

'Jam-dbyangs-bzhad-pa and the emergence of religious orthodoxy and political hegemony under the dGe-lugs

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The lifetime of 'Jam-dbyangs-bzhad-pa (1648–1721) closely corresponds to the pivotal period of Tibetan history between the conquest of Gushri Khan and the establishment of dGe-lugs-pa political authority under the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1642 and the intervention in Lhasa of the Manchu Dynasty in 1720. Moreover, 'Jam-dbyangs-bzhad-pa stands at the intersection of several of the key competing forces that influenced events during this seminal time. His great importance within the dGe-lugs-pa School is signalled by the very prestigious lineage of “pre-incarnations” constructed for him by his followers and by the fact that he became a key target of criticism by scholars from other Schools. In this paper, I will discuss the life of Jam-dbyangs-bzhad-pa in the context of these larger historical forces.

First of all, I will position him within the dGe-lugs-pa School, showing the unique role he played in consolidating the tradition at a time when its political fortunes were in the ascendant. Through his writings, 'Jam-dbyangs-bzhad-pa worked to present a unified and coherent interpretation of Tsong-kha-pa's system, surpassing his fellow textbook authors in the attempt to create philosophical consistency. Through these efforts, he endeavored to fashion a sense of dGe-lugs-pa orthodoxy by responding to the various Sa-skya and bKa'-rgyud critics of Tsong-kha-pa.

At the same time, 'Jam-dbyangs-bzhad-pa represented a conservative element within dGe-lugs that resisted the inter-sectarian syncretic tendencies of the Fifth Dalai Lama, sDe-srid Sangs-rgyas-rgya-mtsho, and others within his own School. Along with the Second Panchen Lama, he worked to encourage the Sixth Dalai Lama to take on his vows and to behave as a Dalai Lama, attempting to minimize the influence of the sDe-srid over the youth. When he understood where events were leading, 'Jam-dbyangs-bzhad-pa gradually distanced himself from all of the figures who were seen as threatening the purity of Tsong-kha-pa's message.

Finally, because of his strong connections to his birthplace in A-mdo, 'Jam-dbyangs-bzhad-pa also had particularly good relations with some Mongolian factions. This involved him in many of the gripping political dramas and power plays that unfolded in Central Tibet during the first decade of the eighteenth century. He was close to the Qosot Mongolian Hla-bzang Khan, who murdered the Regent, took over control of Central Tibet, and perhaps murdered the Sixth Dalai Lama. He had a long and important relationship with the leader of the other faction of the Qosot family, Erdenai Junang Khan, the eventual Patron of 'Jam-dbyangs-bzhad-pa's monastery in A-mdo. It is largely as a result of 'Jam-dbyangs-bzhad-pa's prestige among various Mongolian factions and the Qosot

Mongolians in particular, that the center of gravity of dGe-lugs shifted to the east, a circumstance that is vitally responsible for the prosperity of the School in the chaotic decades that were to follow.