

Article

Ankan Rajkumar

Haanduk: Tale from A Periphery Told with Finesse

In the last five to six years new directors have ventured into the world of filmmaking in Assam and have tried to speak of stories, issues and developments rooted in their own local and immediate surroundings and society. For instance, amongst the emerging directors from the state, Rima Das's oeuvre so far has dabbled with plots and characters firmly rooted in her own rural birthplace while relaying and celebrating the everyday lives of adolescents in rustic settings. Similarly, Anupam Kaushik Bora's *Bornodi Bhotiai* (2019) looked at rural ennui and unemployment in and around the river island of Majuli along the mighty river Brahmaputra. While, *Haanduk* (2016), made by Jaicheng Jai Dohutia, looks at the fissures of the issue of insurgency in a remote upper Assam village through the recording of the lonesome sufferings of an aged woman.

The standout dimension of these filmmakers is that they are a bunch of young people who seem

determined and passionate about the art of cinema as a vehicle for reflection on life and society around them. In terms of genre and form, the films by these makers convey an appreciation and feel for the appropriate means for the stories they want to tell. If Rima Das' filmography and vision is largely in the vein of bildungsroman, someone like Bhaskar Hazarika (of *Aamis* fame) is reveling in the creation of unique cinematic narratives of psychological horror.

Part of this fresh energy in the cinema of Assam can be attributed to the fact that their makers are well exposed to the craft of filmmaking either through film school or stints in Bombay cinema. For instance, Bhaskar Hazarika studied Film and Drama in UK and later worked as a writer in Bollywood before making his first Assamese film. While Rima Das, before making *Village Rockstars* (2017) and winning accolades, was in Mumbai for quite some time trying out her luck as an actor there.



Haanduk is produced and directed by promising new young filmmaker Jaicheng Jai Dohutia. Educated at Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Regional Government Film and Television Institute (formerly Jyoti Chitaban Film and Television Institute), Dohutia has taken inspiration from the recent turbulent political history of Assam to graft a distinct narrative focusing on the lives of ordinary people in an upper Assam village. Although most conspicuously, the film deals with the relationship between a woman called Heramoni and her son Mukti in the backdrop of the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) insurgency, there are multiple narrative strands threaded into the text. Made largely in the Moran dialect and set in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the film evokes a very specific sense of time and place to tell the stories of a set of characters affected by a larger political reality and as to how they negotiated with its resultant effects.

Haanduk doesn't take a judgmental stance when it comes to the means adopted by both the insurgent group and the state to achieve their respective objectives but rather adopts an observational style both in its cinematic means and moral lens in relation to the social reality depicted. The film starts off with a series of striking images of

the life-world of Heramoni as she goes about performing her morning chores and activities in her village. Almost immediately the serene silence of that sylvan surrounding is followed by the eerie silence of a country road where we see a group of young men being inspected by the security forces while the discovery of a dead body of a young man in a rivulet of the vicinity creates panic amongst the villagers. The quiet after sundown too is fraught with stress as army personnel visit Heramoni's dwelling to inquire after her missing insurgent son while another young man nearby decides to sleep in the village woods with his friend fearing possible questioning and detention by the army.

This pattern of meaningful arrangement of content side by side continues throughout the eighty minutes film which gives it a very succinct sense of realism and mood. Not a single frame goes waste as the film makes its business to give visual and spatial access to the open and hidden spaces of a far-flung village in a time of political insurgency. By the middle of the narrative, as anticipation and restlessness of Heramoni for her son Mukti's whereabouts begins to weigh her down, another young man named Biplob makes a return to the village. This character's entry marks a narrative and temporal shift in the film: he is a surrendered ultra unlike Mukti and is cognizant of the new political arrangements between surrendered insurgents and the government. As he scuttles between the demands of the dispensation and the insurgent group to which he is affiliated, Biplob's personal quandary reflects the collective inertia of a society at the end of an armed rebellion going nowhere. At this moment, the film, it seems, loops to its own tale and speaks to itself as Biplob in a trance like state remembers a vivid dream he had back in the jungles as an active insurgent. Biplob's narration about that dream involving a beautiful fairy princess and her pain to his friend Oikya has a strange effect as it seems to have anticipated his own present disillusionment.

The dream of the revolution has surely backfired as the present has shown a mirror as to where things went wrong as self-realization about the larger political picture and its cracks become visible to Biplob. Biplob's name suggests revolution and his story symbolizes the moral degradation of an

entire generation as it chose violence over deliberation and later compromise over character in matters of personal and political integrity.



Haanduk brings to light the experiences of a set of characters in a hidden social space as they are caught in the process of ‘insurgent crossfire’ (Bhaumik, 1996). Far away from the centres of policy making or mainstream political discourse, Heramoni’s story brings one face to face with the realities in a peripheral space. But in a sense, the larger narrative schema of the film can be divided into the characters of Mukti and Biplob.

The film uses their characters to play and comment through the notion of absence and presence. Mukti is clearly absent on two levels in the narrative. At the pure plot aspect, Mukti as a political insurgent is outside the everyday socio-political life and at most has a furtive presence in it. He never makes an appearance in the entire film and we only see other people talking about him (sometimes he visits neighbors in the night to enquire about his mother although he doesn’t visit her fearing being trailed by security or intelligence agents of the state). In fact, his only visible presence is marked by the image of the cigarette butts in the backyard of a neighbor.

At another level, Mukti’s character functions as a conduit for the basic thematic issue of insurgency raised in the film. As the conflict between the state and the rebel outfit intensifies, the security forces and the insurgent group go on a small-scale but insidious war affecting the lives of the ordinary people in unforeseen ways. The name Mukti suggests liberty or independence and stands for the insurgent organization’s demand for a sovereign independent Assam. More importantly, his prolonged absence and the wait for him by his well-wishers probably signal the political impasse in the

state of the period represented in the film. With time the situation only worsens as both insurgents (men like Mukti and Biplob) and the common folk (like Heramoni) suffer at the hands of the state to neither liberation nor revolution.

Biplob or revolution returns but only in its jaded or worn-out form signifying collective fatigue of a society. Mukti or liberation is a farfetched dream in the circumstances and virtually absent in the process. Thus, the film, through its narratives, encapsulates a phase of the political history of the state and comments obliquely on that time.

The moral centre of the narrative of *Haanduk* lies in the tale of the solitary Heramoni as she remains a mute witness to the cycle of violence and counter-violence between insurgents and the state security machinery. Here, the film makes its strongest statement by entirely devoting its creative and aesthetic arithmetic in bringing out the inner suffering of an individual.



As Heramoni goes about her daily routine of cleaning, cooking and working in the field, the entire background landscape speaks through the very naturalistic soundscape and deep-focus photographic design. In fact, the landscapes along with the perceptive close-ups provide the film with a vital realism culled entirely from the sights and sounds of the locations.

Siegfried Kracauer, the leading German theorist and proponent of realist cinema, believed that cinema functions most faithfully and substantively when it presents life as it is. Cinema, he felt, was a unique and significant art in the sense that it tended to turn back to its material (reality) rather than creating an abstract world of art with its own relations and systems. Kracauer did not deny the importance of formal arrangement of the images of reality captured by the filmmaker but held that

this formal urge must be devoted to an ethical adherence to reality.

In *Haanduk*, the formal design of the narrative emanates fundamentally from its commitment to a faithful representation of reality. The world of Heramoni is bared before the viewer in all its textured private and social dimensions as the camera doesn't once make a forced entry or exit. The viewer gets a glimpse of the depth of her inner turmoil in its raw state when she considers taking her own life in one sequence. Clouds gather and thunder for an imminent shower as we see Heramani anxiously moving about from one water body to the other before she makes an attempt at taking her own life by jumping into a pond. But nowhere before the jump, has one got the sense that she is going to make a suicide attempt.



The real and the surreal almost meet in this sequence as the mental visions of Heramoni and the elements merge here. This is the result of depth-of-field composition which allows Dohutia to build suspense over an action for a period of time and to deliver a layered sense of space and depth of the action covered. The narrative unfolds through the action, and yet there is a deeper narrative hidden right in the middle of the visuals. The results achieved in this particular sequence can be amounted to what the philosopher Giles Deleuze referred to as a 'crystal-image' (a subset of his concept of the time-image) where the past and present overlap and converge to communicate a very specific subjective experience.

The filmmaker is more invested in turning a critical eye to an apparently not very interesting woman existing in a secluded rural space and yet there is no trace of theatricality or gimmicks to establish a sincere tone. The film pays the highest tribute to an ordinary isolated woman and her

suffering because it does so without an iota of piety. Rather, the dignity inherent in a group of ordinary persons who experience firsthand the effects of insurgency and counter-insurgency operations is brought out in a fresh cinematic language rarely seen in Assam's cinema. In scenes such as when Sewali (the love interest of Mukti) tries to make Heramoni see through the offer of surrender for Mukti by an army officer, or when a group of villagers rush to the site of a mutilated body of a fellow young person killed purportedly in suspect of being an insurgent, one begins to see the ties binding a community even when its communal life is put asunder by a cynical and violent form of politics.

In unearthing the tribulations of Heramoni, Biplob and Mukti in *Haanduk*, director Jaicheng Jai Dohutia have displayed a rare dexterity and sensitivity of craft and sensibility. Thematically, too the film is able to tell a human story told in a humane way about insurgency, and yet without the usual tropes or frames of identity or security found in mainstream media discourse. In the way it is shot and the manner in which it is put together, the film reeks of solid independent filmmaking in its body, soul and subject.

Mostly performed by an assortment of non-professional actors, (Heramoni's role was played by an ordinary woman named Bandoi Chetia who herself in real life live on the margins of society), the film is an achievement too in the department of casting. At the end of the narrative, when a religious ritual (specific to the Moran community) for the safety and wellbeing of her son missing son Mukti is organized, the gravity of such a communal prayer is brought out in a prolonged final sequence. In faithfully recording the ritual, director Jaicheng Jai Dohutia brings out the kind of spiritual energy released by such a ritual where women like Heramoni participate with all their faith. It is as if the film too here finally puts its message across that faith has true power when it comes to healing personal and social suffering.

Along with Rima Das, Jaicheng Jai Dohutia has introduced a new idiom and style in the cinema of Assam which is marked by restraint, balance and perspective in matters of subject treatment and character development. Departing entirely from the

mores of conventional cinema of the region, their films are telling relevant local stories with cinematic finesse and this is great news for contemporary cinema in North-east India. *Haanduk*, particularly, stands out as it tells a very rooted and buried story which was screaming for sensible cinematic articulation and representation.

Haanduk is also significant (amongst a bunch of fine films made recently in Assam and North-east India) because it is marked by a very earnest and firm conviction in its material and method which is reflected in its overall artistic design and arrangement. The techniques applied elevate the material to a haunting viewing experience which is

quite a thing for any film to achieve anywhere in the world. It must be mentioned here that the film won the prestigious Grand Jury Prize (India Gold) at Mumbai Film Festival in 2016.

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■ *Prof. Ankan Rajkumar is an Assistant Professor of Mass Communication & Journalism at Assam Women's University, Jorhat.*