

Post-Zhabdrung Era Migration of Kurmedkha Speaking People in Eastern Bhutan *

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Abstract

Chocha Ngacha dialect, spoken by about 20,000 people, is closely related to Dzongkha and Chökey. It was Lam Nado who named it Kurmedkha. Lhuntse and Mongar dzongkhags have the original settlement areas of Kurmedkha speaking ancestors. Some families of this vernacular group migrated to Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse in the post-Zhabdrung era. The process of family migrations started in the 17th century and ended in the early part of the 20th century. This paper attempts to trace the origins of Kurmedkha speaking population who have settled in these two dzongkhags.

Kurmedkha speakers and their population geography

Bhutanese administrators and historians used the north-south Pelela mountain ridge as a convenient geographical reference point to divide the country into eastern and western regions. Under this broad division, *Ngalop* came to be regarded as inhabitants west of Pelela, and those living east of Pelela are known as *Sharchop*.¹ The terms *Sharchop* and *Ngalop* naturally evolved out of common usage, mostly among

* This paper is an outcome of my field visits to Eastern Bhutan in 2003.

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¹ From the time of the first Zhabdrung until recent years, people of Kheng (Zhemgang), Mangdi (Trongsa), Bumthang, Kurtoe (Lhuntse), Zhongar (Mongar), Trashigang, Trashi Yangtse and Dungsam (Pema Gatshel and Samdrup Jongkhar) who live in east of Pelela were all known as *Sharchop*, meaning the Easterners or Eastern Bhutanese. However, word has lost its original meaning today. The natives who speak Tshanglakha or Tsengmikha are now called *Sharchop*.

official circles after the 17th century. In the beginning Sharchop was a collective name for people living in regions east of Pelela known as *Sharchog Khorlo Tsibgye* (Eight Spokes of the Wheel of Eastern Bhutan).² These regions were under the administrative jurisdiction of the Trongsa Penlop with Trongsa Dzong as the provincial headquarter. Today, Sharchop may mean either the natives who speak Tshanglakha³ or the population of Eastern dzongkhags officially represented by Mongar, Lhuntse, Trashi Yangtse, Trashigang, Pema Gatshel and Samdrup Jongkhar.

Sharchops are a medley of people.⁴ Out of no less than 19 different dialects in Bhutan, as many as 16 dialects are spoken in these dzongkhags.

District	Dialect
Lhuntse	Kurmedkha, Zhakat, Zalakha, Tshanglakha
Mongar	Khengkha, Kurmedkha, Chalipikha, Bumthangkha, Gondupikha, Tshanglakha
Trashigang	Khengkha, Tshanglakha, Brahmi, Brokat, Dakpakha, Kurmedkha
Trashhi Yangtse	Khengkha, Zalakha, Tshanglakha, Kurmedkha, Dakpakha

Within these major linguistic groups, there are clear and distinct local variations. Bose put forward a hypothesis for the evolution of different dialects, customs, beliefs and other

² 1. Mangdi Tshozhi, 2. Khengrig Namsum, 3. Bumthang Dezhi, 4. Kuri Dozhi, 5. Zhongar Tshogduen, 6. Trashigang Tshogye, 7. Yangtse Tsho-nga, and 8. Dungsam Dosum.

³ Tshanglakha literally means 'language of the Hindu God Brahma'. It is a Tibeto-Burman language, which originally had only traces of links with Dzongkha, Chökey or Khengkha but it now has borrowed and incorporated many Dzongkha and Chökey vocabularies. It is spoken in Trashigang, Pema Gatshel, Samdrup Jongkhar, Mongar and Trashhi Yangtse, as well as in Pemakoe and Tawang areas in Arunachal Pradesh.

⁴ Michael Aris (1979) *Bhutan: The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*, Warmister: Aris and Philips.

ethnic characteristics among the hill tribes, and writes,

The environment has been largely responsible for the multiplicity of languages and customs in the hill tribes, which do not have easy communication with neighbouring areas. The geography helped to shape and retain distinct local identity in each valley and area, and lack of transport and communication facilities have kept the hill tribes separate from each other for many centuries.⁵

According to Aris,⁶ “linguistic variations of the same mother tongue from valley to valley in the Himalayas” derived ultimately from geographic fragmentation. In Bhutan, geographic fragmentation was mainly caused by large rivers and high mountains that acted as communication barriers between different communities settled in different valleys. The two views of scholars mentioned above provide partial explanation about the evolution of culture in the trans-Himalayas and evolution of linguistic variations among a medley of people living east of Pelela.

After the unification, Bhutan was administratively divided into three provinces. Eastern Province east of Pelela, including Kheng and Dungsam, was ruled by Trongsa Penlop, Western Province was under Paro Penlop while Southern Province was looked after by Daga Penlop. Bhutan's theocratic policies and practices of dividing the country into three administrative provinces and filling the posts of provincial governors had practically disappeared with the advent of modernization. However, the old zoning concept still continues, and serves official purpose albeit in a different context.

Eastern Bhutan is comprised of a medley of people where communities speak many dialects, which are unintelligible to one another in many cases. Because of ethnic groups

⁵ Bose, M. L. (1979) *British Policy in the North-East Frontier Agency*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

⁶ Aris, Michael (1979).

belonging to diverse origins, Eastern Bhutanese have drawn the attention of a few native and foreign linguists and cultural anthropologists. However, this study is about the migration of a distinct ethnic group of Eastern Bhutanese who speak Medpa⁷ or Kurmedkha.⁸ The study also provides a sketch and brief references to other Eastern Bhutanese people in so far as it is related to this study by ethnicity, origin, geography and culture as well as in terms of migration routes followed in the past.

Today, there are Kurmedkha speaking communities in Lhuntse, Mongar, Trashigang and Trashy Yangtse. No definitive studies had been conducted to establish their origins. Can they be regarded as one of Bhutan's mainstream prehistoric migrants? The physical evidences gleaned from their settlement patterns indicate that the Kurichhu valley is undoubtedly the original homelands of Kurmedkha speaking population. These people are found on both sides of the lower Kurichhu valley. Their homelands start from Menbi and Minjei gewogs in Kurtoe⁹ and stretch to gewogs of Tsamang, Tsakaling, Thridangbi and Saleng in Mongar. No Medpas settlements are found in the upper Kurichhu valley beyond Lhuntse.

The archaic name for Kurtoe, as the writings of Terton Pemalingpa suggest, is Kurilung. After the unification of

⁷ *Medpa* literally means inhabitants of the lower valley. In Kurtoe, the inhabitants who have settled in the lower Kurichhu valley are called Medpas. The inhabitants who have settled in the upper Kurichhu valley are called Todpas. Medpas speak Kurmedkha while Todpas speak dialects of Zhakat and Zalakha which are closer to Khengkha and Bumthangkha. Dakpakha is said to be a sister dialect of Zalakha/Khomapikha.

⁸ Kurmedkha is the dialect spoken by inhabitants of the lower Kurichhu valley. Sometimes it is called as Tsamangkha or Chocha Ngacha. It is a sister dialect of Dzongkha and Chökey.

⁹ Kurtoe and Lhuntse are interchangeably used.

Bhutan, Lhuntse district was officially known as Kuridozhi.¹⁰ It was divided into four, and sometimes, five major sub-divisions called Dungwog:¹¹ Tangmachu, Khoma, Lingjey (Minjey), Kiling (Gangzur), and Kurtoe. Before modernization, Tangmachu comprised of Menbi, Medtsho and Jarey gewogs. Tsenkhar was under Lingjey Dungwog. Each dungwog was under a *dungpa* (sub-divisional officer).

There are two distinct linguistic groups in the Kurichhu valley in Lhuntse. *Todpa*, inhabitants of the upper Kurichhu, consists of two major linguistic groups. The groups that have settled in Kurtoe and Gangzur gewogs speak Zhakat, while the group that had settled in Khoma valley speaks Zalakha or Sharpakha. Both these dialects have a close linguistic affinity with Khengkha and Bumthangkha. The inhabitants of the lower Kurichhu valley known as *Medpa* are found in Menbi, Minjey, Medtsho, Jarey and Tsenkhar gewogs. They speak Kurmedkha, a dialect similar to Dzongkha, Chökey and Brokat.

The Kurichhu originates in Tibet and enters Bhutan from its northeast border. It then flows down and dissects Lhuntse into two unequal parts, merges with the Drangmechhu and finally drains into the Manas.

Majority of the Kurmedkha speaking population is found in the middle Kurichhu valley of both Lhuntse and Mongar. Their settlement niches in Kurtoe originate at Menbi and continue through Medtsho and Jarey gewogs, and ends with Tsamang, Thridangbi and Saleng in Mongar on the western side. On eastern side of the Kurichhu, the settlement boundary of this linguistic group starts from Minjey and Tsenkhar gewogs in Lhuntse, and ends in Tsakaling and Tormashong in Mongar.

¹⁰ The four sub-divisions of the Kurichhu valley or Kurtoe each administered by a sub-divisional officer, *dungpa*.

¹¹ The sub-division of a dzongkhag administered by *dungpas*.

Kurmedkha speakers are further found in Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse, but in isolated enclaves (see Table II). In Trashigang, they are found in gewogs of Bartsham, Shongphu and Bidung; Tomiyangtse, Khamdang, Bumdeling and Yangtse gewogs in Trashi Yangtse; villages of Tsamang, Banjar, Ganglaping, Saling, Thridangbi, Tormashong and Tsakaling in Mongar. In Bartsham Gewog, out of 15 settlements, people of Zongthung, Ngalung, Muktangkhar and Majong speak Kurmedkha. The rest (Thumling, Mentsang, Trashang, Pangthang, Nangkhar, Yangkhar, Jamung, Yingom, Pumung, Kephung and Bainangkhar) speak Tshanglakha. The settlers in Majong migrated from Tsamang. However, most migrated from Minjey in Lhuntse about four or five generations ago.

In Tongphu Zhangtshen Gewog, 100 percent of the population in 13 out of 16 settlements speaks Kurmedkha. They are at Tsangmadung, Thrichu Gonpa, Marzhing, Taphug, Tsangadung, Gorazhing, Tokaphu, Kunzangling, Kemo, Bagla, Shagpa, Rongkazhing and Menchu, while only settlers at Pang, Lhaozhing and Memung have mixed populations of Khengkha and Kurmedkha speakers. People of Wachan, Rabti and Gangkha in Yangtse Gewog have a mix of Kurmedkha and Dakpakha speakers. In Lychen areas, settlements in Shadi, Dalmung, Dretenmo and Zongkey speak Zalakha. Also in this same area, people in Tongseng, Sisengang and Sisengkakpa speak Dakpakha, while Kurmedkha is spoken in Wanglo, Lychen and Shashing near Dongla. People in Wanglo trace their ancestry to Wambur. The rest of the settlements like Phurdung, Bimkha, Gezang, Baney and Baleng speak Zalakha except at Disa where Tsengmikha is spoken. There are also a few Kurmedkha speaking families in Bumdeling Gewog like Omanang (migrated from Tsamang) and at Yangtse proper. In Khamdang Gewog, people of Kencholing, Sasarpangpa, Shagshingma and Shagshing Gonpa speak 100 percent Kurmedkha, while Khamdang, Shali and Zangpozor have a mix of Tshanglakha and Kurmedkha speakers; Karma Zom

and Jangphu have a mixed population of Tshanglakha, Kurmedkha or Dakpakha speakers. Lengkhar and Dimbu have a population of 100 percent Dakpakha speakers. The settlements at Pam, Sharzam, Nangkhar, Dragtsa, Seb, Badeb, Tsengkharla and Zangpozor are all Tshanglakha speakers.

In brief, it is widely believed that ancestors of Kurmedkha speakers in Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse migrated from Kurtoe. People interviewed from Kencholing and Bartsham said their ancestors had migrated from Kurtoe to these areas about four or five generations ago. Some families in Yangtse Gewog had migrated from Kurtoe Wambur. At least one family in Yangtse Omanang had migrated from Jarey Gewog.¹² Most people including those at Galing and Kencholing claim their origins from Kurtoe Minjey. Therefore, it may be maintained that most Kurmedkha speaking groups now found in Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse can be regarded as descendants of post-17th century migrants, although most of them are ignorant of their historical origins. There are possibilities that these processes of migration on a small or large scale had begun dating back to the medieval age, if not before.

Pre-historic migration in Eastern Bhutan

The Eastern Himalayas provided sanctuaries for political refugees and others who were persecuted at home for reasons of caste, creed and dogma, and for marginalized people who were socially, culturally, economically and politically displaced from their far away homes, mainly from the north, south, east and southeast during pre-historic times.

Bhutan received its share of successive waves of pre-historic and medieval migrants. Changes in global climatic systems, physical and socio-cultural environments as well as perceived economic opportunities in other lands prompted cross-border

¹² This seems to be a recent one.

migrations. Bhutan's fertile valleys, forests, congenial climate and sheer physical isolation had always attracted its share of migrants from outside.

The physical environments typified by sandy deserts and extreme cold climates of a large part of Central Asia had proved hostile to human habitation. During the last Great Ice Age, with glacial advances from the north, it was possible that human survivors mainly from the peripheries of Central Asia had migrated south. Some had settled in the Himalayas where climates and physical environments were tolerable for human habitation.

George Van Driem¹³ put forth a hypothesis that “some of Bhutan's languages were already spoken in the country long before” the Old English entered the British Isles (before 3rd to 4th century A.D.) According to him “languages tell story of our past... about the saga of great migrations of mankind in and around the greater Himalayan region in prehistoric times”.¹⁴ Such an assumption indicates the existence of at least three major languages in Bhutan right from the dawn of the first millennium: Khengkha, Bumthangkha, some Bodkat vernacular groups and Tshanglakha, and each had established its distinctive root in the Bhutanese cultural soil.

Zhakat and Zalakha dialects are close to Khengkha and Bumthangkha vernacular groups spoken in central Bhutan. The first is exclusively spoken in Kurtoe, and the second in Khoma in Kurtoe and Bomdeling in Trashhi Yangtse. Among the Eastern Bhutanese, the dialects somewhat close to Dzongkha and Chökey¹⁵ are Brokat and Kurmedkha. The first is spoken in Merak and Sakteng, and the second in Lhuntse, Mongar, Trashigang and Trashhi Yangtse.

¹³ *Kuensel*, Vol.VIII, No.38, September 27, 2003.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ This is a classical version of Dzongkha. Everything was written in Chökey in Bhutan until the 1960s.

Tshanglakha has no sub-linguistic groups within Bhutan. Dzongkha Development Authority (DDA) has classified this dialect as an independent vernacular. It is spoken in Pema Gatshel (100 percent), Samdrup Jongkhar, Trashigang, Trashigang Yangtse and Mongar. There are Tshangla or Tsengmi communities settled in Gangzur and Bangtsho areas in Kurtoe. These people are descendents of migrants from Dungsam and Mongar.

Until recently, there is no written record on dialects spoken by people in different parts of Bhutan. A few British who visited Bhutan, however, left some notes on Toktop¹⁶ and Lhopa¹⁷ in Western Bhutan. Most literate Bhutanese came to know about 20 dialects only recently from DDA's linguistic survey. There are fewer than 1000 people who speak some of these dialects.

With modernization and pressure from dominant groups, where emphasis is on the preservation of a few well-known aspects of culture and language, this rare linguistic heritage, like Monkha and Lhokha, is barely kept alive by a few speakers. They lack government patronage and support. For thousands of years it was community isolation and non-interference by outside groups that had helped minority groups to preserve their own distinct identity and language.¹⁸ Therefore, without sustained intervention and non-partisan government efforts to preserve the past heritage, minority of ancient native languages and cultural practices could disappear in a few decades.

Considering settlement size, proximity of locations, territorial extents and language affinity, it can be discerned that the ancestors of Zhakat speaking groups most probably migrated from Bumthang to Kurilung. The same argument may be sounded for people of Khoma Gewog, who speak Zalakha, and

¹⁶ Ethnic group living in Chukha.

¹⁷ The Lhopa are tribes found in Dorokha areas in Samtse.

¹⁸ George van Driem, *Kuensel*, 2003

for Tshanglakha speaking people. The migration routes of people of Khoma can be traced back to Kholongtod in Trashi Yangtse. Tshangla community in Mongar had migrated from east or southeast Bhutan. Tshangla speaking populations had originally settled in Samdrup Jongkhar, Pema Gatshel, Trashigang, Trashi Yangtse and Mongar. Outside of Bhutan, small populations of Tshangla settlers are reported in Pemakoe region in Arunachal Pradesh and Shillong in Meghalaya. They are believed to have migrated from Bhutan. Although some Tshanglakha speakers are found outside of Bhutan, some scholars believe Bhutan to be the original homeland of Tshanglakha speaking linguistic group.

East of Pelela, there are two other predominant vernacular groups: Tshanglakha and Khengkha. These two communities stand out prominently in terms of settlement niches, with about 35 percent of country's human settlement, having approximately 17 percent of the total population. No doubt, their settlements in Bhutan date back to prehistoric times.

If we base our hypothesis on the size of settlement niches in Eastern Bhutan occupied by Kurmedkha and Zalakha speaking linguistic groups today, they probably represented later waves of pre-historic migration. The clues read from migration and settlement patterns suggest that the first vernacular group to settle in the Kurichhu valley was Kurmedkha ethnic groups. The original settlement niches of Kurmedkha speaking population comprised of warmer belt of the middle and lower Kurichhu valley. Of the other linguistic groups, Zhakat speakers, or Todpa as they are called, had all settled to the west of upper Kurichhu, while Zalakha speakers had all settled in Khoma Gewog along the the upper and north-eastern side of the Kurichhu.

Ecological evidence further points to the events of pre-historic migration. Prehistoric settlements in Bhutan occurred one after another within a short time gap. It prompted competition for space and colonization of virgin forested

lands, which were cleared for agriculture and human habitation. The different vernacular groups occupied the valleys in Eastern Bhutan at different points of time in history. The earlier groups closely followed the later groups, but from different directions. However, none of the groups had sufficient time gap to monopolize colonization and occupation of the whole of the territory of Eastern Bhutan. As in most parts of the Himalayas, and as the geography of settlement patterns indicate, it can be likewise argued that pre-historic migration events in Bhutan did not favour only one particular group.

For ecological reasons cited above, the expansion of Tshangla settlement had not crossed Tormashong in Mongar and Khamdang in Trashigang, and beyond Kurichhu. Migrants from Bumthang, Zhemgang and Kholongtong (Trashigang) had arrived in the upper Kurichhu probably after Kurmedkha groups had settled in the middle and lower Kurichhu valley. This argument is supported by the fact that as of today, other linguistic groups have enclosed the homeland of Kurmedkha population in the middle and lower Kurichhu valleys. These theories have been put forward to fill and explain the knowledge gaps in settlement history.

Kurmedkha shares a close linguistic affinity with Dzongkha, Chokhat, Tibetan and Brokat. Interestingly, some studies today point out that dialects spoken by all or few people of the districts of Lahul, Spiti, Kinnaur and Kullu in Himachal Pradesh in India are said to be close relatives of Kurmedkha and Dzongkha.¹⁹ Such close similarities in languages spoken by people now scattered in the Himalayas, therefore, point to a distant common ancestry of a shared ethnicity and perhaps indicate similar tribal origins in the distant past.

Chokhat, Kurmedkha and Dzongkha are closely related. Kurmedkha is even closer to Chökey than Dzongkha. Does

¹⁹ *Kuensel*, July 5, 2003.

this mean that looking at the same basic and sub-stratum of these three sister languages shared by people from parts of Central Asia down to the borders of the northern reaches of the Himalayas, these areas were once, in the distant past, before Tibet emerged as a distinct country, had been inhabited and settled by people who spoke the same dialect, possibly one of these three? Does this mean that people who speak Kurmedkha and Dzongkha in Bhutan and other people of the Himalayas were generations who remained outside the direct influence of cultural integration of the Tibetan Empire founded towards the start of the medieval age (3rd to 4th century A.D.)?

The close similarities of these sister Himalayan dialects open up many soul searching questions for further investigation. If no speakers of Dzongkha and Kurmedkha are found outside Bhutan, then it can be argued that these two languages can be regarded as the past relics of a distant common language once widely spoken in some pockets of the lower parts of Central Asia down to northern reaches of the Himalaya before Tibet started to emerge as a country beginning with 3rd century A.D. from the time of King Lhathothori.²⁰

Study Design to Determine Origin of Kurmedkha Migrants

This study attempt to trace the origins of Kurmedkha speaking families and communities settled in Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse. It attempts to provide the missing information mainly through access to field data and primary sources by visiting places, ruin sites and settlements in Kurtoe from where whole families had migrated to Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse. I have interviewed a few elderly people from both the places of origin and places where the whole families had migrated before the 20th century, and by accounting for similarities and variations in terms of dialect, customs, belief systems, and social and cultural practices.

²⁰ The first of five ancestors of Songtsan Gampo, who ruled Tibet in the 4th century A.D. Buddhism first came to Tibet during his reign.

The main research question took account of similarities and differences in dialects spoken by populations from both sides. It paid a close attention to details of certain key words with same accents, phonetics, orthography, and structures in dialects spoken in the places of origin and where people had migrated.

The study is primarily based two main assumptions: (a) dialects are characterized by local variations and are unique to certain localities; (b) not more than two centuries had lapsed since many families from Kurtoe had migrated to Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse. The assumptions, however, rested on the hope of arriving at clues to locate places of origin of these migrants by identifying maximum tallies in selected keywords in the dialects spoken on both sides. Further, it was hoped that the results of comparative study of local beliefs, customs, farming details and socio-cultural practices would supplement this field of enquiry. In fact, the study design and plan incorporated both these strategies.

Reasons for Migration

Migration is defined as a movement from one place to another that results in a permanent change of residence. Migration may be a symptom of change. Migratory movements are a product of social, cultural, economic, political and physical circumstances individual and societies find themselves. The causes of migration are varied and complementary, and involve push and pull factors both at origin and destination of migrants.

Migration may be voluntary or involuntary. Human migration always involves efforts, planning and expense, and motives include physical, economic, social and political factors. While most modern rural to urban migration could be explained through perceived economic opportunities such as better employment prospects, there is a growing evidence to suggest that ancient population migration across the globe occurred through multiplicity of factors: property eviction, poverty and

landlessness, demolition of dwelling space by invaders, wars, famines, epidemic, prosecutions, tax burdens, political and social upheavals, advent of ice age and climate change, etc. Mobility of such nature and long distance movement of people can be conceived as a form of human adaptation in response to stress or changes in the environment.

In Eastern Bhutan, many families migrated between the 17th and early 20th century. Migration occurred in all directions. Tshangla communities who have settled in Thimnyung (Menbi Gewog), Ongar (Medtsho Gewog), Rodpa, Myimshong, Lingabi, Somshing, Magar, Samling and Tongling (Gangzur Gewog) in Lhuntse had migrated mostly from Pema Gatshel and a few from Chaskhar and Ngatshang in Mongar.

Tshangla people who have settled in Ongar in Medtsho Gewog had fled from fear of the Duar Wars of 1864-65²¹ and possible invasions of the country's hinterlands by the British India during Jigme Namgyel's time. The panic-stricken families fled from as far as from Dungsam and Zhongar areas. They heard of a hidden land (beyul) called Pagsamlung somewhere near the northern border, and wanted to enter and settle there but it could not be located. However, they settled in Ongar in Kurtoe and did not return home. The news of outbreaks of the Duar Wars compelled a multitude of families in Eastern Bhutan to cross the border and flee to Tibet. Some of these families permanently had settled in Phagri, Shar Bomdila and Pemakoe.

Local people still recount such poignant narratives of many families and sometimes of whole villages and communities from Kurtoe who had migrated to Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse in the post-Zhabdrung era. Here efforts were made to

²¹ The duars are a continuous strip of plains stretching from Assam to West Bengal. There were 18 such *duars*. These *duars* were annexed by the British Government in India from Bhutan and it is now a part of the Indian Sub-continent.

find reasons for a large-scale family migration from Kurtoe to these two districts.

Migration had occurred from specific localities. Families living in remote places away from internal trade routes from areas like Gangzur and Khoma probably did not migrate, except for Kelling in Kurtoe where it is difficult to attribute reasons for emigration to taxation. The ruins of settlements in other parts of Kurtoe clearly provide the best physical evidence of migration of people. Tachubrakpa and Langkharpa in Medtsho Gewog, and Kupineysa and Wambur in Minjey Gewog in Lhuntse can be cited as examples.

Settlement ruins are sighted in Minjey, Medtsho and Jarey gewogs. In Minjey (formerly Lingjey) areas, ruins of settlement are located at Wangzhing, Langkharpokpa, Khardung Barwa in Kupineysa and Wambur Barwa. These ancient monuments that still stand of course remind us of a bygone era and provide insights into past historical events, particularly about whole families, who had later migrated to Trashigang and Tashi Yangtse.

Interestingly, today there are a few descendants who are able to make vague historical connections from where their forefathers had migrated. Dasho Tenzin Dorji of Galing, Trashigang, is one of them. He traces his ancestral homeland to a wealthy family in Langkharpokpa in Kurtoe. The ruin at Langkharpokpa at Kupineysa under Minjey Gewog is strategically located on a small hillock, facing the Kurichhu. It is located by the side of the ancient trade route, locally called *zhunglam* or *dolam*, in Kurtoe leading to Rondungla. There is another settlement ruins in Medtsho Gewog known as Langkhar, and below it is the ruins of Tachubrak settlement strategically located at the side of Tachubrak River. The ancient village of Langkhar is also located at the side of the same trade route linking Bumthang via Rondungla pass. Thus one most widely used ancient trade route in Kurtoe stretched from Tsenkhar and Wambur, passed

Langkharpokpa, Minjey village, Tangmachu, Langkhar and Ongar in Medtsho to Rodungla. Also one trade route from Yangtse through nine Dongla mountains passed through Minjey and merged at Tangmachu leading to Langkhar in Medtsho Gewog, Lhuntse and Rondungla.

Interviews with old people suggested that these settlements lying in ruins are once homelands of families who migrated to Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse. Their migration was caused by burden of heavy taxation mostly on *threpa*, 'tax bearing families and households'. Migration of this type motivated by taxation, of course, had not occurred in other parts of Eastern Bhutan. In pre-modern Bhutan, from the time of the first Zhabdrung until 1960, *threpa*s were regarded as pillars of the country's agrarian economy.²²

Since complaints of heavy taxes that forced families to migrate had not been documented from other parts of Eastern Bhutan, attempts are made in the following to put bits and pieces of information and shreds of evidence together to arrive at answers which can be regarded as plausible and academically satisfying. From 17th century onwards, families and households in Eastern Bhutan were categorized based on the system of taxation introduced by *desi* and regional governors. Those who owned lands were called *threpa* and *zurpa*.²³ Some *zurpa* families shared tax burdens with *threpa* households in exchange for lands with permanent ownership or titles given to them. Most *zurpa* households were probably offshoots of *threpa* families. Some families earned their livelihood as servants of nobilities or worked on lands owned by the state. They were called *drapa*²⁴ and were generally

²² Threpa were the main sources of revenue to the government in pre-modern Bhutan. Most of the cultivable lands in Bhutan were concentrated in their hands.

²³ Zurpa families were offshoots of threpa families. Sometimes they were called threpa zurpas.

²⁴ Drapas formed a section of the pre-modern Bhutanese society. They were workers attached to priestly nobility and monasteries or

exempted from taxes. *Suma* or *sumapa*²⁵ were landless families, who worked on the lands owned by wealthy families with the system of shared harvests. Basically *sumapa* provided labour input to the land capital owned by rich peasants at that time. The following accounts confirm the prevalence of these social stratifications and taxation system in Bhutan in the post-Zhabdrung era:

Bhutanese society was divided into three classes: priests, government officers and servants, people who worked on the land, landholders and husbandmen. Officers received no salaries and lived on the proceeds of presents and patronage. Taxes [this refers to western Bhutan] were very moderate, each family being rated according to their means and paying in kind.²⁶

Lopen Pemala writes:

From the beginning some families of the Bhutanese public called 'zurpas' were exempted from payment of taxes. They possessed tax exemption certificates of the Government. In some villages, the entire 'threpa' families had died out. The burden of payment of taxes of these extinct 'threpa' families had to be borne by the entire village community, generation after generation, for several decades. The second King who observed this discriminatory tax anomaly had put an end to this practice. Those 'zurpas' who for many decades and centuries did not support the government in terms of contributions of state taxes were put in the place of extinct 'threpa' families as 'threpa substitute'. The taxes in general including local fodder and timber tax were considerably reduced. The second King's far-reaching tax reforms had also put an end to the mandatory tradition of owners having to contribute to the government every young male horse born. Instead, the King granted a horse to all small families with no

worked on the land estates owned by the government.

²⁵ Sumapa were landless peasants, who worked on the lands owned by rich families. In return they had to give a part of the harvests to their landlords.

²⁶ Bogle, quoted in Peter Collister (1987) *Bhutan and the British*. London: Serindia Publications.

or fewer members so that they were relieved of the burden of labour tax, which included transporting loads which belonged to the government.²⁷

It appears there was no uniformity in taxation in the country. From the previous accounts we get glimpses of regional and local variations in taxes. In the 1950s there were four *threpas* in Thridangbi, and six in Saleng. The cattle taxes levied comprised of butter. A family paid annually one *sang* of butter per cattle head regardless of whether they were cows, bulls, bullocks or calves. Even for a day-old calf the family had to pay one *sang* of butter so that for 100 cattle heads a family had to pay 100 *sang* of butter annually to the state. Besides, people of Zhongar valley had to weave and contribute textiles as the state tax.

In Minjey, *threpa* and *zurpa* households were taxed in the ratio of 2:1. Taxes were generally and mostly levied in kind: agricultural and horticultural produces (red rice, sugarcane), seven pieces of textiles - *zongcha boob*,²⁸ cattle in the form of bulls, dairy products (butter), and even dyes. For example, each *threpa* in Kupineysa and Wambur in Minjey paid 10 loads of sugarcane, one cattle each shared by three *threpa* households, one *tegpa*²⁹ (about 2½ kg) of butter for every 100 kg of butter produced annually. *Threpas* also paid currency revenues in the forms of *betang* and *tikchung*³⁰ to the state as

²⁷ Lopen Nado (1986) *The White Dragon: A Political and Religious History of Bhutan*, Bumthang: Tharpaling Monastery.

²⁸ Textiles formed a part of the government tax. A family in Kurtoe had to weave and supply textiles enough for seven men's *gho* or *kira* called *boobs*.

²⁹ A *tegpa* of butter is about four to five *sangs* equivalent to 2½ kg of butter. For small quantities for items like meat and butter, they were weighed using *sang* and *jama*. Cereals were measured with *phuta* and *dre*. These old weighing equipments are now replaced by modern equipment.

³⁰ *Betang* and *tikchung* were old coins that replaced barter trade in Bhutan. But due to shortage of coins people heavily depended on barter trade until recent times.

annual tax. It was also an accepted practice for each *threpa* household to take turns in providing food and lodging to *garpas*³¹ visiting villages.

Some of the wealth taxes collected from all parts of Eastern Bhutan finally reached Bhutan's summer capital, Punakha. In particular, sugarcane and currencies were needed for celebration of the state festival, Lhamoi Dromchoe³² in Punakha. Taxes levied in kind seem to have been based on what wealth *threpa* and *zurpa* households earned in a year, and what wealth they were supposed to generate on a per annum basis out of the amount of land and number of cattle heads they owned. Land and cattle were by far the heavily taxed items. They formed the main sources of revenue to the government. The state economy and revenues in those days were solely supported with contributions mostly in kind from the farming communities. No government servants in pre-modern Bhutan received monetised salaries, but only in the form of rations. Families were taxed in proportion to lands and cattle they owned. For families who had no manpower to cultivate lands and when taxation was based on extent of the land acreage owned, the tax load by today's standard sometimes proved beyond their capacity to endure.

Added to wealth tax was a *corvee* or labour contribution. *Threpa* and *zurpa* families carried and reached their own family tax loads at least up to their communal or district borderlands. For example, in Zhongar valley, people of Thridangbi carried official loads from Mongar to Saleng. It was then people of Saleng's turn to drop loads at Sengor. From there Sengor people transported luggage up to Ura in Bumthang. The system of practice that prevailed was for the villagers to reach the state tax loads up to next villages and community boundaries. Labour contribution to the state was

³¹ Garpas were lay government servants forming the lowest cadre of the government workforce recruited in the post-Zhabdrung era.

³² This is a government festival still annually performed by monks in Punakha and is dedicated to *Palden Lhamo*.

mandatory and a common requirement. All *threpa*, *zurpa* and *suma* households, except most *drapa* communities, were required to contribute labour to the state whenever required.

People of Kurtoe delivered official luggage including annual tax goods accumulated and delivered from other parts of Eastern Bhutan up to Bumthang. In kind taxes collected from Dungsam, Zhongar, Trashigang and Trashy Yangtse got annually accumulated at Kurtoe, waiting to be transported to Bumthang mostly via Rondungla. Obviously the burden of carrying and delivering these state taxed goods delivered from other parts of Eastern Bhutan squarely fell on shoulders of people of Kurtoe, particularly on families and households settled along the principal internal trade routes called *dolam* or *zhunglam*.³³

Some of the principal overnight halting places along the domestic trade routes or *zhunglam* in Eastern Bhutan are:

1. Trashy Yangtse to Bumthang via Kurtoe

Old Yangtse Dzong ↔ Leksipang ↔ Dongla ↔ Pimi ↔ Minjey/Khoma ↔ Tangmachu ↔ Ongar ↔ Pimi (via Rondungla) ↔ Bumthang.

2. Dungsam/Trashigang/Mongar to Bumthang via Kurtoe

Tsakaling ↔ Tsenkhar ↔ Wambur/Kupineysa/Minjey ↔ Tangmachu ↔ Ongar ↔ Pimi (via Rondungla) ↔ Bumthang.

³³ *Dolam* or *zhunglam* were trade routes. In Eastern Bhutan it stretched from Gudama or Darranga in Assam near Samdrup Jongkhar border to Kurtoe and Bumthang via Pimi and Rodungla. The most important commodity required by Bhutanese was table salt; otherwise they were self-sufficient. Most people near the northern border brought rock salt from Tibet. But when the border was sealed off in the north, all Eastern Bhutanese traveled once a year to Gudama (Samdrup Jongkhar) to get salt. The coming of the motor road, however, brought table salt and other imports to the doorsteps in almost every village. By 1980s, villagers in Eastern Bhutan stopped going to Darranga, Assam to procure salt.

3. Dungsam/Mongar to Bumthang via Ganglapong and Kharchung (Kurtoe)

Dungsam ↔ Kengkhar ↔ Tsamang ↔ Ganglapong (Mongar) ↔ Kharchung (Jarey Gewog) ↔ Pimi ↔ Bumthang.

4. Dungsam/Zhongar to Bumthang via Sengor

Kengkhar/Mongar ↔ Thridangbi/Zhongar ↔ Saleng ↔ Sengor ↔ Ura.

Unable to bear the tax obligation prevailing in Kurtoe, and perhaps not so much present to that extreme extent in other parts of Bhutan, families, and in a few cases whole villages, deserted their ancestral homelands in Kurtoe and migrated to Trashigang and Trashy Yangtse after the 17th century. The settlements in ruins abandoned by families and whole villages mostly lie along these ancient domestic trade routes.

Minjey village had four such settlements in ruins. At least three settlements lie in ruins in Kupineysa, and a few in Wambur. The ruins are today found at Langkharpokpa and Khardung in Kupineysa, and in Wambur. Some settlement ruins at Wambur have been demolished. Local people removed stones from the ruins to build Wambur primary school. In the case of Kupineysa, Budur and Wambur the whole settlements had been deserted.

The ruins of deserted settlements are also found at Tachubrak and Langkhar in Medtsho Gewog. Nyakapa and Tshangdrakpa families from Kharchung in Jarey Gewog had migrated to Trashigang or Trashy Yangtse during the same period. These settlement ruins are found along the domestic trade route from Mongar via Tsamang.

Physical evidence of settlements and geography of settlement areas support the fact that communities and villagers lying along trade routes in Kurtoe always faced pressure of carrying tax loads delivered from other districts in Eastern Bhutan; whereas their fellow citizens in other districts living far from the trade routes were generally spared of this burden.

The analyses from this study point to two assumptions. One, it can be supposed that a large scale migration of families from Kurtoe was not so much caused by reasons of wealth taxes. This form of taxation prevailed throughout the country. Two, it was the demand for a heavy labour tax not imposed uniformly on people of other districts that forced families from Kurtoe regions to desert their homelands and settle in other regions. During the rule of *desi* the labour tax was levied on a household regardless of family size and the most people in Eastern Bhutan preferred to stay together as joint families in the same house.

A question may be raised further whether there were other circumstances, which caused people to migrate to other districts. Reference had already been made how people from Dungsam region had fled from the Duar Wars of 1864-65. Another cause of migration worth mentioning here is the frequent occurrences of smallpox epidemic locally known as *miney*.³⁴ A settlement in ruins at Chakhazur, which lies below Ganglapong and above Rindibichu, a tributary that joins the Kurichhu near Autsho, was attributed to smallpox.

In this natural tragedy, only a few family members were spared. The entire Chakhazur families were decimated by an outbreak of smallpox. Today there are houses in ruins covered by vegetation. Carbon dating of tree rings here may help to establish the period during which small pox visited the area. The epidemic probably reached these areas sometime in the later part of 19th or early 20th century.

In Wambur, there are skeletons and bones mostly of children still lying piled up in a cave near the Wambur primary school. People interviewed for finding the reasons said that there

³⁴ Smallpox and plague epidemics were called *miney*. There is enough oral information on the frequent visits of smallpox in the country, but nothing is heard about plague in Bhutan, which devastated medieval Europe and Central Asia.

were no local priests to perform funeral rites and monks had to be invited from Lhuntse Dzong to cremate the dead. Most families, however, found it difficult to bear expenses to cremate so many dead bodies. So, people started a practice of leaving dead bodies to rot in caves. Wambur and Kupineysa are on the Mongar-Kurtoe trade route. Did repeated visits of smallpox cause Wambur residents to flee to the safety of Yangtse area and settle there?

Whether the cause of migration is attributed to smallpox, heavy taxation or others, people who fled from Wambur also included wealthy families. One wealthy family in Wanglo, Yangtse, claims its roots at Wambur.

When smallpox appeared, villagers generally fled to the safety of forests in the nearby high mountains. Villagers knew a few preventive methods of avoiding the disease. One was total isolation including not touching the articles that belonged to infected persons. The second was to flee to safety in the nearby forests. The third was to flee in the opposite direction of the wind. Generally people stayed and waited in the forests for the smallpox to subside.

A man in Thridangbi said generally people returned to their houses after epidemics had subsided. The small pox attacked only humans and not domestic animals. The age-old custom, however, is not to cremate but to bury dead bodies of those who had died of smallpox and leprosy, including children. People who died of these two diseases were supposed to be generally earth buried along with their used articles and belongings mainly for fear of inheriting diseases by their heirs and property users.

Physical evidence of human skeletal remains that lay piled up in Wambur today, indicated frequent occurrences and outbreaks of smallpox in Kurtoe. Some families probably fled from Kurtoe for fear of contracting smallpox. This perhaps provided a good pretext for people to flee to other lands and

escape the inherited burdens of taxation. Most people, however, only temporarily fled to safety of the mountains and generally returned to their homes once the epidemic subsided. In the case of Wambur, the epidemic was probably so devastating and shocking that even the remnants of villagers, it appears, permanently deserted their settlement, never to return home.

Smallpox raged across Mongolia, China and Tibet in 1757. In China, the epidemic was reported in the provinces along the western border. Everyone who contracted this disease died without exception. In 1853, native demographers reported more than 10,000 deaths from one area alone in China.³⁵ Smallpox was reported in Nepal in 1737 and Lhasa in 1631, 1774, 1793, 1882 and 1900.³⁶

The frequent occurrences of smallpox were reported in Bhutan beginning 17th to 1950s and are documented by British officials and native scholars. The chronological reports of small pox in Bhutan were in 1685, 1694, 1696, 1788, 1789, 1842, 1850, 1851 and 1861,³⁷ and till as late as 1906 in Eastern Bhutan as reported by John Claude White.³⁸ There are also reports in 1917 and as late as Babu Karchung and Babu Tashi's time in Zhongar valleys in the 1950s. The epidemic was finally brought under control in Bhutan through a nation-wide BCG vaccination campaign.

Bhutan was not spared from the scourge and devastating effect of this dreaded disease throughout the medieval periods during which the epidemics were reported globally. Certainly

³⁵ McNeill, William H. (1976) *Plagues and Peoples*, New York: Doubleday, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.

³⁶ Sarat Chandra Das (1902) *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, New Delhi: Manjusri Publishing House.

³⁷ Pemala, 1984, Nado, 1987, Collister, 1987

³⁸ Collister, Peter (1987) *Bhutan and the British*, London: Serindia Publications.

this epidemic could have been one contributing factor, however minor, that forced people to abandon their old settlements along trade routes frequented by traders and travelers which brought along with them diseases such as smallpox and plague, forcing local people to migrate to areas less frequented by travelers.

In brief, it was difficult to trace circumstances and causes that spurred families from Kurtoe to migrate to Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse. But migrants had never returned to their homelands, as depicted by Langkhar village in Medtsho and Langkharpokpa settlement which are now in ruins.

The older generations interviewed in Kurtoe said that the whole of Kupineysa and Budur areas in Minjey once remained deserted, without human habitation for a long time. When resettlement programmes started in the beginning of the 20th century, there were only forests everywhere. After people had migrated, the abandoned farmlands in these areas were registered as property of the Lhuntse Dratshang. In the early part of the 20th century, the government redistributed these lands to landless families of Wambur and Tsenkhar. Only four generations had passed since Kupineysa was resettled.

Some farmlands in and around Kelling in Gangzur Geog have been registered as property of the local state monk body. The government redistributed these farmlands in the last century to landless Tshangla settlers from Dungsam and Mongar, who had migrated to Kurtoe during the time of Trongsa Penlop Kuzhu Tshokey Dorji and Jigme Namgyel.

The Origin of Migrants

There were no better approaches and study designs to trace the origins of families who had migrated from Kurtoe to Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse after the 17th century than to resort to comparative study of linguistic variations and similarities of the same dialect spoken, that is, Kurmedkha. On closer analysis, local variations are observed even among

Kurmedkha speaking groups and communities. Slight Kurmedkha local variations are observed in Minje, Menbi, Medtsho, Jarey, Tsamang, Banjar etc. Table III highlights these slight linguistic variations of Kurmedkha. To find out from which parts of Kurtoe families had migrated to Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse, some cross sections of older generations were interviewed. Concurrent views of most people suggested that migration occurred mostly from areas of Minje. Table IV shows information provided by one old man in Minje about earlier migration of people from Minje and their probable settlement destinations in other districts.

I have attempted to verify the origins of Kurtoep descendants in Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse through comparative linguistic studies. Kurmedkha words listed in Table III were crosschecked with the descendants to find out whether accents and phonetics and language structures were identical or different. The sample results are as indicated below.

Table I: Results showing identical language accents

English	Minjay	Yangtse Wanglo
Maize	ashom	ashom
Beans	shaypen	shaypen
Sugarcane	kaburam	kaburam
Cock	zhapo	zhapo
Elder sister	abu/ashay	abu/ashay
Rat	matsangma	matsangma
Broom	shaksang	shaksang
Ladder	treka	treka
Lost	wadhey/wodhey	wadhey/wodhey
Wife/ woman	moisa	moisa
Dove*	duguling	tiwaling
Younger sister*	lemo	noomo
Earthworm*	nyongbula	nyongmaling
Lunch	zarwa	zara
Sparrow*	shangphaling	sangbaling
Maternal aunt	amin	amin
Pillow*	nyaka	ngaka
Saw*	sawaling	sawli
Sieve*	singsang	singma

These sample exercises yielded informative and interesting linguistic study results. The outliers (designated by * in the following tables) probably indicated that language is dynamic, as it can undergo further changes and progressive evolution if people are placed in a different physical and cultural environment and mixed ethnic setting (see Table V).

It is believed that many Kurmedkha speaking families who settled in Shagshing Gonpa (Yangtse) migrated from Kurtoe Nyalamdung. This latter village is very close to Minjey. Kurmedkha spoken by people of Nyalamdung belongs to Minjeypa group. Today Shagshing Gonpa, Saserpang, Tsenkharla and Karma Zom have mixed settlements where Zalakha, Dakpakha, Brahmi, Tshangla and Kurmedkha are spoken. With such mixed ethnic social settings, gradually over the course of many centuries or at end of this new millennium a distinct hybrid language may finally emerge. The descendants of Nyalamdung people in Shagshing Gonpa in Yangtse whose ancestors migrated from Kurtoe about five generations ago (see Table I and V) clearly show evidences of language metamorphosis and hybridization.

In the same way Lopen Nado,³⁹ a respected Bhutanese scholar and an authority on Dzongkha, was of the opinion that Chalipikha in Mongar was a hybrid dialect born from such mixed ethnic settlements. Chalipikha is believed to be a cocktail of many languages including Dzongkha, even having a few words of English and Hindu built on the stratum of the main dialect, Khengkha or Bumthangkha. If this hypothesis is proved correct, then Chali is a relatively new settlement, which emerged in the post-Zhabdrung era, created by people of diverse language groups who came to settle there from different directions. Chalipikha must be the country's newest dialect.

³⁹ Nado, Lopen (1986) *The White Dragon: A Political and Religious History of Bhutan*, Bumthang: Tharpaling Monastery.

It can be thus inferred from such analyses that forces of prolonged isolation and social contacts, changes in the physical environment, new discoveries and opportunities resulting from migration, mixed settlements and intermarriages among different breeds of people can act as the main cumulative causes of language evolution and birth of new dialects of humankind within the broader linguistic groups.

Discussion and conclusion

Some informants are of the view that migration of families from Kurtoe to Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse occurred only in the beginning of the 20th century. However, judging from the settlement ruins in Kurtoe, the process of migration actually began much earlier. It would be closer to the truth to accept the assumptions that this process of migration, partly driven by a heavy taxation, began soon after a new social order came into force in the 17th century. The older social order in Eastern Bhutan based on “clan organization”⁴⁰ had collapsed, giving way to new forms, which created new and different layers of institutional structures. This inevitably called for people to gradually adjust and adapt to changes in the new systems and environment.

A new concept of society, polity and hierarchy among people with common goals, objectives and interests, and with some sense of civic rights, duties, obligations and responsibilities towards fellow citizens and the nation state was introduced during the rule of *desis*. The old boundaries got shifted, dissolved, merged and re-organized.

⁴⁰ Aris, Michael (1979).

Migration of Kurmedkha Speaking People

Table II: Gewogs in Eastern Bhutan where Kurmedkha is spoken

District	Gewogs	Remarks
Lhuntse	Menbi	70 percent approximately
	Minjey	100 percent
	Tsenkhar	100 percent
	Jarey	100 percent
	Medtsho	100 percent
Mongar	Tsamang	100 percent
	Tsakaling	100 percent
	Saleng	50 percent approximately; Thridangbi 100 percent ; Saleng 100 percent; the rest speaks Tshangla , Khengkha, Gongdupikha and Bumthangkha.
Tashi Yangtse	Tomiyangtse	80 percent Kurmedkha speakers; the rest speaks Khengkha.
	Khamdang	50 percent approximately - Shashing/ Shashing Gonpa; Khamdang; Kencholing; Shali, Mac'an and Jangphu have mix of Dakpakha and Kurmedkha speakers.

Journal of Bhutan Studies

	Bumdeling	Some Kurmedha speakers in Omanang; the rest speaks Zalakha.
	Jamkhar	Lajab has 50 percent, Kurmedkha speakers; Jamkhar and Tagchema has 100 percent, Tshanglakha speakers.
	Yangtse	Lyichen, Wanglo, Rabti, Gangkha have some Kurmedkha speakers; the rest including at Tongsen, and Wachan speak Dakpakha.
Trashigang	Bartsham	About 25 percent, Kurmedha speakers in Zongthung and Majong; Muktangkhar and Ngalung have mix of Tsanglas and Kurmedkha speakers; in the rest all speak Tshangla kha.
	Bidung Gewog	Some Kurmedkha speakers had settled in Galing/Bidung; the rest are Tshangla speakers.

Table III. Linguistic variations in Kurmedkha

English	Minjey	Menbi	Tsenkhar	Jarey	Banjar/ Tsamang	Medtsho	Thridangbi & Saleng
Maize	ashom	jangala	ashom	ashom	aham	jana	ashom
Beans	shaypen	shaypen	shaypai	shaypai	shaypai	shaypen	shaypen
Tomato	lama banda	lam banda	lam banding	lam banda	lambanza	lam banda	lam banda
Orange	tshalu	tshalu	tshalum	tshalu	tshalu	tshalu	tshalu
Sugarcane	kaburam	Kaburam	shing-buram	buram-shing	kaburam	kaburam	shingbu-ram
Saw	sawaling	sawli/ sawling	saydar	sogli	sawli	sawli	sawli
Sieve	sinsang	singma	singma	singma	singma	singma	singma
Cock	zhapo	byapo	japo	byapo	byapo	byapo	japo
Rat	matsang- ma	biya	sintola	biwa	singto	biwa	sintola
Spider	pra	lampa	lampa	aiphuta	phuma- zang	lamepei	phumazong
Pillow	nyaka	ngaka	ngaka	ngagpasa	ngagayto	ngak	nyaka
Elder sister	abu/ ashay	ashay	au	ashay	ahay	ashay	ashay
Fig tree	khomdang	khomdar	khomda	khomdang	khomdang	khom- dang	khomdang
Broom	shaksang	phyaksang	phyaksang	phyaksang	phyaksang	phyak- sang	phyaksang
Ladder	treka	trakha	tretha	traha	traha	traha	traha

Journal of Bhutan Studies

Moon	Lawa	acho lala	acho lawa	Lawa	lawa	acho-lawa	lawa
Lost	wodhey/ wadhey	bordhey	bordhey	bordhey	bordhey	bordhey	bordhey
Saddle	gabcha	tai ga	ga	ga	ga	gabcha	gabcha
Wife	moisa	moja/ neysang	moisa	moja/ neysang	mo	nyemo	moisa
Cord	zhagpa			thagpa	pho	thagpa	thagpa
Dove	duguling	digaling	duguling	dewaling	deyaling	deyaling	dewaling
Sparrow	shang- phaling	sang- phaling	sangpaling	sangbya- ling	sangbya- ling	samba- ling	sangmaling
Lunch	zarwa	zara	zarwa	zarwa	zara	zara	zara
Earth-worm	nyongbula	nyetrong zhangba	nyongba- ling	nyongbula	nyetrong	nekong	nyongbu-ling
Charcoal	saykar	saykar/ saya	Saykar	saykar/ saykag	saykag	saykar	saykar
Maternal aunt	amin	amin	amchi/ amin	amasho	amasho	amin	amasho
Maternal uncle				ashang	ahang	ashang	ashang

Migration of Kurmedkha Speaking People

Table IV: Migration of people from Kurtoe to Trashigang and Trashi Yangtse in post-Zhabdrung era

Ancestral homelands in Kurtoe/Mongar	Areas to which Kurmedkha speakers from Kurtoe/Mongar migrated
Minjey Barwa/ Minjey	Trashigang-Bidung, Bartsham; Yangtse- Omanang; Wanglo & Lyichen
Wangzhing/ Minjey	Kencholing (Yangtse)
Kupineysa	?
Jarey Gewog(Ladrong)/ Tsamang	Yangtse Omanang
Langkharpokpa/Minjey	Galing / Bidung
Tachubrak/Langkhar (Medtsho)	Not traced out
Nyalamdung (Menbi)	Shagshing Gonpa, Saserpang, Tsenkharla, Karma Zom and Tsenkharla (Yangtse)
Wambur(Tsenkhar)	Yangtse Gewog - Rabti/Lichen/Wanglo
Tsamang (Mongar)	Majong in Bartsham Gewog
Minjey?	Shali (Yangtse)

Table V: Linguistic evolution in Kurmedkha in mixed Ethnic Settings

English	Minjey	Wanglo	Shagshing Gonpa	Remarks
Maize	ashom	ashom	ashom	
Beans	shaypen	shaypen	shaypen	
Sugarcane	kaburam	kaburam	kaburam	
Cock	zhapo	zhapo	japo*	*similar to Tsenkhar
ELder sister	abu/ashay	abu/ashay	abu/ashay	
Rat	matsangma	matsangma	matsangma	
Broom	shaksang	shaksang	meshaktang*	*new
Ladder	treka	treka	litang	*new
Lost	wadhey	wadhey	bordhey/wadhey	
Woman/wife	moisa	moisa	moisa	
Dove	duguling	tiwaling	diwaling*	*similar to Jarey/Tsenkhar
Younger sister	lemo	noomo	abu themso*	* new
Earthworm	nyongbula	nyongmaling	nyongbula	
Lunch	zarwa	zara	pangtshoran*	* new
Sparrow	shangphaling	sangbaling	sangpaling*	* similar to Tsenkhar
Maternal aunt	amin	amin	amin	
Pillow	nyaka	ngaka	ngaka	
Sieve	singsang	singma	?	
Pant	dorma	dorma	dorma	
Forgotten	vidley ngadhey	vidley ngadhey	vidley ngadhey	

Migration of Kurmedkha Speaking People

From 17th century onwards, Bhutan as a nation state drew its strength heavily from the agrarian economy and its religion. The state relied for its strength on the peasant-based economy, taxes in kind and public services mostly drawn from rural community. Such instances were not at all unique or only peculiar to Bhutan. In fact, all societies in the pre-modern world could not survive without relying on such essential lifelines of statehood built on the strength of an agrarian-based state economy and peasant families.

To summarize the findings of this study, taxes introduced by *desis* and borne by different social strata were certainly not uniform in the country. By today's standards, for some families belonging particularly to *threpa*, taxes proved to be unbearable. Some *threpa* families owned much land and had no manpower to farm it. For them there emerged two solutions to ease the burden of taxation. One was to lease out their lands to landless families (*suma*) for cultivation. The other was to create *zurpa* households. Households who owned vast lands and who had no labour ended up bearing the same burden of tax, which, once fixed, was not changed for a considerable period of time, perhaps even for a century or more. However, if an entire family had died of an epidemic or fled, and there were no heirs to succeed, their properties reverted to the state - *rabched duwa*.¹

Most of the informants attributed to taxation as the cause of this migration, but none of the people interviewed categorically could explain what type of taxes forced people to migrate. The sources of taxes depended on what people produced locally and what resources they could offer to the state. In Bhutan, generally three forms of taxes were levied.

¹ When a family or household became extinct due to causes such as epidemics, the law of the land required transfer of their properties including lands to the state. According to one old informant in Kurtoe, the last member of the extinct family who died used to be given state funerals. The eighth Desi Druk Rabgay put an end to this practice in 1707.

The first was the taxes in kind which included currency taxes. The second was man-tax, whereby it was mandatory for a family to offer at least one son to serve the state in his capacity as civil servant or monk, if required. The third form of tax was labour contribution.

By far the most taxing of all was labour tax. In this study, an attempt has been made to establish cause-effect relationships that started a process of large-scale migration of families from Kurtoe to Trashigang and Trashy Yangtse. The first two forms of taxes prevailed somewhat uniformly in the country. Therefore, people readily accepted such contribution of taxes as moral obligations for the state.

Labour tax, however, varied from district to district in the post-Zhabdrung era. In the case of people of Kurtoe, it had become a great burden beyond their capacity to bear. Every peasant family irrespective of its size contributed labour tax. In general, the bigger the family, more labour tax, and larger the tax or revenue base in the form of land and cattle holdings, etc, the higher the tax and revenues to be paid.

For some families, who owned more lands but had no manpower to till lands, regardless of labour strength, such taxes, once fixed, got perpetuated in some cases for centuries and lasted till the time of tax reforms initiated by the Second King. From the point of launching tax reforms and relieving tax paying households from the misery of age-old taxation system, the Second King His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck was truly regarded as 'The Hero with a Thousand Eyes', whose name is now immortalized in Karma Ura's famous historical novel *The Hero with a Thousand Eyes*.

The biggest labour burden for people of Kurtoe was certainly carrying tax loads delivered from other parts of Eastern Bhutan across their district borders. The people of Minjey and Medtsho in Kurtoe were perhaps so overburdened and kept perpetually busy transporting tax loads throughout the year

Migration of Kurmedkha Speaking People

that they finally responded to the crisis situation by migrating to Trashigang and Tashi Yangtse where people were generally spared from such tax burdens.

Taxation, as pointed out by most informants, was the main reason for migration.² People may have also seized opportunities for migration. Economically, socially and politically marginalized and deprived people, mostly landless families and social outcasts³ have also been known throughout history and centuries, whenever mobility was possible, to have migrated to other lands.

For people to migrate to other distant areas in the country there must be economic opportunities in the forms of land and empty space available for settlement. It appears these two districts provided these resources for migrants from Kurtoe.

In brief, the results of this study bear ample evidence and point to unfair labour taxes borne by some families in Kurtoe as the critical factor that had started this process of migration. Migration began in the 17th Century and lasted till the early part of 20th Century, when the Second King introduced tax reforms and drastically reduced state taxes.

² It was Trongsa Penlop, Choeje Minjur Tenpa who first started collecting taxes from Eastern Bhutan in 1647, but it was the first Desi Umze Tenzin Drukgyal in concert with Kudrung Damchog Pekar who officially approved and regularized the collection of wealth taxes and contribution of labour taxes in Bhutan from 1655. Taxation is one means through which a state exercises its legitimacy of rule and sovereignty over its territory as well as reinforces and strengthens its political unity. The fourth Desi Tenzin Rabgye introduced monk tax on a regular nationwide basis from 1681.

³ In Bhutan, these included ones, who were dubbed as a) *dukjinmi*, 'poison servers', b) witches - community members possessed with *shaza* or flesh eating spirits and *sondrey* or live evil spirits, c) *nganpa*, black magicians, (d) those who inherited family diseases, and (e) slaves.

This study and paper focused on a typical migration process triggered by a factor not easily understood and traced by local people today. The information and results documented herein are based on interviews of some cross sections of communities from where post-medieval migration of families from Kurtoe occurred, as well as from descendents of migrants living today beyond the Dongla mountain ranges in the east.

For those who want to carry out similar ethnographic studies to trace unknown original homelands of migrants settled in groups in any parts of the country, but based on linguistic analysis, the study plan adopted here to find practical solutions to this research problem could be replicated with some modifications. Such an approach is likely to be more useful for this kind of tracer study.

Another way to trace historical relationships between people of the same linguistic breeds with a common ancestry, but living in different districts or other lands, is through a detailed ethnographic study of their customs, belief systems, farming methods, and other social and cultural practices current among the descendants. The second approach is more complex, difficult and time-consuming. Therefore, in this study, this strategy had not been attempted.

The third solution to such research problem can be partly resolved through the study of gene pools of the groups. But again this approach is difficult and time consuming, if not sensitive and expensive.

In conclusion, I want to stress that time is running out for recording folk knowledge, which still remains largely undocumented in Bhutan. Only a few of the old generations are knowledgeable and capable of remembering and recounting such undocumented oral accounts about the past. The largely undocumented rural folk knowledge is fated to die with the older generations. The younger generations, more

Migration of Kurmedkha Speaking People

than 70 percent of them in schools and urban areas, are quite ignorant of ancient folk knowledge and traditions.

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A Cheerless Change: Bhutan Dooars to British Dooars

*Dr. Sonam B. Wangyal**

Following the Anglo-Bhutan war of 1864-65, the Duars,¹ eighteen in number, seven along the Assam and eleven along the Bengal frontiers, were annexed by the British. The British accounts are replete with justifications that led to the war and the eventual appropriation of these tracts. Whether the charges will stand up to any impartial scrutiny, an interesting topic in itself, is another point and this essay will only barely scratch that surface. While ignoring the legal or political correctness of the war and subsequent annexation of the Dooars, this commentary will steal a glance on the moral correctness of the British intervention. The actual hub of the study will muse upon the consequences faced by the natives of these frontiers, more specifically the tribal people of the Western (or Bengal) Dooars.

Considering the accounts of the time, almost entirely written by British authors, and taking Sir Ashley Eden's² estimation as a classic example of the general mood of the British, in his

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¹ In Sanskrit *duar* means door or entrance and so in our case it would translate as passes or gateways leading to Bhutan. (Also spelt as dooars and dwars.)

² Ashley Eden led a Mission to Bhutan in the cold season of 1863. Eden had entered Bhutan to notify the rulers with the existing situation along the border and to impress upon the latter the necessity of stopping of all raids and outrages which, the British officials claimed were inspired, instigated or conducted by Bhutan officials.

expressively cultivated but uniformly hardnosed narrative, the Bhutanese appear to be “treacherous robbers”, “a cruel and treacherous race” and “absolutely without shame” who distinguished “themselves by treachery, fraud, and murder” and were “an idle race, indifferent to everything except fighting and killing one another, in which they seem to take real pleasure”. For a Bhutanese “crime” was “the only claim to distinction and honour”³ and their nation “had no ruling class, no literature, no national pride in the past or aspirations for the future” and that there were “no reliable history, and very little tradition.”⁴ Eden's unlimited scorn of Bhutan is difficult to absorb even if one is charitably blessed with a soft and spongy mindset. Of the revenue system he concluded, “Strictly speaking there is no system. The only limit on the Revenue demand is the natural limit of the power of the official to extort more.”⁵ Commenting on the Judiciary he scoffs that, “the Bootanese have no laws, either written or of usage” and where religion was concerned he berates that the Bhutanese only “nominally profess the Buddhist religion...their religious exercises are merely confined to the propitiation of evil spirits and genii, and the mechanical recitals of a few sacred sentences.”⁶

Of course, Eden had a heavy axe to grind having been a victim to an incensed Bhutanese displeasure for transgressing their frontier, traveling into Bhutan with a huge entourage which even included armed soldiers, and having the temerity to enter the capital uninvited⁷ and even

³ Eden, Ashley: *Report on the State of Bootan, and the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64*, in a combined volume titled *Political Mission to Bootan* (Henceforth PMTB), Majusri Publishing House, New Delhi, 1972 (1865), pp.15, 57, 87, 115, 130, 123,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.105.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.118.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.118 & 124.

⁷ Aris, Michael: *The Raven Crown*, p.60. Aris writes: "Despite a great number of warnings from Bhutan that the mission would not be welcome, Eden and his escort forced their way to Punakha with

demanding that the Bhutanese sign a treaty of non-Bhutanese making. Bhutan was to become Eden's whipping boy and so it is easy to understand his ire and frustration even against his own government when it handed over the ownership of the disputed Falakata and Jalpaish tracts to Bhutan. Eden vented: "I am afraid that on this occasion the friendship of the Bhootanese was purchased at the expense of the Bykantpore Zemindar⁸, and that the unfortunate Bengallee Ryots⁹ living these Mehals, who were thus practically handed over as serfs to the barbarous rulers of the hill tract to the North..."¹⁰ In another instance Eden goes to the extent of transforming the natives into traitors with the claim that when he entered Bhutan's Dalimkote Dooar¹¹ the people there "were vehement in their abuse of their own Government, and loud in their praise of our administration in Darjeeling: their only wish seemed to be that they should come under our rule."¹² On meeting with some Meches of the Dooars he informs us that, "They were kept constantly employed in carrying up rice to the Fort, and received no sort of remuneration for their services. They are absolutely nothing more than slaves to the Bootanese, and their only hope appeared to be that we might be goaded by the misconduct of their rulers to annex their villages to British territory."¹³

In very much the same vein, Captain R.B. Pemberton, who had gone on a Mission to Bhutan in 1838, refers to a certain Major Lloyd, working in the Bhutan frontier, having received a petition to the British government "from the Katmas¹⁴ of the

many obstacles and delays along the way."

⁸ Landlord.

⁹ Cultivators.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹¹ Kalimpong.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.57.

¹³ Eden, p.61.

¹⁴ An inferior official in the Duars appointed by Bhutan. He could be either a Bhutanese or an Indian, the latter generally.

Dooars entreating to be taken under its protection, and representing their situation as most deplorable.”¹⁵ Pemberton himself alleged that, “It is against the inhabitants of the Dooars that the rapacity of the Booteah¹⁶ Zinkaff¹⁷ is principally exercised; ...The arrival of a party of Zinkaffs in the Dooars, on any pretence, is a calamity against which their oppressed inhabitants earnestly pray...”¹⁸

Within four years of Pemberton's adverse reporting on Bhutan, Dr. Archibald Campbell¹⁹ was deputed to enquire into the frontier disputes in the Western Duars and he found that:

... in the majority of cases the Bhutanese were not the main offenders. In 1842 he and the magistrate in Rangpur decided that although the Bhutanese Durga Deva was a major cause of trouble the Baikenthar Zemindar's son on the Indian side was as much to blame. They also considered that the Bhutanese were not hostile to the British government, only to the British subjects who invaded their land.²⁰

Nevertheless, the powers at Fort William failed to cast even the slightest bit of scepticism regarding the veracity of Pemberton's comments, which paved the way for the British to comfortably deem Eden's Bhutan-loathing as an exercise in objective reporting. The East India Company eventually went on to molest Bhutan basically on Eden's inferences and assumptions while outbursts like the ones quoted above instead of raising severe suspicions ended up as being a case of a White Man's word against the alleged misdemeanor of the

¹⁵ Pemberton, Capt. R. Boileau: *Report on Bootan*, PMTB, (First Ed. Bengal Military Orphan Press, Calcutta, 1839), p.183.

¹⁶ Read 'Bhutanese'.

¹⁷ Low ranked Bhutanese Official superior to the Katmas.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Section III, Sub-Section I, p.205.

¹⁹ He was the first Superintendent (1840-1862) of the newly acquired Darjeeling tract.

²⁰ Collister, Peter: *Bhutan and the British*, Serindia Publications, London, 1987, p.77.

'treacherous' Orientals. Conditioned by years of misunderstanding the Bhutanese perspective and problems²¹, and fuelled by negative reporting by frontier officials, Britain invaded Bhutan and appropriated, forever, the eighteen Duars. Eden went on to become the Governor of Bengal, was knighted, and honoured for posterity with Asia's first and one of the largest maternity hospitals²² being named after him. He had obtained, almost on a platter, the eighteen Dooars²³, which, in a short time, would become revenue-spinning tea plantations.

However, Eden was not a solitary figure in this act of negatively characterizing Bhutan. Captain Pemberton (1838) who was hospitably received by the Bhutanese officials, but failed to obtain the desired treaty from them, was to write, in respect to the Bhutanese and the Dooars, "...almost every article of consumption is drawn from them under the name of tribute, the amount of which is entirely dependent on the generosity of the several Soubahs²⁴, who regard the people of the plains with the same sort of feeling which the task-masters of Egypt entertained for their enslaved Hebrews." Kishen Kant Bose, a Bengali, was also dispatched to Bhutan (1815) to settle some frontier dispute and though his accounts, translated by a British officer, generally reported on the route, geography, religion, government and economy, his detached objectivity is blotched by one paragraph where he asserted, "Whenever any Ryot, or landholder, or servant, has

²¹ Mehra, G.N: *Bhutan - The Land of the Peaceful Dragon*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1974, p.92.

²² Eden Hospital (Bengal Medical College, Calcutta)

²³ The Eighteen Dooars: In Assam: 1. Booree-Goomah, 2. Kalling, 3. Ghurkolla, 4. Banska, 5. Chappakhamar, 6. Chappaguri and 7. Bijnee. In Bengal: 1. Dalimkote, 2. Dalimkote, 3. Zumerkote (Mainaguri), 4. Lukhiduar, 5. Buxaduar (Pasakha), 6. Bhulkha, 7. Bara, 8. Goomar, 9. Reepu, 10. Chirang and 11. Bagh or Bijnee.

²⁴ A Bhutanese frontier official. The local administration of the Duars was left to various officials called *Soubah*, *Lashkar*, *Wazir* or the *Gup*.cf. Bikrama Jit Hasrat, pp.90 & 96.

collected little money, the Officer of the Government under whose authority they happen to be placed finds some plea or other for taking the whole. On this account the Ryots are afraid to put on good clothes, or to eat and drink according to their inclination, lest they should excite the avarice of their rulers." Dr. William Griffiths who accompanied Captain Pemberton observed that the Bhutanese committed "black treachery"²⁵ upon the plainsmen and were in "utter want of faith, honesty and consideration" while their "...trickery, intrigue, and falsehood could only be equalled by the supreme ignorance, presumption, and folly exhibited upon every occasion."²⁶

The reports mentioned above are substantially serious and severe indictments and they paint Bhutan in a very reprehensible and repugnant canvas. They obviously raise more questions than can be answered. Could all of what had been written be absolutely true? Could not Eden's vitriolic vocabulary be an aftermath of the drubbing he received at the hands of the Bhutanese? Was Pemberton trying to whitewash his failure by colouring the Bhutanese in the darkest dyes? In an entirely academic and favourable report, why did Bose insert one stray paragraph that besmirched the Bhutanese character? Was he, a native servant, simply trying to appease his European masters? Was Major Lloyd itching for a fight, a profession he was trained and paid for, and so in a circuitous manner was suggesting an invasion? And could Griffiths possibly be trying to buttress what his leader of the failed Mission had stated. The answer probably lies with the fact that Pemberton, Ashley Eden and Kishenkant Bose were on specific Missions to Bhutan and they failed to achieve the desired results.

In contrast, consider the mission of Bogle. His charge was basically targeted at achieving political and commercial

²⁵ Griffiths, William: *Journal of the Mission to Bootan in 1837-38*, Part I, PMBT, p.310.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.309.

liaison with Tibet and had no political representation in Bhutan save for requesting minor trade concessions.²⁷ Consequently, he was able to interact happily with the Bhutanese and effect a successful mission. Because he had not come with any sense of superiority and because he had no brief to dictate terms the Bhutanese returned the affability with utmost courtesy and Bogle in turn obliged with comments like,

The simplicity of their manners, their slight intercourse with strangers, and a strong sense of religion, preserve the Bhutanese from many vices to which more polished nations are addicted. They are strangers to falsehood and ingratitude. Theft and every other species of dishonesty to which the lust of money gives birth are little known.²⁸

Elsewhere Bogle reiterates,

The more I see of the Bhutanese, the more I am pleased with them. The common people are good-humoured, downright, and, I think, thoroughly trusty. The statesmen have some of the art which belongs to their profession.²⁹

Bogle's visit was considered a success³⁰ in that he was able to penetrate Tibet through Bhutan and establish cordial relationship with both the countries. Despite the achievement, it is telling that Bogle's comments had to wait almost a century to come to print, while most of the journals adverse to Bhutan were published within a decade of their writing. Bogle's visit was followed by another mission led by Captain Samuel Turner (1873). Regarding the creditable

²⁷ White, John Claude: *Sikkim and Bhutan - Twenty-one Years on the North-East Frontier, 1887-1908*, Vivek Publishing House, Delhi, 1971 (1909), p.238. Here White writes, "Bogle's appointment letter is dated May 13, 1774, and in that letter no specific Mission is mentioned."

²⁸ Markham, Clements R: *Narratives of Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, Cosmo Publication, New Delhi, 1989 (1876), p.37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.51

³⁰ White, John Claude: p.241.

character of the Bhutanese, “Turner came to much the same conclusion as Bogle”³¹ The only thing that did not agree with him was the natives' poor personal hygiene, which he observed “that my new friends were far from having any nice notions of cleanliness. The ablution, I have just noticed, is a practice connected with their religion, and not repeated more frequently than it enjoins.”³² Though Turner did not achieve anything new the Mission was also considered successful for it consolidated what Bogle had achieved.

It might be appropriate to note that Turner, like Bogle, had no political brief to dictate or negotiate with Bhutan and consequently was received cordially. It appears that those who entered Bhutan with political or territorial motives not really advantageous to her were received with indifference and even hostility and that in turn churned repulsive reporting against the highlanders. Somewhere down the line, the search for the truth went astray, adverse reports were given undue credit, war was invoked and the Dooars were annexed and a happy Agent to the Governor-General, on the North East Frontier, Mr. P. Jenkins, proclaimed, “The Bengal Duars between Manas and the Tista wore a wretched look. The people living there welcomed British rule.”³³

It is difficult to accept that the simple highlanders of the Himalayas could possibly be so treacherous and inhuman as was projected by Eden and his ilk. Even if we accede that some parts of their reports could possibly be true it becomes necessary to examine how much better off the natives were after the civilized and more 'humane' British government addressed the issues after they gained possession of the Dooars.

³¹ Ronaldshay, Lord: *Lands of the Thunderbolt, Sikkim, Chumbi and Bhutan*, Akay Book Corporation, Delhi 1986 (1923), p.213

³² Markham, Clements, R: p.85.

³³ Majumdar, A.B: *Britain and the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan*, Bharati Bhawan, Patna, 1984, p.113.

Documents and research papers on the tribal people inhabiting the Bengal Dooars, immediately before, during and after the Anglo-Bhutan War, are scanty and when available they do not deal in any way with the difficulties faced by the natives in those turbulent years. However, relatively recent research has come out with more detailed studies and they throw a completely different light on what transpired.

Dr. Bimalandu Majumdar in his dissertation exposes that the inhabitants were no better off and the British were as bad as or even worse than what they claimed the Bhutanese to be. In a stinging comment he wrote, "Prior to Independence³⁴ the total villages of this part of Bengal were badly neglected. The administration used to maintain relation with them only to realise the annual revenue without implementing any development programmes or providing amenities to them."³⁵

Majumdar claims that there were several Toto villages during the time of the attachment of the Bengal Dooars: Totpara in the Falakata area, Tatpara under Alipur Police Station, Totapara under Madarihat Police Station, and Totgaon under Mal Bazaar Police Station. Totpara was leased to Sarugaon Tea Company in 1901,³⁶ thus driving out the native inhabitants. Where Tatpara was concerned, even as far back as 1895, D.H.E. Sunder's report³⁷ lets it be known that the Totos had left the place during the Anglo-Bhutan War and, of all the places, they had gone to Bhutan. A large tract of Totopara was converted into Totopara Tea Estate (1892) and once again some of the displaced Totos migrated to "the hills and settled in Dianapuri in Bhutan."³⁸ In the fourth village,

³⁴ This refers to the British period i.e., prior to 1947.

³⁵ Majumdar, Bimalendu: *The Totos*, Academic Enterprise, Calcutta, 1998, p.27 -28

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.29

³⁷ Sunder, D.H.E: *Survey and Settlement of Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri, 1889-95*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1895.

³⁸ Dinapuri is marked as Dinagaon in the Survey of India map of

Totgaon, Majumdar found no Totos at all, three-fourths of the village having been washed away by the river. Records of rescue, relocation and rehabilitation are conspicuously absent. Today Totopara is the only Toto village in existence.

Majumdar enumerates eight reasons for the disappearance of the Totos from their villages and they are worth reflecting upon: (1) destabilization of the geo-political environment, (2) transfer of power from Bhutan to the British, (3) expansion of tea plantations in places populated by the Totos, (4) the abolition of the Capitation Tax (*Dao-khazna*) and imposition of land tax etc. in terms of cash, (5) banning of exploitation of forest resources through Indian Forest Preservation Act of 1886, (6) conversion of the Toto community lands to *jote* lands on the basis of individual ownership, (7) migration into secluded places with a view to retain their separate identity and (8) unusual and unequal competition with the newly settled communities.³⁹ These reasons hardly expound British goodwill, and neither do they sully the Bhutanese character, but they certainly make the British estimation of Bhutan a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

Immediately after the annexation of the Dooars, in 1866, T.H. O'Donnel was engaged to demarcate the boundary between Bhutan and British India and having done so he at once imposed a fixed tax for the village areas with Totopara's share coming to Rupees Sixty.⁴⁰ In 1889-94 the first regular Survey and Settlement Operation was conducted by D.H.E. Sunder and he almost doubled the tax by imposing a levy of Rs.105/= for the Totopara orange groves. The second Survey was conducted in 1906-16 by the District Settlement Officer, J. Milligan, and this resulted in a Capitation Tax of Rs.2/= per adult head in 1911.⁴¹ Historical records show that orange was

Bhutan.

³⁹ Majumdar: pp.26-27.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.31.

⁴¹ Sanyal, C.C: *The Meches and the Totos, Two Sub-Himalayan Tribes of North Bengal*, Part II, The TOTOS, a Sub-Himalayan Tribe, The

an important cash crop for the Totos but by 1830 all the orange trees had died⁴² and despite being liberated from the 'ruthlessness' of the Bhutanese, the Totos had no recourse but to go back to the old masters as haulers of oranges from Bhutan. One would have looked with some sympathy over the detriment faced by the loss of the groves but immediately a year later, with the completion of the third Survey of the district, the Totos received another big jolt when the Capitation Tax was raised by a quarter rupees.⁴³ One is tempted to conclude this was done to offset the loss from the orange taxes but of greater significance is that every time a survey was conducted the taxes invariably increased. In the Western Duars the East India Company's only real concern was enlarging tax revenue: a deed fiercely criticized when the Bhutanese did the same despite the Bhutanese taxes being of lesser value.

That the earnestness and sincerity to help the people of the newly acquired frontiers were either nonexistent or that they had been thrown to the winds is evident from the unprejudiced account of W.W.W. Hunter who, observing that nothing had been done even after half a decade of the annexation, wrote, "In the Western Duars, hardly any of the cultivators have acquired occupancy rights" on the flimsy statute that "up to 1870 very few of them had held their land for the prescribed period of twelve years."⁴⁴

A lot has been written about how poorly the Meches and Totos were treated by the Bhutanese and as an *aide memoire* it would be appropriate to quote Sir Ashley Eden again. The Meches he claimed "complained bitterly of the oppression of

University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, 1973, p.14.

⁴² Sunder's statement in the Survey and Settlement was. "There are no orange trees at Totapara."

⁴³ Sanyal: p.14.

⁴⁴ Hunter, W.W.W: *A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. X, Districts of Darjiling, Jalpaiguri & Huch Behar*, Concept Publishing Co., New Delhi, 1984 (1876), p.276-177.

the Booteahs, for whom they evidently entertained feelings of deep hatred. ...They were kept constantly employed in carrying up rice to the Fort, and received no sort of remuneration for their services."⁴⁵ The comment was basically directed to the Meches but the undertone is a general one implying similar conditions elsewhere also.

This study will deal with what the Meches thought of the British a little later on, but in the meanwhile, we will concentrate on the Toto tribe that once worked under the Bhutanese. Besides Eden, several British commentaries assert that the Bhutanese forced the frontier natives to work without wages but when the allegation is put through the scanner the truth emerges differently. In the Toto language, the labour provided to the Bhutanese was called *hui-hwa* and though this has been conveniently rendered to mean 'free-labour' or 'forced labour',⁴⁶ its accurate translation is 'portage service in lieu of remuneration in cash or kind'.⁴⁷ Even the British Survey Officer Sunder is on record that:

The Bhuteas have a village at Doyapara in Bhutan, where they grow oranges. The Totos bring oranges from there into British territory. In lieu of payment in money for carrying the oranges from Doyapara to Totopara they get one third of the oranges as hire.⁴⁸

By any standard this was generous compensation. Nevertheless, there is no denying that slavery was practiced in Bhutan, the Bhutanese freely admit to it, but to take a blanket approach on the issue and term all acts of labour as being extracted gratis or amounting to slavery is, to say the least, unkind and unjustified. It is rather interesting to note that the British themselves resorted to 'free labour' with the

⁴⁵ Eden: p.61.

⁴⁶ Majumdar, Bimalendu: p.159

⁴⁷ Majumdar: p.53

⁴⁸ For more details on agriculture, taxes, population etc. see D.H.E. Sunder's *Survey and Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1985.

Totos who were, without wages, “obliged to provide to the Forest Department for five to six days annually for clearing the jungles along the international boundary line.”⁴⁹

If the Totos' lot was dismal, what befell the Meches was no better. But before we venture into their (mis)fortune under the British it is essential that we refer to the causes that led to the war. In the memorandum of 7th May 1864, sent to Ashley Eden, two major objectives were highlighted: (a) procuring satisfaction of the repeated insults and threats from the Bhutanese, and (b) “*also in duty to its subjects resident on the frontier.*”⁵⁰ [Emphasis added.] This 'duty' was to redress what Ashley Eden had charged in his report that the Meches

...complained bitterly of the oppressions of the Booteahs, for whom they evidently entertained feelings of deep hatred.
...They do not cultivate more than is necessary to supply their own wants and to enable them to comply with the demands of their rulers, for any surplus which they produced would merely form an additional temptation to plunder on the part of the Booteah taskmasters. They know they can never be rich nor ever improve their position, and they do not therefore attempt it.⁵¹

Historical evidence shows that instead of uplifting the frontier tribes, they were pushed deeper into poverty and eventually suffered a fate worse what they had under their old masters. It is a sad reflection that the people who were supposed to be liberated from the 'oppressive' rule of the Bhutanese were eventually enslaved by poverty and an acute lack of any human benevolence.

The testimonial of a Meche, Jnan Mandal, 80 years, extracted

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.55.

⁵⁰ Rennie Dr. David Field: *Bhotan and the Story of the Dooar War*, Manjusri Publishing House, 1970 (1866), p.358.

⁵¹ Eden, Ashley: pp.61 & 62.

by Charu Chandra Sanyal in the late 1960s⁵² states that,

...at the time of Bhutan Government the Meches were not tortured unlike others. They were in good terms with the Bhutanese Government. Harnath⁵³ was made a Mandal⁵⁴...Bhutan Government took rupees seven per family per year and allowed to cultivate as much as the family could do so.⁵⁵

Another Meche, Phade Saiba, more than eighty years old, living in Mechua-Dhura-Balabathan village commented, "We used to eat rice, vegetables, fish or meat three times a day. But now we can hardly afford two rice meals a day."⁵⁶

Kalsing Saiba, a sixty year old Meche's testimony is equally anguished: "My father had vast plot(s) of land and was well-to-do. Now I have no land. I work as a share cropper or sometimes as an agricultural labourer on cash wage of rupees one a day and three meals."⁵⁷

The fate of Gashat Machari, 98 years, is no better. He rues, "At that time the land was plenty and men were few, so we had much land to grow crop. ...Now I have only five acres of land under cultivation."⁵⁸

Dhansing Meche, a centenarian, living in Sisu-Jhorma⁵⁹ was bitter about the British administration:

⁵² This would mean that Mandal was born around 1880s and that would have made it possible to hear first hand accounts from his father, grandfather and their contemporaries about the state of affairs during the early British years of British rule.

⁵³ Grandfather of Jnan Mandal

⁵⁴ Village headman.

⁵⁵ Sanyal, C. C: Part I, p.85.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.79.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.87.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.86.

⁵⁹ Dalgram Sarugan during the Bhutanese period.

My father's name is Late Khayer Singh. My father was in Bhutan holding a large plot of agricultural land. The whole of the Duars was under Bhutan Government. My father was at Chamurchi near the present Reabari Tea Estate (in the Duars). My father had a large plot of land more than one hundred acres where the present Ambari Tea Estate is situated.⁶⁰ Then we shifted to the present site of Bandhapani Tea Estate, then we came to Maraghat and from there to this place. ...we were cultivators. We grew plenty of rice and we ate rice and vegetables three times a day... As far as I can remember and so far I heard from my father that the Bhotias⁶¹ were good. The collectors came once a year, collected rupees eight per family and left us to enjoy as much land as we could cultivate. The British came. They spoke sweet words. They gave us protection no doubt but they increased the rents, introduced many laws and we gradually lost our lands and we shifted to this place. Now I have only four acres of land that can hardly maintain my family.⁶²

There is no necessity to elaborate on these testimonials for they are clear in their condemnation, and unambiguous in contradicting the claims made by people like Sir Ashley Eden.

I would like to wrap up with the comment made by Dr. David Field Rennie a man who was actively involved in the Anglo-Bhutan war and was a witness to all that had happened. Immediately after the war, he interviewed a frontier gentleman of good standing and wrote the following:

After all that has been officially written on the subject of Bhotan and the oppressive character of its rule in the Dooars, I was hardly prepared to hear from a resident of Julpigorie, peculiarly well placed for obtaining reliable information, that the inhabitants of the Dooars, bordering on our frontier, state that they have no complaints to make of the Bhotanese, and that they have suffered much more from aggression from within our frontier (including that of Cooch Behar) than from

⁶⁰ Another case of a native losing land to Tea Plantations as in the case of the Totos.

⁶¹ Read 'Bhutanese'.

⁶² Sanyal, C.C.: Part I, p.76.

oppression exercised over them on the part of Bhotan; raiding within the Dooars by natives living under British protection, having apparently been as common as it has been within our own frontier by the Bhotanese.⁶³

⁶³ Ibid., pp.357-358.

Two Nineteenth Century Trade Routes in the Eastern Himalayas: the Bhutanese trade with Tibet and Bengal*

*Ratna Sarkar** and Indrajit Ray****

From the early modern era, Bhutan had been carrying out regular caravan trade on the rugged Himalayan terrain with Bengal on the south and Tibet on the north. This is evident in the contemporary Bengali literature, which refers to several Bhutanese commodities, and also in the writings of foreign travellers. In 1626, a foreign traveller noted that Bhutan was “well provided with **Chinese** merchandise such as silk, gold and porcelain”¹¹, and those came through Tibet. According to an eighteenth century document, her annual trade was worth of Rs 200 thousand with Bengal and Rs 150 thousand with Tibet, including China.²² The trade continued, and perhaps flourished, during the nineteenth century. In this century, we are told of an annual event of Bhutan’s royal caravan going to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and also her trade with Rangpur, a business city of contemporary Bengal. The trade seems largely to be of a transit character since several export commodities - salt, gold, tea, pearls and corals, for example - were not of Bhutanese origin. Both Bengal and Tibetan goods could be noticed in either route along with Bhutanese commodities. The transit nature of this trade came in the limelight when the British administration in Bengal temporarily sealed the Bhutan border. It jeopardized the Bhutanese trade with Tibet and China since “in truth the

* We acknowledge Dr. D.P.Boot, Cartographer, Centre for Himalayan Studies, North Bengal University for the preparation of maps in this study.

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¹ Deb, *Bhutan and India*, p.56.

² Gupta, *British Relations with Bhutan*, p.19.

Bhuteahs have nothing to give in exchange for the commodities of other countries.”³ It is highly probable, therefore, that the Tibetan and Chinese traders could be seen in the Bhutan-Bengal route, and the Bengali traders in the Bhutan-Tibet route. In fact, a sixteenth century merchant Ralph Fitch noted in his travelogue the movement of Chinese caravans in the Bhutan-Bengal trade route.

In this background, the present article seeks to identify the routes of trade between Bhutan on the one hand, and Tibet and Bengal, on the other. It discusses various travel characteristics in these routes, and describes their origins, destinations, nodes and links, as defined in an earlier article.⁴ Data and information available in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century reports of various British political missionaries like Bogle (1774), Turner (1783), Bose (1815), Griffiths (1837-38), Pemberton (1837-38) and Eden (1863-64) have been used. There are four parts in what follows. The first two parts concentrate on the details of the Bhutan-Tibet route and its travel characteristics, respectively. The following two parts deal with the similar descriptions of the Bhutan-Bengal route.

Part I

There were four alternative routes between Bhutan and Tibet that traders used at different periods: (1) Paro-Lhasa, (2) Punakha-Gyantse-Shigatse-Lhasa, (3) Bumthang-Lhasa, and (4) Tashigang-Lhasa. Though these routes had a common destination, viz. Lhasa, which happened to be the greatest

³ Eden, “Report on the State of Bootan and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64” in Kuloy (ed.), *Political Missions to Bootan*, p.129.

⁴ Ray and Sarkar, “Reconstructing of Nineteenth Century Trade Route between Bhutan and Assam: Evidences from British Political Missions”, *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Volume 13, Winter, 2005, pp.4-7.

trade centre in Tibet, they had different origins, viz. Paro, Punakha, Bumthang and Trashigang. These origins assumed different levels of importance in Bhutan's domestic trade at different historical epochs, with their rises and falls being occasioned by frequent enmity and rivalry among their regional chieftains. There were, indeed, road linkages amongst them so that gradual diversion of trade from one centre to another was possible. All the routes were not, however, competitive. For instance, the Trashigang-Lhasa route was meant for Assam-bound traffic whereas the Paro-Lhasa route carried Tibetan traffic that were destined to Bengal. The present article takes up the Paro-Lhasa route in view of the availability of requisite data and information, and also the thrust area of this study that includes the Bhutan-Tibet route side by side the Bhutan-Bengal route.

Both in Bhutan and Tibet, the state was grossly involved in the country's external trade so that the benefit of trade went largely to the king, his nobles and other associates including the monasteries. On the Bhutanese trade Collister observed, "[A]ny trade in more valuable goods was entirely for the benefit of the Deb Raja and principal officers."⁵ In Tibet, they were, according to F. Grenard, the great nobles and monasteries "who together with the state were the only merchants on a large scale."⁶ Other similarities were also noticed in the ownership and execution of foreign trade in these countries. First, since the big merchants like the king or his nobles did not participate in the detailed execution of trade, they used to employ trade agents and professional persons to accompany the caravans. These people, therefore, got a share of trade benefits. Secondly, both countries allowed small merchants to carry out trade on their own. They traded mostly with their counterparts in the neighbour countries, but sometimes with their big merchants as well.

In the cross-border trade these small merchants disposed of

⁵ Collister, *Bhutan and the British*, p.21.

⁶ Grenard, *Tibet: The Country and its inhabitants*, p.286.

their wares in transit points with a view either to avoid the hazards in the forward trade, or in submission to the prevailing custom. The prevailing custom was that a particular group of merchants dominated a given stretch of the route. Thus, for example, the Bumthang merchants controlled the trade route from Bumthang to Lhasa while the merchants of Punakha controlled trade in between Gyantse and Shingatse, and monopolised trade up the valley of the river Mo Chu to Lingshi La.⁷ Lastly, although the major trade was carried out by the state in both countries, production was left entirely to private enterprises. Productive activities, basically primary in nature, were undertaken by farmers who sold their output in local markets to the state agents, the Lamas, the grandees and foreign traders. Traders had no large stake in production. Purchasing goods from local markets, they “fit out large caravans to carry it to places at several months” march.⁸

Although temperature during the winter dropped to the freezing point in the Himalayan kingdoms, it was by far the best season for caravan trade. The chance of rain was least; also the river beds were dry so that the caravans could smoothly proceed along those beds minimizing their toil and fatalities. Food was cheap, especially barley, meat and wine, and easily available in the route-side localities.⁹ Also, this was the season when farm activities were slack, and farmers had time to vend their crops and to opt for subsidiary jobs. In Tibet, for example, farmers in winter “proceeded to northern Tibet to lay in their stock of salt, obtained from the salt lakes that found there. Then these men start for Bhutan, Nepal or Sikkim, to sell their goods in those places.”¹⁰ Despite snow and frost in the route, therefore, “winter was the best season to travel to Lhasa”¹¹ for the purpose of trade. The average

⁷ Karan, *A Physical and Cultural Geography*, p.47.

⁸ Grenard, *Tibet: The Country and its inhabitants*, p.286.

⁹ Das, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, p.85.

¹⁰ Kawaguchi, *Three Years in Tibet*, p.458.

¹¹ Das, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*, p.85.

temperature was around 20 C in this season.

Caravans were led, human beings apart, by a host of animals like mules, ponies, horses, yaks, sheep etc. who could negotiate the narrow rugged paths in mountains. On the point of pack animals, however, differences were noticed between the Bhutanese and Tibetan caravans. Horses dominated the caravans of Tibet as those were low-cost animals there. Because of their cheapness, even the Tibetan farmers employed them for carrying loads from the field – a feature never found in Bhutan.¹² Bhutanese caravans, on the other hand, were dominated by human beings, especially the woman folk. Turner wrote, “The modes of conveyance here [in Tibet] for baggage are altogether different from the usage of the inhabitants of Bootan, where every thing, without exception, is loaded upon the shoulders of the people, and where, to their shame be it spoken, the women bear the heaviest share of so laborious an employment.”¹³ Similar was the opinion of Bogle. He reported, “The only way of transporting goods in this hilly country [Bhutan] is by coolies.”¹⁴ Unlike porters in the plain who carried loads on the head, Bhutanese porters fastened the burden upon their backs with a short stick in hand to support it at the time of rest. Even a girl of eighteen years of age could carry a weight of 70-75 pounds, and marched at 15-18 miles speed a day. This job was not, however, class-specific in the Bhutanese society. When caravans passed through a village, its dwellers were recruited at the behest of its headman, and were relieved at the next convenient village of recruitment. There was no market rate of wage for this unskilled job; the pleasure of the caravan-master was all what determined it. “This is a service so well established that the people submit to it without murmuring. Neither sex, nor youth, nor age exempt them

¹² Mehra, *Bhutan: Land of the Peaceful Dragon*, p.18.

¹³ Turner, *An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, p.208.

¹⁴ Ramphell, *Bhutan through the Ages*, vol. 2, p.148.

from it.”¹⁵

Both the Bhutanese and the Tibetans extensively used yaks in their caravans. Because of their heavy body weight and shorter legs, these animals could easily negotiate the rugged mountain passes against strong winds and water currents. They were also least selective in their diet, being satiated with whatever grass, soft or hard, was available wayside. The caravan-master was thus relieved of arranging fodder when yaks were in job. They evidently marched 9-10 miles a day in mountains and at about 16 miles on the plain though horses could run at double this speed.¹⁶ Caravans of sheep were, however, generally popular among the nomads in hills. Similar to other historical trade routes in the world, the traders in these Himalayan tracks preferred larger sized caravans presumably on account of the economies of scale and also out of fear from brigands. A source suggests that each caravan in these routes consisted at least of eight hundred animals and ninety men.¹⁷

Exports from Bhutan consisted of her domestic products like rice, woollen cloth, *munjeet* (a type of dye) and wrought iron, as well as imported products from Bengal such as English broad cloth, indigo, tobacco, coral, leather and sandal-wood. Since Tibet was sterile in grain crops, her people necessitated for their livelihood the import of rice, both boiled and parched, along with wheat and flour. While much of these imports were domestically consumed, some food grains were also re-exported “for the Chinese functionaries and officials”.¹⁸ Next to food came garments in importance, especially woollen products and broad cloths. These imported garments were fashionable only among the nobles, including the *lamas*, as the common people were to satisfy themselves with coarse woollen dresses and cloths woven domestically.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Grenard, *Tibet: The Country and its inhabitants*, p.289.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.287.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.295.

Imported woollen cloths found an additional extensive outlet in temple decorations. For their cotton garments, however, Tibetan women preferred the colour of white, in addition to light-blue and russet,¹⁹ and to sustain whiteness in cloths perhaps, the imported indigo was in great demand. For industrial purposes, again, Tibet imported wrought iron that was manufactured in Bhutan out of her own deposits of iron ore at Paro. This was used for the manufacture of small arms in an arsenal located at Dib near Che-Cho-Ling.²⁰

Bhutan's import from Tibet consisted of raw wool, musk, tea, silver, gold, embroidered silk piece-goods and rock salt. Some of these were domestically available in Tibet while others were Chinese in origin. Among the domestic products, gold was an important mineral that was deposited in the form of gold dust at Thokjalung and Chakchak in the Ngare province in western Tibet to some extent, and richly in its central provinces. It so abounded in the country that, according to Huc and Gabet, even "the common shepherds have become acquainted with the art of purifying these precious metals".²¹ Another important item was musk that hunters gathered from deer. Musk deer inhabited the forests in Kong-bo, Tsari and Lo where dwellers hunted them to barter for their daily necessities and ornaments. Although it had low market price in those places, especially at Lo, exorbitant transportation costs were involved because of high risk and danger from highway robbery—only "uncommonly adventurous [people] proceeded thither to get a supply from the natives".²² Tibetan rock salt was also an item of import in Bhutan which she largely re-exported to Bengal. Bengal had no other source than this though it had high demand on account of prevailing

¹⁹ Kawaguchi, *Three Years in Tibet*, pp.452-453.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.447.

²¹ Referred in Colman Macaulay, 'Memorandum on our Relation with Tibet' in Sharma and Sharma, (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Tibet*, Vol. 2, *Travels and Memoirs of Tibet*, p.19. This part was taken from Report of Mission to Sikkim and the Tibetan Frontier, 1884.

²² Kawaguchi, *Three Years in Tibet*, p.450.

socio-religious and medicinal practices. As noted above, these salts were extensively available in north Tibet. Last but not the least, Tibet was a bulk exporter of raw wool. Rearing of sheep was a household activity in Tibet that generated substantial raw wool. It was partly used domestically in the thriving woollen industry at Lhasa and its surrounding districts, and partly exported to neighbouring countries. About 1500 mule-packs of wool were annually exported to Bhutan in the late nineteenth century.²³

Part II

Paro: The Origin

Paro was historically developed as a fort town in a valley. The fort, locally called *dzong*, was constructed more than four centuries ago for the protection of cultivators and also to appoint government officials such as *penlops* and *dzongpons* to administer the country. Under the *dzong's* protection from wars, internal disorder and natural calamities, an extensive human settlement encompassing various economic activities and institutions, including markets, was developed within a periphery of quarter a mile from this *dzong*. There were long stretches of good arable land in the valley, especially at its lower elevations and in the plain, which afforded the cultivation of rice and wheat. Also, its hill contour, a few kilometres away, contained a significant quantity of iron that was extracted in a naïve way for the purpose of construction and industries. Local people separated iron from sandy soils by using a magnet, and heaped it for sale as iron dust.²⁴ In fact, a nearby hill was called *Chakolah*, 'Iron Mountain', because of its iron deposit. In the late nineteenth century,

²³ Ibid., p.448.

²⁴ Eden, "Report on the State of Bootan and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64" in Kuloy (ed.), *Political Missions to Bootan*, p.92.

there was an iron ore mine at a distance of two days' journey from Paro.

Owing to its location advantages, Paro emerged as an important trade centre in the eastern Himalayas. It was connected in the north with Phari, an important commercial town of Tibet,²⁵ and in the south with Rangpur in Bengal. While describing its locational advantage in the eastern Himalayan trade, Eden observed, "Paro from its situation should be one of the largest cities in the East; situated in a perfectly level plain, easy of access from the low country, only two easy marches by an excellent road from one of the chief marts in Thibet, it ought to be the entrepot of the trade of Thibet, Tartary, China, and India".²⁶ Because of these advantages, Paro's market was dotted with a large number of big depots containing various imported products like broad-cloth, cotton-goods, cutlery, rice, corals, tea, spices, kincobs, leather, and miscellaneous articles of European manufacture along with rock-salt, musk, gold-dust, borax, and silk.

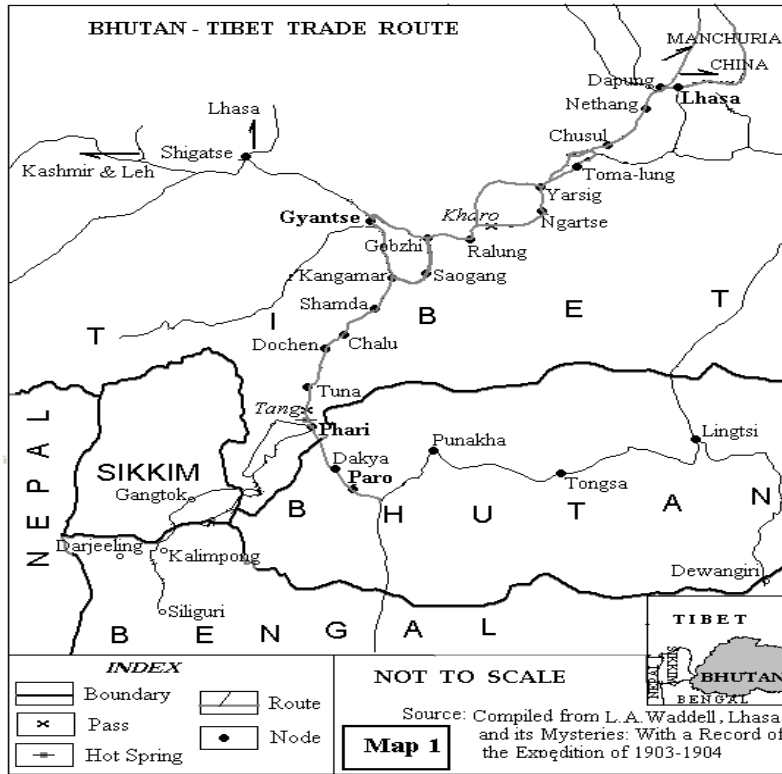
Lhasa: The Destination

Lhasa, the largest as well as the oldest city of Tibet, was set up in about AD 400 by King Srong-tsan-Gampo. The major domestic products such as gold, raw wool, woollen products, rock salt and musk that Lhasa exported, have already been discussed. Among other domestic products that found vent from this place were borax, drugs, ponies, brass utensils and incense sticks. Apart from these domestic goods, a variety of foreign goods were available in Lhasa because of her excellent linkages with two major countries in Asia, viz. India and China, and this ensured her as a unique destination for trade between Bhutan and Tibet. On the east, it was connected with China from primeval time. From this path went an extension westwards of Lhasa towards Kashmir and India

²⁵ Ibid., p.90.

²⁶ Ibid.,

providing it accessibility to those places. On the north east, it had a road link with China extending to Manchuria, and on the west with Leh, “the capital of the farthest outlying province of Kashmir-Ladak”.²⁷ Its southern border was connected with a number of places in Bhutan, that we have already noted, and also with Nepal and Sikkim.



Lhasa’s well-knitted road network with the Himalayan kingdoms generated two important characteristics for her trade. Firstly, a number of non-Tibetan merchants, especially Kashmiris, came to settle in Lhasa, and ran trading

²⁷ Holdich, *Tibet, The Mysterious*, p.44.

enterprises. Akin to the role of the Jews in European trade, the Kashmiris used to play a pivotal role in the east Himalayan trade over China, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Bengal.²⁸ Secondly, commodities from several countries adorned the markets of Lhasa giving it a cosmopolitan character. China provided it with tea, silk, carpet and porcelain articles, and Mongolia supplied it leather, saddlery, sheep and horses. Rice, sugar, musk and tobacco came from Bhutan and Sikkim, and broadcloth, indigo, brass-works, coral, pearls, sugar, spices and drugs from Nepal. Though a number of goods from Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim were made in India, Indian goods were also supplied there directly through Lhadak. In response to the demand from travelling traders in the city, however, a number of hotels and inns sprang up in Lhasa. On the fringe of its every market place one encountered a chain of eateries where various meats and flour predominated.²⁹ These eateries revealed the non-resident character of the trading community at Lhasa.

Nodes and Links

From Paro the first resting place for Tibet-bound caravans from Bhutan was 14 km away at Dakya Dzong (vide Map 1), a walled fort that was constructed to combat the Tibetan invasion. The intermediate road, moderately ascending, ran through a valley of pines, and met with scattered villages on the wayside, which thrived primarily on breeding *tangan* horses. Agriculture was only a subsidiary occupation there. The *dzong*, however, provided shelter to travelling traders along with their animals in stables. Taking night stay there, they proceeded along the valley towards a Tibetan border, the village Sana, on the same ascending road. Dwellers in this border mostly wove coarse woollens, again with agriculture as their subsidiary livelihood. There was a guard house there where a party of Booteah was stationed, who permit no one

²⁸ Collister, *Bhutan and the British*, p.21.

²⁹ Landon, *Lhasa: The Mysterious City, Vol. II*, pp.275-276.

to pass their frontier, without a passport from the Daeb [Deb Raja]'.³⁰

Crossing the border the journey gradually entered into a difficult phase with the road passing through a chain of snow-capped mountains and dense forests. These high inclines were favourite habitats of chowry-tailed cattle which the natives haunted to gather chowry to sell. For taking short rest in this tedious journey often did the travellers sit in cavities of the rocks that sprang naturally on the way. Such a natural shed was Gasa, which, as Turner noted, "served as a resting place for travellers passing to and fro."³¹ About 21 km march ahead this path led traders to Phari, the first node in Tibet. The land here was rocky so that cultivation was impossible. Only hunting and gathering were the means of livelihood. Chowry-tailed animal and musk deer were in plenty, and the local people earned on them. There was, however, a fortress in that place where travellers took night shelter. Alternatively, they could proceed five km farther to Chugya to rest at the Chasa Goompha where Phari Lama stayed. He was the most influential person among the herds, and also the governor of a vast range of rocks and deserts.

The next important commercial town in this route was Gyantse, 132 km from Chugya. Several villages stood on this way for the caravans to stay at night. Those were Tuna, Dochen, Chalu, Shamda, Kangamar, and Saogang with distances from each other varying in the range of 12-24 km. Most of them were insignificant hamlets at the lap of mountains. Only Kangmar and Saogang had some importance in the contemporary business. The former's importance was due to its strategic location as a junction of two paths, one proceeding directly to Lhasa and the other via Gyantse (vide Map 1). Since the former was a shorter path, the Lhasa-bound travellers preferred it in most cases. The

³⁰ Turner, *An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, p.183.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.193.

importance of Saogang was due to the existence of an old fort, and also a monastery, where traders could stay comfortably at night. The road in this stretch, however, ran mostly through valleys. Some of these valleys were extensive while others were narrow. They were cultivable somewhere but dry, rocky and totally unfit for cultivation elsewhere. Many springs and lakes came up on the way, and they were hot beds of superstition in the locality. People could read, for example, the evil design of the forthcoming events from the Lake Ramtchieu. Again, a hot spring in between Saogang and Kangamar was believed to cure all the diseases under the sky. Turner wrote, "The virtues attributed to this spring, were various and powerful, not being confined to invalids of any particular description, but extending to all the sick and aged, whether they seek a cure from infirmity or from disease."³² Whatever their superstitious values, there is no doubt that these springs and lakes provided much-needed water to the moving caravans along this route.

The caravan thus reached Gyantse, the 'dominating peak'. It was one of the earliest settlements in Tibet where goods from south Asia were exchanged with those from central Asia. It had road connections with India, Nepal and Bhutan on the one end, and Ladak and central Asia on the other. Caravans, therefore, regularly visited this place from Ladak, Nepal and upper Tibet with goods such as gold, borax, salt, wool, musk and furs for exchange with the central Asian commodities like tea, tobacco, sugar, cotton goods and hardware. Gyantse itself was a great producer of woollen cloth and carpets, and the third largest market for these products in Tibet. For the purpose of exchange, however, traders flocked in an open place at the entrance of a great pagoda. The Monastery levied taxes on the goods transacted there, and also on the buildings that surrounded the market accommodating various business activities. Some of the caravans coming from Bhutan terminated here while others progressed further.

³² Ibid., p.220.

The next three important nodes were Gobzhi, Ralung and Ngartse (vide Map 1). The distance between Gyantse and Gobzhi was about 24 km, and that between Gobzhi and Ralung about 21 km, both of which were covered in a day's march. For the longer distance between Ralung and Ngartse, viz. 30 km, the caravans often took a halt at Zara, 11 km from Ralung. Gobzhi in the Tibetan language, however, signifies 'the four doors'. The place, indeed, represented a gateway to four different routes, three important trade paths to Lhasa and a fourth of lesser significance³³, and these gave it a place of prominence in the contemporary trade. A fort stood there to protect the caravan. Trade apart, the settlement also thrived in agriculture with its surroundings cultivated extensively with barley, peas and mustards. Some medicinal plants, especially larkspur and aconite, were also gathered and processed here for export to India.³⁴ Ralung, the next node, was not, however, that much important from the viewpoint of trade. It was the headquarters of the Drukpa Sect of Buddhism that controlled all the monasteries and temples of Bhutan, as well as the Governor of Trongsa who was the temporal representative of the Dharma Raja, the spiritual head of Bhutan.³⁵ The caravan traders found it a convenient place for rest at night. Ngartse was also preferred for the sake of security and convenience that was ensured by an existing fort.

Four more nodes, however, followed at Yarsig, Toma-lung, Chusul and Nethang (vide Map 1). Their respective distances from one another were 17 km, 20 km, 11 km and 32 km. Of these, Yarsig and Chusul were more important from the viewpoint of trade. Yarsig was significant as it was directly linked to Shigatse, a commercial town of Tibet. Some Bhutanese caravans visited Shigatse instead of Lhasa, and also some Bhutan-bound trades were originated there. Chusul was comparatively a larger human settlement where

³³ Waddel, *Lhasa and its Mysteries*, p.280.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.281.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 283-284.

houses were built of stones. It housed two forts, one of which was the old castle of Chusul. Waddel remarked, "These two forts had evidently been of enormous strength, and this marvelously strong natural position ...[commanded] effectually the trade routes from India, Nepal, Bhutan and Shigatse to Lhasa."³⁶ Nethang was, however, historically a religious place where a number of monasteries and shrines were situated. Of the two remarkable shrines in this place, one was attributed to the King Ralpachan, who ruled during the ninth century A.D., and the other was the tomb of Atisha, the great Buddhist monk from India who migrated to Tibet in 1038 A.D., and reformed Lamaism.

Similar to the previous stretch, the road ran here mostly through disjointed valleys along the rivers that endowed them. While the journey through the valleys was smooth, it became difficult at the confluences of valleys, which were often occupied by the passes or hills. Such a difficult journey confronted a nine-km path on a mountain between Gobzhi and Ralung. Waddel noted that more often than not goods fell from pack animals in this steep road, and "the falling of any load delayed the whole of the column behind it".³⁷ Similar challenges were encountered along the Kharo pass between Ralung and Ngartse, and along the Kamba pass between Ngartse and Toma-lung. There was another three-km stretch away from Chusul where the road ran beneath overhanging granite cliffs. So accident-prone was this stretch that on a stone the people engraved their goddess of mercy, the Tara, "who guards the traveller from the dangers of the falling rocks, and of the seething waters below his path".³⁸

From Nethang travellers were to go for 21 km to reach Lhasa. The journey continued to be risk-prone, and became still more hazardous as the road advanced through undulating terrains of mountains. On this difficult leg was engraved,

³⁶ Ibid., p.317.

³⁷ Ibid., p.282.

³⁸ Ibid., p.316.

perhaps for the sake of eternal blessings, a massive rock-sculpture of sitting Buddha facing Lhasa. Only two km ahead of the destination the road finally entered a fertile valley with all evidences of advanced cultivation. The journey became relaxed passing by the side of scattered villages, monasteries as well as wild flowering plants that were much to the resemblance of European wildflowers.

Part III

The Bhutan-Bengal trade route claims antiquity on the strength of evidence from the seventeenth century foreign traveller Ralph Fitch. It came to further limelight and got the state patronage in Bengal during the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries because of the colonial government that looked after the trading interests of British goods in general and that of the English East India Company in particular. The route's importance to the British administration was not due to their interest in Bhutan *per se*, but in Tibet and China, which were accessible from Bhutan. Earlier, India used to carry out substantial trade with Tibet and China via Nepal, a connection that was lost in 1768 when King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Nepal reserved the right to trade in this route only to the Gurkhas. The East India Company then sought a vent for their Tibetan and Chinese trade through Bhutan. Though the Bhutan-Bengal trade route was thus primarily intended for a wider trade network encompassing Tibet and China, it did boost up the exchange of goods between Bhutan and Bengal.

Bengal government patronage of Bhutanese trade in Bengal took place in various ways. In the first place, Bhutanese traders had attracted earlier a duty of Rs 2000 at Rangpur³⁹, which was the largest destiny for Bhutanese commodities in Bengal. They were subsequently exempted from that duty. Warren Hastings, the Governor-general of India, personally took initiative in this regard. In a letter to the Collector of

³⁹ Firminger (ed.), *Bengal District Records, Rangpur, Vol.I*, p.70

Rangpur, he stressed, “Having determined to abolish all duties on the Bootea trade to Rangpur, either on the sales or purchase of their horses or other merchandise, we desire that you will carry this resolution into execution”.⁴⁰ Secondly, the government reimbursed the expenses of the caravans coming from Bhutan, and also those relating to the construction of stables in Rangpur.⁴¹ Thirdly, there had earlier been a ban on the purchase of oil and dried fish in Rangpur by Bhutanese merchants. On the complaints received from them, Warren Hastings removed all those bans. He instructed, “[T]he district official should] issue Perwannahs to the Zeminders and officers of the districts in which the Booteas have been accustomed to buy these articles, to protect and assist them in carrying on their trade and to allow their oil and dried fish freely to pass the different chokeys and gauts.”⁴² Fourthly, the government extended civic facilities to the Bhutanese and Tibetan traders who visited Calcutta every year in winter to sell their wares. A Buddhist temple was also constructed near Calcutta, which they could use as a meeting place, a place of night halt as well as for the purpose of prayer.⁴³

These policies were evidently based on the proposal of George Bogle. Bogle believed that the duty on the sale of Bhutanese horses should be removed in exchange of some benevolent measures from the end of the Bhutan government. He advised, “The Bhutanese should be free to sell their horses anywhere in Bengal free from any duty or any other hindrance...and that in return the Deb should allow all Hindu and Mussalman merchants freely to pass and repass through his country between Bengal and Tibet.”⁴⁴ Bogle was aware that the Deb Raja had been stubbornly resisting the entry of

⁴⁰ Quoted in Firminger (ed.), *Bengal District Records, Rangpur, Vol.I*, p.70.

⁴¹ Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.77.

⁴² Quoted in Firminger (ed.), *Bengal District Records, Rangpur, Vol. II*, p.5.

⁴³ Deb, *Bhutan and India*, p.138.

⁴⁴ Collister, *Bhutan and the British*, p.21.

European traders in Bhutan. If the Bengalis were allowed to trade there and use it as a transit point in the Tibetan trade, the interests of English broadcloth and other products would be promoted. Moreover, he pointed out, “[T]he Company may be greatly benefited in the sale of broadcloth, iron and lead and other European commodities by sending proper persons to reside at Rungpore to explore the interest...of Bhutan...”⁴⁵ The marketing interest of British commodities, especially broadcloth and iron, thus underpinned the British policy towards Bengal’s trade with Bhutan.

There were eleven entry points, locally called *duars*, between erstwhile Bengal and Bhutan. Out of these, five *duars* belonged to the district of Jalpaiguri in Bengal and six to the district of Goalpara in Assam during the nineteenth century. The *duars* with Bengal were Lakhimpur, Kumargram, Balla, Chamurchi and Buxa. The caravans from Bhutan travelled mostly through the *duars* Kumargram, Chamurchi and Buxa because of the lack of penetrability at Lakhimpur and Balla. There was, however, a controversy regarding the popularity of Buxa vis-a-vis Chamurchi as a *duar* to Bhutan. Pemberton believed that traders disliked Buxa because of its steep, narrow and uneven paths, which were fatal even to pack animals. According to him, “It appears that the merchants who convey their goods from Tibet and Bootan to the town of Rungpore in the plains, all travel from the northern frontier of the latter country through the districts subject to the Paro Pilo...and instead of crossing, as was generally supposed, to the left bank of the Tchinchoo, near the confluence of that river with the Hatchoo, continue to travel along the right bank, by a route which leads to a village called Doona, between Dalimkotta and Cheemurchee. It is described, as infinitely more easy of access than the road by Buxa Doar...”⁴⁶ Turner, however, did not agree with him. He believed that the journey of caravans that used the Buxa *duar* involved lower costs. Other authorities also confirmed the

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.8.

⁴⁶ Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.48.

preference of the Buxa *duar* among travelling traders. The *duar* at Kumargram was, however, important because of its connection with Kalikhola, a big trade centre in Bhutan that was situated at a tri-junction between Bengal, Assam and Bhutan.

Although the Bhutan-Assam trade route was conspicuous by the absence of traders from the plain, Bengali traders frequently travelled in the Bhutan-Bengal route side by side with hill traders like the Bhutanese and the Tibetans. George Bogle vouched this in a letter to the Governor-general of India in 1774.⁴⁷ A contemporary Bengali pilgrim also confirmed the presence of plain traders in this hilly route. He noted, "Many Bengal merchants had made their way through Bhutan to Tibet."⁴⁸ Moreover, available evidence confirms that traders from the plains were not discouraged by authorities either in Bhutan or in Tibet. According to a source, "Many merchants had...brought their commodities to market...The authorities were most heartily disposed to continue the commercial intercourse. There were no complaints of impediment or loss."⁴⁹ This was a significant development in the nineteenth century in view of the earlier attitude of the Deb Raja to exclude traders from the plain in this route.

Similar to other trade routes in this region, the Bhutan-Bengal route became active and vibrant only in the winter season. According to the Collector of Rangpur, "The Bootan caravans generally arrive at Rungpoor in February and March, and return to their country in May and June."⁵⁰ Note that the monsoon arrived in the sub-Himalayan Bengal around early June so that the caravans from Bhutan scheduled their departure from this place prior to its onset.

⁴⁷ Markham, *Narrative of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, p.53.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Collister, *Bhutan and the British*, p.23.

⁴⁹ Gupta, *British Relations with Bhutan*, p.54.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Pemberton, *Report on Bootan*, p.77.

The beasts of burden in this route were similar to those in the Bhutan-Assam trade route.⁵¹ Cart was, however, never used here for transportation presumably because of its risk and inconvenience in an inclined road. Rather, the practice was to suspend goods on both sides of the animals through a connector of jute ropes, called *taat*. The people accompanying those beasts were called *bolodia*.⁵²

From a contemporary source, Pemberton prepared a list of Bhutan's import and export from Bengal. It appears from the list that the principal export items included *tangun*, *munjistha*, blankets, cow-tails, wax, musk, walnuts, lac, China silk, and silver. *Tangun* was by far the most significant item. An estimated number of 400-500 *tanguns* were annually sold in Bengal and fetched about Rs 30,000-40,000.⁵³ *Munjistha*, a dye material, came next in importance with its annual value of trade standing at Rs 7000.⁵⁴ It was extensively used in Bengal's cotton textile industry. Other important items were blankets and cow-tails amounting in value to Rs 2580 and Rs 550 per annum respectively.⁵⁵ Bhutan's import from Bengal included chiefly broadcloth, indigo, goat skins, and copper. There were also imports of endy cloth, coarse cloth, googol, sandal wood, country gunpowder, dried fish, tobacco, betel-nut, cloves, nutmegs, cardamom, nukher, camphor and sugar. It is noteworthy that Bhutan's trade balance with Rangpur ran a deficit in most years with import exceeding export.

⁵¹ Ray and Sarkar, "Reconstructing of Nineteenth Century Trade Route between Bhutan and Assam: Evidences from British Political Missions", *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Volume 13, Winter, 2005, pp.9-10.

⁵² Barman, *Uttar Banglar Sekal o Amar Jiban Smiriti*, p.11.

⁵³ Firminger (ed.), *Bengal District Records, Rangpur, Vol.I*, p.46.

⁵⁴ Martin, *Eastern Bengal, Vol V, Rangpur and Assam*, p.710.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.710-711.

Part IV

Paro was the origin of the Bhutan-Bengal trade route. Since we have already described the place in detail in Section II we avoid its repetition here. The destination of this route, and its nodes and links are discussed below.

Rangpur: The Destination

Rangpur gained eminence as a destination of hill traffic on the strength of its transport linkage with important commercial towns and cities in the country. Its transportation was entirely river-borne. The river Tista on the bank of which the town was situated was linked with the Brahmaputra on the west and the Mahananda on the east. The Mahananda in turn flows into the Ganges. Rangpur was thus endowed with the transportation facilities of the two great rivers of Eastern India, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Because of these linkages Rangpur emerged as a centre of exchange between the hill products coming from Bhutan and Tibet, on the one hand, and the products available in eastern India, on the other.

The principal commodities that the Bhutanese traders purchased from Rangpur were broadcloth and indigo. The imported English broadcloths in Calcutta were made available in plenty in Rangpur so that the hill markets in Bhutan and Tibet for English products could be explored from Rangpur. In fact, this was the business strategy of the East India Company, which they nurtured by posting their agents at Rangpur. The other product of significance, viz. indigo, was manufactured in Rangpur itself. About 13,000 acres of land were annually put into cultivation in this district during the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁶ While the big manufacturers sent their output directly to Calcutta, the smaller ones sold their products to the local user-industry and the Bhutanese

⁵⁶ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, p.246.

traders. The Bhutanese demand for this commodity may be assessed from the fact that when the Rangpur fair was discontinued in 1832, about 1000 maunds of indigo were to be brought from Rangpur to Jalpaiguri mainly for sale to Bhutanese traders.⁵⁷

The exchange of goods from the hills took place in fairs that sprang up at different places in this region. Those fairs were generally held in winter and continued roughly for four weeks. The biggest one took place at Darwani where, according to a contemporary source, around 50,000 visitors participated. In addition to the traditional products, various live animals like elephants, camel, sheep etc were sold here from the neighbouring states like Bihar. Similar fairs were also held at Panga, Barabhita, Badarganj, Birat and Rangpur. The Rangpur fair was, however, sponsored by the government, who provided the entire organisational expenditures. Bogle started this fair in 1780. There were no state interventions or intervention of any local bodies in the affairs of these fairs. Bhutanese merchants were, as Bogle remarked in 1780, “left to the freedom of their own will in buying and selling, [and] went away very well satisfied”.⁵⁸

Nodes and Links

From Paro, Bengal-bound caravans descended along the banks of the river Pa-chu in the south-east direction, and took a halt 16 km away at Paku, which was situated at the confluence of the Pa-chu and Ma-chu. On the wayside valley of the river grew a few prosperous villages where inhabitants were mostly the arm-guards and officials of the Paro fort.⁵⁹ Sometimes, the caravans halted at the village Essana, close to Paku, which was basically an agrarian settlement. Paku had

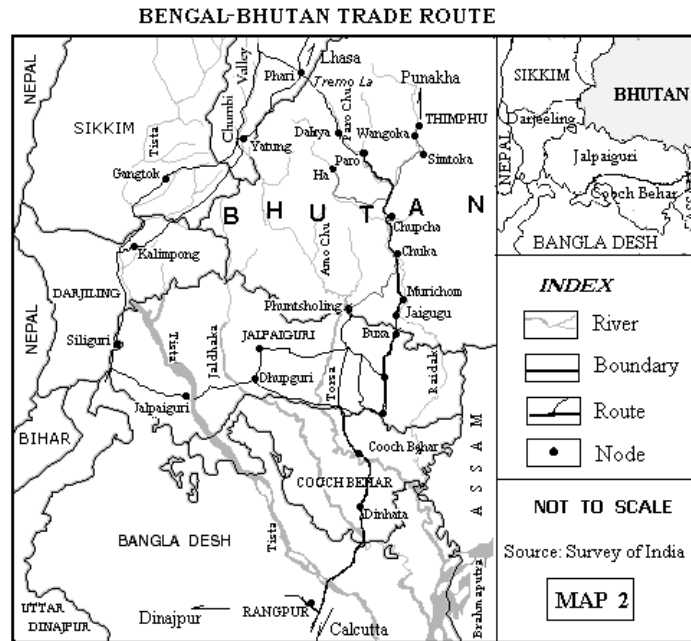
⁵⁷ Ibid.,

⁵⁸ Quoted in Deb, *Bhutan and India*, p.cliii.

⁵⁹ Eden, “Report on the State of Bootan and on the Progress of the Mission of 1863-64” in Kuloy (ed.), *Political Missions to Bootan*, p.91.

its importance in the contemporary business network because of its road linkage in addition to the present one, with Tassisudon (presently called Thimpu), the capital of Bhutan (vide Map 2). From Paku, however, the caravans changed their direction, and proceeded southward towards the border of Bengal.

The first place of commercial interest in this route was Buxa, a place on the Cooch Begar-Bhutan border around 110 km from Paku.



In between Paku and Buxa there were several villages where caravans might halt at night. More prominent among such villages were Chupcha, Chukha, Murichom and Jaigugu (vide Map 2) with successive distances at 27 km, 28 km, 20 km and 19 km. Travelling traders preferred Chupcha and

Chukha for the existence of castles there where they felt safe at night. Murichom and Jaigugu were, however, prosperous agricultural settlements, and traders could rest there at night along with their pack animals. The road in this stretch ran through the slopes of mountains and narrow valleys along the river-bed. Some mountains were almost barren while others were cultivated on the *jhum* technology. The importance of this stretch of the route is understood from the existence of an iron suspension bridge over the river Teemboo in between Chukha and Murichom. It was 147 ft in length and 6 ft in breadth, and could be raised vertically up to about seven feet.

Every caravan, however, took a halt at the commercial hubs of Buxa. It was situated at the base of several mountains, and spacious enough to accommodate a great body of human settlement. Turner described it as “a place of great natural strength”. He continued, “[B]eing a frontier station of these mountains, [it] has been rendered still stronger by the aid of art, which has been most ingeniously employed to strike off the summit of the hill, and to level an extensive space, capable of affording accommodation to a body of men, sufficiently numerous for the defence of this difficult pass, against all assault”.⁶⁰ Because of the importance of this place as the entry point of their trading world, Bhutanese traders performed various rituals at Buxa. One such ritual was to cut off the tails of their horses. Obviously, it disfigured the appearance of *tangans*, and accordingly, depreciated their market value. The British government in Bengal, however, persuaded them to abolish the custom by providing liberal rewards. There was a hearsay that for this liberal reward of the government the place was referred as the ‘bounteous pass’ or the *Buxa duar*.⁶¹

The next important commercial town in this route was Cooch Behar, around 48 km away from Buxa. Unable to cover up

⁶⁰ Turner, *An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, pp, 39-40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.40.

this distance in a day, the caravans used to take breaks at Minagoung and Chichakotta villages that stood on the way between Buxa and Cooch Behar. While Chichakotta housed a fort that attracted the travellers to stay at night, Minagoung was preferred as a halting place by the Bhutanese caravans as well as Buxa-bound traders from the plain. In this stretch from Buxa to Cooch Behar, however, the hilly terrain got flatter and plain. But the slope declined so gently that, as Griffith described, “the boundaries of the Hills and those of the Plains were but ill-defined”.⁶² Consequently, the journey in this segment was smooth and comfortable in contrast to the hazards of the previous legs. The connecting road sometimes ran through the heart of dense foothill forests, sometimes over grass land, and occasionally by the side of wild pineapple orchards. In the season, pineapples were available here in plenty, and Turner reported that “no less than twenty may be bought for a rupee, about the value of half a crown”.⁶³

Many traders from Bhutan terminated their journey at Cooch Behar, disposing their wares there. It was a commercial centre that developed from the sixteenth century onwards as a centre of exchange among various traders from Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim and India. In addition to various agricultural products that grew in and around Cooch Behar, several merchandises from Patna, Rajmahal and Gaur⁶⁴ were also for sale to the Bhutanese traders. Hunter noted, “The Bhutia trade with Bengal was carried on formerly, as now, through territory occupied by Koch chiefs; and when a party of Bhutias arrived in Kuch Behar, it was customary that they should be maintained at public expense.”⁶⁵ This explains the importance of Bhutanese traders in the commerce of Cooch

⁶² Griffiths, “Journal of the Missions to Bootan in 1837-38”, in Kuloy (ed.), *Political Missions to Bootan*, p.302.

⁶³ Turner, *An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, pp, 13-14.

⁶⁴ Deb, *Bhutan and India*, p.55.

⁶⁵ Hunter, *Statistical Account of The State of Kuch Behar*, pp.412-413

Behar.

The last leg of the journey was from Cooch Behar to Rangpur, and that covered a distance of approximately 82 km. Since this was an extensive human settlement, the caravans did not find any difficulty to find their places of rest at night. Often did they stay at places like Ghiddildow, Pahargange, Badaldanga, Mangalhaut, Saftabarry and Calamatty. Most of these were agrarian villages. Only Mangalhaut was a large manufacturing town that stood at the border of Rangpur and Cooch Behar. Excepting innumerable rivers that the caravans were to cross, there was no hazard in this journey.

V

The trade routes between Bhutan and Tibet and Bengal that this study elaborates were thus very active during the nineteenth century. The Bhutan-Tibet trade route that ran about 410 km from Paro to Lhasa belonged largely to the territory of Tibet with Bhutan accounting for only one eighth part of this stretch and three links out of 26 total links as identified in this study. It was thoroughly a mountain route posing various hazards and threats to travelling traders. That was why the speed of caravans here was as low as less than 16 km a day on the average. There were, however, three other contemporary trade routes between Bhutan and Tibet, which originated from different places of Bhutan but were all destined to Lhasa. All these trade routes treaded through mountain passes and river valleys. The route under study contained four such passes, viz. Tremo, Tang, Kharo and Kampa, with the Kharo pass at the top in terms of elevation. In contrast to the Bhutan-Tibet trade route, the Bhutan-Bengal trade route belonged mostly to the plain land. Only a part of its 268-km long stretch from Paro to Rangpur had alternating inclinations of hilly terrain. Gently climbing down from the mountain, it passed amidst century-old human settlements in the plain. Expectedly, the average speed of caravans in this route was higher, about 21 km per day.

These trade routes assumed importance because of the presence of Bengali traders along with the Tibetans and the Bhutanese. The travelling of Bengali traders along these routes contributed significantly to the exchange of knowledge and culture between these Himalayan kingdoms and India. A scrutiny of traded commodities in these routes, however, indicates that Bhutan acted as a transit trade point between these two large countries.

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An Analysis of “Meme Haylay Haylay and His Turquoise” using Joseph Campbell’s Model of the Hero’s Journey

*A. Steven Evans**

At a cursory glance, the Bhutanese folktale “Meme Haylay Haylay and His Turquoise”¹ might be sidelined as a simple wisdom (or idiotic) tale unworthy of in-depth investigation and analysis. A closer look, however, reveals how much the tale reflects the very psyche of Bhutan. It is only as the story is considered in light of its symbolic meaning that Campbell’s ‘hero’s journey’ framework becomes evident and allows for a fuller understanding and appreciation of the tale. In brief, the story is about a poor old man who goes to his fields and uncovers a valuable turquoise stone. On the way home, he trades the stone for a horse, the horse for an ox, the ox for a sheep, the sheep for a goat, the goat for a rooster, and the rooster for a song. He continued home feeling the happiest, richest and most successful businessman in the world.

This analysis of the tale will look at it from multiple vantage points: (a) the folktale itself; (b) the symbolism found within the tale; (c) a rendering of the story in light of its symbolism; (d) the folktale and its symbols through the structure of Joseph Campbell’s ‘hero’s journey’; (e) a comparison of the tale with other stories of a similar type and motif; and (f) the application of the folktale and implications to its cultural setting from which it came.

Symbols in “Meme Haylay Haylay”

One of the first questions to be asked concerning this tale is if

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¹ The folktale in its entirety can be found in the appendix of this paper.

Analysis of Meme Haylay Haylay and His Turquoise

there is any significance to its title and the name of its principle character.

Meme in my dialect actually means grandfather while in Dzongkha grandpa is known as *agay*. 'Haylay Haylay' I think it is just a name like Johnny Johnson or Peter Kinney. Actually, if I am not mistaken, the name is supposed to be "Meme Khelay Khelay", which means limping grandpa. My grandmother used to tell me this story and she told me that grandfather in the story was actually lame. So he was known by the way he walked...limping...limping. That's my version.²

Next, consideration was given to anything else in the story that might have symbolic significance. There was no picking and choosing of symbols to fit personal biases and the same source was used for all. Primary symbolic meanings were identified and applied, with secondary symbolism used to infer possible but significant variations in interpretation.

Figures 1 and 2 below indicate the primary and secondary symbolic meanings found in Jobes' volumes on symbolism and applied to the "Meme Haylay Haylay" story.

Figure 1: Primary Symbolic Meanings in the Story

Old Man: happiness in a family
Lameness: ineffectiveness
Field: sphere of action or opportunity
Turquoise: wealth
Road: happiness
Horse: success, wealth
Ox: abundance, quiet happiness
Sheep: good omen
Goat: fertility, agility
Rooster (Cock): success
Song: joy, happiness

Source: *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* by G. Jobes

² Ngawang Phuntsho, Personal Communication, July 10, 2006.

Figure 2: Secondary Symbolic Meanings in the Story

Old Man: an unproductive state
Lameness: mark of a sacred king
Field: fertility, freedom, lack of restraint; [but is also be symbolic of death]
Turquoise: a sign or pledge of friendship
Road: adventure, experience, progress, knowledge, learning
Horse: endurance, freedom, fertility, generosity, strength, triumph, abundance
Ox: life-power, strength, usefulness, wealth
Sheep: emotional stability, innocence, simplicity, sacrifice, gregarious
Goat:
Rooster (Cock): exaltation, victory
Song: voice of a deity, transforming magic
The Number Seven: adventure, perfection, completion, endurance, stability, victory, strength, wisdom

Source: *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* by G. Jobes

A Symbolic Retelling of the Story

In light of the symbolic interpretations found in figures 1 and 2, it is significant to retell the story of Meme Haylay Haylay and insert symbolic meanings where appropriate.

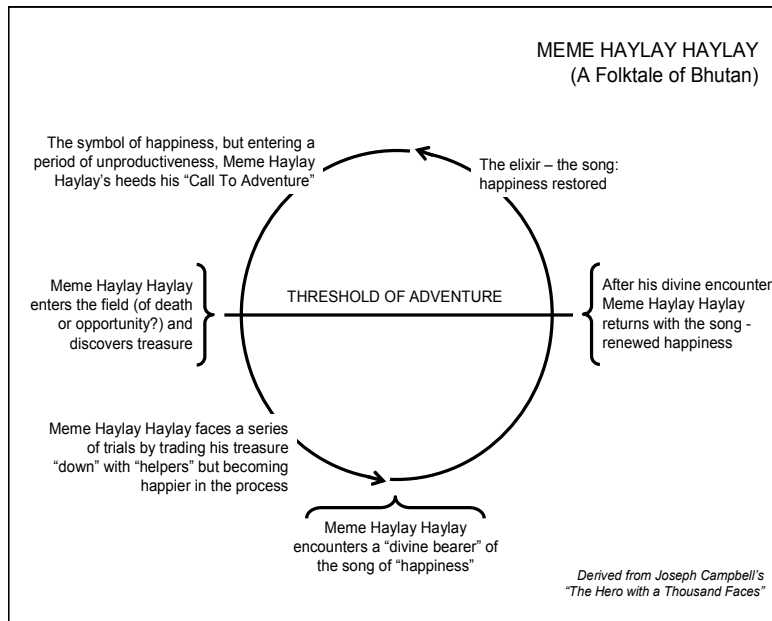
One day poor old Meme Haylay Haylay (a grandfather—the symbol of happiness in the home, but limping, someone in an unproductive state) left home to work in the fields (a place of opportunity, freedom and even fertility; and possibly a place of death). While digging, the poor old man discovered an immense turquoise stone (a symbol of great wealth). No longer poor, but rich, he walked toward home (down the road of happiness and adventure, the road of experience and knowledge, the road of progress). He traded his immense wealth for a horse (symbolic of success, wealth of another kind, generosity, freedom, endurance, strength and even fertility). He then traded this for an ox (abundance, strength, usefulness and quiet happiness). He traded the ox for a sheep (symbol of a good omen, emotional stability, innocence, simplicity and an object of sacrifice). He traded the sheep for a goat (agility and, even, fertility), and traded this for a rooster

Analysis of Meme Haylay Haylay and His Turquoise

(success, victory, exaltation). Meme Haylay Haylay finally heard a song (the symbol of transforming magic; the voice of deity, the voice of the divine, the epitome of happiness) and traded the rooster for this ultimate happiness and joy.

Here is now a journey of restoration, completeness or wholeness, a journey back to a rightful and productive state of happiness. On the journey, Meme Haylay Haylay shed the material and assumed the ethereal or spiritual. Sobol said, "The hero's journey is the hero called on a journey to redeem a loss or good and to bring it back to community".³

Figure 3: Meme Haylay Haylay's Call to Adventure



³ Dr. Joseph Sobol, Personal Communication, July 26, 2006. should Dr. Joseph Sobol be identified as a storytelling professor of East Tennessee State University.

It is interesting to note that there are seven 'objects' involved in the trades: turquoise, horse, ox, sheep, goat, rooster, and song. In many cultures seven is a number of significance and is considered auspicious, and this is true of the Buddhist Bhutanese culture. Here the number seven symbolized adventure, perfection, completion, endurance, stability, victory, strength and wisdom. The series of trades involving seven objects culminated in a sense of completion, victory, perfection and wisdom, among other things.

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation—initiation—return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from the mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.⁴

Meme Haylay Haylay, representing the very psyche of the collective, is the symbol of happiness, but he is limping—old and unproductive—so he heeds the call to adventure not knowing whether he faces a field of opportunity or the field of death. If of opportunity, how shall he return? Wealthy? Strong and virile? Or shall he return the bearer of renewed happiness, once again whole, complete, and no longer limping. On his journey—his road to happiness—Meme Haylay Haylay encountered helpers who guided him along the way—not pointing out the direction, but presenting him with various material and/or physiological options. He always bartered for something of lesser material value, but his happiness increased with each trade. Finally, Meme Haylay Haylay encounters the divine bearer of happiness encapsulated within a song, who bestowed this 'inner wealth' of ultimate, extreme and renewed happiness upon him,

⁴ Campbell, J. (1949) *The hero with a thousand faces*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p.30

dispensing of any material satisfaction he had been receiving or any physical rejuvenation that might have been implied.

“The effect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world,” Campbell said. “The miracle of this flow may be represented in physical terms as a circulation of food substance, dynamically as a streaming of energy, or spiritually as a manifestation of grace”.⁵ In a sense, through Meme Haylay Haylay’s call to adventure and his successful return, the collective psyche is restored and that which has been thrown off balance was once again put on even keel. The all-important ethos of happiness was once again ‘circulating’ within the embodiment of the Buddhist cosmos.

The first stage of the mythological journey—which we have designated the “call to adventure”—signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, a lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight. The hero can go forth of his own volition to accomplish the adventure....⁶

Why would a limping old man go to the fields to prepare it for planting? Could it merely be that he was poor and had no choice if he was going to eat? Maybe. It might be, however, that his call to adventure was more of an emotional or spiritual tug rather than a physical one. Maybe he went to the field in order to feel useful and productive, to see what he could do or accomplish in spite of his age, physical condition and limitations? Even though the field meant either opportunity or death, Meme Haylay Haylay still had to go,

⁵ Ibid., p.40.

⁶ Ibid., p.58.

regardless of the outcome. What he couldn't do is stay where he was, maintaining the *status quo*, or worse, see all that was important to the emotional and spiritual well-being of the 'collective' diminish and slip away.

Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials. This is a favorite phase of the myth-adventure. The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper who he met before his entrance into this region. Or it may be that he here discovers for the first time a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage.⁷

At this point in the story, Meme Haylay Haylay has heeded the call to adventure and entered into the "zone unknown", as Campbell calls it. He then encountered a series of 'helpers', who led him further down the road of happiness by exchanging with him that which symbolized not only wealth, but strength and virility as well—all things that would be appealing to a 1) poor, 2) old, and 3) man.

It is here, though, that the "Meme Haylay Haylay" folktale deviates a bit from Campbell's standard 'hero's journey'. Instead of encountering "strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds and impossible delight", Meme Haylay Haylay encountered normal men with normal possessions. However, two elements of the 'hero's journey' are still evident, even within the deviation: trails or tests; and the assistance of 'helpers', folks familiar to him. Every potential trade is a temptation to keep that which is of greater material or physiological value and is a test, as well, to see if he would indeed make a trade that would lead him one step closer to the ultimate 'prize', that which initiated the call.

The series of tests and trails, aided by the helpers along the way, epitomized the "purification process" described by

⁷ Ibid., p.97.

Campbell:

And so it happens that if anyone—in whatever society—undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending, either intentionally or unintentionally, into the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth, he soon finds himself in a landscape of symbolical figures (any one of which may swallow him).... In the vocabulary of the mystics, this is the second stage of the Way, that of the “purification of the self,” when the senses are “cleansed and humbled,” and the energies and interests “concentrated upon transcendental things”; or in a vocabulary of more modern turn: this is the process of dissolving, transcending, or transmuting the infantile images of our personal past. In our dreams the ageless perils, gargoyles, trials, secret helpers, and instructive figures are nightly still encountered; and in their forms we may see reflected not only the whole picture of our present case, but also the clue to what we must do to be saved.⁸

Meme Haylay Haylay was in the process of shedding the material and physiological in favour of the spiritual. He was refining his motivations, balancing his psyche, to be more in tune with the cosmic collective. He entered the land, was put to the test and underwent the purification process. By these standards, he favoured well, but the journey was not complete, for he hadn't fully achieved what he has set out to do. “The ordeal is a deepening of the problem of the first threshold and the question is still in balance: can the ego put itself to death?” Campbell said.⁹

The question now arises: Could Meme Haylay Haylay truly accomplish the final leg of the journey on his own, even with the aid of the helpers he has encountered along the way? Obviously, the answer is “no”. Meme Haylay Haylay was merely at the point or stage in the journey where he was ready to take the next, but all important, step.

The ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have

⁸ Ibid., p.101.

⁹ Ibid., p.109.

been overcome, is commonly represented as a mythical marriage of the triumphant hero-soul,” Campbell said. “This is the crisis at the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart.¹⁰

At this point in the story, Meme Haylay Haylay heard the song and was struck by its beauty and emotional impact it had on him. The song—the symbol of transforming magic, the voice of deity and the divine, the epitome of happiness—intervened as the final test and as the ultimate prize. It completed the purification process, rejuvenated and empowered the enfeebled old man, and sent him on his way as a bearer of a renewed ethos of the psyche. “The hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society,” Campbell said.¹¹

Genre, Tale Types, Motif, Versions and Variances

The genre of the folktale “Meme Heylay Heylay” probably falls under the ‘fool’ or ‘idiot’ stories category, but with opposite emphasis. In many cases wisdom is seen in the guise of foolishness, while sometimes the opposite is true—foolishness cloaked as wisdom.

There is one such story, a “Jack Tale” from the American Appalachian Mountains, called “Jack Seeks His Fortune”, where the boy Jack headed out to seek his fortune and received a lump of gold in payment for work. Because it became too heavy, he traded it for a horse. A series of trades then took place until Jack finally ends up with a flat rock, which he determined can be used as a doorstep. While drinking water from a well, the rock fell in and Jack lost it for good. “That’s great,” Jack thought, “now I have nothing to

¹⁰ Ibid., p.109.

¹¹ Ibid., p.197.

weigh me down as I seek my fortune!"¹²

There is another traditional folktale motif from England called "Hedley Kow". This story is classified as tale type 1655 (The Profitable Exchange) and/or 170A (The Fortunate Exchange) by Aarne-Thompson. It is in MacDonald's motif index as E 427.1. Hedley Kow stories originated in the area of Hedley, and the motif refers to a mystical creature with magical powers known as Hedley Kow. He is thought to bring good luck, and to encounter him is considered auspicious. The story "Hedley Kow" tells of a poor old woman who discovered a pot of gold on the side of the road. As she travels home with it, the pot of gold changed into a lump of silver, which changed into a lump of iron, then into a large stone. With each change the old woman considered herself better off (for various reasons told in the story) than she was with the more valuable preceding object. Finally the stone turned into the Hedley Kow, and the woman exclaimed, "I do be the luckiest body hereabouts! Fancy me seeing the Hedley Kow all to myself..." She returned to her cottage, sat down by the fire, and contemplated her good luck.

The *Traditional Ballad Index* cites several ballads with motifs similar to the "Meme Haylay Haylay", "Jack Tale", and "Hedley Kow" stories. *The Swapping Song* by Richard Dyer-Bennet and *The Foolish Boy* by S. Baring-Gould are two such ballads. At least a dozen others are listed, including the German *Hans in Luck* tales and songs.

A Yiddish version of the story tells of a son-in-law entrusted with some money to make purchases in town and spends half of it on an incomplete song. He then spends the remaining funds to learn the rest of the song. When he returned home with nothing but a song, the father-in-law said, "What an idiot".¹³

¹² Sobol, Personal Communication, July 27, 2006.

¹³ Sobol, Personal Conversation, July 27, 2006.

In addition to the differing versions of “Meme Haylay Haylay” discussed above, there are differing variations of it as well. One is cited earlier in this paper, differentiating between the name “Meme Haylay Haylay” and the name “Meme Khelay Khelay”. One variance, published in India, has the valuable stone being a ruby rather than a turquoise, which speaks to Indian culture and values. Bhutanese researcher and folklorist Dorji Penjore said that some locally told variations of the story have Meme Haylay Haylay walking down the road with his last trade—either singing the song or playing a flute—and he steps in cow dung, falls to the ground, and either forgets the song or forgets how to play the flute. Meme Haylay Haylay then becomes the fool or idiot who ends up with nothing. “The audience’s reactions to the story are mixed since there are many versions of the story,” Penjore said. “Variations resulted more from how people preferred to interpret and less from their frail memory.”¹⁴

One final observation should be made in this section on genre, tale types, motif, versions and variances. Campbell listed several roles from which the hero could play on his hero’s journey, including that of warrior, lover, emperor, and tyrant. The last one mentioned, though, is saint, aesthetic, or world-renouncer [sic].¹⁵ In many ways, Meme Haylay Haylay filled that role. At the end of the story he was still old and feeble, still materially poor, but he returned spiritually rich. Sobol said, “The unconscious is liberated within the sphere of the divine.” There is interplay between “the wisdom of the earth and the knowledge of the divine,” he said.¹⁶

The Royal Kingdom of Bhutan and Its Folklore

The art which the folktales are narrated could be the same all over the world but what is interesting on the Bhutanese context is that the stories, strictly speaking, are not narrated.

¹⁴ Penjore, Dorji (2005) p.49.

¹⁵ Campbell, 1949, pp.334-354.

¹⁶ Sobol, Personal Conversation, July 27, 2006.

In Bhutan, the folktales are not told but released (*tangshi* in Dzongkha). Here, it is very significant to note that the verb *tang* can mean to “release”, “untie” or “set free”. In effect, if the folktales of Bhutan are not told or narrated but released, set free or untied it is tempting to assert that it is tied or attached to the collective memory of the Bhutanese. This could then imply that the Bhutanese and the folktales are inextricably interwoven that it wouldn’t be wrong to comment that they are found one inside the other. The folktales contain the traits and aspects of the Bhutanese. In the memory of the people dwell the folktales ready to be “untied” at an appropriate time.¹⁷

Bhutan is a Buddhist kingdom nestled in the Himalayan Mountains, founded in the eighth century A. D. It is known as the Land of the Thunder Dragon. A dragon is emblazoned across its national flag, its dominant people are the *Drukpa* or People of the Dragon, and its king is known as the Dragon King.

According to Bhutanese history, in A.D. 747 the Guru Rimpoche flew from Tibet to Bhutan on the back of a tiger and established the Tantric school of Buddhism still followed in Bhutan today. It is said that he subdued a dragon spirit that dominated the country through the construction of numerous strategic monasteries and fortresses.

Today the *Drukpa* tell countless stories about Guru Rimpoche and Pema Lingpa, a saint and a reincarnate of Rimpoche. These stories include those of demons being harnessed by magic to build the many *dzongs* or fortress-monasteries around the country. There are numerous evidences, as well, that indicate a centuries-old endeavour to appease and subdue the dragons and demons. Painted on every house are the symbols designed to assure this, resulting in happiness, peace and harmony of all: colourful yet freakish faces of demons painted on walls; astrological markings above doorways; and graphic phallic renderings (along with carvings

¹⁷ Dorji, Tandin, 2002, p.7.

hung on the four outer corners of the homes) which supposedly drive away demons.

Happiness, peace and harmony have been the ethos or psyche of Bhutan for centuries. The national folktale, “Four Friends”, a tale where four animal friends (elephant, monkey, rabbit, bird) quarrelled and disrupted the harmony of the community, agreed to devise a way restore the peace. Regardless of size, it would be the oldest who would be in charge and oversee the maintenance of peace and harmony. The bird ended up being the oldest, therefore the wisest, and was put in charge, even though it is the smallest of the four. This Buddhist philosophy, along with appeasing the dragons and demons, has been the very soul of the nation for centuries, from its very inception. Countless folktales reflect these themes.

In 1972, the present king, Jigme Singye Wanchuck, ascended the throne at age 16. At that time Bhutan became an official nation for the first time and was placed on the roster of the United Nations. It opened its borders to outside influences for the first time ever. Tourists, a market economy, and Western media and entertainment flooded the kingdom, instigating a shift in the values of the country’s citizens.

In 2008 the king will abdicate the throne in favour of the Crown Prince Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. But, in his waning years as king, His Majesty instituted a program of Gross National Happiness, emphasizing that happiness is as important to the kingdom as its Gross National Product, or more so.

One can ask, is this just some wild-hair idea of an aging king? Probably not. The King of Bhutan seems to be the very embodiment of the psyche of the Kingdom, the product of generations and centuries of the Buddhist concepts of peace and appeasement, but he feels all of this slipping away. As with folktales, Sobol said, “The king is usually a collective

dominant whose job is to resist the new”.¹⁸ Here is the hero’s journey being lived out in real life, even paralleling the “Meme Haylay Haylay” story.

Could it be that the national folktale will shift from that of “Four Friends” to the one of Meme Haylay Haylay? Many recognize that the nation’s folklore should have a role in revitalizing the kingdom’s collective psyche, but most want to take the folktales, pin them to a board like a beautiful butterfly, put them under glass, gas them, and preserve them. The collection, compilation and publishing of Bhutan’s folktales only began in the mid-1990s and there are only a half dozen books or so in the market. This endeavor to preserve only, however, goes against the very soul of the Bhutanese folktale, if what was said is true: Stories are not told—they are released; the folktale is in every Bhutanese and every Bhutanese is in the folktale.

It is in the releasing of the story that national happiness can return.

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¹⁸ Sobol, Personal Communication, July 26, 2006.

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Appendix

*Meme Haylay Haylay and His Turquoise*¹⁹

Once upon a time, there lived a poor old man named Meme Haylay Haylay.

One day he went to his fields to prepare them for planting, and as he uprooted a clump of very stubborn weeds, he found a huge, round, bright blue turquoise stone in the dirt. It was so heavy that a man his age could hardly lift it with one hand.

Well, because of his good fortune, he decided to stop working the fields and go home. So he put the heavy valuable stone in the basket on his back that so many of the common working people used.

On the way he met a man leading a horse with a rope. “Hey, what are you doing there, Meme Haylay Haylay?” the horseman asked.

“Today I am no longer a poor old man,” Meme Haylay Haylay replied, “because today I struck it rich! As I was digging in my fields, I found this huge valuable turquoise.” But before the horseman could utter a word in response, Meme Haylay Haylay put forth a proposal, “Will you exchange your horse for this stone?”

The horseman stood speechless, for who in the world would barter a valuable turquoise stone for a plain ol’ horse? “Don’t joke with me, Meme Haylay Haylay! Your turquoise is priceless, and in comparison my horse is worthless,” the horseman replied.

“Priceless or worthless, you talk too much. Let there be less talk. If you are for the trade, take this stone and hand over the rope,” Meme Haylay Haylay said. The horseman lost no time in throwing over the rope and went his way carrying the stone, feeling happy. Meme Haylay Haylay went his way

¹⁹ Read Dorji Penjore: “Meme Haylay Haylay and His Turquoise,” p.48-49, in “Folktales and Education: Role of Bhutanese Folktales in Value Transmission”, *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Vol. 12, Summer 2005.

feeling happier than the horseman.

But that was not the end of Meme Haylay Haylay's business. On the way, he met a man with an ox. "Hey, Meme Haylay Haylay. What are you doing there?" the ox-man asked. "Today I am no longer a poor old man, but a rich man" Meme Haylay Haylay replied. "As I was digging in my fields, I found a huge valuable turquoise stone and I traded it for this horse."

He then asked the ox-man, "Would you barter your ox for this horse?" "I certainly would," the ox-man replied, and the ox-man went away with the horse feeling very happy. Meme Haylay Haylay went his way feeling happier than the ox-man.

Then, Meme Haylay Haylay met a man with a sheep. "Hey, Meme Haylay Haylay. What are you doing there?" the shepherd asked. "Today I am no longer a poor old man, but a rich man" Meme Haylay Haylay replied. "As I was digging in my fields, I found a huge valuable turquoise stone and I traded it for a horse, then I traded the horse for this ox."

He then asked the shepherd, "Would you barter your sheep for this ox?" "I certainly would," the shepherd replied, and the shepherd went away with the ox feeling very happy. Meme Haylay Haylay went his way feeling happier than the shepherd.

Then, Meme Haylay Haylay met a man with a goat. "Hey, Meme Haylay Haylay. What are you doing there?" the goat-herder asked. "Today I am no longer a poor old man, but a rich man" Meme Haylay Haylay replied. "As I was digging in my fields, I found a huge valuable turquoise stone and I traded it for a horse, then I traded the horse for an ox, and the ox for this sheep."

He then asked the goat-herder, "Hey, would you barter your goat for this sheep?" "I certainly would," the goat-herder replied, and the goat-herder went away with the sheep feeling very happy. Meme Haylay Haylay went his way feeling happier than the goat-herder.

Then, Meme Haylay Haylay met a man with a rooster. "Hey, Meme Haylay Haylay. What are you doing there?" the man asked. "Today I am no longer a poor old man, but a rich man" Meme Haylay Haylay replied. "As I was

Analysis of Meme Haylay Haylay and His Turquoise

digging in my fields, I found a huge valuable turquoise stone and I traded it for a horse, then I traded the horse for an ox, and the ox for a sheep, and the sheep for this goat.”

He then asked the man, “Hey, would you barter your rooster for this goat?” “I certainly would,” the man replied, and the he went away with the goat feeling very happy. Meme Haylay Haylay went his way feeling happier than the man.

At last he met a man singing a beautiful song. Tears of happiness swelled Meme Haylay Haylay’s eyes as he listened to the song. “I feel so happy by merely listening to the song. How much happier I would be if only I knew how to sing it myself,” he thought. The singer spied Meme Heylay Heylay. “Hey, what are you doing there?” the singer asked.

“Today I am no longer a poor old man, but a rich man” Meme Haylay Haylay replied. “As I was digging in my fields, I found a huge valuable turquoise stone and I traded it for a horse, the horse for an ox, the ox for a sheep, the sheep for a goat, and the goat for this rooster. Here, take this rooster and teach me how to sing. I like your melody so much.”

After learning the song, Meme Haylay Haylay gave away his rooster and went home singing the song, feeling the happiest, richest and most successful businessman in the world.

Echoes of Folksongs in Bhutanese Literature in English

Chandra Shekhar Sharma*

Abstract

Folksongs are a part of Bhutanese culture, performed during festivals, celebrations and regular chores. Folksongs and dances are media of communication. To realize the role, place and importance of folksongs in Bhutanese life one's involvement with Bhutanese people is important. This paper attempts to analyze the Bhutanese folksongs and their echoes in Bhutanese literature in English. The first part is a brief analysis of Bhutanese folksongs, and in the second part echoes of folksongs in popular Bhutanese non-fiction and prose fiction in English are analysed.

I

Bhutan is a small country sandwiched between India and China, but it is rich in folk traditions. It has a variety of humoristic folktales, numerous folksongs and dappled collection of dances. Songs, dances and archery live in the veins of Bhutanese people and society, and they together weave a unique cultural pattern. Folksongs and dances are not merely modes of entertainment, but have a message to instruct the common people. Some folksongs are purely vocal while others are accompanied by choreography. Some dances are social whereas others are religious, performed by lamas or monks in *dzongs* and monasteries especially during religious and auspicious occasions like *tshechu*. Religious and mask dances performed at dzongs and monasteries have fascinated foreigners, especially tourists, more than any other folk entertainment and genre. They are found quoted in various books in English by foreign authors.

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Modernization and urbanization are two key factors that are adversely affecting the performance of folksongs. There are three types of songs that are popular throughout Bhutan: *zhugdra*, *boedra* and *rigsar*. Rigsar is a modern genre that is fast becoming very popular, especially among young people, while the performance of *zhungdra* and *boedra* is becoming fewer year after year.

Zhungdra, *boedra* and *rigsar* have been classified based on the tune, style, content and form. Rigsar is mostly about contemporary Bhutanese society. They have blended western, modern Tibetan and Indian music. It is only about two decades old.

By the end of the 1980s, *rigsar* was no longer so popular, until the founding of the Norling Drayang recording label. Since Norling came into limelight, popular Bhutanese music has primarily been the *rigsar* genre, a fusion of elements...¹

Rigsar music grew after introduction of commercial music industry that brought a change in lyrics, instruments, tunes and tastes of music lovers.

Apart from *zhungdra*, *boedra* and *rigsar* there are other folksongs that have more social references. They are notably picturesque and have capacity to imbibe deep feelings. But very few people of the new generation know them. Their classification is difficult because of diverse contents and purposes.

Basically folksongs of a society can be classified into two categories: social and religious. But when it comes to studying folksongs of a country or a diverse society, the classification is difficult and complicated. In such cases, various factors such as region, culture, tune, and purpose must be considered.

Folksongs can be bifurcated into vocal- and dance-oriented

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Bhutan

songs. Subject matters and themes of folksongs help in the classification. On this basis they can be divided into institutional, seasonal and sports-related folksongs. Some folksongs are related to a special class of people. Hence, they have to be classified accordingly. Another way is to study them according to their length. Keeping into account the diversity of folksongs and places they are sung, the classification based on regions best suit the Bhutanese folksongs.

Among folksongs of northern Bhutan, *boedra*, *cha*, *yuedra*, *zhey*, and *zheyim* are dance-oriented while *alo*, *ausa*, *gurma*, *khorey*, *tangmo*, and *tshoglu* are purely vocal. Out of these *gurma* and *tshoglu* are very spiritual and hymn-like. The subjects of *lozey* are epic by nature. They sing of a hero or heroic qualities at length. Sonam Kinga classifies Bhutanese folksongs on the basis of the locality they exist.

They are very regional in character. Alo is ascribed to that region (Kurtoe). Zhetro Yarchoed... is common to Trongsa Valley. Khorey is a type of song unique to Dungsaam, Ausa to Haa, Aulay to Laya, Achay Lhamo to Ura and Omo Omo pad lung to Kheng.²

Goen Zhey is performed at Gasa...³

Cha is performed in the village of Ney, Luntse...⁴

The classification becomes easy if the songs have a common nomenclature for their group. If they are without nomenclature, like those of Lhop community, the classification becomes difficult since each song is a genre by itself.

The northern Bhutanese are followers of Mahayana Buddhism. Most residents of the Southern belt known as

² Kinga, Sonam (2001) "Attributes and values of Folk and Popular Songs.", *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 3 (1): 138.

³ Ibid., p.139.

⁴ Ibid., p.140.

Lhotshampas practice Hinduism. The belt is settled by Bahun, Chettri Limbu, Rai and other Nepali ethnic groups. Though they have their own folksongs they are rarely seen performing. Among others, there are Tamangs inhabitants who have different folksongs. Lepchas too have their own folksongs called *muten chi*, *dambrajo*, *phenlyok*, *pyasu loma lolima* etc.

Sharchops who live in the Eastern Bhutan share same folksongs as those of the Western Bhutanese. Different ethnic groups have their different folksongs related to religion, deity or usual chores but these songs are on the verge of becoming rare.

Folksongs have accompanied every walk of Bhutanese life. One can find them sung during festivals and religious activities, games and sports like archery, regular chores, social activities and farming. They are deeply rooted in rural life. Novels and non-fiction in English are the best means for non-Dzongkha speakers to understand the folksongs and their position.

II

In *History of Bhutan* Bikram Jit Hasrat touches on historical social and cultural aspects of the country but misses folksongs. Though he writes on *chams*, a religious mask dances performed by monks, but folksong is not even mentioned. *Bhutan: Kingdom of the Dragon* by Robert Dompinier contains just one photograph of women performing *zhungdra*, but there is no caption even about the name of performance. In her famous travelogue, *Beyond the Sky and the Earth*, Jamie Zeppa shares her experiences in Bhutan – cultural patterns of rural Bhutan and intrusion of modernization in Bhutan. There's a picturesque presentation of people and society but nothing on folksongs and dances.

Dieter Zurcher and Kuenzang Choden focus on water in their book, *Bhutan: Land of Spirituality and Modernization Role of Water in Daily Life*. They analyze the presence of water in the

Bhutanese life. Amidst colourful photographs they mention “Singing in the rain”.⁵ There is rain, there is water but there is no song sung by the natives during the rains.

Dr. Jagar Dorji’s ethnography on Lhop, a tribe living in hills of South-west Bhutan, gives a little room to folksongs. The songs mentioned by Dr. Jagar Dorji reject above-mentioned classification. The songs of the Lhops differ not only in terms of nomenclature but also in terms of tune and purpose. In some cases there are diverse contents. Songs like “Sele la wo chey; Mainaguri ya chey” and “Tangphu-tangphu la rang ka pon-min-yan” are the songs of surrendering the country to the supreme power and begging for its protection.

Lhops too have sports related folksongs. *Ker* (archery) and *dogu* (discus throw) are their traditional sports. While playing these sports, they enjoy folksongs.

Dasa dogu tsisa ley
Aulu tsemo tsisa ley
Bhoto mahri, butsu mahri,
Gengey nyma tsosa ley...⁶

Dr. Jagar tells us of another ballad-like song about a hero sung during archery matches. The song praises a local hero who devoted himself towards a social cause. The folksong below indicates that the Lhopu’s involvement in building the Dalim Dzong.

Oi pu-chia tang manda wai
Ley yenchey ngari kuzho yen wai...⁷

We get another reference to Labey in the book. Lhops sing Labey during the archery match unlike at the end or

⁵ Zurcher, Dieter, and Kuenzang Choden (2003) *Bhutan: Land of Spirituality and Modernization Role of Water in Daily Life*. Chicago: New Dawn Press, p.27.

⁶ Dorji, Jagar (2003), *Lhop - A Tribal Community in South Western Bhutan, and its Survival through Time*, Paro: Jagar Dorji, p.30

⁷ Ibid., p.57.

beginning of ceremonies.

Ah Labey Labey wai Labey sa
Ah Labey labey lay sho chi
Wangchen poengi wai chandha dhi
Ah Laybi tendi wait se go bay...⁸

The footnote tells that for inhabitant, expression and feelings matter as much as the language. He writes,

Although the words are undoubtedly Dzongkha, their pronunciations have altered so much that that if one does not listen carefully, they sound more like a foreign dialect. Lately, a number of Nepali words have entered the Lhop dialect with such dexterity that it is hard to make out the differences.⁹

To be precise the Lhop community is rich in folksongs and verses that are sung invoke their local deity, Geynen,¹⁰ to revere the local deity during the celebration of Lo,¹¹ their annual festival, to appease the local deity at local festivals,¹² to celebrate the harvest¹³ and to enjoy sports.

These songs are on the verge of becoming a history of the past due to lack of exposure and intrusion of modernization. Jagar Dorji is credited for bringing to light an account of the tribe which before 2003 is hardly known. The same is the case with their folksongs. Though the book has a little room for folksongs, it unveils the vanishing oral tradition of Lhops. There are only few Lhops who know the songs.

Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, the Queen of Bhutan, has emerged as a powerful writer in recent years. Her memoir *Treasures of Thunder Dragon: A Portrait of Bhutan* "is a captivating blend of personal memoir, history, folk lore and

⁸ Ibid., p.59.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.56.

¹¹ Ibid., p.55.

¹² Ibid., p.35.

¹³ Ibid., p.54.

travelogue.”¹⁴ The book interestingly reveals dappled aspects of Bhutanese rural society. But while writing these aspects, Ashi Dorji provides a little room for folksongs. In this book we come across a very emotional melancholic folksong that the author heard one morning while camping in the northern region, the cold region of yaks and yak-herders.

As we rode uphill, the song of a yak herder floated in the clear, still air. There is something haunting about yak herder's songs, whether in Laya or Lunana, and the song I heard this morning was...

How beautiful is yak Legpai Lhadar's face
Yak Legpai Lhadar the god-sent calf
Shall I describe my home and paths?¹⁵

The song translated by Dorji Penjore portrays not only the poetic art or approach but also his or her ability to perceive a yak's feelings and melancholy, and the spontaneity in versifying them.

Though the folksongs are seldom mentioned in the works of foreigners the indigenous writers could not resist themselves from writing something about them. Prose-fiction or novel in English is recent introduction.

Karma Ura in his novel, *The Hero with a Thousand Eyes* describes the developmental stages of society, monarchy and administration through eyes of a courtier who saw the reign of two successive kings. His book is helpful in positioning the existence of folksongs and dances in the society as he gives us a brief, but valuable picture of folksongs. In his preface he mentions that Late Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck “found a great solace and self impression in folk dance, songs, poems, mask dances, architecture, folklores and painters.”¹⁶ A clearer

¹⁴ Wangchuck, Dorji Wangmo (2006) *Treasures of Thunder Dragon: A Portrait of Bhutan*, Delhi: Penguin,

¹⁵ Ibid., p.156.

¹⁶ Ura, Karma (1996) *The Ballad of Pema Tshewang Tashi*, Thimphu: Karma Ura, p.xvii.

portrait of the society and songs during the Second King, Jigme Wangchuck comes with the protagonist's narrative in the second chapter where he describes his departure from the village to serve as a retainer by saying that "after meals, my friends, including girls, sang song with brisk dance into grey hours."¹⁷

He mentions that the song, apart from theme of Buddhist self-contentment, reveals the psychological traits, culture, "love and constancy" and feminism in Bhutan during those times. It should be recalled that at that point, the protagonist's age was just nine years, and that was the age when his friends, children, sang a song of departure. This shows that the society's indulgence in folksongs was so intense that even children knew how to sing.

Here is the song:

You are the high sky, I am the radiant sun.
The sky and the sun,
I wonder whether the twain shall meet
Or whether the twain shall come across each other.
We found each other, Tshering, once again today,
Ah, destined by the force of our previous lives.
No! We are not meeting to make good
The remains of deeds from our previous lives,
But because we have been comrades in Dharma from
immemorial times.¹⁸

The backdrop of the song, which is described intricately in the text, helps the reader understand the social scenario, the Buddhist philosophy and gender roles in the society. But for us at this moment, the piece of narration signifies that the songs were even present in the society long before the time of the Second King. Ura himself says that "it was composed in medieval times in searing circumstance by a woman of western Bhutan..."¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., p.20.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.22.

Another picturesque narrative regarding the usage of songs in the happy and leisure times stimulates reader to cast upon content, context, the unbounded expression, romanticism and spontaneity of composers.

The excitement of archery game was also augmented by a bevy of songstresses serenading their own team and distracting the opposite team. These women dancers heckle and harass the opposite team by occasionally levelling personal criticism in the form of songs. One team's dancers sing:

Your head resembles that of an ape.
And from the back-side you appear like a bear.
The monkey headed bear will not find the target.
The arrow will hit away from the target.
It must be deflected! It must be deflected
Let it overshoot and fly up to the sky
Let it fall short and drop on earth.²⁰

Such impromptu songs are a kind of provocation or a jest or trick meant for enjoyment. Women are the first to break the ice in such condition. How do men respond to the temptation provoked by women? They too respond in the same manner. Karma Ura continues, "the archery players who were butt of provocation responded in the form of song. These lines were full of sexual innuendos and hinted at liberal virtues of some dancers..."²¹ He states the way in which the players responded:

One who is maid of the lady adorned with coral necklace
Your eyes look only to the bright and colourful chambers
Your bed room, at the end, is stable
Though you vocalize as much as a parrot
My arrow cannot be swayed from the bull's eye.²²

²⁰ Ibid., p.64.

²¹ Ibid., p.64.

²² Ibid., p.65.

Not only the laymen or the players were the targets of such women but the then His Majesty also could not escape from such notions as “when the turn came for His majesty to shoot his arrow the women dancers picked on him too...They taunted him equally.²³ But the manner and the matter of taunting changed a little. The vocal would become soft and gentle. Ura says that “one usual singing refrain, welcoming royal seduction, when his turn came was:

You will not propel your arrow on the target
If you must shoot you must launch it below my navel!²⁴

Labe is one common song sung at the end of every occasion. Ura describes its presence in grandeur and comfort. The excerpt below is a chronicle to the change that has taken place in due course of development. “On the last day of the fair, people marched from the fair ground to the palace singing laybey. The first song was always laybey, in contrast to the present practice of singing it at the end.”²⁵ It’s a very gesture in Bhutanese society to be hospitable towards a guest and to entertain the guest by doing the best for him. The tradition of dancing and singing at night as a gesture of hospitality and entertainment towards a guest is positioned in true manner in the chapter “A New Era Begins”:

...the highly relaxed atmosphere it created helped the ladies enjoy themselves and give us great pleasure by serenading throughout the night. The number of songs they knew would have enabled them to sing incessantly for a week, it was only a question of the capacity to on the part of guests.²⁶

This flow of emotions through songs was very vast and intricate and so interwoven with the society that it would go on for successive nights even. This becomes clear through the following narration: “On the second night, we pleaded our hostess to wind up the dancing and singing around

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p.66.

²⁶ Ibid., p.182.

midnight...” But, “My hostess insisted that I also sing. I sang a song that I penned with a friend of mine some years ago.”²⁷

By analyzing such instances of singing and dancing appearing in the novel it becomes comprehensible that:

songs were present with the folk in the times of departure (melancholy), happiness, entertaining a guest, conclusion of a ceremony and childhood, youth and old age; the content of the songs has a wide range of emotions tainted with similes and metaphors consisting of the flora and fauna of the country, and there were numerous such songs.²⁸

Ura’s main purpose in the novel is to deal with a courtier’s life. He can be revered high for portraying a true picture of society and cultural traits of the past. But he does not go deep into analyzing the genres of folksongs. Never do we read him writing about the type of the song. Rather, he leaves this opportunity to others to analyzing the genres. He uses them not merely as a reference but as a tool to tell the moods of society.

A little is written about folksongs in Kunzang Choden’s novel, *The Circle of Karma*. However, her canvas is bigger and places more local colour, tradition, beliefs and rituals. Unlike Ura she mentions the impromptu songs just once in her novel. She gives transliteration and translation of the ‘four verse songs’ that are sung to pinch a girl, Chhime.

Suddenly one or two of the younger people started to sing the four verse songs. These playful songs sung in jest sometimes had subtle meanings. Men and women often express their feelings through them.²⁹

And a boy, Sangay, sings to attract Chhime:

Daughter of noble birth

²⁷ Ibid., p.182.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Choden, Kunzang (2005) *The Circle of Karma*, Delhi: Penguin Books, p.33.

Seeing your beauteous worth;
On a high bough beyond reach
Desirable as ripened peach.³⁰

Chimme responds in verse to this provocation in an absurd manner. Thus the novel attests to the presence of songs aimed to entertaining, expressing feelings or provoking the opposite sex.

While Ura has used folksongs as a ethical tool to provide a cultural identity, Choden has used it just for their referential value or to portray their presence in society.

Some Bhutanese nationals have tried to translate valuable Bhutanese works available in Dzongkha into English. To add to the literature Sonam Kinga and Karma Ura contributed translations of two popular lozeys that have allowed non-Dzongkha speakers to access the style, content and context of lozey.

Foreign authors have frequently written about the mask dances, unlike folksong that have been neglected or avoided. Only indigenous writers have given place to folksongs in their works. This may be because the foreigners who came here on a short duration could see only mask dances for they have more visual appeal. Since folksongs require in-depth understanding, it befits the national authors to write about folksongs.

³⁰ Ibid.

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Preserving the Consciousness of a Nation: Promoting “Gross National Happiness” in Bhutan Through Her Rich Oral Traditions

*A. Steven Evans**

His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, King of Bhutan, has developed the philosophy of “Gross National Happiness” in the Kingdom, accentuating Bhutan's vision of development beyond material economics and growth (sometimes reflected as Gross National Product). In order to balance and even outweigh creeping outside influences of materialism and self-centeredness, in addition to saying there is a better and more applicable standard than the United Nation's Human Development Index, a national emphasis on storytelling and the oral arts at the indigenous grassroots level is being considered.

The Kingdom of Bhutan has a rich heritage in its folktales and famous masked dances, setting the stage for the promotion of Bhutan's “Gross National Happiness” through the time-honoured traditions of oral communication. It is proposed that this integration of entertainment, information and education through a grassroots initiative would contribute to a sense of community, satisfaction and happiness. Also, the utilization of media through such an initiative would develop a sense of ownership at the level of the people, allowing for its acceptance, use and growth among the citizens of the kingdom.

A Royal Challenge

Bhutanese folklore has it that the bat would show its teeth to the birds in order to avoid the bird tax and show its wings to

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the beasts in order to avoid the beast tax. But come winter, when the food supplies are distributed, the bat would show its wings to the birds and teeth to the beasts to claim its share from both ...¹

The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan, steeped in a Tibetan-like Buddhism and literally closed to all outside influences until only a couple of decades ago, has a rich heritage in its folktales, religious masked dances, and other traditional art forms. As such, it is now poised to meet a challenge put forth by the nation's king: How can the promotion and preservation of happiness for its people take precedence over an unhealthy and ever-increasing emphasis on the nation's Gross National Product?

A dichotomy of contrast and conflict seems to exist, however, in the Land of the Thunder Dragon: modern education vs. traditional education; *rigsar* (popular music) vs. traditional music; mass media vs. traditional media; modern, western morals and values vs. traditional, Buddhist morals and values; etc. Sometimes in the pursuit of development, the ends and means can get confused, even reversed. Debate over form and content can constantly arise.

Like the bat of Bhutanese folklore, does His Majesty's Royal Government bare its teeth or show its wings as it seeks to implement its dream of GNH? From an allegorical Buddhist perspective, does it concentrate on the drop of water that falls into the pond and merges with its waters, or does it concentrate on the same drop of water that falls into the pond and causes ripples on the surface, or does it not concentrate on the drop at all, but focus on the ripples? Questions that must constantly be asked and applied are, "What is the ultimate goal or aim of His Majesty's vision? What is right for Bhutan and its citizens? What contributes to Gross National Happiness?" These will help clarify ends and means, form and content. The challenge is to show that a national initiative of

¹ Phuntsho, Karma (2000) "On the Two Ways of Learning in Bhutan." *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 2 (2): 96-126, p.96.

storytelling using local storytellers, along with other specifically local cultural art forms, will not only help preserve the consciousness of a nation, but also help advance the King's vision of Gross National Happiness.

The World of Oral Communication

Oral cultures are centered in the practice of storytelling. Large numbers of the world's population are oral communicators. They learn best through communication that is not tied to or dependent on print. The definition of oral communicator, however, is somewhat fluid. At minimum, the term refers to people who are illiterate, around 1.5 billion in the world today. Many, though, who are functionally illiterate or semi-literate, express a strong preference for oral communication as opposed to literate or print-based communication. When they are included in the definition of oral communicator, it is estimated that more than two-thirds of the world's population, or over four billion people, are oral communicators by necessity or preference. However, preferences for oral communication span all educational, social, gender, and age levels. Many literates around the globe express strong preference for oral communication as well when tested by appropriate tools to identify their communication patterns and choices.²

Primarily through story, proverb, poetry, drama and song, oral communicators house their knowledge, information, teachings, concepts, lists, and ideas in narrative presentations that can be easily understood, remembered, and reproduced. Oral people think in terms of these stories, and not in outlines, guidelines, principles, steps, concepts, or propositions, which are largely foreign to their way of learning and communicating. If they have a teaching, a concept, or a principle they want to remember, they will encase it in a story. This is the common vehicle that oral communicators use to process, remember, and convey information. Through

² Lovejoy, Grant, ed. (2005) *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, pp.3-6, 20-25.

the story and other oral art forms, they preserve and transmit valued truths and teachings, since it is difficult if not impossible for them to learn through principles, precepts, analysis, and syllogistic argument (deductive reasoning in which a conclusion is derived from two premises).

Oral cultures are centered in the practice of storytelling. It is their primary means of communication, normally in their mother tongue or heart language. They prefer these integrative ways of learning rather than the fragmenting, analytical approaches that are common in contemporary education. Western-style education emphasizes analysis—breaking things apart and focusing on extracted principles. Oral communicators prefer holistic learning, keeping principles embedded in the narratives that transmit them. They learn better through the concrete, relational world of narratives than they do through the abstract, propositional framework of Western educational systems.³ Both learning approaches deal with propositional truth, but oral communicators keep the propositions closely tied to the events in which those truths emerged. People who are steeped in literacy can more easily detach the propositions and deal with them as abstract ideas. In both cases people are learning ‘truth’, but the way the truth is packaged and presented differs dramatically.

Those of a literate-print culture mistakenly believe that if they can outline information or put it into a series of steps or principles, anyone, including oral communicators, can understand it and recall it. That is a misconception about learning and how different individuals process information. Most oral communicators do not understand outlines, steps, or principles, and they cannot remember them. For that matter, neither can those of the literate-print culture! They store information in notes, books, archives, libraries, and computers, and ‘look it up’ to refresh their memories.

³ Lovejoy, Grant, ed. (2005) *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*. Bangalore: International Orality Network, pp.5-6, 21-24.

As His Majesty's government seeks ways to implement Gross National Happiness in Bhutan and to ensure satisfied and content citizens at the grassroots level in local communities, it is important to consider the realities of the oral world and its communication and learning preferences.

Setting the Agenda: Gross National Happiness

Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product. - His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the King.⁴

Ever since His Majesty the King of Bhutan initiated the idea, there has been much talk, discussion, and debate concerning the concept of Gross National Happiness, especially in academic, development, and political circles. Needless to say, many do not see eye-to-eye on the topic. In asking the question, "What is it going to take to implement Gross National Happiness?" two other questions must first be considered: 1) How is the concept of Gross National Happiness offered by His Majesty the King of Bhutan to be understood?; and 2) Why is there conflict and confusion over some of the solutions currently being offered?

Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Royal Government of Bhutan said:

His Majesty has proclaimed that the ultimate purpose of government is to promote the happiness of the people. This point has resonated in many of his speeches and decrees, which stress both increasing prosperity and happiness. His Majesty has said, 'Gross National Happiness is more than Gross National Product,' and has given happiness precedence over economic prosperity.⁵

Stressing that happiness is a shared desire of all people,

⁴ Thinley, Jigmi Y. (1999) "Values and Development: Gross National Happiness." *Gross National Happiness: A Set of Discussion Papers*.

⁵ Ibid., 1999: pp.12-13.

Thinley said, "It is possibly the ultimate thing we want while other things are wanted only as a means to its increase".⁶ He pointed out that Gross National Happiness is a "non-quantifiable" development objective in Bhutan.

Happiness has been usually considered a utopian issue. The academic community has not developed the tools we need to look at happiness, one of our primary human values. This has led to a paradoxical situation: the primary goal of development is happiness, but the subject of this very goal eludes our analysis because it has been regarded as subjective.⁷

Thinley said that scientific proof was not needed to assess happiness meaningfully, but that Bhutan must raise policy and ethical questions about happiness. "Its absence in most policies contrasts sharply with the primary concern of each individual human being in his or her daily quest for happiness. But we infer rather boldly from improvements in socio-economic indicators that there might be growing happiness behind it," he said.⁸

"I wish to propose happiness as a policy concern and a policy objective," Thinley said. "In turn this may call for a new policy orientation. This also implies new departures in research, if the concept is considered important".⁹ Thinley stated that Gross National Happiness is the main purpose of development and is rooted in Bhutan's philosophical and political thought.

We asked ourselves the basic question of how to maintain the balance between materialism and spiritualism, in the course of getting the immense benefits of science and technology. The likelihood of loss of spiritualism, tranquility, and gross national happiness with the advance of modernization became

⁶ Ibid., p.13.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p.14.

⁹ Ibid.

apparent to us.¹⁰

Thinley said that within Bhutanese culture, inner spiritual development is as prominent a focus as external material development. “Suffice it to say that, in varying degrees, the contemporary world may be too acutely preoccupied with the self in the sense of paying excessive attention to our selves, our concerns, needs and likes,” Thinley said. “There is a paradox here: excessive preoccupation with our selves does not lead to a real knowledge of our self. Happiness depends on gaining freedom, to a certain degree, from this particular kind of concern”.¹¹ Thinley pointed out that a growing income does not always lead proportionately to an increase in happiness:

In a world where everyone who has less is trying to catch up with everyone else who has more, we may become richer but happiness becomes elusive. People may become richer but they will not have a greater gift for happiness. Nations will not rank higher on the scale of happiness as they move up on the scale of economic performance. As is widely known, this is due to the fact that the value of money in giving happiness or utility diminishes as the amount increases”.¹²

Human Development and Happiness: Amicable Partners?

If happiness is among the cherished goals of development, then it does matter how this happiness is generated, what causes it, what goes with it, and how it is distributed—whether it is enjoyed by a few or shared by all.¹³

According to the *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000*, no one can guarantee human happiness. The choices people make are their own. However, the report said that the process

¹⁰ Ibid., p.15.

¹¹ Ibid., p.18.

¹² Ibid., p.20.

¹³ Royal Government of Bhutan (2000) *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000: Gross National Happiness and Human Development, Searching for Common Ground*, p.22.

of development should at least create an environment to developing citizens' full potentials, giving them a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives. People have a right to make their own decisions and chart their own course, the report implies, and it is the government's responsibility to create the environment in which good choices and courses can be determined. At the same time, however, there is a widespread growing disenchantment with the use of income and income growth as indicators of well-being and progress. "Clearly there is more to life than an expansion of income or accumulation of wealth," the report said.¹⁴ The Human Development Index assumes, however, that by adding increased life expectancy and increased education to increased income, chances of life satisfaction and happiness are almost guaranteed. The question remains whether this is true.

Consistent with the human development approach, but from a Bhutanese perspective, His Majesty the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck has called for focusing more broadly on Gross National Happiness—and not narrowly on just Gross National Product. Already in the 1960s, the late King Jigme Dorjii Wangchuck had declared that the goal of development should be to 'make people prosperous and happy.' Development did not mean a blind expansion of commodity production. Instead, a holistic view of life and development is called for that augments people's spiritual and emotional well-being as well. It is this vision that Bhutan seeks to fulfill.¹⁵

The report said that the concept of Gross National Happiness was articulated by His Majesty to indicate that development has many more dimensions than those associated with Gross National Product, and that development should be understood as a process that seeks to maximize happiness rather than economic growth.

The concept places individuals at the centre of all development efforts, and it recognizes that the individual has

¹⁴ Ibid., p.13.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Promoting Happiness Through Oral Traditions

material, spiritual, and emotional needs. It asserts that spiritual development cannot and should not be defined exclusively in material terms of the increased consumption of goods and services.¹⁶

A grumbling rich man may well be less happy than a commercial farmer, but he does have a higher standard of living than the farmer. It is the sense of discontentment or emptiness that the rich farmer experiences that constitutes unhappiness. Happiness may be subjective, but this subjectiveness [sic] is shared by all, regardless of levels of income, class, gender, or race.¹⁷

If happiness is among the cherished goals of development, then it does matter how this happiness is generated, what causes it, what goes with it, and how it is distributed—whether it is enjoyed by a few or shared by all.¹⁸

According to the *Bhutan Development Report 2000*:

Ultimately, a happy society is a caring society, caring for the past and future.... Establishing such a society will require a long-term rather than a short-term perspective of development.... Happiness in the future will also depend upon mitigating the foreseeable conflict between traditional cultural values and the modern lifestyles that inevitably follow in the wake of development.¹⁹

The report concludes:

As economic and social transformation gathers momentum and Bhutan becomes increasingly integrated with the outside world, people's lifestyles are changing along with family structures. Assimilating these changes without losing the country's unique cultural identity is one of the main challenges facing Bhutan today.²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.22.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p.50.

Chaos, Conflict, Contrast and Confusion

...there is a need to provide a sense of continuity amidst change. In addition, since culture and traditional values form the bedrock of Bhutanese national identity it is important for the Bhutanese to ensure that its culture and values are not undermined.... It is more necessary than ever to ensure the intergenerational transmission of values.²¹

Five articles appeared in various issues of the *Journal of Bhutan Studies* a few years ago that, while not directly addressing the topic of this article, influence it to a large degree. The articles are “On the Two Ways of Learning in Bhutan” by Karma Phuntsho; “Ensuring Social Sustainability: Can Bhutan’s Education System Ensure Intergenerational Transmission of Values?” by Tashi Wangyal; “The Attributes and Values of Folk and Popular Songs” by Sonam Kinga; “Mass Media: Its Consumption and Impact on Residents of Thimphu and Rural Areas” by Phuntso Raptan; and “Folktale Narration: A Retreating Tradition” by Tandin Dorji.

These five articles, coupled with a series of papers on development in Bhutan found in *Gross National Happiness: A Set of Discussion Papers* published by the Centre for Bhutan Studies and *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000* published by the Planning Commission Secretariat, Royal Government of Bhutan, all point toward an underlying situation that greatly affects Gross National Happiness and its success in Bhutan. There is a pattern of contrast and conflict brought out in these studies: modern education vs. traditional education; *rigsar* (popular music) vs. traditional music; mass media vs. traditional media; modern, western morals and values vs. traditional, Buddhist morals and values; etc.

Debate constantly arises over form and content. Phuntso said, “The primary factor that determines the difference in

²¹ Wangyal, Tashi (2001) “Ensuring Social Sustainability: Can Bhutan’s Education System Ensure Intergenerational Transmission of Values.” *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 3 (1): 106-131. p.107.

outlooks and approaches between the two [education] systems [—traditional and modern—] is the ultimate goal they aim to achieve—learning is not an end in itself in either system”.²² At the same time, he makes a strong case for “modern” education while not seeming to recognize the full value of traditional methods. He said, “...modern curricular structures and methods by far excel the traditional styles”.²³

Phuntso is right in concluding that many Bhutanese equate traditional education with monastic Buddhist instruction and want nothing to do with it. Two issues are raised here that need to be addressed, those of ‘form’ and ‘content’. Perhaps it is needed to keep some of the form of traditional education and provide new and appropriate content. I would suggest that education is more than merely imparting knowledge, and that traditional education transcends mere learning of facts and techniques. It is an experiential process directly linked with life itself.

Wangyal raises an important and valid question: “Can Bhutan’s education system ensure intergenerational transmission of values?”²⁴ He then makes an excellent appraisal of the values of Bhutan.

Traditional values based on Buddhist culture have a profound influence on the lives of a majority of the Bhutanese people. Traditional Bhutanese values not only address individual self-discipline and the conduct of interpersonal relationships but also delineate responsibility of all sentient beings.... Such traditional values are, however, being gradually undermined, as people become more self-centered, and materialistic.... Thus there is a need to provide a sense of continuity amidst change. In addition, since culture and traditional values form the bedrock of Bhutanese national identity, it is important for the Bhutanese to ensure that its culture and values are not

²² Phuntsho, K. 2002, p.99.

²³ Ibid., p.104.

²⁴ Wangyal, T. 2002. p.106.

undermined.²⁵

Wangyal points out that Bhutanese society is now witnessing a shift in values, attitudes and expectations. “External influences arising from the values accompanying economic development, the media and the modern education systems, among others, challenge continuance of the national values,” he said.²⁶

According to Wangyal, one of the main challenges in preserving values in modern Bhutan is the need to reconcile the fact that the social, cultural, and economic context in which these values developed through the past centuries is very different from that of Bhutan today.

Apart from the influence of foreign travel and tourism, the mass media is [sic] perhaps one of the greatest sources of external influences and values. The recent introduction of television and the Internet has enabled the Bhutanese to have instant access not only to global news and information but also whetted their appetite for consumer goods. The process of modernization has thus had a profound influence on the social, economic and political outlook of the Bhutanese people leading to a gradual shift in their values, attitudes and expectations.²⁷

This, he said, has created an insatiable appetite for material acquisition.

“It is now more necessary than ever to ensure the intergenerational transmission of values,” Wangyal said. “Otherwise, unbridled modernisation [sic] may destroy the very spiritual and cultural fabric that has enabled the Bhutanese society to live in harmony with each other and with the natural environment”.²⁸ Wangyal praises the introduction of ‘value education’ into the school system and

²⁵ Wangyal, T. 2002, p.107.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p.112.

²⁸ Ibid., p.115.

calls for more of it. He recognizes that it is the stories found in this 'value education' that most impact a student.²⁹

Going beyond education, Kinga pulls into the picture the attributes and values of folk and popular music. While Kinga says that songs and music are integral parts of Bhutanese culture—"not only as mere forms of entertainment, but also as highly refined works of art reflecting the values and standards of society," he also says that *rigsar* or popular songs and music lack the artistic depth and seriousness of traditional songs.³⁰ Kinga concludes, "In their similarity and association with English pop songs and songs of Hindi films, *rigsar* songs no longer function as a repository of and a medium for transmitting social values".³¹ Not knowing if this means that they did at one time but no longer serve in transmitting social values or not, it could certainly be argued that they could and can. There are numerous case studies from around the world that show how popular music has been a powerful tool in transmitting social and moral values. Kinga has a valid concern, that "the popularity of *rigsar* songs and the specialization of music studios in producing them are gradually challenging the sustainability of the culture of traditional folk songs and music".³²

Rapten goes in an even different direction.

The media in Bhutan have progressively enhanced individual awareness by widening the scope of information transmission beyond the traditional face-to-face oral interaction to literacy-oriented communication and now to electronic media. They have helped to share information about the past and present, depict social, cultural and historical aspects of Bhutan that helped to create a common culture, tradition and system of

²⁹ Ibid., pp.115-116.

³⁰ Kinga, S (2001) "The Attributes and Values of Folk and Popular Songs." *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 1 (1): 132-170. p.132.

³¹ Ibid., p.133.

³² Ibid.

values.³³

He says that the mass media and information technology are increasingly becoming powerful instruments for the penetration of global culture and the values of a global market into Bhutan. "This presents one of the greatest challenges to Bhutan as it transitions from a traditional society into the age of information and technology," he said. "While the aim is to reap the benefits of mass media, its excessive influence threatens to undermine indigenous culture and value system".³⁴ In his study, Rapten observes: "It is also a fact that advertisements create desires, which cannot be satisfied by people's current economic situation. Crimes and corruption are often born out of economic desires".³⁵ He concludes: "The greatest challenge that Bhutan is facing at the moment is to make a conscious and informed choice in order to benefit from mass media and information technology, and at the same time keep its negative forces at bay".³⁶

A Change of Heart

"These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life They are foundational words, words to build a life on".³⁷ How does a nation curb and diminish the outside negative influences of the media and electronic technology, while at the same time protect, preserve, and promote its cultural values that have been central to the well-being of its people? Once again, the power of the story, coupled with the inherent nature of the oral communicator, can help accomplish this. The transformational power of stories is not merely found in the compiled written transcriptions of

³³ Rapten, Phuntsho (2001) "Mass Media: Its Consumption and Impact on Residents of Thimphu and Rural Areas." *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 3 (1): 172-198. p.172.

³⁴ Ibid., pp.172-173.

³⁵ Ibid., pp.186.

³⁶ Petersen, Eugene (1999) *Stories of Jesus*, p.17.

³⁷ Ibid., p.17.

traditional folktales and heritage stories, but in the hearing and oral transmission of them. Schools must embrace this and even become catalysts for those stories to flow from the classroom back to the homes and villages from where they originated.

Not only must the question “What to do?” be asked, but also “What is right?” What needs to be addressed are matters of the internal self, matters of the heart. If Bhutan were to focus only on the external, she can never fully impact or influence the internal. Some would say: “Let’s change the environment or the circumstances of our communities. That will give us better, happier people!” Others would say, “Let’s change their actions; changed actions lead to changed people!” Still others, “Change his belief system, then we can fully change the person!” Changing how people live, what they do, how they think, and what they believe, can’t guarantee a happier, more content and satisfied people. The issues are complex. Basically, people are shaped by the stories and events of their individual lives, families, communities, nation, etc., as they are conveyed and lived-out. These stories and events become threads woven together to form the tapestries of their lives. In the academic world, this is called worldview, and it is, illustratively, the particular pair of glasses one wears that determines how he or she sees the world. To completely integrate Gross National Happiness into the lives and very core of the people of Bhutan, she must insert new threads into the tapestries or lives of her people. With the introduction of appropriate stories and narrative events, the tapestry—or worldview—changes, and the mind’s eye sees the world from a different perspective, with a new pair of glasses, so to speak. A changed worldview, does in fact, create a changed person.³⁸

An old story from Japan, called “Empty-Cup Mind,” illustrates the value and sometimes necessity of changing worldview, that of replacing the old with the new:

³⁸ Lovejoy, Grant, ed. (2005) *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, pp.36-37.

A wise old monk once lived in an ancient temple... One day the monk heard an impatient pounding on the temple door. He opened it and greeted a young student, who said, "I have studied with great and wise masters. I consider myself quite accomplished in [Buddhist] philosophy. However, just in case there is anything more I need to know, I have come to see if you can add to my knowledge.

Very well," said the wise old master. "Come and have tea with me, and we will discuss your studies." The two seated themselves opposite each other, and the old monk prepared tea. When it was ready, the old monk began to pour the tea carefully into the visitor's cup. When the cup was full, the old man continued pouring until the tea spilled over the side of the cup and onto the young man's lap. The startled visitor jumped back and indignantly shouted, "Some wise master you are! You are a fool who does not even know when a cup is full!

The old man calmly replied, "Just like this cup, your mind is so full of ideas that there is no room for any more. Come to me with an empty-cup mind, and then you will learn something."³⁹

It is important to realize that the 'end' is happiness, and the 'means' are what it takes to get there, whether it's 'old form' with 'new content' or 'new form' with 'old content'. The use of storytelling to promote Gross National Happiness can serve as a bridge among all viewpoints, spanning the traditional and the modern, the new and the old. Story, whether narrated, sung, or dramatized, conveys the message and quickens the heart. Stories make up the fabric of changed lives. Whether it's stories from an old man sitting around a campfire in a village, conveyed through *rigsar* or popular music, seen and heard on television, learned in school, or read in the newspaper, the point is to touch lives with the morals and values of Bhutan, leading to a happier and more satisfied people.

³⁹ Yolen, Jane, ed. (1999) "Empty Cup Mind." *Gray Heroes: Elder Tales from Around the World*. New York: Penguin Books, pp.3-4.

The Role of the Story in Bhutan

“In the memory of the people dwell the folktales ready to be ‘untied’ at an appropriate time”.⁴⁰ In Bhutan the literary genre of *khaju*, or ‘oral transmission’, serves as an important tool of communication between one generation and another.⁴¹ Tandin Dorji, lecturer of history at Sherubtse College in Kanglung, said:

The role that it plays in the transmission of moral values, philosophy, beliefs, humour [sic], etiquette, and many other traits specific to the Bhutanese society holds an increasingly eminent place.... What is special about Bhutanese folktales is that it is still a living tradition in many pockets of rural Bhutan. In the villages which are far flung from motor roads, the narration of folktales in the pastures and in the evenings is today very much alive.⁴²

He questions, however, “How long will it continue to survive? Will the development process engulf this beautiful tradition? What can be done to keep this heritage alive?”⁴³

Kunzang Choden, author of the classic book *Folktales of Bhutan*, indicates that stories in the Mountain Kingdom are not narrated, but “released” or “set free” (*tangshi*).⁴⁴ “This could then imply that the Bhutanese and the folktales are inextricably interwoven,” Dorji said. “It wouldn’t be wrong to comment that they are found one inside the other. The folktales contain the traits and aspects of the Bhutanese. In the memory of the people dwell the folktales ready to be ‘untied’ at an appropriate time”.⁴⁵ Excluding the narration of epics and the biographies of saints, Dorji observes that there are no professional storytellers and no particular way or place

⁴⁰ Dorji, Tandin (2002) “Folktale Narration: A Retreating Tradition.” *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 6: 5-23. p.7.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.5.

⁴² Ibid., p.5-6.

⁴³ Ibid., p.6.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.xi.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.7.

of narrating stories in Bhutan. “However, there seems to be two ways of telling stories,” he said. The first way is solemn and is done in the house of a sick person, focusing primarily on the victory of good over evil.⁴⁶ “The other type is a freestyle narration,” said Dorji, “as the narrator can be from any age group”. This is the most common and popular type of narrative storytelling, according to Dorji.⁴⁷

By beginning a story with “*dangbo, dingbo*” (long, long ago), the Bhutanese audience detaches itself from the world and enters into the fascinating land of folktales where they identify themselves with the heroes and the good. “People rejoice when the hero very cleverly steals the cubs of a tigress and laughs when he is able to make fools of the villains,” Dorji said. “They are worried when the monsters kidnap the beautiful maiden, and they are sad when the marriage of the charming Prince and the Princess fails”.⁴⁸ Thus, by beginning the story with “*dangbo, dingbo*”, the audience is navigated into a marvelous world that takes place during an unspecified time and is temporarily disconnected from the mundane, everyday world around it. The other ritualistic formula for opening a Bhutanese folktale is “*henma, henma*” (once upon a time).⁴⁹ “Little by little and bit by bit the narrator releases the folktale,” Dorji said, “punctuating his narration with *dele*, which equates to ‘and then’”.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.8.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp.8-9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.9.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.10.

Dangbo, Dingbo

“*Dangbo, dingbo,*” the old man slowly uttered.

“Henma, henma.”

“Long, long ago and once upon a time.”

The circle of crowding villagers around him grew quiet and still. Stars twinkled above in the crisp cold air of the surrounding mountains. Sparks from the burning fire drifted upwards, creating a magic of their own, competing with the impending magic of the story about to come. For a few moments the storyteller drew incomprehensible designs in the dirt with his walking stick, then pulled his *kabney* tighter around him to ward off the chill of the night. Eventually he looked up, his eyes piercing, reflecting the burning fire and projecting the wisdom of generations before him. “When few stones and pebbles could be seen,” he said. “When the saplings and grasses began to sprout out in greenness. When a few drops of water began to drip...in the upper direction; in the lower direction; in that, that direction; in this, this direction.”

On and on he went, with a tale captivating and enchanting, punctuating various parts of the story with “*dele*” (“and then”), leading his audience from one event to another. Not a word was said by those around him; not an eye strayed from the figure huddled by the fire—until he was finished. Then there was a collective sigh, with smiles on their faces and murmurs of approval. One said, “We can be like those of this story! Are we not as good as they are?” The others responded in agreement, “Yes! Yes! We are as good as they! We can be like them!” Then there were pleas for another story from the wandering storyteller who stopped by their village to entertain them for the night. They would stay up late, absorbing the stories of the old man like dry parched ground absorbs the drops of freshly fallen rain. And long after he’s gone they would recall his words, the details of his stories, telling them to others, who in turn would pass them on to even others. “All is right with the world,” they would say upon hearing the

tales. “We are content; we are happy.”⁵¹

For the ancient mystic Drukpa Kunley, fondly called the Divine Madman by the Bhutanese, life was not measured by eight hours of sleep per night or three good meals a day on the table. There was more to life than this, he would say. Though some may laugh at some of his stories and be embarrassed by some of his antics, Drukpa Kunley fully understood the power of story and song and the emotions they evoked.

He knew that people—ordinary, everyday people who worked hard, believed in God, and supported the royal family—needed to laugh, cry, be shocked, and even be outraged sometimes, to give them a broader, better understanding of life and themselves, leaving them content with what they had around them and within them, rather than seeking after things that would never be. Today the Divine Madman has become more than an historical figure in Bhutan; he is a cultural hero around whom a web of stories and legends has been spun. An example follows how the very life of Drukpa Kunley (also named Kunga Legpa) was a story, an event to be remembered, passed on, and enjoyed:

By the age of 25, Kunga Legpa had gained mastery of both mundane and spiritual arts. He was accomplished in the arts of prescience, shape-shifting, and magical display. Returning home to visit his mother in Ralung, she failed to recognize his achievement and judged him merely by his outward behaviour [sic]. “You must decide exactly who you are,” she complained. “If you decide to devote yourself to the religious life, you must work constantly for the good of others. If you are going to be a lay householder, you should take a wife who can help your old mother in the house.”

⁵¹ Evans, A. Steven. (2001) “Tears and Laughter: Promoting Gross National Happiness Through the Rich Oral Traditions and Heritage of Bhutan.” *Gross National Happiness and Development*. Eds. Karma Ura and Karma Galay. Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies, pp. 637-659, pp.650-651.

Promoting Happiness Through Oral Traditions

Now the Naljorpa was instinctively guided at all times by his vow to dedicate his sight, his ears, his mind, and his sensibility, to others on the path, and knowing that the time was ripe to demonstrate his crazy yet compassionate wisdom, he replied immediately, "If you want a daughter-in-law, I'll go and find one." He went straight to the market place where he found a hundred-year-old hag with white hair and blue eyes, who was bent at the waist and had not so much a single tooth in her head. "Old lady," he said, "today you must be my bride. Come with me!"

The old woman was unable to rise, but Kunley put her on his back, and carried her home to his mother. "O Ama! Ama!" he called to her. "You wanted me to take a wife, so I have just brought one home." "If that's the best that you can do, forget it," moaned his mother. "Take her back where she came from or you'll find yourself looking after her. I could do her work better than she." "All right," Kunley said with studied resignation, "if you can do her work for her, I'll take her back." And he returned her to the market place.⁵²

According to Dugu Choegyul Gyamtso in the book *The Divine Madman*:

[Drukpa Kunley's] style, his humour [sic], his earthiness, his compassion, his manner of relating to people, won him a place in the hearts of all the Himalayan peoples.... He may not have been the greatest of scholars or metaphysicians, although he left some beautiful literature behind him, but he is a saint closest to the hearts of the common people.... For the common people it was Drupka Kunley who brought fire down from heaven, and who touched them closest to the bone.⁵³

The life, stories and songs of Drupka Kunley touched, stirred and even changed the lives of the common people in a time when they so desperately needed it. He is a successful example of what the storyteller and his tales can do.

⁵² Dowman, Keith and Paljor, Sonam, trans. (2000) *The Divine Madman: The Sublime Life and Songs of Drukpa Kunley*. Varanasi and Kathmandu: Pilgrims Publishing, pp.39-40.

⁵³ Ibid., p.23.

Dorji claims that folktales represent the collective memory of society:

Despite the nuances in the art of narration and the use of varying vocabulary, the central theme and principle facts remain unaltered no matter who narrates the stories. If the folktales talk of the society, it is in the minds of the people that the stories lie ready to be released at an appropriate moment ... Many beliefs, sentiments, as well as values concerning a society are evoked in the day to day life of the Bhutanese directly or indirectly through the vehicle of folktales.⁵⁴

Dorji emphasized that the telling and hearing of folktales in Bhutan is a grassroots event: “The old and the young alike listen and narrate the same story repeatedly in their own way and always with the same enthusiasm and zeal. The simplicity of the theme and plot of folktales offer itself as a literary genre that is comprehensible to all....”⁵⁵ He concludes:

We have to all agree that the immense reservoir of stories are all created by man for the benefit of the upcoming generations, not only as the entertainment but also as a vehicle of transmission of religious, social, and moral values, philosophies and many unique traits of society. Then, it is not only important to document and create a treasury of folktales but also to keep them alive.⁵⁶

Conclusion

There is a Bhutanese folktale that poignantly, yet delightfully, portrays that happiness and prosperity are not necessarily one and the same. The story titled “Meme Haylay Haylay and His Turquoise” is about an old man who begins the day finding a priceless turquoise and exchanges the jewel with a horse, the horse for an ox, and the ox for a sheep, the sheep for goat, the goat for a rooster, and in the end the rooster for a song.

⁵⁴ Dorji, T. 2002, p.18.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.19.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp.19-20.

The words of Buddhist master Shantideva summarize this story well: “The goal of every act is happiness itself, though, even with great wealth, it’s rarely found”.⁵⁷ It is through the intentional and spontaneous telling and retelling of such stories that allows them to accomplish what they are inherently able to do—touch lives at the heart level, affecting worldview and becoming catalysts for life transformation. As Bhutan moves towards a proactive national promotion and program of traditional storytelling in the entertainment, educational, and informational spheres, the closer she will come to achieving His Majesty, Jigme Singye Wangchuck’s dream of Gross National Happiness.

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⁵⁷ Ibid., p.50.

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