

Culture, Culinary Connection and its Resonance in Cinema

A Study of *Axone* and *Gulabjaam*

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ABSTRACT

Cinema shares an organic bond with the culinary culture of a society which lends it a unique flavour. Metaphors from the culinary arena are used to express societal predicament, such is the connection between society, culture and food. Revolving around the politics involved in cooking a pungent, ceremonial dish, Axone which is prepared for a north-eastern wedding, in the not-so-friendly neighbourhood of Delhi, is what the film Axone (Kharkongor,2019) deals with. Axone or akhuni is fermented soya bean, which is an important ingredient in a variety of north-eastern meat dishes. The film Axone (Kharkongor,2019), begins with a search for sourcing raw Axone and other essential ingredients. The surreptitious manner in which the characters source it, sets the tone for what follows later; a search for identity in one's own land, and its assertion by consciously observing rituals in a hostile set-up. The film, *Gulabjaam* (Kundalkar,2018) is set in Pune, it is 'a discovering one's authentic self and follow your passion, at all costs', kind of a narrative tracing the lives of Aditya and Radha. Aditya is a nonresident Indian, who is back home, fueled by the dream to pursue his passion for cooking and a desire to re-live his childhood by rediscovering traditional Maharashtrian recipes; on-the other-hand Radha Agarkar resides in Pune leading a spartan life. She cooks with dedication for her home-run tiffin service which sustains her. Food connects Radha and Aditya and imbues their life with meaning. This paper aspires to analyze the intertwining of culture, food and its ability to sustain human aspirations. The regional flavor deftly captured through the astute eye of the director and its impact on the narrative will also be studied.

Keywords: *culture, culinary experiments, society, identity, regional differences*

Culture is a coming together of a host of elements, comprising dress, behaviour, mannerisms, traditions, rituals that are observed and followed by a group of people. Food constitutes an important part of culture, it becomes an identity, assuming a much bigger role, as aptly expressed by Boutaud et.al. (2016), 'Food is a lens to analyze society order, historical changes, power and politics.' Cinema reflects the happenings in a society and makes those moments live forever. In a perceptively written essay on the influence on culture by the symbiotic connection that is shared between food and cinema, Spinelli states 'Like all culturally defined material, substances used in the creation of and in maintaining social relationships, food and cinema both serve to consolidate group membership and to distinguish groups.' This is particularly applicable to the movie *Axone* (Kharkongor,2019), which revolves around maintaining a unique identity of the northeast, through insistence on cooking the pungent smelling akhuni, which is added to meat dishes to celebrate a north eastern wedding in the hostile Delhi neighborhood.

This paper will deal with the influence that cinema and food have on shaping of a culture, politics and finally on individual lives. The two films that have been selected for this purpose are *Gulabjaam* (Kundalkar,2018) and *Axone* (Kharkongor,2019). The diverse settings of these films and the different themes dealt with, with food as the mainstay, is indeed intriguing. Food emerges as the main protagonist in both the films, and interestingly shapes the final form that these movies take. *Axone* (Kharkongor,2019) streamed on Netflix, provides visibility to several issues that are of concern to the northeasterners in India. They are not treated as Indian nationals, they are the 'other'.

Prima facie, the movie is about four friends sharing a common rented space in an apartment in the capital city. At the heart of the film, lies the cooking of a meat dish, using dried soyabean which is akhuni (*Axone*) that is staple fare at northeastern weddings. Delhi, which boasts of being home to several communities including the Bengalis, who use dried fish as an important

ingredient in their cuisine and is accepted without any kind of opposition by Delhiites as part of the Bengali food repertoire. Paradoxically, the cooking of meat dishes involving akhuni, poses a problem, so much so that the Delhi police ‘cautioned students and workers from the Northeast India that they should refrain from cooking Axone and other fermented foods.’ (Maity,2020. p. 4). The north easterners are otherized on the basis of food preferences, their features differentiate them and they are treated as foreigners in their own motherland, they are humiliated when addressed derogatorily as ‘Chinky’ or ‘Chinese’. The film is a 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 Axone, which is a popular ingredient in the cooking of most Northeastern communities, that is put up for debate so much so that Balomon, one of the northeastern characters in the film, cries out, ‘Even if it kills us, we will cook Axone.’ (Kharkongor,2019) reminding us of Barthes, who considers ‘food as multidimensional, as something that shapes us, our identities, and our cultures and in the end, our society.’ (qtd. in Sibal,2018, p.3)

There are several layers to the movie *Axone* (Kharkongor,2019), it includes characters belonging to different northeastern states; Bendang and Chanbi, Zorem and Minam, Upasana and Balomon, each representing northeastern culture in their own way. There is an implicit otherizing within the northeastern community of the Nepalis, who are not considered to be part of it. It is intriguing to note, in the film, it is Upasana, who is Nepali, trying her best to adapt and keep the group of friends united, while taking initiative to cook Axone for Minam’s online wedding, she does this by putting aside all misgivings that come her way.

One of the main protagonists, Bendang has faced racial assault in Delhi for having coloured his hair blonde and for ‘standing out’ amongst the Delhiites. He is verbally and physically abused, and the scars remain which make a nincompoop of Bendang, who cannot muster the courage to speak up, when lewd comments are passed on the streets of Delhi at Chanbi - who is his love interest. Chanbi manages to defend herself but feels let-down by Bendang. The same

self-respecting Chanbi, in order to land a job, has to put on a fake American accent and has to agree to work odd hours, after ten years of struggle in Delhi. Making a living in Delhi, is not a cake walk for Bendang either, who finds it difficult to learn songs in the Hindi language, to be sung at clubs, in order to be 'accepted' as a club singer. Zorem runs a store selling Northeastern food stuff, which is 'acceptable' as he is not posing a threat to anyone or any other business, he is treading the oft-trodden path, conforming to what is expected of his community in the hostile Delhi neighborhood.

Racial slurs and taunts are an integral part of the lives of all north easterners. Cooking a ceremonial dish, puts all of this to test. After putting in sincere efforts, when the plan to cook Axone is foiled and the group of friends is mobbed by the residents of the housing society, which is a microcosm of the nation, a resident of the apartment bullies Chanbi, citing the example of a ban on Northeasterners in Munira, (an area in Delhi) suggesting that similar steps need to be taken in the locality that they inhabit in the capital. Chanbi hyperventilates and is on the brink of a nervous breakdown. Cooking Axone in such circumstances is thus out of question.

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. (Maity,2020)

Shiv, the landlord's racist grandson, who is friendly but flirtatious, is on the lookout for a northeastern girlfriend, just for the fun of it, his attitude represents and reinforces sexual stereotypes depicting northeastern women as loose, which is accepted by the mainstream. Shiv helps Zorem and his gang of friends with arrangements for the wedding, and in turn, gets invited to be part of it. He misses the typical north-Indian paneer-laden wedding menu served at receptions, which instead is crowded with northeastern delicacies, including the dish made using fermented soyabean, Axone.

The film also exposes one to the flexible marriage rituals that prevail in the Naga community, which is a refreshing change from the strict patriarchal standards that we are raised on. The Naga ritual of a brother filling up the position for token-marriage rituals in absence of the groom was followed in ancient times, when the groom would be away due to certain professional engagements. A similar ritual is to be followed, in the bride's absence, too. The progressiveness of the community is depicted in the film, with the bride's place being filled up by her sister, as women like Minam, are achievers and have personal aspirations. Naga culture is flexible and acknowledges that women too enjoy equal rights. There are no boundaries proscribed by one's gender.

All through the film we realize that there is no compromise with food through the vehement insistence by all characters, on the inclusion of Axone as part of the wedding celebrations. Its absence is non-negotiable. At this juncture it would be appropriate to quote Murcott (2007, p.204) 'It may be argued that what people are prepared to take inside their bodies reflects their social identities, and their membership of social groups. To view eating habits as a matter of culture is to understand that they are a product of codes of conduct and the structure of social relationships of the society in which they occur.' Rightly then, to retain their identity in a hostile environment, members of the northeastern part of India, have to hold on to the vestiges of their culture very tight and close to their heart, as it sustains their identity and ensures continuity of their unique existence.

The movie *Gulabjaam* (Kundalkar,2018) is set in contemporary Pune, the movie begins with the return of Aditya, a non-residential Indian, who is in search of his 'childhood' using the gateway or the 'portal' of food, to reach it. He has a settled life in the U.K. and has marriage on cards. After getting engaged in Mumbai without any prior intimation, instead of leaving for London, he sneaks out and prefers to be in Pune to pursue his passion and fulfil his childhood dream. He starts living the life he wants to, by lying to his family. Aditya meets with his college friends in

Pune and wants to go back to being a student, which he does, by sharing a hostel room with his friend and his roommates.

He expresses his desire to his friend, to learn to cook authentic Maharashtrian food. In order to achieve this, at the beginning of the film, Aditya meets the author of a recipe book, written in the vernacular, which is created with the intention of being a 'go to' book for young brides. The attempt to establish a connection with the author who is now a septuagenarian, fails, miserably. At this juncture, one is reminded of Arjun Appadurai (2009, p.9) who contends that 'cookbooks in the contemporary world should be viewed as revealing artifacts of culture in the making.' Aditya is on the lookout for someone who would help him create something similar, which would help in exhibiting his culture on foreign shores and simultaneously help fill a void within himself.

It is serendipitous that he ends up eating the vegetarian meal out of a tiffin, that is meant for his friend at the hostel. One bite of the *gulabjaam*, is epiphanous, Aditya is transported to his childhood, in that very instant. In this context a reference to chapter titled 'Habits' in Shylashri Shankar's *Turmeric Nation* (2020) can support Aditya's need to relive the memory of food consumed as a child and his bid to recreate that experience for people staying in far-away lands. Shankar stresses the connection between food and the memory it evokes, which goes a long way in forging a robust relationship with food. Repeating the experience by revisiting the place where you have eaten the food is essential in building a relationship with the memory of food.

She further states 'Flitting constantly to the next 'happening' restaurant or bar signals an absence, a void in our relationship with food.' (Shankar,2020, p.314). The 'void' was perhaps what Aditya was experiencing, which pulled him back home to experience things first-hand, all over again, and with an intention of recreating it for himself and others.

However, biting into the *gulabjaam* that reminds him of his childhood is the beginning of his search for the *hands* that cooked that meal. He ends up at Radha Agarkar's home, a prudish

spinster, who has cut off all ties with the outside world. It is Aditya's undying belief that she is the one who can help him go back to his childhood and channelize his passion in the right direction. It is this undying desire that makes him withstand her idiosyncratic behaviour. Radha Agarkar has her own reasons for the way she is, she has had a difficult life, with a terrible accident that has made her lose the memory of her past. She lies on a hospital bed, in a coma for several years of her life and ironically, continues living in a self-induced coma, even after she is out of the hospital. With both her parents dead, and an elder sister who is emotionless and looks upon Radha as a burden, without acknowledging her individuality; her needs and her concerns. She simply abandons Radha at Pune in the old decrepit family home, all alone, to fend for herself. As a defense, Radha has built a notorious reputation for herself of being a prude, and an introvert.

Aditya's first request at being her disciple is sternly turned down by Radha, hence, he has to sneak into her house. He is pulled by the aroma of the food and like the first time, loses himself in the process, oblivious to her presence. It is Aditya's dedicated pursuit that wins hands down at the end and Radha Agarkar accepts him as her disciple. She is a strict teacher, and Aditya is a sincere student. He is technologically savvy. He slowly and steadily forms a deep bond with Radha, which borders on attraction for Radha, as she has never shared such a close tie with anyone in the past. Aditya encourages Radha to take up independent catering orders, at which they work as partners, they set up a 'Dial-a-Chef' service. On one such occasion, Aditya comes face-to-face with his fiancé in Pune, who is unable to digest the fact that Aditya has given up his well-paying job and has started walking on a path, that is dictated by his passion, which according to her, can be pursued in one's spare time, too. Clearly, they share different ideas of leading their lives. The relationship is broken, and Aditya is relieved as he doesn't have to carry the charade any longer. Radha, meanwhile, meets a classmate who is the only person who has known her from the past.

He is interested romantically in Radha, the fact to which Radha is oblivious. Radha's limited world revolves around Aditya, and the growth that has taken place in Radha is thanks to Aditya. Aditya has now learned the ropes and it is time for him to branch out. It is difficult for Radha to accept this fact as she finds it difficult to imagine a life without her partner-in-learning. However, both have to find their independent ways for which they need to wean themselves off each other. Radha does the unimaginable, as the pain of separation is difficult for her to accept. She consumes excess sleeping pills, ensuring she would remain fast asleep, when Aditya would be embarking on his onward journey. When Aditya comes to bid Radha a final goodbye, he finds her fast asleep. He very thoughtfully prepares *gulabjaams* for her, thus leaving on a sweet note and also, trying to give her a taste of her own training, a '*gurudakshina*', of sorts and in terms of Hindustani classical music, he concludes the Bada Khyal, for the time being, of course, on the very same note, the *sama*, that it began on. There comes in the aptness of the title of the movie.

Radha wakes up and slowly and steadily, learns to cope with life. Aditya and Radha keep in touch regularly sharing notes on recipes and life. Aditya has set up a gourmet restaurant in a foreign land, selling authentic Maharashtrian food, with memories of the moments spent with Radha, being pasted all over the place in the form of beautiful photographs. Life goes on for Radha who spends more time with her classmate, who eventually becomes her life partner and there is a ray of sunshine in the form of a beautiful damsel, who appreciates Maharashtrian food, at the conclusion of the film who is at the table that Aditya is drawn to, at his restaurant, biting into a *gulabjaam*.

What intrigues the audience is the food imagery and minute detailing of facts in the film. The director has taken immense care to add more meaning to the film by including finer nuances, for instance, the title of a novel by James Gleick is read by a person occupying a place on the landing of the floor, titled '*Time Travel*', where Radha Agarkar lives. Radha Agarkar, indeed leads a life that is frozen in time. Her only pastime is to visit the Cinema theatre, which is viewed as a respite

from the monotony of life. She watches films all by herself in the enclosed, dark cinema hall, which is a comfortable place of anonymity, her only foray into and contact with the outside world, in which Aditya is included much later. It is here that we find a different, and a content Radha, akin to a fetus ensconced in the warmth of a womb. For those few hours, she is transported to another world. Cinema has that magic, of allowing belief to suspend, for a while. The title of the film *Gulabjaam* (Kundalkar,2018), like *Axone* (Kharkongor,2019) is food related. The former being sweet and the latter having gained its importance because of its cultural significance. In the film *Axone* (Kharkongor,2019), the dish is nearly prepared and has to be discarded in entirety, once, as there isn't space to cook it. Finally, when the akhuni is cooked, it is done on the terrace of a building, which is an open space, symbolizing a no-man's land in the film. The protagonists have to literally carry the utensil carrying the uncooked *Axone*, in search of a safe place, where its pungent odor would not cause trouble. *Axone* is symbolic of the neversay-die spirit of the northeasterners and cooking *Axone* becomes a political act.

Conclusion:

Films like *Gulabjaam* (Kundalkar,2018) and *Axone* (Kharkongor,2019) successfully drive home the fact that the arena of food is never neutral. Food-bans by the ruling party go a long way in proving this. A democracy that controls the food choices of the general population should ideally be considered unlawful. Perhaps, if the entire population is treated equally, then the question of vehement insistence on 'cooking to preserve culture' would never arise. It is unfair to be *accepting* of the pungent odor of dried fish and levy a ban on cooking of meat dishes which require the use of akhuni, plainly because the northeasterners do not wield as much clout as the Bengalis do. Shylashri Shankar explains this phenomenon of intertwining of identity and power when she states, 'Identity also includes social control-of a power (in a person/s or a set of texts) that determine who is included in that identity and who is not.' (Shankar,2020, p.13). North

easterners are as much part of India as any other community is, it is high time, this fact is accepted.

The concept of 'mosaic bundling' introduced by Shankar (2020, p.13) can be delineated in both the films discussed above. The concept is borrowed by the author, from Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. The mosaic bundle, that is referred to, could be built through our habits created by caste, religion, geography and class. Further addition to this could be the experiences that one gathers while travelling for leisure, study or work. Experiences that we assimilate with our friends belonging to different cultures, religions and regions also adds to the mosaic. Shankar opines, 'Our mosaic bundles change with age, season, beliefs, and geography. In the middle or old age, we seem to return to the foods of our childhood.' (Shankar,2020, p.13) In the movie *Axone* (Kharkongor,2019) the bride Minam experiences unparalleled pleasure as she serves herself the meat dish that is prepared using akhuni, for her wedding, which is a great surprise, as it feeds her soul. Aditya, on the other hand, agrees to take the idiosyncrasies of his teacher in his stride, as the food that Radha Agarkar cooks clearly, resonates with his 'mosaic bundle'

All-in-all, both the films surely underscore one fact, food choices are carved in our DNA, although tastes and food preferences can be acquired, yet, at the end of the day, what feeds one's soul, is to a great extent, a matter of upbringing and memories that the food evokes.

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