditions. The university offers a five-year integrated master's programme with specialisations in dance, music, or theatre, blending professional and academic tracks to develop professional artists and scholars. MUC's curriculum also includes cultural exchanges, foreign language instruction, and cultural tourism, aiming to nurture both practitioners and researchers in the performing arts. Similar programmes are offered at other universities across India, where departments of performing arts and cultural studies, along with dedicated centres, focus on creating an academic and professional pedagogy that blends theoretical knowledge with practical know-how. These institutions play a crucial role in nurturing and promoting both the heritage and contemporary culture of India.

7.6.1 Practical Implications

The practical implications of the research are significant for various stakeholders within the theatre industry. The insights gained from this study can inform theatre practitioners and policymakers about the unique challenges faced by theatre actors in Assam who are a significant part of cultural growth and enrichment. The findings may encourage the development of support systems, bringing theatre artists together under an umbrella organisation to share grievances and policies that address the emotional well-being and professional growth of actors. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach encompassing awareness campaigns, and supportive networks to foster a safe and inclusive environment for actors who are often placed in the lower level of the hierarchy, especially newcomers. Only through dismantling the barriers of discrimination and fostering an environment of genuine inclusivity can the theatre community fully harness the immense creative potential and enriching contributions that actors have to offer. Moreover, the research outcomes can contribute to promoting gender equality and inclusivity within the theatre industry, leading to a more diverse and vibrant performing arts landscape in Assam and worldwide.

In addition to these considerations, integrating cultural tourism into the theatre industry presents an opportunity to enhance the visibility and appeal of local performances. By positioning theatre as a central element of cultural tourism, there can be increased engagement from both domestic and international audiences, which can provide economic support and broaden the reach of local artists. This integration helps to highlight the cultural significance of theatre while promoting a greater appreciation for regional arts. Furthermore, collaboration between academic institutions and theatre practitioners can lead to more robust training programs, research opportunities, and innovations in performance practices. Academic research can deepen the understanding of theatrical techniques and their impact, enriching the educational landscape and providing actors with new tools and insights for their craft. This synergy between academics and the performing arts contributes to a more well-rounded and dynamic theatre industry, advancing the discourse on theatre work and contributing to the development of supportive measures for individuals within the field.

7.7 Limitations and Future Research

The fieldwork for this study was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the prolonged shutdown of theatre performances and shows. This disruption resulted in a delay in the data collection process and caused a shift in the research trajectory. The pandemic-induced changes affected the research angle and objectives, as the focus shifted due to the new realities faced by the theatre industry. Restrictions on travel and access to the field altered the research angle and objectives, as many planned interviews and site visits could not be conducted as originally intended. Consequently, several stage actors initially contacted for interviews either left the industry to pursue other occupations or relocated to different cities and towns, making them unavailable for participation. Additionally, many actors were reluctant to discuss certain issues that emerged during the discussions, further complicating data collection.

The study acknowledges certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the subjective nature of qualitative research and the focus on a specific region i.e. Assam. Future research could overcome these limitations by employing a mixed-methods approach, including a larger and more diverse sample, and expanding the geographical scope to encompass other regions in India or beyond. This work is focused primarily on the stage actors, therefore exploring the

experiences of other theatre professionals, such as directors, playwrights, and technicians, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the theatre industry as a whole.

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APPENDIX I

Interview Schedule (Actors)

▪ Introduction

- Name.
- Age.
- For how long have you been working in this field?
- How did you get into this profession? What interested you?
- How do you get projects? Castings, auditions?
- Describe an average day of work for yourself. What's your schedule like?
- How many shows do you get in a month/year?
- You look at your engagement as a theatre artist as being:
 - A job
 - A hobby/leisure activity
 - Other, please list _____
- Your engagement in this work is:
 - Full-time and permanent
 - Part-time and permanent
 - Full-time and non-permanent/contract
 - Part-time and non-permanent/contract
 - Freelance

▪ Livelihood and Professional Aspects

1. Income and Job Security:

- What is the income range for a theatre artist?
- Is this your only profession, or do you have another job parallelly?
- Do you have any form of job security? Are there any benefits like holidays, leaves, or retirement plans?
- What are the working conditions like in rehearsals and shows?
- Are there any government regulations or policies that support theatre artists? If yes, have you ever availed any?

2. Experience and Skills:

- What is it like to be a theatre artist/actor? Can you share your experience?
- Differences and similarities in your theatre experience with different forms.
- Are there any job eligibility criteria?
- What kind of skills are required to enter the field or to sustain in it? How did you acquire those skills?
- Have you been told to work on anything? If yes, did you ever face any issue or difficulty in attaining that?
- Did you receive any professional training, or did you enter the industry casually?
- How do your folks or close ones react to the fact that you are a theatre artist?
Did/Do you face judgment because of it?

3. Work-Life Balance and Emotional Management:

- How much time and energy are required to stay in this job?
- Do you have to compromise with terms and conditions with the new job very often?
- Do you need to maintain contacts to keep getting work in the industry?
- What are the general difficulties you face?
- Are you satisfied with the job? If not, what are the reasons?
- How has the theatre industry evolved in terms of supporting and acknowledging the contributions of actors over the years?
- Do you feel appreciated for the hard work you put into your job? Are the returns sufficient?
- The magnitude of uncertainty and risk is high in the artist world. How much has the COVID-19 pandemic affected theatre artists compared to others?
- How do you cope with the unpredictability and instability often associated with a career in acting?

4. Memorable Experiences and Challenges:

- Can you share any memorable experiences during your time with the theatre unit?
- How would you describe the experience of being on the stage, and being observed by the spectators?

- How do you handle rejection and criticism? How do you deal with your emotions at that point?
- What are the struggles you need to deal with to maintain your position in the field? Continuous struggles that you still have to go through to keep getting work?
- Have you faced any untoward incidents during a performance or behind the scenes? If yes, please elaborate.
- Is there adequate security arrangement made by the theatre unit for the employees?

▪ **Gender Dynamics and Representation**

5. Gender Dynamics in Theatre:

- How does it feel to be a female actor in a space where women were previously stigmatised?
- Is there a difference in the experience of female actors compared to male actors? What is the status of female actors compared to male actors in terms of job security, pay, status, power, and respect?
- How do women find themselves in the theatre environment?
- Have you ever felt vulnerable, unsafe, or exposed in the industry? Can you share any specific incidents?
- Have you witnessed any form of caste or class discrimination in the industry?

6. Representation of Women:

- How do you think the representation of women in theatre today is different from previous eras?
- How liberating is it to see women in authority positions such as directors and playwrights?
- There is a hierarchy and power dynamics in this work situation—but how does it work? How does being under surveillance feel?
- How do power dynamics change when women are in positions of authority?

- When applying ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills in your acting occupation, have you received any constructive or negative feedback from your director, crew, or audience concerning your gender?

▪ **Emotions, Self, and Identity**

7. Emotional Management and Acting Process:

- How do you manage your genuine emotions to align with the required emotions for your role? Can you give examples of specific situations?
- How do you perform a scene that demands a completely different emotion than what you are feeling at that moment?
- In theatre acting, there is the interplay of emotions - from happy to sad, sad to angry in an instance; how do you work on that?
- Often, your actual emotions may not easily align with the ones expected from you as an actor. Is there any such specific situation where you as an actor had to manage your genuine emotions so they match with the emotions of your character-role?
- Managing your emotions in such a manner regularly, how does it affect you at the end of the day?
- If and when your actual emotions do not align with the ones needed from you as an actor, you may decide to suppress your genuine emotions and show the expected emotions (without truly feeling them). If this has happened to you, can you share the experience or discuss such specific situations in your occupation as an actor?
- How does it make you feel at the end of the day, suppressing and displaying your emotions in this manner?
- Does your acting process involve a lot of pretension, or is there an in-depth internalisation where you make the character a part of yourself?

8. Impact of Roles on Identity:

- Do your character roles leave a lasting impact on you? How do you enact a personality that is different from your own?

- How do you deal with playing roles that are different from your personality or set in a completely different world (e.g., mythological, heroic, villainous)? Is it stressful?
 - How do you handle character roles that have harmful tendencies or violent depictions on stage? How do you handle those roles?
 - How do you interpret roles that are often performed by different actors? How do these interpretations affect your psyche and life?
 - How much autonomy do you have while portraying a character?
 - Do you think that you have one core self or multiple selves working at different times (e.g., actor self, personal self)?
 - Does working as an actor extend to your personal space? How does it affect your personal life, time schedules, and relationships?
 - Does the job's demand for confidence, politeness, and socialisation affect your personality in any way?
 - How does your acting process reflect your own personal growth or change over time?
 - How do you manage individual values and beliefs alongside the demands of a role or production?
 - What strategies do you use to maintain your mental and emotional well-being amidst the pressures of the industry?
- Additional questions-
1. Many occupations want their employees to show specific emotions-

Below are the statements relating to how you act in your job as an actor. For each statement, please select the number that best reflects how often you engage in the following interpersonal behaviour on an average workday.

1- (Never)

2- (Rarely)

3- (Sometimes)

4- (Often)

5- (Always)

- I actively try to genuinely feel the emotions I have to express to my clients.
- I conceal my actual feelings about something and refrain from showing them.
- I make a strong effort to truly feel and experience the emotions required for my role.
- I feign emotions that I don't actually feel.

2. Some jobs offer more interest and satisfaction than others. Below are a few statements about theatre acting as a profession. Please select the number for each statement that best reflects how you feel about your current role as a stage actor.

1- (Strongly disagree)

2- (Disagree)

3- (Undecided)

4- (Agree)

5- (Strongly agree)

- Acting feels like a hobby to me. It is interesting enough that I don't get bored.
- I'm not very interested in acting as a job and often find it boring.
- I find my acting job somewhat unpleasant, and I have to drag myself to work.
- I enjoy my work more than my free time because it brings me genuine satisfaction.
- I feel fairly content with my acting work.
- I dislike my work but do it because I don't have other options.
- I believe I'm happier in my work compared to others.
- I'm enthusiastic about my work more often, even though I sometimes feel frustrated by the workload.
- I like my work more than the people I work with.
- I'm disappointed that I ever got into this field.

(Note: Participants were asked to describe situations where they adjusted their real emotions to match the ones needed for their job, without referring to the term “deep acting.” Likewise, instead of using the term “surface acting,” they were asked to share instances where they hid their true emotions and showed the ones required for their role. It was also followed when asking them how these experiences made them feel.)

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PRIMARY SOURCES

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www.ijsr.net International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR) ISSN: 2319-7064

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