

Across Bhutan in Eighteen Days

A Journey Across the Dragon Kingdom

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The invasion and subjugation of Tibet by the Chinese Communist Army was one of the most tragic events of modern times; not only because it resulted in the annihilation and torment of countless innocent victims, but also because mankind is in eminent danger of losing one of its ancient and most successful cultures. For, whatever its imperfections in terms of modern democracy and in spite of its material poverty, the Tibetan theocratic system seems to have produced a people as content, as tolerant, as courageously independent and as free from cramping taboos as can be found anywhere. Today, Bhutan is almost the only place where this remarkable culture still thrives on its native soil. Like Tibet itself, this small mountain kingdom has remained beyond the reach of all, but a very few western travellers. Like Tibet, true, it has in the past owed its immunity to foreign influence, largely to the policy of the Government of India to define the political integrity of neighbouring states. Unlike Tibet, it is still independent, though how long it will retain this happy position if you would dare to guess.

Foreword by Eric Shipton.

From the book *Two and Two Halves to Bhutan* by Peter Steele.

The flight from Kolkata to Paro was short. We could see the Himalayan range from Kangchenjunga to Masagang almost on border with Arunachal Pradesh. The aircraft made a delicate manoeuvre and we landed at the small airstrip at Paro. We were in Bhutan, called by many names: The Dragon Kingdom, the Hidden Kingdom or Shangrila.¹ Till recently Bhutan had kept its doors closed to the onslaught of tourism and only a restricted

1 Bhutan originated from the word *Bhotente* : Tibet was known as *bhot* and *ente* means a border land 'A land on the borders of Tibet.' However the Bhutanese know their country as *Druk-Yul* : *Druk*-Thunder Dragon, *Yul*-Land-The Land of Thunder Dragon. (Rustomji, Nari, *Bhutan the Dragon Kingdom in Crisis*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1978, p. 4).

number of visitors were allowed. Television, internet and films were not freely permitted till 1998. The benevolent King had intentions of protecting the traditions, culture and environment of the Kingdom – almost like what was envisaged by Shipton in the above quote.

At the airport ‘foreigners’ had to pay steep Visa fees and a hefty charge per day of visit.² For Indians entry was free, no per day charges and we could use Indian currency – we are not foreigners in Bhutan except for passports. Paro (2100 m) was a beautiful town, surrounded by forest. On the first evening we visited the small bazaar, which was almost time-warped, with wood carved windows, small houses and dominated by a huge *dzong* (fort). This was going to be the usual pattern during our travels in Bhutan and we visited several huge *dzongs*. We had planned to drive across Bhutan – from west to east and partake its culture, history and beauty.

Early History

Sindhu Raja, who was converted to Buddhism by Padmasambhava (Lotus Born), was one of the earliest rulers of Bhutan, in the 8th Century A.D. For several centuries after this many Tibetan kings crossed passes to ravage the green valleys of Bhutan. The main contact with Tibet was through religion. Dujom Dorjee was the first Bhutanese lama who repulsed Tibetan invasions in 1527 and controlled the entire country with the name of Dharma Raja (a king who rules as per religious truths). He built most of the *dzongs* for defence. To devote all his time to religion he appointed the institution of Deb Raja (the king who dispenses bounty) to run the country.

The first Europeans to enter Bhutan were Fathers Estevao Cacella and Joao Cabrel in 1627. They met the second King who was visiting Bhutan from his home at Ralung monastery near Gyantse in Tibet. They trekked with the King and wanted to preach Christianity, but were denied permission politely. They left for Shigatse in Tibet, where Cacella, and later Cabrel crossed back to India from Nepal.

The areas south of hilly borders of Bhutan were called *duars*, fertile flat lands and today home to many tea gardens. This is a narrow strip of land about 40 km wide and 400 km long with 18 passes (doors or *duars*).

2 In 2004 foreign visitors (except Indians) had to pay US \$ 200 per day all-inclusive.

In 1772 Deb Judhur swept down to Cooch-Bihar from Bhutan and challenged the British who were in control. Warren Hastings sent the army under Captain Jones. The king compromised and requested Hastings for peace. George Bogle was commissioned to represent the British in 1774, main intention being to open routes to Tibet.³

Dr Hamilton (1775), Captain Samuel Turner (1783), Captain Pemberton (1838) and Ashley Eden (1864) followed to open Bhutan further and establish relations with British India. Ashley Eden's mission was badly treated by the Bhutanese and was forced to sign a treaty for restitution of Assam duars. To punish Bhutanese for this, the British declared war on the Bhutanese in 1865, called the 'Duar War'.

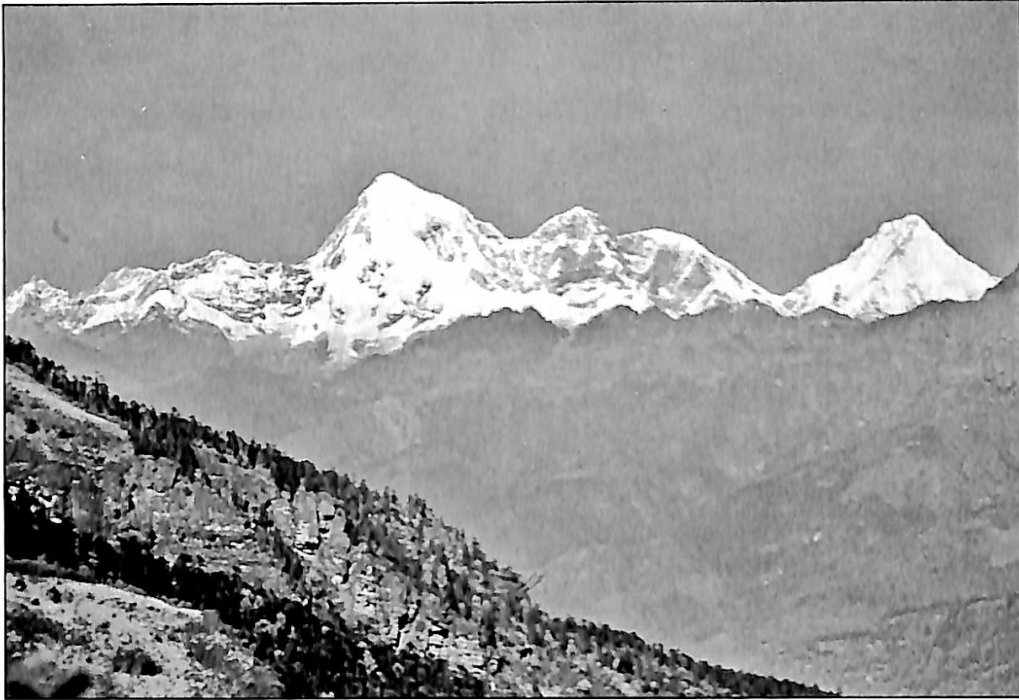
There are three major Duars; Char Duar, Alipur Duar and Buxa Duar. The British in early 19th Century knew the importance of these tea-growing areas and hence occupied it. Bhutan attacked the British but were repulsed. Finally the 'Sinchula Treaty' was signed which gave these areas, including Darjeeling and Kalimpong, to the British and onwards to India. The compensation to be paid was Rs 10,000 per year a later raised by Punakha Treaty to Rs 50,000. Today it amounts to large sum and Indian government pays the sum by adjusting it against the grants given to Bhutan!

Twenty years later the last civil war was fought in Bhutan. The Paro and Tongsa Penlop joined hands to defeat Thimphu and Punakha Dzong chieftains. Later Bhutan remained closed to all outsiders.

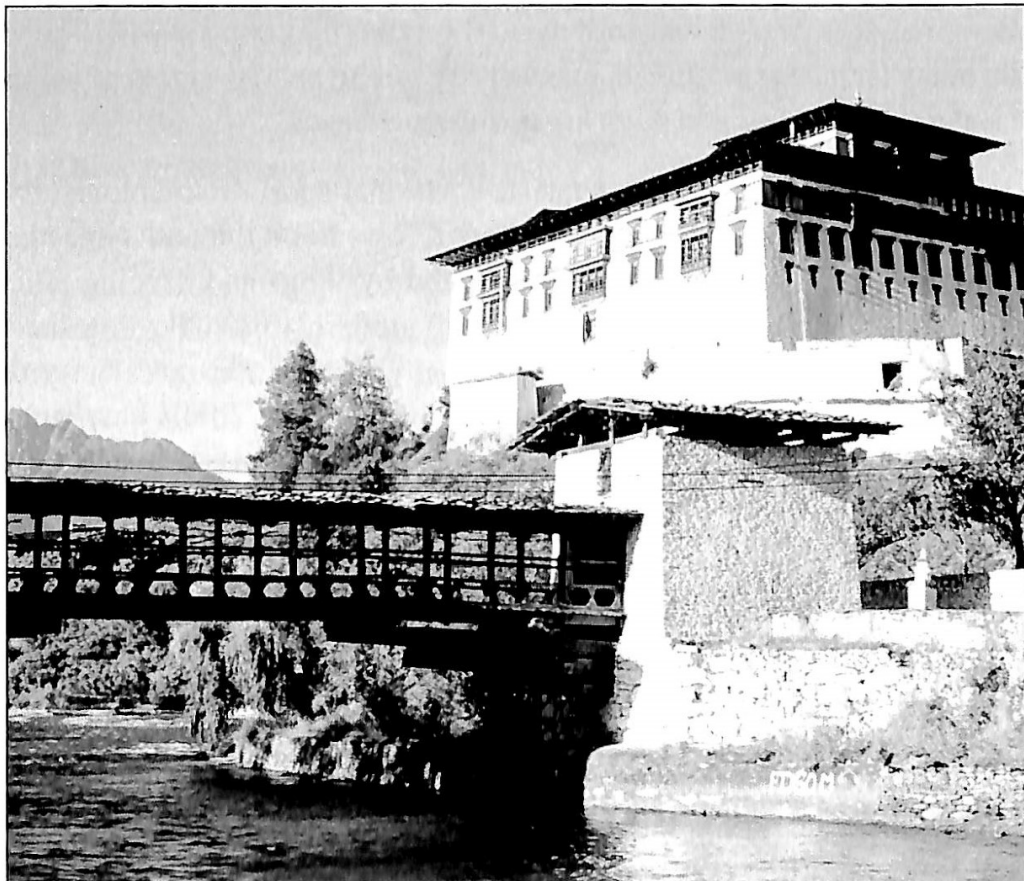
Paro and Thimphu

We climbed to Tiger's Nest monastery (Takstang gumpa) near Paro. It is a beautifully located monastery perched on a huge rock. The legend has it that a lama rode on back of a tiger to reach here. We also visited the stupendous Paro Dzong, built in 1647, and Drukya Dzong. The drive to Gele la (3988 m) gave us a glimpse of Ha district and Chomolhari peak. Everything seemed little familiar for these monuments are featured in many books and magazines. Modern goods were available everywhere and the contrast was worth experiencing - centuries old buildings juxtaposed with hoards of tourists sipping cold drinks, beer and eating chocolates at exorbitant prices. Not to forget hundreds of photos being clicked every hour.

3 Dr Hamilton who was with Bogle, carried large supplies of potatoes which he planted at many places. This was the first introduction of the plant in Bhutan - today its staple food.



6. Chomolhari (left) and Jitchudrake from Gele la.



7. Paro Dzong.

We drove to Thimphu, 55 kms of winding narrow road in dusty and barren valley. Thimphu (2200 m), is like any other Indian hill town, 99% Indian goods in shops, crowded streets and polluted! We were back home.

The *dzong* here is the seat of the Bhutanese government. This was also the seat of the religious head called Je Khenpo. The Potala in Tibet represents religious as well as political power and common head is the Dalai Lama. This union created a conflict, as the same person may not be suited to rule both. They have bifurcated the institutions in Bhutan in the last 100 years. The King is a hereditary monarch while the head lama is a religious head called Je Khenpo. There have been many assassinations to overthrow each other. In last 50 years, especially with support of India, the King has become all powerful, all the better, as Bhutan has had some excellent Kings.

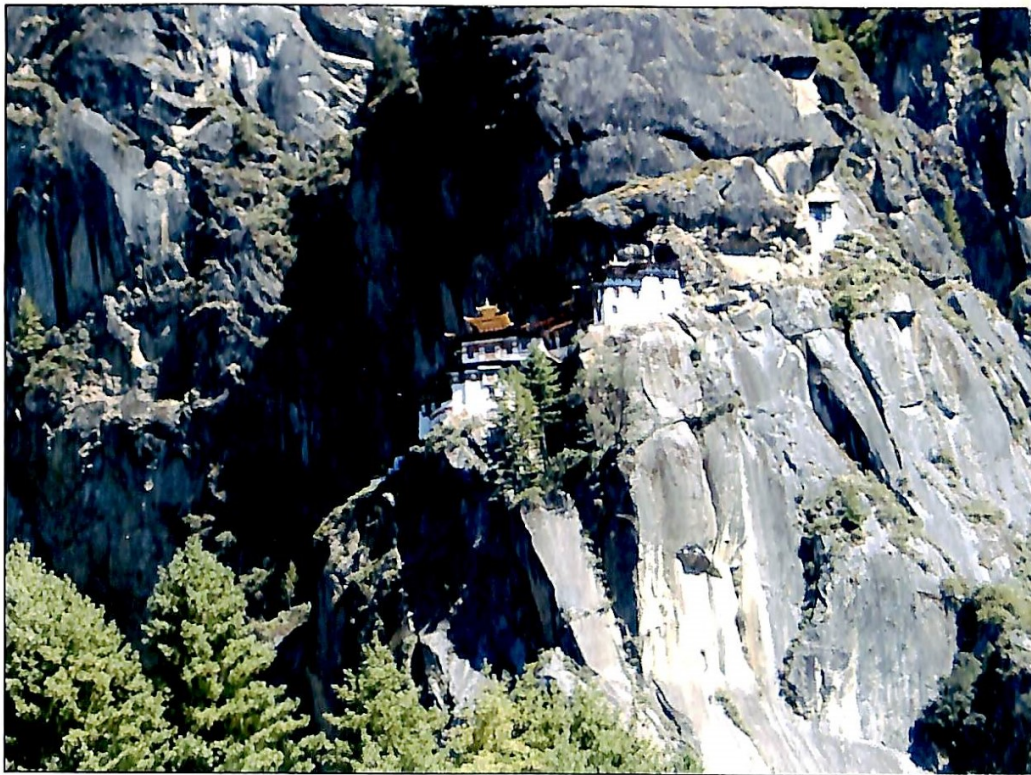
Modern Times, Changing Times

With the Gorkha invasions in Nepal, many fleeing Nepalese had settled first in the duars and later in the foothills of Bhutan, for almost four generations now. Some of them served as slaves of Bhutan nobles till 1963 when slavery was abolished. The father of the present King set them free. It is strange that until the early sixties they were slaves! There are many Nepalese in Bhutan, many speak Nepali but the stigma of being a slave still remains, and there are no intermarriages.

We watched an archery contest, a national sport. Two colourfully dressed teams play each other and shoot arrows to hit the bull's eye at a good distance. The contest is accompanied by songs and dancing after each shoot. We also saw the advent of modern times like internet, telephones and television in Bhutan, most visible in Thimphu but you will get these facilities in remote parts too. With this, life is changing; scantily dressed ladies dance at parties to western tunes, couples live together without marriage, dress codes are turning western and attitudes are changing to cause an HIV scare. The youth are turning to India for work. Compared to Nepal, things are better but winds are blowing from all directions. Bhutan's forests need to be protected so 2nd June, the King's birthday, has been declared as 'Tree Planting day'. At present they say there is no corruption except at lower levels, but if this catches on and more roads are built the forests may be in danger. Bhutan also has the highest birth rate 1: 3.5 in the world. Today's population of 900,000 may triple soon and that may cause major environment pressure. Although difficult, one prays that this small Kingdom will survive as it is today.



1. Rangjung monastery, (Trashigang) Eastern Bhutan.



2. Takstang monastery (Tiger's Nest) near Paro.



8. Archery, the national sport of Bhutan.

Exploration and Mountaineering

Bhutan received few western visitors who wrote about it with knowledge and affection. Claude White, who was appointed as Political Officer here in 1910s travelled and studied a lot, cared for the people and bullied the officials! His book *Sikkim and Bhutan* is still a classic as he was a painter and sketched many features of Bhutan. Dr Peter Steele who was a doctor on Everest, trekked to remote areas with his two young kids sitting on a horse! His account *Two and Two Halves to Bhutan* is fun to read. These are just few names from a long list of visitors. A classic book is by Nari Rustomji, who followed the developments in Bhutan keenly, visiting on several occasions as a Political Agent of Sikkim. His book *Dragon Kingdom in Crisis* was the first book after 1947 Indian independence.⁴

The earliest climber to Bhutan was Spencer-Chapman. He had seen the peak Chomolahri (7500 m) on border of Bhutan and Chumbi valley of Tibet. Chapman climbed the peak via the south ridge in 1937. For decades the peak was left alone. In 1970 an Indo-Bhutan armies' team, led by Col. N Kumar attempted the peak. Two Bhutanese and two Indian officers including Col. Prem Chand and Dorjee Lhatoo reached the summit. The second attempt was mounted two days later and three climbers attempting the peak were seen near the summit - never to be seen again. It was first

4 Rustmoji was a personal friend of the ruling family of Bhutan (as he was with the Chogyals of Sikkim) and was advisor to the Gyalpo (the King) during the most troubled times, again like in Sikkim. What a man!

believed that Chinese may have shot them. But later Chinese co-operated in trying to locate their bodies on the Chumbi side but there was no trace of them.

After a few years, Junko Tabei, the Japanese lady who had climbed Everest, came to climb Masagang, the highest peak of Bhutan on the border of Tibet. She failed narrowly but based on her experience, a strong Japanese team reached the summit the following year. Doug Scott, Victor Saunders and Sharavathi Prabhu climbed Jitchudrake. Soon the Government of Bhutan closed peaks for climbing so in last two decades there have not been any major expeditions. A large area thus remains unexplored for climbers when areas are opened.

Punakha

We drove 60 kms from Thimphu on a winding road with good forest cover. En route we crossed Dochu la (3150 m) and descended to the Wangdi Phodrang valley with a large river flowing in centre. Punakha Dzong (1500 m) was 17 kms away standing in between two rivers.

It is a huge and intricate fort and one of the best in Bhutan. There are several chapels each beautifully decorated and preserved. As there were Tibetan attacks in later years and there was no cultural revolution as in China and Tibet, the artefacts here are well preserved and well maintained. However a major earthquake had destroyed this *dzong* and with it, major written history of Bhutan.

Guru Zhabdrung Ngwang Namgyal was in the Ralung monastery south of Lhasa. The King did not like him and he was to be executed. Hence he ran away to Bhutan with a rare golden statue of Buddha. After few years the Tibetan discovered the loss and attacked Bhutan several times to recover it. The guru built this fort and hid the statue in it. When a large Tibetan force attacked, he reasoned that this statue is cause of all troubles, so he made a duplicate. When the Tibetans came to the *dzong*, he threw the replica into the river. Tibetans were shocked, called all Bhutanese mad for throwing away such a precious statue and went back, never to attack again. The original statue is still at Punakha Dzong but can be seen only by the Gyalpo (King) or Je Khenpo (chief lama) once a year.

The 1904 Younghusband expedition to Lhasa was a turning point in the history for Bhutan too. The Tongsa Penlop accompanied the expedition as a mediator and in return for his services was awarded the 'Order of

Knight Commander of Indian Empire'. John Cloud White went to Bhutan to award this honour in person on behalf of the British government, laden with gifts. He attended the installation of the Tongsa Penlop as Gyalpo or the King, which happened the following day.⁵ The Dharma Raja had died and no incarnation was found so the Deb Raja held both offices. But he was a recluse following a spiritual life, thus power fell into the hands of strong men of the country. At this gathering, lamas, officials and laymen unanimously voted to abolish 400-year-old offices of Deb and Dharma Raja and proclaimed Sir Ugyen Wangchuk, as the first Gyalpo (King) and declared the title hereditary. Britain signed a treaty in 1910 agreeing not to interfere in the internal administration of Bhutan, which in turn agreed to be guided by an advisor from Britain in matters of defence and external relations. The Gyalpo visited Delhi for the Durbar of King George V. Sir Ugyen Wangchuk died in 1926 and was succeeded by Jigme Wangchuk. Bhutan's doors during this time remained tightly shut for the outside world and only a few foreigners entered the country.

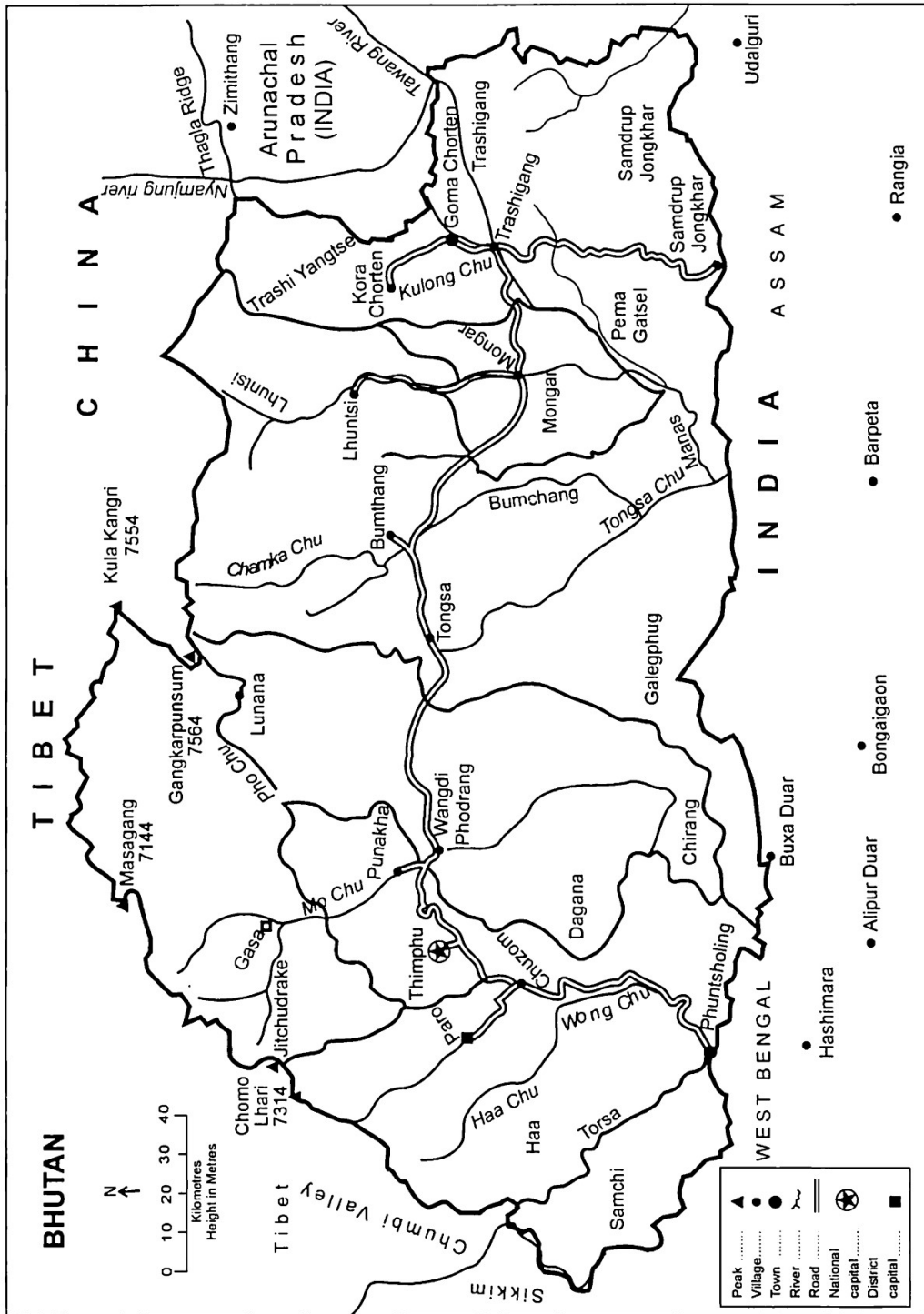
Central Bhutan ; Bumthang

We travelled 200 kms east to central Bhutan crossing Pele la (3390 m) and Yotong la (3425 m). En route we passed Tongsa Dzong and stayed at Jakar in a farmhouse with a villager. It was a well built wooden cottage. Though we missed views of the high mountains we were amply compensated by forest - what a forest! It must be seen to be believed and enjoyed.

Now we were in the ancient and historically important part of Bhutan with many legends. The father of the first king saw a white bird flying to central Bhutan. So he followed it here and a prophecy told him that he would be a king. He employed himself with a local chieftain of the huge Tongsa Dzong. When the chieftain retired he was given charge for 5 years, as the successor was a young child. After 5 years he refused to handover power and a civil war ensued. As a solution, the chieftain's child was made Penlop at Jakar- Bumthang.

The elder was made Tongsa Penlop (crown prince to succeed the king) and when he died his son became the first king of Bhutan. Thus the Crown Prince is given title of Tongsa Penlop and he then becomes a king naturally. The present Crown Prince was declared Tongsa Penlop a day

⁵ *Sikhim and Bhutan*. Twenty-One Years on the North-East Frontier (1887-1908). By J. Claude White. (Edward Arnold, London, 1909).



before we arrived at Tongsa. But as Tongsa Penlops were always fighting in civil war, the name was changed to Chokhor Penlop for future kings.

There was much to enjoy around Bumthang. Mo Bar: the burning lake had a legend: A lama in order to find treasure, stepped into this lake with a lighted lamp and came out with treasure and the lamp burring

intact. There was legend of a lama, who acted as a mad man to popularise religion. While travelling he lost his loads of berries at three places. He established huge Chortens at each place, Ruku *ji*, Chiende *ji* and Tamsu *ji* all ending with *ji* meaning berries, as a clever ploy to establish religion.

We walked to the monastery of Shedung. Again, we were with ancient history and modern western tourists. A camera bag was forgotten by one of our companions in one of the three monasteries we visited and was not traceable. We made a big fuss and took a policeman to the monastery. The bag was returned quietly. It is sad that winds of civilisation are blowing here too and in few years like in Nepal or in India things like this will happen. But we hope that this process is delayed as much as possible.

Next day Bumthang was buzzing with tourists and locals as the Jambey Lhakhang dance festival was to be held. This monastery was built as one of the 1008 monasteries by a high lama in one night. It was destroyed by demons and they would not allow it to be rebuilt. So on a full moon midnight, the villagers dance naked thus cheating the demons who think something is wrong and flee in fear. During the day a *mela* is held where goods are sold and archery contests are held, along with gambling, drinking and eating.

Eastern Bhutan

We were now driving to Mongar (1500 m) and Trashigang (1700 m) in the eastern most Bhutan. This was a thickly forested area, much less travelled. Usually tourists do not proceed east of Bumthang, as facilities are few. We travelled across two passes, Shertang la (3000 m) and Thrumsing la (3780 m), the latter being the highest motor road in Bhutan. We missed the views but forests, again were great. Trashigang ⁶ is the eastern most town in Bhutan.

This was botanist country, well surveyed first by F. M. Bailey in 1924. He travelled in west and central Bhutan and found some rare Himalayan poppies. Two more botanists, G. Sheriff and Frank Ludlow made extensive journeys to every corner of Bhutan. In 1933, they crossed from west to east and in 1934 and 1936 they collected plants from the east and crossed into Tibet. They made two plant-collecting expeditions soon after the war mainly in eastern Bhutan. Sheriff and Ludlow knew Bhutan as no foreigner had ever known before.

6 The lady owner of our small hotel was named Jambey Eden. Eden is quite a non-Bhutanese second name. The only reference could be that of Ashley Eden mission to Bhutan in 1864!

These areas have seen much modern history too. The British had already established a presence in Bhutan and in such remote areas. After the Indian Independence, an Indo-Bhutanese Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation was signed in 1949. This allowed full access to Indians and Bhutanese in each other's countries.

The 1962 Indo-China war changed everything for Bhutan. It is believed that the Dalai Lama while fleeing from the Chinese in 1959, wanted to enter Bhutan from Tibet. The King refused, as he was naturally scared of the Chinese army coming into the kingdom. (The Dalai Lama has not visited Bhutan since, nor has the King, who keeps the Chinese happy, invited him!) It was a wise decision as Chinese may have taken over Bhutan for good, taking that as ruse. Dalai Lama then entered India from far eastern corner of Bhutan-Arunachal border at Khinzemane, an area held by India but within few kilometres of the Bhutanese borders.

During the war Indian troops were on the Thagla ridge, which Bhutan claimed as theirs and protested mildly. Many injured and retreating Indian soldiers came down to safety through Bhutan. The fearful King (of the Chinese) signed a comprehensive treaty with India and almost everything since then in Bhutan is linked to India. India pours in lots of money and goods, undertakes road constructions and both armies jointly patrol the borders with China. Bhutan's defence and foreign affairs are in consultations with India.⁷ The King is wise and does not irritate Delhi. In 1971 when Bangladesh was created, at India's calling, Bhutan a member of the UN, was first to recognise it as a new country.

The Far East

From Trashigang we drove to Rangjung monastery, 16 kms away. This wonderful monastery was renovated by lamas from Mysore (South India) and had old connections with Ralung gompa near Shigatse. We were allowed to photograph inside and young lamas were studying scriptures were least bothered by our presence.

Goma Chorten, was en route to Trashiyangtse. There was a huge rock- signifying evil in one's mind. To purify himself Guru Padmasambhava cut it with a sword; you can see the mark. Then he meditated here; his head mark can be seen. With meditation he conquered the evil mind, but evil spirits still cropped in his head as a serpent. He cleverly buried it

⁷ Bhutan has an army of only 15,000 soldiers.

under the evil mind itself - under the rock. That was his simple message: conquer evil in the mind by burying it under the mind itself.

The last place we visited was Kora Chorten at Trashiyangtse, a holy circle visited by Arunachalis also. It was about 10 kms away from Arunachal Pradesh - the point where I had stood a year ago! It was a touching moment for me. Many passes lead across from here to India and for locals and Indians borders are open.

With this our travel in Bhutan, west to east was complete. Ideally we would have liked to drive out to India from Samdrup Jongkhar in the south, a much shorter route. But this road is closed due to terrorism and this was one of the last chapters in the history of Bhutan in 2000-2003. Many Bodo and ULFA militants of Assam, who were fighting India for separation, had entered lower eastern Bhutan in 1990s, established camps in thick forest and operated from there. As the Indian army did not enter Bhutan territories to flush them out this provided them a safe haven.

Much pressure was put on Bhutan by India to fight these terrorists. The King pleaded against bloodshed, fearing the threat to himself and his people if he fought the militants. Finally the King had to agree to act and appeals were made by him to militants to give up arms. As they did not respond the King personally led a Bhutanese army Brigade to attack the camps. The militants fled and as they entered Assam, the Indian army took over. The Queen



10. Kora Chorten at Trashiyangtse.



11. Rimpoche, head lama.

Mother has built a series of chortens on Dochu la (3150 m) (near Thimphu) as thanks giving to gods for this brave action by the King⁸.

All that remained was to drive back the way we had come to complete our eighteen-day journey across the Dragon Kingdom. What we had witnessed and enjoyed was unparalleled natural beauty, friendly and honest people, rich culture and history with controlled tourism development. With the world changing fast Bhutan cannot be in isolation for long and we wondered

what the next decade will bring for Bhutan. The King cannot keep Bhutan closed forever. After all, needs for future generations as well as the welfare of people is at stake. On the other hand Bhutan cannot allow all carpet-baggers who wish to visit. Bhutan will have to find the golden mean to develop the state and preserve its culture and environment. As a Buddhist tenet states; 'Peace is not absence of chaos, it is peace within chaos'.

While returning we saw a red figure sitting on a rock on the banks of river. He was Rimpoche (precious teacher) of a nearby monastery and was meditating. He had a very pleasant disposition, calm and serene.

The Rimpoche was not disturbed with our presence and did not even look at us. He continued chanting and meditation, like he must have done for decades. I went near him, he opened his eyes. I had never seen a calmer face and quieter eyes. He continued prayers silently as we photographed him at close quarters and still he was not upset. As we left he waved us a good bye with a faint smile but continuing with his prayers. To me this was the true spirit of Bhutan. As long as such devotion continues, Bhutan will remain the major bastion of Buddhism, peace and serenity.

Summary:

Travels in Bhutan in 2004, recalling history, religion and customs.

8 Bodos are fighting for a separate Bodoland while ULFA is the 'United Liberation Front of Assam'. Both are militant and terrorist organisations.



3. Bhutanese lady in traditional headgear.



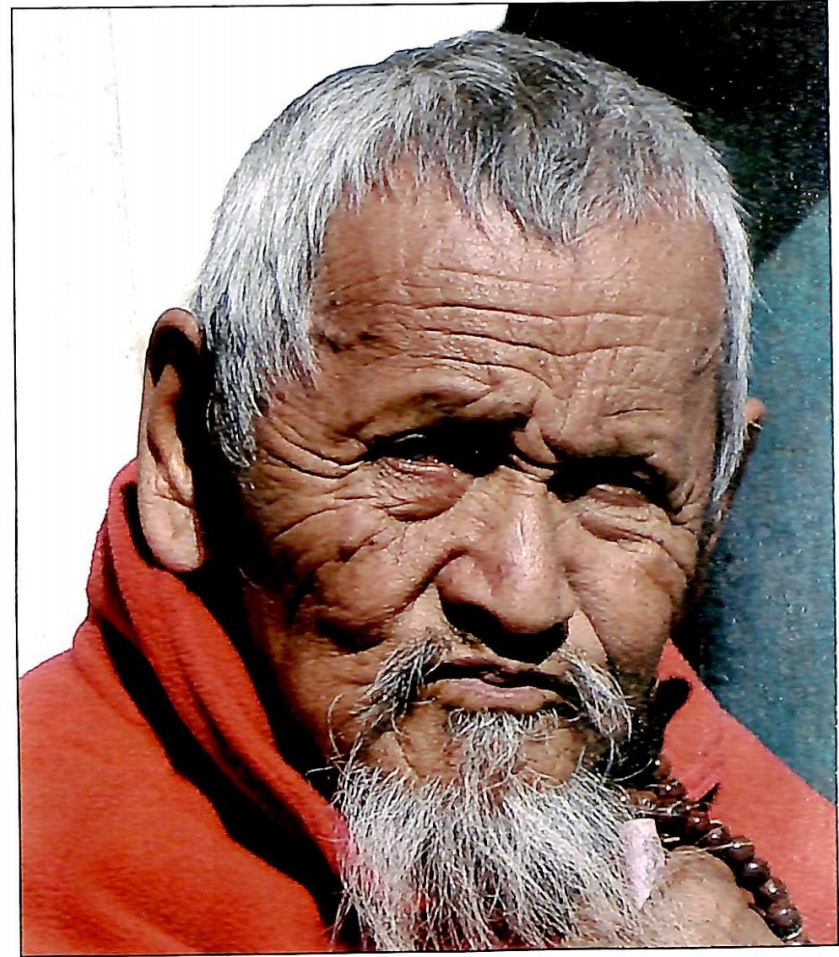
4. Modern Bhutanese lady.



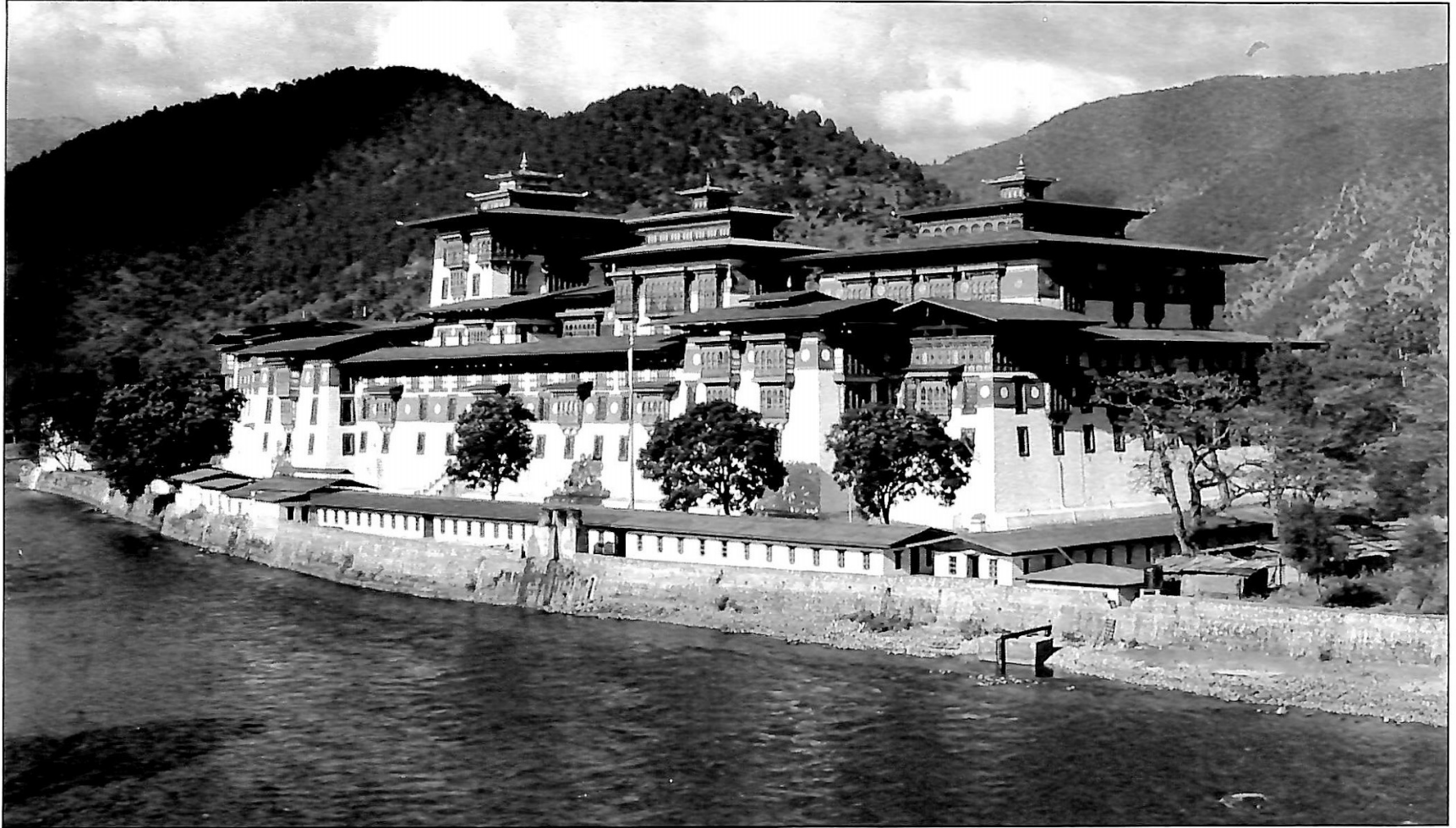
5. Tongsa Dzong, central Bhutan.



6. Student lamas.



7. A lama at Thimpu.

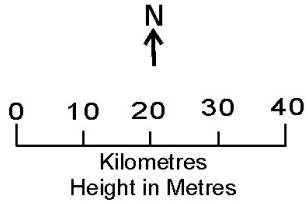


9. Punakha Dzong.

BHUTAN

TIBET

C H I N A



Kula Kangri
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Masagang
7144

Gangkarpunsum
7564

Chomo
Lhari
7314

Arunachal Pradesh (INDIA)

Tibet
Chumbi Valley

Sikkim

- Peak ▲
- Village..... ●
- Town ●
- River ~
- Road =
- National capital ★
- District capital ■

WEST BENGAL

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