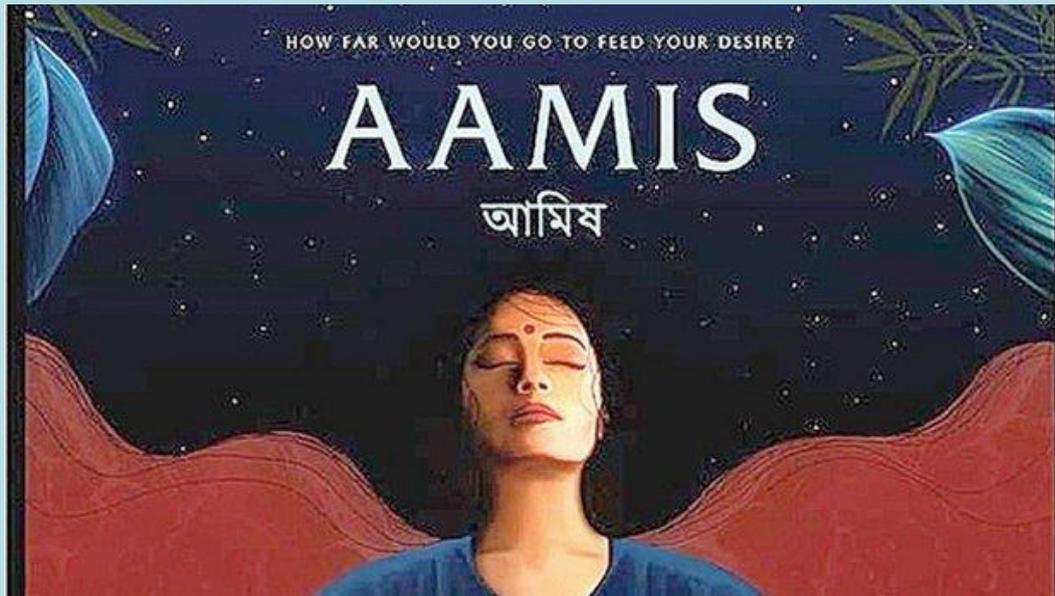


## Competition for the Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Award for Best Film Criticism

**Best Award (Joint Winner)**

**Vedant Srinivas**

**Bhaskar Hazarika's *Aamis***



***Aamis*, 2019, Assamese, 108 minutes, Director - Bhaskar Hazarika**

A few minutes into the film, Sumon pleads with Nirmali to treat a friend of his who is suffering from extreme indigestion. He has apparently had too much meat. As they are walking back, Nirmali tells Sumon that 'meat isn't the problem; gluttony is'. A breezy platitude, yet one that seems to allude to something beyond itself. Indeed, the film is littered with such throwaway lines that perfectly fit the context and yet seem to be adrift in the ambiguity of meaning, as if themselves unsure of what exactly they are supposed to signify. This is one of the striking features of *Aamis*, an audacious second film by Bhaskar Hazarika

that manages to perfectly toe the line between deadpan absurdity and gripping menace.

On the face of it, *Aamis* is a deceptively simple story. Sumon is a PHD student doing his research on meat-eating practices in North-East India. He is also part of a meat-eating club that believes in procuring and cooking fresh meat. Sumon befriends a local pediatrician (Nirmali), a married woman with a pre-teen son and a self-aggrandising doctor husband (Dilip) who is seldom at home. Soon, their friendship burgeons, and eating out becomes central to their budding

relationship. Sumon introduces her to all kinds of meat - even those considered forbidden - and as they spend more time together, we get a whiff of the indescribable feeling of friendship slowly developing into something far more powerful. We are also introduced to some minor characters that serve to morally bookend the narrative - Nirmali's friend Jumi who is unabashedly having an affair, and Sumon's veterinarian friend Dr. Elias, who keeps reminding Sumon of what is morally permissible and what is not.

This boy-meets-girl part of the story proceeds lyrically and with a certain casual abandon. The film opens with an idyllic montage set to a local melody, introducing us to the main protagonists whose paths will eventually cross. As their relationship progresses, they text each other with smiles on their faces, shoot furtive glances when the other's not looking, and share awkward silences. There is a feeling of flushness aided by the warm and inviting cinematography.



Underscoring this allusion of burgeoning feelings is a subtle albeit rigid insistence on propriety. Sumon takes care to always call Nirmali 'Baideo' and sit in the front seat of the car in the presence of her driver. When teased by Jumi, Nirmali vociferously insists that she likes Sumon's company and there is nothing beyond that. She makes it a point to tell her husband

about Sumon the same day he returns from his tour, and also invites Sumon home to dinner to meet her friends and family. There is an unconscious (imbibed) tendency in their behaviour, almost as if their actions are devoid of agency. This is more evident in Nirmali, who is understandably more aware of her middleclass life and the resultant societal norms. Lima Das and Arghadeep Baruah - debutantes - play their parts with charming simplicity. Lima exudes a calm and controlled persona that contrasts well with the naive romanticism of Arghadeep's character.

The first signs of this not being a clichéd film about unrequited love are when Nirmali comes back home to find that Dilip has returned a day early. As Dilip has dinner (veg dishes strewn across the table) and reaches out to lovingly touch her hand, Nirmali suddenly pushes back the chair and gallops into the kitchen. We find her on her knees, a maniacal gleam in her eyes, greedily attacking the cold meat in the fridge with her hands (thus abandoning her knife and fork for the very first time). She felt like having meat, she replies, upon being prodded by Dilip. From here on, the movie turns into something far more sinister and otherworldly, with macabre twists that astonish and astound.

The wondrous ingenuity of *Aamis* lies in its steadfast adherence to push the premise to its limit without providing any kind of respite. It is a film rife with symbolism - meat as forbidden love, as unquenchable addiction - and yet one that seems to rise above such associations, as if a play on the concept of the symbolic itself. Hazarika's script ensures that the otherworldly is constructed entirely from the real. It is this realist treatment of the fantastical that gives it that shimmering quality of ellipsis, of meaning that is

reached and at the same time elided. Aside from a razor sharp deconstruction of everyday notions that we employ and inhabit - food, love, family, identity - *Aamis* is also a rumination on the degenerative aspects of love and longing (as the English title 'The Ravening' subtly suggests), of how the desire to be truly free could itself be a prerequisite for destruction.



Hazarika makes use of inventive cinematic techniques to thematically foreground the narrative - when Nirmali unknowingly tastes a piece of Sumon's meat for the first time, there is a succession of quick cuts of her sitting on a swing, hair flowing, an expression of ecstasy on her face. Similarly, as Sumon ponders over whether there are other ways to get physical with a lover besides the obvious, Hazarika concocts a hallucinatory dream sequence. Corporality is stressed upon as their bodies become the sites of pleasure and obsession. Such flourishes, rarely seen in feature films, are quite admirable.

*Aamis* also features some pertinent socio-political commentary. Whole conversations centre around different kinds of meat and how one ought to cook or eat them. In that respect, it is far far away from the dominant Hindi speaking India, where one's vegetarianism is often construed as a reflector of one's morality and privilege. Its

focus on the sensual enjoyment of life (food being an integral part of it) stands in sharp contrast to the renunciation propagated by the varnashrama dharma. It is thus a resolute cry for North Eastern identity and ideological autonomy.

There are other stray elements in the film, which, though not stressed upon, nevertheless gain significance as the narrative develops. The opening montage ends with a rickshaw-wala as he prepares to sleep - a seemingly innocuous shot. However, in the end, we see the same/ a similar rickshaw puller bear the brunt of Nirmala and Sumon's obsessive hunger. The perverted fight for freedom that our protagonists indulge in finally comes to involve the sacrifice of someone well below them on the socio-economic ladder. Similarly, the pivot of the film is when Nirmala in turn offers her meat to a shocked Sumon. Sumon is no longer alone in proclaiming love through sacrifice, and his passion slowly changes to nervous appeasement. There is thus an emphasis on an intersectional discourse where gender, identity, individual dreams and desires, finally collide with class.



*Aamis* suffers from the occasional contrivances that plague a film that chooses to jump across genres. The character reversals at the end are too abrupt and illogical to believe. Nirmala's

transformation into a person who craves more and more meat no matter the consequences is refreshingly audacious and yet too drastic to escape notice. The same goes for Sumon's decision to commit a murder. The latter half of the film needed more time to breathe, the lack of which makes it feel rushed. Some scenes stand out as unnecessarily expository, as when Elias tries to lecture Sumon on why he should stay away from Nirmala.

Narrative twists aside, there is a much more important concern, namely that it prefers to remain intellectually sensuous and not affectively so. What seems to be missing are tactile images that go beyond mere narrative flow, **a visuality that can trigger physical memories of smell, touch, and taste.** To be fair, the film does make use of this idea, as when images of succulent dishes - made using their own flesh - set against a black backdrop swivel in and out of frame. However, they are still wedded to the narrative. A more powerful association would be one that affects the viewer in a

subliminal manner. This is typified by a scene towards the end. Nirmala now demands more and more flesh to satisfy the 'infinite hunger' inside her. There is a shot of her standing next to a tandoor, peering longingly into it. The charcoal burnt meat is red, glistening with oil, fiery, unstable, overwhelming. It's a powerful image, full of primal associations. One only wishes there was more of it.

Above all, *Aamis* is a provocative treatise on Desire in and of itself, the fundamental lack that each of us face in our lives, one that can only be satisfied by something so utterly primal and 'pre-rational' so as to rise above signification.

It has a disarming effect on the viewer - here is a film that seems to constantly allude to something rapturous that one can almost reach out to and touch with the tip of one's finger, and yet is somehow always beyond our reach: perhaps the very essence of cinema.

***Mr. Vedant Srinivas is an aspiring filmmaker. He pursued a Bachelor's in Philosophy, followed by a Diploma in Filmmaking. Based in Delhi.***