

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## People and Places

# Central Bhutan — where Nature Mingles with Tradition

The ancestral seat of the royal family of Bhutan, Tongsa has played an important and effective role in the evolution of the political history of Bhutan. In early 17th century, when the unification of the divergent factions of the country had been brought about by Shabdrung ("at whose

feet one submits") Ngawang Namgyal, parallel lines of religious and political hierarchy were established. Under this system, Penlops ("Governors") were appointed for the administration of the different districts. The Penlops of Tongsa played a prominent role in this set-up,

### Tuhfa Zaman Ali Writes from Thimpu

and ultimately it was the Tongsa Penlop, Sir Ugyen Wangchuck, who was made the first hereditary monarch of Bhutan in 1907. The Crown Prince of Bhutan is still

conferred the title of Tongsa Penlop when he comes of age. Thus, Tongsa has witnessed great power-play and retains importance to this day. The majestic Tongsa dzong

("fortress") came into view when we were still quite a long way from the town. The dzong, a huge white and red structure, as all dzongs are, stands against the mountain on the other side of the valley, at about 7,500 feet, with a commanding view of the whole valley and beyond. About 400

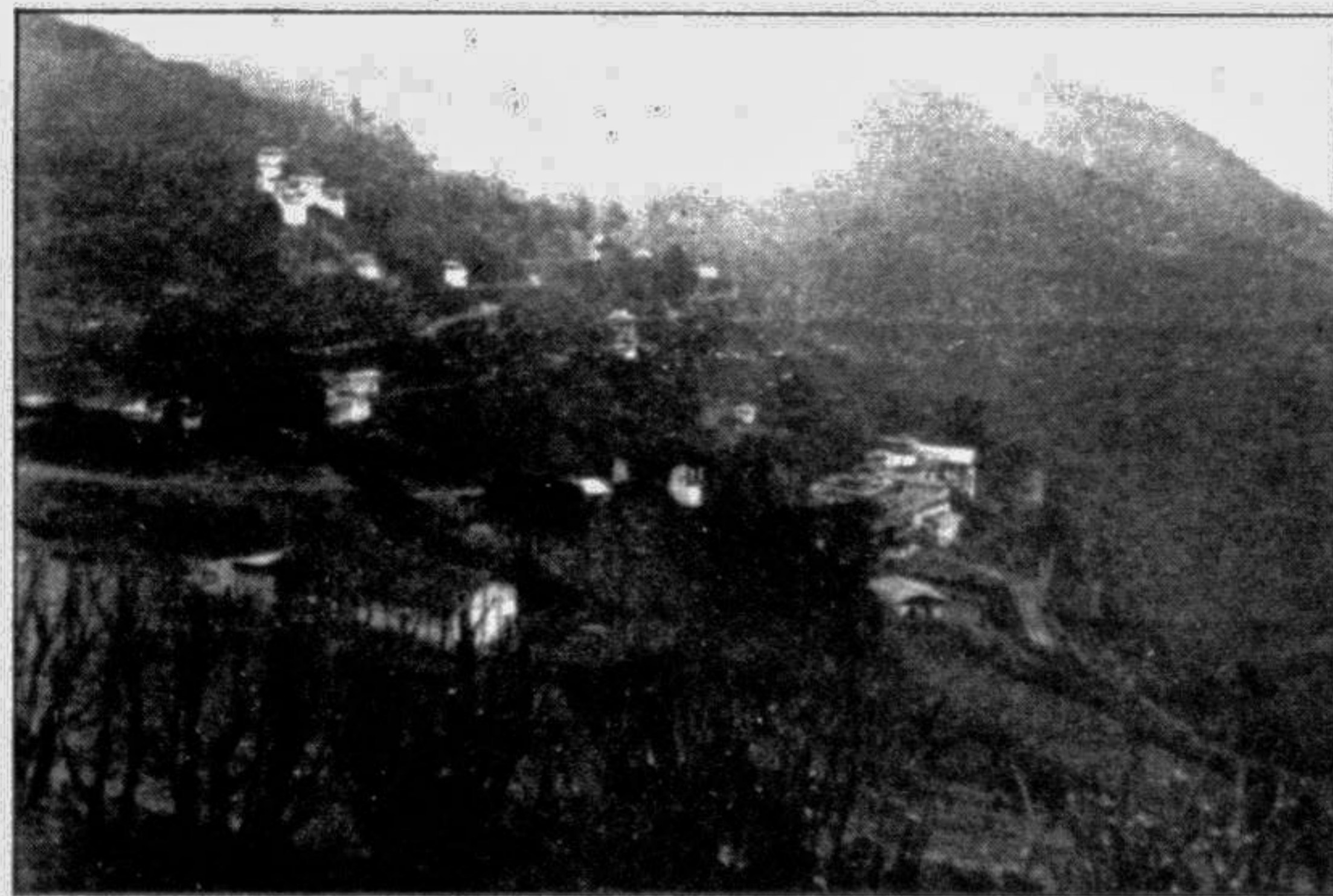
feet above the dzong stands the Ta Dzong or "watch-tower". These old Bhutanese dzongs, usually built on mountain-spurs, are a unique feature of the country's landscape. Though gigantic, these architectural monuments, an adaptation of the Tibetan fortresses, have symmetry,

temple of Yeshe Gampo (Mahakala) — the Protective deity of Bhutan, the Chenreyzig (Avalokiteshvara) built in the 19th century, and the Lhakhang dedicated to Dorje Jigje (Yamantaka). The latter, with Yamantaka in anger form, has a wall-painting of the second King of Bhutan receiving offerings from ambassadors. Near the central tower of the dzong, there is a Jampa (Maitreya) temple constructed by a Tibetan King in late 18th century, with a 20-feet high statue of the Future Buddha.

Buddhism was introduced into Bhutan in mid-8th century by Guru Padmasambhava, also called Guru Rimpoche ("Precious Master"). Prior to that, the country had an indigenous religion, pre-historic and highly superstitious, with tantric and pagan exercises, that Bonism had come in contact with, and to which the Buddhism brought in by Padmasambhava quickly adapted. The tantric form of Mahayana Buddhism practiced in Bhutan is uniquely its own. That why we find the ancestral beliefs and religious practices of the people giving Buddhism a different and colourful flavour in Bhutan. All Bhutanese sculptures, frescoes and murals are religious and, though highly influenced by Tibetan and Indian styles, depict the harmonious intermingling of Bhutan's indigenous religious beliefs and Buddhism.

Our trip to the Tongsa dzong over, we went to the house where Bhutan's third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck was born. A neat two-storied house, it has four-rooms with the kitchen and servant's quarters in separate buildings. We were told that there are plans of converting it into a museum.

Low clouds were draped over the Tongsa Valley as we left for Bumthang on Sunday morning. Hair-pin bends took us up towards the Yutong La Pass through dense coniferous forests covered with snow. Yutong La, at 11,035 feet, is at once most formidable and extremely enchanting. A little before the Pass we were met by the Dzongdag of Bumthang, Mr Pem L Dorji who had come to escort us through to Bumthang. The name Bumthang comes from the word "bumpa" — the oblong-shaped jug used for consecrated water. Bumthang is very sacred to the Bhutanese as Padmasambhava had brought Buddhism into this area first, and as numerous important Lhakhangs and Gompas (monasteries) are scattered over the Bumthang area. So, Bumthang is appropriately,



Tongsa in the early morning. The dzong is visible on the right, and the Ta dzong is at top left.



A view of the Chokhor Valley from Jakar dzong.

"DON'T leave the country before visiting its interiors" is a refrain one hears so often in Bhutan. A beautiful country, Bhutan seems to have been lovingly created by God. The majestic Himalayas, the unspoiled beauty of Bhutan's forests, its rivers and streams, the fertile valleys that unfold before one's eyes as the car takes that turn on the last hillock, makes one marvel at the artistic skill of the Creator, and I was glad that I had heeded the advice of friends and decided to accompany my husband on this trip to Central Bhutan.

It was a cloudy morning in Thimpu when we left on our trip to Tongsa and Bumthang. The view is breath-taking as the road to Tongsa passes through the mist at Dochu La Pass at an altitude of 10,000 feet, through the lush green valley of Wangdi Phodrang (4,430 feet) and up again through the snow-capped mountains of Pele La Pass at 10,825 feet. The road meanders down to a plateau where yaks come down in the winter to graze, and passes by the Chendebji Chorten, one of the few chortens ("Stupas") of Nepalese design that are found in Bhutan. It was built in early 18th century. Next to it stands a Bhutanese style chorten, commissioned by Ashi Kesang Wangchuck, the Queen Mother of Bhutan. The construction of chortens, or other religious edifices, is considered an act of piety and devotion, a means of attaining nirvana. The whole country is dotted with chortens of various shapes and sizes, and there's one in our compound as well.

The landscape, as the road heads towards Tongsa through the Mangde River Valley, is spectacular. Tongsa, which means "the new village", was built around the 16th century.

WITH the Soviet Union in a state of near-total disintegration, who has the time for shedding any tears for Pravda which is in the process of folding up, following a "suspension for an indefinite period" announced last week-end?

Yet, the death of a newspaper, often regarded as the one of the ten most important dailies of the world, is a sad event, regardless of its politics, location or even corporate structure.

Founded in 1912 by Lenin, Pravda served as the official mouthpiece of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, espousing Kremlin's position in the superpower rivalry, with a mixture of arrogance and obstinacy. However, while serving the interests of successive Soviet regimes, it took up causes of developing countries which often needed international support for their very survival, like the liberation of Bangladesh, the support for the reconstruction of China in its early years of socialist revolution, assistance to nationalist struggles in Africa and aid to Nicaragua and Cuba during their battles for survival, among others.

As far as Bangladesh is concerned, the support of Pravda during 1971 and later remains a part of our national history.

The circumstances surrounding the suspension of Pravda, leading to its death, are complex. But they do not give much credit to Boris Yeltsin, not my favourite Russian leader at this moment.

After many ups and downs in recent years, marked by its decline in circulation and financial difficulties, Pravda was obliged to suspend its publication, along with five other newspapers, after the failed hardline coup last August. But a

## Death of a Newspaper; A Chinese Daily for Peasants; and Why Did Bangladesh Miss Out on a Grant from UNESCO?

So, far from freeing the Russian media from total government control, Moscow seems to be setting up its own Trust newspapers, perhaps borrowing a plan from Dhaka. If the Yeltsin regime is all that keen on picking up some ideas from Bangladesh, we can send some of our experts from the Gramex Bank and BRAC to Moscow, rather than officials from our Ministry of Information.

Incidentally, 'Pravda' in English means 'Truth'. So, all one can say, 'Pravda is dead; long live the truth.'

WITH some experience gained from working for an international organisation for nearly a decade, I feel reluctant to look at the media in socialist countries — and, for that matter, in the so-called democracies — in black and white terms. In judging these two types of media, often in simplistic terms, we often overlook the grey area that lies between the government supervision over the press in such socialist countries as China and Vietnam and the free-for-all enterprise that sustains the media in newly-emerging democracies in the Third World. Both types of media have raised questions which are yet to be satisfactorily

lating. nicated Adviser (RCA) for Asia, based in Kuala Lumpur, mentions the *Peasants Daily*, published from the suburb of Beijing, as one of the beneficiaries of the IPDC's assistance. For me, it is a most welcome news. After all, the *Peasants Daily* is one of my favourite publications of Asia.

A brainchild of China's senior leader Deng Xiaoping who himself wrote its frontpage logo in his own hand, just as the late Mao Zedong had written the one for the *People's Daily* in his inimitable calligraphy, the *Peasants Daily* was

lated to the problems and issues facing the peasants and farmers of China, from the use of seeds and fertilisers to the protection of environment and the marketing of agricultural produce. Each issue carried a correspondence column, full of letters from readers discussing all kinds of personal and community matters. The headlines were large and attractive, while photographs brightened up the pages. And, mind you, it is a daily eight-page broadsheet publication, not a weekly tabloid.

How we wish, among all the

has today for raising its monthly subscription from hard-pressed newspapers. It is just as simple as that.

It was nice to know from a despatch of one of our contributors in London, Sagar Chowdhury, published in the Star last week, that both the ruling Conservative Party and the opposition Labour Party have been wooing Asian voters for the forthcoming April British election.

Some time ago, before the announcement of the date of the polls, the Labour leader, Neil Kinnock was shown in a newspaper photograph sitting shoeless at the home of an Indian-born voter.

Now that the election is just round the corner, this kind of photograph gets a frontpage display, all in colour, and in none other than *The Times*. So, here's a picture of the Minister of Education, Kenneth Baker, in a more or less the same pose as that of Mr Kinnock, in what looks like distinctly a Sikh home, reproduced here with due courtesy to the British daily.

My guess is, Mr Baker told his hosts how much he admired the teachings of Guru Nanak, enquired if Gurmukhi could be written in Roman script, asked the lady in the house if Sikhs prepared their curry in the same way as Hindus and Muslims and tactfully avoided all references to the Khalistan issue.

It is worth finding out why no media related organisation in Bangladesh, especially BSS, received any grant, even a modest one, from IPDC this year — or perhaps even last year or in year before last. Was there any project proposal submitted within the deadline? Were all formalities completed? Who was then responsible for the case of Bangladesh going by default? The Ministry of Information, the UNESCO National Commission in Bangladesh, the BSS management or my UNESCO friend in Kuala Lumpur, Martin Hadlow? Finally, was there a Bangladeshi official, either from our embassy in Paris or from the Ministry of Information, attending the IPDC Council meeting in the French capital?

Perhaps there are too many questions which, I am afraid, will get no answers. Maybe it is not all that easy to locate the relevant file, if there is one.

One thing is certain. The BSS could indeed do a lot with a grant of, say, \$50,000 for a training project, with an experienced consultant conducting an in-house six-month programme for the service. Then, by putting out better-written and better-edited file for its clients, BSS would have much stronger reason than it

## MY WORLD

S.M. Ali

launched in the early eighties. Printed from an old Chinese-made plant, the paper had its editorial and business offices housed in rows of single-story buildings, all looking austere and just functionally furnished with minimum chairs tables. Out of this set-up, the editors produced a unique daily that immediately picked up several million subscribers, too big a

Bengali-language dailies coming out in Bangladesh, at least one dealt with problems of the rural community, if not exclusively of peasants and farmers, and with the grassroots development as a whole.

JUDGING by information available from Hadlow, another developing country in Asia which figures prominently among beneficiaries of IPDC assistance is Laos, a former Indo-Chinese state with a population of four million. With its slow pace of life and its gentle people who seem to be in no hurry to build socialism, this Buddhist country has every reason to be a favourite of many who have visited it even just once. It is certainly mine.

With every visit I paid to Vientiane in the mid-eighties, I would see that something new was either being done or planned for the country's media sector, for which a modest grant from UNESCO would be gently requested. Then, in the same vein, someone would politely enquire about the formalities involved in obtaining the assistance.

Once when I told a French-educated Laotian friend that there was no need to be so humble in seeking assistance from an international organisation of which Laos was an important member as any other country, the response was modest and simply,

The logo of Pravda — that the Russians may no longer see again.

week later, it resumed publication as an independent non-partisan daily owned by its 120 reporters and editors, as perhaps the first co-operative daily launched in that region.

The latest crisis for Pravda has been brought about allegedly by the decision of the Yeltsin regime of subsidising newspapers which support the government. One of them is *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* which one of the *Pravda* editors describes as "an official government paper [which] sings the government

rily dealt with. These thoughts are prompted in my mind not so much by the latest news about Pravda as by a letter from a friend in UNESCO with some details of financial grants just made by his organisation's funding window, the International Programme for Development of Communication (IPDC). The friend, Martin Hadlow, an able and experienced UNESCO Regional Commu-

circulation for the paper's printing plant to cope with. Not surprisingly, there came the request from China for at least partial financial assistance from UNESCO for a new press.

During my two visits to the Daily within the space of three years, as the predecessor of Hadlow, I spent a couple of hours each time, with the help of a translator, going over the editorial contents of the publication. All the materials re-

elegance and harmony in form and design.

It was dusk when we entered the town and found our way to the Guest House. The Dzongdag or District Administrator, the highest ranking civil servant of the district, Dasho Phub Dorji, a kind and affable man, was there to receive us and welcomed us into the large lounge, where a huge fire was burning.

A mist hung over the Valley on Saturday morning when Dasho (a non-hereditary title conferred by the King) Phub Dorji took us to the dzong. The Tongsa dzong, built by the Shabdrung in 1648, and subsequently extended by its powerful Penlops, is massive, built on different levels of the mountain. Located at an extremely strategic position, it

had two doors, now permanently closed, connecting the only eastern and western trail right through the middle of the courtyard. This added to the importance of the Penlops, giving them control of the surrounding areas. The dzong has a unique architecture, with an irregular structure and roofs at different levels. Like most dzongs at the present time, the Tongsa dzong is the seat of the district administration and also houses the monastic community.

There are 23 Lhakhangs ("Temples") inside the dzong. Usually, a Lhakhang is the central building in a monastery or a dzong, but it may also be built by itself at any auspicious place. Exquisitely carved statues of deities, and superb frescoes and murals representing Buddhist philosophy and mythology adorn these temples. The oldest Lhakhang in Tongsa dzong is the "Temple of Chortens" — believed to have been made by the Shabdrung himself. It has eight chortens — made of brass with gold-plating. Upstairs is the audience hall of the Tongsa Penlop — still retained as it was in the time of the first King.

Among the other temples inside the dzong are the



Tory leader Kenneth Baker at a Sikh temple in Edinburgh — wooing Asian voters.

It is all my guess. But I could be right.

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