

Brokpa

A 1991 linguistic study listed 5,000 speakers of the Brokpa language living in eastern Bhutan.¹ George van Driem writes, 'Brokpa is spoken in and around Mera, where there are approximately four hundred Brokpa households with an estimated two thousand inhabitants, and in and around Sakteng where there are approximately six hundred Brokpa households with an estimated three thousand inhabitants.'² These two locations are within the Trashigang District in eastern Bhutan, close to the border with the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

People use the word *brokpa* (also *brogpa* or *hbrogpa*) in different ways throughout the Tibetan-speaking world. It can simply mean 'nomad' or 'herder'. In this case, however, people in Bhutan use the word as the name of their ethnic group. Getting to the Brokpa area requires some bone-jarring travel by jeep. Because of the rough roads, it can take over four hours to drive the 92 kilometres (57 mi.) from the town of Mongar. The Brokpa are a nomadic people who live at an average altitude of 3,000 metres (9,840 ft.) above sea level.

For several reasons, it is extremely difficult to identify and classify people groups in Bhutan. Foreigners are welcomed in Bhutan only if they join an organized tour group, which can cost US\$200 per day. Visitors are only allowed to enter more remote areas of the country, such as Trashigang District where the Brokpa live, with special permits from the government. In the late 1990s, one intrepid team of Christian researchers

did get permission to go to this part of Bhutan. They reported, 'We headed to the Sakteng Valley with the permission and help of the Governor of East Bhutan. We were told it was politically incorrect to be talking about tribes or people groups in a country whose motto was "One country,

one people"!' The huts of the Brokpa were empty when we at last arrived as they are nomadic people following their yaks into the high mountains until snow forces them down to their winter "residences". This was disappointing, but we trekked to one hut and had a prayer meeting in it—a shanty

of woven bamboo, very rough thatched roof, a slat floor and nothing at all inside. We met a number of Brokpa on our way down the trail again. They were bringing their horses up to go into the mountains and collect the yaks. Their clothes were very distinctive, especially their five-spout yak-hair hats.³

The Brokpa refer to their language as 'Brokpake'. In Dzongkha (the national language of the Drukpa people in Bhutan), the Brokpake language 'is called *Bjokha* and its speakers are known as *Bjop*. . . . The [Brokpa] language is also known by the loconym Mera-Sakteng-kha "the language of Mera and Sakteng".⁴

Tibetan Buddhism mixed with ancient spirit worship is the religion of the Brokpa people. Although the members of this group say they are Buddhists, shamans are more prevalent than Buddhist lamas. There has never been a church or even a known Christian believer among this unique and precious group.



Population:
6,250 (2000)
8,050 (2010)
10,300 (2020)
Countries: Bhutan
Buddhism: Tibetan
Christians: none known

Overview of the Brokpa

Other Names: Brokpake, Mira Saktengpa, Dakpa, Dap, Mera Saktengpa, Saktengpa, Meragsagtengkha

Population Sources: 5,000 in Bhutan (2001, G van Driem [1991 figure])

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Tibetic, Tibetan, Southern

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 100%

Practising Buddhists: 50%

Christians: 0%

Scripture: none

Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: SGT

Status of Evangelization

