

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 Dzungkha 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 Trashy 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 Trashy 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, Chokat, 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.

Chokat, 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.

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	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

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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

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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 Trashi 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

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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 outcastes³ 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 Damchoe 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

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

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