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-Ion.

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 Matamgi Manipur, the first full-length Meitei-Ion 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 Ladakh film industry by Shabani Hassanwalia and Samreen Farooqi, and Fazlla Ahmed Khan’s Superman 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 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 titilating 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 reviews 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,” Matamgi 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.”

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Max Mueller Bhavan, Fri Mar 23, 6.30pm.