

## Indigenous Wisdom and Sustainable living: Insights from the Traditional Practices of The Tangkhul Nagas.

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### ABSTRACT

The pressing global challenges of environmental degradation and climate change necessitate a reconsideration of contemporary sustainability strategies, often leading scholars and policymakers to seek insights from indigenous knowledge systems. Contemporary strategies for Environmental Conservation often rely on technological and scientific innovations but traditional indigenous knowledge provides a complementary perspective that has guided communities for centuries. Indigenous cultures, with deep rooted understanding of local ecosystems and time-tested methods of resource management, provide important lessons for addressing contemporary issues. By integrating indigenous wisdom with modern technological approaches, a holistic strategy can be developed for preserving and restoring the environment and conserving the varied resources for the generations to come. This research is an effort to investigate the integral role of Indigenous Wisdom in sustainability, with a focus on the traditional practices of the Tangkhul Naga Community of Manipur. By examining the agricultural methods, resource management, spiritual beliefs and associated customs and traditions of the Tangkhul Nagas, this study highlights how indigenous knowledge systems can contribute to contemporary efforts to address the numerous challenges concerning the World today.

**Keywords:** Tangkhul Naga, Customs, Traditions, Folklore

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, humanity has consistently relied on nature to meet their needs and satisfy their desires. In the process, both deliberately and

inadvertently, over time, humans have inflicted considerable harm on the environment frequently alongside population expansion and technological advancements. The urgent global issues of environmental degradation and climate change call for a re-evaluation of current sustainability approaches, prompting scholars and policymakers to explore insights from indigenous knowledge systems. Nations and communities are persistently seeking ways for more sustainable practices to address the challenges of preserving the natural resources and protecting the environment from further damage. While modern scientific approaches towards the conservation of the natural environment are vital, traditional indigenous practices offer invaluable insights into sustainable lifestyles. Modern strategies typically emphasize technological and scientific advancements but traditional indigenous wisdom offers a valuable perspective that has guided communities for centuries. Indigenous cultures, with their profound understanding of local ecosystems and proven resource management techniques, offer crucial lessons for tackling today's environmental challenges. Top of Form Bottom of Form By integrating indigenous wisdom with modern technological approaches, a more holistic strategy can be developed for preserving and restoring the environment and march towards sustainability.

#### OBJECTIVE:

1. To study and examine the traditional practices of the Tangkhul Nagas across various aspects of life, including agriculture, resource management, customs, and traditions,
2. To understand the sustainability aspects of various indigenous practices and
3. To find and suggest any step which can be assimilated for a higher level of sustainability.

#### METHODOLOGY:

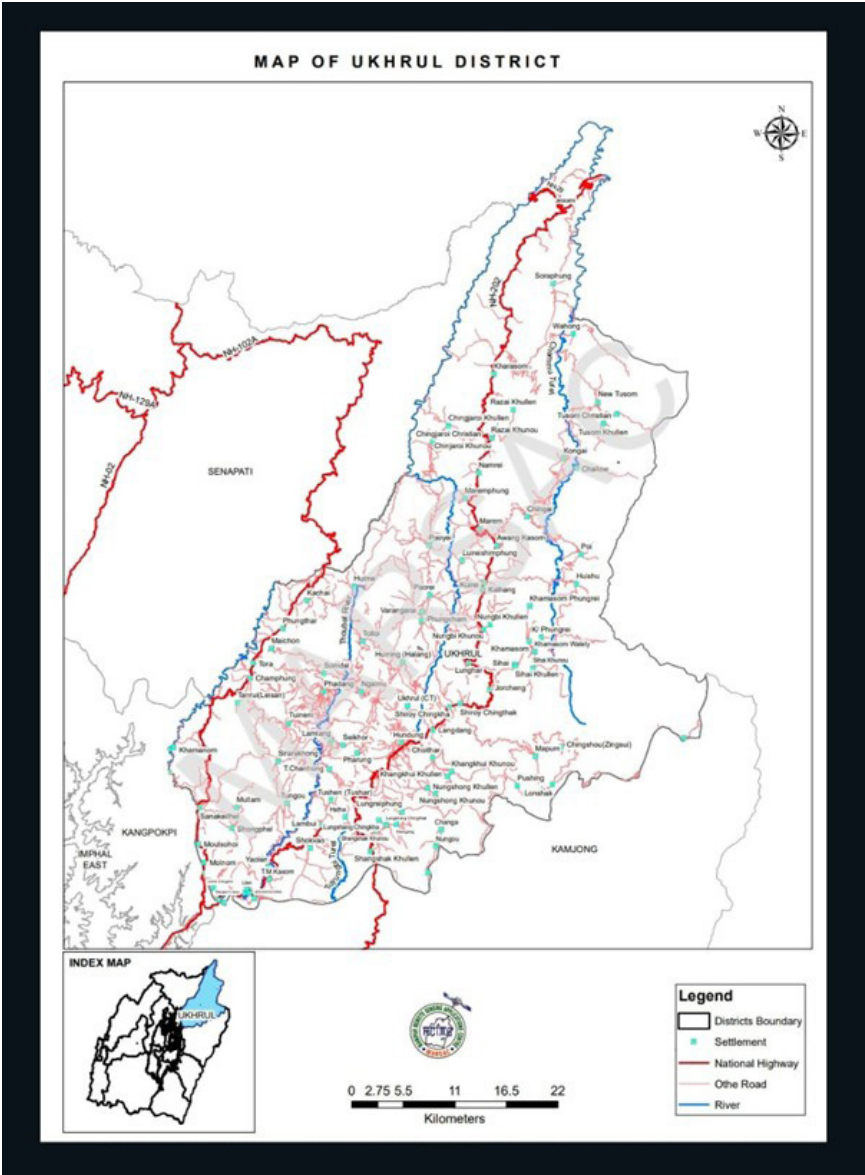
To write this research paper, several available sources were made use of and information was also gathered from interviews to gain a clear idea on the topic concerned. The method can be in grouped as:

1. Collection of Information from Primary Sources; including personal observation, semi structured interview with knowledgeable members of the following villages: Choithar, Khangkhui, Nungshong Khunou, Shangshak, Shirui and Talui villages

2. Collection of Information about the various festivals and Indigenous practices from secondary sources including books, Research papers and the web.
3. Analysis of the information gathered through primary, secondary sources and also from the words of wisdom and information shared by the interviewed persons, drawing of observations and understanding the problems and scope for sustainability.

## STUDY CONTEXT

The Tangkhul Nagas mainly inhabit the Ukhrul District, which is located in Manipur's Northern part. The area is characterized by hilly terrain, abundant fauna, and flora and is native to a variety of flowers that dot the hills in their respective seasons of bloom. During the British Raj, Ukhrul District was first delineated as a Sub-Division in 1919. It became a fully-fledged district in November 1969 and was renamed Manipur East District. The districts of Kangpokpi and Senapati in the west, Kamjong District in the south, Myanmar in the east, and Nagaland State in the north encircle Ukhrul District. The district has a steep topography with multiple small ranges that range in elevation from 913m to 3114m (MSL). The state capital of Imphal is connected to Ukhrul (Hunphun), the headquarters of the Ukhrul district, by NH 150, which stretches for approximately 84 kilometres. The region experiences a Temperate type of climate. Although Ukhrul experiences a cold winter, the rainy season, which runs from May to early October, brings warmer temperatures. Ukhrul is drained by a few streams which emerge from the cracks and crevices of the surrounding peaks and flow downstream. The Tangkhuls are believed to have originally come from China and their last migration has been stated to be from "Thuangdut" Samsok (Burma). (Zimik, 2015)



Source: (MARSAC, n.d.)

The Tangkhuls possess a rich Cultural Heritage intertwined with their environment, reflecting a deep connection to their land and resources. Tangkhul villages are typically situated on hilltops, featuring densely populated and compact settlements. Because each village has always

operated as a separate political, social, and economic entity, its residents have a strong sense of community and collaboration. Each village is led by a chief called the 'Awunga', a position passed down through hereditary succession. He and the village council, or 'Hangva,' are the highest decision-making authority in the village. The Awunga perform rites and sacrifices before the commencement of all village festivals, get-togethers, and religious ceremonies. The rules and regulations are the same for all the members of the village, irrespective of their wealth and possessions.

### INDIGENOUS WISDOM IN SUSTAINABILITY

Indigenous wisdom refers to the traditional or Indigenous knowledge, practices and beliefs developed and maintained by indigenous people over generations through their direct interaction with their environment. It encompasses a thorough comprehension of regional ecosystems, natural phenomena and methods for sustainable resource management. This wisdom is typically embedded in cultural rituals, oral traditions and community practices and reflects a holistic view of interconnectedness of all life forms. Indigenous wisdom integrates ecological, spiritual and social dimensions, guiding communities in living sustainably and harmoniously with their surroundings. "Indigenous contemplative practices reorient the focus to the larger systems of relationships that humans are only part of, bringing equal emphasis to self, community, and environment through keen awareness of relational networks (Celidwen, 2022)". The World Bank (2003) has defined Indigenous Knowledge as 'the large body of knowledge, skills and experiences that has been developed outside the formal educational system which people apply to maintain, improve and sustain their livelihood'. Indigenous wisdom is characterised by a holistic understanding of ecosystems, emphasizing the interdependence of humans, animals and plants.

### **Traditional Practices of The Tangkhul Nagas**

"The Tangkhul Nagas are complexly bound to nature in their social, cultural, economic, ethical and religious values" (Shimray R. A., 2014). Central to their way of life is a profound connection with nature, which is reflected in their agricultural practices, resource management and spiritual beliefs. They have developed a set of traditional and customary practices deeply intertwined with their cultural wisdom. The practices related to

Agriculture and allied activities, Forest Resource Management, Water Conservation and Management, Customs and traditions surrounding birth, death and marriage, architectural styles, textiles, tools and crafts, and culinary traditions exemplify the best alignment with the prevailing natural conditions.

### **Traditional Agricultural Practices and allied activities**

“The tribal people control the land and resources through the different constitutional rights given to the tribals via the Village Authority Act of 1957 and the Forest Rights Act of 2006” (Horam C., 2023). The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms laws of 1960 (MLRLR) excluded the hill territories from the state’s land revenue laws, establishing sovereignty over land usage in the tribal parts of Manipur. Consequently, the land use patterns are quite different in the hills and among the various communities as well. The land use patterns of the Tangkhuls have been studied by a number of scholars. According to Ruivah (1987) “Village land use could be categorized as (i) Village settlement area, (ii) Woodland, the nearest forest to the village settlement area, (iii) Jhum- area, (iv) Public or village community land, and (v) Sedentary terraced paddy field”. On the other hand, Shimray (2007) divides the Tangkhul land use systems into three general categories: (i) Village Settlement Region; (ii) Community and Clan land; and (iii) Forest area. The lives of the Tangkhuls revolve around their settlements, the cultivated areas, and the surrounding forests, wherein, they fulfil most of their needs and find security and happiness amid their kith and kin. Socially, economically, and spiritually, the villages have been self-sustaining to a great extent till recent times.

The Tangkhuls are primarily agrarian and grow crops like rice, maize, potatoes, cabbages, chayote squash, pumpkins, gourds, and beans. The dried gourds serve as valuable utensils to the Tangkhul families. Each family also rear some animals like chickens and pigs which are consumed or sold occasionally and a few also rear buffaloes which are used in farming. The native dog ‘Haofa’ is considered a rare and indigenous breed of dog which is known for its intelligence and highly valuable to the farmers as watchdogs and efficient hunting companions. During the brief period of rice cultivation, fish is also reared in the paddy fields and collected before harvesting. Farming here may be of two types, terraced farming and jhum cultivation. “The south-eastern territory of the Tangkhul tribe practices

jhum or shifting cultivation, whereas the other, north-western territory, practices sedentary terraced paddy plus secondary shifting cultivation” (Horam C., 2023). Jhum cultivation is often regarded to be environmentally harmful; however, the Tangkhuls mitigate this impact by allowing long rest periods for the land and carefully choosing cultivation sites. The village of Ningchou allows for a rest period of approximately 12 years according to Horam C, 2023. Agroforestry is also practiced in some of the Tangkhul villages by integrating trees and shrubs into their agricultural landscapes. This technique improves soil quality enhances biodiversity and provides additional resources such as fruits, nuts and medicinal plants. Each and every activity is carefully exercised with multiple benefits. The farmers use rice husk and chicken guano as useful manures and all food leftovers are used to feed the pigs resulting in zero wastage. Research on Sustainable indigenous practices observed that an important feature of agricultural practices of the Tangkhul are “mixed cropping practices to create physical barriers to check the dispersal and movement of pathogen and insect pests (Chanu, 2010)”.

### **Forest Resource Management**

Forest resources are the soul of all tribal habitations. “Forests are the most important resources for indigenous people, especially those living in tropical ecosystems. Therefore, managing the forest resources is very important for the survival of the indigenous people who dwell in or depend on the forest” (Azlan Abas, 2022). Forest resources are an essential and inherent part of the lives of the Tangkhul Nagas. Settled on the hilltops, the forest has been esteemed as a guardian, a source of providence and home to a vast array of resources. The forest provides firewood as well as raw materials for construction and household articles, even utensils. Forest also are sources of a variety of food products such as mushroom, wild roots and tubers, fruits and nuts and wild honey and larvae and edible insects and game. While harvesting the products of the forests, the Tangkhuls follow a certain set of rules which have been followed since time immemorial. According to (Horam R. , 2019), “There are many customary laws, rules and regulation for preserving it”. These laws include prohibition of cutting young shoots in summer, cutting trees only for necessities and respect and regard for nature. “Their traditional calendar and close relationship with

the environment highlight the importance of respecting natural cycles and seasons” (Chiphang, 2024).

### **Water Conservation and Management**

Settlements established on hilltops are generally prone to water problems. The Ukhrul district of Manipur, due to its hilly terrain also faces water problems, more so in the dry season. The main drainage systems are Maklang, Tuyeng, Thoubal and Chammu and Chingai rivers (Central Ground Water Board, 2013). Spring water and ponds are the main sources of water supply in the region. Ponds are the most prevalent traditional water harvesting structures in the State. The Tangkhuls use water judiciously. Water for household use is gathered from the ponds and springs and water management for agriculture in the terraced farms are in themselves a means of conserving and utilizing it efficiently. The manner in which the Tangkhuls flourish with minimal water is a remarkable example of their harmonious relationship with the environment. Due to the scarcity of water, the customs, traditions and rituals involve minimal use of water.

### **Customs and traditions surrounding festivals, birth, death and marriages**

Festivals and rituals hold immense significance in the lives of the Tangkhul Naga community, serving as a confluence of cultural identity, agricultural practices, social cohesion, and spiritual expressions. The Tangkhuls celebrate a number of festivals throughout the year in harmony with the seasonal changes and the activities associated with them. The festivals represent a clear picture of organisation and each possess a unique purpose.

#### **LUIRA PHANIT (SEED SOWING FESTIVAL)**

Luirā Phanit, one of the most important festivals, is celebrated in February and lasts for approximately 10 to 15 days. The womenfolk of every household prepare rice beer (zam) and sticky rice cakes ahead of the festival. The community wells are cleaned thoroughly. As the festivities begin, the men take responsibility for slaughtering the animals for the feast. The festival begins with the village chief and his wife worshipping ‘Ameowo’, the master of all spiritual beings and their performance of ceremonial tilling of the soil in the fields, followed by rituals meant for bringing prosperity and a bountiful harvest. Travellers and traders are prohibited from entering the village starting from the third day of the celebration due to the possibility



of their bringing in bad luck and evil spirit. This taboo is known as 'khasit'. This restriction is made known to outsiders by burning a bonfire around the fields and gardens and locking of the village gates. The smoke signals the other neighbouring villages that the village is going to celebrate 'Luira' and that nobody could go to that village until 'khasho', the later part of the festival.

#### YARRA (YOUTH FESTIVAL)

Yarra is celebrated in the month of April by the Tangkhul youth to take a much appreciable break after a period of hard work of tilling and sowing of seeds to rejuvenate and prepare themselves for another phase of hard work awaiting them.

#### MANEI PHANIT (FESTIVALS OF TOOLS AND EQUIPMENTS)

The Tangkhuls observe Manei Phanit in the month of April for two days. On this day, meat and wine are offered to the creator, 'Varivara,' or God, in order to grant them more game (animals) to hunt, better agricultural progress, and protection from their adversaries. Hunting weapons and agricultural tools are also lubricated with lard.

#### MANGKHAP PHANIT (FESTIVAL OF THE COMPLETION OF RICE TRANSPLANTATION)

Mangkhap, meaning 'stop drinking' festival is celebrated following the completion of ploughing and rice transplantation. This festival falls during the month of July marking the beginning of the lean months. Since Mangkhap is a festival of rest after the completion of hard work, big feasts are arranged to replenish the lost energy. It is also ensured by the members that each and every one celebrates the festival with hope and anticipation for a good and timely harvest and volunteer to help widows and the families who lack manpower. (Shongzan, 2013)

#### DHARREO

Dharreo is a harvest festival. At the beginning of the festival, the Village Chief goes to the field one day ahead of the people and bring a basketful of paddy and performs rites and ceremonies (Shongzan, 2013) . Fairs are organized in some places, where people bring their first crops, livestock, choicest games, hornet pupae and other food items gathered from the wild.

## CHUMPHA FESTIVAL (FESTIVAL OF THANKSGIVING FOR THE NEW HARVEST)

This festival is a thanksgiving festival, the initiation of the consumption of the grains from the new harvest from the granaries. Ahead of the festival, the men go to the wild and remain there, spending their time with their peer, catching crabs and other wild produce. Every village pond is cleansed and its water is completely drained away on the eve of Chumpha festival. The women go into the granaries and worship ‘Ameowo’ and pray for prosperity, good health in the family and longevity of their food stock.

## THISAM PHANIT (FAREWELL FESTIVAL TO THE SPIRIT OF THE DEAD)

“Thisam is an acronym of kathi (death) and Kasham (forget or remove)” (Shongzan, 2013). Thisam festival is observed for twelve days in the latter part of January every year. It is predicated on the deeply held belief that up until a farewell ritual is held, the deceased’s souls do not leave the world and lingers on in the house.

## BIRTH, DEATH AND MARRIAGES

Birth of a child irrespective of their gender is celebrated with joy. The new mothers are taken good care of just as the newborns. They are given messages and cleaned with hot water compresses as a ritual by the mother-in-law. The new mother is fed with nutritious broth prepared from free range chicken to regain her strength. The rituals associated with death are a blend of traditional and religious beliefs. The deceased are given a heartfelt farewell and all dear to the family offer gifts of all kinds as a mark of respect to the departed soul. While marriages are solemnised according to Christian traditions in modern times, the celebrations which follow still have a touch of indigenous rituals. The womenfolk who go to drop the bride at the groom’s place, with singing, stretch out a cloth for the groom to gift them something in return and continue their singing until they are satisfied with what the groom has offered. These customs foster healthy relationships and continue to unite the communities.

## Music and Dance

As Guru Rewben Mashangva aptly stated, “Nature is always accompanied by music, whether it is the whistling of the blowing wind or the falling

rains or the song of the birds in their communication. Human activities are at their finest when accompanied by sweet sound, music". The Tangkhuls are music loving people. Music and Dance accompany every occasion, emotion and festivals. Music is believed to deepen emotions, bring more joy to celebrations, and make even the hardest tasks feel easier. Folksongs are sung and dances are performed in different seasons and at specific times of the year. Tangkhul women can often be seen weaving and humming a song that reflects their emotions and the menfolk collecting firewood from the forest can be heard from a distance with their "hei ho" rhythmical sounds.

"The musical instruments of the Tangkhuls can be broadly divided into three categories. 1. String instrument 2. Blowing instruments 3. Percussion instruments" (NagaJournal, 2022)

The Indigenous string Instrument of the Tangkhuls is known as 'tingteila', a single stringed lyre. The sound-box of the 'tingteila' is commonly made of half-gourd covered with a pig's bladder or a patch of goatskin fastened to the gourd by pegs of wood. Wire or strands of horse tail is used to make the string. The bow, which is used to vibrate the string, is likewise made from a horse tail.

The blowing instruments include the 'sipa', the flute, and the 'muiza', usually used by women. The 'sipa' is made of bamboo while the 'muiza' is made of reed. These instruments are not played during the intervening period of rice transplantation and harvesting due to fear of bad omen. Bamboo, buffalo horn, and Mithun horn are among the traditional materials used to make the Tangkhul trumpet, or 'talla.' A type of trumpet known as a 'sita' is composed of a plant that is neither bamboo nor wood. The 'sita' is fitted with the horn of a Mithun for a vibrating effect. After the harvest is finished and until the time of the next ploughing, the 'sita' may be played.

Most of the percussion instruments of the Tangkhuls are membrane-style drums, known as 'phung'. Typically made of a hollow cylindrical shaped wood, where a hide membrane is tightly stretched over one or both the heads. The 'phung' enhances the folk dances and songs, without which they are incomplete.

The folk dance of the Tangkhul Nagas is an essential facet of their cultural identity, serving both as a folklore of the past ages and an artistic expression. These dances play a vital role in festivals and communal

gatherings, reflecting the agricultural calendar and sacred traditions of the Tangkhul society. There are three major folk dances viz.

1. Laa Khanganui, the virgin dance, usually performed by unmarried girls during Luira Phanit festival, marking the beginning of the sowing season
2. Luivat Pheichak, performed by men and women depicting the various stages of cultivation
3. Rai Pheichak, war dance which embodies themes of bravery and resilience of the community

### ***Architectural styles***

“Traditional Tangkhul houses are unique in every way” (Khangrah, 2012). They are distinctive in their construction and design. The front section features large, intricately carved pillars. Wooden planks arranged horizontally and held together by ropes or bamboo nails form the major part of the walls. The houses have sloping roofs covered with thatch. The wood used for construction are brought from the nearby forest with the help of the community. The imposing carved pillars at the front are crafted from single pieces of wood, shaped to detail, using axes and rudimentary chisels.

Internally, the house is divided into two areas, separated by wooden planks and carved pillars. The larger front section serves as the cooking area with a hearth in a corner, around which the whole family gather to eat and drink and sing, while the smaller portion is designated as the bedroom. It is around the fireplace that the numerous oral traditions in the form of folktales and folksongs are passed on from one generation to the other.

The doors to the front area and bedroom are crafted from single wooden planks and feature elaborate carvings. One side of the door is designed with pointed ends that extend slightly beyond the main frame. These pointed ends fit into hollowed-out wooden frames, allowing the doors to be opened and closed. In modern times, while the Tangkhuls have become more innovative in constructing their homesteads, the fundamental design remains unchanged. The essential large room with cooking and sitting area continue to be spaces filled with joyful chatter and singing around the fireplace.

### **Tools, crafts and Textiles**

The Tangkhul Nagas possess a rich collection of traditional tools and crafts that reflect their cultural heritage and agrarian way of life. These tools not

only serve practical purposes but also embody the community's artistic expression and historical significance.

### Traditional Tools

The Tangkhuls utilize various traditional tools essential for their daily living and agricultural practices. Key tools include Kazei (spears), Raikhai (swords), Kuisikhai (knives), Malah (arrows), and Ngalasop (baskets) (Kumrah, 2023). Other common items feature axes, spades, and various ornaments for both men and women. These multi-functional items and tools play a crucial role in their daily lives, aiding in the procurement of food and firewood, construction and their safety.

### Indigenous Crafts and Textiles

The Tangkhuls are renowned for their craftsmanship in textiles, pottery, and ornamental crafts. They specialize in weaving intricate textiles adorned with symbolic designs and motifs that reflect their cultural heritage. The beautiful designs and colour patterns are perfectly suitable for the occasions they are meant for. Some are crafted for daily wear, while others are specially woven for festive occasions. Additionally, specific colours and patterns, particularly black are reserved for mourning. It is not just the design but also the choice of thread material that makes these textiles ideal for the local environment. Traditionally, only natural fibres are used. Men wear a loin cloth and shawl during cold weather and the costume of the women consist of a bustier worn occasionally and a sarong which is draped from the waist down. "Male upper garments include Haora Kachon, Luirim Kachon, Tara Kadipui and Thangkang Kachon". Female lower garments consist of Kongra Kashan, Zingtai-Manshing la Kashan, Seichang Kashan and Phangyai Kashan" (Thoudam, 2021). The textiles of the Tangkhuls are adorned with beautiful motifs having a deep meaning. The Uri-Urã motifs, depicting the hoolock gibbon, stand as a testament to the Tangkhul Naga's harmonious coexistence with their natural surroundings (Shimray S. A., 2024). Other motifs include Khaifa Kashan (frog's waist motifs), Chamva Phor (Cicada motifs), and Chonkap motifs, each having a unique meaning. The excellent craftsmanship of the Tangkhuls is exemplified by the traditional Longpi pottery, a labour-intensive craft that involves shaping by skilled hands locally sourced clay and stone into practical yet artistic items. This pottery is celebrated for its durability and aesthetic appeal,

often representing the Tangkhul cultural identity. “Stately black, smooth and exquisitely formed, Manipur’s Longpi pottery is an instant eye-catcher. More popularly known as Manipur’s Black Pottery, the craft is practiced by the Tangkhul peoples of Ukhrul, specifically in Longpi – a general reference to 2 villages in the area – Longpi Kajui and Longpi Khullen” (Jaypore, 2022).

### **Culinary traditions**

The culinary traditions of the Tangkhul Naga primarily center around rice as the staple food accompanied by organically grown vegetables, locally reared animals and vegetables, larva and wild game hunted from the forests. Their food practices reflect a deep connection to their agricultural roots, showcasing the importance of local ingredients and traditional cooking methods. Fermented foods and communal feasting are vital components of their culinary identity. “The most popular raw materials for fermented food items among the Naga tribes are: bamboo shoots, soybean, Colocasia leaves, crabs, animal fats and fish” (Mao, 2007). Festivals and Marriages are occasions where the people indulge in a variety of food but normally, the meal of a Tangkhul consist of rice, boiled vegetables, ground chillies and meat. Their high carbohydrate and protein diet is what is required for the high intensity activities that is performed by them. Though food habits of other regions have influenced the people, at heart, they still prefer the traditional dishes. On special occasions, sticky rice cake, ‘khamui’ is made which is liked by one and all. The women collect different types of edible wild fruits and prepare delicious and highly healthy drinks. They also prepare ‘Zam’ or rice beer which is consumed on special occasions only, due to the influence of Christianity.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study of indigenous wisdom and sustainable living practices among the Tangkhul Nagas reveal a profound connection between cultural heritage and environmental stewardship. The traditional knowledge systems of the Tangkhuls, rooted in their distinctive agricultural practices, ecological understanding, and community-based resource management, customs and rituals associated to birth, death and marriages, their unique craftsmanship provide valuable insights into sustainable living. Their practices, characterized

by a harmonious relationship with nature, emphasize the importance of biodiversity, soil fertility, and seasonal adaptation, showcasing methods that have been applied and refined over the generations.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the crucial roles of the Awunga and the Hangva in preserving and promoting these traditional practices, ensuring that indigenous knowledge is not only recognized but also integrated into contemporary environmental governance and climate adaptation strategies. As contemporary challenges such as climate change threaten ecological balance, drawing upon the wisdom embedded in indigenous practices offers a pathway toward resilience and sustainability.

In summary, the Tangkhul Nagas exemplify how indigenous wisdom encompasses practices that sustain both their livelihood and the natural environment. They provide a framework that not only contributes to ecological integrity but also nurtures community identity and cultural continuity. Emphasizing the need for collaboration between traditional knowledge systems and modern scientific approaches is essential for formulating effective environmental policies, ensuring that the lessons of the past pave way for sustainable pathways in the present and the future.

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