

Article

Manoj Barpujari

Uncrossed Barriers

Why Women in Seven North-Eastern States Aren't Making Feature Films?



Andro Dreams by Meena Longjam

Given the socio-economic status, women are believed to enjoy in seven northeastern states, with matrilineal myths glorifying tribal societies, it is paradoxical that women film directors have yet to open their account in feature filmmaking except in Assam. Facts expose the fallacy of popular myths concerning gender equations in the region: absence of dowry, female foeticide, etc., doesn't make a society egalitarian and gender-equal. There will be enough fire to ignite the speculations as to why women fail at calling the shots as far as a feature film is

concerned. Yet, a visible spurt in their excelling in non-feature (documentary and short) filmmaking will fuel the fire up the imagination to assess their grit and conviction to cross the barriers. In their visual essays in short and documentary formats, quite a few are making strides in defying odds, refusing to buckle under pressures and biases confronting them. A recent example is Meena Longjam, whose *Andro Dreams* (2022) was selected as the opening film of Indian Panorama's non-feature section of the 54th IFFI 2023 at Goa, making it the third non-

feature from Manipur to achieve the honour of opening the section and the first one made by a woman from the state.



Meena Longjam

Meena Longjam epitomises the struggle and success of women filmmakers from the Northeast. She is a PhD holder in Mass Communication and Head of the Department of Culture Studies at the Manipur University of Culture. Incidentally, she is the first Manipuri woman to receive a national award in filmmaking for her earlier documentary, *Auto Driver* (2015). Hailed as an avant-gardist, the 63-minute documentary *Andro Dreams* captures the life of a 60-year-old lady, Laibi Phanjoubam, who is the President of an all-women football club in her village, Andro. Established in 1999, AMMA (short

form of Andro Mahila Mandal Association) FC is primarily managed by the village women. The narrator introduces Andro as a place where outsiders are not allowed to enter or see the Meitei customs and rituals; sarcastically, its women work hard while men noticeably remain drunk. The village has a variety of indigenous rice beer, too. Yet, the football club has little support and sponsors, forcing Laibi and her women's groups to raise money by weaving and sericulture, with some players getting trained as additional help. So, fighting against the entrenched patriarchy, economic hardships and even unforetold miseries, the club not only motivates players to practice but also goes to the extent of providing boots, conveyance and tournament costs, as most of the players come from low-income families.

The director has chosen the subject of extraordinary guardianship in grooming young women footballers, but not without cases of some players abandoning the sport on personal grounds. The film begins with a moving car dashboard showing a Lionel Messi bobblehead toy that appears to be nodding to a profoundly concerned female voice that says that standard delivery is preferable for a female football player because otherwise, she won't be able to play for a long time. Then, a girl apparently in labour is admitted to a hospital maternity ward. The next scene shows a baby in a bed with its young mother, Nirmala, who once represented Manipur in the under-14 category. Getting married means an end to further education or sports for the girls in Andro, laments Laibi. Elaborated visuals of Nirmala doing household chores are juxtaposed with other girls' football routines.

Fortunately for Nirmala, her supportive in-laws allowed her to return to the field, and shortly afterwards, she was selected to play for a professional football club in Bengaluru. However, Nirmala's dream run is jostled by her pregnancy report, forcing the club to drop her, eventually making her regret getting married. Though the girls are free from the menace of drugs in Manipur, according to Laibi, they are addicted to mobile phones; yet while showering blessings, she wishes Nirmala's baby to become a famous person in any field but certainly 'not in the field of drugs'. In a climactic scene, the young footballers are caught with a hysterical illness affecting the club's normal function. Enters a shaman to counter the bad 'spell'— the underlying meaning mystifies the traditional beliefs, symbolising the duel between adversaries and the human spirit. Shot primarily on long and mid-long, the pace of editing the film succinctly holds the viewer's interest and gaze intact throughout the narrative provided in voice-overs but swiftly oscillates between the interviewee and the real-life visuals. The film won the best documentary award at the prestigious Jagran Film Festival in Mumbai and has been showcased at international film festivals abroad.

Focusing mainly on women's empowerment, Meena's other acclaimed documentary, a 31-minute long *Auto Driver*, is about a woman in Imphal named Laibi Oinam who chose driving a second-hand auto-rickshaw for livelihood. To support an ailing husband and to meet the cost of the education of their two sons, she took up this profession, defying traditional norms. Earlier, she used to work in a suffocating brick kiln,

earning a meagre wage daily; driving a three-wheeler became a challenge for her, as women were not allowed in this profession, and she had to cope with discriminatory remarks by passengers. The visuals are self-explanatory, portraying the hard life of wage earners like her, often severely affected by unrest and frequent bandhs in Manipur. *Auto Driver* earned the credit for the best film on social issues in the non-feature category of the 63rd National Film Awards. Screened at some prominent film festivals, including Dhaka, Kolkata and Kathmandu, the film was chosen as the best short documentary in the Audience Choice category at the California-based WVN Film Festival 2017.

Factually speaking, two or three women in the region successfully brushed aside initial disapproval and discouragement from their clan and went on to make commercially viable fiction features in a low-budget digital format. But their attempts are hardly worthy of mention as they smack of the run-of-the-mill variety, poorly copying the typical Bollywood action thriller, song-dance-romance and tear-jerkers. The onus ultimately falls on the serious filmmaker breed, which tries to find authentic film idioms depicting regional consciousness. In northeast India, the highest and longest filmmaking tradition after Assam is owned by the pioneers from Manipur. Hence, it is a pity that not a single woman could register the stamp of creative expression in films of feature-length from the land of Nupi Lal (Manipuri women's war against exploitation and famine triggered by the British colonial rule). As an activist observes, the representation of women of Manipur in the media is different from the underlying reality.

As sections of the media and academia are reluctant to accept the reality, an antithesis is immediately hailed as a bold statement from its exponent. Sonia Nepram is one such non-fictional film-expressionist capable of delving deep into the socio-political dimensions.



Sonia Nepram

A post-graduate in Mass Communication from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, Sonia Nepram's first film, *Gun and a God* (2013), won the Jury Choice Award at the Mumbai International Film Festival 2013. It records the life story of a former female insurgent named Purnima. Her continuous ordeal from her upbringing as the daughter of an unknown father and a mentally deranged mother to early marriage where she is held in contempt, her escape and a new-found power and dignity after acquiring the gun, and then eventually leaving the underground life to embrace Christianity and philanthropy, reveal

the wanderings of a woman under deep personal stress and social stigma. Purnima's memoirs, as divulged before the camera, are often inserted by a visionary's semiotics: they are not confined to a turbulent story of a single woman but catapulted to the story of every woman victimised by the structural violence of society. It hints at layers of struggles many women go through, irrespective of geo-cultural constraints. The filmmaker's intent is clear, from choosing the subject to releasing the product online for maximum viewership. The film can be viewed as a tool to break the stereotype and breach society's rigidity towards women. The later part of the narrative is devoted to Purnima's tryst with searching, rescuing and solving her vagabond mother. That part traverses beyond the usual pattern of a documentary, effectively blurring the factual and fictional divide. Purnima's resolve as a 'daughter of a thousand men' to do her best for a 'thousand men's woman' is specifically redefining a woman's and a transformed human's soul. It is an immense gesture for the destitute, exploited and helpless.



Bloody Phanek

Sonia's second independent film, *Bloody Phanek* (2017), after its official release at the DMZ International Documentary Film Festival in South Korea, became a festival favourite in Asia and Europe. It is about the

filmmaker's quest to get answers to myths and beliefs, identity and fascination attached to *phanek*, an exclusive attire of Manipuri women. Blending the personal and political memories and observations, the visuals aim to discover how women use *phanek* as a medium of protest against atrocity and masculinity. Resonating with the socio-political realities, the film begins with two little girls thrilled at trying to wear the *phanek* for the first time, only to be disrupted by a distant cracking sound; 'a bomb – explosion,' one tells the other. This instantly mirrors the conflict-ridden situation of the region. Answers to the filmmaker's questions as to why the attire is regarded as impure once it is used, why the male is barred from touching it, disallowed to walk under a clothesline if a *phanek* is hung on it, but on the other hand, why it is regarded as so sacred that a mother's *phanek* can ward off all evils, all these are shrouded in mystery. There are stories of *phanek*-clad valiant women, and the dichotomy's ambiguity is significant when seen against the custom that the *phanek* is not to be hung in the front courtyard, lest its sighting bring bad luck to the men in the family when they leave for work. The beliefs centred on *phanek* are similar to other cultural traits of South East Asia's superstitions regarding similar types of ladies' garments, which are auspicious.

The insert of a scene from Heisnam Kanhailal's famous play *Draupadi* exemplifies the power of the *phanek*. It brings alive the memory of the Kangla Fort agitation when a few elderly women disrobed themselves at the front gate of the Assam Rifles to show their anger against rape and atrocities committed with impunity under the

Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). Heisnam Sabitri's act, in her words, a representation of our repressive society as a 'reflection of the torture against women', is indeed not just a theatrical performance alone. Scenes of mass upsurge in Manipur are synonymous with women in *phanek* taking the leading part. *Phaneks* are tied to rope and bamboo, displaying 'impurity' to hinder the state's power and to block the movement of armed forces. A series of lively interviews with both knowledgeable and commoners, males and females, brings out its unique tradition and culture. But the gender question also emerges when a student body imposes a dress code forcing female students to wear the *phanek* as uniform while sparing the boys. *Phanek* is deeply entrenched in the psyche of the people of Manipur, with the motifs in its designs suggesting even links to Meitei Cosmology according to ancient scriptures. While offering the *phanek* in its multitude of meaning, the final allusion suggests the filmmaker's inconclusive journey to secure the answers she wanted.

From Nagaland, names like Sesino Yhoshu, Sophy Lasuh, Kivini Shohe, Tiainla Jamir and Yapangnaro Longkumer have become familiar in the film festival circuit for some time now. In 2018, the Best Environment Film award at the 65th National Film Awards was won by a Kohima-based documentarian Sesino Yhoshu. Given the state's reputation of being home to one of the oldest insurgencies in the 20th century, a question that larks over one's head is whether the state is ready to provide ground for the time-consuming effort and necessary precondition for a composite artistic endeavour like cinema and of course its

acceptance. Albeit, filmmaking is a new phenomenon in the hilly state where, leave aside women, even their male counterparts couldn't get onto the feature-length bandwagon till the first decade of the new millennium. Though Nagaland's first feature film in digital format was made in the first decade of the 21st century, the state had to wait till 2017 to taste the first artistic success and recognition. Tiakumzuk Aier's 100-minute feature in Nagamese dialect, *Nana: A Tale of Us* (2017), which engaged local cast and crew, got rave reviews and won the best director's award at an Indian film festival in Edinburgh.



The Pangti Story and Sesino Yhoshu

Tiakumzuk and his female counterparts, including Sesino Yhoshu, belong to the first-generation filmmakers of Nagaland. Sesino is an alumna of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, and has a Master's in Documentary from Royal Holloway, University of London. Her national award-winning 26-minute documentary *The Pangti Story* (2017) explores the transition of villagers from hunters to protectors of Amur

Falcons. The interview-based film gives a gripping account of the migratory birds coming from Siberia every fall to roost in Pangti, a Lotha Naga village, only to be caught, sold and consumed by people. But thanks to the conservationists' timely moves at the government and non-government levels, people in the remote village became aware of wildlife conservation. They wiped out their past reputation, thereby earning much recognition and praise. The film also won the Golden Beaver Award at the 7th National Science Film Festival. Sesino's other acclaimed film is *Apfutsa (My Grandfather)*, 2009), which intimately portrays the filmmaker's grandpa as he reflects upon his life through personal travails and political turmoil of different hues. Announcing the arrival of a courageous filmmaker, the film has the proud distinction of getting screened at prestigious venues like the National Portrait Gallery in London, the Bang Short Film Festival of Nottingham, the University of Rochester and the Rubin Museum of Art, both in New York.

Before this film, Sesino and Sophy Lasuh jointly made a 5-minute film titled *The Story of a House* (2014) about a Naga family home that sits right in the middle of the Indo-Burma international border. It focuses on the boastful village head, Angh, who owns the house; he married seven women, and with six of them already dead, the number of family members, primarily children, is 55. At night, they sleep in the Myanmar part of the house facing the east where the bedrooms are, because they prefer sunshine, and in the morning, they cross over to India for daily chores, though that part remains empty due to insufficient light. The Angh household

receives taxes from five Nagaland villages and fifty villages from across the border. ‘The only thing we do is cook and eat’, says Angh, who also declares that ‘irrespective of man-made borders, we, the people, will continue to live as one’, mocking modern and discordant fiefdom. It was screened at multiple festivals worldwide and received accolades, including the best director award in the short film category at the festival of Film Northeast 2015 held in Itanagar.

Sophy Lasuh did her masters in film and television at Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland, and her graduation film was a 23-minute documentary, *Children of Silence* (2010). The film was shortlisted for the BAFTA (The British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Awards. It is a hard-hitting film on the aftermath of the Oinam incident of 1987 and the subsequent military retaliation seen in Nagaland under the aegis of the AFSPA. The village of Oinam witnessed a paramilitary outpost raided by insurgents, leaving nine soldiers killed and a massive cache of arms and ammunition looted in broad daylight on July 9, 1987. The following days saw one of the biggest operations carried out by the security forces since the 1950s in Naga-dominated areas. Nicknamed ‘Operation Blue Bird’, it accounted for wide-scale human rights violations, arson, looting, rape and torture, resulting in the loss of at least fifteen civilians and a lot of physical and mental health problems. The matter was raised in different forums, even in the petition benches of the Gauhati High Court. Still, no justice was delivered to the innocent victims and instead left the sufferers numb with indelible scars on their memories. According to the young director, her teacher at

Edinburgh guided her on the importance of telling an untold story, and what she did became an unforgettable piece in ‘art journalism’. The film could be a reminder of what Laura Poitras, the famous documentarian, said: There is no blurry line between truthful journalism and honest documentary filmmaking.



Kivini Shohe

Another filmmaker to reckon with is Kivini Shohe, a leading force behind the annual Nagaland Film Festival. Kivini’s 26-minute documentary *Oh My Soul* (2015) on the lives and struggles of three trans-genders in the state’s commercial hub Dimapur was adjudged the best documentary in ADDA Film Festival 2015, Guwahati, and at Film Northeast 2015, Itanagar. Showcased in the ‘New Horizons from North-East’ section of Indian Panorama, IFFI 2015, the film, a first-of-its-kind documentary for Nagaland, sensitively presents the threesome who live on the margins of society as outcasts, often abused and condemned. The film is palpably marked with excellence: first, its editing and music both meaningfully and skilfully join the

three trans-genders who are unrelated. Second, its construction of three personal stories blurs the documentary and fiction on one hand and acting and interview on the other with aplomb. Third, its touching tales in the form of honest confessions from the subjects (the speakers) underline the director's absolute grip and command over the treatment. Kivini and fellow filmmaker Yapangnaro Longkumer have been at the forefront of a timely awakening of youngsters through initiatives under the banner of The Film Association of Nagaland (FAN).



Yapangnaro Longkumer

Yapangnaro is a graduate of the Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, and she

documented challenges posed by modernisation to the ordinary fisherman as the reality changes around life and lifestyle in a 6-minute film, *River Story* (2018). The film was among 50 films from 20 countries shown at the Asian Women's Film Festival 2019, organised by the International Association of Women in Radio & Television (IAWRT) in New Delhi. She eloquently asserted that the few of them who had ventured into documentary filmmaking in Nagaland were mostly women, and it might be because that gave them a space to tell stories in a landscape where men hold the reins. Yapangnaro's recent 25-minute film *The Other* (2020) focuses on two working women who fancy calling their away-from-home environment home: an Assistant Professor from Nagaland in Delhi and a journalist from Mumbai who shifted to Dimapur. Their inner urge to base themselves in their workplace, preferring to settle down there against the hostile undercurrents, sometimes raising their ugly faces towards the outsiders, is the core theme of the documentary. While the narrative in spoken words, in a way, addresses questions of nascent federalism, it also highlights the general truce and cordial camaraderie upheld by the citizens of the vast, diverse land. The sublime matrix of the film has stressed the need for an anti-racial law, a sense of solidarity with the 'other' and the spaces for developing people-to-people relationships.

Tiainla Jamir is qualified in mass communication media, video editing, animation, and other faculties of the audio-visual medium, having formally learned at reputed institutions in Shillong and Mumbai. Her documentaries and news features were aired by Doordarshan national and regional

centres, also by BBC Radio World and commissioned by others, including the Australian International Health Institute, Melbourne. *Going the Distance* (2010) is her best-known work to date. Incidentally, it was the first film from Nagaland shown in the Indian Panorama of IFFI in its 2010 edition and in various sections of international film festivals showcasing films from northeast India. The 24-minute film presents the realities of a young woman named Nukshinaro from the Tuensang District of Nagaland. It traces her physical, emotional and spiritual journey tainted by stigma and discrimination faced by people living with HIV. From the day she discovered her HIV-positive status, her life and relationships stopped remaining the same. Still, the way she faces her existential questions makes the portrayal a saga of an exceptional journey. The construction of the film in the form of a confessional soliloquy in fluent Nagamese, while constantly shifting locations, presents the character as a sweet, cheerful girl, an undaunted human being and resolute connoisseur of truth-seeking whom the camera follows in subtle orderliness. The narrative is embellished with adorable nuances of physical and emotional attachments among Nukshinaro's close relatives, young and old. They appear so natural that they tend to negate many misconceptions hyped around HIV-positive persons.

On the opposite side of the North-Eastern region, Tribeny Rai has been holding the fort of non-feature filmmaking with authority in Sikkim. She is the first from the Himalayan state to learn the craft at the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute of

India (SRFTI), Kolkata. She has worked with Doordarshan Kendra Gangtok on a series of documentary films based on women's empowerment. Right from her 22-minute-long debut short film *Yathawat* (As It Is, 2015) and another 10-minute short, *Chori* (2015) to her 34-minute-long documentary *Sikkim Soccer Girls* (2016), she ardently makes it a point to protest against gender discrimination. *Yathawat*, which was screened at some important film festivals such as those of Goa, Kolkata, Kathmandu, IAWRT, etc., revolves around three sisters and their mother trying to secure a government job following the demise of their father on the grounds of compensation but with little success. At the same time, they are forced to negotiate with the stark realities challenging their existence, which is layered in the sound image of a barking dog, apart from dramatic compositions. *Chori*, an autobiographical short film, in her own words, 'a personal video journal' made with 'zero budget', is again based on gender biases. The film presents the disadvantages and prejudices a girl faces in a patriarchal society with intensity. In *Sikkim Soccer Girls*, she depicts the dedication and sacrifices of the founder coach of Mangalbaria Girls Football Academy, who groomed gifted footballers and their dreams and struggles.

Tribeny's 5-minute experimental short *Memory of a Heart* (2015), which won the best short film award at Film Northeast 2016 at Itanagar, is about a series of memories a daughter relates with her father through past episodes mostly recollected in metaphors. The film won the Audience Choice Award for best experimental film at the Women's Voices Now (WVN) Film Festival 2017

conducted from California and received the best short fiction film award in the 2016 edition of Film Northeast, Itanagar. Her films are organically personal and imbued with desolation, a sense of humour, sarcasm and a yearning for truth and meaning in life. All these qualities are present in the narrative of even her 8-minute-long student participation film *My Russian Friend* (2016), which came out of the 8th Annual Vgik International Summer School held at Petrozavodsk, Russia.



Tribeny Rai

It won't be a tall claim to say that women filmmakers from India's northeast region are harbingers of hope in non-feature formats. Although for certain complexities related to filmmaking, often resisted by social biases, many among them tend to distance

themselves from the feminist discourses and the feminist tag in fear of being associated with marginalisation and ideological controversy, the filmmakers whose films are discussed here are in no way submissive to that fear; they are bold and assertive despite all the odds and regressive pulls. Those not selling themselves to the male psyche, male gaze and male domination in exploring the film language usually align themselves with the experimental and the avant-garde. Historically, there are alignments and alliances of these two with feminist interest and feminist politics, of course, both inseparable in subliminal humanity, as proclaimed by the famous film theorist Laura Mulvey. This association is made stronger by the difficulty of earning financial support to venture into feature filmmaking. Low investment of money and other hurdles mean that non-feature filmmaking is more open than other film formats. To say the least, women in India's north-eastern states are not only proven non-conformists, but they have also readied themselves to deal with other issues enveloping their socio-cultural existence in particular and the society as a whole.

Mr. Manoj Barpujari is a Member of FIPRESCI-India.