

Damkar ritual marks beginning of rice transplantation in western Bhutan

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Introduction

Rituals and traditions play important parts in the lives of people as well as in the lives of the communities in which they are embedded. Rituals are predetermined and well-established pattern of behaviors, which may be verbal, physical, or symbolic in nature, and which are carried out in a certain order and is unique and differs greatly among societies around the globe. Likewise, the communities in the Hindu Kush Himalaya region being a center of the historical significance of various religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and many more has given rise to numerous rituals which are different and similar in certain ways. Bhutan is a country where rituals are ubiquitous and deeply ingrained in the culture. Rituals and traditions are a fundamental way of life for a family in Bhutanese culture and tradition. Rituals are performed across the whole of Bhutan on an annual basis to deliver offerings to the gods who provide people with temporary refuge. They are also performed as offerings to deities and are carried out in order to bestow blessings on the home, bring about good fortune, and accomplish other goals. Consequently, rituals are an important aspect of farming and Bhutanese people place great emphasis on integrating age-old traditions with modern farming.

Study sites for *Damkar* ritual

Damkar is predominately practiced in Thimphu, Paro and Trongsa districts where paddy is cultivated. Our study was at four villages namely Kharabjee, Khasadrapchu, Gyebjana and Phunub villages.

The villages of Kharabjee and Khasadrapchu, which are under Mewang Gewog of the Thimphu dzongkhag



Figure 7. Paro international airport opposite to Gyebjana village where the study of traditional ritual was interviewed

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and have an elevation of around 1958 meters above sea level, are well known for their marble and limestone quarrying.

Gyebjana village in Lungnyi Gewog under Paro dzongkhag is few minutes' drive from the international airport (Figure 7) and famous for the picturesque Dzongdrakha monastery which houses one of the five goddesses of longevity (*Tshe ring mched Inga*).

Phunub village at Doteng gewog under Paro district is located at the north part of Paro beneath the famous *Ragoe Nye*. In the northeast, Doteng Gewog and Thimphu Dzongkhag share a border (Figure 2). Northern part of Doteng Gewog is home to the sacred site of *Chumbu Nye*, the statue of *Dorji Phagmo*, also known as the "floating" statue, is the most remarkable thing about the Temple.

What is *Damkar*

Damkar or *Dhangkar* or also known as *Jah Ghi Aum* is a ritual conducted before paddy



Figure 8. Tenzin Namgay from Gyebjana share *Damkar* ritual tradition to the Research Assistants

transplantation, where paddy transplanting is traditionally started by a designated lead farmer and the rest of the households in the community follows. According to Azha Tenzin Namgay, 54 years from Gyebjana village, Lungyi Gewog under Paro Dzongkhag (Figure 8), the literal meaning of *Dhangkar* can roughly be translated to having an illumination (*Dhang*) which can be

compared to that of auspiciousness and positiveness spreading (*kar*) from one source bringing out a sense of luminosity in the proximity. He also emphasized the mutual trust and understanding everyone has because of *Damkar* as a feeling of contentment arises due to the good start of the event.

Damkar ritual in Bhutan is like the *Ropain* Festival (Rice Planting Festival) of Nepal. According to Pandey (2020), most Nepalese farmers celebrate *Ropain* to mark the beginning of the plantation of new rice seedlings in their fields in *Ashar* (June–July) wishing to make quintals from kilos. Nepali farmers worship their land to receive maximum harvest of rice and celebrate this exciting festival by singing, mud splashing, dancing, rice seedling plantation, sharing joys and sorrows, and feasting after the plantation. Similarly, the festival of *Kati Bihu* is celebrated by the people of Assam, India. With prayers sung and rituals performed, a celebration is held to ensure the

transplanted plants survive well (Gauri Jog's Indian Dance School, 2021). In a similar fashion, Buddhists, farmers, and members of the Thai Royal family pray for a bountiful harvest at the Grand Palace in Bangkok's Royal Cultivating Ritual in May (Banyan Tree Hotels & Resorts, 2023). The Thai Royal Ploughing, or *Charot Phra Nangkhan Raek Na Khwan*, marks the start of the growing season. An astrologer or Brahman priest will choose the ceremony's date in Thailand, which is usually May (Thailand Foundation, 2022). Likewise, the Mibu and Kawahigashi villages in Kitahiroshima Town, Hiroshima Prefecture, conduct *Mibu no Hana Taue* to worship the rice deity and guarantee a plentiful harvest (UNESCO & cho, 2009).

Rationale for *Damkar* ritual

Damkar is considered a very simple ritual and hassle-free in terms of manpower and time. Although the façade of *Damkar* is simple, it stores a very powerful significance as it is considered a ritual in accordance with auspicious occasion (*Tendrel*). Bhutanese believe that when starting a new work, one must entail good *Tendrel* both known and unknown aspects, such as the appropriate time, place, and spiritual blessings, in order to end the project successfully. Before planting paddy, *Damkar* is performed to guarantee a bountiful crop and to ask for blessings to safeguard the land from natural disasters and wild animals.

Aum Tshering Lhamo from Gyebjana or even called Gatana village in Paro narrated a story of a mythical creature named *Dreyghochuchem* – a mythical man (*Drey*) wearing *gho* (Bhutanese men dress) would come out before dawn breaks to collect the first harvest of grains from the fields and stores it in the *sabo* (grain storage box). The household to which *Dreyghochuchem* brings the harvest is known to have profuse fortune. According to her, they must keep a *gho* (male dress) on *sabo* (grain storage) to know if *Dreyghochuchem* had visited them or not by seeing wetness of the *gho* from the morning dew in the paddy field. Although the authentication of the folktale is questionable and could not be validated being off season for paddy during the study period, she reiterated conducting *Damkar* to appease *Dreyghochuchem* as well apart from other motives.

Interviews with *Damkar* practitioners have shown that the practice has been around since the time of their forefathers, even though no one knows where it originated, and no records or documentation is found. It is usually conducted in 3rd or 4th month of the lunar calendar which coincides with the time of paddy transplantation. In Nepal, *Ropain* festival falls in June and is also called *Ashar* coinciding its month.

A slight variance can be seen in conducting *Damkar* among various communities in different places but generally, it involves seeking guidance from astrological predictions to find the most favorable time and direction in which the paddy is to be transplanted. The astrology prediction will also include a compatible person who will be selected based on the twelve animal Buddhist zodiac sign to transplant the paddy. In Doteng Gewog, under Paro dzongkhag, only women are allowed to lead the *Damkar* but such gender roles are not defined to do *Damkar* in villages in Thimphu. Azha Tenzin Namgay of Lungyi gewog, Paro shared that the compatibility of the person depends on the lunar year and the birth year animal of the person must also be well-suited to the field. For

instance, Aum Phub Lham, aged 74 from Maedwang Gewog said a person born in the year of the ox (*Glang*) is usually considered suitable for *Damkar*. Whereas Dawa Tshering from Khasadrapchu village under Mewang Gewog mentioned that a person born in the year of a rat (*Bjewwa*), pig (*Phag*) or rooster (*Bja*) should not lead the transplantation as the animals are seen as a threat to the crops (Figure 9).



Figure 9. An astrologer from Khasadrapchu narrates paddy transplantation to be avoided by people in some specific lunar year

The field is set up in the evening before *Damkar*, but it is also possible to do it the day of the transplant. A small plot of paddy field called *Dhangka-ari* is selected specifically to do *Damkar*. According to Dawa Tshering, 44, of Khasadrapchu, just a small field of rice is typically transplanted on *Damkar* day, and only a few members of the chosen family who are needed to conduct the transplantation must be present. He claims that *Damkar* is also known by the name “*Chang-guh Chang-ju*,” where “*Chang*” stands for the paddy field, “*guh*” for the beginning, and “*ju*” for the finish. As a result, the phrase “*Chang-guh Chang-ju*” refers to the beginning of paddy transplanting and the day's conclusion once all the fields have been transplanted. However, in order to do so, all of the household's fields would need to be transplanted, necessitating the assistance of more people.

Before the transplantation begins, *Lhabsang-thruelsei* (the ritual of cleansing any defilements) is conducted for the auspicious start of the day. Three to five bundles of paddy seedlings are prepared to be transplanted and are kept in the altar overnight. Upon reaching the *Dhangka-ari*, the selected person will face towards the most favorable direction which is called *Bum-pa gangway* which roughly translates as full vase since anything which is filled and overflowing is considered prosperous. Then prayers are recited before planting the paddy seedlings. As previously noted, an astrologer determines the timing and placement of the transplant.

Aum Phub Lham, aged 74 and Dawa Tshering, 44 both from Mewang gewog under Thimphu Dzongkhag shares the significance of seeking protection of the field when first transplanting the paddy. They put in good intention and solicits positive messages as follows:

Tsimo bu ba thoo ma chu

May no pest cause harm to the panicles

Ja ghi za ma chu

Protect the crops from birds

Lo toh lay chu

May the harvest be bountiful

According to Desam, aged 70 from Phunub village, Doteng gewog under Paro Dzongkhag, her family must take *Damkar* the helm of the transplantation as her house's front entrance faces *Chumigang* (rice hill). She remembers that *Damkar* has been a tradition since her forefathers and should they fail to do so, they are penalized by the community. Likewise, the other farmers are penalized with fines if they have commenced paddy transplantation before her field. There is general myths behind that if someone else starts the transplanting who is not supposed to, the harvest won't be satisfactory, and misfortune will befall.

The elected leaders of the local administration of Doteng Gewog takes this *Damkar* ritual seriously and attend to perform *Damkar* ritual at Desam's house to mark the beginning of paddy transplantation in their community. As the the local leaders' visit the household, they take customary gifts that include various alcohol brands, fruit juice, and other items. He guests are served tea, snacks and the first meal. Several women from the community are hired for uprooting paddy seedling and the man for pulverizing irrigated terrace field with machine. The elected local leaders offer *Nyendhar* (cash) and *khadar* (silk scarves) at the altar and proceeds outside by taking overnight paddy seedling kept at the altar to the the starting terraced field. The five females selected base on astrological predictions for transplanting line-up inside the puddled field facing *Chumigang* mountain while solemn chanting of prayer is performed by the monk.



Figure 10. Five women selected for transplanting paddy seedling based on astrological prediction receives a bundle of paddy seedling from the local elected leader

The *Gup* of Doteng distributes a bundle each to the five women and directs them to proceed to the extreme end for transplanting (Figure 10). The *Damkar* flag is hoisted at the starting end of the terrace. The ladies pray for a bountiful harvest without disease and pests. Then the middle lady moves forward from the rest and transplants three paddy seedlings as she had been identified with good birth year and appropriate age by an astrologer (Figure 11). The remaining four ladies then join the middle lady to transplant the paddy seedling with scintillating songs. Such elaborate *Damkar* ritual is performed only at Doteng Gewog. In rest of the study sites, involvement of the elected local leaders are not present.



Figure 11. Middle women moves forward from the rest four women to inaugurate transplantation by planting three seedlings while rest then follow

Conclusion

Damkar is an important ritual that must be conducted to have a good agricultural yield and such rituals and their significance must be shared with younger generations to carry on the rituals. While it is not a ceremony designed to increase crop productivity, it does serve the purpose of bringing people together and acting as a bond to keep the community together harmoniously. Through the interviews, it is found that currently none of the interviewees feel like there is either a decline or incline in the way *Damkar* is performed. While the continuation of *Damkar* is still strong, it is essential to make efforts toward the preservation of such rituals in order to safeguard the timeless beauty and art of simple rites. During the festival, it is just as essential to learn about the people's spirituality and their trust in nature and the powers that she holds as it is to learn about their culture and the rituals that they do.