

Economic Issues and Challenges of Assamese Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The journey of Assamese cinema dates back to 1935 with the making of a movie called '*Joymoti*', by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. The hope of making cinema in Assamese language had dawned in Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's mind as early in 1922 during his stay in Calcutta. The popular Bengali movies had an impact on Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. Later he went to Germany to acquire improved knowledge of technology for making cinema. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala had the opportunity to get himself familiar with such actors and film makers of world repute such as Charlie Chaplin, D.W.Griffith and Rene Claire and this also acted as motivating force for him for making an Assamese movie. Since 1935, the journey continued accompanied with a number of issues and challenges which prevented the regional cinema to become a fully fledged industry in Assam.

Key Words: Assamese Cinema, technology, challenges, Bengali cinema, Joymoti.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are:

- To study the background of Assamese regional cinema.
- To find the issues and challenges of Assamese cinema.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of the study is to analyze the development of Assamese cinema and the key issues and challenges associated with it. In this social science research the researcher have adopted qualitative methods. The descriptive analysis in qualitative research focus on description as primary goal for straightforward summary. The findings are presented in a clear and easily understandable manner aligns with naturalistic inquiry, aiming to study phenomena in their natural context. The researcher deal with different types of qualitative data, such as interviews, observations, and documents.

DISCUSSION

The Socio-Political Factors:

Indian cinema emerged against the backdrop of British colonial rule in India, especially in Assam, where films were intended to act as a significant means for cultural affirmation and the expression of regional identity in response to the colonial devaluation of Assamese culture. It was an uphill task for Jyoti Prasad Agarwala for his historic creation in 1935. Joymoti was integral to a wider socio-cultural initiative that emerged in literature and the arts, aiming to establish and articulate an Assamese identity in cinema and culture. The film aimed to safeguard and celebrate Assamese history and lifestyle, laying the groundwork for the development of Assamese cinema in the future. The period was colonial and the society was conservative. Agarwala's movie represented an important stride in advancing feminist concepts by featuring an exemplary female character at its core. The narrative of Joymoti's unwavering resolve and selflessness aimed to motivate women and aid in the continuing liberation of women in Assam.

The militarization of Brahmaputra valley on the eve of Second World War was one of the reasons of political unrest in North eastern region of India. The normal life was paralyzed as the food supply, communication; health services etc. were greatly affected. Sri Promod Ch. Bodo, an octogenarian from Guwahati said, “The British government made a huge stock of rice and other cereals for war emergency. Broken rice having stone mix were supplied to the people, normal cultivation witnessed stagnation. Movements of the people were restricted, but the zaminders were still allowed to collect taxes. We were cine lovers but how could we move in that situation.”

Theatre and Its Role:

The absence of theatre halls in Assam was one of the major obstacles for the development of Assamese cinema in the evolutionary period. In the time before permanent movie theaters existed, films were shown in makeshift locations such as school facilities, community halls, and sometimes temporary tents. The limited theatre halls and the less priority of regional cinema in such theatres and absence of adequate government policy resulted in the abrupt state of the industry. The premiere show of *Joymati* was screened at Raunak Theatre in Calcutta. On 20th March 1935, *Joymati* was released at Kumar Bhaskar Natya Mandir (erstwhile Kamrup Natya Mandir) at Uzanbazar, Guwahati with a handful of audience. Agarwala's second creation *Indramalati* was released at Sati Talkie at Guwahati on 1st August, 1939. Rafiqul Rasul Sahab of Guwahati established the ‘Kamrup Cinema Company’, the first theatre of Assam during Silent Period of cinema. The ‘Kamrup Cinema Company’ was shut down as the sound pictures were introduced in India.

Many popular cinema halls mentioned here appeared to be fighting for survival in the market, because of the low audience and the domination of Bollywood Hindi and Hollywood cinemas and by the year 2000, the following cinema halls in Guwahati had been transformed into different commercial establishments.

1. Choudhury Talkies.
2. Bijulee Cinema.
3. Urvasi Cinema.
4. Rupayan Cinema.
5. Bandana
6. Anupama
7. Neptune
8. Mayur Krishna.
9. Aruna.

Professionalism in Production:

The issue of professionalism in the Assamese film industry is multifaceted, marked by a slow transition from conventional methods to more contemporary, digital practices, yet still encountering obstacles such as financial oversight, governmental backing, and a unified festival scene. Although artists and filmmakers are progressively making a living from their creations and leveraging innovative digital tools for both production and marketing, there is a clear necessity to cultivate skills such as punctuality, script analysis, and comprehensive technical knowledge to enhance the industry effectively. The industry is in a state of change, but an increased focus on business skills, strong infrastructure, and organized support mechanisms is essential to nurture higher professionalism and sustainable advancement, shifting the focus from individual artistic talent to a shared, industry-wide standard. The absence of professionalism in Assamese cinema can also be attributed to a limited market, scarce funding, a poor distribution network and conflicts within the industry.

Although a few independent films have received recognition on national and international stages, the industry overall has faced challenges in securing commercial success and reliability.

Budget of Assamese Cinema:

Assamese films struggle with inadequate budgets mainly because of minimal investor engagement in a small regional market, causing a shortage of financial support for filmmakers and a dependence on inexpensive production approaches such as crowd-funding or self-funding. This financial limitation hinders the adoption of advanced technologies and leads to subpar production quality, even though certain successful low-budget films highlight the potential for impactful local narratives and backing. A tailored budget is always an essential part for the perfection of films. From evolutionary to development period the maximum budget for an Assamese cinema was estimated within rupees ten lakh. The estimated budget of such films did not commensurate the processing and technical costs for the films. On the other hand the processing labs and studios were primarily located in Bengal, Pune and Madras during the period. The proximity of such labs and studios facilitated the growth of other regional cinemas from technical side. It also reduced the post production costs.

Audience:

It is generally observed that most of the cinema halls in Assam turned into commercial complexes due to the less interests of audience towards regional cinema. It is also important to note that some of the renowned cinema halls earned good revenue by screening mainstream cinema but halted their activities to some extent. (Deuri, Manoj & Bora, Abhijit, 2020). The interests of audience on cinema depend on variety of factors such as language, culture, socio-political issues, story, projection, technical quality and taste of the audience. It is not true that the regional Assamese cinema unable to meet the needs of the audience at all. It is the responsibility of the producers to analyze the factors for the perfection. The entertainment media needs perfection to attract the audience. (Das, Arun Lochan, 2017). The appearance of big budget and technically sound movies from both Hollywood and Bollywood lowered the audience presence in local theatres.

Lack of Distribution Networks:

Limited Screen Availability: With only around 80 to 90 operational screens in the state, filmmakers in areas like Guwahati find themselves in intense competition for showings against major Bollywood and South Indian films.

Concentration in Urban Areas: The existing distribution model is heavily reliant on a few multiplexes (particularly in Guwahati), which leaves many tier-2 and tier-3 towns underserved and isolates a large rural audience.

Exhibitor Reluctance: Historically, mainstream exhibitor and distributor sectors show little inclination to create a statewide, solely regional framework, as they consider it to be a financial risk.

Insufficient Digital Platforms: Regional streaming (OTT) services have traditionally suffered from underfunding, resulting in films facing challenges in reaching the diaspora or viewers residing beyond a theater's proximity.

Artists of the Assamese Cinema:

It is a well known fact that the fluctuating economy of the Assamese film industry has severe impact on the life of the artists of Assamese cinema. The relatively low income, job insecurity and health issues further paralyzed the condition of the artists. The social taboos of the contemporary period increased the hardship of the artists, especially the female. The involvement of Aideo Handique as an actress in Joymoti was a path breaking event in the history of Assamese cinema. But the conservative society made her life miserable. She was inspired by Jyotiprasad, performed well, but the society never accepted her and was boycotted along with the family. The lifetime reward of Aideo Handique includes an ill health with wheel chair, a stipend of Rs.1500 per month by the state.

Artists in the Assamese film industry often encounter tough economic circumstances, largely resulting from the financial struggles that have persisted historically, the relatively low commercial success when compared to other regional cinemas in India, and insufficient infrastructure. Numerous artists and technicians deal with poor pay and inconsistent job opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The Assamese film industry is surrounded by a number of issues since its inception in 1935. It was expected that the industry would work for the preservation and manifestation of regional cultural heritage and strengthen the economy of the region. It has been observed that the issues of the Assamese cinema seemed to be a never ending process. The role of the stakeholders need consciousness about the surroundings. For sustainability, the quality of the cinema must be improved. It should meet the needs of the viewers. The people of the region must have love and passion for the century old native industry. In the wave of modernization we are neglecting somewhat our regional cultural values and gradually influenced by the globalization process.

Secondly, the producers of the Assamese cinema required to follow the essence of professionalism. The professionalism nature would make a cinema perfect to face competition in the market. Until and unless the producers lean towards professionalism the economic downturn is inevitable. The situation is primarily responsible for the economic hardship of the artists.

Thirdly, the existing policy of the government, for the particular industry, required to be modified and reformed. The Assam State Film Finance & Development Corporation Ltd. (ASFFDC) offers financial assistance, although this support is restricted and should align with the requirements of the films. The proper and time bound implementation of the government policies could be an elixir for the survival of the industry.

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