

## WOMEN ISSUES IN THE CINEMAS OF BHABENDRANATH SAIKIA

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### Abstract

*Cinema as a medium of communication and as an art form reflect socio-cultural elements or the historical past. It depicts the social realities in various ways. It has great social significance. Women in cinemas were confined largely to the traditional, patriarchal framework of the Indian society. The ordinary woman has hardly been visible in cinema. Women were represented as upholders of traditions, family bonding, thus depriving them of any sense of power and agency. Women were depicted as passive, submissive wives as perfect figures and martyrs for their own families. Many filmmakers who believe that cinema is the art of expression and mirror to the real world. Bhabendranath Saikia is one such serious filmmaker of Assam who makes films with diverse social issues. Some of his films represent the issue of gender inequality. In this paper an attempt will be made to analyze the gender inequality and various issues of women in films of Bhabendranath Saikia.*

**Key Words:** *Cinema, Social realities, Gender inequality, Women*

### INTRODUCTION:

Cinemas can be regarded as the opium of Indian masses as people rely on this for escape to a world of fantasy. In a very explicit way, cinema has shaped the cultural, social and political values of people of this country.<sup>1</sup> Cinema not only captures and reflects a society and its culture its elements form but also explores deep into the human psyche to reflect dormant, unleashed despair as well as its aspirations. Films have evolved as a powerful art form, a source of popular entertainment and a powerful method too for sensitizing citizens. Interpretation or reading of a film is a full-fledged discipline in itself. As a discipline, Cinema Studies is extremely inter-disciplinary and it draws on the contents and methods of literature, history, sociology, political science and economics among others.<sup>2</sup> Among the filmmakers Bhabendra Nath Saikia is one who can be counted one of the serious filmmaker of Assam. Bhabendra Nath Saikia has an immense contribution towards the Assamese society in the fields of art, culture and literature has not yet been adequately measured. In between 1977 to 1999 Saikia made 8 films, 6 in Assamese and 1 in Hindi.<sup>3</sup> Along with the various issues of society he depicted women's issues through his cinema.

### OBJECTIVE:

The main objective of this study is

- How women issues are treated in cinemas of Bhabendra Nath Saikia
- How women are portrayed and what is the role of film-maker in depicting women's issues through cinema.

### METHODOLOGY:

The work is primarily to study various women issues that are portrayed in cinemas of Bhabendra Nath Saikia. For this purpose cinemas of Bhabendra Nath Saikia will be used as the primary sources and various writings by other authors on cinemas will be used as the secondary sources. For this part study is carried out through narrating the stories of cinema and focus has been given into the gender issues that are raised by his cinemas. Then an analysis will be made on these issues with the contemporary society and its real issues. In this study, various historical books, articles, autobiographies are used.

### DISCUSSION:

#### ***Sandhyarag: (1977)***

*Sandhyarag* is a 1977 Assamese film of Bhabendra Nath Saikia, one of the prominent film makers of the Assamese cinema.

A widow lives in the village with her two daughters Charu and Taru. Because of poverty daughters are sent to the city to work as domestic helper in two different household

and live under different circumstances. The film dramatized two parts of their life at the house of their employers where they enjoy the lavish life with the family and at last part of the film they become useless for the village life as they are colored with urban life style and becomes inefficient in rural household work. In the beginning of the narrative, when the two children Charu and Taru left their village for town, on their way, they were teased by some village boys. Boys ask Charu in a typically smart male inquiring tone about how she is planning to go to the town, Charu replies, in an uncomfortable manner that she would be going to the town in 'motor' (i.e. bus). By hearing her answer boy teases her. When Charu and Taru leave the place, the boy saying a dialogue from the Ramayana about how Rama mourned after his wife Sita was sent to exile in forest teases them. This shows the socialization processes of the children in the Assamese villages, with hegemonic gender codes for boys and girls. The girls are brought up with the idealized images of Sita who sacrificed her life with extreme tolerance and passivity; and the boys are given their roles in the heroics of Rama and other warriors.

In city the elder Charu is accepted as a part of the family where she works for and gets adjusted to the life in the city, but unfortunately Taru cannot adjust fully with the environment. She has to keep warding off the advances of the traitorous son of her master. Taru lives amidst fear of insecurity because of the shameless gazes and sexual advances from the son of Urmila. But instead teaching a lesson to her son, she punishes Taru and defends her son. This not only shows the class differences among elite section and lower section of people but also shows the discriminatory attitude of society towards female. In the film also provides reflections on issues pertaining to the urban women who were embracing a specific kind of elitism during the early phase of urban modernity in Assam. The issues got manifest through the characters of two mistresses of Charu and Taru, Mrs Das and Urmila respectively. Mrs Das represents all the virtues of an ideal urban wife; she is a caring and watchful mother of her children. She also carries some of the pleasant humanitarian senses, especially when treating with her maid, she ensures that her maid Charu does not miss a meal and gets the

basic amenities like clothes to wear an arrangement to sleep at night.

At one point of time Charu and Taru both of them are abandoned when the needs of their master's family are over. They are compelled to return to their village. After coming back to their village Charu and Taru had to suffer a lot for their survival and ultimately decided to go back to the city again with the help of Moti, who is an impotent. By showing the unstable changing condition of the female protagonist, the film marks the distance between the two sections of people.

With the progressive ideology of Jawaharlal Nehru, who stressed on rapid economic growth through industrialization got its boost in five years plans. Urbanizations and industrialization has increased in a big way after independence. But still India remains a nation of villages as the rural population is increasing equally. That is why there is a rural-urban difference in India for which the rural-urban migration has been in full force. For employment the urban centers are still attracting people from villages.<sup>4</sup> In the film there can be seen specific gender question in such society where social and cultural transformation caused by the industrialization and urbanization processes. Most vividly, Saikia captures the displacement of women domestic laborers caused by the urbanization and industrialization. As a result of urbanization process Charu at the end of the movie, surrendered to an impotent man Moti. Her return journey to the city along with her mother and sister is nothing but a conciliation she did with her pathetic condition. Moti becomes the only hope for her survival.

### ***Itihaas: 1996***

Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *Itihaas* is a contemporary deflation of human relationship. The background of the film is once was a small neighborhood in the outskirts of a city. Amidst poverty and hunger, the people of the neighborhood led their lives filled with sorrows and happiness, traditions and superstitions and their simple values. When news of cholera was spreading in near areas, the people then met and offer prayers to the gods too prevent the disease from spreading to their locality. There is a well in their locality, once in a year the municipality workers arrive to remove the mud from the public well and

cleanse the water. On the day preceding this event, there is an air of excitement in the neighborhood as people hurry to store enough water. Gradually the years pass by; meanwhile the city grew rapidly. Huge multistoried buildings were being constructed. A land owner and a property developer Kishorilal bought most of the land in the neighborhood from the local people by giving them huge amount of money. Bhola, one of them refuse to sell his land, for which Kishorilal makes an agreement to give them an apartment in the new building which will be constructed on their land till then he constructs a temporary house for them and gives Bhola a new job in a mill far from this area. After the agreement the younger brother leaves home to work in a rice mill of the builder at a distant place. He starts to enjoy his life there and forget about his mother, sisters. After some difficulties they finally get the apartment to live there. As Bhola their hardly send money to them, Lakhimi bound to works as a domestic worker in various apartments of the buildings occupied by the rich and elite peoples. One resident in a building makes a repeated advances to touch her and Lakhimi's resistances and protests only damaged her own character in that of so called 'elite society'. Even her fiancée too blame her for all these. One night on her way to fetch water from the well, she is teased by a group of drunken men with whom she fights but she is easily overpowered and raped then murdered. After some time her body was flaunting in the well. Later as a part of the police investigation, municipality workers come to lift the mud from the well. In the ending scene, an old resident is seen to pour potash into the muddy well to clean the water.

In this film Saikia shows dark side of the progressive society at its best. The film shows about the urbanization process and how some sections of the society especially women have to go through in this process. Dr Saikia exposes the most evil and ruthless aspects of urbanization: forced displacement of villagers from their own land, corrupt lives of urban dwellers and the impossibility of survival of a young village woman Lakhimi, the protagonist in the movie, in this forcefully imposed urban environment. Like other protagonist in *Itihaas*, Lakhimi faces the economic hardship of livelihood, hostile social environment after displacement and she has no able and reliable

companion to take support. She dies at the end of her struggle. Saikia's statement in the film can be understand as the fact that behind the urban structure of a city or a township, there is always an untold *Itihaas* (history) of deaths and displacement of many individuals like Lakhimi.

### ***Kulahal(1988)***

*Kulahal* is based on one of his short story *Endoor*(Rats) written in 1969 translated by Bhabendra Nath Saikia himself. Kiron is main character of the film. Story revolves around Kiron's adjustment with the socio-cultural and biological conditions. She lives in the slum area with her little son Moti alone after her husband Binod left her in search of better source of earnings. In the film it shows that how Kiron manages with a little money that is given to her by her husband before he leaves. Unlike other boys Moti does not go to collect the left-over of rice from trucks which jammed in the narrow road nearby godown in trucks. At one point of time she is compelled to send Moti to collect rice from the loaded trucks. Though at first she feared to send Moti to collect rice but as time goes on day by day her limited amount of money reduce, she has no option remain in front of Kiron as her husband's disappearance for quite long time, she allows Moti to join with his friends in this kind of rice collection.

In one unfortunate day, heavy bags full of rice fell from a loosely packed truck on Moti's body while he was continued collecting rice and Moti succumbs to death in that accident. In sorrow and grief Kiron refuses to take foods in few days. She was compensated by rice bag, which has killed Moti. The handyman of the particular truck Badal placed the rice bag at a corner of her house by hiding blood of Moti. Kiron initially refused to accept the rice as it was the reason of death of her beloved son. Sleeping several nights without eating, at one point Kiron came to be submissive by her survival instinct. She was taking rice from a hole inside the bag, which created by a rat. Few days later she also comes to know that her husband Binod was actually a fraud who was having multiple families in other places and he will never be come back to her life to take her out from such sorrow, grief, loneliness. Her loneliness is visually articulated by showing her single occupancy upon her double bed. After failing to sleep that night amidst the restlessness and

confrontations with the movement of the rat, in the next morning Kiron getting freshened up and getting her hair combed, applying fresh vermillion on her forehead invited Badal through small boy. Badal arrives, accepting her invitation and she looks at him with hope without saying anything. But her expression said everything with that close up shot movie ended. *Kolahal* depicts that the biological needs of humans are bigger than social norms.

Cinemas of Dr Saikia focused various problems and issues of Indian women in the post-independent India. After independence the government asked prominent women's organizations to assist them in developing five-year plans. These women agreed with government that economic growth was the most silent issue that women would gain from expected prosperity.<sup>5</sup> The overall picture of Indian women presented in 'Towards equality' (A report on the status of women in India from 1974 to 1975) and the studies carried out by these and other research institutes is depressing. Much of this literature has focused on the failure of programs and policies. Nevertheless, the advances made by some Indian women have been and continue to be awe-inspiring.<sup>6</sup> Bhabendra Nath Saikia in his maximum films showed this issue. Further, institutional changes have made a difference, as is evidenced by the leading roles women continue to play in India and on the world stage. They have been strong enough to mount a challenge to ultra-conservative forces that would have them return to

'traditional roles' that were fictionalized ideals even in the nineteenth century. But the main point of the report, that millions of Indian women have not benefitted from 'modernity' whether it be economic, technological, political or social, remains true even today.<sup>7</sup> In *Sandhyarag*, *Itihas*, *Kolahal* shows such condition of women, where they were suppressed in various aspects. In various aspects Indian women were not equals of Indian men, in terms of ownership of property, control of resources, wages earned, food consumed, and access to medical care or sex ratio. Towards Equality blames women's low economic status on public policies that view women's work as supplemental to family incomes and to the economy generally. Statistical evidence from census showed a decline in women's participation in the formal

economic sector, both as a percentage of the total population and as a percentage of the total female population and as a percentage of total population. Members of the committee explained this decline, first as part of the process of the 'transformation of the role of the household and small scale industry in the national economy.' As production moved from the household to the organized sector of the economy, women were the biggest losers. They were not able to compete for jobs in the new industries that relied more heavily on technology and called for skills and education women did not have. Second, their presence in the modernized workforce was not viewed as desirable. This led to economic marginalization of women in the unorganized sector where they are especially vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation.<sup>8</sup> In *Sandhyarag* Charu and Toru only employed as a household worker, after that they were unable to find a proper job for themselves. In *Kolahal* it is clearly shows how Kiron remained in her house and in spite she sent her son to collect rice from roads. In *Itihas* also Lakhimi could not find a proper work for herself.<sup>9</sup>

Some women managed to find some works in small sector. However, in post colonial India women's growing importance in the service industries and professions focuses new attention on the problems associated with housing, transportation, sexual harassment and conservative attitudes.<sup>10</sup> In *Itihas*, Lakhimi has faced sexual harassment and at last he has to lose her life by some culprits. The film shows corrupt lives of urban dwellers as well as an unhealthy environment of a single working woman like Lakhimi. Women were always judged and blamed by people if she chooses to work outside. This shows improved economic status does not guarantee these women will become rebels against a system that oppresses them.

### ***Abartan:1993***

*Abartan* is a story of Joyonti who works in mobile theater company in Assam. She is the center of attraction of the theater and leading actress. She joins in the theater company for various economic reasons and social pressure. She was termed as a notorious woman in society for her involvement in Theater Company. Eventually she becomes the lead actress of the mobile theater company.

On day she meets Primal who is an engineer by profession in a bus journey. After their interaction few days later he comes to see her in the set of theatre where she practices of her drama. Gradually both Porimal and Joyonti fell in love with each other. One day Porimal proposes her for marriage. But Joyonti cannot accept his proposal because of many troubles. Although Porimal and Joyonti had a sea of problems that hamper their marriage, later both tackle the issues without creating any problem for anybody. Joyonti leaves her acting career in theatre and starts a new life with Porimol.

Though men and women have equal rights and freedom in society, society did not allow women to proceed equally with men. The film shows the condition and position of woman who worked in the theater or involved in other profession as an artist. Society did not give them respect for their works. Apart from Joyonti there is another woman Taru who works in the same theatre company

where Joyonti works. Toru told Jayanti about her life story that once she loved a man and dreamt a life with him but the man not accepted her for her profession doubting her character. She had to sacrifice her child for her survival in life and remain unmarried for life. As she becoming old gradually she also loses good roles, good dialogues. Like these women in the film the first heroine of Assamese cinema was also had to suffer for her innocent act of working in the film. The path breaker Aideu Handique had to accept the impatient anger of social puritans for whom a woman doing a talkie was trespassing moral taboo. This young heroine's life spirit was taken off, mauled and smashed under the unabashedly flaunting patriarchal boot. Aideu was rejected by her own society.<sup>11</sup> Aideu was a fourteen year old girl from a backward area of the district of Sonitpur when preparation was on for the first Assamese cinema by Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Agarwala faced much difficulty in searching a young heroine for his film. Aideu was somehow persuaded by her uncle Dimba Gohain to go Gamirighat on the way to Bholaguri Tea Estate, the location of Agarwala's temporary studio. The terrified Aideu began crying out of helplessness, when she realized that she was far from home.<sup>12</sup> Agarwala sent a telegram to Aideu's father to come and meet him. Her father came and

Agarwala persuaded him to give permission to Aideu to act in the film. Aideu's father was assured that his daughter was in good hands and ultimately gave in. As Aideu puts it "This is how I come to act in cinema".<sup>13</sup> Although *Jyoti* got her heroine, Assamese cinema its first actress and Aideu became immortal in the annals of the history of Assamese cinema, this act of treachery on the part of Dimba Gohain left a permanent scar on the young girl. After her return, Aideu was socially ostracized for three years by the villagers for acting in a film—a fact the late actress lamented in many of her interviews. She was compelled to live in seclusion in the compound of her father's house. She remained unmarried for life.<sup>14</sup> In this film Taru has to spend her life all alone, as everyone doubt about her character. As an artist Aideu did her best in the film. Although Aideu Handique becomes the part of history but in the role of path breaker she had to face anger of social puritans for whom the woman doing the talkie was a kind of sin. She was considered as a loose woman as she has committed the sin of calling a man on screen as "*Bangahardeo*" (my husband)! Aideu was rejected by her own society, instead of recognition, she and her family lose even mere self respect and social prestige.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly women in the film *Abartan*, where hard work and dedication of both actress Joyonti and Taru are not recognized by society, society only question their characters for their profession. At the same time male actors do not face such type of humiliations by society. Joyonti is exploited not only by her male co-actor who wants to keep her as his concubine, but also by her parents and brother and sister at home who emotionally disown her but still want her to be an uninterrupted economic source even at the cost of her future. Bhabendra Nath Saikia was associated with '*Abahon Theatre*' for long time. There he met a lot of theatre artist and observed their life from very near which motivated him to write this story of *Abartan*.<sup>16</sup> Here, Saikia's intention is not to show a single person as a villain, but to criticize the social system as a whole where female artists were given unequal treatment in a society. But through this film Saikia portrays a well-built female character. Joyonti in the film is a hard working female artist, she does not care about society and rumors that they create. She is the only money earner of her family and supports them in

every crucial time. But when she comes to know that her family does not support her like her brother and sister, she does not hesitate to leave her work and to marry Porimol.

### ***Agnisnan: 1985***

The *Agnisnan* tells the story of an aristocratic Assamese family during the last two decades of British colonization of India. Menaka is his wife and together they had four children. They are happy family consisting father-in-law, mother-in-law and one brother-in-law. Being the wife of Mohikanta who is a wealthy person, she has a respectful position within the family and the society as

well. However her happiness does not last long because Mohikanta attracted towards young Kiron and wants her to marry. Mohikanta explain about it to Menaka that as he has much money and wealth, he can feed another woman like he added a cow within the herds of cows. Menaka is shocked by hearing his words, the reward which he gives to her for her dedication and loyalty towards him and his family. He is cruel enough to ask her for doing work in his wedding. The situation that Menaka face during Mohikanta's marriage is heart breaking scene. In this hour of agony calm quite Menaka turn into a vindictive towards her husband. Obviously the issue is not societal, the issue is of Mohikanta and Menaka's own but through the film Dr Saikia shows humiliation, grief, pain, revenge of individual person in a society. In the grief of being cheated by her husband, humiliation of her love and affection towards her husband Menaka turns into rebellious. First she avoids coupling with Mohikanta later she decides to intimate with Madan, a thief in the village. Mohikanta was shocked when symptoms of her pregnancy began to be visible. This is the revenge of an innocent woman against discriminatory patriarchal society in an unauthorized dishonest way. By doing this act she is almost in a grief of regret and says Madan about her past life when she was young, she was advised by her father to be loyal dedicated towards her husband like Sita and Sabitri. Towards the end of the movie, inside the rice mill, Menaka strictly explains to Mohikanta- "As I am not the mother of our fifth child, similarly you are not going to be the father of our sixth child. To have a Sita, there must be a Ram". It can be accepted that the character of Menaka in the film is the

strongest character ever. The film questions the realm of patriarchy which may not necessarily commit violence but manifest domination in other forms like denial of space and freedom and subjugation. The society needs to accept these forms as patriarchal domination and not just focus on violence. The protagonist Menaka emerges in the end as a strong woman with her own thoughts who rather than seeking forgiveness from her husband, chooses to walk out and live her own terms. In a man dominated patriarchal society the revenge takes by Menaka can be recognized as the best she can do in that circumstance. Saikia gives us the strongest woman character that exists never before. Like the women characters in the commercial revengeful movies, Menaka in *Agnisnan* takes a successful revenge. However, her weapon is not like commercial stereotypes. Here her weapon is the women's ability of giving birth. Eminent intellectuals of Assamese society criticized the film as Menaka chooses for establishment of self pride was unfair and curse for a women's pride. Though Bhabendra Nath Saikia in an interview says this story is like thousands of other stories only, he did not want to give message towards society to choose the way which Menaka chooses for her. He gave example of Mahabharata. In Mahabharata Drupadi married five men no Indian chooses Drupadi as ideal one. The use of body as an instrument of revenge by Menaka is similar with the inscriptions of the female body by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist writers and critics. In Indian context, Meenakshi Thapan has noted that "the female body becomes an instrument and a symbol for the community's expression of caste, class and communal honor. Chastity, virtue and above all, purity are inscribed as great feminine virtue embodying the honor of the family, community and the nation". Thus, women's body transforms into a bearer of honor of her family, community and nation. Her "body is not so much a body of individuality but a 'body-for-others'. They viewed woman's body as her weapon against patriarchal society. This can be seen in the films of women filmmakers of Indian Diasporas, Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta where they established a new meaning of a woman's body against the popular construction of an Indian female body. In Deepa Mehta's *'Fire'* (1996) the two women characters Sita and Radha asserts their own

identity by freeing their body from the patriarchal cage. Their physical involvement declares a movement against the age-old patriarchal values. Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *Agnisnaan* can be read as regional variation of such kind of feminist filmmaking.<sup>17</sup>

### CONCLUSION:

Bhabendra Nath Saikia was a filmmaker who maintained a distinctive ideological stand point in making films. He was a passionate follower of realism, so he felt that films should be a medium to represent the reality. This makes him different from the parallel Indian cinema of the 1960's and from

their commercial counterparts. Dr Saikia's films have made of from various real issues of society and have been praised for the same reason. His films dealt with bold and unfamiliar themes. Majority of his films had female protagonists. He made an appreciative attempt to bring some strong female characters in front of us. Issues of women like gender inequalities, exploitation of women, their status, their struggles etc were beautifully portrayed by Bhabendra Nath Saikia in his films. Though his characters give us glimpse of bold resistance; but these are only confined to some restricted sphere of action.

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