

FROM HER house in the hills, Neelima Mathur peers into the forest, her cigarette poised between her fingers as she lets out a raspy laugh. She isn't quite plotting a revolution, but as the daughter of a Trotskyite mother and a second generation socialist, her plans do have more than just the veneer of an insurrection. Ostensibly, she is bringing an international documentary film festival to Uttarakhand. More specifically, to the Naukuchiatal Lake Resort — an idyllic little tourist haven in the hills, overlooking an overhang of pine trees,

market can offer. For someone who has spent her life saying 'frankly my dear, I don't give a damn' to the commercial market, carving out an alternative is something of a mission and has cost Neelima and her husband Pramod many stressful nights in a relentless search for funds for their new idea. Almost nothing came of that. But they soldiered on. Creating a new space, they reason, takes time and this is only the first year. Registering for the festival, therefore, costs anywhere between ₹2,500 and ₹5,000 — depending on whether you're a student or not. They reason that even if only a

Some are now facing sentences up to 300 years. It's a movie that forces anyone watching to ask the question — is it possible to protect your land and forests from degradation by the State without resorting to violence?

More than provocation, what the festival provides, says Neelima, is atmosphere. You could, for instance, be watching these films online. However, "when you have a physical festival, the conversations you have with people, during coffee and cigarette breaks, is what makes the difference. That's the kind of intellectual churning I'm looking for,"

that she is translating into German as her one final mission. Translating, she reveals in the film, is a "yearning for something that keeps escaping for the unrivalled original, the final, the essential".

The Lakeside Leipzig festival is tied umbilically to its parent — 'DOK Leipzig' in Germany — the world's oldest international documentary film festival. But even before the first chapter of the festival in India is born, Neelima says she has big plans. The coming year, the feast of films will fly into India along with their makers to conduct sessions on their craft. And in the years ahead, an in-

the bloody civil war of 1979, where 80,000 people died, emerges only as the story picks up. As people in the village speak of being persecuted and hunted down by the army for being communists, the screen cuts to giant ants marching in file, carrying bits of leaf, until one goes astray and is crushed. The imagery is powerful, evocative and dramatic.

You could also lose yourself completely in the darkly elegiac *Goodnight Nobody*, a film whose haunting music stitches together four stories of insomnia from different parts of the world, whose listless nights of staring into the

is often forgotten, even unimportant as long as you know you being served the best. But when you watch a film like *The Steam Of Life*, you cannot but be startled by the fact that this is a documentary, when you see the subjects of the film, naked Finnish men, bare their souls as they engage in Finland's most popular pastime — the sauna. That their catharsis is real moves you to tears and drives home the point that Neelima is trying to make. Non-fiction film has an important place in the sun.

So far, film festivals like the International Film Festival of India in Goa or

THE WOMAN WITH FIVE ELEPHANTS, AND OTHER STORIES



In a country devoted to film, the space for documentaries continues to shrink. **REVATI LAUL** previews a debut international festival devoted to non-fiction in the hills of Uttarakhand

home to 150 different species of birds, some inquisitive monkeys and the occasional spotted deer. Tucked into the folds of this plan for the 'Leipzig Lakeside Festival' is a larger plot. To expand the horizon of the documentary in India from the educational films on television about Tutankhamun's tomb and endangered dolphins to what it really is — non-fiction storytelling.

As long as reality is limited to ancient Egypt and endangered species, it keeps the status quo. When tightly woven narratives like *War On Air* question what gets left out by journalists covering Gaza, the agenda does become something of an insurrection. Or at the very least, a brave attempt to stretch what the

motley crew shows up for the five-day festival that starts on 7 March, it will be an encouraging step towards making space for the kind of filmmaking they believe India desperately needs.

Take the film *If A Tree Falls*, for instance. It's a close look at America's version of Maoists. The Earth Liberation Front, or the ELF, is a group of people that started out in the 1980s as hippie tree huggers, saving the giant redwood trees from being razed for profit. When their Greenpeace-type protests didn't work, they became arsonists, burning down factories and cars that they held responsible for gobbling up the forests. They were hunted down by the FBI and branded terrorists for their tree love.

she explains. Like the films on offer, the life she and Pramod have chosen for themselves is part of a counter narrative to the mainstream. Slow living, with the forest in your face, is what they call progress. And the ideal setting for a festival of non-fiction film.

Like Vadim Jendreyko's *The Woman With Five Elephants*, which sets you on a deeply spiritual journey of remembrance and forgetting. The story of a hunched Russian woman, Svetlana Geier, who has spent a lifetime recovering from the second world war, which forced her to flee from Ukraine and live all her life in Germany as a translator. She now carries around her 'five elephants' — five of Dostoyevsky's novels

cubation lab for young filmmakers to grow their ideas and find takers in the international market.

All of that can only happen with the first baby step being taken this March. By putting out a carefully curated section of the finest non-fiction film. Films like *The Tiniest Place* that must be seen for the sheer pleasure of experiencing storytelling at its best. Set in El Salvador, filmmaker Tatiana Huezo Sánchez weaves the story like Gabriel García Márquez did in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Where you have an inside out experience as you see the first idea arrive and take root in the tiny village of Chinquera. That this idea sows the seed of dissidence that eventually builds into

void are turned by filmmaker Jaqueline Zünd into something poetic, as you lose yourself in the pathos of Fedir Nesterchuk from the Ukraine, the man who hasn't slept for 20 years. Or Lin Yao from Shanghai, the girl who stayed awake at night to keep her parents from fighting and who then forgot how to sleep.

That you're watching fact, not fiction,

Films like *The Tiniest Place* deserve to be seen for the sheer pleasure of experiencing storytelling at its best

● **Show time** Stills from the movies (L-R) *The Woman with Five Elephants*, *Steam of Life*, *A Piece of Summer*, and *The Tiniest Place*

Osian's Cinefan in Delhi have focussed largely on fiction. This festival is about giving non-fiction the space it deserves, says Neelima, as her cackle rips through the hilly air like a challenge, as if trying to live out the lines from an Eliot poem — "For us there is only the trying, the rest is not our business," she and her husband now work furiously and frenetically towards D-day.

Details at www.formedia.org.in/lake-festival/index.html

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