

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Making Sense of the *Auteur*

The objective of this study was to find out the thematic and stylistic features of Saikia's seven Assamese films. In the previous chapters, attempts have been made to trace some of the identifiable characteristics of Saikia's films, grounding on various theoretical frameworks. In the first chapter, an attempt was made to locate Saikia as a filmmaker within the historical context of Assamese cinema in particular, and the Indian parallel cinema in general. The second chapter has been an endeavor to have an analytical discussion on the first thematic feature of Saikia's films— the representation of women. This discussion concentrated on selection of women's problems, their presentation and treatment and the articulation of women's agencies in responding to such problems. After a close reading of these films some pertinent features can be summarized:

Saikia's women protagonists are confined within socio-economic, cultural and biological tensions. Saikia focuses more on the historical interpretative account of these problems, and documents the pathological courses in details through which the protagonists are compelled to go through.

- a) The responses and reactions of the protagonists in Saikia's films vary from helpless submissions to possible negotiations to revengeful transgressions. However, in no film of Saikia, a woman protagonist is seen to be committing any kind of protest or revolt against oppressive systems like patriarchy or urban exploitation. Despite their miserable conditions within such systems, Saikia's women always find, or at least hope to find, means to negotiate effectively within the system itself. Menaka's revenge in *Agnisnan*, despite its credibility as a perfect *tit for tat* kind of response to a corrupt husband, illustrates how it is possible for her to remain *equal* to her husband within the same system. In *Sandhyarag*, Charu, Taru and their mother hope to survive by returning to the urban township where their life had been thoroughly displaced. It seems Saikia is ready to see his women accepting death, like

Lakhimi in *Itihaas*, but in no film he allowed them to explore life outside the prevailing system.

- b) Saikia's women characters are not constrained exclusively by their gender roles; their class positions crucially determine their roles as women. His films testify positively with the perception that gender is not a standalone and exclusive category as far as the disparity of power is concerned. It is not a simple case of powerful man and powerless woman in his narrative contexts. Rather, power operates in relative hierarchies which get formed not exclusively due to gendered positions but more effectively due to class positions. Therefore, it is not surprising that Menaka can command over a lower class man Madan in *Agnisnan*; and Mrs. Das and Urmila do not exhibit any special sympathy towards Charu and Taru just because they are women.
- c) In most of his films, Saikia is seen to be tempted for providing a solution to his protagonists. In doing that, as mentioned in point (2) above, Saikia ends up solving the problem of a single individual and not a solution for women in general in similar contexts. In *Sandhyarag*, Charu's hope is created by the probable help and support from an impotent man like Moti. In *Abartan*, Jayanti has been *rescued* by an exceptionally good and capable man Parimol. In *Kolahal*, after the betrayal of her husband and death of her only son, Kiron finds a man called Badal as her sympathizer and probable support.

The third chapter was about the second thematic feature of Saikia's films – urbanity. Saikia's films are based on issues which are directly or indirectly connected to the making of the urban society in Assam in the twentieth century onwards. It will not be an oversimplification to say that Saikia's entire filmography can be taken as a kind of critical commentary on the emergence and expansion of the urban life world in Assam, especially in post-independence times. His films bear some common characteristics as far as the representation of urban society is concerned. Some pertinent issues covered in Saikia's films are:

- a) Saikia's seven films depict different stages of development of the urbanization process. His first film *Sandhyarag* has been based on a theme

which is perhaps the most logical theme to be taken up for his first take on urbanity – the then experience of the emergence of a city, its happy urbanite middle class and its compelling pull of the villagers to explore livelihood within it. His second film *Anirban*, though may not be thematically too connected to his urban sequel, yet it does portray the urbanized cultural traits like emergence of private tuitions, widening of gap between the adolescent school-goers with their parents, etc. In his third film *Agnisnan*, Saikia moves little backward in the historical timeline by bringing a semi-urbanized feudal society of pre-independence times. Here, along with the highly articulated central narrative of conflict between Menaka and her husband, Saikia has also invested on the emergence of some of the fundamental traits of urban life and culture: the shift towards non-agrarian economy (the rice-mill of Mohikanta which was later increasingly controlled by Menaka) and the gradual emergence of the material city (the lighting of street lamps). In *Kolahal*, Saikia again catches the thread which he left after *Sandhyarag*. Here, an emergent intermediary and liminal category of the slum-dwellers can be seen to slip into the erstwhile prominent rural-urban divide of *Sandhyarag*. For Saikia, the outgrow of this highly cosmopolitan segment, wherein the normative compulsions of the erstwhile homogeneous and bounded cultural authority get loosened, is a kind of universal condition caused by the urbanization process in India. In *Sarothi*, Saikia chose to pick up the subjectivity of a typical male middle class urbanite. With this film, Saikia addresses largely the frustration and the loss of dreams of the urban middle-class, who are caught in the paradox of physically living in the actual city but mentally fantasizing about an alternative one. In *Abartan*, Saikia tellingly illustrates how the material and cosmetic changes of modernity and urbanity have not been able to wash away the intangible archaic prejudices of the society, which results in pathetic victimization of women actors in commercial theatre. In his last film *Itihaas*, Saikia projects urbanization as a ruthless intrusion. Here, the villagers do not migrate to township, but the township expands itself to uproot them.

- b) In his films, the urban space is construed as a part of urban-rural dichotomy. In all the films of Saikia, the urban and the modern have been conceived not as standalone categories but as entities that make sense with their contrasts with the pre-urban and pre-modern. Even in a film like *Sarothi*, which is seemingly a treatment exclusively on the life of an urbanite, the secret fantasies of the protagonist are unmistakably shaped by his pre-urban baggage.
- c) Saikia portrays differential effects of urbanization on men and women. Women are seen to be more victimized in comparison to the relative ability of men in acclimatizing with the changing social environment. In *Sandhyarag*, though Moti and Charu are both victims of urban displacement, Moti is clearly in a better position than Charu. And Charu can think of survival of herself and her family only by her dependence on Moti. Similar dependence can be seen in the cases of Jayanti on Parimol (*Abartan*) and Kiron on Badal (*Kolahal*). In *Itihaas*, Lakhimi's death can partly be attributed to the unavailability of adequate confidence and support from her fiancé Madhu.
- d) Saikia is neither a blind supporter of the kind of urbanization experienced in the context of Assam, and elsewhere in India, nor he wanted to celebrate the idea of romantic return to the village; he ends his films with a hope or continuity within that urban life world – which is inevitable for him. This aspect is significant particularly because of the fact that the escape to the good old village has been a recurrent theme in many Assamese commercial and art house cinema. Jahnu Barua, another well-known director of several widely acclaimed Assamese films, is also seen to subscribe this theme of romancing with the pre-urban pastoral life and a fantastic return to that life from the city life, particularly in his films like *Xaagoroloi Bohu Dur* (1995) and *Konikar Ramdhenu* (2002). For many of the currently circulated commercial VCD-films in Assam, this has become a repeated stereotype. Saikia never resorted to this illusive return to the village and the past. Rather, he took up this syndrome, of urban fantasizing of the past and the village, as

theme for his film *Sarothi*. While his protagonist Niranjan Dutta is a victim of this syndrome, Saikia himself was not.

The fourth and the fifth chapters are discussions on Saikia's film-making techniques. It has been mentioned that Saikia's style of filmmaking was criticized as literary kind of filmmaking. He himself called his films as *sahityadharmi* (literary). The basis of this kind of criticism and observation is the fact that each of Saikia's films relies heavily on a tight literary plot, without depending much on the techniques of the so-called cinema proper which includes creative and experimental exploration of cinematic elements like cinematography, sound, editing and mise-en-scène. However, while going through his cinematic contents, some common features of his films in the application of above mention tools can be outlined:

- (1) Use of basic cinematic tools applied by realist filmmakers: location shooting, use of natural light, unprofessional actors, absence of songs and dances.
- (2) Successful use of literary metaphors as cinematic metaphors.
- (3) Co-relation between opening and closing sequences.
- (4) Emphasis on theatrical dialogues rather than on subtler voiceless expressions or other creative audio-visual treatments.
- (5) Extensive use of jump cuts but with conscious efforts not to break the continuity.

The above mentioned commonalities of the thematic and stylistic contents of Saikia's films bring the issue of authorship promulgated by auteur theory. Auteurism or auteur theory is about conferring the authority to a single director on the basis of the distinctive thematic and stylistic features of his/her films. Building three premises: technical competence, distinguishable personality and interior meaning of the film; auteur theorists like Andrew Sarris distinguished a filmmaker as an auteur. Apart from Sarris' delineated principles, maintenance of stylistic and thematic consistency by the director in his films is considered as the basic tenet of auteur study. François Truffaut, one of the leading proponents of auteur theory, proposed that the films of an auteur are "an expression of his own personality" (Caughie 2007,23). Celebrated Jean-Luc Godard of the French film-noir believes that an auteur can transform the conventional stereotypes and archetypes into 'living beings' (Rivette 1985, 132).

Adding to Sarris principles, Brian Michael Goss puts another principle to the auteur study. According to him, in addition to Sarris' three premises, signature also accentuates the collaborative nature of an auteur director through his tendency to work with same group of artist (Goss 2009, 48). Graham Petrie, on the other hand, sets freedom as one of the main tenets of auteur criticism. For him, the director should have the freedom to do all the works from the beginning to the end in the filmmaking process (Petrie 1973). Gaut, in his book *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, consciously gives a 'gaggle of authorial claims' posited by auteur theorist. Dividing into three dimensions of authorial variations – the *existential* claim, the *hermeneutic* claim and the *evaluative* claim, he summarized claims of auteur theory in the following lines

“There is a film author, who is an actual person, a textual author, the director, and there is just one for a film. Or one can hold that there are multiple authors, who are critical constructs, are artists rather than textual authors, and are directorial, screen writer, and star constructs. Or one can hold that to understand a film requires understanding what the author did, constructing the author as a single directorial construct and textual author” (Gaut 2010, 102).

However, in the same book Gaut shows how the above mentioned claims are denied by group of scholars, even by some of its proponents. Immediately after its emergence, auteur theory has been challenged by many critics like Paulin Kael, Graham Petrie, Robin Wood, André Bazin and many more, 'as an agency of oppressive power' (Dix 2010, 142). Roland Barthes' cult article 'The Death of the Author' (1968) and Michel Foucault's 'What is An Author?' (1969) brought new perspectives or criticisms in the proclamation of authorship. Negating the existence of author, Barthes claims that "the figure of the author is pernicious in its effects and analogous to the ultimate embodiment authority" (Dix 2010, 142). However, Foucault is less provocative in comparison to Barthes. Instead of disapproving the existence of author, he fixed some 'author-function' – 'a standard level of quality', 'a certain field of conceptual or theoretical coherence' and 'a stylistic uniformity'.

The main criticism on auteur theory is for conferring all the credits to the director by ignoring the 'context', 'ideology' and 'unconscious structure' (Hayward 2000, 22) operating behind the filmmaking process. André Bazin also emphasized on the

consideration of the influence of context, while studying auteur's works (Grist 1996). Apart from that auteur theorists ignore the contribution of other persons like actors, screenwriters, cinematographers, producers and so on. Auteurism, according to Robin Wood, the former follower of auteurism, "emphasized the personal signature at the expense of everything else....and , at the worst, claimed or at least implied that the author was solely and exclusively responsible for the meaning and quality of his texts" (Wood 1989, 9). Labeling some auteur directors like Von Stroheim and Eisenstein, "as the desire and demand of an industry to generate an artists (and specially Romantic) aura during a period when the industry as such needed to distinguish itself from other, less elevated forms of mass media", Timothy Corrigan, said that

"Auteurism offered not just audiences, retrieved from the modernist art communities, but new cultural sanctions to old audiences, alienated and awash in an indistinguishable spate of media.....auteurism became a deft move in establishing a model that would dominate and stabilize critical reception for at least thirty years" (Corrigan 1990, 45).

He further said that "to view a film as a product of an auteur means to read or to respond to it as an expressive organization that precedes and supersedes the historical fragmentations and subjective distortions that can take over the reception of even the most classically coded movie" (Corrigan 1990, 46). Thus, auteurism becomes a strategic tool for the film studios to popularize films with an authorial tag. It limits the popularity of the theory in later part.

But auteur theory helps to "improve the production value of a film. In this sense the study and application of film theory will also inform and improve a production" (Tregde 2013, 6). In contemporary period, auteurism is still practiced by both film critics and viewers. This categorization helps the audience to select movies from the bunch of movies producing during these days. People are still watch movies with the name of the director, not with the name of other collaborators. For that reason Robin Wood summed up as such,

"Authorship thus matters, in our view – but as a critical tool, as a knowledge brought to bear, not as a source of value per se. the concept of authorship aids in the perception of aesthetic qualities –

but it enters not all into the definition either of aesthetic objects or the aesthetic experience they may give rise to” (Quoted in Poague 1985, 78).

Answering to the criticism for ignoring the efforts of other collaborators, Peter Wollen said that “director can make a film of his own despite the contributions of others, by controlling the synthetic relationships that constitute a film’s essence” (Wollen 1972, 104-105)

After going through the principles as well as the criticisms of auteur theory; and by taking into account the commonness of Saikia’s thematic and stylistic elements, it can be said that Bhabendra Nath Saikia bears substantial amount of authorial quality. Apart from the commonalities in theme and style, Saikia’s signatures can be felt both inside and outside the films. Linear progression of story, concentration on women subjects, adaptation of his own literary writings, an attempt to give a solution at the end of the film – these are some visible commonalities of the thematic contents of Saikia’s films. In the case of style also, Saikia demonstrates several features of his consistency and integrity: similar type of opening and closing, use of metaphor, absence of songs and dances and his recruitment of the same set of technical crews for cinematography, editing, costume supervision, etc. in addition to the same set of actors.

Apart from these thematic and stylistic features, another common feature of Saikia’s films lies in the selection of the name of each film. It is interesting to note that instead of using a phrase or a sentence like Jahnu Barua (*Xagoroloi Bahu Dur*, *Halodhia Charaye Baodhan Khai*) or Padum Barua (*Ganga Chilonir Pankhi*), Saikia used single word as the name for each of his films. Even some characters’ names are also repeatedly used by Saikia, like Moti, Kiron, Madan and Bholu in different films. These can also be seen as additional instances of Saikia’s authorial integrity or consistency throughout his films.

Saikia was an independent filmmaker, without belonging to any institutionalized schools of Indian commercial or parallel cinema. While most of his contemporary filmmakers of Indian parallel cinema, like Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, etc. were formally trained in the craft of filmmaking, Saikia’s entry

into film direction was rather amateurish, without formal institutional training. Unlike most of the parallel movies in India of his times which were funded by government agencies, Saikia himself financed all his films (in his wife's name). Except *Sarothi* which was produced by Doordarshan (the Indian government television network), all the other movies are produced by Saikia himself. His financial constrains in completing his films are evident in several pages of his published diary. In addition to production and direction, he was also the scriptwriter (of his own stories) in all his films.

The influence of modernist realism is paramount in Saikia's films; and Saikia can be regarded as one of the last champions of such kind of filmmaking. He belongs to an era when the aura of the author was not only incidental but was also desired. The materialist argument that an individual, and for that matter a filmmaker, is conditioned by historical forces and not on his own – indeed has reasonable validity. But all filmmakers, at least in Assam, did not make films in Saikia's ways. His distinction in this regard is unquestionable; and thus, his *auterurship* deserves its own legitimacy.