

Witnessing the Cultural Richness and Ingenuity of Kiphire, Nagaland

50th Shodhyatra January 18-24, 2024

Faraway from the hustle and bustle of cities, the 50th Shodhyatra meandered through the valleys and mountains of Kiphire, Nagaland. The yatris at first enjoyed the utter quiet of the nature but soon they felt something amiss. It was too quiet. The chirping! They realised there was no sound of the chirping birds. This didn't felt right. It was the same all the way from Anatongre until the last leg of the journey when the yatris reached Tethuyo. Finally, the yatris heard the chirping of the birds! On inquiry, they found that the tribal councils in Natsami and Tethuyo impose fines on hunting of birds and harvesting of wild honey – willingly foregoing any income from such activities. Their knack for creating enterprise is tempered by a deep respect for nature.

The journey was filled with such examples and observations. Learning came from all quarters; from the community elders who are the living repositories of Naga traditions;

women entrepreneurs bringing local flavours and foods to the world; the youth who are keen on conserving their heritage while embracing the spirit of innovation; the songs, chants and dances that accompany important occasions; and nature herself.

Kiphire, Nagaland lies on the Myanmar border, covering a surface area of 1,255 sq. km between the Saramati and Jingkhu mountains. It is populated by



four recognised tribes - the Sangtam, Yimchungru, Sumi, and Tikhir, and a few other sub-tribes.

Culture

People's attire signifies their position in the society. Traditionally the village head had a special tattoo and wore a necklace with tiger teeth, and small metal skulls signifying the number of heads hunted. This practise is no longer permitted and is a relic of the past. Men's attire includes 'athergo bumkhom' (waistcoat), 'singthu' (forefather's plate), and 'rumzhu' (belt). Red jackets are worn by educated men, and plain red waistcoats are worn by elders, signifying their duty to act as a protector and guide for the village. Women's attire comprises a 'mekhala' (Naga wrap skirt), 'akhiru lak' (necklace), 'sangtam rushu' (shawl), 'sangtam rugchi' (belt), and a colourful headdress. Special stones called 'lung' are used in jewellery.



Naga Warrior Folk Dance in Yingshukiu

(<https://dcmsme.gov.in/old/dips/DIPR-Kiphire-Final.pdf>)

Clothes feature animal and weaponry motifs which symbolise valour, wisdom, and other desirable characteristics.

There are songs unique to particular occasions, such as threshing of paddy, or grinding its grain. The grinding dance has carried over from the time when feet were used to grind grains before machines became common. The threshing dance is done using a bamboo stick as a prop.

With a church in every village, the population is well-versed in hymnals. This is the village's everyday music — songs sung at mass and the ringing of church bells.

In one of the villages, over 20 dancers of Yingshukiu created a spectacle, marching in their traditional martial costumes, with military precision and performing the Naga Warrior Folk Dance. The shodhyatris also witnessed the folk dances performed by Apunoqho and Lezele in Lukhami.

Every village has quite a few centenarians, the last living repositories of the Naga traditions. There is immense respect given to elders, and it is customary to refer to them for any major decisions.

The shodhyatris made a special effort to document their knowledge.

Natural Architecture And Crafts

Bamboo is commonly found and is widely used as building and craft material. Most houses are built with either bamboo or wood, with tin roofing.

In Yingshukiu, Bamboo is also used for decorations, mats, baskets, bags, and hats. All utensils and eating plates used during the yatra were made entirely from bamboo, creating zero non-biodegradable waste. This helped fulfil the Shodhyatra's aim of joining the local people in ecological preservation.



Traditional wooden craft & vessels

Wooden artefacts are also common. Mr. Tsalimong had crafted an ornately carved wooden walking stick, under which he had fixed a pin which would provide good grip and stability even in the rough terrain.

The yatris also saw a display of a few traditional wooden vessels and implements such as *tusipong* (money box), *pumji* (chair), and *atongy and hinyang pong* (mortar and pestle).

Tree cotton is used to weave Naga shawls which are naturally dyed in red and black. The yatris met Ms. Yantushe in Anatongre who has set up a micro banana fibre processing unit.

Flavours, Foods, Herbs and Healing

Rice, maize and millets are the major cereals consumed, often made into '*mshuh asna*' (sticky rice) or '*apallam*' (sticky maize), *tekhri* (pulao), a mash, porridge, bun and pancakes. The yatris saw a few landrace rice varieties like '*munitsa jin*', '*alitso*' for brewing beer, and wild rice, in shades of red, brown, and black. Three varieties of corn were found - yellow, orange, and red, which are savoured with sticky rice. There was a wealth of endemic millet varieties, such as '*tantso*', '*rein*', '*xutse*', and '*mumtseh*' (Job's tears millet); 11 varieties of Job's tears millets alone are cultivated there. White maize is also grown to feed pigs.

Name of Variety	Mean (Fe)	SD (Fe)
Kholar white blue small	51.78	5.64
Kholar white pink large	57.63	10.48
Kholar navy blue	54.42	4.82
Kholar brown light	52.98	4.71
Kholar brown dark	59.5	8.39
Kidney bean-white (control)	37.78	5.05
Kidney bean-red (control)	34.22	5.13
Kashmiri kidney bean-red (control)	32.84	3.79

Rajma varieties showing higher iron content than commercial varieties

The biggest bounty - over 30 types of 'khollar' (kidney bean, or rajma) grow in the region. Testing by Tata Institute for Genetics and Society (TGIS) scientists, under a GIAN and DBT project, found that five of those varieties were very high in iron. Stink beans and soybeans are also staples.

The vegetables were delicious and often very large sized, likely due to the high soil carbon of 5 per cent - over ten times the national average of 0.3 per cent. The folks at Old Risethsi claimed that often a single potato would weigh a kilo. The yatris met Ms. Vihoni, a farmer at Lukhami who came to the meeting with a cabbage of six kilograms. It is supposed to be the largest in the region.

Common vegetables are cauliflower, cabbage, pumpkin, and tubers like

yam, sweet potato and potato. Local Sangchunang and Leichunang potato varieties have a lot of flavour.

Vegetable seeds, such as 'muyits' (pumpkin seeds), were widely consumed. Hamirbhai and Rajeshbhai, farmers from Gujarat, had brought seeds from their fields, and in return, the Naga communities generously shared many seeds with them.

The community is also well-versed in the health benefits of their food like the perilla seeds (*Perilla frutescens* (L.) Britton) which are consumed almost daily because of their anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects. (Kaur, et al., 2024, *A comprehensive review on nutritional, nutraceutical, and industrial perspectives of perilla (Perilla frutescens L.) seeds - An orphan oilseed crop*) Boiled papaya stems are consumed as a digestive. (Iseal, s & Oluwaseyi, J, 2024,

The Benefits of Papaya for Digestive Health and Weight Loss

Fruits such as bananas, guavas, passionfruit, pineapple, and pomelo (*limbu*) are commonly grown. Many are found in the wild, like black cherries.

Few herbal healers also shared their knowledge of medicinal herbs with the yatris. Belenso T. Yimchunger and Ypongsuthong of Anatongre village told: 'Kutasova' is massaged for pain relief. 'Rummimoi' is juiced to treat a fever. Drinking soaked 'Sitong-apong' helps with coughs, and is also used for massage. 'Singying' leaf extract helps with symptoms of typhoid. 'Burmakash' prevents blood loss. Boiled 'Chongpa' helps manage diabetes. 'Akangna' is massaged on insect bites. 'Chacheva' leaf juice alleviates gastric conditions.



All such shared knowledge was documented by the shodhyatris.

Village meetings were organised during the day and night for more interaction between the villagers and the yatris and facilitating knowledge exchange.

SHGs and Recipe Competition

The district had many SHGs; there were 17 in Amahator alone. The SHGs welcomed the yatris with a wide range of foods to represent their diverse cuisine. They market many types of rice, maize and beans along with fruit-based products like wild apple candy, sumac jam, and wild black cherry jam. Sumac is known to have heart-healthy fats, and is an anti-inflammatory and has diabetes management properties.





The endemic small gooseberries are boiled with sugar and salt into a jam called 'quinsey' (pronounced *kyunsee*). Teas are often made with local flowers and herbs, like sumac, soybean powder, and Roselle. Achungla, a member of the Mutsaki A SHG, highlighted the efforts being taken to market wild honey out of state, exploring the viability of platforms like Amazon.

The recipe competition in Amahator brought forth creative dishes like Job's tear millet popcorn, 'shutze' (tree spinach), bitter eggplant with yam stem, and tapioca chips.

There was also an exhibition organised of the SHGs for the yatri to know more about them and also purchase their products.

Entrepreneurship and Opportunity

The community's entrepreneurial spirit was obvious. The people have built community marketing sheds, where everyone is given the opportunity to set up shop, with the blessing of the headman. A bulk LED manufacturing unit in Philongre

sells bulbs to all nearby villages. Given the remoteness of these villages, the communities feel it is important to promote such a 'hyper-local' approach to marketing basic household items. Reaching the market is a challenge, as roads and infrastructure pose hindrances in reaching the wider markets.

Education and Children's Ideas

Places of learning are locally called 'mourang'. The village had several schools, but a few were only up to primary class. Mostly the schools in larger towns or district headquarters offer higher classes, which required the students to live in the cities, while their parents stayed back in the village.

The children have inherited the culture of environmental consciousness, evident in their submissions to the idea competitions. Many youngsters want to plant seeds from fruits that have been eaten and reuse resources like water, chalk, and plastic. Anisheli suggested extracting ink from brightly coloured flowers which would otherwise

be thrown away after being used as decorations. Akito, a class eighth student, had many ideas like protecting baby plants, and making gifts for his mother and teachers. He wishes to invent a musical instrument, and also create magic tricks and a toy for his cat.



One Shodhyatri had brought robotic kits with him and organised workshops for kids in every village the yatri visited. The yatri observed that these village kids were sharp, determined and very hungry to learn.

Challenges

- Water for domestic purposes, including drinking water, and irrigation is in short supply.
- Roads are untarred, and often not motorable, especially after rains. Often people cannot walk on them at night due to low visibility and uneven surface. It makes accessing amenities like fuel, hospitals, etc. very challenging.
- Education quality is affected by inadequate teaching staff and frequent transfers. School infrastructure requires an overhaul.
- Due to the remote nature of their villages, doctors, or those holding training workshops might have to travel half a day to reach them and would have to stay the night. However, there is a lack of boarding facilities for guests.
- There is a shortage of doctors at the primary healthcare centre. The cycle of *jhum* cultivation is shortening.

Conclusion

Whatever the hardships, there is an innate sense of hospitality and warmth among the people. At Sitimi, the hosts had prepared over 24 dishes to welcome the yatris. Despite the late hour, they would give yatris company and share their valuable knowledge. Yatris learned not only from walking observations, the community practices, and the environment but also embarked on the *Shodh* inwards.

“Nürü erü yanglanü tsingye, erü khyang dünushi...”

(Even if you go away from our village, do not forget us.) from a Sangtam song to welcome guests)