

Punakha Drupchö

Every year, men of Wang Tsochengyé (ཡང་ཚོ་ཚེན་བརྒྱུད་) or the eight great blocks of Wang, take up the role of *pazap* (པཟམ་པ་མཛེངས་པ་), or noble warrior, and reenact war scenes from the era of Zhapdrung Ngakwang Namgyel (ཞབས་དྲུང་ངག་དབང་རྣམ་རྒྱལ་; 1595-1651). *Punakha Dromchö* (ཕུན་ཁ་ལ་རྒྱལ་མཚོང་) was first performed in 1639 by Zhapdrung Ngakwang Namgyel to hoodwink the Tibetan invaders. It is an annual festival introduced by Zhapdrung to commemorate the victories over the Tibetans. During the festival, the *pazaps*, dressed in battle gear, showcase a battle scene of this distant past recalling the days when in the absence of a standing army, men from the eight *tsochen* the eight great blocks of Thimphu came forward and managed to expel the Tibetan forces out of the country ushering in a new-found internal peace and stability.

Besides recreating the war scenes, there will be a demonstration of Norbu Chushani (ནོར་བུ་ཚུ་གཤམ་ནི) or immersion of relic into the Mo River. The Tibetan invaders were hiding and watching from Jili Gang, a hill above the Punakha cremation, waiting for the perfect moment to forcibly take back the relic that Zhapdrung brought along with him in 1616. Zhapdrung knew that the Tibetan army only wanted one thing—the Rangjung Kharsapani (རང་རྒྱུང་ཁ་ས་པ་ནི), the self-created image of Chenrezik (ལྷུན་རས་གཟིགས་). The next day Zhapdrung walked to a big tree beside the Mo River bank, and he dropped the relic into the river. The Tibetans had come all the way to get the relic, and now that it seemed to be lost, the deceived Tibetans went home thinking that there is no longer any purpose to fight with the Bhutanese. Yet the Zhapdrung did not throw the real relic into the river. Instead he hid the original in his sleeve while he threw a decoy into the river.

The eight great *gewog* of Wang—Kawang, Chang, and Mewang in Thimphu Dzongkhag and Baap, Kabjisa, Shengana, Toewang and Toeb in Punakha—contributed 136 *pazaps*, including a *zimpons/makpons* (གཞིམས་དཔོན་/དམག་དཔོན་) or generals and eight *gups* (གཤོ་བརྒྱུད་), as Zhapdrung's representatives during the war. *Pazaps* were selected based on requirements and an individual's interest. *Tsokpa* (ཚོགས་པ་), the chiwog representatives, elect three *pazaps*. Each *gewog* select seventeen *pazaps* alongside a *zimpon/makpon* and eight *gups* who act as the representatives of Zhapdrung and guide the warriors in battle.

Punakha Domchö starts with an esoteric ceremony of Gönpé Wangchen (གོན་པོ་པོ་འཇམ་མེད་) for seven days. After the conclusion of Gönpé Wangchen, the *gups*, *pazaps* and *zimpons* gather at the Punakha a day before *dromchö* to set up camps and to take a ritual bath near the Mo River. The *gewog* leaders used to collect rice from people. That was called Güpi Kamtré (གུཔི་ཀམ་ཏྲེ་), or dry-tax for local leaders. They would also arrange food to be

served during the three-day *dromchö* event. But *dromchö* preparation has now become much easier with government sponsorship. Today, *pazaps* get a Nu.2500 allowance.



Procession of *pazaps* carrying flags during *Punakha Dromchö*

Pazaps wear red fabric where the lower part is folded like a gho. The *pazaps* wear black jacket and *khamar kabné* (ཁ་དམར་བཀའ་ནེ), or a scarf with red and white panels. They also wear *tsoklham* (ཚོགས་ལྗམ་) or traditional boot, a heavy iron helmet (ལྷགས་རྩྭ་) with flags and a *patang* (པཎ་ཀ་) or sword. The *zimpön* wear the finest battle garb, a gho with magnificent patterns, a white skirt, with *dhar nyenga* (དར་ལྗེ་) or scarves of five colors woven across their chests.

The *gups* wear red robes, transforming into monks until the end of the *dromchö* because they act as the representatives from the dzong that Zhapdrung selected and sent as warriors to guard each clan.

After the *dromchö*, local leaders collect garb from the *pazaps*, count them, fold and lock them inside metal boxes that will not be opened until the next *dromchö*. Punakha Dromchö is a three-day extended *pazap* festival. On the first day of *dromchö*, after the *zhukdrel pünsum tsokpa* (བཞུགས་གཤམ་ཕུན་སུམ་ཚོགས་པ་) and *marchang* (མར་ཚང་) ceremonies, His Holiness the Jé Khenpo (ཇེ་མཁན་པོ་), the representative of the Zhapdrung, reads out the Zhapdrung's edict (ཞབས་བྱང་བཀའ་ཤོག) to the *pazaps*: "I have placed my trust in people of Wang Tsochengyé, and together we have to defeat the enemies from Tibet through craft and shrewdness".

On the second day of the *dromchö*, the *pazaps* wake up early and circumambulate Punakha Dzong three times before gathering near the lake. There, the *zimpön* demonstrate through actions and songs how to fight the enemies. On the final day, eight *pazaps* perform the groundbreaking ceremony in front of the Jé Khenpo at the

receives *jinlap* (ཐྱིན་བརྒྱུལ་པ་) or blessings and religious strings from His Holiness the Jé Khenpo every year. Today, the people of Bhutan remember the way the Zhapdrung saved the relic and Punakha Dzong, and the won the war against the Tibetan army.

Sonam Chopel is a researcher at Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research.