

Chapter II

Origin, Growth and development of Assamese cinema and the importance of women characters, and their representation in Assamese films through the decades

Origin and Growth of Assamese Cinema

Assamese cinema was born in March 1935, with the release of 'Joymati', the first ever film of Northeast India, made by cultural icon and freedom fighter, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, who not only chose to make a film relevant to the social scenario at the moment when India was fighting to overthrow British rule (the film being about patriotism, though during the Ahom era), but also decided to convey his message of patriotism through a woman centric film.

'Joymati', a talkie, became the first Assamese cinema ever made. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala made the film under the banner of Chitrallekha Movietone with a budget of 60,000. Due to the lack of trained technicians, while making his maiden film, Jyoti Prasad had to shoulder added responsibilities as the script writer, producer, director, choreographer, editor, set and costume designer, lyricist and music director. The film, though commercially a failure, remains one of the most important milestones in the history of Assamese cinema. (Wikipedia.org)

Rejection by the general audience is not new in Assamese film history. 'Joymati', the very first film made in the state met with this fate, in spite of creating a sensation. The gap between serious cinema and the audience continues to exist, much to the disappointment of committed filmmakers. The reasons are mainly lack of a proper film culture that might have fostered appreciation of good, meaningful cinema. (Manoj Borpujari, Frontline, October 2013)

In the 1930s women in Indian cinema were passive and were sidelined, unlike the powerful and self respecting princess Joymati in Jyoti Prasad's film. He went on to make his second and last film 'Indramalati' in 1939.

Nevertheless the pioneer's bold efforts did not inspire others as there were concerns about incurring losses. The first film of Assam to receive the president's certificate of merit was 'Piyoli Phukan', 1956, based on a historical figure and directed by Phani Sarma, acknowledged as the major Assamese filmmaker after Jyoti Prasad, though his films were not free from Melodrama. (Borpujari, October 2013)

It is disappointing that a big portion of the prints of 'Joymati' was damaged due to lack of preservation facilities. Though, the remaining parts were saved with efforts of filmmaker Bhupen Hazarika and Jyoti Prasad's younger brother. Hazarika made a documentary on the film 'Joymati' in 1976, titled 'Rupkunwar Jyoti Prasad Aru Joymati'. He incorporated remaining bits of reel of the film in the documentary. (Perspectives on Cinema of Assam; 2007)

In 2006, film critic Altaf Majid managed to digitally preserve and arrange portions of the film so that the present generation could once again see the first Assamese film, though a slightly shorter version compared to the original film.

The Indian talkie production began in 1931, with 'Alam Ara', however Indian film industry was then already firmly rooted with Dada Saheb Phalke making the first Indian silent film 'Raja Harishchandra' in 1913 and production houses like Prabhat Studios and New Theater in Pune and Calcutta (Today's Kolkata) respectively, dishing art regular fares to the people clamouring for the new mode of entertainment. (Apurba Sarma, 2007)

If we look back to the times of the advent of Jyoti Prasad in the Assamese cultural scene, we'd find it a colossal effort in his part to embark on an attempt to make a film in this part of the country. Assam, in the thirties of the twentieth century was just beginning to get the feel of modernism having already acquainted itself with the Macaulay designed British Colonial education system, but in all other aspects of life it was extremely backward and underdeveloped.

The seeds of film appreciation in Assam were sown by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Pramathesh Chandra Barua, both of whom were born in affluent families but who chose to tread the painstaking path of learning and making films. Their pursuance took both of them to the West for a while, where they were exposed to extraordinary

world cinema made by masters. Both of them came back, made films, and died young in the same year. (Borpujari, 2007)

Pramathesh Barua, though, never made films in Assamese language. He made 'Devdas' in Hindi in the 1930s, and a few other popular Hindi and Bengali films in the following years.

In Assam, the state film scenario failed to see any action for a while after Aggarwala's demise. Then in 1941 Rohini Kumar Barua's historical 'Manomati' was screened. This was followed by Parbati Prasad Barua's 'Rupahi' in 1946 and Kamal Narayan Choudhury's 'Badan Barphukan' in 1947. Other films of the time were Natasurjya Phani Sarma's 'Siraj', Asit Sen's 'Biplabi' and more. In the 1950s, Phani Sarma, the father of Assamese theater, directed 'Piyali Phukan' a film that won a national award. The film was produced by Gama Prasad Agarwala and the music was composed by Bhupen Hazarika. The decade also saw young filmmakers like Nip Barua, Prabhat Mukherjee and even Bhupen Hazarika, come up with meaningful cinema that was noticed by the national film critics as well. (www.rupaliparda.com)

The followers of the pioneer, Jyoti Prasad, made films with historical or mythological fervor. Third Assamese film 'Monomati' 1941, by Rohini Kumar Barua was based on a popular novel, while 'Badan Borphukan' in 1947, was a historical by Kamal Narayan Choudhury. But in 1948, 'Siraj' became the first film of the forties to deal with social issues like Hindu Muslim unity. The story was written by Lakhinath Sarma and it was directed by Phani Sarma. Phani Sarma could easily be acknowledged as the first major filmmaker after Jyoti Prasad, but was not free from melodramatic mood of the mainstream Hindi cinema. (Borpujari, 2007)

Filmmaker Kulda Kumar Bhattacharjee though informs about Phani Sarma that, 'Siraj' the sixth of Assamese films, made in 1948 by Phani Sarma, was a phenomenal success, not only in the box office but also with the discerning audience. The lead actor and co director, Phani Sarma in the title role of a peasant captivated the audience so much that a remake of the film 'Siraj' by Bhupen Hazarika in 1988, eighteen years after the death of Sarma, failed to create any ripple. Phani Sarma is still remembered as the greatest actor of 20th century Assam. He made 'Siraj' with cultural icon Bishnu

Rabha, and then also directed 'Piyoli Phukan' in 1955, which was again a success. The film was a mix of history and imagination. (Perspectives on Cinema, 2007)

Film production took a small leap forward in the 1950s but could draw crowds only through family dramas and romantic sentimentalism. In the late 1950s, Prabhat Mukherjee's 'Puberun' was the first Assamese film to enter Berlin Film Festival and win president's Silver medal also for best regional film. But it did not fare well in business.

Even Bhupen Hazarika, considered one of the finest film musicians of the country, who was conferred with Dada Saheb Phalke in 1992, made films mainly to satisfy viewer demand. His 'Era Bator Sur', 1956, became a phenomenal hit at box office. (Borpujari, 2013)

In the sixties, 'Lachit Borphukan' (1961), directed by Prabin Phukan and Lakhyadhar Choudhury, became one of the most successful historical films, while Bhupen Hazarika's 'Shakuntala' (1961) won President's silver medal.

But film scholar Bhubon Lahkar informs that when Bhupen Hazarika was still a child, he was once in Gauripur in Goalpara district, the place of Parmathesh Chandra Barua, the prince of Gauripur and a renowned filmmaker. Barua was shooting for a movie there. As a child, Hazarika got attracted to the all powerful role of the director in the process of film shooting, while watching Barua. Later during a visit to Calcutta with Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, for voice recording of 'Joymati', Hazarika was again inspired by the filmmaking environment in Tollygunj (Calcutta).

His film 'Era Bator Sur' was made in 1956, and could be notably mentioned to have been made on the idea of real cinematic expression. His, 'Sikmik Bijuli' in 1969 also dealt with the inevitable part of city-life- slums and slum dwellers, their life style and way of thinking.

Films like 'Narakasur', 'Itu Situ Bahutu', 'Tejimola' and many more were made and new names like Brojen Barua, Anwar Hussain, Saila Barua, Abdul Mazid, Amulya Manna, Nalin Duara, Sujit Singh, Prafulla Barua and few others were added to the Assamese film industry.

Anwar Hussain with his 'Tejimola' in 1963 began the trend of Folk tales in cinema. (As told by Anwar Hussain in a conversation)

Brjen Barua's 'Ito Sito Bahuto', a comedy, made huge money at the box office in 1963. This was followed by his film, 'Dr. Bezbarua' in 1969, which was a mega hit again.

In the seventies, films like Samarendra Narayan Deb's 'Aranya', Pulak Gogoi's 'Khoj', Padum Barua's 'Ganga Chilanir Pakhi', Deuti Barua's 'Bristi', Atul Bordoloi's 'Kollol' and few more did well among the audiences. Kamal Choudhury's, 'Bhaiti,' released in 1972, became the first Assamese coloured film.

When it comes to realistic and humane films, after Jyoti Prasad it was Padum Barua's turn to defy prevailing norms of filmmaking. Against the backdrop of neo realism in the Indian cinema of the 1970s, his maiden venture 'Ganga ChilanirPakhi' was a realistic film with questions on the post independence development model told through the story of a widow. (Borpujari, 2007)

Bhabendranath Saikia's films got Assam in to the Parallel cinema movement of the country. He was a master story teller. Saikia emerged as a promising contributor to the state's film industry with his first film 'Sandhyaraag' in 1977. He focused on serious cinema that covered grave social issues mainly revolving around women. He also brought international acclaim to Assamese cinema. (www.rupaliparda.com)

Bhabendranath Saikia's 'Sandhyaraag' was a story of migrant workers from villages to the cities that was shown through the life of a woman protagonist. 'Agnisnan' 1985, on the other hand dealt with a woman's boldness to fight the infidelity of her husband by paying back with the same coin.

Nip Barua's 'Aajoli Nabau' in 1980 was a big commercial hit where different hues of womanhood were portrayed, while Siba Prasad Thakur's 'Buwari' in 1982 also stereotyped the Indian woman as a homemaker. Pulak Gogoi's 'Srimati Mahimamoyi' 1979 depicted the woman character in a negatively humorous angle while 'Sadori' in 1982 dealt with social issues.

From the late eighties, the film scene in Assam was exploded with directorial debuts, promises and achievements. In spite of facing hardships and having all odds, Dr.

Saikia and Jahnu Barua continued to make films with wider social concerns and with greater insights into human values.

Jahnu Barua's 'Halodhiya Choraie Baodhan Khaye' and 'Sagoroloi Bahu Dur' brought huge international recognition for Assamese cinema along with many national awards for most of his films. The genre of experimental social films that stirred human emotions and thoughts alike was carried on by Sanjeev Hazarika, Gautam Bora, and Manju Borah along with Jahnu Barua.

Jahnu Barua made his mark in Assamese cinema along with the national scene with 'Aparoopaa' in 1982, where Suhasini Muley brilliantly played the central character of a woman who though bound by social norms eventually breaks-free to follow her dreams and love. Jahnu Barua's 'Papori' (1986) and 'Phiringoti' (1991) are very impactful films where social issues are portrayed through a woman's viewpoint. Sanjeev Hazarika's 'Meemansha' in 1994 is yet another bold portrayal of woman's struggle for emotional independence.

In 1986 'Alayaraon', the first Bodo language film was made by Jwngdao Bodosa which got him a national award for best regional film in non scheduled language. In 1990, the first Karbi language film 'Wosobipo' was made by Gautam Bora, who trained in Germany in filmmaking.

Gautam Bora's 'Wosobipo' tells the story of a Karbi community on the verge of disintegration because of the forces of development. The film enlivens the details of the lifestyle of the Karbi people.

Through the eighties many popular family dramas like 'Buwari', 'Sun Moina', and other films brought good number of audiences to cinema theaters. Bidyut Chankraborty's 'Raag Biraag' also won national and international acclaim. Yet a deep lull was faced by the industry through the nineties until 'Jaubane Aamoni Kare' was released in 1998. The film did good business across Assam, encouraging filmmakers to come up with new ventures. In the year 2000, 'Hiya Diya Niya' followed suit with cinema halls going 'House Full'.

Manju Borah, known woman filmmaker of the state made many thought provoking films. Manju Bora's 'Akashitorar Katha Re' (2003) is a sad depiction of a woman's

fate where submission in all aspects is expected by society. 'Laaz' (2004), 'Joymoti' (2007), 'Aai Kot Nai' (2009) are other women centric films by the filmmaker.

Santwana Bordoloi, though has made only one film so far, her 'Adajya' (1997), is a film based on a novel by renowned writer Mamoni Roysom Goswami, on life of widows in conservative Brahmin society of Assam. 'Adajya' gained much critical appreciation across India.

Other names like Arup Manna, Suman Haripriya, Pradyut Deka, make a list of younger dedicated filmmakers. Arup Manna's 'Aideu' (2007) very touchingly portrays the stigmatized painful life of Aideu Handique, the first heroine of Assamese cinema who played the lead role in 'Joymati'. Manna has also come up with 'Adhyay', a woman centric film in 2013 that has done its rounds in many prestigious film festivals. 'Sinyor', released in January 2014, a film by young filmmaker Kangkan Rajkhowa deals with prostitution, a subject very rarely taken up by Assamese filmmakers.

While Jahnu Barua's recent release 'Ajeyo' in January 2014 has again won much appreciation and National award. Octogenerian filmmaker Abdul Mazid who made 'Chameli Memsab' in 1975, has again taken the director's hat to make 'Saat Nambaror Shandhanat', a film about the Assam's tea tribe and the story revolving around a woman. The journey of Assamese cinema goes on through trials and tribulations.

Importance of women in Assamese cinema

What remains remarkable in Cinema of Assam is that, most of the visionary and serious filmmakers of Assam have very often, consciously, chosen to deal with women centric films or have left a mark on the audiences through the way they have represented women even in non women centric films.

'Joymati', the first ever Assamese film was based on a story revolving around a courageous Ahom princess. The people of Assam have an emotional attachment to this historical character and moreover, Jyoti Prasad wanted a story for his first film where he could give a valiant picture of Assamese life unfolded in full Blossom.

Being a freedom fighter himself, he wanted an anti imperialist angle to his film where Princess Joymati fitted well. He created the screen play from Lakshminath Bezbarua's story 'Joymati Kunwori' and tried to give a realistic film to the people of Assam. (Altaf Mazid, Perspectives on Assamese Cinema, 2007)

For any film, the story, theme and subject are of utmost importance, and many films are influenced by literature. Assamese films are either based on literary works, mythology or folk tales and history, or simply are a remake of other language films into Assamese. In total, through these eight decades of Assamese cinema, the state has produced approximately, only 430 films. And sadly, in case of many remarkable films made in the past, the prints could not be preserved well.

But very interestingly, almost sixty films out of the total films of Assam revolve around women. Some are named after women, or at least, show the woman protagonist in the film as the main strength of the story. Many unusual themes have been taken up by different directors in such women centric films. (Pramod Kalita, Satsari, 2010)

The first film 'Joymati', itself was a woman centric film. Jyoti Prasad made only two films, 'Joymati' (1935) and 'Indramalati' (1939). He gave prominence to women characters in both his films. He defied the social norms of the pre independence Assamese society and boldly presented real women actors on screen and dealt with women centric themes.

Finding the heroine for his first film was a challenge. He took time and efforts to even find the right women actors to play women characters in his films. His passion for cinema was blended well with his ideology and principles in spite of many social obstructions. He himself wrote that "My film 'Joymati' and its characters have a very realistic representation of the historical story. Something like the soviet, English and American classics of the time. My Joymati maintained her dignity in all circumstances through the film." Jyoti Prasad worked very hard and faced immense challenge to make his 'Joymati' dream come true. (Kalita, 2010)

Padum Barua wrote on Jyoti Prasad, "Jyoti Prasad, at a time, when even on stage the women characters were played by men, he successfully made women act in front of

the camera. Except Swargajyoti Barua, who played Dalimi in 'Joymati', all other actresses like Aideu Handique, the heroine and Mohini Rajkumari, who played the queen mother, were originally village girls.

Though in the film 'Indramalati' the central woman character is Malati, she is weaker than Upina, the other woman character who is tribal. It is Upina's boldness and her protection over Malati that takes the story forward. Women characters in Jyoti Prasad's films symbolized different traits in women. Like Joymati stood for strength and patriotism, while Dalimi and Upina stood for social unity and brotherhood among communities. (Kalita, 2010)

As mentioned above, many of the films made in Assam have been named after women characters. After 'Joymoti' and 'Indramalati', in 1941, Rohini Kumar Barua made 'Monomati'. Then in 1947, Parbati Prasad Barua's 'Rupahi' was released. All women-centric films named after women characters.

Not only directors, but also audiences, it seems, through the years have willingly accepted women-centric films in Assam, as many hit films like 'Rupahi', 'Shakuntala', 'Lalita', 'Raangdhali', 'Papori', 'Aparoopaa', 'Sontara', 'Sonma', 'Taramai', 'Moromi', 'Buwari', 'Soru Buwari', 'Ajaoli Nabou', 'Sreemati Mahimamoyee', 'Sindoor', 'Chameli Memsahib', 'Patni', 'Nayanmoni', and many more are there where the names themselves suggest women-centric themes.

The 1950s saw mythological films like 'Sati Beula' and social dramas like 'Mak Aru Maram' where women characters remained central to the storyline.

Since 1950 till 1970s, filmmakers Nip Barua, Brajen Barua, Bhupen Hazarika, Anwar Hussain made films where women found a special place. Nip Barua's 'Smritir Parakh' in 1956, was his debut film as a director. He made films till 1988. In 1973, his 'Sontara', and in 1977 'Sonma', in 1980 'Ajouli Nabaou' and in 1984 'Shakuntala', 'Shanker Joseph Ali', all these films represented women in different important roles.

The contributions of members of Barua film family, which includes Nip Barua, Brajen, D'Bon, Ramen and Dwipen Barua are important in the growth of the Assamese film industry. It is really a matter to be noticed that there are producers,

directors, actors, music directors, play back singers, story, script and dialogue writers in the same family. In fact the Golden era of Assamese film industry had started with the unexpected commercial success of a film called 'Dr. Bezbarua' in 1969, directed by Brajen Barua who also acted in the film. The brothers not only made commercially successful films but also created local film technicians through the years. (Pabitra Kumar Deka, Perspectives, 2007)

Their films 'Mak Aru Maram' in 1957 received certificate of merit from Indian President, and 'Ronga Police' in 1958 was awarded the silver medal. During the 1950s Assamese filmmaking was mostly dependent on Studios and technicians of Kolkata, but Nip Barua then shot 'Mak Aru Moram' in the outdoor locations at Darjeeling. (Rupaliparda.com)

In 'Tejimola' 1963, the two main characters were women where one stood for innocence while the other symbolized evil and sin. Abdul Mazid's 'Chameli Memsahib' (1975) became a commercial success with enchanting music by maestro Bhupen Hazarika. The story depicts the tea garden life during the Colonial era where the woman protagonist remains central to the theme and she is shown as victim of destiny.

Padum Barua's 'Ganga Chilonir Pakhi', (1976) a story about social upheavals and constrained development sees a love story run parallel to the plot where the female character Basanti remains crucial. The story depicts love, hope, catastrophe, ecstasy and tragic consequences in the life of the heroine. 'Ganga Chilonir Pakhi' represented a woman character that stood for the common problems that women face in the society, but most of it goes unnoticed by majority of people. The story for the film was written by Sahitya Akadmi winner writer Lakhinandan Bora. Though the film was not a commercial success it is still acclaimed as an artistic masterpiece.

In the same year, Dibon Barua's 'Taramai' 1976, was a superhit. 'Taramai', a simple village woman's love story depicted the simplicity and strength in women at the same time.

But the most important mention here should be of late Suprabha Devi, the first woman director of Assam, who also produced some hit women oriented films in

association with her husband before directing herself. She produced films like 'Toramai' (1976), 'Moromi' (1978) and 'Rangdhalee' (1979), before the release of her own directorial debut 'Nayanmoni' in 1983, which also centers around a woman character Nayanmoni.

Another woman filmmaker of older times, Kuntala Deka made 'Kanaklata' in 1990, on a woman freedom fighter of Assam. The character represented patriotism and courage, just like Joymati did.

During 1970s to 1980s, Bhabendranath Saikia, Samarendra Narayan Deb etc made more women centric films. Samarendra Narayan Deb's 'Aranya' 1971, and 'Putalar Ghar' 1976, represented women of different social strata. While in 'Aranya', Bidya Rao played a carefree woman's character. 'Putalar Ghar' represented the childlike innocence in a young woman and her transitions in life from childhood to adult age.

Filmmaker Pulak Gogoi has always given a respectable place to women in his films. 'Srimati Mohimamoyee' in 1979 though represented the negativity of a woman in a comic way, yet the character was not criticized or looked down upon by the director in his representation of her in the film. 'Sadori', 'Sindoor', 'Khoj', 'Patni', 'Mamtaaz', all his major films are women centric where women are placed highly in moral and emotional terms.

Siba Prasad Thakur's films like 'Ghar Sansaar', 'Mayuri', 'Shewali', 'Buwari' all focus on women characters elaborately, and his 'Buwari' was a super hit in 1982. Women characters though, in his films, are common and not very strong, yet important to the story line. In 'Buwari' he explored both, the positive and negative traits in women and the importance they have in holding a house and family together. Yet, the women very easily surrender to destiny even when they know that they are much important to the society and family, in his films.

Known as a great story teller Bhabendranath Saikia's stories have always been very powerful. A writer himself, he very skillfully converted many of his novels into his own films. Seven of his films were women centric. His first film 'Sandhyaraag' 1977, tells the story of two sisters from the village who work as domestic helps in the city

through their growing years. Charu, the central character is depicted very realistically where the bitter reality of poor women in our society is revealed.

The film 'Anirban' 1981, is based on his story 'Prahari'. Cinematic adaptation of his own story is also seen in 'Agnisnan'. Bhabendranath Saikia's films used simple language, and were uncompromisingly based on reality, every time conveying a strong message.

'Agnisnan', in 1985 won him a National award for best screen play. With a very strong story line, the film was controversial, where goddess Sita's *Agnisanan* stands as a metaphor for the tribulations that the central woman protagonist Menaka goes through. The film was a call for equality of genders in a way.

In the eighties Jahnu Barua took the lead among young filmmakers followed by Munin Barua, Sanjeev Hazarika, Bidyut Chakraborty, and later in the ninties, Manju Bora, Santwana Bordoloi, and others, who made women centric films.

Jahnu Barua has made many women centric films and in almost all his films women are placed respectfully as strong characters. His first feature film 'Aparoopaa' 1982, was about a woman's loneliness and quest for love. The character played by Mumbai actress Suhasini Muley, was ultimately shown braving her way out of misery and finding love and freedom.

'Papori' 1986, 'Banani' 1990, 'Phiringoti' 1991, 'Ajeyo' 2014, all show women with different qualities and strength. In 'Phiringoti', a strong woman protagonist is central to the theme who coveys the filmmaker's message that never give up no matter what comes your way. 'Phiringoti', also bagged the best actress National award for the heroine.

His films 'Pokhi', 'Konikar Ramdhenu' and 'Sagraloi Bahu Dur' form a trilogy of Grandfather Grandchild relationship. The bond is shown in the backdrop of different situations, while 'Pokhi' is about a girl child who is able to win the love and affection of an old villager after much tribulation, 'Konikar Ramdhenu' is about a molested child who is sent to a juvenile home but finds grandfatherly affection from the elderly warden there. 'Sagoroloi Bahu Dur' is about an old boatman who is affected by the

decision to make a bridge over the river that flows by the village. The story simultaneously also shows the growing bond between him and his little grandson.

Sanjeev Hazarika's 'Haladhar' 1992, won him national award for best first film of a director. The film is about a simple poor villager who after going through much complex situations and humiliation, gains a sense of dignity. His next film 'Meemansha' is a woman oriented film made in 1994. It revolves around a young widow pitted against all odds of the world. After the demise of her husband, she faces hardships to earn a living and also has to fight her unfair in laws to keep her small piece of land for herself.

Jwngdao Bodosa, an FTII alumni, made 'Hagramayao Jinahari' 1993 (Rape in the virgin forest), a film criticising the government's insensitivity towards deforestation, told through the story of a woman.

The story is about a young village girl Mithinga, and her father. While the father works for a timber smuggler like other villagers, who cut trees from the forest for the smuggler and make a living. He saves to marry off his daughter. In Boro her name 'Mithinga' means Nature. She is finally raped by the men of the timber smuggler. The situation is almost like the men raping the virgin forest by destroying it for selfish interests. The film won a national award for best film on environment issues.

Santwana Bordoloi came up with the much acclaimed 'Adajya' in 1997, a film based on a story by Mamoni Roysom Goswami, about the plight of widows in the conservative Brahmin society of Assam during the pre independence period.

The main character of the film is Giribala, a young widow, who comes back to her parental home. The story moves forward, depicting her relationship with three other widows in the joint family, and a British national, Marc Saheb (Played by Tom Alter), who is in the village to do research on old Assamese manuscripts.

'Adajya' earned national awards for best regional film and best cinematography, besides Jury's special mention of a role played by a leading actress Bhagirathi. It also bagged special Jury award at the Asian director's Competition in International Film Festival of India (IFFI) 1998, and G. Arvindan Award for best film of the year in the International Film Festival of Kerela.

Munin Barua made 16 films in total. His 'Ramdhenu' and 'Hiya Diya Niya', 'Pahari Kanya', all have women as central characters, though the stories are mostly hero heroine love saga. In 2000 'Hiya Diya Niya' represented two contradicting young women characters while 'Pahari Kanya' was a hill woman's love story. 'Ramdhenu', 2011, though did show a strong woman character, played by Prastuti Parashar, who fights odds in life never compromising on her self-respect.

Much acclaimed woman filmmaker of Assam Manju Borah also has four women centric films to her credit, each one leaving a strong impact on the audience differently. While 'Akashitorar Katha Re' 2003, is a sad tale of women's submission to social pressures, 'Laaz' 2004 is about innocence and helplessness of a girl child who is almost deprived of education following social circumstances, in spite of being bright and talented. The film also makes a mockery of the education system in rural Assam.

Her film 'Joymoti' (2006) is based on the political undercurrent of the Ahom era. Bora's 'Aai Kot Nai' (2009) is the story of a woman's maternal instincts and the universal nature of woman's love for her children. The story is about an Assamese tribal woman's lost child that was separated from her due to Assamese and Naga community conflict in a village in Assam Nagaland border. The child is finally found at the home of a Naga hill woman who saved and nurtured the baby as her own.

Arup Manna is another serious filmmaker of Assam whose two women centric films 'Aideu' 2006 and 'Adhyay' 2013, depict the painful tales of two village women, in different times respectively. While 'Aideu' is based in Pre Independence and newly independent India, 'Adhyay' is based in contemporary society, where in spite of changing times, plight of women remain same.

Manna's 'Aideu' is a very touching depiction of the real life of Aideu Handique, the first heroine of Assamese cinema who was immortalized on screen through Jyoti Prasad's film 'Joymati', but spent her life in pain and misery due to unjust social system of her conservative village in Upper Assam.

As writer Garima Kalita puts it, 'Hours have been spent while crediting the producer and director of 'Joymati' the film for daunting the challenge of filmmaking in a region

like this, which he rightly deserves; but an innate nay indispensable ingredient of the whole process is often forgotten and history suffers at the hand of choice and priorities. The story of Aideu Handique, the woman who played the lead role of 'Joymati' needs further interpretation, an unbiased and gender free assessment and at the most a thoroughly sympathetic and compensatory point of view.'(Garima Kalita, 2007)

Arup Manna's 'Adhyay' is a painful story about a poor tribal village woman, who moves to the city with her husband looking for a livelihood but is finally raped and killed by some politicians and men of her employer.

Less known filmmaker Deepa Bhattacharya, an academician, made 'The Sixth Day of Creation' in 2004 that has a woman playing an important role in the story. It is an offbeat film with only three characters about a painter's (Vishal) dilemma over a maligned young woman (Manashi). Vishal believes that art of any form, whether literature, paintings or music, should reflect the suffering of humans. He saves a young woman Manashi from committing suicide one day, and also helps her regain memory through his painting. She recalls that her husband died and she was attacked. Then comes the third character in the film who is an art critic, who eventually destroys Vishal's works and tries to influence Manashi. That is when the hero hopes that God will again create the right kind of humans on the sixth day of creation.

Woman filmmaker Suman Haripriya has made three films, two of which are comedies. 'Koina Mur Dhunia' and 'Koka Deutar Ghar Juwai', are hilarious with strong woman characters in them. Her third film, on the Sattriya culture, 'Kadam Tale KrisnaNache' won her a national award.

In the hardcore commercial line filmmakers like Chandra Mudoj who's 'Ujanir Dujoni Gabhoru' (2003) and 'Joon Da Imaan Goonda' (2007) have stereotyped women in Bollywood style. Debutant filmmaker Pradyut Kumar Dekha's 'DhuniaTirutabor' (2009), experiments with women's sensuality and strength in an interesting manner. Pradyut Dekha's following films also revolve around women characters that are important to the development of the story in the film.

In 2014, Knagkan Rajkhowa, a young director, came up with his debut film 'Sinyor'. It explores prostitution and is also about the challenges women working in electronic media face. Themes of this kind were not touched by filmmakers of the state earlier.

Most filmmakers of Assam gave importance to the positive side of women. Vamps or negative women characters were shown in very few Assamese films.

There are six types of women characters as represented in Assamese cinema through the decades, they are, the Ideal women like in 'Joymati' (historical) , 'Sati Beula' (mythological), 'Ajoli Nabou' (Realistic), 'Tejimola' (Imaginary folk tale figure). Or revolting women, like characters in 'Agnisnan', 'Kanaklata', 'Phiringoti' etc. Negative women characters like the stepmother in 'Tejimola' or youngest daughter in law in 'Ajouli Nabou'. Or comic characters like 'Srimati Mohimamoyee', or the women in 'Koina Mur Dhunia'. Or the glamorous women like in 'Hiya Diya Niya' or 'Dhunia Tirutabor'.

Many women centric films were being made in the Hindi film industry also at the moment when 'Joymati' was made.

Films in the thirties were like, 'Draupadi' 1931, AlamAra 1931, 'Madhuri' 1932, 'Radha Rani', 'Sati Sabitri', 'Jalim Jawani', all in 1932, then 'Miss' and 'Sabitri' in 1933, while 'Gumsundari', 'Indira MA' in 1934, 'Hunterwali', 'Achyut Kanya' 1935, 'Deccan Queen', 'Gram Kanya' in 1936. (Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema, Oxford, 1998)

Jyoti Prasad's 'Joymati' in 1935 was strikingly different from many other women centric film being made in mainstream Hindi industry, as it portrayed the woman as a valiant humanitarian. It earned a reputation of the first auteur of Assamese cinema with higher aesthetic and cinematic values, but has been deprived of a worthy place in history of Indian cinema. (Borpujari, 2007)

Though, according to Geetha Ramanathan, professor of Comparative Literature and Women's Studies at West Chester University, 'Hunterwali' (1935) is stunning in producing an image of woman that could not be seen even in Western films.

Even DW Griffith's female stars were waifs, and young girls, shot using halo lighting, to elicit pathos. In contrast, Nadia, in 'Hunterwali' plays a fearless woman who by

night roams around bringing predatory males to justice, using symbolically loaded whip, taking space of the male. Full shots of her emphasise her power and screen presence.

The plot of 'Hunterwali' is predicated on routine, if awe inspiring, notions of nationalism and female honour that enable stable definitions of womanhood to prevail. 'Hunterwali' moment is resurrected in Shekhar Kapoor's 'Bandit Queen' (1994), where her visual exploitation of the narrative line invites a brazen consumption of the female figure. In 'Hunterwali', the woman is hidden and the hunter thrown into relief. (Ramanathan, Missing Angle, Frontline October, 2013)

She also appreciates the powerful representation of a woman in the film 'Guide'.

A film on a smaller scale, but very successful was 'Guide', 1965, which feels more 'modern' in its outlook and its character presentation. The film's single achievement is to have been able to present a complex female character Rosie (Waheeda Rehman), who makes several choices based on rational criteria. She leaves her husband for his double standards and moves in with an itinerant Guide and pursues a career in dance. (Ramanathan , 2013)

Women's desires are ostensibly more central to melodrama genre, which dominates the Hindi, the Tamil, and many other regional film industries. Melodrama often expands women's roles through eliciting a strong emotional response from viewers. However, in many cases the resolution of the film reinstates the status quo.

'Alam-Ara', 1931, inaugurating the talkies, did boast of a huge and heroic role for a female. 'Achyut Kanya', 1936, challenges caste constraints, introducing the idea of individual desire. The film is about love between a Dalit woman, Devika Rani and Brahmin hero Ashok Kumar. While the romance remains unfulfilled, the film established the narrative, if not visual presence of the Dalit woman.

'Mother India', 1957, celebrated as the triumph of womanhood by the industry, is perhaps less advanced in its thinking of woman than might be assumed. The film's presentation of radical anti-feudal hero Braj is severely compromised by his abduction of the land lord's daughter. When his mother, (Played by Nargis), shoots him, the honour of all Indian women is salvaged. The film pits Braj's post-colonial hero status

against women, suggesting that anti-feudalism results in barbaric behavior against women. It follows then that when Mother India shoots Braj, she stands for tradition; thus one of the most radical acts, one woman defending another woman from sexual assault, is reprised to send back women into the *dharmic* order, or in other words the feudal. Most of the Indian women on screen were shown as considering marriage their eternal spiritual bond and in her absolute dedication to the husband, her single prayer is to die in presence of her husband. Her home is her temple, husband her God, children his blessings and land the great mother. (Ramanathan, 2013)

Assam's Film Scenario in Present

In spite of its long history, and its artistic successes, for a state that has always taken its cinema seriously, Assamese cinema has never really managed to make the breakthrough on the national scene despite its film industry making a mark in the National Awards over the years. Although the beginning of the 21st century has seen 'Bollywood' style Assamese movies hitting the screen, the industry has also not been able to compete in the market, significantly. (www.Indianetzone.com)

The central protagonist in the first film 'Joymati' was not just a legendary figure of a politically turbulent medieval Assam, but stood as a Metaphor for the contemporary tribulations of India's freedom struggle. This made the film directly political, a hitherto unknown endeavour of Assamese cinema. (Borpujari, 2007)

It is another matter that Jyoti Prasad's initial efforts of making Assamese cinema a serious independent, socially meaningful art form could not be sustained and his dream of creating a healthy powerful tradition of Assamese cinema went haywire in later years. Different from the host of other filmmakers in the beginning of Indian Talkies, Jyoti Prasad made another inconsequential film, 'Indramalati', with the self-confessed intention of restoring his financial stability by paying off his debt incurred during the making of Joymati. (Apurba Sarma, Jyoti Prasad as a Filmmaker, 2005)

With Independence, the unbounded spirit of freedom and the dream of a new life in a changed society should have provided the springboard for new cultural visions and concomitant actions. But like in all other spheres, the hopes and aspirations of an

unshackled nation, in its cultural front, too, got stifled. When freedom came Jyoti Prasad himself was debilitated by recurrent illness..... The nature of governance and the fall in the ideals and morals of the Congress party, once its role changed from the vanguard of a fighting nation to the ruler of the people, left many a sensitive and creative mind completely disillusioned. (Apurba Sarma, Perspectives, 2007)

Films made in Assam, immediately after Independence were nothing to talk much about. The fact is, the pursuit of artistic excellence in themes deeply rooted in Assamese life and society initiated by Jyoti Prasad, were forsaken to a large extent by many of the filmmakers who followed him. Besides, the inevitable war time scarcity allowed some people to acquire huge unaccounted money through hoarding, black marketing, speculation and tax evasion. Much of this money was pumped into filmmaking in Assam by hiring studios and equipments in Calcutta. But most of these films were artistic and commercial disasters. (Sarma, 2007)

Though the filmmakers were sincere, the right tradition for Assamese cinematic art was yet to develop. Among the seven films made in the 1940s, Bishnu Rabha and Phani Sarma directed 'Siraj', was the only poignant, socially relevant and well crafted film.

In the mid fifties film production took a leap forward with owners of show houses seeing a new market for low quality family dramas with romantic sentimentalism. As a consequence number of cinema halls and audiences grew. Touring film units began showing films in villages. But most of the films showed a lack of proper social consciousness among the filmmakers. (Sarma, 2007)

The problems of Assamese film industry are in plenty and it is not even an industry yet, in spite of its eight decades of functioning.

Film journalist, and jury member of many International film festivals, Utpal Borpujari speaks about its problems at a film and literary meet in Guwahati in 2013 saying that, limited screening space and limited market are arguably the biggest problems facing the film industry of Assam.

He also informs that when 'Joymati' was released in 1935, it was first done in Kolkata, not in Assam, and later its first screening in Assam was in Kumar Bhaskar

Natya Mandir, a theater hall and not a cinema hall..... The lack of screening space was one of the major reasons why ‘Joymati’ was a miserable failure financially. Now over seven decades later, films made in Assam face similar problems as there are no theaters still, in large tracts of Assam, where there is huge audience. Problem has only worsened in recent years with many halls closing down in the first few years of the 21st century. The problems began with the social unrest that began towards the end of 1980s with Assam agitation and simultaneous birth of ULFA.

In the 1970s and 1980s, it was a common sight in cities like Guwahati and towns like Jorhat, Tezpur, Nagaon and Nalbari that bus loads of people came to these places to see Assamese films in the halls. These would commonly be social entertainers with folk tuned music. As socio political situation worsened, these audiences started thinning before completely vanishing..... The local film industry decimated, with many filmmakers reduced to making digital films in the VCD format for home viewing by local people.

Utpal Borpujari, suggests that building of mini cinema halls in different parts of Assam and the government’s assurance that films in native language are given permanent preference in these mini halls, is essential.

Writer Hare Krishna Deka, speaking at a seminar on Assamese cinema in 2007 says, “I feel there is a need to have a fresh look at touring cinema in Assam. It has to be reorganised and a system of networking has to be adopted. The Assamese cinema may take a leaf out of the book of Mobile theater of Assam..... Many will argue that since only 16mm format suits touring cinema, this idea is impractical on these days of 35 mm cinema. But since it is a question of survival for an almost dying industry, it better survive first, by using 16 mm format and then go for 35mm films.”

In eighty years of Assamese cinema, National awards and international recognitions have come to its films and filmmakers on a regular basis. But the success of good meaningful films in the market has been a fluctuating phenomenon here. In spite of growing support from the government in the recent three to four years and efforts by Assam State Film Finance and Development Corporation, (ASFFDC), and private producers alike, even good films by serious filmmakers have not been pulling in much crowd to the halls.

The ASFFDC has been financing feature films since the year 2011, and has managed to release two good films and is about to release one more this year. Moreover, the ASFFDC has done a creditable job in 2011, by coming up with Northeast India's only film archive, with assistance from National Film Archive of India. Lot of Assamese films have been lost in the last few decades due to lack of preserving facilities in the Northeast. This problem has found a solution with the films that can still be saved.

Mini cinema halls, is an issue that has been proposed by the members of film fraternity since long but has not yet taken shape. Just the way, Assam's mobile theater takes entertainment to almost people's door steps, the mini halls and touring cinema is likely to serve the same purpose.

Also, since four to five years, a few theaters have opted for satellite screening facilities where films are downloaded onto a computer system at the main center, which could be in Mumbai or Chennai, and through satellite signals is released and screened in halls across the country including Assam. Some multiplexes and mini luxury halls have also come up in Guwahati and important towns in Assam. Some Assamese films also have been released in a similar manner to reach out to larger audience, and also to beat piracy.

The final question remains about the quality of films. While some critics like Apurba Sarma, or even filmmakers like Jahnu Barua, Santwana Bordoloi or Arup Manna and many others feel that filmmakers should stick to indigenous themes and make films true to Assamese culture. That is the only way to keep Assamese cinema alive many feel. While some other filmmakers hold the view that cinema can be realistic and thought provoking and reflect only reality, but films have also traditionally served the purpose of entertaining the masses by relieving them of stress when they go into a world of fantasy, created by the filmmaker through the images and the stars on screen. (As they spoke to the researcher on their views)

In that case, it becomes confusing if, general family entertainers should always be realistic in nature, or continue to serve the purpose of entertaining the masses by taking them into a fantasy world.

Film writer Fareed Kazmi in his book 'The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema', argues, 'A crucial point that emerges from our analysis is that conventional cinema cannot be dismissed as trivia. To label it as 'escapist', 'mere entertainment', 'fantasy oriented', is to misunderstand its essential nature and function. It is to miss out and ignore the reasons for its hegemonic position and the ideological role that it performs.'

Despite the existence of Kitsch, of inanities and apparent irrelevancies, this cinema is deadly serious. It is a political cinema and ideologically loaded. Its raw material is always social reality. It moulds fashion and articulates this reality from a particular one sided perspective. It is a specific way of seeing the world. It constructs a final position of intelligibility about the world for the audience. (Kazmi, 1999)

Viewed from this perspective, the entire terrain of the debate, changes. The notion that conventional cinema can only be combated by art cinema is quite clearly misplaced. Especially if we keep in mind the way films are being made, both within modernist and innovative category, there is no likelihood of them challenging the hegemony of conventional films. This is so because in their sets of concerns, thematic structures, style, world view as also in the way they are structured, their pace and the language that they employ, serious films are totally different from conventional films. Almost none of the films belonging to the former category have been able to establish any 'Phatic' contact with the audience as a result of which they are largely ignored by the majority of filmgoers, especially those belonging to the subordinate classes.

The reason for their failure lies in the fact that, unlike conventional films, they rarely- if ever- concern themselves with the contemporary ideological tensions of society. Moreover, even in those films which take up the problems of the marginalized, it is more from a psychological perspective rather than launching any direct attack on the system. (Kazmi,1999)

Film writer from yester years, Feroz Rangoonwala, in his book 'A Pictorial History of Indian cinema' also conveys his views on the issue of conventional cinema saying...'Indian cinema's attempts to tackle some of the burning social, socio economic and political problems are to be commended, if only because the audience

usually shies away from them and makes it plain that what it wants is escapism and whatever goes under the vague label of entertainment, at least in all-India cinema.

That is why National films have always wrapped any problems they dealt with in the sugar coating of songs, dances, dramatic dialogues, comic sequences and so on for easier and wider consumption.

This has not been so in regional art films and few other exceptions. It was also not so true in older films when the stakes were smaller and the audience more serious and responsive. So the big banners of the 1930s and 1940s, (New theaters, Prabhat Studios, Bombay Talkies, Minerva, National Studios, Filmistan, Ranjit, Sagar, Kardar, Wadia Brothers and Rajkamal) could try out a variety of themes, even if framed in a popularly enjoyable set up. (Firoze Rangoonwalla, 1979)

Geetha Ramanathan, though has a counter view. And while focusing on representation of women and their problems in Indian cinema, she thinks that, 'the realist cinema in India is far more sensitive to issues surrounding the representation of women than either the French, American or German New Wave films.' And it is mainly Parallel cinema, that was to accomplish the task of realistic depiction of women.

Comparing those with regular Hindi films like 'Sholay' she writes..... In 'Sholay' the introduction of the female hero, Hema Malini, as a *Tongawali* is more nuanced, using an understated medium shot to show her in the driver's seat, in the *Tonga*. The *Tongawali's* costuming is traditional, the function is not. The image reveals double pull in many films; the actual modernity of woman is irrelevant to the plot; indeed it is largely absent in this film.

The film does include another moment of radical investment in suggesting women's roles in a changing society. The other hero Jay (Amitabh Bacchan), seeks to give the widowed Radha (Jaya Bhaduri) another chance in life, because as he so passionately advocates, even dacoits are given another chance. The ready approval of the father in law comes as a shock until he persuades Radha's father of the practical benefits of such marriages. The gap in social difference is overlooked. But just as welcome change is awaited, Jai dies, leaving Radha twice widowed, an image touchingly

caught by her closing the windows of her house and shutting herself in. The message is clear, woman has to stay inside, almost as though to make up for the spirited role played by the Tongawali.

The Bombay film industry's presentation of women would continue to be inflected by visuals that are extremely contemporaneous. (GeethaRamanathan, *Missing Angle*, *Frontline* October 2013)