

Assamese Cinema and its Revival at the Age of Globalisation: A reading of Rima Das's films

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Abstract: Cinema has a universal language that transcends national and regional boundaries. Yet like all ideological apparatuses, it is not free from the power relations that permeate through the various signs and symbols it uses and the myths it circulates. Therefore despite its universal appeal, there exist intrinsic differences between regional and 'mainstream' Bollywood cinema. The differences can be observed in the stories they tell, the stands they take and the visual treatment they offer. The Assamese film industry in this regard has undergone a number of changes over the years. One of these changes has been the crass commercialization of the films by borrowing elements and styles of 'mainstream' cinema. By offering an analysis of two national award-winning films by Assamese filmmaker Rima Das, this article argues that the chase for commercial success in Assamese cinema has threatened its regional distinctiveness, leading towards a mainstreaming process. In this regard, Das's films have demonstrated that it is still possible to make commercially viable films keeping its regional specificities intact. In other words, the paper proposes that commercial ambitions should not conflict with the regional sensibilities of cinema.

Keywords: Local, regional, territorial, Assamese cinema, auteur

Introduction:

What makes regional cinema? The term 'regional' is mired by a complex mix of connotations that needs elaboration today, especially in the context of Assamese cinema. With the opening up of the markets post-liberalization and the structural changes in the country's economy, the dynamics of filmmaking have also changed. Such changes have necessitated a relooking at the idea of "regional" cinema. While a pure definition of what comprises the regional is difficult to come by, a simplistic understanding of it would simply encompass the cinemas divided across categories based on geography, language, etc. Yves Thoraval (2001) in his book on Indian cinema subscribes to such a definition by categorizing Indian regional cinema on the basis of the dominant regional language of each Indian state. Such a conception of Indian cinema started mainly after 1956 developments in Indian states in terms of the linguistic reorganization of the Indian union (Srinivas, 2015, vii). The Film Finance Corporation also contributed to the development of regional cinemas by providing state subsidies for films and the setting up of state film development corporations (Bhaskar, 2013). While this enabled to bring the focus on regional stories, it also resulted in the 'suppression of linguistic and cultural diversity within states' as films started to be made in the 'dominant' regional language (Srinivas, 2015, vii). Therefore, the idea of regional films based on language tends to offer only a superficial description of the subject and overlooks any textual considerations of what's 'regional' in the regional. This often eclipses the multiple voices of creative expressions that are place-based or community-sensitive.

Film critic Manoj Barpujari delves deeper in contextualizing of the 'regional' in Assamese cinema. He chooses the term 'territorial' to the almost abstract concept of the 'regional' when it comes to Assamese cinema. He writes, "Owing to a changing situation and a host of factors detrimental to the growth of local film industry, Assamese cinema can best be termed as territorial cinema instead of regional cinema" (2013, 56). Barpujari's statement is not without context or its fair share of reason. The major reason for the 'territorial' tag he attaches to Assamese cinema has to do with the changing content of the films over the years. As Jacobson (1991) writes, "The idea of "films made in and growing out of the many regions of the country" has a distinctly populist appeal, but provides little meaningful criteria for use of the term "regional" in relation to contemporary film studies" (18). In another

definition, the terminology has been associated with the existing power relations in the film industry. Therefore, the regional, which mostly strives on the local audience, is one that is posited against a “mainstream” – a dominant, centrally located film industry with a pan-India or global audience base.

Jacobson points out, “What must be made clear is that the regional does not designate a fixed geographical, social, or political reality, but rather describes a relationship of marginality to the mainstream or centralizing influence of the metropolis” (ibid,19). Such an equation is valid for most regional film industries in India. However, there have been few, mainly the South Indian film industries that have been able to withstand the pressures of mainstream Bollywood films. They have emerged as a counter space to the dominance of the Hindi-language based Bombay Cinema or Bollywood by producing their own oeuvre of films that caters to the taste of the local audience. The popularity of the commercial South based film industry that churns out films characterized by high-voltage action and visual effects have grown over the years. In fact, 70 percent of the total feature films in India comes from Tamil, Telegu, Kannada and Malayalam films combined (Kumar, 2015). In parts of South India, regional film productions irrespective of the linguistic differences, enjoy greater popularity than Hindi cinema. One of the reasons for this is the cultural exchange that takes place among the states in terms of film stars, film distribution and screening. For instance, Telegu actors can be seen in Tamil or Malayali or Kanarese films (Dasgupta, 1969, 33). Their films are also screened in their native states which helps cinema to dissolve linguistic barriers. This is something that the regional film in Oriya, Assamese, Bengali have not been able to emulate and most of the productions are confined to their own linguistic zone. Within Northeast India for instance, state film productions could have reached out to its sister states to revive the ‘regional’ film industries of the Northeast. This has, however, remained a distant dream.

Kumar (2015) writes, “Until the 1950s, Hindi cinema accounted for only one third of the total film productions made in India whereas by 1960s, the Tamil and Telegu cinemas together produced more films per year than the Hindi film industry and by 1979, they outnumbered Hindi films made during year”(93). Like Bollywood, South Indian feature films are also seen to apply their share of formula content in big budget films produced in large, extravagant sets using exaggerated narratives, melodrama, elaborate song and dance sequence, special effects and high-end editing for action sequences to create a spectacle (Kumar, 2015; Dasgupta, 1969). Commenting on these films, Dasgupta (1969), points out, “It is only in superficialities that it maintains some semblance of regionalism (34).” Irrespective of whether we choose to agree or disagree with Dasgupta, the South India based film industry has developed into a fledging industry in terms of commercial turnouts. On the other hand, the Bengali film industry has been experimental with its themes and content. Known to produce some of the most popular names in Indian film history like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, who were pioneers of the realist trend, the industry have survived the popularity of Bollywood films. Their cinema is characterized by a concern for topics that were rooted in reality and appealed to the rural or urban middle class while being entertaining at the same time. And despite the commercial formula films that are now being produced in Bengali cinema, a large part of the films continued to cater to a sophisticated artistic exploration of real-life middle-class topics like those during the time of the legends (Dasgupta, 1969, 31). Other regional film industries like Marathi cinema, despite a good number of quality films, were weakened by the presence of an expanding Hindi audience and the presence of Bollywood. As Dasgupta (1969) comments, “It is only at the level of art that the regional film can survive, as the Bengali film has done so far” (32). But unlike the South-based industries or the Bengali film industry, other language films have not been as successful in fighting the pressures of Bollywood taking over their market.

Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2015) points out that central to the survival of regional cinemas is the need to place them in opposition to Hindi cinema. In what comprises the regional, Ira Bhaskar (2013) differs from Chidananda Dasgupta(1969). According to Dasgupta (1969), films of the New Wave filmmakers even those made by the Mumbai based Hindi film industry differed from the mainstream in that they were basically ‘regional’ in character, with their heightened ‘regional characteristics in language, dress, names and manner’. Bhaskar (2013) notes while these filmmakers “located their films in specific regions and attempted an ‘authentic’ look in order to communicate the ‘reality effect,’ most of the regional languages in which these films were being made had flourishing mainstream industries of their own, and the cinematic practice that the New Wave films represented was at variance from them” (28). In fact, she even dismisses the idea that the regional should be “counter-posed antithetically against the national” (29).

Bhaskar’s argument that within the regional also, there exist mainstream industries following clichéd formula narratives is as valid a point as the one Dasgupta (1969) makes while talking about the need for local appeal in the regional. That is the very argument that this paper intends to make without dismissing the commercial interests

of film production. The fact that at the age of globalization, the regional core should be preserved to prevent it from losing its essence in the face of Bollywood's mainstreaming effects or global market pressure is a point that I try to make in this paper. The regional film has an identity of its own. Beyond its linguistic understanding, it should bring out elements of local traditions with pride and nostalgia. In fact, regional cinema in India developed as part of this attempt to narrate stories of the region, mindful of their cultural ethos and sensitivities. Away from the centre or the mainstream Hindi films, they led the parallel film movement in India by indulging in some of the most serious story-telling, even as they transcended regional lines. Led by the likes of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, these regional films engaged with serious storylines with a raw appeal that purported to provide a more real picture of the Indian people and their many stories. The purpose was not to cater to purely commercial ends but to use cinema as a form of creative expression of the many facets of the Indian society at large. The parallel movement couldn't be sustained for long as commercial interests poured in. The South based film industry like Tamil, Telegu and Malayalam, Kannada film flourished in this regard, so did the Bengali film industry, although the style and nature of films differed thematically and stylistically from one another. In the West, the Marathi film industry, supported by the state was able to survive the strong presence of India's commercial film capital: Bollywood.

In discussing the Bollywood/ regional divide, one should be mindful that there are clear hierarchies even within the category of "regional". Here, the South based industry and the Bengali film industry occupy the top rung of the popularity ladder while films of northeast India are relegated to a lesser position. This leads to the danger of the general life and lore of the region being obscured from the imagination of the 'mainstream' (Dutta & Dutta, 2011, 216). While Assamese film industry's foundation was laid way back in 1935 with Jyotiprasad Agarwala's *Joymoti*, it had a slow start and attracted a fewer audience. Even as the situation improved from 1970-1980s onwards, the industry's growth compared to many other regional cinema have been relatively stunted for various reasons. It was also observed that regional film distributors began exercising control over cinema from the 1960s onwards by making exhibitors screen more commercial Hindi films over the Assamese film (Borpujari, 2013 55). Lack of proper infrastructure, funding or promotion activities, fewer screens, a more or less passive Film Development Corporation as well as the linguistic diversity in the region along with the political conflicts has had an adverse effect on the growth of local cinema in the region. The 2002-2003 ULFA ban on Hindi cinema (which however did not last long), further brought a drop in audience for Assamese films (Borpujari, 2007). Owing to the small size of the audience, filmmakers started to introduce populist elements within the films, mainly a cut and paste Bollywood cinematic formula. In doing so, regional cinema over the years seemed to have by and large bargained for populist appeal over the local, endowing it with the characteristics of territorial cinema rather than being regional in its true sense.

In this paper, I argue that regional here does not simply mean a film made in the Assamese language with the Assamese village setting. It should represent the desires and aspirations, the trials and tribulations and the various narratives of the people of a place in its distinct ways of filmmaking. It needs to go beyond its boundaries and take forward the multiple narratives of the geography to people outside its perimeter, even inspiring the 'mainstream' to adapt them in their own languages as can be seen in the case of South Indian films. In the age of globalization when the regional has to contend with not just Bollywood but also with global cinematic cultures, it is more than necessary that it should sustain itself as a distinct form of art. This should go hand in hand with the creative exploration of local content while incorporating it with the technical sophistication of global cinema. There is a need to upgrade the technical aspects of regional cinema in Assam and the Northeast while retaining the 'territorial' core to address both the commercial concerns of film producers and withstanding the competition from Hindi films. Having said this, it cannot be said that there is a dearth of 'good regional' cinema from the state. Elaborating the problem with 'good' or quality Assamese cinema, film critic Utpal Borpujari explains, "The 'good' cinemas that stick to aesthetic and narrative excellence and truly reflects the standard of regional Assamese film productions are less favoured by the people." He further writes, "The few awarding winning films which have represented Assam outside like those of Manju Borah, Santwana Bordoloi, Sanjay Hazarika, etc fail to appeal to the local tastes despite being good in content. Lack of effective marketing, reluctance of cinema owners to screen art films at the cost of commercial Hindi cinema fare are some of the reasons" (Borpujari, 2007). The development of the regional film industries was to a great extent ushered in by state policies like loans, entertainment tax concessions, cash subsidies, and at times the institution of awards, etc. The active support of the state in financing film projects in order to revive the Assamese film industry was lacking for a long time.

The reasons quoted by Borpujari have even dissuaded a few filmmakers from going for a theatrical release of their films. For instance, national award winning Assamese filmmaker, Manju Borah, doesn't strive to entertain the popular masses even as her films are intrinsically local in context, narration and stories. In an interview with an institutional magazine *Srijan*, Borah (2012) says,

In the northeast, viewers are not purely Assamese or Manipuri... it is a complex pattern of inhabitants and we speak many languages. So ultimately for a regional film, it is difficult to get a good number of viewers. The screening timings are also very odd. So, there is no scope to recover the cost. Since my last film, I have decided not to release my films in theatres here (in Assam).

Therefore, filmmakers like Borah, whose films appeal to the regional sensibilities and speak about the problems and prospects of the region, have been sending their films mostly to film festivals and private screening than a theatrical release which does not meet the costs of production. In recent times, it can be said that Assamese cinema is undergoing a revival period which many critics like Borpujari choose to call a new wave in Assamese cinema. This is ushered by the likes of young filmmakers like Rima Das, Bhaskar Hazarika, Himjyoti Talukdar, Anupam Kaushik Borah, etc who are known for their unconventional styles of storytelling. Whether or not this could be called a new wave is yet to be seen but the film economics in recent times has definitely turned for the better. The developments in technologies and market practices revolving around film promotions, especially after the coming of the OTT platforms, has provided a golden opportunity to revive the 'regional'. This article tries to examine the filmography of award-winning Assamese filmmaker Rima Das within the discourse of the regional. Das's films were not only well-received over the world but were also big audience pullers in Assam. Her style of filmmaking is different from her counterparts who are equally indulging in experimental films. And the reading of her films is important because it highlights how art films or serious filmmaking which had scarce audience reception until some time ago could be crowd pullers and be intrinsically 'regional' and 'local' without losing their universal appeal. Her films are read within the context of the changing dynamics of film production and audience reception in the state. A reading of her films will throw light on some of these questions.

It must be mentioned that in the films of Rima Das made under the banner Flying River Films, the filmmaker wears several hats at the same time-- as director, scriptwriter, editor, cameraperson and even a co-producer. Das has been bringing accolades to Assamese cinema worldwide and has finally forced the audience to come out of their homes and watch "regional" film made in the style of docu-fiction. She had two theatrical releases so far. Her film *Village Rockstars* (2017) was India's official nomination to the 91st Academy Awards, but it was not nominated for the top nine films from 87. The film also won several accolades like the Best Feature Film 'Swarna Kamal' award at the 65th National Film Awards in 2018 along with awards in three other categories: Best Child Artist, Best Location Sound Recordist and Best Editing.

Set in a remote village in rural Assam, *Village Rockstars* revolves around Dhunu and her friends. Dhunu lives with her widowed mother and her elder brother. One day, she watches a group of local boys performing in her village with handmade musical instruments and thinks of forming a rock band herself. She makes a handmade styrofoam guitar and along with the boys perform in the paddy fields as a band. Dhunu however nurtures the dream of possessing a real guitar one day and on the advice of a village elderly, starts saving the money she earns by helping neighbours with small tasks like picking betel nuts from the trees. But when monsoon sets in and floods their village, problems come their way. They lose their goat, the crops are destroyed and even their house is half submerged in water. Dhunu retrieves her savings to give it to her mother who runs the house single-handedly after her husband's demise. But when the seasons change and the situation improve, Dhunu's mother brings her a second-hand guitar which she jubilantly holds as she walks into the fields with her boys' gang.

Das's second film *Bulbul Can Sing* (2019) also won several accolades around the world. It was screened in the Contemporary World Cinema section at the 2018 Toronto International Film Festival and like her previous film, won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Assamese at India's 66th National Film Awards. *Bulbul Can Sing* is a story of three teenagers, Bulbul, Bonny and Suman coming to terms with the own sexualities and the social mores of an orthodox village society. Bulbul's father wants Bulbul to excel in her singing. Yet it is always Bonny who wins accolades for her singing in school. Their friend Suman, who is effeminate, is bullied by his classmates and is teased as "Ladies". Irritated and dejected with the bullying, Suman feels disheartened when even the villagers start calling him so. As the three friends revel in their teenage dreams and their new found love, life takes a nasty turn. It happens one fateful day when the five decide to visit a hilltop known for fulfilling the wishes of lovers who pray there. The couples are caught red-handed by a group of men who witness them kissing. All this takes place

even when Suman is supposed to be on the watch. Caught unaware, they are beaten and shamed by the men and soon the news spread in the entire village. The couples are rusticated from school and unable to bear the embarrassment, Bonny dies by suicide. Bulbul severs ties with her boyfriend and the incident puts a dent in Bulbul and Suman's friendship until the two finally reconcile after Bonny's death. The film ends with Bulbul offering solace to Bonny's mother and finally learning to sing in tune.

The following section presents a reading of Das's films that enable us to look at the key themes of her work and then locate them within the discourse of the regional.

Women and Nature in Rima Das's films: Towards universal aesthetics in filmmaking

Nature seems to be an inseparable element in Das's films. She begins her films with the vast expanse of paddy fields where her protagonists, mostly children or young adolescents are seen to spend their time. Both her films show nature in all its resplendence mirroring or even forecasting the stories in the lives of the protagonists. Das uses the rural landscape with its natural sights and sounds as an aesthetic trope not only to complement her story but also to speak a universal film language that resonate with people across the region and beyond it. Nature in Das's films, therefore, does not lie separate or outside the narrative as a mere setting but participates in her storytelling as an important component, providing both aesthetic as well as narrative thrust to the plot.

If in *Village Rockstars*, the filmmaker uses the natural landscape to represent the innocence of childhood and a girl child's initiation to womanhood, *Bulbul Can Sing* uses nature to make a more political statement about sexualities. In *Village Rockstars*, the close-up of the children lying amidst the tall grass, of the rustling leaves in the trees or the wide-angle shot of the paddy fields and children playing in the streams knee-deep in water are representative of the unbridled joy and freedom of childhood. Dhunu is seen playfully moving around the fields, climbing trees, sleeping half-drenched in water-logged fields with her friends, rowing the boat over flooded fields with natural ease. The filmmaker focuses on the joys of childhood, the unrestrained, unrestricted movements of young kids and the ungendered pleasures of childhood with the natural landscape of rural Assam as the backdrop. In doing so, Das also makes sharp demarcations between gendered spaces. Das rarely shows Dhunu indulging in any household chores. Her world remains outside the house, where she helps her mother in plucking betel nuts from trees, feeding the animals to planting rice in their paddy fields.

Much to the objections raised by the village women, Dhunu is always found in the company of boys. It is only when she attains puberty that restrictions are imposed on her by the women of the village. Simone De Beauvoir points out that there is no difference between pre-adolescent boys and girls; they share the same interests and pleasures (1997, 295). It is only when a girl's bodily development occurs that each new stage demarcates her more and more sharply from the opposite sex. De Beauvoir talks about the process of 'becoming flesh', which is the process whereby one comes to experience oneself as a sexual body being exposed to another's gaze, even forced to become 'flesh' against one's will. This process mostly begins at puberty when a girl is initiated into womanhood. Therefore, after Dhunu has her first periods, she is tutored into giving up the carefree life she enjoyed hanging around with the boys and climbing up trees. She is, in other words, cultured into embracing the codes of feminine conduct and dissociate from her previous pleasures, the world of nature. Das captures Dhunu's bodily changes and the nature/culture divide with the change of seasons. Soon after her first periods, monsoon strikes the state inundating the village, destroying their crops and even immersing most of the houses under water.

Similarly, Das also uses nature to offer a feminist critique of the social customs in *Bulbul Can Sing*. Bulbul's father had a long cherished dream to see his daughter become a singer. On the other hand, Bulbul who has a thin voice is least perturbed by his wishes. Wearing a flowery dress, she climbs trees and frolics in the river with her friends Bonny and Suman. The very first shot of the film is that of a close-up shot of Bulbul lying on the ground strewn with the fallen blooms of the *Erythrina(modar)* flower as she fiddles with a fallen flower while gazing up at the sky. The flower here is used as a metaphor for the fate that is going to befall Bulbul. The use of the flower is itself significant. Popularized by the famous song of Assamese musical maestro Bhupen Hazarika *Modaror Phul Henu Pujat Nelage*, where he talks about *Modar* (*Erythrina*) being a colourful flower that brightens the sky during springtime but never used in sacred offerings, is symbolic of social discriminations. Interestingly, the flower blooms during the season of spring, the season of bounty and fertility and the season of the Assamese traditional festival *Rongali Bihu*. This is a festival where young Assamese girls and boys rejoice in their youthful charm and openly partake in teasing activities. *Rongali Bihu* is associated with fertility and was originally celebrated in the crop fields to bring a good harvest. It is a celebration of union, love, eroticism, a time of the year when the atmosphere is filled with the lilting tunes of young boys and girls dancing in gay abandonment in the form of *husori*.

Therefore Das's selection of the flower to begin the film is a direct commentary on human sexuality and the natural process of heterosexual attraction that the season represents. The deep red of the flower represents their flaming young hearts, which though natural and pure remains outside the acceptable bounds of society. Taking *modar* as a metaphor to begin the film, Das sets the stage for the course of events to follow, events that are reflective of the cultural and the natural configurations of gendered behaviour that are deeply ingrained in the society.

One of the most interesting scenes in the film is when Bulbul climbs up a tree to meet her lover. As the lover pulls her up the tree, she shuts her eyes and feels the tree trunk with her fingers in a slow erotic caress. The tactile movement of her fingers slowly travelling along the bark or her feet feeling the blade of grass as they lie next to each other in the open field are some symbolic gestures used in the film to show the fresh realization of their desires. Das beautifully captures these intimate scenes from close-up, the significance of which is not lost on the audience. This is followed by the sensual touch of their hands and some quiet moments in one another's embrace under the open sky. Nature is here used in symbolic ways to associate the desires of a young woman to seasonal change to imply how adolescent desires are as natural as nature's changes. But soon their lives take an odd turn as Bulbul and her friend are caught in an act of physical intimacy with their boyfriends. Even here, the change in Bulbul's life is shown with the arrival of monsoon.

Feminist writers have written elaborately about the desiring female body which finds little mention in a patriarchal world obsessed with the desires of men. Therefore social constraints legitimize and provide a model of sexual behaviour for young a woman which is described as passive femininity. Such ideas of passivity have no concept of autonomy of female sexual desires (Holland et al, 1994, 24). By focusing on Bulbul gingerly stroking the trunk of the tree, the filmmaker brings out the subjectivity of the desirous women, by portraying her as a desiring subject instead of an object of desire.

One of the recurring tropes in Rima Das's films is the huge tree in the middle of the field. The tree itself stands in for a patriarchal structure whose limits are defined and its accessibility is culturally and socially regulated. It is around this tree that Das forwards her arguments for women's subjectivities and desires. The tree can symbolically point to the patriarchal structures- the law, rigid and deep-rooted in the society. It is around this tree that Dhunu's limits are set. To climb or not to climb becomes a gendered question. Similarly in *Bulbul Can Sing*, the tree appears in one of the very first few sequences as Suman teases Bulbul about finding a boyfriend and dissuading her from climbing the tree with her untied hair. As Suman narrates, the ghost of a young girl who had hanged herself in the tree hovers around the place and attacks girls with unkempt hair. Using the story of the ghost and connecting that with untied hair, Das explores how gender is imposed over everyday acts in favour of a highly repressive social apparatus. And most of the time, it is the women who are the bearers of patriarchal norms. This is clearly visible when in one scene Bulbul expresses her irritation with her mother who always preaches to her about what not to do. The tree is again one of the places Bulbul visits after Bonny's death. It once again represents the repressive social structure that curbs the full expression of female subjectivities over norms of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, where non-conforming individuals are often relegated as evil, spoilt and punishable. As Das shows, a concerned Bulbul quickly ties back her hair after hearing Suman's story about the ghost in the beginning of the film and comes back to it after losing her best friend. In this context, Salleh's (2017) writings on Man/Woman=Nature assumptions are interesting. She writes,

In too many cultures, girls come to adulthood with assumptions about themselves as essentially Other: as instinct-driven, irrational creatures, as temptress, Earth Mother, dark, evil, damp, passive, moon goddess, and so on. Masculinity, by contrast, elicits associations of rationality, sun, activity, goodness, light and order. Man evokes law, regularity and permanence, while Woman implies chaos and unpredictability (68).

It is this notion that Das tries to subvert by her overt emphasis on nature and the natural world of acceptance.

Elements of Subversion in Das's Films:

Both films portray a challenge to the dominant cultural codes for women. It is obvious that Das's main protagonists are women and she offers a feminist critique of the social situations that surface in rural and urban settings alike. By highlighting the prejudices of society, she lends a voice to her protagonists by narrating a story about their subjectivities. And Das does this by making both the protagonists of her films sing: they sing the song of their desires. In *Village Rockstars*, Dhunu cherishes the dream of opening her rock band, an unconventional dream for a girl in a remote rural village with no material means to realize it. But Dhunu persists with her efforts to realize it. Even in her next film, Das makes sure that her protagonist 'sings' despite the odds set against her. The very title

of the film is a strong statement of feminist assertion. Bulbul means nightingale, a bird whose melodious notes enthrall its admirers. In *Bulbul 'Can Sing'* throughout the film, the young protagonist is off-tune till she finally finds the right notes towards the end - a symbolic way of suggesting that Bulbul finally overcomes her challenges and finds her own individuality. This association with songs is symbolic of the hopes and desires of young women that remain unexpressed and veiled under social appearances. A close look at Das's filmography would show that both her films are about hopes and desires. In *Village Rockstars*, it is the guitar that becomes the object of Dhunu's obsession which Dhunu's mother makes sure that despite their financial constraints, Dhunu is not disheartened. When Dhunu realizes that they do not have a bank account and enough money to buy a guitar, she starts to save penny by penny by helping villagers with their work. At many times, Das uses low angle shots to tower the subject of her films as a reflection of their tall hopes.

Village Rockstars is perhaps a narrative of passion that does not dwell on self-pity but rather hinges on hope and a continuous effort for its attainment. In fact, the filmmaker has completely dispensed with pity in the film, even during times when the family's only goat goes missing or when the crops are destroyed or even when Dhunu gives all her savings to her mother as the floods destroy their crops. The mother-daughter duo reflects an agency for change- to cherish dreams and pursue them. In this case, Dhunu's mother draws an interesting character for the film. Being a single mother whose husband died in the floods, she does not wallow in grief despite having to raise their children alone amidst adversities. Her serene countenance unperturbed by the numerous struggles that she encounters in life lends the character a great degree of strength that one can emulate. When the village women taunt Dhunu for climbing trees with the boys, her mother comes to her defence. Dhunu's mother tells an elderly woman that it is part of her training that Dhunu is adept in all outdoor activities, even in climbing trees. The freedom that she gives to her daughter is to make her self-reliant. And when the elderly woman comments that it is because of the absence of the father that the villagers had the temerity to rebuke Bulbul, she is quick to retort that it is she who has been running the house single-handedly for many years without a husband.

The story of *Village Rockstars* offers a space for exploring the different phases of a woman's life, the passage from a child to an adolescent, the story of their dreams, hopes and struggles with the protagonists wearing an attitude of invincibility throughout the film. It is a story about women by a woman where very little cinematic space has been allotted to the men of their lives. One could even argue that Das's efforts are skewed and partial for she often tries to totally eclipse the opposite sex in her narratives. For instance, while Dhunu nurtures her dreams, her brother seems to be giving up on his. He flunks his class three times and enjoys the idea of skipping school during the floods, a contrast to the enthusiastic Dhunu. Again, Dhunu is the one who climbs trees to collect betel nuts while her brother stays below to pick them up. He rather helps his mother with household chores like washing dishes. And when Dhunu shows him a cartoon strip where the characters form a rock band, he refuses to believe they could afford to do a similar thing. Even the image sketch of the father that the film offers is that of a timid man who lacked a fighting spirit. That is why while Dhunu's mother survived the floods by learning to swim through, her father died by drowning. Her mother, therefore, makes sure that to survive, Dhunu must learn to swim, be it in the waters of the flood or through the various challenges life throws at her. Examining Das's main focus in her films, one could argue that such a narrative omission of the opposite sex is also Das's way of bringing her women to the foreground of their stories. For, in the gendered world of everyday, the lives and stories of women are seldom visible. An individual like Dhunu's mother would have been an insignificant subject, busy with the ordinariness of everyday life. But it is in these ordinary life moments that a culture of submission and acceptance finds root. Therefore by highlighting her character, Das has instead transformed the ordinary into an agent of change, an instrument to drive home the message that one open mind is enough to bring the change that we want to see in the world.

In *Village Rockstars*, Dhunu's dream of forming a rock band is itself an act of subversion, of crossing the territory reserved mostly for men. One of the most striking subversive commentaries that Das makes in the film is by showing Dhunu reveling in her ornaments, wearing the sindoor during her puberty ritual and breaking the same codes of womanhood that she is initiated into by making her climb the tree the very next day. In the story, the guitar becomes symbolic of the victory of a free, indomitable spirit. As it can be seen towards the end of the film, Dhunu finally gets to own a real guitar.

In *Bulbul Can Sing*, the filmmaker takes forward her argument on female desires by also introducing the idea of alternate sexualities, or at least indirectly talking about non-normative identities. If *Village Rockstars* is about a young girl's childhood, then *Bulbul Can Sing* is about adolescent desires. The object of desire in both phases of a girl's life has changed. If Dhunu had centred her desires on a material object like the guitar, adolescence changes the objects of desires respectively. The filmmaker is more direct about her approach towards the social stereotypes around gender. She beautifully captures the gendered conversations of the present age by including the story of Suman in her narrative. In fact, Das makes a political statement with her second film. By portraying the teenage love story of Bulbul and Bonny, she creates a space for contesting the 'natural' against the 'cultural' by situating the 'natural' course of teenage love and their flaming emotions in a narrative that talks about the acceptable and unacceptable parameters of the society. As the story progresses, it can be seen that both Bulbul and Bonny face the consequences of their transgressions. They are beaten, shamed and publicly humiliated after some men catch them red-handed kissing their lovers. Das makes a case about the idea of moral policing here and talks about a society where even an innocent act of love is censured but violence against women is permissible. The filmmaker, it seems, deliberately prolongs the sequence of the mob attack to emphasize the dualism that exists in our society.

Das explores this dualism at various levels. Bulbul and Bonny's indiscretion earns the wrath of the people of their village. The physical violence upon them by the men on the other hand is justified in a society sharply divided along ideas of sacred and profane. By their physical act, they have transgressed their moral code of conduct since sensual pleasure outside marriage is deemed problematic and profane. Such ideas are backed and sustained by and through the moral and ideological validations provided by the religious scriptures written by men to represent 'their' worldview. This in turn enables men to control women's bodies and their lives. This is captured by Das in the sequence when a village elderly talks about the distinction between spiritual and physical love in a religious ceremony held in Bulbul's house after the incident. Commenting on the present generation, the preacher in his speech on carnal desires, talks about how the younger generation has reduced the spiritual essence of love to mere physical attraction. His words are however lost on the audience, especially the women who later discuss how his talk was beyond their comprehension. Yet, going by the preacher's interpretation of the scriptures, any punishment meted out to the deviants is justified. Here, while the lovers are rusticated by the school authority for bringing dishonour to their school, a purification ritual is carried out by Bulbul's father to wash her sins. Bonny on the other hand takes her life to escape the shame and vilification. If Bonny and Bulbul are branded as deviant, Suman too is not accepted by the society. He is continuously shamed and bullied by people for his effeminacy by being teased as "ladies". Throughout the reading, it looks as if the term "ladies" to shame Suman has been deliberately used by Das to talk about how being a woman itself becomes a slur in the orthodox society trapped in layers of patriarchal obligations.

By exploring the experiences of Suman and the two girls, Das makes an endeavor at naturalizing the processes of adolescent desires. She attempts to free the bodies caged within narrow ideas of conformity. Like the nature in her background and the seasonal changes that she so beautifully captures, expressions of love and lust are only normal. What is needed to overcome the social barriers is a solid sisterhood among women who extend solidarity to each other. Bulbul finds solace in the company of Bonny's mother and it is only towards the end of the film that she finally 'Does' Sing.

A reading of the films highlights how the filmmaker has artfully flipped the gendered understanding of roles and customs to produce subversive texts that pass off silently as art film or as many write, a docu-fiction style of filmmaking less experimented in the state. In many ways, the filmmaker tries to defy the rigid structures of society by offering a different cinematic experience to the audience.

Locating the Auteur:

A producer, director, scriptwriter and cameraperson, Rima Das dons the role of a multifaceted filmmaker. According to the auteur perspective of film studies, a film is a reflection of the director's artistic vision and therefore a given filmmaker will have recognizable, recurring themes and visual cues in her films. In Rima Das's filmography, we find this consistency. This is in terms of the aesthetics, the settings, nature of her characters and even in the formal and thematic elements of her films. Some of the recurring tropes found in her films are the paddy fields, a tree in the middle of the field, the streams and the seasonal changes. Even her selection of shots shows a striking similarity in both the films: the wide-angle shot of the fields, the high angle shots of the people lying on the field, close-ups of the natural settings, low angle shots of youngsters frolicking around the trees and the open fields, etc. Thematically, both films are women-centric. Apart from these, other identifiable elements are invariably the

use of non-professional actors and the dialect spoken by the characters-- a Lower Assam Nalbariya dialect. In terms of film form, Rima Das's films, especially *Village Rockstars* borders on docu-fiction. In fact, Das does not pay much attention to form at all. Such visibly recurring themes make Das's films suitable for studying her films from the perspective of the auteur film theory. Despite a few out of focus shots and technical glitches like that of sound clarity with her first film, Das produces a visual treat on-screen with a wide range of shots from the book.

Reading both her films, it will not be wrong to call one a natural progression of the previous story. In both the stories, the filmmaker traces the cultural stigmas associated with each stage of female development through its formative stages: from childhood to youth. Dhunu's story represents the childhood phase while Bulbul is a reflection of the desires of youth. Undeniably, in both the films, the 'author' maintains her standpoint: a story told from a feminist standpoint, a story about female subjectivities.

Another characteristic of Das is her cinematic approach. Using a wide range of film shots, Das speaks a universal language of human desires that is not location-specific. Therefore, even when the setting and the story are locally set, it becomes universal in terms of her film aesthetics that communicates with the audience not just with its content but also with its symbolic metaphors. One cannot help but see a clear influence of the likes of Majid Majidi in her style of storytelling. Yet while doing so, the local is not lost in her films. The landscape, the sights and sounds of an Assamese village, the ordinariness of life that she presents can very well strike a chord with anyone from the region. Moreover, Das does not fail to address the problems of the region in her films. The perennial Assam floods and the erosion of embankments claim many lives and render a large number of people homeless every year. This does not escape Das's narrative as Dhunu tells her friend that she had lost her father in the floods many years ago and even as she says this, she finds herself at the centre of another one. Another significant point of departure in Das's films from most of the other regional films is that she does not pander to the standardized Assamese language in her films or the dominant linguistic tastes. Instead, she creates her own cultural space using a distinctive Nalbariya dialect of her native place. It is these definitive qualities that make a reading of Das's films important in the parlance of what comprises the 'regional' within the discourse of the 'mainstream'.

Conclusion:

One of the central tenets of Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis on 'Culture Industry' in *Dialectic of Mass Enlightenment* is that mass production of culture through mass media have resulted in the standardization and rationalization of cultural form, and that this, in turn, has weakened the capacity of the individual to think and act in a critical and autonomous way. While distinguishing the commoditized products with autonomous art, Adorno argues that autonomous art has the capacity to highlight the inequalities and irrationality of the status quo, by presenting an ideal vision of what mankind can aspire towards. As such it has an emancipatory character. While their thesis was a critique of the commoditized culture produced by all forms of mass media and its role in maintaining the status quo in the society, it nonetheless offers me prisms to read the regional/ mainstream divide that is the argument in this article. Even within this commoditized, commercial culture of mass media and the growing global media networks facilitated by the rise of capitalism, there exist oppositions. Such oppositions provide a counter-balance to the cultural domination of the centre on the periphery. Regional films, I believe, serve this important function. By retaining its unique identity, it opposes the mainstreaming of culture. In a multicultural, multilingual nation like India, the regional films provide a balance to the hegemony of the centre: the Bollywood productions, and help retain the distinct cultural spaces of each region.

Therefore even as globalization has opened up the film markets to foreign productions and distributions, connecting distant lands, people, markets and ideas, it has also simultaneously produced a stronger sense of asserting local identities where previously fluid and inchoate ones existed. The need then is to produce more content that on the one hand is descriptive of a region, stands for and advocates for it through stylistic, aesthetic and thematic narration and on the other hand, has a universal appeal that reaches out to a large number of people. And in the case of India, the case for regional cinemas becomes even more urgent since we are dealing with a nation that is held together neither by a common language or a shared religion. Therefore, the development of strong regional cinema will help strengthen the existing variety in India and save it from the onslaught of a homogenizing effect, from the non-place of a globalized world where regional specificities are erased. Unlike the South India based film industry, it is only in terms of art that as DasGupta writes, "the Bengali cinema, the Oriya or the Assamese, or the newly identity-proud Gujarati and Konkani film will survive in the end, bolstered up by state finances or art theaters or whatever mechanics we eventually arrive at for making it possible to have artistic films for a minority audience"

(34). He further clarifies that in a country like India, the proportion of what comprises this 'minority' can be almost equivalent to the entire population of say, a country like Scandinavia (34).

Assamese cinema which made an early start and produced some serious award-winning films like *Piyali Phukan*(1955), *Maak Aru Morom* (1957), *Ronga Police*(1958), *Puberun*(1959), *Pratidhwani*(1964), *Dr Bezbarua*(1969), *Sandhyarag*(1977), *Anirban*(1980), *Aparoop* (1982), *Xagoroloi Bohudoor*(1994), *Adajya* (1996), etc had undergone a slump in film viewership after the 1990s owing to a number of challenges it faced. The dire state of affairs has however not dissuaded filmmakers from producing films, unlike its neighbouring state Manipur where filmmaking has been severely affected after the insurgent's ban on Hindi films. In Assam, the attempts to revive the industry contributed to a number of changes in the content of the films. Firstly, to survive the competition from Bollywood films, filmmakers have pandered to the popular tastes of the audience who frequent the theatres for Hindi films rather than the home produced Assamese films. Secondly, the dismal audience numbers had made some filmmakers to opt for screening their films in international festivals or selling their telecast rights to television in order to make up for the costs of production. Both changes threaten the existence of the regional industry. However, after years of struggle, the film industry is finally reviving in the state with more and more audiences turning out in the theatres for Assamese films. Assam has seen some of the biggest commercial successes in its film history in recent times. Produced by popular Assamese singer Zubeen Garg *Mission China* (2017) became Assam's first film to earn a massive 6 crores. His second film *Kanchanjanga* (2019) earned a whopping Rs 5.12 crores while popular actor Jatin Bora's film *Ratnakar* (2019) grossed over 6 crore and witnessed the highest all-time single-day collection record of Assamese cinema. These films also opened at multiplexes in cities like Delhi and Mumbai ushering in a new hope for the revival of the Assamese film industry. Some of the films released during this period like Bhaskar Hazarika's *Aamis* and Rima Das's films *Village Rockstars* and *Bulbul Can Sing* have also simultaneously released on the OTT platforms which helped bring more audience to watch the films. This was unimaginable a few years ago. The changes seen in the industry today have not occurred in a day. It has been a gradual process, mostly owing to the collective efforts of film producers, directors, financiers, the Film Corporation of Assam along with government support, implementation of massive marketing strategies, etc. Aggressive film promotion strategies by releasing trailers, teasers, outdoor promotions with the film's cast and crew travelling to the far reaches of the state to schools and colleges, have generated interest among the people to watch the films. Some of the films released during such hay days include Bhaskar Hazarika's *Kothanodi* (2015) and *Aamis* (2019), Reema Bora's *Bokul* (2015), Jaicheng Jai Dohutia's (2016) *Haanduk*, Himjyoti Talukdar's *Calender* (2018), Zubeen Garg's *Mission China* (2017) and *Kanchanjanga* (2019), Jatin Bora's *Ratnakar* (2019), Santwana Bordoloi's *Maj Rati Keteki* (2017), Anupam Kaushik Borah's *Bornodi Bhotiyai: Love, by the River* (2019), etc.

Notwithstanding a few innovative films, a closer look at the biggest hits in the history of the state has shown a strong influence of Bollywood. In an attempt to produce a profit, the industry has been pumping out a series of films that borrow heavily from Bollywood's form and style of filmmaking. Although the content of each is different, they are identical in treatment, in form and style. The differences, in fact, are superficial ways to mask the uniformity of the products. This threatens the very core of the 'regional'. In this case, films like those of Rima Das with her own indigenous form and style of narrating a story of the region have shown that it is equally possible to make sustainable commercial films keeping the 'local' intact. With entertainment shifting also to the digital platform, regional cinema has got a new platform. While this has also necessitated a bigger need for marketing and promotion, it has also ensured that the 'regional' does not remain confined to the region alone. The OTT platforms have collapsed the language and cultural barriers of the past and facilitated the wider reach of regional cinema which now comes with English subtitles. This also opens the scope of experimenting with films based in other languages of Assam or specific to the various communities and tribes inhabiting the state. Problems like lack of viewership of Assamese cinema in film theatres or a lack of number of screens for regional film can be taken care of by this platform. The regional as I have argued in the beginning should represent the social and cultural ethos of a place, present the dreams and aspirations of its people, promote its diversity and at the same time critique the shortcomings, while entertaining the people with its aural and visual appeal. This, I believe is what makes the regional different from the 'mainstream'. Regional cinema therefore should offer glimpses of a region in ways that resonates with the tastes of a universal audience, both inside and outside its geography. The high grossing commercial hits of this decade have however failed to truly represent the region. Therefore, at this juncture of Assamese films, when many Assamese films are enjoying unprecedented commercial success, Das films demonstrate what is amiss in this hullabaloo. In her films, we find a glimpse of the state, the beauty amidst the ordinariness, themes that echo the lives and struggles of common people battling their own demons. After winning laurels around the world, Das has in fact shown that a film need not be glamour filled or pander to clichéd

themes to truly enjoy commercial success. In the age of capitalist market practices and homogenization of cultures into the global, what is rather required is the need to stick to one's roots. While commercial success is a requisite to revive the moribund condition of the Assamese film industry, cinema which is rooted in the socio-cultural traditions of the state is also important to retain the 'local' while catering to the global. Films like those of Rima Das, and a few of her contemporaries have definitely proved this in time with their innovative styles of filmmaking.

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