

Chapter 2

Recasting Feminine Identity in Assamese Cinema: *Joymoti*

Rinku Pegu

Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

Rarely would an auteur choose a female protagonist as the lead character for one's debut film. In 1935, Jyoti Prasad Agarwal chose a historical figure of Ahom princess Joymoti as the central character for the first Assamese film. Was it enough to portray an Ahom princess as the lead character, or was it lending the historical figure a new perspective? During the stated period in Assam, the cult of Joymoti had gathered momentum. In this discourse, much emphasis was given on Joymoti sacrificing her life rather than revealing the whereabouts of her husband Prince Gadapani to the state authorities. This chapter seeks to explore how the social status of women was addressed and tackled in the film.

INTRODUCTION

In the hands of a capable artist, Joymoti's narrative would have glittered in gold without straying from historical facts, while making her character shine simultaneously. Unfortunately, in several forums truth has become a casualty at the altar of nationalism (Bordoloi, 1935).

This criticism aimed at Jyoti Prasad Agarwala for directing and producing *Joymoti* the first Assamese film in 1935, based on the life of seventeenth-century Ahom princess. The Assamese litterateur, Rajani Kanta Bordoloi accused Jyoti Prasad of betraying history in opting to project the accessible version of *Joymoti* on celluloid. Rajani Kanta Bordoloi who completed his higher education at Calcutta, served in the administration while engaging in literary activities. By this time he had several short stories and poetry to his credit.

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According to Bordoloi, the old version as established by Harakanta Barua's *Assam Buranji* blames the Chowdangs for *Joymoti's* death after torturing her for a whole day to elicit information about her husband Prince Gadapani whereabouts. As opposed to the accessible version of *Joymoti's* representation, which hinged on extending the torture period to a full fortnight under the public gaze. The handwritten *Assam Buranji* by Harakanta Barua who retired as Sadr Amin became the first publication of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in 1930. The Chowdangs were the designated official executioners of the Ahom monarchy.

The latter turning an impromptu decision of the showings into a public spectacle. The completion of the first feature film in Assamese *Joymoti* in 1935 apart from its cinematic value generated a lot of excitement and debate on both ends of the spectrum. This incident has highlighted because it drew into its vortex a cross-section of the upper caste Assamese intelligentsia, who were preoccupied with crafting a collective Assamiya identity. In this sense, I shall be approaching this paper by dwelling on the circumstances in which the life of seventeenth-century Ahom princess chosen as a subject for the first Assamese film and the tropes on which the discourse about the movie panned out.

JOYMOTI: THE FIRST ASSAMESE TALKIE

Nothing would deter Jyoti Prasad from the object of producing the first Assamese film, not merely directing but engaging in every other creative aspect of film making from scripting, penning lyrics, composing music to training the actors male and female. Indeed to embark on the filmmaking project, Jyoti Prasad had first to establish a production house by the title Chitralkha Movietone. *Joymoti* was made at the cost of rupees fifty thousand and as a consequence had incurred a loss of twenty-eight thousand. Intending to give an authentic experience about Assam, Jyoti Prasad went to great lengths leaving no aspect unattended. Right from the architecture of the Ahom monarchy, to their attire, gait and lifestyle all were researched through books, documents and consultation with domain experts by the auteur himself.

The craft of film making for Jyoti Prasad was not merely a medium to dabble with and tell a story. It was a project attached with showcasing the distinct nature of Assamese arts and culture as well as to serve as a tool for archiving Assamese uniqueness for posterity. In doing so, Jyoti Prasad felt that film making through *Joymoti* was a cultural project of Assamese identity and sub-nationalism.

Popular Vs. Authentic

The simplified representation of the Ahom princess, *Joymoti* was contested from a historic position. In a 1930 publication, *Assam Burnaji* (History of Assam) brought out under the aegis of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) Bordoloi's core argument was that contrary to popular currency princess *Joymoti* was not tortured for a fortnight at the behest of an upstart king to forcefully reveal the whereabouts of her husband Prince Gadapani, heir to the throne of Ahom kingdom. Accordingly, death meted out to *Joymoti* within a day of being tortured for refusing to divulge anything (Bhuyan, 1930).

The argument for accepting the book version as accurate was due to its 'rationality'. Bordoloi questioned as to how could *Joymoti*, scion of one of the seven ruling families of Ahom royalty face torture for a whole fortnight without any element of protest within the powerful? The possibility of such an incident not only seemed remote but jarring too, given that *Joymoti's* father formed one of the triumvirates of powerful ministers in the Ahom administration of Assam. Ahom dynasties claim to fame rested

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