

Critique

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Nine Hills One Valley: Unfolding Labyrinths



Nine Hills One Valley (India, Manipuri-Tangkhul, 2021, 75 mins) By: Haobam Paban Kumar

"God says, "You want to fight? Fight with me. Let's see who wins. It's a challenge. God just sent a virus... earlier we used to live as a joint family. We grew up in a single room. Now, everyone wants their own space. Now my son is asking for his own room." - *Nine Hills One Valley*

The cinema of the North East, though categorised in ways, has always played an invested role in the century-old history of Indian cinema. However, due to a number of geographical and social economies, North Eastern cinema has had difficulty establishing itself in the mainstream. The film industry of the North East is mainly credited to the film industries of Assam and Manipur, as these two film industries have linked their respective heartlands with synchronous cinema.

To cognoscere the registration and the vistara of the grammatical sovereignty of the shots in unison in making a film, a director's skill is reflected in the isolated, altruistic narrative he resorts to in the cinematic illustration of a complex social or political

conflict. Manipur is one of many states in India's northeast that the country's social geography has stamped with biased analysis as a haven for militants. Despite gaining constitutional status as an independent state, Manipur is still plagued by many internal and external conflicts. The small state has long been troubled by conflicts between ethnic groups over integrity, sovereignty and cohesion issues. Conflict-shaping identities are not necessarily pre-original but are the product of political necessity and administrative convenience. In recent decades, the Naga Kuki conflict and later the ethnic identity conflict between the Kukis and Paits has been fought not only over issues of land, immigration and

settlement but also over the devastating fear of loss of identity.

Nine Hills One Valley, a phenomenal film by Manipur's sensitive filmmaker Haobam Pawan Kumar, travels from the sterile highlands to the beautiful valleys to the state capital, Imphal, with many survivors of various political and social conflicts as storytellers. This journey is a story in itself, presenting narratives of ordinary conversations between people, daily activities, common anxieties, discomforts and sorrows of past events. Conversations between people about the development of the state and their children make up the film's "collaborative dialogue." In the midst of fear and suffering, people are trying to be optimistic and seek peace, trying to move forward with life so that the next generation does not assume that the various conflicting outcomes are the decisive force in life.

This beautifully crafted and extraordinarily narrated docu-drama judiciously addresses the important ethnic complexity of the hills through a philosophical lens with magnificent nature as a silent witness, making it one of India's most notable political films of artistic excellence. *Nine Hills One Valley* does not follow the traditional formula, the narrative and the structure that a film should have, but rather an independent style of production that gives it the flavour of a documentary.

Anam Ahum, a tribal community subject living in the hills of Manipur, is the equitable chronicler of the film. He travels to the valley city of Imphal to meet his daughter. The purpose is to meet my daughter once before she leaves for New Delhi in search of a job. In the course of this journey from the mountains to the valleys, he encounters different people and their many stories, which gradually reveal the brutality of the ethnic conflict. Through the first-person narrative, director Haobam Pawan establishes the organic form of truth without any partisan admixture. It is difficult to express the poignant story of socio-political conflict in such a calm and sophisticated manner. Death, depression, protests, political opposition, constant internal conflict between ethnic groups - all these "violent" events are shown as social phenomena with a stable

combination of tracking and panning shots - with no intention of provoking any individual or group of individuals. The language of the film should be - polite, objective correlative, the number of characters and good use of their screen time - these cinematic terms have portrayed *Nine Hills One Valley* as a human drama. It's a story of love, isolation, surrender and passion - and the way the filmmaker's personal life is fused with the visualisation offers a protective sense of narrative clarity. The static shots inside Anam Ahum's van make us a fellow part of Ahum's journey. From the back seat of his van, we silently witness many incidents - try to sympathise with the plight of a Northeast Indian girl who is a victim of racial discrimination in Delhi (Delhi people do not have any respect for our Northeast people. Main reason is our appearance. We look so different from the mainlands), the possibility of a missing football player joining the rebel movement and the Kuki-Naga conflict, and we share the suffering of a family in a house burnt down by communal clashes. However, the film is not limited by a micro-level study of these characters. Instead, it is a study of society through the characters and maintains its critical voice throughout. Director Haobam Pawan Kumar has boldly shown these sensitive issues of a state burning in the flames of hatred and negligence. It has questioned the government's development agenda while criticising its policies. The film begins and ends with scenes of mass protests that symbolise the everydayness of such incidents. If there is even slight productivity, it is only through demonstrations that protests attempt to solve the problems discussed.

Director Haobam Paban Kumar says that *Nine Hills One Valley* is his personal journey about his inner dilemma of being born in a place like Manipur, steeped in the fabric of indigenous diversity. This film was made during the melancholic period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2015, well-known Iranian filmmaker Zafar Panahi made a notable film - *Taxi Tehran*. Pawan Kumar's *Nine Hills and One Valley* blends fact with fiction like this film. A man on wheels guides the journey and sets visitors as witnesses to the mysteries of the present hills and valleys, the emergence of ethnic conflict and the role of indifferent politics in

Manipur. The difference is that Panahi was banned from making films, and Pawan Kumar was not.

A high-angle wide shot frames a religious congregation inside the church, with the huge assembly below transformed into a miniature version of itself. When the rather enthusiastic speaker talks about the cultural importance of race, the shot moves to the audience's face. It uses more wide-angle shots than close shots to show people's facial reactions, as the main emphasis throughout the film is on the mutual conversations of the folks and the various events they share: "Humans have guns, bombs and other weapons. Because of these reasons, our society is in chaos... Say, you're Tangkhul, and I am Meitei; see the newspapers... There's a lot of tension over land. The day before, there was a news about two villages fighting over land."

Another of Aham's fellow passengers said: "I think Manipur has the maximum number of ethnic communities in India. So many tribes, sub-tribes, languages, traditions and cultural differences... that's why they say Manipur is Mini-India. I feel a lack of communication" increases this enmity....so I wish to make a film on this."

A character whom Anam Ahum meets along the way tells how militants killed his sister's family on their way home about 25 years ago: "It happened 25 years ago. My sister was married in Montauk

village. In 1992, I attended school in Montauk village. We are 4 brothers and 3 sisters. She was older than me. That day my sister was coming to our house along." with her two kids... husband, mother-in-law and father-in-law- all 6 members of the family were killed by a gang of people. 25 years back, my main objective was nothing but to take revenge."

One woman describes how she fled a situation of racial abuse early in her life, in which she lost numerous family members - "She cried out thrice. Then there was silence...".

His presentation, through mobile phone videography, reveals the truth about today's electronic and social media: These stories are often used for news and TRP, but little initiative is taken to find solutions.

Nine Hills One Valley by Haobam Pawan Kumar is a humanitarian document against sociopolitical and internal caste conflicts. Many other films have been made to highlight this conflict. Still, the audience must put that presumption aside when watching Pawan Kumar's film, as its production technique and demonstration methodology are entirely different. When establishing a collective problem, the focus is on the views of the collective group, not on any individual affected or harmed.

Nine Hills One Valley - A humane story of eternal conflict.

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