

Critique

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**The Chicken Vendor Who Became a Bike:
The Bizarre, Subterranean World of *Kok Kok Kokook***



The present political discourse of Assam feeds on the fear of the increasing number of the illegal migrants from Bangladesh as it is anticipated that in the years to come the community is going to supersede the Assamese in their own homeland in every aspect. The fear is not without foundation as indigenous communities and their space is under threat from a veritable demographic shift among other factors. Although both Hindus and Muslims are part of the alleged illegal migrants, it is the Muslims who get the brickbats as the community is singled out by Hindu majoritarian political groups and voices. However, regarding the issue, the national governments of India and Bangladesh both so far have failed to arrive at a firm solution. The much-vaunted National Register of Citizens which was carried out a

few years ago to resolve the vexed issue came to nothing as the exercise got mired in controversy amid allegations of mismanagement and corruption by various stakeholders. In such a situation, ordinary Muslim migrants have been particularly susceptible to forms of humiliation from the general public and law enforcement agencies as their citizenship status is looked upon with suspicion. The recent Assamese film titled *Kok Kok Kokook* attempts to craft a fictional drama out of such stories of paranoia and anxiety of the people of Bengali Muslim origin. However, the style and mode of the film is clearly imaginative as it mixes elements of surrealism, crim thriller and plain idiosyncrasy to evoke a sense of dread, humour and absurdity. As such it appears to

be a postmodern film as it juxtaposes both common and intellectual appeal in its design.

To be specific, the film centres on the trials and tribulations of a chicken vendor named Nur Ali in the city of Guwahati as he surreptitiously becomes a suspect in the course of a police investigation into an accident. Nur, tauntingly addressed by his fellow mates as ‘Siken’ (a reference to the way Assamese people colloquially pronounces the word chicken), is representative of the immigrant Muslim working class population of the city. Subdued and bullied around, he finds a strange solace in his motorbike, a kind of warmth which is sorely missing in his life atop a corner in a hillock of the city. As often it appears to happen, he unwillingly has to share his old vintage red Yamaha bike with peers of his social circle. Incidentally, one morning he finds out that the police are looking for a bike of the same model and colour like his own when it is suspected that a rider escaped from the spot of an accident involving the son of a powerful politician. Nur finds himself nervous as in the same night that the accident took place his bike was borrowed by one of his fellow mates. Evaded by the peer on being enquired regarding the matter, Nur’s already fragile existence becomes doubly so as he finds out that the local police are on the lookout for such bikes in the city. His only other support appears to be another immigrant named Abebe: a Sudanese Black young woman who works in a boutique outlet in one of the city’s posh hotels. However, in this aspect also Nur is at a loss as the woman is emotionally more invested into him than he is to her. Both appear desolate in their own way, and the narrative tension generated gives way

to a bizarre turn as Nur’s body gradually metamorphoses into a straw-made motorbike from severe psychological pressure emanating from his personal difficulties. Thus, in terms of plot and narrative, the film veers into the zone of the body-horror from what appears to be initially a crime thriller with an irreverent and satirical undertone. At the same time as can be seen the film places Guwahati as an urban nightmare of sorts (even as it glows now as a neo-liberal door to the region) for immigrants as both Nur and Abebe face clandestine abuse in their vicinity even as they go about their daily lives.

To the advantage of the film, *Kok Kok Kokook* adopts the liberties associated with a ‘fiction film’ seriously and is inventive from the word go. The film begins through a visually animated prologue (with voice-over from noted Assamese actor and writer Tapan Das) on the extinction of dinosaurs millions of years ago, and suggests the fallibility of anything all powerful like the dinosaurs if given to hubris. Thus, the prologue sets out the film with something of a cosmic joke which appears disconnected from the main narrative to follow which is somewhat equally off-kilter and cerebral in its articulations. Examples of experimental and playful narratives in Assamese cinema are few and far between. In recent Assamese cinema where such an approach is evident are perhaps *Bornodi Bhotiai* (2019, Dir: Anupam Kaushik Borah) and *Bhoot Jolokiya* (2024, Dir: Chinmoy Sarmah). Although generically different, these two films attempted to push the boundaries of local cinematic storytelling by placing their narration between the believable and the magical to somewhat mixed results. To this list, one must add *Kok*

Kok Kokook which is perhaps the first instance of an exploration into the genre of body-horror in Assamese cinema. Body horror films typically exploit the fear and anxieties generated by unnatural physical mutations in human beings to relay messages on the human condition in the modern age. Accordingly, it is a relevant and exciting sub-genre of horror cinema as it is directed to appeal to both our intellect and the unconscious. The loss and capture of Nur's bike and his subsequent unnatural bodily change, thus, becomes a metaphor for migrant Muslims and their anxiety in a regime driven by populism rather than law. At its core, the bodily horror of Nur in *Kok Kok Kokook* is inherently a symbolic reflection of the various modes of suffocation and suffering of ordinary working-class migrants at the door of a Kafkaesque officialdom where respite is near to impossible, and people like Nur are disposable to make the system look efficient. In all this, the presence of the Sudanese woman remains like a puzzle as she is a witness to the misfortune befalling her loved one even as she is the only person who sees Nur as a human being in proper measure.

At another level, *Kok Kok Kokook*, it seems, also works as a surreal psychological film as it says something about the relation between man and bikes, and thus on masculinity. Motorbikes are a celebrated symbol of masculinity but in the case of Nur it becomes a substitute object for attachment as he fails to connect with his beloved despite her advances. He appears more in love with his bike than with his beloved. In a word, the motorbike is his fetish object, and as it becomes a thing to hide in light of police enquiry, he loses his bearings at a deeper level

also. Raju Roy's performance as Nur is the standout aspect here, and he holds his own even as the film goes discursive in its mood and direction.

Largely containing night sequences shot in a neon-blue tone, the film's cinematography is reminiscent of noir treatment. The police figures depicted appear more like buffoons than serious investigators but this does not take away their edge as probable manipulators. The precarious mental world of the protagonist and the locus of his socio-political milieu is thus heightened by the specific stylistic arrangements in the film, which includes its setting, props, background music, sound and editing. Deftly paced and edited, the film is without hiccups in its narrative flow if somewhat loose by the end of the proceedings where it gives way to some indulgence.

The director of *Kok Kok Kook* Maharshi Tuhin Kashyap first came to the limelight in the year 2023 when his short film *Mur Ghorar Duronto Goti* (The Horse from Heaven, English title, 2022) entered the Oscars in the short film fiction category from India. In hindsight, thematically, it appears that the two films show a resemblance in that both are character studies of sorts. If *Mur Ghorar Duronto Goti* is a playful glimpse into the mind of a middle-aged village simpleton, *Kok Kok Kook* is a window to the life of a young immigrant working class 'miya' Muslim representative in the city of Guwahati. The contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou proposes that films are a thinking medium and it bears witness to people otherized in various ways, and attests to the universal value of human existence and human freedom. To the credit of Kashyap,

both his films bear testimony to lives easily forgotten and elided in the social imaginary of the state and the region.

To sum up, *Kok Kok Kook* is young talent Maharshi Tuhin Kashyap's showreel as a director to look out for as his filmmaking shows fluidity, style, eccentricity and control. More importantly, the film has a pulse and heart in spite of its experimental nature. Stakeholders of the film scene in Assam often point out the commercial challenges of the industry but deep-down Assamese cinema suffers from a creative crisis of quite some

magnitude. In bringing out a story of a subaltern figure of a burgeoning Guwahati's informal economy with a creative flair, the film adds to the visual vocabulary possible in contemporary Assamese films.

Kok Kok Kook had a special screening for local viewers at the 2nd Guwahati Asian Film Festival in January this year after its international premiere in the Vision Asia section of the 30th Busan International Film Festival last year which annually puts a spotlight on innovative and fearless new voices from Asian cinema.

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