

# India's singing village

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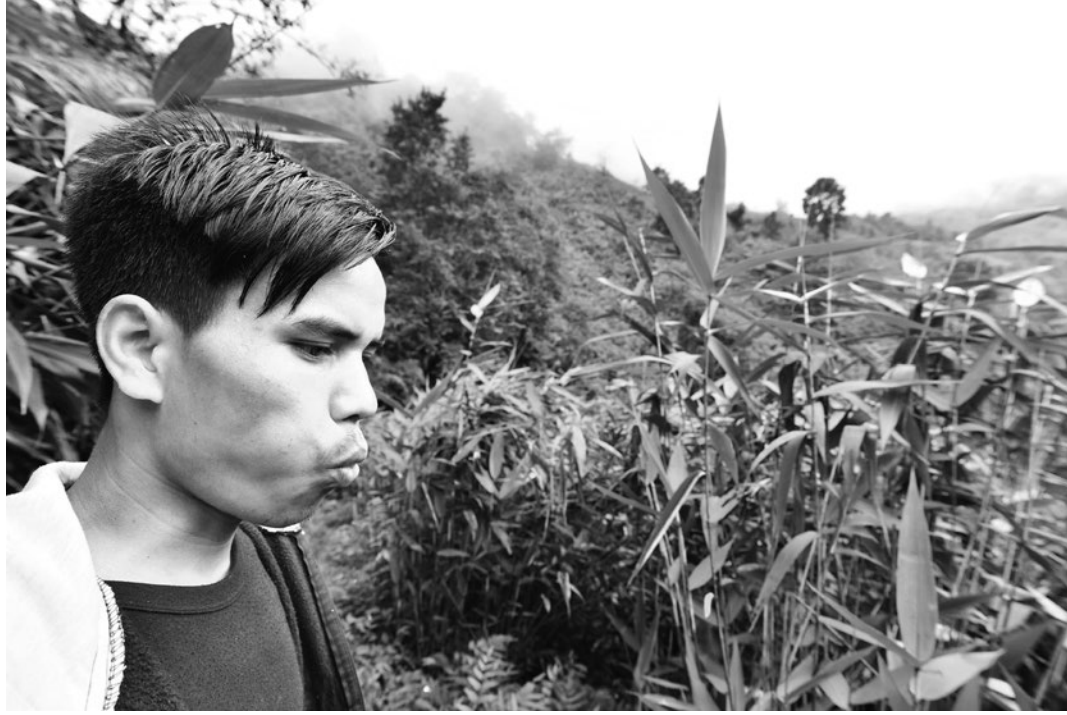
AFP | Kongthong, India

Curious whistles and chirrup echo through the jungle around Kongthong, a remote Indian village, but this is no birdsong. It's people calling out to each other in music -- an extraordinary tradition that may even be unique.

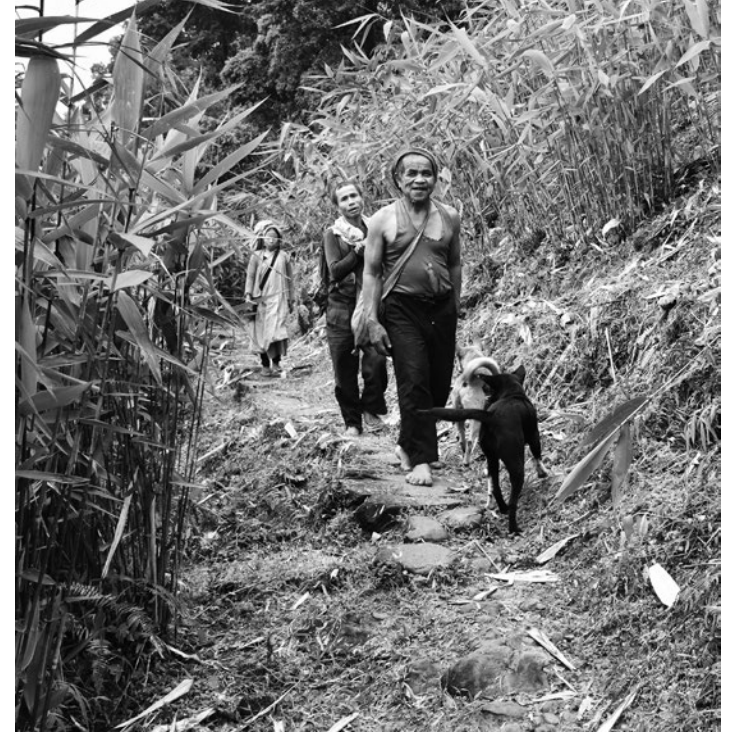
Here in the lush, rolling hills of the northeastern state of Meghalaya, mothers from Kongthong and a few other local villages compose a special melody for each child.

Everyone in the village, inhabited by the Khasi people, will then address the person with this individual little tune -- and for a lifetime. They have conventional "real" names too, but they are rarely used.

To walk along the main road in this village of wooden huts with corrugated tin roofs, perched on a ridge miles from anywhere, is



An Indian villager whistling as he calls to a friend in a field in Kongthong village



Indian villagers on their way to work in fields outside Kongthong village



Indian child whistling her name, in Kongthong village



The composition of the melody comes from the bottom of my heart. It expresses my joy and love for my baby

PYNDAPLIN SHABONG  
MOTHER-OF-THREE

to walk through a symphony of hoots and toots.

On one side a mother calls out to her son to come home for supper, elsewhere children play and at the other end friends mess about -- all in an unusual, musical language of their own.

"The composition of the melody comes from the bottom of my heart," mother-of-three Pyndaplin Shabong said.

"It expresses my joy and love for my baby," the 31-year-old said, her youngest daughter, two

and a half years old, on her knee.

"But if my son has done something wrong, if I'm angry with him, he broke my heart, at that moment I will call him by his actual name," rather than singing lovingly, said Rothell Khongsit, a community leader.

## Harmony with nature

Kongthong has long been cut off from the rest of the world, several hours of tough trek from the nearest town. Electricity arrived only in 2000, and the dirt road in 2013.

Days are spent foraging in the jungle for broom grass -- the main source of revenue -- leaving the village all but deserted, except for a few kids.

To call out to each other while in the forest, the villagers would use a long version lasting around 30 seconds of each other's musical "name", inspired by the sounds of nature all around.

"We are living in far-flung villages, we are surrounded by the dense forest, by the hills. So we

are in touch with nature, we are in touch with all the gracious living things that God has created," says Khongsit.

"Creatures have their own identity. The birds, so many animals, they have ways of calling each other."

The custom is known as "jingrwai lawbei", meaning "song of the clan's first woman", a reference to the Khasi people's mythical original mother.

And unusually for India, this is a matrilineal society. Property and land are passed down from mother to daughter, while a husband moves in with his wife and takes her name.

"We consider the mother the goddess of the family. A mother looks after a family, after the inheritance we get from our ancestors," Khongsit said.

## Modern world

But according to anthropologist Tiplut Nongbri, a professor at Jamia Millia Islamia universi-

ty in Delhi, it is something of a "disguised patriarchy".

Women "don't have decision-making powers. Traditionally, they can't take part in politics, the rules are very clearly demarcated between male and female," she told AFP.

"Taking care of the children, that's the women's responsibility. Statecraft and all that is (a) male function."

The origin of "jingrwai lawbei" isn't known, but locals think it is as old as the village, which has existed for as long as five centuries.

The tradition's days may be numbered, though, as the modern world creeps into Kongthong in the shape of televisions and mobile phones.

Some of the newer melodic names are inspired by Bollywood songs.

And youngsters are increasingly going off singing out their friends' melodic names, preferring instead to phone them.

## British cover sues Elon Musk over 'pedo' comments

Washington, United States

A British cover who helped in the dramatic rescue of 12 boys trapped in Thailand earlier this year sued Tesla founder Elon Musk on Monday for calling him a "pedo guy" and a "child rapist."

The defamation suit filed in Los Angeles by Vernon Unsworth, a Briton involved in several cave rescues, follows a highly public spat between the two after Musk traveled to Thailand and offered to assist in rescue efforts.

The dispute made headlines in July, when Unsworth called Musk's effort to build a mini-submarine for the rescue a "PR stunt" and Musk responded on Twitter by calling Unsworth a "pedo guy," or pedophile.

Musk, a tech entrepreneur who also founded the private space firm SpaceX, apologized days later but not before his comments were widely condemned, raising concerns over



Unsworth (left) and Musk. Picture courtesy of Daily Mail

his leadership abilities.

But he reignited the dispute in August with an email to BuzzFeed News accusing Unsworth

of being a "child rapist," marrying a 12-year-old and engaging in child sex trafficking, the lawsuit alleges.

Musk made the series of false statements "with actual malice, that is, with actual knowledge of falsity or a reckless disregard for



It took 11 hours for a diver to make the 5-mile roundtrip to reach the boys. All the while, hundreds of gallons of water were being pumped out -- the equivalent of 48 Olympic-sized swimming pools in a 75-hour period

truth or falsity," according to the complaint.

Instead of apologizing for his comments, Musk responded with an expletive-laden statement saying, "I hope he... sues

me," according to the lawsuit.

Unsworth is seeking unspecified damages "for the worldwide damage he has suffered to his reputation," according to the lawsuit, which noted that a separate complaint was being readied in the High Court of London.

The suit also seeks an injunction barring Musk from making further slanderous comments, according to Unsworth's lawyer L. Lin Wood.

Unsworth, who lives part of the year in Thailand, took part in the gargantuan 18-day effort to retrieve the boys and their coach, a mission that ended on July 10, when the last five members were extracted.

Musk has been the focus of increased scrutiny in recent weeks over erratic behavior including an online interview in which he was smoking marijuana.

Tesla shares have faced pressure amid concerns over Musk's stability as the company seeks to ramp up production of its mass-market electric car.