

Chapter 5

Visual Contents in the Frame: Mise-en-scènes of the Literary Filmmaker

5.1. Introduction:

The French term *mise-en-scène* is used to mean ‘staging or putting on an action or scene’. Whatever comes in front of the camera falls under the umbrella term *mise-en-scène*. From the beginning, style of *mise-en-scène* is associated with two specific film genres- German expressionist cinema of 1920s and the French style of 1930s known as poetic realism (Pramaggiore & Wallis 2005, 59). The basic tenet of these two styles is projection of real and unreal or imaginary. German expressionist cinema is ‘highly stylized type of film. Hallmark of this style is oblique camera angles, distorted bodies and shapes, bizarre and incongruous settings that are almost gothic in their look and framing’ (Hayward 2000, 176). To create a fantasy world they use *mise-en-scène* in a stylistic manner. Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* (1924) and Lang’s *Metropolis* (1926) are some of the well-known examples of German Expressionist films. In contrast to this, poetic realism “erase the idea of illusion, creates the reality effect” (Hayward 2000, 312). The purpose behind the composition of the shots is to present a real world in front of the audience. “Two visual characteristics of poetic realism convey this theme: careful construction of the *mise-en-scène* and elaborate camera movement. Because these films explore how environment shapes human behaviour and destiny, set-designers paid attention to minute, yet meaningful details” (Pramaggiore & Wallis 2005, 91). Hence, *mise-en-scène* is often judged by the ‘standard of realism’. Both critics and audience expect to witness a real world with the realist composition of *mise-en-scène*. Bazin, for whom *mise-en-scène* is “the crux of the Realist film” (Monaco 2000, 408), stated that

“there is only one reality that cannot be denied in cinema- the reality of space.....since there is no irreducible reality of presence, ‘there is nothing to prevent us from identifying ourselves in imagination with the moving world before us, which becomes *the* world’ in the

vocabulary of cinematic aesthetics. Moreover the one irreducible reality is that of space. Therefore film form is intimately involved with spatial relationships: mise-en-scène in other words” (Monaco 2000, 409).

Nevertheless, mise-en-scène is not always used to create realism; it fulfils some other functions too. Mise-en-scène can give different effects like exaggeration of comic, creation of terror, enhancement of aesthetic beauty etc. while studying geographic realism in films; Aitken and Dixon comment that “mise-en-scène is more than just the frame of a shot. It is a continuous space that is a positioned and positing movement” (Aitken & Dixon 2006, 332).

However, it was after the development of auteur study of single director’s film, critics pay attention to the analysis of mise-en-scène as an important cinematic tool. They were tempted to bestow all the credits to well organized mise-en-scène of a director. Robin Wood, while dwelling on the significance of film style in film criticism in his article published in *Oxford Opinion*, mentioned about the director’s ability to fit the actors within the decors “so that the decor itself becomes an actor; with the advice and co-operation of the cameraman, to compose and frame the shots; regulate the tempo and rhythm of movement.....All this is mise-en-scène” (Quoted in Gibbs 2002, 57). It is the “tone and atmosphere of the film, visual metaphor, the establishment of relationships between character, the relation of all parts to the whole (Gibbs 2002, 57). Considering mise-en-scène as an important aspect of film analysis, Robert P. Kolkar said that “mise-en-scène and auteur criticism were closely intertwined within the analysis of style, and style was often implicitly defined as the personal expression of mise-en-scène” (Kolkar 2000, 15).

Scholars differ on the divisions of mise-en-scène. For Bordwell and Thompson setting, costume and make up, lighting and staging or acting are the main aspects of mise-en-scène. While Amy Villarejo considered hair as a separate component of mise-en-scène along with the above components (Villarejo 2007, 29), Andrew Dix divided mise-en-scène into five elements- settings, props, costume, lighting and acting (Dix 2010, 12). It can be noted that in all these schemes of classifying the mise-en-scène by various authors, the subtle difference lies only in their

vocabularies and not in the thematic contents. For my discussion on mise-en-scène of Saikia's films in this chapter, I will be following Bordwell and Thompson's terms for mise-en-scène, which are Setting, Costume and make-up, Lighting and Acting.

5.2. Setting:

Setting is the location where the action takes place. Settings may be realistic / natural or artificial. It plays an important role in the construction of filmic language. Sometimes even a character becomes less important than setting. In Lang's *Metropolis* setting acquires the central position both in narrative and cinematic structure. André Bazin rightly said,

“The human being is all important in the theatre. The drama on the screen can exist without actors. A banging door, a leaf in the wind, waves beating on the shore can heighten the dramatic effect. Some film masterpieces use man only as an accessory, like an extra, or in counterpoint to nature, which is the true leading character” (Bazin 2005, 102).

Setting, then, is not simply the ‘container for human events’ but it can disseminate symbolic meaning by entering into the film narrative. When a character is framed in an “abundant space around it, the framing is called loose framing” and if the framing contains little space around it, it is called tight framing and it often convey a sense of confinement and stress (Phillips 2009, 17).

Different film genres construct the setting as per their own principle and requirements. One can find ‘the distorted settings of German expressionist films, the dimly lit rain washed streets and empty cold interiors in film noir, the natural settings of Italy's cities and countryside in Italian neo-realism films’ (Hayward 2000, 325). Selection of setting depends on the choice of the director. Many directors prefer studio settings with the belief that it provides increased control in the shooting. But some other directors from neo-realist school like Vittorio de Sica, Griffith, and Stroheim believe in authenticity, and prefer location shooting.

Saikia categorically comes under the second group, as he selects existing local for the action to convince viewers that whatever they are watching can really exist and

happen. He attempts to maintain the authenticity in the projection of socio-spatial condition of the situation. In Saikia's films, characters were placed both within urban and rural settings. Following the conventional ways of projection, Saikia constructs the image of village with, river, ponds, greenery, village huts, grazing cattle, bullock cart and some other signifiers of rural life; and an urban landscape is constructed with the smoking factories, busy roads, multi-storied buildings, buses, cars, shops and other similar objects.

With his attempt to documents different stages of urban development, Saikia chose some distinct objects to frame a particular phase. For example, to depict a pre-independent semi urban society, Saikia used some emerging urban markers of that period like the street lamp, horse cart and rice mill in *Agnisnan* (Figure 19). In *Sandhyarag*, he used to put smoking factories, railway tracks, busy road, bus stand etc. inside the frame to give an impression of the outdoor environment of the urban world of that time. For the indoor context in the same movie, he set an urban household with sofa set, telephone, carpet, radio and some other decorative items (Figure 20). Likewise, the 'unintended city' part of *Kolahal* is constructed with the messy housing system, go-downs, narrow approach-roads, trucks and rickshaws.

Sometimes, setting acquires the position of a subject. For example, the story of the film *Sarothi* revolves around the construction of a house. The story of Mr. Dutta unfolds in the construction site which also becomes a character in certain moments of the film (Figure 21). On other occasions, "where the characters live or work, which objects surround them, and how they arrange those objects can also tell us much about the characters" (Phillips 2009, 19) and the meaning and significance of their actions. Saikia utilized this power of the setting on a number of occasions effectively. For example, the concluding scene of conversation between Menaka and Mohikanta in *Agnisnan* is taken in Mohikanta's rice mill. The rice mill is a significant site of Mohikanta's pride and his exclusive power, where he has his designated chair as the owner of the mill inside a cabin wherefrom he commands the labourers of the mill. It was Mohikanta himself who invited Menaka for the talk; and sitting on his authoritative chair, he began to charge Menaka for her illicit affair. However, Menaka, with her powerful and highly rational replies punctured Mohikanta in his own site of power. Likewise, in *Itihaas*, in the scene when Lakhimi



Figure 19: Lighting of street-lamp and horse-cart in *Agnisnan*



Figure 20: Setting for urban interiors in Saikia's first film *Sandhyarag*



Figure 21: The house-construction site in *Sarothi*



Figure 22: Tight framing of Jayanti, depicting her theatre-world in the background



Figure 23: Loose framing in *Sarothi*

climbs the stairs of the elite apartment for the first time, she sees indoor glimpses of the various individual families through partially opened doors. The partially visible stuffs inside those household, like modern sofa-sets, other furniture and interior decors reflect the tastes and norms of that society which is highly contrasting with the world of Lakhimi.

Saikia's characters always remain in some kind of confinement; it can be social, psychological, economic, biological or familial. For that reason, Saikia mostly placed his characters within a tight framing rather than a loose one. For instance, in *Abartan* Jayanti and Parimol, in one shot, are discussing about Parimal's unexpected marriage proposal; and messy materials of the theatre party are seen in the back of Jayanti. These materials stand for Jayanti's captivity within the theatre profession (Figure 22). In contrast, when Mr. Niranjana Dutta is recollecting his past village and the woman of his choice in *Sarothi*, in one flashback shot both of them are captured in a loose frame where the woman is talking about their relationship. The essence of their conversation is that they cannot establish a relationship as it will not be beneficial for them, and this unbounded-ness, or the lack of compulsiveness, is visually spread through the loose framing of the shots of that scene (Figure 23).

However, this ease of relative non-compulsion ceases when Dutta comes down from his fantasy to the reality of his present life where he is always shown within tight frames.

Prop is an important element of mise-en-scène, adjunct with setting that performs “setting’s functions of substantiating narrative, signaling genre and revealing character” (Dix 2010, 14). To manipulate the settings of a shot directors often create props. In simple terms we can say that “when an object in the setting has a function within the ongoing action, we can call it a prop” (Bordwell & Thompson 2004, 183). The snowstorm paperweight of *Citizen Kane*, the cactus rose of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and the walking stick of Gulzar’s *Mausam* (1975) carry distinctive meanings within the film narrative. A prop can function as a motif in the course of a narrative. Therefore, a prop’s “inanimate properties are just as useful as the human actor to show psychic status” (Arnheim 1957, 143).

Running bus, leafless tree, flowing river, horse cart, rice mill, rat, rice bag, lizards and community-well are used by Saikia in his films as props. Bus journey of both Charu and Jayanti suggest their exploration of a new world and starting of a new life in *Sandhyarag* and *Abartan* respectively. On the other hand, the rice bag and rat signify Kiron’s constant battle with her biological urges and its fulfillment in *Kolahal*. In *Itihaas*, from the beginning to its end, the public well stands as the witness of the social change. In *Agnisnan*, the horse cart and the rice mill are the signifiers of Mohikanta’s social and economic power, while a leafless tree is used as the indicator of severity of life and a flowing river suggests the continuity of life in *Anirban*.

5.3. Costume and Make-up:

Costume and make-up have a wide range of importance in the composition of a character. The scholarship in structural semiotics has compelled us to read costume as a “structured set of signs replicate with connotations. Particular items and combinations of clothing index national identity, class allegiance, sub-group affiliation, gender position, emotional and psychological status, and so on” (Dix

2010, 16). In structural semiotics of Roland Barthes and his followers, each piece of clothing is a 'signifier' of meaning. Their approach has been applied in film analysis to decipher the denotative meaning of clothing or costume design. The meaning of costume is time and culture specific. Whenever we see a lady with white sari in Indian cinema we immediately recognize her as a widow, just like the top hat of *Stachka / Strike* (1924) that signifies boss's arrogance and a structure of class exploitation (Dix 2010, 16).

The role of costume in film can be understood from the emergence of a separate genre called costume drama in world film history. Costume can play important, motivic and casual roles in narrative (Bordwell & Thompson 2004, 186). It can help the audience to makes a statement about the film genre. Costume can reinforce an aspect of the character. It can differentiate the character within socio-economic, political and cultural contexts. Like other components of mise-en-scène, costume and make-up are also genre specific. Directors can use both stylized or natural costume and make-up. Depending on the viewer, the "make-up often goes unnoticed in many realist films" (Villarejo 2009, 34); but the directors always keep a balance between costume and make-up with the character to achieve realism.

Devi Haldar served as the make-up artist Saikia's all films. With the help of Devi Haldar, Saikia matched the costume and make-up of the artists with their narrative contexts. While in other movies he used Assamese outfit to represent the mainstream Assamese society, in *Kolahal* Saikia stayed away from the typical Assamese mainstream dresses to construct his desired unbounded social and cultural space. Here, as he attempted to mean "any place" of Indian society as the site of his story, he uses *sari*, *kurta-pyjama* (One of the common clothing of Indian man) shirt-pants for his various characters. In all his films, the clothing of the characters remains as an effective signifier of socio-economic condition of the character. For example, in *Sandhyarag* Saru and Kanta's dress demarcate their differential positions in the social hierarchy. Likewise, in *Agnisnan*, their ironed Assam silk *kurta* (a kind of loose shirt with long sleeves) with *dhoti* (a long piece of cloth worn by men as a lower garment) for Mohikanta (Figure 24) and Muga silk *chadar-mekhala* (traditional Assamese dress for women folk) for his wife Menaka portray the rich and prestigious positions of these two characters in their social milieu.



Figure 24: Mohikanta in *Agnisnan*



Figure 25: Mala with her goggles in *Anartan*

Costume and make-up also reflect the attitude and behavioural traits of a character. Heavy make-up and fashionable dress, especially in the context of Indian cinema, signifies a character as mechanical and void of human sensibilities. Saikia also uses this cinematic convention to draw a line between cruel and wise characters. Say for instance, in *Sandhyarag* costume and make-up of Mrs. Das and Urmila, proprietors of Saru and Taru respectively, are different from one another. To project Mrs. Das as wise and ideal urban wife, Saikia used sober dress and make-up for her; while Urmila's insensitive and cruel character is matched with her excessive make-up and modern costume. Same can also be observed in *Sarothi* where the real wife and the fantasized wife of Niranjan Dutta are showed with different costumes; the dress of the *desired* and ideal woman is sober and disciplined; whereas the real wife is shown in modern and immoderate dresses.

Like setting, a 'portion of a costume can become a prop' (Bordwell & Thompson 2004, 187). For example in *Titanic*, Rose's diamond pendant can be considered as prop as it signifies her link with Jack. In Saikia's film *Abartan* the goggles are used as props. In the film, it is established that the lead actress of the theatre wears a dark goggles. When Jayanti is introduced to the audience, she is seen sitting at the front seat of the bus wearing black goggles. Later, after Jayanti's leave from the theatre party, the junior artist Mala is upgraded to Jayanti's position and her up-gradation is portrayed by her wearing of similar goggles at the end of the movie (Figure 25).

5.4. Lighting:

'Light is everything. It expresses ideology, emotion, colour, depth, style. It can efface, narrate, describe. With the right lighting, the ugliest face, the most idiotic expression can radiate with beauty or intelligence'-

Federico Fellini
(Quoted in Bordwell & Thompson, 2004, 191)

Lighting is the means for manipulation of images. It permits us to see the action. "A brightly illuminated patched may draw our eye to a key gesture, while a shadow may conceal a detail or build up suspense about what may be present" (Bordwell & Thompson 2004, 191). Lighting is also of two kinds- natural lighting and artificial



Figure 26: A shot from *Anirban*



Figure 27: Use of front light to illuminate facial expression of Kiran, in *Kolahal*

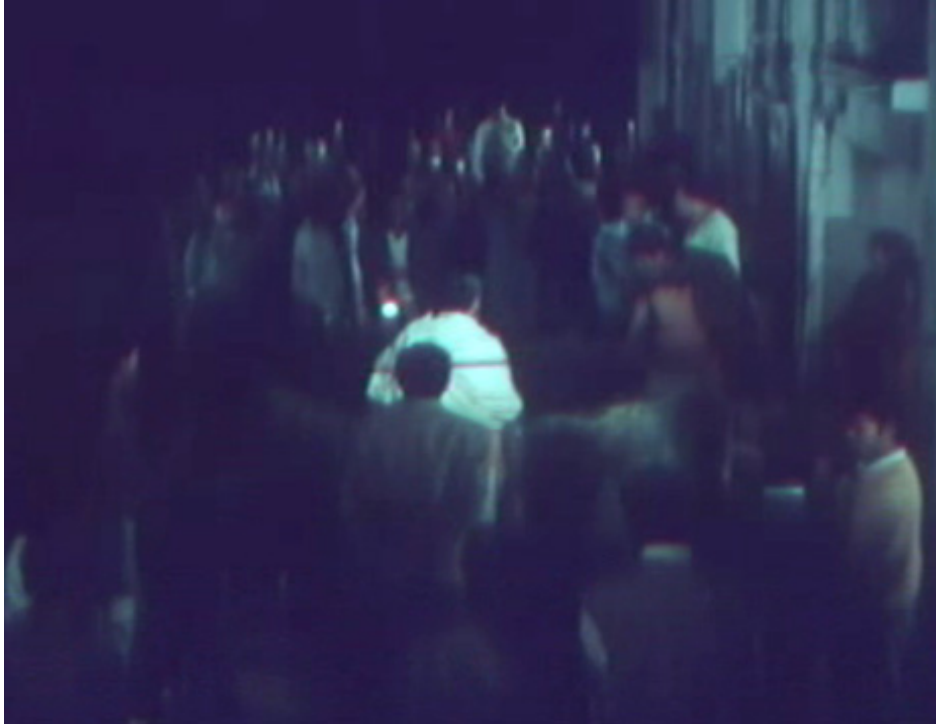


Figure 28: Chiaroscuro lighting in *Itihaas*



Figure 29: Side lighting focused on Menaka, in *Agnisnan*



Figure 30: Diegetic lighting on Pintu in *Sandhyarag*



Figure 31: Side lighting on Parimol and Jayanti, in *Abartan*

lighting. In earlier times, film directors used natural lighting, but with the development of technology directors began to use various artificial lights to confer more meaning to the narrative. From one perspective, lighting quality can be thought of two types – hard light and soft light. “Hard lighting creates clearly defined shadows, crisp textures, and sharp edges, whereas soft lighting creates a diffused illumination” (Bordwell & Thompson 2004, 126). As per the direction of the lighting, lighting can be – frontal lighting, back lighting, side lighting, under lighting and top lighting. Frontal lighting eliminates the shadows and it creates the features of the character prominently. Back lighting illuminates from the back of the character and it makes the subject threatening as viewers cannot interpret his / her mood. Side lighting illuminates from the side to suggest the character’s dual personality as well as contradictory feelings. Under lighting or bottom lighting often used to enhance the frightening mood of the character and lastly, top lighting is illuminates from the top of the character (Phillips 2009 71-73). Filmmakers use two sources of lights – key lights and fill lights. Key light is the primary lights that provides the dominant illuminations that ‘tends to evoke a sense of clarity and optimism; while fill light is less intense illuminations that ‘may induce feelings of moral ambiguity, anxiety, even terror’ (Dix 2010, 18).

Lighting can ‘shape the objects by creating highlights and shadows’ (Bordwell & Thompson 2004, 191). In *Anirban* by highlighting the lizards of the wall, Saikia tries to express the psychological condition of Bhagyabati after the death of her new born baby (Figure 26). In another shot of *Kolahal* when Kiron is perturbed by Bhola’s disturbances, to show her anguish Saikia uses frontal lighting on her face to express the moment more intensely (Figure 27). In *Kolahal* and *Itihaas* Saikia used chiaroscuro lighting to represent the darkness of the city. Chiaroscuro lighting is a mixture of light and dark mostly used in noir film. As these films sketched detail pictures of the dark sides of urban development, therefore Saikia used chiaroscuro lighting in an extensive manner. Last ten minutes of *Itihaas* shows the end result of urban development through the unnatural death of Lakhimi. How she is raped and killed by three young boy of that colony and how her dead body is recovered from the public-well by Madhu and other village men is shown in these ten minutes. Saikia uses high contrast lighting (Figure 28) to express the trauma of death.

Likewise, when Mohikanta returned with his second wife, Menaka is focused by side lighting to signify her mental condition (Figure 29). Apart from all these, in *Sandhyarag* and *Abartan*, Saikia used the diegetic lighting to express the theme of the situation. According to Bordwell and Thompson, these lights are ‘often used to create dramatic horror effects’ (Bordwell & Thompson 2004, 193). In *Sandhyarag* when Pintu, (son of Taru’s proprietor) tries to make sexual advances to Taru, to show him as a man of bad character, Saikia covers Pintu’s face from below with a flashlight coming from the table light (Figure 30). In *Abartan*, when Parimol is insisting Jayanti to accept his marriage proposal, both of them are focused with a side light coming from the real light of the theatre party. It suggests the dramatic nature of the moment in Jayanti’s life (Figure 31).

5.5. Acting:

Acting or performance, the final component of mise-en-scène is rarely discussed in cinema studies (Dix, 2010 & McDonald, 2000). Acting is a combination of body movements and voices of human or non-human characters. Michael Caine expressed that film acting is all to do with the eyes: prolonged looks or minute glances towards or away from some object or person can convey (obviously with the assistance of the camera) so much meaning (Caine 2000). In his article ‘Film Acting’, Paul McDonald mentioned about different views on the significance of acting in a film. Lev Kuleshov bestowed supremacy on editing instead of acting. For him, “it was the editing and not the actor that determined the meaning of the performance” (McDonald 2000, 28). Walter Benjamin, in contrast, viewed film technology as the divider of the ‘art objects from its creator’. He perceives actors as an ‘almost ghostly figure’ (Dix, 2010: 19) that ‘diminishes the aura, or charisma, of the individual’ (McDonald 2000, 29). While John Ellis, from psychoanalytical perspective, argues that, “the film actor is placed in relation to the narcissistic, voyeuristic, and fetishistic looks of moviegoers” (Ellis 1982). Both Benjamin and Ellis emphasized on film apparatus rather than the actors. Nevertheless acting, in supports from other components, crucially expresses the meaning of the film. “For an audience, the activity of reading a performance involves the bringing together of actor and

character, and the interpretation and evaluation of acting has tended to assess whether or not the actor has ‘become’ the character” (McDonald 2000 ,28). Therefore acting is often measured by the scale of realism, and it is “articulated in terms of whether a performance is more or less ‘believable’, ‘truthful’ , or ‘realistic’ (McDonald 2000, 28). But Bordwell and Thompson put a contrasting view about the analysis of acting on the basis of realism as, according to them, ‘not all film try to achieve realism. Since the performance of an actor creates is part of the overall mise-en-scène, films contain a wide variety of acting styles. Instead of assuming that acting must be realistic, we should try to understand what kind of acting style the film is aiming at” (Bordwell & Thompson 2004, 198).

Saikia was very particular about the selection of his actors. Therefore, instead of recruiting the established film actors, on many occasions he went for unprofessional and theatre actors. Even some new faces like Runu Devi (Charu in *Sandhyarag*, Bhagyabati in *Anirban*, Kiran in *Kolahal*), Nikumoni Barua (Lakhimi in *Sarothi*), Arati Barua (Mrs Das in *Sandhyarag*), Maya Barua (Urmila in *Sandhyarag*) are also introduced by Saikia in his films. Many of these actors later could build up their careers in professional acting after being introduced in Saikia’s films. Saikia, like Satyajit preferred to work with the same group of actors. Runu Devi, Mridula Barua, Arun Nath, Chetana Das, Biju Phukan, Lakhmi Borthakur, Jayanta Das, Arun Guhathakurata and few others are repeatedly casted in his films. Saikia’s attempt was to express the essence of the film through strong and realistic acting and dialogue. Therefore film critic Utpal Datta rightly said that “the plots and expressions of his films became more complex, but the reality and truthfulness in the acting methods touched newer heights, such that not another filmmaker in the entire nation could successfully put forth such innovation in making the actors portray heart-felt reality in films” (Datta 2007, 90-91).

The facial expression of the actor becomes the main criteria for the judgment of his/her acting. And consequently close-up shot gives more space to put their acting skill in front of the camera. On this ground, film acting differs from theatre acting. In theatre there is no scope to get the close view of the actor but in a film with different camera movement director can capture the figure from any distance. In *Seven Samurai* (1954), a win over the bandits is shown through one shot where “the



Figure 32: Kiran's sadness of not getting news from her disappeared husband

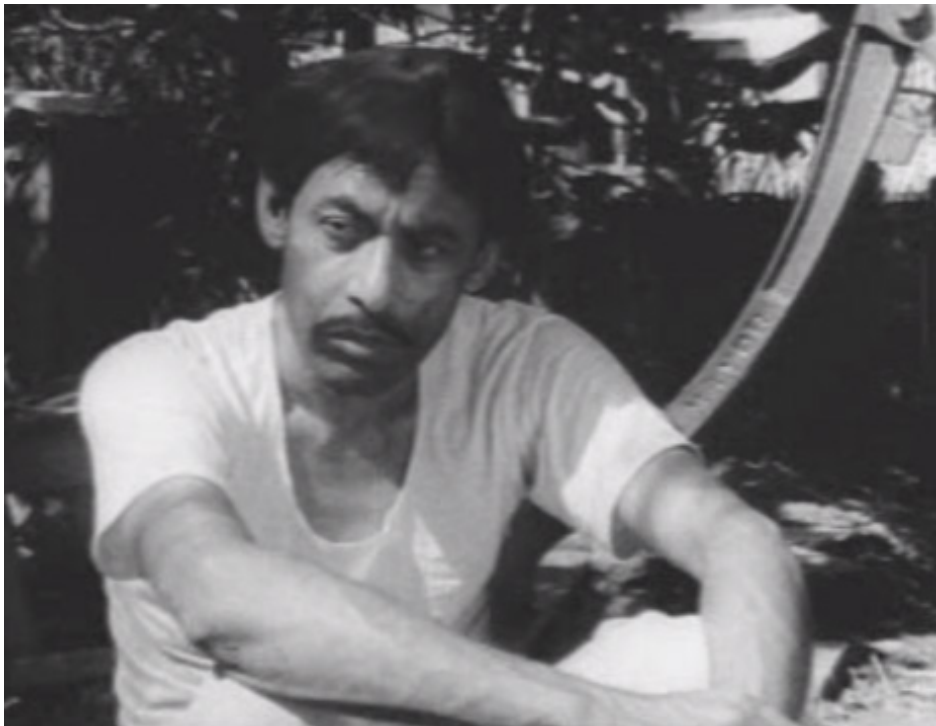


Figure 33: Rajani, after death of his second child, in *Anirban*

only movement in the frame is the driving rain, but the slouching postures of the men leaning on their spears express their tense weariness” (Bordwell & Thompson 2004, 198). Thus body gesture of actor is enough to decipher meaning. In this context, Saikia’s preferred style of acting can be said as rather theatrical and dialogue-dominated. Expressions of characters through silence, or other non-vocal facial and eye expressions and gestures are almost absent in Saikia’s films. In one of the few exceptions, Kiran’s facial expression was framed at the beginning of the movie, to portray her upsetting mood when she notices that the postman has crossed her house without delivering any letter. The agony of a wife waiting desperately to hear from her disappearing husband is reflected in the silent and close-up framing of her facial expressions (Figure 32). Likewise, Bholu Katoki’s acting as the school teacher in *Anirban* also involved such realistic emotional expressions, without much dependence on dialogues. His effective portrayal of the nuances of the pain and distress of a father, who has lost three new born babies, is enacted with voiceless expressions having realistic appeal (Figure 33).

Saikia was very particular about the selection of settings, costume and casting. He always tries to describe the story in an appropriately designed setting and costume. It helps the audience to demarcate the different phases of urban development. Regarding the selection of casting crew also Saikia gives preference to their real performance as well as the resemblance of their physical structure with the character. This can also be called his unique character in respect of the stylistic feature.