

Article

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Depicting the Bengal Origin Muslims of Assam through Cinema*What the Fields Remember (2015)*

The Bengal origin Muslim community is one of the many communities that comprise the present demography of Assam. In her thesis titled 'Emergence of a Community: the Muslims of East Bengal Origin in Assam in Colonial and Postcolonial period', Anindita Dasgupta, mentions that since the last decade of the nineteenth century, landless Muslim peasants from the East Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Noakhali, Pabna, and Bogura began to enter the neighbouring province of Assam, in undivided India, in search of agricultural land.^[1] Since then the community has been a part of the socio-political landscape of Assam and over the years the cultural assimilation of this community with the region is reflected in the language spoken by them which is in the Mymensinghia dialect of Bengali with words adopted from the Assamese language.

Shalim M Hussain, who has worked as a researcher for the short documentary *Nodir Kul Nai (2019)*

illustrates the fact, 'Language plays a very important role in the cultural assimilation of the Bengal origin Muslims of Assam. An overwhelming majority of the community returns its language as Assamese in all records. Similarly, Assamese is the language used in the public sphere and as a link language with other communities in the Brahmaputra valley. For private use, the community uses a number of dialects. I don't agree with the phrase 'so- and-so dialect is a dialect of so- and, -so language'. An ur-language is one that has always existed and other similar dialects are derived from it. This is not how dialects and languages are formed. Dialects are independent entities which are fluid and show immense internal variations as well as overlaps with other languages/dialects. They are in a constant state of flux because of their ungoverned nature and thus, have existed before modern 'standard' languages and continue to show immense alterations depending upon time, the place where they are spoken and the other languages/dialects they interact with. Thus, the

dialects spoken by the Miyah/Bengal origin Muslim communities of Assam can certainly not be confined within the phrase 'Mymensinghia dialect of Bengali with words adopted from the Assamese language'. This hypothesis is wrong on two counts: first, the Miyah/Bengal-origin Muslim community in Assam is composed of descendants of migrants from various districts and thus, various dialectal groups. Second, the dialects as they are spoken now in Assam, have borrowed lexicon not just from Assamese'.^[2]

Self-trained filmmaker Deep Choudhury, who made his debut with *Alifa* (2016) had to make an important decision regarding the language of his film while obtaining the censor certificate. 'The dialect I choose for *Alifa* was never been used earlier in cinema, there were political implications too. But to keep the authenticity of the story I decided to use this dialect. But the hitch came in at the time of censoring the film when we realized that the language is not included in the VI schedule recognized language list and on top of that, the language has no such specific name. So looking at the proximity to Bengali we decided to censor our film in Bengali', says the filmmaker.^[3]

In this context National Award-winning film critic and filmmaker, Utpal Borpujari, expresses his opinion, 'I would not like to look at this as something specific to the "Bengali-speaking Muslim community", and rather I would like to look at it from the angle of Bengali-speaking community (including both Hindus and Muslims) with roots in East Bengal/East Pakistan/now Bangladesh. This is important because, in Assam, the socio-political discourse is along with ethnicities and not along with religiosity despite recent attempts by some political forces to make religion a bigger element than ethnicity in the state. From that point of view, we must mention the Assamese film *Aami Asomiya* (*We, the Assamese*, 2006) directed by Rajeeb Bhattacharyya, which looked at the sensitive relationship that the Assamese and Bengali communities have in Assam. Without going into the cinematic merits or demerits of the film, I must say that it was the first film to explore this topic and had

tried to iterate the fact that the Bengali community in Assam is an inextricable part of the larger Assamese community (which includes all ethnic communities living in Assam, speaking in hundreds of languages and dialects)'.^[4]

Over the past few years, the filmmaking practices in Assam has witnessed a diversity in the form of films made in different dialect and languages by debutant as well as veteran filmmakers. Films are not only been made in the Assamese language but also in various ethnic languages such as Bodo, Karbi, Mising, Rabha, Moran, Rajbongshi, and Tiwa. So, when filmmakers are making films that portray the Bengal origin Muslims of Assam, both within the domain of fiction and non-fiction, it can be perceived as an inevitable approach. By analyzing the following films I will attempt to critically understand how the substantiality of language helps to enunciate cultural distinction and difference as well as how language, region, and cinema get delineated onto each other.

What the fields remembers (2015)

The title of Subasri Krishnan's documentary signifies the importance of the fields in Assam's that had witnessed the infamous Nellie massacre on February 18, 1983, where Bengali Muslims living in fourteen villages had to face the rawest violence unleashed upon them by people from certain communities of Assam who have not yet been punished by the law. As a creative decision, the director revisits the massacre by narrating the gruesome tale of the massacre from the point of view of the survivors, Sirajuddin Ahmed and Abdul Khayer, who narrate indignant moments from the day of the attack and the aftermath that haunts them even after more than three decades. Through the interviews, they inform the viewers about the act of brutality that is not only unnerving but dismaying in equal measures of how their families have been massacred with impunity. Abdul recalls how his young son, whom he had held on his back, was split into two when attacked by a sickle, while his other son was killed and thrown away, right in front of his eye. The helpless Abdul bolsters courage and asks

the perpetrators that what was his child's fault? Similarly, Sirajuddin feels sad to remember that his daughter Rumi who took part in anti-foreigner processions, before succumbing to her injuries, asks his father that if they are also foreigners? Such soul-stirring pieces of information appear as if the deceased is making a loud cry for remembrance, where the survivors are required to express sympathy and grieve for the dead and narrate the tale of bestiality with courage and resilience. Another character, Mohammad Khalilur Rahman, sing songs lamenting for the dead, the futile visits of two prime ministers of India, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, as well as the visit of the seventh president of India, Giani Zail Singh, who showed his sympathy to the victims and donated a sum of rupees five thousand. And to date that is all they have got as justice had eluded the dead.

The filmmaker uses long uninterrupted takes and dedramatizes the narrative to create an unhurried pace where the temporal causality and progress unfolds at a measured pace to facilitate a contemplative viewing experience. She mutes dramatic intensity and foregrounds idleness and ambiguity to underline the aesthetic stimulation of the narrative. There are several shots in the film such as the slow pan to reveals the area named 'Borbori', which happens to be the site of a mass grave of the massacre, a boat sailing across Muladhari river, the hunched old man walking briskly holding a stick; can be technically considered as supplementary footage to enrich the storytelling and provide the narrative with options for flexibility during the process of editing. But the treatment of the documentary is such that it reconfigures the slow pace of the film and incorporates such shots to elicit our cognitive engagement with the film. The cinematography reveals the locations and day-to-day activities in stillness and quietude and focuses on the more mundane aspects of life. Such sort of shot design highlights that the people residing in the village have escaped the tumultuous stride of the contemporary world and are relishing in the small little things of life. It also creates an ambiance for the viewers to contemplatively mull over a

massacre, that remains on the edge and has more or less wiped out from the collective consciousness of the nation.

Alifa (2016)



Deep Choudhury begins the film with the titular child protagonist (Pakija Hasmi) gazing in wonder at the sprawling expanse of the city of Guwahati from the vantage point of her abode, situated in a hill thick with forests overlooking the city. Through an off-screen narration, she cherishes the prettiness of the densely settled area where the lights glow like stars in the evening and wished she could keep looking at it throughout the day. But soon her younger brother Faizal (Rayan Abdul) pulls her ponytail and busts her bubble of reverie. She retaliates and chases her brother playfully. As the narrative of the film progresses, the viewers discover that Alifa and her younger brother live with her parents, Ali (Baharul Islam) and Fatima (Jaya Seal) in a bamboo thatched home built illegally over an occupied area that belongs to the forest department. And to save his family from becoming homeless, Ali has to grease the palm of the forest guard with a monthly allowance. When Ali fails to deliver the amount on time the irked guard passes profane comments such as 'Don't you have anything to do except shouting Allah's name all the time'. The family is a victim of the natural calamity unleashed by the flood and hence the penurious members had to seek refuge in the Narakasur Hill, hoping for a better livelihood. So, Alifa's strong desire to be a part of the city is a yearning that is hidden in the deep recess of her mind and metaphorically reflects upon the plight of the community who are often faced with the problem of uprootedness and displacement.

Deep Choudhry has brazenly highlighted the discrimination Ali faces as and when he is called 'Miya', which is a derogatory word for Bengal origin Muslims of Assam, who are looked down upon, and their citizenship is constantly questioned. There is a scene in the film where Ali and his friend are hired by an employer, played by Victor Banerjee, asks Ali with a good intention that if he was born here (Assam) or beyond the border (Bangladesh). As the conversation continues the employer expresses his grief over the fact that since poor individuals like Ali and others from his ilk are unable to buy land in the city with the sky-soaring prices, they are compelled to build sheds illegally in the forest areas. While the city-bred individuals are destroying hills and building settlements for their comfort and benefits. But Ali is too naïve to comprehend the reasoning of his employer and responds that he came to the city to escape death and make sure that his family does not die of starvation. This small scene speaks in volume not only about the poignant rural-urban divide prevalent in the society but also touches upon the effect of forced migration due to the disastrous consequences of flood, erosion, and poverty-plagued within the countryside. These groups of people in the struggle of coping with the city life bring in newer challenges to the cities. The stark economic division highlighted in the scene is now a common phenomenon in urban life. And it is due to such attributes that it makes the film a delightful watch.

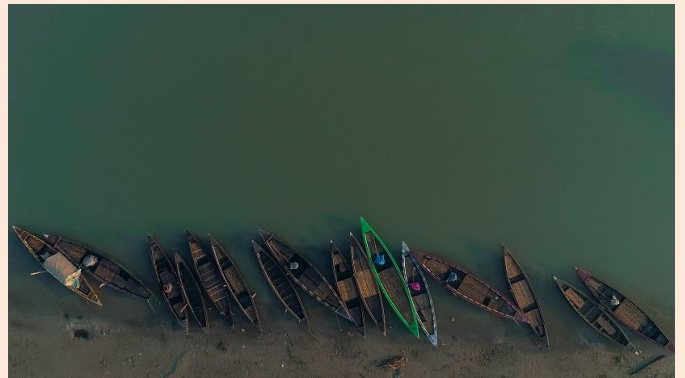
III Smoking Barrels (2017)



Sanjib Dey's *III Smoking Barrels* is a feature film that has been structured with three segments interconnected with a common theme. The third and final segment titled 'Man' narrates the tale of

Mukhtar (Subrat Dutta) who belongs to the Bengal origin Muslim community and used to earn his livelihood as a fisherman in the woods and look after his wife Morjina (Amrita Chattopadhyay). But now the government has restricted fishing in the protected areas of the forest. Dejection and frustration have taken a toll over Mukhtar and he has become an alcoholic. Later, he is enticed to enter the dark terrains of elephant poaching by a manipulative individual who works as a middleman. As Mukhtar gets embroiled in one heinous crime after the other his life seems to have struck a balance. But soon misfortune befalls him and he had to pay heavily for his bad karma. The story also represents in a way that it is the weaker and ignorant class of the society, who always lives in a vulnerable position. The protagonist of the film, Mukhtar, is inspired by a real-life character and for the sake of dramatic purposes, the director had introduced fictionalized characters such as the mute guy Ikram (Nalneesh), his wife Morjina, and Mukhtar's newborn baby, within the narrative.

Nodir Kul Nai (2019)



The mighty Brahmaputra keeps fluctuating between calmness and discomposure. During the monsoon, the river and its tributaries rise above the danger level and wreak havoc in Assam. For the rest of the year, it is placid and enchanting in its scenic beauty. The Bengal origin Muslim community who resides in the *Char Chapori*, low-lying flood-prone floating islands on the riverbanks of the so-called *pagla nodi* (mad river), are extremely affected annually by the natural disaster. Parasher Baruah's approximately seventeen minutes long documentary begins with one of the characters Kurajat Ali, from *Boro Arikati*, informing the viewers about the *Bhatiali* songs,

which he has been singing since an early age. When the river carries away their home, and the inhabitants go from one *Char* to another with their belongings on the boat. It is during such moments of distress that they sing these songs and express their grief. Kurajat had learned these songs by hearing Manik Kana (Manik The Blind), who used to sing when *Goruchar* was eroded by the river. The documentary portrays the Muslim community residing in these islands as artists who through their songs and poetry express their grief as well as an attachment with the river. One of the characters while singing in their native languages decides to sing a particular song in the Assamese language. He switches to Assamese and informs us that they live on lands surrounded by the river, which at times takes away their homes, and then when the land rises in the middle of the river they shift to their newfound abode. The quandary over land and identity is a burning political and social issue that the people of this community have been encountering for ages. And the natural calamities in the form of the flood are an extension of their misery. It appears as if Mother nature rubs salt into their wound by displacing them every year. Parasher, a trained cinematographer from the Film and Television Institute of India, has beautifully framed the *Char* region in all its picturesque charm along with striking aerial shots that capture the vast expanse of the area, narrating the unending distress of the people residing there. As the documentary ends it leaves us gasping for more. We wish that the journey we had embarked upon with these artists from the *Char* area could have continued for few more minutes so that we could have probed deeper into the lives of these people. *Nodir Kul Nai* is a praiseworthy venture undertaken by the filmmaker and his team to highlight a variant aspect of these individuals who otherwise have been categorized around the nation as one of the most disputed communities of the state of Assam.

Sharing his views on the films, Utpal Borpujari explains, 'Films like *Alifa*, *III Smoking Barrels*, and *Nodir Kul Nai* have tried to look at the community, that have migrated and settled in the state from the

specific geography since the Colonial era, in a more realistic and humanistic way and thus are important works of cinema in the context of Assam's local filmmaking practices. Going beyond the politics and reality of illegal migration from Bangladesh and the "cut off date" of March 31, 1971, to determine who among the migrants are illegal immigrants, the "East Bengali" communities in Assam have lived in the state for over a century and these films reflect that reality while also focusing - as *Alifa* does more vigorously - on how the community, especially the Muslims among them, has to face an unequal status in the society. I would put *What the Field Remembers* in a separate category as it is not a voice from within the state and thus is devoid of the finer nuances of the socio-politics of Assam while to a great extent objectively documenting the history of one of the cruelest incidents of Assam's recent history'.^[5]

These films have captured the ethnographic realism of the Bengal origin Muslims community of Assam with an element of authenticity within the form of storytelling. It has also provided a platform for viewers to understand the societal structure and living patterns of individuals from the community as well as their linguistic organization within the state. And such an effort should be applauded because it may open doors for a lot of filmmakers to take a similar stride in the distant future. As Deep Choudhury recalls his experience from one of the screenings of the film, 'I remember a young man coming to me after the screening of *Alifa* was over and confessing with a heavy heart how him being a racist and used slur many a time to people from this community and he could not stop his tear seeing the protagonist Ali's struggle with life and the humiliation he has to go through each day. Cinema has the power to change human values, creates voices for the oppressed, and can give a reason to start a revolution. If I could make one person think about the points I raised in my film, I think I am successful as a filmmaker and it is more than winning an award. I tried to raise a politically vulnerable question in the most human way possible, which was pure and honest'.^[6]

NOTES:

- ^[1]. https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/67559/7/07_chapter%201.pdf
 - ^[2]. Email interview with Shalim M Hussain conducted in February 2021.
 - ^[3]. Email interview with Deep Choudhury conducted in February 2021.
 - ^[4]. Email interview with Utpal Borpujari conducted in February 2021.
 - ^[5]. Email interview with Utpal Borpujari conducted in February 2021.
 - ^[6]. Email interview with Deep Choudhury conducted in February 2021.
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