

- (ii) *BHUTAN : Land of the Peaceful Dargon* by G. N. Mehra. XVI—151 text pages and 93 colour photographs. 16 black and white photographs within the text. Price Rs.150/-. Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore, Kanpur, 1974.

In this time of violent changes, upheavels, environment pollution and general unrest all over the world, it comes as a relief to be introduced to a country, in which life is still in harmony with nature, religion still a source of culture and human happiness, and the rulers still in personal touch with their people. In fact, it was the late King of Bhutan who inspired this book and to whom it is, therefore, dedicated by the author.

Mr Mehra, who in his capacity as Financial Adviser to the Government of Bhutan, lived for many years in this country and had access to many places and sources of information which are inaccessible to most other visitors to Bhutan, is in the lucky position to give to the world a unique insight into the life and nature of one of the last "Shangri-las" of the world. And he does so not only by giving us a detailed account of the land and its people, of art and architecture, religious tradition and early history as well as the present administration and general economy of the country, but supports his description with magnificent full-page colour photographs which in themselves would make this volume the pride of any library, both from an artistic as well as from a documentary and historical point of view. In these pictures we admire the majesty of the mountains, the loveliness of the valleys, the monumentality of architecture, the lovable character of the people and the uniqueness of their religious art, in form of paintings and ritual dances, interiors of temples, adorned with frescoes, statues, richly carved altars and precious offerings. Without these pictures, which are a credit to the photographic skill and artistic sensitivity of the author, nobody could imagine the vital importance of colour in religious tradition as well as in the daily life of the people of Bhutan. The high standard of the colour reproductions does full justice to the excellence of the originals and corresponds to the high quality of the descriptive text, in which the author shows himself as a reliable guide to the understanding of the ancient culture and the present conditions of Bhutan. He writes with warmth and conviction, based on keen observation and practical knowledge of both, the common people and the administration of the country.

His book is all the more interesting as it depicts a country in transition from a medieval, more or less feudal society, to a modern state, under the courageous leadership of its late King Jigme Dorje Wangchuk, who tried to guide his people into the new age, without destroying the essential values of his country's ancient culture.

Here we have a fascinating example of an enlightened monarch, who had the farsightedness to divest himself voluntarily of his absolute powers, in order to share them with his people. The measure of his success may be gauged from the balanced account of this book which deals as much with the present problems and achievements as beauty of Bhutanese art. "The modern world", the author says, "with its penchant for materialistic values . . . might consider the creation of such 'useless' beauty a purile and wasteful effort. But ultimately the call of the spirit is what matters or should matter and by giving dynamic visual expression to their vast mythology, the Bhutanese artists have not only accomplished a difficult task but have created a lasting symbol of the triumph of their faith. This has fed the country's soul and made it possible for Bhutan to maintain its identity and not to be swallowed by the culture of its big neighbours".

This book will take its place as a historical document of the transitional period of Bhutan as well as of its living art and tradition, and as such I warmly recommend it to all who are interested in the unique culture of this beautiful country.