

IN INDIA'S LAST ELECTRIFIED VILLAGE

'Around 5-6 pm, bulb came on... That night, not one of us slept...'

JIMMY LEIVON

LEISANG (MANIPUR), MAY 5

AT 10 PM on April 28, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it official, tweeting that Leisang in Manipur had become "powered and empowered" as the last village in India to be electrified.

The news of its fame reached Leisang a couple of days later.

Village secretary Lalboi Haokip, 33, in whose house the first bulb of Leisang lit up, "between 5-6 pm on April 27", is surprised at the sight of a "stranger". Despite being located just 77 km from state capital Imphal, the village is up a 3-km foot climb, and not used to visitors. "We have been taken aback by so many queries about our village. I went to the nearest town and people called me up several times," he says. Laughing, Lalboi adds, "The sudden interest has left our elders worried."

The Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Senapati district, Athem Muivah, is as surprised. Told Leisang is in the district, he says he has no idea where it is and that the Kangpokpi DC might know. Later, it turns out, Leisang used to be under Senapati district, but is now part of Kangpokpi. Another reason the officials are confused is that the village was established in 1996 as Leisang Khonomphai (or L Khonomphai) and only later came to know as Leisang.



A villager switches on the light at home. Jimmy Leivon

When they flicked the switch and electricity came on, Lalboi says, it was a dream come true. Speaking on behalf of the villagers who surround him, the carpenter says it had been "painful" to see neighbouring villages get power as they reeled in the dark. Leisang would manage with solar lights, or through power sourced from dynamos, brought across the border from Myanmar.

"That night, none of us, including the children, slept due to the excitement. The children kept running around in the fields. We are very thankful to the government. No words can express how happy we are," Lalboi says.

The Power Department had

been working to install the required equipment for a week leading up to April 27, he adds. There was a power cut from April 30 evening to May 1 morning, he says, but electricity has been "almost 24X7". They don't mind the interruption, the villagers add.

Satlen Haokip describes having electricity in his home as "waking up from a nightmare". Since he couldn't afford solar lighting either, the 47-year-old had only kerosene lamps and candles to get by. A jhum cultivator, like most others in Leisang, he makes around Rs 6,000 a month selling the seasonal vegetables he grows on his little patch of land cleared from the nearby hills. Half of that would go into kerosene and candles, he adds.

Kerosene is a better option as a litre of it, costing Rs 60-70 right now, lasts a week while a Rs 20 candle packet gets over in a night, Salten explains.

For Leisang, the electricity is also a rare sign of "the government" reaching them. The nearest motorable road, public health centre and school are 4 km away. Asked if they are beneficiaries of any other government scheme, Lalboi's wife Chongpi butts in, laughing, "The light so far is the only scheme from the government."

Of its 70 residents, only 10 have election I-cards. Villagers say their applications are pending.

The Hmar Students' Association (HSA) has ques-

tioned the claim of the government of having achieved "full electrification" with Leisang. "What does the Prime Minister and his administration think they are achieving with all these fabricated alternative facts remains a mystery. Who are they trying to fool?" it said in a statement.

The HSA also claimed that more than 50 villages in Pherzawl and Dima Hasao districts of Manipur each, and more than 30 villages in the Barak Valley area of Cachar district of Assam were yet to be electrified.

The Manipur State Power Distribution Company (MSPDCL) data puts the total number of 'electrified' villages in Manipur at the end of March at 2,486 out of 2,582. As per that update, the remaining were to be 'electrified' in collaboration with the Manipur Renewable Energy Development Agency, under the Deendayal Upadhaya Gram Jyoti Yojana scheme, by April.

Leisang, meanwhile, is hoping that the fame brought by the PM's "powered and empowered" tweet means it won't fall off the map again.

It is also getting ready for other changes with electricity, in how their children study, and from access to technology like computers and satellite TV.

Satlen says he knows exactly what he will do next. "Now that I can save money on kerosene and candles, I will buy a television set," he grins.