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A Commentary on the Portrayal of Nagaland in *Paatal Lok* Season 2

Yuvaraj Gogoi (PhD)^{1*}

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Gargaon College, Simaluguri, Sivasagar, Assam, India, PIN-785686.

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ABSTRACT

This commentary looks at the portrayal of Nagaland in *Paatal Lok* Season 2. It argues that despite stellar performance by the actors, the narrative of the series is stereotypical and indicative of the dominant mainstream perception of North East India and its people. The series, despite some degree of sensitivity, portrays the Naga society and Nagaland as an outlier province, a picturesque but xenophobic tribal hinterland that has become a safe haven for insurgents, drug lords, mafias, and a hell of crimes.

Keywords: *Paatal Lok* Season 2, Nagaland, North East, Stereotypes

Amazon Prime aired Season 2 of the much-anticipated crime thriller *Paatal Lok* on January 17, 2025. Most reviews have highly praised the series. Mishra (2025) called it ‘a masterpiece in fictional storytelling’. Jogani (2025) commented, “The series is a pride for Indian content on a global stage, showcasing the capability of Indian cinema to delve into complex, layered narratives” (para 6). Gupta (2025) observed, “*Paatal Lok* redux, which sticks to its combination of a police procedural, the inner lives of its denizens, and compulsions of the outer world, is sharper and better” (para 3). Sharma (2025) noted *Paatal Lok* Season 2 represents “underbelly of crime, corruption, and societal decay” (para 1). She also observed, “Season 2 reminds viewers that *paatal lok*—the metaphorical underworld—exists in every system, society, and human psyche” (Sharma, 2025, para 5). Kotecha (2025) also highlighted that the “second season plunges us into an entirely new abyss—darker, murkier, and riddled with fresh complexities. While treading a different path, the show retains its gripping core: an unrelenting search for truth in a world marred by deceit and corruption”(para 2). However, most of the existing reviews of the series are silent on the depiction of North East India and its people. This commentary seeks to address this issue.

The narrative of *Paatal Lok* Season 2 is multilayered and set in a multilingual context interspersed with Hindi, English, and Nagamese. Das (2025) commented, “*Paatal Lok*’s unafraid use of Nagamese for a large part has lent it a fresh and authentic feel” (para 5). *Paatal Lok* Season 2 is the story of a slain affluent businessman and founder of Nagaland Democratic Forum, Jonathan Thom (Kaguirong Gonmei), and the investigation to find his murderers by a headstrong, honest but underdog Police Inspector, Hathiram Chaudury (Jaideep Ahlawat) of Outer Jamuna Paar Police Station. The portrayal of the character Hathiram by Ahlawat is par excellence. Tilottama Shome shows another brilliant histrionic performance portraying Meghna Barua, an IPS officer posted in Nagaland. Shome depicts multiple facets of a working woman: a cop, a negotiator, a loving mother, and a good human being.

While *Paatal Lok* Season 2 is an extraordinary thriller, one must examine how Naga society and Nagaland are portrayed in the series. First, in most mainstream movies and webseries, the narrative primarily focuses on North India, and North East barely finds any mention, let alone a complete series or movie dedicated to North East India’s stories. Seen in this way, *Paatal Lok* Season 2 is a trendsetter as it brings on board several fresh insights and novelties in terms of themes and storytelling. As Das (2025) rightly claimed, “*Paatal Lok* Season 2 has set a benchmark for mainstream portrayals of the northeast region of India”. This article argues that while North East does find a place in the narrative of the story, its depiction is not fundamentally different from other stories that portray North East India in the mainstream entertainment industry. A stereotypical understanding of the region and its people is intertwined in the narrative.

This article departs from the review done by Das (2025), who found the series as a candid representation of Nagaland, its history, and culture. No doubt *Paatal Lok* Season 2 shows some sensitivity in portraying Naga society, as Das (2025) pointed out. Nevertheless, the narrative is not free from stereotypes. A closer inspection reveals that the series portrays Naga society and Nagaland as an outlier province, a picturesque but xenophobic tribal hinterland that has become a safe haven for insurgents, drug-lords, mafias, and a hell of crimes (*Paatal Lok* or ‘hell’ as the makers of the series have called it). The series still depicts the Naga Society as ‘Other’. In fact, this otherness or ‘us-vs-them’ binaries is evident in the narrative of the series. It portrayed the dark elements of the Naga society, but the narrative did not have much space for the rich cultural diversity and hospitality of the Naga people. The orphanages have been portrayed as shelter-houses for nurturing future mafias and drug addicts. The portrayal of Daniel (A dreaded assassin), Rose (A drug addict young woman), and others bear testimony to this point. Nagaland has much more to offer than what is portrayed in *Paatal Lok* Season 2. Mitra (2025) also mentioned in a similar vein, “The Nagaland of *Paatal Lok* is vaguely summoned, with much exposition and lip service” (para 5). Commenting on the series, Krocha (2025) argued, “these negative elements are just part of the storyline and do not necessarily depict the reality of either Naga lives or Nagaland as a whole” (para 10).

In another scene, Virk (Anurag Arora), the officer friend of inspector Hathiram Chaudhury, narrates the origin of Daniel in these words: *Daniel kisi Long Fong (Langchoma) naam ki jega se hain* [Daniel is from some place called Long Fong (Langchoma)]. This indicates the perception of the majority of North Indians who still regard the North Eastern places as so alien as if these could not be remembered or pronounced correctly. Some other instances like a police constable uttering in disbelief: *'train jaati hain waha (Dimapur)'* (Do trains even go there (Dimapur)?) portray Nagaland as an outlier about whom the mainstream Indians do not have much knowledge. The series reflects a narrow understanding of the vibrant Naga society and the people living on the hilly terrains. The representation of the Naga orphanages is also misleading, to say the least. Prasenjit Biswas (2025), a Professor of Philosophy at North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) of Shillong, opined in strong words on his Facebook handle on January 27, "Patallok [sic] serial on Nagas is a damn bullsh*t". He elaborated in sub-comments that the series has been "portrayed in a manner that doesn't correspond to Naga social world" (Biswas, 2025).

Another noticeable aspect of *Paatal Lok* Season 2 is that not all the Naga characters are donned by Naga people but by actors belonging to different ethnicities like Uncle Ken by Jahnur Barua (Ahom), Senior SSP by Kenny Deori Basumatary (Bodo), Daniel by Prashant Tamang (Nepali). Probably this has sprung from a fallacy of the makers that most North Eastern communities look alike, and hence, they can don the role of one another easily. This presumption of taking all North Eastern communities as facially similar to one another is also reflective of the dominant mainstream perception of North India about North East India and its people.

The series also ventures into zones of portrayal of gore elements of ultra-violence. For instance, the first episode depicts the decapitated head and torso of Jonathan Thom, strewn in a sea of blood in succinct details. It is beyond the comprehension of this author why an internationally acclaimed Assamese film director of Jahnur Barua's stature donned the role of Uncle Ken, the key villain who slashed the throat of Jonathan Thom with a kitchen knife and later decapitated the head from the torso with beastly instinct. Post-murder, Ken was shown in one episode cleansing his blood-drenched body without an iota of remorse for killing a fellow human being. The indulgence of Barua in depicting such gore instances of violence is ghastly surprising, to say the least. Thom is a fictional slain character around whom the narrative of *Paatal Lok* Season 2 revolves. The scene is alarming beyond words and will retain its after-effects in the audience's minds for a long time. The decapitated scene shows as if such things were normal in Nagaland and is probably indicative of the primitive head-hunting tradition that some war tribes of Nagaland practised. In one scene, Hathiram Chaudhury, after a deadly fight, smashes the head of Daniel with a cylinder. Another scene shows how Raghu is killed by one of his roommates with a brass metal musical instrument brutally and buried alongside the instrument. Such scenes unequivocally indicate the trend of the rise of portrayals of ultra-violence in Indian web series and movies.

On the whole, in terms of performances and thriller components, *Paatal Lok* Season 2 is a brilliant webseries. But, the way it portrays the Naga people and the state is still stereotypical and indicative of the dominant mainstream perception of North East India and its people.

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