

# ORCHID

EDITION *eight* VIII

THE  
ST. STEPHEN'S  
NORTH-EAST  
SOCIETY



COVER PHOTO:

**Raguel Meetei**



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ORCHID VIII

Language

মুম্বাই, ২১ জুলাই : ২৯

আজি চি বি আয়ে গ্রেপ্তার

সংস্কৃত কবিতা

সংস্কৃত কবিতা

স্টক দালাল ঝাকেশ মেহতা

টকাৰ কেলেংকাৰী সন্দৰ্ভত

৬ বজাৰ পৰা ব্যাপক তা

1 A tîrin Pathianin lei leh vân a siam a. 2 Tin, lei hi a chhia a, a ruak ngawt a ni a; tui thûk tak chung chu a thim mup a. Pathian Thlarau chuan tui chungte chu a awp reng a.

3 Tin, Pathianin, "Êng lo awm rawh se," a ti a; tichuan, êng a lo awm ta mai a. 4 Tin, Pathianin êng chu a en a

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# Editorial

Three young summers ago, strutting about with loads of inexperience and a humongous sack of febrile awkwardness, I was gently beckoned to a peculiar urban hearth and greeted by those gathered around. I will always remain grateful to that kindly huddle, The St. Stephen's North-East Society, a medley that is striving in earnest to retrace and rehearse its numerous tunes, and whose warmth, you have my word, was not inherited solely from the ancient Dilli sun. The song they were composing was doubtless sweet and inviting, to say the least, but that was not what caught my ears. What had me riveted was the nature of their harmony; the remarkable voice of solidarity fascinated me. Presented with such vitality, I knew I had to sit down and listen to what they had to say, even if only for a day.

Viewing geography as history can unwittingly reveal the hushed presence of the 'Northeast': a barely legible squiggle in a belated appendix of the nation's autobiography.

Today, whether the squiggle can be attributed to the region's unpronounceable names or not is no longer the primary issue. The offbeat nature of its dramatis personae is no more the centrepiece of the museum. Because what can easily be described as a 'philologist's paradise' more often than not finds itself caught in seemingly perpetual crossfires. We have lived mostly in interludes, solemn gaps that briefly interrupt the 'disturbed' repose of our lands. The discord has left the "children of violence" at risk of forgetting the rhythms of their pasts, at risk of losing their voices, drowned out as they are by the cacophony of 'progress.' Is this our story?

As gifts that are forever ancient and new, languages seem to possess the 'current of experience' required to navigate the flux of the everyday. For societies like ours, languages function as more than just mediums of communication: they remind us of ourselves and tell our stories, sonorously carrying the history of our future echoes.

They are bridges of hope, windows to our worlds. And while they might only be faint melodies from the margins, they are melodies yet. They might very well be labelled offbeat, but they beat nonetheless with unique rhythms. There is no denying that the winds are wantonly fierce and unfriendly, sometimes lacking rhyme, sometimes reason. But when one believes that each language is a distinct way of lighting up the world, one cannot help but make every effort to keep each lamp glowing.

My sincerest thanks are due to all who were on board this brief expedition, each playing their parts with poise and diligence. I am especially grateful to the crew that steered it, the stellar team of editors and designers without whose efforts edition eight would have remained in the realm of ideas. It is our prayer that Orchid will continue to be a symbol of the hope that we carry in us and the love we wish to share.

**Yozo Nüvocho**  
Editor-in-Chief



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While this edition of Orchid is in the process of being published, my heart is filled with a myriad of emotions. When I first stepped onto our campus, it was for the St. Stephen's North-East Society. The halls were silent, the classrooms were empty, and the lawns were calm. It was during the pandemic when college was still closed and we had met up to shoot a video for an online edition of Unicolour. Little did I know then that this Society would become my sanctuary, my crucible, and the vessel that shaped me into the person I am today.



# ***President's note***

CATHERINE LALMA SAWMI

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The St. Stephen's North-East Society is the first Society I was introduced to and it also came to be the only Society I ever applied for. It embraced me with open arms, inviting me to explore, to learn, and to grow in ways I could never have imagined.

Through our Talks, Discussions, online carousel posts, blog posts and other curated content and readings that were disseminated, I discovered a treasure trove of knowledge and wisdom, offered generously by passionate individuals, fellow students, and my senior mentors. They ignited a fire within me, fostering a love for learning that transcended the confines of textbooks. The vibrant tapestry of diverse faces, stories, and experiences that surrounded me every day moulded me. I forged lifelong friendships and bonds that were built due to Unicolour, Echoes of the Eight, Lunch and other cultural events. Through heartfelt conversations and shared laughter, the Society's vibrant community taught me the beauty of collaboration, empathy, and the strength of collective aspirations. Moreover, it truly made me see the importance of being connected to one's roots and being aware of both the cultural and political significance of our identities.

Narrating the story of the North-East is one of neglect and misunderstandings. As students from that very region, we confront stereotypes every single day, break multiple barriers, and overcome adversities mirroring the resilience of our ancestors. In a way, we shoulder the responsibility of preserving our identities and heritage and are given the title of being the ambassadors of our respective states.

As such, it is our duty to bridge gaps and promote intercultural understanding amongst our peers. The Society members, and by extension the Society itself, became a safe space, a nurturing environment where I could explore, learn, and unlearn about the complexity of the 8 beautiful states. I was constantly challenged to step outside my comfort zone, to dismantle preconceived notions, and to view the world through a wider lens. This is exactly what I wish and will continue to hope for Society, that it becomes a safe space for its members and a place where they can keep learning and unlearning about the North-East and its intricate history, culture, and other expansive leitmotifs.



One cannot fail to acknowledge how The St. Stephen's North-East Society, in all its capacity as a student-run college society, tries its best to promote discussion and discourse on the issues that pertain to the North-Eastern region. This academic year, although it was the first time we had to organise events in an offline setting with no prior experience, we managed to pull off 4 online talks and 3 offline ones, all our flagship events including North-East Lunch, Echoes of the Eight and Unicolour. We also have several "firsts" for the Society which includes a purely academic side of Unicolour.

Here, the fest got divided into two days wherein the opening day saw the orchestration of the first-ever inter-college Quiz Competition, an intra-college Debate Competition which saw participation from both junior and senior members as debaters as well as a Panel Discussion solely scheduled for the fest.

We also managed to pull off two other events that were targeted towards celebrating the festivals namely, Bihu, a harvest festival and Losar, the Tibetan New Year. We managed to curate a number of content through our Alumni Outreach Programme in the form of interviews with our dear Alumni and we also formally created a Research Team to work on various topics although it is still very underdeveloped.

With love, always,  
Catherine Lalmalsawmi  
III BA (Hons) English

Since its inception, the aims of the Society still remain the same. It will always try to promote social and cultural integration between the North-East and mainland India. It will always aim to showcase the rich cultures and traditions of the North-East and provide a platform wherein outstanding issues concerning the North-East can be discussed and awareness on the same can be raised. The Society never intended to evoke division, on the contrary, it holds inclusivity as a founding principle. The Society is not perfect, however, it is truly commendable on how determined and dedicated it is to its mission.

May the upcoming Council members and Society members alike keep this flame alive and remember this task that has been taken upon ourselves. May the Society bring a positive change and bring forth a force strong enough to impact spaces even beyond these red brick walls.



**EXPLORE  
THE  
INTERVIEWS**

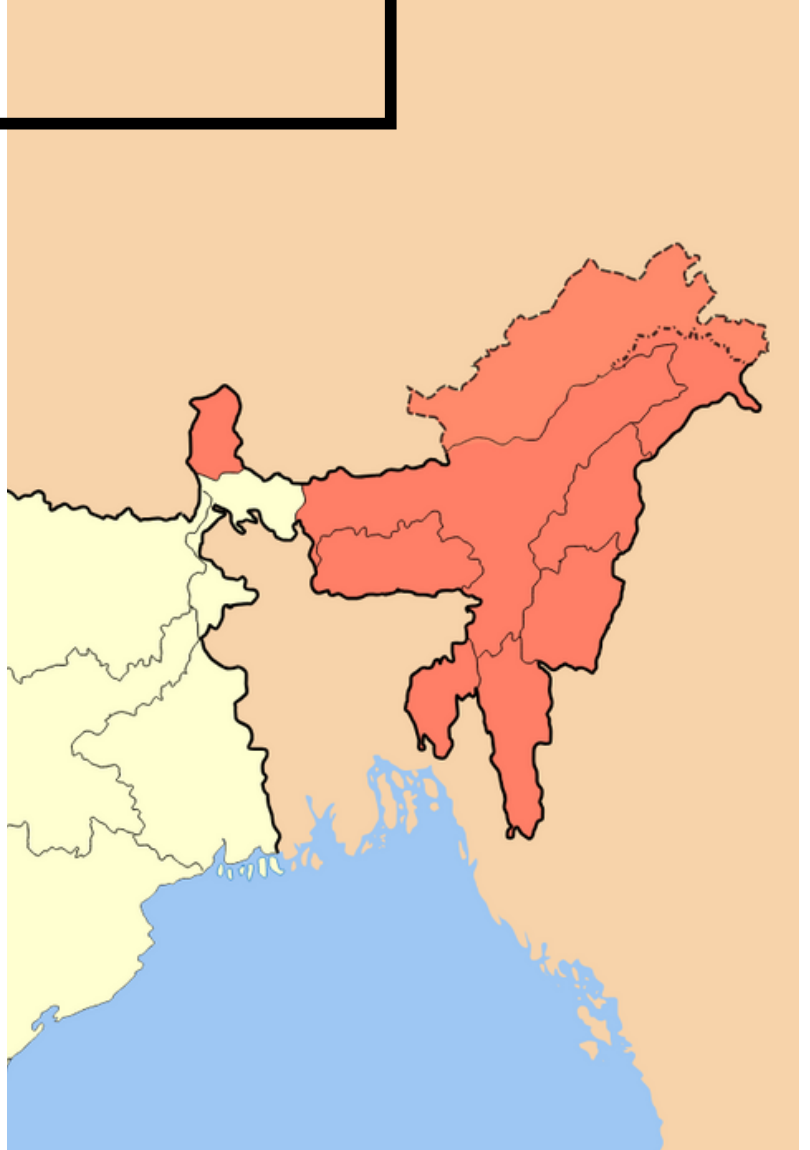
# A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE LANGUAGES OF NORTHEAST INDIA

David VL Muanpuia Hlawndo  
II B.Sc. (Hons) Physics

*“There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning”*

*-1 Corinthians 14:10*

The Northeastern states of India comprises the seven sister states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and one brother Sikkim. With over 200 languages spoken by some estimates, it is one of the most linguistically diverse areas of the world. Owing to the large numbers of languages and other constraints such as geographical inaccessibility and insufficient data, the classification of these languages remains an open problem with scholars giving acceptable but incomplete solutions to the problem of classifying said languages. With the disappearance of many of the “indigenous” languages of the region, the full story these tender tongues tell may very well be never known. That being said, after more than a century of linguistic hard work, we thankfully have a glimpse of their stories.



The languages of the North-East belong to four major language families namely: Austroasiatic, Indo-European, Kra-Dai and Sino-Tibetan languages. Indo-European is represented by Asamiya, Sino-Tibetan by Tibeto-Burman Languages such as Ao, Boro, Dimasa, Lepcha, Nyishi, Mizo, Tangkhul, etc., and Kra-Dai by Tai represented by a few dialects of Tai-Ahom, Tai-Phake, Tai-Turung, Tai-Aiton, Tai Khamyang and Tai Khamti. Khasic languages spoken in Meghalaya are the sole representatives of the Austro-Asiatic family.



# LINGUISTIC HISTORY

It is believed that the hills and valleys of Assam and by extension the whole North-East were first settled by Austro-Asiatic people in around 2500-2000 BC. The Tibeto-Burman tribes entered the region in two groups, one from the east of present-day Myanmar, and one from the north-west of the Himalayan Mountain ranges in about 1000 BC and gradually encroached upon the Austroasiatic settlers, forcing them to take refuge in mountain homes. This is why the Khasic languages are so isolated in the hills of Meghalaya (Moral, 1994), their closest relatives being the Austronesian languages of Palungic languages found around 1000 kilometres away on the Myanmar-China Border. Its other famous siblings are Vietnamese and Khmer, found almost 3000 kilometres away in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Asamiya (Assamese), an Indo-Aryan language, came into existence not later than 643 A.D. as indicated by copper plate inscriptions of the rulers of Kamarupa or Assam, found written in Sanskrit from the 5th Century to the 13th Century. Asamiya had its roots in the Apabhramsa dialects developed from Magadhi Prakrit of the eastern group of Sanskrit languages.

Early in the 13th century the Tai people invaded Assam and continued ruling it till the British annexed it in 1826. The Tai Ahom people spoke a Kra-Dai language and had their own script and a rich literary tradition. Gradually almost all of these Tai people began integrating and speaking the local Assamese language, leading to Tai-Ahom becoming a 'dead' language.

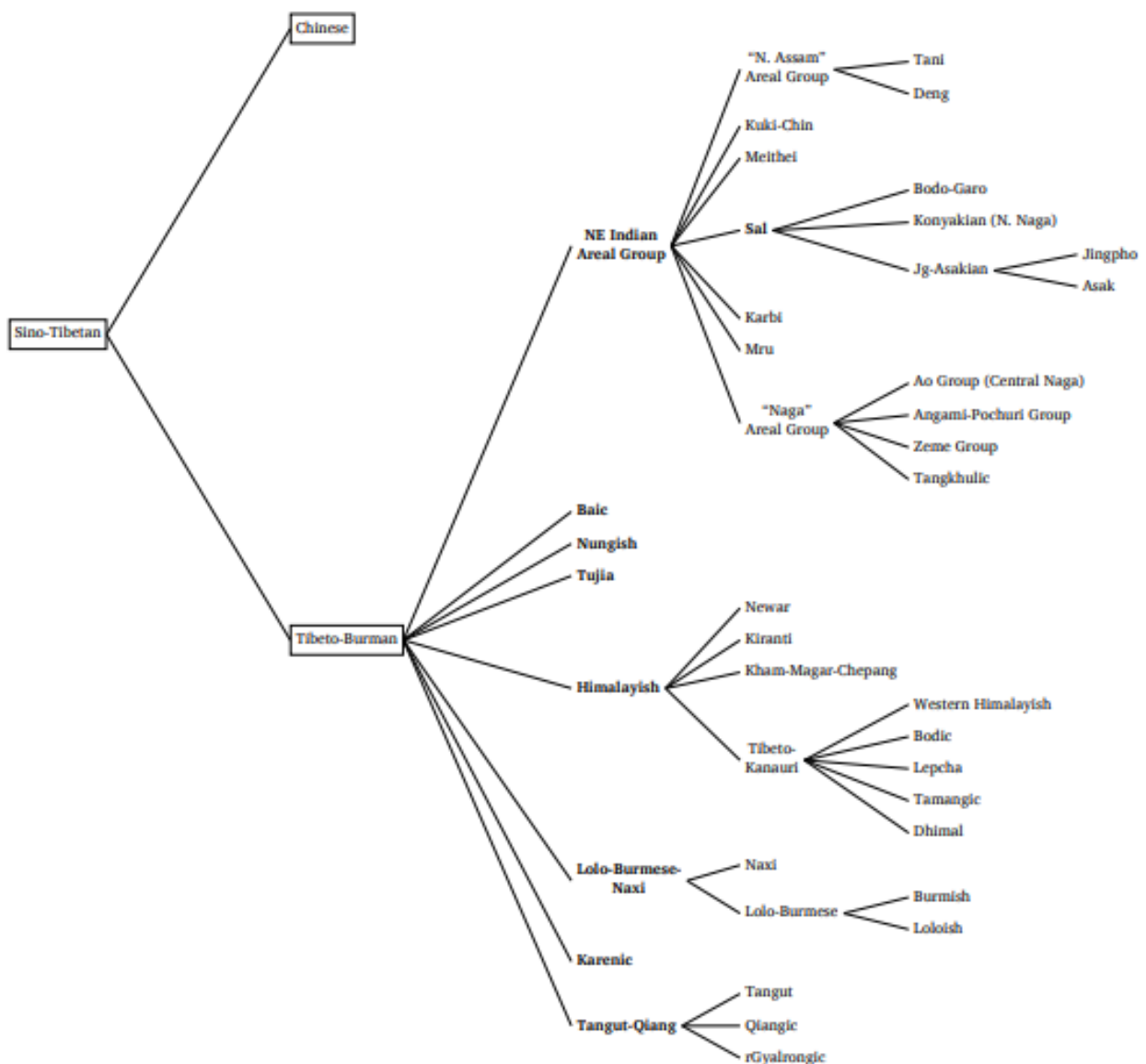
Excluding the plains of Assam and the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, all the remaining regions of North-East India are occupied by Tibeto-Burman speakers. These various said languages belong to smaller families within Tibeto-Burman who might have smaller families within themselves. Classification of languages, in general, is difficult as the border between a language and a dialect is very hard to distinguish. A popular adage in linguistics is, therefore, "A language is a dialect with an army and navy." This being the case, I will try to highlight the internal classification of these families according to the most accepted scholarly models.

# Classification:

## Tibeto-Burman

Starting with the most numerous language family of the region: The Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family. Matisoff, speaking on the languages of this family, states that “millennia of language contact due to migrations, intermarriage, and warfare have presented us what I have described as ‘an interlocking network of fuzzy-edged clots of languages, emitting waves of mutual influence from their various nuclear ganglia.’” (Matisoff, 2015)

The name Tibeto-Burman itself is a misnomer. It is formed from the words Tibetan and Burmese, the two most widely spoken languages in this group. As such, it is easy to imagine that all the languages within this group evolved from these two languages. The truth, however, is that all the language groups within “Tibeto-Burman” form an independent branch from a common ancestor the same way as Burmese and Tibetan, the namesake of the family. This is clearly seen in the subgrouping scheme shown below.



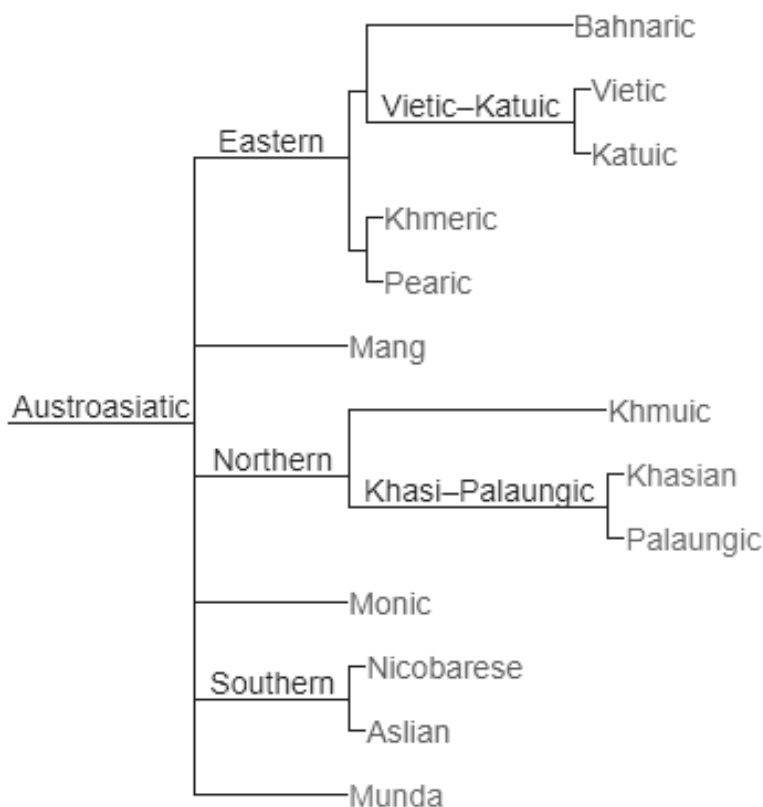


As to be expected, most Tibeto-Burman languages in the North-East belong to the NE Indian Areal Group. Areal groups in geolinguistics are languages or dialects in a geographic area that share elements not necessarily due to being closely related but due to geographical proximity.

We also see that many languages of the region belong to Himalayish, including Lepcha and Tamangic. These languages entered the region from the western and northern routes, whereas the NE Areal groups are generally thought to have entered the region from the eastern routes. Do note that each endpoint of a branch seen here is a smaller language family of its own with dozens of languages in each of them. An example is Kuki-Chin which has about 50 or so languages in it.

## Austro-Asiatic

Next, we have the sole Austro-Asiatic language family: The Khasic languages. Sidwell (2018) gives the classification of Austro-Asiatic as:



Sidwell (2015) suggests that Austroasiatic may have begun to split up 5,000 years B.P. during the Neolithic transition era of mainland Southeast Asia, with all the major branches of Austroasiatic formed by 4,000 B.P. (BP here stands for Before Present which denotes the years before 1st Jan, 1950: the year radiocarbon dating was first introduced).

## INTERNAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE KHASIC LANGUAGES:

### Proto-Khasian

- **War (Amwi, Mnar)**
- **Proto-Pnar-Khasi-Lynggam**
  - Lynggam (Former Garo-speakers)
  - Pnar (Jaintia), Khasi, Maharam (Maram)

Remarkably, though they have been surrounded by other language families for millennia, these languages have had little outside influence. The closest relatives of these Khasic languages are Palungic languages found in the Myanmar-China border further east. It is also distantly related to the Munda languages (which are Austro-Asiatic languages) of mainland India which includes languages such as Santali and Korku.

### Tai Languages

The Tai languages of the region belong to the Northwestern branch of the Southwestern Tai languages which include Ahom, Shan and Khamti. A well-known Southwestern Tai language is the Thai language spoken in Thailand.

According to Ethnologue, the Northwestern Tai languages are as follows (Lewis, 2009):

- Northwestern Tai dialects (Shanic family)
- Ahom (Assam – extinct. Modern Assamese is Indo-European.)
- Khamti (Assam, Burma)
- Tai Laing (Tai Lai; Burma)
- Khün (Kuen; Burma)
- Khamyang (Assam)
- Shan (Tai Shan, Dehong; Burma)
- Tai Aiton (Assam)
- Tai Nuea (China, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos)
- Tai Phake (Assam)
- Turung (Assam)

Most of the Tai languages remaining in use today are critically endangered with the native speakers speaking Assamese.

As mentioned before, for half a millennium, a Tai language namely Ahom was the court language of the Ahom Kingdom consisting of territories in and around present-day Assam. It's status was replaced by Assamese and now the hundreds of manuscripts written in the Tai-Ahom script remain undeciphered as the language is dead. Importantly, Tai-Ahom was a tonal language and the script lacked tonal marks, leading to their undeciphered state.

### Indo-Aryan Languages

Last but not certainly the least are the Indo-Aryan languages. The language with the most speakers in the region is Asamiya (Assamese). It belongs to the Eastern Indo-Aryan languages (Magadhan languages) and is closely related to Bangla.

There are many features of Asamiya that differentiate it from other Indo-Aryan languages owing to the interaction and influence of the various non-Indo-Aryan languages of the region. These include the absence of retroflex consonants and the presence of the voiceless velar fricative (the sound of ch in Bach).

Nefamese and Nagamese are also in use in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland as a lingua franca amongst the various tribes who speak one of the hundreds of languages mentioned above. The immediate relationship with Asamiya is as follows:



# Eastern Magadhan

## ■ Bengali-Assamese:

1. Gaudic
  - Bangali (Eastern Bengali)
  - Bishnupriya Manipuri
  - Chakma
  - Chittagonian
  - Hajong
  - Manbhumi (Western Bengali)
  - Noakhailla (Southeastern Bengali)
  - Rarhi (South-Central Bengali)
  - Rohingya
  - Sundarbani (Southern Bengali)
  - Sylheti
  - Tanchangya
  - Varendri (North-Central Bengali)
2. Kamarupic:
  - Assamese (Kamrupi, Goalpariya)
  - Rangpuri, Surjapuri, Rajbanshi

## Linguistic Development

As we can see from history, languages are not static nor set in stone. They change with time; they live and sadly, they also die. Take the case of Tripura, a Tibeto-Burman Kingdom in the form of the Twipra Kingdom since the 15th century. Since the last century, it has become a Bangla majority state owing to demographic changes caused by events not limited to but including the partition of India, when Bengali Hindus fled East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). From an indigenous population of 90% in 1871 it has gone down to 31% as per the latest census. This has caused the loss of the many smaller indigenous languages of the region whose speakers struggle to survive owing to outside pressure.

A similar case can be seen in the Barak Valley of Assam, once the abode of the Dimasa Kingdom, the region is now mostly populated by Bangla speakers and presently speakers of the Dimasa language only amount to about 100,00 according to the 2011 census.

We see a troubling trend of smaller indigenous languages getting displaced and assimilated everywhere in the NE region. This is very troubling as the multitude of languages, each with their unique stories are often retained only through oral tradition. If this trend is to continue, we might soon lose the great treasure and pride of the region and our country as a whole: the immense diversity and long profound history of the languages and the communities who speak it.

## Epilogue

In this article I have, to the best of my abilities, tried to provide a very brief introduction to the languages of the North-East. I hope that this article may shed some light on the nature of the place and the people of the region who are often kept in the darkness. We are fortunate to have all this diversity right at our footsteps; we must be ready to fight to preserve it. As Prof. Tanmoy Bhattacharya, head of the University of Delhi's Department of Linguistics said in the Panel Discussion held at Uicolour '23, "*Diversity is always good... Languages shouldn't die due to a government policy of homogeneity.*" I pray the stories these tender tongues tell may continue to be told for generations to come.



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INTERVIEW

ORCHID 2023

# K O L O M A

*koloma*

FOLK-INDIE BAND



TRIPURA



# K O L O M A

## BARING ALL ROOTS

This folk Indie fusion band from Tripura is currently trending for all the right reasons – original music, promoting native culture and simply keeping it real. Here’s an article where they share their passion, story, music, and their main mission of preserving their native language and folk tradition alive.

It was a pleasant afternoon with a light breeze and a positive mood all around. As luck would have it, we were soon blessed with heavy thunderstorms and a really bad internet connection. We were doubtful whether we would be able to conduct this interview at all. Fortunately, after a slight delay, we managed to contact the members of Koloma and started the interview right away.

We started off slow with some light-hearted and fun questions which allowed us to get to know the band mates better.

It was quite interesting to find out that their interest in music started out on a common ground- listening to classic Western rock, country, and folk bands.

From there they were able to solidify their roots in music and expand their talents further.



Koloma as a folk fusion band has been creating waves and inspiring a new generation of musicians who are not just proud of their abilities but are promoting their Tripuri roots as well. We asked them the motive behind such an initiative, to which they said-

“Our mission as a band is to take the art and culture of the Indigenous people of Tripura, keeping it relevant through our music and stories. Most importantly, we want to promote our native language Kokborok.”

Originally a five-member band, Koloma comprises Rumio Debbarma - lead vocalist, composer, lyricist, and folk instrumentalist, Bhaskar Debbarma - guitarist, Kiyok Debbarma - bassist/ sessions arranger and Shimul Debbarma- drummer/ percussionist and Ronel Debbarma - guitar / BGV).

Koloma first flew their wings in 2014 and it has been a high ride for the past 9 years. This band has performed in multiple venues across the country like the Ziro Music Festival in Arunachal Pradesh, several events in Delhi, Mumbai, Guwahati etc., and their home state of Tripura.

The preservation of their Kokborok language is a major driving force behind Koloma’s musical endeavour. The idea of using music as a medium to preserve and encourage the use of a language intrigued us a lot and we had to ask them whether they faced any difficulties in carrying out such a task.

This was their response-

“We can't really force writing. There is no particular time to write as songwriting is a process. Difficulties come when you overthink too much when trying to write a song.

A personal experience was when we wrote a song, we were buying something from a shop and saw a lady

Then the idea just came into our heads and then we started to make a rough note and finished it in 15 mins. It was funny and entertaining.”

It is the daily lifestyle and the simple phenomenon of life that inspire them. From there onward we gradually started to talk about their performances and their collective memories of the band

The release of Their EP 'Chapmanliya' seems to be a fond memory that the band members share. They went on to describe how the title ‘Chapmanliya’ is a Kokborok word meaning “Confusion.”

Shimul shared his thoughts regarding the EP –

“All the songs of this EP signify and highlight feelings that we get confused or astonished with, be it the feelings felt during love at first sight, long-distance love or even the feelings in relation to homesickness.”

The band members also collectively agreed that the recording sessions of ‘Chapmanliya’ were a fond and perhaps their favorite memory. The band’s unique style of combining traditional Kokborok language and folk nuances with contemporary Indie and Western Folk elements and their Electro pop and post-rock elements are what made them truly burst onto the scene and help captivate the younger generation.

They also highlighted how they do not let their professional life try to disrupt the working of the band.

Each member has a certain sense of responsibility and commitment to the band.

“Rumio is a teacher, Bhaskar is a professor and I am a lawyer. However, we try our best to get together and do what we love doing and that is making music. Everyone supports each other, be it regarding their profession or in their musical journey.”

– says Shimul.

They told us how much work goes into the production of a single music video and emphasized the importance of proper representation and the power of visuals. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Koloma has also worked and experimented by composing the background score for certain Kokborok movies.

They also highlighted that besides showcasing their culture and language through the auditory medium, they do it through visuals as well. If you go to the band's official YouTube page, you will see what we are talking about. Koloma puts a great emphasis on visual storytelling and how they portray their own culture and roots.

Since we already had a renowned folk fusion band in our hands, we had to ask them about a certain Sikkimese folk fusion band as well as the possibilities of a collaboration.

We asked the members of Koloma whether there was a potential collaboration between them and Sofiyum.

The band members were excited when they heard the name Sofiyum and let us know that they shared a good relationship. They have worked together before and stated they are always ready to welcome future collaborations with any band in the name of culture and music.

Besides all the heavy queries, we also took the time to ask them about how the band functions behind the scene. They were kind enough to talk to us about their personal growth and how the band and its music have shaped their lives. From the knowledge that we received, each member brings about a sense of positive energy to the group that defines their style. Koloma told us how they are no different from the rest of the bands that exist.

They sometimes end up sleeping in the studio and there are certain times when nothing productive comes to fruition and it is just the members in the studio eating and talking and having a good time.

However, they still find some value in these moments and use them to fuel their musical ambition.

Koloma stands out as a unique and exciting band that continues to surprise its audiences with its unique multi-music elements. In an age where the Northeast is awash in the seas of Westernization and Eastern Pop cultures, our native cultures and languages are being neglected or forgotten.

This band stands as a lighthouse of pride and originality for people to pay attention to. With their use of indigenous language and instruments, they have created a niche for themselves in the music scene of India. We owe them for inspiring the youths of our generation to go back to our roots and also write and listen to songs in our traditional language.



# ON SOCIETY, SPIRITUALITY, AND TALES OF OLD

*Travel*

VIVIENNE HRILROKIM  
B.A. (HONS) HISTORY 2019

*Story*

The Northeastern region of India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and parts of Myanmar have been an area of interest for scholars for a long time. Right up till the colonial period, little was known about the region as well as the numerous people groups that inhabited these hills. For a long time, the tribes that lived in these hills were feared for it was felt that they were savages who had no semblance of civilization. To what extent this assumption holds ground has become a matter of major debate over the course of time. The tribes that inhabited these regions could be considered state-evading communities that preferred to live beyond the pale of civilization. We can learn about their origin from the various myths and lore that have been passed down over generations through word of mouth. Written accounts about these tribes were made only during the colonial period. In this essay, we will look into the tales of three communities: the Lusheis, Bunzoos, and Hmars, their origin story, their spiritual practices, and the nature of their society.

The Lusheis, as documented by Thomas Lewin, inhabited the Chittagong Hill tracts, and extended in great numbers in the surrounding areas towards Burma. Lewin believed they could not be called a nation as they had no semblance of a government or a policy. They were hence seen as a primitive people, a conglomeration of unruly people. Their 'hilliness' was seen in stark contrast to the civilised people of the plains. Thus, the hill people were the 'primitive races,' the 'children of nature' and the 'rare vestiges of prehistoric society' which 'still survive[d]'.<sup>[1]</sup> This was considered true of all the tribes of the region.

The Lusheis lived in a system of petty states under a "dictator" or "president"<sup>[2]</sup>. Chieftainship was hereditary in the sense that only the son of a chief could set up another village and become its chief. Men of one chief could transfer their allegiance to another chief. More importantly, it was forbidden to kill a chief save in the heat of battle. These battles mostly took the form of raids that were done not only to plunder property but also for the acquisition of heads.

Headhunting was not an uncommon practice. There was however a difference between hunting and raiding. Whereas the motive of raiding was supposed to be obtaining slaves and booty, the purpose of headhunting was claimed to be non-materialistic considerations like gaining social prestige and spiritual benefits in the other world.<sup>[3]</sup> It is interesting to note that even when the colonial government restricted raiding for slaves, it did not put a stop to headhunting. Headhunting was seen as a sign of ultimate heroism among these tribes. It was associated with bravery and manhood. On the return of an expedition, the heads of the slain were placed on posts in open spaces, and the victorious warriors would be paraded. Taking the head of the enemy meant eternal glory. Another reason behind the practice of headhunting was a religious one. All genuine headhunting tribes had a belief that unless a man has taken heads, he has no surplus soul about him to beget offspring.<sup>[4]</sup>



Raids, on the other hand, were carried out for different purposes. Jangkhomang Guite has summarised it as the expression of 'hill politics.' It was to represent kingship and authority in the hills. It was carried out not only for heads but for loot, plunder, and slaves. Slaves in the Chief's household played a major role. The number of slaves indicated the power of the chief. They played an important role in the household; they were messengers and his favourite slaves became the chief's ambassadors in war. On the death of a slave, his family became the property of the Chief.

The egalitarian nature of the Lusheis could be seen in the position held by women. While women did not inherit property, they still held an important position. On the death of the husband, the widow assumed an important position within the household and made major decisions. While women did most of the household work, men could be seen raiding weaker tribes, hunting, drinking, smoking, and polishing their arms. Marriage was a social contract that could be dissolved by the consensus of both parties. Crime was rare in the community. However, if a man kills another, the relatives could strike him down. The only way to evade death was if the Chief's wife decides to adopt the culprit which would be followed by lifelong slavery.

On the death of someone from the Lushei tribe, the corpse would be dressed in the finest clothes and seated in a sitting position in the centre of the house. A notice would be sent to friends and relatives. On his right, they place his guns and weapons, and on the left sits his wife. The mourners feast and food is placed in front of the corpse along with his pipe. The body is buried after twenty-four hours. While some clans bury it in hollow trunks, some clans sheath their dead in a pit and place it on a platform. They light a fire below this platform till their body has dried.

The Lusheis believe in the existence of a Supreme being whom they address as Pathian. They consider Him the Creator. They also believe in the existence of secondary deities in inanimate objects like the sun, moon, and trees.

A close study of the lives of the common people was done by Rev JM Barbe who lived among the Bunzoo tribe. Bunzoo was an exonym for the Pang tribe that lived in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The houses of the Bunzoos were elevated, three or four feet above the ground. This is similar to the houses of the Lusheis mentioned by Lewin. He says that the villages were situated atop hills and houses were made of logs. Even for the Bunzoos, the houses were on summits.





Men of the Bunzoo tribe wore a piece of loincloth like the members of the Lushei tribe. While the Lushei women would leave their breasts bare, the Bunzoo women covered their bosom with another piece of cloth. One common thing that one could say the Lusheis and the Bunzoos had was the importance ascribed to the guyal or the Mithun. It was found in the wild but these communities had domesticated it. The milk of the animal according to Lewin was thick, much better than cattle. However, it was not reared for its milk but its meat and hide. Apart from the guyal, the goat was also reared. Deer and fowl were among the animals that were hunted for in the wild.

Jhum cultivation was largely practised. These communities would be in a place for roughly four to five years. This system of cultivation was seen as a wasteful one by the British. It was a system that compelled them to migrate, thereby making them nomadic. Quite was however of the view that jhum cultivation just about provided the hillmen with the mobility they needed. Besides, it is not as 'wasteful' and inefficient a method compared to lowland cultivation. The main crop that they cultivated was rice, which was their staple.

The Bunzoos were spiritual people. They believed in the existence of a Supreme being. Although they did not worship this being, they attributed all disease, famine, crop failure, and other malice to an evil entity. To such an end, they would perform sacrifices to appease it. They believed in a place of torment in the afterlife, even though they were not sure what actions warranted punishment. They believed that the dead came back after they died in the form of inanimate objects.

On the death of a person, the Bunzoos would deposit the dead in a hollow piece of wood and bury the body atop a hill along with heads of animals, spears, and cloth.

The Bunzoos practice endogamy and marriages are a matter of huge fanfare. A lot of money is spent on marriages. The parents of the groom would ask for the woman's hand in marriage and if the groom is without parents, it is done by the headman. When the bride gives consent, a date for marriage is fixed. The bride's relation will receive a sum of money which is the bride price. On a set day, they marry with a feast and without much ceremony. Like the Lusheis, the woman can leave the husband. However, if she leaves her husband without a legitimate reason, her relations will be compelled to return the bride price.

Lore has it that the Hmar people that inhabit the hills of North-Eastern India migrated from a mythical city that they called Sinlung. The term Sinlung literally translates to "brick-walled city"; sin means "enclosure or rampart" and lung translates to "rock".

Where is this mythical city actually geographically located in the Chindwin Valley? The answer to this question is perhaps beyond the scope of empirical research. However, the idea of a place as such has a deep sentimental value for the Hmar people.

The Hmar people were once city dwellers. At what point in history did the Hmar people decide to leave their abode, Sinlung, and begin their southward migration to the hills of the Northeast, where they reside even today, has remained a matter of considerable debate. Legend has it that the people escaped to their present hills due to great fire, great darkness, a great flood, great famine, and a great epidemic. They escaped from Sinlung, legend has it, due to the cruelty of the king and the encounters with the 'children of men' (enemies). The factors that influenced the outward migration of the people from their mythical abode are both human as well as natural.

'Remember Sinlung!' was a common refrain among them to warn a chief who had unduly become tyrannical; should he become too oppressive, he will soon be deserted by his people just as they once fled the oppressive ruler of Sinlung. The people left their homes to rebuild a new home and set up a political arrangement that was egalitarian. Egalitarianism continued to be the essence of their social organisation in the relationship between the chief and his own clansmen.

While fleeing from their mythical homeland, the people seemed to have evaded the state as well as its oppressive ruler. In their new home, they set up a society that was egalitarian and free. In this new society, there was increased mobility. These tenets hold true to the most extent in the organisation of the tribe even today.

As such they have always been dwellers of peripheral zones[i] that have always stayed away from state structures.

True to this state evading nature of the Hmar people, they still are a people that live in the hills of North-Eastern India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts as well as in parts of Burma. Artificial borders were drawn by states. This fragmented the people group, placing them not only in separate states within India, but also across international borders.

Interestingly, a millenarian concept of 'back to the valley' to rebuild their ruined kingdom is gaining currency among the Hmar people. "Kan Sinlung khawpui chul hnung chu, in din thar ei tiu" is a common refrain. While we can never prove whether an actual city of "Sinlung" existed, the harking back to such a past has deep spiritual connotations for the people. It could mean the reformulation of a place like Sinlung in the world that we live in today. This idea of Sinlung may not take a physical form but will remain alive in the minds and imagination of the Hmar people for generations to come.

All of these communities may not have the same practices today as they did in colonial times or before. Indeed, modernity and the coming of the Christian faith have brought about much change for these tribes. Practices like headhunting or raiding are no longer practised. The dead are buried with Christian rites and slavery has ceased to exist. Yet, these tribes still thrive and are still carving out a certain niche for themselves in today's modern world.

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[1] Guite, Jangkhomang; *Civilization and its malcontents*; Page-334

[2] Lewin, Thomas; *Wild Races of Southeast Asia*, Page-250

[3] Zou, David; *Raiding the dreaded past*; Page-80

[4] Zou, David; *Raiding the dreaded past*; Page-94

[i] In area studies, peripheral zones, as opposed to core areas, are areas that stay away from formal forms of the state system (*Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance*, Wilhelm Van Schendel)



# HOMIE HERITAGE



STORYTELLER

ANIMATOR

ILLUSTRATOR

A N I N T E R V I E W W I T H

# LUNGSHAI LEISAN



INTERVIEWED AND TRANSCRIBED | RACHEL TONGBRAM | JUDITH L. PULAMTE



# H O M E H E R I T A G E

*“I love cats and had a black cat as a child. Back then, the only people I ever spoke to were my cat and the animals. Whenever I'm with animals, I feel more like myself. I can chat to them and no one will understand what's going on or what I'm talking about. So, I began to draw black cats, shy and moody, as my alter egos. That describes who I am.”*

Interview with



LUNGSHAI LEISAN

Lungshai Leisan enjoys conversing, which allows us to better comprehend her perspectives. She incorporates her paintings to deliver stories and has a unique talent for illustrating and narrating them.

Lungshai is from Ukhrul, Manipur, and she infuses her Tangkhul heritage with passion in her artwork. home. 21

She graduated from the College of Art in Delhi and the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai. Her decision to leave her corporate job to follow her passion for painting is significant, and she has since worked as a freelancer.

What else is needed to convince us that she is a committed artist

who works not only for revenue but also for her community.

One of the most important things Lungshai shares, as we begin with the interview, is that she has never regretted taking art as a career. She explains that she has long been interested in artistic endeavors and has met numerous people who have changed careers. She continues.

“I believe my privilege is equally to blame. I know that I have the privilege to make my own decisions and to be where I am.

I don't think it would be a suitable career choice if I were in a different situation, like, if I had to struggle, take care of my family, and require money.

It's difficult to define who has the privilege of making that decision because some people have to work hard for it while others don't.”

Lungshai's exuberant artworks of today are inspired by her happy childhood recollections. She adds numerous elements from her Ukhrul home to her work. She draws most of her artistic inspiration from her surroundings. She explains why she chooses to remain with watercolor-based illustrations for most of her artwork, with pride and joy.

“Once I started learning how to use watercolor, I think it became one of my favorite mediums. For me it is very unpredictable; the texture it creates. You can say it's very versatile.

You can also create so many different things out of it. It can give you a transparent look; it can give you an opaque look.

I feel like in watercolor you can get so many shades of color just by the amount of the water you put in; this is where I enjoyed watercolor the most.”

Lungshai remembers how her debut exhibition of live human portraits took place at the Lalit Kala Akademi Art Gallery's 12th Grand Annual Art Exhibition in 2014. Since this occurred before she graduated, she claims that at the time, in contrast to other aspiring artists, she was ecstatic about her accomplishment and showed no signs of anxiety.

She is a strong, brave woman who confronts challenges with zeal and perseverance. Even her very first comic, "Lost in Translation", illustrates how challenging it is not to speak one's language and how difficult it is to learn and interact in multiple languages.

This linguistic dilemma is not limited to Manipur; it affects the rest of the North East Indian population. Additionally, she admits that the subject matter of the comic has personal resonance for her. She believes that since she is not the only person with the same story, she should document her life accounts and struggles as much as she can through her work, whether they are as big as an entrepreneur's struggle or as minor as a hilarious childhood memory.

According to the illustrator, "You can be comfortable with almost everyone everywhere." She describes her experiences living in and outside of Manipur, including how she felt prejudiced towards non-North Easterners in places like Delhi and Mumbai. She continues by saying, "I feel more independent when I'm outside home," implying that she feels confined in Manipur.

She then goes on to explain how living in Delhi and Mumbai and interacting with the locals helped her have a wider viewpoint and helped her be more creatively flexible.



She hopes to bring about change in her community's outlook on life and the way people think about it. She also highlights that the 'Zubaan' project she worked on a few years ago emphasizes the discrimination and challenges Manipuri women experienced during the pandemic times.

Although Northeast Indians have a rich history, culture, and traditions, she says that they don't document things as thoroughly as they should, which is why she worries that the culture is in danger of fading away.

Her goal is to preserve memories and history. She goes on to say that her motivation for creating her current stories is to leave a legacy.

"I draw a lot about my cultures when I create illustrations because I want people to understand what it's like to live in my time and generation. It will once more be a very different culture for the subsequent generations.

They will deal with various issues. I wish I could do what my forefathers did, but I know that's not possible right now."

For instance, she discusses the vintage and modernised traditional clothing and accessory designs and adds,

"I hope that there will be both people who can research earlier periods and people who can preserve their present experiences. People will then begin to appreciate how far we have come."

She also points out that the community will shift with changing times and trends to adapt and survive.

"Although it won't completely disappear, our heritage won't be recognizable as it once was. Things will be added and things will be changed.

Moreover, I believe that each generation will have its own unique culture. My challenges will differ from the ones my children will encounter."

"I wish to narrate tales of my grandmother and how life used to be for us back home. I want to capture as much of my life as I can. I aim to achieve this."

As the conversation draws to a close, she states with pride that she hopes to have achieved substantial progress where

"people know our identity, not just for our clothes and what we eat but for how we think as well"

... something that will make one think,

*"Ah this feels like Manipur."*



town, where everyone k

Where to?

village!!

aya...  
Not too

Tao! Did you  
finish your homework?

Chicken?  
You don't have to,  
Aya! Thank you.

eahhhh! !! Let's play m

nothing!  
or family  
s it.

Lingshai





# THE ORIGIN OF THE RENGMA NAGAS

The Tseminyu district of Nagaland is home to the Rengma Naga tribe.

It is believed that the Rengmas travelled to Nagaland from South-east Asia via Burma (Myanmar). About the origins of the tribe and, in particular, the term "Rengma," there are two widely accepted tales.

A strong and independent chieftainship headed the Rengmas. Their leader was Keyhon. He was thought to possess magical abilities. He allegedly had the ability to appear simultaneously in two locations. He guarded the refugees from Ahom during the Burmese invasion of Assam. He was granted the name Phukon by the Ahom King in recognition of his valour. He was called Keyhon Phukon from there. The Ahom King personally instructed Keyhon Phukon to meet with British representatives on his behalf when they wanted to speak with him. Keyhon Phukon and the British met at Mohung Dehooa in Assam in 1839. The officer was surprised by the peculiar traditional attire. Through an interpreter, the British representative asked Keyhon what "ghost" is called in his mother tongue. "Remi," yelled Keyhon in response to the question. Since then, the British have recorded and used the word "Rengma" to refer to this tribe of the Nagas.



Image: The sacred stone at Khezha-Kenoma, whence the Angamis, Semas, Lothas and Rengmas migrated [photo from "The Rengmas" by J.P Mills]

The second tale is based at Khezhakhenoma, believed to be the location of the dispersal of several Naga tribes. It is believed that the two brothers fought over a magical stone on which a basket of paddy drying was multiplied. Both the brothers had differing opinions about the stone. The mother particularly gave the younger brother special consideration.

As a result, the family members started fighting bitterly. The mother and her youngest son Remi fled. Thus, the word "Rengma" came into being. The Rengmas further split apart after this migration.

First, at Aghonshü, a stag descended and destroyed the paddy. The farmers pursued it but got lost in the dense woodland.

They were both hungry and thirsty. Rice beer and rice were surprisingly discovered while removing bamboo and wild plants. The locals chose to reside in that area because they believed that nature had blessed them. They established a new tribe and are now known as the Pochury Nagas, also referred to as the Eastern Rengmas, who now reside in the Phek district of Nagaland.

Secondly, there were three children of the early Rengmas at Terogvüthon, namely, Tsemi, Kasha, and Senden. One group, led by the third child Senden, were unsuccessful at farming and hunting. As a result, they consequently migrated from Dimapur to Assam and lived at Karbi Anglong. Today, there are Rengmas residing in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam who are believed to be the descendants of the long-gone migrants.

It is important to note that these stories are based on oral tradition. How oral stories that have been passed down through the generations have resonance with modern developments is intriguing to study. These tales, which once served as bedtime stories, now serve as sources for reconstructing history, especially in the Naga context, where written documents are scarce.



# GREETING DAWN

AN INTERVIEW WITH VIJAY D’SOUZA

VIJAY D’SOUZA



## ABOUT

- Initiatives at NEILAC
- Aka (Hrusso) and Takeaways
- Exclusionary Biases in the Process of Oral Documentation
- Linguicide
- Rootedness
- Multilingualism
- Accessibility
- Epilogue

## INTERVIEWED AND TRANSCRIBED

BY JOANNA ELIZABETH PHILIP, YOZO NUVOCHO

## INITIATIVES AT NEILAC

Vision is the faculty or state of being able to see. A vision, alternately, has as its premise wisdom and is very often thought to be a prerequisite for excellence. A visionary, interestingly, is someone whose name starts with the letter ‘V’.

As we gaze at our screens with nervous excitement, Rev. Dr. Vijay D’Souza, a.k.a. Vijay promptly hops onto the platform and greets us with a smile. In atypical online class fashion, we unmute and begin to throw a barrage of questions at him, electing to start with the genesis of the North Eastern Institute for Language and Culture (NEILAC).

A brief account of Jesuit heritage later, he reveals that the novelty of an institution like NEILAC lay in the fact that it was conceptualized as a gift; 50 years of the Jesuits’ presence in the region made their leadership reflect, leading eventually to the establishment of an institute that would study and promote what could arguably be the region’s most valuable asset: its languages.

*“We aim to support endangered languages of northeast India in any way possible. There are many facets to working with indigenous languages so we do all sorts of things. We serve and do community mobilisation, community involvement, language documentation, language revitalization and linguistic research.”*

Some of their initiatives include holding seminars on indigenous languages, producing textbooks, and providing technical support by way of preparing keypads. As D’Souza animatedly remarks,

*“anything that can support endangered languages.”*

Fresh from the University of Oxford with a PhD in Linguistics, Dr. D’Souza dived into the work with much enthusiasm.

# AKA (HRUSSO) AND TAKEAWAYS

Tasked with helping a school in the village of Palizi in 1999, D'Souza, then a young Jesuit trainee set about learning the particular language of the village - Aka (Hrusso).

He remarks that on seeing his efforts to learn the native tongue, villagers commented that

*'it was a useless endeavour.'*

On a meeting with a villager, he had this to say:

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*"I had a very interesting conversation with a young father.*

*Although the parents were both very fluent Hrusso speakers, their two children were speaking only Hindi at home.*

*When I asked the father why this situation happened, he told me what is the use of teaching my language to our children?*

*It will not earn them the daily bread in future.*

*So they need to know Hindi and eventually they need to know English.*

*Our language, I don't have to teach them. So that was the attitude prevalent there."*

For D'Souza, this was very new. Coming from Karnataka where his native tongue, Konkani, a minority language in the Kannada-speaking state, was appreciated and abundantly spoken and written, this repulsion towards a native language puzzled him deeply.

Determined to change this attitude, he committed to learning the language with more dedication, and soon was successful in printing a small alphabet booklet in the Aka (Hrusso) language.

For the villagers who only knew their language orally, the booklet

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**"GOT PEOPLE VERY EXCITED. THEY STARTED SUPPORTING MY [D'SOUZA'S] WORK, PEOPLE FROM THE TRIBE AND WE NEVER LOOKED BACK AFTER THAT, ACTUALLY. SO THE WORK HAS BEEN CONTINUING FOR THE LAST 24 YEARS."**

Mulling over our question on the biggest takeaways from his process of documenting the Aka language, D'Souza gently exclaims that there are many lessons to be learnt, but kindly decides to highlight four of his main insights.

As he rightly points out,

***"Language is more than the sum of its parts, more than the phonology, grammar, semantics of it.***

***Language encodes so many things; it is a basis of people's worldview, their understanding of themselves and the world and the community and their very existence.***

***And when a language is lost, all these things are lost."***

Debunking the commonly held belief that tribal languages are primitive in nature, D'Souza points out the highly complex linguistic mechanisms in Aka (Hrusso): It has about five grammatical tones. And unlike Western and Sanskrit based languages, where case marking is always through morphological units, Aka boasts of case marking through tones as well.

Another important aspect he highlights is the depth of philosophical thought that is encoded in these languages.

Unlike Western or Chinese philosophy that has been elucidated and studied by scholars, the philosophical sophistication in tribal languages such as Aka (Hrusso) is not easily accessible.

As D'Souza explains,

***"We say all tribal folktales are beautiful, they're very entertaining, that we need to preserve these beautiful stories and all that. But why should we preserve these beautiful stories?"***

***Because a tribe's philosophical system is hidden and symbolised in the form of stories. So only when we go behind the symbolic system, and unravel what is the foundation of these symbolic systems, then can we understand the richness of these languages."***

He correctly points out that this process of revitalising, or preserving endangered languages cannot be achieved by a scholar or an expert from the outside; it is only through the effort of the people from the inside. In this instance, collaborators from the Aka Language Academy and friends from the community proved to be invaluable resources.

# EXCLUSIONARY BIASES IN THE PROCESS OF ORAL DOCUMENTATION

Vijay intervenes by saying

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**“LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION SHOULD BE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE MANY VARIETIES AND DIALECTS OF A LANGUAGE; THAT IS THE IDEAL THAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE.”**

Alongside with being multi-purposeful, he also says that one could have unconscious biases against which a careful self-evaluation is needed.

One must also be aware of the gendered biases that may be evident, even in the process of recording tribal stories.

He feels that the dangers of one-sided stories from patriarchal points of view can also be avoided by according space to stories told by women.

## L I N G U I C I D E

As D’Souza elucidates, linguicide is the systematic process of killing a language. Northeastern school systems that prefer English education over indigenous study are complicit in this move.

This is dangerous, he says

*“Because a tribe’s philosophical system is hidden and symbolised in the form of stories. So only when we go behind the symbolic system, and unravel what is the foundation of these symbolic systems, then can we understand the richness of these languages.”*

*“We are simply destroying that skillset and are trying to impose another one, which is a bad method. Research is showing that when mother tongues are destroyed, the consequences are grave.”*

From cognitive deficiencies to acute difficulties in comprehending subjects like Mathematics and Science, the impact is severe. As a way of mitigating this, NEILAC is proposing a bilingual model of education: children are taught complex mathematical and scientific concepts in their mother tongue first, followed by English. This enables greater understanding and retention as well.

One of the other concerns he points out is the lack of access to knowledge in people’s mother tongues. For instance, information about government welfare schemes and programmes is broadcasted in a dominant language like English or Hindi.

Only people who are educated and fluent in the dominant languages are able to make use of such welfare schemes. The speakers of the indigenous languages are unable to comprehend the information, and continue to remain marginalised.

*“Why would you want to remain in your own language and not understand? If you want to develop yourself, you must learn the major language.”*

This has a negative psychological impact on indigenous speakers, and as a result, they give up their mother tongues. As D’Souza rightly points out, giving up one’s native tongue is never out of free choice.

*“They are directly or indirectly coerced or they are pressured into making that very sad choice; they’re not very happy about it.”*

## R O O T E D N E S S

What has taken place in the region is nothing short of an ‘invasion’ by ‘dominant’ languages that have come from the outside. He says that a dominant language occupies not only the linguistic space of a relatively ‘weaker’ language, but also its conceptual space to a large degree.

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**“YOU MAY LEARN PERFECT HINDI OR PERFECT ENGLISH, YOU MAY UNDERSTAND AND APPRECIATE WORDSWORTH OR SHAKESPEARE OR MODERN POETS WHOEVER THEY ARE. BUT AS A HUMAN BEING, YOU ARE ENJOYING SOMEBODY’S, SOMEONE’S EXPERIENCE.”**

Vijay quips,

Appreciating thoughts and concepts from some other culture through a language is certainly beneficial and can allow one to see things from a different perspective.

*“But when we speak our own language,”*

*“it conveys to us much more than that. And I can give a lot of examples from Hrusso itself.”*

He goes on to explain the word ‘ako,’ calling it untranslatable because English cannot adequately capture the feelings embodied by the word in Hrusso. Nevermind, he says, and attempts to give us ‘non-Hrusso-vians’ an explanation of the word in our ever-present colonial remnant.



“

**“IT MAY MEAN SIMPLY A CHILD, OR MY YOUNGER BROTHER AND SISTER, OR ANYONE YOUNGER THAN ME TOWARDS WHOM I FEEL AFFECTION.**

**THERE MAY BE A CHILD WHO IS SITTING THERE VERY ANGRY; YOU JUST CALL THAT CHILD AKA IN AKA AND THE CHILD WILL IMMEDIATELY CALM DOWN BECAUSE THERE IS A GREAT FEELING OF AFFECTION CONVEYED IN THAT WORD.”**

A cool word indeed.

This untranslatability espoused by Dr. Vijay seems to have an underlying premise. What it translates to is a language’s relation to one’s identity. Languages convey the historical self that we are born into,

*“so when the language is gone, that connection to the past is gone.”*

He makes a peculiar observation with regard to this language-identity relation: in general, those who have learned their native language and are fluent in it seem to be much more stable, particularly emotionally.

## MULTILINGUALISM

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**“WE INDIANS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MULTILINGUAL. THIS IS OUR DEFAULT SITUATION.”**

He says that he has a friend among the Hrusso Akas who speaks seven languages, someone who never went to school. This sort of multilingualism is not uncommon in the Northeast because many are forced to learn multiple languages for various reasons, one of which has historically been trade.

This history, he says, is today being re-written in favor of a monolingual education modelled after a colonial structure, which has far-reaching consequences

*“It pushes people into poverty, not only economic, but also brain poverty.”*

This impoverishment of brains that he alludes to has systemic roots. Referring again to language-banning schools, Dr. Vijay says that this practice is not something that is done voluntarily.

*“First of all, there is a feeling among parents that these languages are not economically viable.*

*In fact, who would like to give up their mother tongue? It is a very painful process for children to give up one’s mother tongue in favour of another.*

*But parents are thinking that it is going to help their children because any parent would like to give the best to their children.”*

The premise is that learning English will allow you to have better prospects in the future. While agreeing that English does indeed have its own way in the world today, he asserts that if you have a mother tongue education, you will inherently learn better: linguistic skills, scientific or mathematical concepts, etc.

*“All the money you are putting into school fees will be much more effective if these concepts are given in your mother tongue. Therefore the likelihood of your child doing well increases when your child is rooted in your mother tongue.”*

The argument is that if one teaches a child his/her mother tongue first, the child will be able to learn any other language better.

There are also a couple of other ‘myths’ surrounding indigenous languages that he dispels with glee. One such myth, he claims, is that

*“there is another language much more prestigious, much better, much more developed than my language.”*

Another is that children cannot learn two or more languages at a time, therefore English should take precedence. Vijay dismisses such attitudes toward endangered languages as erroneous.

*“In my district in Karnataka, at least in my community, every child speaks three languages: Konkani, Tulu, and Kannada before going to school. And I never remember getting confused with any language.*

*I spoke all three languages fluently. Children might have smaller brains but they have a very special capacity in early childhood to acquire languages.”*

So then, having identified certain myths and prevailing attitudes towards indigenous languages, what does the way forward look like? Vijay says that

*“the moment our schools realize the benefits of the mother tongue including the simultaneous benefits of multilingualism, and are presented with an alternative education model, they will be our allies.”*

Therefore, awareness has to spread among the teachers and management of different schools.

“

**“I THINK IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO DEVELOP ALTERNATIVE MODELS. NEILAC IS DEFINITELY GOING IN THAT DIRECTION, INTRODUCING BILINGUAL EDUCATION.”**

In a nutshell, in living as well as in education, multilingualism is the way forward.

# ACCESSIBILITY

There is now virtually almost no place on the planet where the digital has not made its mark in some way or the other. Even the farthest corners of the Northeast have started to understand the bits and bytes of it.

*“We need to be where people are,”*

Vijay says through the thin laptop screen, explaining the ways his team at NEILAC were working on reaching out to as many people as possible. In addition to publishing news on a weekly basis, the team has started to make the most of its presence on various social media platforms.

“

*“We produced a podcast on health and hygiene in Hrusso Aka and now on Facebook, it has hit more than 10,000 views already.*

*For a small community of about 8,000 people and not everybody having mobile phones, to have that kind of reach means that people are liking it.”*

He was delighted to hear reports that people kept listening to the podcast over and over again, whether in the fields or at home.

While stressing the importance of reaching people where they are through electronic media, he also laments the lack of material available for people with certain disabilities. Sign languages for instance are especially marginalised.

*“In many communities there is no critical mass where unique sign languages can emerge,”*

he says.

He mentions a couple of institutes in the region where disabled children are brought up and taught sign languages, but says that we still have a long way to go.

“

**“WHAT WE ARE DOING IS TOO LITTLE AS A LINGUISTIC COMMUNITY.”**

# EPILOGUE

Rev. Dr. Vijay D’Souza SJ can be described as an approximately-seven-language polyglot, the numerical fact by no means exhaustive.

He introduced us to several aspects of indigenous languages and their increasing value in a world that ardently refuses any slackening of pace. Indigenous languages are disappearing fast and there is not very much to say on the matter save that they need to be given due attention before it is too late.

Institutions like NEILAC are tangible rays of hope that promise to illuminate the many hilly trails that daily tread on in the region.

Multilingualism as utilized quite liberally above is evidently crucial and therefore must be recognized by all stakeholders as one of our best bets.


Because the worlds that languages create cannot be recreated by others, it is imperative to tell our stories in all our varied tongues, ceasing not when the sun sets, nor when it rises again over the hills tomorrow.



# THE EPIC OF LING GESAR

JIGME TENZIN NIDUP





Himalayan nations comprise legends and folktales that have yet to receive mainstream attention. Like any other storytelling medium, they provide diversity and illuminating propositions in their chronicles. The Legends of Mt. Kailash, Taktshang Monastery and Gyanganj city of Immortals are just small droplets in this vast ocean of Himalayan stories. These narratives have influenced much of Himalaya's authentic culture. Yet, there are startling conclusions and uncharted realms of possibilities left open from those stories. With so many possibilities at the helm, we might wonder why it is not being explored any further. We must first dabble into, perhaps, the most famous Himalayan story to seek a solution.

## The Epic of Ling Gesar


In Tibetan culture and folklore, Ling Gesar, often referred to as Gesar of Ling, is a legendary figure of utmost propriety and leadership. He is revered as a brave monarch and warrior who defended the Tibetan people by battling evil forces that brought suffering to innocent people. Gesar is thought to have lived many years ago, and the epic tale of his life has been passed down orally. In many parts of Tibet and Northern Bhutan, you will find kids enthusiastically sharing what they heard about the valiant King from their parents or grandparents. A friend of mine, living in the northern part of Bhutan would share such tales with so much attention to detail that it would take hours to finish one chapter of King Gesar's life. Yet, I would find comfort in my friend's interest in this storytelling method knowing full well he would one day pass it down as per the custom.

Indeed, the tales would take hours for him to finish. With more than 120 volumes of literature, the Gesar epic is one of the longest in history.

It chronicles Gesar's conception, upbringing, and several conflicts with demons, bad spirits, and rival kingdoms. The Gesar narrative is a lengthy and intricate epic that features a wide variety of subplots and characters. Apart from being an exposition bearing a weak resemblance to that of Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great, the epic also contains teachings on Buddhist Philosophy and Spirituality as well as stories about Love and Passion. Below, we shall delve a little deeper into King Gesar's story. It should be noted, however, that this small excerpt barely scratches the surface of what this massive epic presents:

In the Kingdom of Ling, which was situated in what is now eastern Tibet, Gesar was born into a Royal family of distinguished lineage. Legend has it that Gesar's mother, Queen Konchog Kyi, had a dream in which a golden wheel descended from heaven, signifying the coming of a great leader. She gave birth to Gesar shortly after, who was born speaking fluently and walking upright. Gesar was nurtured by his mother and a band of devoted warriors after the monarch, the boy's father, passed away soon after his birth. His mother, a wise and strong queen, knew her son was destined for greatness and worked to shield him from the envious and evil spirits that wanted to do him harm.

Gesar displayed amazing skills as a child, including strength, intelligence, and psychic abilities. He had a wide range of knowledge, including the art of combat, medicine, astrology, and philosophy. He could understand and speak numerous languages. In addition, Gesar owned a mystical horse named Kyang-go Karkar that had superhuman speed and flight abilities. Gesar demonstrated his abilities as a leader and warrior as he grew older. He ascended to the throne as king of Ling and began defending his people against the myriad dangers they faced.



As a result of his conflicts with demons, witches, and rival rulers, he earned a reputation as a champion of justice and a defender of the weak.

A stunning princess from a nearby kingdom named Kyangzom captured Gesar's heart along the way and he fell in love with her. They were married and had a large family, but numerous foes and rivals frequently endangered their happiness. Gesar and Kyangzom stayed committed to one another and their people in the face of these difficulties. They had two sons, Gungthang and Jigme, who went on to become well-known warriors in their own right. Throughout the epic, Kyangzom was often kidnapped since she was a frequent target of Gesar's foes. Gesar often referred to Kyangzom in battle since he found power in his love for her.

Gesar continued to fight, but he also developed into a spiritual figure and a Buddhist Philosopher. He gave advice and knowledge to his people and assisted them in overcoming their apprehensions and uncertainties. Gesar fought valiantly to defend the Ling population from the powers of evil. Demons, witches, and competing monarchs were among the forces that strove to subjugate and enslave the inhabitants of Ling. The malevolent king of Shangshung, who possessed a sizable army and several magical weapons, served as Gesar's major foe. Yet, Gesar had a large number of allies, including his devoted troops, his enchanted steed, as well as many spirits and deities.

After years of conflict, Gesar finally overcame his adversaries and won a significant triumph. He brought about enduring peace in the kingdom of Ling and rose to the status of a saint and hero.

His epic tale continues to inspire and enlighten those who hear it. Gesar was a spiritual teacher. He instructed his people in Buddhist ethics and philosophy while also urging them to develop enlightenment and inner serenity. According to legend, Gesar possessed the characteristics of a Bodhisattva, a being that strives to become enlightened for the good of all beings. Bodhisattvas are also regarded as the sons of the Buddha in certain translations. The teachings of Gesar were highly regarded and cherished by his people, and they contributed to leaving behind a lasting legacy of knowledge and kindness.

Gesar is regarded as a cultural hero and spiritual guardian in Tibet, and song, dancing, and other forms of artistic expression are still used to celebrate his life. Many Tibetans think that Gesar's soul still guards their people and their land. For many generations, Gesar's epic tale has been transmitted orally. It has been translated into many languages and is regarded as a cultural treasure of Tibet. Gesar's story continues to motivate and enlighten all who hear it. The Gesar epic has served as a source of inspiration for numerous musicians, authors, and painters, and it continues to be full of myth and legend.





# NOTORIETY

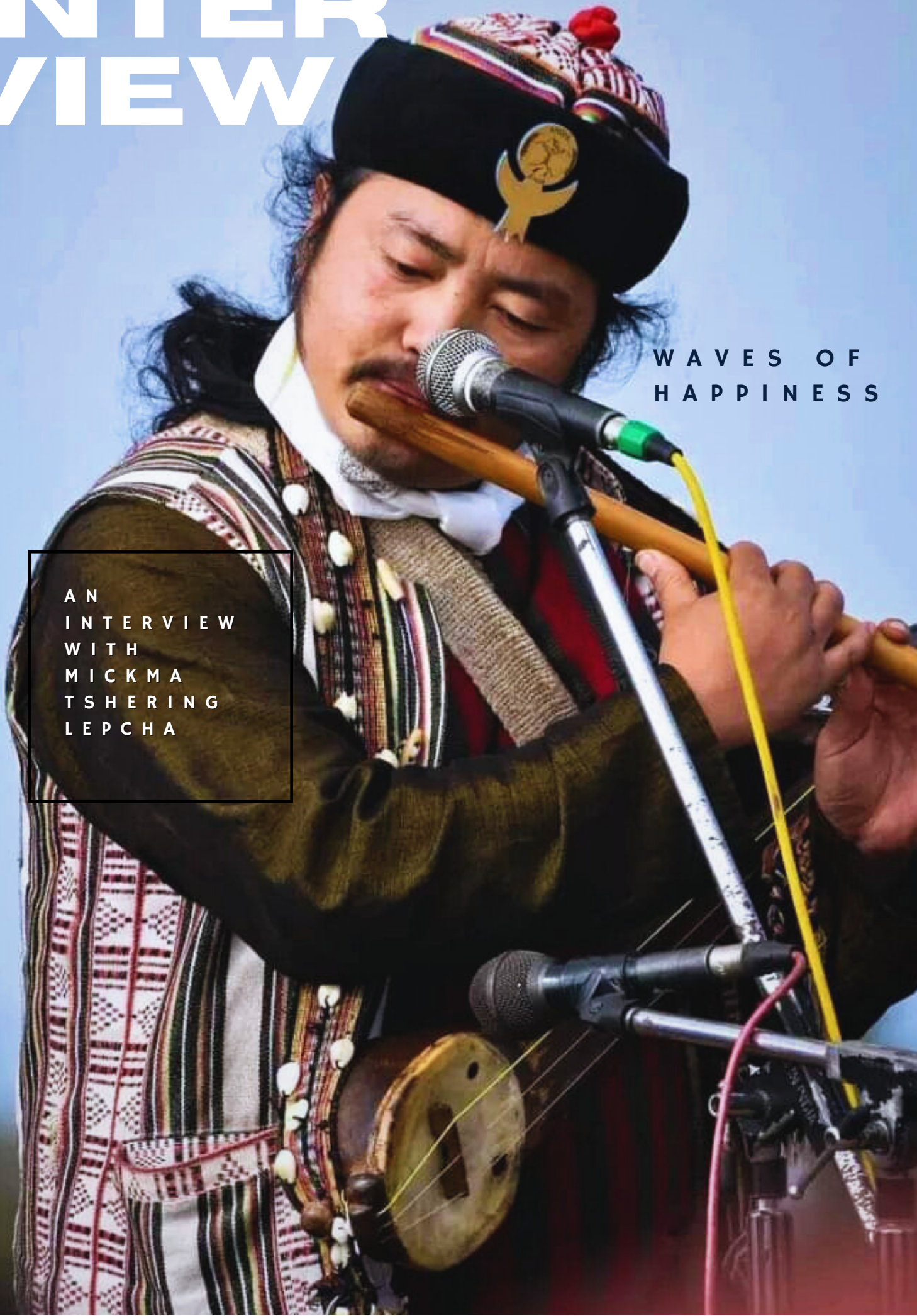
So, why is it, then, that a figure of such magnanimous feats is not being recognized in general media? An article about King Gesar has described the epic as having a multifaceted nature; it is a story, a song, and a wonderful teaching of morality and altruism. Such are the tales found in the Himalayas. There are stories of such dexterity and wonderful details about life that we are missing out on. It is sometimes unsettling when you realise that we occupy only a figment of the sky. The generations of hatred and ego over the last few centuries mean nothing compared to the universal timescale.

Tales about love, passion, compassion, and integrity are much needed in this fast-paced era of human lives. Maybe then, we can find comfort in each other, see that we who are from all walks of life have stories that are just as detailed and complex as King Gesar's and that those stories, although centuries old, still remain a lesson for people today.

# INTERVIEW

WAVES OF  
HAPPINESS

AN  
INTERVIEW  
WITH  
MICKMA  
TSHERING  
LEPCHA





# WAVES OF HAPPINESS

MICKMA TSHERING LEPCHA



The unexpected showers of blessings did little to dampen the afternoon mood. Our happy guest was more than delighted to share his musical journey with us through this gift of writing.

Mickma Tshering Lepcha is a musician and folk artist who has dedicated his life to preserving and promoting Lepcha folk music, a vital component of the Lepcha community's culture. Born and raised in a small village near the Himalayas, Mickma's music is deeply influenced by the natural beauty of the region.

He plays various traditional Lepcha instruments and has recorded several albums of his music with his Folk-fusion band 'Sofiyum'.

In addition to performing, Mickma also teaches others about Lepcha music and culture, hoping to inspire a new generation to carry on the traditions of their ancestors.

Ryen Mickma was generous enough to give an insight into his upbringing and how it affected his journey towards music -

“When I was young I used to listen to songs on the radio which was a great privilege for me as I belonged to a very low economic background. I used to sing along with the radio and that taught me how to sing on a basic level.

I also used to listen to my sisters singing and humming old Lepcha songs, so later on when I was in 8th and 9th standard I began singing western oldies, gospel songs etc.



...with my school choir group called "Mayel Nurdik", which was backed by my sponsor Mr Max Melliger, from Switzerland."



He talked about the important role his sponsor, Mr Max Melliger, played in his musical journey. He gives him a great amount of recognition saying that it was he who backed his school choir and encouraged him to pursue music as his career.

Another important figure in his life is the Padmashree recipient Mrs Hildamit Lepcha, who accepted Ryen Mickma as her pupil and expanded his knowledge of Lepcha folk music. From there, he went on to represent Lepcha folk music at the state and national levels.

We asked him about the various obstacles Lepcha music and the culture as a whole face nowadays.

He replied by saying their audience primarily hails from very confined spaces due to the Lepcha culture not being particularly known to the common public.

He does admit that the limited range of listeners does affect the growth and popularity of any kind of language and music related to it.

Thus, accordingly, it gives a very small amount of opportunities for artists to expand their work.

"...so to bring change to these obstacles I formed musical bands such as "Wvoth" and "SOFIYUM", the latter which is surviving still.

I believe as a member of Sofiyum we are honoured to have influenced various aspiring youngsters who are forming musical bands now and performing on various platforms.

I am also a trained musical instrument maker (tungbuk and sutsang to name a few) which I learned from my guru Ryen Dik Tshering Lepcha of Gitdabling, West Bengal.



Now I am training our youngsters in these fields and one aspiring instrument maker that I have trained is Master Jornay Lepcha of Kongri, Lhabdang, West Sikkim.

I am also teaching how to make 'puntong polit' and various percussion instruments. I believe in sharing knowledge which in turn will save our language and culture for a long time."





When asked if their way of music influenced his work, Mickma Tshering Lepcha said that A.R. Rahman and other musicians with whom he has worked had a large influence on his musical approach and style.

To produce genuine and meaningful music, he understood that it is crucial to stay true to one's artistic expression when making music.

Ryen Mickma says that there is a misconception that Folk music is sometimes thought of as monotonous or repetitive because it lacks variety.

However, he has discovered that musical pieces is extremely important in producing a distinctive and varied sound.

While respecting the origins and traditions of Lepcha folk music, he pushes the limits of established genres and ventures into uncharted territory.

Ryen Mickma further let us into the intricacies of Lepcha music. He says that their culture uses distinctive vocal expressions including Munns, bungtheengs, and pudims to portray Lepcha culture and traditions. These vocal emotions have deep significance, and Lepcha music can expound and reference anything in their lives through aaprya vohms, an expressive medium.

These antiquated folk melodies serve as pearls of knowledge that bind the Lepcha community to its past and preserve its identity.

Mickma Tshering Lepcha is a hallmark of the music culture of Lepcha. With time and experience, he got opportunities to interact and collaborate with other musicians. A.R. Rahman was notable from the bunch.





A testament to the effectiveness of music in sustaining cultures and identities is Mickma Tshering Lepcha's commitment to conserving and promoting Lepcha folk music.

For Ryen Mickma, his goal has always been to promote and safeguard his culture and language. He states that through music he wanted to contribute to it personally or through his band. He holds the youngsters in high regard and wishes that the knowledge he imparts upon them will lead them to continue his vision for the Lepcha cause.

Another aspect he touched upon was the originality of his works.

In this regard, he likes to keep the original work as it is in terms of melody and lyrics, changing only the way it is presented keeping in mind the different ways a human perceives different genres of music. That does not mean that they do not experiment

Ryen Mickma states that they do break away from their shells, harnessing their originals in different styles which he believes helps them in staying connected to their contemporary listeners as well. However, the one constant thing is his mantra:

*“If it makes me happy I believe it will make you happy too.”*

On the topic of Sofiyum, he talks about his role and the journey he has had with his bandmates:

*“Sofiyum was conceived with the principles of safeguarding our language, culture, tradition, our land and rivers through our music, creating social awareness. Accordingly, our songs contain lyrics relating to current social situations, love for the land, rivers, romance and language.*

*So far I believe we have lived up to that promise, our youngsters look up to us as Sofiyum and take inspiration and form their music bands and on seeing them it inspires us to do more.  
This way I believe Sofiyum has contributed to our society.”*







Ryen Mickma also excitedly showed us some Lepcha indigenous instruments during the short time we met online.

*“In Lepcha culture, we have many folk instruments in terms of wind, string, leather and percussions: tungbuk is the most popular, sutsang, tungdarbong, chaakpurzang, baagnaw, puntong polit, nyebryok polit, gyom polit, veem polit, rundong, po-potek, po-posong, bling thoap, tuzyeet thoap, kung thyol, long thyol, po-puhruot, po-puhraap, bum pothyut, fyuet polit etc.*

*All these instruments have evolved through the activities of farming, hunting, cattle rearing, and the culture of munn and bungtheeng.*

*Thus when we trace back to the history of how these instruments originated I can simply say that it signifies and carries the reflection of our culture and who we are.”*



Offering advice to all aspiring artists who would like to follow a similar path to his, he emphasises the language of music.

*“Though our language may differ from each other, we always understand the language of music. The only challenge that exists is understanding the way how it all works together.”*

*This can be tackled through respecting, honoring, and understanding each other. Be patient, respectful, and proud of what you are presenting.”*

Lastly, Ryen Mickma shares his thoughts on his journey as a folk musician.

He advocates the importance of folk music as an instrument for reflecting one’s roots, carrying messages and showing the history of the human race and its relationship with land, rivers, mountains, flora and fauna. It also highlights the growth of a society and according to him, folk music is an elaboration of his culture, tradition and roots.

*“.....thus during my journey in folk music, I have met many non-Lepcha fans who appreciate my work. This simply signifies that we are bringing ourselves together in a bond of love and understanding of each other's culture and traditions through folk music and music in general.”*

He elaborates further on the challenges faced as a folk artist, throwing light upon problems such as the lack of gig opportunities, payment, facilities regarding travel and accommodations etc.

Yet he is still positive that things will change in time and states that he believes in voicing for his rights when things do not go as they should.

This interview taught us that Mickma Tshering Lepcha is a tireless advocate for the preservation and promotion of Lepcha folk music.

He has dedicated his life to sharing the beauty and significance of this musical tradition with the world. Through his music and teachings, Mickma has inspired a new generation of Lepcha folk artists. His commitment to conserving and promoting Lepcha music has ensured that this important cultural tradition will continue to thrive for years to come. Despite the challenges of a limited audience and lack of mainstream recognition, Ryen Mickma has remained dedicated to his craft. A feat worthy of praise and pride. The North East Society is grateful for his work and the accomplishments he has so far. We would like to end this article with a parting message from Ryen Mickma Tshering Lepcha:

*“Live your life, be happy, and share happiness for we all are one.”*



# HINDI: Lingua Franca of

A R U N A C H A L  
P R A D E S H



GANDHI  
RIYANG

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**W**e generally do not associate Hindi with North-east India. Hindi, a language prominent in the Gangetic plains, seems like a foreign tongue with a foreign script, with the possible exception of Bodo, which is written in Devanagari. But the perception of having no takers is sharply contradicted by the fact that the largest state in Northeast India in terms of land mass uses Hindi as its lingua franca.

According to the noted linguist G. N. Devy, the state of Arunachal Pradesh possesses the largest number of languages in the Indian Union. But despite this linguistic diversity, English is the "official language" of Arunachal Pradesh, while 'Arunachalees' use creolized Hindi as their lingua franca to communicate among different ethnic communities. How did this happen? What are its implications? And what is the way forward? These are questions which need answering.

Early on, the medium of education in Arunachal Pradesh was Assamese (with an existing pidgin called 'Nefamese' the introduction of Assamese was easily facilitated). This was to change during the 1970s when the state became a Union Territory: Hindi and English were introduced. English became the official language and the medium of education was English, with Hindi being the second language and Assamese relegated to the status of a third language, all this under the aegis of CBSE. Arunachal Pradesh along with Sikkim remains the only state in North East India not to have its own State Education Board, so the compulsion to study Hindi from nursery till class 10 is strictly adhered to. It only took 10 years to replace Assamese in Arunachal Pradesh. Hindi was also a tool to integrate the state and its people into the larger "Mainstream". Educators, administrative officials, soldiers, and guides were drawn from the Hindi heartlands, making Hindi and the ability to speak it a matter of prestige as well as a mark of education, modernity, and change. The government also promoted Hindi in Arunachal Pradesh to function as a link language. It truly emerged as a lingua franca when 'Arunachalees' themselves were inducted in works for which people from the Hindi heartlands were drawn, making mobility to the deepest hinterlands possible. No one could remain isolated within their own linguistic community, and in this, the profound importance of lingua franca emerges. Hindi became the shining star of Bethlehem.

We joke in Arunachal Pradesh: "You make love and do politics in Hindi". One cannot in fact imagine partaking in pan-Arunachal politics without having a grasp of Hindi, not the Mānak Hindī (Standard Hindi) one imagines that is

associated with articulate voices from North India, but a kind unique to Arunachal Pradesh, which has turned into a creole of its own, much akin to Nagamese in Nagaland.

The main feature of this creole, if I may say so, is its unique vocabulary, the absence of gender while speaking, and the absence of some sounds that are present in Hindi.

Unnoti-Development, Haring- Outsider/Plainsmen, Jul-Gravy, Chikna-intercourse, Chul-Hair, Kinna-To buy, Mithun Mircha -Bhoot Jolokia are some examples of its unique vocabulary, some borrowed from Assamese and then modified, some derived from local ethnic languages and English.

Some sentences:

"Hum kana kaiga" (I will eat food)

"Hum luk chala jaiga (We will go)

"Hum luk ka jamin" (Our land)

"Hum soyega" (I will sleep)

"Tumra/Tumara nam kya hai?" (What is your name?)

"Mera nam Yangki(Female name)hai" (My name name is Yangki)

"Hum South Campus me partai" (I study in South Campus).

Sample texts:

"Sakti wala, bagwan/bogwan, prabu/probu bolrai, or bularai jameen ko suraj ugne wala se suraj dubne tak.

Psalm 50:1(translated by Gandhi

Riyang)

Sab insan luk ajad or same-same somman or odikar/adikar me janam letai.

Wo luk ka pas achcha sochne or achcha-karab ko alag-alag dek sakne ka takat diyay hotai,or ye sab ko bhai-bhai jesa rehna or karnai.

Article 1. Universal

Declaration of Human Rights (translated by Gandhi Riyang)

These sentences and sample texts demonstrate "Arunachal Hindi's" lack of gender while speaking as well as lack of some aspirated sounds called Mahāprāṇ, one reason a Hindi chauvinist in the state referred to it as "Bāzārī Bhāsā" or Market language. The fact that it is not standardised, nor has a native script further fuels the negative connotations.

The implications have been no less than severe, but have also served a purpose. Arunachal has no insurgency of its own and has remained an island of peace in a turbulent North East. This proves its success as a language which has brought Arunachal Pradesh to the mainstream and integrated it profoundly. Nonetheless, the concern of protecting endangered ethnic languages remains, one of its [Hindi's] more severe implications being the fact that it is slowly killing and taking over the mother tongues of Arunachal Pradesh; it has become the cannibalising juggernaut which is devouring everything on its way.

But we certainly cannot leave behind Hindi. It has played a crucial role in bridging the gaps and integrating us. Over time it has become the language of Arunachalee sub-nationalism, which according to me has three broad pillars: a) Race b) Ethnicity and c) Language which is Hindi, Arunachal/Arnachal/Orunasol Hindi to be precise. Not only has it bridged gaps between the 'outsiders' and us, but it is an important tool of connection between diverse ethnicities within Arunachal Pradesh. To me, it seems as if it has created a point of reference from where we can rally around and see ourselves as one people.



A survey conducted by me in a government primary school in Arunachal Pradesh revealed some startling facts: the class composition was diverse, with different communities studying together. Even among the same tribes, the factor of the sub-tribe came out. Officially, the medium of instruction in such schools is English, with textbooks other than Hindi being written in English, but the students were communicating in Arunachal Hindi with teachers teaching them in the same language!

I see a great opportunity in utilising 'Arunachal Hindi' as a medium of education in Arunachal Pradesh. People should be educated in the language they are comfortable with and this must be done while teaching English, Standard Hindi along with their respective mother tongues. The work done in regards to the standardisation of Nagamese for Bible translation is a good point of reference for future work that can be done with Arunachal Hindi. Maybe declaring ethnic languages as well as Arunachal Hindi written in the Latin script as official languages in Arunachal Pradesh along with English can be a way forward. Nevertheless, while there does seem to be a window of opportunity, we must choose our words carefully and guide our tongues with prudence.



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interview

ALYSSA PACHUAU

# Enchanted Reality

Children's book illustrator based in NY





# Enchanted Reality

Interviewed and Transcribed by  
Samanir Imchen

Magic realities spring forth in the pious unbounded imaginations of a child, enrapturing them in the seamless tales they grow up with. This experience is patently universal since no man has ever not been a child. As it is, tales of the past enrapture us still with vivid, personal imagery.

Surrounded by memories that go back to innocence, Alyssa Pachuau is no short of an enchanter.

She enjoys telling stories and believes that narratives are the very fabric of life that connect us – either through shared experiences or exposure to new and unfamiliar perspectives and values.

Her unique illustrations take us back to a time when things seemed so terribly simple, rekindling a childlike wonder and an appreciation to be able to reminisce.

“I come from a family of avid readers. My paternal grandfather was a passionate storyteller. It was common for the neighbourhood children to gather on summer afternoons on our veranda to listen to his tales”.

When asked about what sparked her interest in drawing, she says that colours always fascinated her as a child.

“For every birthday, I would ask my parents for a set of watercolours. Some of my earliest memories of myself are drawing and painting alone at night. When everyone slept and the house was quiet, I would sit and paint until I was ready to go to bed.”

Miss Pachuau grew up in a small town in Churachandpur, Manipur. It was a time when the internet and televisions were rare, and so children would spend countless hours outdoors exploring the neighbourhood and nearby woodlands.

Picnics at the river with friends and family, collecting herbs in the fields, climbing trees, visiting different neighbourhoods on foot/bicycles, and listening to narratives or folktales from older folk were what constituted the child’s daily life.

She recalls watching a local artist who specialized in tribal culture painting in his studio in awe. This was one of the highlights of her childhood. Coming from a very close-knit community, she still has fond memories of her childhood and a strong attachment to her birthplace.

“Life was simple but we were happy, and this influences my drawings to a great extent”,

Though the only formal education Alyssa Pachuau had in art was Studio Art in high school, her interest drove her to pursue what she loved.

“I learnt and taught myself new techniques, explored new mediums of drawing and became more invested as I devoted all my free time to creating while deriving great joy from doing so. From a serious hobby, it gradually became my profession.”

she adds.

While explaining the techniques and resources she uses for illustrations, she revealed that she works with traditional mediums of ink and watercolor along with digital tools and software to enhance her illustrations.

“There is something very charming and liberating about drawing beyond the boundary of accepted norms of drawing - the liberty of not having to stick to the rules of shapes or anatomy as we know it (not that these rules are not important,



in fact, it is extremely important and useful to have in-depth knowledge of the core concepts of drawing and painting), the creative licence to combine realism and fantasy, and most importantly, the exhilarating freedom to express what you really feel inside without fear of repercussion i.e. the whimsical, childlike joy of how you see the world”

, she enthusiastically pronounces as she introduces the world of illustration.

While counting the charms of this field, she does not discount the fact that it is fiercely competitive and diverse:

“You do have to work hard to find your niche and audience. The key is to stay consistent and draw from your heart.”

As every artist has role models they look up to and trends which they incorporate into their work,

Miss Pachuau was very much inspired by golden age illustrators such as Frank C Pepe, Edmund Dulac, Ivan Bilibin, Arthur Rackham, Beatrix Potter, etc, who illustrated popular fairy tale books like the Grimm’s Fairy Tales. She particularly admired their ability to flawlessly mix realism and fantasy, which can be appreciated by all age groups.

Drawing from these, she tends to use analogous colours and a subtle, nature-inspired palette of greens and blues accentuated by dashes of vibrant colours in between.

“Despite being whimsical, my illustrations often have dark themes and sinister undertones as they are based on folklore and mythical creatures.”

Although all of Alyssa Pachuau’s work is enchanting, her illustrations of folklore from the North-East seem to be her hallmark.



When asked about the North-East and what it means to her, she succinctly replied,

*“To me, it means home and belonging.”*

Furthermore, she said that through the lens of an illustrator, it means diversity and vivid identities.

“From hills to valleys, no two states are alike. Within each state, there are multiple tribes and ethnicities with distinct identities defined by beliefs, dialects, food habits, and cultural practices. This seemingly homogenous yet diverse characteristic of the region is what constitutes ‘North-East’ to me.”

To be able to draw and illustrate the various aspects of the region with creativity requires a firm knowledge and awareness about the people. It’s no wonder that Alyssa Pachuau does her homework and that too very diligently!

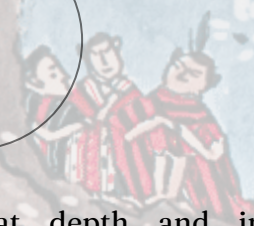
“If an illustration pertains to a specific tribe(s), I normally allocate time to research and collect data such as the general history of the tribe(s) and any visual documentation available.

I collect books on folktales and folklore from different tribes, which are the first set of references for illustrations.

I also collect articles, academic papers on folklore written by scholars from various tribes, ethnobotanical research papers from different states, historical documents, and visual narratives pertaining to indigenous tribes from North-East India.”

Folklore and folktales contribute to the individuality of different tribes which establish their uniqueness as a group in opposition to other groups and communities from different regions. Beyond fantasies and superstitions, these myths and tales contain ancient lore and wisdom which are specific to a particular group of people. Those with these shared beliefs and wisdom will have strong ties and reinforce their connection with the land and region,, specific to their beliefs.





Exhibiting great depth and importance of indigenous narratives and having a strong sense of allegiance to her people, Alyssa Pachuau finds it imperative that we tell these stories and tales from our own perspective. By doing this, she feels that we can control the narrative and ensure indigenous stories are being told with authenticity.

“Over the years, pursuing art has turned into a journey of rediscovery of my cultural heritage.”

have evolved and experienced a remarkable longing to reconnect with my roots and cultural identity. Compelled by this renewed appreciation, I find myself reading and learning more about my own culture and that of other tribes”

, she says with a tone of satisfaction and gratefulness.

She always seems to find her way back to simplicity in her understanding and it is this simplicity which is at the heart of her work.

“Simple stories of ordinary people stir our hearts because they are real and honest. Such stories resonate with most people who see/read them, as they can identify themselves with their authenticity and simplicity. Linking ourselves to these experiences pulls down barriers and connects us. It gives us hope and faith, so they are significant and meaningful.”

The tradition of storytelling can become a way to preserve languages and customs. All of Alyssa Pachuau’s illustrations tell stories. She believes that when a story is retold in any form, it helps revive the culture and verbal language of a tribe.

“Lore and tales contain words, idioms, poetry and songs that are not in common usage today. Illustrating these stories becomes a significant way for me to revive these little-known but significant words and sayings thereby preserving the language.”

Thus, these illustrations become in themselves a project of language revitalization and expression of identity

Understanding the importance of preserving and appreciating our own dialects and languages, Alyssa Pachuau shares her thoughts on how this might be sought:

“Today, I feel this responsibility begins at home and young parents need to encourage children to appreciate and learn their own dialects/languages.

“We should encourage young people to speak and spell words correctly, focusing on grammar and sentence formation.

Simultaneously, it is also crucial to create a balance i.e., to inculcate a renewed appreciation for our own dialects/languages without being necessarily disdainful of other languages.”

When asked about her favourite project, she promptly replied:

“Every new illustration or project brings its own set of joy and challenges and I enjoy most of the illustrations I work on. “Ukepenuopfü- an Angami folktale reimagined”

by T. Kreditsu was extremely memorable as it was a great learning experience for me.

I was very invested in the project and the picture book contains some of my best illustrations to date.”

Speaking of her future plans as a storyteller and an illustrator, she hopes to publish an author-illustrated picture book on Mizo folklore. Simultaneously, she wants to continue to explore and illustrate folktales about more indigenous tribes in the Northeast, especially those who are relatively underrepresented.

Truly, Miss Pachuau’s passionate and tantalising illustrations have not failed to capture our minds. Her wondrous talent initiates a new appreciation and a want for the realities which lie behind her art, making us reflect and ponder on the astonishing beauties of the times left behind.






The sacred wild pear tree     illustrated by: ALYSSA PACHUAU

ALYSSA  
PACHUAU  
2022





# **EXTINCTION OF LANGUAGE IS THE DEATH OF CULTURE**

The idea of identity is something that dominates and captures most of North-East India. Being home to a variety of tribes and ethnic groups, demand for individual and distinct recognition is sought by its communities. The categorization of “North Eastern” in India is, however, very vague. How would you call someone a North Easterner? Is it by their looks? Their food? Their culture or religion? Traditions or the attire they wear? The obscurity of this question has led the people of the North Bengal Hills to be stuck within the doldrums with some recognizing them as North Easterners and others calling them “the other people”.

**PRAVEK PATRICK SITLING**

## RONG:

Nestled among the ever-flowing Teesta and the misty hills of Darjeeling, lies the tribe of the Lepcha people. The Lepchas are an ancient tribe indigenous to the Himalayan belt and its regions that stretch from the eastern lands of Nepal to the western borders of Bhutan. They are predominantly found in the lands of Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan and the North Bengal Hills. In this discourse, I shall be taking examples of the Lepchas who hail from the North Bengal hills, namely- Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and Mirik.

It is believed that the term "Lepcha" was actually a derogatory insult given by their Nepalese neighbours, which roughly translated to "Vile speakers". The Lepcha people were originally called "Rong" and their language was known as "Rong-Ring".

The 14th century marked the arrival of Tibetan monks who sought to convert the local people and make them adopt the Tibetan or the Bhutia culture. Over the years, the Tibetan population and influence grew which led to a mass extermination of Lepcha people under the orders of the then Tibetan monarch, who overthrew the Lepcha King. Ever since then, the Lepcha people have been marginalised and neglected.

Lepchas call themselves "Rongkup/Rumkup" or in short "Rong", which means "The son of Snowy peak or the Son of God". They have their own language with a script, grammar and literature. It is believed to be one of the most comprehensive languages. They believe that the language was spoken by God to the first creation and was transmitted to posterity. It is understood that the Lepcha language spoken today is still the same as it was all those centuries ago.

As per Mainwaring (1876), Lepcha is the oldest extant language and is unquestionably "far anterior to the Hebrew and Sanskrit". However some researchers and writers have quoted that the language falls under the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan speech family.

The Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India (1909) has placed Lepcha as the non-pronominalised group of Himalayan language. The language is considered to be a distinct and rich language of eastern Himalayan region.

## RONG-RING:

Rong-Ring or the Lepcha script is said to be of Tibeto-Burman origin. It is said that the Lepcha language is " ..unlike any other languages of Indian subcontinent as it does not owe to any other languages and it possesses distinct characteristics of its own." There are several folktales that talk about the origins of the language and how it came into being.

Tamsang (2008) says: "The Lepcha Script is said to have existed long before the Tibetan came to Sikkim in the 13th century. There is proof that this script existed four centuries ago long before King Chagdor Namgyal's reign, the third Tibetan King of Sikkim (1700-1717). There was an Oath of the Blood Brotherhood Treaty in 1366 AD between a Lepcha divine priest and a representative of Tibetan and that was written and signed in both Lepcha and Tibetan language. It has been said the Buddhist missionaries led by Namgyal kings took the initiative to spread the Lepcha script for writing the Namthar (Lepcha Script). The first ever print of the Lepcha script was for the Bible which was done by the Christian Missionaries in 1845 and had devised the font for the printing. "The gift of Darjeeling Grant 1835" (The deed by which Maharaja of Sikkim ceded Darjeeling district to East India Company) was written in Lepcha language with the official seal of Maharaja of Sikkim. In the earlier phases of British rule, Lepcha was considered to be the official and court language of Darjeeling."

With these important developments in mind I shall now be discussing about the gradual decline of the usage of Lepcha language and its importance with respect to the North Bengal hills.



## DARJEELING HILLS:

The Lepcha language was originally the official language of the Darjeeling Hills until 1911 when the British declared it to be “unfashionable”. They then decided to replace it with a much more commercial and profitable language, Nepali. This became one of the primary reasons as to why the language started to die out. Since Lepcha no longer had any official or political meaning, it was deemed useless and redundant. This became unappealing to the majority of the people who at the time of the British Raj were willing to adopt anything to survive what they thought as “modernization”. In the desperate hopes of keeping up with the times and not dying out as a community, the Lepcha people with much acquiescence gave in to the usage of Nepali as the primary medium of communication.

Another major reason as to why the language began to drown out was the influx of migrants from all over the neighbouring regions. The Tibetans had already migrated to Sikkim a couple centuries ago and now it were the Nepalis, the Bhutanese and other communities of “Mainland India” who began to settle down in the Darjeeling hills. This paved the way to a melting pot of diverse cultures and traditions who were in desperate need of a common medium of language. Since the majority of the migrants were from Nepal with their language being the closest thing resembling the “Hindustani” criteria of what a language is supposed to be, Nepali soon became the primary medium of communication.

## A DYING LANGUAGE:

What kills a language? There are several factors that lead up to the demise of a language. As mentioned beforehand the lack of usage and value in day to day conversation plays a vital role in erasing a language. Although human nature does come into play as well. Patrick Sada says that “ The Language started to face a serious challenge of negligence not only from outside but also from the Lepchas themselves, though compelled by the outside environmental forces and changing life patterns of the tribe.” He says that the “linguistic complacency” of the Lepchas is also a great vice that they carry.

The author is very critical of the attitude of the Lepcha people as he states that they tend to be content and satisfied with what they already have and do not strive for excellence or improvement.

The migrants from the neighbouring regions also brought in a sort of linguistic invasion that led to Rong-Ring being uprooted from the linguistic control of the natives. It did not come as a surprise when the British then opted to use Nepali and other more “Indian” centric languages.

Another major reason would be the proselytization by the monks and the missionaries. Undoubtedly, the advent of the Christian missionaries brought about change in the landscape of the hills, literally and metaphorically. Earlier on the priests had translated some sections of the Bible into Lepcha but it gained little traction and eventually gave way to Nepali being the more suitable language to be translated into. The change into education policies was also something that dealt a huge blow to the Lepcha purpose. Education was intended to modernise these “rural people” and introduce them to the new age. In the 1920’s the Nepalis started a movement in order for Nepali to be recognized in educational institutions. The Lepcha hopped onto this train and did the same for theirs. However the outcome was not even remotely similar.

In 1929 the Nepali Text Book Committee gave the following reasons as to why the inclusion of Lepcha as a vernacular language would not be preferable.

- *As there are no Lepcha textbooks, there is no point in teaching a boy Lepcha language*
- *Unless the language is actually dying out, the majority of Lepcha boys will learn to speak it in their own homes.*
- *The written language Lepcha is of no practical use in life*
- *The Lepcha boy already has to study both Nepali and Hindi at some stage or other, why add to his difficulties by teaching him to read a third language in which there is practically no literature? (Thakur,1998: 88)*

The Tibetan Monks also played a huge part in erasing the Lepcha language. After gaining foothold in the land of Sikkim they burnt and destroyed several scripts and documents written in Lepcha with the ulterior motive of establishing Tibetan as the primary language of conversation. This would later have severe repercussions over the upcoming generations as now there are hardly any written scripts that one can refer to in search of reviving the Lepcha culture and language.

### **SIKKIMESE LEPCHAS & NORTH BENGAL LEPCHAS:**

This leaves us with the status of the Lepchas in an awkward state of no proper definition. Sikkim being recognized as an official "North-East" state in 2002 has allowed the community to retrace their footing on their cultural identity. In Sikkim resides a restricted area called Dzongu which is a Lepcha reserve with dense forests and an undisturbed civilization. The Government has recognized these Lepcha tribesmen as the natives and have left them to their own preferred lifestyles. Comparatively Lepchas from Sikkim enjoy much more amenities, financial support, political privilege and cultural recognition than their North Bengal counterparts. With their local tribal organisations being supported by the government, the Lepchas of Sikkim have a solid ground on which they can promote and preserve their identity.

Vibha Arora (2017) writes : "The Lepchas of Darjeeling and Kalimpong in West Bengal were exposed to the modern world much before the Lepchas of Sikkim. After 1947, this region underwent drastic socio-economic and political changes. Hence, the Lepchas acquired the political capacity to negotiate the different institutions and safeguards of Indian democracy far ahead of the Sikkimese Lepchas. As one of the tribes of West Bengal, the Lepchas have been vigorously fighting for cultural protection and competing for access to resources with the ethnically diverse and numerically dominant Nepali groups."

She also mentions how the West Bengal government plays a crucial hand in the negligence of the Lepcha people. Lepcha festivals are not recognised as a state holiday and neither are there provisions of funds reserved for the preservation of their culture which is a total contrast from their Sikkimese counterpart. There have been several demands for the introduction of Lepcha language in the schools of Darjeeling Hills which have not been accepted. Also one of the major factors to take into account is the demand for Gorkhaland for the past few decades which has completely engulfed the political scene of the Darjeeling Hills. The migration of the Nepalis and their strong demand for an ethnic homeland has resulted in the negligence of the Lepcha community and has rapidly reduced their interests to an "insignificant minority".

The Lepchas in North Bengal also have certain organisations and committees that have gathered to spread awareness about their preservation and identity. However, there is a stark difference between them and their Sikkimese brethren. Since the socio-political scenario of the Darjeeling hills is dominated by the Nepali speaking community, the Lepchas of these regions live in a constant fear that their individual identity as an ethnic group is getting drowned out. On September 10th 2004, Bhupendra Lepcha, the convener of the Lepcha Rights Movement brought out the argument that the Government's decision of labelling all Lepchas as "Sikkimese" compromises the Lepcha identity and culture, greatly undermining the legitimacy of their origins in the Darjeeling Hills and relegating their identity to a mere "State identity". Categorising them as "Gorkhas" would also be problematic as the Lepchas by origin and descent do not share common lineage as their Nepalese neighbours. Many researchers and scholars have deemed that the Lepchas themselves have become a minority in their homeland, by being subjected to factors such as homogenization and proselytization. This reluctance of being categorised as "Nepali" has led to controversial political tensions between the Lepcha community and the Gorkha community on the issue of Gorkhaland.



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HhAs mentioned earlier, when we think of the Lepcha tribe, our mind automatically reverts to Sikkim. In this aspect the identity of the North Bengal Lepchas have been generalised to come under the term "Bengali" due to geopolitical boundaries. This has greatly blurred the definition of what it means to be considered a North-Eastern. If Sikkim being an official member of the "North-East" means that their Lepcha population can be considered as "North-Eastern", then where does that place the North Bengal Lepchas who share the same culture and traditions. The crisis of identity seeps in when this question arises leaving the Lepchas of West Bengal displaced with the feeling of "neither here nor there". As a state identity, they are not Sikkimese but neither can they be Bengali in terms of culture and lineage.

the end, the role language plays in shaping and defining one's identity is monumental and a necessity. The title of this article is not merely a title but a factual statement which rings true, especially in a post-colonial world where we can still see its effects take shape in a multicultural environment. The Lepchas are one of many tribes who have been subjugated to proselytization, unjust administrative decisions and marginalisation. The purpose of this article was to show that there are many complex dimensions behind the decline of a culture.

It is a sophisticated and sensitive issue that needs to be treated with immense care and understanding.

Preserving one's language is the first step to preserving one's identity and culture.

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# SOCIETY EVENTS

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# TALKS AND

# PANEL DISCUSSIONS

THE ST. STEPHEN'S NORTH-EAST SOCIETY  
PRESENTS A TALK WITH  
**DR. ARKOTONG LONGKUMER**  
ON  
*Healing of Colonial Wounds: Pitt Rivers Museum  
and Repatriation of Naga Ancestral Remains*



Dr. Arkotong Longkumer  
Senior Lecturer in Modern Asia  
University of Edinburgh

15th October, 2022  
Time: 3:30pm IST  
Platform: Google Meet  
Meeting code: ttf-aavm-ima

Chinghoih Khuptong +91 9123962696      Samanir Imchen +91 7641905537

THE ST. STEPHEN'S NORTH-EAST SOCIETY  
PRESENTS A TALK ON  
**"Aspects of Matrilineal Practices and Some  
Reflections on Khasi Religious Folklife: Tigerwomen,  
Alcohol, and Gender Swapping"**




**MARGARET LYNGDOH**  
Research fellow in Indigenous Folklore Studies  
University of Tartu

Date: 21 April, 2023  
Time: 4:00 PM  
Platform: Google Meet  
Meeting Code: agq-rgng-juo

Chinghoih Khuptong +91 9123962696      Samanir Imchen +91 8527908997

THE ST. STEPHEN'S NORTH-EAST SOCIETY  
PRESENTS A TALK WITH  
**MR. SANJOY HAZARIKA**  
ON  
*"AFSPA and the North-East"*



Mr. Sanjoy Hazarika  
Political commentator and author  
Former member of the Justice (retd.) B.P Jeevan Reddy Committee


13th January, 2023  
Time: 3:00 PM  
Venue: Seminar Room

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in collaboration with other societies

THE ST. STEPHEN'S NORTH-EAST SOCIETY  
IN COLLABORATION WITH  
**THE HISTORY SOCIETY**  
ON  
*"Archaeology of Northeast India: On-going research in the Naga  
Metamorphics and Naga Hills Opbiolites, Nagaland"*




**DR. TIATOSHI JAMIR**



8 FEBRUARY, 2023  
4:00 PM  
Meeting code: vjv-kzff-cmd

THE ST. STEPHEN'S NORTH-EAST SOCIETY  
IN COLLABORATION WITH  
**THE ENGLISH LITERARY SOCIETY**  
PRESENTS A TALK ON  
**Torture and the Unbinding of the Everyday in the North-East:  
Dhrubajyoti Borah's Kalantarar Gadya**



**AMIT R. BAISHYA**  
Director of Graduate Studies, Associate Professor  
Department of English, University of Oklahoma

Date: 15th March, 2023  
Time: 6:00 PM  
Platform: Google Meet  
Meeting Code: vzr-fawi-ski



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*the North-East Lunch*



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*Hornbill TV Interview: 100 years of Allnutt Residence*

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*Echoes of the Eight*







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Orientation

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# Freshers



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Harvest Celebration

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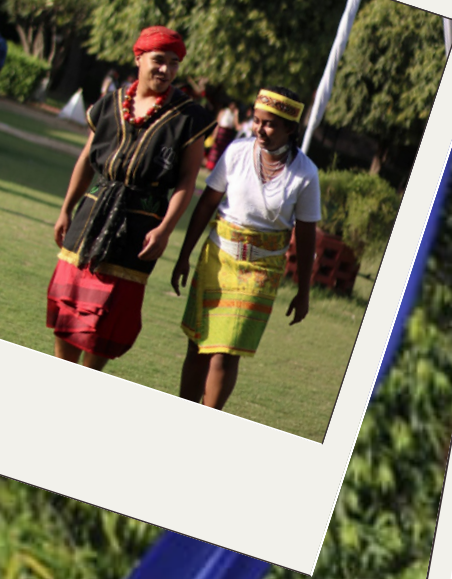
# Losar Celebration



NAAAC  
Cultural Team

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Unicolour





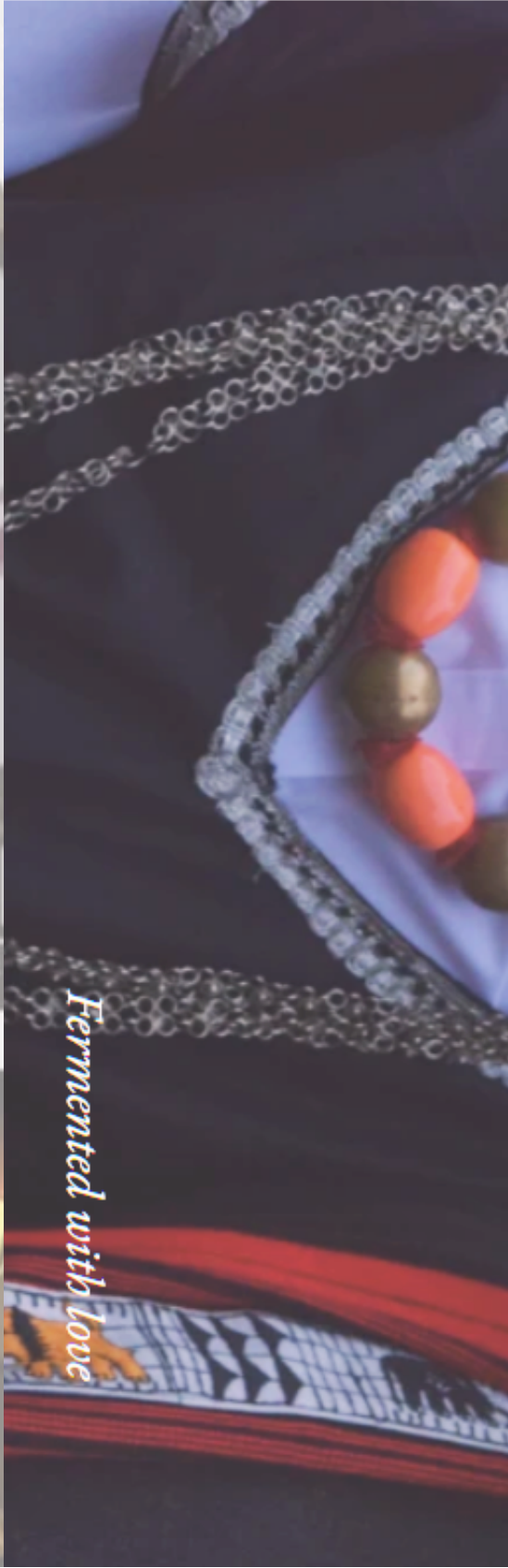
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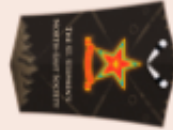


# OUR OFFICIAL BLOG THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

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*Fermented with love*



The Hills Are Alive

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Catherine Lalmalsawmi



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Dushyant Pateriya



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Samanir Imchen

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editorial and design



Judith Lalvarzing Pulamte



Rigzin Tshogay



Abigail Ocean



Jigme T Nidup



Mharon Ngully



Rachel Tongbram



# Exec' 22-23

(L-R) David VI Muanpuia Hlawndo, Thumloy Phom  
Judith Lalvarzing Pulamte, Samanir Imchen, Akuminla Aier  
Tsudimen Jamir, Chinghoih Khuptong  
Hiya Seb, Pravek Patrick Sitling, Steve Narjinary  
Neinomching Haokip, Yozo Nuvocho  
Moachet Pongener, Catherine Lalmalsawmi, Lucy Chingneihoh











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