

## FIFTY YEARS IN KULU

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HAVING definitely promised the Honorary Editor a short article on Kulu and about my own lifelong association with this remote corner of the Punjab, I must endeavour to fulfil my commitment.

My father, an officer of the Munster Fusiliers and, later, of the Bengal Staff Corps, made his acquaintance with Kulu about 1875. His penchant for exploring out-of-the-way places (and Kulu was very far from a beaten track those days) first attracted him to the valley. His friend, Captain Lee of the Sussex Regiment, was of a similar disposition and, after retirement from military service, both purchased land and settled in Kulu, Captain Lee at Bundrole, my father at Manali. Their respective orchard estates are still owned by Lees and Banons.

Although one of the older members of the Himalayan Club and having spent most of my life within the shadow of the Himalayan mountains, I cannot claim to have done any real climbing simply for the sake of climbing, or even attempted to scale one of the many peaks by which I am surrounded unless it happened to be for some utilitarian purpose of my particular occupation at the time. But one cannot live an active life in Kulu without climbing. In quest of game and of minerals I have travelled some thousands of miles on and over the mountains and ridges which encircle this valley and, on occasions, farther afield. But such wanderings have been, more or less, all in the day's work—or play—and cannot be identified with climbing in the sense of scaling a particular peak or reaching any specified altitude. Clambering up, down, or across these steep hill-sides and craggy nalas, after both big or small game, can provide some very strenuous exercise and occasional risk, but one does not, in the stricter sense, think of it as climbing. For me, alas, those days are ended. Isolated *thaches* bordering the snow-line, precipitous grassy clefts, and upland forest glades still provide sustenance and habitation for numerous regional fauna; at lower altitudes sheep-killing bear and panther are still the bane of grazing flocks, but unless they happen to stray into the vicinity of my desmesne—as a snow leopard did last winter—all such game and vermin are perfectly safe from my personal shikar.

According to the local Gazetteer the mineral wealth of Kulu is believed to be potentially very great. Mountains, valleys, and riverbeds of this area have for centuries past been known to contain precious stones and minerals: silver in Kulu; sapphires in Padam; turquoise, gold and other precious metals in Tibet. Within my own recollection silver was mined in the Parbatti valley. Previous to my

day, but within the personal knowledge of my father, sapphires in abundance were excavated from the banks of the Kado Gokpo, a stream which rises in Zangskar and joins the Bhaga near Darcha, in Lahoul. For centuries and up to recent years Lahoulas have crossed into Tibet to dig for gold. Although there may not have been many spectacular strikes in this digging area the practice would not have continued over so long a period unless it was a paying proposition. Placer mining for gold in the rivers of Mandi State used to be a common feature but is now discontinued.

An imaginative mind, fostered perhaps by garbled stories of locally rich finds, as well as by tales of fortune-finding prospectors in other parts of the world, induced me, as a youth, to try my luck in a hurried scramble for wealth. Rumours of a fabulous nala in Tibet, with platinum as the lode-star, provided zest for the venture. Accompanied by a relative, an American-trained mining engineer, we left Kulu on the 17th May 1905. Travelling light and living on the country through which we passed, our route led us through Mandi, Suket, Bilaspur to Sabathu and Simla; thence to Dehra Dun, Mussoorie, Tehri-Garwhal, up the Ganges valley to Gangotri, and over the Nelang pass to the border of Tibet. We crossed the border without much difficulty and the farther we penetrated into this 'forbidden land' the more we congratulated ourselves on the ease with which we had surmounted the obstacles of travel and border regulations. But our vainglorious assumption of success was short-lived. Frontier guards, who must have received information of our trespass from the inhabitants of the border village where we spent a night, caught up with us. We were escorted back to the frontier and given dire warning of evil consequences if we were again caught trespassing without an entry permit. Helpless, we had perforce to obey. We travelled back from Tibet via the Shipki pass to Pooh where we met the reverend Peters of the Moravian Mission who, later, became Bishop, at Leh, of this far-flung diocese. From Pooh we went to Ropa, then over the Manirang pass to Mani, in 'Spiti, where we crossed the river by jhula to Dhankar, up the 'Spiti river to Kyibar and Losar, then via the Kunzam and Hampta passes back into Kulu, reaching Manali on the 15th of August. Our treasure hunt had failed. The only rewards of our three months' trek were contacts with new species of Himalayan fauna, including ovis ammon and kiang, and a lasting remembrance of the majestic grandeur of range upon range of Himalayan mountain scenery, perhaps the finest in the world.

Later in life, for a Delhi firm, I supervised the extraction of stibnite on the Shigri glacier (Lahoul). Climatic conditions and excessive altitude limited the duration of work on the glacier to three or four summer months and these conditions, together with the difficulties

of extraction, smelting, and transport made the project, from a commercial point of view, uneconomical. Intensive geological survey may still unearth, in more accessible places, the legendary riches of our mountains and valleys.

Five years after my Tibetan venture, at my father's behest, I left for Canada and British Columbia. Orchard practice in other countries and a more intensive training in fruit culture were the main objectives of my journey overseas. During about a year's absence from this country I travelled from Calcutta, via England, to Montreal; then right across Canada to British Columbia and Vancouver Island. Coming back to India I travelled via Japan, China, Penang, and Singapore to Calcutta, the whole voyage comprising a trip almost round the world. Again, during the First World War, I had experience of several other countries including France, Egypt, Aden, Iraq (Mespot.), Kurdistan, and Waziristan, but never, in all my travels, did I come across scenery to match the sublime splendour of the Himalayas; the richness and brilliance of the seasonal colourings of Kulu; nor did I discover more serene environment than is available in my own home valley.

Even during my lifetime Kulu has not changed to any appreciable extent. Away from the one and only motor road life is carried on with the same placid regularity as it was when, as a boy, I roamed the hillsides and valleys and visited many of the highland villages. The older villages are mostly at an altitude of over 7,000 feet. This is in harmony with the persisting legend that the upper Kulu valley was, at some distant period, a series of lakes at different levels; that these villages were just above the then water level; and that the alluvial soil of the Manali basin is a legacy of this period of submergence.

Since the advent of the motor road twenty odd years ago, inhabitants of the lower part of the valley and of Kulu proper have gradually accepted the motor-bus as the ordinary form of travel and very few riding ponies are now to be seen on or near the main road. Yet, as I recently experienced, it is anything but a pleasant journey to travel by bus from Pathankote to Kulu. I may be old-fashioned, but I still think that for would-be climbers—and even for other visitors with time to spare—the old route of pre-motor days, via the Bhubu pass, has many advantages. The distance from Ghatasni (or Guma village) to Kulu is 30-odd miles. Three rest-houses—Jatingri, Badwani, and Karaon—are available *en route*. The Bhubu pass, between Badwani and Karaon, is over 10,000 feet so, for prospective climbers direct from a hot and enervating climate it provides good 'limbering-up' exercise and a fair measure of acclimatization. The only drawback under present conditions is the lack of pack or coolie transport. When this road was in general use pack transport was

provided at several places by the Mandi State authorities, and providing the rates are made sufficiently attractive it might not be difficult to arrange pack transport from Guma, a village on the main road 2 or 3 miles below the point where the Bhubu pass route diverges. If approached by Himalayan Club officials—or even in the interests of tourist traffic—the Himachal authorities would, no doubt, provide active assistance, not only in regard to transport, but also for comfortable lodging in the Jatingri and Badwani staging bungalows at the Mandi side of the pass. For the same reasons the approach to Kulu from Simla, via the Jalori pass, should, by climbers, be preferred to the uninteresting and wearisome bus journey from Pathankote.

Even experienced climbers do not always realize the necessity for gradual acclimatization and, not infrequently, suffer for this neglect. They rush to Kulu from the plains as fast as train and motor will carry them and think they can continue to rush, on foot, up the sides of steep mountains. I have known several cases where even the comparatively easy road up the Rohtang pass has been too much for these enthusiastic but enervated mountaineers.

In recent years, for climbers of proved experience, Deo Tibba, in this area, appears to be the favourite objective. With such a variety of unclimbed peaks between 15 and 19,000 from which to make a selection I do not exactly realize the attraction of this particular peak—or peaks (vide E. H. Peck's 'Reconnaissance' published elsewhere in this *Journal*). Several reasons may perhaps be adduced: approachability; the rumour that it has been climbed in a day from Manali (which I certainly cannot credit); or that it is, as its name implies, and as the Malana people earnestly believe, the habitation of their locally very important *deota*, Jamlu. Under the latter supposition it might not be out of place for future climbing parties to pay a preliminary and propitiatory visit to Malana to secure, at least, the goodwill of Jamlu's main adherents!

As Deo Tibba appeals to the more spectacular climbing enthusiast, so does the Rohtang pass to the less ambitious. It is, in a sense, a 'fashionable' trek and very few long-term visitors to Manali escape its implication. A government rest-house at Kothi, from whence the ascent and return can be made in a day, obviates the use of tents and this, undoubtedly, is the main consideration. Personally, I wish that other passes leading out of the valley (some of which afford infinitely better scenic effects than the Rohtang) attracted more attention: Chandra-Khanni and Hampta on the east; Ghora-Lotnu, Kali-Haini, and the paths which lead over to Bara-Bangahal from the Dorni Thach (Manalsu Nala) and the Dhundi Thach (Solang Nala) on the west. Many of the lesser peaks on both sides of the valley

also deserve more consideration than they have received up to the present. Only a few are named on the Survey maps. Some have local names but these, usually, are the names of nearby *thaches*; grazing grounds are of much more importance to local *zamindars* and shepherds than a mass of bare rock!

Within a radius of 10 to 15 miles of Manali there is almost unlimited scope for short exploratory treks, and I would be delighted to see visitors to Kulu take an interest in these hitherto neglected areas and, more important, write short descriptions of their respective journeys. These areas, of course, are not entirely unknown. Wherever any grazing is available, however difficult of access, local and visiting *gaddis* seldom omit it from their annual migratory marches. *Gaddis* generally, as befits their strenuous all-weather outdoor existence, are a hardy race, expert mountaineers with an almost uncanny sense of direction, and in the minds of would-be climbers there need by no feeling of inferiority in following their footsteps over such ridges and mountains. Mostly uneducated, however, they cannot, for the benefit of visitors and tourists, transmit a written account of their wanderings in these out-of-the-way localities.

Prospective visitors frequently ask me to quote the cost of trekking in Kulu. So many considerations are, however, involved that it is difficult to furnish definite quotations. Under ordinary conditions the cost of trekking depends largely upon the amount of transport and service required—pack ponies, coolies, guides, and camp servants; what might be considered luxury to some may be regarded by others as unconditional austerity. As a general rule the use of light and easily erected tents, lightest of folding camp furniture and toilet equipment, light but warm clothing and suitable footwear, sleeping bags in preference to awkward bedding rolls, compact cooking, eating, and drinking utensils, and concentrated foodstuffs, all tend to provide a maximum of comfort with a minimum of weight, thereby reducing the cost of transport. But few, if any, of these articles are available in Kulu and must be brought from the plains.

For ordinary trekking routes where no difficult or dangerous climbing is involved coolies will carry a load of about 50 lb., and a pack pony, of compact loads, about 2 maunds. The average rate per day for a load-carrying coolie is Rs. 2/8/-; and for a pack pony Rs. 5/-. During harvesting periods (15th May to 30th June and 1st October to 15th November) these may be enhanced by 15 to 50 per cent. For a sirdar in charge of coolies and camping arrangements the average rate is Rs. 5/- per day.

Prospective trekkers—individuals or parties—should endeavour to make all arrangements well in advance of the actual starting date as it is not always possible to obtain coolies and pack animals at short notice.