



A SHORT HISTORY OF ASSAMESE FILM UP TO *DR. BEZBARUAH* (1969).

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Abstract : From the release of *Jaymoti* (10 March 1935) to the last film of the previous century, *Morom Nadir Gabhoru Ghat* (December 24, 1999), two hundred and twenty-seven Assamese language films were released. Among them, the *Bhagya* (12th April 1968) was dubbed from the Hindi film *Taqdeer* under the guidance of Bhupen Hazarika.

Change and novelty have been a part of Assamese film music in those sixty-five years. Many factors influence the environment in which films are made. Thus, the number of films increases and decreases in response to that. Assamese films have to wait for a long time up to the release of *Dr Bezbaruah* to get an actual commercially successful movie. Dr Bezbaruah Changed the scenario of Assamese films as they adopted many experiments and the audience got a taste which was new to the Assamese audience. This paper attempts to trace the short history of Assamese film up to Dr. Bezbaruah.

Keywords : Assamese film, movie, Dr. Bezbaruah.

The Assamese film industry has embarked on a significant journey spanning over 85 years, during which approximately 400 films have been produced. The inaugural Assamese film, *Jaymoti*, premiered on March 10, 1935, at Raunak Hall in Kolkata. Between 1935 and 2000, 227 films were released, with some being screened exclusively on Doordarshan rather than in traditional cinema halls. Additionally, films have been produced in Bodo, Karbi, and other regional languages, highlighting the diversity within this artistic medium.

The genesis of Assamese cinema began in close correspondence with the development of the first talkies; *Joymati* was released shortly after *Alam Ara*, the first Hindi talkie emerged in 1931. Jyotiprasad Agarwala journeyed to Germany in 1929 to further his education in filmmaking, where he engaged with the esteemed UFA (Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft), a leading film institution. His time at UFA allowed him to acquire essential filmmaking skills, including scriptwriting, casting, and editing. Jyotiprasad endeavoured to produce a sound film by crafting a script titled “The Dance of Art”, which he submitted to UFA. Unfortunately, due to the studio's financial challenges, he was unable to realize this project. As articulated by Parthajit Deka,

“Jyotiprasad Agarwala was poised to make history in the 1930s by planning to create the first talkie by an Indian at UFA. Neither Himangshu Rai in Berlin nor any other director in India ever pursued the creation of a talkie on foreign soil.”¹

Jyotiprasad faced imprisonment for fifteen months in Shillong due to his participation in the Indian independence movement. During this time, he conceptualized the film *Jaymoti*. Following his release, he established a film studio in a secluded area amidst his tea garden in Bholaguri, located 300 kilometers from Guwahati. He named the studio Chitraban and his production house Chitrlekha Movietone. Before his endeavours, Pramataash Ch. Baruah founded the Baruah Film Unit in Kolkata, affiliated with a Zamindar family in Gauripur, Dhubri district. Having acquired filmmaking knowledge at the Fox Studio in Paris, performed in several silent films, including *Panchachar* (1929) and *Takay Ki Na Hay* (1931). His most recognized work includes *Devdas* (1936), although the majority of his films were in Bengali.

Jyotiprasad encountered numerous challenges due to the nascent state of infrastructure in Assam, relying on technicians from Lahore, Kolkata, and Mumbai for support. The remoteness of Chitraban deterred many technicians from offering their expertise. Moreover, the cultural restrictions of the time posed difficulties in securing female actors, as acting was considered socially unacceptable for women in Assam. While an advertisement seeking male actors was published in the Assamese newspaper *Tindinia Assamiya* in July 1933, there were no female applicants. Ultimately, Jyotiprasad cast Aideu Handiq from Golaghat district in the role of Jaymoti, overcoming significant barriers. He also faced challenges in sound recording, ultimately persuading Lahore-based sound recordist Mr. Faiz Muhammad, owner of Faizi Sound Equipment Company, to assist with this vital aspect of production.

Despite these formidable obstacles, *Jaymoti*, premiered on March 1, 1935, and was met with enthusiastic acclaim from the audiences of Assam. As noted by Parthajit Baruah,

“Inspiringly, a heavy rush of viewers could be seen on every show, and after watching the film, Gopinath Bardoloi, the Assam chief minister during the British regime, commented that he was enormously charmed by the cinematic technique and artistic skills of the film's performance.”¹

But Jyotiprasad Agarwala had to face the commercial failure of this movie. After *Jaymoti*, Jyotiprasad Agarwala made another film named *Indramalati* (1939), which screened on 30 July 1939 for the first time in the Sati Talkies of Guwahati. As far as artistic value is concerned, this film is completely different from *Jaymoti*. Jyotiprasad wrote in his language,

"Chitrallekha Movietone r Jaymotit 50,000 toka kharas hoisil.Tar adhatkoiyu kom tokahe uvoti ahise.'Jaymoyi' t Chitrallekha movietone prai 28,000 toka loksan bhoribilogiya hoise aru sei 28000 toka Jaymotir babe chirakalaoi loksan.Etia Chitrallekha Movietone r Dwitiya kathasobi 'Indramalati mukoli kora hoise.Ei chabikhon 'Jaymoti' r khorosoloi saikom khorosote kora hoise.Iyar khoros bohu katkin kori aru samayat filmkhanar angakshati ar saundarya hani koriu khoros komai dhara hoise"ⁱⁱⁱ

(Chitrallekha Movietone's *Jaymoti* costs around Rs. 50,000, including interest. And less than half came back. In *Jaymoti*, 'Chitrallekha Movietone' suffered a loss of about Rs. 28,000, and that Rs. 28,000 is lost for *Jaymoti* forever. Now Chitrallekha Movietone's second film *Indramalati* has recently been released. The film is inexpensive considering the cost of *Jaymoti*. Many cuts and damages have reduced its cost to the body and beauty of the film.)

Before India gained independence, the Assamese film industry produced four significant films, laying the groundwork for future cinematic endeavours. The 1940s witnessed the emergence of five Assamese movies, among which *Siraj*, a collaboration between the visionary directors Bishnuprasad Rabha and Phani Sharma, stood out for its commercial success. This film explored themes of patriotism, cultural

¹ Barua, *Jyotiprasad Jaymoti/Indramalati and Beyond*, 87.

assimilation, love, and the intense struggle for freedom, reflecting the aspirations and sentiments of the Assamese people during that era.

The landscape of Assamese cinema expanded dramatically in the 1950s, heralding a decade of national recognition. A pivotal moment came when the film *Piyali Phukan*, expertly directed by Phani Sarma in 1955, garnered a certificate of merit at the prestigious 3rd National Film Awards, marking a milestone for Assamese cinema on a national platform. Notably, this film was significant for being the second collaboration with the legendary Bhupen Hazarika as the music director, whose evocative compositions enhanced the film's emotional depth.

Following this success, the film *Runumi* emerged as a narrative tapestry that delicately wove together the relationships between Assam's diverse plains and hills. Directed by Suresh Goswami, it celebrated the rich heritage of Assamese folk music and *Bargeet*, while also breaking new ground by introducing the concept of a double role, showcasing the versatility of actors. Despite its positive reception among audiences, the government of Assam controversially banned the film, citing its perceived misrepresentation of the Naga tribe.

The decade was also notable for *Nimila Anka* (1955), a delightful comedy directed by Lakshyadhar Chaudhury that became another commercial success. With a modest budget of Rs. 64,000, this film infused fresh energy into the Assamese film industry. Phani Sarma continued to be a significant force in filmmaking during this period, directing four movies after *Siraj*. Additionally, the Baruah family from Uzan Bazaar made a remarkable entry into this creative realm, starting with *Smritir Parash* (1965) under the direction of Nipa Baruah. Other family members enthusiastically participated in various roles within the Assamese film community, contributing their talents and expertise for decades.

In discussing Nipa Baruah's directorial style, writer Utpal Mena remarked on his versatility, stating,

“Nipa Baruah parichalana saili kono bisesh biritrar majot bndi nohoi.

*Porichalakgorakoye art, commercial adi britta bishwas kora nasil”.*ⁱⁱⁱ

(Nipa Baruah’s art of direction is not confined to any particular circle. He did not believe in the art and commercial circle of films.)

This decade also witnessed Bhupen Hazarika stepping into the director's chair with *Era Bator Sur* (1956), further solidifying his powerful influence in Assamese cinema. The film *Puberun*, released in 1959, achieved a remarkable honour when it was chosen to represent India at the Berlin Film Festival, where actress Gyanada Kakati represented the film's esteemed cast.

The following decade brought transformative changes to Assamese films, notably with the introduction of colour, albeit in a limited capacity. In the film *Shakuntala*, Bhupen Hazarika's song "Prathama Prahara Ratri" showcased the innovative use of gevacolor technology, a pioneering achievement that led to significant commercial acclaim. During this vibrant period, Bhupen Hazarika directed additional works such as *Pratidhwani* (1965), *Latighati* (1966), and *Chikmik Bujili* (1969), each contributing to the rich tapestry of Assamese cinema.

Brajen Baruah, the younger sibling of Nipa Baruah, embarked on his directorial journey with *Eto Sito Bahoto*, released in 1963. The involvement of other Baruah brothers, including Ramen Baruah and singer Dwipen Baruah, marked a significant milestone in this decade. The film *Dr BezBaruah* (1969) emerged as a pivotal moment for the Assamese film industry. In this production, Ramen Baruah made his debut as an independent music director while Dwipen Baruah lent his voice as a singer, showcasing their exceptional talents. This film was notable for its commitment to local talent, employing technicians from within Assam rather than relying on external expertise.

Anjali Chutia Saikia eloquently captured the film's impact, stating,

“Dr BezBaruah safalatai Asomor bolchabi udyogoloi ek notun ashar bitora kohiai anile. Adhik toka byoi nokori, Kolkatar kola kushalir sohai nuluakoi aru, studio floor byobohar nokori sthaniyo kola kusholi aru manuhar ghorokei floor hisape byobohar koriu je bolchabi nirman kori sofolota arjan koribo pari seya Brajen Baruah Praman kori dekhuale.”^{iv}

(The success of *Dr BezBaruah* brought new hope to the film industry of Assam. Brajen Baruah proved that success can be achieved without excessive spending, without the help of artists from Calcutta, and by using local talent and people's homes as sets.)

Following the groundbreaking success of *Dr. BezBaruah*, the Assamese film industry underwent a remarkable transformation. In the 1960s, only 14 films were released, but this number skyrocketed to an impressive 59 in the 1970s. This surge clearly demonstrated the influence of Hindi commercial cinema, as filmmakers eagerly adopted styles that resonated with broader Indian audiences. As articulately noted by Manoj Barpujari,

“Prathambaroloi sthaniya chabinirmatasokole Asomiya chalacitrar byobosayik sombhabonak loi udiptta hol, kintu tar samantaralbhave sarbabharatiya dhanatantrik shaktisomuhe tholua sanskritir uparat peloa ashubha prabhavar pratik hoi uthe sthaniyabhabe nirmat chalacitra kolau. Dr BezBaruah r porai Bollywood r ruchir usarat Asomiya chalacitrai atmasomorpan korar anusthanikota sampurna hoi.”^v

(For the first time, local filmmakers were energized by the commercial potential of Assamese films; yet, in that same breath, local film art became a reflection of the powerful influence of pan-Indian capitalist ideals over local culture. *Dr BezBaruah* epitomized the complete surrender of Assamese cinema to Bollywood tastes.)

The audience is the heartbeat of the film industry. While some Assamese films have received high praise and awards from critics, the impact that *Dr. Bezbaruah* had on audience engagement was

unprecedented. It transformed filmmaking enthusiasm in Assam. The following decade saw a surge in productions, totalling sixty films. In terms of music, the Assamese film industry welcomed two new composers and singers: Ramen Baruah and Dwipen Baruah. Ramen Baruah popularized a new genre of Assamese songs known as Bihusuriya through this film. Although this genre was first introduced as an experiment in the film *Lachit Barphukan* (1961) by Brajen Baruh, it only gained popularity after the success of the songs in *Dr. Bezbaruah*.

ⁱ Parthajit Baruah, *Jyotiprasad Joymoti Indramalati and Beyond* (Nagaon: Ajanta Press, 2021), 87.

ⁱⁱ Agarwala Jyotiprasad, *Jyotiprasad Rachanawali*, (edited and revised by Sumanta Chaliha, 9th ed. (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 2017), 533.

ⁱⁱⁱ Utpal Mena, *Asomiya Cinema*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Chitrachal, 2021), 12.

^{iv} Anjali Chutia Saikia, *Sur Samraat Ramen Baruah*, 1st ed. (Jorhat: Grantha Sanskriti, 2019), 87.

^v Manoj Barpujari, *Jyotiprasador Pora Jahnu-Jwangdao aru Onyanyo* (Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 2016), 22.

