

Biography Series on Jigme Namgyal and *Druk Gyalpos: A Review*

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The publication of the biographies of Gongsa Jigme Namgyal and the four kings of Bhutan by the Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research between 2008 and 2011 is a monumental undertaking. In all—1,478 pages spread over five volumes—the biography series is the biggest work of documentation on the kings of Bhutan undertaken by an institution so far.

The five volumes—one each on Gongsa Jigme Namgyal and the first, second, third, and fourth kings—present granular details about Bhutan's monarchy and the events related to the lives of the kings that evoke lingering imagery in the reader's mind. The scene at the coronation of the first king Ugyen Wangchuck in Punakha, for example, is particularly poignant. The banquet spread to celebrate the occasion so thoroughly satiated every living creature who gathered in Punakha Dzong that, after a while, even the resident dogs and crows looked away from the feast. An ocean of *ara* and *singchang* (locally brewed grain wines) inundated everyone and numberless people staggered their way home in the evening, but most collapsed by the wayside.

The research on the books, led by former *Drungpa* Damchu Lhundup, has drawn on a wide range of sources, including almost all books on Bhutan's history, domestic and external reports, National Assembly resolutions, development plan documents, and oral accounts, among others. Oral accounts about the kings in particular add colour and a human dimension to the historical narrative. The volumes on the Third and the Fourth *Druk Gyalpos* draw heavily on the resolutions of the National Assembly.

Because the books draw on multiple sources, the series is a melting pot of historical, documentary, and oral accounts about Penlop Jigme Namgyal and the four kings. The juxtaposition of different—often conflicting—accounts opens new perspectives and new areas for research. However, the volume presents little analysis of conflicting accounts and facts. Oral accounts emerge as a refreshing way of telling historical stories. The series makes repeated reference to *rgyal rabs gsal ba'i sgron me* by Lam Pemala, *smyosrabs yang dsal me long* by Dasho Lam Sangag, and *lho'i chos 'byung blo gсар rna ba'i rgyan* by Je Gedun Rinchen, among others.

Although written in easy Dzongkha, the reader finds literary embellishments strewn over many pages of the books. Some of them, like this example, help bring home the message powerfully: ‘Against King Ugyen Wangchuck, his enemies were like fireflies trying to outshine the sun and like someone banging his forehead against the mountains’. But often they present themselves as mere figures of speech that stick out but mean little. However, the numerous old verses picked from religious texts and freshly composed ones come as a linguistic and philosophical complement to the narrative.

Dramatic events, especially in the lives of Gongsa Jigme Namgyal and King Ugyen Wangchuck, are heightened by the mythical treatment they receive. This very quality makes the volume on Jigme Namgyal more riveting to read than the others, which often tend to list and describe the achievements of the kings in a linear narrative. The 234-page volume on Gongsa Jigme Namgyal is populated by power-hungry, manipulating, scheming men fathered by territorial deities with Bhutanese women. Gongsa Jigme Namgyal was one of the few gifted men of his time with a human father.

The gathering of the biggest group of Bhutan’s strongmen took place when Punakha Dzong was burnt down in 1849, bringing people from all over the country to Punakha to rebuild it.

Twenty-five-year-old Dronyer Jigme Namgyal led the workforce from the east. The web of political intrigue surrounding the rebuilding of the *dzong*, which catapulted Jigme Namgyal to national fame, is described in fascinating detail drawn from historical sources and oral accounts.

The series also provides a rare glimpse into the lives of Gongsa Jigme Namgyal and the *Druk Gyalpos* through some of their deeds that rarely find a mention in the popularly read writings on Bhutan’s history and kings. Gongsa Jigme Namgyal’s strongly-worded *kasho* issued in 1885, two years after he had become Trongsa Penlop—banning killing of ‘humans and domestic animals, birds and wild animals, fish and other aquatic creatures thriving in the rivers and streams, insects and flies living on land, cliffs and trees’ in eastern Bhutan—makes a stimulating read. One can draw a number of historical insights from the long decree that threatens to cut off limbs and slit the mouth, and invokes the wrath of Bhutan’s tutelary and territorial deities upon those who failed to heed its contents.

This decree finds resonance until the reign of King Jigme Wangchuck who ruled Bhutan with an iron hand to secure social peace and national solidarity. Some readers might find Wangdicholing’s system of punishing criminals and unfaithful individuals, recounted by former courtiers, particularly fascinating.

So might the routine and rituals that Wangdicholing Palace followed from dawn to midnight.

An oral account has it that the second Druk Gyalpo piloted rice plantation in a place called Garbang in Bumthang and appointed a *zimgarp* (attendant) to monitor the progress. The three *drey* (a measuring bowl) of paddy that the small plot of land yielded was mostly with unformed or partially formed grain inside the husk. The king nevertheless sent an attendant to Tibet especially to offer a *drey* of paddy to Lhasa Jowo with the prayer that the Bhutanese may be able to grow rice in Bumthang one day.

Despite scintillating details on the attributes and achievements of the kings, the series does not sound hagiographic. The darker side of Bhutan's modern history such as the assassination of

Zhabdrung Jigme Dorji by King Jigme Wangchuck and assassination of Jigme Palden Dorji are captured in some selective details. The series cautiously weaves some oral accounts of these events into textual accounts drawn from books published or available in Bhutan. No attempt is made to shed more light on them.

The biggest volume from the hard-bound series, the 417-page volume on the Fourth Druk Gyalpo published in 2011, stands out in terms of the amount of information and the range of topics covered in 14 chapters.

This series will serve as rich reference source for researchers, teachers, and students. An English translation and wider distribution of the books will certainly lead to a larger and wider readership.