

Article

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Female Film Directors from Assam: Paradigm Shift in Cinematic Spaces



Santwana Bardoloi

Over the eight decades of the history of Assamese cinema, Assam saw the emergence of a bunch of talented Assamese female filmmakers who, with their own distinctive cinematic techniques and narrative style, have got a niche at the national and international space. Their films address a wide range of subjects, which reflect a nuanced understanding of the socio-political situation of Assam—woman's identity, real-life situations and struggle of women in the male-dominated society, local socio-political, cultural and economic issues, retelling of folk-tales etc. The writers of the journal named *The women and Film* hold the belief that when the stereotypes fade or when there are more women filmmakers, the reflection we see on screen will be really transformed. Women will be portrayed as they are, rather than as servile caricatures'ⁱ

My article primarily addresses the female filmmakers of Assam, who focus on the construction of woman and reflect the social-political and cultural milieu of Assam, leaving out the female filmmakers who make the short

and documentary films for a future discussion because that requires a different space altogether. Furthermore, the article focusses those Assamese female filmmakers who have made full length feature films in different languages of Assam and made films at the setting of Assam. For instance, the filmmakers like Reema Kagti, who made some super hit Hindi films like *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd.* (2007), *Talash* (2012), *Gold* (2018 film) and Pinky Brahma Choudhury, the first girl from Assam to join the Film Direction Course at Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, made the documentary *Duphang-ni Solo*, (1997), will not be considered in this article.

The journey of the female Assamese filmmakers began with Suprabha Devi in the 1980s, when she made the film, *Nayanmoni* (Apple of the Eye, 1984), a family drama revolving around a widow mother and her two sons-Parag and Arup. Again, she made her second film, *Sarabjan* (The omniscient, 1985, co-directed by Hiren Choudhury,) is based on a folktale of Assam, taken from *Burhi Aair*

Sadhu (Grand Mother's Tales) which is a collection of folktales, compiled by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. In the year 1990, another female filmmaker Kuntala Deka came up with her film *Kanaklata*, a tale of supreme sacrifice of a seventeen-year-old girl named Kanaklata who joined Mahatma Gandhi's Quit India Movement of 1942 with the call "Do or Die". The sacrifice of Kanaklata, hitherto unknown and undocumented at the national narrative, remains as a symbol of resistance that came from Assamese women. Both the filmmakers- Suprabha Devi and Kuntala Deka- initiated the journey of the female filmmakers in Assam. Their films were more focused on the storyline than the narrative technique.

But it was Dr. Santwana Bardoloi who brought remarkable change to both theme and narrative of Assamese female film-making discourse. Bardoloi's critically acclaimed debut



Manju Borah

film *Adajya* (The Flight, 1996) was a landmark film. *Adajya* (The Flight, 1996) based on Indira Goswami's *Dontal Haatir Uiye Khuwa Howdah*, (The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker), is set in the 1940s of Amranga Sattrā of South Kamrup, Assam. The film recounts the miserable position of Brahmin widows in an orthodox Assamese society. Though the film recounts a tale of three Brahmin widows - Giribala, her aunt Durga and Saru Gossain-ee, yet it zooms in the plight of Giribala and at the same time, her fight against the orthodox Brahmin society of Assam. Giribala, who lost her husband at her young age, is brought back

from her in-law's house by her parents. Her life at her parents' house, is trapped in the rigid rules of the society. She fights against this old practice. A Brahmin widow is forbidden to eat non-vegetarian food, but she secretly eats the mutton curry on her grand father's annual funeral ceremony and when she is caught by her family members, she is purified through some rituals. She constantly attempts to come out of this trap. She unmasks the face of the Brahmin male by saying to Durga, her window aunt, "My husband wore shoes only while visiting that woman. Every night he would go to her. He said, a wife is always dry, cold. A low caste mistress is warm who has passion." Giribala's mother who is a very conservative woman, says to her daughter Giribala, "Do you even know about the rules for a Brahmin widow? Just for touching a low caste man, you will be purified by fire like that sacrificial goat." Giribala's suicide at the end of the film poses a question to the age-old traditions of the Brahmins in the Assamese society.

Assamese audience had to wait for two decades to watch Bardoloi's second film *Maj Rati Keteki* (2017). The film narrates an author's quest for truth in life and raises questions with subtlety on diverse issues. The film unfolds with the award-winning author Dr Priyendu Hazarika who is invited to talk on "Truth about Truth in Autobiography" at 4th Literary Festival of Guwahati, who returns Guwahati after a gap of ten years. Dr. Hazarika feels that the city Guwahati is not the same anymore, and meets an upcoming young author, Sumona who is promised by the Publisher Bipul Dutta to publish her first book. She is trapped in her dream and even agrees to compromise with the publisher who exploits her. When Dr. Hazarika finds how Sumona is exploited by the unscrupulous publisher, he decides to talk to his own publisher for her book. With the flashback, we are taken to Dr. Hazarika's childhood memories-- he remembers people he loved and lost. When the filmmaker takes us back to Dr. Hazarika's childhood in the 1970s, the filmmaker brings in various issues

as subtext: child exploitation through Bhola Charan Ray, who is kept as domestic helper at Kartik Das's house, a Government employee, but while one day trying to escape from the owner house, Bhola was found dead in the river. The child abuse which is happening in our society, and which sometimes remains unnoticed, is brought through the character of the lecherous shopkeeper, who attempts to abuse Dr. Hazarika's little sister. While the issue of old age loneliness, a universal concern in modern day life, is brought in through the old uncle Sarma, whose son Atanu and daughter-in-law live in the USA. While the caste discrimination is highlighted through Papori's parents when one day Dr. Hazarika's elder brother went to clear doubts in some subjects for his classmate Papori just before Board exam. The film takes the audience to the past and brings back to the present- both the time spaces reflect a society – about which one can not truthful for both highlight social maladies in different sorts. Both the films- *Adajya* (The Flight) and *Maj Rati Keteki* (2017)- won National Awards for Best Regional Film in Assamese and travelled in various national and International film festivals.

One Assamese female filmmaker who is persistently making films for the last two decades and giving the cinema of Assam a distinctive identity at the National and International Film Festivals, is critically acclaimed filmmaker Manju Borah. Borah's films, with the exception of her film *Anya Ek Yatra* (Another Exploration, 2001), are intertwined with the intricacies of the life, the struggle of the common man, gender stereotyping, hegemonic patriarchy, local histories. These diverse concerns are held together by a commonality- the voice of humanity. The characters in her films like Samiran, Aakashitora, Ila, Raimali, Paukam- are ordinary human beings but given allegorical dimensions by Borah.

In her twenty-year journey as a filmmaker, she made ten films- seven in Assamese: *Bai-*

bhab (A Scam in Verse, 1999), *Anya Ek Yatra* (Another Exploration, 2001), *Aakashitorar Kothare* (A Tale Told Thousand Times, 2003)



Reema Borah

Laaz (Shame, 2004), *Joymati* (The Saviour, 2006), *Aai Kot Nai* (Ma, 2008), *Sarbagunakar Srimanta Sankardeva* (2016, 2D Assamese film), one in Mising language *Ko:Yad* (A Silent Way, 2012) and one in Bodo, *Dau Huduni Methai* (Song of the Horned Owl, 2015). It is notable that both Mising and Bodo are two local ethnic languages of Assam). She made one film in Pangchenpa: *Bishkanyar Deshot* (In the Land of Poison Women, 2019), an ethnic language of Arunachal Pradesh. Borah's 2D animation biographical film *Sarbagunakar Srimanta Sankardeva* (2016, Assamese), is about the life and philosophy of Srimanta Sankardeva, a 15th century poet, playwright, and social-religious reformer. Besides winning multiple national and International awards, she too served as juror in numerous Film Festivals.

Manju Borah's *Baibhab* (1999) focuses on the disturbed psychology of Samiran Choudhury, a 37-year-old man, who is haunted by a childhood trauma of accidentally killing his younger brother. He suffers from a quasi-Hamletian alienation and his inner turmoil is reflected when he speaks out in a soliloquy, 'I have never been able to make myself understood to anyone.' Again, Samiran tells his nephew in the zoo, "It can see only through the bars of

the cage/ The look on its eyes is tired and hazy as if covered by mist/ My situation is similar.’ The film won Special Mention (Feature Film) at the 47th National Film Awards for her poetic expression in her debut film and also won Best Film in Asia, at 6th Dhaka International Film Festival, 2000.

Borah’s second film *Any Ek Yatra* (Another Exploration, 2001) incorporated with the commercial elements of songs, dances and fight sequence, is a tale of a young man, Vikram,



Bobby Sarma Baruah

who is trapped in his sense of responsibility as a son when his father Dr. Bidhan Saikia was arrested by the police for experimenting to replace the ailing heart of the patient with that of a pig’s heart, and eventually the patient died.

Borah’s next film *Aakashitorar Kothare* (A Tale Told Thousand Times, 2003), a woman-oriented film, speaks of the quest of woman identity in the patriarchal social set up, and how the women, in search of their voice, had to merge with the male identity. The film revolves around a twenty-five-year-old research scholar Aakashitora, whose research topic is the ‘sacrifices by women for the greatness of

the society’, and who travels different rural places of Assam to know how the traditions and customs have been making women as a symbol of sacrifice. The film makes the reference of the sacrifices of devdasis in the male dominated societies, deodhani dance that signifies male dominance, Hudum Puja of Rajbangsi where women surrender to Hudum (Rain god) for the well being of the society. During her research work, she meets Raghab Choudhury, a Deputy Commissioner, who encourages her in her research work, and gradually they became close, and eventually they got married. Her dream to pursue her research work is shattered when her husband says to her, “I want a wife, not research scholar...” Even Raghab’s older mother who was a graduate at the time of her marriage, says to her, “The days of a married woman end in serving the husband. As the children come along, she gets even more busy.” The film is a critique of the male dominated society who constructs woman as wife, mother, and does not give space to search for their own identity. The film went on winning two National Awards - Best Assamese Film, and Best Female Playback Singer award for its music director Tarali Sarma at the 51st National Awards.

Borah’s next film *Laaz* (Shame, 2004) portrays the plight of the poverty-stricken fishing community of Assam who are trapped in between their perpetual state of poverty and the stigma of low caste. The protagonist of the film, Ila Das, a school going student and the daughter of fisher man, undergoes several adversities in her young age: her experience of untouchability at the village Naamghar, regular absence in her school as she takes the responsibility to look after her ailing father and two siblings due to sudden demise of her mother. In fact, the filmmaker shows the other side of the society when the naamghar bhakat treats Runu, the rich girl, in a different way. When one day, her school teachers come to her village to meet her, the filmmaker ends the film with her words speaking to her teachers

that she did not go to school as she can not afford to buy even an undergarment. The film was selected at London Film Festival (LFF), and many other film festivals

Borah then made a historical film *Joymati* (The Saviour, 2006). The film, set in 17th-century Assam, is based on the life of Joymoti, an Ahom princess who laid down her life for the country and for her husband. The film begins with the narration how the founder of Ahom dynasty Chukafa came to Assam in 1215 through the Patkai Mountains, and how he established the capital of Ahom kingdom at Charaideo in 1228 and the Ahom dynasty helps to form a single Assamese community from the diverse tribes scattered in both sides of the Brahmaputra river. The film also focuses on how the Ahom defeated the Mughals at Saraighat in 1670 under the valour leadership of Lachit Barphukan. Then gradually, the narrative goes to the life of Joymoti, who was tortured to death when she did not reveal her husband's whereabouts. The film was screened at IFFI, Goa.

Borah's film *Aai Kot Nai* (Ma, 2008) that won the Best Film on National integration at the



Rima Das

56th National Awards, deals with the border conflict in the provinces of Assam and Naga-

land. The film zooms in a village located in the Nagaland-Assam border area which is a cluster of so many people with different religion. The film begins with bhauna enacting a fighting scene from the epic Mahabharata. The filmmaker wants to establish through this scene the frequent conflict that takes place between the Assamese and the Nagas. One character says in the film: "Can you see the plight of clash between brothers? While watching the battle scene in the drama, I was reflecting right from Kurukshetra to the Naga-Assamese discord, the root is always land and border."

Borah's Bodo film *Dau Huduni Methai* (Song of The Horned Owl, 2015), unfolds the complexity and conflicts at the Bodoland. Set at the Bodoland of Assam, the film narrates the socio-political disturbances among the Bodo. The protagonist Raimali when she goes to the village shop, hears the news in the radio: "This is All India Radio. We have received report that five militants were killed in an encounter with the security forces at Dwimuguri near Serfangguri in Kokrajhar district early this morning. A jawan too was injured in the incident. A few militants managed to escape. Three AK 56 rifles, three detonators and several live cartridges were recorded from the spot..." In a flashback technique, the filmmaker shows through her eyes, how insurgency in Bodoland has changed her life, her lover, and their families. She is raped and left alone in a deserted house. Her lover dies in an encounter, and later, she dies by drowning in the river.

Ko: Yad (A Silent Way) 2012, based on the story of the same name by Anil Panging, is a poignant depiction of the life struggle of the Mising people living by the river Brahmaputra. The film shows through the journey of the protagonist, Paukam from his youth to the old age how he struggles to run his family, and how his children, first by his doctor son, followed by the younger son, and daugh-

ter betrayed. The boat which was given by his father was the companion to the times of happiness and sorrow.” But eventually his boat- the only source of income to run his family, sank in the river, thus making his world more miserable. He cries out in agony: “You should have drowned this Paukam along with his boat.” The film also brings in a subtle way the patriarchal social set up and polygamy through drawing the living pattern of the missing people in Assam. The film won Best Film in Mising and Best Cinematography Award at the 60th National Film Award for 2012.

But the filmmaker who gave an Assamese Cinema a new identity in the International Film circuits is Rima Das, through her second feature film *Village Rockstars* (2017). She created history by becoming the first Assamese female filmmaker to win Golden Lotus, and it also bagged awards in the Best Child Artist, Best Audiography and Best Editing categories at the 65th National Film Awards in 2018. Das became the first filmmaker from the region to get the Oscar entry from India in 2018.

When Rima Das made her first feature film *Antardrishti* (Man with the Binoculars, 2016) on the life of a retired geography teacher, they went almost unnoticed. Her second film *Village Rockstars* (2017) put her name to global map. Set in the remote village of Chhayagaon in Assam, *Village Rockstars* is about a little village girl named Dhunu who dreams to have a real guitar and forms a music band with her friends – Manabendra, (her elder brother), Rinku, Boloram, Bishnu and Bhaskar – in the village. The band members lead a carefree life, climbs up the trees, go for fishing and walk together to school. The film narrates the day to day struggles of common villagers and the way they deal with poverty and natural disasters. In the film, Dhunu’s family that consists of her widowed mother Basanti and her elder brother Manabendra, represents the life

of the villagers.

Das’ third feature *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018) that bagged the Best Assamese Film at the 66th National Film Awards, is a quest of Bulbul’s voice to sing the song of life. It addresses issues like love and loss, moral policing, child abuse, male gaze, patriarchal social set up, traditional rules for girls and notion of effeminacy in Assamese society, and they emerge as various sub-texts of the film. The film is set in the unobtrusive idyllic village in Assam and zooms in on the fifteen-year-old three teenagers, namely – Bulbul, Bonnie and Suman who are in quest of their true selves. When the narrative shifts from the carefree world to the confined school life, it is revealed that Bulbul and Bonny are in love with Parag and Deep respectively. When Bulbul loses her friend Bonnie, Bonny’s mother tells Bulbul on the riverbank while watching the sunset, “If you listen to people too much, your whole life will be ruined. Do what your heart says.” From here, Bulbul starts finding her voice.

Another filmmaker who was trained at the country’s premier film school- Film and Television Institute of India, Pune- is Reema Borah. Borah is known for her nuanced understanding of cinematic language, for taking up contemporary socio-political issues and narrating the stories of ordinary people’s life-struggle. She debuted her film career with critically acclaimed feature film *Bokul* (2015). With multi-layered narrative, the film represents a tumultuous period in the socio-political sphere of Assam where human values have no space. The film *Bokul* illustrates three characters– an old fisherman, a young rickshaw puller, and a single mother – all are named Bokul, representing the varied slices of human lives. The film is a poetic depiction of human pain, drawn through the characters of the three Bokul. The protagonist Raktim is an observer who sees his town changing with time. While depicting the lives of three characters named Bokul, the filmmaker uses

different frame composition and camera technique to reflect the character's mind as well as his/her behavioural pattern. Her upcoming film *Noi*, is a quest for the meaning of life. It depicts the journey of an old man who sees different phases and faces of human life, and his search remains ambiguous.

Filmmaker Deepa Bhattacharjee who made the one film only *The Sixth Day of Creation* (2005), is about man-nature relationship, and shows through an artist's struggle to terms to life due to the shifting scenario in Nature. One day, the artist rescues a woman, draped in white saree when she goes to commit suicide, and gives her shelter at his home. He draws painting of the lady in her varying moods. One friend comes to buy his paintings, but he does not like to part with his creations. In fact, the film is a depiction of the philosophical journey of an artist who looks at the world while human beings are destroying the mother nature.

A filmmaker whose films are well appreciated at different National and International Film Festivals is Bobby Sarma Baruah. She made three feature films: *Adomya* (Invincible, 2014, Assamese), *Sonar Baran Pakhi* (The Golden Wing 2016, Rajbongshis), and *Mishing* (The Apparition, 2018) in the Sherdukpen dialect of Arunachal Pradesh. She also served as juror at different film festivals. She debuted with the film *Adomya* (Invincible, 2014) that depicts the story of a woman- Jury, who after getting married to a young engineer, is infected with HIV. She comes back to her village where she gives birth to a baby girl named Jonak. This film shows the position of women in a patriarchal society and how often they have to fight against the social taboos and prejudices. The protagonist fights back such prejudices with great courage and conviction. The film bagged the Best Film Award in spiritual category at the 13th Dhaka International Film festival. Baruah's second film *Sonar Baran Pakhi* is based on the life of Pratima Barua Pandey who is best known for her contri-

bution to Assamese music. The film, a truthful depiction of an artist's life, traces the journey of Pratima Barua Pandey from her childhood to the time of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's discovering her. The film won multiple awards for this film such as Best Audience Award at the 15th Dhaka International Film Festival, 2017, Grand jury Award at the 15th Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, 2017 and so on. "As a film lover I intended to capture the uncommon threads of life of this gifted artist who, despite being a girl child and being born and brought up in a royal family braved all odds, mingled with *mahouts* (elephant drivers), *moishals* (buffalo boys) and *naworias* (river boatmen) in a rural ambiance", says Baruah.

A filmmaker who made both popular film and meaningful film is Suman Haripriya. She won Best Assamese film at the 53rd National Film Awards for her film *Kadamtole Krishna Nache* (Krishna Dances under Kadam Tree, 2005).

The film brilliantly reflects the traditional, cultural, and colourful Vaishnavite Assamese society, created by 15th century Great Saint Sankardeva. The film shows how Sanakardeva used the performing arts like dance, music, devotional songs and plays as the tool to unifying the people of diverse caste and creed into spiritual fraternity. Filmmaker Suman Haripriya said that Shankar Deva's objective was to preach religious pursuit through devotion among all section of people cutting across caste, creed and religious differences, and that's why she had chosen the theme finding it very relevant today.ⁱⁱ

Filmmaker Junmoni Khaund debuted with the film *Tula Aru Teja* (Tula and Teja, 2012), a folk tale taken from *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, a collection of stories compiled by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. It is a story of conspiracy portrayed through a farmer and his two wives. It narrates how the first wife, and also the second wife's daughter Tula become the victim of the farmer's second wife's conspiracy. The filmmaker

offers a modern interpretation at the end of the film that a man should not two wives to have a peaceful life.

Rajani Basumatary's debut Assamese feature film *Raag* (2014), set in Delhi, is the story of a Hindustani singer Radhika, and her businessman husband Alok, and how she meets the painter Iqbal, and her childhood friend Partho. Basumatary takes the insurgency problem of Assam as the theme of her second film, *Jwlwi* (The Seed, 2019), made in Bodo language. The film shows a time span from the year 1997 to 2014 and depicts the journey of Alaari both as a mother and as a common woman who struggles to survive in the face of familial and social hurdles. The film begins with the year 1997 at a time when insurgency in Assam was on the peak, particularly in Bodoland. Alaari's husband who believed that freedom is a utopian idea, was killed inadvertently in the market while a cross firing took place between the Indian Army and the rebels. But gradually she is more concerned with her only son Erakdao, who is growing up. Then the filmmaker gives us the time frame- 2008, when Erakdao was waiting for his degree result, and her mother wants to keep away from the complex situation of Assam, and advises him to go out of Assam for his further studies. But he joins the rebel group. Then, we are given the time frame 2014. Alaari learns that her son Erikdao, the Unit commander is succumbed to death in an ambush. The film shows how she tries to save the last of her family: she goes to Thailand to meet Boonsri, her daughter in law and grandson Dwimalu. Dwimalu is the last seed whom Alaari must save for her family and for the Bodo. Rajani believes that gun power is not real power.

Popular Films

Another brigade of Assamese filmmakers made films to entertain the audience with the commercial formula- romance, song, dance, and fight. Their films are well received among

the audience. One such filmmaker who made some commercially hit films is Simple Gogoi who debuted with the film *Tumi Jodi Kuwa* (If You Say, 2013). The film, a musical, romantic drama, narrates the relationship of Friendship, Love, and Life through a group of young friends who formed a music band, and then their struggle to sustain and fight back. Prerana Barbarooah made a film *Tumi Aahibaane* (Will You Come, 2017). The film, a musical romance, centres round Nibir, a music director and his childhood friend Birina and their love. Suman Haripriya made two commercially hit Assamese films: *Koina Mur Dhunia* (My Bride is Beautiful, 2001), a romantic film, and *Kokadeutar Gharjonwai* (Grandfather's son-in-law, 2002), a family drama. Filmmaker Junmoni Khaund made her second film *Sumporoxote* (The Touch of the Kiss, 2014) is a romantic thriller.

Two female filmmakers of Assam, although they have not made feature length films, are: Anjali Das and Sakina Rashid Hazarika. Anjali Das' *Sati Radhika* (2003), a 58-minute short fiction film, focusses on how Srimanta Sankardev tried to exterminate the superstition, social taboos and casteism from the society. The film unfolds with an incident that took place while Sankardev encounters with an ordinary woman -Radhika, who belongs to the fishermen community--of Bordowas Satra. The film won National award for Best Short Fiction Film at the 51st National Film Awards,

Sakina Rashid Hazarika's film *Fish in the bowl* (2016), that was screened at the Delhi International Film Festival in 2015, is a very sensitive subject dealing with how woman's voice is subdued by circumstance. The film is a depiction of domestic violence that is prevalent in the society ranging from upper to lower class, and sometimes, the victim deliberately chooses to remain trapped in such state. "My idea behind choosing this sensitive issue was to highlight the psychology of many a liberated and idealistic woman for whom such a

tribulation is way beyond imagination until it actually does happen. The subsequent disbelief, turmoil and self-doubt and eventual acceptance of everything as fate (that defeats the very ideals that she stood for) needed to be questioned. Doesn't this meek reconciliation erode away the lofty ideals and bring the so-called elite lady at the par with her underprivileged counterpart?", says filmmaker Sakina.

A paradigm shift has been witnessed in the cinematic space of the female filmmakers of Assam, from Suprabha Devi to Rima Das, in their approach and technique, more specifically in their dealing with the themes - from family drama to the quest for identity, and from historical issues to socio-political upheavals

of the region. Furthermore, it is a good sign that many film festivals, such as the Cairo International Women's Film Festival in Egypt, the Barcelona International Women's Film Festival, are coming up to promote female filmmakers.

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