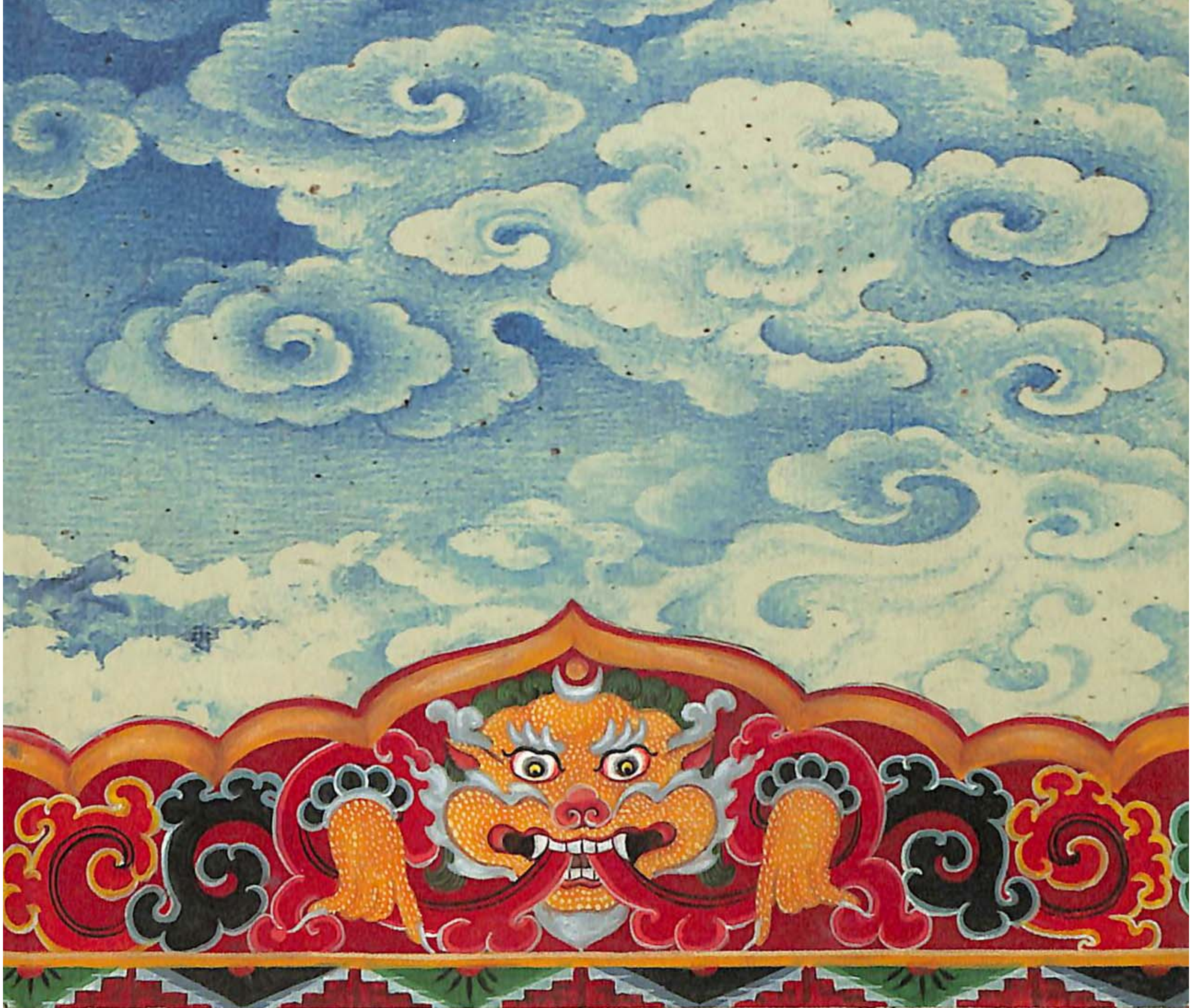

TREASURES OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

A PORTRAIT OF BHUTAN

SHI DORJI WANGMO WANGCHUCK

Queen of Bhutan

TREASURES OF THE THUNDER DRAGON

A PORTRAIT OF BHUTAN

ASHI DORJI WANGMO WANGCHUCK

Queen of Bhutan

PENGUIN
VIKING

Prof. A. C. Sinha

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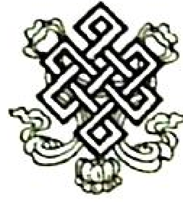
Prof. A. C. Sinha



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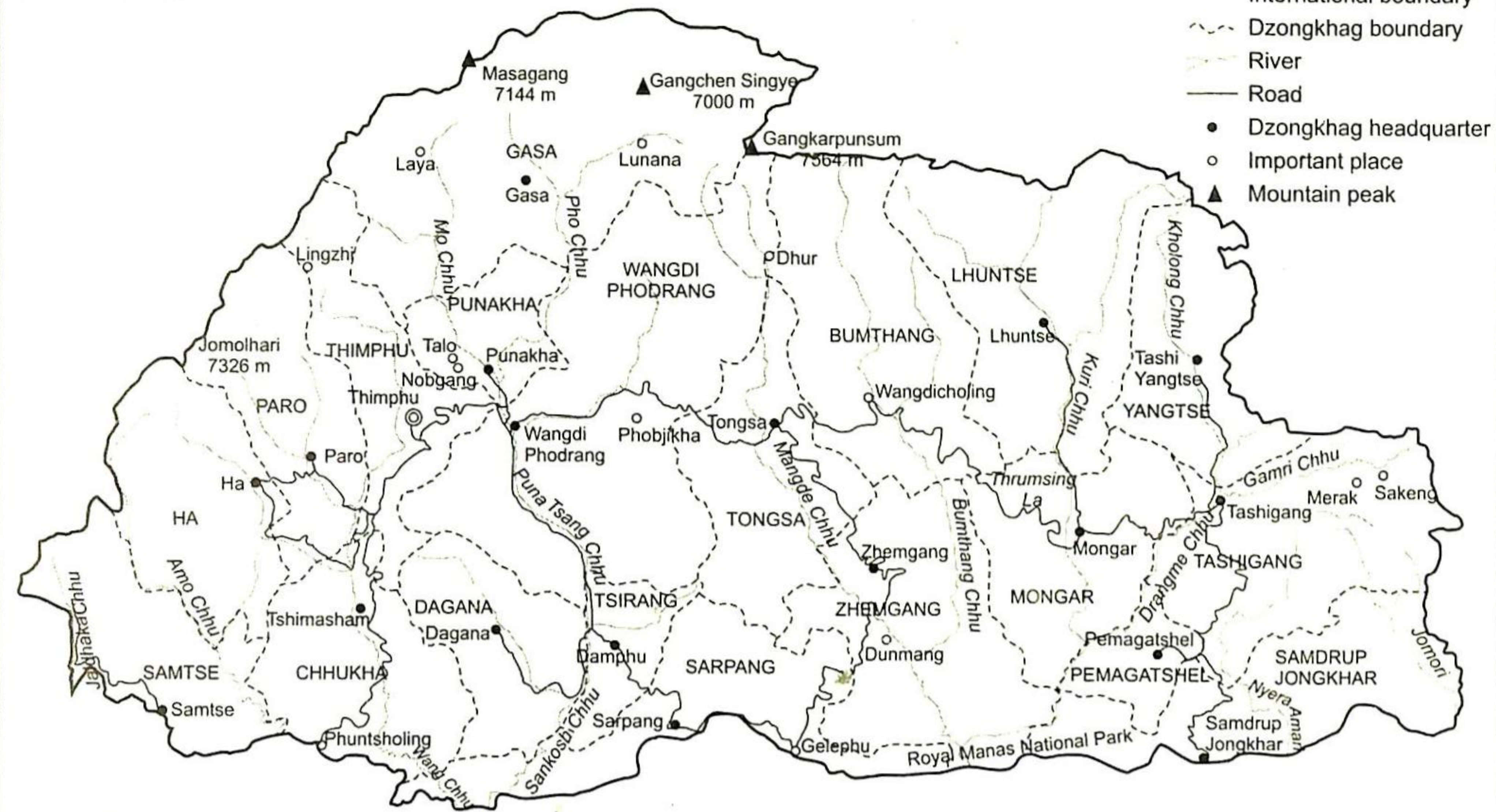
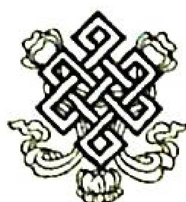


Administrative map of Bhutan



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Over the past seven years, I made several journeys on foot to different parts of my country. Often, while travelling by car, I would catch glimpses of distant valleys and villages, of temples and monasteries perched on peaks and ridges, and would long to go and explore those places. They lay along footpaths and muie tracks, which once used to be vibrant with pilgrims and monks, caravans of traders and herdsmen, and rural families on the move, making the kind of journeys I remembered well from my childhood—for that was how we all travelled in the days before the automobile came to Bhutan.

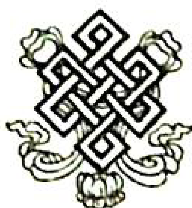
I finally decided that I must fulfil my desire to meet the people and see the places that were well off the beaten track while I was still physically fit enough to do so—because these journeys could be gruelling, involving crossing mountain passes above 5000 metres and trekking for seventeen days at a stretch through jungle-covered hills and valleys. I am grateful to Karma Ura, who helped me plan my travels on foot to different parts of Bhutan. I made detailed notes during these journeys, and it is thanks to the urging and encouragement of my editor at Penguin, Nandini Mehta, that I have written this book, a full ten years after writing my first book. Both Karma Ura and Nandini have made very helpful suggestions for

correcting and improving my manuscript. My Bhutanese readers might find that in many places I have explained at some length aspects of our history and culture that they are already familiar with—I hope they will bear with me, because my publishers were insistent that I also keep in mind the reader who does not know Bhutan. Kama Wangdi and Rinchen Wangdi, two fine Bhutanese artists working at the Voluntary Artists' Studio of Thimphu (VAST), have vividly captured the unparalleled scenery of our country—from glaciers to subtropical forests—in their paintings. Their styles reflect an imaginative synthesis of the rules of classical Bhutanese iconography with more contemporary perspective-based art.

While I always prefer to travel incognito, it was not always possible to do so, and I am grateful to the district officials who on so many occasions helped make my journeys more comfortable. Though I have not mentioned them individually, I was accompanied during my journeys by a set of wonderful travelling companions. Together we experienced enthralling landscapes, breathless climbs and knee-crunching descents. But nothing was more rewarding for us than the encounters with people during these journeys, and the generosity with which they shared their lives and their homes with us. Their spirituality, serenity and fortitude, the integrity and harmony in their way of life, have taught me invaluable lessons that I try to take forward in my life. Right from my first journey, my aim was to try and help especially vulnerable people—children, the elderly and the disabled—through scholarships, medical support and monthly stipends. And thus was born the Tarayana Foundation, which supports scores of such people whom I first met on my travels. Though many of them live in the most remote parts of the country, the Tarayana Foundation provides the link that keeps us in regular contact.

Above all, it is my Beloved King who has been my inspiration, a king who spends each day in the service of his people.

17 December 2005 DORJI WANGMO WANGCHUCK



INTRODUCTION

'Bhutan? Isn't that the place they call the Last Shangri La?'
'Bhutan? Isn't it that kingdom frozen in the medieval ages?'

The outside world's reactions to Bhutan tend to swing between two extremes—it is perceived either as a paradise on earth or as a country completely isolated from the rest of the world and trapped in a time warp. Neither image is true. But it *is* true that Bhutan is like no other place in the world. Its spectacular natural beauty and pristine environment, its fabulous architecture and living spiritual culture, and its wise king whose unique philosophy of governance measures the country's progress and development not by its gross domestic product (GDP) but its gross national happiness (GNH)—this is the stuff of which legends, and romantic flights of fancy, are born.

The Land and the People

For centuries, until the building of roads in the 1960s made the country accessible, Bhutan was known as the forbidden land. Its isolation was not a deliberate political or historical choice, but more a consequence of its geography. As Captain Pemberton of the English East India Company noted in 1838: 'The whole of Bootan

territory presents a succession of the most lofty and rugged mountains on the surface of the earth . . . The consequence is that the traveller appears to be shut out on every side from the rest of the world.' A later British colonial official, who seemed terror-struck at the prospect of a journey to Bhutan, wrote in 1894: 'No one wishes to explore that tangle of jungle-clad and fever-stricken hills, infested with leeches and the pipsa fly, and offering no compensating advantage to the most enterprising pioneer. Adventure looks beyond Bhutan. Science passes it by . . .'

Such misconceptions and exaggerations about Bhutan were typical until about fifty years ago, and are not uncommon even today. So perhaps it is best if I begin with some facts. Bhutan is a small country in the Eastern Himalayas, nestled between two giant neighbours, India and China. It is bordered on the north by China's Tibet Autonomous Region and on the east, south and west, respectively, by the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal and Assam, and Sikkim.

Our own name for our country is Druk Yul. The legend goes that when the great Tibetan saint Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorji (AD 1161–1211) was consecrating a new monastery in Tibet, he heard thunder which he believed to be the voice of a dragon (*druk*), loudly proclaiming the great truths of the Buddha's teachings. He named the monastery 'Druk', and the religious sect he founded 'Drukpa Kargyupa'. When this school of Mahayana Buddhism became Bhutan's state religion in the seventeenth century, the country was named Druk Yul, or the Land of the Thunder Dragon.

The profusion of temples and monasteries throughout the country—there are more than 2000 of them—and the ubiquitous presence of red-robed monks indicate the important role that Buddhism plays in almost every aspect of Bhutanese life. Every district in the country has a *dzong*—an enormous fortress—which houses the official monk body and several temples. And every village has a temple, around which the life of the community revolves. Hinduism, the other major religion in Bhutan, is followed by people of Nepali origin belonging to different castes such as Chhetri, Rai, Tamang and Gurung, who are collectively known as the Lhotsampas. They are settled mainly in southern Bhutan.

Bhutan's official language is Dzongkha, spoken mainly in western Bhutan, but there are two other major languages—Sharchopkha, spoken in eastern Bhutan, and Nepali, in southern Bhutan. In addition, there are as many as nineteen major dialects, which have survived in pockets, in isolated valleys and villages which are cut off from neighbouring areas by high mountain barriers.

Bhutan's area is 46,500 square kilometres—about that of Switzerland—and its population is about 750,000. So the population density is low—about sixteen persons per square kilometre—and every Bhutanese owns his own land. We are still predominantly an agrarian country, with 79 per cent of the population dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. However, only 8 per cent of our land is arable. Some 72 per cent of Bhutan's territory is under forest cover, and nearly 20 per cent is under perpetual snows.

Our national dress is the *kira* for women and the *gho* for men. The kira, a rectangular piece of woven cloth about the size of a single bed sheet, is wrapped around the body, secured at the shoulders by a pair of silver clasps called *koma*, and at the waist by a tight belt called the *keyra*. An inner blouse with long sleeves called the *wonju* and an outer jacket called the *tyoko* complete the outfit. The art of weaving, which is only done by women, is highly developed in Bhutan, and an elaborate kira can take a whole year to weave. Unusually for Asian women, most Bhutanese women have short-cropped hair, cut in a fringe across the forehead, though young women in our urban centres increasingly sport long hair. The man's gho is a one-piece costume rather like a kimono with broad white cuffs, which is pulled up to knee length and fastened at the waist with a belt, forming a deep pouch across the chest. This pouch is like a vast pocket, used to carry all sorts of things—money, important papers, a wooden bowl for drinking tea, some hard cubes of dried cheese to munch as a snack and a little round box for carrying *doma* (betel nut, wrapped in a paan leaf smeared with lime paste)—chewing doma is a Bhutanese passion!

The most important events in the Bhutanese calendar are religious festivals. The major ones, which attract enormous crowds, are the *domchoe*s and *tsechu*s, held annually at big monasteries and dzongs all over the country. The dates vary, but most tsechus are held in

autumn, which is a leisure period for farmers (though the famous tsechu in the Paro Valley is held in spring). The highlight of a tsechu is the religious dances that are performed by monks as well as laymen in fabulous costumes and masks, while clowns known as *atsaras*, often carrying large wooden phalluses, entertain the crowds with their slapstick routines in between the dances. Many households also hold their own private annual prayers, called *choku*, followed by a feast for the whole village. (I have written in more detail about domchoes, tsechus and chokus in Chapter 2.) Dasain, also in autumn, is the big festival of the Lhotsampas, with prayers at their temples, joyous drumming and dancing, and lavish feasts, with everyone dressed in new clothes.

Archery, or *datse*, is undoubtedly Bhutan's most popular sport, traditionally played with bamboo bows and arrows, with two small targets placed at either end of the field, 140 metres apart (in international archery the target is at a distance of a mere 50 metres). On holidays, you can usually see several archery matches in progress, and people driving by an archery ground tend to hastily roll up their car windows—unlucky passers-by have been known to be hit by stray arrows, sometimes fatally. Every village has an archery ground, and at important matches the two competing teams are supported by lively groups of women 'cheerleaders' (see also Chapter 2). These days, expensive imported bows, with pulleys to increase the speed and force of the arrows, are coveted status symbols. *Khuru*, or darts, is another favourite sport, played outdoors, with the target placed at a distance of 20 metres.

Our topography has to a large extent shaped our way of life and our history. The country has aptly been likened to a gigantic and steep staircase, which rises from the foothills, at 150 metres above sea level, to snow peaks of above 7000 metres. Within a distance of only 240 kilometres, one can pass from semi-tropical to temperate to freezing alpine areas. Bhutan can conveniently be divided horizontally

into three geographic zones. The foothills of the south, which rise from the plains to an altitude of 1500 metres, have thick broadleaf evergreen forests, fertile farmland and a relatively high population density. This region also has a number of trading towns, such as Phuentsoling and Gaylegphug, which have sprung up close to the border with India. The climate is warm and humid in the lower areas, and damp and misty as one rises to the hills.

The central, temperate zone, cut off from the foothills by the high ranges of the Inner Himalayas, has a succession of valleys at altitudes ranging from 1500 metres to 3500 metres. The capital, Thimphu, and most of our major towns, dzongs and monasteries lie in this zone. The hillsides here are thickly forested with blue pine and other conifers, oak, magnolia, maple, birch and rhododendron. Willow, poplar, walnut and flowering dogwood are among the trees commonly found in the valleys, where farmers grow rice, millet, wheat, buckwheat and maize, as well as cash crops like asparagus, mushroom and potato, strawberry, apple and peach, mandarin oranges and cardamom.

Above the temperate zone, at altitudes ranging from 3500 to 5500 metres, are the subalpine and alpine highlands, ringed by the towering snow-clad peaks of the Greater Himalayas, among them Mt Chomolhari (7300 metres) and our highest peak Mt Gangkar Puensum (7541 metres). These are our sacred mountains, abodes of the deities, and most of them have never been climbed. The alpine zone boasts beautiful glacial lakes, and pastures covered with carpets of wild flowers when the snow melts—among them dwarf rhododendron, edelweiss, fritillaries, anemone, primula, delphinium and our national flower, the fabled blue poppy (*Meconopsis grandis*). In the summer months the pastures are dotted with herds of yaks, and the distinctive black tents of Bhutanese yak herders. The alpine highlands are also the home of the snow leopard, the musk deer and our curious national animal, the takin (see Chapter 11).

Bhutan's rivers, which rise in high mountains, flow southwards through the country, creating deep gorges and valleys. The river waters are our 'white gold', for Bhutan's major source of revenue is hydroelectric power, which we export to India. The waters of the

Thimphuchhu (also known as the Wangchhu) power the Chukha and Talo hydroelectric projects. Other major rivers are the Amochhu (*chhu* means river) which drains south-west Bhutan, the Phochhu and Mochhu which meet at Punakha to form the Punatsangchhu, and the Mangdechhu which flows through the central district of Tongsa, and then joins the Manas, the largest river in Bhutan. All our rivers flow into the plains of India, where they eventually join the mighty Brahmaputra.

While the Great Himalayas run from east to west, many ranges of the Inner Himalayas run from north to south through Bhutan, creating formidable barriers between the valleys in the central belt. The Pelela ranges of central Bhutan are an example, dividing the valleys of western Bhutan from those of central Bhutan. In the days before the roads were built, the route to Bhutan from the Bengal plains, through the south-west of the country, was particularly difficult, as it involved walking for about a week through the humid malarial tracts and dense forests of the foothills, facing the real risk of attacks from wild animals, and then crossing raging rivers and steep passes to reach the valleys which were the historic centres of power in western Bhutan—Thimphu, Punakha and Paro. Since the early 1960s, a highway has connected the town of Phuentsoling in south-west Bhutan, bordering the plains of Bengal, to the higher valleys of Paro and the capital, Thimphu, in western Bhutan—a distance of 184 kilometres which can be comfortably covered in six hours.

Crossing the country on foot from west to east, though it took at least two weeks and involved steep ascents and descents over the series of mountains that divide one valley from another, was somewhat easier, for there was an extensive and well-maintained network of mule tracks and bridle paths connecting all the major valleys. Today, the East–West Highway (also called the Lateral Road), which was completed in 1975, makes it possible to traverse the country comfortably within three days. I will briefly describe this journey to give you a glimpse of the landscapes, historic sites and cultural traditions you will see along this road (see map on p.182).

Driving east from Thimphu, you will cross the Dochula Pass on the crest of a ridge at 3050 metres. From here, on a clear day, you

will have a spectacular view of the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas, among them Mt Masangang (7158 metres) and our highest peak, Mt Gangkar Puensum. In spring, the *Magnolia campbelli* and rhododendron trees are in full bloom in the forests around Dochula, and the air is heady with the scent of the daphne plant, from which we make paper. Passing the magnificent group of 109 *chortens* (stupas) at Dochula, the Druk Wangyel (or Great Victory) Chortens (which I have written about in Chapter 8), the road then descends steeply to Lobeysa, where a turn to the left would bring you to the Punakha Valley, with its great dzong on the confluence of two rivers. But if you continue on the East–West Highway, you will pass the seventeenth-century Wangdiphodrang Dzong, dramatically straddling the crest of a ridge, with the Punatsangchhu river flowing far down below. Prickly cactus covers the hillsides below the dzong, an effective, if unusual, deterrent to invaders. You would now have travelled 70 kilometres from Thimphu, a journey that takes about two and a half hours.

Past Wangdiphodrang, the road begins to climb, and after 40 kilometres there is a bifurcation, which leads to Phobjika, a wide and beautiful glacial valley, 13 kilometres off the highway, at an altitude of 3000 metres. Phobjika is the winter home of the rare black-necked crane, and the site of Gantey Gompa, one of Bhutan's most famous monasteries, established in 1613. The people of Phobjika eagerly await the arrival of the cranes each year—the birds are regarded as sacred, and the popular belief is that they circle the monastery three times when they arrive and depart from Phobjika. Back on the highway, the road ascends steeply for 14 kilometres to cross the Black Mountains at Pelela Pass, at 3300 metres. If you make this journey in early spring, you may see herds of yaks which have still not gone up to their higher summer grazing grounds. If you are lucky, you may also see the Himalayan red panda, whose favourite food is the dwarf bamboo that grows around the pass.

Past the Pelela Pass, you are in central Bhutan. The scenery and vegetation change perceptibly, with the wide plateau of Rukubji stretching out, its fertile fields golden yellow with mustard or white with potato flowers, depending on the season. The road descends to the valley floor at the Nikkarchu bridge, and enters Tongsa

district, passing the village of Chendebji (27 kilometres from the pass), with its great chorten built in the Nepali style. The road now twists and turns, hugging the mountainside for 42 kilometres, with awesome views of Tongsa Dzong, the historic seat of the royal family and one of the most impressive examples of Bhutanese architecture (see Chapter 14).

Tongsa Dzong is at the junction between the East–West Highway and the road to the south, which leads to Zhemgang district and on to the border town of Gaylegphug. If you stay on the East–West Highway, another 68 kilometres, crossing the Yotola Pass at 3400 kilometres, will bring you to the Chumey Valley in Bumthang district. Bumthang is famous for its distinctive woollen weaves, known as *yathra*, and at the village of Zugney you will see fine samples of yathra hanging by the roadside to entice travellers. Especially eye-catching are the colourful blankets with intricate patterns which are wonderfully warm and rainproof. Yathra is also made into ponchos, jackets, rugs and cushion covers. The weavers, all women, can be seen at their looms beside the road.

The highway continues over the Kikila Pass to enter the next valley in Bumthang—Jakar, the district headquarters, watched over by its lovely dzong, which looks like a white bird perched on the hill. The valley floor is dominated by Wangdicholing Dzong, the summer palace of the first two kings of Bhutan (see Chapter 8). Bumthang is often called the cultural heartland of Bhutan, and it would take you at least a week to visit all the sacred temples and monasteries in and around Jakar, Chumey and the neighbouring valley of Tang. Some of Bhutan's most important pilgrimage sites are in Jakar, among them the sublime ensemble of three temples at Kurjey, Tamshing Monastery with its rare murals, and Jamba Lhakhang, which dates to the seventh century. Jakar is also renowned for its locally produced Gouda cheese and honey, first introduced through a Swiss development project—don't fail to try these delicacies.

Beyond Bumthang, the East–West Highway crosses the Thrumsingla Pass (3800 metres) with a series of dizzying ascents and descents—the faint-hearted are advised not to look down into the steep vertical drop at the edge of the road! There is a poignant memorial to the men who died building this stretch of the road.

Spectacular waterfalls line the route, which goes through forests of rhododendron and conifers, and the beautiful tragopan and monal pheasants can often be spotted in this area. The road then descends into Mongar district, one of the biggest in Bhutan in terms of its population. You are now in eastern Bhutan, and would have travelled 450 kilometres from Thimphu.

But before climbing to Mongar Dzong, a road branches off the highway and leads to Lhuentse district, about 70 kilometres away. Until this road was completed in 1980 this district in north-eastern Bhutan was only accessible through mule tracks from Bumthang, with which it has had long cultural and historic links. The landscape now displays the typical features of eastern Bhutan—narrow valleys with very little flat land, villages often perched on ridges, with terraced fields on the lower slopes. Ferns and a variety of spectacular orchids grow in profusion in the forests, while maize is the main crop you will see in the fields, together with millet—much of which is turned into the home-brewed alcohol, *ara*, that is popular in the east.

Lhuentse boasts a spectacular seventeenth-century dzong, perched high on a rocky spur above the Kurichhu river, and the district is famous for the skill of its weavers. It is also the ancestral home of the royal family—Jigme Namgyel, the father of the first king of Bhutan, was born in 1825 in a Lhuentse village called Dungkar. He left home at the age of fifteen to find his fortune, became the powerful Penlop (governor) of Tongsa, and then the de facto ruler of the country in 1870. In 1999, it took me two days of walking from Lhuentse Dzong to reach Dungkar (there is now a motor road to the village), where the two fine ancestral manor houses still stand. The superb weaving tradition of Lhuentse owes much to the patronage of the daughter of Bhutan's first king, Ashi Wangmo, who became a nun and bequeathed her priceless collection of textiles to the Jangchubling Monastery above Lhuentse Dzong where she lived for some years. Even today, the most prized textiles in Bhutan are the *kushuthara* weaves of Lhuentse with luminous, multicoloured silk patterns woven against a white background. Other renowned centres of weaving are in the south-eastern district of Pemagatshel and in Khaling in Tashigang district.

Tashigang, in the heart of eastern Bhutan, is 92 kilometres from Mongar, a three-hour journey on the highway. Its historic dzong, built high on a cliff above the confluence of two rivers, was the centre from which eastern Bhutan was governed until the early twentieth century. Today Tashigang is the major urban centre in eastern Bhutan. Bhutan's first college for undergraduate studies, Sherubtse, is located about 20 kilometres from the town, in a large and beautiful campus.

From Tashigang, it is a scenic 53-kilometre drive to Tashi Yangtse district, past the sacred rock and temple of Gom Kora (see Chapter 5), on to the great chorten of Chorten Kora, built in 1740 and modelled on the style of the Boudhnath Stupa in Nepal. Its annual tsechu attracts enormous crowds, including people from Tawang in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

By now you would probably be suffering from severe road fatigue, especially after the unending series of hairpin bends that the Lateral Road makes. (The joke goes that the longest stretch of straight road in Bhutan is the airport runway in Paro!) So this is a good place to get out of the car and off the road, and make the delightful two-hour walk from the road-head to the serene Bumdaling Valley. Like Phobjika, Bumdaling too is a winter haunt of the black-necked crane—only about 5000 of this endangered species remain in the world. The birds arrive here in late October and leave in late March for their summer home in northern China. A day's walk north of Bumdaling is the sacred Rigsum Gompa Monastery, which has the most exquisite mural that I have ever seen, depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha. Tashi Yangtse district is famous too for its beautiful lacquered wooden bowls (see Chapter 5) and its Institute for Training in Zorig Chusum, the thirteen classical arts of Bhutan. Slate carving, paper-making, iconographic painting, and intricate silver and gold work are among the arts taught here (see Chapter 8). The Tashi Yangtse district is also believed to be a favoured habitat of the elusive Yeti or Abominable Snowman (see Chapter 13). People here have wonderful tales to tell of Yeti sightings, though the creature has never been captured on camera.

From Tashi Yangtse, you have to return to Tashigang to get

back on the Lateral Road, which continues on for 180 kilometres to Samdrup Jongkhar district, in the steamy foothills of south-eastern Bhutan, on the border with the Indian state of Assam. From here, an eight-hour drive westwards through the plains of Assam and Bengal would bring you back to Bhutan's south-western gateway, Phuentsoling. The traveller, having made the journey through Bhutan along the lateral east–west road, would now have a pretty good idea of the topography of the country, and the extraordinary variety of landscapes and climates, peoples, languages and cultural traditions that it contains.

History

The journey through Bhutanese history is a more complex one. Little is known about our early history, though archaeological evidence suggests that Bhutan was inhabited as early as 2000 BC. Oral tradition indicates that at the beginning of the first millennium, the country was inhabited by semi-nomadic herdsmen who moved with their livestock from the foothills to grazing grounds in higher valleys in the summers. Like the rest of the Himalayan region, they were animists and many followed the Bon religion, which held trees, lakes and mountains to be sacred.

By the eighth century, with the advent of Buddhism in the country, our history becomes closely entwined with religious figures, and the myths and legends associated with them. In the early seventh century, the Tibetan Buddhist king Songtsen Gampo built the first temples in the country, in Paro (see Chapter 9) and Bumthang, to pin down a giant ogress who sprawled across the Himalayas and had been terrorizing the entire region. But another century passed before Buddhism actually took hold in Bhutan. In AD 747, the great Indian saint and teacher Guru Padmasambhava, who had founded the Nyingmapa sect of Buddhism in Tibet, came to Bhutan—legend says that he manifested himself riding on a flying tiger—and stayed in a meditation cave in a cliff in the Paro Valley, now the site of the famous monastery of Taktsang or Tiger's Nest (see Chapter 9). After meditating there for some time, he travelled on to the Bumthang region in central Bhutan, where the ruler Sendha Gyab (also known

as Sindhu Raja), having heard of his miraculous powers, had invited him to exorcize a spirit that had made him ill. The Guru converted the spirit to the Buddhist faith, and the grateful king and his subjects followed suit. The Guru then persuaded King Sendha Gyab to make peace with his enemy, King Nowuche (Big Nose), at a place called Nabji (see Chapter 14), bringing to an end years of bloody warfare.

Guru Padmasambhava—or Guru Rimpoche as he is more commonly known in Bhutan—was a historical figure, who was born in Uddiyana in the present-day Swat Valley of Pakistan, and became a renowned sage in India as well as Tibet. He visited many parts of Bhutan, performing miraculous feats and winning people over to Buddhism. During this period, many local deities became assimilated into the Bhutanese Buddhist pantheon, usually as the protecting deities of a particular village or valley. Many Bon practices, particularly those which worship nature in its various manifestations, have been integrated into the form of Mahayana Buddhism practised in Bhutan. And there are still isolated pockets in the country where the Bon religion, with its shamanistic practices, lives on.

Today, Guru Rimpoche is revered in Bhutan as the second Buddha, and there is no temple, monastery or Buddhist home in Bhutan that doesn't have an image of him. He is often shown flanked by his two consorts, the Indian princess Mendharawa and the Tibetan princess Yeshe Tshogyel. At the annual tsechus held at dzongs and monasteries, the grand finale is usually a ceremony of special homage to the Guru, when life-size images of him, representing his eight different manifestations, are brought out in a spectacular procession. In almost every valley in Bhutan, you will be shown a rock or a cave where Guru Rimpoche has left his footprint, handprint or some other sign of his visit and his benediction, on a rock or a cave. Visitors might view these with bemusement or scepticism, but not a Bhutanese—for us they are especially sacred pilgrimage sites.

The era after Guru Rimpoche's was one in which Buddhism went into eclipse in Tibet. During the reign of the heretical king Langdharma in Tibet (AD 836–42), Buddhism was banned, monasteries destroyed and monks persecuted. At this time, many people from Tibet fled the country and settled down in Bhutan, mostly in the western valleys. The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw

another wave of migrations from Tibet when lamas of the various sects took refuge in Bhutan, where they found growing support especially in the western part of the country. Among them was Drukpa Kinlay (1455–1529), known as 'the Divine Madman', who remains one of the best-loved saints in Bhutan (see Chapter 5). He spread his teachings through his unorthodox and often shocking behaviour, using songs and poems, earthy jokes, and his legendary sexual prowess, to draw attention to true Buddhist spiritual values. Bhutanese culture is both deeply spiritual and robustly earthly, and the wooden phalluses that you see hanging from the eaves of many Bhutanese houses as well as the flying penises painted near front doors are a typical expression of the latter.

Much of the history of Bhutan's medieval period is lost, because many historical records were lost in a series of fires and earthquakes that destroyed our dzongs, monasteries and printing presses. But enough has survived to provide an outline of major events. For much of the medieval period, Bhutan had no single dominant figure of authority. A number of local chieftains ruled different valleys and constantly fought each other. Then in 1616 arrived a figure who was to change the course of our history. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651), descended from a distinguished lineage of great lamas, was at the age of twelve recognized as the reincarnation of the Prince-Abbot of Ralung Monastery in Tibet, the main seat of the Drukpa Kargyupa sect. His enthronement at Ralung was, however, challenged by a powerful rival claimant, whose threats and repeated attempts to overthrow him made his position very difficult. In 1616, Ngawang Namgyel left for Bhutan, entering the country through the northern region of Laya (see Chapter 11).

Very soon, he established his spiritual as well as political authority over the country, under the title of Zhabdrung (which means 'at whose feet one submits'). Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel was a great spiritual, cultural and military leader, and we regard him as the founder of the Bhutanese state. He repelled a series of Tibetan invasions, established the dominant position of the Drukpa Kargyupa school, formed a state monk body which was housed in Punakha Dzong and, for the first time, unified the country. He exercised his power through the series of dzongs he built right across the country,

controlled by his representatives, called Penlops. The Zhabdrung also drew up a code of laws, and created cultural and religious traditions which have helped shape Bhutan's distinct identity. For example, it was the Zhabdrung who devised our national dress, and introduced the practice of holding the annual religious festivals called domchoes at Thimpu and Punakha.

The Zhabdrung instituted a unique system of administration whereby he was the spiritual head of the country, while administrative and political affairs were handled by a secular ruler called the Desi, and monastic establishments were headed by the chief abbot called the Je Khenpo (British colonial texts often refer to the Desi and the Je Khenpo as the Deb Raja and Dharma Raja, respectively).

Perhaps the first Westerners ever to visit Bhutan came during the Zhabdrung's rule—two Portuguese Jesuits, Fathers Cacella and Cabral, who arrived in 1627, have left glowing accounts of the Zhabdrung's kindness, scholarship and tolerance: 'He received us with a demonstration of great benevolence, signifying this in the joy which he showed on receiving us . . . This king has also a great reputation as a man of letters and . . . all other great lamas reverence him.' The two priests stayed for many months with the Zhabdrung in Cheri Monastery, at the northern end of the Thimphu Valley. He allowed them to preach, was eager to learn about their faith, but drew the line at converting to Christianity himself!

In 1651 the Zhabdrung went into meditation in Punakha Dzong, and was not seen in public again. He died soon thereafter but, incredibly, his death was kept a secret for more than forty years, as it was felt that news of his passing would create instability and invite Tibetan invasions again (see Chapter 8). Desi Tenzin Rabgye (1638–96), the fourth civil ruler, was the Zhabdrung's chosen heir. He ruled for fourteen years, and was a great administrator who consolidated the Zhabdrung's legacy and completed his unfinished work (see also Chapter 7). He also instituted the system of rule by reincarnations of the Zhabdrung, who would be reborn in three forms, embodying his mind, speech and body. The mind incarnation, however, was the only one who had the right to rule. In practice what usually happened was that since the Zhabdrung's reincarnations were recognized and enthroned when they were still minors, power

was often exercised in their name by others, leading to vicious intrigues and tussles for power. Two reincarnations of the Zhabdrung were born in my father's family—but that is another story, which I have told later in this book (see Chapter 1).

After the Zhabdrung and Desi Tenzin Rabgye, Bhutan once again went through a long period of turmoil and instability. Several Desis were assassinated, and in the absence of a strong central authority, wars broke out between rival Penlops and chieftains. During this period, Tibetan armies invaded Bhutan three times. Bhutan also engaged in a series of skirmishes with the British in the region known as the Duars (literally doorways) in the plains and foothills of Bengal, as the East India Company was eager to wrest this fertile area over which the Bhutanese had traditionally enjoyed control. These early skirmishes ended in an uneasy truce.

In 1774, Warren Hastings, the Governor General of Bengal, eager to explore new trade possibilities, sent a mission to Bhutan led by George Bogle. Bogle spent five months in Bhutan, and fell in love with the country and its people. Since he was one of the handful of foreigners who visited Bhutan during this period, his account is worth quoting. He noted that everyone from the ruler to a humble farmer dressed the same (this is true today as well), and that:

> The simplicity of their manners . . . and strong sense of religion preserve the Bhutanese from many vices to which more polished nations are addicted . . . They are strangers to falsehood and ingratitude. Theft and every other species of dishonesty are little known. The more I see of the Bhutanese, the more I am pleased with them. The common people are good-humoured, downright and, I think, thoroughly trusty. The statesmen have some of the art which belongs to their profession. They are the best built race of men I ever saw.

Another mission sent in 1783, led by Captain Samuel Turner, recorded its 'favourable impression of the intelligence and civilization of the inhabitants of Bootan'. The surgeon who was part of this mission declared: 'I think the knowledge and observations of these people on the diseases of their country, and their medical practice,

keep pace with a refinement and state of civilization which struck me with wonder.'

But by the mid-nineteenth century, relations between Bhutan and the British again deteriorated, when they fought several battles over control of the Duars on the border with Bengal and Assam, which were the only routes in and out of Bhutan from the south. In 1864 a British mission led by Sir Ashley Eden arrived in Bhutan to resolve the border dispute. But unlike his predecessors, Eden had nothing good to say about the country. The Bhutanese, he said, were 'an idle race, indifferent to everything except fighting and killing each other'; the Bhutanese mules were 'fidgety and vicious', and the music 'monotonous and noisy'. The last straw for Eden was his meeting with the Tongsa Penlop at Punakha: 'The Penlow took a large piece of wet dough and began rubbing my face with it; he pulled my hair, and slapped me on the back . . . On my showing signs of impatience or remonstrating, he smiled and deprecated my anger, pretending that it was the familiarity of friendship . . .' Later that year, the British struck back—they annexed the Bengal Duars, but the Bhutanese army led by the Tongsa Penlop fought fiercely and ousted the British in 1865. Eventually, after long negotiations, the two countries signed the Treaty of Sinchu La, in which the Duars were ceded to the British, in return for which they paid a large annuity to Bhutan.

In these troubled times a new leader emerged in Bhutan—Jigme Namgyel (1825–82), the very Tongsa Penlop who had so enraged Sir Ashley Eden, and led Bhutanese troops to victory against the British in the Duar Wars of 1864-65. Jigme Namgyel, scion of a noble family descended from the fifteenth-century saint Pema Lingpa, was a self-made man, who had risen through his remarkable abilities to become the Tongsa Penlop. He soon gained the upper hand over rival penlops and chieftains, and became the most powerful man in the land. Peace and stability returned to Bhutan. In 1870 he became the Forty-Eighth Desi or civil ruler of Bhutan for a period of three years, but remained the main locus of power even after the appointment of his successors.

The Monarchy

Jigme Namgyel's son Ugyen Wangchuck was a worthy successor to his father. He became Penlop of both Paro and Tongsa, and further strengthened his position by defeating his rivals. The reigning Desi was by now a mere figurehead, and Ugyen Wangchuck became the unchallenged leader of the country. In 1907, Ugyen Wangchuck was unanimously elected as the first hereditary King of Bhutan by an assembly of people's representatives, high officials and important lamas. He was given the title Druk Gyalpo, and his coronation day, 17 December, is now observed as Bhutan's National Day. Ugyen Wangchuck was a much-loved king, and his was a peaceful and enlightened rule until his death in 1926.

He was succeeded by his son Jigme Wangchuck, whose reign was one of peace and prosperity, and on his death in 1952, he was succeeded by his son Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. We regard the third king as the Father of Modern Bhutan. He was a visionary, who launched Bhutan on a programme of planned development that ended its isolation. Under his rule, the first major motor road was built, which changed our lives dramatically (see Chapter 3), modern education was made available to his people for the first time and a number of technical assistance programmes in cooperation with India and other countries were started, to develop agriculture, hydroelectric power and a modern system of administration. He also instituted a National Assembly composed of representatives of the people from all parts of the country, as well as officials and members of the clergy, and set up ministries, a high court, a currency, and banking and postal systems. In 1971, Bhutan joined the United Nations. In just two decades King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck propelled Bhutan out of the medieval ages and into the twentieth century.

The third king died tragically young in 1972. His son Jigme Singye Wangchuck became the fourth Druk Gyalpo, and the youngest monarch in the world, at the age of sixteen. In 2007, Bhutan will have had a monarchy for a hundred years, more than a third of which will have been under the reign of the present king.

Modern Bhutan

The new king's coronation ceremony in 1974 focused the world's attention on Bhutan. It brought the international media to our country for the first time, and photographs and articles published in international journals projected Bhutan as a fairytale kingdom ruled by a dazzlingly handsome young king. Soon after his coronation, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck announced his philosophy for the future development of his country. He declared that Bhutan's growth and progress would be guided, as well as measured, not by its gross domestic product but by its gross national happiness. It was a revolutionary new concept, and one that initially invited much scepticism from economists and other development experts. GNH was a nice catchphrase, many of them said, but on what index do you measure happiness? Today, the success of his gross national happiness theory is widely recognized, and has become a model for economists and planners the world over.

Put very simply, GNH is based on the conviction that material wealth alone does not bring happiness, or ensure the contentment and well-being of the people; and that economic growth and 'modernization' should not be at the expense of the people's quality of life or traditional values. To achieve gross national happiness, several policy areas were given priority—equitable socio-economic development in which prosperity is shared by every region of the country and every section of society; conservation and protection of the pristine environment; the preservation and promotion of Bhutan's unique cultural heritage; and providing good, responsive governance in which the people participate. These are the principles that have driven the King's policies.

The highest priority has been given to rural development through making health care and education accessible to all, including those living in the most remote villages; the building of roads and communication; the launching of livestock and agricultural development schemes and their associated industries; and promoting traditional handicrafts—all of these aimed at improving rural livelihoods and creating new job opportunities.

Bhutan's environmental protection measures have been drawn

up keeping in mind the mistakes made by other countries in our neighbourhood. They include laws to ensure that forest cover in Bhutan never drops below 60 per cent, and that any industrial and commercial activity that causes environmental deterioration and threatens wildlife is not permitted (see also Chapter 5). This policy has, for example, resulted in all our hydroelectric projects being run-of-the-river, with none of the ecological damage and submersion of habitats caused by large dams. Stringent eco-sensitive measures have not affected the profitability of Bhutan's power projects—they now provide 40 per cent of the country's revenue, and will ensure our economic prosperity and independence. Environmental as well as cultural concerns have also dictated the decision to discourage mass tourism, and to forgo the exploitation of many of our rich natural resources, such as copper, which would result in the destruction of human as well as natural habitats.

The unique cultural traditions which give Bhutan its distinct identity are preserved through laws such as those that require all Bhutanese to wear the national costume in public (this also keeps alive our wonderful weaving tradition), and make it mandatory for all buildings, private and public, to follow the designs and rules of our superb traditional architecture (and this certainly does not rule out having every modern convenience inside). The traditional arts and crafts are encouraged, with the highest standards maintained through the regular patronage of the government and the clergy, and through large projects for the restoration and renovation of dzongs and monasteries.

Our spiritual culture permeates every aspect of our lives, including the government. The state-supported monk body, with a strength of about 5000, is headed by the Je Khenpo or chief abbot, who is elected by the central monastic body, and is the spiritual head of Bhutan (the present Je Khenpo is the seventieth in an unbroken line). Even in the twenty-first century, monks continue to play an essential role in the life of the community, presiding over festivals and rites of passage, and providing guidance, advice and solace. About another 3000 monks are supported by private patronage. We also have the institution of lay monks called *gomchens*—these are people who live with their families, yet have acquired the religious teachings

that allow them to conduct prayers and other religious ceremonies. They play a particularly important role in eastern Bhutan, travelling from village to village where their services are needed. Since monks are highly educated, greatly respected in our society, and influential in shaping opinion, they now play an important new role in national life—as highly effective agents of social change in fields such as public health, family planning and AIDS awareness and prevention.

There is now concrete evidence of the achievements of the GNH policies. From 1985 to 2005, life expectancy in Bhutan went up from forty-seven years to sixty-six. Literacy has increased from 23 per cent to 54 per cent, and enrolment in primary schools has reached 89 per cent. There are now thirty hospitals in the country, 176 basic health units and 476 educational institutions. In the field of environment, Bhutan has been named as one of the ten biodiversity hotspots in the world, for the wealth of its biodiversity and the exemplary management of its natural resources. These successes are due in a large part to the King's close personal supervision of the implementation of policies—he spends a large part of his time travelling through the country, often on foot, to make his own assessment of the progress of projects and to hear what the people have to say. Every Bhutanese has access to the King, and can personally present him a petition.

The King's goal of providing responsive and participatory governance is one that he has been working at steadily for twenty-five years, introducing fundamental changes in slow and steady phases. In 1981, for example, he began the process of decentralization and democratization by giving each of the *dzongkhag*s (districts) in the country the power to determine its own developmental priorities. In 1991, he extended this decision-making power to the villages. Then, in 1998, against much resistance from the National Assembly (more than two-thirds of its members are elected representatives from the twenty districts in the country), he divested himself of his executive powers and transferred these to a council of ministers. He also pushed through a law that gave the National Assembly the power to call for a vote of confidence in the King—he insisted this was a safeguard that was essential for the future well-being of the country. And in 2001, he launched the drafting of a Constitution

that would give Bhutan a two-party electoral system, and a constitutional monarchy, with a mandatory retirement age of sixty-five for the monarch (the King turned fifty in November 2005). The draft constitution is now ready and has been presented to the people for their views. In late 2005 the King started touring each district of the country to hear the people's opinions, clarify their doubts, and personally explain to them how the Constitution will make them the masters of their own destiny, in a parliamentary democracy headed by a constitutional monarch. And on our National Day, 17 December 2005, he announced that he will step down as King in 2008, and be succeeded by his eldest son, Crown Prince Dasho Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who would be the guardian of the new Constitution. History will, I believe, judge the reign of Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck as the Golden Age of Bhutan.

Bhutan does not want to keep the outside world and the twenty-first century at bay. We want prosperity, but not at the cost of our cherished traditions and culture. We want the benefits of modern technology, but at our own pace, according to our own needs, and when we feel the time is right. It was why we waited until 1983 to build an airport and start air services to Bhutan; why we gradually increased the number of foreign tourists from 200 in 1974 to 14,000 in 2005; and why we introduced television only in 1999. People often wonder for how long, in this age of information technology and an increasingly globalized economy, Bhutan can retain its distinct identity and its deeply spiritual culture. I personally don't have any doubts on this score. You only have to see how adeptly a Bhutanese monk uses the computer to prepare a scroll of 100,000 prayers to put inside a prayer wheel to realize that Bhutanese society is both vibrant and deeply rooted in tradition, that it has an extraordinary capacity to appreciate, absorb and adapt new ideas, and effortlessly make them a part of the Bhutanese way of life.

A Word about This Book

Treasures of the Thunder Dragon is not a scholarly book on Bhutan, nor does it try to be a comprehensive one. My portrait of my country is one that is drawn from a very personal perspective, and based almost entirely on my own experiences. This book is divided into three sections. The first section, 'Growing Up with Bhutan', is a personal memoir, which describes my childhood years and my schooldays. It is a portrait of life as it was in a Bhutanese village before the country opened up to the outside world, and recounts the great changes that took place in our lives as Bhutan emerged from its isolation in the early 1960s, with the building of motor roads and the access to modern education.

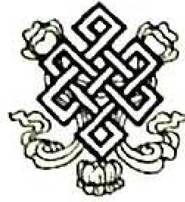
The second section, 'The Way We Are', attempts to explain, again largely through my own experiences, some of our most fundamental beliefs and practices, such as reincarnation, our system of traditional medicine, our architectural traditions, and the ways in which our spiritual beliefs have helped preserve our environment.

The last section, 'People and Places', is based on my extensive travels on foot to different parts of the country, mostly to places well off the beaten track. Some of these journeys were pilgrimages to sacred sites, but most were to villages, communities and remote habitats that have rarely seen outsiders, and are little known even to most Bhutanese. They resulted in heart-warming encounters with unforgettable people, they opened my eyes and my mind to the needs and problems of people who live far away from Thimphu and other centres of government, and led me to discover places of unimaginable beauty.

I hope this book will provide some new insights into Bhutanese character and culture, give some glimpses of the magical beauty and diversity of our land, and convey the pride that all Bhutanese take in being the children of the Thunder Dragon.

PART ONE

GROWING UP WITH BHUTAN



CHAPTER 1

THE VILLAGE ON TREASURE HILL

I was born on 10 June 1955 as the sun's first rays touched the mountains of Nobgang, a village in western Bhutan, in the Punakha district. My father acted as the midwife, cutting my umbilical chord with a sharpened bamboo stake before handing me over to my maternal grandmother, Ugay Dem. By the time I was born, my father was an experienced hand at this task, for he had delivered my two older siblings, my sister Beda and brother Sangay, as well. There's a family story that as each of her children was born, during the worst of her labour pains, my mother would beat my father on his head, so that he too would experience a bit of the pain she was suffering, and my father would submit to this bashing with perfect good humour.

In keeping with childbirth practices in Nobgang, my father's duties at my mother's bedside would continue for several more weeks as he nursed my mother through her convalescence. For two months after each childbirth, my father would be kept busy chopping logs of wood to heat water in a gigantic cauldron in the outdoor bathhouse for my mother's twice-daily baths. The boiling water

would be poured into a wooden tub and allowed to cool naturally to the right temperature, and then my father would carry my mother from the bedroom to the bathhouse, bathe her and carry her back to bed. For extra strength, the new mother was fed eggs fried in butter, and *maru*—a dish made with minced dried beef, ginger and a touch of chilli. To keep her relaxed and contented she was also served *chungkay*, a fermented rice porridge cooked with butter and eggs. No doubt my mother, with doting parents and a loving husband, was nurtured with extra tenderness, but in those days everyone in Nobgang set great store by the curative powers of warm baths, and maintained that women should rest completely for two months after each delivery, as this would ensure that they stayed strong and youthful. Modern medicine might scoff at these beliefs, but my mother, who has borne and brought up nine children, is a remarkably youthful seventy-year-old.

Nobgang village is perched high on a ridge above the Punakha Valley. It was founded by the Ninth Je Khenpo, Shacha Rinchen, who was the chief abbot of Bhutan from 1744 to 1755, one of the most revered and learned religious figures in the country. The legend goes that while he was in meditation in a remote retreat in the mountains above Nobgang, he noticed a sparkling light, like a brilliant star, in an area that was then a jungle, some distance below. He sent a monk to investigate, and the monk was astounded to see a stone radiating light. He promptly took the stone to his master who declared it was a gemstone (*Nob* in Dzongkha). And so he named the place Nobgang, literally Treasure Hill, and built a temple there called Tsolhakhang. He interred the luminous treasure inside an image of the Buddha in a chapel on the third floor of the temple.

There is a powerful legend attached to this image. In the 1950s there was an epidemic of smallpox in Nobgang and several neighbouring villages. Many people succumbed to the dreaded disease, but after the first death in Nobgang a curious thing began

to happen to the statue—its outer layer began to blister and peel off, and there were no further smallpox deaths in our village. The people of Nobgang believed that the Buddha had absorbed the disease in order to spare them from the worst of its ravages. Later the image was repaired and given a new coating of gold. But to this day a small dot, like a pockmark, remains on the face of this serene Buddha. This dot moves its position every few years—earlier it was on the cheek, and now it has emerged on the upper lip. No amount of gilding can cover it up.

Some years after the Tsolhakhang temple was built, the tenth chief abbot of Bhutan built another temple facing it, the Zimchu Gomo temple. The village of Nobgang grew up around these two temples. Had I been born thirty years earlier, I would not have been born in my grandmother's house in Nobgang, but in birthing shacks located on the outskirts of the village. For in those days, strict monastic rules had to be followed by the residents of Nobgang. No animals were allowed to be kept in the village, not even birds. Only a lone rooster, who served as the community's alarm clock, had the privilege of living there. Neither weaving nor farming, the usual occupations in villages, was allowed. A monk with a fearsome leather whip ensured that the monastic rules were observed. Despite these restrictions, people were attracted to settle there because as a monastic village Nobgang and its inhabitants were exempt from the compulsory labour tax then prevalent in Bhutan. The labour tax, known as *woola*, meant that for every building project in the country, be it the construction, repair or renovation of a monastery, dzong, road or mule track, people were obliged to contribute a certain amount of their labour. The monastic rules that governed Nobgang were relaxed only in the 1930s.

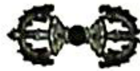
There were more than fifty houses in Nobgang, strung out in a line along the ridge. Our house, situated on the highest point in the village, was a large double-storeyed one, with a walled outer courtyard and a smaller inner courtyard. It was made of rammed earth and stone, with carved wooden windows and lintels, and a broad pitched roof covered with wooden shingles, weighted down with stones. There was an open space between the top floor and the roof, which was used to store firewood and hay, and to dry chillies

and meat. In those days most village houses in Bhutan used to stable their livestock on the ground floor, but we had our spacious kitchen and grain store here. There were five rooms upstairs, including bedrooms and an ornately decorated chapel. From the top floor a rectangular room jutted out at a right angle from the house, so that the shape of the structure was that of an inverted L or, as we liked to say, a flag (*tharcham*) on a mast. These tharcham houses were unique to Nobgang. From our house on the crest of the hill there were wonderful views of the snow-capped peaks to the north, and the wide and fertile valleys of Punakha and Wangdiphodrang to the east and south.

Just outside the west door of our walled courtyard was a paan leaf grove, and near it grew indigo and rubia plants, which were used to dye blue and red the yarn that every household wove into cloth. Nearby was our bathhouse, with its large wooden tub, and fig trees and wild raspberry bushes growing around it. My mother, a stickler for cleanliness, made all her children wash their clothes and bathe here in hot water twice a week. This meant the consumption of large quantities of firewood, which we would get from the forests nearby. Pear, peach, orange and persimmon trees surrounded our wheat fields to the north of the house, while Sichuan pepper bushes and *guendrum* (*Diospyros lotus*) trees grew around a chorten nearby. Also outside our walled compound was our latrine, its wooden floor supported by eight-foot-tall poles above a pit.

Running the entire length of the village was a water channel, made of hollowed-out logs, propped up on wooden poles. The source of the fresh water which flowed through the channel was a spring above the village, shaded by a large tree entwined with gourd creepers—these were lovely to look at but not to eat. The gourds, hollowed out and dried, were used as ladles in every Nobgang house. Being the first house in the village, our house was the first to collect water from the channel. We would store it in great copper urns in our courtyard, as would households further down who would tap it at the point closest to them. If people wanted to quench their thirst, they simply had to put a leaf into the channel to divert the water towards them. This water channel was the daily meeting point in the village, where people would gather, exchange news and

pass on messages. The channel came to an end at a chorten at the far end of the village, where people living in the lower half of Nobgang would collect their water. It was not only the lifeline of Nobgang, it added character to the whole village and knit it together.



While my mother's family had been settled in Nobgang for a long time, my father's family made their home here much later, after a period of considerable turmoil in their lives. This was caused by a tragic event which affected not just my father's family, but had repercussions throughout the country. To explain its significance, I need to go back a bit into history.

As I have written in the Introduction, Bhutan was unified and given its administrative structure in the seventeenth century by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. The founding father of our country, he was in his lifetime the supreme authority in Bhutan. After his death there followed a long period of dual rule—by a temporal head (the Desi) and the ecclesiastical head (the Je Khenpo). In addition, spiritual power rested in the three reincarnations of the Zhabdrung, representing his mind, speech and body. The Mind Reincarnation, in particular, was traditionally held to have the right to exercise supreme authority in Bhutan. With the introduction of monarchy in Bhutan in 1907, the system of dual rule came to an end. But the three separate reincarnations of the Zhabdrung's mind, speech and body continued to be recognized and greatly revered by the people.

In the early part of the twentieth century, two of these reincarnations were born in my father's family. My father's uncle (his mother's brother) Zhabdrung Jigme Dorji (1905–31) was the Sixth Mind Incarnation, with his seat at the great Talo Monastery, an hour's walk uphill from Nobgang. And my father's elder brother Jigme Tenzin (1919–49) was the Sixth Speech Incarnation with his seat at Sangchoekor Dzong in Paro. In his childhood, my father

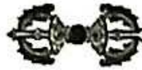
regularly went to stay with his maternal uncle, the Mind Incarnation, Zhabdrung Jigme Dorji, at Talo.

In November 1931, during the reign of the second king of Bhutan, Zhabdrung Jigme Dorji was assassinated at Talo Dzong, asphyxiated in the dead of night with a silk scarf stuffed down his throat. He was just twenty-six years old. My father's uncle was a deeply religious person, with no temporal ambitions, but some powerful courtiers feared that he could become a challenge to the king's power, and they poisoned the king's mind against him. In this atmosphere of intrigue and suspicion, some of the Zhabdrung's own courtiers also created mischief, challenging the king's authority in the Zhabdrung's name. The murder of Zhabdrung Jigme Dorji was covered up. His body was hastily cremated, and the news given about that he had died suddenly in his sleep. People throughout the country were stunned and grief-stricken, and whispers and speculation about his death continued for decades to come.

My father's family was, naturally, deeply shaken by this event. Moreover, they now feared for the life of my father's elder brother, the Sixth Speech Incarnation, Jigme Tenzin. They were particularly apprehensive about the powerful regional governor of western Bhutan, the Paro Penlop, who was a cousin of the king. He had allegedly played a major role in the assassination at Talo. Moreover, he bitterly resented the status my father's family enjoyed. He never missed an opportunity to harass them, and forced them to sell him their beautiful home in Paro, Kuengacholing, for a pittance. Fearing for the young boy's life, my father's family fled Paro, leaving behind their lands and property. My father was then eight years old. For the next sixteen years his family lived in self-imposed exile, and suffered tremendous hardship, moving from place to place—Tibet, the Haa Valley in Bhutan, Gangtok in Sikkim, and finally Kalimpong in India.

In 1947, the king sent word that my father's family should return to Bhutan, and that their lands would be returned to them. My father, then twenty-two, came back to Bhutan to serve the royal court at Wangdicholing in the Bumthang Valley. He also travelled to the Punakha Valley, to inquire about the restitution of the family's ancestral land in the valley, and stayed on to attend the

annual domchoe at Punakha Dzong (see Chapter 2). My mother, dressed in her beautiful white kushuthara kira and a string of corals, was there too, and it was love at first sight. Their romance blossomed at the tsechu at Talo Monastery, which takes place soon after the Punakha Domchoe. My father was determined to come back and marry her. We still have the photograph he took of her at the Talo Tsechu, with the camera he had brought from Kalimpong. In 1949, my father's parents returned to Bhutan and, at my father's urging, settled down in Nobgang. They bought a house in the middle of the village, facing the Zimchu Gomo temple. Tragically, on their way back from India, my father's elder brother, the Sixth Speech Incarnation of the Zhabdrung, died of malaria in Tongsa, at the age of thirty. In 1949 my parents began their married life—he was twenty-four and my mother eighteen.



I was extremely fortunate in my childhood to be surrounded by two sets of loving grandparents, who were wonderful role models. My mother, Thuiji, was the only daughter of her mother, and so it was my father who moved into his wife's family home. My maternal grandmother, Ugay Dem, was unquestionably the boss of the house. Indeed, she was a figure of authority in the village, where she and her best friend Ugay Pem used to dictate decisions at village meetings, sitting under the old peach tree near the Zimchu Gomo temple. The tree, believed to have been planted when the temple was built in the eighteenth century, used to be covered with beautiful blossoms in spring. It was an education to see how my grandmother tackled people with a mixture of diplomacy, command, accommodation and fearlessness to get her way. She not only managed to make people accept her point of view, but to end up thinking that it was originally their own as well. The women of our village had the reputation of being strong and independent. The joke in Nobgang was that if a man were to become the husband of a Nobgang woman, he should come with his sleeves rolled up, ready

to take on any task she assigned him. Grandfather Samdu Nob certainly came with his sleeves rolled up. He was my mother's stepfather—her biological father had left the family when my mother was a year old—but had brought up my mother with unstinting love. He was a tremendously hardworking man, a devoted husband and a much-loved grandfather.

Grandmother Ugay was a slim and petite woman with chiselled features, a renowned beauty in her youth. She was a superb cook, and prepared all the family meals. She was also a skilled weaver whose fine textiles earned her a considerable income. My mother also did some weaving, but her main responsibility was to look after her growing brood and tend the kitchen garden. Though Grandmother Ugay could not read or write, she had memorized prayers that took hours to recite. She was an excellent and pragmatic manager, and firmly assigned responsibility to her husband and son-in-law for all the tasks that needed to be done. There were our paddy fields down in Punakha to be tended, seasonal vegetables and grains to be planted, cattle and horses grazed, logs to be chopped. All these tasks were uncomplainingly carried out by Grandfather Samdu Nob, assisted by my father. Grandfather's strong hands were so roughened with work that without flinching he could pull up huge bunches of stinging nettles to feed the cattle. Many were the nights he sat up, guarding the crops, orchards and livestock from the depradations of bears, wild boar and leopards.

I still remember the excitement one evening when a leopard stealthily followed my father right to the wall of our house in Nobgang, and bit a gaping hole in the neck of his horse, before loping off to the house next door, where it made a meal of their cat. Another evening, my father encountered a bear near the fence of our house, attracted there by our fruit-laden pear tree. As the huge animal leapt towards him, my father shot it with the rifle he used to carry for protection against such encounters. The bear fell with a thud beneath the pear tree, and the next morning the whole village converged on our lawn to gloat over the death of the bear, which had been eating their fruit and killing their pigs. They also came to marvel at my father's marksmanship—his single shot had hit the bear inside its open mouth.

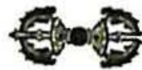
We loved and respected Grandmother Ugay Dem, but it was

Ashang Samdu Nob that we felt close to (Ashang means uncle and we called him that because our mother did). A lean man with a kindly face, it was he who taught us our prayers, and enforced discipline. He also taught us the traditional Bhutanese etiquette—how to receive guests, show respect to elders and religious figures, and conduct ourselves during prayers and visits to temples and dzongs. At mealtimes he would ensure we ate without dropping food or wasting a grain of rice. Sometimes, he would tie my left hand behind my back to ensure I ate with my right hand (I remain unreformed!). Grandfather Samdu Nob was a fount of folk wisdom, and some of his favourite proverbs are permanently impressed on my mind. Here are some of them, though they sound so much more poetic in Dzongkha:

> 'To know your limitations is the mark of a wise person.'
> 'Never perform all the thoughts in your mind; never speak all the words that come to your lips.'
> 'The way the arrow is targeted is more important than the way it is shot; the way you listen is more important than the way you talk.'
> 'It's no use burning the incense after the lama has left; it's no use drawing your sword after the bear has run away.'
> 'If you give someone a seat, he will soon ask for a place to stretch.'
> 'There is no tree without knots, and no person without faults.'
> 'Better to possess one virtue than a hundred nuggets of gold.'

Though we lived with my maternal grandparents, we spent a lot of time at my paternal grandparents' house. Ashi Dorji Om, my father's mother, in contrast to my dynamic and practical maternal grandmother, was a gentle lady of true sweetness and piety. We called her Angay. She never spoke a harsh word or had a malicious thought. With her snow-white hair and fair, translucent skin, there was a special radiance about her. She was treated with deference and respect by the whole village, especially as she was the sister of their late revered Zhabdrung who had died so tragically at Talo. My

paternal grandfather, Sangay Tenzin, whom we called Jojo, was also a man of great presence—handsome and imposing with his long beard and silver hair. His laughter lit up his face, and his magnetic personality drew children as well as adults around him. I could see why women had found him irresistible in his youth. My father's elder brother, Uncle Wangchuck, lived with them, and the children of my father's sisters were there often. These cousins were our close companions, our accomplices in all the pranks we played. The food at my paternal grandparents' house, made by their cook Mindu, was always plentiful and delicious. We grandchildren had but to ask for a favourite dish and it would immediately be made for us.



You may have gathered from what I have written so far about my upbringing in Nobgang that women enjoy a position of equality with men in Bhutanese society. Women often inherit their parents' property, and their husbands often live there with them. Women are free to marry whom they choose, and to divorce and remarry without any social stigma. And household tasks, including childcare, are shared by men and women. My earliest childhood memory is of my father carrying me on his back when I was three, securely strapped to him with a *kabney*—a long woven cloth, which was knotted across his chest. Sometimes my baby sister Tshering Pem would be strapped to his back along with me. This left my father's hands free to do other chores around the house, while we were safely with him and out of harm's way. We would peep over his shoulder, watch what he was doing and eventually fall asleep nestled against his back.

As I grew older I would gather wood, fetch water, help harvest maize and vegetables, and often take the cattle out to graze. I especially loved milking cows. I was a tomboy, and felt more comfortable in my elder brother's knee-length gho than in the ankle-length *gochu* (tunic) that small girls wore. My gochus were stitched by my father, as were the long boots I wore, with cloth uppers and

leather soles. He was very skilled with his hands, as most men were in those days, able to stitch clothes and make shoes for his family, repair everything from farming implements to the house roof, as well as do fine woodwork, carving altars, lintels and window frames—these last tasks, though, were saved for the winter months when there was little work in the fields. And of course, he was skilled at delivering babies (the practice of men acting as midwives still continues in remote villages in Bhutan).

My father used to be gone for long stretches of time, loading our family horses and mules with rice, chillies and *zaw* (toasted rice made by my mother and grandmother), to barter them for dried fish, salt and tea in Phari, in Tibet. He would also go once a year to Kalimpong in India, to buy cloth, sugar, soap, edible oils and betel nut. We would count the days until his return with toffees for us, and marvel at the factory-made fabric that he would bring back, to be stitched into new clothes. For the rest, we were self-sufficient. We ate what we grew; our oil for cooking as well as for lighting the house came from mustard seeds which we pressed ourselves; we made our own butter and cheese; and brewed tea from plants that grew nearby, such as the hypericum (St John's Wort), now recognized all over the world for its medicinal properties. Every household had basic knowledge of herbal remedies, and many villages had a skilled traditional healer with an encyclopedic knowledge of medicinal plants. But of course, they were not able to save lives in cases of serious illness, where surgery or antibiotics were required. We had no access to modern medicine.

At harvest time, it was the custom for all the villagers to pool their labour and work on one person's fields at a time. When the work was done, the owner of the field would host a feast for all those who had helped him, and this was always a very jolly occasion, when many romances flowered amongst the young people. It was the same system of communal labour whenever someone in the village was building a house—everyone would chip in. Many hands made light work at these times.

We created our own entertainment. Particularly popular was *lozay*—a kind of musical debate in which the women would be ranged against the men, and in which wit and clever repartee were much prized. The women usually won.

One of my most vivid childhood memories is of a gramophone record in my paternal grandparents' house. Uncle Wangchuck had brought a hand-cranked gramophone with him from Kalimpong—a great novelty in Nobgang—and a 78-rpm record of just plain laughter. This was a particular favourite with the whole village, elders as well as children. Many were the winter afternoons when people would gather at my grandparents' house and ask for that record to be played. After listening to it for some time, the laughter would become completely infectious—everyone listening would fall into paroxysms of mirth, until tears flowed down their faces. This record, which brought fun and laughter to generations of people in Nobgang, is still in perfect condition in Uncle Wangchuck's house.