

***Mahadev-than Puja* - A binding force behind community vitality among the Hindu communities in Bhutan**

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Background

Religious and cultural forces play an inevitable role in the daily lives of Bhutanese people. Bhutan is home to a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multilingual population that embraces and celebrates its diversity. Early in the 20th century, Bhutan experienced the most significant population development and changes when Nepalese migrants started to settle in the southern lowlands. These immigrants represented a diverse spectrum of ethnicities. People of Nepalese origin make up about 25% of Bhutan's population today, despite a bitter ethnic conflict that broke out around 1990 (Basnet, 2020). The politically correct terms used to refer to them are *Lhotshampas* or "Southerners." The majority of *Lhotshampas* practice Hinduism, which is indistinguishable from the Hindus of Nepal and India.

Lhotshampas in the southern lowlands of Bhutan also celebrate and conduct most of the festivals and rituals like any other Hindu community around the world. *Mahadevthan puja* is one such ritual practiced by the Hindu communities in Bhutan. According to its literal translation, *Mahadevthan* can be known as the 'a place where *Lord Shiva* meditated'. This ritual according to 71 years old



Figure 21. Seventy one year Nandalal Orari from Tsangkha under Dagana district shares Mahadevthan ritual to Research Assistants at his house

Nandalal Orari, from Tsangkha village under Dagana district (Figure 21) is conducted in honor of *Lord Shiva* who is worshiped as the supreme being in Hinduism and is also known as 'The Destroyer' within the *Trimurti* along with *Lord Vishnu* and *Lord Brahma*. The concept of *Trimurti*, or "the trinity of celestial forms," has its roots in the earliest Hindu beliefs, possibly the solar cult. The sun had three characteristics: it is bright and warm, and it cast scorching

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rays. According to the world process, this seems to have contributed to the three fundamental roles. It is believed that the warmth of the sun's rays causes creation, the brightness of the sun's light preserves it, and the sun's blazing beams cause destruction.

In addition to introducing a new concept of the unity of creation, preservation, and destruction, the idea of the triad also suggested that life, death, and rebirth are all part of a cycle. The Vedic triad of *Agni*, the embodiment of creative heat, *Surya*, the sun god, and *Indra*, who is also known



Figure 22. Mahadevthan puja site at Damphu Dophu Nye, Kikhorthang Gewog under Tsirang district recently improved with concreting and basic amenities.

conduct the puja.

as *Rudra*, the storm deity, is composed of these three deities. In Hindu mythology, a name change doesn't always indicate the emergence of a new deity. The personification of *Shiva* was later combined with the personifications of *Indra*, *Vayu*, the *Maruts*, and the *Rudras*, who all seem to be variations of one another. Similarly, *Surya* had many incarnations, including *Varuna*, *Mitra*, and *Vishnu*, who is the second figure in the later Hindu *Trimurti*. Last but not least, *Agni*, the powerful creator of life, effortlessly transformed into *Brahma*, the Creator god. Thus, *Mahadevthan puja* honors all the omnipresent forms of *Lord Shiva*.

Site for *Mahadevthan Puja*

Mahadevthan puja is usually conducted in a sacred place far from the settlements which normally includes caves (Figure 22) but in places where the caves are destroyed due to natural calamities and are not reachable, people also prefer to conduct this ritual in the Hindu temples built in their communities. Every lunar month on the Hindu calendar, there is a *Shivaratri* which occurs on the 14th day of each month (12 per year). *Shivaratri* means the night of *Lord Shiva*. But the spiritual meaning is about the day creation took place out of the dark. *Mahashivaratri*, which takes place once a year between February and March, is seen to be the most important of the *Shivaratri*s. Thus, on *Mahashivaratri* people go to *Mahadevthan* to

Mahadev-than is seen in many places in Bhutan such as Tashiding village in Dagana district, Barshong, Sunkosh, Damphu (*Dophu Nye*) and Menchuna villages in Tsirang district, and Dolkhola village in Sarpang district. According to 68 years old Pandit Mani Kumar Gautam, *Mahadevthan Puja* is performed at the sacred cave within the Damphu village under Tsirang district (Figure 23) twice in the year corresponding to the beginning of farming and harvesting. Tsirang Dzongkhag, located in southwestern Bhutan, is rich in biodiversity, agricultural practices, and diverse culture and tradition.

Folklore of Damphu

According to a local folklore documented in Denkar's Facebook, the name 'Damphu' of Tsirang Dzongkhag, is said to have derived from the mysterious cave *Dra-Phu*. In local language 'Dra' means rock and 'Phu' refers to cave. Earlier, the cave is said to be known as *Draphu Nye*. However, due to verbal orientation, it is referred as *Dho-Phu Nye*, which means "rock cave".

Although written account of the Great Guru Padmasambhava's arrival in the southwestern part of Bhutan could not be verified, locals believe that Guru Rinpoche travelled through Dagana-Tsirang valley, touching Nabji-Korphu on his way to Bumthang to cure King Sindu Raja's illness. Guru Rinpoche is said to have rested at the *Dhophu Nye* cave in a forested area with no human settlement. Since then, the locals have revered the area as a sacred site of worship for Guru Padmasambhava. However, as narrated by a Pandit of Damphu temple and site visit by the Researchers indicate more of sacred site for *Mahadevthan* since there were no indication of any Buddhist ritual offerings as seen in Figure 22. However, the co-existence of Lord Shiva's abode and Guru Rinpoche's transit halt cannot be disputed as such sacred caves are seen in Maritika Helesi, Nepal where both Buddhist and Hindus make pilgrimage.

Interestingly, the other popular folklore version of naming place name 'Damphu' is that as many Nepalese immigrants settled in central-south Bhutan, the first ethnic groups settled at Tsirang below the present cave were said to be mostly the Tamang tribes. It is said that these ethnic



Figure 23. Pandit Mani Kumar Gautam meets Research Assistants and explains why *Mahadevthan puja* is performed twice in a year

Tamang tribes would gather with their percussion instrument like the tambourine and would sing and dance at the same tableland regularly in the evening at the present Damphu town, which also



Figure 24. Magnificent passage seen where Nandi a sacred bull has entered and vanished in this rock cave

served as an open market and community gathering place. The single-sided circular frame drum dance by these Tamang tribes had become so popular as it reverberated every evening on the same plateau. Therefore, the present place is said to have been called 'Damphu' (circular drum) where this musical instrument created melodious sounds while dancing and singing by the people.

This version of getting the place name 'Damphu' appears to near correct since this sacred cave has connection to mysterious *Nandi* disappearing through the passage. According to Pandit Mani Kumar Gautam of Damphu, long ago when people started settling and cultivating paddy in the terraces along the riverbank, a bull would come out on an auspicious occasion to their paddy field in the village below the present cave. The present rock cave (*Dhophu Nye*) or *Mahadevthan* is at Kikhorthang Geog facing Rangthangling Gewog and Tsholingkhor Gewog that has predominantly a terraced paddy field at the foothill. People upon seeing the appearance of the bull on the auspicious occasion in their field without harming their crops once decided to follow the bull trailing towards the cave area (*Dhophu Nye*). To the astonishment of people, the bull perished inside the cave and left a magnificent hole (Figure 24). After this magical incident, locals believed that the bull was the manifestation of *Lord Shiva* as *Nandi* which means "giving delight/joy". *Nandi* is the sacred bull of *Lord Shiva* and is also believed to be *Shiva's* animal form and his means of transportation.

Ever since then, the local villagers have considered the present cave *Dhophu Nye* as *Mahadevthan* and performed *puja* twice in a year. The first *Mahadevthan puja* is performed on *Mahashivaratri* sometime in between February and March months before the plantation begins for good yield of crops. The second *Mahadevthan puja* is performed on *Balachaturdashi* which falls during late November or early December after the harvest seasons for the bountiful harvest to appease and acknowledge the local deity. According to the local community, the cave passage is said to have

an outlet at Darachu which is several kilometres from the present cave site at Tsirang-Sarpang highway. However, no one over the recent decades have attempted to walk or crawl through to explore the myths. Whether Guru Rinpoche had visited and took shelter or not, the cave today has been transformed with modern 360-degree walking trails and is well developed with basic amenities like metal railings footpath, permanent ritual site, water tap, open cooking space, public gathering space with concrete flooring and metal railing, and restroom since *Mahadevthan puja* is performed twice a year (Figure 25). The 360-degree trails have obviously attracted public to visit the sacred cave either for recreational pilgrimage or for seeking blessing by revering the sacred site located in deep forest cover. There are also two tower rest houses at strategic site with clear views of downhill and opposite settlements within the deep forest.



Figure 25. Access to Mahadevthan sacred site with metal railings and footpath developed for public visit by 360 degree trail at Damphu Tsirang district

Features of Mahadevthan

Mahadevthan is particularly characterized by the formation of stalagmites and stalactites in the shape of flowers, teats of a cow, bells, statues, and prints of gods and goddesses, surrounded by waterfalls and other significant figures and narrow passageways. However, the narrow

passageways of *Dophu Nye* which is said to be extended till Darachu on Sarpang highway in the past is not accessible to human although it is believed to serve as *paapdvvara* (cleansing passage). Therefore, geographical formation of stalagmites and stalactites in this passage could not be verified due to inaccessibility. Such incredible geological formations have been recognized as enigmatic divine signs, and these locations have obtained the status of spiritual power.

One of the *Mahadevthan* site is at Dolpani under Dekiling Gewog of Sarpang district where people maintain absolute cleanliness and believe that any defilement to the sacred place could bring disharmony and misfortune to an individual and the community. Dolpani *Mahadevthan* is a sacred site for Lord Shiva where stalagmites and stalactites rock formation can be witnessed with crystal lime water flowing in the valley. According to 55 years old Harka Bahadur Mohat, a resident of



Figure 26. Harka Bdr Mohat from Dolongang, Dekiling Gewog shares real incidence of desecration impact to innocent person of Dolpani sacred site

Dolongang village under Sarpang district (Figure 25), there was once an incidence where a man allegedly took away some flower-shaped stones from *Mahadevthan* site in Dolpani located upstream of Dolkhola river out of ignorance. The person was said to have fallen into instant illness. An

astrologer had indicated that the only way to cure his sickness was to return the special stone to the same sacred site which located in deep valley forest with running river and seek forgiveness from *Mahadevthan*. Upon returning the special stone to the same site at Dolpani *Mahadevthan* site, the person is said to have regained his health.

Preparations for *Mahadevthan Puja*

Padma Kumar Theba, a 57-year-old resident from Tsangkha village in Dagona district described *Mahadev-than puja* as a solemn event notable for its introspective focus and fasting. Visitors to the *Mahadevthan* should abstain from meat and alcohol the day before the *puja*. Before going to the *puja* on *Maha Shivaratri*, also known as the Great *Shivaratri*, one must take a bath and cleanse themselves. The rite is initiated by members of the local community along with a *Pandit*. People who worship *Shiva* offer him offerings of fruits, leaves, sweets, grains, milk, and kheer. The

purpose and objective of performing *Mahadevthan puja* are mainly for the well-being of an individual, family, and community. Pandit Mani Kumar Gautam from Dampfu also said that wishes made on the day of the rituals are granted. People even conduct the ritual for the abundance of natural resources such as water, a variety of trees, and living organism around the place. Brahmins/ *pandits* read out a holy book called *Chandi* where all the prayers are embedded.

Mahadevthan puja relating to its Hindu origination is found to be conducted in many regions of Nepal and India although variations in the name might be observed. However, according to its name, rituals conducted in a place that has a sacred connection to *Lord Shiva* could be considered *Mahadevthan puja*. A report by Khatry and Shrestha (2014) states that Halesi or Maratika in Nepal though widely visited by Buddhist followers as a homage to Guru Rinpoche is also known to be *Mahadevthan* according to the Hindu connection. Halesi is one such place where Hindus worship the *Haleswara* form of *Shiva*. Hindus perform various rituals in a year honouring the sacred place such as during *Shivaratri*, the great *Shiva* festival that falls in the month of *Phalgun* (February-March), during *Ramnavami*, the Rama festival that falls in the month of *Chaitra* (March-April), during *Teej*, the women's festival that falls in the month of *Bhadra* (August-September), and during *Balachaturdashi*, a festival where people throw away the grains in the name of the dead that falls in the month of *Mangsir* (November-December).

Sustainability of *Mahadevthan puja*

People in the villages perceive nature as a powerful entity, not to be messed with. Mountains, lakes, and caves were seen as a formidable site while forests and rivers were believed to be the abode of non-human spirits. Out of fear and awe, people respect the nature and stay away from it. Thus, the rituals are still vibrant and thriving in the villages. However, some older generations worry out changing faith and religion among people which leads to the abandonment of the long-practiced traditions and rituals. An octogenarian Mon Bdr. Subba, 88 years old of Dolungang village in Sarpang district, expressed his concerns about the consequences of displeasing the gods and non-human spirits due to the discontinuation of ancestral practices since the younger generation is uninterested. Further Ran Maya Subba 74 years old adds that with children going to school and choosing to work outside of the village, rituals and sacred sites like *Mahadevthan* may become extinct in the coming decades.



Figure 27. Man Bahadur Leuintal of Barshong Gewog under Tsirang district fears extinction of Mahadevthan puja due to inaccessibility of Mahadevthan sacred ritual caves

Besides socio-cultural threats, 67 years old Man Bdr. Leuintal from Barshong Gewog under Tsirang district expresses the environmental challenges in visiting and performing *Mahadevthan puja* which might lead to its extinction (Figure 26). According to him, the *Mahadevthan* cave in their community is about two-hours walk from the roadhead at Barshong village. The sacred site is often inaccessible during the winter due to dense forest along the trails and swollen river during monsoon. Even the *Mahadevthan* site at Dholpani, Dekiling Gewog under Sarpang district is three hours deep forest walk upstream river. In the future, the village elders fear that there is a risk of losing the essence of *Mahadevthan puja* since younger generations may believe that *Mahadevthan puja* is only performed in temples rather than deep forest rock caves. However, *Mahadevthan*, as the most sacred place, has played an integrative role and is widely visited throughout the year by people of various faiths, castes, ethnic groups, and cultures to observe various festivals, perform pujas, and other events. The environment is indirectly protected due to fear for desecration and the caves have always remained secluded and sacred.