



Home Run

An award-winning feature documentary that premiered last month at the New York Indian Film Festival explores Manipur's preoccupation with America's national sport, baseball

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IN a green clearing, a boy wearing brown leather mitts and a cap tosses a ball in the air, while his friends stretch their limbs. A woman, on the other side, swings a bat in the air and says, "Don't over-rotate with your hips when you swing. Lead with your arm." Clearly, a game of baseball is about to start. This, however, is nowhere in the US, where the sport is considered a national pastime. Between images of temple prayers, handloom weaving, barricaded roads dotted with armed soldiers and raging protests, this footage is a part of *The Only Real Game*, American filmmaker Mirra Bank's documentary on the popular culture of baseball in Manipur.

In 1947, when baseball legend Babe Ruth retired before succumbing to throat cancer, he called baseball the only real game since it gave everyone — orphans like himself who learned the game on the streets — a chance to become "heroes". "To us, this made a great title for a film in which baseball

bridges age, gender and culture. I don't know that anyone will fully solve the mystery of its preference in Manipur. But it's clear that it provides them a sense of joy and shared purpose," says Bank.

In a country obsessed with cricket and our lives pounded by ongoing scams, the 80-minute documentary refreshingly shows Manipur's love for the "pure and untainted" sport of baseball. "There are men, women and children, as young as six and as old as 60," says Bank. In a state seeped in decades-old insurgency, Bank turns her gaze towards the people, who find solace in this American game that they have adapted to their culture, already rife with indigenous games, dance and martial arts of their own. "There is a sequence in the film in which, strength and agility, disciplines of the traditional Manipuri martial art, Thang Ta, are revealed as very relevant to baseball," says Bank.

Bank was nominated for an Academy Award for her last documentary, *Last Dance* (2002), which follows a collaboration between New York-



(Clockwise from far left) Mirra Bank; children watch a ball on tee; a player catches the ball; Manipuri film crew members

based Pilobolus Dance Theatre and author-illustrator Maurice Sendak of *Where the Wild Things Are*. *The Only Real Game* premiered

last month at the New York Indian Film Festival where it won the Best Documentary award. In 2006, Bank's colleagues Muriel Peters and Somi

Roy asked her to film their efforts at First Pitch, an organisation they founded to help baseball grow in Manipur. Obtaining visas was an arduous process, especially in 2010-2011 when Manipur was under Disturbed Area Permit regulations. "I never felt threatened here, though the military and bureaucratic restrictions were constraining in many ways. And restrictions on the length of stay for any one visit were frustrating — a maximum of 10 days," says Bank.

The film transports us to black-and-white 8mm visuals of World War II, when Japan was to attack India through the then princely state of Manipur in 1942. As Allied force bases were made in the Manipur-Burma border, American soldiers flew in "silver birds". This was when baseball is said to have been first introduced to the local community. Some of them talk about the odd jobs they held at the base. Bank also introduces two World War II US Army veterans, Theron Smith and Bob Bilello, who were posted in Manipur. They recount how they "made a little game bigger".

One of the subjects Bank closely worked with were women, who are the "torchbearers" in the sport, as some of them are prominent coaches in the state, as well as the society. "To Manipur's women, baseball seems a safe haven for children, a way to keep them away from guns and drugs — and the ever-present threat of HIV infection," says Bank. The voice over has been done by Academy Award-winning Hollywood actor Melissa Leo who, along with Bank's American and Manipuri crew, delivered a "trustworthy, engaging and unobtrusive" narrative.

The film, realistically, is not about baseball as the ultimate success. For instance, a design for a ballpark by Assamese architect Nandinee Phookan in Imphal was approved but never executed. "People have been disappointed so often for so many reasons. Baseball has had its ups and downs too. I've been struck by the tenacity of those who love the game in Manipur," says Bank, who is working on bringing the film to film festivals across India, especially to Manipur.

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