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Massive Rice Offering in Wangdiphodrang in Zhabdrung Rinpoche's Time

Dasho Karma Ura*

A newly discovered book of 1679, perhaps the oldest extant land record, shows that there was a survey of taxable fields and taxable houses of Wangdi district (Shar mTsho brGyad kyi khral Zhing khral Khyim gyi Deb gTer) to collect rice taxes as fresh-harvest offering for blessing tithes (dbang yon thog phud).

At the end of the eight months' stay of the two Portuguese Jesuits - Father Estavao Cacella and Father Calbral - with Zhabdrung Rinpoche in Cheri in 1627, Father Cacella noted that Zhabdrung Rinpoche was famous for "his abstinence, as he never eats rice, meat or fish..." (Baillie, L. M. 1999). Yet rice became the main instrument of his political economy. The 3232 households of Wangdi district offered on an average 359 kg of rice every year, a breath taking quantity that might have made people gasp for air as they carried on their backs these offerings up to the dzong. Wangdi dzong can be imagined holding and rolling rice reserve from the 1,144,636 kgs of rice (quantity corrected for missing values) it collected every year as fresh harvest offering for blessing the paddy growers by Zhabdrung. One can picture dzong builders, pazaaps (*dpa' rtsal pa*), monks and officials by bags of rice and packs of dairy products seasoned in the well-ventilated Wangdi dzong. Ranks of high officials were evocative of food entitlements, like *tshogs thob* (meal entitled), *dro rgyar thob pa* (breakfast entitled), and *lto bzan dkyus ma* (ordinary food entitled) (Ardussi and Ura, 2000). The volume of rice collection also gives us an idea of the food supply available for the construction of gigantic structures like the Wangdi dzong in 1638.

A sprightly man named Wangchuck from Wache in Jena gewog of

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Wangdiphodrang turned up in this author's house in late 2010 to show two hand written copies of voluminous *pecha gutshem* (*dgu 'tsems*) that had back spine stitches and dog-eared edges that bibliophiles would adore. One copy had 327 folio-pages and the other, smaller in size, had 431 pages. There are minor content differences between them. The first copy of the document was written in *tshuyig* and stamped after every few pages with black seal with imprint of cross-dorji (*dorji ja dram*). The second copy was also in *tshuyig* with its text interspersed with stamps of red seal of "Wang 'dus" (ie. Wangdiphodrang). Each copy weighed approximately 2 kgs. I arranged, with the prompt help of Home Minister Minjur Dorji, for both the copies to be bought by the National Library of Bhutan where they are archived and safe from the ravages of rats, silverfish, fire hazard and negligent handling. It is fortunate that the family of Wache Wangchuck had kept these documents in their custody after Wangchuk got it from his grand-uncle who was the last *nyerchen* (lord steward) of Wangdiphodrang.

The document is titled "*don drub zhas pa sa mo lug los shar tsho brgyad kyi khral zhing khral khyim gyi deb gter gsal bai me long zhas bya bzhugs*." It translates as "The treasure book of Female Earth Sheep Year that clarifies like mirror the taxable fields and taxable houses of the eight-parts of Shar". *Don drub* is synonym for sheep year in astrological lexicon (Astrologer Sonam Tenzin, 2012). This new source will be referred hereafter as *TB*, as abbreviation of the Treasure Book.

No measurement is neutral although it is often made to appear so: how it is done is absolutely driven by the purposes and ideology beyond the metrics themselves. *TB* begins by introducing its primary purpose as being an unchanging reference to stabilize rice tax collection. *TB* was intended to prevent "the sale and purchase of taxable fields out of which the respectful, happy, and faithful subjects offered harvest-fresh offerings, in return for blessing (*dbang yon thog phud*), to the unity of skillful and compassionate bodhisattvas of all directions, Palden Lama

Dudjom Ngagi Wangpo Choglas Nampar Gyalwa, (ie. Zhabdrung Rinpoche)." A brief translation of the rationale given in the document for Zhabdrung to collect the grain offering reads; "The grain offering was collected in order for the people to generate merits by supporting the noble community (monk body) and by making offering as vast as ocean to the three roots (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha). The grain offering was collected also to turn the wheel of cloud-vast offerings without ever ceasing, according to the mandalas of secret tantra so that the sentient beings will gain two types of merits (*dmigs bcas bsod nams dang dmigs med yeshes kyi tso*) either immediately or indirectly" (*dgos dang brgyud*)."

TB ends by pointing out tersely the consequences of evading cash and commodity taxes (*skam khral* and *rlon khral*). The frequent reference to *skam khral* undermines our assumption that cash taxes were absent in those days, unless it meant something different. *TB* notes that "People living in evil times would attempt to be outside the purview of the taxation of the government of Choje Drukpa, by bribing the high officials with food and wealth (*pon la zas nor sgye bsud btang ste*) in some cases". *TB* goes on to say "in other cases, wealthy households, who could be in close and pleasurable company of the high officials, would be removed from the tax register. But the friendless poor could be crushed like mustard oil-seeds and driven into oppressed hardship." *TB* says that "there is nothing more intensely amoral than these activities in the relationship between officials and the subjects." Frauds and scams involving high officials and wealthy people were known then. *TB* declares that "Henceforth cases of evading cash taxes (*skam khral*), of changing commodity taxes into cash taxes by altering tax books, by adding or deleting, (*rlon khral skam khral la sgyur bai khrel yig bris bsub byed pa*) can bring harm to the perpetrators up to seven generations by the heart-blood drinking, oath-bound protectors of the teachings." Our world would be beautiful if we had an ethical tax system and there were divine multi-generational tax inspectors who have perfect memory of tax records over seven generations. *TB* ends by

proclaiming, "The oath-bound protectors of the teachings of the Buddha would certainly save those with right attitude, faithfully serving the government of Choje Drukpa from unharmonious accidents in the present life." At the end, *TB* states that "the protectors of the teachings will surely assist the people in ultimately obtaining the profound enlightenment because of the grace of honouring the command and seal of Zhabdrung Rinpoche on the crown of their heads" (*mthar thug byang chub kyi go 'phang bla na med pa thob pai stong grogs mzaad nyes pa zhabs drung rinpoche' bka' rtags kyi phyag rgya spyi bors bcings pai' mthu las bslu ba med*).

The dating of the document can be ambiguous because the document does not specify the exact *rabjung* or the sexagonal cycle. Female earth sheep year, the year when *TB* was written, can be any of the following years: 1619, 1679, 1739, 1799, 1859. But the larger context of history can be studied to find out which of these years can be the particular female earth sheep year. A comparative analysis of *TB* with other relevant documents also narrows down the date of *TB*.

So, when was it first written? The year 1619 is too early for rice taxation to have started in Wangdi district. It is barely three years after Zhabdrung reached Bhutan, and he would not have been able to organize systematic collection of rice offerings. On the other hand, he would have needed substantial supply to feed his militia that repelled a huge Tibetan invasion in that year. We cannot pretend to be able to judge the effect of a monk-statesman, who could accomplish such marvels, on mass psychology. He could have inspired a new level of philanthropy of rice. However, *TB* was most likely written in 1679 to document the land tax system that Zhabdrung started during his life, and updated in 1687. 1679 coincides with the second last year of the rule of the able expansionist administrator, the builder of six dzongs in the East, and a brilliant general, Minjur Tenpa (1613-81), who successfully commanded the Bhutanese forces in the war of 1675-79 with Tibet, but whom the fratricidal, unethically ambitious and scheming Kabje Gedun Chopel

overthrew in 1680.

TB explicitly mentions that it was revised and updated in the earth female rabbit year (*sa mo yos lo*) in Punthang Dewachen Phodrang. Again, the *rabjung* is not specified, leaving us to define the year by understanding the greater context of history. Earth female rabbit year can be any of the following years: 1627, 1687, 1747, 1807, 1867. Considering that Punakha fortress was built in 1637, 1627 can be ruled out. We can also rule out 1747 or any later years for one reason. The biography of Desi Sherab Wangchuck (1797-1765) gives us different administrative divisions of Wangdiphodrang and a different number of households. Those administrative divisions are conspicuously silent in *TB*. In the biography of Desi Sherab Wangchuck, Tsirang and the villages and households under Tsirang *drungwog* were clearly enumerated. There is no mention of Tsirang *drungwog* or any village in Tsirang in *TB*. It seems that Tsirang was yet to be incorporated into the tax system at the time of writing *TB*. It can then be confidently said that *TB* was updated in Punakha dzong in 1687. A stronger reason still for proposing 1679 as the most probable date of *TB* is that it directly links harvest-fresh offering of paddy (*dbang yon thug phud*) to the blessings or empowerment given by Zhabdrung Rinpoche who is mentioned by his grand full title. We do not know when the passing away of Zhabdrung was made publicly known, but it is thought that it was kept secret for a long time, although Zhabdrung himself directed that the secret be maintained for 12 years. His state funeral (*dgongs-rdzogs*) was publicly performed only in 1754 (Ardussi, forthcoming Ch. 3). The direct emphasis on Zhabdrung in *TB* indicates that tax collection needed invoking his charisma and personal authority.

Estimates of the population of Bhutan have so far not been found in old texts. What is usually found is counts of households known as *gungs* or houses (*mi khyim* or *khyim*) because households were the basis of tax. In fact, even if the occupying family came to an end through deaths or lack

of issue, the house as a tax-basis continued through *tsa-tong* (*rtsa-stong*, literally empty root household) system whereby the tax of the empty house was paid by any family who took over its properties. *TB* lists the houses and vegetable plots in Wangdiphodrang at that time. The purpose of recording the number of houses or households in other old documents in general was related to taxation, distribution of *mangyed*, or enthronement gifts (*khri-ston gnang-shin*) by the government (Ardussi and Ura 2000; Je Ngawang Lhundrup's biography of Tenzin Rabgay KMT 2005, p.159). But the counts of those household liable to taxation did not include households and families that were not paying taxes for one reason or other. *TB* also omitted such households.

Ardussi and Ura (2000) estimated the total population of Bhutan by going through the household data found in the passages related to the enthronement of Zhabdrung Jigme Dragpa I (1725-1761) in 1747. They also estimated total population for other years - 1796 and 1831- from additional sources. A fraction of the population was added to represent those who did not pay taxes and were thus not listed in the biography. However, I came across certain official agency who estimated past populations of Bhutan by absurd 'backward projections' at 3% a year, a logic that will show that Bhutan had no human being at a certain point in medieval period! His enthronement account is part of the biography of Desi Sherab Wangchuck (reign 1744-63). In that article, Ardussi and Ura also estimated the population of Wangdiphodrang in 1747, which is summarized here.

According to the biography, there were seven major administrative units of Wangdi districts: Shar (Dangchu) *drungwog*, Jena *drungwog*, Jargang Penlopwog, Gaseng *drungwog*, Naynying *drungwog*, Uma Penlopwog, and Tsirang *Drungwog* excluding Indians subjects. The total number of households under Wangdi including Tsirang *drungwog* was 3,701 under 36 different locations of major settlements by names. Tsirang *drungwog* was part of Wangdi district in 1747. The total number of households in

1747 is uncannily close to the number found in *TB* in 1679.

According to household level data found in *TB*, in 1679, there were 3,232 households in Wangdi who were paying yearly rice offering in various quantities to the government. When Tsirang *drungwog's* villages are excluded to facilitate comparison, the household number in Wangdi district in 1747 was 3,566. Between 1679 and 1747, about 334 new households were established.

Like the rest of Bhutan, since 1679, the number of rural households had not increased significantly over three centuries in this district. The 2005 population and housing census found that Wangdi district had 6,227 households (p.47). Out of this total, 4,773 were rural households. In the special demographic dynamics of Bhutan influenced by several factors including monkhood, immigration had played a greater role than internal growth or decline. Once immigration from north or south ceased, population changed slowly.

On an average, each household paid 359 kg (257 dre) of rice as fresh harvest offering for blessing, as rice tax was known euphemistically. If a kilogram of rice is valued at Nu 60, the value of yearly rice offering by each household in Wangdi district was Nu. 21,590.

TB furnishes us detailed data to do certain estimation. At the aggregate level, the results show that 3232 households listed under 74 villages grew paddy in 26,693 terraces. The district of Wangdi as a whole had to pay paddy offering equal to 1,635,195 dre which is equal to 817,597 dre of rice, which is further equal to 1,144,636 kgs of rice, when a dre is multiplied by 1.4 to convert to a kg. The value of rice offering in the district as a whole was Nu. 68,678,220 when a kg of rice is costed at Nu 60.

We do not know the acreage of rice cultivation in the district at the time

of Zhabdrung Rinpoche or nearly three decade after his passing away when *TB* was drawn up. *TB* does not give data on area by such measures as *langdo*. It however meticulously records the number of terraces owned by a household head who is mentioned by name along with his or her house and vegetable plot. It would seem that the acreage and output of rice were higher compared to today's level. The fields left fallow today due to breakdown of irrigation channels brought from intake heads far away; lack of labour; competition from Indian rice; absorption of rice fields into urban lands; and relatively higher wages in non-farming sectors; are the bases for this observation. One could physically verify whether the numbers of terraces mentioned in *TB* are still being farmed both at village and district level.

Total rice production of Wangdiphodrang in 2010 according to the Ministry of Agriculture statistics was 7,645,000 kg of paddy (DoA 2010, p.7) which is equal to 3,822,500 kg of rice. For crude estimation, I assumed that 2010 paddy output level to hold for 1679 in Wangdi district. When the rice offering of 1,144,637 kg that is recorded in dre equivalent in *TB* is divided by 3,822,500, about 30% of the rice production in 1679 was offered to the government of Zhabdrung. That amount of rice could be sufficient to feed 3000 persons a year.

Top five		
Village	Householder	Kgs of Rice
Zarmading	Lamkey	1,680
Samdrugang	ShakangPhuntshog	1,540
Mesokha	NorbuTshering	1,400
Jhala	Gyalwang	1,400
Rumed	NamgayTshering	1,330

Lowest five		
Village	Householder	Kgs of Rice
Nyishokha	ThrungThrung	28
Mangtsikha	Karpo	28
Gaygar Karma Nang	Delek	28
Gaygar Karma Nang	TsheringDrukpa	28
Sakar Chen	PhuntshoTshering	14

Maximum offering by a household was 1,680 kg of rice (worth Nu 100,800) and the minimum offering by a household was 14 kg of rice (worth Nu 840). Top five and lowest five individual patron-tax payers from Wangdi district in terms of yearly rice offering are shown in the above Table.

Villages who made maximum amount of rice offering were in descending order of amount; Rumed, Zarmading, Samdrugang, Ula, Phakhatsemdong, Rutoedkha, Draphug, Phu and Jala. The villages which had the maximum number of terraces were in descending order; Kunzaling, Nishokha, Jala, Neynyingnyingpa, Gaylingdrongtoed, Kashi. The correlation between the quantity of rice offering and the number of terraces owned by a household was not strong. R^2 between the amount of rice offering and terrace number was weak: $R^2 = .29$. There was no proportionality. It seems size of offering was dependent on motivation, and not land size. But the number of households in a village and the number of terraces in a village were strongly correlated; $R^2 = .85$. These two variables went together.

It is instructive to compare more information found in *TB*, pertaining to 1679, and data on landholding today. Land titles have increased from 3,232 to 7630 over 333 years. *TB* shows that in 1679, out of 3,232 households in Wangdi, 82.5% of householders in whose names paddy land titles occur were male while 17.5% were female. Land records in 2012 show a near reversal in the way landownership is recorded in Wangdi district. In Wangdi district at present, men have 29.2% of the land titles in their names while 70.8% of land titles are held by women. In the country as a whole, land records in 2012 show that 53% of land titles are held by women and 47% are held by men. Women in Wangdi are mistresses of rice terraces, an unbeatable record in at least one aspect of gender equality.

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Note

Due to concerns over space and propriety, the data set containing records of 3232 households in 74 villages of Wangdiphodrang from the recovered 1679 tax record could not be included in this edition for publication. However, in the interest of wider dissemination of original research sources, the meticulously managed data will be uploaded on the publication section of our website www.bhutanstudies.org.bt. The following table shows aggregate data at the level of the 74 villages. Limitations in the data include apparent missing information and in some instances, possible errors due to the difficulty in reconciling old measurement units. This is especially true in case of the information on the number of terraces.

Village	Mean paddy offering (in Dre)	Total paddy offering (in Dre)	No. of thram holders	Male thram holder	Female thram holder	Missing sex information	Total no. terraces	Missing information on no. of terraces
Russmad	1,147.32	47,040	42	40	2	0	340.0	1
zar ma sding	1,129.17	27,100	24	21	3	0	332.0	0
bsam 'brugsgang	1,098.52	29,660	27	25	2	0	248.0	0
dbu la	1,008.70	23,200	23	21	2	0	271.0	1
Pharkhatshemgrong	999.07	42,960	45	34	9	2	459.0	0
Russtodkha	893.33	40,200	48	43	4	1	435.0	0
Bragphug	890.50	35,620	40	30	10	0	511.0	0
Phu	825.00	66,000	80	64	16	0	496.0	0
rgya la	815.93	48,140	61	51	10	0	804.5	1
Nassgor	813.33	12,200	15	12	3	0	108.0	0
Bkrashissdingkha	780.91	17,180	22	19	3	0	200.0	0
nasrnyidsnying pa	750.89	67,580	90	81	9	0	803.0	0
Mangphadkha	715.65	16,460	23	20	3	0	164.5	1
Smalrdogyang	695.33	20,860	30	25	4	1	253.0	1
grab can kha	684.44	49,280	73	60	13	0	395.0	2
mangrtsispo tog	676.00	20,280	30	22	8	0	196.0	1
Spanggsarkha	650.00	16,900	27	18	9	0	136.0	1
Gdung	643.19	36,662	57	42	15	0	340.5	0
yulgsar gong ma	642.25	46,884	73	54	19	0	438.4	0
smal so kha	620.38	32,260	52	39	13	0	325.0	1
Stongzhol	600.69	34,840	58	46	12	0	343.0	0
dga'sengkhostod	592.91	39,132	66	58	8	0	379.0	0
mos pa sgyidkha	564.71	9,600	17	15	2	0	102.0	0
Mangrtsikha	553.48	38,190	69	60	9	0	444.0	3
yulgsar 'og ma	542.78	19,540	36	29	7	0	237.0	0

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Village	Mean paddy offering (in Dre)	Total paddy offering (in Dre)	No. of thram holders	Male thram holder	Female thram holder	Missing sex information	Total no. terraces	Missing information on no. of terraces
lhakhang can	536.36	5,900	11	11	0	0	67.0	1
khyong se kha	536.09	24,660	46	33	13	0	512.5	0
Spyankakha	532.68	43,680	82	74	8	0	480.0	1
Domkha	512.00	23,040	45	26	19	0	584.0	0
Amdpalkha	498.67	22,440	45	36	9	0	509.5	0
Phangyer	491.15	29,960	62	35	27	0	575.0	0
lung bar	480.47	20,660	43	42	1	0	508.0	0
Shingsngon	464.00	51,040	110	92	18	0	640.0	2
Dgoncung	460.00	2,300	5	5	0	0	32.0	0
Aaumkharstod	457.22	32,920	72	54	18	0	670.0	0
dbu ma khasmad	450.70	19,380	43	33	9	1	243.0	0
Kabzhi	447.41	24,160	54	32	22	0	714.0	1
nagsri bar	431.94	26,780	62	57	5	0	586.0	2
then 'bag kha	429.73	15,900	37	33	4	0	381.0	0
Tingngag	426.67	8,960	21	21	0	0	87.0	0
Kongphir	426.29	14,920	35	25	10	0	309.0	0
Kunbzanggling	424.11	38,170	90	85	5	0	919.0	0
sbi nag sbug	421.38	24,440	58	54	4	0	505.0	0
Spanggshong	414.63	11,195	28	25	3	0	180.0	0
rte'uskyeskha	407.75	3,262	8	7	1	0	109.0	0
Bsamgtansgang	407.27	4,480	11	11	0	0	121.0	0
lenkha'lsbi	404.52	29,530	75	61	14	0	644.5	2
Aomchensgang	402.86	14,100	35	24	11	0	385.0	0
Garbzhikha	399.51	16,380	41	36	5	0	412.0	0
Duthul	399.05	8,380	32	24	8	0	128.0	7

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Village	Mean paddy offering (in Dre)	Total paddy offering (in Dre)	No. of thram holders	Male thram holder	Female thram holder	Missing sex information	Total no. terraces	Missing information on no. of terraces
bang legs kha	391.11	3,520	9	8	1	0	58.0	0
Ngagwa	381.40	16,400	43	38	5	0	424.0	0
Dgonsde	377.31	25,280	67	57	10	0	592.0	0
Gyedglinggrongsmad	362.94	24,680	69	55	14	0	678.0	0
Chassbagkha	360.00	10,440	29	29	0	0	273.0	0
Dargyassgang	359.29	10,060	28	23	5	0	280.0	1
Nyishogkha	354.52	29,780	84	71	13	0	846.5	0
Gyerglinggrongstod	354.12	24,080	70	57	13	0	757.0	0
Aathang	346.67	10,400	30	25	5	0	273.5	0
Risbikha	316.67	1,900	6	5	1	0	22.0	0
sadkar can	286.40	14,320	51	47	4	0	369.0	1
Sgalsbrags	285.71	12,000	42	38	4	0	318.0	0
Sgangrgyab	283.41	11,620	42	30	12	0	503.0	0
Khyimsagling	277.89	5,280	19	16	3	0	143.0	0
amphalpa Idbyarsa	271.67	3,260	28	22	6	0	82.5	12
Gtsangra	270.86	9,480	36	35	1	0	249.0	1
Stagssha	264.62	10,320	40	36	4	0	254.0	1
lo pho	240.40	6,010	25	21	4	0	200.0	0
dgassgardkar ma nang	240.20	24,020	100	88	11	1	630.0	0
rkar ma sngangkha	235.74	11,080	48	38	9	1	245.0	1
Lommtsho	235.56	2,120	9	8	1	0	80.0	0
Theed	210.00	1,680	8	7	1	0	-	8
shang stag	198.95	11,340	58	36	22	0	285.0	1
sbag lam kha	156.36	1,720	12	6	6	0	68.0	1

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