

Arunachal Pradesh: Kho Shi Pai Brings Lisu Community's Heritage and Hardships into Focus

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11–14 minutes

A cold February morning, an overcast sky with patches of sunlight, hangs over the green Patkai hills in the remote village of Gandhigram in [Arunachal Pradesh](#)'s eastern district of Changlang bordering Myanmar. On a wide sprawling field, a stage made of wild bamboo, cane, and local leaves was all set for the second Kho Shi Pai festival of the Lisu tribe.

“Kho” means year, “shi” translates to new, and “pai” means festival. As flowers start to bloom in February, Kho Shi Pai marks the beginning of the new year for the Lisu community, also known as Yobins in India. The words Lisu and Yobin are often used interchangeably to refer to this minority tribe comprising just about 5,000 people in India. For this community, the festival is also a way to unite, come together, and celebrate, besides solving any problems that arise among its people.

However, due to a lack of substantial research and written material on the Lisus in India, their existence has remained shrouded in mystery. People from the community believe they have been inhabiting the hamlets of Vijoy Nagar and Gandhigram situated deep inside the Namdapha National Park for decades. They also reside in Changlang's Miao town and Injan village. Belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family, they are primarily from the Yunnan Province of south-western China, Kachin State of north-eastern [Myanmar](#), and the hills of Thailand. The people speak the Lisu language, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language group.

Showcasing Lisu culture

Foot-tapping music of the Lisus reverberated throughout the entire field as people gathered in large numbers. Adutiasa Yobin, a 35-year-old woman from the Lisu tribe, swiftly arranged vegetables, fruits, snacks,

and other local items for display at one of the many stalls in the festival. “We want to showcase our culture and tradition to the rest of the world,” she said.

Ngwasibo Yobin, a 31-year-old member of the Kho Shi Pai festival’s organising committee said, “We made a committee and organised this festival for the first time in 2024. Our culture has been hidden for so long—we want to invite people from the rest of the country,” Ngwasibo said. Compared with last year, the arrangement is better, Ngwasibo added. Funding, he said, usually comes from the Lisu families. “People contribute according to their own wish, there is no fixed amount.”

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Besides food stalls and stands selling knick-knacks, several other stalls displayed the Lisus’ agriculture equipment, traditional looms, and utensils. Local songs, dance, music, and food were an integral part of the Kho Shi Pai festival. A fashion show that declared “Mr Kho Shi Pai” and “Miss Kho Shi Pai” were also held.

One of the main attractions of the festival is the Lisu traditional dance: the *Cheyngo Wakhi* (the song is called *cheyngo* and the dance *wakhi*). Members from the community form a circle around the field and receive guests by performing this dance. It is believed that during Kho Shi Pai, their forefathers communicated with each other by singing and dancing *Cheyngo Wakhi*.

Lisu women usually wear a blue outfit that includes a shirt, skirt, a waistcoat paired with elaborate headgear, and a sash with tassels draped over the shoulder, which is accompanied by heavy ethnic jewellery. The Lisu men wear trousers with long shirts that resemble a robe. They team it up with a traditional cap and a belt on their waist. Their outfit, too, is blue. Although Lisu clothing was primarily made from hemp fibres, now cotton and velvet have taken over.

Cut off from society

For years, the Lisus have lived a life of obscurity because they are completely cut off from Arunachal Pradesh’s major towns and cities. There is one road through the Namdapha National Park that goes to Gandhigram and then 20 km further up to Vijoynagar—the last Indian village bordering Myanmar. But this bumpy and rough stretch takes about 8 hours to Gandhigram from Miao, a sleepy picturesque town and a

subdivision of the Changlang district. The only cars that can manoeuvre their way through the terrain are 4x4 pickup trucks.

During monsoons, landslides are common and chances of being stranded without any network and internet are high. Until a few years ago though, even this road did not exist, and people trekked through the forests of Namdapha National Park for about 4 to 5 days, camping at various points to reach Miao.

It is believed that the Assam Rifles, one of India's oldest paramilitary forces, found the Lisus in 1961. Yomanu Yobin, president of the women's wing of the tribal uplift group Yobin Welfare Society, said: "The land we live in fell in an undefined land during British India. This part of the land was known as NEFA [North-East Frontier Agency, a political division in British India which is now present-day Arunachal Pradesh]."

Yomanu added: "The Central government must have decided from a security point of view to safeguard the international boundary and they began to air survey the limits of NEFA. While surveying the Noa-Dehing river and this valley, the air force pilot saw smoke in the present-day Gandhigram area. That's how they located us."



Lisu women dressed in their traditional outfits. In the past, Lisu clothing used to be

made from hemp fibres. Now cotton and velvet have taken over as the primary material. | Photo Credit: Sanskrita Bharadwaj

Cheyose Ngwazah, a primary school teacher at the Government Upper Primary School in Gandhigram, said that his elders used to say that there were some Lisus who entered India from Myanmar through the historic Stilwell's Road—a 1,726 km-long road constructed by the Allied Soldiers led by the US during the Second World War that started from Ledo in Assam to the Burma Road, going up to Kunming, China.

According to Ngwazah, these Lisus initially settled in Nampong in Arunachal Pradesh and met many Singpho tribesmen (also known as the Jinghpaw in Myanmar and China) who reside in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. "Some Lisus picked up the language of the Singphos and told them that there were more Lisus who had settled in the valley below Mount Mugafi beside Noa-Dehing river beyond the forests of the present-day Namdapha National Park," Ngwazah said.

"Our elders used to say that our people migrated from Kachin in Myanmar because that region was hilly. Our ancestors were hunters and gatherers, and they were on the lookout for plain areas. They found this place and settled here," Ngwazah added.

Around the same time, the Indian government began to settle the retired Nepali soldiers of the Assam Rifles in Vijoynagar to secure India's international border with Myanmar. "Settlers were brought into our land as human boundaries for the Indian territory. But we are where we used to be. We will survive against all odds," Yomanu said.

"Lisus rear chickens, pigs, and cows; grow vegetables and paddy; and fish in the Noa-Dehing river for sustenance; for most of them, the main source of income is cardamom farming."

As one leaves Miao and enters the boundaries of the Namdapha National Park, mobile connectivity disappears. There is no electricity, mobile network, or internet connection facility at Gandhigram. Those who possess an internet broadband connection—operated mainly through solar—are families who are slightly more well-off than the others. Vijoynagar has a BSNL network that works intermittently.

Even without these basic amenities, Lisu society is self-sustaining, which works by being tightly knit. For instance, they often barter and help each other when someone from the community is constructing a house.

Healthcare, education, and livelihood

In a scenario where proper roads and connectivity are unavailable, accessing healthcare remains critical for the Lisu community. “Here people don’t fall sick as much and even when we do, we rely more on local medicines and traditional ways of healing,” said Adutiasa Yobin, adding that there are people in the community who know how to treat people with jaundice, fever, pain, etc.

In case of an emergency, many depend on booking the Indian Army helicopter service in Vijoynagar. But getting an immediate seat is hardly possible and might require days. Those who can afford to book a 4x4 pick-up truck take one of those to Miao, a difficult journey that costs Rs. 1,000 (one way) while others trek the entire route. Babies are often delivered at home with the help of midwives.

Steven Fish, a Lisu who works as a pastor at a church in Miao, was in Gandhigram to attend the Kho Shi Pai festival. According to Fish, he is a second-generation Lisu in India—his parents were born in Gandhigram. Like Fish, many from the community were able to study because of the Church of Christ, he said. “The current lot of educated people from the community were able to access education because of the church.”



Inside a church that belongs to the Church of Christ in Miao town of Arunachal Pradesh. Lisus in the State mainly follow Christianity under the Church of Christ. |

Photo Credit: Sanskrita Bharadwaj

The Church of Christ's intervention among the Lisus and in Gandhigram is palpable. Lisus in Arunachal Pradesh mainly follow Christianity under this church. Some families who cannot afford to send their children for higher education rely on the church for help.

Many Lisus move to Miao for schooling and college, and then also to other areas like Itanagar (the capital of Arunachal Pradesh), Margherita (a town in Assam), or even all the way to Shillong in Meghalaya. Many then move back to Gandhigram and Vijoynagar to teach in primary schools, while many prefer living in Miao.

Lisus rear chickens, pigs, and cows; grow vegetables and paddy; and fish in the Noa-Dehing river for sustenance; for most of them, the main source of income is cardamom farming. Ngwasibo Yobin worked as an accountant in an NGO in Miao but moved back to his village to grow cardamom, which has been more profitable. "I got my father's pacemaker installed in Guwahati through the money I made from selling cardamom," he said.

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However, over the years, the community has been in conflict with the forest authorities. "Namdapha was declared a forest reserve in 1982. There were no discussions with the Lisus back then, and we don't agree with the current demarcations made by the forest authorities—that's where the dispute lies," Cheyose Ngwazah said.

For now, the dream of a proper road for the Lisus is still a long way off. Kamlung Mossang, the MLA from Miao, said previously there were no roads and there were no cars coming in. "Now, due to the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, this road [Miao to Vijoynagar] has opened. But for this road to become better, a highway has been sanctioned and within a few months, the tendering process will be complete too," Mossang said, adding that the highway will be 170 km long starting from the Namchi check gate on the Assam-Arunachal border to Vijoynagar. "The estimated cost of the highway is Rs.2,400 crore. It will take 4-5 years to make this road."

Phiacha Yobin, a 63-year-old elderly man who was at the Kho Shi Pai festival, believes that successive governments have not done much for the community, which is why even in 2025 the Miao-Vijoynagar road is in

a deplorable condition. "If we get a proper road—it will be a big relief for us."

Sanskrita Bharadwaj is an independent journalist from Assam.