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Media and Censorship

Comprehensive Analysis of The Cinematograph (Amendment) Act

Changing
Paradigms
of Vigilantism,
Revenge, and Justice
Analysis of Select New
Generation Malayalam
Crime Films

SPECIAL ISSUE 29 # F

Indian Cinema Now: Voices from the Margins and Beyond

മാറുന്ന ലോകം, മാറുന്ന സിനിമ

ആൻ ഹുയിയുടെ പെൺപക്ഷ ചലച്ചിത്രലോകം ശബാന ആസ്മിയുടെ 50 അഭിനയ വർഷങ്ങൾ

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We are grateful to various film websites from which we have borrowed materials to enrich this magazine. The opinions expressed herein are not necessarily of the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy or the editors.

ലേഖകരുടെ അഭിപ്രായം സർക്കാരിന്റേതോ അക്കാദമിയുടേതോ ആയിരിക്കണമെന്നില്ല. അവയുടെ പൂർണ്ണ ഉത്തരവാദിത്വം ലേഖകർക്ക് മാത്രമായിരിക്കും.



Representing the State-Community Relationship through an Emerging Feminist Voice from the Bodo People

Understanding Gorai Phakhri (Wild Swans)

Dona Biswas

Abstract

This paper tries to analyse the state-community relationship through the interpretation of a Bodo film *Gorai Phakhri* (*Wild Swans*) directed by Rajni Basumatary. The paper argues that the state violence that Bodo community faced during the Bodoland movement is still remembered as a collective trauma by the community. It is particularly meaningful for feminists due to the horrendous sexual violence Bodo women faced. Yet, this relationship with the state, the paper feels, might be undergoing changes in contemporary times. This leads to a trial towards the resolution of that trauma in representation. The reading of the film directs one to think that this happens through a provisional acceptance of the state with whom a contemporary feminist voice is making an effort to negotiate.

Keywords: Bodos, Feminism, State, Conflict

The paper studies the film *Gorai Phakhri* (*Wild Swans*), directed and written by Rajni Basumatary (Basumatary R., Gorai Phakhri: Wild Swans, 2024) and released on 16th June 2024 in a theatre of Kokrajhar,³ one of the districts in Bodo Territorial Region (BTR henceforth) in Northeast of India. The film is a ninety five minutes show with an all-female-cast. *Gorai Phakhri* received national and international attention.² It was screened at various film festivals before it was released at the theatre of BTR in Kokrajhar.

The Northeast³ itself is a neglected part in the national saga of India. But, there are marginal sagas even within this. Thus, dominant regional nationalisms like Assamese nationalism often neglect the experience of sub-regional tribal assertations like the Bodos. As a scholar working around these issues analyses: "The separatist ideology that the leadership of the movement (Bodoland movement) articulated …is rooted in a deep sense of alienation in relation to the Assamese society of which they had been considered to be a peripheral part" (Basumatary J. , Quest for Peace in Assam, 2014, p. 7).

The Bodoland movement, which began in 1987 and which led to the formation of BTR is an example of a sub-regional tribal assertation. To describe what the movement stood for:

The Bodoland movement that began on 2nd March, 1987 was basically the product of Socio political change among the Bodos which led to the identity articulation. Though the Bodos had their own kingdoms in different historical periods, their last kingdom was annexed by the British in 1854. During the Colonial rule up to the early part of 20th century the Bodos remained socio-economically very backward and therefore some Bodo historian termed this period as 'darkest' period of Bodo History. The economic backwardness and exploitation, the influx or immigration problem, land alienation, identity crisis, linguistic and cultural assimilation policies, political domination by the ruling clique etc. made the Bodos to rise from the suppression and oppression which eventually created favourable atmosphere for social and political movements and as such the Bodoland Movement became the testimony which was not emerged out of a vacuum but through a process of long series socioeconomic and political changes and upheavals among the Bodos. (Singh & Mushahary, 2015, p. 78).

The extreme violence that was unleashed on the Bodo population following the movement has left deep community traumas. Any story around Bodo life constantly goes back to this political moment because of the depth of that trauma left behind. This serious and traumatic experience of the community's past has hardly found space in cinematic expression.

The story of Bodo women in this conflict-ridden area is yet another marginalised narrative that hardly finds mention in most forms. This is due to various reasons, including the difficulty of telling the stories from marginalized locations, especially, gendered stories. As far as the medium of film is concerned, we should also remember the lack of production of films from the Northeast generally, and Bodo locations particularly.⁴

Rajni Basumatary's Filmography: A Gendered Voice from Bodo Areas

In these circumstances, Rajni Basumatary's films plays an important role in bridging this gap. Her earlier film, *Jwlwi* (*The Seed*) was released in 2019 (Basumatary R. , Jwlwi: The Seed, 2019). It is a common-enough story in a conflict area - the story of a woman who lost her husband first and then her son, all in the context of violence unleashed against the community by the state. The film is set in the 1990s and portrays the time of insurgency in Assam and the enactment of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA) which affected ordinary lives. Bodo men were



the target of the state then. They were killed with the slightest of doubt that they were part of the movement.

In the movie *Jwlwi* (*The Seed*), the female protagonist, Aalari, learns that her son was killed in an army encounter and is left all heartbroken. Amidst the conflict, as the title of the movie references, hope comes to her, translating into the climax when she learns that her son, before the police encounter, had fled to Thailand. He had got married to a Thai woman and the couple now has a son living there. Hearing the news, Aalari hurriedly plans to visit Thailand, to see her daughterin-law and grandson. The metaphor 'seed' used in the title of the movie reads both as the 'offspring,' as well as connotes the importance of actual seeds for farmers (Basumatary D., 2023).

Gorai Phakhri (Wild Swans)

The film opens through the eyes of a middle-class educated Bodo woman's eyes, Preeti. She travels to an interior Bodo village to conduct her research on gender and Bodo women. While most of the film unfurls through the ethnographic eye of Preeti, observing the women at work and their relationships, it also shows us the changing life of girls and women in the Bodo village.

There are two or three main strands of narratives that criss-cross and sometimes run parallel. The final effect is that of a group of women (it is an all-woman cast) and their stories.

Preeti's own tumultuous relationship with another educated Bodo man, Rindo unfurls in front of us through WhatsApp chats and phone calls. The final breaking point of the relationship itself, due to Preeti choosing to find her own intellectual and perhaps activist path alone points to the choices in front of a feminist character.

Among the other stories, Malothi, the older woman who lives alone is significant. She is a survivor or sexual violence by the Indian state during the Bodo movement. She has been abandoned by her husband who could not bear the shame of the rape. She is facing the dilemma of her husband now wanting to come back to her life.

The other major strand is that of Mainao's and Gaodaang's fractured friendship, again connected to Bodo movement and the state. Towards the end of the movie, the friends find they continue to love and care for each other.

The narrative the brings them together is that of the younger generation of their daughters, Sonathi and Daisy along with Preeti. Sonathi faces digital sexual violence,

when her nude video that she sends to a boy she is developing an erotic interest, publicises it in the community. This brings all the women who might even be fighting among each other together.

The film is peppered with many other sub-plots – like the resistance of Bimoli whose husband is a drunkard, Promila who "catches" a young woman in a compromising position with her husband, but is questioned by the village women why she is so violent with the "other" woman but is kind to her husband etc.

While the film shows the conflict-ridden area and the lives of women in this space, their varied experiences are also seen to build a sisterhood among women. It is not just in the chosen theme of the movie that one can read gender in the movie. One can also read a feminist intention in the all-women-cast of the movie. The paper helps to understand community memory through the emergence of the feminist voice.

As the writer-director mentions in the public discussion after a film screening in Delhi (Basumatary R., 2024), when we talk about women from the Northeast, we often compare their struggle with the struggles of women from "mainland" India. The "mainland" women face patriarchal practices such as sati and dowry. These can be seen as caste-society problems. Since these forms of patriarchy are not the one present in the Northeastern tribal societies, this might wrongly make us think that the tribal women in Northeast are "more free." This leads to a romanticising of tribal women in the Northeast. But, the film does not work with this premise at all, and its main intention seems to be an expose of Bodo patriarchy and resistance through feminist sisterhood.

Representation of Bodo Women's Labour

The film background of the movie is provided by shots of Bodo women's labour. Every scene opens into a scene of transit (with women riding bicycles) or a scene of labour. The specific form of labour that Bodo women participate in are focussed on. One of the things that should be noted is the focus of group labour. Thus, in one of the opening scenes itself, which establishes the tiff between Mainao and Gaodaang, we see a group of Bodo women going out fishing. The tension between the women is palpable in the scene. Yet, it is also to be noted that neither one can do without the community and thus "adjusts" to the presence of the other. Thus, labour becomes a glue that binds the women's community together, even if it is a fractured unity.

Like this, we see every scene peppered with Bodo women's labour. There is a scene where Mainao appears to be weaving using a handloom. There are other scenes where the women are foraging for greens, picking shoots from plants, and even driving a bullock ploughing.

The presence of the researcher Preeti, though a Bodo woman, makes the questions "ethnographic." She is almost always concentrating on gender issues since at the beginning itself we understand that Preeti is working on gender. So, while she sees a Bodo woman ploughing the field, she asks: "Isnt this a man's job?" The ploughing woman smiles and says: "Nobody says women cannot do it, right?"



The violence that working class women, including Bodo women face from within the families, is represented by the "stealing" of their labour by some of the husbands. Alcohol becomes a sign of male irresponsibility. Thus, a character, Bimuli (played by Rajni Basumatary the director, herself) has to leave the fishing because the husband has arrived and he is "angry." There are many scenes which builds her broken relationship with her husband, who is exploitative of her and is addicted to alcohol. Labour of Bimuli is the central point of this exploitation. At a crucial scene, Bimuli resists the husband, because she has reached the end of the tether. She locks him up in the granary because he refused to let her sell the grains she had painstakingly collected to sell in the market. He wanted to drink away this small wealth. She transfers the sacks of grains outside and locks the husband inside the granary. She tells her women friends that she intends to sell the product and use it to run the family.

But, it should be noted that labour is not just shown as back-breaking and exploitative. In fact, throughout the movie, it is also shown as women "having fun," especially an organic connection with nature and community. While it is relentless and sometimes exploitative, there is also a chance of women to come together, in spite of their differences and support each other.

Representation of the State

This section of the paper deals with the major arguments around community and state relationship of a region that has undergone conflict. Thus, we can also read one of the major issues the film deals with is the community's relationship with the state. The paper presents this through four sub-sections - a. Malothi's Story: Trauma of Women in a Conflict Area, b. Mainao and Gaodaang: Fracturing of Female Bonding due to State c. Preeti's Character: Middle-Class Educated Feminist Identity and Affinity with the State d. The Resolution in Contemporary Times: Sonathi's Story.

The state comes as drawing a wedge between the community bonding, which is shown to be fragile and sometimes even fractured. There are many instances where women's bonding, a central theme in the movie itself comes as part of the threatened community bonding. Yet, it is the argument of this paper that while there is a driving of a wedge between community, the state also is represented as a possibility that might lead to a negotiation space to resolve gendered conflicts in the area.

a. Malothi's Story: Trauma of Women in a Conflict Area

It is through Malothi's story that the trauma that the community carries is brought about. In this story, the state plays the role of a pure villain. Malothi is a middle-aged woman who is Mainao's mother. She is shown to live alone in the village. We understand during the course of the film that Malothi is a victim of sexual violence by the state and this happened during the Bodo movement.

Through a flashback that takes the audience briefly to the time of the movement, we see Malothi walking through a village road at night. The violence that is visited upon her is represented by the blinding lights of the jeep that suddenly stops in front of her and then we only hear her screams.

The painful part of the story is not even the gang rape that Malothi underwent. It is the rejection by the community after the rape. Her husband throws her out of the house once he hears that she was raped. He is a character who is always asking the question: "What will people say?" This fear of reputation is what breaks the marriage itself. Instead of supporting his wife, who went through violence for the community, the community gives her up for sexual reputation. Thus, Malothi's words that she will never forgive or forget can be seen as the voice of countless Bodo women's voice who must have faced horrendous violence by the state but might have felt betrayed by the patriarchal norms of the community.

Dr. Anjali Daimari played the role of



Malothi in the film. This choice of the director, to represent a crucial character who stands for the sacrifices that Bodo women have undergone due to state-community violence can be read as the using of Daimari's startext for representational purposes. A star text is "a composite media text that combines a celebrity's visual, verbal, and aural appearances in the press or on screen. It's a metanarrative that links each film a star appears in" (Dyer & McDonald, 2019).

Daimari is hardly a film star. But, that is precisely her star text which lies outside the film. She is a well-known activist among Bodo people. She herself has had experience of being incarcerated as an activist. She might not have suffered sexual violence but has taken up many sexual violence cases suffered by Bodo women by the state. Thus, her "acting" was playing herself, Thus, discussing this with the writer-director and actor allowed me to explore the intersectional ties between personal narrative and film's fictional portrayal of violent times.

The case of Malothi is common to many women who were sexually harassed and raped by the Indian army and lost their regular lives fighting the consequences. Their voice never got registered in the narratives of the movement. They are still fighting the lone battle within their families. Some of them

may have returned to their families. Some, represented by the character Malothi, could not. The dignity of these women were never taken seriously by the state or the ruling body of Bodoland. The few reports could reach the police station and the court but never found any justice, which Anjali Daimari shared in an interview (Daimari, 2024). The formation of the Bodo Women's Justice Forum (BWJF, henceforth) in 1993 continued fights on that ground. Daimari shared a moment from the film set when she acted as Malothi. While delivering the dialogue, she burst into tears, as "I felt I was revisiting the whole age of violence that I witnessed working on those cases. I could see all those faces of women struggling... even when I was arrested by Assam police and kept blindfolded in Guwahati custody.. I got lost in the dialogue and did not know what I was speaking to... as if I lost my sense that day!" (Daimari, 2024).

The final scenes where Malothi accepts her husband back, but in her terms could also be read as a compromise that the feminist voice of Bodos reach with the community that betrayed them.

b. Mainao and Gaodaang: Fracturing of Female Bonding due to State

One of the other main threads of the story can

also be read as a problem of community and state relationship - the portrayal of differences between Mainao and Gaodaang. This is shown to be a bond that used to be strong at one stage in their lives. As young brides, in a flashback in the movie, we see Gaodaang and Mainao cooking in the same kitchen. This time, it is Gaodaang's turn and she is generously sharing her cooking with Mainao. Mainao replies that tomorrow she will make something special for Gaodaang's family.

But, the state comes between these two women's families. In Gaodaang's and Mainao's case, it is also symbolically expressed through the choices their husbands take. Thus, Mainao's husband joins the anti-state rebels. Gaodaang, on the other hand, is married to an army man. She is even shown to be proud of his status now. Mainao, on the other hand, is filled with grief because of the choice of her husband because he has also become a martyr. This itself is the cause of their rift, and one can perhaps read it as the state coming in between two women belonging to a close-knit community.

Another part when representation of the state comes into the movie is through the character Preeti, the researcher. She asks Mainao whether her husband asked her permission to join the rebels, Mainao is shocked. For, till then perhaps, she didn't even think she had that choice to say "no" to her husband. Preeti clarifies that Bwhwithi, Mainao's husband had no right to take that choice because that decision impacted Mainao's and her child's life deeply, but Mainao was hardly given a choice. Thus, there is a subtle critique of the Bodo movement itself from a gendered perspective that the film shows.

c. Preeti's Character: Middle-Class Educated Feminist Identity and Affinity with the State

The character Preeti is shown to be a "city girl." She is extremely educated, doing her PhD in Anthropology, winning international research grants and is an "insider-outsider" in the Bodo village. She belongs to the community but does not belong to the class of her relatives. Her own relationship with the state and the question of Bodo past with

the state can be read as a middle-class Bodo feminist's relationship with the state.

Preeti's own opinions about the movement also comes through while she is talking to Mainoa. She says that no nation-state would tolerate any group asking for self-rule. But, the comparatively uneducated Mainoa has the community's perspective about her husband joining the rebels. She simply says Bwhwithi left to fight for the freedom of "our people." While one suspects, it is Preeti's perspective that the film is sharing about the Bodo movement, Mainoa's counter also presents another perspective.

d. The Resolution with the state in Contemporary Times: Sonathi's Story

In the incident with the digital sexual harassment that Sonathi faces, we can see as a kind of denouement of the community-state relationship. Here, the state is invoked by the feminist voice of the film. Preeti stands strongly for giving a case against the sexual harasser, who seems to have tried to destroy Sonathi's reputation among community members by circulating a very private moment of hers, shared with him consensually. Gaodaang, the mother, is not so sure of it in the beginning. She feels her daughter will only suffer more. But, Mainoa who suddenly comes back to her life in this crisis moment, takes a step towards this. She has a contact in the police, Ratnadeep.

Ratnadeep, who never appears in the film (like all the other male characters) has an interesting past. Mainoa clarifies later in the movie that Ratnadeep was involved in the movement at one stage and has now joined the police.

This can be seen as a coming together of the Bodo movement and the state, where the sexual harassment issue gets resolved. This incident can also be seen as symbolically, the community accepting a truce with the state with gender playing a role in bringing about this truce.



Conclusion

This paper argued using a contemporary feminist film from Bodo language that the contradictory relationship of the community with the state is represented quite strongly in the film. The past, where deep traumas are left in the community due to the facing of violence, is represented through the portrayal of the memory of sexual violence that a major character has faced. Yet, the contemporary times is also portrayed as raising other forms of feminist questions that women of the community are facing where the state sometimes also comes as a platform that provides a provisional resolution.

(**Dona Biswas**, PhD Scholar, Women's and Gender Studies, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi)

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- For more details, check https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=6mmAOoanzt4
- Check https://northeastlivetv.com/topnews/ bodo-film-wild-swan-to-be-premiered-atvancouver-film-fest-on-sept-29/
- 3. The northeast is used to signify the region covered by eight states of a hardly studied area in India. The state of Assam is the entry point into most of these states. The Northeast has a pervasive feeling of marginality because of the neglect of Indian central government. It is understood as 'culturally different' from Indian culture as the majority of the population is recognised as the 'tribal population' of Southeast Asia influence (Wouters & Subba, 2022).
- 4. There are a number of Bodo films from 1984 onwards (List of Bodo-language Films, n.d.). But, compared to languages where a film industry exists robustly, the number is quite limited.

