

Article

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The Cinema of Meghalaya: Culture and Identity



Pradip Kurbah with his Awards at 47th Moscow International Film Festival 2025

In the recent times, there has been a boom of quality cinema in the hill state of Meghalaya. And a majority of the credit for leading this cinematic uprising goes to filmmakers like Pradip Kurbah, Wanphrang Diengdoh, and Dominic Sangma. The collective works of these filmmakers are not only defined by the local stories that they strive to tell but also by the universality of their appeal. We can mention the names of films like *Iewduh (Market)*, *Lorni – The Flaneur* and *Rapture (Rimdogittanga)* which are not only receiving critical acclaim but has also taken the cinema

of Meghalaya to the national and international level. Produced primarily in Khasi and Garo languages, the mentioned films have represented the communities that they respectively belong to at the global stage. Therefore, this essay will try to look at three significant works by each of the three filmmakers and briefly analyze how these films reflect the culture and identity of their region.

A pioneering voice in Khasi-language cinema, Pradip Kurbah has brought global recognition to Meghalaya with films like *RI:*

Homeland of Uncertainty (2013), *Onaatah: Of the Earth* (2016) and *Iewduh* (2019). His *Iewduh* (2019) won the Kim Jiseok Award at the 24th Busan International Film Festival, making a historic first for Indian cinema. Moreover, his *RI: Homeland of Uncertainty* (2013) explored the issues of insurgency and identity in Meghalaya and *Onaatah: Of the Earth* (2016) provided a humane look a rape survivor trying to reclaim her life. Both the films have won the National Award for the Best Feature Film in Khasi language. His latest and fourth feature film, *The Elysian Field (Ha Lyngkha Bneng)* won the Best Film, Best Director and the NETPAC Award at the 47th Moscow International Film Festival. But this essay will only choose to look at his previous feature length directorial, *Iewduh* (2019), which by definition reflects the quintessential spirit of Shillong in a unique way.



Set in Shillong's Bara Bazaar, Kurbah's *Iewduh (Market)* shows the intersection of multiple lives that are not only dependent on the market for their livelihood but also influences the market to be the way it is – unstructured and unplanned and yet reflective of a soft warmth and generosity of its kind. The almost non-existence of a narrative is substituted with the collective existence and the everyday experiences of Mike, a public toilet cleaner and Hep, a

recovering drug addict. Through their stories, the interconnected storylines of Lamare, an old man suffering from dementia and left behind by his family, Priya, a woman suffering severe domestic abuse and Sharma, a non-tribal sweet shop owner, who is facing harassment over his daughter's dowry, develop.

Baruah (2025) observes that Kurbah's approach of setting the film in the 'congested' environment of a local market instead of going for the picturesque locales of Meghalaya reflects a unique perspective. He also notes how the film with its 'unheroic narratives' critically explore the common lives and the unnoticed stories of struggle in the market adding the fact that the market, in all its uniqueness, is predominantly run by community women (Baruah, 2025).

Kurbah captures the soul of the place and introduces the market as an organic structure with the location also serving in as the key catalyst of his story. The realism of the imagery is integrated into his mise-en-scène which is also critically grounded in its socio-cultural context. As Hasan (2019) notes, *Iewduh* exposes stereotypes and questions the premise of being tribal and non-tribal by reversing some rigid notions regarding identity and ascribed social status of the community. He notes how the central character, a Khasi, is also a toilet cleaner in the film. Then there's the love story between Edwina, a Khasi woman and Navin, a Khasi-speaking non-tribal. He also adds that the story of Priya, another Khasi woman, who suffers and meets a tragic end, showcases the vulnerable side that uproots many general ideas regarding the matrilineal society (Hasan, 2019).

The characters in the film are bound together by a thematic logic of interdependence, care, and kinship as they feel caged in by their own individual circumstances. Moreover, through these characters, *Iewduh* not only offers a critique of the social hierarchies and gender dynamics that are at play within the market community but also within the Khasi community at large. Kurbah's storytelling is observational and also tragic as not every character gets to outrun their shadows. It's a bleak tale of loss but also of solidarity that finds a place within the larger chaos of the market. It is a tale that celebrates the mutual dependence of life. *Iewduh* also shows how the visual vocabulary of film production can sometimes originate from within the geography of a place as opposed to being enforced upon.

Wanphrang Diengdoh, another Khasi filmmaker who has made significant contributions to the resurgence of filmmaking in Meghalaya, mostly takes a bold and experimental approach to storytelling. His documentaries, such as *Between the Forest and the Song* (2015), *Where the Clouds End* (2015), *Because We Did Not Choose* (2017) and *The Blood and the Border* (2023), focus on the culture, identity, and the broader socio-political history of the Khasi people. Diengdoh made his feature length debut with *Lorni – The Flaneur* (2019) which premiered at the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival in 2019 and was also screened at the Moscow International Film Festival 2021.

Lorni – The Flaneur (2019) starring Adil Hussain in the lead role is about an out of job private investigator who gets assigned to locate a missing cultural artefact. Although by design it appears to be an investigative

thriller, the film carries the undercurrent of Shillong's tryst with culture and modernity. The narrative is paced slow as it takes the liberty to reflect the many textures and the moods of the city. And like *Iewduh* (2019), here too, a specific treatment is attached to the imagery that exposes the various hues and shades of Shillong as the detective combs every nook and corner of the city.



Moreover, filmmaker Diengdoh infuses various elements of noir to the plot which also has a local folklore running parallel to it. He positions the culturally valued missing possession as a metaphor to reflect on the cultural erosion of the traditional Khasi way of life. In fact, this contentious tension between tradition and modernity, as a theme, is dominant throughout the film. A stylishly crafted drama, *Lorni – The Flaneur's* subject specific focus also draws visual corollaries to the myths and the philosophies of the city's natural landscapes and narrow alleys and by doing so it represents the reality of a community that is struggling between the weight of the past and the uncertainty of the present.

Therefore, Diengdoh's vision is definitely broad in scope but his aspirations are also rooted in the cultural context of the region, for which the viewers will require some insight of the issues like the tension

between indigenous tribal populations and non-tribal outsiders, to truly appreciate the subtext of the film.



Hailing from the Garo Hills, Dominic Sangma is another major name in the contemporary filmmaking scenario of Meghalaya. His filmmaking represents a style that is not only visually poetic but also culturally sensitive. In the present times, Sangma's works are collectively redefining Garo cinema by taking it to the national and international platforms. His debut feature *Ma.Ama* (2018) won the Best Garo Film at the 66th National Film Awards of India and the Best Cinematography at the 22nd Shanghai International Film Festival, 2019. His second film, *Rimdogittanga (Rapture)* (2023) was officially selected for the prestigious Locarno Film Festival in 2023. It also won the Best Garo Film at the 71st National Film Awards of India among other wins.

Rapture (Rimdogittanga) is a haunting tale of a Garo village afflicted by fear and paranoia stemming from the mysterious disappearances of children and a prophetic period of darkness. There's a thin air of mystery surrounding the Christian village, as the villagers find unidentifiable people of suspicious origins entering their land. And under the prevailing set of conditions, trespassers aren't easily spared.

Sangma's dictions about the authority of the church, the various belief systems in place, and the thin line between faith and superstitions, are daring and it is delivered with precision as for example, the blood moon of a total lunar eclipse is feared by the commoners as the oncoming of the darkness. His story goes out as an unmistakable commentary on the state of affairs pertaining to faith and rationality, fear and fragility, and power and prejudice. And by telling it through the perspectives of a ten year old suffering from night blindness, he draws a direct comparison and contrast of how truth can be manipulated and re-framed even under the brightest of light. On one hand it is Kasan's innocence and on the other it the strong sensitivity to showcase a society in peril.



Shrouded by the dark clouds of anxiety and cold beliefs, the shadows of identity and threat to the community are a part of *Rapture* as well. Also, using the experiences of a community under stress, the film shows how fear is not just an external threat but can sometimes also be an internal construct.

Moreover, there is a quality of immersion in Sangma's storytelling which too is rooted in the indigenous cultural practices of the community. It evokes a certain feeling of familiarity but in the guise of a complex form of observance which operates along the fault lines that divides our

society and morality. And the fact that it doesn't shy away from showing the consequences make *Rapture* feel all the more frightening. There is no easy answer or the justification of a particular moral ground in the film but the realization of a uncertain future that we are slowly moving towards.

All the characters come with conflicting motivations and questionable judgement. In fact, there are many ambiguous shades that promote an engaging opportunity for the viewers to question the preconceived notions about 'outsiders,' authority, and faith in general. It also functions like a self critique on how fear is manufactured and propagated among the naive.

Therefore, all the films discussed above feature local contexts but the issues of fear, identity, social threats, cultural erosion, and the insider-outsider debates are very universal in nature and hence relatable across the world. The selected films boldly depict the social realities of the region and moves forward the many tales of a region that is often marginalized in the mainstream discourse. It reflects the fears and anxieties and also the hopes of the people, and serves as a social and cultural reminder to everyone that we are incomplete without our society and culture.

So, to conclude, the current filmmaking scenario of Meghalaya, as reflected in the

References:

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works of Pradip Kurbah, Wanphrang Diengdoh, and Dominic Sangma, is a step towards reclaiming their cultural identity through cinema. They are not only making films about stories rooted in local and indigenous culture, history and socio-political issues of the community, but also redefining the cinematic imagination of India's Northeast.

But the cinematic tale of Meghalaya doesn't end here. Because, as Baruah (2025) notes, filmmakers like Shri Riquoma Rq, Ribait oo Pde, Memorial Dkhar, D. R. Michael Buam, Peling Lyngdoh, Simi Khongtiang, Wanbud Langstang and many more are also trying to set the ball rolling for Jaiñtia language films in the region. In fact, *Ka Chithi - The Letter* (2023), a Jaiñtia feature by Simi Khongtiang, was also screened at the at the competition section of the 15th Bengaluru International Film Festival, 2024 (Baruah , 2025).

Moreover, other Khasi filmmakers like Raphael Warjri, Nicholas Kharkongor along with the popular and mainstream filmmakers like Larry K. Suchiang, Commander Shangpliang, Kiki Garod, S. Tynsong and Kit Rina Nongrum are also contributing in their own way to the filmmaking scenario of Meghalaya (Baruah, 2025).