

The Forgotten Battle: Unearthing Bhutan's Triumph at Paro

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The Paro Valley witnessed one of the greatest battles fought in the history of Bhutan. The battle took place in 1617 and was fought between Tibetan invaders and Paro farmers-turned-warriors. It was Zhabdrung who the Tibetans were after, but who the Bhutanese defended. Not many details exist of what came to be known as the First Tibet-Bhutan war at Paro. In his comprehensive *The History of Bhutan*, Karma Phuntsho (2013) devotes a couple of paragraphs to this battle under the heading 'Zhabdrung arrives in Bhutan.' He narrates that the invasion ensued as the result of Zhabdrung's rejoinder to the Tsangpa ruler's letter that ordered the confiscation of Zhabdrung's estates in Tibet, while also summoning him to return with the Rangjung Kharsa Pani (the vertebra relic of Tshangpa Jarey) he had taken with him to Bhutan. Karma Phuntsho further mentions the residence of Zhabdrung (Drukchöding) at the time of the attack by Tibetan forces in collaboration with the Lhapa forces, from within. He wrote:

'... While he was in Drukchöding... in Paro town, he received a letter from the Tsangpa ruler informing that all of Zhabdrung's estates in Tibet had been seized and that he should return to Tibet with the vertebrae relic and surrender... Zhabdrung wrote a long rejoinder with a stern warning: "You have inflicted in me all the damages you possibly could. On my part, if I fail to eliminate you and your family line, you may decide that the Drukpa school does not have protecting deities and I am not the true incarnation of the omniscient Pema Karpo.'" (Phuntsho 2013: 218)

The name of the Tibetan General, in charge of the Tibetan forces, was identified as Laguney. The narrative is that, because of the sudden invasion, Zhabdrung had to flee from Paro to Thimphu, and that the Bhutanese chieftains led by Zarchen Chöje

and the scions of Phajo Drugom assembled a local militia to counter the Tibetan invasion. The ultimate outcome was the victory of the Bhutanese force and the killing of the Tibetan General.

In the biography of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651) written by Dasho Sangye Dorji, as translated by Sonam Kinga (2008), a single page is dedicated to the battle. Complementing Karma Phuntsho's account, Sangye Dorji provides a number of details, such as the name of the Zarchen Chöje as Dorje Gyalpo and his brother Nyenpa. Further, he notes Lungmi Serp as the leader of Wang and Chang, and who with the combined forces of Gon Khapa, Jelela Samten Tsemo, Do Choten, Damchenang, Lateng Gonpa and Chewekha engaged the invaders. He narrates that while Zhabdrung was preparing to perform a religious event (drupchen) at Druk Choeding the attack came. Zhabdrung had to flee to higher grounds of Hungrel Dzong, but which was soon surrounded by the invaders, thus forcing him to flee towards Damchena first and then onward to Thimphu over Jela. Dasho Sangye (2008: 76) invokes some kind of divine intervention:

'... the moment Zhabdrung Rimpoche made offerings to Yeshe Gonpo at Jela, the Tibetan force saw him dressed like yogi, holding a thigh-bone trumpet wrapped with a blue ribbon and leading an army which consisted of accomplished beings who filled the earth and sky ... they found in front and behind them, an army of ravens cawing aggressively... Besides, Zhabdrung Rimpoche had unleashed a non-human army of eight classes of spirits and deities against them.'

While this account indeed offers further details, all in all only scant information is available on the battle. While, for instance, the year of the battle, namely 1617, is widely agreed upon by scholars, many other details are missing. These include the number of invaders, the kind of weapons they used, the duration of the battle, the number of casualties, the number of militias that engaged the invaders, the circumstances of the battle, and the nature of divine intervention. As textual sources are lacking on this, oral histories and narratives, as they continue to be told in Paro, may be engaged as a complementary source to fill these gaps. The remainder of this article attempts such an exercise.

Oral Narrations of the Battle

Gathering a group of Paro elders of Horey and Wangchang gewog together, I posed to them the following questions:

“As you were growing up, what kind of stories did you hear?”,
“Who were the narrators of these stories?”, and “What was the situation like?”

The elders mentioned stories about business trips to Tibet and inter-gewog/chiwog archery matches as the ones most heard about. In addition to these, they had also heard stories about the Bhutanese-Tibetan battle. In fact, all of them had heard about this story when they were young, though details differed in their various narrations. Ap Sangye Dorji, aged eighty at the time I interviewed him, offered the most detailed account. He mentions of a place called Taju (*ta* meaning horse, and *ju* meaning gallop) as a place where the Tibetans galloped on their horses, and about the interference from bees (to the aid of the Bhutanese), and finally the battle ground of *Nangka Tarey Tshey* (Nangka forest). Ap Sangy Dorji also included the part played by Zarchen Chöje in engaging the invading Tibetan forces.



Fig 1: The house of Zarchen Choje, over-looking the valley (Photo by author)

A central place in the battle, as it unfolded, was the Nangkha forest. The Nangkha forest, as explained by Dago Penjor, another elder from Paro and a resident of Nangkha, has been preserved for many centuries. It was considered the garden of Phajo Drugom (1184–1251). Phajo, who established Drukpa Kagyud in Western Bhutan, set up his seat at Nangkha Lhakang, overlooking the Nangkha forest. Phajo first arrived in Bhutan in 1224. Considering that the battle occurred in 1617, it implies that the forest had been preserved for nearly four centuries. Dago Penjor recounted that the forest had, in fact, remained untouched for over seven hundred years but was cleared in the early 1960s. He mentioned a large fallen tree about fifty years ago, from which his family crafted a bathtub. All the elders I spoke to recalled a dense forest, home to a variety of wildlife, giant pine trees, and thick undergrowth.

A Plausible Theory of the Battle

Oral histories, supported by literature, allow us to assert that there had been a Tibetan invasion of the Paro valley in 1617, and that the Bhutanese successfully thwarted this invasion. Zhabdrung escaped unscathed to build the Bhutan State over the next three decades. This battle was highly significant: Zhabdrung had just arrived in Bhutan and was not yet established as its undisputed ruler. Followers of Lhapa, for instance, opposed the Zhabdrung at that time. This was the only time that the Bhutanese were divided in their allegiance to Zhabdrung. At Tsaluna he had been shot at with the arrow piercing into his saddle. One can sense the frustration and desperation of Zhabdrung, who had to flee from his Ralung seat and thereafter also had to flee in Bhutan. The Tsang ruler did not leave him in peace. Karma Phuntsho (2018: 219) writes:

‘...at Tsaluna, he had a sudden urge to renounce everything... He blew his ritual trumpet three times in the direction of Ralung calling out the names of his father and predecessors out of exasperation and lamented about the difficulty to maintain the Drukpa order.’

Even when the news of the Bhutanese victory reached him at Wachen in Shar, he had nothing to offer to the Chiefs who had come to his rescue. It was only in 1644 (27 years later) that Zhabdrung could reward Zarchen Chöje with an edict freeing his family and heirs from any kind of tax.

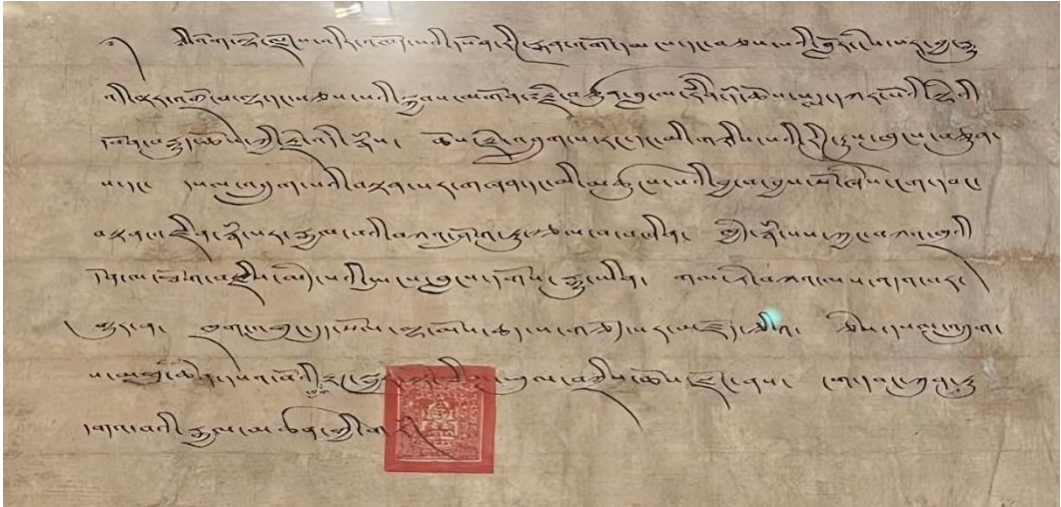


Figure 2: Photo of the Edict (source: Tshering Tashi)

In the context of this battle, a major question arises, namely:

‘How did a small group of unprepared farmers from Paro manage to defeat the larger, better-armed Tibetan invaders?’

By comparing textual and oral sources, a plausible explanation emerges. According to Ap Sangye Dorji, there could well have been over one hundred Tibetan invaders, while the Bhutanese farmer force likely numbered fewer than fifty. He explains that the villages in Paro were scattered along the mountain slopes, and much of the valley would have been forested at the time. This is supported by a reference to a wooden pillar at Duntse Lhakhang, contributed by Damno from Khanku (as inscribed on the pillar) which is now a prime paddy field. He also pointed to the remains of mud walls on the mountain slopes surrounding the Paro Valley as evidence of earlier dispersed settlements. The Tibetan invaders, unfamiliar with the Bhutanese terrain, rode horses and carried long knives, while the Bhutanese farmers, on foot and equipped with shorter knives, had the advantage of knowing the landscape intimately.



Fig 3: An Imaginary Sketch of the Paro Valley at the time of the battle (painting by Chimi R Namgyal)

The Tibetan invaders had camped at Druk Chhoeding, which is now Paro Town. The Lhapa base was located at Chang Pelri, on the hill above what is now Bondey Town. The seat of Zarchen Chöje was at Zarcheka, overlooking the area that is the present-day airport. Nangkha Tarey Tse covered about fifty acres, spreading from the north of the airstrip to the end of the Paro College of Education, along the Pachu (Paro River).

Two main paths led to Rinpung Dzong: one passing through Nangkha Tarey Tse and another skirting the base of the cliff extending from Zarchen Temple. The Pachu River divided the two villages, Tarey Tse at Chang and Wang on the opposite side of the river. To the north, Wang connected to Druk Chhoeding, where the first village was Taju. From Taju, the footpath ran along a cliff with bee hives hanging deep inside limestone caverns, known as Jong Tsho Bjewa, or the bee hive corner.

The first Tibetan assault on Druk Chhoeding went without any resistance. After all, this was a surprise attack. Zhabdrung barely had enough time to escape to Hungrel Dzong, wearing only his undergarments. No sooner the Tibetan forces had surrounded Hungrel Zong, forcing Zhabdrung to flee further up to Damcheno and

Jela. The military objective of the invaders was never to occupy Paro, but to capture or kill Zhabdrung. While Zhabdrung had some patrons in Paro, there were also people in the valley aligned to Lam Lhapa and who were opposed to Zhabdrung. Zhabdrung's loyal patrons were Zachen Chöje, Dorji Gyalpo, and Nyenpa. They rapidly raised a small force among the farmers of Chang and Wang, probably approximating around fifty men. Few Bhutanese back then had long swords. Most would have been armed with shorter knives and arrows. The freshly assembled Bhutanese forces launched a surprise attack on the invaders at Druk Chhoeding, and they must have shot their arrows while doing so. The invaders then came charging, riding their horses, at the Bhutanese forces, which then withdrew towards Nangkha forest by the river.

The path from Druk Chhoeding towards the south passed the Jong Tsho Bjewa (bee hive corner). Even today, the marble caverns inside the cliff houses bees. There would have been many bee hives there around the time. Powerful swarms of these bees attacked the moving Tibetans and entangled themselves in their long hair. As the bees were stalling the Tibetans, the Bhutanese withdrew further towards Nangkha Tarey Tse, crossing Pachu. The Tibetans chased the Bhutanese in to the Nangkha Tarey Tsey, which turned out to be a terrible mistake for them as the thick forest soon entrapped them. The Tibetan soldiers and their horses, accustomed to the barren plateaus of Tibet, were disoriented by their sudden entry into dense forests. The unfamiliar terrain added to their difficulties, and they began to experience what they perceived as apparitions. Their loose garments and long hair became entangled in the thorns and bushes, which also ensnared their long swords.

In contrast, the Bhutanese forces, well-adapted to such vegetation, moved with ease and launched swift attacks on the disoriented Tibetans. The shorter knives carried by the Bhutanese proved more effective in the dense undergrowth than the long swords of the Tibetans. The battle raged throughout the day, culminating in the defeat of the Tibetan forces and the death of their general, Laguney. A few fortunate invaders managed to escape and return to Tibet, recounting their sorrowful tale. They described the Bhutanese defenses with vivid imagery:

‘In Nangka Tara Tsey, the thorns are stronger than iron hooks,’
and “At Druk Jongtso Jhewa, the bee stings are deadlier than

arrows.'

The battle narrated in this article was hugely significant for Bhutan. Especially also considering that at the time of this battle the Zhabdrung was merely starting his process of uniting Bhutan. The Tibetans saw him as a young, fugitive who needed to be brought to their justice. As such, this was a story of Tibetans on the hunt for another Tibetan. Had they succeeded, the course of history for Bhutan would likely have been entirely different. At the time of the next Tibetan invasion, the Zhabdrung had well established himself as the ruler of Western Bhutan. He had also completed a three year retreat and designed the Nga Chudrungma seal, signifying his maturity and confidence. Moreover, he had raised a sizeable number of *pazabs* (lay soldiers) and had built several Dzongs. At this time, he was much better prepared to ward off any Tibetan invasion.

References

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- Karma Phuntsho (2013). *The History of Bhutan*. Delhi: Penguin Random House.

Interviewees:

- Chimi Dorji, 71, Care taker, Zachen Lhagang
- Drego, 68, Sekona, Wangchang
- Dago Penjor, 74, Chang Nangkar, Wangchang
- Lam Chencho Nidu, 40, Head monk, Tenchey Goenpa, Gepti
- Namgay, former monk, 71, Jangsa, Dop Shari
- Pem Gyatsho, 71, resident at Jongtso Jhewa
- Sangay Dorji, 81, Horekha
- Sangye Dorji, Dasho, 70, author, Thimphu
- Sangna Zam, 70, Khanku, Wang Chang