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# Tracing Bodo Film Festival: The Makings of a Local Film Festival

By Ankush Bhuyan

28 April 2017: I am near the Indo-Bhutan border in a village called Dimakuchi in the Udalguri district of Assam in Northeast India. There are hundreds of people around me and we are in a large field where temporary tents are pitched. Lightning flashes in the sky as people huddle together under a slight drizzle. The faces of the crowd are all turned to one direction, captivated by the spectacle of dance, song and entertainment on the makeshift stage as though they are under a spell. As the compere monotonously calls for the next performer in line for the *Master of Dance* competition, I wonder if this is the Bodo Film Festival I was invited to, and how I am supposed to make sense of it.



Figures 1 and 2: Pictures from the ABAA Conference, a glimpse of the location and setting.



Figure 2

This was my first impression of the event I had come to attend which was the *2nd Bodo Film Festival, 2017*. An initiative of the Bodo Cine Artistes'

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Association (BCAA), the film festival turned out to be part of a larger two-day cultural event called the *ABAA Conference*,<sup>[1]</sup> which had song and dance competitions offering lucrative prize money, followed by cultural performances, seminar on the state of Bodo films and a felicitation ceremony for those who have contributed to the Bodo community.<sup>[2]</sup> The *2nd Bodo Film Festival* was at the end of the two-day event on 29 April, 2017, and was the main highlight where awards were given to Bodo video films of the previous year, 2016.<sup>[3]</sup> It was attended by well-known Bodo artists, dignitaries, and a large public gathering who came to watch the spectacle of an award ceremony. It was presented in the format of any mainstream award show with presenters, performances and award categories such as best film, best director, best actor, best actress, etc. There were no film screenings where a jury and audience watch selected films in different competitive categories. However, a jury had pre-decided the winners, and at the ceremony, they were announced and felicitated with a trophy and a certificate. The event as a whole was a rollercoaster of competitions, performances, festivity, and artists, and in all its confusion and cacophony was a highly sensorial experience in itself. It offered a unique insight into the thriving world of Bodo entertainment and film culture, with its many dreams and aspirations. And offered possible layered and intertwined connections between Bodo video films and the Bodo Film Festival.

To begin with, it was Bodo video films which led me to discover a relatively new but thriving industry and film culture in parts of Assam that produces what are locally called video films or VCD films. My first brush with Bodo video films was on the internet in the form of video clips, photos, and posters, on Facebook and YouTube. When I started my research, I quickly realised that while these films were sold to the public earlier through VCDs, this practice had already ceased due to piracy which made VCD distribution unfeasible.<sup>[4]</sup> This was my first lesson in understanding just how dynamic the infrastructure of such films can be, where practices can emerge and be abandoned in the span of a few years. Delving deeper into the world of Bodo video filmmaking, I discovered more about its flexibility and bricoleur practices in its use of informal networks for its production, distribution and exhibition, bypassing legal regulations, and cohabiting with allied media objects such as music videos, and the more hegemonic Assamese and Hindi film industries. It was in the course of my fieldwork that I received an invitation from my interview subjects, who are Bodo filmmakers and actors, to attend the two-day event on 'Bodo films' to be held on 28-29 April, 2017.

The body of Bodo video films are a direct outcome of the relatively cheap availability of digital equipment and technology from the late 1990s, which has contributed to the rise of locally made films in the various languages of this region. Most Bodo video filmmakers are amateurs who

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are otherwise engaged in businesses or salaried professions, and the budget for such films usually ranges from rupees forty thousand to rupees seven lakh (approximately four hundred to seven thousand five hundred British pounds).

The organisers of the event, the Bodo Cine Artistes' Association's (BCAA) objective is to focus on the ways in which Bodo video films could be standardised so that they are recognised as a legitimate form of Bodo cinema, and not just amateur filmmakers who are making video films circulating in liminal spaces. The journey of BCAA started a decade ago when a group of Bodo artistes from different cultural fields, who primarily went on picnic trips together that served as a mode of socialising and networking, decided to initiate a cultural organisation for their cause. One of their endeavours has been to organise the annual cultural event over the past decade, the *ABAA Conference*, to bring together Bodo artists to showcase their talent, and it is also a meeting point for interaction and deliberation for future directions. This was the germination for what was until recently called All Bodo Artistes' Association (ABAA) and is now BCAA (see endnote one). After forming a recognised body under the Societies Registration Act, 1860, and working towards the establishment of Bodo artists by organising cultural events and working as a society that promotes Bodo art and culture. The organisation recently decided to refocus their goal largely towards the upliftment of Bodo video films, and also initiated the Bodo Film Festival from 2016. They also launched an annual Bodo film and cultural magazine called *Bao Suthung Mulung*.

In its functioning, the BCAA has a decentralised structure and it is present in about thirteen of the thirty-three districts in Assam. The structure of the organisation is elaborate and complex. The president is elected from the executive body for a period of three years. Apart from the president, there are three vice-presidents, a general secretary, a cultural secretary, and in the districts where BCAA has a presence, there is an elected president, general secretary and joint secretary. BCAA comprises of artists, filmmakers, singers and dancers, and includes well-known members such as the celebrated filmmaker and cultural icon Jwngdao Bodosa who made the first nationally recognised Bodo film in celluloid, *Alayaron (The Dawn, 1986)*, which won him a National Award.[\[5\]](#)

In 2016, the *1st Bodo Film Festival* was held to focus exclusively on providing a platform for Bodo video filmmakers, artists and films, and to shed the undesired label of video/VCD films. The association is also implementing strategies to archive Bodo video films, as most of the older Bodo language films are either lost or in very poor condition. As a result, BCAA started collecting VCDs of Bodo video films from 2015 to store

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them in their head office in Kokrajhar in Assam. Crucially, films registered with the BCAA would be able to compete for awards under thirteen categories at the annual Bodo Film Festival. Twenty-one films in 2016 were registered, and these were judged and awarded by a selected jury at the *2nd Bodo Film Festival*. Registration with BCAA would provide the films and filmmakers a certain level of recognition and legitimacy within the local film and artists' fraternity.

### **Highlights from the *2nd Bodo Film Festival***

A schedule of the programme was shared with me beforehand with a map of the venue (figure four), and I left early in the morning to cover the distance and reach on time. From the village, I was directed to a large field where a big rectangular marquee was put up facing a half open-air stage, which had other smaller tents nearby.<sup>[6]</sup> The tent had a divider placed in between to separate the crowd from the invited guests, the latter being marked with a 'VIP' label for artists and delegates.<sup>[7]</sup> The registration counter was on the side under a separate awning, and a generator van stood at the opposite end. As the day progressed, large traditional bamboo replicas of fishing baskets were placed on the field and a glittering market of tiny make-shift shops sprang up near the entrance.

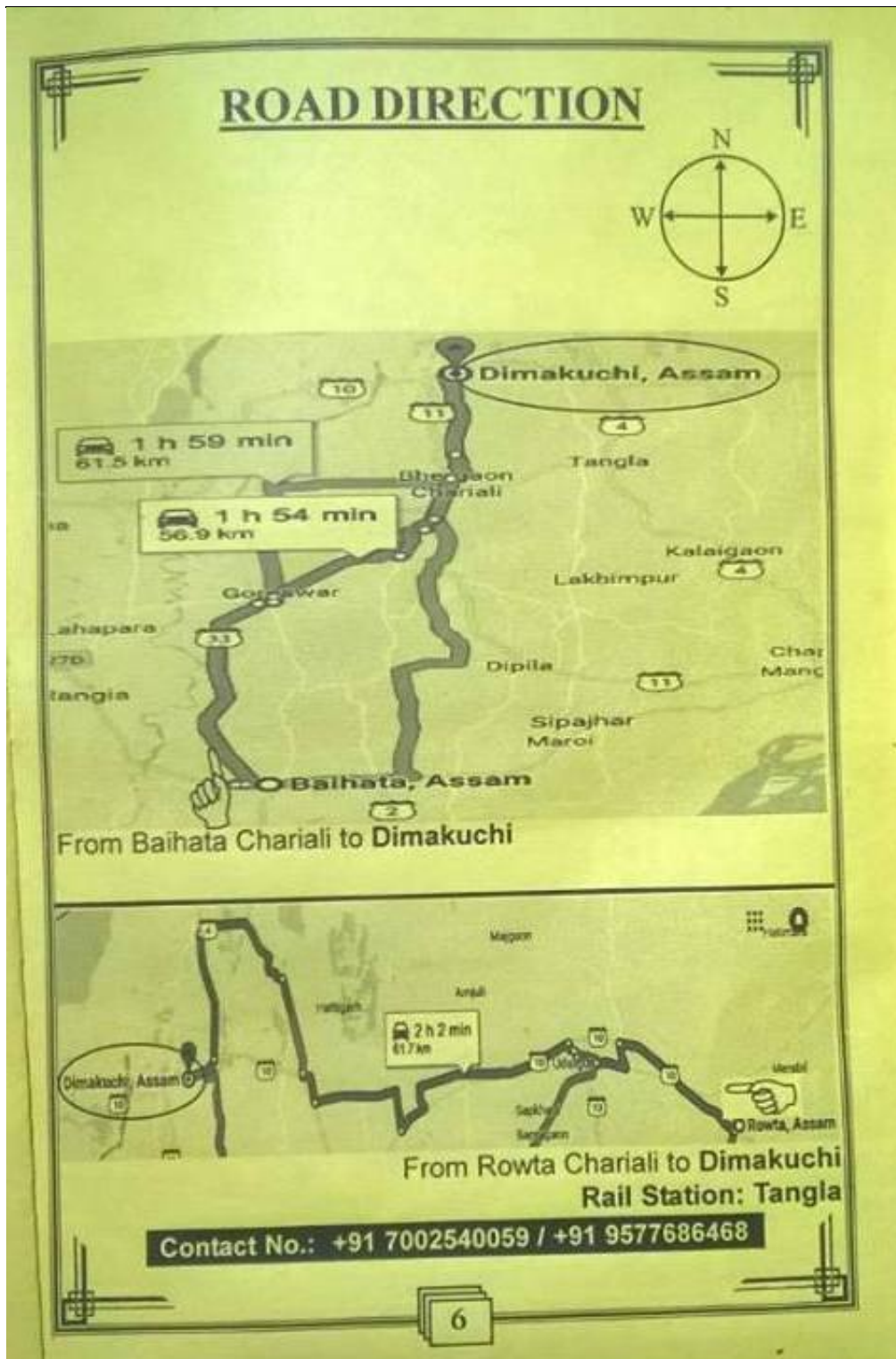


Figure 3: A road map to the village of Dimakuchi, the venue of the 2nd Bodo Film Festival and the ABAA Conference.

While I was watching the song and dance competitions, I met Ron Narzary who is a young student working in Bodo video films. He told me that even though the show is still quite disorganised, it is an improvement

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from the past.[\[8\]](#) I also gathered that Bodo video films post-VCDs are now through ticketed screenings during the main Bodo religious/folk festival season, which starts in the month of September and wraps up by the month of March in the following year. Afterwards, such films find a second life when they are released on YouTube. Both these modes of film distribution are important, with the religious/folk festival season providing the main commercial earnings and the online distribution generating interest in audiences and often resulting in more employment for the cast and crew. During the local religious/folk festival season,

Figure 4: A screenshot from Google Maps of the distance between the major city of Guwahati, which houses the capital of Assam, and Dimakuchi.

Bodo video films are screened in non-urban areas in a makeshift tent near the main *pandal* (the temporary marquee where the God/Goddess is kept

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for worship), much like the whole cultural event including the Bodo film festival at Dimakuchi was organised in a public field with temporary tents. Narzary and others also informed me that Dimakuchi isn't popular for Bodo video films, but the reason behind organising the event in such an area is to create a market and an audience through it. This is also the reason why the event is held in different towns and villages every year in order to generate local interest towards Bodo artists and films, as well as organising competitions.

The final event, the *2nd Bodo Film Festival* started many hours later than the scheduled time. The stage was decorated with lights and a crane with a camera was placed in front to record the show, which kept blocking the audience's view of the stage. Moreover, despite the light rain that fell on the half-covered stage and on the equipment, which was covered with tarpaulin, the show went on. The big winners of the night were *Khwina* (directed by Phaylaw Basumatary, 2016) and *Nepal to Bodoland* (directed by Swapan Brahma, 2016).<sup>[9]</sup> As the awards were handed out, artistes were invited to perform and entertain the audience with dance steps, songs and dialogues from famous Bodo and Hindi films. The hosts for the award show were two Bodo actresses who were most likely not given prior direction as they talked over each other and awkwardly stood not knowing which way to face or receive people on the stage. But for the crowd, it was a chance to glimpse local stars who were examples of Bodo people who had garnered success, and a moment of Bodo pride.





Figure 5: A still from the 2nd Bodo Film Festival at the end of the two-day ABAA Conference.

Jesus Kherkatary, who makes Bodo video films and one of the organisers of the event, informed me that in the future the BCAA would like the programme to be televised and ticketed.[\[10\]](#) He said that it should be more systematic and organised at recognised auditoriums like Rabindra Bhawan or Pragjyoti Cultural Complex in Guwahati, which can hold large gatherings, and has the reputation of hosting international level functions and events. He says BCAA faces issues with crowd management and a lack of seriousness that plagues the way the event is organised and received.[\[11\]](#)



Figure 6: Jesus Kherkatary (second from left) with the new trophy for the best negative role (male) for Khwina at the 2nd Bodo Film Festival.



Figure 7: Swapan Kumar Brahma (left) receiving the best director award for Nepal to Bodoland (2016).

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BCAA is trying to work with the local government to improve the state of Bodo films by advocating the need for cinema halls in Bodo areas and training workshops for filmmakers and artists. One of the main complaints of some of the Bodo filmmakers I interviewed have been that Bodo video films are copies of Hindi films, and they lack professional and formal structure. The producer often serves as the director and the lead actor, and then hires the cast and crew from among family and friends. However, a few directors such as Phaylaw Basumatary, Swapan Kumar Brahma and Rabi Narzary are now trying to make their filmmaking more professional with elaborate plots, song and dance, and action sequences with VFX. The desire for greater professionalism seems to largely rest on emulating practices of established film industries.

### **Implications of the Bodo Film Festival**

On my way back from the festival/award ceremony at night, I passed by quite a few other stage shows in open fields but nothing as big as the one I was returning from. The stage shows were organised because of the *Bohag/Rongali Bihu* festival which happens every year in April. This is the harvest festival marking the Assamese New Year, where cultural stage shows are organised with folk music, songs and dance. They form an integral part of popular entertainment in Assam, and it is one of the driving forces of the cultural industry of the region. It was then that it started to make sense as to why the so-called 'Bodo film festival' had such a format. The combination of singing and dance competitions with a film festival/award show further underlined the interconnected nature of culture, art, tradition, and entertainment. It was a reaffirmation of how both the Bodo Film Festival and Bodo video films have their roots in such forms of localised mass entertainment, and the advent of digital technology has enabled them to foray into filmmaking which is both a new beginning and a continuation of older entertainment traditions integral to community life of the region.

As with digital film subcultures elsewhere in the world, Bodo video filmmaking seems to be in the throes of a transition, and it is deeply enmeshed in the germination of the Bodo Film Festival. The BCAA organising the Bodo Film Festival is clearly an attempt to make Bodo filmmaking more formal and draws heavily from the model set by big film industries. Film festivals, magazines, conferences, certification and archives are all concepts that have had a long history in the pre-digital, and their adoption by BCAA is also a hybridisation of those practices.[\[12\]](#) Moreover, in the case of the Bodo Film Festival, the infrastructural logic of localised filmmaking is mimicking the vocabulary of well-known and 'well-respected' forms purely in the pursuit of legitimacy, even though in practice the Bodo Film Festival is rooted in a very different infrastructure that is informal.

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This central purpose of seeking legitimacy brings us to question the ontology of film festivals, how it is created, how it is bestowed on a certain practice, and most importantly, the political economy of cinema that this entire regime of legitimacy establishes. The vocabulary of 'amateur', and the binary logic of 'meaningful' and 'trashy', 'serious' and 'non-serious', 'high' and 'low', is very much rooted in this value hierarchy created through infrastructures that prescribe, control and regulate their usage. The hegemony of such logic is clearly demonstrated when Bodo filmmakers themselves consider their work to be second-rate when compared to more established industries, and submit to this hegemonic system through their attempt to adapt the idea of a film festival in order to achieve a certain 'standard'.

The present format of the Bodo Film Festival does provide a larger and more encompassing idea of what a film festival could be, of a filmmaking practice and film culture that contributes to the growing understanding of the nature of digital cinema, of informality and how it has been adapted in places where filmmaking is a relatively unstructured profession. This is a cinema by the people, and my participation in the Bodo film festival gave me a glimpse of the ways in which the advent of the digital turn in cinema has posed newer challenges to the normative understanding of film and film festivals, and perhaps telling us, once again, that the very nature of the cinematic medium is unstable, undefined and elastic.

## Notes

[1] All Bodo Artistes' Association (ABAA) was renamed to Bodo Cine Artistes' Association (BCAA), which was announced during the two-day event, *ABAA Conference*, held on 28-29 April, 2017.

[2] The Bodos are one of the largest ethnic and linguistic tribe from the multi-ethnic state of Assam in Northeast India. They are settled primarily on the upper regions of the Brahmaputra river, with smaller populations in the state of West Bengal, and nearby countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Over the last couple of decades, the Bodoland Movement for an independent state carved out of present-day Assam has witnessed outbreaks of violence based on ethnicity, identity and land ownership. Identity based politics in the recent history of the state has led to conflict and large scale displacements of local population of different identities in certain parts of the state. See, James B. Minahan, *Ethnic Groups of South Asia and the Pacific: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 42-44, Print.

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[3] For a list of all Bodo films, in which most of them are Bodo video films, please see, “List of Bodo-language films,” Wikipedia, accessed April 11, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Bodo-language\\_films](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Bodo-language_films); and, Listbodolist Blog, accessed June 7, 2016, <http://thebodotribe.blogspot.in/>

[4] Ankush Bhuyan, “A Post-Cinematic Landscape: Bodo Cinema After the Digital Turn” (MPhil diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2018), Print.

[5] *Alayaron* is not a video film as it pre-dates it and is made on celluloid and it had a theatrical release with a certification from the Censor Board of Film Certification (CBFC) of India. Ajit Kr. Basumatary, “Jwngdao Bodosa–Jewel for Bodo silver screen,” *The Sentinel*, July 17, 2015, accessed August 5, 2016, <http://www.sentinelassam.com/sunday/pages/cover-story/0/2013-04-29/2>

[6] The organisers were gracious hosts who organised my stay with the delegates and participants from the Kamrup district, which was in a local school, as delegates and participants of each district were hosted in different locations.

[7] As a delegate from the Kamrup district, I was given a pass to sit at the VIP section, but I spent most of my time walking around, taking pictures and videos, interacting, and observing. I noticed after a couple of hours people were sitting wherever they found an empty chair, irrespective of the segregation, as it got crowded and people began to sit on the ground on both the sides of the tent near the stage. The ushers for the event who were directing the crowd were dressed in traditional Bodo attire lost track of who is a delegate or an invited guest and who is part of the audience. Only for the Bodo Film Festival I actively sought after a place at the VIP section to be able to watch it from close because of the large turnout of people, and the ushers were more particular who sat on the VIP section.

[8] Ron Narzary, interview by author, April 28, 2017.

[9] Khwina pronounced as /k<sup>h</sup>ɑ̃nə/. See, “Khwina,” Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, accessed July 4, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khwina>. See, “Nepal to Bodoland,” Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, accessed July 4, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nepal\\_To\\_Bodoland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nepal_To_Bodoland).

[10] Jesus Kherkatary, interview by author, Guwahati, December 29, 2016.

[11] Jesus Kherkatary gave examples where in the past well-known Bodo artists have gotten drunk with audience members, and it has led to drunken brawls.

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[12] My experience of the *2nd Bodo Film Festival* and the *ABAA Conference* elucidates the hybridity of such praxis.

### **Notes on the Contributor**

Ankush Bhuyan is presently pursuing a PhD in Cinema Studies from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). He has completed his Masters in Arts and Aesthetics and an MPhil in Cinema Studies from JNU. His MPhil dissertation was on Bodo digital films, music videos from Assam and its presence on social media. He was one of the recipients of the Social Media Research Grant for 2016 from The Sarai Programme, Centre for the Studies of Developing Societies (Sarai-CSDS), New Delhi. He has presented papers in national and international conferences previously at JNU, Sarai-CSDS, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, University of Oxford, etc. He also has pursued film appreciation courses and art appreciation courses at FTII, Pune, and at the National Museum, Delhi. His research interests are popular film forms, film history, music videos, social media, contemporary visual and performative art, to name a few.

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