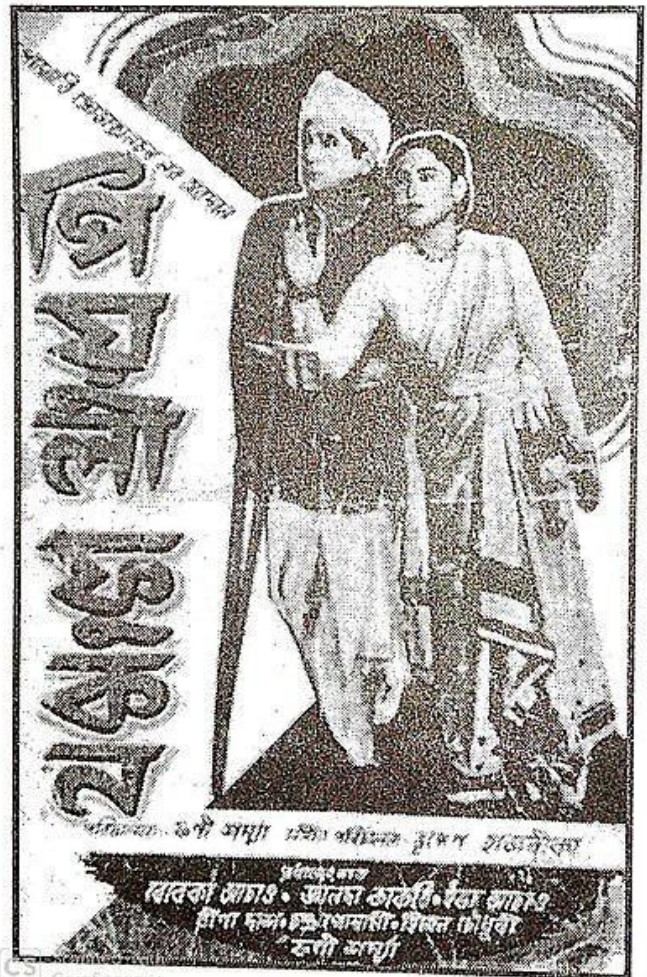


Article**Dipsikha Bhagawati****Flag Waving Fibre: A Chronological Narrative of Assamese Cinema**

Across all the collective aesthetics, film is comprehended as one of the most realistic tools for the adaptation and presentation of the collective psyche and history of time, not limited to any group of time, but as a pricking tool to capture the details of timeless chronicles that have transformed, polished and framed all the story of the concerned lands. The eldorado of the silver screen has always been structured with its contemporary societal issues - in a broader and universal sense - it may encompass socio-political, historical, economic or other significant and sensitive pinnacles of the tour de force of life. The continuous journey of civilization documents the manifold domain of humans, a term referred to as history. Movies are media, massive experimentation and reflection of the applied and interpretative psychology of civilization's weave, of relationships and qualities of the lifestyles, of the priorities and the subjects being established in multiple dimensions, beamed, mood swings sometimes to be in diaspora of conscious and unconscious self-states of the globe's split fragments and the visible organic connectivities where different styles and subjects have been experimented, glorified, frowned upon and removed. Here, change is the nature of time, and the world of cinema has been continuously savouring this immutability through the tailored wizards of the concerned sphere.

In recent years, cinema in Assam and the North-East has received much attention at national film festivals. Active support from the state-run Assam Film Finance and Development Corporation has plans to establish a chain of halls for regular exhibition of films. Mobile Cinemas are also being encouraged by the exemption of entertainment taxes. In its golden jubilee year, the Assam State Film Corporation has built a hall - 'Aideo' at Jonaki

Complex in Guwahati's Panjabari area. The Assam State Film Corporation took up the construction of five new halls and the renovation of nine existing ones, and the 'Aideo' cinema hall is one of them. With 240 seats and a state-of-the-art Dolby sound system, this cinema hall is tailor-made for close gatherings.



The cinema of Assamese language was born in 1935 when Jyoti Prasad Agarwala released his movie 'Joymoti'. Since then, Assamese cinema has developed a slow-paced, sensitive style, especially with Bhabendra Nath Saikia and Jahnu Barua movies. However, despite its long history and artistic success,

for a state that has always taken its cinema seriously, Assamese cinema has hardly managed to make the breakthrough on the national scene despite its film industry making a mark in National Awards over the years. Although at the beginning of the 21st century, Bollywood-style Assamese movies hit the screen, the industry has been struggling hard to compete in the market, significantly overshadowed by larger industries such as Bollywood and the South.

Since the inception of the historical 'Joymoti', Assamese cinema has not stopped marching its victory flag with precious inclusions like *Indramalati*, *Monomati*, *Badan Barphukan*, *Siraj*, *Erabator Sur*, *Piyoli Phukan*, *Maniram Dewan*, *Pratidhwani* and so on. Most of these films depicted the country's freedom movement at large, with communal harmony and patriotism. But most of them, especially those exercising the theme of patriotism, were located in the timeline of history through the frame of a biopic. Individual heroism played a vital role in establishing the theme as an "issue" in a much broader societal canvas.

1. 1930s: The origins of Assamese cinema can be traced back to the dreams and imagination of a revolutionary visionary, Rup Konwar Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, who was also a distinguished poet, playwright, composer and freedom fighter. He was instrumental in producing the first Assamese Film, *Joymati*, in 1935 under the banner of Chitralekha Movietone. 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. 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 all the prints of '*Joymati*' are missing. Some effort has been made privately by Altaf Mazid to restore and subtitle whatever is left of the prints. Despite the significant financial loss from '*Joymati*', the second film '*Indramati*' was filmed between 1937 and 1938 and finally released in 1939.

2. 1940s: Remaining strong in the face of adversity, Agarwala made another film after a lapse of two years titled '*Indramalati*'. It was his second and

last film. The eminent composer and singer of Assam, Bhupen Hazarika, played a stellar role in the play. With the passing away of Jyotiprasad in the Assamese film scene, he witnessed a temporary lull for about a couple of years. But things changed with the onset of World War II. To take advantage of this, Rohini Kumar Baruah made a film on a relevant historical topic called '*Manomati*' in 1941. It was followed by films like Parvati Prasad Baruah's *Rupahi* (1941), Kamal Narayan Choudhury's '*Badan Barphukan*' (1947), Phani Sharma '*Siraj*' (1948), Asit Sen's '*Biplabi*' (1950), Prabin Phukan's '*Parghat*' (1949) and Suresh Goswami's '*Runumi*' (1952).

3. 1950s: The most remarkable film of the fifties was Piyoli Phukan, which went on to win a National Award. The movie was produced by eminent film producer Gama Prasad Agarwala under the aegis of Rup Jyoti Productions. The film was directed by Phani Sharma, and the music was composed by the young Bhupen Hazarika. The film depicted the life of the freedom fighter Piyoli Phukan, who stood against the British rule. The British executed him on charges of treason. Technically, the film was ahead of time. In 1955, a new talent, Nip Barua, made his directorial debut with *Smriti Paras*. His subsequent films '*Mak Aaru Moram*' and '*Ranga Police*' bagged multiple awards and the silver medal at the national level. Bhupen Hazarika also produced and directed his first film, '*Era Bator Sur*'. Prabhat Mukherjee made a film on motherhood - '*Puberun*' (1959), which was screened at The Berlin Film Festival.

4. 1960s: The next notable film production was *Lachit Barphukan* by Sarbeswar Chakraborty. Bhupen Hazarika made his unforgettable musical '*Shakuntala*' and proved equally successful by critics and the press, winning the President's medal. Following this, a chain of films went into regular production, including Nip Barua's *Narakasur*, Anil Choudhury's '*Matir Swarga*', Brojen Barua's '*Etu Situ Bahuto*' and Mukuta and Anwar Hussain's '*Tejimala*'. By the middle of the concerned temporal, film began to be produced in Assam on a regular basis. However, between 1970, a total of sixty-two films were made. The notable others engaged in filmmaking during the period were Pravin Sharma, Saila Barua, Abdul

Mazid, Amar Pathak, Indukalpa Hazarika, Dibon Barua, Amulya Manna, Gauri Barman, Atul Bardoloi, Sujit Singh, Nalin Duara and Prafulla Barua.

Militancy has become a pressing issue in Assam, first highlighted in Assamese cinema by the film *"Surjyo Tejor Onyo Naam,"* directed by Dinesh Gogoi in 1991. In 1997, renowned filmmaker Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia created *"Kalsandhya,"* which portrayed the turmoil and suffering caused by the rise of armed militancy in the state. The film's main character, Ranjit, is an educated but unemployed man who gets drawn into militancy, ultimately engaging in targeted killings in pursuit of a better future. Another significant portrayal of this issue is found in Sanjiv Sabhapandit's *"Jatinga Ityadi,"* released in 2007. This film tells the story of an armed militant group that kidnaps a British couple visiting Assam to find a family grave. Unable to communicate with them, the militants enlist a frustrated, educated local youth as a translator. This young man becomes an unexpected hero, revealing the true nature of the insurgents. *"Jatinga Ityadi"* was featured in the Indian panorama section at the International Film Festival of India in Goa in 2007. The famous film *"Dil Se,"* directed by Maniratnam, also used the backdrop of the Assam insurgency. The rise of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) has severely impacted daily life in the state through activities such as kidnappings, murders, extortion from officials, and intimidation of civilians under the guise of "regional patriotism," which has significantly disrupted Assam's social, political, and economic configuration.

A recent release - *'Mantur Montoh,'* marks the cinematic debut of Ramen Bora and is a narrative that eschews the use of loud, conventional terms related to terrorism. Set in a rural area of Assam, it portrays the aftermath of the state's deep-seated militancy during the 1990s. The film explores the emotional toll of terrorism's aftermath, the cycle of poverty it spawns, the mysterious insights of a young boy, and the global impact on him and those around him - all central to its theme. *'Mantur Mantoh'* is a poignant film that tells a story through the director's unique, quiet, and restrained approach to filmmaking rather

than the typical, consumerist portrayal of terrorism and poverty. It delves into the question of how much influence a young boy can have amidst his parents' relentless fight for survival and their efforts to reunite with his father, Arindam, who had once been a poet and a dreamer but later became a terrorist like many of his peers, and is now a former insurgent. The film also touches on how the child, at a young age, managed to keep his surroundings filled with the joy and innocence of his childhood, a sentiment that is conveyed powerfully through the film's silence.

Following its independence, Assam faced numerous socio-political upheavals, including the Assam movement, boundary disputes, China's invasion in 1962, and more. Even though the police narratives occasionally fall short of justifying these delicate social issues, it's important to note that filmmakers such as Jahnur Barua used the Assam movement as a backdrop for his well-known 1986 film *Papori*. Strong cinematic text is used in the film to establish the state of emergency, the imposition of the president's rule, and the All Assam Students' Union's 1979 agitation against the illegal entry of foreigners. *"Papori"* is a story about Papori, the female protagonist, and is set against the sociopolitical backdrop of the state agitation during the 1983 election. *"Papori"* narrates the experiences of its female protagonist, Papori, and her husband, Binod, a school teacher who becomes embroiled in a conspiracy leading to his wrongful arrest on murder charges. Despite the Police Inspector's awareness of the underlying truths surrounding rape and murder, he remains unresponsive, highlighting a profound sense of helplessness. The director of this film is notable for placing Assamese cinema on the global stage with his 1987 work, *"Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai,"* which addressed the exploitation of impoverished farmers, exemplified by the character Bora, a wealthy landlord manipulates. This farmer ultimately finds himself coerced into promoting the landlord's political agenda, illustrating the harsh realities of his existence. The film garnered the Silver Leopard award at the Locarno International Film Festival. Additionally, Bidyut Chakravarty's *"Dwaar"* (2012) and Bidyut Kotoky's *"Xhoixobote Dhemalite"* (2016) are recognized for their artistic

representation of this sensitive subject matter, effectively capturing a pivotal era in Assam's contemporary history during the 1980s. Director Hem Bora's film *'Sankalpa'* (1986) captures the intense socio-political upheaval during the peak of the Assam Movement. The film features Ramen Dutta and Afzal as student leaders, depicted in a way that transcends typical religious stereotypes. Similarly, Manju Bora's *'Aai Kot Nai'* (2008) and Jahnu Barua's *'Firingoti'* (1992) serve as powerful portrayals of the Assam-Nagaland border conflict and the 1962 Indo-China war, respectively.



The present scenario of cinema entails its history and evolution. In the years between 1903 and 1909, three illustrious sons of Assam- Pramathesh Chandra Barua, Jyoti Prasad Aharwala and Bishnu Prasad Rabha were born at Gauripur, Tezpur and Dhaka, respectively. The former would, in 1935, give the North East its first film - the iconic Joymoti with the vibrant, protean, a real thespian of Assam - Bishnu Prasad Rabha. P. C. Barua, in 1937, gave the third remake of the legendary Devdas and the first one to execute modern means such as montage,

besides rooted 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 an analogous 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.

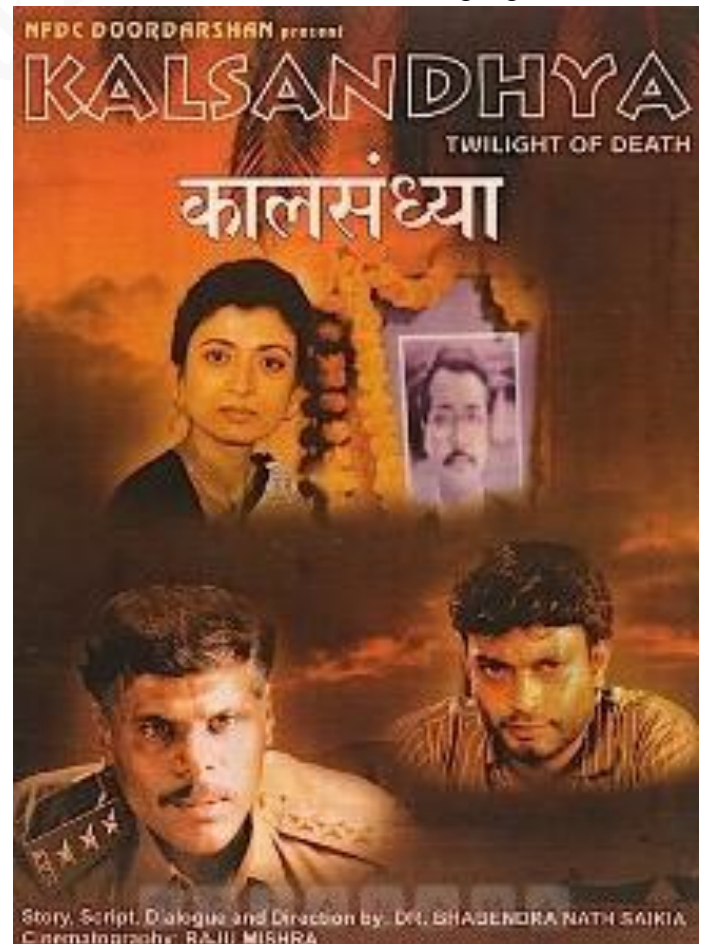
A major influence of European literature in the formation of modern Assamese literature and the cinematic genre of the state was an impervious part of the early 20th century. A powerful media like cinema is always influenced by its contemporary history and genre of literature. This impact entered Assam, refined through the Bengal Renaissance and other developments in some neighbouring states. Its unswerving character was the expansion of the 'jatra party', and the association of the pronounced thespians and organizers like Hemango 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 Bishnu Prashad Rabha. Rabha's degree of struggle was intense in all directions, as this was one of the most turbulent periods of Assam's political and socio-economic history. Rabha started collaborating with his preceptor, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, in filmmaking, music collection, playwriting, music experimentation and recording. This historical journey began when Rabha assisted Agarwala in making his first film, the first trailblazer, the first film ever in the history of the land of the 'Red River and Blue Hills' - Joymoti.

Senola Recording Co. invited them to Calcutta to record music for Joymoti. This was the beginning of Rabha's escapade with music recording. Rabha recorded musical plays written primarily for 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 of around 78 revolutions per minute is called a "78" by collectors. The materials the discs were made of and with which they were coated were also of various components; shellac eventually became the commonest material) known as Pala, traditional plays such as 'Ojhapali', traditional music such as 'Borgeet' and 'Bihu geet' including his own musical anatomy.

By the late 1930s, he was deeply influenced by communist literature, which started to communicate in parts of the Assam Province and began to voice the nationality of the peasants. By 1946, cultural organisations such as the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) began synchronising the cultural articulations of the peasants, workers and 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 for power. In 1951, after the untimely demise of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha became the President of the Assam branch of IPTA.

Looting, molestation, destruction of property and social disorder, mass migration, religious uproar and the Hindu and the Islamic divide were the actualities 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 Muslims on the basis of the story 'Siraj', written by Lakhidhar Sharma under the banner of Chitravali Pictures. Siraj was the first film of Assam made on the concept of national integration, a perfect example of communal harmony as portrayed and preached for ages. However, they can be regarded

as pseudo-truths, and there can be a hook somewhere. Did it aim at celebrating some private dogma? Or the social culture of the present generation or its business? But parallelly, as a model of those filmmaking skills, 'Siraj' was designed to be irresistible, particularly with the property of a musical note that goes endlessly. As Kamrup Chitra moved on, under the direction of Bhupen Hazarika, he told the folk tale of 'Manik Raitong' of Khasi, which enriched another iconic film 'Pratidhwani' in 1964. It was a beautiful depiction of the storyline that depicted the hills and plains perfectly fine. Bishnu Rabha has acted "Khasi Siyem (King)" in "Pratidhwani" in connection with the thematic strain maintaining the issue of communal integrity; royal sanction for sharing mutuality of brotherhood alongside love predicament of Manik Raitong & Lien Makao. His Mongolian physical build and his quiet and compelling screen presence made the 'Siyem' character cult-like. During the 12th National Film Festival of India held on 31.05.1965, 'Pratidhwani' was awarded the President's Silver Medal for the Best Feature Film in Assamese language.



Siraj's cinematographer 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 premiered on January 4, 1948, at Deepak Auditorium in Kolkata and was 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. Aggrandised with the pithy, impeccable direction and touching musical wizardry of Dr Bhupen Hazarika, the rich execution of 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 film's music reflect the emotional rise of the people of that era. These sensitive, socially

conscious artists of this cultural confederation were members of the 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 members has also been highlighted against the exploitative attitude of someone of a particular fraternity.

Nationalist revolts, mass migration, social turbulence, political jurgens, deaths, trials and punishments and the collective chaos born out of these temporal instabilities were the pivotal highlights of many written texts, and many of them were brought into the silver screen by many cine researchers who always considered cinema as a major tool of defining and re-shaping the societal chemistry beyond its generic, non - didactic ostensibility.

Acknowledgement:

Jyotiprasad Joymoti Indramalati and Beyond: History of Assamese Cinema by Parthajit Barua (2021, Publisher: Krantikal, Guwahati)

References:

1, 2, 3 & 4

<https://www.davuniversity.org/images/files/study-material/History%20of%20Indian%20Cinema.pdf>

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