

# MIILELAM MIIYOH

A film by  
**Savyasachi Anju Prabir**



SRISHTI FILMS Presents

A NAGA JUNGLE BOOK

# MIILELAM MIYOH

A Film By

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B.Cr.A in Film Studies, 2016



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# INTRODUCTION

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## SYNOPSIS

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“The boundary of our field is the boundary of our life...”

Deep in to the forests of Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary, where the Indian state of Nagaland shares its border with Myanmar, lives the Yimchunger tribe. The protagonists, Shetsulam and Pensokiu, offer insights into the bond they share with their immediate environment – the forests, rivers and wildlife. Even as the community tries to domesticate the *mithuns* (animals endemic to Northeast India) by redefining their boundaries, the film is an attempt to capture a perceptive account of the changes in their relationship with nature.

“The blooming Rhododendron is a sign of the new year’s beginning, The blooming orchid tree is a sign that it is now sowing season...” recites Pensokiu, drawing words of wisdom from a Yimchunger folklore, and the quest for sustenance and sustainability continues...





*Fakim means ‘a land surrounded by salt deposits’*



## FAKIM VILLAGE

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Fakim is a remote village of about sixty-five households, at the base of the highest peak of Nagaland, Mt. Saramati. Fakim in the local language means, ‘land surrounded by salt deposits’ as it has multiple streams with natural salt water. The village is in Kiphire district of Nagaland. Kiphire was carved out of Tuensang district and is one of the least populated districts in the state. The district shares borders with Myanmar and Fakim happens to be the last motorable village, at the Indo Myanmar border. There are predominantly three tribes that reside in the district; Sangtam, Sema and Yimchunger. The people of Fakim primarily belong to the Yimchunger tribe and speak Yimchung and Chirr languages. The primary occupation of the people is subsistence farming (Jhum cultivation) and logging for commercial purposes.

The forest around Fakim was recently declared a Wildlife Sanctuary and many more initiatives have been taken for wildlife and environment conservation since. Like other regions in the Northeast, developmental activities are taking away from traditional knowledge systems. Jhum cultivation is done on forest land after burning the vegetation that makes the soil fertile. Logging also takes place within the forest, where planks are made out of tree trunks. Hunting is another major activity in the forest, but since March this year, the village committee has banned hunting for nine months of the year. The people there have shared a very unique relationship with their forests, mountains and rivers through folk songs and ancient tales.





*Pensokiu*



*Shetsulam*

## YIMCHUNGER TRIBE

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Yimchunger is a large tribe in Nagaland predominantly based in Tuensang and Kiphire district and the bordering areas of Myanmar. The Yimchunger tribe is said to have been formed with the union of people from the north and the south. Centuries ago, two communities of the region met at a central point and decided to unite in order to form one tribe. The tribe today is known as the Yimchunger tribe that has learnt to live in harmony with its environment with no support from the outside.

My film focuses on two people from the village, Pensokiu and Shetsulam. Pensokiu is in his 60's and goes to the river to hunt for crabs for his meals. He used to hunt birds and other animals in the forest, while also working on his farm to grow millets, pulses and vegetables. In the film, Pensokiu goes out to hunt for crabs in the river.

Shetsulam is in his 40's and a father of nine children. He has seven *mithuns* that need looking after. He also has a few responsibilities of village committees and the Forest Department. In the film, Shetsulam goes into the forest to look for his *mithun* and is later building a shed for the *mithuns* with other villagers.





## MITHUN

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*Mithun* is a large, semi-domesticated animal found only in the Northeast region of India. *Mithuns* are typically referred to as the ‘cattle of the hills’ and freely roam the forests. Although magnificent and huge, they are extremely shy and docile and do not harm or attack unless they feel threatened. The *mithuns* are closely associated with the Indian Bison but they are a completely different species. Although they are privately owned, they wander in the forest in small herds to graze and drink water. They are generally found near salt water deposits on hills or around streams. The ears of the *mithuns* are clipped in different patterns in order to mark ownership. The villagers also feed salt to the *mithun* from their hands--this is the first step towards the domestication. The *mithun* starts to respond to their call and also licks their hands to eat the salt.

One of the threads of my film follows Shetsulam as he roams the forest to look for his mithun. Shetsulam owns seven *mithuns*. During my stay in Fakim and our journeys together in the forest, one of his *mithuns* delivered a little calf. As part of my filming experience there, I also witnessed the clipping of the calf’s ear in order to mark him as Shetsulam’s mithun.





PRE PRODUCTION

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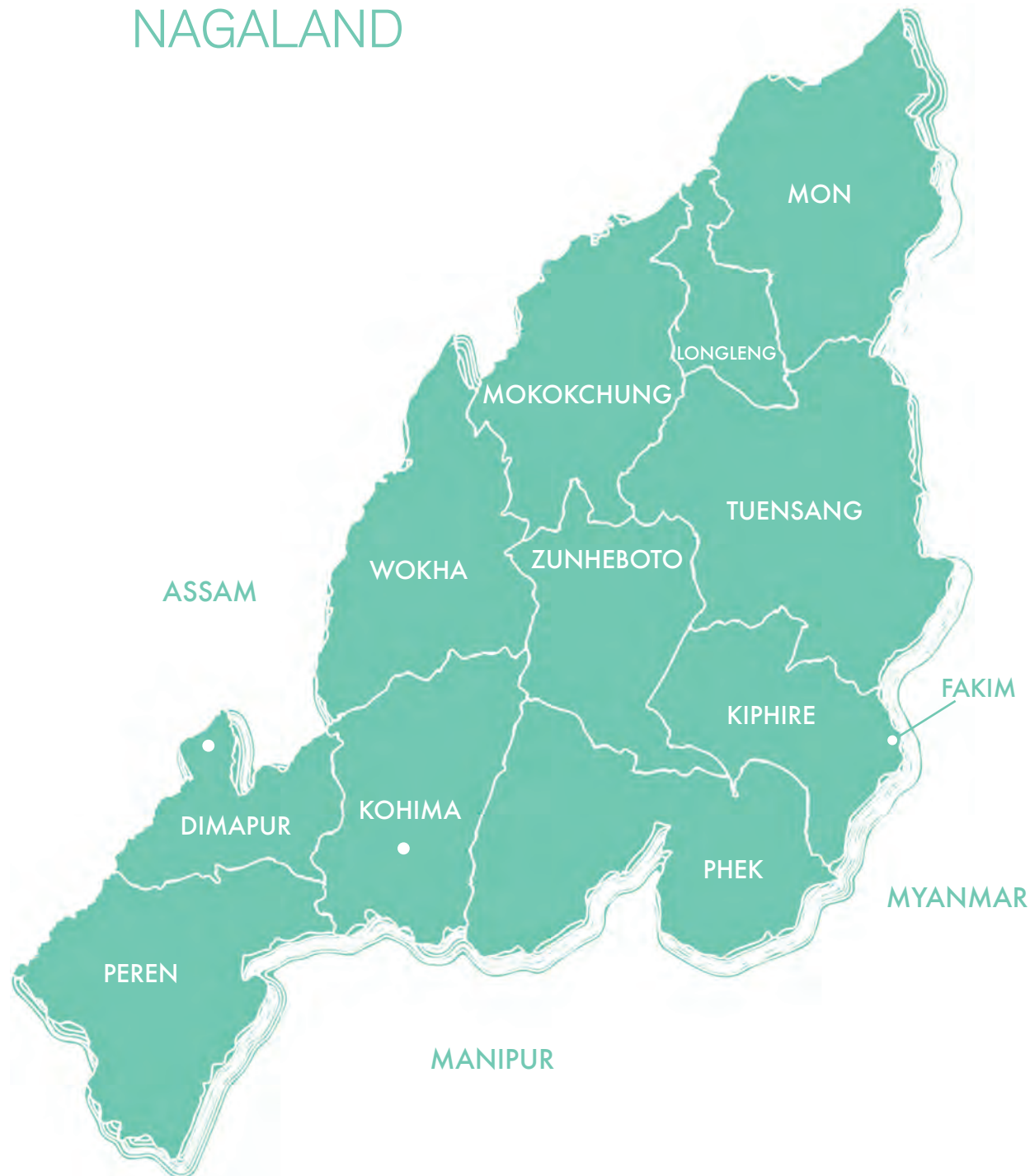




## INITIAL RESEARCH

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### NAGALAND



Primary research began in Bangalore through books, articles, papers and news about Nagaland and Kiphire district in particular. First step was to understand the landscape in order to get an idea of the landscape. I read about Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary, the rivers nearby, Mt. Saramati, the Myanmar border and many other geographical aspects of the region on websites and multiple blogs that shared personal experiences of people who had visited the place. Even learning about the weather was important in order to plan for rains and the cold, as Nagaland has extreme climatic conditions. As much as it was necessary to learn through these sources, I had to make a conscious effort to not form an opinion about the people and the place. I wanted to go to Fakim without any pre-conceived notions so I could explore and build my own understanding of the place.

One of the books that we referred to was 'Mistaken Modernity', written by Dipankar Gupta. The book essentially talks about India stuck between two worlds, one that still believes and practices traditional notions and the other that has adopted this false sense of modernity by only mimicking the western approach. The book gave me good insights in to the notions that I would like to engage with while challenging in my approach and filming practice.



# FIELD RESEARCH

The second step of the research began at Green Hub, a partner organization that helped us greatly with our project, put us in touch with people and provided us with resources in Tezpur. We watched a few short films made by people from Nagaland, Assam, Arunachal and other Northeastern states. This helped in getting a sense of the visuals that one was going to experience and live in for an entire month. Organizing the logistics was also very important, as production is a very important aspect of filmmaking. This facilitates interaction with people from the region who are familiar with the land and the language.

The final and the most important step was to forget all the above so that we do not enter Fakim with preconceived notions about various aspects of life. Instead I thought it better to start interacting with people from the community to get a real feel of the place and the life. Visits to their farmland, machang (place where they cut trees and make planks of wood) and the forest with different people helped us build a larger picture of the life in Fakim. With time, the relationship with people deepened over games of carrom, cups of tea, plates of spicy food and walks in and around the village. This helped in consolidating all of the research from the first stage and applying it in the field to start conversations and sustain them in order to draw insights and construct narratives.

I learnt a lot during my stay there and it helped me greatly to work further on my concept in order to make it more relevant and find appropriate and meaningful content for my

film. I spent a long time in the village trying to find a relevant poem about the forest, and finding Pensokiu was one of the best things that happened to me. Apart from being one of the protagonists of my film, he also helped me understand and look at the entire village from a different perspective. Pensokiu was one of the few in the village who did not want to leave the village and was content and happy with his life in the village. He spoke highly of their traditional knowledge systems and helped me realise the need for this wisdom. Most of my time was spent in talking to Pensokiu about the village, traditions and even his childhood memories. It was very important for me to have indepth knowledge of traditional practices in order to conceptualise and construct my narrative. I have realised the importance of initial research as well as field research through the course of this project as one needs to understand the issues at a personal level but also be able to place them in the larger context..





# EVOLUTION OF IDEAS

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People's relationship with the forest was extremely complex and equally interesting to explore. The initial idea was to begin to understand the relationship through different lenses, different people, all of who depended upon the forest for their livelihood--a hunter scouting for his meals in the forest, a logger trying to make money by selling timber and a farmer practicing Jhum cultivation. All three depended on the forest for their survival but their relationships differed greatly. Although, it would paint a bigger picture of the topic at hand, the concept seemed underdeveloped and un-evolved; no one was just a hunter or just a farmer. I felt that it was very reductive of me to look at the situation through that lens.

I decided to focus on hunting as the theme of my film and started to film interviews on the practice of hunting, traditional weapons versus rifles and even the ban on hunting that was implemented during our stay there. Although, I would have been able to build a strong storyline through traditional practices of hunting and their dependence on the forest for survival, it

would have just been a part of the relationship they share with their forest. In order to paint a larger picture of their relationship and the interdependence on the forest, it would be important to look at multiple facets of it.

Upon applying all the gathered knowledge about the landscape and people, I realised that the story could be looked at from a nostalgic lens and work on an emotional plane rather than a structural plane. The first step was to start looking for stories and songs that spoke about the relationship between the people and the forest. I started meeting older people in the village who would have stories and songs to share. The plan was to try and build the framework of the film through experiences in the forest and the journey taken by the protagonists of the film. Having met Pensokiu and Shetsulam, I began to stitch two separate narratives that could give glimpses into life in Fakim and into the forests and rivers. The decision to have the two threads form a single narrative was taken after finding the poem. The poem takes one on a nostalgic trip to the environment and draws metaphors between the forest and the people. It speaks of the animals, birds, flowers, trees and their meanings in our lives.

Like Robert Bresson has written in Notes on Cinematography, "Let it be feelings that bring about the events, not the other way around."





## FINAL IDEA

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The final concept of the film arose from the dilemma of whether to make the film about the forest or the characters. The film evolved over time and became a story about the forest, told through the two characters. I thought it would be interesting to show diversity through the journey in the forest and therefore decided to focus on two narratives based on two individuals that share the same forest. The individuals are just representation of the community that lives in and around Fakim, as they all share an equally interesting and sensitive relationship with the forest. The motivation is to try and enunciate diversity and traditional knowledge systems that will slowly fade away from general practice and become ancient wisdom.

The film would begin with Shetsulam going into the forest to look for his *mithun* (cattle of the mountains). The second thread would explore the forests and the river around Fakim with Pensokiu while he hunts for crabs and fish in the river. The film will then move on to looking at the construction of a *mithun-ghar* that is a step towards the domestication of a wild animal. The first thread would end with Pensokiu and his wife eating a meal at home. The overarching theme of the film is to explore the people's relationship with the forest and river that is present at multiple layers.

Quoting Sanjay Kak from The Open Frame Reader, "...a documentary is not life, but it is an argument about it."



PRODUCTION





# STORY

The film begins with the forest and hills of Fakim, Nagaland. The journeys of the two protagonists in the film paint a picture of their relationship with their environment, forest and river.

The first thread takes us through the forest with Shetsulam, in order to find his mithun as she has recently given birth to a calf and the calf must be marked by clipping its ear. Traditionally, people have been clipping the ears of the *mithun* in order to differentiate between their owners. Through our journey with Shetsulam we learn different aspects of survival, the terrain and traditional knowledge systems. We get to know about different trees and their uses, tracking the *mithun* in the forest and also about edible leaves. Towards the end of the film, we see Shetsulam among many other villagers building a '*mithun-shed*' in order to restrict the *mithuns* to a small part of the forest so that it is easier to keep track of their whereabouts. The idea is to portray how closely their lives are linked to the naturally existing systems and the impact of changes in these systems.

The second thread of the film focuses on Pensokiu who is walking us through the forest to go to the river. Along the way, he collects bamboo and constructs a net to hunt for crabs. This kind of traditional knowledge rests with the older generation and will soon be lost with the passage of time. We learn much about his understanding of the forest. He is able to construct a net using minimal resources that are all locally available. The '*dao*', a traditional weapon that resembles a machete is the only

tool used to make or break anything. These little things signify a sensitive and sustainable practice that has evolved over generations in order to live in harmony with one's environment. Upon reaching the river, he folds his sleeves and walks into the river to look for his catch. Trailing the river for a few kilometres, and after having harvested a small amount of crabs, Pensokiu sits by the riverside and begins to wash his shoes. Soon after, Pensokiu dismantles the net and leaves it by the riverside as he walks home with his catch of the day.

The poem that is recited by Pensokiu speaks about the relationship shared by all living beings and the environment. It speaks of seasons, activities, animals, birds, trees and flowers. The poem gives us an insight into the people's way of marking time in terms of days and seasons and ends the film on a nostalgic note about their fields, forest and soul. The story of the forest, slightly hints at the changes in the systems towards the end of the film.









## VISUAL TREATMENT

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As Robert Bresson wrote in 'Notes on Cinematography' - "Where not everything is present, but each word, each look, each movement has things underlying."

The film will progress at the pace of walking in the forest or reciting a poem about the forest. The idea is to try and move at an emotional pace rather than a structural one. Conversations between the characters and the filmmaker, and between the two narratives introduces the viewer to life in Fakim. While little would be said about the actions being performed on screen, a larger picture would start to take form through the interactions between the audio and video. While one thread takes form in the river, the other will take the viewer deep inside the forest and in both locations there is little under anybody's control. The idea was to have slow and still frames in order to portray the pace of life in the village. The film would be using both stationary and handheld camerawork in order to compliment the landscape and terrain where the particular sequences are being filmed.

Both the narratives have been shot in the same location that shows how everything is interconnected and interdependent. At multiple points the location of the two narratives overlap, although in the edit one reaches the same location much after the other has already moved ahead. Structurally the narrative has been shifted in order to break away from the literal connections that can be drawn.





Shooting this film was an extremely difficult process for me physically and mentally. Playing with the idea of a walk in the forest in comparison to trying to find meaning behind all the shots was extremely hard. In the process, I also ended up shooting a lot of sequences that were unnecessary or irrelevant. A lot of those sequences were shot with shaky camera work and barely any planning. Since I was shooting and doing sound myself for my film, it was very tiring for me to keep up with my characters in the terrain, carry and handle equipment and also work on my visual style.

It was also very important for me to constantly review my footage in order to plan for the next shoot. A lot of it was for translations to English or Hindi, and also to see if the visual language works with the previous day's shoot. A lot was dependent on the weather and timing of the incidents as well, because Nagaland has heavy monsoons and also summer showers. During our stay there, we could not shoot on a lot of days due to rain even though the locals went about their business just as any other day.



Shooting alone took away from the help I could have had with a crew, it made it easier for my character to open up to me and talk to me. Our relationship existed more off the frame than it did on frame and that is something of much more value to me than anything else. The film for me is a way to try and communicate that experience, that relationship with others in a way that it is also commenting on the lifestyle and the changes that they are going to experience in the near future.





## AURAL TREATMENT

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The first few days in Fakim were spent exploring the village, meeting people, and walking in the forest to their fields or *machang* (place where they cut tree trunks in planks). During our exploration phase, I did not focus on capturing sound and completely neglected it. I realised that I needed to focus on good sound to help create the mood I was aiming for.

Once we returned to Fakim to shoot our films, I decided to use a wireless lapel microphone on my characters so that I am able to capture dialogue as well as other sounds. The wireless lapel was directly connected to my camera and I could monitor sound from the camera directly. The lapel helped me a lot as I did not have to worry about capturing their dialogue and ambient sound simultaneously. Since, I was also shooting my film alone it would have been very hard for me to record sound separately. I also managed to capture good ambient sounds like footsteps while walking in the forest, Pensokiu making the fish net, among others.

Since my film will progress as the characters move through the forest, I felt that good ambient sound of the forest would be very important to build the mood and transitions between different spaces. I established all locations in a few general categories and have recorded sound specific to these locations. In order to maintain the aural differences that I experienced, I decided to work on creating high and low points in the film that would be based on the true experience of the walk.





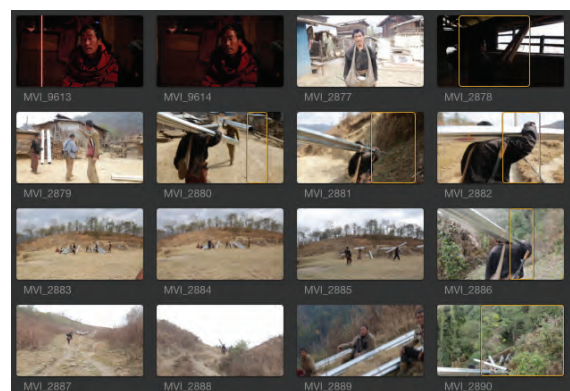
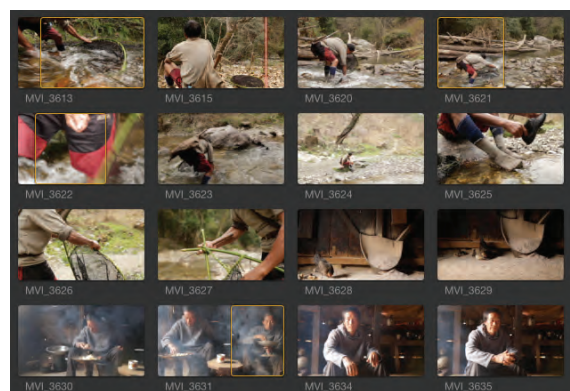
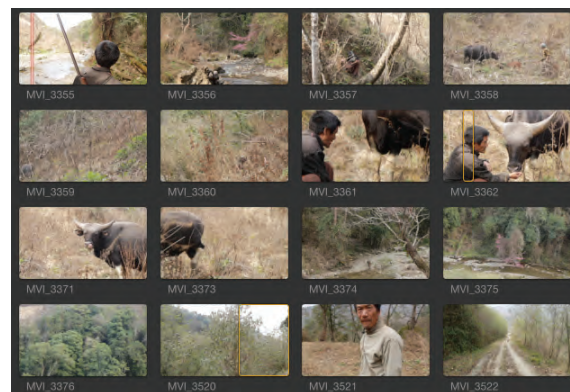
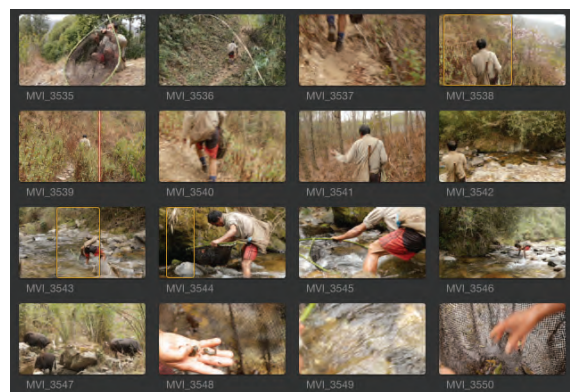
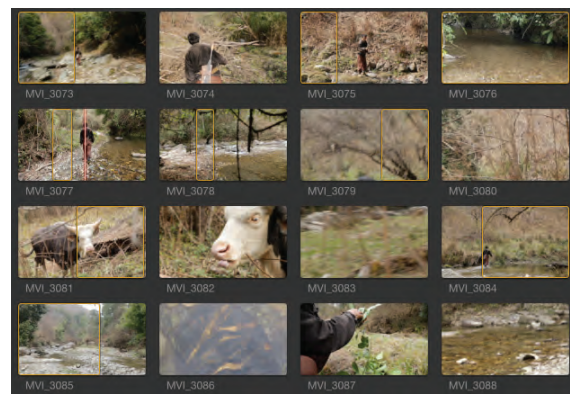
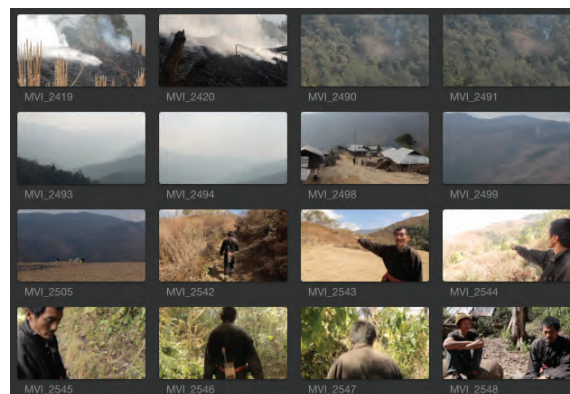
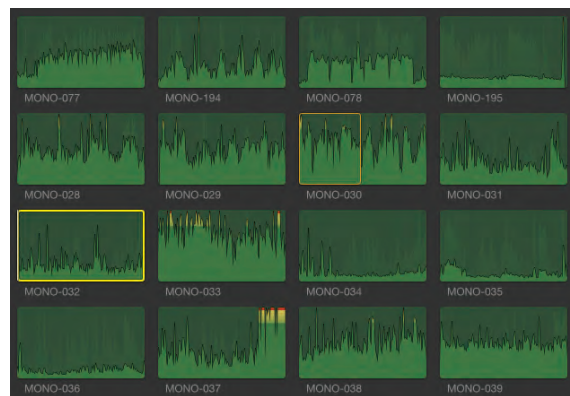




POST PRODUCTION







## EDITING

The first step of editing was to begin logging my footage and identifying sequences that were relevant to my story. After compiling all the video and audio, I started constructing a narrative on the timeline. As I had already made a brief map of my film, I knew exactly what I needed to construct my first cut.

As I had shot most of my film with long takes and handheld camera, it was challenging for me to make cuts. I started to notice a lot of my mistakes as a cinematographer, in terms of decision making, shot-taking and also with the questions I posed to my characters.

A lot of my sound clips also have microphone sound and disturbance. A lot of the technical issues that seemed like small problems during the production, were actually crucial things that I had ignored. Since language was also a barrier for us in Fakim, translations were also an important part of the edit. Translating conversations in English for subtitles was equally challenging, especially for the poem at the end of the film.

Although there seemed to have been many mistakes that I am recognising now, as an editor my role is also to overcome the challenges and cover up for the mistakes made during production. It was a very tedious editing exercise for me to identify useable sequences and cut them together to form the narrative. I also felt the need to allow my presence to be felt in the film, sometimes through subtle references as well as through direct conversation with the characters of the film.



The first cut that I presented in class did not do justice to the script I had written. The cut had a lot of shaky shots, unnecessary sequences that took away from the narrative rather than adding to it. The cut was too long to be able to sustain the narrative and it was extremely rudimentary. After receiving the feedback from faculty, I got multiple ideas on the direction to take with the film.

A few structural changes were made in both the story and the poem. I decided to divide the film into three chapters in my second cut. The chapters would be marked by a verse from the poem and each chapter would have both the stories starting and ending at the same point in the narrative. Although the chapter division made sense for my film, the structure did not work as it was very rigid and linear. Both the narratives were progressing at the same pace and time. In order to add another layer of time and space, I decided to scrap the second cut and start from scratch.

The third cut was made with many structural changes and refined cuts. The duration of the film had reduced to 28 minutes and the two stories had been shifted on the timeline



so that they do not reach their high and low points at the same time. The second story was intercut with the first based on the references made in the first story. The transitions were smoother and did not come across as jumps in the narrative. I had longer cuts in this edit and the bare minimum conversation. The focus was to work according to the mood and feel of the narrative rather than to try and communicate information and cover specific topics.



The final edit that I arrived at has many structural changes than any of the previous cuts I had made. It has completely changed one of the stories in order to make it the central theme of the film. The second story is now only an incidental story that I stumbled upon while on my way to the first story. The distraction takes me through another part of the forest to look at a mysterious character and soon return to the mithun story. Only later in the film is one able to tell that the mysterious character in the film is also the poet in the film. The narrative comes back to Shetsulam as he and other villagers build a shed for the *mithuns* in order to restrict them to a certain part of the forest.



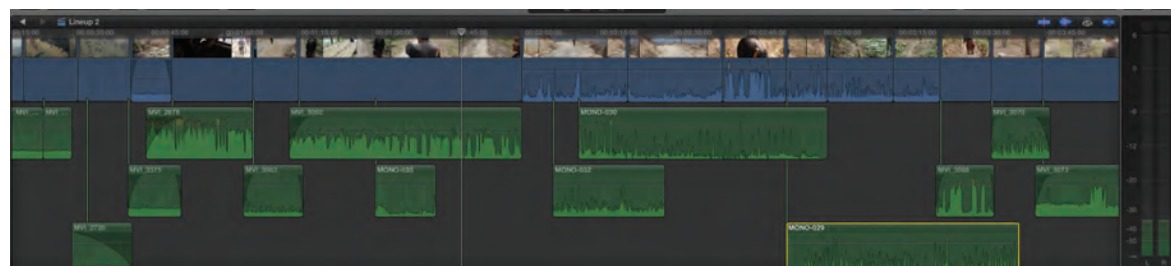
Translations

Rhododendron (flower) is blooming	—	Muthapan pon
"		
the rho. blooming (means)	—	amate ja
(spring) new season / new year	—	maganee sam
Flower is blooming	—	Thavepan pon
same as above	—	amate ja
The season of sowing is coming	—	tsugo sulam
The cock is crowing	—	tsuo kong lam
"		
means	—	amate ja
(the light at the horizon)	—	ama sulam
The day is coming	—	changa konglam
The great barbet is calling	—	amate ja
"		
means	—	amate ja
The village leaders are calling	—	ki shu lam no
hooot gibbon is calling	—	huli kong lam
"		
means	—	amate ja
village announcing in the village	—	hi vang tha sam
rainy festival (monsoon) means	—	maganee chax
"		
means	—	amate ja
spirit / soul going back/away	—	sha vang lam no
boundary of the field	—	la ra long stone
"		
means	—	amate ja
we life (our life)	—	jam sam (thang) tam
the crying of our minds (sadness)		

## TRANSLATIONS

Plot Structure

The Rhododendron blooming means the beginning of new year.	1	Poem
Thavepan blooming means the season of sowing has come.	1	Poem
Entrance of livestock from the village. Pigs, Chicken, Dogs.	1	Story
Relates to mithun (beaming livestock) and also food largely. Subtext	1	Story
Mulingmang making the plate. Story	1	Story
Relates to food. (Subtext)	1	Story
Also mithun - food.	1	Story
The cock is crowing means a new day is coming.	2	Poem
The Great Barbet is calling means the village leaders are calling.	2	Poem
The Hooot Gibbon is calling means the time has come to go.	2	Poem
Mithun looking in forest and river, with Alim	2	Story
Crab hunting with Pensokiu	2	Story
Primarily the journey of the film. With two parallel stories making the crux of the film.	2	Story
The season of rain means the spirit/soul is going back.	3	Poem
The boundary of the field means the boundary of life.	3	Poem
The building of the mithun ghat. Pensokiu and Lunkichu eating.	3	Story
Livestock and mithun, domestication. Food and how it is going to be drastically changing.	3	Story
The crying of our minds. Poem	4	Poem
The sadness in our minds.	4	Poem
End		



# SOUND DESIGN

Sound plays a very important role in my film as it is crucial for me to be able to recreate the mood of the forest and river for the audience. Although the visuals are my strength, it was necessary for me to utilise good sound in the edit to reinforce the video. During production, I was doing sound and camera for my film by myself and that made it extremely hard for me to do justice to either at certain points. I decided to use the wireless lapel microphone sound to my advantage and have sequences with the characters far away from the camera but the conversations audible to the audience.

I had to make a very hard and important decision for my film against the use of music. Although a lot of people's feedback was that music will reinforce or enhance the mood and setting of the narrative, I felt that it would take away from the normality of the experience that the viewers will have in the forest through the film. By adding music one tends to make the usual seem unusual and exotic, and I was not willing to take that decision on my edit. Therefore I worked on an ambient track for my film and decided to end it with Pensokiu singing the poem.

Another very important aspect of sound design was to record and edit the poem in a crisp and sharp manner. Since I had taken over two recordings of the poem on different occasions, I had multiple options to work with. I did not want to take away from the feeling and ambience created by the poetry and therefore had to also do poetic subtitles for the film. Although the poem was translated into English, the effort was to retain the emotion and meaning of the original verse.



CONCLUSION

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## REFLECTIONS

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We spent over a month in Fakim, living and sharing a common space with many new people. Initially, there was a lot of excitement for new things, talking to people and spending time in the forest. But slowly the slow pace of life and the disconnection from the rest of the world starts to become an issue. The initial period I spent in trying to communicate with people from back home but slowly that shifted and we started to move away from virtual reality.

I started to spend a lot of time with the two characters of my film and began to learn a lot about their lifestyle while sharing meals, tea and playing carrom. Suddenly, I realised how comfortable people were becoming with us in the village. There was a sense of acceptance from both sides and there was a stark difference between the looks exchanged when we first arrived to half way through our trip. Apart from the people who feature in our films, we also became a part of the larger community and interacted with everyone in the village. Slowly, I started adjusting to the pace of life there and had become very comfortable living that lifestyle. I wanted to try and share the experience of this pace through my film.

The film is to become an expression of my journey and time there, to show my interest in their way of life. It is also a gateway for me to dive into their world and explore the environment through their lens. In my film, I have only tried to observe and visualise the everyday. This culminated in to an experience of my journey with the two characters through the forests and rivers of Fakim.







# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Tsuseki and his family for being so kind to host and feed the five of us for a period of over a month in their home and their lives.

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Ali, Harsimran, Siddharth and Zahra for making it a memorable journey.

Cover Design by Shreya Vyas





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2. 'Even Dwarfs Started Small', Werner Herzog
3. 'Grizzly Man', Werner Herzog





The blooming rhododendron

Is a sign of

The beginning of a new year

The blooming orchid tree

Is a sign of

The beginning of a new season...



This film was made as part of a undergraduate degree program for the academic year 2015-2016 under the project A Naga Jungle Book.

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