

Critique

Sujata Hati Baruah

Rapture: Politics Captured through Aesthetics



I watched Dominic Megam Sangma's *Rapture* (Sangma D. M., *Rapture*, 2023), a Garo-language film in February this year. Thanks to the Government of Meghalaya for launching an OTT platform (*Hello Meghalaya*) to encourage and provide a space for local filmmakers of the state. The film is now available on this platform for free. *Rapture* garnered extensive festival acclaim following its premiere at the 76th Locarno Film Festival and went on to screen at film festivals like Busan, MAMI, IFFM, and beyond. It received the National Award for Best Feature Film in the Garo language in 2024.

Rapture (in Garo *Rimdogittanga*) is written and directed by Dominic Sangma, an SRFTI (Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute) graduate, and is his second feature film. Another SRFTI alumnus, Tojo Xavier, is the director of photography. The film's sound designer is yet another SRFTI alumnus, Vineet Vashistha. The editor of the film is again another batchmate of Sangma at SRFTI,

filmmaker Mohan Kumar Valasala. Three of the lead characters are played by Johan Ch. Sangma, Handam R. Marak, and Torikhu A. Sangma.

At first glance, *Rapture* is a film based in a remote, peaceful Garo village Nongthymmai with crime-thriller elements. As a creative product of four SRFTI alumni, it is also a visual poem in cinematic form. However, at the core, it is a political film that speaks of politics not loudly, but through a refined cinematic language.

Reflecting on the socio-political context that informed the film, the filmmaker stated: *While writing the film, I was conscious of what was happening in the country with regards to the CAA, especially in my neighboring state of Assam, where millions of people were excluded from the updated draft of the National Register of Citizens in 2019 for the lack of adequate documents to prove their citizenship. I wanted to capture the essence of that fear at the grassroots level in a village because the fear of outsiders was a*

constant during my childhood. (Sangma, 2024) (Interview: Dominic Sangma, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the story has been told or shown largely from the perspective of a ten-year-old boy, Kasan. While doing so, Sangma never loses focus on the political statement, emphasising visual aesthetics, nor does he compromise on politics in pursuit of visual storytelling. Both move together with remarkable balance.

The film's story begins with the mysterious disappearance of a young man, Mangkungchi, from the village. When villagers sought the help of the local *shaman*, he attributed this to the hand of the forest nymphs. On the other hand, the pastor of the village church had his own explanation. He predicted an approaching apocalypse for 40 days and 40 nights in the village. Also, some villagers noticed some outsiders in the village. So, the people became confused, divided, or burdened by misinformation, their own perceptions and beliefs. They start living in constant fear. But it is not clear exactly to whom they fear most. As victims of such insecurity and confusion, they collectively committed a crime in the village, and the rest of the film shows the repercussions, both social and psychological, of it on them. The major part of the film has been nothing but the gaze of a 10-year-old child, Kasan, who has cleft lips and night blindness.

In the first long shot, a group of villagers were searching for cicadas, an edible insect that appears once every four years, in a nearby forest in the darkness. Each was carrying a torch, a handmade local *mashal*. This metaphor continues throughout the film. Searching for the truth in the darkness. In a

mixture of misinformation, rumours, etc., prophecy and amidst real insecurity. It may not be the physical darkness, but to fight from inner darkness. The physical darkness in light has nothing to do with it. Sangma says, “The idea I tried to communicate was that darkness can only be dispelled by carrying your own light (Sangma D. , 2023) .

The film powerfully depicts fear and insecurity towards the unknown ‘outsider’. Rumours and mysterious disappearances of a few villagers fuel suspicion and paranoia, culminating in a brutal mob attack on an outsider without any valid proof of wrongdoing. As someone from Assam, this narrative strongly reminded me of the horrific and infamous Abhi-Neil incident, where two young men from Assam’s plains were mistakenly identified as child abductors and were brutally lynched in a hill district. Sangma has mentioned that during his childhood, he often heard rumours about child kidnappers roaming villages. This fear gained a semblance of credibility after the sudden disappearance of Kasan’s uncle one night. The director has stated that the idea for the film took shape during the anti-CAA movement in 2019. So, it can be assumed that the backdrop of *Rapture* is the widespread resistance against the Citizenship Amendment Act, which sought to grant citizenship to certain foreign communities. Against this politically charged atmosphere, the film weaves its central mystery—the unexplained disappearance of Kasan’s uncle. Already fearful due to the pastor’s prophecy of an approaching apocalypse, the villagers are easily manipulated. The appearance of a blood moon, rare in Meghalaya’s sky,

becomes a convincing sign of divine warning for the deeply religious villagers.

The idea of outsiders, as already mentioned, is central to the film, which is set against the backdrop of the ongoing anti-CAA movement in India in 2019. News was pouring in from Assam that lakhs of people's names had been cut from the National Register of Citizens, and, as a neighbouring state of Assam, this created a real threat of insecurity in the minds of the locals in Meghalaya about their own existence, as the act was supposed to shelter outsiders who fulfilled certain criteria. This political backdrop, Sangma's own childhood experience of rumours about child kidnappers, his own vulnerabilities and his keen observation on the influence of the folklore of his own communities and hypocrisy of the organised Christianity are the inputs of this film.

Though the narrative involves only a few characters, the larger philosophical and political perspective is deeply rooted in Kasan's worldview. The beauty of the film lies in how it presents fear and insecurity with extreme effectiveness, while simultaneously provoking introspection about adopting violent measures to cope with or overcome that tension. The film questions the moral compass of the community that has created a Us vs Them narrative and gone to extremes to impose it in reality in a particular incident. In doing so, *Rapture* becomes a local voice with a universal moral appeal—much like the films of Majid Majidi, where a child becomes the moral centre of the narrative.

The film does not shy away from exposing the hypocrisy of organised religious figures- this time through the pastor of the

village's only church. The pastor's personal life starkly contradicts the values he preaches publicly. He spreads a rumour of an impending prophecy: that doom will descend upon the village for forty days and forty nights, plunging the earth into darkness. He urges every family to increase their weekly church contribution to one thousand rupees in preparation for this apocalyptic event. After a character (Sangma D., 2024) questions the *shamans'* credibility, the film's writer addresses the pastor's hypocrisy beneath his performative religion. He used his power to minimise the agency of the scared people in general and the young widow Kimkime in particular. Eventually, the pastor attempts to flee with the collected money and the young widow, abandoning his ailing wife—revealing the moral corruption beneath his spiritual authority.

Aesthetically, the film is a blend of politics, nature, and cinematic language. It uses some long shots, several mid shots, panoramic views, drone shots, and—most importantly—intimate close-ups of Kasan. Each frame captures the lush flora and fauna of the Nongttingmai village with striking beauty. Nature is not merely a backdrop but an active presence in the narrative, adding mystery and the richness of the locality.

There are three interesting characters in *Rapture*. The first one is Kasan, an innocent soul with pure human emotions, uncorrupted by his tender age. Kasan is carrying an insider's perspective burdened with the politics of insecurity and religious rumours. Kasan is vulnerable because of his night blindness, but during the day he was scolded to see a poor forbidden in the forest. He is carrying a moral voice, sympathetic,

confused. On the other hand. Kasan's father, Nengsal, is one of the members of the village's night patrol team. Kasan's father emerges as another moral voice—timid and ineffective in expressing dissent publicly. Though he does not support the violence, he remains silent, forced by the will of the majority of village men who demand punishment for the unknown outsider. He is afraid to speak his heart out because of peer pressure. He became a reluctant enabler of an injustice in their village, driven by fear and suspicion of an outsider.

And then there is Sobel. An aged coffin maker in the village who lives alone. While the whole village was gripped in fear of the unknown outsider, Sobel is fearless, wise and indifferent. His house was open with broken doors and windows. He does not talk to others. Does not fear anything, even death. Kasan finds out, or he was made to believe initially, that every time Sobel finishes a coffin, there is a death or a person dies in the village. It may be his miscalculation. But it may be Sobel's mysterious wisdom that accepts death with ease. Sobel seems to have a more universal approach to the whole chaos. Kasan is placed on a higher moral pedestal—his conscience, combined with childhood innocence, is carried with utter conviction, allowing the film to explore childhood wilderness as both a personal and political space. The director probably identifies him more with Kasan's worldview.

The strongest aspect of the film is the direction. Sangma does not let a single shot go to waste, applying every shot and scene to advance the storytelling and enhance the visuals. The cinematography of Tojo Xavier complements each other here. The camera

work has served as a powerful tool for telling this political tale more effectively while remaining visually appealing without sacrificing realism. The long shots often showcase the natural landscape of the Garo hills. The mid shots are often used so that the audience can catch the characters' different emotions to the right degree.

The first shot of the film, with villagers searching for cicadas in the dark forest by their own lights, compels the audience to appreciate the director, the cinematographer, and the sound designer simultaneously. This is almost four and a half minutes long, a continuous shot that shows how effectively one can choreograph the actors, even in darkness, with minimal light, and amid the most natural sounds. This set the mood of the film by drawing the audience's attention to the spirit of community life in the village, their dependence on folklore, their relationship with nature, and their dietary habits. Because of the film's mood, several scenes are set in the dark, at dawn, or under moonlight. And Tojo Xavier is successful every time in keeping it natural. Whether it is the scenes under the blood moon's light, capturing the natural beauty of the dawn, or a long scene of a procession carrying a statue of Mother Mary through the village at night.

I loved Dominic Sangma's debut film *Ma. Ama* (2018) for many reasons, one of them being his remarkable handling of child actors. Directing children convincingly is something even many seasoned filmmakers struggle with, but in *Ma. Ama*, Sangma did it effortlessly. The children were portrayed in the most natural atmosphere possible. *Rapture* is no exception. The group of teenagers in the film have been captured

carefully without disturbing their innocence and spontaneity. The central protagonist, Kasan, has a cleft lip, which makes his speech unclear. According to the director, Kasan represents Sangma's own childhood mental state, his vulnerability marked by trauma after losing his mother at a very young age, which affected his communication and emotional openness (Sangma D. M., *Xenophobia and verbal charisma in a new film*, 2024). Torikhu A. Sangma, who played Kasan, is not a trained actor, yet the director successfully draws out the precise expressions he needs. As the lead protagonist, he delivers an unforgettable performance as Kasan, and is another asset of the film. In fact, the film's actors are mostly non-actors, and they perform in a way that looks natural.

Although *Rapture* is made with the intention of exploring various perspectives on the issue of outsiders concentrated in a rural village in the Garo Hills, its political observation has not affected its quality as cinema or as a visual experience. The camera is mature enough to capture the audience's attention with the place's breathtaking natural

beauty and the ethnographic details of people's lifestyles, without imposing a tourist's eye that tends to glorify everything. The natural performances of the non-actors, with minimalist dialogue, have carried the storytelling forward without disturbing the film's pace in the director's able hands.

Rapture says, whatever may be the reason, the fear is real. According to Sangma, the film's theme is the fear of a community in the northeast and its consequences. It is an insider's perspective without judgment. But, resulting in violence as an insider raises the question: Is it justified? What is left untouched in the film are the outsiders' views and the State apparatus's stance. The film has no clear ending. It is not a one-time watch. One has to watch it again. First, to appreciate the visuals; second, to understand the politics it seeks to showcase. *Rapture* ultimately stands as a powerful example of how politics can be quietly and poetically captured, with enduring physical and emotional patience. It is the story of an insider's self-reflection, self-criticism or self-revelation.

References

- Interview: Dominic Sangma.* (2024, May 10). Retrieved from BOMB: <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2024/05/10/dominic-sangma-by-arun-ak/>
- Rapture.* (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rimdogittanga>.
- Rapture.* (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rimdogittanga>.
- Sangma, D. (2023). The Author's Corner, EP 3, Shillong Literary Festival.
- Sangma, D. (2024, January 29). An Interview with 'Rapture' Filmmaker Dominic Sangma. (D. Sarkar, Interviewer)
- Sangma, D. M. (Director). (2023). *Rapture* [Motion Picture].
- Sangma, D. M. (2024, May 10). *Xenophobia and verbal charisma in a new film.* (A. A.K, Interviewer)