

Article

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**A Heart-Wrenching Triple Tale from the Edges of India:
*III Smoking Barrels***



Over the last decade or so, independent filmmakers from Northeast India have fundamentally transformed the way cinema is visualized in this part of the country. Their films stand out thanks to an undaunted commitment to authenticity, inventive storytelling techniques, and a refusal to conform to mainstream cinematic styles. Young directors like Rima Das, Haobam Paban Kumar, Pradip Kurba, Bhaskar Hazarika, Dominic Sangma, Jaycheng Jai Dohutia, Himjyoti Talukdar, Khanjan Kishore Nath, Reema Bora, and Manjul Barua have become representatives of a unique creative approach that extends regional narratives far beyond local audiences, winning accolades both nationally and internationally.

Rima Das first gained global recognition with *Village Rockstars* (2017), an

Assamese language film that movingly portrayed the innocence and dreams of rural childhood and went on to represent India at the Oscars. She continued her profound creative vision unabated with films like *Bulbul Can Sing*, *Tora's Husband*, and *Village Rockstars 2*. Drawing from scanty resources and largely non-professional actors, and closely rooted in her surroundings, Das crafts films that consciously break away from traditional cinematic norms. Her work has received multiple National Awards and international festival honours while preserving the indigenous culture, language, and landscapes as vital cinematic themes.

In a vividly different yet equally bold and experimental path, Bhaskar Hazarika's *Aamis* (2019) challenged audiences and critics by blurring the boundaries between romance and taboo, encouraging viewers to

rethink story genres. Pradip Kurbah explores indigenous themes and social realities in films like *Ri*, *Onaatah* and *Iewduh*, stealing the show at major platforms such as the Busan International Film Festival. This signals how deeply local stories can weave magic on a global stage.



Among the most fearless voices from the region is Haobam Paban Kumar, whose fiction and documentaries expose the political and existential struggles of Manipur. His film *Loktak Lairembee* (Lady of the Lake) tangles ecological worries with the fragile lives inhabiting these spaces. His films such as *Nine Hills and One Valley* and *Joseph's Son* probe into personal and collective upheavals. His documentary *AFSPA 1958* remains one of the clearest cinematic commentaries on militarization and conflict in Northeast India, making his body of work a testament and act of resistance.

Directors like Dominic Sangma (*Ma.Ama, Rapture*), Jaycheng Jai Dohutia (*Haanduk, Baghjan*), Manjul Barua (*Antareen, Kaneen, Anur*), Himjyoti Talukdar (*Calendar, Taarikh*), and Reema Borah (*Bokul, Noi, Anunaad*) have also expanded what the quality Indie cinema from the region

can give vent to. Their films repeatedly address themes such as memory, cultural identity, the flow of time, and generational tensions—broadening the thematic scope of Northeastern cinema while highlighting the delicate balance between tradition and modern life. These filmmakers have opened key avenues for cultural self-representation and easier access into international film circuits.

What unites these storytellers is their pursuit of realism: filming on actual locations, natural performances, and the use of local languages that reflect lived realities rather than spectacle. Their movies foreground urgent issues—marginalization, gender questions, ecological crises, young people's hopes, and unresolved conflicts between preserving continuity and embracing change. Despite challenges like limited funding and scarce distribution channels, these filmmakers have built a resilient practice that enjoys recognition well beyond their home region.

Within this vibrant movement, Sanjib Dey's *III Smoking Barrels* (2017) stands out distinctly. The film complements the works of Das, Hazarika, Kumar, Sangma, Kurbah, Dohutia, Borah, Nath, and Barua, yet introduces a fresh way of weaving the region's stories. Presented as an anthology, it interlaces the experiences of a child soldier, a young person entangled in drugs, and an elephant poacher. These interwoven narratives provide three perspectives on violence, addiction, and survival. By integrating six languages, the film reflects both the diversity and fracturing of life in Northeast India. Sanjib Dey shares with contemporaries like Rima Das and Haobam

Paban Kumar a predilection for subtle storytelling over flashy spectacle, but his film also boldly combines multiple genres within a cohesive whole. Instead of reinforcing conventional stereotypes about the Northeast, it portrays the region as complex, multifaceted, and deeply human, while engaging with broad questions of morality and endurance.

Together, the achievements of these filmmakers reflect the dynamism, rootedness and vibrancy of independent cinema in Northeast India. Authentic, experimental, and attentive to marginalized voices, their work forms a distinct counterpoint to mainstream Indian cinema. Through their artistry, the local stories transform into vehicles for engaging global audiences, building up a film culture that is diverse, innovative, and socially veracious.

Sanjib Dey's *III Smoking Barrels* is a gut-punching anthology film that kicks off his journey as a director. The film spins out three stories that link up in sneaky ways but stand tall on their own, each one mirroring a raw slice of what it means to be human—those fragile kid years, the messy teen scramble, and the brutal grind of adulthood—all slammed against the chaotic, charged canvas of Northeast India. This geo-political area is a patchwork of eight states, bursting with every kind of people, tongues, and terrains one can imagine, even though it doesn't get the short end of the stick in Bollywood's spotlight. The title hits like a punch to the chest, conjuring up those three smoking gun barrels that scream out the constant shadow of brutality and unease weaving through every tale, while tipping its hat to the gritty, no-holds-barred truth of how it all feels up close.

A linguistic love letter to the Northeast's soul, *III Smoking Barrels* really lays bare the wild swirl of languages and cultures up in Northeast India by folding in six of the region's tongues—Assamese, Hindi, English, Bengali, Nagamese, and Manipuri—right into the heartbeat of the stories and the places they happen, nailing those real-life chit-chats that folks have every mundane day. Shooting bounced around states like Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and those sketchy border zones, scooping up the raw faces of different ethnic groups, the everyday rituals, and those one-of-a-kind vibes through clothes that feel lived-in, actors who belong there, and spots that breathe the place. That whole multilingual vibe is no fancy trick—it is a gut-level call to grab the Northeast's tongue-twisting variety by the horns, turning this into India's very first full-on multilingual film that actually gets it right.



The thematic depth of *III Smoking Barrels* is rather overwhelming. An anthology of independent yet interconnected stories, each section refers to a life stage and shows how issues such as violence, marginalization, and survival are inexorably interconnected in a tangled terrain with an apparently gory history. Yet, there remains a thread of hope amidst the despair. The three smoking barrels epitomise the presence of guns in the rebel camps, drug vials in a barrel

and poaching rifles. It subtly critiques how the sheer neglect of systemic issues leads to a repetitive cycle of trauma.



The section ‘Child’ deals with child soldiers and insurgency. In the midst of a tense road trip between Manipur and Guwahati, an Engineer runs into Janice escaping a rebel camp, pistol in hand, hijacking the engineer’s car. Flashbacks of her abduction and enforced training, echoing the real-life abductions of the AFSPA era where children were used as pawns by vengeful parents, crop up. Thematically, it explores trauma’s indelible scars. Janice’s wide-eyed innocence is matched with hardened instinct to survive and question identity in a region where so much ‘belonging’ is up for grabs. This film is not propagandistic like the familiar films we may have seen. Far from organizing any political binaries, it focuses on personal loss. Janice escapes from Bangladesh, but she is not sure after escaping. It reflects the Northeast. The Northeast is not sure either, whether to ask for autonomy or to be integrated. This story is about how generations pass on their wars to children. How children bear the burn of adults’ wars. This has become very common, especially in Manipur. Reports suggested that more than one thousand children were recruited for war in Manipur alone in the 2000s.

In the story titled ‘Boy’, flares up Donnie, a Guwahati lad who dropped out of engineering to sell drugs as he could not get any other work. Rivalry in gang wars culminates in his sudden death. The dominant theme of the segment is economic despair, as reflected by the youth unemployment rate of over 20% in the North-East. Further, due to porous borders with the Golden Triangle of Myanmar, the drug trade here is a whopping one each year. Donnie’s strained relationship with his mother, who pushes for migration, highlights family tension and the futility of aspiration. The document flips the known rural-urban pull around, portraying Guwahati as a vice trap. The theme of addiction and urban decay does not just stop there. Societal ‘drugs’ such as neglect also intoxicate young people. For example, neglect has fatal consequences in the case of Donnie’s death, critiquing the failure of government employment schemes to show how globalization skips the periphery, rendering prospects as pitfalls.



The ‘Man’ part, the film’s emotional core with Subrat Dutta as Mukhtar and Nalneesh Neel as Ikram, throws lurid light on the exploitation of nature. Near the border of India and Bhutan, a 55 year old poacher Mukhtar kills elephant for ivory literally putting his life and everything else at stake. Mukhtar the poor poacher ironically has to kill elephants only to support his family, as fishing is banned in protected areas. His journey from a drunk opportunist to a forest

guard signifies his moral awakening. As per a report published in the Economic Times, 60 per cent of India's elephant poaching occurs in the North-east, driven by corruption and poverty, threatening the biodiversity of Manas National Park. Again, Mukhtar's Bangladeshi immigrant backstory contains multiple immigration themes: the fluidity of borders makes it impossible to own identities while 20 million undocumented migrants live in constant danger of being exploited. The tale presents poachers as 'villains,' who ironically behave this evil because circumstances force them. Preserving wildlife for redemption could perhaps hope for personal change in sustainable development.



The thematic complex spread across all the three stories in Sanjib Dey's anthology subtly conjures up a dismal picture of multi-level marginalization readily tangible in the North East. Regionally, this strategically vital geopolitical terrain is an internal colony, where 90 percent of the land is forest. The locals experience the extraction of forest resources without benefits. This makes the ethnic groups resentful. Gun violence does not repeat itself as spectacle, but as consequence. Nonetheless, there is some modest optimism – escapes, maternal requests and ethical turnarounds suggest agency. The film criticizes nationalism's blindness and advocates for a small region

that provides the country with a sizeable percentage of its GDP, yet is targeted excessively. Like Dey wanted, it is a 'fictionalized' social realism which is crucial to discussions about federal equity.

Technically, *III Smoking Barrels* embodies neo-realism on a shoestring, leveraging Northeast's terrains for authenticity while exposing debutant limitations. The camera work of the film is top notch, walking through the misty hills, the deep jungles and even the border haze with handheld intimacy. The vibrant greens of the third story counter the urban rusticity. The basic sound design for the film features ambient rains and wildlife sounds that heighten the tension in scenes. However, the muffled dialogues, especially in multilingual scenes, creates a jarring effect at times. Dey's raw style – long takes with minimal cuts – works to build an immersive experience but slows down the pacing of the film, particularly in 'Child' and 'Boy'. Editing does not rise to the occasion, especially in the transitions, but the gun motif ties most of the film together. Performances are a mixed bag. Subrata Dutta's nuanced poacher is the anchor here, while the rest of the cast show promise with their performances, though they do come across as slightly stiff. Music by Anurag Saikia and Michele Josia is a winner, scoring mellifluous folk fusions that weave through the film, adding to the ethereal depth of the experience. Production values are moderately low, with natural lighting and local costumes helping create a sense of verisimilitude. On the whole the film's technical quality contribute positively to the thematic matrix and cumulative treatment, bearing testimony to Dey's well-contrived

directorial vision, even if the execution is sometimes awry.

In the mad sprawl of Indian movies, where the familiar mainstream's glossy dreams hog the frame, *III Smoking Barrels* crashes in like a wake-up call, cranking up the volume on whispers from India's 'Far East.' And it matters a lot in so many gut-twisting ways: it is a landmark for culture, a cracked mirror to the politics grinding folks down, and a spark plug for storytellers from the fringes. Top of the heap, it breaks ground on letting languages breathe free. By tangling six of them without always slapping on subs in fest runs, it mirrors the Northeast's 200-plus ways of talking and its ethnic fireworks, kicking sand in the face of the Indian mainstream stranglehold that rules the roost. It cracks open a 'hidden' Northeast, pulling heartstrings to the quiet hells most of India never sees. This word-jumble is not a stunt—it is a roar for who we are, slotting in as the 'way overdue' fix that strips away the 'wild jungle' or 'hot zone' tags and shows people just trying to live. Thematically, it packs a wallop by tackling the Northeast's 'fires'—rebel ghosts, dope floods, animal heists, job black holes—without turning it into cheap thrills. Unlike the surface-skim jobs in stuff like *Mary Kom* that parades the region like a trophy, Dey's film dives into the rotten roots: AFSPA's long shadow in child-soldier hells,

the Golden Triangle's sludge wrecking a generation, wildlife grabs slipping through border cracks like water. It refers to 'burning issues' plaguing the North-east in a country racked with federalism and encourages people to be empathetic rather than ignorant.



Premiering at major international film festivals such as Durban, Kerala, and Mannheim-Heidelberg, *III Smoking Barrels* received some global acclaim and also secured distribution in India and on Netflix. Yet, ironically, despite the accolades and international visibility and having the potential of a game changer in league with the best of the Indie gems churned out of the Indie citadel of contemporary Northeastern Indie cinema, the film sadly went underappreciated in its home. Ultimately, *III Smoking Barrels* is important not for accolades and awards but for being there with aplomb: a testament to resilience, challenging cinematic hegemonies and amplifying marginalized narratives in an increasingly polarized India.

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