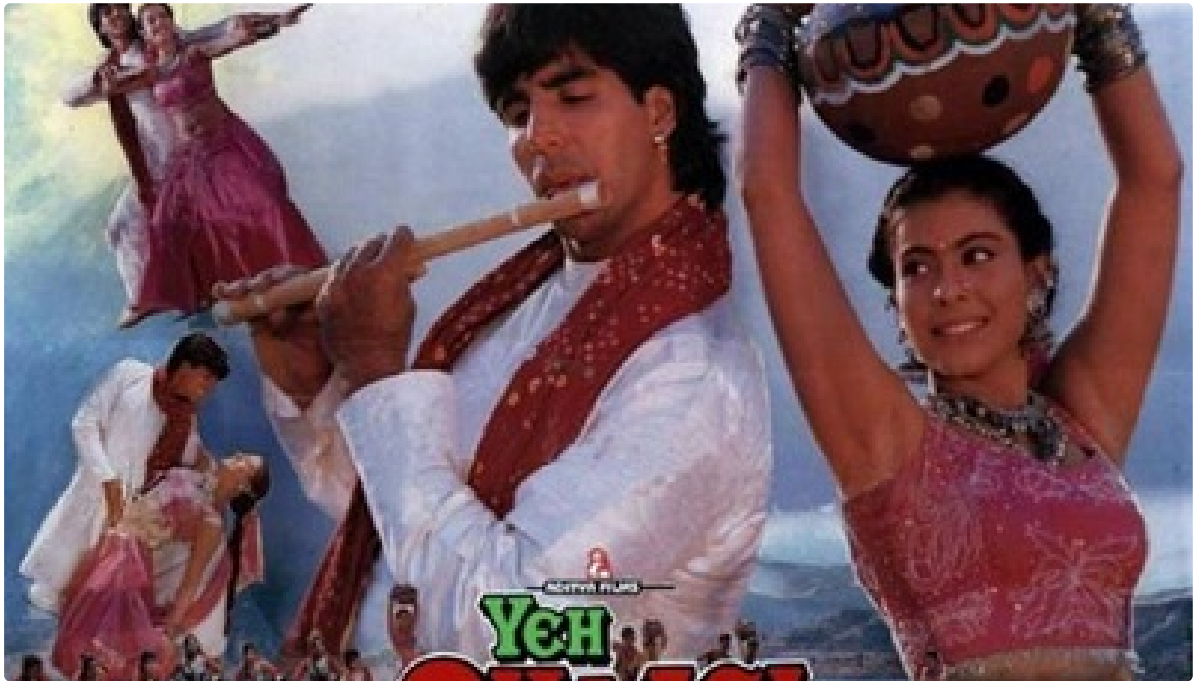


Cinemas of Guwahati: a walk down the memory lane



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The year was 1993, and I was in preparatory but the memory is still fresh from that matinee show when my elder brother took me to see a MithunChakravarti starrer “PhoolAurAngaar” at the majestic Udeshna Cinema. The film was hardly a watch befitting a kid with its gruesome violence and torture but what captured my imagination more than the film itself was the theater. A lush and vibrantly colored cinema wherein the bright red curtains on the screen rolled up before the [start](#) of every show. The curtains were complimented with the flashing lights if the beautifully decorated ceiling was not enough to amuse you. Sitting in the balcony [as](#) the upper class was called, the ambiance felt dreamy for a kid of my age.

With the curtain rolling up, you could see the milky white screen with the theater giving you just enough time to set your eyes in before the trailers started playing. The cinema of the 90s was just [as](#) colorful [as](#) the cinemas that showed them. I was hooked. Every subsequent visit to the cinema hall was [as](#) much about the movie for me [as](#) it was about the cinema itself. I can clearly remember the cinemas running at that point of time in Guwahati.



All of these cinemas showed the regular Bollywood releases coinciding with the release of the films. However they did [follow](#) a pattern. While Apsara, Anuradha, Udeshta, Urvashi, Vandana, Praggyoti and Meghdoot were the fore runner in showing the new film, there was a clear demarcation of films between the halls when two or more biggies released together. I still vividly remembered that films like Hum Aapke Hain Kaun!..., Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge and Dil To Pagalhai released exclusively in Apsara where they ran for months. Udeshta, Urvashi and Meghdoot on the other hand got films like KuchKuchHota Hai, Raja Hindustani and Baazi which got them good business. The other halls like Rupayan, Bijulee, Rupashree and Kelvin always got the films once they were at least a week old. The Bollywood stuff played second change at these theaters. Kelvin sometimes got in the new film. The Hollywood movies were restricted to Apsara, Anuradha and Vandana mostly. I remember watching films like Braveheart, Water World and Species at Apsara. The Lost World was one film which I watched at Kelvin.

The cinemas of Guwahati had another sparkling aspect to them. The hand drawn cutout posters which have become a matter of collector's item today were put up in atleast four of the cinemas regularly. I still can visualize the huge hand drawn poster of Species on the Apsara cinema which showed the half woman-half alien heroin of the film. Another poster which really captured my imagination was that of the Sunny Deol starer Jeet. It had an aggressive Deol almost tearing out of the poster with his outstretched hands pointing towards the viewers. The poster made [as](#) much of a splash [as](#) the film itself.

Udeshna- Dispur
Urvashi- Fancy Bazaar
Rupayan- Fancy Bazaar
Rupashree- Tokobari
Kelvin-Tokobari
Bijulee-Fancy Bazaar
Mayur [Krishna](#) - Fatasil Ambari
Pragjyoti - Maligaon
Anupama - Maligaon
Anuradha - Bamunimaidam
Apsara- Paltan Bazaar
Aruna- Maligaon
Neptune - Basistha Chariali
Meghdoot -Nepali Mandir
Choudhury -Athgaon
Vandana - Noonmati



The cinemas were doing rollicking business and the audience was hooked. Even lesser films like YaarGaddar, Suraj and even Gunda did decent business. The ticket prices ranged between Rs. 8/- to Rs 30/-. I remember my brother paying Rs 200/- to watch Karan Arjun at Udeshta for a ticket which otherwise cost Rs 12/-. Such was the craze. The [Assamese](#) film industry did release films from time to time and they got mostly Udeshta, Apsara and Anuradha to screen their fare. Since the number of films releasing were lesser they got their share of Screen time but never saw mass releases like the Bollywood fare. Let's face it, hailing from Guwahati, I never saw any craze about the regional cinema here. A film like "KhagoroloiBahu Door" by JahnuBarua which also happens to be one of my favorite [Assamese](#) films till date came and went without making any splash or ringing the cash registers. At about the same time, a film called Coolie No. 1 made a whooping moolah and also enjoyed the maximum number of screens that the exhibitioners could put forward.

Time passed and then came the 2000s. The people were just warming up to the concept of plush cinemas. No longer were cinemas like Rupayan, Rupashree, Anupama getting the sort of footfalls that it used to get. These cinemas slowly drifted into showing soft-core stuff to get the ogglers in but that too didn't work [as](#) the whooping cost of maintaining these cinemas took its toll. Rupayan was converted into a shopping mall which now goes by the name "Rupayan Arcade". Udeshna was the next victim and that too of a strange predicament. The hall decided to show only regional stuff once a ban was instilled by the militant organizations to film only regional films in the theater to get blown. Strangely enough [as](#) the other theaters dealt with the issue by installing bomb-detector at their doorsteps, Udeshna decided to let go of Bollywood and Hollywood fairs and show only regional cinema. With only a niche audience to cater to, Udeshna gradually dowsed its lights and with it a slice of my childhood fantasy was lost right in front of my eyes. It was first converted into a sales point of Marble and now it remains dilapidated for someone to pull it down.



Kelvin sees its end [as](#) it is broken down and converted to a multi-[level](#) parking lot while Mayur [Krishna](#) is a ruin. Bijulee survives and now shows only soft-core stuff and thus caters only to the ogglers. It's ironic to note that it is actually Assam's oldest and first cinema and by now should have become a [state](#) property but instead it is a home to those who are there only to wet their lusty thoughts and something more. Of those that survive, Anuradha has got a facelift and now provides you with a multiplex ambiance in a single screen theater. It is the only hall which still does that curtain trick. Urvashi still shows all new Hindi stuff and hasn't increased its ticket prices from Rs. 17/- Yes you read it right. I have seen Dhoom 3 for Rs. 17/- when the rest of the [city](#) was going crazy paying 200-500 for one ticket.

There has been so much said about the regional films not getting enough halls and hall owner not giving enough screen time to these films. I have just a question to ask in this regard. Are the regional films good enough to draw the audience to the theaters in hordes? If we have regional cinema playing in all the screens of the [city](#), can we expect a single houseful board [as](#) compared to a SRK starer or even a Sunny Leone starer. I can ask this because I have seen every regional film in the theater and have been disappointed again and again. The only two films which I care to remember from the recent times is JahnuBarua's Bandhon and Rajni Basumatary's Raag. We have to realize that the theater owners are actually running a business and all they wants to make is profit. So if regional cinema is to find a taker, it has to up its ante. They have to make entertaining cinema which will appeal to the senses. Intellectual mucks will get them nowhere. The films also have to be polished and technically sound. A crude film Like Local Kung fu [found](#) taker primarily because of its content and [heart](#). Why can't we have more like this? The problem isn't with the cinema halls but with the cinema that we are making.



The onset of multiplexes and the fact that at least 12 new screens are coming up in the [city](#) might finally end the rein of the single screens here in Assam. Chances are either the single screens will convert to multiplexes or close their shutters permanently. Whatever might be the case, the single screens will always hold a cherished place in my memories for the simple reason that I owe my love for cinema to the visits to these theaters. They were like a dream world to me and I will always remain in awe of their power. May be that is the reason which takes me again and again back to the dirty and dilapidated Urvashi and Neptune cinema when I can jolly well afford the plush luxury of a multiplex. The reason is the good memories that I have of the places and the fact that I get to relive them every time I set foot in these cinemas. I just wish they became the way they used to be...

Aambar Chatterjee

Ambar Chatterjee is an IT Graduate from Kuvempu University, Karnataka. His keen interest in films made him start a blog where he reviewed films of both recent times and yester years. Over the years the site garnered good viewership and led to some considerable number of hits. The flare for writing and the author's undying love for cinema made the site grow in content and viewership. The author completed his Masters in Computer Application from Indra Gandhi National Open University and took up a job with NIIT, teaching Software Engineering. <p> He took to making Short Films on social and cultural inclinations which gained appreciation. Taking the new found success in this field as a motivation and his own willingness to forward his own opinions about various aspects of our day to day life like current affairs, politics, social matters etc, the author started another blog that he used to write and bring forth issues of social and national interests.

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