

THIRD EYE EDITION

Monsoon Raga

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Last week, when we were all going about our mundane tasks, showers of silver rain cascaded down from the grey masses of the thunder clouds above. Each warm, salty raindrop drenched every trembling blade of grass, each trusting flower, all the gnarled and spreading trees. The rivers and streams have become swollen with white, foaming torrents of water. Emerald ponds, swarming with darting fish, receive the rain like a benediction. In distant fields of the remote countryside, children scream with joy as they ride on water buffaloes and dance with the inhibited joy of those who know no artifice or hypocrisy, who are attuned to the truest part of themselves – the innocence and joy of being alive, of being one with the grand panorama of Nature.

Following the monsoon trail in India, one of the most fascinating countries of the world, is an adventure that beckons the most intrepid romantics among us. Come June, the intense heat of the Northern plain causes the upper air currents to move north of the Himalayas and draws the monsoon across this vast country. Starting from the southwestern coast, it branches eastward and northward, and on reaching the Ganga delta, follows the wide river valleys bounded by the snowy Himalayan ranges and its heavily forested foothills. By mid June, the swift, eastward moving monsoon winds reach the Chotanagpur plateau, drained by the Damodar. It is a wide plateau with conical and dome-shaped hills which look like gigantic bubbles that have solidified. During the three long monsoon months, the brown forests of *sal*, bamboo and teak turn green and the tribals collect resin from tree trunks, and clumps of *mahua* flowers. Replenishing itself in its passage over the Bay of Bengal, the southwest monsoon continues westwards along the wide Ganga plain and eastwards along the Brahmaputra gorge.

Eastwards, the Brahmaputra Valley cuts across the Shillong plateau ringed by the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and through the Assam-Burma range. The Brahmaputra swings across its wide valley which is encased in an immense rocky corridor. On the banks of this fabled river, tiny hamlets are skirted by golden rice fields and gently undulating tea estates. On the slopes, tussar silkworms are bred on the mulberry trees, and pineapples prick the hills in even rows.

For me, personally, the monsoon rains have a significance which is rooted to my idea of life, and of the awareness of the kind of person I am. When the heavens open up, lightning and thunder play their celestial dance and wind tossed clouds shift restlessly in the unending dome of the sky, my soul is awash with memories, fragments of poetry take birth, forgotten songs come to life. Everything is beautiful and pure... not just the rolling fields and the dripping trees, the urgent, impatient streams rushing down between hilly boulders, but also the drab urban sights... the bedraggled crows

perched on telephone wires shaking off the raindrops from their sodden wings, the car tyres speeding past rain puddles, and the water whooshing up in surprised silver waves, the windscreen wipers of countless cars doing their synchronised tango, little children in the

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backseat, wiping away the misty windows to see the world beyond, or scrawling their names with tiny fingertips...

Nature renews itself with the rains and I believe we must cleanse ourselves too – get rid of our egos, our little, petty hatreds and bitterness, our self-obsessed, one-track minds, our hankering for material goods and refusal to accept the world and the people just as they are.

Many creative geniuses have used the rains as a *leit motif* in their films. Nature's fury – howling winds, streaks of lightning, drums of thunder and relentless showers have been used not only to tell a story, but heighten a mood, create an atmosphere of impending doom, or passion. In the iconic *Sound of Music*, based on the singing von Trapp family of Austria, Julie Andrews is the runaway nun who plays surrogate mother to a brood of motherless children. One stormy night, the children cling to her as all hell breaks loose outside. And she is there among them, hugging them, singing to them, having pillow fights. Her love helps them overcome everything.

Cut to Tom Hanks in Robert Zemeckis's *Cast Away*. Hanks plays Chuck Noland, a Federal Express Systems engineer who has to learn to survive on a South Seas atoll after his charter flight crashes. We see Hanks – lean, grizzled, dressed in animal skins, fighting to survive alone, struggling to keep himself sane. He is alone against the elements as pitiless tropical storms rage around him and it takes all his physical strength and mental prowess to win in this titanic struggle for survival. Whew! What a performance. Then, the spectacular effects in *The Perfect Storm* depict the waves and winds of the Atlantic as they thrash the fishing boat, the *Andrea Gail*, skippered by Massachusetts fisherman Billy Tyne (George Clooney). As the rains fall from a brooding, melancholy sky, I also remember the warriors of Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* fighting their last epic battle drenched in the downpour, wallowing in the mud, their eyes filled with searing hatred and a burning desire to kill.

Then, who can forget Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*, the first film of that heartbreaking trilogy based on Apu's childhood, youth and coming of age? His older sister Durga is dying. The father is away on work. In that humble shanty, deep in the heart of impoverished rural Bengal, mother Sarbajaya helplessly nurses her dying daughter. The wind slams the windows, the lamp sputters weakly. Outside, as the storm wreaks havoc, uprooting trees, blowing away roofs. Durga slips quietly to her death. At daybreak, the father returns. He gazes, stunned at Nature's fury, not knowing his first born is no more. The poignance of those moments are unbearable in their intensity.

Mainstream Bollywood has memorable rain sequences, in fact, too many to enumerate here. There is Raj Kapoor and Nargis in rain drenched bliss in *Shree 420*. There is Hema Malini, in all her statueque sensuousness, aboard a storm-raged ship with Manoj Kumar in the revolutionary *Kranti*. I remember Smita Patel's lithe frame, her dark eyes smouldering, as Amitabh romances her in a humble cart in *Namak Halal*. It is different from any soppy, filmy romance. Smita is a strong woman, she challenges her man and makes it clear that the relationship will be on her terms. There is a playfulness and battle of wits that redefine the rules of Bollywood romance. And, of course, torrential rains play a big role in Raj Kapoor's magnum opus *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*, where, in the climactic scenes, Shashi Kapoor rescues a drowning Zeenat Aman in a heroic act of atonement.

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As for Assamese cinema, there are innumerable rain moments. Remember the Atul Bordoloi directed *Kallol*, where the young rebel Lachit Phukan fishes during rain and shine, in a symbolic protest against both Nature and the claustrophobic feudal society? Manju Bora's latest film *Aai Kot Nai* shows the misery of people displaced by the Assam-Nagaland border clashes. She uses the rains to highlight their helplessness and despair, heighten the mood of melancholy and show the agony of a mother separated from her suckling infant.

So, the monsoon *Raga* plays on. Hear it as you bury yourself in work, an endless melody unchained all around you. Be a part of Nature's magic and learn to uplift and cleanse yourself. And, I promise there will be rainbows all around you, spanning the earth and sky.