

Zhidar Matters

*The Rise and Fall
of a Controversial 18th Century
Bhutanese Ruler*

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*Zhidar Matters: The Rise and Fall of a Controversial 18th Century
Bhutanese Ruler*

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Preface

This book is a historical work, not by a historian but by a student of history who overcame anti-history sentiments current in Bhutanese schools where history was, and remains, an unpopular subject among students. History is brushed aside as having little or no relevance to the present. I did not find it then, and do not now. If history is bland, blame historians and history teachers, not history which is as interesting and important as any other discipline, especially for Bhutan, a small but old Himalayan country, whose nationhood and cultural identity are founded on its historical roots. For Bhutan, history is too important to be left to individual choice and interest. History helps us to understand our roots, who we were, who we are, and who we are becoming.

The book is essentially a re-writing of materials on Zhidar available in a few sources. Zhidar was an 18th century Bhutanese ruler, or Druk Desi, during whose reign Bhutan fought the first war with the British. Re-writing about Zhidar is necessary since what little information is available on him in Bhutanese primary sources is written in classical Tibetan and thus inaccessible to the reading public. He is often (mis)understood in history as a war-mongering, autocratic ruler. But history-writing is a social and political process, and not a neutral rendering of what happened in the past and to legitimate one version as true.¹

¹ McGranahan 2010: 3.

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The British mission reports which deal with Zhidar are few in number, and were written by officials with little or no knowledge of Bhutan. The British deliberately (mis)represented him in their reports for waging a war with them. Their informants in Bhutan were government officials of mixed loyalty to Zhidar. The Bhutanese sources authored by monks privileged the ruling power. The sources of Bhutanese history are mostly hagiography (*rnam thar*), which are about the spiritual life of Buddhist personages written mainly for soteriological end. They usually mention little or nothing about ordinary people, other than disciples and patrons.

In spite of the paucity of our sources, Zhidar's life provides insight into old Bhutan's power structure and society. His life trajectory is a textbook case of how an orphan from a remote village could rise to occupy the highest civil office of the land. His conflict with the Throne holder sheds light on a constitutional dilemma that plagued the theocratic governance after Zhabdrung's death (d. 1651) was only revealed in 1704. We come to understand through his life story how Bhutan became a power to be reckoned with in the region. We learn about Bhutan's most aggressive and expansionist foreign policy vis-à-vis its southern and western neighbors. His policy to expand Bhutan's engagement into Cooch Behar brought Bhutan face to face with the British, who had since 1857 supplanted the Mughals in Bengal. His decision to invade Cooch Behar and to withstand the British effort to drive the Bhutanese from the kingdom changed the course of Bhutan's history. Its ripple effects are being felt today. The physical shape and political structure of modern Bhutan are living legacies of Zhidar's and subsequent British encounters.

A total of 65 Druk Desis ascended the throne to serve as the equivalent of today's head of government. They played a distinct role in the annals of 256 years of theocratic governance (1651-1907) of Bhutan. Out of those many Druk Desis, I have reasons to write about Zhidar, the 16th Druk Desi. While reading a little about him in high

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school, I became interested in him as a civilian ruler who fought the British in Cooch Behar. His losing or winning was secondary. What was primary to me was that Bhutan under his leadership dared to engage the British. During those years, literature read outside the classroom was mostly about British colonialism.

My interest was first rekindled in June 2002, after joining the Centre for Bhutan Studies, where I met Dr John Ardussi who was writing about him. When the foremost historian of Bhutan was working on Zhidar, what role was there for me, I asked myself? I shelved the plan to write about Zhidar and waited for him to finish the book. In 2012, some 10 years later, I had enrolled for my post-graduate studies at the Australian National University where Dr Ardussi became the first person to write a Ph.D. on Bhutan's history in 1977. I next met him at the 2014 Himalayan Studies Conference held at Yale University, where his paper on Zhidar² re-kindled my smoldering interest. As revealed in Dr. Ardussi's paper, some new information on Zhidar became available.

I increasingly became interested in Zhidar as a tragic historical figure, a ruler who was betrayed by his country, people, and close friends. After submitting my Ph.D. dissertation two years later in December 2015, I went through my old notes and read anything on and related to him. The first draft of this book was written in Canberra, and only the fieldwork and oral interviews were left for my return to Bhutan. Fieldwork for this book was done in Jobesa where the ruins of Zhidar's house still stands and Khyung-chung Dingkha, Zhidar's birth village, and Khasadrapchu, Thimphu where the ruins of Zhidar's house can still be seen.

In compiling this book, I have referred *'brug gi rgyal rabs slob dpon pad ma tshe dbang gis sbyar ba/ 'brug gsal ba'i sgron me* by Pema Tshewang (1994) and *'brug gi sde srid khri rabs rim byon gyi*

² Ardussi 2014.

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mdzad rnam deb ther dpyod ldan dgyes pa'i do shal/ by Sangay Dorji (2017). *The history of Bhutan* by Karma Phuntsho (2013) in English was one of the most useful sources on the topic and history of Bhutan in general.

The British sources are mainly the mission reports: *Narratives of the mission of George Bogle to Tibet, 1774* by George Bogle (1876), *An account of an embassy to the court of the Teshoo lama, in Tibet; containing a narrative of a journey through Bootan, and part of Tibet* by Samuel Turner (1800), and more importantly, *Bhutan and Tibet: The travels of George Bogle and Alexander Hamilton 1774–1777, Vol 1 - Bogle and Hamilton Letters, Journals and Memoranda* edited by Alastair Lamb (2002).

Chapter 6 on Cooch Behar is based on two Cooch Behar sources: *Koochbiharer itihas*, translated by Hemanta Kumar Rai Barma (1988), and *Kochbihar parikrama*, edited by Krishnendu Dey, Niraj Biswas and Digbijoy De Sarkar (1813).

Lastly, the Tibetan account of the exile life of Zhidar in Tibet is based on a paper in Chinese by Za Luo and Ao Jian (2012) sourced by John Ardussi. I am grateful to Prof Deng Lan of Institute of Indian Studies, Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, for procuring me the paper, and Ms Phyllis Ng, who was then completing her Master of Business Administration at the Royal Institute of Management, Thimphu, for translating the paper into English.

Even as this book was being prepared for printing, I sent a copy to John Ardussi. He expressed his eagerness to read, comment and even write an introduction had it not been for his prior commitment. However, I am grateful for managing time for the first two chapters. His critical comments and editorial suggestions had improved those chapters. Only if I could have waited for a couple of months the book would have benefited from his deep knowledge about Zhidar in particular and Bhutan's history in general, and *The Royal History of Sikkim: A Chronicle of the House of Namgyal, a new, fully annotated*

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and illustrated Translation from the Tibetan Original, which he has translated into English with Anna Balikci Denjongpa and Per K. Sørensen. I will always remain indebted for his inspiration and support as a reputed scholar of Bhutanese history.

Dorji Penjore, Thimphu, June 2021

Chapter 1

Coup in the Capital

Away from home in 1773, Zhidar (*bzhi dar*), alias Sonam Lhundup, was fighting a losing war against the British over the control of Cooch Behar, a kingdom he invaded to defend Bhutan's right to appoint the king and secure its foreign interest. Back home, his political rivals led by Jigme Senge ousted him from power rather than uniting against a common external enemy.

Zhidar was the 16th Druk Desi (*'brug sde srid*) from 1769-1773, a civilian head of the dual system of governance (*chos srid lugs gnyis*)¹ while Jigme Senge was the seventh Throne holder (*khri pa*) and therefore the 'nominal' head of state. The appointment of Desi and Je Khenpo, the secular and religious heads of the dual system, must be legitimized by the Throne holder (i.e., Zhabdrung's representative) who was head of the state. Once in power both Desi and Throne holder could dethrone each other. Zhidar was overthrown in what I would call a 'monastic coup' and Kunga Rinchen, the man who was appointed by Zhidar himself to deputize for him during the war, became the 17th Druk Desi. The new Desi closed all border routes to stop Zhidar from returning home and orders were given to kill him if he tried to enter the country.

It was not a disgrace to lose a war against the British, who were then consolidating their holdings in Bengal after 1757. What was

¹ See Cüppers 2004 for variants of this form of government in the Tibetan Buddhist cultural areas.

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disgraceful is the overthrowing, in absentia, of a war commander in place of giving a hero's welcome, whether he returned home as a victor or vanquished. Most nations in history gave this due honor, which was denied to Zhidar. And worse, he was barred from returning to his homeland for whose greater cause he had left the comfort of his home and throne to lead and fight in a foreign land.



Figure 1: Punakha Dzong by Samuel Davis, 1783. Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

According to Zhidar's opponents, he had intruded on the authority of the state monastic institution (hereafter "Dratshang") which had the power to elect Desis, and there were even cases of Desis being put to death. He was ambitious and planned to remain Desi for life. To make himself famous, they claimed, he brought hardship to the public by coercing them to rebuild, within a year, the fortress of Tashichho Dzong, destroyed by fire in 1771. He undermined the

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reigning Bhutanese head of state by patronizing the sixth Panchen Lama of Tibet. He not only waged wars against Bhutan's neighbors to enrich himself but befriended Prithivi Narayan Shah, the Gorkha King. He courted the Chinese emperor Qianlong by circulating Chinese imperial seals in the country, and undermined the country's sovereignty won by fending off several attempts to invade Bhutan by past Tibetan rulers, and thus risked turning Bhutan into a Chinese vassal state. Finally, while mismanaging and misgoverning the country, his opponents claimed, he fomented 'great trouble' (*phung gzhi chen po*) which led to a war with the British, against whom he continued to fight until Bhutan was defeated.²



Figure 2: Tashichho Dzong by Samuel Davis, 1783. Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

² Bogle 1876: 40-41.

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Zhidar's supporters disagreed. To them, he was a man of extraordinary abilities. It was rare for a Desi to be removed from office. There was a tradition for Desis to remain in power for life. If the Dratshang had the power to remove Desi, it was the Throne holder Jigme Senge, not the Dratshang, who had ousted him in his absence on spurious charges. He was not given a chance to defend himself for his alleged misgovernance. The public were obligated to rebuild Tashichho Dzong, his supporters claimed, because the sooner the dzong was completed the better it was for both the Throne holder and Dratshang. As for the war, Zhidar had requested the Panchen Lama to mediate and restore peace, and the mediation work had begun before he was ousted.³

Zhidar can be compared to the Roman general Julius Caesar who won many wars for Rome but harbored an ambition to become emperor, only for a group of conspirators led by Marcus Brutus, his best friend, to murder him for his ambition in 44 BC. In William Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony, who was a senator and Caesar's friend, walks onto the pulpit, carrying Caesar's body, and tells the public that only the evils live after a man's death while the good is often buried in their graves.

Unlike Shakespeare's tragic characters who fell due to their hubris, Zhidar was a tragic figure because of human betrayal. It is neither my intention to commend Zhidar nor to condemn Jigme Senge in this book. My aim is to provide a portrait of this important historical figure.

³ Bogle 1876: 41.

Chapter 2

Where Garuda Nestlings Hover

Biography usually bears a person's birth and death years, but these dates about Zhidar are not known although this book is not a biography. Like many Bhutanese historical figures, only a little is known about him.

Zhidar was also known as Sonam Lhundup, a spiritual name given by the tenth Je Khenpo Tenzin Chogyal while taking the vow of a novice monk (*dge tshul*). In the British political mission reports, he is referred to as Deb Judhur,¹ Deb Terria,² and Deb Jeedah and Deb Shidariva.³ An epithet 'dharma king' (*chos rgyal*) is used for him for his service to the Buddha's teachings. He was widely known by his birth name, Zhidar or Zhidarla. In his home village, he is known as Kushu Deba Zhidar.

Zhidar was born in Khyung-chung Dingkha (*khyung chung lding kha*),⁴ which translates as 'Where Garuda Nestlings Hover'. It is a village in Jimena, the lower Thimphu valley, located above the village of Jobesa and the Thimphu-Paro traditional road. It is about half an hour's walk from Jobesa. All that remains of the village are a couple of stupas (*rnam rgyal khang bzang mchod rten*), a stone bowl used for pounding paddy into rice, remains of a water-mill (*chu rag*),

¹ Bogle 1876.

² Turner 1800.

³ Eden 1865.

⁴ Dorji 2013: 221. It is spelt as *khyung chu sdings kha*. There is a village called *bya sding kha* some distance from Khyung-chung Dingkha.

ruins of several houses, and the village land which now serves as community pasture land.



Figure 3: Ruins of a house at Khyung-chung Dingkha. Photo by Dorji Penjore, 2017.

Villages like Jobesa and Khyung-chung Dingkha were once vibrant settlements, frequented by travelers, state officials, and pilgrims. Jimena formed a part of the ‘eight great communities of Wang region’ (*wang tsho chen brygad*),⁵ and the people owned paddy fields in Punakha where they migrated in winter. Because of its relatively steep terrain, narrow valley, poor soil and limited paddy fields, most

⁵ *Wang tsho chen brygad* consisted of Kabji (*ka spi*); Kawang (*ka wang*); Chang Bar Kor (*lcang bar skor*); Zhang Tshan Mojodpa (*zhang tshan mo rgyud pa*); Wang Tshonyi (*wang tsho gnyis*); Tshaluna (*tsho lung pa*); and Todpa (*stod pa*). See Ardussi & Ura 2000: 68.

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inhabitants had migrated to other places. Some of the households settled in Punakha permanently and depopulation of the valley began. After 1959, Jemina became one of the areas for resettling Tibetan refugees. Today, the Tibetan settlers outnumber the original population. Jimena is revered as a sacred hidden land (*sbas smad na*), and as a sacred place and Tibetan settlement area, new Buddhist temples have been built. A new industrial zone has been established below the village.

An Orphan

Zhidar's parents died when he was a child, and as an orphan he had a difficult childhood. Food and clothing were scarce. It is said that he survived the cold winter nights by leaning against an ox for warmth. Maybe he at least did not sleep in the open air since domestic animals were kept in the ground floor of a typical three-storied traditional house in western Bhutan although it is uncertain whether this privilege was extended to oxen. But the lack of material support was certainly compensated by the non-material. As a child, he might have listened to Bhutanese folktales around the oven fire and become inspired by Dawbutshu (*dva wa bu tshu*, an orphan), a popular character in the Bhutanese folktales, who often outwits the kings and ascends the throne. Surely, he would have heard about a poor man's son, another popular Bhutanese folktale character, who becomes rich by avenging his friend, the rich man's son, often portrayed as a bad character. As an orphan and a poor child, life trajectories of those characters showed him the path to greatness. The egalitarian nature of traditional Bhutanese society enabled anyone to become a ruler.



Figure 4: Namgyal Khangzang Chorten at Khyung-chung Dingkha. Photo by Dorji Penjore, 2007.

A certain lama of Yamalung (*g.ya' ma lung*) made a prophecy that Zhidar would become great and benefit both the Buddha's teachings and sentient beings.⁶ The first Zhabdrung Thugtrul Jigme Drakpa predicted that he would become Druk Desi. Like Macbeth,

⁶ *sman ljongs 'brug rgyal khab chen po'i sde srid khri rabs dang brgyud 'dzin gyi rgyal po rim par byon pa'i rgyal rabs deb ther gsal ba'i mi long zhes bya ba'i zin bris bzhugs* (unpublished manuscript).

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Shakespeare's play by the same name, who was encouraged by prophecies of the three witches to take over the throne of Scotland, Zhidar had his destiny revealed, and all he needed to do was to work towards it.

In Service of the Dual System

During his visit to Bhutan in 1818, Baboo Kishent Kant Bose made this observation of the Bhutanese social mobility:

They [Bhutanese] first become Zinkaffs [*garpa*, messenger] or Poes [?], then Tumas [?], then Zumpes [*dzongpon*] under the Pillos [*ponlop*] or other Officers, after that Iodus or Soubahs of Papes, after that Zimpé [*zimpon*], then Pillo, and at length they may become Deb Raja... If a man, however, possess extraordinary abilities or interest, he may get on more quickly and become at once a Zimpé [*zimpon*] from being a Zinkaff.⁷ [words in parenthesis mine]

Zhidar rose from an orphan to become Druk Desi, the highest post of the land.

Menial Servant

Zhidar was enrolled as a menial servant (*sgar lto*)⁸ in the state bureaucracy at a young age. Menial servants occupied the lowest rung of the bureaucratic ladder; however, they were entitled to food from common kitchens of the dzongs, the administrative and religious centers of the dual system of governance. Perhaps, the circumstances related to his orphanage forced him to leave his village and escape a childhood of cold and hunger. He outshone other menial servants and attracted the attention of the authorities at a time when

⁷ Bose 1865: 201.

⁸ *Sgar lto* is synonymous with *sgar pa*, or *zeenkaff* or *zeenkaub* of the British records, a class of government orderlies who played the role of messengers.

achieved status was valued as much as ascribed status. The Bhutanese bureaucratic ladder was open for anyone, other than social subclasses, to climb to the summit.

Border Road Protector

Zhidar soon became a servant to the border road protector (*srang srung*)⁹ of Tsirang region. In this capacity, he visited the state capitals, Punakha and Thimphu, several times to deposit revenues and offer gifts to the authorities. He made friends in the Dratshang, particularly with Kunga Rinchen from Rubesa village in Wangdi Phodrang. During those times, a lay civil servant aspired to become Desi, the civilian ruler or the head of secular laws, while any monk dreamed of the post of Je Khenpo, the head of religious laws. It is said that Zhidar and Kunga Rinchen promised to help each other to realize their ambitions.¹⁰ The consequence of this promise later proved tragic for the country, especially for Zhidar. He soon succeeded his master as Tsirang border road official.

⁹ *Srang srung* [pa] should not be confused with *sa srung pa* (border guard or border patrol functionary). While *sa srung pa* protected national borders by preventing the illegal entry of foreigners, *srang srung* (*srang*=road or pathway, *srung* = protector) protected the border roads and facilitated the movement of people for administration and trade. The Bhutanese armies who were posted in the north-eastern outposts in Sengye Dzong in Lhuntse District in the 1970s to prevent the exodus of the Tibetan refugees to India via Bhutan were also called *Sa srung pa*. A functionary called *srang srung* was appointed at Hamral King's *nag tshang* in Khoma, Lhuntse District, to administer the Khoma region. *Srang srung* was hierarchically positioned between *drungpa* (*drung pa*) and *gup* (*rgad po*).

¹⁰ Jochu 2017; Phuntsho 2013: 348.

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Courtier

Zhidar was still young when he became a courtier (*phyag sgar*)¹¹ at the court of the 10th Druk Desi Mipham Wangpo (r.1729-1735). Young Zhidar's qualities became all evident when he was chosen, again at a young age, as one of the courtiers to accompany his master to Tibet in 1736.

at midnight of the 25th day of the new year he and a small body of close supporters sneaked out of Punakha and headed quickly for the northern frontier. It was apparently not a well-planned action. The party was poorly equipped for heavy ice and snow, and frostbite hampered their progress. Nevertheless they managed to elude a party of pursuers and crossed the border into Tibet over Wa-skyes-la [Wakela] pass north of Mgar-sa.

There they rested for a few days before moving on to Gyantse. By this time, we are told, Pho-lha-nas [Pholanay] had heard of their flight, sent out supplies for their comfort, and given orders for their safe escort on to Lhasa. They passed Rwa-lung [Ralung] monastery, halting to tour the shrines. Mi-pham-dbang-po [Mipham Wangpo] was the first Bhutanese ruler to do so in more than one hundred years, and no disguise or secrecy were now needed. Crossing the Gtsang-po [Tsangpo] River at Chu-bo-ri [Chubori] he was met by a delegation from Lhasa, including twenty or more monk officials and his own Gzims-dpon Tshe-ring-dbang-chen [Zimpon Tshering Wangchen]. Immediately he was conducted on to Lhasa where he was warmly received.

Tshe-ring-dbang-chen, apparently, had remained in Lhasa since the treaty of 1730, serving as the Bhutan government's representative in Tibet. One condition of that treaty had been that Bhutan should dispatch an emissary to be present at every Tibetan New Year, to pay respects to the Dalai Lama and his court....

The Bhutanese accounts describe Mi-pham-dbang-po's reception in glowing terms. On various days he was hosted to festivals and dinners by

¹¹ *Changap*, still used today to refer to butlers, valets, and men in waiting, is a corruption of *phyag sgar*, meaning *sgar pa* courtier) to serve the lord.

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different groups of monks and officials, including the Ambans (Rgya-nag Ta-bzhin) [Janag Tenzin]. Tours were made of the temples of Ra-mo-che [Ramoche], Jo-khang, and Lcags-po-ri [Chagpori]. There were several audiences with Pho-lha-nas, the Dalai Lama, and members of the Tibetan cabinet. Gifts were exchanged and a complementary letter of “tribute” dispatched on Mi-pham-dbang-po’s behalf to emperor Chien-lung. This was followed by a long and leisurely excursion to important pilgrimage centres including Bsam-yas [Samye], Tshal-gung-thang [Tshalgungthang], Brag-dmar [Drakmar], Yar-klung [Yarlung] and Mtshur-phu [Tshurphu].¹² (words in parenthesis are mine).

This must be one of many journeys Zhidar made to Tibet, learned about the country, and made friends and connections. His patronage to the Panchen Lama could also be related to these travels.

State Chief Protocol

Soon after returning home from Tibet, Mipham Wangpo was enthroned as the fifth Throne holder after the death of Jigme Norbu (his brother, the fourth Throne holder) after being on the throne for six years. Zhidar became Zhung Dronyer (*gzhung sgron gnyer*, the state chief protocol) during this brief reign of Mipham Wangpo (r.1736-38). Zhung Dronyer, head of the state civil service, was one of the nine state ministers (*bka' blon*). The eight others were Thimphu Dzongpon, Punakha Dzongpon, Wangdi Dzongpon, Paro Ponlop, Dagana Ponlop and Trongsa Ponlop, Depai Zimpon (*sde pa'i gzims dpon*) and Zhung Kalon (*gzhung bka' blon*).¹³ As Zhung Dronyer, he renovated Chimithang temple, the residence of Ngawang Chogyal (b.1475-d.1540), who was a cousin of Drukpa Kunlay and the 15th Prince Abbot of Druk Ralung in Tibet (Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was the 17th Prince Abbot).

¹² Ardussi 1977: 234-35.

¹³ Ardussi & Ura 2000: 40-41.

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Trongsa Ponlop

Zhidar was next appointed as Trongsa Ponlop (*krong gsar dpon slob*). As Trongsa Ponlop, Zhidar brought peace to the region. He expanded the prayer hall of Trongsa Dzong and added a new dzong (*rdzong gong ma*). More importantly, he established Trongsa Rabdey (*rab sde*: monastic institution), enrolled monks from the region and invited 10th Je Tenzin Chogyal (r.1755-1762) to consecrate it in 1760. It was during the consecration that he took the vow of a novice monk and received his spiritual name, Sonam Lhundup. Monk tax (*btsun khral*) was imposed in Trongsa and Bumthang regions for the first time.¹⁴ Je Tenzin Chogyal's biography mentions that a virtuous ruler in the east called Zhidar constructed a huge monastery where many easterners learnt everything.¹⁵

Wangdi Dzungpon

From Trongsa, Zhidar moved on to become a governor of Wangdi Phodrang in western Bhutan: Wangdi Dzungpon (*dbang 'dus rdzong dpon*) abbreviated as Wangzob. While he was serving as Wangzob, 13th Druk Desi Sherab Wangchuk (r.1744-1763) sent him as an envoy to Ladakh to mediate in a conflict between Ladakh King Phuntsho Namgyal (r.1740-1760) and his ministers.¹⁶ Tibet also sent an envoy to solve the problem since there was a chance of endangering the peace not only in Ladakh but in Tibet as well.¹⁷

When Zhidar was Wangzob, he received Thugtrul Jigme Drakpa at Wangdi Phodrang, and offered both the summer and winter

¹⁴ Phuntsho 2013: 342.

¹⁵ Tshewang 1994.

¹⁶ Phuntsho 2013: 338.

¹⁷ Francke 1987: 121.

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residences. Declining the offer, Jigme Drakpa asked Zhidar to serve him when he became Druk Desi.



Figure 5: Wangdi Dzong and Bridge by Samuel Davis, c.1800-1808. Trustees of the British Museum .

We do not know the exact years Zhidar served as Trongsa Ponlop and Wangdi Dzongpon. Inferences can be made from the events in which he was directly involved. If Zhidar was appointed as an envoy to the Ladakhi court during the reign of Desi Sherab Wangchuk (r.1744-1763), the mission took place between 1753-53. So, Zhidar must have been Trongsa Ponlop when he led the envoy to Ladakh since we know he was serving as Trongsa Ponlop in 1760. While the dates matter in history, what mattered more is that Zhidar had served as Trongsa Ponlop and Wangdi Dzongpon, two important posts for anyone wanting to occupy the high post of Druk Desi.

Zhidar's exposure to the world outside the borders of Bhutan at a formative age changed his outlook. As a child, he faced the difficulty

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of an orphan. He won against adversities. Because he entered the state bureaucracy at a young age, he had received a rigorous bureaucratic grooming and he knew the secrets of climbing the rungs of the bureaucratic ladder. First as a servant to the Tsirang border road officer and then as a border road officer himself, he had detailed knowledge of the Bhutanese duars, its significance in providing revenue to the state as well as amassing personal fortunes. He made personal and political contacts with important people in the government (Punakha and Thimphu) while depositing taxes and offering gifts. As Mipham Wangpo's courtier he had friends in the court of the Throne holder and the Dratshang, and he understood the court politics and culture. While accompanying Mipham Wangpo to Tibet on a pilgrimage, he was exposed to the ways of the northern neighbor. Perhaps, he saw there with his own eyes the spiritual significance of the Tibetan world to Bhutan. It was perhaps because of his sound knowledge of the Tibetan world and diplomatic skill that he was chosen to mediate in Ladakh. Zhidar became excellent Druk Desi material. There was a divine blessing as well.

Chapter 3

On the Throne

When the 15th Desi Druk Tenzin passed away towards the end of 1768 (11th month of Earth Mouse Year), the Throne holder Jigme Senge, the Dratshang and the State Council (*gzhung lhan tshog*) enthroned Zhidar as the 16th Druk Desi. Sources differ on Zhidar's reign as Desi: 1768-1773, 1768-1772, 1769-1774. According to Sangay Dorji, Zhidar was enthroned on the 4th Day of the 12th Month of the Earth Ox Year (beginning of 1769) when the Dratshang (*gsol thab*) was in Punakha, and went to war in the beginning of Water Snake Year (1773); so, Zhidar's reign would be from 1769-1773.¹ He was preceded by Druk Phuntsho and Druk both of whom died in office. They in turn were preceded by Desi Sherab Wangchuk (r.1744-1763), whose 18-year-long glorious reign was marked by domestic stability and political reconciliation with Tibet.

There was almost a year's delay in enthroning the 16th Desi. Was Zhidar's appointment not as smooth as it is usually narrated? Was there no consensus among the Throne holder, the Dratshang and members of the State Council in his appointment? Bhutanese sources are silent but the British records provide some information about the nature of his appointment. Zhidar's election owed more to his intrigues and fear of his power than the free choice of the Throne

¹ Dorji 2017: 258.

holder and Dratshang. He was employed to fight against the neighboring rulers, occupied the offices of Trongsa Ponlop and Wangdi Dzongpon, won considerable wealth, power, and importance in the process, and became Desi in the end.²

Dharma King

Like the Medici rulers of Florence who patronized arts, rulers in the Himalayan Buddhist regions patronized large Buddhist art projects which mainly consisted of building Buddhist monuments, commissioning fresco paintings, reproducing Buddhist texts, carving statues of Buddha, Bodhisattvas, the pantheon of deities, gods and goddess, and the lineage holders and hierarchs of different Vajrayana Buddhist schools, and renovating old Buddhist monuments. Zhidar undertook several such projects. It is written that “whatever objects he touched immensely benefited sentient beings because of his pure dedication”.³ Zhidar was referred to as a Dharma King (*chos rgyal*) to acknowledge his great service to the Buddha’s teachings in the country.

The Seven Buddhas

As Desi, Zhidar first completed a project he had started as Wangdi Dzongpon. The project consisted of making,

a statute of a 12-year-old historical Buddha as the central figure,

flanked on the right by Dhanyakataka stupa (*'bras spungs kyi mchod rten*), statues of Vipasyin Buddha (*rnam gzigs*), Shikhin Buddha (*grtug tor can*), Visvabhu Buddha (*thams cad kyob*), and Je Tenzin Chogyal;

² Bogle 1876: 37.

³ Tshewang 1994. *'brug gi rgyal rabs. dpal 'brug pa'i bstan srid kyi byed po bsod nams lhun grub ces pa'i bla dvags can rang nyid kyi lhag bsam dag pas/phyag tu dngos po ci byung chud zos su mi 'gro bar rnam 'gyur zhes pa.*

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on the left are the statues of Vijaya (*rnam rgyal ma*), Kracucchanda Buddha (*'khor ba 'jigs*), Kanakamuni Buddha (*gser thub*), and Kashyapa Buddha (*'od srung*).

He built entrance halls to both the upper and lower floors of Wangdi Phodrang Dzong.

Enthronement of Je Khenpos

In the same year he became Desi, he oversaw the enthronement of Kunga Gyamtsho (r.1769-1771) as the 12th Je Khenpo with the consent of the Throne holder, Jigme Senge, the Dratshang and the State Council. Zhidar had the obligation to support Kunga Rinchen's candidacy by informal agreement but so Kunga Rinchen was not selected. When Kunga Gyamtsho retired in 1771 Kunga Rinchen was again overlooked in favor of Yonten Thaye (r.1771-1775) as the 13th Je Khenpo.

Zhabdrung Thongdrol

Zhidar commissioned, for Punakha Dzong, a scroll painting of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal measuring 15 by 15 arm-spans, together with 23 silk scroll paintings of Zhabdrung's spiritual lineage, the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche, and a scroll painting of Je Tenzin Chogyal. The project was consecrated in 1769, the same year Tibet handed over Druk Ralung monastery to Bhutan and the Gorkha king gave Bhutan the temple of Swayambhu (*phags pa shing kun*) in the Kathmandu valley. Both were attributed to the blessing of these great scrolls.

At a place where Vanaratna or Panchen Nagi Rinchen (b.1384-d.1468) once meditated he built the main prayer hall (*grtsug la khang*) and cast of gold and copper statues of the assembly of five

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families of Buddha Amitayus (*tshe dpag med rigs nga'i lha tshog*). He named it Zamling Gatshel (*'dzam gling dga' tshal*).

Casting Buddha Statues

In 1770, Zhidar initiated a project to cast the image of the Buddha aged 12 years, as well as a statue of Krakucchanda Buddha (*'khor ba 'jigs*), and the statues of one thousand Buddhas (*sangs rgyas stong*) with mixed gold and copper. He offered statues of eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche (*gu ru mtshan brgyad*) to Chumophu temple. This project, which began on the seventh day of the third month, Iron Tiger year (1770), was completed in the Water Female Sheep year (1771).

Zhidar enjoyed a good relation with the sixth Panchen Lama, Lobzang Palden Yeshe, who was then serving as the ruler of Tibet during the minority of the eighth Dalai Lama. He commissioned a wall hanging silk scroll of Zhabdrung and a statue of Buddha, and offered the latter to the Panchen Lama. He sent a mission to the court of the Panchen Lama at Shigatse in 1771 to offer him a new year greeting.

Zhabdrung's Reliquary

Zhidar built a reliquary of Zhabdrung of gold and copper for long life, a Stupa of Auspiciousness (*bkra shes 'byung ba mchod rten*) and a Stupa of Reconciliation (*dbyen lzum mchod rten*) in silver. In the grove (*kun dga' ra ba*) of Punakha Dzong he built a gold-gilded roof (*rgya phibs*). One important project was reproducing Kanjur (*bka' 'gyur*) in gold by assigning the task of copying nine folios each day to the two best scribes. According to the biography of Je Tenzin Namgyal (r.1775-1781), he went to Punakha on Zhidar's order to work as a scribe. As a smart and fast writer, he could do the work of two, and each day he was able to copy nine pages from the vermilion

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edition. He worked for more than one year and completed 8 or 9 volumes.⁴

Copper Cauldrons

Zhidar also commissioned a large copper urn/cauldron called Sonam Palkhil (*bsod rnams dpal 'khyil*) with a circumference of four arms-span for holding the ritual alcohol of *pazap* (*dpa' zab*), the state militia mobilised from the Eight Great Communities of Wang Region, and another cauldron of the same size called Tashi Odbar (*bkra shis 'od 'bar*), for use in the monastic kitchen. Most visitors to the National Museum of Bhutan in Paro Taa Dzong will not miss Tashi Odbar whose outer face bears imprint of verses translated by John Ardussi.⁵ The verse describes Zhidar as firm and powerful with courage as exalted as the sky.

Enthroning Zhabdrung Thugtrul

The reincarnation of the first Zhabdrung Thugtrul Jigme Drakpa (b.1724-d.1761) was born in Tibet in 1762. As mentioned earlier, Thugtrul Jigme Drakpa had asked for Zhidar's service when he became Desi. So, it was only right for Zhidar to fulfil Thugtrul Jigme Drakpa's wish. It is possible that the prophecy could also have inspired him to become Desi. Perhaps, he even considered his Desi post as the fruition of Thugtrul Jigme Drakpa's aspiration prayer, and the onus then was on him to serve the incarnation. For Zhidar, nothing could be a more fitting service than bringing him from Tibet and enthroning him as the Throne holder. Because of his special connection with the previous Thugtrul, Zhidar was able to bring the child to Bhutan but only after much difficulty. The child, Thugtrul

⁴ Ibid.: 317. *'brug gi rgyal rabs slob dpon pad ma tshé dbang gis sbyar ba.*

⁵ Ardussi, forthcoming.

Chokyi Gyaltsen, was enthroned and Je Yonten Thaye (r.1771-1775) and the retired Je Kunga Gyaltsen were made responsible for his education.

Undermining the Throne Holder

However, Zhidar's patronage of Buddhism was undermined by his acrimonious relation with Jigme Senge, the reigning Throne holder. As a reincarnation of Mipham Wangpo (the fifth Throne holder), who in turn was the reincarnation of Tenzin Rabgay (the first Throne holder), Jigme Senge was enthroned in 1763 after the death of Thugtrul Jigme Drakpa in 1761 and Cholay Trulku Drukdra Namgyal in 1762 who held the office jointly as the sixth Throne holder. After losing faith in Jigme Senge, Zhidar started to look for an alternative Throne holder who would and could support him politically. Towards this end, he made repeated efforts to bring Thugtrul Chokyi Gyaltsen, the reincarnation of Thugtrul Jigme Drakpa from Tibet. When he finally succeeded, the child was enthroned clearly as a rival to Jigme Senge. As a reincarnation of the sixth Throne holder, Thugtrul Chokyi Gyaltsen had the legitimacy to occupy the throne, but power was needed to back up the claim when there were multiple contenders to the throne, and Zhidar had the power. He supported Thugtrul Chokyi Gyaltsen's right partially because the head of the state was a source of legitimacy for whoever wanted to become or extend the tenure of Desi.

After enthroning Thugtrul Chokyi Gyaltsen, Zhidar started to undermine Jigme Senge's authority. He took even religious matters into his own hands and tightened the silken laws of the religion. According to Bogle, "His [Zhidar] bold and restless spirit was unable to brook the cautious maxims of priests", and kept Jigme Senge under a state of imprisonment, and governed the country without

consulting him on any matter of governance.⁶ He insulted Jigme Senge's religious authority and significance by patronizing the sixth Panchen Lama of Tibet. While in Tibet, the Panchen Lama had promoted Thugtrul Chokyi Gyaltsen as a rival to Jigme Senge,⁷ perhaps in support of his patron, Zhidar.

An acrimonious relation between Zhidar and Jigme Senge can be understood from the fact that there was only an outer consensus in his election as Desi in 1769 and thus the delay in his enthronement. The enmity between Zhidar, head of the government, and Jigme Senge as head of the state, ensued due to their differing interests:

A rooted enmity, founded on a natural opposition of interest, took place between him [Zhidar] and Lama-Rimboché [*bla ma khri pa* Jigme Senge]. The executive power was in his hands; the supreme authority and control were claimed by the other. His bold and restless spirit was unable to brook the cautious maxims of priests, and he endeavoured by every means to render himself independent of their [dratshang's] authority. With this view he strengthened his connection with Teshu Lama [the sixth Panchen Lama Palden Yeshe, b.1738-d.1780] and the Rajah of Nepal [Prithvi Narayan Shah, r.1768-1775]; he endeavoured to secure the friendship and protection of the Emperor of China [Qianlong, r.1735-1796], by circulating his seal in the country; he kept the Lama [Jigme Senge] in a state almost of imprisonment; he transacted the most important business without the advice of the priests; he seldom employed them in any of the departments of government, and he engaged in wars with his neighbours, and filled his coffers with the booty which he thereby procured.⁸ [words in parenthesis are mine].

Dividing the Dratshang

Zhidar's conflict with the Throne holder naturally led to a conflict with the Dratshang. He did not consult the Dratshang hierarchy in

⁶ Bogle 1876: 37.

⁷ Lamb 2002: 103.

⁸ Bogle 1876: 37-38.

the governance of the country. This fomented discontent and dissent in the Dratshang, and the only thing which prevented the outbreak of a rebellion was fear of Zhidar's power. But there were Zhidar's supporters in the Dratshang. That Zhidar enjoyed good relations with some members of Dratshang headed by Je Khenpo is clear from his relation with the 12th Je Kunga Gyamtsho and the 13th Je Yonten Thaye both of whom were appointed while passing over Kunga Rinchen. All Throne holders lived with the Dratshang and it was difficult to separate the affairs of the Throne holder from that of Je Khenpo, albeit being constitutionally different. It can be explained that the Throne holder's role was political and ceremonial while that of Je Khenpo religious and technical.

Although it was Zhidar himself who promoted his friend Sherab Senge, the Neten of Wangdi Dratshang, as Dorji Lopen (*rdo rje slob dpon*) of the Dratshang he later demoted him to lama of Talakha Tashi Drugyal for merely suggesting that religious matters should be left to the Dratshang in keeping with the tradition. Similarly, Yangbi Lopen (*dbyang ba'i slob dpon*) Ngawang Tenzin Namgay (who became the 14th Je in 1774) was demoted and transferred as a lama of Dongkarla by fabricating false charges.

We do not know why Zhidar took recourse to such extreme measures. We can only guess based on existing information. Zhidar's supporters and sympathizers told George Bogle that "the government of this country is held for life".⁹ Did Zhidar harbor an ambition to become Desi for life in a country, observed by Bogle, as "minimally governed by regular and strict police, independent by the Situation of the People, and subject to an elective Government, which though

⁹ Ibid.: 40.

absolute was checked by the free Spirit of the People, unawed by Mercenary Troops, and apt to rebel when treated with Opposition”?¹⁰

If Zhidar wanted to hold the office of Desi for life, what stood in the way of fulfilling his ambition were the institutions of the Throne holder and the Dratshang, the spiritual arm of the dual system. His reason for enthroning Thugtrul Chokyi Gyaltsen must have been to secure his own spiritual legitimacy and fulfil a constitutional requirement for his office in future.

Constitutional Crisis

After the death of Zhabdrung, the country went through a political instability due to what Ardussi calls “constitutional disorder”.¹¹ To begin with, the lineage of the Gya clan that provided hereditary prince abbots of Druk Ralung in Tibet could legitimately claim to be successors to Zhabdrung as the 18th Abbot, not as a supreme head of the dual system. In 1626, Zhabdrung told two Portuguese Jesuits Father Cascell and Cabral that his son would be his successor.¹² There is no doubt that his son Jampal Dorji was the natural heir. But Jampal Dorji was too sick to occupy the throne, and Tenzin Rabgay (r.1680-95), also of the Gya clan, who was blessed and anointed as the prince (*rgyal sras*) by Zhabdrung himself, assumed the combined role of first Throne holder (*khri pa*) in 1680 and the post of Desi (civilian head). When Jampal Dorji passed away in 1681 he left a daughter Tshoki Dorji, and Tenzin Rabgay too failed to produce a male heir. Their deaths brought an end to the bone line of the Gya clan. With Zhabdrung’s death still concealed, Kunga Gyaltsen was born as Jampal Dorji’s reincarnation in 1689 in eastern Bhutan. In

¹⁰ Cited in Teltscher 2008.

¹¹ Ardussi 1977: 475.

¹² Baillie 1999.

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the absence of a male heir, the ruling hierarchs resorted to enthroning the reincarnation of the Gya clan, and Kunga Gyaltsen was enthroned as the second Throne holder in Punakha. Jampal Dorji's reincarnation line is called Gyalsay Trulku (*rgyal sras sprul sku*). Mipham Wangpo was born in Trongsa as Tenzin Rabgay's reincarnation in 1709, and his reincarnation line is called Lama Thripa (*bla ma khri pa*) or Thriltrul (*khri sprul*). Tenzin Rabgay of Gya clan (r.1680-1695) and Kunga Gyaltsen (r.1696-1713) served as the Throne holders from 1680 to 1713.

Kunga Gyaltsen started a long period of constitutional crisis in 1708 by disclosing Zhabdrung's death. Consequently, multiple incarnations, Thugtrul (mental incarnation) and Sungtrul (speech incarnation) of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal were recognized as rival claimants to the throne. The eighth Desi Druk Rabgay enthroned the first Sungtrul Choglay Namgyal (b.1708-d.1736) as the third Throne holder in 1713 after forcing Kunga Gyaltsen to step down.

When he died in 1736, Mipham Wangpo (Tenzin Rabgay's reincarnation) was enthroned as the fourth Throne holder. He became the first Lama Thripa (*bla ma khri pa*) to be enthroned.

The constitutional disorder started over the question of who had more legitimacy to occupy the golden throne as Zhabdrung's representative: reincarnations of the Gya clan (*rgyal sras sprul sku* and *bla ma khri pa*), or reincarnations of the Zhabdrung (*thugs sprul* and *gsung sprul*)? As Zhabdrung's representative, the Throne holder's recognition gave official legitimacy to both Druk Desi and Je Khenpo, respectively the secular and spiritual arms of the dual system. In other words, the choice was between two reincarnations of the direct family lineage of Gya clan who occupied the abbotship of Druk Ralung in Tibet (Zhabdrung was the 17th abbot) and reincarnations of Zhabdrung whose claim as the fifth reincarnation

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of Tsangpa Gyare was contested, and it was for this reason that he fled Tibet to Bhutan. The fifth Desi Gedun Chopel (r.1695-1701) even made Jampal Dorji's daughter Tshoki Dorji to wear men's robes to enthrone him as a Desi after the first Throne holder Tenzin Rabgay had passed away in 1695. Anointment by any of these reincarnations as head of the state was necessary to legitimize the office of Desi or Je Khenpo.



Figure 6: Wall painting of Gyalsay Tenzin Rabgay at Tango monastery.
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Patronizing Foreign Powers

One accusation against Zhidar was his courting of the sixth Panchen Lama and undermining the political sovereignty of Bhutan won after thwarting several invasion attempts by Tsang Desi and later by the Fifth Dalai Lama with Mongol support.

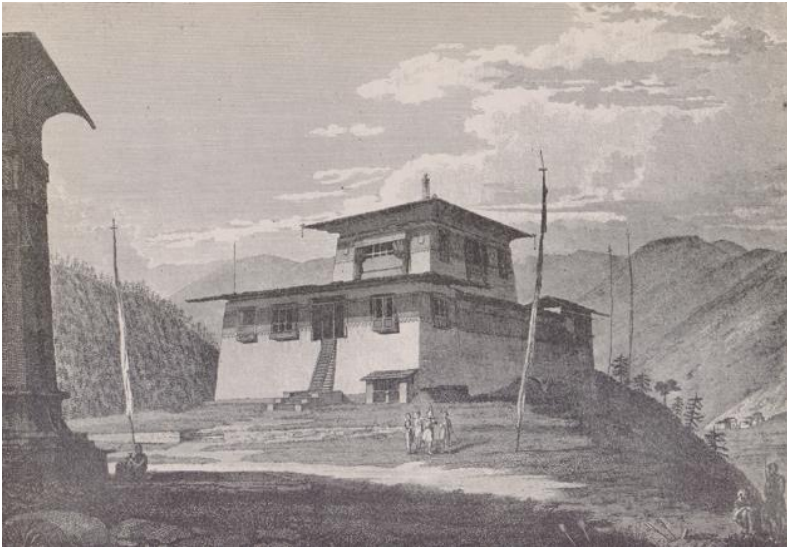


Figure 7: Engraving of Dechen Phodrang Monastery by James Basire. Turner 1800. Plate VI.

During the minority of the eighth Dalai Lama, Jamphel Gyatso (b.1758-d.1804), Tibet was under a regent (*rgyal tshab*) appointed by the Chinese emperor on the advice of the sixth Panchen lama who enjoyed great authority in Tibet and influence in the court of China. Shigatse (*gzhis ka rtse*) where Tashi Lhunpo, the seat of Panchen Lama is located, is only a few days walk from Phari, the closest Tibetan settlement from the border of western Bhutan. Based in

Tengyeling Monastery, the Demo Tulku was one of the incarnate lineages who served as regents during the minority of the Dalai Lamas, and the sixth Demo Rinpoche, Ngawang Jampal Delek Gyatso was a regent from 1757-1777. Tibet had conflicting policies towards Bhutan, and towards Zhidar as Desi and Zhidar as a refugee due to possible conflicts between the Panchen Lama and the Regent.

Zhidar was also accused of making overtures to the Qing emperor of China, via the Panchen Lama and the Regent, and circulating the Imperial seal in the country. After becoming Desi, Zhidar worked on his plan to make himself (i.e., the institution of Druk Desi, head of the civilian arm of the dual system, which is today's equivalent of head of the government) independent of the constitutional constraints imposed by the institutions of the Dratshang (religious arm of the dual system) and the Throne holder (the ultimate spiritual and secular authority, today's equivalent of head of the state).

According to his enemies, Zhidar aspired to hold the office of Desi for life. Towards this end, Zhidar befriended the Lhasa government, and, according to George Bogle, "offered to hold Bhutan under the Emperor, to allow two Chinese Viceroys to reside at his Court, to obey implicitly their commands, to pay an annual tribute, and in order to regain his authority and be revenged of his enemies, scruples not to subject his country to a foreign yoke".¹³ Zhidar "applied for or consented" to receive the Chinese Emperor's seal to win the favour of the Lhasa government, and after the seal had been granted, he gathered his officers, dressed himself up in the Chinese *khilat*, assumed the title of "Most Fortunate" and started to issue all edicts under the Emperor's seal.¹⁴ This was how the Chinese seal spread across the country in the form of edicts stamped with the seal. That Zhidar put his power before the country is clear from his

¹³ Lamb 2002: 317.

¹⁴ Ibid.: 327.

patronage of China since there was a risk of China claiming vassalage over Bhutan. Countries agreed to become a part of the “tribute system” to secure a guarantee of peace, appointment, and trading opportunities. One country acknowledged another country’s superior position, and the superior bestowed investiture upon them in the form of *a crown, official seal and formal ceremonial robes* to confirm them as kings.¹⁵ Formalized during the early years of the Ming dynasty, the tribute system entailed a foreign court sending envoys and exotic products as tribute, which need not be political subordination, but rather a theatrical subordination, to the Chinese and at various times, the Mongol emperors. The emperor reciprocated the envoys with gifts and permitted them to trade in China. Tributary states were autonomous, and the political sacrifice was merely a symbolic obeisance, and the Chinese influence was always non-interventionist in nature, with no expectation of military assistance from the emperor in event of invasions by other powers.

To Build a Dzong

On the same spot where Dechen Phodrang Monastery stands today once stood Do Ngon Dzong (*rdo sngon rdzong*), also called Do Nyug Dzong. It was originally built by a Lhapa lama but later it was taken over by Phajo Drugom Zhigpo’s descendants. After taking it over from Phajo’s descendants, Zhabdrung not only renovated it but expanded the structure by adding a new dzong in 1641. The renovated block was called Dzong Gongma and the new block was called Dzong Wogma. However, the entire structure was called Tashichho Dzong.

¹⁵ Lee 2017.



Figure 8: Wangditse by Samuel Davis, c.1800-1808. Trustees of the British Museum.

But in 1771 (Water Dragon) Tashichho Dzong caught fire for the second time. Je Khenpo Yonten Thaye who was absent during the accident arrived at the scene with his attendants and was able to save the boxes containing sacred religious objects (*rten sgrom*). Efforts to save other relics were in vain. It is said that people brought water in jars to put out the fire. A heavy rainfall on the day was like pouring melted butter onto butter lamps, and the loss of the dzong was compared to the disappearance of rainbows in the sky. Yonten Thaye attributed the fire to the demonic forces flourishing in the land.

Zhidar, who was at Wangditse at the time of the accident, rushed to the scene and fainted at the sight of the destruction. After regaining consciousness, he invited Yonten Thaye to Wangditse for the night.

In the morning, he made offerings to the divinities and promised to build a new dzong that would not be smaller than the one just lost and that too within a year. The Dratshang was temporarily housed at Semtokha Dzong (*gsang zab rdzong*).

Most of the dzongs in Bhutan have been built at strategic places usually on hills, cliffs and ridges commanding the view of surrounding areas or approaches to the place. Instead of building a new dzong on the same site—a hillock commanding the valley below—Zhidar decided to build it on a new site and chose paddy fields by the Thimphu River. Je Yonten Thaye and the retired Je Kunga Gyamtsho performed the land-opening (*sa bslang*) ritual, and the construction, supervised by Yonten Thaye, began with compulsory unpaid labor (*'u lag*) mobilized from the public.

As promised, the new dzong was completed within a year but it brought much hardship to the public. The free labor itself might not have been questioned, only the amount of labor the public had to provide. More labor for the dzong construction meant less labor for farm work, from which the public had to pay grain taxes to run state institutions and to finance wars. While Zhidar's reputation grew after undertaking and completing several Buddhist projects as a ruler, he became infamous for torturing involuntary workers mobilized to build Tashichho Dzong by “gouging their eyes, breaking their arms and throwing them into a river” in order to complete it quickly.¹⁶ The fire not only razed Tashichho Dzong to ashes but burned Zhidar's name and fame. The successful building of the Dzong within one year, made him highly unpopular. His enemies saw the public discontent and used it to their advantage later.

¹⁶ Luo & Jian, 2012: 81.

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Sonam Phodrang

The dzong was completed in 1772 and the consecration ceremony held on the eighth day of ninth month by the Dratshang, Yonten Thaye, Thugtrul Chokyi Gyaltshen, Jigme Senge and Shakya Rinchen, with grand festivities and celebration. Just as it was time to install relics, the problem in Cooch Behar started.



Figure 9: Tashichho Dzong by Samuel Davis, 1783. Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Zhidar named the new dzong Sonam Phodrang after his name, or Sonam Lhundup, according to an unpublished manuscript.¹⁷ What did Sonam Phodrang look like? George Bogle who visited Bhutan in 1774, one year after completing the dzong, provided its description,

¹⁷ *sman ljongs 'brug rgyal khab*, unpublished manuscript.

including the Thimphu valley and the surrounding mountains and settlements:

The palace of Tassisudon [Tashichho Dzong] ... is a very large building, ... A tower [*utse*], about five or six stories high, rises in the middle, ... The walls of the palace are between two and three stories high and built, as all walls in this country are, inclining inwards. What with stairs, pillars, galleries, and roofs, there is an immense quantity of timber about it... The roofs are of planks two or three deep, and kept down by stones; ... The roof of the Lama's [Jigme Senge] tower is entirely gilt, is ornamented with dragons, &c., and rises like the top of a Chinese temple.¹⁸ [words in parenthesis mine]

The dzong was not fully completed during Bogle's visit. He saw men putting a large gilded image of the Buddha in Jigme Senge's quarters. There were nearly 3000 men, but not a single woman, living in the new dzong. Out of these, about 1000 were monks, and the rest were the officers of Desi Kunga Rinchen and the Throne holder Jigme Senge, and the officers' servants. The monks seldom moved beyond the walls but except once every eight or so days when a group of 500 or 600 went out to bathe in the Thimphu River.

In addition to making sketches of Bhutanese people, architecture and landscapes, Samuel Davis who visited Bhutan in 1783 left his impression and description of the dzong in his diary.

The palace of Tacissudjon [Tashichho Dzong] really surprised me by the regularity and grandeur of its appearance, though I had previously conceived a favourable idea of it from similar buildings on the way. It is an oblong, two hundred yards in front and a hundred in depth, divided within two squares by a separate building raised in the centre, more lofty and more ornamented than the rest. In the latter the Rajah and some of his principal people reside; and upon the top appears a square gilded turret, said to be the habitation of one of the lamas. One of the squares

¹⁸ Bogle 1876: 26-28.

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comprehends the chapel and apartments of the priests, and the other is allotted to the officers and servants of the government. There are three stories of apartments, which communicate by handsome verandas continued round the inside of the whole building, and from the middle story communicating by a passage to the Rajah's apartments in the centre. From the windows of the upper chambers balconies project of a size to hold fifteen or twenty persons; but there are no windows below, as they would not contribute to the strength of the place. The walls are of stone and clay, built thick, and with a greater slope inwards than is given to European buildings. The roof has little slope, and is covered with shingles, kept down by large stones placed upon them in the manner the Portuguese fasten the tiles of their houses in Madeira: - it projects considerably beyond the walls. The apartments are spacious, and as well proportioned as any in Europe. The only singularity that strikes at first sight is the ladders instead of stairs; but the steps are broad, and after a little use are not found inconvenient.¹⁹

Sacking the Divinity

In Bhutan, deities protect all dzongs and temples or even houses from negative external forces, both human and non-human. Dud Drakpa (*bdud brag pa*), alias Naydag Drakpa (*gnas bdag brag pa*: a local deity) was the protector of Tashichho Dzong when it was destroyed by fire. Zhidar intruded into where most feared to walk. He sacked Dud Drakpa for failing to perform his duty of protecting the dzong, and installed Dorji Draktsen (*rdo rje brag btsan*) of Pemula (*spus mu la*) as a new protector.²⁰ A double storey house was built above the dzong as a dwelling place (*gnas khang*) for Dorji Draktsan, a tree of life (*bla shing*) planted around the house, and a life-force lake (*bla mtsho*) created around the tree.²¹ Like Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal

¹⁹ Davis & Aris 1982: 48.

²⁰ Tengay 2001: 218-21.

²¹ Ibid.

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who dispatched edicts declaring the formation of the state of Bhutan (*dpal ldan 'brug pa*) to both non-humans and humans, Zhidar also issued edicts to protecting deities and spirits in the country and commanded them to bring timely rain or perform other superhuman duties.²²



Figure 10: Naykhang of Dorji Draktsen by Kinzang Tshering. Credit: KinsArt 2020.

²² Phuntsho 2013: 343.

Chapter 4

Duars

Bhutan owned territories in the south bordering Cooch Behar, Ahoms and Bengal called duars. Bhutan lost these duars, which formed almost one-fourth of her territories, in the Duar War of 1865. The Treaty of Sinchula signed in 1865 ceded these duars to the British in return for a subsidy paid every year. After independence, India took over the British mantle and continued to pay the subsidy, in recognition of its occupation of the duars, right up to 2006 when the subsidy payment was dropped from the revised Indo-Bhutanese Friendship Treaty.

The word duar means ‘door’, for they served as doors to the rolling plains of Ahom, Cooch Behar and Bengal, or vice versa. It is a tract of land adjoining southern foothills to the plains. Samuel Turner described it as

a wide and extensive plain, covered with woods, and sunk in morasses, forms a natural division between Bengal and Bootan, being nearly unfit for the support of human life, and almost destitute of inhabitation.¹

Ashley Eden left its description and measurement:

a narrow slip of land, ranging in breadth from ten to twenty miles [32 km], which runs along the base of the lower range of Bootan Hills from the Darjeeling District to the Frontier of Upper Assam...by nature singularly rich and fertile; ... formed of the richest black vegetable mould, is washed

¹ Turner 1800: vii.

Duars

by many rivers... capable of producing almost any crop...² [words in parenthesis mine]

Robert Boileau Pemberton provided the estimate of the size of duars:

the breadth of this tract varies from ten to eighteen and twenty miles, [16 to 29 and 32 km] and its extreme length may be estimated at 220 miles [35 km], giving an area of about 400 square miles [700 sq. km.], exclusive of the lower ranges of hills³ [words in parenthesis mine]

There were dense forests and thick jungle between the foothills and the southern parts of duars where rice was cultivated, with numerous rivers and streams flowing over pebbly beds from the mountains. During winter water-worn pebbles and rocks could be seen from the hills. The forests and jungles were swarming with elephants, deer, tigers, buffaloes, and other wild animals. It was not hospitable to human habitation due to climate and malaria. Duars were the most important source of revenue for Bhutan. Kacharis and Mechis ethnic groups who inhabited the duars paid taxes and yearly tributes to Bhutan. The provincial rulers appointed local officers for their administration. Rivers and streams provided natural boundaries between most duars.⁴

Without its duar territories in the south, Bhutan would not have been involved in Cooch Behar's affairs. Bhutan's interest in Cooch Behar was partly to secure these duars. Duars controlled trade routes from Bhutan to Bengal and Assam, and served as buffers to the Mughal Bengal and later to the British.

² Eden 1865: 7.

³ Pemberton 1839: 47.

⁴ *Ibdi.*: 189-190.

Duars in the Bhutanese Source

In his English translations of two 18th century manuscripts, *Rgyal rigs* and *Lo rgyus*, Michael Aris translated *las sgo* as duar land. In fact, the conflict between King Dewa (*bde ba*) of Khaling and a certain Drugyal over the Indian duars and subjects precipitated the unification of the eastern and central regions of Bhutan by Trongsa Ponlop Chogyal Minjur Tenpa in the mid-17th century.⁵ Let me present events and anecdotes related to the duars contained in *Rgyal rigs* and *Lo rgyus*. Duar (*las sgo*) is recorded as an important possession of the clans established by the descendants of Prince Tsangma in the eastern and central Bhutan. After taking control of the royal castle, Choka Dorji competed with Indian Dorong Raza on their magical skills and won, and thereafter subjugated the Indian duars (*rgya'i las sgo*). On the invitation of officers and subjects of Khaling, Choka Dorji's son Gyamtsho went to Khalingkhar and built a royal castle, and brought under him officers and subjects and the Indian duars.⁶

Gongkar Gyal's grandson was Gyaldung Dar, and Gyaldung Dar's grandson was Prangpo Dar. Taking his patrimony and precious possessions Gongkar Gyal went to Shar Domkha, subjugated the communities, and gained power over the Indian duars. His descendants are the Babu (*bas spu*) of Shar Domkha and Murshing.⁷ At the time when the duar lands were under the Yodung Wangma (*yo gdung wang ma*) clan, the Wangma sub-clans quarreled over the duars. Yodung Wangma sought the protection of Choka Dorji, the king of Chengkhar; unfortunately, the battle destroyed Yodung

⁵ Ngawang 2009b.

⁶ Ngawang 2009a.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 28-29.

Duars

Wangma, and Choka Dorji took control of the duars. This was how Chengkhar came to own the duar in Assam.⁸

The descendants of Thrisong Detsen's son Zhithri Tsenpo went to Lhawog Yulsum (in today's Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh), and from there came to Mizimpa. His descendants lived for six generations. Ser Dung took control of the Bengkhar castle and owned a duar called Nyawo Chung Sermi (*nya'u chung gser mi*).⁹

Wangma Paldar went on a pilgrimage to Lhasa, accompanied by three yogis who had come from Lhasa and Samye and a couple of servants. They returned via Lorog, and on arriving at Shar Thempang, the village headman A-Gyal heard the yogis calling Wangma Paldar by the title Lhatsun (*lha btsun*). When questioned, the yogis explained that Wangma Paldar was a descendant of Thrisong Detsen. A-Gyal believed the account and asked him to be the village chief. The officers and the subjects honored him and later gained control over the Indian duars. He was given the name of Babu (*bas spu*). Wangma Gabde Tsan abandoned Wengkhar castle and went to live in the district of Manchod at the lower end of Khaling. The local people, after hearing about the great story of his clan, paid respect. The Indians honored him, and he gained control over the duars and became wealthy.¹⁰

King Wangma offered Molonga duar to the reincarnation of Kunkhyen Pema Karpo as a special donation from amongst his Indian duars.¹¹ Following are names and boundaries of the duars (Indian lands) ruled by the Yodrung Wangma clan: At the top of the Boka-li district is Goma-ri. Kipara and Kisha-zuli to the east. Khir-zan, Halda-bari, Beta-na and Zalu-bari are the western duars. Ling-zan, Molong-ga, Bar-song, Gamri-kata, Dokor-par, Khang-zuli,

⁸ Ngawang 200b: 70-71.

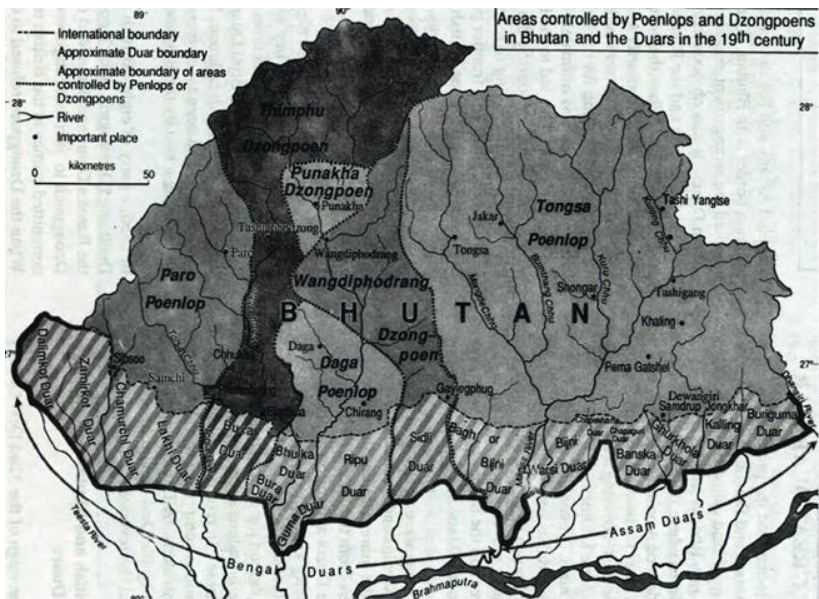
⁹ Ibid.: 68-69.

¹⁰ Ngawang 2009a: 42-42.

¹¹ Ibid.: 76-77.

Wagzam-bari, Nogor, Shinging-bari, and Sham-nyi-ya are in the central region between Diga and Dobli. Phan-tsho, Shab-kha and Pula above Khokhora-dobli. Furthermore, all the land below Newle in the east; hitherward from Bardsa; hitherward from Gagari-zan; westward from Gagari-zan; eastwards the Zoya River; westwards from the Brongon River; westwards from Dakhu-ba; eastwards from Dho-kha-shing; eastwards from Bhula-zuli; upwards from the Nye-ri Stream; eastwards from Shu-ka-la; eastwards from Gho-na-bar to Dong-gey; eastwards from Bhuli-dobli; eastwards from Shubapur and the Bos-prok River.¹²

There were 18 duars, 11 in Bengal and seven in Assam, which today form a part of the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam.



¹² *Ibid.*: 74-75.

Duars

Figure 11: Map of Bhutan showing the duars. Royal Education Council 2018: 82.

Bengal Duars

The available sources point out that the Bengal duars were acquired from the Muslim rulers after Bhutan was unified as a state in the mid-17th century long before the British took over Bengal. According to the Indian sources, the duars were ceded to Bhutan as buffer zones and to end never-ending Bhutanese raids and incursions on the duar populations made from mountain bases. Bhutan and the Koch kings contested the duars because of their military and economic importance.¹³

Eleven Bengal duars were located between the Testa River in the west to the Sunkosh River in the east as enumerated below:¹⁴

<i>Bengal Duar</i>	<i>Alternative name</i>	<i>Officer in-charge</i>
1. Dalimkote		Dalimkote Suba
2. Zamerkote	Mainaguri	Mainaguri Katam
3. Chamurchi	Cheemurchee, Samchee	Chamurchi Suba
4. Bala	Lukhe	Bala Suba
5. Buxa	Pasakha	Buxa Suba
6. Bara	Bura	
7. Bhalka		Bara Suba
8. Guma	Goma	
9. Ripu	Repoo	Ripu Suba
10. Sidle	Cheerung	
11. Bagh	Bijnee	Cherung Suba

(1) Dalimkote was valued for controlling an easy pass to Bhutan and to the Chumbi valley, Tibet, and it forms a part of Darjeeling and Kalimpong today. (2) Zamerkote, (3) Chamurchi (called Samtse

¹³ Kohli 1982.

¹⁴ Based partly on White 1909.

today), (4) Bala, and (5) Buxa duars were acquired in the early 18th century from the Narayan kings of Cooch Behar in return for an annual tribute composed of a fixed number of yak-tails, ponies, blankets, and a fixed quantity of musk and gold-dust.¹⁵

The last Bengal duar located to the west of the Guddadhur River is (5) Buxa Duar [Pasakha in Bhutan]. It was perhaps the most important and valuable of all 18 duars, the most frequented duar due to its central location, opposite to Balarampur and nearest to Rangpur where the Bhutanese traded every year. As will be made clear in Chapter 6, the 11th King of Cooch Behar, Upendra Narayan (r.1714-1763) repelled a Mughal invasion of the kingdom from 1737-1738 through Bhutan's assistance, and some of the Bengal Duars, especially Buxa Duar located north of Cooch Behar, could have been ceded to Bhutan in exchange for Bhutan's military help. Druk Desis during the time were Mipham Wangpo (r.1729-1737) and Kuo Penjor (r.1738-1739). To the east of the Guddadhur River [Amochu, or Torsa in Bhutan] were (6) Bara, (7) Bhulka, and (8) Guma duars. (9) Ripu, (10) Sidle, and (11) Bagh were three remaining Bengal duars.

Assam Duars

There were seven Assam duars under Bhutanese control extending from the Sunkosh River in the west to the Dhunsiri River in the east. Seven Assam duars were categorized and named after two conjoining Ahom districts. Five duars bordered Kamrup district and two duars shared borders with Darang district. Of the two other Assam duars, Kariapar duar was independent while Tawang controlled Charduar, which was the largest and most valuable Assam

¹⁵ Ram 1971: 42.

Duars

duar, for all trade with Lhasa, Tibet's capital, passed through this duar.

<i>Assam duar</i>	<i>Alternative name</i>	<i>Officer in-charge</i>
12. Buri Guma	Booree	Dompa Raja Benkar Suba
13. Kulling	Kailing, Kalleng	Ghumbher Wuzer
14. Ghurkhola	Gurkola	
15. Banska	Banska, Boksa, Buksha	Boora Talokdar & Bugut Wuzer
16. Chapagure		
17. Chapakhamar		
18. Bijni	Warsi	Doba Raja

According to the Indian sources, Assam duars were ceded by Ahom King Jayadvaj Singha (1648-1663) to stop endless Bhutanese raids and incursions.¹⁶ Since Kamrup was then not under Ahom rule, only two Darrang duars (Buri Guma and Kulling) were ceded. When Ahoms took possession of Kamrup in 1667 five Kamrup duars (14) Ghurkhola, (15) Banska, (16) Chapagure, (17) Chapakhamar (18) Bijni were ceded to Bhutan. The Ahom made a written arrangement, acknowledging Bhutan's control of Kamrup duars from 15 June-15 October every year for the payment of a tribute to the Ahom kings. This arrangement continued after the British took over Assam in 1826, and legal papers to that effect were found with Jugoo Ram Majinder in Guwahati and the agreement was honored by the British.¹⁷

¹⁶ Chowdhury 2015: 52.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Administration and Revenue

Contrary to Ashley Eden's observation, there was clearly a system of land tenure, administration, and revenue collection in the duars that was little understood. After the war of 1772, the British started to write about the duars, the land, people, the administration, etc. Every duar was either under the Druk Desi or one of the six regional governors. However, neither Druk Desi nor regional governors had direct control over these duars; they were looked after by sub-governors under them. Under sub-governors were local officers.

In 1838, Captain Pemberton wrote some details of the general administration and revenue collection institutions based on Dr. Buchanan's report on Bhutanese officers responsible for 11 Bengal duars, published in the *Annals of Oriental Literature*.¹⁸ The Suba [Dzongpon] of Dalimkote [Dalingkha] oversaw the western-most duars (1) Dalimkote, (2) Zamerkote and (3) Chamurchi (Samtse). Holding the same rank was the Suba of (4) Bala Duar, followed by the Suba of (5) Buxa Duar. These five duars, all located to the west of the Guddadhur River (Amochu) were under Paro Ponlop. However, the immediate management was under subordinate officers called Katma who were mostly directly appointed by a decree issued by the Druk Desi, and they lived in the plains with the *ryots*.

The Bengal duar, east of the Guddadhur River, was (6) Bara. It was under the Suba of Bara whose authority extended to (7) Bhulka Duar, (8) Guma Duar, and the lesser Guma Duar, a tract of land along the western bank of the Guddadhur River and surrounded by Cooch Behar territory. Next was the Suba of (9) Ripu Duar, whose jurisdiction was confined to Raymana on the western bank of the Sunkosh River. Under Cherung Suba's jurisdiction were vast

¹⁸ Pemberton 1839.

Duars

territories between the Sunkosh River and the western bank of the Manas River, containing (10) Sidle Duar and (11) Bagh Duar. It commanded a pass to Bhutan, considered to be the best of all passes. Cherung Suba resided in the mountains between Wangdi Phodrang Dzong and Cutchabarry located near the plains where subas spent their winter months. These six Bengal duars were under the jurisdiction of the Wangdi Dzongpon. The Rajas of Sidlee paid to Bhutan an annual tribute consisting of five hundred rupees, some oil, dried fish, and coarse cotton cloth. While the amount was nominal, far greater exactions were made at the pleasure of the Suba of Cherrung.¹⁹

In Assam, the post of Suba was retained as the post of duar governors once they came into Bhutan's possession. Bhutan appointed officers from amongst Kacharee, Assamese or Bengalese to administer the duars through an edict of the Druk Desi on the recommendation of the Trongsa Ponlop who had jurisdiction over the Assam duars.

The Koch chiefs of Sidli and Bijne, also referred to as Rajas or Zamindars, controlled territory between Kamrup district in the east and to the Sunkosh River in the west. Bhutan had the right to nominate their successors. In a dispute over the succession in Bijni in 1792 Druk Desi Tashi Namgay (r.1772-1799) intervened successfully and the incumbent became a Raja.

The detailed breakdown of annual tribute paid by Bhutan for the Assam duars consisted of "24 tolas of gold dust, 36 ponies, 24 pieces of musks, 24 cow-tailed [sic], 24 daggers, 24 blankets and 2,400 rupees in cash having an estimated value of 4785 Narayanee rupees".²⁰ Assam appointed functionaries known as Stirawals to receive the tribute from the Bhutanese officers and deposit it to the government. Stirawals exploited this system by substituting original

¹⁹ Ibid.: 30-31.

²⁰ Deb 1976: 48.

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goods paid by Bhutan with inferior goods. These goods were later auctioned in the public and the rule was that the amount received should be Narayani rupees 4785 and four annas. Because of the deceptions, the goods always fell short of the stipulated amount, and consequently increasing the arrears to be paid every year.

Buxa Fort and Buxa Pass

Buxa Duar was famous for its strategic Buxa Fort (Pasakha or Pagsam Dzong),²¹ and a difficult pass, and access it gave to Bhutan. In 1774, Bogle described Buxa Fort as “situated on a hill, with much higher ones above it, glens under it, and a 3-foot wall of loose stones about it, a fine old banian tree; that’s all.”²² Samuel Turner who followed Bogle a decade later noted that Buxadewar [Buxa Duar], also called Pasakha, consists of

ten or twelve houses, invisible till the very moment of approach... it is placed upon a second table of levelled rock, which has little soil upon it, yet is covered with verdure, in consequence of its very sheltered situation, being surrounded on three sides by lofty mountains, and open only to the south, which affords a narrow prospect of Bengal.²³

Turner praised the genius of the people who chose the place for building the fort:

[It] is a place of great natural strength; and, being a frontier station of these mountains, has been rendered still stronger by the aid of art, which has been most ingeniously employed to strike off the summit of the hill, and to level an extensive space, capable of affording accommodation to a body of men, sufficiently numerous for the defence of this difficult pass, against all assault. A range of temporary sheds, thrown back to some distance from

²¹ It is also spelt as *spa mtshams kha rdzong*, which can also mean the border of Paro province under Paro Penlop (see Department of Education 1985: 40.

²² Bogle 1876: 16.

²³ Turner 1800: 40.

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the edge of the eminence, are designed to shelter a garrison that may be stationed to defend it. A deep ravine divides this from the opposite hill, which is steep, and has a narrow road formed on its side, not capable of admitting the passage of two persons abreast. It winds in a semi-circular form, round the jutting eminence immediately opposed to it, which stands high above, and within reach of their common arms, the bow and arrow, for a great distance; till the road is at length connected with, and leads to, Buxadewar, by a very steep ascent. Such is the nature of this pass, which, however it may have been strengthened and improved by art, does real honour to the judgment of those who originally selected it as a post of defence.²⁴



Figure 12: Buxa Duar by Samuel Davis, 1783. Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Turner even left an etymological explanation of ‘Buxadewar’ [Buxa Duar], and the difficulty of crossing the pass above the Fort.

²⁴ Turner 1800: 39-40.

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It was a custom for the Bhutanese mule merchants bringing the caravan to Rangpur to cut off the tails of their Tangun horses (mules) almost close to the rump while passing the pass. This practice depreciated the value of animals. The Britishers were disgusted with the animal cruelty and asked to stop the practice in return for reward. The following year the animals arrived unutilated and fetch good price, and since then no animals had to lose their tails while passing the pass, and thus it was named Buxa-dewar, *the bounteous pass*. It was commanded by Buxa Soobah; Passa Geatong [Pagsam Gya Drung].²⁵

a perpendicular rock, the road being only about two feet broad, formed entirely of large loose stones, and projecting over a deep precipice below, which is twice the height of the tallest trees; above, large masses of impending rock, frown horribly on the passenger, and threaten every moment to overwhelm him. It is an awful situation: and were the rock stript [striped] of the trees and vegetables with which it is covered, the boldest adventurer would be filled with terror and dismay. My head almost turned around. In this place was lost the fine Arabian horse sent by the Governor General as a present for the Daeb Raja [Druk Desi]. He started at the overhanging rock; and falling from the road, was dashed to pieces at the bottom of the precipice.²⁶

A history of Buxa Duar and Buxa Fort will be enough to understand their significance. The builder of the first Buxa Fort is not known. Some sources attribute it to the Tibetan forces that once occupied the regions, or to Sangaldwip, the first Koch king of Kamatapur, in the seventh century. The Koch kings took possession of the fort only for it to be retaken by Bhutan in the second half of the 17th century. Bhutan built a fort out of wood, bamboo, mud (dolomite wash) and stones, and used it for protecting the trade route to Tibet via Bhutan. During the British occupation of the fort in 1865 a copper statue of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (Figure 13) was seized and donated

²⁵ Turner 1800: 40-41.

²⁶ Ibid.: 45-46.

Duars

to the Asiatic Society Museum, Kolkatta. Kshiti Goswami built the present Swarak stambha temple on the original site of Bhutanese fort and erased any historical evidence of the Bhutanese fort and temple.

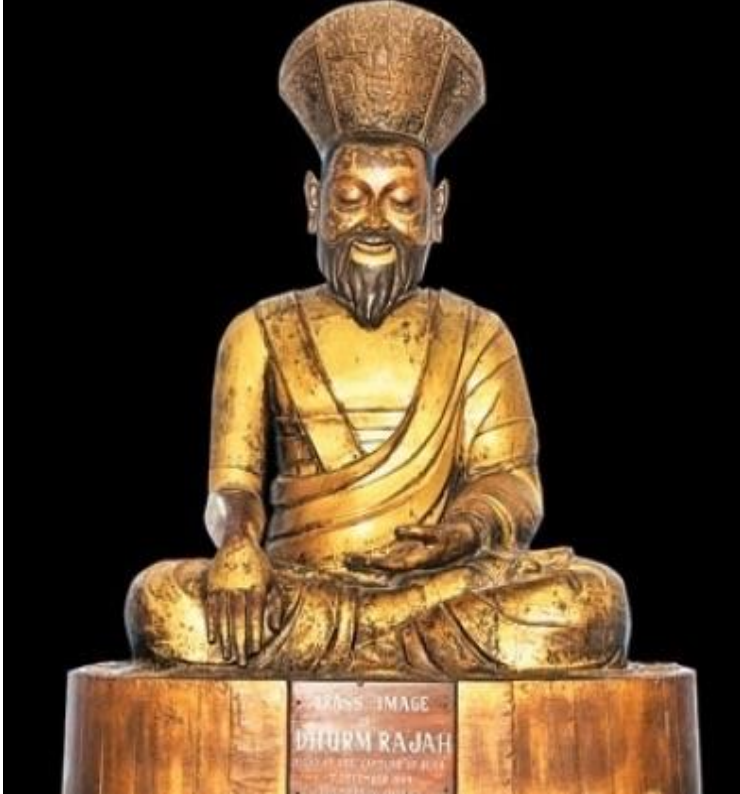


Figure 13: Statue of Zhabdrung looted from Pagsamkha Dzong. Asiatic Society, Kolkatta, India.

After occupying Buxa Fort and Buxa Duar in 1865, the British rebuilt the fort, and used it initially as a barrack for the Bengal native infantry and later as a high security prison and detention center in the 1930s. It became notorious as an inaccessible prison only less

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renown than the cellular jail of Andaman. The fort held several Indian independent freedom fighters, including Netaji Subash Chandra Bose. The fort, albeit almost a ruin now, is frequented by visitors for scenic beauty and to honor the freedom fighters.²⁷

The Indian government also settled Tibetan refugees here, who had escaped after the Chinese takeover of Tibet and subsequent failed uprising in 1959. Around 1500 monks and nuns made Buxa Duar their new homes. The monks and nuns did not do well due to harsh climate, and the refugees were re-settled in 1971 at Bylakupee and Mundgod, both in the state of Karnataka.

Chitakota

Chitakota was an important Bhutanese stockade. It was a frontier Bhutanese post in the plains. Located near the present Raja Bhatkhawa, it was destroyed during the first war with the British in 1771. It was the farthest accessible place from Cooch Behar towards Bhutan, and the road from Chitakota led to Buxa Duar. A densely forested territory between Chitakota and Bhutan proper came into Bhutanese possession in 1711 when Cooch Behar ceded the territory for five Tungun ponies each year. It became the focus of the 1772 war along with Pasakha Dzong [Buxa Fort] and Daling Dzong [Dalimkote Fort]. When Bogle halted there for the night on his way to Bhutan in 1774, he was put up in one of the houses, and he left a description of the stockade.

²⁷ After 1865, the British appointed a Bhutan Agent, called Pasa Kutshab in Bhutan. Pema Dorji was Pasa Kutshab in 1910. After his resignation in 1918, the post was vacant until Sonam Tshering was appointed by the Government of India. He was followed in 1924 by Ugyen Tshering who later served as a tutor to the Second King, Jigme Wangchuck (b.1905-d.1952). See Tshering 2015).

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[It was] thatched, the floor of lath of bamboo, and raised four feet from the ground; the walls of reeds, tied together with slips of bamboo; and the stair a stump of a tree, with notches cut in it. It had much the look of a birdcage, and the space below being turned into a hogstye contributed little to its pleasantness. There was not a bit of iron or rope about it. The houses for the three next stages were in the same style.²⁸

Nine years later in 1783, Samuel Turner passed through Chitakota and wrote that, as a fortification, Chitakota of 1774 and 1783 were same: “a large oblong square, encompassed by a high bank, and thick stockade”.²⁹

²⁸ Bogle 1876: 15

²⁹ Turner 1800: 19.

Chapter 5

Neighbors

Bhutan's interaction with its northern neighbors, namely Tibet and Ladakh, might have been older but its interaction with its southern neighbors was and is more significant for political, economic, and a host of other reasons. Bengal, Assam, Cooch Behar, and the Limbuwan kingdoms became Bhutan's southern neighbors after acquiring the duars.

Unlike Bhutan which was a single continuous unified polity after the mid-17th century, Bengal saw several empires and dynasties, from the Gupta (240-550 BC) to the British (1756-1947). The Bengal Sultanate, a province of the Mughal empire, was ruled by a total of seven dynasties from 1342-1746. The Bengal sultanate fell to the Mughals in 1576 and then to the East India Company after 1757, with Calcutta becoming the capital of British India in 1772. Assam saw Kamarupa kingdom (350–1140), Ahom kingdom (1228–1826), and the British empire (1826-1947). Sikkim, after its founding in the 17th century under the Chogyal dynasty, was quite stable unlike the Limbuwan kingdoms which were under a constant state of change.

Morang

The Kingdom of Morang with its capital in Vijaypur was Bhutan's dependency with an obligation to pay an annual tribute. It became Bhutan's dependency during the reigns of the Sen dynasty (1609-1669). The king of the Sen dynasty Kama Datta Sen failed to pay the tribute for a year, and this resulted in Zhidar's invasion of Vijaypur

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in 1770 to claim the tribute and punish the king. The invasion was not without consequence for Bhutan's domestic politics and Zhidar's own downfall.

But first, a brief historical background on the ten Limbu kingdoms which no longer exist. The ten kings of Limbu declared the ten kingdoms between east of the Arun River and west of the Kanchenjunga Mountain and the Testa River as Limbuwan. It was called Limbuwan (Land of Limbu) kingdoms. Ten kingdoms were Tambar, Mewa, Athraya, Yangwarok, Panthar, Phedap, Ilam, Bodhey, Thala, and Chethar Limbus.

Later, Mawrong Hang Mung, the king of the plain area, became powerful and took over the terai lands of Panthar, Ilam, Bodhey and Chethar kingdoms. He named his kingdom Morang (Mawrong) after his name. He unified all Limbuwan kingdoms in the seventh century and became their overlord. The unified Limbuwan kingdom again split into ten kingdoms in the ninth century. In 849 Morang was incorporated into the greater Limbuwan kingdom by king Uba Hang whose dynastic rule ended when king Sangla Ing made Morang independent in 1584. The Ing dynasty was followed by the Sen dynasty and then the Khebang dynasty. In 1609 Kirant King Lo Hang Sen of the Sen dynasty captured Morang and ruled it for seven generations.

The non-payment of the tribute, as the following events will show, was not deliberate but partly a result of a power struggle in the Vijaypur court. The Bengal famine of 1770 must also have hit the kingdom. King Subha Sen had 18 illegitimate sons from his mistresses but none from his queen. When the king died in 1750 his eldest son Kama Datta Sen assumed power. Being an illegitimate son, the prime minister Bichitra Chandra Rai who was responsible for the administration enthroned Jagat Sen of Mokwanpur Kingdom. When Bichitra Chandra Rai died, he was succeeded by his son Buddhi Karna Rai. Kama Datta Sen mobilized soldiers from lower

Morang, occupied Vijaypur and became the king of Morang (r.1761-1769). He then expelled the prime minister (Bichitra Chandra Rai) for plotting to kill him. He invited the rulers of Bhutan, Sikkim and Gorkha for his coronation. Bhutan attended the ceremony unlike Gorkha and Sikkim. The exiled prime minister had advised the Sikkimese king Phuntsho Namgyal (r.1733-1780) who was then under a regency from attending the ceremony. Kama Datta Sen sent an elephant, a rhinoceros and gold and silver to the ruler of Bhutan in gratitude, and encouraged Bhutan to invade Sikkim with the promise of military help. In 1769, the exiled prime minister invited the king to lower Morang for a meeting to settle old disputes in presence of representatives from Bhutan and Sikkim. The king was killed as he entered the house for a meeting.¹ Buddhi Karna Rai declared himself the king. Chaos and disorder descended on the Limbuwan kingdoms.

After hearing about the king's assassination and Buddhi Karna Rai's ascension to the throne, the Gorkha King Prithvi Narayan Shah sent Drugyal, a Bhutanese lama in the Gorkha court, to explain to Desi Zhidar that the self-declared king of Morang was a servant, and that servants should not become kings. Because Bhutan was obligated to protect Morang as its dependency, Prithvi Narayan Shah promised to give whatever Desi Zhidar wanted in return for allowing him to take over Morang and for the loss of tribute.² The dead king (Kama Datta Sen) was an affinal relative of Prithvi Narayan Shah (r.1769-75). Buddhi Karna Rai went to Tibet to seek help. During his absence, the Gorkha king sent his army to Vijaypur. A peaceful surrender was achieved on the condition that the Limbuwan kingdoms would be given self-government. After ruling Morang for

¹ Chemjong 1966: 173-174.

² Tshewang 1994.

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four years, Buddhi Karna Rai's prime minister ceded the kingdom to the Gorkha through the Gorkha-Limbuwan treaty of 1774.³

After 1774, the Limbus began to fight alongside the Gorkhas. However, when king Pratap Singh Shah invaded Sikkim in 1775 some Limbus defected and fought on the Sikkimese side. After the end of the war in 1776, the Gorkha started to prosecute the Limbus who fought for Sikkim. The Limbus, numbering 32000, gathered at Ambe Pojoma and migrated in three groups to Sikkim, Assam, and Bhutan.⁴

The invasion of Vijaypur in 1770 had a larger implication on Bhutan's relation with Cooch Behar. As Bhutan's dependency, Cooch Behar was obligated to help Bhutan during military campaigns, and Dhairjendra Narayan sent Dewan Dev Ram to join the Bhutanese forces in the invasion of Vijaypur. After the invasion, Dewan Dev Ram returned home with significant war loot, which provoked an envious king Pran Narayan to kill him. Zhidar avenged the murder of his ally in the Cooch Behar court by taking the king and his new Dewan as prisoners to Bhutan. On hearing this news, the Panchen Lama asked Zhidar to free the prisoners; Zhidar replied to state that Cooch Behar king was planning to invade Tibet with Mughal help.⁵

Sikkim

In 1770, a huge Bhutanese force invaded Sikkim, Bhutan's immediate western neighbor, and occupied territories east of the Testa River. Zhidar was not as successful in Sikkim as in Vijaypur.

³ Chemjong 1966: 173-174.

⁴ The first group went to Sikkim and settled in Rung, Rhino and Magnesia villages, the second group migrated to Bhutan and settled in Kuching, Tendu and Jumsa villages, and the third group migrated to Assam and settled in Beni, Kalchini and other Meche and Koch villages.

⁵ Lamb 2002: 240.

While the main body of troops was taking possession of those territories, the advance troops arrived at Mangbrue and Barphong; one sub-division penetrated Ralang and Samdong. However, the Sikkimese force surrounded and cut them off from the main body. They laid traps of sharp bamboo stakes and ropes of twisted reeds called Payum bamboos at Tama Bya, the base of the Maphila hill. The Bhutanese were trapped and killed while trying to save themselves. The survivors escaped and joined the main body. The negotiation took place at Pob Chhyu near the Rhenock hill spur in 1772 and a settlement was signed.⁶

The Lepchas are the original inhabitants of a part of eastern Himalayas called Mayel Lyang, and considered the indigenous people of modern Sikkim. Sikkim's border once extended from the foot of the mighty Kanchenjunga to the present-day Bhutanese border. According to *History of Sikkim* by Thutop Namgyal and Yashey Dolma, the boundaries were Bibdala in the north, Singa, Dag-yas, Walnut, Yangmang Khangchen, Yarlung and Timar Chorten in the west, down along the Arun and Dud Kosi rivers, down to the Mahanandi, Naxalbari, Titalia in the south. Tagong La on the east and Tang La on the north.⁷ Sikkim then roughly consisted of present-day Sikkim, plus much of Darjeeling district and parts of Duars and the Siliguri area. Several forts (Damsang, Daling, Fyung, Savong Dang, Mungzing, Laiti, Songsaw, Tusaychyok and many smaller ones) were built within and around Mayel Lyang to protect the land from foreign attacks: Bhutanese from the east; Nepalese from west; Tibetans from the north and the British from the south. However, the Sikkimese king only had loose controls over his vast territory, leaving it opened to attack from Nepal and Bhutan.⁸

⁶ Chemjong 1966: 212.

⁷ In Roy 2011.

⁸ Mullard 2011: 3.

Neighbors



Figure 14: Wall painting of Phande Wangmo. Credit: Anna Balikci Denjongpa.

Sikkim's interaction with Bhutan began during the reign of the second Chogyal Tensung Namgyal (r.1670-1700) who married Nambi Wangmo from Bhutan. His two junior queens were a Tibetan (Lhacham Padma Buthri) and a Limbu. The king had intended his marriages to the queens from two bigger neighbors as a diplomatic masterstroke; unfortunately, it resulted in the war of succession (c.1699–1708) between groups allied to the heir Chador Namgyal and the princess Phande Wangmo who was supported by the Bhutanese faction. Despite being the older queen, Nambi Wangmo's daughter was overlooked in favour of Chador Namgyal (r.1700-1716), born to a Tibetan queen. Nambi Wangmo challenged the succession and claimed Phande Wangmo's right to the throne as the oldest child, and sought Bhutan's help to support the claim.

The fifth Desi Gedun Chopel (r.1696-1701) invaded Sikkim in 1700 under the military command of Tapa Ngawang Thinley and Dron Phenlay in support of Phande Wangmo.⁹ Chador Namgyal, then only 10 years old, fled to Tibet after handing over the power to the chief minister Yungthing Yeshe. In the invasion, Bhutan occupied the capital Rabdantse and took the chief minister's son as a prisoner to Bhutan. Phande Wangmo came to be known as a usurper of the Sikkimese throne although she was only a figurehead for the Bhutanese faction in the Sikkimese court.¹⁰ Tibet persuaded Bhutan to withdraw its troops from Sikkim. In a letter written to Desi Bon Penjor (r.1704-1707), the Dalai Lama compared Tibet to a father, Bhutan to a mother and Sikkim to a child, and urged for the three to live as one family and one nation. The Druk Desi withdrew the Bhutanese forces from Rabdantse in 1706 after six years of occupation during which the Bhutanese settled in the south-eastern

⁹ Mullard 2011: 165.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 91.

Neighbors

areas of Sikkim contiguous with Bhutan and continued to live even after Bhutanese forces had left Sikkim.¹¹ Chador Namgyal tried to drive away the Bhutanese settlers but was unsuccessful due to the support received from Daling and Damsang dzongs. Today, there are several clans in Sikkim that claim or can trace their ancestry to Haa and Paro.¹² Nambi Wangmo did not give up the throne even after the Bhutanese withdrawal. She poisoned the king in 1716 with the assistance of a Tibetan physician, and she was strangled to death for the regicide.

Chador Namgyal's son Gyurme Namgyal (r.1716-1733) succeeded to the throne. During his reign, Bhutan had border disputes with Sikkim and made numerous border incursions, at times carried off local people as slaves.¹³ Rabdentse was fortified to fend off Bhutanese raids. Drukpa Kagyu spread to the kingdom during his reign. Between 1717-1733, the kingdom faced many raids by the Gorkhas in the west and Bhutanese in the east, culminating with the destruction of the capital Rabdentse by the Gorkhas.

Gyurme Namgyal died in 1733, heirless. However, the late king was believed to have fathered a son (Namgyal Phuntsho) to a Lepcha nun, a claim rejected by the Sikkimese faction. In the internal turmoil between 1734-1741 a Sikkimese Phyagzod Tandin took temporary control of the government with support of Tibeto-Sikkimese ministers who did not recognize Namgyal Phuntsho. They instead proposed that the throne should pass to a leading Tibeto-Sikkimese aristocratic family. Meanwhile, Garwang and the Lepcha faction recognized Namgyal Phuntsho's legitimacy. After taking Namgyal Phuntsho to Bhutan for safety, Garwang rebelled against Tandin's rule and deposed him seven years later (c.1741) through Bhutan's

¹¹ Basnet 1974: 18-19.

¹² Mullard 2011: 37.

¹³ Basnet 1974.

support. Tandin fled to Tibet to lobby for Tibet's assistance in restoring his rule. Similarly, Garwang lobbied the Tibetans to send a regent to administer Sikkim during the minority of Namgyal Phuntsho. Garwang again won and secured a Tibetan regent in Sikkim in 1740.¹⁴

Bhutanese military support to Garwang, albeit small, earned Bhutan the right to keep a small military garrison in Gangtok and collect taxes from some 143 households. Sikkimese refugees of the war were also allowed to settle in Bhutan by the Paro Ponlop.¹⁵ In the records of a gift-giving ceremony sponsored by Desi Sherab Wangchuk to celebrate the enthronement of Thugtrul Jigme Drakpa I (1725-1761) in 1747, there were 143 tax units in Gangtok under Dzungpon Agyal, Gangtok zhalngo Gyalto and Rabten, and four other zhalngo.¹⁶

Kalimpong

During the 1700 invasion of Sikkim, Bhutan occupied territories east of Testa River, and during its six years of occupation Bhutanese settled in those occupied territories, which includes the present day Kalimpong area. Bhutan held on to Kalimpong until the Duar War of 1864 when it was ceded to British India. After independence, it became a part of the Indian state of West Bengal in 1947. When Tibet became a part of China, hundreds of Tibetans, mostly monks, settled there, and it assumed a multi-cultural identity of the Lepchas, Limbus, Bhutanese, Nepalese, Indians, and Tibetans. When it was

¹⁴ Mullard 2011: 174-75.

¹⁵ Phuntsho 2013: 330.

¹⁶ Gangtok Dzungpon Agyal received rgyab bkab phyag mdud and 10 matam; Gangtok zhalngo Gyalto and Rabten received phyag mdud rgyab bkab ceremonial shawl or kabney, and 5 matam; four other zhalngo each received phyag mdud and 2 matam; 143 tax units each received one gsum bar matam. See Ardussi & Ura 2000: 73.

Neighbors

under Sikkim, it was called “Dalimkot”; after the occupation Bhutanese named it “Kalimpong”. Today, it is a city and a municipality of West Bengal.

The Bhutanese administered territories east of the Testa River, including Kalimpong and Rhenock from the two forts, Daling Dzong (*brda' gling rdzong*) and Damsang (*'dam tshang*) Dzong. The former was the seat of Dzungpon responsible for collecting revenue from the taxpayers while Damsang was much smaller and under Neeboo. Ashley Eden visited Daling Dzong on his way to Bhutan in 1864 and left a description of the dzong.

The Fort ... consists of a large wall built of mud and stones; it has one large gateway to the North-East, in which the Jungpen [Dzungpon] resides; inside the wall are a number of houses and a garden; one house is, assigned to the Ryots of the Dooars when they come up with their tribute, another is a monastery; there was a barrack, stables, store-houses, and a residence for the women.... The garrison is nominally 200 men, but in point of fact they could not muster more than seventy fighting men, of whom about thirty might be armed with old matchlocks.¹⁷

Damsang Dzong was built with local materials on the top of a hill for watching enemies approaching from all sides. It had separate rooms and bath rooms for the king and queen, and for guards and soldiers.¹⁸

In 1747, the territories under Daling Dzong were administered by five Daling zhalngo and 21 Daling chipon (*spyi dpon*); while those under Damsang had four lords of Damsang (*'dam tshang rgyal po*), 18 zhalngo (*zhal ngo*) and gadpo (*rgad po*). There were 425 tax units who paid taxes to Bhutan. In the 1747 gift-giving records, 425 tax units in Daling Dzong (*brda' gling rdzong*) each received one *matam*.¹⁹

¹⁷ Eden 1865: 65-66.

¹⁸ Lepcha 2017: 32.

¹⁹ Ardussi & Ura 2000: 73.

Achyok

According to the British sources, both Daling and Damsang dzongs were built by Bhutan, while Lepcha sources claim they were built by Gaeboo Achyok (*rgyal po a mchog*), a Lepcha culture hero.

During his rule in Kalimpong Pano Gaeboo Achyok built many forts as outposts to keep an eye on his enemies. One of the most popular one is Damsang Gree, which is situated above Pedong in Kalimpong. Damsang was named after Pano Gaeboo Achyok's father Damsang Pano. Besides Damsang Gree, Lepchas claim that they have constructed a good number of forts all over the Eastern Himalayan region forts in the eastern region were constructed to prevent Bhutanese attack; in the west to counter attacks from Nepal; in the north to protect the land from Tibetan attack.²⁰

A person by the name of Monpa Achyok (*mon pa a mchog*) first appeared during the Bhutanese-Tibetan war of 1668.²¹ Achyok had risen to local prominence around 1660-1663 through his depredations in territories bordering Sikkim, between the lower Chumbi valley and Darjeeling, which were then not under the control of any larger state, and the territories were populated by Indic tribesmen, Lepchas, Bhutanese, and Tibetan settlers. Achyok is known as the last Lepcha chief who fought Bhutan, and asserted the right of the Lepchas over their ancestral lands in the region of modern Kalimpong and the hill country near south-western Bhutan. Unfortunately, Achyok's incursions came into a direct conflict with third Druk Desi Minjur Tenpa (r. 1667-1680) who pursued expansionist foreign policies in all territorial directions. Achyok's incursions provoked the local Bhutanese populations in the area, who received support from Daling Dzong. In the ensuing conflict,

²⁰ Tamsang cited in Lepcha 2017: 321.

²¹ Ardussi 2014.

Neighbors

Achyok went to Lhasa in 1668 to seek Tibet's support, and two months later, the Mongol forces of the fifth Dalai Lama attacked Bhutan in support of Achyok and a Gelugpa Lama in Merak (*me rag*) in eastern Bhutan.

The war did not go as planned for Tibet, and a peace treaty was negotiated to last through 1675. When it was learned that Bhutan was planning to attack Achyok, Tibet launched a pre-emptive attack. The Bhutanese were victorious once again. By the third month of 1676 Bhutan's south-western border fortress of Daling was retaken from the Lepcha. It was in his attempt to retake Daling that Achyok lost his life. The rebellious Monpa villages in the area between Bhutan and Damsang were brought back under Bhutanese administration. Achyok became a cultural hero for standing up to the stronger armies of Bhutan and assaulting and seizing Daling Dzong for a time.

Gorkha

Bhutan had religious and cultural relations with Malla kings of the Kathmandu valley and the kings of Gorkha.²² The practice of Tantric Buddhism in Bhutan and the existence of Swayambhu (*phags pa shing kun*) in the Kathmandu valley were two common Buddhist elements that brought Bhutan and Nepal together and started a relationship that lasted for centuries.

The reign of Prithvi Narayan Shah (r.1769-75), the Gorkha king who unified Nepal, coincided with that of Zhidar (r.1768-1773). Prithvi Narayan Shah had always wanted a strong Bhutan to engage the British in the eastern Himalayas and leave them little time and resources to trouble his kingdom; so, he supported Zhidar. Later, Zhidar's domestic rivals accused him for befriending the Gorkha King.

²² Dhakal 2003: 1-6.

The centuries old Gorkha-Bhutan relation was strengthened during the reign of King Prithivi Narayan Shah. There was a deal to give authority of all Buddhist monasteries within Nepalese territory to Bhutan if Bhutan helped him in his unification campaign. After the unification was completed, six monasteries and their land were given as *birta* (*land grant*), and Bhutan retained authority over these monasteries, and Prithivi Narayan Shah's ancestors and the kings of the Kathmandu valley also provided land.²³

Let me provide a brief history of the Gorkha dynasty. It was the third Mughal emperor Akbar-i-Azam (r.1556-1605) who conferred the title of "Shah" on Yaso Brahma, the Raja of Lambjang. Drabya Shah, his son succeeded him. He conquered the principalities of Liglig, Siranchok, and Azirgarh, and after subjugating Gorkha and expelling the ruling dynasty of Khandka, he was crowned as Raja at the Gorkha Fort in September 1559. Drabya Shah (r.1559-1570) was the founder and the first king of the Gorkha kingdom. Drabya Shah was succeeded by his son Purendra Shah (r.1570-1605), who in turn was succeeded by his son Chatra Shah (r.1605-1606) as the third Gorkha King. He was deposed after seven months by his younger brother Rama Shah (r.1606-1633). From the first king to the third it was a father-son succession.

In 1633, Rama Shah abdicated in favor of his son Damber Shah, the fifth Gorkha King. Damber Shah (r.1633-1645) was succeeded by his eldest son Krishna Shah (r.1645-1661). Rudra Shah (r.1661-1673) was followed by his son Prithvipathi Shah (r.1773-1716) as the seventh Gorkha King. Nara Bhupal Shah (r.1716-1743) who succeeded his grandfather Rudra Shah, in 1716, "expanded his territories considerably, taking them up to the borders of the principalities of Kantipur, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpattan".²⁴ Prithvi Narayan Bahadur, second and eldest surviving son of Prithvipathi

²³ Ibid.: 4.

²⁴ Buyers 2015.

Neighbors

Shah, became the last Gorkha King and the first king of the unified kingdom of Nepal.

The Court lama

Bhutan had a patron-client relation with successive Gorkha kings. Ever since Damcho Pekar (b.1628-d.1707) became the first court lama, the appointments continued right up to the middle of the 19th century. The patron-client relation between the Gorkha kings and the Dharma Raja (the throne holder) began during the reign of Rama Shah (r.1606-1633) who became the fourth Gorkha king by ousting his older brother. Unfortunately, he had no heir; so, his brothers began to fight with one another over the succession.²⁵ The queen had a dream in which it was revealed that a son would be born to her if only a lama was invited from the court of the Bhutanese Dharma Raja (Throne holder) to subdue evil spirits afflicting the court, and that the son's descendants would also be powerful. The king took the dream seriously and sent an envoy to Bhutan. This resulted in Bhutan appointing Damcho Pekar as the first lama to the Gorkha court. Damcho Pekar's subjugation rites not only stopped the sibling infighting but his blessing of the royal couple caused the queen to deliver three sons. However, the Gorkha king could not be Rama Shah who was the king from 1606-1633, while Damcho Pekar lived from 1628-1707, and served as the fourth Je Khenpo from 1697-1707. Damcho Pekar also travelled to the Kathmandu valley on the invitation of the King of Yambu, who could possibly be Pratap Malla (r. 1641–1674), the ninth Malla ruler of Kantipur.²⁶ According to

²⁵ Ram Shah had no children from his first marriage Rani Mahimavati, daughter of Raja of Parbat, but have three sons from his second marriage Rani Sashirekha Devi of Musikot.

²⁶ Rigzin 2011.

John Ardussi,²⁷ the first Bhutan mission to Nepal took place in 1672. Once Sikkim started to ally with Tibet, third Desi Minjur Tenpa sent a mission to Nepal led by Damcho Pekar in 1672 to foster a closer diplomatic relation with Nepal. After an audience with the king of Yambu, the old name of Kantipur which is modern Kathmandu, the envoy was granted permission to build several Bhutanese (*'brug pa*) monasteries in the valley. Damcho Pekar laid a plan to establish a permanent Bhutanese mission and consequently reconstructed Layang Gonpa (*bla byang dgon pa*) and founded another monastery at Namkhaling (*nam mkha' gling*). Thinley Gyamtsho was summoned from Bhutan to head the monastery. Tibet, after coming to know about these developments, countered by bribing the Nepalese ministers with gold and other valuables. In the process of expelling the Bhutanese mission the king was killed. Damcho Pekar and his followers barely managed to escape the army sent by the ministers and fled westwards towards Jumla, where Tibet (*dge lug pa*) influence was well entrenched. They returned secretly to Kathmandu only to be frustrated by the Hindu ministers and increasing Tibetan pressure. Damcho Pekar finally abandoned the Nepalese holdings and returned home in 1675.²⁸

The second court lama was Lama Yangpon, followed by Bumthangpa Choje who served three kings: Rudra Shah (r.1661–1673), Prithvipati Shah (r.1773–1716) and Nara Bhupal Shah (r.1716–1743). Nara Bhupal Shah was initially childless, but through the power of Bumthangpa Choje's ritual, the queen gave birth to Prithvi Narayan Shah (r.1723–1775), the tenth Gorkha king. During Prithvi Narayan Shah's reign the court lama was Chodra Koncho. The king had a pleasant dream, which was interpreted by his court

²⁷ Ardussi 1977: 318-320.

²⁸ Ibid.

Neighbors

lama as a sign that he would conquer and control the whole country. Several children were born to him. The king and the lama had excellent relations that the king attributed whatever good that happened in the kingdom to the lama's blessing. The king shared his plan to unify the country and sought the lama's blessings, and promised to hand over monasteries and monks to the lama's care.

Ngawang Drugyal was on his way to the Gorkha court to become the fourth lama when he came across Tibetan soldiers who were about to massacre Gorkha soldiers between Kyidrong and Ngari. He explained that Bhutanese and Gorkha were friends and threatened to destroy them completely if they did not spare the Gorkha armies. Heeding the warning, all Gorkha armies were freed, and in gratitude Nara Bhupal Shah gave the Nagathali Gonpa and its religious administration and six villages along with two fields, with the property ownership carved on bronze plates (*tamrapatra*) in 1741.

After Zhidar's invasion of Vijaypur in 1770, the exiled prime minister assassinated the king and enthroned himself as the new king. Prithvi Narayan Shah sent his court lama Thinley Drugyal to Zhidar to withdraw his protection as Bhutan's dependency so that all of the Limbuwan kingdoms could be unified, and promised to give Swayambhu Stupa (*phag pa shing kun*) and *bhirshing* farms in return. In gratitude for its non-interference and as compensation for the loss of tribute from Morang, Bhutan was given five rice fields (*kheta*) at Swayambhu in Kathmandu, the village of Hago, and the farms of Bhirshing.²⁹ These lands later developed into Bhutanese enclaves in Nepal.

During the reign of Pratap Singh Shah (r.1775-1777), the court lamas were Thinley Drugye and Tsepa Lhundup. When the king died, his son Rana Bahadur Shah (r. 1777-1799), only two years old, was crowned. The queen Rajendra Lakshmi Devi asked Thinley

²⁹ Tshewang 1994.

Drugyal to perform tantric rituals for the crown prince's long life and she reciprocated the service by offering cultivable fields in Tsherae and Shindhura.³⁰ The king of Sikkim revolted against Bhutan during Tenzin Drugyal's tenure and sought Tibet's help. Tibet dissuaded Bhutan [Desi Minjur Tenpa] from invading Sikkim since the kingdom was already under Bhutan. However, Rana Bahadur Shah's uncle Khen Bahadur called for Bhutan and Nepal to act as one. Nepal invaded Sikkim and sought Bhutan's cooperation with the pledge to provide Thongmon and Kalari. After the invasion, three years later the two areas were ceded to Bhutan. Later, Nepal took back Thongmon, and gave Lamagang, Dradragang, and Thangzhing as substitute.³¹ The child king died, and the lama performed propitiation rites to avoid further obstacles. The queen became the regent, only to be deposed and imprisoned in 1778; restored in 1779 to serve as a regent until her death.

The sixth Panchen Lama Palden Yeshe travelled to Beijing with a huge retinue in 1780 on the invitation of the emperor Qianlong. There he was honored and showered with riches. However, he contracted smallpox and died in Beijing in November 1780. His stepbrother, the 10th Shamarpa Mipam Chodrup Gyamtsho had expected to inherit some of the riches obtained in Beijing, but when this was denied, he conspired with Nepal. Rana Bahadur Shah informed Bhutan through his court lama Tshampa about the plan to invade Tibet, and asked Bhutan to refrain from supporting Tibet.³² Nepal invaded Tibet in 1788 and plundered Shigatse, against the Druk Desi's advice. Tibet was made to sign the Treaty of Kyidrong 1789 that obligated the country to pay an annual tribute to Nepal. After the war, Bhutan was given estates outside the Kathmandu

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Neighbors

valley in lower Mustang, Tamang country, and Yolmo, the land of Sherpas.

Below is the list of successive Bhutanese court lamas³³ who served successive Gorkha kings and later the kings of Nepal.

	<i>Gorkha/Nepal King</i>	<i>Reign</i>	<i>Court lama (s)</i>
i	Drabya Shah	1559-1570	
ii	Purendra Shah	1570-1605	
iii	Chatra Shah	1605-1606	
iv	Rama Shah	1609-1633	
v	Damber Shah	1633-1645	1. Damcho Pekar
vi	Krishna Shah	1645-1661	2. Yangpon
vi	Rudra Shah	1661-1673	
viii	Prithvipati Shah	1773-1716	3. Bumthangpa Choje
ix	Nara Bhupal Shah	1716-1743	4. Ngawang Drugyal
x	Prithvi Narayan Shah	1743-1768	5. Chodra Koncho
1	Prithvi Narayan Shah	1769-1773	Chodra Koncho 6. Thinley Drugyal
2	Pratap Singh Shah	1775-1777	7. Tsepa Lhundup Thinley Drugyal
3	Rana Bahadur Shah	1777-1806	Thinley Drugyal 8. Saka 9. Tshampa
4	Girvan Yuddha Bikram Shah	1799-1816	10. Ngawang Norbu 11. Sangye Norbu
5	Rajendra Bikram Shah	1816-1847	12. Sonam Gyamtsho 13. Sherab Chogden 14. Palden Wangpo 15. Jinpa Tharchin 16. Kyilkhon Lopon Jinpa 17. Kagyu Wangchuk 18. Gangtengpa
6	Surendra Bikram Shah	1847-1881	
7	Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah	1881-1911	Gangtengpa

³³ The list is based on Tshewang 1994.

Zhidar Matters

But the war resumed after Tibet failed to pay the tribute. This time, China helped Tibet with 70,000 men. Bhutan sent Thinley Drugyal and the Desi's personal secretary Sherab Drago to negotiate peace. Nepal could not withstand the Chinese army amidst internal rebellion. In a treaty signed in October 1792 Nepal accepted the Chinese terms, which required Nepal, among other obligations, to send tributes to the Qing emperor once every five years. During Saka's tenure Rana Bahadur Shah asked for Bhutan's permission for his army to march through Bhutan to invade Assam. Desi Druk Namgyal (r.1799-1803) refused since Nepal acted against Bhutan's advice and invaded Tibet. Lama Sonam Gyamtsho became the court lama when Rajendra Bikram Shah (r.1816-1847) was the king. He was succeeded by Sherab Chogden, followed by Palden Wangpo, Jinpa Tharchen, Kyilkhor Lupon Jinpa, Kargyu Wangchuk, and Gangtengpa.

Taking Back the Gifts

Bhutan-Nepal friendship suffered during the Rana rule. In 1855 Jang Bahadur attacked Tibet and advanced to the districts of Kurti and Kyriiong, and Dzongka. Tibet took advantage of winter snow and launched an offensive in which Kurti was recovered, and then besieged Dzongka. However, Nepal regained Kurti and burnt it to the ground. In the resulting treaty signed at Thapathali, the Tibetans agreed to pay an annual subsidy to Nepal and allow a Nepalese trading station and agency in Lhasa. Tibet paid the first instalment, but refused to pay the following year which caused war between two nations to continue. During the Nepalese-Tibetan war of 1855, the Tibetan Kalyon sought the friendship of Lamai Zimpon Sonam Dondup from Punakha, and this caused a rift in Bhutan-Nepal relations. Nepal suspected Bhutan's support to Tibet and Janga

Bahadur Rana confiscated all the lands, monasteries and trusts provided to Bhutanese lamas as gifts.³⁴ The monasteries fell into ruins; however, some of the Bhutanese rights were restored after realizing the mistake.³⁵

Ladakh

Let me provide a brief background of an old relation between Bhutan and Ladakh. When the western Tibet (*mnga ris skor gsum*) was under Ladakh, King Jamyang Namgyal (r. c.1595-1616) had a priest-patron (*chos yon sbyin bdag*) relationship with a Drukpa Kagyu master Kunkhyen Pema Karpo (b.1527-d.1592) who sponsored monasteries in the kingdom. Following the split in the Drukpa Kagyu School, both Zhabdrung (head of the southern school) and Pagsam Wangpo (b.1593-d.1641, head of the northern school) maintained a close contact with Ladakh.

Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal enjoyed close relationship with Jamyang Namgyal's son, King Senge Namgyal (c.1570-1642), and the latter offered several monasteries surrounding the Mount Kailas (*gangs dkar ste rste*). Senge Namgyal's brother Tenzin lived in Bhutan and later became Wangdi Dzongpon. He in fact helped defeat Tibetan forces at a battle fought in Punakha in 1639.³⁶ These monasteries later developed into eight Bhutanese enclaves: Darchen Labrang Gonpa (*dkar chen bla brang dgon*), Nyenpoi Ri Dzong (*gnyen po'i ri rdzong*), Dripha Phug (*'bri ra phug*), Zuthrul Phug (*rdzu 'phrul phug*), Ge Dzong (*ge rdzong*), Ja Kib (*bya skyobs*), Yerigon Phug (*ye ri dgon phug*), Saser (*dag ser*), Somo Ju (*so mo*

³⁴ Dhakal 2003: 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*: 4-5. Some of the gompas, hardly recognizable today, were Charikota, Nagathali, Yolmo, Nagare, Teri, Lichyakhu, Humi, Pundi, Nama-syun (Nasa., Cho Jodath, New Gompa, Chiran-cha, Yate, and Thate.

³⁶ Phuntsho 2013.

rgyu), and Shi Hara (*shi ha ra*).³⁷ According to John Ardussi, the enclaves were acquired between Senge Namgyal's final conquest of Guge in 1630 and his death in 1642.³⁸ Darchen, Dripha Phug and Zuthrul Phug are illustrated on the map of Kailas (Figure 15).

Tibet recognized these enclaves as Bhutanese territories and they were not subject to Tibetan laws. They were administered by the religious post of Gangri Dorzin (*gangs ri rdor 'dzin*: Vajra Holder of Mt. Kailash) supported by one or two lay officials. The enclaves added national prestige to Bhutan, besides earning revenue from pilgrimage tolls and serving as a diplomatic outpost in Ladakh to keep in contacts with the courts of Ladakh and those of its dependencies such as the kingdoms of Zangkar and Guge where other Drukpa monasteries were located.³⁹ Gangri Dorzin, also known as Gangri Lama (*gangs ri bla ma*), governed these enclaves, collected taxes, and dispensed justice.⁴⁰ During the latter half of the 17th century, Gangri Dozin were usually selected from amongst the native Drukpa Kagyu monks, and the official was second only to the dzongpon and chila (*spyi bla*) in hierarchical status.⁴¹

After exercising sovereignty for more than 300 years Bhutan lost these enclaves when Tibet became a part of China. The first session of National Assembly of Bhutan, in 1953, discussed about appointing Gangri Lama or Dzongpon to administer the territories of Mt Kailash received as a gift from King Jamyang Tenzin and his son

³⁷ Bray 2012: 1-20.

³⁸ According to Aris (1979), the relations between Ladakh and Bhutan were consolidated by Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltshan (1647-1732) and the grant was given during his lifetime.

³⁹ Ardussi 1977: 311.

⁴⁰ Dasho Sonam Rabgay was the last Gangri Lama and he continued to serve until 1959.

⁴¹ Ardussi 1977: 311.

Neighbors

Senge Namgyal of Ladakh.⁴² Later, due to political development in Tibet, the administrative power of Gangri Lama was given to the Bhutanese Trade Agent in Lhasa. Later, Bhutan raised the issue of these enclaves in the annual Bhutan–China boundary talks, but China ignored it as a legacy of feudal practices.



Figure 15: Illustration of Mt Kailas, with Darchen shown at the base. Rohweder 2021.

⁴² National Assembly of Bhutan, *Proceedings and Resolutions of the National Assembly of Bhutan from the 1st to 30th Sessions. Vol. 1* (Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan, 1999).

Chapter 6

Cooch Behar's Kingmaker

Bhutan's relation with Cooch Behar, its southern neighbor, and her involvement in the kingdom's politics, led to Zhidar's downfall and its reverberations are being felt to this day. In this chapter I will narrate a brief history of Cooch Behar through its successive kings and selected events involving Bhutan directly or indirectly.

Cooch Behar was a small kingdom between the Bengal Duars and Bengal. Bhutan's role in the kingdom over the centuries should be understood within the court politics of successive Narayan kings from the second king (1552) to the 15th king in 1773 when the kingdom became a vassal of the East India Company. Bhutan was a force in Cooch Behar's politics during the reigns of some of the Narayan kings. The influence of course was both ways Cooch Behar also impacted Bhutan.

The Founders

Kamata was one of the kingdoms that appeared in the 13th century after the collapse of the Kamarupa kingdom. The kingdom later split into Koch Hajo and Cooch Behar. Koch Hajo, the eastern kingdom, was absorbed by the Ahom kingdom in the 17th century whereas Cooch Behar, the western kingdom, continued to be ruled by the Narayan, a branch of the Koch dynasty.

Cooch Behar's Kingmaker

It was Chandan Narayan (d.1524) who founded the Kamata kingdom and started the Narayan dynasty as the first king.¹ After ruling for 13 years Chandan died at the age of 40 without leaving an heir. His half-brother Viswa Sinha succeeded him and became the progenitor of the Koch kings of the Narayan Dynasty. Viswa Sinha's brother Shishu Sinha took control of the land at Baikunthapur in Jalpaiguri in 1545 and assumed the title of Raikat, meaning 'family guardian', and his descendants became Raikats of Jalpaiguri. The Raikats paid taxes to the Narayan kings and they were obligated to hold the royal umbrella atop the crown during the coronation of Cooch Behar kings. His descendants became Bhutan's ally in the 1772 war with the British.

The Conquerors

The second king Viswa Sinha Narayan (r.1524-1554) was an able ruler who expanded the kingdom. The first contact between Kamata and Bhutan took place during his reign. He sent an envoy to Bhutan to ask for a tribute, but when his envoy was insulted, he retaliated by attacking Bhutan. His armies conquered the territories up to the foothills, and after occupying some parts of the mountain territory, he had to sign for peace in the face of defeat. Bhutan agreed to pay a tribute.² What is clear is that Bhutan's southern borders began from the plains, not the foothills, as far as the mid-16th century, one hundred years before Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal arrived in Bhutan in 1616. In 1554 Viswa Sinha Narayan abdicated the throne and spent the rest of his life in the Himalayas after crowning his

¹ Chandan's father, Haridas Mondal of a Mech tribe, ruled over an area near the Chikna mountains between Sunkosh and Champabati rivers in the present day Goalpara district of Assam. Jira, his mother, was a daughter of Koch Hajo, a Koch chief.

² Chaudhuri 1903: 228.

younger son Nara Narayan. His older son Narsingh renounced the right to the throne and came to live in Bhutan. According to another source, Viswa Sinha Narayan had 19 sons, of which Nara Narayan and Sukladhvaja were the eldest. He sent them both to Banares for Sanskrit education. When he died it took time for the news to reach the two older sons. His third oldest son Nar Singh ascended the throne. But he was expelled after the two brothers returned from Banares, and Nara Narayan was crowned.³

The third king Nara Narayan (r.1554-1587), like his father, conquered vast territories and subjugated most of the surrounding principalities with his brother Sukladhvaja as a military commander. According to the Narayan dynasty chronicle, he established sovereignty over almost the whole of north Bengal, Bhutan, Assam, Kachar, Jaintia, Manipur, Sylhet and Tripura. His domain extended as far as the coast of the Bay of Bengal.

Ma-tam

Nara Narayan introduced a famous Narayani rupee coin that lasted for three centuries. It became the main currency throughout the region, including Bhutan. In 1783, the Narayani rupee, a base silver coin, was in circulation as a common coin in Bhutan and Cooch Behar.⁴ Just as Tibet sent silver to Nepal to be struck into coins Bhutan sent her silver to Cooch Behar mints. The coins reached Bhutan as gift, through trade and in exchange for silver bullion sent

³ According to one account, Nar Singh fled to Morang following a civil war with his brother and later came to Bhutan. See Chemjong 1966: 236. Nar Singh with his followers came to Bhutan and he established a Koch kingdom. Later a Tibetan lama influenced the king to convert to Buddhism. Thus, a branch of Koch king intermarried with the local people and became Bhutanese. But according to another source, Narsingh wandered and eventually came to Bhutan where he established himself as a 'local raja'. See Chatterji 1951: 119.

⁴ Turner 1800: 140.

Cooch Behar's Kingmaker

for minting in Cooch Behar. They were used in Bhutan as ceremonial donations to the public who kept them as a store of value and as a customary gift, and their circulation as money was limited.⁵



Figure 16: Half rupee coin with “Ma” at the top-right of the obverse.
www.colnect.com.

After the British closure of the Cooch Behar mints in 1790 Bhutan began to mint copies of the half rupee as its own coins beginning from the reign of Druk Tenzin (1788-1792) mainly for use in trade with the plains. It was initially made of fine silver; later the silver content was reduced until they were made of pure copper or brass. When the Bhutanese looked at the coin (Narayani rupee), the script at the top right of the obverse looked like the alphabet “ma”. Later, the Bhutanese coins were struck with the letter “ma” and called ma-tam (Figure 16).⁶

During Nara Narayan’s reign the Kamata Kingdom split into Cooch Behar and Koch Hajo. His brother Sukladvaja took over

⁵ Rhodes 1999.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 89.

Koch Hajo, the areas east of the Sunkosh River. The kingdom was soon absorbed by the Ahom kingdom in the 17th century and the royal descendants became Assamese zamindaris of Bijni and Darang, Raikats of Baikunthapur, and the Panga of Rangpur.

The Decline

The decline of Cooch Behar began during the reign of the fourth king Lakshmi Narayan (r.1587-1621) who had none of the bravery and martial skill of his father or grandfather. The Mughals began to occupy his territories, and the rivalry with Koch Hajo made the Mughal's work easier. The Mughal commander Ali Kuli Khan took Gour and surrounding territories, and all efforts by Lakshmi to reclaim the lost territories failed. After becoming a Mughal vassal in 1609 the neighboring rulers revolted against Lakshmi, who ironically defeated the rebellion with the Mughal's help. The Mughal emperor Jahangir captured the territories up to Ghoraghat, and the weakening Cooch Behar lost Boda, Patgram and Purbabhag.

The three institutions of power in the Cooch Behar kingdom, all occupied by the Narayan family, were King, Nazir Dev and Dewan Dev. Based in Balarampur, the Nazir Dev looked after the kingdom's defense while the Dewan Dev, based in Baikunthapur, was responsible for civil affairs and more importantly finance. Both Nazir and Dewan enjoyed considerable power and more than two-thirds of the kingdom's revenue, leaving only a small portion for the king. As the weakest of the three and whose position depended on the loyalty of at least one of them, the king played them against one another.⁷ The post of Nazir Dev up to Lakshmi Narayan's reign was always held by a Brahmin. The king discontinued the tradition and appointed

⁷ Majumdar 1984: 31.

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his son Mahi (the ancestor of the Nazir Dew of Balarampur) by dismissing a Brahmin Nazir.

When Lakshmi Narayana died in 1621, he was succeeded by his son Bir Narayan as the fifth king. Like his father, Bir Narayan (r.1621-1625) was a weak ruler and an administrator who avoided royal duties and indulged in excessive amusement and pleasures. The Raikat family refused to hold an umbrella during the coronation and ceased to be a tributary. During his reign, Bhutan was able to replace annual tribute to the kingdom with an annual gift to the king. The Bhutanese expansion into the plains is believed to have begun during his reign. By then Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal had begun the process of unifying western Bhutan and forming the first Bhutanese state.

Pran Narayan (r.1625-1665), who succeeded his father as the sixth king, befriended Zhabdrung. He sent a letter accompanied by a gift of silver trumpets, ivory, gold and silver coins and cloth to Zhabdrung when he was living with his patron Darchung Gyaltshe in Chapcha in 1619-1620. These must be the first Narayani coins to arrive in Bhutan. Zhabdrung responded with a friendly letter and gifts, which included amulets, silk, and Tibetan horses with saddles. Later Zhabdrung asked the king to become a Buddhist, and the king replied with a gift of a volume of the Prajnaparamita (*rgyad stong pa*: meaning 'eight thousand verses', it is a scripture abridged in 8000 *slokas*) written on palm leaves.⁸ In 1620, Pran Narayan is said to have supplied the entire quantity of silver required for making a silver stupa in honor of Tenpai Nyima, Zhabdrung's father. And during the appointment of Tenzin Rabgay as the fourth Druk Desi in 1680, Pran Narayan's daughter came as an emissary, carrying 700 gold coins and 1000 silver coins.⁹

⁸ Pommaret 2000.

⁹ Ardussi 1977: 275.

Pran Narayan took advantage of friction in the Mughal court between Aurangzeb and his brothers and invaded Ghorghat and captured Dhaka in 1661. Aurangzeb usurped the Mughal throne and resumed the subjugation of Assam and the upper Bengal. In December 1661, the Mughal commander Mir Jumla attacked Cooch Behar, forcing Pran Narayan to seek refuge in Bhutan. The Mughal captain Isfandiyar Beg reached the foothills of Bhutan in 1662 and asked Bhutan to hand over the fugitive king. Bhutan refused the request. Pran Narayan was instead given the sanctuary of the hills to start a guerrilla war that forced the Mughals to retreat from his kingdom. Meanwhile, Bhutan took advantage of a weakened Cooch Behar and began its southern expansion.

By the time of Pran's death in 1665 Nazir Mahi of Balarampur became so powerful, and it was thought that he would snatch the throne from the king's sons (Mod and Basudev). However, Nazir Mahi's sons already started to quarrel over succession even before their father had become the king. Mahi crowned Mod as the seventh king, fearing that his own sons would kill him should he ascend the throne. Mod Narayan's reign (r.1665-1680) coincided with the reign of the third Desi Minjur Tenpa (r.1667-1680) who followed an expansionist foreign policy. Mod Narayan was the king but the real power was with Nazir Mahi. With the army's backing, he persecuted the king's courtiers and soldiers. Slowly, after winning over some courtiers and soldiers on his side, the king prosecuted Nazir Mahi's supporters and finally removed him from power. In an open fight Nazir Mahi was defeated and fled to Bhutan but he was later caught and sentenced to death. His sons, Kumar Yajna and Kumar Jagat also fled to Bhutan. Bhutan again provided sanctuary, this time to the king's rivals. Yajna and Jagat began to attack Cooch Behar with Bhutan's help and nearly defeated the king only to be rescued by the Raikats of Baikunthapur. The two brothers again withdrew, along

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with the Bhutanese soldiers, to the hills, taking considerable property.

Mod Narayan died in 1680 without an heir and a power struggle began once again. Basudev Narayan, the king's younger brother, became the eighth king in the end but his reign was short-lived. On hearing the news of Mod Narayan's death, the late Nazir Mahi's sons Kumar Yajna and Kumar Jagat (or the king's cousins) again attacked Cooch Behar with Bhutan's help and plundered the capital and took away the royal insignia. During the second attack, they captured the palace, beheaded the king (Basudev) and massacred the royal family. After hearing the tragic news, the Raikat of Baikunthapur intervened once again. Yajna was defeated in a battle fought on the banks of the Mansai River. The Raikats then crowned a five-year old Mahendra Narayan who had survived the massacre as the ninth king. He was Visnu Narayan's (second king) grandson.

Bhutanese Influence

Aurangzeb imposed taxes on the small states of Bengal to finance his military campaign in the Deccan and took over one province after another during Mahendra Narayan's reign (r.1682-1693). In the face of increasing Mughal attacks, the king made a pact with his cousin Kumar Yajna, who in turn secured Bhutan's help against the Mughal in 1682. Tenzin Rabgay, who was a Desi at the time (r.1680-1694), dispatched troops under Paro Dronyer (chief of guest) and Dalingkha Dzongpon. However, Bhutan's help could not prevent Cooch Behar's submission to the Mughal in 1685. The rulers of surrounding areas declared independence from Cooch Behar and started to pay taxes to the Mughal. The loss to the Mughal resulted in a court conflict in which Bhutanese representative Zimpon Norbu Drung made an unsuccessful attempt to mediate. In 1683 a rival candidate from the collateral line of the Cooch Behar royal family based at the

ancestral palace of Baikunthapur (the Railkats) revolted against the king and Bhutan was again asked for assistance. Desi Tenzin Rabgay (r.1680-1695) agreed reluctantly. It was during Mahendra's reign that Bhutan's direct involvement in the Cooch Behar court politics began. Bhutan's role as a king-maker became vital for any faction to become a legitimate king. It was in this connection that the prince Rup Narayan of the rival Balarampur made a state visit to Bhutan in 1680, bringing gifts.¹⁰

Mahendra Narayan died at the age of 16 without an heir, and with him died the direct father-to-son royal line, which started from the second king. The royal dream of Nazir Mahi (the fifth king's brother) was realized posthumously when his grandson Rupa Narayan was enthroned in 1693 as the 10th king. It was during his reign (r.1693-1714) that Bhutan's role in Cooch Behar court increased due to the support given to Nazir Mahi and his sons in the past. Even before becoming the king Rup Narayan had made a state visit to the court of Desi Tenzin Rabgay in Tashichho Dzong in 1680. Bhutan strengthened her position and overran Cooch Behar in 1695 and usurped the government, until Nazir Shant, with the assistance of the Mughal viceroy, restored Rup Narayan to the throne after a long struggle.

Rup Narayan was succeeded by his son Upendra Narayan (r.1714-1763) as the 11th king. He too faced Mughal invasion of his principality from 1737-1738. A family feud did not help their cause. Because he had no son, he adopted Deena, the son of Dewan Satya (his father's second cousin) and gave him considerable power. He did not make a formal promise to pass on the throne. Deena invited the Mughals to occupy the kingdom in return for kingship under their supremacy. When the Mughal attacked Cooch Behar, the king sought Bhutan's help. A joint Bhutan-Cooch Behar force successfully

¹⁰ Ibid.: 390.

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repelled the Mughals and Deena fled to Rangpur. Bhutan's military help was not for free. The Bhutanese soldiers stayed behind in Cooch Behar and began to be involved in the court affairs. Gya Chila (*rgya spyi bla*) was appointed as a permanent representative in the Cooch Behar capital supported by a battalion of troops to look after Bhutanese interests. Dewan was made responsible for arranging provision for the Bhutanese soldiers in the capital. This formalized Bhutanese influence in Cooch Behar's affairs. Much of northern plains adjacent to Bhutan came under the Gya Drung of Pagsam Dzong (Buxa Fort).

Bhutan institutionalized a tribute from Cooch Behar in the form of gifts and feasts as an annual event. In this feast, the Pagsam Gya Drung and his officials descended to Chitakota while the king of Cooch Behar, accompanied by Nazir Dev and Dewan Dev, travelled up to host a feast of pigs, honey and other delicacies. The Bhutanese brought horses, *kaichin*, *debánga*, *shetamaa*, and *Bhotmala* silks, musk, white cowries, walnuts, ghee, rice, etc., for the Cooch Behar kings.¹¹ However, it became customary for the king to reciprocate the gifts in the form of cash double the value of the presents received. After the feast and gift exchange, both parties returned to their respective countries.¹²

The Kingmaker

In 1763 Nazir Lalit enthroned a four-year-old Devendra Narayan (r.1763-1765), as the 12th king, under the regency of a council of ministers. Lalit was Nazir Mahi's grandson who was Bhutan's ally in Cooch Behar politics, and it was in Bhutan's interest to approve the appointment. During Devendra's minority, Pagsam Gya Drung became the de facto ruler of the kingdom and Bhutan's influence

¹¹ Chaudhuri 1903: 214.

¹² Chaudhuri 1903: 244.

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increased. No important matters could be decided and carried out without Pagsam Gya Drung's consent. But this arrangement did not last. The court was in turmoil in 1765 when the king was assassinated on the instigation of a court priest Ramananda Gosain. The 15th Desi Druk Tenzin (r.1765-1768) avenged the regicide and imprisoned Ramanand Gosain in Punakha where he was later executed. Punsutama was then appointed as Gya Chila. After Devendra Narayan's assassination Nazir Rudra attempted to enthrone his nephew Khagendra, a move opposed by Dewan Ram. Fighting broke out between the two powers. In the end both parties accepted Bhutan's candidate Dhairjendra Narayan, the late king's first cousin, as the 13th king. Dhairjendra Narayan (r.1765-1770) of course became Bhutan's puppet. Gya Chila, supported by Bhutanese soldiers, continued to interfere directly in the affairs of the kingdom. Bhutan struck its own currency (the Ngutam Ghatika), a silver coin of the value of a half-rupee and circulated the currency in Cooch Behar. Gya Chila not only became the de facto ruler but took direct control of Cooch Behar's territories.

Zhidar became the 16th Druk Desi during Dhairjendra's reign. As Bhutan's tributary Cooch Behar was obligated to send troops for Bhutan's military campaigns, and when Zhidar invaded Vijaypur in 1770 Dhairjendra sent Dewan Ram, who later returned home with war booty which in turn provoked the envy of the king and his courtiers. Disgusted with Bhutan-backed Dewan Ram for collaborating with Gya Chila, the king killed him in 1770 and made his brother Surendra as the Dewan. Desi Zhidar exercised patience and avoided hasty action. A year later during the annual feast at Chitakota, both the king and his brother Dewan Surendra were captured while Nazir Khagendra escaped. Both were taken to Bhutan and imprisoned at Chapcha Dzong. Zhidar installed Dhairjendra's

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younger brother, Rajendra Narayan, as the 14th king in 1770 and took him to Chitakota for safety. The king died of a malarial fever there in 1772, heirless.

After Rajendra Narayan's death in 1772, Nazir Khagendra proclaimed Dharendra Narayan, the son of Dhairjendra who was then imprisoned in Bhutan, as the 15th king only to be rejected by Punsutama, the Gya Chila, who instead favored Bijendra Narayan, the son of Dewan Ram who was earlier murdered by the king. Seeing a chance to capture the throne for himself, the Raikat Darp Dev of Baikunthapur conspired with Gya Chila and confiscated the royal symbols including the throne, royal scepter, and umbrella, and secured them in the Madan temple under the Bhutanese guards. Bijendra Narayan was crowned. However, Nazir Khagendra and his allies were able to win back the royal regalia and crowned Dharendra Narayan (r.1772-1775) at the expense of Bijendra Narayan. Coins were issued in the new king's name.

After this turn of events, Gya Chila had to flee to Bhutan. Desi Zhidar responded by sending 4,000 soldiers to invade Cooch Behar capital, only to be repelled by Nazir Khagendra. Zhidar mobilized more troops. It is written that all male Bhutanese were recruited for the war.¹³ Some 18,000 soldiers under the command of his nephew descended to the plains. Dronyer Rabgay and dzongpons of Wangdi Phodrang and Thimphu also joined the war. The two armies fought a fierce battle at Sanjamini. After suffering an initial defeat, the Bhutanese forces under Pagsam Gya Drung Ngawang Samten overcame stiff resistance and occupied Cooch Behar's capital city. Paga Lama Ngawang Kunga Gyamtsho made a comment on the war: "It was a time when, by fierce hatreds and unrequited desire, our dear sons of Bhutan were all conscripted and their flesh given up like

¹³ Dorji 2017: 256. *'brug gi skyes pa pho lus thob tshad bkug.*

offerings to the jackals and vultures of India”.¹⁴ Pemberton reported that Cooch Behar “had been overrun and devastated by the troops of Bootan”.¹⁵

After taking the control of Cooch Behar capital, Zhidar enthroned Bijendra Narayan as the 16th king and took him to Chitakota for safety. Like the 14th king, the young king did not survive the malarial climate. After Bijendra Narayan’s death, Bhutan took complete control of Cooch Behar and fortified the city, with forts built at Gitaldaha, Bheladanga, Mawamari and other places, and guarded by a strong force. The army commander Zimpon (?) himself lived in Behar Fort guarded by soldiers. Poisoned bamboo poles were planted all around the fort to stop the enemy attack.

In the meanwhile, Nazir Khagendra fled to Balarampur by taking along the young king Dharendra and other royal family members, and from there to Rangpur to seek British help. Nazir Khagendra pleaded with the British on the young king’s behalf and offered one lakh rupees in return for expelling the Bhutanese from the capital. George Purling recommended the Governor General Warren Hastings to take over the kingdom and make the hills the boundary with Bhutan. The Council of Calcutta decided, on 27 October 1772, to help Cooch Behar, on the following conditions: (a) the kingdom will be annexed to the province of Bengal after the war; (b) the kingdom will bear the expenses of war with Bhutan; (c) the kingdom agrees to pay half of its yearly revenue to the Company in perpetuity; and (d) the kingdom will pay 50,000 rupees to the collector of Rangpur immediately.¹⁶

¹⁴ Tshewang 1994: 373. *'dod pas ngoms mi shes pa'i nga rgyal dang zhe sdang drag pos lho nang gi bu gces thams cad rang nyid kyi dpung du khrid cing/ rgya dar wa spyang dang 'phar ba dang dur bya sogs la mi sha'i mchod sbyin byed pai skabs di dag tu.*

¹⁵ Pemberton 1839: 2.

¹⁶ Deb 1976: 174-75.

Chapter 7

War with the British

The first contact between Bhutan and the British was through the War of 1772, which began when the British East India Company started to drive the Bhutanese forces from Cooch Behar's capital in October 1772 and formally ended when a peace treaty was signed in April 1774. The war changed the course of the history of north-east India, the Himalayas, Tibet, Bhutan and Cooch Behar, and reverberations of this and subsequent wars and political events are still felt to this day.

Who Should Lead the War?

When the war broke out in Cooch Behar that threatened Bhutan's interest, Zhidar consulted Tshanyid Lopen Kunga Rinchen, his good and trusted old friend in the Dratshang, over the question of who should lead the war. Like Pemi Tshewang Tashi, Zhidar resorted to seeking divine intervention. This decision provided an opportunity for Kunga Rinchen to avenge him for his broken promise. Note that Zhidar had become Desi while Kunga Rinchen was not Je Khenpo; he was only Tshanyid Lopen (*mtsham nyid slob dpon*, a master of dialectical studies) which was of course a prominent post in the Dratshang. He also had been angered by Zhidar's mistreatment of Jigme Senge and possibly for overlooking him twice for the post of Je Khenpo and his interference in the religious affairs. He manipulated the dice reading, and declared: "no one but you alone is

best suited to lead the war”.¹ Zhidar did not listen to his ministers and the public who all advised against leading the war. This was in complete contrast to the Wangdi Dzungpon Amdruk Nyim, a hundred years later, who refused to fight the battle at Trongsa but sent his chamberlain Pemi Tshewang Tashi. The chamberlain lost the battle and flung himself off the Thomang cliff to avoid being captured, and left behind a melancholy of the tragedy in the form of a ballad.² This was not the case with Zhidar.

The Panchen Lama told Bogle that Zhidar had fought many battles in which he had always been victorious, amassed a “great deal of booty and money; that when a man finds his advantage in a thing he is naturally led to follow it, and so he considered that fighting was a good business.”³ After trusting Kunga Rinchen with the authority of Druk Desi, Zhidar went to the war. Sources say Zhidar had received a promise of military help from the kings of Gorkha and Ahoms, and even Sylhet (which is in Bangladesh today), but the help never came.⁴ The Panchen Lama had discouraged Zhidar from going to the war with the British contrary to the Regent in Lhasa who encouraged him.⁵

Fall of the Capital

The Company’s troops under Captain John Jones started an assault on the Cooch Behar capital on 27 October 1772. The four divisions of troops consisting of *sepoys*, a locally recruited army who functioned as infantry, and four cannons marched from Calcutta

¹ Tshewang 1994: 373. *dmag gu gdong len du shu gzhogs khyod rang byon pa drag gzhan gyis tshags kha mi tshud.*

² Ura 2011.

³ Lamb 2002: 241.

⁴ Bogle 1876: 131.

⁵ Lamb 2002:

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towards Mughalhat through Rangpur. There is no record of Zhidar mobilizing more troops. It seems the existing troops who took part in the occupation fought the British. Messages were sent to the Bhutanese to surrender and vacate Gitaldaha Fort. Some soldiers heeded the message and escaped at night. The British crossed the Dharla River the following day, and by that time Nazir Khagendra's forces had secured Gitaldaha Fort. The Bhutanese took up positions in Baladanga Fort and put up a stiff resistance. The British deceived the Bhutanese by pretending to withdraw, and seeing the enemy withdraw, the Bhutanese charged on only to be met with cannon fire. The Bhutanese militias armed with bows and arrows were no match for the Company's forces armed with guns and cannons. The survivors fled. After the fall of Nazirganj Fort, the Bhutanese retreated to Behar Fort and defended it. The British camped by the bank of a pond at Debibari while two divisions of troops were stationed at the southern side of the palace and another two divisions at Khagrabari. Behar Fort was stormed in the end at the cost of nearly one-fourth of the *sepoys* while Bhutan lost 600 men. A Bhutanese commander fought fiercely, and bravely lost his life. Some soldiers were taken prisoner. After taking over Behar Fort, all poisonous bamboo poles pegged around the palace were removed by the British by rolling plantain trunks.

Retreat to Chitakota

After losing Cooch Behar's capital the Bhutanese troops retreated to Chitakota stockade and proposed peace. George Purling, the collector of Rangpur, accepted the peace offer on the condition that the Bhutanese leave Cooch Behar, confine themselves to about 13 kilometers from the hills, and accept the Company's possession of Cooch Behar. Purling thought Zhidar had accepted his conditions of

peace and he even informed his superiors in Calcutta on 17 January 1773, only to discover that the Bhutanese, instead of withdrawing from Chitakota, had occupied territories between Chitakota and the foothills. In the meantime, Zhidar mobilized more troops and employed local Sannyasis. The Sannyasis were a lowland people who had been Bhutanese allies against the British. They were earlier dismissed from the service of the Cooch Behar court on the Company's advice. Warren Hastings described them as people who were accustomed to travel around some parts of Bengal begging, stealing, and plundering wherever they went under the pretense of religious pilgrimage.⁶

On Zhidar's request, Zhabdrung Cholay Trulku Shakya Tenzin (1736-1780) thrice performed Varja Kilaya exorcism rites (*rdo rje phur pa'i gtor zlog*) at Paro Taktshang according to the progress of the war as well as Mahakala ritual (*mgon po'i gtor chen yang 'phangs*) at Sangchokhor, Paro.

After discovering that Zhidar had proposed peace to mobilise troops, Purling sent Lieutenant James Dickson to capture Chitakota stockade only to find it deserted. Even Sannyasis who fought for Zhidar had fled. He occupied both the Buxa Fort and the Buxa Pass on 23 February 1773. However, the success was short-lived. A day after occupying the fort it rained for three continuous days. Using their knowledge of local geography and weather, the Bhutanese and the Sannyasis allies attacked Dickson's forces at night. The British troops withdrew after receiving the report of a renewed Bhutanese-Sannyasi alliance and the risk of being cut-off, but in the process lost 14 *sepoys* and an English sergeant on 25 February 1773. Bhutanese pursued the retreating troops as far as Rangpur.

⁶ Kohli 1982: 10.

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Purling sent Captain George Thomas with a small party of 'Pergunnah' *sepoys*, a locally recruited paramilitary force, to drive away the Bhutanese. In an unsuccessful attack, the *sepoys* exhausted their ammunition and Thomas was killed. The British authority in Calcutta did not welcome the news and sent orders to Purling on 11 March 1773 to continue the war until all cultivable land right up to the foothills was occupied and made the new frontiers of Bengal. Orders were given not to listen to any peace offer until the entire lowlands had been occupied. Bhutan was told that no treaty would be signed before completing the occupation. The war aim expanded from expelling the Bhutanese from Cooch Behar's capital to extending the border to the foothills. The British re-captured Chitakota.

Samuel Turner left the following notes about Chitakota in 1783:

Chichacotta is famous, as having been an object of contest between the first detachment of our troops, and the people of Bootan, in the war carried on upon their frontier in the year 1772...The Booteas [Bhutanese] defended it with obstinacy, and a battle was fought in its vicinity, in which they displayed much personal courage, though it was impossible they could long contend against the superior advantage of firelocks and cannon, over matchlocks, the sabre, and the bow. But though compelled to give way, they made Chichacotta, for a considerable time after, a post of danger and alarm, which we were alternately obliged to possess and relinquish, till they were finally driven back, and pursued beyond Buxadewar [Buxa Duar]. It was restored at the close of the war, and now constitutes the Bootan frontier.⁷

Jigme Senge appealed for peace but Desi Zhidar mobilized additional troops. About 3000 Bhutanese soldiers attacked a detachment of 226 enlisted troops under Lieutenant Dickson in Chitakota on the night of 16 March 1773 to win back the stockade.

⁷ Turner 1800: 19-20.

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After putting up a stiff fight the Bhutanese withdrew to the hills after losing more than 200 men and killing five British men and wounding 33. Dickon, who prevailed in the end, admitted the difficulty of the battle in his letter written from Chitakota on 16 March 1773:

The Bhutias [Bhutanese] behaved with amazing bravery, but their daring courage was only productive of a greater slaughter. They often rushed upon our bayonets and met their death at the very muzzle of our pieces. At Kooch Behar I fought for glory. But here I was made to fight for life.⁸

Zhidar was deposed following this defeat.

The Second Front

Soon after the British attacked the Bhutanese positions in Cooch Behar capital, Bhutan's ally Raikat Darpa Dev of Baikunthapur opened a second front from the west. Not discouraged by Bhutan's setback in the capital, he advanced towards Cooch Behar with Sannyasi mercenaries. The Company had already decided to occupy Baikunthapur before the war to punish Darpa Dev for insulting its authority earlier and for protecting Sannyasis. Purling had planned to deal with Darpa Dev only after defeating Bhutan, but because of the Sannyasi-Darpa Dev alliance, Sannyasi had to be defeated first.

Captain Jones advanced towards Baikunthapur with little resistance from Darpa Dev whose forces had crossed the Testa River after sinking all the boats, unaware that the British force under Captain Robert Stuart were waiting at the other bank. During the encounter Darpa Dev's forces suffered 14 casualties. Stuart advanced to Jalpaiguri and occupied it in mid-January 1773 after expelling Darpa Dev and his Sanyasis allies.

⁸ Cited in Deb 1976.

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Figure 17: Armed Villager and Regular Soldier of Bhutan. *The Illustrated London News*, Vol XLVI: 440.

The Fall of Daling

North of Jalpaiguri, up on the mountain overlooking the plain, is Daling Dzong, better known as Dalimkot Fort. Captain Jones advanced to the hill in the middle of February 1773 and could take over the Dzong only in April. However, malaria decimated the British troops and claimed the lives of Captain Jones and many other officers.

On 2 April 1773, Purling reported about the offer of a peace treaty from the new Druk Desi on the condition of the Company's withdrawal from Cooch Behar. The Company insisted on the release of Cooch Behar King Dhairjendra held in Bhutan. Bhutan sent its representatives to conclude a peace treaty on the conditions of returning to Bhutan certain areas of the plains in the foothills, arguing

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that those areas were necessary for the very sustenance of the frontier Bhutanese, and for the right to send annual caravans to Rangpur, a market town in northern Bengal.⁹ Just as the Governor General was studying Bhutan's peace offer, a new event developed.

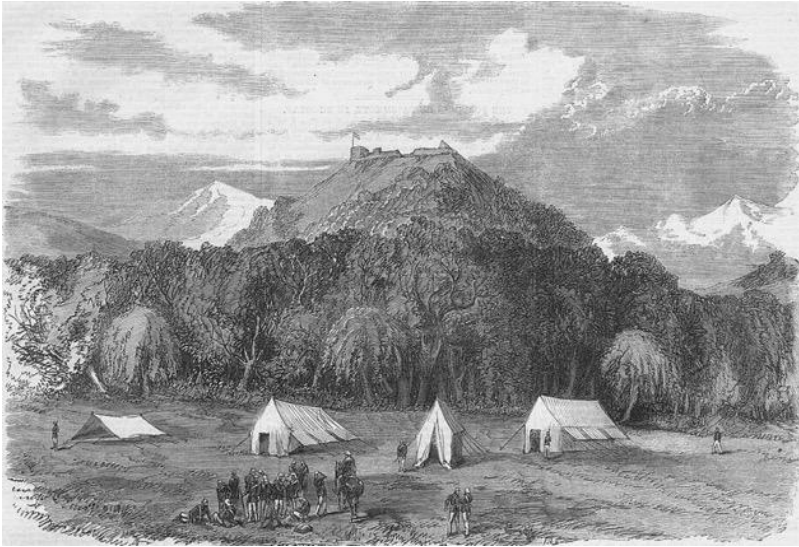


Figure 18: Dalingkha Dzong as Seen from the Plains Below. *The Illustrated London News*, Vol XLVI: 121.

The Peace

The East India Company became interested in the trans-Himalayan trade after gaining control of Bengal in 1757. However, the old trade route between India and Tibet through Gorkha was closed following the unification of Nepal by the Gorkhas in 1769. Bhutan became a natural choice for transit to Tibet via the Chumbi valley. Just as the Governor General received instructions from the Company's Board

⁹ Kohli 1982: 17.

of Directors to explore Bhutan and adjacent countries to expand the trade of Bengal and Cooch Behar with Tibet and offset the huge financial loss of the Bengal Famine of 1771 the Panchen Lama's letter of mediation was received.

The Mediation

Bhutan's defeat shocked the Himalayan countries, especially Tibet and Nepal. Nepal had an interest in curbing British influence in the region and making their unification campaign easier. Zhidar's ally Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Gorkha King, also appealed to the Panchen Lama to mediate. The Gorkha envoy arrived on the first day of the seventh month of 1773 headed by Brahmachari Bhagirathi and Jayas Ram Thapa. Luciano Petech, citing the autobiography of the Third Panchen Lama, wrote that a Bhutanese envoy had arrived at the court on the fifth day of the 12th month of 1771 bearing Zhidar's message and presents.¹⁰ According to this account, the Panchen Lama had earlier asked Zhidar to release the Cooch Behar king and his brother (Nazir) both of whom had been held in Bhutan since 1770. Zhidar's envoy brought the message of the prisoners' release as demanded by the Panchen Lama, although the prisoners were released by Kunga Rinchen following the signing of the treaty with the British in April 1774 which agreed, among others, the prisoner release.

It was Zhidar, not the new Desi Kunga Rinchen, who had requested for the Panchen Lama's help and mediation although the negotiators and representatives sent by the new government signed the resulting treaty. In his biography the Panchen Lama mentions that he decided to mediate after he could not bear the miseries the war had brought on the Bhutanese. He sent a letter of mediation to

¹⁰ Petech 1939: 339.

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Warren Hastings, the Governor General of Bengal, on behalf of Bhutanese, and falsely claimed Bhutanese as Tibetan subjects.

The Panchen Lama's letter delivered by Purangir Gosain, an Indian devotee, and Paima, a Tibetan, was read to the Board of Company on 29 March 1774. The English translation of the letter written in Persian is reproduced below.

The affairs of this quarter in every respect flourish. I am night and day employed in prayers for the increase of your happiness and prosperity. Having been informed by travellers from your quarter of your exalted fame and reputation, my heart, like the blossom of spring, abounds with gaiety, gladness, and joy; praise that the star of your fortune is in its ascension praise that happiness and ease are the surrounding attendants of myself and family. Neither to molest nor persecute is my aim; it is even the characteristic of my sect to deprive ourselves of the necessary refreshment of sleep, should an injury be done to a single individual. But in justice and humanity I am informed you far surpass us. May you ever adorn the seat of justice and power, that mankind may, under the shadow of your bosom, enjoy the blessings of happiness and ease. By your favour, I am the Rajah and Lama of this country, and rule over numbers of subjects, a particular with which you have no doubt been made acquainted by travellers from these parts. I have been repeatedly informed that you have been engaged in hostilities against the Deb Judhur [Desi Zhidar], to which, it is said, the Deb's own criminal conduct, in committing ravages and other outrages on your frontiers, has given rise. As he is of a rude and ignorant race (past times are not destitute of instances of the like misconduct, which his own avarice tempted him to commit), it is not unlikely that he has now renewed those instances; and the ravages and plunder which he may have committed on the skirts of the Bengal and [Cooch] Behar provinces have given you provocation to send your vindictive army against him. However, his party has been defeated, many of his people have been killed, three forts have been taken from him, and he has met with the punishment he deserved; and it is as evident as the sun your army has been victorious, and that, if you had been desirous of it, you might, in the space of two days, have entirely extirpated him, for he had not power to resist your efforts. But I now take upon me to be his mediator, and to represent to you that, as

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the said Deb Rajah is dependent upon the Dalai Lama, who rules in this country with unlimited sway (but on account of his being in his minority, the charge of the government and administration for the present is committed to me), should you persist in offering further molestation to the Deb's country, it will irritate both the Lama and all his subjects against you. Therefore, from a regard to our religion and customs, I request you will cease all hostilities against him, and in doing this you will confer the greatest favour and friendship upon me. I have reprimanded the Deb for his past conduct, and I have admonished him to desist from his evil practices in future, and to be submissive to you in all matters. I am persuaded that he will conform to the advice which I have given him, and it will be necessary that you treat him with compassion and clemency. As to my part, I am but a Fakir, and it is the custom of my sect, with the rosary in our hands, to pray for the welfare of mankind, and for the peace and happiness of the inhabitants of this country; and I do now, with my head uncovered, entreat that you may cease all hostilities against the Deb in future. It would be needless to add to the length of this letter, as the bearer of it, who is a Gosain [a title often given to a Hindu pilgrim of particular merit], will represent to you all particulars, and it is hoped that you will comply therewith. In this country worship of the Almighty is the profession of all. We poor creatures are in nothing equal to you. Having a few things in hand, I send them to you by way of remembrance, and hope for your acceptance of them.¹¹

According to the letter, the Panchen Lama had been “repeatedly informed” about the war in his capacity as the ruler of Tibet during the eighth Dalai lama’s minority, or as Zhidar’s spiritual benefactor. Zhidar had been described as “a rude and ignorant race”. This is a typical ethnocentric view Tibetans had about all peoples living in the Himalayan frontier regions. Two widely used Tibetan terms are *lalok* (*kla klog*, barbarian) and *monpa* (dark dwellers, i.e., those who live in dark places, not lit up by the light of Buddha’s teachings.). However, the Panchen Lama’s use of derogatory and ethnocentric

¹¹ Lamb 2002: 37-38.

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labels for the Bhutanese could be understood from the fact that he was writing to persuade the British to stop the war and show clemency for Bhutan, and one means of extracting maximum compassion and clemency was by demonizing the vanquished (Bhutan) and eulogizing the victor (the British), and bring an end to hostility that could potentially spread to Tibet.



Figure 19: George Bogle with the Panchen Lama by Tilly Kettle,1775.
Distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license.

The letter mentioned that it was avarice that lured Zhidar to commit “plunder”, “rages and other outrages” in the frontier areas in the past, and the Panchen Lama had not only reprimanded Zhidar for his past conduct but cautioned against similar conduct in future, and gave an

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assurance that Zhidar would stop any further crimes and be “submissive” to the British in future in “all matters”.

Zhidar had received the “punishment he deserved” in the form of his overthrow. Zhidar must have been already deposed at the time of writing the letter. Zhidar’s personal punishment was distinguished from the collective national punishment: the Bhutanese army (“his party”) had been defeated, “many of his people killed,” and three forts taken.

The Panchen Lama acknowledged that Bhutan was not his concern (thus independent), but he was obliged to be Zhidar’s mediator and representative since “the said Deb Rajah [Zhidar] is dependent upon the Dalai Lama. The Panchen Lama was referring not to Bhutan, but to Zhidar, who was his spiritual benefactor, and through him to the Dalai Lama. That Zhidar could have been a direct spiritual benefactor of the Dalai Lama if he was not in his minority cannot be ruled out.

The letter warned that if the present hostilities against Zhidar’s country (Bhutan) continued Tibet and its ruler would turn against the British. However, ceasing all hostilities against Zhidar for now and in future would confer on him the greatest favour and friendship.

The British agreed to cease hostility since the mediation letter came from the Panchen Lama, the most powerful leader in Tibet during the minority of the eighth Dalai Lama. It had always wanted to explore Tibet for trading purposes via Bhutan. So, the British responded quickly to the Panchen Lama’s mediation. It took less than a month to negotiate the terms of the peace treaty which was signed on 25 April 1774. Unlike other treaties between the victor and the vanquished, the terms were fair. However, it put the Panchen Lama in debt to reciprocate, which was to accept George Bogle as the British envoy to Tibet. The following are the Articles of a Treaty between the Honourable East India Company and the Deva Raja or Raja of Bhutan [Druk Desi]. [The words in parentheses are mine].

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Article 1: That, the Honourable Company, wholly from the consideration for distress to which the Bhutias [Bhutanese] represent themselves to be reduced, and from the desire of living in peace with their neighbours, will relinquish the lands which belonged to Deva Raja [Druk Desi] before the commencement of the war with the Raja of Kooch Behar, namely, to the eastward of the lands of Chichakhata [Chitakota] and Paglahat, and to the westward of the lands of Kyranti, Marghat and Luckeepore.

Article 2: That, for the possession of the Chichakhata [Chitakota] province, the Deva Raja [Druk Desi] shall pay an annual tribute of five Tangan horses to the Honourable Company, which was the acknowledgement paid to the Kooch Behar Raja.

Article 3: That, the Deva Raja [Druk Desi] shall deliver up Dhairjendra Narayan, Raja of Kooch Behar, together with his brother, the Dewan Deo, who is confined with him.

Article 4: That, the Bhutias [Bhutanese], being merchants, shall have the same privileges of trade as formerly, without payment of duties, and their caravan shall be allowed to go to Rungpore [Rangpur] annually.

Article 5: That, the Deva Raja [Druk Desi] shall never cause incursions to be made into the country, nor in any respect whatever, molest the ryots, that have come under the Honourable Company's subjection.

Article 6: That, if any *ryot* or inhabitant whatever, shall desert from the Honourable Company's territories, the Deva Raja [Druk Desi] shall cause them to be delivered up immediately upon application being made to him.

Article 7: That, in case the Bhutais [Bhutanese], or any one under the Government of Deva Raja [Druk Desi], shall have any demands upon, or disputes with any of the inhabitants of these or any part of the Company's territories, they shall prosecute them by an application to the Magistrate who shall reside here for the administration of justice.

Article 8: That, whatever Sannyasis are considered by the English as an enemy, the Deva Raja [Druk Desi] will not allow to take shelter in any part of the districts now given up, nor permit them to enter into the Honourable Company's territories, or through any part of his ; and if the Bhutias [Bhutanese] shall not of themselves be able to drive them out, they

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shall give information to the Resident on the part of the English in Kooch Behar and they shall not consider the English troops pursuing the Sannyasis into these districts as any breach of this treaty.

Article 10: That, there shall be a mutual release of prisoners.

This treaty to be signed by the Honourable President, and Council of Bengal, and the Honourable Company's seal to be affixed on the one part, and to be signed and sealed by the Deva Raja [Druk Desi] on the other part.

Signed and ratified at Fort William, the 25th of April, 1774.¹²

The Company maintained a battalion in the Cooch Behar capital in case the Bhutanese did not honor the treaty.¹³ After signing the treaty, Warren Hastings sent *parwana* (a permit or custom-house pass) on 28 November 1774 to Bhutan to resume their annual caravan to Rangpur. Hastings intervened personally and solved the problem Bhutan faced while trading cotton in the winter of 1774. The annual Bhutanese caravan to Rangpur then carried oranges, walnuts, and coarse woolen manufacture of the country and returned after a month's stay with cotton cloths, salts, and other produce of Bengal.¹⁴ To solve the physical distance between the Desi and Warren Hastings the latter suggested Bhutan keep a Bhutanese representative (*vackil*) to deliver Desi's letters to him and submit any issue to him directly.¹⁵

The King Returns Home

In a treaty signed in 1773 with the British East India Company, Nazir Khagendra acknowledged the Company's supremacy and entered Cooch Behar into a tributary relation with the British for the first

¹² Deb 1976: 175-77.

¹³ Bogle 1876: 58.

¹⁴ Turner 1800: vi.

¹⁵ Bogle 1876: 54.

time. Cooch Behar disappeared as a state in 1773, and more importantly for Bhutan as a buffer state with the British.

One of the terms of the treaty Bhutan signed with the British was the release of the king Dhairjendra and his brother imprisoned in Bhutan since 1770. They were sent back with gifts of friendship. Nazir Khagendra and the high-ranking officials went to meet the king and offered presents in celebration of his release. The place where the king ate food is still called Rajabhatkhawa (“where the king ate rice”). Upon hearing that his kingdom had only traded domination by one foreign (Bhutan) for another (the British) the king felt sad and questioned Nazir Khagendra what had led him to submit his god-blessed land to the British. Nazir replied that it was done for his sake, to free him from prison, and to free the land from Bhutan. The king could not come to terms with British domination and the revenue obligation. He declined the throne and asked for Dharendra to be enthroned. But when Dharendra died in 1775 without an heir Dhairjendra ascended the throne for the second time, but that time as the 17th king of the Narayan Dynasty.

An Envoy to Tibet

An important result of the Panchen Lama’s mediation besides ending the war was the sending of the first British mission to Tibet. The Governor General Warren Hastings chose a young Scot George Bogle for the task. The main objectives of Bogle’s mission were “to remove the obstacles which merchants are at present exposed to in travelling between Bengal and Tibet, and to revive the commerce between the two countries”.¹⁶ The idea was to request Bhutan to allow Bengal merchants to travel to Paro located along the Bengal-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 188.

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Phari trade route and easily accessible from Bengal through three duars (Lukhi, Dalimkota and Buxa).

The East India Company became interested in re-starting the trade between Tibet and Bengal via Bhutan. This old trade had completely stopped due to the war, and Zhidar did not allow any passage of Tibetan goods to Bengal and vice versa. Before the war, the Tibetans traded with Bengal through Bhutanese merchants. Tibetans carried gold, musk, cow tails and coarse woolen cloths up to Phari from where Bhutanese merchants bartered or purchased them and carried them to Bengal. Bhutanese brought to Bengal musk, horses, *munjít* (*Rubia mungista*; a madder used as a dye and for medicinal purposes), blankets and some thin twilled cloths. Bogle was asked to negotiate with Bhutan for a permit for free passage of Tibetan traders to Rangpur. In Bhutan lucrative trade was dominated by Druk Desis, officers, and provincial governors who were “the merchants of Bhutan”.¹⁷ Tibetans were allowed to come only up to Paro and restricted to trading their rock salt with Bhutanese rice since the Bhutanese rulers monopolized lucrative trade in musk, horses, and *munjít* and thin twilled cloths. The company feared that the trade would be limited if Paro, instead of Rangpur, became the center of trade since Desi and his officers (“the merchants of Bhutan”) were not wealthy enough to trade, and governance was their principal duty, not trade.¹⁸ Moreover, Bhutanese consumed only a little of Bengali goods except tobacco, betel nuts, and other bulky goods.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 183.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 8

After the Coup

Zhidar went to fight the British in Cooch Behar leaving behind a disgruntled public, a divided Dratshang, a vengeful Throne holder, and above all by trusting Kunga Rinchen, his political foe in friend's clothing.

Taking advantage of Zhidar's absence, Jigme Senge and Kunga Rinchen, the acting Desi, joined hands to lead a rebellion that was possible only behind his back, for none dared to even whisper against him in his presence. Zhidar was deposed in February 1774 in a "coup d'état" although it did not involve the use of the military, which ironically was with him in Cooch Behar.

The Lhasa government played conflicting roles. First, the Regent encouraged Zhidar to make his position absolute. This could be achieved by becoming independent of the Throne holder and the Dratshang. Second, the Regent instigated him to go to war with the British. Consequently, he lost his throne and was reduced to the state of seeking protection from those whom he knew by experience were reluctant and deceitful.¹

After the coup, the new Desi Kunga Rinchen was appointed as the 17th Druk Desi. The new government issued orders to apprehend Zhidar and stop him from returning home. An important route to Thimphu from Cooch Behar or Rangpur was from Buxa Duar via Pasakha Dzong (Buxa Fort), Sinchula, Meritsimo and Chapcha. The gate at the Chapcha bridge across Wangchu was guarded and made

¹ Lamb 2002: 390.

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impassable. Orders were given to kill Zhidar if he tried to cross the bridge. Zhidar not only lost his post and power, but more importantly his right to return to his own country for whose greater cause he led the army to a foreign land.

The government destroyed the seal of the Chinese emperor and stopped its circulation. When the Regent came to know about it, he wrote to Peking to ask for another one, which was granted. The seal accidentally fell into the hands of the Khampas and was destroyed.²

The government did not touch Zhidar's property out of fear of driving him to desperate action and offending the Panchen Lama under whose protection he had taken refuge. A couple of Zhidar's staunch supporters were put to death and some of them were terminated from their offices.

More importantly, the government ended the war with the British in Cooch Behar. Zhidar had requested the Panchen Lama's assistance in the war against the British, not for mediation. The Panchen Lama, who was not only against Zhidar's imprisoning of Cooch Behar king but fighting a war with the British, only sent a mediation letter to stop the war.

The Bhutanese army, defeated and without their commander-in-chief, returned home led by dzongpons of Wangdi Phodrang and Thimphu. Zhidar's nephew, one of the commanders of the war, was allowed to return only to be pursued later by government forces. He escaped to Je Yonten Thaye's palace to seek protection, which was kindly granted. Yonten Thaye was accused by the government's supporters of siding with Zhidar. In a letter sent to Jigme Senge, Yonten Thaye rebuked the former for demonstrating curiosity in English goods and gadgetry; mentioned how he had suffered from meaningless, malicious gossip about supporting with Zhidar; how the people who had lost faith in him disliked him, and had started to

² Ibid.: 327.

call him a learned divine who prophesized to be the true incarnation of a false incarnation recognized by Desi Zhidar.³

Dratshang Divided

Unfortunately, the coup split the Dratshang further. The war had depleted the revenue, and monks became disgruntled with the government's frugality. Zhidar was tough with the institutional powers of the Dratshang and Throne holder, but liberal with the liberties of individual monks. The existing split was made worse by the government's prosecution of Zhidar's supporters and sympathizers. Kunga Rinchen initially continued to employ Zhidar's supporters. Later, they were terminated either out of suspicion of their loyalty or to make room for his own supporters.⁴ Paro Ponlop who received Bogle at the Rinpung (*rin spungs*) Dzong in October 1774 was Jigme Senge's cousin who had been a monk a few months earlier and he became the Paro Ponlop after the coup. The government troops paraded, from the street to Paro Dzong, the head of Zhidar's supporter who had been killed. Those rebels who were caught were punished by throwing them into the Paro River, by imprisoning or by making them pay fines in lieu of imprisonment or death.

Fortunately, some of Zhidar's supporters who lost their positions were allowed to lead a private life. Bogle observed that out of 3000 men in Tashichho Dzong, 1000 were monks, and some of the monks who supported Zhidar were "kept in a kind of imprisonment".⁵

Zhabdrung Thugtrul Chokyi Gyaltsen who was brought from Tibet after much difficulty and then enthroned by Zhidar was tutored

³ Davis & Aris 1982: 119-120.

⁴ Bogle 1876: 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 26.

to go on a hunger strike in support of restoring Zhidar to power.⁶ Consequently, he was mistreated by the new government. Before retiring, Jigme Senge, who had assumed the role of Desi in addition to the Throne holder, appointed Gyalsay Tulku Jigme Namgyal (1763–95), the fourth incarnation of Jampal Dorji, on the throne. Around the same time, Thugtrul Chokyi Gyaltshen was also poisoned to death in 1785, the same fate met by his previous incarnation.

The Fear

“The fear of the Bhutanese,” Bogle wrote, “are not quieted while Deb Judhur [Desi Zhidar] is yet alive”.⁷ This was partly because Zhidar still had supporters in the Dratshang even after many executions, terminations or forced resignations. Kunga Rinchen received a series of letters from Zhidar, “asserting his claim, warning him upon no account to touch his property, and desiring him to quit the house which he had built, as he intended to return to take possession of it, and to cut down his corn as soon as the harvest was ready”.⁸ The house referred in the letter could be Tashichho Dzong, which Zhidar had built and named Sonam Phodrang, i.e., the palace of Sonam Lhundup. In 1775, Kunga Rinchen wrote to the Panchen Lama, requesting him to detain Zhidar “by all means”,⁹ after hearing about Zhidar’s plan to return and invade the country. It was the Panchen Lama who stopped Zhidar from again going “to war with his own people,” and he wrote he “will not suffer him to quit [Gyantse], where he now is”.¹⁰

⁶ Ibid.: 39.

⁷ Lamb 2002: 209.

⁸ Bogle 1876: 39

⁹ Lamb 2002: 259.

¹⁰ Bogle 1876: 41.

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As Zhidar's ally in the unification of Nepal, the Gorkha King Prithivi Narayan Shah refused to recognize Kunga Rinchen as a Desi and reportedly sent 200 troops, and later even threatened to invade Bhutan in support of his friend.¹¹

Zhidar off the throne was feared as much as Zhidar on the throne. Or rather Zhidar the Druk Desi was as powerful as Zhidar the refugee in Tibet in constantly tormenting Jigme Senge, Kunga Rinchen and the government collectively. The extent of fear was such that despite being held in Gyantse and even after bribing the Regent with two mule loads of silver, the government remained in perpetual fear of [the Regent] "letting him [Zhidar] loose upon them."¹²

Here is an excerpt of one of Desi Kunga Rinchen's letters to the Regent:

I think you must be well and healthy, protecting the Dharma and sentient beings as usual. Due to the blessings of three jewels, we are under the protection of the Living Buddha. I will do my best to ensure the peace of the local people. As I have mentioned earlier, the sentient beings in this country could benefit from the Dharma once patronised by Zhidar. It was the Dharma which helped him to ascend the throne. But Zhidar later suppressed the upper-class figures like lamas and monks, and damaged the Buddhist teachings. He embezzled offerings. He was fraudulent and violent. For this reason, the whole world was angry. So, the old palace of Tashichho Dzong was destroyed by fire. Then the conflict with Cooch Bihar occurred. Previously, the Dharma King Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and the Cooch King Pran Narayan lived in harmony as good friend. Zhidar's greed for others' wealth caused chaos and hurt people on both sides. Bhutan was connected to the sacred place of India by the pass (*las sgo*, duars), but now they are no more. His behaviours were harmful to living as well as dead. While rebuilding the new dzong, he tortured many workers by gouging their eyes, breaking their arms, throwing them into the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lamb 2002: 263.

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river, and subjecting them to other forms of unbearable torture in order to speed up the completion of the new dzong.

Therefore, the Bhutanese, big and small monks, public, all, decided to overthrow him. His subordinates gathered in Rinchenpang to occupy Paro Dzong. After a long time, his relatives fled since they could not stay there. I think he was not able to return to Mon [Bhutan] because of his own evil deeds. If he fled to your place, he would be extradited after taking both Gelugpa and Drukpa schools into consideration. I wait. I learned from the Zongben who came here for mediation: Zhidar is staying in Tashi Lhunpo Monastery. The 6th Panchen Lama feared chaos if he were to settled elsewhere. Therefore, he ordered him to stay at Tashi Lhunpo. He is provided with a means of living, but he must follow rules on visiting other places. Despite knowing his erratic behaviour, you have given him protection since he sought asylum from you. If he goes to Lhasa and other places, he cannot get support because of his evil deeds. Therefore, he is restricted to living in Tashi Lhunpo Monastery. I dare not ask you for returning him to us. After inflicting various sufferings, he yells about injustice and grievance. He always deceives and conceals, and talks inconsistently. To tell the truth: if you do not investigate his behaviours thoroughly, it will be impossible to understand him in details. If he finds an opportunity in future, he is cunning and will disturb all beings and cause a gap between Cooch Bihar and Bhutan. It is not the teachings of Buddha to protect Zhidar who has tortured many people. Not only that, he will violate your Dharma and political matters. For this, I tell the truth, hiding nothing: I cannot bear to hurt even ants and the human body endowed with freedoms and advantages. I understand this principle of retribution. As you know, I have never done anything to hurt the innocent. Therefore, I think it is best to repatriate him. Secondly, if you are kind to give him asylum, please ensure that he will no longer be a cause of turmoil. I dare not set a precedent for changing your law. I only hope you can give him the necessities for living in a remote area and not allow any outsider to get in touch with him. As such, he will not cause any suffering for everyone. My legal name is added falsely as Kunga Rinchen, and all monks unanimously call me Sawang Gyampa Palgi De (*sa dbang byams pa'i dpal gyi sde*). I

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hope to be named thus. From now on, please give me advice always. I offer these gifts on this auspicious day.¹³



Figure 20: Upper Thimphu Valley by Samuel Davis, 1783. Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

If there is any truth in the agreement reached between Zhidar and Kunga Rinchen to support one another to become Desi and Je respectively then Zhidar had overlooked the latter twice in favour of Kunga Gyamtsho and Yonten Thaye who were appointed as the 12th and 13th Je Khenpo respectively during Zhidar's reign. Perhaps, Zhidar's fall could be interpreted as a full ripening of his karma for failing to honor the agreement. The fact was that Zhidar became the Druk Desi, Kunga Rinchen did not become Je Khenpo, only to

¹³ Luo & Jian 2012:

overachieve his ambition later albeit by betraying the trust and allying himself with Jigme Senge.

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Bogle reported that although the faction supporting the ousted Zhidar was not significant, it took a lot of the attention of Desi Kunga Rinchen. Zhidar's supporters started a series of rebellions against the government. One such rebellion took place when George Bogle was about to leave Tashichho Dzong for Tashi Lhunpo, Tibet. Unfortunately for the government, those men who were terminated from their office were able to contact Zhidar and plan a counter coup to restore him to power. The insurrection was supported by the Lhasa government,¹⁴ in opposition to the Panchen Lama whose protection of Zhidar did not extend to reclaiming the post of Druk Desi.

Led by former dzongpons of Thimphu and Daga, Zhidar's supporters had planned to attack Tashichho Dzong with 250 men with the help of monks living inside the Dzong who sympathized with Zhidar, and capture Jigme Senge, Kunga Rinchen and prominent monks. However, the plot was foiled and several of the rebels were put to death. The rebels escaped to the south of the valley and occupied Semtokha Dzong, a historic first dzong built by Zhabdrung himself in 1629 that contained sacred objects, paintings, and statues. Some 60 monks escaped from Tashichho Dzong and joined the rebels in Semtokha.

After hearing about the fall of Semtokha, Desi Kunga Rinchen returned to Tashichho Dzong, amassed arms and ammunition, and mobilized forces from different parts of the country. The government's forces grew in strength with each passing day. Because the rebels had arms, ammunition, provision and treasures in their

¹⁴ Lamb 2002: 314.

possession, the government preferred a siege instead of storming the Dzong. This strategically located dzong controlled all roads to and from Tashichho Dzong, and the government blocked three of the four roads, while the fourth road was kept open should the rebels opt to escape and to avoid bloodshed and destruction of the Dzong. Expecting some help, or for some people to join them, the rebels held on. After ten days of seize, they abandoned the Dzong and fled to Tibet by moonlight. The leaders escaped and some of the rebels were captured. Bogle was told that many of Zhidar's supporters had escaped to the forests and later started to engage in robbery and murder, their plunder spreading as far as Rangpur.¹⁵ Some 80 supporters of Zhidar took refuge in Phari Dzong and Kunga Rinchen's request to surrender them was denied.¹⁶ From a house near Tashichho Dzong where Bogle had resided, he saw and heard much of the action of the rebellion. The rebels advanced as far as the palace gate, and Hamilton, the mission's surgeon, treated the wounded. The most notable beneficiary was the Thimphu Dzongpon who was injured. Jigme Senge showed interest in medical work and wanted to take over the work after the mission's departure. Bogle sent for fresh supplies of medicine and dressing.

Bogle and his party left Thimphu to Paro on 13 October 1774. The normal route to Paro was over the mountains but they had to take the route along the Thimphu River, the same route along which they travelled to Thimphu from Buxa Duar via Chukha. They travelled along the Thimphu River, and after crossing Semtokha, they came across the government's soldiers led by Kalyon (*bka' blon*) pursuing the rebels who had escaped over to the mountains on their way to Tibet. Bogle reported seeing "a village on the top of the mountain in flames" as punishment for allying with Zhidar.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.: 324.

¹⁶ Bogle 1876: 78.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 62.

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A Counter Coup Ten Years Later

Zhidar's supporters were still strong ten years after the coup. There were rumours of rebellion for a long time and it finally took place in 1783. Led by Wangdi Dzongpon and (Deb) Zimpon, Zhidar's supporters took control of Punakha Dzong which had remained unguarded when the Punakha Dzongpon and his men were accompanying the court (the Throne holder, Druk Desi and the Dratshang) to Tashichho Dzong, the summer capital. The court arrived at Thimphu on 25 June 1783. The capital bustled with military preparation, as men were recruited and dispatched in groups to rescue Punakha Dzong, the winter capital. Replacing Zhidar's men with Kunga Rinchen's own supporters in the capital and different parts of the country became a seed of rebellion. Those who lost their positions included the Wangdi Dzongpon and the Zimpon. On 26 June, the government put guards at the bridge across the Thimphu River and the gate of Tashichho Dzong. More men joined the government to defend the sovereign. Some men were sent to Punakha. In the afternoon of the same day, the government lost many of its men to the rebels in the south of Tashichho Dzong. On 27 June, some men were sent to stop the rebels' advance to the capital; however, the rebels took possession of three villages located within three miles of the Dzong and nothing seemed to be able to stop the rebels from talking over the Dzong. Slowly, the rebels lost grounds. Samuel Tuner made the following observations of the insurrection:

It is evident that the want of vigour in the Raja's [Desi Kunga Rinchen] troops was highly calculated to raise the ardour of the insurgents, who all seemed animated in their leader's cause, and steady to his standard; yet, whatever might be the views or motives of this revolt, the rebels had not yet employed their power to its utmost extent, having hitherto made no effort beyond their own intrenchments, except indeed to repel the assaults

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of their opponents. Had their forces rushed on with the same rapidity with which they at first sprang forth, it would have been to certain conquest. The very first impression of their arms shook the prince upon his throne, made him tremble for the permanency of his power, and instilled a panic through every department of the palace. Bold and daring as the first onset was, the prosecution of their scheme, in this manner, seemed to betray a want of confidence in their strength for every moment they wasted in inaction, before a defenceless citadel, strengthened the Raja's power; and, whatever might be their object, a very short time placed it forever beyond their reach. Before sunset a pretty considerable reinforcement joined the insurgents; and it is reported, that early in the day, they received also a large supply of men and ammunition, which seemed by no means improbable, from the frequent firing, and increased numbers of people distinguishable by the telescope, about the houses, and on the skirts of the village....¹⁸

It was noon, before the consequence of this preparation was fully known; then the warrior, with a stout heart and full stomach, issued forth to battle, having raised his courage and his spirits by an ample meal, and copious draughts of chong [alcohol]....¹⁹

Desi Kunga Rinchen described the rebels as ‘a disorderly rabble,’ led on by Zimpon, “the head of a misguided mob”, whom he had terminated from his post for misconduct, who had made collections from people by misusing his authority and then disappeared into the forests.²⁰

In Gyantse

Zhidar heard the news of his overthrow when he was in Pasakha (Buxa Duar) with the Panchen Lama's messenger, Purangir Gosain. From Pasakha, Zhidar secretly went to Paro. That Zhidar could enter

¹⁸ Turner 1800: 114-15.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 115.

²⁰ Ibid.: 111.

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the country only spoke of the loyalty and support he enjoyed. At Paro he stayed at Rinpung Dzong. Zhidar had told Paro Neten Dorji Namgyal about having no regret for all of his actions, except for dismissing Sherab Senge as Dorji Lopen.²¹ The government forces surrounded Rinpung Dzong, but he avoided capture and fled to Tibet.

On hearing about the political situation in Bhutan, the Tibetan government sent the Dalai Lama's envoys, Khenpo Chowang (*mkhan po chos dbang*) and Gyalkorwa (*rgyal skor ba*) to mediate. However, before they reached the border Zhidar had entered Tibet to seek political asylum from the Regent and the Panchen Lama. There is no exact date of his entry into Tibet. It must have been before May 1774 since Desi Kunga Rinchen's letter to the Regent dated 9 May 1774 mentioned that Zhidar was already in Tibet.²²

Here is the excerpt of Zhidar's letter to the Regent:

When I was Druk Desi I was committed to strengthening the bridge between Tibet and Bhutan. I also did my best to serve the government of Tibet. Even amidst adversity I did my best conscientiously.

Due to the past or temporary fate, there was a war with Kooch Behar. They were supported by the brutal army of the British East India Company. If left unattended, the barbaric army would not only seize the important places and endanger the Dharma, but also invade the sacred territory of Bhutan. Thus, I had to muster courage and fight for the Dharma.

However, one or two lawmakers disregard the Dharma and seek personal interest only. If I had wanted, I could go to western or eastern countries to seek asylum. They would accept me. They would not betray me. Now the war had been won, I could even go to eastern India, or to China, via sea, to meet the emperor and tell the truth.

However, I followed my heart and came here [Shigatse] to seek an asylum. My requests are thus: To escort me back to Bhutan. Second is to request

²¹ Tshewang 1994: 374.

²² Luo & Jian 2012: 81.

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for investigating the truth thoroughly. Although you have already sent letters there is still a hope as I have not seen you personally. Thanks to Panchen Lama's kindness that I don't have to worry about food and clothing. However, I was born in the south [Bhutan] and I have no wish to stay here [Tibet] for long. So, please negotiate with Bhutan. The best option is to give me the control of the capital and two or three subordinate dzongs. If this is not possible, I prefer to losing my life than staying in jail here. Please grant me permit to visit places I want to. I have no one except you who are always sympathetic to those seeking asylum. In time of crisis, please take care of me. Do not leave [me]. Do not abandon me, but always give me advice.²³

Zhidar explained that whatever he did in Bhutan as its ruler was to strengthen the bridge between the two countries. If he had not fought a war with the enemies, namely the British and the Bengalese, he said, they would have endangered the Buddha's teachings and invaded Bhutan. His wish was to return to Bhutan where he was born and brought up, not to prolong his stay in Tibet. His requests to the Regent to mediate with the new Bhutanese government on his behalf consisted of three options: first was to restore him to power; the second was to handover the governance of Thimphu and Punakha to him; the third option was to give him freedom of movement in Tibet.²⁴ To the Regent, the first and the best option was to repatriate him and restore his power. But Zhidar himself knew about the new political situation and impossibility of regaining his power.²⁵ The second option was to negotiate with Bhutan to handover the administration of Thimphu and Punakha similar to what happened in 1730 when Paro under Ponlop Kabje Dendup, through Tibetan mediation and intervention, ceded from the central government of Desi Mipham Wangpo and became independent for six years until the Ponlop's death. Acquiescing to the first two requests would lead

²³ *Ibid.*: 80-81.

²⁴ *Ibid.*: 81.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

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to a military confrontation with Bhutan. The best option was to respect the status quo and give Zhidar a life in Bhutan by making Desi Kunga Rinchen responsible for it. The Regent and the Panchen Lama sent two officers to Tashichho Dzong to ask for Zhidar's supporters in the government to be pardoned and reinstated, and for conferring the post of Paro Ponlop or other similar posts in the government to Zhidar. Kunga Rinchen delayed the response by using every means of giving gifts and deference, and even dependence to secure the friendship of the numerous rulers of Tibet.²⁶ In the end, even the third option, which was the freedom of movement in Tibet to facilitate Zhidar's pilgrimage, was not granted.

Asylum was granted and the local government provided food, clothing, and shelter, but on the condition of refraining from engaging in any political activity.²⁷ After arriving at Tashi Lhunpo, the Regent gave orders to confine Zhidar at Gyantse. In the beginning the Tibetans were afraid to capture Zhidar who was a strong man and always armed; so, he was captured while having dinner. Since it was against the Tibetan custom to handcuff a king, his hands and his whole body were "sewed up", and confined at Gyantse".²⁸ Such harsh treatment was meted out not because of the Regent's friendship with Desi Kunga Rinchen, but due to Gorkha's threat to invade Bhutan in support of the deposed Zhidar.²⁹ The Panchen Lama too wanted to confine him at Gyantse, knowing the trouble he was going to create if he were to return to Bhutan.³⁰

In his letter, Zhidar requested to meet the Regent personally to present his case. Zhidar arrived at Tashi Lhunpo on 10 October 1774 to discuss with the Panchen Lama. From there he went to Samye to

²⁶ Lamb 2002: 317.

²⁷ Luo & Jian 2012: 8.

²⁸ Lamb 2002: 241.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Bogle 1876.

meet the Regent. Zhidar's men returned to Tashi Lhunpo 25 days later and reported to Panchen Lama about Zhidar's plan to return to Gyantse. In the end, Zhidar was confined to Gyantse in some kind of house arrest in the custody of Dapon Janglochen (*mda' dpon ljang lo can*).³¹

Zhidar thought that so long as he had the support of the Tibetan government there was a chance to reclaim the post. While in Tibet, Zhidar and his supporters fomented troubles in Bhutan and posed a continuous threat to Desi Kunga Rinchen. Desi requested the Tibetan government to either prosecute him or restrict his movement in Tibet. According to Janglochen's report on Zhidar submitted to the Regent, Zhidar had no patience to wait until the days became warmer and insisted on moving out of Gyantse on pilgrimage despite being hosted at Gyantse. Zhidar was reported as being cunning and could not be trusted. He had requested for a permit to live in Dromu (*gro mo*), Yadong county, closer to Bhutan, and asked for the Regent's decision about his request.³²

Zhidar's Death

Tibet's policy for handling Zhidar both as a Desi in Bhutan and as a refugee in Gyantse was made more complicated by different positions by the Panchen Lama and the Regent, who headed the Lhasa government during the minority of the 8th Dalai Lama. The Regent was intent on killing Zhidar without the Panchen Lama's knowledge.³³

There are several stories of Zhidar's death, but the Bhutanese sources are unanimous in providing a single narrative about his death:- Zhidar was killed in northern Bhutan while trying to escape

³¹ Luo & Jian 2012: 81.

³² Lamb 2002: 82.

³³ Ibid.

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to Tibet; nomads murdered him inside his tent after arriving at the highlander village of Soe (*sras*); Zhidar returned from India and went to Paro, and from there he proceeded to Tibet, but on arriving at Laya-Lingzhi in north-western Bhutan, government forces entered his tent and assassinated him in 1773;³⁴ unable to stay in Paro, Zhidar went to Tibet, and while spending his night at Soe nomads broke into his tent and killed him in 1773;³⁵ Zhidar was murdered when he arrived at Sod (*srod*).³⁶

Desi Kunga Rinchen perhaps dreaded the ousted Zhidar abroad as much as Zhidar at home. The government fabricated the simmering news of his death to discourage his supporters in the government as well as among the public to put off any flaming hope of his return.

Alexander Hamilton, who accompanied George Bogle to Bhutan in 1774 as the mission's surgeon, shared two different accounts of Zhidar's death in his letters to Bogle. According to the letter of 26 December 1775, Zhidar was executed publicly by the Tibetans for attempting to create a commotion in order to free himself from his confinement and reclaim his position as Druk Desi. He was trying to escape to Nepal to join his friend Prithivi Narayan Shah with whom he had been writing.³⁷ Hamilton criticized the Tibetans for "violating the most sacred laws of hospitality which are held in veneration by nations much more barbarous in your opinion than the Tatars", no matter how justified the execution might be. He cautioned Bogle about the account's veracity since he had heard about it "from those on the same side of the question".

In a second letter to Bogle dated 7 January 1776, Hamilton wrote another account of Zhidar's death. Desi Kunga Rinchen invited

³⁴ Department of Education 1985: 41.

³⁵ Bogle 1876.

³⁶ *sman ljongs 'brug rgyal khab*, unpublished manuscript.

³⁷ Lamb 2002: 390.

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Zhidar to take over the government in Bhutan and Zhidar was a fool to believe his nemesis. So, he escaped from the prison in Gyantse. The government's men met him after crossing the border. They "made him shorter by the head (euphemism for beheading), fixed the head upon a pole at Punakha as a reminder of his present folly and past treachery."³⁸

The second account was confirmed by other sources. Zhidar did not want to live under house arrest and was always looking for an opportunity to escape Gyantse. The Tibetan government knew that the real purpose of his request to live in Dromo and make a pilgrimage in Tibet was to escape to Bhutan. Janglochen increased his vigilance. Zhidar's stay in Tibet was an obstacle to maintaining good relations between Tibet and Bhutan. After coming to know about the Tibetan government's reluctance to entertain his wishes, Zhidar made a risky decision to escape from his house arrest in Gyantse and return to Bhutan. According to the report made by the Kasha to the Regent, Zhidar escaped from Gyantse without anyone's help on the night of 5 August 1776. Janglochen's servants chased him right to the Bhutanese border. The Bhutanese force captured and killed Zhidar and his men after crossing the border on 8 August. Panchen Lama had consented to Zhidar's wish to escape Gyantse to Bhutan and no one was held responsible except for Janglochen's servants who were sent to Lhasa to face punishment.³⁹

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 392.

³⁹ *Ibid.*: 83.

Chapter 9

Ruins

Some 244 years later, it is still possible to find some remains associated with Zhidar or his rule in the form of ruins. As a rule, and out of necessity, Druk Desis were celibate. Most of the Desis were elected from amongst senior monks who had reached the end of their lives, and whether it was by design or coincidence several of them died in office. So, it will be futile to look for Zhidar's descendants.

Khyung-chung Dingkha, his birth village, and the neighboring village of Jobesa in Jemina, still bear some of his remains in ruins, and the oral accounts which are being forgotten. There are four ruins associated with Zhidar: Khyung-chung Dingkha, Jobesa, Tshaphu at Khasadrupchu, Thimphu, and Jibjakha in Punakha.¹ Jobesa bears a legacy of Zhidar in the form of a unique temple housing a chorten. At first, there was only a stupa. Later, a temple was built to house the stupa [Figure 22]. From the temple door, an adjunct has been built for performing rituals. The local people share two accounts about the building of the stupa. The first account has it that it was built by Zhidar himself. According to the second account, it was built after the war and Zhidar's death as a *tsi-dok* (*rtsod bzlog*) chorten to prevent the outbreak of a similar war with other countries and civil

¹ Jochu 2017.

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wars in the country in future, and Zhidar's personal wealth were used as relics inside the chorten.²



Figure 21: Ruins of Zhidar's Palace in Jobesa village. Photo by Dorji Penjore, 2017.

The temple walls housing the chorten seemed to have been originally built in the style of *kakaling* where travelers could receive the blessing while passing beneath the chorten's *kilkhor* or being inside the sacred space. This is evident from the remains of large doors on the walls. The main wall paintings on the front wall (opposite the entrance door) are of the Buddha Shakyamuni flanked by the frescos of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal on the right and of Guru Rinpoche on the left. The paintings of the Buddha flanked by Guru Rinpoche (left) and Chenrize (right) adorn the right wall. On the left wall are the fresco of the Buddha of Boundless Life (*tshe dpag med*) and

² Ibid.

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Buddha Dipankara (*mar me mdzod*). On the entrance door wall are the paintings of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.

So, what can we make of Zhidar, “a controversial Himalayan Buddhist”³ who was multi-faceted? A constitutionalist will certainly mark him for violating the separation of religious and secular powers in the dual system of governance in which the Throne holder held the supreme power in legitimizing the office of Je Khenpo and Druk Desi on behalf of Zhabdrung. Jigme Senge had been the reigning Throne holder since 1763 and Zhidar’s enthronement as the 16th Desi was possible only through his blessing, together with the consent of the Dratshang headed by the Je Khenpo and the Lhengye Tshog. A liberal will consider him as an autocrat whose heavy-handed governance oppressed the public and coerced them to build Tashichho Dzong with conscripted labor within a year. Building of such a large dzongs was not the first; many dzongs had been built through similar labor arrangements although the public was not pushed hard to build it within a short period. A Buddhist zealot will find his insult of the reigning Throne holder sacrilegious although he patronized Buddhism and commissioned and sponsored various Buddhist projects, and the epithet ‘chogyal’ was used before his name. As a representative of Zhabdrung himself, Jigme Senge was more than the head of state. A pacifist will object to his military campaigns against Sikkim, Vijaypur (Morang) and Cooch Behar for the loss of peace and human lives, and squandering of resources. A patriot will consider his patronage of the Panchen Lama as undermining the national sovereignty secured after overcoming more than a century of threats posed by Tibet. Ever since Zhabdrung’s arrival in Bhutan in 1616 several attempts were made by Tibet to defeat and destroy the new state of Palden Drukpa. While peace had been restored after 1730, patronizing the Panchen Lama, the supreme

³ Ardussi, forthcoming.

ruler of Tibet, had crossed the line. A nationalist will consider him a traitor for circulating the seal of the Chinese emperor, which risked Bhutan becoming a Chinese tributary state. Most will avoid him. Many will be indifferent. Some will emulate him.

Today, when it has become popular to read any opinions on foreign or domestic policy in terms of the duality of pro-India or pro-China, it is not difficult to label Zhidar as pro-Tibet or pro-China, except there was then no India, or not even the British in the form of the East India Company, as a player to bargain with. Bhutan's encounter with the British through the 1772 war was a matter of chance, not choice; a matter of destiny, not design. To use the contemporary vocabulary, Zhidar followed a "realist" foreign policy by placing the country's interests before ideology and principles. He was a realist who refused to be constrained by an idealistic constitutional separation of the spiritual and secular power of the dual system. He undermined the reigning Throne holder because he saw the obstacle Jigme Senge was going to create in realizing his goal of becoming a Desi for life. He had seen how the extended tenure of a Druk Desi, such as the glorious reign of 13th Desi Sherab Wangchuk, could serve the interests of the country and the subjects by providing political stability and prosperity, compared to his two immediate predecessor Druk Phuntsho and Druk Tenzin, both of whom served for less than three years and died in office.

He invaded Vijaypur for failing to pay one year's tribute, but left the kingdom to be taken over by the Gorkha although Bhutan was required to protect the kingdom as her dependency. Bhutan was reciprocated with the gift of Swayambhu and monastic fields. As a Vajrayana Buddhist country, it was a gift worth praying for.

Since he had no knowledge of the British who had taken over the control of Bengal, he was not a fool to think that he could fight and win against the British. He was familiar with winning wars, and he clearly understood the importance of the duars from a revenue-

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generation point of view while working as a border road guard in the Tsirang region that bordered the Bengal Duars.

Ever since its first contact with Cooch Behar in the mid-16th century to the early-18th century, Bhutan took about 150 years to gain a foothold in the kingdom as a legitimate kingmaker, not as an invading force, but after helping the kingdom fight the Mughal invaders, often successfully. Zhidar invaded the kingdom when this right was threatened, resulting in the war with the British.



Figure 22: Jobesa Lhakhang. Photo by Dorji Penjore, 2017.

Zhidar’s “courage is as exalted as the sky”.⁴ He was no Wangdi Dzongpon Amdruk Nyim who sent his chamberlain Pemi Tshewang Tashi to fight the war in his place in 1881. Zhidar led his armies personally to fight the East Indian Company in Cooch Behar. After 233 odd years in 2003, the Great Fourth Majesty led the Bhutanese

⁴ Ibid.

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armies to flush out the insurgents from the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal who had been holed up in Bhutanese territories and threatened the sovereignty of the country and good relations with India.

The early history of Bhutan is filled with treacheries, deceptions, backstabbing, plots, and counterplots, but nothing is as poignant as the betrayal and the fall of Zhidar. He was not only removed from power; he was not allowed to return to his homeland, for whose greater cause he had gone to fight. Since Zhidar was a product of his time, contemporary standards should not be brought into the service to judge Zhidar. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio says, "[S]ome are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em" (Act II, Scene v. 55-57). Zhidar was neither born great like his adversary Jigme Senge who was born as the third reincarnation of Gyalsay Tenzin Rabgay, nor became great through circumstance (of Zhidar's absence from the country and losing the war) like Desi Kunga Rinchen. Zhidar began his life with the adversity of an orphan, which proved to be the springboard for his rise in the state bureaucracy. As an orphan he survived the cold winters by the warmth of the oxen, stepped on the first rung of a long bureaucratic ladder as a menial servant, braved the harsh climates of the Tibetan plateau with his master, survived the tropical malarial climates and inhospitable geography of the duars as the servant of border guards, rose to become State Chief Protocol, followed by Trongsa Ponlop, and Wangdi Dzungpon, and finally reached the summit: the highest post of the land, Druk Desi. When a tragedy ends with a hero's death due to his hubris, a hero dies within each one of us. May this book on Zhidar be read and, Zhidar, the Lord of Men, be understood.

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Figure 23: Sidok Chorten inside the Jobe Lhakhang. Photo by Dorji Penjore, 2017.

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