

**Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Contest 2022: Winner of the Certificate of Merit**

**Kalpajyoti Bhuyan**

***Village Rockstars: A Natural Ode to Simplicity  
And a Lesson Never to Give Up in Life***



The monsoons bring great plight to the hills and plains of Assam, a north-eastern state of India. Devoured by an unprecedented rise of the Brahmaputra, people succumb and lose everything to the deadly waters. Such recurring devastation resulting from flood, landslide and erosion sets up the context of reckoning in Rima Das' acclaimed feature - *Village Rockstars*. But the movie is not a musical engulfed in the classic tragedies of life and death but a heartfelt ode to simplicity, sincerity and charm.

An all-encompassing filmmaker who is also her screen writer, cinematographer and editor, Rima Das's *Village Rockstars* is the ultimate triumph for Assamese cinema. Not because it represented India in the race to the Best Foreign Language Film category at the 91st Academy Awards but because of its naivety and dimensional portrayal of innocence in the rural heartland of Assam.

It narrates the story of a young fatherless girl named Dhunu whose dreams aren't bound by any strings to the ground. Fond of music and aspiring to own a real guitar to fulfil her dream of forming a

band, life, however, doesn't come easy for Dhunu. The situational impediments are plenty. A fortuneless life with meagre living conditions in a flood-stricken village forces her to re-think about holding on to such expensive and fancy dreams. But her eyes continue to bear that sparkle of hope as Das' close-up shots of her affirm.

Dhunu, the only girl in her group of free-spirited school-going youngsters, is carefree and is consistently found to be in the company of boys. When alone, she is located in the field and mostly atop trees which is much against the approval of the women folk of her society. But patriarchal reasoning grounded in culture is neither an obstacle nor an excuse for Dhunu's mother, who, after the death of her husband, alone fulfils the breadwinning responsibilities for her family. It also neither works as a force of resentment for her child, who sources her power from the exact nature that took her father away from her. Appropriating this absence as their empowerment, the characters tackle their regular

non-conformism, ensuring their survival and quietly meditating on life.

A poignant scene which visually speaks of their remorse and their undeterred spirit is that of the mother-daughter duo sitting by the bank of the river with their backs to us as the approaching sun-down sucks out the light of the day. Rima Das' visual language of filmmaking is on glorious display here. It may be the simplest of all scenes but it offers a strong reading. Turning their backs to us demonstrates that they care little about what others think of them. Instead, they are focused on the battles and struggles of life. They look forward to the approaching night because the day's sun no longer brings light to them; instead, it's the darkness of the night that gives them strength.

The movie celebrates silence, and hence it comes without a background score. The silence speaks of their grief when the mother-daughter duo traverses through the waters observing their submerged crops. The quiet tranquillity of the magic hour reflects on their existence. With two horrible years of Covid-19 induced lockdown behind us, this silence is palpable because silence works in strange ways and has peculiar effects on the human psyche. With prolonged and persistent exposure, the quiet can make us feel helpless. But exposed to the random chaos that life is, silence would make us long for it. In *Village Rockstars*, the silence echoes our helplessness and our yearning for it. It also tries to represent the flood-stricken valley of the Brahmaputra and the lives affected by the natural calamity every year in the monsoons at the national platform.

Rima Das's mostly handheld camera work tracks Dhunu out and throughout. From selling snacks with her mother outside a local musical concert in her village to sneaking in and watching musical rehearsals in her school, from walking down miles to attend classes to hanging out with boys her age, climbing trees to going fishing. Amidst all of these, she rejoices in her little dreams, plays with her Styrofoam guitar cut-out, and, under no condition, gives up faith in the fantasy of owning a real guitar. In this way, Dhunu acknowledges the little joyful moments in her life.

Eliminating the fine line between fact and fiction, Rima Das's *Village Rockstars* accurately depicts life in her hometown Chaygaon in Assam. It is the story of a mother and a daughter versus the rest of the world. The inundated crops, economic hardships, and, most importantly, the absence of a father fail to break their indomitable spirit. Neither her call of puberty holds her back from climbing her favourite tree, nor do the devastating floods prevent her from dreaming big. Their optimism when everything shatters communicates with us to embrace our troubles, endure the circumstances, and never lose sight of hope. Failing to be constricted behind the daily limits, Dhunu is the urgent mascot of optimistic hope. She and her mother aren't Rockstars who perform on stage but in life.

An independent production, the movie differs from the lot primarily because of its approach and the way it is made. Raw to the bone, the people are real (non-professional cast), the dialogues are colloquial, and the set-up is natural. There is barely any conventional dialogue!

Genuinely rooted but often at the cost of minor technical imperfections, it is also a visually impressive picture where the camera does the talking. Das' camerawork infuses life into each frame, field, tree, and lane in its coverage. The evocative natural light cinematography makes a disastrous situation like a flood appear beautiful on screen. Rima's style is not a limitation or an affectation but the very soul and substance of her films. And this is the reason why both *Village Rockstars* and *Bulbul Can Sing* (Rima's third feature film) are viewed as complementary to each other or belonging to the same universe. Co-produced by Jaya Das - Rima's mother, the movie's production is also an allegory to the mother-daughter relationship it portrays.

*Village Rockstars* is personal but political, mainly because of its eco-feminist sub-text other than the second-wave feminist outcry of the individual being political. It's a sure reading that Dhunu's personal choices in life, from her friendly mingles with boys to that of climbing trees, have been subjected to a constant patriarchal critique from the village folks. However, Dhunu's mother's indigenously feminist perspective and approach to

things triumph over the rest. According to Jihan Gearon, indigenous feminism is an intersectional movement that strives to break free from the assigned roles of women that colonisation, capitalism, and patriarchy have provided. Dhunu's mother is right when she points out that in a family without a patriarch, one cannot expect the female members to refrain from entering the domains typically seen as men's purview, such as taking on an economic role of providing for the family. While her statement is empowering, at the same time, she is also aware of the fact that looking after her home is of the most importance to her, which is in perfect disagreement with the first-world notions of feminism. In contrast to a capital-intensive way of life that has diminished traditional living, the knowledge here is indigenous and situation owed. Still, the philosophy that feminism is post-colonial, intercultural and intersectional is ingrained throughout the movie.

By subtly brushing a feather or two, the film has contextualised several issues relating to women and nature. In this regard, the movie also holds an eco-feminist standpoint. While elaborating on the idea that capitalism and patriarchy are to blame for exploiting women and the environment, eco-feminism also advances the notion that women and nature are conceptually connected due to the ability to reproduce. Both nature and women are viewed as healers and caregivers. Women, like nature, are sensitive and are leading the environmental revolution worldwide. It is in nature that a woman finds her true power. *Village Rockstars* shows Dhunu mainly in the lap of nature – whether atop a tree or in the fields grazing her goat, nature is a trustworthy source of her strength here. The monsoon and her coming-of-age can be seen as the parallels between the natural and biological. It is also extraordinary how Dhunu relates with nature when she is happy and upset. As if both are constantly communicating with each other. A scene in which she lies with her friends in the shallows, with folded hands covering their ears, and only diegetic natural sounds filling in, illustrates this point.

Winner of the Best Feature Film in the 65th National Film Awards, India, *Village Rockstars* also emerged victorious in film festivals worldwide. It has been universally praised for its style and for breaking the mould with its raw and unconventional narrative. Dhunu's introduction, the lifestyle of the village, her background and education and her relationship with her friends sets up the film's first act. The inciting incident that pushes the film towards its second act is the desire for a real guitar. The confrontation in act two happens when the situation goes wildly against her favour and her hopes of getting a guitar become thinner with every passing day. The resolution, however, brings a ray of hope so that the story continues even after the third act ends and the credits roll.

As Dhunu's mother is seen returning home with a guitar, the film's narrative cuts to black, but the story continues to be in our hearts and minds. Dhunu will get to hold that real guitar in her hands soon, something that she has desired for a long time, but it might also be at the cost of an unknown sacrifice. In this case, the viewers are given more information than the character of Dhunu, which allows us to appreciate the fulfilment of Dhunu's wish while simultaneously feeling sorry about it. The film leaves the choice of determining the final feelings of the story up to the audience's judgment. In this way, *Village Rockstars* decides to have a satisfyingly unsatisfying end. Nevertheless, close to human hearts and nature, Dhunu's coming-of-age is an ode to simplicity and a lesson never to give up in life.

Title: Village Rockstars

Year: 2018

Language: Assamese

Director: Rima Das

Written by: Rima Das

Cinematography: Rima Das

Edited by: Rima Das

Producer: Rima Das, Jaya Das

Running time: 87 minutes