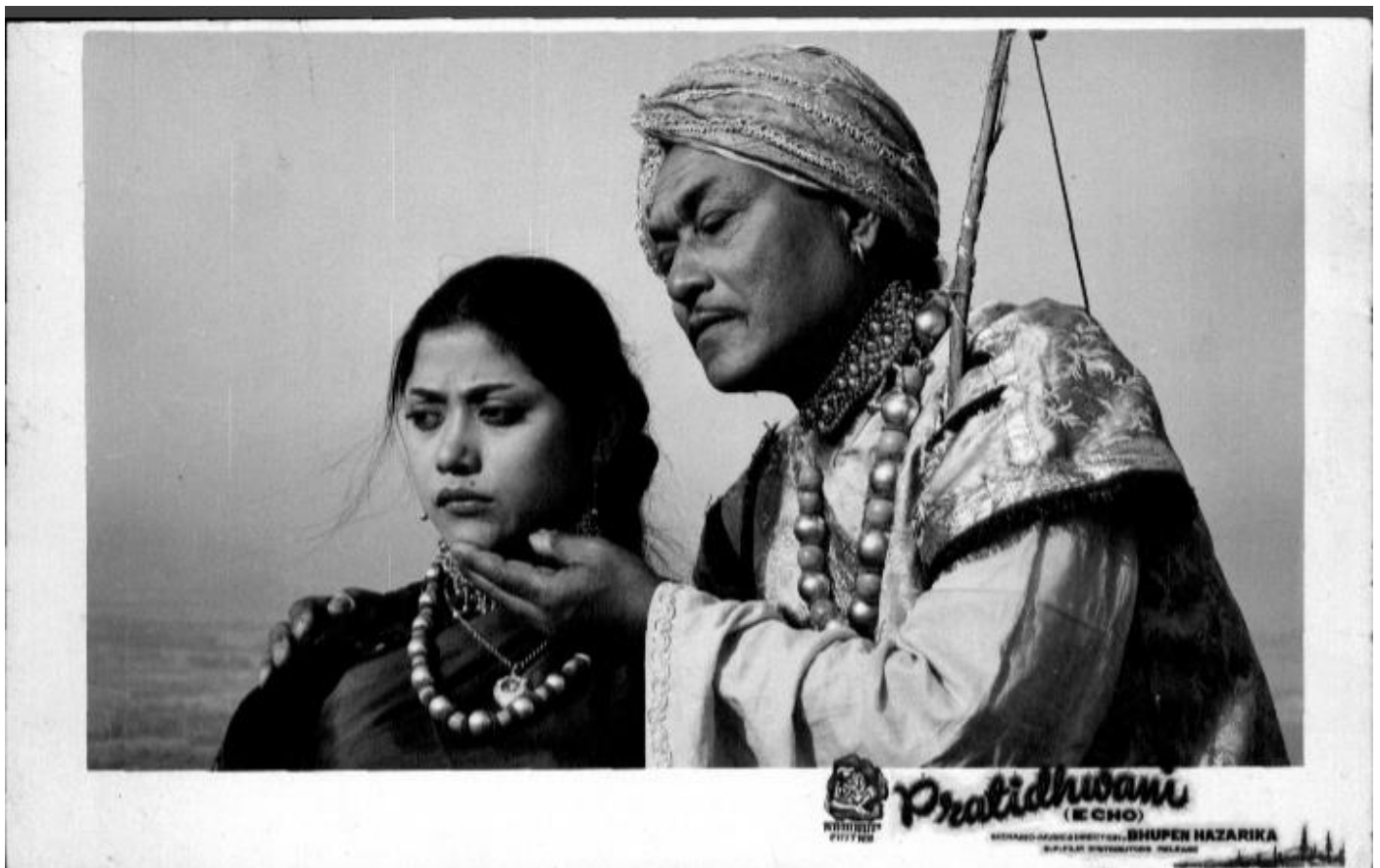


Article

Dipsikha Bhagawati

## The Vintage Class: Bishnu Rabha through the Key Light



Each and every territory of civilization is largely a honed empire of various social, political, economic and cultural history in each stream. Every nation, every country, province, continent, village - clan, even a marginalised hamlet has some of its own cultural heritage, a rich, extended trial ground - which often proves to be an engrossing, fortifying result of multicultural migrations associated with disparate group of people. Different branches of audio visual and performing art reveal the character and instincts of the place and ambience associated to it. The character of an art that is controlled more by human skills than technological strategies, in particular, is always organic, non-changing and classic to a broader extent.

The present scenario of Assamese cinema calls for a retrospection of its history and evolution.

In the early part of the last millennium, from 1903 to be precise, three illustrious sons of Assam, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Pramathesh Chandra Barua, were born at Tezpur, Dhaka, (at then Bengal presidency) and Gauripur, respectively. The former would in 1935 gave the North East its first film—the enchanting *Joymoti* in assistance with the vibrant, protean, a real thespian of Assam - Bishnu Prasad Rabha. The latter's 1937 version of *Devdas*—the third remake, and the first in Assamese—inculcated modern means such as flashback montage, besides natural performance by the artists, to portray the common human dilemma via what is now termed as the subjective camera. These two films in particular had set up for the cinema of Assamese a butterfly canvas for future masters such as Sarbeswar Chakrabarty, Bhupen Hazarika,

Bhabendranath Saikia, Padum Barua, Samarendra Narayan Deb, Nalin Duarah, Brajen Barua, Jahnu Baruah, and Dr. Santana Bordoloi and a few to improvise upon.

*'Look, Bhujlang, this chest of yours looks like your vast paddy fields, and mine - like that extended foliage of those teagardens...'*

(A couple of dialogues exchanged between the actors Bishnuprasad Rabha (as Bhujlang) and Natsurya Phani Sharma in the iconic film - *Erabator Sur* by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika)

A major influence of European literature in the formation of modern Assamese literature and the cinematic genre of the state was an impervious part of the early 20th century. A powerful media like cinema is always influenced by its contemporary history and genre of literature. This impact entered into Assam, being refined through Bengal Renaissance and other such developments in some neighbouring states. Its unswerving character was the expansion of the *jatra party* (1) and the association of the pronounced thespians and organizers like Hemang Biswas - IPTA-Indian People's Theatre Association - and its vital capacity was Bishnuprasad Rabha, a figure of assembled aesthetics, of revolutionary consciousness. During this period of colonial rule, the socio-political situation in Assam was complicated and critically volatile, but European literature helped to transform the nationalist conscience through a rich intellectual development in the state. Pioneering penmen like Chandrakumar Agarwala, Laxminath Bezbaruah and Hemchandra Goswami had already established the foundation of a remarkable genre of Assamese language and literature in the nineteenth century in a certain shape, that in later period opened the way for the rise of progressive cultural characters like Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Kolaguru Bishnuprasad Rabha. Rabha's degree of struggle was intense in all directions, as this was one of the most turbulent periods of the political and socio-economic history of Assam.

Rabha started collaborating with his preceptor Jyoti Prasad Agarwala in film making, music collection, play writing, musical experimentation and recording. This historical journey began when

Agarwala was assisted by Rabha in the making of his first film, the first trailblazer, the first film ever in the history of the land of the 'Red River and Blue Hills' - *Joymoti* in the year 1935. Both of them were invited by Senola Recording Co. to Calcutta to record music for *Joymoti*. This was the beginning of Rabha's escapade with music recording. Rabha recorded musical plays written specially for 78 rpms (2) known as *Pala*, traditional plays such as *Ojapali*, traditional music such as *Borgeet* and *Bihu geet* including his own musical anatomy.



By the late 1930s, he was deeply influenced by the communist literature that started to communicate in parts of then Assam Province and began to voice the nationality of the peasants. By the 1946 cultural organisations such as the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) began to synchronize the cultural articulations of the peasants, workers and the artists. The Assam branch of the IPTA started under the leadership of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Hemanga

Biswas in the year 1947. These intercessions were in succession influenced by blanket political affairs such as the Bolshevik revolution and the fight against fascism in the early twentieth century. His cultural or political ideologies were never loaded with individual craving of power. In 1951, after the untimely demise of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha became the President of the Assam branch of Indian People's Theatre Association.

were voiced by Sudhakantha Bhupen Hazarika and Shiva Bhattacharya. '*Kopi uthe kiyo Taajmahal*', '*Agni jugor firingoti moi*', '*Babu ghorer sakri*' and '*Aaru nobojabi bin*' are all-time acclaimed songs of Assamese cinema, where Bishnu Rabha's liberal social views and progressive revolutionary entity are embedded in a sharp note. The cinematographer of '*Siraj*' was Suresh Ghatak and Kamal Ganguly was in charge of editing. The outdoor shots were taken in and around Tezpur and the Indoors were shot at the "Kali Film Studio", Kolkata. '*Siraj*' was premiered on January 4, 1948 at Deepak Auditorium in Kolkata and released on January 16, the same year at Ranghar Cinema in Dibrugarh and Krishna Talkies in Nagaon district.

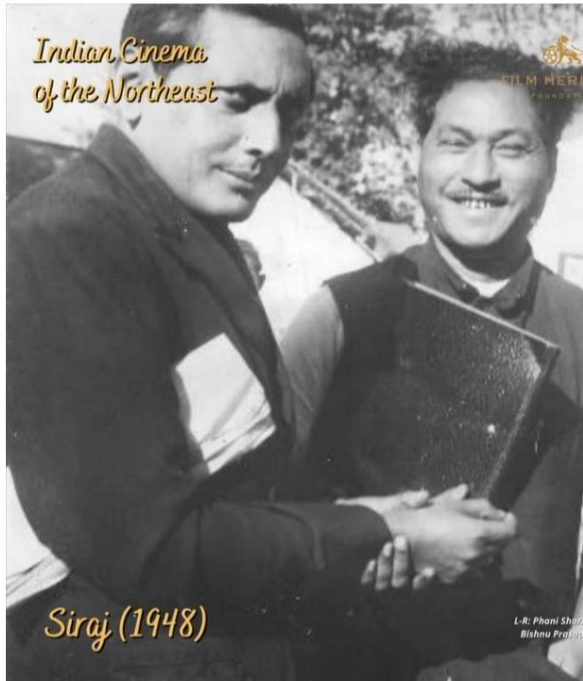
Away from direction, the first Assamese film starring Rabha was the 1956 release (30th November) *Erabator Sur*, under the banner of BP films - unanimously regarded as a milestone in the history of the cinema of Assamese. Aggrandized with the pithy, impeccable direction and touching musical wizardry of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, rich execution of the celebrated stage artists like Balraj Sahani, Natasurjya Phani Sharma and Rabha - *Erabator Sur* carried the clear influence of Bharatiya Gana Natya Sangha. The story and the music of the film reflect the emotional rising of the people of that era. These sensitive, socially conscious artists of this cultural confederation were the members of IPTA. Equipped with the power of folk art and folk music of Assam, the film presents the life of the worker class and owner class of the tea garden of Assam. No ultimate verdict or opinionative statement regarding someone as 'good or bad' has been rendered in the film. The sympathy of certain other member has also been highlighted against the exploitative attitude of someone of a particular fraternity. Vishnu Rabha played the challenging role of an ingenuous countrified peasant - Bhujlang Kaka. Director Hazarika adjudged the character to match the folk culture of Assam, the typical look of his customised community and linguistic projections in such a way that nowhere during the tour the force of the film, do the audience feel him to be Bishnu Rabha - rather the organic Bhajlung Kaka, who could plough the croplands being nonchalant of sun or rain, can come



**Paper advertisement of *Era Bator Sur*, first film of Bhupen Hazarika, 1956**

Social chaos, mass migration, religious outcry, rape, destruction of property and the conflict between Hindu and Islam's were a major truth of the partition of India in 1947. When this conflict of two religious lines was in turbans across the country, two cultural icons of Assam - two dedicated thespians - Bishnuprasad Rabha and Phani Sharma - came forward to make a film on the harmony of Hindus and Islams on the basis of the story - '*Siraj*', written by Lakhidhar Sharma, under the banner of Chitravali Pictures. *Siraj* was the first film in Assam to be made on national integrity, a benchmark example of communal harmony. Rabha was in charge of directing its music too, and these haunting melodies

out of the prevailing preconceived or prejudiced ideas and appreciate the new plantation manager frankly, sing shyly in the *karam festival* (3), dancing with his companions in the rhythm of *Budhua in Ratanpur* - can celebrate the rustic joy of living amidst green plantations.



*“Oi serata jaai aar muk kosisi je gaan gaana lage...ei boixot aar gaan gaana paarong naa mui...aar oi burhita - laajote ekebare soromote mori jaai aase”* (That guy is urging me to sing... but how can I sing at this age... and that old lady is almost dying out of shame.)

(Dialogue of Bishnu Rabha in the film *Erabator Sur*. It's a mixed local dialect of Assam, mostly colloquial.)

So strong was his performance that once Bhupen Hazarika said at an event, "They are artists, life artists till the end of their life." The technology of the film making was not as advanced and hybrid then, as it is today, but in black & white films, in close shots, the evident simplicity of Bishnu Prasad Rabha, the spontaneous expression of his face, exuberant dialogue delivery - were so possible only because he was gifted - a born talent. He did not have to get into a character, rather it was the very character that had got fit into his frame. The camera person (now DOP) of "Era Bator Sur" was Anil Gupta, editing in-charge was Tarun Dutta and it was choreographed by none other than the versatile Priyambada Patel. The haunting melodies of the film *Sagar Sangamat*

*Kotona Saturilo, Jonakore Rati Asomire mati* (Lata Mangeshkar) and *Rod Puwabor Karone Matibano Kak* (Hemant Mukherjee, Lata Mangeshkar and Bhupen Hazarika) have remained unparalleled ever in the history of the music of Indian cinema.

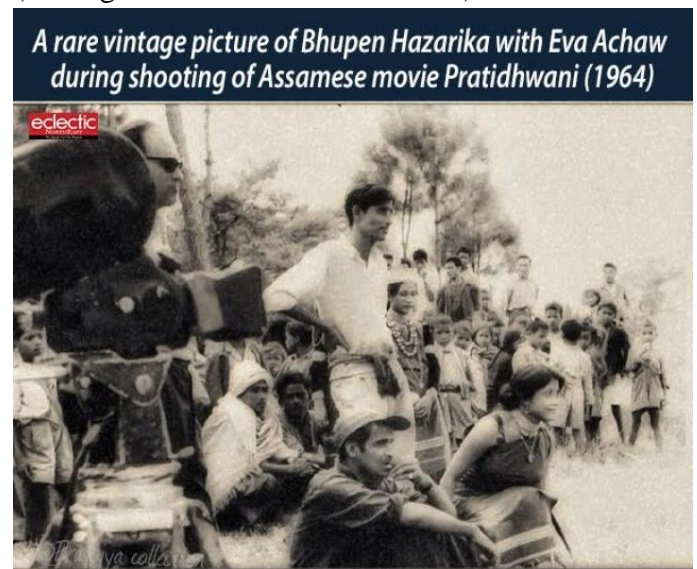
Under the banner of Kamrup Chitra, adapting the Khasi folklore of *Manik Raitong*, Bhupen Hazarika had crafted out another iconic film - *Pratidhwani* in 1964. It displayed the beautiful saga of the harmony between the hills and the plains. Bishnu Rabha played the character of Khasi Siyem (King) in *Pratidhwani* tied to the tune of communal integrity, royal patronage to create mutual brotherhood that goes parallelly with the love story of Manik Raitong and Lien Makao. His Mongolian physical structure along with dulcet and arresting narrative expression gave the character of the 'Siyem' a cult level status. During the mutual amity treaty between Hills and the Plains, between the Siyem and the king of Plains, Rabha's dialogue - spelt out in the royal court is brilliant in its natural flow:

*“In return of this precious gift, from our Khasi and Jayantia states, will be sent, as a symbol of humility - sir, better you say it.”*

Siyem's royal gravity, deep love for aesthetics is well-exercised in his body gesture while enjoying music in the court:

*“The leaves of the Pines are green with high simplicity, the banyans too conceive the same tone... As the generous clouds embrace our river as the monsoon sweep...”*

(A song from the film *Pratidhwani*)



This simplicity did change to rigor, when Manik Raitong, the suitor of his wife Lien Makaw (Eva Asaw) was hanged to death as per Khasi rules. The next level performance of Bishnu Rabha in the character of Siyem is so dominating, that most often it overshadows the glamorous protagonist *Pratidhwani* Manik Rating (Pabitra Borkakoti). A Khasi legend was not easy to establish in celluloid through Assamese artists, but the skill of the legendary artists had made it possible. The music of *Pratidhwani* is still immortal, major hit. In 1964, undivided Shillong (Meghalaya was yet to be created as an independent state) had the premiere of *Pratidhwani* at Anjali Cinema. On May 31, 1965, in the 12th National Film Festival of India, *Pratidhwani* was honoured with the President's Silver Medal as the Best Feature Film in Assamese language. The success story of *Pratidhwani* owes a lot to the gorgeous performance of Bishnu Prasad Rabha in the lead role and simultaneously to its mesmerizing musical

numbers. *Lien Makaw* (Talat Mahmood and Bhupen Hazarika), *Oi oi Akash Subo* (Suman Kalyanpur) are the ever cherished parameters of what melody could be.

This rebellious, multipotent man could have established himself outside the state through the connection of being an accomplished artist of 'Baan theatre' of Tezpur, nurturing a good relationship with the artists' community of Assam and Bengal and being a leading figure of the Gananatya Sangha (IPTA). He assisted Jyotiprasad Agarwala during the making of *Joymoti*. The present premise of Tezpur University is located on the land he donated. But a generous man, a soul of progressive outlook didn't want to detach himself from the vertebrae of his own state. Bishnu Prasad Rabha offered his soul and talent exposed to the native soil, enriching the history of Assamese cinema, with unparalleled gravity and cinematic potency- *Like a generous cloud, like a blei* (4).

## NOTES

1. Jatra party: Jatra literally means procession or journey in Sanskrit. It is a popular folk-theatre form of Odia theatre, Bengali theatre, spread throughout most of Odia, Bengali speaking areas of the Indian subcontinent, including Bangladesh and Indian states of Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar, Assam and Tripura.
2. 78 rpms: Any flat disc record, as a specific example - the gramophone records, made between about 1898 and the late 1950s and playing at a speed around 78 revolutions per minute is called a "78" by collectors. The materials of which discs were made and with which they were coated were also of various components; shellac eventually became the commonest material.
3. Karam festival: Karam is a harvest festival celebrated in Indian states of Jharkhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Odisha and West Bengal. It is dedicated to the worship of Karam-Devta (Karam-Lord/God), the god of power, youth and youthfulness. Karam festival is celebrated mainly among the tea garden community.
4. Blei: In Khasi language, 'blei' means 'God.'

**Dr. Dipsikha Bhagawati Teaches English at Dawson Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School, Nagaon, Assam.**