

Article

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***Gulai Soor: An Experiment in Gender and Sexuality on the Assamese Silver Screen***



*Gulai Soor* (2025)

The Assamese cinema of the past decade has been witnessing a phase in which a few new filmmakers, mostly independent, have emerged to work in this art form. A shift from cliché family dramas or action-romance films towards a phase of new experiments can be observed during this period. A fresh start has begun with directors, often experimenting with genres (action-comedy, horror, thriller, etc), crafts (realistic and/or minimalist approaches), or in accommodating varying degrees of socio-political issues, such as identity, regional aspirations, unemployment,

migration, gender, and sexuality, in different films.

Regarding gender and sexuality, Reema Borah's *Bokul* (2015) and Kenny Basumatary's *Jiya* (2024) raise some questions about single mothers. Khanjan Kishor Nath, in *Ata Nirjon Duporiya* (2024), while heavily focusing on the craft of the film, also highlights the issue of physical desires of young couples, especially in small towns of Assam. Kangkan Deka in *Beautiful Lives* (2017) is handling the issue of sexual needs between a young widow and a young

bedridden handicapped man, a victim of the Ganeshguri bomb blast (2009), with utter sincerity and maturity. Another of Kenny Basumatary's works, *Suspended Inspector Bodo* (2018), features a protagonist who is unapologetically gay. Bhaskar Hazarika's *Aamis* (2019) leaves the audience to decide the queerness of a significant character. Prakash Deka's *Jonaki Porua* (*Fireflies*, 2020), a coming-of-age film, traces the life of a transwoman Jahnabi. Kulanandini Mahanta's *Emuthi Puthi* (2022), a road movie, also throws a new light on the lives of three women representing three generations. Rupjyoti Borthakur's *Satya: The Truth* (2024) is about the love relationship between a gay couple. Rima Das and Raktim Kamal Barua, in their films, *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018) and *Gulai Soor* (2025), respectively, have presented two unique yet contrasting perspectives on how traditional Assamese society responds to the existence of people questioning or exploring their gender identity within the society. *Bulbul Can Sing*, set in a present-day rural Assam, portrays a teenager named Suman, one of the protagonist's best friends. The film centres around these three teenage best friends — Bulbul and Bonny, two cis females, and Suman, who is biologically male but is in the process of exploring their gender identity. On the other hand, *Gulai Soor* is a film set in the backdrop of rural Assam, spanning three timelines: one in the 1940s and the other two in the 1970s and 1980s. As a dark comedy, this film is a roller coaster ride through the last century of Assam. The film serves as a perfect dose of nostalgia for many older generations in Assam. This is a heist movie. The central theme or plot of the film revolves around a

group of expert thieves, led and trained by the fictional, legendary thief "Diga Soor" in Assam during the late 1940s, who reappeared in the 1970s and 1980s, and used to rob the wealthy homes. One of the sensible subplots of the film revolves around a character named "Golapi" and their romantic relationship with one of the young men from the village.

From the voice overs, the audiences learn that, "Golapi", a biologically male, feminine person had been brought up as a girl since their childhood by their father to ditch the fate of their possible death by disease; a common trick used to be practised by people of upper Assam in those days when life threatening diseases among infants were common and people tried to protect them.

It is interesting to observe how the two individuals in both films are treated and accepted by the two traditional societies, considering the differing perceptions of social reality between the two directors. Neither of the directors ignores the social reality nor do they seem explicitly vocal for the rights of the persons under discussion. However, the depiction of violence and restrictions on the two characters differs in the two films. Two distinct, if not polar opposite, takes on Assamese society; in one case, Suman is vehemently resisted by the society; on the other hand, Golapi is being accepted in the society under some conditions.

In *Gulai Soor*, through its non-linear storytelling, which often jumps to different timelines, Raktim Kamal Barua, with the help of voice-overs and animation, highlights one of the significant cultural aspects of Assamese society, at least until the last century — a tradition: the theft, or, more accurately, burglary. There were thieves of various types

in Assam, employing different techniques, who targeted wealthy and influential people in the villages. In the film, without glorifying the profession, it is evident that the actual thieves are the powerful and corrupt individuals. So, Diga Soor's targets were colonial Assamese allies, or *mahajans*, in the 1940s, 1970s, and 1980s. In the 1940s, he was declared a legend by the British due to his unbeaten quality. But he was captured in 70's. In the 1980s, he attempted to reclaim his profession, and a thief universe was formed, attracting potential interested individuals from diverse communities and locations in Assam under his training. Was Diga, also known as *Gulai Soor*, successful in passing his legacy to this group? This should have been the central or primary focus of the movie. However, while doing so, the writer duo (Raktim Kamal Barua and Mrinmoy Saikia) became ambitious and included numerous subplots, characters, and incidents alongside this. The film has experimented with the politics of gender and sexuality with the help of one of Diga Soor's disciples, Golapi, in Assamese cinema like never before.



In the film, the title 'Gulai Soor' is given to Diga Soor for being the most brilliant thief. However, towards the end of the film, it is evident that the most skilled thief is actually Golapi. Their intelligence and resilience in reclaiming what belonged to them were unmatched by their comrades, even by Diga

Soor, the most experienced legendary thief for decades. Golapi is a feminine man, a trans person, who is romantically involved with another man in the village. Their queerness and their acceptance in society is the story of many such faceless names of Assamese society of the generations, whose gender preferences or sexual orientations may not be explicitly known to the society. However, due to either ignorance or confusion, they were often accepted in society for ages, as cross-dressing or gender expressions were not permitted in such societies. There must have been hundreds of such people who have lived their lives as one among them in Assamese society. But was, or is, the society so welcoming or liberal? No, whenever such a person opens up about their gender preference or sexual orientation, society would go against them. The film ends with Golapi regaining their family's lost gem, which was once a family heirloom. Did they get back the love of their life? Were they able to live a happily ever after life with their partner? These are all questions which remain unanswered about the fate of Golapi.

Rima Das has taken a position in *Bulbul Can Sing* for Suman. However, despite providing a nuanced background of Golapi, their way of being, and eventually turning them into the central character of the film, Raktim Kamal Barua's position remains subtle. Rather than trying to project his own position, he is busy unveiling the layered attitudes of the society in rural Assam towards a queer person. The villagers accept Golapi as one of them, despite the exceptions in Golapi's mannerisms, which are not heteronormative. On the other hand, the utter helplessness of the character played by

Mrinmoy Saikia as Golapi's romantic partner, who was forced to marry a girl by his family, reveals another hidden layer of society. He cannot come out in the open about his sexuality. And he is aware of the invisible yet existing violent societal consequences. As for Golapi's inner turmoil comes to life at the seemingly effortless performance of Himangshu Gogoi. Throughout the film, he was able to draw empathy towards the character Golapi. Gogoi carries the character so effortlessly that it seems as if he has not done any homework; it is ingrained in him, especially in the scenes where he visits his partner's house just one day before the said marriage. He breaks the hearts of audiences when he dances with the elderly women, exhibiting feminine traits that perfectly complement the joyous mood of a coming wedding, as if the actor had worn the character under his skin. Golapi does so to please the outer world, despite their inner world of grief, after being heartbroken by their partner. Because, for Golapi, this is the only way they can find acceptance and a place in society.



Their fellow thieves appreciate Golapi for their exceptional skills in the profession. There are no judgmental eyes for Golapi among them. So, society has not always been black and white in treating queer people. Its attitude has been grey towards queer people for ages. Probably, it was due to this loose scope or space that queer people sought to

find a place in society, being one of them, before their questions of identity and existence, and their quest for rights, became a movement in recent decades.

In the director's subtle portrayal, Golapi finds her place in society; she creates a space for herself. However, in the story of their upbringing, as told through voice-overs on Golapi's childhood photographs, it is unclear what type of treatment Golapi might have faced during their childhood as a biological boy, given that they were named and raised as a girl. Golapi is shown as a young man on the screen. Now, as a grown 'man', they have made a place in the village, hardly facing any bullying on their face. But did they face bullying as a child is totally absent in the film. Generally, childhood trauma creates heavy impacts on people who are gender non-conforming and who were at a phase of self-exploration about their gender identity or sexuality. In *Jonaki Porua* (Fireflies), Prakash Deka devoted a considerable amount of screen time to exploring this phase of Jahnu, later known as Jahnob. This part remained unexposed in the case of Golapi, by the screenplay and the director. Also, social conditioning might have an impact on one's gender identity, but the exact reason may not be valid for sexuality at the same time. Here, in the case of Golapi, both their gender identity and sexuality have changed due to the childhood social conditioning- the treatment as a girl at home. Although the gender identity for the society is that of a man, it is clear that Golapi does not mentally think of themselves as a man. So, it seems. Golapi needed to be explored more in the film. Still, it can be safely assumed that Golapi's is the story of many unknown

individuals whose stories were left behind under the guise of a moral standard that regards heteronormativity as ideal.



Rituparno Ghosh redefined Indian cinema with his sensitive and unapologetic portrayal of queer identities. *Gulai Soor* is

also a vital intervention in Assamese cinema, as it attempts to accommodate the voices of those silenced beyond the bounds of heteronormativity. Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh*, Konkona Sen Sharma's *Geeli Pucchi* (a part of an anthology *Ajeeb Daastaans*) or Rahul V. Chittella's *Gulmohar* are some of the recent movies that have left an impact on Indian audiences. However, this fragmented yet compelling narrative of a queer character, Golapi, with a complementary performance of the actor Himangshu Gogoi, resembles Thiagarajan Kumararaja's Tamil directorial *Super Deluxe* (2019) and Vijay Sethupathi's performance as a transwoman, Shilpa, in the Indian context. While portraying queer characters in Assamese cinema, other directors have often taken a one-dimensional direction. Raktim Kamal Barua's nuanced, realistic, and audience-centred approach has opened a new door of possibilities in exploring more layered truths and intersecting realities about politics surrounding gender and sexuality.

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