Chapter IV
Response of Experts

The researcher has taken help of in depth interviews for compiling expert opinion for the study. In total twelve important members from the Assamese film fraternity were interviewed, which includes award winning filmmakers, film producers, veteran actors and film critics.

While some of them spoke about individual films that have been included in the study, some spoke about Assamese cinema in general. All shared their views on representation of women in films of Assam through the decades and briefly on the impact of women centric films on common viewers.

Whether it is internationally renowned filmmaker like Jahnu Barua, Octogenerian filmmaker of yester years Anwar Hussain, award winning filmmakers like Manju Borah or Arup Manna, women producers like Priti Saikia and Sangeeta Tamuli, or leading commercial film director Munin Barua, or film critics Apurba Sarma and Arun Lochan Das, or young serious filmmaker Pradyut Kumar Deka, all have given their valuable inputs into the study by answering the questions included in the interview.

The interviewees have been individually introduced within their professional context before each interview.

Interviews

Interview 1

Pulak Gogoi, the director of ‘Srimati Mohimamoyee’ and ‘Patni, two films that are included in this study, has made many films in the last few years and has also won national award for one of his films. He not only spoke about the central women protagonists in his above mentioned films but also representation of women in Assamese films in general.

Researcher: What did you want to reflect through your woman protagonist as you created her for the respective films?

Response: ‘Srimati Mohimamoyee’… The story is by writer Lakhinath Phukan. I adapted it into the film by giving my screenplay, direction and dialogues.
Through the character of Mahimamoyee in ‘Srimati Mahimamoyee’, I did not just want to make a comedy film, but wanted to convey a strong message. My challenge was not only to reveal why Mohimamoyee is like that but also to show how Karabi’s mother and Nabin fight social injustice. In the film, Mohimamoyee personifies that injustice.

At the same time I sympathise with Mohimamoyee, the central character. Though she is mean and materialistic, she can be forgiven at times. She belongs to a middle class family where her husband has a low paying job. He is not only honest but also generous. She hence decides to save money by being miserly, to give a comfortable future to her children, in the process she becomes mean and comic.

Karabi, without a father’s identity, is soft and emotionally weak. She has no fault of her own for being illegitimate, still society blames her, as women are blamed for everything. Nabin, a young modern and understanding boy stands by Karabi against the wishes of his aunt Mohimamoyee, who is influenced by the narrow ways of the society. Nabin though disagrees with her yet he is grateful to her for being mean to Karabi, as that makes him value the goodness of Karabi all the more.

Karabi’s mother on the other hand is a strong woman and can go deeper into issues in life.

In my film ‘Patni’, Roma and Maadhan are the main women characters and in spite of their age difference, they are both very strong women who believe in themselves and in relationships. Both are financially independent as well.

The film shows that no one can escape from true love and also from their primary duties in life. And it is the strength of women who often bind the society together.

**Researcher:** Do you agree with the common belief that women in our Northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How do you think this is reflected in your films or generally in Assamese films?

**Response:** The women in Northeast do enjoy a better status when compared to those in North India or in some other parts of the country. There might be quarrels between couples or rudeness towards women in the family, but overall people are respectful to women here. Most of our films do reflect this belief.
**Researcher:** Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly, has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

**Response:** Yes our films in majority can be justified in the way women are shown in them. My films also have mostly been women oriented. Women are in charge of things in the family, and their decisions respected by the men folk to a larger extent in Assamese society. This is reflected in many films of the state.

In ‘Patni’, I have also tried to reflect my view on equality of genders by making my central protagonist the bread earner.

**Researcher:** How far have women characters in Assamese films been able to leave an impact on the common viewers as to bring some changes in our society?

**Response:** Yes sometimes they have left an impact in terms of fashion and all, but don’t know about any impact on ideology.

**Interview 2**

**Jahnu Barua,** is an internationally renowned filmmaker who has bagged many national and even international awards for his thought provoking films. He has directed ‘Phiringoti’, a film included in this research work. He talks about his central protagonist and what he has conveyed through her. He also talks about women in Assamese cinema.

**Researcher:** What do you have to say about your woman protagonist what made you create her?

**Response:** In understanding man and woman in society, I go by the reality. No one is more justified or valid than the other. This is one aspect I keep in mind when I create my characters. I have learnt to understand women’s characteristics, the power that they have, first by observing my mother who did emotional justice to all of us. The power of women is not being utilized fairly in our society.

In my films I have tried to project that power and in ‘Phiringoti’ Ritu is able to create a school under challenging circumstances because of such power. She does everything in a very subtle manner and is hardly aggressive. Yet she is successful. Her connection to her father is very vital as he encourages her to start life afresh and says...
that laws in society should be equal for men and women. The father’s support within the house gives her courage to go out and fight.

Even Paisukhowa’s character is aggressive and egoistic initially, but in front of his wife he is timid. He also succumbs to Ritu’s sincerity.

**Researcher:** Do you believe that women in our Northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How is it reflected in our films?

**Response:** It is disgusting to see how women in other states are treated, just like slaves especially the northern belt. Considering that, yes the status of women in Northeast is better. I do not want to end up insulting anyone just for the sake of my story, but though status of women is better here not everything is so good. They enjoy better status when they get compared.

Now mostly through television serials women here know what happens in many other states like Rajasthan or Haryana, UP. But sadly, instead of retaining what good the Assamese society has, they are absorbing the negative traits from outside making things difficult for women through dowry, greed or domestic violence. In this case, at least our films need to be more responsible and represent women and society in such a way that the old values of Assamese society are saved.

**Researcher:** Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

**Response:** Representation of women in Assamese cinema is justified, compared to other cinema in the country. It is not about the character only but how you treat the character. Malyali, Marathi and Bengali films have respected women characters well apart from Assamese films.

**Researcher:** How far have Assamese films or women characters in these films, been able to leave an impact on our society, especially on women?

**Response:** Impact of Assamese films and women characters has been seen since the time of ‘Joymati’. Some on screen characters have made impact off screen also in some cases. Like after the film ‘Joymati’, people started valuing historical women characters, and more films on other brave women figures in Assam were made, like ‘Kanaklata’, ‘Mula Gabhoru’ and all. Apart from that, films made by Bhabendranath
Saikia also generated debates and the women characters made an impact. The situation has been better in comparison to other cinema in the country.

Interview 3

Mridula Barua is one of the most popular female cine stars of Assamese cinema from yester years, who has acted in approximately sixty films, including three of the films taken up for this research. The films are ‘Buwari’, ‘Abartan’, and ‘Hiya Diya Niya’. She speaks about the film Buwari and her general views on women and their representation in the films of Assam.

Researcher: What did the director want to reflect through your character Rongili in the film ‘Buwari’?

Response: Yes, if I talk of the central women character in ‘Buwari’, that is Rongili, which I played. Here we see how the woman is shown to be very tolerant, sacrificing and yet strong. There is a contrast, the other central character Molly, is the one who acts mean and tries to take advantage of Rongili when she loses her husband. Molly, her own sister in law makes her work like a servant and ill treats the family.

But the director in the end wants to show through Rongili and also through a changed Molly, the ideal image of women that our society expected in those days. Things now are little different. Women do not remain silent now when injustice is done.

Researcher: Do you agree with the common belief that women in our Northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How do you think this is reflected in your film or generally in Assamese films?

Response: I agree that women in our Assamese society enjoy a better status than those outside Northeast, but it was better reflected in earlier films than now. These days, women are objectified in many new films, while some also show the generation next women with their independent outlook on life. Most of my films reflect women in different ways.

Researcher: Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly, has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

Response: Assamese cinema has done justice to representation of women in some of our very important films. Women characters in films like ‘Joymati’, ‘Agnisnan’,
‘Aideu’, ‘Buwari’, ‘Hiya Diya Niya’, ‘Abartan’ are realistic. The films reflect the actual kind of women in our society who differ from situation to situation.

At the same time filmmakers also have their point of view on women reflected through their works. If Joymati, the historical character was strong, so was Aideu in real life. Or in Abartan, Jayanti’s character is very realistic. Many a times a woman remains the sole bread earner of the family and is exploited, but many revolt finally.

**Researcher:** How far have women characters in Assamese films been able to leave an impact on the common viewers as to bring some changes in our society?

**Response:** The earlier films had stronger themes and were more impactful. Though, not many could set any trends among common women.

**Interview 4**

**Munin Barua**, is a senior and very successful commercial film director who also directed ‘Hiya Diya Niya’, a film taken up for this study. He also expresses his views on representation of women in Assamese films and women in his own films.

**Researcher:** What did you want to reflect through your woman protagonist as you created her for the film?

**Response:** Momi and Sunita, represent the young generation. But there is contrast in the characters. Though Momi is good at heart, she wears all western outfits, parties till late with friends and does all she can to hang on to her idea of a modern society. While Sunita understands that wearing simple traditional clothes, and being homely does not mean you are not moving on with the modern times. I have two kinds of representation of women from the same generation, as I wanted to prove that every individual is different you cannot generalize anyone.

Even the character of Runu, Momi’s mother, though reflects a lot of negativity and wrong values, she actually does it out of fear. She wants her daughter’s future to be secure. She had once suffered poverty in the village. So she tries to leave all that behind even if it meant hurting old friends.
Researcher: Do you agree with the common belief that women in our Northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How do you think this is reflected in your film, or generally in Assamese films?

Response: Yes, our society has seen many women enjoying a better social status than many in western or northern India. But this belief changes from house to house and situation to situation to be frank. My films have mostly shown women enjoying a good social status.

Researcher: Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly, has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

Response: Our films have given both kinds of representation of women, positive as well as negative. But yes, things in the last twenty years have changed. Earlier, many women, which also includes my mother, were good in studies and the family sent them to acquire education but, as soon as some good match for marriage would come the woman would leave studies and settle down as a homemaker.

But today, people in Assamese society want professionally independent daughter in laws. No one objects to women working and earning.

With time, films are also changing. Now people are ready to accept women police officers beating up goons very easily. A few years ago this would be criticized as unnatural by viewers.

Researcher: How far have women characters in Assamese films been able to leave an impact on the common viewers as to bring some changes in our society?

Response: Impact of Assamese films have been there right from the beginning in different ways. A few decades ago, bravery in women was represented by women like ‘Joymati’, or ‘Kanaklata’, then came ‘Phiringoti’ and ‘Agnisnan’ type of women characters. Women found them inspiring even if they did not practically follow them all the time. There are many women oriented films in Assam that have been thought provoking.
Interview 5

Manju Borah, is an award winning director who has made many women oriented films including ‘Akashitorar Katha Re’, which is part of the study. She speaks about her views on the film, and women, as represented in Assamese cinema.

Researcher: What did you want to reflect through your woman protagonist as you created her for the film?

Response: The character of Akashi, my main protagonist, reflects the actual reality about many women in our society. Many people asked me why the character did not revolt at all. The reason is simple. If I create one Akashi today who revolts, still the reality of many Akashi’s will not change. That is the reality of our society.

In spite of their qualification and potential, most of the women amidst us are recognized by the men in their lives, whether it is the father, brother, husband or son. Only the one who rebel are either single or divorcees. Those who want to continue with marriage, keep quiet. Akashi, a scholar, trusted her husband so much at the time of marriage. But once she became the wife, a totally different person started emerging in her husband, who was selfish, egoist and dominating in all aspects. She had no say, not even in the bed. Very repulsive, yet this is reality.

Because she was not a dumb uneducated woman, she had the capacity to judge between good and bad hence she suffered and finally depression killed her.

Researcher: Do you agree with the common belief that women in our Northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How do you think this is reflected in your film or generally in Assamese films?

Response: Yes, compared to some other states, status of women is socially better. But within the domestic sphere if not physical, at least lot of emotional suffering takes place even in Assam.

Researcher: Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly, has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

Response: Cinema of Assam has done justice to representation of women through many appreciable films right from the time of ‘Joymati’. Jahnu Barua’s ‘Phiringoti’ and ‘Aparoopa’, Bhabendranath Saikia’s ‘Sandhyaraag’, ‘Agnisnaan’, Padum Barua’s ‘Ganga Chilanir Pakhi’, Sanjeev Hazarika’s ‘Meemanxha’, or even my films are
mostly women oriented. Then Kuntala Devi’s ‘Kanaklata’ and many more. These films have taken their women characters seriously. In fact my own film ‘Joymoti’ 2006, has a different aspect of the character of princess Joymati, than in the earlier film by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala.

**Researcher:** How far have women characters in Assamese films been able to leave an impact on the common viewers as to bring some changes in our society?

**Response:** Assamese films left some impact in earlier times, but never in a big way. First of all Assam has never banked on stars like in Mumbai or South. It is mainly the storyline that matters, or the performance of actors in old films. There were a very few popular actors who could be called Assamese cinema stars. Hence there was no way that the fans would follow anything about them. And today, hardly any actor stands out as distinct. Most of them dress and behave similarly.

**Interview 6**

**Priti Saikia,** a Producer and wife of Late Bhabendranath Saikia, one of the most respected filmmakers of Assam, who made many socially relevant and women oriented films including ‘Abartan’ and ‘Agnisnan’, that are part of the study. She not only conveyed her husband’s views on his main women protagonists in these two films but also shared her own views on women in Assamese films.

**Researcher:** What did your husband want to reflect through the women protagonists in these two films as he created them respectively for the films?

**Response:** The film ‘Agnisnan’ is based on Bhanbendranath Saikia’s own novel ‘Antarip’ and as he had informed, the character of Menaka was actually some woman he had known in his village as a child. He was known for his women centric films and the reason why he liked to create such women characters was mainly to fight social injustice.

He often questioned, why women are always suffering, and are blamed for everything, even though they sacrifice for their families and often lose their own identity to keep others happy?

Through Menaka he was not justifying a woman’s infidelity to take revenge from her husband, but he was questioning that if Menaka’s husband can have relation with
some other woman and hurt her, why she cannot avenge this humiliation by conceiving a child from another man. Though, she never continued any illicit relation with anyone.

Many people including women, in the eighties in Assam, could not accept the character then. But today they might be able to relate with her better as marriages have a different definition today.

In case of the film ‘Abartan’, Saikia, who also wrote scripts for mobile theater, had closely observed the life of people in mobile theater for years. The character of Jayanti was created with some real actresses and their problems in mind.

Her decision to follow her dreams and her love at the end of the film, defying the selfish wishes of the family, was again a way of showing how women can fight against exploitation if they want.

**Researcher**: Do you agree with the common belief that women in our Northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How do you think this is reflected in your film or generally in Assamese films?

**Response**: Yes, I agree that women in Northeast enjoy a better status. But not many of our films have been able to reflect this. Films like ‘Buwari’ and some others, though show women as calm and tolerant, they also show how women have the power to change situations. But not many films have explored the status of women as enjoyed in Northeast India.

**Researcher**: Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly, has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

**Response**: Assamese films have done justice to representation of women at certain times. Some important aspects of women in our society were reflected in films from yester years but very few new films can do that. For eg. I myself was only a housewife until I lost my husband. Till then I never knew what all I can do. But after losing him I have had to take responsibility of his institution and other works, and am doing them well. Such hidden power of women, need to be reflected in women characters of our films.

**Researcher**: How far have women characters in Assamese films been able to leave an impact on the common viewers as to bring some changes in our society?
Response: These days, films have lost the power to leave as impact on society much. Mostly, now women are shown as objects that dance and sing and please. Earlier women characters were thought provoking and could leave a positive impact through our films.

Interview 7

Sangeeta Tamuli, a leading woman producer and filmmaker of Assam who also produced Manju Borah’s Akashitorar Katha Re, a film included in this study. She speaks about women of Assam and Assamese cinema.

Researcher: What do you wish to reflect through women protagonists in your films?

Response: The women protagonists in my films are usually created to reflect the reality of women in our society. Though women are supposed to enjoy a better status in our society, still we see that many women in Assam are victims of suppression by the husband, or discrimination by parents or even atrocities of mother or sister in laws are common. The films need to reflect those and I try to do that in the ones I produce or make.

Researcher: Do you agree with the common belief that women in our Northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How do you think this is reflected in your films or generally in Assamese films?

Response: Yes, women in our society of Northeast are believed to have a better social status, but only when they are compared to those in other parts of the country. Otherwise, even in Assam, women have suffered. But if we stick to the belief, then I do not think the films being made now have been able to reflect that very well all the time.

Researcher: Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly, has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

Response: Yes, the older films have done justice to representation of women in Assam. If we look at the character of Jyotimali in ‘Jyotimali’ or Aideu in the film ‘Aideu’ or Ritu in ‘Phiringoti’, then yes, these women characters are strong and well defined. Even in ‘Buwari’ the woman is shown in positive light where she tries to hold the house together through her sacrifices.
**Researcher:** How far have women characters in Assamese films been able to leave an impact on the common viewers as to bring some changes in our society?

**Response:** Women characters in Assamese films need something new in them. The taste of the audience needs to be tested in creating women characters. Only then more impactful films can be made. And unfortunately, women in our society are good at picking up the negative traits faster than the positive qualities that they see on screen. So many times in real life, like on screen, women only become the enemies of women. We as women, have the power to both create and destroy. Our films need to reflect that well.

**Interview 8**

**Anowar Hussain,** the director of ‘Tejimola’ is an octogenarian who made some popular films in the sixties and seventies and still is active behind the camera. He talks about his two main women protagonists and also how Assamese cinema has changed through the years as far as representation of women is concerned.

**Researcher:** What did you want to reflect through your woman protagonist as you created her for the film?

**Response:** I was the first one to pave the path for folk tales in Assamese cinema. ‘Tejimola’ is a very popular but slightly vague story by Lakhinath Bezbaruah. I cannot ethically change much in a story written by some other author, and Bezbarua is one of the pioneers. Yet, I decided to change some scenes into a dream sequence just to make them seem realistic. Some things are not possible in reality so audience will not take it well if I had shown it as it is in the story.

At the end I have changed the conclusion of the film, like the evil receiving divine punishment. Though in the actual story, Tejimola pardons the stepmother. In the film I have shown that the wicked step mother has lost her sanity due to guilt and suffers for the rest of her life. The character of Tejimola personifies innocence, kindness and tolerance. The step mother personifies evil.
Researcher: Do you agree with the common belief that women in our Northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How do you think this is reflected in your film or generally in Assamese films?

Response: The status of women in the Northeast is somewhat better I agree. Old Assamese films, mainly during the 1970s, do reflect the belief that women enjoy a better status. My own films like ‘Sarapat’ or ‘Paap aru Prayashcit’, show realistic representation of women.

Later, films made by Bhabendranath Saikia gave a good representation of women, where the women characters are strong.

Researcher: Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly, has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

Response: The representation was justified more in old films as I have said already. The contemporary films, in them only thirty percent are realistic or have a good representation of women. Others mostly are copied ideas from Hindi films where women are objectified.

Researcher: How far have women characters in Assamese films been able to leave an impact on the common viewers as to bring some changes in our society?

Response: Some films have been able to leave an impact on the ideology of people, like ‘Joymati’. Or even through my ‘Tejimola’, I tried to tell that any evil deed, even if it escapes punishment from the society, it never escapes, divine justice. Such messages leave an impact among the simple rural viewers at least if not all.

Interview 9

Arup Manna is a filmmaker with some serious films to his credit. He directed ‘Aideu’, a film included in this research work. He won a national award for the film. He speaks about his main woman character and women in Assamese cinema in general.

Researcher: What did you want to reflect through your woman protagonist as you created her for the film?
Response: Through the film, the character of Aideu stood as a protest against the social barriers over women folk of the society during those times. The society was then fully dominated by men and the females had less opportunity to raise their voice. They could never fulfill their dreams into reality or were allowed to render their service to mankind. I would like to say that from the time of Mahabharata till date the women are under dominance of men and men have been snatching their rights.

Through the character of Aideu, I tried to present these social evils to the world and show how women had a poor and pitiful life then as well as now. Aideu raised her voice against such social injustices and was forced to shut her mouth.

Researcher: Do you agree with the common belief that women in our Northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How do you think this is reflected in your film or generally in Assamese films?

Response: Yes, the women in North East India including Assam have been enjoying a better status than the women folk of the other states of India. Some films reflect this but not many.

Researcher: Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly, has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

Response: There are very few films made in Assam that represent women in a proper way. ‘Agnisnan’, ‘Firingoti’ and my film ‘Aideu’ are among the few films. These films have done justice to representation of women. But most of the strong characters are historical and less from present times.

Researcher: How far have women characters in Assamese films been able to leave an impact on the common viewers as to bring some changes in our society?

Response: No, not much impact has been seen on the present society through our films. Every director wants to stir the thoughts of people, mainly through parallel cinema. The intention is to motivate or inform, and not pass laws, as no filmmaker is an administrator. Not all films can give conclusions or solutions.

Some films are left with open ends for people to decide what the protagonist should do. In my film ‘Aideu’, the character of Aideu is very impactful when she says to Joymati’s sketch on her wall, that since the time of Draupadi, in Mahabharat, women are being stripped off their honour and joys.
Interview 10

Arunlochan Das is a senior Film critic and scholar who has many books and articles to his credit. He speaks about representation of women in Assamese cinema through the decades.

Researcher: What do you think the director wanted to reflect through woman protagonists in many of our women oriented films?

Response: Women in our films, especially those in women oriented films have mostly been created to reflect strength of women in different ways. Some are strong through silence while some speak and act according to situations.

Researcher: Do you agree with the common belief that women in our Northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How do you think this is reflected in your film or generally in Assamese films?

Response: Women in Northeast states are respected more than women in other states. Rather, Meghalaya has a Matrilineal society and Assam also never saw any woman being tortured for dowry. Though they enjoyed a better status in the past, in the 21st century things are changing. Whether it is media effect or globalization, lot of social evil like dowry harassment, and crime against women is on the rise in Assam.

Government has blindly given away licenses for wine shops which is also a cause of alcoholism and rise in crime and violence. Only some of it is reflected in our films these days.

Researcher: Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly, has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

Response: Earlier, in films like ‘Joymati’, the character was not only brave and selfless but also very caring. She saved the life of her husband and the kingdom from destruction by silently tolerating torture and sacrificing her life.

Similarly, Tejimola in ‘Tejimola’ also was an epitome of tolerance and goodness who was sacrificed by jealous people. But finally goodness reigned. This is a folk tale that has run through generations and talks about the tolerance power and goodness of women has continued with this. While ‘Tejimola’ also reflects the evil side of human beings including women, goodness is also shown.

**Researcher:** How far have women characters in Assamese films been able to leave an impact on the common viewers as to bring some changes in our society?

**Response:** Even women writers like Mamoni Roysom Goswami revealed the strength of women through her characters who tried to change unjust social rules. Serious Assamese cinema reflects woman’s stand against injustice. **examples Phiringoti, Agnisnan, Papori and others.**

Many filmmakers are thus trying to change the way society treats women, through their films which is good. And yes, there is a change in how women are being represented now and was then in terms of appearance, clothing, attitude and outlook. **Earlier films did not show many working women, whereas now women are shown moving out to work and this represented in the films.**

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**Interview 11**

**Apurba Sarma** is a film scholar and has written a book on Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, the first filmmaker of Northeast India. He speaks about ‘Joymati’, the first film of the region and also about Assamese films and women in them.

**Researcher:** What do you think Jyoti Prasad wanted to reflect through the protagonist Joymati in his film?

Response: Joymati is a historical, and partly mythical character, made more prominent by Lakhinath Bezbarua in his play ‘Joymati’. While Jyoti Prasad, in his film ‘Joymati’, represented the character Joymati in his own way. He wanted to say that my Joymati does not believe in histrionics. Though she is an ideal royal daughter in law, yet she is resolute. Determined to undo injustice in the kingdom, she sacrifices her life. In the process he put her on a higher platform.

**Researcher:** Do you agree with the common belief that women in our Northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How do you think this is reflected in your film or generally in Assamese films?

**Response:** Yes, women in Northeast do enjoy a better status, and some of our films have reflected that well but not majority of the films could do so.
**Researcher:** Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly, has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

**Response:** The status of women historically in Assam was better than what it is now. Hence we cannot say that the films have justifiably represented women of Assam. Now in ‘Agnisan’, the director, through the character of Menaka was trying to justify something socially not acceptable. No director has the right to establish some new values by destroying the old values.

An artist always tries to create some new waves, but whether it should stick to old established values or move on remains debatable.

**Researcher:** How far have women characters in Assamese films been able to leave an impact on the common viewers as to bring some changes in our society?

**Response:** Impact of films on Assamese viewers has not been very noticeable. In rural sector, where we have larger audience for Assamese films, the people watch a film mainly for entertainment and not really look at them as thought provoking. Even the urban audience is hardly affected by the women protagonists in Assamese films except for characters like Menaka or one or two more could steer some debate. Assamese cinema still needs such powerful characters that can make strong impact on the people to change their outlook on things.

**Interview 12**

**Pradyut Kumar Deka**, a young filmmaker who directed the film ‘Dhunia Tirutabor’ which is part of this research work, apart from three other films. He spoke about women characters in his film and also spoke about representation of women in Assamese films in general through the decades, and impact of women centric films.

**Researcher:** What did you want to reflect through your woman protagonist when you created her for the film?

**Response:** My film’s central protagonist Chayanika has some similarity with the central character in the classic Hollywood film ‘Sunset Boulevard’. She is past her prime, while the other character Ayesha is an upcoming actress. Both are in contrasting situations. In fact I created them from real life people whom I had met through my growing up years.
The story of the film is actually not a story but just a search for a character which leads to discovering many more women with varying characteristics. I have at times put them in dramatic situations to create a strong impact.

Like Robin asks Chayanika who she is, which surprised her because she was a well known Cinestar. But she did not take offense. Rather she played on the idea and disguised herself to be the assistant Ragini. Whereas Ayesha, she is a new generation, ‘I me and myself’, kind of a woman who carries an attitude of a cinestar. These situations are very realistic.

**Researcher:** Do you agree with the common belief that women in our northeastern society enjoy a better status than their counterparts in other states of the country? How do you think this is reflected in your film or generally in Assamese films?

**Response:** Yes, definitely women here enjoy a better status. My own film is about women. There is no class distinction as such in the film among my female characters. I am trying to represent different characteristics of women irrespective of their social class. But yes, the status they enjoy in general in real life and in films is alike.

**Researcher:** Do you think the cinema of Assam, majorly, has done justice in representation of women through the decades?

**Response:** I do not feel that Assamese cinema has done justice to the representation of women. We have some good women centric films, but those are very few. Some strong characters like Joymati in the film ‘Joymati’, or Menaka in ‘Agnisnan’ are there, but we could have had some more women centric films. The seventies and eighties were the golden years for Assamese cinema. But that time saw less of serious women centric films, and more of some formula commercial films. The time could have been utilized for more serious women oriented films as well, where women in stronger and less cliché roles could have been presented by film makers.

**Researcher:** How far have women characters in Assamese films been able to leave an impact on the common viewers as to bring some changes in our society?

**Response:** I have not seen much impact from our films on our society or women.
Conclusion from the responses

The views of the interviewees might have differed in some aspects on cinema of Assam and representation of women in them, but overall, the observations made by them on the social status of women in Assam and the issue of impact made by women centric films or women characters in those films has remained pretty much similar.

While some say that the power of women is not being fully utilized or reflected in our films these days, some feel that representation of women in Assamese cinema, through the decades is justified in majority of the films, when compared to many other regional films industries in India. Some interviewees say that Assamese films through the decades have shown women as decision makers, or they have tried to give a realistic representation of women, whether in an urban setting or rural Assam.

Most of the film critics and filmmakers agree that, the older Assamese films have done more justice to representation of women than the new ones. They say that old films had better treatment of women, with more realistic women characters in them, while the new films being made now very often objectify or stereotype women. The common observation about new films, mainly commercial ones is that new films even in Assam have slowly begun to copy the mainstream Hindi films, or even Hindi serials these days.

Some feel more justice to representation of women in our films could have been done if more Assamese filmmakers took up serious issues surrounding women. Some serious filmmakers have been doing this for decades in Assam, but since commercial films reach to more audiences, even commercial filmmakers need to treat their women characters in a more realistic manner. Some have strongly observed that seventy percent of new films in Assam fail to show women in a realistic manner.

Most of them agree, with time, the social outlook is changing, and so is changing the way in which women are represented in our films.

The Status of women in Assam, all of them agree, is definitely better compared to other parts of India. Even though, some of the filmmakers and other interviewees agree, that small incidents of gender bias take place here and there, within homes or in organizations, but overall our films represent women in high status as per the general belief on the status enjoyed by women in Northeast India.
Some also observe that women do enjoy a better status in Assam if the overall scenario is taken into consideration. Yet, like anywhere in the world, here also women are at times victims of injustice inside the house. Sometimes women are victimized by women members of the family themselves, and not necessarily always by men. Our films should reflect such aspects of women’s sufferings as well feel some producers.

Some women members of the film fraternity have observed that many films, instead of exploring the positive aspects of women’s status in Assamese society are busy picking up negative social traits from other parts of India, where women are ill treated. Some say that we need films where the inner strength and hidden potential of women who mostly stay within the confines of homes, also need to come up. Then more women can identify with such characters while they watch these films.

But majority of the interviewees say that, films of Assam can still do better in exploring the social status of women in Northeast India including Assam. A few filmmakers and producers also say that, the general belief that women in Assamese society enjoy a better status is true, but again the degree of this belief differs from home to home and situation to situation.

Now in the society, even in Assam, crime against women is on the rise. But our films are not taking up these issues, observe some of the interviewees. While some say that though many of our women characters through the decades have been made to behave in a way that patriarchal society wants them to behave, yet these characters have carried their own inner strength and they reflect this strength when required.

When it comes to the question of impact left by women centric films and the women protagonists in them, majority of the interviewees believe that the older films represented women characters or women centric themes that were more thought provoking. Many say that the characters, like Joymati, Menaka, Ritu, or Aideu, have managed to stir the thoughts of the audience and have left some kind of impact, mostly positive.

They agree that in earlier times, Assamese films at least took women characters and women issues more seriously. Majority of the interviewees say that older Assamese films have left a strong impact on the viewers, sometimes through their central characters, and sometimes through the stories. Women in our films, especially those in women oriented films have mostly been created to reflect strength of women in
different ways, explain some film critics. Some are strong through silence, while others speak and act according to the situation, say others.

Majority of the interviewees though agree that in contemporary Assamese films, women characters are stereotyped, and portrayed without much distinct qualities in them. They observe that these days the women characters are highlighted more through songs and dances, fashion and makeup, rather than actions and strength of the character. Women now are decorative things in a film. Hence, the present day films hardly produce women characters that can leave a strong impact on the audiences.

Some explain that a filmmaker always tries to create some impact through their films and some characters. But in Assam not much impact has been seen in ideologies, or even behavior and trends in fashion, through films. Yet another observation is that impact of Assamese films has not been very highly noticeable because, majority of Assamese cinema viewers are in rural areas. These viewers see an Assamese film just as mere entertainment and not as something thought provoking.

This sums up the mosaic of views expressed by the members of the film fraternity through the conducted interviews in the course of the research.