

A WOOL MART OF THE INDO-TIBETAN BORDERLAND

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Immediately to the south of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir's territory of Ladakh, or Little Tibet, as English writers used to call it, a narrow tongue of British India runs eastward to meet independent Western Tibet. The end of this tongue comprises the cantons of Spiti and Lahul both of which tracts politically belong to the Kangra District of the Punjab.¹ South of Spiti lies the native state of Bashahr. After the first Sikh War in 1846 the British Government retained this strip of country, barely 120 miles wide north to south and mostly consisting of sparsely populated and barren mountain wastes, in order to secure a route under its own control between the wool districts of Tibet and the Punjab plains. This was thought necessary, as in those days traders were subjected to innumerable delays and imposts, both authorized and unauthorized, in the hill states through which they had to pass. Now that roads are improved and vexatious obstacles to trade have been removed, a considerable volume of trade from Tibet passes through Kashmir; but still a fair amount reaches the Punjab through Lahul and Kulu. This is largely owing to the enterprise of the Lahul people, keen traders who, speaking the Tibetan language and being used to Tibetan conditions, do not find it difficult to negotiate with the pastoral nomads of the high steppes.

THE SOURCE OF THE WOOL

The part of Tibet from which comes the bulk of the wool and certainly the best of it, is the Chang Tang, or "Northern Plain," lying north of Nari Khorsum, the district which contains the sources of the Indus and Sutlej, and northwest of the Tsang-po valley, in which are situated Lhasa and most of the settled portions of Tibet. Geographically it extends into Rupshu, politically a part of Kashmir. The Chang Tang has been aptly described as "a wind-swept expanse of bare mountains and shallow valleys filled with brackish lakes, that find no outlet for their waters. Hardly anywhere does the surface sink below the level of the highest point of the Alps." There are no real villages in the Chang Tang. The inhabitants dwell in low black tents of yaks' hair, in shape much like those of Bedouins, and shift their encampments about according to the season to obtain the best grazing. Most of the grazing grounds lie between 15,000 and 17,500 feet. The snowfall is small, far less than farther west in Lahul. Even in the winter months a

¹ For further description see the author's paper: *Border Countries of the Punjab Himalaya, Geogr. Journ.*, Vol. 60, 1922, pp. 241-268.

certain amount of grazing can be obtained, as the violent gales of wind blow away the hard fine snow from the more exposed parts of the lower slopes. During the same season in the less elevated valleys of Spiti and Lahul, between 10,000 and 14,000 feet high, no grazing is possible, for the snow lies to a depth of eight feet or more: flocks and herds have to be stall-fed and are confined to the lower stories of the houses. At the same time the cold in the

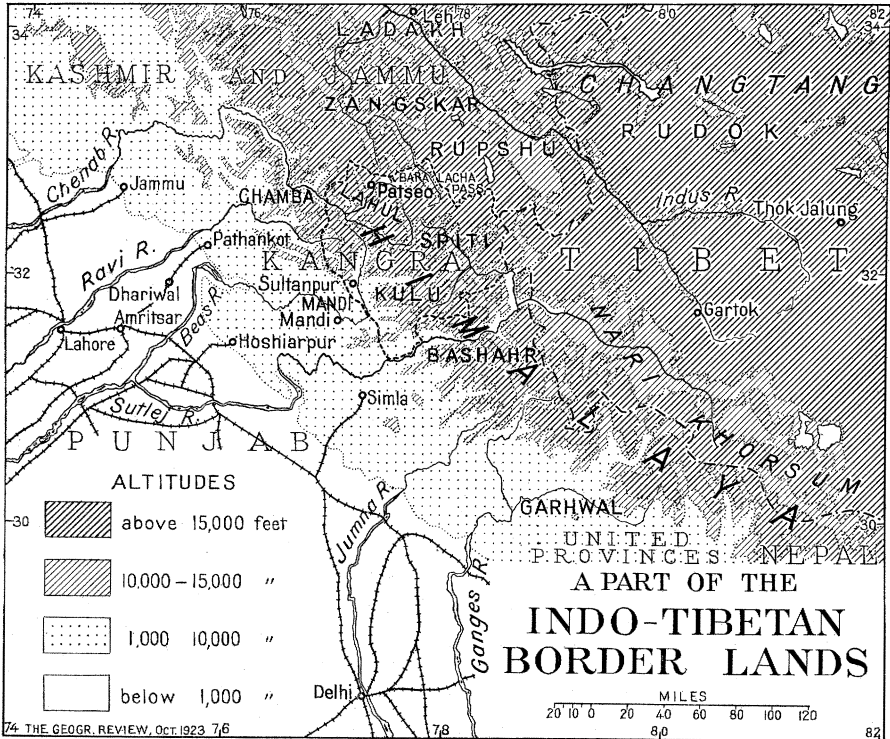


FIG. 1.—Map showing the situation of Patseo, a wool mart of the border region between the highlands of Tibet and the northern plain of India. The boundary of the administrative subdivision of Lahul, Spiti, and Kulu is shown by a line of dashes. Scale of map approximately 1: 6,500,000.

Chang Tang is intense and penetrating. The animals, domesticated and wild, which inhabit that inhospitable region, have been provided by nature with suitable warm coverings for their bodies. The fleece of the sheep is of very long firm staple, up to six inches and even sometimes a little more, though rather harsh in texture. These big long-legged sheep of the Tibetan nomads of the "Northern Plain" are known as the "Northern" animal or "Byang-gi."²

² The word "Byang" is interesting as it represents the original pronunciation of the Tibetan word for North, "Chang." "Chang" is still written as "Byang" in the Tibetan. The termination "-gi" merely indicates a genitive or turns the preceding noun into an adjective.

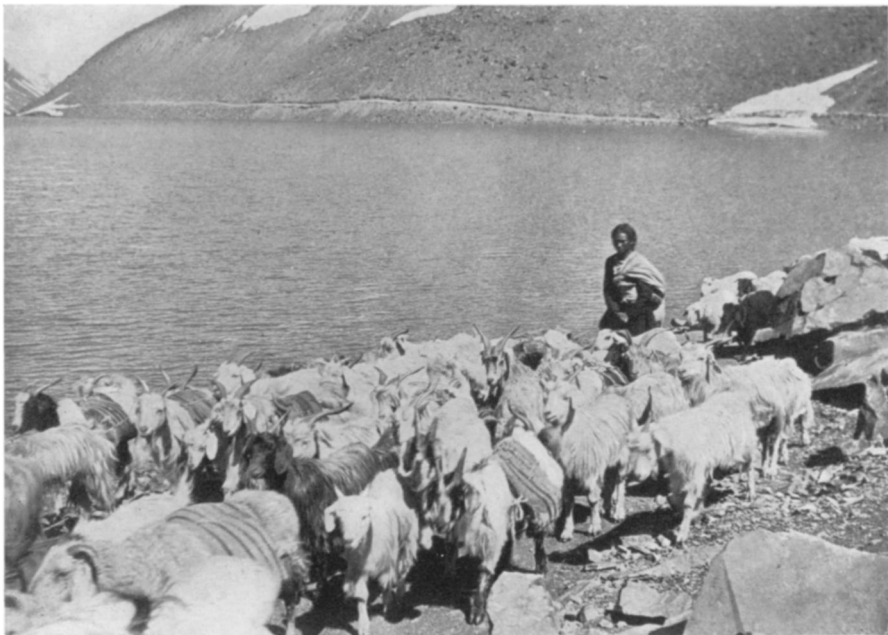


FIG. 2



FIG. 3

FIG. 2—Lahul pack sheep and goats ascending the Baralacha Pass, 16,047 feet high (see map, Fig. 1). They are taking up grain to Western Tibet and will bring down wool.

FIG. 3—Bales of wool from Patseo on their way to Sultanpur in Kulu. The Lahula is taking them down on his sheep and goats.



FIG. 4

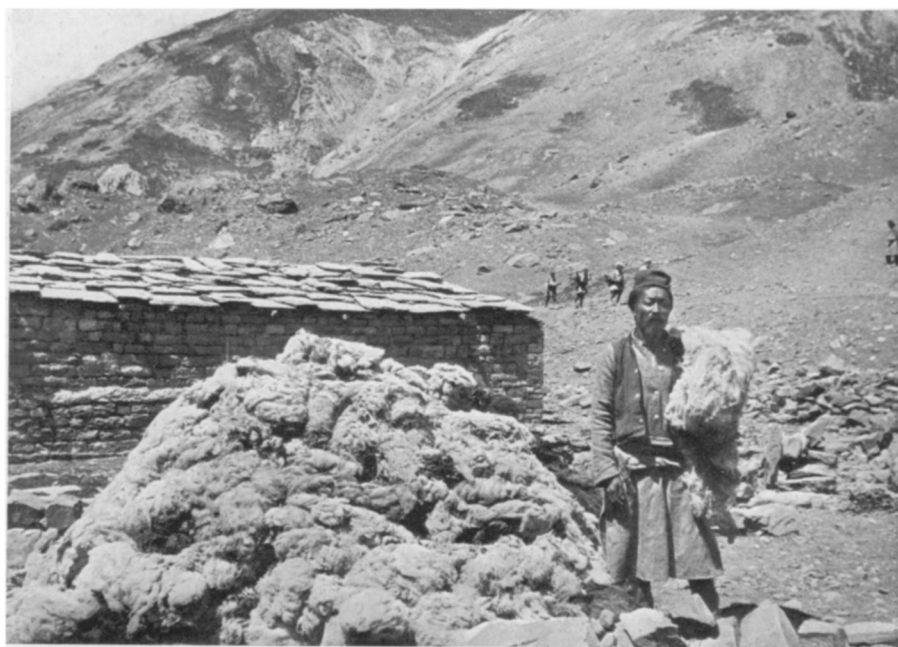


FIG. 5

FIG. 4—A Lahula shearing sheep at Patseo.

FIG. 5—A heap of fleeces by a stone shelter at Patseo with a Lahula. The men in the background are Gaddis.

SITUATION OF THE WOOL MART

Many Lahulas either own flocks of these Chang Tang sheep or are shareholders in them with the Tibetan Chang-pas. Other Lahulas pay advances for the wool they will want in the coming year. The result is that practically all the wool that enters Lahul is in the hands of a small number of dealers, and outside buyers have little chance of obtaining any quantity. Nowadays the wool mart is situated at Patseo, or Do-zam, to give it its Tibetan name, on the Bhaga River. The name, meaning "stone bridge," has outlived the natural bridge whose existence it commemorates. This bleak spot is ten miles west of the Baralacha Pass on the Great Himalayan Range and eight miles to the northeast of the last Lahul village of Darcha. The little stony plains that lie on either side of the Bhaga are nearly 13,000 feet above sea level. The Chang-pas and their flocks are not supposed to thrive at low elevations: certainly they do not enjoy them. However, it is said that in old times they traveled 25 miles farther southwest down to where the Bhaga joins the Chandra at a little below the 10,000-foot level. From this instance and another in Spiti, in which within the memory of man the mart has been shifted nearly 40 miles eastward, it will appear that the ever increasing demand for wool has induced the merchants to travel farther and farther toward the wool producers' country, reducing the journey for the shepherds and their flocks. Even as it is, some flocks bound for Patseo may have to travel for a month or more from their grazing grounds beyond the Indus, perhaps 150 or 200 miles away, while those from neighboring Zangskar or Rupshu have to be on the move for at least a fortnight. For flocks must travel slowly and have ample time to graze.

It will have been gathered that the bulk of the wool that comes to market is carried there growing on the sheep. But some animals are shorn at home, and their wool is brought in small bales on the backs of sheep or goats—the common carriers of roadless Tibet. Elsewhere in Tibet and in Lahul and Kulu sheep are clipped at least twice a year, but here shearing is done only once in the year in late July or August. At this time great flocks of long-fleeced sheep, each flock consisting perhaps of a thousand or so in charge of two or three wild-looking men and a few fierce Tibetan mastiffs, and many smaller flocks of pack sheep and goats all proceeding westward, will be met with on the desolate 46-mile stretch of road between Patseo and the great upland plain of Lingti, 14,600 feet high, where Spiti, Lahul, and Ladakh meet. As far as Lingti there is a fair mule road, which then turns north to Leh. But beyond here to the east made roads are nonexistent.

TRADE AT THE MART

For a whole month at this time every available piece of ground at Patseo, among the rocks as well as on the little plains, is occupied by tents, men, animals, piles of fleeces, bags of salt and borax from the East, and bales of cotton cloth, packages of tea, and bags of grain from the West. The mer-

chandise from the Punjab plains and Kulu or Lahul is carried up on ponies or pack sheep and goats of breeds different from those they meet at Patseo. The same animals, with more bought from the Tibetans, take down the wool. A pony load is from 160 to 200 pounds or more according to the condition of the road. Men from Kulu and a few Lahula women also take away loads of 60 or 70 pounds on their backs in "kiltas," the conical baskets used by hill folk throughout the Himalaya. Owing to the nature of the transport possible on these roads trade here must always remain on a small scale as compared with lands where railways or waterways are available. In the year 1918-1919 imports by this route consisted of 3878 maunds of wool and 5820 maunds of salt, each maund equal to 82 pounds. Also in the same year 9050 live sheep and goats were imported, and no doubt many of the sheep were shorn later. If we calculate the total imports of wool, salt, borax, and other articles in pony loads, about 5000 ponies, quite a respectable number, would be required for transportation. But the wool entering by this route is only a small part, a little more than one tenth, of the total wool imports from Tibet to British India, which in 1915-1916 amounted to 1346 tons. That this is so is not surprising when we remember that Patseo is some 255 miles from the railroad at Pathankot, whence the wool goes to the mills at Dhariwal and to dealers at Amritsar.

During August the human population of Patseo is made up of most varied elements. Besides Lahulas, Chang-pas, and others from independent Tibet we meet with Zangskaris, Spitials, Khampa gypsies, originally from Kham in far eastern Tibet and now wanderers between Patseo and the plains, Kuluis, and a few tall Gaddis from Kangra or Chamba. The Gaddis keep immense flocks of sheep that supply a coarse short-stapled fleece of much less value than that of the Tibetan sheep or even of the local Lahul or Kulu flocks. In the winter these sheep are pastured among the outer hills and in the summer move up to Lahul as far as the Baralacha. Between 100,000 and 200,000 of them cross the passes into Lahul in May and June for the rich grazing available there; but they are shorn near the plains in March and November, and so their wool does not appear at the Patseo mart. The actual sheep shearing at Patseo is done by hand by the servants of the Lahula flock owners or of the purchasers.

Accounts at the market are settled up and the balance due is paid in silver Indian rupees, together with an advance for next year's wool. In this way a large amount of rupees goes out of Lahul into Western Tibet every year. In 1918-1919 Rs.99,893 were recorded as leaving Lahul. In the same year three times that amount of silver went to Tibet and Central Asia from the Punjab by the various routes to make up the adverse trade balance. It is interesting to recall that, while a constant stream of Indian silver enters Western Tibet annually, another stream, one of gold, some of it from Thok Jalung in the Chang Tang, flows out of Eastern Tibet into China. In the year before the Great War £30,625 in Tibetan gold entered Tachienlu alone. But none of this gold enters Lahul. It is strange also that, though Lahul is

situated in Kangra, an Indian tea-producing district, some brick tea reaches Patseo and Lahul from far-off China after traversing the whole length of Tibet from east to west. So little grain is grown in the uplands of Western Tibet, though barley ripens there up to elevations of 15,000 feet above the sea, that were it not for the imports of grain from the Punjab and Kashmir, the sparse population would scarcely be able to live. It is mainly due to the large supplies of wool available that the Chang-pas are able to import sufficient foodstuffs from the Punjab and the more fertile parts of southeastern Tibet. Wool is their only real wealth, as the Tibetan Government has a monopoly of gold.

The wool that leaves Patseo does not go straight down to the railway. The bulk of it is carried by the Lahula pony men through Lahul and over the 13,000-foot Rohtang Pass down into Kulu. There at the town of Sultanpur, 90 miles from Patseo, it is sold either to down-country purchasers from Amritsar, Dhariwal, and Hoshiarpur or to local dealers, who will distribute small quantities to consumers in the hills. Most of this buying and selling takes place during the Kulu Dussehra fair, when large crowds from all parts attend Sultanpur to join in the religious festival or engage in trade. Long before then, even in late August, Patseo, a short time before so full of life and activity, is deserted, with nothing left to remind one of the wool market except the stone shelters and the low walls where tents are pitched from year to year. The only animals to be seen now are herds of ibex that come down to lick the stone slabs on which the Tibetan salt has been piled. From October to April deep snow covers the ground and closes the passes.