Dzongs of Bhutan

Madhu Rajput

Lucknow University, INDIA

Abstract An attempt has been made in this paper to trace the various Dzongs of Bhutan around which the life of every Bhutanese revolves. The seat of administration, religion and higher learning, Dzongs present the high watermark of Bhutanese architecture, introduced in Bhutan by Tibet. To fulful the purpose of a military observation post Dzongs were mainly built on sites overlooking valleys. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, was the greatest builders of Dzongs who undertook the constructions of six Dzongs across Bhutan. Mainly constructed with wood and stone, they had to survive the rage of frequent fires and natural calamities. However, the resilience of Bhutanese government and people has succeeded in rebuilding and sustaining these unique architectural and historical marvels over the centuries. The paper presents an outline of the great intricate architectural plan of the Dzongs as well as their multifarious utilities, in addition to providing a glimpse into their cultural significance as being the sacred sites of annual religious festivals known as Tsechus. Thronged by visitors from far and wide the Dzongs come alive with colourful famed masked dances being performed. A symbol of Bhutanese ingenuity, creativity and authority, Dzongs form the centre piece of Bhutanese socio-cultural, religious and political life. Any imaginable aspect of life for Bhutanese remains incomplete without a detailed study of Dzongs. The paper intends to provide an insight into this riveting thread of Bhutan.

KEYWORDS: Dzongs, Architecture, Culture, Political Life, Religious Significance

Introduction

Life in Bhutan is inseparable from Dzongs which depict their beliefs, and dominate their religious as well as political life. These are the carriers of rich Bhutanese heritage and history and each has a story of its own. Since ancient time, these have been the seat of power. Located strategically at those points which were outside the preview of attacks, the dzong system is Tibetan in origin and was introduced Bhutan by Gyalwa Lhanampa, a Tibetan monk who came to Bhutan in 1153 A.D. from Desung.1

Dzongs form an integral part of Bhutanese life. The word Dzong means a ‘castle’ or a ‘monastery’. In earlier times, dzongs were used for defensive purposes. Now these are used for administrative as well as religious purposes. They were built on a cliff or ridge.

Under attack the whole population of the valley would take refuge in the dzong. They were also used for stocking food grains in times of emergency. The dzong was the seat of the religious Head which continues till today. Inside the dzong, there is a monastery where monks reside, study and pray. In Bhutan they symbolised the power centre of administration and religion. Till today the functions of the dzongs are the same except their defensive uses.

Construction Style of Dzongs

The dzongs are designed with enclosed courtyards with an internal division between those areas dedicated to the monastic body and centres for civil administration. Deviations from standard, square-unit patterning were generally due to the physical characteristics of the terrain. The structure of the dzong consists of heavy-load bearing walls made of stone masonry, which gently taper from the foundations to the roof. Construction materials of mud, stone, and timber comprise all

Dzongs of Bhutan

other features of the dzong including windows, doors, flooring, and roofing.

The habitable rooms are normally found on the upper levels of a dzong, where the outer wall consists of timber and mud construction that allows more leeway in construction due to its lighter weight and plasticity of form. The vertical emphasis reflected in overall size and decoration serves the purposes of both defense and aesthetics. Windows and cornices form the main decorative elements in the white outer walls, though windows at the lower levels are small and modest, sparsely decorated if at all, with sober wooden frames set into the heavy stonewalls. The higher one ascends, the larger and more ornamented the window become.

A tower-like structure, or utse, is located in the center of the courtyard, forming the core of the dzong and containing the main temples. It is the most important space within the dzong and is usually a multi-storey structure, square or oblong in plan. The most sacred space within the utse is the lhakhang, which means ‘house of god’, rendering an overall equivalent of ‘temple’. Statues of Buddha, Guru Rinpoche, bodhisattvas, and other saints are placed in the lhakhang.

In order to reach the lhakhang, one has to cross the tshokhang, more commonly known as kunrey. Kunrey is the large hall where the monks gather several times in a day for prayers and other religious activities. In most of the dzongs, the tshokhang is flanked by one or more smaller shrine rooms, which are devoted to a variety of deities and saints. In all of these spaces the walls are richly adorned with murals.

Before entering the tshokhang, one has to pass through the gorakha, which literally means “mouth of the door”. This is a half open space, with walls on three sides, whose open side faces the courtyard. There are no statues in the gorakha, but rich murals adorn the walls. These are normally devoted to the guardian kings of the four directions or are of different types of mandalas.

Almost without exception, there is a path for pious circumambulation around the utse, marked by a continuous row of prayer-wheels set into the niches at the base of the building. These prayer-wheels are cylindrical with mantras painted on the outer surface and are filled with prayers written on paper. In order to pay respect to the temple and its deities, the pilgrims circumambulate the utse clockwise and turn the prayer-wheels. Every turn of the prayer-wheel carries the religious message painted on the surface and written on the pieces of paper inside, out over the world. The prayer-wheels are usually placed in their niches in front of slates with carved images of the Buddhas, the bodhisattvas, saints, mahasiddhas or lamas.

Rough but beautiful large flat stones flank the courtyard called the dochhen enclosed by the outer walls of a dzong. As there is a clear division between the monastic body and civil administrative center, there is usually more than one dochhen. Along the sides of the dochhen, the outer structure of the dzong generally consists of two or three storey with inward-facing decorated arcades. These structures house the living quarters and classrooms for the monks in one part of the dzong and the administration offices in the opposite part of the dzong.2

Dzongs across the country vary in size, although their basic structure remains the same. Some of the important dzongs are as follows:

- Dogar Dobji Dzong,
- Byakar Yulgyel Dzong,
- Gasa Tashi Thongmon Dzong,
- Zhongar (Mongar) Dzong,
- Paro Ta Dzong,
- Trashigang Dzong,
- Zhemgang Dechen Yangtse Dzong,
- Simtokha Dzong,

Dzongs of Bhutan

- Tango Dzong
- Trongsa Dzong
- Lhundrup Rinchen Tse Dzong
- Trashi Yangtse Dzong
- Druk Gyal Dzong
- Tashicho Dzong
- Punakha Dzong
- Haa Dzong
- Wangdue Phodrang Dzong

Dzongs, lhakhangs and chortens are unique examples of architecture which was introduced by Tibet to Bhutan. Dzongs were mainly built on sites overlooking valleys.

Simtokha Dzong (Sanga Zabden Phodrang)

Simtokha Dzong was the first dzong to be constructed by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the greatest builders of Dzongs in Bhutan who undertook the constructions of six Dzongs to consolidate his newly acquired domain in western Bhutan and to defend himself from both the internal foes and external enemies.

The location of the dzong has a great historical significance. The present place where the Dzong stands was the crossroads of the three prominent western regions of Sha (Wangduephodrang), Wang (Thimphu) and Pa (Paro). The intersection was marked by three stones that belonged to the people of Punakha, Thimphu and Paro. In the middle of these three stones was a piece of land known as Sem – to kha or Sem – Dokha with a temple built on it. This temple was later gifted to Zhabdrung by Lam Pangka Shong. History says that a prophecy was made by one Tibetan Lama known as Lama Zhang that Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal after his arrival to Bhutan would build a Dzong at the junction of three western lands. As a gesture of fulfilling the prophecy and soliciting the offer of Lama Pangka Shong, Zhabdrung decided to build the Dzong.

The area was inhabited by many demons and legend has it that the particular place where Zhabdrung decided to build the Dzong was occupied by a demon harming the travelers who often stayed during the night. Zhabdrung visited the place and subdued the demon, banishing her into the rock on the hill where the present Dzong is located. The Dzong was constructed enclosing the rock ensuring the imprisonment of the demon. Hence the Dzong derived its name as Simtokha from the word sinmo (demon), Do (stomach), Kha (on) – the Dzong on top of the demons stomach.

At the age of 36, in 1629 corresponding to the 11th Rabjung and Earth Snake Year of the Bhutanese calendar, he laid the foundation of the Dzong. The construction of the Dzong was undertaken by Tango Chhoje Mipham Tshewang Tenzin with assistance from Zhabdrung’s devotees and disciples.

The Dzong was successfully completed in 1631 corresponding to the Iron Sheep Year of the Bhutanese calendar after two years. The Dzong was named as “Sanga Zabden Phodrang” (Palace of the Profound Meaning of Secret Mantras).

Punakha Dzong

One of the oldest is Punakha Dzong. Situated on a stretch of land where two rivers – the Phochhu and the Mochhu converge, Punakha Dzong was the second Dzong to be built in Bhutan. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel built it in 1631. It was named Punthang Dechen Phodrang Dzong or ‘the Palace of Great Bliss’.

Punakha became the capital of Bhutan where the successive Desis administered the country through the Dual system of government. It served as the seat of government until the reign of the second king Jigme Wangchuck. The negotiations with the British envoys all took place in this Dzong. It was also the place where Ugyen Wangchuk, Bhutan’s first hereditary king, was crowned in 1907. The first session of the National Assembly of Bhutan was also held here under King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk in 1952.
Disasters have struck Punakha dzong repeatedly. It had to be rebuilt several times and always to the original specifications. It was damaged by fires in 1780, 1789, 1802, 1831, 1849, and in 1986. There was a massive earthquake in 1897 and a devastating flash flood in 1994 when the Dzongchhung, which houses the images of the Lord Buddha and Dupthob Ngagi Rinchen was nearly washed away. According to a common folklore, the then Zhabdrung had taken a disliking to Punakha; therefore in 1835 he summoned a flood upon the area, damaging the Dzong. The Desi repaired the Dzong in 1849. Another fire in 1866 caused considerable damage to the south-West corner of the Dzong, which was the home of the Je Khenpo.

In 1969, Tibetans attacked Punakha to recover the relics of Ranjung Kharsapani, but were defeated. In honour of the protective deities that is deemed to have played a key role in the victory over the Tibetans, Zhabdrung had an additional chapel built in the Punakha Dzong. The Punakha Damchoe is held to commemorate this famous victory every year.¹

The latest edition to the Dzong is the wooden bridge (Bazam) built in May 2008, with the German assistance. The only wooden bridge, with the longest unsupported span worldwide, considering the applied structural methods, the 55 m long Puna Mochhu bazam at Punakha was opened to the public on 28 May 2008 by Prime Minister Jigmi Y Thinley and executive chairman of Pro Bhutan Association, Harald N Nestroy.

A sleek creation of Walt+ Galmarini AG, a renowned engineering company specialized in designing bridges, the bridge is the prototype of a hybrid construction, using a mix of medieval traditional designs and innovative modern technology.

Since the Dzong and the bazam come under the “red area” of potential danger from glacial lake outburst floods, the new concrete foundation has special protection with thousands of boulders and concrete blocks placed into the riverbed.

For the security of the people using the bridge in future, invisible steel elements have been incorporated to stabilize the high bridge arch and prevent it from twisting or falling sideways.

Construction began in mid 2006, two years after the Pro Bhutan Association was approached by the then Prime Minster Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup. The completion of Puna Mochhu bazam marks the close relationship between Bhutan and Germany and celebrates 100 years of monarchy in Bhutan.⁵

**Tashichho Dzong**

Known as “The Fortress of the Glorious Religion”, Tashichho Dzong is the most impressive building situated on the banks of the Wangchu (Thimphu River).

Tashichho Dzong was built in 1641 by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and reconstructed in 1962, by the Late King, His Majesty, King Jigme Dorje Wangchuck. The Tashichho Dzong was built in the late 1700’s and also serves as the home of the Central Monastic Body.

In 1216, Lama Gyalwa Lhanangpa built the Dho-Ngen (blue stone) Dzong on a hill above Thimphu, where Dechenphodrang now stands. When Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal came to Bhutan in the 17th century, the lhapas were completely crushed and the Dho-Ngen Dzong fell into the hands of Zhabdrung. In 1641 Zhabdrung the Dho Ngen Dzong was rebuilt and named as Tashicho Dzong (Fortress of the Glorious Religion). In 1694 it was enlarged by the 4th Desi Tenzin Rabgye. During the reign of the 5th Desi Gedun Chophel in 1698 the Dzong caught fire and was restored. The 10th Desi Mipham Wangpo built the Kagyu lkhakhang inside the Tashichodzong. In 1747 the Dzong was enlarged at the initiative of the 13th Desi Chogyal Sherab Wangchuk.

During the reign of the 16th Desi Sonam Lhendup and the 13th Je Khenpo Yonten

---

4. Ibid.
Thaye the Dzong caught fire for the second time. The two proposed to then build the Dzong at the site of its current location. In 1777 during the time of the 18th Desi Jigme Singye the Kunre of the Dzong was renovated as it was totally dark. It was further renovated by the 25th Desi Pema Cheda. The 32nd Desi Phurgyal installed many new statues.

In 1869, the Dzong caught fire and was afterwards extensively repaired. The late king Jigme Dorji Wangchuck had the Dzong rebuilt from 1962 to 1969 and made the building into the new capital.6

**Paro Ta Dzong**

Paro Ta dzong is located about five and a half kilometres from the Tshongdue town and is built in between the palace of the Hungrel Ngonpa and famous ancient Donam Dzong. The Ta dzong is situated near the ancient Gonsakha temple and 500 meters above Rinpung Dzong.

All the material used in the construction of the dzong was locally available. The dzong is seven storied and is divided into many cells within its building and sizes. Ta Dzong being a war fortress had a security system inside it. There was also a hidden path connecting the main Rinpung dzong with the river below, used for fetching water through the tunnel in times of war.

The builder of Ta Dzong was La Ngonpa Tenzin Drugdra, who was the second temporal ruler in 1656 and he ruled for twelve years. 1649 is the ascertained year of construction of Ta Dzong. Its foundation has been laid on the right side of the holy syllable Hung and main entrance facing west and back of the dzong faces east. The round passages inside Ta Dzong are designed and constructed to trap and halt the moment of enemies.

Ta Dzong lay dormant and unused for a long time which resulted in a gradual decline of its stability. His Majesty the Third King Jigme Dorje Wangchuck commanded the Ministry of Development to renovate the dilapidated Ta dzong in 1966. The Ministry also took great interest to renovate Ta dzong and further, constructed a motor-able approach road and developed infrastructure around the dzong.

After renovation of the dzong, the third king commanded the collection and display of significant cultural artifacts in it, thus establishing the National Museum of Bhutan in 1968. The museum became a separate entity within itself from 1969 and continued to collect artifacts from the government and private donations to form full time exhibits. In 1974 electricity was installed in the museum and standard exhibit showcases were built. The museum is restoring and preserving the valuable and irreplaceable objects for future generations of Bhutanese, while offering a venue for cultural interface with visitors to the country. Today there are over 3000 artifacts in the museum.7

**Paro Rinpung Dzong**

Situated 55 Kms from Thimphu Paro dzong was referred to as Hungrel Gonsarkha in earlier times. It was founded by Drung Gyalchog. The imposing dzong which was made at the backdrop of the mountains can be entered through a wooden bridge on the eastern side. Paro Chhu (river) forms a natural defense to the west which is bridged only at one point. Its architecture is a fine example of Bhutanese art. This large rectangular building surrounds a hollow square, in the centre of which a large tower with seven storey. The outer building has five storeys. An interesting feature is the gateway on the eastern side, ornamental and beautifully engraved, which leads straight to the third storey. A huge prayer wheel about 10 ft. high is located here which is turned by a catch which is so arranged that at each turn a bell is rung.8

---

Paro dzong was the main centre of governance and it withstood many past invasions from Tibetans and Mongolians. The sessions of Bhutan’s National Assembly were held in this dzong since second session till 1968. It was also the centre for signing of many friendly treaties. In 1969 the socio-economic development was initiated from Paro.

**Haa Wangchuk Lo Dzong**

Because of its location, being near to the border of Tibet, the dzong has a strategic importance. The Dzong as any other in the country also had a Ta Dzong (watch tower) for the purpose of detecting any enemy approaches from afar. This Dzong was built in a place called Dumchog and it was also called Haed Dumchog Dzong. In addition to its military and secular purposes, the Dzong also became a reservoir of grains, which could be distributed to the people should there be any kind of natural disaster in the region causing famine.

Another oral tradition has it that another reason why the Dzong was built in this place was to hold back the evil influences of the serpent deities upon the lives of the people and their livestock. This place, where the Dzong was built, was a place well known for the abundance of serpent deities. People say that there were about hundred and eight such serpent deities in and around that place. Even after all these years, some of the stupas which were built in order to appease these deities can still be found. Unfortunately, in 1913, during the tenure of Haa Drung Kazi Ugyen Dorjee, the Dzong caught fire and was left as a pile of ashes. The devastation was so huge that the Drung, who otherwise had the authority to summon people for the reconstruction decided it was easier to build a new one than to revamp the burned Dzong. Thus, Dumchog Dzong met with its end in a futile fire incident. It was finally abandoned and a new Dzong erected.

Today all that is left of the Dzong are ruined walls worn out by weather and time, and some scattered boulders. Sadly a marvellous and significant artifact was once and for all lost to the power of nature.

In the same year that Dumchog Dzong was reduced to rubble by fire, Gongzim Ugyen Dorjee took charge to build the new Dzong. The people of the four Geogs were summoned to contribute their labour tax during the entire renovation period. The new Dzong which was to assume the functions of the ruined Dumchog Dzong was built about a kilometer away from the debris of the Dzong. A prefix, Dzonngasar meaning the new Dzong, was added to the new name of the Dzong. Hence, the Dzong was called Dzonngasar Wangchuk Lo Dzong.9

At present the dzong has been given to the Army where military training to the Bhutanese soldiers is being imparted by the Indian Army.

**Wangdue Phodrang Dzong**

Wangdue Phodrang Dzong was founded by the Zhabdrung in 1639. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was supposedly at Chimmi Lhakhang in Punakha when he met a decrepit old man who described a ridge in present day Wangdue Phodrang as a ‘sleeping elephant’ and told him he would unite the country by building a Dzong on the ‘neck’ of the ridge. The Zhabdrung, surmising the old man to be Yeshey Gonpo (Mahakala), took his suggestion and sent forth a noble to scout the area. As the emissary drew close to the area, he saw four ravens circling above the ridge. Upon reaching the ridge, the birds flew away in four directions, north, south, east and west. When returning to Chimmi Lhakhang, he made his report. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel took this as a good omen and immediately set forth in 1638 to construct a Dzong overlooking the convergence of the Dangchu and Punatshang chu. The people of Wang and Shar Dar Gyad were involved in its construction along with the people of Rinchen Gang who were skilled masons.

---

The Dzong consisted of three doorways and three courtyards. The first gate is the entrance, the second leads to the inner sanctum of the Dzong and the third contains the deep interiors of this historic structure.

Years later, the Dzong was enlarged by the 4th Desi Tenzin Rabgye. In addition to the four storied Utse built by Zhabdrung he added another two storied Utse. The construction was looked after by the Dzongpon Gedun Chopel. The 7th Dzongpon of Wangduephodrang Sonam Lhendup also added new structures to the Dzong. He also installed a statue of Lord Buddha.

Much later with the passage of time a powerful local lord known as Kawang Sangye, extended the Dzong towards the present town. Another Wangzop, Acho Boep, ordered further construction, modifying the Dzong to the form which it holds today. In 1837 the Dzong was destroyed by a great fire and later rebuilt. During the time of Lam Neten Pelden Singye the Dzong was also damaged by a severe earthquake which was later rebuilt. Dzongpon Domchung also seems to have also restored the Dzong though at an unknown time. During the reign of the Late King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the Dzong was renovated supervised by Dronyer Pema Wangdi.

The rabdey was first instituted by Zhabdrung himself after the completion of the Dzong which was alter increased during the time of 10th He Khenpo Tenzin Chogyal.10

The 374 years old Wangdue Phodrang Dzong was completely destroyed by fire recently in June 2012. Since the dzong was under renovation before the fire, most of the sacred relics, which were relocated, were saved. The loss has been termed as a national tragedy by the acting Prime Minister Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly dzongs are the centre of Bhutanese cultural life. Annual Tsechus (festivals) are celebrated in the dzongs with much fanfare and the famous mask dances are performed. Life of every Bhutanese socially, spiritually and politically revolves around dzongs. These are not only seats of higher learning but also act as prisons as the first hereditary king Ugyen Wangchuck was kept prisoner in Ta dzong. All the religious, administrative and educational functions are performed in the dzongs as they hold administrative offices as well as the monastries.

It’s a place where village heads assemble for administrative work, peasants come to pay revenue and the army for their arms and equipment. All these people under one roof make dzong an all encompassing entity.


About the Author

Prof. (Dr.) Madhu Rajput is HOD of department of history, Lucknow University. She has several publication to her credit. Her area of interest is research on women and children.

Prof. (Dr.) Madhu Rajput is also associated with Indian History Congress, U.P History Congress, and Indian Social Science Congress. She has been awarded Shakti Samman’, on 08 March 2016 in the field of education, by Social Active Welfare Trust and ‘Sanskritiki’ Lucknow University, Uttar Pradesh.