

Article**Dipsikha Bhagawati****Ode to Water: Bridge**

*"Thy name was writ in water—it shall stand:
And tears like mine will keep thy memory green..."
- Oscar Wilde, 1877.*

Medium shots. A rural set up. Approaching dawn. Radiantly projected effect of fading lunar beam and the colour of genesis. Everything is pragmatic and ubiquitous. Medium shots frame the devoting figure of the "namgharia"1, the quiet twilight is radiated in the entire surrounding, the grave chanting of morning prayers is echoed from the *namghar* and quietly breaking the soft twilight, a teenage girl moves forward with her bullocks and the ploughs on her shoulder, carrying the mass of her dear ones, being leveraged by life and its sharp situations. Now, this is something not very conventionally expected, even in a rural setup of a state like Assam. But the director, Kripal Kalita wants to demonstrate poverty, life, and its compelled journey in front of dire time and disaster caused by nature. He also wants to establish the fact that every inbuilt blessing of nature has multilayered configurations. Water is life, water is death too. A river can create civilization and

simultaneously swipe away all the dreams in its neutral and powerful tour the force, if there is no "bridge" to connect void to void, life to life. The film constitutes the fragility of the civilized fraternity in front of the high and mighty force of unpredictable character.

Laurence C. Smith, one of the world's leading environmental scientists, wrote in his celebrated book 'Rivers of power', how a natural force "raised Kingdoms, Destroyed Civilizations, and Shapes Our World."

Bridge by Kripal Kalita neutrally embodies the tragedy, caused not exactly by a river, rather to say by a tributary, but its abnormal rise to flood and the lack of affinity to associate the habitations on both of its banks.

Kalita has expressed to TOI:

"In Assam, the Brahmaputra and its tributaries are notorious for floods every year which

wipe out many villages. Still, people love the river and its green valleys."

Shot on location at Sonarichapori in Upper Assam's Dhakuakhana, Kalita's movie depicts the struggle of a teenage girl residing along the bank of a tributary of the Brahmaputra in the absence of a bridge and amid perennial floods. But, though "Bridge" is widely circulated as a film, made solely on flood, in fact, flood is not the prime focus of it, flood is one of the pivotal characters of the film and it is a pseudo metaphor, a little beyond of being a common backdrop. The characters here are not projected as something loud or with some heroic attributes, but very pragmatic in the way they really are. The director is not preachy either in his treatment or in his script, he has just presented the tragedy of a remote locality, devastated by flood and effected by poverty - a byproduct of the detachment from the prospering Global world outside, as there was no "Bridge" to join these two parallel worlds. He has projected this detachment and the behavioral mechanism of its obvious contenders and consequences, in the silver screen.



Jonaki (Sibarani Kalita), lives in a small village with her mother and only brother, *Bapukon* (*Partha Pratim Bora*). Being driven by absolute poverty, she has to take charge of her entire family in such an age, when she should have been engaged in weaving colours in her young canvas, if time, life and situation would have favoured her destiny. But she had to walk through thorns, all her dreams are shattered in that soil. As if, the land, being fertile with her relentless steps, exploited her youth and the ruthless, frequent affair of flood had siphoned her effort to live, without the least excuse. "Bridge"

establishes the issue of flood not only as a backdrop, but also as a metaphor. All the conjunctures that eventually go on in due course, are the byproducts of its central nervous system - flood. Jonaki's father died in flood, this had led her to leave her studies and take charge of the family. Here, the empowerment of women is projected in a very silent but strong way, that, in that comparatively backward rural society, detached from the city life, where they don't even have a bridge, Jonaki's character is treated not as the eldest girl of the family, not as someone to be pitied, but as the strong, responsible eldest child, who can go to the fields, who can plough, who can cremate her dreams by saying, " *who will look after my family if I get married*". When *Atul* (*Swapnil Nath*) uploads a still photograph of Jonaki, ploughing her land in social media, it reaches a news channel and the editor sends a journalist to her village to make an exclusive story on her. The journalist, *Parag*, (*Kripal Kalita*), is a sensitive young man, whose emotions get softly hooked by Jonaki's uncomplicated charm, her struggle and her naivety of not being either exaggerated or sympathized, even in spite of her negative situations of life. Parag sees a group of people with a bride and a bridegroom.

He asks: " *In your village, people observe the wedding rituals at day time?*"

Jonaki replies: " *We have no other way, because we do not have a bridge.*"

The absence of a bridge has been a great obstacle for the whole of the village life. Boys from other villages or adjoining areas don't want to marry a girl from their village, school students and the teacher have to cross the river on a boat made of banana trunk, which too is impossible, when flood comes. The river, though a shelter for the village in ways, simultaneously a curse too, because the slope of the very river that rises overnight, sweeps away lives and livelihoods with its devastating water.

Parag asks Jonaki: " *What do you think about getting married?*"

Jonaki replies, " *Who will marry me? Will you?*"

This innocent question haunts Parag and he decides to marry her. Jonaki too, starts dreaming of a new life, as it is a normal dream for any girl of her age. But history repeats. When on a day, as decided

before, Parag comes to her village with his parents, they readily reject the proposal when they see that there is not even a "bridge" to cross the river. The intending marriage is broken, her dream gets shattered once again before it blossomed. The absence of a physical bridge has broken the bridge of life that could be a feasible factor between Parag and Jonaki. Parag has got every good will, he is not someone who contains a ghosting tendency, but he is not that brave to break the words of his parents. He goes back. Jonaki accepts her destiny silently, but somewhere in her subconscious mind, that wish remains buried. Her brother Bapukan's words, just after this incident clearly indicate his anguish towards the river. Though he is tender in age, time and situation made him feel what was going on and why. He, very angrily throws stones into the river water and shouts: *"Mother, I will kill this river. It has taken away our father, it has broken the marriage of my sister, I will kill it."*

The combination of close and medium shots with thrifty projection of colour, capturing the gravity and silence of the last hours of night, give this short but powerful scene a brilliant cinematic touch.

How the nonavailability of a bridge is causing severe medical emergency, is shown through the pregnant woman. On one hand, it penetrates the situation and on the other, glorifies Jonaki's humanity and generosity, when she leaves behind the bunches of bananas, that she was carrying to sell in the market, and instead, accompanies the pregnant lady towards hospital. Some dramatic elements are used as addons to intensify the pathos of Jonaki and her family. First, her mother being an epilepsy patient, and secondly, the incident of a pervert village lad, trying to molest Jonaki. She was thoroughly innocent but as they were alone, they were poor, and they did not have any strong support, Jonaki was unfairly accused of seducing the guy. The village council, constituting the Namgharia too, had supported this injustice, and according to the rule of the community her family had to arrange a grand feast for the village as a punishment. Jonaki had to sell their only asset of livelihood- the bullocks. Here, the belief of the fair entity of God is

questioned, that for the poor, God is a crucial existence.

Tragedy does not get a full stop here. Just after this incident, in a massive sweep of flood, their mother gets a sudden epilepsy attack and dies helplessly in the midst of that vast flood water, leaving Jonaki and her brother as orphans. This shot, a combination of medium and long shots is catchy enough to speak of that undaunted tragedy.



This time Parag comes to collect flood reports for his media house and encounters Jonaki, but they do not exchange a single word. Parag's face reflects that guilt of his cocooned behaviour, who, in spite of having good will towards her, could not behave accordingly due to the strict social parameters set by his parents. Jonaki did not let her morals go down, she had accepted the fact that life must go on, in spite of everything.

Life starts getting normalised again, Jonaki and her brother starts re making their shelter again. Suddenly, at that time, Bapukan digs out a tin trunk out of the sand. Jonaki opens it and takes out some miscellaneous things along with a packet of vermilion and a small mirror. She takes a pinch of it and applies it on her forehead. This close shot is the most suggestive of the entire slot. What Parag could not dare to do, is accomplished by Jonaki, that for her, commitment is the greatest creed.

The last shot of *"Bridge"*, the outstanding high angle shot, capturing the vast river is symbolic of the ever-prevailing void in Jonaki's mind.

The film is almost shot in real set ups, even the sounds are not blended with any synthetic texture, to its maximum.

Director Kripal Kalita has told: *"For a particular shot, the crew had to remain submerged*

in flood-water for seven hours. Even real scenes of people struggling in the floodwaters have been used in the film.”



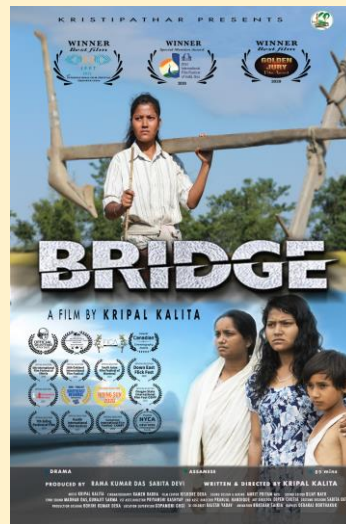
The sensitive cinematography of Ramen Rabha and the sound design by internationally acclaimed sound designer Amrit Pritam is the super DNA of the visual. Interestingly there is no background music used in *Bridge*, but still, the entire slot of the film is full of music, the music of nature, of wind, of the flowing river water, of the prayers, of life. Shot divisions, the use of light and shadow are kept extremely natural, as they really are. The long shots of green fields, of the river, the high angle shot, capturing the tragic death scene of Jonaki's mother in the midst of helpless water, the close shots, used to capture the praying man, the sad faces of Jonaki and her mother, seeing their bullock coming back to them again at night, even after selling them- are some mind-blowing, true to emotion shots.

Jonaki's mother sobs and pampers the bullocks: *"Go dear go. We have broken all our ties with you."*

The character of Jonaki's mother seems to be a little flat from time to time, but it is balanced through the powerful performance of the protagonist. One of the short films by the director- "Megh" is solely credited to be a piece based on the tragedy of flood. In 2017, the internationally acclaimed film *"Village Rockstar"* by Rima Das too highlighted this issue. The difference is that in *Bridge*, the level of

pain is all pervasive and in the *"Village Rockstar"*, there was some dream to be nurtured. *Bridge* depicts the story of survival amidst natural and manmade disaster. *"Village Rockstar"* exploited the essence of dream, keeping these calamities of poverty and nature as backdrops.

Disasters caused by nature is always a timeless and hypothetical issue. They can be controlled, mitigated, not erased. All that is needed is good will, blended with unbiased honesty. Jonaki's silent struggle is allegorical of the fact that situations of time can determine or radiate any move in human life. It all depends on one's perspective, as all the bridges link up two folds of life, simultaneously destroying the boat man. Might be for a time being, might be for the lifetime. To fall for is not collective, if it is intense, honest and integrated, it has to be customised at any cost, it has to be a registration of sensorium.



1. *Namgharia*: The priest of a "namghar". Literally, namghar is a Prayer House are places for congregational worship associated with the entire Assamese community and the Ekasarana sect of Hinduism, in particular, that is native to Assam. Namghars were introduced in Assam by the Vaishnavite saints Damodardev, Madhavdev and Sankaradeva for Assamese people where they can culture and practice naam (devotional songs) and Bhakti of God (devotion). (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Namgha>)

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