

# TAWANG

The Land of Mon

Neeru Nanda

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**FOR  
GURUDEV**

*Only a few moments now  
Before silence sets in.  
My life overflowing the edge  
I smash before you  
Like an earthen vessel.*

## Acknowledgements

But for earnest and industrious Charu Dutt Mehta who deciphered my handwriting and typed out the manuscript, this book would never have seen the light of day. Shri R.C. Dua has also been a pillar of strength in this task.

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## Prelude

You ask me why I dwell in the green mountains;  
I smile and make no reply for my heart is free of care.  
As the peach blossom flows downstream  
And is gone into the unknown,  
I have a world apart that is not among men.

—Li Po

On Sunday mornings, when I am alone, I sit chin on knees, on the warm wooden planks of my little verandah and watch Tawang. The silence is honeyed and golden in the November sun. A few calendulas and marigolds make splashes of orange and yellow in the dried garden.

The first range of mountains in front of me is smooth, moulded and many-coloured. On the Tawang plateau the colours are yellow and green—yellow of the sun and yellow-green of dying grass. Further behind to the north, the second line of mountains is sharp and craggy, black and bottled-green peaks covered by cotton clouds streaked with sunlight. The pointed peaks of the range from Bumpala to Geishila stand in a sweeping line—angels' wings transfixed in dance. It is the golden season, all is turning to gold before the snow sets in and the country side starts gleaming again in its winter colours.

Sela Pass is hidden to the south by a poplar and silver fir, both young trees, embracing each other and blocking the view. There is a breeze in the willows. The apple trees have shed their leaves. The red-beaked winter crows have already arrived and are cawing away.

Doka (my ayah) comes and brings me a cushion to sit on, a

cushion for my back. I sip my mug of tea, warming my hands around it.

When the sun becomes difficult to bear I shift inside into the glassed verandah which is suddenly cold, full of bumble bees whose humming distracts me. Doka comes to kill them with the *Illustrated Weekly* before she brings me lunch, as always, on a tray in my room while Drema (my dog) squeals indignantly from the kitchen where she is confined. Sometimes Doka releases her when she comes bounding in, puffing and panting, her pink tongue hanging out, leaping like mad and squealing away to glory. This is her usual way of welcoming meal times which she must share with me, standing with two paws on my knee or on the arm of the chair and giving me a gentle push with them now and again when she feels that I have forgotten her.

Nowadays, the evenings are cold but, when it was not so cold, I could while away in walking, what is, for me, the most depressing hour of the day—half-light when the power house has not yet started the generator and the evening shadows are just spreading into darkness. I have this cloistered walk down a cemented path which is bounded by the eastern wall of my house on one side and a line of apple trees on the other. I often pace up and down this path in the fading light and watch a few stars make their appearance while the sun sets in a flame of orange and red beyond Chongchongma. There is a nip in the air, the trees are very still, the mountains silent and dark purple except (in winters) when a blazing fire lights up some distant grazing ground.

Walking and watching the Bhutan range never fails to cure my black moods and I count each peak and grazing ground where we have sat and camped—Ngorgomche, which can't be seen in twilight, neither Nyngsangla, but Pensar Ganya—yes—and Gudpi.

Who could ever forget Gudpi—over whom I shed so many tears—a few of tiredness after the gruelling climb and so many of defiance and despair? After Gudpi—Chongchongma (the trident god) and Jama Punsum (the three sisters). I have left a bit of myself everywhere in those rough tracks and rocks of the southern range.

Tawang has taken great chunks out of me. Now that the end is near I am somewhat at a loss, like a ship off keel, not so certain of its destination.

This morning I went through my old notes and snippets on

Tawang, beginning with that article I was so proud of on Monpa poetry. Re-reading it now, I could only wince at the laboured pretentiousness of style, but as I started reading my other notes my heart lifted, for I found these rang true, since they were written, rather scrawled, by lamplight or firelight mostly during tours and were not written with any audience in mind.

I have decided now, thinking and mulling over it, that if I am to present a book at all it will have to be a mere collection of these notes. Let these broken and snatched memories—these perhaps totally unconnected anecdotes—form whatever colour, whatever tapestry to which they can lend themselves.

If I wanted to be “learned” about it, I could always call it the “case-study approach” because without it research efforts are mere skeletons, giving as little idea of the people they describe as the picture of a skeleton gives of human beings. But then the Monpas are interesting enough in themselves not to require any portentous justification, so let me continue with my narrative and if there is anything of anthropological interest it will have to be gleaned from the chaff of these jumbled memories. I think more and more, that eventually this book will turn out to be like the Duchess’s pig-baby of whom Alice said, “It would have made a very ugly human being, but as animals go, it made a rather handsome pig.”



# 1 Tawang—A Rough Sketch Map

Its land is not like our land,  
Its sky is not like our sky.  
It stands outside the circle of the earth,  
And the bowels of the enveloping sphere.  
It has been separated from the world,  
Like the letter *aliph*.

—Quoted by Verrier Elwin in  
*Art of the North East Frontier of India*

The Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh lies between Tibet and Assam. Its western most district is Kameng with its head quarters at Bomdila. The northern most tip of Kameng district comprises Tawang area which is inhabited by the Monpa tribe and is also known as Monyul or the land of Mon (the lower land), since it lies wedged between the towering Himalayan ranges of Tibet and Bhutan. Tawang figured prominently in the Indo-China conflict of 1962 and was temporarily occupied by the Chinese army. It is known for the Tawang monastery which is the oldest existing Buddhist monastery in Asia having been constructed around the middle of the seventeenth century.

In time, the Tawang monastery became a stronghold of *Gelukpa* Buddhism (the Yellow Sect) and its sway extended over the entire Kameng district upto the foothills of Assam. The *lamas* (monks) of the Tawang gompa used to collect customary religious taxes not only from the people of Tawang, but also from Bomdila upto certain portions of the plains of Assam in the Balipara Frontier Tract.

In the early nineteenth century the British Government took over the administration of Assam and the North Eastern Frontier

Tract. For the latter they evolved a loose and sporadic administration which hardly interfered with the local institutions. The first British officer to visit Tawang was Captain Bailey who submitted his report on "Explorations on the North-East Frontier 1913," extracts from which are quoted below:

Monyul consists of the valley of the Tawang chu, down to the Bhutan Frontier, the Nyamjang valley and the Dirang valley as well as some valleys south of this down to the plains. The Monpas are distinct in many ways from the Tibetans. Tibetans as a rule do not live below 10,000 feet and prefer high altitudes whereas the Monpas live at altitudes between 4,000 and 10,000 feet. Their language is distinct from Tibetan though they have many Tibetan words: they say that their language is nearer to the Bhutanese of Eastern Bhutan than to Tibetan. We usually found one or two people in the Monpa villages who could speak Tibetan. At Trimo (Khrimu) the people all speak Tibetan well. The people had cushions for us to sit on—they also grow peach trees on which we found excellent fruit. Both in the nature of the country they inhabit, customs, dress and method of building houses the Monpas are very distinct from the Tibetans and resemble more the inhabitants of Bhutan and Sikkim. Their country is low-lying and well-wooded and their villages large and prosperous.

In Captain Bailey's report there is a slight inaccuracy. Dirang is described as a part of Monyul whereas actually it lies south of Sela. The Tawang gumpa had extensive taxation rights south of Sela but Monyul itself refers to the present area of Tawang which lies wedged between Bhutan and Tibet, connected with the rest of the country by the Sela Pass which marks the entry point into the administrative jurisdiction of the Additional Deputy Commissioner, Tawang.

Tawang, Bhutan, Sikkim, Mechuka (in Siang district of Arunachal) were probably populated more or less together when a great wave of migration took place from somewhere in central Tibet pushing the people southwards, in search perhaps of the promised land of milk and honey. Tawang, at least, fulfilled that promise—as Verrier Elwin said, "If there is a hidden paradise on earth, this is it, this is it, this is it!"



While the area remained loosely administered by the British government, after independence the Indian Frontier Administrative Service was formed with the recruitment of officers from the armed forces. These officers were the pioneer vanguard who marched into the remotest border areas and set up permanent administrative outposts. The aim of government became the economic and political betterment of the people with the avowed objective of not disturbing their cultural heritage or socio-political institutions.

Soon after independence Major Bob Khating, a Naga officer of the Indian Frontier Service and the Deputy Commissioner of Bomdila, marched into Tawang. He was greeted warmly by representatives of the Tawang monastery, the three *tsorgens* (heads) of *Choksum* (the three chos) and other noted leaders who welcomed him with open arms when he declared the intention of the Indian government to establish a permanent office and headquarters in the area. After watching the working of the office and men for about a month the leaders came to him quietly in a deputation with folded hands and grave faces.

“Well sahib,” they said, “we have been watching your work and we like it but there is something that makes us very suspicious.”

“What is it?” a startled Major Khating asked, wondering what had gone amiss.

“Sahib,” they said melancholically, “you do not take anything from us by way of tax, neither do you seem to be proposing to take any. This is causing grave concern to all of us.”

The sahib relaxed visibly. “Is that all?” he said cheerfully and drawing himself to his full height, delivered a long lecture on how there was only one country and one government that was not exploitative. The Indian government considered itself specially bound to develop the brothers and sisters of border areas, who had been neglected so far by the Britishers.

The village elders heard him out politely and respectfully and after he had delivered his sermon they folded their hands, again bowed before him and said, “Well sahib, all this is very good. But the villager is illiterate, foolish and ignorant. He will not understand a government that abstains from taxation—so even if it is a very petty amount, you must take a tax.”

It was thus, the story goes, that the system of house-tax was

instituted whereby each household paid Rs 5 annually to the government and this is the only tax collected in Tawang till today.

Major Khating was true to the frontier tradition of not interfering as far as possible with the local institutions. But he did appoint a *gaon budha* (village headman) in each village in addition to the traditional pattern where there was a *gaon budha* only for each *cho* (group of three to ten villages). The administrative divisions of Tawang were also formed in such a way so as to coincide, as far as possible, with the traditional political divisions. The traditional *cho* structure was broadly as follows:

- (1) Thingbu Mago Lugsum
- (2) Rho-Jangda
- (3) Choksum
- (4) Dakpanang Chogyet and
- (5) Pangchen Dingdruk

The first two chos, though traditionally distinct, were territorially contiguous. Therefore, they were grouped together into the administrative circle of Thingbu which is in the extreme north-eastern corner of the sub-division, four days march from Tawang. The people of Thingbu Mago wear their hair in pig-tails; their faces are mostly tanned and deeply lined. Their clothes are white and black—not the traditional Monpa red. Their women wear fantastic hats made of black yak's hair with innumerable fingers sticking out and turning upward to form an unusual brim. Their ear-rings are also curious—a string of topaz and amber beads hanging down, anything between one and a half to three feet in length. The three villages of Thingbu, Mago and Luguthang are located above 11,000 feet and are snow bound and deserted in winter. In fact they always wear a deserted look because the inhabitants are *chowriwallahs* (yak and sheep graziers) who graze their herds near the border in summer and take them down to warmer pastures in winter. Cultivation is almost a taboo in this area—perhaps the traditional way of preserving available land for grazing.

The main river of the sub-division emerges from Mago as the Mago chu. It takes an east-west course before Rho-Jangda from where it flows as the Tawang chu, along the northern and southern banks of Choksum. The three chos are the Lhoucho, Serucho and Shyarcho which form the heart of the

Monpa area. The portion of Choksum which falls on the northern bank of the Tawang chu along the main Bomdila-Tawang road contains the most developed area of the sub-division. Many travellers accounts carry vivid descriptions of this broad, beautiful and triangular plateau with its rich fields and thickly wooded forests.

Traditionally, each cho was a distinctive self-governing unit headed by a tsorgen now known as gaon budha. The cho was further sub-divided into *gachungs* which comprised a single big village or a group of small villages or hamlets. Thus Shyarcho, for example, was divided into eleven gachungs which also had a nuclear body for self-government. In the olden days the three tsorgens were important and powerful, since each controlled a sizeable population of villages for purposes of judicial administration, settlement of land disputes and other socio-political interaction. However, they were not either dynastic or feudal lords and the spirit and tradition of self-government was very real in Choksum.

After Major Khating started the practice of appointing gaon budhas in each village the centre of power devolved from the cho to the individual village but the traditional practice of nominating a cho tsorgen (gaon budha) continues even today. It is indeed significant that in the first democratic elections held in 1977 for the Arunachal legislative assembly, the successful candidates were the tsorgens of Shyarcho and Serucho. The competition was stiff and one cannot escape the conclusion that the traditional leadership pattern of the cho continues to be a strong force in deciding modern trends. In the Choksum area, the three chos also continue to retain a certain degree of importance because at least some definite territories belong to the cho and not to any particular village. For instance, the high altitude forest area above Tawang headquarters towards Pangenktso and Bumla belongs to Shyarcho, while the forests to the west of the Bramdongchung *ani gompa* upto Gamrala belong to Serucho. The grazing grounds used by the villagers of Shyarcho are still owned by the cho. The worship of certain mountain-gods and the maintenance of gompas is also common to certain chos, over and above the village gods and gompas.

The Choksum affiliations were retained, as far as possible, by grouping these into a single administrative circle under Tawang

headquarters, but the villages on the southern bank of the Tawang chu had to be separated later into the administrative circle of Mukto with its own circle officer and other departmental units.

The next major political division is Dakpanang Chogyet which lies westward, towards the borders of western Bhutan along the valleys of the Nyamjang chu and the Tawang chu. Dakpanang is distinct in area, climate and the system of government from Choksum. It traditionally consisted of eight chos—each comprising of a group of villages. The villages of Dakpanang are located at lower altitudes; it is a warmer region with more paddy areas than Choksum, nestled along the banks of the Tawang chu valley which broadens out before taking a turn south-westwards into Bhutan where it is known as the Gamri chu. Before it turns into Bhutan the Tawang chu is joined by the Nyamjang chu which flows in a north-south direction. This river which originates from Tibet is also marked by extensive paddy cultivation along its banks.

While Choksum had a fairly strong tradition of village self-government, Dakpanang had traditionally been ruled by the Kharteng *Sengu*, a feudal landlord who commanded a lot of patronage. Taxes, free labour and general exploitation of the poorer people by the Sengu ended only with the opening of an administrative outpost near Lumla village, when the Dakpanang area came to be termed as the administrative circle of Lumla.

The last division is that of Pangchen Dingdruk or the six *dings* (villages) of Pangchen which adjoin Tibet. These villages of Lumpo, Soksen, Muchut, Kharmen and Kalyaikteng grouped together, along with three adjoining villages of Dakpanang, form the administrative border outpost of Zimithang.

The Pangchen villages are lined on either side of the Nyamjang chu as it flows through the Tibetan plateau into India. The border between the two is marked by Kinzemane which figured prominently during the Indo-China War of 1962.

The famous Thagla ridge can be seen all along the march towards Zimithang—jutting out, massive and looming, like a constant, brooding ill-omen. The dress, customs and accents of the Pangchen people are again different from the Monpas of Choksum and Dakpanang. Their caps are made of yak's hair but without the five protruding fingers like other Monpas. Instead,

twine of bamboo or cane is twisted around the brim and stuck with peacock feathers which has a particularly charming effect on girls. The people are primarily yak graziers, but there is no taboo on cultivation, which is extensive. The Soksenpas and Lumpopas, however, are primarily graziers who own beautiful summer pastures situated all along the border range with Tibet. Distance-wise Zimithang is closer to Tibet than Tawang, since the nearest Tibetan village is just two hours march away from Zimithang.

Communication-wise Tawang is better off than comparable border areas elsewhere in Arunachal as it is connected with the rest of the country by 400 km of an all-weather motorable road maintained by the Border Roads Task Force. Till recently, all its other administrative outposts had to be reached on foot and were supplied food stuffs by air-dropping or mule carriage. Thingbu is four days march from the road-head while Lumla is two days and Zimithang another two days march from Lumla. Mukto alone is the closest, about five hours march from the nearest road-head. In 1976 the administration started building the 45 km lateral road to Lumla on village self-help basis. This was inaugurated in April 1979, opening up the backwaters of Dakpanang by facilitating movement of cereals, salt, edible oils and other essential items into the area. It also helped in the export of its major product of potato, which will be followed in a few years by fruits like apples, peaches, plums, pears and possibly almonds.

Visitors to Tawang asked me with astonishing regularity whether the Indian government could count upon the loyalty of the Monpas after the 1962 debacle when Tawang was briefly occupied by Chinese troops. Had the administration and the army been able to recover from the loss of face occasioned by the retreat before the Chinese army?

Being deeply involved with the Monpas myself, it would be difficult for me to answer this question objectively though this book itself may, in some ways, provide an answer.

But whenever this question is asked the picture of a golden afternoon somewhere along the banks of the Nyamjang chu river, on the porter track towards Zimithang, flashes across my mind. We were a small group—Pem Thinley (political interpreter), Doka (my ayah), the gaon budha, porters and I, trudging along in

the usual villager's slow and steady march. The day was hot and the climb rather steep.

Suddenly I heard the sound of bounding footsteps and we had to stand aside to make way for three strapping jawans led by an officer. They were tall and hefty with strength packed in every movement. The officer (young and fair with a burgeoning moustache) was carrying a light machine-gun in addition to his man-pack. In two minutes, they overtook us and disappeared as swiftly as they came. As we stood staring after them, Pem Thinley said whimsically and with a trace of wonder in his voice, "Look at these jawans, sahib! When they came to Tawang in 1962, they had canvas shoes and could barely walk a step without gasping and fainting. Now their officers carry load and even we have to walk fast to keep up with them."

But in the border areas, one can never afford to rest on laurels, real or imaginary. The loyalty of the border people has always to be earned, for governments in border areas anywhere in the world will invariably get the loyalty they deserve—perhaps more, but never less.

## 2 The Village Community—Cooperation and Conflict

We all sit together  
In comfort and ease,  
Drinking chang and tea,  
In the mangma hall.  
Happiness glows in our hearts,  
Like sunrise in the east.

—Monpa folk song

The village unit is the essence of Monpa life. In the traditional structure each village was represented by a *gomi* who can be designated somewhat inadequately, as the 'village accountant', but the government of India took to appointing gaon budhas or village headmen who are chosen periodically, partly by election and partly by nomination. The villagers choose their gaon budha who thereafter gets a formal letter of appointment along with a red coat as the insignia of his office from the Additional Deputy Commissioner, Tawang. There is no hard and fast method of selection nor any settled term of office. Three years is generally the norm, but some gaon budhas have continued in office for as long as twenty years. The most dignified and widely accepted method of change was for the gaon budha to approach the *mangma* (village assembly) with a *khada* (ceremonial white scarf) and a bottle of *chang* (millet beer), place it before them and then stand and deliver a solemn speech the general purport of which would be as follows:

He (the out-going gaon budha) had served the village but poorly all these years. He had not been able to do much for them, even though he had tried his best all along. Now as he had been

doing his share of public service for the past so many years he would beg the mangma to kindly excuse him by appointing another gaon budha and allowing him to retire. As an excuse he would put forward certain domestic pre-occupations—his wife was sick, his house needed to be reconstructed, he was growing old—any one of these excuses amongst others would do.

This apparently harmless little speech was generally preceded by days of active discussion and meetings in the village. By the time the formal resignation was tendered with the ceremonial khada, the mangma had decided upon the stand it would take and the reply that would be given. In case the mangma was happy with the functioning of the gaon budha they would refuse to release him from office, in which case he had to continue whether he liked it or not. The Seru gaon budha, Sange Khandu had been known to ask *maf* (request to be excused) quite a number of times but the Seru mangma refused to release him for over fifteen years.

If the mangma decided to appoint another gaon budha the method of selection assumed importance. The initial basis for appointment was always mutual discussion and unanimous vote. Very rarely was there any competition for the office which carries a certain degree of onerous responsibility without much material reward or consideration. The matter did not end with the unanimous choice because the person chosen was, more often than not unwilling to accept the office. Even if he secretly wanted to accept, it was customary to show some polite reluctance. In the traditional system people are not supposed to grab the chair. Instead good breeding demands that they be pushed into it. There was thus always a little tussle with the village elders grabbing khadas and putting them around the new gaon budha's neck, while he would frantically tear them off and lay them on the ground as a token of his unwillingness. After much pleading, bowing, scraping and exchange of bottles of *roxi* (liquor distilled from rice, colourless like vodka, and similar in taste), the deal would be struck and the new gaon budha persuaded to assume office. I had a taste of it myself when Tashi Ongdi was appointed gaon budha of Gyamdong. We had a bout of wrestling, the two of us, with me determined to put the khada around his neck while he struggled to prevent this. It was a trial of strength in which, of course, I



emerged victorious being supported physically and otherwise by the other villagers.

In case there was more than one contender for the office, *gyan* would be held. This was a simple method of secret ballot. Both the candidates would leave their hats upside down near a scribe who sat while the villagers lined up and came to him one by one to whisper their choice in his ear. He would duly write the name whispered to him on a piece of paper and place it in that particular candidate's hat. In the end each candidate picked up his hat to count the votes.

Occasionally, where a gaon budha had outstayed his welcome, factions would form and there would be a pro-gaon budha group and an anti-gaon budha group. It was upto the Additional Deputy Commissioner of Tawang to see that the village was not split by factionalism and one of the gaon budhas edged out tactfully without much fuss or fanfare. In a certain village, an old and faithful gaon budha came to grief by falling in love with a much younger woman. Being smitten by her, he neglected his domestic as well as public duties, much to the dismay of his family and the disapprobation of other villagers. His son wrung his hands and complained to me that the father had taken to sleeping in the *parmong* (garden) shed and threatened to partition the family property. The villagers complained of impending scandal and the gaon budha's increasing indifference towards village welfare. Ultimately, we managed to make him retire gracefully. He came with a khada asking for *maf* and was released by all with a grave and courteous show of unwillingness. These small courtesies and gentle hypocrisy are a part of Monpa society which one had to be fast in picking up. Saving face, amongst the Buddhists is in fact a very important part of good breeding and good manners. Similarly, the Pangchen gaon budhas of Lumpo and Soksen retired gracefully after over fifteen to twenty years of service. They were replaced by younger men who were keen and progressive cultivators. The transition was achieved by the face-saving process of having a second gaon budha. In Khet and Mukto however, two gaon budhas were appointed as a matter of tradition against each village. In Khet, one gaon budha represented the *Totpas* (residents of the upper village) while the other represented the *Metpas* (residents of the lower portion). While the division was geographical in Khet, it was occupational in Mukto where gaon budha,

Rinchin Chawang represented the rich and fairly powerful yak graziers while Pem Norbu gaon budha, though rich himself, was accepted as the spokesman of the poorer group of shepherds and cultivators. In Shyo village too, there were two gaon budhas by tradition but all the other villages were represented by a single gaon budha.

During the International Women's Year, I decided to do my bit for womens' lib by appointing some women as gaon budhis. I chose Lhou, Seru, Khartot and Thongleng villages for this experiment. As usual, they were quite unwilling to accept the appointment and at least one gaon budhi was known to have run away to hide herself in the jungles—from where she was extracted only after much pleading, coaxing, and offers of khadas and chang. The gaon budhas were vaguely apprehensive of the move, much to my secret amusement. I assured them (tongue in cheek) that there was no question of involving the ladies in the politics and management of village affairs. I had them appointed only to take the responsibility of showing the doctors and health workers around the village and ensuring general village participation in health and sanitation programmes. Secretly, however, I wished to somehow introduce women into the mainstream of socio-political activity which remains a monopoly of males in Tawang. Only the future can tell whether this move will be fruitful.

The main functions of the gaon budha are organisation of portage and settlement of minor disputes. They are also required to act as a sort of a jury in major disputes which are referred to the administration. Mobilisation of community labour for any village task or services requisitioned by the government is his chief responsibility, in addition to the reception of all government officers visiting the village.

The gaon budha has to work hard but gets no pay. It is no wonder, therefore, that fringe benefits were quietly taken by many gaon budhas. In this way some would pocket an extra share of government payments received in the name of the village which the gaon budha was actually supposed to divide equally between all the households. Often the gaon budha would swallow the lion's share of any offering collected from the villagers ostensibly for presenting to the *burra sahibs*. Each household would be asked to donate one egg for the Deputy Commissioner's visit. This would amount to about thirty eggs out of which the

gaon budha would pocket fifteen. From June 1975 onwards I stopped taking *timri* (community offerings) from the villagers but I doubt whether this leakage was effectively plugged. It is amusing to note that the Seru mangma liked their gaon budha Sange Khandu, because (amongst other things) the villagers maintained that he never ate a single egg donated by them for officers. An inbuilt system of checks and balances is provided through the subsidiary institutions of the *gomi*. The *gomi* is appointed for a few months and normally one adult male per household has to hold this office by rotation. He is responsible for convening mangma meetings and maintaining the accounts of mangma funds collected out of taxes, fines, government grants and donations. A balance sheet is duly kept and recited before the mangma. If actual misappropriation is to take place, the *gomi* and gaon budha have to align themselves and this may not always be possible, since the *gomi* is frequently changed. In the olden days villagers used to help the gaon budhas out with some aid by way of labour, chang and grain, but this practice has died out as the average villager has become increasingly advanced and sensitive to any hint of exploitation. Actually, the gaon budhas' is a thankless job to be borne as a public duty with good humour and resignation.

The future of the gaon budha as an institution is yet uncertain. In the course of time the gaon budha may just survive as a figurehead satisfying the need for some tinsel and frills to the local administration. He may remain as the village dogsbody to run around government officials when they visit, collecting a crowd, arranging a dance party and bringing out the chang bottles. On the other hand the institution can also become the spearhead of a small group of capitalist entrepreneurs who may lap up the cream of government aid, sanctions and benefits.

A *via media* could be found by utilising the gaon budhas as the spokesmen of the mangma—certainly the pace-setters of development but not monopolists. But this is a problem peculiar to rural society all over the country and not to Tawang alone.

The mangma is the base on which the superstructure of the cho, gaon budha and *gomi* ultimately rests. The basic organ of self government is the power of this collective body which is something more than the mere arithmetical total of all the village households. It is strange and interesting that there is no exact

equivalent of the term *mangma* in Hindi or English. The nearest translation of the term in the English language is that of the concept of “general will”—the will “of the community for the community.” No such concept of *mangma* exists in Hindi or allied languages because, to my mind, the democratic community does not exist anywhere else in India as it does in the tribal areas. In northern India we do have the panchayat system but this is not representative of each and every household in the community. Caste in fact vitiates the formation of a village assembly or *mangma* as the tribals understand it. It is interesting to note that Assam has a similar concept of *raiz* perhaps because Assamese society is not ridden with untouchability and still retains a dash of *ahom* (tribal) equalitarian traditions.

How does the power of the *mangma* manifest itself? Not so much by actual activity as by a series of acts which are done in the name of and in the cause of the *mangma*. Graziers' tax for example is *mangma* tax which is collected and handed over to the village assembly (represented by the *gomi*) for apportionment and utilisation. Similarly, all fines are collected against the *mangma* account to be equally distributed. The *mangma* is also a land-owner because considerable stretches of village forest, barren open grazing land adjoining the village, as also certain cultivated fields are owned by the village in common. These are utilised in different ways. The *mangma* forests are always open to each villager and there is no tax. Similar is the case with grazing land adjoining the villages. Cultivable land however is a different matter and is leased out on an annual basis to individuals who may approach the *mangma* with a *khada*, a bottle of *chang* and some token annual tax. The *mangma* may agree to lease out common village land for cultivation, but it will always reserve to itself the right to take it back whenever the *mangma* pleases. Sometimes, though very rarely, the *mangma* jointly cultivates the common land. The administration in the 1960s had opened apple orchards on *mangma* land but these proved to be a signal failure since everybody's property was, in effect, nobody's baby and therefore totally neglected. Having learnt from this experience, we continued the system of communal planting of apples and walnuts in *mangma* land with a difference. After plantation the trees were divided equally amongst all the households, and each householder took care of the further growth, fencing and protection of his plants. Individual ownership of plants

helped a great deal, but it was the concept of mangma ownership which enabled even the semi-landless and the poor to have at least a few plants which they could call their own.

One should not conclude that the failure of mangma orchards implies that Monpas do not know how to cooperate or work on joint projects. What the *ghotul* (dormitory system) is to other tribals in the avenue of village cooperation, the mangma is to Monpa society. All responsibility for providing portorage rests with the mangma in Tawang, unlike the Garhwal Himalayas, where the locals seldom carry loads and one has to depend upon professional porters even for government load carriage. The division of responsibility in Tawang villages is more or less institutionalised. The number of man-days per household is equally divided serial-wise so that each household knows whose duty for portorage falls on which day of the month, even though the formal apportionment of porters is done by the gaon budha to whom the official *parwanas* (summons) are always addressed. The system is known to all and any blatant injustice can be detected easily. In case a particular household finds it difficult to share the common burden of portorage, the family is bound to approach the mangma with a request for being excused duly accompanied by chang and a khada. Such requests are seldom accepted. All households (after excluding landless persons—widows, widowers or very old people who are issueless) have to share the responsibilities equally and send one adult per family as and when summoned. This stern rule of the thumb is applicable to all avenues of community work—cleaning porter tracks, building bridges, repairing the village gompa, transporting the Tawang gompa loads, participating in all community projects organised by government, receiving and entertaining V.I.Ps and so on. The entire Tawang-Lumla road was in fact built on subsistence wages and completed in the teeth of opposition, only on the strength of the collective will of the mangma. Absenteeism from community work involves payment of a stipulated fine to the mangma for each day of absence. Interestingly enough, the fines so collected are divided equally amongst all householders including the offender. Some people are given maf by the mangma on special appeal but since everyone knows everybody else in the village the mangma cannot be fooled and maf is given only in very genuine cases. Sometimes, if the defaulter happens to be a fairly well-placed person the administration's support is needed to enable the mangma to effectively impose

its authority upon the recalcitrant villager. It would interest the reader to know that the persons who generally refused to participate in community labour or pay up the mangma fines were government servants like peons, craftsmen, jawans, and constables. Government servants very often felt that they had graduated into a superior class over and above the villagers (*bastiwallahs*) who could be left to do the “dirty work”—a corrosive attitude which was an off-shoot of modernisation. Not all of them were like my political interpreter, Pem Thinley, who had engaged a wage labourer at Rs 120 a month to work on his behalf on the Tawang-Lumla road. “What does it matter”—he said philosophically. “It is *dharam ka kaam*-(the service of god).” Most government employees, however, complained bitterly to their department heads about the unreasonable Additional Deputy Commissioner Tawang, who supported the mangma against them. Many senior officials failed to realise that the houses their employees were living in had been built with the mangma’s help, the village gompa in which they prayed was built and maintained by the mangma funds and mangma labour. The roads they walked on and the bridges they crossed were also built by the mangma and the movement of these government officers themselves was made possible by the mangma. Often, many of those who had no land of their own or were migrants from another village had built houses and cultivated fields on land leased out from the mangma.

Was it fair then to allow these people to enjoy the fruits of mangma labour without sharing the discomforts of its participation? If this is the result government has—then it is a disruptive influence which must be consciously controlled and harnessed so that it does not destroy the community. The strength of the mangma in fact is the backbone of Monpa society.

The other side of the coin is therefore conflict. Cooperation is naturally followed by and inter-laced with discord as the essence of social interaction and each community develops its institutional setup for tackling conflict situations.

The gaon budha along with other village elders is usually the first to be approached for the settlement of a dispute. If he fails, the village elders may involve the gaon budha of their particular cho after which the three tsorgens (in Choksum) or the four tsorgens (as in Pangchen) can be asked to sit together to resolve the case. Sometimes cases are referred to individual lamas who

command prestige and obedience based mostly on charisma rather than office.

When a case becomes really serious and no settlement is reached it may be referred to the *Nyerchang* (treasurer) of the main Tawang gumpa. Settlement of cases by the gumpa institutions however is rare nowadays, this role having devolved upon the Deputy Commissioner Tawang.

Judicial disputes are always settled through mutual discussion and deliberations. The venue is generally a neutral place—either the Deputy Commissioner's office or the *mang khem* (community hall). Both sides will line up before the judges and offer khadas and serve tea or chang in their best crockery. It is customary to accept a khada and tea or chang from both sides before and after the deliberations. Each side brings out its best finery like cushion carpets and employs other delicate modes of pleasing the eyes and palates of the judges who have to ensure that the final verdict they deliver is accepted by both sides. A judicial case in the tribal areas is never settled until and unless both sides agree to the decision, since tribal justice is not like justice in the plains where a verdict is delivered and then enforced, so to speak, at bayonet point. Often, when threats are of no avail, the elders and middlemen pool some money to bribe the recalcitrant party to give in and accept the decision, which is carefully written out on Monpa hand-made paper, stamped with the seals of different gaon budhas, lamas, Nyerchang (as the case may be). Copies are given to both the parties for record.

Disputes usually occur between two villages or two or more individuals or families. In some cases an individual may be pitted against the mangma. The Monpas display an extraordinary tenacity in fighting judicial cases, since they seldom take "no" for an answer and will reopen cases, if they can, with each successive Deputy Commissioner. Some cases carried on for ten to twelve years. Some of the bigger disputes arouse much public interest. The entire area gossips, harangues and predicts the outcome of the case. If no bribes are taken and decisions are quick and stern there is always a noticeable decline in litigation after which only the genuine cases come up. The origin of their disputes are often very minor but the roots go deep and mostly hinge upon land.

The origin of disputes and the modalities of their settlement are best illustrated in a rather old and precious document which I

came across in Khet village which I quote below in a translation prepared with the help of Lama Tsering Dorjee, my official interpreter:

In the third month, twentyfourth day of the Fire-Pig year—Khet and Gyamdong village came to the Nyerchang to settle their case.

This document has been drawn up after hearing both parties.

Khet and Gyamdong together repair the bamboo bridge over the Tawang chu. Two people from Khet were absent during the community labour. As per custom they were to pay four *betang* (silver coins) as fine to Gyamdong but they gave only three. Gyamdong reported the matter to the tsorgen of the cho and thence the case came to the Nyerchang.

Both sides spoke opposite things and neither would agree with the other. The Nyerchang referred the matter to the Serucho tsorgen since Khet and Gyamdong fall within Serucho.

Seru gaon budha saw that there was no special cause for quarrel. He gave sixty *betang* according to Monpa custom to both sides requesting them not to quarrel but Khet would not agree. From there the case went to a lama of Tawang gumpa (who belonged to Thongleng village) and another leading person of Shyo.

They also advised the two parties not to quarrel as both were poor. But Khet would not agree and opened fresh quarrels on all sides including grazing grounds. But the quarrel originated from a very minor matter.

Around the 1890s too the two villages had fought a case and the decision had been recorded in documents which the villagers possessed. Then around 1900 there was another case which was settled by the *drukdel* (a semi-judicial wing of the Tawang gumpa). Both sides should have abided by these documents and decisions.

In the year of Water Sheep (about 1929) there was heavy rainfall and all the bridges were destroyed by a flash flood, including the Chaksam bridge. Then it was decided that Gyamdong would bring three loads of *rhoikyo* (a rope-like cane creeper) and other materials including bamboo for the bridge. At that time the Khetpas objected, saying that the Gyamdongpas should not take bamboo and cane from Khet territory for making ropes



but their objections were overruled. It was once again stated that Khet and Gyamdong must cooperate and work as a single village. When the people from Gyamdong come out to work the Khetpas must also attend and not absent themselves.

As soon as the bridge needed repair Khet would inform Gyamdong. If they did not come in time they would have to make one *khrama* (long rope for the bridge) themselves and drag it to the bridge point.

Khetpas of both upper and lower villages will go to the other side of the river. The *Metpas* (lower Khet village) will also go. The Gyamdongpas will supply the materials but will not pull the ropes of the bridge. The Khetpas do not tell the truth and that is why they quarrel every year.

Lobsang Dorji of Shyo gave hundred betang and Lama Norbu gave twenty betang to the Khetpas as help for their labour, so that they should not trouble the Gyamdongpas. The Metpas will take count of all the labourers who come from Gyamdong and note absentees. Similarly, Gyamdongpas will note the attendance of the Khetpas. The fine will be two betang for each absentee. The fines will be collected at one place and two parts will go to Khet and one part to Gyamdong who will divide the proceeds equally amongst their mangma.

You both are like one village. You intermarry and are like brothers. You must not quarrel now. The children shall not later on deny the decisions arrived at and agreed upon by their forefathers. In case of default they will be liable to a fine. Nobody should go against the decisions which have been recorded.

Both parties agreed to this and affixed their seals accordingly.

Two rather famous cases which I settled as Deputy Commissioner Tawang, illustrate classic conflict situations between the mangma and rebellious individuals.

The first case was that of the Paikher mangma against Kesang Gombu who was formerly their gaon budha. He was a rather handsome and distinguished old man with a fair and deeply wrinkled face, silver grey hair falling over his forehead in the characteristic Monpa fringe and grave, courteous manners with an air and polish which few villagers possessed. To top it all, his son was a sort of a constable and well up with the local administration—a fact which he did not refrain from flaunting before the other rustic bas-

tiwallahs. The actual dispute arose (as normally happened) over a very small matter. Kesang Gombu had extended a part of his kitchen garden fencing in such a manner that it blocked the normal village path adjoining his house. He did not thereby create a blind alley and there was an alternative route, albeit a slightly circuitous one, but the mangma chose to make an issue out of it, along with another fencing along his wheat barley field, which he was also accused of having extended in such a way as to encroach upon the village porter track. This, strictly speaking, was also mangma land. Underlying these petty issues was the deep-seated resentment of the mangma against an individual who was becoming powerful to a point where he was prepared to cross swords with the village assembly. This was a threat to the village authority which the latter would never take lying down. In both cases I had to decide in favour of the mangma; the village right of way had to be given and the porter track encroachment vacated. The victory however was not of land *per se* but of the humbling of Kesang Gombu who dared to infringe upon the ancient realm of mangma ownership and mangma authority.

The famous case of Tsering Norbu vs the mangma of Seru village has perhaps gone down by now in the annals of Monpa history.

Tsering Norbu was at one time a great friend of Sange Khandu, the gaon budha of Seru village. He was supposed to be clever, resourceful, cunning and intelligent. It was whispered that he had made a lot of money, some of it by dubious means. Whatever the truth, he became, after sometime, the object of total dislike and hatred whose cause was difficult to fathom. Perhaps, it would not have been possible for even the Serupas to explain the cause of this unreasonable hatred. As one gaon budha whimsically put it, they just did not like the look of his face. Also, in the vague stirrings of the mangma sub-conscious they intuitively guessed that he was an upstart who could snub the mangma if the occasion arose, so they arranged matters to ensure that this would never happen.

So, one fine morning the entire mangma arose in a body and attacked Tsering Norbu's house. The offender himself was conveniently absent, but his family was there. The mangma attack resulted in eight cows being carried off which were subsequently killed and feasted upon. The roof of the house was badly damaged and

dismantled. The message was very clear; “Tsering Norbu—not wanted in Seru village. Go elsewhere and find a place to lay your head.”

The outcaste accordingly took refuge in Teli but lodged a case with the Deputy Commissioner Tawang. He had been summarily evicted from his village; his house had been dismantled, his cows killed and his fields taken away from him. Was the Deputy Commissioner, Tawang to sit back and watch all these atrocities without lifting a finger?

I discussed the case at length with Lama Tsering (head political interpreter) and the main gaon budhas of the area, particularly the Choksum tsorgens. They all gave cautious, carefully worded advice in the Monpa fashion, which spoke something for both sides but never gave anything away. In short it required an acute and devious cunning, with a certain sixth sense, to ferret out the facts from such lengthy and thoughtful discussions.

I know the general public has a certain stereotype image of the tribal character of which straightforwardness is the major hallmark in their imagination. However while the Monpas were simple in their own way and straightforward to some extent (when it suited them) their minds were far more complex and given to more subtleties than can be compressed into one of these click-camera pictures of tribal people. The first norm of judicial decision-making in Monpa areas, therefore, was to remember that the villagers always spoke simultaneously for and against each side, since they were never sure which side would ultimately win and it was unwise to permanently antagonise the possible victor. This required a lot of delicate and deeply thought out manoeuvring, not only on the part of the gaon budhas who acted as jury but also the Deputy Commissioner who acted as a judge.

In the case of Tsering Norbu therefore, the gaon budhas of Shyarcho and Lhou alongwith others agreed that Seru conduct had been reprehensible and would have far reaching consequences on the village discipline, bringing the prestige of the local administration to an all-time low. On the other hand, however, they wrinkled their noses delicately and said in hesitating but significant tones, “*pata nahin kya baat hai sahib par uski shakal koi pasand nahin karta*” (don’t know what the matter is, sir, but somehow nobody really likes the look of Tsering Norbu’s face). They proceeded to relate the tales of his misdeeds which were extensive, by any

standards, assuring me that there was not a single village in the entire sub-division, which would be prepared to give him shelter.

“What to do sahib,” they said philosophically, “the fellow is born like that—twisted, cunning, a no-good bounder and a rascal.” When a case becomes as involved and difficult as that, a general meeting of all the gaon budhas of Tawang area is called. Interestingly enough the gaon budhas summoned included the entire Choksum area (even that part which fell in the Mukto circle) as also the gaon budhas of Thongleng and Pamakhar which were traditionally a part of Dakpanang but now fell in Tawang circle. The case was argued at length and both sides were given a protracted and patient hearing in the newly constructed Anchal Samiti hall. As the deliberations proceeded, I did my best to persuade the Serupas to accept Tsering Norbu back into their fold, but they threatened bloodshed and dire consequences if this eventuality was forced upon them. What about his *kheti* (cultivation) I challenged them. Surely the mangma could not take away his cultivated land which he had inherited from his forefathers. But here the Seru mangma received unexpected support from the other villagers—the land which Tsering Norbu cultivated was not his own in the first place. His father had migrated to Seru from another village and had approached the Seru mangma with the usual khada and chang with a request for a lease on the mangma land. Since the land originally belonged to the village assembly Tsering Norbu had no right over it. This reasoning was perfectly logical and since Tsering Norbu could not dispute the fact, it caused me also to pause and scratch my head.

Finding no way out and seeing the Serupas get more and more aggressive I slipped a note out summoning the Central Reserve Police Force who came dramatically and took away six or seven of the Seru stalwarts—the pride of their manhood. I was to use them as “my bargaining counter” for the scoundrel whose face (must I admit it?) even I had grown to unconsciously detest.

With their stalwarts and best speakers clapped behind the bars, negotiations started in right earnest. The prominent gaon budhas were gravely upset at the high-handedness on the part of the Deputy Commissioner Tawang, but wisely kept their counsel while I laid my cards on the table. I would not insist on Tsering Norbu being taken back by the mangma. Let him start a small shop in Tawang. I would give him some land and other help. But the Seru mangma would be required to pay Rs 18,000 for the damages

caused to his house and property.

To my autocratic mind this stupendous amount appeared perfectly reasonable since I would make it mandatory for the offender never to try and settle in Seru village once the fine had been paid. The idea was to warn other villages that in case they wanted to drive some guy out whose face they did not like, they would have to pay for it in hard cash.

Since the mangmas sovereignty was recognised, atleast theoretically, in the above solution it was accepted by all, albeit under protest. In the Monpa area too, it is customary to ask for and be given maf once a fine has been announced. This is part of the Monpas' good breeding and face-saving techniques which must be understood and adopted. Hence, after the customary movements had been gone through the fine was reduced from Rs 18,000 to Rs 16,000 but even then it was a very heavy amount, considering the fact that Seru consisted of approximately 150 households and the fine was to be shared more or less equally. This amounted to about Rs 107 per family—a heavy price to be paid for the pleasure of not seeing Tsering Norbu's face first thing in the morning outside one's kitchen garden.

### 3 The Village Economy

Let us live together,  
It is a time for rejoicing.  
We will drink bhangchang,  
And make merry all night.  
May our fields ripen with rich grain,  
Our cows give good milk.  
Let all live  
And prosper together.

“Yuipaksam”—A Monpa song

About three hundred years ago, when the Tawang monastery was first established by Mera Lama, the people of Tawang voluntarily bound themselves to pay a grain tax for the upkeep of the monks of the monastery since lamas live on charity and must not cultivate. The Nyerchang or revenue officer of the monastery was responsible for collecting the grain tax or *khrai* from the villagers and cultivation thus became inextricably linked with *khrai*. Most of the permanent cultivation in Tawang is owned by *khrai*-holders, i e., tax-payers to the Tawang monastery. The records of the Nyerchang still form the only basic land records available in the territory. The *khrai* has never been revised or rationalised since its inception and has been passed down from father to son (by way of inheritance) or between villagers by way of sale. Being static, it has no relationship with the actual grain production or increase or decrease in landholding and therefore does not act as a disincentive to increased production. Thus, while the system of grain tithe is in itself a feudal attribute it has not stood in the way of speedy development because the fruits of prosperity are not mopped up by this taxation.

Jang is the first village after Sela Pass after which the stretch of cultivation starts and seeing it the visitor will immediately understand that the Monpas not only live off the soil but love it. It is a green country that looks rich and fertile and yet it is a fertility which is man-made, being preserved and nourished with loving care. Towards the Tawang chu roaring along its steep gorge, one can see narrow, piled-up terraces which are called *ering* and used for paddy cultivation only. We were double-cropping these with high yielding variety wheat on a limited scale since *ering* are reserved for winter grazing of sheep. Above the *ering* and interspersed between them are broad patches of cultivation sloping along the hillside. In these are planted maize, intercropped with soyabean, and millet which is rotated with wheat barley.

Further up, along an altitude of 8,500 feet (almost at level with the main road), begins the line of villages. Their high-roofed, double-storeyed, closely-clustered, grey stone-walled houses have around them a never-ending spread of cultivated fields often built up with stone ramparts to prevent erosion. They are planted with millet interspersed with lemon and maroon of amarynthus, pink and mauve of buckwheat, followed by wheat barley with an occasional golden spread of mustard. The fruit trees make splashes of pink and white in spring. Peach is native to the place, but the agriculture department had planted apples and walnuts, Himachal peaches, plums and pears. The young trees which grow in half-moon pits, in a contiguous spread of orchards lined along the main road mark, with fresh brown earth of potato fields, the changing village landscape.

In the olden days tools and implements were primitive and cultivation was accordingly limited. Nowadays hoes, spades and crowbars have rapidly changed the economy simply by putting effective instruments of labour into the villagers' hands. These are distributed on subsidy by the government—always one of the major block schemes, the basis of all development. Labour saving devices such as power tillers and threshers would be particularly useful in the hills where labour is in short supply, but the hills have just a few rich and big landowners who could afford these. Maintenance of machines in these remote hilly tracts (even when connected by road) poses a major problem. Presently, the traditional system continues whereby neighbours help each other in their fields at the peak cultivation season. There are some poor marginal farmers who

depend for their living primarily on labour and secondarily on their fields. They are paid good wages as there is an acute shortage of labour. These consist of three *brays* (a kg) of grain accompanied by two meals and *chang* which easily amounts to about Rs 7 a day.

Monpa villages always wear a deserted look during the *kheti* (cultivation) time. Their cobbled streets are hushed and silent, a silence broken only by the squawking of hens, the chuckling murmurs of fat infants laden on the backs of their two or three-year old brothers and sisters and the toothless babbling of old women sitting on their balconies, carding raw wool with slow, quivering hands. The barking of stray dogs occasionally echoes along the silent, sunlit, stone houses while the entire adult population, along with the youngsters, are out in the fields. Harvesting, collection of seedlings, mixing manure into the soil and simultaneous transplanting is a back-breaking and never-ending process. When they finish with their own fields, they have to go and work on their neighbour's fields as a courtesy in return for the help.

Yet the Monpas are always happy while working. The men work stripped to the waist, their fair ruddy bodies glistening with sweat (devastatingly attractive); the women with their laughter and babble and an occasional spurting rhythm of song. It is customary to shout a greeting to workers as you pass them—“*Si podgu appa?*” (What are you planting, father?), I would call out and they would shout back, “*Ko-nos podgue D.C.*” (We are planting wheat barley, D.C.)

Harvesting, as with other hill tribes, is carried out by pulling off the grain with the hands and tossing it into a bamboo basket slung over the forehead. Usually it is the girls who harvest—rows of chattering, giggly, rosy-cheeked young women. Storage of grain is similar to Tehri-Garhwal and Lahoul-Spiti rather than the adjoining tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. While the Adis, Nishis and Apatanis have separate granaries, somewhat isolated from the bamboo thatch huts of the village, the Monpas store their grain in the main stone-built houses. Pounding, cleaning and threshing are done as in other districts but Tawang has *atta chakkis* (flour mills) operated by water power for grinding wheat, barley and millet into a fine flour which is cooked in water and eaten as a kind of *halwa* (paste) known as *bokpoi*. The groaning and creaking of the *atta-chakki* greets one occasionally along the porter track, mingling with the



rush and roar of the mountain stream over which it is located. The chakkis are self-operated by water-power and require only *chowkidari* (watch and ward); a function which is mostly carried out by the old. Usually there is an old couple or an old widower, living in a solitary thatch hut, set up shakily next to the chakki. It is the custom to send children there with a bag of grain—they await their turn and leave a bray or two of the flour as payment for the aged chowkidar for whom this tithe is his main subsistence.

The Monpas are by far the best and most sophisticated cultivators in Arunachal, matched perhaps only by the Apatanis. A number of advanced agricultural practices being recommended these days by agricultural scientists have been in vogue in Monpa areas since kheti began. Thus inter-cropping of maize (a heavy feeder) with soyabean (a leguminous crop) is part of the natural agricultural pattern in Tawang and all the administration did was to give a gentle push here and there by replacing the local seed with soyabean bragg (a high yielding variety). This got an excellent reception in Tawang, particularly in Mukto circle.

While the Manpas are distinctive in not practicing *jhum* (slash and burn cultivation) they are matched, again, only by the Apatanis in the care of forests and woodland areas. These are considered as important as agriculture for the village economy, so that land use patterns of the forest and cultivation interlock and support each other instead of working at cross purposes.

Agricultural fields and the forest woodlands are intermingled all along the broad sweep of the Tawang landscape. The trees of the village forests are varied—spruce (*maniseng*) is interspersed with magnolia (*ngangong*), poplars, birches, willows, blue pine (*hroseng*), wild walnut (*keseng*) and the grand deciduous oak (*paseng*). The oak forests or *parmong* are omnipresent. They adjoin each village and are a significant part of not only the landscape, but also the agricultural economy. Their leaves are made into a compost and used as fertiliser. The oak forests differ from the usual village forests. They are privately owned. Each tree is somebody's private property and is passed down from father to son along with the homestead and agricultural land. Young saplings are nurtured and cared for separately and fresh ownership devolves on the person who has "brought up" the young plant. Since the oaks always grow in a thick contiguous belt known as *parmong*, the leaves form a lovely carpet of gold in winters, which is swept up by the women and stacked in *parmong*

sheds which stand next to the lavatory in one corner of the backyard. Oak leaves are thrown into the lavatory after use, and the entire compost thus formed is turned over once a year, stacked up and dried in the fields, after which it is mixed with the soil at the time of sowing and transplantation.

The oak trees are the most beautiful feature of Tawang forests, not only when they are in their full autumnal glory of red-gold, but also when, in early spring, the leaves are just in bud. The knarled branches and tree trunks are covered with clusters of pearly white orchids—dewy, glistening and lovely. The oaks are always the sturdiest and oldest trees that can be found along the otherwise ravaged roadside forests. There is a taboo on cutting the paseng since the leaves are used for manure. The Monpas do not worship trees in the same way as the Hindus worship the peepul, but oak is certainly beloved and regarded with a veneration that has almost devotional overtones.

While furniture, housing and bamboo resources are derived mainly from the high altitude forests, firewood is cut and collected from the village forests which adjoin habitation. The Monpas never use cowdung for fuel though this practice (prevalent in Lhasa) is not unknown to them. Animal refuse is used strictly for manure in Monpa society which is, of course, putting it to its best use.

The bastiwallah is habituated to carrying immense loads of firewood home. Along the village tracks one often came across the inevitable rosy cheeked six-year olds with little bundles of firewood on their backs and then incredibly wrinkled and old people bent under their huge bundles carried slowly and patiently. They would rest now and then on any convenient stone, with whoops and gasps of breath and a sweet senile nodding of the head and blabbered greetings as we would pass—“D.C., *phepua*” (Deputy Commissioner welcome), they would murmur with warm, toothless smiles and we would respond, “*Seng rhotua appa, seng rhotua amma*” (Carrying firewood, grandpa or grandma).

There are certain unfortunate villages which have no forest area for collection of firewood. For them there is no alternative but to cut firewood from the forest belonging to the neighbouring village the rate being Rs 4 a day in which they are allowed to cut as much firewood as they can take home. For the villagers themselves there is no mangma tax for firewood collection.

Life without firewood would only mean one thing—total annihilation. This is not even remotely understood by outsiders and the government agencies who are causing terrible destruction of the Monpa forests. The para military forces and the army particularly have transport and manpower at their disposal, so half a platoon can suddenly descend on a roadside forest, chop the trees and load them into a three tonner before you can say Jack Spratt.

In the traditional community-life, the village boundaries are jealously guarded and no outsiders are allowed to cut trees indiscriminately without paying a tax. Cutting of saplings and young trees is in any case forbidden even to the villagers who own the forest. All this is enforced by an informal system of chowkidari and fines which are effective only on their own people. The system breaks down with the onslaught of outsiders on whom their community laws are not binding. The position is no better in areas where the government has taken over and notified the land, because the forest department is in any case unable to control the various government agencies from their depredations. To make matters worse, in the government forests the outside agencies are helped by the villagers themselves, since community controls are not operative on government land. To clinch the destruction and make it total, protection and nurture of saplings does not form part of the forest department manual. Thus natural regeneration is also neglected and the area is gradually being written off, with the hills above Tawang becoming increasingly bleak and bare as the tree line recedes further.

I had always cherished a concept of forest regeneration based upon private ownership and people's participation with some subsidy from the government on the same lines as our horticultural schemes. Between 1974 and 1977 the agriculture department led by pioneering District Agriculture Officer, Sri S.R. Ghosh, had planted 80,000 fruit trees of different varieties on private or mangma land and survival rates were about 95 per cent because these were owned by individuals and were not government property. Afforestation schemes on similar lines would be well worth an experiment. It is not money that is required, nor very great technical skill—only passion, determination and a change in the thinking of the Forest Service from a departmental to a village orientation; from revenue for the government to revenue for the village and a recognition of the fact that the two are not contradictory but synonymous.

At the time of writing the Monpa economy is perhaps still self-sufficient for its forest-based needs, a self-sufficiency which will break down when the apple trees start bearing fruit and packing case material is required in large quantities. In cereal production on the other hand, the economy has never been self-sufficient and perhaps never will be. Self-sufficiency, in fact, is an impossibility in most Himalayan tracts due to shortage of flat land, constant soil erosion and limited irrigation facilities. Earlier thinking in the Arunachal administration had focussed on increased food production with self-sufficiency as a proclaimed target. Believe it or not, government grain shops were set up for catering to government staff only, on the plea that the villagers should not be tempted to depend upon government rations and should be encouraged to grow more food. Recently, however, the government policy has changed, mainly due to the thrust and impetus provided by the then Lt. Governor, Colonel K.A.A. Raja. The Arunachal government has realised that the accent should be on cash crop development which gives a much higher return for the same unit of land than cereals, since the latter can be bought more profitably if the distribution system is managed properly. In Tawang the main Cooperative Store could set up a chain of fair price shops where Food Corporation of India rice and wheat flour were sold free of any permits or ration cards for Rs 1.70 to Rs 1.80 per kg. Sales were brisk almost throughout the year, particularly during the lean months just before the two annual harvests. This was very important for the extreme border areas of Thingbu Mago and Luguthang and Pangchen which are dependent mainly on animal husbandry and have very little cultivation. Supply of food grains is a prime necessity in these areas and much of the credit for success in Tawang goes to the zeal and hard work of Sri L.P. Singh, then Executive Officer of the Tawang Cooperative Consumer Store.

But to buy rice and wheat flour from the fair price shops the villager needs money and so we come to the next question.

How does cash enter the village economy? The established avenues have been porterage, unskilled or semi-skilled labour with the border roads and Central Public Works Department, petty contractor or shop business, supply of firewood or timber, in almost that order of importance. After 1974 the government accelerated the cultivation of cash crops (both short-term and long-term) with excellent results. Kufri Jyoti potato brought as a sample from Simla

in 1973 shot into the economy by 1976 with a dramatic suddenness that startled even the most sceptical observers. Since September 1977 Tawang has become a regular supplier of seed potato to West Bengal and production levels exceeded all expectations. Vegetable production took second place along with limited supplies of ginger and turmeric for which permanent markets are still being located. The long-term cash crops planted between 1974 and 1977 were apples, peaches, plums, pears, walnuts and almonds which have yet to enter the economy in a significant way. By 1983 the Tawang economy will have to handle approximately 50,000 fruit bearing plants. If the parallel processes of packaging, storage and marketing can be adequately harnessed fruit cultivation will cause a major boom to the economy since land ownership in Tawang is broad-based and the policy had been to restrict the largest orchards to a maximum of 4-6 acres. Further, the availability of mangma land had enabled communal planting of trees for almost every household in the village, so prosperity, if and when it comes, will be broad-based and would trickle down to almost 90 per cent of the population. This may sound somewhat bold but by 1977 almost 70,000 fruit trees had been planted in an area with only 20,000 people.

Other cash crops whose results are still awaited are saffron (which was smuggled out from Kashmir under the nose of a jealous and monopolistic state government) and cardamom from Sikkim both of which are showing promising results. Initial limited experiments had proved successful, but saffron fields have to be extended before they make any sizeable impact, and cardamom fruition will take a few more years.

Medicinal herbs are providing a steady cash flow into the economy as some local businessmen tap markets in Kalimpong for *gutki* and *panchanguli*, the former being the most popular and widespread of plants found in the high altitude grazing region. However, this is a recent trade for the Monpas who do not cultivate medicinal plants unlike the Mishmis who have been growing and selling the famous Mishmi Teeta since the last century. In this way Tawang is similar to Tehri-Garhwal and though the Regional Research Laboratory, Jorhat had sponsored a comprehensive survey of the herbal potentialities of the area, the aim was to proceed very cautiously towards commercial exploitation, making sure that we

could combine it with some indigenous methods for propagation and regeneration.

The main influx of cash comes into the economy through the *ghorawallas* (yak and pony carriage contractors) who, in a way, form a subsidiary community amongst themselves. They carry all government loads and rations to the outposts earning an average gross income of Rs 14 a day per animal. (In difficult terrain this could go upto Rs 20.) Their earnings can be imagined only when one sees them move down the mountain sides with their loads, like a small battalion, with no less than 30 to 50 animals in one consignment, in which each contractor owns three to ten ponies or yaks. The *ghorawallas* heyday came with the boom in potato production. There was heavy procurement from the interior villages from where the potato had to be brought to Tawang. They thus got what they had never dreamed of earlier—backload! The more enterprising amongst them used to purchase potato quite cheaply in the interior and then sell it at a profit in Tawang, well into the winter months.

The *ghorawallahs*, like the *chowriewallahs*, have their own peculiar society and their typical way of life. They are constantly on the move travelling long distances, sometimes two to three weeks at a stretch, giving their animals the stipulated rest after every four or five days' march. They carry little tents with them which provide nominal cover. Oftener than not they sleep in the open under clear skies, a log fire blazing away all night in the middle of the group. The *ghorawallahs* camp site can always be recognised from a distance—there is the familiar smell of horses and dung; wooden pegs driven into the ground for tethering the animals; the almost permanent hearth with the fire extinguished, no doubt, but the ashes still warm. The area itself is always pleasantly secluded, shaded and flat. Sometimes on our journeys we would hear the tinkle of bells and pass them seated in their camps sipping *Monpa cha* (tea) or busy making *momos* (steamed flour balls stuffed with meat) if they had been lucky enough to secure a hunk of meat from the village nearby.

Because of their money and mobility perhaps, the *ghorawallahs* have a certain arrogance which results in clashes with the villagers mainly over the grass of the village which is grazed by their animals in transit. Normally, no customary tax is imposed on this grazing. Since the number of animals has now increased with

greater volume of load carriage, the villagers en route have started making faint protests, being jealous for their fields, the grass and perhaps also of the money being made by the ghorawallas.

Since prosperity invariably brings in its wake an increase in avarice, the cleverer amongst the ghorawallas supplement their earnings by occasional subtle forages into the ration loads being carried. Some of them make a small hole in the sugar bags and a trickle of sugar ensures a few cups of sweet tea (which the Monpas love) along the way. Similarly a hole carefully pierced in a tin of ghee will yield a generous flow of ghee when the tin is placed near the fire! Such petty pilferage is well established and well known and it is upto the receiving party to be careful in their checks and catch the culprits if they can!

The ghorawallas, Central Public Works Department labour and border roads labour have tended to become the cleverer sections of the Monpa community. Since they have had constant commercial dealings with government officials they learnt from the lower echelons (sometimes the higher officers also) a few tricks of the trade which the tribals are always quick to pick up and turn to their personal advantage. Thus there were in the Monpa economy certain established illegal ways of making money which were all made possible with the aid and connivance of outsiders, most of whom were government officials, armed forces and para military forces personnel.

Illicit brewing of *roxi* was fairly widespread in the headquarters township of Tawang. All tribals make their own *roxi* but the CRP jawans, the army chaps and the civilian staff provided a fairly good and steady market for those who were in this business. Needless to say it was good, healthy and highly potent *roxi* with no adulteration and therefore there was no fear of liquor poisoning. The extra supply of rice was made possible by bogus or inflated ration cards and by 1976 in any case rice was being sold freely in the open market.

One rum bottle of *roxi* was sold for Re 1 during my stay but the price might have gone up since then.

Selling rum was also an extremely lucrative business which all shopkeepers indulged in as a side-line activity. Rum substituted cash in the Monpa economy when it came to selling anything to the army; be it vegetables or *lai patta* (a kind of spinach) or dogs, carpets, decoration pieces, *thankhas* (holy scroll paintings) or even

gold ornaments. Rum was in fact the *chalu* (acceptable) currency and all commodities were priced in terms of cash and crates of rum. Thus a dog would be Rs 200 or ten bottles of rum (when the market price was Rs 20 per bottle). The army also released quantities of milk powder, eggs, kerosene oil and ghee into the economy—sometimes in the form of barter, sometimes as outright clandestine sale. However, milk powder at least was heaven sent for all of us. But for this secret source of supply, most of the staff would have had to go without milk and except for occasional checks to see that the milk powder was fit for human consumption, I preferred to turn the Nelson's eye on all these activities.

Prosperity in the form of corrugated iron sheets and cement also sidled in through the backdoor occasionally, thanks to the lower echelons of the border roads personnel. Largely because of this we could boast of a lovely clean bazaar and pucca shops which had a neat and shining look about them with brightly painted roofs and freshly plastered cement walls.

What did the Monpas do with the extra money they earned? Most of their earnings were mopped up by consumption needs—in buying more rice, flour and ghee. Being extremely shrewd, cultured and thrifty by nature the Monpas did not blow up all their extra earnings in eating and drinking. A lot of available funds were invested in opening new orchards, purchasing apple plants, potato seeds and fertilisers which were considered prime necessities, as important as food stuffs.

Prosperity also showed itself almost immediately in a change of dress. It is not that the Monpas discarded their red coat (which is thick and beautiful, made of the best wool) but they did have a fondness for quilted feather jackets and leather jerkins which were imported from Darjeeling and Kalimpong and were well-suited to the vagaries of their weather conditions. A definite indication of the "better-off" Monpa would be his headgear. The traditional headgear of the people is a cap made of black yak's hair with five long fingers protruding all around. This is worn both by men and women. As the *bastiwallah* becomes advanced he exchanges this for a *balaclava* (woollen cap) or a more sophisticated leather cap tipped with fur or even broad-brimmed, rather nice looking felt hats. The women, as sophistication catches up, wear Tibetan *chupas* or the Arunachal *lungis* while some of them, like Pema Doka of Lhou, used to wear slacks in which Pema at least looked absolutely



charming. Leather boots and hunter shoes sometimes replaced the traditional Monpa shoes but the latter were retained for ceremonial occasions.

Buying intricately carved and beautifully painted vessels for puja is another passion with the Monpas. The prosperous shopkeepers invariably have an altar decorated with a row of shining lamps and silver water bowls purchased mostly from Kalimpong.

As the average Monpa earns some money he also starts improving his house, adding a room here or a balcony there. The rich people build three storeyed houses as against the normal two storeyed Monpa houses. If they can afford they would also replace the normal plank roof with brightly painted corrugated iron sheet roofing. Money is also spent in buying furniture—a good prayer cabinet, an altar, some chairs and a table, cushion carpets and perhaps some sophisticated china bowls for noodles, soup and tea.

Sending children to a good school in *gyaghar* (the plains) was a rare but sophisticated sign of a wealthy and prosperous man. Tsering Tashi's father, the grand Nyerpala and one-time political assistant of Tawang who was an extremely rich man sent one son to a Military School in Bhubhaneshwar and another to an English speaking school in Darjeeling. Tsering Tashi is now a minister in the Arunachal Ministry and the latter, Thupten Tempa, is the first Tawang student for M.A. at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. Karma Chettan, one of the biggest shopkeepers, had sent his youngest to St. Peter's school in Shillong and, more recently, visits by devoted monks had persuaded some of the elite led by Pema Gombu, gaon budha of Lhou, to send their sons to the Ramakrishan Mission School at Along.

Usually, money was reinvested in opening a petty shop which must have been a thriving business to judge from the number of petty shops which were being opened in Tawang, along the Lumla road and near Lhou (apropos the Kitpi Hydrel Project).

The Kitpi Hydrel Project (1500 KW) inaugurated in 1977, marked a leap forward for Tawang though it has not yet effected any major changes in production or the agricultural or forest economy. The construction work involved labour mobilisation at a daily wage of Rs 8 for unskilled labour which pumped a sizeable amount of cash into the economy. Village electrification was part of the development programmes of the Hydrel Project and this is but a step away from private connections in individual houses. Commercial

use of power will perhaps take some time but the project might have an immediate beneficial effect on the economy by sharing atleast part of the burden of fuel provision and providing marginal relief to village forests.

Prosperity in the ultimate analysis is not so much a way of life as a way of thought—you must think big, feel rich. No matter what clothes he wears, whether he can read or write, the villager should be able to stand straight before the literate, the *babu* and *sahib log* and look at them in the face without cringing or fawning. For me the sweetest memory is of two bastiwallahs with layers of dirt from the Tawang-Lumla road on their person, who came upto our cooperative shop and asked for Panama cigarettes. The salesman handed over the cigarettes and muttered to himself, “Bidis are not good enough for them, they must have Panamas.”

The two villagers must have overheard, for turning round to him they said, “Hey, there, look here—our clothes and hands may be dirty but don’t mistake us for paupers.” Then they fished out their bulging wallets, showing a roll of notes which left the salesman gaping after them, as they both took off with a jaunty swagger, smoking their cigarettes, content with the world.

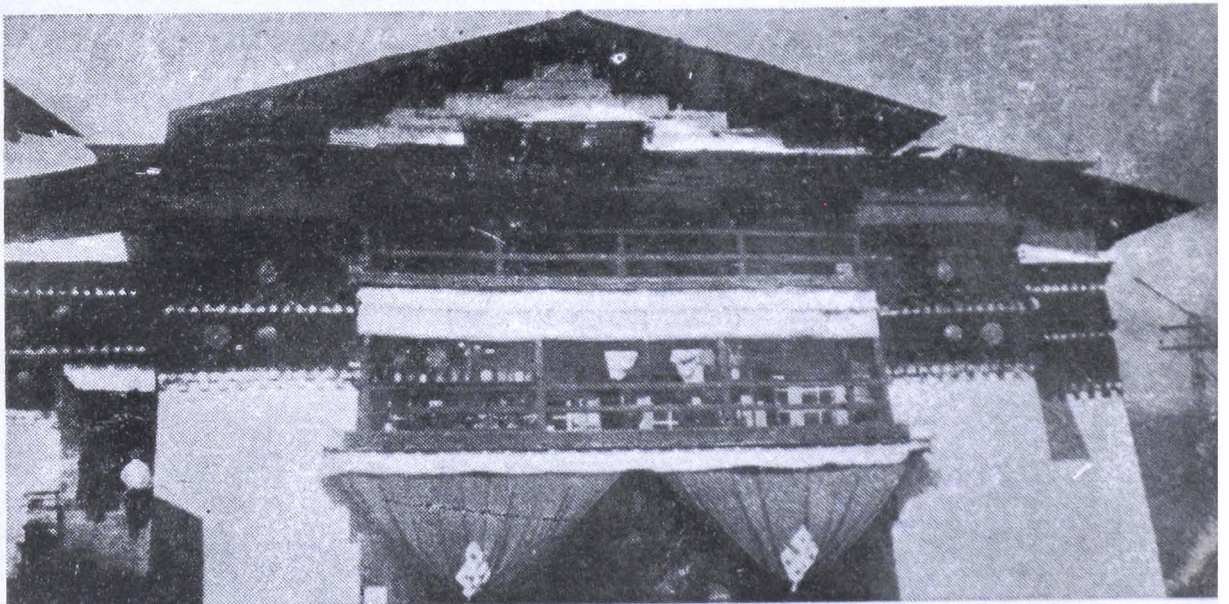




Bon Priests

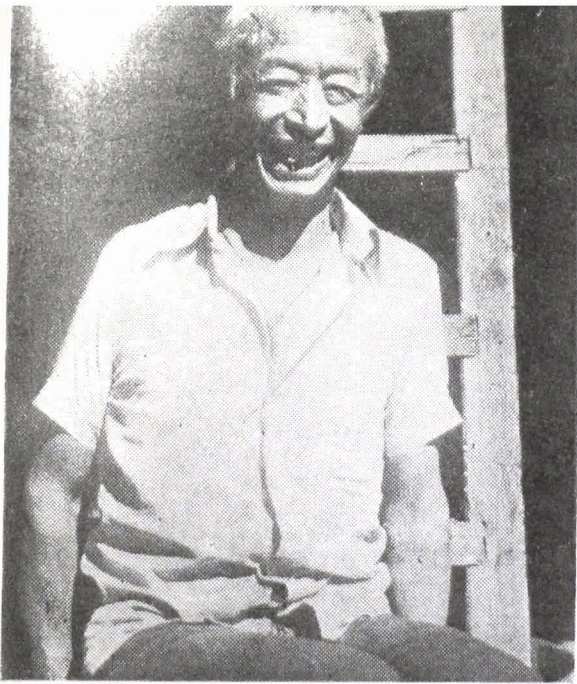


A Group of Anis



Tawang Gompa





Tashi Khandu



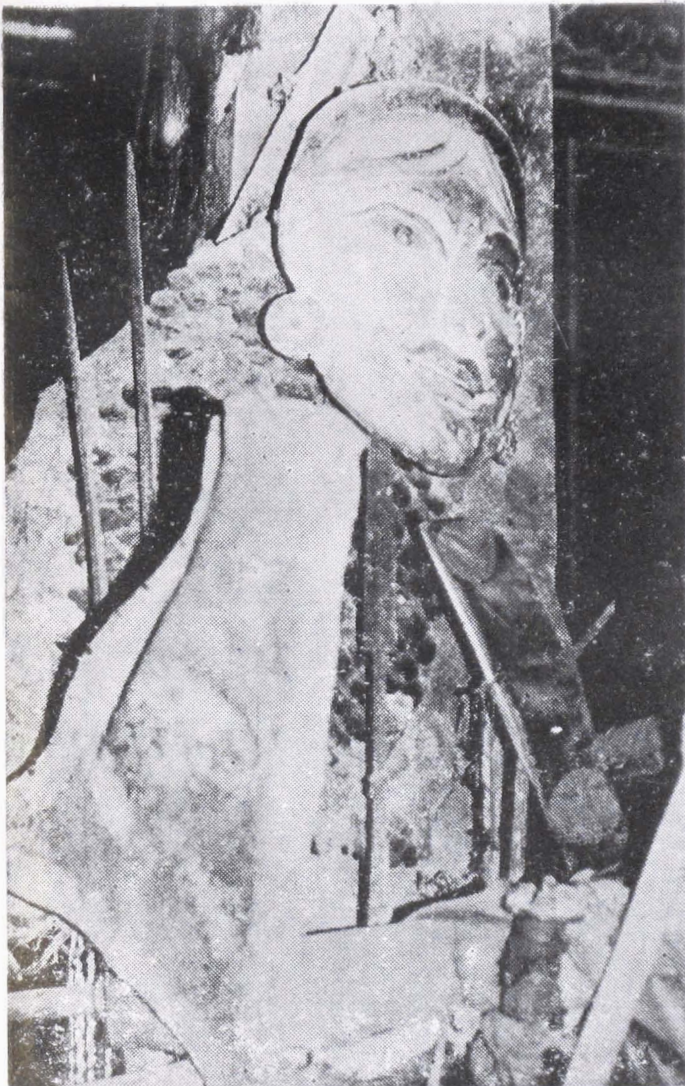
Tsering Tashi







Rigya Rimpoche



Gompitse Rimpoche





A Village Belle

Tsering Chuki with Pem Thinley



Gurudev in Tawang





## 4 The Chowriwallahs—The Yak Graziers

Far up the cold mountain  
the stony path slopes.  
Where the white clouds are born  
there are homes of men.

—Tu Mu

To the outsider the border ranges are just mountains but for the villagers these are well-demarcated territories with known boundaries, within which each village exercises its rights of grazing and exploitation of natural resources like extraction of timber, herbs, hunting and trapping.

Since the grazing grounds belong to the mangma, there have to be set customary methods whereby these are apportioned between chowriwallahs during the grazing season in summer from May to October. These vary with villages but are broadly as follows:

*Community grazing:* In some villages like Khet and Gyamdong, all the graziers meet with their herds in an appointed meadow on an appointed day and then move up together after which grazing is in common and there are no more restraints. This is prescribed by their village document which I quote below:

In the Iron-Lion Year Shyarcho and Lhoucho gaon budha had given you a document with their and your seals—saying the same thing “You are as one village.” Both sides must adhere to this and not depart from their ancient customs.

Chowries of both sides will come down to the fixed grazing grounds on the fifteenth day of the eighth month. Chowrie huts will be shared and repaired together. The grazing grounds

which fall on Bomja side are for Khetpas alone and will not be shared with Gyamdong. Those of Gyamdong on the Gonghar side will not be shared with Khet.

*Draw of lots (gyan):* In other villages like Gonghar, grazing grounds are allotted by draw of lots. Twigs are used instead of slips of paper. Each grazier marks his twig in his own way and these are shuffled and then joined at random with twigs representing the grazing grounds.

The right to participate in gyan cannot be violated. This is clear from the document of Gonghar village which is reproduced below:

In the Water-House Year;

Both Rinchin Dorji and Jamba have got the same document. Both belong to Gonghar and should act as one household and not quarrel. Their quarrel was over grazing grounds. All the sheep graziers got together in one party and lodged a case. Jamba wanted to graze his sheep in the grazing grounds but Rinchin (the chowriewallah) would not allow it. He did not let him give gyan along with the others despite his appeals. Rinchin behaved as if the grazing grounds were his and would not cooperate with the villagers in taking his chowries up and bringing them down at the same time. Hence all reported against him.

It was finally settled that the grazing grounds belonged to the mangma and Rinchin had no right to stop Jamba from gyan.

The above document is significant in showing that mangma ownership has never reigned undisputed. Social conflict has reared its head and private, vested interests have tried to make inroads into this power structure but time and again the village assembly has asserted itself—reasserted and clung to the concept, theory and practice of common ownership.

*Gombro:* I found this system of ownership only in Mukto village. While there does not appear to be any modification of the basic concept of mangma ownership, individual chowriewallahs are allowed to retain prior claims over grazing grounds which they have cleared themselves. Gombro literally means cutting and clearing of the grazing area. Any chowriewallah wishing to graze in these particular meadows must approach the owner offering a



tax. His responsibility ends there and it is the duty of the owner to pay the stipulated tax to the mangma. Sange Khandu used to graze in Wangteng which was owned by five persons who accepted the tax from him and paid the mangma tax themselves. In Seitheng meadow, however, the owner was an old man and Sangu Khandu's group used to pay one *dokpo* (container) of ghee directly to the mangma on his behalf.

*Mutual discussion:* In some villages like Lumpo, grazing for each season was settled by calling a meeting and mutually deciding as to who would graze where. In this system, oftener than not, the bigger chowriwallahs fared very well, perhaps at the cost of the smaller.

Taxation is closely related to ownership. All boundary disputes between villages boiled down to the simple point of "Who paid the tax to whom and how was it shared?"

One may ask why the tax should be paid by the graziers to the village assembly—theoretically, even if each and every household had yaks they would still have to pay tax to the mangma.

I think the reasons are both practical as well as conceptual. The tax itself is not heavy but the very fact that it has to be paid ensures the subservience of the individual to the general will. Each must bow before this superior authority of which he is an integral part and which is something more than the mere arithmetical total of the village households. The tax thus ensures the supremacy of the collective will over the individual—of cooperation over conflict. In most villages now, a limited number of households possess chowries—hence the payment of tax to the mangma ensures that the rights of all are kept open and vested interests are not allowed to develop a stranglehold over graziers' society.

The exact mode of settling the tax amount is still not clear. The amount being paid as mangma tax has been coming down from father to son without much change and does not appear to be very clearly related to the number of animals owned by each household. On the other hand, the gombro tax is a commercialised affair and there is a definite correlation between the number of chowries owned and the amount paid. Further details could not be secured despite some efforts on my part, because the Monpas are politely reluctant to reveal the complete facts of their income and expenditure to prying outsiders.

On a fixed day (known to all the graziers) they come down to

the village and deposit their tax collectively with the gomi (village accountant). The gomi then calls a meeting of all the villagers. One person from each household has to attend and absence involves a fine. All of them sit together and decide what to do with the year's contribution of ghee. Usually it is spent on village pujas for making butter lamps and for donation and feeding the lamas. Sometimes it is also used for community feasts when the villagers work together on repairing the bridges or cleaning the tracks. In Mukto, the usual practice is to give the ghee received by the mangma in lieu of grain for the gompa tax.

Incidentally, the mangma tax is based on grazing grounds and no tax is realised for the chowries which may happen to graze in the village fields during winter.

Ownership is determined by the mode of sharing the tax proceeds. Most tax payers are also owners, while some are simply tax payers with no ownership rights which devolve only on those who enjoy the right of sharing in the consumption of the total tax. Thus Pem Norbu, gaon budha Mukto, paid tax to the villagers of Mago Luguthang for grazing in their area but got no share in the tax consumption which was divided by the mangma of Mago Luguthang. In the Mukto grazing grounds, however, he would pay a tax to the mangma and also get a share in the proceeds since he belonged to the Mukto mangma.

For fear of giving rise to hereditary claims by graziers of other villages, the chowriewallahs seldom lease out the same grazing ground to outsiders for more than two or three seasons successively. The case of Muktopas twentysix grazing grounds which the chowriewallahs of Mukto grazed in Bhutan is a classic instance of the development of hereditary claims sanctified by documents and the red seal of the *Dharamraja* (grand Lama) of Bhutan.

The Dzungda (Deputy Commissioner) of Tashigong after studying some of the old documents of the Muktopas gave me some useful conjectures regarding the origin of Mukto grazing in Sakden (Bhutan). Before the present secular rule in Bhutan the monasteries controlled the administration under the rule of the Dharamraja. At that time Lama Chode of Sakden was much honoured and respected by the Muktopas. He often visited these areas for performing pujas on important festivals and returned laden with gifts and offerings. Probably at that time the immense pastures just across the border, on the Bhutan side, were govern-

ment land being grazed by Muktopas since these adjoined their pastures along the main saddles, passes and ridges of the border. The Muktopas sought to legalise these grazing rights through a formal gift deed which they secured from the Dharamraja, probably through the good offices of Lama Chode, since in Bhutan, Tawang and Tibet, there is a delicate and rather gracious way of bribing officers and influential people.

The gift deed, bearing the red seal of the Dharamraja, allotted twenty-six grazing grounds of Bhutan to the Muktopas, to be grazed by them on payment of an annual tax to Sakden. This relationship was not a purely commercial or contractual one, being cemented by traditional rules of courtesy and ceremonial exchange of gifts. Eighteen Mukto elders would proceed annually to Sakden with their offerings of ghee, butter and chang, the amounts being prescribed in detail in the Muktopas document against each grazing ground. The Muktopas were in turn feasted by the *Brukpas* (Bhutanese) and sent back with chang and gifts. Thus contractual relationships were softened and hallowed by courtesy and tradition, but the Muktopas had no right to share the tax proceeds which were divided amongst the Sakdenpas and ownership indisputably vested with the Bhutanese.

Since all the households do not possess yaks, butter and cheese have to circulate by a process of exchange and barter. The measure for butter is *hrang* (about 0.25 kg) against the bray (about one kg) for cereals. One hrang of ghee or cheese is exchanged for three brays of grain. In this way the sedentary villagers obtain butter and cheese while the graziers do not run short of cereals. All this trade takes place during the winter season.

During winters the yaks are less of a burden to the graziers because the chowriwallahs can stay either in the chowrie huts nearby or in their homes. Family income is also supplemented because the yaks can carry ration loads along altitudes of 6,000 feet which they cannot negotiate in summer. In winter, on golden afternoons, it is a common and pleasant sight to see the yaks carrying loads almost everywhere—long lines of black, bushy-tailed animals with imposing curved horns, tufts of goats hair dyed red and black tied to their ears and round their necks, and brass bells tinkling away as they amble along the stony porter tracks.

In contrast to the winter grazing of yaks, the grazing of sheep

in winter is a more organised and complex social phenomenon.

In Tawang we have three areas which can be termed as rice-bowls—Kharsanang, Namsetering and Bongleng. Kharsanang adjoins Tawang lying along an altitude of 5,000-7,000 feet just below the Tawang-Sela road. The entire area consists of not more than 300 acres of paddy terraces. Namsetering and Bongleng are situated three to four days march away from Tawang in the flat charming valleys of Warong chu and Nyamchang chu, where these two rivers join the main Tawang chu.

After the harvest in these areas the paddy stalks remain untouched, ready for grazing by sheep which are brought down in hordes from Lhou to Kharsanang and from Rho Jangda to Namsetering and Bongleng. The traditional winter grazing areas are fixed village-wise and encroachments are not permitted. Within the village, however, the village assembly meets for the purpose of allocating the sheep to different fields. First preference is given to those farmers who have no sheep of their own, since sheep dung and urine are extremely valuable as fertiliser. (The fields which have hosted the shepherds always stand out by the depth and luxuriance of their crops.)

At the end of the winter grazing season, somewhere near *Losar* (Tibetan and Monpa new year) the villagers will approach the immigrant shepherds with a khada and some bottles of chang. As a return courtesy the shepherds donate a sheep or two to the host village. This donation is obligatory and is in fact tantamount to a tax paid by the shepherds for the grazing rights enjoyed by them which are customary, being hallowed by tradition.

This is also the time for trade and barter—the shepherds sell raw wool, cheese and butter and carry away cereals. This grazing pattern naturally restricts double-cropping in the paddy fields in these areas. Double and triple cropping in paddy fields in fact has to be spread with due caution because it would threaten the traditional institutional structure of grazing, including barter and exchange of essential commodities. Modernisation and planning on the analogy of the plains has to be undertaken with due care so as to maintain the present balance and inter-locking of systems which the traditional society has achieved. In this respect, I am a protectionist not because I do not want change, but because I feel change should bring about integrated development of the Monpa community and not spectacular development in a parti-

cular field at the cost of another.

Milk is never drunk in Monpa society and is instead made into butter and cheese. These are stored in leather bags which are kept hanging from the beams of the chowrie huts which, as a consequence, always let out a peculiar rancid smell. Cheese is an essential ingredient in Monpa cooking. It is added to noodles and vegetables to make *thupa* (stew). Often it is ground with red-chillies or fomented soyabean into a delicious *chamin* (chutney) with which they eat plain rice or bokpoi (millet halwa). This is potent but delicious once the stomach has got used to the fiery chillies. Chorkum or mouldy and dried cheese cubes are carried by the Monpas in their bags or heavy coats to be munched at intervals like *channa chor garam*. It must be this rich cheese among other things which keep the villagers solidly healthy. Monpa life without cheese will be unimaginable. While ghee has replaced Monpa butter in certain respects, we have fortunately, been unable to provide a suitable substitute for Monpa cheese.

*Mar* (Monpa ghee) is mainly used for buttered tea which is traditionally made by churning butter, salt and tea in tall, narrow, copper urns (crested with silver in the richer households). The average Monpa nowadays, boils tea leaves in an aluminium vessel, pours it into the *gurku* (Monpa cup) and then adds a chunk of butter with a pinch of salt. Often, I have sat near the fire with a seat made of leaves topped with a Monpa coat, watching the tea being prepared and then slurping the hot liquid and licking the butter off (being the Deputy Commissioner, I always got an extra generous dab of butter). Whenever there is a puja or some auspicious occasion Monpa *mar* has to be used—a part of the cultural framework interwoven in every aspect of Monpa life. When tea is served to a guest it is brought in blackened urns with long, curved spouts into which a rose or geranium is tucked with a dab of butter on the lid as a mark of auspiciousness. When there is *dumchang* (all sit together and drink) a dab of Monpa ghee is put on each roxi bottle. When someone is ill the lama, while performing puja and blessing the patient, dabs butter on various parts of the anatomy.

Most important of all are the festivals and pujas where a thousand butter lamps have to be lit. Butter offerings are made and the gompa altar is decorated with coloured butter *alpana* in intricate, tantric designs that mark all holy days in the monastery.

With the onset of vegetable ghee the villagers and lamas have started using it for puja, saving much Monpa ghee for human consumption.

From Zimithang Circle (Pangchen) the monastery accepts ghee as tax. Other villagers are also allowed to substitute the grain tax with butter, thus saving more cereals for the village.

## 5 Travels amongst the Graziers of Mukto Circle

From my chowrie hut I can see  
The meadows and grey rocks,  
Bare of trees,  
Except where the *kemsang mento*  
Ruby red flower,  
Blooms in its glory  
Far far as the eye can see.  
Oh flower, you have dyed my heart  
To a similar richness!  
Let the snow fall three long years  
And turn into ice  
Covering you.  
But your colour will not fade.  
You will bloom away,  
Bright in my heart for ever.

—Chowriewallah's song

The *Meme* (grandfather) Sange Khandu of Mukto was one of my fast friends amongst the graziers. My research on the grazing community perhaps began in his house one October evening in Mukto in 1974. He was staying separately in the outhouse with his youngest unmarried daughter who took care of him. His only son, Sange Phurpa stayed in the main house in accordance with Monpa custom. The other two daughters were married and lived nearby. They greeted us with warm smiles, prepared some buttered tea and offered popcorn and chorkum to munch as we sat around the hearth which forms the centre of activity in Monpa households. No lamps in the house—we talked by the light of the flickering fire, feeding the flames with an occasional log or bamboo stick. The light of

the flares revealed in flashes Meme Khandu's thin, long face with his drooping white moustache and exceptionally bright eyes. His son, Sange Phurpa, impressed me in a way few others did. He stood over six feet tall when he entered the room. His legs were large and stocky and somewhat hairy; his chest was covered with a *dzomo* (female offspring of the yak) skin which added to his wild appearance. His clothes were dirty but his shoulders were broad and strong. He was not as refined as the village Monpas. His lips were thick, if not coarse. He had a stubble of a beard, his nose was broad, his black hair curled over his forehead—matted and unwashed. Not a beautiful figure of a man and yet, imposing—the typical *chowriewallah* whose life is so fascinating amidst their alpine landscape, their yaks, their songs.

Sange Phurpa was very rich and master of many chowries but would not reveal their number, in true Monpa style. In reply to my queries regarding traditional grazing practices, however, he came out with a fund of information interspersed with much laughter and song. Soon neighbours dropped in one after another. I coaxed them into singing for me a chowriewallahs' song which they did, linking arms and jerking hands and knees, as their voices rang out against the stone walls of the house, their red and black figures showing up dimly in the firelight.

The Muktopas normally graze their yaks in the Bhutan border ranges which I had occasion to tour frequently. Most of the villages of Mukto circle lie along an altitude of 6,000—7,000 feet. Upto a climb of 10,000 feet the topography and vegetation is more or less similar to the villages. When it is misty, nothing can be seen but on a clear day the view from a height of 10,000 feet is altogether charming—the Tawang chu river roaring below in its narrow gorge, bright sunshine on the terraced fields of Kharsanang opposite and the white buildings of the Tawang monastery and township glinting away in the distance. At a height of about 11,000 feet, we enter the belt of the *tama seng* (rhododendron forests). The trees are slim but not tall and their tangled, twisted branches are covered with a bark that is pale pink and smooth like a woman's skin. The branches overlap each other, forming a kind of tunnel which has a delicate air of mystery on misty days.

The rhododendron flowers are in their full glory in June which is the time when graziers start moving up with their yaks. The range of colours in the rhododendron forest are extraordinary—



shades of red and orange alternate with lilac and mauve, further set off by cream and white. The leaves of the tama seng (red rhododendron) are poisonous and can prove fatal if eaten by cattle. The flower is considered inauspicious and unlucky because of the poison and more so since it blooms alone in remote areas which are visited only by the graziers. Hence the theme of this song:

Sad that you must bloom alone  
Tama flowers, lonely in the forest.  
I would have plucked you  
To adorn the Buddha in Gaya.  
You should have been laid  
At the altar of our village gompa.  
I would have gifted you  
To my beloved!  
But you must bloom and die  
Alone, unhonored and unsung.

To this there is the reply of the tama flower

What if there is poison in my bark?  
Oh lover, you did not  
Pluck me as a gift for your sweetheart.  
You did not take me  
As an offering to the gompa!  
But then—what of that?  
The bee still sucks my honey  
Offering its sweetness to the gods.  
In his eyes I am still beloved  
So what if you cast me off!

Above 11,000 feet the rhododendron forest is replaced by alpine meadows. The mountains are covered with *wang seng* (silver fir) interspersed with wide, lovely grazing grounds. The *Pangteng* (meadows) are cleared by cutting the fir trees, for which the graziers have their own method—they slash the tree-trunk with a *dao* (dagger) thus interrupting the flow of sap so that the tree dies a slow and natural death, its branches drying up one by one. Within three to four years it is dead wood, easily felled by a few blows of the *dao*.

The wang seng is a lovely tree with its rich green branches spread out like the umbrella skirts of a ballet dancer. The tree trunk is very long, straight and symmetrical and the graziers explain the difference in appearance between the rhododendron and fir by means of a little story which I relate below.

The wang seng and the tama seng set out to establish themselves on earth. While going, the silver fir who was the cleverer of the two, told the rhododendron, "On earth we must conform to the customs of the people. It is normal for the trees on earth to keep themselves squat and short, so you had better mould yourself accordingly so that you are admired most." Saying this the silver fir hurried away and planted herself on the mountain ranges where she grew tall and proud, preening herself on her beauty and many-skirted foliage.

The rhododendron, being a simpleton, followed his instructions to the letter and went and twisted himself into strange, contorted shapes. He grew squat and never attained even half the height of the silver fir.

When he discovered that he had been cheated, he shivered with wrath and cursed the silver fir.

"You may grow as tall as you like but your head will always break and your pride will have a fall."

And so it happens that as the silver fir grows in height, the top breaks off and its beauty is consequently marred. The tree trunk is often hollow from within and its timber is not counted amongst the best.

In the alpine belt at a height of about 11,500 feet, one comes across the *lachang* or log gate which the graziers construct at strategic points along the yak trail to prevent the animals from straying to lower altitudes where the heat would kill them. (In summer the yaks have to stay above an altitude of 12,000 feet.) The *lachang* was greeted with mixed feelings of welcome and trepidation—it was welcome because invariably and mysteriously it marked the boundary of leech infestation. (Suddenly, on the other side, there would be no leeches.) On the other hand, anyone crossing the *lachang* for the first time had to sing a song or pay a fine as default. This was a graziers' custom and while crossing this point the mountains would echo with often unmelodious song and laughter.

Beyond 12,000 feet, the vegetation again undergoes a change.

Junipers somewhat stunted in growth make their appearance along with a new species of rhododendron called *bolo* and *solo* with small beautifully delicate purple and white flowers. The leaves of this shrub are used for incense.

At 13,000 feet begins the border range with its row of passes along the water-shed. The most important pass of the Mukto range is Nyngsangla (12,500 feet) regarding which the story goes as follows:

Once upon a time there were seven brothers who set out on a journey to Sakden (Bhutan) but as they reached this pass the gods turned them into seven *lapze* (heaps of stones) so as to remain a route mark for all subsequent travellers to Bhutan. These are the *Lapzepundun* literally the "seven stone brothers," which are seven stone structures, decorated with prayer flags located just at the pass.

To get a good look into Bhutan from here one has to climb another thousand feet, to Sursumpe, where there is a *mane* (stone wall with inscribed prayers). The traveller can rest his back here and gaze into Bhutan. The day I reached the mane the clouds had lifted and the low hills and undulating meadows of Labreteng in Sakden (Bhutan) were clearly visible. Sakden appeared to be a rich and gentle countryside. Though it lay just across the ridge where we stood, the difference in topography and vegetation was quite marked. The junipers which were short and stunted on our side were tall and stately with green-gold colours in Bhutan. The grazing grounds were huge and spreading. Sakden is reputed to be graziers' country with very little cultivation. The grass is also reportedly richer. Their meadows are definitely warmer than ours and this is proved by the fact that Bhutanese yaks are still there while yaks on our side have moved down to warmer winter pastures.

A most interesting grazing area was Gudpi (14,500 feet), where the grazing grounds of Khet and Gyamdog villages (Mukto Circle) are located. Khet is a very remote village inhabited by strange, rough and rather lovable people. The approach to Gudpi from the village was supposed to be the most difficult route-march in Tawang. Hence when I reached Khet in October 1974 with the Circle Officer Ponya Ette, we found the villagers absent from the traditional reception. The yak trail itself was neglected and had overgrown with jungle. It had not been cleared perhaps because the Khetpas had decided amongst themselves that I would never

attempt it, so why bother! Ponya Ette was furious and took it as an insult to himself and the Mukto Circle! When he lost his temper, however, the villagers came to offer apologies accompanied by a goat and a basketful of green chillies for which Khet is famous. All these were very welcome and they were accordingly forgiven! The next morning all the adult males accompanied us up the climb which took a solid ten and a half hours and was the toughest and most wearying climb I have ever undertaken (8,000 feet of height had to be gained within 8-9 km). The Khet rest house chowkidar sang songs and occasionally skipped a few dancing steps to lighten the burden of the climb. Pem Thinley cracked jokes at the expense of the Khetpas, calling them monkeys for having a yak trail which was really fit for monkeys, not even yaks, what to talk of human beings!

We had started from Khet at 7 a.m. and only around 4 p.m. we got some break from the gruelling climb as the slopes became gentler and a shaft of sunlight lit up Rinchin Gor. This is a lovely meadow marked by lapze. The stones have striking shapes—long, flat, rectangular, triangular and pointed ones, piled in a strange symmetry, one on top of the other, a welcome resting place for weary travellers.

In Rinchin Gor there were six to seven in a row—they had an imposing architectonic effect against the rugged peaks, alpine firs and blue mountains. We had a brief glimpse of sunshine as we ran panting to the edge of the ridge hoping to get a good view of the border only to find ourselves looking down upon the clouds which were slowly settling themselves between the mountain ranges. A tea-break here and then we set off again.

Gudpi turned out to be another one and a half hour's march and dusk had fallen as I stumbled over the rocks wondering if the journey would ever end. Lama Tsering and the others had already reached the camp and I strained my eyes in vain for some sign of camp fires. Finally I saw a torchlight moving—it was my faithful Lama, coming to fetch us, and I almost wept with tiredness and relief as he helped me across the last portion of darkness.

In the camp at Gudpi, the fires were already burning in the chowrie huts. Doka had prepared tea. The porter girls were chatting away. What could be more welcome than the sight of the camp fires, torchlight and the sound of human voices!

Our chowrie hut was just in the shadow of Gudpi which is quite

like the roof of the world. We were looking down on the clouds. It is said that on clear days one can see over the entire area right into Tibet. From Thagla Ridge to Gorichen the snow-capped peaks of the entire Himalayan range are visible. No wonder the Khetpas call it the *mukpin* (general)! Though I went to Gudpi twice, each time I was unlucky—a long patient wait on the top only brought a few glimpses of the Himalayan range through golden clouds, as the sun set, and the colours of the mountain ranges turned from pink to violet, purple to mauve.

Near the peak itself there is a mane and a small *tso* (lake) where in the *devata* of Gudpi is supposed to dwell. He is the guardian god and can be malevolent if disturbed. The graziers firmly believe that the mountain gods do not like to be disturbed with raucous noise. Speaking loudly, let alone shouting and laughing, is strictly forbidden near the mountain peaks and holy lakes. As a sign of displeasure they say the skies will darken and the gods will send thunder, lightning and rain. So the Khetpas slunk past the *tso* in a most subdued manner quite unlike their usual boisterous selves. For the villagers of Khet and Gyamdong, Gudpi is the sanctuary and refuge where they hid themselves in times of yore. Gudpi is the great father and they are his children, always under his protection. The tie is spiritual, legendary and symbolic which ensures that they approach their mountain peak in a spirit of veneration and not of conquest. This spiritual relationship with an often demonic and powerful mountain god marks the life of most villages in Tawang and is incidentally also a factor in socio-political integration.

The vegetation here at 14,500 feet is totally different from Nyngsangla which is at a lower altitude. The tree-line is left behind—the silver firs cease after a certain point—giving way to yet another species of rhododendron. These shrubs are short and squat, but the leaves are similar to the taller species found at a height of 11,000 feet. The flowers are only of two colours—red and cream, growing in small, bell-like bunches which, when in bloom, form an unbroken carpet of colour. In July-August new flowers take their place—primroses, gentians and myriads of other varieties bloom in hidden corners and bunches, sometimes covering the meadows, occasionally peeping from under rocks and crevices. But I was unlucky, for my work did not take me there during the flower

season, though I must have toured some parts of this border range three to four times.

In Gudpi I spent two nights in the graziers' huts which were built of stone with a low door and low roofs. In these huts the graziers have to pass about five months from June to October during the summer grazing season and for them these constitute a second home. In Gudpi for once I had a chowrie hut entirely to myself (usually mine was shared with my staff since a camping ground has seldom more than two or three huts).

The bed in that chowrie hut was low and made of stone slabs. The hearth was just next to it. One could not stand up. The evenings were spent stoking the fire and sitting around the hearth with the smoke filling the hut and our eyes streaming with tears. In a chowrie hut one has to choose between two alternatives—either to freeze in the cold or to light a fire and be blinded by smoke and tears. Perhaps in order to console themselves in this dismal situation the chowriewallahs have a saying which goes like this: "The smoke from a fire follows the man of good deeds." Pem Thinley my political interpreter, would quote this during moments of frustration when, despite all my perambulations around the fire, smoke still blew steadily into my eyes! The nights used to be comfortable with a hot water bag snuggled up under my heavy quilt, but there used to be this hard knocking of the heart against the ribs even when one turned on one's side (a sure sign of high altitude). To while away the evening hours, Pem Thinley would have to sit by the fire and tell me stories (often ribald ones) and sing songs. Lama Tsering (head political interpreter), failed as an entertainer, being very particular about his puja over which he spent long evening hours. During one particularly lonely, mist and rain-riven evening, with the smoke stinging our eyes, Pem Thinley sang a plaintive song with a haunting tune which I have called, *The traveller's song*:

I came through the high mountains  
 Covered with thick forest.  
 I have entered a strange place.  
 The sun's rays lengthen on the ground.  
 I had no heart to leave my home,  
 But god has ordained me to a strange place,  
 To eat strange food.

And sleep and clothe myself  
In strange apparel.

Pem Thinley was always having his leg pulled for flirting with Doka and the porter girls. He would ostentatiously brush his jacket, straighten himself up and announce in stentorian tones, "Sahib, I must now go and check if the luggage has safely arrived,"—a check which necessarily involved long nocturnal visits to the hut occupied by the porter girls, from where only my repeated imprecations and threats could drag him out. He would then come to my hut and flirt with Doka and after much persuasion sing and translate some love-songs for me. Perhaps, as a hint against my strictures on his nocturnal visits, he sang for me a song of much delicacy which I have titled, *The Lover Frustrated*:

If I could be like the mountain stream,  
I would go happily as I please.  
But my parents have tied me down,  
Kept me confined  
A prisoner of their love.  
Yet I climbed up the high mountains  
And the snow hurried down to meet me.  
But the sun broke through  
Before I could reach  
And the snows melted,  
My desire unfulfilled  
Our meeting incomplete.

It was during one such lonely misty evening that I learnt the story of the *yak chamb* (yak dance). All tribes have legends and myths of their origin about the first man on earth and I wondered whether there was perhaps a tribal myth about the first yak. The Monpas have this yak dance which is performed in many villages. The central figure in this folk dance is a beautifully caparisoned yak with a strangely masked and richly dressed goddess placed on its back. Dancers hidden beneath the black folds of cloth manipulate the yak's head and tail to make it dance. This is accompanied by the single beat of a drum, clash of cymbals and four other masked dancers, who recite the story of the *yak chamb* in fragmented verse as it has been passed down by word of mouth.

Pem Tsering, village level worker at Bomdir related the story as follows:

Once upon a time in a certain family there were three sons but the middle one was not loved by anyone. His parents neglected him while his brothers scorned him. Finally one day he said to himself, "Better to leave this house where no one loves me and seek my fortune elsewhere." When the day of parting came, his mother bade him farewell carelessly, presenting him with an old rope, his father handed him an old and battered hat, while his brothers gave him some torn shoes. Thus he went out alone.

As he was walking quietly through the forest brooding over the total isolation which had overwhelmed him, he almost tripped over three eggs which he suddenly found in his path. The eggs were strange indeed—for one thing they were very large and for another they were coloured; one was brown, another red, and the third white. Intuitively he felt this was a divine visitation and he took them up carefully and warmed them with his coat and soon all three eggs hatched one by one. The first opened and lo and behold! from it emerged a fairy spirit who said, "I belong to the heavens and in the skies is my abode." Saying this she flew away to the skies while the boy was left open-mouthed and full of wonder. The second egg hatched and this too was a fairy spirit and she said, "I belong to *Ocholo*—to the gods of the nether world. Therein is my abode." And saying this, she too disappeared.

But when the third egg hatched there emerged from it the divine spirit of the yak who said to the baffled and lonely boy, "I am of this earth and I shall abide with you" and thus was born *Tregi Gyepo*, the first chowrie. The boy, who thus became the first *brokpa* (chowriewallah), took great care of his chowrie. He had to initially keep it tied with a rope so that it did not run away. Since the open scrubland was liked best by the chowrie and it was easier for the *brokpa* to watch it in the open meadows, these became sacred in a way and were called *pangdeng*.

The chowrie then grew big and gave birth to many children and as time passed the *brokpa* became a rich man.

Hearing of his riches his parents and brothers came to him for favours but he looked at them sadly and replied more in sorrow than in anger.



“When I left your house you turned me out as though I was an orphan. You gave me an old rope, a battered hat and torn shoes as parting gifts which I now return to you.

Now I am alone. While sitting, walking, eating and working I am alone.

When I rise from my bed, I am alone.

When I return to sleep, then too I am alone.”

So he lived in this world and all he had was his chowrie, Tregi Gyepo, whose great presence loomed over his life as a guardian and bountiful spirit.

## 6 Monpa Family—Marriage, Courtship and Divorce

I will give you  
Lion's milk

In a slender wine glass;  
Rarest of offerings  
Laid before you my love.

Lift it to your lips  
Quickly drain the cup,  
When it is empty,  
Hand me the glass.

With one arm I place it aside,  
With the other I pull you down  
To my waiting couch.

—Monpa song

Monpa families are well-knit and cohesive units in which they all work together. It is a hard life. Little children learn early to share the burdens of the family—fetching water or little bundles of firewood and carrying their tiny brothers and sisters on their backs. Once a child is ten years old he starts helping in the fields and participating in community labour if required. The little ones also tend sheep—sitting on a stone and playing their flutes. The young men go up to the chowrie huts or remain with the horses along with the portorage loads. All the hard work of felling timber, pulling bamboo, building bridges, constructing water channels, repairing the village gompa roofs are done by the men. Hoeing and ploughing, sowing, transplanting, weeding and harvest are jointly done by men

and women. There is no strict division of labour between the sexes. Even cooking is not strictly a woman's preserve, but weaving of the Monpa woollen cloth is performed exclusively by women.

The family meals are very simple—plain boiled rice which is red, sweet and sticky or a halwa of millet or barley flour ground into a paste and eaten with chamin chutney. The latter is the main condiment which consists of red chillies ground with cheese or fomented soyabean. Vegetables are cooked in a stew with cheese and Monpa ghee added for taste. Meat is often eaten in the form of momos. Popcorn forms part of their staple diet along with roasted soyabean and both these items are always kept in a little Monpa bag while going on long journeys. Potato has, of course, become a major part of the staple diet with the boom in production after 1974-75. Earlier, potato had to be stored and preserved carefully for the annual new year feast in February but now it is sold as seed and table potato in the market after meeting the family requirements.

Chang and roxi are so interwoven in Monpa life that it would be impossible to pin-point even a single occasion when roxi is not drunk. Chang forms a ritual part of many pujas (both Bon and Buddhist). While working and touring it is consumed all the more and before and after a meeting the chang cup must make its inevitable round. Chang and roxi also mark every auspicious occasion. Then there is the special Monpa custom of *dumchang*—a row of chang or roxi bottles is lined up along with a single cup from which the entire company drinks if not to their death—at least to a point of total, rolling and tottering intoxication. With all this drinking going on, however, I never saw a Monpa misbehave while under the “influence” and there were hardly any drunken brawls. Some got excessively addicted to roxi which ate into their liver—a slow but steady killer. Abstemiousness was always looked upon highly and moderate drinking or total abstention was an accepted norm, even if honoured more in the breach than in practice.

The Monpas have nuclear families. When the eldest son marries, the parents move out of the main houses into the outhouse and relinquish all their cultivation. The son in turn takes care of his parents and gives them a piece of land to cultivate during their lifetime. This land is known as *phoreng moreng*, the gompax tax for which is paid by the son to whom it reverts after the death of his parents. Normally old people are looked after by their sons, unless

the latter migrate to other villages in which case they occasionally turn destitute. But the village community also shoulders the responsibility for feeding the destitute, handicapped and mentally retarded who subsist on alms given by the village households.

In most villages the elder son inherits the property while the younger fares for himself, but in some villages this pattern is reversed. In any case, the son who does not inherit the land by right gets some share in it if there is a mutual understanding between the brothers. A common recourse is to go as *makpo* (son-in-law) to a family where there is no male heir. The *makpo* resides in the father-in-law's house, works on the land and inherits his property.

Marriages are arranged partly by parents and partly by mutual consent. Monpa boys and girls have ample time for love and courtship which may or may not culminate in marriage. The birth of a child does not always pressurize a couple into marriage and there is no social stigma attached to a *shou* (illegitimate child) who remains with the mother's family and is often taken over by the next husband. The father of the *shou* may occasionally take care of his child. If he is a good man he may send some clothes and a little money for him. It speaks volumes for the openness of tribal society that a *shou* is never nameless as such his paternity is known and well-established. The *shou* however has no right to property or land of the father and must fend for himself.

Considering the fair amount of freedom allowed to youngsters in Monpa society, it is amazing that the frequency of illegitimate birth is fairly low. This is perhaps because the majority of the couples eventually do marry and settle down. As to the ones who don't, Doka used to quote a Monpa saying (about promiscuous women) to explain the puzzle.

The grass never grows there  
Where, with the passage and  
Pressure of innumerable feet,  
The path is used by all and sundry  
As a mere thoroughfare.

This was a novel way of looking at an age-old problem and I was suitably impressed. While private morals are a personal affair, public behaviour is observed and regulated and fines are imposed

by the mangma for any public indecorum or indecency. Only once did I see a young boy and girl shyly and tenderly holding hands, since demonstrativeness of this sort was rare and strictly discouraged. Still, love always finds a way out, as it has been since time immemorial. Doka used to relate with many a giggle, how couples managed to get together during the annual trip to Tawang for the *Torgya* (Lama Dance) festival. All the villagers used to converge on Shyo village (just below the gumpa) with as many as five to six families lodged at a time in each of the Shyo households. Naturally people slept around the hearth, in the paramong shed or outhouses and such times afforded endless opportunities for enterprising youngsters. Thus, certain nocturnal perambulations and discreet activity beneath vaguely heaving blankets invariably marked these nights, with the older people in blissful ignorance, either real or simulated.

Monogamy is the normal rule and a second wife can be taken only with the consent of the first wife. There were instances when consent was not given though it is normally given when the first wife is issueless. Otherwise the man who is attracted elsewhere must resort to the normal intrigues of all wayward husbands and face the music when found out. Desertions on grounds of infidelity are rare. Mostly the aggrieved partner fights a case, bringing it to the notice of the elders who suitably chastize the erring spouse if found guilty, and a certain amount of fine, chang and khadas settle the case. I heard more of wayward husbands than wives, but there was one brown-complexioned, full-bosomed, bright-eyed, dimpled woman who not only carried on with another man, but did so with her husband's active consent. Her stalwart lover used to propitiate her weak-kneed husband with money and gifts while his own wife worked her fingers to the bone in Bomdila. Finally she came to Tawang and wept and complained to the village elders who interceded on her behalf and suitably chastized the erring couple.

Occasionally, however, a man fell in love desperately and then it was no longer an affair but a serious matter for which he would have to seek separation from his first wife before remarriage. If the husband seeks separation he has to give a piece of cultivation to his first wife for her lifetime or till her remarriage, after which it reverts to him. Generally, the daughters go with the mother while the sons are retained by the father.

I had to settle (much against my will) a divorce case between Leki Chommu and Tsering Tashi of Thongleng which was a classic instance of an "old man infatuated by a young wife." Tsering Tashi had remarried with permission, since his first wife, Leki Chommu was issueless. The problem must have lain with him since he did not fare any better with his younger wife and the inevitable domestic quarrels set in. The gaon budha and elders tried to patch up but this only resulted in widening the rift. By the time the case came to me the entire village had got involved and I had to halt a night in the village to settle the issue. As usual both sides gathered a raucous, belligerent crowd. There was a hailstorm of charges and counter charges. I looked curiously at the younger wife. The kindest thing one could say about her was that she had nothing to commend her but her youth. The old man was long-nosed, aggrieved and definitely parsimonious. Leki Chommu was buxom, vociferous, self-righteous and perhaps a shrew. Leki Chommu had been so careful in tending to the old man, she had worked in the fields, kept the house, cooked for him and yet he preferred that upstart chit of a girl. The old man yelled back that she was a liar and a vixen; she had in fact deserted him. She was quietly selling off all his utensils and, to add insult to injury, she was sleeping with younger men. "Well, good for her," I thought, and decided to separate the couple then and there, a decision which was greeted with surprise mingled with relief. After a brief lull, however, they fell to quarrelling over division of the land, the wife claiming half the share while Tsering Tashi wanted to give only a piece under phoreng moreng. Since it could not be proved that she was refusing to entertain her husband and there was an element of desertion from his side, we divided the property into three shares, giving her one-third. This settled the case for some time, but subsequently they squabbled over the household goods and Tsering Tashi again appeared in my courtyard with a long face, a khada and a petition. By that time, I had had enough of their domestic quarrels and chased him out with blood-curdling threats and imprecations. Did I have nothing better to do than sit and divide their pots and pans? The thought drove me into one of my notorious fits of temper and he was almost thrown out with some of Doka's pots and pans hurtling after him, after which I was never troubled by this case again.

Deeper glimpses into the love-life of the Monpas came my way somewhat unexpectedly during tours in Zimithang Circle, in the

village of Lumpo and the Hathongla Pass. Norwangdi, gaon budha of Lumpo since 1962, was my all-time favourite,—a handsome old man, not Apollo but Dionysius grown old and still merry, with a wicked gleam in his old eyes and fleshy lips, an aquiline nose and a ruddy complexion. There was a crowning coronet of woven bamboo on his mat of grey shoulder-length hair and the tip of his big pink tongue would loll out, in old Tibetan style wickedly, as he joined both hands in a hearty namaste accompanied by a sound that I reproduce inadequately as, “Oh yeah sahib!”

Lumpo was replete with good looking men and women. The other characters who figured in the gossips and tales which I picked up on my tour were also attractive and striking. Pem Tsering (nephew of the Lumpo gaon budha) had fair good looks, a long straight nose and a thin, finely cut (rather cruel) mouth which curved into a dare-devil grin. His keenly intelligent eyes were alert and piercing and he had a charming smartness of manner as he always stood erect, in a military fashion, whenever we talked.

But it was Peki who stole the show, stole the scene, the entire stage in fact. Who could ever forget her? I believe even John Dalvi in the midst of matters of state has remembered her in his book. I heard so much of her—the only daughter of the gaon budha Norwangdi and there she was, the evening I arrived in Lumpo, greeting me in the flickering lamp-light and holding both my hands—to me then, she seemed to be the loveliest woman I had ever seen. She was tall, very slim and strong, her legs well-formed, her hands rather large. It is difficult to describe her, to pinpoint what was so fascinating about her face. It was not her complexion which was indeed fair and rosy (since Monpa women are always fair) nor the glossy, black sheen of her hair which was extraordinarily thick and woven into a long plait at the back and lay loosely in a deep half-fringe on her broad, white forehead. May be it was her teeth which were small, white and even, shining out in constant smiles or that lovely open expression on her face and those deep, black eyes full of fun and gentleness. What rendered the final touch, perhaps, was her mouth which was large, yet delicate and perfectly shaped and those high cheek bones which gave a special piquancy to her long face and made it beautiful.

But what was beautiful about her actually was Peki herself—my

charming Peki with her slight lisp and halting Hindi and fluttering eyelashes, her directness of look and innocent expression.

Peki's life history was woven inextricably with Kesang, her first husband who impressed me almost as much as she did when I met him first. I had had occasion to hear of him, since he was a well-known and prosperous shopkeeper and a progressive cultivator whose name stood apart from others. I first met him in November 1974, amidst the rich elegance and decor of the Gorsam Chorten gumpa. He stood there quietly holding out a porcelain cup of tea, murmuring a quiet welcome and the moment I saw him I had said, "So you are Kesang."

He was over six feet tall, slim, slightly stooped with a fair, rather pale complexion and handsome, aquiline features. His face had a melancholy look in repose till his fine lips curved into a smile of overwhelming charm.

Everything about Kesang exuded quiet elegance, and good breeding in contrast to the other boisterous and rowdy Lumpopas. For all the apparent sobriety of his looks and life-style (he abstained from smoking as well as drinking) he must have been quite a Casanova in his days because he had married thrice, twice in Lumpo itself and to the celebrated beauties of the village. Children might have been a factor in this instability since his son from the first wife died and Peki was barren.

Kesang's first wife Pema was undoubtedly beautiful, her face small and heart-shaped with regular features and a look of fragile sweetness and delicacy which Peki with her tall, strong figure could never convey. Kesang left Pema after nine years for reasons which I could not fathom. Obviously he was tired of her charms and found fresh attractions in Peki who was, moreover, the daughter of the rich and powerful gaon budha of the village.

Kesang came as makpo to the gaon budha's house of his own volition since it was a love match, though makpos are also ceremoniously asked for with khada and chang.

Kesang, however, could not fully shoulder the responsibilities of a makpo being absorbed with a lot of extraneous activities. His was the life-style of the *nouveau riche* as against Norwangdi's rustic, boisterous and bawdy company, so unlike his own refined elegance. The two life-styles did not mix and Peki was barren in any case. Or did she perhaps get tired of him and not vice versa! Anyhow, he left her and remarried someone in the adjoining village of



Muchut and his brother Sonam Dondup (tall, dark, good looking and an excellent dancer) stepped almost immediately into his shoes. How did all this happen? But there were limits even to my prying questions, hence the gaps in my story.

Still, on candle-lit evenings during my Lumpo tour in June 1975, I talked to Peki about her past, reliving bits of her life with her. When I told her that Kesang was very handsome, she laughed and said, "Yes, he is very good looking."

"But you are very beautiful too," I hastened to reassure her.

"Oh no sahib!" she said, with a whimsical smile, "I am no good and illiterate as well."

"Why did you leave Kesang", I asked her, thinking what a handsome couple they must have made.

"He left me no, sahib! I was not nice enough for him," she said with a child-like wistfulness in her voice.

"But you are very nice Peki," I comforted her. And, as if to comfort herself, she said, "Sonam Dondup (her present husband) is a very good worker and is a great help in the fields. Kesang never did any kheti."

"What did he do then?" I enquired. "Oh he was in government service and then he had his shop business also, no sahib? All his time went in that."

I could not help feeling a tinge of sadness because she was barren and so, the family of Norwangdi—great, rich, colourful, loving, lovable and loved—after Peki would be no more.

"Did you ever have yourself medically examined Peki?" I asked.

"No never sahib, but Kesang has three children from his new wife, from me he had none. Nothing comes to fruit here," she said pointing to herself with characteristic openness but with no trace of complaint.

I asked her to come sometime to Tawang where she could get herself examined by the lady doctor.

Yes, now that memsahib was there she would come but not immediately since they were all very busy with cultivation, somebody had to be with the yaks all the time and they had but few hands for kheti.

The next evening she came to see me, all abloom, glowing with satisfaction. She had gone to check the millet seedlings and found them just right for transplantation. On her back was slung the skin

of a small animal—a fox or a large squirrel perhaps, the tail going flop, flop behind her as she walked. She explained that it was meant to ease the burden of the firewood she carried. The next day she put on all her finery and jewellery to get herself photographed while Sonam Dondup leaped into the picture at the last moment and stood beside her—tall, dark, laughing, the perfect picture of a fond husband. I can see the laughing couple as I write but I lost her photographs and now I have nothing left but memories.

Peki and Kesang's separation had left no scars as is invariably the case in Monpa society. I often came across divorced husbands and wives—happily married elsewhere—on most cordial terms with each other. When Kesang remarried and went as makpo to Muchut, just adjoining Lumpo, he decided to settle there and build up his farm. We visited him since Muchut was just an hour's march from Lumpo.

Everything about Kesang was associated with beauty and what could be more beautiful than his log cabin hut situated just in the midst of waving wheat fields (ripe gold when we visited in June) on a perfectly flat piece of land measuring about three acres. Flat land in the hills always arouses in me a mystic wonder and awe; a house in such a situation seemed particularly serene. We felt pleasantly restful sitting in his elegant and sparsely furnished lounge, munching parched corn and sipping millet beer. From the window hung with clean, white curtains we could see the wheat field, half an acre of walnut plantation and a kitchen garden with an excellent potato crop. Behind his house there was a neat spread of about two hundred apple plants. From his wheat field Kesang plucked two or three large ears of *kalyan sona* and showed them to me proudly.

Kesang, Peki and Pem Tsering formed a trio who were united by a common thread of sparkling magnetism that made itself felt on their immediate neighbours. On the way to Hathongla from Lumpo, in the midst of much laughter and teasing I caught some glimpses into the life and amours of Pem Tsering.

His first wife had died young leaving a daughter. He was a nephew of the gaon budha and gossip would have it that he was once in love with Peki. Of course nothing came of it and he took the village belle, Pema as his second unofficial wife. She had been Kesang's first wife and Pem Tsering himself told me (rather

unkindly) that by the time Pema came to him she had been completely finished by Kesang. (Was there a strain of bitterness in his voice?) They said, Pem Tsering did not marry Pema but lived with her for nine years, a relationship with which no odium is associated in Monpa society. It did not seem to them very different from marriage even though perhaps he would not formally introduce her as his *muibo* (wife). This type of relationship also had the advantage of easy, mutual separation without protracted disputes or land settlements as in the Leki Chommu case—and Pem Tsering took full advantage of this loophole by getting involved in a third (or was it the fourth?) romance.

Pem Tsering was courting a young girl from Lumpo, the gaon budha informed me gleefully while Pem Tsering looked self-conscious and attempted a feeble denial.

“Was he leaving Pema then?” I asked, feeling upset about poor Pema, loved and deserted by the two Don Juans of the village.

Pem Tsering hinted delicately that she had become too old for him, “Why did you not realise it at that time,” I asked, putting on my severest look. “Is it fair to desert her now?”

“Sahib does not know the lady,” the gaon budha of Lumpo intervened with a polite cough. “Had sahib known what she was like, sahib would definitely have sympathised with Pem Tsering. The *budhi* (old woman) really scolded and nagged him day and night.”

Pem Tsering intervened mournfully at this point. He had bought a horse but it died in Kubleteng soon after he purchased it, after which he never knew any peace. Day and night she would berate him for having wasted his money, for not having maintained the horse properly and so on—enough to drive a man out of his senses. Public sympathy was definitely with Pem Tsering and finding myself in a minority I gave up and decided to join in the universal teasing.

Pem Tsering was a confirmed flirt as could be seen from the way he chafed and teased Tsering Lhamu, the only porter girl accompanying us. Though a good girl, Tsering Lhamu was not altogether impervious to the infectious charm underlying his casual manners.

In the evening when we reached our camping ground, I sat quietly near the log fire outside my hut with light dew falling and the moonlight filtering through. I felt very peaceful, wrapped in the cosy warmth of a blanket. Tsering Lhamu crept up to me

sweetly with a dog-like wistfulness, obviously eager to chat. I asked her to sit down and not much effort was required to draw her into conversation. It was from her (my secret is out) that I gathered all these tit-bits on the love life of the Lumpopas, for Tsering Lhamu, like any other girl, was a veritable store-house of village gossip.

She confided that had come to talk to me against the advice of the gaon budha and others. They had told her to leave the sahib alone since the sahib would not waste time talking to such an ignorant person as herself. But she had come to me in any case because they were making her life miserable.

I was all attention, as desired! "What has happened," I asked.

"I am the only girl amongst them sahib," she told me woefully. While being detailed for porter duty she had protested against the fact but the *thumi* (village elder) had not heeded her. In the porter's hut they were cracking dirty jokes now, which made it impossible for her to even sit there.

I was thoroughly amused. "What were they saying?" I asked.

"They are asking me—which one of us will you sleep with?" she moaned, looking very injured or pretending to be. "All of them getting drunk and singing away sahib," she went on, the little tell-tale! Seeing us chatting away Doka came and squatted beside us, thus completing the *maiki* (women's corner). Memsahib had no idea what these men were like, they jointly assured me. "Why, if a couple of them get together and find the girls in a minority, they will make them run away in shame by cracking such filthy jokes." At this point they related some quite unprintable ones, which made my hair stand on end!

Tsering Lhamu herself had had an affair with a lama who was of the Red Sect and allowed to marry, but they had not settled down to marriage even though she had borne a child through him.

"What happened?" I asked her curiously. She shrugged her shoulders. She just had not liked him enough, she said. They didn't really get along.

I probed further—"But what about the child?"

"Oh, the child was a mistake, the result of a chance encounter." But much later I came to know that she had eventually settled down with the lama and borne him a second child.

In Lumpo an interesting fact emerged; formal marriage ceremo-

nies were on the way out. Most of the young people had merely settled down through mutual understanding and I can bear this out for the rest of Tawang because during my tenure there I never got a single wedding invitation. One merely got to hear, by the way, that "so and so" had settled down and taken a wife. Marriages in Tawang just "happen" and yet they are monogamous and largely stable. When, (as in the case of the Lumpopas) there are a series of alliances, these also more or less just "happen" and are not accompanied by any serious social or mental traumas.

Monpas in fact have a curious habit of not informing anybody of marriages, not even their close friends. What could illustrate this better than Doka's marriage, two years after I left Tawang! Though she used to write to me regularly before she settled down there was a dead silence afterwards and I came to know of the happy event, as always, through a third party. I believe she still entreats people not to tell memsahib because she feels shy, though she has already produced a bonny child and must be fast on the way to producing another.

Sex in Monpa society is something to laugh at, poke fun about and hold one's sides in lung-splitting mirth. Doka would always come to me, flushed and giggling with the latest bawdy camp jokes: someone bathing in the improvised bath-room and yelling out to her in rougish merriment, "Hey girl! come and sponge my back." Others would perform an impromptu dance with a bunch of bananas! I myself shall always remember my dear Lama Tsering (otherwise so pious) distributing brinjal seeds to giggling village girls with suggestive gestures and lewd looks.

Lama Tsering and Tashi Khandu made a merry pair whenever they got together, particularly when on tour with me. Evenings used to be spent around the camp fire, but I would retire early to the warmth of my bed with a mattress of bracken and fir, awaiting the hot water bag which was my addiction in Tawang. There would be laughter, a little hushed and muffled, as Doka filled the bag. She would come in to place it near my feet, telling me in whispers how Lama and Tashi Khandu daily shook their heads and muttered at each other. "All memsahib can take to bed with her is the hot water bottle," and then, as she poured the water in and screwed the cap, "there goes the lucky bag" and worse! The two of us would shake with silent laughter. Life was so sweet suddenly, so rich and uncomplicated.

## 7 The Tawang Gompa

Towards the east on a high hill  
There is a temple of Pandhen Lhamo.  
I saw three Buddhas there.  
Around them the lower gods sat.  
The Buddha of today,  
Of yesterday and tomorrow,  
All were there.  
Beyond them lay their huge estate.  
All villages clustered around  
Deriving their comfort and their strength.

—Monpa song

Before the Tawang monastery was built in the 1680's the Monpas of Monyul were Nyngmapa Buddhists of the Red Sect even though Gelukpa Buddhism (the Yellow Sect) had long since established its sway over the Tibetan plateau. Gelukpa Buddhism came to the fore only with the establishment of the Tawang gompa which was built under the inspiration and leadership of a persistent and devoted monk called Mera Lama.

According to Monpa legends, Mera Lama was born in Tashi Khandu's house in Kitpi village. The house where he was born is now hallowed by a gompa and called Paodung. While young, he went as a lama to Tibet and studied in the famous Yellow Sect monasteries of Tashi Lumpo and Drebung. After that, he went to pray and meditate in the remote and inaccessible regions of Tsari Che (a pilgrimage spot of the Buddhists) which were inhabited by the Nishi tribes of the present Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh. These tribes were called Lopas by the Monpas and Tibetans. The journey to Tsari Che was extremely hazardous and

the area was full of this hostile tribe who regarded all outsiders with fear and suspicion. Despite this Mera Lama started living in a cave meditating on the path of righteousness. The Lopas did not take cordially to his presence and tried to kill him. First they threw him into the river but he did not die. Then they tried to finish him with fire and daos (swords) but to no avail. Finally they understood that he was a man of God and left him in peace.

After his return he made his way to his birth place Kitpi and constructed the small Langateng gompa near his village—probably the first Gelukpa gompa to be constructed in Tawang. From there he sent two monks towards Mera (now in Bhutan) with orders to construct a large monastery and as soon as the work started he himself reached the place. Many monks flocked to the Mera gompa and thus he got the name of Mera Lama. But the Nyngmapa Sect which was still powerful became jealous of him and plotted to take his life, so he had to flee Mera and take refuge in Tawang in a spot called Sangle Phe (just above the lower helipad in the Tawang township). But the people of Mera Sakden incited the Monpas to burn his hut and he had to flee further north into the jungles towards Bumla. Tired and hungry, his clothes torn, his body full of scratches and bruises he stumbled into a cave which still exists just above Bramdungchung Ani gompa. They say he fell asleep there and in deep slumber saw his white horse sleeping on a beautiful, flat grassy mound situated on a thickly wooded steep ridge, Intuitively, he knew that this was the spot where he must erect his gompa anew.

The next morning as he scrambled out of the cave he noticed the hoof-marks of his horse leading down in a south-westerly direction. Following them he found the horse sleeping on the grassy mound which he had seen in his dream and thus he sited his gompa which was named Tawang (*Ta*—horse; *ong*—blessing) or the place chosen and blessed by the horse.

The gompa was completed during the reign of the 5th Dalai Lama who was asked to send his blessings. The story goes that he drew blood from his nose and with his forefinger drew a *thankha* (holy scroll painting) of *Pandhen Lhamo* (Mother Kali). This was rolled, encased in silk and kept hidden in the main altar where none can see it and therefore the presiding deity of the gompa remains Mother Kali.

The Monpas had been mobilised under Mera Lama's leadership

and so they pledged donation of land, grain and firewood, among other things, for the upkeep of the gompa and further pledged to give the middle son out of three brothers as a lama to the monastery. All these commitments continue to be honoured strictly to this day. The khrai (stipulated grain tax) is paid up religiously by all the villagers. The repair and maintenance of the gompa and lama quarters are also conducted periodically by the different chos amongst whom the different buildings have been permanently divided for purposes of maintenance.

The gompa itself is built like a huge fortress on a high hill with a very commanding and impregnable location. The entrance to the gompa is along a flat, grassy mound with a cypress grove. One can get a glimpse of wide grazing grounds to the west, white walls of Gyangnong Ani gompa perched above them and the Lumla road looping along the broad open meadows of Gomkang below. To the east, through the thick branches of cypress trees, there is the glitter of white buildings laid out in neat clusters spread over the sprawling plateau of the Tawang township. A little ahead of the entrance there is a *mane* from where we move through two *kakalingas* (gates with frescoes on religious themes) up a cobbled stone path, past the rose Rambler wall of the gompa canteen onto the main gompa gate. From there we move past a row of faded prayer wheels, up to the open paved courtyard dominated by a single, immensely tall pole with prayer flags whipped by the wind. This is the area where the lamas dance and main pujas are performed and standing here one can see the wide sweep of the southern Bhutan range—Sela, Nyngsangla and Gudpi. On the other three sides, the courtyard is ringed around by the gompa buildings with deep high-roofed verandahs and frescoed walls. To the right there is the main puja hall with the Rigya Rimpoche's living quarters overhead, in the middle—the library where visitors are entertained and a little gallery abutting the courtyard where guests can sit and watch the lama dances being performed below. To the left there are the Nyerchang's quarters and below the library one can see the old location of the gompa's now extinct printing press.

In the main gompa hall the altar is decorated with butter lamps, water bowls and butter offerings. The holy and mysterious thankha given by the fifth Dalai Lama is kept behind a curtain recess, never to be seen. Offerings are tossed swiftly, delicately



into the opening behind the curtain (a khada weighted with grain and some money tied in a knot at one end). The puja-hall is distinguished by its *asanas* (seats). The highest seat is kept reserved for His Holiness the Gyalwa Rimpoche, or the Dalai Lama, whose photograph is placed on the silken covers of his seat. After that are placed the seats of the other incarnate lamas—the Rigya Rimpoche and Gompatse Rimpoche, all in an intricate order of seniority. Each has his own seat which is kept vacant unless the Rimpoche himself occupies it.

The main image in the gompa is of the seated Buddha, an immensely tall and imposing figure at least fifteen feet high. There was always an inevitable hush, a vague awe (touched with peace) when one approached the image. They say it was carved in Tibet, but how it was dragged across the border ranges to Tawang remains anybody's guess.

In the library, upstairs in the middle cluster of buildings, the scriptures are kept. These are printed on hand-made paper which is locally manufactured from the bark of the *sugu* tree (*daphne botanica*) and preserved in excellent condition—long, oblong bundles tied in cloth of faded red and yellow silk. The books are merely show-pieces now, since the gompa has no scholar worth the name who can study and translate them. The main show-piece of the library is a book written in letters of gold. Two pages have been displayed in glass cases and are beautiful, each page decorated with a drawing of a god or goddess, also done in gold and studded with minute jewels, with the scriptures written in the dull glow of ancient gold dust. Interestingly enough, the library walls are decorated with medieval looking shields and swords, probably relics of the first decade of the gompa's history when the Gelukpa lamas of Tawang had to face a number of onslaughts from the Nyngmapa of Bhutan—a feud over which was waged many a gory battle. An account of one such warrior monk was related to me by Lama Tsering Dorji and the story has somehow remained with me vividly. Mukpin Lama Drakpa or the Sarong Rimpoche (as he came to be known later on) was the greatest of the warrior-lamas of the Tawang gompa who led a series of defensive forays into *Drukpa* (Bhutanese) territory in which he killed hundreds of Nyngma Buddhists. After one such foray into Thakti in Bhutan he was returning to Tawang via Sakden and Nyngsangla Pass. As I mentioned earlier, the Nyngsangla range can be seen clearly from

the monastery. Around dawn as he reached the grazing ground of Ngorgomche (just below the pass) he caught a glimpse of the white turrets of the Tawang gomba glinting faintly in the rays of the rising sun. In the gomba the long brass trumpets resounded and the cymbals clashed for their morning prayers. For an instant he stood there, his eyes closed as if in a dream, his sword stained red with blood of his victims slipping slowly from his suddenly limp hand.

“Ah gomba!” the lama sighed deeply within himself, wracked with a soundless grief, “In your name I shed the blood of so many innocents and departed from the way of righteousness.”

Putting his sword aside there and then, he retired to the jungles for a life of penance and prayer and after many years the people of Rho Jangda found him in a cave above their village and built the Sarong gomba in his honour, after which he became the first Sarong Rimpoche.

The distinction between Monyul (Tawang) and Drukpa area (Bhutan) thus came into being and boundaries came to be drawn along the dividing line of religion—the Red Sect area of the Drukpas became in due course the territory of Bhutan, whereas the Monpas of Monyul remained staunch Gelukpas. It was basically a religious and sectarian division which eventually resulted in border clashes and territorial disputes between Tawang and Bhutan.

For the ordinary villager the differences between the Red and Yellow Sects centre around simple facts. The lamas of one wear red hats during pujas as against the yellow hats of the latter; the Nyngmapa lamas are allowed to marry, not so the Gelukpas. The monasteries of the former practice a lot of tantric rites which are usually absent in Gelukpa monasteries or kept carefully controlled. *Mith.un* (erotic) images and idols are conspicuous by their absence in Gelukpa gompas. Most important of all is the fact that the Red Sect do not pay homage nor owe any allegiance to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of the Yellow Sect.

Administratively the Tawang gomba has three wings—the *nyerchang* (revenue), the *drachang* (administrative) and the *labrang* (spiritual).

The Nyerchang is always a fairly senior lama elected at the general body meeting of monks in which some of the prominent gaon budhas are also required to participate since the Nyerchang

has a dual responsibility; he is a collection agent vis-a-vis the villagers and a distribution agent for the monks who get a monthly ration of 13 bray of grain. The records of annual tax, festival tithes and firewood are maintained by him and timely collection is ensured and organised with the help of villagers whose responsibilities for delivery of khrai are clearly defined.

The collection procedure is laid down to the minutest detail. The rule is that the mangma will have to make good the loss to the Nyerchang for individual defaulters, since it is the mangma's responsibility to make full payment on the due date. In case of repeated default, the mangma reserves the extraordinary right of taking away the khrai land of the defaulter which is then offered to any other villager willing to take it—an offer which is generally accepted with extreme reluctance. It rarely happens that a family is unable to maintain its land holdings and contribute its khrai, and in my entire tenure I came across only one or two such cases.

Firewood tax is also laid down. On appointed dates the mangma gives its contribution to the Nyerchang after getting the loads weighed and duly acknowledged by him.

In Dakpanang, which is primarily a rice-growing area, the taxation is much heavier than in Choksum. Tax is levied at least three times a year in the name of different festivals. It is a common saying in Dakpanang that the monks reach the peasant's doorstep even before the harvested grain is dumped on the threshing floor.

Paying tax to the gompa, however, has become a part of the fabric of Monpa life, the very essence of their society. While the bastiwalla occasionally grumbles over the tax burden, it is a burden which is carried as naturally as one's own weight, being hallowed by time, tradition and spiritual sanction. In April 1976 there was a slight drought and the wheat-barley harvest was badly affected. I asked the gaon budhas to consider approaching the lamas of the Tawang gompa for a slight remission in the annual tax. However, they all shook their heads and said that the lamas would never agree. In any case they would not venture to even suggest a remission, no one was willing to sign an appeal, so I had to let it go at that.

The drachang, being the administrative wing of the gompa, takes care of the day-to-day management of gompa affairs, organises the big pujas and festivals and divides responsibilities

amongst the monks. The drachang itself is a small committee of senior monks who are elected periodically more or less by unanimous choice.

The labrang is the official name ascribed to the office of the *khembo* (abbot) of the Tawang gompa. This post was occupied by the Rigya Rimpoche till his death in November 1976 after which His Holiness the Dalai Lama appointed another Rimpoche who continues to hold this office.

The abbot is concerned strictly with puja and spiritual uplift, secular affairs of the gompa being managed by the Nyerchang and drachang who, however, acknowledge subservience to the ultimate sanction and control of the spiritual head. The abbot is, in fact, the life-blood of the gompa—without the constant presence and blessings of an incarnate lama (rimpoche) the gompa inevitably goes to seed. I often heard the villagers grumble quietly to themselves about growing indiscipline amongst the younger monks which had reached scandalous proportions before the Rigya Rimpoche came as abbot, when it subsided only to simmer below the surface. The villagers would mutter amongst themselves about the vices which used to be indulged in by some of the younger lamas—smoking, drinking and gambling. To add to this, most of them were illiterate and therefore unversed in the holy scriptures. Spiritual bodies always start going to seed through the normal process of institutionalisation, but severing of ties with Tibet has accelerated the decay, since the source of spiritual regeneration and higher learning was the Potala in Lhasa and Dharamshala is too far away to fill the vacuum.

Nowadays the villagers are not as keen to send their sons to the monastery. However, in all families of three sons, the middle one has to be sent to the gompa and the lamas come to take him away when the child is about eight. In case the family does not wish to spare the middle son, they have to place the usual khada and chang before the lamas and plead for maf which is normally granted only on payment of a *chatpa* (heavy fine) which can go upto Rs 2,000.

Similarly if a lama wants to lay aside the monk's robes he has to plead for maf before the drachang and pay a fine. Often women are the cause of a lama's departure from the order. Both the political interpreters of Additional Deputy Commissioner's office (Lama Tsering and Pem Thinley) were *dhallos*—monks who had "fallen from grace" due to involvement with women, though I must hasten

to add that both my political interpreters were honourable men and married their women afterwards. However, a lama might also have to leave the gompa if there was no working adult left to tend the family cultivation and manage the khrai. Since land is the Monpa's first love, he will pay a fine and leave the monastic order to look after it without hesitation or any social disapprobation. For that matter, even the dhallos did not attract any social disapproval. In fact they commanded respect in the village for their past association with spiritual learning and matters of higher import!

The ancient ideal of the gompa was always of the *bhikku* (mendicant lama) who lived a life of seclusion, puja and prayers and depended on charity and alms that came his way. But as matters stand today, the lamas do not depend upon the monthly ration doled out to them by the Nyerchang. Other things have to be purchased—ghee, cheese, vegetables, puja articles and furniture for which money is required. Though a lama is forbidden to cultivate, he is not debarred from being a landowner or from engaging in business or trade (which includes moneylending). Most of the gompa lamas have taken to rearing horses and yaks which are used for carriage of government loads and they must be making a tidy sum from these contracts. Porterage has become a major business occupation of the lamas. I frequently heard the bastiwallahs grumble, saying that the khrai remains the same as in the olden days, but the number of lamas has decreased by half. Moreover, they are allowed to change their ways and become ghorawallas while the villagers have to continue paying their age-old dues.

Besides this, the gompa as an institution has also entered the realm of money making with considerable success. Since the grain tithe is surplus (the number of lamas having decreased from 500 to about 200) the gompa lends out grain to the villagers at the prevailing local rates of interest which are quite exorbitant. The gompa lamas also make money by selling surplus firewood which is donated by the villagers. The drachang raises a sizeable income from petty shopkeepers who put up temporary stalls just outside the gompa during the Torgya festival. The gambling stalls in particular bring in good profits because Monpa pujas are just like Hindu pujas with a big mela, lots of secular entertainment and a lot of fun.

During Torgya the lamas performed their dances in the huge paved courtyard against the backdrop of snow peaks while we

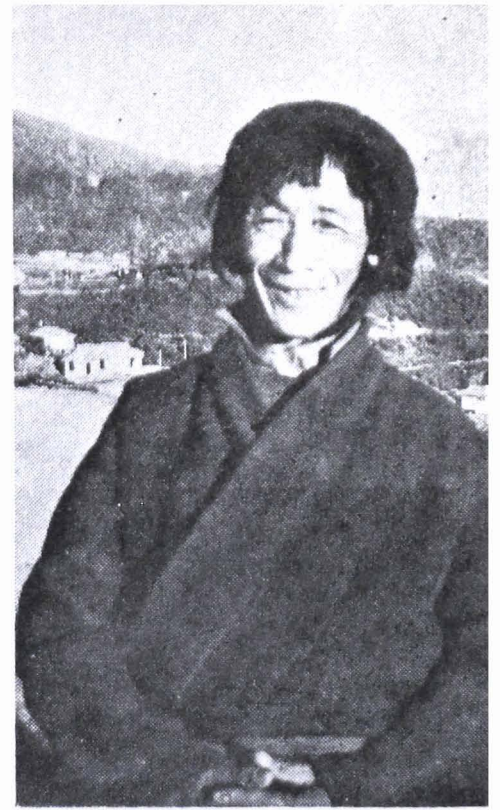
sat in the gallery upstairs sipping tea and munching snacks. The most dramatic of the dances was perhaps the devils' dance in which four lamas would emerge in dreadful grinning skull masks and elaborate dresses that simulated skeleton bones. They had long claws for fingers which they waved in grotesque, clutching movements as they leaped around the courtyard in a practised symmetry accompanied by a high pitched whistling shriek that marked in staccato beats the entire dance. According to some persons the devil's dance symbolised the fate of the evil soul in hell but it might also be intended to convey the gruesome nature of death and therefore turn the viewer's mind towards spirituality.

The dance of the good spirits followed with a troupe of lamas wearing beautiful, serene and rather feminine masks and rich, old Chinese brocades skirts swirling around them as they waved khadas and clinked tiny silver bells. After this rather fascinating sequence there would be an amusing skit portraying the life of the ideal man of dharma, and good deeds, who spent his time in building bridges and repairing porter tracks.

The grand finale came on the third day of Torgya when a richly caparisoned and masked figure representing Pandhen Lhamo was escorted in state to her throne to the accompaniment of solemn and moving music. This was followed by a Gelong dance performed by lamas in their red monastic robes after which there would be a rush of eager crowds to throw khadas and ceremonial cloth over them.

The dances and the gompa are precious to Tawang for they contain within their pageantry, their colour and ritual, all that is unchanging and timeless about the area. In India, we cling to ritual because we are a people who are Janus-like: we look back always, even as we move ahead and in this double vision perhaps lies our security and our strength.

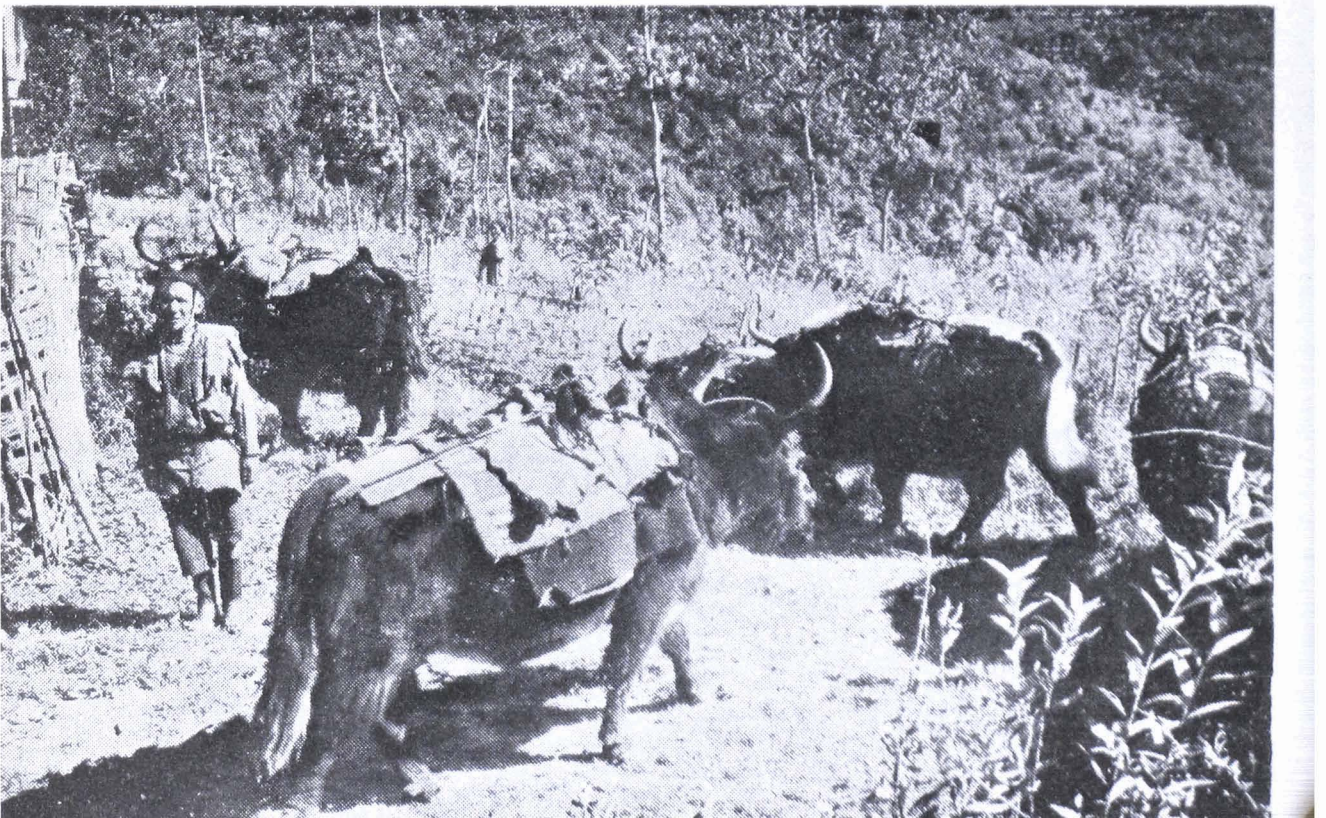




Pema Leki of KI

Tsering Doka with Chuki

Chowriewallah  
with Yaks



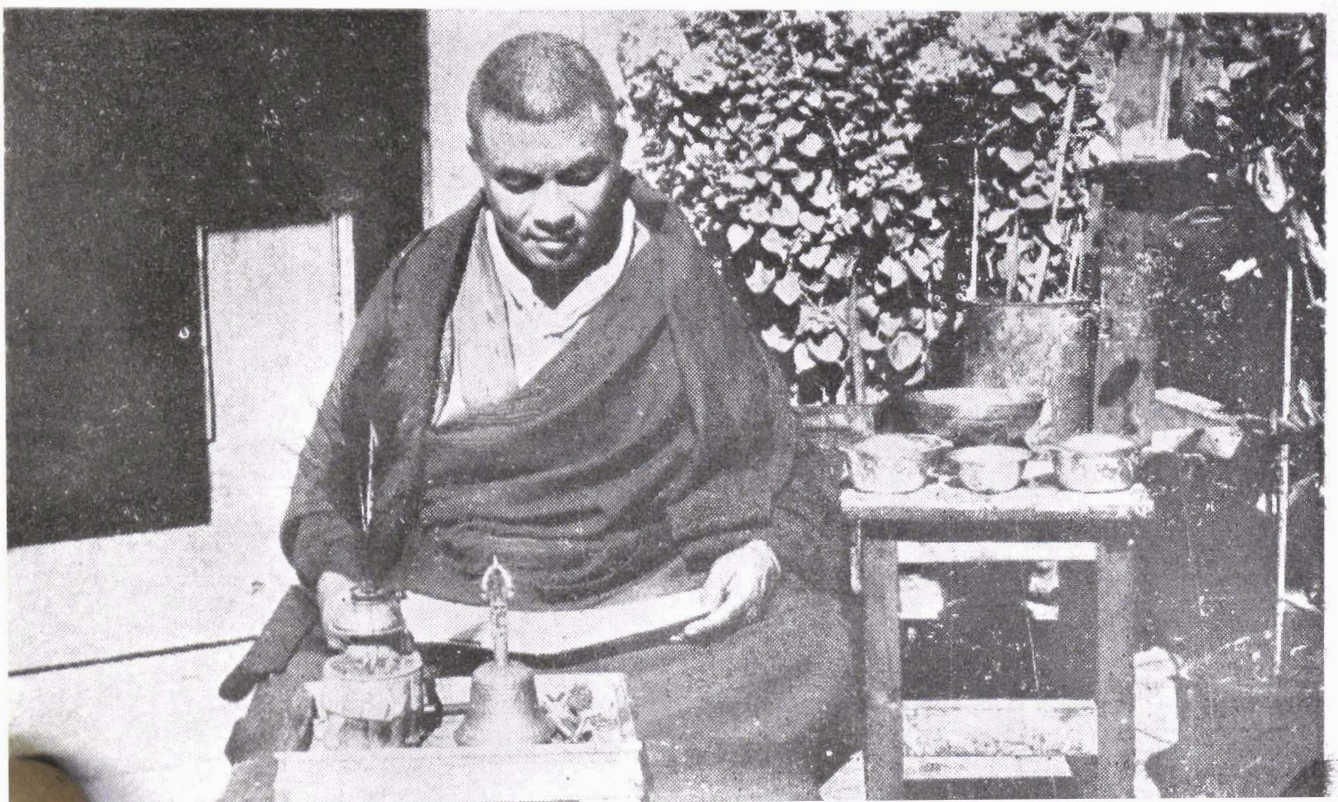




Karma Wangchu

Kesang of  
Muchut Village

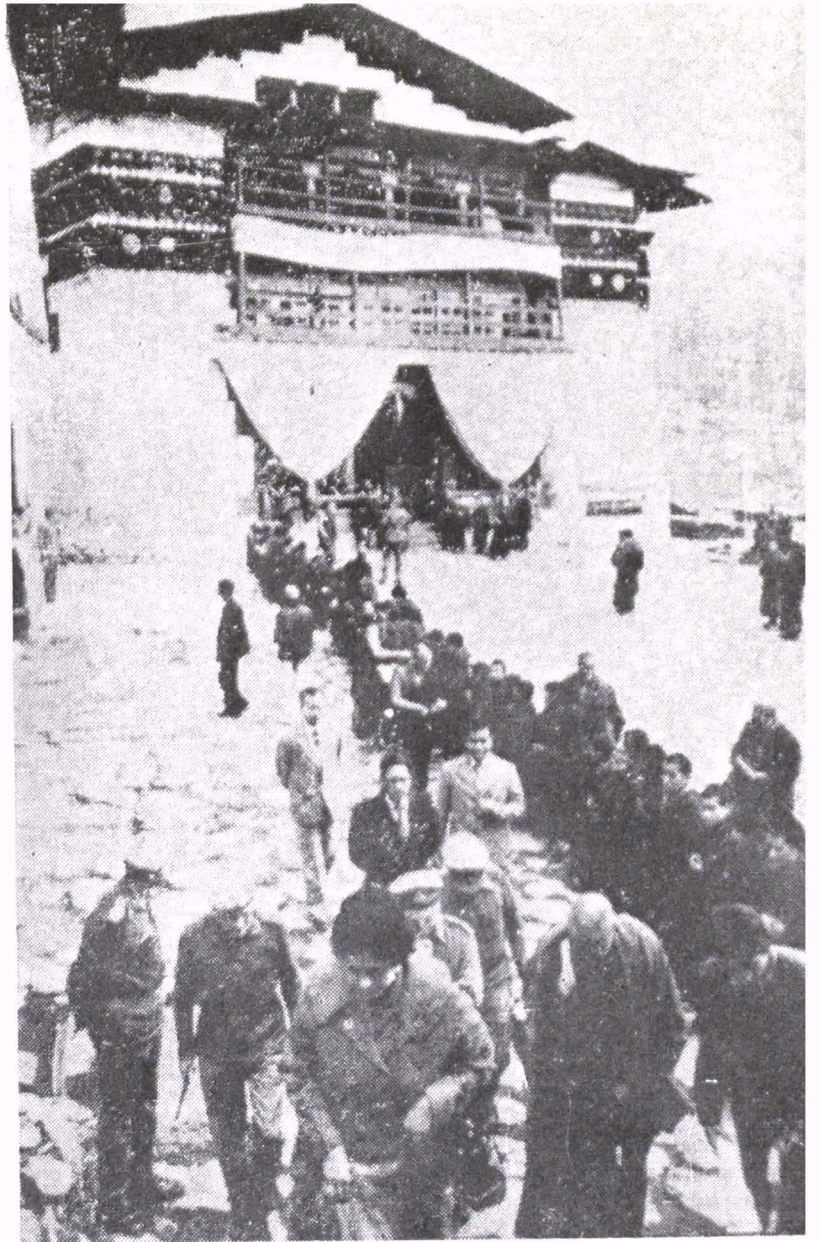
Lama Danga







Lama Hridar—The Black  
Magic Man

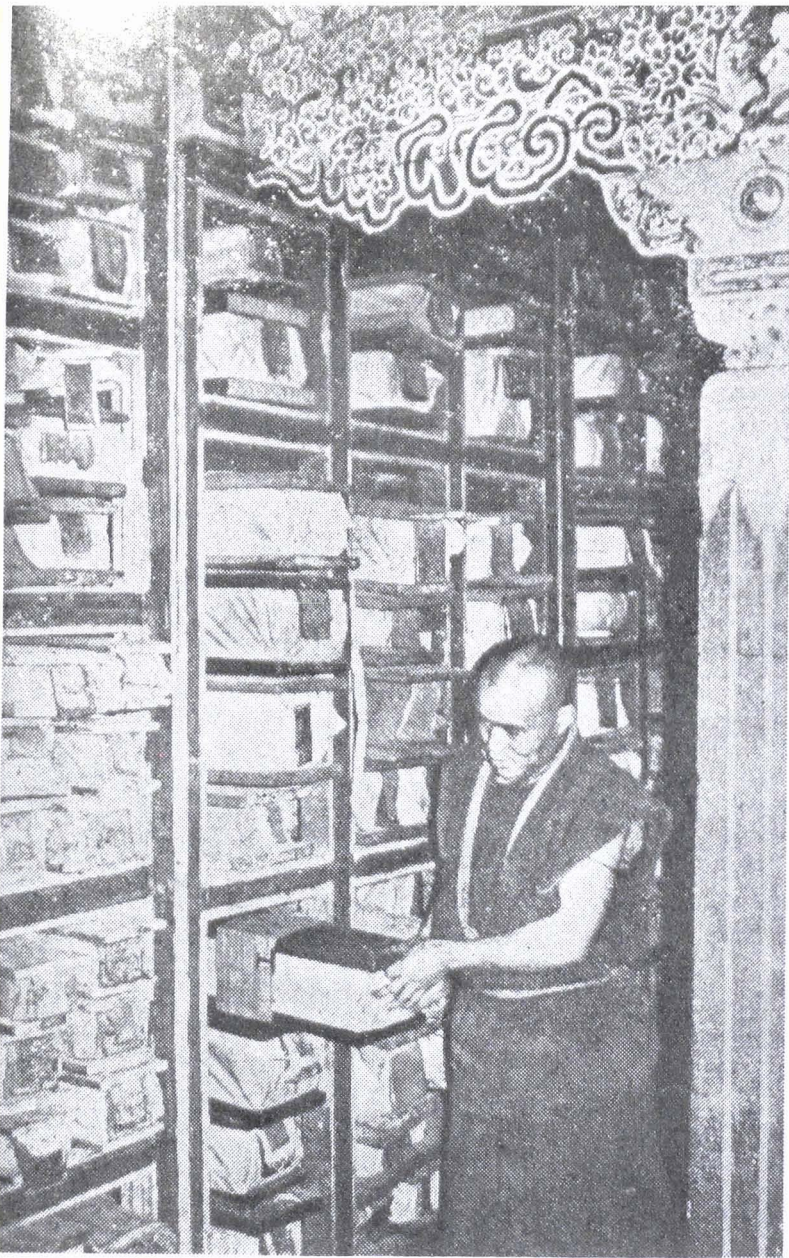


Main Building of  
Tawang Monastery

View of  
Tawang Township







**Champrong Rimpoche**

**Library of Tawang  
Monastery**

**Regional Seed Potato Farm**





## 8 The Compassionate Ones

As long as any living thing  
draws breath,  
Wherever he shall be,  
There, in compassion, shall the  
Buddha appear;  
Incarnate.

—from Mngon Rtog Rgyan

In Tawang and Tibet there are many rimpoches who are liberated souls and take birth again and again for the cause of dharma and the uplift of humanity. Of these the Gyalwa Rimpoche or His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the greatest.

Rimpoches invariably leave indications of where they will be born next. Soon after they pass away the lamas start their search for the next incarnation. Messengers are sent in all directions to find out if reports have been received in any village regarding the birth of a divine child. A rimpoche manifests his divinity as an infant in many ways—either by uttering words which recall his past birth or by display of extraordinary powers of meditation, puja, detachment from play or material interests and occasionally even by miracles. Often, more than one such divine child is discovered and then a second team of lamas goes out to interview the infants. They are put through a series of tests like recognition of the rimpoche's personal articles of puja, which are deliberately mixed up with others. (The true rimpoche will always pick out "his" articles unerringly.) After these tests are completed the results are sent in a sealed cover to the Dalai Lama whose verdict on the matter is final. The child is then taken over by the *chamje* (secretary

of the previous incarnation) and the monastic training of the child is earnestly started. After passing the requisite examinations he assumes full-fledged office and inherits the personal property (landed and otherwise) of the previous incarnation.

The difference between the ordinary lama and the incarnate lama is, in fact, the distinction between institutionalisation and charisma. It is this factor of charisma which, like the Hindu saints and yogis, provides the fresh blood, inner pulse and vitality to Buddhism in Tawang.

The greatest of the rimpoches of Tawang was naturally the Gyalwa Rimpoche—Tsangyang Gyatso the sixth Dalai Lama, lyrical poet and lover, the darling of the Tibetan people. Few know that he was born and brought up in Tawang and that the Choksum area is replete with stories about him. Due to the peculiar circumstances of the fifth Dalai Lama's death, it took quite some years for the Tibetan lamas to discover him and he spent his first twelve or thirteen years in Tawang itself. I could gather a few legends about his birth and childhood from Lama Tsering and Tashi Khandu of Kitpi.

Tsangyang Gyatso was born in Kitpi village in the household of Yeshe Chombey just adjoining Tashi Khandu's ancestral house where Mera Lama is said to have been born. This area is known as Paodung. It overlooks the most beautiful part of Choksum—paddy fields, terraced carefully step by step, in what seems to be a never ending expanse extending down to the white ribbon of the Tawang chu river. Kitpi, which still remains much the same, was a small cluster of houses with open fields below and heavily wooded country above. According to the legend the Rimpoche's soul came to Tashi Khandu's house first, but as he was about to cross the threshold he saw a woman coming out of the house with a basket of *shi* (cowdung and leaf manure). Repulsed momentarily by the unclean thing, he turned aside and went instead to the adjacent house of Yeshe Chombey where he took birth and was born as his daughter's son. The Dalai Lama's father was settled in Urgelling village located just below Tawang. The village is completely deserted now, except for the Urgelling gompa which is constructed on the spot where their house once stood. The ancient courtyard and his mother's grinding stone can still be seen. Towards the southern and western side there are a few ruined foundations and

crumbling stone walls, which indicate the previous existence of a small village.

The Dalai Lama's childhood house, which is now the Urgelling gompa, wears a curiously peaceful air despite the ruins and general neglect. There are green fields all around and a huge, enormous tree shading the gompa roof. It is said that the Dalai Lama while departing for Tibet planted a sapling near his house saying, "When the three topmost branches grow to an equal height I will pass by here again" and the stories have it that this occurred when His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama crossed into India via Tawang in 1959.

The gompa itself is small and fairly dark as is the case with all old gompas. Lama Tsering took me there once and showed me all the *nyokar* (holy signs)—his mother's grinding stone, the Dalai Lama's childish hand imprint on stone and a stone with a curious depression that could vaguely be associated with a child's head. Lama Tsering told me that Mera Lama was simultaneously reborn as the sixth Dalai Lama's brother, but he hit his head against this stone while crawling around and passed away almost instantly. The story goes that the child Rimpoche ran towards the baby crying "*Mera Lama shisu, Mera Lama shisu,*" (*Mera Lama is dead*) which puzzled his mother who had but few inklings of his greatness. However, another story associates some miracles with his birth, for they say that his mother, while carrying him, felt thirsty but when she knelt to drink from a nearby spring, she found milk flowing instead. The spring is still known as *Oma Chu* (milk water).

Somewhere near this spring there is a wooded grove—very green, deep and mysterious, somehow cut off from the rest of the world. They say that he was playing here alone all by himself when the lamas from the Potala came to take him away. The young boy who knew his own self, deep down within him, must have realised that the time for parting had come. Krishna leaving Gokul must have heaved a silent sigh all to himself as did the young Rimpoche and sighing thus he wrote with his finger on a slab of stone jutting above the grassy mound where his head had rested: "*Lama Khenu*" (*Oh My Lord*). The faint inscription in Tibetan letters can still be seen there.

He was just a lad of thirteen brought up in the sunshine, hard labour, laughter, song and freedom of a Monpa village. He had entered adolescence in a community replete with rosy-cheeked,

full-bosomed girls, full of fun and giggles, their daily labour always laced with song and bawdy merriment. It is no wonder then that he was what he was later, even in the Potala, in Lhasa, but always innocent and strangely holy. His poems written in Lhasa reflect this nostalgia.

My favourite is a poem which is quoted in *Tibet*, by Thubten Jigme Norbu and Colin Turnbull—only those who have been to Tawang and lived in the orchid-strewn, sunlit villages in spring can appreciate it fully.

The cuckoo bird from the land of Mon  
 Brings rain,  
 It descends from the sky  
 It brings blessings to the earth.  
 Life grows and blossoms.  
 When the cuckoo bird comes from Mon  
 My lover and I join as one  
 In body, heart and mind.

The Potala lamas came and took him away via the traditional Bumla route: from Tawang to Pangkengtso, then Mila and finally to Bumla which was the main border pass. There is a point just below Pangkengtso from where one can see the entire Choksum area spread out below like an emerald jewel—a hidden paradise. They say he stopped his horse here and the slow procession halted as he dismounted and went a little ahead to stand on a rock quietly by himself, looking down for the last time on his home. Thereafter he left, suppressing a sigh and the stone on which he stood still carries his footprints and is known as *Lama Chapche* (the lama's shoes).

According to another local legend, as he climbed towards Bumla he crossed a point near Pangkengtso where Nemajing a Bon devata, is said to have dwelt. (Nemajing was perhaps a local tribal god probably of Bon, animistic origins, co-existing—as invariably happened—with gods of the Buddhist pantheon.) They say that the Monpa god accompanied the Dalai Lama upto Lhasa where His Holiness bade him, “Stay where I can see you daily from my window in the Potala.” According to the story there is a temple just opposite the Potala where Nemajing is supposed to have enshrined himself—the last link with the Dalai Lama's homeland.

Nemajing, however, could not have consoled the young Rimpoche left alone in the bleak grandeur of the Potala and the austerity of the monastery which he had perforce to accept. He could not forget the warmth of Monyul, paddy fields, freedom, the wine and laughter, the women—most of all the women. He would slip away from the Potala after dark to frequent certain quarters of the Shyo village next to the Potala, but the Tibetan people knew it and loved him notwithstanding.

All this is reflected in his poems which are now famous. But few know that his chief inspiration had sprung from Tawang; the rich texture of life there is mirrored always, though obliquely, in so many of his verses. This one for example which Lama Tsering translated from memory.

The sun has risen in the east  
Lighting the four corners of the world.  
Now I remember again my mother's home.  
At this time,  
The fields will be covered with golden grain,  
Ready for harvest.  
When the grain is ripe and sweet,  
That is the time to pluck it.  
Is it not so my love?  
Yet you chide me for my impatience!

Then there is the wry humour of this poem in which he gently pokes fun at himself, referring to his nocturnal adventures as a stealthy lover. (Lama Tsering sniggered considerably while translating it!)

No one knows that I pass this way at night  
And return the next morning on the quiet.  
Only this old dog, this stray-dog of the bye-lanes,  
He has discovered my secret.

Another simple piece also translated for me by Lama Tsering, barely hiding the smirk on his face, seems utterly beautiful and timeless to me. (The Monpas are in any case very romantic and love poetry delights them immensely.)

Has the sun risen?  
 You are mistaken my love!  
 It is not the sun but some stray stars  
 Which have deceived us.  
 But sun, do not shine,  
 Stand still in your course.  
 Time has been too short,  
 Our love still incomplete,  
 Words left unsaid,  
 Kisses yet to be taken.

Another rimpoche who belonged to Tibet but played an important part in the life of the Monpas was the Gompatse Rimpoche. He was the spiritual head of the Tsona gompa to which the Tawang gompa was affiliated. He fled to India just before the Chinese aggression and established himself in Bomdila where he spent his last days. After his death the usual search started for his reincarnation and around 1972-73 a holy infant was discovered in Shyaro village in Thingbu circle, in a little white house shaded by a grove of trees which fitted a description that had been given by the Rimpoche before he passed away.

This discovery occasioned much rejoicing in Tawang and Bomdila and the Rimpoche was taken by the old Chamje for his monastic training to Bomdila, where he was installed with due ceremony. In October 1973, I happened to meet the child Rimpoche who was then just five years old.

The gompa where he lived was on a high hill from where we could see the entire township. As we entered the first room where there was a shrine with *thankas*, water-bowls and butter-lamps, I caught a glimpse of the inner room. A child dressed in lama's robes was craning his neck curiously to see the strange visitors. He was seated on a diwan but made no attempt to run out and see us though there was no one to forbid him. Finally, I went inside and said, "Namaskar" which he acknowledged gravely with a natural and impressive dignity. His smooth baby face exuded peace and holiness and a certain gentle radiance.

I felt an upsurge of love for the child and kneeling beside him asked, "Do you speak Hindi?"

Suddenly he was shy, like a child, squirming a little and glanc-



ing at Chamjela who answered for him and then he himself whispered, "*Thora thora*" (a little).

Somebody offered him a fiver as we left. The child folded his hands in acknowledgement but made no attempt to touch the money.

Subsequently during my tenure in Tawang distressing events took place. The Rimpoche's mother turned out to be quite a shrew. She remained perpetually at odds with the old Chamje upon whom (as secretary to the previous incarnation) devolved the responsibility of training the young lama, along with commensurate rights which exceeded those of his parents since a rimpoche is supposed to discard his parents in favour of his monastic calling. Thus the ding-dong battle between the two continued and as a consequence the child's training and education suffered. Only the future will tell whether he will blossom forth into his full powers and stature as an incarnate lama.

In the late 1960s the Dalai Lama was requested to send an incarnate lama as the abbot of the Tawang gumpa. The Rigya Rimpoche accordingly came to Tawang and held this office till his death in November 1976. He was a soft-spoken, alert, intelligent and venerable old man with a distinct indefinable air of spirituality.

The Rimpoche presided over all the religious functions of the gumpa. On major festivals he would give *ong* (blessings). He remained seated or standing while the villagers came to him one by one, heads bared, bowing low before his outstretched hands. He would touch their heads and cast a strip of ribbon around their necks. This they would secure into a knot and continue to wear till it fell off. (It must be remembered that *ong* can be given only by an incarnate lama.) A major portion of his money came to him through donations since the poorest of the poor will bring a rupee as an offering to the Rimpoche and this money goes into his personal account. Once some wealth has been accumulated, the chamje often takes to money-lending. The Rigya Rimpoche's Chamjela had been very careful with his pennies and managed to save enough to make the Rimpoche one of the richest men in the sub-division. The Tibetans are good businessmen; when I last heard of Chamjela, he was about to buy a truck and start carriage contract between Bomdila and Tawang! The people of Bomba and Gyanghar had donated a piece of land to the Rimpoche where Chamjela built a lovely stone house, with huge rooms and trellised balconies lined

with pots of geranium and double petunias. Around the Rimpoche's house there was an apple orchard and fields of kufri-jyoti potato from which Chamjela earned good money.

A lot of the Rimpoche's time was spent in touring interior villages which sent out invitations for pujas which had to be conducted often for healing the sick. During one of these tours he died suddenly and peacefully near the Thongleng mane after having completed the ong and puja in Doble gompa for the speedy recovery of the Doble Rimpoche. It was November 26, 1976. He had just left the gompa and descended on horse-back with Utthala (a lama) for company. Suddenly he felt giddy and dismounted from his horse; holding on to Utthala's arm he took two paces and then and there, leaning on him, he left this world—lama to the last, to the end, to die in the open quietly, effortlessly without any notice.

I got the news the next morning. We were camping at Marmang for the Lumla road works. The day was bright and clear as we set out for the Thongleng mane, up the steep climb where a small lonely tent was pitched in a wide open space. Chamjela stood before the tent and as I went to hold his hand he wept with a violent, irrepressible grief, difficult to bear for its lonesomeness.

They allowed me to see him as a special privilege. He lay on the ground wrapped in robes of golden silk, his face holy and peaceful though suddenly shrunken. The only sign of unrest was the trickle of blood oozing from his mouth which had dried up and had not been wiped away.

I did not know how to lay a khada—for others the khada is laid vertically along the length of the body, but for a rimpoche it is different. Chamjela took the khada from me and laid it horizontally across the body.

Finally they brought him out seated on a carved chair that had two poles extending on either side which could be carried as a palanquin. His face was covered with a robe of silk and the palanquin too had silk curtains. The crowd pressed forward, bowed their heads and touched their foreheads to the chair and prayed as the palanquin was carried away.

The next day I left for Tawang to attend the funeral. When I went to call on Chamjela the pujas were already in progress—lamas sat around droning their prayers and clinking their bells, while the Rimpoche's dead body had been placed in an upright position on

the highest seat with a crown on his head, his face and body swathed in robes of silk.

Chamjela was busy supervising the preparation of the samadhi where the Rimpoche was to be cremated. The samadhi could be constructed only by special Tibetan carpenters according to specified measurements. I learnt later that the Rigya Rimpoche's first incarnation dated back to the 10th century AD. Just before his coming, there had been a lot of persecution of Buddhists in Tibet. The first Rigya Rimpoche was persecuted by the king who imprisoned him and asked his brother to pay a ransom of gold equal to his weight for his release. The Rimpoche's brother laboured endlessly travelling the length and breadth of the country, but when he finally brought enough gold to buy the Rimpoche's freedom, his brother waved it aside and said, "There is a very learned scholar in Gyaghar by name of Atisha. Go there with this money, place it before him and request him to visit our country and spread the way of dharma in our land. The money you have collected will come in use for his travels." Thus he sacrificed himself to a lifetime of imprisonment.

I asked Chamjela if the Rimpoche had left any indication of his next birth. He shook his head in silent despair and said, "A rimpoche's reincarnation cannot be taken for granted. If he is reborn it will only be in response to our earnest and continued prayers to his soul to manifest itself once again for the good of the world."

The last rites of a rimpoche are quite different from those of an ordinary monk. Books have to be consulted and certain calculations made before they decide on the method of disposal. The puja can be performed only by another incarnate lama of equal spiritual status. The final cremation ceremony was conducted under the auspices of the Kalaktang Rimpoche with solemn pageantry—rich robes of the lamas, thick clouds of incense, solemn notes of long-horned brass trumpets, deep bass of lama prayers and the pyre flames whipping hot air into the grieving crowd.

As beloved as the Rigya Rimpoche was the Choiche Rimpoche or the Champrong Rimpoche, so called since he had built his house on a piece of land donated to him in Champrong, along a rounded and rather charming saddle just below Tawang.

The Choiche Rimpoche was much younger than the Rigya Rimpoche but his age could have been anybody's guess—from

twenty-five to forty. He had a delicate face, ascetic and kind looking, with a generous smile and eyes that were alert and full of laughter. In his manner he was humble and informal.

I first went to his house in August 1976 when construction on the Tawang-Lumla road had just begun. The monsoon had hit Tawang in full force and there were innumerable landslides on the newly cut road, making it almost impossible to work. Pem Thinley suggested that we go to the Champrong Rimpoche and request him to stop the rains with his puja.

Buddhists firmly believe that incarnate lamas have magical powers for inducing or stopping rain. Anyway, living in Tawang one had absorbed this atmosphere of belief so I set forth without a second thought for the Rimpoche's house, climbing the slushy track across the Seru hill to Champrong. The clouds lay low and grey-black, and all the fields were green; the earth smelt fresh and very pleasing. The plank floors in the Rimpoche's house were well polished so I removed my muddy shoes and walked into the house in my socks.

His living room was long and narrow with lovely carpets and silver puja vessels, a low Tibetan table, a low divan, some precious thankas and images. It was simple yet aesthetic. Of course the main charm was in *Khusho* (the Rimpoche) himself as he came forward to welcome me with his warm, eager smile. I sat on the divan and poured out all my troubles, drinking cup after cup of sugared tea and demolishing packets of sugared biscuits. Would he pray for us, I asked him, perhaps a trifle naively.

He heard my tale of woe and then said, "Well this is the rainy season. I can't promise but I shall try." But the next day the weather improved and we did not have any major landslides after that.

Again in October 1976 I had evidence, at first hand, of the power of his prayers when a lady of Sohung village suddenly developed a reaction to an injection given to her by the compounder. Her cheek swelled, lips got distorted and the skin started oozing a curious white pus. We begged her to accompany us to Tawang hospital but to no avail. The whole family raised such a din, behaving as if she was being taken for her execution, so we gave up in disgust and left wishing her a speedy and comfortable death.

A few weeks later we again visited Sohung. Our lady, to my great surprise, was much better—the swelling had almost subsided

and the pus had dried up. She greeted me warmly and apologetically, explaining that she had been to the Champrong Rimpoche who had done puja for her and sprinkled holy water on her cheek and told her to go to the hospital in case she did not improve.

The next Sunday we were invited for lunch to the Rimpoche's house and I asked him how he cured her. He replied diffidently that he had done puja for her and then sprinkled the holy water on her cheek. The people had widespread belief in his powers of prayer and it was quite common to hear of the Champrong Rimpoche being called for pujas to cure the sick and he used to roam around quite freely on his errands without any fanfare.

The Monpas often approach a rimpoche for prediction, but with a veneration and simple faith that is spiritual, unlike the worldly eagerness with which we approach astrologers or palmists.

I once asked the Rimpoche how he predicted events. He told me thus:

“Mother Kali is our ruling goddess. She is the greatest, the source of all creation, the destroyer and protector of her devotees. She carries in her hand two dice stones, one black, the other white. When she tosses the white one onto the chessboard of this world all good things flow from it. When she throws the black dice there come destruction, sorrow and death.”

So when he has to predict something, he will first perform a long puja dedicated to Mother Kali, with offerings to her, after which he will throw his dice which he showed me. (The Rimpoches' dice is very holy and used only by lamas.) Each number has its own significance for different people, countries and problems and from these combinations he can compute and interpret the trend of future events.

Spiritual greatness notwithstanding, the followers of both the Rimpoches managed to create misunderstandings and party politics, each group claiming that their Rimpoche was greater. In a small place like Tawang the slightest whisper is heard and inevitably exaggerated. The gap had developed to an unbridgeable extent, where the Rigya Rimpoche and Champrong Rimpoche each went about his work, politely and courteously ignoring the other's existence. Thus is greatness crossed with human frailty!

## 9 The Weakness of the Flesh

I went to my teacher, with devotion filled,  
To learn of the Lord Buddha.  
My teacher taught,  
But what he said escaped;  
For my mind was full of compassion,  
Full of that Compassionate One who loves me.  
She has stolen my mind.

—Tsangyang Gyatso,  
The Sixth Dalai Lama.\*

The Doble Rimpoche belonged to Dakpanang (Lumla area) having his residence in the Doble gompa just above Lumla. There were numerous stories regarding the present and the past incarnations. In one of his previous incarnations he was a holy and ascetic monk, but in the next he was an alcoholic though a great personality, much revered by the people of Dakpanang. He had studied in Lhasa under the Regent Protector of the Dalai Lama but became a drunkard after his return to Dakpanang. Once he was invited to a villager's house near Thrillam. Night fell but the Rimpoche continued to drink. In the kitchen, the hostess muttered imprecations under her breath. Suddenly, as the host took the next bottle of chang to the guest room he found His Holiness missing.

They ran in all directions searching for him and eventually found him sleeping on the porter track, his head resting against a stone. Repentant and humble, they begged him to return to their house but he placed his palm against the stone and swore never to

\*Thubten Jigme Norbu and Colin Turnbull, *Tibet: Its History, Religion and People*.

return. The imprint of his hand can still be seen on a rock along the old Lumla Thrillam porter-track.

The present incarnation was born in Shyangfu (Bhutan) and brought very early to Lumla. He did not complete the monastic training in Lhasa. It was predicted that he would be a womaniser and he seemed to be determined to prove the truth of this prediction. His sons litter the country-side around Lumla. As if the chance encounters were not enough, he earned for himself this dubious distinction of having eloped with one of the *anis* (nuns) of the Gyangong Ani gompa. The ani belonged to one of the notable families of Choksum. She met him when he visited the Ani gompa for performing a puja. One can imagine the horror of the nuns, therefore, when one fine morning they discovered that the Doble Rimpoche had disappeared quietly along with this tall, attractive ani whom he took as his wife.

In Tawang the fines for such offences are quite heavy and the Rimpoche had to pay two—one to the furious father of the girl—and the other to the Ani gompa. Since Gelukpa lamas are not supposed to marry, the Rimpoche also lost the right to occupy his traditional *asana* (seat) in the Tawang gompa, which will remain vacant till the next incarnation.

Love and passion, however, are fleeting things. After having paid so dearly for this marriage, their life together turned out to be anything but idyllic. The Rimpoche had always been somewhat hot-tempered and once, during my tenure, things flared up to a point where his wife ran away, taking the children with her. As she belonged to Choksum she returned to her parental home, and it now became an issue between Dakpanang and Choksum. The gaon budhas of the former came to plead with the gaon budhas of the latter to persuade the recalcitrant wife to return to their beloved Rimpoche who had lost weight and had become quite ill since the desertion!

She came to see me also—a tall, strapping, brown-complexioned woman. I could not see what he had found in her till she smiled and showed even white teeth and suddenly looked very attractive, and devil-may-care.

I did not give her much sympathy though she was asking for it. Had she not married him of her own free will, run away from a nunnery to become his wife, I asked, in a pompous tone. “Ah yes,”

she sighed in Monpa with a soft, nostalgic look on her face, “but in those days he was so nice, so good to me.”

The crisis had occurred over this indiscretion committed by her daughter with one of the lads of Thongleng village. The intrepid lover had been caught by the enraged father climbing into the girl’s room through a window, while they were staying in the Doble gumpa. The Rimpoche worked himself into a fury, beating the girl black and blue and demanding an exorbitant fine from the boy’s father for the dual sacrilege of daring to touch the Rimpoche’s daughter and profaning the sanctity of the gumpa.

The wheel had come full circle. The Rimpoche must have forgotten (or pushed aside) memories of how he seduced the girl’s mother in similar circumstances. (But the lover and the father are poles apart—had he not paid a huge fine himself to his wife’s parents?) When this beating became unbearable for the child she ran away from home. The mother followed her with the other children, declaring that she would not stand by to see her child murdered. Finally, she did return to him and settled down to the old routine but I never checked up the fate of the young lovers.

While the Rigya Rimpoche and Champrong Rimpoche lived in Tawang, the Doble Rimpoche was based in Lumla. I met him only once and that too by chance somewhere near Bomba village in Tawang.

Winter had been completely dry that year. The skies were clear and cloudless under a merciless sun. We had not had a drop of rain or snow for weeks and all the villagers were out in the open, burning incense and beating drums which is the traditional way of praying for rain. The wheat and barley plants were green but stained yellow at the roots and the ears of grain were pathetically small and stunted. The earth ached for rain and all of us with it, but in Tawang one could never call the sun cruel and beauty reigned still.

The day we met the Rimpoche we had gone for an impromptu picnic along the Seru jeepable road where we found a cool, shady spot near a mane with a steady rush of water in the midst of a blue-pine forest, tall and rather thick. In the open meadow ahead, a few bright-hued carpets had been laid out with low *chokches* (Monpa tables) laden with popcorn and bottles of chang. Somebody told us that these had been laid out for the Doble Rimpoche who had been called by the Bomba Gyanghar people to pray for the rains.



Later, sipping tea in the village level worker Tashi Dondup's house in Lumberdung, we heard the conch-shells and the loud, deep notes of lama trumpets and dashed out pell-mell to see the fun.

What a gorgeous sight it was—the villagers moving with *kangyur* (108 holy scriptures) slung across their backs in slow procession. Women wore their best finery with Pangchen brocade edged caps; silver jewellery, silver talismen and charm boxes, while the men wore new shining Monpa shoes and caps of brocade, tipped with fur, set jauntily on their heads.

We strained our eyes eagerly to see the Rimpoche but could not place him in that colourful medley. Suddenly to our right (about fifty yards well behind the procession) under a clump of trees there appeared a group of four men, one of whom was very tall and stout. He was dressed in the red and yellow lama robes and had an indefinable air of greatness. When we exchanged greetings he said, “*Tashi delek*” in a soft and distinct Bhutanese accent. The puja bowl with its small prayer flag and heap of wheat-barley grain and powered flour were offered as in Losar. As he went ahead he kept glancing back and saying namaste with a certain innocent grace and childlike dignity.

The Doble Rimpoche had a strange impact on me. His body, so tall and stout was in contrast to his face which had the smooth, gentle, child-like quality one associates with the rimpoches. Despite this his face managed to retain a curiously sensual quality. Maybe it was his mouth which was full and pink like a child's; maybe the fleshiness of his body which yet could not be called flabby—a strange, startling mixture of sensuality and innocence which I find difficult to forget.

The next day, his men came with a huge bag of Monpa rice and I returned the gift. A few days later, it rained a little in the nearby villages.

A year later Doble Rimpoche developed a peculiar disease which distorted his face and defied cure. It was to pray for his recovery that Rigya Rimpoche went to the Doble gompa in November 1976. It is said that the Rigya Rimpoche took his illness upon himself and passed away quietly after finishing the puja.

When we went to take the Rigya Rimpoche's body from the Thongleng mane, I met the Doble Rimpoche again after about a year. He was standing with a khada in his hand at the door of the tent. He was unlike the imposing and beautiful figure I had seen in

Bomba, being stooped, bare-headed, with a straggly, drooping moustache which he never had earlier, his face pale and dark with illness. Still there was a whiff of the old devastating charm in his smile and his manner as he offered the khada to me.

Sex is in many ways inter-linked with religion and some traces of phallic worship definitely exist in the interior. Doka told me that while constructing a monpa house the male organ is carved in wood and installed along with the first beam of the roof. This installation is considered auspicious and no house can be built without it.

Along the porter-tracks Doka had often pointed out rows of *pong* (phallic symbol) carved on sticks and stuck into the ground. The connection, however, could be traced either to Bon worship or to later Buddhism. One cannot rule out the possibility of the Guru Padma Sambhava having brought with him some elements of Shiva linga worship hence phallic worship may be attributed to either the pre-Buddhist or the post-Buddhist period. The numerous Tibetan stories of Aku Tembu further support this contention. I managed to get Doka to relate one or two which she could remember.

Aku Tembu was a great lama who is said to have been involved in sexual pranks which are startling till one remembers Krishna leela and the gopis and the same riddle of love, riddle of life, looms before one's eyes and things begin to fall into place. Nothing the Hindus wrote however could quite compare with the outrageous stories of Aku Tembu. Once he smuggled himself into a nunnery disguised in the anis' voluminous red robes after which he had a grand time screwing all the nuns. One by one the anis became pregnant and started leaving as dhallos while the elder anis were left scratching their heads and wondering how so many anis could have had access to a man in a nunnery which was so secluded.

Finally they conjectured (rightly enough) that the culprit was, in fact, in their midst, disguised as one of them and hit upon an ingenious device for ferreting him out. They set up a stile in one corner of the gompa courtyard and organised a race which required the anis to jump over the stile one by one. While doing so they had to lift their heavy robes and the elder anis posted themselves at strategic places, peered appropriately and pounced upon the culprit just as he was bouncing over the stile.

Doka could not recall what happened thereafter, but knowing

Aku Tembu one can be sure that he got away.

In another story Aku Tembu was passing some villagers engaged in ploughing a field and he shouted out the customary greeting "*Si podgue?*" (What will you sow?) But the villagers replied in a spirit of levity "*Pong podgue*" and behold—actually that field bore only a crop of the carved wooden phallus to which the farmers had jokingly and irreverently referred.

Aku Tembu took one wooden phallus out of them and gave it to the *umze* (head) of an Ani gompa. She used to carry it with her for luck. When she would suck her breath inwards the pong would enter her of itself and when she sighed it would come out, since it had magical qualities. She always kept it hidden carefully from prying eyes but once while going to perform a puja in a neighbouring village she forgot to carry it with her. In vain she pressed the villagers to allow her to return to the gompa but they insisted they would go themselves and bring back whatever she wanted. She enjoined them not to look inside the packet in her drawer and bring it straight to her. The messenger, however, could not contain her curiosity and opened the packet wherein she discovered the carved phallus. In surprise she cried out, "Oh!" whereupon it promptly entered her. When she sighed, it left her body as suddenly as it had entered her. But its magical qualities were irrevocably lost for which the ani umze had only herself to blame.

This was one of the most peculiar stories I have heard so far in Tawang. Perhaps it illustrates the practice of masturbation which might have been prevalent in the nunneries. I also heard stories of homosexuality amongst the monks in the olden days, when the young and good looking novices used to be taken as porters by the older lamas on their long journeys to the Tsona gompa in Tibet.

These sexual deviations were an occasion for jokes, laughter and some shame but certainly no guilt.

In case the reader tends to misunderstand this chapter I must reiterate that sexual licence was not rampant amongst the monks or incarnate lamas. There is certainly a degree of degeneration in the gompa. The Doble Rimpoche did have certain extraordinary habits but had settled down after his marriage and was in any case the exception, not the rule. What is remarkable is not that such aberrations occurred, but the fact that these were accepted by the Monpas in a spirit of tolerance and with a marked absence of hypocrisy.

## 10 On the Pilgrims' Trail

The pilgrims move towards *chang* side.  
The mountains are very steep;  
The path is treacherous.  
Still we are going to the place of dharma;  
Oh God, guard our footsteps.  
Safely let us reach our pilgrims' shrine.

—Monpa invocation

Before the advent of Buddhism, Bon was the ancient religion of Tawang and Tibet. It was marked by the animistic worship of spirits and demon gods, many of whom were believed to dwell in the prominent mountain peaks of the region.

Bon was ousted from Tibet and Tawang by a great tantric saint of West Bengal who was known as the Guru Padma Sambhava or Lupon Rimpoche. Tawang is replete with stories of the Lupon Rimpoche. According to legends he possessed immense magical powers with which he subdued most of the demon gods and goddesses.

Tawang gompas and kakalingas are covered with frescoes of the Lupon Rimpoche. Traditionally he is portrayed as a fierce overpowering presence with a strange aura of menace and magic. His personality overshadows Tawang like a great brooding eagle hanging over every remote mountain peak and cave.

Local legends relate vividly how the Rimpoche came from Tibet via the traditional route of Bumla pass and paused at the top of the pass to survey the green plateau of Tawang nestled between the mountain ranges of Tibet and Bhutan. They say that he found it very beautiful. So he carved a huge and stately throne for himself near Bumla by magic which can still be seen. He seated himself

there, and waved his magic sword and beat his *damroo* (a minute self-operated drum), slowly increasing the tempo till the sound thundered and echoed and all the mountain peaks bowed their heads in obedience. Thus the peaks north of Tawang township are strange and curiously shaped, somehow bent and leaning towards an indefinable, invisible presence. One of the demons refused to bow his head. So the Rimpoche rose in his stately manner and caught the defiant peak within his mighty fist. They say the imprint of his fingers can still be seen from Bumla. Some were just crushed by him and the peaks near Pemakhar (adjoining Pangkentso lake) are said to be remnants of those petrified spirits. Lana peak is locally known as the accursed or hail storm peak. Lupon Rimpoche is believed to have cursed this recalcitrant devata and condemned him to a lifetime of snow and hail. The peak thus remains a solid block of bleak bare granite; not a blade of grass grows on its slopes. The chowriewallahs still claim to find bits of iron and shrapnel around the vicinity. They say that these are weapons of war which the Rimpoche hid there to be used again in the remote future when dharma shall recede and the Lord shall send His incarnations to destroy evil-doers and uphold the path of righteousness.

According to legend the Lupon Rimpoche traversed entire Monyul and adjoining Tibet but in particular he hallowed four places, not unlike the *char dham* (four shrines) of the great Hindu Sannyasin Shankaracharya. These four shrines are Bangajanga, Takstang, Karpotsang and Domzang, out of which the first two are in India, the latter being on the Tibetan side. The legends about the Lupon Rimpoche are curious in the extreme. They say he visited Domzang in the form of a bear and from there he traversed the border to Takstang (the Tigers lair) in the form of a tiger. I could visit the Takstang gompa twice, the account of which is given in a subsequent chapter. Besides these four shrines he also visited other remote, inaccessible peaks where gompas now stand in his memory. Of these certainly Chongchongmaphu and Thangabe both at a height of 15,000 ft. were exciting, mysterious spots, both of which I was able to visit.

Chongchongmaphu is a proud, rather lonely trident-shaped peak at the westernmost corner of the Bhutan border range directly overlooking the Dakpa (Lumla) area. Next to it are three subsidiary peaks, set in a row, called Jamepunsum (the three devis or

three sisters). According to the migration history of the Lumla people (which I gathered from their elders and political interpreters) the people of Dakpanang migrated from *changrelung* (somewhere in central Tibet) under the aegis of their guardian god Chongchongma who was originally a Bon devata called Damjin Dorji Lekpa.

When the Lupon Rimpoche came to Tibet and subdued all the Bon Gods, Damjin Dorji Lekpa also went to pay homage to the great saint. The god was accompanied by his servant Samey Peyghar Gyebo who was a very cunning fellow. As they approached the gates of the huge monastery where the Rimpoche was staying he asked the master to alight and hold the reins of the horse for a second, while he went to enquire if they would be given an audience. Going inside, however, he bowed deeply before the Rimpoche saying, "I am the Bon devata Damjin Dorji Lekpa. I have come with my servant who is outside holding the reins of my horse. I pay homage to you. Henceforth I bow to you only and not to the powers of Bon."

Having paid homage thus to the Rimpoche, he got himself installed by hoax as a devata. When Dorji Lekpa came to know of the trick that had been played on him he was furious and threatened to create havoc for the world, but Lupon Rimpoche prevailed upon him to become the guardian god of a huge migration wave which was pushing southwards from central Tibet. He offered him a lion to ride upon, but the devata preferred to retain a simple goat for himself. Thus armed with his goat and his *dorji* (thunderbolt) he made his way southwards, accompanied by three goddesses. In his wake followed the Dakpa people. Of the three goddesses he kept one as his mother and two as his wives. After travelling a long way he came to Monyul and seeing the flat valley bed of the Tawang chu and the Warong chu, he found it good and installed himself there as the Chongchongmaphu, along with the three *devis* who came to be known as the Jamepunsum.

In the meantime because of the long route and difficult terrain the god and his followers got separated. But as soon as the migrants entered the Tawang chu area they caught sight of their god in the Chongchongma and settled themselves there in the shadow of the mountain peak which they worship to this day.

The Chongchongma gompa is located just at the base of the peak at an altitude of 13,000 feet. The pilgrim's trail to this

mysterious, secluded spot follows a route which was largely untraversed by the administration till the Bonglengpas took us there in a big group in November, 1974. The trip started, I must confess, at my inspiration since the place appeared redolent with mystery fascinating me to the point of becoming an obsession. Bongleng village was the starting point of our journey from where we climbed up slowly, slowly towards our first halting camp at Domrong (11,000 feet). The village paramong gave way to tall varieties of rhododendron which provided some shade. A curiously shaped red flower which grew erect like a burning rod made splashes of colour in the forest midst. The path was in portions quite as bad as the Gudpi climb being narrow and unstable, though the gradient was more bearable.

The villagers from Bongleng and Kharung accompanied us in large numbers, some carrying our loads while others cleared the track as they moved on ahead. The young men sang Monpa folk songs while they cleared the path. They were sweet-natured and full of laughter, ever ready for mirth to lighten the fatigue of the journey. I can still picture them as they marched and rested in turns—the sunlight weakly filtering through the forest leaves on to their red coats, knee-length red boots, fair ruddy faces framed by black fringes of hair falling straight on their foreheads and shoulders. They whistled for breath and sang lilting songs, some of which I have translated.

In a beautiful plane he has come.  
In a golden plane he has come.  
See, the precious jewel seated within!  
Oh welcome welcome, pray take your seat,  
I offer my salaams to you!  
We all bow to you  
He has come from very far,  
He has come in a motor car made of pearl.  
The sahib from Delhi is seated within!  
(*Chorus*)  
Oh welcome welcome  
The way was long indeed,  
He has come in a golden train.  
Pandit Nehru has come in a golden train,  
(*Chorus*)



Oh welcome welcome.

If we promised three cups of roxi to Thuten Nima he would promptly halt in his tracks, solemnly lift his fat arms and raise his voice, his deep bass filling the forest with strange melody. After the song he would explain it in his stumbling pidgin Hindi which would invariably make us laugh. So he sang an invocation to Chongchongma holding the roxi cup in his hand and dipping his forefinger delicately into the liquid (as is the Monpa custom), flicking roxi thrice as an offering to the gods, before the cup was drained.

Pem Leta, gaon budha of Bongleng village needed more coaxing and after much persuasion, mingled with threats, he sang a song while we rested on an incline somewhere near the thick bamboo forest adjoining our camp.

In Lhasa we have placed the  
 Holy Sun.  
 Around Him we built a golden wall.  
 In the garden all around  
 We planted sun flowers.  
 Bright flowers, bloom on forever,  
 Celebrating our God, the Sun.

Our camp at Domrong was located on a saddle in the midst of a thick bamboo forest from where Bongleng and Kharung used to cut bamboo.

(In Arunachal, as pointed out in an earlier chapter, all forest lands belong to the villagers and there is no harassment of permits to be issued by the Forest Department.)

My camp hut consisted of an improvised bamboo shelter with a bamboo bed and a narrow bamboo table—all very clean and pleasant. The night was warm. The villagers had no shelter for themselves being used to sleeping in the open. That night however no one slept. Though they had walked the whole day carrying load and cleaning the porter track as they went up, the villagers appeared not one whit tired. The whole night through we heard their endless chatter along with the slash of daos felling bamboo and snapping twigs. In the morning Doka reported that the entire entourage was equipped with new bamboo and cane headbands

and baskets—so hard working and indefatigable are the Monpa people.

The next day we were to reach Labray, our destination, from where we planned to visit the Chongchongma gumpa. On the way we had a panoramic view of the Manchurong forest basin, the beauty of which struck me like a shock. It was like a bowl covered from inside with a deep, dense, golden green forest, ringed by a semi-circle of scarred and twisted granite peaks. The *maniseng* (spruce) were tall, stately and unlike any tree I had seen elsewhere in Tawang. Its beauty was silent and enclosed within itself—cut off completely from the rest of the world.

Bongleng gaon budha told me the history of the Manchurong forest. Traditionally Bongleng has shared the exploitation of timber with the Bhutanese village of Dukti just across the border, even as Khet and Gyamdong shepherds have shared their winter pastures since time immemorial. While Dukti exploits timber and bamboo from the lower basin the Indian villagers carry out their extraction work in the upper reaches of the Manchurong river. This is recognised by both sides as an area where joint rights exist and are mutually respected. After crossing over the smallest peak of the trident known as Japache, we went down a steep descent till we emerged at Labray.

The scenery at Labray was gentle and soothing with Tawang hidden behind us by thick forest and Bhutan ahead with its blue mountains and the wide gentle spread of Thongrong pastures just below, where we camped.

It was late November and the Bhutanese shepherds had already taken their yaks down. The grass was slowly drying up. Meadows extended southwards down the hill-slopes as far as the eye could see, the only snag being the total absence of water on the Bhutanese side of the border range. However, there was a good water source at Labray chu on the Indian side, falling in the territory of Bongleng Kharung with whom the Thongrong (Bhutan) villagers have one of those traditional understandings which are quite common in this region.

Lama Tsering went ahead as always to arrange our camping ground and by the time I reached everything had been organised, down to the lavatory! Kharungpas had decorated my room with yellow silk and *endi* (Assam silk). The chowrie hut was a beautifully built log cabin with the usual hearth—comfortable and cosy.

We slept on the floor. The altitude could not have been more than 10,000 ft. We were just under the shadow of Chongchongma.

In the evening I took a short walk in the grazing ground. Coming back I looked up to see the mountain-god towering above, with a single pointed peak emerging through a passing violet cloud as the sun set and tinged the sky with rose. The mountains turned dark blue and suddenly black and Chongchongma loomed above them, somehow compelling and alive with an unnamed presence. Really, it seemed natural to me then to worship the mountain.

In the evening Lama Tsering and some of the party came to me, their faces aglow with excitement, the light of devotion in their eyes. They wanted to visit the peak the next day if Madam would permit. Needless to say Madam was thrilled and so we proceeded the next morning with J.P. Choudhry (Circle Officer Lumla) grumbling ominously at my heels. (He did not think highly of prancing about mountain-tops while the serious work of administering the headquarters lay neglected!)

After about half an hour's climb through a wooded spur, we came to a point where suddenly the tree-line ceased and we saw, just above us, a huge, bare expanse of rock—a single slab of mountain about sixty feet wide and perhaps over hundred feet high. One felt dizzy looking up. At its base were a row of stone slabs with inscribed prayers like a *mane*.

Suddenly we were right there, in the wake of the Lupon Rimpoche. The villagers told me in hushed tones that he had meditated there, residing in a small cave-like enclosure to the left of the rock. It is difficult to believe that someone could have traversed this difficult route and survived in this terrain over four hundred years ago. The spot was more accessible from the village of Thongrong and perhaps it was from this village that the visitors thronged his retreat and disturbed his solitude so that he moved even further up the granite peak, lodging this time at a height of 13,000 feet where the present gompa is situated.

Lama Tsering had already reached the gompa before us. (He could never forget his monastic training.) He had swept and cleaned the rooms, filled the water-bowls at the altar, lit the lamps and burnt incense.

I had gathered the impression that the gompa was in ruins but we found it in fairly good condition. Adjacent to the shrine was a big room with a hearth for camping pilgrims. In the central puja

room there was a large image of Lupon Rimpoche along with depictions of his eight forms. One wall was completely covered with frescoed paintings. For the first time I saw *Mithun* (erotic) images and thankhas of obviously tantric origin in a gompa. These are not to be found in gompas of the Yellow Sect. One particularly striking and ubiquitous scroll painting showed the Guru in lotus position, his form painted dark blue, with a naked woman on his lap. Her arms were wound around his neck, her face turned sideways, their lips meeting in a kiss which appeared strangely dispassionate, since the Guru was detached and serene while the pose of the woman indicated greater involvement. The painting showed her back towards the observer. She was embracing the Rimpoche boldly from both sides with her legs—her long slim back, rounded hips, and flowing black hair were very prominent. While it was clear that she was very closely pressed against his body, all the passion and eagerness seemed to be concentrated in her. The Guru was resplendently calm, his dark blue in strong contrast to her white nakedness.

Just next to the gompa there was a spot where the Rimpoche is said to have drawn water miraculously from a rock surface. There were two huge rocks here—very tall, facing each other with their tops almost meeting in an overhang, leaving a small patch of sky visible through the roof they made. The rock cave itself was narrow and dark. There was no water anywhere else in the vicinity, except in this small pool just inside the cave. At first glance the water appeared slimy but when scooped up in one's palm it was clean and sweet to taste. All of us bathed our heads in the holy water and drank it reverently. My head was throbbing slightly with tiredness but the water soothed me and made me feel peaceful.

After that I attempted the Chongchongma peak while J.P. groaned and gnashed his teeth behind me, but I had to retrace my steps quickly since one had to climb the last bit holding on to bushes and tree roots like a veritable monkey along a very steep ascent. Alternatively there was a route up along a sheer slab of rock which the pilgrims traversed with the help of a rope. It must have been a dizzying climb but the danger and risk added to their fervour and devotion. On the very top there fluttered a few prayer flags and there was hardly room for more than ten people to stand. They burnt incense, offered khadas and intoned their prayers after which

they returned to camp all aglow with satisfaction.

In the same aura of devotion Lama Tsering chanted for me one of the most beautiful songs in my collection. We were returning to Bongleng, scrambling slowly down from Japache with sunlight on the Manchurong forest below while Lama chanted and translated alternately as we marched.

I saw a puff of white cloud  
Towards the East,  
Above the Kangri hill.  
Seeing it my heart was filled with love  
Remembering my Guru Che Lobsang Drakpa,  
Lord of our land,  
Through whose great teaching  
All dharma came to this world.  
All we have, we owe to him,  
To his penance and his teaching.  
Never did I serve the people.  
Let alone help others,  
I only wished for their harm.  
Now I must change my ways.  
I too will leave the village  
And move as a lama to the mountains.  
I will meditate on the path of dharma.  
I will try and follow in the footsteps  
Of our Lord.

Thangabe looms large and protective over the villages of Thongleng, Pamakhar and Sakfret. The peak is the guardian god of Thongleng as Chongchongma is for Dakpanang.

While supervising the Lumla Road works in October-November, 1976, I used to watch Thangabe while returning to the Marmang Camp late in the evenings. The mountain range curved around a flat basin nestled at the base of the peak, which stood silhouetted against the night sky like a majestic presence seeming to guard the workers and the wide sweep of the freshly cut road looping its slow course below.

They say that August is the best time for visiting the holy lakes which are situated in the Thangabe region. Tibet and Tawang are known for their Himalayan lakes which are supposed to be imbued

with a divine presence, granting visitations to those who trek up to them during the auspicious time. In August the flowers would have been all abloom in the grazing grounds but in November we were preparing for snow.

We set off for Thangabe with a small party consisting of Thukla Tashi political interpreter, Doka and Pem Leta, gaon budha of Thongleng. Three anis (nuns) from the Sikarteng Gompa above the village also accompanied.

The route to Thangabe goes via the village of Thongleng where we halted in Pem Leta's house for the inevitable cup of tea. We relaxed in the guest room, munched popcorn, and exchanged khadas.

It was a lovely day—clear and sun-soaked. We started off on horse back up a steep climb past the Thongleng school and then through a rather magnificent oak forest which led to a small patch of cultivation and the village gompa which was situated in a very commanding position. The anis joined us at this point—one of them knew all the puja and legends of Thangabe but had a hoarse throat and could speak only in a raised whisper.

At an altitude of about 10,500 ft. we reached a wide open stretch of meadows and I dismounted (despite Thuklas entreaties to the contrary) and walked on the smooth grass. Behind us to the south, we saw the magnificent sweep of the Bhutan border range. The snow peaks of Gadpo Ganmola and the far southern mountains of Morshing and Kalaktang—revealed themselves in a grand vision unfolding slowly, layer by layer as we went higher and higher up north. I walked backwards most of the time in order to see the mountains better. It was such a beautiful scene—to be remembered (as I have done now) with intense pleasure.

We halted for lunch in a small clearing in the midst of silver fir and rhododendron forest. It was growing slightly cold. We lit an improvised fire and ate beef and Monpa rice (pilgrims are not supposed to eat certain items—eggs, goats meat, fish, onion or garlic are all taboo but beef is allowed). From Chokterla we went ahead to another pass whose name I have now forgotten, but from where we got a panormic view of the Indo-China-Bhutan trijunction. Thagla and Hathongla could be seen clearly. It was an indescribable sight—range upon range of snow peaks, the Great Himalayas themselves, pink in the rays of the setting sun, and in the midst of them all a beautiful proud cone, majestic and flowing, a veritable

queen of the mountains which (some mountaineers have later told me) could be none other than the Kanchenjunga. I would go back to Thangabe all over again just to see that sight once more, to believe that we saw it, that it was real.

As we turned north eastwards from this pass the snow-line started. We walked through snow for about two hours. (In Tawang one never thought twice about walking through snow and we did it most of the time in canvas shoes called hunters.) The snow was brittle with little icicles that formed an intricate and delicate flowery pattern on the rhododendron bushes and the ground.

It was very quiet and a little cold. The old ani coughed and laboured slowly through the slush. Thukla gave me his hand, as usual, so I came through merrily enough. At Hathongla there is another pass and just below it the entire basin of Thangabe unfolds itself, ringed on three sides by towering black granite. In the centre, we saw dark waters of a lake and towards the southern opening of the bowl a clear view of Chongchongma looming erect and tinged with sunset glows.

As we descended from the pass it became colder. Pem Leta and the porters debated where we should halt—there were some chowrie huts nearby, while the gompa was further up. I opted for the gompa though they told me there was no firewood to be found there since it was beyond the tree line. The others went ahead as Doka and I, accompanied by Thukla, lagged behind picking our way along slowly in the translucent clarity of the evening-light; a serene walk except for the cold which nipped our feet. The horse ani told us about the visions they see in the lakes. The other day, she said, she saw a line of horses and then a line of Indian troops marching across in the waters. The lucky ones see all this in the lake besides gompas, lights, jewels and other divine visitations which are most frequent in the topmost lake of Guisang which is considered to be very holy. Thukla's father too had told me that he saw yaks and sheep in the waters but many others have returned disappointed. It depends upon your good luck, they say. The gods have to be pleased with you and you are not to make a din when you go there since the mountain-gods are particularly allergic to noise.

We started collecting scraps of firewood as we went along, not relishing the idea of reaching the gompa to shiver in the cold with snow soaked shoes and socks. We found only pathetic little twigs



which Thukla piled into an armful till, in the distance, I suddenly caught sight of a number of wooden planks (perhaps cast off from some chowrie shed?) I hurried Thukla towards the planks, taking hold of his armful of sticks but he returned soon, empty handed, with a disgusted expression on his face, "What happened?" I asked. He told me that those planks were part of an abandoned lavatory, perhaps built for the gompa!

When we reached the gompa the porters had already deposited their loads and were returning to collect firewood. The gompa was nestled at the foot of a massive craggy peak of towering granite. For me, they chose a cave-shelter—a huge rocky overhang made into a room with stone walls and a low door. There was dried mountain grass on the floor, some stone shelves in a corner and the inevitable stone hearth. Doka, Thukla, Pem Leta and I were to camp here while the others slept in the gompa.

It must have been 7 p.m. and I was feeling uncomfortable with the cold. In rather indecent haste I got Doka to light the fire but a tongue of flame licked the dried grass which lined the floor and the room was ablaze in a minute. Instead of panicking, Doka and I went into a fit of hysterical giggles, weakly pulling at our bedrolls, shouting for Thukla and leaning helplessly on each other in inexplicable mirth. Finally, Thukla heard the din and came running to stamp out the fire while the gaon budha pulled out the remaining luggage. There were no casualties except for Doka's sling bag containing *atta* (flour) which got slightly burnt. At that time we gave the matter hardly any thought and soon we had the flames going merrily. A Monpa dinner was prepared while we sat around the fire with a pleasing hunger growing inside us, watching the vegetables with huge chunks of ginger, meat, potato, cheese and ghee bubbling in the pot.

I took off my sodden shoes and socks but as I placed my half-frozen toes near the fire Thukla informed me that this act was taboo in place of pilgrimage. The gods would be offended by the smell of damp, dirty socks and equally damp, dirty toes. This delicacy on the part of the gods was a bit of an inconvenience and I removed both offending members from the hearth with a groan and some muttered imprecations.

What would the gods do if they were annoyed I asked? They would not allow the offender to sleep, Thukla explained. They would rush in through the door and sit on his chest, they said, with

a certain grim glee. Pilgrims had to be very careful in observing all these taboos—the smell of burnt cloth also annoyed them, along with onion, garlic and other forbidden food.

We sat round the hearth till late chatting of this and that. I had wrapped myself in Thukla's new *chupa* (Tibetan coat) which was very heavy and warm.

At night, perhaps I made the mistake of taking the *chupa* over me in addition to the quilt and blanket. Maybe it was this which, along with high altitude, induced the intense sweat and fear in which I awoke around midnight with a great weight like a stone on my chest, my heart thumping away. My throat was parched. I felt suffocated and somehow hung on to a thread of commonsense which prevented me from running out into the open. We were already sleeping under the sky for the rock was merely an overhang and not a cave—overhead in the dark blue of the moonlit sky a few stars twinkled away.

For me, the night became suddenly imbued with an ominous presence—spirits that threatened to swallow me up. Waking the others would not have helped—they were sleeping close by and yet I felt the threat and the burden was on me alone. I drank a little water which was mercifully close (thanks to Doka's daily, thoughtful routine) and took up my *mala* (rosary). I must have sat up for two hours. Fear had gripped me to the extent where I was terrified of lying down and again feeling that dreadful weight upon my chest.

Intuitively I guessed that whatever was troubling me would fade away latest by 3.30 a.m.

The hours were long indeed. In the middle Doka and Thukla turned, awoke and saw me, but since I gave them no indication, they rolled over and slept again. By morning I was pale and wan and all knew and whispered amongst themselves that the gods had troubled the deputy commissioner during the night. Thukla told me gravely that their anger must have been occasioned by the socks and the burnt cloth of the *atta* bag. Madam had also scoffed at the gods—in her heart of hearts, she had not believed in their power.

A much chastened Madam therefore crept out of the cave shelter later to explore the banks of the lake which lay before us. The air was crisp and clear. In the distance a solitary Himalayan duck quacked away in the waters. There were no flowers at this time.

The area of the lake bowl had an uncanny stillness perhaps because of the wall of granite which protected it on three sides.

Thukla was with me when we saw the lights in the lake. It happened very quietly and suddenly. Just as I was about to turn away and move back to camp, a sudden glimpse of lights caught my attention and there they were—a train of jewelled lights like flickering *divas* (earthen lamps) being lit slowly in the water, one after another. They danced right up to the shores of the lake in a stream of hundreds, only to recede and disappear again quietly, one by one, extinguished as it were by an unknown hand.

This phenomenon must have repeated itself about three to four times till it stopped, as suddenly as it had begun.

It could not have been an effect of the sun's rays because the glint of sun-light on water is something we all know and understand. What Thukla and I saw there was different. (Perhaps the gods were making up to me for the fright of the night before?)

But the same heavy fear gripped me when we climbed up the craggy peak which towered above our night shelter and beyond which lay the holiest of the three lakes—Guisang. The hoarse-throated Ani was busy pointing out the holy features of the place. She scrambled amongst the rocks, her face lit with religious fervour and exaltation, pointing out where the Lupon Rimpoche sat and meditated, where he cooked his meals and so on. But I heard nothing as I clutched Doka's hand and sweated with that same mysterious unease, gritting my teeth and forcing myself to climb up the rocky tower which suddenly—once again—began exuding that demonic presence.

Once we reached the top, I felt some relief on the shores of the small lake with its placid blue waters, absorbing the atmosphere of peace that surrounded it. The Thonglengpas climbed a small rock overlooking the lake, lit incense and chanted the Sirkim mantras, with billows of smoke rising to the sky.

I shall never forget that Sirkim puja performed on the banks of that Himalayan lake. The Thonglengpas had deep, melodious voices. Their chant rose rythmical and soothing in the thin crispy air, streaming across the lake shores towards the ring of snow peaks and craggy mountains.

In the Guisang we all saw the *yui* (precious jewel): the image of a turquoise stone glinting away very clearly in the lake waters quite near the shore. It was very large—about four to five inches in

length and two to three inches in breadth, sparkling quietly—very still. All of us were lucky to see it before it disappeared mysteriously and suddenly as is the case with all such visions.

Perhaps to touch the shores of peace one must first suffer the torments of the damned?

## 11 Relics of Bon

I got a flower,  
A golden flower.  
I gave it to the gods  
Of the nether world.

—Monpa song

The advent of Buddhism was resisted by the Bon priesthood in Tawang but the Guru Padma Sambhava did not seek to obliterate the Bon gods altogether. He was content to accept their submission in a trend which is evident from the legend of the subjugation of the Bon god, Damjin Dorji Lekpa who was elevated in status and admitted into the Buddhist pantheon. It is paradoxical, therefore, and yet, in the circumstances, understandable that the Guru Padma Sambhava, himself the destroyer of Bon, yet forged a link between the two religions, so that we find a synthesis of old and new in Tawang where present day Buddhism has never quite shaken off its Bon heritage.

It would interest anthropologists to know that certain professedly Buddhist deities have limited territorial jurisdiction while others do not. Thus the universal deities of the Buddhist pantheon such as Tara, Avalokiteshwara, Pandhen Lhamo are worshipped all over Tawang. But others like Chongchongma and Kromtin are village gods (*Kela*) who are worshipped within well-defined territorial limits. The worship of Chongchongma is confined to Lumla Circle where Bongleng and Kharung which together form the Khabong cho worship Changchongma as their village deity.

The eight to ten villages which comprise Sanglum also worship

Chongchongma and share common forest lands and grazing areas. In public participation and community works they emerge as a single unit.

The Pangchen area has its own deities, chief of these being three holy peaks of Gompa punsum adjoining Manum La which are worshipped by Lumpo and Muchut. These two villages are adjacent to each other, and again have grazing and forest areas in common.

On the southern banks of the Tawang chu, the worship of Chongchongma ceases with the territorial limits of Bongleng and Kharung. As we move eastwards we find that the villages of Mukto, Gomkeling and Mirba owe allegiance to Langepunsum, a peak with three camel-humps that figures prominently, (as in the case of Chongchongma,) in legends relating to the migration history of these villages.

According to the stories I heard in Mukto, this group of villages was first inhabited by two brothers who, having crossed the Tawang chu, parted somewhere near the Chaksam bridge in search of arable land. While one went east the other went west. They traversed the area in a circle and when they met in the middle hump of Langepunsum peak they drove a stick in the ground to mark the boundaries of their respective domains. To the west of Langepunsum falls the territory of Mukto and Gomkeling and to the east that of Mirba.

This legend was hallowed and strengthened in the same pattern as the Chongchongma legend. Even as Guru Padma Sambhava's visit to Chongchongma and the establishment of the Gompa converted a place of Bon worship into a Buddhist shrine, the Bangajanga Gompa set up enroute to Gebrala and Sela consecrated Langepunsum. It has now become a pilgrimage spot where a fair is held every October, so that the villagers congregate to reinforce ties which are animistic, legendary and symbiotic while being apparently Buddhist.

North of the Tawang chu the line of Dakpanang and the accompanying worship of Chongchongma ends with the village group of Thongleng and Sakfret. These villages worship Thangabe and are also marked by certain socio-political ties and cooperative functions. Pilgrimage to the spot continues as a Buddhist ritual, but the special allegiance of Thongleng and Sakfret is indisputably of more ancient origins which in the circumstances may be attributed to relics of Bon.

Further east the people of Namet-Bomdir worship Geishila, a prominent peak visible from Tawang and consecrated by the presence of a gompa perched in its high sanctuary, said to have been built by one Kromtin Lama. I could never visit Geishila, though it is just a day's march or so from Tawang, but heard stories of the strange sights to be seen there. Like Thangabe, one has to go up in a spirit of true devotion, abstaining from meat, onions and garlic. There, amidst massive boulders and yawning caves the pilgrims can see signs of a huge battlefield wherein a lama was said to have waged war against a dragon. This legend probably reflects the Bon-Buddhist confrontation that must have taken place in Tawang. Some claim to have seen petrified remains (fossilised rock?) of the dead dragon along with marks of the lama's prone body as he fell asleep exhausted after the battle. Three *chortens* (stupas) naturally carved in the rock are also said to be visible. The Kromtin gompa just below Geishila, is further surrounded by legend and myth. Some say that the Kromtin Lama Sonam Gyatsen hailed from Tibet, while others hold that he belonged to the village of Thongleng in Tawang. According to the legend he was constantly troubled by his family and ungrateful children. One day while working in the fields he suddenly decided to renounce the world. Then and there he left his spade on the ground and went off to the mountains on an arduous pilgrimage to Tibet. When he returned as a lama he was told, in a dream, to construct a gompa. A red dog led him to the place where the gompa is presently constructed on a narrow ledge. Though the area was inaccessible and small he nevertheless started the construction. In a strangely fascinating sequence the story relates how the workers found it difficult to construct the gompa on the narrow ledge. They went in procession to the lama, and admitted defeat before that massive granite. But the lama merely placed the palm of his hand against the rock and pushed it backwards. The rock obeyed this supernatural command and the imprint of his palm is still visible in the rock face just behind the gompa.

The Sirkim puja is the most important of the Buddhist prayers in Tawang which is recited on almost all occasions—on the commencement of a journey, to ward off ill-health, or cure sickness. Amongst the invocations which are gone through in the Sirkim mantras, the first is to Chongchongma, then to Kromtin Gyabo and



subsequently to the village deity particular to the place where the puja is being held.

Some of the ancient Bon gods, however, remain in their pristine form, untouched by the synthesis which was effected by the visits of Guru Padma Sambhava, other Buddhist saints and subsequent construction of gompas. The chief example is that of Gudpi mentioned before and worshipped by the Khetpas without any trace of Buddhist legends attached to it. The reasons for this survival of the ancient form could be two-fold. Even for saints and Lamas used to trekking in difficult terrain, Gudpi could be termed as virtually inaccessible. Secondly, Khet is one of the most primitive and backward villages of the region. It is no wonder then that relics of Bon survive there more or less in their pristine form.

Survival of the Bon festival of *plah* is a curious feature of Tawang. Other festivals like *Choikar* (the harvest festival) and *Torgya* (the lama dance festival of the Tawang gompa) show traces here and there of Bon influence.

*Plah* survives in its most ceremonial form in Lhou village where it is celebrated every April as a district event with government grants for purchase of finery, feasting and merry making. There is pitching of tents, shamianas, microphones, V.I.P's and speech making—all the modern paraphernalia shot with dramatic overtones of the seven *devis* who go through their ritual paces on the rounded green meadows above Lhou on a flat, wide expanse shaded by heavy trees. The girls wear curious crowns and heavy jewellery. Each dancer is escorted by a relative who has to watch over her carefully and see that her long stockinged shoes do not slip over the ankles or that a brooch does not fall off. In case this happens they have to pay a ceremonial fine which is an integral part of the ritual. The group of dancers is escorted by Bon priest also in rich traditional dress.

The air in April is crisp and cold, the skies are blue and the sunshine gentle and pleasing. In the Lhou meadows huge white orchids hang from the trees in profuse, exotic bunches. The place where the puja is performed is quite extraordinary being situated in every village along a broad expanse of flat land, beneath a thick grove of trees where stones are arranged in flat and vertical piles in a strange and inexplicable symmetry.

These semi-religious stone structures in the hills are shrouded in mystery. One remembers the awesome cathedral effect of Stone-

henge, and the huge stone circles of the Khasi hills and one wonders whether perhaps primitive man all over the world began his very first obeisance to a supernatural world through this medium?

I have a notion that the plah puja spots were originally sacrificial altars where animals might have been sacrificed to propitiate the gods before and after the harvest. While the time of celebration varies, the puja itself coincides with the harvest or the sowing season in each village. During the puja each household places its basket of offerings on the large, flat stones. The baskets contain grains of wheat and barley. The curious features of this ritual is the offering of little animal figures made out of flour which are also placed on the stones. Could it be that the advent of Buddhism put a stop to animal sacrifice but allowed the symbolic offering of animal figurines to continue?

Plah in Lhou is now also marked by secular sports. There is an archery contest and an exhilarating horse race. In Bongleng, the villagers celebrate plah with communal drinking and a folk dance called *keng* which is described at length in the chapter North to the border.

Somewhat similar to *keng* is the lama dance which has to be performed very early in the morning, in the biting January cold in the gumpa precincts in Tawang during the annual Torgya festival. This dance is supposed to be very auspicious but the dancers have to appear almost naked. The story goes that the lamas once failed to perform this dance because they felt shy to appear naked in public. In that year calamity is supposed to have befallen the Monpas and some say that this incident took place in January 1962.

In some deep, primeval sense Bon practises are not only older but more sacrosanct than the Buddhist—perhaps because there is something demonic about them. There is the fear of evil befalling the offender—a belief that still characterises Tawang and is well-illustrated in a story about the Bon god Nemajing.

The Bon devata Nemajing has already been mentioned in the chapter on 'The Compassionate ones'. He is supposed to dwell somewhere in rocks and caves adjoining the traditional route to Tibet via Bumla and it is customary for the travellers to pay homage to the devata as they pass his dwelling place. Once, however, a Tibetan lady who must have despised the so-called barbaric Monpas, refused to pay the traditional homage as she passed by

(the Tibetans, like many other nationalities elsewhere tend to regard everyone, except their own brethren, as somewhat uncivilised outsiders).

The Bon god, however, was not to be easily snubbed. As the lady moved towards Tibet she realised to her horror that she had lost a valuable turquoise earring. Frantic searches proved in vain till someone advised her husband to go back to Nemajing and render the customary obeisance. A much-chastened Tibetan noble therefore went back and bowed his head, after which, needless to say, the earring was found.

These injunctions continue today in one form or the other. Most significant is the Monpa custom of doing a special, small puja every full moon and new moon day. On these days every family must offer a *Khada* and burn incense in the village gumpa or the Tawang gumpa but the injunction is to offer puja to the *Kela* (village god) where oftener than not (as pointed out already) the village gumpa is located. In case this is not done, the offender will have bad dreams and will be visited by sickness and misfortune—an aura of superstition and propitiation that marks Monpa life and continues as a strong undercurrent till today.

Relics of Bon, are entrenched in the Sanglum area around the valley bed of the Nyamjang chu. Ethnographically the people of this area are distinct from the Tibeto-Mongoloid group who have long, aquiline features, tall figures and fair complexions.

The people of Sanglum have a cast of features that can be considered aboriginal, being marked by thick lips, squat noses, low foreheads and dark complexions. The broad, gentle valley bed of the Nyamjangchu river could easily have harboured such an aboriginal population which could have existed long before the wave of migration from Tibet pushed southwards into Tawang, the new Mongoloid stock establishing its racial superiority over the former and gradually suppressing it. Nowadays those who practice black magic in these villages are often Bon priests thus inextricably linking *ngan* (black magic) with Bon. Witchcraft, on the other hand, is credited mostly to women and not to a priesthood, and also seems to abound mostly in Dakpanang.

In Tawang we have the curious prevalence of a system of black magic which is known and widely practiced in its most ancient form being preoccupied with the cure of sickness and elimination of enemies. While one has heard and read a lot about tantric

practices and magical powers acquired by Buddhist priests in the remote Himalayan regions, one has heard comparatively less of the exploits of black magic men. Perhaps the best account I could give of these persons is that of my own encounter with Lama Hridar, the Bon priest of Hoongla village.

I met Lama Hridar one winter morning while I was camping for road works in the Marmang camp. It must have been 6 a.m. I had got up, washed my face and sat down near the fire in my kitchen shack, drinking a huge mug of morning tea, when Doka came in and said excitedly "The Hoongla Bon priest—Lama Hridar—has come". I turned round, still holding my mug and saw him, seated near the entrance.

"Do you see palms?" I asked him without ceremony. "Well, see mine then!" and he took my hand strangely enough by the pulse and not the palm. Bowing his head over it he intoned a prayer with his eyes closed, after which he started speaking. "Aha," he said "this is a good soul—a friend to the poor, the picture of mercy and compassion"—a string of similar politenesses! Was he a courtier—a mere flatterer out to grease his own palm? But suddenly his face became intense in concentration. He announced briefly, "You would be going down soon." (*Dojo mar gaigue.*) There had been talk of my going home in December but I did not wish to leave the roadworks.

"I won't go," I told him stoutly—"it is not possible for me to leave the road." But he shook his head sagely and repeated "*Dojo mar gaigue.*"

Lama Hridar came to be my friend. People were scared of him and I must confess that there was something compelling—a latent power—in his silent eyes, with their curious steady gaze. I have a photograph of him taken against the background of the freshly cut road but I wonder if it conveys to a stranger the sense of mystery that shrouded this otherwise very ordinary looking person.

For one month I avoided going home and would taunt him everytime we met on the roadworks.

"Well Lama Hridar—your prediction was wrong. I haven't gone home as yet!"

But as January 1977 approached and my brother arrived from England. I got letter after letter summoning me home, and I became restless to go. Now, fate would put obstacles in the way! The Chief Minister started thinking of visiting Tawang and

my release orders did not come from Itanagar. I sat through the evening hours fretting in the candle-lit darkness of my tent, awaiting some information and longing, somehow, for Lama Hridar. He arrived suddenly one evening and I greeted him with mingled joy and imprecations, holding out my hand and begging him to tell me when I would go home. This time he took my mala from me and moved the beads around instead of feeling the pulse as he did before. He told me that predictions should be made in the morning, preferably on an empty stomach and not at night. (Once before he had refused to see my hand because he had drunk roxi that day.) However he told me, "The message from Itanagar should come by day-after. If it does not come by then it will not come at all."

Exactly the day after this incident (which had taken place at 7.30 p.m.) I returned to camp after an exhausting day. The *dak* (mail) had come but there was no news of my leave. I threw myself upon the bed and went to sleep in disgust, only to be woken up by Doka for dinner at 9 p.m. and the news that somebody had brought special dak from Tawang. I grabbed the envelopes and tore it open with shaking hands—of course it was the expected wireless telegraph from Itanagar.

On two other occasions he predicted correctly for me. When I knew my tenure was drawing to an end, I asked him if he could predict the exact date of my departure (This happened around 17th-18th April). He had earlier told me, "*Tomre nyi su gosu ni*" (You should stay on for another two years). But now he said 'I did puja again and discovered you will not stay more than three months'. Sure enough, I left Tawang around 17th June. He told me I would come back—once—for a visit, but this is one prediction which has yet to come true. Earlier he had told me "*Nyet thi rogu ni*" (I see you will have a small accident on the road). I too had a premonition and as predicted by Lama Hridar, it turned out to be a minor fall from which I recovered soon.

Lama Hridar was not as feared as his father who was a powerful magic man, known to have killed a number of his opponents through black magic. The art is passed on from father to son and is taught and not mystically acquired.

While my encounter with Lama Hridar was confined only to predictions, both Doka and Pem Thinley had benefited from his extraordinary powers of curing sickness. In Tawang, sickness

is often attributed to ritual poisoning which I shall presently describe. But once a person has been poisoned through witchcraft and black magic he can only be cured by the services of another black magic priest. I heard extraordinary tales of how this is done—how the black magic men sit at dead of night, making dummies of flour and sticking them with pins and needles, reciting *mantras* and taking ritual draughts of roxi, in a complicated, miniature chess game played by the Bon priest against an imagined evil presence which he must vanquish.

When Pem Thinley fell sick with a languishing ailment that defied cure he finally sought the help of Lama Hridar. The Bon priest did a protracted puja and came to the conclusion that he had been poisoned by some evil person somewhere in Lumla area.

I shall never forget the tale of his cure as related to me by Pem Thinley. It is etched vividly in my mind as though I had been present.

Pem Thinley had lain on the floor in the darkened central room, the hearth providing a ghostly flickering light for the Bon priest who sat in meditation before him. From time to time he took ritual sips from a cup of chang and continued to recite his mantras. After some time he approached Pem Thinley and lowering his head, placed his mouth against his navel. Slowly he sucked the navel and then lifting his head turned and spat into an empty cup which he had placed nearby. He repeated this ritual thrice, sucking a curious liquid out of the navel till the cup was almost half-full. Then he lifted the cup, examined the contents and declared.

“The poison had been administered to you through a red chillie but now it is out of your system.”

I remember asking Pem Thinley if he had seen the liquid and he told me it was yellowish in colour, somewhat like a raw egg. Needless to say, Pem Thinley improved and was soon back to normal health.

This experience was corroborated by Doka whose sister had also fallen ill and had been cured by Lama Hridar with a similar ritual. The latter had predicted strange things for Doka long before I took over as Additional Deputy Commissioner, Tawang. He had seen her pulse the same way as he saw mine and said, with that far away look in his eyes.

“In your last birth you were a shepherd, grazing your yaks in

remote mountain areas. You never saw anything but grazing grounds hence you said to yourself.

‘In my next birth I shall roam around and really see the world.’”

Subsequently she joined office as my personal attendant and toured almost the entire North East, travelling as far as Shillong and Jorhat, and later, in 1979, even upto Delhi.

Death by poisoning is a part of black magic, though ngan also specialises in powers which can kill outright, without any physical contact with the person. Ritual poisoning is common in Lumla and Zimithang circles and is practiced mostly by witches who are occasionally known and identified. At other times, poisoning is practiced as a matter of ritual even by ordinary persons.

There is no obviously scientific or sociological explanation for this phenomenon. The most curious thing about poisoning in Dakpanang is the widely acknowledged fact that poison is not necessarily administered to an enemy. Strange though it may sound to outsiders, poisoning in these areas is a matter of ritual or even habit. Witches poison because they must, this being a part of their macabre profession! As tools should not be allowed to rust, so must a sincere witch sharpen her craft and remain in practice by continuing to poison people at regular intervals!

After some time in Tawang I could gather that the main motive behind administration of poison is luck—a desire to obtain the luck and good fortune of the other person. The Choksum people were particularly terrified of Dakpanang and Zimithang and one of the stock pleas against transfers to those areas would be this fear of poisoning. All the sahib log were duly warned that they should eat and drink with these people at their own risk and peril. G.L. Roy the Circle Officer, Zimithang would not even allow the villagers to watch him while eating, for fear they would poison him through their eyes. According to local superstition poison could be administered through food, drink, finger-nails and even the eyes—just by looking at the person while he was eating his food.

My political interpreters used to tell me that in some villages it was customary to call out a warning to such people asking them to leave the congregation before giving a feast to visitors. Witches, of course, were ostracised and could not eat and drink in company, though this ban did not necessarily extend to their husbands and children. Burning of witches is unknown but ostracism is definitely the rule.



I cannot say if I ever met a real witch! Witches did not proclaim themselves in the same manner as Bon priests who were respected and feared and did not suffer from ostracism, though they were also reputed to have powers of inducing sickness and death. With witches, however, the main concern seemed to hinge around poisoning through physical contact or the eyes, thus making it imperative to isolate the witch completely from the social life of the community.

I was sorely puzzled once when called upon to settle a case in Bongleng which involved social ostracism of a woman accused of witchcraft. Of course she vehemently denied the charge. But the villagers insisted, gathering in angry, menacing hordes, accusing her of this and that—vague, nebulous charges of which I could make nothing at all, being such as anyone could either support or refute. For instance, if a woman crossed the witch in the morning and fell ill before daybreak next day, there was very little I could do about it, since the cause and effect relationship was firmly established in all minds. To make matters worse, the witch had gone and got married! The husband and wife, pathetically sullen, stood hand in hand a little away from the crowd. The witch was very ordinary looking if not plain and I admired the husband for his dogged loyalty to this ostracised woman. I managed to settle the case then by forcing the community to accept her in their midst after she paid a fine of Rs 200 and promised not to repeat her imagined misdeeds. But I do not think the case ended there since it continued to irritate the Circle Officer Lumla at subsequent intervals.

In Pangchen it was widely whispered knowledge that poisoning of bhangchang took place as a matter of custom and ritual. The Pangchenpas were reportedly in the habit of putting *chando* (aconite) in their chang and gently increasing the quantity for outsiders whose luck they might be tempted to take on to themselves! My political interpreters would whisper sinister tales of how so and so Deputy Commissioner of Tawang had fallen into a mysterious coma after drinking with the Pangchen people but I always scoffed, never quite believing them till the sudden tragic death of Peki, my lovely friend, daughter of the gaon budha of Lumpo.

It happened one quiet evening along the banks of the Nyamjang chu river where all the Lumpo villagers had gathered

to collect stones from the valley bed for the repair of their village gompa.

Cheddar Buti, a woman belonging to Lumpo village, had a small house nearby and so it was but natural that she should invite them for a drink in her house. Bresang, Urgen and a few others came. Peki and her husband Sonam Dondup were elsewhere, chatting with an army officer, but she sent a boy after them, requesting them to join the party in her house. They all sat around, talking, laughing and drinking chang and as the last drops were poured out from the vessel, Urgen gave an exclamation as he saw the treacherous aconite root lying at the bottom. The survivors related how Urgen took it between his teeth, tasted a bit and then spat it out saying "It is quite old and could not have been very potent."

Cheddar Buti also said "It has been lying with me since three years—that is why I put the whole root, instead of a small piece".

But a sudden chill crept over the company and they got up hurriedly, anxious to return home before the effects of the chando caught on, knowing as they did that an inconvenient overdose could cause severe vomiting.

As they picked up their stones and proceeded ahead they fell down one by one, in single line, retching and writhing in agony as the poison did its terrible job. I do not know who ran to Dr. Sam (Medical Officer Zimithang) with the dreadful news—fourteen persons, dying or dead in the darkening twilight beside the rush and roar of the river.

Dr. Sam reached Peki first and she died holding his hand, begging him to save her life. While all the other bodies were distorted in one way or the other, Peki remained as she was—beautiful and unblemished even in that terrible death. (How kind of fate!) Urgen swelled up like a balloon and Bresang's face became dreadfully black, almost unrecognisable. One of Cheddar Buti's relations also died but the rest were saved, no little due to the vigorous efforts and prompt action taken by the young Khasi Medical Officer, Dr. Sam.

I kept Cheddar Buti and her husband in quaterguard for ten long months, trying in vain to fathom the mystery. It appeared to be a motiveless murder, particularly in view of the fact that one of Cheddar Buti's own relatives was amongst the dead. Curiously enough, the whole of Pangchen sided with the old woman, coming with khadas, long processions and equally long faces to plead for

her pardon. Even Norwangdi, the old man, came to me clucking and sighing with a khada in his hand, pleading for his daughter's murderess! But I told them all in anger and a strange, seething bitterness that I would never forgive her for Peki's death, never and I finally released her on bail after keeping her in quaterguard for over ten months.

This case remained an unsolved mystery. Only in Zimithang could such curious, inexplicable events occur—which is why other Monpas shudder superstitiously and do not like to be posted there.

One thing, however, was established by this tragic affair—that ritual and customary poisoning in Zimithang is a fact and not superstition as some people would have liked to believe.

## 12 North to the Border

Since long I heard of you  
Oh Sun, dweller of the skies,  
Since many years, this desire  
Remained in my heart!  
But this year we could meet!  
Only this year we could meet!

—Monpa folk song

Touring in Tawang was always a delight. I am tempted to let the reader think that our tours in the interior were one long orgy of drink and dance, because work was so intermingled with informal relationships and merry-making that the division between leisure and duty became blurred to a point of no return. The district head in Tawang was supposed to tour all villages (most of which could be reached only on foot) at least once a year. Each visit followed a fairly similar pattern: the Deputy Commissioner would be greeted with a song and dance group, there would be an evening's entertainment along with visits to the local school and gompa. The next morning there would be a mangma meeting where the village adults would gather to represent their demands through the gaon budha, mostly for more tools and implements, for a sanction for a village track, a small water supply scheme, and (often than not) grants-in-aid for repairs and beautification of the village gompa. In the earlier days, when the Sela-Tawang road was still under construction and Tawang was air-fed, there used to be only one simple demand—for salt. Now those days are gone, since we have regular traffic between Tezpur and Tawang and a chain of fair price shops opened under the Tawang Cooperative Stores.

During these tours one could bring the government programmes home to the people—right down to the grass roots where they belong, where, in fact, they should have their beginnings. Thus there would be endless inspections of potato fields to check if they were blight-free and the Kufri (hybrid) seed uncontaminated. Apple and walnut plantations were canvassed vigorously right up to the border, and annual plans for horticulture and cash crops drawn up for each and every village. School buildings had to be set up on self help, afforestation schemes started, border disputes settled.

But now when I sit down to reminisce, the scenes that come before my eyes are still those of song, laughter, bonfires and merry making, most memorable of which pertain to my visits to the border villages of Bongleng, Namsetering and Zimithang.

Bongleng is in the south-westernmost corner of Tawang. We were lodged in the village Rest House which was built like a gompa, the walls inside being frescoed with religious paintings. J.P. Choudhry, Circle Officer Lumla, was with me. Our rooms overlooked Lumla to the north while to the south the Bhutan border range loomed low and close. The first night was clear as far as I can remember and a huge *chorten* (stone stupa) stood outlined to the right against the sky. The place had a strangely peaceful atmosphere and I took to it instantly.

The gaon budha and village elders came forward quietly before dinner with timri—monpa rice and eggs and chang bottles (with the ceremonial dab of butter on the lids) were placed before us. Nobody spoke. Breaking the awkward silence, I asked Thuten Nima, “Perhaps the gaon budha is feeling shy?” And Pem Leta, the gaon budha turned away awkwardly and muttered “Yes, a little.”

“What about a camp-fire?” I asked them. This always broke the ice in most places. So the next day in the evening we gathered in the big courtyard where a huge bonfire was lit.

Thuten Nima did a lot of dancing—dear, fat, sweet-natured Thuten Nima, who looked like a benevolent, laughing Buddha, so full of good cheer with his orange pom-pom balaclava hat and his huge frame rolling in surprising rhythm. To set him off, there was Lobsang who was delightfully clownish, with his tall, lean figure, battered broad-brimmed felt hat, sparse drooping moustache and this large dirty, handkerchief which he waved solemnly in the air

while he leaped around the fire in what was his version of Nepali dance. Following close upon his heels was little Lobsang, the village level worker of Bongleng who was four feet nothing and father of four kids (I used to tease him by calling him dwarf high yielding variety!).

In the general melee Pem Leta, gaon budha, was also dragged in and once amongst the dancers, he performed with great rhythm and gusto, being both a good dancer as well as a clown. Seeing his antics, the imp in me reared its head and I could not resist leaping into the fray and mimicking the gaon budha in all his various gyrations round the fire, to the accompaniment of howls of delight from the audience.

The next day's bonfire was an even greater success. The villagers turned out in huge numbers. A ladies dance troupe made its debut led by a grand old lady who was obviously a *maestro* and must have been quite a beauty in her day. During this second campfire the villagers presented the strangest dance I have so far witnessed in this area, which is otherwise full of strange dances. It was a unique dance in the sense of being the villagers "own dance" which they were showing me as a very special favour. The dance is called *keng* and is part of the Bon puja festival which is celebrated every November after the millet harvest. It is performed only at night, by all the menfolk of the village who turn out in full force. After drinking together they dance through the village streets, getting roxi and chang from every household. This song and dance goes on even in day time but on a somewhat lesser scale. *Keng* is not peculiar to Bongleng and is celebrated in most villages, but this being one of the bigger villages, the turn-out (like a small army) is perhaps the most impressive.

*Keng* literally means naked and this is how the troupe emerged before us around the campfire that night—naked, except for a loin cloth and skull masks. They made a rather wierd picture with their fair, beautifully formed bodies and muscles undulating and glinting red in the firelight, with their grinning skull faces and the single hollow beat of the drum to which they did their barbaric dance. It was one of those few scenes which one can never forget.

The origins of this dance are obscure. All agreed that it was a typical Monpa dance native to the race and had no connections with Buddhism or Tibet. From what I could gather of their explanations, the skull masks and the waving of sticks (probably symbo-

lising human bones) were symbolic of the community's effort to drive away demons from the village, exhorting the spirits of their dead to rest in peace and not come back to disturb them. It is definite that the dance is a remnant of the Bon religion since it coincides with the main Bon festival of plah and exhumes devils with an element of village participation that normally characterise folk-based and animistic, as against priestly, religions.

The village of Namsetering was just a day's march from Bongleng. I shall always remember my first glimpse of Namsetering: the sudden opening up of a long, flat, narrow valley. The pony trail went through fields where millet had been harvested, and the graceful *mom* (*amarynthus*) plants stood high in their maroon and golden colours. The buckwheat fields were white, pale pink and mauve—a beautiful blending of colours against the darkening hills and sky. Ahead of us, at the foot of the hills, stood a solitary house, double-storeyed, large, rather proud looking: all alone. We crossed a small bridge to reach it. The gaon budha of Namsetering and owner of the house was waiting along with four or five other gaon budhas. The usual crowd was not there. The gate was a ready made one.

This was the house of the famous Rani of Namsetering who came out to greet us. Her Monpa skirt was shabby, her legs slim and long. Her manner was deceptively shy and diffident. She belonged to the house of the Kharteng Sengu—a house with a history that could fill a book.

The first Sengu came from Drukpa area, settled in Dakpanang and made a lot of money primarily through trade with Tibet. With the passage of time he grew into a feudal landlord, realising tax from the Dakpa villagers who donated forced labour, firewood, grain, horses and cattle towards his upkeep. This exploitative system seems to have left its stamp on the people who have none of the verve and vigour of the people of Choksum area.

The hatred against the Kharteng Sengu was reinforced by the fact of his being an outsider though their family occasionally intermarried in Tawang. The hegemony of this house was given a fresh (though distinctly different) lease of life when the Indian Administrative posts were established and Tsering Drema, the only surviving child of the Sengu, was made the gaon budhi.

Tsering Drema married late. Here again there is a story. Her father had left an illegitimate son who laid claims to their ancestral



property. The boy tried to woo her but she refused his hand, instead marrying the gaon budha of Salengdung who already had a wife and two children. It was a love match. He came to her house as makpo, thus inheriting her property but the illegitimate son forgave neither the injury nor the insult. He fought a long, protracted case that rocked Tawang from end to end and finally won a division of property in his favour, getting also the ancestral house in Kharteng. The house where Tsering Drema put us up was the family's winter lodge which had fallen to her share and thus she paid her price for marrying the man she loved.

The couple had only one son. The husband was gaon budha Namsetering at the time of my visit, his wife having resigned in his favour. He was a tall, dark man with intelligent and rather cruelly handsome good looks. He spoke excellent Hindi and stories of his pride and hauteur were legion. He was reputed to have told the Lumla doctor "to go and give his injections to the pigs". Later, after he lost his land dispute case, his influence and pride waned simultaneously and his main object in life became progressive farming and keeping on the right side of the administration.

The living room which Tsering Drema had prepared for me was any day better than a government rest house. The walls were tastefully draped with red and white endi and the long low table was also covered with endi. A rich carpet was laid out on my bed. Cushion carpets covered the arm chair and low diwan. On the shelves against the wall stood two photographs—one of Indira Gandhi draped with a khada and another of all the Lumla area gaon budhas with Tsering Drema in the forefront posing with the Deputy Commissioner, Bomdila and Additional Deputy Commissioner Tawang.

The aesthetic beauty of my room was in sharp contrast to the Sanglum villagers who though no cleaner than others, still seemed to be sad and ugly looking, terribly thin and poor, some of them in dirty rags. For the first time I saw what seemed to me the stark face of poverty in this area—the rice bowl of the entire Tawang Sub-Division. Yet Namsetering was famous for its record of agricultural development which was due to the good offices of Agricultural Inspector D.V. (Monpa) Rao who had given the best years of his life to this region.

Despite the aura of agricultural progress, Sanglum was so dreary Bletteng, just four hours march away, came like a burst of life and

laughter, brimming over with bounce and enthusiasm.

The migration history of Bletteng and Domering was quite interesting. I found an old man in Domering who knew something about the legends and he related as follows.

A family consisting of mother, father, son and dog came into Tawang from Bhutan. The dog remained behind at the present site of Khyingme (*Khyi*=dog) village (now in Bhutan). The mother stayed on at Manum, the son at Domering and the father at Buri. Earlier Buri was the mother village and not Bletteng, but with the passage of time the roles have been reversed and now Buri is left with only two hamlets. Bletting, Buri and Domering however still function as a single socio-political unit and the legend perhaps justifies this original symbiotic relationship between them which is a normal characteristic of Monpa village life.

I halted two days in Bletteng. They had an Ajhi Lhamu dance-party who performed the whole afternoon for us. I sat in the sun to watch as the men leaped around gracefully, shaking their masked heads hung with long, wild-goats' hair and coloured streamers waving from their wrists to the clash of cymbals and the single beat of a drum. Afterwards the Domering party, led by a handsome youth with a cheeky grin, did a lot of vigorous Drukpa tap dancing which I was drawn into despite my tiredness.

The evening in Bletteng brought some disturbing news in the shape of a wireless telegraph from the Chief Commissioner informing me that Shri L.P. Singh, Governor of Assam was visiting Tawang and my presence was required there immediately. This came as a sharp blow to my plans for visiting Zimithang which was just two days march from Bletteng. Tawang on the other hand was four days march from our camp. Getting out of the headquarters was difficult, what with V.I.P. visits, tours to Itanagar and all kinds of other demands on one's time. The disappointment was deep and in a fit of perversity I decided to wriggle out of the commitment. Since Deputy Commissioner Bomdila was coming, could he not do the honors in my place? My young Circle Officers of Lumla and Zimithang looked on in grave horror and disapprobation as I drafted a garbled wireless telegraph to the Chief Secretary in Itanagar, pleading ill-health and prior commitments regarding my Zimithang tour. Mustering up all his courage J.P. Circle Officer, Lumla trotted up to me with a very serious expression to say that I was taking a most inadvisable course of action.

To disregard a summons to headquarters issued by the Chief Commissioner, in honour of no less a person than the Governor of Assam, was an act of temerity which would bring Madam discredit. Would she kindly reconsider her decision?

Madam however would not reconsider, being by nature wilful and stubborn and lacking the normal courtesy and polish which this task required. So I sent off the message and proceeded onwards to Zimithang. We reached Zimithang on the fourth day, progress being slow due to diarrhoea which I had developed along with weakness due to fasting. The route to Zimithang lay via the villages of Muktur and Kubleteng, the latter being notorious as the village of murderers, since Kubletengpas were used to killing off quite a few of their number in factional feuds. (Normally Monpa disputes, though long and protracted, seldom—if ever—end in murder). Lama Tsering told me how a previous Additional Deputy Commissioner Tawang Sri Anupam Dhar had the Kubleteng people caught, bound hand and foot and whipped as a punishment, after which this turbulent village came somewhat under government control. In any case they were wild and rough looking and almost perpetually drunk. Muktur and Kubleteng were one of the most backward villages of this region and our development programme for them centred mostly around creation of walnut belts. The walnut has a long gestation period but is easily stored and transported and is one of the more valuable cash crops of the temperate region.

The journey from Kubleteng to Zimithang was interspersed with waterfalls, small lakes and huge rock caves. We marched along the cool shady banks of the Nyamjang chu, reaching Gorsam chorten at 4 p.m. The chorten is the only evidence of Buddhist stupa architecture in Tawang and is a huge, imposing sight. The Pangchen, gaon budhas were lined up with their red coats and white scarves. Chief Circle Officer Zimithang, G.L. Roy had been boasting to me about the good looks of his Pangchenpas “I will line them all up in front of you Madam,” he had said proudly. “They are all like Greek gods,” and so they were, some of them atleast while the others were like rather handsome Turks or Spaniards with small black goatee beards and red coats for cloaks thrown in graceful folds over their shoulders! The girls were charming with their pink cheeks, short hair and black Monpa caps (minus the five fingers) with a twine of bamboo and peacock

feathers and flowers stuck fashionably on the brim.

The Gorsam Chorten gompa which stood just on the banks of the Nyamjangchu had suffered considerable destruction due to a flash flood in the recent past. The Pangchen villagers had pooled labour and resources to rebuild it with a government grant. Now it was beautiful and well-maintained, painted with a rich elegance and decor in the midst of which, standing there to greet me with a Khada, was the man who had masterminded the project. He stood there quietly, slightly stooped, holding out a Chinese porcelain cup of Monpa tea, murmuring a quiet welcome: none other than Kesang of Lumpo village.

The Inspection Bungalow in Zimithang was a fairly pretty and unusual building but cold and empty. Furnishings are notable by their absence in all interior inspection bungalows. I had just sat down to pull off my shoes, the chowkidar was lighting the lamps when the special runner arrived, breathless as usual.

The Chief Commissioner had received my garbled wireless telegraph sent from Bletteng and was not impressed either by my ill-health or by previous commitments to the border people. Would Additional Deputy Commissioner Tawang kindly leave whatever she was doing and take the trouble to present herself in her head-quarter before the Chief Commissioner of Arunachal Pradesh on 25th November?

Gloom pervaded the already empty, lamp-lit walls of the huge inspection bungalow while G.L. Roy tried not to put on his "I told you so" expression. An order was an order and had to be obeyed but the message had reached on 23rd evening and the only short-cut to Tawang along the Tibet border route via Takstang Gompa was still a march of 45 km along an average height of 13,000 ft. It had been traversed earlier by Bob Khating, the first Deputy Commissioner Bomdila and T.S. Murthy, Additional Deputy Commissioner Tawang (1959-62) but Lama Tsering shook his head when I suggested making it in one day. He doubted if (in my state of health), I could make it even in two days, but the next morning at 6 a.m. I hustled them out of their beds, packing loads and arranging porters in great haste since I was determined to attempt a valiant dash across!

I have never regretted the events that occurred at this time because, but for the exigencies of the Chief Commissioner's crash message, I might not have traversed the little known Takstang

gompa route which we later constructed into a proper muleable porter track, cutting short the marching distance between Tawang and Zimithang by two days. Besides this, we visited the Takstang gompa or "The Tigers Lair" which is famous for having been one of the meditation retreats of the Guru Padma Sambhava. The route we traversed was beautiful. The grazing grounds had double-storied, pucca stone-walled chowrie huts which I had never seen before.

The Takstang chu river flowed westwards to join the Nyamjang-chu and its valley-bed was pretty, with the waters of the river in portions already congealed into ice.

I had enjoyed most of the march despite the early start, hurried breakfast and meagre lunch but as evening approached we found ourselves walking along the river bed for what seemed hours and hours and still no sign of the Takstang gompa where Lama had planned to halt the night. After every half an hour or so I would pipe up. "How far is it now lama?" And he would say reassuringly, keeping his face quite expressionless, "Just another half an hour sahib." After half an hour, the same question and the same reply till suddenly the humour of the situation overcame my weariness and I had perforce to laugh while Lama Tsering's face broke into wide-splitting grins.

When we finally reached the gompa which is perched at a height of perhaps 13,500 ft. (requiring a steady climb just when one is most fagged out), the gompa lama was there to welcome us. A fire was burning and water put on to boil. Soon we were huddled around the fire while Doka cooked *paronthas* for all. We were hungry and tired out. The porters reached after one and a half hours and caused us some anxious moments. Reaching Tawang was out of the question and we decided to halt the night.

Once our anxiety was over and hunger appeased, the evening turned out to be cosy and unforgettable. We crouched comfortably around the fire, eating and drinking cups of tea, while the old lama was persuaded to tell us his life-history. In the course of his narrative we got a first-hand account of the famous Tibetan pilgrimage to Tsari Che.

In Tibet, every twelve years, a huge caravan of pilgrims used to converge at Lhasa and then move on towards Tsari Che. The Lhasa officials in charge of the caravan used to be laden with presents and bribes for the Lopas through whose territory the

caravan had to pass in order to reach Tsari Che. The officials, however, were corrupt like many Government officers and kept most of the presents for themselves, so that the Lopas, being dissatisfied, would lay an ambush and attack the caravan to plunder, loot and even kill. The track itself was most hazardous. There were some sheer rock faces which had to be climbed like a monkey. At times the path was so narrow that they had to spend the night standing up or crouching on narrow precipices. The Buddhists believe that only very good souls complete the pilgrimage successfully but even those who die on the trip attain salvation. The lama had been there thrice, having survived all these hazards. After 1951 he came to India, after which he allowed himself to be persuaded by all to marry. Was he a reluctant husband, we asked him teasingly. "Indeed no," he chuckled "I made her produce one every year".

Since then he had stayed on as the village lama and managed the Takstang gumpa for which he was given khrai from all the villagers. He kept some chowries of his own and had a little cultivation. So we talked far into the night while the dying flames lit up his tall frame throwing a fitful glare on his long thin face, much lined and wrinkled but still alive and shrewd.

Before we retired for the night they sang an invocation song in praise of Tsari Che.

In Tsari Che the heights are covered  
With bamboo flowers  
And all kind of tall grass.  
In the lower regions rivers and lakes abound.  
On the hill-tops, amidst the grass,  
Flocks the precious musk deer.  
Such is the holy land where pilgrims gather  
Encircling the high hill thrice,  
Remembering the Lord.

## 13 Death on the Road\*

Long have I travelled in the mountains,  
Drank the water of their streams,  
Made friends with the white lion,  
Guardian of the snows.  
Now it is time to part,  
I sing my farewell song,  
Stay well, oh snow lion!  
Give me leave to go.  
I have wandered long in the heavens,  
Drank the water of their streams.  
Now it is time to part,  
I must descend,  
I must return.  
Farewell then Oh sun,  
Great god of the skies!  
I sing my farewell song.  
Give me leave to go.

—Monpa folk song

*22nd November, 1976*

I am writing here in Sakyur, in the gompa kitchen in the combined light of the fire, a kerosene lamp plus two candles stuck on top of a small post.

Just now I bathed in the kitchen. It is better to bathe at night since the mornings are chilly and we are out on the road by 7 a.m. It was very warm by the fire and a lovely feeling somehow to be naked near the flames, licking heat into one's body with boiling hot water soaking through and then the luxury of clean clothes, my old,

\*Excerpts from the author's dairy of the Tawang—Lumla road works.



much-washed nightie smelling sweet with freshness. Now I am sitting cosily wrapped up near the hearth, writing my diary.

I have a very neat tent. Section Officer Mazumdar has made two wooden shelves on the upper side and I have the luxury of a wooden bed. (Camp cots are awful.) There is a large bamboo mat on the floor which gives the whole room a nice appearance, though of course it is very small and cramped and poor Doka cannot stand up straight. If two of us are inside the tent, I must keep lying on the bed otherwise we invariably knock into each other and step on each other's toes! Still I am peaceful and happier here than in the big walls and rooms of my house in Tawang.

After I finish the official papers my political interpreter comes in with his English books for his occasional English lesson—charming Thukla with his lower lip stuck out, frowning in concentration, his fair face ruddy with the bokhari heat as he labours over “This is a man” and “She is a woman”. Thukla is my body-guard and companion in our daily trudge up and down the road length, sometimes 15-16 km in a day, returning home at night, stumbling over the stones and mud which are heaping the porter track—refuse from the road construction which is in progress just above. Nowadays when we return late to the camp my back aches and aches, and I am so sleepy and tired.

I have suddenly recalled that scene in Tawang in my enclosed verandah near the bokhari which was burning noisily, merrily while outside it rained and poured—a dark, depressing night. Lama Tsering stood by me—sympathetic, reassuring. I said to him in Hindi, “*Hamari ijat ka sawal hai*” (It is a matter of our prestige.) We must mobilise the people. He nodded a grave assent and told me not to worry. He would do his best. So he went to Teli, in that pouring rain at 10 p.m. holding on to the shoulders of his companions as he slithered down the dark, wet, slushy, tracks leading from Tawang to Bomba village. He camped there the whole night, sending messages across to the surrounding villagers, bidding them assemble the next morning to start work on the Lumla road. The next dawn saw two hundred workers assembled there to start the work, much to the consternation and dismay of the Central Public Works Department who had been sitting back, complacently sure that volunteers could never be mobilised at such short notice. We had received the wireless telegraph from the secretariat in Itanagar around the 4th of March, ordering us to start

the work and incur full expenditure within 31st March. It had seemed then an impossible proposition—sure to fail. The road claimed Lama Tsering as her first victim, the most priceless. He died the same night in his sleep—a sudden sword thrust.

How many heads will roll before this road is clear? There is something after all in the Nepali belief that human or animal sacrifice is necessary for the building of bridges and roads. Blood must be shed before the road is through. I am certain of it and I wait, half-tensed up always.

*25th November, 1976*

The Pangchen people have started work in the rocky area. The 38 km. road length has been divided between the whole population of Tawang. Lumla and Zimithang circles are going to construct from Lumla to Thongleng and Tawang circle, Mukto and Thingbu circle will jointly construct the other half from Thongleng to Tawang. In their own areas, as well, the road lengths have been divided between village groups according to their numerical strength. But near Sakyur, the worst rocky area has fallen to the lot of the Pangchen people. They are cutting the rock from a height of over 180 feet. They have only crow bars and very few hammers. Tools and implements are in short supply. Little platforms have come up now: after a few days blasting they will have some firm footholds. Below them—a perpendicular drop to the river, far, far down. This portion quite consumes me with anxiety, but our people are fearless and seem to have no nerves at all in these heights.

The Lumla villagers have a slow, easy going style of work. After their mid-day meal they play games for some time—volleyball with an improvised bundle of rags to serve as a ball! Then an improvised game of high jump, all in the midst of much mirth and relaxation, so unlike the Tawang people who are like clockwork, whose work is to order and much swifter and better organised.

*27th November, 1976*

Today while crossing the Thrillam villager's portion I asked them why they were not camping on the road (They walk to and fro daily, Thrillam being about an hour's march from their contracted portion of the road).

A tall, hefty, long-faced chap grinned and said in Monpa "Our

wives feel cold at night,” mimicking a woman forlornly hugging her body. All rocked with laughter and he was mightily pleased with his jest.

In the Sazo-Kungba portion they are throwing huge rocks and boulders. Monpas are expert in this—the most exhilarating part of roadworks. A long rope made of coiled bamboo strips is slung around the rock while two parties, sometimes over fifty in number, hold the rope and pull from either end.

Another party, the most important one, levers the rock with crow bars. If these are not available, they use strong wooden posts. The crow bar party lifts the rock slowly while the rest pull the rope ends. Since this has to be a combined effort it is timed by a resounding chant which echoes all along the roadworks. Thus the leader cries, “*Cho che choini!*” The others pull at the end of this chant, taking it up with the refrain of “*Mo! He!*” This carries with it two jerks in two sharp successive movements.

The next line of the chant is by the leader, “*Tale phunchi,*” to which again the labour pulls and the crow bars heave with united cries of “*Mo! He!*” Slowly the stone is raised as people hold it up with their hands and crowbars, others run for small rocks which are quickly shoved underneath to support the raised stone. Yet others sit on the ground and push and slide the stone forward with the combined pressure of their feet.

Thus pushing, heaving, shouting and laughing, faces flushed with excitement and vigour they slide the stone forward to the hills edge, where its majestic weight rolls down—at first slowly and then with increasing speed, crashing into trees which crack, splinter and topple to destruction. With the force and momentum of the boulder’s downward course the forest echoes with groans and the villagers send out war whoops and yodels of joy, for a Monpa loves nothing so much as to see a huge stone rolling down the mountain side—the bigger it is, the more noise they will raise.

*20th December, 1976*

Tragedy sprang upon us like a panther in broad daylight. It was perhaps 11th December—now I can’t even remember the date but the day itself is etched clearly in my mind. The skies were bright, sunlit, spotless like the day Lama Tsering died. 12 o’clock and I had descended to the Gomkang camp to wait for the Assistant Engineer. As I neared my tent Doka came with the news. Two men

have died, she said, in the Jang villagers' portion. Falling rocks. Time stood still, the world stood still and I stood mechanically, dispassionately trying to think. Then I mustered my thoughts, picked up my scissors, looked for some cloth for bandages and could find only my old black linen petticoat. No dettol or cotton wool—just an old, much-used tube of Burnol. I told the peon to pick up a tarpaulin with vague notions of making a stretcher. All this took five minutes and then we all ran—Goeling, the peon, myself.

I have never run like this in the hills before—heart thumping so hard it seemed as if it would burst out of my chest. Still, the way seemed long and then in our confusion we got lost. Half-way up I realised suddenly that I should have sent for the ambulance. It was the most obvious task. Also, I could not go any further—felt I was dropping dead. Gasping and panting for breath, I gulped some water and scribbled a few lines to Rao Sahib. Extra Assistant Commissioner, Tawang. The peon pushed off with my chit. In the distance I saw Sange Phuntso coming up and making my way through Karne Wangchu's camp, I heard the wild maddened wails of a woman.

In the sun-drenched mountains her incoherent, hoarse cries and the contorted mask of her face—like a mad woman, reeling drunk, she pointed her finger at me.

“Ah you there! You there! Get my *shokpu* (youngster) out! Get him out! See what they have done to him!” She staggered towards me, fingers clawing the air.

(Was it she who made me feel responsible—the first sword thrust?)

They had managed to extricate one of the bodies by the time I reached. It had twitched convulsively as they hauled it out and died just five minutes before. I did not have the courage to see the face. We laid it out wrapped in the tarpaulin, next to the killer rock. The second one was also dead but still trapped beneath the rock. Karma reached the spot. D.V. Rao and Biswas were already there. Nair (the health assistant) had been sent for. But to what avail?

We spent the next three hours rummaging around the rock; the villagers digging the soil, wriggling underneath the massive boulder, trying to extricate the slim boy's body that lay crushed underneath, so near and yet so far. We tried blasting the rock, while seeing to it that the body was not blown to pieces, but the stone just could not be moved in fact there was danger of it sinking further and

crushing the pathetic, curled-up body completely.

Alas Kesang, we got you out at last, after blasting so many holes in the rock, after so much digging, our men bravely working away at their gruesome task with set faces and grim eyes, rummaging away till suddenly the body was loose. One man was under the boulder from the left straightening the poor hands and legs. Rao was towards the front pulling him by the ankles and then he was out—youngster, staring up at us with the horrified, glassy eyes of death. The sisters came running up, but it was not a pretty sight and we had to grapple with them to turn them back and the crowd heaved and wept silently as we laid the young body out and straightened its twisted limbs.

Hrangchung, brother of the other dead man, had no other relations, but Kesang would have to be taken to Jang so that his mother could look upon his dead face. They bundled the body and slung it across broad shoulders. The bundle had already started smelling—strange that it should have started giving odour so soon, within four hours. The sisters stumbled behind the party with dry sobs, softly mourning to themselves.

Rao and I soon forged ahead—we were hungry when we reached camp. It might have been 3.15 p.m. when we ate some tea and bread, glad to relieve our hunger before we set off again.

Near Kangteng bridge we met Hrangchung with his own bundle on his back, his eyes still red with unshed tears. He was accompanied by two others. They would have to chop up his brother's body into 108 pieces and cast them into the Kangteng stream. (This is the usual Buddhist custom for disposing the dead.) D.V. Rao whispered something in a peon's ears. The latter left us at a run and Rao said to Hrangchung in Monpa, "He will be bringing you a bottle or two of roxi."

Later, he explained to me that it is not possible for the relatives to cut up the dead body until they are quite drunk. But in the confusion and grief Hrangchung had forgotten this.

There was no sign of our jeep even as we crossed the Kangteng bridge. I felt our helplessness deeply at that time, this waiting for a vehicle that does not come. Again and again we calculated the runner's time to Tawang, preparation time, the vehicle's journey time to Seru but to no avail. As we marched on the sun set and rosy skies sank into pale darkness, and then—thank God—we saw the

jeep at last. We put them all in, bundled and bunched up, hanging out, and saw them off.

We were near Seru by then and the teachers of the school asked us into their bamboo thatch hut and gave us lovely tea and sugared biscuits which I ate. Biswas joined us and finally we left, tramping up the path to Gomkang under a lonely, star-lit night.

In my tent, hot tears sprang and then died away.

*15 April, 1977*

*Pamakhar*

There has been a long gap in my diary. We have had to work so hard and I could not find time to write. Yesterday it rained as we walked along the jungle across Lebra at 12-13 km. point, where I never dreamt that we would actually succeed in building the road. I remember walking along the trace-cut with D.V. Rao just five or six months ago. It was such an awful, back-wrenching, aching journey—laboriously climbing over one huge boulder and slithering down its sides only to ascend the next.

I don't know how we all are saved from the blasting. In the Sakfret rong it is a very, very narrow gorge. From the bridge-point northwards the valley is perfectly flat and the little labour camp shelters are grouped in single line within its narrow confines. People hide under caves, overhangs, behind tree-trunks. Someone will be casually washing his legs in the stream, another will crouch grinning behind a perfectly ludicrous shelter as the blasting resounds in the gorge. Thangabe is just above us and I am scared of the gods who were so malignant to me. The mountain gods are allergic to noise and what a lot of disturbance we are creating! Perhaps the gods of Thangabe will guard us, who rush in where angels fear to tread—fools, to attack a rock of this length and magnitude with nothing to commend us but our two hands. Desperate man have no choice. It is not courage but desperation that achieves the impossible. When you have burnt your boats, there is no going back—no way, but the laborious march ahead.

Nima's camp has become my usual mid-day halting place. It is a rickety shelter made of two tarpaulins and four poles, near the Sakfret rong. A cave shelter provides one wall, and leaves and branches make up a second wall. The other two sides are open. There is a huge log-fire in the central hearth, paved with stones.

The ground is covered with dry leaves and grass. Their basket loads of ration etc., are lined up on one side. For me, a gunny bag and a blanket form a permanent seat. Since I normally reach the bridge point at 12 noon (blasting time) we have our lunch and chat in Nima's camp. Nima is a great chatterbox. He has a wide, horsey, ever-present grin and intelligent eyes gleaming and blinking away as he talks incessantly, lecturing one and all. He gives me Monpa tea in a Monpa tea-cup with butter floating on the top—rich and inviting. We sit and sip—rather slurp—the tea and lick the butter.

The bridge point here is almost ready. On the other side it is complete. The road looks wide here, huge and broad in the midst of the narrow gorge of the Sakfret rong.

I wonder what it will be like later? When the vehicles move along it? Dear Lord, will the vehicles ever move across?

17 April, 1977

This morning I heard the cuckoo again. The bird never stops calling and really there is something sultry, melodious, something so inviting about her voice, raising strange yearnings. Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo on warm spring afternoons is bad enough, but this morning the skies are heavy with gray clouds blanketing the countryside. It is like something out of Meera's lyrics—no mango trees here but the koel still sings.

Calm has descended after the storm. The white orchids are blooming once again. The red *udang* (rhododendron) has shed its petals. The oak forest is a fresh green.

It has been so wonderful for me—so lucky to be in the mountains and watch the march of seasons—the leaves shed, the flowers bloom.

We crossed Marmang Camp yesterday—the fields a rich green and wind in the pines. The road portion constructed by Soksen and Sakyur people is now like a lover's walk—the colour of the road pinkish brown, shaded on either side by huge trees, the sweet smell of resin and pine needles rustling heavily in the wind. There was a quarrel here over the gaon budha's millet field which was being affected by the road. But it is forgotten now—all is over. The road is made.

Today I have started wandering and rambling in my notes, perhaps because it is a holiday: that is to say I have decided to treat



today as a holiday and soak in the pleasure of a willed, wilful rest.

I was a little worried this morning because it had rained a bit but Lobsang and Biswas have returned safely. The rain has stopped. We have all been chatting for some time but now I am tired of talk and want to write again and what I had set out to write today was about the day the Lumla man died.

My heart was sinking a little that day when I asked the Lumla gaon budha how long he thought it would take and he said confidently, "We shall reach road level within 4 days." I felt a vague nagging guilt because I had forcibly called them all the way from Thrillam and scolded them too for their slow progress.

We were near the portion of flat rock when the lad came running up—just about ten minutes after my talk with the Lumla gaon budha. He gasped out the news. It took a split second for reaction and suddenly Lobsang leapt ahead and ran towards the spot. I can't remember what happened to Tashi. The young *mohori* (road supervisor) Pal stood before me, pale and shaking. I asked him for a piece of paper and scribbled a note to Doctor "So unfortunate. One is dead and one serious. Come fast." I handed it to the lad and told him to run to Pamakhar. Then I went up there, for once without any helping hands, up to the treacherous ledge where the Lumla people were huddled in a group, young lads trembling, weeping and shaking. No one shouted or spoke except the gaon budha who was very calm. When I came up, the dead man was already slung across someone's shoulders. Of course he was dead—the very limpness spoke of it with his leg dangling behind. God, what a sight—the red, raw meat just dangling there, the muscles and bones showing clearly, the rock having stripped it clean of flesh. In that split second I waited to feel sick or faint but felt nothing and knew then that it was going to be alright. In the same instance, however, Lobsang started weeping—poor boy, a helpless, tearless, animal grief.

The rock had killed one man and wounded another. It was terrible when the wounded man regained consciousness because the pain bore down upon him and I was helpless,—couldn't do anything except hold his hand, smooth his forehead and murmur ineffectual consolations. He moaned and wailed in agony, hauling himself up first to sit and then to lie down—turning restlessly first on one side and then the other. I searched in vain for the injury.

He complained of pain in the left thigh but there was not a scratch there, no hurt, no swelling. We could do nothing but wait for Doctor and it seemed hours till he arrived.

The dead body lay outside. I felt I must pay a last reverence, so I knelt and prayed and then we closed his eyes as we did for Kesang, because it is unpleasant for the relatives to see the staring, gasping eyes of a sudden death.

Meantime the wounded man had become restless again. He kept moaning about his shirt and pant which I had slit in my vain attempts to locate his injury! I promised him a new set and was just getting impatient for Doctor Lallwani when he appeared, blue jeans and putties suddenly looming up in the small hut. Injections were boiled. Penthardine given. Suddenly we all felt much better and things moved quickly.

The stretcher was prepared, poles fixed, knotted and tightened. Doctor straightened the patient's legs very gently, so that he hardly screamed and then wound a long cloth around them pulling them together and tying them firmly. Suddenly he was very quiet, as if relieved of pain.

Six stretcher bearers were needed since the terrain was steep, slippery and difficult to negotiate in the dark. *Hrampos* (bamboo torches) were organised and we started off, torches flaming. Karma Wangchu was a great help. I sent Pem Thinley ahead to make sure that the ambulance would reach us.

As we touched the main Lumla Road Karma's boy served us all with hot, sweet tea which was so welcome. I was tired. The long line of nerves along the left hip, and left leg was shot with pain.

In the camp we kept him in Doctor's room. He was better and kept asking for *tambakoo* (tobacco), refused *khichri* (rice gruel) but ate some tea and biscuits. Doctor lit a cigarette for him and I left them chatting away.

They left the next morning. I was too tired to see them off. Later, the helicopter came to Tawang and took him to Gauhati.

The next day I had to visit the site of the accident again. Workers were not there and I went up the treacherous ledge and saw the killer stone and the water seepage—unmistakable, dangerous. I scrambled down, heart in mouth, with an odd sensation in the stomach. There could be no question of putting the Lumla people on the job again. This portion would have to be left as it was—incomplete.

Administrators and politicians have to make capital out of anything. I made the most of this death with a sure instinct that it would pay off. On a spate of frantic wireless telegraphs from me, the Executive Engineer agreed to take over the road on 12 ft. width as against 18 ft. and that was a great, a fantastic relief.

*19th April, 1977*

Two or three days back I had gone to Thrillam and stayed in the village level workers' quarter with Assistant Commissioner Neog Sahib who made me this notebook in which I am writing now. We sat chatting the whole evening. He had such stories to relate about NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) old-timers. He told me how he once entered his room in Khela (Tirap District) and heard a strange sound under his bed. When he peeped he found none other than his Mizo colleague, Thangseiyya sahib, crouched underneath, air-gun in hand, holding a finger to his lips. Neog Sahib retired precipitately till Mr Thangseiyya finally nabbed and killed the rat he was after! Mizos eat mice and after having finished off all the rodents in his house he had come rat-hunting in his neighbours!

Apropos strange meat-eating habits he told me another story of a Naga Officer who accompanied his commissioner on an elephant hunt. After the latter had left with the tusks, he chopped off the elephant's trunk, liver and other delectable parts, packed them into his jeep trailer, covered his handiwork with a tarpaulin and took it home. For the next few days a daily barbecue was held in his garden, chopping pieces of the elephant and roasting them over a huge fire, all friends, relatives and hangers-on merrily eating while pious Hindus shuddered and gave the house a wide berth!

But in NEFA no one remains a pious Hindu for long. As Rao Sahib says with a twinkle in his eye, "Here there are no brahmins, only NEFA brahmins."

So many people have sacrificed themselves for this road. I have known how to scold and get work out of people, but how much love have I shown them? What can be done? Perhaps by writing I can make up for it, for the villagers and the staff—for Mazumdar and Tashi Dondup, for Doc and Lobsang Dorji, Pem Thinley, D.V. Rao, Thukla, Basu who gave themselves up and forgot everything for this road.

They have showered love on me in a hundred different ways.

Tashi and Mazumdar waiting for me above Sakyur Gompa with torches, my muffler and gloves which I had forgotten to take on moonlit nights—wind through the pines as Thukla and I stumbled back late as usual to camp. D.V. Rao with that hurt look in his eyes following me doggedly in the darkness after the dead body of the Jang boy. Lobsang helping me limp across the tracks when I hurt my knee. Pem Thinley looking at me reproachfully, saying “Don’t go to Thrillam today. See how thin you have gone!” Karma, poking an anxious face inside my tent said, “Madam, don’t go to the rocky area, see how it has rained!”

My vessel is truly full, brimming, pressed down and falling over. When we receive, we receive abundantly. All this must sound sentimental. But it was not a fool’s paradise. Paradise does not last for three long years and there are no tears in paradise. Here there have been tears, much love, much joy.

## Epilogue

Much has happened since I left Tawang in June 1977. Bits and pieces of the latest news have kept trickling in intermittently across Sela Pass. Doka came to Delhi in 1979 as usual brimful of happenings. Tashi Khandu, Karma Wangchu, Tsering Tashi have also come off and on in connection with the toruous knots and crosses of the political *tamasha*. Kuru Hasang, my jet-pilot friend who had helped to ferry Lumla Road casualties to Gauhati through formidable weather has now resigned from the air-force and joined politics in a big way. The final writ of power for Arunachal issues from oracles that lie hidden somewhere along red carpeted corridors in Delhi, (where else?) and so the city is a magnet which draws my friends, with the inevitable news letter.

Tawang has never been a sleepy little paradise. After the dubious distinction of the Chinese occupation it has now to its credit the first Regional Seed Potato Farm established by the North Eastern Council in Arunachal Pradesh. This was set up after my departure and is functioning well. Tawang, still guided by dedicated District Agriculture Officer Shri S.R. Ghosh, is also now the only district of Arunachal which exports seed potato as a major cash crop to West Bengal, Assam and Mizoram. Having been for long an important dot on the political map, it has now emerged on to the potato map of the country.

The Kitpi Hydel project is functioning fairly well after some teething troubles. Village electrification is well under way.

The Tawang Co-operative Consumer Stores, led by Assistant Registrar of Co-operatives Shri L.P. Singh has expanded its activities and a chain of fair price shops now dot the main Sela-Tawang road.

The Lumla road was inaugurated in April, 1979. What is more important, vehicles are actually plying on it and enterprising con-

tractors have started carriage contract with one-tonne vehicles.

But it is the political scene over the past three years which commands interest. Personalities and power politics have chased each other like giant shadow puppets across a stage constructed by a paternalistic *Bharat Sarkar* anxious to draw tribals into the democratic mainstream of the nation.

I am reconstructing here with as much accuracy as I could muster, the course of events on the political scene from May-June, 1977 till January, 1980.

When I left Tawang in June, 1977 we were preparing for the first democratic elections to be held in Arunachal Pradesh. Outsiders may not be aware that Arunachal had a Council of Ministers and an Assembly even before elections were held. Democracy in fact was served to Arunachal on a platter, with the existing Counsellors taking over as a caretaker ministry and the acting Vice-Presidents of Anchal Samitis being nominated directly as members of the legislative assembly.

The Council of Ministers chose for their leader Pema Khandu Thungon who assumed office of Chief Minister which he relinquished in late 1979. Pema Khandu was the sole representative of Kameng district in the Council of Ministers. Though belonging to a minority tribe of Rupa (Bomdila district) the fact that he was Buddhist and married to a Monpa girl of Dirang gave him unquestioned ascendancy as the leader and spokesman of the Monpa tribe.

In Tawang these developments saw the ascendancy of Tashi Khandu who, having been Vice-President Tawang Anchal Samiti became member of the newly constituted assembly. Tashi Khandu has figured often in the preceding narrative. We used to call him by the honorific "*Zinda*". Others called him *Appa*—a tall, slightly stooped, aquiline-featured, soft-spoken man, with a gentle though shrewd face, unassuming dress and quiet manners. There was no showmanship about Tashi Khandu who always measured his words before he spoke. His influence in Choksum emerged not only from the fact that he had been Shyarcho tsorgen but also because of his considerable wealth. Tashi Khandu's family belongs to the elite of Kharsanang who trace their family tree back to the sixth Dalai Lama; they own large chunks of land in the paddy terraces of Kharsanang and are accordingly obeyed and respected.

Pema Gombu of Lhou and Karma Wangchu of Seru have also

risen to positions of power in this period. Pema Gombu, gaon budha Lhou and tsorgen of Lhoucho has an eminent record of service to the government in various capacities. Having a keen business sense, he is now running a flourishing transport business, in addition to shops, hotels and (for sometime) a trial bakery. He is perhaps the richest of the three leaders—a handsome and urbane man who could grace with credit the best drawing-rooms of Delhi.

The third (though not the last) figure on this political chess-board is that of Karma Wangchu, gaon budha Seru and tsorgen of Serucho. Karma is tall, dark, with keenly intelligent eyes and a wide, ever-present smile. While Tashi Khandu and Pema Gombu carry with them an aura of Tawang—remote, rustic and in the case of the latter, slightly exotic—Karma is much more like a plainsman.

Like Pema Gombu, he runs a flourishing business. He is widely known for his romance with the daughter of the late Nyerpala, the rich, powerful and esteemed Political Assistant of Additional Deputy Commissioner. She was working in the Tawang General Hospital as auxiliary nurse midwife when they fell in love. Karma was already married, with a number of children and I cannot escape a lurking admiration for the tenacity with which he fought the divorce case and obtained his freedom to marry the woman he loved. This marriage was to prove fateful for him in more than one way.

Onto this stage, dominated by tradition, age and wealth, entered two other contestants who were products of modern India. Tashi Lama was an M.A. from Bombay University and had discontinued LL.B. to settle in Tawang and take up politics in right earnest. A short, dapper, bespectacled youth, very slight and dark in contrast to the tall athletic Monpas, he soon gained a following for himself amongst the people of his village group of Bomba Gyanghar. He had the added advantage of being related to my Head political interpreter Lama Tsering who commanded a great deal of influence and respect.

Curiously enough Tashi Lama did not face competition from the old camp. His arch rival turned out to be the second educated youth who made a bid for political power—Tsering Tashi, son of the late Nyerpala and brother-in-law of Karma Wangchu, gaon budha Seru.

Tsering Tashi is tall, well-built with quiet and pleasing manners. He had studied for some time in the Sainik School in Bhubha-

neshwar. While Tashi Lama had taken up a teaching post, Tsering Tashi did not seek employment but confined himself to constructive avenues for the development of Tawang. His approach was sober and found favour with the Chief Minister, Pema Khandu.

A cold war between Tashi Lama and Tsering Tashi should not have been inevitable, since Tashi Lama had staked claims to the Lumla constituency and thus he was not an immediate rival to Tsering Tashi who planned to stand for election from Tawang. But the division sharpened and grew to disquieting proportions. In the meantime the Emergency was revoked and Indira Gandhi lost the 1977 elections. Within two months, the Arunachal Ministry followed the rest of the country and turned themselves into protagonists of the Janata rule. None of them could have liked the treatment meted out to them by Morarji Desai who barked at the ministers and almost evicted them from his room when they went to call on him and ask for statehood. As to the other central ministers, they barely knew that Arunachal existed and those who did, confused its location variously with Nagaland and Sikkim. In the meantime Assembly elections were held. Being amongst the educated elite of Arunachal, Chief Minister Pema Khandu gave party tickets (now Janata) to both Tsering Tashi and Tashi Lama from Tawang and Lumla constituency. The support of the ruling party, sponsorship of Pema Khandu and their own educated status proved to no avail. Both lost the race to traditional leadership. In Lumla Karma Wangchu, gaon budha Seru defeated Tashi Lama while in Tawang Tashi Khandu, (previous member of legislative assembly) defeated Tsering Tashi. Both had stood as Independents but were later persuaded by Pema Khandu to join the ex-Congress(I) turned-Janata Party which returned Pema Khandu to power in the same elections. Both victors, Tashi Khandu and Karma Wangchu came to Delhi and looked me up in an atmosphere of friendly cordiality still reminiscent of the old days. The split, however, came with certain developments on the main stage of Arunachal politics.

Pema Khandu could not remain indefinitely unchallenged as leader of the Assembly. There were rumbles of discontent to be heard in his own district but he had, shrewdly enough, offered the M.P's seat to his major opponent Sri Rinchin Khandu Khrime, an ex-Stephanian. The next threat to his leadership came from Siang. Sri Tamo Riba, Agriculture Minister in Pema Khandu's party, quit the forum to join up with Sri Bakin Pertin to form a regional



party called the Peoples' Party of Arunachal which was dominated, to begin with, by Adis of Siang district while Kameng remained with the ruling party. Kuru Hasang, the Apatani jet pilot, who had started his own pharmaceutical business meantime joined politics as general secretary of Janata Party led by Pema Khandu.

In late 1979 the P.P.A. engineered a number of defections which culminated in the resignation of Pema Khandu as Chief Minister. I will not dwell at length upon the tortuous moves that preceded and followed this event. In Tawang it marked an important, far reaching and sociologically significant development. For the first time the Tawang members of legislative assembly took opposite sides, instead of unanimously supporting Pema Khandu along lines of community, dialect and religious affiliations. Thus Tashi Khandu remained with Pema Khandu who once again changed cloaks and went back to the Congress(I) fold after his resignation. Karma Wangchu was won over by P.P.A. and promised a minister-ship in the new cabinet which had an abortive tenure. Kuru Hasang also went over to the P.P.A. as an important office bearer. The Assembly was dissolved soon after and elections held along with the Parliamentary elections of January 1980. In this contest again a crystallisation of forces took place. While Tsering Tashi was aligned with his brother-in-law, Karma Wangchu, Tashi Lama caused a vacuum by stepping off the political stage. He married, took a State Bank loan for starting a flour mill and built an imposing house for himself. The gap in Lumla had to be filled urgently in order to balance the odds against Karma Wangchu. Pema Gombu gaon budha Lhou then joined the fray. In the contest in January, 1980 in Lumla constituency Karma Wangchu (P.P.A.) defeated Pema Gombu (Congress I) by over 1,500 votes. In Tawang constituency Tsering Tashi (P.P.A.) defeated Tashi Khandu (Congress I) by only fourteen votes.

On the Parliamentary level there were three main contestants for the M.P's seat: Pema Khandu, ex-Chief Minister, Rinchin Khandu Khrieme ex-M.P. also belonging to the Kameng Buddhist community and Kuru Hasang, who is Apatani, and non-Buddhist. The main contestants were Pema Khandu and Kuru Hasang.

Shortly before the elections were held I was speculating about Kuru Hasang's chances in Tawang. I estimated that he would get hardly any votes on account of the fact that he is non-Buddhist and a Lopa or an "outsider". The Parliamentary election results, thus,

came as a considerable shock to me when it emerged that voting both for the Assembly as well as Parliament *had been strictly along party lines* in ostensible disregard of religious and community affiliations. Kuru Hasang won a majority vote in Kameng, defeating Pema Khandu in his own district, but the Itanagar vote went against him and Pema Khandu was elected as the M.P. from Arunachal (West).

On closer scrutiny, it emerged that the votes were cast not merely for Kuru Hasang but for the Karma Wangchu-Tsering Tashi alliance, which also canvassed for Kuru. Tradition, in the sense of clan and family affiliations continued to play a strong determining role in the choice of candidates. Politics in Tawang, as in the rest of the country, thus tended to follow configurations of personalities and not party affiliations. This has been borne out by recent developments which took place soon after the election results were announced without either party [Congress (I) or P.P.A.] getting a clear majority in the Assembly. The usual hectic bargaining started and culminated in a majority for Congress(I) after some P.P.A. M.L.As had been induced to cross the floor. Amongst these, in a curious rigmarole were Karma Wangchu and Tsering Tashi who went back to the Congress(I) fold led by Pema Khandu, on the basis of a ministership offered to Tsering Tashi who is now minister for cooperation. They make curious bed-fellows indeed since Karma was amongst those who toppled Pema Khandu in '79 by initially defecting from his party to the P.P.A. and Tsering Tashi opposed and defeated Tashi Khandu who was Pema Khandu's candidate. But in the political game whether it be played on the panchayat or national level—whether it be in Tawang or Delhi—power, presents and patronage are the rule. Thus has Tawang been drawn into the mainstream of the nation.

## Glossary

<i>A.D.C.</i>	Additional Deputy Commissioner
<i>atta</i>	flour
<i>atta chakki</i>	flour mill
<i>asana</i>	seat
<i>ani</i>	nun
<i>ani gompa</i>	nunnery
<i>bhangchang</i>	millet beer
<i>betang</i>	silver coin
<i>bray</i>	a measure of weight, about one kg.
<i>bokpoi</i>	a preparation of millet flour eaten with chutney
<i>Bon</i>	the Bon religion; a Bon priest
<i>bastiwallah</i>	villager
<i>brokpa</i>	grazier
<i>bro</i>	grazing ground
<i>buxsar</i>	bride
<i>bokhari</i>	a metal/tin oven used for heating rooms
<i>brah</i>	steep rocky area
<i>cho</i>	a group of two or more villages
<i>Choksum</i>	a group of three chos i.e., Serucho, Lhoucho and Shyarcho
<i>chowrie</i>	yak, dzo, dzomo and other related species
<i>chowriewallah</i>	grazier
<i>chang</i>	beer
<i>chang</i>	north or central Tibet
<i>chowkidari</i>	watch and ward
<i>chowkidar</i>	watchman
<i>chu</i>	river
<i>cha</i>	tea
<i>chamje</i>	secretary to a rimpoche

<i>chorten</i>	stupa—a sacred memorial
<i>chando</i>	aconite
<i>chupa</i>	Tibetan coat
<i>chorkum</i>	fomented or dried cheese
<i>chamin</i>	chutney made by grinding red chillies with cheese
<i>chokche</i>	table
<i>Circle Officer</i>	administrative head of a circle
<i>Dakpanang</i>	the traditional name for the villages of Lumla circle
<i>ding</i>	a group of households
<i>D.C.</i>	Deputy Commissioner
<i>Dharam</i>	righteousness
<i>drukdel</i>	a judicial body now extinct
<i>dhallo</i>	a monk who has renounced his vows
<i>dumchang</i>	communal drinking
<i>dzomo</i>	female yak
<i>dao</i>	dagger
<i>Devata</i>	god
<i>drukpa</i>	Bhutanese
<i>drachang</i>	administrative wing of the Tawang gompa
<i>ering</i>	paddy terrace
<i>endi</i>	Assam silk
<i>E.A.C.</i>	Extra Assistant Commissioner, who controls two or more circles
<i>gompa</i>	monastery, temple
<i>Gelukpa</i>	the Yellow Sect of Buddhism
<i>gaon budha</i>	village headman
<i>gomi</i>	village accountant
<i>gyan</i>	a form of ballot/lottery
<i>ghorawallah</i>	horse and pony carriage contractors
<i>Gyalwa Rimpoche</i>	the Dalai Lama
<i>Gyaghar</i>	the Monpa term for Hindustan
<i>gombro</i>	system of grazing whereby the grazier who clears the meadow has ownership rights over it.
<i>halwa</i>	a paste of millet or wheat flour
<i>hrang</i>	a measure of weight equal to a quarter litre
<i>khada</i>	white scarf offered on all ceremonial occasions

<i>kheti</i>	cultivation
<i>khrama</i>	coiled bamboo rope
<i>ko-no</i>	wheat-barley
<i>khembo</i>	abbot
<i>kangyur</i>	one hundred and eight holy scriptures
<i>keng</i>	Bon dance of Bongleng village
<i>kemsang mento</i>	a high altitude flower, red in colour
<i>Kakalinga</i>	an archway with frescoes on religious themes
<i>Labrang</i>	the spiritual wing of the Tawang monastery headed by the Khembu (abbot)
<i>losar</i>	the New Year festival
<i>lachang</i>	a graziers log gate
<i>lapze</i>	stone structures
<i>la</i>	pass
<i>lopas</i>	the dwellers of Subansiri district
<i>la</i>	an honorific e.g., chamjela
<i>Monpa</i>	the inhabitants of Monyul
<i>Monyul</i>	the lower land
<i>Mangma</i>	the village assembly
<i>mane</i>	a stone wall with inscribed prayers
<i>Maf</i>	excuse
<i>mo-mo</i>	steamed meat balls
<i>maniseng</i>	spruce
<i>mithun</i>	erotic images
<i>mento</i>	flower
<i>mar</i>	ghee
<i>mukpin</i>	general
<i>makpo</i>	son-in-law who resides in wife's house and inherits the property where there is no male heir
<i>muibo</i>	wife
<i>Nyngmapa</i>	the Red Sect
<i>Nyerchang</i>	the revenue officer of the Tawang monastery
<i>ngangong</i>	magnolia
<i>ngan</i>	black magic
<i>N.E.F.A.</i>	North East Frontier Agency
<i>ong</i>	blessings
<i>pangchen</i>	traditional name for the villages of Zimithang circle
<i>paseng</i>	oak tree

<i>parmong</i>	oak forest
<i>parmong shed</i>	garden shed where oak leaves are stored
<i>pa</i>	dweller, e.g. Monpa, (dweller of Mon), Pangchenpa (dweller of Pangchen)
<i>pong</i>	phallic symbol
<i>pangteng</i>	grazing ground
<i>phoreng-moreng</i>	a piece of land given for cultivation to old people, the ownership rights of which do not rest with them
<i>Pandhan Lhamo</i>	Mother Kali
<i>political interpreter</i>	a Monpa official attached to the A.D.C. Tawang as interpreter
<i>plah</i>	a Bon festival
<i>roxi</i>	liquor distilled from rice
<i>Rimpoche</i>	an incarnate lama
<i>rong</i>	a stream
<i>surbi</i>	dried cheese cubes
<i>shou</i>	illegitimate child
<i>samadhi</i>	sacred memorial for the dead
<i>tsorgen</i>	gaon budha
<i>timri</i>	ceremonial offering to visitors
<i>thankha</i>	holy scroll painting
<i>thupa</i>	a soup of noodles, vegetables etc.
<i>tama seng</i>	the red rhododendron
<i>tso</i>	a lake
<i>Torgya</i>	the gompa dance festival held in the Tawang monastery every January-February
<i>thumi</i>	village elder
<i>umze</i>	head of a nunnery
<i>udang</i>	another species of rhododendron
<i>wangseng</i>	hill fir
<i>seng</i>	tree
<i>yeng</i>	sheep
<i>yui</i>	village
<i>yui</i>	precious jewel
<i>yui paksam</i>	village song
<i>yak chamb</i>	yak dance

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