



At the Edge of Altitude

Observing landscape, belief, and life at high altitude.

Journey through **Western Arunachal Pradesh**

Xtreme G2 | December 2025

KANDATZP & SONALI



Dates

11th Dec - 19th Dec, 2025

Length

9 days

Overview

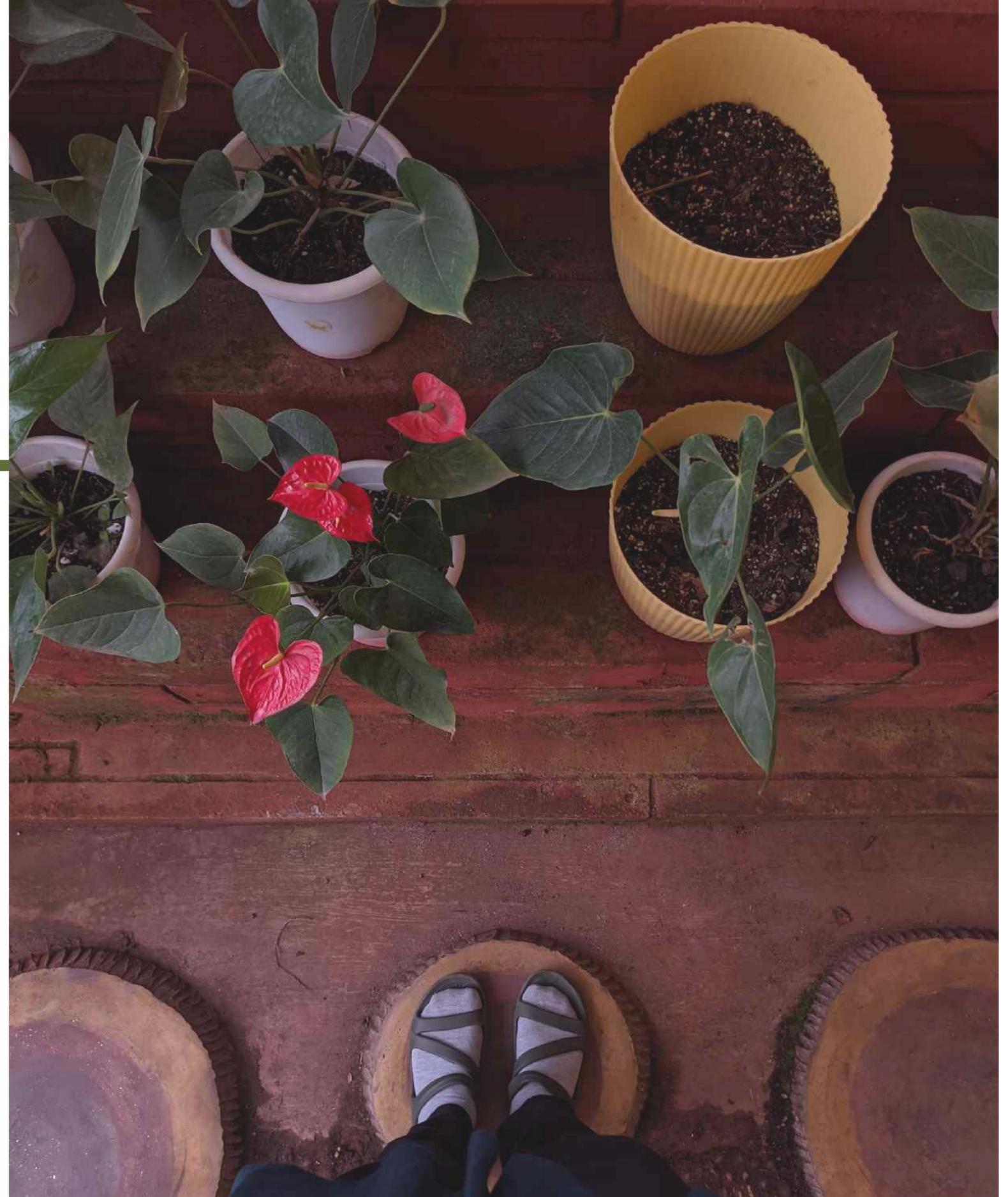
This presentation documents a winter journey through the high-altitude landscapes of Western Arunachal Pradesh, supported by the Xtreme G2 Winter Grant 2025. Travelling through Dirang and Tawang, the journey focused on observing how climate, terrain, faith, and settlement patterns shape everyday life in extreme conditions.

Moving through winter landscapes slowed both travel and perception. As plans adjusted to weather and terrain, the journey evolved into a process of attentive observation rather than the pursuit of destinations. Through settlements, passes, monasteries, and border landscapes, the journey sought to understand how life, architecture, and belief respond to altitude and constraint.

Acknowledgement

With gratitude for the support that made this journey possible.

We sincerely thank Trust Xtreme G2 for supporting this journey through the Winter Grant 2025. The grant enabled a slow, observational engagement with high-altitude landscapes, allowing this journey to unfold as a meaningful process of learning and reflection.





BORDER LANDSCAPES

WHY THIS JOURNEY?

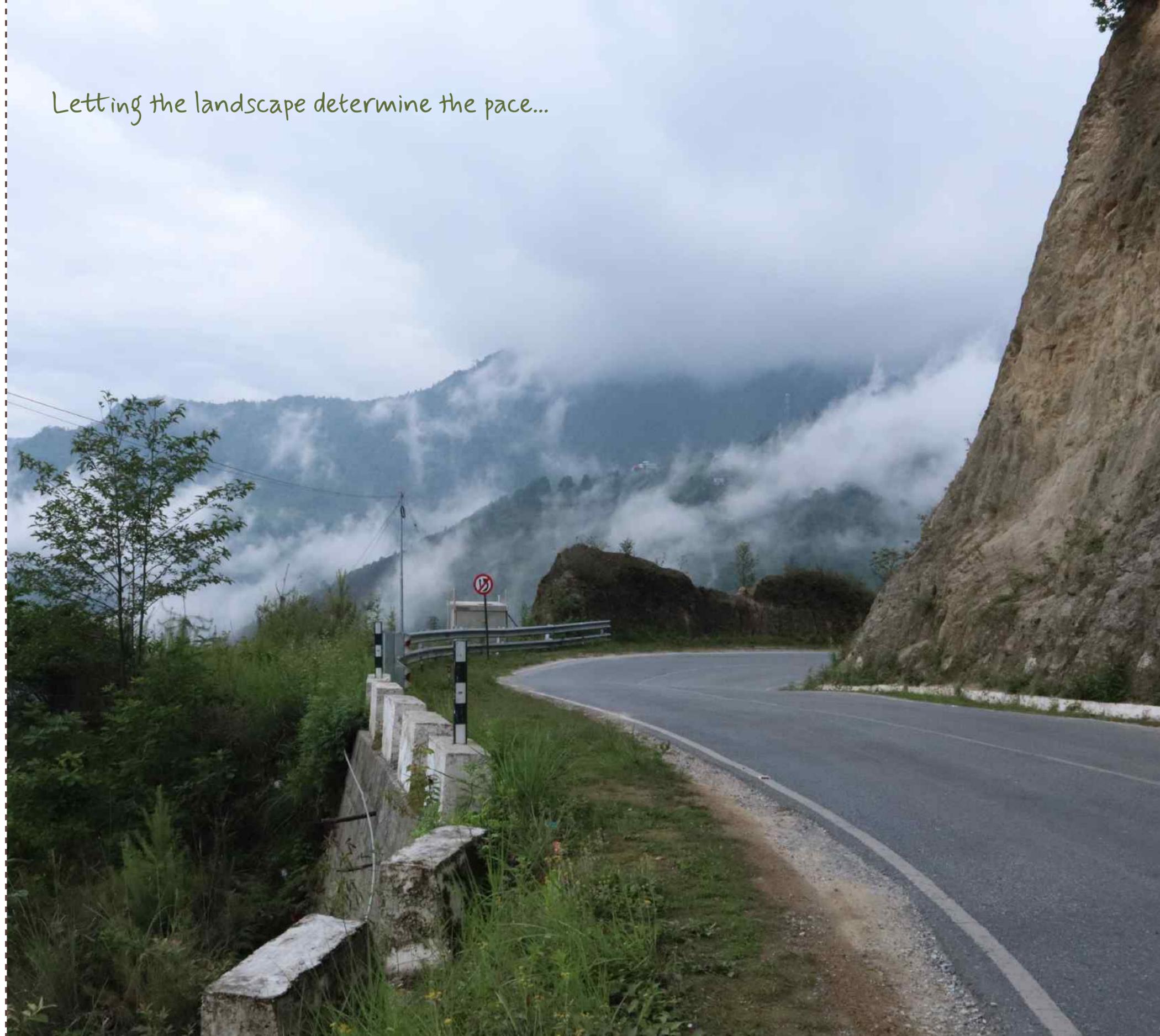


HIGH-ALTITUDE MONASTERIES



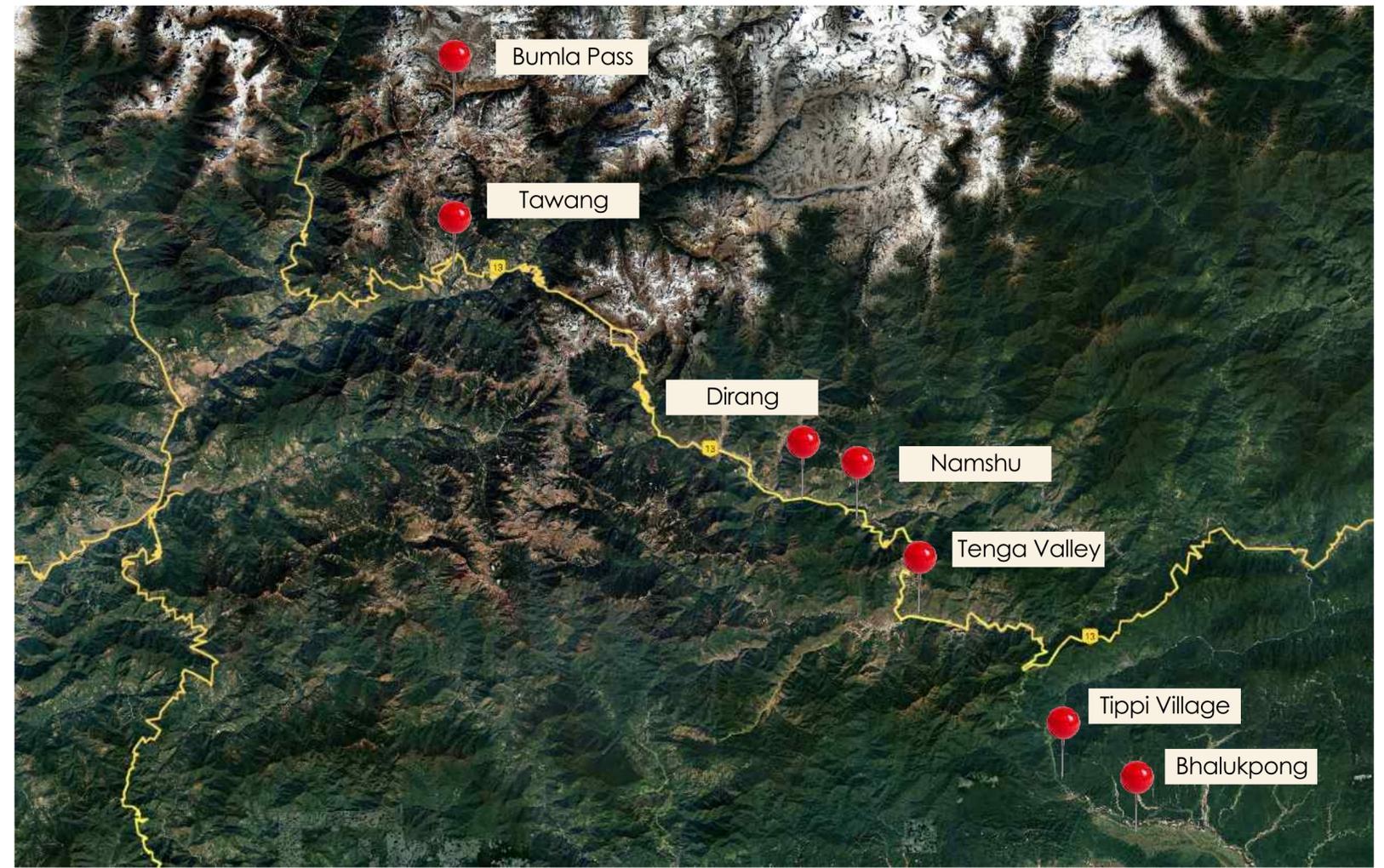
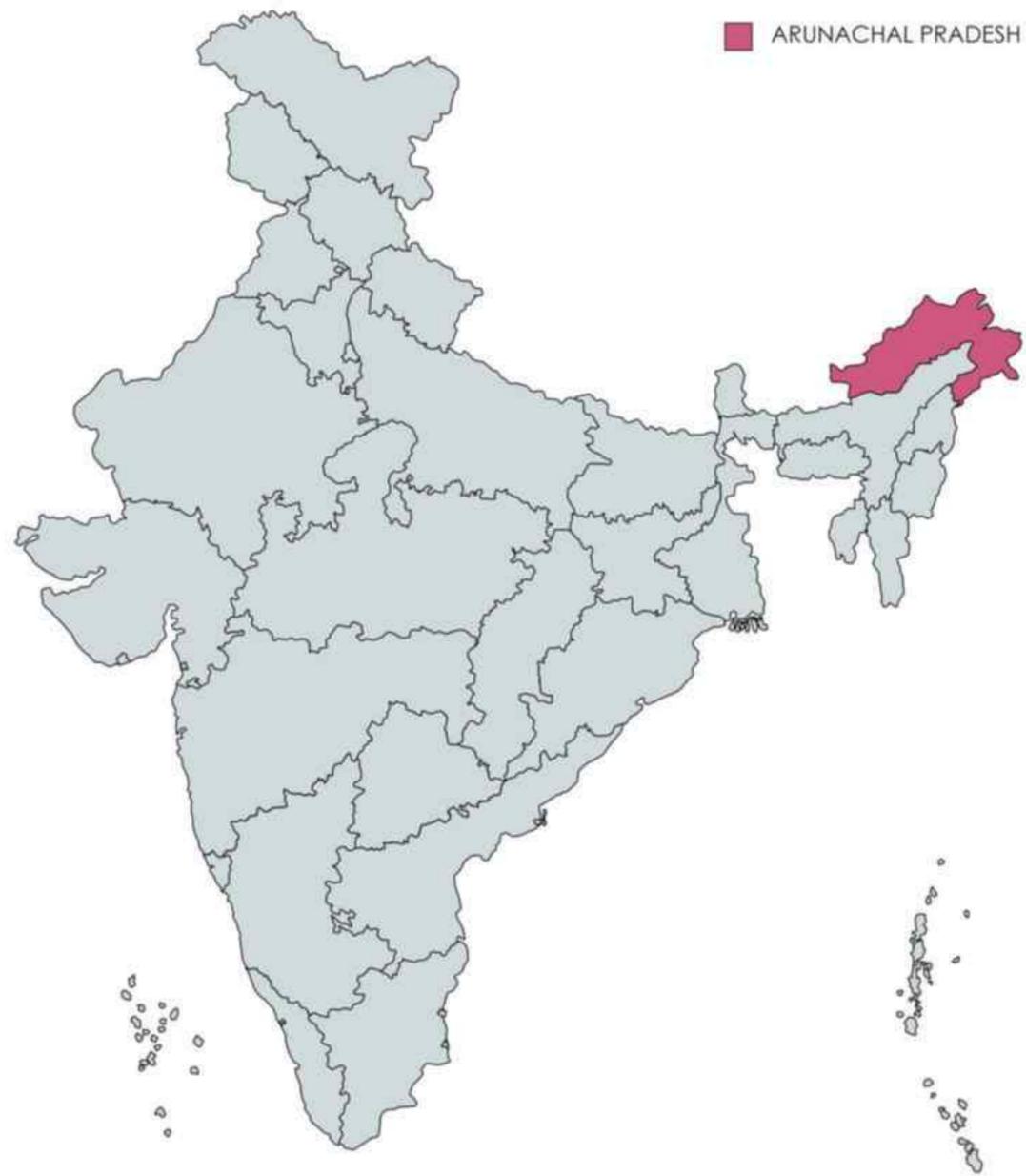
**MILITARY + SPIRITUAL
COEXISTENCE**

Letting the landscape determine the pace...



Intent of the Journey

This journey turned toward the North East to observe a region often left unexplored, shaped by distance and hesitation created through selective media narratives, choosing Tawang to experience the place directly through its landscapes, people, everyday practices, and the quiet realities that unfold beyond headlines and assumptions.



Area of Exploration :

Western Arunachal Pradesh lies at the intersection of:



HIMALAYAN ECOLOGY

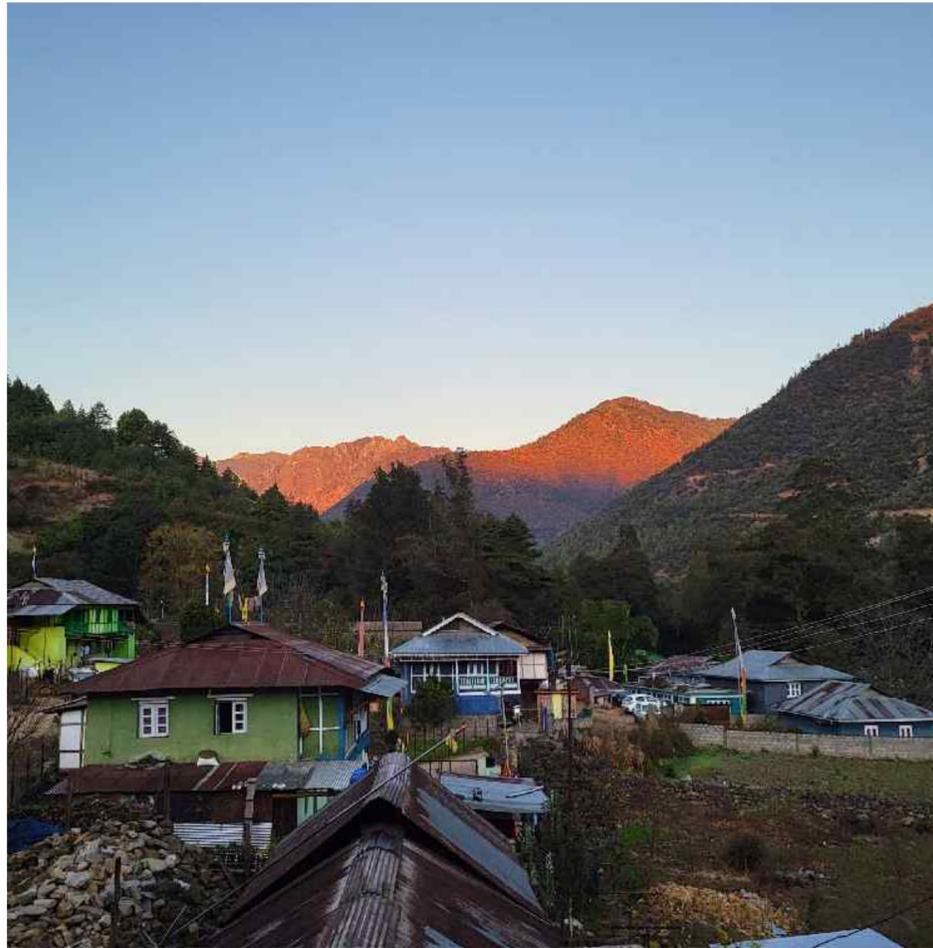


BUDDHIST CULTURAL NETWORKS

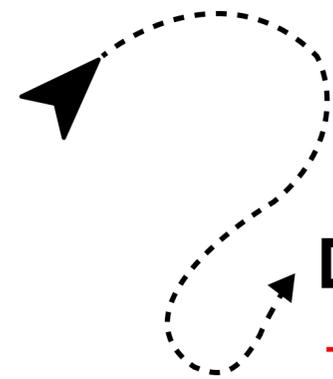
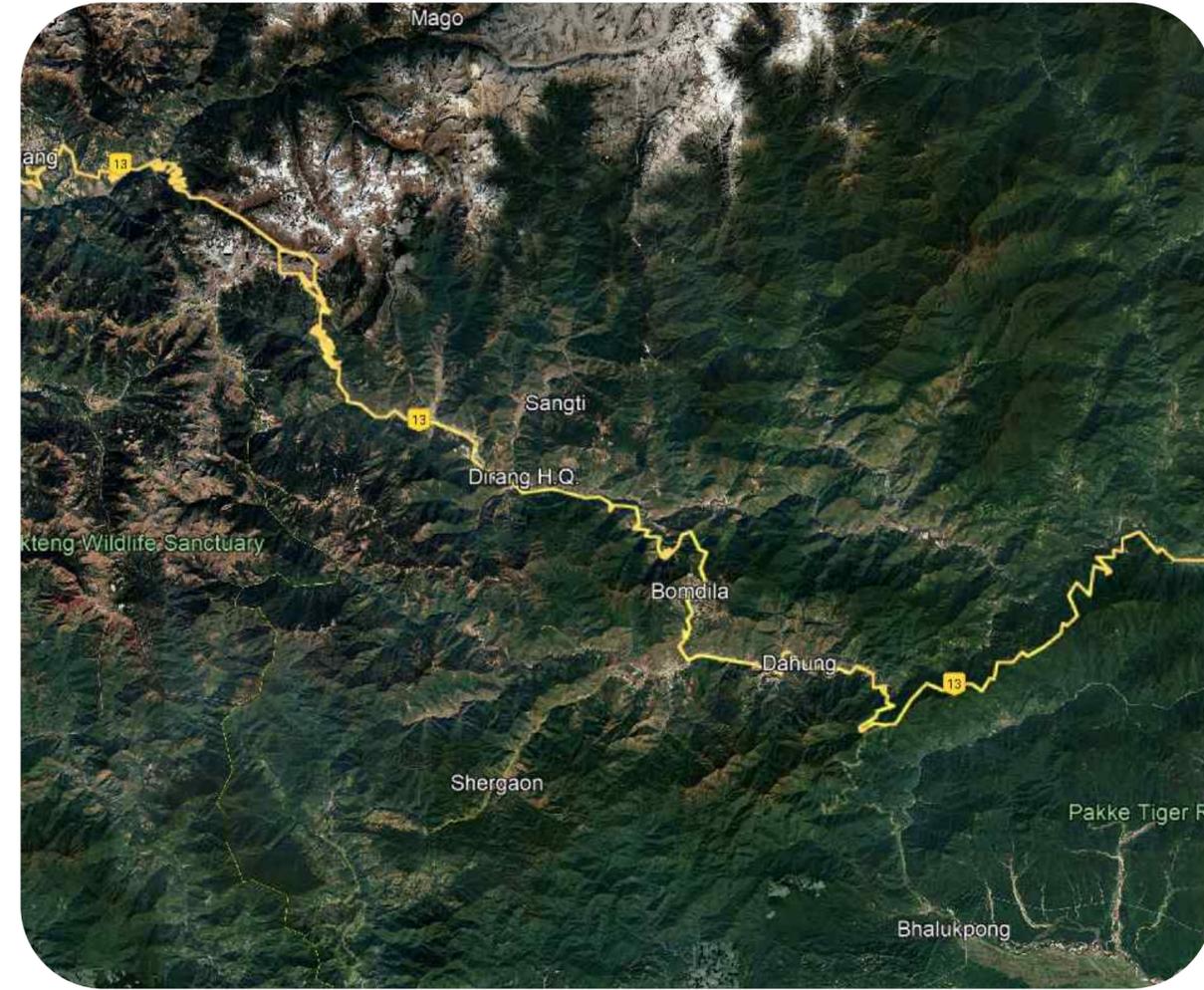


STRATEGIC BORDER GEOGRAPHY

JOURNEY OVERVIEW:



The journey traced a route from **Delhi** to Guwahati, and onward into **Arunachal Pradesh**, passing through Dirang and Tawang before returning along the same terrain.



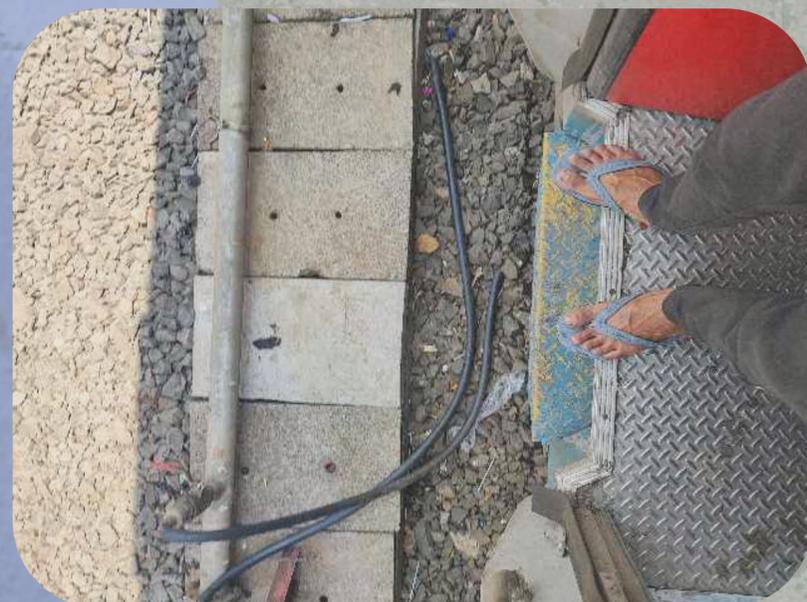
Delhi → Guwahati → Dirang
→ Tawang → Bumla Pass
→ Namshu → Guwahati

Journey Map Day 1-2



Delhi to Guwahati :

The 32-hour journey on the North East Express marked a gradual transition from the plains of Delhi to the layered landscapes of the Northeast. As hours passed, shifting terrains, rivers, and changing light made the distance feel experiential rather than measured. This long rail journey allowed time to observe scale, movement, and the slow unfolding of geography before reaching Guwahati.

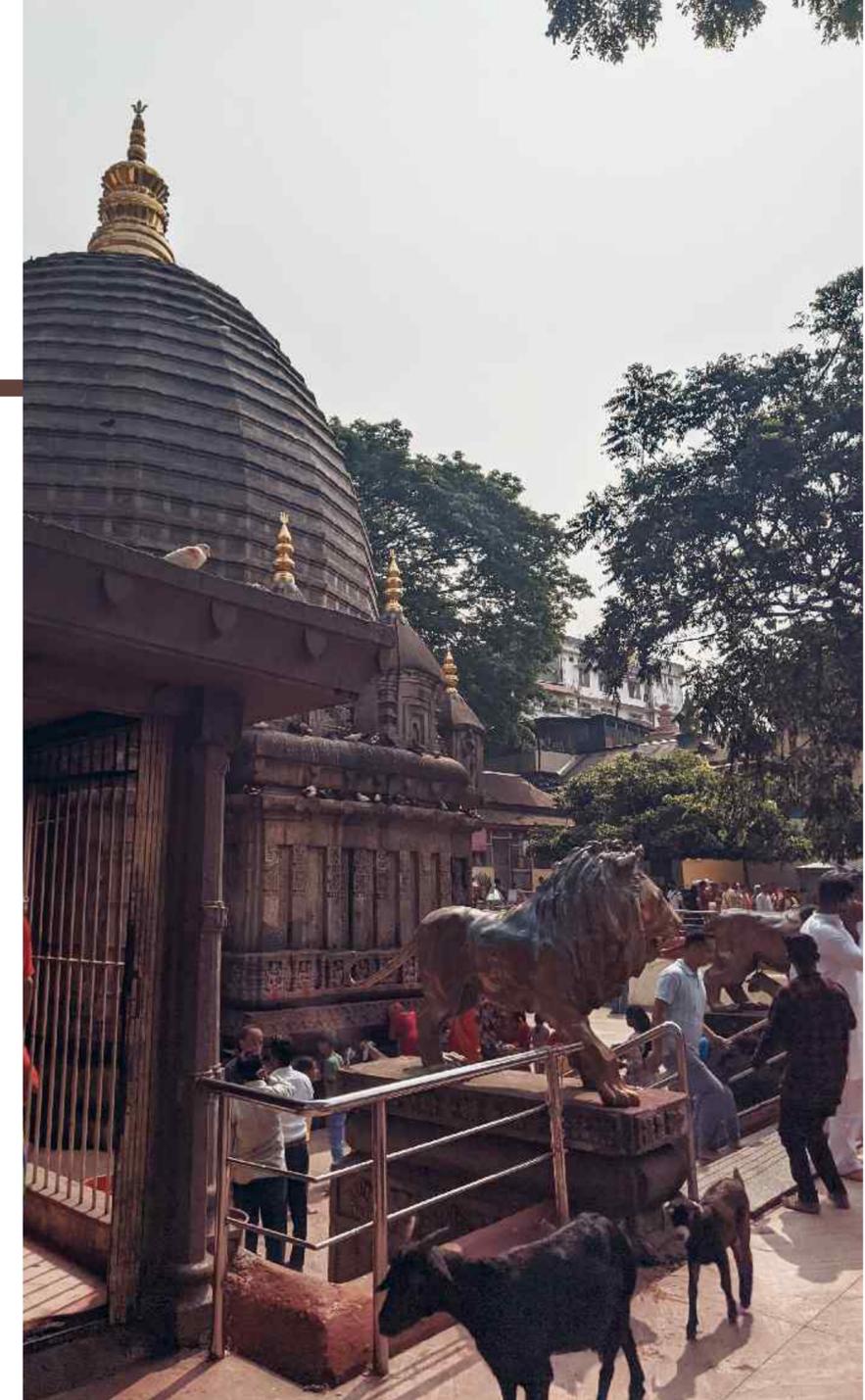
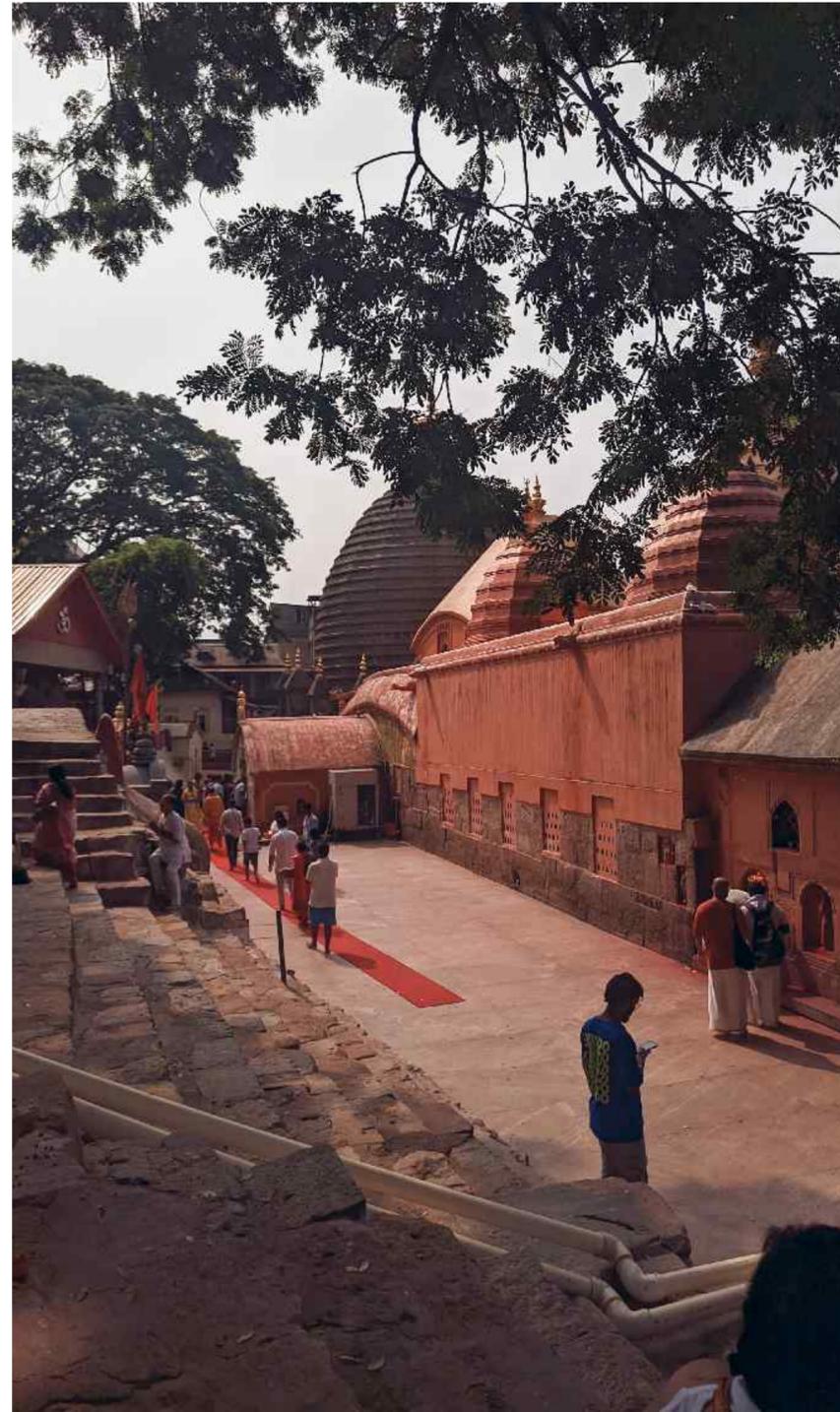


Guwahati

Encountering Local Belief...

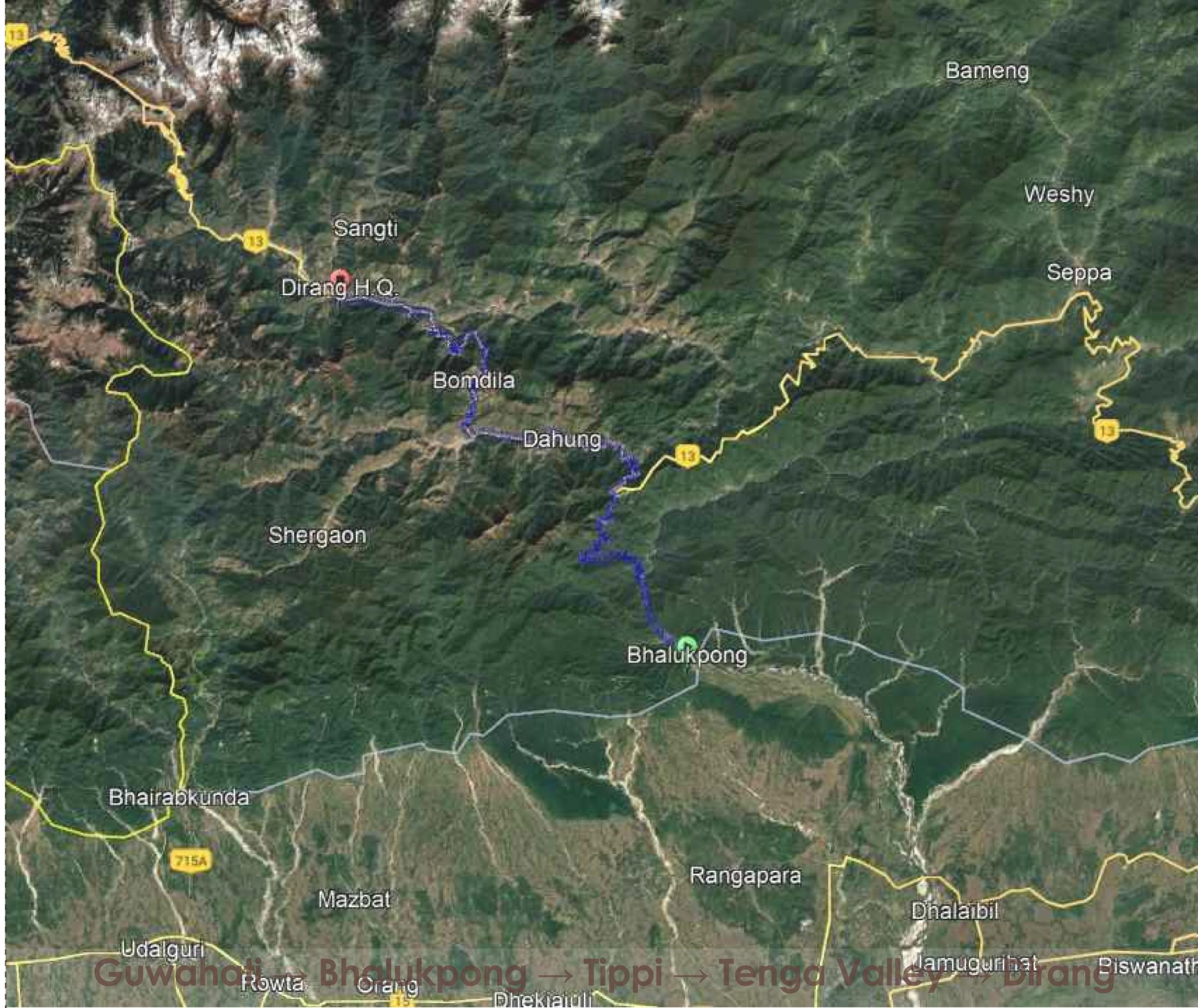
Before travelling onwards to Dirang, we visited **the Kamakhya Temple** in Guwahati. The visit offered an early encounter with local belief systems and ritual practices, revealing how faith remains embedded in the everyday cultural life of the region.

This moment became our first introduction to the **cultural landscape** of the Northeast before moving into the mountains.



Understanding place through ritual and practice.

Day 3 Journey Map



Guwahati to Dirang

Day three unfolded as a full-day road journey from Guwahati into Arunachal Pradesh. Crossing Bhalukpong marked the formal entry into the state, followed by a pause at Tippi, home to the Orchid Research Centre. Passing through the strategically significant Tenga Valley, the terrain gradually rose, leading us into Dirang where movement, landscape, and transition became deeply felt.

From familiarity to threshold.

"The journey begins before the mountains appear."



Fragile in form, essential in use

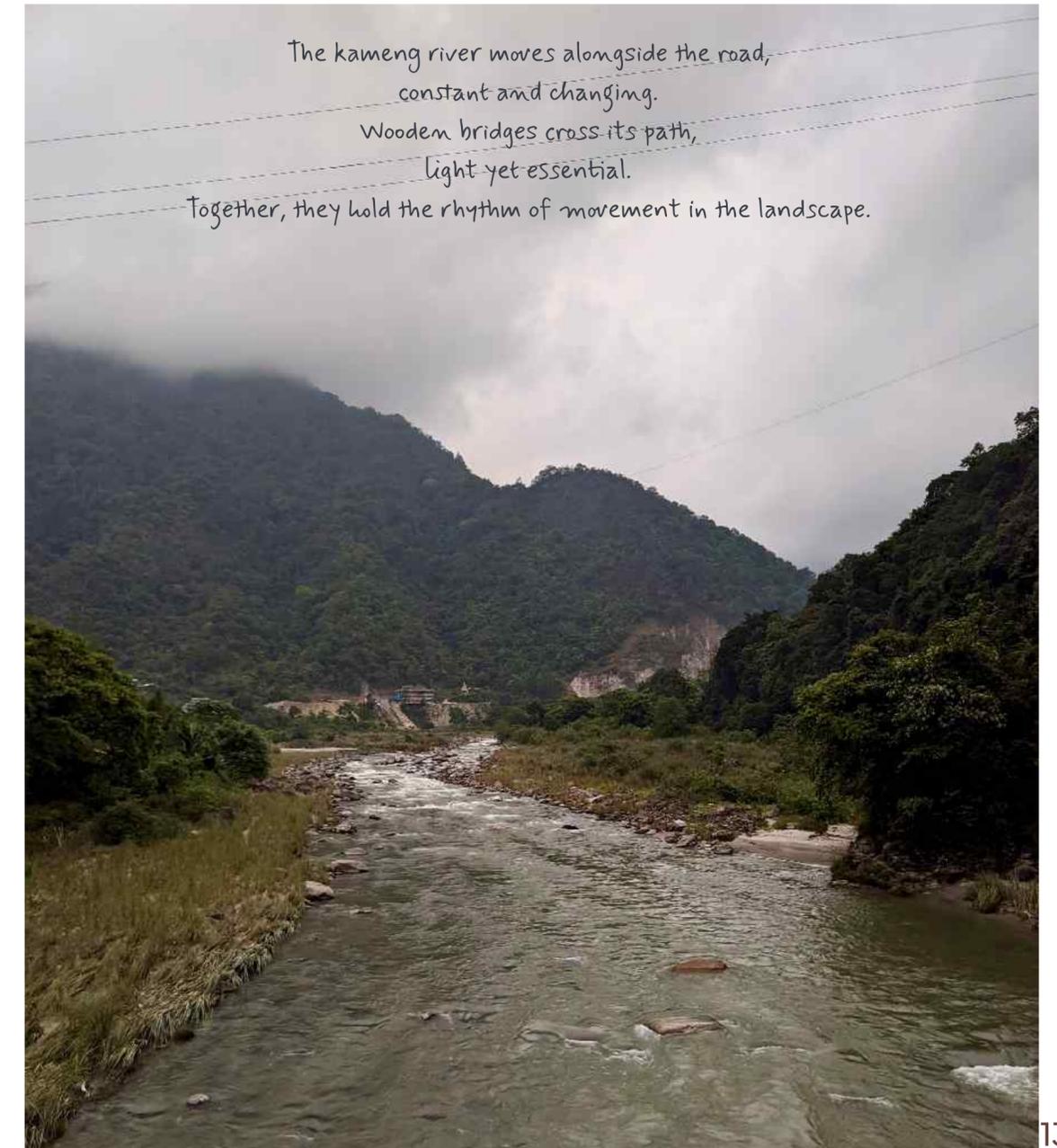
Guwahati to Dirang

As elevation increased, roads narrowed, settlements thinned, and the relationship between infrastructure and survival became evident.

Though temporary in nature, they sustain everyday connectivity, allowing people, goods, and services to move across the landscape.

Introducing the landscape through its vegetation

On the **way to Dirang**, we visited an **Orchid Research Centre, Tippi** displaying native species of the region. The stop offered an introduction to the local ecology and the role of climate in shaping Himalayan plant life.



The kameng river moves alongside the road,
constant and changing.
Wooden bridges cross its path,
light yet essential.
Together, they hold the rhythm of movement in the landscape.



Orchid Research Centre, Tippi

The centre is located at Tippi in West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh. It is situated on the west bank of Kameng river surrounded by high hills covered with semi ever green tropical rain forest vegetation. It stretches over an area of 10 hectares of flat land comprising of office buildings, orchidaria, tissue culture lab., Museum, herbarium and garden.

One of the main attractions of the center is the orchid glass house. This is made up of fiberglass roof, display gallery around and a central pond with fountain. It was inaugurated by Shri B.K. Nehru on 26th Dec. 1972. The house accommodates about 1000 exotic orchids displayed in pots, hanging baskets etc. Curious and attractive blooms of the species and hybrids of Paphiopedilum, Dendrobium, Cattleya and Vanda groups are a feast to the eyes of visiting tourists.



“Orchid Glass House”

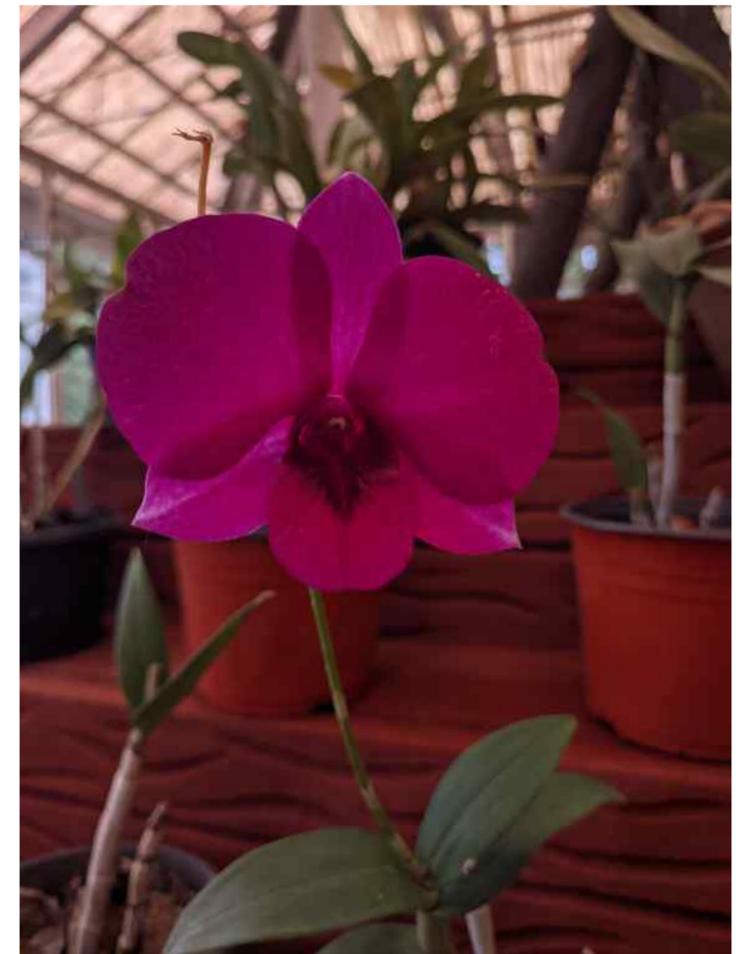


orchids

A Pause That Bloomed

*For a moment, Arunachal slowed us down,
and the journey became a feeling,
not a destination.*

*The orchids bloomed,
and so did something inside us
a calm we didn't know we needed
until the journey gave it to us.*



Roads as Lifelines

Here, roads are drawn with care.

They negotiate slope, weather, and distance.

Movement depends on their continuity.

They connect settlements to resources and each other.

A thin line sustaining everyday life.

Arrival at DIRANG !

*As we enter Dirang, prayer flags greet u
carrying hopes, peace, and protection with the mountain winds.*

Prayer flags at the entrance of Dirang signal arrival into the **cultural heart** of **Northeast India**. Placed by the local community, these colorful flags are a Buddhist tradition believed to carry prayers, blessings, and protection through the wind across the valley.

Set against the mountainous landscape, they represent how faith, nature, and everyday life are deeply intertwined in Dirang, making the entry into the town both a physical and spiritual transition.



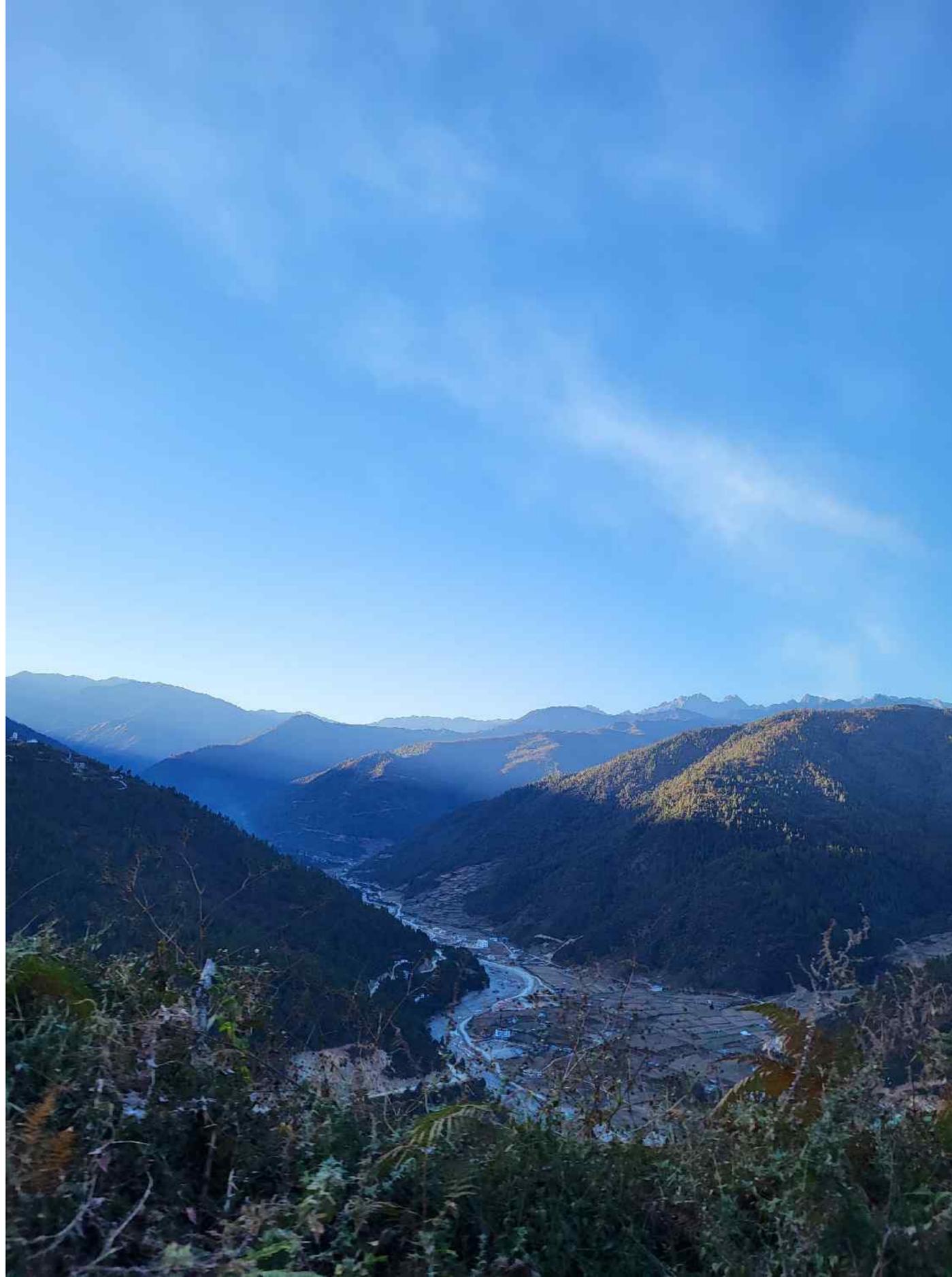


MOVEMENT AT ALTITUDE

Army Area
on the way due to LOC

Breath, body, and
time adjust as
elevation increases.

DAY 4
MORNING
DIRANG
LOCAL



Sangti
Valley

West Kameng district, near
Dirang town, Eastern
Himalayas.



Thupsung Dhargye Ling Monastery

We arrived at the **Dirang Monastery**, set quietly above the valley.

Named **Thupsung Dhargye Ling**, the place where the Buddha's speech flourishes, it stands as a centre of learning and practice. From its hilltop, the monastery overlooks the river and settlement below, binding belief, landscape, and daily life. Consecrated by the Dalai Lama, the monastery reflects a continuity of faith rooted within the terrain.



Thupsung Dhargye Ling Monastery



"Silence as an architectural presence."

Light rests quietly inside the
monastery.

Time softens into stillness.
Inside, the noise of travel fades.
Silence teaches attentiveness.
Calm settles into space.

WITHIN THE MONASTERY

Thupsung Dhargye Ling Monastery

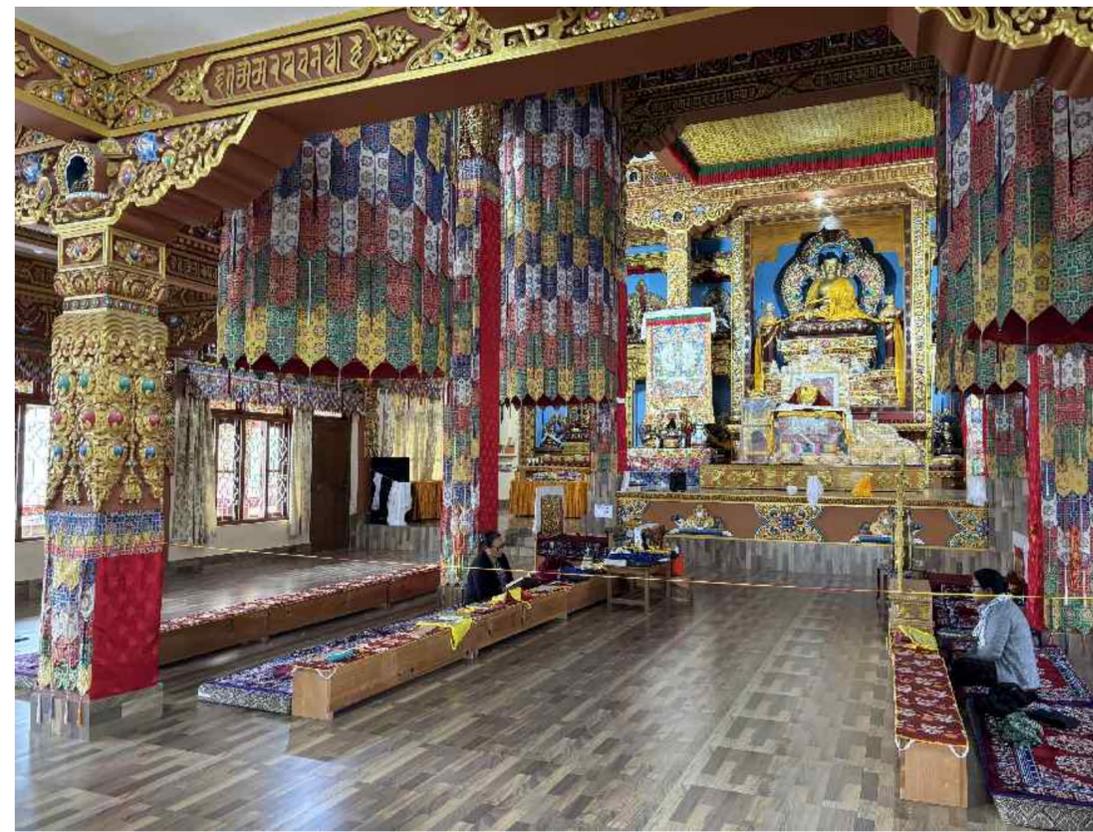
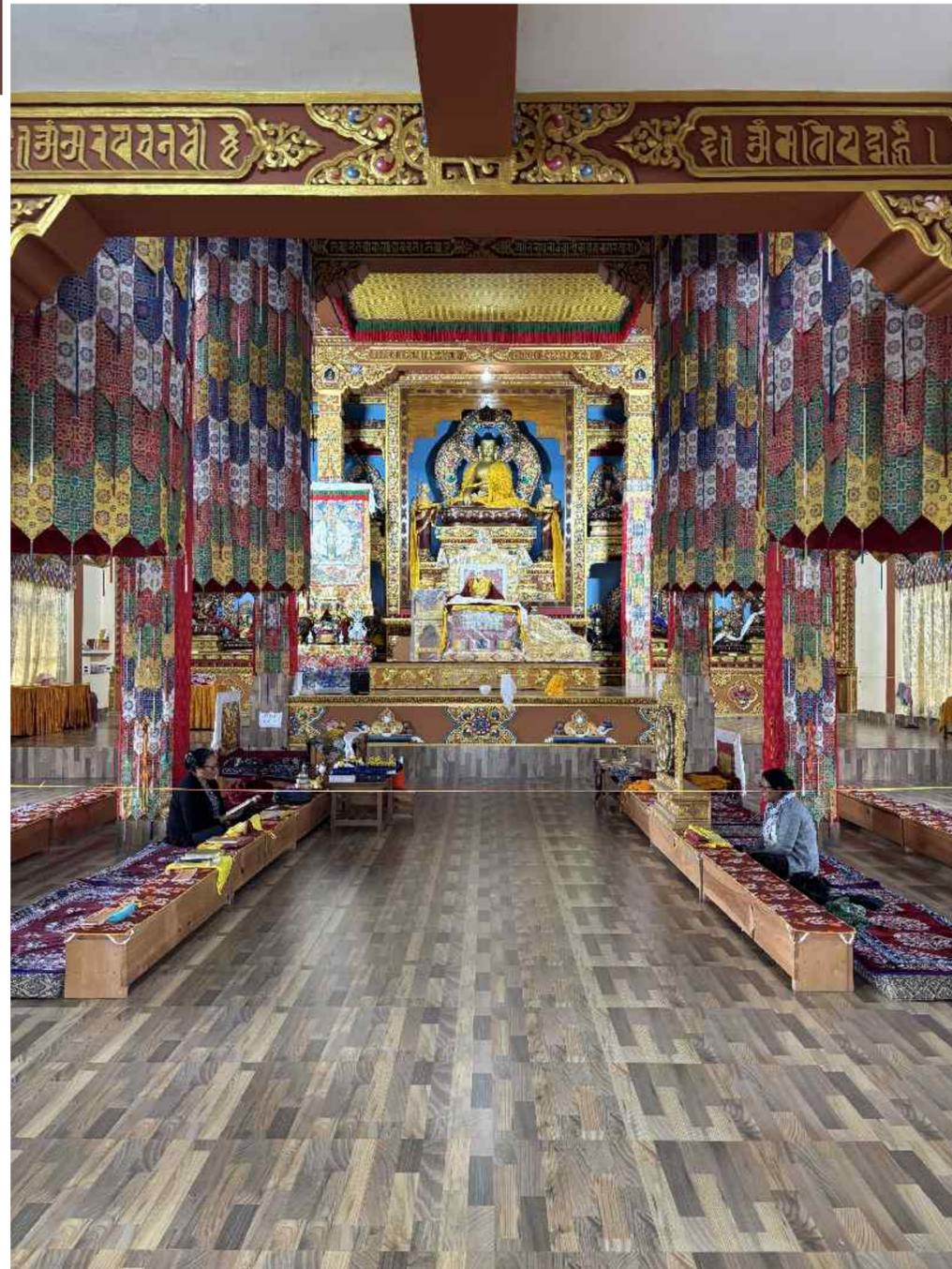


This ornamental stupa element within the Dirang Monastery complex stands as a visual marker of Buddhist symbolism and craftsmanship. Its layered form, rich colors, and careful detailing reflect ideas of balance, devotion, and continuity, quietly anchoring the monastery within the surrounding mountain landscape and everyday spiritual practice.



INSIDE OF MONASTERY

Thupsung Dhargye Ling Monastery



Inside, the noise of travel fades.
Light rests gently on painted
walls.

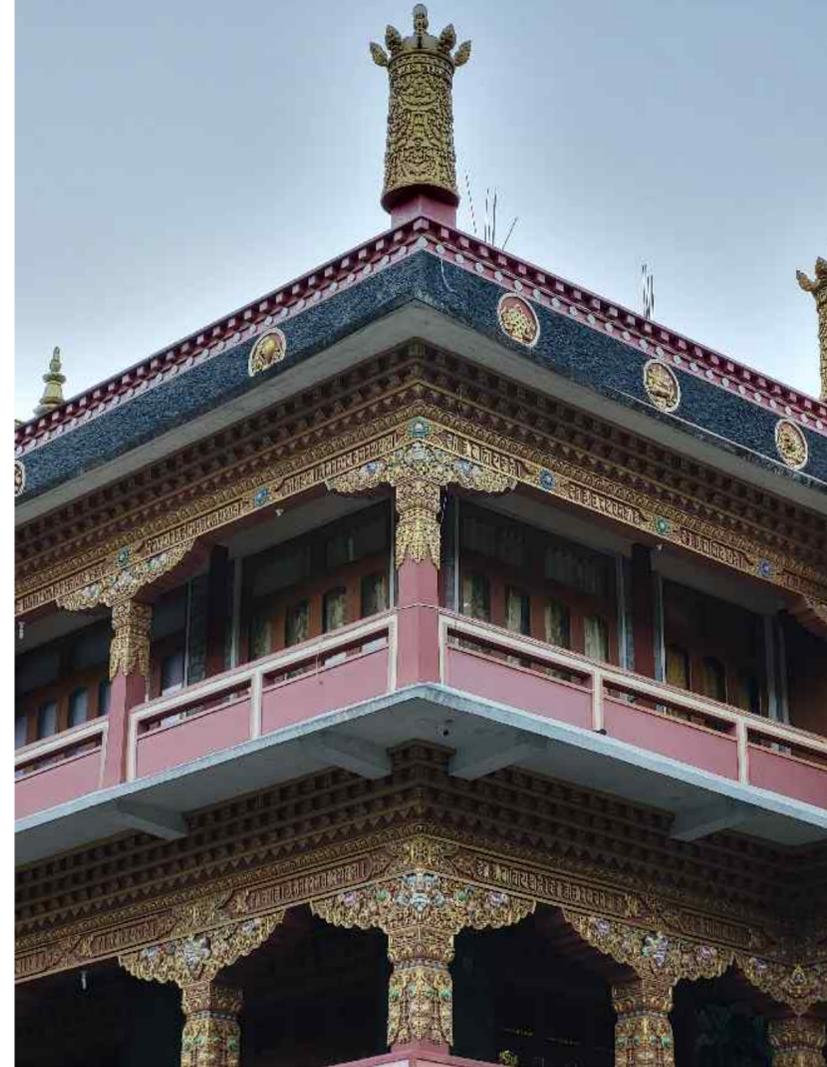
Time loosens its pace.
Silence teaches attentiveness.
Calm settles into space.

ELEMENTS OF MONASTERY

Thupsung Dhargye Ling Monastery



"Where detail and design quietly create beauty."



"Beauty of this masterpiece lies in Architectural details used"



"What makes this structure timeless is the language of its architectural details."



Hot Water Spring, Dirang – Arunachal Pradesh

The hot water springs of Dirang are woven into daily life.

As we heard from local residents, the springs are visited for warmth, relief, and healing. Emerging from the ground, they offer **comfort in a cold landscape**, where nature itself becomes a source of care and continuity.



On the way... Dirang to Tawang...

SELA PASS

TAWANG, ARUNACHAL PRADESH
AT 13700 FT.

Where altitude becomes tangible



The pass narrowed movement and sharpened attention. **Wind, altitude, and terrain shaped each step forward.** Crossing Sela Pass, we became aware of how the landscape governs travel, reducing it to presence and care.



Crossing a landscape that determines its own rhythm.

SELA PASS

TAWANG, ARUNACHAL PRADESH

AT 13700 FT.



SELA LAKE

13700 FT.

The Sela Lake, also known as **Paradise Lake**, rests quietly within the high-altitude landscape.

Surrounded by **open terrain**, the lake offered us a **moment of pause** after movement, where water, altitude, and silence came together.

Here, **the journey briefly rested.**

Still water holding the vastness of the landscape.



JUNG FALLS

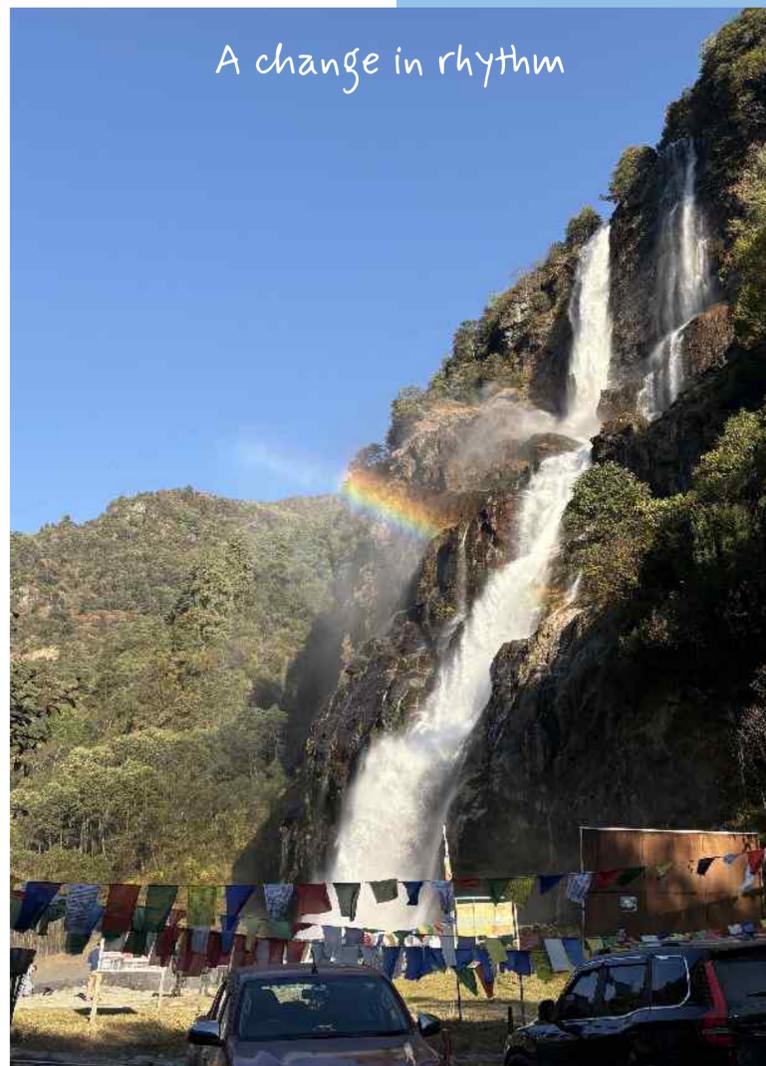
Flow encountered after the pass.

After **crossing Jaswantgarh**, the journey descended toward Jung Falls.

Emerging suddenly from the terrain, fog cleared the waterfall marked a shift in scale and sound.

Water, movement, and mist contrasted with the earlier stillness of the **high-altitude landscape**.

Here, the terrain revealed another rhythm where descent brought flow, and pause took the form of listening.



A change in rhythm



entering TAWANG !



Tranquil Tawang

Tawang unfolds gradually,
layered with prayer flags,
slopes, and built form.
Along the way, small flowers
appeared beside the road,
soft against the vast terrain.
They marked our entry not as
an arrival,
but as a gentle transition into
the landscape.

Day 5 Exploring TAWANG !



TAWANG MONASTERY

about 10,000 FT.

Founded in **1681**, Tawang Monastery is the **largest monastery in India** and a major **spiritual** and **socio-cultural center** of the eastern Himalayas.

Tawang Monastery is known in Tibetan as **Gaden Namgyal Lhatse**, which translates to "**the divine paradise of complete victory**". It was founded by **Merak Lama Lodre Gyatso** in 1680–1681 in accordance with the wishes of the 5th Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso. It belongs to the Gelug school of Vajrayana Buddhism and had a religious association with Drepung Monastery of Lhasa, which continued during the period of British rule.

Where belief, community, and landscape converge



The Tawang Monastery entrance features a distinct, hut-like gateway called the **Kakaling**,



A two storied building, on the eastern side of the court is called Rhum-Khang which is used for cooking the food-offerings for the rituals as well as refreshments for the monks on ritual days.



DUKHANG

"the heart of the monastery"

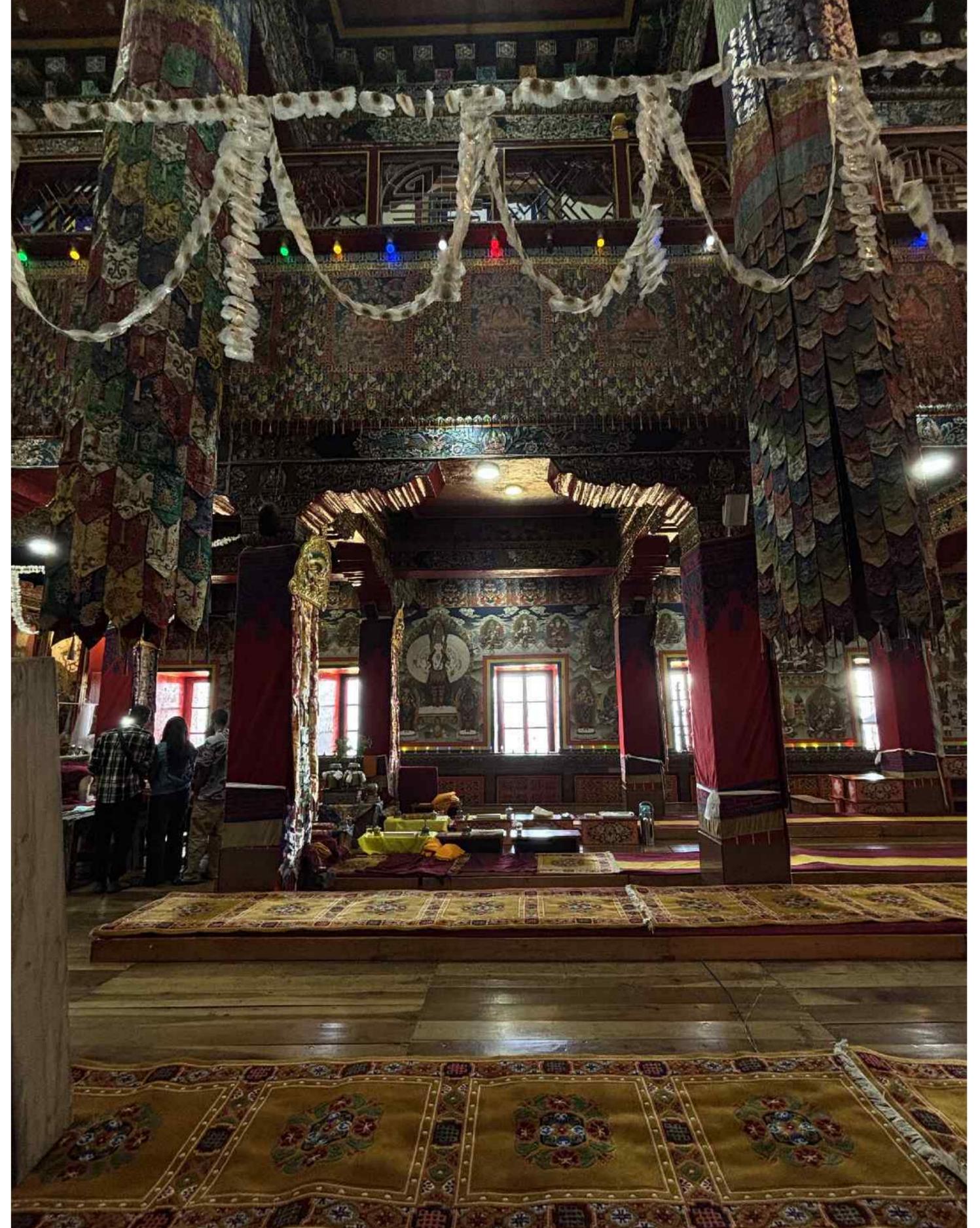


The two-storeyed **Dukhang** is the most prominent building in the monastery, with the **main assembly hall** covering the entirety of its ground floor. On its first floor is the **Labrang**, or the **residence of the Rinpoche (abbot)**, and the second floor is the **residence reserved for the Dalai Lama**. It is believed that the lower section of the Dukhang was constructed by the villagers of Tawang and West Kameng districts and is still maintained by them. Contributions were also made by other villagers as per the 5th Dalai Lama's instructions.

HISTORY OF TAWANG MONASTERY



The full name of the monastery is **Tawang Galdan Namgye Lhatse**. **Ta** means "horse" and **wang** means "chosen", which together forms the word **Tawang**, meaning "the location selected by horse". Furthermore, **Gadan** means "paradise", **Namgyal** means "complete victory" and **Lhatse** means "divine". Thus, the full meaning of Tawang Galdan Namgye Lhatse is "the site chosen by the horse is the divine paradise of complete victory".





An artwork that exists only long enough to be understood.

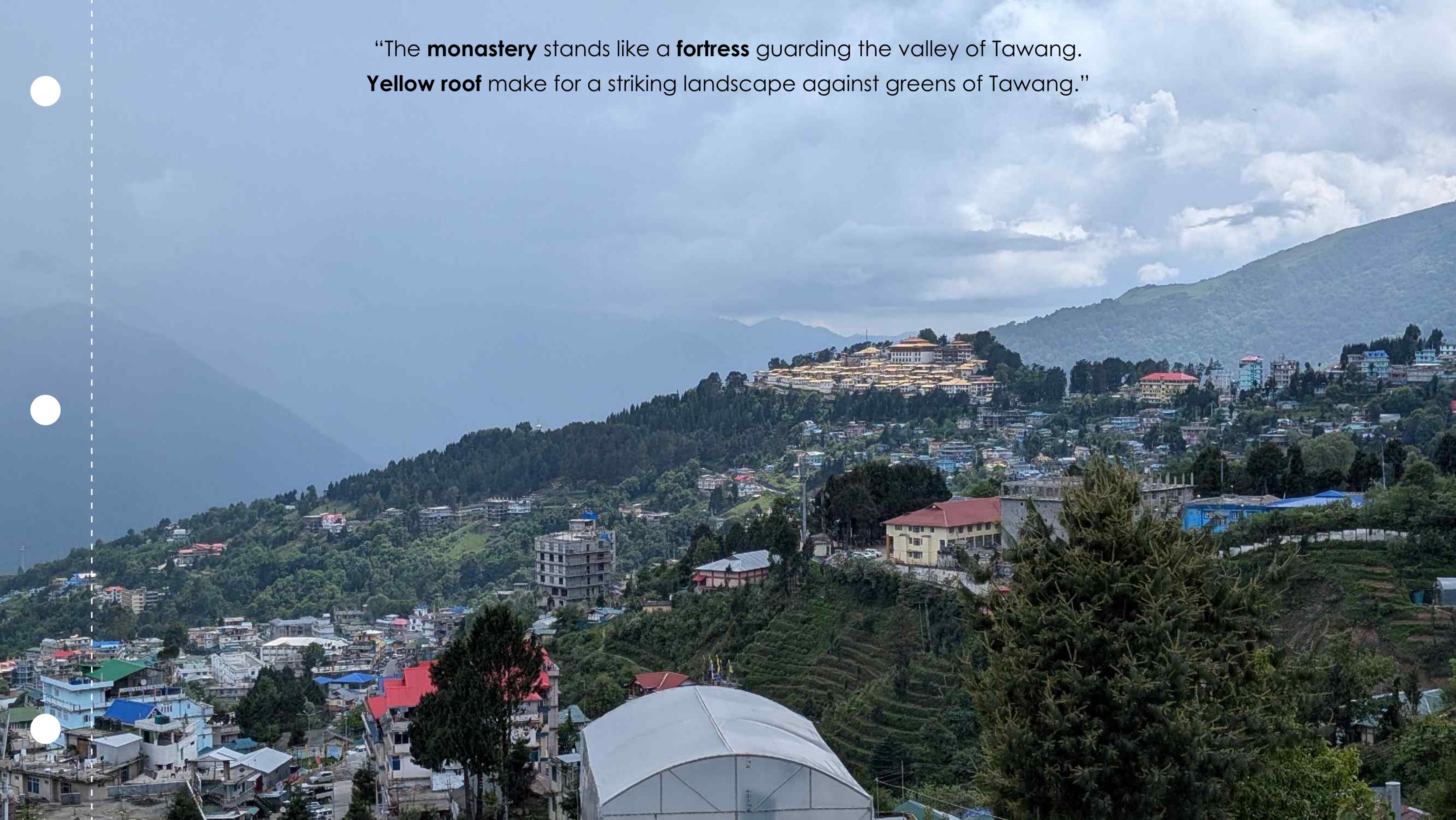


The monks explained that the **Tibetan sand mandala** was created for an ongoing monastery festival. Made patiently **with colored grains**, it embodies impermanence, an artwork meant not to last, but to teach the act of making and letting go.

“The **monastery** has a large **residential complex**, home to Buddhist monks”



“The **monastery** stands like a **fortress** guarding the valley of Tawang.
Yellow roof make for a striking landscape against greens of Tawang.”



GIANT BUDDHA STATUE (SAKYAMUNI BUDDHA)

Separate from the monastery, the **Giant Buddha Statue** overlooks Tawang from a nearby hill. **Open to sky** and **landscape**, it offers a moment of pause contrasting the inward life of the monastery with outward stillness.

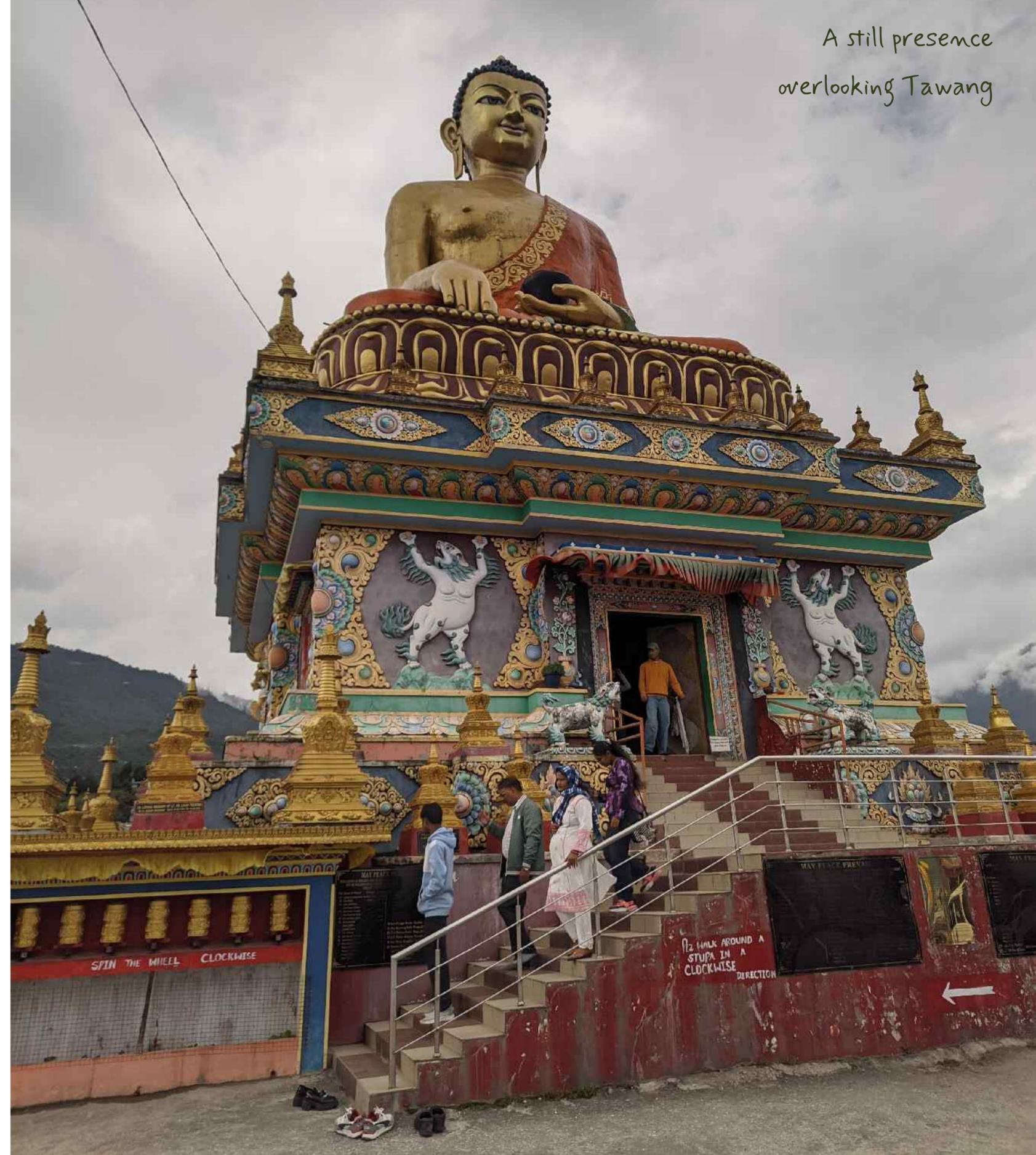


"Budhha ki Rasoi"

We were **offered a simple meal** by those who serve here, **shared with quiet generosity.**

Had a tasty a **lunch!!**

A still presence
overlooking Tawang



TAWANG WAR MEMORIAL

Tawang War Memorial is a stupa (Buddhist shrine) built to commemorate the **Indian martyrs** who sacrificed their lives in the **1962 Indo-China war**. Located a stone's throw from Tawang town, the memorial has been designed using Buddhist architectural and cultural elements, including prayer wheels and flags, colourful serpents, dragons and other Śarīra (Buddhist relics).



Where memory overlooks the town



A national memory embedded within a religious settlement.

Seeing Tawang as a whole



MAJOR RALENGNAO BOB KHATHING

museum of valour



The museum commemorates **Major Ralengnao “Bob” Khathing**, whose service and leadership played a defining role in the history of the region. The exhibits trace how personal dedication becomes part of a **larger national and cultural narrative**.



CULTURE IN MOTION

Local voices performing shared traditions



'Snow Lion Dance'



The day concluded with **cultural performances** that reflected **Tawang's traditions**, set against the **backdrop of surrounding mountains and valleys**.

We later experienced the Army's light show, where history and landscape came together through sound and illumination.



'Yak Dance'

Tradition performed, culture kept alive.

The 'light show' could not be captured, but its presence stayed with us.

Local flavors after long roads.

Meals that matched the journey



Sharing **local food**, we **experienced** the **culture** not only through sight, but through everyday practices.



URBAN FORM, SETTLEMENT AND SCALE

Linear growth responds directly to slope, access, and climate.

Built form remains **compact**, balancing density and accessibility.



Day 6 To Bumla pass



BETWEEN SKY, ROAD, AND BORDER

Where the road meets the edge of the country.

Winding roads, thinning air,
the landscape unfolding in calm layers.

SANGETSAR TSO

SHONGA-TSER LAKE *also* MADHURI LAKE

Located along the route **from Tawang** to **Bum La Pass**, lies close to the Indo-China border.

Formed by **an earthquake** that altered the course of the **Taktsang Chu**, the lake now rests in quiet stillness, a landscape shaped suddenly by nature and slowly embraced by time.

-A lake shaped by rupture, held in calm.



BUMLA PASS

15,200 FT.



Gratitude at the border

At **Bum La Pass**, we stood at the edge of the country, where **India meets China** at a high-altitude border. Phones were kept aside and photographs were not permitted, allowing the moment to be experienced without a lens. Seeing the soldiers stationed here calm, alert, and unwavering **filled us with pride and gratitude**.

At this height, the landscape was vast, but the feeling was deeply human: a quiet respect for those who guard the nation in silence, keeping us safe far from home.

Standing at Bum La Pass,
phones away and borders
close, we witnessed the quiet
dedication of soldiers
guarding the nation at
extreme altitude

An experience that left us
proud, grateful, and deeply
moved.



BUMLA PASS

15,200 FT.



BEGINNING THE RETURN

Descending altered perspective; familiar paths felt different.



PENGA TENG TSO

about 12,000 to 13,000 ft.



A glacial lake where silence, altitude, and reflection come together.

Penga Teng Tso (PT Tso) is a high-altitude glacial lake in the Tawang district, set against snow-capped Himalayan peaks. Known for its serene surface and spiritual significance to local communities, the lake feels almost suspended within the landscape.

On the way back to Tawang, the lake appeared like a calm pause in the landscape.



BACK TO TAWANG



Passing through the all the familiar landscapes reappeared now marked by **fluttering prayer flags** and a changed perception shaped by experience.

perception shifted through experience.



DAY 7 WAY BACK TO GUWAHATI

The journey back to Guwahati retraced familiar routes, now layered with memory and experience. Landscapes once new felt quieter and more personal, marked by prayer flags, long roads, and a sense of completion after days spent in Tawang.

“The journey, seen differently on the way back.”

PASSING THROUGH SELA TUNNEL

The tunnel reframed a landscape



FRP Sculpture of Yak & Calf

Passing through the **Sela Pass Tunnel**, familiar landscapes reappeared now marked by **fluttering prayer flags** and a changed perception shaped by experience.



NAMSHU VILLAGE

Namshu village near Dirang is
the **largest Monpa village** in
West Kameng



MONPA GATHERING

On the return journey, we stopped at Namshu, where a **Monpa gathering** was underway at the monastery. Groups assembled around prayer structures, observing **rituals, conversations, and shared practices**. **Movement, dress, and spatial use** reflected how the monastery functions as both **a religious and communal setting**.

The gathering belonged to the place, not the moment.

MONPA GATHERING

Tradition passing through gestures

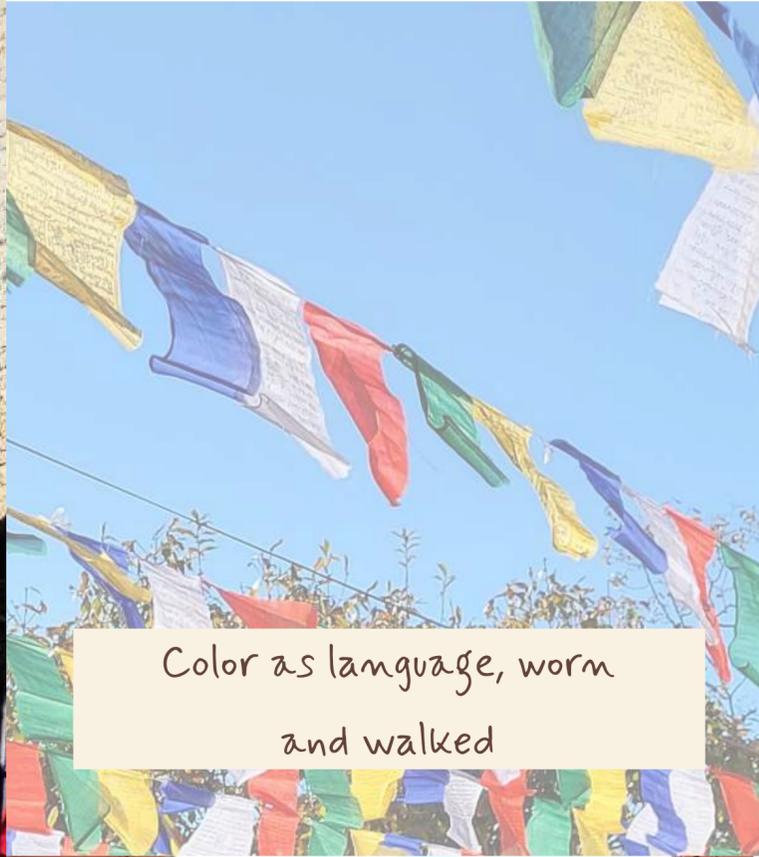
At the monastery, we observed a **masked figure dressed in bright, layered clothing**, moving through the gathering. People stood around watching quietly, some participating, others simply observing. The masks, colors, and movements suggested a ritual or performance tied to the place, unfolding naturally as part of the gathering rather than as a formal event.



MONPA GATHERING



Color as language, worn
and walked



Clothing held stories we could
only observe.



A gathering that belonged
to the place.



At the monastery, we became part of a quiet gathering where people sat, watched, and moved naturally. Bright clothes, prayer flags, and small rituals filled the space. We didn't understand everything, but we could feel that this was not a performance it was everyday life, shared calmly and without explanation.

MONPA GATHERING

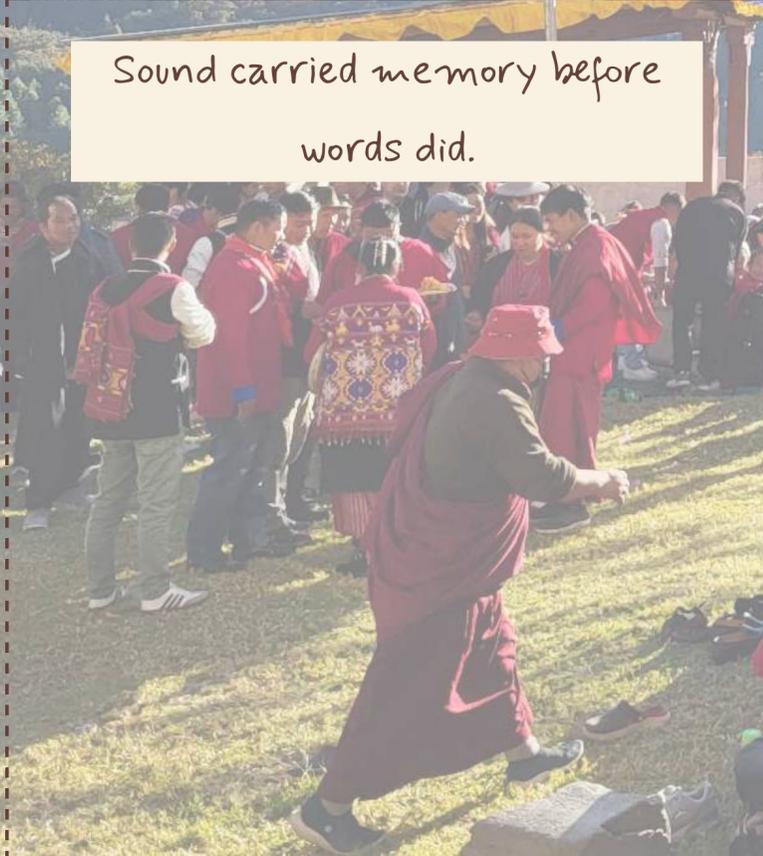


Faith repeated through touch and routine.



As the gathering continued, movement became more pronounced.

Music, footsteps, and ritual gestures flowed through the monastery courtyard, blurring the line between observer and participant. People moved without instruction some dancing, some chanting, others simply standing still.



Sound carried memory before words did.



The courtyard held both stillness and motion.



MONPA GATHERING



Toward the end of the gathering, attention shifted inward. Food was shared quietly, without ceremony, marking a pause rather than a conclusion.

Sitting together, eating simply, we felt the gathering soften into something intimate.

*Hospitality expressed quietly,
without words.*

Arunachal Pradesh stole our heart with its breathtaking landscapes, vibrant culture, and warm hospitality. As I reflect on my journey, I suggest everyone to explore the untamed beauty of Arunachal Pradesh and North East India. Experience the majestic mountains, pristine rivers, and rich heritage of this hidden gem. Discover the magic that awaits in Arunachal and beyond!



AFTERWORD

Arunachal did not reveal itself quickly. It slowed us down, often without intention, and asked us to observe more than we had planned. As we moved through Dirang and Tawang, the landscape began to set its own rhythm. Monasteries appeared steady and composed, resting within vast, unforgiving mountains. They did not announce themselves. Instead, they seemed to hold their ground quietly, shaped by patience, restraint, and a long familiarity with the terrain.

At Bumla Pass, the experience shifted. The terrain felt alert. Borders were no longer abstract lines but conditions that shaped movement and behaviour. The presence of the military was mostly unseen, yet constantly felt embedded into the everyday workings of the place. The landscape here carried a sense of vigilance, where silence, distance, and control became part of daily life.

On the return from Tawang, the Monpa gathering at Namshu village revealed a contrasting rhythm. The atmosphere was warm and deeply rooted, shaped by shared rituals, conversation, and simple acts of participation. There was no clear boundary between observer and participant. People gathered, moved, prayed, ate, and waited together, allowing the moment to unfold naturally.

This journey did not register as a sequence of destinations, but as a gradual balancing of experiences between strategic geography and lived culture, between tension and ease, between landscapes that demand endurance and communities that respond with quiet resilience. What stayed with us was **not only what we saw**, but how the place asked us to slow down, **remain attentive**, and **learn through presence**.



Tawang, December 2025

*Travel taught us to slow down.
To see, not just move.*

THE FINAL FRAME

The journey ended, but the experience stayed with us.

