

Dungkhar Ugyen Choeling Gonpa: A Temple that was Built with Gifted Stones

Dorji S & Dorji Phuntsho

Abstract

Bhutan is blessed to have historically significant temples and monasteries that are centuries- old. Such religious infrastructures play a vital role in the social, religious, and cultural identities of the community around and all over Bhutan. As such, Pemagatshel has both recent and ancient Gonpas (མགོན་པོ་ mgon pa), which are very sacred and culturally poignant to the community though not known to many. One such is Dungkhar Gonpa which is in Khar Gewog. Therefore, this paper attempts to narrate the oral accounts of the Gonpa, its histories and anecdotes for the benefit of people with similar interests and, of course, posterity.

Keywords: *History, Saints, Temple, Myths, Legends, Festivals, Culture, Tradition*

Introduction

During the early 12th to 17th century C.E., there was an influx of Buddhist saints and masters belonging to various sects or schools from Tibet to Bhutan. According to Dargye (2008), they were attracted to Bhutan either by the great pilgrimage sites of Padmasambhava or by the search for local patronage and recognition, while some intruded into the sacred valleys of Bhutan to escape the turmoil of Tibetan politics. Bhutan then in any circumstances was very fortunate to have been blessed by many renowned masters and saints, like Phajo Drugom Zhigpo (པ་ཇོ་འབྲུག་གློ་མ་ཞིག་པོ་ *pha jo 'brugsgomzhigpo*, 1184–1251 / 1208–1275), Kunkhyen Longchen Rabjam (ཀུན་མཁྱེན་ལོང་ཆེན་རབ་བྱམས་ *kun mkhyen klongchen rab 'byams*, 1308-1363), Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (ཞབས་དྲུང་ངག་དབང་རྣམ་རྒྱལ་ *zhabsdrung ngagdbang rnamgyal*, 1594–1651), etc. All of the saints and masters had some impact on the religious, social, cultural, and political developments in Bhutan. Most of these saints, masters, and

lamas came to western Bhutan but few have travelled to the far east of Bhutan and established seats. They also founded temples and monasteries in a number of their destined places.

One of the masters and a great Buddhist luminary, who made immense contributions in eastern Bhutan was Yab Tenpai Nyima (ཡབ་བློན་པའི་བྱི་མ་ - *yab bstanpa'i nyi ma*, 1567 1619) also known as Mipham Tenpai Nyima (མི་ཕམ་བློན་པའི་བྱི་མ་ - *mi pham stanpa'i nyi ma*). One of the prominent places in the east was Dungsam (གདུང་བསམ་ - *gdung bsam*) present day known as Pemagatshel (པད་མ་དགའ་ཚལ་ *pad ma dga-tshal*). The word 'Dungsam' was recorded and widely used since the time of the First Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (Wangdi, 2003). Some of the sacred monasteries and temples of Pemagatshel (Dungsam) region are Yongla Gonpa founded by the great Nyingmapa Master, Jigme Jangchub Gyeltshen also known as Kheydrup Jigme Kuendel, KheriGonpa and Dungkhar Gonpa. Most of the temples and monasteries of the region later gave rise to ruling families and occupied an important place in the Bhutanese history-politically, socially, and even culturally. Amongst the many temples and monasteries, Dungkhar Gonpa is believed to be the oldest and built by an important figure, Yab Tenpai Nyima from Tibet. The Gonpa is located on a ridge measuring about 6800 feet above sea level in a secluded place called Dungkhar. It is a day's walk from the Khar village under Pemagatshel Dzongkhag¹ (District) in eastern Bhutan and it's about an hour's walk from the recently constructed farm road. The very name of the Gonpa must have given the name "Dungsam" to the region as it is still known to the people but tradition maintained in the villages does not conform to the conclusion.

Brief History of Dungkhar and Dungsam

What makes Dungkhar Gonpa very sacred and different is the right whorled Conch, which according to the belief is very rare and precious to possess. In Sharchokpa

¹Bhutan is divided into 20 Dzongkhags for administrative convenience. Pemagatshel is one of the smallest Dzongkhags (Districts) in Bhutan and it has 11 Gewogs (Blocks).

(Easterner's) dialect or sometimes known as Tshangla², conch is called as **Dungkar** (གདུང་དཀར་ - *gdungdkar*). This sacred and precious Conch is believed to have been discovered like a treasure from the very lake (མཚོ་ - *mtsho*) **Dungtsho Karmathang** by treasure discoverer, Terton (གཏིར་སྟོན་, *gter ston*) **Pema Lingpa**³(པདྨ་ལིང་པ་ *pad ma gling pa*, 1450-1521). Aris (1979) has also mentioned the arrival of Pema Lingpa to Dungsam during his journey to the east as far as Tawang in modern day Arunachal Pradesh⁴. He travelled to the east in 1507 on the invitation of the King of Shar Dongkha. Aris (1979) has also quoted from the biography of Pema Lingpa that he met the king of Dongkha with fifteen horsemen and soldiers wearing armour at **Dungtsho Karmathang** after thirteen days of the journey. King **Jo phag Darma** of Shar Dongkha first met Pema Lingpa in 1504 while the former was constructing the **Tamzhing** temple in **Bumthang**.

Although this temple is situated in the Dungsam region, there is no tradition conforming to the name of **Gonpaas Dungkhar** as per its location - Dungsam. It is conclusive that the name of the **Gonpais** derived from the sacred and precious conch which is preserved dearly in the **Gonpa**. But on the origin of the name **Dungsam**, two different traditions are passed over generations. One tradition maintained in the region tells that three ridges in the area resemble a conch (གདུང་དཀར་- *gdung dkar*) in shape. According to **Wangdi** (2003), a conch is called 'Dung' in the region and 'Sam' means three and so the name as **Dungsam** (Three Conches). The other tradition mentions that long ago there was a lake called **Dungtsho Karmathang** over a hill overlooking the **Khar** village. Once the lake began to dry up, there appeared settlements on the very place of the dried lake. The people who settled at the dried lake were called **Dungtshopa**- people of **Dungtsho** and **Dungsampa** is a corrupted form of 'Dungsapa' which is also a corrupted form of **Dungtshopa** (**Wangdi**, 2003). Community believe that the name of **Gonpa** is a corrupted form of **Dungkar**. However, the name of **Gonpa** may have derived after

²Descendents of Tsangma, who founded ruling clans in the east are considered as speakers of Tsangla

³One of the five sovereign Terton and born in the Nyo family of Bhel region, in Tang, Bumthang

⁴Arunachal Pradesh is one of the states of India situated towards the North-Eastern part of Indian Sub-Continent

combining ‘Dung’ and ‘Khar’ (མཁར་- *mkhar*) the name of the adjoining village. Whether the name originated from the three conch-shaped hills or the settlement upon the drying of the lake is difficult to ascertain in the absence of literature and scanty oral traditions.

Another luminary who visited the eastern region was Lhasay Tsangma⁵ (ལྷ་སྐལ་གཙང་མ། *lhasrasgtsang ma*). His descendants started many ruling families or clans in eastern Bhutan. The palaces or castles built for Lhasay Tsangma were called “Khar”⁶. One of the Khars built for Tsangma was Jamkhar in Trashy Yangtshi. According to Aris (1979), clan principalities had well-recognized borders (*samtshams*) and kings of these principalities ruled their territories from defensive buildings called ‘Royal Castles’ (*rgyal-mkhar*). In both versions, *khar* connotes their capitals or centre of administrations. Most ruling chieftains that descended from Tsangma lived and commanded their territories from the Khars. The village name with *Khar* suffix conforms the visit of Tsangma and the establishment of a local chieftain in the Dungsam region.

Journey of YabTenpai Nyima to Bhutan

When Dungscho Karmathang lake dried up and settlements began, it is believed to be blessed by the visit of Yab Tenpai Nyima. He was a son of Mipham Chogyal (མི་ཕམ་ཚོས་ལྷུ་ལ་ - *Mi-phan chosrgyal*- 1543-1604) the 17th Prince-Abbot of the Drukpa (*brugs pa*) school based at Ralung (ར་ལུང་ - *ra lung*) in Tibet. Yab Tenpai Nyima was married to Sonam Pelgi Buthrid (*bSod-nams dPal-gyi Bu-khrid*) and they had a son Ngawang Namgyel, who was recognized as the reincarnation of Kuenkhyen Padma Karpo⁷ (ཀུན་མཁྱེན་པད་མ་དཀར་པོ། *kun mkhyen pad ma dkarpo* 1527–1592 CE).

⁵Son of King Thrisong Detsen of Tibet who was exiled to Bhutan by his brother Langdarma as part of his plan to take over the throne

⁶Legends maintained in Trashiyangtshi district today say that people of Jamkhar (*byams mkhar*- easy castle) built a castle for Tsangma in agreeing to be their rulersaying it is easy (*byams*) to build

⁷He was a greatest Drukpa school saint-scholar and was recognized as the reincarnation of Tsangpa Gyaray, the founder of Drukpa School in Tibet

According to Aris (1979), Ngawang Namgyel was born in 1594 at the ancestral monastery of Gardrong (*mGar-grong*) in Tibet near the oldest foundation of his school at Druk Jangchubling (འབྲུག་ཇུང་ཚུབ་གླིང་- *brugbyang-chub-gling*). Ngawang Namgyel came to Bhutan in 1616 and unified the country under the centralized rule of the Drukpa School, defeating all other rival sects in Bhutan. There is little or no information about Yab Tenpai Nyima perhaps because his father Mipham Chogyel always looked upon to his grandson Ngawang Namgyel as successor than his son. In the absence of records, his reasons for his coming to Bhutan and particularly his visit to Dungsam region remain obscure. The oral tradition maintained by the people in the Dungsam region only tells of his visit to the place. In such ambiguity, assumptions that Mipham Chogyel may have also left for Bhutan along with his son Zhabdrung on the issue of real reincarnation of the omniscient Padma Karpo. In Tibet, there was a controversy in the recognition of the reincarnation of Kuenkhyen Padma Karpo. Although Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was recognized as the true reincarnation and was contested by a rival claimant. Yab Tenpai Nyima was even invited by the rival claimant's parents, the hereditary prince of Chong Ja (*phyong-rgyas*) to give recognition. He conducted various tests but failed, yet he gave polite tonsure and named him as Pagsam Wangpo (Aris, 1979, p.206). But, taking into consideration of Zhabdrung's half brother, Tenzin Drugdra's (discussed below) birth year (1602) to the actual escape year of Zhabdrung in 1616 loosely indicate that Yab Tenpai Nyima's coming to Bhutan much earlier than hitherto assumed. And these need thorough research and study.

It is conclusive that Yab Tenpai Nyima did not live long in Bhutan and went back to Tibet because records mention of his passing away in Tibet. This can be corroborated from an account of Zhabdrug Rimpoche's episode of the plan in bringing the holy remains of his father to Bhutan. There is an account where Zhabdrung heard of his father's death in Tibet and he secretly prepared to bring his father's corpse (སྐུ་གདུང་ - *sku gdung*) to Bhutan. He built a Cheri (ཚུགས་རི་ - *lcags ri*) Monastery in the valley of present-day Thimphu District to preserve the ashes of his father. So, from this very account, it is logical to conclude that Tenpai Nyima

has returned to Tibet. The assumption of his travel back to Tibet could have been to continue the legacy of the Drukpa school and take the reins in his hand of the Drukpa seat at Ralung, he being a son of Mipham Chogyal.



Fig. An Old Picture of Temple



Fig.2. Gangtey Trulku

(Photo Credit: <https://dungkhar.weebly.com/gallery.html>, dated 22/4/2019)

Founding of Dungkhar Lhakhang

There are different accounts on the founding of Dungkhar Gonpa. The first oral account tells us that the youngest son of Lhasey Tsangma has founded the temple. The other account mentions that a person named Norbu, who was the great great grandson of Pema Lingpa established the temple upon his being appointed as the lama. The third account is that Yab Tenpai Nyima, during his visit to the Dungsam Region particularly (Dungtsho Karmathang) founded the temple. He not only founded the Gonpa for the people but also fathered a son in a local lady, Ani Choney Wangmo, a sister of Norbu's - the grandson of Khedrup Kinga Wangpo, one of the sons of Terton Pema Lingpa. A son, whose name was Tenzin Drugdra born to a local lady, is mostly mistaken by the Bhutanese as Tibetan. He was born in 1602, corresponding to the 10th Rabjung of the Water Tiger year of the lunar calendar. In most accounts, there is a mention of Tenzin Drugdra as an illegitimate son of Yab

Tenpai Nyima. In Lopon Pema Tshewang's History of Bhutan-Druk Selwai Dron Me (འབྲུག་གསལ་གཤིལ་རྫོན་མེ - *bruggsalb'Isgron me*), there is a mention of Tenzin Drugdra having a facial resemblance with Zhandrung Ngawang Namgyel (ཞབས་རྒྱལ་དབང་ལྷ་སྐུ་ལ་, *zhabsdrung ngagdbang namrgyal*, 1594–1651). Tenzin Drugdra is believed to have gone to Tibet at a very young age because by then Tibet had been considered a destination to undertake religious studies. Dorji (1994) rather tells that he was taken to Tibet particularly to Druk Ralung at a young age to study under his ancestors. So, it reasonable to say that he has gone to Tibet and later returned to Bhutan. Tenzin Drugdra occupied a very important post and steered the loosely confederated nation as second Druk Desi (འབྲུག་ཟེ་མིང་; *'brugsde-srid*) from 1656 till his sudden death in 1657.

An oral account maintained in Dungsam (གདུང་བསམ་-*gdungbsam*) region tells that when Yab Tenpai Nyima thought of settling in one of the places in Dungsam region. However, he decided not to settle as he was disheartened because there was no water around. As he was planning to leave the place, he saw a blackbird flying over him and the bird dropped some water droplets. Taking that as a good omen, he followed the bird and reached a place that resembled a conch. He also found a lake in the valley that resembled a cauldron. By then Dingtsho Karmathang has started drying and settlements have begun. It is believed that during his visit and time, there were only a few settlements. It is in this place that Yab Tenpai Nyima has constructed a small temple. Local tradition says that the present structure of the Gonpawas not built by Tenpai Nyima. It is believed that he only built a small temple on the remaining lake by filling with soil and then with flat stones. Initially, his structure was reinforced with another layer that was thicker and ultimately with a structure that looked like a wall on four sides. He also kept a small hole in the centre for the people in the years to come to make people believe that there exists a lake right under the Gonpa. These developments under him have earned him as the founder of Dungkhar Gonpa. People also say that vapour from

the Dug-khang⁸ (བསྐྱུ་ཁང་ - bsdukhang) or the same hole kept by Yab Tenpai Nyima can be felt even today. Eight decades later, settlements increased and they say it was because of the descendants of nine sisters of Gongkhar⁹.

Myths and Legends around Dungkhar Gonpa

There are interesting anecdotes connected to Dungkhar Gonpa. One of the oral accounts passed down generations is that the Gonpawas built from stones gifted by Khandoms (མཁའ་འགྲོ་- mkha gro) or *Dakinis* [in Sanskrit]. According to one account, the mason had retired to his home after having dug the foundation of the temple. When he came to the worksite next morning, he saw stones being piled up. He started the work with those stones and not trying to figure out who could have collected all those stones. Similarly, when he came for work in the next early morning he saw more stones being kept ready. When the Gonpawas on the verge of completion, mason gave a thought that the stones are enough and don't need anymore. The next morning there were no stones piled up. But stones were not sufficient when it progressed to the final floor (top) layer of the Gonpa. As a result, the mason had to find stones from the nearby area and completed the Gonpa. Today, one will notice different types and sizes of stones being used at the top level of the temple as compared to two lower floors. Locals attribute it because of the very reason for the mason being judgmental of the sufficiency of stones.

Sacred Relic and Statues of the Gonpa

The main relic of the Gonpais right whorled Conch (གདུང་དཀར་གཡམས་འབྲིལ་ - *gdung dkar yashkhyel*) and the lake right under the altar (Choeshum མཚོ་དྲ་བཤམས་- *mchodb shams*) of the Gonpa, which locals say it can be seen even today. Every year people come during the annual Tshechu (Festival) of the Gonpato seek blessings from the sacred relics and the lake. It is believed that whoever receives blessings are

⁸ Dug-khang is a sacred hole under Choesham (alter) of DungkharGonpa where Dungshto lake is still seen today and women are forbidden to enter inside it.

⁹ Gongkar was an old name of present day Khar.

cleansed from all defilements. Another relic that adds to the sacredness of the Gonpa is the human skull used a bowl for preparing Duetse (བདུང་ཅི - *bdud rtsi*). This skull bowl is no ordinary skull, it has a letter 'AH' (ཨ), imprinted and such miraculous appearance is very rare and it is considered very sacred in the Bhutanese tradition.

Besides these relics, Gonpa has other items of venerations such as statues, images, religious items, and also other antiques adding value to its unique and sacredness. As one enters the Gonpa visitors will notice the 'Wheel of Samsara' or Sidpa Khorlo (སྤྱི་པ་ཁོ་རྟོ་ལོ་ - *sridd pa khor lo*) and Chok Zhi Gyalpo-King of Four Directions (ཕྱོགས་བཞི་རྒྱལ་པོ་ - *phyogs bzhi rgyalpo* -King of the East (ཤར་ཕྱོགས་རྒྱལ་པོ་ - *shar phyogs rgyalpo*), King of the South (ལྷོ་ཕྱོགས་རྒྱལ་པོ་ - *lho phyogs rgyalpo*), King of the West (ནུབ་ཕྱོགས་རྒྱལ་པོ་ - *nub phyogs rgyalpo*) and King of the North (བྱང་ཕྱོགས་རྒྱལ་པོ་ - *byang phyog rgyalpo*). The Gonpahouses statues of Guru Rimpoche in the centre and Yab Tenpai Nyima to the left and Tertön Pema Lingpa and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel to the right side of Guru statue. In addition to these statues, there are statues of local deities and other nearby region regions such as Mamo Eka Dzati (མ་མོ་ལྷ་ཀ་ཇ་ཏི་ - *ekazati*), Damchen Dorji Lekpa (དམ་ཅན་དོ་རྗེ་ལེགས་པ་ - *dam chan rdorje legs pa*), Dzachok Rahula (གཟའ་མཚོག་རྩ་ལུ་ལ་ - *gza mchog rahu la*), Namsey Tsheringma (ནམ་སྲས་ཚེ་རིང་ - *nam sras tshe ring ma*) and Maning Nakpo Pekar Kuenzangmo (མ་འིང་ནག་པོ་པད་དཀར་ཀུན་བཟང་མོ་ - *ma ning nag po pad dkar kun bzangmo*).

Frescoes include Kagye Lhatshog (བཀའ་བརྒྱུད་ལྷ་ཚོགས་ - *bkabrgyud lhatshogs*), Tsheyi Lhatshog (ཚེ་ལྷ་ཚོགས་ - *tshe-ilhatshogs*), Zhelgi Lhatshog (ཞེ་ལྷ་ཚོགས་ - *zhelrgi lhatshogs*), Rigsum Goenpo (རིགས་གསུམ་མགོན་པོ་ - *rigs gsumm gonpo*), and TenpaYabyumMengiLha (སྟོན་པ་ཡབ་ཡུམ་སྐྱེན་གྱི་ལྷ་ - *stan pa yab yum smanrgilha*), Guru Tshengye (གུ་རུ་མཚན་བརྒྱུད་ - *gurum tshan brgyad*), Jangchub Tungshag Lhatshog (བྱང་ཚུབ་སྐྱུང་བཤམ་ལྷ་ཚོགས་ - *byang chub stung bshags lhatshogs*), Jetsun Dolma (རྗེ་བཙུན་སྐྱེལ་མ་ - *rjebtsunsgadrol ma*), Kagyudpa masters (བཀའ་བརྒྱུད་པ་ - *bkabrgyudpa*)-TshangpaGyareyYeshiDorji- གཙང་པ་རྒྱ་རས་ཡེ་ཤེས་དོ་རྗེ་ - *gtsang pa rjaras ye shesrdorje*, 1161 - 1211), Tilopa (འི་ལོ་པ་ - *ti lo pa*, 988-1069), Naropa (ནལ་པོ་ལྷ་པོ་ - *naropa*, 1016-1100),

Marpa (མར་པ། mar pa, 1012-1097), Jetsun Milarepa (རྗེ་བུ་རྩལ་མེ་ལ་རས་པ། mi la ras pa, 1052-1135), Gampopa (གཤམ་པོ་པ་ - *sgampo pa*, 1079–1153), Phagmodrugpa (པག་མོ་གྲུ་པ་རྗེ་རྒྱལ་པོ་ - *phagmogru pa rdorjergyal po*, 1110-1170), and Lingrepa Pema Dorji (གླིང་རྗེ་རས་པ་པདྨ་རྗེ་ - *glingrjeras pa pad ma rdorje*, 1128-1188), Pema Lingpa, LhaseyTsangma, local deity Khar Kebu Dagtshen (སྐད་ལུ་སྐུ་བཙུན་ - *skid bus grabtsan*). The mural in the ceiling is of Dorji Sempa (རྗེ་རྗེ་སེམས་པ་ - *rdorjesempah*). The Gonpa also has Thankas (Scroll Paintings) of Avalokiteshvara (ལྷན་རས་གཟིགས་ - *spyanrasgzigs*) and Kuenkhyen Longchen Rabjam and Four Harmonious Friends (མཐུན་པ་སྐུན་པའི་ - *mthun pa spun bzhi*). The other items of the Gonpa include two ancient Sergi Bumpas (Gold plated vase), Gold religious texts written in gold called 'Serbum'¹⁰ (གསེར་འབྲུག་ - *gser bum*), two Dungkhars (Conches) and large and long trumpets (གདུང་ཆེན་ - *gdungchen*). The religious text called 'Serbum' is believed to have been brought from Lhasa Potala later by nine sisters of Dungkhar family during their pilgrimage.

Myths and Accounts

Settlement continued for many years but disappeared later in the years because of reasons unknown. Most people share about the end of settlement because of the acute shortage of drinking water (at least for the recent past it holds to be true). On a visit to the site, authors noticed acute shortage of water even for basic purposes drinking and cooking. And there are even legends surrounding this end of settlement in the past connecting to reasons for water shortage. According to one account, there wasn't any water problem in the place before the visit of Tibetan Lama called Sopchee¹¹ (སོཔ་ཆེ་ - *sop chi*) because the settlement is believed to have evolved on the surface of a lake that had nine water sources. The lake dried and people attributed to lama Sopchee as very much responsible for the drying. The

¹⁰ Serbum is a religious text and is considered as the main relic of Gonpa (མགོན་པ་ - *ngon pa*) beside the Conch

¹¹ Meme Nyera, who is 96 years old now say that Lama Sopchee visited and stayed there during his grandfather's time. It is approximately in the early 20th century.

oral tradition maintained in the villages around the Dungkhar Gonpa gives insight that Lama reached in Dungkhar during the time of nine sisters of Dungkhar family. One of the respondents who belonged to the Dungkhar family says that they fall within the social group called Draps (ལྷན་པོ་ - *sgrap*, the upper class of the society). Today, social class divisions are not prevalent in Bhutan vis-à-vis Dungsam. It was completely abolished with the issue of a royal edict by Third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. Lama Sopchee was very cruel and proved powerful than other lamas. He washed his face and body most often with milk offered daily by 'nine sisters'. He dug a channel from a lake towards his toilet so that he could keep his toilet always clean. The lake water supposed to be kept pure and clean flowed to his toilet and as a result of contamination and defilement, it soon dried up. Lama then is believed to have left the place for Punakha after the lake has completely dried. The lake is still there in Dungmin Tomey in Pemagatshel which people of Tomey consider as Dungkhar Lake. According to the Bhutanese myths and legends, some accounts tell of the lake being possessed by certain deities and it would move to a different place once they are defiled. So, the very lake defiled by Lama Sopchee is believed to be the lake that is still there in Dungmin Tomay. This is the reason why locals even today consider it as Dungkhar Lake.

Another tradition (also recorded by Wangdi, 2003) attributes the decline to a mysterious epidemic that struck the settlement of Dungscho Karmathang. All died except two Khoche brothers who escaped to a place called Khala Tsho (not to be confused with lake-Tsho in Tshangla dialect). The ruins of Dungscho Karmathang can be still seen submerged beneath the earth today (Wangdi, 2003). One of the oldest respondents recalls a tale that was shared by a grandmother about the epidemic that struck the settlement. This epidemic made people suffer from rashes and his description is similar to smallpox from a layman's knowledge of diseases. He also narrates an epidemic that struck during his time. This killed all the people of the settlement around Dungkhar Gonpa. He escaped because he had gone to the lower valley particularly to Khar and returned many years later to the original site and started the Nagtshang (གནམ་མཚང་ - *gnag tshang*) near to Dungkhar Gonpa.

The actual epidemic occurrence needs proper study and periodization. Today, few of the people have come back and settled. The number of households has increased to four. They came and settled at the very site the settlement affected by the epidemic and so it is called as *Dung man ma* (གདུང་མན་མ - *gdung man ma*, old Village in Tshangla dialect). Another oral account which is quite recent tells that settlement has disappeared because of the heavy taxation imposed by the regional rulers. Taxation included long hours of work especially corvee labour for various constructions that included bridges and also grain collections. Most of the people migrated to the outside of the country like Pedong in Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Gangtok in Sikkim, all in India. Some even migrated within the country particularly to places like Daliphangma and Rangshikhar in Trashigang District. The other factor that people ascribe was the internal strife for supremacy amongst the regional rulers and it affected the people one way or another. But this lacks information.

Dungkhar Choeje to Dungkhar Gonpa

Until the supremacy of power was overtaken by the Drukpa forces in the early 18th century, most of eastern Bhutan was ruled by different clan-based local chieftains. Most of these ruling families emerged or descended from the noble families, important saints and Buddhist masters. Some of them traced their origin to Tsangma while others to different great personalities. Dungsam region has their version of the origin of ruling families or clans that traces their origin to Yab Tenpai Nyima.

During the early part of the 17th century, there were three Drukpa Choeje (ཚོས་རྗེ། *chosrje*) families in Pemagatshel and there are two different versions of its origin. According to one tradition, they were the descendants of Tenpai Nyima, the father of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who had travelled throughout eastern Bhutan. The three choeje families were Khar (མཁར་ - *mkhar*) Choeje also known as Dungkhar (གདུང་མཁར་ - *gdung mkhar*) choeje, Chungkhar (གཅུང་མཁར་ - *gchung mkhar*) also known as Khardung Choeje, and the Sharlikhar (ཤར་ལི་མཁར་ - *shar li mkhar*) Choeje.

Among these family lineages, Dungsam Dungkhar Choeje (Khar) was dominant. They were the ones who took care of the temple called Dungkhar Gonpa and carried out all the functionalities. It is believed that the half-brother of Zhabdrung, Tenzin Drugdra belonged to the Dungkhar Choeje family founded by Tenpai Nyima and was responsible for the continuity of the Dungkhar Choeje lineage in the region (not to get confused with the Dungkar Choeje of Kurtoe). The other version of the origin states that the Dungkhar Choeje was established by Tsangma the grandson of King Trisong Detsen (ཁྲི་ཤོང་ལྷེ་བཙུན་ - *khrisrong ldebtсан*, 742 – 797 CE) when he came to Bhutan as a royal refugee when exiled by his brother Langdarma (ལྷང་དར་མ་ - *glangdar ma*, 799 – 842 CE). He was banished by Langdarma in his effort to become the king after assassinating their elder brother Thri Ralpachen (ཁྲི་རལ་པ་ཙན་ - *khri ral pa can*, 802 – 838 CE) of Tibet. He mostly travelled around Eastern Bhutan and his descendants have founded different family lineages. Although Tsangma is said to have stayed mostly at Trashiyangtse and Trashigang regions in places like Tshenkharla, Bengkhar, Yonphula, and Kanglung, he is also believed to have visited Dungsam region. During his visit to Dungsam region, it is said that he stayed and blessed Dungsam Karmathang. There is no account mentioning Tsangma building any castles or Khars but it is from this very historical understanding that people say why the place is called Khar and they believe his descendants have founded a family lineage. The ruling families that emerged in Dungsam region are believed to have descended or branched from the clan established by Tsangma's twin grandsons called Bjar (བྱར་ - *bjar*-joined). Therefore, people believe that one of the Choejes was Dungkhar Choeje and traces their origin to Tsangma. Some of the families who have branched out from this noble lineage can be found even today in the villages viz: Khangma, Yurung, Chimung, and Dagor. Although they all trace to noble birth none today occupy upper rungs of the society and they are commoners like any other.

Dungkhar Tshechu-A Yearly Festival

Despite fewer households, Gonpa draws lots of people from the Khar villages down the valleys once in a year. This is because of its annual socio-religious festival of Dungkhar Gonpa conducted on every fifteenth day of the third month of the lunar calendar. Although, the pattern of performance and certain aspects have changed, however, the festival is conducted without fail. There is no information on the origin of this festival and most believe the practice has been there from time immemorial. The festival takes place for four days and it is considered one of the most sacred and blessed festivals of the Dungsam region. The festival is usually performed in line with the Peling tradition, a branch of the Nyingma (འདྲེང་མ་ - *nying ma*) sect of Buddhism. This four-day festival is conducted by people of Khar, Labar, Bongman, Yegyur, and Khengzor villages. During the festival, all support comes from these villages. In the past, it was compulsorily for each household to contribute in kinds, but these days even cash is also accepted as contributions. But certain necessary items like flour for the making of ritual cakes (Tormas) are still collected from households. During these festivals, it not just attracts people from nearby villages, hundreds of people from other villages like Yurung, Chimung, Tshebar, and Mikuri come to witness religious dances and receive blessing from the sacred lake.

What makes this festival unique is anyone found copulating or sleeping with the opposite sex is punished. To keep an eye on such obscene activities, during the festival, a minimum of two nightguards are appointed. They go around especially at night and if they find anyone sleeping together, they mark their clothes in white colour. Next morning, they will be reported to the Thri Lama (Head Lama) and as a punishment for the defilement of the festival sanctity, culprits were made to carry a mask around the Gonpa. It is believed that carrying a mask will indirectly reduce their merits of evil deeds. It is only during these festivals that people are given the blessing of the lake. It is believed to have been said by Yab Tenpai Nyima that such blessings were very rare and it should be kept pure and in the holy state. As indicated earlier, women were not allowed to enter the Dugkhang.

Interestingly, Nalu Thoepa, the local deity of the Khar village has to be propitiated and offering has to be made to honour the deity. It is believed that if they defy paying obeisance to Nalu Thoepathe deity would not protect the people, as a result, there would be natural calamities such as heavy rains and storms. People also believe that Nalu Thoepa keeps a watch over the opposite sex sleeping together especially during the festival time. If people do not adhere to this rule, he brings rain and storm usually after the festival. Such rain and storm are called as 'Mi-Tsang-ri' - 'water to cleanse the defilements'.

Conclusion

This Gonpa is one of the oldest lhakhangs in the Dungsam region and has withstood all the natural calamities. But over the years it has shown signs of dilapidation. Wooden structures have lived its life and it needs immediate replacement and renovation. Although, it was renovated by local people of Khar, Khengzor, and Labar on their initiatives there is a lot to be done. Recently, the caretaker at his initiative supported by a few villagers has extended the Gonpa but nothing major is done to preserve this sacred and ancient Gonpa.

This Gonpais certainly the oldest and has lots of history woven around it. The history of Gonpa predates the state formation under the Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel and it is founded on a place that has historical significance. This Gonpa stands on a place the most blessed by various important figures of Bhutanese history. Because of the very ancient in nature and sacredness, it is comparable to most other similar temples and monasteries of the eastern region and in Bhutan. One of the pillars of Gross National Happiness is the preservation of culture and tradition and time has come for the people and government to protect, safeguard and preserve this historic pillar through major renovations as it needs attention to save it from the verge of dilapidation.

However, much to the relief of the community members, under the wise patronage of former Chief Justice of Bhutan, His Excellency Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye, and the community contributions, the Gonpa has been revived to its

erstwhile glory with the construction of new Drasha and Shedra in 2014. His Eminence the Gangtey Trulku Rimpoche, body emanations of the 16th century King Tertön (Treasure Discoverer) and Patron Saint of Bhutan, Pema Lingpa solemnized to ordain monks on 12 and 13th October 2014.

With the institution of shedra, 24 monks have started their monastic education. It has not only provided opportunities for the youth and children from economically disadvantaged families to continue their education but also provided a place for the old aged people to practice religion in the Gonpa.

References

- Aris, M.(1979). *Bhutan: A Early history of the Himalayan Kingdom*. England: Aris & Philips.
- Dargye, Y. (2008). *Play of the omniscient- Life and Works of Jamgon Ngawang Gyatlshen an Eminent 17-18th century Drukpa Master*. Thimphu: National Library & Archives of Bhutan. Dungkhar Ygyen Choeling Gonpa (n.d). Retrieved from <https://dungkhar.weebly.com/> dated 22/4/2019
- Kinga, S.(2005). *Speaking Statues, Flying Rocks*. Thimphu: DSB Publication.
- Tenzin, N.(2001). *Guide to Chari Monastery- a brief History of Chari Vajrayana Monastery*.Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies. (vol.5).
- T, Pema. (2001). *Guide to Chang Gangkha monastery*. Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies. (Vol.5). Wangdi, S. (2003). *Myths, legend and History Surrounding Dungsam*. Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies.

About the Authors

Dorji S is a Lecturer in History Education and former Dean of Student Affairs (DSA) of Samtse College of Education (SCE). He taught at Sherubtse College (SC) and Bajothang Higher Secondary School, and provided history curriculum support to REC and MoE. His research interest includes history education, ethnography, anthropology, happiness and well-being and curriculum and teaching & learning.

Dorji Phuntsho is a Assistant Lecturer in History at Sherubtse College. Prior to his current position, he had brief stint at the College of Language and Cultural Studies, Taktse, Trongsa. He graduated with Bachelors of Arts in History and Dzongkha from Sherubtse College in 2013.