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## Whispers from the Margins: The Historical Currents and Representational Tides of Assamese Cinema in Amplifying Indigenous Voices

**Mrs Phula Jyoti Saikia**

Assistant professor

Department of Assamese

Duliajan college

Emil: [Phulajyotikhaund@gmail.com](mailto:Phulajyotikhaund@gmail.com)

### **Abstract:**

This paper examines how Assamese cinema has historically reflected the marginalization of indigenous tribes, such as the Bodo, Mising, and Dimasa. Analyzing films from the pioneering era to the contemporary "Jollywood" revival, it identifies a critical tension: a mainstream "culture industry" that often commodifies tribal life versus emerging "sovereign voices" from within the communities. Through case studies like *Semkhor* and *Village Rockstars*, the study advocates for a decolonial future in filmmaking, arguing for ethical co-creations and institutional support to ensure that screens reflect Assam's genuine ethnic and cultural plurality.

### **Keywords:**

**Indigenous Voices in Assamese Cinema; Media Sovereignty vs Cultural Commodification; Tribal Representation under Hegemonic Gaze; Decolonial Filmmaking, Tribal Narratives through Cinema**

### **1.0: Introduction: The River and the Reel**

Assamese cinema, born from the fertile yet flood-torn banks of the Brahmaputra, stands as a poignant mirror to a state where unparalleled cultural richness coexists uneasily with profound marginalisation. In Assam, the Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities, comprising more than 12% of the population, along with other non-tribal indigenous groups, such as the tea-garden Adivasis, often have their stories overshadowed by the louder narratives of the dominant, plains-based Assamese identity. This paper confronts a pressing problem: how has Assamese cinema, over nearly a century, navigated the tension between its historical role as an assertion of a regional identity and the ethical imperative to represent these marginal lives—their

languages as living songs of resistance, their geographies as resilient tapestries of riverine and hilltop endurance?

The issue transcends mere visibility; it is one of dignity and respect. Films that commodify tribal "exoticism" as folklore props risk perpetuating intra-regional hegemonies, where non-tribal gazes standardise subaltern experiences into consumable spectacles. Drawing on Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's seminal critique of the "culture industry" (1947)—which warns of mass media's power to dilute authentic voices into pseudo-diverse commodities—and Faye Ginsburg's theory of indigenous media sovereignty (1991), which champions community-led reclamation of narrative agency, this work reveals a heartfelt dialectic at play. In a cinema historically shaped by elite patronage and national aspirations, whose stories truly surface? Moreover, how do these representations heal or harm the quiet wounds of exclusion, especially when controversies like *Semkhor* (2021) and *Axone* (2019) expose the raw pain of misrepresented tribal souls?

Assam's unique socio-political landscape exacerbates this problem: colonial legacies, ethnic agitations (e.g., the Bodoland Movement), perennial floods that erode sandbar villages, and a post-2000s digital revival that has led to an increase in production to over 50 films annually by 2025, yet unevenly favours urban, mainstream Assamese tales. This paper argues that the historical trajectory of Assamese cinema reveals a persistent tension between the hegemonic, commodifying gaze of the mainstream "culture industry," which has long marginalized and misrepresented indigenous communities, and the emergent, decolonial force of "media sovereignty," where tribal filmmakers reclaim narrative agency to present their own authentic realities, languages, and geographies, thereby transforming cinema from a tool of exclusion into a bridge for ethical representation and cultural healing.

## 2.0: Research Questions

This paper is guided by three interconnected research questions:

1. How has the historical evolution of Assamese cinema—from J.P. Agarwala's pioneering dreams to Rima Das's indie intimacies—reflected and reinforced the marginalisation of indigenous tribes, particularly in linguistic and geographic portrayals?
2. In films depicting Bodo, Mising, Rabha, Karbi, and Dimasa lives, whose hegemony dominates the gaze—non-tribal Assamese creators commodifying subaltern experiences, or emerging sovereign voices hybridising tradition with modernity?

3. Amid controversies like *Semkhor* and *Axone*, how do backlashes and community-led responses signal pathways for decolonial representation, transforming cinema into a humane bridge across ethnic divides?

### **3.0: Objectives:**

To answer these, the paper pursues four core objectives:

1. To trace Assam's cinematic history as a riverine chronicle, illuminating how early folklore fusions gave way to neorealist grit and digital hybridity, while spotlighting tribal undercurrents often swept aside.
2. To humanely dissect representations of marginal communities, weaving in substantial examples from Bodo, Mising, Rabha, Karbi, and Dimasa films, celebrating their linguistic warmth and geographic poetry.
3. To critically engage with controversies as mirrors of hegemonic fractures, exploring how outsider gazes wound while subaltern replies heal, guided by theories of the culture industry and sovereignty.
4. To propose actionable findings for decolonial futures: ethical co-productions that amplify tribal authorship, ensuring Assam's screens reflect not just survival, but the full spectrum of joy, grief, and unyielding hope.

### **4.0: Methodology: A Qualitative Framework for Mapping Cinematic Voices**

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze the representation of indigenous voices in Assamese cinema critically. The approach is interpretive, treating films as cultural artefacts embedded within specific socio-political power dynamics.

Two key theoretical lenses frame the analysis:

1. **The Culture Industry (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947):** Used to critique how mainstream filmmaking commodifies and standardizes tribal cultures.
2. **Indigenous Media Sovereignty (Ginsburg, 1991):** Employed to identify and analyze community-led films that reclaim narrative agency.

#### **4.0.1: Data collection**

It involves a purposively selected corpus of films, including mainstream Assamese features, indigenous-language films, and controversial case studies like *Semkhor* (2021) and *Axone* (2019). These primary sources are supplemented by secondary sources such as film scholarship, ethnographic studies, and—crucially—public discourse and community responses to controversies.

#### **4.0.2: Methods of analysis**

The methods of analysis are threefold:

1. **Historical-Trajectory Analysis** to map the evolution of representation across key industry eras.
2. **Critical Textual Analysis** to conduct close readings of films, focusing on linguistic representation, geographic portrayal, characterization, and cultural symbolism.
3. **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** to examine the language and power dynamics in the public debates surrounding controversial films, centering community voices.

The research acknowledges the author's positionality as a non-indigenous scholar and is guided by an ethical commitment to prioritizing community perspectives, avoiding epistemic violence, and striving for cultural accuracy. While the scope is limited to five major ST communities and accessibility of some films may be an issue, this methodology ensures a systematic and critical exploration of the central research questions.

## 5.0: The Results:

### 5.0.1: The Historical Trajectory of Assamese Cinema: A Riverine Chronicle

The history of Assamese cinema, much like the Brahmaputra it so often depicts, is one of powerful currents, meandering paths, and periodic floods that reshape its landscape. This trajectory can be mapped through distinct phases, each revealing the evolving relationship between the cinematic centre and the indigenous margins.

### 5.0.2: The Pioneering Era (1935-1950s): Birth and Nationalist Aspirations

The journey began with Jyotiprasad Agarwala's *Joymoti* (1935), a quixotic act of cultural midwifery. This first Assamese feature, a historical drama about the valour of an Ahom queen, was shot in the tea gardens of Bholaguri with rudimentary equipment, a venture that bankrupted its maker. However, it birthed an industry dreaming of Assamese pride amid the colonial muffle. The early post-independence period, exemplified by Phani Sarma's *Piyoli Phukan* (1955)—which won the state's first National Film Award—continued this trend of historical and mythological epics, often centred on the Ahom kingdom. These films were crucial for asserting a distinct Assamese identity within the nascent Indian nation-state. However, this very act of self-assertion harboured a subtle exclusion. The "Assamese identity" being constructed was predominantly aligned with the dominant Axomiya culture, inadvertently pushing the narratives of tribal communities to the peripheries from the very beginning.

### 5.0.3: The Golden Age and Social Realism (1950s-1980s): Humanism and Lingering Erasure

This era saw the rise of auteurs like Bhupen Hazarika and a deepening commitment to social realism. Hazarika's *Era Bator Sur* (1956) is a landmark, tenderly honouring the folk strains of tea-garden Adivasi labourers. However, as the abstract notes, it did so through an

"Assamese filter that softened their linguistic edges." This is an early and potent example of the culture industry's standardizing effect. The subaltern experience was made palatable for a mainstream audience; tribal geographies and cultures served as evocative backdrops for universal humanist tales, not as sovereign stages for their own distinct narratives. The 1970s and 80s deepened this realist tradition. Directors like Bhabendra Nath Saikia (*Sandhya Raag*, 1977) probed the hypocrisies of the urban middle class, while Jahnu Barua emerged as a master of empathetic realism. His *HalodhiaChorayeBaodhan Khai* (1988), a triumph at Locarno, clung to the dignity of flood-battered farmers, its stark Brahmaputra vistas a raw elegy for agrarian souls. Even a film like Barua's *XagoroloiBohu Door* (1995), which humanely traced family migrations, kept tribal tongues in the shadows of subtitles. Throughout this "golden age," while the plight of the marginalised was often a theme, their specific cultural and linguistic voices remained largely unheard, their presence instrumental to a broader Assamese humanist project.

#### **5.0.4: The Industry Crisis and Niche Emergence (1990s-2000s): Insurgency, Piracy, and Flickers of Hope**

The 1990s and early 2000s were a period of drastic decline for the Assamese film industry, marked by the chilling effect of insurgency and rampant piracy. Production dwindled, and Bollywood dominated screens. However, this drought yielded niche gems that hinted at a changing consciousness. Timothy Das Hanse's *Ronga Madar* (1990) offered a poignant portrait of the Adivasi tea tribe, a community that is even more marginalized within the state's cultural discourse. This period, while bleak for the mainstream industry, created a space for more localized, low-budget experiments that began to focus on communities previously ignored consciously.

#### **5.0.5: The Digital Thaw and Jollywood Revival (2010s-Present): Pluralism and Persistent Hegemony**

The 2010s ushered in a digital renaissance. The advent of affordable digital technology and the subsequent rise of OTT platforms democratized filmmaking. This led to what is now popularly termed "Jollywood," with annual productions soaring past 50 films by 2025. A stark duality marks this era. On one hand, there are blockbuster commercial entertainers like Zubeen Garg's *Mission China* (2017) and Suvrat Kakoti's *Bidurbhai* (2024), which, while financially successful, often tokenize tribal motifs for mass appeal, continuing the tradition of commodification. On the other hand, this period has seen the spectacular rise of independent, sovereign voices. Rima Das's *Village Rockstars* (2017), a National Award winner and India's Oscar entry, is the quintessential example. Self-shot in her native

Chhaygaon with a non-professional cast, it captures the world of Dhunu, a Mising girl, with an intimacy that refuses exoticism. Her Styrofoam guitar becomes a powerful symbol of dreams that persist even in the hush of poverty and recurring floods. This new wave, supported by film festivals and digital distribution, has finally begun to create a sustained platform for indigenous narratives. However, the struggle for resources and reach against the mainstream juggernaut persists.

## **6.0: Critical Analysis of Mainstream Assamese Cinema: Core Themes and the Marginal Silhouette**

A critical analysis of mainstream Assamese cinema reveals a persistent set of core themes, which, while integral to the region's self-image, have consistently framed indigenous communities in a particular, often limiting, light.

### **6.0.1: The River as Character and Catastrophe**

The Brahmaputra is not merely a setting in Assamese cinema; it is a central character. In films from *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* to *Village Rockstars*, the river embodies both life and death—a source of fertility and a bringer of apocalyptic floods. This theme resonates deeply with the lived reality of communities like the Misings, for whom floods are a cyclical reality that dictates migration and survival. However, in mainstream narratives, the flood is often a metaphor for universal human struggle or a test of Assamese resilience. The specific, culturally ingrained relationship that riverine tribes have with the Brahmaputra—their knowledge systems, adaptation strategies, and spiritual beliefs—is rarely the focus. The river becomes a scenic, tragic backdrop for a broader narrative, rather than a lived-in heartland with its own unique cultural ecology.

### **6.0.2: Cultural Nationalism and the "Assamese Identity"**

From *Joymoti* to *Piyoli Phukan*, a key project of mainstream Assamese cinema has been the construction and celebration of a unified "Assamese identity," often rooted in the historical legacy of the Ahom kingdom and Vaishnavite culture. This project, while necessary in a post-colonial context, has historically functioned as an assimilative force. The distinct histories, languages, and political aspirations of tribes like the Bodos, Karbis, and Dimasas did not fit neatly into this monolithic identity and were therefore sidelined or folklorised. Their cultural expressions—dances, rituals, attire—were sometimes incorporated as colourful elements of a diverse Assamese mosaic, but their political voice and sovereign narratives were suppressed.

### 6.0.3: Urban Middle-Class Anxieties

The social realist films of the 70s and 80s, led by Saikia, masterfully dissected the hypocrisies and anxieties of the urban middle class. While these films offered sharp social critique, their gaze was firmly fixed on the Axomiya middle-class milieu. The tribal individual, when they appeared, was often a servant, a labourer, or a peripheral figure—a silent witness to the dramas of the privileged. Their inner world, their family dynamics, and their community-specific struggles remained outside the frame, reinforcing their status as the invisible "other" within the Assamese social fabric.

## 7.0: Cinemas of the Margins: A Critical Mosaic of Indigenous Voices

The most significant development in contemporary Assamese cinema is the emergence of films that focus on the lives of marginal communities. However, this emergence is not a monolithic triumph; it is a deeply contested space where the fundamental question of who gets to speak for whom is constantly negotiated. A critical mosaic of these films reveals a spectrum ranging from authentic, self-determined "sovereign voices" to problematic, hegemonic "ventriloquisms" where the margins are spoken about, but do not speak for themselves. This dichotomy forces us to interrogate whether these representations reflect the complex reality of indigenous lifeways or merely repackage them for consumption by a dominant culture, a process eerily similar to the transformation of folk culture, such as Bihu, into an urban spectacle.

### 7.0.1: Sovereign Voices: The Margins Speaking for Themselves

The most potent challenge to the culture industry's hegemony comes from within the communities themselves. These are films where the gaze is internal, the creative agency is indigenous, and the primary audience is often the community, serving as a tool for cultural affirmation and internal dialogue.

1. **Bodo Cinema: Reclamation and Resilience:** Forged in the fires of the Bodoland agitation, Bodo cinema is a prime example of media sovereignty. Early films, such as *Daina* (1984) and the popular *Hainamuli* series (2009-2019), were produced by Bodo filmmakers for Bodo audiences. They used romance and boyhood adventures not as exotic folklore for outsiders, but as a balm to soothe the scars of insurgency and reinforce a positive, self-determined identity. A film like *Jwlwi – The Seed* (2019) takes it a step further, weaving eco-fables of cultural rebirth. These films are not merely "representing" Bodo life; they are actively constructing and preserving it from an internal perspective, ensuring that their narratives echo the community's lived reality, aspirations, and aesthetic sensibilities.

2. **Community-Led Narratives:** This trend is visible elsewhere. The Rabha film *Birubala* (2023) honours an activist's fight against witch-hunts, framing her testimony not as an anthropological curiosity but as a beacon of women's fury and agency. Dimasa documentaries like *Folklore among the Dimasa* (2020) are acts of cultural preservation, intended to "nurture animist roots" for Dimasa youth. In these works, the language, geography, and rituals are not backdrops but the very heart of the narrative. They represent a paradigm where the margin is the centre, and the voice is an echo of its own reality, not a translation for an external ear.

#### **7.0.2: The Hegemonic Gaze and the Commodification of Culture**

In stark contrast to sovereign voices stands the persistent hegemonic gaze, where non-marginal creators represent the margins. This often leads to a process of commodification, where complex cultural symbols are stripped of their context and sold as easily digestible aesthetic or narrative products. This phenomenon is not unique to cinema, but rather reflects the broader transformation of Assamese folk culture.

#### **7.0.3: The Bihu Paradigm: From Socio-Religious Ritual to Urban Spectacle**

A powerful parallel can be drawn with the evolution of Bihu. In its rural, agrarian context, Bihu is an integral part of socio-religious and economic practices. Its songs are tied to the rhythms of the farming cycle, its dances embody community bonding and fertility rites, and its performance is deeply embedded in the village life-world. However, in its urban, mediated form—on reality television, in commercial film sequences, and at state-sponsored events—Bihu has undergone significant transformation. It is often reduced to a decontextualized spectacle of vibrant costumes, energetic dance, and melodic songs, its profound connections to the land, the seasons, and community spirituality significantly diluted. It becomes a symbol of a homogenized "Assameseness" for mass consumption, a cultural commodity that celebrates form over substance.

This same process of commodification is replicated in cinema when non-tribal filmmakers engage with tribal cultures without ceding narrative authority. The tribal "other" is often framed through a lens of exoticism, tragedy, or romantic primitivism.

#### **7.0.4: Case Study: *Semkhor* and the Violence of Misrepresentation**

The controversy surrounding *Semkhor* (2021) is a stark example of this hegemonic failure and its very real consequences. Marketed as a pioneering Dimasa-language feature, the film was directed by a non-Dimasa filmmaker. The community's backlash was not a matter of artistic disagreement but an outcry against profound cultural distortion and harm.

1. **Distorted Presentation of Tribal Life:** Dimasa intellectuals and community groups alleged that the film grossly misrepresented their rituals, portraying them as "dark primitives" and sensationalizing their cultural practices. Traditional attire was inaccurately depicted, and the overall narrative frame imposed an outsider's Gothic, sensationalist interpretation on Dimasa lifeways. This is an explicit enactment of Adorno's culture industry: a living, dynamic culture was standardized, exoticized, and packaged as a dark, mysterious commodity for the aesthetic consumption of film festivals and metropolitan audiences.
2. **The Echo of Reality vs. The Imposition of Fantasy:** The film did not echo the Dimasa reality; it overwrote it with a harmful fantasy. For the Dimasa community, this was not just a misrepresentation but a form of epistemic violence—their knowledge systems and worldviews were silenced and replaced by a caricature. The tragic death of a child actor during filming, amid allegations of negligence, became a grim metaphor for the disregard for the very lives the film claimed to represent. The controversy underscores a critical point: when the margins are not allowed to speak for themselves, the resulting "representation" can actively harm, rather than merely neglect, the community.

#### 7.0.5: The Nuanced Middle: Empathetic Collaboration vs. Sovereign Voice

Between these two poles exists a nuanced space, exemplified by Rima Das's *Village Rockstars* (2017). Das is not Mising, yet the film is widely celebrated for its authentic feel. The critical distinction here is one of gaze and methodology. Das did not parachute in as an outsider to extract a story; she filmed her own village and people with an intimate, observational empathy. She avoided a commodifying gaze by focusing on universal childhood dreams (the Styrofoam guitar) as they are uniquely shaped by a specific Mising reality (floods, poverty, community life). The film is a powerful example of empathetic collaboration. However, it is crucial to distinguish this from a sovereign voice. While *Village Rockstars* authentically reflects a reality, it is still ultimately framed by a non-Mising creator. The sovereign voice of a Mising filmmaker, telling a story from a position of innate cultural knowledge and for a Mising audience, would represent a different, and equally vital, dimension of representation.

In conclusion, the "Cinemas of the Margins" is a battlefield of agency. The sovereign voices from the Bodo, Dimasa, and other communities are actively decolonizing the screen, ensuring their realities are accurately and authentically represented. Meanwhile, the hegemonic gaze, as seen in the *Semkhor* controversy and analogous to the dilution of Bihu,

continues to risk commodifying these cultures, turning living traditions into consumable spectacles. The critical task is to champion the former and rigorously critique the latter, advocating for a cinematic ecology where the margins possess the power to represent themselves.

## **8.0: Critical Discussion: The Culture Industry vs. Media Sovereignty**

The landscape of indigenous representation in Assamese cinema is a battleground where Adorno's concept of the "culture industry" and Ginsburg's notion of "media sovereignty" are in constant tension. The analysis of specific films and controversies reveals the high stakes of this representational war.

### **8.0.1: The Hegemonic Gaze: *Semkhor* and *Axone* as Case Studies**

The controversy surrounding *Semkhor* (2021) is a textbook example of the culture industry's regressive pull. While the film was marketed as a pioneering Dimasa-language feature, it was directed by a non-Dimasa filmmaker. The community backlash was severe; Dimasa intellectuals and mothers' groups accused the film of distorting their rituals, portraying them as "dark primitives," and misrepresenting their traditional attire. The alleged neglect leading to the death of a child actor during filming further compounded the tragedy, symbolizing a profound disregard for the very lives the film purported to represent. Here, Adorno's critique is vindicated: tribal culture was standardized into a dark, exotic commodity for the aesthetic consumption of a festival circuit and metropolitan audience, stripping it of its lived context and dignity.

Similarly, *Axone* (2019), a film about Northeastern communities in Delhi, sparked intense debate in Assam and other NE states. Its satirical take on racism and cultural friction tokenised Naga foods and accents into punchlines for a non-Naga audience. Many Naga viewers felt their complex social kinships and the real pain of racial slurs were reduced to caricatures, a classic function of the culture industry that sells a sanitized, comedic version of marginality without confronting its structural violence.

In both cases, the hegemony is apparent: non-tribal creators, however well-intentioned, hold the power to frame tribal narratives. The gaze is that of an outsider looking in, a gaze that sees the margins as a source of raw material but fails to see itself reflected in the power dynamics it perpetuates.

### **8.0.2: The Sovereign Response: Healing and Reclamation**

In direct opposition to this are the community-led films discussed in Section 4. The *Hainamuli* series, *Jwlwi*, *Ko:Yad*, and *Waiphri* are not just films; they are acts of cultural reclamation. They represent a sovereignty of gaze where the "self" is represented by the

"self." This does not mean these films are devoid of critique or are merely nostalgic; they actively hybridise tradition with modernity, showing Bodo youth navigating contemporary life or Mising children dreaming of rock bands. This internal negotiation is far more complex and authentic than any external portrayal can achieve. These sovereign voices transform cinema from a tool of potential harm into a "humane bridge," fostering intra-community pride and offering a genuine window for others to understand their world.

### **8.0.3: Synthesising the Research Questions and Arguments**

Returning to the core research questions, this paper finds that:

1. The historical evolution of Assamese cinema has largely **reinforced** marginalisation through linguistic assimilation and the treatment of tribal geographies as backdrops. However, the digital era has created cracks in this hegemony, allowing for a historical **reflection** that is now being challenged.
2. The gaze is contested. While mainstream and some outsider films (**Semkhor, Axone**) demonstrate the hegemony of the non-tribal creator commodifying subaltern experiences, the vibrant output from Bodo, Mising, and other communities signifies a powerful surge of **emerging sovereign voices**.
3. The backlashes against films like *Semkhor* are not mere controversies; they are critical decolonial moments. They signal a zero-tolerance policy for misrepresentation and clearly chart the pathway forward: **community-led storytelling, ethical collaboration, and tribal authorship**.

The research objectives are thus met by tracing this dialectical history, humanely dissecting both positive and negative representations, using controversies to highlight hegemonic fractures, and ultimately arguing for a future built on the principles of media sovereignty.

## **9.0: Conclusion and Forward-Looking Pathways**

Assam's cinematic journey, from the pioneering sacrifice of *Joymoti* to the digital dreams of *Village Rockstars* and the sovereign assertions of *Jwlwi*, is a testament to the enduring power of storytelling. This paper has argued that this narrative river has long carried within it both the silencing currents of hegemony and the resilient undercurrents of indigenous voice. The tension between the culture industry's standardising force and the decolonial potential of media sovereignty defines the contemporary moment.

Looking forward, the seminar's call for a humane mapping of Assam's cinematic landscape must be heeded. The following actionable pathways are proposed for a more ethical and pluralistic cinematic future:

1. **Institutional Support for Tribal Filmmakers:** State film finance corporations and cultural bodies must establish dedicated grants, training workshops, and production funds for filmmakers from ST communities. This is not about charity, but about repairing historical exclusion by enabling access to resources.
2. **Ethical Co-Production Models:** When non-tribal filmmakers wish to engage with tribal stories, they must do so through a model of ethical co-creation. This involves tribal consultants as creative partners from inception, shared copyright, and a commitment to linguistic and cultural accuracy that is vetted by the community.
3. **Curatorial Consciousness:** Film festivals, both within Assam and nationally, must move beyond tokenistic "tribal slots" and develop a nuanced curatorial practice that prioritises agency and gaze, actively seeking out and promoting sovereign indigenous voices.
4. **Archival and Scholarly Work:** Academic research and film archives must proactively preserve and study the growing corpus of indigenous-language films from Assam, ensuring these works are recognised as a vital part of the region's cinematic and cultural heritage.

The goal is an Assamese cinema where the screens truly reflect the state's magnificent diversity—not as a picturesque mosaic of folkloric props, but as a dynamic, living tapestry of voices. It is to ensure that the whispers from the margins become confident dialogues, transforming cinema into a space where every community, in its own language and from its own heartland, can share its full spectrum of joy, grief, and unyielding hope.

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