

Chapter 2

Representation of Women: *Menaka's Revenge*, *Kiron's Negotiations* and Other Schemes

2.1. Introduction:

An easily visible distinction, common to almost all the films of Bhabendra Nath Saikia, for both the critics as well as amateur film-lovers, is that all his movies centre on women characters. Except the film *Sarothi*, all of his films have one or more women characters as the protagonists and the narratives are built upon issues pertaining to the lives and worlds of these women characters at the centre. This thematic unity has earned the popular distinction for Saikia as the maker of women-centric films. This chapter is devoted to a critical discussion on Saikia's projection of the gendered reality, including aspects of his constructions of femininity and masculinity, in relation to the historical context of his times. For that matter, various theoretical notions and perspectives about the operation and articulation of gender are summarized at the beginning of the discussion, in order to have a theoretical framework of this analysis. Gender, which has become a common theme within cultural studies to study social experiences and representations, is understood here not as a mere division but as an interrelated entity, as it has become increasingly evident that "the idea of gender should not be conceived of merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex. Rather notions of gender must also take into account the very apparatus of production through which the sexes themselves are established (Butler, 1990). As a bearer of ideology, cinema transports, celebrates, questions and resists the gender differences that hail from patriarchy.

Further, in order to contextualize Saikia's works, a brief description of the representation of woman in Indian and Assamese cinema is also included before coming to the core part of this chapter – the gender question in Saikia's cinema.

2.2. Representation of Women in Cinema:

The images and the sounds in film have a large impact on how we see the world, and the representations used are nothing but a comment on society. However these representations add greatly to our worldview and how we perceive the society. It helps both the producer (of meaning) and the receiver to speak and gather knowledge about the social happening or social changes. “Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we ‘belong’ – so it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups...It is produced in a variety of different media...especially in the modern mass media...which circulate meanings between different cultures on a scale and with a speed hitherto unknown in history” (Hall: 1997, 4). Similarly, according to Hall, the question of meaning arises in relation to ...the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct” (Hall:1997, 4).

Representation of woman in cinema has been a recurring theme in the discussions of not only cinema studies but also the politics of representation in general. With the growing interest of feminist scholars on the cinematic representation of women; instead of being an innocent medium of entertainment cinema transformed into a source of gender differentiation. With the application of psychoanalytic theory, semiology and historical materialism (Hayward: 2000), scholars, especially feminists, attempted to uncover the hidden reality behind such projections.

The dominant way for decoding the women’s representation in the film narrative, especially in the commercial cinema, by the feminist scholars is the objectification of women’s body and denying subjectivity to women on screen. Marjorie Rosen’s book *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and American Dream* (1973) and Molly Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974) were considered to be the pioneering steps towards the investigation of representation of women on celluloid. They argued that “women on the screen are often nothing more than cultural stereotypes of women – the flapper, the vamp, the virgin, the Madonna, the femme fatale, the gold digger, the hooker with a heart of gold” (Fabe 2004,208). According to them “woman’s image of herself is so

entwined in the tangle of myths and inventions made by man that it is hard to look at it straight (Haskell 1987, 278). With this they help to understand how representation is intricately linked to “patriarchal myths, values and opinions” (McCabe 2004, 10). After that representation of women in cinema was explored from various approaches. Semiotic and psychoanalytic theories were popularly used by the feminist scholars to uncover the ways in which women were projected on films. Claire Johnston’s essay ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema’ (1976) and Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ brought new perspectives to look at the representation of women in cinema. Mulvey’s theorization of the male gaze brought a radical change in the debates pertaining to women’s representation in cinema. In cinema, as Mulvey observed, women are ‘coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey 2009, 19) to perform her ‘traditional exhibitionist role’. Mulvey’s discovery of ‘three different looks’ – camera, male audience and male actors; attacked on the cinematic structure of mainstream narrative cinema.

The essence of the stereotypical projection of women in cinema is perhaps best reflected in the words of the Hollywood filmmaker Budd Boetticher when he says,

“What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fears she inspires in the hero, or else the concern she feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance (Quoted in Mulvey 2009,20).

So eventually, E. Ann Kaplan declared that, “in [Hollywood] films, then, women are ultimately refused a voice, a discourse, and their desire is subjected to male desire. They live out silently frustrated lives, or, if they resist their placing, sacrifice their lives for their daring” (Kaplan 1983, 7)

In addition to the projection of women as visual spectacles on the screen for the pleasure of the male gaze, the other non-visual narrative subtleties of/about women in cinema are loaded with male hegemony. The stories of the films about women are, in fact, the stories of men – their dreams, aspirations and heroism. Kaplan sums up,

“this is not to deny that women have a history of their own which can, to some extent, be rediscovered; but it is to argue that in terms of dominant film narratives, of classic forms, women, as they have been represented by men in these texts, take on images that have an ‘eternal’ status, and are repeated through the decades in their essentials: the representation changes superficially in accord with current styles and fashions – but scratch the surface and one finds a familiar pattern” (Kaplan 1983, 2).

A critical analysis of such representation, after ‘scratching the surface’, reveals that the reality hidden behind most of the seemingly positive and correct representations are actually loaded with many contradictory connotations.

Apart from such conventional perspectives on women’s representation, “some attempts have been made to overcome such stereotypical notion” (Sarkar 2012, 36) and go for an *alternative* way of projection as well as deconstruction. For analyzing the films of Bhabendra Nath Saikia rather than the *conventional* perspective, this *alternative* standpoint on the depiction of women will be more relevant.

Counter cinema, as an important genre of exceptional women projection negates the stereotypical roles of women and depict women with their separate identities. Srajita Sarkar in her thesis, attempts to resemble counter-cinema with Foucault’s idea of ‘counter-investment’. The main argument of counter cinema is based on the negation of patriarchy as superior to femininity (Sarkar 2012,43). Counter cinema, according to Foucault, is an attempt to concentrate on the discourses that have been avoided so far (Hayward, 2000). Even by expecting some more counter cinema with new outlook, Clair Johnston (1976) suggested that one should learn to function at various levels, which means that movies should also be made in different genres other than the male-dominated one. Independent cinema, for Kaplan, “either attempt to discover for women a voice and a subjectivity, a place from which to speak, or try to define what the ‘feminine’ might be in a system that has done everything to define femininity for women” (Kaplan 1983, 8).

Voice of women or women’s voice, that Kaplan mentioned, has a definite connotation within feminist discourse, especially in feminist ethnography, where it is argued that emphasis should be given more on women’s voices rather than

capturing their visuals. The voice-centered approach in the feminist ethnographic research 'focuses on women's authorial power to speak with the researcher and reader' and consider voice as 'the sound of the ethnographic world being called into being' (Sanger 2003, 30). Another explanation on women's voice was promulgated by Kaja Silverman, who intricate the continual fascination of cinema with its sounds and meanings generated by the female voice. Normally, voice means express something in words. It is the connection between meaning and materiality. "It is through the voice that the subject normally accedes to language, and there by sacrifices its life, it is associated as well with phenomenal loss, the birth of desire, and the aspiration toward discursive mastery" (Silverman 1988,44). Notably, in a cinema, voice exceeds the basic meaning of the term and entered into the world of meaning making process. Many feminist scholars study voice as a signifier of woman subordination. For them male voice signifies power over female's submissive voice. According to Silverman "sexual difference is the effect of dominant cinema's sound regime as well as its visual regime, and that the female voice is as relentlessly held to normative representations and functions as is the female body" (Silverman 1988, viii). Woman's words are shown to be even less her own than are her "looks." "They are scripted for her, extracted from her by an external agency, or uttered by her in a trancelike state. Her voice also reveals a remarkable facility for self-disparagement and self-incrimination.... Even when she speaks without apparent coercion, she is always spoken from the place of the sexual other" (Silverman 1988: 31).

It is important to note that apart from 'counter cinema', a trend of *new wave*, emerged with an exceptional representation of gender especially women, caught initially the French cinema in the twentieth century and later got expanded to other regional constituencies including India. Though they are not typically confined to issues of woman alone, their distinction lies in their going against the lopsided representation of marginalized categories like race, gender, class, caste and color in the then mainstream cinema. Their treatment of women within the narrative and cinematic composition is visibly different from that of the mainstream commercial cinema. A major and common characteristic of this new kind of cinema was that

these movies were made with critical consciousness, in varying degrees, about the problems of the *old school* order of gender, class, sexuality, race and ethnicity.

In her observations on gender and sexuality in French New Wave Cinema, Dina Sherzer noted that

“....New Wave films position gender-roles in a strikingly progressive fashion. Men and women are placed on an equal footing; one gender does not dominate the other, and, furthermore, men do not enjoy the masculine privilege of seduction or conquest. Women are given many positive attributes. They are independent from masculine power and do not expect anything from men. They do not seek security in marriage and are not dominated economically. They are active, energetic, assertive and either strong or gaining strength. They are fighters and stand up to men. They have a dynamic control of their bodies, and do not exist as merely physical objects” (Sherzer 2001, 230).

Unfortunately, analytical literature on the gender issues pertaining to new wave films elsewhere or in India is strikingly few in number, in contrast to the massive books and articles on the gender stereotypes in the mainstream commercial cinema. It is true that commercial entertaining cinemas in India, like that in the West, project women with her subordinate roles. Observing that women in these films are “still vitiated and subordinated by a nationalist patriarchy and a sexist film industry”, Jyotika Viridi rightly questioned “why women have been fashioned so relentlessly in this manner in the period immediately following independence when in all other matters of development and national reconstruction, Hindi Cinema was relatively forward-looking” (Viridi 2003, 60 - 61). Noting that “Indian women are not in general autonomous and self defined in the films”, Urvashi Butalia stated,

“It is not an oversimplification to say that in popular Indian cinema women are seen very much in bad or good roles. The good ones are, more often than not (self sacrificing) mothers, (dutiful) daughters, (loyal) sisters or (obedient and respectful) wives. They support, comfort and very seldom question their men. They are self-sacrificing and above all pure. It is these ideals that make up their strength.” (Butalia 1984, 109)

These observations on women’s representation in Indian cinema are evidently applicable to the so-called mainstream of popular and commercial cinema, iconized

through the Mumbai-based film industry which was later loosely labeled as *the Bollywood*. But in contrast to that, during post emergency period, India witnessed the production of a number of women centered movies, particularly by the *new wave* directors (Mazumdar 1991, 81). This new trend of movie making tradition, both in national as well as in multiple regional scales, came up with an exceptional image of Indian woman. These movies are often referred as Indian art-house movies, or parallel cinema, though many film scholars later criticized such categorization as ‘the self-deception of the intellectual classes’ to assign certain movies the ‘status of unique art works’ (Kazmi 1999, 51). Despite such criticisms, and their validities at certain circumstances, it is believed that some kind of distinction of such movies is necessary in comparative analysis of the representational patterns in various types of films in India. In this thesis, the phrase *parallel cinema* is used for that purpose.

Among the various distinctions of the parallel cinema or the new Indian cinema in terms of their portrayal of the reality, the treatment of the women’s issues in these films is particularly distinctive. The “new Indian cinema has attempted, to some extent, to redress...by looking at women’s issues more seriously and by attempting to avoid some of the stereotypes....The new Indian cinema is characterized by the more independent film directors making films with less money, and the subject matter is more overtly serious and political” (Butalia 1984, 110). “Moreover, these films have portrayed woman as individuals having desires, opinions and most importantly these women have the willingness to stand up for themselves” (Sarkar 2012,79).

Unlike popular cinema, the parallel cinema is consciously refusing to follow the popular stereotypes; attempts to focus on the real and sensitive issues of women. “While in Bollywood films, women are often used as a metaphor, either for the suffering of the poor, or for India, or for stereotyped depictions of family life, India's auteur filmmakers seem generally more wary about reducing individual women by generalisation and strive consciously against metaphorical portrayals of women protagonists” (Hemphill 1998, 167).

The directors of this category, like Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and others, concentrated on the complications of modern life and its impact on women. “In the artistic cinema, directors associated with the New Cinema sought to present a very different image of women – women not as objects of male desire, but as products of diverse social formations and seeking to transcend their sordid circumstances. These directors are interested in capturing the plight of women as they are caught in the contradictory pulls of tradition and modernity, past and present, and individuality and community” (Gokulsing & Dissanayake 1998, 76). Satyajit Ray’s *Mahanagar* (1963), *Charulata* (1964), *Ghare-Baire* (1984), Shyam Benegal’s *Ankur* (1974), *Bhumika* (1977) are some of those films that try to capture the existing issues related to women. Instead of emphasizing on the construction of an ideal image of Indian woman, they are trying to show the real woman on the screen. “In films like this we find an attempt to capture the complexities of modern life and their impact on women. Questions of rights and obligations, duties and privileges, independence and respect for authority, and other related issues influencing the life of women in India are being increasingly explored through cinema by directors associated with the New Indian Cinema” (Gokulsing & Dissanayake 1998, 81). Rejection of traditional roles by a woman is another important feature of such movies. From *Ankur* to *Bhumika* of Shyam Benegal “the viewers looked at real life women located in specific cultures and histories....a deep psychological studies of characters grounded in reality, with their own conflicts and compulsions” (Datta 2002, 109). Likewise, in the film *Charulata*(1964), *Ghare-Baire* (1985), while adapting Tagore’s literary piece *Nashtanir*, *The Home and the World*, Ray consciously deviated from Tagore’s perception about woman and instead of “portraying her as necessarily powerless because she is female, he modernises the image by depicting her strengths, and by stressing her powerlessness not as inherent in her female nature but as a result of the world's buffetings” (Hemphill 1998, 172).

Some female directors like Vijaya Mehta, Sai Paranjpye, Parvati Ghosh, Aparna Sen, Kalpana Lajmi, Deepa Mehta, and Mira Nair are also engaged in producing movies on women, ‘in search of social and sexual identity, women firmly located in specific socio-historical contexts’ (Datta 2000,73). They have shown immense

interest in making films from women's perspective. Their women characters are always in search of their own identity. In this regard Subeshini Moodley said,

“The female characters in Nair and Mehta's films rebel against their oppression through the exploitation of their sexualities and the reclaiming of their bodies. By stretching the boundaries of their sexual identities, these women speak out in resistance through the language of their bodies” (Moodley 2003, 68).

They attempted to negate the so called stereotypical role of woman strongly maintained by popular Bollywood movies. “The depictions of women's multiple and heterogeneous sexualities, desires, and identities in *Fire* disrupt the post-colonial nationalist attempts to create a unified, singular identity of 'woman' as mother and wife, as keeper of the domestic sphere, by reviving the ideas of purity, duty, and Hindu womanhood” (Madhuri 2009, 88). This anti-stereotypical projection of women by such serious filmmakers changed the conventional notion on women's identity and brings the realist issues in forefront.

However, Hemphill observes some affinities between these two genres in respect of women's representation. According to her, “both Indian popular and art-house cinema manipulate the story's women, usually intending to create a contemporary image. The secondary women in film, those in minor roles, sometimes slip past this self-consciousness and reveal those stereotyped images of women which remain largely unchanged from one generation to another” (Hemphill 1998, 177).

It is true that treatment of women in Saikia's films cannot be explored by the application of so called western feminist agendas like male gaze or objectification of her body; but there are certain other convincing issues related to women's representation which can be taken as the main theoretical argument for studying his films.

While studying Aparna Sen's women characters, Roy and Sengupta, in their article 'Women and emergent agency in the cinema of Aparna Sen' argued that

“Sen responds to the women's movements in India through the 1970s and 1980s by nuancing the identity of the Indian woman through a pluralistic and polyvocal feminist lens, in the sense that her women are not merely products of the feminist movements in

India – their sense of agency might have been influenced by the social climate, but their negotiation of that agency is unique to their specific circumstances” (Roy & Sengupta 2014, 56)

Similar attempt was made by Saikia while depicting the women in his films. Like Sen, Saikia’s films were also not a response to the feminist movements in India. They are, rather, some reactions against the socio-cultural situation of Assam in particular and India in general. Therefore, treatment of women’s issues in his films is situation specific. His films demonstrate women as victim, as exploiter or as revengeful women, who are surrounded by challenging socio-cultural and economic condition. However, Saikia’s understanding about gender reflects in his films contends the traditional gender division. His women characters are not confined to their feminine role. Theorizing it as a performance, gender is, for Butler, nothing but the stylized repetition of acts, and it is practiced through the stylization of human body. According to her,

“If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently and consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler 1990, 3).

Hence, Butler comes to the conclusion that the conception of gender should be regarded as a constituted social temporality (Butler 1990, 140-141).

Echoing a similar performative stance on gender, but from the perspective of social interactionism, Connell too reiterated that gender is “not fixed in advance of social interaction, but is constructed in interaction” (Connell 2005,35). In her authoritative work on masculinity, she perceived that “gender is a way in which social practice is ordered” which “constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do, it is not social practice reduced to the body. Gender exists precisely to the extent that biology did not determine the social” (Connell 2005, 71). Highlighting the relations of power between men and women and also between different groups of men, Connell opined that gender is relational and hierarchical. Thus gender *performed* by a body is not

fixed or static, but keeps on changing constantly as responses to situations, following the structured and normative social practices.

Apart from that, as Butler said, some other factors like class, caste, religion, community and other social status also determined the gendered activities. In Malini Bhattacharya's words,

“Class is a category which enables us to historicise ‘gender’ to trace the development in time of the concept. The evolution of the man-woman relationship in society or of gender politics, while it has its own internal logic and seems at times to operate independently of class differentiations can nevertheless only be understood in the context of the organization of production relations within a particular social structure. Such a perspective enables us to specify gender relations. It also opens out continually to include the complex interplay of gender relationships with other social relationships” (Bhattacharya 1989-90, 277).

Saikia's women characters are functioning within the above mentioned framework. From that point of view it can be said that like Sen's character, his women are also not fully confined to patriarchy. Their class position offers them a license to jump from one gender to the other. All the above mentioned factors will be taken into account while studying Saikia's crafting of women character in his films.

2.3. Women in Assamese Cinema:

The history of Assamese film starts with the woman-centric film *Joymati* of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala in the year 1935. Though *Joymati*, the protagonist woman character of the film, was a historical figure, the narrative as well as the cinematic treatment had projected her as a strong woman in political sense. With her silent tolerance of the violent torture subjected to her till her death, the director signifies the desirable character of an Assamese woman. In the whole movie Jyoti Prasad Agarwala had given special focus on the character *Joymati*. He explains the character of *Joymati* in the following lines,

“I tried to direct the film and its characters in realistic manner. This type of realistic portrayal of the characters can be seen in the first class English, American and Russian films. This is the reason for which the *Joymati* of my film speaks much neither at the royal court, nor in any public place. She is shown as a tolerant *alpa-*

bhasini [one who speaks less]. An Assamese aristocratic daughter-in-law maintains silence, speaks only when it is absolutely necessary and proves herself through her actions [not through words]....I have sketched out the character of Joymati on the basis of my understanding of the Assamese woman. Silence is one of the features of the Assamese [woman] character. It is this feature which I tried to highlight in my portrayal of Joymati” (Agarwala 2003, 537-538, translated from Assamese by the researcher).

Rachel Dwyer commented about D. G. Phalke, and the first Indian film *Raja Harischandra* (1913) made by him, that he “established India’s first filmic genre, the ‘mythological’, creating an immediate connection between religion and cinema in India which persists to this day” (Dwyer 2006, 1). Similarly, it can be said about Agarwala and his *Joymati* that the first Assamese film itself established “immediate connection” between cinema and Assamese identity – specially symbolized through Assamese women. It created a long-sustaining ideal image of *the Assamese woman* to be projected in cinema – she is calm, tolerant, dignified, and above all, she embodies the essence of Assamese ethnic/nationalist identity. Given the historical circumstances, Agarwala’s imaging of *the Assamese woman* was far from being accidental. For, it was during the nineteenth century when the romantic nationalist Assamese elites already had constructed such an idealized image for the Assamese woman. However, Agarwala’s film-making needs to be credited for his cinematic ability to attach the political goal of nationalism of that historical period to a seemingly tragic romantic narrative of a woman called Joymati.

In post-Agarwala times, the film-making tradition in Assam flourished in later times mostly with commercially driven entertainment movies which were heavily influenced by the typical Bombay cinema. In such movies, the role of woman is confined to her societal role of a humble daughter, ideal daughter-in-law, sacrificing mother, obedient and subordinate wife, etc. Such stereotypical projections are evident in films like *Bowari* (1982), *Apaoopa* (1982), *Nayanmoni* (1983), *Ghar Sansar* (1983), *Devi* (1984), *Sendur* (1984), *Papori* (1984), *Mon Mandir* (1985), *Pooja* (1985), *Aarati* (1986), *Maa* (1986), *Nijara* (1986), *Mayuri* (1986), *Jetuki* (1987), *Pratima* (1987), *Pratham Ragini* (1987), *Protidan* (1987), *Sewali* (1989) etc. where women were shown as ideal daughter-in-laws, ideal wives and simple village girls happily championing the patriarchal values.

Amidst this unrealistic commercial funfair of Assamese cinema in post-Agarwala times, the cinematic realism was brought in Assam by Padum Barua with his one and only movie *Ganga Chilonir Pankhi* (1976) which opened up new ways of filmmaking for his successors. This movie is about the pathetic story of a widow, trapped in the bindings of archaic patriarchal values. After Barua, few other Assamese filmmakers also attempted to make films on women's issues. Among them Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Jahnu Barua, Swantana Bordoloi, Manju Borah were most noticeable.

Jahnu Barua, a critically acclaimed filmmaker of current times, started his career with the film *Aparoopaa* (1982). In this film, Barua tells the story of an elite and educated woman who is the wife of a tea-garden's manager. Her unsatisfactory relation with her husband is depicted against the background of the cacophony of a routine materialist industrial life. Her solace comes with her accidentally renewed friendship with her former fiancé; and finally she could abandon her husband and flee to reunite with her former lover. Despite the presence of undeniable elements of male-dependency and conformity to patriarchal structures, such kind of narratives should be noticed for their relative boldness in deviating from the orthodox moral stereotypes pertaining to woman and matrimonial affairs in Assam at that time. In Barua's another film *Papori* (1986), the protagonist, a simple housewife is shown to be "trapped in nightmarish circumstances with the student unrest in Assam" (Senapati 2007, 94). Perhaps Barua's most acclaimed cinematic project on the plight of woman is his *Firingoti* (1991) which is about the struggle of a woman school teacher. This time the protagonist's struggle is not against the urban industrial sphere but against the prejudices in the typical rural society of Assam – a site which is often celebrated, in many other Assamese films, for its valorized virtues rather than being critically questioned for adhering to the decadent values and orthodoxies.

Amidst such sporadic productions from the few Assamese male directors, perhaps the one movie which can be designated as a convincingly feminist one is the *Adajya* (1996). Based on a novel *Dantal Hatir Uiye Khowa Haoda* of the renowned Assamese woman litterateur Mamoni Roisom Goswami, the *Adajya* was directed by a woman filmmaker Swantana Bordoloi. Its story is about the measurable lives of three widows of different generations. Demonstrating a number of feminist essences,

especially women's subjectivities and the woman–woman interdependent relationships, this film “takes a dig at social norms and orthodox value system which always reduce men's better halves to a suffering lot. The poignant way and subtlety the director adopted to establish her statement made the film a democratic feminist critique” (Borpujari 2007, 106). Another movie *Akashitarar Kathare* (2003) by another Assamese woman filmmaker Manju Borah depicts a story about an educated woman who has to sacrifice her career for upbringing her family. The film could earn attention of critics for its “strong unconventional portrayal of a woman protagonist rarely seen in Assamese cinema. Obviously this film touches a thread of woman lib movement sans the pro-activist as it shows a passive protestor who ultimately refuses to toe the happy-go-lucky housewife's line of thinking” (Borpujari 2007, 110).

Ironically, for screening the plight of woman, Arup Manna chose for his biopic *Aideu* (2006) the pathetic life-history of Aideu Handique (1915-2002), the lead actress of the first Assamese film *Joymati*. Here, Manna documents the real life-story of Aideu Handique – the price she had to pay for unknowingly being the first Assamese actress: she was socially ostracized, she had to remain unmarried. In the conclusion of this film, Manna tellingly recreates a scene where the old actress is shown to walk up to the gate of her fenced courtyard to look inquisitively at the returning crowd from a cinema-hall. For, she herself could never watch any movie in her life.

2.4. Women in Bhabendra Nath Saikia's Cinemas:

In *Jivan-Rekha*, the published and edited version of the personal diary of Bhabendra Nath Saikia, written in Assamese, following words can be found as a part of Saikia's entry for the date of 27 June 1988:

I do not accept any division among human beings (Christian-Hindu, white-black, Assamese-Bengali, *Brahmin-Sudir*). I accept two divisions – men and women. Surprisingly, immense attraction is there between the two. Problems arise in between these two divisions; and in many such problems, the one which emerges as the weaker division perhaps draws more of my attention. (Saikia 2010:188; translation by researcher)

Therefore, it is not surprising that five of Bhabendra Nath Saikia's seven films are based on issues related to women's lives, especially their sufferings, struggles and occasional triumphs. His cinematic oeuvre portrays the plight of women functioning within various incarnations of patriarchy in different historical temporalities. Maintaining a distinctive ideological standpoint, Saikia felt strongly that films must be a medium to represent the reality. Being an ardent follower of realism, which is undeniably the most important marker that differentiates the *serious* or parallel Indian cinema of the 1960s and onwards from their commercial counterparts, Saikia was constantly inclined to paint each of his films, and the women therein, realistically acceptable. Each woman protagonist, in his films, is encircled with some social situation that determines her movement as well as reaction. Saikia's seven films dwell on such reactions performed by women in response to various socio-cultural situations. Being a (male) director his perception towards woman's position and role within her family and the larger society can be conceived from the composition of the female characters in his films. From Menaka's revenge to Lakhimi's death, Saikia travels through different incarnations of woman.

Menaka, the female protagonist of Saikia's third film *Agnisnan* (1985), placed within the setting of a pre-independent urban society, has a happy family consisting of her husband, four children, mother-in-law, father-in-law and one brother-in-law. Being the wife of a man (Mohikanta) who holds powerful position of a feudal lord, she enjoys a privileged position within the family and the society as well. However, the twist in her life comes when one fateful day she comes to know about Mohikanta's second marriage; and she is shocked with the reward her husband is going to give her in return to her dedication. After the entry of Kiron as her co-wife, Menaka completely avoids coupling with Mohikanta; and silently plans to take her revenge. With calculated steps, she initiates a physical relationship with Madan, a man shown to be belonging to a lower class. When the symptoms of her pregnancy began to be visible, Mohikanta gets shaken because he was never allowed by Menaka for any physical intimacy with her after his marriage with Kiron. Towards the end of the movie, inside the rice mill that Saikia uses as the symbol of Mohikanta's power, Menaka sternly 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 Rama”. The film ends with the switch-over of the horse cart from Mohikanta to Menaka suggesting the change of power equation.

During the decades of 1980s, elements of radical feminism and the issues of gender-inequality came to be visible within the different cinematic spaces in India. In the commercial cinema, Lalitha Gopalan illustrated in her article *Avenging Women in Indian Cinema* that during 1980s, a new *formula* inaugurated by N. Chandra’s film *Pratighat* (1987) followed by *Sherni* (1988), *Khoon Bhari Mang* (1988), *Khoon Bahaa Ganga Mein* (1988), *Commando* (2013), *Bhrashtachar* (1989) and *Kali Ganga* (1990). “The common theme in these films ...is their portrayal of women as hardened, cynical, vengeful creatures...and that screenplays and powerful women are a welcome break from stereotypical roles as submissive and dutiful mothers and wives” (Gopalan 2000, 216). Darius Cooper’s observation on Satyajit Ray’s woman-centered films can be taken as a kind of representative of the changing representation of women in the serious cinema of that time. Referring to Nandy’s psychoanalytical observation, Cooper noted that the woman in these films resolve to redefine herself by devising “means of de-emphasizing some aspects of her role in her family and society and emphasizing others so that she may widen her identity without breaking totally from its cultural definition or becoming disjunctive with its psychological distinctiveness” (Nandy 1980).

Saikia’s *Agnisnan* exhibits proximity, in varying degrees, with both these cinematic aesthetics of that time. Like the women characters in the commercial revengeful movies, Menaka in *Agnisnan* accomplishes a successful revenge. However, her weapon is not any “feminine wiles or Machiavellianism” or even the commercial stereotypes of “martial arts and firearms of all calibres and sizes” (Dasgupta 1996, 177). Her weapon is the most distinctive ability of a woman – the ability of conceiving a child. This revenge, as pointed out by Nandy, involved changes in her emphases in certain roles in the family. These changes include: a complete avoidance of Mohikanta as her husband for the obvious reason; and secondly a more active and articulated concern for the future of her children in the face of an irresponsible husband. Therefore, she stops allowing Mohikanta to share the bed with her; and she begins to take her legitimate control in the economic source of the

family – the rice-mill. Other than these few deliberate changes in her roles, the rest of her character remains within the “cultural definition”: she remains as a caring mother, dutiful to her in-laws, responsible towards the well-being of the family and dignified in the social space within and outside the family.

Scholars like Hiren Gohain and Apurva Sarma criticized Saikia for projecting a woman (of that period) with such an ‘illegitimate’ vengeful activity. According to Gohain, “by establishing an illegitimate relationship with a lower class man, she has lost her own position in the society” (Gohain 1993, 60). Apurva Sarma comments that Menaka’s revenge is only for her own sake; her intension behind this step is to secure her position in the family, rather than for a social change. Her character is weak in humanitarian ground also, as she is not sensitive toward Kiron, who is mere a victim of economic exploitation (Sarma 2001, 73). However, in a slightly different context of the women characters in the films of Aparna Sen, Roy and Sengupta pointed out that “women [characters in such films] are not merely products of the feminist movements in India – their sense of agency might have been influenced by the social climate, but their negotiation of that agency is unique to their specific circumstances” (Roy and Sengupta 2014, 56).

While assessing the presence of feminist consciousness in select Hindi films, Dasgupta opined that

“Feminist consciousness is defined here as a two-step process: (1) an awareness of women as victims of social oppression in the patriarchal world order, and (2) an integration of the complexities of race, class, sexuality, and culture into this awareness” (Dasgupta 1996, 178).

Dasgupta’s second point, particularly the issues pertaining to social class and cultural context, is crucial in assessing the realistic credibility of Menaka’s revenge in *Agnisnan*. Being a woman, Menaka obviously belongs to the oppressed sex. But being the wife of a feudal lord, she accesses legitimate power over Madan, a man who is not only from the lower class but is also a social deviant (he is a thief). This relatively powerful position availed by Menaka by virtue of the class structure is instrumental in her commanding over Madan to accept a so-called illegitimate and

unrealistic adulterous relation. Like Connell's idea of gender, gender role performed in *Agnisnan* is not in a water tight division. Being a female, Menaka's character bears some male attributes imbibed from her class position; and from the middle part of the film she transforms herself into a *malevolent aggressive destroyer*, who dominates her co-wife Kiron and the lower class man Madan.

Her multi-layered consciousness, however, does not allow her to indulge in uncritical celebration of her adventurous mission with Madan. "I don't want to stay in the mud; I will also come clean for the society" – Menaka's self-apprehension about her step expressed in this dialogue reveals that she is still trapped into the concept of purity-impurity produced by patriarchal society, which keeps the women in a subordinate position. But her scheme of revenge is based on this structure of purity-impurity itself. In the concluding scene, she is shown to regain her confidence on the legitimacy of her act. She speaks to Mohikanta amidst the cacophonous noise of the rice mill and makes him clearly understand that she is actually using the same structure of purity and impurity championed by men like Mohikanta.

This concluding scene of *Agnisnan* brings in another significant aspect of the *woman question* in cinema: the woman's voice. Unlike the stereotypical silences or orchestrated voices of women in films, Menaka in *Agnisnan* is rather shown as a vocal woman. All throughout the movie, she is seen in her disgusting expressions and reasonably argumentative voices. However, her voice achieves its crescendo in the concluding scene when she speaks to silence Mohikanta. A sample of this highly energetic conversation is given below:

Menaka: *..actually, these things should have been sorted out at home. I am your wife. You had four children, now it is five. I am not the mother of the last one. Now it will be six , and this time, you will not be the father of this child. But everybody would know that we are living happily, and you are still accepting me as your wife. It is indeed a good thing....Otherwise, people would have thought that you are discarding me though I am living in the same house. Now people will not give you that bad name.*

Mohikanta: *You are not supposed to be concerned with my good name or bad name. You never allowed me to sleep with you even for a single night. How is it possible?*

Menaka: *Speak it out. If you have the courage to say that you never approached me, then speak it out in the public. Why are you not saying it to every one? Why are you not saying it to Kiron? And why are you asking it to me secretly in this rice mill? People will ostracize me like anything at the slightest revelation by you regarding me. But I am not afraid of that. Why are you afraid of?*

.....

Mohikanta: *I willsmash you inside the machine of this mill*

Menaka: *Be aware of one thing. If necessary, I will disclose it myself. But I will never allow you have the courage to ask me who this man is. Remember one thing; I could have continued to remain dirty with this man secretly. But I don't need that. What I need is an evidence to show you; and then I want to come clean again. I have just done that. (Translation by researcher from Agnisnan)*

The use of her body as an instrument of revenge by Menaka resonates with the inscription of the female body by the late twentieth century feminist writers and critics. Feminist scholars focused attention on the “negative effects of social inscription on the body: the ways in which a society constructs meaning around the biological conditions of gender in order to discipline and control the body” (Lewis 2002, 295). 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 honour. Chastity, virtue and above all, purity are extolled as great feminine virtue embodying the honour of the family, community and the nation” (Thapan 1997,6). Thus, women’s body transforms into a bearer of honour of her family, community and nation. Her “body is not so much a body of individuality but a ‘body-for-others’ (Thapan 1997,6). Apart from that “women often experience their bodies as shameful (Viswanath, 1997), having learned that there is nothing to be proud of in a woman’s body” (Macdonald 2009,4). This idea was challenged by the écriture feminism and looked into women’s body from a different angle. This movement, emerged in France by several women writers including Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, and Cixous, was “a refusal to accept the traditional Western binary opposition of mind and body” (Huang 2004,15). Kristeva explored the cases of mother’s body. While, Irigaray and Cixous go further to say that,

“If women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must

begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men (Jones 2003, 366).

They viewed woman's body as her weapon against patriarchal society. This re-reading 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 Seeta 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. Saikia's *Agnisnan* can be read as regional variation of such kind of feminist filmmaking.

In his next film *Kolahal* (1988), immediately after *Agnisnan*, Saikia tells the story of Kiron who lives in the slum – a space which referred by scholars as the *unintended city*. She lives with her little son Moti after her husband Binod left her in search of better earnings. The story revolves around Kiron's adjustment with the socio-cultural and biological conditions. At one point of time she is compelled to send Moti, her only son and support of her life, to collect rice from the loaded trucks which get jammed in the narrow road. Many kids in her locality are shown to be indulged in such illegal and risky collection of rice that get scattered overboard on the private carriers of loaded rice bags from the godown. Despite her initial apprehension and fear, Kiron is later compelled to allow Moti to join with his friends in this kind of rice collection, as no option of livelihood is left to Kiron after the prolonged disappearance of her husband Binod. In one unfortunate day, a heavy bag full of rice fell from a loosely packed truck on Moti's body who was collecting rice; and Moti succumbs to death in that accident. Devastated Kiron is compensated by a rice bag, incidentally the same bag that fell on Moti's body, by the truck owner, and Badal, the handyman of that particular truck placed the rice bag at a corner of her house. Kiron initially refused to accept the rice bag which was still carrying the stains of Moti's blood on it. Sleeping several nights without eating, and having the rice bag inside her house, at one point Kiron came to be subdued by her survival instinct: she starts eating by taking rice from that inauspicious rice-bag. She also comes to know that her husband Binod was actually a fraud who was having multiple families in other places; and that he is not going to come back anymore.

Meanwhile, Badal, the handyman of the truck which was carrying the rice bag that killed Moti, is deeply affected by the unfortunate turn of events in Kiron's life. He leaves his job in the transport company, and approaches Kiron to be a part of her life. After her initial denials, the film concludes with her consent to Badal.

In comparison to *Agnisnan*, Saikia's *Kolahal* offers an entirely different site of woman's life and struggle. Here, Kiron's traumatic passages, and the ways she responded to them, are far less symbolic than those of Menaka. Unlike the structured environment of feudal aristocracy of *Agnisnan*, the geography in *Kolahal* is rather liminal: it is not a typical village to be dominated by archaic social norms, nor it is a rigidly structured urban space enlightened ethics. Within this distinct geography, Saikia chose to bring into the fore a rather deeper epistemological problem: the conflict between the biological demands that a woman experiences as a living being and the normative socio-cultural values that engulf her. With telling cinematic metaphors and engaging storyline, Saikia illustrates the victory of the former over the latter in *Kolahal*.

The first victory is accomplished when traumatized Kiron finally starts taking rice from the ominous rice-bag. When a rat makes a hole on the bag, handful of rice begins to accumulate on the floor, falling through the hole. Starving Kiron collects that rice in a container. But she cannot use that rice to prepare her meal. Why? Because she has just lost her only son, her only familial companion; and more importantly, this particular rice-bag is the one that killed her son. This legitimate cause of not eating is based on the normative cultural values and socially prescribed acts and emotions. So, she keeps the rice that leaked from the rat-hole again inside the bag; and she seals the hole with a piece of cloth. But her refusal of food does not continue for long. Soon, her survival instinct forces her to open the sealed rat-hole herself, collect rice, cook her meal and start eating.

After convincingly establishing, through impressive cinematic techniques, this triumph of natural hunger over cultural prejudices, Saikia moves on to deal with another theme: desire. Filling her stomach with meal prepared from the rice, which is readily available in the bag for quite a number of days, Kiron tries to sleep alone on her bed. Her loneliness is visually articulated by showing her single occupancy

upon her double bed. When she ponders over Badal's proposal, which she has been rejecting so far, she looks at the rat that comes again to roam around the corner of the room. If that rat served as a facilitator to fulfill her hunger in the previous phase, this time the rat symbolizes the igniter of her desire. After failing to sleep that night amidst the restlessness and confrontations with the movement of the rat, we can see Kiron in the next morning: getting freshened up with bath, getting her hair combed and applying fresh vermilion on her forehead. Badal arrives, accepting her invitation; and she looks at him. A close-up shot of Kiron looking straight to the camera is used as the freeze-frame shot to conclude the movie.

Several feminist critiques pointed out, especially after the waves of classical feminism were over, the necessity to locate woman in her specific historical and geographic constituencies instead of projecting any feminist grand narratives. Therefore, Teresa de Lauretis said,

“What I would call alternative films in women's cinema are those which engage the current problems, the real issues, the things actually at stake in feminist communities on a local scale, and which, although informed by a global perspective, do not assume or aim to a universal, multinational audience, but address a particular one in its specific history of struggle and emergency” (Lauretis 1990, 17).

The specificity or the uniqueness of the life-world of Kiran is that it is far different from the usual sites we commonly see in the films where women's issues are projected. In *Kolahal*, Kiran does not get disturbed or pushed by any other champions of patriarchy, but her own self of being a woman in a seemingly cosmopolitan geography where traces patriarchal prejudices are still left but only marginally. Off course, she had a husband who abandoned her. But that clichéd rhetoric of betrayal is not the core element in Saikia's narrative. Here, Saikia is not interested in assessing the efficacies of various socio-cultural regimes pertaining to woman and her conduct in societies, but in demonstrating how all these normative social edifice gets dismantled when the very question of survival is at stake. In the case of Kiron, her subjectivity, and the acquiring of her agency, is derived more from her impulses as biological being which compels her to stop refusing food and to stop denying her desires. Thus, Saikia has been reasonably successful in

articulating the *universal* amidst the *particular*, without compromising with the aesthetics of realism.

Saikia's first film *Sandhyarag* is about Charu and Taru – two sisters who were brought from village to an urban household, in their childhood, to serve as domestic aids. They were abandoned by their masters after they grew up and became adults in the urbanized environment. They no longer remain fit to survive on their own, either in their home village or in the town. While this is largely a plot about the exploitation of the rural poor by the emerging elite class in the newly formed urban localities in post-independence times, there can be seen specific references to the gender question in this important social and cultural transformation caused by the industrialization and urbanization processes. Most vividly, Saikia captures the displacement of women domestic laborers caused by the so-called progressive processes like urbanization and industrialization in their early stages. 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 feeble condition. The man (Moti), whom she used to hate earlier, becomes the last hope for her survival. One can discern from this narrative that displaced women are less compatible than their male counterparts to the changing urban environment in one hand; and also to get acclimatized with their erstwhile home environment even if they choose to return. Moreover, an important thesis of *Sandhyarag* is that women's dependency on men does not get abolished, if not gets worsen, in their transition from rural to the urban.

In an arresting moment at the beginning of the narrative, when the two children Charu and Taru walk in their village streets, they were interrupted playfully by few boys of their equal age. The boys were shown playing among themselves on the street, enacting as warriors in fighting scenes from Assamese traditional plays. When these boys encircle the two sisters and one of the boys ask Charu in a typically smart male interrogative tone about how she is planning to go to the town, Charu replies, in a passive, awkward and extremely restrained manner that she would be going to the town in “motor” (i.e. bus). The little boy then makes the mimicry of an adult male by uttering a common dialogue of Assamese traditional

plays “Oh, come on folks, look at her and hear her, our lady is going to foreign land in a motor (car)”. When Charu and Taru leaves the place, the boy utters another dialogue from the Ramayana about how Rama lamented after his wife Sita was sent to exile in forest. This seemingly insignificant scene of the narrative of the film *Sandhyarag*, documents the socialization processes of the children in the Assamese villages, with hegemonic gender codes for boys and girls. The girls are made to grow 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.

The emerging urban world is far different from this age-old rural cultural milieu. However, in Saikia’s *Sandhyarag*, the spectacular urban world fails to alter the structure of gender inequality. Here, young women like Charu and Taru get relatively better material comfort in terms of food and dress; nobody comes to humiliate them with pranks like the village boy in the open streets. But Taru lives amidst fear of insecurity because of the lustful gazes and sexual advances from the male members of her master’s family. Both of them are abandoned when the needs of the urban masters are over: their children are grown up and domestic liabilities are now manageable by the mistresses themselves. When compelled to return to their villages, Charu and Taru realize that it is impossible for them to survive in the village because they were not trained in the essential vocational skills to survive in villages: sewing clothes and working in the paddy fields.

While the life-struggle of Charu and Taru is the core theme in *Sandhyarag*, the film also provides reflections on nuanced issues pertaining to the urban women who were embracing a specific kind of elitism during the early phase of urban modernity in Assam. These issues got manifest through the characters of the two mistresses of Charu and Taru – Mrs. Das and Urmila respectively. Despite the intimate friendship between Mrs. Das and Urmila which is reflected through their typical urban etiquettes like leisurely chatting over the dining table or telephoning conversations, subtle but significant differences are visible in the characterization of these two urban wives. Mrs. Das embodies all the virtues of an ideal urban wife: she is a caring and watchful mother of her children, obliged and mostly uncritical to her husband. Above all, she carries some of the pleasant humanitarian senses, especially

when dealing with her domestic aides, without erasing the class boundaries. 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. But this cordial diplomatic skill of Mrs. Das is not free from her consciousness of the class-divide which she respects: for example, Charu is supposed to wear the old and used clothing of Mrs. Das's children. In contrast to the harmony in Mrs. Das's character, everything does not go too well with Urmila. As a woman, Urmila can be seen as the victim of the crises brought in by the emerging urban lifestyle. Some of these urban crises are the loneliness of urban wives and their anxieties in within concretized spaces. Saikia has chosen to reflect the vices of urbanity through Urmila and her handling of her domestic affairs: when her adult son is caught in his sexual advances towards Taru, Urmila punished Taru and defends her son.

Saikia's active involvement and deep experiences in the Assamese mobile theatre is reflected in his sixth film *Abartan*, in which he captures the conflicting situations of a female theatre actor, Jayanti. She is popular enough to be sought after by competing theatre groups as their brand actor. One day, in a bus journey, she met Parimol Dutta, an engineer by profession. Gradually they engage in a relationship and they decide to get married. Unfortunately Jayanti's decision is not entertained by her family members, who are solely dependent on her earnings, and the theatre owner who has signed three years contract with her, for their selfish motives. In this situation, Jayanti is no more an independent woman, though she earns money her movement both in public and private sphere, is decided by others. She is fascinated with the conflicting situation of public/professional and private sphere. However, after a long battle with both the parties, she is able to start her new life with Parimol.

Unlike Menaka of *Agnisnan* who suffers from her blatantly recognizable drunkard husband, Jayanti 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. Here, Saikia's intension is not to show a single person as a villain, but to criticize the social system as a whole. In this film, Saikia emphasizes on the impact of urbanization process noticeable in the family relationship. Rather than Jayanti's future life her father, mother, sister and brother

are concern about their own benefits. For them she is mere a money earning machine. In *Kolahal*, Kiron's battle is internal and the solution to her problem, as suggested by Saikia, is also real/natural. But Jayanti is fighting with the external world – it is with her family members or the theatre owner or the co-actor. In contrast to *Kolahal*, the solution put forward in *Abartan* seems to be unreal and melodramatic. Though Saikia tries to legitimize Parimol's expected but unrealistic proposal of marriage by referring to his *dark past*, but by doing so Saikia seems to be compromising with the realistic integrity of his narrative. By rescuing a suffered woman through her marriage Saikia is proposing for a partial settlement of the problem within the system, rather than a permanent solution through systemic change. Saikia ends the movie with the occupancy of Jayanti's seat by Mala, the junior female artist; suggesting the continuity of the process. Consequently, like *Agnisnan*, in this film also Saikia fails to realize the complexity of the situation and go for a simple and partial solution to the problem by staying within the patriarchal boundary.

Abartan deserves a legitimate comparison with Shyam Benegal's *Bhumika*, as both these movies thematically center upon the real-life problems that come to a professional woman actor. In *Bhumika*, the life of one film actress Usha is narrated through her episodic affairs and experiences with different men as her real life companions. "She transgress and enters other worlds, but none can give her what she seeks" (Datta 2002, 116). Finally after a long search Usha finds her desired freedom in the small suburban hotel. Commenting on the treatment of *Bhumika*, Jasodhara Bagchi said, "this society is not able to give Usha her due status, nor is her work in the film industry duly rewarded. Whether she donned modern or traditional roles each relationship has tied her with fresh bonds. Only the undulating branches of the tree outside the hotel window bring a hint of freedom in Usha's life" (Bagchi, 1982). Though Benegal and Saikia's selection of women's problems are same, yet their suggested solutions of those problems differ drastically from one another. "Benegal is interested in human stories, in exploring complexities, but not in providing judgments or answers" (Datta 2002, 117). Instead of imposing an unrealistic solution to Usha's problems, Benegal keeps the narrative open-ended and moved Usha from the position of a victim to that of someone who is in control of her own

life (Datta 2002, 117). In contrast to Benegal, Saikia prefers to go for a concrete solution to the problem. Therefore, unlike *Bhumika*, *Abartan* ends with the settlement of Jayanti's problem through her marriage.

In his last film *Itihaas* (1996) Saikia revisits the theme of urbanization and its consequences which he also took up in his first film *Sandhyarag*. However, *Itihaas* depicts a later historical phase of urbanity where the mild and subdued forces of material progress of *Sandhyarag* take more aggressive turn. Lakhimi, the protagonist of this film, is a young woman who lives with her mother and siblings in a place nearby an expanding city. The members of Lakhimi's village are being forced to sell away their lands by the urban builders. Despite the initial resistance of Lakhimi's brother, finally Lakhimi's family too had to sell their land. They could achieve a deal with the contractor that their family will get a space to live in the building which will be constructed upon their land once it is sold. Later, in absence of her brother who had to leave away from home for his job, Lakhimi had to struggle a lot with the mischievous builders to get the promised deal realized; and finally, with the help of Lakhimi's fiancée Madhu, the family could take possession of an apartment in the new concrete building. After this, Lakhimi had to transform herself into a part time domestic help for the rich and elite residents of the building. Though this earning of Lakhimi could provide the basic amenities for her family, it came at the cost of Lakhimi's dignity: her humiliation and harassment in various apartments of the building came to be a regular feature. Eventually, in one night on her way to fetch water from the public well, which Saikia symbolized as the bearer of all changes, Lakhimi is raped by some drunken men. After few hours her body is found in the public well.

Itihaas explores the hidden stories of urban development where the poor, the illiterate, the rural and the traditional has to be forcefully uprooted to erect the edifices of the rich, the elite, the urban and the modern. In this process of transformation, woman like Lakhimi has no other way but to accept death. Unlike other women protagonists of Saikia's films, in Lakhimi we witness a voiceless woman who is left with no means to articulate herself. She is not Menaka to strike back, not Kiron to negotiate with her conditions and not Jayanti to be rescued by a good man. Death is only solution left to her. This extreme consequence of urban

transformation is the core issue of *Itihas*, which is Saikia's last venture in filmmaking.

In *Sarothi* (1992), Saikia's protagonist is not a woman, but a man who has taken up the construction of the house for his family at his retiring age. However, despite this male character leading the story of the film at its surface level, the whole narrative can be reduced to a kind of comparative assessment of two life-options symbolized by two women: one is the real wife of Niranjan Dutta and the other is his imagined companion – who is actually his lost love in the past. *Sarothi* is centered on the inner conflict of Niranjan Dutta amidst the *undesired* urbanity with an *undesired* woman. In comparison to his real wife who is indifferent and insensitive to his finer emotions, his fantasized wife is sober, indulgent and connected to his emotional chords.

Sarothi is a deliberate celebration of male subjectivity and fantasy. But the two women who enter into Niranjan Dutta's real and imagined lives are not merely women alone; both of them also symbolize two distinct sets of values and normative practices.

Chronologically, *Anirban* (1980) was Saikia's second film. The story of the film is centered on a school teacher Rajani and his wife Bhagyabati. After the consecutive death of three new born babies, Nisha the fourth child of this desperate couple grows up, goes to school and attains adolescence amidst the usual joys and sorrows with them. Like the other girls of her age, she also falls in love with her young home tutor Dibakar. Love makes her conscious about her beauty and she often asks her mother if she is looking beautiful or not. Her hesitation to introduce Rajani as her father in front of her friends, her anger at her father for bringing the used cosmetic products from her friend Jonali – all these articulate the complex mental status of an adolescent girl. When her father stops her tutorial class, without uttering a single word she obeys his order and concentrated on her studies like a matured girl. But being a girl of that complicated stage of life she is unable to digest the tension and becomes sick. The disapproval of her love affair by her father deeply affects her from within; and as a result she becomes sick and finally succumbs to her death.

Nisha's psychological growth in attaining her adolescence and her confrontations with her emerging adolescent complexities form a substantial part in the narrative of this film. Unlike Saikia's other films, the causal elements of various consequences are not clearly indicated in *Anirban*. The cause of Nisha's death can be understood as her depression which resulted from her inability to cope with the facts that: a) she is not beautiful enough to attract the attention of her tutor and b) her increasingly developing inferiority complexes with the status of her father (not clearly indicated whether it was due to his age or his poor financial condition). What can be discerned here is that her agency of being a young woman failed to cope with the socially prescribed notions like beauty (of woman) and idealized daughterhood.