

Unintended Part of Urban Lifeworld

Meenakshi Dutta

Assamese filmmaker Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia's films can be read as a historical description of the different phases of urbanization people of Assam had to go through. In his seven Assamese films - *Sandhyarag* (Cry of Twilight, 1977, B&W) *Anirban* (The Vigil, 1980, B&W), *Agnisnan* (The Ordeal, 1985, Colour), *Kolahal* (The Turmoil, 1988, Colour), *Sarothi* (The Shelter, 1992, Colour), *Abartan*, (On the run, 1994, Colour) and *Itihaas* (Exploration, 1996, Colour) Saikia expresses his perception towards urbanization and the effects of these changes on human lives (especially on woman). If *Sandhyarag* depicted the journey from rurality to urbanity, *Itihaas* is all about the last phase of urbanity, where he explored the darkness of a city. Likewise, in *Kolahal* Saikia tellingly demonstrates the growing cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism of urbanization. The society depicted in *Kolahal* is free from the quintessential authority of the archaic social prejudices of a homogenous and bounded traditional society. This film begins with a statement: "this film has been made in Assam in the Assamese language, but its theme and the characters belong elsewhere – to many places" (*Kolahal*, 1988). The people of this place are more concerned about their survival, than the maintenance and celebration of social customs. They are living more like biological beings than socio-cultural ones, without bothering much about their future because they cannot afford to do so. Uncertainties of time, instability of family, insecurity of women and fragility and impermanence of emotional ties are some of the traits that mark the world in *Kolahal*, which can be termed as the 'unintended city' theorized by Sen:

"the relationship of the unintended city to the urban city is limited. It is for the most part only economic and at that an exploitative, dependent link. The city uses and exploits the poor, and they in turn use the city to their ends; indeed they use it in ways that the urban middle class consider 'abuse', with no apparent loyalty, respect, or civic sense" (Sen, 1976).

The physical and cultural geography of the world in *Kolahal* can claim a kind of novelty in Assamese cinema. First of all, the site of the story, where the protagonist Kiron resides, is neither a village nor a city or town but perhaps a location where the village and the town meet each other. This physical liminality gets extended to the other narrative features of the film, like Kiron's dilemmas and conflicts as a wife, a mother and a woman. Kiron's husband leaves, which he claims for a business purpose, to Muzzafarpur – a rather unlikely destination in a typical Assamese movie. One of the two songs in the film is sung in Hindi, by Kiron's sympathetic mentor Master uncle.

Though the representation of this liminal world is new thing in Assamese cinema, it was a recurrent theme in many Indian movies in Hindi and other languages. However, a significant difference can be noticed in the projection of the 'unintended city' in commercial cinema and that of the art house cinema. The rhetoric in the commercial entertaining cinemas is more about the blatant oppression, exploitation, injustice and torture on the part of the urban elites towards the slum-dwellers. Most of these movies are characterized by the presence of an 'angry young man' who accomplishes revenge by delivering 'poetic justice within three hours' (Bachchan 2015). This narrative methodology of revenge, as described by Mazumdar, is an articulation of the traumatic memory of the past:

“The articulation of a tragic and divided urban subjectivity has played an enormous role in cinema, working primarily through the performative power of anger. When combined with revenge, anger allows one to create a temporality of past, present, and future through which the revenge plot reaches its climactic resolution. In the revenge narrative, the past is the site of traumatic memory to be settled in the future” (Mazumdar 2007, 1).

However, the portrayal in the parallel cinema is far different from this heroic individual achievement in accomplishing revenge with the urban masters. Instead, these films are mostly characterized by their disinterest in unrealistic revolutions and their emphasis on the realistic and documentary portrayal of life and humanity in the contexts of heterogeneous locations, peoples and cultures at the edges of the urban world. Theorization of his 'slum's point of view' to interpret Indian cinema, Nandy states,

“The slum may or may not be ugly, it may or may not symbolize absurdity, but it always has a story to tell about the state of the vitality, creativity and moral dynamism of the society that defines the relationship between the slum and suburbia. That story can take many forms .The slum can be read as the past of the suburbia or as an alternative to or decline from it. It can even be romanticized and invested with the vision of a desirable society or a lost Utopia, as Sai Paranjape's *Katha* (1983), Aziz Mirza's *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* (1992) and the television serial *Nukkad* come so close to doing” (Nandy 1999, 2).

Saikia can join in Nandy’s list through *Kolahal*. However, here Saikia’s romanticization is not specifically aimed at projecting the slum as desirable or as lost utopia. Despite the undeniable dependencies and cause-and-effect relationships of the slum with the past village and future of the city, the focus in *Kolahal* is more on the self-sufficient intimate world of Kiron. Unlike Menaka in *Agnisnan* and Jayanti in *Abartan*, who are trapped in social taboos and have to engage in battles with other characters for their existence, Kiron is not disturbed by any of her fellow characters. The cause of her disturbance and conflicts is her own carriage, – the *memory of the past*, which is symbolized by the vermilion mark on her forehead. In the visualization of the ending scene of the movie, she adds fresh vermilion on her forehead; and her welcoming mood towards Badal is shown in the freeze-frame close-up shot of her portrait where a melancholic relief can be visible along with the red vermilion spot. This telling semiotic stands for her successful negotiation with herself.

Reference:

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