



Gongdue Kha going extinct in Mongar

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Mongar—Gongdue Kha, a local dialect of a remote gewog in Mongar, is one of the indigenous languages that is slowly disappearing as locals are now fluent in Tshangla, Khengkha and Dzongkha.

Of the nine chiwogs, only three have active speakers in Baagla-Dengkaling, Daagsa-Kumadzong and Phagdzong, with a handful of speakers in Yangbari and Damkhar.

A 2004 study by the Himalayan Language Project reported that Gongdue Kha was among 15 dialects in Bhutan on the verge of extinction due to rapid socio-economic change and demographic pressure.

Elderly residents said the dialect is now seldom spoken in the community, with Tshangla in particular gaining popularity.

“Young people today are increasingly speaking English and Dzongkha, and very few of them can speak Gongdue,” said villager Jamyang Lhamo. “Some children do not even speak Dzongkha properly and instead rely on English.”

The natives of Gongdue are expected to learn other

dialects easily, as their speech is intertwined with several languages, including Tshangla, Bumtap Kha, Khengkha and Dzongkha, among others.

Baagla-Dengkaling Tshogpa figure Thinley said there is a strong possibility that the language will disappear. “More people are now marrying speakers of other languages, which is leading to fewer people speaking Gongdue Kha,” he said. “We ourselves do not speak Gongdue Kha the way our parents did. When we speak, we sometimes mix Dzongkha with Gongdue Kha.”

He attributed the decline in households from about 33 in the past to 28 at present to rural-to-urban migration.

A Class Three student, Deki Tshomo, speaks Gongdue Kha, which she learned from her parents. She prefers Dzongkha but still uses the local dialect to communicate with friends and family at home.

Bakla and Daksa are the last localities where Gongdue Kha can still be heard.

According to elderly residents, the number of Gongdue Kha speakers is declining due to increasing migration. The decline in the native population and resettlement are also

believed to be contributing factors to the possible extinction of the language.

The data show a decreasing trend, with the registered population falling from 1,234 in 2017 to 1,026 in 2024, alongside 60 gungtongs recorded in 2024. This year, 54 gungtongs were recorded, with the highest in Daagsa-Kumadzong chiwog with 20, followed by Pikari-Yangbari chiwog with 16, and the lowest in Baagla-Dengkaling with two gungtongs.

The 2024 population data is also skewed towards older age groups: the largest single group is aged 65 and above, at 197 people, followed by 96 people aged 15–19 and 86 people aged 35–39, leaving relatively few in the prime language-transmission age groups.

A 65-year-old Kencho Dorji, from Gongdue village, said another reason for the disappearance could be young people leaving the village after their studies and becoming civil servants.

“If you walk through the village, you will notice that every household has both elderly and young people, while some houses stand closed and empty,” he said.

He added that most children are brought up away from the village and are not familiar with the native dialects.

However, those like Sangay Chopel remain hopeful that the dialect will survive. Right now, many people do not even know Gongdue Kha exists, as it is not documented anywhere as one of the country’s languages.

“However, I am hopeful that through ongoing research, Gongdue Kha will gain recognition both locally and internationally,” he said. “There are also plans by researchers to transcribe the language, which will greatly benefit its preservation.”

A five-year effort to document the language before it disappears is now underway. The “Lo-Rig” project, based at Trinity College Dublin’s School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences and funded by the European Research Council, was launched on July 1, 2025 in partnership with Bhutan’s Centre for Bhutan and Gross National Happiness Studies.

Researchers plan to use recorded natural speech to produce full descriptive grammars of Gongdue and Monpa,

two Sino-Tibetan languages with no known close relatives. Both are at high risk of extinction and have been largely overlooked despite a rare shared grammatical feature known as biactantial verbal agreement.

According to the project’s website, community members told researchers that Western, Japanese and Bhutanese visitors had previously come to ask questions, record language, take notes, and even draw blood, then disappeared without sharing any books, results or findings.

Lo-Rig researchers say they have assured the community that this project will be different, a promise the website says was well received.

Gongdue Gup Tshewang Tobgay, said that hearing people from the gewog identify as being from Gongdue while only speaking Tshangla and Khengkha is disheartening.

To actively preserve and promote their heritage, he is urging villagers to speak Gongdue alongside Dzongkha during community meetings and to use the language consistently when communicating with their children and family members.