



ARTS ILLUSTRATED





Into the Shot, Quietly

Filmmakers Anushka Meenakshi and Iswar Srikumar's U-ra-mi-li project is an experience that breaks down the audience-filmmaker mould in quite unexpected ways, making way for fresh perspectives on how we engage with cinema

PRAVEENA SHIVRAM



Tulku ji playing Kokpo, Spiti valley, Himachal Pradesh

In 'Up Down and Sideways', one of the films of the U-ra-mi-li ('the song of our people') project, there is a nine-minute shot of farmers in Nagaland's Phek village, working in the field, singing a haunting, lilting melody. The shot itself, long and static like relentless summer rain, washes over you as you feel that familiar itch for change – surely, an intercut needs to happen now, a close-up should break the rhythm, maybe more music or editing gimmicks? You let all that pass and the shot is still there, waiting like an old friend, and you find yourself falling into its pace and it hits you, this realisation like lightning firing up the night sky, that there is something untouched you are witnessing here, that you are not outside of the film but inside it – emotionally and physically – as the music, so specific to the region goes 'up, down and sideways'. 'I think, as an audience, we are extremely conscious of the pace of a film. And, as makers, we are conscious

of the rhythm of the footage. This particular nine-minute shot, that comes in the middle of the film, a lot of people have told us it's too long, but don't change it,' says Iswar Srikumar, one of the filmmakers of this 'two-member crew' with Anushka Meenakshi that makes up the U-ra-mi-li project.

I met Anushka and Iswar at a noisy cafe in Chennai, but ten minutes into the conversation I was just as drawn into their world of film-making as I was drawn to their films. The first time I heard about this project in 2011 – it didn't have a name then – it was via a Facebook post. The post said something to the effect of Anushka and Iswar not being able to find a decent apartment in Chennai for an unmarried couple, and so they decided to travel through the country, filming interesting performances along the way, and invited their friends to support them. 'It really did begin that randomly,' says Anushka, 'and we didn't have a very clear idea of what we

wanted to do then. We knew we wanted to look at music and performance specifically, but it was only when we received a grant from Pad.ma (Public Access Digital Media Archive) and worked with them that it really helped us break down the "whys" of our film-making process. And, in the course of our travels, we also went to Spiti Valley, where we first saw farmers singing and something clicked. In retrospect, I think it was that moment when U-ra-mi-li came to be.'

'By the way,' adds Iswar, 'what you hear in that nine-minute segment is gibberish. The farmers are just making up words and singing it, and we get the maximum laughs there when we screen the film locally.'

There you go. Right there, for me, is what makes U-ra-mi-li significant – that the immersive can be just as soulful as it can be amusing.

Excerpts from the conversation

How do you manage to strike that balance between remaining true to the essence of the songs despite how they are placed in a film – the editing, the shots, the presentation – all of which play on a viewer's mind?

Anushka Meenakshi: I think we are still trying to find that balance, and increasingly, looking at how you film performance, because it isn't just about switching on the camera. And, I think, we also go by instinct; there are no set patterns. In 'Up Down and Sideways', for instance, the language of filming reflects the work and the rhythm of the people. We haven't seen this work before, and spend probably a day or two with one group and that's all the time there is. And, it's difficult, because nothing is staged. We are walking around waiting for something to happen, and the reflection of our thoughts is only in retrospect, not at the moment of filming. Iswar Srikumar: Practically, as well, we don't speak the language. So we would always shoot without interrupting the flow or the rhythm of the conversation or the singing. We only had a vague idea of what they were saying with our translator there, so we had a sense of it, but it was only a year later, when the transcript came, did we know exactly what was being said.

Because of the way you went about this project, I get the distinct feeling that you are your first audience. You pick and shoot things that interest you, things that you hear about, and then in one of your descriptions you mention 'parts of this may or may not make it into the film', so now here is another 'viewer' who has taken your place. How would you describe that viewer?

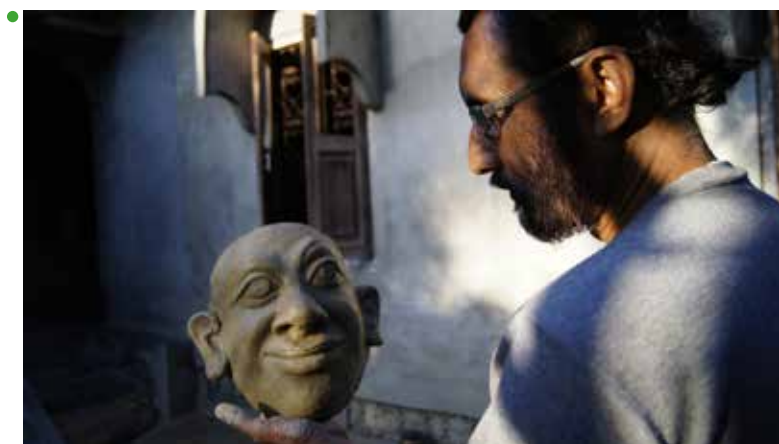
Anushka Meenakshi: There are all kinds of viewers today. The online audience is important to us, but what I have enjoyed more is physically going from place to place screening the film. To have people come, and not be distracted for the duration of the film – I know this is a tiny percentage of our viewership, but the feedback we get from such a 'live' audience is immensely valuable. And, to watch people watch your film is a great exercise in sensing the mood in the room.

Iswar Srikumar: What moves me is also the non-verbal engagement with the viewer when we travel. We can't have subtitles for everything, and how many languages would that mean, then? It's how you feel when you watch the film even when you don't necessarily understand the language. It's how we film as well, sensing the mood more than drowning in details.

I am also interested in crowd-funding as a process. How does that affect the way you make your film – this need for it to be accepted as much as the need for it to be recognised?

Iswar Srikumar: It's neither acceptance nor recognition. A lot of the people who fund our work are people who know us as film-makers, or people who have been moved by what they have seen. It's not raining funds, and we are glad, actually, for the pace at which this project is going. We do other work as well to keep ourselves financially sustained. Anushka Meenakshi: Funnily enough, though, the other work we get somehow falls into the U-ra-mi-li concept.

- Horse in horse, Still from the film *Opacity*, 2017
- *Mule* (working collective) resting between work, Phek, Nagaland
- Goswami ji, the mask maker at Samaguri Sattrra, Majuli, Assam
- Yaks, cows, goats, donkeys and sheep are herded home in Dhangkar, Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh



How do you deal with the unexpected as a filmmaker? And how does that change you as makers?

Iswar Srikumar: The first thing to keep in mind is that labour has a lot of dignity. They are working, and there is a reason they are doing what they are doing. We are very conscious of that when we enter that space, and we mostly just let them be.

Anushka Meenakshi: I think I am a lot more thrown by the unexpected, by not knowing. Iswar Srikumar: I think it also has a lot to do with how you interact with them. It's about drawing them out, to take the attention away from the camera, and sometimes that means giving them the camera to play around with, to keep moving around, so that after a while, they will go back to their work because they need to work, and then they are a lot more relaxed about having us around.

I was completely taken in by the 'Li' music, and while watching 'Up Down and Sideways', I couldn't make out what was making me fall in love with the film – the music or the film itself. Which made me wonder, between the story and the song, which one completes the other, you think? Sort of like the chicken and the egg question. For you, which one comes first?



Paddy fields in Phek, Still from the film *Up Down and Sideways*, 2017.



Anushka Meenakshi: I think it's the song or the rhythm that comes first to me. If we find an emotional energy or react at a gut instinct level to the rhythm then that's the core of it. Though I do worry a lot about the 'story' of the film, and what we are going to make of it, I think the song comes first for me.

Iswar Srikumar: It's also really about the relationship with human beings who allow you into their work. In our 37-minute work-in-progress film, we have this bit with Goswamiji in Majuli Island, Assam, who makes performance masks. We spent four to five days there filming and we would just shoot him work, without interrupting him, and there was very little conversation. Just him and the rhythm of his work, and suddenly he would ask us something – if we had monkeys in Chennai and if they were big as well – he was curious about us, and this is what makes the process exciting for me.

The advantage for independent film-makers today is that you will always have an audience for your film, and the flip side is that kind of open landscape/opportunity can also become overwhelming. So, my question is, how do you, as makers, decide this is something that will 'stand out' in this deluge of images? How 'different' or 'offbeat' does something have to be? And, therefore, did you choose Nagaland's Li music as your first U-ra-mi-li full length feature release?

Anushka Meenakshi: Not at all. It was entirely by accident that we found ourselves there. And it was one of the few places where work songs existed as work songs. In the other places we had filmed work songs, we found that we had to egg people on a bit, but here it was a natural process. And by then we knew for sure that we wanted to focus on movement and rhythm and look at more everyday songs, not performances that are performed on stage. Iswar Srikumar: A month and a half into the project, we cut our first 17-minute film from the footage we had till then. When we continued to travel – mostly through the North East – and showed the 17-minute film, it allowed us to engage with people and see our process better. In fact, it was during one of the screenings in a school in Nagaland, that the children, who saw Spiti Valley farmers in the film singing, told us about farmers singing in their Phek village.

And, finally, U-ra-mi-li, as a concept, can be never-ending. Does it scare you, sometimes, that this may become a life-project?

Anushka Meenakshi: No, it doesn't scare me at all. When we started out, we would say by next month we should do this, or in six months this should happen, and now it's been five years, and I think we are quite happy with

how it is unfolding. Iswar Srikumar: For me it's like theatre. I fell in love with theatre, and U-ra-mi-li affects me the same way. It's filming a certain kind of engagement with people, of watching the rhythm of work, of a job being done, and there is so much beauty in that, so much focus that it could well have been the beginning of performance, of where theatre began, as a collective, and I could watch this rhythm of work for hours.

● Harvest time in Phek, Still from the film *Up Down and Sideways*, 2017.

● Paddy fields in Phek, Still from the film *Up Down and Sideways*, 2017.

● Cattle in Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh

● Fish Tree, Still from the film *Opacity*, 2017.

● Rewben Mashangva and Tshampang yongonpokpi, Manipur

All images courtesy of U-ra-mi-li

U-ra-mi-li's 'Up Down and Sideways' is now in its final stages of post-production. The film is partly funded by a grant from the India Foundation for the Arts. Otherwise, it is entirely crowd-funded.

If you would like to support the film, write to uramili.project@gmail.com

