

Critique

Subrat Jyoti Neog

## India's Northeastern Border Dispute, Humanity and *Aai Kot Nai*



Many thoughtful films have already been made on the border issue. Manju Borah's directorial venture '*Aai Kot Nai*' portrays how the border dispute between Assam and Nagaland makes the lives of ordinary people miserable. Manju Borah's film "*Aai Kot Nai*" was released on September 12, 2009. The film is based on the short story "*Aai Kot Nai*" by eminent writer Arun Goswami. This short story was published in 1970. The film won the Rajat Kamal Award for Best Film in the National Integration Category.

Some opportunistic people in the Naga state on the border of Assam encourage some ordinary Naga youth to occupy the land on the border of Assam for their interests. As a result, there have been Naga-Assamese conflicts at various times. The film criticises the government's and political parties' indifference to solving this problem. The film is a strong portrayal of the fact that humanity and love are inexhaustible despite misunderstandings, fear, terror, murder, and violence that occur in our society. Khudmai,

the central character whose son died in a Naga attack, finally rescues her baby from the home of the Naga society, whom she considers an eternal enemy. Khudmai had seen that her son was taken care of by a Naga woman who was breastfeeding. This kind of presentation proves that love is the priority of a mother. Rich and poor, enemies and friends, caste and race, etc., are secondary for a mother. The director wants to symbolise Mother Basundhara with this example of motherly love. For Mother Basundhara, people are equal. If everyone loves the world and thinks of it as their own, a peaceful environment will be created instead of enemies, caste, murder, and violence. This is the message of the film '*Aai Kot Nai*'. Eminent Film critic Shoma A. Chettarjee tells-

"She (Manju Borah) goes on to explain the basic message, which shows how love can build bridges between two neighbouring regions engaged in a conflict that was broken earlier by this very conflict. It is about love between an Assamese boy and a Naga girl

who live on either side of the disputed lands that divide them. But the two communities are against the union, and they burn down a few houses in which a baby is presumed to have died. But a weaning mother on the other side of the bridge saves the baby and returns it to the grieving young couple.” (Barpujari, p330)

The time gap between the film and the short story is 29 years. The film is based on the story of the contemporary environment, circumstances, and audience tastes. The first sequence of the film shows a scene from a bhaona. The people of an Assamese village had been watching the Bhaona at night in the village's Namghar. At that time, taking advantage, some Naga youths attacked the village. But the leading short story begins with a description of the plight of the people of the village after the Naga invasion. There is no mention of the festival in the original story. Realistically, the Nagas are taking advantage of the bhaona to attack the village. The addition of these scenes beautifully reflects the realistic thinking of director Manju Borah.

Arun Goswami's main story only describes how a woman named Khudmai lost her baby in a Naga attack. The story is mainly about the suffering of Khudmai. However, Manju Borah has added three new sensitive stories alongside this main story. These stories are almost as important as the story of Khudmai. The stories added by Manju Borah are:

a] The story of the village headman and his son Simanta: The film shows the village headman losing his young son Simanta in the Naga attack. The film is a sensitive portrait of the village headman's sorrow.

b] A love story between Simanta and a Naga girl- The director Borah shows that Simanta loves a Naga girl. Later, Simanta was killed in the Naga attack. The film is a heartfelt portrayal of the pain of the Naga girl after the death of Simanta.

c] The story of an old Naga person- An old Naga comes to the Assamese village from time to time. He is very close to the Assamese people. After the Naga invasion, he was very sad when he learned that some of his beloved Assamese people had been killed by his Naga people. The old man's character paves the way for a new positive perspective on Naga-Assamese relations. Adding this character, the director signifies that borders, races, countries, etc., are secondary. Through the old Naga character, Manju Borah emphasises that looking at people from a human perspective is very important. These inputs expand the original text's meaning and make the film another original work of art.

There are many things in the story that Manju Borah tries to say in her way. These creative inputs make the content more realistic. For instance, in the story, Khudmai learns that her baby is in the Naga village from an Assamese boy named Daukan. But in the film, Khudma learns of the baby from the old Naga person. Naturally, it is more realistic to get news of the Naga village through a Naga person. Manju Borah says about the backdrop of the content of this film-

“While Assam accepted its assimilation with India as a historical fact, the Nagas are still fighting for their political freedom. They also claimed a vast tract of Assam's territory as their own, resulting in frequent armed conflict between the state forces, the insurgent groups and the political

opportunists. As a result of such conflicts, the common citizens residing in the border areas of both states are suffering untold miseries. Many precious lives have been lost, home and hearth destroyed. At times, no one, even newborn babies, is spared the violence of marauding mobs and frenzy of armed militants.” (Barpujari, p.330)



Manju Borah’s high-level cinematic styles give the plot of ‘*Aai Kot Nai*’ a new dimension. Manju Borah beautifully portrays the Assamese village devastated by the Naga invasion with three long shots [L.S] and one mid-long shot [M.L.S] at the film's beginning. Three long shots beautifully present the scene of fire and smoke, burning houses, and reflection of burning houses in the water. The high-angle shots of the burning pyres of the people killed in the Naga attack and the close-up shots of the village headman and Dharani's faces balance the frame composition to convey the depth of the story.

The appropriate use of camera movement, subject movement, and combined movements reflect various important aspects of the theme of the film interestingly. For instance, the long shot shows the old Naga man (Indra Bania) walking on the sand after the incident of the Naga attack. Then, the old Naga sits on the sand in sorrow. After showing this in the long shot, the camera

slowly moves towards the subject (the old Naga). The sequence starts with a high angle shot, moves the camera slowly toward the character, and ends with a close-up of the old Naga character; in the close-up shot, the character cries loudly. The camera movement makes the whole sequence very sensitive.

Rain is shown meaningfully as a metaphor for memory in ‘*Aai Kot Nai*’. The film shows Khudmai enjoying herself in the rain with her two children. Khudmai lost her baby in the Naga invasion. The rain brings back memories of the joys of the past. The scene of her crying out loud in the rain is quite sensitive.

Manju Borah’s film ‘*Aai Kot Nai*’ uses a parallel narrative to present the plot. Along with the sadness of the villagers after the Naga invasion, the happy times they spent before the Naga invasion are strongly portrayed. There are six types of parallel narratives. Flashback has been one of them. The film “*Aai Kot Nai*” presents the past and the present in parallel with flashbacks.

The strongest aspect of ‘*Aai Kot Nai*’ screenplay is the fluent use of binary opposition. The film beautifully portrays two different natures of society alongside happiness and sorrow, laughter and tears. If one scene in this film makes the audience laugh, the next scene may make the audience cry. For example, the first scene shows the Bhaona. This scene is entertaining to the audience. The next sequence depicts the village burning down. This contrast makes the subject interesting.

There are some mistakes in this film. One sequence shows many people mourning the loss of their relatives in the Naga attack. Their houses were burnt down in the Naga

attack. So, they are now taking refuge in a village school. The people who have taken refuge in this school are crying loudly. There is a sound of screaming all around. A secondary character named Patoli is also crying out loud. While she is crying, a sudden flashback shows her conversation with her son, whom she lost in the Naga invasion. The sequence of flashbacks in a crowded environment is not spontaneous and organic. It has been proven that this is an imposed sequence. Some of these imposed sequences reduce the artistic quality of the film.

This film shows an MLA visiting the victims of the Naga attack. A young man says a long dialogue addressing the MLA. This dialogue is rich in literary qualities, and this kind of non-realistic dialogue reduces the artistic quality of the film.

Organically applied transitions give a distinct sweetness to a film. However, some

of the transitions in this film are not smooth. For example, the sequence of conversations among the Naga youths is suddenly shown after the death of the village headman's son, Simanta. The scene of the rainy night where brothers and sisters stand on a porch crying in the pain of losing their mother is suddenly cut off, and the scene of Simanta's singing is introduced. These transitions are not smooth. The audience's eyes are jerked.

Some sequences in this film are repeated. For example, Khudmai is crying and looking for her son among the things that were burnt down. Like Khudmai, Simanta's lover, the Naga girl recreates almost the same scene when she is crying and touching the land where Simanta's dead body is lying down. The film's creative value suffers due to sequence repetition.

**Dr. Subrat Jyoti Neog is an Associate Professor, Department of Assamese, Tezpur University, Assam**