

Documentary Films from Northeast India in Yamagata International Film Festival



Opening Ceremony YIDFF 2019

The opening ceremony at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF, held from October 10 to 18, 2019) pretty much reflects the spirit and ethos of the festival in general– the avant-garde film. *On My Way to Fujiyama, I Saw...* (1996) by the avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas was the opening film. A farmer-poet Kimura Michio from Yamagata was the guest of honour invited on stage to speak about his association with Jonas Mekas and his own poetry. Kimura spoke at length about his journey as a poet born to a family of sharecroppers in a tiny village near Yamagata – what a struggle it was for him during his early days in Tokyo writing in a Japanese dialect that was not recognized by the mainstream Japanese writers then. The finale of the ceremony was a grand dinner hosted by the Mayor of the city of Yamagata – with the best of rice, vegetables, fruits, sea food, meat and drinks served with pride showcasing the food treasure of Yamagata, a farming city known for their abundant harvest. Groundbreaking cine-

ma; intimate interaction with people and society through their special packaging of films & symposiums; a close connection with the city of Yamagata as the festival is organized by the city Mayor; the support of the public working for the festival; and most of all the local citizens as well as citizens from across the country traveling to Yamagata, buying tickets and queuing up for hours to watch documentary films – this is the magical spirit of YIDFF!

Asia's oldest and the most prestigious documentary film festival, YIDFF completed 30 years with its 16th edition in last October. Loved for its intimate, informal atmosphere, Yamagata continues to be one of the most important destinations for filmmakers from across Asia as well as the world. Along with the regular programs of International Competition and New Asian Currents, the festival this year had 12 other packages showcasing Japanese cinema, cinema from Pacific islands, Iranian cinema, war time Japanese cinema, films

where cinema and life converge, films on Yamagata city, films on disaster made in Taiwan and Japan, Yamagata rough cut, YIDFF network special screenings, many symposiums and also a special program of documentary films from northeast India – it is about the last mentioned program that I am going to share here today in details.



Post screening Q & A session

Titled “Rustle of Spring, Whiff of Gunpowder: Documentaries from Northeast India”, this special program was organized in collaboration with Sasakawa Peace Foundation, YIDFF and Northeast India Archive. 16 documentary films from the region were carefully curated and packaged into thematic groups which showcased not only the wide range of films in the region, but also reflecting the changing voice and trend in filmmaking as much as bringing out a glimpse of the politics, ethos and sentiments of the area.

Two films produced by Films Division (FD),

under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, produced 40 years apart were shown, which were carefully selected to bring out the changing voice of documentary films in the region while giving a glimpse on the political history of the two states of Nagaland and Mizoram – *New Rhythms in Nagaland* (1974) directed by Prem Vaidya and *MNF: The Mizo Uprising* (2014) directed by Napoleon RZ Thanga. The 1974 film was made post the creation of Nagaland state in 1963, showcasing the progress in building up infrastructure towards development under the Indian Government. The film follows official delegates of Naga youths on a tour around mainland India, connecting with rest of India and experiencing the richness of the country and the possible benefits of the integration with India. This must be viewed with the knowledge that the Nagas were fighting for a sovereign state. The 2014 film by Napoleon RZ Thanga is also about an agreement between Government of India and Mizo National Front (MNF) and signing of Mizoram Peace Accord, 1986 after a prolonged movement for sovereignty by MNF. But the film very vividly describes the brutal retaliation of the Indian Armed forces against MNF during its armed agitation for independence, voicing strong questions on the atrocities of the Indian armed forces on its own citizens. The film on Mizoram thus also reflects the maturity of a premier government documentary production organization like FD not hesitating to produce a film questioning the Indian government.

Three films by eminent filmmaker Aribam Syam Sharma – *Maipuri Urei* (*Orchids of Manipur*), *Yelhou Jagoi* (*The Dances of Lai Haraoba*) and *The Monpas of Arunachal* marked the rich, distinctive culture and life of the people of northeast. A deep love, reverence and understanding of Manipuri culture reflects in the films on orchid and the dance, etched with an even greater mastery over cinematic language. Film on the Monpas is a visual treat

thick with cultural description. It was a delight to see all these films in their 35mm print with the projector purring in the dark, a rare sound these days. The entire session was a vintage experience – in the post screening interaction, on a request, Aribam Syam Sharma graced the occasion with a beautiful rendering of a Manipuri song. The credit goes to Asako Fujioka, the former Director of YIDFF, who had done her research well before conducting the Q&A session to get him round to sing. This 85 years old veteran filmmaker, with two of his feature films shown at Cannes, is a trained musician from Shantiniketan, scores music for all his films.



History of changing times of the region reflected in films like *In the Forest Hangs a Bridge* by Sanjay Kak, *Old Man River* by Gautam Bora, while the dark realities are boldly thrown bare in films like *Phum-Shang (Floating Life)* by Haobam Paban Kumar, *Prayers for New Gods* by Moji Riba, *Haba Kynih ka Syiar Kynthei (When the Hens Crow)* and *La Mana (Not Allowed)* by Tarun Bhartiya. *La Mana* by Tarun is definitely a bold film where a filmmaker pitches his personal story of a Bihari married to Khasi to bring to discussion a very sensitive issue of matrilineal Khasi society and the fear of the Khasi men that the men of the India plains are not only stealing their women's affections but are also enjoying the family wealth and properties inherited by their wives. Intimate interaction in close quarters with wide range of characters, social media and cable TV narratives, poetry, rappers

and then the filmmaker's personal narrative – the film is able to weave a layered tapestry on the issue. I am very happy to have produced this film as part of my Films Division project. And then a bold stroke – an engineer by profession, a film critic and a filmmaker by passion, late Altaf Mazid has always experimented with forms. *Sabin Alun (The Broken Song)* plays around with the oral singing traditions of the Karbi tribe from Assam. Heroes from the local version of the Ramayana epic are set in contemporary times where gangsters wear shades and drive limousine.



At YIDFF 2019

Songs of Mashangva by Oinam Doren is about Rewben Mashangva and his music and music tradition of his community. Mashangva wears a traditional 'haokuirat hairstyle' and western boots and performs along with his 9-year old son Saka across India and Southeast Asia, a musical style he describes as Naga Folk Blues. His music is grown out of the traditional Tangkhul Naga music and musical instruments which he collects from remote villages, wanting to hold on to the old tradition. *What the Fields Remember* by Subasri Krishnan revisits the fields that had witnessed the violence in Nellie on 18th February 1983 where 2000 Bengali speaking Muslims in Assam were killed. It is a poignant film that brings out the voices of the family of the victims. Japanese scholar, Professor Makiko Kimura was present for the post screening Q&A session. Kimura was the first person to relook into the incident, thir-

ty years later after its occurrence. Her book “The Nellie Massacre of 1983: The Agency of Rioters” tries to recreate the incident from both the victims’ and the perpetrators’ perspectives. This book was a major resource for Krishnan’s film research and Kimura helped her with pointers for persons to speak to during the research for the film.

Loralir Sadhukotha (Tales from our Childhood) by Mukul Haloi is on the memories of Assam in the 1990s, the turbulent times of armed rebellion and the resultant state armed forces atrocities which was part of everyday life then. The narrative is very sensitively crafted – the filmmaker’s childhood friend poses as a rebel wearing a borrowed uniform from an insurgent. A poem read by a friend from an old diary becomes a narrative – a journey begins into those troubled times. The film is important for so many of us in Assam who have lived through those troubled times – it is as much reconciliation for the filmmaker, the characters in the film as well as audiences.

Along with Mukul’s film was my film *Duphang-ni Solo (An Autumn Fable)* which I made in 1997 – a film that was a response to the violence in the Bodo dominant area in the late 1980s and 1990s. The whole area was rife with fear, anger and uncertainty during that period. The film is an essay of stories of the times and times immemorial, wanting to have an inward gaze within the community that is striving for their rights and identity, so as to see the consequence of the anger, to ease the fear and reconnect with the essence of life and culture, to feel responsible for the future generation. ‘Gaan’, a musical theatre form of the Bodos is another dominant part of the narrative. Stories in a ‘Gaan’ have universal themes depicting human emotions like greed, lust, appearance, reality, predestination, free will, good, evil and the supernatural. The stories almost as a rule have implications on contemporary scenarios and situations with comic reliefs. I have tried to play around with the form

hoping to evoke memories of the experiences of the play, to help throw light on human predilections and predicaments. Going back to YIDFF for the second time with the same film was very special for me, as *Duphang-ni Solo* was part of the New Asian Currents in 1999.

With these films showcasing in the festival and with the growing repertoire of exciting documentary films in northeast of India, a symposium titled “Documentary Films from Northeast India: When Margins becomes the Centre” was held. Speakers were Aribam Syam Sharma, Haobam Paban Kumar, both from Manipur, and me. The symposium was moderated by Tarun Bhartiya, who is from Meghalaya. Though the discussion was on documentary films, the pioneers from northeast India who have contributed hugely to mainstream Indian cinema were invoked, eminent filmmakers like Pramathesh Chandra Barua, S. D. Burman, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika amongst them.

In yet another symposium on the importance of digital archive for independent filmmakers (“The Time Space of Images: Towards a Multi-faced Film Archive”) Tarun Bhartiya presented the setting up of the Northeast India AV Archive under the Department of Mass Media, St. Anthony’s College, Shillong, in Meghalaya. The inauguration of the Archive on the 10th of October 2019 was also announced at the opening function at YIDFF. Funded by Sasakawa Peace Foundation, the archive will collect and provide public access to documentary films, newsreels, photographs, video interviews and other materials from the Eastern Himalayan region and northeast of India. Although blessed in geographical and cultural diversity, decades of political unrest have prevented the region from establishing a repository for its rich audio visual culture. By collecting, protecting and sharing the audiovisual culture and heritage of northeast India, the archive will contribute to constructing the future of societies in the region.

One very important and popular part of YIDFF I must mention here is the Komian Club, a traditional Japanese restaurant that runs from 10 pm until 2 am. After the evening screening and dinner, festival guests and film fans reach there every evening networking, engaging in conversations and deeper connections over traditional Japanese food and drinks. Organisers at YIDFF have been able to strike a balance between the serious cinema, the fun of the informal conversations and the stay at Yamagata. Located in the Tohoku region in Northeast Japan, a two and a half hour bullet train ride from Tokyo, Yamagata was once an obscure corner of the film world far from being a documentary film hub. Established in 1989, this biennial film festival has over the years grown to be the most prestigious documentary film hub with the guidance of one of its visionary founders, the legendary documentary filmmaker Ogawa Shinsuke, guiding and inspiring the nonprofessional voluntary. Soon after the 15th edition in 1997 of YIDFF, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network officially named Yamagata as the “Creative City of Film”. The stamp of UNESCO’s Creative Cities Network should seal the governmental support for the festival and provide YIDFF with bigger reach and wider initiatives.

Even with eight venues running screenings at the same time, “Rustle of Spring, Whiff of Gunpowder: Documentaries from Northeast India” surely has touched not only the Japanese audience and filmmakers from across the world, but also filmmakers from other parts of India as well. There is a keen interest to take this film package to different parts of India and within northeastern states as well. The history, culture and ecology of diverse ethnic groups and way of life is not fully known to even within northeastern states, not to speak of other parts of the country. Such film packaging if taken across the region itself could be

an important step towards building breaking boundaries.

At YIDFF, though the size of the audience was small at certain days due to the typhoon Hagibis, every screening was followed by intense interaction with the audience. The interest in the films as well as the region of northeast India itself grew with every screening, every discussion and symposium. And as Kimura Makiko wished, I hope that the appreciation for northeast India will become widespread in Japan, and its rich culture and heritage will unfold and will expand the understanding of the region much beyond just the site of battle fields during the World War II. And for all of us filmmakers at YIDFF, we wished for such a hub of films, stories, music, symposiums and hospitality even in our own region which could broaden the awareness of our documentary films both for the audience as well as the makers, sharing visions, problems and solutions.

Images:

No 1: (Opening Ceremony YIDFF 2019)

L to R: YIDFF Vice-chairman of the Board, Aribam Syam Sharma, Tarun Bhartiya, Haobam Paban Kumar, Pinky Brahma Choudhury, Asako Fujioka.

No 2 : (Post screening Q & A session)

L to R: Tarun Bhartiya, Pinky Brahma Choudhury.

No 3: (Symposium)

L to R: Tarun Bhartiya, Pinky Brahma Choudhury, Haobam Paban Kumar, Aribam Syam Sharma.

No 4 : At YIDFF 2019

L to R: Asako Fujioka, Pinky Brahma Choudhury, Tarun Bhartiya, Aribam Syam Sharma, Yui Nakamura, Haobam Paban Kumar.