
Manipur's first digital film was shot on this Handycam, in 2002.


VHS cameras were most popular in the 1990s as film was too expensive.


A humble 16mm Bolex was used for Imagi Ningthem.


I tell you


- Seen the cinema?
- Have you?

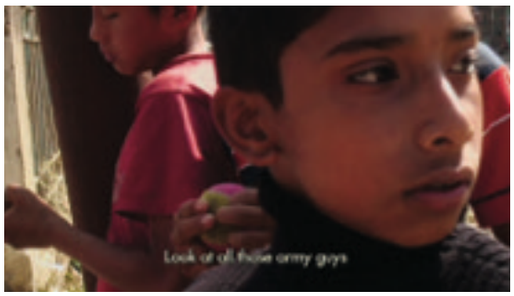

- It's just missing
- I meant the plays


- Oh I've seen up to porn
On cassette and on TV also


IMAGI NINGTHEM
Arriflex company at Nantes were so struck by such an outdated camera being used to produce a gem of a film...


... they gifted the producer,cameraman Ibohal Sharma a 35mm Arriflex.


- How did you get the cassette?
On rent


Look at all those army guys


That's how Manipur got its first 35mm professional camera.
In 1981. The first colour film followed in 1984.


If they shoot with that
blood will gush out!


Ya, if we get hit
with one of those!

METROPOLIS AND PERIPHERAL LIFE

DIGITAL CINEMA DIALECTS IN 'NORTHEAST' INDIA

NEIKOLIE KUOTSU

This essay looks at contemporary film cultures within the complex socio-political world of Northeast India. The attempt is not to offer a holistic account of the cinema of the entire region, but to draw attention to certain practices that have emerged with the digital turn in filmmaking. While cinema's relation to the city in which it is produced has been widely studied and analysed, both textually and socially, we often overlook non-metropolitan experiences and non-theatrical modes of dissemination and reception. There is a growing body of academic work in which cinema is twinned with the city. Such scholarship has been significant in examining cinema's relationship with modernity and the associated experiences of space, time, speed and commodity culture, and the corporeal, psychological and social transactions of cinema. However, if cinema's relationship with the city is essentialized, there is a danger that some crucial aspects of this engagement may be overlooked. These may pertain to the political and material conditions of production, circulation and reception of cinema that occur at the fringes of metropolitan urbanity, and the complexities of cultural appropriation and border-crossings in the era of globalization.

In this essay, I examine how technological, cultural, and socio-political forces determine film cultures in some parts of Northeastern India. This is not to suggest that the Northeast is a homogeneous category as each state in this region throws up diverse political and cultural experiences that have a complementary and contestatory relationship with 'national culture'. The essay primarily takes up the case of Manipuri digital cinema owing to its existence in a highly politically charged milieu, and draws attention to the liminal space it occupies between what is deemed as 'tradition' and the 'alien'. The documentary film Fried Fish, Chicken Soup and a Premiere Show (dir. Mamta Murthy, 2012) is used to facilitate the discussion for its interweaving of the socio-politics of Manipur, the film history of the state, and its affectionate portrayal of a contemporary digital film production unit. Some reference is also made to digital filmmaking practices in the states of Nagaland and Meghalaya. To retain focus on the digital phenomenon, Assamese cinema, which otherwise has a long history, is not discussed. While a few film texts are synoptically discussed, the emphasis is on the social world of film production and reception, and the attendant pleasures and travails. The essay also briefly examines the circulation of cinema through the medium of piracy and its engendering of a complex world of identification, in an attempt to better understand what popular culture entails in a region that is constantly punctuated by questions of identity. Along the way, it will hopefully unravel how local film practitioners and users of media engage in a media urbanism that allows them to script their own versions of modernity that has hybrid origins.[1]

THAT THING CALLED THE NORTHEAST!

Connected to the rest of the country by a narrow strip of land, the proximity of Northeast India to international borders determines much of the centre's policies towards it and the geo-politics therein. Various political movements for identity and struggles of ethnic nationalisms have persisted in this region following India's independence, which are not only pitted against the nation-state, but also take the form of inter- and intra-community conflicts. In the national imagination, the Northeast is perhaps not so much a geographical category as it is a signifier of rich cultural diversity, political

1 The idea of engendering local modernities by way of engaging with media in non-western urban locations is drawn from Ravi Sundaram's formulation of the dense practices of media urbanism by subaltern populations that he calls 'pirate modernity'. See Ravi Sundaram, Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.

turbulence and underdevelopment. The region's folk and traditional cultures remain largely obscure, but for tableaux appearances on Republic Day.

Analysing the Republic Day parade, Jyotindra Jain writes: 'by strategically merging the local or the diverse with the national or the abstracted generalized Indian/national tradition, a spectacle is staged on Republic Day which generates an archive of images'.[2] He argues that the state effectively mobilizes symbols, icons, performances and spectacles to acquire ideological control and disseminate the idea of national unity in diversity. Diverging slightly from Jain's reading, it may be argued that the assemblage of traditional performances and the patriotic display of 'hi-tech' military paraphernalia on Rajpath in New Delhi often appear asynchronous. The folk elements are rendered as markers of difference of a 'pre-modern' vintage that 'hinders' the nation's perceived march towards being a homogenous global power. Thus, instead of an unruptured and seamless continuity between the past and present that the parade seeks to project, temporal discontinuities are enhanced. It is no wonder, then, that the Northeast is one of the most highly militarized zones in the country, in response to the separatist tendencies of certain groups and political movements of identity struggles that assume ethnic, religious, linguistic and racial overtones.

As we discuss film cultures in the Northeast, a recurring trope will be that of borders – real and imagined, cultural and cartographic. Apart from being geographical demarcations, borders are 'zones of cultural production, spaces of meaning making and meaning breaking'.[3] They are simultaneously there and transcended constantly. To be able to discursively discuss cinematic practices and the phenomenon of media urbanism in the Northeast, this essay freely picks up particular instances and probably leaves out some. By studying this phenomenon, it hopes to be able to throw light on the ways in which people in the peripheries engage with modern life and assert their identities mediated through cinema and digital technology.

RECEPTION OF POPULAR CULTURES[4]

Historically speaking, British colonial interests in the Northeast were primarily confined to administration for trade, territorial control for strategy and security; as such, they did not have a major involvement in the fields of education and religion. On the other hand, even though the colonial regime was not interested in socio-material transformation of the region, it nevertheless created administrative infrastructure that paved the way for gradual advancement of missionary activities. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, English-medium schools were established in the hills. By the first quarter of the twentieth century, schools and colleges began to proliferate as a result of the active efforts of missionaries and, in later years, by the government.[5] While the Serampore Baptist missionaries promoted the Bengali language and script in the Northeast region in the early nineteenth century, the Welsh Presbyterian missionaries who came later introduced the Roman script. The American Baptist missionaries encouraged the Assamese language but it was English that prevailed predominantly among the various hill communities.[6]

The introduction of English-language education largely influenced the cultural mores of the hill communities. English came to be associated with the upper-class gentry and signalled upward mobility for those with the wherewithal to be educated in

2 Jyotindra Jain, 'India's Republic Day Parade: Restoring Identities, Constructing the Nation', Marg, vol. 59, no. 2, December 2007: 24–39.

3 Donnan Hastings and Thomas M. Wilson, Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State, Oxford: Berg, 2001: 64.

4 Although the term 'popular culture' is slippery and debatable, in this context it refers to media offerings of culture industries and not the folk variety.

5 S.K. Chaube, Hill Politics in the Northeast, Patna: Orient Longman, 1999: 62.

6 Ibid.: 54–55.

English-medium institutions. This class was more attuned to western cultural mores and tastes, and considered their pre-anglicized cultures as something to be preserved but not practised in everyday life. It was in keeping with this scheme of things that the educated neo-elites, speaking diverse languages and dialects, consciously adopted English as the medium for political and cultural articulation. Film cultures in large parts of the Northeast need to be placed and seen within this historical rubric.

If the hilly topography in many parts of the Northeast precluded the nation-state's project of nationalizing the frontier region via the construction of railroads and national highways, it was All India Radio, and in later years Doordarshan and the Directorate of Field Publicity, that emerged as agents of naturalizing citizenship.[7] It may be argued that cinema, however, did not quite succeed as a pedagogic and cultural institution owing to its ambiguous status. From the colonial period, the content of cinema and its social world of exhibition were perceived with suspicion by the authorities for its alleged potential of endangering race authority, and the moral and social order.[8] Cinema theatres were tightly regulated as they were also seen as potential sites of danger, posing law and order problems and fire hazards. A particular case in Nagaland attests to the legitimization of such fears among the authorities as well as political groups with vested interests. In the late 1970s, a group of unidentified people alleged to be Naga separatists bombed Ruby Theatre in Kohima while a film was being screened.[9] Many were seriously injured and some lost their lives in the explosion. It is believed that the perpetrators of the bombing acted out of a perceived threat of cultural assimilation through Hindi films.[10] This incident goes to show that the status of cinema is unstable as it is seen through the twin optics of fascination and dread. Thus there is a constant urge to discipline it both by the state and by non-state agents.

Northeast India has a long history of film production and circulation, crisscrossed by diverse cinemas in theatrical as well as non-theatrical circuits. Cinema theatres were limited to urban towns where rudimentary infrastructure existed from early on.[11] Itinerant showmen operated for a long time in smaller towns and rural settings, but did not reach far and wide. The arrival of television in the early 1980s and the subsequent entry of VHS (video home system), legal as well as smuggled, led to the mushrooming of video parlours/shacks. This contributed to the popularity of Hindi films, Hollywood Westerns and Hong Kong martial arts films. Within this complex scenario also emerged a trend of amateur video filmmaking, a precursor to today's digital films. The advent of digital technology spawned newer forms of film cultures. Beginning in the mid-2000s, the borderlands of the Northeast have witnessed a profusion of South Korean films and tele-dramas in the form of pirated DVDs and VCDs. Before a detailed discussion of this phenomenon, however, we will first examine the conditions of film production and reception in some parts of the region.

THE SOCIO-POLITICS AND CINEMA OF MANIPUR

An account of cinema in Manipur is also a narrative of the state's socio-politics and the precarious relationship of the local with the 'national'. Before the accession of the erstwhile kingdom of Manipur to India in the 1940s, 'Indian' films made their way there in the early decades of the twentieth century and immediately became a

7 The Directorate of Field Publicity was established in 1953 for the purpose of screening newsreels (short educational films) on issues such as family planning, national integration, rural development, government plans and policies, and health awareness. In an interview with a DFP official in Nagaland in 2009, the author was told that Toyota vans customized as mobile film screening units travel to rural areas and projected films on to a collapsible screen. However the trend has declined after the 1990s when television became more entrenched.

8 See Stephen Hughes, 'Policing Silent Film Exhibition in Colonial South India', in Ravi S. Vasudevan, ed., Making Meaning in Indian Cinema, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. For more recent literature, see S.V. Srinivas, 'Is there a Public in the Cinema Hall?', http://www.sarai.net/research/media-city/resources/film-city-essays/sv_srinivas.pdf, accessed on 14 March 2012.

9 Interview with Khyomo Lotha, co-proprietor of Ruby Theatre, November 2009.

10 Ibid.

11 Documents pertaining to the certification of films for exhibition in the province of Assam (which includes many parts of present-day Northeast) suggest that film screenings in theatres as well as travelling shows were common in the region in the early decades of the twentieth century. For example, films like D.W. Griffith's The White Rose, Majestic Films' Razia Begum, Madan Theatres' Matri Bhakti, among others, were denied certification by the state administration citing reasons ranging from the moral tone of the films to physical safety in theatres. Cf. Cinematograph files from 1924 to 1931, State Archives, Directorate of Art and Culture, Kohima, Nagaland.

curious object of both desire and dread. From initial screenings at the Royal Palace in Imphal to its present-day digital avatar, cinema has persistently survived the ravages of political instability and transformations wrought by technology.[12] If royal patronage enabled film screenings in the early decades to be received with notions of respectability and modernity, cinema also engendered anxiety among certain sections of the society. Those with a socialist bend of mind protested against the new cultural commodity, fearing that it would drain their economy.[13] This uneasy relationship that the Manipuris have with 'external' invasion, be it political or cultural, is constantly played out in their everyday lives. While cinema as an art form and entertainment was accepted early on, local cinema, the production and exhibition of local cinema, became a site of tensions between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. This cinema, in effect, serves as a medium of pedagogy and assertion of cultural authenticity and tradition.

The high period of adoption of Vaishnavite Hinduism in Manipur in the eighteenth century reordered the traditional cosmos and arrested fluid socio-cultural exchanges between neighbouring communities.[14] The Manipuri script Meitei Mayek came to be replaced by the Bengali script, and fell into disuse. However, Manipur in present times has seen a revivalism of traditional culture that harks back to a pre-Hindu period – a revisionist project strongly espoused by certain ethnic nationalist outfits. The Mayek has been revived, albeit in an incomplete form, and is mandatorily implemented, requiring Manipuri film titles to be written in that script. The inhabitants of Manipur, comprising the numerically dominant Meiteis in the valley and the geographically dominant but diverse hill communities, pose complex forms of communal dynamics that often take a violent turn. The hill communities' dialects are extremely varied, and therefore Meitei and English serve as the lingua franca of the state. Several militias for the protection of ethnic identities have emerged in post-colonial Northeast India owing to fear of domination from within and without. The lived realities of the inhabitants of the region are strongly defined by the dictat of insurgent groups. Thus daily-life practices, from the procurement of cooking gas to cultural forms such as the Shumang Leela (courtyard play) and cinema, are punctuated by bouts of anxiety and disruption caused by political turbulence. The average citizen has to constantly contend with the myriad insurgent outfits on the one hand, and the high-handed military in civilian spaces on the other.

The practice of filmmaking operates under the constant gaze of extra-legal custodians and non-state players. Ultra ethnic nationalists, cultural moralists and purists of tradition ensure that the content of films remain within permissible parameters. The Film Forum Manipur – an institution comprising various guild members of the digital film 'industry' – prescribes and implements censorship, unofficially sanctioned by the insurgents. The Preview Committee of the Film Forum sees to it that films are shorn of 'indecent' depiction of women, adhere to Manipuri culture and tradition, and are not imitations of popular Hindi cinema. This means that every Manipuri film is pre-certified before it makes its way to the regional office of the Central Board of Film Certification at Guwahati in Assam.[15]

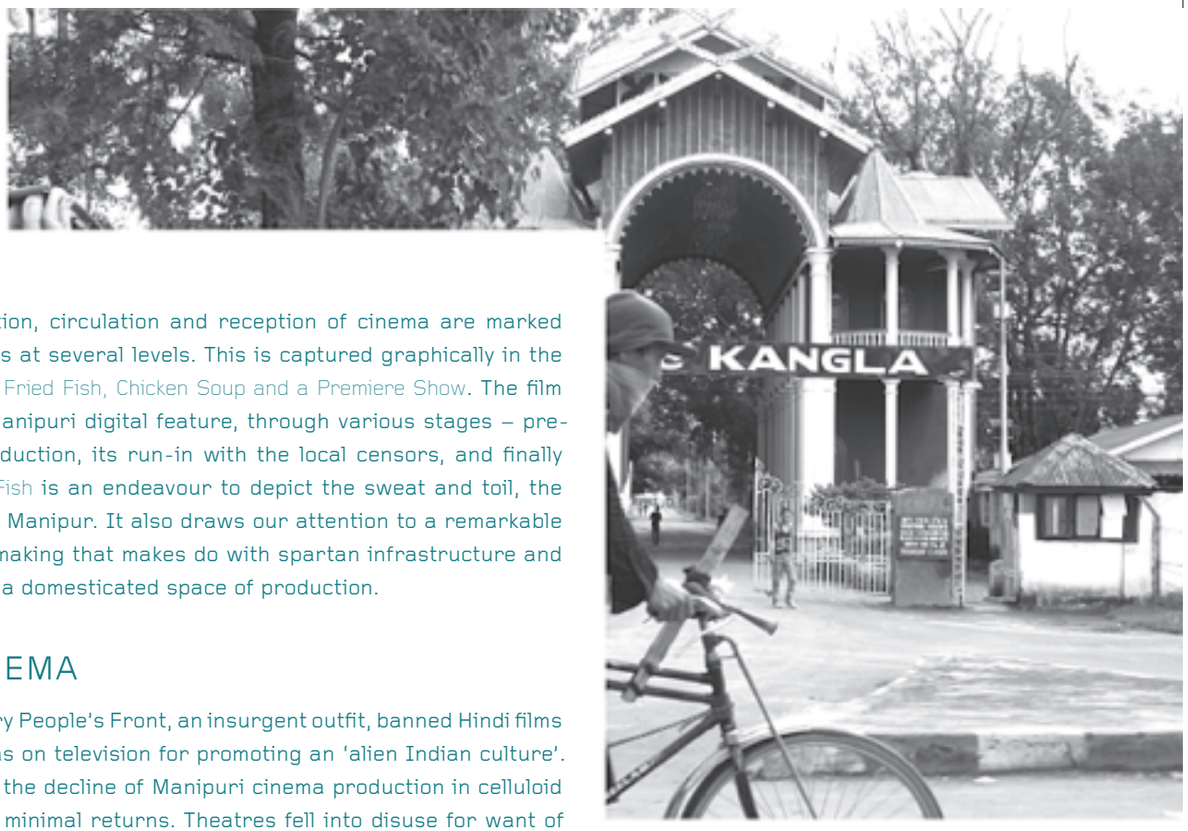
The institutionalization of extortion by various insurgent outfits under the euphemism of 'taxation' brings all and sundry under its ambit – from government employees to neighbourhood grocers. Film producers are reluctant to reveal the actual figures of their budgets and earnings, perhaps out of fear of having to cough

12 According to national film critic awardee R.K. Bidur, films came to Manipur two decades after the first screening at Watson Hotel in Bombay in 1876. See his essay 'Manipuri Cinema: A Recountal, in Celebration of 25 years of Manipuri Cinema, Imphal: Manipur Film Development Corporation, 1997: 13.

13 In the 1930s cinema theatres did brisk business, resulting in meetings and protests against it by certain groups of people. Ibid.: 14.

14 J. Shakespear, 'The Religion of Manipur', Folklore, vol. 24, no. 4, December 1913; Thingnam Kishan Singh, 'A Critique of Hindu Proselytization in Manipur: Ordeals and Upheaval', http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Manipur_and_Religion.Hindu_proselytization_in_Manipur.Hindu_proselytization_in_Manipur_2, accessed on 1 May 2012.

15 Interview with filmmakers Ranjit Lancha and Haobam Paban, November 2009.



up higher 'taxes'. The production, circulation and reception of cinema are marked by restrictions and negotiations at several levels. This is captured graphically in the Mamta Murthy's documentary, Fried Fish, Chicken Soup and a Premiere Show. The film tracks the making of Kunti, a Manipuri digital feature, through various stages – pre-production, shooting, post-production, its run-in with the local censors, and finally the frenzy of exhibition. Fried Fish is an endeavour to depict the sweat and toil, the joys and chaos of filmmaking in Manipur. It also draws our attention to a remarkable and endearing practice of filmmaking that makes do with spartan infrastructure and improvised technologies within a domesticated space of production.

A RELENTLESS CINEMA

In the early 2000s, Revolutionary People's Front, an insurgent outfit, banned Hindi films in Manipur's theatres as well as on television for promoting an 'alien Indian culture'. This period also coincided with the decline of Manipuri cinema production in celluloid owing to the small market and minimal returns. Theatres fell into disuse for want of films. Soon, the digital technology boom led many youngsters to experiment with music video productions. They too were banned for allegedly promoting an 'alien culture', as opposed to ethnic and traditional culture. However, many aspiring filmmakers continued to make feature films, adhering to and negotiating the strict restrictions. In this way, the first digital feature film Lammei was made by Oken Amakcham, which received a positive response. Much like the numerous insurgent outfits that spring up overnight, many autodidact filmmakers emerged in the state. Thus was born Manipuri digital cinema. We may however ask, what is Manipuri cinema? Is it representative of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the state?

A rich account of the cultural history of any cinema should also include the political and material conditions of production. Manipuri cinema is the outcome of a labour of love that strives against all odds. The film Imagi Ninghthem ('My Son My Precious', dir. Aribam Shyam Sharma, 1981), which was filmed with a humble 16mm Bolex camera, went on to receive a Grand Prix at Nantes. One of the strengths of the film is telling a local story with the universal themes of love, sympathy and familial devotion. The documentary Fried Fish, Chicken Soup and a Premiere Show is notable for its documentation of the 'reality' of the enterprise of digital filmmaking in Manipur, warts and all. It shows how a husband–wife duo functions as the writer and producer respectively of the feature film Kunti, engaging the entire household and using all the resources at their disposal. Like cottage industry artisans, the duo transforms the space of the home and hearth in putting together their work of art. The wife/producer also functions as caterer, production manager and choreographer, all rolled into one. Similar to the way Dadasaheb Phalke and his household sacrificed everything to produce Raja Harishchandra (1913), digital filmmakers in Manipur almost a century later thrive as an outcome of their love of films and the pleasure they derive from creative labour.[16] This filmmaking practice cannot be apprehended within a narrative of the 'alienation of labour' as Marx would have it. It reveals that as much as Manipuri film production is driven by commerce, it is also driven by cinephilia – a pure labour of love that encompasses creating the film, operating the equipment, participating in the social act of film-viewing, encounters with ticket scalpers, anticipation of new

16 I thank Ananya Parikh for drawing my attention to certain similarities between Phalke's enterprise and the makers of Kunti.

releases, and being absorbed by the cinematic spectacle in the darkness and din of the theatre. Cinema in Manipur operates in an economy largely defined by a calendar of social life. If new film releases in metropolitan cities occur on Fridays, in the towns of Manipur film exhibition assumes a different logic. The season of paddy-sowing and school and college examinations determine when a film should be released.

The patriarchal order of society regulates cinema to protect the 'modesty' of women, and to ensure 'proper' depiction of the Manipuri culture and ethos. While the society chastises women who consume alcohol, wear revealing clothes and behave coquettishly, it is the insurgents who ensure that such 'outrages' are not depicted on screen.[17] However, women in Manipur have always been in the vanguard of social and political movements. Be it through protests against military atrocities or as vigilante groups in combating social ills, the Meira Paibis (women torch-bearers) have led the way. Hence nobody is surprised to see women deftly scalping theatre tickets, as it is just another chore that needs to be accomplished within the public–private space of film production and reception in Manipur.

Fried Fish shows how the courtyard of the filmmakers' house is transformed into an agora of film production and distribution, as it were. It is a space that is simultaneously private and public. The wife/producer is equally comfortable cooking meals for the film crew and instructing the film director during filming. By performing various tasks in the space of the home, she comes to participate in public life through the act of filmmaking. Fried Fish also reveals the prevailing tension between the indigenous Meitei tradition and Vaishnavism. The conversation between the director of and producer of Kunti about a song sounding too 'Indian' and their apprehension of it being censored by the Film Forum Manipur brings out their frustrations. In another instance, the film director expresses his frustration to a member of the Film Forum for censoring the words 'chicken soup' from his film as it is deemed offensive to the Goudiya Vaishnavite code of vegetarianism adhered to by many Manipuris. The editor of the film struggles to write the film title in Meitei, an antiquated script made compulsory by the traditionalist Film Forum. It becomes evident that through this form of cinematic culture, alternative forms of debate over modernity are being articulated.

Given the penchant of Manipuri films for mimicry of 'Bollywood', educated Manipuris are wont to dismiss them as inauthentic culture and they betray a sense of embarrassment.[18] These films, often disowned by the educated upper class, however inscribe social verities in forms that are fantastic, excessive, pedagogic and accessible to common audiences. In the next section, we will cast a broad look at a few films from some of the Northeastern states, to gain a sense of their aspirations and relationship with contemporary social life. It may be mentioned that this examination is preliminary and would do well with further enquiry.

FILMS AS SOCIAL TEXT

Although non-theatrical circuits are difficult to trace, video stores and film rental shops reveal that Hindi films vie for viewership with local cinemas, Hollywood and various Asian cinemas in large parts of the Northeast. In Dimapur, the commercial hub of Nagaland, cinema theatres screen Hindi films and infamous 'adult' films. The situation is similar in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, though locally produced digital

17 Ranjan Yumnam, 'No Sex Please, We are Manipuris', http://www.e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=Reviews.movies.No_sex_please_we_are_Manipuris, accessed on 22 March 2012. Also see Shreema Ningombam, 'No Sex Please, We are Hypocrites', http://www.e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=Reviews.movies.No_sex_please_we_are_Hypocrites, accessed on 22 March 2012.

18 Interviews with filmmakers Ranjit Lancha and Haobam Paban (November 2009), and conversations with university students.

films are also screened apart from the regular fare of Hindi and Hollywood films. In both these states theatres are crumbling and patrons of cinema chiefly comprise the plebeian population.

Local digital films, though made in differing local contexts, often portray social ills and political conflicts by situating them in the space of the home and within the family structure. More often than not, dilemmas are posed in Manichaean binaries of good and evil. The films are varied and range from comedies, romances, family dramas and socials, to political films. Given the extreme political instability in the region, the degradation of moral values and the adversities encountered by inhabitants collectively and individually, it is but natural that the insecurities, angst and predicament that haunt contemporary society find forms of expression. The disintegration of society caused by antagonisms between communities, ideological divides, the inability of the state to provide security, growing unemployment and the sense of being unable to keep pace with progress have thrown the moral universe of the people into a crisis. The narrative worlds of films are therefore charged with situations of extreme injustice, haplessness, vulnerability, and of resigning one's life to fate. Scholarship in literature, theatre and film has defined such forms of dramaturgy, coupled with effective use of mise-en-scène and music to express the ineffable, as the melodramatic mode.[19] Larger socio-political battles are subsumed and effectively staged in the private space of the home, the familial and the personal. This gives melodrama its affective charge and renders relevance to the films as contemporary social texts. It may be useful to briefly examine the themes of some of these films to offer a sense of their narrative worlds.

Meghalaya's first film, Synjuk Ri Laiphew Syiem ('The Alliance of Thirty Kings'), directed by Hamlet Bareh Ngapkynti, was released in 1981. Existing only in fragments, the film is said to be a historical account of the trade and social practices of the Khasis. This was followed by the National Award winner Manik Raitong (dir. Ardhendu Bhattacharjee, 1984), based on a folk mythology about an eccentric flautist who was condemned to die by burning for transgressing social norms and fathering the son of the king's married daughter. If these two films remain largely oblivious to young audiences in Meghalaya, Ka Mon Ba Jwat produced in 1999 by Pomu Das, a second-generation Shillong-based Bengali married to a Khasi, is well known. Directed by his son Pradeep Kurbah, the film has generated appreciation as well as sneers. It has also caused embarrassment among some for its unabashed borrowing of Bombay cinema's idiom to tell a local story. Hasan and Bhartiya write:

> The embarrassment is about being unable to reconcile oneself to the Bambaiya idiom in which Pomu Das chooses to image Shillong. The embarrassment is also about Sonu Nigam's poor rendition of Khasi lyrics. The embarrassment is eventually about finding secret longings for things 'Indian' in the spotlight that has so long focused on graffitti like We are Khasis by blood. Indians by accident.[20]

Perhaps drawing inspiration from its recent celluloid ancestor Ka Mon Ba Jwat, Meghalaya now produces digital films in the Khasi and Jaintia languages. These films portray social issues like alcoholism, drug-dealing, unemployment, unintended pregnancies, etc., in a local context. They invariably contain song-and-dance sequences filmed in local settings. Though the music is highly westernized, there are visible markers of Hindi film's song-and-dance routines. These films are exhibited in theatres in the capital city of Shillong and in smaller towns like Jowai. They are also

19 For a seminal text, see Peter Brooks, 'The Melodramatic Imagination', in The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. See also Thomas Elsaessar, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in Christine Gledhill, ed., Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film, London: BFI Publishing, 1987.

20 Daisy Hasan and Tarun Bhartiya, 'A short and incomplete guide to Khasi Cinema', http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2001-August/000373.html

widely disseminated in rural areas on VCDs. Some films like Hep (dir. Pradeep Kurbah, 2006), however, have attempted to evolve an idiom of controlled performance, devoid of garish music and the trappings of music video aesthetics that many other films resort to. Targeting urban viewers, Hep deals with the travails of a heavily indebted family to survive and the sacrifice they make to support their son's dream of becoming an engineer. While the mother and daughter are supportive, the irascible father berates and discourages him. The frustrated son is led astray by a friend and eventually becomes a drug addict. He squanders his family's meagre savings and associates with a group of thugs in desperation for his next fix. They mug unsuspecting people at night by resorting to brutal attacks using a metal rod. One night, when Hep and his friends attempt to mug a passer-by, to his utter shock the intended victim turns out to be his father. Deeply remorseful, he drops the rod and runs away as his father is left to bemoan his fate. In an interview, the producer Jova Kurbah informed me that their production unit, Red Cherry Productions, draws their stories from local situations and that it is easy for viewers to identify with them.[21] While dealing with the menace of drug abuse, the film Hep is also a narration of the pressures of a rapidly modernizing society dealing with the problems of unemployment and aspiration for material comforts and striving to keep the familial structure intact.

In Nagaland, local digital films made in the pidgin Nagamese are not released in theatres and circulate only through VCDs and DVDs. Nagamese films, though few and far between, do not generally deal with political turbulence, but depict social ills like crime, corruption, swindling, alcoholism and drug-peddling. The film Hosha Morom ('True Love', dir. Imjungnok Pongen) portrays the struggles of an orphan girl and her lover. The girl's overbearing brother, a politician, compels her to marry his right-hand man for his own professional and monetary gains. The girl and her lover are beset with obstacles, and their constant suffering and separation generate pathos in this otherwise humorous film in which the dialogues are frequently delivered in crude English in an effort to express suaveness. The trope of romance is common, and watered-down song-and-dance sequences are used to depict the emotional states of the star-crossed lovers. The tunes of the film's songs are liberally poached from western music and artistes. The lyrics are rewritten in Nagamese to suit the given situations. For example, Hosha Morom has music ranging from The Godfather (Francis Ford Copolla) theme to tunes appropriated from artistes such as Bob Dylan and Kenny Rogers. In large parts of urban Northeast India, particularly among the hill communities, Hindi film music is reified as a genre, and figures lower than western genres like rock (including its sub-genres), gospel, pop and country in the hierarchy of music. Perhaps rock music appeals to the educated youth as it allows them to give vent to their counter-culture urges and offers a sense of protest against the 'Hindi culture' that they feel is being imposed upon them. Cultural flows in the period of globalization, mediated by piracy and border-trading, further provide educated youngsters alternative forms of entertainment that bypass official channels of popular culture. Thus we find local films operating within a complex of cultural borrowings and appropriations that evolves into a 'language' that is theirs as much as it is of hybrid ancestry.

In Manipur, many films portray the hardships posed by contemporary socio-political turbulence. One such film is Chumthang Makong ('Beneath the Rainbow', dir.

21 Interview with Jova Kurbah, November 2009.

Romi Meitei, 2010). It depicts the struggles of pre-university sweethearts Priyoranjan and Lingthoi who leave Imphal for Delhi in pursuit of better education prospects. They swear undying love for each other, and their romance is portrayed through song-and-dance sequences set against landmarks of Delhi's cityscape such as Lutyens' Delhi, Old Fort, Lotus Temple and gardens.[22] In spite of being a good student, Priyoranjan is compelled to return home to tend to his sick father. Following his dad's demise, he looks for employment but without success. He starts an enterprise in horticulture and prospers. Soon enough, an insurgent outfit starts extorting him. The police prove to be weak and ineffectual. Abducted by a group of militants hostile to the nation, Priyoranjan is asked to join them or face the consequences. Eventually he joins them and renounces his Hindu name as the militant chief renames him as Singthalemba. He attempts to bring about ideological changes among them and strives to gain the confidence of the public by eschewing extortion. Meanwhile Lingthoi, his childhood sweetheart, returns to Imphal and is now a police officer. Still harbouring feelings for each other, they are caught in a dilemma between love and duty. Lingthoi vows to bring law and order back into society. She pursues Singthalemba and his cohorts during a crackdown, and eventually there is a face-off between the ex-lovers during which both are killed in crossfire between the police and the 'militants'. They die beside each other. Many Manipuri films deal with social crises by placing the protagonists in situations of extreme moral dilemma, such as the difficult choice between filial/romantic and professional/ideological commitment. The overwhelming political circumstances and insurmountable situations they are caught in are captured in this form of dramaturgy, that lends itself to the melodramatic mode described earlier.

The production of occasional digital films from the non-Meitei hill communities in Manipur also cannot be ignored. The hill communities are predominantly Christian and mostly produce digital films for circulation through VCDs. Though few in number, such films portray their own subjectivities and work within a moral universe largely influenced by Christianity. R.K. Assurance, along with some other enthusiasts, has been making video films in VHS format from the late 1980s. Gospel Bell, made around 2008, is one such film that portrays the ambition of a man to make it big in life.[23] The protagonist and his girlfriend resort to violent means to procure money. On being pursued by the police in the forest, he is shot and severely wounded. As he resolutely crawls towards his home, he hears the village church bell and is reminded of the moral lessons he learned as a child. He repents to God and dies before reaching home. At his funeral, a note from his pocket is read out which mentions that he has atoned for his sins. His mourning family and relatives take solace in the hope that his repentance has returned him to God's arms. A remarkable feature of the various films described above is the absence of a neat narrative closure and the difficulty faced by the protagonists to transcend their state of being. This trope is reflective of the lack of easy solutions in the lived socio-political world of the filmmakers, and differentiates them from the narrative strategies of Hindi cinema.

Although Manipuri digital films have been criticized for their imitation of popular Hindi films, they appropriate the latter's song-and-dance aesthetics cautiously, without resorting to the pelvic thrusts, heaving bosoms and 'wink-wink-nudge-nudge' idioms. This may be seen as a ruse to subvert the ban on imitation of 'Indian' culture imposed by insurgent outfits, and as simultaneously enabling audiences to precariously

22 Interview with Manipuri filmmaker Romi Meitei, November 2009. Romi mentioned that Manipuri digital filmmakers are strongly influenced by popular Hindi films of the 1980s. While the song-and-dance sequences in this film are shot in real locations, Romi said that they also use chroma key to add actors to scenic locales that are filmed separately (probably owing to budget constraints). He expressed with disappointment that local filmmakers are unable to imitate the sleek, trendy and often lavish offerings of South Korean films and tele-dramas which are popular among youngsters.

23 Interview with film director R.K. Assurance, November 2009. The film was shown to the author on a television set during the interview.

derive pleasure from engaging with a form that they have been weaned on. At this point, we may interrogate what Manipuri cinema is. Ironically, while Manipuri cinema is predominantly Meitei in language, probably the same cannot be said of its character. It is tempting to say that Manipuri digital cinema serves as a countervailing force to the hegemony of popular Hindi cinema, but it is not entirely successful in this mission. Manipuri cinema exists in a liminal space that at once imbibes and derides the 'alien'. Thus, drawing from the diverse cinematic practices in the Northeast, we may suggest that the notion – held from within and without – of a static society with monolithic cultural practices and crystallized identities appears to be misplaced in an age of flows as borders are constantly crossed.

CODA

The vast circulation of Korean Wave content in pirated forms in states like Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh also reveals dense narratives of cultural reception and enriches our understanding of cultural hybridity. In Mizoram, some social organizations and the church objected when the Hindi serial Kasauti Zindagi Ke was dubbed into Mizo and telecast by local cable television, for promoting 'alien culture'. However the trend of dubbing continues, and Hollywood and Bollywood films are selectively dubbed and telecast, after ensuring that the content is free from depictions of nudity, sex and gratuitous violence.[24] South Korean films and teledramas dubbed in Mizo do not come under similar scrutiny for their 'sensible' depiction of romantic love and filial relationships in settings of material abundance and aesthetically pleasing locations.[25] Voice-over artistes use creative liberties to add humour inflected with a local flavour, adding to the appeal and 'indigenization' of Korean content.[26] The wide appeal of Korean Wave content in the Northeast could be seen as offering a possibility of negotiating the insecurities of being subsumed by dominant 'national' culture. As the region undergoes modernization and turbulence marked by identity politics, it may be argued that the idea of an alternative modernity that is neither of western origin nor coloured by memories of the violence of post-colonial modernity remains appealing.

In many parts of the Northeast, films largely followed a non-theatrical trajectory and made their way to the hinterlands subliminally through mobile cinemas, film songs on radio and Doordarshan, in the earlier decades. If the national broadcasting networks engendered a fragile sense of national intimacy, the advent of satellite television in many ways led to its undoing. However, in a politically volatile region where cultural practices come under the surveillance and restrictions of ethnic militias and powerful social organizations, it is border-trading, cyber networks, piracy and various ruses employed by local filmmakers, pirates and audiences/users that facilitate both the contestation and coexistence of diverse popular cultures. Local cinemas in effect become a palimpsest of sorts, in which contesting elements are inscribed and passed off as 'local'.

The cinephiliac enterprise of digital film production in the Northeast also resonates in other parts of the country, from Ladakh to Malegaon, albeit in different scales and contexts. Even as globalized cultural forms have become more proximate, they are paradoxically – and perhaps increasingly – distant from the lived realities of the

24 Interview with Tluanga, a pioneer of sub-titling and dubbing of films into the local language, Mizo.

25 Sauma, the proprietor of LPS, the largest cable network in Mizoram, expressed a desire to stop the dubbing of South Korean serials and films, but the demand from audiences has prolonged the practice.

26 Interviews with dubbing personnel from LPS.

masses. In spite of the homogenizing tendencies of globalization, the 'local' persistently articulates itself. Thus, from being receivers of goods, images and sounds, people have become poachers and active creators. These peripheral practices have begun to signal the emergence of cinematic publics that complicates, if not challenges, received notions of legality and hegemony that flow from the centres of power, culture and the economy. Much like the waning of the borders that once separated the third world from the west, alternative spaces and practices are emerging that allow regional peripheries to respond to metropolitan 'national' cultures through creative energies. It would probably be inappropriate to celebrate such tactics for survival and pleasure as the subaltern talking back to an unequal economic order. We may however reiterate, in a manner similar to Latin American scholar Néstor García Canclini, that popular cultures today are multi-determined by actors that are hegemonic and subaltern, metropolitan and peripheral, national and transnational.[27]

27 Néstor García Canclini, Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995: 157.

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