

Article

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Northeast Cinema: Resistance to Stereotyping

“Sikkim is a small state in the Northeast of India which never had a film industry or anyone who made films from the region. This is the first film ever that comes out of that region, because it is very troubled with insurgency and troubling situations,” said Priyanka Chopra in an interview to ET Canada at the Toronto International Film Festival-2017 (TIFF). Under the banner Purple Pebble Pictures, Chopra produced the film *Pahuna: The Little Visitors* (2018) in Nepali language, directed by Pakhi Tyrewala. But Chopra fell into the fresh controversy for her remark that Sikkim is “troubled by insurgency”. After huge outrage on social media, Chopra apologized, “In no way did I intend to offend or hurt anyone's sentiments and for that I apologize.” Mumbai based Sikkimese filmmaker Karma Takapa, who

did his postgraduation in Journalism from IIMC and worked as a journalist in Indian Express before joining FTII, Pune in the Direction course, responds on this issue to the author: “Priyanka Chopra's comment on Sikkimese cinema is naive and misinformed. When you are misinformed, and open your mouth, and you will then land up problem.” Filmmaker Dawa Lepcha reacts, “In the whole film you are talking about a family, displaced by insurgency, which is not there in Sikkim. I think, everyone knows that we have no history of insurgency. They could have done much research.”

Priyanka Chopra's comment on Sikkimese film is a resonance of outsiders' gaze how they look at the Northeast- ‘insurgency prone zone’ or ‘mongoloid appearance’. The outsiders' gaze on

the Northeast as one entity limits its boundaries to understand the local stories. By outsiders' gaze, I mean those who are not born and brought up within the geography of the Northeast. But Joseph Pulinthanath, although he is from Kerala, spent more than three decades in the Northeast, and now settled in Tripura. His films will be analyzed from the local perception as he made films in Kokborok, the tribal language of Tripura.

The misrepresentation and stereotypical portrayal of the Northeast in popular Hindi films is evident in many Hindi films. For instance, Mani Shankar's Hindi film *Tango Charlie* (2005) where the filmmaker shows the NDFB militant as located in Manipur. In fact, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) is an armed separatist outfit in the Bodoland of Assam. On the other hand, Mani Ratnam's Hindi film *Dil Se* (1998) presents Northeast militants attacking Delhi with a suicide bomber during the Republic Day. History says that the Northeast militants have never gone out of their territory to the mainland. Another Hindi film *Yeh Gulistan Hamara* (1972) directed by Atma Ram depicts how India is worried about its North eastern residents who are cut off from the mainland and who are generally considered as backward, illiterate and under developed. This film contains a popular song "Mera naam aao, mere pas aao, tera naam aao toh mera naam jaoh, o tera mera milan bada mushkeel hai...". But this song has to be removed from the film as it was thought to be affronting to the Ao community in Nagaland. Again in the film *Chak De! India*, directed by Shimit Amin, the woman players in the Indian hockey team- Mary Ralte played by Kimi Laldawla from Mizoram and Molly Zimik played by Masochon from Manipur in Northeast, are made to feel the racial discrimination. 'We are introduced to the two players from Northeast who have come to New Delhi to register for the National Camp. The camera finds no better way to roll but settles for satisfying the male gaze as they capture the attention of two men ogling lasciviously at the girls and suggesting to each other, "They must have been headed for the disco or nightclub. They must have taken a wrong turn

and come here.'¹ writes Sohinee. In 2016 Hindi film *Pink*, by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, Amitabh Bachchan comments as a lawyer that his client from Northeast is asked about her belonging by the lawyer of the opposite part, which merely reflects the taboos and prejudice of the people of the mainland towards the North eastern people.

In fact, 'Northeast', situated in the North-eastern part of India, is not one entity, as many think. It comprises eight states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, but it continues to be one of the stereotyped regions of India - a conflict zone, an 'Other', an exotic territory and a monolithic entity. Thus one loses its geographical, cultural, social, historical and political distinctiveness.

In the narrative of Indian cinema that attempts to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena, the local characteristics of distinct regional cultures of Northeast seem to be lost. The film-makers from Northeast have raised numerous local issues – social, political and historical- folktales, myth and popular beliefs in their films, which remain unexplored in the larger context of Indian cinema or in Bollywood. The cultural texts of the Northeast exhibit multiple types and facets of local life, often left unseen and unheard. They attempt to replace pan Indian narrative in films by focusing on specific local contexts as well as the on diversity of human experience.

The Northeast film-makers interrogate potential questions, and films made at these regions can be taken as instance to prove that Northeast film tells distinctive and unique local stories that have social, political and historical significance. There must be the counter narrative to tell the stories of Northeast which transcend the geographical boundary. The narrative of pan-Indian can be replaced with small, local narratives as they have lost their power to convince stories that are told in order to find out the truth behind reality. The films of the Northeast do not reflect the endless quest for the establishment of separate

identity, but their films do show that they have distinct features as far as the themes of their films are concerned.

Not All About Insurgency

Filmmakers of the Northeast have made films on insurgency, but the contemporary filmmakers of this region begins to tell the local and human stories. Assam and Manipur are the only two states in the Northeast that have consistently made films on its local issues and its problems. Since the inception of the first Assamese film, and also the first film in Northeast - *Joymoti* (1935), by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, the films in the Northeast have a tremendous growth with a distinctive identity of its own. The first film *Joymoti* was based on the history of Ahom Kingdom. Agarwala adapted the film *Joymoti*, from the renowned litterateur of Assam, Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Joymoti Kunwari*, a play that narrates the seventeenth century story of a valiant Ahom princess Joymoti who sacrifices her life to save her husband Gadadhar Singha and the Ahom kingdom. Although the subject of the film was a historical one, the issue of a woman's sacrifice is foregrounded, which takes the film beyond a historical narrative. Internationally famed filmmaker and an alumnus of FTII, Pune, Jahnu Barua was the first Assamese filmmaker to win International awards at Locarno International Film Festival for epoch-making film *Halodhia Choraiye Baidhan Khai* (The Catastrophe, 1987). The film shows how the rich exploits the poor farmers, while Rima Das' *Village Rockstars* (2017) was the first film from Northeast to be selected as India's official entry to the 91st Academy Awards. The film is about the children's dream and their carefree lives. Dr. Bhupen Hazarika was honoured with Dadasaheb Phalke Award for his contribution to development of Indian cinema. Assamese cinema gets its recognition at the global map with a distinctive narrative technique.

The origin of Manipuri cinema goes back to the late forties of the last century. A group of enthusiasts from Manipur attempted to make the

first Manipuri film with *Mainu Pemcha* (1948). Ayekpam Shyamsunder Singh's work *Mainu Pemcha*, is based on Manipuri folklore stage drama. But the film remained unfinished. People of Manipur had to wait for almost thirty years to see the first Manipuri feature film *Matamgi Manipur* (Contemporary Manipur, 1972), by a Bengali director Debaki Kumar Bose. It was released in 1972 and thus heralded the new beginning in Manipuri cinema.

The emergence of Aribam Syam Sarma brought the Manipuri cinema on the International map with his films such as *Imagi Ningthem* (My Son, My Precious, 1981), awarded the Grand Prix at the Festival of Three Continents, Nantes in 1982, *Ishanou*, (The Chosen One, 1990), the official selection at the 44th Cannes Film Festival, and *Sangai –The Dancing Deer of Manipur* (1988), honoured with the Outstanding Film of the Year 1989 by the British Film Institute. His films depict the dynamics of Manipuri culture and its way of life. His films address a wide range of themes that help to understand the socio-political and cultural milieu of Manipur. Haobam Paban Kumar, one of the finest new generation filmmakers from Manipur, and an alumnus of SRFTI, Kolkata, has carved a niche in the International film circuits with his unique themes. Paban Kumar's films speak of the local problems with its universal appeal. His debut feature film *Loktak Lairembee* (Lady of the Lake, 2016), set on Manipur's Loktak Lake narrates the tragedy of the local fishermen, who are driven from their homes. The film won the National Film Award for Best Film on Environment Conservation/Preservation at the 64th National Film Awards. His most critically acclaimed documentary *AFSPA 1958'* (2006) that won the prestigious FIPRESCI Prize, at the 9th Mumbai International Film Festival, 2006, highlights the dark reality of Manipur caused by Arms Forces Special Power Act. His documentary *Ruptured Spring* (2012) depicts the plight of the children whose parents are lost in HIV/AIDS or lost in violence. These local issues remained unexplored in the larger canvass of Indian cinema.



Narrating the distinctive and unique style of the Northeast film-makers, Paban says to this author: “If you look at the classical dance of India like Kathakali, the eyes and hands play a significant role. But if you look at the Manipuri dance, you have to watch it in a long shot to enjoy its movement. It is not about the close up. Even in my film *Lady of the Lake*, I always go for the long shot to get the movement through the whole body expression, not through the eyes. I believe more in the body language to reflect the human emotions.”²

Filmmakers like Haorongbam Maipaksana Singh’s film *Eibushu Yaohanbiyu* (2015) that won the Best Manipuri Feature Film at the 63rd National Film Awards, 2015, is about the desire of a disabled boy, who wants to play football like any other boys of his age. Filmmakers Oinam Doren, Longjam Meena Devi and others are telling local stories and culture through their documentaries.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the first film *Mera Dharam Meri Maa* (1976) made in Hindi and shot on, 35 mm film was directed and composed music by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. But in the mid 80s, Taro

Chatung emerged as the new voice of the cinema in Arunachal Pradesh as his debut film *Donyi* (1986), explored the prejudices of the inter tribe marriage in Arunachal Pradesh. Taro Chatung says that his intention in making the film *Donyi* is to encourage the inter-tribe marriage. He states, “During that time I myself married outside of my community and because of that I had to face a lot of problem. During that time, our Arunachalee tradition was rooted to its own tradition, and was very rigid.”³ New generation film-maker Moji Riba’s documentary *Between God and Me* is about the new concept of ‘Donyi-Polo’ and captures the socio-cultural changes among the tribal peoples in Arunachal Pradesh. Ahsan Mazid’s *Sanam* (The Fortunate One, 2006) gave a new taste of cinema in this region as it was made in local Monpa dialect. An alumnus of SRFTI, and a native film-maker of Arunachal Pradesh Sange Dorjee Thongdok’s feature film *Crossing Bridges* (2013) focuses on the social and economic displacement of indigenous people. An alumnus of FTII, Pune, Nilanjan Datta made a feature film *The Head Hunter* (2015), in Wancho tribal language. The film that won the National Award for Best Wancho film, speaks of the displacement of the tribal. *In the Land of Poison Women* (2019) directed by multiple award winning filmmaker Manju Borah was made in Pangchenpa language. The film that won Rajat Kamat at the 66th National Film Awards, is about a woman who is outcast by the society believing that she is a a doumoh- a poisonous woman as some people died after consuming a local wine, prepared by Lusang. Bobby Sarma Baruah’s “Mishing” (The Apparition, 2019) that won Rajat Kamal at the 66th National Film Award, is on a popular belief of the Sherdukpen tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

The journey of Meghalaya cinema begins in the 80s with Hamlet Bareh Ngapkynta’s Khasi film *Ka Synjuk Ri ki Laiphew Syiem* (*The Alliance of 30 Kings*, 1981). But Ardhendu Bhattacharya’s *Manik Raitong* (1984) was the first Khasi film made in colour, based on the folk tales of the Khasi Hills. More recently, the film-makers from

Meghalaya Pradip Kurba and Dominic Sangma have made a niche in the International film circuits.



Pradip Kurbah who recently won the prestigious Kim Ji-Seok Award at the 24th Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) in Korea for his film *Iewduh* (Market) made three feature films so far. His film *RI: Homeland of Uncertainty* (2013) was the first film in the Khasi language to win a National Award. This film depicts how the youths of Meghalaya turn to insurgency to vent their annoyance against exploitation. His second feature film *Onaatah: Of the Earth* (2016) that won Rajat Kamal at the 63rd National award, and which was also selected for Indian Panorama, looks at the journey of a young woman who is shattered after she met with an incident, but eventually she gets back faith, and love in a small village. His third feature film *Lewduh* (2019), set in Shillong's Bara Bazar, depicts the lives of the common man with stories that remain unnoticed in public's eyes. Kurbah says to this author: "The tag of Northeast is there in India which I cannot

deny it. In fact, it comes from the mainland India. I don't understand why they use that tag for our film-makers. Look, my last film *Lewduh* (Market) is completely on human story, and deals with human emotions and their conditions. I feel proud to represent the region and it makes me happy that I am from northeast. But as far as my films are concerned, they have universal quality that everyone in the world can connect. I feel, it varies from state to state in Northeast how stories are told. They are distinct and unique."⁴

While another filmmaker from Meghalaya, Dominic Sangma, an alumnus of SRFTI, Kolkata, debuted with his feature film, *Ma'Ama* (Moan, 2018) in Garo language. The film portrays eighty five years old man Philip's hope that one day he will be united with his dead wife. This film won a National Award at the 66th National Film Award and thus, Dominic Sangma became the first Garo filmmaker to win the award.

Another filmmaker Nicholas Kharkongor from Meghalaya who has not so far made films in local language, made the feature film in Hindi *Axone* (2019). The film narrates the story in satirical tone at the gaze and behaviour of the outsiders towards the people of the north-east with an intense depiction of the lives of Northeaster people who settled in Delhi.

Filmmaker Dipak Bhattacharya scripted history in Tripura when he made the first feature film *Long Trai* (Holy Hill, 1986) in Kokborok language. But before this film, there were a few documentaries made in Tripura, sponsored by the government of Tripura. When the first left-front government came into power, they asked Mrinal Sen to make a documentary, and Sen made a documentary *Tripura Prasanga* (About Tripura, 1982) in Bengali, financed by the State Government of Tripura. Bhattacharya's film *Long Trai*, based on a novel by Bimal Sinha, is about the lives of the Reang tribes in Tripura. The Reang, the primitive tribal community in Tripura, were shifting jhum cultivators. Bhattacharya tells this author about the film, "The film is narrated in a love story but I have shown through love story, the struggle of the families who particularly

depends on the products of the hills. The government officials in the forest do not allow them to go the forest to bring bamboo and firewood. A crisis develops from that, and the families eventually become labourer. The basic idea of the film is the conversion of a farmer into a labour. When the film was released in theatres, it was a hit and tickets were sold in black. Bengalis and tribal all watched the film. After that, Tripura government got three prints and they screened the film everywhere.”



It was not an easy task for Bhattacharya to make the film. It was produced by three persons-Manoranjan Saha, Reboti Das and Ranjit Datta. The shooting of the film started in 1984, but due to financial hardship, it was stuck. Bhattacharya had to abandon the shooting for almost one year, and then he approached the then chief minister of Tripura Nripen Chakravorty for the financial aid. Then the State government came forward to help him financially in the later part of 1985, and the state government gave him Rs 1,25,000 with a condition that he needed to hand over three prints to them. He could not make three prints with a limited resource. Somehow he could manage to do one print only, and later, the government got the print from me. The film was shot in 16mm and then blew up in 35mm. Bhattacharya could not make the second feature film due to the producers.

The first feature film of Tripura *Lang Trai* made the people realize that cinema could be made in Tripura. There were almost seven -eight features films, made in the 80s and early 90s. But cinema halls were closed in the later part of 1990s due to the rise of insurgency. The government had to impose in the cinema halls not to show the night shows. Then Ruhi Deb Barma made the second Kokborok feature film *Langmani Haduk* (Life and twist of Life, 1993)



But in 1991, a Bengali filmmaker Debashish Saha who made the first Bengali film in Tripura, feels that screening of the world films in every weekend by Agartala Film Society opened his eyes about the emergence of new kind of cinema. Saha's film *Rupantar* (Transformation, 1991), based on his own story, was shot in 16mm and then blew up to 35mm. The film looks at the diminishing folk art and how they give up the folk art forms and shift to other professions. The filmmaker narrates the story through Gopal a folk artist, who dresses up as Goddess Kali and sings mythological songs for his livelihood. But, the gradual loss of interest in such folk art forms for the rise of films and music, Gopal goes to the city in search of livelihood. But his dream gets gradually shattered, when he feels that he loses connection with his roots. "I believe that every creative artist wants to speak some stories through their works. I wanted to tell the stories through my films," says the filmmaker Saha to this author. But after a gap of more than two decades, Saha made his second feature film *Buno* (Wild, 2013). This film is about the strange behavior of the human who sometimes react violently. "We can not precisely understand why we have become so violent in certain times. This is the central idea of the film", says Saha.

But the filmmaker who brought the cinema of Tripura to the national and International map is Joseph Pulinthanath. Pulinthanath's two feature films *Mathia* (The Bangle, 2004) and *Yarwng* (Roots, 2008), gave a new identity to the aesthetics of Tripura cinema. His film *Mathia*, that takes up the superstitious practice of witch-hunting in the tribal society of Tripura as the

theme of the film, was the first film in Kokborok to win the best feature film at the coveted Polish International Film Festival of Niepokalanow held in Warsaw, and scripted history by becoming the first film in Tripura to win an International Award. The film was selected to the Indian Panorama of International Film festival of India 2004, it was a rare distinction for the Kokborok language. Mathia is produced by Joseph Kizhakkechennadu and directed by Joseph Pulinthanath, both members of the Salesian society. It is a 132 minutes long film, produced by Don Bosco Sampari Pictures.



Pulinthanath's second feature film *Yarwng* (Roots, 2008), that looks at the displacement of thousands of indigenous people in Tripura because of the Gumti Hydel project, was the opening film of the Indian Panorama section at India international Film Festival of India (IFFI Goa) in 2008. It got the rare distinction when the film won Best Feature Film in languages other than those specified in the Schedule VIII of the Constitution at the 56th National Film Awards in 2010, and thus becomes the first feature film to win National Award. The film travelled over 40 international film festivals across the world, including New York, Stuttgart, Moscow,

Brisbane, Dhaka and Taiwan. "With its byline 'A romance on the idyllic banks of the Raima and Saima, swept away by the floodgates of Change', *Yarwng* is both a protest on behalf of 'the excluded' and a celebration of their unconquerable spirit of survival in the face of extraordinary upheavals", says filmmaker Pulinthanath. The film *Yarwng* was shot on actual locations - Bolongbasa and adjoining areas and many of the people who acted in the film are real-life victims of displacement. A group of 60 people consisting of the technical crew and artistes spent about a month in capturing through the lens the emotional turmoil of Karmati and Wakhirai and the story of their love torn asunder by the thwarted flow of the legendary waters of Raima and Saima.



Self taught young filmmaker Sarat Reang, who directed three Kokborok feature films- *Nwng Bai* (2011), *Bwkha* (Heart, 2011) and *Mari* (2014), wants to keep alive the indigenous culture of Tripura. His film *Bwkha* looks at the relationship between the Tripuri tribes and other community in Tripura. The local tribes welcome other community people in their day to day life but still, inter community-marriage is considered a huge taboo and completely unacceptable. The story is told through a Tripuri girl (Tiyari) who falls in love with a Bengali boy (Hridoy).

The history of cinema in Nagaland is not as rich as the rest of the states in the Northeast, but many documentaries were made on the Naga

people, their lives and its culture by the British during the British Regime. Documentary film, *Naga Story: The Other Side of Silence* (2003) by Gopal Menon, looks at the struggle of Naga people and focuses on the human rights abuses suffered by the Naga people in post Independent India. In terms of understanding a cinema in wider perspective is a new phenomenon in Nagaland. A young brigade of filmmakers from Nagaland have made a niche at the national and international film circuits. Filmmakers like Tiakumzuk Aier, Sesino Yhoshu, Sophy Lasuh, Yapangnaro Longkumar, Kivini Shohe, Rebecca Changkija Sema, and such likeminded filmmakers have made attempts to create environment for meaningful cinema by organizing film festivals. Recently, short and documentary film festivals have been organised by Film Association of Nagaland (FAN) and sponsored by IPR department at Capital Convention Centre, Kohima. "As a kid, I watched a film in Nagamese- 'My Blood for the Nation', which was made at the backdrop of insurgency. Those films can not be called as classic compared to other parts of the country. We are the first generation filmmakers in this region with possibilities, and of course, we like to reach to the heights of the Assamese and Manipuri Cinema," says filmmaker Tiakumzuk Aier.

The Nagamese film *Nani Teri Morni*, (41 min duration) by filmmaker Akashaditya Lama that was selected to be screened at the 49th International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in Goa, is based on the real life event. Mhonbeni Ezung, the youngest recipient of national bravery award for children in the year 2015, saved her grandmother from drowning and triumphed over her fear. Another film *The Pangti Story* (2017), a 26 -minute documentary by Sesino Yhoshu, an alumnus of FTII, and a Master's degree holder in Documentary from Royal Holloway, London, won the 65th National Film Awards for Best Environment Film. It depicts the change of a village from one that killed thousands of Amur Falcons, that fly from Siberia every fall to perch in Pangti, a Lotha Naga village in Nagaland. Sophy Lasuh who completed her Masters in Film & Television at Edinburgh College of Art, made a

23 minute-documentary film *Children of Silence* as a diploma film for her institute. This documentary film focuses on the oppression seen in the beautiful of Nagaland under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958, and zooms in the village of Oinam. This film was shortlisted for the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Awards. Kivini Shohe, the filmmaker from Nagaland who are quite exposed to the world cinema, made a documentary, *Oh My Soul* (2015) on the lives of three homosexual persons in Dimapur. Filmmaker Yapangnaro Longkumar, a graduate from the Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, made a short documentary *River Story* (2018) that depicts how changes around us need to be accepted with time. Tiakumzuk Aier continued, "If we look at the filmmakers in Nagaland, I feel that those who are qualified and trained in filmmaking, are not making feature films."



Though feature films in digital format were made in Nagamese in the first decade of the 21st century, yet the first Nagamese feature film, that engages all the Nagamese cast and technical crew including the director, and that drew attention at the national and International film festivals circuits is *Nana: A Tale of Us* (2017), a 1hr 45 minutes duration film by Tiakumzuk Aier. The film that won the Golden Calton Best Director 2017 at the Edinburgh Festival of Indian Films and Documentaries (EFIFD), depicts the tale of a community reflecting love and

forgiveness through the story of a family living in rural Nagaland. The film begins at the juncture of the impending State elections and quietly leads us through events that affect its character to make certain life decisions.

The history of Mizo film begins in 1980s with the first Mizo film made in Mizoram was *Phuba* (revenge 1983) by Biak Than Sanga. The film, a love story with a twist, is about an opulent businessman who attempts to avenge his ex-lover by killing her daughter, but in turn, he learns that the girl he kills was his daughter.



Filmmaker Biak Than Sanga tells me that he made the film *Phuba* in 8mm in a shoe string budget of Rupees twenty thousand. He screened the film with his 8mm projector, which he brought from Belgium, in different villages. In the 80s in Mizoram, there were only two cinemas- Puspak and AR cinema halls- where only Hindi and Hollywood films were screened. People of this region were more exposed to the Bollywood and Hollywood in the 80s and 90s. More recently, in 2003, Mizo Film Forum was formed to encourage

the local talents and to give a exposure to the world cinema.

Filmmaker Napoleon RZ Thanga who is exposed to the world cinema, says, “Veteran filmmakers are like Biakthansanga, F.Hrangmuana, Lalsawma Pachuau did a moderate job for the Mizo cinema. But there are no filmmakers from Mizoram who came out of the premier film schools in India till now. One or two has gone abroad to study on films but they have not so far made films. We don’t have trained filmmakers in Mizoram.”



Promising filmmaker Mapuia Chawngthu has recently drawn attention to the festival circuits through his film. Chawngthu’s Mizo-language feature film *Khawnglung Run* (2012) narrates the significant historical massacres of Khawnglung during 1856-1859. The film did not get any award, but got screening in film festivals.

The first Mizo film to get a National award in Mizo category at 63rd National Film Award, in 2015 is Zuala Chhangte’s *Kima’s Lode Beyond the Class*, funded by the Children’s Film Society of India. The film is about twelve -year old boy Kima who goes missing in the border town of “Chhintui, but surprisingly, Kima returns home

one day and refuses to tell where he had been. Zuala Chhangte, a diploma holder in Film & TV Productions from XIC, Mumbai, has become a familiar name in the film festival circuits. C. Hmingthangvunga known for *Chhingkhual Lanu* (2002), and *Zuali te Unau* (2013), Lalawmpuia Khiangte's *Beiseina in*; C.Lalvunga and Jerry Lalngaihzuala's *NH54*, Lalduhkima Khiangte's *Hmangaihna Rinawm*, KC Zoherliana's *Inhlanna*, Lalmuanpuia Renthlei's *Khua Ruatloh* and VL Peka Zote's *Bumna Ra* are some of the filmmakers that have created ripples in Mizo cinema.

Before 1975, Sikkim was an Independent Kingdom, and it was not even a part of India. It was almost a closed Kingdom where there was not a larger interaction with the larger world, happening at that point of time. Everything came in much slower in terms of larger globalized or connecting to larger scheme of things. Now, a large number of students are going out of Sikkim to study. *Romeo in Sikkim* (1975) is directed by Harikishen Kaul, set against the virgin background of Sikkim, was made in Hindi. It was shot exclusively in Sikkim and in some parts of Darjeeling and then Bombay. Interestingly, This was the first film where a Nepali actor Shyam Pradhan from Sikkim played a lead role. Actor Pradhan made films like *Bhool* (1992) and *Sanjiwani*. There are filmmakers like Ugen chopel, Samten Bhutia who have made tremendous contribution to the Sikkimese cinema. But the first Sikkimese film to cross the geography of Sikkim was Prashant Rasaily's *Katha* (2013) which was screened in the 44th International Film Festival of India 2013 in Goa.

Dany Danzonpa, the first person to join FTII from Sikkim, did diploma in acting at FTII, and then Karma Takapa was the first one join FTII in Direction course. Tribeny Rai was the first female filmmaker to do a diploma in film direction and screenplay writing from Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, Kolkata. Her films (short fiction and documentaries) have travelled in numerous International film festivals. Her film *Memory of a Heart* (2015) is made in the memory

of her father that bagged Best Short Film at the Northeast Film Festival, 'Audience Choice Award' at The Women's Voices Now Film Festival in California and many more.

Compared to Assam and Manipur, Sikkimese cinema has a long way to go as the Film Society was established in 2019 only in Sikkim, and also conducted the first official film festival in December known as Global Cinema Film Festival in association with the film federation of India. Sikkim Film Cooperative Society was the first of this kind to establish in this region.



The main language spoken in Sikkim is Nepali, but there are films made in different local language like Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu etc. "Very few filmmakers are exposed to the world cinema, and moreover, filmmakers from this regions are not formally trained. They are the self-learnt filmmakers. They have their own knowledge and own understanding of cinema. Very handful of cine goers are there in Sikkim who watch World Cinema. I don't think that people go beyond Hollywood and Bollywood", says filmmaker Tribeny Rai.



Filmmaker Dawa Lapacha who made the film *Dhokbu*, (The Keeper, 2017), was the first feature length film in Lepcha language. It was

released in theaters, and it ran on three weeks in local theatres. This film is about a belief by Lapachas that wildness or deep forest is taken care by somebody, or some kind of guardian. A university student Tina gets lost while going into the forest for her research. She goes into the surreal adventure. She goes adventure of dark horses and and eventually she is rescued, and is taken care of, and gets back to the living kind of world. Then she realizes that once she is back to human dwelling, she realizes that she was lost in the wild forest for three months. Somebody tells her that she has been lost. She does not realize whether her adventure was real or unreal as if she was trapped in between them. "I am a Lepcha, and wanted to make a film in Lepcha. I tried to make the story as universal as possible so that it does not confine to local," says filmmaker Dawa Lapacha.



Karma Takapa says, "When I was a child, there was nothing much related to films. In all of Sikkim there two single screen theatres, and both of these theatres are in Gangtok. So, whatever we watched, that was mainstream India was throwing at you. We are not watching world cinema. Of course, we had VHS tapes of 2001 Space Odysseys. My uncle was a collector of VHS tapes. Because of that I was exposed to films, specifically Hollywood films, but not the World Cinema. We are talking about all the western-2001 Space Odysseys, James Bond films- which was larger popular consumption films. Those were the films that we were exposed to. I was specifically exposed to."

Takapa's film *Roland Road* draws attention to the national and international film

critics. His film *Ralang Road*, a fragmented, multi-narrative, is set in a small hill town amid the Himalayan region of Sikkim. It is a tale of four individuals who are interwoven in a labyrinth of local landscape, village buildings, and the social microcosm. Teacher, who comes to the region to solve pressing emotional problems, apparently has nothing much in common with the villagers, but, however improbable, fate gradually builds pathways that lead to an encounter with two local guys trying to kill time while wandering the streets; the fourth character is the ever-taciturn owner of a billiard club. When *Roland Road* was first screened in Bombay, in MAMI, in competition section, most of the time, people were more surprised that they do not see mountains in the films. For me, what happens that as you are from Sikkim, a mountaineer region. You see mountains everyday. You know that the place is beautiful. You take that as base value and then you look at other things up after that. You don't get enamoured by the beauty. As you are from there, you are looking at it from a different perspective, or from an inside perspective. If you come from outside, and look at Sikkim, you would be just shooting mountain and the beautiful scenes which are right. Its just the gaze.

"I would say definitely, my film *Roland Road* is a Sikkimese film because the consciousness or the foundation of the film is rooted to Sikkim which does not mean that there are lots of films shoot at Sikkim. Like Priyanka Chopra produced the film in Sikkim, and the entire crew came from Bombay. But for me, that's not a Sikkimese film, our understanding comes from outside what Sikkim is. There are two different ways of looking at the space- if you are from a space, you look at it as an insider, if you come from outside, you then give a gaze towards a film. If you are insider, you look at this space, people, issues differently, and what you look at, you will explore differently in terms of how people outside of this space will look at."

The contemporary filmmakers of the Northeast have shunned away the stereotypical notion that insurgency is the thematic concern of

their films, but they focus more local stories and identity. Time has come to look at the Northeast cinema from a microscopic lens than from a stereotypical perspective, which will unravel the polyphonic potential of these films.

End Notes:

1. Shohini in her article “Bollywood needs to break free from stereotypical portrayal of Northeast sportspersons”. Published: January 8, 2019 in her article: (thebridge.in/bollywood-needs-to-break-free-from-stereotypical-portrayal-of-northeast-players/
2. Conversation with Haobam Praban Kumar
3. From the film 40 years Through the lenses by Sanju and Apak
4. Conversation with Pradip Kurbah
5. Edward Gait : A History of Assam, (Guwahati : New Book Stall, Indian Reprint, 2013) 71.
6. Yasmin Saikia, Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai-Ahom in India, (Durham and London : Duke University Press, 2004) 5.
7. The Hindu , April 01, 2015
8. Kushal Dutta, Translation : Bibekananda Choudhury , Culture of Assam, Assamese Culture, Original in Assamese: <http://www.dimorianreview.com/2017/03/culture-of-assam-assamese-culture>.
9. Amar Asom, 23rd April, 2017.

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