

Chapter 9

Patriarchy in Assamese Cinema: An Analysis of Bhabendra Nath Saikia and Jahnu Barua's Films

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ABSTRACT

Cinema is said to be one of the most important and influential social institutions of our time. The Indian film industry, for instance, is the biggest in the world, churning out dozens of films belonging to different genres every year. A good movie is always characterised by a well-written script, right direction, brilliant acting, and use of mind-blowing visual effects whenever necessary. Very often, the protagonist of the films would be essayed by a male artist while the woman would play second fiddle. However, times are changing and women have come to occupy an important place as far as the depictions of such issues are concerned. In this chapter, the study concentrates on the portrayal of women in some of the prominent films of two prolific filmmakers of Assam: Dr Bhabendranath Saikia and Mr Jahnu Barua. Both these filmmakers' cinematic oeuvres portray the plight of women functioning within various incarnations of patriarchy in different historical temporalities.

INTRODUCTION

The world of cinema has come to occupy an essential place in our day to day life. The key to unlocking the meaning of cinema lies in a better understanding of culture and philosophy of life. Indian cinema is renowned the world over not only because of its colourful song and dances but also the intricate storytelling techniques. Regional cinema has contributed immensely towards the growth and development of Indian cinema, including mainstream Hindi cinema (Roy, 2016; Sahoo & Purkayastha, 2019). Assamese films have of late, managed to capture the imagination of film aficionados across the length and breadth of the country. A prime example, in this case, is the much loved and appreciated *Village Rockstars* which created ripples in not only the land but also the world over. So much so that the movie bagged the 'Best Artistic Contribution from the International's Critic's Week Competition' at the Cairo

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International Film Festival, 2017 and was also India's official entry to Oscars this year(though it fell short of the top 9 nominated films). Thus, Assamese cinema has come a long way since the very first film *Joymoti* produced way back in 1935. The portrayal of women in cinema is something that has been a matter of considerable debate in recent times.

Filmmakers, especially women directors, have tried to portray the fairer sex in a countless number of roles. However, the fact of the matter remains that the men continue to rule the roost on the screen while the women are relegated to small and mediocre roles (except a few films). This particular chapter will mainly concentrate on the portrayal of women in the movie of Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia and Jahnu Barua, two of the prolific filmmakers of Assam (Dissanayake & Gokulsing, 2004).

GENESIS OF THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN INDIAN FILMS

Cinema is said to be one of the most important and influential social institutions of our time. It has grown to be a standard reference point for most kinds of discourses or discussions(Dyer, Hill & Gibson, 2000). The Indian film industry, for instance, is the biggest in the world churning out dozens of films belonging to different genres every year. Apart from the mainstream Hindi movies, regional cinema is also doing a flourishing business with many of the art films grabbing numerous International awards at various film festivals across the globe. Some of the prominent regional film industries include those of Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi and Assamese film industry. A good film is always characterised by a well-written script, right direction, brilliant acting and use of mind-blowing visual effects whenever necessary. People are always looking for stories that would pull at their heart-strings, stories that would bring a social-cultural change in society and focus more on socially relevant issues. Very often, the protagonist of the films would be essayed by a male while the woman would play second fiddle. However, times are changing, and women have come to occupy an important place as far as depiction of such issues is concerned (Thoraval, 2000).

Alam Ara (1931) did have a more significant role for a female. *Achyutkanya* (1936) challenged the constraints of casteism while highlighting individual desire. Interestingly the film throws light on the love affair between a Dalit woman(Played by Devika Rani)and that of a Brahmin hero (played by Ashok Kumar). And who can forget the iconic scene in *Mother India* (1957) when Nargis shoots her son to save Radha(a character) from being kidnapped by him. All these show women in path-breaking roles that might have been impossible to foresee in the early and late 30s. Nevertheless, women have always looked as mere objects, and their characters have reprised to show them as a traditional Indian woman whose role confined with the four walls of the house.

The complex and fascinating relationship between women and cinema has been an area of study and debate for an extended period. Women have always played second fiddle to men, and that is how they have been represented on screen too. This perception soon changed with the emergence of a new breed of filmmakers that mainly focused on art cinema. If one moves over to West Bengal; we have Satyajit Ray who is well known for two of the essential women-centric films – *Aparajito* (1956) and *Devi* (1960). *Aparajito* is the second film in the Apu Trilogy which captures the nuances of a mother-son relationship. There are certain moments in the movie that are communicated by way of glances which accentuates the beauty of communication. *Devi* talks about how a young girl is worshipped and made to feel like she is the reincarnation of the Hindu Goddess of destruction, Kali. In both the films, the presence of the mother is depicted who despite being marginalised is yet the controlling presence in the society. In fact,

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