

## The world of Assamese celluloid: 'yesterday and today'

Violet Barman Deka, Delhi University, violetbarman04@gmail.com

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### Abstract

The study explores the entire journey of the Assamese cinema, which means a journey that will narrate many stories from its past and present, furthermore also will try to analyze its future potential. This paper deals with the trends emerging in genres, technical advancement, and visual representation along with a cult that emphasized the commercial success of cinema by toeing the style of Bollywood and world cinema. It explores the new journey of Assamese cinema, which deals with small budgets, realistic approaches, and portraying stories from the native lanes. It also touches upon the phase of 'freeze' that the Assamese cinema industry was undergoing due to global pandemic Covid-19.

**Keywords:** Assamese cinema; Regional cinema; Jyotiprasad Agarwala; Regional filmmaker; Covid-19; OTT platform



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## The world of Assamese celluloid: 'yesterday and today'

Voilet Barman Deka

### Introduction

Is there any transformation in the craft of Assamese cinema or it is the same as it was in its beginning phase? Being a regional cinema industry, has the Assamese cinema been able to make its space in the creative catalog of Indian and world cinema? Is there anything radical that it has contributed towards the current and the next generation who is accepting and appreciating experimental cinema? This paper aims to explore the elongated journey of the Assamese cinema, a journey that will narrate many stories from its past and present as well analyze its future potential. It will also have an insight in illustrating how the cinema industry of Assam has faced privation, but still is endeavoring its best to rise like a phoenix by adapting renewed technologies and a vision to live another cycle. It endeavors to provide a gist of the current scenario of the Assamese cinema: the new journey dealing with smaller budgets, a more realistic approach, and portraying stories from the native lanes.

As expressed by Stanley Kubrick, *One man writes a novel. One man writes a symphony. It is essential for one man to make a film.* Cinema entertains, but at the same time they also address, represent, and communicate with its audience: cinema has become multi-layered. A cinema influence, express, aspires, and also builds a perception of a community, society, and a country. It is a powerful influencer and a reflector for humanity. Talking about the regional cinema, most of the regional filmmaker knows the relation between their soil and the seeds, their 'man' and the 'air'. They have experienced the smallest to the greatest moments portrayed in the celluloid, from simple stories of earning daily wages to dreaming big: everything portrayed undiluted. So is the approach of Assamese filmmakers. Assam

comprises some of the small developing towns and humble villages. The growth of Assamese cinema is gradual as compared to the other mainstream cinema industry in the country.

It is an endeavor to root out the cause and effect of unpredictable yet the popularity of Assamese cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where top-notch technologies and equipment can be used for quality management. It is a rare occasion for the Assamese cinema that its indigenous narrative has made its entry in the podium of magnificent Oscar. The year 2018 created history with the nomination of the *Village Rockstar* by Rima Das in the Oscar. Blandford and others advocate “... three criteria any director must meet to be an auteur: technical competence, personal style, and interior meaning” (Blandford, 2000:17). Considering Blandford’s criteria, it shall not be wrong to address Rima Das as an auteur. *Village Rockstar* represents not only the essential, experimental approach of the Assamese ‘another’ new wave cinema, but also it has become a torchbearer for several projects of avant-garde filmmakers. However, Assamese cinema has rarely managed to make the breakthrough on the national screen of the multiplexes regardless of its cinema’s making its presence in the National Awards over the years. The journey of National Award for Assamese cinema began with Nip Barua’s *Ronga Police* (1958) in the 6<sup>th</sup> National Film Awards.

But it does not mean that the craft of weaving narratives in the celluloid is a secondary means of communication in Assam as a regional cinema. Storytellers like Bhabendra Nath Saikia<sup>1</sup> (20<sup>th</sup> February 1932-13<sup>th</sup> August 2003), Jahnu Barua<sup>2</sup> (born 1952), Bhupen Hazarika<sup>3</sup> (8<sup>th</sup> September 1926 - 5<sup>th</sup> November 2011), Munin Barua<sup>4</sup> (5<sup>th</sup> November 1946 - 7<sup>th</sup> April 2018), to name a few, have always been loyal to this form, as the pages of history testify that making of cinema has been a part of their identity. They struggled for a realistic representation of the rural culture and the tussles of the inhabitant against oppression and exploitation. Even though the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen ‘Bollywood-influenced’

Assamese cinema releasing on the big screen, but the stories were not been able to compete in the national market of cinema 'bazaar'. Despite being a self-supported entertainment industry, Assamese cinema has its own local flavor of narratives, the stories transmit its people's culture, struggle, believes, and existence. The contemporary Assamese cinema and its filmmakers are trying to leave an imprint on both national and international screens and platforms. To mention, Bhaskar Hazarika's *Aamis* (2019) won two awards at the 3rd Singapore South Asian International Film Festival (SAIFF) 2019, and also the 'Best Director' Award with the lead Lima Das winning the 'Best Actor: Female' Award.

### **Beginning of Cinema in Assam**

“The first Indian film show occurred in July 7, 1896, a few months after the Lumiere brothers introduced the art of cinematography in Paris in 1895. Filmmakers in the west soon started using India, its scenery and exotic culture in their films like *Coconut Fair* (1897), *Our Indian empire* (1897), *A Panorama of Indian Scenes and Procession* (1898), and *Poona Races '98'* (1898)” (Acharya, 2015:10). When the Lumiere brothers organized their short films screening in India, it was in Watson Hotel, Bombay. “There were four shows in the evening, at 6, 7, 9 and 10; admission was a flat Re1; the films screened were *Entry Of Cinematographe*, *Arrival Of A Train*, *The Sea Bath*, *A Demolition*, *Leaving The Factory*, and *Ladies And Soldiers On Wheels*” (Bhatia, 2017). However, it took a little more than a decade for cinema to reach Assam. Assamese cinema cannot be thought about without Jyoti Prasad Agarwal<sup>5</sup> (17 June 1903- 17 January 1951). “Assamese film industry's foundation was laid way back in 1935 with Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's *Jyototi*, it had a slow start and attracted a fewer audience. Even as the situation improved since 1970-1980s onwards, the industry's

growth compared to many other regional cinemas has been relatively stunted for various reasons” (Barpujari, 2013:55). On 10<sup>th</sup> March 1935, under the banner of Chitralkha Movietone, in the Chitraban Studio at Raonak Cinema (now Jyoti Cinema) in Kolkata and on 20<sup>th</sup> March at Guwahati in Kumar Bhaskar Natya Mandir *Joymoti* was released.

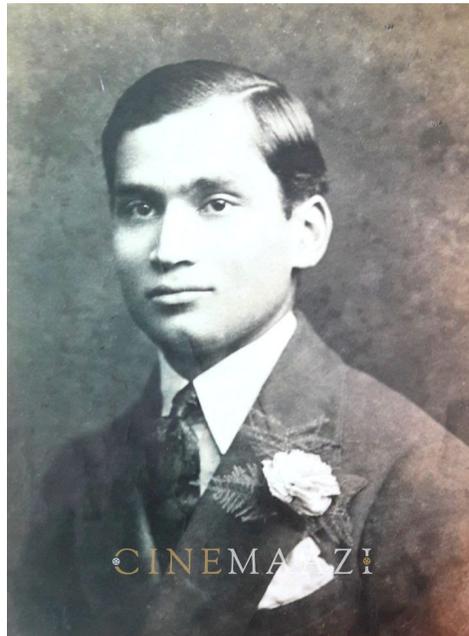
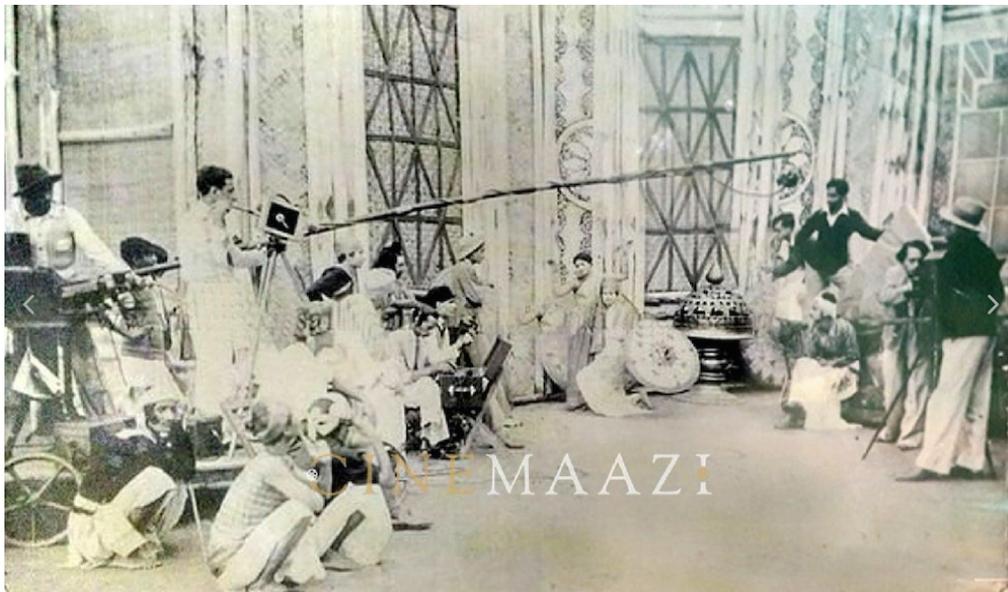


Figure 1. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala<sup>6</sup>

Jyoti Prasad Agarwal was influenced by Lev Kuleshov’s style of crafting cinema following the doctrine of cinematic realism that demands banish of the theatrical elements of cinema and creating space for the aesthetic values of documentaries, montage, and real-life substance. The changes that have taken place in the Soviet Union in 1917 after the revolution had influenced Agarwal’s idea of a new culture in the cinema while learning filmmaking at the UFA studio in Germany. “While in Berlin, Agarwala attempted to turn his play, *Sonit Konwori*, into an English movie, with the help of UFA studio. Things didn’t work out, but the experience greatly enhanced his knowledge of filmmaking” (Dey, 2020). In pre-independent India, Agarwala was the only political filmmaker, however, in post-independent India, there came

many filmmakers in the timeline of Indian cinema like Ritwik Ghatak and Shyam Benegal. “After his return to Assam, he continued his activities for Indian independence that has disrupted his studies earlier and in 1932 he was imprisoned for fifteen months. He established the Chitraband Studio at the Bholaguri Tea Estate and began filming the movie *Joymoti* around the end of 1933” (Raj Kumar, 2009:249). Agarwala was financially strong enough to schedule the production of his first film in any of the popular studios in Calcutta or Pune. But, he was deeply skeptical regarding any misrepresentation of the conventional culture of his native land.



*Figure 2: Shooting of Joymoti*<sup>7</sup>

The large concrete Chitraban studio was designed using local and traditional materials. However, there were technical challenges, like sunlight being the only source of lighting, for developing the celluloid ice was brought from Calcutta by steamer, train, and automobile. Agarwala opted for newspaper advertisements for actors audition, citing brief outlines of the storyline along with the description of the characters that he was looking for. At the same time, his one prerequisite was that the actors should be from ‘reputable’ families,

which ultimately restrained people from red-light locales. His search ended with his desired talents after a prolonged search to introduce the craft of making cinema to his native land. He pursued a triad including Bhupal Shankar Mehta as a cameraman and the Faizi Brothers as sound-recordists from Lahore. He expressed that he has arrived at Guwahati with his talents who were fresh and yet to be weighted by the commercially dominated Hindustani cinema.

“*Joymoti* might have allowed Jyoti Prasad Agarwala to project the political values of the ‘Assamese’ screen-images. But compared to the works of other filmmaking regions of undivided India, it was a disaster in terms of technical quality, particularly in sound. The cheap battery-operated sound recording system chartered from Lahore turned out to be quite inadequate, which he found out only at the editing table in Lahore during post-production” (Mazid, 2006). With limited money, he could not return to Assam for re-recording, also, there was no possibility of getting another Assamese-speaking person. Left with no other options he dubbed about thirty characters with his voice, including those of the female characters. In the undivided Assam, only Guwahati and Shillong had one cinema hall each which proceeded him to construct a cinema hall in the town of Tezpur and organized numbers of roaming shows around the state. Assam accepted cinema with a favorable response, but at the same time failed to appreciate its value. Despite his immense effort, *Joymoti* was an unsuccessful attempt that ultimately left Jyoti Prasad Agarwala bankrupt: he failed to introduce cinema as a mainstream industry in Assam.

“*Joymoti* may also be seen as India’s first feminist film. Three of the film’s female characters — Joymoti herself, her close friend Seuti, and the king’s mother — were against the royal court’s politics.”<sup>8</sup> (Mazid, 2006). Otherwise, the portrayal of women in the Indian celluloid has been either as a vulnerable gender, sufferer, a voiceless, or a Goddess of ‘sacrifice’ for her family. After four year’s he made his second last effort in 1939 titled *Indramalati*, which was

shot in a studio in Kolkata with a hope for a successful box office. And it merely recovered his production cost, and, with a heavy heart, he had to close-down his studio. Unfortunately, Agarwala is not considered among the pioneer of Indian cinema. The world of South Asian cinema had to re-discovered his passion for cinema since he was never acclaimed in his native place. It is the current Hindustani cinema that is feeling a need to look back at the unsung heroes of the realism cinema on the Indian map.

### **Timeline of Assamese Cinema**

The narrative of Assamese cinema has been a slow-paced linear narrative from the beginning. It had its own share of experimentation, expectation, and limitation. The scripts were mostly adapted from history, mythology, and realistic stories from the native land. Creating a fancy imaginary world for the audience to escape their reality was not a filmmaker's choice. Considering the cinematic language, basic editing approach, locked frames with simple compositions, earthy color palettes were the prime choice of the Assamese filmmakers, without taking away the essence of realism from the audience. Joymoti was the first historical release followed by Indramalati (1939), the third Assamese cinema. But subsequently, the production of cinema in that decade was limited. Stories were there, but the storytellers were apprehensive and took time to analyze this form. Socio-politically, this period saw the unexpected tussle for power and influence, while economically it was very much dependent on agriculture and especially in the tea industry. However, there were a handful of achievements and are worth mentioning. Pramathesh Barua's directorial release *Devdas* (1937, Assamese version) can be considered as the second Assamese cinema, which gave Assam its first association with a path-breaking Indian cinema. The Indian cine-scholars considered it to be the first successful social

cinema that changed the viewpoint of Indian social pictures. *Devdas* was also appreciated for the appropriate use of editing techniques: flashback, closeup, montage, wipe, dissolve, and fade-in & fade-out. It became a landmark in world cinema for the introduction of the inter-cut telepathy shot technique.



Figure 3: Phani Sarma in *Devdas*<sup>9</sup>

The 1940s carried the pain of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's loss along with a temporary pause for a few years in the cinema production until the onset of WWII, which brought changes in the landscape. The phase of silence motivated Rohini Kr. Baruah to produce *Manomati* (1941). At the same time, there were noted poet, lyricist, dramatist, author, artist, theatre actors who had the desire to try their skills of narrating stories using celluloid. Indeed, after the gap in cinema production, their efforts became notable contributions, however, the production of cinema in number was limited as it did not come out to be a successful form to invest time and money. The filmmakers of the 1940s had well represented the stories revolving around the then existing issues like communal violence and the common man's struggle for survival.

*Rupohi* (1944) produced and directed by Parbati Prashad Baruah, *Badan Barphukan* (1947) directed by Kamal Narayan Choudhury, *Siraj* (1948) directed by Bishnu Prasad Rabha (31<sup>st</sup> January 1909- 20<sup>th</sup> June 1969), and Phani Sarma (1910–1970), *Parghat* (1949) directed by Prabin Phukan, and *Biplobi* (1950) by Asit Sen are some of the regional releases depicting the socio-cultural scenario in the 1940s.

By the 1950s, several significant Assamese cinemas were released like *Runumi* (1952) by Suresh Chandra Goswami, *Smritir Parash* (1955) by Nip Borua, and more. This was the first Assamese cinema to have a song sang by a non-Assamese singer: the legendary singer of Indian music, Lata Mangeskar. But the cinemas produced by the industry were not up to the mark for consideration until the third National Film Award ceremony held in September 1956. Nonetheless, only the Certificate of Merit was issued in this ceremony, the reason is that no Assamese cinema was considered appropriate enough for President's Silver Medal. The first to earn the Certificate of Merit was Phani Sarma's directorial *Piyali Phukan* (1955). Not to forget, the first Assamese cinema where an actor from outside Assam, Mr. Balraj Sahani acted as a guest appearance was *Era Batar Sur* (1956) directed by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. The critically acclaimed work of filmmakers like Jahnu Barua, Manju Bora, and Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia hardly earned accomplishment in their commercial returns. In addition to this, as mentioned earlier, it was in the sixth National Film Award where Nip Barua's directorial *Ronga Police* (1958) was the first cinema to earn the President's Silver Medal for Best Feature Film in Assamese. Talented Nip Borua as a young filmmaker has added to the contribution of many popular cinemas and his directorial work *Maak aru Morom* (1957) brings home Certificate of Merit respectively. Subsequently, *Puberun* (1959) directed by Prabhat Mukherjee of Kolkata wins the President's Silver Medal for Best Feature Film, moreover, it is

the first Assamese cinema to open the door towards an International platform at the Berlin Film Festival in the year 1960. One most notable attribute of this film is that Margaret Anderson from London Dramatic School acted in this cinema. This was for the first time that an actor from England acted in an Assamese cinema.

The cinema industry of Assam has celebrated its golden period around the 60's: to be precise between the period of 1959 and 1969, as cinema was produced regularly. During this period about 25 cinemas were produced and out of which nine won the National Award. Notable releases of the 1960s are Sarbeswar Chakraborty's *Lachit Barphukan* (1960's), Anil Choudhury's *Matri Swarga* (1963), Nip Barua's *Norokaxhoor* (1961), Anwar Hossain's *Tejimola* (1963) winner of President's Certificate of Merit, Sarbeswar Chakraborty's *Maniram Dewan* (1964), Bhupen Hazarika's *Pratidhwani* (1964) and *Lati-Ghati* (1966) winner of President's Silver Award. *Dr. Bezbarua* (1969) by Brajen Baruah (1925-1972) won the National Award-Best Regional Film. It is regarded as the point of accomplishment of so-called commercial cinema in the industry. *Dr. Bezbarua* is the first thriller narrative to have indoor and outdoor production in various locations of Assam. It motivated directors and producers to release commercial cinema on the big screen. This phase released the first Assamese partly colored cinema *Shakuntala* (1961) directed by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. Another cinema to be the first in full-length comedy was *Ito Sito Bahuto* (1963) directed by Brajen Barua. *Bhagya* (1968) was the first Assamese film dubbed from Hindi while *Chik-Mik Bijuli* (1969) is the first long playing record of an Assamese cinema directed by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika.

Between 1970-82, a good number of amateur filmmakers came into the timeline of cinematic craft, and during that period around 57 cinemas were produced. "In the latter half of the 1970s, the audiences in Assam were introduced with a fresh and new wave of cinema by the famous academician, litterateur, filmmaker Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia. His first venture

*Sandhyarag* (1976) created a sensation in the Assamese cinema history” (Deori, 2020:3). Notable cinemas like Brojen Barua’s *Mukuta* (1970), Samarendra Narayan Deb’s *Aranya* (1971), *Upaja Sonar Maati* (1972), *Mamata* (1973), *Chameli Memsaab* (1975), *Putala Ghar* (1976), and Atul Bordoloi's *Kollol* (1978) were winners of National Award- Best Regional Film. Manoranjan Sur's *Uttaran* (1973), Pulok Gogoi’s *Khoj* (1974), Padam Barua's *Ganga Chilonir Pakhi* (1976) are the one’s which can be referred to for an insight into Assamese life. The year 1972 wears the crown of producing the first color Assamese cinema *Bhaity* by Kamal Narayan Choudhury and *Bristi* (1974) by Deuti Barua was the first cinema broadcasted in Doordarshan. However, the parallel cinema can be considered from *Ganga Chilonir Pakhi* (1976) by Padum Barua, while on the larger landscape the Indian cinema began its journey of parallel cinema with *Pather Panchali* (1955) by Satyajit Ray and *Ankur* (1974) by Shyam Benegal.

During the 1980s the timeline of Assamese celluloid had another good number of additions. By this time Assam gave prominent directors for contemporary Assamese cinemas like Jahnu Barua, who made influential celluloid depiction like *Anirban* (1981), *Aparoop*a (1982), *Alokar Aahban* (1983), *Son Maina* (1984), *Baan* (1986) Papor, (1986), *Pratham Raagini* (1987) and *Kolahal* (1989), which were the winners of National Award- Best Regional Film. The 80’s also has some first’s in the Assamese cinema industry like the first Eastman color movie was *Ajali Nabou* (1980) directed by Nip Baruah, the first lady director was Suprabha Devi and her debut directorial was *Nayanmani* (1983) along with the first Assamese cinema scope cinema *Jeevan Surabhi* (1984) directed by Naresh Kumar. To add more to the list was the first cinema to get Best Screenplay Award at the National level was *Agnisnan* (1985) directed by Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia and the first Assamese celluloid to collect the

Swarna Kamal in 1988 was *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* (1987) along with the Grand Prix for Best Film and Best Actor at Locarno International Film Festival.

To tally the timeline of cinema production, the 1960s had witnessed an era of box-office hits along with the 1970s, the 1980s and the late 1990s where the new wave was on its way. A 'new cinema' was in the process of emerging: shredding away the limited camera composition, static frames, emotional narratives, controlled soundtrack, use of basic editing techniques, realistic dialogues, mise-en-scene depicting the humble livelihood: abandoning a non-experimental cinema. The investments were limited as the reach of the audience from the Assamese cinema was also limited. Another beauty of the Assamese cinema industry being a regional cinema is that the veteran actors were very much a part of the common crowd in the streets: no comfort of vanity van, no luxury brands to endorse, or any exclusive lifestyles to maintain. Stardom did not prevail in the Assamese cinema industry till then. They witnessed and lived through the problems of life, they experienced the issues instead of reading, hearing, or try to just adopt the script. These precious experiences assisted them to nurture the same emotions on the silver screen.

The 90s was the era that has accepted both: popular cinema and flop releases. With a gradual decline in the popularity of Assamese cinema, the industry started accepting influences from the cinema around the globe. *Aabartan* (1994), *Itihaas* (1996), *Adajjya* (1997), *Kushal* (1998), *Pakhi* (1999) are the notable National Award- Best Regional Film winners. Further, Gautam Bora's directorial *Woshbipo* (1990) and Sanjeev Hazarika's *Haladhar* (1993) both won Best Debut Film along with National Award- Indira Gandhi Award. Jahnu Barua wins the National Award- Best Director for *Sagaraloi Bahu Door* (1995). Bidyut Chakraborty wins Director's Best Debut Film *Raag Biraag* (1996) along with National Award- Indira Gandhi Award. *Abuj Bedana* (1993), was the first children's cinema directed by Gunasindhu Hazarika

and *Rag Birag* (1996) was the first cinema, which was screened as an inaugural cinema of the Indian panorama directed by Bidyut Chakrabarty.

Further celluloid releases like *Firingoti* (1992), *Haladhar* (1991), *Meemanxa* (1994), *Sarothi* (1991), *Abartan* (1993), *Kaal Sandhya* (1997), and *Surya Tejor Anya Naam* (1991) are still alive in the memories of cinema enthusiasts. The release of *Jaubone Amoni Kore* (1998) directed by Ashok Kumar Bishaya is considered to give rise to the flat graph of the Assamese cinema, which ran on the big screen for 25 consecutive weeks in Assam. Nonetheless, there was a time, around the mid-90s where the decline of cinema production gave prospects to other forms of communication like Mobile Theatre and local television daily soaps. Due to this decline, many talents from the big screen had to shift to other professions. While a few have moved towards metropolitan cities and especially to Mumbai in search of their livelihood and also to satisfy their thirst for creativity. The metropolitan cities did provide the space for the growth of talents like Adil Hussian, Sima Biswas, Amrit Pritam, Debojit Changma, Zubeen Garg, and more who are currently excelling in the field of national cinema.

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century underwent an efficient phase for the Assamese cinema industry. But not to ignore, there are certain factors for which the industry has faced the crisis, which almost broke the backbone of the Assamese cinema industry. The factors can be described as follows:

*Firstly*, the lack of immediate film review after the film release is a strong reason for which the cinemas in the theatre does not get the best number of audience. The common people are ignorant about the weakness or strength of the new release. This ignorance of the new theatrical release ultimately becomes a factor for not being able to generate revenue.

*Secondly*, multiple episodes have interrupted in the course of making cinema. In the

1980s, due to the Assam agitation under the student's leadership against immigrants (1979-85), the rise of a secessionist outfit, political instability, etc. hampered the smooth growth though the films were still made. Around the year 2003, some of the rebellious groups issued warning to the cinema halls and distributors to boycott screening and distribution of Hindi cinema. They believed that the Bollywood cinema was a threat to the regional cinema and also to the native culture. Ultimately, these and a number of such episodes had a massive negative effect on revenue generation. And also resulted in shutdown of many cinema halls in Assam.

*Thirdly*, this ultimately opened scopes for television and other entertainment sources. In the current scenario, the converging of the internet with radio and television has served the masses with a large number of options for infotainment. Also, online channels and various apps like *Disney Hotstar*, *YouTube*, *ALT Balaji*, *Amazon Prime*, *Voot*, *Netflix*, *JioCinema*, etc. have given an altogether different meaning to watch cinema at the fingertips.

*Fourthly*, the natives of Assam have always kept Bollywood and Hollywood as their first preferences for entertainment consumption. The presence of a stereotypical notion has always been felt that local productions do not pull much of the audience's interests. Also, the low maintenance of halls and their infrastructures do not motivate the locals to spend on it for their leisure time.

The Assamese cinema industry has witnessed multiple fractures. "Lack of proper infrastructure, funding or promotion activities, fewer screens, a more or less passive Film Development Corporation as well as the linguistic diversity in the region along with the political conflicts has had an adverse effect on the growth of local cinema in the region. The 2002-2003 ULFA ban on Hindi cinema (which however did not last long), further brought a drop in audience for Assamese films" (Borpujari, 2007). These factors ultimately brought the VCR cult,

which gave businesses to local vendors who provided the new releases mostly on rent, and also sold video cassettes/tapes on demand. Watching cinema at home was a luxury affair and also a matter of pleasure around the early 1990s since the mall-culture, fine dining, or clubbing was not common. The cult of video and cassette tapes ruled the market for a certain period for both cinema and music (albums). Nonetheless, by the end of the 90's arrived a time where the VCR cult came to an end, the release of Assamese cinema was nearly on the threshold of collapse. Shifting to digital production was a dice decision. Adapting to digital production was an undiscovered investment for a small self-supported industry that has not even settled yet. Expecting quality content, influential narratives, creative techniques, or the performance of good actors were not even thinkable.

Cinema in India has its deep-rooted influence among its people. As the youth of Assam started migrating to the metro cities they got more exposed to the national and international taste of cinema. This did bring back the vibe to revive the Assamese cinema. On the other hand, certain factors have influenced the emergence of these new dynamics in regional cinema (and especially for Assamese cinema) :

*Firstly*, the new generation has helped to act as a bridge of knowledge from one state to another, from one country to another. They discussed ideas, appreciated experimental work, and nurtured creativity. They understood the need of the hour: they embraced 'newness'. The tech-savvy Generation Z is helping to build a network society for the exchange of information, content, and ideas.

*Secondly*, the convergence of the internet with mobile technology has made information accessible to everyone and everywhere. This has supported many cinema critics and creative

brains to form groups to exchange ideas and works. In short, the internet has unlocked an extensive horizon towards the world cinema library which can be accessed by anyone from anywhere at the tip of their figure. The OTT platforms and digital media have also added to this new wave of demand for regional cinemas.

*Thirdly*, globalization along with mobility in all directions has opened the minds and scopes. And due to this, the contemporary filmmakers (especially regional filmmakers) got exposure to the international cinema with the help of various prestigious film festivals as a platform to experience brilliant works and also to showcase their own crafts.

*Fourthly*, independent and government bodies (Film Division of India, Children's Film Society of India, and a few more) have begun to take the initiative to nurture the small but creative thoughts and support the regional filmmakers.

The meaning of entertainment has changed; the rigidness to accept and absorb representations on-screen has transformed. Platforms to access cinemas have enlarged for which the dynamic for demands of the content have also changed. "The way we consume motion pictures has changed even more. In the 1970s, film buffs organized their lives around repertory-house schedules and might travel 50 miles to catch a screening of a rare film. Today, even the most out-of-the-way town has a video store with four or five thousand titles in stock, ready for viewing at a moment's notice, and if you can't find it there, you can get it on the Internet. Twenty years ago, very few of us actually owned movies; today, even fewer of us do not. Films are a lot more like books, now (and books are about to become more cinematic). In the past twenty years our exposure to filmed entertainment has increased by a magnitude or more" (Monaco, 2000:13).

## The Contemporary world of Assamese Celluloid: re-birth of Assamese cinema

In an interview, 1961, Truffaut said *the 'New Wave' is neither a movement, nor a school, nor a group, it's a quality*. The contemporary phase has opened a new discourse on 'regional reality'. It is filled with stories, mostly from debut directorial which has created a buzz not only in their homeland, but their stories have reached national and international screens. "The more we see the screen as a mirror rather than an escape hatch, the more we will be prepared for what is to come" (Bazin, 1967:7). Cinema is trying to be a mirror for the transformation of the Assamese society which is in a complex state moving towards a new paradigm in every aspect. "North-east India, is flooded with visionary filmmakers; who, on almost zero support and budget, are being able to make a mark for themselves at various film festivals, both in India and abroad. Bagging National awards and entries to national and international film festivals, it seems the game has just begun. This is a whole new breed of filmmakers from the region, which has defined all odds and journeyed afar, to voice social concerns that need attention" (Goswami, Borah, Barbaruah, 2012:36).



Figure 4: Posters from Assamese Cinema (clockwise)-*Village Rockstar*, *Aamis*, *Bornodi Bhotiya*, *Raag*<sup>10</sup>

Satyajit Ray once expressed that *it is a poor film, which draws attention to style, rather than content*. With the change in technological and cinematic language, the content and narratives have undergone major changes by the time it was 2000. Nonetheless, Assamese cinemas have content that has always represented its native. By the beginning of this period, it did not give the basic pragmatism of serious cinema, but a subtle realism inspired by the common man's life with a trace of fantasy and imagination. *Hiya Diya Niya* (2000) by Munin Barua was a blockbuster that became almost every households choice to watch on the big screen and gave a fresh wave to revive the Assamese film industry with its commercial success. Subsequently, during the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there were numerous Assamese cinemas, which were released in the theatres with good commercial returns like Jahnu Barua's *Konikar Ramdheni* (2003) and Timothy Das Hanche's *Jeevan Baator Logori* (2009).

The year 2011 had a good number of productions with good revenue generation like Diganta Mazumdar's *A Weekend* (2011), Rajesh Bhuyan's *Janmoni* (2011), Timothy Das Hanche's *Pole Pole Ure Mon* (2011), and Munin Barua's *Ramdheni* (2011). As stated in *Problems and Perspective of the Relationship between the Media and Human Right* by Paromita Das, Charu Joshi and G.P.Pandey that by 2011 the Assamese cinema industry has produced 333 numbers of cinemas. And the subsequent year 2012 and 2013 prominent theatrical releases were Jahnu Barua's *Bandhon* (2012), Gautam Baruah's *Rowd* (2012), Bidyut Kakoty's *Ekhon Nedekha Nodir Xipare* (2012), Junmoni Devi's *Tula Aru Teza* (2012), Sanjib Sabhapandit's *Jangfai Jonak* (2012), Pranani Jyoti Bharali's *Ranangan* (2013), Prodyut Kumar Deka's *Surjasta* (2013), Simple Gogoi's *Tumi Jodi Koa* (2013), Pulak Gogoi's *Momtaaz* (2013), Moupram Sharma's *Durjan* (2013) and John Mahaliya's *Mahasamar* (2013) are a few to name.

The debut directorial release holds a lot of promises for cinema enthusiasts. As new narrative styles evolved in various shades, it can be realized that contemporary cinemas have a large variety to offer: precisely there is a story for everyone. Kenny Deori Basumatary directorial debut *Local Kung Fu* (2013) is a local adaptation of the genre that Chinese actors Jackie Chan and Stephen Chow have made universally popular. It was made with a tight budget of Rs 90,000. Fusion with comedy was a new taste to appreciate on the regional screen which was a hit among the movie buffs. Its sequel, *Local Kung Fu 2* (2017) was produced after four years with the help of crowdfunding which was also appreciated. The contemporary filmmakers are not just making cinema for commercial, but also setting examples around the globe. Jaicheng Jai Dohutia debut feature film *Haanduk* (2016) will give the audience an insight into a real news event and incidences of radical militarization in the Northeast. If one experiences action and thriller, then they one can opt for Zubeen Garg's *Mission China* (2017) which went for nearly 168 screenings daily. It had lucrative box office openings in Mumbai, Pune, Delhi, and Banglore along with the entire Northeast. Its first music video was well received on *YouTube* gathering around 1.9 lakh views within 24 hours of its release.

To experience the innocence of a child's imagination and fear one can watch Jahnu Barua's *Tora* (2004) produced by Children's Film Society of India. On the other hand, to view the rural simplicity, young souls fighting for their dreams with a lyrical montage of life in contemporary rural Assam can be watched in Rima Das's *Antardrishti (Man with the Binoculars)* (2013), *Village Rockstar* (2017) and *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018). Whereas Utpal Borpujari's directorial debut *Ishu* (2018) will introduce the audience to certain myths, stereotypical taboos of witch-hunting, and practices that were and might be is still being

practiced in rural Assam. Deep Choudhary in his directorial debut *Alifa* (2018) deals with displacement, alienation, and marginalization that is a major concern existing in the region of Assam. A large portion of people is still deprived of their fundamental human needs and in such situations where one cannot gain the basic needs, then essentials like health and education become a matter of luxury. They are left alone to fight and make a choice between their existence and dreams.

*Bornodi Bhotiai* (2018), Anupam Kaushik Borah's directorial debut is to be counted as the first full-length cinematic projection focusing on the discourse of the *Sattriya*'s in the land of Majuli, the decaying of tribal culture on the island, and the hardship of its people. Audiences can experience an extremely simple and slower pace of living, ample time, but few opportunities to invest in. "In September, a movie named *Kanchanjangha* collected Rs 5.12 crore at the box office. Since October, another movie named *Ratnakar* has grossed over Rs 6 crore and smashed the all-time single-day collection record of Assamese cinema. What's more: both movies opened at multiplexes even in cities like Delhi and Mumbai. For the moribund industry that was once called 'Jollywood', there is suddenly hope of revival" (Sharma, 2020). Jatin Bora's production *Ratnakar* (2019) depicts the beautiful bonding between a father and a daughter. It will mesmerize the audience with its visual appetite, emotional tangent, and music, which has made space in everyone's playlist. It has been seen as a developmental cinema in which it supports the formation of outdoor shooting location, new technical implications like shooting with Drone camera, great editing work with VFX, and much more. The use of digital technology enables the regional filmmakers to become economically hopeful to get the investment in return and be free of the oppressive loan structure. Other releases of 2019 are Biswajit Kalita's *Bhaworiya*, Dhruva J. Bordoloi's *Kokaideu Bindaas*, Shankar Borua's *Rongeen*, Monjul Baruah's *Kaneen*,

Hiren Bora's *Seema-The Untold Story*, Topon Bordoloi's *Rowd Hoy Aha Tumi*, Mirza Arif Hazarika's *Astittwa*, Pranabjyoti Bharali's *Epaar Xipaar*, Bhaskar Hazarika's *Aamis*, and Achinta Shankar's *Pratighaat*.

The year 2020 was supposed to be a promising year for the filmmakers of Assam as some of them had their scripts ready for the production stage like Rima Das while some of them were finalizing their project for the theatrical release like *Xubala* (2019, *The Darkness Within*) directed by Munna Ahmad. *Xubala* is based on Homen Borgohain's novel *Subarna Kahini*. *Xubala*, portraying the dark side in the world of prostitutes was selected in FilmFreeway UK for joining International Film Festivals globally. But all such projects underwent a long pause: the entire human existence went for a pause. The socio-political situation and later the economic condition of the state were deeply challenged by CAB (Citizenship Amendment Bill) protest (December 2019-March 2020), followed by a worldwide pandemic caused by the Covid-19 (lockdown started from 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020). The entire world has undergone a complete lockdown and this has also shuttered the film industries in many aspects. While some projects in South-India gave an attempt to restart their incomplete projects keeping all the mandatory safety guidelines on the fore-front but things are not so simple, especially when it is to deal with a large team.

The Assamese film industry, which also comes under the Producers Guild of India tried to abide by their working protocol and made a working protocol by 90 percent matching it. But practically, the guidelines are not possible to meet up as the cost of production increases triple times. With certain resolutions, some of the film professionals have gradually started gearing up, but yes the time consumed is three times longer. Digital platforms have

become a great podium to start the process of coordinating between different departments of the same production unit using *Whats App*, *Zoom* calls and *Google Hangouts*, etc. Productions are done by abiding the governmental guidelines, like not releasing content for streaming in HD, the content has to be in standard definition. Online digital platforms like *Netflix*, *YouTube*, *Voot*, etc. are silently becoming the prime source of entertainment consumption where the finest web-series are being released like *Special OPS*, *Patallok*, *Aarya*, etc. Even Bollywood big projects like Shoojit Sircar's *Gulabo Sitabo* (2020) starring Amitabh Bachchan and Ayushmann Khurana got their theatrical release on *Amazon Prime Video* with other projects of 2020 like *Laxmii Bomb*, *Gunjan Saxena*, *Ludo*, etc. which got their release in various other OTT platforms. However, just before the pandemic, one achievement that Assam as a state has achieved is that the glamorous *Filmfare Award 2020* was held on 15<sup>th</sup> February in Guwahati, Assam with an estimated budget of Rs 20-30 crore. The city hosted this for promoting Assam tourism and also introducing filmmakers to the land of Assam.

This decade not only brought technical innovations in trend, but also has changed the portrayal of anti-heroes or negative hero's as central characters. The audience has become more flexible and adventurous in experimenting with visual taste. Their credibility to understand and appreciate a good script with a fusion of multiple genres has developed as the audience profile has also diversified with time. The contemporary releases on the big screen are not only a way for escapism, they have become a tool for celebrating, challenging, and changing modern India as its narratives are in the context of social relevance. The contemporary regional filmmakers depict what they have experienced, felt, or have witnessed: from minute to major details and flavor of the local. The contemporary audience does have the reasoning and understanding of what are they are being shown and why are they being shown.

Regional cinemas have traveled a long way in every aspect: acceptance of experimental cinemas, horizontal growth of screening platforms, and the experimenting fusion of genres. Cinema has become a tool from few to many, from closed and controlled studios to the lanes and streets of the nearby soil. Cinema narratives have new cinematic language now: from stories of legends and super-heroes to stories of 'you and me'. In the contemporary period, filmmaking has no closed style and banner, every filmmaker has his/her own style to represent a common story in their own uncommon approaches. It shall not be wrong to analyze that the world of 'you and me' is changing, so thus the stories on the big screens. Use of silence, casting non-professional actors, capturing more of nature humbly, real space and real events (unstaged and unscripted), portraying characters in a raw look (no make-up, no designer costumes) are some of the essential elements which the filmmakers are giving attention to in the contemporary Assamese cinema. The new air of significant approach to set an example for the contemporary regional filmmakers with small-budget and limited technology with non-state aids has generated another new wave cinema.

The freshness of themes, the recreation of the innocence and simplicity of everyday life filled with emotion and sentiments, and significant experimentation with cinematic languages are pulling back to the road of Italian neo-realism cinema forms and style. Some of the key characteristics of Italian Neo-realism traces that can be seen in the contemporary Assamese cinemas like documentary visual style, the use of realistic locations rather than studios, use of non-professional actors, avoidance of superficial editing styles, with basic camerawork and lighting, which indicates towards another new wave. The slowness of tempo, the minimalistic use of music, absence of peppy song and dance, the simple dialogues minus the high melodrama and reactions: all these marks towards minimalism that not only seems very

different from the earlier cinemas but also identifies the contemporary filmmakers as the representative of avant-garde cinema. Small steps have been initiated to motivate the new dynamic in Assamese cinema production. Like, the screening of the five new releases of Assamese cinema has been made compulsory for at least 100 days a year in the malls and cineplexes of Assam; cine-awards are being conducted to encourage the film fraternity. However, are these strategies sufficient enough to renew an under-developed means of art and communication?

### **Changes in the Assamese cinema of 21<sup>st</sup> century: film techniques**

The production of cinema is no more a pure form of art, indeed it is a classic fusion of art, science, and technology. Technological advancement has made a paradigm shift impacting the production of cinema worldwide and the regional cinemas are no less in using them. The stages of production itself have under-gone into detail precision with experts working only in their specialized areas to produce technically richer final productions. Each stage of production (pre-production, production, and post-production) have been incorporated with technical experts. Also to mention, all these three stages are affected by many factors, like the budget of the project, the subject of the film, and also the duration they have to adhere to work in.

To begin with pre-production, thick hand-written scripts are being gradually replaced by scripts digitally typed, and storyboards are no more done with hand-painted sketches as digital software for sketching or images from the internet are easily available, no more shooting schedules are done with paper and pen as software with standard formats are available on the internet where one just needs to fill the details. Screenplays are done with the help of intelligent screenplay writing through AI (Artificial Intelligence) and costume designs, sets, etc. are also done using AI, apps, and software. There is no doubt that the workload has

reduced to a great extent, the time consumed has decreased, more accuracy of fine work has evolved with an adaptation of technology, but a few of the veteran professionals have been affected, especially, who are technically challenged. However, not to forget that due to these technical advancements, the production of cinema has geared up again especially in the post-pandemic scenario. Maintaining social distance and avoiding much traveling is possible due to many online apps and platforms like *Zoom*, *Google Meet*, etc. to conduct an online meeting to discuss, plan and bring scripts into action. Digital platforms have also helped in penetrating the releases of new productions on ‘multiple screen sizes’<sup>11</sup>.

In the context of the production stage, the entire shooting of a film has undergone from analog to digital: advanced technical equipment in the market has given contemporary filmmakers a wide catalog of technical possibilities for audio and visual production. In the analog system, the cost of the reel was a major investment, the time consumed in the process of developing the film was another concern. Furthermore, if any technical or non-technical error occurs, then planning for a re-shoot was an additional hurdle. It was also a major hit in the budget. Furthermore, the analog sound had its own merits and demerits. In many contemporary cinemas, the cameras are used not to captivate the audience with complicated narrative and unreal images, on the contrary rather to play with audience expectations. Independent Drone cameras, 4K 3D cameras, Dual camera VR, with Dolby sound are in trend. Various camera accessories, a wide range of compositions for sound recording has facilitated to reboot shooting post Covid-19 pandemic.

“Three jobs generally proceed more or less concurrently during post-production: editing, sound mixing, augmentation and looping (or ADR), laboratory work, opticals and special effects” (Monaco, 2000:129). The post-production stage is no less behind in accepting

the technical ‘beauty’ which can alter any lifeless footage to mesmerizing content for the big screen. Softwares like *Filmora9*, *DaVinci Resolve*, *Lightworks* are found to be the editor’s favorite which offers a large palette for editing. Working with handy equipment, minimum set-up time, and flexibility in breaking the editing norms are the new ways of filmmaking that often represents a documentary style. Filming technique includes fragmented, discontinuous editing, and long takes. The filmmakers and critics of the new wave considered the work of western classics and used avant-garde stylistic direction. But regional cinema, especially in Assam will need some more time to experiment, adapt and imply unprecedented methods of expression. It will take some time to break the rules and compose a new norm of experimentation. Algorithmic video editing, powerful animation, AI-Powered Sound Engineering, and Sound Design are some of the advanced editing elements which the Assamese industry is becoming familiar with. Softwares and innovative techniques like sharing the same screens in different editing machines have helped the editors and filmmakers to sit in a different location, different cities and yet stay connected at the same time during the pandemic. Many big and small budget projects which were in the post-production stage could productively get their release on various OTT platforms mainly due to these technological advancements.

Apart from the pre-production, production, and post-production stages, two more stages have informally become a core part of the production: research and marketing & distribution. Depending on the subject and its treatment, research is done for a deeper understanding. Social media has been a boon, especially for the regional and small budget cinema for crowdfunding, marketing & distribution. The entire process of producing a cinema has become more in tune with the current demands and aspirations. In terms of marketing and distribution where the big studios are still working with the traditional distribution strategies

and process, the small budget, regional cinemas, and many directorial debuts are choosing the new breed of online distribution channels. *Prime Video, Netflix, Disney Hotstar, Voot, MX Player, ALTBalaji*, etc. have emerged in the era of the internet and made it easier for the filmmakers to get audiences beyond the traditional platforms. Traditional celluloid preservation has been a challenging expense which the digital production techniques have relieved the filmmakers from. Digital preservation simply requires few megabytes for storage in the computer. But to be practical and give a realistic presentation there are many limitations yet to be met. Limited institutions to graduate skilled technical professionals, lack of finance to avail the latest equipment, tight budget to include industry experts, and with one professional studio is the ‘common reality’ that the Assamese cinema industry has been surviving with. Satyajit Ray says, “Somebody-I do not remember who- has defined the Cinema as the highest form of commercial art. After ten years in this profession, I have no quarrel with that definition” (Ray, 2001: 48)

The industry has become more regulated, capitalized, and well-equipped with digital high end-production techniques. Cinema production has become more professionalized, rationalized, and specialized in terms of the division of ‘labor’. Post pandemic, the world is trying to reboot at its best, resuming back to normal and at this pace, the Assamese cinema industry has also geared-up by effectively hosting the Prag Cine Award 2021. Productions of cinema have been started scheduling, cinema halls are gradually planning to put up their big screen whereas new network society like *Reeldrama Production* has rolled out a new OTT platform for Assamese films, web series and other shows to be released.

## Conclusion

The contemporary period has the potential to nurture many auteurs from the regional landscape with their own styles of treating simple to complex stories: stories that need not wait for big budgets, big stars, big banners, and multiplexes to be produced and released. When an individual travels, along with 'him' many stories, memories, and feelings are also carried and so do cinema. After a long wait, local stories have traveled and made space on the big screen of Indian cinema. In the midst of all these some creative minds have selected cinema to be a tool for representing their simple stories on the big screen in a very unique yet common manner. And this, with the transformation of time, has brought various shades of cinema to the screen around the globe. Cinema is no more confined to the big banners, nor a matter of legacy: it has become a canvas for a storyteller whose story can influence the audience. The audiences are now accepting and appreciating the stories from their next door, stories from their life, and also trying to find themselves in the characters on the screen.

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## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Bhabendra Nath Saikia directed eight feature films, which have been screened at various International Film Festivals. Cinemas crafted by him are *Sandhya Raag* (Rajat Kamal Award 1977) screened at Cannes Film Festival in 1978, *Anirban* (Rajat Kamal Award 1981), *Agnisnaan* (Rajat Kamal Award 1985), *Kolahal* (Rajat Kamal Award 1988), *Sarothi* (Rajat Kamal Award 1992), *Abartan* (Rajat Kamal Award 1994), *Itihaas* (Rajat Kamal Award 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Jahnu Barua wears the hat of being a significant contributor to Assamese cinema with *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* (*Catastrophe*, 1987), *Hkhagoroloi Bohu Door* (*It's Long Way to the Sea*, 1995), *Konikar Ramdhenu* (*Ride on the Rainbow*, 2003), *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara* (*I did not kill Gandhi*, 2005), *Baandhon* (*Waves of Silence*, 2012), *Ajeyo* (*Invincible*, 2014), *Bhoga Khirikee* (*Broken Window*, 2018) etc.

<sup>3</sup> Bhupen Hazarika has left a treasure of contribution in the world of music and cinema. Some of his contributions are *Era Bator Sur* (1956), *Mahut Bandhu Re* (1958), *Shakuntala Sur* (1961), *Pratidhwani* (1964), *Lati-Ghati* (1966), *Chik Mik Bijuli* (1969), *Roop Konwar Jyoti Parsad Aru Joymoti* (1976), *Through Melody and Rhythm* (1977), *Mon-Prajapati* (1979), *Swikarokti* (1986), etc.

<sup>4</sup> Munin Barua's contribution holds great significance in popularizing Assamese cinema, especially outside the state and the turning point, which can be called the new wave for the Assamese cinema, is the year 2000 with the movie *Hiya Diya Niya*. His work like *Pratima* (1987), *Pahari Kanya* (1990), *Prabhati Pokhir Gaan* (1992), *Nayak* (2001), *Kanyadaan* (2002), *Dinabandhoo* (2004), *Raamdheni* (2011), *Priyar Priyo* (2017) are some of his prime contribution to Assamese cinema.

<sup>5</sup> Jyoti Prasad Agarwala can be titled as the father of Assamese cinema who in his first release wore a number of hats for productions with a tight budget of rupee sixty thousand in the year 1935. But unfortunately, the original celluloid of *Joymoti* is missing like many other notable cinemas of India.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cinemaazi.com/feature/jyotiprasad-agarwala-the-father-of-assamese-cinema>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cinemaazi.com/cinemaazi-studio/visual-images/joymoti>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.himalmag.com/joymoti-the-first-radical-film-of-india/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://scroll.in/reel/822679/pramathesh-chandra-barua-was-the-original-devdas-on-and-off-the-screen>

<sup>10</sup> <https://thefederal.com/features/otts-newfound-portal-of-northeast-filmmakers-to-reach-global-audience/>

<sup>11</sup> The convergence of the Internet with various technologies has given rise to multiple screen sizes to consume the broadcasting content from numerous sources (like online television, apps like *Disney hotstar*, *Sony liv*, social media platforms like *YouTube* etc.). Various audiovisual screens like phones, tablets, laptops, and more, has become the new norm to opt for new releases, whether it is for big budget cinemas, serials or web-series.