

A Historical Background of the Chhoetse Penlop*

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The institution of the Chhoetse Penlop (later called Trongsa Penlop) is more than 350 years. It was started by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in 1647 after he appointed Chhogyel Minjur Tenpa as his representative in Trongsa. This royal institution with a unique blend of mythology and history represents Bhutan's past.

The Trongsa Dzong was founded by Yongzin Ngagi Wangchuk (1517-1554), the son of Lam Ngawang Chhoejay. According to the legend, Ngagi Wangchuk was guided in a vision by Palden Lhamo, the guardian deity of the Dragon Kingdom, to go to a place in central Bhutan which resembled a bow and which was abundant in food grains (*mang-dru*). The name Mangdey has its origin in this word.

Accordingly, Pal Ngagi Wangchuk arrived at Trongsa in 1541 where he took residence in the village of Yueli which was located on the northern hill-slopes overlooking the then bare hillock upon which the Trongsa Dzong is presently located.

One night when Pal Ngagi Wangchuk was meditating in Yueli, his attention was drawn by a flicker of light, resembling that of a butter-lamp burning in the open air, at the spot where the present day Goenkhang in the Trongsa Dzong is located. Upon visiting the spot, he was deeply overwhelmed by discovery of Lhamoi Latsho (a sacred lake of Palden Lhamo) and the hoof prints of Palden Lhamo's steed.

In 1543, Pal Ngagi Wangchuk established a small *tshamkhang* (meditation quarter) in the sacred spot brought

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to light by the auspicious signs, and named it “Mon Drubdey”. He soon attracted large disciples who built their own meditation units around the main tshamkhang. The cluster of newly built meditation quarters appeared to the people of Yueli like a new village and hence they called it “Trongsar”, meaning “new village”. The name is popular to this day. According to one oral version, there was a tall (*trong*) house on the spot of the present day Trongsa Dzong. After construction of the new dzong, the people started to call it “Trongsar” – meaning a new tall house.

By that time Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was fifty-two years (1646), and he had succeeded in bringing the whole of western Bhutan under the theocratic rule he established. He then turned his attention towards eastern Bhutan with the idea of bringing the whole region under one rule. In order to achieve his goal, the Zhabdrung wanted to establish a seat of authority in Trongsa which would, considering its strategic location between east and west, play a crucial role in the unification of the country.

At that time, there were many feudal rulers in eastern Bhutan, mainly in Bumthang, Lhuentse, Trashigang and Zhemgang. The Zhabdrung found Chhogyel Minjur Tenpa, a close confidante and a person of unquestionable loyalty and integrity, as the most suitable candidate for the daunting task of unifying and consolidating the whole of eastern Bhutan. Chhogyel Minjur Tenpa subsequently brought eastern Bhutan (*sharchog khorlo tsibgay*) under the rule of the Zhabdrung.

Seeing the unification as an auspicious symbol, the Zhabdrung instructed Chhogyel Minjur Tenpa to construct a dzong at the seat of Yongzin Ngagi Wangchuk and Mephram Tenpai Nima in the centre of the Mangdue region. As commanded, Chhogyel Minjur Tenpa built the Trongsa Dzong as the seat of authority of *Sharchog Khorlo Tsip Gyed* in 1644 at the sacred site earlier founded by Pal Ngagi Wangchuk

about a hundred years before him, and called it Druk Minjur Chhoekhor Rabten Tse Dzong.

The name is derived from the lhakhang named *Minjur Lhakhang*, which later came to be known as *Poe Lhakhang*. It was built on the top of a cliff which has a base in shape of a White Right-Turning Dharma Conch (*Chhoe Dung Karpo Yeykhil*). The lhakhang looked like a palace of a temporal ruler from outside and a seat of a spiritual master inside. The construction of the lhakhang was completed in 1652. The Dzong was named *Druk Minjur Chhoekhor Rabten Tse Dzong* (the fortress of the changeless culmination of the eternal Wheel of Law in the Dragon Country) after the shape of the location of the Dzong and the name of the builder.

Its literal translation is *Druk* (Dragon Country) *Mijur* (Changeless, or name of the builder), *Chhoekhor* (Wheel of Law of Dharma), *Rabten* (Eternal), *Tse* (Apex), *Dzong* (Fortress). Yet another oral source says that there is a place above the present Ta Dzong where a famous lama gave the Buddhist teachings. The place was then called Chhokhor Tse.

The dedicated effort of Chhogyel Minjur Tenpa and subsequent governors of Trongsa gradually expanded Trongsa Dzong. The Chhoeten Lhakhang, which can be seen to this day, is believed to be the only remnant of the old structure which incorporated to the new Trongsa Dzong. Trongsa Penlop Sherub Lhendup built the Goenkhang in 1667 and was consecrated by Gyalsay Tenzin Rabgey. Trongsa Penlop Pekar built the Lhakhang of Gyelwa Jampa Drolma and Namgyelma in 1770. In 1715 Trongsa Penlop Druk Dhendup built the temple of Chenrezig which was later renovated in 1927 by the Second King. The Serto on Lam Lhakhang and Tshepamed Lhakhang were installed by Trongsa Penlop Druk Phuntsho and consecrated by Penchen Tenzin Chhogyel. In 1853 Trongsa Penlop Jigme Namgyel built the Dechog Lhakhang. The Dzong has now a total of 25 important lhakhangs.

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Though the meditation centre of Yongzin Ngagi Wangchuk was known as *Trongsar* in the dialect of Mangdey community (Mangdey Tsho Zhi), the chief/head lams were known as Chhoetse Chila or Trongsa Chila. *Chilas* were ordained monks. However, with the passage of time, non-monk chiefs were appointed to the post, and the title Chhoetse Penlop came to be used, replacing Chila with Penlop¹. But the use of the titles Trongsa Chila and Trongsa Penlop was more common than Chhoeste Chila or Chhoetse Penlop.

Similarly, the Zhabdrung also established the institutions of the Paro Penlop and Daga Penlop to head different administrative zones. Chhoejay La Noenpa Tenzin Drugdra was appointed as the Paro Penlop, Tenpa Thinley as the Daga Penlop. Since then the tradition of appointing Trongsa Penlop has continued. The Penlops were direct representatives of the Zhabdrung bestowed with authority to make independent decisions on his behalf and govern according to the administrative and judicial code established by him.

In 1853, Penlop Tshoki Dorji resigned paving way to the installation of Jigme Namgyel as the next Trongsa Penlop. Twenty-nine years later his son Ugyen Wangchuck became the Trongsa Penlop in the year 1882. Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck was the Trongsa Penlop when the Bhutanese clergy, the government, and the people unanimously elected him as the first hereditary King and established a new era of Bhutanese history.

His Majesty King Ugyen Wangchuck served as the Trongsa Penlop between 1882 and 1907, and it was in Trongsa that the people of Bhutan offered their love, their reverence, and their allegiance to their Monarch.

His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck was installed as the Trongsa Penlop on May 15, 1972, at the age of 16 years.

¹ Personal Communications, Lupon Padma Tshewang (Lupon Padmala)

The institution of the Trongsa Penlop, therefore, came to signify the true heritage to the Bhutanese Throne and the investiture ceremony of the Trongsa Penlop became the formal declaration of this status of the Crown Prince. The lhengye zhungtsho had announced that the revered position of the Trongsa Penlop would once again be known by the historical term, Chhoetse Penlop as the Crown Prince represents all the 20 dzongkhags of the kingdom.

With the formal awarding of the Gyalse Ngadun which signifies mastery over worldly and spiritual matters, miraculous accomplishment, inexhaustible speed and strength and the trinity of love wisdom and power, and the celebration of the traditional ceremonies in Trongsa, His Royal Highness Dasho Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck is the sixteenth Chhoetse Penlop.

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