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Role of Taklung Dzong among the Monpas of Kalaktang Area: A Preliminary Study

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Improper presentation of reference

Abstract

The central idea of this paper is to examine the role of Dzong in socio-cultural practices of the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh from historical perspective with special reference to Taklung Dzong. Dzong a distinctive type of fortress found among the Himalayan states is massive in style with towering exterior walls surrounding a complex of courtyards, etc. This magnificent, Dzong (fortress) is an architectural masterpiece of Himalayan states of both in Bhutan and Tibet. Dzongs were used for political and administrative purposes. It was provincial administrative centre through which these states used to control the local people. In each politico-administrative division there was a Dzong which served as the religious, military, administrative, and social centre. Inside this typical fortress, half of the rooms were allocated to administrative function headed by Dzongpan, and half to religious functionaries, primarily consisting of a temple and housing for monks. Culturally being akin with the Bhutanese and Tibetans, the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh also has a Dzongs in their area. So here in this paper attempt will be made to describe the role of Dzong in socio-cultural practices of the Monpas. For these both the primary and secondary data have been collected from area under the study and collected data have been interpreted with historical method to draw a logical conclusion.

Key Words : *Dzong, Himalayan States, Dzongpen, Cultural Affinity, Monpas.*

Introduction:

The literal meaning of Dzong is a “fortified place”. This distinctive type of fortress architecture is found in the Buddhist states of the Himalayas, both in the Bhutan and Tibet. The architecture of Dzong is massive in style with towering exterior walls, surrounding a complex of courtyards, temples, administrative office and monks’ accommodation. In general the Dzong has high inward sloping walls of brick and stone painted white with few or no windows in the lower sections of the wall. But unlike other forms forts or fortress and building around the world, the Dzong is multifunctional even today. It has been said that Dzongs in the Himalayan states were used for political and administrative purposes. It was provincial administrative centre through which these Himalayan states used to control the local people.

The main purpose of the Dzongs is that it served as the religious, military, administra-

tive, and social centres of Buddhist states. They are often the site of an annual social or religious festival. The military would use the Dzong as a garrison. If need be, and as an army. The administrative bodies of a district would be housed within the Dzongs, as would monks. And the Dzongs were also places of trade and an area where people would congregate to share in celebration with their fellow man, especially during the annual tsh-echu (mask dance festival). Inside the Dzong or fortress large number of rooms were allocated for an administrative function (such as the office of the Governor), and half to religious function, primarily the temple and housing for monks. This division between administrative and religious functions reflects the idealized duality of power between the religious and administrative branches of government. Nevertheless in Tibet Dzongs were purposefully used for administrative convenience. They divided state into various administrative divisions called Dzongs and Lama called Tse-dung was appointed as Governor of the Dzong. The Lamas were entrusted with both civil and military powers and were equal in all respects, though subordinate to the generals. Describing the Himalayan architecture with special reference to Dzong architecture, Ronald M. Bernier writes that:

The Dzongs are build as variation of basic model; a quadrilateral of building enclosing one or more courtyards. A central toward called Utse often marks the division between the religious and the civil quarters, which are strictly separated. The wood carving and painting that decorate the Dzong (Fort) are often outstanding, complex and subtle.

Being a part of sub-Himalayan region, Arunachal Pradesh is culturally influenced by the Himalayan states of both the Bhutan and Tibet. Each developed a distinctive type of fortress architecture known as Dzong . It could be witnessed in Arunachal Pradesh especially among the Monpas of East Kameng and Tawang Districts. Apart from politico-administrative role Dzong could have played other important role among the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, in this paper attempt has been made to describe the role of Dzong among the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh by taking a case study of Taklung Dzong. For this primary data had been collected from Kalaktang areas by undertaking a field work.

Locating the Study Area:

The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh are a large tribal community inhabiting in two districts, viz., the West Kameng and the Tawang district. In Tawang the entire district is inhabited by them while in West Kameng a wide area comprising of Dirang, Bomdila and Kalaktang circle is inhabited by the Monpas. West Kameng district is surrounded by Tawang and East Kameng on the North, Bhutan on the west, Sonitpur district of Assam on its south. The District has three sub-divisions namely, Bomdila, Thrizino and Rupa with ten administrative circles viz., Dirang, Bomdila, Nafra, Kalaktang, Rupa, Singchung, Jamiri, Thrizino, Bhalukpong and Belemu. Kalaktang which being the thrust area of study in this paper is one of the circle headquarters of the West Kameng which is 80 k.m. away from Bomdila. It is connected with the district headquarter Bomdila by a circuitous road. There are several link roads from different villages that connect to the Kalaktang circle. The whole area consists of a cluster of large hills and is clad by evergreen forests in which blue pine and chin pine grow in abundance .

The entire Monpa population of Arunachal is divided into three sub-divisions according to their variation in geographical division viz., the Tawang Monpa or northern Monpa, the Dirang Monpa or central Monpa, and the Kalaktang Monpa or the southern Monpa. But traditionally the Monpas were divided into two categories only viz., Brahmi and Tsangli. There the Brahmi stands for people living in rocky side of the country while Tsangli refers to people living below the mountains. As the Monpas of Kalaktang is living in below the mountainous region they are also known as Tsangli. But in terms of cultural practices there are no differences between the Brahmi people and the Tsangli people as both of them are follower of Buddhism. However, linguistically there is slight difference between the Tawang Monpa and the Kalaktang Monpa. The reason for this difference is yet to be established and many of earlier scholars who studied in Monpa areas considered the geographical variation as main reason for this difference.

Regarding the origin and migration of the Kalaktang Monpas, we have very scanty written record. There are two different views prevalent among the Monpas of Kalaktang regarding their migration. One view states that they came down originally from Tibet to present area of settlement via Tawang. However the other version states that they migrated from Tibet via Bhutan . But in all probability it can be said that their migration might have taken place batches after batches over centuries involving many groups who were on the move under the unknown difficulties .

Historical Perspective of Taklung Dzong:

Historically the building structures today called as Dzong among the Himalayan states is said to be developed from precedents of tower and khars (fortified palaces for lords built according to the tower typology). It was also known as pho brang, which means residence of male hero . In Tibet the Dzong architecture is said to be originated in about 8th century AD when Padmasambhava, popularly known as Guru Rimpoché visited the Tibet. According to the tradition of the Testament of Ba, repeated with considerable elaboration in later histories, the local deities and spirits of Tibet so obstructed the foundation of the temple at Samye that the intervention of occult power in the service of Buddhism was deemed essential. Therefore, Santarakshita a Buddhist scholar recommended to the King Thrisong Detson (742-797) to invite master of mantras named Padmasambhava to Tibet. Therefore, King Thrisong Detson, the 38th king of the Yarlung dynasty and king of Tibet invited the Guru Padmasambhava in order to suppress and place under oath the restless demonic forces and to establish the Buddhism in Tibet and its adjoining areas. When they meet Guru Padmasambhava, better known as Guru Rimpoché said to have advice the king of Tibet that:

Although you have built many castles, when the time of dying comes, only the bier will be yours! Therefore, from now on, you must no more build so many houses for yourself, but you must erect temples and present holy statues, (these are actions) which are helpful for the next life too! .

In his mission of establishing and spreading the Buddhism in Tibet and its adjoining

areas, the Guru Padmasambhava travelled from Tibet to the Monpa region and Buddhism was introduced in the Monpa areas. This also testified by the fact that in some Tibetan documents the word dzong describes specific places which were visited by Guru Rimpoché during 8th century AD. In other word, the landscape settings like caves and special rock formations he visited thus became Padmasabhava's strongholds inhabited by protective deities and these places were often termed dzongs to describe them as the power places they had become, and still are today. By last quarter of 12th century Buddhism was spread in large areas of Himalayan region and it is now difficult for single administrative centre to look after whole areas from religious and political point view. Therefore, king of Tibet introduced a form of administration from forts which came to known as Dzongs, which we know was an established Tibetan tradition.

Regarding the origin of Dzong among the Monpas it is said that two important personalities is associated with it. First one is Padmasambhava, who is said to have introduced the Buddhism among the people of this valley, while second one is Berkhar Targe of Tawangchu valley (modern district headquarter of Tawang District). It has been said that Berkhar Targe had seven sons. The second and seventh sons were deputed to Tibet for study. They were admitted to Tibetan study centre of Buddhism and put under the guidance of Changton Hrolpei, the then famous Buddhist Monk and disciple of first Dalai Lama. After successful completion of their education in Buddhist study, the second Dalai Lama Gedun Gyatso (1475-1542) designated to second son of Berkhar Targe as Lama Tanpei Dornme and seventh son as Lobsang Khenchun. Thereafter, the second Dalai Lama instructed both to preach the idea of Mahayana Buddhism among the people of Lho Mon Yul, which means people of Tawang and its adjoining lower regions .

Thereafter, they started establishing the Dzongs in order to carry on the Tibetan cultural-economic and political expansion in this part of sub-Himalayan region. In total there is four different Dzongs in the Monpa area, viz. Tawang Dzong, Dirang Dzong, Sange Dzong and Taklung Dzong. Through this Dzongs, administrative measures were provided, tax collected and sent to Tibetan capital during pre-colonial period. However, after the establishment of colonial rule in Assam, the administrative and economic functions of the Dzong ceased but they continue to play an important role in religious life of the people.



The Taklung Dzong thrust area of study in this paper is said to be a fifteenth century Himalayan architecture. It was the symbol of religious enunciations for the Monpas of Kalakrang area. It was constructed during Lama Tanpei Dronme, the second son of Berkhar Targe and contemporary of second Dalai Lama Gedun Gyatso (1475-1542). This Dzong is perched on eye-catching snake shaped hill called Taklung Zor near the village Sanglem in the South western part of the west Kameng District. According to a research conducted by one of the Japanese research scholar in 2012, in which he scientifically tested small wooden structure. He found that structure of Taklung Dzong is 536 years old. It means that this Dzong could have probably constructed during 1470s which coincided with period of second Dalai Lama (1475-1542). This fifteen century historic monument now lies in dilapidated ruined status after a massive earthquake of 1950s and the history of this Dzong could only be drawn on the basis of information given by the elders of the locality.

Nevertheless, after visiting the dilapidated ruin of Taklung Dzong certain inferences could be drawn that this Dzong was two storied building made of stones and mud plastering in the style of local craftsmanship. The Dzong seems to have had three rooms in the ground floor of which one room was used as store while other two rooms were used as prison cell. In the first floor, there were apartments for Dzonpens, including kitchen room while in the middle large room meant for alter and besides there is a room for Taklung Lama. This Dzong was a dignified mansion roofed with the planks and painted with the local artistic style of paintings. While interacting with elders of the locality it could be gleaned that this Dzong was constructed with instruction from the Lama Tanpei Dronme by dividing the work among the nearby villages. Some villagers have said to have collected the stones for building, some prepared the mud plastering

while others constructed the roof of the Dzong .

Role of Taklung Dzong among the Monpas of Kalaktang:

Historically the socio-cultural and religious life of the Monpas centred on the Dzongs but due to lack of written documents, comprehensive historical information is difficult to collect on the role of Dzongs among the Monpas. Nevertheless, amidst the paucity of record, an attempt has been made here in this paper to reconstruct the role of Dzongs among the Monpa with special reference to Taklung Dzong. For this purpose data has been collected from Kalaktang area by undertaking extensive field work which had been substantiated with scanty literature available on the Dzong. In collecting primary data, I mostly relied on oral history and social memory of local people to reconstruct the role of Taklung Dzong among the people. And collected data has been interpreted in the perspective of historical method.

It has been already pointed out that historically Dzong served as religious, military, administrative, and social centres of Himalayan Buddhist states. Especially for Tibetan states it has been served as provincial administrative centre and initially Taklung Dzong was also constructed for same purpose . However, after interacting with local people especially elders and Lamas of Kalatang area it was found that Taklung Dzong was basically a Dra Dzong or war Dzong. This suggests that Taklung was war fort in which a prison cell was also provided. It was through Taklung Dzong, the Tibetan run the administration in Kalaktang and its adjoining areas. To run the administration, Dzongpens (provincial administrator) was appointed by Tibetan King appointed from Tawang Dzong . While discussing about the role of Taklung Dzong Rinchin Dondrup states thus;

The Tawang Monastery gradually held supremacy in the region. It needed more resources for maintenance. By the introduction of the Taklung Dzong and Dirang Dzong has (sic) contributed an additional source. The administration system of the Tawang Monastery has been extended for (sic) the appointment of two Dzongpens each for the Taklung and the Dirang Dzong .

Under the supervision of Tawang Dzong, the Dzongpen of Taklung Dzong used to run the administration in Kalaktang area. It has been said that initially two Dzongpens and two Lamas were appointed for Taklung Dzong in which one Dzongpen has the supreme power. They were appointed for a period of three years . The two Dzongpens were selected by abbot of the Tawang Monastery on the basis seniority from among the monks of the monastery who worked earlier as a Gergo . Off these two Dzongpens, again the senior most Dzongpen was promoted to the higher post of Tsipa (the highest in the hierarchy) who looked after the library .

In exercising their administrative duties, the main task of the Dzongpen was to collect taxes locally known Khrai from the local people which were sent to Tibet via Tawang Dzong. Generally, in Tibetan administrative system areas that controlled by Dzongs was made to supply huge quantities of rice, butter, cotton and iron, in addition to undertaking three periods of corvée. If they failed, then 'laws according to Tibetan practice' were exacted on them . After

conducting fieldwork among the people of Kalaktang area, it became clear that Taklung Dzong was also constructed under the system of 'corvée system' in which local people were not paid for their works. Under the administration of Taklung Dzong the items such as rice, animals skin, Arba, Lani ru etc were collected as tax from teh Kalaktang area which was transferred to Tawang Dzong via Phudung, Dirang Dzong, Senge Dzong, Jang, Lhou, Gyangkhar Dzong. From Tawang Dzong these items were sent to Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet.



Dilapidated ruin of Taklung Dzong

The administrative system of the Dzongpens were quite temporary, and their visit to Taklung Dzong were allowed only from winter to the middle of summer, while the rest of the year they stayed at Tawang Monastery . However the two Lamas who were appointed along the Dzongpens stayed at Taklung Dzong throughout the year and performed the religious activities. The other members who accompanied the two Dzongpens to visit the Taklung Dzong for collection of the Khrei (revenue or tax) were Nyetsang (accountant), Drong yur (calculator), Dojapa (checker), and Korkorpa (informer) . All these functionaries along with two Lamas permanently stationed at Taklung Dzong collected Khrei at Kalaktang area. While writing about the mode of collection of revenue by the Taklung Dzongpen Niranjan Sarkar noted that;

Khrei is for the maintenance of monastery and the Lama and has been levied from time of Mera Lama. The landed property of each family measured at the time in terms of Khreikhang, a local unit of measurement. Each household pays for one Khreikhang twenty bres of wheat in Dawa Nyapa (June to July) and twenty bres of millet or barley in Dawa Gupa (October to November) .

In order to collect revenue, Taklung Dzong has classified the families of Kalaktang area into three categories, viz., (1) the Khrei-mi, (2) Mi-Lhak and (3) Yan Lhak . The Khrei-mi hailed from the landlord family or owner of large cultivable land and they were subjected to pay more

land revenue. The other group category Mi-Lhak means the outsider villagers and they were suppose to pay nominal Khrei. The last category was Yan Lhak which means the poorest family and they were subjected to pay less Khrie than the other two other categories. Apart from paying the annual revenue, the villagers of Kalaktang area were subjected to offer their services to the Taklung Dzong and its Dzongpen. The villagers too had to look after the animals and carry the belonging of the Dzongpens while travelling during the day and night hours. if the villagers failed to do so, they were harshly treated and sometimes awarded with severe punishment .In addition each family of Kalaktang area were required to supply a particular quantity of firewood to the Dzong .

With passage of time, the administrative system of Taklung Dzong and its Dzongpens became very harsh as they imposed heavy taxes on people and severe punishment were awarded to the local population who did not carry out orders. Punishment included putting them in prison cell and cutting off nerves of the legs. Confirming the brutality of Dzong and Dzongpens administration, D.K. Dutta also writes that;

The villagers of Kalaktang area had to pay monastic tribute in kinds to the present Tawang through Taklung Dzongpens situated at Morshing area. Once they were so oppressed by the monastic officials that most of the villages have dwindled in size. Many people migrated to Bhutan .

Considering their brutality in running administration and collecting the revenue from the commoners they sought British intervention in this regard. Consequently, British intervened in the administration of Taklung Dzong in 1940s . According to information provided by informants of area, in the year 1944-45 British reached there and they interrupted the working of Dzong on account of oppression expressed by the local populace, in the context of collection of huge taxes and working without payment under the ‘corvée system’. After visiting the Dzong, the British administration took up the matter with the authority at the Tawang Dzong monastery that had control over them. After the intervention by British government, the administrative apparatus at Tallung Dzong became dysfunctional from administrative point of view. In other word, after the intervention of British administration in 1944-45, the administrative power of Taklung Dzong was ceased and which was construed as a relief from taxation and labour dues for people of the area.

Apart from aforesaid administrative activities, the Taklung Dzong was also a centre of religious activities for people of Kalaktang area. Religious activities form an important aspect in the socio-cultural and religious life of the people of the Moanpas. Earlier most religious ceremonies and rituals held at the Dzong. Within structure of Dzong itself a large of portion building especially central portion is allotted for religious ceremonies and rituals. In religious activities, however, it was the Lamas appointed by Tawang monastery who looked after the Dzong and its religious functions. They had to perform the Kangso prayer every twenty-fifth day of the month throughout the year . The villagers offered food and other requirement for these Lamas. Besides, the Taklung Lamas accompanied by Dzongpens visited Amortala. It was the winter habitation of

the Kalaktang Monpas. In winter season the Monpas of Kalaktang migrated to Amortala which lies in the border between Assam and Arunachal, and settled there for one or two months as winter was severe in the highly mountainous areas. There they conducted trade exchange with the Bodos-Cacharis of Assam. There the Dzongpens and Lamas used to perform religious ritual for betterment and prosperity of the Monpas.

Monpas of Tawang and West Kameng were prolific traders. Since early days, they had commercial intercourse with different communities of Assam through the various markets in the foothill region. On the other hand they extensively had commercial intercourse with both the Bhutan and Tibet in northern side. Apart from these they served as intermediaries for trade between the Bengal and Assam with Tibet and Bhutan. There were trade and caravan routes suitable for pack-animals, which linked the western region of NEFA with Tibet, Bhutan as well as the plains of Assam. The Monpas said to have exchanged with the plain people their cows, horses, goats, blankets, and chillies for metal-utensils, eri-cloth and thread etc. With Tibet and Bhutan, they said to have exchanged goods like musk, blanket, yak etc. for Tibetan silk cloths, cotton, rock salt and brass utensils etc. In this trade transaction, the Dzongs played an important role. Though Dzong basically was a fortress for protection against external threat, it also provided shelter to travelling traders along with their animals in the stables. The traders from the plain Assam halted at night at the Dzong before proceeding to Tibet and Bhutan. Generally the trading season of the Monpas starts in winter session. However, before they begin their trading venture, they collected their goods at Dzong. Thereafter, goods were loaded in a caravan and trading started under supervision of the Dzongpan who travelled with the traders to give protection.

Conclusion

The discussion in this paper reflects the dynamism of Dzongs in history of the Monpas culture since the introduction of Dzong system. No doubt after intervention of British administration in 1944-45 and independence of India in 1947 the supremacy of Dzong has been put to an end. In order to regulate their administrative affair the local people constituted inter-village council known as Tsopo. Today this Dzong is locally known as Gompa where only religious activities are carried out. But many important historical events had taken place in Dzong. The structural remains of Dzong in Kalaktang area which is still traceable provides enough evidence of crucial roles played by Dzongs as the centre of government and culture in the course of history of the Monpas of Kalaktang area. The traditional Dzong system and rule of Dzongpens completely controlled the socio-economic and religious-political life of the Monpas of Kalaktang area. The Tibetan agents used Dzong as means of political control and cultural-economic expansion among the Monpas of Kalaktang area. There are ample circulation within social memory and oral literature of stories or events associated with these important Dzongs existing today. Therefore, the Dzongs among the Monpas can be regard as living witness to the successive social development and cultural evolution of the Monpas. It can be useful historical remnant through which one can reconstruct the political, economic and religious history of the Monpas of Kalaktang area. I believe this paper as median research in this area and more paper

will be there in days to come which will gives us in-depth knowledge regarding the Dzong and its role.

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