

# Highland Film Club: Connecting People and Cultures through Film

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Based at the Highland Institute in Kohima, The Highland Film Club, launched in February 2023, shows a variety of films by indigenous and non-indigenous filmmakers on the last Friday of every month. The films, usually documentaries and feature films, from all around the world feature a range of topics, including environmental stewardship, indigenous culture and knowledge and social issues. Wherever possible, the film director is invited to attend, in person, or online, and the lively discussion after the film is a key part of the event.

**Keywords:** critiquing films, filmmakers, Kohima culture, Nagaland

Art, in all its forms, reflects society. Films, in particular, because of their accessibility, help dismantle stereotypes and act as carriers of culture across the world. Apart from entertaining us, films can teach us about bygone eras, critique contemporary socio-economic, political, and environmental issues, and become catalysts for social change. As a response to the lack of a forum for showing and critiquing films in Nagaland's capital, Kohima, The Highland Film Club was launched on 24 February 2023 with an online announcement and a poster (Fig. 1). The Club, which enables meaningful dialogue between filmmakers and film enthusiasts, is an exciting addition to Kohima's cultural scene and shows diverse films by indigenous and non-indigenous filmmakers every month. It aims to foster critical



Figure 1: Film Club poster (design: Santosh Yen)

1. The Highland Institute



Figure 2: Interactive session with filmmaker Chentei Khamniungan (photo: author)

thinking and address themes of trauma, stereotypes, environmental stewardship, and the preservation of traditions and cultures.

Since its inception, the Highland Film Club (run by the Highland Institute) has collaborated with national and international organizations such as the Reciprocity Project, Kriti Film Club, Ektara Collective, independent filmmakers, and local filmmakers. It has drawn scholars, students, working professionals, educators, and filmmakers into its hub, and stimulating discussions are a feature of every screening (Fig. 2). Additionally, viewers of different age groups can engage in various types of fun activities (Fig. 3). Each curated film carries a message and exposes the audience to a rich tapestry of cultures from around the world. Reciprocity Project films, for example, transported viewers into Native American communities.

The various films addressed themes ranging from the transmission of cultural traditions and customs, the resurgence of tattooing among indigenous people as a mark of identity, the reverence for human and nonhuman relations, and the preservation of tradition amid development. Similarly, Naga filmmakers have documented indigenous Naga crops as well as handicrafts and weaving practices that are on the verge of extinction. Chentei Khamniungan's *Just Like Our Grandmothers* documented the dying tradition of nettle weaving among the Eastern Nagas. In *Honey Hunters of My Village*, Thangsoi Khamniungan took the viewers on an adrenaline-fuelled visual journey to harvest cliff honey. In addition, a thought-provoking documentary, *We Don't Need a Map*, by celebrated Australian filmmaker Warwick Thornton discussed the significance of the Southern Cross for the Aboriginal people and how it has become a contested symbol in contemporary Australia.

In some cases, films screened at the Club have resonated with the local audience and encouraged them to reconnect with their roots. For Saktum Wonti, a researcher, the tattooing in *We Will Walk the Trail of Our Ancestors* reminded her of her mother:



**Figure 3:** Fun activities for adults and kids at the Highland Film Club (photo collage: author)

*The first thing that stood out was the familiar parallel lines pattern, tattooed on the woman's chin. I could recall my mother, who also wears a similar traditional tattoo, saying she was one of the last in her village to receive this tattoo, which used to be a mark of identity. As the film progressed, I marvelled much at how rich and diverse our world is, while also lamenting how much we have left behind while progressing with the fast-changing world. The films, so beautifully captured, bring to us a strong message to reconnect with our roots and the importance of our traditions that no book or film will ever fully capture until we practice and let it live on.*

Dr. Ketoukhrie, an assistant professor from Kohima College, who often brings her students to the Film Club, says:

*The Highland Institute Film Club is a wonderful exposure to different genres of films revolving around contemporary critical issues such as indigenous knowledge, livelihood, food security, and so on. Besides imparting knowledge, it provides a perfect ambience to relax and socialize with filmmakers, interns, and participants from*

*schools and colleges. If you are looking for a place to de-stress after a hectic week, Highland Film Club is the right place with great films, warm people with warmer coffee, and popping popcorn.*

Tarini Manchanda, filmmaker, made the following comment on the Club:

*It is a space for curiosity and discussion within the broader landscape of the peaceful everyday life in Kohima. A source of information, entertainment, reflection and much more, I would recommend it to any filmmaker seeking an informed audience and to cinephiles who would like to explore the medium of film.*

Films advocate for social change, promote solidarity, raise awareness for environmental sustainability, and preserve diverse cultures for posterity. The Highland Film Club is free and open to all on the last Friday of every month at the Highland Institute in Kohima. The Club is also open to organizations and filmmakers for collaboration on future screenings.

Contact details are accessible at: <https://highlandinstitute.org/>

