

Article

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A Critical Trajectory of Urban Life World In Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia's Assamese Films



Assamese filmmaker Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia, who was an award winning litterateur of Assam, directed seven Assamese and one Hindi film from 1970s to 1990s. Being a follower of Indian art-house filmmaking tradition, Saikia exploited every possibilities of this genre to bring into notice the changing scenario of Assamese society during that period. This was the time when the urbanization process was taken place in its real sense. Therefore, his films can be read as a historical document of this rural – urban transition. Significantly, this urban

projection was a new addition to Assamese film history, as literary and cinematic imagination in Assam during Saikia's times were largely dominated by the rural or the non-urban subjects and subjectivities. Therefore, Saikia's making of his very first film *Sandhyarag* in 1977 on urban subject-matter was a significant departure from the stereotypical celebration of rurality on the celluloid screen.

It is to be noted that Saikia wrote several short stories and couple of novels on various themes projecting both the rural and the urban world.

However, as far as his film-making is concerned, all of his films, except *Anirban* (1981), describe various aspects of an evolving urban society. This commonality of his films on the theme urban is far from being incidental. Emerging from *Sandhyarag* his cinematic chronology ends at *Itihaas* (1996). His films neither celebrate nor refuse urbanity, but projects urbanity as an inevitable phenomenon that needs to be scrutinized critically.

The concept of urbanity is closely associated with modernization. Rather than the infrastructural development, it is a socio-cultural movement of the society. Along with their lifestyle it brings changes to the minds of the people too. Urbanity has both positive and negative connotations. Same place can be a place of knowledge or freedom for someone, for others it can be a place of homelessness. And while projecting this urban world Saikia consciously put those features in his films.

Saikia started to reflect his views on the urban question from his first movie *Sandhyarag* itself, which showcased “a polemical look at the urban-rural divide, middle-class characters and the irony of changing attitudes towards life” (Barpujari 2013).

The story of this film is located in the historical context of the early urban cultural emergence in Assam, which indeed makes quite a sense to begin Saikia’s cinematic historiography of urbanity. The advent of urbanity during this time is characterized by migration of men and women from villages to the emerging cities and towns; and their life-struggle to survive within the radically changed environment of the urban spaces. The distinction between the village and the city can be conceivable not only in terms of their material differences, but also in terms of their differences towards the intangible values and ethics of life. Thus, despite the continued social transaction between the village and the city, the two worlds remained mutually incompatible.

Sandhyarag can be treated as a critical commentary on the urban-rural dichotomy through the compulsive journey of Charu and Taru to the urban landscape to become housemaids. Though the film opens and ends with Charu’s journey from her village to the emerging city, but both the journeys are

not same as per the situations and purposes of the journeys are concerned. Saikia’s film starts with the accidental death of their father Mukunda, which brings hardship in the livelihood of the family. As a solution to this problem, Charu’s mother decides to send her little daughter (Charu) to serve as a housemaid in an urban household. Like other parallel filmmakers, Saikia’s intension, in *Sandhyarag*, is to explore substantial reasons behind the process of migration from villages to cities and towns. For that purpose, unlike Satyajit Ray’s *Mahanagar* (1963) that opens with some descriptive shots of Calcutta city, to locate the problems of one urban middle-class family, by starting his film from the village, Saikia depicts poverty as a reason behind the migration from the villages to the cities. Saikia exhibits little Charu as a helpless creature; she doesn’t have a choice of her own, and obligated to make her journey to the city. But same Charu, at her adult age, after failing to adjust with village life, decides to come back to the city by taking it as the last option for their survival. This time she is neither innocent nor obligated, but ‘orchestrated with the urban disorders’ and colored with urban culture. The solution to Charu’s crisis, as suggested by Saikia, indicates the assimilation of rural with urban.

After sketching the emerging urban society in *Sandhyarag*, Saikia tellingly demonstrates the growing cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism of urbanization in *Kolahal*. The society depicted in *Kolahal* is free from the quintessential authority of the archaic social prejudices of a homogenous and bounded traditional society. This film begins with a statement: “this film has been made in Assam in the Assamese language, but its theme and the characters belong elsewhere – to many places” (*Kolahal*, 1988).

The people of this place are more concerned about their survival, than the maintenance and celebration of social customs. They are living more like biological beings than socio-cultural ones, without bothering much about their future because they cannot afford to do so. Uncertainties of time, instability of family, insecurity of women and fragility and impermanence of emotional ties are some of the traits that mark the world in *Kolahal*, which can be termed as the ‘unintended city’

theorized by Sen: “the relationship of the unintended city to the urban city is limited. It is for the most part only economic and at that an exploitative, dependent link. The city uses and exploits the poor, and they in turn use the city to their ends; indeed they use it in ways that the urban middle class consider ‘abuse’, with no apparent loyalty, respect, or civic sense” (Sen, 1976).

Saikia’s critical attack on urban hypocrisy and inhumanity is powerfully reflected in his two films *Abartan* and *Itihaas*. In these two films, Saikia brought the dirty and cruel aspects of urbanity. The *Abartan* centers on the life of Jayanti, a professional theatre artist struggling for her freedom from patriarchal bindings both within and outside her family. In this film, the impact of urbanity on family relationships crosses its limits. Due to growing materialistic and selfish attitudes, a father is not hesitating to exploit his own daughter to maintain his urban etiquettes. Jayanti is exploited by both her family and the owner of theatre party. Unlike the relative freedom of Kiron from the social forces, Jayanti is always surrounded by the suffocating structures of social authority: she is not free to get married with the man of her choice, as her parents fear that it would disturb their economic dependence on her; and in her professional world, she is compelled to compromise with her choices amidst powerful male actors and producers.

In *Sarothi* Saikia explored the urban subjectivity of a male protagonist without relying much on the rural-urban dichotomy. The film depicts the agony of losing hopes of a man, Niranjana Dutta, who is settled in the city and is in the verge of retirement from his job. The difference in the private aspirations and real experiences of Niranjana Dutta in *Sarothi* can be read as the symbolic of the larger issue: a sense of cynical frustration at the end of the urban seduction. This frustration is not exactly due to the replacement of the village by the city, but due to the inability to experience and avail urbanity in its specifically desired form. This consists of a set of selective preference from the urban as well as the

rural – which are reflected in Mr. Dutta’s fantasies, where Mr. Dutta’s desired woman companion exhibits the rural simplicity, sacredness, tolerance and obliged nature towards him, but she exhibits all these not in the village but within the other comforts of the urban world.

Saikia projects the most evil and ruthless aspects of urban expansion: forced displacement of villagers from their own land, corrupt lives of urban dwellers and the impossibility of survival of a young village woman Lakhimi, the protagonist in the movie, in this forcefully imposed urban environment in his last film *Itihaas*. Among all the women protagonists of Saikia’s films, Lakhimi’s problems are the most multilayered and most aggressive: she faces the economic hardship of livelihood, hostile social environment after displacement and she has no able and reliable companion to take support from – as it happened to be in the cases of Kiron and Jayanti. It is therefore not surprising that Lakhimi is also the only protagonist in Saikia’s film who dies at the end of her struggle. Saikia’s statement in the film can be read as the fact that behind the urban edifice of a city or a township, there is always an untold *itihaas* (history) of deaths and displacement of many individuals like Lakhimi. Unlike Saikia’s other movies, the urban in *Itihaas* is unambiguously cruel and inhuman. It may be more than coincidental that in Saikia’s first movie *Sandhyarag*, the villagers came to the city with hopes; but in his last film *Itihaas*, the city gets expanded to uproot the village, both physically as well as socially, – as a consequence of which Lakhimi had to die and perhaps her death can be read as Saikia’s final statement on urbanity.

References:

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