



# **THE LIFE AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF LUGPONS: PASTORAL TRADITIONS AMONG THE MONPA TRIBE OF TAWANG DISTRICT, ARUNACHAL PRADESH**

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**Abstract:** Traditional pastoralism constitutes an important component of indigenous knowledge systems in the Himalayan region. The present study examines the life and cultural significance of Lugpons (shepherds) among the Monpa tribe of Tawang district, Arunachal Pradesh. The study titled “The Life and Cultural Significance of Lugpons: Pastoral Traditions among the Monpa Tribe of Tawang District, Arunachal Pradesh” explores the traditional pastoral lifestyle and cultural values embodied by the Lugpons (Shepherds) of the Monpa community in Arunachal Pradesh. Lugpon represents not only an occupation but also a symbol of leadership, care and harmony with nature. Based on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork, including personal interviews and participant observation, the paper documents transhumant practices of Lugpons, indigenous livestock management techniques, customary institutions and material culture associated with Lugpon pastoralism exploring tools such as Laktsa Kaw, Ghrom, Woordhop, reflecting the ingenuity of indigenous adaptation to the Himalayan landscape. The study highlights traditional mechanism such as Kha-Sey (grazing tax), Lhur (sacred sheep enclosure) and indigenous tools that regulate pastures use, ensure livestock protection, and reinforce community cohesion. Finding reveals their deep ecological knowledge and a

Received : 12 November 2025

Revised : 08 December 2025

Accepted : 10 December 2025

Published : 27 December 2025

## **TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Tsetan Wangmu, Ranju Panging & Thutan Wangda (2025). The Life and Cultural Significance of Lugpons: Pastoral Traditions among the Monpa Tribe of tawang District, Arunachal Pradesh, *Journal of South Asian Research*, 3: 2, pp. 367-377.

sustainable relationship between humans, animals and high altitude Himalayan environment, also reflection on the social role they played within the Monpa society. The paper emphasizes the need for documentation, policy recognition, and community based initiative to safeguard Lugpon indigenous knowledge, which holds relevance for sustainable pastoralism, biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage preservation.

**Keywords:** Lugpon, Monpa Tribe, Pastoralism, Transhumance, Cultural Heritage, Indigenous Knowledge; Arunachal Pradesh.

## Introduction

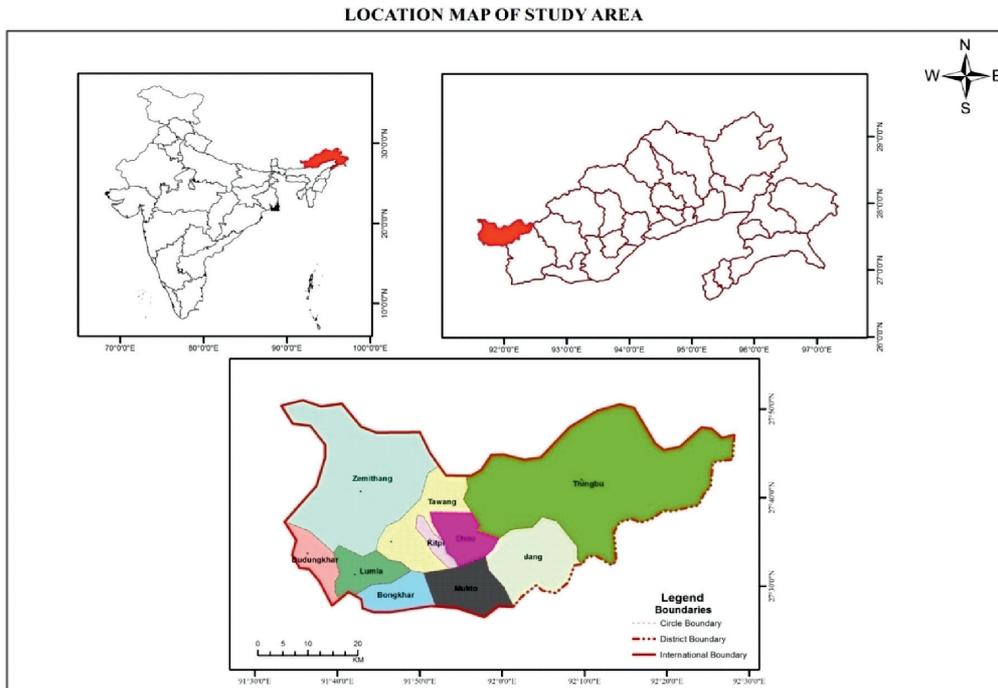
The Monpa tribe, inhabiting Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh, possesses a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in its ecological surroundings. Among the most important traditional occupations of the community is pastoralism, particularly the traditions of Lugpons or shepherds. LUGPON, the combination of two words i.e., Lug meaning 'sheep' and pon meaning 'leader' refers to the leader of sheep. Lugpon is also known as *Yength* in Monpa dialect. In general, the term "Lugpon" refers to an occupational profession practiced by members of the Monpa community, whose primary source of income is sheep rearing. They are responsible for ensuring the well-being of the sheep, guiding them to the grazing areas (Pengdang), protecting them from predators.

Despite socio-economic changes, modernization, and the gradual decline of pastoral livelihoods, lugpons remain symbolic of Monpa identity and ecological wisdom. Their lifestyle reflects a harmonious interaction between humans, animals, and the environment. The present study seeks to document and analyze the cultural significance, practices and tools associated with lugpons, and to explore the challenges faced by this pastoral tradition today.

## Study Area

Tawang is a thinly populated Mountainous tract lying roughly between the latitudes 27°25'N and 27°55' N and longitudes 91°35'E and 92°20' E on the North West extreme of Arunachal Pradesh. The district is surrounded by Tibet (China) in the North East, Bhutan in the South East and West Kameng and East Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh in the South West. The District is

also known as the 'The Hidden Paradise'. The district occupies an area of 2172 sq.km. which is 2.59 % geographical area of the state.



Source: Extracted from DEM using arcGIS 10.3

## Objectives of the Study

- To document the traditional lifestyle and pastoral activities of Lugpons among the Monpa tribe.
- To examine their seasonal transhumance and ecological adaptation strategies.
- To analyze the cultural and social significance of Lugpons in Monpa tribe.
- To document the indigenous shepherding tools.
- To evaluate contemporary challenges and the need for safeguarding pastoral knowledge.

## Methodology

The study is primarily based on original ethnographic fieldwork and oral narrative collected from practicing Lugpons in Tawang district, with minimal reliance on the secondary literature. Primary data's were collected through:

1. Semi structured interview with Lugpon Tashi Phuntso from Lhou village of Tawang district.
2. Field observations in high altitude pastures.
3. Documentation of shepherding tools, grazing patterns and traditional practices.

### The Life of a Lugpon

Shepherding, one of humanity's oldest occupations, dates back to ancient times. The life of the Lugpon (Shepherd) is profoundly shaped by the seasonal rhythms. These herder migrate their flocks across landscapes, guided by weather patterns and the availability of grazing lands, driving their flocks and herds to greener meadows during the warmer months (zharth) and as winter approaches (gunth), lugpons along with its herd return to their permanent village. This seasonal movement takes place in Tawang region in winter from higher altitude areas such as Thingbu, Rho, Jangda and Lhou to lower altitude areas like Bongleng, Kharung, Namtsering, Kungba, Dudungkhar & vice versa in search of pastures.

In order to optimally exploit the seasonally variable resources of their environment and to provide food and water for their animals, they take a cyclical movement from lowlands to highlands to take advantage of seasonally available pastures at different elevations. Seasonal fluctuations in grazing availability compel nomads to relocate to upland pastures, where private land ownership by individual families is absent and grazing is unrestricted except the inter-regional boundaries. Key pasture land is designates as *Broh*, are further classified as *Tengchenma*; considered as one of the biggest grazing land followed by *Yoiteng*, *Lungzang*, *Phorong*, and *Dhole-tse*. They usually practice a vertical movement between established points through very ancient routes.

They also played a vital role in agricultural societies. They sustain profoundly close and interdependent relationships with agricultural communities, sustained through a barter economy wherein grains and other agrarian produce are exchanged for livestock products like wool and sheep dung which is used as an organic fertilizer.

One of the most profound aspects of a Lugpon's life is their deep connection with the natural world. The shepherd's daily existence revolves around the rhythms of nature-the changing seasons, the rise and fall of the sun, the cycles of life and death within the herd. They often develop an intimate knowledge of the landscape, optimal grazing lands, water sources, and treacherous deep

trenches harboring constant dangers. This deep connection to the environment is not only practical but also spiritual. Therefore the identity of a pastoralist is based on the close association with their livestock that forms a key component of their social and ritual life.

### **The Role of a Lugpon**

1. *Caretaker*: The role of a shepherd is to care for sheep, ensuring the sheep are healthy & safe.
2. *Leader (The Pon)*: They direct the flock, often with the help of tool known as *woordhop*. It is made from thread & leather.
3. *Protector*- Defending the flock from danger such as wild animals or harsh weather.
4. *Guide*- Leading the flock to new pastures or safe areas.

### **The Raising of Livestock**

Lugpon has developed an intimate relationship with its herd. They train their sheep's to obey their voices by offering them a small quantity of salt mixed with yoghurt each time they come at the shepherd's call. The shepherd's call out "SHEY SHEY SHEY" and the shepherds call are being answered by the sheep however far they are.

Nomads have mastered the technique of determining sheep age by examining their horns, known as *Ruwa*(Norbu,1997). Despite the absence of written veterinary texts, the nomads are extremely expert in livestock management. They know what techniques to use, how to protect animals from illness and how to cure them when necessary. Their ability to accurately prevent and treat animal illness is rooted in their experiential knowledge transmitted across generations through oral traditions.

### **Traditional Economic Obligations: The Practice of Kha-Sey**

An important aspect of the pastoral economy among the Lugpons is the customary tax known as Kha-Sey (grazing tax). A tax is levied at the rate of one bowl of barley ( *Nai breh thi*) for every five sheep. This levy is paid annually by shepherds to the local community as part of their traditional obligations. After collection, the community formally offers the kha-sey contribution to the community's Gonpa (Monastery), reinforcing the cultural and religious interdependence between pastoral households and monastic institution.

The Kha-Sey is specifically associated with the rights to access communal grazing lands by paying this levy; shepherds receive permission to graze their sheep in designated pastures maintained collectively by the village. The practice not only serve as a regulatory mechanism for pasture use but also reflects the traditional governance system in which economic activity, religious authority and social responsibility are closely connected.

### **The Institution of Lhur: Sacred Sheep Enclosures in Monpa Pastoralism**

Another significant component of the Monpa pastoral management system is the use of *Lhur*, a traditional fenced enclosure constructed specifically for safeguarding sheep during the night or periods of prolonged grazing. The Lhur represents more than a utilitarian structure-it is regarded as a culturally sanctioned and protected space under customary law.

According to longstanding Monpa beliefs, the lhur may be accessed or handled only by the designated Lugpon. No other individual within the community is permitted to touch, modify, or interfere with the enclosure. This restriction highlights both the symbolic authority of the Lugpon and the respect accorded to pastoral boundaries within the community. Damage to the lhur, whether deliberate or accidental, is treated as a serious transgression. Community norms dictate that any individual who harms or dismantles the enclosure is subjected to penalties imposed by traditional village authorities. Such customary regulations ensure protection of livestock, maintain discipline in grazing practices, and reinforce the sanctity of structures integral to pastoral livelihood. The lhur thus stands as an important cultural institution, reflecting the community's reverence for pastoral labor, ecological responsibility, and collective harmony.

### **Tools and Indigenous Shepherding Practices**

*Laktsa Kaw*: - Among the essential pastoral tools used by Lugpons is the Laktsa Kaw, a traditional leather bag carried during grazing. As seen in the image, the bag is crafted from animal hide and is designed for durability, enabling shepherd's to store and carry small but vital supplies such as salt (*tsa*), flour (*feh*) or other daily necessities required during high altitude pastures.

A distinctive cultural feature of the Laktsa Kau is the decorative pattern made from cowries shells arranged in star like motifs. These embellishments are not merely ornamental; they hold symbolic significance within Monpa

pastoral belief systems. It is traditionally believed that the greater the number of star-shaped cowrie arrangements on the pouch, the more prosperous the flock will become. In this way, the Laktsa Kau serves both a practical purpose and a spiritual one, reflecting the intertwining of utility, aesthetics, and indigenous belief in pastoral life.

The pouch thus embodies a unique combination of craftsmanship, cultural symbolism, and functional necessity, illustrating the depth of indigenous knowledge systems embedded in Monpa pastoral traditions.



LAKTSA KAU

**Woordhop:** - Woordhop is made from thread and leather intertwined with stones in the middle of leather shaped diagonally. The stone hold the weight which makes the woordhop more efficient in his throw and for covering larger distance. It is also used to guide the flock of sheep and protect them from predators.



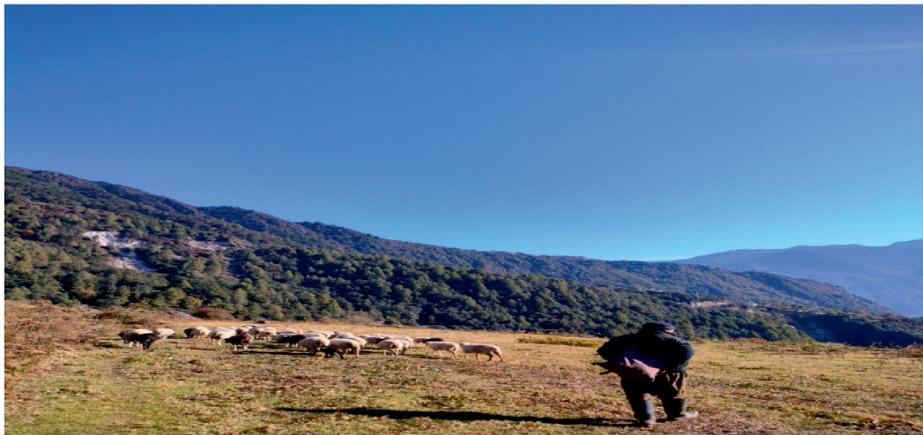
WOORDHOP

**Ghrom:-** Ghrom (Trough) is a long wooden container used to feed salt to the sheep.



### Cultural and Social Significance of Lugpons

The life of a Lugpon carries a deep cultural significance in many societies. They are often considered symbols of self-reliance, resilience, and harmony with the environment. The image of a shepherd has appeared as a symbol of care, sacrifice, and guardianship-ideals that resonate in many spiritual traditions.



Shepherds play a critical role in sustaining local communities. Through the production of wool, and meat, they provide essential resources for daily life. They are also vital to maintaining biodiversity, as grazing livestock helps manage vegetation and supports the overall health of the ecosystem. Thus,

in the context of traditional pastoralism, shepherds functions transcend basic reciprocal interdependencies, incorporating essential guidance and mediation that harmonize livestock behavior with ecological contexts.

- (i) *Guardians of livestock* : - Lugpons are entrusted with communal or family owned herds-signifying trust and respect.
- (ii) *Harmony with nature* : - Their daily life promotes sustainable resource use, respect for animals and minimal environmental disturbances.
- (iii) *Rituals and beliefs* : - Lugpons often perform rituals before seasonal migration, seeking blessings for safety, protection from predators and healthy offspring of livestock.
- (iv) *Social role* : - Lugpons contribute to wool supply for traditional attire like Chuba (gown), Bai Totung (coat), Tengkyima (a small woolen cloth typically worn by women, secured at the waist and extending to the knees, modestly shielding their lower back), khanzar (shirt), etc. They also contribute to exchange and barter networks.

### Challenges of Shepherding

Despite the tranquil image of a shepherd's life, it is a profession that comes with various challenges:-

1. One of the greatest concerns is the unpredictability of the weather. Harsh winters, scorching summers, or unexpected storms can endanger the herd and make the shepherd's job far more difficult.
2. Predators, both wild and human, are also a significant threat.
3. They may also face the challenge of encroaching development or land use changes that disrupt grazing areas or migration routes.
4. Young people are increasingly abandoning sheep herding as a profession, leading to the decline and potential extinction of this traditional practice.
5. Youth migration to urban areas and modern education reduces interest in pastoral life.
6. Climate change affects the quality of the pasture land and the variability in the temperature of the region also affects the life of the sheep.

## Preservation of Indigineous Knowledge

To safeguard the Lugpon heritage following suggestions are recommended:-

1. *Systematic Documentation and Archiving:-*
  - Conduct community based documentation of Lugpon's knowledge, including transhumance routes, grazing calendars, animal health practices, rituals and tools.
  - Audio-visual records, field notes, and digital archives in local Monpa dialects should be created in collaborations with elders and practicing Lugpons.
2. *Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission:-*
  - Encourage structured knowledge transfer through mentorship programmes where experienced Lugpons trained interested youth.
  - Seasonal participation of students during migration periods can help sustain practical learning beyond oral narratives.
3. *Integration into Education and Curriculum:*
  - Incorporate local pastoral knowledge into school and college curriculum in Tawang district, particularly within Geography, History, Anthropology and Environmental Studies.
  - Lugpons should be invited as Guest Instructors.
4. *Legal and Policy Recognition:* Customary institutions such as Kha-Sey and Lhur should be acknowledged within local governance and land use policies.
5. *Livelihood support and Incentives:* Provide targeted livelihood incentives such as veterinary support, insurance for livestock loss, and fair market access for wool and sheep products, to make pastoralism economically viable for younger generation.
6. *Community Awareness:* Public awareness initiatives can enhance respect for pastoral knowledge and strengthen community pride.
7. *Collaborative Research and Partnerships:* Promote collaborative research between academic institutions, local communities and Government agencies to ensure ethical, participatory and beneficiary approaches in studying Lugpon traditions.

## Conclusion

The life of a Lugpon is one of hard work, patience, and deep connection with nature. They are dedicated to the care and well-being of their flocks. Their work is deeply rooted in tradition, with practices passed down through generations. The life of a shepherd is an essential part of rural communities, embodying a way of life that values hard work, resilience, and harmony with nature. The pastoral traditions of the Lugpons represent a significant aspect of the Monpa tribe's cultural identity, ecological knowledge, and historical continuity. Their transhumance practices, tools, rituals, and social roles embody a harmonious relationship with the environment. As modernization accelerates, there is an urgent need to preserve and revitalize this indigenous knowledge system. Recognizing and safeguarding Lugpon traditions will not only sustain cultural heritage but also contribute to broader discussion on sustainable pastoralism, biodiversity management and indigenous ecological wisdom.

## Acknowledgement

We sincerely acknowledge the Lugpon community of Tawang District, particularly the informant from Lhou village, for generously sharing their knowledge and experiences. Gratitude is also extended to local elders for their guidance during fieldwork.

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