

Finding community

EYE CULTURE

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“What do you call moths in your language? ‘Chungnuk?’ ‘Jugnu?’” “Like a firefly?” “No, chungnuk.” This exchange between researcher Mansi Mungee and her assistant Bicki — spanning the Bugun, Hindi, and English languages — is captured in *Nocturnes*, a documentary about the secret world of hawk moths set in the Eastern Himalayas. Bound as the film’s human protagonists are by the pursuit of elusive insects, it is a reminder that Mungee is visiting from a distant city, while Bicki is a Bugun local from Arunachal Pradesh.

The scene also reflects the spirit of curiosity and learning that first brought directors Anirban Dutta and Anupama Srinivasan to India’s northeast, where they have made two internationally-recognised documentaries now. *Nocturnes* debuted at the recent Sundance Film Festival, where it picked up a special jury prize for craft. The duo’s previous work, *Flickering Lights*, about a Manipur village’s long wait for electrification, won a cinematography award at the 2023 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam.

In both films, patience is a main character. It is built into the observational shot-making and, as the filmmakers share, it is part of the process behind the camera too. It was in 2005 that their years of bonding with the Tangkhul Naga community in Manipur and Nagaland, featured in *Flickering Lights*, started. The duo were interested

in stories that were not getting told, and curious about the perception that some parts of the northeast were not safe. For Mr Dutta, it was important to find out what this perception meant, and understand why this alienation existed.

The duo have been mindful not to parachute into the Northeast and start making films. Communities living there foster a valid suspicion — that if people from Delhi are coming to film us, it must be to show our poverty. Ms Srinivasan found that locals eased up once they saw that was not their intention. They worked together on projects — photo groups and film workshops — where local community members made art that travelled to various villages. “After we had spent 10 years in that area, we understood the complexity of the place, and we felt we were now ready to possibly tell a story through our view,” Mr Dutta told me.

That story was of Tora village, where news had floated that electricity might arrive. The appreciation Mr Dutta and Ms Srinivasan gained of the Tangkhul Naga way of life informed the film’s content. The collective is important above all in the community. That is mirrored by the filmmakers’ decision not to isolate characters for their film. Instead of focusing on individual protagonists, common in the Western style of documentary, they covered the village as a group.

Shots were filmed at ground level, where people eat, chat and sing, with a fixed lens so as not to zoom into somebody without their knowledge. The result is far removed from the costume-heavy *National Geographic*-esque depictions of tribals which viewers are

used to. Instead *Flickering Lights* opens with the Tangkhul Nagas dancing in the dark in plain clothes, illuminated only by the moon, a bonfire, and car headlights.

Humans take a backseat in the duo’s *Nocturnes*, which examines the brief lives but enduring presence of moths on the planet. But the filmmakers worked closely with local Buguns, who are acknowledged in the credits for sharing their land for biodiversity research. The film was born at this intersection of science and community — in the Singchung Bugun Village Community Reserve (SBVCR), and drawing on Mungee’s research.

Mr Dutta and Ms Srinivasan broke bread regularly over four years with the Bugun village elders to make sure they knew their shooting plans. Much of *Nocturnes* unfolds in SBVCR — which was the theme of Arunachal Pradesh’s tableau in the recent Republic Day parade — where locals gave up hunting and became involved in helping naturalists navigate the landscape and weather. We can glimpse in the film the way scientists rely on community support, and appreciate how without that partnership, the film itself would not be possible.

It is why that short trilingual exchange in *Nocturnes* feels almost poetic. Bicki and his friends banter in Bugun but switch fluently to Hindi while talking to scientists about “hawk moths”. “For us as filmmakers, maintaining and preserving heterogeneity in terms of culture and language is very precious,” Ms Srinivasan shared, in a conversation after the screening. “That is a sort of political position.”