

Brief background of Wangdue Phodrang Dzong and the Bridge.

The Wangdue Phodrang Dzong (Wangdi) was founded by the Zhabdrung in 1638 atop a high ridge between the Punatsang Chhu and the Dang Chhu. It was clearly chosen for its commanding view of the valleys below. Wangdi is important in Bhutan's history because, in the early days, it was the site of the country's second capital.

One legend relates that Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel was supposedly at Chimi Lhakhang in Punakha, an old cripple or decrepit old man approached him and described a ridge resembling a nose/neck of a sleeping elephant and told him that, if he could built a Dzong, where present Wangdue Phodrang Dzong is located, he would unite the country. Zhabdrung, surmising the old men to be Yeshe Gonpo (Maha Kala,) the guardian deity of Bhutan, concluded to build the Dzong and completed it in 1638. It was said that people of Wang and Shar Dar Gyad were involved in its construction and the people of Rinchengang village contributed a lot as they were skilled masons.

Like other Dzongs, Wangdue Phodrang Dzong also lies in a prominent position, imposing a demeanor of the authority of the Zhabdrung in both civil and religious affairs. Wangdue Phodrang Dzong is and has always been the provincial capital of Shar district, and in feudal days, a Dzongpon was the secular administrator known as Wangdzop in a local name.

Today, the Dzong comprises three distinct zones: a courtyard at the northeast, used for administrative purposes, a narrower middle enclosure used for religious activities, and a third courtyard at the end of the ridgeline to the southwest, also housing religious functions.

The fortress was extended in 1683 under Tenzin Rabgye (1638-96), a nephew of the Zhabdrung who served as both a civil administrator and the Zhabdrung's religious successor. Tenzin Rabgye added the first and second courtyards along the spine of the ridgeline, likely building atop the roadway that led to the Dzong. While still claustrophobic, the topography widened enough to allow slightly more spacious courtyards than those found in the third enclosure. This addition of these courtyards may be extended to provide more space for festivals and religious activities that blossomed in the years following the Zhabdrung's unification of the country. Or may have reflected the growing administrative burden of running the state, which required additional space for administrative functions and the bureaucracy it nurtured.

In later centuries, the Dzong was renovated by Dzongzin Sonam Lhendrup in 1767. In the 18th century, the fortress suffered the twin indignities of a fire (in 1837) and an earthquake (in 1897), resulting in several further rounds of reconstruction. Over 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. During the time of Lama Neten Pelden Singye, the Dzong was damaged by a severe earthquake and rebuilt. Dzongpon Damchung was also involved in the renovation. During the reign of the late king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the Dzong was renovated.

The 20th century was kinder, as the Dzong required only minor renovations in 1952 and 1983. Disaster, however, struck on June 24, 2012, caught fire. The blaze rapidly spread to the whole of the Dzong, leaving it a smoldering ruin apart from its foundations and portions of its lowermost walls. Following the fire, His Majesty the King granted Nu 200 million for reconstruction. His donation formed the core of a repair fund that, along with private donors, various organizations, and foreign governments, allowed reconstruction to proceed swiftly.

The connection between the Choten (Stupa) and Wangdue Dzong.

There is a local legend popular with the Wangdue Bridge. It was said to have been built back during the time of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. It was said that traders and travelers were having tough time crossing the Punatshangchu river. The people attempted several times to

build a simple wooden bridge over it. However, it was learnt that the hard labor had been destroyed during the night by a mermaid of the particular area, making difficult and impossible for people to build a bridge.

The incident was heard by Zhabdrung, and he immediately went to the people and assured them that handle this situation himself. He announces to all the people that there will be a Tshechu festival in the Dzong soon. On the day of the festival, the perpetrator (mermaid) was beguile and distracted by the supernatural influence of Zhabdrung and is believed to have attended and witnessed various dances performed in the courtyard for three entire days until people furnished the building Wangdue bridge. And thereby Zhabdrung subdued the mermaid and made the host and deity of the place. The Wangdue Tshechu is believed to be celebrated from the time of its inception and falls in the 8th month of 10 day of the Bhutanese calendar.

Another interesting story connects the Dzong to the old cantilever bridge that once spanned the Punatsangchu river. The bridge was built after the construction of the Dzong under the direction of a famed mason called Drakpa from Rinchengang village. As a safeguard against flash floods, a Mandala dedicated to Mithrupa (Akshobya) was installed at the base of the bridge's foundation. During the tenure of the 20th Wangzop Damchung, a big flood washed away the entire bridge, but the base where the Mandala was installed was left intact.

It is said that Dzongpon Damchung organized a Tsechu in which the Doley Raksha Dance, famed in the region for its aesthetic intricacies, was performed to attract the river spirit, who was disrupting the reconstruction of the bridge. As the spirit stayed engrossed in the festivity, Damchung, with several hundred men, sneaked down to the river and completed the bridge. The spirit unleashed many floods to bring down the bridge, but the Wangzop, true to his clever character, had worked a clever design into the foundation pillars to withstand the force of the water.





Wangdue Phodrang Dzong before and after reconstruction, old cantilever and modern bridge over Punatshangchu river..

As to safeguard against flash floods, a Choeten gateway to the Wangdue Dzong, and a Mandala dedicated to Mithrupa (Akshobya) installed at the base of the bridge's foundation, untouched by the forceful flood reconstructed during the tenure of the 20th Wangzop Damchung was seen deteriorated at the roof level was detected until recently.

It was learnt that minor repair works like ceiling and flooring with installation of Tsa-Tsa along with a base for Tsa-Tsa placement were probably said to be carried out in or before 2000. However, no major maintenance was done until His Eminence Dorji Lopen in 2020 was extremely interested and, knowing the significance, fact, and reason of Choten there, instructed this administration to carry out an assessment, especially the roofing at the northern part of Choten, and to carry out maintenance with urgency.

The Wangdue Dzong reconstruction project director and team, along with the Dzongkhag administration, had carried out a needs assessment and found that the wood component of the roof, mostly at the northern part, had been fully damaged.

The administration through the cultural unit has made the financial proposal in the FY 2022-2023, with consultation and advice from the Department of Culture and Dzongkha Development, for the maintenance of the entire roofing with experienced workmanship from the Dzong reconstruction office, and completed in December 2022.

The Dzongkhag also carried out the maintenance of the base or plinth wall from the south, east, and north after seeing the wall disintegrate at some parts and cleaning the vegetation overgrown on the wall and whitewashing. The Choten was also adorned with dim red lighting at Kemar level.

The consecration and cleansing sacrament as customary rites, is carried out with the new installation of inner relics on date 9th day of the 1st month of the Lunar calendar (28/02/2023).



Before and after maintenance.





