The voice of reason

“Ishu” looks at the malaise of witch hunting through the eyes of a child

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“Mor Borna Daini Noboy, Jaa, Bormak pita manuh borak kamuri degoi. / My aunt is not a witch. Go, go and bite those who are beating her….”, these heart-wrenching words of the child protagonist Ishu in Utpal Borpujari’s debut Assamese feature film Ishu, that won the Rajat Kamal at the 65th National Film Awards, still echo in our minds. These words demonstrate a grim picture of the Assamese society. However, Ishu’s effort to save his aunt Ambika from the clutches of the evil forces after being branded as a witch, or ‘daini’, is an oblique suggestion about the possibility of resistance and transformation which gradually emerges in society.

Assam, an ethically diverse state, has experienced the evil practice of witch hunting for decades, and once a woman is branded as witch by a ‘Bej’ or quack, she is either banished from the village or killed after being brutally tortured. This sensitive issue is the central theme of the film critic-turned-filmmaker.

Based on Manikuntala Bhattacharya’s eponymous novel, Borpujari’s Ishu is the second Assamese film to be produced by the Children’s Film Society of India (CFSI), after noted filmmaker Jahnur Barua’s ‘Tora’. An M.Tech in Applied Geology from IIT-Roorkee, Borpujari says, “When I read the novel Ishu, I was struck by the way it looked at the malaise of witch hunting through the eyes of a child. We often don’t realise the impact of such incidents – and the violence that comes with them – on children. I decided to adapt it and thought of looking at it from a child’s perspective.”

Set in a contemporary Rabha village, Karipara on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra river along the Assam-Meghalaya border territory, Ishu engages with a long existing problem which has plagued the Assamese society. The film was shot in different Rabha villages, near Agia in the Goalpara district of Assam to depict the dynamics of Rabha culture and image, its society, its customs and ways of life. Anurag Saikia’s music in the film wonderfully evokes the emotions of characters, and reciprocates with the visuals through Rabha folk tunes. In Ishu, the filmmaker presents the reality of the peripheral people being neglected by the government. For instance, in one scene a dilapidated building, with a worn out board of ‘health centre’ in Karipara village is shown which connotes the utter negligence of the health department.

Making of a witch

Ambika, a widow in her late 40s, lives all alone in a dilapidated thatched-roof house and practises herbal medicine. Her popularity among the villagers grows due to her knowledge of herbal medicines, and as a consequence, the village Bej (quack) is worried. He wants to gain confidence back from the villagers, while a woman named Bhadreswari is eyeing on Ambika’s property. The Bej brands Ambika as a daini. A visible scar on her forehead leads the illiterate villagers into believing that she is a real ‘daini’. Superstitious villagers easily get swayed by such superstitions, they torture her and set fire to her house. She disappears from the village. The forlorn Ishu looks around the village for his beloved aunt.

The innocent world of children and their psychology are brilliantly portrayed in the film. Ishu’s leisure time with his friends Jitul, Sarat, and his conversation with the piglet – Moina with a human dilemma – feelings and emotions relating to his family, village life, and the violence that comes with them – on children. Ishu converses and shares his feelings with the piglet - feelings and emotions unheard and unnoticed by the outside world, and thus, Borpujari has assigned the piglet – Moina with a human character.

Parallel narrative

In Ishu, the characters of Radha, the teacher and Bipul are the symbols of the resistant voice against the superstitious beliefs prevailing in the rural society.

Dipika Deka, who played the character of Radha, says, “Radha is a character who in spite of living with superstitious people, voices against the social evils. The character has brought a lot of changes in my life too.”

The epilogue of the film shows Ishu as Dr Ishwar Prasad Rabha, pioneering the research on traditional herbal medicines of Northeast, conversing with the journalists and expressing his indebtedness to his aunt Ambika for introducing him to the wonderful world of traditional herbal medicine.

This short yet highly meaningful scene indicates that the film Ishu is not simply about the theme of witch hunting; it contains a parallel narrative which represents the power of an apparently iliterate, simple village woman to pass her legacy to the next generation.