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SHANTA
GOKHALE



SEPARATING THE BEST FROM THE BANAL ON MUMBAI'S CULTURESCAPE

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East is East

Mamta Murthy's feature length documentary film, *Fried Fish, Chicken Soup and a Premiere Show*, produced by Majlis for its Cinema and the City project, has been much written about since it won the International Jury Award at the Mumbai International Film Festival in February last year. For those who missed the screening then, there have been other opportunities to see it. Mine came at Films Division's FD Zone on Saturday.

Fried Fish, Chicken Soup and a Premiere Show is about film-making in Manipur, its history, problems, challenges and, yes, rewards. The shooting of a film called *21st Century Kunti* is underway and provides the necessary entry point into the subject. Murthy shoots both the action on the set and behind the scenes, where the screenplay writer's wife and producer of the film, doubles as cook for the crew.

Interspersed with the here-and-now of the film shoot are personal photographs of the crew, titles providing significant details of the his-



A still from the film

tory of Manipuri cinema and clips of old films. There are also pages from a text with highlighted lines which you can't read, but a helpful voice is saying things like, "A pretty place, more beautiful than many of the show-places of the world," which suggests this is a memoir about Manipur. The name Grimwood hangs in your head. Later at home, you trawl the net and catch the fish. The text is Ethel St. Clair Grimwood's *My Three Years in Manipur and Escape from the*

Recent Mutiny, a charming Raj narrative of the late 19th century.

All in all we're watching a busy film of multiple layers. Since a shoot is a shoot is a shoot wherever you go, and since you don't have a clue as to what the film within the film is about, you get interested in the side business, so to speak. Alongside the shoot, there is an ominous coming and going of armed soldiers and the rumble of military trucks, underlining the context in which films have been

made, dances danced, songs sung and stories told in Manipur since 1980, when it was declared a "disturbed state".

Manipur seethes under the military presence. This was a state that had thought of itself as a free country for a brief two years after the British quit in 1947, till India annexed it as part of its territory in 1949. A great resentment against this annexure grew amongst the Manipuri people, particularly the Meiteis who are the majority community. The resentment festered and led to insurgency, spawning a dozen militant groups and the politics of Us and Them.

If for the self-proclaimed guardians of Indian culture, who keep an unblinking vigil on how we dress and spend our leisure hours, what we eat and drink and whom we sleep with, the big bad wolf is western culture, to be kept aggressively away from the gates, for the insurgent groups in Manipur, the big bad wolf was Indian culture as represented by Bollywood. In 2001, a separatist group threw the wolf out by banning the screening of Bollywood films in Manipur. Whatever we might think of muscle-aided bans, this diktat helped to release Bollywood-enthralled audiences to local fare. Film production leapt up from one film a year in the '80s and '90s to 70 a

year in the new century, aided in no small measure by the digital revolution which turned film-making into an affordable business.

The rock of Bollywood thus countered, the hard place of militant groups remained to be negotiated. Their rules for films were stringent and their eyes peeled for any hint of cultural misdemeanour. There was to be no gaudy make-up, no running around trees, no suggestive dancing and no changes of location and costume in the course of songs. To pre-empt trouble, the film-makers set up their own forum to pre-censor their films. The screenwriter of *21st Century Kunti*, spends some of his tensest moments waiting for their verdict on his film. The forum suggests a couple of cuts in the film's songs, and the dropping of the words "chicken soup"! The circuit of film production is finally completed with an overbooked, overcrowded and generally chaotic premiere show.

Fried Fish, Chicken Soup and a Premiere Show is a layered, lively, informative film. But a question that Mamta Murthy never set out to answer, but which one is curious about, remains. While 70 films a year is an impressive number, how uniquely Manipuri are Manipuri films? Or are they only low-budget, digital answers to Bollywood?