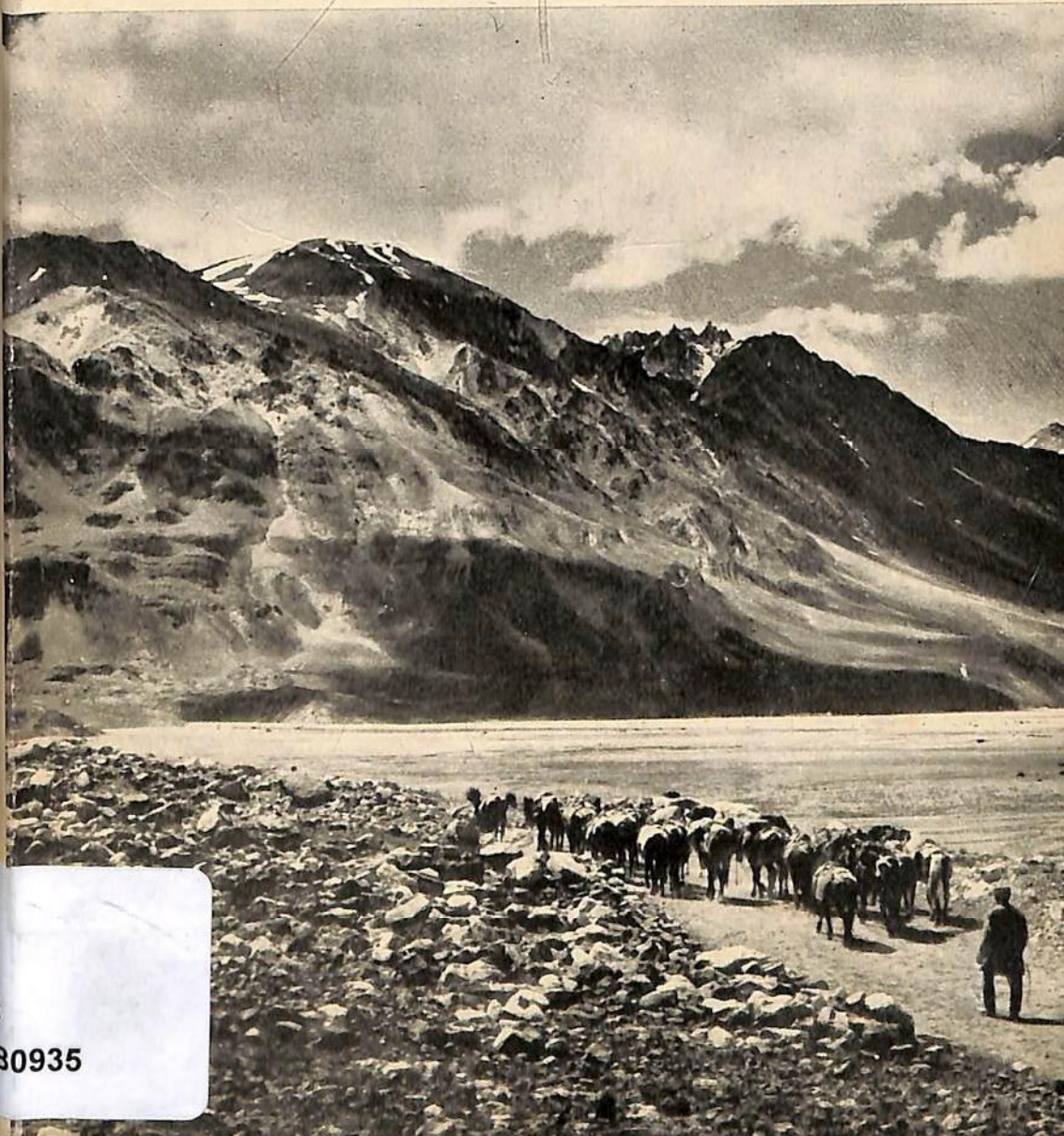


Himalayan Wonderland

Travels in Lahaul-Spiti

M S Gill



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Travels in Lahaul-Spiti

Foreword by Mrs. Indira Gandhi

MANOHAR SINGH GILL



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PRIME MINISTER

FOREWORD

There is a romantic aura about far away places, especially if they are difficult of access. But the lives of those who inhabit our mountainous areas are far from romantic. The people are simple and sincere but every problem acquires complexity because of the altitude, the shortage of water and the lack of communications. As one who loves the mountains, I have deep concern for the mountain people. In order to survive, they must have great faith and fortitude. They are sturdy and hardworking, yet full of laughter and gaiety.

Shri Manohar Singh Gill's book has awakened old memories of my own crossing of the Rohtang Pass with my father many years ago. I am sorry that lack of time prevented us from proceeding to Lahaul and Spiti and since then I have nursed a desire to go to this lovely part of our country. Shri Gill captures something of the majestic beauty of this area and gives us glimpses into the lives and customs of the people and the difficulties of administration there. I hope that his book will kindle the interest of its readers and will urge them to get better acquainted with the people of Lahaul and Spiti and indeed those of all our hill areas.

Indira Gandhi
(Indira Gandhi)

New Delhi,
July 17, 1972.

preface

This book is an account of nearly a year's stay in a little known valley in the inner Himalayas near the Indo-Tibetan border. Lahaul lies in the north western part of India beyond the Great Himalayan Divide. To be exact, it is situated between north latitude $32^{\circ} 8'$ and $32^{\circ} 59'$, and east longitude $76^{\circ} 48'$ and $77^{\circ} 47'$. It comprises a vast mountainous area of 2,255 square miles lying south of Ladakh. The Great Divide separates it from the district of Kulu. The mountain range is almost uniformly 18,000 feet or higher, and the sole access to Lahaul lies over the 13,050 feet high Rohtang pass. In the west lies Chamba and the Jammu province. Spiti in the east is separated from Lahaul by a high mountain rib running north from the main Himalayan range. The two valleys have a tenuous link over the Kunzam pass (height 14,931 feet).

Lahaul has a central mass of high mountains and vast glaciers. Peaks of 20,000 feet or more abound. The Chandra

and Bhaga rivers rise on either side of the Baralacha pass (height 16,047 feet), and flow through narrow valleys on opposite sides of the central ridge to meet at Tandi, giving birth to the Chenab river. The Chandra and Bhaga valleys are largely desolate in their upper reaches. Near the confluence there is cultivation on flats above the rivers, and there are many picturesque villages. The Pattan valley beyond the confluence, on account of its reduced elevation, is richer both in crops and population.

These rugged valleys lie at a height of 10,000 feet to 16,000 feet above sea level. The summers are pleasant with rich crops, lush green meadows and a mass of alpine flowers. Not so the long winters. From the first snowfall in October-November to the month of May the valley is continuously under snow.

Kyelang gets about twenty feet of snow in the season. The temperature falls to -13°C or even less. The Rohtang pass is then closed to the outside world, and the valley must live on its own resources. Living is hard with limited fuel, lack of fresh fruit and vegetables. But the people have a cheerful happy attitude to life. They have achieved complete harmony with their harsh environment, and display a wonderful contentment.

Since independence the Punjab Government have done much to improve the lot of these very fine people.* Roads have been built, water supply schemes laid, hospitals and schools opened. Lahaul-Spiti is now a separate district with headquarters at Kyelang. A council chosen by the people advises the Administration on welfare and development schemes. All this is in sharp contrast to its adminis-

*The credit for this goes primarily to the dynamic leadership of the late S. Partap Singh Kairon, who in spite of his indifferent health, personally visited these remote valleys, travelling long distances on foot and horseback. On account of the reorganisation of the Punjab, since 1 November 1966, the district forms part of the State of Himachal Pradesh.

tration under the British, when the valley was left to the whimsical charge of a local Baron. A British magistrate from Kulu visited the valley once a year for a couple of days. For the rest, the valley was left to fend for itself.

I had always wanted to visit this strange and romantic land. Hikers and mountaineers spoke in glowing terms of its clear summers, massive glaciers, and challenging peaks—most of them unclimbed. Fortunately, the Government of Punjab gave me an opportunity to live for a year in this fascinating Shangrila. I was appointed Deputy Commissioner of Lahaul-Spiti in 1962, the second officer to be so posted since the creation of the district in 1960-61. Many officers and others have visited the valley in summer. Hardly any spent the winter there, and certainly none have written of a winter in Lahaul. With no contact with Chandigarh save a wireless set, and no work within the snow-bound valley, I was rich in time. This I invested in a study of the people placed under my charge. I took part in their festivals and fairs, and tried to identify myself with their lives and longings.

All this I did primarily for the pleasure of it, but I had another motive too. The setting up of a district administration with concentrated work on community development, health and education, was bound to have an impact on the people very soon. Apart from raising the standard of living and reducing the harshness of existence, such contact was likely to change and modify the social values and customs of the people. Time-honoured traditions and values would soon crumble under the bulldozer effect of new cultural influences. I wanted to record and preserve something of the life and values of the people of Lahaul before this finally happened.

The people of Lahaul-Spiti have been kind and hospitable to me beyond measure. This book is an effort to pay back a little of that debt. I have tried to record everything as I

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The people of Lahaul-Spiti have been kind and hospitable to me beyond measure. This book is an effort to pay back a little of that debt. I have tried to record everything as I

saw it, without any attempt to make comparisons. I believe that the social system of a people is, to a large extent, the result of their environmental needs. It evolves out of a collective experience. There is an old Lahaul saying that no custom is bad if it leads a people to happiness. The Lahaulas have been well served by their customs and beliefs.

The first draft of this book was written in 1967. Over the succeeding years, whenever I could arouse my interest in the manuscript, I attempted to improve and re-write it. In this I have had valuable counsel from Dr. M. S. Randhawa, who is ever willing, and even anxious, to help the new writer or the unknown artist. To Tshering Dorje, I owe more than I would care to admit! Major Haripal Singh Ahluwalia, the Everest hero, and Jo Bradley of the Cambridge University Press, both in their own ways, have been of immense help. I must acknowledge gratefully the valuable secretarial services of Sardar Chanan Singh, Shri T. R. Vij and Shri Attar Singh.

Chandigarh
18 July 1972

Manohar Singh Gill

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A. Senko
28. XII '92

28. XII '92

Turning west a little, he speered for the green hills of Kulu, and sought Kailung under the glaciers. "For thither came I in the old, old days. From Leh I came, over the Baralachi."

"Yes, yes, we know it," said the far-faring people of Shamlegh.

"And I slept two nights with the priests of Kailung. These are the Hills of my delight! Shadows blessed above all other shadows! There my eyes opened on this world; there my eyes were opened to this world; there I found Enlightenment; and there I girt my loins for my Search. Out of the Hills I came—the high Hills and the strong winds. Oh, just is the Wheel!" He blessed them in detail—the great glaciers, the naked rocks, the piled moraines and tumbled shale; dry upland, hidden salt-lake, age-old timber and fruitful water-shot valley one after the other, as a dying man blesses his folk; and Kim marvelled at his passion.

RUDYARD KIPLING, *Kim*

a beginning

It all began one August morning with a summons from the Chief Secretary, Punjab. As Under Secretary Labour, I sat in an eighth-storey room in Le Corbusier's elegant Secretariat, looking out over his other fantasies, the High Court and the State Parliament building. The Chandigarh lake shimmered in the distance. All morning I plodded through numerous memorials from Labour Unions, preparing summaries for the Deputy Secretary. It was all so tiresome—more so on a sultry August day. The telephone rang. The Chief Secretary would like to see me. Wondering what it could be about, I walked down to his fourth-floor office—thick piled carpets, Le Corbusier tapestry on the wall, air conditioners humming. E. N. stood at the far end, looking at a huge wall map of Punjab, pipe in hand.

Without turning around he asked in his gruff voice, "How are you making out in Labour?"

"Not too badly, Sir."

"Would you like a change?"

"If I can get out of the Secretariat, yes."

"The hills or the desert? I can give you a choice."

"Any time, the hills."

"It will have to be the high hills, not the Kangra or Kulu districts with their pleasant wooded valleys, the trout, and the tourists."

I knew what he meant. There was only one spot that fitted the bill, Lahaul-Spiti. With more than four thousand square miles of high mountains, glaciers and deep-cut valleys, none less than ten thousand feet high, Lahaul-Spiti was wedged between Tibet in the east, Ladakh in the north and Kulu in the south. Its sole precarious link with the Punjab lay over the Rohtang pass thirteen thousand fifty feet high, snow-bound for six months or more, and with a murderous reputation. Life was harsh and primitive, but exciting. The nearness of Tibet and China added zest to living, and urgency to one's work. I jumped at the offer.

E. N. was in an expansive mood. Over a cup of tea he talked of Lahaul.

"I hope you know the difficulties. The valley is snow-bound and cut off all through a long and severe winter. No communication, not even letters then. Not much in the nature of creature comforts or medical aid. You have to live like the locals."

I thought it all heavenly. I dreamt of being cut off from Chandigarh and its meaningless Government circulars, its tedious routine, and petty intrigues. E. N. talked on.

"But you will like it—particularly the hiking and the climbing. Most wonderful area for mountaineering. No monsoon. Fine weather all through the summer. Glaciers, and mountains of twenty thousand feet at your doorstep. Take an interest in the people. There is much work for an amateur anthropologist. Be in sympathy and

harmony with them. Be aware of your surroundings and the people, and you will never be lonely."

E. N. was clearly of the Verrier Elwin school of tribal administrators.

"When can you leave?"

"Within three days if you like."

I wanted to put some distance between me and the labour unions at the earliest.

"Well good luck to you, and keep me informed." At the door E. N. softened a little and confided, "I think I envy you. I wish I were younger and able to get away from these concrete walls."

Two days were spent in hectic activity, collecting tinned food, cameras, mountain boots, sleeping bags and a thousand other odds and ends. Finally, one fine morning I found myself at Chandigarh's fledgling airport waiting for the Dakota flight from Delhi. These vintage specimens of World War II still do yeomen service in India, flying mainly on faith!

As we lifted over the airfield and gained height, Le Corbusier's brain-child fell into clear geometric patterns; sector and sub-sector all dotted with neatly built cubes of white and grey. We swung away to the north flying over the low Shiwalik hills. After about twenty minutes we cleared the crest of this range, and flew into the broad Sunder Nagar valley heading for Mandi. From Mandi the fun started. Turning sharply we entered the Beas valley. Now the plane flew low, hemmed in on both sides by steep mountains. The valley was so narrow that the sides seemed within touching distance of the wing tips! The plane turned and twisted like a car in a traffic jam. There was no scope for turning back. I think most passengers prayed—the tourist guide in Delhi had evidently told them only of the beauties of Kulu, not its hazards!

After another ten minutes the valley broadened out, and

we flew low over the Beas river, which tumbled and rumbled down the boulder-strewn valley, in its mad rush to the plains. Soon we were skimming over the water, and then with a bump or two, we came to rest in a small grassy patch on the water's edge. The sole and proud representative of Indian Airlines came forward accompanied by all the local urchins. Together they put up a rickety ladder, and we stepped out to a perfect salesman's smile from Mr Airlines and cheers from the children. We deserved the ovation. The flight to Kulu is basically an affirmation of one's faith in God and the machine age!

The plane was tied up in a corner of the field, the luggage and passengers loaded on to a bus that rivalled the Dakota in age, the wind sleeve hauled down and stowed away. Mr Airlines adjusted his peak cap at a rakish angle, took the front seat, and we rumbled away in a groan of gears. Kulu airport was closed for the day!

At Manali I was sorting out my boxes and crates from the tourists' luggage, when I heard a soft voice at my elbow, "Mr Gill, Sir." I swung around and found myself looking at a tall well-built man of about thirty, with mongoloid features, and a perpetual twinkle in his eyes. A handsome man, except for the silly little Lenin peak cap on his head which gave him a slightly comic look.

"Sir I am Tshering Dorje, Bhoti teacher, come with the jeep from Kyelang," he said.

I had heard much about Dorje, a young Lahaula, extremely intelligent, tough, and with a most interesting and chequered past. In his youth he had travelled widely over western Tibet and Ladakh. He joined the monastery of Tholing near Taklakot in Tibet, spending the summers there, and the winters in Lahaul. But his restless spirit found the lamaistic discipline and confinement irksome. He ran away and got married. Now he teaches Bhoti to new district officers in

Lahaul. All spoke of him as a virtual Jeeves.

Dorje stepped aside and introduced the jeep driver—Fauja Singh, literally meaning “Army lion.” Fauja Singh was true to his name. A powerful, bushy bearded Sikh, he had seen service with the Fourteenth Army in Burma. A veteran of the Tiddim road, he now delighted in roaring down the mule tracks that did duty for roads in Lahaul.

Both men were Lahaul characters and their fame had filtered down to Chandigarh. I looked forward to working with them. Quickly and efficiently they sorted out my packages and loaded them. The jeep swung away across the suspension bridge over the Beas; the road rising in a series of serpentine curves. On our left was the river, and in front the magnificent ice walls of the Himalayan divide separating Kulu from Lahaul. On either side beautiful pine forests raced down the mountain slopes to the water’s edge. We gained height quickly and the valley got narrower, the Beas now pounding down a deep gorge.

Another bend in the road and the valley came to an abrupt end. Wedged in front like a giant dam was mountain mass bare of all vegetation. It rose sharply in a series of rock buttresses and grassy slopes. I had to throw my head back to look at it. The pine forests came down the side slopes, and then stopped abruptly at the foot of the pass, like hesitant maidens. A few tea shops, some road builders’ huts, and scattered stores, marked Rahla at the foot of the Rohtang pass.

A short halt for tea and we were off again. Now the real climb started. The road rose in a series of steep loops up the sheer face. In fact it was hardly a road; I might better describe it as a boulder strewn ledge cut along the mountain side. After every two or three hundred yards it took a sharp hairpin bend. The jeep bounced along groaning in low gears. It had no grip on account of the loose stones, and I half expected it to bounce off the edge. Fauja Singh drove

on serenely. He particularly delighted in demonstrating his virtuosity on the U turns. He would cut sharply, then back the jeep over the abyss, without so much as looking back, in order to complete the turn. The toes he kept on the brake, in case the jeep rolled back over the edge; the heel on the accelerator as a cut engine could be equally fatal. He was an artist and he knew it. I sat quietly trying to renew my faith in destiny and God. I dared not do otherwise. I had been told about the Commissioner touring Lahaul with Fauja Singh. At a particularly dangerous section the Commissioner thought discretion the better part of valour, and decided to get off. He asked Fauja Singh to drive on and wait a little distance away; he himself would walk, stretching the legs, and all that! Fauja Singh stopped the jeep, saluted, and said, "Sir, I also have a wife and children. If you walk, I walk!" The Commissioner meekly got back into the jeep and they drove on.

Sanity returned slowly to the slope, the groaning of the jeep ceased, and soon we were on top of the saddle. A small stone shelter for travellers caught in a Rohtang hurricane, a little board saying "*Height—Thirteen Thousand Fifty Feet,*" and some prayer flags marked the pass. The view was magnificent. Looking back we could see heavily forested ridges stretching back to the snow covered peaks around Manali. In front lay the Chandra valley of Lahaul, a barren land of rock and snow. Gephan peak, abode of the Gephan *devta*, the presiding deity of Lahaul, stood directly opposite the pass. Head uplifted, beautiful fluted sides covered with a mantle of snow, it was a mountaineer's dream. In 1912 Captain Todd and the Swiss Guide in General Bruce's party got to within twenty feet of the top. They were almost blown off* by the fierce gale from the Rohtang

*Fuhrer reports it to have been extremely hard work, but very fine climbing—ice and snow, with occasional bits of outcropping rock, their only

and retreated. On either side of the pass were two peaks of sixteen thousand feet or more, like the horns on a saddle.

For once there was no gale on top of the pass. It was exceptionally calm. We sat down near the stone hut and opened a thermos of tea. Tshering Dorje talked of Rohtang and its legends. The Kulu people have an interesting story about its origin.

It is said that at one time there was no gap in the great mountain barrier separating Lahaul from Kulu. The people of Lahaul were very sad as the winds and birds had told them of another world rich in trade, across the mountain barrier. They tried again and again to discover a way, but there was none. Disappointed, they thought that perhaps the Lord of Creation did not wish them to go beyond the mountains. But again they remembered what the winds and the birds had told them about the wonderful opportunities of trade in the south. So they decided to approach Lord Shiva to help them find a way over the mountain barrier.

The priest sacrificed a young virgin, as in those days it was considered an honourable and a good thing to sacrifice and even to be sacrificed. Besides, this was the only way to get in touch with Lord Shiva. The priest went into a trance to speak to Lord Shiva, and begged that the people of Lahaul be allowed to cross the barrier. But Lord Shiva was angry, as the people had turned to him only after they had failed to find a way themselves. So he refused to answer.

The priest and the people were greatly distressed, as men in those days were pious, and it was not good that Lord Shiva should be angry. A boy and a virgin were

trouble being that, owing to the heavy corning of the ridge, they occasionally had to take to the face. However, when they had passed all difficulties, and when not more, he says, than twenty minutes from the top, they were suddenly caught in a regular *ourmente*, which nearly took them off the mountain, and without stopping a moment they fled." Lt. Col. C. G. Bruce, *Kulu and Lahoul*, Edward Arnold, London, 1914.

sacrificed, and the priest asked again, praying for an answer. Lord Shiva got over his anger when he saw these simple and good people entreating his help and said, "Yes, you and your people may go beyond the barrier."

The priest replied, "O Lord, there is no way. We have searched much but found none. How shall we go?"

Lord Shiva answered, "Indeed, you have been wicked to look for a way yourself. Nevertheless, I will give you a path to the plains."

And the priest and the people prostrated themselves and gave thanks.

"But beware," Lord Shiva said, "of the winds which my whip will unleash when I strike down the barrier. These winds will be sudden and fierce, and will last for all time to come. Beware, lest you get caught in them and perish."

The priest thanked Lord Shiva and informed the people. Lord Shiva sent messengers to warn the people to the south. Everyone in Lahaul and Kulu hid lest they should be stricken by the awful might and majesty of Lord Shiva.

Taking his whip, Lord Shiva smote the mountains, again and again. There was a terrible crashing, and fierce and strong winds, such that the mountains swayed before them. Huge rocks fell from the mountains. Finally, there was a great silence and darkness over the land as all birds, animals, and even the rocks and the sun, stood still before the majesty of Lord Shiva.

After some time the people recovered their courage and came out, and behold—there was the Rohtang Pass! The people of Lahaul rushed to the top, but when they got there they were afraid, as there was no way to get down to the valley on the other side. Disguised as a mortal, Lord Shiva appeared again to show them the way. Telling the people to watch, he gave a mighty leap, and as he went through the air a path sprang up below him on the ground. This path led

to Manali. But Lord Shiva apparently miscalculated his spring, and landed head first near the Manali village. To this day the earth there has a bruise and a swelling, and that is the hillock above Manali. There is also a rock to commemorate the landing of the Lord. The people of Manali built a temple around the rock in praise of Shiva, for they got much trade from Lahaul. Lord Shiva however went away with a broken head. Many people hurried over the new path in both directions. But some in their foolishness forgot Shiva's warning about the wind. The pass seemed so safe and easy. Because of their carelessness many died on its treacherous top, being frozen by the wind. To this day almost every year some people pay the supreme price for their recklessness on the Rohtang. The people of Kulu vividly remember a clear and sunny October day in 1869 when some of their people returning from Lahaul were caught in a sudden wind storm on the pass, and seventy of them perished. Within a month of my arrival, I was to experience, in dramatic fashion, the truth of this legend.

The Lahaul people have a different story about the making of the Rohtang pass. It is said that long ago, there ruled in Western Tibet a king by the name of Gyapo Gyaser. He was a very powerful ruler and he had conquered many kingdoms around Tibet.

Once he came to Lahaul on his horse which was named Thuru Kyangmo. This horse was also well known, and could fly like Pegasus. The king was accompanied by a goddess named Ane Gurnam Gyamo. The king travelled through Lahaul, conquering as he went. At last he came to the great mountain barrier near Khoksar. At that time there was no Rohtang pass, and the high mountains extended in a continuous chain between Kulu and Lahaul. Thus the people of Lahaul were completely cut off from the south, and had no contact with Kulu. The king was very keen to

go across this mountain barrier, and see the new lands on the other side. He, therefore, gave a powerful blow with his magic hunting crop, and created a great dent in the mountain chain above Khoksar. He was about to give another blow but the *devi* restrained him saying, "If you make the pass too low and easy, the Buddhist people of Lahaul will mingle with the people of Kulu and the plains. This will not be good." The king then passed over to the other side.

Travelling down he came to Rahla where he met a very beautiful and bewitching *rakshasani*. He fell in love with her and stopped there. Forgetting his own kingdom, he began to spend all his time in pleasant dalliance with the *rakshasani*. Meanwhile his own kingdom in Tibet was attacked by a neighbouring king. His armies were defeated, cities ravaged, and his queen carried away by the victor. The people were in great distress, and they constantly prayed for the return of their king. The prime minister, who was a very wise old man, decided to send a message to the king. He wrote a letter which he tied to the wing of a *thung thung* (crane) and asked the bird to carry it to the king across the mountains. For many days the *thung thung* flew looking for the king, until it came to Rahla, and saw him playing chess with a beautiful lady. The king on seeing the bird was reminded of his country, and of the long interval he had been away from it. He thought to himself, if the bird sits on my right, the news will be good, but if it comes to my left it will be bad. The *thung thung* alighted on his left. The king saw the message tied to the wing and took it. He was greatly distressed by the ravages suffered by his kingdom and the loss of his queen. He decided to go back immediately.

When he broke the news to the *rakshasani* she began to cry, and said that she must go with him. Perplexed, the king consulted the goddess who declared it impossible to

carry the *rakshasani* to their country, for their own gods would be displeased. She said it would be best to kill her by a stratagem. He should suggest to the *rakshasani* that since the horse could not carry two, she should hold on to the tail when the horse flew off. The king gave this suggestion to the *rakshasani* and she agreed. Everything was got ready and the king mounted the horse. But as the *rakshasani* caught it by the tail, the horse, Thuru Kyangmo, gave her a mighty kick. The *rakshasani* was hurled with great force against a nearby cliff and killed. So great was the force that the outline of a woman was impressed into the rock, and can be seen to this day. The king flew off to his own country accompanied by the goddess.

The dent made by the king with his magic hunting crop ultimately came to be known as the Rohtang pass, and became the main route between Lahaul and Kulu.

Tshering Dorje paused. We had dallied long enough on the pass, bewitched by the surrounding beauty and the tales of gods and demons. It was getting late, and we still had forty miles to go to Kyelang. Quickly we rolled down to Khoksar, Fauja Singh showing complete mastery over his home road. Khoksar is a desolate place marked only by a small rest house and a suspension bridge over the Chandra river. It is important, however, as a road junction. Upstream from here the road goes along the Chandra river to the Kunzam pass and into the Spiti valley, downstream to the Tandi confluence, and then up the Bhaga river to Kyelang, the district capital. Beyond Kyelang the route leads over the Baralacha pass to Leh, capital of Ladakh.

Crossing the suspension bridge we drove along the right bank of the Chandra river. The road was dusty, the hills barren. The river water was a muddy brown and the banks were strewn with loose boulders and scree, the result of winter avalanches from the surrounding slopes. Except

for a few fields of barley at Khoksar, there was no vegetation. We drove through such a desolate landscape for about ten miles, till we came to Sissu. What a change! The village is situated on a broad flat above the river. On the hill slopes were plantations of willow, poplar and alfa. The fields around the village were full of lush green barley and buckwheat. There appeared to be no shortage of water. It flowed in abundance down the slopes and through the fields in little channels. In Lahaul the people have perfected the technique of bringing water from the high glaciers to the villages below, in channels cut along the contours. Sometimes these water channels, known as *kuhls*, run for miles and are cut along cliff edges.

Water had made all the difference to Sissu. Rich crops, lovely trees and a mass of summer flowers surrounded the villages. Along the water channels, I found every colour and specie of alpine flower, and the hill slopes were covered with white, pink and yellow wild roses. Sissu is typical of Lahaul scenery. From the green valley one looked across the river, and up the mountain to a massive glacier wedged in a narrow gorge, topped by a beautiful peak of twenty thousand feet. All this one could take in at a single glance!

Sissu is important to the spiritual welfare of the people of Lahaul. Behind the ridge on which the village nestles, towers the peak of Gephan, abode of the presiding lord of Lahaul. The peak is visible from both ends of Lahaul—from the Baralacha and the Rohtang passes. On a clear day it can be seen from Simla. Other mountains in Lahaul may be higher, but none excites the imagination more. There is a temple of Gephan in the village and in summer a festival is held here.

It is said that the Gephan *devta* came to Lahaul from Ladakh, across the Baralacha pass. He was accompanied by his mother and a retinue of lesser *devtas*. At that time there

lived some *rakshasas* near the Baralacha pass. They were keen that the Gephan *devta* should not cross into Lahaul, as it was their private preserve. To hinder the *devta's* progress they raised a severe snow storm. It snowed continuously for many days and the pass was deep in snow. In spite of the soft snow the Gephan *devta* crossed the pass with his followers. On the way his mother was buried under an avalanche. The party pressed on till it reached Zing Zing Bar in Lahaul. After six days the Gephan *devta* went back to the top of the pass, dug out his mother, and brought her safely down. The *devta* passed through Lahaul and ultimately settled at Sissu. He is said to live on top of the Gephan peak.

The mother, who was named Zangdul, settled at a place called Kewak about two miles from Sissu towards Khoksar.

The Gephan *devta* is also reputed to have brought various foodgrains to the valley of Lahaul. It is said that before his coming, the valley was ruled over by *rakshasas* who ate meat only. When the *devta* was coming to Lahaul, he decided to bring seeds of various grains. To hide them from the *rakshasas*, he and his companions filled their mouths with a little of each variety of seed. During the fight at the Lingti plains, beyond the Baralacha, one of the *rakshasas* smote Gephan on the cheek with his fist. The *devta* lost most of the seeds, along with a few teeth! Only a little of barley, wheat, and buckwheat seeds remained in his mouth. Even today there are little mounds on the Lingti plains which are said to be heaps of the grain knocked out of Gephan's mouth by some particularly belligerent *rakshasa*. The three main crops grown in Lahaul are barley, wheat and buckwheat—the result of the few seeds which the *devta* managed to smuggle in. No wonder the people of Lahaul hold the Gephan *devta* in such awe and respect.*

*“Temples to *devtas* and *devis* and to snake-gods are frequent in Pattan, though almost entirely wanting in Gara and Rangoli. An exception in

The rest house is situated in a fine grove of willows overlooking the river. After a welcome cup of tea with the engineer working on the road, we drove on. At Gondhla the next important village, *Thakur* Duni Chand welcomed us.† One of the hereditary families of Lahaul, Duni Chand has a small castle with an ancient tower which might be worth exploring. But Gondhla and the *Thakur's* puny tower are overshadowed by the Gondhla peaks. Across the river they rise sheer for thousands of feet, with ice walls to match the Eiger's north face, and so much more.‡ In fact I think Lahaul is a mountaineer's paradise. Nowhere else can one drive in a matter of hours to the base camp of a twenty thousand feet high mountain. The weather is fine all through the year. There is no monsoon, as the clouds cannot cross the mountain barrier, and precipitate themselves on the Manali side of the range. Tough porters, as good as the Nepal Sherpas, are available. For a small, cheap expedition, out to have fun, Lahaul is the place.

We descended to the Tandi confluence. The slope of

Rangoli is the temple at Sissu to Gyephan, the god of the Snowy Cone mountain of the same name; he is the brother of Jamlu, the god of Malana in Kulu, and as at the temple of the latter so also sheep sacrificed to Gyephan are slain by having their bellies slit open and the gall extracted while they are still alive." (*Kangra District Gazetteer*, 1897.)

†"The *thakurs* are the gentry and quondam rulers of the valley. They are more or less pure Botias or Mongolians by blood, but have begun, as the natural sequence to the Hinduising tendency already described, to assert a Rajput origin. Three families of *thakurs* retain in modern times a status of importance as jagirdars—that of Hari Chand Negi of Lahaul, who holds his village of Kolong in jagir, that of Devi Chand who holds Gumrang, and that of Hira Chand who holds Gondla." (*Kangra District Gazetteer*, 1897.)

‡"I have seldom seen such imposing and hopeless precipices, a magnificent piece of mountain sculpture, but not for the foot of man; some eight thousand feet of gigantic pitches, every little valley being filled up with hanging glacier at the steepest angle, from whose ends broke off continual small ice avalanches. The upper ridges seemed equally uncompromising, all of the boldest and steepest scale." Lt. Col. C. G. Bruce, *Kulu and Lahoul*, Edward Arnold, London, 1914.

both the Chandra and Bhaga valleys ease here, and both the rivers meet in a gentle embrace. The confluence is overlooked by the Goshal cone, a *lingam* like peak of about twenty thousand feet. There is a sandy beach at the confluence triangle and a beautiful chorten. I walked down to the water's edge and heard the gentle murmur of the two streams united again after a long separation.

The Tandi confluence of the Chandra and Bhaga rivers is sacred both to the Hindus and the Buddhists. There is an interesting story connected with this place.

It is said that the son of the Sun-god and the daughter of the Moon fell in love with each other. They decided to get married and alighted on top of the Baralacha pass. For some obscure reasons, they went off in opposite directions, planning to meet at Tandi for the marriage. Chandra, the daughter of the Moon, found an easy way through the valley, down from the north-eastern slope of the Baralacha pass, and arrived quickly at Tandi. Bhaga, the son of the Sun-god, had to cut his way through a very narrow and difficult valley, and could not keep his rendezvous. Chandra waited at Tandi for some time, and then worried, came up the valley to Beeling near Kyelang. Here she met the prince and together they went down to Tandi and were married.

The *sadhus* who come in large numbers from the plains to visit the temple of Triloknath beyond Thiro, and to bathe at the Tandi confluence have another story to tell. It is said that long ago Lahaul was the abode of the *rishis*. They used to come here in large numbers for meditation. In those days these two rivers ran full of milk. Nor did they tumble through narrow gorges, but on the contrary flowed gently through pleasant grassy meadows. The *rishis*, who had their *ashrams* on the banks, would sit in *samadhi*, and every morning before opening their eyes, drink a little milk from the river.

The *rakshasas* who got to know of this wonderful land were jealous, and one day they killed and threw animals and men into both the streams at the two ends of the Baralacha pass. In the morning the *rishis*, without opening their eyes, took a drink from the rivers. When they opened their *samadhis* they found that the rivers were running blood. Having drunk from the polluted waters the *rishis* were defiled and had to leave these valleys. In anger they laid a permanent curse on the two rivers, saying that henceforth they would flow deep in narrow channels and no men will drink from them or use their water for water-mills.

The road crossed the Bhaga over a newly built bridge and began to climb up the right bank of the Bhaga river. The valley was narrow and rose sharply. On our left were sharp cliffs, on the right, little flats full of barley and buckwheat. After about four miles, around a bend, we suddenly came upon the village of Beeling, clustered together at one end of the village fields. The village is perched overlooking the deep Beeling *nullah* which separates it from Kyelang. We drove across a little bridge, up the opposite slope, and found ourselves in Kyelang,* a compact cluster of square built houses, bunched together on the flats above the Bhaga river. The slope around the village was covered with green fields of barley and buckwheat, interspersed with groves of willow and poplar. Magnificent snow peaks dominated this pleasant oasis, in a wilderness of rocks and glaciers.

A welcome party awaited us. Lama Dumbaji, abbot of Sha-shur monastery above Kyelang, with his lama band which immediately began to play vigorously, school children, men and women from the village, and a host of giggling girls

*"Kyelang is like a barbaric jewel—a roughly cut emerald in a bronze and silver setting. In plain words, it is an oasis of green fields and willow-planted water-courses surrounded with brown hills and snowy heights." Lady Bruce, in Lt. Col. C. G. Bruce, *Kulu and Lahoul*, Edward Arnold, London, 1914.

who were waiting their turn at the water tap. The headman of Kyelang, Kalzan, a small man with an infectious grin stepped forward and welcomed me. I immediately christened him Mayor Kalzan, boss of my little capital.

I was escorted down to my house. Thanking them, I bade them good-bye. Though the elders went away, a lot of happy-faced curious children hung around my verandah. The house was lovely. Five rooms, a loft, and a beautiful verandah—all in excellent wood. It was the residence of the Moravian missionaries who were in Lahaul from 1854 to 1940.

The Moravian mission among the Tibetans and Lahaulis was started in 1856 by Rev. A. W. Heyde and a friend, Mr. Pagell. From the beginning it was run on practical as well as spiritual lines, and they entered into the agricultural life of the peasants. They were soon joined by Mr. Jasckbe, an able linguist who gathered his intimate knowledge of the Tibetan tongue from his long periods of residence with the country people. He compiled a dictionary, framed a grammar, and translated the New Testament into classical Tibetan. Mr. Heyde and his wife, also scholars, translated the New Testament into colloquial Tibetan.

The story of Mr. Pagell and his wife, who also came out as a young bride, is a stirring one. They started the centre at a place in the Upper Sutlej Valley, called Poo, also in the year 1865. For eighteen years they worked there, often terribly depressed, but persevering in the face of all difficulties, and they had many converts. One winter they both fell ill, and convinced that they could not recover, they had their coffins and shrouds prepared.

Mr. Pagell died on a cold January day. Fortunately, the poor wife only survived her husband three days. Feeling her own end was near, she laid herself in her coffin and died peacefully. They were buried by their converts, and the

headman of the village at once sealed up their effects. When, in answer to the sad news and appeal from the Tibetan Christians the following May, a member of the mission was able to push through to Poo, he found all in perfect order.

When the Morovians left in 1940, they sold the house to a local landlord, who has now rented it out to the Government. A small compound with yellow wild rose bushes completed the picture. The missionaries gave much to Lahaul—internal heating, ventilation with windows and glass panes, growing of vegetables, and the knitting of socks and pullovers. They also gave of themselves—many old and young lie buried below my house in a clump of willows.* I was told that the house was haunted and on certain nights an old lady could be seen walking about with a stick in the rose garden. If the poor lady existed she never bothered me in the least.

The mission did not, however, have much success in conversion to Christianity. The number of the faithful stood at twenty-nine only, including children, in 1897.**

As the sun went down I stood on the verandah having a last look around. Below and around me lay the village, quiet

*"The pathos of these isolated lives, struck me very forcibly as I walked from the willow-shaded path leading from the house to the God's acre below. For, enclosed within stone walls and entered by a gate from the lower garden was the little cemetery, full of graves. Under the protecting branches of willows and poplars rested the bodies of two children of this family, as well as those of several other small boys and girls. There are memorial tablets to some adults, too, but the greater proportion are to young children." Lady Bruce in C. G. Bruce, *Kulu and Lahoul*, Edward Arnold, London, 1914.

**"The very tolerance of the Boti race in religious matters will, I think, be one obstacle to their conversion. In the Sunday services of the mission house I saw an old and learned lama, who lives there to assist Mr. Jeschke in his Tibetan studies, join in the hymns and responses with great zeal and fervour. I do not think that either he or his friends saw anything inconsistent in his so doing, though he had not the least intention of becoming a convert to Christianity. All worship is good, seemed to be his motto." Sir James Lyall writing in 1868 (quoted in *Kangra District Gazetteer*, 1897).

and serene in the evening shadows, smoke rising from chimneys all along the slope. Looking down the valley I could see the snow *lingam* of the Goshal cone glowing with the last flush of sunlight. On the opposite side of the valley Karding and its monastery nestled in the shadow of the Rangcha peak.

As twilight came on, all was quiet, save for the occasional gruff barking of a dog, and the muffled roar of the Bhaga river in its cavernous passage. And then the shrill haunting notes of the *gyadung* began to float down from the monastery. I was home at last.

surely the gods live here!

I was in charge of two distinct areas, Lahaul and Spiti. Though administratively one, they were geographically separate entities. Lahaul consisted of the valleys of the Chandra and Bhaga along with the mountain mass they clasped between their extended arms. Below Tandi the two joined to form the Chanab, one of the Punjab's great rivers. To reach Spiti one goes up the Chandra valley from Khoksar. About two marches short of the Chandra river's source at the Baralacha, the path climbs steeply up the ridge on the left bank to the 15,000 feet high Kunzamla. From this watershed the Spiti river flows down a broad valley, till almost a hundred miles later it batters its way through a fearful gorge and seeks sanctuary in the Sutlej. Two separate drainage systems flow in opposite directions from the Kunzam ridge, and end in two of the great Punjab rivers.

Chance had placed them in one administrative division, but the rule of Kyelang lay lightly on Spiti. Nature ensured

that. The Kunzam opened even later in the summer than the Rohtang, because of the deep piled snow in the upper Chandra valley. One was lucky to get across in mid-June. Mid-September generally saw the first snowfall, and the gate to the Spiti valley was locked. For the rest of the year the Deputy Commissioner's authority depended on a tenuous wireless link which did not help much. An even younger vice-regent in the valley, in the shape of an imperious Assistant Commissioner, generally considered the Lahaul viceroy "an old bore", and preferred not to hear the cackle from Kyelang. The wireless set could always go out of order!

Following a time-honoured civil service tradition, the Spiti Deputy invariably felt the Kyelang overload to be ignorant of and insensitive to the problems of the local inhabitants. While hotly denying any such possibilities, the Kyelang man usually felt the same about the drones in the Chandigarh Secretariat! Occasionally, like Aurangzeb in his dotage, the Deputy Commissioner felt his fair province of Spiti slipping away from the empire under an obsteporous governor. Strident orders sizzled out over the wireless, but to no avail.

On one occasion the hint of open rebellion came over the wires, when the Spiti Subedar accused the boss of seeing problems through rose-tinted glasses, and had the temerity to advise him to get rid of them! Kyelang hummed with rumours of a coup, for the wireless operators kept the town fully supplied with gossip material. "Aurangzeb" had in such cases to literally cool his heels during the long winters, and console himself with dreams of a summer expedition to quell all rebellion in his fief. The summer reunion quickly resolved the disputed points of theology—generally arguments on the interpretation of revenue law! All differences were buried in pots of tea in Kaza, the Spiti capital. "Aurangzeb" came home and immediately got into the next argument, which naturally lasted the new winter!