

Leh nest chuach *Press* *29*

Bhutan's bachelor king

By CHAITANYA KALBAG, of Reuter, in Thimbu

Tucked away in the eastern Himalayas lives the ruler of a fairyland little kingdom who must be one of the world's most eligible bachelors because he is the world's youngest reigning monarch.

The personal life of the Druk Gyalpo (precious ruler of the dragon people) is not gossiped about in Bhutan, a mountainous kingdom of 1.4 million people sandwiched between India and China's Tibet region.

Nevertheless, there is intense speculation about who King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, aged 29, will take as his queen.

In spite of his relative youth as a monarch, King Jigme Singye has been on the throne for 13 years. He handles absolute power in easy fashion.

He frequently sits beside his driver in most unroyal fashion as his Mercedes limousine, with a bright red licence plate simply reading "Bhutan," purrs around Thimbu, the capital.

No bodyguards are in sight when

the tall, slightly balding king, dressed in track suit and sneakers, heads for Thimbu's Changlimithang Stadium for a game of basketball.

Earlier this month security was stepped up when foreign ministers of seven South Asian countries met in Thimbu to discuss regional co-operation.

"This is the first time most people in Thimbu discovered that Bhutan had a police force," a senior official said.

The king lives in a small building, called the Royal Cottage, in the town, preferring its simple comforts to official palaces on Thimbu's outskirts.

Like other young educated men in the kingdom he enjoys the national sport, archery, and dabbles in golf, shooting, and photography.

The Bhutanese are used to the informal ways of their monarch, the fourth in a hereditary line established in 1907 after decades of strife between provincial over-

lords; but they are discreetly curious about his plans for marriage.

Speculation flared three years ago when two princesses from neighbouring Sikkim, a former kingdom that became India's twenty-second state in 1975, visited Bhutan as the king's guests.

"Nothing came of it," one official said sadly.

King Jigme Singye, who received part of his schooling in Britain, has told questioners he will most likely marry a Bhutanese girl when he makes up his mind.

Four months before his father died in July, 1972, the 16-year-old prince was considered mature enough to be appointed chairman of the country's planning commission.

Every morning hundreds of people line up outside the king's office in the imposing fortress-castle, Tashichhodzong, the seat of the Government, to talk with their monarch.