

# Framing Portraits, Binding Albums



*Family Photographs in India*

**EDITORS**

**SHILPI GOSWAMI AND SURYANANDINI NARAIN**



Long neglected in academic discourse in India, family photographs make a silent contribution to the histories of photography, marginality and the family. In this volume, the writers dwell on the importance of family photographs and their visual omnipresence in our daily lives.

They point out how family photographs have belonged to the 'vernacular' material of visual culture, more seen and lived with, less written and consciously thought about. Attempting to retrieve family photographs from a space of neglect, this volume demonstrates how they are fundamental to the microhistories of a nation and its many societies, and suggests the importance of such counterarguments to the dominant strains in an emerging discursive space.

The essays do not offer a comprehensive survey of all types of family photographs in India. Instead, they present focused insights into chosen areas of interest on the part of the writers. Collectively, they embrace the intersectionalities of gender, caste, class and regional trajectories, making the politics of representation even more layered with contestations between the historical, oral and affective memorialisation surrounding family archives and photographs. These concerns centrally inform the essays, as they accept and negotiate a terrain shared by all types of narrativisation.

Framing Portraits, Binding Albums:  
Family Photographs in India





Over the last 200 years, the study of humans and their cultures has benefited from the addition of a new resource: photography. At first an intrusive tool in the hands of the colonizer, there perhaps was more truth than superstition to the fear that the camera would ‘steal the soul’ of the subject. But thankfully the pleasurable choice to have formal photographs made to commemorate special occasions soon followed. And then there were cameras in the hands of home hobbyists, who brought about an acceptance of informal snapshots for remembrance.

*PhotoSouthAsia* is proud to support the printing and production of *Framing Portraits, Binding Albums: Family Photographs in India* edited by Shilpi Goswami and Suryanandini Narain. These academic examinations of family photographic archives recognize them not only as witnesses to these specific people, in these specific places, at these specific times, but also bestow value on photo albums and shoeboxes in attics, cedar chests, and flea markets around the world, bursting to tell their stories: the stories of other people, in other places, perhaps occasionally at the very same time.



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Shilpi Goswami  
and  
Suryanandini Narain





ZUBAAN

128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor

NEW DELHI 110 049

Email: [contact@zubaanbooks.com](mailto:contact@zubaanbooks.com)

Website: [www.zubaanbooks.com](http://www.zubaanbooks.com)

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# The Art of Belonging in *Imagined Homeland*

Ranu Roychoudhuri<sup>1</sup>

‘We belong here, they say, quietly.’

— De, 2018

What does it mean to belong—belong to a space, landscape, community, or perhaps to a pre-given home, family, kinship and state, or to modernity and history? Where must we locate the liminality of these categories, and how must we understand the porous boundaries that shape ideas of belongingness? And how is one to visualise this fluidity when the medium of representation thrives on a promise of realism and fixity of meaning? These layered questions mediate the historical and the ‘magical’ in *Imagined Homeland* (2013–2019) by contemporary Indian photographer Sharbendu De (b. 1978). Ethnographic in approach, it is a long-term, conceptual photo-documentary project depicting the lives of the indigenous Lisu (Yobin) people in the remotest areas of the Namdapha National Park and Tiger Reserve and other highland forest areas along the Indo-Burma (Myanmar) international border in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh (Figure 1). Employing varied styles and genres, the duration of De’s project was from 2013 through 2019. I will focus on selected photographs from between 2018 and 2019 in this essay. My choice is guided by increased technical, conceptual and narrative layering in De’s later works as compared to his early oeuvre, his emphasis on the spaces devoid of human presence, and his active engagement with Lisu orality from their pre-colonial, pre-Christian past.

While De’s portfolio and artist statement devote substantial space to the lived realities of the Lisu and their location in trajectories of socio-political belonging/s in the recent past, this paper offers observations primarily related to the nature of photographic reality and its dialogic relationship with the extra-photographic. While realism conditions social expectations and analytical thinking about belonging, home, family and photography, this essay aims to act as a meditation on non-realist strategies in contemporary lens-based practices to address belongingness. My analyses emphasise how magical

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<sup>1</sup> My gratitude to Sharbendu De for generously sharing his works, experiences, stories, thoughts and responses to an early version of this article. I thank Arvind Elangovan and Rochona Majumdar for their insightful comments on previous drafts. I also thank Tapati Guha-Thakurta and my co-contributors to this volume, Uzma Mohsin and Sireiliu (Anna) Charenamei, for their questions and comments during initial presentations of this essay.



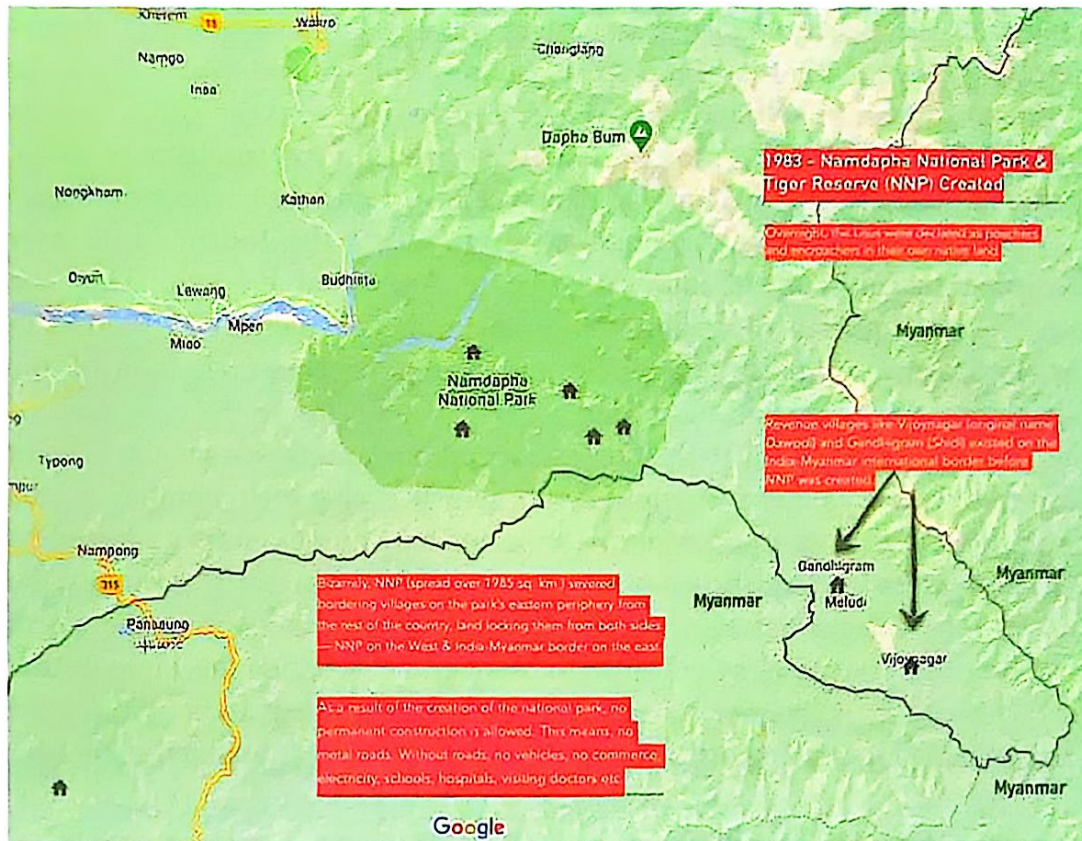


Figure 1. Map of Lisu villages (For illustrative purposes only; not to scale). Courtesy: Sharbendu De.

realism as a visual form complicates the dominant ways of representing ideas of home/homelands and reflects on the role of family photographs as affective–performative spaces to memorialise social bonds. Thus, this article is neither a historical nor an ethnographic account of the Lisu ‘tactics’<sup>2</sup> of belonging to a specific tribal identity, statist category, religious faith, territorial boundary, or temporality. Instead, I begin with a brief historical overview of the Lisu’s marginal location to argue how surfaces of *Imagined Homeland* craft conceptually provocative, fluid and transient spaces of belonging beyond material particularities.

### Precarious Lives

Known as Yobin in India, the Lisu is a collective identity for multiple clans of a Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic group spread across hill areas of Arunachal Pradesh, Burma (Myanmar), Southwest China, and northern Thailand. Scholarly research on the Lisu is primarily focused on their communities in China, Burma and Thailand (Arrington 2019; Yu 2007; Hutheesing 1990),<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven F. Rendal (Berkeley, University of California Press). pp. 34–39.

<sup>3</sup> Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale Agrarian Studies, New Haven & London: Yale University Press); van Schendel,

while scholarship on the Indian Lisu remains scarce (Maitra 1988, 1993).<sup>4</sup> Recent historiography on other indigenous communities in India and specifically in the Northeast Indian borderlands, like the Naga, the Mizo and the Kuki, vis-à-vis layered ideas of belonging, have variously discussed a broad spectrum of issues, including state, citizenship, kinship, identity, mobility and their representations.<sup>5</sup>

Often euphemised as ‘prisoners of geography’,<sup>6</sup> the Indian Lisus, now Christian by faith, are a minority tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. They are concentrated around Gandhigram (Shidi) and Vijoynagar (Da-Wo-Di) in the Vijoynagar administrative circle and Nampong Forest Division of the Changlang district, while most Lisu villages remain inside the core area of the Namdapha National Park. The district administration claims the current Lisu population as approximately 2,000, which is also their number on the voter identity list.<sup>7</sup> But according to an unofficial enumeration conducted by the community leaders, the number was around 4,300 in 2019.<sup>8</sup> Formerly, the Indian Lisu villages belonged to the Tirap Frontier Tract within the North East Frontier Tract under the British, subsequently becoming the Tirap district of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in independent India. Finally, the area became Changlang in 1987, after Arunachal Pradesh attained statehood.

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Willem. December 2002. ‘Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia.’ *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 20:6. pp. 647–68. doi. org/10.1068/d16s; Aminta Arrington, *Songs of the Lisu Hills : practicing Christianity in southwest China*, University Park, Pennsylvania : The Pennsylvania State University Press, [2019]; Zack Michele, *The Lisu: Far from the Ruler* (University Press of Colorado, 2017); Otome Klein Hutheesing, *Emerging Sexual Inequality Among the Lisu of Northern Thailand: The Waning of Elephant and Dog Repute* (E.J. Brill, New York and Leiden, 1990); D Yu, “Gender and Language Use in Lisu Traditional Religion,” in *Language and Religious Identity: Women in Discourse*, edited by A. Jule (London: Palgrave, 2007), 172–95.

<sup>4</sup> Maitra, Asim. 1993. *Profile of a Little-Known Tribe*, and Maitra, Asim. 1998. *A Guide Book to Lisu Language*, Delhi, India, (Mittal Publications).

<sup>5</sup> Longkumer, Arkotong (2010), *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement in Northeast India*, London, Continuum.

Rycroft, Daniel J. and Sangeeta Dasgupta. eds. 2011. *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi* (Oxford and New York, Routledge).

Sadan, Mandy. 2013. *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the State in the Borderlands of Burma* (London: Oxford University Press).

Pachau, Joy L.K. 2014. *Being Mizo: Identity and Belonging in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

Pachau, Joy L.K. and Willem van Schendel. 2015. *The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India* (Cambridge University Press).

Bhattacharya, Neeladri and Joy L.K. Pachau. 2019. *Landscape, Culture, and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>6</sup> Talukdar, Sushanta. 2021. ‘Prisoners of Geography’. *Frontline*. [frontline.thehindu.com/other/travel/article30188563.ecc](https://frontline.thehindu.com/other/travel/article30188563.ecc). Accessed 20 July 2021.

<sup>7</sup> See Vijoynagar, Changlang District. Government of Arunachal Pradesh. [changlang.nic.in/tourist-place/vijoynagar/](http://changlang.nic.in/tourist-place/vijoynagar/). Accessed 20 July 2021.

<sup>8</sup> See Lisu—Yobin Dreams. [yobindreams.wordpress.com/?s=population&submit=Search](https://yobindreams.wordpress.com/?s=population&submit=Search). Accessed 20 July 2021.



British colonial surveys and documents mention the Yawyin (Lisaw) (Figure 2) as being part of Burma. They appear in the Census of Burma<sup>9</sup> rather than that of Assam till 1937, when Burma became a separately administered colony of Great Britain. However, it is unclear if the Lisus of the Namdapha area were enumerated till later. Given their much larger population in Burma and Lisu linguistic similarities with Burmese, the Indian Lisu's identification with Burma continued in the post-colonial period, resulting in the Lisus' complex relationship with state machinery. For example, the Indian government considered them Burmese refugees from 1980 to the early 1990s. This was despite their earlier tribal status in India since the 1950s and long-standing demands for formal recognition by Yobin civil society organisations like Yobin Tribe Fundamental Rights Forum (YTFRF), Yobin Welfare Society (YWS), and All-Yobin Student Union (AYSU) as well as sometimes the All-Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU), notwithstanding occasional conflict between the Yobin/Lisu and AAPSU leaderships.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, the declaration of Namdapha as a wildlife reserve in 1972 and the creation of the Namdapha National Park and Tiger Reserve in 1983 overwrote the Lisu claim to their ancestral land. Part of the Lisu ancestral homeland became the national park, similar to other instances where national parks were created out of indigenous lands, fuelling prologued land rights debates.<sup>11</sup> The formal creation of the national park pushed the Lisu further away from their traditional homeland and made them encroachers in their ancestral territory, as had been the case for other indigenous and tribal communities' land rights and forest rights across India and beyond (All India Forum of Forest Movements 2021).<sup>12</sup>

Indian Lisu or Yobin were formally granted Indian citizenship in 1994 and Notified Scheduled Tribe status in 2018, after several previous stints of administrative acceptance and refusal of their indigenous tribal identity, confusion over where they belong on the map of tribal rights in India, and their residential status as Indian citizens.<sup>13</sup> Even in the 2018 notification,

<sup>9</sup> Bennison, J.J. 1933. *Census of India 1931*. Vol XI. Burma Part I—Report (Rangoon, Burma: Office of the Supdt. Govt. Printing and Stationery). p. vi.

<sup>10</sup> 'Yobins deserve ST status'. 22 February 2015. *The Sentinel*. [www.sentinelclassam.com/news/yobins-deserve-st-status/](http://www.sentinelclassam.com/news/yobins-deserve-st-status/). Accessed 20 July 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Brockington, Daniel and James Igoe. 2006. 'Eviction for Conservation: A Global Overview'. *Conservation & Society*. 4:3. pp. 424–470.

Poirier, Robert and David Ostergren. 2002. 'Evicting People from Nature: Indigenous Land Rights and National Parks in Australia, Russia, and the United States'. *Natural Resources Journal*. 42:2. pp. 331–351.

<sup>12</sup> All India Forum of Forest Movements. 2021. *Struggles for the Right to Live in Forests Declared Protected Areas in India: Experiences of Communities in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh*. [www.wtvm.org.in](http://www.wtvm.org.in). Accessed 17 December 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Letter No. YT/1/2017/STGAR/DEOTH/RU-II. 30 May 2018. From National Commission of Scheduled Tribes, Government of India to the Chief Secretary, Arunachal Pradesh.



the Lisu right to affirmative action is guaranteed only under the generalised clause 'all tribes of the territory', and at the time of writing this article, they are yet to be included in the 'individual notified ST list of the state.'<sup>14</sup> Yobins are still awaiting what they call 'constitutional identity by name.'<sup>15</sup> The Lisu civil society organisations continue to mount public protests demanding their constitutional rights, including their rights to traditional lands, denouncing the governmental proposal of extending Permanent Resident Certificates (PRC) to non-Arunachal Pradesh Schedule Tribe (non-APST) and the latter's inclusion in the Panchayati Raj.

The 2018 notification issued by the National Commission of Scheduled Tribes, Government of India, also instructed the state government to 'take immediate action to provide infrastructure like roads, electricity, water supply, medical facilities, education, etc., in the tribal area.'<sup>16</sup> These civic amenities are yet to materialise where the Lisu live, given much of it is within the national park with its own set of prohibitions on infrastructural expansion. The nearest town Miao, 157 kilometres from Vijoynagar and a three to five days' walk through challenging terrain, is where the Lisu could procure essential supplies like salt and cooking oil. In the absence of roads or any form of transportation, the active presence of the Assam Rifles in Vijoynagar since the 1960s provided the Lisu with some form of rudimentary, restricted and monitored connectivity with the world by intermittently bringing them limited essential supplies via choppers.

Contacts, conflicts and negotiations with the armed forces, the Forest Department, a sizeable population of non-indigenous settlers comprising of former army servicemen and immigrants from Nepal and Bihar ensure a substantial presence of Hindi, even if broken, as a medium of communication for the Lisu speakers to interact with others. Ironically, the Assam Rifles credit themselves and their veterans for pacifying the Lisu discontents regarding administrative neglect by extending essential goods and services to the community, despite community members often feeling otherwise.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, many Lisus routinely use English as a communication medium, including in their protests and negotiations with the state and central governments. They also use Lisu with the help of the Lisu-English interpreters

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<sup>14</sup> Rina, Tongam. 6 January 2019. 'Yobins resent exclusion from ST bill,' *The Arunachal Times*. [arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2019/01/06/yobins-resent-exclusion-from-st-bill/](http://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2019/01/06/yobins-resent-exclusion-from-st-bill/). Accessed 20 July 2021.

Readers' Forum: 'Where do Yobins fit in the proposed APST Amendment Bill?'. 19 July 2021. *The Arunachal Times*. [arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2021/07/19/where-do-yobins-fit-in-the-proposed-apst-amendment-bill/](http://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2021/07/19/where-do-yobins-fit-in-the-proposed-apst-amendment-bill/). Accessed 20 July 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Readers' Forum. 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> See *STORY(Six) Vijoynagar End of The Road* [video] by The Assam Rifles Sentinels of Northeast. 2018. 17:31 minutes. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=511YA\\_SzkRA&t=12s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=511YA_SzkRA&t=12s). Accessed 21 July 2021.

for official purposes, as they did for a landmark press conference in Itanagar on 15 February 2019. It demanded constitutional protection, initiating a peaceful, democratic and powerful movement, with stray deviations, like the incident when several governmental establishments in Vijoynagar were set to fire by a 300–400-strong Yobin mob in December 2020, for which All Yobin Students' Union claimed responsibility.<sup>18</sup>

### Location of Belonging

Against this backdrop of long-standing administrative and political volatilities and narratives of marginalisation as part of general histories of postcolonial unrests, insurgencies and suppressions in Northeast India, De's *Imagined Homeland* takes place in an administratively and infrastructurally remote, isolated and disconnected but not entirely unconnected tropical rainforest on the highlands of the Indo-Burma (Myanmar) international border. This location also makes De's work grounded in the Zomia, conceptualised by historian Willem van Schendel to characterise the margins of Area Studies divisions of South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and East Asia as 'an area of no concern'<sup>19</sup> for specialists. According to van Schendel, Zomia is

derived from *zomi*, a term for highlander in a number of Chin-Mizo-Kuki languages spoken in Burma, India, and Bangladesh. Linguists classify these languages as belonging to the very large family of Tibeto-Burman languages spoken all over Zomia [Kashmir, North India, Nepal, Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan, Northeast India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Bangladesh), Burma, Yunnan, and Sichuan (China), Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam] (van Schendel 2002, p. 653).

Van Schendel and political scientist-anthropologist James C. Scott extensively theorised the immense socio-political and disciplinary-area studies implications of Zomia (van Schendel 2002; Scott 2009). In terms of its material location, Zomia coincides with Southeast Asian mainland massif (or a section of it depending on specific scholarly position), a geographical category marking South-Southeast Asian highlands with an altitude of 300 meters above the sea level. Although Zomia's location is not precisely the same for Van Schendel and Scott, the site of the Lisu habitation is common to both positions. De's portfolio of *Imagined Homeland* mentions Zomia as merely an 'anthropological context' for his ethnographic project. In my analysis, Zomia's socio-political import as an 'area of no concern' and 'shatter zones or zones of refuge'<sup>20</sup> lends itself to how photographic realities produced through a language of magical realism create spaces of mythical refuge for

<sup>18</sup> 'Mob Torch Govt Offices in Arunachal Border Town,' *Northeast Today: Redefining Northeast* (Dec 12, 2020) [www.northeasttoday.in/2020/12/12/mob-torches-govt-offices-in-in-arunachal-border-town/](http://www.northeasttoday.in/2020/12/12/mob-torches-govt-offices-in-in-arunachal-border-town/) accessed July 29, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> van Schendel. 2002. 'Geographics'. p. 653.

<sup>20</sup> Scott. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed*. p. x.



Lisu desires. This makes *Imagined Homeland* an art of belonging for the people 'not being governed.'<sup>21</sup>

De reflects, 'they [Lisu] live alone and die alone,' highlighting how the Lisu live by themselves without much assistance from the Indian federal or Arunachal state government. The statement also foregrounds De's admiration for the Lisu's 'grace' and grit in their refusal to take up arms despite deprivation, suffering and loss. De chooses two points of departure in what he describes as a 'research-based approach' to represent the Indian Lisu in Namdapha.<sup>22</sup> First, he wants to move away from colonial visual surveys like the *People of India* (Watson and Kaye 1868–75)<sup>23</sup> that generalised, exoticised and decontextualised tribal identities. In other words, De's ethnography wants to dismantle colonial anthropology's objectifying gaze and its widespread positivist practice of fixing tribal identity on the photographic surface, often dehumanising their human referents. Visual anthropologist and art historian Christopher Pinney described 'stern fidelity' and 'penetrating certainty' (Pinney 1998) as the dominant approach of colonial anthropological photographs exemplified in Figure 2, while De's photographs move away from any search for either fidelity or certainty. On the contrary, his works accommodate illusory and fleeting possibilities and fluid identities. Second, De is inspired by literary critic A.K. Ramanujan's phrase 'mythic entities called self-sufficient village communities',<sup>24</sup> despite missing Ramanujan's irony of using 'mythic' to denote a wide spread belief about self-sufficiency that is unreal. De's reading of the 'mythic' leads him to explore the Lisu myths and to represent the forced self-sufficiency of the Lisu in a 'mythical' visual space of refuge. In doing so, De's project resonates with postcolonial critics like Partha Chatterjee, who demonstrate how the dominant state failed to 'represent' the aspirations of its 'people-nation' like the Lisu.<sup>25</sup> A move away from the colonial gaze and an emphasis on the Lisu's mythical refuge equip De to forward a critique of the postcolonial Indian state that kept the Lisu at the margins.

However, the space he creates is not entirely premised on any pre-existing cultural narrative as a myth. Instead, De resorts to his imagination in

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Growing up in an upper caste professional Bengali family in the Andaman Islands, De was intrigued by the relative obscurity of the Lisu (Yobin) in popular discourses compared to more widely discussed tribal groups like the Naga, the Mizo, and the Jarawa. The artist's social position vis-à-vis the possibility of an exoticising, romanticising, infantilising, and patronising gaze in his work is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>23</sup> Watson, J. Forbes and John William Kaye. eds. 1868–75. *The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan*. Originally prepared under the authority of the Government of India, and reproduced by order of the Secretary of state for India in council, London, India Museum.

<sup>24</sup> Ramanujan, A.K. 1990. *Who Needs Folklore? The Relevance of Oral Traditions to South Asian Studies*. South Asia Occasional Paper Series No. 1 (Honolulu: Center for South Asian Studies, University of Hawaii Manoa). p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Chatterjee, Partha. 2019. *I am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today* (New York: Columbia University Press). p. 31. And passim.



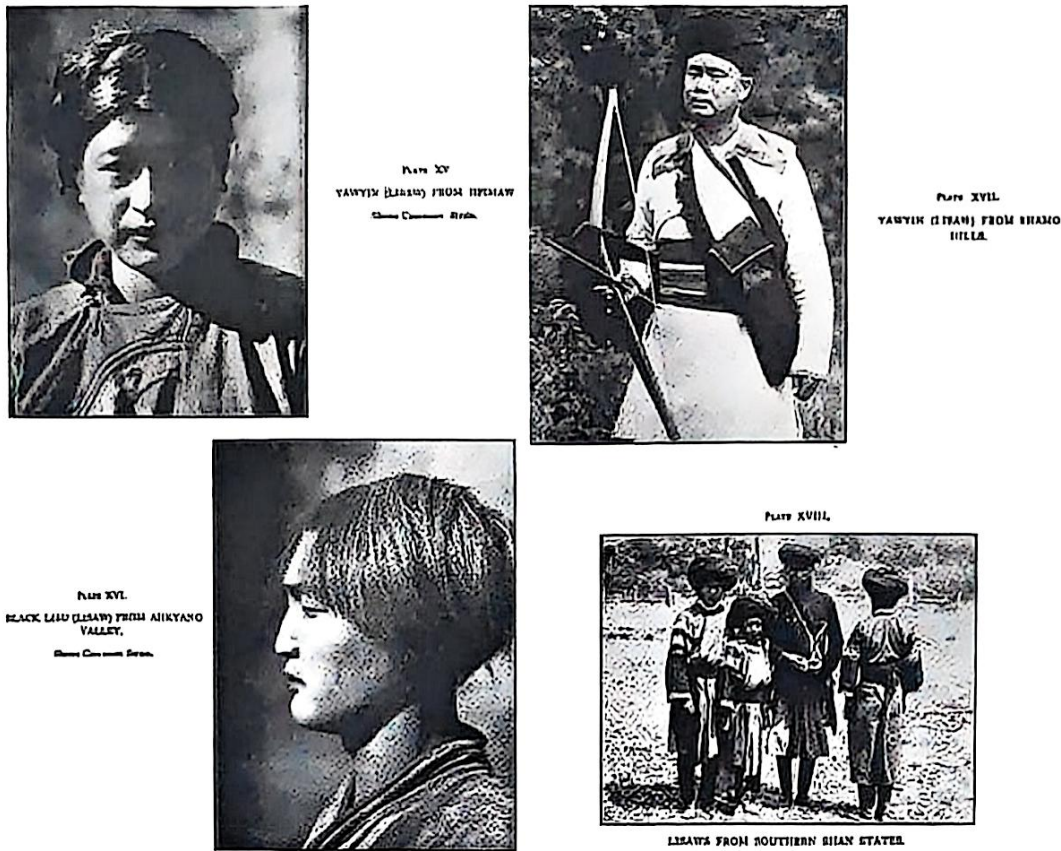


Figure 2. Halftone printed plates from *Census of India 1931, Vol XI, Burma Part I—Report* (Rangoon: Office of the Supdt. Govt. Printing and Stationery, Burma, 1933).

interpreting the word ‘mythical’ as he documents ‘Lisu way of life—philosophy, and magnanimity of spirit’. It makes him ‘realise that they epitomise the true essence of being magical.’<sup>26</sup> Inspired by the Lisu folk traditions and oral narratives, he devises a form of magical realism towards this twin impulse to address, on the one hand, a specific history of visualising Indian tribes and, on the other hand, imagination as an operative category to address borderland tribal identity. Without any claim to realism or semiotic fidelity to material realities, *Imagined Homeland* creates photographic realities that can accommodate competing notions of a historically specific borderland tribe and an ahistorical representation of their belongingness to the geography they inhabit. It muddles dominant understandings of home, family, domesticity and citizenship by weaving a layered narrative of how human and non-human subjects coexist in seemingly contradictory worlds of everyday modern objects and supposedly ahistorical wilderness of a tropical rainforest where ‘politics collide with fantasy.’<sup>27</sup> With its visual economy and complex narrative, the genre-bending

<sup>26</sup> The portfolio, dated 2021, De shared with me and his artist statement on [www.desharbendu.com/imagined-homeland](http://www.desharbendu.com/imagined-homeland) accessed October 30, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Zamora, Lois P. and Wendy B. Faris, eds. 1995. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Communities* (Durham: Duke University Press). p. 1.

*Imagined Homeland* pushes the limits of easy categorisation and encourages looking beyond the critical lenses available within photographic discourses.

After Franz Roh coined the term in 1925 in the context of post-expressionist art, 'magical realism' as a representational genre had a diverse life, most prominently in Latin American literature in the twentieth century. While Roh's understanding of the style in art was flipped on its head when adopting it in Latin America, the flip incorporated more thoroughly Roh's claim that 'with the word 'magic,' as opposed to 'mystic,' [he] wished to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it...' (Roh 1925/27).<sup>20</sup> The literary practice of magical realism subsequently manifested in postcolonial literary spaces, where 'magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinise accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation.'<sup>21</sup> It is 'closely linked with a perception of "living on the margins"'.<sup>22</sup> The possibility of incorporating the magical and the apparently impossible within banal spaces of the everyday makes magical realism a productive lens to interrogate belonging in the margins depicted in *Imagined Homeland*. But how might looking closely at the photographs from the series help us think about belongingness?

### In Magical Realism

Seated on wooden benches, an adult man and three children stare at a television set accompanied by a flower vase, both placed on a table covered in patterned fabric, and human faces are illuminated by the screen's neon hue (Figure 3). This description can fit a whole range of family snapshots encoding forms of twentieth-century leisure from across spaces; the reader is transported immediately to a stereotypical modern urban home embodying a sense of comfort. However, 'Waiting in the Forest' (Figure 3) includes two ducks next to the seated man and unfolds in a dense tropical rainforest illuminated by artificial light. Given the limited solar-powered electricity and wireless network in Lisu villages, the television set in Figure 3 signals its limited function, mimicking the limit set by the forest to access modern goods and services. Simultaneously, it signifies the Lisu desire for connectivity with the world beyond their immediate surroundings. Some of these motifs are shared by 'Untitled' (Figure 4), including the little boy glued to the television, the flower vase and the pony. Additionally, Figure 4 has an Airtel dish antenna, a set-top box and a plate of white rice. Unlike 'Waiting in the Forest', the story in 'Untitled' unfolds in a paddy field in what appears to be a valley. Likewise, 'Three Tea Mugs, Father

<sup>20</sup> Franz Roh, "Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism," quoted in Faris, Wendy B., and Lois Parkinson Zamora. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. 1 ed., Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Zamora and Faris. 1995. *Magical Realism*. p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Slemon, Stephen. 1995. 'Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse'. Zamora and Faris. *Magical Realism* (Durham: Duke University Press). Pp. 407–426.





Figure 3. Sharbendu De, *Waiting in the Forest*, 2018, Inkjet print on archival paper.  
Copyright & Courtesy: Sharbendu De.



Figure 4. Sharbendu De, *Untitled*, 2018, Inkjet print on archival paper.  
Copyright & Courtesy: Sharbendu De.



Figure 5. Sharbendu De, *Waiting in the Forest*, 2018, Inkjet print on archival paper.  
Copyright & Courtesy: Sharbendu De.

and the Child' (Figure 5) has a domestic setup amid the forest. The father reads what appears to be a magazine. The language is uncertain, but the object forges a connection with the world outside. The magazine also locates these human actors in the global contemporary mass culture like the television does. There's a pony and a duck in the frame, but unlike the ducks in Figure 3, it is unclear if the animals in Figure 5 form a part of human domesticity or if they mark its boundaries.

Like many others from the *Imagined Homeland*, these photographs offer staged scenes that are impossible otherwise but are made possible by the 'magic' created by the photographic event. They emerge simultaneously as celebrations of the Lisu's cohabitation with nature, a critique of the colonial discourse of tribes as forest-dwelling primitives, and postcolonial governmental neglect, forcing the community to build a self-sufficient life amid adversities. Forest, animal, human and modern gadgets exist seamlessly in De's magical world. Their simultaneity challenges conventional expectations regarding mass culture, urban comfort, domesticity and leisure. De's human subjects like Ngwalidew Yobin '[search] for a portal to a place where there is a balance between the mythical and the modern' (Figure 6) in the 'magical forest' created on the photographic surface. 'Ngwalidew and the Portal' (Figure 6) directly point to the imbalance between what appears to be the mythic and the modern in the photographic present and thereby emerge as a critique of the extra-photographic reality. In other words, the 'portal' as a channel of





Figure 6. Sharbendu De, *Ngwalidew and the Portal*, 2018, Inkjet print on archival paper. Copyright & Courtesy: Sharbendu De.

communication promises the Lisu a possibility of embracing ‘modern’ services without having to leave their myths, self-sufficiency, and attachment to their ancestral land. This dual pull of staying grounded in their ancestral homeland and their desire to go beyond those ties mark one of the characteristics of De’s work, as they interpret Lisu imaginations and experiences.

According to De, he tried portraying the sensory experiences felt by the Lisus as a result of living amidst nature (away from an urban monetised economy). ‘I borrowed from their folklores, journalistic accounts shared with me, dream symbolism etc. to evoke an aura of their world (which included encounters with the spirit-world “*Maamimu*” and “*Musi*”) and explored archetypal interconnections between “man, animal and nature”<sup>31</sup> instead of resorting to spectacle. All efforts were aimed at alluding to their state of mind and feelings, including despair, anguish, relationship with nature, togetherness, family, gentle stewardship of their animals and their rare ability to collectively search for light despite the hardships.’<sup>32</sup>

De’s narrative style employs psychoanalyst Carl Jung’s notion of the archetype<sup>33</sup> to access the Lisu ‘collective unconscious’ through their traditions, oral histories, lived experiences and collective dreams. However, he creates

<sup>31</sup> Jung, Carl G. 1981. *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. Vol. 9. Part 1. (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

<sup>32</sup> Sharbendu De’s portfolio for *Imagined Homeland* dated 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

archetypal symbols rather than borrowing from Jung's original twelve archetypes. 'Golden light,' duck and water are recurrent motifs as manifestations of the archetype of 'man, animal and nature' in De's visualisation of the Lisu 'collective unconscious'.

De emphasises, '[t]he recurrent usage of this "golden light" is symbolic of something warm, alluring and prosperous, everything that gold as a metal signifies (and partly even fire). I also had in mind paintings, for example, Francisco de Goya's *The Third of May 1808*.'<sup>34</sup> Spanish Romantic painter Francisco Goya's 'The Third of May 1808' (1814), also known as the 'Execution of the Defenders of Madrid', depicts the execution of Spanish civilians by the French army during the Peninsular War and commemorates the Spanish resistance to Napoleonic aggression. It inspired generations of European painters in their attempt to bear witness to statist violence and atrocities perpetrated on innocent and unarmed individuals. 'The Third of May 1808' has attracted scholarly attention, among other things, for its tonal value and how Goya created contrasting light and dark on the canvas highlighting the figures of the to-be martyred individuals facing the French firing squad. De's reference to Goya is reminiscent of photo-theorist Susan Sontag's exposition on 'regarding the pain of others' concerning Goya's prints and paintings immediately preceding 'The Third of May 1808'. Sontag claimed, '[w]ith Goya, a new standard for responsiveness to suffering enters art. (And new subjects for fellow-feeling ...)'<sup>35</sup> (Sontag 2003, p. 45). Shall we interpret De's 'golden light' as bearing witness to the sufferings of the Lisu and their resistance to statist indifference by solidifying their belonging to the warmth of the 'mythical forest'?

The frequent appearance of the motif of the duck in *Imagined Homeland* aligns with De's attempts to 'look beyond the human' in grasping the Lisu lives.<sup>36</sup> These efforts are prominent in De's inclusion of other animals, like the pony in Figure 4. However, De's most notable statement on 'beyond the human' comes in the form of spaces devoid of human beings (Figure 7) or spaces embodying only human cultural objects (Figure 8). Likewise, water in De's work appears repeatedly to assimilate the non-human, even though for De, water signifies human 'life in motion.'<sup>37</sup>

He explains,

I use water as symbolic of transiting time but also reference dream symbolism where "crossing a water body is symbolic of an impending transition in life, either about to happen, or at least the aspiration." Such tropes entered my lens when years later the Lisus opened up, revealing their belief in dreams and motifs they see in their sleep state, but they also apologetically saying, "They

<sup>34</sup> Email correspondence with Sharbendu De (29 July 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin Books, 2003

<sup>36</sup> Email correspondence with Sharbendu De. 28 July 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Email correspondence with Sharbendu De. 29 July 2021.



Figure 7. Sharbendu De, *Untitled*, 2019, Inkjet print on archival paper.  
Copyright & Courtesy: Sharbendu De.

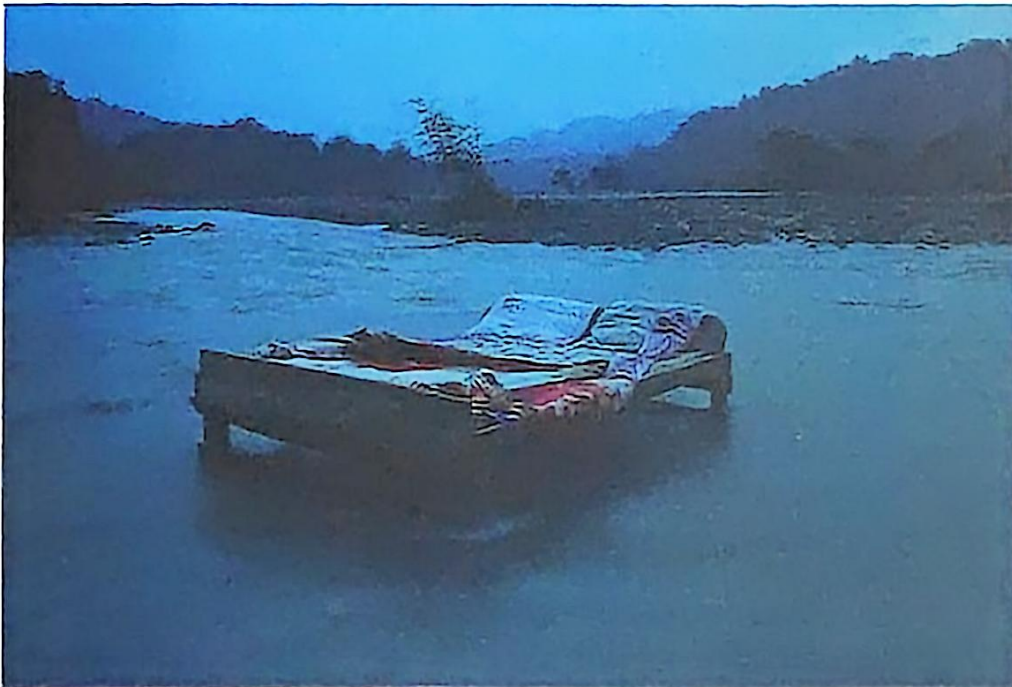


Figure 8. Sharbendu De, *Untitled*, 2019, Inkjet print on archival paper.  
Copyright & Courtesy: Sharbendu De.



do not believe or practice animism anymore as they are no longer *junglees*, but Christians.”<sup>38</sup>

In my analyses, the motif of water in De’s work is as much about the non-human and the motion of life, as it is about the fluidity of Lisu belonging in the visual space of the *Imagined Homeland*. Further, thinking ‘beyond the human’ entails rethinking the idea of humans belonging to the planet Earth; it involves ‘decentering the human in our narratives of the world’ (Chakrabarty 2021, p. 203).<sup>39</sup> This makes one aware that humans are one of many species inhabiting the planet where human narratives are somewhat ‘incidental’ (Chakrabarty 2021, p. 67). However, De’s quote of the Lisu statement of how they ‘are no longer *junglees*, but Christians’ grounds the chronicle of Lisu belonging to an anthropocentric world. Indeed, the visual space of the *Imagined Homeland* focusses on the non-human as long as that attention contributes to an unfolding human story of fluid belonging.

The three motifs, namely the ‘golden light’, duck and water, are instrumental in assimilating seemingly incongruent ways of belonging simultaneously to the specific and the eternal domains of Lisu existence, giving viewers access to magical possibilities. According to De, ‘[m]agic when explained, deconstructed, analysed, articulated and its origin traced, loses its charm.’ So he wishes ‘to leave this [magic] unexplained’ to keep alive the element of mystery associated with the idea of magic.<sup>40</sup> He further explained that even when faced with adversities and difficulties in life, the Lisu ‘grace, gentleness and warmth in their hearts, is what [he feels] is magical.’<sup>41</sup> De describes their grace and grit in the following terms:

Refusing to protest or take to arms, the Lisus simply focus on finding solutions. They grow their rice and vegetables, sustainably extract forest produce, build each other’s homes, bury their dead, pray and feast together. In the absence of an external economy they mostly barter, living symbiotically with nature as a self-sufficient community. These gentle people call the forests ‘home’ and consider the idea of life outside the forest as inconceivable. We belong here, they say, quietly.<sup>42</sup>

Even though De would refrain from explaining ‘magic’, his follow-up elaborations intend to use ‘magic’ as a trope to critique the Lisus’ bleak present resulting from the prolonged denial of citizenship rights and access to state resources. Thus, ‘magic’ is a critical tool for De to comment on the ‘impaired

<sup>38</sup> Email correspondence with Sharbendu De. 28 July 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago ; London : University of Chicago Press, 2021

<sup>40</sup> Email correspondence with Sharbendu De. 29 July 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> De, Sharbendu. 2018. ‘Imagined Homeland’. *IQ: The Indian Quarterly*. Jan–Mar. indianquarterly.com/?p=4469 accessed 20 July 2021.



citizenship<sup>43</sup> of the Lisu. In the process, De employs what I would call a lens of magical realism to understand the complexity of the Lisu belonging. The magic in De's work doesn't happen outside reality in some otherworldly fantasy space; it doesn't provide an escape from lived realities. On the contrary, magical elements are located within the spaces of the ordinary and the everyday; they happen in the forest the Lisu live in or the lands they cultivate. Everyday objects acquire new meanings in the De's 'golden light'. This focus on the ordinary and the everyday is further enhanced by how De did not use any prop that the Lisu did not use in their daily lives, except his photographic equipment and artificial light. By making the apparently impossible unfold through the ordinary, De's articulation of the everyday magic in the Lisu lives in the Namdapha affiliates his work with the broader tenets of magical realism in postcolonial literature, where he doesn't essentialise the unexplainability of magic as the only way of accessing the non-Western tribal consciousness and/or their cultural milieu. Indeed, De employs magical realism with an impulse of a documentarian as he weaves an album of Lisu lives.

### Album of (Be)longing in Zomia

While the idea of family albums and family photographs are commonplace, conveying fixed meanings in specific social arrangements and/or communities of photographs—like the bourgeois family or the genre of portrait/group portrait and snapshot—the ideas could be completely foreign and protean in other social, political and visual contexts. In other words, the idea of family photographs and family albums are not seamless across contexts and they are marked by conceptual fissures. Indeed, historians of gender have compellingly discussed the disconnect even between bourgeois imaginings of the family photograph and actual family values, and how the photographic reality and lived reality were not necessarily aligned.<sup>44</sup> This caveat creates room to think that not all families are the same, and not all of them would have family photographs/albums as sites of affect, memory and nostalgia. Consequently, how must we think of the idea of family photo albums as a socio-linguistic space for producing the social and the political when those albums come from socially and politically marginal spaces? Is the concept of a family album an a priori for the Lisu in their *Imagined Homeland*? The conceptual and material location of the Lisu in De's representation of belonging might serve as an entry point to rethink both ideas: of family and album.

The album, the folio and the scrapbook as genres have a long and diverse genealogy in the histories of visual arts in India. They come in all shapes and

<sup>43</sup> Azoulay. 2008. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Srinivas, Mytheli. 2008. *Wives, Widows, and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).

Majumdar, Rochona. 2009. *Marriage and Modernity in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press).

forms from different periods with diverse patronage and ownership structures. In its variegated public, private and domestic forms, even the modern genre of the photographic album is rich in its diversity. Family albums in this context have mostly remained part of the private and the domestic, despite family photographs often making it to public discourses and acquiring public lives in specific political contexts. The vast personal archives of family photographs and family albums from India, and the existing scholarship on some of them appear to foster several assumptions regarding the social positions of families who would have objects called family albums. They signal social and economic privilege and/or social capital at the elementary level. Simultaneously, they point to how family photo albums embody traces of historically specific photographic practices, including genres and individuals associated with them.

Scholars like Don Slater and Jessica Evans describe family photographs as 'a great wasteland of trite and banal self-representation'<sup>45</sup> and as a 'stultified and stereotyped repertoire of composition, subject-matter and style',<sup>46</sup> while others like Gillian Rose draw attention to how family photographs' association with domesticity and women make them invisible and/or repudiable in critical discourses on photographic aesthetic.<sup>47</sup> Either way, the broader body of scholarship on family photographs from across cultures routinely demonstrated the diversity of uses and afterlives of family photographs and albums. Often, photographs from family albums have made their way into theorising the ontology of photography, for which, undoubtedly, the prime example is the famous 'Winter Garden Photograph' depicting cultural critic Roland Barthes' mother<sup>48</sup> that nevertheless remains unreproduced in his book. Marianne Hirsch argued, 'Barthes cannot *show* us the photograph because we stand outside the familial network ... because he claims it is a very private kind of self-portrait'<sup>49</sup> that would not have the same significance for the viewers. Barthes and Hirsch were two of the many scholars, including Julia Hirsch, who emphasise familial and kinship ties as the foundation on which family photographs thrive.<sup>50</sup>

De's ethnography alerts his viewers to the precarity of Lisu families and kinship ties at the margins of statist governance and national narratives. Yet, *Imagined Homeland* demonstrates how '[t]heir sense of identity and feelings

<sup>45</sup> Slater, Don. 1995. 'Domestic photography and digital culture'. Lister, M. ed. *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (London: Routledge) pp. 134.

<sup>46</sup> Evans, Jessica. 2000. 'Photography'. Carson, F. and C. Pajaczkowska. eds. *Feminist Visual Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. 112.

<sup>47</sup> Rose, Gillian. 2010. *Doing Family Photography the Domestic, the Public and the Politics of Sentiment* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate). p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. First American edition (New York: Hill and Wang). p. 67. And *passim*.

<sup>49</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. 1997. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Post-Memory* (Harvard: Harvard University Press). p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Hirsch, Julia. 1981. *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning and Effect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).



of belonging are never entirely shaped by the practices of the state'.<sup>51</sup> De's project highlights how ideas of home, family and domesticity are not exclusive to human bonds and how they incorporate the wilderness and the spirit world of *Maamimu*. As De explains,

The Lisu believe that a parallel invisible world coexists in the same time-space. They call it *Maamimu*, and the invisible humans living there as *Musi*. For each Lisu, there is a similar looking *Musi* in *Maamimu*, and should one suffer or die, the same fate meets the other ... Invisible portals connect both worlds and stories of interactions with the *Musi* exist in the Lisu world. They usually do not share these stories with outsiders, or for that matter, their belief in dreams and symbolic elements from nature. Their relationship with the forest and its innumerable elements is influenced by similar belief systems making them more respectful of nature and its cohabitants.<sup>52</sup>

Consequently, De uses multiple exposures to accommodate the Lisu and their *Musi* (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Sharbendu De, *Noyu Yöbin*, 2018, Inkjet print on archival paper.  
Copyright & Courtesy: Sharbendu De.

Likewise, the idea of domesticity in its most comprehensive scope makes it possible for De to position a bed in the middle of a flowing water body (Figure 8) or have the wilderness overpower human presence, signalled by the hint of

<sup>51</sup> Bhattacharya and Pachuau. 2019. *Landscape, Culture, and Belonging*.

<sup>52</sup> Sharbendu De's portfolio dated 2021.



fire (Figure 7). How might one tell stories of material hardship simultaneously with a parallel world devoid of any material existence per se, without resorting to the techniques of magical realism, radically redefining dominant ideas of home, domesticity and family! De's work provides a novel visual language of human belonging in liminal zones, including home/world, domestic/public, family/nature and human/non-human.

The wooden bed frame, printed linens, two pillows and patterned blanket in Figure 8 tell a story of human domesticity devoid of any active human presence. At first glance, the non-human elements seem to be the protagonists of the photograph. But a closer look reveals traces of human habitation. The pillows seem to have been used and the folds on the printed bedsheet and the patterned blanket bear marks of usage. They bear impressions of corporeal presence as if someone just got out the blanket and left the bed, making the absent user of the bed the real protagonist of the narrative. This is congruent with De's understanding of flowing water as a metaphor for flowing human lives. Poignantly, this domesticity unfolds in the most unlikely of scenarios—in the middle of a river flowing through a valley. The absence of the human only reinforces the centrality of anthropocentrism in *Imagined Homeland*. As much as the photograph highlights the conjoined lives of the human and the natural worlds, it also crafts a non-normative form of domesticity, privacy, home and family against the backdrop of mountains, vegetation and a river.

This fluid, liminal and non-normative belonging on the surface of the photographs allows the magical realism of *Imagined Homeland* and the concept of Zomia in its most comprehensive possible scope to co-constitute each other. On the one hand, the material location of the Lisu in the margins, in zones remaining ungoverned by the political power in the valleys and the 'heartlands' provoked De's visual narrative. On the other hand, De's work expands the scope of Zomia by including the 'magic' and the spirit world of Maamimu as zones of refuge from material hardship and the complex engagement with the governmental machinery. While it is uncertain if the Lisu of the Namdapha can be linked in terms of life choices to the Lisu elsewhere, Scott's argument about the deliberate absence of history or clan genealogy among Thai Lisu<sup>53</sup> is illuminating in thinking about belonging to Maamimu as a way to escape the history and the present, without severing material ties. This begs the question if the Lisus in De's works are meant to be the people who inhabit the human world or if they are the Musi from the parallel world who stand in for the Lisus of the extra-photographic material world. What if Musi from the *Imagined Homeland* promise a zone of freedom that is materially unattainable and creates affective and performative sites of belonging that only exist in photographs, pretty much like family albums?

<sup>53</sup> Scott. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed*. p. 235.



## In Conclusion

In concluding this article, let me briefly reflect on the exhibitionary life of *Imagined Homeland* to think about the kind of family album it would make and the stories of belonging it would tell within and outside the Lisu social sphere. De would carry back in his subsequent trips multiple prints of photographs made during his previous trips to the Lisu villages. He would also carry numerous copies of his published photo stories. However, the postcard-sized prints he would take back as a gesture of gratitude are the ones that depicted their material reality and portraits of individuals. He would not take any print of his conceptual works, which the people could see only in copies of published photo essays. In other words, prints from *Imagined Homeland* would not make it back to the community due to the challenging logistics of carrying them to the villages.

This practice of taking back images locates De in the long lineage of globally practised socially committed documentary ethics, where photographers organised community exhibitions and handed prints over to the people featured in specific photographs. They often emphasised collaboration and trust as foundational to long-term documentary projects that depicted victims of 'slow violence', especially when they belonged to marginalised communities. For example, Magnum photojournalist Eugene Smith took back photographs of victims of the Minamata Event—the prolonged industrial mercury poisoning in Japan between 1908 and 1968 with enduring effects till date—during his subsequent trips to the Japanese coastal town of Minamata. Similar is the case for numerous Indian photographers who conducted long-term documentation on urban poverty or other forms of violence.

Further, these victimised communities at the margins often lack the means to afford photographic prints, both in terms of money and access. Even in the smartphone age, access to photography and digital technology is not universal, particularly in the Global South. Prints brought by photographers often become precious objects and prized possessions. Conventional and dominant styles of family photography are not essential for some of these photographs to enter the discourse of family and domesticity. The genre doesn't matter because, in most cases, these prints are about belonging in photography, owning the prints, celebrating and memorialising the individual/s depicted. De's prints would have similar currency for many Lisu, for many of whom photographs are a luxury in the face of the 'slow violence' that conditions their material reality. As De narrates, some of them have a smartphone and even digital cameras, but for the majority, photographs are certainly not part of their everyday. As he further confirms, many of his portraits of people or candid shots of village weddings become Lisu family possessions for their commemorative value. This is a narrative on the one hand of how the Lisu belong to photographs and on the other hand, how the photographs might belong to Lisu families. However, the series *Imagined Homeland* is not the site of this dialogue between the artist, his works and the community. The series exists somewhat independently of its affective ties with the community.

Outside the community, *Imagined Homeland* is an award-winning body of work that circulated widely through galleries, photo festivals, biennales and print publications, with a very different set of publics than the Lisu. The publics of the gallery would encounter a very different set of photographs printed in larger dimensions than the prints the Lisu would see in their villages. The location and format condition their reception and continued life in the art market. De remains conscious of the exotic value the series might hold for most viewers because of popular discourses about tribal communities, especially from Northeast India. In the artist's talks, he tries to reach out to his audience on how to look at the Lisu lives beyond the exotica. His efforts to make the audience sensitive to the material realities of the Lisu are indicative of his interpretation of belongingness in the Lisu lives within and beyond the frame.

For De, the prints on the gallery walls are only intermediaries between the Lisu and the world beyond their villages. His approach to his audience is similar to what film theorist Fr. Gaston Roberge SJ wrote on a 1970s–80s long-term documentary project on the urban poor that he helped organise. According to Roberge, those photographs were meant to sensitise the middle class about the precarity and resilience of the poor. He wrote, '[w]e do not offer these images to arouse pity. We offer them as one would open a family album with trust in [the] onlooker's readiness to understand others.'<sup>54</sup> Despite the absence of the rhetoric of the 'family album', De's sentiments echo the objectives of social documentary practices.

However, there is a fundamental difference between the visual styles of documentation employed by De in *Imagined Homeland* and social documentary photographers like Eugene Smith or Roberge's team. The former worked with conceptual photography, while the latter practised documentary realism. Unlike realism, conceptual photography is at liberty to not allude to material specificities, provoking the audience to see them independently of the artistic intentionality about the material world of the referents outside the photograph. This stylistic difference accounts for how De's work expands the scope of family photographs/albums beyond the verisimilitude offered by either snapshots in family albums or documentary realism within discourses of social change. As a result, the surface of the prints doesn't simply remain an intermediary between the audience and the referents, as De had asserted. The surface itself becomes the space where the referents belong. It is the economy of the image that creates the possibilities of novel ways of human and non-human belongings. In doing so, *Imagined Homeland* helps introspect the accepted categories of family, kinship, domesticity and competing claims about them by making the idea of belonging an operative thread. *Imagined Homeland* emerges as an art of that belonging.

<sup>54</sup> Roberge, Gaston. 1980. 'Shaheed Minar'. *Quarterly Journal of National Centre for Performing Arts*. Vol. IX. No. 2. June.