

Research Article

Construction of Nation and a National Hero in Joymoti

Manaswinee Mahanta,

Deptt. of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University
Manaswineemahanta91@gmail.com

Abstract

This research work looks at the cinematic construction and internalisation of national identities by national populace, taking the case of Assamese film *Joymoti* under study. Films have a distinctive presence within every society and play a significant role in creating new constructs and modifying the existing ones. Researcher cited some instances of cinematic nation construction in Russian, Italian and African film. She further referred some existing literature on Danish films with banal national references. Reflection of socio-political conscious of Assamese society and nation in the Assamese cinemas of early age has also been discussed with this regard. It has been observed that these films advocated the construction of a free nation as an organic outcome of the society that they are associated with, where social equity is a primary facet. The researcher further elaborated Berger and Luckmann's three fundamental processes in the construction of any social phenomena: externalisation, objectivation and internalisation. Here, the construction of national identities in films have been analysed taking the first Assamese Film *Joymoti* as case study, keeping this three stage process at backdrop. The researcher observed the journey of *Joymoti*'s legend, from a myth primarily popular in the eastern part of the state that got objectivised with written texts in the form of a novel establishing her to be the epitome of national valour. Further with the film by Jyotiprasad Agarwala, the divide of illiteracy has been addressed and *Joymoti*'s myth got internalised by Assamese populace.

Keywords: nation, national identities, social construction, cinematic construction, Assamese film

Introduction

As a powerful mode of mass media, films constitute a global culture. Across the world, films are made in different languages on diverse subjects. Jeffrey Geiger and R.L. Rutsky in the book *Film Analysis* interpreted the interdependence between films and society as,

“Films are not simply entertainment. They are also meaningful document with the potential to yield rich insights into the cultures and times in which they are made.”
(Geiger and Rutsky, 2005, pp.17)

Siegfried Kracauer (1997) in his book '*Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*' puts forth the argument that films allow the recording and revelation of reality. French scholar *Annie Goldmann* (1971) in '*Cinema et Societe moderne*' said that films are the connection between a certain vision of the world and the attributes of modern society.

Explaining sociology related film research in his article '*Sociology and Film*' published in the book '*Film Studies Critical Approaches*', Andrew Tudor (2000) observes that as films are socially constructed within a three way association between filmmakers, film viewers and the text of the films, hence negotiation and active social interaction involving institutionalized social practices can be experienced at every point of this three dimensional relationship. Emphasising on the use of various signs in terms of costume, make up etc. to establish a relation between the filmed characters and their social –history, Roland Barthes (1972) has defined the interrelation between the social structures and their cinematic portrayal in the essay *The Romans in Films* from his anthology '*Mythologies*'. For example, Barthes (1972) has referred the use of Vaseline in make up for sweating to show inner struggles of the characters in the film '*Julius Caesar*'.

Films act as an integral part of the society that they come from and represent their culture and social history. While doing so, a filmmaker, as a non-isolated social entity, deals with the social constructs associated to the particular society and culture. These constructs also act as an active agent in meaning-making process for the film viewers. Eventually, like every other form of mass media, films also either help in creating new constructs or reaffirm/rejects the existing ones. Explaining film's relation with its viewers from socio-cultural perspective, in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen have observed,

"...the way films shape or reflect cultural attitudes, reinforce or reject the dominant modes of cultural thinking, [and] stimulate or frustrate the needs and drives of the psyche" (1985. ppXI)

With theoretical support from Mead, Blumer, Baird, Edgerton and Jackson, Cynthia-Lou Coleman (2005) in *Framing Cinematic Indians within the Social Construction of Place* has observed that film holds to a 'double-edged social constructionist frame' where she opines that 'messages and meanings are constructed within film' and the viewers discard and construct meaning from their interaction with film.

The aim of this research work is to look at the construction of nation in films. While doing so the discussion covers the three tier process of social construction and specifically explains how this process of construction helps in creating 'social reality' of a national hero for Assamese populace when they were exposed to the new medium of mass influence-cinema, with the first Assamese film *Joymoti*ⁱ.

Nation and its Cinematic Construction

Nation is a much used social construction in films across the globe. In cinematic representations, nation has always been projected as a social-reality and sometimes referred synonymously to the concepts of society and culture. However, although related and constructed out of human interaction, all these three constructs are distinctive to each other. It is very interesting to see how these constructs are being created, used, evolved and thus reaffirmed in cinema. Generally nation-states and national identities emerged from a socio-cultural space. Hence, any discussion on cinematic construction of nation and its socio-cultural references needs to get substantiated by the social construction of nation as a social reality.

The Western notion of modern nation-state surfaced following the treaty of Westphalia, 1648. From this perspective, a nation does not refer to 'people'. It is more of a political idea than an ethnic group. Antony Smith (1991) described 'historic territory', 'legal-political equality of members', and 'common civic culture and ideologies' as the elements of standard, Western model of nation-state in

his '*National Identity*'. Accepting the working of a political conscious behind the social construction of nation, Thomas Hobbes (2018) has defined the requirement of a political community to form a state. This political community, as defined by Hobbes in '*Leviathan or Matter, Form and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*', gathers solely to create the state as a political entity to protect themselves from the fear of violent death- the greatest evil or the *Summum Molum*ⁱⁱ. However, contrary to Hobbes's assumption, the concept of nation is not always backed by the political construct of state.

Anthony Smith defined state as a public institution that exercises political control over all social agencies within its territory, where as nation signifies a cultural and historical bond. Despite "some overlap between the two concepts, given their common reference to an historic territory and (in democratic states) their appeal to the sovereignty of the state." (Smith, 1991, p 15), at times a nation and national identity may emerge without the political cognisance of a state or its land. The idea of a Welsh national identity is an example of such state-less nationalism. In case of the Indian state of Assam, before the Assam agitation (1979-1985), consequent emergence of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)ⁱⁱⁱ and other separatist groups, the notion of an Assamese nation worked within the territory of Indian state without the demand of a sovereign state. In both these two cases the idea of nation is ethnocentric and non-sovereign. Common historic descent plays an important role in the ethnocentric model of nation as defined by Antony Smith (1991). His idea of *Ethnosymbolism* considers ethnic identity as a form of cultural identity to be the origin of national identity.

Philip Schlesinger (1994) says that national identity emerges or revives when it encounters a supranational entity. He said, "National identity politics in today's Europe is unavoidably shaped by its encounter with the supranational level." (Schlesinger, 1994, p 26)

In *The Sociological Scope of 'National Cinema'*, Schlesinger has also analysed Anderson's observation on nation and the elements to construct national stories in post-colonial nation- states as, Anderson has considered how the national story has been told in postcolonial states by way of the cultural institutions of the census (enumerator and sorter of populations), the map (definer of the political boundaries) and the museum (vehicle for the establishment of legitimate ancestry). (Schlesinger, 2005, pp21)

Schlesinger (1994) also acknowledges media's role in creating a common space for Europe to communicate in *Europe's Contradictory Communicative Space*. For creating the conscious for a common ethnic identity with or without a sovereign territory, a political conscious is needed. This political conscious often gets build up by virtue of mass media. For Example, print media and underground radio plays a significant role in building up the essence of Indian nationalism during Indian Freedom Movement. Benedict Anderson (2006), in his monumental *Imagined Community* has observed that nation can occur only when 'print-capitalism' creates large reading population in vernacular languages through the dissemination of books and newspapers.

In the wake of globalisation, when the very construct of nation and national identities are being questioned by many scholars, Michael Billig(1995) still finds it relevance given the increasing number of boundary wall and deaths on national borders. Billig has given the idea of *Banal Nationalism* and described how nation has been created everyday with apparently insignificant references in media. Billig's idea of banal nationalism can be looked at from the perspective of cinematic representation of nation with references that has no focal awareness; but speaks largely about nationalist sentiment. Mette Hjort has mentioned about such banal elements of nation not amounting to a theme in Danish National Cinema. He said,

The casual use of 'about' assumes that all films that make use, for example, of recognisably Danish locations, the Danish language, Danish actors and props that mirror the material culture of Danes, qualify as being about Denmark. (Hjort, 2005, pp99)

Analysts and scholars identify uses of different elements to show various aspects of a national identity. Richard Barsam (2004) while analyzing the film *American Beauty* directed by Sam Mendes, in his book '*Looking at Movies: An Introduction to Film*', points out that certain details of the costumes are being used by the director, "not only to define characters but also to attack various aspects of contemporary American society, including consumerism, self empowerment jargon, peer pressure, drug abuse, unemployment, loneliness and discrimination". (Barsam, 2004, p199) Referring to Pierre Sorlin in Italian context, Philip Schlesinger argued that

"The cinema was part of a cluster of tools which enabled the Italians to build a picture of themselves, both individually and as members of a group." (Schlesinger, 2000, pp25)

Ethnic atmosphere or the *ethnoscape* as defined by Smith, contributed to the construction of national identity in film. He has observed the "reconstruction of ethnoscapescapes-from the great temples of ancient Egypt and the basilicas and monuments of the Roman Empire to the windswept Russian steppes and the idyllic hamlets of Southern England." (Smith, 2000, p50) Jennifer Peterson's 'Scenic Nationalism' can be duly evoked here, where a land or potential land of national population becomes mise-en-scene in cinema.

For the formation of national dialogue, Smith points out the inevitability of two elements-while ethnoscape formed one, the people or the folk (volk) served as the second. In the films of Eisenstein, 'the people' has been used as an active, conscious political force to create a Soviet Socialist nation. Eisenstein's aspiration and cinematic construction of a Soviet Socialist nation can be spotted in his film 'Old and New'. Film critic Altaf Mazaid (2010) has noticed that in the initial days of Assamese cinema, the early Assamese filmmakers are largely influenced by Eisenstein's projection of 'the people'. How they used this concept of 'people' to construct the idea of an Assamese nation will be dealt with in the later part of this discussion.

At times films also advocate for a nation that never existed or yet to born. Referring to *The Birth of a Nation* in *Birthing Nation*, Jane M. Gaines has observed that,

"...the film advocates a nation that never was. Contrary to most interpretations of the film that stress the constitution of the American union, the nation that is 'birthed' in the film is really the impossible, 'invisible' nation that only exists in the minds of stalwart Southerners." (Gaines, 2000, pp280)

Similar advocacy proposition can be observed in the South African equivalent of the *The Birth of a Nation*, *De Voortrekkers* that has been historically associated with the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. Similar observation can be made with the early Assamese films *Joymoti*(1935), *Badan Barphukan* (1947), *Piyali Phukan* (1955) etc. However, their projection of an Assamese nation was an inclusive, egalitarian construct unlike their American and African counter parts.

Assamese: Constructing the Society, Nation and Their film

The use of media to generate a socio-political responsiveness among Assamese people during the independence of India and aftermath can be looked at from the idea of Schlesinger's communicative space via media. Conscious for a common ethnic identity is always backed by a political conscious. In Assamese context the political conscious of an ethnic identity could be sensed first in the writings of the socio-cultural doyens from the region during late 19th and early 20th century. As an outcome of such nationalistic sentiment, first institute of Higher Education in the region, Cotton College and *Asom Sahitya Sabha*^{iv} were established during the first two decades of 20th Century.

Along with print media, theatres and other forms of mass media prevailed in Assam during the time, films of Assam also advocated for the construction of an egalitarian Assamese national identity. Though it was more of an idea than reality; but cinema played a significant role in constructing this idea.

In the mid of 20th century popular mediums of theatre and Cinema too had started being used for the same purpose by Jyotiprasad Agarwala and other doyens. Assam, though it fought essentially as a part for the freedom of Indian nation during Indian Freedom Struggle; but at the same time with the socio-political and cultural conscious, it set the ground for creating an Assamese national identity within the working set up of Indian national identity, based on the principle of equality.

However, despite formally shaped during modern age in 19th and 20th century, the socio-political conscious for an Assamese nation came about as a part of an evolutionary process. It was not an aware decision; but the process of cultural assimilation that Antony Smith termed as 'Cultural Borrowing' served as the backbone for this political conscious. The history of Assam is a history of migration that led to a composite culture with three racial elements the Australoids, the Mongoloids and the Caucasoids. Banikanta Kakati (1962) in *Assamese: Its formation and Development* talked about the first cultural assimilation that the region had witnessed between Austro-Asiatics and Tibeto-Burmans, took place some 2000 years back. With the integration of different ethno-lingual tribes, the socio-historical and cultural environment of Assam has evolved organically into an egalitarian one. However, the conscious for a socio-cultural identity of Assamese first happened with Srimanta Sankardeva's^v *Nava Vaishnava Pantha*^{vi}. Antony Smith considered religious reforms as one of the fundamental practices for self-renewal of an *ethnie* to create a national identity. Sankardeva did the same for Assamese community during 15th century Bhakti Movement. Assam has an ethnically pluralistic society; hence Sankardeva borrowed ideas from all the prevailing cultural practices and set up the ground for an Assamese nation with a distinct cultural identity that has egalitarianism at its core, as the living principle. Abhijit Bhuyan has explained the ideas and living principles adhered by Sankardeva's Nava Vaishnava Pantha in *Sankardeva and Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam* as,

"The Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam in the latter period of the 15th century ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam, humanist in content and popular in form, in literature as well as in the vocal and visual arts." (Bhuyan, 2013, pp 4)

Similar idea of religious reforms can be found in Sufi saint Azan Fakir's^{vii} religious writings and teachings as well. Through his *Jikirs*^{viii} creations, Azan Fakir urged to maintain brotherhood. Thus the construction of an egalitarian Assamese socio-cultural conscious took place in 16th century. However, as mentioned by Max Weber and quoted by Anthony Smith,

"It is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized that inspires the belief in common ethnicity". (Smith, 1991, pp26)

Hence to create a political conscious for constructing an Assamese society and a nation, during the late 19th century, student authors of Assam initiated Oxomiya Bhaxa Unnati Xadhini Xobha^{ix} in Kolkata in the year 1888. They have started publishing monthly magazine *Jonaki* with an aim of making Assamese language to flourish in every aspect of literature. Later, these group of people also stated writing plays in Assamese language to stand against the contemporary practice of Bangla language theatre. *Baan Theatre*^x started exclusively for the performance of Assamese language plays in the year 1906. This emergence of Assamese national performance spaces can be seen in the light of Schlesinger's idea of forming national identity when it encounters a supranational entity. *British imposition of Bangla language and culture*^{xi} made the Assamese people to go through an identity crisis, which eventually emerged as a political conscious as much as socio-cultural.

Egalitarianism as a backbone to Assamese society and the idea of creating an Assamese national identity with equality as the driving force has found its place in the artistic expressions of 20th century Assam. Along with print media, the region has also witnessed the rise of popular cultural mediums like *Mobile Theatre*^{xii} and Cinema with the same purpose of creating an Assamese political conscious since the mid of 20th century. Jyotiprasad Agarwala and other cultural doyens of Assam fought essentially for the freedom of Indian nation during Indian Freedom Movement; but at the same time with the political and cultural conscious, they also laid the foundation for the construction of an Assamese national identity assumed to work within the functional set up of Indian national identity. With the newly found and more inclusive medium of cinema, they started voicing out for the socio-political construction of this Assamese nation that has 'volk' or 'the people' as an active political force and conscious like it was presented in the films of Eisenstein.

The journey of Assamese films started in 1935 with Jyotiprasad Agarwala's *Joymoti*. Contrary to its contemporaries in Indian subcontinent, most of which were mythological ventures, Assamese cinema, in its inception time, was largely inspired by the socialist realism of Russian film legend, Kuleshov. In early Assamese films, The realist making process involves shooting in real locations with non-actors. As Gitashri Tamuli and Akhil Gogoi quoted Jyotiprasad Agarwala on the making of *Joymoti*, in the book '*Uribo Parahole Akou Jujiloheten*' as,

"The picture (*Joymoti*) as contemplated will be a new move in India. No professional actors and actresses are required. All artists are scrupulously searched and discovered and only 'types' are selected following Russian method. All the girl artists are required from respectable families."(Tamuli & Gogoi, 2002, pp71)

Carroll and Banes have observed that the idea of Soviet Russia was constructed in their cinema. They described the processes of constructing the national identity of Soviet Russia in Russian films of 1920s as,

"Many Soviet films of the 1920s were devoted to consolidating a tradition for the new nation, commemorating its revolutionary founding in historical spectacles, like V.I.Pudovkin's *The End, of St. Petersburg* (1927) and Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (1927)."(Carroll and Banes, 2005, pp 113)

They also have noticed that in *The Old and the New* of Eisenstein, the idea of a national identity acted as a storyboard to demonstrate the filmmaker's idea of Soviet community that he believed one day might evolve as the Soviet nation. As Carroll and Banes have observed,

“But certain other films.... Eisenstein’s *The Old and the New* (1929) (originally called *The General Line*), looked primarily to the future, rather than to the past, in order to imagine what the Soviet Union could become.” (Carroll and Banes, 2005, p113)

Similar reference could be found in the early Assamese films as well where the films served as the blueprint of the filmmaker’s notion of an Assamese nation. While *Joymoti*(1935), *Monumoti*(1941), *Piyali Phukan*(1955) etc. dealt with the notion from a historical point of view, *Siraj*(1948), *Runumi*(1952), *Puberun*(1959) etc. dealt with the idea from a contemporary approach.

After Jyotiprasad went for his second film venture *Indramaloti* in 1939, few other people also chose some historical subjects for their films. *Monomati* by Rohini Kumar Barua in 1941, *Badan Barphukan* by Kamal Narayan Chowdhury in 1947 are to name a few. These historical narrations picked stories of individual sacrifices irrespective of caste, class or gender for their nation. These films served as a virtual storyboard to illustrate their idea of an Assamese nation in order to construct one socio-politically. Their purpose was to make Assamese people aware of historical and cultural commonness by constructing some larger than life national heroes who sacrificed their personal happiness for the nation.

This process of cinematic construction of an Assamese national identity and a hero with historical and therefore cultural commonness went through Berger and Luckman’s three fundamental processes for any social construction: externalisation, objectivisation and internalisation. The process could be best understood with the case of *Joymoti* and in the next part of the discussion, this three step construction of a hero to serve the national identity will be dealt with in detail.

Constructing the Legend of Joymoti

For some scholars of nation, nation are permanent, primitive entity that finds its place in media and art by virtue of its existence; while for other scholar like Gellner, nation is being constructed in a process of myth-making. This process of creating myths to serve the purpose of creating the nation goes through the process of social construction.

We use social constructs that emerged in the course of social communication. Social constructs are ideas or thoughts formed, shaped and adhered by the members of a society. Berger and Luckman (1966) in *Social Construction of Reality* have argued that reality is constructed by the use of our shared and agreed meaning in human interaction. They believed that our perceptions of the world are social inventions and language plays an important role in it. Language categorises human experiences. As Berger and Luckman mentioned,

“Language also typifies experiences, allowing me to subsume them under broad categories in terms of which they have meaning not only to myself but also to my fellowmen.”(Berger and Luckman, 1991, pp53)

Defining the process of social construction and changing ideas of race, gender, religion, equality etc. John McLeod has said that

“...the way we understand the world is a product of a historical process of interaction and negotiation between groups of people.” (McLeod, 1997, pp83)

The practice of creating of stories, myths and legends can also be looked at from social constructionist point of view. Mythmaking takes place by virtue of social interactions. And mythmaking involves

construction of folklores, fables, tales and legends etc. These myths, over the time, help in the construction of oral history for the society that they are part of. The socio-political and cultural believes of any society get shaped in their myths. Mythmaking often speaks of Kings and Queens, Prince and Princess, war heads fighting for the nation etc. As a part of oral history, myths often served as a medium to create socio-political conscious for the construction of a nation. Legends of *Shivaji* from the Indian state of Maharashtra, *Maharaja Ranjit Sigh* of Punjab or *Jhansi Ki Rani Lakshmbai* of present day Uttar Pradesh served as the backbone for constructing national conscious in their respective geo-cultural context. In case of Assam, the story of Princess Joymoti has often been considered as the epitome of Assamese nationalist sentiment.

In cinema, historical legends are often used to construct a political conscious. Such films usually work as propaganda for a national sentiment. Example of such use can be found in the Italian films where the city of Rome plays an interesting character. Sergio Corbucci's 1961 film *Duel of the Titans* deals with the legend of twin brothers Romulus and Remus, who revolt against tyranny in pre-Roman Italy, finally to lead their people toward the founding of a new city, Rome. On the contrary to such heroic portrait to raise historic conscious, in *Ivan the Terrible*, Eisenstein's negative portrayal of the first *Tsar* led to the ban of the series as it went against Premier Stalin's idea of Ivan. In Czechoslovakian historical-drama *The Emperor and the Golem* (1951), Martin Fric deals with the legend of Emperor Rudolf and his obsession for the Golem in a comical way. The film deals with some contemporary national propaganda.

Political construction of any myth, irrespective of the medium, takes place through the three step processes of construction- externalisation, objectivisation and internalisation as defined by Berger and Luckman in *Social Construction of Reality*. Social reality gets constructed involving these three steps that start with the societal idea as a human product. With human interactions, the social idea, which is a subjective reality evolved in to an objective reality. Finally by internalisation of that reality the social idea, once a subjective reality, gets considered as social reality. Involvement of these three steps is inevitable in any construction of social reality. Construction of Joymoti as a national icon also involves these three steps.

For his film, Jyotiprasad Agarwala chose the mythical character from oral history of *upper Assam*^{xiii}; but the trajectory of Joymoti's life as shown in the film is largely based on legendary Assamese author Lakhinath Bezboroa's novel, *Joymoti Kunwari*. Especially popular in upper Assam, precisely in the southern bank of Brahmaputra, where *Ahom*^{xiv} had a strong hold, the legend of Joymoti was part of the oral folklore. The legend, passing through generations, describes the story of Ahom Princess Joymoti, who sacrificed her life to save her husband, the potential future king of the Ahom Kingdom.

This myth was first externalised by Lakhinath Bezboroa in his novel. It is very significant to notice here that Ahoms have a long tradition of written history. These set of historical documents, known as *Buranji* - a term adopted from Tai language into contemporary Assamese language to refer historical chronicles and manuscripts, had no reference of this noble Ahom Princess. Before this novel of Lakhinath Bezboroa and a play written by Padmanath Gohain Baruah, except for the temple and the large water tank built by Joymoti Kunwori's son and 30th Ahom King Rudra Sigha, no historical reference or written words on the legend of Joymoti could be traced from Assam History.

Bezboroa, with his novel *Joymoti Kunwari* externalised the idea of Joymoti as a national hero, who sacrificed her life not solely to save her husband; but for a greater purpose of securing national integrity. It has been described in the novel that Princess Joymoti succumbed to death because of the physical tortures she had been put through by the Ahom King Sulikphaa, instigated by aristocrat

Laluksola Borphukan, yet she did not disclose Gadapani's whereabouts even when she was asked to do so by Gadapani himself, to ensure a revolt against the tyranny. Here, one should also notice the description of Sulikphaa's rule given by Bezboroa. Not only Gadapani or other Ahom Princes are tortured by him; but his statute also went against the societal equilibrium maintained during Ahom rule. The aspiration for an egalitarian living as the driving force of the society had been challenged and wrecked. The socio-cultural conscious of the ethnic identities had also been opposed. Death of Joymoti, as described by Bezboroa, was an act of self-sacrifice and martyrism for the greater benefit of the society that the author has addressed as Assamese society or the *Axom Dekh*^{xv}. By the use of these two words, he has set the ground for an Assamese nation that has to be unified against their enemy, just the way Princess Joymoti did.

After the novel, the legend of Joymoti, now in written text, entered into a larger social realm. The oral story which was told only in Upper Assam at the eastern part of the province, especially around the present day Sivasagar district, now have a reach up to Dhubri district situated at the Western most end of the Assam province . Joymoti, as a national hero, has now become an object of political consciousness. This consciousness challenged the British colonial rule at the same time as a part of Assamese literature it stood against the imposition of Bangla language in Assam. The subjective reality of Joymoti which was there in Jyotiprasad's mind, appeared as an objective reality after the novel. Here, one can refer to the 'double-edged social constructionist frame' defined by Cynthia-Lou Coleman where the facts and the constructs presented in the film are being perceived and re-constructed or discarded by the audience from their set of experiences and conversations.

Both the construct of an Assamese nation and Joymoti, now got objectivised by Agarwala and taken as an objective reality. Further, he came up with the second strata of externalisation of the idea with a cinema and the second level of objectivisation happened aftermath. With the fascination of the new medium and cinema's ability to transcendent time, therefore also generations, the idea continued its social existence. Generations, born after the externalisation and objectivisation of the idea of Joymoti, internalize Joymoti as the quintessential Assamese national hero who fought for the Assamese nation- a political idea which was yet to emerge when she succumbed to death in 17th century.

The construction of Joymoti- as the epitome of Assamese national identity, materialized through two stages:

i) Creation of Assamese nation: At the first place, the filmmaker tried to construct the *Assamese Nation*, with emphasis on a) landscape and b) populace. Landscape represents the territory. Jennifer Peterson's idea of Scenic Nationalism can be called up here with the context of using landscape to suggest territory. These suggestions include the representation of geographical entities, such as the river Brahmaputra that travels through the state. One can see the last scene from the film where the filmmaker used the river Brahmaputra to suggest Assamese geographical commonness. (Figure 1)



Figure 1: Scene from Joymoti with the River Brahmaputra suggesting Assamese ethnoscape

The filmmaker also represented the cultural elements to showcase the cultural landscape of the national territory or the ethnoscape as referred by Smith. The representation of traditional weaving scenes on Assamese front-yards was representative of such portrayal of ethnoscape. (Figure2)



Figure 2: Joymoti and other women while doing Tant-bati

Such representations along with cultural performances like *Nisukani-geet*, *Bihu*, *Ojapali*, *Gayana-Bayana*^{xvi} etc. were used as symbolism of ‘Assamese nationality’ to integrate people and raise the national questions. (Figure3)



Figure 3: Performance of Gayana-Bayana in Joymoti

These references of cultural performances are apparently banal; but very much significant. Since these cultural performance forms are indistinctively connected to the Assamese populace as popular mass cultures, hence they helped in strengthening the political conscious for an Assamese nation.

Jyotiprasad’s construction of an Assamese national populace in film, who lived in the ethnoscape that’s being represented, shared the same culture that of its viewers. Here, the filmmaker tried to construct a common historic descent and cultural identity as the origin of Assamese national identity, which is the core of *Ethnosymbolism* as described by Smith(1991).

ii) Creation of an Assamese Hero: Simultaneously to the cinematic construction of Assamese nation, Joymoti was presented as the saviour of that nation. Egalitarianism of the Assamese social conscious, now presented as the nation was established by using shots where Princess Joymoti had a close friendship with her helping hand. Sons of Princess Joymoti and Prince Gadapani called her as *mahi* or maternal aunt. The disequilibrium set by the King to this egalitarian set up, suggestive of the

colonial rule, was established through juxtapositions of shots. Joymoti was shown as to stand against the elements responsible for the disequilibrium in the national system. While doing so, Joymoti had been seen performing cultural practice, intricately connected to popular mass cultures from the region, to establish her to be essentially Assamese. *Tant-bati*^{xvii} scene in Figure 2 is suggestive of such representation.

Jyotiprasad considered Assamese audience to be an active participator than to passive receiver. His notion is largely based on Eisenstein's idea of the Russian film viewers who essentially also were the populace for Russian nation. Similarly Jyotiprasad Agarwala also believed in the participation of the audience to reconstruct his objectivisation according to their understanding and eventually to construct an Assamese national populace. Here once again the 'double-edged social constructionist frame' can be rightfully evoked, where Cynthia-Lou Coleman opines that 'messages and meanings are constructed within film' and the viewers discard and construct meaning from their interaction with film.

Cinematic construction of Joymoti had not only served helpful in constructing a national hero out of a mythical character; but also actively took part in disseminating the ideas of national construct, in this case the Assamese construct as social reality. The political conscious of Assamese nation with strong socio-cultural reliance on Vaishnavite teachings and organically egalitarian living principle, adhered by the Assamese literary figures during the 19th and 20th century, thus also secured its place in Assamese language cinema with Joymoti as the icon of Assamese national valour. This process of cinematic construction of national hero and nation had reached a larger audience with the new medium of cinema and thus gets objectivised and internalised further among the Assamese populace, to continue the process of re-construction.

Conclusion

Nation and national constructs will never be a thing of past anytime soon. Media, everyday, is reaffirming existing national constructs. Cinema, as one of the strongest mode of entertainment and mass interaction, takes active part in disseminating the ideas of national construct as social reality. Socio-historic, cultural and geographic contexts are accountable for cinematic depiction of social reality. With their share of socio-cultural experience, filmmakers construct their account of social reality including nation. Contemporary social issues and atmosphere also determines their journey. Cinematic depictions deal with the constructs that have already been considered as social reality. Filmmakers as very much part of the society, also objectify subjective reality as natural reality and facilitate the process of internatlisation of those subjective realities as social realities. Nation and other constructs associated to the idea of nation also get constructed and reconstructed in this process. The construct of Joymoti and the Assamese nation also got constructed as social reality with the help of their cinematic construction. The national identity that has been adhered or represented in Joymoti is not an idea of a nation-state. Jyotiprasad's Joymoti is the first cinematic construction of Assamese sub-nationalism with distinct cultural landscapes.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Prof. P. Anbarason, Deptt. of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University; State Film Archive, Jyoti Chitrabhan, Guwahati and Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry, towards helping in pursuing this idea forward.

Endnotes

ⁱ Joymoti or Joymoti Konwari was a Tai-Ahom Princess and the wife of Prince and Ahom king Gadapani or Supatphaa. She is known for her heroic endurance of torture until she succumbed to death in the hands of Sulikphaa, without disclosing her exiled husband's whereabouts and thus ensured a revolution against the tyranny of Sulikphaa.

Joymoti also referred to the first Assamese film *Joymoti*, directed in 1935 by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, based on the life of the Princess.

ⁱⁱ summum malum, or the greatest evil, according to Thomas Hobbes is the fear of violent death.

ⁱⁱⁱ The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) is an armed separatist that seeks to establish a sovereign state of Assam, founded in the year 1979.

^{iv} The Asom Sahitya Sabha is a non- Governmental and non-profit literary organisation of Assam, founded in December 1917, to promote the literature and culture of Assam.

^v Srimanta Sankardeva was a 15th–16th century Assamese scholar-philosopher, social-religious reformer and cultural personality. One of the most important figure the socio-cultural history of Assam, he is widely credited for the Neo-vaishnavism or the 15th century renaissance in Assam.

^{vi} Nava-Vaishnava Pantha or the Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam basically refers to the renaissance in Assam during the 15th and 16th century that brought about considerable changes in almost all aspects of life including social, cultural and religious.

^{vii} Azan Faqir also known as Ajan Pir was a Sufi poet and saint who came to Assam from Baghdad in 17th century and worked for unity and brotherhood in the Brahmaputra valley.

^{viii} Jikirs are the Sufi devotional songs written in Assamese by Azan Fakir and his successors. The word probably has its origin in Arabic *Dhikr* or *Zikr*.

^{ix} Oxomiya Bhaxa Unnati Xadhini Xobha was a literary organization formed on in the year 1888 with the prime objective to develop Assamese language and literature. It is the precursor of the Asam Sahitya Sabha.

^x Baan theatre is the first modern Assamese theatre hall established in the year 1906 at Tezpur to develop the cultural life of Assam.

^{xi} During British India, the Bangla language was imposed over Assamese as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges, and for all official purposes. The clerical and technical workers that the British brought were Bengali, allegedly in order to impose Bengali language and culture in the region.

^{xii} Mobile Theatre, known as Bhramyaman Theatre in Assamese is the most popular theatre practice exclusive to Assam. As suggestive to the name, Mobile Theatre groups travel and perform from place to place with their cast and crew, carrying all the theatre arrangements with them.

^{xiii} Upper Assam culturally refers to the Ahom ruled Assam in the pre-colonial period, from present day Tinsukia district to Koliabor. It also refers to the administrative division of the state that contains 10 districts, including Biswanath, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Golaghat, Charaideo, Lakhimpur, Majuli, Sivasagar and Tinsukia.

^{xiv} The Ahoms also known as Tai-Ahom is an ethnic group from the Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Ahoms ruled much of the Brahmaputra Valley in the medieval Assam until 1826.

^{xv} Asom Dekh in Assamese literatures during Romantic age refers to the nation of Assam with the sense of an emerging national identity.

^{xvi} These are traditional form of performances and elements of mass culture from the state of Assam that often involve storytelling.

^{xvii} A process in Assamese weaving process to arrange the threads neatly, before weaving.

References:

1. Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections On The Origin And Spread Of Nationalism*. 3rd ed., Verso, 2006.
2. Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. 25th ed., The Noonday Press, 1972, pp. 24-26.
3. Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality A Treatise in The Sociology Of Knowledg*. Penguin Books, 1991.
4. Bhuyan, Abhijit. "Sankardeva And Neo-Vaishnavism". *Semantic Scholar*, 2008, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Sankardeva-and-Neo-Vaishnavism-in-Assam-Bhuyan/23ad2fd73c65ce9c555a50a4ab212cc9b6806865>. Accessed 9 Sept 2018.
5. Billig, Michael. *Banal Nationalism*. 1st ed., Sage Publications, 1995.
6. Carrol, Noel, and Sally Banes. "Cinematic Nation-Building: Eisenstein's The Old And The New". *Cinema And Nation*, Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie, Taylor & Francis, London, 2005, pp. 113-130, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/cinema-nation-mette-hjort-scott-mackenzie/e/10.4324/9780203977279>. Accessed 4 Sept 2018.
7. Coleman, Cynthia-Lou. "Framing Cinematic Indians within The Social Construction Of Place". *American Studies*, vol 46, no. 3/4, 2005, pp. 275-293., https://www.jstor.org/stable/40643900?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.
8. Gaines, Jane M. "Birthing Nations". *Cinema and Nations*, Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie, Taylor & Francis, London, 2005, pp. 280-297, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/cinema-nation-mette-hjort-scott-mackenzie/e/10.4324/9780203977279>. Accessed 4 Sept 2018.
9. Geiger, Jeffrey, and R.L. Rutsky. *Film Analysis*. WW Norton, 2005, p. 17.
10. Goldmann, Annie. *Cinema et Societe Moderne: Le Cinema De 1958 A 1968, Godard, Antonioni, Resnais, Robbe-Grillet (Sociologie Et Connaissance Series)*. Anthropos, 1791.
11. Hjort, Mette. "Themes Of Nation". *Cinema And Nation*, Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie, Taylor & Francis, London, 2005, pp. 95-109, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/cinema-nation-mette-hjort-scott-mackenzie/e/10.4324/9780203977279>. Accessed 4 Sept 2018
12. Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan Or Matter, Form And Power Of A Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical And Civil*. 1st ed., Touchstone, 2018, pp. 129-191.
13. Kakati, Banikanta. *Assamese, Its Formation And Development..* 2nd ed., Lawyer's Book Stall, Guwahati, 1962.
14. Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: The Redemption Of Physical Reality*. Princeton University, New Jersey, 1997.
15. Mast, Gerald, and Marshall Cohen. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, New York, 1985.
16. McLeod, John. *Narrative And Psychotherapy*. Sage Publications, 1997.

17. Schlesinger, Philip. "Europe's Contradictory Communicative Space". *Daedalus : Europe Through A Glass Darkly*, vol 123, no. 2, 1994, pp. 25-52.
18. Schlesinger, Philip. "The Sociological Scope of National Cinema". *Cinema and Nation*, Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie, Taylor & Francis, London, 2005, pp. 17-28, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/cinema-nation-mette-hjort-scott-mackenzie/e/10.4324/9780203977279>. Accessed 4 Sept 2018
19. Smith, Anthony D. *National Identity*. University Of Nevada Press, Reno, 1991.
20. Tudor, Andrew. "Sociology and Film". *Film Studies Critical Approaches*, John Hill and Pamela C. Gibson, Oxford University Press, London, 2000.
21. Tamuli, Gitashri, and Akhil Gogoi. *Uribo Parahole Akau Jujiloheten*. 1st ed., Banalata, 2002, p. 71.

Biographical Note

Manaswinee Mahanta is a researcher in the field of film and society. She also is a documentary film maker and script writer with two short films and one documentary to her credit. She has been working in the field of folk and traditional theatre believing the capacity of people's theatre in evoking changes in society.