

## A thriving *Devi Puja* ritual of Southern Communities in Bhutan

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### Background

Bhutan is a country with diverse cultures, ways of life, languages, and religious beliefs. Bhutan's population of over 700,000 people may only be small, but there are 19 different spoken languages (van Driem, 2015). The population of Bhutan underwent significant changes in its makeup and ethnicity when the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese, also known as *Lhotsampas* ("People of the South"), began to immigrate to Bhutan from Nepal. In the middle to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, inhabitants of Nepal were invited to settle in the lowlands of southern Bhutan (Maxym *et al*, 2010). Buddhism is the most popular religion in Bhutan, followed by Hinduism. Bhutanese culture is thus heavily influenced by revered Buddhist ideals. Bhutanese people adhere to their religious beliefs and have a high regard for their gods and deities (Holidify, 2020). Contrary to the nearly entirely Buddhist northern Bhutanese, the majority of the *Lhotsampa* people about 22% of the population follow Hinduism and are mainly concentrated in the southern Bhutan (U.S DS, 2020). After Buddhism, Hinduism is the second most popular religion in Bhutan. There are many Hindu temples, particularly in the southern Bhutan (Maxiym *et al*, 2010). The *Lhotsampa* people celebrate Hindu festival and religious occasions just like the Hindu community in India (78.9%) and Nepal (80.6%). Hinduism is a polytheistic religion, which means that there are numerous deities as opposed to a single supreme deity (Wisevoter, 2023). As a result, *Lhotsampa* also performs various religious rituals related to various deities, one of which is the *Devi Puja* ritual performed particularly for deity known as *Devi*.

*Durga* in Sanskrit: - "the Inaccessible" is a Hindu Goddess who is also known as *Devi* and *Shakti*. According to legend, *Durga* was created to help *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Shiva*, and the lesser gods to defeat the buffalo demon *Mahishasura*, who was otherwise invincible. She is both a derivative of the male divinities and the true source of their inner power, embodying their collective energy (*shakti*). *Durga*, when fully grown and beautiful, takes on a fierce and menacing appearance to her enemies. She is typically depicted riding a lion and with eight or ten arms, each holding the special weapon. *Durga Puja* is celebrated in her honor.

*Durga Puja* is observed in a variety of ways known as *Devi Puja* annually that has its roots in the Indian sub-continent; honouring the Hindu goddess *Durga* and commemorates her victory over

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evil *Mahishasura*, the Buffalo demon (Agnihotri, 2022). *Devi Puja* has been transmitted through generations although over the years it has undergone some changes in style and form. Most of the *Lhotsampa* from at Kana and Tsangkha villages in Dagana district, Dorokha and Yoeseltse villages in Samtse district, Barshong and Patshaling villages in Tsirang district and Dolongang village in Sarpang district perform *Devi Puja* (Phanchung *et al*, 2022).

### Study site Dolongang at glance

Dolongang is a village under Jigmedling chiwogs (basic electoral precinct), which is part of the Dekiding gewog (block) under Sarpang district situated in south-central region, bordering the Indian state of Assam. Sarpang, one of Bhutan's three entry points from India via Gelephu, is a rapidly developing socio-economic region where *Lhotsampa*, an Indo-Aryan language is spoken by the diverse community. The district's north-eastern regions have East Bodish Kheng speakers. Dolongang village is located about 20 km from Sarpang Dzongkhag and 16 km from Gelephu Domestic Airport. The village was formerly known as “Gairegoan”, where “Gaire” stood for “deep” and “Goan” for “village” (Figure 16). However, these days the village is known as Dolongang, where “Dolong” stands for “widespread stones” and “gang” for “at the disposal”. The area is mostly



Figure 16. Dolongang village under Dekiling Gewog at foothill seen in February 2023

covered with stones, hence appropriately christened as “Dolongang”.

The village is located near an industrial area which provides great opportunities for business setup. The village also has a Technical Training Institute for skill development, where many young people

enroll for skills development. The presence of institute also creates job opportunities and assist in the improvement of the village. Dolongang is 30 kilometres away from the Gelephu commercial town. Being located at the foothill of a dense forest reserve, the village undergoes unrest in controlling wildlife, such as elephants, deer, rabbits, and wild cats, which damage their houses and fields. The migration of young people from rural to urban areas has resulted in a labor shortage, challenging to fully utilize the large agriculture fields. Most of the Dolongang locals practice either Buddhism or Hinduism. They perform various rituals as part of their religious practice in order to appease the gods and make health-related prayers. *Devi Puja* is one of the rituals that is practiced in Dolongang village.

## Site for Ritual Performance

*Devi Thang* is said to be a sacred location where *Devi Puja* is performed. A versatile 71 years old Nandalal Orari, who served as *Gup* (Head of local administration) and *Chimi* (people's representative to the National Assembly) of the Tsangkha gewog under Dagana district, claims that *Devi Thang*

typically appears in nature close to a water source as they believe it to be a water goddess or a tree that produces milk-like sap as seen in Zinchella village



Figure 17. *Devi Thang* at Zinchella village under Tsangkha Gewog, Dagana district where *Devi puja* is performed by Tsangkha community

Tsangkha gewog (Figure 17). Even in a

remote hamlet of Barshong village under Tsirang district, 67 years old Man Bahadur Luintal confirmed a similar ceremony performed by the community in such sacred sites. The representation of deity is in a form of *Trishul* and a stone or huge old tree as seen in Dolongang village (Figure 18).



Figure 18. *Devi Thang* at Dolongang village, Dekiling Gewog under Sarpang district where *Devi puja* is performed

The sacred site is typically located by a *Pandit* or *Dami* (celebrant), but occasionally it is discovered by chance by regular people. According to Nandalal Orari of Tsangka village, the *Pandits* or *Dami* give hints as to what might be causing illness to individual or disease outbreaks in their community. When in doubt, the person affected goes to the specific spot where they might have desecrated or defiled *Devi Thang*. They offer milk and flowers to the *Trishul* and rocks and

if diseased person improves sickness over time, they recognize the site as *Devi Thang* which later perform elaborate rituals. Harka Bahadur Mohat, our respondent from Dolongang village in the Sarpang district narrated a real-life incident of workers who were unable to install power transmission tower on the hilltop (Figure 19).

The contractor had installed a railing to carry power tower item but failed to move an inch delaying the work. The assistance of *Pandit* was sought to appease and forgive since they had desecrated the sacred site while building the railing. Having followed the *Pandit's* advice and solemnized the sacred *Devi Thang*, the power transmission work later was erected with ease. Such incidence strengthens community's beliefs in protecting sacred site to perform annual *Devi Puja* which also helps to protect their water source.



Figure 19. Harka Bahadur Mohat from Dolongang village narrates real incidence of power transmission work disruption due to defilement of sacred *Devi Thang* by construction workers

### Rationale for Performing *Devi Puja*

One of our senior citizens who participated as respondent was 88 years old Mon Bahadur Subba of Dolongang village. According to him, the community holds a *Devi Puja* primarily for climatic reasons. *Devi Puja* is carried out primarily for agricultural purposes, such as for timely rainfall at the start of the vegetable and crop sowing season. The traditional ritual is also performed to prevent hailstones and storms while growing and harvesting crops like maize, paddy, and vegetables like chili, broccoli, spinach, cabbage, beans, and cauliflower. The community of Dolongang also performs *Devi Puja* to have a reliable water source for irrigation and other purposes. *Devi Puja* usually takes place in April. As per Padma Kumar, a villager from Zinchella village in Tsangkha under Dagana district, the ritual is performed in late March or early April since it is the beginning of spring for crop plantation. They pray for timely rainfall and the avoidance of

any unwelcome climatic changes, such as storms and hailstones. They also ask for continued health and a fruitful year.

## Ritual Processes



Figure 20. Pandit Mani Kumar Gautam at Damphu temple, Kithorthang Gewog meets Research Assistants to explain Devi puja ritual

A *Pandit* Mani Kumar Guatam from Damphu temple at Tsirang Dzongkhag (Figure 20) said that the appropriate date and time to perform the *Puja* should be in accordance with the Hindu religious text known as *Chandi path* which is the first step in the preparation of a *Devi Puja*. Typically agreeing on the respondents of Tsangkha village in Dagana district and Dolongang village in Sarpang district, *Pandit* Mani Kumar Guatam stated that the *Devi Puja* occurs once a year in April, either on *Buddha Purnima* or *Devi Purnima* (Full moon day). The community raises funds in advance of the ritual to buy ceremonial objects like vessels, masks, deity sculptures, incense burners, *diya* (Clay or mud oil lamp with a cotton wick that has been dipped in ghee or oil) and embellishments on holy scrolls and books. The holy site *Devi Thang* is cleaned and washed. The people visit the holy site on the day of the *Puja* along with the *Pandit* or *Dami*. They set a flag close to the stone (representation of god/*Devi*) and clean it with buttermilk. They place a fresh flower close to the stone and apply *sindoor* (vermilion) on the stone. On a plate made of cow dung or a normal plate, fresh fruits, sel roti (circular fried rice ponded flour), *kheer* (Sugar milk cooked rice pudding with saffron and cardamom), milk, and sweets are offered to the stone. As stated by veteran Mon Bahadur Subba of Dolongang village, there were animal sacrifice especially the kid of a goat. However, the Hindu devotees forbid animal sacrifice and alternative forms of worship

is performed respecting the beliefs of other members of their tradition. Yet, in Barshong village under Tsirang district, it is said that the community still practices animal sacrifices.

The *Pandits* and *Dami* recite the *Purana* (Sanskrit scripture) and *Homa* (known as *Havan*, a fire ritual) after lighting an incense stick. The crowd prostrates before the stone and offers prayers for respect for the divine mother's nine facets. They ask for timely rain, good health, protection from illness, and protection from harsh weather. After the recital of prayers, the *Pandit* or *Dami* provides a blessing to the villagers ending the *Puja*. It is crucial that everyone understands the true meaning and purpose of this worship for everyone to receive the greatest possible amount of enduring spiritual and material benefits.

## Conclusion

Even though it is uncertain at the end of the day whether the ritual actually brings the village timely rain, good health, or prosperity, it does bring the community together and uphold the tradition and religion that their ancestors have passed down. Additionally, the villagers have a strong belief in the *Devi Puja* and want to keep it going and pass it on to future generations. The villagers believe that there is a gradual disappearance of these customs as the result of young people's changing attitudes, their transition from Hinduism to other religions, and changes in lifestyle. However, the villagers who adhere to those customs feel to keep up their practice while welcoming the newcomers.