

The Cultural History of Gelephu

ABSTRACT

Gelephu is rich in religious, ethnic and cultural diversity, each contributing to the town's unique cultural identity. Previous experiences show, Gelephu and its residents have an enduring capacity to adapt and respond to change when new factors/influences are introduced, while simultaneously preserving that which promotes unique aspects of culture and religion. This kind of adaptability supports the ambitions of the GMC. This study examines the pre-Gelephu culture, the impact of Nepali culture, the emergence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, and the role of religious artifacts, festivals, and traditions in shaping the region's cultural heritage. It also looks at the futuristic view of the cultural diversity if the GMC vision is realised in its entirety. It shall also shed lights on the extent to which Nepaliness and Hinduness of Gelephu eroded overtime and shall continue further in the future city.

Keywords: Culture, Nepali, Lhotsam, identity, history

The Name

The name of the town Gelephu⁸ (དགེ་ལག་ཕུ་ dge-leg-phu, གེ་ལེ་ཕུ) has gone through several changes over the years. The region was infested with elephants prior to first quarter of the last century due to the presence of dense forests until people began to settle in the area converting the it into commercial centre. At that time, the town was called Hattisar or Hatti Sahar.⁹ Hatti means elephant in Nepali and Sahar as town - Hattisar literally translates to elephant sanctuary,

⁸ Historically, Gelephu (previously spelled as Gaylegphug) was within Tsirang (previously spelled Chirang) or Sarpang (previously spelled Sarbhong) region in many references.

⁹ [Background History](#). Gelephu Thromde. Archived from [the original](#) on 2014-10-23.

resonating to its proximity to the cross-bordered Manas Conservation Park. There are no records or references in any literature as to what the town was called prior this. The region likely had some human settlement considering its proximity to the Duar plains where Bhutan fought a war with British India in 1864-65 and had controlled the region for a long time. The possibility of residents migrating to other regions following the war would likely have pushed the region to be infested with elephants and other wild animals. TBJ tried exploring myths and folklores associated with proper Gelephu prior to mid of last century without success. Elephants are still occasionally seen in the area to this day (Kuensel,2023), confirming the city was once habitation of elephants.

Hattisar was a name likely adopted from a neighbouring Indian village with the same name and resonates to the understanding of the local Nepali-speaking residents at the time. Areas south of Gelephu was once ruled by Bhutan, Hattisar was likely a bigger village that included modern day Gelephu.

The town was renamed to Gaylegphug in 1959. One popular oral story among the Bhutanese is that the names were the result initiative by the third king who wanted to have Bhutan-sounding names across the country, the mission Bhutan still pursues today. According to the story, the storekeeper of the third king, Lopen Nyapchhi, played a key role in coining the names of the frontier towns (including Gelephu) and in familiarising them. King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1952-72), once summoned Nyapchhi to his chamber wanting to know why letters with a Jaigon address came to him in Thimphu. Nyapchhi responded, 'Our border towns don't have Bhutanese names. They use the interchanging names from the bordering Indian villages'.

The King commanded Nyapchhi to find appropriate names for the towns, including Gelephu. Following discussion with locals, the storekeeper reported the King to name the central southern town as Gaylegphug, which means 'the sanctuary of virtue'.

Based on the King's order, the name was then announced through a wireless radio station located above the Dechencholing palace. The announcements were made daily with the help of an Indian man called 'wireless babu', who set up the station.

In earlier records, the name was spelled differently, with variations including Gaylegphug, Gelegphug, and Gelyephug. The current spelling of the name was standardised in 1996-97 when the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) changed hundreds of names in southern Bhutan in an attempt to erase the traces of Nepali settlements.

Pre-Gelephu Culture

Gelephu has a rich cultural history that spans more than a century. The region's cultural landscape is characterised by a diverse array of religious and ethnic groups, each contributing to the town's unique cultural identity.

There is lack of written records or oral history about the pre-Gelephu culture making it challenging to reconstruct the region's early history. However, oral history from the local residents and folklores indicate that the region was inhabited as early as the 1850s. The region's unique climate and geography played a significant role in shaping the early settlers' way of life, fostering a connection to the land that continues to resonate in contemporary culture.

The district Sarpang, under which the proposed GMC is located, has enjoyed a long history of human settlement. The cultural history of the area was dominated by the Nepalis, who settled as early as 1880s encouraged initially by Raja Ugyen Dorji and then by his son. The Dorjis, based in Kalimpong (India) and who played crucial role in installing Wangchuk dynasty in Bhutan, were given responsibilities to administer southern Bhutan considering their closeness to Nepalis in India. The Nepali culture thrived in Gelephu as the population continued to grow under the Dorji family's supervision. People continued moving into the area until 1945 when government restricted further migration into the region.

The Nepali people brought their own distinct cultural practices, languages, and traditions, introducing their own customs, and festivals. The Nepalis also brought their own religious practices, including Hinduism and Buddhism, which became an integral part of the region's cultural landscape.

Until the mid of last century, there was little communication or cultural connection or exchanges between those in Gelephu and those in northern Bhutan. There are several factors for communication gap such as separate administration of the south by Dorjis, geographical barriers for southerners to travel north, northerners to travel south and the languages they speak.

The dominance of Nepali culture further expanded eastward to where present-day Gelephu is located and beyond in the early 1940s when new settlement lands were announced. As a result, newly established villages adopted Nepali names. However, this practice began fading out in 1980s when the northern Bhutanese were encouraged to migrate south to live alongside the Nepalis. This resulted in more mixed Hindu-Buddhist communities. This evolution

continued to make Buddhism a dominant religion following the resettlement of northern Bhutanese on the land left vacant from the exodus of Nepalis from the region in 1990s.

Hinduism

Hinduism has a significant presence in Gelephu, with several Hindu temples scattered throughout the region. The Bhutanese government census does not collect population statistics based on ethnicity or religion, yet majority of the Gelephu residents are estimated to be Hindu followers. The Shivalaya Yagyaswar Mahadev Mandir, a replica of a temple by the same name in Samtse¹⁰, was constructed upon the command of the King Jigme Khesar in 2018 (The Bhutanese, 2023). The residents of Gelephu municipality and surrounding villages congregate here for religious gatherings. (Bhutan Luxury Tour, n.d., Heavenly Bhutan, n.d.). It is a notable example of Hindu architecture in the region. The temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is an important pilgrimage site for devotees, especially during Maha Shivaratri.

Gelephu Hindu Mandir and other Hindu temples within the proposed GMC are an important part of the region's rich cultural heritage and diversity. These temples serve not only as places of worship and devotion but also as cultural hubs where festivals, community events, and religious ceremonies can take place. As such, these temples are integral to the social fabric of Gelephu, fostering a sense of identity and continuity among the Hindu population.

Som other notable Hindu temples in the region include Mahamrityunjaya Temple, Sarpang Shir Hindu Temple, Shiva Mandir (Sarpang), Hindu Mandir, (Toribari or Chhokhorling) and Hindu Mandir Dandagaon (Chhuzagang).

¹⁰ Samtse is a new name of Samchi since late 1990s.

Buddhism

Buddhism has relatively more recent but nonetheless significant presence in Gelephu, with several monasteries scattered throughout the region. The Zangdopelri Monastery is a prominent example of Buddhist architecture, serving as a centre for meditation and spiritual learning. The monastery attracts Buddhist monks and lay practitioners from across Bhutan.

The Buddhist monasteries in Gelephu are an important part of the region's cultural heritage and identity, reflecting the region's rich cultural and religious diversity.

The Buddhist community began taking shape in late 1980s and cemented its presence in the early 2000s. Some of the other important monasteries in the region include Chorten Kora, Nimalung Monastery, Pema Yoedling Monastery, Jubrey Chorten, Pemaling Monastery. These Buddhist monasteries play a vital role in the community, providing spaces for meditation, education, and cultural preservation. They often host festivals that involve traditional dances, music, and rituals, showcasing the richness of Bhutanese Buddhist culture.

Christianity

Christianity has a small but growing presence in Gelephu, with no open places of worship or established churches. Christianity is strictly discouraged (U.S. Department of State, 2022) through a ban on religious conversion and public congregation. There were reports of prosecution for practising the religion (Bhutan News Network, 2014). However, this is likely to change with the realisation of the GMC, which is expected to attract foreigners leading to the growth of the Christian community. While the country's constitution stipulates to have only Buddhism and Hinduism as the national religions, the

government may face increased challenges to their policy of discouragement for the growth of Christianity in the near future. The realisation of the GMC will be a litmus test for conservative Buddhist society in how they respond to the growing presence of Christianity in the country.

Cultural Artifacts

Gelephu has a rich presence of religious and cultural artifacts that reflect its diverse cultural heritage. Notable artifacts include statues and icons, *thangkas*, and ritual implements. These artifacts serve as focal points for worship and devotion, and are an important part of the region's cultural identity. The statues and icons are often decorated with intricate carvings and paintings that reflect the values from two dominant religions – Buddhism and Hinduism. *Thangkas* are traditional Tibetan Buddhist scroll paintings that depict religious scenes, teachings, and important figures in Buddhism. These artworks are not only visually stunning but also serve as educational tools for practitioners. The ritual implements in Gelephu include prayer flags, bells, and drums, which are used to enhance the spiritual atmosphere during rituals and celebrations.

People And Their Cultures

Gelephu celebrates several festivals that highlight the region's cultural diversity. Events such as *Tshechus* (Buddhist religious festivals) often feature performances that showcase traditional music, dance, and attire from northern or eastern cultural backgrounds. *Tshechu* festivals are known for their masked dances, which tell stories from Buddhist mythology. As the predominantly original inhabitants of the region, the Hindu festivals of *Dashain* (Bhutan Today, 2023), *Deepawali* and *Holi* are celebrated by the residents of Gelephu. Some Shaiva followers also organise events

like *Bol Bam* (Bhutan Broadcasting Service, 2024), a celebration of devotion to the Shiva.

These festivals hold public significance considering the engagement of the people from all faiths during these festivals.

Cuisine

The culinary landscape in Gelephu is diverse, influenced by the various ethnic groups residing in the area. Local cuisine includes a mix of staples, such as rice, meat, and vegetables, often prepared with distinct regional flavours and ingredients. The culinary variations are heavily influenced by north-east India but maintain the taste of Bhutanese identity. The blend of Indian, northern Bhutanese and Nepali cuisine has evolved to create a distinct taste of the region. Some of the popular cuisine of the region include *dal-bhat-tarkari*, red rice and roasted goat curry. Momo is increasingly becoming popular.

Language

Multiple languages are spoken in Gelephu, including Dzongkha (the official language of Bhutan), Nepali, and several other local dialects. Migrants from across Bhutan have brought several dialects with them while the local Nepali community is already rich in linguistic diversity. This linguistic diversity is an important aspect of the town's cultural identity. However, the government of Bhutan forbids any enumeration of linguistics and ethnic dimensions of the region and the country in any official records. Bhutan has not officially said how many languages are spoken in the country, let alone in Gelephu.

Costume

Traditional clothing in Gelephu follows the country's dress code. The men from northern Bhutanese community mostly wear a *gho*, a

knee-length robe fastened at the waist with a cloth belt called a *kerā*. The *gho* is often made from handwoven fabric, featuring intricate designs and patterns that are unique to different regions of Bhutan. The colours and motifs can vary, with earthy tones and vibrant hues being common, reflecting the natural surroundings and local culture.

Women wear a *kira*, a long, ankle-length dress that is made from colourful, patterned fabric. The *kira* is worn over a traditional long-sleeved blouse known as a *wonju*. The fabric used for the *kira* is often handwoven, locally. The patterns can range from simple to elaborate, often incorporating symbols and motifs that hold cultural significance. Accessories such as *rachu* (a ceremonial scarf) and jewellery made from silver and semi-precious stones are also popular, adding elegance and individuality to the attire.

The traditional dress for the original inhabitants, Nepalis, includes *Daura-Suruwal* for men. The *daura*, a long tunic, is usually made of cotton or a cotton-silk blend and may be white or colourful, depending on the occasion. *Suruwal* is trousers worn along with *Daura*. Women in the Nepali community traditionally wear a *gunyo cholo*, a two-piece garment consisting of a long, flowing blouse (*gunyo*) and a wrap-around skirt (*cholo*). The *gunyo* is often colourful and can be made from a variety of fabrics, including cotton and silk. However, the Indian attires like *saree* and blouse have replaced the *gunyo-cholo* in modern times. Women also wear accessorise of jewellery, which may include necklaces, earrings, and bangles made from gold, silver, or beads, often reflecting local craftsmanship.

However, the warm climate and modern influences have changed the public attire of the Gelephu residents. Younger generations often blend traditional pieces with western styles, reflecting a more

globalised fashion sense. This has led to a creative fusion of styles, where traditional garments are paired with modern accessories or worn in casual settings.

Conclusion

Gelephu's cultural history is a rich and diverse tapestry, woven from the threads of various religious and ethnic groups. This study has explored the pre-Gelephu culture, the impact of the Nepali culture, the emergence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, and the role of religious artifacts, festivals, and traditions in shaping the region's cultural heritage. Gelephu's local identity is a unique blend of its diverse cultural influences. As the proposed GMC materialises, the cultural landscape of future Gelephu metropolis is expected to go through metamorphosis, creating a blend of regional and global cultures to create an even more unique identity. It is a matter of time if the regions holds on with its unique cultures or devolves to be guided by foreign influences.

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