

## Rise of Arunachali Cinema

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*In The Land of Poison Woman*

August 9, 2019, the day of announcement of the 66th National Film Awards 2018 was a delightful day of the people of Arunachal Pradesh as two Arunachali films- Manju Borah's *In The Land of Poison Women* and Bobby Sarma Baruah's *Mishing* (Apparition) bagged the National Awards for Best Feature Film in Panchenpa and Best Feature Film in Sherdukpen respectively. More overwhelmingly, both the films are based on the novels by Sahitya Akademi award-winning author Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi.

Incidentally, both the film makers are women showing their power to create a history of Arunachali Cinema. Both are prominent film makers of India based in Guwahati. With Bulbul Can Sing, directed by Rima Das, having bagged the Best Feature Film in Assamese in the said National Awards, all these Assamese women directors outshone the men folks and emerged as shining stars in Assam.

Manju Borah's *In The Land of Poison Women* is among two feature films from the North

East Region selected for the Indian Panorama of the 50th International Film Festival of India, Goa, 2019. The other film is Pradip Kurbah's Khasi film- *Iewduh* (Market).

Bobby Sarma Baruah's *Mishing* was earlier selected for participation in many major festivals including the Kolkata International Film Festival 2018, International Film Festival of Kerala 2018 and Bengaluru International Film Festival 2019.

The maiden full length feature film from Arunachal Pradesh- Ahsan Muzid's *Sonam* in Monpa language produced in 2006 is also based on Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's popular Assamese novel in the same name. Eminent litterateur Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, who is at present the member of the Assamese Language Advisory Board of Sahitya Akademi said, "I am doubly happy with both the films getting national recognition", according to a media report. He, however, gave credit to the directors of the two movies and said, "It is the result of their hard work." He received Sah-

itya Akademi Award 2005 in his Assamese novel- Mauna Outh Mukhar Hriday (Silent lips, Murmuring Heart).

When the sun first strikes India, it shines upon Arunachal's wild jungles and tribal communities. Arunachal, the name means "Land of Rising Sun". Situated at the extreme north eastern part of India, Arunachal Pradesh is the largest state having an area of 83,743 sq km in the North Eastern Region and has a long international border with Bhutan to the west (160 km), China to the north and north-east (1,080 km) and Myanmar to the east (440 km). It stretches from snow-capped mountains in the north to the plains of Brahmaputra valley in the south. Population of Arunachal Pradesh is 13, 83,727 as per census figure of 2011 and is scattered over 25 districts and 5589 villages.



*In The Land of Poison Woman*

High mountains and dense forests have prevented inter-communication between tribes living in different river valleys. Isolation imposed by geography has led different tribes with several dialects to live and flourish with their distinct identities. The state is inhabited by the world's largest variety of ethnic tribal groups and sub-groups numbering over a hundred and each tribe speaking their own-language and dialect. Their diverse and unique rich culture and traditional heritage constitute arts and crafts, fairs and festivals, social structure, folklores in the form of songs and dances that still remain fresh and well-preserved in this state. To maintain their livelihood, people in rural areas chiefly practice diverse trade

and profession including jhum and wet rice cultivation, horticulture, fish farming, carpet making, wood curving, breeding of mithun, yak, sheep and other livestock.

Indigenous inhabitants are of mongoloid stock but their geographical isolation from each other has brought amongst them certain distinctive characteristics in language, dress and customs. So, numerous unique stories of myth and belief of different communities are an inherent and integral component of the social structure of the people of the region. For many, unaware of their existence, it is a hidden treasure of unexplored subjects and mysterious tales.

### ***In The Land Of Poison Women: A Mysterious Tale***

Based on Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's novel-Bishkanyar Deshot, Manju Borah's *In The Land of Poison Women* (2018) reflects how a superstitious belief among the Panchenpa tribe leads to the death of many women. The film also tells the efforts of new generation working hard to eradicate the blind belief that women have poison in their nails and if they serve food to the males, they die.

There was a story that Thongchi, in his school days, read about a sensational murder of a beautiful young Panchenpa woman that took place at Zemithang in the then undivided Kameng District, which appeared in the popular magazine- Dharmayug with the photograph of the slain women. Much later, when the writer was serving as the Deputy Commissioner of Tawang District, he saw a mysterious house at a place called Brokenthang in the Zemithang region. He heard people talking about an old couple residing in the house and the old woman was very beautiful. And thus he created the novel-Bishkanyar Deshot, a mysterious tale.

The language used in the film is that of

Panchenpa tribe, a section of Monpa tribe with a population of around 5000, settled near the Indo-China border, around 100 kilometers West of Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. When Thupten is posted at Brokenthang as an SIB Officer, he comes across at an isolated house down the slope of the hilly terrain. His attendant tells him not to look at that house. He is curious to know the fact. When he approaches to the house, the old woman says, a “My son, listen to what Apa says. Go away. Don’t ever come back here. Bad omens will befall you. Your Apa and I don’t want any harm to come to you.” When he meets the Circle Officer, who is a lady, he asks, “What is this slur on Pangchenpa women are talking about?” The lady officer replies, “Men are not supposed to eat anything offered by us. If they do so, the curse of Panchenba women will fall upon them. Gradually they will suffer stomach ache and die.” The story attempts to deconstruct the belief among the Panchenpa tribe that Panchenpa girls are doumo who produce poison in their nails and kill men with that poison.

With the initiative of the Circle Officer of Zemithang, the Panchenpa people are made aware of the fact that the beautiful Panchenpa people do not produce poison in their nails and people will not die if they eat anything served by a Panchenpa girl. People die of diseases caused by the unhygienic living conditions. The film ends with a note, “Why are the girls called poisonous? Why do you men heap such a burden on women?” The film truly captures the beautiful landscape, culture and traditions of the community that makes the audience to get a new taste of an unexplored area. The jury of the National Film Awards says, “The film is a depiction of an individual’s effort to break the myth of Poison Women in a remote part of Arunachal Pradesh.”

### ***Mishing: A Supernatural Theme***

Bobby Sarma Baruah’s *Mishing* (2018) has a

supernatural theme based on the belief of the Sherdukpen tribe of Arunachal Pradesh that a dying person’s spirit comes out of his body. The spirit called Mishing roams around and frightens human beings. It is at the will of Mishing who would finally see the spirit. If someone sees the Mishing of an ailing person or of someone who met with an accident, they take it for granted that the person will not live long.



*A Scene from Crossing Bridges*

On why she made the film, Baruah says, “My intention is to showcase the culture of the Sherdukpen tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, which has an estimated population of only 4200 people. These people value their cultural moorings and the folks. My goal is to do full justice to the traditional concept of Mishing. I believe that my film will help people experience the beauty of this part of India along with this community’s strongly held otherworldly belief in wandering souls and spirits”.

The main character in the story is Radha Binode Singh, a Manipuri. His name is Kunja Singh while he is serving as mechanical head in the Army. He leaves the service and becomes a deserter after his junior has been promoted to a higher post leaving him aside. Abu’s father Togbe Mahajan, a leading member of Sherdukpen community of Arunachal Pradesh meets driver Radha Binode Singh after buying a second hand vehicle in Assam. As he returns to Arunachal Pradesh, Togbe Mahajan learns that the driver is a deserter from the Indian Army. The Mahajan arranges a set of



fresh identity papers for the driver who stays on and becomes an extended member of the family. The family fondly calls him as Singh Driver. At the time, Abu is a child.

The film evokes excitement and suspense in the audience. The film opens with a scene of Abu, the middle aged man whilst having dinner. Door knocks. He opens and finds an old man standing at the door and asks, “Who are you?” He replies, “I am a driver. Your driver. Singh Driver.” Astonishingly Abu asks, “Singh Driver! Why are you here?” He says, “I am looking for you.” Abu, in infuriated tone asks, “How did you find me? Why did you run away from our home?” He politely replies, “I come all this way to explain before I die. I want you to know everything. I could not tell your dad.” “I don’t understand what are you saying”, Abu closes the door.



*A Scene from The Head Hunter*

Next morning, Abu finds him at the door. “You are still here? Say what you must quicky. I am to leave soon. Be quick or just leave.” Singh Driver says, “I know. It is good that you did not go yesterday. Anyway officer was not there.” Abu curiously asks, “How do you know?” He says, “Don’t worry. Your business will be settled today. What if I come with you? I could talk on the way.”

Singh Driver is in the front seat while Abu is driving the vehicle. At a tea stall, Singh Driver narrates, “I found your father 30 years back.” The events of the bygone days are revealed in flashbacks. When the flashback returns to normal, Singh Driver asks Abu to go to their

Guwahati residence and collect a precious possession of Togbe Mahajan that has been with him. The vehicle reaches the office. Abu enters into the office and Singh Driver is with the vehicle. When Abu comes out, he does not find Singh Driver as he disappears without a trace.

In Guwahati, Abu receives his dad’s precious possession from Singh Driver’s son. Abu has been told that Singh Driver is a Vellore hospital fighting for life at the last stage of cancer. Then, who was the man who visited Abu? Abu comes to know that Manipuri Singh Driver, with whom he has talked last two days is actually a Mishing.

### ***Sonam: Maiden Arunachali Film***

Based on a popular Assamese novel of the same name, written by Sahitya Akademi winner Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, the Monpa feature film- Sonam (2005) directed by Ahsan Muzid introduced the Arunachali Cinema represented the country in various festivals across the globe including National Geographic’s ‘All Roads Film Project’ Film Festival in Los Angeles and Washington and Himalaya Archie Nederland Film Festival in Amsterdam and Autrans International Mountain Film Festival in France.

The film won the Rajat Kamal in National Film Awards 2005 for the best feature film in Monpa for “picturesque and effective portrayal of the contemporary tribal life”. It was also selected in the Indian Panorama 2006 of 37th International Film festival of India. It also won the Special Jury Award and FIPRESCI Award at MAMI International Film Festival 2007 in Mumbai.

It took Muzid and his crew 45 days of gruelling trekking and travelling at heights of 8,000 feet to 15,000 feet to complete the film. The story revolves around polyandry and the socio-cultural ethos of the Brokpas, a yak herding community among the Monpa tribes

of West Kameng and Tawang of Arunachal Pradesh in the high altitude of the Himalayas. It deals with the subject of love, hatred and jealousy that can breed between two husbands of a Monpa woman.



*A Scene from Sonam*

“The Brokpas are pastoral nomads as their existence depends only upon yaks. The system of polyandry came to the community to save the cattle from being divided among brothers,” Muzid reveals.

It is a custom in that region for a woman to have more than one husband. They call this system khor dokpa. The cultural connotation of khor dokpa is totally different from polyandry as the custom of khor dokpa is a survival strategy among the Brokpas. Muzid depicts a unique situation where the husband offers to accept his wife’s lover as co-husband. But the presence of the new man makes the first husband very lonely.

Sonam, the wife of the duo slowly and silently starts suffering due to the body and mind complex. Being a believer in Buddhism, she opts for her own death in a heartbreaking ending.

### ***Crossing Bridges: A Film Made by Son of The Soil***

Crossing Bridges (2013) directed by Sange Dorjee Thongdok is the first feature film in Sherdukpen, the dialect spoken by an indig-

enous community of the same name in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. The film premiered on 27 September at the Mumbai International Film Festival in 2013. The film revolves around Tashi, a man in his early thirties who is forced to come back to his village in the remote northeast region of India after eight years when he loses his job in the city. As he stays in the village waiting for news of any new job in the city, he begins to experience the life and culture of his native place and his people. He gradually rediscovers his roots, which he has never paid attention to earlier. He meets and falls in love with a girl, Anila, a school teacher in the village who helps him in the process. Ashu Jamsenpa, the first Indian Woman to reach the summit of Mount Everest five times plays the female leading role of Anila in the film.

The film was screened at several international film festivals including Mumbai International Film Festival, Dharmashala International Film Festival and International Film Festival of Kerala.

Crossing Bridges, directed by Sange Dorjee, that won the National Film Award 2013 for best feature film in Sherdukpen had all-India release on August 29, 2014 in five metro cities in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Pune and Kolkata under PVR Director’s Rare banner.

Sange Dorjee Thongdok belongs to the Sherdukpen Tribe from the remote Northeast corner of the country. He is the first person of his state to pass out of a film school -the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, at Kolkata. He also holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology from Hindu College, University of Delhi.

Crossing Bridges is his first feature film based on his own people. It is also the first feature film in Sherdukpen, a dialect and tribal community living in West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, and the first feature film directed by a native of the state. The film was



shot in the director's own village of Shergaon in Arunachal Pradesh.

Prior to this film, Thongdok has made two short films – Pratyabartan and Evening Café. His documentary- The Nest (2015) which is about Yeshi and Dema, who run Tashi Delek – a small eatery – at the mouth of the Sela pass, at an altitude of 14000 feet, more often than not, being the only sign of human habitation, bagged the Best Documentary and the Best Cinematography in the 4th National Documentary and Short Film Festival, Thrisur 2017, the Best Film on North East in the 4th Woodpecker International Film Festival, New Delhi 2016 besides participation in New Horizons from NE, International film Festival of India, Goa 2015.



*A Scene from Sonam*

His second feature film in Sherdukpen- River Song (2018) is a film about the developing bond between two lonely youths who have differences of opinion and a language barrier. How they overcome obstacles in life besides developing a beautiful relationship is the theme of the film, says Thongdok. The film was selected for competition and premiere at the 15th International Indian Film Festival (IIFF), 2018 at Stuttgart, Germany on July 20. Tashi, a lonely single man stays by himself in a defunct fuel station on the edge of a small town that is slowly being inundated by water from a dam reservoir that is being constructed nearby. He is unwilling to leave the place in

spite of the coming danger and the warnings from the authorities as it holds a lot of memories for him. He meets Eshna, who comes to town with her husband, who is overseeing the construction of the dam. Despite the differences in their culture and unable to understand each other's language, Tashi and Eshna slowly begin to form a close bond finding companionship from their loneliness in each other. As the dam nears completion, the authorities clamp down on the people to leave town. Thongdok says that dam construction along Himalayan region is a real threat for many communities living in the area.

### ***The Head Hunter: A Nightmare In Modernisation***

The Head Hunter (2015) directed by Nilanjan Datta, an FTII graduate and working as Associate Professor of film editing at FTII Pune bagged the National Film Awards 2015 for the Best Film in Wancho for its 'a cinematic contemplation on the lives of the Wancho tribe, regarding the balance required in modernising tribal environment, while intruding and displacing their lifestyles'.

The story revolves around Apu, an old tribal man from a forgotten tribe of India, who dwells in a forest as ancient as him. Fierce and warrior like, rugged and wrinkled, he belongs to Wancho tribe, dreaded for their practice of head hunting. Donning headgears made of bamboo and hairs of wild bears, and wrapped in nothing more than a loincloth, he is the lone caretaker of one of the wildest and most dangerous forests of India.

When the government decides to build a road through the old man's forest, he resists and becomes a nuisance for the administration. Finally, a city bred young official, who belongs to the same tribe and also speaks his native language, befriends him and tricks him to spend a few days in the city. It is Apu's first brush with cigarettes, money and cars. For the

first time in his life the old man encounters the concept of money, concrete buildings, crowds of people and complex living.

The road comes up swiftly after Apu's house is razed. When he finally comes back to his forest everything has changed. The film is a story of human tragedy, of lost identity and also of the comic simplicity of an ancient man who is exposed to city life for the first time in his long years. It is also about the dilemma of a young official who is forced to betray his own past, in his quest for a secure future.

The film was selected in the 'India Gold' competition of Jio MAMI Mumbai Film Festival 2015.

### **For Growth of NE Cinema**

To boost up the growth of film industry in the North East Region, the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting started organising a yearly event of Northeast film festival on the theme 'Fragrances from the Northeast', which seeks to showcase the potential of the region in the media and the entertainment sector in the year 2014. The first edition was inaugurated by Minister for Information and Broadcasting Prakash Javadekar at Siri Fort Auditorium, New Delhi on August 22, 2014. Javadekar rightly said the growth of the

Northeast in these fields was illustrated in the increasing number of awards won by the films from the region at the National Film Awards every year. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, he said, would always provide all possible support for promoting films from the region. He mentioned for opening a film institute in the region.

Information and Broadcasting Secretary Bimal Julka said all support would be extended to development of film-making in the North-eastern region and funds would not be a constraint. He also touched upon the creative potential of the region with regard to young film-makers.

As a follow up of the initiatives, the National Film and Television Institute and Animation (NFTIA) in Arunachal Pradesh started its initial ten-week course on film making entitled- 'Journey to Cinema' on May 15, 2017. The sixth batch of the course is being conducted from October 10 to December 20, 2019 with an intake of 20 students.

With lots of unusual and interesting tales of the numerous communities of the state and the growth of the national film school in the state, Arunachali Cinema, one day, will carve out a niche in the world of cinema.

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