

Baseball-ing in Manipur

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By: Aseem Chhabra

The Only Real Game is about the craze for an American sport, juxtaposed with the socio-economic condition of the state.

Mirra Banks had travelled to India a number of times, but in 2006 she experienced something that was incredible, a story that filmmakers only dream about. That year, with the support of some friends, Banks and a small crew travelled from New York to Manipur in search of a story about baseball and the passion Manipuris have for the American sport.

The Only Real Game shows us images of the armed forces on the streets of Imphal

Out of that trip and two subsequent visits was born a remarkable and fascinating documentary - *The Only Real Game*, looking at how baseball came to Manipur and how the sport keeps many of the local residents of the state - men, women and children focused, despite the harsh realities of their lives. The film is narrated by Oscar winning Hollywood actress Melissa Leo (she won the best supporting actress Oscar for *The Fighter* and was also nominated for her lead performance in *Frozen River*).

"It is such an unlikely story," Banks says from her home in New York City. Her 2002 documentary *Last Dance* was shortlisted for the Oscars. "And I was also very attracted by the fact that Manipur was truly unknown, and apparently to most Indians as well."

This May, *The Only Real Game* premiered at the New York Indian Film Festival, where it won the best documentary award. Later this month, the film will be shown at the Mumbai Film Festival, followed by a game of baseball organised by the US Consulate at the city's American School.

Baseball came to Manipur during the World War II when the American armed forces were stationed in the region to counter a potential Japanese invasion of India. Banks managed to find two surviving American veterans who recall the time they spent playing the sport while waiting for the war to happen. They left behind the passion for baseball that still engages Manipuris.

Manipur is a state ravaged by insurgency (there are about two dozen insurgent groups), political protests, constant presence of armed forces, high unemployment level (nearly 20 percent) and drug addiction that makes HIV/AIDS a serious concern. But nothing matters more to many Manipuris than to play baseball everyday.

The Only Real Game shows us images of the armed forces on the streets of Imphal. And then there is some very dramatic and disturbing footage of political protests and the harsh way in which they are crushed.

But the film also focuses on the work done by *First Pitch*, a not-for-profit group in New York, which raised funds to send two Major League Baseball coaches and equipment to Manipur. A fundraiser was organised in New York City and people were generous, given that they knew very little about Manipur.

Spalding - a major sports company in the US donated baseballs and mitts for the players. "This is not an obvious project for charitable donations," says the film's producer Mike Peters who appears briefly in the film.

In the very moving and inspiring sections of the film, Banks and her crew follow the two American coaches as they practice every morning with potential Manipuri coaches and with children. The emotional bond between the two Americans and the players is heartening.

Leo says in her narration, "Baseball is the microcosm of life. The disciplines, the struggles and things that are not fair. It is an extremely difficult road." Her words obviously draw a parallel with the lives of Manipuris.

"Manipur is a tremendously moving place," Banks adds as she prepares for her trip to Mumbai.

"For India the situation is very poignant. Here you have this powerful economic engine, the largest democracy in the world. But until you are in places like Manipur, you don't really realise how far apart people can be and how difficult some people's lives are."

She acknowledges that she is not an expert, and in making the film she wanted to convey a unique story to the audiences in India and abroad. But she did notice a thing or two about Manipuris.

"The people of Manipur feel very betrayed," she says. "I sense they feel they have been pushed aside and are forgotten for the most part."

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