



AIDEU HANDIQUE

Unsung Heroism

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No one could imagine in 1935 that an eighteen year old girl's reluctant step into the world of Assamese Cinema in its nascent state would ultimately prove to be a formidable one for the entire craft of filmmaking in its evolution into a full fledged industry in Assam. The girl who created history through her appearance in the silver screen was Aideu Handique, a girl blissfully unaware of the ways of the world outside her small village.

Aideu Handique was born in a poor family in Kamargaon Panidihingia village in the year 1915 to Neelambar Handique and Laksmi Handique.

The doyen of Assamese cinema, Jyotiprasad Agarwalla was planning the first Assamese movie 'Joymati'. However he faced a major hurdle in finding an actress for his movie to play the role of Joymoti. During that period men used to play the role of females, as women were not allowed to act. Yet Jyotiprasad was determined to find a woman to play the role of Joymati, the historically famous heroic figure and martyr of Assam. He advertised in newspapers and toured villages

in his quest for a girl prepared to break social shackles and appear before a camera, but initially all his attempts proved futile.

Then an associate of Jyotiprasad and Aideu's cousin, Dimba Gohain showed him some photographs of Aideu. The filmmaker was impressed with the looks of Aideu. However, the difficult task was to convince Aideu to act in the movie. On request of Jyotiprasad, Dimba managed to bring Aideu to Jyotiprasad's tea garden on some pretext. Initially, Aideu refused to act. However, Jyotiprasad could persuade her to change her mind and after getting her father's consent she agreed to perform the role of Joymoti in the film, which included a scene in which she was severely beaten up. With her aching and frail body bearing witness to that scene of royal persecution, Aideu kept remembering that traumatic experience all through her life.

The film 'Joymati' was premiered in 1935, and became a classic, while Aideu's name went down in the annals of Assamese cinema. But the irony was that Aideu never got the 'privilege' of watching her own performance in the epoch-making film. There was no local cinema-hall and only 40 years later, in a documentary did she get to see some clips from it. But that was not the end of her tryst with the celluloid world. True, that she did not act in any other film in her life, but she had to pay a heavy price for it and her world turned upside down after her appearance in the silver screen. Aideu was ostracised during her life for acting in a movie which was considered unbecoming of a woman in the Assamese society during that period. She was shunned by neighbours, and she sank into solitude and obscurity. Villagers would not drink from the pond from which she fetched water, her family were fined by the villagers for allowing their daughter to act in a film and the public injunction was that no man would be allowed to marry her. Only in 1985, when the state celebrated the golden jubilee of Assamese cinema, was her role acknowledged. A pension, erratically paid, was instituted and in 1991 a girls' school was named after her in her village.

Once she had taken a bold step, and in bearing the consequences with courage and fortitude, she herself embodied the quintessential Assamese women of her time. Aideu Handique received artist pension in 1989. She died in the year 2002 due to old age ailments. One can find a true parallel of the century-old saga of Joymoti's sacrifice in Aideu's life of heroic fortitude in modern India, both being victims of an authoritative system against which there was only one form of resistance possible for a woman— it was silence. She had to remain for so long a victim of historical neglect in the cultural arena of Assam, but Aideu will always be remembered by the future generation as the unsung heroine in both the reel and real life, a maker of history indeed. □□