Chapter 3

From *Sandhyarag* to *Itihaas*:
A Critical Trajectory of the Urban Life-world

3.1. Introduction:

In addition to the women-centric characteristic, another authorial element prevalent in almost all the films of Saikia is the projection of the urban life-world. This is significant particularly due to the fact that the literary and cinematic imagination in Assam during Saikia's times were largely dominated by the rural or the non-urban subjects and subjectivities. Therefore, Saikia's making of his very first film *Sandhyarag* in 1977 on urban subject-matter was a significant departure from the stereotypical celebration of rurality on the celluloid screen. It is to be noted that Saikia wrote several short stories and couple of novels on various themes projecting both the rural and the urban world. However, as far as his film-making is concerned, all of his films, except *Anirban*, describe various aspects of an evolving urban society. This commonality of his films on the theme *urban* is far from being incidental. Rather, it is argued in this chapter that the depiction and analysis of the urban life and society is a feature that was taken by Saikia as a conscious auteur of his times. In one sense, his repertoire of films can be read as a single sequel that captures some of the arresting historical moments the urban world in its various phases of evolution, in the context of Assam. Emerging from *Sandhyarag* his cinematic chronology ends at *Itihaas*. His films neither celebrate nor refuse urbanity, but projects urbanity as an inevitable phenomenon that needs to be scrutinized critically.

The concept of urbanity is closely associated with modernization. Rather than the infrastructural development, it is a socio-cultural movement of the society. Along with their lifestyle it brings changes to the minds of the people too. Urbanity has both positive and negative connotations. Same place can be a place of knowledge or freedom for someone, for others it can be a place of homelessness. Scholars like

Baudrillard (2004), Walter Benjamin (1980), Simmel (1957), Lefebvre (1974), Manuel Castells (1972) and Edward S. Soja's (2000) works on urbanity contributed a lot to the emergence of urbanity as a site for academic discussion. They define urbanity from different perspectives by taking into account the material as well as the incorporeal urban structure. Benjamin, Lefebvre and Simmel- these three theorists investigated the urban culture as the reaction of modernity and try to expand the impact of urbanity from the concrete world of city to the ways of life, their consumption patterns and mental status as well. George Simmel's essay *Metropolis and Mental Life*- is a theoretical study on the changing psychology and inner life of metropolis.

> With each crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life, the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life. The metropolis exacts from man as a discriminating creature a different amount of consciousness than does rural life" (Simmel: 2005,25,).

Likewise, Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* is an urban suspicious character that stays outside the city crowd and observes urban movements. For Benjamin "the modern city was either natural or homey was ultimately illusion.....For the *flâneur* his city is no longer a homeland-even if, like Baudelaire he was born in it. It represents for him a show-place" (Hanseen: 59).

Manuel Castells' *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach* (1972) was a historical reading of the urbanization process; as he believed that "a study of the history of the process of urbanization would seem to be the best approach to the urban question, for it brings us to the heart of the problematic of development of societies, and shows us, at the same time, an ideologically determined conceptual imprecision" (Castells 1972:7). Urbanity is conceived both as a site of development and a place of homelessness, loneliness and insecurity.

 Labelling him as the 'left wing' scholar on urbanism, Manuel Castells said that Lefebvre's contention on urbanity is the 'profoundest intellectual effort that has been made towards understanding the urban problems of the present day' (Castells 1972, 87).

For Marxist scholar, Henry Lefebvre's 'urban society' is a society that results from complete urbanization. He suggests that this is virtual but expects that in the future it will become real. Marxist defines urban space with the base-superstructure model. Perceiving urbanity from Marxist ideology, he labeled 'urban society' as a site of class domination. For him "urbanization had played a significant role in the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie, of bourgeoisie thought and the attendant exploitation and alienation of the proletariat" (Elden 2004: 143). He studies the changing urban space and lifestyle in the wave of modernization.

According to him,

> The urban is… pure form; a place of encounter, assembly, simultaneity….. has no specific content, but is a center of attraction and life. It is an abstraction, but unlike a metaphysical entity, the urban is a concrete abstraction, associated with practice. . ….It centralizes creation….. creates everything. Nothing exists without exchange, without union, without proximity, that is, without relationships….. creates a situation, where different things occur one after another and do not exist separately but according to their differences…... the city constructs, identifies, and sets free the essence of social relationships. . . the urban (as opposed to urbanism, whose ambiguity is gradually revealed) rises above the horizon, slowly occupies an epistemological field, and becomes the episteme of an epoch. (Prigge: 49).

He understands urbanism as 'the cancer of modern life, that a Marxist research of its space might be the cure' and it is a 'society that born of industrialization' and also 'dominates and absorbs agricultural productions' (Elden 2004: 141-143).

Therefore, urban life-world or urban culture, refers to the socio-cultural life emerged as the result of the technological and infrastructural development of urban society. It is "made at the interface of society, community and built environment" (Stevenson 2010, 856). Urban culture is closely related with the urban space; therefore with the development of the city, the habits and lifestyles of the urban inhabitants also keep changing, resulting to formation of new identities within the changing space. However, Victor Burgin says that the city apart from being a physically factual built environment, is also shaped in the perception of its inhabitants. Thus the city is also the city shaped by its cultural representations. Stories, urban myths, statistical

reports – all the "representations" shape the "urban" for us. (Somdatt Bhattacharya:2012,1). According to Clark, urban culture is rooted "in the complex relationship between memory and history on the one hand, and culture and power on the other. Yet the central images associated with 'urban culture' seem to imply a dynamic contemporary moment of enactment of who and where we are in time and place with the time being 'now', and the place being characterized as the physical context of a city" (Clark 2003, 4). Within this space of urban culture, battles between class, gender, caste and community are fought both inside and outside urban household.

Deborah Stevenson identified two broad perspectives to study urban culture:

> "the first encompasses those approaches that have sought to identify what is about urban life that is specific to the city and from this to develop a generic, universally applicable definition of urban culture. This theorizing is usually done first by assuming a causal link between industrialization, modernity, and urban life. From there it is suggested that the built environment somehow determines social life. The second broad approach rejects the existence of a single urban culture and emphasizes instead the diversity and complexity of cities and the multiplicity of urban culture" (Stevenson 2010, 856).

To study the representation of urban life-world in Saikia's films, the two approaches referred by Stevenson seems to be applicable. The urban life projected by Saikia is intricately connected with, and most of the result of, the industrialization and modernity. His film undoubtedly depicts the changing human behavior and their life style under the influence of above mentioned factors. Similarly, like Stevenson's second approach, Saikia emphasized on the depiction of multiple cultures and conflicting subjectivities emerged within urban periphery, instead of showing one homogenized form of urbanity, at its different stages of development, which can also be experienced elsewhere.

3.2. Urban Representation in Cinema:

> "The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare is a real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps and statistics, in demography and architecture". (Raban 1998, 4)

Engaging with a complex and complicated relationship, cinema, from its inception enthralled with the representation of the distinctive space, habits, lifestyles and human conditions of both urban and rural society. Scholars are normally busy with the exploration of the relationship between cinema and urbanity in two perspectives. In the first one, urbanity is defined in cinematic text and in the second perspective cinematic production and distribution becomes the focal point within urban context (Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2001).

City appears as character, metaphor, symbol, history and commodity in the creative imaginations. From the early twentieth century, city has been experienced in many ways through the lens of camera. Being a repository of modern way of life, cinema offers a historical account of the changing infrastructural and behavioural picture of city. Cinematic representation of city enables to have an experience of the vibrancy of urban lifestyle. With growing popularity of celluloid city, the concept of 'Real' and 'Reel' cities acquire far-reaching attention in the critical discussion of a growing number of disciplines. The history of the cinematic representation of the city has emerged as a new field of inquiry bringing together the history of art and architecture, urban, social and cinema studies (Maher 2010, 15). Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin's studies on film-city argument reveal that film is diversely connected with urban experiences. Both of them consider the film medium to be a social institution that answers the need for stimulation created by the general stress of urban life (Larsen 2010, 31). Cinema is not always playing the role of a critic of the changing urban conditions; but it can help the people to tackle the changing social environments. With its dual functions cinema played a vital role in the progression of the urban society. On the one hand, it gives a fragmented view of the urban world, and similarly on the other hand, it suggests the ways to be orchestrated with the urban disorders. According to Kracauer, film can give the impression that

'all this will suddenly burst apart', and at the same time he sums up as: 'Most of the time it does not' (Kracauer: 1995, 327). In comparison to Kracauer, Walter Benjamin is "more optimistic: he is certain that film by virtue of its fragmentation has the redeeming power necessary to help the urban masses break the spell of modernity, to blow up 'our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories" (Benjamin 1977, 236; Larsen 2010 , 31).

During twentieth century the construction of 'imagined city' was at its height. These creative renderings played an active role in the exploration of city life in proper sense. Even scholars view that city life can be experienced in the creative imaginations rather than in the real city. Allan Siegal said that

> "It would be erroneous to talk of the city as a singular unified social reality that we have all experienced, participated in, or have an understanding of. Such a city does not exist. More appropriate to the discussion are images of a city, a multifaceted city that represents ideological concepts, economic forces, and social spaces that reflect a diversity of cultural, historical and geographical markers" (Siegal 2003, 143).

While theorizing modernity and urbanity in the context of cinema, Barbara Mennel sorted out two types of engagement of cinema with the urban phenomenon or what she calls "emerging metropolis". Referring to George Simmel's sociological observations on the "effect of the modern metropolis on subjectivity that encapsulates the potential of the medium of film to express the characteristics of the city", Mennel illustrates how certain films projected "the sensory experience of the city through its "associative montage," a method which can capture the fragmented aspects of modern life in the metropolis". The second type of engagement of cinema, combine the contrast between the rural and the urban environment with a developmental narrative from rural to urban" (Mennel 2008, 25).

3.3. Urbanity through the Lens of Indian Cinema:

"The city in the Indian imaginary", as summarized by Brinda Bose, "has occupied an ambivalent, confrontational as well as contemplative space that signifies 'modernity' and its concurrent promise as well as ills" (Bose 2011, 44). As such, Indian cinema has been a platform for the contesting binaries like tradition/modernity and urban/rural. The disavowal of modernity is expressed through the metaphorical victory of rural over urban in the film narratives. Interestingly, to a definite period of time films like *Mother India* (1957), *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953), *Pyaasa* (1957) set a trend of making films only on rural subjects. Whenever urbanity figures in within this celluloid discourse, it is always as an opponent to the virtues of rural life and pastoral aesthetics. Yves Thoraval rightly records that "the films produced during 1950s to 1960s are profoundly Indian and exposit the virtuous life of poor; while rich city dwellers are shown as Westernised egoistic and inveterate materialist" (Thoraval 2000, 50). The reasons for such kind of cinematic representation in India have been found by critics like Ashish Nandy and Ranjani Mazumdar in the facts that unlike West, in India urbanity is the extension of rurality; the urban inhabitants have always migrated from village and their detachment compelled them to express through cinema, especially the commercial and entertaining cinema of India (Nandy, 2001; Mazumdar, 2002). In addition to that, the Indian cultural consciousness is largely rooted in the recharging of Indian nationalism that began to emerge in 19th century which, till now, has been depending heavily on the real and imagined scraps of rural India. Indian freedom movement was the period for the glorification of Indian village. At this point of time, father of the nation, Gandhi's views on village played a dynamic role. His ideas on village brought a revolutionary change in the Indian nationalistic imagination. Gandhi believed that "if the villages perish, India will perish too. It will be no more India. Her own mission in the world will get lost" (Joshi 2002, 2). Urbanity, for Gandhi, is a place of evil and corruption (Prakash 2002, 2). He said that "We are inheritors of a rural civilization. The vastness of our country, the vastness of the population, the situation and the climate of the country has, in my opinion, destined it for a rural civilization... To uproot it and substitute for it an urban civilization seems to me an impossibility" (Joshi 2002, 2).

Despite such Gandhian celebration of the rural in the age of nationalism, scholars like Ashis Nandy believes that the literary and aesthetic representation of the city and urbanity has its own history that goes far beyond the relatively recent nationalist regime. From ancient time "the city has had a distinct and identifiable relationship with the village and that dyadic bond has been an important theme in classical plays, such as those of Bhasa, and in epics such as Mahabharata" (Nandy 2001, 24). During colonialism this connection was broken down, and according to Nandy, the then mythmakers were trying to rebuild the connection (Nandy 2001, 24). However, immediate and the most tangible factor that caused the re-emergence of city in national imaginary was the vision and developmental policies of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru for whom village is a place of backwardness and ignorance. He considers urbanization as the most rational channel of modernization. Expressing his views on village, Nehru wrote a letter to Gandhi in 1945 - "I do not understand why a village should embody truth and non-violence. A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment" (Prakash 2002, 3). After Indian independence, Neheruvian policy of development focused mainly on transformation of village into town. His main motto was to modernize or urbanize Indian villages. Because,

> "urbanization meant modernization, which was expected to lift India out of the morass of the past and set it on the road to progress, Nehru approached the city as an aspect of planning and development. His sense of history as a linear story of development and fulfillment, and his confidence in planning as an instrument to achieve progress came together in the building of Chandigarh as a symbol of the freedom of India unfettered by the traditions of the past" (Prakash 2002,4).

It was this notion of progress and modernity which was the ideological force of the Nehruvian model for socio-economic development in independent India. The planned implementation of this developmental scheme led to the expansion of the cities, townships, industries and markets and metropolitan lifestyles.

Ravi Vasudevan has given detailed description about India's socio-political situation and the reflection of such situation through 'Bombay popular cinema' and parallel cinema. Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* is the first movie with an Indian village

(Nandy 2001, 17); but in the same movie the railway tracks are placed "as the vehicles to carry one into an extending universe of new experience" (Vasudevan 2010, 307). Subsequently, urbanity came to become a familiar sight of projection in Indian cinema.

> "The city – urban space- became an increasingly important location for films in the 1950s: the site where survival and change, allurement and search were to be dramatized; it embodied the life- world of a new individual that cinema had to invent in the context of the post-independence modernization" (Biswas 2007, 48).

In addition to the officially sanctioned discourse of development, there was another factor that began to contribute for the increased citations of urban images in Indian cinema. That was the 'crisis' of Indian nationalism in the 1970s which eventually hit at the *village-nationalism* nexus:

> "it was the crisis of Indian nationalism in the 1970s that led to Bombay cinema's reflection on urban life in terms that had not been possible earlier. By the 1970s, the dreams of the "development decades" held by the new leadership of post-independence India had run aground. Unemployment rose rapidly and social movements with strong urban referents emerged throughout the country. For the first time, the confidence of post-independence nationalism was shaken. The space of the village, which was central to the imaginary constitution of anti colonial nationalism (the Gandhian imaginary), had started fading in cinematic representation. There was now a greater acknowledgment, even centrality, of urban space" (Mazumdar 2007, xx).

Thus, the dichotomy between the rural as residual and the urban as emergent has been a recurrent scheme in Indian cinematic narratives in many different forms, and in different inclinations towards either of the polarities. However, most of the commercial and entertaining movies are noted for their biased representation of the rural which received enthusiastic respond not only from the rural audience but also from the urban cine-goers. The symbolic significance of the village-city duality in the context of Indian popular cinema has been aptly interpreted by Nandy:

> "…. the village of the imagination has become a serene, pastoral paradise. It has become the depository of traditional wisdom and spirituality, and of the harmony of nature, intact community life and environmental sagacity- perhaps even a statement of Gandhian austerity, limits to want, and anti-consumerism. The village, too, is

no longer a village in itself; it is a counterpoint to the city. India lives in its villages- social reformers and political activists love to say, usually as a glib, ideological ploy. That statement has acquired a deeper meaning today. The village symbolizes control over self; the city reeks of self indulgence and the absence of self restraint" (Nandy 2001, 13).

However, this bipolar situation soon came to be added with another feature which can be regarded as the undesired byproduct of the socio-economic development in the Nehruvian scheme. It is the emergence of slum areas and speedy expansion of slum-dwellers on the liminal space between the city and the village. This has led to a situation where the village is no longer the *essential other* to conceive the planned and homogenous urbanity, but the increasing differences and conflicts within the city began to paint the city as "the pre-eminent space of representation(s)" which is characterized by "ceaseless conflict of interests between two opposed energies, embodied, on the one hand, in transparent city that planners and administrators, architects and utopianists dream of bringing into being, and on the other hand, in the dense, obscure, opaque lived city of human experience" (Prasad 2007, 82). Gradually, the city became divided into two groups – one is the refined and enlightened city dwellers who exhibit the urban lifestyle and on the other hand the other category of the population living in extended site of urban space which is termed as *unintended city* by scholars. Conflict between these two groups became a subject for Indian cinema. About this phase, Aruna Vasudeva commented,

> "In the 1970s and 80s, Bombay and other big cities have been marked by underworld activities, a rise in crime, smuggling, illicit fortunes, rape and prostitution…….A more serious problem is the degeneration and systematic denigration of the forces of law and order----the impact on cinema being even more pronounced---which has resulted in an exaggerated portrayal of the general growing disenchantment with established institutions. Commercial cinema sees in this phenomenon a way of making money" (Thoraval 2000, 120).

Apart from such dichotomies of rural-urban and intended-unintended city which have been exhaustively represented in commercial cinema, many parallel filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Saeed Mirza, Ketan

Mehta and others chose to tell their narratives beyond these simplified binary schemes. Their films are thematically based on varied and intricate nuances and complexities of everyday life with the urban world.

3.4. Urbanity in Assamese Cinema:

Manoj Barpujari has categorized the history of Assamese cinema into "four different eras according to film phenomenology". These are: the Jyotiprasad era, the post-Jyotiprasad era of copycat tales and melodrama, the era of regional realism and the contemporary era of surviving against the odds (Barpujari, 2013). The urban question can be seen in the Assamese movies of all these eras in different ways of treatment and assessment. In Jyotiprasad's works, what Barpujari has termed as "an indelible mark by a radical auteur", the urban aesthetics has been carried out with powerful nationalist consciousness and historical imagination which manifest in the appropriated historical narratives and masterly blended folk music and dances. What can be said is that the thematic and stylistic celebration of the *pre-urban* by Jyotiprasad itself was based on the emergent urban-nationalist aesthetic of that time. However, that "serious note" was missing in the succeeding phase of "copycat tales and melodrama". This phase coincided with the time when film-watching emerged as a typical form of urban entertainment in the developing townships. The political baggage of nationalism was seen to be replaced by the entertainment factor in the context of film and its viewing; and the comic aesthetic of Hindi commercial cinema provided models to be copied in most of the Assamese commercial films. The popular themes, which envelope the urban concerns in many different ways, of this period are romantic love affairs, familial relationships and complexities, religious tolerance, social injustice, inequalities and prejudices; and themes related history, mythology and environment. The most prominent filmmaker Nip Barua, who got fourteen Assamese films to his credit as the director, chose to tell happy-ending comedies that depict emergent urban values pertaining to relationship between a woman and her in-laws, inter-generational gaps or the urban hypocrisy about social prejudices. As to cite a random glimpse of the most of movies of this time, a good urban woman in these movies always wears the traditional *chadar-mekhela* (two

pieces clothing for Assamese women folk) while a mischievous woman can be identifiable by her excessive make-up. In the third phase of "regional realism", the urban question was seen to be treated in two different ways by the two leading filmmakers: Bhabendra Nath Saikia and Jahnu Barua. Barua is seen to be resorting to the old rural-urban divide, but with his impressive cinematic sophistication and wisdom. In Barua's films, the city and the urban space are frequently portrayed as the site of corruption and unethical doings, in contrast to the disappearing virtues and simplicity of the village life. Barua's call for a kind of *return to the village* is reflected in his *Konikar Ramdhenu* (2002). In contrast to that, Saikia's works, though they relied more on literary integrity of the plot than on cinematic sophistications, reflect a more realistic approach to the urban question. For Saikia, the transformation from village to city and township is inevitable and irreversible; and he is in no mood to call for a return to the village. Instead, his films take up varied issues of struggle and negotiation of man and woman in everyday life, in the different phases of urbanization. The fourth and the contemporary phase of Assamese cinema, rightly described as "survival against the odds", exhibits proximities to the previous thematic schemes in diverse intensities. Most of the films of scattered independent filmmakers of this phase can be described as mixtures of consumerist pleasure in one hand and the rhetoric of old urban ethics and decadent nationalistic sentiment on the other.

3.5. Urbanity in Bhabendra Nath Saikia's Cinema:

Saikia started to reflect his views on the urban question from his first movie *Sandhyarag* itself, which showcased "a polemical look at the urban-rural divide, middle-class characters and the irony of changing attitudes towards life" (Barpujari 2013). The story of this film is located in the historical context of the early urban cultural emergence in Assam, which indeed makes quite a sense to begin Saikia's cinematic historiography of urbanity. The advent of urbanity during this time is characterized by migration of men and women from villages to the emerging cities and towns; and their life-struggle to survive within the radically changed environment of the urban spaces. The distinction between the village and the city can be conceivable not only in terms of their material differences, but also in terms

of their differences towards the intangible values and ethics of life. Thus, despite the continued social transaction between the village and the city, the two worlds remained mutually incompatible.

As already mentioned Saikia was under the impact of filmmaking style of Satyajit Ray. Apart from the women's representation, in respect of urban projection also Saikia's understanding of the changing situation is similar with the trend of making films on urban issues set by filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen and others . Ray's concentration on the reaction of the man, rather than the situation reflects in his films like Jana Aranya, Pratidwandi, Seemabadha, Apur Sansar, Mahanagar etc. Though the causative factors—of zamindari and its decline, of rural   people's migration to   urban   areas   either by choice   or compulsion, of man-made famine, the partition of Bengal (1905) and India, the annexation of Oudh, the Naxalite movement and such major events—are all palpable in his films; but for Ray, what is more fascinating is to understand the man reacting, or failing to react   to   such signals (Bhattacharya: 1991, 302). Similarly, Ritwik Ghatak also made movies like *Nagarik* (1952) *Interview* (1970), *Calcutta 71* (1972), *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) and some others on urban subjectivity. Their tradition was followed by contemporary filmmakers like Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Ram Gopal Verma and some others. Therefore, though Saikia's stylistic quality is poor in comparison to the other filmmakers, but thematically he was also a follower of that particular trend of filmmaking.

Saikia's first film *Sandhyarag* can be treated as a critical commentary on the urban-rural dichotomy through the compulsive journey of Charu and Taru to the urban landscape to become housemaids. Though the film opens and ends with Charu's journey from her village to the emerging city, but both the journeys are not same as per the situations and purposes of the journeys are concerned. Saikia's film starts with the accidental death of their father Mukunda, which brings hardship in the livelihood of the family. As a solution to this problem, Charu's mother decides to send her little daughter (Charu) to serve as a housemaid in an urban household. Like other parallel filmmakers, Saikia's intension, in *Sandhyarag*, is to explore substantial reasons behind the process of migration from villages to cities and towns.

57

For that purpose, unlike Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* (1963) that opens with some descriptive shots of Calcutta city, to locate the problems of one urban middle class family, by starting his film from the village, Saikia depicts poverty as a reason behind the migration from the villages to the cities.

Saikia exhibits little Charu as a helpless creature; she doesn't have a choice of her own, and obligated to make her journey to the city. But same Charu, at her adult age, after failing to adjust with village life, decides to come back to the city by taking it as the last option for their survival. This time she is neither innocent nor obligated, but 'orchestrated with the urban disorders' and colored with urban culture. The solution to Charu's crisis, as suggested by Saikia, indicates the assimilation of rural with urban. Astute representations of urban issues by Saikia in his films, especially in *Sandhyarag*, reveal the fact that he is neither an ardent follower of Neheruvian scheme of progress and development, nor he was a champion of the idea of romantic return to the village.

Taking urban-rural conflict as the core issue, Saikia in his *Sandhyarag* gives ethnographic nuances of the urban etiquettes, women's role and position, and other visible markers of emerging urban life world. Charu's first journey to the urban world, which came to her as a compulsion, explores this newly emerged city from the lower and subordinate position of the structured hierarchy occupied by Charu. Charu notices in bewilderment through the window of the bus, and shots are taken in ways so that audiences also merge with Charu's subjectivity, now the landscape changes as the bus goes on from rural vegetation and settlement to concrete structures, motorized traffic and smoking factories. However, in the rest of sequences in *Sandhyarag*, Saikia concentrate more on the indoor visuals than the outdoor environment to create the urban world. Saikia emphasized on the documentation of both the changing material and behavioral features of urban dwellers. He gives an impression of the external material world by showing railway tracks, electric tower, smoking factories, multi-storied buildings, and busy roads with mechanical noises at the time of Charu's entry to the urban world, while the telephone, water tap, dining table, radio, gramophone, refrigerator, ambassador car etc. are set as the markers of urban household.

Apart from those material signs, Nandan Das and his family remarkably exhibit some urban attributes; and live a comfortable life within that urban domesticity. For them, buying a second hand car is a sacred event and educating their children with English education and classical music is a typical urban compulsion. Mr. Das, the representative of the typical urban middle class man, who is seen to be busy in listening classical music and sometimes getting invited to nearby village to deliver lecture on humanity and social upliftment of the society, never hesitates to scrape the service of his maid Charu once his daughter is grown up and married. Likewise, his wife Mrs. Das is an *ideal urban wife,* who smoothly handles her household matters: selection and training of new housemaid, arrangement of cloths and specified area to sleep at night for the new comer, maintenance of class hierarchy but still retaining soft humanitarian values towards her servants and driver.

The partial character of Urmila, who is shown as another urban wife and friend of Mrs. Das, deserves some attention. Through the character of Urmila, Saikia seems to hint at some uncanny aspects of emergent urban lifestyle which he would be dealing with more attention in some of his next films like *Sarothi*, *Abartan* and *Itihaas*. Unlike Mrs. Das, Urmila is shown to bear deceitful characteristics, unshared anxieties within the family especially when her son is caught in sexually harassing the maid Taru. Her frequent visits to Mrs. Das, embarking on gossips over tea and dining tables, can be read as the undeniable urban symptoms – loneliness and workless-ness of urban wives.

Sandhyarag largely captures the utopia about urbanity in its early phase in regional pockets like Assam in post-independence times. While the urban dwellers at this stage were happy with the cash economy, material comfort and commoditized leisure of the new urban life, the village dwellers were also initially optimistic towards this systemic transition. However, the hope of Charu's mother gets fatal at the end of *Sandhyarag*. The irony of this dystopia is that, even after realizing incompatibilities with the city, Charu and her mother and sister are left with no option but to go to the city again.

After sketching the emerging urban society in *Sandhyarag*, Saikia tellingly demonstrates the growing cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism of urbanization in

Kolahal. The society depicted in *Kolahal* is free from the quintessential authority of the archaic social prejudices of a homogenous and bounded traditional society. This film begins with a statement: "this film has been made in Assam in the Assamese language, but its theme and the characters belong elsewhere – to many places" (*Kolahal*, 1988). The people of this place are more concerned about their survival, than the maintenance and celebration of social customs. They are living more like biological beings than socio-cultural ones, without bothering much about their future because they cannot afford to do so. Uncertainties of time, instability of family, insecurity of women and fragility and impermanence of emotional ties are some of the traits that mark the world in *Kolahal*, which can be termed as the 'unintended city' theorized by Sen:

> "the relationship of the unintended city to the urban city is limited. It is for the most part only economic and at that an exploitative, dependent link. The city uses and exploits the poor, and they in turn use the city to their ends; indeed they use it in ways that the urban middle class consider 'abuse', with no apparent loyalty, respect, or civic sense" (Sen, 1976).

The physical and cultural geography of the world in *Kolahal* can claim a kind of novelty in Assamese cinema. First of all, the site of the story, where the protagonist Kiron resides, is neither a village nor a city or town but perhaps a location where the village and the town meet each other. This physical liminality gets extended to the other narrative features of the film, like Kiron's dilemmas and conflicts as a wife, a mother and a woman. Kiron's husband leaves, which he claims for a business purpose, to Muzzafarpur – a rather unlikely destination in a typical Assamese movie. One of the two songs in the film is sung in Hindi, by Kiron's sympathetic mentor Master uncle.

Though the representation of this liminal world a is new thing in Assamese cinema, it was a recurrent theme in many Indian movies in Hindi and other languages. However, a significant difference can be noticed in the projection of the 'unintended city' in commercial cinema and that of the art house cinema. The rhetoric in the commercial entertaining cinemas is more about the blatant oppression, exploitation, injustice and torture on the part of the urban elites towards the slum-dwellers. Most

of these movies are characterized by the presence of an 'angry young man' who accomplishes revenge by delivering 'poetic justice within three hours' (Bachchan 2015). This narrative methodology of revenge, as described by Mazumdar, is an articulation of the traumatic memory of the past:

> "The articulation of a tragic and divided urban subjectivity has played an enormous role in cinema, working primarily through the performative power of anger. When combined with revenge, anger allows one to create a temporality of past, present, and future through which the revenge plot reaches its climactic resolution. In the revenge narrative, the past is the site of traumatic memory to be settled in the future" (Mazumdar 2007, 1).

However, the portrayal in the parallel cinema is far different from this heroic individual achievement in accomplishing revenge with the urban masters. Instead, these films are mostly characterized by their disinterest in unrealistic revolutions and their emphasis on the realistic and documentary portrayal of life and humanity in the contexts of heterogeneous locations, peoples and cultures at the edges of the urban world. Theorization of his 'slum's point of view' to interpret Indian cinema, Nandy states,

> "The slum may or may not be ugly, it may or may not symbolize absurdity, but it always has a story to tell about the state of the vitality, creativity and moral dynamism of the society that defines the relationship between the slum and suburbia. That story can take many forms .The slum can be read as the past of the suburbia or as an alternative to or decline from it. It can even be romanticized and invested with the vision of a desirable society or a lost Utopia, as Sai Paranjape's *Katha* (1983), Aziz Mirza's *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* (1992) and the television serial *Nukkad* come so close to doing" (Nandy 1999, 2).

Saikia can join in Nandy's list through *Kolahal*. However, here Saikia's romanticization is not specifically aimed at projecting the slum as desirable or as lost utopia. Despite the undeniable dependencies and cause-and-effect relationships of the slum with the past village and future of the city, the focus in *Kolahal* is more on the self-sufficient intimate world of Kiron. Unlike Menaka in *Agnisnan* and Jayanti in *Abartan*, who are trapped in social taboos and have to engage in battles with other characters for their existence, Kiron is not disturbed by any of her fellow characters.

The cause of her disturbance and conflicts is her own carriage, – the *memory of the past*, which is symbolized by the vermilion mark on her forehead. In the visualization of the ending scene of the movie, she adds fresh vermilion on her forehead; and her welcoming mood towards Badal is shown in the freeze-frame close-up shot of her portrait where a melancholic relief can be visible along with the red vermilion spot. This telling semiotic stands for her successful negotiation with herself.

Saikia's critical attack on urban hypocrisy and inhumanity is powerfully reflected in his two films *Abartan* and *Itihaas*. In these two films, Saikia invested on the dirty and cruel aspects of urbanity. The *Abartan* centers on the life of Jayanti, a professional theatre artist struggling for her freedom from patriarchal bindings both within and outside her family. In this film, the impact of urbanity on family relationships crosses its limits. Due to growing materialistic and selfish attitudes, a father is not hesitating to exploit his own daughter to maintain his urban etiquettes. Jayanti is exploited by both her family and the owner of theatre party. Unlike the relative freedom of Kiron from the social forces, Jayanti is always surrounded by the suffocating structures of social authority: she is not free to get married with the man of her choice, as her parents fear that it would disturb their economic dependence on her; and in her professional world, she is compelled to compromise with her choices amidst powerful male actors and producers.

Despite such unquestionably realistic portrayal of the case of a professional theatre artist like Jayanti, the solution given by Saikia to her problems resembles more with the formulaic solutions offered in unrealistic and entertaining commercial cinema. Jayanti is rescued by Parimol, a man who ensembles all the virtues that makes him too good to be realistic: he is handsome, rich, sensitive, honest courageous and responsible. However, more than this quick fix to an array of acute problems, the focus of *Abartan* is on the uglier outcomes of the passionate and uncritical embracing of urbanity by the characters like Jayanti's parents. Jayanti's old father carries the heritage of village life. In one of his visits to Jayanti, he demonstrates, among the artists of the professional theatre group, his skills of enacting in the rural Assamese community play *Bhaona*. In another scene at his home, he is also seen winnowing rice at the backyard which demonstrates his agricultural root. Despite his

initial reservation towards Jayanti's interests in professional acting as her career – which is another decadent social stigma against the free mixing of women with men in the professional world of theatre, he is now dependent exclusively on the salaried income of Jayanti as an actor. While Jayanti's brother is aspiring for higher education, her sister is more occupied with her matrimonial future. These two dreams are especially significant in the newly urbanized societies. For Jayanti's parents, her income is the only means to fulfill these two compulsions of her brother and sister, even at the cost of Jayanti's own future. This contradiction of interests leads to the uglier hypocrisy which is symbolically amplified by Saikia through one off-stage conversation of Jayanti with her male co-actor during a play. During this conversation, Jayanti and her co-actor both are attired in western Victorian styled dresses for the play. But their conversations at the back of the stage are highly contrasting to the visual dignity of their dresses and excessive make-ups, which creates a sophisticated parody and sarcasm of their whole venture. This metaphoric scene can be taken as the ultimate gist of the entire film: an unhealthy mixture of archaic social norms and their artificial cover-up with the urban masks.

In *Itihaas*, Saikia projects the most evil and ruthless aspects of urban expansion: forced displacement of villagers from their own land, corrupt lives of urban dwellers and the impossibility of survival of a young village woman Lakhimi, the protagonist in the movie, in this forcefully imposed urban environment. Among all the women protagonists of Saikia's films, Lakhimi's problems are the most multilayered and most aggressive: she faces the economic hardship of livelihood, hostile social environment after displacement and she has no able and reliable companion to take support from – as it happened to be in the cases of Kiron and Jayanti. It is therefore not surprising that Lakhimi is also the only protagonist in Saikia's film who dies at the end of her struggle. Saikia's statement in the film can be read as the fact that behind the urban edifice of a city or a township, there is always an untold *itihaas* (history) of deaths and displacement of many individuals like Lakhimi.

Unlike Saikia's other movies, the *urban* in *Itihaas* is unambiguously cruel and inhuman. It may be more than coincidental that in Saikia's first movie *Sandhyarag*, the villagers came to the city with hopes; but in his last film *Itihaas*, the city gets expanded to uproot the village, both physically as well as socially, – as a

63

consequence of which Lakhimi had to die. The singular residential house of Nandan Das of *Sandhyarag* is replaced in *Itihaas* by the archetypal icon of contemporary urban life – the multi-storied apartment, within which the urban citizens live with their many different characters, problems and priorities. Noticeably, most of the happy characters in this urban ecology are shown as cunning and corrupt; and the seemingly good and honest characters, who are fewer in number, are shown to be unhappy within the concrete walls of the apartment.

Before making *Itihaas* to tell the most pathetic consequences of urbanization, Saikia had made the film *Sarothi* where he explored the urban subjectivity of a male protagonist, without relying much on the rural-urban dichotomy. *Sarothi* depicts the agony of losing hopes of a man, Niranjan Dutta, who is settled in the city and is in the verge of retirement from his job. Despite the fact that the central character of *Sarothi* is a man instead of a woman, there are few more distinctions of this film in comparison to Saikia's other films. Firstly, this is the only film of Saikia where the subject-position of the narrative is taken from the perspective of a fully urbanized character. Secondly, the problems of Niranjan Dutta have nothing to do with any material discomfort or insufficiency; and not even any particular social issue that keeps him constantly in a melancholic mood. The cause of his cynical attitude is shown to be within his own inner self – a site of conflict between private fantasies and undesired reality. Though Mr. Dutta is shown to be in nostalgic recollection of his young age in the village, his *undesired reality* is not about the replacement of the village life. Rather, it is about the non-fulfillment of very specific unarticulated desires from his urban achievement. Mr. Dutta's fantasies are symbolized through a woman he met in the past, with whom he had unexplored romantic possibilities. In the present, his dissatisfactions compel him to resort to a kind of soliloquist fantasy where he indulged with that woman and empower her with all his own senses of virtues. What are the dissatisfactions of Mr Dutta? As manifest in the film, his dissatisfactions are due to the lack of harmony and clash of preferences in his own family. His wife is not particularly shown as *bad*, but she differs in her sensibilities with Mr. Dutta; his two sons are shown little intolerant and affected by their anxieties of employment; and his only daughter – for whom Mr. Dutta is planning a special room in his house under construction – is just beginning to enjoy her teenage

life in the coming-of-age style. Mr. Dutta believes that things could have been better; and he frequently reconstructs it in his private fantasies. In his fantasies, his real wife is replaced by the other woman of Mr. Dutta's past who is in exact tune with Mr. Dutta's choices: she is caring and sensitive to his thoughts, does not exhibits the roughness of his real wife. His sons and daughter in his fantasies become polite and responsible.

This difference in the private aspirations and real experiences of Niranjan Dutta in *Sarothi* can be read as the symbolic of the larger issue: a sense of cynical frustration at the end of the urban seduction. This frustration is not exactly due to the replacement of the village by the city, but due to the inability to experience and avail urbanity in its specifically desired form. This consists of a set of selective preference from the urban as well as the rural – which are reflected in Mr. Dutta's fantasies, where Mr. Dutta's desired woman companion exhibits the rural simplicity, sacredness, tolerance and obliged nature towards him, but she exhibits all these not in the village but within the other comforts of the urban world.

Saikia's characterization of Niranjan Dutta resembles the *flâneur,* the early nineteenth century French literary type that later began to be associated with the paradoxical images of urban modernity. A *flâneur* is a "man who saunters around observing society" and whose "movement creates anachrony: he travels urban space, the space of modernity, but is forever looking to the past" (Seale 2005). Mary Gluck articulated the paradoxical duality of the *flâneur* in the following words:

> The flâneur's simultaneous commitment to mobile experience and panoramic vision explains his profound ambiguity as a cultural symbol. Inscribed within his figure was a fundamental duality that was invariably represented by two distinct images: the idle *badaud*, who passively abandoned himself to the crowd and gave in to the seductions of the city; and the discriminating observer, who retained his personal autonomy and was capable of privileged insights into modernity. (Gluck 2010, 273)

Niranjan Dutta is idle and passive towards the seductions of the city; yet he is a discriminating observer who retains his personal autonomy and is capable of privileged insights into the urban modernity where he is living.

The chronology of Saikia's filmmaking cannot be said to follow any linear order of progress of urbanization as per the historical order. Thematically, his second film *Anirban* appears to be little odd in his otherwise continuous treatment on various aspects of urbanity. Though the context of this movie depicts the early urbanized phase of Assamese society (practice of private tuitions, modern education), the narrative focus of the movie cannot be said as connects to urban issues in particular. His third film *Agnisnan*, discussed in the previous chapter, can be said as a kind of retrospective exploration of the root of the urban at its budding phase during the last regime of feudalism. Though the temporal and geographical locations of that film are largely semi-feudal and rural respectively, there are moments like lighting of the street lamps. The horse-cart and rice-mill of Menaka and her husband signal the coming of an urban industrial society over the pastoral village life.