From Margins to Markets: Positioning Assamese Cinema as an Emerging Investment Hub through Lessons from Malayalam Cinema and Philippine Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The small film industries are usually seen as ‘cultural' but ‘restricted'. This paper paves the way to disagree with that assumption by examining the potentiality of investing in Assamese cinema based on the comparative case study analysis of Malayalam cinema and Philippine cinema. Drawing on the political economics of media, the study will analyze successful decisions impacting the sustainable evolution of small cinemas and their participation in creative economies through the support of production ecosystems, distribution channels and audience development processes. The paper points out that the size of the market is not the only factor of success for an industry: Institutional capital, distribution flexibility (especially by leveraging Over The Top platforms), and strategic penetration of audiences are the other elements that are crucial.

Malayalam cinema proves that regional film industries are viable and are gaining cultural respect and success in the commercial market with their viable production network and high narrative literacy. At the same time, Philippine cinema offers a blueprint for managing structural fragmentation, for putting measures in place to financially protect localized production, and to make the most of global diasporic markets. However, on-ground challenges of critical issues and financial clauses, coupled with the scarcity of exhibition screens and exposure, have narrowed the scope for Assamese cinema, despite its rich historical legacy, nodding to its critical accolades and strategic positioning.

This paper assesses these structural restraints and concludes determining them and proposing an integrated policy and investment planning framework. It spells out detail of actionable Public Private Partnerships, specific incentives for exhibitions and digital distribution systems that can help re-position Assam as a new regional film hub. Overall, this work joins discussions made within the frame of the creative economy in the Global South, plausibly showing how the cinema industry of a less economically active region can become a stable, autonomous economic system through strategic structural intervention.

Keywords: small film industries, Assamese cinema, Malayalam cinema, Philippine cinema, distribution flexibility, global diasporic markets, Public Private Partnerships

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING

There is a sentimental paternalism in the discourse of small, regional and peripheral film industries in the field of media scholarship. Inspired by the need to celebrate something that sets it apart, peripheral cinema ecosystems and in the case of India, hegemonic cultural poles like Hollywood or the Hindi film industry of

Mumbai (Bollywood) are constantly inspected pedantically in terms of cultural preservation. They are praised for their purity of aesthetic form, authenticity and ethnographic significance, but at the same time they are regarded as "structurally unsound investment risks. This analytical trend creates a false dichotomy between “economically productive” and “culturally authentic” when failing to make money becomes a “logically and historically given” side effect of the restricted linguistic, geographical and cultural target audience of small cinemas.

The perspective of this study is quite different and not at all deterministic. Drawing on the analytical tools offered by the political economy of media we suggest that the economic marginalisation of peripheral cinema is as much a result of structural underdevelopment and capital fragmentation, as it is of the size of the market and of unequal capital distribution networks. The focus of political economy as described by Vincent Mosco is on "power relationships, patterns of capital accumulation, and the patterns of institutional ownership that shape the process from the production of cultural expression to the production of a media product" (24).

The shift and development of an economically marginalized art into a lucrative arts hub resembles the transformation from a sidelined industry to a primary industry pointed to by Nicholas Garnham in his theory of the cultural commodity distribution, which states that the power and profit margins of the media industries lie with distribution, not production (31). While creators can have great filmmaking, without structural access to exhibition spaces, digital platforms, and monetisable distribution channels, capital remains locked up in them and industry growth is stunted.

In addition, concepts of asymmetrical interdependence and cultural proximity by Joseph Straubhaar (39) are used. As regional and local audiences have a strong organic pull for local content, which bestows them with their own distinct cultural, historical and linguistic context, media conglomerates can significantly influence global and national markets, but fail to dominate local ones, argues Straubhaar. Transforming the structural pathways through which local content and this local demand cross can buffer the local economy from external shocks and help it capture the domestic surplus value, making it an appealing investment project for the local economy through structured institutional investments.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This study aims to shift the attention from looking back on the past, with a state-subsidized approach to the survival of Assamese language films to a market-oriented roadmap towards financial independence of the language film. The study identifies whether there are any internal systemic weaknesses and aligns them with the models of successful creative economy in the world and the region to chart a way to create a resilient, investable creative economy in the Northeast region of India.The specific operational objectives are:

1. **Systematic Structural Diagnosis:** To map the current choke points within the Assamese film value chain, precisely auditing the exhibition crisis, the absence of institutional media banking, and the distribution gatekeeping that cuts off local creators from wider markets.
2. **Cross-Border Operational Analysis:** To deconstruct the survival and scaling tactics of Malayalam cinema and Philippine cinema. This includes isolating their use of micro-budget production discipline, strategic tax adjustments, cooperative distribution networks, and digital-first diaspora mobilization to maintain commercial viability under structural strain.
3. **Actionable Framework Formulation:** To develop an integrated, policy-driven investment blueprint tailored to Northeast India's unique socio-political climate. This framework leverages public-private equity, regional OTT aggregation, and state-backed exhibition incentives to build a self-sustaining creative ecosystem.

METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

This study utilizes a qualitative, comparative case study approach, choosing its subjects through purposive sampling to construct an analytical matrix of small-market creative economies. The political economy lens requires shifting focus away from aesthetic textual analysis or directorial intent, looking instead at the institutional frameworks, legal policies, and financial vectors that dictate a film's lifecycle.

The research cross-examines three distinct cinematic entities across a spectrum of industrial development: Assamese cinema (the primary underdeveloped subject), Malayalam cinema (representing structural scale, capital efficiency, and collective audience mobilization), and Philippine cinema (representing historical structural decline, subsequent policy adaptation, tax relief frameworks, and global integration). Crucially, the study contextualizes these models within the immediate socioeconomic realities of Northeast India by drawing parallels with adjacent regional independent breakthroughs (*Zoliana*) and modern localized commercial successes (*Northeast Now*; *NDTV*).

Data Collection Matrix and Multi-Tiered Secondary Sources

To ensure analytical rigor, data was collected, triangulated, and cross-examined using a diverse array of institutional, economic, and historical documents:

- Macroeconomic and Regulatory Data: Industrial market studies regarding anti-competitive practices, revenue-sharing models, and virtual print fee (VPF) choke points compiled by the Competition Commission of India (CCI) (14).
- State Film Development Records: Official policy declarations, financial ledger templates, and operational frameworks from the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP) and the Kerala State Film Development Corporation (KSFDC).
- Academic and Trade Archives: Historical documentation of Southeast Asian and Indian regional cinema business models, including the industrial contraction records of the Far East Film Festival Archives and retrospective independent filmmaker testimonies (Dowerah; Mathew; Tolentino).
- Grassroots Regional Reporting: Journalism tracking contemporary, digital-first independent breakthroughs, industrial boom cycles, and audience mobilization in Northeast India and regional hubs (*Northeast Now*; *Zoliana*; *The Hindu*).

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Malayalam Cinema: Capital Efficiency, Collective Subversion, and Hyper-Monetized Distribution

Kerala, a state in India, has developed a regional film industry which holds up as an example for the rest of the world to emulate in terms of artistic value and undeniable success and profitability. Malayalam film industry political economy is distinguished by its capacity to earn massive revenues with an economy of production ranging from low to mid range. This is done by moving away from "star" movies with the focus on effects, and making some screenplays that are more about the story and the idea, with less-than-significant physical production. The Hindu fears reported that successive box-office hits by "wave" making local filmmakers have always been a "shot in the arm" for the regional ecosystem as they add fresh economic confidence to the films and immediate returns to their investment in narrative power.

The Odessa Collective: The Historical Blueprint for People’s Cinema

This new capital efficiency is built on a long and strong tradition of circumventing commercial gatekeepers by means of community-backed finance. Directed by John Abraham (1986), Amma Ariyan (Mathew) is an important historical film made by the Odessa Collective. The Odessa Collective circumvented conventional studio finance by adopting a different approach, "people's cinema". These were organized with the option of rural local money voluntarily contributed; a local team of actors collected the funds by traveling around and providing street shows as well as handing out donation boxes (Mathew).

This community supported solution was shown at the world's premier film festival, the Cannes Film Festival where a love for it was born by a very clean and beautifully 4K restored version of Amma Ariyan was showcased world first.Long-term cultural and economic benefits of that community supported solution were also identified through its global premiere at the Cannes Film Festival (Mathew). This proved the thesis that community-driven, decentralised movie theatres can ultimately secure world-wide institutional legitimacy in the absence of the corporate movie studios.

Modern Agility and Digital Platform Integration

Today in the modern film industry Malayalam films have taken their own effort to traverse the path and to channel in the Over The Top (OTT) medium. Malayalam producers, through the strength of their trade associations engaged in collective bargaining while the larger, hypercapitalized film industries faced hard times due to the impact of the theatrical market. Made attractive direct to OTT and short window streaming contracts with global partners, thus reducing the risks associated with private equity investments and guaranteeing prompt capital turnaround (India, Competition Commission 48).

It is paired with a vibrant domestic theatrical system to help propel this avenue of digital monetisation forward. The state-run KSFDC is responsible for the creation of exhibition spaces which ensure screentime for independent local content, that the multiplex complexes of the corporate giants can't monopolise local screens.

Philippine Cinema: From Industrial Collapse to Structural Adaptation

The Philippine movie industry offers a good illustration of a sector in deep economic turmoil, driven by legalised market inequalities originating from colonial years, heavy taxes and rigid market fragmentation.

The concern is macro-structural crisis, and historical Colonial Hegemony.It is about macro-structural crisis and historical Colonial Hegemony.

The Philippine theatre culture, from its very beginning, was heavily influenced by the American colonization and Hollywood studios (San Diego Filipino Cinema). Early in the twilight of the century, the market was inundated with foreigners, namely multinationals such as MGM, Paramount, and Warner Bros. that regularly outnumbered local films four to one; the data comes from Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS). (8) It made it extremely difficult for local studios to survive, as they had to seek a studio [economically] as if they were under a tight management system, otherwise they would not survive, thereby giving the independent, indigenous voice an institutional disadvantage from the outset.

Towards the end of the 20th century, the domestic system of production split up, plunging the industry into deep structural crisis. The Far East Film Festival Archives records the dramatic collapse of the industry that resulted from increasing production costs, rampant copyright infringement, entrenched institutional perfidy, and localised theatre cartels. It was a time when independent producers suffered the most and commercial producers were forced to conform to the cheaper, risk-free formula-both of genre.

This was compounded further by significant leakage in the domestic film moviegoing ecosystem. Box office revenues were sharply fragmented, with the theater owners getting up to 45%, distributors taking 5% to 20% and historical 30% amusement tax imposed by local governments added on top of that a 12% Value-Added Tax (VAT) ("How Philippine Films are Evolving"). A film could only make back its production costs, and investors got scared, leading to the dramatic drop in the production of films, from more than 350 per year to less than 50 ("How Philippine Films Are Evolving").

Including Structural Pivots and Global Diaspora Mobilization

To reverse the trend of decline, the Philippine media ecosystem did two significant policy changes:

1. Metro Manila Council and the FDCP coordinated a shift in policy - to temporarily suspend the localized amusement tax assumed to be unsustainable for domestic films, for 3 years, and to institute a protective fiscal buffer, that allowed for a dramatic improvement in the producer profit margin even in an increasingly unsustainable box office environment - "How Philippine Films Are Evolving".

2. The industry, in a deliberate attempt to go beyond reach-and-replace streams of distribution and embrace its globalized market, chose to target expansion on the diaspora of more than 10 million overseas citizens.

Independent-studio hybrids fell away from the local theatrical box-office, instead gaming the local theatrical digitization and streaming networks, particularly the FDCP's own streaming network JuanFlix ("How

Philippine Films Are Evolving") and game-proprietary digitization system. These ran a path into culturally near international revenue streams, so to speak, and structured them. Additionally, through active capacity building and strategic synergies with regional "capital hubs" such as the Southeast Asian Fiction Film Lab (SEAFIC), and with international festival networks, Filipino creators successfully capitalized on external production opportunities—this is a solid model of internationalization that bypasses the activities of domestic media conglomerates ("How Philippine Films Are Evolving").

This chapter explores challenges faced by the structural development of the Assamese cinema, as well as some potential solutions, through a mention of proofs of concepts.

Even though the Assamese film industry can boast well over two decades of critical acclaim and creative outpouring, it is trapped in a vicious cycle of economic underdevelopment as compared to the resilient film industries of Kerala and the Philippines. This fragility or vulnerability has been produced by several vicious circles, now and then interrupted by abrupt advances made by the creators.

Screen Crisis and Capital Fragmentation

Assam suffers deficiencies in its exhibition infrastructure which is closest to the public view is almost killed. Today, over 150 theaters have been replaced by fewer than 50 single-screen theaters that are still in operation (Dowerah 52). The thin infrastructure does not support local feature films to have commercially viable theatrical runs. Urban multiplex parent companies always throw their hats in front of any major film dominating the movie market, which is either from pan-Indian Hindi, Telugu, Tamil language or from Hollywood, and therefore, give least importance to local Assamese films despite their potential of winning audiences since they can't go to them.

The financing within the Assamese ecosystem is also scattered and informal, unorganized. The industry has no venture capital interest, there are no media banking pipelines or corporate slate-financing models. Producers have to use their own savings, sell property or take out loans from alternative sources which carry high interest. The lack of finances causes short production runs and virtually nothing is left for marketing, P&A (Print and Advertising) or for wide distribution.

The Independent Distribution Gatekeeping Gap

This insulation is exacerbated by the country's distribution market for the product is lacking for hostility. The Indian independent regional film industry has been reported to be heavily restrictor for the prominent local film makers and the major multiplex cartels as well as for the dominant foreign OTT platforms, which have a preference for starring made-up films with big concepts rather than the story of real people from their own region and country (as stated in media reviews by Ramachandran). This structural isolation somehow prevents the national money from flowing into Assamese film and thus necessitates a shift towards accessing consumers directly by making it more decentralized.

Townsman History Feature: Mission China (2017)

In spite of these limitations on infrastructure, the capability to reach the 'massive local audience was demonstrated with black-and-white comedy film Mission China' (2017) by Zubeen Garg. The action thriller, which could never have been done under the corporate's sway, also set regional box office records and attracted young people back to single screen theatres as well as equaling or surpassing opening week box-office figures for the massive national blockbusters such as Bajrangi Bhaijaan and Baahubali 2 in its native state of Assam (NDTV). For Mission China, it showed that with effective and bold grassroots marketing and extensive local promotion, there is no reason not to be commercially viable with a high cost of sales in a small market, when the content resonates with the local audience's identity.

The YouTube-to-Cinema Paradigm Shift" – YouTube Vidya R V Vidya Rani (2024)

Mission China laid down a business model that required huge investment, while Bidurbhai (2024) by Suvrat Kakoty gave birth to a counter-model with a substantial influence. The project started during the COVID-19 pandemic when it was conceived as a low budget, independent YouTube web series "Bidurbhai Xukha-Dukha" that employed skilled, site-specific satirical expression to make contact with everyday socio-political reality in Assam (Northeast Now). Through open access, Kakoty crafted a -- largely non-paid -- fan base that is highly devoted to their content online.

Bidurbhai recommenced in a full theatrical film in 2024 and earned a huge commercial crossover. It took in an untouched multi-crore take at the box office, giving single-screen movie theaters a renewed life in the region and sparking a bidding war among regional OTT platforms (Northeast Now). The path here is a huge paradigm shift in the political economy of small cinemas: discovering how creators can generate cultural capital, how they can foster audience loyalty through free digital distribution platforms and then reap the rewards of theatrical success and rich streaming rights.

The Modern Intra-Regional Analogy: Roi Roi Binale (2025)

Intra-state local mobilization in harmony with this pattern is more supported by the empirical evidence observed in the neighboring states of the Northeast where the pattern is already observed. In late 2025, a grassroots exhibition campaign coupled with filmmaking under $20,000 proved to be an effective strategy to routinely sell out theaters in Aizawl (Zoliana), as evidenced by the independent feature film 'Roi Roi Binale'. In absence of the formal corporate theatre facilities the film attracted intense local demand that makes it "housefull", or "holding every home", as is popularly said.

COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

Cross-examined in the light of Garnham's (31) and of Straubhaar's (39) theoretical frameworks, a clearly identifiable trend emerges: market size is no guarantee of the success or failure of a film industry. Rather, the main rule is its distribution network's structure, the adaptability of its funding and the capacity to reach a unique market base.

Resilient distribution of a regional ecosystem can spur a regional industrial economy quickly when local movies hit the block in big numbers as pointed out by The Hindu in its trade section "Recent hits." Clearly, this is to prove that cultural proximity is a valid thesis when put on the screen in time to pre-sell a loyal consumer before going over the high pay-back risk of a theatrical release plan.The table below synthesizes the structural realities of the three models analyzed:

Economic and Operational Dimension	**Malayalam Cinema Model**	**Philippine Cinema Model**	**Contemporary Assamese Cinema Ecosystem**
Primary Financial Sourcing	Coordinated private equity, collective industry pooling, and institutional state backing (KSFDC).	Transnational grants (SEAFIC), international co-productions, and independent-studio hybrids.	Fragmented, informal personal capital, unorganized individual loans, and non-repayable state subsidies.
Distribution and Exhibition Control	Strong trade unions leading collective bargaining with major global OTT platforms; public theater networks.	Global diaspora monetization channels (*JuanFlix*); targeted international festival circuits.	Severe screen shortage (under 50 screens); gatekeeping by major national multiplex lines and global OTT platforms.
Fiscal and Policy Protections	State-supported theater networks ensuring guaranteed screening time for local language films.	Strategic policy pivots including multi-year local amusement tax suspensions and unified filming	Lack of single-window clearance systems; minimal structural fiscal protections or tax reinvestment models.

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Economic and Operational Dimension	Malayalam Cinema Model	Philippine Cinema Model	Contemporary Assamese Cinema Ecosystem
		clearances.	
Audience Cultivation Strategy	Capitalizing on deep local narrative literacy to produce low-to-medium budget, high-return scripts.	Converting transnational cultural nostalgia into direct streams of foreign exchange.	Historically fragmented across distinct ethnic lines; shifting toward digital IP cultivation (*Bidurbhai*).

The comparative data reveals that Assamese cinema remains vulnerable because it has historically treated film production as an isolated artistic act, rather than managing it as an integrated financial system. While Malayalam cinema uses collective bargaining to protect its margins and the Philippines uses tax policy and diaspora networks to expand its reach, Assam has remained dependent on volatile domestic theatrical runs. However, the breakthroughs of *Mission China* and *Bidurbhai* show that the market is ready for local content.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

To transform Assamese cinema into a resilient, investable regional film hub, the industry must move away from non-repayable cultural subsidies and implement a structured, multi-pronged economic strategy. We propose a framework organized into three core pillars:

Financial and Policy Innovation

Government of Assam should have a co-equity fund with involvement of financial institutions in the region such as the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation (NEDFi) and private venture capitalists. This fund will need to reject the classic charity models, moving to the co-investing of film packages with clear, auditable business models, proven completion guarantees, and monetization plans—many of them structured across multiple platforms.

- Adopt Assam Government Reimbursement Incentive Scheme - State GST (SGST) for verified indigenous-language movies that is similar with the tax measure that helped place the Philippine movie industry on a stable path - with a temporary 5-year duration. It will be returned to the producer where the powerful money will stay in the local eco-system thus reducing the break-even point for the investor.
- Strict Micro-Budget Production Principles: It is essential for local production houses to have disciplined micro-budget production principles. With lean physical production cost and controlled, creators can keep a reserve capital for more ambitious post production and targeted marketing which mitigates the financial risk to a scale of the regional market size as in the independent Mizo film sector.

Infrastructure and Distribution Re-engineering

Introduce a Mini-Cinema Subsidy Scheme: Sometargeted real-estate subsidy, low interest equipment loans and long term tax break should be provided to the entrepreneur of the semi-urban and rural areas who will establish low cost digital mini cinema (50-100 seats). It would quickly increase the state's theatrical presence beyond the packed movie theaters of the cities.

Expand the State-backed exhibition infrastructure: Copying the Kerala model of KSFDC, Assam's public screen exhibition network (ASFFDC) should grow and bring in guidelines that promote indigenous regional films for a week a year to prime time theatre screenings.

Rise of Cooperative Independent Distribution Collectives: The Assamese film makers, in order to resist the corporate monopoly should come together to form Cooperative Independent Distribution Collectives like what Odessa Collective has done, modeled after the filmmakers. Combining financial resources, organizing members of self-governing groups for screens and focusing on high population local clusters, independent filmmakers can replicate the grassroots successes of neighbouring states such as Mizoram.Independent creators can replicate the distribution success enjoyed by the small screen maker scene in Mizoram through the creation of self-governing distributors that combine financial resources, organize with community-led screenings, and target high-density local population clusters.

Distributive Adaptability and Market Expansion

Implement a Uniformed North-East Regional OTT Aggregator: Media players in the North-East region should come together to establish a well-financed OTT platform combining the linguistic content of multiple local OTTs from the North-East region (such as the Assamese, Bodo, Manipuri, Mizo and Khasi cinema). These different groups combine to form an even bigger consumer-sized market which can prove to be a lucrative avenue for securing institutional and corporate advertisers, major corporate sponsorships, and VC money.

Raised Intellectual Property (IP) Pipelines: Production companies need to run on-demand production to create content that is easily accessible via open access digital platforms such as YouTube. It gives creators the opportunity to try out ideas, gain early credibility and fan loyalty, and prove their concept by gaining cultural capital before investing large sums of money in a theatrical release.

Target Transnational Diaspora Audiences: The producers need to create digital-first, pay-per-view distribution models that can be targeted to reach the wealthy Assamese community across North America, Europe, the Middle East, South East Asia and other regions, monetising cultural nostalgia.

A summary and Future Research directions

The economic domination is not immutable and is not determined by place or language and it is possible for Assamese film to change.Marginalisation of Assamese cinema is not a given and could change if it is possible. But there are ways to overcome the shortcoming of a small market as has been shown by the operational resilience of Malayalam cinema, policy changes of the Philippines' film industry, as well as a few local breakthroughs that have come in recent years, such as Bidurbhai and Roi Roi Binale. If the sentimental arguments for preservation of Assamese cinema model continue to hold the fort, it might fall prey to economic stagnancy in the future, since it lacks any organized funding cadre, and it's a market dominated by the multinational media giants.

The industry needs to have a deeper understanding of production being a formal and sustainable business environment and a conscious paradigm shift. Future studies must attempt to collect detailed and empirical data on the shift of media usage across the rural and urban divide of Northeast India, assess the profitability of Northeast media networks and streaming platforms, and examine the legality of fostering collaborations between independent and local Northeast media producers with Southeast Asian media networks.

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