



Ethnographic Reflections Of The Moran Community In Assamese Cinema

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Abstract: The current paper applies to an ethnographic and sociological approach to examine how the Moran people are portrayed in Assamese film. It aims to explain how the cultural identity of an under-represented indigenous population, of the Moran people living in the area, is created, negotiated, or falsified in Assamese filmic productions. Based on a qualitative approach, the study unites the filmic analysis with the ethnographic data, which are collected based on the interactions with the audience members, community stakeholders and filmmakers. The study will reveal the implicit discourses of identity, peripherality and place by analyzing some Assamese films that prefigure Moran people, places or cultural constructs. The paper also asks the question of how Assamese cinema is the embodiment and shaper of the social realities through the prism of its cultural art. The research results are likely to improve our understanding of ethnic representation, change in regional identities, and the importance of visual culture in recording and explaining the experiences of the indigenous in Northeast India.

Keywords: Moran community, ethnography, Assamese Cinema

I. INTRODUCTION

During a significant time frame, cinema has served as the reflector and the producer of social reality. Film has acted as a cultural negotiation site whereby such issues as ethnicity, language and belonging have been discussed in Assam. Still, the relations between Assamese cinema and the great number of indigenous tribes in the state are rather contradictory, even though the genre tends to be proud of location and embodies the richness of the folklore. The Morans are a closed grammatically and historically agrarian group that has traditionally been located in the Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and Sivasagar districts of Upper Assam and has by far been a forgotten group as far as scholarly and film thinking is concerned.

Repeated marginalization has been observed in the Moran community both at the Assamese community and politics level where the identity discourse is often controlled by bigger ethnic groups and in the representative media where the media may often simplify or even ignore the richness of the Moran culture. As such, the visual of the larger Assamese community has come to be seen in mainstream Assamese cinema, and as such, has limited the chances of the indigenous expressing themselves. This article is aimed at, therefore, analyzing the role of the film in the formation of information concerning the community into which Moran belongs and the ways these representations are applied to the community of indigeneity.

Anthropological study of cinema involves a process that goes off screen and into cultural concepts that influence the way an audience receives media and how the media is constructed. As an analytical field, visual anthropology focuses on how films are constructive as well as represent a culture. Exploring the representation of the lesser-known cultures would provide important information regarding politics of cultural inclusion and exclusion in Assam where film has long been bound up with linguistic nationalism and the construction of regional identities.

The essay begins by critically examining the relevant literature before presenting a theory that brings about a connection between ethnographic interpretation as well as the representation in films. The paper discusses the ideological discursive formation of ethnicity, labor, and belonging by analysing specifics of the Assamese films, such as *Boomba Ride* (2021), *Village Rockstars* (2017), *Jilmil Jonak* (2014), and *Aparoop* (1982). Even in cases where none of them specifically portrays Moran life, these works provide comparative precedents to understand the silence or falsification of Moran identity as an anthropological problem. The general purpose of the paper is to prove that the invisibility of the Moran community in the cinema is a cultural text itself, and represents Assamese anxiety about modernity and ethnicity.

2. Review of Literature

The intersection point between culture, ethnicity and cinema has generated a large amount of academic discussion. Stuart Hall and Homi Khabib Bhabha are among the world scholars who argue that representation is non-neutral in nature and the place where meanings are created, debated, and propagated. The concept of cultural hybridity by Bhabha asserts the controversial nature of the identity negotiations in the postcolonial society, and the concurrent method of ideological transfer via the visual materials as imagined by Hall is explained through the model of encoding/decoding. These theoretical categories give a general prism through which Assamese cinema manifests its identification with the multiethnic make-up of the state.

Ashish Raja dhaksha and Rachel Dwyer have explored the way regional film industries negotiated the issue of linguistic and identities in Indian cinema in the literature. However, a majority of researches pay little attention to Northeast India, concentrating their efforts on the main language centres of production like Bengali, Tamil, or Hindi. As a part of Assamese scholarship, Uddipan Dutta (2018) and Tilitema Misra (2014) have emphasized that the indigenous heterogeneity is frequently repressed in Assamese films, in the name of achieving an objectively negotiable authenticity that fits into modern goals.

The use of video as an ethnographic piece of data has methodological approaches presented in the works of Karl Heider, David MacDougall and Jay Ruby as visual anthropology. The elements highlighted in these studies include reflexivity and the positionality of the filmmaker who is imperative in the critical evaluation of any regional theatres purportedly being a presentation of the local culture. There has been research by Dolly Kikon (2019) and Tuli Ghosh (2020) on how local experience mediated through visual media and circulated globally in Northeast India, but the Moran community is still conspicuously lacking in these accounts.

As a consequence, two glaring gaps in the surviving scholarship occur. To start with, few studies have focused on how Assamese cinema is internally represented in terms of foregrounding and marginalizing of actors and narratives has been conducted despite being used as a means of regio-identity identification. Second, there are only limited studies on the significance of the anthropological background of the indigenous people in smaller communities between the cinematic portrayal and the material circumstances. This study aims at filling both gaps by incorporating filmological analysis and an anthropological approach and confirming that visual narratives are social constructs along with the communities they are supposed to represent.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the postcolonial theory, cultural studies and visual anthropology, and it offers a solid foundation of the analysis of the way Assamese cinema constructs and reproduces the images of indigeneity. These lenses highlight the content of representation and the processes of representation in the extensive system of identities, knowledge, and power.

The colonial, The Cultural and Postcolonial.

The analysis is based on the powerful theory put forward by Stuart Hall (1997) according to which representation is a meaning-making process but not a simplistic factual reflection. Hall assumes that the media representations have a very active role in the creation of the reality that they show. The representation of Indigenous communities in Assamese cinema is often done through a process of selectivity, including romanticization of folklore and erasing the social realities such as ethnic strife, unemployment and migration. The thesis by Hall explains how the broader ideological constructions of the Assameseness can be reflected

in the existence or lack of existence of the Moran community. The concept of hybridity introduced by Homi K. Bhabha (1994) is also important to make the analysis of this phenomenon more complete, explaining the interstitial areas that the colonial and postcolonial subjects inhabit. The Moran identity in the Assamese mainstream cinema frequently plays a marginal role in cinema: as a part of the Assamese community but out of the Assamese culture. It is this ambivalence that results in the creation of cinematic texts that are oscillating between inclusion and erasure thus facilitating assimilation and resistance.

Reflexivity and Visual Anthropology.

The framework, using an ethnographic perspective, has adopted the ethnography of visual anthropology, especially that of David MacDougall (1998) and Jay Ruby (2000) who think that film is a means of cultural production in itself but not a weapon to document culture. The concept of reflexivity the recognition process of the film-maker and his power in meaning-making is an unavoidable component of ethnographic filmmaking. Majority of the Assamese filmmakers originate within dominant language or caste groups and their production decisions are always based on particular perceptions of the world. This reflectional awareness enables us to examine films to determine how the image of Moran community is mediated by that of the external instead of being self-mediated.

Semiotics and Politics of the Gaze.

Lastly, the techniques of deciphering the signs, symbols, and visual clichés that are often present in the movies about the life in the countryside and among the Indigenous people can be supplied by the theory of semiotic (Barthes, 1977). Who is gazed and gazes is socially constructed by the class, gender, and ethnicity. The native themes are often not turned into the discursive objects in the Assamese films, rather, the native subjects are object of curiosity and nostalgia or even sympathy. The explanation of this visual politics is a condition of interpreting film as an anthropological text, which does not reflect the current culture but actively builds it.

4. Research Methodology

This study looks at how the Moran community is portrayed in Assamese films using a qualitative, interpretive, and ethnographically informed methodology. In keeping with the history of film ethnography (Heider, 1976), where cinematic scripts themselves become cultural artifacts for examination, the study uses textual analysis and literature-based ethnographic interpretation rather than practical investigation.

4.1 Research Design

Three analytical levels are integrated in the study:

1. Textual Analysis: A careful examination of a few chosen movies to find recurrent themes, conversations, and visual codes connected to marginality and indigenesness.
2. Contextual Analysis: Placing movies in the historical, sociopolitical, and cultural context of Assam, especially with regard to identity politics and indigenous rights.
3. Comparative Interpretation: To identify trends of inclusion and omission, compare how Moran culture is portrayed in Assamese movies to how other indigenous or rural populations are portrayed.

4.2 Film Selection Criteria

The films were selected as Boomba Ride (2021, directed by Biswajit Borah), Village Rockstars (2017, directed by Rima Das), Jilmil Jonak (2014, directed by Sibanan Borah), and Aparoop (1982, directed by Jahnu Borah) based on the concerns they stereotype and the topography of their setting to Upper Assam. Despite the fact that none of them specifically centers around the Moran community, these accounts offer a representative spectrum that will enable a critical analysis of the glaring gap of the Moran in terms of nursing film discussions. Rebellious art-house and modern neo-rural narrative, every movie represents the gradual aesthetic and ideological movement of the Assamese motion picture.

4.3 Data Interpretation and Collection.

The secondary sources used to gather information were scholarly studies, published reviews, film texts, and the interviews with filmmakers that are stored in media archives. They are placed within the framework of analytical approaches based on the method of semiotic reading and discourse analysis to decode the ideological basis of both narrative and image. Markers of ethnic coding / exclusion were determined in discourse, the choice of costumes, landscape description, and the language.

4.4 Reflexivity and Positionality.

The author recognizes that she occupies a dual role of an Assamese researcher and film maker. This reflexive position will guarantee that interpretation is self-critical by specifying the ways in which personal cultural proximity might affect readings. Therefore, the analysis attempts to maintain a sense of objectivity among academics and understand insider cues.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The research considers cultural representation as a humanethical area even although there is no direct subject human. The fact that communities are being misrepresented in the visual media has ethical implications, and the role of the researcher is to facilitate a country that should have fair and accurate representations. Based on this, the process of interpretation itself involves ethics.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Notwithstanding its historically small scale in comparison with other Indian regional industries, Assamese cinema has developed into a large cultural arena in which identity, belonging and regional modernity are debated. The indigenous groups like the Ahoms, Mishings, Karbis, Morans among others are depicted in a manner which says a lot on Assamese social imagination. In this part, the author will discuss how the Assamese films have depicted the rural and indigenous life, paying specific attention to what the narrative and visual decisions made in the films can tell us about marginalization or symbolic silence of the Moran people.

5.1 Assamese Cinema and Indigeneity Question.

Assamese cinema has been striving to create a unique identity that does not follow the colonial and mainstream Indian standards. Earlier article works like *Jyoti* (1935) by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala placed the Assamese culture on an ethno-nationalistic framework that glorified the past and moral excellence. The voices of the lower-status indigenous were more or less neglected in favor of the upper-caste Assamese middle-class, which served as the main object of this underlying imaginative.

During the late twentieth century, movies like *Jahnu Barua* and *Santwana Bordoloi* were made that portrayed social realism in Assamese films, presenting moral issues and tribulations in the villages. However, even under such realism, when the Assamese village is universalized, cultural differences are likely to be eroded. Film studies used to seldom give serious consideration to the Morans, although they played an important role in the history of Assamese politics and agriculture. Ethnographically, this exclusion is an indicator of a more expansive politics of visibility: an order in which one group of people is allowed to represent Assamese culture onscreen.

5.2 Aparoop (1982): The Middle-Class Gaze

In the emotional transit of its urbanized female main character, *Jahnu Barua* in his *Aparoop* - considered by many as a canonical piece of work in Assamese film industry, makes an implicit implication of a critical view of modernity. The image of the countryside of Assam presented in the film serves as a nostalgic set-up, full of scenic fields, peaceful agrarian workers, and traditional celebrations, despite its central theme not dwell upon indigenous identity. The rural milieu is actually aestheticized, instead of being lived, as MacDougall (1998) describes in terms of the ethnographic gaze of distance, in which culture is spectacularized.

Aboriginal workers and peasants are also literally and figuratively present in *Aparoop*. They form the context of dramatizing Assamese modernity. Objectification of the rural and indigenous body into the authentic space of locality with no agency is an early cinematic trend. This generalized definition of rurality, a condensed visual elliptical shortcut to moral integrity and plainness which narrows the complexity of the real-life experiences, is an incomplete depiction of the Moran in the larger ethnographic haze.

5.3 Jilmil Jonak (2014): Nostalgia and the Postcolonial Return

Jilmil Jonak by Sibanan Borah deals with rural Assam through the adventure of a protagonist who visits the country after a long break in foreign lands, and is the first sign of cultural shock of Assamese elites, who have to live in the contradictions of local and global identities. The film follows a traditional visualization of village life, and at the same time, it takes a socioeconomic injustice and environmentally harmful issues. Repetitions of the Indigenous American performers, presumably recruited in the communities like the Moran or Mishing are used as exemplifications of innocence and ecological balance.

Postcolonially, this representation can be described as the so-called ambivalence of mimicry as described by Bhabha (1994); the native theme is at the same time romanticized and commodified in the visual economy of the movie. Cong songs, rituals, and scenes of farm work is a kind of cinematic ethnography, aestheticizing the nameless Moran character. But this ethnography is an outwardly created one: the Assamese elites borrow the native images in order to retrieve modern authenticity. Therefore, the movie becomes consistent with the idea of a regime of representation presented by Hall (1997) since it recognizes cultural diversity but safely transfers it into dominant discourses.

5.4 Village Rockstars (2017): Emerging Voices and Visual Realism

The global recognition of Assamese cinema underwent a sea change with Rima Das's Village Rockstars. The film's neorealist style, which was shot in Chhaygaon with amateur performers, honors the dreams of a rural girl who wants to start a rock band. Its personal depiction of rural youth and female agency upends previous aesthetic hierarchies, even though it is not precisely about the Moran community. In line with MacDougall's participatory ethnography, where the visual frame becomes an extension of lived experience, Das's camera inhabits rather than observes.

But even this critically lauded movie implicitly engages in the politics of selective representation. Although genuine, the protagonist's world is linguistically and culturally generic—Assamese but not ethnically specific. The narrative's universality, which appeals to audiences worldwide yet ignores particular communities like the Moran, is maintained by the lack of overt indigenous identification. As a result, Village Rockstars is a symbol of artistic advancement rather than necessarily anthropological inclusion.

5.5 Boomba Ride (2021): Education, Humour, and Peripheral Modernity

Boomba Ride, a rare rural satire by Biswajit Bora, centers on a mischievous schoolboy in a secluded community. The film, which was shot on the outskirts of Assam's tea garden region, emphasizes the ridiculousness of rural development, corruption, and education. It has anthropological authenticity because of its aesthetic choices, which include natural lighting, dialect variety, and minimum artifice. Crucially, Boomba Ride provides insight into the socioeconomic precariousness faced by marginalized groups, such as the Moran, who live in comparable underdeveloped environments.

The film's linguistic texture and visual geography are similar to locations inhabited by Morans, despite the fact that it does not identify the community. Instead of emphasizing victimization, the portrayal of rural resiliency and humor highlights indigenous adaptability. This change from object to subject points to a new stage in Assamese cinema, where indigenous and rural lifeworlds are portrayed with compassion and autonomy. Nonetheless, the Moran identity is unacknowledged due to the continued use of generic labels such as "village people" and "local dialect."

5.6 Ethnographic Reading of Absence

The lack of the Moran community in film functions as a text of marginality from a sociological standpoint. In her research on media invisibility, Gaye Tuchman (1978) pointed out that absence itself is a type of representation since it conveys who matters in a cultural narrative. Anxiety over fracturing regional identity is seen in Assamese cinema's unwillingness to identify or distinguish the Moran. Filmmakers frequently universalize "Assamese culture" to preserve unity in a multilingual, multiethnic state, unintentionally stifling particular voices.

From an ethnographic perspective, this pattern illustrates the postcolonial problem of representation: to be visible is to run the risk of stereotyping; to stay hidden is to run the risk of erasure. The Moran live in this contradictory area, as do many other tiny indigenous people in Northeast India. Their culture is not expressed through self-articulated narratives, but rather through pieces like as traditional motifs, agricultural practices, and musical allusions. As a result, their representation in movies is synecdochic, representing the entirety of "Assamese indigeneity."

5.7 Cinema as Cultural Archive and Political Space

Assamese cinema serves as both a cultural heritage and a political platform. It records visual recollections of rural life, but it also decides whose lives are worth preserving. In the instance of the Moran, the archive is incomplete and mediated. However, the increased prominence of independent filmmakers, digital platforms, and participatory film movements in Assam creates new opportunities for self-representation. The rise of community-based documentaries and local video collectives in Upper Assam exemplifies this change from anthropological object to authorial subject.

This change is consistent with Faye Ginsburg's (1991) claim that indigenous media serves not just as cultural preservation but also political activity. If future Assamese cinema integrates Moran narratives through collaboration rather than appropriation, it can contribute to what Nichols (2010) refers to as "representational ethics"—a movie that speaks and listens to its subjects.

6. Findings

An assessment of selected Assamese films and the larger cinematic discourse indicates a number of interconnected tendencies in the representation—or absence—of the Moran group.

6.1 Marginal Visibility and Symbolic Inclusion

While Assamese cinema has always relied on rural life and folklore to give aesthetic and cultural authenticity, it has a propensity to subsume individual ethnicities under the umbrella of "the Assamese." This results in a symbolic inclusion devoid of cultural character, with communities such as the Moran appearing solely through generic rural scenery. As a result, the Moran identity is portrayed through inference rather than articulation.

6.2 The Ideological Construction of Indigeneity

Stuart Hall defines "regimes of truth" as discursive structures that govern what constitutes authenticity in cinema. Films like *Aparoop* and *Jilmil Jonak* reinforce a sentimental vision of the Assamese hamlet as the moral core of society. However, this authenticity is selectively constructed to benefit the Assamese-speaking middle class while stifling subaltern voices. When the Moran are present, they are typically portrayed as "background culture," so validating Assamese modernism rather than expressing it themselves.

6.3 Shifting Aesthetics and Emerging Realism

Recent works, such as *Village Rockstars* and *Boomba Ride*, indicate a turn toward neorealism and participative aesthetics. Their minimalist approach, use of non-actors, and close involvement with rural life result in a more intimate and compassionate cinematic setting. These films, while remaining ethnically nonspecific, provide new opportunities for depicting marginalized identities. They show how visual realism can promote a sense of anthropological intimacy that undermines prior exoticism.

6.4 Ethnographic Potential and Reflexive Awareness

The most noteworthy finding is that Assamese cinema possesses an unrealised anthropological potential. Its close connection to everyday life, oral traditions, and regional spaces may make it an essential tool for cultural documentation. However, attaining this demands greater reflexivity from filmmakers—acknowledging positionality, involving communities, and incorporating indigenous perspectives. This method would shift cinema from a representational medium to a dialogic practice, allowing communities like the Moran to reclaim narrative agency.

6.5 The Politics of Naming and Recognition

The deliberate or inadvertent omission of specific indigenous communities' names in films reflects a politics of acknowledgment. It highlights concerns over ethnic disintegration in Assam's social landscape. However, such silence reinforces cultural invisibility. Naming, in this sense, becomes a radical act of anthropological recognition. The incorporation of Moran voices, language, and locales into future films would enhance not only cinematic variety but also the social fabric of Assamese identity.

7. Conclusion

This paper aims at looking at the manner in which the Moran people being an indigenous community within the region of Upper Assam have been either represented or rendered invisible in Assamese films. The paper shows that although Assamese cinema has changed aesthetic wise, its politics of representation are still stuck in the mainstream cultural discourses.

The findings are consistent with three main conclusions:

1. Invisibility of the film as cultural commentary: The lack of the circumstances of Moran presence indicates the Assamese cultural hierarchy. This deficiency highlights the weaknesses of what some people believe to be the inclusivity of Assamese cinema as well as its geographic representativeness.
 2. Changing aesthetics, constrained ethnography: In as much as recent film directors become interested in foregrounding realism and local textuality, they fail to provide any depth of ethnography. The Moran and the groups do not play a central role, they are only symbols, present on paper but not in the narrative.
 3. Inclusive/reflexive cinema scope: The Assamese cinema is at a crossroad where technology and independent production would allow a variety of views. Incorporating participatory filmmaking and engage with indigenous people can change the cinematic environment of ethnographic observation to co-creation.
- The paper brings an end of the paper by concluding that the real potential of Assamese cinema lies in the ability of the film to be a cinema of listening and thus go beyond representation to a level of participation. Cinema can also be at once, a cultural archive and a decolonial site of visibility through the participation of communities like the Moran as co-narrators instead of subjects.

The possible future studies can further this investigation by conducting field-based ethnographic film records of the Moran cultural manifestations, the ways in which digital media space enables the indigenous self to be represented, and the comparisons between how Moran is depicted in the films on art and other indigenous groups in Northeast Indian cinema. This would add value to the visual anthropology in India and significantly contribute to representation, identity and media justice discourse.

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