

Negotiating Peace and Conflict through Cinema: A Reading of *Handuk*

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Abstract:

Jaicheng Joi Dohutia's Moran language film *Handuk* is based on the tumultuous period of military operations commissioned against ULFA in the 1990s and the 2000s. The movie offers the audience the scope of multidimensional critical approaches in its portrayal of the social realities of Assam during that period. The film recreates the environment of all-pervading fear which people in Assam during the 1990s can identify with; it throws illustrative hints at the socio-economic conditions of Assam which was one of the root causes of the genesis of the insurgent outfit; it exposes the vagueness of ideological conviction in the organization's leadership and the transitions the organization has undergone over years. Furthermore, the film offers an objective assessment of the sacrifices that common people in Assam and the members of the outfit had to make and the price they had to pay. This paper is an attempt to examine how the film *Handuk* recreates the traumatic experiences that people in Assam had to live through during conflict period between ULFA and the Union of India and raises some vital questions pertinent to the intentions of the insurgent group and the methods of controlling it by the state.

Keywords: Assam, ULFA, peace, conflict, fear, military operation.

India's North-East has been a hotspot to diverse types of organizations in conflict with the Indian state over the period of more than half a century. Apart from 'peaceful' and democratic as well as violent protests by social groups over different issues pertinent to the interest of the local communities, there have been various organizations taking recourse to armed struggles against the Indian state. Armed groups like National Socialist Council of Nagaland/Nagalim (K), National Socialist Council of Nagaland (IM), United Liberation Front of Assam, National Democratic Front of Bodoland, Mizo National Front have been able to garner international attention towards their cause over the last few decades. The Indian state has responded in varied manners starting from applying military power to engaging in series of discussions and geopolitical negotiations involving representatives of the concerned local bodies and the insurgency groups. While the inhabitants of the vast region have gone through traumatic experiences of violence, bloodshed and sufferings and the public memory is soaked in innumerable stories of loss and pain, there have been attempts to bring 'peace' by addressing personal and collective experiences as well as negotiating the armed groups through discussions on the part of the government.

One common trait noticed among the armed insurgency groups like ULFA, NDFB, Naga National Council, NSCN (K), NSCN (IM), MNF, UNLFM, hailing from the Indian states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram is that in their historical articulations, the Indian state is described as 'colonial' in nature and is essentially 'external' to the region. (Das 8) In Assam, ULFA was one of the corollaries of the Assam Movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s which was mobilized against the 'illegal immigrants' from Bangladesh with the participation of people from "virtually every ethnic group of the State, student associations from other States, Government officers, business people, lawyers, journalists, artistes and other creative groups, as well as professionals" (Hazarika 2000: 65). ULFA shifted its attention towards resisting the 'colonialism' of New Delhi (Das 13), focused on rural development works at areas beyond the reach of Government (Das 13) and rose to fame through bank heists, kidnappings and murders of capitalists and important government officials. In the words of Nani Gopal Mahanta, "From 1985 to 2009, ULFA has been one of the most 'dreaded' insurgent outfits in the country". (211) Several army operations since 1990 accompanied by other conflict settlement strategies like

creating SULFA (Surrendered ULFA cadres), holding discussions have been instrumental in ‘liquidating’ the organization. (Das 14)

If we look at the history of literary and artistic representations of Assam during the three tumultuous decades of Assam’s history – the 1980s, 1990s and the 2000s – considered as the heydays of ULFA in Assam, not many cinematic and audio-visual representations come to the fore. Compared to cinema, a good number of music has been composed depicting the experiences of people during those times. Also, there have been a lot of fictional works in Assamese as well as other languages that have tried to document the lives and experiences of people during these times. Some powerful novels like Parag Das’s *Changlot Fenla* (1993), Dilip Bora’s *Kolijar Aai*, Bhringeswar Sharma’s *Teje Dhowa Xomoi*, Juri Borah Borgohain’s *Camouflage* (2023) and *Netri* (2024) have questioned, examined, and evaluated the functioning of the organization, the mutations it has undergone in terms of its structure, motifs, social relations and commitments and accountability to the communities they sought to represent. These works have attempted to examine the promises and activities of the organization and its leaders and other members and assess the gains and loss that Assam and its people have to experience. The novels bring out compelling and traumatic stories of loss, pain, fear and violence endured by the common people as well as the outfit-members over the last few decades.

When we come to the cinematic representation of the eventful days of ULFA in Assam, Jaicheng Joi Dohutia’s *Handuk* (2016) comes out as a strong movie in terms its critical grit and depth of vision. There are movies in Assamese language like Moirangthem Maniram Singha’s *Mon Jai* (2008) and Sanjib Sabhapandit’s *Jatinga Ityadi* (2007) that has touched upon different aspects of social realism in Assam during those days. While *Mon Jai* recreates the environment of helplessness and hopelessness in the youths of Assam incurred by widespread unemployment during ULFA’s active days, *Jatinga Ityadi* questions the feasibility and legitimacy of the claims and promises upon which the organization is formed. Jaicheng Joi Dohutia’s Moran language film *Handuk* offers the audience the scope of multidimensional critical approaches in its portrayal of the social realities of Assam during that period. The film recreates the environment of all-pervading terror which people in Assam during the 1990s can identify with; it throws illustrative hints at the socio-economic conditions of Assam which was one of the root causes of the genesis of the insurgent outfit; it exposes the vagueness of ideological conviction in the

organization's leadership and the transitions the organization has undergone over years. Furthermore, the film offers an objective assessment of the sacrifices that common people in Assam and the members of the outfit had to make and the price they had to pay¹. This paper is an attempt to examine how the film *Handuk* recreates the traumatic experiences that people in Assam had to live through during the 80s, 90s and the 2000s in the conflict between ULFA and the Union of India.

Handuk shows the story of an elderly woman Heramoni who eagerly keeps waiting for her son Mukti who has joined the insurgency group ULFA. In the environment of fear and uncertainty fostered by deaths and killings, kidnappings, army operations, she receives the mutilated body of a young man believed to be Mukti. After performing all the rituals connected to the deceased son, she receives the information that Mukti might still be alive. Till the end of the movie, the reality of Mukti remains in dark as the content of the letter Heramoni is about to receive is not revealed to the audience. The movie is also about Sewali, Mukti's childhood friend and faithful beloved who, despite being aware of the uncertainties and dangers associated with a rebel's life in her times, continues to wait for him and refuses to get married to somebody else. The movie is also about Biplab, the surrendered rebel who has just come out of jail and struggles to come in terms of the realities outside the forest – the rebel's domain.² While he has to take shelter at somebody else's place for fear of being killed, his family members are killed by unknown persons in the middle of a night. He goes to meet the surrendered leaders of his organization in order to discuss their future course of actions and returns confused, bewildered and disheartened at the casual and escapist attitude of leaders towards their cause. He tries to get information from the government authorities on Mukti's whereabouts, but remains unanswered.

The term 'handuk' in Moran language means a very remote or interior place or a dark corner of a house or a hiding place. This title has multiple resonances: literally, the film is about remoteness; the plot is located in a remote village pathetically connected with the outer world; most of the men including young boys in the village have to keep hiding in the forest because of

1. As mentioned in the film, around 30000 people have lost their lives in ULFA's conflict with the Union of India (film time 1.18.40).

2. Forest – 'haabi' in Assamese – is a metonymy referring to the hideouts of the ULFA cadres. To go to 'haabi'/forest means to go to the underground or to join the rebel group.

fear of Army's torture; the militants dwell in the remote parts of the forests. However, as the movie progresses and as the echoes of the heartrending wailing of people at the loss of the loved ones (Biplab, Sewali) or the blank and lost stares of Mukti's mother get contrasted with the luxurious life and politically comfortable position of the surrendered cadres, the title of the movie achieves deeper signification. It not only critiques the integrity and commitment of the rebels to their cause and the people but also questions and even mocks at the amnesia of the public – as if the memories of the bloodstained days of terror have gradually been engulfed by forgetfulness. As if the world outside have pushed those lived experiences of a generation of people to a dark corner of their memory.

Movies based on socio-political and historical situations and true incidents have to negotiate certain specific problems rooted in the audience's expectations of fidelity towards reality. The visuals must have the authenticity within themselves so that the story can be transmitted to the audience trustworthily. When the film takes up issues and situations from the contemporary history, the task of remaining true to life becomes even more challenging for the director because the audience can relate the cinematic text to their lived experiences as well as their popular imagination and knowledge about the subject matter of the movie. *Handuk* is based on contemporary history and its subject matter is something that everyone living in Assam during the 1990s and 2000s can identify with. As such, the filmmaker has to address the challenge of making trustworthy representation of experiences that most of the contemporary audience has lived through.

Cinema as an art form is primarily audio-visual in nature where stories are told through moving images and, as such, the visuals have to be chosen carefully in order to tell a story. The very first shot of the film sets the tone of the all-pervading sense of desolation and abnormality in the film. The wide, long and still shot shows an elderly woman (Hera Moni – Mukti's mother) entering into the frame through the right side walking involuntarily in a bamboo grove to the left of the frame where she cuts a bamboo pole, cleans its branches and pulls the whole bamboo to the right side of the frame. The visuals in the shot hints at certain absences: the absence of men in her household and the absence of dynamism in the woman's gait. The question that strikes the audience immediately is about the reason why the elderly woman has to cut and pull the bamboo, which is normally done by men-folk. Such scenes are repeated again, e.g. in another scene she is

plucking areca nuts from a very tall tree with the help of a bamboo pole. The question about the absence of men that might arise in the first scene is answered immediately in the second scene which shows a group of men being lined up in the street while a group of armed personnel interrogate them and keep vigil on them. This scene lays down the context of the movie which is set against the backdrop of the military operations commissioned against the outlawed rebel group.

Throughout the movie, there pervades a sense of gripping fear and tension about the uncertain. While there are news about military operation circulating in the air, young boys have to take shelter in the forest during night. Nights are scary not because of superstitious beliefs but because of the fear of military or unknown militants. Military forces enter Mukti's house in the dead of the night, inspects every nook and corner, leaves the house in a mess, and in a threatening tone advises Hramoni to convince her son to surrender. In another scene, the woman urinates inside her house on a pot because of the fear of going out in the night. In the morning, while sweeping her backyard, she discovers butt ends of cigarettes hinting at somebody's spying presence near her house during night. There are multiple scenes where people are shown sleeping during daytime; for example, Hramoni sleeps peacefully on her veranda while her neighbour boy repairs the radio for her (24.35). In another scene, before daybreak, two boys hurry to take shelter in the rice-straw storage when one commands the limping other, "Come fast, if the Army guys catch you, they will beat us till end for no reason" (13.18). This is followed by news on radio about conflicts between ULFA and army, deaths, CM's plead to the center to deploy additional military forces, secret killings, ULFA's calling for Assam *bandh* (shutdown), kidnapping of businessmen from the heart of the city, about the death of a woman who offered shelter to ULFA cadres in firing in a joint ambush by army and police against ULFA. All these descriptions speak of the fearful realities of the period the movie tries to portray.

Johan Galtung, a noted scholar on peace studies, has brought the idea of violence while understanding 'peace'. Peace is the absence of violence, and violence can be of many types. He categorically defines peace as absence of three types of violence: 'direct violence', 'structural violence' and 'cultural violence'. (17-18) Through the use of images of mutilated bodies, the zoomed shots on the faces with the pervading sense of fear, hopelessness, and helplessness,

through the portrayal of loneliness of the characters, and through the metaphorical images like that of the boot-marks on the neatly mopped floor, the movie offers clear cut evidence of the existence of 'direct violence'. This 'direct violence' is inflicted by the military. In the film, military becomes synonymous with fear and oppression. The boot-mark left on the neatly mopped mud-floor at Heramoni's house is a strong image of oppressive power. The mutilated dead bodies, the first dead-body with bullet-mark on the forehead hinting at zero-distance shooting, the wailing of Biplab at the murder of his family members before daybreak are all reflective of the oppressive nature of the army operations.

Johan Galtung's idea of 'structural violence' refers to a more nuanced and meticulously organized functioning of a power structure that is oppressive, violent and often inhuman. The movie uses different images and shots to portray this 'structural violence' inflicted on the citizens by the state through militarization of the 'terrorism affected areas'. The initial shot on the villagers lined up on the street while being interrogated by armed forces is reflective of the operations organized by the state against the insurgent groups in Assam. The central government of India executed multiple operations against ULFA in the 1990s and the early 2000s. Operation Bajrang, Operation Rhino, and Operation All Clear are some of the most significant attempts to eliminate the insurgent groups in Assam that had severe consequences on the people of Assam. While there are numerous reports on human rights violations, abductions and arrests of suspected insurgents and civilians, torture, rape, and killings of innocents, because of legal protections like AFSPA, most of such cases remained unexamined and unaddressed in the house of the court. The violence inflicted upon the people was 'structural' in nature as it was legitimised under the shield of acts like AFSPA. In the movie, the news bulletin telecasted by radio mentioning the abductions, killings etc, the boys spending night outside in the forest for fear of the armed forces, are some of the multiple evidences of the 'operations' executed by the state.

The idea of 'structural violence' pervades deeper into the movie through the character of Biplab. Biplab's return to mainstream life and attempts to reflect on the motifs and dreams of the militant organization offers a critical perspective to understand how different tactics adopted by the state to 'neutralise' the insurgents have fostered dilution of the intent of the members of the outfit. Formation of SULFA was a major masterstroke by the state on the insurgents. Biplab is bewildered at the dilution of the intentions and integrity of the rebel leaders and members of the

organization. The luxurious cars of the surrendered leaders living in cities are contrasted against public vehicles used by Biplab living in the remote village. While Biplab does not want to deviate from his integrity as a rebel, the leaders and decision makers of the organization have already been bought by the state through money, luxury and power. The violence is more subtle; it hits at the core of the organization; and it is structured in such a way that the perpetrator becomes ambiguous in front of the victim. For Biplab, there remains not much difference between the state and his fellow rebels who have surrendered to the state.

In *Handuk*, we can witness ‘direct violence’ and ‘structured violence’ by the military forces in abundance. While the movie questions the very notion of ‘peace’ itself through its powerful imageries, screenplay, music and story, at the same time in nuanced ways it exposes how ‘violence’ is inflicted on the innocents and civilians through subtle state mechanisms. On the other hand, the movie is critical of the very ideals of the insurgent members of whom innumerable numbers have lost their lives, many have surrendered and chosen the comfortable position of mediocrity, and many dedicated cadres are left confused and lost at the ‘liquidation’ of the organization. However, the ultimate sufferers are the common public, the neighbours, friends, relatives and lovers of the rebels, who have to live through the ordeal of uncertainty, terror and hopelessness.

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