

# Leveraging Rural-Urban Migration for a Translocal Community Economy: Lessons from an Enterprise in Shingkar

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In collaboration with

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**Abstract:** Bhutan faces accelerating rural-urban migration, driven by

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disparities in employment quality and productivity, as noted in official government documents. While orthodox migration models emphasize a dichotomy between sending and receiving areas, this study examines the migration-development nexus through the lens of a translocal community economy approach. Such a perspective illustrates how migrants and non-migrants, bound by enduring attachments to their ancestral homes, co-construct livelihoods through both material and symbolic exchanges. To explore how these translocal dynamics unfold in context, this study presents a case study of Bhutan Healthy Tea, a herbal and mushroom-based tea manufacturer in Shingkhar village, Bumthang. Founded by a migrant, the enterprise integrates commercial viability with community well-being by retaining value-added production within the village, generating local employment, and reinvesting profits in community welfare initiatives. Its success can be attributed to the enabling role of Shingkhar Dechenling Phendey Tshogpa, a migrant-founded association that nurtures networks of reciprocal care and collective responsibility between migrants and non-migrants. This relational infrastructure underpins the enterprise's capacity to move beyond an exclusive focus on profit, while drawing on the proprietor's sense of fraternity with his home village. While the findings are context-specific, the case shows how Bhutan's Tshogpa culture—informal associational practices linking migrants with their home communities—can inform broader reflections on policy and practice. Reframing migration as a resource rather than a rupture aligns with Bhutan's GNH vision of a just and harmonious society, and highlights the potential of translocal practices to foster inclusive, participatory, and place-based development.

**Keywords:** migration-development nexus, translocal community economy, Tshogpa culture, translocal social capital, commoning, a just and harmonious society, Gross National Happiness

## Introduction

In Bhutan, the ongoing influx of people from rural to urban areas is a pressing

issue for its leaders and policymakers. The country is on track to become a primarily urban nation. The country's urban population increased from 30.9% of the total population in 2005 to 37.8% in 2017, and is projected to rise to 56.8% by 2047 (National Statistics Bureau 2019, xvi). Moreover, while the absolute number of people residing in rural areas continued to grow until 2018, it is expected to enter a declining phase thereafter (UN 2019, cited in Wangchuk et al. 2023, R2).

The major cause of outmigration is rural-urban inequalities in “the quality of employment,” according to a policy brief of the Bhutanese government (National Statistics Bureau 2020, 4). While unemployment is relatively low in rural areas in government statistics (12.8%, compared to 22.0% in urban areas, National Statistics Bureau 2025b, 1), the most prominent motive for people to leave their home communities, whether as individuals or entire families, is to search for better employment opportunities. This is especially the case with educated persons who are more likely to opt to migrate out of rural areas, as attested to by the educational profiles of the rural and urban populations (National Statistics Bureau 2020, 5).

The gap in “the quality of employment” manifests itself in the relatively low productivity in the rural economy (National Statistics Bureau 2020, 4). While the rural labour force population constitutes more than half of the total labour force population (National Statistics Bureau 2025b, 1), the primary sector, comprised of agriculture, livestock, and forestry, contributes around 14% to the country's GDP (National Statistics Bureau 2025a, 10). The disproportion between the large rural labour force and the relatively small contribution of the primary sector to the country's GDP underscores the need to enhance its productivity, remuneration, and contribution to rural livelihoods.

Against this background, the government, through its Economic

Development Policy, aims to create an “enabling condition to transform from subsistence to commercial production including postharvest value addition, processing and marketing” (Ministry of Economic Affairs 2016, 28). The 13th Five-Year Plan (2024–2029) refers to rural-urban socio-economic disparities as one of the pressing issues, together with youth unemployment, substance abuse, and the outflow of educated citizens (Royal Government of Bhutan 2024, 8). The Plan accordingly designates the agricultural sector as a priority area in its pursuit of “Strategy 3: Investing in traditional growth drivers and new sources of growth” (Royal Government of Bhutan 2024, 27–28). It seeks to boost the sector’s contribution to the economy as well as farmers’ income.

In creating an “enabling condition” for rural employment, it is meaningful to heed the migration-development nexus, namely, how rural-urban migration shapes socio-economic development in migrants’ places of origin and vice versa. This is because “migration-development interactions are dependent on the context in which migratory systems are embedded” (Bernard et al. 2020, 61). Bhutan provides an apt context for such an inquiry, owing to its “informal Tshogpa [associational] culture” (Phuntsho 2020, 106). Associations are often formed by people from the same village, maintaining enduring ties that facilitate coordinated support for community projects, remittances, and local problem-solving. These community-based mechanisms make Bhutan a distinctive setting for examining the migration-development nexus.

How can such ties between migrants and their places of origin help create gainful employment in the latter? “Until not so long ago,” migration research was confined within “territorial container thinking,” disregarding the connections that migrants maintain with their home communities (Etzold 2017, 51). As a corollary, a recent review of migration studies notes that it is a multidimensional phenomenon, yet its models have been “mainly rooted in economic ... differentials between areas of origin and areas of destination”

(Rajan and Bhagat 2023, 20). Then, what alternative perspective is called for, to dispel such “territorial container thinking” to shed light on migrants’ social ties with their places of origin? What attributes of migrants’ connections impinge on how socio-economic development takes place in their home communities?

Guided by these questions, this study presents an illustrative case of Bhutan Healthy Tea, a herbal and mushroom-based tea manufacturer located in a mountain village in Bumthang district of central Bhutan. The enterprise was launched in March 2021 by an entrepreneur who was born and raised in the mountain village but later migrated to the central town of Bumthang. It makes significant contributions to the village, not only by increasing residents’ earnings through ingredient collection and processing, but also by allocating part of its profits to community welfare projects that benefit all residents. This case serves to illuminate the potential mechanisms through which migrant-community linkages—rooted in Bhutan’s Tshogpa culture—can generate mutually reinforcing economic and social values in rural settings.

## **Background: Conceptual Framework**

Despite occurring at several times the scale of international migration, internal population mobility has received comparatively less attention in research and policy practice (Rajan and Bhagat 2023, 1). This lopsided treatment needs be rectified, given that movements of people within a country are a major factor that defines and transforms the size, distribution, and composition of residents in each locality, thus conditioning its socio-economic development. It is crucial to grasp the singularity of internal migration, as it encompasses both its distinctive nature relative to international migration and the diversity inherent within it (Charles-Edwards et al. 2020, 32). Internal migration takes a

range of forms, encompassing rural-rural, rural-urban, urban-urban, and urban-rural flows, with its own specific ramifications for local, regional, and national development.

Existing studies on rural-urban migration conventionally associate it with the following socio-economic transformations (Charles-Edwards et al. 2020, 33). On one hand, it supplies labour required of the advancement of urban economic activities and industries, thus playing a crucial role for industrialization and economic growth. Moreover, the shift of labour into non-agricultural sectors can stimulate mechanization of the agricultural sector, improve its productivity, and increase rural income (Memon 2005, cited in Mukhopadhyay 2022, 12).

On the other hand, rural-urban migration often intersects with critical economic and socio-economic vulnerabilities (Mukhopadhyay 2022, 12). Urban areas may face difficulties in accommodating the growing population, specifically challenges related to employment, transportation, housing, sanitation, and other public services. Migration can also exacerbate rural-urban income disparity, as well as the twin challenges of shrinking and aging populations in rural areas.

A drawback of these and other positive and negative analyses is that they lapse into a unidirectional, unnuanced worldview depicting migration as a predictable move towards a prescribed set of universal conditions—an assumption largely rooted in normative, evolutionary models. This contravenes the growing realization in migration studies about the need to understand the singularity of migration phenomenon. Different mixes of socio-economic forces shape location-specific evolutions of migration, to bring about multiple pathways (Bernard et al. 2020, 71).

In exploring diverse configurations of population mobility, the “territorial container thinking” should be done away with, to avoid distinguishing sending places and receiving areas. It is beneficial to instead examine whether and how “those who move” interact with “those who remain.” Some migrants maintain social ties with their places of origin, and retain translocal spheres of life stretching over multiple localities: they emplace themselves both “here” and “there,” and harbor “situated yet mobile subjectivities” (Smith 2011, 181).

Those migrants living in translocal social fields also send remittances, invest in their home communities, or initiate new flows of commodities, knowledge, and ideas. As a result, such translocal flows of capital, goods, and information create opportunities for local development—what the editor of a special journal issue on *Development at the Crossroads of Capital Flows and Migration* terms “flow-driven development” (Zoomers 2018, 2).

Moreover, migrants and non-migrants often nurture “translocal social capital,” or trust and solidarity based on their common ancestral ties to a particular home community (Etzold 2017, 54). Those in such translocal networks forge multiple connections with each other that enable them to seek advice or other forms of support from the network members. Multi-sited connections and attachments generate “a shared sense of interests and meanings that bound key actors [migrants and non-migrants] ... together, sustaining their sense of hometown membership and belonging” (Smith 2011, 184).

Translocal social capital is therefore rooted in both material and symbolic exchanges between migrants’ destinations and their places of origin (Smith 2011, 184). Migrants’ attachments to home communities embody symbolic significance, shaping their practices and identities. Their resultant symbolic exchanges with non-migrants—such as the sharing of cultural traditions, the

provision of moral support, and the granting of social recognition—help to sustain and reinforce ties across geographical distance. In these contexts, migration is not solely driven by economic or employment needs; non-material factors such as social belongings and cultural connections also play a crucial role (Brickell 2011, 25).

In this respect, in examining the migration-development nexus, it is useful to draw on the notion of “community economy,” as it similarly brings to light material and symbolic exchanges. According to the notion, there exist a wide range of transactions circulating goods and services in support of people’s livelihoods, and formal market exchange is a subset of various forms of economic transactions (Gibson-Graham 2006, 60–62). People are driven not solely by the subjective, market-centered calculation of personal gains or anticipated outcomes, but also by non-calculative, non-market values, including public service, fraternity, pity, devotion, loyalty, courage, and honor (Skidelsky 2020, 8–9).

Such material and symbolic exchanges can take place among those who share ties to a particular home community and nurture translocal social capital. This form of exchanges can be named “translocal community economy” —a term coined by extending the notion of “community economy” with the qualifier “translocal” to highlight how migrants and non-migrants in a single translocal network draw on their local attachments to safeguard their common community and environment. In line with the ethical orientation of the community economy approach, which advocates more thoughtful and collective ways of meeting needs, its translocal version is also proposed here as a normative framework that envisions fairer and more responsible ways of sharing resources and sustaining livelihoods across places.

Although migrants and non-migrants engage in material and symbolic

exchanges beyond the calculus of their individual gains, “romantic social constructions of community formation tend to obscure the ongoing power relations underpinning the formation and reproduction of any kind of ‘community’” (Smith 2011, 186–187). It is crucial to refrain from privileging localism founded on a form of “common being,” and instead uphold a relational and constructivist view on community, where a locality is not naturally unified but harbors diversity, contestation, and even fragmentation (Gibson-Graham 2006, 167).

It is therefore imperative for those belonging to a single translocal network to endeavor in “commoning” (social organizing) to continually adjust their mode of collaboration to sustain and manage social relations (Fournier 2013). Efforts in commoning should proceed along the following key coordinates: what are important for personal and social survival; how surplus is appropriated and distributed; and how commons are produced and sustained (Gibson-Graham 2006, 88–97). These coordinates mandate continuous deliberations to enact and sustain inclusive economic and social ties amidst power inequalities among the translocal network members, to balance attention to market considerations with that given to non-market transactions based on mutual aid and ethical economic practices.

### **A Case Study: Bhutan Healthy Tea (Shingkar, Bumthang)**

This study examines Bhutan Healthy Tea as the focal case among ten major herbal tea manufacturers in the country<sup>3</sup>. Among the remaining nine

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<sup>3</sup> The ten herbal tea enterprises were identified through the downloadable catalogue of the CSI Market website—the government-supported and largest retail hub for Bhutanese products—as well as through the product listings on two major e-Rig Tshoel, Volume 8, Number 1 (2025): 139-170  
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producers, two others likewise operate rural-based production facilities and source their raw ingredients locally. However, they are not included in this study; one does not operate within the proprietor's home community, while the other procures materials from multiple villages within his home gewog (a group of village clusters). These represent different forms of locally based production, which diverge from this study's focus on translocal ties among people from the shared home village, including the proprietor. Of the remaining seven manufacturers, six produce tea in the vicinities of Thimphu and Paro, two major urban centers in Bhutan, while the last one outsources its production to a business partner in India.

This research is based on fieldwork conducted in Bumthang, the district where the migrant proprietor's current town residence and home village are both situated. The author conducted semi-structured and informal interviews with the proprietor, enterprise staff, and local collectors of herbs and mushrooms during three field visits: January 1–8, February 11–20, and March 19–22, 2025. In addition, quantitative data were collected on the earnings of the enterprise, its employees, and the collectors. The information presented in this study also draws on the author's long-term engagement with the village. He has been visiting there since 2006 and was involved in supporting the establishment of the village's dairy cooperative.

## **Background of the enterprise**

Bhutan Healthy Tea was launched in March 2021 by an office worker residing in Chamkhar, the central town of Bumthang. The enterprise is based in his place of origin, Shingkhar, located in one of the valleys of the district. The

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commerce platforms, DrukSell and Taste of Bhutan, each of which features more than twenty herbal tea products from various manufacturers.

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village is approximately 60 km away from Chamkhar by road. To reach it, one must leave the main road and ascend a non-blacktopped path. The enterprise initially manufactured three types of tea products—rosehip, matsutake, and mistletoe tea—and in its second year, added tea varieties from Himalayan rhododendron, cordyceps, and juniper berry (later discontinued). It expanded into dried matsutake mushroom production in its third year, followed by the launch of Anthopogon flower tea in the fourth year.

As of July 2025, Shingkhar has 40 households with just over 110 residents. The residents, living at 3,400 m and above, primarily engage in cattle rearing and farming, cultivating potatoes, buckwheat, barley, and wheat. Mushrooms are gathered from nearby forests for both sale and personal consumption. In recent years, the dairy cooperative has become a major source of income for most villagers. Shingkhar is known for its religious importance, as one of the Eight Lings (holy places) established by Longchen Ramjampa (1308–1363, a scholar-yogi of Tibetan Buddhism, popularly known as Longchenpa) in Bhutan. Longchenpa propounded Dzogchen or the great perfection teaching on the basic nature of the mind to liberate people from the glossier levels of delusions. Shingkhar is thus called Shingkhar Dechenling (a blissful place). Its name derives from a wood cabin (“shing” denotes wood; “khar,” house/cabin), said to have been built by followers of Longchenpa. The dairy cooperative has become a major source of income for most villagers. Shingkhar is known for its religious importance, as one of the Eight Lings (holy places) established by Longchen Ramjampa (1308–1363, a scholar-yogi of Tibetan Buddhism, popularly known as Longchenpa) in Bhutan. Longchenpa propounded Dzogchen or the great perfection teaching on the basic nature of the mind to liberate people from the glossier levels of delusions. Shingkhar is thus called Shingkhar Dechenling (a blissful place). Its name derives from a wood cabin (“shing” denotes wood; “khar,” house/cabin), said to have been built by followers of Longchenpa.

The village offers a revealing context for examining the migration-development nexus. Among many rural communities affected by outmigration, Shingkhar stands out for the vitality of its Tshogpa culture—an organized form of voluntary association linking villagers and migrants. This vitality is evident in the regularity of collective projects, the sustained participation of both groups, and the steady flow of financial and material contributions to the village.

At the center is Shingkhar Dechenling Phendey Tshogpa (SDPT)—the Shingkhar Welfare Association—initiated in 2006 by Shingkharpas based in Thimphu, the capital city (“Shingkharpas” refers to individuals raised in Shingkhar as well as those with familial or ancestral ties to the village)<sup>4</sup>. SDPT has played a vital role in reviving Buddhist festivals and rituals, restoring religious infrastructure and maintaining enduring translocal networks. It has helped transform the ties among Shingkharpas residing in and outside the village into a solid form of translocal social capital. The Shingkhar case suggests that, under certain cultural and organizational conditions, migration can reinforce translocal social capital and sustain local vitality.

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<sup>4</sup> The idea of starting a Tshogpa was prompted by an incident highlighting the need for a translocal network. In 2001, a villager died in the National Referral Hospital in Thimphu, and the body remained unclaimed for several nights. This led Shingkharpas in Thimphu to form a Tshogpa to manage a system where information about any Shingkharpa admitted to the hospital would be communicated to them.



*Fig.1. Shingkhar village, Bumthang*

*Photo courtesy of Garwang Bumthap's Facebook page (2023)*

It is against this background that Bhutan Healthy Tea started with a mission to integrate commercial success with community well-being, utilizing both market and non-market transactions in line with the community economy approach. It hires staff members as well as herb and mushroom collectors on wages, including those with limited mobility and others facing economic hardships. Moreover, the proprietor—an active member of SDPT with a sense of connection to the home community—allocates a portion of the profits to rural welfare projects that benefit all residents, as described below.

## **Contributions to community well-being**

The enterprise's commitment to enhancing the livelihood of Shingkharpas is demonstrated by its decision to retain the entire value-addition process within the village, among other considerations elaborated below. The

manufacturing of tea begins with the collection of ingredients from designated locations (Step 1, Fig.2), after which they are weighed and the collectors are paid. The ingredients are then sorted, washed, and dried in a solar greenhouse to preserve quality (Steps 2–3). Once dried, they are weighed again, ground into a finer form (Step 4), and packed into tea bags, paper wraps, and boxes (Step 5). After inspection for quality and accuracy, the products are transported to their intended destinations for delivery (Step 6).

### M an u fa ct u ri ng p ro ce ss

- 1 . C ol le ct io n o f in g re d ie n t s
- 2 . S or ti n g a n d w a sh i n g
- 3 . D r y i n g
- 4 . M e a s u ri n g a n d c ru sh i n g
- 5 . P a ck a gi n g
- 6 . S h i pp i n g

*Fig.2. Manufacturing process*

*Table courtesy of the author (2025)*

Unlike Bhutan Healthy Tea, as stated at the beginning of the “Case Study” section, most other herbal tea manufacturers avoid engaging farmers in higher-value stages of processing and distribution, and limit them to supplying raw or lightly processed ingredients. Bhutan Healthy Tea’s unorthodox approach—entrusting rural farmers with processing and shipping—poses challenges in quality control, inventory management, and market access, which, from a commercial standpoint, makes such an arrangement less attractive for most manufacturers.

Albeit challenging, the enterprise started making a net profit immediately after its start-up, earning a gross income of about Nu. 1.4 million (Ngultrum, the currency of Bhutan) for the first 12 months, and its annual gross profit grew to about Nu. 2 million in 2024. This was despite the failure of the proprietor to secure a loan from banks. He had borrowed money from his relatives and acquaintances, to set up his office-cum-factory in Shingkhar, and purchase equipment and packaging materials.

This mode of operation is intended to generate greater socio-economic benefits for the village than the usual practice of merely sourcing ingredients from rural farmers. Accordingly, it employs three female staff members from farming households in Shingkhar. These employees manage all handling records and engage in the manufacturing and packaging of products. They also coordinate with villagers who collect rhododendrons, rosehips, and matsutake mushrooms—the three ingredients naturally available around the village.

In 2024, the additional incomes earned by the three employees accounted, on average, for 16% of their household incomes. This figure does not include earnings from ingredient collection; they and their household members also gathered herbs and mushrooms to secure sufficient quantities of ingredients. The three employees spent 107, 99, and 22 days, respectively, at the office-cum-factory in 2024. One of them spent significantly fewer days due to the unforeseen need to devote time to her family's farming, cattle rearing, and household chores, resulting from a labour shortage at home.



*Fig.3. Product packaging in progress  
Photo courtesy of the author (2025)*

The additional incomes from the enterprise supports the sustenance of the employees' households, not only by supplementing earnings from farming and livestock rearing—activities limited in productivity due to the high-altitude location—but also because these employees are the sole prospective heirs in their households, with their sisters residing elsewhere. In line with the local tradition of matrilineal inheritance, they are thus expected to inherit family houses and properties.

As of March 2025, it had been less than five years since two of the three employees completed secondary education. One of them had previously sought employment in town areas, and the other had considered doing the same. The enterprise, however, has provided an opportunity for both employees to stay gainfully employed in Shingkar. The other employee had lived in the village for over a decade since finishing secondary education. Although she could have settled elsewhere with her spouse, who is from a town in a district neighbouring Bumthang, she has chosen to remain in the

village.

The collection of herbs and mushrooms benefits a wide segment of the village population, with the group of collectors varying each year based on household labour availability and needs. In 2024, 17 households—nearly half of the village’s total of 40—earned income from gathering rhododendrons, rosehips, and/or matsutake mushrooms. Of these, five had not taken part in 2023, when 16 households were involved in total. Among the 2023 collectors, four had not participated in 2022.

In 2024, the additional income from herb and mushroom collection increased the harvesters’ household earnings—averaging Nu. 169,990—by about 20% (Nu. 34,696). Some households benefited more than others. For instance, one couple, who had suffered a sudden loss of their sole income source when predatory wolves killed their cattle, compensated by engaging in herb collection, earning up to 12 times what they earned from rearing their remaining cattle that year.

At the same time, simple calculations do not always capture the significance of the additional income from herb and mushroom collection. For lower-income households, even a relatively small additional income can make a significant difference in their economic stability and well-being. Among the 17 households was an elderly woman living with her spouse, whose mobility is limited. In 2024, she collected rosehips and earned Nu. 8,000, which accounted for 9% of her other earnings (Nu. 91,696). Given that her household income was far below the average of the 17 households, this additional income carried substantial weight.

Moreover, the extra income not only buffers economic fragility but also allows for a broader intra-household distribution of disposable cash, empowering

some collectors to gain independence through their own earnings. For instance, one elderly woman felt that the additional income would allow her to fulfill long-held wishes, such as visiting a hot spring. Another expressed gratitude for being able to cover her children's needs without relying on her parents. To ensure that collectors receive their payments directly, the staff members hand them over in person.

For matsutake mushroom collectors, the enterprise offers a reliable income, reducing reliance on unpredictable outside buyers. The latter's visits and purchasing quantities are uncertain, whereas the enterprise guarantees to buy a fixed amount. At times, the proprietor even purchases extra for personal use and ritual offerings.

Each year, the enterprise invites villagers to collect herbs via social media and word of mouth, while matsutake collection is entrusted to experienced individuals. Herb collectors often come from households needing extra income to offset low agricultural yields or urgent medical and educational costs. This is especially true for rhododendrons—the most lucrative of the three—whose collection requires trekking for some hours up slippery, muddy hills in summer, and is thus remunerated at a higher rate.

## **Analysis: Translocal Social Capital and Community Economy**

What factors led Bhutan Healthy Tea to forgo the potential benefits of situating its processing and distribution facilities in Chamkhar—the central location of Bumthang that would facilitate quality control, streamlined inventory management, and improved access to markets? Ostensibly, this can be attributed to the characteristics of its operations. First, it operates entirely within one village, unlike most other manufacturers that source ingredients

from multiple villages and thus demand centralized processing for cost efficiency. Second, the enterprise can function effectively in Shingkhar because it does not rely on advanced processing machinery or automation.

However, focusing solely on these business modalities does not provide a substantive answer to the question above. A more compelling explanation—one that emerged from the author’s interviews with the proprietor and the enterprise staff—lies in its mission to integrate commercial success with community well-being, a commitment grounded in translocal ties and collaborative efforts among Shingkharpas living both in and outside the village. Migrants from Shingkhar often emplace themselves both “here” and “there” through their “situated yet mobile subjectivity,” thereby maintaining a sense of attachment, loyalty, and fraternity to their home village.

### **Translocal social capital nurtured by SDPT**

The proprietor’s place of origin, Shingkhar, is endowed with vibrant translocal social capital, as explained in the “Case Study” section in connection with the village’s Tshogpa culture. Shingkharpas who have migrated elsewhere and those who remain in the village maintain close, reciprocal networks. These ties are exemplified by the establishment of SDPT in August 2006, which mobilizes urban migrants to support Shingkhar’s cultural preservation and local development. Over time, such initiatives have transformed the village’s informal institutions of mutual help into translocal ones, linking migrants with non-migrants, thereby reinforcing Shingkhar’s capacity for self-organized development within its broader migratory networks.

Among SDPT’s major achievements is its role in starting a dairy cooperative

in 2018, whose membership includes all the households in the village. The cooperative was set up with the support of SDPT members brought up in Shingkhar, who retained a sense of home village membership and belonging. For example, a civil servant based in Thimphu drafted an article, discussed it with the villagers, and finalized it. The proprietor of Bhutan Healthy Tea developed a bookkeeping format and trained cooperative workers in its use, designed dairy product packaging, and identified sales outlets.

SDPT has also helped reinvigorate Shingkhar's Buddhist tradition. In 2023, it assisted in the installation of 1,000 Dorji Sempa statues in Drubri Rinchen Jungney Lhakhang (a temple), overlooking the settlement from a hilltop. Other landmark projects include the revival of the Kangyur Recitation in 2022, among numerous others undertaken since the 2010s. The latter include the donation of Longchen Thongdrel (a large scroll painting depicting a seated Longchenpa surrounded by lineage masters and dharma protectors), and the resumption of Baza Guru Dungdrup (recitation of 100 million Baza Guru [the 8th-century Buddhist master, Padmasambhava] mantras).



*Fig.4. Longchen Thongdrel*

*Photo courtesy of Rinchen Dorji (2024)*

Underlying these achievements are Shingkhars' informal institutions of mutual help, founded on non-market transactions circulating goods and services. For example, at festivals, all the households, either at once or on a rotational basis, offer alms to monks, plus in-kind and cash contributions for preparing ritual offerings, food, and drinks, in addition to serving as voluntary labourers, cooks, and waitpersons. A similar pattern of mutual help is observed in the dairy cooperative, a village-based enterprise with its place-based membership and democratic management structure. Some of the members help make dairy products, to ease the burden on the cooperative staff, who have to handle farming and household chores after completing the cooperative's tasks.

Building on these mutual help practices, SDPT has assisted villagers in tackling other difficult challenges that might have been hard to overcome individually. One noted example is the expansion of the courtyard of Shingkhar Lhakhang, which is located at the center of the village. SDPT was involved in a series of delicate negotiations with landowners, who eventually agreed to donate free of charge their land that had been used as their kitchen gardens. As noted in the author's previous empirical study (Masaki 2024, 40), this outcome resulted from SDPT's collaborative, repeated interactions to resolve differences and reach a mutually acceptable solution.

In this milieu of translocal social capital encompassing Shingkharpas staying in the village and those living elsewhere, they have been building on their common ancestral ties and promoting more considered ways of engaging in material and symbolic exchanges to satisfy the village's economic, social, and cultural needs. Underlying this translocal social capital has been SDPT's voluntary service provision, material support, and event organizing, such as those explained above. SDPT's assistance is also of symbolic nature as it is founded on Shingkharpas' attachment to their home community and thus

serves to affirm their mutual trust and obligations to foster communal cohesion.

### **Translocal community economy driven by the enterprise**

The proprietor of Bhutan Healthy Tea was brought up in Shingkhar and witnessed how the villagers' livelihoods were enhanced by the informal institutions of mutual help, encompassing both migrants and non-migrants. Since he became an office worker in Chamkhar, he has joined SDPT as an active member, taking advantage of living a few hours' drive away from the village<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, in a personal capacity, he has made donations to help preserve Buddhist monuments in and around the village<sup>6</sup>.

Given the proprietor's "mobile subjectivity," through which he positions himself both "here" and "there" and defines his social roles, obligations, and identities beyond his current place of residence, it is natural that the enterprise places priority on improving local livelihoods, aiming not only at increasing material transactions but also at attributing symbolic meanings to its operations. As noted above, the entire value-addition process is based in Shingkhar—from wild harvesting and initial preparation to packaging and shipping the final products. This approach enables profits to remain within the village to the greatest extent possible, in contrast to those other enterprises mentioned at the beginning of the "Case Study" section that conduct high-value processes in central locations.

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to his support for the dairy cooperative mentioned above, the proprietor has been playing cordial roles in numerous other SDPT-assisted initiatives, including organizing festivals and rituals, as well as supervising projects to renovate buildings within the premises of Shingkhar Lhakhang.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, he supported the renovation of a chorten (stupa) on the village outskirts, believed to bring peace, prosperity, and harmony to the community. In addition, he contributed financially to the renewal of the flooring at Drubri Rinchen Jungney Lhakhang, alongside other initiatives.

Accordingly, the enterprise exemplifies the promotion of a translocal community economy, as its idea, capital, and management are embedded in the transnational social field. While it operates as a commercial entity engaged in the economic calculus of profit, its underlying motive is rooted in loyalty and a sense of fraternity toward the home community. This orientation aligns with the community economy approach, which frames market exchanges as one component within a broader spectrum of economic transactions—encompassing non-market circulations of goods and services grounded in social norms, reciprocities, and mutual obligations.

The enterprise's commitment to transcending mere market considerations is reflected not only in its manufacturing base, situated away from commercial centers, but also in its earnest efforts to benefit the village population as a whole. However, with only three office positions available and limited opportunities for households to participate in herb and matsutake collection, the proprietor has had to adopt a relational and constructivist approach—one that emphasizes ongoing dialogues with local residents and co-construction of mutually acceptable solutions to any emerging issues—a stance described in the “Conceptual Framework” section in connection with the community economy approach. By its nature, the enterprise constantly faces challenges in distributing benefits accrued from its business to the entire community.

First, while tea products are sold to Shingkharpas at a discounted rate, some villagers purchase them particularly on special occasions, such as when receiving respected monks or holding important rituals. Consequently, its benefits do not reach a wide segment of the population unlike cheese and butter sold by the dairy cooperative at discounted prices—indispensable ingredients in the villagers' daily diets. These dairy products are also purchased by those households that have few or no milking cows and thus do

not earn income through milk supply.

Second, households with limited labour capacity and villagers with restricted mobility tend to be excluded from collecting rhododendrons, which represent the largest source of income among the three ingredients. Harvesting them requires a few hours' walk up slippery, muddy hillsides, making the task both time consuming and physically demanding. Moreover, access to the other two ingredients is also constrained. Rosehip collection coincides with the peak farming season, and part of the work must be entrusted to another village located at a lower altitude. Similarly, the collection of matsutake mushrooms is restricted to individuals who possess the necessary knowledge and experience, further limiting participation.



*Fig.5. Rhododendron collection*

*Photo courtesy of Bhutan Healthy Tea's Facebook page (2023)*

The enterprise has not remained passive in addressing these challenges. It provided rubber boots and raincoats to assist several elderly villagers in walking up the hills, and plans to make available a tractor free of charge to

facilitate rhododendron collection. Furthermore, the enterprise intends to increase production volumes in order to benefit a larger number of households. To this end, it is preparing to introduce a new product line—blueberry tea—and expand its production facilities in Shingkhar. These initiatives are set against the backdrop of the enterprise’s steady business growth, with gross profits increasing continuously since its inception (Nu. 1.4 million in 2022, Nu. 1.6 million in 2023, and Nu. 2 million in 2024).

Moreover, the enterprise returns 30% of its profits to the village in the form of community welfare initiatives that benefit all residents. In this regard, it has funded the installation of a statue in a community shrine dedicated to one of the local deities, and the construction of a glass cabinet for housing scriptures at Drubri Rinchen Jungney Lhakhang. The proprietor also regularly donates a fixed monthly ritual offering to Shingkhar Lhakhang as an expression of respect and devotion to Dharma protectors and enlightened beings. As of July 2025, future plans include establishing a village library and organizing a town-stay program in Chamkhar to provide children with broader educational and cultural exposure.

These initiatives, along with the other activities described above, contribute to commoning—the process of managing social relations through mutual care and collaboration, particularly in light of the challenges of equitably distributing the benefits of the tea business among the villagers. Like other localities, Shingkhar is neither bound by a natural unity nor does it embody a single “common being,” despite the presence of informal institutions of mutual help that are integral to the villagers’ daily lives. As noted earlier in relation to the community economy discourse, it is crucial to avoid adopting a romanticized view of unified localism.

To further address this issue, the enterprise plans not only to provide

additional rubber boots and raincoats for rhododendron collectors, but also to create three new job opportunities by expanding its product variety and production volume. One of these positions is for a marketing role that involves traveling to major towns like Phuntsholing, Gelephu, and Paro to promote the products. While the position could be filled by someone from outside with higher qualifications, the enterprise intends to hire a local youth—a Class 12 graduate (holding a Higher Secondary Education Certificate) currently living in the village.

### **Discussion: Tshogpa Culture as a Narrative for Shaping Translocal Community Economy**

The case of Bhutan Healthy Tea illustrates the value of contextual and relational perspectives in understanding the potential of addressing rural-urban migration issues through translocal networks connecting migrants and non-migrants. The concept of translocal community economy helps explain how these actors, bound by common ancestral ties to their home community, co-construct livelihoods through both material and symbolic exchanges; this can foster rural enterprises that integrate commercial success with community well-being. Sustaining such practices requires commoning—the collaborative management of shared resources and social ties—offering a more inclusive approach to migration and development.

At the same time, a contextual and relational lens highlights the specificity of each migration setting. In this respect, the success of Bhutan Healthy Tea draws on the Shingkharpas' long-standing mutual-help networks, where migrants living in places such as Chamkhar and Thimphu have contributed skills, knowledge, and funding to support various village activities. This cooperation was facilitated by years of institutional support from SDPT,

which revitalized local festivals and communal practices.

In this regard, particular attention should be drawn to a popular narrative that emerged in Shingkhari in the early 2010s, prior to the establishment of the dairy cooperative in 2018, emphasizing the importance of self-reliant livelihoods (Masaki 2024, 37–38). When the cooperative proposal was being considered, a controversy arose over whether to accept an alternative plan to convert communal pastureland into a golf course. While this proposal was claimed to provide an additional source of income, not all profits would have remained within the village, as highlighted in an online petition (Phuntsho 2011), which became a focal point of public debates on the plan. After extensive deliberations, the villagers ultimately chose to retain the pastureland and preserve their cattle-rearing practices.

Underlying the success of Bhutan Healthy Tea is the resultant narrative shared among the villagers—one that favors community-based production focused on collectively fulfilling local needs and maintaining social and environmental harmony. In contrast, externally driven initiatives tend to place community resources under outside management, often leading to wealth accumulation by a privileged few, whether from within the village or from outside. This comparison underscores the importance of locally embedded narratives in guiding economic choices and sustaining community cohesion.

This episode points to an area for further research: the notion of “narrativeness” (Morson and Shapiro 2018, 39). In tandem with the ideas referred to in the “Conceptual Framework” section—such as translocal social capital, commoning, and translocal community economy, all of which highlight the importance of location specificity—the concept of narrativeness contributes to understanding the link between evolving popular narratives and local economic outcomes. Narrativeness is tied to “the appreciation of

people as inherently cultural” (Morson and Shapiro 2018, 17). It thus illustrates how the migration-development nexus is shaped by concrete, situated human stories.

This brings the discussion back to the above-stated Tshogpa culture, the theoretical and practical applications of which remain underexplored in migration-development studies. The Tshogpa culture is practiced in different areas of Bhutan and this cultural trait may be expressed not only through popular narratives in different localities but also through official policy documents. By embedding norms such as attachment to ancestral homes and communal cooperation into policies, these narratives reinforce a shared sense of identity and social cohesion. This, in turn, can motivate both migrants and non-migrants to collabourate in the development of their communities, linking cultural values with practical development outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

Bhutan faces the challenge of increasing rural-urban migration and its socio-economic consequences. While rural-urban migration is driven by differences in employment quality and productivity between rural and urban areas, this study has taken an exploratory and illustrative approach to show—through the specific case examined—how migrants’ enduring social ties with their home communities can play a crucial role in promoting rural socio-economic development. This requires moving beyond the conventional “territorial container thinking” that downplays these connections.

A key policy implication is that the government can actively engage out-migrants in initiatives aimed at improving livelihoods in their places of origin while nurturing their ties to these areas. The diaspora’s sense of connection to Bhutan has been leveraged by the Gelephu Mindfulness City project, which is managed as a special administrative region with its own executive, legislative,

and judicial systems. Building on this model, a similar initiative can be implemented to address the challenges and opportunities associated with the acceleration of rural-urban migration within the country, with the government playing a proactive coordinating role.

While, in this respect, the narrative of the Tshogpa culture can be adopted in relevant governmental policies and programs for addressing rural-urban migration, care should be taken to avoid explaining away every locality with a single stroke. This is because the Tshogpa culture manifests itself in location-specific ways, as illustrated by the case of Shingkhar. The village's history has culminated in the shared narrative of advancing community-based production, local needs, and social-environmental harmony over centralized, profit-driven models. This specific Tshogpa culture emanates from the particular relationships and socio-spatial dynamics in Shingkhar.

It is therefore important to avoid seeking to replicate Shingkhar's Tshogpa culture across all localities and instead focus on learning from its relational logics—how local associations mobilize social capital, maintain ties between migrants and their home communities, and translate these relationships into cooperative economic activities. Policies informed by such insights can be designed in ways that create enabling conditions for similar locally grounded associations to emerge elsewhere, by providing supportive frameworks for community-based activities, flexible funding for place-specific initiatives, and institutional recognition of local self-organization.

GNH requires much more clarity, especially in its pursuit of a just and harmonious society—central to the vision but described as “just as real as the Last Shangri-La is a dream” by a renowned proponent of GNH (Dorji 2024, 3). This underscores the need to pay renewed attention to locally grounded practices. Rural-urban migration, while posing challenges to the GNH vision,

can also be reimagined as a co-creative force when guided by the Tshogpa culture, which valorizes collective responsibility and reciprocal care among people sharing ancestral ties to their home communities, both migrants and non-migrants. By affirming these cultural networks, the Bhutanese government can reimagine migration not as a rupture, but as a dynamic resource for nurturing inclusive and sustainable rural futures.

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