

Fish fry for the Manipuri soul

What does it take to make movies in a state possibly more disturbed than Kashmir, where surviving each day itself is a triumph? **Bachi Karkaria** writes about a film that puts that battle in perspective

Fried fish is served first, the 'chicken soup' comes later, and by the time we reach the chaotic 'premiere', we have made a rivetting journey through Manipuri cinema. And through a Manipur where the clichés of conflict and beauty take on a disturbingly different form.

If Mamta Murthy's first feature film, 'Fried fish, chicken soup & a premiere show', is so distinctive, it's partly because it was commissioned for Madhushree Dutta's ambitious research art and archive project, Cinema City, and partly because of the talented director's own cross cultural disciplines, mainly photography and curating.

'Fried Fish...' is a road film, 'hanging around' the making of '21st century Kunti', earlier Manipuri cinema wanders in and out. It's an experiential usage of the footage. The Manipuri filmmakers actually create the narrative, not just be the narrative," says the unnervingly young Mamta.

'21st century Kunti' is literally a home production, not only in the familial adjustments everyone makes as they struggle with intrinsic Manipuri constraints. The power goes off, and when even the 'CM's VIP line' fails to come on, they call for a candle. 'Do you have compact powder?' asks Joy, the director, helping out a harried Poison, the make-up girl. Popular novelist and playwright, Manaobi MM, nervously gathers his papers; he is writing for the first time for his own film. And behind a shabby curtain, his



BIG BROTHER: A woman walks past a patrolling Indian army soldier in Moreh

no-nonsense wife, and producer, H Neki, fries up a daily fish lunch for the whole team, squatting before a firewood stove.

She is a remarkable presence in the film, the typical product of a matrilineal society and a perfect foil to the more professorial

Manaobi. Husband and wife juggle budgets and bribes; deal with the 30 militant groups who must be informed before any shooting starts; and negotiate their way past the Film Forum, self-anointed custodian of the purity of Manipuri culture. Apart from mauling the film's songs, it insists on the removal of a reference to 'chicken soup'. It's 'alien'.

The film draws in the larger swathe of Manipuri cinema. It's a long and vibrant oeuvre, not only because of a 30-year-long ban on the screening of Hindi films. Says Mamta, "Mine is not a curatorial representation. The films included are meant to trigger rumination. For instance, on roads as a site of love in an earlier era (even gay love — the first archival sequence I show in the film appears to be

two men romancing each other, in the 1960s!) to roads as a site of violence in recent times."

Conflict strolls nonchalantly through her film. Its most unsettling sequence is the fake encounter of former militant C Sanjit, captured on a passerby's cell phone and then exposed by Tehelka. Says Mamta, "It struck me then that living constantly with conflict means having a bloody image of a killing co-

exist in your cell phone with that of your kids' birthday pictures. I took that thought to my film. So when Mr Manaobi leaves home on a scooter to buy medicines for his wife, he is tracing the path of C Sanjit who was on his way to the pharmacy for his sick un-

cle. I am trying to experimentally depict what Manipuris say very casually — that staying alive in Manipur is like winning a lottery, pure luck."

The film's canvas broadens also to show the dovetailing of key political and cinematic moments. The night of the screening of the first magic lantern performance in Manipur was its last free night as an independent kingdom. Just over a century later, in 2001-2002, when Manipuri films went completely digital, the people were rising in mass protests against the Indian

army's excesses.

Coming to the 'premiere', when the blue ray of the projection slits the dark night, a hush descends on the chaotic, Kumbh-grade crowd. For Mamta Murthy, this pivotal moment asserts that while Manipuri filmmakers 'sing a dirge that is crying out to the outside world', here cinema is also a psalm of hope'.



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— MAMTA MURTHY

Uneasy state

A documentary on Manipuri cinema reveals hopes but also fears.

In May 2009, Mumbai filmmaker Mamta Murthy travelled to Manipur to examine the state's filmmaking scene for Cinema City, a multi-disciplinary arts project that studies filmmaking practices in Mumbai. On the surface, Manipuri cinema has no truck with Bollywood, but the island city has influenced popular culture in the hilly state in indirect ways. In 2001, in response to a ban on movies from the rest of India by a separatist group, local filmmakers began rolling out movies made with digital equipment and using local talent. Nearly 70 digital films are now made in Manipur every year. Bollywood has made way for "Imphalwood".

"The cinematic and political streams have coincided in curious ways in Manipur," Murthy observed. She returned to the state in November 2009 and spent the next nine months filming the making of 21st Century's *Kunti*, a melodrama about a Manipuri woman who marries an Army soldier. Murthy's documentary *Fried Fish*, *Chicken Soup* and a *Premiere Show* uses the production of *Kunti* to discuss the past and present of Manipuri cinema. The state's filmmaking scene is dominated by members of the majority Meitei community, and the films are made in their language, Meitei-lon.

Murthy's documentary explores how cinematic expression is linked to political identity. The story of the making of *Kunti* is interspersed with what she calls "annotations"

— personal photographs of crew members, inter-titles explaining the history of Manipuri cinema and clips from older films. Manipur became a state of the Indian union in 1972, the same year that *Matangi Manipur*, the first full-length Meitei-lon feature, was made. According to Murthy, between one and two films were made every year during the '70s and '80s. The use of video in the '90s gave way to digital filmmaking in 2000.

"A digital dialect has come up in all of the north-east," Murthy said. "There are small tribes making films about their people, folk tales being revisited, modern stories being told." Popular Hindi cinema remains the frame of reference, but the themes include melodramas that personalise the separatist movement — *Red Rose*, for instance, is about two brothers, one of whom is in the Army and the other is a militant.

Fried Fish is of a piece with *Out of Thin Air*, a documentary about the Ladakhi film industry by Shabani Hassanwalia and Samreen Farooqi, and Faiza Ahmed Khan's *Supermen of Malegaon*, about the Bollywood spoofs produced in the Maharashtra powerloom town. Like the residents of Ladakh and Malegaon, Manipuri filmmakers face tremendous challenges. One part of the documentary's title is inspired by *Kunti*'s intrepid producer, who doubles up as the cook for the unit. The shooting of outdoor sequences is fraught with tension because of the heavy Army presence. Power cuts are frequent, and curfew is a way of life.

Yet, determination and passion will ensure that the scene survives, Murthy said. "The films

are creating an infrastructure — there is a sense of an industry that is taking root," she said. "There is an upsurge in filmmaking culture."

The popularity of Manipuri films may have had a lot to do with the 2001 ban on Bollywood (pirated Korean films are also highly favoured in the state), but local directors haven't escaped censure either. Filmmakers are governed by rules imposed by the militant outfits, who insist that they must not imitate Bollywood-style make-believe. Murthy lists some of the many don'ts: no excessive make-up, no running around trees, no unnatural costume changes, no titillating dancing. "Increasingly, films are seen as visible markers of a dominant Manipuri identity," she comments in one of the intertitles. "Their plots, their stars and their lyrics are always on the radar of underground groups and state forces."

An underground group briefly banned Manipuri films in the mid-2000s for being Bollywood imitations, which prompted filmmakers to set up the Manipur Film Forum to protect their interests. The forum previews all movies to check how authentically Manipuri they are before sending them to the Central Board of Film Certification.

The MFF's activities are a mixed blessing. One of the standout sequences in the documentary captures the *Kunti* writer's tense wait for the forum to clear the film. Three songs are deemed to have too many costume changes. An objection is also raised to a reference to "chicken soup", which is considered as offensive to the vegetarian Meiteis. The harassed writer rushes back to the studio to make the alterations in time for the premiere.

Murthy faced her own hurdles during the shoot. "There has been little academic research on the subject," she said. "You need to approach different sets of people to get a linear sense of Manipuri film history." *Matangi Manipur* was made in 1972 on 35mm, as were other films. "There is a pre- and post-digital divide," she added. "The older lot is embarrassed about digital cinema."

Nandini Ramnath



Manipur return Mamta Murthy

Max Mueller Bhavan, Fri
Mar 23, 6.30pm.

Film