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**ZHABDRUNG  
NGAWANG NAMGYAL  
AND THE PROCESS OF  
STATE FORMATION**  
in Bhutan (17th to Early  
20th Century)

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**THESIS**

**TSHEWANG NGEDUP**



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## Abstract

**Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and the Process of State Formation in Bhutan (17<sup>th</sup> to Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century)****TSHEWANG NGEDUP**

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A substantial amount of historical evidence on the career of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, arguably one of the leading political figure of Bhutan in the 17th century, exists. He was the unifier of the kingdom of Bhutan, and he accomplished this task, by putting an end to the powers of warring chieftains. He was successful in uniting Bhutan into a nation-state by overcoming both the internal and the external threats. His victory over various political factions, creating internal strife, laid the the foundation on which the lineage of the Drukpa Kagyu and the Drukpa State were established. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal instituted a system of governance called chhoesid nyiden, a dual system of governance. He went into permanent retreat in 1651, and his retreat assisted in securing the sovereignty of the country by putting an end to various threat that the country faced at the time. He was the first to consolidate power and unify Bhutan into a nation-state. The dissertation deals with the life and times of Zhabdrung, focusing on a series of reforms introduced by him to consolidate Bhutan into a nation-state. In order to substantiate the discussion on Zhabdrung as nation-builder, the dissertation will highlight the changes he brought in both temporal and spiritual arenas. Further, the work explores the reasons for the survival of the political system founded by Zhabdrung in existing Bhutanese polity.

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# INTRODUCTION

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**Introduction****INTRODUCTION**

The kingdom of Bhutan is sandwiched between the two giant countries. China in the north and India to the south, and yet it is remarkable that the country has retained its unique identity derived from a rich religious and cultural heritage. Indeed, it was because of guidance and leadership provided by Zhabdrung (literally, at whose feet one submits) Ngawang subsequent to his arrival to Bhutan in the seventeenth century that the country's independence was further secured. The unique administrative systems which Zhabdrung introduced helped the country maintain its sovereignty. Theocratic form of Bhutan's polity founded by Zhabdrung further united the people and the nation.

Bhutan's unity as a nation is embedded in religious beliefs. The first seed of Buddhist teachings in Bhutan dates back to the time when Paro Kyichu Lhakhang (659 CE) and Bumthang Jampa Lhakhang were built [1]. However, it was after the visit of Guru Rinpoche (746 AD) to Bhutan, that the essence of Buddhist teachings spread afar [2]. It is believed that Buddhism was introduced to Bhutan in the 5th (433 AD) century by an Indian Buddhist monk, Buddaraksita who passed by Bhutan on his way to Tibet. Karma Phuntsho notes that the coronation of Langdharma in the 8th and 9th century as the ruler in Tibet paved path for the arrival of Buddhism in Bhutan. Langdharma, an anti-Buddhist ruler, is believed to have destroyed all religious institutions in Tibet. He exiled his own younger brother Tsangma to Bhutan. Thanks to Tsangma's Buddhist piety and efforts that Buddhism reached the pinnacle in Bhutan. Even the arrival of Phajo Drugom Zhipo (1176-1247) helped flourish the teaching of Drukpa, says Lopon Nado [3-6]. By the time Zhabdrung arrived in Bhutan, the instructions of Drukpa and its religious studies had already gained a strong foothold [7]. After reaching Bhutan, he introduced a formal monastic system and constructed dzongs (fortresses) as a spiritual center from where the diffusion of religion ensued. Dzongs also became the monastic seats and symbol of political power.

Zhabdrung rose to power by defeating rulers of fiefdoms and different religious sects and combining the forces of the five lamas. To celebrate his victory, he wrote the famous poem Ngachudrugma (the Sixteen legal Codes) and also had instituted the form of

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government called chhoesid nyiden (dual system of governance) - the secular and religious system of governance. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal went into a permanent retreat in 1651 after having overcome all the strifes and threats [6-7]. The secret of Zhabdrung's death was maintained for fifty-four years and officially announced only in 1705. Zhabdrung, a highly respected figure in the history of Bhutan, is credited with the achievement of consolidating the power and unifying Bhutan into a nation-state [8].

The dissertation attempts to discuss the emergence of Bhutan as a nation-state under Zhabdrung. It analyzes his system of governance and the political activities that contributed to the unification of the country's sovereignty [9]. The dissertation will also explore how the political affairs and traditions of Zhabdrung are still perceived to be practiced by the current administration [10].

The dissertation is divided into three chapters. Chapter One presents a historical overview of Zhabdrung's life in Tibet. It also encapsulates the information about the Zhabdrung's cause of leaving for Bhutan in 1616. The chapter also highlights the monastic education system and some of the changes he brought in monastic arenas. Chapter Two discusses the kind of tasks he performed in the fields of language, administration, military, law/discipline, land and taxation system, education, art and architecture, music. It also examines a series of internal and external conflicts and how Zhabdrung's confrontation and victory over enemies were enough to consolidate the power and security of the country. The methods Zhabdrung adopted in establishing the Chhoesid or the dual system of governance will also be discussed in this chapter. Chapter Three discusses the reason for Zhabdrung's entry into a permanent retreat and its significance and proceeds to investigate the ways through which the legacy of Zhabdrung was maintained after his demise by the successive rulers. The chapter also examines the reasons for maintaining the secrecy of Zhabdrung's death and its political value. Similarly, the discussion on some of the contributions by his successive rulers who served the country in different capacities to protect and preserve the country's sovereignty until the establishment of hereditary monarchy in 1907 will be discussed.

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The close textual analysis and a qualitative research approach using primary and secondary sources have been used to support the arguments and to analyze the tasks carried out by Zhabdrung to unify Bhutan and also to discuss his continuing legacy. Moreover, the data for the research is collected through the conduct of interviews. In doing so, the consideration is made to highlight the contributions of Zhabdrung, mainly for the cause of state formation.

Although Zhabdrung occupies a position of pivotal significance in the political and religious history of Bhutan and several scholars have already shed light on many aspects of his career, there is still a scope to re-assess his political career. A few analytical works on Zhabdrung's life have been published. Karma Phuntsho and Sonam Kinga have done pioneering research on the significance of the birth history of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Their works constitute an important resource for an understanding of the life and works of Zhabdrung after his coming to Bhutan and Zhabdrung's relationship with the contemporary ruler of Tibet (Phuntsho Namgyal). These two authors have also discussed the establishment of monastic institutions by Zhabdrung and their perceived value for political legitimation.

Ardussi John A has discussed the significance of various reform measures, introduced by Zhabdrung in political as well as religious domains. Amundsen Ingun Brunskeland has shed light on Zhabdrung's skills and talents in such fields as painting, drawing, carving, and sculpturing and his contribution to the development of Bhutanese art and culture in a journal article. Brunskeland has correctly pointed out that cultural reforms and developments witnessed during the era of Zhabdrung, served as the linchpin of the cultural identity of Bhutan. Dujardin Marc in his work "From Living to Propelling Monuments: the Monastery-Fortress (dzong) as Vehicle of Cultural Transfer in Contemporary Bhutan" noted that dzong, established by Zhabdrung as the seat of government, played a vital role in establishing the identity and sovereignty of the country. Karma Phuntsho in his book "The History of Bhutan" argues that dzong testifies to the geopolitical and military genius of Zhabdrung, as they met the security needs of the country. Zhabdrung built the fortresses on the strategic points such as at

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the confluence of rivers and crossroads, on hilltops and mountain from where it was convenient to fight and repel invaders.

Sonam Kinga in the book *The Biography of Zhabdrung* discusses the ways in which Zhabdrung overcame internal strifes and the external threats and consolidated the base of his power. The author also examines and understands Zhabdrung's permanent retreat and the establishment of a system of governance called *chhoesid nyiden* (dual system of governance) whereby power is divided into spiritual affair, administered by Je Khenpo (abbot) and the secular affairs, presided over by Desi (Debraja). Kinga explains that the institution of *chhoesid nyiden* (dual system of governance) and maintenance of secrecy about Zhabdrung's death facilitated the consolidation of the country's sovereignty and also the spread of Drukpa Teachings.

Bikrama's book *History of Bhutan* is concerned with the evolution of a political system in the early twentieth century, but it makes it clear that the root of many political reforms in the 20th century can be traced to Zhabdrug's policies and the system instituted by him in the seventeenth century.

It is obvious that several scholars in the recent times have addressed the important topic of Zhabdrung and his legacy, but it is still a highly understudied area in the West. The present dissertations seeks to fill a void in our understanding of the personality and politics of Zhabdrung by placing the evolution of his career in a historical context and providing an integrated analytical understanding of his life and times as well as his significance in the history of Bhutan.

# CHAPTER

# 1

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ZHABDRUNG'S LIFE IN TIBET

### 1.1. Zhabdrung: Birth and Early Life

Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was born at Ralung, Tibet, in 1594. (Fig 1.) He was a scion of the royalty, and his lineage entitled him to be appointed as the spiritual head of the Ralung monastery. He became the 18th abbot of the Druk Ralung monastery in Tibet before he embarked on the historical journey to Bhutan. He is widely regarded in Bhutanese tradition as the incarnation of Pal Yeshe Gonpo and Chenrezig (Avalokitesvara). Sonam Kinga mentions that though Zhabdrung was born in Tibet, his ancestral lineage could be traced to two men called Lha-ga and Lu-ga, who visited Tibet to present the holy image of Jowo Shakyamuni (Fig. 2.) from China. It was from Lha-ga that descended the Gya lineage and thrived till the time of Tsangpa Gyare (1161-1211). So, Tsangpa Gyare (founder of Drukpa lineage) is the direct line of descent where Zhabdrung's father Tenpai Nyima belonged.

As prophesied by Kinga, the first marriage of Sonam Pelgyi Buthri to Depa Phuntsho



**Fig.1.** Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-? 1651), the State-builder of Bhutan. (Source: Michael Aris, *The Raven Crown*, 1998.)[11]

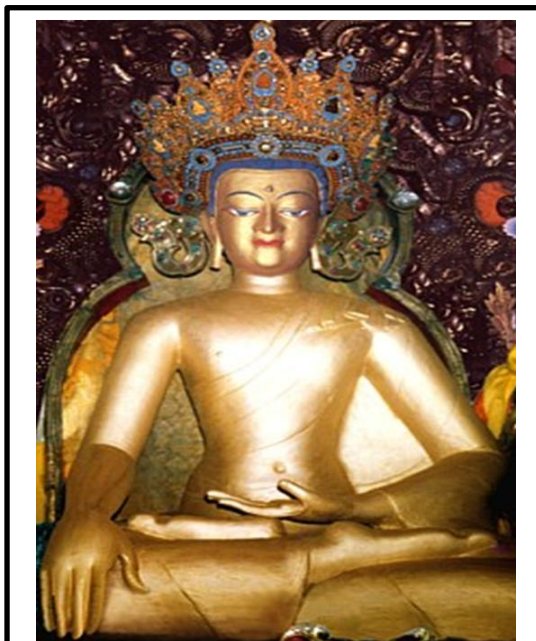
Namgyal of Dagpo Kuragpa was meant to be unsuccessful. Her life was predestined to be with Tenpai Nyima and she later gave birth to Prince Ngawang Namgyal. After her divorce, she left for Gardong Nyamrang to stay there and spend a life devoted to the practice of dharma. As destiny would have it, during her stay at Gardong, she met Tenpai Nyima and got married for the second time and conceived Prince Ngawang Namgyal. Soon

after conception, Sangay Dorji's narration is about the auspicious signs and the miracles shown within and outside the palace as a good gesture for the virtuous birth [12]. Thus, as desired, it was under such shimmering rays of the light, that the prince was born on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1594.

Soon after the birth of the prince, he was known by different names. Dudjom Doji and Ngagi Wangpo Nampar Gyalwa were the first names given to him that were based on the prophecies made by Guru Rinpoche and Kunkhyen Pema Karpo. But his grandfather, Mipham Chogyal named him Mipham Tenzin Dorji. Later, when the prince took the vows of Genyen (novice), his grandfather (Mipham Chogyal) named him as Ngawang Jigme Dragpa Chogle Nampar Gyalwai Pelzang. However, these names were condensed as Ngawang Namgyal.

Ngawang Namgyal grew up under the guidance of his parents. The Drukpa monastic community, the followers of Drukpa and the devotees all shared equal responsibilities in providing him with parental care. Their combined efforts helped to nurture and shape his personality and make him a very skilled and adept child. They did not confront any hardships in nurturing him, because he was a gifted child. He easily

developed mental, spiritual and physical strength and capability. The extraordinary traits of his personality are part of the Bhutanse lore. On one occasion, Zhabdrung said, "I am Drukchen Thamche Khyenpa (another name for Kuenkhyen Pema Karpo)," meaning the Great Drukpa, the all-knowing soul. This bears close resemblance to the childhood of the Buddha who is believed to have walked on the earth at the time of his birth and about whom the soothsayers said that he would be the cakravartin (universal ruler) or a universally recognized sage. It is believed that because of the power of this



**Fig.2.** Statue of Jowo Shakyamuni.  
(Courtesy: Google Image)

assertion (being the all-knowing soul) that he was recognized as an incarnation of Pema Karpo. Likewise, another reason to substantiate Zhabdrung as a reincarnation of Kuenkhyen is noticeable in the conversation that Pema Karpo had with his followers, in which he revealed the place of his future birth or incarnation [13]. Besides, the miracle manifested in his childhood confirms the reality of his incarnation and destiny in Bhutan. According to one legend, nobody would visit his place to make the offerings at night, yet, out of nowhere, often the cereals, flowers, rice seedlings, and grasses were found placed on the table of his bedroom, which seems to be his destiny in Bhutan. The cooked rice was often found in-between the gums of teeth, though no grain of rice was taken [4]. Such mystical signs anticipated that at any course, his undertaking would flourish in Bhutan. It was also a coincidence that Bhutan was known for an extensive paddy plantation at that time.

## 1.2. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and His Education

Zhabdrung received his education from an early age and he studied under many teachers. The most prominent teachers were his father Tenpai Nyima, his grandfather Mipham Chogyal, Yongzin Lhawang Lodro and Taktse Pekar (incarnation of Yongzin Ngagi Wangchuk). Under the supervision of his father, he learned the letters of u-chen, u-med, lentsa and vartu scripts [5, 14]. Under the guidance of these teachers Zhabdrung also became proficient in drawing, painting and sculpturing. At the age of eight, Zhabdrung took vows of genyen (novice) and admitted at Sewa Jangchubling under the tutelage of his grandfather. His education at Sewa Jangchubling continued till he was thirteen. He was trained to study the teachings of both early and later transmission of the Secret Mantrayana, says Kinga. In the same way, he also mastered the lesson in oral communications and instructions of the Drukpa tradition and the practices on upadesa (Mahamudra) and tsa lung [15]. As the central scholarship, he studied the disciplines such as Buddhist philosophy, sciences and tantric treatises.

When Zhabdrung was thirteen, he became the Throne Holder of the Kagyu tradition at Druk Ralung by succeeding his grandfather in 1606. It was at this time he set up Chogdra community mainly for lay practitioners and composed chayig (code of

conduct). Zhabdrung also continued his schooling till he was nineteen even after he was crowned as the Throne Holder of Drukpa Tradition. He gained mastery over grammar, poetry, and sciences under the tutelage of Yongzin Lhawang. From Dreyul Keytshel and Dagpo, he mastered the sciences of dialectics and mechanical arts [5]. Zhabdrung also engaged devotedly in meditation which was an integral part of the monastic education. So it was also important for Zhabdrung to invest his energy in meditation for entire day and night. The sorcery he mastered at the time of meditation became the tool for his victory during the Tibetan invasions.

### **1.3. Political Upheaval in Tibet and Zhabdrung Leaving for Bhutan**

Tibet became a center of political unrest from the mid-sixteen century till the early seventeenth century. It was at this time that the controversy concerning the reincarnation of Pema Karpo first arose. In 1610, the wish of Chongje Depa was rewarded by Tsang Desi Phuntsho Namgyal who recognized Pagsam Wangpo as Kunkhyen's incarnation. Zhabdrung wrote to the ruler of Tsang requesting to resolve the dispute fairly but Tsang showed his bias towards Chongje Depa. Chongje Depa was a powerful lord in central Tibet and thus, it was essential for him to retain Depa's political alliance. The rivalry regarding the identification of real incarnation was intense than any other. It was because of the identification of the embodiment that there was a long dispute of misunderstanding between Zhabdrung, Passam Wangpo and ruler of Tibet (Phuntsho Namgyal) on the subject to recognize the real incarnation of Pema Karpo. Though Zhabdrung was the real incarnation, Passam Wangpo, a false claimant, was recognized as an incarnate by Tsang ruler only because Passam Wangpo was his nephew [9]. It discouraged Zhabdrung and the dispute intensified when Zhabdrung came to know about the secret plan of the ruler of Tsang to attack him. Further, Zhabdrung was forced to relinquish the throne, pay indemnity and asked to surrender the sacred relic by the Tibetan ruler Tsang Desi.

A legend about the dream Zhabdrung in which he saw about the raven flying south throws light on the reason why he felt compelled to leave Tibet. The raven he saw in the dream was the protective deity who offered him a home and hearth at Bhutan. Believing

his dream and being caught in nasty and protracted disputes with Tsang Desi, Zhabdrung left Tibet. Reaching Bhutan, he soon founded the Cheri Monastery in Thimphu. It became the new base from where the Drukpa teaching flourished. Zhabdrung's coming to Bhutan did not occur just because of prophecies; indeed it was because of persuasion of Zhelngo Sithar (patron of Zhabdrung from Bhutan) who approached Zhabdrung and invited him to Bhutan. He told Zhabdrung the prevailing anarchy and political chaos in Bhutan under the dominance of petty rulers and repressive lamas (saints). Such circumstances made Zhabdrung decide to come to Bhutan.

Moreover, Zhabdrung's stay in Tibet involved the risk of unabatedly intense threats from his political foes and rivals. In 1616, Zhabdrung embarked on the historical journey from Tibet to Bhutan in order to escape various threats and danger [8]. Instead of surrendering the most sacred Drukpa relic, the Rangjung Kharsapani which was in his possession, to the ruler of Tibet, he brought it along to Bhutan [16]. Later, the bone relic became the leading cause of conflict that engendered many clashes between Tibet and Bhutan. Though several Tibetan forces attacked Bhutan, they were unsuccessful in undermining Zhabdrung's power, nor were they able to seize the relic. The relic was kept in secrecy and later placed in the Punakha Dzong.

#### **1.4. Traditional Scholarship in Pre-Zhabdrung's Era and the Changes Ensued during his Reign**

Before the introduction of modern education, a religious-oriented education structure played a significant role in Bhutan. Monasteries served as centres of education. The core learnings were the practices which were transmitted from generation to generation by intellectuals either in a written form or orally. The medium of instruction was classical Tibetan and in vernacular language [17]. The purpose for the education in the monasteries was for spiritual development. According to Yonten Dargye, "the ultimate purpose of monastic education was spiritual progress and what-ever the information and skill taught surrounded the spiritual realms. Thus was the monastic education different from the modern education system and the practices." In those days, rote

learning of religious scriptures was the primary form of practice. Students were taught to acquire skills that helped them develop spiritually. Besides learning ordinary arts, the students were engaged to study other parts of teaching concerning the karmic laws, including recognition of the realm of human birth and existence, cause and effect, and the making of Bodhicitta. The training of the mind and learning moral values and principles were also the focus of study. Thus, religious education during those times was mostly about the liberation of oneself from cyclic existence [18]. According to conventional historians, the texts comprised religious-based subjects such as; “chhoejung (religious literature such as Kangyur and Tengyur), namthar (religious biographies), gyalrab (historical chronicle), logy (records of chronicles), terma (treasure texts), srung (epics eg. Gesar of Ling), glu (folk songs), nyam gyur (religious poetry), nyan ngag (ornate poetry), karchang (catalogues), and tshig dzod (dictionary) [19].”

This pattern of teaching and learning has ceaselessly flourished in such religious centers of Bhutan as shedras (monastic college), drubdras (meditation center), and dratshangs (religious school), etc. The method of learning was standard in all the monasteries and taught in Choe-kye (Tibetan classical language). Besides daily spiritual practices, learning was also done through memorizing text, debate, contemplation, and exposition. Such trends of teaching prevailed until Zhabdrung introduced reforms in monastic schools [17]. After unifying different religious sects, he implemented the new approach of the system, which was accepted in all the monasteries of the country. The writing system in the monasteries was instituted, apart from the usual process of memorizing the religious texts. Through such initiatives, the curriculum which consists of religious rituals, painting, chanting, and meditation was expanded with the inclusion of subjects like grammar and prosody.

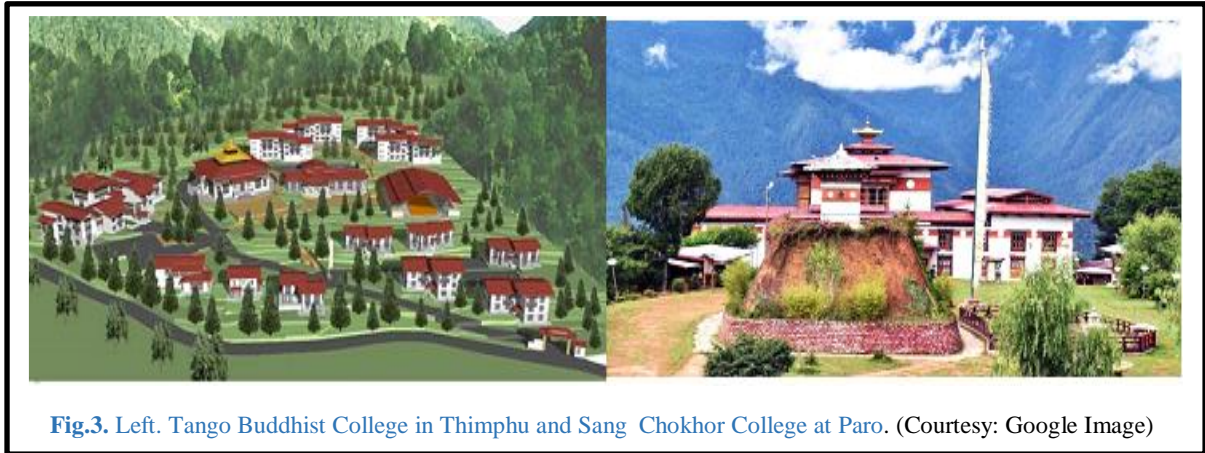
Education in the monasteries consisted of religious philosophies. Teaching and learning were centered on Buddhist beliefs and the teachings of Buddha. The topic of astrology was common in all the centers of spiritual education. Generally, they followed strict triadic activities in monasteries like learning through hearing (thos pa), reflection through thinking (bsam pa), and meditation through practice (sgom pa), which are

considered to be primary elements of learning from the time of inception [17]. Apart from other methods, memorizing prayers and relevant texts (verse by verse) was a prominent practice.

All the monasteries in Bhutan, which were centers of monastic education, are the pillars of sovereignty and provide Bhutan with a unique national identity withholding a cultural essence. Zhabdrung, developed synergy and mutually empowering relationship between the secular and religious affairs by introducing the dual administration known as the Chhoesid lugnyi, the system of governance sharing the equal power between the spiritual leader and secular leader.

The transformation of systems came in with the arrival of Zhabdrung in Bhutan. The new phase of the Buddhist philosophy took shape in 1616 CE. He established the Central Monastic Body (Zhung Dratshang) to initiate formal learning and scholarship in monasteries. He, later extended it by instituting many branches of religious bodies such as Rabde (monastic body), Dratshang (monasteries), Lobdra (monastic school), Gomdey (spiritual community), Shedra (Buddhist College), etc. He introduced centralized learning and emphasized on language, art, literature, and philosophy from spiritual-religious knowledge itself. It was with the establishment of the Chari monastery that the first Monk Body was formally instituted, and formal religious education began. It started from around 1622 CE after Zhabdrung ordained thirty regular monks in the monastery. From then onward, the number of monks began to rise drastically. There was an expansion in learning Buddhist philosophies. Throughout ages till Zhabdrung's rule, learning in Bhutan was ritualistic based on faith. However, now it offers graduate and postgraduate studies in Buddhism, unlike before. Tango Buddhist College (Thimphu) (Fig.3.left) and Sang Chokhor College at Paro (Fig.3.Right) are the institutes of higher learning in Bhutan. Both served as the seat for Buddhist masters in the past and continue to do so.

Sang Chokhor College is said to have adopted its curricula from the Nalanda University, India (5th Century CE) [20]. Today it has become a seat for part-time students, as Dzongkha lectures from different colleges across Bhutan would go to pursue degree



programs through the mode of distance education. Also, many civil servants who wish to pursue traditional studies visit the college. In a way, monastic or traditional learning contributed substantially to the preservation of the culture and identity, which was cherished from time immemorial. It facilitates the diffusion of moral, ethic, and philosophical teaching, which are enshrined in the Buddhist texts. Zhabdrung could unify all religious sects that prevailed in Bhutan during his time.

# CHAPTER

# 2

## ZHABDRUNG'S CAREER IN BHUTAN

### 2.1. Overcoming Internal and External Threats

The formation of Bhutan as a State occurred in phases. It started with the establishment of Buddhist theocracy in the 17th century. A hereditary monarchy was established in the early 20th century and finally in 2008 decentralization of power, leading to the process of democratization took place. Karma Ura has correctly noted that these changes were the result of the strength and resilience of the political institutions of Bhutan to respond to internal and external threats and ensure national security

Zhabdrung's arrival in Bhutan in 1616 helped transmit the teachings of Drukpa and the institution of dual systems (the secular and religious system of governance). He began the work of establishing monastic centers and visiting the sacred seats founded by his forefathers. He visited Paro accompanied by his devoted followers. It was the first time where Zhabdrung started his policy of 'geographical unification.'

In 1617 Zhabdrung received a letter from Kalyon Zugpopa, the ruler of Tibet, through his emissary in which he was criticised and his conduct and behavior were cited as main reasons for dispute between Tsang Desi and Densa Zhungpa (the administrator of Ralung) after his departure to Bhutan. The letter demanded the return of Rangjung Khasarpani (Fig.4.) along with other relics. Zhabdrung did not pay heed to the letter. He mentioned offensive points in

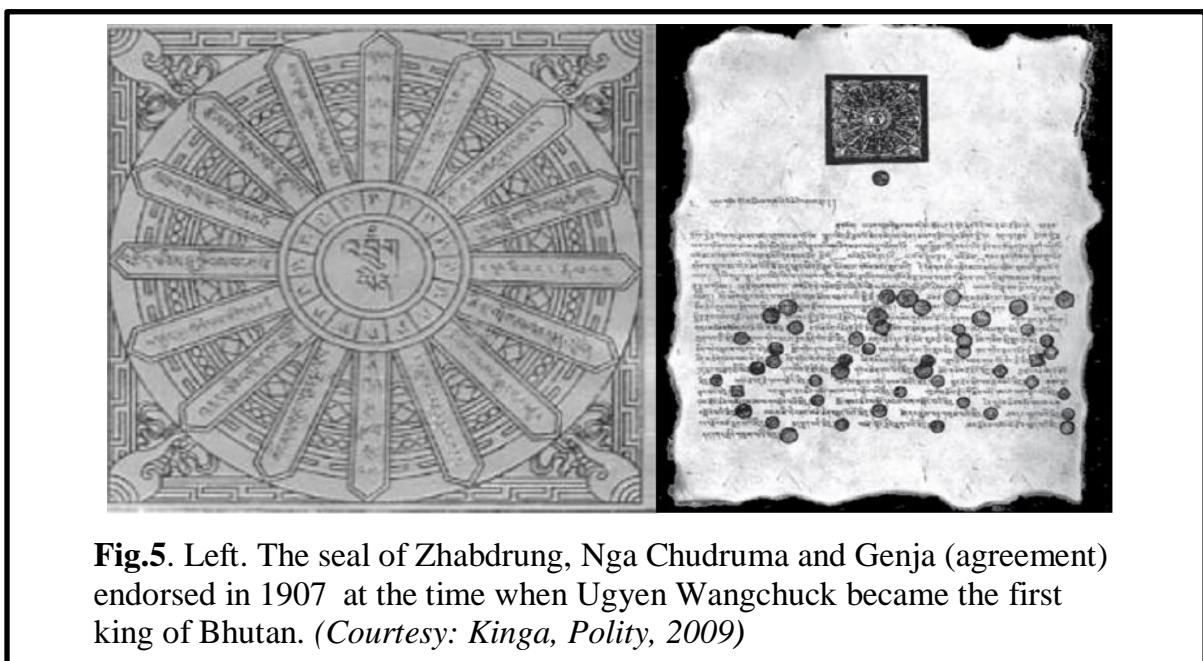


**Fig.4.** Ranjungkhasarpani, the self-emanated relic from the vertebrae of Tsangpa Gyare. (Courtesy: Kinga, Polity, 2009.)[5]

response and then instructed the emissary to deliver it to Tsang immediately [7]. The exchange of letters added an insult to injury. Upon the receipt of the letter, Tsang Desi was infuriated and immediately mobilized his troops to not only kill Zhabdrung but also to seize the whole of the country. He sent his general Laguna who was renowned for winning every battle he fought. However,

Zhabdrung won the battle and killed General Laguna.

After the victory over the first Tibetan invasion (1617), Zhabdrung and his troops returned to Thimphu. On their way back to Thimphu, it was at Kabji, and he meditated for three months after receiving a prophecy concerning the meditative accomplishment and spread of Drukpa teaching. Soon Zhabdrung entered into the cave to carry out the meditative task, and it was at this cave (Tango) that he is believed to have gained mastery over sorcery and cast a spell on Tsang Desi [9]. According to the Bhutanese tradition Zhabdrung by his sorcery brought death to Tsang ruler Phuntsho Namgyal and his wife. Thus as a token of appreciation for being victorious from the external threats (having killed his greatest enemy), he wrote the sixteen lines of verses known as Nga Chudrugm [5] (Fig.5.Left). The writing affirmed Zhabdrung as an unquestionable lineage holder of Drukpa and helped to spread the idea of proto-nationalism. His greatest achievement is inscribed in the form of the seal used as the national symbol in many official and important documents. The seal ironically reinforces and depicts Zhabdrung as the leading figure of Bhutan's polity. In short, it is through the seal Zhabdrung declared himself as the supreme lineage holder of Kagyu and the upholder of the sovereignty of the two traditions. After that, the seal became an important emblem for national identity. It was the same seal being used in the genja (Fig.5.Right) of 1907 at the time Ugyen Wangchuck became the King.



**Fig.5.** Left. The seal of Zhabdrung, Nga Chudruma and Genja (agreement) endorsed in 1907 at the time when Ugyen Wangchuck became the first king of Bhutan. (Courtesy: Kinga, Polity, 2009)

It was on the foundation of the religious/spiritual unity achieved by him that Zhabdrung wanted to bring about political unity. The foundation of Chagri Dudul Phodrang was laid on 21st May 1620 of the Iron Monkey year. Construction of the Chagri was his proclamation of the founding of the government.

By the early mid-seventeenth century, most of the lamas and lords within the Thimphu region were brought under the rule of Zhabdrung. After they submitted their power to Zhabdrung, the construction of the first Dzong Simtokha began in 1627. He built the Dzong at the confluence of the three valleys of Thimphu, Paro, and Punakha mainly for easy and better governance of the country. However, Zhabdrung faced stiff confrontation from the five groups of lamas who were collectively known as Lama Khag-nga – the lhapa, Barwapa, Chakzampa, Kathokpa and Nenyingspa. However, the combined forces of five lamas were defeated. Zhabdrung resumed his construction work and completed the dzong in 1630. After the construction of Simtokha Dzong in 1630, Chagri monastery and Simtokha became his principal abodes. It was at this busy hour in 1631, a son Jampel Dorji was born to them (Zhabdrung and his consort Goekar Drolma, 1606-1684) at Simtokha dzong.

Over time, Zhabdrung became so popular that his name and fame spread far and wide. His growing popularity helped him to build cordial relationships even with religious masters beyond Bhutan. Bhutan's friendly relationship with Sakya of Tibet and other religious leaders made Tsang ruler feel jealous (second Tibetan invasion, 1634) against Bhutan. Similarly, lama Lhapa and Nenyingspa became jealous of seeing the teaching of Drukpa flourish every day. They sought support from Tsang Desi and requested him to wage war against Zhabdrung. At once, the Tsang Desi Tenchong Wangpo launched an invasion from four directions (Gon, Paro, Bumthang, and Thimphu) supported by Lama Khag-nga [21]. However, it was in the short skirmish that the combined forces of the five lamas and Tibet were defeated [8] Therefore, the defeat of the Second Tibetan invasion (1634) to Zhabdrung proved advantageous as he was able to start establishing a monastic seat in Punakha without any confrontation as a center for spreading Drukpa teaching [22].

The foundation of Punakha Dzong was laid in 1637, the Fire-Ox year in Tibet's lunar calendar. It was built at the confluence of two rivers- Phochu (Male River) and Mochu (Female River). The construction work was completed in 1638 and it was indeed the greatest

triumph for Zhabdrung. He performed the consecration ceremony. Shortly after the consecration, the precious relic Rangjung Khasarpani was solemnized and put inside the chapel of Punakha dzong as the main relic. The first monastic community from Chagri and the Prince Jampel Dorji were also received at Punakha Dzong. It was at this time (1638) that Zhabdrung instituted the work of state-building for the first time with the institution of the formal administrative system. After that, the country of Lhomon Khazhi, the land of four approaches, become the Kingdom of Palden Drukpa [9].

The country was in shambles and thrown into utter confusion when Tibet launched its third invasion in 1639. Upon the request of a lamaist faction from Bhutan, a large army was sent to attack Zhabdrung and destroy two newly built dzongs, Punakha and Wangdiphodrang. The Tibetan forces easily sieged the dzongs, although the Bhutanese fought bravely. However, the war soon came to an end and Bhutan sustained only minor damages. The belief is that Zhabdrung went to Chagri monastery from where he cast a spell to punish and defeat the armies of Tibet. Nonetheless, starting from 1640, a new era of friendship started between Tibet and Bhutan after the exchange of the letter of peace and treaty [23]. Even the neighboring states of Kathmandu, Batgaon, Patan, Ladakh, Kham Derge and rulers of Kamata and Gadikha recognized Bhutan as a sovereign land under the rulership of Zhabdrung [23].

In 1641 Zhabdrung seized control over Do-ngon Dzong and renamed it as Tshichho Dzong soon after the consecration ceremony. It had served as the summer residence for the monastic community and still, it serves as the summer residence of Je Khenpo and the monastic body of Bhutan.

In order to promote knowledge of philosophical texts, a separate school of Buddhist philosophy was introduced. Zhabdrung invited reputed scholars and requested them to teach logic in this school. Khukhu Lopen, the Abbot of Serdogchen, was the one who came and taught metaphysics to the brightest students. Those students who excelled in studies were sent to different monasteries after their studies to further propagate his teachings. His teachings of Drukpa or Kagyu tradition are today the state religion of Bhutan.

It was from 1642 when Zhabdrung had a friendly relationship for some time with the new Tibetan government that he concentrated entirely on the works of making sacred relics and

artifacts [24]. However, their friendship was short-lived when Desi Sonal Chopel and Gushri Khan invaded Bhutan (Tibeto-Mongol) through Paro region in 1644. In this conflict Tibetan soldiers suffered defeat, partly due to hot summer weather that Tibetan soldiers found impossible to bear. They finally had to submit to Zhabdrung. Immediately after the defeat of the Tibeto-Mongol invasion in 1644, Zhabdrung visited Paro to inspect the construction site for Dzong. Zhabdrung performed a powerful ritual to appease the local deities and laid the foundation for Paro Dzong in 1644. Later in 1645, the monastic community performed drubchen coinciding with the consecration ceremony of the newly built Paro Rinpung Dzong. It was this time that Zhabdrung was able to bring control of the whole Paro valley and Paro Taktsang under his rule [25].

It was in the mid-seventeenth century after Zhabdrung lost his control over the Ralung Monastery that he decided to make an effort to expand the Drukpa state. He focused on unifying the Eastern regions as the west and center of Bhutan were already under control. Trongsa dzong became the central location from where the eastern regions were governed. The saintly figures of the eastern region readily submitted and paid obeisance to Zhabdrung's power and rule. Hence, with the strong tie of friendship sealed between Zhabdrung and the Eastern rulers, the task for Zhabdrung to unify the eastern regions became easier. Between 1647 and 1648, the regions of Kurtoe, Yangtse, Zhongar, Dungsam Dosum, and Khengrig Namsum were believed to have been brought under the control of Drukpa authority [25]. The petty opposition factions were easily defeated by the forces of Zhabdrung.

Meanwhile, the most arduous struggle that ensued was with Lama Nagseng from Merak in the east [26]. However, at the behest of Trongsa Penlop the rivals were defeated and the Tashigang Dzong was captured. Finally, the whole of eastern Bhutan was brought under the control of the Drukpa rule. At the same time, notwithstanding a long treaty of friendship between Gelugpa Government and Drukpa, an invasion was launched on Bhutan in the 10th month of 1648 [9]. The second Tibetan-Mongol invasion was well-planned and it involved sophisticated weapons as canons.. It is believed that the spiritual power of Zhabdrung and the intense cold of winter month forced Tibetan-Mongol army to abort their campaign. They were subsequently defeated. Following the victory over Tibetans, Zhabdrung along with the monastic community led the prayer ceremonies to the deities as a gesture of thanksgiving.

Later, this became a culture that came to be known as Punakha Domcho [27]. It is celebrated mainly once in every year to honor and pay reverences to the State-builder, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.

After defeating the Tibetan-Mongol forces, Zhabdrung started to perform the tasks in constructing the Dzong at southern Bhutan. After the construction, the Dzong was named Darkar Tashi Yangtse Dzong and therein, he appointed Tenpa Thinley as the first Penlop of Dagana. Thus, from then onwards, the rule of Zhabdrung and Drukpa traditions too spread in southern Bhutan.

## **2.2. Dzongs (Fortresses): The Fulcrums of Zhabdrung in the Formation of Nation-State**

Zhabdrung is not only remembered for formulating administrative structures but he was also a good architect. Dzongs (fortress) construction by Zhabdrung was another important event for state-building because dzongs housed both political and religious functions of the state. Zhabdrung built Dzongs at important places such as the confluence of rivers, hilltops, mountain spurs and crossroads as a protection from the invasion or antagonistic fronts. Some of them were solely built to tame the ill-spirited beings or ward off the evils [22]. Another reason for the construction was to signify the unification of the country's authority. They also represent the principal seat for Buddhist schools responsible for propagating the ideas of the religion [22]. Dzongs in ancient times were principally used as religious centers or institutions for monastic education. However, after Zhabdrung established a dual form of government the Dzong became center for administration. In 1629, Zhabdrung laid the foundation to build the first Dzong called Semtokha. The foundation work for the Punakha Dzong was laid in 1637. Among the many dzongs of Bhutan, Semtokha, Trongsa, Wangdue, Dagana, Paro Thimphu and Punakha at one point were considered vital since they housed the seats of high officials (Penlops and Dzongpons).

## **2.3. State-Building; Creation of Unique Identity**

Zhabdrung felt the importance that Bhutan has to be different from neighboring countries to preserve its religious practice and cultural identity. Therefore, he developed various customs, traditions, ritual ceremonies and festivals for Bhutan. The dress code, ritual, music, and

language were unique and peculiar from other neighboring countries. He was also the one to have redefined the national dress, as well, who have instituted tshechu festivals all over Bhutan. Zhabdrung's taxation model was the taxation protocol up to the reign of the Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the third king. However, the third king reformed some of the taxes (which were inconvenient) in the year of 1956. Codification of laws was one of the achievements that Zhabdrung did for the country. Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi is of the opinion that there was no specific set of laws practiced before Zhabdrung. It was Zhabdrung, who codified laws for the first time, to benefit the people and national security.

Zhabdrung's code of laws was modified many times subsequently, and this explains why the actual codification was completed only in 1652 during the rule of first Deb Umzed Tenzin Drugyel. Later in 1959, Bhutan endorsed the first law code Thrimzhung Chhenmo (the Supreme Law) based on the laws implemented by Zhabdrung. It covered a wide range of civilian codes with the inclusion of sections on marriage, theft, weight and measures, etc. Zhabdrung also developed a TsaYig (legal system) to bring all the local warlords under his control.

The separation of the administration into two traditions in the 1640s and forming the system of Chhoesid was the most significant contribution of Zhabdrung to the process state-building. The secular administrative and foreign affairs of the government were looked after by the Desi and spiritual affairs by the Jekhenpo. But Zhabdrung was the supreme head of the state. The trend of governing the country by Desi and Jekhenpo continued till Bhutan gave birth to the hereditary monarchy in 1907.

Another laudable initiative of Zhabdrung for state-building was introduction of a standing army. Since he did not have the regular troops, Zhabdrung built the system to recruit militias from villages for defense purposes. Bhutan in the later period formed the Royal Bhutan Army in response to threats imposed by the neighboring countries; however, the trend of gathering militias was not yet stopped. It was because of support from militias that Zhabdrung was successful in making the country emerge as a nation-state.

# CHAPTER

# 3

## Zhabdrung's Retreat and Expansion of Drukpa state

### 3.1 Permanent Retreat of Zhabdrung

The last phase of Zhabdrung's accomplishment was to go for the final retreat as per the prophecy of Guru Rinpoche. It is said that his mediation would stop the future war and help flourish his teachings. Even his tutelary deities and Sri Mahakala entreated him to act as per the prophecy. Thus, deciding to enter the retreat, he summoned his disciples Tenzin Drugyal and Drung Damcho. The last will he bequeathed to two of them was as follows: "Although I should speak to all the monastic officials, lama netens umdzes (cantor) of dratshangs (Mahavira) and the entire monastic community I don't feel well to do so. So you, the umdze must convey all my commands to them" [7]. Moreover, he gave every detail about the conduct of affairs of the kingdom. Having said, he entrusted the responsibilities of the state to Tenzin Drugyal by appointing him as the first Desi of Bhutan, whereas Drung Damcho was assigned to look after the monastic community and also as his attendant during the retreat. After entrusting administrative assignments, Zhabdrung entered into permanent retreat in 1651. Except for two of them, no one knew about his secret retreat. Everything was kept secret, and no one was given audience with him at the time of retreat. As a result, people were unaware of his death until it was officially announced in 1708. His death was unknown as there were Machen Zimpon (chamberlain) and Solpon (cook) appointed to attend the usual duty to Zhabdrung. The daily prayers and tradition of offering was carried out as usual in the morning and evening. This made people believe that Zhabdrung was still alive. It is said that the Tibetan government sent a spy to find out whether Zhabdrung was alive or dead, but when he saw the attendants of Zhabdrung carry out the usual chores of serving him meals, beating drums and chiming the ritual bell from inside his meditative cell, his apprehension was allayed and upon his return home he conveyed the news that Zhabdrung was in retreat. The secrecy of Zhabdrung's death that lay concealed for a long period of time, contributed to the perpetuation of his charisma which in turn led to the consolidation of the country's sovereignty. It also helped in the propagation of Drukpa Teachings.

The news about the demise of Zhabdrung was suspended for more than 50 years to avert the return of warlords and dynastic struggle [29]. That is why the exact date for the death of Zhabdrung is unknown. Several religious traditions and scholars have put forward their opinions. The 5th Dalai Lama (1617-1682) fixed 1651 as the year of the death of Zhabdrung's demise, as it was in 1651 that Zhabdrung entered into retreat and the sorcery performed by them against him in that year took effect. According to the Tibetan tradition the cause of Zhabdrung's death was spell or sorcery cast on him by Tibetans. Some Tibetans believe that he died due to sudden seizure while bathing in the Chupho hot-spring or because of mixing poisonous elements in the water. But the information in 'lho'i chos' byung and the Biography of Gyalse Dungzin Tulku by the 10th Je Khenpo (Penchen Tenzin Chogyal) refute these claims of Tibetan source. The biography written by Tenzin Chogyal talks about the return of Zhabdrung from the hot-spring and notes that he performed the propitiation prayer for the protective deity Palden Lhamo. It was then in 1651 before Zhabdrung entered a retreat that the message and congratulatory gifts were sent to Druk Namgyal for having designed the proper layout for the Daga Dzong construction. It is apparent that Tibetan records about Zhabdrung's death in 1651 lack credibility.

### **3.2 Post Zhabdrung Era: Second Phase of State-Unification by Successive Rulers**

The death of Zhabdrung was shrouded in secrecy for many reasons. One reason was due to the concern of continuation of his legacy. If the death of Zhabdrung was revealed, succession struggle, jeopardising his legacy of political and spiritual unification would have ensued and torn the country asunder as was the case in Tibet. [30]. Besides, it would have caused political instability to his heir-apparent Jampel Dorji who had yet to consolidate his power. Tshokey Dorji, the daughter of Jampel Dorji, who was supposed to succeed, passed away in 1650 in her infancy. His second wife also bore a daughter. Moreover, in 1681, before the lid of secrecy on Zhabdrung's death was taken out, the only heir to the throne Jampel Dorji also passed away, leaving behind no successor to the throne. However, their successive mind and speech reincarnations (Zhabdrung and his son Jampel Dorji) were born who served the country in different capacities either as religious figures or as the political leaders until the establishment of

hereditary monarchy in 1907 [6, 31]. According to later historians, Tenzin Rabgay (Zhabdrung's relatives by lineage) replaced the lineage of Zhabdrung as Gyaltsheb or prince regent and after him, the lineage of Kuenga Gyaltsheb (1689-1714) as Zhabdrung's incarnates assumed power. It was during Kuenga Gyaltsheb's reign that the secrecy of Zhabdrung's demise was announced officially [6]. According to many contemporary hagiographers, Zhabdrung woke up from his meditative posture, emitting rays of light from his body as and when his death was announced. The three rays traveled to Sikkim, Dagana and Tibet, leading to the birth of three incarnations viz; body, speech and mind, which later reappeared into multiple incarnations. Chogley Namgyal (1708-36), who was enthroned as third state leader was the Sungtrul speech incarnation of Zhabdrung from Dagana. A few years later, the incarnation of Tenzin Rabgay named Mipham Wangpo was born (1709) [6]. Likewise, in 1717, Jigme Norbu, the younger brother to Mipham Wangpo, was born as the incarnation of Kuenga Gyaltsheb, or otherwise, he was also considered as the incarnation of Zhabdrung's son Jampel Doji [6]. By this time, four incarnation lines became significant in Bhutan [32]. One was from Tenzin Rabgay's line what was called Tritrul incarnation of throne-holder or the Gyalse Trulku, the prince incarnate. The other three were those whose origin was traced to Zhabdrung himself called Chogtrul, the supreme incarnate, and another was from the origin of Kuenga Gyaltsheb and Chogley Namgyal. Incarnations from the four incarnate hierarchs were occupants of Gyaltsheb's seat (prince regent) alternatively. Therefore, it was from these four incarnate hierarchs that the multiple incarnations were born.

The ascension of Jamyang Tenzin to the throne in the mid-twentieth century broke the incarnate hierarch tradition for the first time, since Jamyang Tenzin does not belong to any of four incarnate lines. By the year 1850, the regal incarnation of Zhabdrung died with a sign never to be reborn. Following the year 1851, the case with Tenzin Rabgay's incarnate was the same. Likewise, Jampel Dorji's (Zhabdrung's son) incarnation was never recognized after the last one had died in 1833 [32]. However, two lines of incarnations of Zhabdrung (mind and speech) were active until the end of the nineteenth century [33]. The desi Yeshe Ngodup (1851) was the speech incarnation of

Zhabdrung and ascended to the throne in 1903 as the last desi by Ugyen Wangchuk, few years before Bhutan gave birth to the hereditary monarchy.

The country was also engulfed in chaos, and political confusion while these incarnates contested for power and authority. Numerous persons, claiming to be incarnates caused constant conspiracies and civil war, and under these circumstances it became increasingly difficult for religious leaders and the civil officials to identify the real incarnation. Jigme Namgyal (1825-81), the father of the first king Ugyen Wangchuk rose to power proving victorious by breaking the cycle of conflict. After he negotiated tensions between the two power blocs (Thimphu and Punakha Desis) was the reason for him to become the central figure of Bhutanese politics [34]. He assumed the position of Penlop in 1853 and seized power in his hands. As desired, on 17 December 1907, there was the establishment of a new political system in Bhutan. It was the commencement of hereditary monarchy and ushered Bhutanese polity into a new era of modernity.

On 2 November 2008 Bhutanese polity witnessed the beginning of the Democratic Constitutional Monarchy in Bhutan. On this day the crown prince, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck was conferred with dar na nga (five silken scarves) at machhen (sacred remains) lakhang of Zhabdrung Rinpoche [5]. His enthronement marked the start of the Democratic Constitutional Monarchy for the first time in Bhutanese history. It should not be forgotten that these monumental reforms have root in chhoesid zungdrel, a union of secular and spiritual affairs, established by Zhabdrung.

Jigme Wangchuck (1926-1952) came to the throne as the second king of Bhutan in 1926 when he was twenty-four. Like his father, he brought changes in the administrative and taxation system. During his reign, the number of government officers was reduced and this reduction of officers minimized the burden on people. One needs to remember that the state expenditure was defrayed from tax gathered from the people. He established a formal military training center and as well as introduced reforms and advanced monastic education started by Zhabdrung.

Of all the kings, the third king Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1952-1972), is honored for the changes he brought in social and economic spheres. Because of the three successive five-year plans that were initiated by him was the reason for the greatest developments taken place during his reign. Followed by the fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck (1972-2006) was at his reign; the socio-economic progress and participation in diplomatic and international affairs gained momentum at large. Besides his emphasis on modern education, health and communication, he is well regarded for the expansion of the philosophical idea called GNH, which stands for Gross National Happiness. It was introduced in the 1970s. Moreover, it was his initiative that helped Bhutan adopt a democratic constitutional monarchical form of government.

The fifth king Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (1980-till date) has carried forward the legacies of his royal ancestors and introduced many new ideas into the Bhutanese polity. His initiative in institutionalizing Dessung (Guardian of Peace) and Galsung National Service (official announcement during 112th National Day, on 17 December 2019) is similar to that of collected militias at the time of Zhabdrung.

### **3.3 Zhabdrung's Legacies in Continuum**

The political system founded by Zhabdrung has withstood the ravages of time and survived. According to contemporary historians, the reason for the continuity of Zhabdrung's legacy can be attributed to the faith of succeeding rulers in Zhabdrung's polity. All the incarnations from four incarnate hierarchs were recognized to be the manifestation of the universal monarch or the Avalokiteshvara. Moreover, to maintain the rightfulness and legitimacy, the appointment of the state head became necessary.

The current political structure and governing systems of Bhutan also appeared as responses to the both internal and external threats, as the rulers believed that without introducing political and social reforms the identity, and national unity could not be preserved. Ritual performances were considered as integral to the country's cultural identity, and the rulers of Bhutan from Zhabdrung to the present day have endeavoured to perpetuate and advance them.

Similarly, Zhabdrung's reign witnessed growth of creativity in the field of art and crafts, including painting and leathering of bamboos, and in subsequent centuries the creative power of the Bhutanese people was crystallized in the form of the institution of thirteen crafts. Zhabdrung also systematized legal codes and unification of the nation under a dual (religious and secular) system of government. The contemporary administrative structures, formulation of laws, and policies do have immense influence by the dual system, which accounts for King as head of state and Je-Khenpo as chief Abode of Monastic Body (Karma Phunthso). The contemporary development of the Constitution of Bhutan is based on Zhabdrung's association in the code of conduct, Lha-Choe-Gaywa chu, and Me-Choe-Tsangma-Cudru.

The Nga Chudruma, Sixteen Legal Codes of Zhabdrung, written in poetic form, represents one of the major political and cultural symbols of Bhutan [9]. It was engraved on an official seal and was used in every important official documents, constructions. Dzongs, symbolizes the architectural representation of Zhabdrung's power and is still being used as an administrative center or the seat of government.

According to Tashi Wangchuk, the system of written and spoken language is the same as it was during the reign of Zhabdrung. He mentions some changes that might have taken place with the passage time, yet the standard point of reference for the language of Bhutan is Zhabdrung's systematization of language and writing system of Bhutan. To quote Michael Aris, "with only a few minor changes and some additions, the offices created by Zhabdrung are essentially those which survive today in the structure of the modern government."

Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal arrived in Bhutan when there was the greatest turmoil, social disorder and instability in the country. He selflessly played a critical role in carrying out the tasks for the country. He dedicated his life to the task of advancing Bhutanese civilisation and overcame many invasions and crises to maintain the integrity and sovereignty of the country. It is indeed remarkable that his various initiatives are still remembered with respect and the country is committed to the task of carrying forward his legacies.

Though there was a major shift in the structure of governance in 1907, yet, it was in many ways the continuation of the ideas of Zhabdrung's political system. The Government of Bhutan always tries to maintain continuity with the past. Therefore, it was even under the leadership of the monarch, the legacies of Zhabdrung and the system he instituted continues to be honored and practiced. For instance, the system of dzong administration is still intact. One of the influences that had come down from Zhabdrung to the present political system is the union and the integration of state and the Buddhist monastic institution. The political system of Bhutan is so unique that the sacred and profane or political and religious domains are never separated. Therefore, the state has to support to carry out the activities of the Buddhist monastic institution, as these two are like two wings of a bird or two wheels of a cart, maintaining balance and equilibrium.. It is for these reasons that religious rituals are conducted under the sponsorship of the state.

Legal codes, procession ceremony and existing monastic institution are also surviving legacies of Zhabdrung [35]. Though the procession ceremony (Childrel) was instituted before Zhabdrung came to Bhutan, Zhabdrung was credited for introducing various prominent rituals and systematizing them. Later these religious entities (rituals, religious items and dances) facilitated emotional integration of the people of Bhutan and provided Zhabdrung a serene platform to execute the works for state legitimatization. The establishment of a dual system-the the secular and religious system of governance is the most influential contribution of Zhabdrung that continues to survive in the present political system.

# CONCLUSION

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**Conclusion****CONCLUSION**

Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was one of the prominent political figures of Bhutan in the 17th century. He is well-regarded as the unifier of Bhutan into a nation-state. He assumed power for thirty-five years (1616-1651), and during this period he stabilized the country's sovereignty, identity, and power. Even though he was born in Tibet, he left for Bhutan in 1616 AD. The rivalry regarding the identification of true incarnation made him quit Tibet for Bhutan. Besides, it may have been due to the childhood prophecies about his to Bhutan that his father and grandfather prepared him mentally to undertake the journey to Bhutan and become the successor of Ralung Monastery. It was after the demise of his grandfather he became the 18th prince-abbot of Ralung at the age of twelve.

Upon arrival in Bhutan, Zhabdrung's power surpassed other political figures he incurred jealousy and resentment of valley chiefs and saints. It was for these reasons Zhabdrung faced a series of internal and external threats. However, he overcame these challenges, and with his resolute will and determination he accomplished the task of territorial unification and promotion of political unity under Drukpa. He put to an end to the series of political upheaval in Bhutan due to his military genius and political insight. Some of his adversaries submitted to him voluntarily. He successfully unified the warring valley kingdoms under a single rule and made the nation-state stable.

After Zhabdrung arrived in Bhutan, he introduced the dual system of governance called the Chhoesid (Spiritual and Religious tradition) as per the Tsa Yig, legal code. The governance system had two equal power centers to control the country; a spiritual leader (Je Khenpo) and Desi, the political leader. The trend in Bhutan to be governed by the Desis continued until the enthronement of Ugyen Wangchuk as the first King in 1907. The form of government (theocracy) he instituted was operational till 1651, and it was from then onward witnessed fragmentation. Nonetheless, Bhutan observed different expressions of political arrangements that were founded on Zhabdrung's fundamental ideas. So, Bhutan's polity after that became unitary connecting the politics

## Conclusion

of the past and the present. The national politics that emerged so far in Bhutan has managed to sustain in the name of Zhabdrung.

Furthermore, the Drukpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism flourished in Bhutan through Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. He fashioned religious and cultural practices in different forms. He created new national emblems and symbols that helped to protect the country's independence. Therefore, it was through the creation of the symbols of Bhutanese identity that he was able to unify Bhutan into a nation-state. Among the many symbols of the significant deeds of Zhabdrung was to make religious education the dominant practice. The opening of the Buddhist learning centers by Zhabdrung, such as universities, monastic schools, and colleges, stands out as a living manifestation of Bhutan's rich spiritual heritage and civilizational pride. He introduced new learning to help sustain the Buddhist education and it was under his supervision that the Drukpa teaching became so prominent in Bhutan. So, he is appreciated and remembered for the establishment of monasteries and the spread of Drukpa teaching. Today it has become the state religion. It was through spreading of singular kind of teaching that Zhabdrung promoted the sense of unity and nationalism among the people. The jury systems in Bhutan were systematized after Zhabdrung formulated the laws. It has helped to prevail justice, peace and order in the society. His laws become the foundation for the formulation of the legal system in subsequent years.

The dzongs constructions symbolically remark tasks of Zhabdrung's unification of the state. He built Dzongs right after the defeat of enemies to signify the victory and supremacy. It was through the construction of dzongs that Zhabdrung's political dominance and the establishments of reliable political power were successful. Later it has become the tangible cultural heritage of Bhutan. Dzongs functioned as the seats where Zhabdrung often held his authority. It also had held the offices of district administrative heads and served the functions of the monastic body. Later it had played vital roles in establishing the identity and sovereignty of the country. Today, it continues to house the offices of the government and as well as the monastic body. Therefore, the constructions of dzongs were one means for Zhabdrung to unify the state.

## Conclusion

Subsequent to the achievement of political unification Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal went into permanent retreat in 1651. He also successfully overcame all the strifes before going into retreat and made the Drukyul into a strong and unified country. It was because of the geopolitical insight and strategic genius of Zhabdrung that numerous petty rulers were pacified and Bhutan emerged as a centralized state. The secrecy of Zhabdrung's death was kept under the lid of secrecy for fifty-four years under the pretext that he was in strict meditation. The secrecy was maintained because of the danger of the reappearance of dynastic struggle and a return of the power of warlord. The death of Zhabdrung was formally announced in 1705, fifty-four years after his death. Zhabdrung was the first to consolidate the power and to unify Bhutan as a nation-state. After him, the coming of successive Desis to the post and institutionalizing of the monarchy system (1907) helped to sustain both religious and the political policies initiated by Zhabdrung. Zhabdrung left behind a rich legacy of virtuous deeds for Bhutan and Bhutanese people.

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Tashi Wangchuck Khenpo at Minjey Central School

Pasang Tshering Khenpo of University of Buddhist Studies at Tango

Karma Chopel Lecturer at University of Buddhist Studies at Tango

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