

Assamese Cinema Through Nine Decades: Challenging Journey with Encouraging Trends

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Abstract:

Assamese cinema is about to attain nine long decades of its existence with a lot of promises while leaving a rich legacy on the way. Like any other film industry anywhere in the world, it has also seen good and bad times on the way. But it has learnt to take all of them in its stride and move ahead in a robust manner. Today, Assamese cinema has climbed new heights of glory acquiring even global accolades in addition to being already recognized as an entity to be taken seriously in the national domain as well. This long journey would not have been possible without ample contribution from generations of filmmakers, directors who did care enough to take the challenge of presenting good cinema to the society from time-to-time. Being a regional language cinema industry with comparatively lesser number of audiences till date, it has been able to achieve for itself a respectful position in the world of Indian cinema. And thereby contributing invaluable contents to the overall cinema movement of the country and also the world. This paper is an effort to trace the journey of Assamese films from its humble beginning to the present day era. And also examine the various milestones of the meaningful development to an established brand making its presence felt in a comfortable manner against all odds. So, Assamese cinema seems to have come of age.

Keywords: Crowd-funding, Commercial cinema, Marketing, Regional cinema

Introduction:

Indian cinema boasts of a rich legacy of more than a century since *Raja Harishchandra*. It is now an established industry in the world of cinema with a special place of distinction reiterated with the passage of times till date. The positive point is that it seems to be set to grow to newer heights in the near and distant future. Representing a whole lot of different genres in its wake over the decades, it very well reflects the wide diversity of the country's culture and ethos through its films. Further, it is a major high point of Indian cinema that it is enriched by the films from several of its regional centres including films from the north-eastern region (NER - mainly Assamese and Manipur). Among them, the movement is flourishing even including several well-known and prominent filmmakers of Indian origin settled overseas adequately contributing to the mosaic of this world. Keeping up with the tradition, Assamese cinema has also entered the ninth decade of its existence at present. It definitely had its share of challenges and difficult times in this journey. But they were tackled and overcame with innovations and a determined mindset not to bow down to any adverse situations.

It can be said that Indian cinema was not much late in starting its debut following the growth of world cinema in the 1890s. From only visuals to audio-visual and then the latest most modern technical issues of film production, today it can comfortably compete with those from any country around the world and stand on its ground.

Cinema, or a motion picture, is the art of moving images; a visual medium that tells stories and exposes reality. It is the world's most recent art form and by far the most complex, collaborative, and costly artistic expression (Scorsese, 2019). At their inception, the first two versions of the film camera (the kinetograph and its European counterpart, the cinematograph) were used to record daily events. This was followed by documentary filmmaking which was explored with a lot of gusto. With the release of the *Jazz Singer*, the silent era came to an end in 1927 and by 1929 most of the films made were 'sound films'. This momentous development heralded a major improvement in the history of the medium. So it can be said that there were initial problems in adapting to

the new development. But very soon 'sound' opened up immense potential for providing far more entertaining contents to the audiences than it was possible in the silent era.

Methodology

This is primarily an empirical paper based on secondary information and experience of the authors following their close observation of the industry as both of them belong to the state and had worked in the media of the state. While there is a dearth of adequate literature in this direction, practical observations and whatever amount of literature available have yielded the necessary base for drawing conclusions after the discussions.

Objectives

In this regard, this paper endeavours to look at ---

- The changing face of the Assamese film industry with new developments in the current century in its ninth decade.
- Examine various trends in this movement with future implications.
- Study any possible avenue for further development of the movement in the coming days.

Assamese cinema:

The last few years have ushered in a few rare major achievements till date for Assamese cinema. This period also happens to be the mid-way of the 'nine long decades' of its glorious existence.

First, the film *Village Rockstars* (2017) by Rima Das was nominated for the Oscar Awards (2019) following its being adjudged the Best Film in the Indian National Film Festival. Prior to this, eminent filmmaker Jahnu Barua's *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* (Catastrophe) won the award in 1988.

Second, a renowned actor from the state Adil Hussian had a major role in the film *What Will People Say* which was the official entry for the Oscar awards of 2019 from Norway. It also happens to be that country's best film in their national festival.

A brief history:

It was a humble beginning in 1935 by Rupkonwar Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla with the state's as well as the entire north-eastern region's (NER) first film - *Jyoti*. It was a historical film based on a courageous young lady of the Ahom kingdom era.

This assumes another significance that it happened only four years after the first Hindi talkie film - *Alam Ara* was released in Mumbai. So, the legacy is not at all lagging behind. Since then, Assamese cinema has traversed a long journey so far. It is worth mentioning that the state directly went on to the talkie films with no silent film ever produced here.

Agarwalla was a poet, dramatist, song writer-cum-music composer, litterateur all combined into one. That too, with such a quality that the title Rupkonwar was conferred on him by the people of the state. Rup means beauty and Konwar means Prince. Unfortunately, he died at a rather young age of 48 (1903-51). He was a meticulous person and a genius in innovations. He went to Germany for training in film making. When he went to Lahore for editing the raw print, because of the technician's fault the audio was wiped off and he had to dub everything himself. Never the one to lose heart and possessing a rare fighting spirit, he completed the film and released it in the Rownak theatre of Kolkata (Erstwhile Calcutta) on March 10 of 1935. He was a man far ahead of his times, to say the least. This characteristic made him not to care much for spending about Rs 60,000 for the entire venture which did not even return a penny to him. That too, he risked everything for the activity at a time when the majority of the people of the state were not even aware of this medium, let alone go to watch it.

A statement from the Press Information Bureau (PIB) of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) of Government of India notes that *Jyoti*'s off-the-beaten-track realistic treatment was in contrast to the theatrical style of filmmaking in practice elsewhere in India in those times. This was possible because of the Rupkonwar's adequate exposure to European realistic story-telling style. The tradition he set for sensitive and sensible cinema was maintained later by stalwarts like Jahnu Barua and late Bhabendra Nath Saikia. This note was published as part of a film festival of the region in Mumbai a few years back. Another important point to note is that Rupkonwar himself made the third ever Assamese film (second for him) *Indramalati* (1939), a social drama unlike the first one.

This period was followed by a few other prominent films. One of these includes the highly-acclaimed film - *Piyali Phukan* (1955) by Phani Sarma - a historical one on a martyr who fought against the British. This was the first-ever film from this region to bring laurels to the state by winning a Certificate of Merit in the National Film Awards of India. Similarly, it was *Puberun* (1959) by Prabhat Mukherjee which had the distinction of being screened at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Another important development of the era was the emergence of the great maestro Bhupen Hazarika as a filmmaker of vision around the mid 1950s. He started his directorial debut with *Era Bator Sur* which also projected his musical acumen and expertise. Some of his films include - *Pratiddhani*, *Latighati*, *Chikmik Bijuli*, *Ek Pal* (Hindi). In addition to making films himself, Hazarika also rendered quite a few songs in several movies until a few years prior to his demise. Some of these include - *Piyoli Phukan*, *Maniram Dewan* (the first Assamese tea planter and also a martyr).

It was *Gonga Chilanir Pakhi* - a well-acclaimed film with high popularity and promise of better days in the personality of the director - Padum Barua, was released in 1976. The PIB statement mentioned earlier further notes that this film practically ushered in the realistic film-making movement in the state. And also presented a true picture of the rural settings of the state in those days without any trace of melodrama. He made only this film in his life despite high potential and promise.

Over the passing decades, Assam also witnessed a movement of artistic and meaningful cinema along with a commercially-motivated entertainment-centric cinema. The first category included those like - *Khoj*, *Brishti*, *Dr Bezbarua*, *Aranya*, *Sreemoyee Mahimamoyee*, *Jog Biyog*, *Ranga Police* to name a few.

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. This highly-acclaimed first creation was followed on by other equally-acclaimed and appreciated popular ones like - *Anirbaan*, *Agnisnaan*, *Kolahal*, *Sarathi*, *Abartan*, *Itihaas* and the only film he made in Hindi - *Kaalsandhya*. The last one was a realistic film looking at the issue of insurgency from a different angle.

The trend was carried forward by another well-known filmmaker Jahnu Barua who also succeeded in taking Assamese cinema to the national as well as the global audience. Since the release of his first venture *Aparoop* (1982), Barua continues his stride with creations like *Papori*, *Banani*, *Pokhi*, *Kuhkhal* and *Konikar Ramdhenu*. His creative ventures earned him the honour to be counted amongst the best of contemporary Indian filmmakers for products including *Halodhiya Choraye Baodhan Khaye* and *Xagoroloi Bohudoor* (It's a Long Way to the Sea). The first one won him a host of international awards as well as the National Award for Best Film. The latter also earned him critical acclaim across the globe. His Hindi film *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara* also got appreciated widely. In his serious efforts to narrate a story in an effective manner to the audiences, Barua has also made a film named *Bandhon* based on a story of a family affected by the Mumbai serial blasts of 2008. This film was given an all-India release and has been successful in catching the attention of popular audiences as well as the critics.

An eminent film critic and historian said that about 300 films were produced in the state between 1935 and 2004 (Deka, 2006). He also broadly classified Assamese films into these categories - Mythological (*Narakashur*, *Raja Harishchandra*, *Shri Shri Maa Kamakhya*), Historical (*Lachit Barphukan*, *Piyoli Phukan*, *Maniram Dewan*), Freedom Struggle and Comedy.

It is important to note that, within the state, films have also been made in a few other languages in addition to Assamese. These include films mainly led by Bodo, followed by Mishing and Karbi languages. *Hagramayao Jeenahari* in Bodo won the best film on the environment while *Aloyaran* won the best film award both at the national level. In Karbi language, *Woshobipo* was awarded a national prize for best film and best music. *Panei Jongki* was the first Mishing film to be produced and had achieved high popularity. Noted director Manju Borah made a film in Mishing language that went on to win national awards - *Ko: Yad*.

In the meantime following Rupkonwar's untimely demise Assamese films saw a transitory respite for about a couple of years. But things changed with the beginning of World War II. Exploiting this, Rohini Kumar Baruah made a film *Manomati* (1941). It was followed by others like Parvati Prasad Boruwa's *Rupohi*, Kamal Narayan Choudhury's *Badan Barphukan*, Phani Sharma's *Siraj*, Asit Sen's *Biplobi*, Prabin Phukan's *Paarghat* and Suresh Goswami's *Runumi*, all released in the 1940s. The next decade saw a few imperative Assamese movies - Phani Sharma's *Piyali Phukan*,

Nip Baruah's *Smritir Parash*, *Maak aru Morom* and *Ronga Police*, Bhupen Hazarika's *Era Bator Sur*, and Prabhat Mukherjee's *Puberun*. Another notable achievement of that decade was a rise of youthful movie maker Nip Baruah, who coordinated numerous prevalent movies later. *Piyali Phukon* and *Maak aru Morom* earned a national-level declaration of legitimacy in 1955 and 1957 individually.

The period somewhere in the range of 1959 and 1969 is, for the most part, viewed as the brilliant time of Assamese films. This is because out of the about 25 films made in the period, nine of them won national awards. In the 1960s, Sarbeswar Chakraborty's *Lachit Barphukan*, Bhupen Hazarika's melodic *Shakuntala* and *Chik Mik Bijulee*, Nip Barua's *Narakasur*, Anil Choudhury's *Matri Swarga*, Brajen Baruah's *Itu Situ Bahuto* and *Mukuta* and Anwar Hossain's *Tejimola* were released. By the middle of the 1960s, films were produced in Assam on a regular basis. It should be mentioned that between 1935 and 1970 more than 60 films were made. The period also saw the emergence of a younger breed of promising directors. This includes Saila Barua, Abdul Mazid, Amar Pathak, Indukalpa Hazarika, Dibon Barua, Amulya Manna, Gauri Barman, Atul Bardoloi, Nalin Duara and Prafulla Barua. *Dr Bezbarua*, the highly-successful crime thriller was released in 1969. Then, the period of 1970-82, 57 movies were made. More and more enthusiastic and skillful directors started making films such as Samarendra Narayan Deb's *Aranya* (1970), Kamal Choudhury's *Bhaity* (1972) Deuti Barua's *Bristi* (1974), Pulok Gogoi's *Khoj* (1974) Padam Barua's *Ganga Chilanir Pakhi* (1976) and Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia's *Sandhyarag* (1977) are films worth mentioning.

Theoretical Perspective:

The analysis of the development is sought to be seen against the backdrop of mainly three theories - The Social Responsibility theory, Uses and Gratification theory and the Agenda-Setting theory.

The first-ever cinema in Assamese languages or for that matter of the state of Assam way back in 1935 has been a historical film based on a story of the ultimate sacrifice by the wife of a prince in exile. The lady preferred to dedicate her life for the country than divulge the whereabouts of her husband to the rogue king. It can be argued that the film director the Rupkownar took it upon himself as a social responsibility of popularizing the story among the people of the state for inspiring them with the tale. This need mention here that the director's second film *Indramalati* (third one for the state) was a romance story infused with a good portion of encouragement and participation in social movements of freedom struggle of those days. This director being a versatile artist with a multi-faceted personality and talent was always highly active in all kinds of movements and activities oriented towards development.

Even after his untimely demise, this spirit was continued later on also by other prominent directors including Phani Sarma, Bhupen Haarika, Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Jahnu Barua among others. Thus, several films were produced over this long period which corroborates the Social Responsibility aspect of the fraternity. Their films ranged from historical to the socio-economic situation of the society, the day-to-day struggle of the common people etc. Through them, they wanted to portray the truth and create awareness among the people about the need for standing up for their rights. Phani Sarma through his film *Piyoli Phukan* wanted to introduce as well as popularize the ultimate sacrifice made by this martyr during the early days of freedom struggle from Assam. Bhupen Hazarika's *Pratidhwani* (Echo) has been an important endeavour in building a bridge as well as further strengthening of the age-old bond between the Assamese and Khasi communities. Similarly, each of Bhabendra Nath Saikia's films is a discourse on a specific issue confronting the society about which people have long been looking for a solution. His initial films starting from *Sandhyaraag* to *Agnisnan* are looking at the world from woman's point of view. These woman protagonists represent life struggles of those from the downtrodden category, middle-class ones etc. In the same way, most of Jahnu Barua's films also reflect a socially-relevant issue that needed to be focused through a fine system of story-telling mastered by his artistic finesse. Also, Atul Bordoloi's *Kallol* (Wave) symbolizing the decaying system of landlords torturing the tenants in the state is an important example of this development.

At the same time, the Agenda-Setting theory is also equally applicable under the circumstances. The directors mentioned above and several others have been engaged in making cinema of substance which intend to set the agenda for the public in different areas of life. Picking up various issues and problems in the society including educational development, family disputes, woman-empowerment, historically-important events, this breed of film-makers of the state has always been on the lookout for only those kinds of themes or genres which would be of some benefit to the masses. This is against the principles of 'profit-only' interests of the commercially-oriented filmmakers. Another important characteristic of these films is that they have been able to weave the stories and tell them to the public in such a manner that they have become adequately popular also. This is unlike the popular belief that principle-oriented films usually are not successful among the popular audience. It is also worth

mentioning that this category of films has been a strong ray of hope amidst the wave of commercially-oriented cinema in the state as well as in any other places.

The Uses and gratification theory is also applicable here in terms of audience satisfaction and inspiration reflected in terms of the films of the recent past which have managed to make crores. Agenda-Setting objectives of the media fraternity are important, it is also a significant point to provide pure entertainment to the masses at the same time. And, if the elements of Social Responsibility, Agenda-Setting can be judiciously mixed up with that of entertainment in a seamless manner, it is going to be a major contribution to the society. This is because mass media in the true sense must reflect the aspirations and the state of the society at any given point of time.

Prominent trends:

The almost nine-decade long journey of Assamese cinema has exhibited encouraging trends during the course of time. Assamese cinema, a regional set up entity can't be compared with other regional film industries like those of Southern or Marathi because of size and spread. Yet, catering to the market limited to the confines of the state, a few of these trends are worth discussing here.

i) Commercial success:

In the last few years, apart from the Oscar connections, another positive trend that is being observed is the growing commercial success of Assamese cinema. Two movies - *Kanchenjunga* and *Ratnakar* released within a gap of one month in the second half of 2019 have managed to raise gross box office collections to between Rs 5 and 6 crore in a matter of a few months. This is the highest-grossing record for any Assamese film so far, even after adjusting for inflation and value of money for films of earlier years. More importantly, both these films were also released in multiplexes of Delhi and Mumbai for catering to the Assamese population in these cities (Sharma, 2020). This is of recent origin though, revenue collections can't be the sole yardstick of a film's overall success, going by the popular trend and system, this is an encouraging development for this regional film entity that was long deprived of such phenomenal commercial success.

In this regard, eminent film critic and filmmaker who have won a national award, Utpal Borpujari says that this has highlighted three important aspects. These are - that Assamese cinema does not have adequate audience has been proved to be a myth no longer true and that proper star power can lift a film's success to a height. Further, aggressive marketing was also highly beneficial for the films.

This last aspect has proved to be correct over the years for the Assamese film world when well-oiled publicity and marketing strategies are employed for creating an atmosphere and appetite for the films. As both these films mainly appealed to the youths, the team behind the production made sure that they visited selected educational institutions of the state on a representative basis for publicizing their films which had properly paid off. It needs mention here that Assamese films had a fair growth over the decades till the late 1970s and catered effectively to the tastes of the audiences. In the 1980s, due to the Assam agitation under the students' leadership against immigrants (1979-85), the rise of a secessionist outfit, political instability etc. hampered the smooth growth though films were still made. But because of the situation of agitations, cinema halls had to remain closed for quite longer spells. However, it revived itself against all odds in a matter of a few years.

Another bad spell of the industry arose in the 1990s and 2000s when instead of going for full-fledged feature films a trend of VCD films emerged which was a major threat to the film industry. But, at present, it is a thing of the past and the industry has moved on to the newer horizons. It has taken up the challenge of new concepts of the entire film-making and distribution-cum-marketing process suited for an audience of the multiplex culture and the efforts are paying good dividends.

Further, Borpujari in his article (2013) points out to a few important aspects of this movement. Demonstrating the commitments and sacrifices of a bevy of Assamese directors and writers it discusses the role played by Assamese cinema in the society in various aspects, be it social development, entertainment and motivation for economic progress. It traces the unusual aspects of the movement through different periods like Jyotiprasad era, post-Jyotiprasad era, and Golden decades of the 1960s-1970s, state patronage, western influence etc.

A research paper in this regard (Deka, Das, 2015) talks about the development that the scholars consider as a very slow one compared to the other parts of the country. Being optimistic for the future, the scholars

speak about the challenges that must not be ignored. It is an endeavour to root out the cause and effect of decreasing the popularity of Assamese cinema in the 21st century where world-class technical tools can be used for quality management. The paper includes interviews of some noted personalities of this domain - actors, directors, marketing personnel, critics, related to the Assamese film industry. Analyzing reasons for this slow growth, the paper says that around 2003 a section of insurgent groups issued warning letters to the cinema-hall owners and distributors asking them to stop showing Hindi movies. They reasoned it was thought to be doing harm to the regional film culture. As a result, for a long period, the audience stayed away from venturing into cinema halls to watch films. This had caused many of the cinema halls to be shut down.

Initiating this momentous journey only after four years of the country's first talkie film it has achieved quite a few accolades worldwide establishing its credibility of having quality movies since its inception. For many factors, on an average, less than 10 films are usually made in the state with tight budgetary allocations with even the critically-acclaimed directors finding it very difficult to get adequate returns on their investment.

One major cause of this is the less availability of financial resources for this industry forcing it to keep off from the stiff competition of other established films centres. This also reflects in other aspects of the film-making business like special effects, publicity, the release of many copies at the same time etc. It is a difficult job for films made in this manner to win over the present-day audience.

But, even amidst such a despairing scenario, 2018 has bought a ray of hope with different awards for *Village Rockstars* and the commercial success of *Mission China*, a movie produced by popular Assamese playback singer Zubin Garg. So, it is interesting to see the peoples' acceptance of Assamese movies with such success. Zubin Garg for the first time in Assam started a promotional campaign throughout the state by organizing mega road and stage shows and through a social media campaign. This may be one of the sole reasons for the commercial success of the movie. And subsequently, *Ratnakar* by popular actor Jatin Bora was also released and similar promotional campaigns were planned and apparently the movie also received a good response from the audiences.

The state had to wait far too long for a commercial success of a cinema to such an extent as mentioned at the outset. It is expected that this trend would continue in the coming days also. It is also a reflection that filmmakers of the state have been able to provide adequate relevant contents for the people for their 'use and gratification' underlining the theoretical analysis of the system.

ii) **Assamese Cinema and society:**

Assamese cinema has been performing the expected duties of a medium towards the audiences and the society of which it is a part of. In simple terms, it can be explained this way - media and people have a symbiotic and mutually-complementary relationship. In addition to disseminating information of various kinds, media also needs to carry out its duty of trying its best to inculcate a 'good taste' in the minds of the masses. The audiences, on the other hand, need to intervene whenever it might be felt that the media was not adhering to its ideal path of development. And thereby make a case for course correction whenever it is necessary. Assamese cinema seems to be fulfilling this responsibility with a fair amount of success over the years.

Further, despite the continuous run of the profit-oriented cinema contents, it is encouraging to see the trend of a good portion of films being made which can be categorized as 'socially-relevant' ones fighting for space and also making their presence felt strongly in the process. The contribution of Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Bhupen Hazarika, Jahnu Barua, Atul Bordoloi among others are effective reflections of this development. The point to be noted here is that this genre of films also does have their audiences in numbers which are not discouraging at all. Thus, it can be said that the Social Responsibility aspect is also being exhibited by the filmmakers of the state in a parallel streak with the commercially-oriented ones at the same.

iii) **Crowd-funding of films: A new development**

One positive major trend being noticed for the last several years is the emergence of a group of young and upcoming independent filmmakers taking advantage of the 'crowdfunding' way for producing films. Because of their sincere devotion to the medium, some of these films have managed to make audiences take serious notice by their good craftsmanship of the celluloid medium storytelling.

Even the *Village Rockstars* was produced absolutely on the director-producer's own resources without any support from studios or production houses. And the honours it received speaks for itself. The filmmaker went to produce another film *Bulbul can sing* which also acquired good audience acceptance.

One good example - Bhaskar Hazarika, a young director with formal training in the field who has two ventures to his credit at present. The first one - *Kothanodi* (2015) was done by combining three woman-centric tales from a very prominent litterateur of the state, Lakshminath Bezbaruah. They were from the latter's collection of tales - *Burhi Air Sadhu* (Grandma's Tales) published in the 1930s. It was awarded the best Assamese feature film in the 2016 National film awards. It was well-received by the audiences in the state with good critical acclaim. This was followed by the widely-publicized film *Aamis* (2019) that also received good acclaim and introduced the director to the national platform. *Kothanodi* was produced solely on crowd-funded sources without the backing of any formal organization at all. The first film was also taken up by one of the highly popular international TV movie channels which speak of its quality.

All the efforts paid off well in the end. Following the first film's success, Hazarika got adequate backing from producers who had faith on him which saw him acquiring wide acclaim for a very unusual theme and fine film-making sense.

There is something interesting to be noted here. Being educated outside the state, Hazarika had a problem in being able to read Assamese text. However, he was mesmerized by the tales of the book (for the first film) which his mother used to tell him when he was a child. Later on, when he decided to make a film on those tales, his mother would translate them into English and send him the audio records to listen and visualize the stories and the screenplay. The director made the movie in such a way that there is no way of telling that he had done so from his understanding of the stories, not from the original language. But only from an English translation. The blending of the three different stories of the same book of tales has been implemented with excellent finesse. This makes it impossible to believe that they were not the same story. Hazarika also employed an exhaustive publicity drive for both his films, an effort that had benefitted with a fair amount of success.

Another Assamese filmmaker Kenny Deori Basumatary also begun a crowd-funding campaign to meet the post-production expenses and release of his Assamese movies *Local Kun Fu 2* after the online success of *Local Kung Fu*. It received a good response and the filmmaker could collect the target amount and accordingly released the movie. He has also been able to collect the target amount for his next film project i.e. *Local Utpaat*, the actor-director-writer started the campaign through online crowd-funding sites to generate fund for the films. It is quite encouraging to the independent filmmakers that such crowdfunding initiatives are being appreciated in Assam also for the good taste of movies.

An article in a monthly in this regard says that the North east region, flooding with visionary filmmakers are making films on almost zero support and budget. But they are adequately 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 breed of filmmakers from the region has defined all odds and progressed comfortably to voice social concerns that need attention." (Goswami et. al, 2012).

This is one trend that is worthy of mention as it is an encouraging aspect for independent filmmakers with an interest in this direction as this can be a good way to embark on the journey. With the ready availability of many web-based platforms nowadays in the internet world, which are approachable for releasing films, this option shall go well for serious filmmakers. This also points towards the gradual development of a new breed of filmmakers ready to take up the challenges of doing it alone without any assistance with the established studio or star-based system, which is the usual course of action for a majority of the people in the industry.

iv) **Variety of genres:**

It needs to be pointed out here that the quantity of Assamese films seems to be not very high compared to other prominent regional language film industry like the South Indian states or West Bengal. But it is a fact that the films made so far have represented a highly encouraging range of genres under the sky. This starts from historical ones to human emotions, social issues, a various emerging crisis of the state or the country among others.

Even an animation film was produced on the life and times of Srimanta Sankardeva, the great Vaishnavite preacher and founder of 'Namghar' (Prayer house) - a household culture in the state. This saint is also recognized as the first-ever 'mass communicator' of the state way back in the 15th century when he invented the unique system of bringing the public together with chanting of *Geeta* and *Bhagawat* in Namghars.

It also needs to be informed that cinema in Assam has always been having a healthy mixture of genres of different kinds as mentioned above. So, artistic, realistic portrayal of the socio-economic conditions of the society are properly being reflected side-by-side with commercially-oriented films also at the same time. This is because cinema as a powerful medium has to cater to the wide cross-section of the audiences in any society.

v) **Few interesting timely initiatives :**

Looking at the growing popularity of the online streaming sites and applications in smartphones and other electronic devices, the regional film producers have also created online movie streaming applications for the movies of the Northeast India, where Assamese films are also made available.

An enterprising film enthusiast Manas Pratim Kalita has launched *Movietonne* in 2018 which is a streaming site for Assamese films modelled somewhat loosely on similar well-established and popular international channels (VICE, 2018). With a fine repository of Assamese films, both old and contemporary, a person can watch a film here for a nominal payment. As per an interview published in the media, the big idea came to his mind following his realization that because of distribution and other related issues, people were finding it hard to watch an Assamese film even if anyone wanted to do so. Recently the N.K Production house in Assam has also launched another mobile app named "N.K. Bigstar", which will also enable the subscribers to watch movies, audio-video songs along with web series through the online platform. People are welcoming such initiatives in Assam as it provides them with an ample opportunity as viewers, filmmakers, actors and entertainment entrepreneurs.

In yet another equally-interesting and unusual initiative, the *Aideo Talkies* has launched an innovative scheme for taking films to the nook and corner of the state. The idea is to allow people to watch Assamese films in a convenient and relaxed atmosphere. This is helpful rather than being compelled to visit the multiplexes in urban areas always for this purpose. About less than a decade of its launch, the scheme has been getting a fair amount of success and people are accepting it across the state. With modern technological systems in place, it has been able to let the audiences enjoy the sophisticated feel of watching a film in the proper cinema ambience (VICE, 2018). It may be mentioned that Aideo Handique was the lady who played the role of *Joymoti* and had to pay a heavy price for the act. As female acting was a big taboo in those days, she could never get married and lead a normal life. She had to stay alone until her death about a decade ago.

Problems of film making in the state:

After discussing the major trends in the industry over the decades, it would be important also to look at the problems or rather challenges confronting the entity.

This is because though film making in Assam has such a rich history yet the whole activity is still to be free from manifold problems in addition to those mentioned earlier. These issues vary from state to state within the NER while some of them are common.

i) **Lack of audience in sufficient numbers:**

One major problem is the lack of audience and theatres for screening films in regional languages.

It is common to see traditional cinema theatres closing down one by one or being converted into other business purposes. This is because of lack of viewers visiting these halls at different points of time during the last about two decades. It is not that only regional films are having problems in screening. For popular Hindi films also, the same problem arouses across the nation forcing the people concerned to bring out the concept of multiplexes - more than one smaller hall showing several films at different times for accommodating various groups of audiences. This concept takes care of empty seats in the bigger theatres of earlier days and the resultant loss of revenue.

Next major problem is the competition that regional language films have to face with popular Hindi films. This competition emerges due to several factors, such as - better money power and facilities available in

the established studios, films from Bollywood and the few from Hollywood are most of the times technically much better-produced than regional ones.

This leads to a crisis where many of the theatre owners accord a very low priority for booking of their halls for regional films. They are much more interested in allowing films from Bollywood to be shown regularly for all the shows. Hence, it has been an uphill struggle for most of the regional filmmakers to get adequate booking slots for showing their films in the theatres of the states. It has brought in disastrous results for many of the films produced over the years.

Further, another major problem in the state's film industry is the lack of adequate production as well as post-production facilities. In the whole of the NER, the Jyoti Chitraban Film Studio that was set up in 1961 in Guwahati, is the only full-fledged studio offering at least the basic amount of services to the film fraternity. While it does possess facilities for production and post-production requirements, there is hardly any other highly-professional, sophisticated competitive service available in the field within the region.

Now, the Dr Bhupen Hazarika Regional Government Film & Television Institute (DBHRGFTI) established in Guwahati since 1998 has been rendering yeoman's service towards the training of film-making with success. It was started as the Jyoti Chitraban Film & Television Institute (JCFTI) in that year in Jyoti Chitraban Film Studio. Later on, it was relocated to its present premises on the outskirts of Guwahati city and since 2016 renamed it, by the present name. This is the only institute in the north-eastern region of its stature till date.

Another issue continues from the main problem of lack of a sufficient number of audiences to support the films made in regional languages in the states. That is, because of this problem, the human resources concerned with the profession including actors, supporting artists, technical services, directors etc. find it difficult to get a decent return of their investments in the films. Also, not properly established as a lucrative business model yet, banks and other financial institutions are not playing an encouraging role to offer loans to the film producers.

Among other drawbacks, one major drawback is the general mindset of the audience by which people speaking a specific language would like to watch a film only in that language. These further limits the scope of a film to have a bigger share of viewers.

In addition to the problems of film making in Assam, there is another important factor compounding the difficulties faced by the professionals. It is the lack of interest of the people in general in films. Unlike in southern India, where cinema has a highly intimate relationship with the peoples' life, the same is not yet true for NER. That is, the way cinema is considered and watched in that region of the country is yet to be experienced in Assam. Here, watching a film has not been a very encouraging trend during the last several decades.

As already mentioned above, most of the films in regional languages are made on a tight budget. This does not leave many financial resources at hand for proper publicity, marketing and distribution and this takes its toll on the recovery of investments.

ii) **Proposed Mini Cinema Halls yet to materialize:**

Veteran and reputed filmmakers and other concerned in the industry in Assam did come out with the idea of mini-cinema halls or parlours at different nooks and corners of the state. This would have facilitated showing regional films to the people living in remote places and also within urban areas. It is expected that this system would help in addressing the issue of lack of audience for regional films. Even the state government of Assam at different points of time have admitted that this was a feasible solution and spoke about implementing it in the right earnest. However, this is yet to become a reality with no positive sign of development.

Again, Borpujari (2013) in an article advocates a few possible solutions for the promotion of regional films in Assam which may prove equally applicable also for the other states of the region.

First of all - the critic says that to keep up with the changing times, filmmakers need to adopt digitalization so that they can compete with the industry as a whole. He cited the example of Manipur, where an average of 60 low-budget films are produced in a year in the digitalized format which helped in cost-effectiveness.

Further, the critic points out to another possibility. While attempting to emulate such a model, the idea mooted by an industry body to revive around 100 halls that had closed down, by networking them with a satellite screening model with the server-based in Guwahati must be vigorously pursued by all the stakeholders. And while reviving those cinema halls, it should be kept in mind that this is the age of compact halls. They may be having 75 to 150 seats depending on the population profile of the place where a particular hall is located. Also, the rest of the place can be given out to non-film revenue-earning centres so that these places can become a sort of local art/entertainment zones' (Borpujari, 2013).

Borpujari also offers a long term solution for the problem of lack of audience for films (particularly regional films). It is that our institutions of education - both at higher and school levels should introduce different levels of courses in film appreciation. The critic is optimistic that once students are exposed to cinema from various parts of the world under such a course, generations of students would surely develop an audience for good cinema.

An in-depth article on cinema sometime back informed that there were 550 cinema theatres in Kerala - a state that can be termed as a tiny one if compared to Assam or any other bigger Indian states. On the contrary, Assam had not more than a hundred cinema theatres many of which were already closing down for various other factors.

Besides, the kind of fan following and appreciation for a good film on any theme or genre prevalent in that region, in Assam it can't be seen. This must be because of some major differences in our culture. Thus, Assamese films do not get the desired number of audiences and so the revenue collection falls far behind. And it is common knowledge that unless there is a good revenue return the same director or producer would hesitate to take up the next venture.

In this connection, the established bodies and associations of film personalities have come up with several agenda which also reflect similar concerns for filmmakers for all the member states of the NER. Such as, providing subsidy to local filmmakers and stipend to students who pursue studies in different fields related to filmmaking, appeal to the government for considering exemption of entertainment tax on local films etc. They also requested the government to allot cinema halls dedicated exclusively for the screening of local films, both in the state capital and also in all the district headquarters. These demands if accepted and implemented with adequate planning, may give a major boost to the film industry of the state.

However, the question of quality - for both technical and story sides also need to be taken seriously. Because no amount of patronage from any quarter including government or society can help the industry to survive in the competition without it. Of course, the stiff competition from films from Bollywood and Hollywood with their big-budget may not be matched so easily in the immediate future. Yet, efforts must be taken up for achieving it as in the final analysis it is the audience which matters.

Besides, filmmakers and those involved in the profession have a major responsibility to the audience for presenting the latter with good contents for consumption and entertainment by all counts. It is said that in mass media, the switch is in the hands of the audience. That means, if the audience or customer does not like something he or she would immediately switch off the TV / Radio channel, do not even visit the cinema theatre to see a particular film, put down the newspaper or magazine. Thus, for survival and acceptance by the audience inadequate numbers there can be hardly any alternative to quality in all aspects of media contents and the film making is no different.

Few eminent filmmakers:

An interesting development that can be observed in Assamese cinema is that some of the very prominent filmmakers came from diverse backgrounds.

For example, film director Bhabendra Nath Saikia (late) who went on to win quite a few major honours, awards at national and international levels was a professor of Physics in Gauhati University. While teaching at the University later on, in 1977 he produced his first film *Sandhyarag* (Cry of twilight) in black and white for which he took a bank loan to start with. He made seven films all of which were adjudged of having far higher quality from all possible perspectives of film making. They were also awarded at national film festivals at different point of time. Further, he was also a litterateur of considerable fame with many short stories, novels and dramas including a very popular children's series for All India Radio to his credit. He was the founder-editor of a highly popular Assamese fortnightly

- *Prantik* which is still going on. One characteristic with his film making endeavours is that he always preferred to take only his own stories for the purpose. Secondly, a good portion of his films centered around the life of woman telling various untold stories to the audiences. He has also made a film in Hindi.

On the other hand, Jahnu Barua is a trained film-maker from Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune and worked in UNIDO and NFDC before taking the plunge into full-time film-making with *Aparoopaa* (1982). His cinematic journey excels in a kind of realistic story-telling that hardly has a parallel, at least in Assamese cinema. His films have been getting more than adequate attention as well as acclaim.

Among the older generations, it would be unfair not to have mentioned Bhupen Hazarika who have made several films of rare brilliance starting way back in 1956 with *Era Bator Sur* (tunes of the deserted path). This film was termed as a commercial success with the film world taking due note of the upcoming story-teller. *The Hindustan Standard* from Kolkata soon after the release of the film dubbed it as a pioneer of a new vista of hope for the industry. The great musical maestro went on to make seven films in all till the late 1980s, most of which were well-received by the audiences and critics.

It may be mentioned here that this singer-cum-magazine editor-cum-short story writer combined into one had a master's degree in Political Science from Banaras Hindu University. He moved to Columbia University in the USA for Ph D in 'Role of mass media in adult education'. Incidentally, he was nurtured by another great personality and the father of Assamese films - Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwalla.

Further, Padum Barua (late) of *Gonga Chilonir Pakhi* (the wings of the water bird) fame way back in 1976 was an official with the Assam State Government. He made the movie that had won wide acclaim from artistic points. And also for its overall presentation of a socially-important theme of a young widowed lady who fails to fulfil her desire to get married again because of the prevailing social system.

Conclusion:

From the discussions made in this paper, it can be concluded that over the almost nine long decades of its existence, Assamese cinema has come of age by now. It has been able to establish its own identity in the national and international levels with hard work, dedication and timely initiatives. All these are effects with serious contributions from all quarters concerned. Being an active industry, it has gone through its share of verse situations at various points of time during this period. However, it has been able to fight back on every occasion, learning from difficult situations always. It is heartening to find that cinema which is a powerful medium by any means of story-telling is contributing positively towards the society on a continuous basis. A good and proper media is bound to reflect the reality of the very society of which it is a part of. Thus it is called the 'mirror of the society.' Assamese cinema, true to its convictions, has been mirroring the state of the Assamese society to a great extent reflecting all its characteristics without fail. It is also important to note that out of the eight states of the NER, Assam has pioneered as well as still leading from the front in the world of cinema till date. Of course, Manipur is also making its presence felt to a big extent. In the coming days, it can be expected that the well-established cinema culture of the state shall be able to influence and inculcate it to the other neighboring states as well. This shall help in facilitating an inclusive film or cinema culture that can be developed in a cluster-like situation. As the first-ever state to have launched film-making in this region and being one of the earliest in the country also, this is a responsibility the state has to shoulder in the coming days. It is also important to point out that the new breed of upcoming young filmmakers are acquiring national and also international acclaim with their films. Thus, the future of Assamese cinema seems to be set on the path of proper growth with all the accompanying benefits which empower the larger society in the final analysis. A good and appreciable system of artworks is the result of the dedicated efforts of many people delivering their dues to it. This discussion can be concluded on an optimistic note here as the present and upcoming generations are expected to contribute positively to the already-created repository of good works done so far.

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