

Sherdukpen: finding a recipe to fit the future

Author - Nitin Sethi , Published on - 19.12.2015



The traditional wooden kitchen is where Sherdukpen life thrives (note stoves based on different technologies)

Dorjee K Thungon shows us around the new concrete house his father is building by the river side. The house does not have a kitchen. "We don't build our kitchens inside the concrete houses. We retain our traditional wooden kitchens. The concrete house is to store things, sometimes to entertain formal guests and to sleep in. But, a Sherdukpen's life is spent in the traditional kitchen, around fire." he explains, while plucking the sugar-sweet ripe plums off the tree for us.

I am in a village called Shergaon. It is home to about 1,000 people from the Sherdukpen tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. There are only about 4,000 people in the entire tribe. The village, originally known as Shenthuk, is tucked deep inside a beautiful valley sculpted by three rivers and surrounded by thick forests in the West Kameng district. This time of the year plums are ripe. The last time I was in Shergaon, in another season, the plum trees and apple orchards were loaded with flowers and the nearby hills afire with red rhododendron flowers. Depending on which part of the year you go, you can pluck apples, walnut, chestnut, peach, cherry, pear, pomegranate and kiwi. The valley looks like the scenes we were made to draw as children - high hills in the backdrop, a river flowing down through the valley, the house by the river, trees laden with fruits and gardens flush with flowers.

But, Dorjee's old wooden house that I stayed in two years ago is gone. Concrete houses are popping up in place of other wooden houses too. Yet every family retains its wooden kitchen. Sherdukpen life, I see over the next few days, does thrive in the kitchen, around the constantly burning wood fire. Family members, extended family members, clan members, neighbours, friends and others all keep streaming in and out of the kitchen all through the day.

A small tribe, divided into seven clans, the Sherdukpen are a tightly knit community. Anyone and everyone is a holler away. I remember Dorjee's wedding two years ago. Cousins and family all got together to make a carpet out of pine needles for the wedding, collecting them from weeks before. At the end of three days of elaborate traditional wedding ceremonies that require every family of the village to bring food for the bride, popular Bollywood numbers played on community-owned loudspeakers for the village to dance on the carpet all night.

The mix of modernity and tradition is also visible inside the wooden kitchens. The traditional mud stove sits on one side. A stove made out of iron with a chimney drawing the smoke out of the kitchen, imported from Bhutan, sits right beside it. There is also a gas stove with an LPG cylinder. "This iron one comes from Bhutan. But it doesn't provide as much heating in the kitchen as the traditional one. I want to build a way to funnel the heat from it to the other rooms as well. For our severe winter we need a source of heating," says Dorjee. Though it rarely snows, Shergaon hits sub-zero temperatures in winters. Dorjee, an engineer who left his job in the software industry to come back to Arunachal, thinks these low-tech solutions shall make life better in Shergaon.

He is the first engineer from the Sherdukpen tribe. There are others from his generation who are gaining higher education and ploughing their energies back in to their village.

Shergaon faces the same challenge as many hill regions. The younger generation goes for studies and once educated, turns to other options than farming back home. But there are still several people like Dorjee who are equipping people to make the economic and cultural transition at somewhat better terms.



At the Chekyor festival the community walks encircling the village boundaries

A botanist and forestry expert doing his doctorate, Lobsang Tashi is one of those shepherding the change in Shergaon. He enjoys sipping in information from the elders about the plants and their uses. Then he links it up to the world of new science. The world of science calls it ethnobotany. He is clear that marrying the two worlds of knowledge is essential for Shergaon to progress. "We can experiment with new plants and trees here with new knowledge and in parallel we must record the medicinal and other uses of our plants, herbs and forest produce. Our generation doesn't go into the forest like our elders did, we shall lose this information unless we document it," he says as we trudge up a nearby forested hills.

Besides Lobsang, we are accompanied by a group of young men, all in their early 30s. Their varied levels of comfort with the forest is evident. The one absolutely at home in the forest is the only elder accompanying us, Tsang Dorjee Thungon. He may be a decade or two older than the rest and with a heavier disposition, but he hikes up and down the half foot-wide trails and mountain ridges with the finesse of a trapeze artist and the speed of a hare. He is a renowned hunter in Shergaon. "None of us know the forest like he does. Aka (uncle) sees, smells and hears things in it that we just cannot," tells Lobsang as others around nod in acknowledgement. "The new generation will gradually get weaned entirely off hunting. But we must make sure that our relation with the forest does not break or we shall lose knowledge of what riches lie inside," he says. In the meanwhile, Aka has warned us of the single brown bear roaming around, fed us some edible mushrooms, and pointed out a dozen odd herbs used in the Sherdukpen kitchen.

Shergaon village, home to the Sherdukpen tribe. Photo: Nitin Sethi

Traditional Wooden kitchen with stoves with different technologies. Photo: Nitin Sethi

The village is in a valley sculpted by three rivers in West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. Photo: Nitin Sethi

There are few in the new generation trying to learn the traditional weaving designs. Photo: Nitin Sethi

[The traditional house being restored now as a living museum and possibly homestay for tourists. Photo: Nitin Sethi](#)

Evening in the village as clouds gather ominously. Photo: Nitin Sethi

Inside the kitchen, evening conversations draw the generations together for spirited discussions. Photo: Nitin Sethi

A group of young Sherdukpen people, under the banner of Garung Thuk, are conserving the stretch of river to let the fish breed ...

Garung Thuk members after a day hiking through the forests collecting herbs and checking on the river patch they conserve. Photo: Nitin ...

Tsang Dorjee Thungon, a hunter par excellence. The younger generation holds him in awe. They don't hunt as much but they want to retain the ...

Praying service at home. Sherdukpen follow Buddhism. Photo: Nitin Sethi

Prayer flags on long poles dot Shergaon. Photo: Nitin Sethi

A plum tree flowering in the Shergaon village which has very good state of art horticulture farm. It is rich with many varieties of ...

While many of the young are moving out, there are others who invest their time to ensure the cultural heritage of their tribe does not pass ...

Cultural practices and dances are on a mode of revival in Shergaon. Photo: Lobsang Tashi Thungon

For the rest of India tribal communities are often depicted in their traditional costumes celebrating their festivals. That is a beautiful ...

Sherdukpen are migrants from Tibet. In their belief system, their ancestor Asu Gyaptong, a descendant of the Tibetan king Songtsan Gampo, came to the plains of Assam and married a native Ahom princess. They follow Tibetan Buddhism. There are some traces of the pre-Buddhism period too in the area, though the last few knowledgeable people are very old now.

But some traditions are being revived as well. For instance, a dance form that had almost died is now performed at the Predo Chhepchi and Cheykor festivals. Young people were sent this year to stay in dormitories with elders to learn the dance for 15 days to be able to perform.

"There was a time when the best dancers of Shergaon were legends in the region. Women used to go for the best dancers," Dorjee tells later sitting around the fire. His Achi (father), who everyone knows was a well-known dancer in his prime, smiles a childish grin, tickled by memories of his exploits when his troupe went travelling through the nearby hills, villages and townships dancing and collecting funds.

Besides the cultural practices that the youth of the village have revived, others are trying to conserve a couple of traditional wooden houses that have now fallen into disuse. Made out of large wooden planks, constructed without the use of a single nail, standing on wooden stilts - most Sherdukpen people have now abandoned these houses. But a group that includes Lobsang and Dorjee has restored one into a museum and plans to restore the other. Inside, one finds old wooden and aluminium utensils, arms, tools, kitchenware that the tribe used till the last generation but the new generation has no use of. "Our coming generations must have a living memory of our heritage," explains Ledo Thungon, chairman of the Garung Thuk, the group created by the youth to revive heritage values and introduce new ideas in the village. Ledo is an officer in the state government like many others who are contributing to the village's rejuvenation. There is no funding, donor, or outside NGO involved.

The group held a competition for the young children to write down the traditional Sherdukpen folk stories that used to be passed down the generations orally earlier. At the same time the group is stocking up on other books from outside to run a library for the children.



Next up, they want to provide homestay to tourists in the old wooden houses-turned-museums. "It shall take some time because we are doing it from our own resources and whatever people around donate. We don't want to do this like an NGO project," says Netan Thungdok, secretary of the group.

The group has got permission from village elders to preserve a five kilometre stretch of a river from overfishing, and try introducing new fish too. Around the fire in the kitchen, they all discuss whether introducing the non-native carnivorous trout could kill other fish in the river.

"We could have alternative itineraries for potential tourists. From visiting trenches in the hills dug by the Chinese during the war, camping, learning about the resources in our forests, to angling in the river and seeing our cultural practices. But we must ensure tourism doesn't over-run the place," says Dorjee thinking aloud to his group of friends and elders around. Just the day before, he and his sister had taken us to the stone structures that were once homes for the tribe that inhabited the area before the Sherdukpen arrived.

There is feverish energy about the village with the youth experimenting but some of it I presume comes from the enterprising history of the tribe and the elders. The Sherdukpen people used to carry out transhumance even till the previous generation - trekking from the high mountains of Tawang and beyond, down to the plains of Assam with active trading that helped them thrive economically.

That risk-taking spirit is alive today even though the transhumance has stopped. The elders have moved from growing corn as staple to rice, potato and fruits. Additional rice available cheaply from Assam is now the staple, and potato is the cash crop. They moved to tomato when they found out the market was doing

well. Another topic of discussion between the elders and the younger generation is about the overuse of herbicides - a first in the valley. The timing of the rain and the cold weather makes tomato growing tricky. It requires herbicide protection and labour from outside but the tomato grows late at higher reaches, so the rates people get down at the Assam border are good.

So far, there is ample valley land available for people to expand their cash crop operations. They already grow maize, rice, ragi, tomato, potato, cabbage, brinjal, chilli, garlic and onions for self-consumption. Nature provides additional bounty - herbs, edible plants, tubers, mushrooms and plants from the forest supplement the diet and the rivers are a perpetual source of fresh fish.

The traditional practice of contributing physical labour and agricultural produce for the rituals, festivals and other activities in the village remains intact and vibrant. The land structures include common lands, private agricultural lands, sacred groves and community forests.

The village expects economic prospects to improve further as a highway being built at the moment will connect Shergaon to Guwahati in just six hours, cutting the time taken at the moment by half. People had the option of permitting an airstrip too in the village for which they would have to give up fertile valley lands. They decided it would not add much to the village economy.

My last evening at Shergaon, sitting around another kitchen fire, discussions are still on. Today it is about how to revive the traditional weaving practices and wood and bamboo work by linking it to the markets beyond the village. Dorjee has already been checking with his engineer friends abroad to buy and send a wood burner that can be used to embellish the bamboo mugs.

Next morning as I prepare to leave the village, families that have become friends gift me a khada - the traditional silk scarf - even as they scurry around to get ready in their traditional dresses for the festival.

I wonder, if the rest of India will ever get to see the Sherdukpen people beyond the images of happy dancing tribals - so typical of how the lives of communities in the northeast often get depicted in the media and in Republic Day tableaux?

Dorjee says, "Next year, come when the apples are ripe. Our library for children should be running by then and the second traditional house also restored. Achi's (father's) new house would be ready by then. We shall again sit by the fire in the old-style kitchen."

First published by [Business Standard](#)