Tracing the Elements of Cinema Proper:
Cinematography, Sound and Editing

4.1. Introduction:

This chapter is the first part of my attempt to analyze the stylistic characteristics of Saikia's films. While the mise- en- scène of his films is discussed in the next chapter, here I shall be concentrating on some of the features related to cinematography, sound and editing of his films.

Saikia's films are known for their distinctively strong plots rather than the cinematic compositions. The reason behind this, according to critic like Sarma, is Saikia's weakness for literariness of the cinematic narrative.

> Dr. Saikia's deep literary sense and insight always helped him choose the right story, visualize its depth and sensitive nuances and follow its real drift to the proper cinematic climax. Negatively, his weakness for the 'literariness' of the narrative often blurred his creative vision through the cinematic language. (Sarma 2012, 86)

Therefore, when Saikia is compared with Indian parallel filmmakers, one big difference between Saikia and the rest can be seen in the difference in application of cinematic tools while unfolding the narrative. In the cases of other filmmakers, various audio-visual enrichment and creative narrative techniques of cinematography contribute to the aesthetic content of the film. But Saikia is noted for his primary dependence on the plot or story and the dialogues in the films, giving comparatively lesser attention to the other stylistic aspects of cinematography. Some other critics, however, consider this linear style itself as his directorial signature (Mena, 2011).

Despite his relatively oblivious position as far as the sophisticated and creative cinematography is concerned, the technical aspects of Saikia's film do exhibit a range of characteristics in addition to their minimalist presence. Being a follower of

realist filmmaking tradition, Saikia's films are characterized by location shooting, use of natural light, unprofessional actors, absence of songs and dances, etc.

4.2. Cinematography:

Cinematography, literal meaning 'writing with light' or 'writing in movement', makes the audience to engage in the narrative. The director or the cinematographer uses the camera to capture movements that stimulate the minds of the audience. As such, "the cinematographer uses the camera as a maker of meaning, just as the painter uses the brush or the writer uses the pen: the angle, heights, and movements of the camera function both as a set of techniques and as expressive material" (Barsan 2004, 178). However, it is the cinematographer and the director, who decides the angle, distance, movements and frame of the camera to "helps convey the subject matter in expressive ways and powerfully shapes the viewers' emotional responses and the meanings viewers detect in films" (Phillips 2009, 61).

Camera distance, camera angle, camera movement and camera frame – these four aspects of cinematography contribute in the progression of the film narrative.

The object of a film can be captured from six distances – extreme long shot, long shot, medium shot, medium close-up, close-up and extreme close-up. In extreme long shot, object is hardly visible; in long shot though object is prominent, the background still dominates the object, while in medium shot the physical movement of the character is also visible. Medium close-up shot covers the body of the character from the mid-chest up to the top of the head, while close-up shot captures the face, hands, feet or any small object to express facial expression or signify objects. Likewise, extreme close-up shot captures a portion of the face, isolates and manifests an object.

Camera angle proposes the position of the camera from where to capture the mise-en-scène of a shot. Different directions and heights connote different meaning in a film. Normally, camera angle is distinguished into three different categories – high angle, straight-on-angle and low angle (Bordwell& Thompson 2008, 190; Dix 2010 ,25); but some other camera angles like Dutch angle, aerial view, bird's eye view are also used in film discussion (Barsan 2004, 207; Phillips 2009, 89). The high angle

shot takes from above the action or character to suggest the superiority of the character, while opposite to it, low angle shot captures the character or action from below and "places the observer in the position of feeling helpless in the presence of an obviously superior force" (Barsan 2004, 208-209). Likewise, straight-on-angle shot is taken from eye level and it "appears to be fairly neutral and devoid of emphasis" (Dix 2010, 25).

The main shots involving camera movement are pan shot, tilt shot, tracking shot and crane shot. The horizontal and vertical movement of the camera known as pan and tilt shot respectively, while camera change its position and moving in any direction along the ground, it calls tracking shot and when camera moves above ground level it calls crane shot. According to Rudolf Arnheim, "in a good film every shot must be contributory to the action" (Arnheim 1957, 14).

Apart from these, framing of object in the camera is also another significant aspect of cinematography. Like other aspects, camera angle, distance and movements, framing "may serve the narrative in yet other ways. Across and entire film, the repetitions of certain framings may associate themselves with a character or situation" (Bordwell & Thompson 2008, 193).

As it is already mentioned that Saikia's films are not well-off as far as the cinematic aesthetic is concerned. Saikia and his one and only cinematographer Kamal Nayak all throughout his films, stay away from the experimentation of cinematic tools in their seven films. Saikia gives more emphasis on the telling of stories in a simple linear way, without much technical sophistications. In addition to Saikia's literary bent as a filmmaker, the limited technical infrastructure for filmmaking in Assam and the high cost of availing them outside the state are also understood to be the crucial factors affecting the works of directors like Saikia.

In his films, Saikia preferably uses long and medium shots to exhibit the character within the contexts. For him, in both the narrative and cinematic contexts, surrounding situation is equally important as the characters. However, in some specific moments he used extreme long shots also. In the film *Agnisnan*, the movie is opened with a medium shot of Mohikanta's horse cart coming through the semi-urban locality. It establishes Mohikanta's privileged position which is going to be a
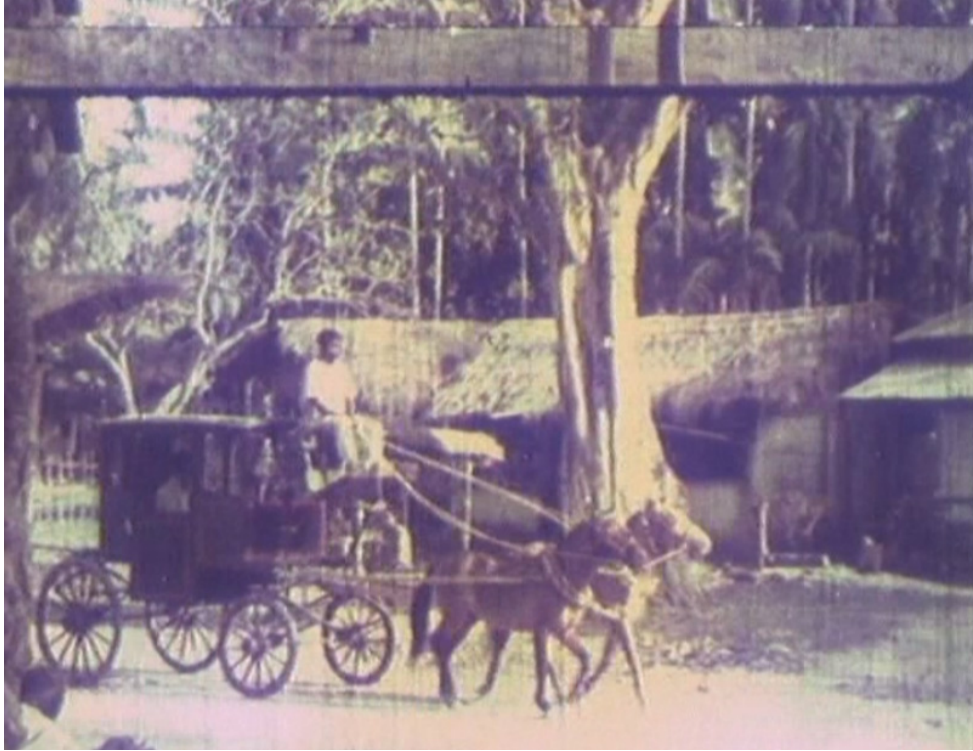
Figure 1: Horse-cart of Mohikanta in *Agnisnan*

Figure 2: An extreme long shot in *Anirban*

Figure 3: Another extreme long shot, ending scene of *Abartan*

Figure 4: Close-up shot of Kiran, in *Kolahal*

Figure 5: Close-up shot of cup-plates to be washed,
signalling Charu's upcoming days in *Sandhyarag*

Figure 6: Extreme close-up shot of Charu in *Sandhyarag*

Figure 7: Low-angle shot for focusing on Parimol,
from Jayanti's point of view, in *Abartan*

Figure 8: High-angle shot: Jayanti from Parimol's point of view in *Abartan*
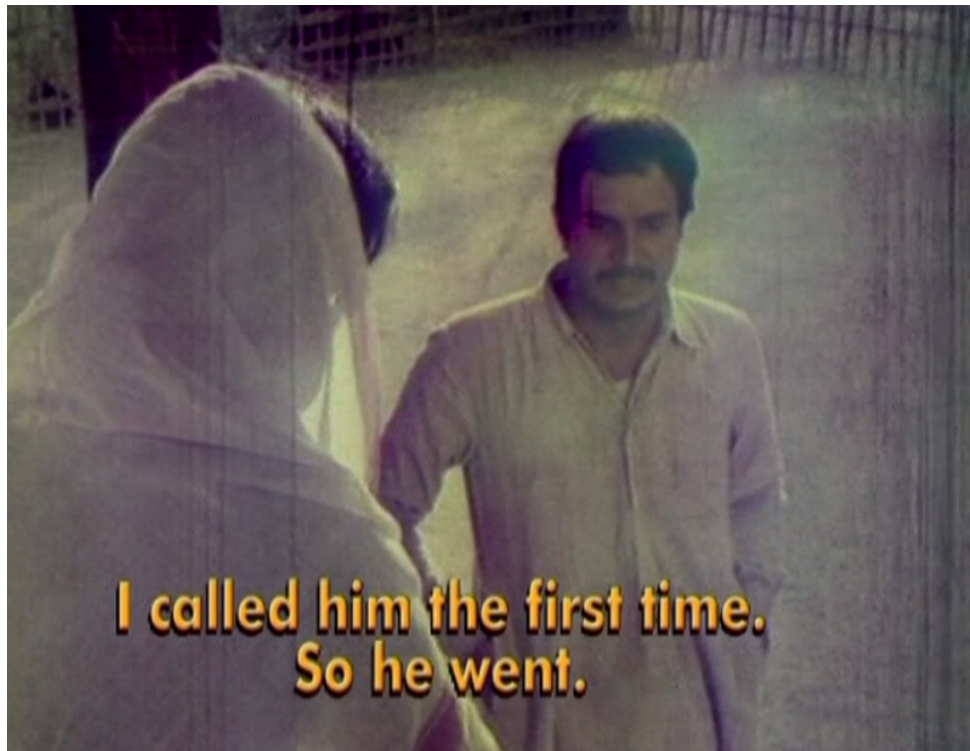
Figure 9: Madan from the perspective of Menaka,
a low-angle shot in *Agnisnan*

Figure 10: Initial point of a tilt-down shot in *Anirban*

Figure 11: Kanta (outside the frame as the subject) sees Charu face to face;
A low-angle point of view shot in *Sandhyarag*

Figure 12: High-angle point of view shot;
Kanta being seen by Charu, in *Sandhyarag*

Figure 13: Charu seen through window-grid in *Sandhyarag*

Figure 14: Lakhimi seen through window-grid in *Itihaas*

Figure 15: Close-up shot of Kiran,
used as the ending freeze-frame of *Kolahal*

Figure 16: An establishing shot in *Sarothi*

crucial element in the plot of the film. As Mohikanta's power, symbolized through the horse-cart, is effective in the locality, Saikia prefers to capture the situation in a medium shot. (Figure 1). Similarly, in *Anirban*, Saikia captures school master Rajani on his way to cremation ground in an extreme long shot covering the leafless trees and Rajani within the same frame. It suggests the trauma caused by the death of his newborn baby (Figure 2). *Abartan* also ends with an extreme long shot of a bus, wherein Jayanti and Parimol are passengers, crossing a railway track. After winning her battles on her domestic as well as professional fronts, Jayanti is metaphorically shown to pass an important crossroad of life with Parimol. (Figure 3).

Though Saikia is noted for his lesser interest in using medium close-up, close-up and extreme close-up shots, however, he used such shots in some specific moments to express the nuances of human emotions, and also to create symbolic meaning of the visual content within the frame. Instead of the characters, most of Saikia's close-up shots focus material objects or faceless human actions which he constructs as visual metaphors for something else.

"The close-up directs the attention of the spectator to that detail, which is, at the moment, important to the course of the action" (Pudovkin 1966, 190). In *Kolahal*, when Kiron, after starving for several days, finally surrenders to her biological demand of hunger and proceeds to take some rice from the rice bag, Saikia captures Kiron at this moment in a close up shot of her face. Her extremely distressed mental condition is reflected through her facial expression in that close-up shot (Figure 4). Similarly, in *Sandhyarag*, when Charu arrives at her urban master's residence for the first time, the next course of her life is effectively predicted through a series of close-up shots on utensils and other kitchen articles (Figure 5).Saikia used one extreme close-up shot in this movie, which is rather an exception in the cinematography of Saikia, when little Charu is on her first journey to the town, sitting on a window seat of the bus, recollecting her mother and sister at home. At this moment she is remembering her younger sister, who was insisting to come with her (Figure 6).

Saikia extensively used high, low and straight-on angle shots to provide the audience with his desired perspectives. Like the popular use of these shots, Saikia also used these shots to signify the position of characters within the narrative. In *Abartan*,

when Parimol brings marriage proposal for Jayanti, initially she rejects his proposal by saying that she is *dirty* and she doesn't want to spoil his life. Parimol continues to insist and tries to convince her by referring to his own *dark past*. To projects his condition in front of Jayanti, Saikia uses a low angle shot where the weakness of Parimol comes to prominence (Figure 7). One shot of this scene has been taken from high angle to signify Jayanti's relatively superior moment over Parimol in that particular moment (Figure 8). The same technique was also used in *Agnisnan* to project Madan's inferiority in front of Menaka (Figure 9).

Saikia's substantial use of medium shots can be seen as a legacy of realist cinema which he consciously imbibed. The *deep focus* style of realist cinema is characterized by the depth of focus, which "occurs when all objects in front of the camera, no matter how distant from it, are in focus" (Gaut 2010: 74-75). Gaut referred to André Bazin's interpretation on the efficacy of this cinematographic technique in achieving the realistic effect on the audience:

> [T]his style preserves the unity of space and time, does not impose an interpretation on the spectator, allows the spectator to scan the image on her own and allows the action to occur independently of the spectator. These features are the reasons that he offers for holding that the style is realist. (Gaut 2010: 75)

Saikia used tilt down shot in *Anirban* to capture the leafless tree after the death of the second new born baby of Rajani and Bhagyabati(Figure 10). The tree becomes the reminder of their distress that Saikia repeatedly use in this film. Likewise, in *Sandhyarag*, when Charu encounters the first urban dweller Kanta who is the daughter of her urban master and is equal to her in terms of age, Saikia used both high and low angle point of view shots to exhibit the differential positions of these two children in the social hierarchy. The first low angle shot captures Charu from Kanta's perspective to project her inferiority (Figure 11), and after three other shots, Saikia captures Kanta in a high angle point of view shot to display her superior social position in relation to Charu (Figure 12).

Regarding framing, most of the time Saikia placed the character within a frame in ways that create additional suggestive meanings. In addition to the character, other objects appeared within the frame express the situation of the character. For

example, in two moments of *Sandhyarag* and *Itihaas*, Charu and Lakhimi respectively, are captured through a window to suggest their confinements(Figure 13 and Figure 14). If Charu is going to incarcerate in the urban periphery, Lakhimi is already imprisoned by the inhuman, materialistic and cruel inhabitants of the aggressive city. In other shots, characters are usually framed at the central position of the camera frame. It suggests the importance of the character in the narrative. Apart from these kinds of framings, freeze frame shot is also used by Saikia in the film *Kolahal* at the end of the movie. This freeze frame contains the moment when Kiron is finally getting ready to welcome Badal and his proposal (Figure 15).

Apart from the above mentioned shots, an important shot used by most directors is the establishing shot. This shot is particularly used to inform the audience about the changing context at the beginning of a new scene in the film. It helps the audience to understand the place, time and relationship of the character with that particular context. Saikia's establishing shots are mostly taken in long or medium long shots. For example, in *Sarothi*, when Mr. Dutta is indulged in his retrospective fantasy about his past village life, Saikia set the village environment with a long shot of a flowing river and some huts on the bank of the river. After this shot he unfolds the village life of Mr. Dutta(Figure 16). Similarly, in *Sandhyarag*, various markers of an emerging urban society, like smoking factories, electric tower and railway tracks, are also composed within long and medium long shots.

4.3. Sound:

Sound does create, and add to, meaning in a film narrative. It contributes to the process of storytelling. Manufacturing of sound has both technical and aesthetic sides. Therefore, while making a critical assessment of sound, 'we should remember that what we hear results from choices made by directors and their collaborators during production' (Barsam 2004, 352). In addition to that Rick Altman emphasizes on the contextual soundtracks to study the auditory materials of a film (Altman, 2004). As sounds are not isolated from the socio-cultural context; hence while studying sound the socio-cultural context should be taken into consideration. Sound can fill up the gap of the story and can keep the audience engaged. It has the power

to manipulate the emotions of the audience. According to Bordwell and Thompson 'sound can actively shape how we perceive and interpret the image' and it 'gives a new value to silence' (Bordwell& Thompson, 2004: 348). Sound can be diegetic (originates from within the film world) and non-diegetic (comes from outside the film world).

Like other films, in Saikia's films also sound play a supportive role in the proceeding of the narratives. In his earlier movies Saikia used more diegetic than non-diegetic sounds, plausibly due to limitation of technological access during that time. But from *Kolahal* onwards, he is seen to include non-diegetic music to express the emotion of characters and essence of the situations. In *Kolahal,* sad music of violin is dominant, enhancing various moments of Kiron's pain intensely. Likewise, Charu's moments of arriving at her urban destination are elevated by diegetic sounds motor vehicles, signaling the 'sense of joyous enjoyment of the city's crowds and the rapid rhythms of its street life' (Kaviraj 2007, 73).

Padum Barua, in a remarkable enactment of auditory aesthetic in his film *Ganga Chilonir Pankhi,* used the sound of *Dheki* (a rice pounding instrument of Assam) to reflect the heartbeat of the protagonist in the famous elopement scene. Saikia also used such kinds of organic sounds, like sounds of chirping birds, flowing river, crackle of fox, and sound of insects in various contexts of his films to retain their realistic appeal. A significant use of diegetic sound is seen in *Agnisnan.* The sound of the horse-cart, the stepping sound of the horse and the tinkling sound of the rattle around its nose, is repeatedly used in different contexts of the movies to signify either the different power equations or the rhythm of life of the characters in the semi-feudal milieu. Just like Mohikanta who dominates others, the sound of Mohikanta's horse cart also dominates all other sounds. In *Sarothi*, the disturbing noise of the mixing machine of stones and sand is metaphorically used to signify the internal cacophony of the protagonist Niranjan Dutta.

4.4. Editing:

An important formal element of a film that helps to define the course of the narrative is the editing of the film. 'Editing consists, in part, of the techniques and conventions used to arrange and assemble and remaining footage, both picture and

sound, and to govern the relations between shots and between scenes' (Barsam 2004, 296). Editing is necessary to create meaning, to incite expressive and rational responses and to make the film intelligible for the audience. It "can make everyone involved in the film look better by cutting the tedious and extraneous" (Phillips 2009, 113).

Saikia took Nikunja Bhattacharya as the editor in all his films. Basic techniques of editing like flashback and flash forward, continuity editing, superimposition, and jump cut are used by Bhattacharya in Saikia's films.

From the perspective of creative editing, the critics have found the *Sarothi* to be more noticeable in comparison to the other films of Saikia (Gohain, 1993). Besides the extensive use of flashbacks and flash-forward sequences, the narration of *Sarothi* is also distinct because of its plot which is structurally different from the plots of any other film of Saikia. Unlike the plots in Saikia's rest of the films, the plot of *Sarothi* lacks linear progression of events towards a conclusive ending. Here, the condition of the protagonist Niranjan Dutta, or any aspect of the world around him, remains unaltered all throughout the movie, without any dramatic happening at any moment. In each of the other six movies of Saikia, the story progresses with the happenings occurred in the world external to the protagonist and the protagonist's responses to these happenings. However, half of the context in *Sarothi* has to do with the internal mental world of the protagonist who is shown as rather indifferent and disconnected to, and withdrawn from, his external realities which are highly contrasting with his internal fantasies. This strength of non-linearity of the story in *Sarothi*, which makes it a comparatively better achievement of Saikia in terms realism, has been adequately exploited by suitable mode of narration and editing of the film.

Saikia has deployed flashback and flash-forward methods to portray the personal retrospections and fantasies of Niranjan Dutta respectively. "Flashback is a mimetic representation of thought processes looking to the past, whether they be dreams, confessions or memories. They are then subjective truths, an explanation of the present through the past" (Hayward 2000, 136). Thus, the apparently non-dramatic present life of Niranjan Dutta gets "explained" when it is contrasted with his unshared memories and dreams. Saikia allowed five flashbacks which are created mostly through jump cuts, with matching visual actions or continuous diegetic sound

or non-diegetic sound bridges, to enable the transition from Dutta's present to the past and from his external world to the internal world. Similarly, flash forward is another common technique of film editing and narrative style which enables to "reflect a character's desire for someone or something, a premonition of something that might happen or even a psychic projection" (Barsam & Monahan 2010, 325). In *Sarothi*, there are sequences, in which we find the protagonist in his future imaginations about various events that center around his imagined family with his desired and nameless life partner. Employing six flash forward shots, Saikia constructs the imaginary world of Mr. Dutta in *Sarothi*.

Continuity editing and discontinuity editing are two styles of film editing. When the rhythm of the sequence is maintained and viewers feel that the subject of that particular shot is related with the subject of the other shots, it is called continuity editing. It "allows the omission of minor details within scenes yet maintains the illusion of completeness and of the continuity of time, place and action" (Phillips 2009, 127). Continuity editing is also understood as a kind of invisible editing as viewers are not made to be conscious that they are actually fed with some edited footage on the screen. In contrast, discontinuity editing is more expressive kind of editing because it deliberately makes the viewer aware of the intervention of editing. In the case of Saikia's films, use of discontinuity editing is evident in his extensive use of jump cuts and occasional non-diegetic inserts.

Jump cut is the manipulation of time and space of the narrative content through the removal of some portions of the film. The purpose behind the shots are 'to surprise or disorient viewers' (Phillips 2009, 121), and to speed the sequence of events. However, jump cut is considered by the critics, more 'as an error than an expressive technique of shooting and editing' (Barsam 2004, 322) that 'weaken the narrative continuity' (Bordwell & Thompson 2008, 254). "Jump cut registers as an uncanny jolt in a film's advance, drawing the spectator's attention to disturbing elisions of time and space" (Dix 2010, 64). After going through the history of art cinema of 1950s, Bordwell viewed that the filmmaker of this school, especially Godard used jump cuts as one of the major component of his story telling and it were read as his specific *tone of voice* and his personal signature, an index of his modernity. Bordwell goes on saying that "the jump cuts were also naturalized as realism: they

do not tell a story but render 'a sensation or an experience' with the kind of chances and hazards that intervene in life" (Bordwell 1984, 10)

On various occasions of his films, Saikia used jump cuts to suggest the transition of time and space. One sequence of *Kolahal* can be illustrated here: Badal goes to meet Master Uncle at his residence; Master uncle after returning from a long search for Binod hands over a photograph to Badal; in the photograph, Binod is seen with another woman as his wife.The next shot shows the photograph in the hands of Kiron at her home. This jump cut enables the transition of space from Master Uncle's residence to Kiron's home. However, it is felt that unlike the most expressive ways of discontinuity editing, Saikia preferred to minimize the feeling of interventionist editing. Almost all his jump cuts are executed with some kind of concern to ensure the smoothest possible transition, with the deployment of various bridging elements. In the above example of *Kolahal*, for example, close-up on the photograph that remains in the two spatial contexts of Master Uncle and Kiron, ensures this smooth transition.

Superimposition is used to "function as traces of characters' thoughts and feelings" (Bordwell& Thompson 2008, 451). Mostly, editors use close up of character's face to express his/her mental image in a superimposed shot. In *Sandhyarag*, when young Charu is sitting on the verandah and revisiting her past memories; her childhood face is superimposed on her youth face. This superimposed close-up shot is a visual representation of Charu's thoughts, the connectedness between her present and her childhood (Figure 17). In another telling superimposition of the same film, a bow-shaped bone of fish is superimposed with the sickle-shaped moon on the sky. The bone of the fish in that context is a piece shown as a part of the left-over food Charu had to consume because the guests of her masters finished the food. Charu's degenerating condition is portrayed through a close-up of the fish-bone, which is then superimposed with the moon on the sky that may stand for her dreams (Figure 18).

The co-relation between the opening and closing scenes of the film is another significant editing style used repetitively by Saikia in his films. The opening shot of *Agnisnan* shows Mohikanta's ride on his horse cart and the ending scene of the film

Figure 17: A superimposition of Charu's face with her
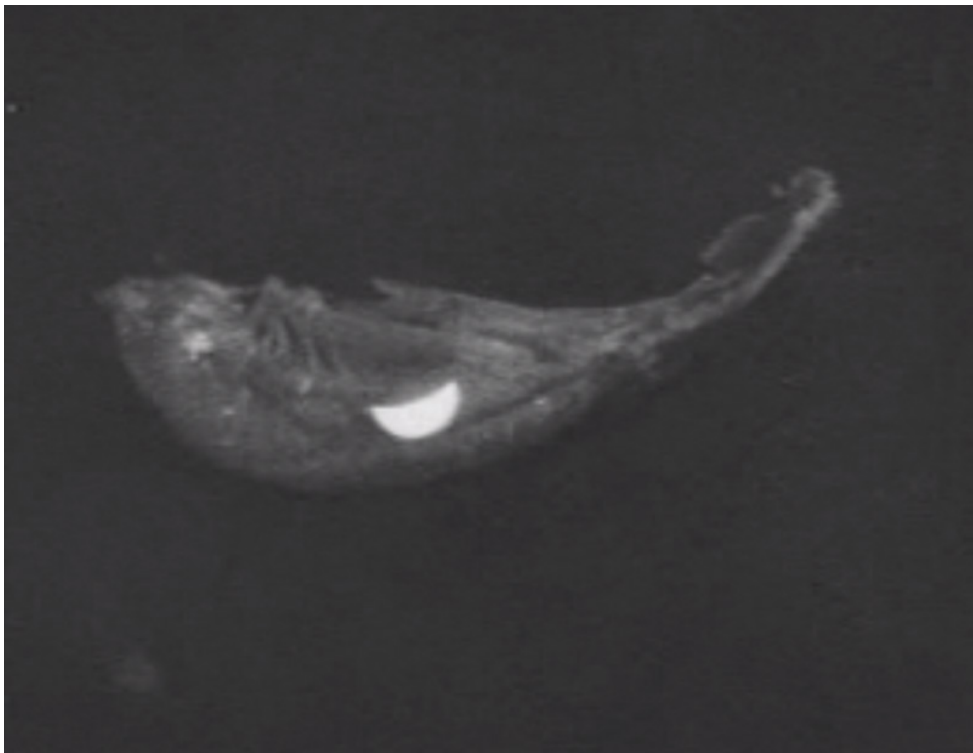childhood face in *Sandhyarag*

Figure 18: Another superimposition in *Sandhyarag:* the fish-bone and the moon

depicts Menaka coming home on her own horse cart. This ending scene, which stands for Menaka's triumph over Mohikanta, is related to the opening scene where Mohikanta's power was uncontested. In the opening scene of *Abartan*, Jayanti is seen travelling on a bus. In the ending scene of the film, she is again seen travelling on a bus, but this time with Parimol. Similarly, in *Itihaas*, after the casting of its credit titles, Saikia begins his narrative by focusing on the community water-well – which is going to be cleaned and treated by the municipality staff. The last sequences of the film again come to the same well, but this time to lift Lakhimi's body from the well by Madhu and other villagers. This consciously built connection between the opening and closing scenes gives us further ground to call Saikia as an auteur. This interconnectedness between the beginning and the ending of a film, not seen in the other Assamese films of that period, is surely a unique auteurial trait of Saikia.