

Article

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## Assamese Cinematic Narratives: The Changing Landscape

### Introduction

What constitutes a cinema and how its meaning or magnitude is constructed have captivated the film theorists for long. David Bordwell in his book *Poetics of Cinema* proposes that in narrative there are three dimensions that constitute the totality of narrative structure. These are *Story world* (its agent, circumstances and surroundings), *plot structure* (the arrangement of the parts of the narrative), and *narration* (moment by moment flow of information about the story world, 88). Defining what narrative is, Bordwell further says that it is ‘a process by which the film prompts the viewer to construct the *fabula* (the story’s state of affairs and event) on the basis of *syuzet* (the arrangement of the story’s state of affair in the narrative) organization and stylistic patterning’ (98). Narrative may be treated as a *representation*, considering the story’s world, its portrayal of reality and its broader meanings. Secondly, narrative has a *structural value* depending on a particular way of combining parts to make a whole. Thirdly narrative is a *process*; the activity of selecting, arranging and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time- bound effects on a perceiver.

In visual analysis, images are considered as representation that gives ideas and meaning to the world of cinema. This is because, any kind of film and television product construct time and space with the conventions of the media and point of view of the director. With the help of editing, editor creates and recreates events, confers coded information and gives scope to the audience to recognise their ideology and interest in the visual experience. The context of viewing, content of production and looking (form a meaning by denotation, semiotics, social conventions, recognition and identity of audience) or gaze<sup>1</sup> play significant roles in creating patterns for subtle meaning of the images (Collier 35-60). Narrative representation relates

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<sup>1</sup>Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Screen* (1975) influenced the gaze theory worldwide. In this essay, she argued about the patriarchal structure of an ‘active’ male gaze. Clifford T. Manlove in his essay “Visual Drive and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock and Mulvey” in *Cinema Journal* (2007), observes that gaze theory has also made its way into cultural studies, queer theory, post-colonial studies, holocaust study, critical race theory etc. He further comments that in most cases, gaze is used to help explain hierarchical power relations between two or more groups or, alternatively between two groups and an object.

participants in the terms of 'doings and happenings' of unfolding events. The *narration* is constantly at work seeking to justify implicitly or explicitly the possibility and happenings of the events.

### **The Journey of Assamese Cinema**

Assamese cinema has traversed a path from the first film *Joymoti* directed by Jyotiprasad Agarwala in 1935. The language of Assamese cinema since then has transformed from a linear narrative to an experimental one. Jyotiprasad Agarwala tried to establish cinematic language in Assamese film and experimentation on cinematic language was later carried out by Padum Barua, a noted director Assamese cinema of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Direct narratives dominated Assamese cinema for decades with exception of a few directors. The ecology of the cinematic language has evolved with new directors' who prefer layered, experimental and discontinuous non-linear and hyperlinked narrative.

Our approach in this study is based on observation. We did not analyse individual images or individual 'visual texts', instead, we allow description of fields of visual representation by describing the constituents of one or more defined areas of representation, periods or types of images (14). Exploration on the changing landscape of narrative structure with few selected samples of the narrative pattern are also included. Framing of period in a discrete manner is done deliberately, keeping in mind the commonness or *narrative shifts* of the films which can be considered as a land mark in the Assamese cinema tapestry.

### **Early cinema (1935-1950)**

Jyotiprasad Agarwala, the doyen of Assamese music and drama, made the first Assamese film in 1935, a mere four years after *Alam Ara*, the first Indian talkie. It was a period film based on seventeenth century Ahom Kingdom in Assam<sup>2</sup>. He learned the language and form of cinema at the Edinburgh University in the late 1920s. *Joymoti*, is based on a powerful, assertive and self-respecting Assamese woman constructed in a linear narrative pattern. Through, *Joymoti*, Jyotiprasad bucked the prevailing trend of Indian cinema which portrayed women as passive and submissive. A total of eight films were made during this time. Historical tales dominated the early phase of Assamese film *fabula*.

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<sup>2</sup>Apurba Sarma in his book (2013) states that "Jyotiprasad researched extensively into the Ahom history, travelers notes and also the writings of eminent scholars, to reconstruct the period with sets, costumes, apparels and ornaments, manners and customs and also the speech-patterns of the characters belonging to varied social groups of the time (p 19)

### **Germinating Phase (1950-1960)**

A total of 18 films were made during this period, which focused on varied themes, ranging from mythological and historical to socially relevant one. It was a struggling phase for the industry to try various aspects of cinematic narrative. Apart from that, Assamese films initiated the venture of exploring into international arena during this time. *Puberun* (The Sunrise, 1959), directed by renowned filmmaker Prabhat Mukherjee, was an Indian entry at the Berlin International Film Festival. Dada Saheb Phalke awardee Bhupen Hazarika directed his debut film *Era Bator Sur* (Tunes of the Abandoned Road) in 1956. It was the first Assamese film to use background score and playback singing. Lata Mangeshkar, Hemant Kumar and Sandhya Mukherjee lent their voices in addition to Hazarika himself. This period also marked the entry of Nip Barua, a director who contributed immensely in the commercialisation of Assamese films.

### **Commercialization of Assamese Cinema (1961-1975)**

This period of Assamese cinema is considered as a 'golden phase' by many film enthusiasts considering the simplification of form and narrative contents in the films that appealed to the taste of middle-class cinegoers. Forty-five films were produced during the period. Brajen Baruah provided the Midas touch to the industry through his commercially successful films. *Dr Bezbaruah* (1969), heavily influenced by mainstream Hindi cinema, became the first Assamese crime thriller (and thus, influence of Hindi cinema slowly seeped in Assamese films<sup>3</sup>). Layered, non-linear narrative was experimented in this film for the first time and became a box office hit. It was the first film shot entirely in Assam with a unit of local artistes and technicians (Deka, 2004). Pulok Gogoi ventured into the growing commercial industry with his film *Khoj* (1975). Although the film could not attract the audience, Pulok Gogoi is regarded as one of the finest directors in Assamese Film industry in terms of his experimentations in narrative formats. Many of the films made predominantly in linear narrative in the 1970s were commercially successful.

### **Realism in Assamese Cinema (1976-1977)**

Realism in Assamese cinema truly began with Padum Baruah's maiden venture, *Ganga Chilonir Pakhi* (Feathers of the Tern, 1976), based on a novel of the same name by Lakshmi Nandan Bora. It has a linear

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<sup>3</sup>Noted Film critic late Pabitra Kumar Deka wrote that Brajen Barua advised his new hero Biju Phukan to watch Hindi films regularly (*Brajen Barua* by Pabitra Kumar Deka, in "Asomiya Choloচিত্রর Bhojisyat-Bartaman-1": Kotha Guwahati, (Ed) Dev Goswami, R, 2008, p 26)

narrative. Barua himself stated in the preface of the print version of the film that after viewing *Joymoti* by Agarwala, he realized that depiction of intricacies of any society is possible only through cinema and not in an artificial situation with overstated dialogue and melodramatic acting (Das, 2013, p 52). The film made its mark in the use of cinematic language with extensive cultivation of semiotics in depicting loneliness of characters as well as opened the scope of parallelism in Assamese cinema. Noted film critic Apurba Sarma writes, ‘...Barua’s *Ganga Chilanir Pakhi* brought a breath of fresh air to the staid atmosphere of Assamese cinema. But it still failed to create an immediate awakening in the Assamese mind and except for a handful of discerning cineastes, the general Assamese audience and the press failed to appreciate the film’ (Souvenir, Jonaki 2020).

Assamese cinema became a part of Indian parallel cinema movement with Bhabendra Nath Saikia’s, *Sandhyarag* (The Evening Song, 1977). Saikia continued to bring laurels to Assamese cinema with his neorealistic, socially relevant films, such as *Agnisnan* (1985), *Anirban* (1980) and *Kolahol* (1988). Saikia preferred linear narrative in his early films while *Sarathi* (1992) and *Abartan* (1993) were made in a non-linear structure.

### **The Acceleration (1978-2015)**

The road chosen by Padum Barua paved a new dimension into Assamese film industry. The 1980s saw the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers, both in commercial and parallel cinema. The respectability that Assamese cinema has achieved vis-à-vis Indian cinema owes much to Jahnu Baruah’s volume of work. He began his illustrious career with *Aparoopaa* (Expectation) in 1982. However, it was his *Halodhiya Charaye Baodhan Khai* (The Catastrophe, 1987) that catapulted Assamese cinema to the international platform. Indra Bania, who played the protagonist in the film, received the Best Actor Award at the Locarno International Film Festival. In the 1990s, Jahnu Barua continued battle for the cause of meaningful cinema with works like *Bonani* (The Forest), *Firingoti* (The Spark) and *Hkhagaraloi Bahu Door*.

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of quite a few promising directors – Gautam Bora, Sanjiv Hazarika, Bidyut Chakraborty, Santwana Bordoloi and Manju Borah - who made their presence felt at the national and international circuits. In the late nineties Assamese film industry showed signs of revival, with films like *Joubone Amoni Kore* (1998) by Ashok Kumar Bishaya. Commercial Hindi films heavily influenced Assamese films at the turn of the century. A few young directors like Sanjib Sabhapandit, Suman Haripriya, Arup Manna, Chandra Mudoi and Moirangthem Maniram made socially relevant films dealing with human relationships and values

Munin Barua created history in Assamese cinema in terms of commercialization of Assamese films with almost all of his films overwhelming response from the audience. Feature films in languages other than Assamese started during this period as well. Mission China (2017) directed by Jubeen Garg, a popular singer in Assam, became commercially successful.

The period also established two different domains in filmmaking approach - the *parallelism* focusing on reality in films and *commercialism* leading to a market-oriented storytelling. Regardless of the domain, the *three-act narrative structure* remained popular during this period. Syd Field in his influential book *Screenplay* argues that classical narrative (Hollywood in reference) has three-act structure. In the *first act* a problem or conflict is established; in the *second act* the conflict moves to a peak of intensity and in the *third act* the climax and denouement takes place. Narratologist's agree that narrative structure of storytelling in general establishes the character's goal in the beginning and revises and refines it to take it to the climax and conclusion. According to Bordwell, a narrative is designed to give strong and accurate first impression of their characters and is rarely designed to introduce evidence that would make change in the audience mindset (115). Additionally, practise of non-linear film narrative slowly took a firm ground in both the realm.

Single stranded narrative (where one main character is focused and take the lead to reveal the story) is also observed to emerged in the hands of several filmmakers like Jahnu Barua (*Firingoti*, 1992), Bhabendra Nath Saikia (*Abartan*, 1993), Manju Bora (*Akashitorar Kothare*, 2003) and many others. It was simple exposition mode that the directors preferred in these cinemas to bridge the emotional bonding between audience and the characters.

*Relor Alir Dubori Bon* (Dir. Pulok Gogoi, 1993) is a significant film in terms of narrative construction of this period. Unravelling of subplots through first person narrator was a notable experiment in this cinema. This reminds audience the universal influence of Indian drama where a *sutradhar* narrates the story in dramas. The director here, takes the liberty to include the narrator as a part of the story unlike *sutradhar* and deliberately used camera as a medium in taking the story forward. Establishment of camera 'as a character' on-screen is sensible in *Relor Alir Dubori Bon*. Camera (as a character) syncs the multiple narratives here.

Commercial films on the other hand adopted multi stranded narrative as the most common narrative style. Conflict between rural and urban life, issues related to changing mindsets, unemployment, socio political matters, personal solidarity, insurgency are some of the protuberant areas which constituted the plot structures and thus the storyline of majority of films. *Fabula* of these periods unfolded through well exploration of both linear and non-linear modes of narrative. *Syuzet* is unadorned without much

experimentations in terms of storytelling, light, colour and camera (Budget remain the biggest challenge for the filmmakers as opined by many of the film makers).

Unlike other technical periphery, *sound* in cinema is one of the favourite areas where music directors plays a lot to tune with the storyline. Dance and songs are incorporated as a significant element for expressing emotion of character or to change plots. Silence too are arranged to maintain mood cueing in both the domain. Directors like Jahnu Barua, music director like Sher Choudhury preferred to arrange sound as a character which helps in expressing a situation much stronger than words or human reaction. For example, in *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* (The Catastrophe- based on a novel by Homen Borgohain), the ambience created by the natural sounds of raindrops falling on a empty metallic bowl from the leaking roof of the protagonist Rakheswar (Indra Bania) leaves a deep impact in the minds of audience on the pains of poverty.

### **Experimental Phase (2015- 2019)**

In recent times, due to technological advances, various aspects of filmmaking ranging from production to distribution and projection has become digitalized. With more young filmmakers venturing into the field, Assamese cinema is witnessing remarkable changes in *syuzet* in contemporary period.

Rima Das tried to explore new realism in her film with village life through a few adolescent characters. Heavily influenced by the style of Iranian filmmakers, Rima Das brought laurels to the Assamese film industry, by representing India in Oscar with her debut film *Village Roackstar* (2017). Das's next venture *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018) examined the mind of a teenage transgender in a small village of Assam. In both her films, Das uses natural settings, acting, music and location to give a feel of new realism to the prevailing art of techniques of film production in the state. Her works are devoid of a climax situation in the films and hence ignored the usual three-act structure. For her, events happen with characters as it happens in real life. Bhaskar Hazarika presents a different perspective in the creation of *fabuala* through his film *Kothanodi* (River of Stories, 2015). Hazarika recreates four stories from *Buri ai'r Xadhu* (Grandmother's Tales), a collection of folk tales by renowned Assamese writer Lakshminath Bezbaroa. The film is first of its kind which alters with the original story narrative to fit into modern socio-political problems. It added dark edges contrary to happy endings, insisted on innovative point of view to those folk tales by relating to infanticide and witch hunting in present day context. With adopting multi -narrative approach, the film follows a hyperlinked cinema style, allowing the story to expand and then again bridging each story in the same thread. Hazarika took his liberties with this narrative style, since it draws from folk

tales and have undergone embellishment and rewrites over the years. “There has been a trend of re-imagining folk tales and adding a realist spin to it,” said the filmmaker, This is my cultural heritage and I can take liberties with it. I like stories that are dark and macabre, and I changed the endings – for instance, the original elephant apple story is about a king and his seven queens, one of whom gives birth to the fruit. I made the story about common people” (Ramnath, 2015). Hazarika’s expedition with his next film *Aamis* (The Ravening) in 2019 sets a milestone in Assamese film narrative. It is a story of love affair with a dark twist. “It presents a non-veg metaphor. The film devotes a lot of time to cooking, eating, chatting, texting, and the screenplay, full of dialogue and detailed cooking and eating scenes, delivers it all with a beaming smile and a powerful comment on the politics of foo...” (Sharma, 2019). This film challenges the mainstream narrative and argue for individual freedoms, choices, and basic human right. Hazarika is an independent filmmaker who consciously tries to match the colour of the apparels of the heroine to the changing mood of the plot throughout the film. This is innovative approach is a first for Assamese films wherein a filmmaker tries to express meaning through colour. Unconventional content of the story also gives a unique flavour to the audience.

*Alifa* (2018) is an eco-sensitive cinema made from the perspectives of displaced people. Like many other migrants, the central character Ali comes to Guwahati in search of livelihood and illegally settles at a hill- a protected forest area after erosion of Brahmaputra river turned them homeless at a distant district of Assam. A ‘journalistic’ narration of a Bengali speaking Muslim reflects on the controversial subjects of nationality and migration in Assam (Saikia, 2018). Through Ali, director Dip Choudhury portrays the entwined relationship between migration and environmental issues. Though the filmmaker claims that the film is apolitical, the inherent political undertone created a furore when it was released in Assam (Jonaki 2018). The language spoken by the protagonist is the colloquial Mymensingh dialect (They are referred to as Na-Asomiya or new Assamese who got assimilated and contributed to form the greater Assamese society). Dip Choudhury constructed a multinarrative structure in *Alifa* without camouflaging the vivid societal change.

The depiction of harmonious coexistence of Hindu and Muslim society was a part of Assamese cinema since 1950s. *Siraj* (Dir. Phani Sharma & Bishnu Rabha, 1948) depicting both Hindu and Muslim society was a well-received film of its time. Many films after that were made representing both the society. In these films, Muslim society is an integral part of subplots to construct the totality of *syuzet*. In contrary to this prevailing norm, *Alifa* is presented from the point of view of Ali and his family. As such, the state language Assamese becomes secondary for Ali turning the language into lingua franca for a daily wager like him. Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) approved the language of *Alifa* as Bengali in its certificate. This wonderful narrative aspect of Dip Choudhury, was never attempted by any of the

filmmakers in Assam (earlier films were limited to depicting Muslim characters through mise-en-scene and in adding a few Urdu words in dialogue). But *Alifa* is different from the conventional narrative. The director was able to construct the syuzet in the way to encapsulate the hardship of people who lives at the lower strata of society, whose struggle for survival are very often ignored by sociologists during initial formative stages. The film hence echoes, what James Monaco said, “much of its (cinema’s) meaning comes not from what we see (or hear) but from what we don’t see or more accurately, from an on-going process of comparison of what we see with what we don’t see” (Monaco, 189).

### Conclusion

Narrative plays a pivotal role in generating dynamics like motion, emotion, polarity and more reflecting a deep bonding between character and audience. Synchronized *syuzet* and *fabula* magically dissolves the camera and, screen transcending the audience to a world of imagination. A minute disruption in story telling can strongly distract viewer leading to disruption of psychological resonance between audience and the characters. This reality check is a clear indicator for a mess in narrative construction regardless of budget, length and type of genre the film is representing.

Assamese cinema, which primarily had a linear narrative style, is gradually changing with experimentation with heavily textured, layered, hyperlinked narrative styles. Experiments in creation of characters, use of sound, music and colour augments the flow of narrative. It is sad to see the Assamese film industry which is more than 80 years old is yet to make its distinctive mark in establishing unique stylistic signature in narrative construction. Filmmakers should also focus to explore narratives of various genres in Assamese cinema. For example, though there is a political cinema genre in Assamese cinema, the narrative of post independent political history of Assam is yet to be documented firmly.

Assamese cinema also needs to invest and focus in constructing narrative that will preserve socio-political-cultural and economic narrative. Although there is a political cinema genre in Assamese cinema, the narrative of post independent political history of Assam is yet to be documented objectively. Narrative must contain the essence of pure art form to entertain and to add wings to the imagination of the audience to the world of cinematic structure and meaning.

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