Chapter I
Framework of the Study

Cinema has always played a very important role in documenting time and society through the ages. An important aspect of cinema is that it usually records the world as it is, except for the use of special effects and skilful editing to create extraordinary images, letting people enter into a world of fantasy. Cinema, for over a century has recorded all, whether it is moments of history, beauty or fury of nature, or human emotions. Its’ link with reality makes cinema important. One of the most popular forms of Mass communication and entertainment, cinema has completed a century in India and close to eight decades in the state of Assam.

Assamese cinema has through the years introduced the people of the state with its history, important social issues, culture and tradition apart from simply entertaining them. But all through out, it has reflected upon the Assamese society in various ways, including the status of women here. It is important to note that the first Assamese film itself was a woman centric film.

The study titled, “Gender Representation in The cinema of Assam: A Study of Representation of Women In Assamese Cinema Since Its Inception” is a sincere effort to study selected films from different phases of Assamese cinema, in which either the themes revolve around women or the women characters and their treatment reflect the social norms and traditions of the Assamese society. The researcher, in the process of the research wishes to understand how some of the leading filmmakers of Assam have treated women characters and themes related to women in their films, and how well is it in conformity to the traditions, customs and status of women in the society of Northeast, especially Assam.

Statement of the problem

Assamese cinema was born in 1935 with the release of the first Assamese film ‘Joymati’, a historical film that revolved around the legend of Ahom princess Joymati, one of the most courageous women figures in Ahom history. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala,
the icon of Assamese art and culture, in spite of many hurdles, went ahead and made the film and chose a women centric story for the first ever movie of the region.

These eight decades have seen hundreds of Assamese films come and go. While some of these films did manage to touch the masses strongly and stir debates and thoughts, many also went unnoticed. Some of the films even made it to the national and international arena winning critical acclaim and awards, among which many had Women play a crucial role in the storyline.

Unlike Dada Saheb Phalke, the father of Indian cinema, Jyoti Prasad the founder of Assamese cinema, did not use male actors to play women in his films. Rather he fought odds and made actual women actors act in the first film of Assam ‘Joymati’.

It is generally believed among the people of the region and other Indian states that women of Northeast, including those of Assam, enjoy a better social status than their counterparts in many other parts of the country. That could be a reason why women came forward to act in the film ‘Joymati’ back in early 1930s.

Though ironically, the woman who played the central character in the film ‘Joymati’, Aideu Handique, only a teenager at the time, was eventually ostracized by her own village people in Upper Assam, for acting in a talkie, a medium where men and women had to work together.

Yet, it is a customary view (As written and discussed by scholars through ages), that most women in Northeast India, including the state of Assam enjoy a better social status in terms of respect from men in the family, freedom and power of decision making in comparison to their counterparts in Western, Southern and Northern India. Irrespective of what strata of society they belong to, women are supposedly more comfortable with the social norms in the region. Tribal women especially have enjoyed a powerful place in the family in many tribes and communities of Assam.

For instance, just to mention a few, academician Fatima Tohsin Sahidullah of Handique Girl’s college, Guwahati, observes in an article by her on Status o women in Assam in ‘The Assam Tribune’ that ‘In Assam the status of women is high in comparison to women of other states in the country. One salient feature in the Assamese society is absence of dowry system.’ She also stated that in the field of
education and Female work participation rates (FWPR), women in Assam are in a better position.

Similar views are held by academician Tineshwari Devi in her article on status of women published in Journal of Business Management and Social Sciences Research, January, 2013. She mentions that the literacy rate in Assam for women is 67.27 percent and women do enjoy a better status in terms of education and employment. Though, both these scholars agree that it is the middle class, upper middle class or upper status women who enjoy a better status and those below poverty line do experience discrimination and exploitation even in Assam.

Writer Pramod Kalita and film critic Apurba Sarma also agree that women in Assam have been hailed high by the local society, if compared to other parts of India.

The present study aimed to closely analyse the representation of women characters in some selected films with women centric or socially relevant themes. Through the study the researcher wanted to find out if the general belief about the status of women in Assam is truly reflected in these films or the filmmakers simply portray Assamese women in conformity to the universal essence of womanhood, their problems and their strengths.

The study also hoped to examine whether the women characters, being portrayed in Assamese films (Focusing on the chosen films), have undergone changes through the times and how gender sensitive are the filmmakers here.

The study aimed at closely viewing selected films by some renowned and some new filmmakers of Assam and analyzed major women characters in those films with main focus on the representation of women. Also the treatment of women characters and handling of the themes in these films have been discussed. Most of the chosen films are either women oriented, reflecting upon some serious social issues concerning women and traditions of our society or, films where women play a central role in dealing with social issues strongly affecting the Assamese society.

The study has divided the eight decades of Assamese cinema into four phases like Pre independence, post independence, from ‘1970 to 1999’ and contemporary phase from 2000 onwards. The films for the study have been chosen accordingly, though availability of prints for some old movies has remained a big challenge for the study.
Review of literature

Mainstream Hindi Cinema:

Cinema stepped into the lives of Indians in July 1896, when the Lumiere brothers screened their short films at a Bombay hotel basement. The exhibition included short films of arrival of a train, ladies and soldiers on wheels, sea bath etc. which managed to pull crowds daily for two months. (Keval J Kumar, 1998)

The Lumiere’s large stock of small films ran at Watson’s Hotel and Novelty Theater to packed houses. The programme ended on 15 August 1896, but the Indian audience had made it amply clear that they wanted more and more and so from 4 January 1897, there began a regular flood of imported movie shows at the Gaiety Theater led by a Mr. Stewart’s Vitagraph, trumpeted as the ‘latest scientific invention’ and with amazing originality ‘as the wonder of the world’.

The next step was for an enterprising Indian to make the first indigenous shorts. HS Bhatavadekar, who already had a projection outfit, imported a British camera and filmed two shorts: Specially staged bout of two wrestlers and a man training a monkey. The second pioneering effort came from FB Thanawalla and his Grand Kinetoscope, covering ‘Splendid views of Bombay’ and ‘Taboot Procession’. In 1901, third came from Hiralal Sen in Calcutta, whose Royal Bioscope produced extracts from seven popular Bengali plays of the time. In 1905, JF Madan and his Elphinstone Bioscope Company of Calcutta created the first semblance of an industry with a regular exhibition cum production set up. (Firoze Rangoonwalla, 1979)

But, the first full length film in the country was produced and directed by Dadasaheb Phalke in 1913. His silent film ‘Raja Harishchandra’ was inspired by a silent film from the West, ‘Life of Christ’. So successful did Phalke’s film prove among the audiences that he went on to make many films in the years to come. Like George Melies, Phalke was a special effects genius. (Keval J Kumar, 1998)

During the silent era, over a thousand films were produced in India, and in the early twentieth century, cinema as a medium gained popularity across the country. Eventually the content of these commercial films was increasingly tailored to appeal to the masses and young Indian producers began to incorporate elements of India’s social life and culture into cinema. The first chain of theaters was owned by Calcutta
entrepreneur Jamsedji Framji Madan who oversaw production of ten films annually. (www.Indiancinema.com)

One impression of India that does not miss the mark is the widely perceived notion of a land of movie mania. Indeed there cannot be many countries in the world where cinema is more popular than it is in India. It is not uncommon to see at various times of the day inordinately lengthy queues outside box offices and touts offering tickets at inflated prices amongst disappointed crowds where a much exposed and tatty ‘House Full’ sign is displayed. It is also interesting to note that Hollywood, that great cultural dictator for the rest of the world, hardly has a foot in the door here, for most of the films being seen- and by many, more than once- are home made. India has the biggest film industry in the world, producing more than seven hundred films a year, most for its home market. (John W Hood, 2009)

Though initial years of cinema in India saw historical and mythological themes being taken up by the enthusiastic filmmakers, gradually the focus was moved to socially relevant themes sometimes including women centric stories. The talkies era began in the country in the 1930s with Ardeshir Irani’s ‘Alam Ara’ in 1931. It included twelve songs. With many new hands becoming necessary in the production of films, this was gradually developing into an industry. (Keval J Kumar, 1998)

Throughout that history, in various ways and to varying degrees, India’s rich literary traditions, especially its mythological and devotional works, have provided filmmakers with an unlimited source of material and so guaranteed popular appeal for their works. Even many of the ostensibly secular films of the contemporary commercial cinema reflect allusions to literary tradition and many themes, perhaps updated, are drawn from it. (Hood 2009)

Among the earliest movie made in India was the legendary Dada Saheb Phalke’s ‘Raja Harishchandra’ 1913. Or first sound film made in India ‘Alam Ara’ (1931) was a clear sign of things to come, for not only did it talk but it offered songs and dance as well. The mythologicals, survived well into the sound era as did devotional films about great religious leaders, such as Debaki Bose’s ‘Chandidas’ (1932) and ‘Vidyapati’ (1937). ‘Chandidas’, having been notable among other things, for his unconventional love for a low caste woman. Prathomesh Barua’s ‘Devdas’ (1935),
was also based on the novel of the popular and highly regarded Saratchandra Chatterjee.

The foremost of directors of the forties and fifties - Guru Dutt, Bimal Roy, Raj Kapoor, Mehboob and the like, were making films that might be identified as forerunners to both the art cinema of India and the Hindi commercial cinema, in that there were films that rejoiced in the obligatory musical element and so appealed to popular tastes and values, yet at the same time were intelligent in substance and representation, despite the obvious melodrama and were marked by a notable degree of artistic sophistication. (Hood, 2009)

Cinema began to play a key role in moulding opinions, constructing images and many a times reinforcing the existing cultural values. Women, being an integral and important part of human society, gradually found a significant place on the silver screen both in world and Indian cinema. Though it is, mostly through the male point of view that women found their representation on screen (especially in popular cinema), where they were either portrayed as the ideal homely woman who cannot do any wrong and submissively abides by her duties towards her marriage and family, or as the vamp or the prostitute. (Rangoonwala, 1979)

Stories about the oldest of ‘professionals’ provide a typical study. In the silent films such women were roundedly condemned as home wreckers, gold diggers and disease spreaders. The notion was carried forward by hits like ‘Gumsundari’ which was typical. Later it was rejected in favour of a more humane approach to the prostitute as a woman with emotions and with her own hopes, more sinned against than sinning, with the blame for her plight on the Samaj and the males.

This was so in ‘Devdas’, and more sharply in V Shantaram’s ‘Aadmi’. But her rehabilitation or the prostitute coming inside the house was too much. She could be glorified better, only by death or permanent exile. Somewhat less tarnished socially are the characters of stage dancers, singers, those in traditional folk troupes like Tamasha or Nautanki, circus artists, gypsies or Quwwali singers, and even cinemas own directors or actors. (Rangoonwala, 1979)
The society has always been reflected in films irrespective of where they are made. The cinema, it was argued, is a dense system of meaning, one that borrows from so many different discourses of fashion, of narrative, of politics, of advertising, and so on that it offers particularly rich possibilities for ideological understanding. The argument went still further; the cinema was not just a form of entertainment but rather one embodied deep-seated myths and ideologies central to the functioning of modern industrialized countries. Hence, many film theorists of the seventies argued that the medium of cinema is not just a product of a particular culture but rather a projection of its most fundamental needs, desires, and beliefs. These include a notion of narrative made to the measure of social needs, an extension of the nineteenth century realist novel into the realm of the image and sound. (Judith Mayne, 1993)

Trakovsky wrote in his Sculpting in Time about Battleship Potempkin as very different and were full of life and poetry. He writes, “The cinematic image is basically observation of life’s facts within time organised according to the pattern of life itself, and observing it time laws. “Trakovsky believes that cinema must record life with life’s own means. It must operate with the images of actual reality and cinema can only exist by being totally identified with images of life itself, that is how it affects the audience. (Filmmaker Gautam Bora on Trakovsky, Chitra Chinta, 2008)

Though it is believed that film, through its visual image is a closer proximation of reality, how real are the women characters in our films has remained an important question. Women, as mentioned above are either elevated to higher position or are simply portrayed as a low social figure, irresponsible and immoral. Their grievances, desires, ambitions, feelings, perspectives are completely missing from the scene. The earlier films rarely had women who could change her outlook or attitude as per the situation in real life. Some were good and some bad under all circumstances.

An intriguing figure of Bombay cinema is the Westernized Vamp, or a night club cabaret dancer who was pitted against the female protagonist in many films. She occupied a hyper-sexualized yet illicit space, which in spite of the moral discourses continued to be popular into the 80s. The 1990s witnessed the dispersal of this original image when explicit dance sequences associated with the vamp began to be performed by the heroine. The regulation of desire was undergoing a series of changes in the 1970s onwards with emergence of heroines like Zeenat Amaan who neutralised
the western look (for eg ‘Hare Krishna Hare Rama’, ‘Yaadon Ki Baraat’ etc). The actress heralded the seventies look of westernized, liberated young woman. (Ranjini Mazumdar, 2007)

The trends changed gradually, with new filmmakers experimenting with different themes where women could be good, bad, submissive or courageous and assertive, intelligent and successful.

At its best, this attempt to represent ‘modernity’ redefined, the love story by violating several moral codes advocated by earlier melodrama to control female sexuality. The heroine now occupied the space of the vamp, through a process marked by a public display of desire and an entirely new discourse of sexuality that threatened the old boundaries. (Mazumdar, 2007)

The special problems of women and children have also motivated various films, though these are normally only a part of the entertaining whole. A woman’s talent being neglected by domestic drudgery or a careless husband or father, drawing her to some former sympathizer have yielded good films like Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s ‘Abhimaan’, ‘Anuradha’, or Ray’s masterpiece ‘Charulata’. (Rangoonwala, 1979)

In an era of information overload, it is not too radical to expect some social consciousness from the cinema medium. Popular rhetoric and culture need to be challenged and cinema can do it effectively if it exhibits some sensitivity to gender issues. This is because Hindi films now enjoy a huge international market in many South Asian and Western countries. Thereby, operating in a larger frame-work like this calls for a portrayal of women which is not only accurate but also just to the cause of women empowerment.

From the Gender lens, the narratives of Hindi cinema have undoubtedly been male dominated and male centric. The heroine is always secondary to the hero. Her role is charted out in context of any male character which is central to the script. It may be the hero, the villain, the father, the boss, an elderly male figure etc. She is devoid of any independent existence and her journey throughout the film is explored in relation to the male character. This kind of straight-jacketing limits the women’s role to providing glamour, relief, respite and entertainment. (Tere S Nidhi, 2012)
Film scholar and author *Shoma Chatterji (Subject: Cinema, Object: Women, 1998)* says, ‘Women in Hindi cinema have been decorative objects with rarely any sense of agency being imparted to them. Each phase of Hindi cinema had its own representation of women, but they were confined largely to the traditional, patriarchal frame-work of the Indian society. The ordinary woman has hardly been visible in Hindi cinema. But contemporary cinema has attempted to explore taboo subjects like sexuality, infidelity, surrogacy, divorce, live-in relations etc through movies like *Jism*(2003), *Astitva* (2000), *Salaam Namaste* (2005) etc. For eg: *Chak De India* (2007) talks about the conflicts that women face when they decide to excel in the field chosen by them. In these films the women are not super-women; they are just normal beings who are able to decide their priorities. This portrayal is no mean achievement of Hindi cinema. *(Tere, 2012)*

Interestingly, the viewer is male (even in Indian cinema), finding himself on screen, marking the first crisis in the portrayal of Indian women. The new art did offer images of women, unknown in literary and artistic forms, but the pull of the narrative line to situate women within culturally comfortable guises conflicted with modern challenge posed by images. Film was made for the sons of India, sometimes about the mothers of India, but seldom, for the daughters of India. *(Geetha Ramanathan, 2013)*

Women filmmakers are alive to both issues of how women are represented, and their difficulties in the modern world, have tackled the question of what’s woman’s identity. Like *Aparna Sen’s ‘Parama’* starring Rakhi or ‘Sati’ with Shabana Azmi. ‘Sati’ shows how feminist consciousness can be raised without projecting a strong female character. The film claims humanity for a woman expelled from the human community. In most cases women are suppressed, domesticated yet glamorized. Contemporary films that explore the abrupt transformation of certain segments of society as a consequence of globalization have been able to thematise women more broadly than ever before. *(Ramanathan, 2013)*

Going back to the initial years of cinema in the country, while the mainstream Hindi film industry continued to make its mark across the nation and even abroad, in a very soft manner was developing the regional cinema of India in the 1930s itself. The same year saw regional films being released in states like West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.
The following years saw Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, Punjab, Karnataka join the club.

**Cinema of Assam:**

The first filmmaker from Assam was Promathesh Barua, Prince of Gauripur, but he successfully made Hindi and Bengali films from Calcutta and never an Assamese film. Assamese cinema was born, in the true sense, in the year 1935 on March 10, with the release of ‘Joymati’ the first Assamese cinema that was a talkie, by Rupkonwar Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. Made under the banner of Chitralekha Movietone with a budget of 60,000, the film ‘Joymati’ though commercially a failure, remains one of the most important milestones in the history of Assamese cinema. (Wikipedia.org)

Due to the lack of trained technicians, Jyoti Prasad, while making his maiden film, had to shoulder the added responsibilities as the script writer, producer, director, choreographer, editor, set and costume designer, lyricist and music director. He went on to make his second and last film ‘Indramalati’ in 1939. It is disappointing that a big portion of the prints of ‘Joymati’ have been damaged due to lack of preservation.

Though, the remaining parts were preserved with efforts of filmmakers like Bhupen Hazarika who made a documentary on the film ‘Joymati’ in 1976, titled ‘Rupkonwar Jyoti Prasad Aru Joymati’. He incorporated remaining bits of reel of the film in the documentary. In 2006, film critic Altaf Majid managed to digitally preserve portions of the film so that the present generation could once again see the first Assamese film again, even though a slightly shorter version compared to the original film. (Perspectives on Cinema of Assam; 2007)

In the 1930s women in Indian cinema were passive and were sidelined, unlike the powerful, and self respecting Joymati in Jyotiprasad’s film. Nevertheless the pioneer’s bold efforts did not inspire others as there were concerns about incurring financial losses in case of Joymati. (Borpujari, Frontline, 2013)

In Assam, the state film scenario failed to see any action for a while after Agarwala’s demise until 1941 when 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.

‘Siraj’, a film on Hindu Muslim unity in Assam, was produced by Gama Prasad Agarwala and the music was composed by Bhupen Hazarika. The decade of sixties and early seventies also saw filmmakers like Nip Barua, Prabhat Mukherjee, Bhupen Hazarika, and few others come up with meaningful cinema that was noticed by the national film critics as well. (www.rupaliparda.com)

In the sixties ‘Lachit Borphukan’ became one of the most successful historical films while Bhupen Hazarika’s ‘Shakuntala’ won President’s silver medal. Films like ‘Narakasur’, ‘Itu Sito Bahutu’, ‘Tejimala’ and many more films 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.


The genre of experimental social films that stirred human emotions and thoughts alike was carried on by Jahnu Barua, Sanjeev Hazarika, Gautam Bora, and Manju Borah. Jahnu took Assamese cinema to international festivals across the globe and also brought in many national awards to the state with films like ‘Halodhiya Soriaye Boudhan Khaye’, ‘Phiringoti’, ‘Sagaroloi Bahu dur’ and more. Santwan Bordoloi’s ‘Adajya’, based on Mamoni Roshom’s book on the plight of widows in upper caste Hindu families in pre independence Assam, and Bidyut Chankraborty’s ‘Raag Biraag’, a film about identity crisis within a family, also won national and international acclaim.

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Through the eighties many popular family dramas like ‘Buwari’, ‘Sun Moina’, and other films brought good number of audiences to cinema theaters, 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 encouraging filmmakers to come up with new ventures. In the year 2000, ‘Hiya Diya Niya’ followed suit with cinema halls going ‘House Full’. (www.rupalipada.com)

But what remains remarkable 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. If observed carefully, many of the films made in Assam have even been named after women characters or figures. Whether it is Jyoti Prasad’s ‘Joymati’ or ‘Indramalati’, or Rohini Kumar Barua’s ‘Rupahi’, Bhupen Hazarika’s ‘Shakuntala’, Brajen Barua’s ‘Lalita’ or films like ‘Raangdhali’, Jahnu Barua’s ‘Papori’ or even ‘Aparoopa’, or films like ‘Taramai’, ‘Buwari’, ‘Soru Buwari’, ‘Ajaoli Nabou’, ‘Sreemati Mahimamoyee’, Abdul Mazid’s ‘Chameli Memsaahib’ and many more. (Kalita, Satsari, 2010)

‘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 the first film where he could give a valiant picture of Assamese life unfolded in Full Blossom. Moreover, 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. (Altat Mazid, 2007)

Though many women centric films were being made in the Hindi film industry at the moment like ‘Draupadi’, ‘Alam Ara’ etc in 1931, ‘Sati Savitri’ in 1932, ‘Hunterwali’ in 1935, Jyotiprasad’s ‘Joymati’ in 1935 was strikingly different 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)
Women in Assamese cinema have been represented in different ways through the decades. In 1941 Rohini Kumar Barua’s ‘Momototi’ and Parbati Prasad Barua’s ‘Rupahi’ in 1947 are worth mentioning here. The 1950s saw mythological films like ‘Sati Beula’ and social dramas like ‘Mak Aru Maram’ where women characters remained central to the storyline. In 1961 Bhupen Hazarika’s ‘Shakuntala’, that won the President’s silver medal, was also a woman centric film.

Abdul Mazid’s ‘Chameli Memsaab’ (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. Padum Barua’s ‘Ganga Chilinir Pakhi’, a story about social upheavals and constrained development sees a love story run parallel to the plot where the female character Basanti remains crucial. (Satsari, 2010)

Bhabendranath Saikia’s ‘Sandhyaaraag’ in 1977 was not exactly a women centric film but the story of migrant workers from villages to the cities was shown through the life of a woman protagonist. ‘Agnisnan’, on the other hand dealt with a woman’s boldness to fight against injustices in marriage. Nip Barua’s ‘Aajoli Nabau’ in 1980 was a big commercial hit where different hues of womanhood were portrayed while Siba Prasad Thakur’s ‘Buwa’ 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 ‘Sadari’ in 1982 dealt with social issues.

Though many times critics claim that some of these films had influence of Hindi or Bengali film, yet the common viewers of Assamese cinema could identify with these women characters as someone from their own social environment. Eg. Ila Kakoty’s role in ‘Ajoli Nabou’. (Satsari, October 2010)

Jahnu Barua made his mark in Assamese cinema along with the national scene with ‘Aparoopa’ 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. Sanjeeb Hazarika’s ‘Meemansa’ in 1994 is yet another bold portrayal of woman’s struggle for economic and emotional independence fighting the atrocities of her in laws after she becomes a widow.
Santwana Bordoloi’s ‘Adajya’ (1997), a film based on a novel by renowned writer Mamoni Roysom Goswami, is a strong depiction of the plight of widows in upper caste Hindu society in Assam, where a young widow, Giribala, revolts against the social norms.

Manju Bora’s ‘Akashitor Katha Re’ (2003) is a sad depiction of a woman’s fate where submission in all fronts is expected of women by the male dominated society. ‘Laaz’ (2004), ‘Joymoti’ (2007), ‘Aai Kot Nai’ (2009) are other women centric films by the filmmaker. Arup Manna’s ‘Aideu’ (2007) very touchingly portrays the stigmatized painful life of Aideu Handique, the first heroine of Assamese cinema who played the character of princess Joymati in the film ‘Joymati’. And Arup Manna’s ‘Adhyay’ (2013) is a story of a Bodo woman who along with her husband moves to the city looking for livelihood, but in the process she loses her honour and life in the hands of some urban men associated to her employer.

In the hardcore commercial line filmmakers like Chandra Mudoi who’s ‘Ujanir Dujoni Gabhoru’ (2003) and ‘Joon Da Imaan Goonda’ (2007) have stereotyped women in Bollywood style, with songs and dance sequences costumes, gestures, all inspired by Hindi commercial films. Though even among the new filmmakers, debutant Kangkan Rajkhowa came up with ‘Sinyor’ (2014), a film on prostitution, while young filmmaker Pradyut Kumar Deka’s ‘Dhunia Tirutabor’ (2009) experiments with women’s sensuality, weaknesses and strength, through different women characters.

Representation of women in Assamese cinema remains important to the understanding of films of the region and its close relation to the culture of the state. In Assam, as seen right from the beginning, unlike mainstream Hindi cinema, women characters have been mostly depicted in a realistic manner, though both the dark and the bright sides of their characters have been portrayed in different films at different times.

But it remains ironical that the first heroine of Assamese cinema was made to suffer for years by the Assamese society in Upper Assam, for her innocent act of working in a film.
The pathbreaker, Aideu Handique, had to accept the impatient anger of social puritans for whom a woman doing a talkie was trespassing moral taboo. This young heroine’s life spirit was taken off, mauled and smashed under the unabashedly flaunting patriarchal boot. Aideu was rejected by her own society. (Garima Kalita, 2007)

A study of the portrayal of women in Assamese cinema will be a huge task as women in any society, especially in Indian states can belong to different social or religious groups with different cultural norms or economic status. Here it becomes very important to first of all see how close is the portrayal of the woman character in the film, to the real life situation. Does the depiction fall in context with the social and cultural norms of the character?

**Feminism and cinema**

Gender and Sexuality are crucial constituents of the pleasure of cinema, even if evaluation and enjoyment may differ from person to person…… Women’s voices and issues are central to every society because they define all human relationships and social constructs. The body also becomes an integral part of it. In a visual medium, it is not only important how women look at their bodies but how men look at them, how they dress and behave, the manner in which they are used by the director, by the narrative and by the women themselves. (Madhuri Chaterjee, Films Literature and Culture, 2009)

Laura Mulvey talks about the male gaze, in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Here the male character is identified as the driver of the film’s narrative, the character followed by the camera. The female character serves as a spectacle to provide pleasure to the male spectator, for which Mulvey used the term ‘gaze’.

‘The directorial gaze, even while framing the female body for exhibition and erotic impact can code it differently, particularly when there is an act of transgression. It raises questions related to self’, being and personhood. She becomes the ‘other’. Also the women in matters of articulation, reproduction and management or even something as fundamental as the control of one’s own body, are seriously, fundamentally and much too often deliberately disadvantaged, sometimes to the
extent that it longer remains merely a hegemony masculine or otherwise but is a blatant intimidation, repression and subjugation.” (Mulvey, 1999)

The contemporary women’s movement is generally considered to have arisen in the early 1960; by the end of the 1960s, the new women’s movement began to receive worldwide public attention. With the exception of Simone De Boaupoir’s The Second Sex, which was first published in 1949 in French. (Parchley HM, 1981)

The terms ‘feminism’, new feminism’ and ‘women’s liberation’ are generally used with different connotations. ‘Feminism is defined as a position of advocating women’s rights while women’s liberation implies advocacy of the full freedom of women. The term women’s liberation is popularly used synonymously with new feminism. As women’s liberation groups spread through US, many European countries and Japan, Australia specific issues differed from country to country ; yet the basic concern was same everywhere. (Bhagawat, 2004)

Due to sexism, prejudice and discrimination against women being rampant in all as of aspects of contemporary society – its schools, literature, employment practices, even in its methods of child rearing- women have always been kept from entering diverse male spheres. In the economic sphere, women who work outside the home are heavily concentrated in the lowest paid, least prestigious jobs. Traditionally women were stereotyped as passive and dependent, while men were regarded as active and independent. Male domination of patriarchy is, according to many feminists, the primary social division, much more significant than divisions of class of race.

The industrial revolution affected women from the middle class and upper class in a different way. Among working class women leading a sub-human life, the temptation to accommodate rather than to resist was strong. They were not, in fact, submissive, but their resistance erupted in crime or sexual immorality. The revolt against their world was a personal one. (Bhagawat, 2004)

In the upper middle class nuclear families, the women became dependant and powerless members. The working class women were depicted as evil, sexually dirty and passionate in contrast to purity of bourgeois women. Liberal feminism believes, not only that, laws should not discriminate against women, but also that laws should be used to make discrimination illegal. Women must be able to control their
reproductive capacity. When children are born, rearing them must be the responsibility of men as well as women. (Bhagawat, 2004)

In The second sex, de beouvoir had to prove how woman had become the other. Her answer is that female dependency had not emerged in a specific historical period. Her position is that, “they are women in virtue of their anatomy and physiology. Throughout history, they have always been subordinated to men…. (A woman’s otherness is) a natural condition beyond a possibility of change.” (de Beauvoir 1981, pp. 18-19) Women thus have been condemned from the beginning of history and always to alterity. (Bhagawat, 2004)

If we look at the representation of women in Indian cinema, a lot of it is influenced by the socio cultural and political history of the nation since ancient times.

Around 1500 B.C. before the Aryan invasion, it is generally argued that women enjoyed a high status in society. However, after their (Aryan) arrival, an inferior status was assigned to them. Society was divided into four major groups, Brahmans (Priests), Kshatriyas (Warriors), Vaishyas (Traders and artisans), Shudras (Unouchables). The concepts of Dharma (Sacred Law) and Karma occupied central importance………. The work was divided among people according to the castes. A high caste woman’s duty was mainly to serve her husband and look after the family. Both Sudras and women were barred from participating in spiritual life. The lives of upper caste women were largely confined to the domestic sphere with no rights over immovable property and exclusion from the public sphere of the productive economy. (Bathla, 1998)

Women’s position deteriorated further around AD 500 in particular among the upper castes. Child marriage was made compulsory and widows were despised. The position worsened in the middle period (Thomas, 1964; Pannikar, 1958). Arabs, Turks and Mughals invaded India in the eleventh, twelth and sixteenth centuries respectively resulting in further tightening on upper caste women. In fact, when British rule started, the position of women in India was the worst in the history of the country. The common practices being followed during this time were child marriages and Sati. (Sonia Bathla, 1998)
Films on women and by women in different parts of the world explore various aspects of women's hood and various social issues. While in France, films by women introduced new cinematic spaces (young women and children on the margins whether in the city or the provinces) and also reworked themes of interest to female spectators. Themes like mother daughter bond, female friendships etc. Their innovative use of cinematic language has produced new representations of the feminine which avoid clichés and stereotypes of mainstream cinema. The best genre films opened up new spaces for women and innovative representations of femininity. (Cinema and the Second Sex, 2001)

Hollywood films offered Voyeurism and identification. The male gaze is based on the idea that there is a gender imbalance in looking; the male is active and the woman is passive, or men look, women are there to be looked at. This structure of looking and identification in the cinema affects the form of the narrative- women looked at as erotic objects slow down the story; women become static while the male is active, moving the story forward. In challenging the theory of male gaze, feminist theory developed a more positive view of Hollywood cinema, suggesting that there was space for women in mainstream film. There were examples of films which did not merely use women as objects but as central to the narrative in roles more usually associated with men. (Empowering women; Film Studies, the essential Introduction)

The different phases of women’s status transition has been reflected in World cinema, Indian cinema and regional films.

(As, there is very little work done on the Assamese cinema in terms of research and published books, the researcher has also had to depend on websites and direct conversations with members of the film fraternity to add information on Assamese cinema in the review of literature, apart from referring to the few books available)
**Objectives of the study**

The general objective of the study is to examine the representation of women in Assamese cinema through the eight decades of its existence, divided into four phases.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- To study the representation of women in the films made in the state of Assam since the beginning of Assamese cinema in 1935;
- To evaluate if the films made through the decades represent women in the way that confirms to the believed status of women in the society of Assam and the region.
- The changes seen in the women characters as represented in the films with the changing times (In the four divided time phases), and their impact on the viewers in general as observed by film experts.

**Hypothesis**

It is assumed that the Assamese society has always hailed women in high esteem and women here through the ages have held responsible positions in the family and society. Education has been imparted to both boys and girls without much discrimination. Women have remained an important part of our culture and hence, the cinema of Assam is expected to give such a picture of women on the screen.

**Methodology**

The present study has been designed to follow qualitative method. Studies on any one specific filmmaker’s films have been taken up in the past but no research work has been done on Assamese cinema in relation to representation of women in Assamese films as a whole. Hence the area of study becomes unique. The researcher has also applied Syntagmatic analysis coupled with Discourse analysis and In-depth interviews. In the present study the selective sequences of the films have been analysed, where the women characters have been interpreted according to the cultural conventions and codes conveying meaning on symbolic and indexical levels.

The researcher has first of all sieved out films from each phase of the eight decades of Assamese cinema depending on their importance to the study and availability of the
prints in case of the older films. Analysis of the films in relation to representation of women on screen, which does not mean only the leading lady’s character, but also the other significant women characters in the chosen films, and how women’s issues are represented in those films, including, how the women characters are positioned vis a vis the believed status of women in the Assamese society has been done.

Furthermore, the objective was to investigate the role of cinematic language with regard to construction of gender. The reasons for undertaking such a research are several and they lie mainly within the salience of gender within cinematic discourse. The data source consists of a set of twelve films which are by and large women centric or women oriented films produced during the four phases: Pre-independence, Post – independence, 1970 to 1999 and Contemporary (2000 onwards), period by different film makers of the Assamese film industry. The preliminary data for analysis was selected from the following list:

The list of films taken for the study:

1. **Pre Independence** = Joymati (1935) Jyoti Prasad Agarwala
2. **Post Independence** = Tejimola (1963) Anwar Hussain
3. **1970 to 1999**
   (a) Srimati Mohimamoyee (1979) Pulak Gogoi
   (b) Buwari (1982) Siva Thakur
   (c) Agnisnan (1985) Bhabendranath Saikia
   (d) Phiringoti (1991) Jahnu Barua
   (e) Abartan (1993) Bhabendranath Saikia
4. **Contemporary** = (2000 onwards)
   (a) Hiya Diya Niya (2000) Munin Barua
   (b) Akashitorar Kathare (2003) Manju Bora
   (c) Patni (2003) Pulak Gogoi
   (d) Dhunia Tirutabor (2006) Pradyut Deka
   (e) Aideu (2007) Arup Manna
The study includes in depth and structured interviews with filmmakers, film critics, film actors and film scholars from within the state. This method has been chosen as this saves time and is also cost effective. This method is likely to have a snowball effect adding to the value of the research by bringing in new information and dimensions.

**Study sample**

Twelve Assamese films mentioned below have been taken:

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<tr>
<th>Pre Independence</th>
<th>= Joymati (1935) Jyoti Prasad Agarwala</th>
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<tr>
<td>Post Independence</td>
<td>= Tejimola (1963) Anwar Hussain</td>
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<td>1970 to 1999</td>
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<td>(f) Srimati Mohimamoyee (1979) Pulak Gogoi</td>
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<td>(g) Buwari (1982) Siva Thakur</td>
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<td>(h) Agnisnan (1985) Bhabendranath Saikia</td>
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<tr>
<td>(i) Phiringoti (1991) Jahnu Barua</td>
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<td>(j) Adajya (1997) Santwana Bordoloi</td>
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<th>Contemporary</th>
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<tr>
<td>(g) Akashitorar Kathare (2003) Manju Bora</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(h) Patni (2003) Pulak Gogoi</td>
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Besides, renowned filmmakers, producers, actors and film critics have also been interviewed from the Assamese film industry.

**Variables**

- Character Representation
- Issues Represented
- Characters positioned Vis a Vis believed status of women in Assam
**Instrument**

The instrument for data collection was interview schedule which was carried out amongst the film experts, actors and filmmakers. The interview schedule was prepared with the help of ‘open’ ended questions.

**Techniques of data collection**

Films were viewed and analysed in the light of the existing literature to closely study the representation of women characters in them. Senior filmmakers, producers, actors and film experts were questioned based on structured interviews.

**Scope of the study**

There is a customary view held by the scholars and people in general in the state of Assam that women in Northeastern India, including Assam enjoy a better social status in terms of respect and freedom and power of decision making, in comparison to their counterparts in Western, Southern and even Northern India. Irrespective of what strata of society they belong to, women are supposedly more comfortable with the social norms in the region.

The present study aimed at finding out how filmmakers of Assam have been portraying women characters through their films and to what extent are these celluloid representations true to the real scenario. The researcher aimed to closely study the selected films that are either women centric or have socially relevant themes making representation of women characters in these films important. Through the study the researcher tried to find out if the general belief about the status of women in Assam is truly reflected in these films or the filmmakers portray Assamese women in conformity to the universal essence of womanhood with their problems and their strengths in general.

The study also hoped to examine whether, through the ages, the women characters, their attitude etc. being portrayed in the local films are changing with the times or the issues revolving around them remained the same even in the changing times.
Uniqueness of the study

The study titled, “GENDER REPRESENTATION IN THE CINEMA OF ASSAM: A STUDY OF REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ASSAMESE CINEMA SINCE ITS INCEPTION” stands unique as very little work has been done on the Assamese film industry. Also, studies on any one specific filmmaker’s films have been taken up in the past but no research work has been done on Assamese cinema in relation to representation of women in Assamese films as a whole. Hence the area of study becomes unique.

The Assamese society, as per customary or uncritical views, is known for the high status given to women irrespective of social or religious background. The study aims at finding out how well have our filmmakers been able to portray women of Assam through their movies and how true to the real scenario, are these celluloid representations.

Operational definitions

The definitions of the terms used for the study are as follows:

**Film** = A film or a movie or a motion picture is a series of still or moving images produced by recording photographic images with cameras or by creating images using animation techniques or visual effects. The process of filmmaking has developed into an art form and an industry. Films are cultural artifacts created by specific cultures, which reflect those cultures and in turn affect them. Films are a popular source of entertainment and educating the masses. The visual elements of cinema give motion pictures a universal power of communication.

**Movie** = Movie suggests popular culture rather than art, while Cinema suggests art rather than popular culture. Ironically, cinema, though it is a French word, is derived from Greek Kinenin (To Move); thus, whether we use cinema or movie, we are talking about an art form that was once known as “moving picture” – appropriately as the pictures really moved.

**Gender** = The word gender has been used since the 14th century as a grammatical term referring to classes of noun designated as masculine, feminine or euter in some languages. Although the words gender and sex both have the sense ‘state of’ being male or female, they are typically used in slightly different ways: Sex tends to refer to
biological differences while gender refers to cultural or social ones. (Oxford University Press)

Gender is a range of characteristics of feminity and masculinity, depending on the context, the term may refer to such concepts as sex (as in the general sense of being male or female), social roles or gender identity. Sexologist John Money introduced the modern academic sense of the word, in the context of social roles of men and women in 1955 and was further popularized and developed by feminist movement from the 1970s. (Wikipedia)

**Limitations of the study and experiences during the course of research**

The study seemed challenging at times as prints of many good films from yesteryears of Assamese cinema, that could have played a crucial role in the study, have been damaged due to lack of preservation facilities in the state earlier. And even those preserved have scarcity of copies of the film available in the market. Also very less literature is available on Assamese cinema related to the subject taken for study.

Yet, the researcher managed to find the needed films, by time and again reminding filmmakers, and video disc shop owners to arrange for the copies. A great blessing was also the newly opened film archive of the state where some old rare films could be watched. But the whole process was very time consuming, as arranging for the prints of the films took time.

Also finding literature on Assamese cinema, especially in the related topic became a herculean task, with very little material available. Hence, many a times the researcher had to depend on conversations with film experts or translate some old write-ups in Assamese for the study. But overall it was a fulfilling experience. Watching some good films for the study and also talking to important members of the film fraternity of Assam helped the researcher gain invaluable knowledge and also form new views on cinema of Assam.