

Exploring Bhutan's North-west

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Since the death in 1972 of the late King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck there have been few travellers among Bhutan's N mountains. So when the young King sanctioned my visit to the NW frontier of his country and strongly encouraged me to take a few pupils from my coeducational boarding school I jumped at the chance. Their reaction, however, was surprising: some were keen to come, others more hesitant. Although the majority are accustomed to long journeys on foot at the start and end of the school year, the idea of travelling for pleasure is unfamiliar, and in general they know little of their country. Largely through self-selection, I ended up with 3 boys from Bumthang in the N, Letho, Sonam Phuntsho and Lham Nidup, and one westerner, Pasang Tshering, from the Paro valley; no girls volunteered to join but my wife needed little persuasion to come along for the first few stages. Two Royal Bhutan Army guides and two muleteers, Gomchen and Sangay Wangchuck, bringing pack animals and a suitably docile saddle-horse, Wangdü, were also laid on at royal command, and a sketched-out route from His Majesty together with two bottles of 'Black Dog' Scotch were typical of the thoughtful courtesy we had learned to expect of royal organization in Bhutan.

We had just the morning to buy food, pack our 'expedition' and equip the boys with tents and sleeping bags. Boots proved something of a problem as all Bhutanese youths seem to have wide feet, size 5, but the RBA rescued us with army trekking boots. In the midst of all this confusion a special pleasure was the unexpected arrival of Eric Shipton, our first British visitor for 6 months. So it was late in the afternoon before we left by Range Rover for the road end at historic Dukye Dzong, and it took the promise of a bottle of rum to persuade Gomchen to start his mules at that late hour. Long after dark we reached the army camp at Guni Chava.

Much of the route we were to take had been followed by the botanist Frank Ludlow in 1949. The details of Ludlow's many E Himalayan journeys, admirably reconstructed by Dr Harold Fletcher¹ from diaries, had recently been published and sent to us in Bhutan, and we set out in the knowledge that Ludlow had never in his life felt quite so in the blue as on this particular trek; 'all he knew was that he was south of the main range, not very far from it, and east of Chomolhari.'² Even 15 years later Michael Ward, whose route we followed in the reverse direction, felt himself 'travelling *in vacuo* or wandering for "miles meandering with a mazy motion".³ We were luckier: thanks to Chris Justice and the staff of the Geography Department at Reading University, I had been able to examine this region stereoscopically from satellite imagery, and I carried with me in my rucksack satellite prints as informative as most maps; besides, we were to have better weather than either of my compatriots. That I was also following in the footsteps of Professor Augusto Gansser goes without saying; I seem to have been doing so for over 20 years.

From Guni Chava we continued NW on the Chumbi valley track, soon turning N at Penji Zam (bridge) into a gorge section of the Paro Chu. After about 7km we

¹ For all references, see end.

² Fletcher *op cit* p 314.

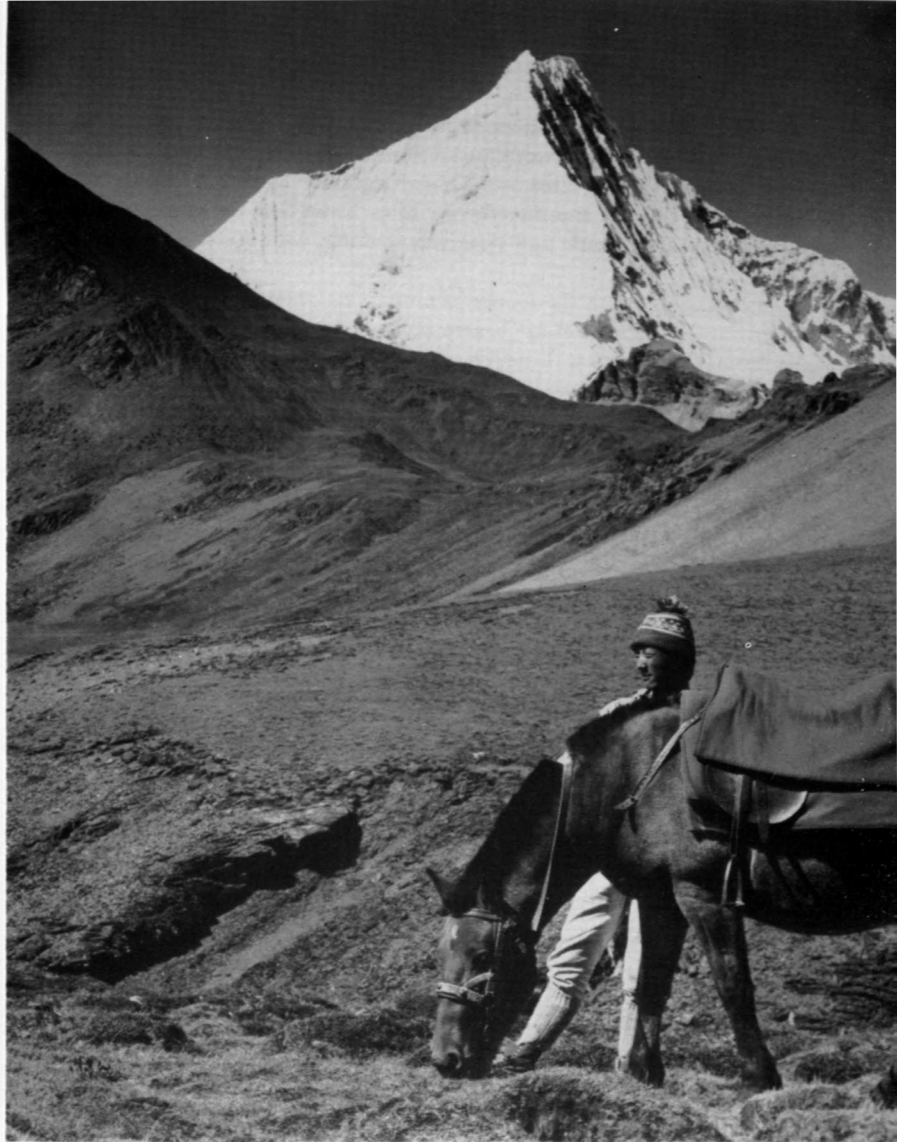
³ *AJ* 70 108.



71 Chomo Lhari (7326m) and Peak 6942m from ruined fortress (This and next five photos: John Tyson)

passed the point where a track branches off NW and leads over a pass into the Tibetan Chumbi valley to Phari Dzong, at this point only 18km distant. Our own route was up the main valley, here named Seyende (or Soe or Sey) Chu for a further 10km to a point where a powerful torrent joins it from the N. This place was known as Seyende Zam, bridges spanning both rivers. There was plenty of wood for a camp, and towards dusk the mists which had filled the valley parted to give us our first close view of Chomo Lhari (7326m) dazzlingly white, then pink and finally cold, steely blue against the starry night sky. Next day we followed the tributary for 2 hours of gradual ascent, then climbed steeply for a further hour to reach the small Bhutanese army outpost of Soe. Hardly an hour from the Chinese frontier, this remote unit serves to keep Bhutanese herders from unwittingly straying across the border after their yak. Recently, we were told, Chinese vets had inoculated both Tibetan and Bhutanese yak in the frontier region and relations had been 'cordial'.

Soe camp was located somewhat nearer to the frontier than Michael Ward's 1964 Soe outpost in the valley, so we had to cross a spur and descend 500m through dense rhododendron thickets to get back on course; this detour took us into the side valley of the Chomo Lhari Chu which we might otherwise have missed. We followed this stream NW towards the frontier, camping in a cirque near the limit of juniper growth. An unexpected snow shower was a timely reminder that it was already well into November. The wintry silence was broken only by restless movement of yak around our tents, the rumble of falling stones, or the occasional thunder of an avalanche from the S face of Chomo Lhari. The boys had hoped to see the holy lake at the head of this valley, and although the weather did not look



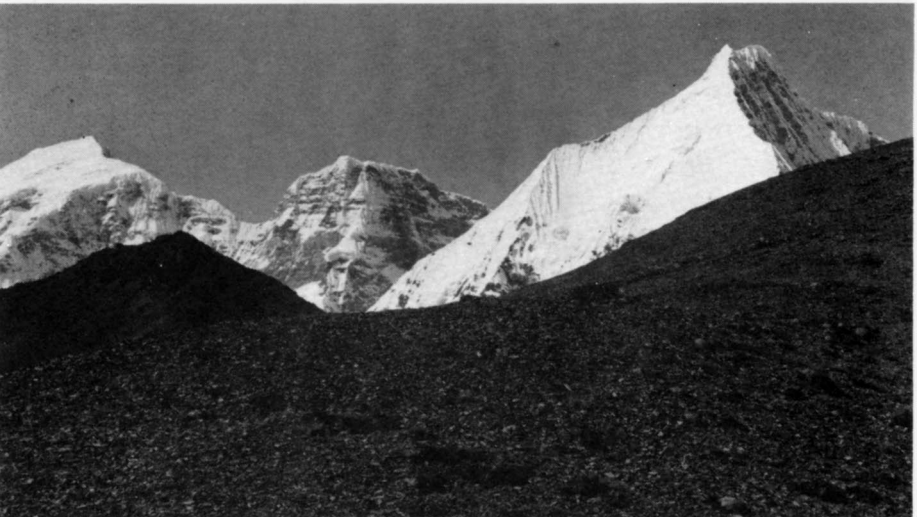
72 Tsheringme Gang (or Kungphu) 6789m

promising, we set out soon after dawn, stopping for cheese and yoghurt from the yak herders by a remote gompa beneath an overhanging cliff. The lama had gone down for the winter, but keys were produced and we were given holy water at the austere but impressive shrine. An hour's climb over moraine brought us unexpectedly to a cliff-top, some hundred metres below which was a cirque enclosing a small tarn. At the water's edge, we watched reflections of Chomo Lhari in the sacred Tsheringme La Tso.

With our dog and an RBA guide for company, my wife now started the 60km walk back to Dukye Dzong, whilst the rest of us continued on our way. Passing through the yak herding villages of Jemphu and Dotabethang on what seemed a

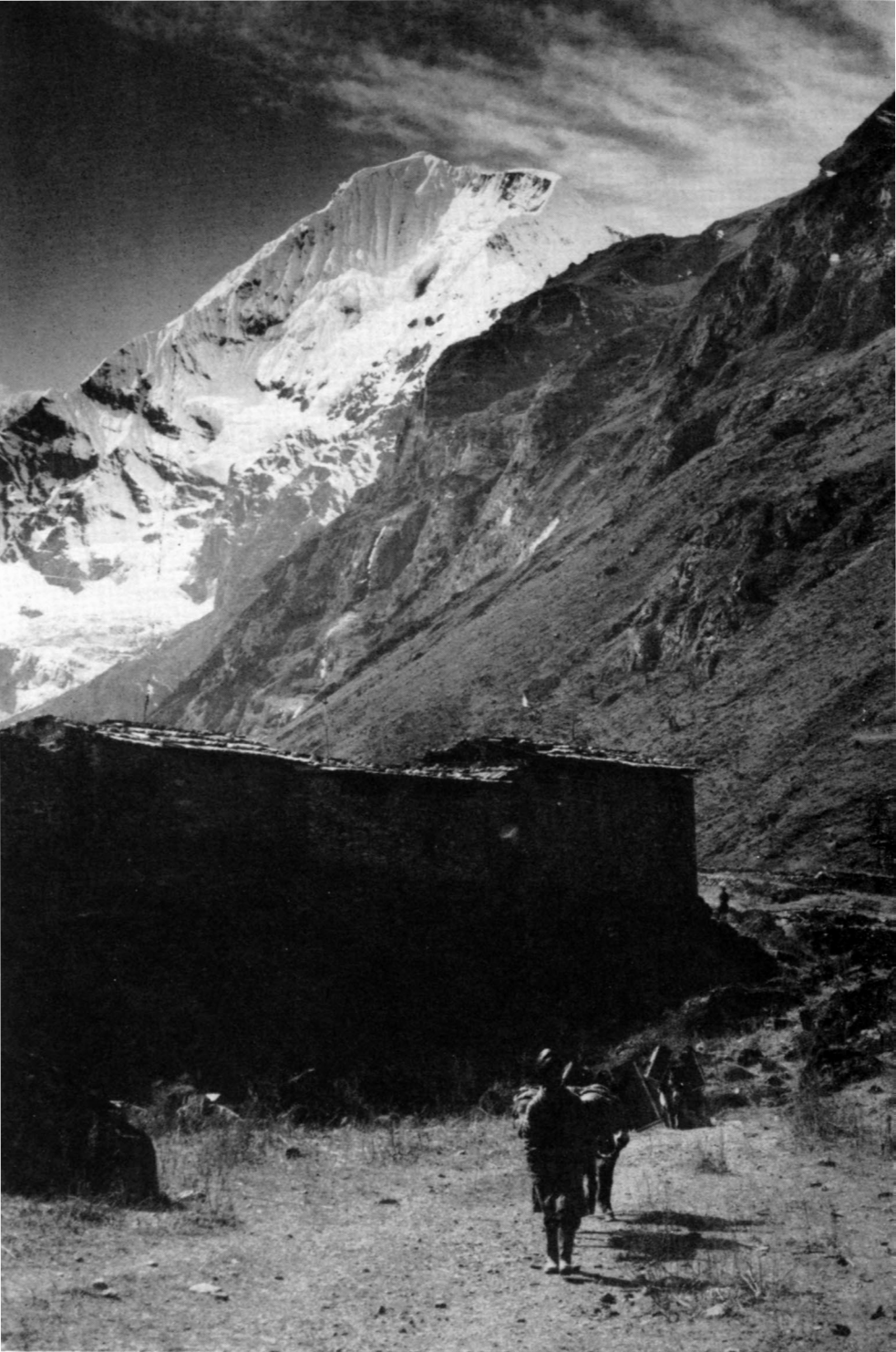
gentle afternoon's stroll, we camped on another broad grazing-ground, or *thang*, beneath a ruined fortress, part of the ancient fortifications of Bhutan against Tibet. The whole valley seemed filled by the massive granite, marble and quartzite bulk of Chomo Lhari, close by and directly NW of us. From here the upper section of the mountain appeared gentle and positively inviting, with access posing no serious problem.

In trying to establish the names of mountains, we met with difficulties all too familiar in other ranges off the beaten track. Maps disagree with topography, old maps are not in accord with newer ones, names apply more generally to groups than to individual summits, and frontier ranges frequently carry different names from opposite sides. The Survey of India (SI) had long ago fixed by triangulation the positions of the larger mountains near the Tibet-Bhutan frontier NE of Chomo Lhari. The names Kungpu 22,250ft and Ta-ka-pu (no height given) appear on 1:50,000 to 1 mile maps from 1906 onwards, and as Kungphu and Takaphu are retained as recently as 1972, I hesitated before adding further names which might confuse rather than clarify.



73 From track SW of Ngile La

As we climbed the Ngile La towards Lingshi Dzong, a most shapely and striking spire of granite on a thick marble plinth began to dominate the view. It sends a spur N to the frontier range, its summit lying about 1km inside Bhutan at a height of 6789m. The yak herders S of the pass give it the local name Jichu Dak Keth 'sparrow rock sound', but the correct Dzongkha (Bhutanese) name appears to be Tsheringme Gang 'snows of the goddess of long life'; this name is occasionally applied by locals to its slightly lower neighbour to the NE which, however, carries the Dzongkha name Chumi Gang or Chum Gang, 'mountain of no water'. These two peaks are Kungphu and Takaphu of the latest SI maps. (Gansser and Olschak give the names Tshering Kang and Chum Kang to these 2 summits, whilst G. N. Mehra, who includes several fine pictures of both, names them Chumkhang and Tserimkhang respectively, in effect reversing the names; *khang* in Dzongkha means house.)

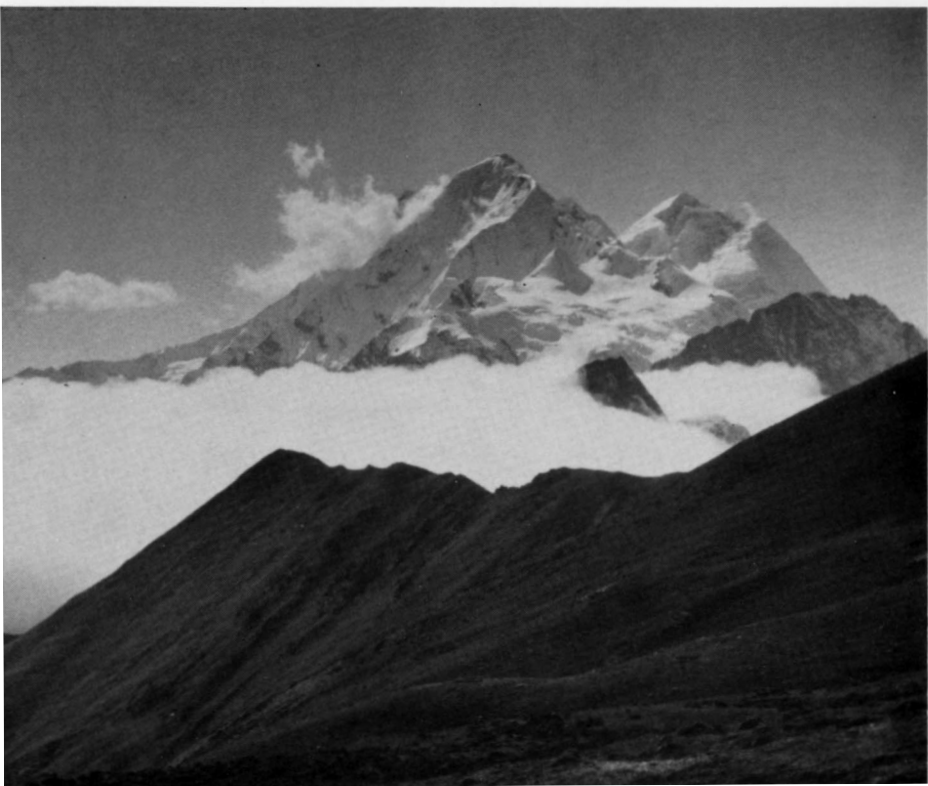


74 Peak 6526m from Goyok—Peak 6789m visible over SE spur

Peak 6526m, Chum Gang, rises almost due west of Lingshi Dzong, and about 8km NE of its higher neighbour, Tsheringme Gang; these two impressive unclimbed mountains were to display their more fearsome aspect from the NE for several days to come. A bottle of the King's Scotch was shared with the officers of this small Lingshi outpost while Lt Rinzing, deputy camp commander, kindly helped to check the mountain names penned in both Dzongkha and romanized script by the boys. On purely geological grounds, Survey of India's Takaphu seemed acceptable in the spelling 'Dakkarphug' from the extent of rock, *dak*, which was marble-white, *kar*, at the foot, *phug*. But it is very hard to feel certain and I have committed names to map and paper with considerable hesitation—perhaps encouraged by the discovery that one of the authorities quoted above has his fine colour photograph of Chomo Lhari printed in reverse.

Voracious mastiffs roamed our camp throughout the night, and we were glad to set off N with new guides, crossing the Jaje Chu, a curious defile showing evidence of flooding probably due to fairly recent bursting of a glacial dam. The dzong was unoccupied at this season, so we continued to Jamethang where we managed to buy a good quantity of yak cheese before rounding a gentle spur to the prosperous little village of Goyok. Here the rocks underfoot were mostly mesozoic sedimentaries in striking contrast to the igneous and metamorphic Tsheringme Gang whose N face was still visible over the SE ridge of Chum Gang. Round the next spur was Chebesa. From this cluster of houses a track leads in a few km to the Lingshi or Phyen La, a pass of over 5000m, beyond which stretches the Tibetan plateau. Our own route took us up a relentless grassy slope in the full heat of the afternoon sun

75 SW from Yari La; Peaks 6789m, 6526m and Chomo Lhari 7326m

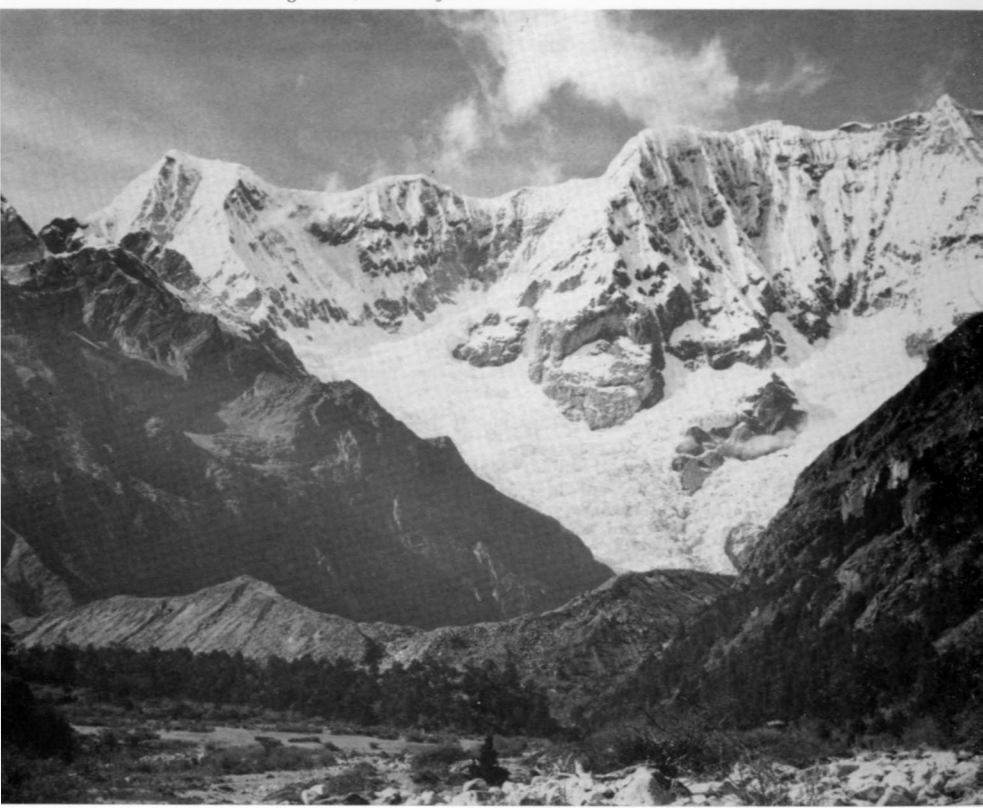


followed by a descent through uninhabited wooded country to a riverside camp-site known as Shasipasa. The river appears to be a distant headwater of the Same Chu which joins the Mo Chu near Gaza Dzong.

For 2 further days we were to pass no habitation, and as we were now in country famous for its herds of takin we kept tripod and telephoto constantly at the ready. Sadly, takin were nowhere to be seen, but we did manage to film at quite close range large numbers of nayaur or blue sheep, and to remain close to the herd for several hours. From Shasipasa we climbed for 3 hours to the Yari La, a pass of about 4740m, from which magnetic bearings were taken back to Tsheringme Gang, Chum Gang and Chomo Lhari and ahead to the peaks of extreme NW Bhutan. Then a short descent took us to a broad river at a camp-site known as Tsaye Gyathang, the last flat ground before the haul over the Shinki (or Shinje) La. From this pass, obligingly, Tsheringme Gang and Chum Gang again showed themselves, just clear of a nearer ridge, and a panorama with bearings to the same N peaks was once more possible.

Our descent brought us close beneath a very striking range of mountains, the highest being marked by a spot height on the 1930 ¼ in and on the 1972 Bhutan 1:250,000 map as reaching 6678m. From the people of Laya, only 2 hours' journey away, the boys took the name Gangchentak 'the proof of a great glaciated mountain', and indeed it must be amongst the highest of all these frontier peaks between the Chomo Lhari and the Kula Kangri groups. Whatever the name of the range, the ice-field beneath it and the glaciers across which we picked our way, with their 'textbook' moraine-dammed lakes, seem to have a fair claim to be the true

76 Far NW Bhutan: Gangchentak, a source of the Mo Chu



source of the Mother River, the Mo Chu, which flows down the Punakha valley and beyond, to become the mighty Sankosh—great river of central Bhutan.

The villages of the Laya region were for me the most attractive of our journey, finely situated on S-facing slopes, with open views of ranges neither too distant nor oppressively close. Girls here keep their hair long, unusual in Bhutan, and wear conical straw hats unique to the region. There being no tourists, it is evident that any visitors come by royal approval, so the *Gup* (headman) quickly put a field at our disposal and organized a team of stone shifters and dung sweepers.

For the remainder of our journey we followed the course of the Mo Chu S in a deep, sultry gorge cut through vertical beds of Pre-Cambrian rock. Marble was again much in evidence, glistening through the forest of spruce and larch. This track between Laya and Gaza Dzong is only passable in summer, the yak being the appropriate beast of burden, so Gomchen was somewhat reluctant to risk his mules so late in the year with fresh avalanche débris lying across the route. Meeting an old friend on the track he became inordinately quarrelsome, and we camped at a spot without food for the animals, so that the unfortunate Sangay Wangchuck had to spend 2 hours in pitch darkness in the jungle cutting grass by hand under orders of his inebriated senior colleague. By morning, sobered up and filled with remorse and apology, Gomchen headed us for Kohina where we slept the night in the one stone hut used in 1949 by Ludlow. Some 20km of contouring 1000m above the river brought us next day to Gaza Dzong, where we learned from the Dzongda Ramjan that it was only another 2–3 days' walk to the road-end at Punakha.

Pilgrims, soldiers and lamas luxuriating in the sulphurous hot springs were soon joined by schoolboys, muleteers and a geographer. This seemed a fitting end to 2 unforgettably enjoyable years spent working among some of the toughest, gentlest and certainly happiest people I have ever known.

References

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Note The map is based on pre-war Survey of India (SI) sheets, the latest SI information on mountain heights, and altimetric readings for heights of passes; other detail has been plotted from 'Landsat I' satellite imagery, and it has been drawn by E. J. Hatch.