

Article**Manoj Barpujari****Assamese Cinema: Will the Wave Last Long?**

Perhaps the worst days are over! A promising young film director after an impressive debut is no longer wasting his or her valuable time for some willing producer to turn up. With digital transformation making low-budget indie film a viable option, the youngsters grabbed every opportunity and make most out of it, creatively. A strong breed of both self-taught directors and film-school products carved out a niche for themselves by going beyond the local market and by setting their eyes on the highly competitive national and international circuits. In a globalised world it is a paradigm shift for many young and gifted filmmakers that Assam produced of late.

Reaching out to film market and screen labs, otherwise relying on the zero-budget concept and crowd funding, have had started paying rich and unheard-of-till-the-other-day dividends. Minimum financial spending, avoidance of

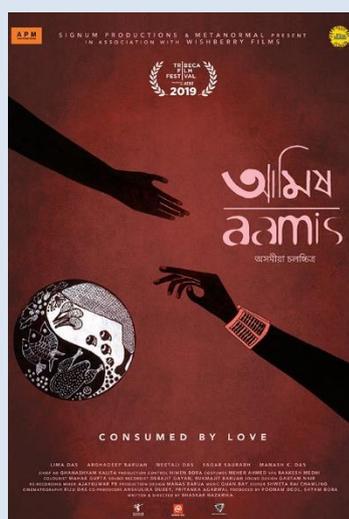
costly mise-en-scene, reliance of non-actors, minimalist set design, but in-depth and realistic treatment of the subject concerned, poetic and philosophical undertone, blurring of fiction and documentary, political consciousness, focus on the downtrodden and exploited class, and so on, have been the hallmarks of the new filmmakers' bid to tell their stories. As a matter of fact, these characteristics have been the basic principles governing the New Wave film patterns elsewhere in the world. Hence it is imperative to observe New Wave traits in the vibrant works of the new generation of filmmakers who are bringing in sensations to the film-scene of Assam of late.

Opinions may differ on whether this trend should be called a New Wave, or should it be hailed as a Renaissance. The word Renaissance, literally meaning "Rebirth" in French, first appeared in English in the 1830s; though observers of Assamese cinema at best might have meant "Resurgence" by this word. But, Renaissance is actually a long period in European history marking the transition from the middle ages to modern era, but not uniformly experienced across Europe. The intellectual basis of the Renaissance was its own invented version of humanism, a pattern of new thinking, which became manifest in the arts, science and humanities at the same time. Although the Renaissance saw revolutions in many intellectual pursuits, as well as social and political upheaval, it is perhaps best known for its artistic developments and contributions, with the society sustaining changes in all spheres.

Here two glaring observations should suffice. Firstly, aesthetics of cinema in Assam had been organically tested against regional and contemporary reality by new generation filmmakers from the late 1980s in a strong way. It remains in practice till date with many of the stalwarts refusing to succumb to the pulls and counter-pulls of the market. With the new breed of uncompromising filmmakers giving a fillip to the existing trend, it becomes a force to reckon with. Obviously, hence to say, it is a kind of resurgence. Secondly, and at the same time, the filmmakers' attainment is sadly lacking support of the polity. With no political or socio-philosophical boosting in sight, their efforts should have met untimely death. No public support system and no government patronage mean there is no practical renaissance occurring in Assam. Therefore, the moot question could be: how without the oxygen from the society and the establishment, the new filmmakers will be and are thriving.

It is often said that “parallel Indian cinema” which was in full bloom within two decades of early 1970s and early 1990s, gradually faded away with decreasing signs in welfare role of the state, the coming up of multiplexes and rise of blatant consumerism. But Indian cinema’s vibrant nature and resilience were coming to the fore again which is epitomised in present day Marathi cinema that made exemplary presence at national and international stages with hard-hitting social commentary brought forth by daring writers and debutant directors. This success story is greatly indebted to an ambitious and futuristic State Film Policy. The cultural department of Maharashtra government had adopted a policy of offering subsidies after a strict selection procedure is followed. The result is obvious with a shoot-up quality to telling effects.

However it is altogether a different story in Assam. Whatever the young filmmakers achieved were completely out of their own individual efforts. A consistent onlooker may get tempted to hail their efforts as a kind of unleashing a silent revolution a la Cinema Novo. There are number of films highlighting

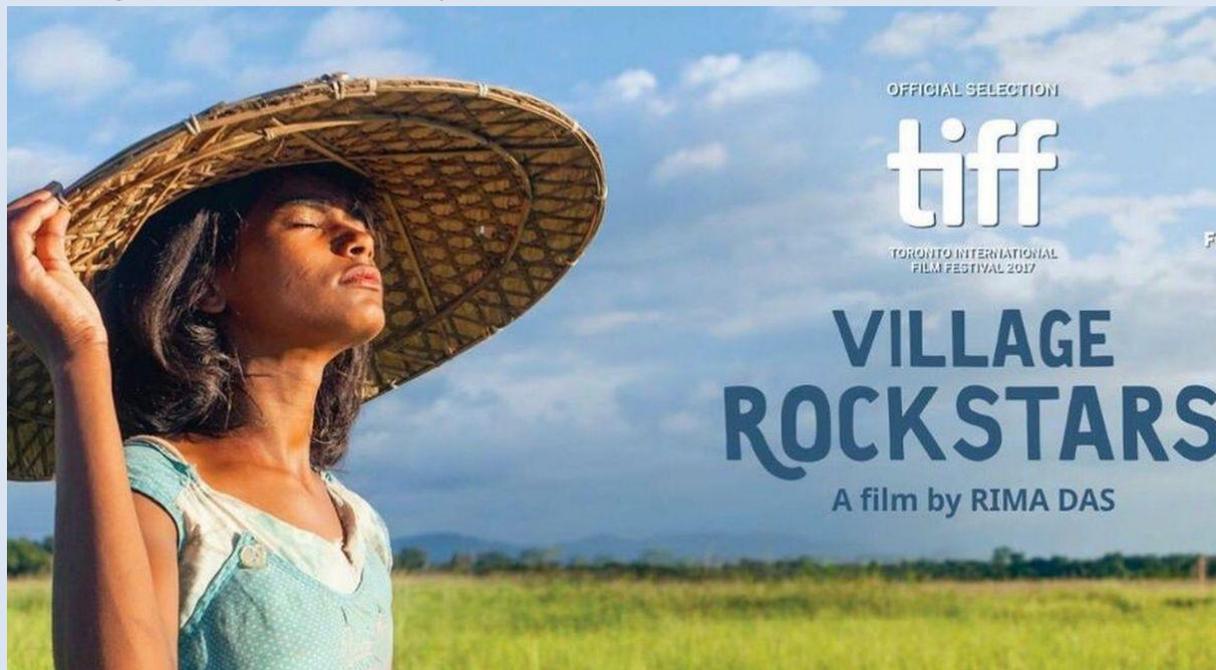


this sort of phenomenon in Assamese cinema as seen in last five years of 2014-19. A quick look at two most recent films – Rima Das’ *Bulbul Can Sing* and Bhaskar Hazarika’s *Aamis* – should suffice. These two filmmakers are in opposite pole in learning the craft: Rima is self-taught while Bhaskar is formally trained. Rima invented an extraordinary method of making films by being a one-woman film production team, doing the camerawork, editing and production design, as well as writing, directing and producing all by herself. The result is a strongly personal style at the

price of some admittedly minor technical imperfections – like Aribam Syam Sharma’s unforgettable *Imagi Ningthem* once showed – that patently takes the cinematic adventure close to the French Nouvelle Vague.

Rima’s second feature *Village Rockstars* (2017) achieved phenomenal acclaim when after touring more than seventy international film festivals across the globe, it was selected as India’s official entry for the Oscars. After delving deep into childhood in rural backdrop in this film, she chose the same ambiance to peep into young adulthood in her third feature that again gives a realistically woven story ordained in details of the locale. *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018), like its

predecessor, had its back to back world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival. Both films are scoring another double in successive triumph of winning the Golden Gateway Award for the Best Indian Film at the Jio MAMI



Mumbai Film Festival. It revolves around three teenagers searching for their identity, focusing on one girl in particular who struggles to sing and whose clash with traditional rules of behaviour leaves her shaken. Although the film is hailed as a quietly insightful saga of pleasing simplicity and realism, its other layer of vigilantism in a time of growing intolerance is unlikely to get overlooked. Awards at Berlin, Osaka, Singapore, Dublin, Melbourne and other film festivals are just adding feathers on its cap. Yet it is not guaranteed that general filmgoers are ready to take pride in an auteur's achievements by thronging the theatres after the film is released, which is why a filmmaker of repute like Jahanu Barua once lamented that Darwin's Survival of the Fittest Theory could be best applied in terms of Assamese cinema. Village Rockstars was lucky to draw crowds at cinema halls across Assam, thanks to media hype showered on account of its achievements; but whether its successor would score a double in receiving public favour is yet to be seen.

For some positive vibes created around Bhaskar Hazarika's debut film *Kothanodi* (The River of Fables, 2015), it could successfully pass the litmus test at the box office. In fact it was the first film from Assam to receive Asian Cinema Fund's Post-Production Fund Award and its DI and colouring were done in the Korean Film Council laboratory in Seoul. After its world premiere at Busan, the film toured the world with halts at London BFI, Jio MAMI Mumbai,



Goteborg, Calgary, Stuttgart, Paris, The Hague, Melbourne, New York, Paris, and so on. The film adapted four separate well-known and grim folktales of medieval Assam revolving around foeticide, possession, dark belief, magic and witchcraft, best described as a horror anthology. The script by the director himself – who holds a masters degree in film and drama from the University of Reading, UK – blended the stories tactfully without any modern interpretation to their gist. Bhaskar's second feature script *Aamis* (Ravering, 2018) was an official selection for 2017 Asian Project Market (Asian Cinema Fund's co-production market) in Busan. Premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, and with two awards added in its kitty from the Singapore South Asian International Film Festival, *Aamis* is a next-step-forward-film from its maker who feels that Assamese filmmakers are culturally more analogous to the Orient rather than to the pan-Indian mainstream. The film explores themes of forbidden love and the curious relationship between a married paediatrician and her younger friend who is a PhD student of anthropology researching food habits in northeast India. The young man introduces her to a variety of fresh, organic, exotic meat with their passion deepening in the discovery and sharing of food but the possibility of togetherness eluding them. The idea of craving for one kind of flesh makes *Aamis* a food movie, while the fulfilling the desire for flesh of another variety makes it a romantic drama. Again for a gory murder scene with most unusual logical end turns it to a chilling crime thriller, but the logic also makes it an absurd drama. In short, the film moves towards a twilight zone that challenges the viewers with genre-defying motif with shocking details that is not far from a Kim Ki-duk or Nagisa Oshima's. Such attributes are readily

appreciated at the film festival circuit, but the local public domain is still non-committal.

Rima and Bhaskar's achievements do not mean that the medium has come out of its fledgling existence, thereby making film art a highly risky proposition. This is happening largely because of the nexus between film distributors and exhibitors on one hand, and the Bollywood-influenced mindset of the public on the other hand. Given this situation, there will be no change in the overall film culture if some formidable changes are not enforced. This long-felt necessity for a healthy growth of cinema in Assam should have been hallmark of the state film policy. Following more than a year and half of threadbare discussion, the "Assam State Film Policy Rules 2019" was declared in August, 2019. Surprisingly, the policy rules were declared in an odd manner as the drafting committee members were kept in the dark for a good nine months of gestation period. What is more vexing is its total silence on film society movement, film literature and non-government film festivals and other initiatives taken by various bodies who are actually responsible for taking the film culture forward through difficult times. The rules of subsidy and award are also far from fulfilling expectations of new filmmakers of the state.

The policy rules thus is least expected to help fill the void in film culture and in realization of wider appreciation of film aesthetics. Because of this void, any dissent over a popular film draws instant trolling in the social media. It happened again when popular singer, actor, film director Zubeen Garg released



his latest film *Kanchanjangha* (2019) to a thunderous box office success, in spite of it being a typical melodramatic, romantic action movie that pitted resentment and frustration of young people in false premise. The film appears a clichéd copycat tale of romance, deprivation, conflict, challenge and retaliation all put on the screen in a rush; yet any criticism and debate over its artistic demerits are rejected indecently by the maker's arrogant followers. Their attitude might smack of the rude behaviour meted out, for instance, to the *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott for his analysis of Hollywood blockbuster *Avengers Assemble* (2012) or to M. K. Raghavendra for his take on one of the highest-grossing Indian films *Bahubali: The Beginning* (2015). If lovers of cinema are disdainful of criticism, then it may well be said that cinema in a given time or space has just ceases to form an integral part of modern cultural ecosystem. But this outcome is a necessary devil riding the multi-eyed digital leviathan. A film policy which refuses to address these broader concerns will do no good to the related film industry however itsy-bitsy the industry might be. The moot question therefore remains valid and is casting its shadow of fear over the future state of Assamese cinema. The onus will clearly lie on the hands of the foresighted young, not the ones who sport bankruptcy with little shame or sense.

Manoj Barpujari is a Member of the Fipresci-India. He is based in Guwahati.