

Article

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Negotiating the 'Alien' in City Spaces through 'Axone' and 'Aamish'



'Food passes across any boundary you care to mention' - Salman Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*.

Culture is the primary lens through which ethnic communities are differentiated as a way to posit them as the 'other'. In India, we have multiple ethnic communities living and historically the Indian Peninsula has been the meeting ground of various communities who have come as visitors or conquerors and have in the process, consciously or unconsciously, shared and become a part of the cultural uniqueness of the people already living in this land. But that cultural exchange has mainly remained restricted to the mainlands. The fringes of our society, while having a vibrant

culture of their own, remained 'virgin' without being contaminated by external influences, thus failing to become global, and continued to exist outside the purview of mainstream scrutiny, overlooked to be too 'alien' to be a concern for people in the metropolis.

Yet in the last decade we have seen a rising concern with the same 'alien' culture, which is seen in the way regional food has slowly become a concern for many chefs of some of the leading restaurants in the economic and cultural capitals of India. Restaurants like Masque, Oota, Hornbill and Bombay Canteen

have repeated feature of regional cuisine packaged in contemporary styles giving their patrons a taste of distant lands whose culture may remain a mystery to them while giving them boasting rights of having tasted 'authenticity' in these restaurants. Northeastern states like Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Manipur, Tripura has been in the news for political unrest that has been plaguing these states owing to the unique space they hold within the country's geo-political life, or they are seen through the lens of tourists who does not engage in the life of the community but observe from a distance. This alienation has been farther under scored by the lack of representation of the rich history of theater and cinema that has been produced there (case in point: Priyanka Chopra's comment on *Pahuna* being the first film about the North Eastern states).

What is interesting to note is the change in attitude we have seen in recent times in relation to the North Eastern states after *Axone* (2019) premiered in the streaming platform Netflix. A film about four friends living in Delhi who are intent in cooking a special dish for their friend's wedding brings out the cultural and emotional alienation that people from small communities face in majority communities. It was only after '*Axone*' received popular vote that mainstream media concentrated on mapping the trajectory of films produced in the North Eastern states. Taking this as a cue, this article will try to map a trajectory of representation of communities- especially the North Eastern communities, with special focus on Assam, in mainstream lifestyle through food films and whether this increased interest in regional cuisine can be seen as a journey back to the villages in search of familiarity after the city has turned out to be an alien land devoid of warmth and acceptance.

The first question has a broader outline. Which is similar to the eternal question of which came first?- the egg or the chicken. The question of why the Indian hospitality industry felt compelled to return to its roots, is I think, tied to the question of why regional food slowly became a popular medium through which film makers started to explore the Indian consciousness. And these concerns are explored by Ashis Nandy in his '*An Ambiguous Journey to the City*', where he looks at traveling to the city and back to the village as a symptom of lost familiarity that the Indian populace is trying to reclaim by returning to its roots.

In this context, two films with completely different themes will be discussed- *Aamish* (2019) by Bhaskar Hazarika and *Axone* by Nicholas Kharkongor. While *Axone* is a tale of minority communities living in the city, *Aamish* revels in the peculiarity ascribed by mainland India to minority communities and poses the question- 'To what extent is normal, normal enough?' In that sense, both these films have the same concern, a concern for representation and acceptance and these concerns unfold through the medium of food and our relation to it.

Ashis Nandy writes, 'We live in an age of testimony.' And testimony is in abundant form in the 21st century. With the rise of social media and the expansion in the scope of visual media distant lands have come within our grasp. Unlike trains and museums, which according to Nandy are the two cultural 'symbols of conquest over time and space', the world wide web brought the world at our fingertips, becoming another cultural symbol of compressing space and time into a smallest possible entity which has the ability to move with us, rather than us having to move. This has lead to a renewed curiosity for the unknown; a phenomenon seen in the restaurant industry abroad and at home. The epithet 'ghar ka khana'

found a new meaning in this age of heightened representation, bringing in the possibility of exploring often overlooked cultures like that of the Kashmiris or the North East.

A 2017 article in restaurantinindia.in talks about this same phenomenon. *The epicenter of dining today for guests is its ultimate taste for which they could crave and return back. People are gradually getting bored of technical beautification around food instead they prefer eating authentic to get that real flavor. Simple garnishing is more impressive to them now rather than gastronomic garnishing. Year 2017 will see a drastic change in F&B industry by shifting the focus to traditional Indian cuisine and gastronomy.*

Along with the internet, streaming platforms enabled us to travel to new locales since we now had the choice of choosing a film to our liking, rather than that choice being made for us, which is the case with television. Food films, especially transported us to unknown territories since food was the perfect conglomeration of geography, and culture. From ingredients to method of preparation, each stage of creating a dish transports an individual to the land it is coming from. Films have the freedom to go behind the final product- the dish. And films can have various lenses through which to showcase the journey of a dish, an ingredient in order to explore its history. This shift from being a mere consumer to an explorer is simultaneously seen in the way various restaurants introduced new ways of consuming food. Restaurants now have tasting menu and communal sitting arrangements where strangers have vibrant conversations and exchange knowledge about food- there are workshops, intimate cooking classes with introduction to the history of a cuisine, and the number of patrons who are interested in such activities are growing with time. Like Nandy's museums where strangers come together to find relics of history, restaurants become a meeting

ground of food enthusiasts looking for relics of culture.

Films like 'Axone', or 'Aamish', then become the symbol of these changes in the attitude related to food at the fringes. *"Being an Indian I know seven items from Mexico, 11 from Italy, 13 from Lebanon but if you ask me for an item from Meghalaya, I will look at you as you have spoken a foreign language. The idea that I have gone to this pursuit in food sector was to expose the rich Indian cuisine to trace our own roots. That is why I bring Indian food to Indian people in their homes,"* says Nishek Jain Founder of 29, a restaurant serving 59 dishes curated from 29 states of India.

But looking at a film like 'Axone' we realize that while the larger populace has become more open to experimenting, this experimentation has certain limits to them. There is still a continued status quo maintained by chefs when it comes to the dishes that are curated. As mentioned by Mr. Jain one of the criteria for selection of dishes served at 29 is the 'palate of the diners.' In India, still, we are afraid to try our own culture. There is a very visible line between which is 'marketable' and which is not. *Aamish* takes this anguish and throws it back at its audience, repeatedly probing us to redefine our moralities and identify our hypocrisies.

Throughout the two films we see the characters negotiating with the cities they inhabit in; trying to break free while remaining legitimate inhabitants of those spaces. Whether it is Nirmali with her newly acquired taste of human meat or Bendang and Chanbi trying to make a good life in the country's capital- both are continuously persecuted and when needed rejected as rational thinking individuals purely because the city has turned them in to the Freudian 'hysterics'.

Cities are a space where status quo are maintained. Where subjective concerns have to remain a secret or accept persecution. In *Axone*

we see the coming together of various communities from parts of India: Punjabi, Bengali and a conglomeration of Naga, Meitei, Mizo, Nepali, Bodo, Khasi, Sema communities. Yet, it is the *Axone*, which is a popular ingredient in the cooking of most Northeastern communities that is put up for debate.



Bengali's are known to have sun dried fish popularly called shutki maach which makes the whole neighborhood smell when it is being cooked- an ingredient quite similar to that of axone for its bizarre smell. *Axone* is fermented soya beans which is a popular ingredient in not just Naga dishes but in a variety of meat dishes in Northeastern states as well as in Japan where it is known as Natto. On the one hand Delhi has a significant Bengali population which means that shutki maach is a popular ingredient for the residents of Chittaranjan Park where most of the Bengali upper class live. Looking at the restaurant going crowd one will notice that Shidol shutki and Natto has a significant space in the popular consciousness, but *Axone* remains at the fringes, to the extent that Delhi Police 'cautioned students and workers from the Northeast India that they should refrain from cooking axone and other fermented foods.'

Food is political. But this idea came to its head only after ban on consumption of beef was imposed by the ruling government in 2014, even though the law was passed on 26th October 2005. This imposition and subsequent violence inflicted on minority communities enabled directors like Bhaskar Hazarika to probe more

important questions like those dealt with in '*Aamish*'. It is not only the radical right that is put under examination in *Aamish*, it is the liberal neutral of the society who feels that they can negotiate with their privilege while staying secure in their hypocrisies who are being repeatedly challenged. When Sumon first visits Nirmali's house for a party, we are given a glimpse into the psyche of the upper class through the character of Dillip- Nirmali's husband. Dilip is a quintessential urban, upper class male who loves to listen to his own voice. When Dilip recounts the story of leeches that had stuck to his body at a camp in the outskirts of Assam, Sumon talks about an European community which eats leeches. This interruption from Sumon and the strange anecdote about leech eating communities does not bode well with Dilip and his expression reflects that. In the very next scene, we see Dilip talking about eating a well marinated meat of crow which Jumi finds disgusting. But here Dilip has to establish his intellectual superiority and place himself at par with the new generation and goes on to talk about people he has encountered in his visits, eating various species of creatures which are 'strange'. Sumon even utters the central theme of the film in this scene, "Actually, there is no universal definition of 'normal'." And we see the fate of this pluralistic notion of 'normal' tested in '*Axone*', and put under scrutiny and challenged at every step for being too 'alien'. Throughout '*Axone*' we see the central characters moving across the lanes and bylanes of Delhi, either in search of ingredients or space to cook with those ingredients. *Axone* or akhuni is a symbol of cultural uniformity between the hundreds of ethnic communities that live in the Northeastern states. *Axone* is a symbol of the familiar that becomes really important in a land of strangers, which is why cooking *Axone* becomes a political act for the group of friends planning a party for their friend's wedding.

Balomon, one of the friends, even cries out, 'Even if it kills us, we will cook axone.'

Both *Axone* and *Aamish* are set in two different cities. but the cities interact with the characters in similar ways. While everything seems nice and rosy in the beginning of *Aamish*, things take a heated turn by the time it reaches the closing line, in *Axone*, right from the beginning we see a tension brewing. *Aamish* starts on a hopeful note, almost as if the city and it's people are willing Sumon and Nirmali to meet and find their true selves. Their experimentation with meat starts in the city through the exchange of tiffin boxes. But the intimacy grows when they go off to villages to try out various meats. Even when Sumon decides to cross the last moral code and treat Nirmali to his own flesh, cooked with utmost love and tenderness, the city is accommodating in the form of Elias, who is Sumon's senior studying veterinary. Anything goes when it is for experimentation, which is how Sumon convinces Elias to cut some flesh from his body. In a scientific society where animals are frequently used for various testings, it should not come as a surprise that someone wants to experiment with human flesh. And this is where the tension between Guwahati, a rapidly developing city, and Sumon and Nirmali start. While Sumon wanted to be as intimate as possible with Nirmali when he decided to cook his own meat, Nirmali's experience eating Sumon's meat was one of complete freedom and liberation, which bordered on gluttony, something Nirmali herself cautions against at the beginning of the film when she says, 'Meat is not the problem, gluttony is.' It is this addiction and gluttony which culminates into Sumon being forced to kill an innocent man and consequently getting caught in the act. As long as it was Sumon's own meat which he was feeding Nirmali consensually no moral code was being broken, but when Nirmali fails to curb her addiction and goes to the extent of

finding a fresh corpse for butchering, the city starts encroaching on their private affairs. We see their discussion about cutting up the corpse interrupted by the morgue in charge; later, it is the police who find Sumon in the act of butchering the rickshaw wallah he killed.

In *Axone* there is always a gaze, always prying eyes keeping track of every action of these strangers going about the city. This constant gaze also takes the form of harrassment and physical violence which subsequently forces the 'outsiders' in the city to stay quiet and not create undue chaos. A woman is subjected to continuous harrassment from the male gaze on a daily basis, but Chanbi being a part of a minority community has to find solidarity from people around her in her reports of violence if she wants herself to be heard or she will be slapped into silence. Moreover, we see the landlady's grandson, Shiv becoming a negotiator and navigator for the community, as they try to prepare the *Axone* pork dish. This farther reinforces the idea that to survive in a city of strangers one needs a guardian, even if a



racist one if one wants to make the best of their situation. 'Our consumption of food media tends to render ethnicity as novel and exciting, while also ensuring that we as viewers engage with worlds that are safe and clean,' writes Parasecoli, in *Feasting Our Eyes*. This farther complicates our relationship with ethnic communities. The aesthetics used in presenting the food in '*Axone*' are made to look safe, which also makes the ethnic cuisine look 'normal, natural and appropriate'. This

question of appropriateness while touched upon in 'Axone' is never intended to disturb the audience, and 'privileges mainstream value systems while offering a virtual vicarious touristic experiences of various kinds of otherness.' By the end of the film *Axone* was cooked but out in the open where this otherness does not fear encroaching on the privileged class. And Bendang and Chanbi decide to return to Assam, one being subjected to inhuman violence, while the other understands that the fight she had started can never be won in the city.

The character of Shiv is supposed to add a comic relief in this film, but most of his dialogues are racist and sexist. The fact that Shiv's racism is tolerated and even accepted in the form of him being invited to the wedding fails to make mainstream population understand how much racist slurs, however, innocent can add to the alienation felt by minorities in the city. Shiv wants to be helpful and his heart is in the right place, but when his racism is not questioned somewhere the film legitimizes racism with the disclaimer that as long as someone is genuinely trying to be helpful their racism should be tolerated and even accepted.

For Sumon and Nirmali, tension between the personal and the city was different. As long as the personal eats away at each other the city does not care. With Chanbi and Upasana, their personal is public and there is no space for privacy. The village or the hometown that is repeatedly referred to (in 'Axone') and returned to (in 'Aamish') then become the space for individual freedom and finding the 'self'. While the city makes the demarcation between the 'self' and the 'other', the act of returning to the village 'underpins the urban psychogeography in which the village is the location of an irreverent, active, even aggressive renegotiation of unjust social relations...' Village allows the space for

questioning unjustness, while in cities the judgment has already been passed even before the transgressions are fully understood.

While Bendang is cautioned by Chanbi, that he 'made a northeast here', Shiv is never expected to come to terms with the cultural difference between him and the people he is interacting with. At the very end of the film we see Shiv complaining about the lack of butter chicken and paneer and to satisfy Zorem takes a bite of some lettuce that was there for garnish, lest he is asked to take some food. This difference in expectation also farther distances people from minority communities who are expected to come to term with the alienation that is constantly perpetrated on them. *Aamish* takes this perpetration and does not sit quiet. In the last scene when we see Sumon and Nirmali being taken to jail we see Nirmali take Sumon's hand, which is also the first time both of them touch each other. This simple gesture reinstates Nirmali's support of Sumon as well as the unique tradition of meat eating that Sumon wanted to hold on to.

Food crosses barriers between communities, but that barrier sometimes becomes too huge to allow any space for negotiation making it one of the most contested space where the tensions between communities and personal preferences are best highlighted. Like the question, 'what is normal?' does not have a singular answer, the question 'what is food?' too does not have a singular answer and once that is understood food will truly then become above cultural barriers.

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