

An unseen film

I have not yet seen the film, *Adajya*. It has not been shown in the cinema halls, nor has it been projected fully on the small screen. Some significant extracts of the film were screened on the T.V. on the day it received the awards, and I did see these. But the bits that were shown were so vague and brief, that it was difficult to understand what exactly the picture was about. So, frankly speaking, I am still not clear about its message or real content. Indeed, those who are connoisseurs of films, and the critics too, have praised *Adajya* very highly, and in almost all its aspects. But the opinions of critics do not usually influence me much. For example, the film "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" was highly acclaimed by film critics and experts of the Western world, (and our own film experts too followed suit!) I think the main song of the picture too won an Oscar. But after I saw the picture, I felt almost compelled to say that 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid' was a disgusting film that it was immoral, and should be banned. I was fortunate to find at least a few who agreed with me. One was William Whitebait, of the popular old newspaper, the 'New Statesman', and another was C. A. Lejeune of London's prestigious paper 'The Observer'. We have some film critics like them here in Assam too, and from what they had to say about *Adajya*, I feel that we can be very hopeful of a bright future for the Assamese film industry.

However that maybe, in spite of the fact that most of the Assamese newspapers are almost unreadable, I usually read their reports on Assamese films. The other day, - 8/6/'97 to be exact, - I read an interview with the producer of *Adajya*, Dr. Santana Bordoloi, in 'The Sentinel'. After finishing the usual felicitations, and words of praise the interviewer asked her some general questions like what inspired her to make the picture, why she selected Mamoni Raisom's story, who her favourite producer was etc., I saw one question which stopped me short.

"Did you have to face any problems or difficulties when you were making the film?" she was asked, "Where did you shoot the film?"

Dr. Bordoloi replied that there were scenes with an elephant in the picture, and one night it broke away from its chain and went off somewhere, once one of the actresses fell ill. Another time, they had to use the generator when shooting a night scene, but....

I was shocked! They had just one generator! How much light could they hope to generate with just one generator, for shooting an entire scene? What paucity of necessities! And this was supposed to be a Film Company! I did not know whether to laugh or to cry. This was no way to go about producing a 'hit' film! If one really wanted to produce a film, I thought, visualize a scene like this -

A rather out of the way place in either Maharashtra or even Arunachal. It was night, but below the hills, an area was bright and dazzling, lit with numerous bulbs and halogen lamps. The nearest town that had electricity was at least 15 kilometres away, - or maybe it could be even as far away as 50 kilometres. But that, it seemed, did not matter. A cable had been drawn from there to this remote area, most probably after having spent several lakhs of rupees to satisfy various officials and staff of the Electricity Board. But that was hardly anything, because although the film may not be a "super-hit", it would undoubtedly be a "hit" picture and would fetch a few crores at the least. At this moment only some tents of various sizes, a few cars and vans could be seen in the lighted area. Scattered here and there were also some men and

women, - producers, directors etc.- seated around tables, enjoying tea, coffee, soft and hard drinks , and a variety of snacks. Amidst the conversation and laughter, strains of American pop music could be heard in the background, played from stereos. It was as though the people were enjoying a party in a relaxed and cheerful mood. There was no sign now of all the work and running around that were part of producing a film:- the director in a white hat looking through the camera, the camera man himself examining and adjusting the lighting etc. through the gadget hanging from his neck, someone pushing the boom of the mike to the exact position, and the assistants and helpers shouting instructions, helpers pushing and pulling the huge arc lights to the required position, and so on. The actual 'shooting' of the film would take place in the day time. But now, in the darkness of the night, the dazzling electric lights were so bright that even the stars above were eclipsed; the natural phenomena in the region outside the lighted area also were hidden from view. The actors and actresses were not there, but the producer was to be seen, going from one table to the other. He seemed to be in a happy mood, - and why not? He had had to cancel a number of 'shootings' due to the inclinations and desires of the very high profile and popular stars he was using. But both had come, albeit separately, and graced the place of 'shooting'. The hero was popularly known as "Big Bee". Why Big Bee, one may justly ask. Well, - because, apparently, there was no 'flower' whose 'nectar' he had not tasted at some time or other, no 'villain' who had not felt his vicious sting at some time or other.... At the moment he was in his specially made tent, busy discussing something with his hangers-on and fans. Bee was getting on in years now, and white streaks were visible in his full bushy hair. Fine wrinkles could be discerned here and there on his famous face, and there were dark circles under his eyes. But that did not really matter, - he could still frolic around trees singing suggestive songs, and chasing the heroines, as he had done twenty years ago! He could be a pistol-happy hero, shooting round after round of bullets, could, when necessary, fight his enemies, punching, walloping, and trouncing them all by himself! There was no doubt that our Big Bee could carry on in this manner for quite some more years. And he still has the capacity to drive the spectators sitting on the benches in the front, - the third class, - almost wild with admiration and enthusiasm, whistling and applauding as their hero of heroes overcomes all obstacles and emerges winner! Indeed these fans of Big Bee do not expect him to do anything else; they do not know or care whether he can act in any other way, in any other character. So, all he has to do is to carry out his part in the same way as he used to do twenty years back, - deliver dramatic and unrealistic dialogues while capering around, sing songs and violently box and beat up his opponents. And this will ensure that his film will be a 'box office hit', earning enormous returns for the producers. The film makers of Hollywood, France and England do not seem to realize this simple thing. As a result they go to a great deal of trouble to find suitable parts for their famous but ageing actors and actresses. When this particular film was being organized, and prepared, its producer happened to get a pirated video copy of an American film before it was formally released in the cinema halls there. The hero of that picture was Sean O' Connery, who used to act the part of the popular and famous "007 James Bond" who was getting older now. But it was found that the muscular body and the accompanying powerful, vigorous and formidable actions could not be laid upon our Big Bee. So the producer brought in some 'hi-tech' special effects from there and filled his picture with them.

But whatever that may be, the producer was all smiles today,- the so difficult to get heroine had at long last arrived on the scene, after having cancelled several 'shootings', - the lovely Natiza herself. Indeed, some much younger, equally beautiful,

and more uninhibited actresses had come onto the film scenario and tried to steal her place. But Natiza still reigned supreme so far as the 'box office' was concerned.... The producer was happy no doubt, but he was not completely free from anxiety. Things had not gone as smoothly as he would have liked. On their way from the town, the actress and her party had experienced an unpleasant and undesirable incident. There had been a rumour, fed by the film magazines and newspapers, that she had recently become estranged from her husband. It was also reported that she had been seen in 'intimate' situations with some upcoming actors and industrialists. In fact, some enterprising photographers had also managed to take a few photos in those strategic moments! The actress's highly strung nature, and fiery temper were well known. It was also no secret that that she was apt to take a peg or two more than she could handle in parties, and that she often created 'scenes' on such occasions (which were not rare). Of course her press agents always tried to brush these away as false, saying that they were merely attempts by her unsuccessful rivals to malign her image. It was also rumoured that her favourite things were French perfume, Italian shoes and marble, and the latest and fastest luxury cars from America, - not racing cars, but the most stylish and sleek, fast automobiles.... It was just such a car that was speeding down the road from the town. There were three other cars with her. About five miles away from the Ra village, when they had to turn onto the *kuttcha* village road, the driver did not think of lessening the high speed, and he hit a cyclist and a bullock cart that were proceeding unsuspectingly and leisurely along the same road. The hapless cyclist was thrown off from his bicycle, and he crashed into a tree hitting his head against the trunk, while the bullock cart toppled over, tipping the sacks of flour it was loaded with onto the bullock and the driver, pinning both under the heavy weight. Both lay helpless under the sacks with broken limbs, until the village people came and pulled them out. The cyclist died soon after due to excessive loss of blood. The driver of the bullock cart and the bullock were later pulled out, and the man was taken to the local hospital for treatment.

There were no paddy fields nearby, and since this place was where the jungles began, there were hardly any actual eye witnesses. But the few who happened to see the incident said later, that after the accident the car braked and stopped for a few seconds. The occupants craned their necks out of the windows and looked at what had happened from inside the car, before speeding away again without even bothering to find out whether the victims of the accident needed any assistance. By the time the witnesses had come running to the spot, the cars had vanished round the bend in the distance.... Well naturally! Natiza and her companions had come on important work, and could not afford to waste time on something as trivial as a roadside accident! The producer too understood this. After all just one day's 'shooting' involved lakhs of rupees and the shooting of an entire film involved crores. So after quickly consulting with his advisers he sent two delegates with a big brief case full of notes to the place of the accident, so that they could meet the relatives of the injured and the dead and give them large amounts of money as compensation. The police and the newspaper reporters too would be given small gifts, - in the shape of notes and bottles, - in order to hush up the whole incident. It would be explained to them that an accident was after all an accident; it was destiny and was in God's hands, - and no one was to blame for it. So it was unnecessary to raise a hue and cry about it, or to make any distorted report about it in the newspapers. This would only harm the production of a really great film and be an obstacle in its path.....

Thus, on the whole, the producer was quite happy and satisfied. Once this minor problem had been overcome, work on the film should proceed according to

schedule. But as he soon realized, the horizon was not quite clear as yet. There were some young reporters these days who did not understand anything, and who were obstinately bent on reporting everything. Neither money nor any other "gift" could sway them from what they considered to be their duty. And unbelievable though it may seem, there were some police personnel here and there too whom nothing could bend from the path of what they considered to be their duty! The only way they could be stopped was to have them transferred, which was not easy. Our producer had on occasion to include a few ideal and highly principled policemen as characters in his films in order to satisfy the censors. And these one track minded fools seemed to take those policemen of the cinemas as the norm! What would happen to his film if Natiza was somehow trapped in a police case at this stage! No no! He could not allow that! There were always ways and means to get a "stay order", at least for some time. The main thing was that, if the weather permitted, the 'shooting' must be started next day. This location was ideal,- there was a small river spanned by a beautiful little bridge, against a background of blue-green hills, with lovely colourful wild flowers scattered here and there. Birds and butterflies of all hues flew about and around the picturesque trees and shrubs, interspersed by rocks and stones of various sizes. Everything, in fact, was ready, as though only waiting for the hero and Natiza to play out their frolicking scenes of love making! In the meantime, - (as though, to quote a popular saying, the Ramayan was ready before Ram had even appeared,) - one of the most sought after and popular music directors of the cinema world, Bapre Malik, had already composed the theme music of the film, fusing Rimskey Korsakov's Russian folk music with the rhythm and music of America's well known and popular 'Rap group', The Stringers. There was no doubt at all that this song would be a 'hit!' In the beginning, the producer had thought of shooting this scene in Switzerland, in the snow covered slopes of the hills there. But finally he had to give up that idea, and choose this place. There was a fighting scene as soon as the song and music was finished, and it was decided that this would not be feasible in the midst of all the snow! The scene involved some lascivious villains who would jump on Natiza from among some bushes and try to overwhelm her. At the last moment, her lover, the hero Big Bee, would arrive on the scene, - a fearless and skilled warrior, protector and saviour of women, - suddenly jumping down from a tree on to a small hillock, and single - handed routing the villains by raining down blows and gunfire on them. As usual, he alone could cope with more than a hundred of them!

A mafia don from Dubai had financed the film, and he had made it clear from the very beginning that he wanted it be full of violence, - gun battles, knives and daggers etc. in the hands of all - both hero and villain. And on the posters he wanted pictures of men with bloody faces and bodies oozing bright red blood! Besides, he also wanted pictures of scantily dressed females, - lots of them. These had to be mirrored again and again until the entire milieu was filled with the notion that all these, - viciousness, lust, hatred, immorality, - were the right things; until the minds of the people filled with pictures and ideas of such things became weary and tired, and finally accepted that this was the natural way of life, - that this indeed was what life was all about. Naturally a film financed by the Mafia had to project "mafia culture", the culture of war and conflict, of corruption and deceit, - and lust for power and for women! There was no place for justice, or compassion in this world. There was no place for anything other violence and immorality!

So, cinema making was a 'business'. There was nothing like art or the projection of truth involved in it. The film makers were not concerned with what the spectators might want, whether they were entertained and relaxed by the film, or

really enjoyed it in the real sense, or whether there was any ideology represented that people could strive towards; whether the ills of society were mirrored, so that there could be an awareness of these. A film, for these cinema makers was a saleable commodity, - and their only concern as to make as much money out of it as possible. In short, all a film maker had to do was to take the same basic ingredients, shuffle them around and make their pictures. When nothing else was on offer, this "package" would draw hundreds of spectators to see these films, and money would keep pouring on to the laps of these unprincipled and unscrupulous producers.

But there was a time when we went to the cinema halls to be entertained,- to laugh a bit, to be filled with harmless suspense for a while, or to sympathise with or become emotional with the ups and downs of human life and nature. And the film makers of those days made their pictures with a thought for what the ordinary people sought for in the cinema halls. Fortunately there are still some film producers who strive to make such films, whose posters are attractive and non -violent. Often going out to distract our minds, - maybe because we are happy, or maybe depressed, - we happen to see posters on the walls of movie houses with pictures of the Marx Brothers, or Bob Hope, Danny Kaye etc. And after spending an hour and a half inside the hall, the audience would come out refreshed and entertained. Walking along we would happen to see an advertisement of an Alfred Hitchcock film, starring James Stewart and Kim Novak, and after standing in the queue for sometime we would enter the hall to be thrilled with curiosity and suspense for two hours. In this way, we would line up to watch films produced by well-known Studios, featuring popular and highly skilled actors like for example the famous Ealing studio, or the actor Alec Guinness or Ralph Richardson etc. Such pictures stirred universal human emotions, sympathy, and responsiveness. The audience could identify themselves and their feelings with those represented by the characters of the film they were watching. These were also kind of lessons in how varied emotions could be expressed through a few skilful changes in the actions and expressions by seasoned and good actors., whether they be wit or humour, or sorrow, compassion etc. These pictures could be Western movies, starring great actors like John Wayne, Gary Cooper or Alan Ladd, or they might be Musical hits with Doris Day, Jean Kelly, Bing Crosby, 'Rogers and Hammerstein'. Another film would have a cast of, say, Spencer Tracy, and Katherine Hepburn, Gregory Peck and those most skilled actors of villainy, Rod Steiner, Humphrey Bogart and Jack Palance.....These films too had their full share of all the elements that we find in our pictures too There was suspense and thrill, there was violence, gunfire and fighting; lust for power too, leading in many cases to vicious and gruesome murder. There was romance, and sex, and crime, and what you will. But the difference was that everything was related to the plot, to incidents in the story. That is, these films did not present violence and murder, sex and lust ,merely as a means to attract a particular section of people, and to ensure a 'box office' hit. It was included because it was necessary for the art of the cinema. ...

People do not go to see a picture in order to cry. But sometimes, in a mood of depression, when the weather too is damp and gloomy, with drizzling rain, and the footpath covered with slippery sleet, as for example in the streets of the area around Paddington in those days, - an area frequented mostly by the lower middle class, - when one longs for a hot cup of tea. But there are no tea shops nearby. But one comes across a rather small, but well known cinema hall, - the Odeon or the Gaumont, -and sees it as a haven of entertainment. The film being shown was "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn". Brooklyn, I knew, was one of the poorer sections of New York, and I decided to see it. There was no queue for tickets, maybe due to the weather,

and I walked up the few steps to the counter to find the girl there sitting bored and drowsing. The picture was going on inside the hall. In those days, there was always a film being shown continuously. For example, the show would start with the main film. Then there might be a short cartoon, followed maybe by a couple of advertisements. These would often be followed by a short film, - a B-movie, - and a few news reels, and then the main film again. Thus there would be a continuous showing of cinemas, and a person could buy a ticket and enter and leave as he wished, throughout the day, picking up the main picture where he had left it.

Entering the hall, I saw what looked exactly like the street which I had just left, and the people too looked similar.- It was a street in Brooklyn, lined by houses which had become quite familiar after watching a number of American films. Snow fell onto the roofs of these houses, and the scene looked very vivid,- not like something being merely represented artificially on a cinema screen.....

After taking my seat inside the warm and cosy hall, and seeing the familiar and vivid scene on the screen, all my exhaustion, and lethargy of mind and spirit vanished. The picture was about an ordinary family, - their joys and sorrows, their small disappointments etc. unfamiliar. It was a more or less ordinary story of any middle class family, and in spite of some things that were unfamiliar, one could identify oneself with it. I had become quite engrossed in the film, when I suddenly heard sounds of soft weeping from round the hall. Looking around I saw the handkerchiefs of the women who were moved to tears - of compassion and sympathy - by the story of the film, which was based on real and common things of the life of general people. Then I realized that there were drops of tears in the corners of my eyes too, and quickly wiped them away. I sat there until the picture came to the beginning again, and I saw that its director was the famous Elia Kazan. I had seen some of his films before, films that had an uniqueness about them, like for example, the films "A Streetcar named Desire", "Panic in the Streets", "On the Waterfront". After that I tried my best not to miss any picture by Elia Kazan, - and I have never been disappointed. Every one of them was marked by the same faultless direction and style of production; the same beautiful and skilful characterization. But at the same time, it all seemed so effortless, so easy. There was no kind of artificial straining after effect, no visible attempt to make the film a 'box office hit'! It is not that there was no sex or violence. But it was never forced, - it came naturally with the needs of the plot. And most important of all was the fact that nothing, - neither sex nor violence, nor any other element, was used at the cost of truth to life. The actualities of life were not sacrificed for the sake of the 'box office'. One of his films based on sex and suspense was his film based on Tennessee Williams' story, "Baby Doll". The entire picture was serious and the viewers had no occasion throughout to laugh or be light hearted. He kept the audience spellbound by arousing their emotions and feelings through a highly skilled representation of what can be termed only as a deep intellectual anxiety. It afforded the spectators an entirely new experience in the art of cinematography. At the same time, it was not as though the producer and director were thinking of the 'box office'. A film company after all, is not a charitable organization, and it has to make some profit. But their first priority must be what they will offer to the public. It may turn out to be box office hit; it may even break all records; it may win the Oscar, or be declared as a top hit at the Venice Film Festival. But all that comes later.....Against this, let us consider the thoughts of our own directors and producers.- 'Let the cinema goers feel and think what they like, - we will pour bottles and bottles of tomato ketchup on the faces and bodies of our actors, making them all gory and blood spattered. The spectators will be in a state of high anxiety and suspense, - and

money will come pouring in.....' As against this, I remember a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's famous horror picture, "Psycho". Hitchcock started shooting the film in colour, but after a large part of the shooting was over, he was shocked when he saw the scene of the murdered girl coming out frighteningly bloody and perturbing. So in spite of the fact that a few thousand feet of the film had already been shot, Hitchcock stopped it and started shooting the entire picture again in black and white. He thought that the very horror of the gruesome scene might have the opposite effect from that which he wanted to represent. It is probably because of this concern for the audience, - together with some other concerns, - that whoever has seen the film can never forget the thrill of suspense and fear that "Psycho" generates. It has been a long time since I saw the film, "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn". I am sure that when the film was being made, the primary concern of the producer, director, as well as the actors and actresses, was how they could best bring out the story of an ordinary, poor family, - how to arouse the compassion and human sympathy of the spectators. This was the concern that occupied the skill and art of all the people involved in the making of the picture. And that is the reason that even today, so many decades after seeing the film, I can still vividly remember the impression created on my mind, although I do not remember the actual story. Indeed I cannot say with any certainty whether the same feelings will be aroused in my much older mind today, a mind filled with cynicism due to many reasons. But what I do say is that even when I watched it so many years ago, I was not an immature person!...

Now, after having diverted from my main topic for so long, let me get back to where I left off, - the interview with the producer of *Adajya*. Let me go back to this question: "Did you face any particular problems as a female producer?"

"None at all," she replied. "We were a close knit group with an understanding with each other, and all of us cooperated with each other at all times. That is why there was never any unpleasant incident while making the picture."

That meant that here too was the same single minded devotion to making the film as acceptable to the public as was to be seen in the making of the western pictures I have mentioned, - the question that had stopped me short. - "Were there any problems while shooting the picture?". And the answer, "There is an elephant in the picture, and one day it broke away from its chain and disappeared. One of the actresses fell ill; and we had to use a generator to shoot some night scenes. That created a big problem for us, because of the loud noise it created. We did not know that a boy from the area was preparing for his final examinations. ...When we came to know about it next morning, we had to shift our location from there. Of course, later we returned to the same place. But shifting all the equipment and people from one place to another and then coming back again was not only difficult, but also involved a great expense."

I wonder, is there any other example in the history of film making, of a producer concerning herself with the difficulties caused to a young unknown village boy studying for an ordinary matriculation examination, and relocating the site at such an expense?

I have read that the main theme of the film was to make the people aware of some of the unfair and obnoxious customs and traditions of the olden times that were carried over to the 20th. century. In order to do that it would be necessary that the film maker have ample human sympathy and compassion. I am sure that such an attempt, if carried out sincerely and with no other aim in view, cannot but touch the hearts and minds of the audience..."

I have not yet seen the picture, so I cannot say with any certainty how I will feel about it. The paucity of funds, limited experience and the limited conveniences available to the producers will definitely have a somewhat negative impact. But overriding all these, I feel that my feeling will be a sense of relief that we have not completely lost that fellow feeling, that universal human sympathy and compassion, and dissatisfaction at unjust treatment of innocent sufferers at the hands of some callous, tradition bound people. I will end this article by quoting what the Times of India (13/7/1997) had to say about it... "It seems that this year the arts of creativity have gone down another notch, almost touching the lowest level. In the National Film Festival this year, even the more skilful of film makers have proved unable to satisfy the expectations of the mature connoisseurs of cinema.....However even in the midst of this general lack of right direction and right aim, there were a few films that earned the praise and approbation of the judges of the festival. Santana Bordoloi's *Adajya*"