

THE RISE OF CHANGCHUB GYALTSSEN AND THE PHAGMO DRUPA PERIOD

The Director of the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology has asked me to present a paper on any period in Tibetan history at the Seventeenth annual Conference of the Historical Studies Institute. I have chosen to write about Changchub Gyaltsen of Nedong and his rise to power, to become the ruler of Tibet and to establish the Phagmo Drupa lineage, after the overthrow of Sakya regime. I have based my paper on Changchub Gyaltsen's *Lang ki Pudi Siro* and on the Fifth Dalai Lama's *Zog-dhen Jhunui Gaton*.

Changchub Gyaltsen was one of the most colourful personalities in Tibetan history. The statues of Changchub in Nedong depict him as a man with droopy eyes and small stature. But he was a man of very strong will and great compassion. He was also a man of deep insight and strong social commitment. The mistreatment he received from the Sakyapas, while governor of Nedong, led him to seize the power from them and, unlike many others in history, he rose to power without the aid of foreign allies. When he became the ruler of all Tibet he introduced social reforms which helped to make the Phagmo Drupa period, a period which lasted for more than two hundred years, the most stable and peaceful period in Tibetan history.

From 1253 to 1358 Tibet was ruled by the Sakyapas. During their rule, central Tibet was divided into thirteen states and each of these states was governed by a hereditary governor or Tripon. The state of Nedong was governed by the descendents of Lang Lhasi. 1) Earlier a Kargyu lama named Dorje Gyalpo, who lived from 1010 to 1070, built the famous monastery of Dhensa Thel in Phagmo Drupa, a hermitage in Nedong. This lama later became known as Phagmo Drupa Dorje Gyalpo. After his death Dhensa Thel began

1. *A mythology. The son of Deity Mengdhom Taktzen (the fifty sky deity) and Goddess Mentsum.*

to deteriorate. Unable to bear the deterioration of such a great monastery a disciple 2) of Phagmo Drupa sent Che-nga Drakpa Jungne, his trusted attendant and a descendent of Langsi, to become the abbot of Dhensa Thel and to renovate the Monastery. Chen-nga Drakpa Jungne presided over Dhensa Thel for twenty-six years and rebuilt the monastery to its former grandeur. In 1253 when the Sakyapas came into power they appointed Dorje Pel, the brother of Chen-nga Drakpa Jungne, as Tripon of Nedong. From that time on the Tripon, who was a monk, assumed the seat of government at Nedong and also ruled as abbot at Dhensa Thel and his brothers married in order to perpetuate the family line. This tie with the monastery founded by Phagmo Drupa led to the Tripons of Nedong to become known as Phagdru (short of Phagmo Drupa) Tripon and their period of rule in Tibet as the Phagmo Drupa period.

In 1302 a son was born to Phagdru Tripon Rinchen Kyab and he was named Changchub Gyaltsen. At the age of six he was initiated into monkhood at Dhensa Thel. At the age of twelve he went to Sakya in order to become an official in the Sakya government. The Sakya ruler 3) at the time was a man of hot temper and so, fearing that a burst of temper from the ruler would do damage to the name of Phagmo Drupa, Changchub decided instead to concentrate on his studies. He entered a school run by two Sakya Lamas, Lama Jampel and Lama Nyamepa. He studied mathematics, astrology, poetry, art, grammar, logic, tantric and many other subjects. He was always an outstanding student.

Six months out of a year the boys of this school were taken on camping tour. On this tour, Lama Nyamepa required this student to experience first-hand the life of common folk. Each student, by turn, had to fetch the water, gather fuel, build the fire, cook the meal and sweep the floor. Changchub proved capable of facing hardships. While on this tour the students studied their religious texts with fervor; and they also learned to excel in athletic skills

2 *Kyopa Jigdhen Gampo (1143-1217), founder of Drigung Monastery.*

3 *Dakchen Zangpo Pal*

such as stone-throwing, horse-racing, swimming and long distance running. They were also taught public speaking and the art of leadership, and how to sing and how to debate in song. In his autobiography, writes, "I am forever grateful to Lama Nyamepa"

After completing his studies at the age of twenty, Changchub Gyaltzen was appointed the Phagdru Tripon of Nedong by the Sakyapas in 1322. He was also given the Mongolian title of Teisitu, which means Learned Instructor, and presented with a seal carved in sandal-wood. In Nedong, he appointed new civil administrators and new generals for his army. He built a bridge across the Shamchu river and planted new trees throughout the valley. Two years after Changchub had become governor of Nedong, Atula, the Sakya overseer of Livestock, came to Nedong on his round of inspection. One day he summoned Changchub down to the horse stables and pointed to a broken section of the manger and said, "Three pieces of brick can prevent that log from falling down and breaking a horse's leg. To buy a new horse will cost on 'de' of silver which is equal to 8 'sho of gold.'" 4) Changchub writes in his diary, "After receiving this sound advice, I ordered all the broken fences and walls repaired."

During the governorship of his uncle, the Tripon of Yasang had seized territory and two hundred and eighty families belonging to Nedong. When Changchub became Tripon, he seized back the lost territory and people. A state of hostility existed between the two provinces which led to a court inquiry by the Sakya government. The Tripons of Thangpoche and Tselpa, who were friends of Yasangpa, bribed the investigators and the case could not be settled. While the case was in the court, Yasangpa led a battle against Nedong and thirteen persons including the relatives of Changchub were killed, and Changchub himself narrowly escaped death. The bribed administrators in Sakya sent one Sonam Gyaltzen as the new Tripon of Nedong, claiming him to be a descendent of Lang Lhasi. Changchub refused to hand over the governorship of Nedong to the new man.

A few months later, the Sakya Internal Minister, Wongtson visited Dhok Lumpa near Nedong. From there he sent an invitation

4 *Lang ghi Pudi Siro*

to Changchub. Suspecting treachery, Changchub nevertheless went to meet Wongtson. He was immediately arrested on arrival and commanded to give up his office and his seal to Sonam Gyaltzen. Changchub defiantly refused and replied, It is amazing that a new Tripon should be appointed in my place when I have done no wrong to the Sakya Government nor to my people." 5) He was put under house arrest for 19 days 6) and subjected to torture. Again, Wongtson tried to persuade Changchub to obey his command. He promised Changchub he would restore Nedong to him within a year or two if he would give up his office now. To that Changchub replied "If you wish so much to aid Sonam Gyaltzen you can tie a sealed letter around our neck and send us to Sakya to be judged. Otherwise, kill me now and take over Nedong." 7) Not knowing what to do the minister sent Changchub back to Nedong. Reluctantly, wongtson returned to Sakya where he told malicious tales about Changchub to the ruler.

At about this time, the Tripons of Yasang, Tselpa, and Thangpoche had a meeting in Lhasa. At the meeting Tripon Yasang boasted that he would soon spend his summers in Yamdrok and his winters in Nedong. "This boast" writes Changchub, "was like an arrow through my heart." 8) In 1351 fighting broke out between Nedong and Yasang, and Changchub emerged the victor. Sakya sent negotiators but they returned having failed to bring peace. Then a meeting was held by the Sakya administrators in which it was decided that Gyalwa Zadgpo, the Prime Minister, should go to Nedong and hold another inquiry. It was also decided that if the parties did not cooperate, Changchub was to be killed and the Tripons of Yasang and Thangpoche were to be expelled; and Sakya was to assume direct control over the states of Nedong, Yasang and Thangpoche. When Changchub heard about the Sakya decision, he

5 *Ibid*

6 *In Trul ghi Deme it is written that changchub was under arrest for 90 days*

7 *Lang ki Pudi Siro*

8 *Ibid*

undertook a massive strengthening of his army and prepared his people for a revolt against the Sakyapas should the central government unlawfully kill him. He also sent a message to Yamdrok Tripon to be ready to come to his aid. After a few months while Gyalwa Zangpo was enroute to Nedong, Changchub went to receive him at Ghonkar. On meeting Gyalwa Zangpo, Changchub offered him a salutary scarf and a lump of gold and said, "I am ready to obey your verdict if you will conduct your investigation honestly; but if you should unlawfully kill me my body will be claimed from all four directions and this will hurt the stability of Sakya." 9)

When Gyalwa Zangpo arrived in Nedong, he set up camp on the west bank of the Shamchu river. Tripon Yasangpa and his men camped not far away. Inside the Nedong fort, Changchub gathered his trusted men and bid them that if he should be captured they were not to surrender until a just settlement of the dispute was made. The next day when the disputing parties had assembled in the camp of Gyalwa Zangpo, they were arrested 10) and the inquiry continued separately for three days. Fearing that his seal would be used to falsely command his men Changchub, while under arrest, burned his sandal-wood seal and sent a message to his men telling them that he had burned his seal and they were not to surrender Nedong even though they should hear that his skin was peeled off and that he was being dragged along the ground. At the court of inquiry a number of false accusations were brought against Changchub and he was told to place his seal on these, and when he told them he had burned his seal he was subjected to severe torture. Later Changchub was sent to a prison in Kotel, a town near Sakya. A triangle-shaped hat with a yak's tail upon it was put on his head; and he was made to ride on a bullock backwards. The citizens of Nedong gathered along the road and openly wept and protested loudly on seeing their leader taken away. As the Sakya soldiers marched across the bridge with their prisoner Changchub, with a shake of his head, tossed his hat into the river and turned to his people and called out to them saying, "Don't worry about

9 *Ibid.*

10 *In Trul ghi Deme it is writing that Gyalwa Zangpo, Changchub and Yasangpa were assembled on the bridge when suddenly only Changchub was arrested.*

me. They have made me ride this bull backwards but I take it as a good sign. I will be back soon." 11) When Changchub was brought through the streets of Kotel, people jeered at him and threw handfuls of mud at him. He opened his mouth to catch the mud. Laughing, he said, This is a good sign that I will soon be eating Sakya." 12)

Meanwhile in Nedong, Gyalwa Zangpo banished Tripon Yasang to Jayul in southern Tibet and declared Nedong, Yasang and Thangpoche under direct Sakya control. Leaving a batch of soldiers behind, Gyalwa, Zangpo returned to Sakya. In reality, Changchub's men had not surrendered to him.

For some time now, a political rivalry existed between Wongtson and Gyalwa Zangpo. Wongtson had already been decorated by the Mongol Khan, Togan Timur, and there was talk that the Sakya ruler would make him Prime Minister in Gyalwa Zangpo's place. Fearing this to be true, Gyalwa Zangpo knew his only hope in remaining in power was to have a strong ally. So he sent Lama Nyamepa to visit Changchub in prison and offer him his release in return for military aid. After only two and half months of imprisonment, Changchub was secretly set free. But openly it was declared he had escaped.

To the surprise of all in Nedong, their leader suddenly arrived amidst them. A joyous welcome reception was held for him. Later Changchub held a meeting at which he praised his men for their steadfast loyalty to him and then he informed them of internal strife within the Sakya government. The split within the House of Sakya 13) and the deep rivalry between the two powerful ministers had weakened the

11 *It was the custom in Tibet to make a prisoner ride a bull when sentenced to banishment. But strangely, here changchub is made to ride the bull backwards. This must be why he took it as a good sign.*

12 *In Tibetan, the word MUD and the 1st syllable in the name of SAKYA has same spelling and pronunciation. So Changchub is making use of a pun.*

13 *The family was divided into four. It was agreed that each would, by turn, rule the country.*

Sakya government considerably. "Our time is ripe" said Changchub, "none of you must excuse yourself on grounds of illness, old age or religious commitment. All of you must cooperate with me. The iron must be pounded while it is hot". 14) And Nedong made preparation for battle.

Not long after, Gyalwa Zangpo was suddenly put under arrest by Wongtson. Then he sent his forces by two routes to battle against Nedong. Meanwhile word of Gyalwa's arrest had already reached Nedong and Changchub and his ally, Tripon of Yamdrok, sent their forces from two directions against Sakya. Soldiers led by Minister Shunu Zangpo sped along the road towards Sakya and and at Mongardong they clashed with the Sakya forces and easily defeated them. The second Nedong company led by Trompa Laptsum sped over the pass and clashed with Sakya soldiers at Chang Lakha and was victorious. As was the custom in those days, the victors sent back the heads and limbs of the defeated generals. Then Changchub led the third group of forces against Sakya. But the fame of Changchub's might was already wide spread and so as he led his army through Drachi and Ghongkar the Sakya soldiers turned and fled in all directions, many jumping into rivers on surrendering on the spot, and Changchub and his men hardly saw any action. Fearing the fall of Sakya to Changchub, the Sakya rulers, Khetsum Nagalekpa and Lama Dhampa Sonam Gyaltzen, and the leaders of the Chokhasum 15) received Changchub at Rong. They told him that Gyalwa Zangpo had been set free and they begged him to agree to a truce. In 1355 a truce was set and Nedong's new territory was drawn up. East of Mt. Jomo Khara came under Nedong and the lands west of Mt. Jomo Khara remained under Sakya. The leaders of U, Dho-thod (Kham) and Dho-med (Amdo) came to pay obeisance to Changchub and each offered him a letter of allegiance stamped with his own seal.

After a few years there was another crisis within the Sakya hierarchy. This time rivalry between Prime Minister Wongtson and the new Internal Minister, Namkha Tenpa resulted in the murder of Sakya Lama Kumpangpa. Also at the same time, Gyalwa Zangpo died mysteriously.

14 *Lang ki Pudi Siro*

15 *The three regions of Tibet, U-Tsang, Dho thod and Dho-med.*

riously 16) at his home estate of Lhatse. On hearing this news, Changchub led a large army and headed for Sakya. On his way he met with a few vain attempts to block his path but, like the sunrise pushing back the darkness, Changchub advanced head-on towards Sakya. At Sakya Changchub dethroned the main ruler, Ta On Lordo Gyaltsen. He imprisoned more than four hundred Sakya ministers including Wongtson and Namkha Tenpa. He placed Rinpungpa Namkha Zangpo as chief administrator of Sakya and ordered him to put guards around the beautiful Sakya temple and palace to protect the art pieces from the rampage of his soldiers.

On returning to Nedong in 1358, Changchub Gyaltsen declared himself the ruler of Tibet. His first order of work was to eliminate the potentially dangerous office of the Tripon and in its place he appointed a man with unquestioned loyalty as Dzungpon (District Officer), to administer a small Dzung (district), and thus he divided the country into many districts. As the study of Sutra was never undertaken by Changchub's religious sect, the Dhakpo Kargyu, a monastery was built in Tsethang to house the school of Sutra. Then he started a major renovation of Dhensa Thel, Lhasa Tsuglag khang, Samye Tsuglag-khang and all the major monasteries in Tibet. He banned fishing and hunting of wild animals. He built bridges across rivers and where bridges could not span the rivers he posted ferry boats. For the protection of travellers, he stationed Jigkyabs (police) along solitary roads. At pilgrimage sites he posted families to provide free food and lodging to the pilgrims.

Changchub improved the condition of the nomads and the farmers and gave them relief from unfair taxes. Although the Sakyapas had a system of taxation based on the Mongolian system, their tax-collectors misused their power and taxed the people unfairly. Changchub set up a new system whereby the government yearly collected only one-sixth of the produce reaped by the nomads and the farmers. In U, Tsang and Thod he build thirteen fortresses at strategic sites.

Changchub Gyaltsen also reformed the system of punishment. During the latter part of the Sakya rule, the constant fighting

16 *Zan-dhen Jhunui Gaton states that some say he was murdered and others say he died of drunkenness.*

within the ruling family and the frequent change of its ministers diminished the fairness of justice; and also the adoption of Mongolian punitive methods sanctioned the execution of criminals without a hearing and permitted the handing the severe punishment for misdemeanors. Changchub adopted the practice of the early kings of Tibet and devised thirteen grades of punishment and decreed that hearings were to be held before a sentence was passed. Because of the firm but fair system of punishment thieves, and bandits virtually disappeared from the land and the Phagmo Drupa period in Tibetan history was also known as the 'Ghe-mo Serkhur' period; meaning a period in which an old woman carrying a bag of gold could travel from Dhartse-dho in the east to Ladakh in the west and not come to any harm by bandits. Changchub Gyaltsen died in 1364 at the age of sixty two in Nedong. 17)

After Changchub's death, two of his relatives came to the throne in quick succession. The fourth Phagmo Drupa ruler was Che-nga Sonam Drukpa. During his four year rule, harvest was bountiful and he became known as the "ruler of good fortune." After his retirement, his nephew, Miwang Drakpa Gyaltsen ascended to the throne in Nedong in 1385. The famous Raptan Kunsang Phagpa, the founder of Pekhor Chote monastery in Gyangtse, served as one of his attendants. During Drakpa Gyaltsen's reign, the Chinese Emperor Yung Lo (1403-1424) of the Ming Dynasty sent an invitation to the Tibetan ruler to visit China. Drakpa Gyaltsen refused the invitation and Karmapa Deshen Shekpa (1384-1415) was invited instead. Karmapa was given a grand welcome and the Emperor himself went to receive him at the gates of Nanking. Emperor Yung Lo also sent representatives, a number of times, to Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), the founder of the Gelugpa sect, inviting him to his court. Tsongkhapa declined the invitation and instead sent a representative 18) to Nanking.

Through the patronage of Drakpa Gyaltsen and his minister, Neu Namkha Zangpo, Tsonkhapa in 1409 instituted the first Monlam (Prayer) festival in Lhasa. Until 1959, when Communist China Committed aggression and overthrew the government of Tibet, the Monlam festival was held every Spring for three weeks in Lhasa.

17 *In Deb-ther Nagompo it is written that Changchub retired in 1363 and died at Thel monastery in 1373.*

18 *Jamchen Choje Shakya Yeshe.*

During the reign of Drakpa Gyaltzen there was peace and prosperity in the land and, for this, the people named him "Ghongma Chosgyal Chenpo" meaning "The Great Religious Emperor".

During the Phagmo Drupa period there lived many learned and famous men in Tibet. It was an era in which there was an outburst of life and beauty and a deep quest for knowledge. Bodhang Chojle Namgyal, the famous poet and astrologer, was a contemporary of Changchub Gyaltzen. Among his wellknown works is the ode he wrote in praise the Nedong government. Thangthong Gyalpo (1385-1509), a travelling medicant helped built fifty-three iron-chain bridges across rivers in U and Tsang regions. He is also responsible for introducing the tradition of the opera in Tibet. About the year 1400, the first method of printing was introduced in Tibet by Lochen Thugchi pel and Gelong Tashi Gyatso. Gos Lotsawa Shunupal, a disciple of Tsongkhapa, also lived in this glorious era. He is known for his famous *Deb-ther Nogmpo*, which is an indepth study of the Buddhist sects in Tibet. Many other famous architects, astrologers, metalurgists, painters, philosophers, poets, and sculptors lived during this period. The names of some are Bhuton Rinchen Drupa, Re-Dawa Shunu Lordo, Thuksey Rinchen Namgyal, Kheydrup Gelek Palsang, Je Gedun-drup, Yaktruk Sangye Phel, Rongton Sheja Kunrig, Ngor-chen Kunga Zanpo, Jamchen Rabjampa Sangye Phel, Gowo Rabjampa Sonam Sangye, God-truk Ralpa and Taktshang Lotsawa Sherab Rinchen.

Ghongma Drakpa Gyaltzen died in 1432 and his nephew, Che-nga Drakpa Jungne, was enthroned as Nedong Ghongma in 1433. The new Ghongma was also a nephew of Rinpung Norzang of the House of Rinpung. From about this time on, the House of Phagmo Drupy slowly began to loss its political control in Tsang and Thod. The Rinpungpas and, later, the Depa Tsangpas held the reins of government in these regions. Elsewhere the Phagmo Drupa ruler was little more than a figurehead. However it was not untill the late 1500s that the power of the Phagmo Drupa finally ceased to exist in Tibet. Although their political power had ended, the descended of the Phagmo Drupa line were regarded with respect and, for many years after, was addressed as "Ghongmar" by all.

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