



History of Assamese cinema since 1935-1985

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Abstract

Assamese cinema as a regional division of Indian cinema emerged in the year 1935 with Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's *Joymoti*. For the proper understanding of the history of Assamese cinema, a study on the first phase (1935-1985) of its growth and development becomes important. This paper will be an attempt to delineate some specificities of this phase. It will illustrate the distinctiveness in respect of its thematic and stylistic features of the films of this phase along with its differences with the other Indian films of that period. Apart from that the paper will also show the importance of this phase in the development of Assamese cinema.

Keywords : Assamese Cinema, Regional Cinema, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Pre-Post Independent Era.

1. Introduction

After completion of four years of *Raja Harishchandra* (1931), the first Indian feature film, Assamese legendary genius Rupkonwar Jyoti Prasad Agarwala made the first Assamese movie *Joymoti* (1935). While artists and professionals in Maharashtra, Bengal and the Southern part of the country began actively exploring the new mass medium right from the silent era, it was only in 1935 that the Assamese audience had their first viewing of a film which was made in their native mother tongue. Though Pramathesh Chandra Barua was the first Assamese to join the adventures of cinema he did not make any films in Assamese. Barua was exposed to Bengali and Hindi cinema and went on to direct Charat Chandra's *Devdas* in both the languages. It has remained a masterpiece till date.

It was Jyoti Prasad Agarwala who had dared to make a film in Assamese language with his limited knowledge and other challenging circumstances. Agarwala, who was a son of wealthy business man went to Calcutta for his college studies but soon left it mid way to travel to England in 1926 and join Edinburg University. Agarwala again left his education half way

and travelled to Germany. He then got an entry into the UFA studios, where for seven months he learnt the art and science of movie making. It was in Germany that Agarwala also came in contact with the stalwart of Indian cinema, Himanshu Roy. While in Germany, Agarwala was exposed to the legends like Griffith, Einstein, Pudovkin, Pabst, Chaplin, Karl Dreyer, Munrau and Stronhein. Jyoti Prasad's *Joymoti* was a significant step towards the development of Indian cinema also. It is the privilege for the people of Assam to witness that the first Assamese film *Joymoti* was also the fourth film of Indian film history. Unlike the films of other parts of India, *Joymoti* was based on a historical fact. Along with history it represents the bold and sacrificial nature of Assamese women folk. But it was not acknowledged by the Assamese people and the Indian people also. Aparna Sharma, a researcher from California University researching on Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, during her visit to Tezpur University opined that *Joymoti* was much technically and artistically advanced than most films made in India during that time (Sharma, 2012). His cinematic techniques involved a generous mixture of varying shots. The style of using dominant long shots found a healthy break in

Joymoti. He also gave Assamese cinema its first actress in the form of Aideu Handique. Handique overcame her initial hesitations and dared social taboos associated with acting in cinema to create a history and legacy of her own. She has been an inspiration to all generations of actors of Assamese cinema. Another important feature of his film is the extensive use of Assamese folklore material. *Zapi*, *Xarai*, etc were used in his film in an innovative manner. The film completed with a budget of 60,000 rupees was released on 10 March 1935. The picture failed miserably. Like so many early Indian films, the negatives and complete prints of *Joymoti* are missing. Some efforts were been made privately by Altaf Mazid to restore and subtitle whatever is left of the prints. Despite the significant financial loss from *Joymoti*, the second picture *Indramalati* was filmed between 1937 and 1938 and was finally released in 1939. It was his second and last film. The eminent composer and singer of Assam Bhupen Hazarika played a stellar role in the play. *Indramalati* received little recognition. He is believed to have been the first director to introduce playback singing in Indian Cinema. With the passing away of Jyotiprasad, the Assamese film scene witnessed a temporary halt for about a couple of years. Since then Assamese cinema has developed a slow – paced, sensitive style, especially with the movies of Bhabendra Nath Saikia and Jhanu Barua.

In this paper our study will be limited to the Assamese films produced from 1935 to 1985. This is the initial stage of Assamese film history. This phase has a great importance in the development of this industry. The quality of this phase decides the way of its movement. Therefore, a study on this phase is a must for the researchers of this field.

2. Films of this era

After *Joymoti*, the filmmakers were not concerned about the serious nature of the art. They are making films for entertainment only. From 1949 to 1950s there was a long gap in filmmaking. This was due to the lack of importance given by Assam government in this line. It was during 60s the Government had taken initiative in national theatre. During this significant period total twenty one movies were made. i.e *Joymoti*(1935) and *Indramalati* (1939) by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, *Manomati* (1941) by Rohini Kumar Barua, *Rupohi* (1946) by Parbati Prasad Barua, *Badan Borphukan* (1946) by Kamal Narayan Choudhury, *Siraj* (1948) by Phani Sarma and Bishnu Rabha, *Parghat* (1948) by Prabin Phukan, *Biplabi* (1948) by

Ajit Sen, *Runumi* (1948 by Suresh Goswami, *Sati Beola* (1948) by Sunil Ganguli, *Nimila Aanka* (1955) by Lakha Dhar Choudhury, *Piyoli Phukan* (1955) by Phani Sarma, *Smritir Paras* (1955) by Nip Barua, *Xara Pat* (1955) by Anowar Hussain, *Era Batar Sur* (1956) by Bhupen Hazarika, *Mak aru Maram* (1957) by Nip Barua, *Dhumuha* (1957) by Phani Sarma, *Lakhimi* (1957) by Bhaben Das, *Natun Prithivi* (1958) by Anowar Hussain, *Ranga Police* (1958) and *Bhakta Prahlad* (1958) by Nip Barua. By the middle of 60's, films began to be produced in Assam on a regular basis. However, between 1935 and 1970 a total of 62 films were produced. Besides, the film makers already referred to many others engaged in film making during the period including Pravin Sharma, Saila Barua, Abdul Mazid, Amar Pathak, Indukul Pattazarika, Diben Barua, Debkumar Basu, Amulya Manna, Gauri Burman, Atul Bardoloi, Sujit Singh, Nalin Duara, and Prafulla Barua.

During the period of 1970-82 a total of 57 Assamese films were made. New directors started emerging on the horizon, Samarendra Narayan Deb's '*Aranya*' (1970), Kamal Choudhury's *Bhaity* (1972, the first color film of Assam) Deuti Barua's *Bristi* (1974), Manoranjan Sur's *Uttaran* (1973), Prabin Bora's *Parinam* (1974), Pulok Gogoi's *Khoj* (1974), Padam Barua's *Gonga Silonir Pakhi* (1976), Bhabendranath Saikia's *Sandhya Raag* (1977) and Atul Bardoloi's *Kollol* (1978) are films worth mentioning.

In the 1980s notable directors of contemporary Assamese cinema are Jhanu Barua (who directed *Aparoopo*, *Papori*, *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai*, *Bonani*, *Firingoti and Sagoroloi Bohu Door*), Sanjiv Hazarika who directed *Haladhar*, *Meemanxa* and Bhabendra Nath Saikia who directed *Sandhya Raag*, *Anirbaan*, *Agnisnaan*, *Sarothi*, *Kolahool*, *Abartan*, *Itihaas* and *Kaal Sandhya*. Other directors include Santwana Bordoloi who directed *Adaiya* and Bidyut Chakraborty who made *Rag Birag*. Both of the films have won national and international awards. By the end of eighties, however, film production had slumped as in the rest of the country. The new films that were made won national acclaim. In 1986 only 11 films were made and only eight in the following year. But this too is creditable since the entire state has only one government owned studio and minimal infrastructure. Most post production work has to be completed in laboratories in Calcutta, Bombay or Madras. Exhibition theatres do not number more than 143 in the entire State. Jhanu Barua and Bhabendranath

Saikia have now put Assamese Cinema on the international festival circuit. Jahnu Barua's *Halodhiya choraye Boodhan Khaye* won the Golden Lotus in 1988 and also the Grand Prix for Best Film and Best Actor at Locarno, while *Khagoroloi Bohu Door* bagged ten international awards including Best Director at the Brussels Festival of Independence Film Makers. Being in the tradition of 'new wave' Indian cinema, Barua and Saikia both strive for the authentic portrayal of the village ethos, of the struggle of men and women against oppression and exploitation. Other film makers of note in Assam include Siba Thakur, Padma Barua, Jones Mohalia, Gautam Bora, Mridul Gupta and Hemanta Das.

3. Specialty of this era

The films were based on historical, social, romantic and mythological story. First movie *Joymoti* was made on a historical story called *Joymoti Kunwari* written by Sahityarathi Laxminath Bezbarua. Though, Assamese film tradition starts with a serious note but films of later period were mainly based on the style of so called commercial Hindi cinema. Because of this reason the films of this period could not acquire a distinct position in the larger Indian context. Therefore, the films of this period were mainly the photocopies of 'Indian Commercial Cinema'. During this period Assam was far away from development; we can say that at that period Assam was extremely backward and underdeveloped. Comparing to other parts of India like Bombay (now Mumbai) or Calcutta (now Kolkata), Assam was not developed in scientific and technological infrastructure. Despite these infrastructural limitations, Assamese film directors were dared to produce a bulk of movies with some specificity. The directors of this period introduced many aspects in this film industry. Some of them were able to achieve the national awards also. Some movies of this period were adapted version of stories or famous novels of that period. Apart from *Joymoti*, *Manomati* and *Siraj* were adapted from the novels called *Manomati* by Rajanikanta Bordoloi and *Siraj* by Lakshidhar Sarmah respectively. *Siraj* was the first movie which is based on the Hindu-Muslim harmony. This movie was remade by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika in the year 1988. At the time of Hindu-Muslim hostility, this movie played an important role in the minds of the Assamese people. Indeed, it can be called a nationalist movie of that period. Apurba Sarma in his write up on Assamese cinema said that "of seven film made in the forties only *Siraj* by Phani Sarma and Bishnu Prasad

Rabha deserved mention as a poignant, socially relevant and well-crafted film. Based on the powerful story of Lakshmidhar Sarma written with a theme of Hindu-Muslim unity against the backdrop of the traditionally conservative Hindu society and reflecting the conflicts between the rich upper class with their mean and false pride and the tender human attributes of the simple, generous downtrodden people, the film produced a sensitive love story. Likewise, *Manomati* captured the terrible days of 'Manar Din' (the invasion of Maan or Burmese). It was the first Assamese movie where poster was made for publicity. Till 1970, *Manomati* was the longest Assamese cinema with a total 19 rills. During this period some movies were made on the story of Assamese freedom fighters. Say for example, *Badan Borphukan* and *Piyoli Phukan*. *Piyoli Phukan* was based on the life and sacrifice of the freedom fighter Piyoli Phukan, who stood against the British Rule. It was the first film from Assam to receive the President Certificate of merit, the highest Regional Film Award given by Union of India. Some of the social movies like *Rupohi*, *Siraj*, *Parghat*, *Runumi*, *Nimila Aanka Smritir Paras*, *Xara Pat*, *Era Batar Sur*, *Mak aru Maram*, *Lakhimi*, *Natun Prithivi* and *Ranga Police* were based on the familial or love stories. Apart from that some of those films bring some political issues like freedom movement, Burmese invasion, corruption within the film narrative. Indian mythology had a good connection with Indian cinema from its inception. Many films of the first phases were made on mythological stories only. Though Assamese cinema starts with a historical film, yet impact of mythology is evident in this industry also. *Sati Beola*, and *Bhakta Prahlad* were two films of this category. However, in Assamese film industry the impact of mythology is lesser than the film industries of other parts.

In the film, *Mak Aru Maram*, a well trained Alsatian dog was introduced. 'Runumi was a controversial film of this period. Based on Goswami's adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's play 'The Warriors at Helgeland', Runumi set in Assam and Nagaland had been running to a good response when it was unexpectedly banned by the then state government under Chief Minister Bishnu Ram Medhi without giving any reason' (The Hindu: 2010). However, in this movie the Assamese *Bihu* folk dance was shown for the first time in history. Rajeshwar Bordoloi's *Natun Prithivi* was the first Assamese Film where trailer was introduced. Likewise, in the film *Smiritir Paras*, first Hindi song was introduced.

In this phase some woman-centric movies were

also made. *Joymoti* is an excellent example of such woman representation. This phase built an imaginary of Assamese woman folk by visualizing an 'ideal' image of 'Assamese woman'. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, about the character of Joymoti, said that, "Joymoti my film neither speaks much at the royal court, nor speaks publicly in any place. She is represented as a stoical 'alpa-bhasini' Assamese aristocratic *bowari* who maintains silence, speaks only when required proves herself through her actions....I have sketched out the character of Joymoti following my understanding of the Assamese woman. Silence is one of the features of the Assamese character. It is the quality that I have tried to highlight in my portrayal of Joymoti" (Agarwala: 537-538). In this way he constructs the ideal image of an Assamese who speak less in a public place. She is also strong enough to resist the intolerable torture. After *Joymoti* other movies like *Manomati*, *Rupohi*,

Runumi, *Lakhimi* all are based on woman protagonist. Even the films are titled by their name.

4. Conclusion

The phase after Independence, when films were made for the first time in Assam was an important phase in the development of Assamese film industry. It can be considered as the base of development. However, taking into account the quality and purpose of Jyoti Prasad's *Joymoti*, it is easily observable that, the other films of this period were for mere entertainment. Jyoti Prasad's vision was not followed by his followers; the pursuit of artistic excellence in themes deeply rooted in Assamese life and society initiated by Jyoti Prasad was forsaken who followed him. Thereby failing to build up a sound tradition of Assamese cinema rich in the aesthetics and the ethos of a culturally endowed nation.

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