Article

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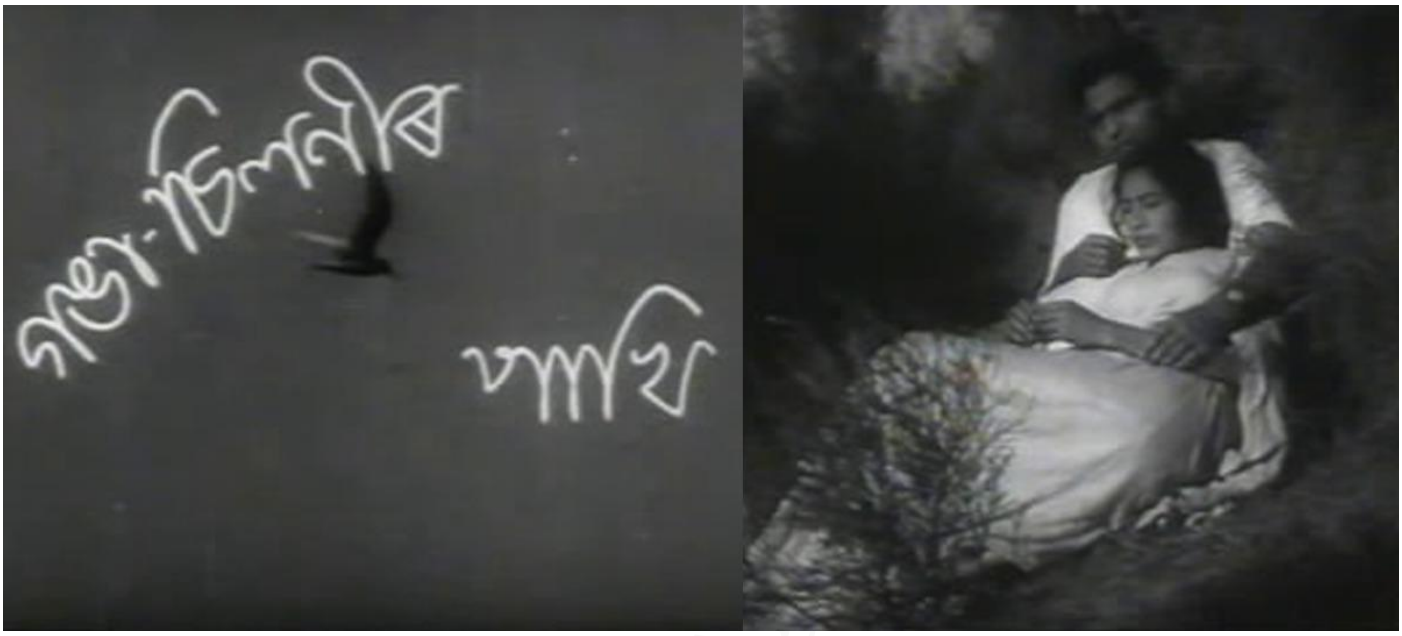
Celluloid Subversions: A Feminist Deconstruction of Subjectivity and Space in Assamese Cinema



Ganga Silonir Pankhi (1976)

Abstract

This paper follows the changing image of women in Assamese cinema from Joymoti (1935) to the independent films of the digital era. Instead of treating female representation as a simple story of progress, it asks a more difficult question: what kinds of womanhood have Assamese films made visible, and what kinds have they kept within the margins? A feminist reading of selected films—Joymoti (1935), Ganga Silonir Pankhi (1976), Sandhyarag (1977), Agnisnan (1985), Firingoti (1992), Village Rockstars (2017), and Bulbul Can Sing (2018)—shows a gradual movement from the idealised woman who proves her worth through sacrifice to women and girls who increasingly claim desire, mobility, work, friendship, and self-definition. The paper uses ideas associated with Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, and Teresa de Lauretis to examine not only characters but also the ways camera, narrative, and cinematic space organise gender. The argument is not that patriarchy disappears from recent Assamese cinema. Rather, the terms of representation change: silence can become a sign of constraint rather than virtue, public space can become a site of female action, and ordinary experiences can become worthy of cinematic attention. Across these films, the female subject gradually moves from being a symbol through which family or community values are expressed to becoming a person whose inner life, choices, contradictions, and aspirations matter in their own right.

1. Introduction: Gendered Lives and the Assamese Screen

Cinema does not merely hold a mirror to society. It selects, arranges, and gives emotional weight to particular experiences. What a film allows a character to say, where it allows her to move, how the camera looks at her, and whose point of view guides the audience can all shape our understanding of gender. Assamese cinema is especially useful for examining these questions because women have occupied an important place in its cultural imagination from its earliest years. Yet visibility should not automatically be mistaken for freedom. A woman may stand at the centre of a film and still be asked to carry the moral expectations of an entire community.

This tension is already visible in Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's Joymoti (1935), generally recognised as the foundational feature of Assamese cinema. Joymoti places a woman in the middle of a political and historical conflict and makes her courage essential to the survival of a larger political order. Minakshi Dutta's discussion of the film is useful here because it draws attention to the symbolic importance attached to women in Assamese cultural narratives (Dutta, "A Reading" 253). Joymoti is therefore both an important moment of female visibility and an early example of how women's value can be tied to sacrifice.

The idea of Assamese society as comparatively egalitarian can sometimes hide the quieter forms through which patriarchy operates. The absence of practices such as sati or dowry has often encouraged a sense of regional exceptionalism, but cultural expectations concerning obedience, modesty, endurance, marriage, and family responsibility can still regulate women's lives (Dutta, "A Reading" 251–53). The ideal of the patient woman who speaks little—described through qualities such as sahansila and alpa-bhasini—has been influential in literary and cinematic representations. Such qualities can certainly be read as strength, but they can also make suffering appear natural and self-denial appear virtuous.

From the 1970s onward, Assamese filmmakers increasingly turned towards realism and social observation. Padum Barua, Bhabendra Nath Saikia, and Jahnu Barua brought domestic labour, class, widowhood, education, institutional neglect, and unequal power relations into sharper focus. Their women are not always openly rebellious, but the films ask viewers to notice the structures that make certain choices difficult or

impossible. In the work of Rima Das, this movement develops in another direction. Girls and young women are shown moving through ordinary landscapes, friendships, anxieties, desires, and ambitions. Their lives do not have to become heroic in order to become significant.

This study therefore traces a historical change in representation while remaining attentive to continuities. It considers narrative, visual style, silence, bodily autonomy, and cinematic space alongside characterisation. The central claim is that Assamese cinema has gradually widened the meaning of female agency. The change is visible not simply in what women do, but in the shift from asking what a woman symbolises to asking what she experiences.

2. Theoretical Framework: Gaze, Gender Performance, and Counter-Cinema

A feminist reading of cinema must look beyond the presence of female characters. It must also ask how images are constructed and how viewers are positioned in relation to those images. Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze remains important for this purpose. Mulvey argues that conventional cinema can organise looking around a masculine subject who acts and a feminine figure who is made available to be seen. Even where Assamese films do not rely heavily on the sexualised imagery associated with commercial cinema, a comparable form of control can operate symbolically: women may be displayed as embodiments of family honour, tradition, sacrifice, or community morality (Choudhury).

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity provides a second useful perspective. Gender, in this account, is not simply an inner essence that individuals possess. It is repeatedly produced through acts, habits, gestures, speech, dress, and social expectations. Family, school, religion, and media all participate in teaching people what is considered properly masculine or feminine. Assamese cinema has often rewarded women who are obedient, restrained, dutiful, and self-sacrificing, while characters who disturb these expectations can be marked as difficult or transgressive ("Gender And Assamese Cinema"). Reading later films through Butler makes it possible to see moments when characters refuse, alter, or negotiate these prescribed performances.

Teresa de Lauretis extends the discussion by treating gender as something produced through cultural technologies. Cinema is one such technology: it does not simply record identities that already exist but participates in teaching audiences how gender can be imagined. This is why placing a woman at the centre of a story is not, by itself, a feminist act. The narrative structure and visual language must also make room for forms of subjectivity that do not depend on patriarchal approval.

The idea of feminist counter-cinema is helpful here. Counter-cinema questions familiar storytelling conventions and makes room for ambiguity, interiority, everyday labour, and experiences that conventional narratives may overlook. Long takes, naturalistic performances, location shooting, ambient sound, open-ended narratives, and attention to ordinary movement can shift the viewer away from spectacle and towards lived experience. The realist and independent traditions in Assamese cinema provide

important examples of this possibility. The films examined below do not all qualify as counter-cinema in a strict theoretical sense, but many of them interrupt conventional ways of seeing women and thereby create room for alternative readings of gender.

3. The Foundational Figure: Joymoti (1935)

Any feminist history of Assamese cinema has to begin with Joymoti. The film's importance is historical as well as representational: it inaugurated feature filmmaking in Assamese and placed a woman at the heart of a political narrative. Based on Joymoti Kunwari, the wife of Godapani during a troubled period of Ahom history, the story centres on her refusal to reveal her husband's whereabouts even when she is tortured. Her death makes her sacrifice the moral centre of the narrative (Dutta, "A Reading" 253).

There is an important feminist contradiction in this construction. Joymoti is not passive. Her decision has political consequences, and the film gives her a role in shaping history. At a time when women were often positioned around male protagonists, this was a powerful intervention. Her courage demonstrates that political agency cannot be understood as exclusively masculine.

At the same time, the form that her agency takes is closely tied to suffering. Joymoti's virtue is expressed through restraint and silence; Agarwala's description of her as alpa-bhasini, a woman of few words, reinforces this cultural ideal (qtd. in Dutta, "A Reading" 253). The film therefore gives a woman enormous symbolic importance while asking her to prove that importance through self-denial. Her own desires do not become the central question. What matters is what she is willing to endure for husband, kingdom, and collective honour.

This tension became influential. Silence, patience, and endurance could thereafter be read as signs of ideal womanhood. The visual treatment of Joymoti contributes to this process: dignity and composure are foregrounded, and suffering is transformed into something noble. The audience admires her ability to withstand pain, but this can also make the structures that demand such suffering less visible.

Joymoti should therefore neither be dismissed as simply patriarchal nor celebrated as straightforwardly emancipatory. Its historical achievement is real, but so is its limitation. It creates an enduring female political figure while tying feminine heroism to sacrifice. Later Assamese cinema repeatedly returns to this contradiction, sometimes reinforcing it and sometimes trying to break it apart.

4. From Symbol to Social Person: Ganga Silonir Pankhi (1976)

Padum Barua's Ganga Silonir Pankhi marks a major change in the cinematic treatment of women's everyday lives.

Influenced by realist traditions and the Indian New Wave, the film turns away from idealised rural imagery and observes the social conditions in which ordinary people live ("Gender And Assamese Cinema"). Basanti's story is especially important because the film makes her lack of choice visible without turning her suffering into a romantic virtue.

Basanti has an emotional attachment to Bhogman, but economic circumstances overwhelm her personal wishes. She is married to an older, wealthier landlord because the arrangement offers security to her family. Marriage therefore appears less as the fulfilment of romantic desire than as an economic decision in which Basanti has limited control. Her later widowhood makes these restrictions even more pronounced. Society begins to define her through rules concerning sexuality, respectability, and behaviour.

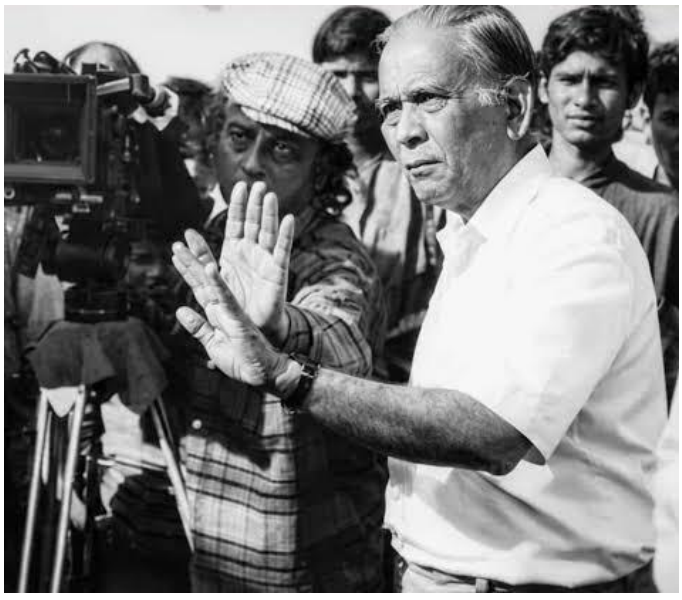
The film's visual language reinforces this sense of enclosure. Windows, doorways, partitions, and domestic boundaries repeatedly place Basanti within spaces that feel physically and psychologically restrictive. The restrained use of dialogue and the realist aesthetic prevent her suffering from becoming conventional melodrama. Instead, viewers are encouraged to consider why she has so little room to act.

Silence also changes meaning here. In Joymoti, silence is heroic because it is chosen as an act of political loyalty. Basanti's silence is more painful: it often points to circumstances in which speech would not materially change her position. The difference is crucial. The film begins to separate endurance from empowerment and asks the viewer to recognise the social conditions behind female suffering.

The village itself is not presented as a naturally harmonious community. It is a place of observation and judgement, where custom and collective opinion can regulate individual behaviour. Patriarchal power therefore does not depend only on a single authoritarian man. It is reproduced through everyday expectations and community surveillance. Basanti's story does not end in a triumphant liberation, and that refusal of an easy resolution is one of the film's strengths. Its achievement lies in making structural inequality visible.

Ganga Silonir Pankhi thus stands between two modes of representation. It moves away from the symbolic woman of Joymoti without yet offering the fully articulated individual subject that becomes more common in later cinema. Basanti is still constrained, but the film makes the constraint itself its object of criticism.

5. Bhabendra Nath Saikia: Class, Desire, and Patriarchal Authority



Bhabendra Nath Saikia deepened this shift by bringing psychological complexity to

Assamese cinema. His films are attentive to the gap between respectable social appearances and the private desires that those appearances conceal. From a feminist perspective, this makes his work particularly significant: women are not simply good victims or bad rebels. They are people trying to make choices within structures that can be both intimate and coercive.

5.1 Sandhyarag (1977): Gender and Class

Sandhyarag follows sisters Charu and Taru, who leave their poor rural home to work in the household of a wealthy urban family. The move initially exposes them to comforts and possibilities unavailable in their village, but it does not remove the inequality between them and the family they serve. They remain economically dependent and their labour sustains the comfort of others.

Their later return to the village becomes an experience of displacement. They have changed through their years in the city, yet they do not possess the social position required to belong to the urban world they have encountered. The village that should represent home is no longer fully familiar either. Saikia's use of space captures this uncertainty: distance, wide framing, and the contrast between locations make their emotional dislocation visible ("Portrayal of Muliebrity").

The sisters' situation also demonstrates why gender cannot be separated from class. Their vulnerability is shaped by being women, but it is intensified by poverty and dependence. The appearance of care or paternal protection does not necessarily provide autonomy. The film therefore suggests that meaningful liberation cannot be reduced to individual kindness; the material conditions governing women's work and mobility must also change.

5.2 Agnisnan (1985): The Body as a Site of Resistance

Agnisnan takes the question of female agency into the intimate territory of marriage, sexuality, inheritance, and bodily control. Menoka is initially presented as the dutiful wife expected by a patriarchal household. She manages domestic responsibilities and remains loyal to her husband, Mohikant. Yet he exercises the privilege of taking a younger wife, Kiran, without being subjected to the same moral judgement imposed on women.

Menoka's response is unsettling precisely because it refuses the familiar role of the silently suffering wife. Her consensual relationship outside marriage and subsequent

pregnancy challenge the assumptions through which her husband's authority is maintained. In the film's logic, control of female sexuality is not a private matter alone; it is connected to lineage, inheritance, family honour, and male power. Menoka's decision therefore becomes a challenge to the system itself (Dutta, "A Reading" 262).

The film's feminist force lies in its treatment of her action as intentional rather than merely immoral. The confrontation with Mohikant exposes a double standard: male desire is normalised while female desire is treated as a violation. The title Agnisnan recalls the trial by fire associated with Sita, but Saikia reverses the familiar moral logic. Menoka's ordeal becomes a movement towards self-definition rather than a test designed to restore patriarchal purity (Dutta, "A Reading" 265).

Taken together, Sandhyarag and Agnisnan broaden the range of female subjectivity in Assamese cinema. The first reveals how class and gender reinforce each other; the second attacks the idea that a woman's body should remain under male authority. Saikia's women are still shaped by their circumstances, but they are no longer defined entirely by what those circumstances demand of them.

6. Jahnu Barua's Firingoti (1992): Women in Public and Institutional Space

Jahnu Barua extends the feminist discussion from household and feudal structures to education, bureaucracy, and public life. Firingoti places Ritu, a young widow, in a remote village where she has accepted a teaching position during the period surrounding the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Her decision to work publicly is significant because widowhood has often been associated with withdrawal and reduced social visibility.

When Ritu arrives, she discovers that the school exists largely on paper. The physical infrastructure has been neglected and administrative promises have not translated into a functioning institution. Instead of treating this failure as an unavoidable fact, she begins teaching children under a tree. Her action is modest, but its social consequences grow as she persuades families to value education and builds a learning community.

Ritu's agency differs sharply from the sacrificial model established by Joymoti. Her authority comes from knowledge, professional work, persistence, and community involvement. She is not valuable because she suffers for others; she becomes influential because she acts with and for the community. The film repeatedly places her in open and shared spaces, allowing her to occupy the public sphere rather than confining her to domestic interiors.

Education is consequently more than a theme. It becomes a practical means of changing power relations. Literacy gives children, including girls, access to possibilities that social exclusion might

otherwise close off. Yet the film avoids presenting social change as effortless. Local elites and bureaucratic authorities resist Ritu's work, showing that institutional systems can reproduce inequality even when they are officially designed to serve the public.

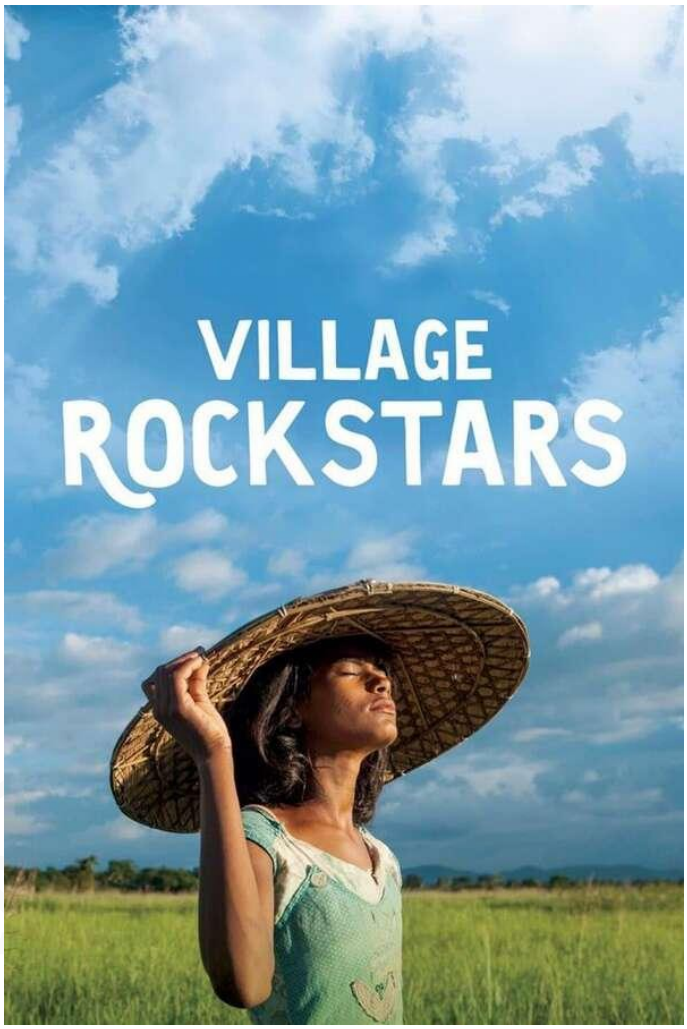
The title's image of a spark is apt. Ritu's intervention begins on a small scale, but it demonstrates how individual action can initiate collective change. Firingoti represents a significant development in the feminist trajectory of Assamese cinema because it locates women's agency in public work, intellectual labour, and social leadership.

7. Rima Das and the Independent Turn

The independent cinema associated with Rima Das introduces a different register of female representation. Her films often feel close to lived experience because they use natural locations, non-professional performers, modest production methods, and an intimate camera style (Deka 396). Das's approach is important not simply because she makes films about girls and women, but because she gives ordinary experiences enough narrative space to matter. The female subject does not need to stand for an entire culture before her life becomes worthy of attention.

7.1 Village Rockstars (2017): Girlhood and the Freedom of Movement

Village Rockstars follows Dhunu, a young girl living in a flood-prone rural community whose dream is to own a guitar and create a rock band. Her ambition is deliberately ordinary and ambitious at the same time. She wants something for herself, and that desire is enough to place her in conflict with expectations about what a rural girl should be.



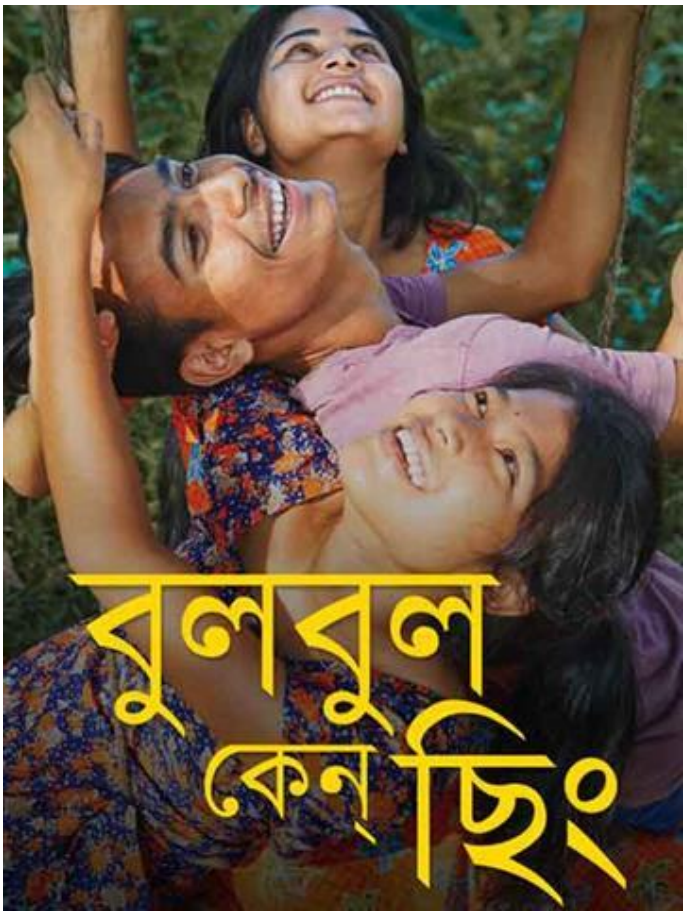
Dhunu moves through fields, rivers, trees, and village paths with an ease that is striking when compared with earlier cinematic images of women enclosed by domestic space. The landscape is not simply scenery. It becomes a field of experimentation in which she can climb, swim, play, imagine, and build friendships. Das's handheld camera follows her rather than turning her into a distant object of observation. Natural light and ambient sound strengthen the sense that viewers are entering her world rather than merely looking at her (Das, "Platform-Mag").

Menstruation becomes a turning point because it brings a new set of rules. The girl who previously moved freely is suddenly expected to behave according to more

restrictive ideas of femininity and modesty. This is a clear example of gender being socially performed and regulated. Yet the film does not treat maturity as the inevitable end of freedom. Dhunu's mother supports her ambitions despite her own economic difficulties, creating a meaningful form of female solidarity.

Village Rockstars therefore presents empowerment without requiring a dramatic rebellion. Dhunu's freedom lies in her continuing to imagine a future for herself. Her desire for music, movement, friendship, and exploration challenges the assumption that rural girlhood must be defined by restriction.

7.2 Bulbul Can Sing (2018): Desire, Surveillance, and Belonging



Bulbul Can Sing moves from childhood into adolescence, where questions of sexuality, identity, and social judgement become sharper. Bulbul, Bonny, and Suman form a close friendship, but each encounters pressure to conform. Bulbul's interactions and emotional life become subject to community scrutiny, while Suman is mocked because his behaviour does not fit narrow expectations of masculinity.

The episode involving Bulbul and Bonny's encounter with their romantic partners reveals how moral policing works. A group of young men assumes the authority to regulate their behaviour, humiliating and violently confronting them ("Gender And Assamese Cinema"). The significance of the episode lies not only in the violence itself but in the atmosphere of surveillance surrounding it. Fear and shame become tools through which the community disciplines young people.

Das spends time with the emotional consequences rather than turning the incident into spectacle. Long takes, pauses, and understated performances allow grief and trauma to remain unresolved and palpable (Das, "Inside Every Woman"). This attention to aftermath is important because it restores psychological depth to characters who could otherwise be reduced to victims of a social problem.

Suman's story also expands the film's feminist field. His gender non-conformity exposes the same rigid social logic from another direction. His friendship with Bulbul suggests that resistance to patriarchal norms is not limited to women alone. Those who fail to fit prescribed forms of masculinity and femininity can experience different but connected forms of exclusion.

The final image of Bulbul singing in an open landscape carries particular force. Her

voice becomes a small but clear refusal to remain defined by shame. Singing does not erase what has happened to her, but it allows her to reclaim a form of expression. The gesture connects voice with survival and selfhood, making the ending less a declaration of victory than an assertion that she still possesses a voice.

Together, Village Rockstars and Bulbul Can Sing mark a significant departure from representations built primarily around duty and sacrifice. Their protagonists are not monumental heroines. They are young people learning how to live, desire, fail, dream, and negotiate social expectations. This ordinariness is itself politically meaningful because it treats female experience as valuable without requiring idealisation.

8. Comparative Evaluation: From Sacrifice to Selfhood

Viewed across nearly a century, the selected films reveal several connected changes in Assamese cinema. The first concerns silence. In Joymoti, silence is celebrated as courage and moral discipline. In Ganga Silonir Pankhi and Sandhyarag, silence increasingly suggests limited choice. In the films of Rima Das, expression becomes central: Dhunu pursues music and Bulbul finally sings. The change is not simply from silence to speech; it is a change in the value assigned to female voice.

The second change concerns space. Joymoti's historical world turns female suffering into a test of virtue. In Ganga Silonir Pankhi, domestic and village spaces reveal social control. Sandhyarag uses both the urban household and the rural village to show economic and emotional displacement. Agnisnan turns the feudal household into a map of patriarchal authority. Firingoti then moves a woman into the public sphere of education. Finally, Rima Das opens up rivers, fields, forests, and village roads as spaces in which girls can move, experiment, and imagine.

Agency also changes meaning. Joymoti's agency is real but inseparable from sacrifice. Menoka's agency takes the form of a direct challenge to sexual and patriarchal double standards. Ritu exercises authority through education and public work. Dhunu and Bulbul represent an even more personal form of agency: the right to have dreams, friendships, desires, and a voice that does not need to justify itself through service to family or nation.

The camera changes along with these representations. Earlier films often frame women with an emphasis on dignity, composure, and symbolic significance. Realist cinema introduces closer attention to psychological experience and social environment. Saikia's films make interior conflict important, while Rima Das's mobile, intimate camera often travels with her characters. The effect is subtle but important: women increasingly cease to appear as figures being displayed for judgement and become people whose experiences structure the film's point of view.

These developments should not be turned into a simple story of progress. Patriarchy remains present in contemporary cinema, although its forms may be less obvious. Moral policing, economic dependence, unequal institutions, and restrictions on mobility continue to shape the lives represented on screen. What changes is

the willingness to expose these structures and to imagine identities that do not fit comfortably within them.

The broadest shift, then, is from symbolic representation towards lived experience. Earlier cinema often asks what a woman represents—honour, loyalty, sacrifice, tradition. Later cinema increasingly asks what it feels like to be her: to work, desire, lose, learn, move, resist, make mistakes, or dream. That change in the question itself is one of the most important developments in Assamese feminist cinema.

9. Conclusion: Reclaiming Voice, Space, and Subjectivity

The history examined here suggests that Assamese cinema has gradually changed the terms on which women become visible. Joymoti established an extraordinarily powerful female figure, but her heroism was inseparable from sacrifice. Later realist filmmakers shifted attention towards the social conditions behind women's suffering. Bhabendra Nath Saikia complicated the picture further by exploring class, desire, marriage, sexuality, and the contradictions between social respectability and private life. Jahnu Barua moved female agency into public and institutional space through Ritu's commitment to education. Rima Das then brought the camera even closer to the everyday worlds of girls and young women, where freedom can be expressed through movement, friendship, creativity, and the simple insistence on having a life of one's own.

The theoretical perspectives of Mulvey, Butler, and de Lauretis help make sense of this transformation. Mulvey directs attention to the politics of looking and the ways women can be positioned as objects of observation. Butler helps explain how femininity is repeatedly produced through social expectations and everyday behaviour. De Lauretis reminds us that cinema is not merely a record of gender relations; it participates in producing the meanings through which those relations are understood. Read together, these ideas show why changes in cinematic form matter as much as changes in plot.

The movement from static, symbolic compositions towards realist and immersive forms is therefore more than an aesthetic development. It reflects a changing understanding of who deserves narrative attention. Women increasingly occupy the centre not because they represent an ideal community, but because their experiences are treated as meaningful in themselves. Cinematic space also changes accordingly. Places once associated with confinement can become places of negotiation, while open landscapes become spaces of possibility.

Still, the story is unfinished. Recent Assamese cinema does not present a world free from gendered violence, surveillance, unequal power, or social judgement. Its importance lies elsewhere: in its willingness to make these pressures visible and in its refusal to assume that women must accept them as natural. The most significant change may therefore be the move from celebrating a woman's ability to endure towards recognising her right to speak, choose, desire, and define herself.

From Joymoti's silence to Bulbul's song, Assamese cinema traces a long and uneven movement towards female self-

expression. The journey is neither linear nor complete, but it has expanded the screen's understanding of womanhood. Women are no longer required to function only as guardians of culture or symbols of virtue. They can be workers, teachers, daughters, mothers, friends, adolescents, dreamers, dissenters, and complicated individuals. In that sense, the feminist transformation of Assamese cinema is ultimately a transformation of subjectivity: the woman on screen increasingly becomes someone who can look back, speak for herself, occupy space, and imagine a future on her own terms.

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