



TEZPUR, INDIA

Rita Banerji is developing a ‘forest’ of conservation-minded filmmakers



PHOTOS BY ANNE PINTO-RODRIGUES

EYES ON ECOLOGY: Epil Rani Kongari has completed the Green Hub filmmaking fellowship. She is working on a documentary about conflict between people and elephants in Bindukuri, India.

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues / Contributor

Epil Rani Kongari describes the many problems – from child marriage to rape and murder – faced by girls and women in her village, Bindukuri, in India’s northeastern Assam state.

“It’s not a safe place for women at all,” she says.

Ms. Kongari’s family is part of the Munda community, brought to Assam from other parts of India by the British in the mid-19th century to be laborers on tea estates. Generations later, Munda people are still working on these estates, where they barely receive a living wage. Access to higher education and other opportunities, particularly for Munda women, is also severely limited.

Despite this background, Ms. Kongari is an independent filmmaker and an aspiring cinematographer for wildlife documentaries.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

Providing a camera and filmmaking training to rural and Indigenous young people has been transformative in northeastern India. The youths can now be a voice of their environment.



KAREN NORRIS/STAFF

She is currently making a film about conflict between humans and elephants in her rural community – something she would never have been able to do if not for Green Hub, a pioneering fellowship program that offers free training in conservation filmmaking to Indigenous and rural young people.

“The program changed my life completely,” says Ms. Kongari, who has been interested in photography since her early years. “For those of us who are not financially strong, it’s such a blessing.”

“We can create a future”

Rita Banerji, one of the earliest female wildlife filmmakers in India, started Green Hub in 2015 in partnership with North East Network, a women’s rights organization working in northeastern India. “We’ve always known that video is a powerful tool for conservation action, but over the years, we’ve started seeing it as really transformative,” Ms. Banerji says.

“Someone who may have never noticed anything outside their home, when you give them a camera, they suddenly start looking at their surroundings very differently,” she adds. “That’s when the stories start coming out.”

Ms. Banerji thinks that this network of discerning fellows will have the most impact in the country. “The only way forward is by creating a forest of people who understand that if we come together as a community, we can create a future,” she says.

A winner of several national and international filmmaking awards, Ms. Banerji is no stranger to conservation successes. She played a pivotal role in the making of “Shores of Silence,” a 2000 documentary that shed light on the killing of whale sharks by impoverished fishers off the coast of India’s western Gujarat state. The film led Indian officials to give whale sharks the same safeguards as tigers – the government’s highest level of protection.

However, at one point, Ms. Banerji says she began to believe that her filmmaking was “not enough” and started thinking about how to promote conservation action on a larger scale. She launched Green Hub in

the city of Tezpur in Assam to empower marginalized young people – especially women – to create films.

Several of the fellows haven’t touched a camera before the program, while some haven’t even been to school. In the latter case, the youths are taught how to use a camera by recognizing the icons on it.

Each batch of fellows undergoes three months of technical training in the classroom, followed by 10 months of filmmaking in the field on a specific environmental issue, in collaboration with a local nonprofit.

Ms. Kongari was affiliated with Aaranyak, an Assam-based wildlife conservation group, and made her fellowship film about the threats faced by the Kohora River and the Karbi community that depends on it. In 2023, the film was selected for screening at the All Living Things Environmental Film Festival, held across India annually.

On completion of the yearlong program, Green Hub fellows receive mentoring to help them chart their desired course. Ms. Banerji says most Green Hub alumni are working on issues related to conservation, in different capacities.

Some are making documentaries, either as independent filmmakers or as part of a production house, while others are working with researchers or conservation organizations. Still others are working on conservation projects in their communities. Several alumni have had their films screened at national and international film festivals, including the prestigious Banff Centre Mountain Film and Book Festival in Alberta, Canada. Alum Salma Sultana won second place in the 2025 Yale Environment 360 Film Contest for “Chasing Birds,” a documentary about a young man from Assam who finds his place in nature.

Shaleena Phinya from Arunachal Pradesh, another northeastern Indian state, was already affiliated with the local forest department when she joined Green Hub. She made her fellowship film about the Bugun liocichla, a



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– Rita Banerji (left), a filmmaker who founded Green Hub in partnership with the nonprofit North East Network in 2015

critically endangered bird found only in her town, Singchung, and a few surrounding forest areas. The bird is named after the Bugun, her community.

“I learned about the bird only after coming to Green Hub,” Ms. Phinya says. “Outsiders knew about the Bugun liocichla, but my own people did not.”

Her film was selected for screening at the 2020 Bali International Indigenous Film Festival.

Ms. Phinya returned to her job at the local forest department after completing the Green Hub program and currently juggles her patrol duties with filmmaking. Last year, in recognition of her contributions to the

community, she was selected to join India’s team at the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (known as COP16) in Colombia.

Rooted in kindness

A decade since Green Hub’s launch, the alumni base consists of more than 250 fellows. It’s the diversity in the classroom that alum Gaurab Talukdar from Assam values the most. “By the end of the program, we became a family,” he says.

Now an independent filmmaker, Mr. Talukdar also leads healing walks and mindful birding trips. “We’re all aware of words like kindness, compassion, and

love, but how we apply these words to others – not just human beings but all forms of life – [is what we learned] at Green Hub,” he says.

Anish Andheria, president of the nonprofit Wildlife Conservation Trust, has seen Green Hub evolve over the years.

“While urban filmmakers can be sensitive to the challenges faced by people and wildlife in remote areas, they cannot capture these realities with the same authenticity as youth who live in those landscapes,” he says. “Green Hub empowers rural youth to be the voice of their own environment.”



LEARNING TO LISTEN: Mentor Vijender Sharma (in black T-shirt) instructs the current batch of Green Hub fellows in Tezpur on best practices for recording audio.