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Loktak Lairembee

Lady of the Lake

Haobam Paban Kumar

Producer Haobam Paban Kumar, Thiyam Romola Devi, Warepam Jhansirani. **Production company** Oli Pictures (Imphal, India).

Director Haobam Paban Kumar. **Screenplay** Sudhir Naoroibam, Haobam Paban Kumar. **Director of photography** Shehnad Jalal. **Editor** Sankha. **Sound design** Sukanta Majumdar. **Sound** Sukanta Majumdar.

With Ningthoujam Sanatomba (Tomba), Sagolsam Thambalsang (Tharoshang).

Colour. 71 min. Manipuri.

Premiere October 9, 2016 Busan International Film Festival

World sales Oli Pictures

The flames reach high into the sky when the fishermen's huts burn on Loktak Lake, a rural paradise in northeastern India where extreme beauty meets extreme violence. In Manipur, it's about survival of the fittest. The fishermen have no security, just like the shaky foundations of the floating islands of biomass to which they owe their livelihoods. One day, Tomba comes across a pistol wrapped in plastic as he's laying traps, changing his mood from one of lethargy to one of vague belligerence. His wife is worried. Yet their daily struggle for survival has made the couple grow apart and Tomba begins to drift away. He feels even more threatened when he encounters a mysterious woman in a boat. But is the danger real or mere psychosis? Just another way of distracting himself from the unbearable nature of the everyday?

Haobam Paban Kumar made a name for himself with documentaries about Manipur. In his feature debut, which was shot exclusively with non-professional actors from the region, he expands his cinematic exploration of the land of his home into the story of one dramatic, individual fate, where mythology and political struggle merge into an ethnographic thriller.

Dorothee Wenner

Fear leads to more fear

Decades of insurgency and socio-political uncertainty have thrown my home of Manipur into disarray, leaving the people to recede into a cocooned existence devoid of any space for free and visible self-expression that evokes compassion and concern for others. Today when I look at my birthplace Manipur, I see guns all around. Guns – symbols of tyranny. We forgot that fear and anxiety instil further worries resulting in more violence. I sincerely believe in a resumption of our cultural values that propagates an inclusive society imbued with love, trust and tolerance. **Loktak Lairembee** symbolically delves into the ‘fear psychosis’ that leads to mistrust and irresponsible conflicts.

Haobam Paban Kumar

„Our entire culture is centred on water“

You live in Imphal, Manipur, the north-eastern region of India. Loktak Lake is not very far from your city, but the people we meet in your film lead a life that seems to have nothing in common with the urban life we know. Please tell me something about the lake – and what made you decide to shoot your film there.

Haobam Paban Kumar: The lake is only forty kilometres from Imphal, and it is the biggest fresh-water lake in north-east India, with a unique ecosystem and floating islands of biomass. We have many more lakes and swamps in Manipur; water is almost everywhere. Naturally, our lives are very much influenced by water – our nutrition, our income, our entire culture is centred on it. And Loktak Lake is the very soul of our culture.

But for a long time, the pollution of its water has been a big topic. We know we have to do something about it; we have to clean it. My mentor, Aribam Syam Sharma, who also come from Manipur, made a documentary about that problem in 1998, called *Loktak: The Dying Lake of Manipur*. I was his assistant then. But I have to admit, as a filmmaker I was first and foremost attracted by the incredible beauty of the place.

The story of your film is inspired by a short story titled Nongmei (the gun) by Sudhir Naoroibam – what was your initial fascination with it?

Manipur is one of the most politically unsettled regions in India, very much like Kashmir. There as well as in Manipur and the other north-eastern states, the so-called AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) grants the Indian Armed Forces special powers. Basically it is the army’s licence to kill people based only on suspicion. My documentary AFSPA, 1958, which I made in 2005, is about living in Manipur under the act. Some people say it was the first film to talk about this reality internationally. The act has many consequences in our daily lives: we were very isolated because until three or four years ago, foreigners were not allowed to visit Manipur. After decades of violence, there are guns everywhere – carried not only by the insurgent groups and the authorities. Until today, many people in Manipur believe that arms can solve problems. Whoever carries arms is in power. I sensed this logic strongly when I went on my research trips to Loktak Lake. For example, after the fishermen were evicted from their houses, their reaction was: ‘If only we had arms, we could do something.’ This deep-rooted belief has led to many cases of the misuse of arms and is constantly stirring up fear and anxieties among

my people. Since I wanted to make a film about contemporary life in Manipur, I could relate to that short story extremely well: it shows how a single man becomes completely obsessed by the gun he finds by accident.

You shot the entire film on original locations and have worked exclusively with non-actors and actresses. All the characters in your movie are inhabitants of the floating islands. How did you convince them to collaborate with you?

That wasn’t easy! All of them are incredibly hardworking fisher-folk; they are busy day and night. Since shooting is such a time-consuming affair, there were serious concerns, especially from the women. But time constraints were only secondary. Firstly, I had to build a relationship with them, and I proceeded very much like I do when making a documentary. This was a very conscious decision, as I wanted to apply my former working style in my feature as well. Initially, an environmentalist friend of mine introduced me to them, which helped me to start working with them. But beyond that, it wasn’t too difficult to gain their confidence, as they all knew about my documentary – like most people in Manipur. I used my camera during the whole process of research, and that resulted in my documentary *Phum Shang / Floating Life* from 2014. Some of the footage of the documentary I used in the feature later on. This way, my protagonists became very used to the camera. After some time, they even forgot the camera’s presence. Once our relationship was firmly established and they committed to the new film, it was easy for us to work with them as ‘actors’ when we started shooting the feature.

The footage from the documentary you mention is the dramatic eviction of the huts in the beginning of the feature film. I was deeply impressed by the women’s courage and anger in the confrontation. Also, the determined character of Tharosang, the fisherman’s wife, and of course the presence of the mysterious ‘Lady of the Lake’, seem to speak of a role for women in your culture that is somewhat different from mainland India.

All over India it is very well known that Manipuri women are extraordinarily strong; their reputation is legendary. I’m not quite sure where this tradition stems from, but in Manipur women are rather open and often seen at the forefront of protest. The best-known example of this ‘type’ is the human rights activist Irom Chanu Sharmila, ‘The Iron Lady of Manipur’, who went on a hunger strike for sixteen years in protest against that draconian act, the AFSPA.

Tell me something about the artistic concept of your film: the entire film is shot on boats or on the floating island.

That was a central idea of my visual concept: I was convinced that I didn’t want to have any sight of land in my film. I wanted the audience to feel the ambience of the place, its peaceful beauty and quietness. It was a real challenge to achieve this cinematographically, especially for the sound engineer and the cameraman – but it was only I who fell in the water once, of course unintentionally!

Who supported you? How were you able to finance and produce your film with this radical concept?

After three years of development, when I felt ready to shoot the feature, I was invited to *Filmbazaar* (an annual co-production/financing platform for Indian films in Goa, -Ed.).

Initially, the project attracted a lot of interest, but in the follow-up all the producers asked me questions like, 'Why don't you tell your story in a normal way?' 'Why make it so complicated?' But I didn't want any changes from my original idea. Luckily, my family, my mother and my wife supported me. Then I approached my classmates from film school – I studied at the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute in Kolkata, one of the two national film schools in India. They agreed to work on the film for very little money, so making this movie felt like a reunion ten years after we left the school. My cameraman is from Kerala; my editor and sound recordist is from Bengal. Luckily I could pay everyone a decent fee after I won the Golden Gateway Award at the MAMI film festival in Mumbai, 25 lakhs! (around €35,000 -Ed.). Now all I need to do is to give back to the community. Whenever I get something, I distribute it. That is needed!

Imphal is far away from the big commercial film hubs in India. Outside the festival circuit, Indian films in regional languages have a hard time finding distributors beyond their territories. What exposure do you think your film will get in Manipur once you release it?

In recent years, one of the first digital film industries of the country has developed in Manipur – maybe also because Bollywood films are banned in Manipur? Today we are releasing around sixty to seventy features annually in the Manipuri language. Unfortunately, most of these films seem to be filling the gap of the Bollywood films. Today, with the advent of digital technology, almost every neighbour is a filmmaker here. Earlier, in the celluloid era, Manipur produced one or two features a year, which usually were made with much more thoughtfulness and care. Against this background, I'm sure my film will find its local audience – how much I will recoup from ticket sales I dare not say. But I know that if my film is invited to foreign festivals and wins awards, that is something the media at home follow very closely and it will certainly help my film have a successful release locally.

Interview: Dorothee Wenner, December, 2016



Haobam Paban Kumar was born in 1976 in Imphal, India. He studied Directing and Screenwriting at the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute in Kolkata. Since then, he has worked as a screenwriter, director, and producer. He has made several documentaries and television productions, and *Loktak Lairembee* is his second full-length film.

Films

2003: *Punshi/Life* (3 min.). 2004: *Malem/Mother Earth* (6 min.). 2005: *They... Me... Them* (20 min.), *AFSPA, 1958* (77 min.). 2006: *A Cry in the Dark* (52 min.), *Ngaihak Lambida/Along the Way* (19 min.). 2008: *The First Leap* (25 min.). 2009: *Mr. India* (47 min.). 2010: *Nupishabi/Women Impersonator* (52 min.). 2011: *Along the Way* (5 episodes, 22 min. each). 2012: *Ruptured Spring* (17 min.). 2014: *Phum Shang/Floating Life* (52 min.). 2016: *Loktak Lairembee / Lady of the Lake*.