Parmananda Sharma

men and mules on a mission of democracy

THE SPITI valley is a land of wonderful charm. Here, the inner Himalayan belt is at her beauty's best, inviting one and all to adventure and romance. Unfortunately, nature and geography have so far combined to keep Spiti aloof from the rest of the country and the sturdy Spitian has been denied the benefits of science and education. The Government of India, keenly aware of the problem of bringing Spiti into line with the rest of the country, did not ignore this remote area when the Second General Elections were held all over the country in 1957. A team of polling officers, cameramen, police constables, porters and last but not least, mules loaded with ballot papers and provisions—what might be called an "election expedition" was sent to distant Spiti to take democracy to the people there for the first time.

In this book, Parmananda Sharma, deputy leader of the team, without any pretensions to telling a story of daring exploits attempts, very successfully, to narrate the story of the interesting and enjoyable trek of about 350 miles over difficult terrain.

However, this is not merely a holiday book crammed with facts and incidents. The author has successfully captured the freshness and charm of open-air life, the majestic serenity of the mountains, the friendly, unsophisticated nature of the Spitians, and, above all, their ancient and inalienable spirit of oneness with India.

See also back flap of jacket

29s.

MEN AND MULES ON A MISSION OF DEMOCRACY

Frontispiece. On the Kunzum Pass (15,300 ft.)
(Left to right) Prem, Kaushal, the author, Kaul and Dharamchand
Photo : Prem Sharma

MEN AND MULES ON A MISSION OF DEMOCRACY

PARMANANDA SHARMA

ASIA PUBLISHING HOUSE
NEW YORK

PRINTED IN INDIA

BY Z. T. BANDUKWALA AT LEADERS' PRESS PRIVATE LIMITED, BOMBAY AND PUBLISHED BY P. S. JAYASINGHE, ASIA PUBLISHING HOUSE, BOMBAY

To the memory of my father

FOREWORD

LAST YEAR when I was spending a few days at Manali in the Kulu Valley, Professor Parmananda Sharma came to see me. He gave me a manuscript of an essay he had written on his adventures in Spiti where he had gone to organise elections. This was at the time of the last General Elections, and for the first time in its history, the Spiti Valley and its people were having this new experience.

I read Professor Sharma's essay and found it most interesting. Partly my interest is always attracted to books about mountains and mountain trekking. In addition to this, his account of electioneering in that rather remote valley of the Himalayas was fascinating. Electioneering normally is not a heartening process, but in these high valleys, cut off by difficult passes from the rest of the country, even electioneering can be exciting.

I suggested to Professor Parmananda Sharma that it might be worthwhile for him to write more fully about Spiti and his electioneering campaign. He has now done so, and I commend his book to all those who are interested in these two rather diverse subjects—mountaineering and electioneering.

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

New Delhi
November 21, 1959

PREFACE

MEN AND MULES does not pretend to be a narrative of daring feats of adventure. It is only an attempt at recapitulating the story of an interesting and enjoyable trek over difficult terrain for about 350 miles, in a land where there are no roads, no bridges, no post offices, no shops, no rest houses; in fact, no amenities worth the name. When an expedition, defying rain and snow and facing all the moods of a treacherous weather-god goes to such a country as this on so urgent and onerous a duty as democratic elections and discharges its functions successfully without the shadow of an untoward mishap, a modicum of tribute is due to all the participants, men and beasts alike, the players and actors in the unique drama. The present book is, therefore, a just tribute to all his comrades by one who was actively connected with the work of this expedition in strengthening the foundations of India's young democracy in that distant Lama land bordering on Tibet.

The Spiti Valley is a valley of wonderful charm, a land of enchantment. Its mountain tops are perpetual citadels of snow and have an average height of 18,000 feet, some of the peaks rising as high as 23,000 feet. The valley itself has an average height of more than 12,000 feet above sea level. Here is the inner Himalayan belt at her beauty's best, inviting the trekker and the mountaineer in man with open arms to revel in the joys of its thrilling romance. The Spitians are an excellent people. It is only proper that they are made to feel a part of the great India which is theirs, and that the feeling of remoteness and alienness, for which nature and geography have been responsible, is fast obviated by bringing them within reach of the benefits of science and education.

The author will feel his labours amply rewarded if this little volume helps to bring Spiti and its people closer to readers' minds and whets their interest in the welfare of this backward region.

My most grateful thanks are due to Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, for his valuable guidance and help in making this publication possible.

Dharmsala
(Kangra Valley)
August 8, 1958

PARMANANDA SHARMA

CONTENTS

LIST OF PLATES

MAPS

I

WORK AND ADVENTURE

IT WAS a case of love at first sight between me and the Kangra Valley. I have been in Dharamsala (headquarters of the Kangra district) for more than seven years now and, in the course of many hikes and long excursions, have trekked through the length and breadth of the beautiful valleys of both Kangra and Kulu. I have drunk deeply of the beauties of nature during my ramblings and tried to imbibe all the manifold messages of this valley of the gods 'with a mind that watches and receives'. The spell of the eternal Dhauladhar with its crown of snow, the music of its numerous rills, the majesty of its landscapes, the panoramic beauty of its terraced paddy fields and tea gardens, the tumult of its cataracts and waterfalls, the vaporous might of its monsoon clouds, the myriad hues of its vernal bloom, the tales of its simple folk with their songs of romance and love—all this has become a part of me. Born, bred and brought up in the alluvial plains of the Jullundar Doab, these mountains have become, as it were, my second home.

I will never forget that cold December evening when I had my first view of the Dhauladhar range, its high and mighty serried tops aglow, copper-red with the light of the setting sun. Ever afterwards have I seen this unearthly glow illuminating the mountain's brow, a phenomenon that takes place only from November to December every year. The spell of the Kangra Valley was on me ; for the Kangra Valley is a valley of charms. From the ruins of the ancient Kangra Fort to the Hotwater Springs at Manikaran in Parvati Valley ; from the Chakki Bridge to the top of the 16,000-foot high Dhauladhar, from the black marble image of Lord Krishna in the Nurpur Fort temple to the awe-inspiring Bijli Mahadev (near Kulu), from the pre-Christian era rock inscriptions at Dadh to the equally ancient Hidimba Temple at Manali—all have meant many an enjoyable trip full of instruction, wisdom and entertainment.

However, I had always felt, 'what you have seen is only a

part of the whole'. And so it was! Kangra is the largest district of the Punjab with an area of about 10,000 square miles. There is a far-flung, distant portion of this district—a sort of forbidden backwater, in the consciousness of most people here—which I had not seen so far. How many times I had wished to be able to go to this far corner of Kangra, this most backward of the backward areas.

And the opportunity came! The Government provided it; for a vagabond and a rambler like me it was a golden opportunity. I was drafted to go to Spiti as deputy leader of the polling parties to conduct the first general elections in the snow-bound areas of that distant land. I was happy, very happy, notwithstanding the risks and hazards involved. Does not all adventure presuppose a modicum of risk? My decision to go was made at once, but till the day of actual departure I had to face volleys of angry outbursts and long dissuasive sermons from my near and dear ones. Those who had never even been to a nearby ridge, much less to distant Spiti, seemed to be the loudest in enumerating the dangers and difficulties of my proposed trip, and the most expert story-tellers were those who tried to impress it on me that the chances were that I would not come back alive. Then, there was the weather. It had been very inclement for many days. Whenever the nearby Dhauladhar would lift her veil of clouds a little we could see fresh snow on the high tops of that beautiful range, and the sight would take our imagination to the high Passes in Lahaul and Spiti which would have to be encountered on the route. Weather reports from that area were equally disconcerting. It continued to snow on the high ranges even in late May when, usually, the routes to Lahaul and Spiti open up for traffic. The tragic news of the death of two Police boys in the snow blizzards over the Rohtang Pass set us thinking. About half a dozen persons had been lost in the Rani Nullah (or the Khuni Nullah) at the foot of the Rohtang. What would happen if it continued snowing heavily after we had reached that area? Perhaps the tragic history of 1955, when hundreds of traders and trekkers were miserably marooned because of an unusual snowfall (25 feet at places) and relief supplies had to be air-dropped by the Government, would be repeated. The weather-god seemed as if he was

in no mood to relent ; nature was adamant.

Spiti, on the borders of Tibet, was a far cry from Dharamsala, the district headquarters; even in the fairest weather, and when the fury of the early rains and late snows showed no sign of abating, it appeared that our proposed tour might not come about at all. But no ; the Government was determined. No elections had been held in that area even in 1952, the year of that first great experiment in Parliamentary democracy in India. They had been postponed again now, in 1957, from March to June. While the elections all over India had been completed to schedule, the snows and mountains of Lahaul and Spiti had stood out intransigent, not permitting the message of democracy to enter the secluded Lama land, a very special exception from the rest of the area of this great sub-continent ! This had even made a zealous oppositionist challenge the election (held in May 1957) of President Rajendra Prasad to his august office on the ground that since two Vidhan Sabha and two Parliamentary seats of Kangra district had not been filled, the Presidential election was null and void. Yes, indeed, they had not been filled ; so they must be filled. Onward to democracy ! Rain or snow we would go, for the elections must be completed ! The Government's decision was final and it heartened me.

As the Rohtang (13,40 feet) and the Kunzum (15,300 feet) Passes were still impassable, the age-old route to Spiti through the Lahaul Valley was barred to us. It was decided that we would make a long detour from Mandi to Simla and from Simla to Rampur Bushehr (in Himachal Pradesh) by bus. From there we would march on foot to Chini (Himachal Pradesh) along the Hindustan-Tibet Road up to the last Indian outpost on the Indo-Tibetan border, from where we would turn north-west and enter Spiti by this distant eastern approach. This was the only feasible route as the barometer stood then. It was a very long route, but it was our only choice. With all the inherent problems of a difficult terrain, without the luxury of dependable roads or means of transport and communication, and with the extremely unpredictable moods of the weather-god persisting, our trip needed careful preparation and planning. Besides the election material which had to be carried, there were lots of things to be looked

into. The whole tour was to take about two months, out of which we would be constantly on the move for more than a month and a half like full-fledged *khana-badoshes* (literally, 'people who carry their houses on their shoulders'). There were many things to be done before we actually started out. We held conferences to consider various problems connected with the tour. Spiti has no bazaars, no provision stores, not a single shop. We were expected to carry our two months' rations with us, as well as snow-kit and warm clothing, accessory articles of everyday use, and medicines. This made an approximate forty maunds of load with each party. We were five polling parties of six members each, in addition to a police contingent of seven men, and a wireless team of three, which would join us at Simla. A medical officer with an orderly, and a movie cameraman from the Public Relations Department at Chandigarh, completed the team of about half a hundred men to which, at a later stage, would be added a score of muleteers with over a hundred mules. I expected we would make an impressive cavalcade.

We were going to Spiti primarily on Government duty and very onerous duty at that. Elections are of prime importance in any democratic country ; they are doubly so for us in this part of India. A question of prestige ? Yes, to some extent ; first, that of the district administration ; then, of the Punjab Government ; and, finally, of the Government of India. We were, therefore, conscious of the onerous nature of our mission and our duty. The pleasures of trekking and the thrills of hitch-hiking would have to be made subservient to the dictates of duty. Still, we hoped to make the most of this opportunity. I for one knew how to combine duty with pleasure, work with adventure and sojourn with study. However exacting the nature of our duty, I was confident of myself, and so not only looked forward to fulfilling my official mission with success, but to widening the horizons of my mind and adding a good deal to my little store of knowledge. The 'pros' far outweighed the 'cons'. The Hindustan-Tibet Road, the Spiti gompas, the Kunzum Pass, the rope bridges, the Nono, the Pin Valley, all made my imagination tingle with that eagerness and curiosity which the strange and the mysterious always inspire in inquisitive minds.

II

THE FIRST CASUALTY

IT WAS a bright May morning on the 27th, the day of our departure. The night before had marked the climax of days of hectic activity and breathless preparations. I had brought to bear my experience and training in the Army on deciding about the ticklish problems of organization, rations, equipment and medicines. The rations had been carefully measured and packed. I had also secured, through my friend and colleague, Gurmukh Singh Mann, a useful map of Kangra (scale 1" : 4 miles), and made a PWD draftsman prepare copies of the portion relevant to our route. Each party had been supplied with a copy of this map. Our medical bag was full of important patent medicines of everyday use. We had been examined by the Civil Surgeon, and declared fit. We were ready to leave for distant Spiti.

The authorities, on their part, had divided the five polling parties into two groups for purposes of movement. Three parties, bound for Hanse, Kuling and Rangrik stations, had been designated Group A and put under my command. Two parties, bound for Tabo and Danghar stations, had been designated Group B and put under the command of G. C. Sharma, our leader. I was appointed deputy leader. My group, comprising the main body of the expedition, also included the Police contingent and the wireless party, and was required to move out first, to be followed after a day by Group B. This was to eliminate congestion at halting points and to save the consequent inconvenience, which would have been inevitable if the whole expedition had moved in a body.

As we gathered together at the dispersal point near the District Courts with our packages dumped for loading on requisitioned buses, it looked as if a big mountaineering expedition was on the move. There was a large concourse of friends, officials and spectators. The district authorities had arranged a little tea party for the occasion and we sipped our tea with mixed feelings of joy and sadness. Our joy was at

the prospect of a two-month adventure in an unfrequented land, and our sadness an infection caught from the looks of the crowd of friends and well-wishers, some of whom actually had tears welling up in their eyes. Deputy Commissioner Khosla asked me to recite a few verses from my epic poem *Chhatrapati*, depicting the matchless courage of Shivaji's troops. Being an emotional person, my heart was already too full and I was not in the mood to recite. However, I could not disappoint Mr. Khosla either, for I have great regard for him. The recitation over, we came out and, in the midst of brisk handshakes, warm embraces and affectionate tears, got into our vehicles. Then, at exactly 10 a.m., the vehicles started off, as Mr. Khosla waved to us and smiled under his smart, Army-brand whiskers, wishing us all well.

I had my choicest friends in my party: U. S. Rana, J. Kaushal, S. Kaul and Prem Sharma. Gomat Ram (Patwari of the Kaza area in Spiti) and Achhar, my orderly, completed the number.

From Dharamsala to Mandi is a distance of 91 miles with a good, metalled road. Capital of a former hill State of that name, Mandi (2,500 feet) is a town of temples on the banks of the Beas. The old town is largely situated on the left bank, although in recent years quite a modern colony has sprung up on the right bank as well. Over the Beas is a magnificent suspension bridge, the Victoria Bridge, which leads you into the town, and your first impressions are of the innumerable temples on the river bank, ancient monuments of Hindu culture. Through the bazaar the bus takes you to the Chowk or Square. In the centre of the Square there used to be a large masonry tank built in the reign of the famous ruler, Sidh Sen, who ruled Mandi for 41 years and was over 100 years old when he died. The tank, now converted into a beautiful park, has an impressive clock tower, built in the chinese style of architecture.

We reached Mandi in the late afternoon and, as our bus turned right to traverse the suspension bridge, bang went my brand new thermos flask against the bus window. 'The first casualty!' I exclaimed. A little superstitiously, I thought the mighty Beas could not allow water from any other spring or stream to pass over its head, and I felt I should have emp-

tied my thermos completely before crossing the river.

I had instructions to ring up the Deputy Commissioner of Mandi about accommodation arrangements, and did so. Soon, his representative arrived and lodged us in a not very comfortable hotel for the night. The dinner, too, did nothing to redeem the discomfort of the lodging.

We started at seven the next morning for Simla, 108 miles from Mandi. It is a *kacha* road except for about ten miles beyond Mandi. For some distance it runs fairly level through an expansive, green valley full of good, fertile fields with sturdy bulls at the plough. They struck a great contrast to the small-statured, half-hungry cattle of my own Kangra Hills. Sundernagar (the capital of the former Suket State) justifies its name, which means 'the beautiful town'. The avenue of tall eucalyptus trees as you enter the outskirts of the city presents a very charming sight. Immediately after Sundernagar the expanse of the level valley gradually shrivels into narrowness with hills converging from both sides. The road now is awful, full of hairpin bends and dangerous turns. Of course, a new road with fresh alignments is being taken in hand and, when constructed, is bound to improve matters on this important hill route. At Dehr, we halted a little for a refreshing cup of tea. Over the suspension bridge at Dehr we had our first glimpse of the Sutlej River, with which we were to spend many weeks all along the Hindustan-Tibet Road. Reaching Bilaspur at midday, we had lunch before resuming our journey.

Bilaspur is situated on a level stretch of land on the Sutlej and was formerly the capital of an important hill principality of that name. There is a famous temple of Naina Devi here. A copper-plate grant (7″ x 3″) found in this temple is said to be very old. Fifty-six miles beyond is Simla (7,000 feet), former summer capital of the British India Government, and the resort of princes, rajahs, nawabs and 'burra sahibs'. It was half-past six in the evening when we reached Simla, the hour when this queen of the Punjab Hills is at her beautiful best, and the cream of Simla society converges to the Mall and the Ridge and life seems all 'a sunlit stream, forever flowing in a changeless peace'. We made ourselves comfortable in a *serai* nearby. Soon after, I set out to acquaint myself with the

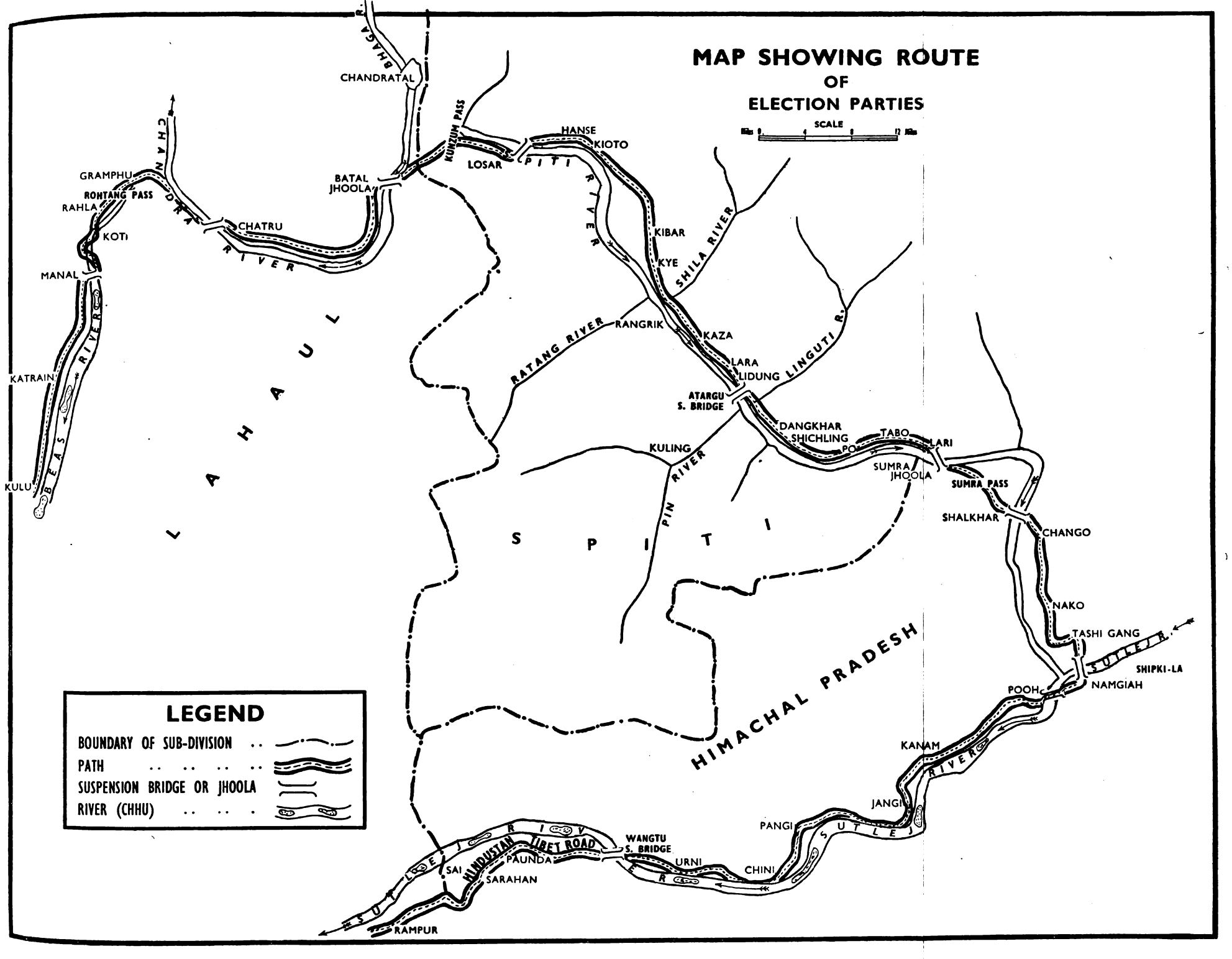
whereabouts of G. C. Sharma (who had reached Simla three days earlier) and Mr. Luthra, the Deputy Election Chief of the Punjab, in order to complete a few last-minute arrangements and see about the wireless team. As was expected, I bumped into G.C. on the Mall but we parted soon, promising to meet the next morning and confer on our immediate problems. So the 29th of May was spent in running about here and there on various errands.

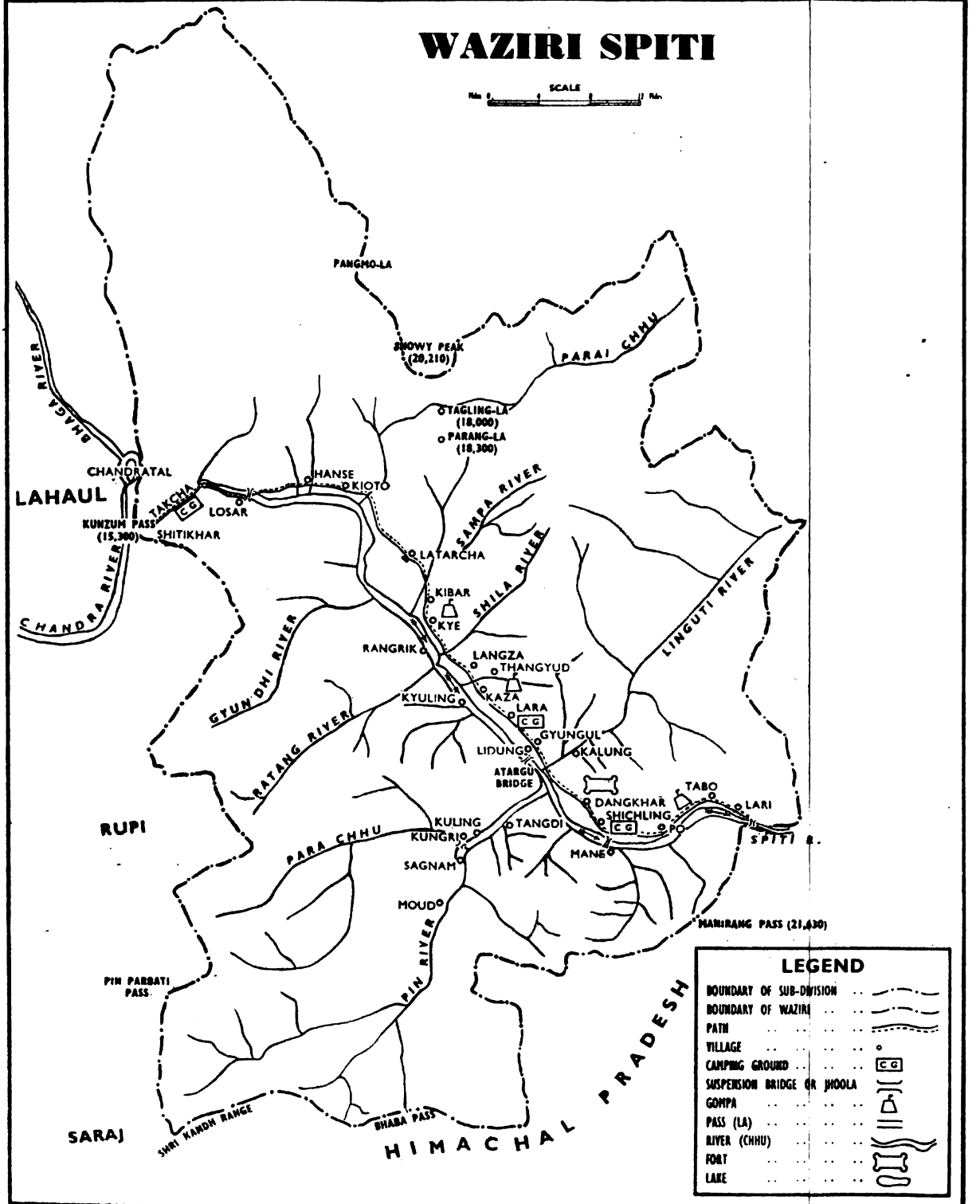
In the evening we received a telegraphic message from Mr. Khosla saying, 'ROADS WASHED AWAY ; ROUTE DANGEROUS : DON'T PROCEED TILL FURTHER ORDERS'.

I was dismayed. I was in no mood to accept any 'dont's' now that we had commenced our long journey in the cause of India's democratic elections. In fact, this 'don't' had come too late in the day. However, it was not long before we learnt that this message was based on a news item in the papers speaking of the loss of many lives in the interior of Chini owing to a landslide on the road. Actually, this had happened many days before, and only the delayed publication of the news item made the accident look so recent. We had, nevertheless, to vegetate at Simla for another day waiting for fresh instructions from our headquarters. We were able to resume our bus journey to Rampur Bushehr only on the 30th of May.

Early in the morning I had met an old and respected friend of mine, S. Waryam Singh, Additional District Magistrate, Simla, and had promised to have tea with him at Davico's in the evening. When I got to the hotel, I looked for his tall, well-built figure in the crowd. I thought I had spotted him and advanced joyfully, when the man I was approaching casually turned his back and I saw I had been mistaken. I finally tracked down my old friend in another part of the room and we laughed over my discomfiture.

On my way back, I stopped at a bookstall and bought a copy of Kahlil Gibran's *Tears and Laughter*, the only book I carried with me during the Spiti trek. Certainly I hoped to have a good mixture of tears and laughter during our long trip full of thrills and hazards.


MAP SHOWING ROUTE
OF
ELECTION PARTIES
SCALE
BHAGA R.
CHANDRATAL
KUNZUM PASS
HANSE
KIOTO
LOSAR
PITI RIVER
BATAL
JHOOLA
CHANDRA BHAGA RIVER
GRAMPHU
ROHTANG PASS
RAHLA
KOTI
CHATRU
MANAL
KATRAIN
KULU
BEAS RIVER
LAHAUL
KIBAR
KYE
SHILA RIVER
RANGRIK
RATANG RIVER
KAZA
LARA
LIDUNG
LINGUTI R.
ATARGU
S. BRIDGE
DANGKHAR
SHICHLING
TABO
PO
LARI
KULING
PIN RIVER
SUMRA
JHOOLA
SUMRA PASS
SHALKHAR
CHANGO
SPITI
NAKO
TASHI GANG
SUTLEJ R.
SHIPKI-LA
NAMGIAH
POOH
HIMACHAL PRADESH
KANAM
SUTLEJ RIVER
JANGI
PANGI
WANGTU
S. BRIDGE
HINDUSTAN TIBET ROAD
PAUNDA
URNI
CHINI
SAI
SARAHAN
RAMPUR
LEGEND
BOUNDARY OF SUB-DIVISION
PATH
SUSPENSION BRIDGE OR JHOOLA
RIVER (CHHU)


WAZIRI SPITI
SCALE
PANGMO-LA
SNOWY PEAK (20,210)
PARAI CHHU
BHAGA RIVER
TAGLING-LA (18,000)
PARANG-LA (18,300)
CHANDRATAL
LAHAUL
TAKCHA
C G
LOSAR
HANSE
KIOTO
KUNZUM PASS (15,300)
SHITIKHAR
SAMPA RIVER
LATARCHA
SHILA RIVER
KIBAR
KYE
CHANDRA RIVER
GYUNDHI RIVER
RANGRIK
LANGZA
THANGYUD
LINGUTI RIVER
KYULING
KAZA
LARA
C G
GYUNGUL
LIDUNG
KALUNG
RATANG RIVER
ATARGU BRIDGE
TABO
DANGKHAR
SHICHLING
C G
PO
LARI
RUPI
KULING
KUNGRI
TANGDI
PARA CHHU
SPITI R.
MANE
SAGNAM
MOUD
MANIRANG PASS (21,630)
PIN RIVER
PIN PARBATI PASS
SARAJ
SHRI KANDH RANGE
BHABA PASS
HIMACHAL PRADESH
LEGEND
BOUNDARY OF SUB-DIVISION
BOUNDARY OF WAZIRI
PATH
VILLAGE
CAMPING GROUND
C G
SUSPENSION BRIDGE OR JHOOLA
GOMPA
PASS (LA)
RIVER (CHHU)
FORT
LAKE

III

HINDUSTAN-TIBET ROAD

THE Hindustan-Tibet Road is an important, strategic road that provides the only feasible major link between Simla (India) and Shipki (Western Tibet). It proceeds all along the tortuous Sutlej gorge for 216 miles. First constructed in 1886, it then extended only as far as Karin Khad, about six miles beyond Chini in the former Bushehr State territory. It was extended up to a little beyond Namgiah (the last Indian village on Indo-Tibetan Border) in 1927. Construction work has now been in progress on this road for some time and it is hoped that it will not be long before jeeps and station wagons can ply on it right up to the Tibetan border. It is the old trade route to Tibet and is bound to develop into a highway of vital significance to both India and Tibet.

We started at 10.30 a.m. on May 30 from Simla for Rampur Bushehr, the terminus of our bus journey.

It is a *kacha*, narrow road all through, with boulders at several points jutting over it so low that at places we had to unload packages from the roof of the bus to ensure a safe passage. The view between Simla and Fagu (8,178 feet) is very fine, especially that of the snows in the distance. From Fagu, several routes branch off to Mussourie via Sainj, Patharnala, Chopal, Moudhol and Tuini; to Chor Peak via Kot, Digtali, Bhajji and Madhani Ghat; and to Deora (capital of the former State of Jubbal) via Theog, Kotkhai and Hathkoti.

From Fagu to Theog (7,421 feet) the hills suddenly become bleak and barren for about six miles. Theog is a small market-place. About 11 miles from Theog is Matiana (7,691 feet). The scenery on this part of the road is very beautiful as the road winds through thick, dense deodar and pine forests that cover the hills on all sides.

Eleven miles beyond Matiana is beautiful Narkanda (9,000 feet). It is as lovely a spot as one would wish to see. On turning a bend on the road as you approach Narkanda, a magnificent panorama of endless, snow-clad ranges comes

into view right in front. This scene of wild beauty soothed our spirits, especially after the strain of a little shake-up we had received a few miles before when, while on the point of negotiating a critical bend, one of the tyres of our bus had burst and the driver had very skilfully and with great presence of mind put the vehicle back safely along the hillside. It took us an hour and a half of strenuous effort to replace the tyre.

From Narkanda to Thanadhar (Kotgarh) is ten miles. For miles now the road gradually descends lower and lower to Nirth (3,660 feet) and then reaches the left bank of the Sutlej along which it runs up to Rampur Bushehr and beyond.

We reached Rampur at 9.30 p.m., dog-tired and thoroughly bored. This journey of 90 miles had been on a very rough and narrow road, and our drivers had never been on this route before. I was all praise for their skill and grit and even tipped a fiver as *inam* to my driver for his services. The MIC at Rampur had deputed his *tahsildar* on duty to arrange for my stay at the Rest House. I thanked him, but preferred to stay with other members of my party in the spacious Government High School building. It was quite late at night when we retired to sleep.

Rampur Bushehr (3,870 feet) is, like many other towns so far enumerated, the former capital of the famous Bushehr State. All through the ages it has been a great centre of trade between hill areas of the Northern Himalayas and Western Tibet. Especially famous are the woollen shawls and *neozas* (pine-nuts). The Sun Temple here is worth seeing. There are several other temples including a Buddhist one which contains a large library of Tibetan literature.

We halted at Rampur for a day, the 31st of May. This halt by no means meant rest or respite. I was busy throughout the day making arrangements for our 'goods train' consisting of a little over 100 sturdy mules. Of course, the MIC Rampur, whom I went to see in the morning, helped all he could in the arrangements and I felt grateful to him. In all, 72 mules were engaged for my group (that is, Group A) and 40 for Group B. Gian Chand Sharma arrived on the afternoon of the 31st. He had a funny and interesting anecdote to tell. At a wayside halt he went, with others of his party, to a teashop and asked for a glass of water. The shopkeeper,

first happy at the prospect of a crowd of customers but soon disillusioned by G.C.'s simple request for a glass of water, looked at the latter's khaki uniform and the pencil stuck over one ear, and said, '*Baboo ji*.! All bus conductors are *muft-khoras* like that.' My sides ached with laughter at this story; the shopkeeper had assumed that Gian Sharma, our leader, was a bus conductor! Very often after this I would address G.C. as 'chief conductor' rather than leader of the Spiti teams.

IV

RAIN ON THE ROAD

FROM Rampur (3,870 feet) onwards was a matter of men and mules alone. Here was the starting point for our nearly two hundred mile trek to our first station in Spiti. Thick black clouds had gathered over the sky in the evening; they had come converging from the south-west over the tall hills that border the narrow Sutlej gorge at Rampur. Midnight brought a sharp drizzle and I was suddenly awakened at 2 a.m. to find the whole camp in consternation. The drizzle had changed into a downpour and I had just woken up in time to take care of our belongings lying in the school compound, ready for loading on mules in the morning. I woke up Rana at once, for there was no time to waste. Both of us struggled with the heavy packages and dragged them to the safety of the verandah one by one. By the time we had finished wrestling with the heavy packages, we had, of course, become completely drenched.

It continued raining till six in the morning. Thus, on the very first day our hopes of an early start, so essential in all such travel, were dashed, and we sat brooding on the perversity of the weather. Nor did the muleteers, true to tradition, turn up in time. They arrived at 9 a.m. from their colony, which lies on the other bank of the river at Rampur. The mules were loaded in the midst of a great pandemonium as the boys shouted at the muleteers and the muleteers shouted at the mules with such typical curses as: 'Come, come Santi! may your thief die', or 'O Jai-Kaur, come or I will teach you a lesson', or 'O my Dalipo dear, come to me!' Santi, Jai-Kaur and Dalipo were, of course, the names of some of the mules whom their masters loved, for were they not their bread-givers, their pride, their joy? With a lot of patting, coaxing, cajoling and, finally, cursing, the animals were loaded and now our cavalcade was ready to march.

Our 72 mules and about 40 men moved out of the school compound at 11 a.m. The long, winding Hindustan-Tibet

Road lay before us ; the Sutlej flowed on our left. For about six miles I went at the head of the column and then stopped at a limpid wayside stream. It was about the time we were required to flash the wireless signal about our progress and welfare, in accordance with an arrangement with the control at Simla. The wireless party for whom I was waiting caught up with me at 10 a.m. Immediately, the set was fixed and the long aerial opened in the charming setting of pine-covered hill flanks. The weather was still bad and a loud wind roared, disturbing our transmission. In spite of the efforts of our wireless operators, our message was not being received at the other end. Finally, we gave it up and had a hurried lunch, for it was already past 2 p.m., and we had been delayed by two hours. I was now bringing up the rear of the caravan ; we had still to cover eighteen miles. Suddenly there was lightning and thunder and the canopy of clouds split open to pour down torrents of unwelcome rain. We trudged on. The road grew slushy and the weather continued to be wet. We had made a bad beginning ; a late start, bad weather and, to crown that, this first day's march was probably the longest : twenty-four effective miles.

Evening came and still there was a good ten miles ahead of us. We took a short-cut which would save us six lengthy miles. This short-cut involved a steep, 75-degree climb up the face of a high, wooded ridge for about four miles to reach the Rest House. The track was very slippery, its steepness adding to the discomfort. We climbed and climbed, panting and parched, drenched and hungry. There were quite a few *sari* trees (a local Khirmani type) at one place on the way, and though the fruit was not yet fully ripe, we ate it to our fill, pungent and sour as it was. With our hunger considerably satiated, we did the rest of the climb in better spirits. By now it was quite dark and we nearly lost the track twice or thrice in the wilderness of terraced fields. It was 7.30 p.m. when we reached the Sarahan Rest House at a height of more than 7,000 feet. Darkness spread all around ; the rain poured in torrents and a very cold wind blew.

Jasbir Singh and his party, who had reached earlier, had lighted fires and, thanks to their forethought, we had a warmer Rest House than expected. We dried our clothes as we took

mugfuls of hot tea to ward off the cold. The mules arrived a little later and with them, the muleteers, utterly woe-begone. The rain-soaked baggage was unloaded in pitch-black darkness in the midst of a lot of confusion as the skies rained down incessantly and the cold entered our very bones.

I called a meeting of the officers, gave them necessary instructions and, dinner over, retired to sleep.

It rained non-stop throughout the night. It was still raining when I woke up in the morning. To go or not to go was the question. Should we cover the eight-mile distance to Chora, our next stage, or do a double stage the day after ? I tuned in my battery radio set at 8 a.m. for the news. The weather bulletin at the end of the news forecast heavy rain and storms during the next twenty-four hours. Ultimately I decided in favour of a complete halt for the day at Sarahan, hoping the weather might clear up during the night. Moreover, I wanted the teams to have a little rest after their first day's endurance march of twenty-four miles, which had actually proved too much for some of our friends.

Sarahan (about 7,000 feet above sea-level) is an impressive town and, till recently, used to be the summer capital of the ruler of Bushehr. It is believed that this place was formerly known as Shonitpur and during the Mahabharata period was the capital of King Banasur whose beautiful daughter, Usha, was married to Anirudha, a grandson of Krishna. The erstwhile ruler traced his descent from him.

We spent the day confined to our rooms because of the rain. Playing cards, gossipping, singing and dancing ; that is how we whiled away our time. In the evening we decided to exercise our limbs a little and go for a brief stroll into town. Ex-expecting Group B to arrive by the evening, I wanted to make arrangements for their stay in the local High School. So to the school we went, Rana, Kaushal, Kaul, Jasbir and I. There we met, in the school compound, a smart, intelligent-looking young lad, Singh Ram by name. He impressed me as much more cultured and intelligent than the mere sixth-class student that he was. He took us round the school and inquired about our lodging and boarding arrangements. Did we have beddings? Who would cook for us ? Did we need anything ? He was a very lovable fellow indeed ! The school looked neat and tidy.

By the time we reached the bazaar a crowd of red-cheeked, gay-looking urchins in dirty but thick woollens had collected around us.

We then went to see the famous Shakti Temple built by Rana Padam Dev of Rampur. It is a magnificent structure in wood and stone. You enter from the main vestibule into a compound and, turning right, face the first of the three main buildings which rise one after the other as you pass from corridor to corridor. The first temple is dedicated to Raghunath Ji (or Lord Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu). The finely executed *motifs* on the silver panels of the main door are from the Puranas. Then, as you enter, you have to climb in darkness a couple of flights of worn wooden stairs to reach the shrine. The second temple is dedicated to Bhagwati Durga, the spouse of Lord Shiva. This is built in exactly the same style as the first temple. The door panels have the *motifs* of Shakti, Lakshmi and Shiva in their various exploits. This temple also contains the treasure of the shrine. The treasure has been sealed by the Government. There are long, sturdy iron chains hanging from the roof down to the main door outside. This, I was told, was a device to maintain communication between the priests on the first floor and those on the ground floor. The third temple, adjacent to the second one and symmetrical in design with the other two, is an incomplete structure, for Death called King Padam Dev before he could complete it. These temples exhibit an influence of the Chinese style of architecture in their basket-like projections on roofs. The Rana's Palace, at a hundred yards distance from the magnificent temple enclosures, is a less impressive monument. In a way it was only proper that the abode for our deities should be more magnificent than our dwellings. These temples are held to be very sacred, and from far and wide pilgrims come every year to pay their homage to the gods.

Once out of the temple precincts, the crowd of enthusiastic little urchins again gathered round us. We sat down on a parapet in the palace courtyard and asked one of the lads who was carrying a flute to give a recital. He played a local hill tune, very much as the Kangra herdsmen do, and we thoroughly enjoyed it.

Group B did not arrive that evening,

V

KINNAR DESH

LEAVING the muleteers to take their time, I made an early start in the morning for the next stage, Paunda, about twenty miles ahead. Clouds still littered the sky but they were no longer threatening. In fact, they would afford protection from the sun, which would soon be out and scorching. The road was punctuated by mild ascents and descents and the scenery on both sides was charming. Dense vegetation on the hills around created a world of gloomy shades, the high cliffs on our right adding to the awe, mystery and enchantment of the atmosphere. The Sutlej looked like a narrow torrent of dirty water and rolled far below us in a shrivelled gorge to the left. After covering about fourteen miles, the Tranda Bridge was reached. Blasting work on the Tranda *Dhank* (ridge) was in progress as part of the scheme to widen the Hindustan-Tibet Road for vehicular traffic. This ridge is a mass of sheer granite and presents immense problems to our blasting teams. I was told by a Public Works Department official on the spot that the work was very hazardous and had already taken the lives of many labourers. Precipitous cliffs could be seen standing thousands of feet high in sheer eminence. After crossing a few nullahs on narrow wooden bridges and trekking six miles more, Paunda Rest House (7,200 feet) was reached in the afternoon at 2 o'clock. As I looked up at the sky, the clouds were thick and black. And then, it started drizzling !

The Rest House had two spacious rooms and was under repairs. I lodged my party in the worse of the two rooms, leaving the habitable and furnished portion for the other parties. As commander, you just cannot be selfish ; not even completely just to your own comforts, for the welfare of those under your command should always come first.

A few furlongs below the Rest House, a new member, Dogia-Dundop, joined ranks with my party, but of him I shall speak later. His voluntary spirit, his devotion and faithfulness deserve special mention.

It rained all evening and all night. The rain stopped in the morning as if saying: 'You can proceed now; I have had my way for a couple of days; after all, I should not be as nasty as that. I bless your mission. Go ahead!' And off we started for Urni (16 miles).

The road was fairly level for a couple of miles. Beautiful, dense deodar forests stood silent in the undisturbed peace of their embalming shades. These contained quite a few trees whose age might well be counted in terms of centuries and not decades. Four and a half miles beyond Paunda was beautiful Nachar (7,200 feet) couched in the midst of a thick forest of ancient deodars. With a much more picturesque view and a more spacious camping ground than at Paunda, it would have been, I thought, certainly better as a halting place for the night. There was water in abundance, too; and there were a few shops on the roadside. A few yards to the left of the road is an old Buddhist temple built of wood. Here we stopped for a while, not so much for a respite as to enjoy the exquisite scene of beauty and peace around us.

A little after Nachar the road entered a long, gradual descent to Wangtu (5,360 feet). The Wangtu Bridge over the Sutlej is a 140 foot long suspension bridge. Here you cross over to the right bank of the river for the first time. Wangtu has a Rest House. It is an important junction on the Hindustan-Tibet Road, not only because it provides a safe crossing over the river but because it is a bit of a marketplace comprising half a dozen shops; fodder (both dry and green) for mules is available in plenty. With so many of them as we had with us, fodder was, and would be, a major problem. The mules, who formed our only means of transport for our stores and luggage, needed full stomachs before and after everyday's march. It was as much a matter of mules as of men and, in fact, of both mules and men. Much of the success of our venture would depend on the care and maintenance of these hundred-odd quadrupeds on our hands.

From across the Wangtu Bridge, a track branches off towards the north of Spiti over the 16,000-foot high Bhabba Pass. This track was closed for us, as the Pass was closed. The Pin Valley (in Spiti territory) is only a matter of four or five days from here. As soon as the Wangtu Bridge is crossed a gradual

ascent starts and the track is narrow and rocky. Our target now was Urni, nine miles beyond. The road had been washed away at several points, and the gorge of the Sutlej below grew narrower than ever. We were now practically across the first range of the Himalayas and the giant trees of the Bushehr Forest Division were becoming scarce, giving place to dry vegetation. The hill slopes were greyish white, full of a strongly-smelling aromatic herb growing in abundance. After five miles we reached Tapri, a small village situated on the spur of a little ridge above the road. We halted there for half an hour, for the temptation of tea (available at a small shop there) was too great. We were gratified to see a little post office there and some of us used that brief interval of rest to write letters home. Refreshed by tea, we left the road and took to a steep short-cut. This was a pretty stiff climb, but at the end of it we found ourselves to our delight on a level stretch of road flanked on either side by medium-sized, green *Vana* trees. Leaves of this bushy tree are used as animal fodder in winter in this part of the area. After a very pleasant walk of half an hour, we climbed up to the Forest Rest House at Urni (9,000 feet). Accommodation in the Rest House was scanty. I, with my party, decided to billet myself in the verandah. A few others also volunteered; all the rest were comfortably lodged in the nice little rooms of the Rest House.

It was likely to be extremely cold at night at that height, for the evening air had a sharp nip in it. We made use of our canvas bed sheets, fixed them alongside the wooden railings of the verandah, and were thus able to provide ourselves with at least a little imaginary protection from cold. Urni Rest House is beautifully situated in the midst of long terraces of green paddy fields spreading as far as the eye could see. As evening came, the scene changed to one of grandeur: the golden red of the setting sun covered the snow of the high and mighty Morang mountains in the east across the Sutlej, and the peaks of Kinnar Kailash and the Raldung nestled high up in the sky. A strange, timeless calm seemed to descend from the heavens, slow, unseen, enveloping!

I could get no sleep throughout the night owing to the tinkling of mules' bells as the animals munched their fodder. At first I thought that I was the only person awake, looking

up at the star-bedecked vault of heaven but at about 2 a.m., I found that some others in the verandah had also been unable to get any sleep. They had, like me, kept quiet, trying to feign sleep so as not to disturb the others. But by now it had become intolerable for them to continue lying in that state and so they had lighted a candle and begun to play cards. I too got up, and we all laughed over our common ordeal, silently endured. When morning came we had a hot mug of tea each and started on our sixteen mile trek to Chini.

Bathed in the light of a mild dawn, the snow-capped hills to the north and the south presented a fine view. The slopes of the hills were dense with vegetation with patches of cultivated land here and there. In fact, every available spot from the tops of the snow-covered ridges to the bottom of the river, however steep, had been brought under the plough and golden corn waved its sheaves in the midst of the lush green of the hills. There were little hamlets scattered all over these precipitous hills, speaking the story of man's toil and adventure in the search for bread. The road was level for some distance, but soon the gradient turned steep. The view of the forests around us, however, was wonderful and the scenery superb, especially seven miles beyond Urni. Once again we were in the midst of tall deodar forests and *neoza chils* in abundance. Looking back, we could still see the Urni Rest House (where we had sojourned the night before) nestling almost a mile behind. A little ahead we found the road completely washed away, although a diversion for the mules had been created. To avoid this long diversion, we stuck to the original track and, very cautiously, negotiated the dangerous, eroded portion, clinging warily to boulders and stones. The slightest mistake on our part would have meant a straight drop into the river a thousand feet below to our right. We halted for a while at a wayside spring and had our lunch before continuing our march to Chini.

Rogi (9,616 feet) on the way, was a big village in a beautiful setting. From here onwards our road was level and at every step it opened up before us a more and more enchanting panorama of nature's grandeur, with the Morang snows right in front of us. We reached Chini in the afternoon at about 2.30 p.m. Kaushal and Kaul had reached there a little earlier and

had got the spacious forest Rest House ready for our camp.

We were in Kinnar Desh and the little fingerlike tip of the Kinnar Kailash peak looked down on us from its pedestal of perpetual snows.

Kinnar is a Sanskrit word meaning literally 'What men ?' (*Kin naras*). *Kin-naras*, in Hindu mythology, were celestial choirsters and musicians, dwelling in the paradise of Kuvera on Kailas. The nomenclature of Kinnar Desh for this part of the country must be associated with the mythological Kinnaras of our history. Dancing, drinking and singing are, even today, the most important part of the normal life of the semi-civilized people of the Chini region.

Chini (9,196 feet) is now a *tehsil* headquarters of Himachal Pradesh. Formerly it was a part of the Bushehr State. It is situated on a big, open spur and its beauty is heightened as much by the vernal woods around it as by the snow ranges that surround it on the east and south. The town is not big nor has it any monuments, ancient or modern, for a tourist's predilection. It is, however, well worth a few days halt because of the charming, natural beauty of the place.

Our programme allowed us a day's halt at Chini. We had reached here on June 5, exactly on time. We had made up the loss of two days (a day's late start and a day's extra halt at Simla) by doing double stages. I had been sending daily wireless messages about our progress and welfare. Deputy Commissioner Khosla had replied : PLEASED TO KNOW OF YOUR PROGRESS AND WELFARE. KINDLY DO NOT UNDERTAKE DOUBLE STAGES ; CONSERVE ENERGY FOR FURTHER TREK. HOWEVER, YOU BEST JUDGE.

Yes, being on the spot, I was the best judge. So I decided that we halt at Chini for a complete day. This would afford us an opportunity both to relax a little and to look about this principal town of Kinnar Desh.

It was a cold morning. Sunlight flooded the hill tops. A *kuhl* of clean, ice-cold waters was flowing near our camp. I washed my clothes there and had an invigorating bath in the freezing current. The luxury of a warm bath was not for me owing to an earlier vow I had taken secretly and silently for reasons best known to me alone. In an expedition like this the strain of the journey and the boredom of the routine are

so exhausting that they make great demands on one. One of my great weaknesses is an addiction to bed-tea in the morning. Without that my day just does not begin. This seems to have irritated the more puritanical members of my party, and constant nagging references to this weakness of mine had been made in many veiled allusions right from the start. Early in the morning, when my orderly would put water on the stove to boil, it was used by some of them for their toilet. As a result the kettle would be on the stove alright, but without its contents ever reaching boiling point, for every mugful of hot water taken out was replaced by a mugful of ice-cold water. I did feel rather disgusted and so I said to myself: 'No use having a row with my choicest friends on this little matter. Treat the first cup of tea at whatever hour served as bed-tea.' I resolved also to rely on nature's own plentiful supply of cold water for washing. Hence, ever afterwards throughout my tour, I was never uneasy about this minor need. Even at 15,000 feet, it was the sweetly murmuring cold waters of the Kanzam Nullah with which I washed my hands and face. This constant use of ice-cold water burnt the skin on the palms of my hands by and by, but that was no discomfort.

In the morning, one Jaishi Ram, a distant relation of Kaushal, came to see us. Kind, courteous and gentle, he spent the better part of the day with us and had a fund of information about the land and people of this area. He had been in Chini for two years. Pointing at the peak of Kinnar Kailash, he told us of the local legend that nobody had been able to scale the peak so far. A daring man had once ventured to reach it but had been turned into stone before he could reach the top. Since then nobody had dared to make the attempt. That is, I suppose, a very common story about all unclimbed mountain tops, big or small.

In the afternoon, we went to the bazaar in search of potatoes which, we had been told, would be available in abundance at Chini. Relying on this information we had not taken a full quota of potatoes in our provisions purchased at headquarters. But, unfortunately, Chini had no potatoes for us. In vain did we rummage all the shops. Finally, a cobbler came to our help and offered five seers of potatoes. He was from Raipur

near Ambala and did not seem to be very happy with his lot. It must be said in fairness to him that he parted with those five seers of potatoes to help us rather than to strike an an advantageous bargain. I went to see the *tehsildar*, the local administrative head, as I had to send a wireless message through the Himachal Police Post, Chini, my own sets being out of order. Later in the evening, the *tehsildar*, a local man, well-built and stout, returned the call and came to my room in the Rest House.

I also went to the Himachal Border Police Post nearby and saw the new recruits (recruited from the local populace) under training. The training or the drill part of it did not at all impress me; perhaps the recruits were too raw, or the instructors too lazy, or both. The town was not impressive either. I could, however, make out the effects of Buddhism, which a traveller on this route meets for the first time to a marked degree in the town of Chini. It was here, too, that for the first time we heard the accents of an absolutely strange tongue. The town had its *Thakardwara*, a four columned, roofed square construction with painted Buddhas on the ceiling, and inscriptions in Bhoti, a Tibetan dialect. Such *Thakardwaras* were later to be found at the entrance and exit of all villages on our way, especially in Chini *Teshil*. On my return to the Rest House, I found I would have to make an investigation. A man had come in hot haste from Urni alleging that our muleteers, on the night of our stay there, had cut paddy from his land in a most reckless manner. I listened to his complaint with patience and I believed that what he said was true. It tallied with the night-long munching and crunching by the mules and the tinkling of their bells. I threatened the muleteers with dire consequences and they confessed their guilt. They had to pay ten rupees as compensation to the complainant. I learnt with pain that one of my own officials had a hand in encouraging them in this act of gross indiscipline.

From Chini to Pangi (9,000 feet) the next morning was an easy, enjoyable march of a bare seven miles. Tall deodars added to the beauty of the level road. To our right was the village of Dhuni which has the Government Weaving School. Trainees get a stipend of thirty rupees a month.

Half way between Chini and Pangi was the Government Experimental Agriculture Farm.

It was quite a commodious Rest House at Pangi, but on arrival I was a bit shocked to see how the other officers (who had reached a little earlier) had occupied almost the whole of it, leaving a dingy dark room at the back for me and my party, and this in spite of earlier generosity towards them in relation to all accommodation arrangements. I kept quiet and occupied the back garret with my men but resolved to teach them a lesson in the future. As commander, I was not prepared to tolerate any nonsense or indiscipline. In future, I would make it a point to reach the stages earlier and allot all available accommodation on a just and equitable basis. I stuck to my resolve and did this even though my friends chafed at my strictness.

VI

LAST INDIAN VILLAGE

THE WHOLE of my party, except the orderly and the patwari, started at 6 a.m. from Pangi. The road was good and pleasant all along the Sutlej except for a portion of it near the fourth mile where it had completely disappeared, having been washed away by heavy rains. A make-shift diversion both for men and mules at an 80-degree climb had been created. Apparently, the mules found the ascent difficult, and we held our breath while negotiating it. We, therefore, sat down, waiting for the mules to arrive. The muleteers would undoubtedly need our help, for every loaded mule would have to be led singly up and down this steep, narrow diversion. When the muleteers arrived and the process began, all went well except for one mule. It shied, got nervous and off went the load hurtling down quite a few hundred feet. Fortunately for us, the Sutlej was at a respectable distance from this point. Two of the muleteers went down and retrieved the baggage which, incidentally, belonged to me. On the way we met herds of goats and sheep belonging to nomadic *gaddis* of the Kangra Hills. We also came across a caravan of *Khampa* traders from Lahaul. They are roving tradesmen, who ply between Kulu, Rampur Bushehr and Tibet. The word *Khampa* originally stood for a native of Kham (a province in eastern Tibet) and then came to be used for a Tibetan domiciled in India. When I inquired of a little boy, a member of this caravan, as to where they were coming from, he replied : 'Dari'. This surprised as well as delighted me, for I knew Dari intimately. It is a delightful suburban village near Dharamsala and is known for its annual *mela* in spring. It was as if a whiff of Dharamsala breeze, a part of Kangra itself, had come to me and filled my whole being with joy. The boy told me that the caravan was bound for Tibet. Almost midway between Pangi and Jangi was Rarang (9,068 feet). It had a good camping ground and looked a flourishing hamlet. The entrance and exit were marked by the same *Thakardwara*. A stone wall with in-

numerable Buddhist inscriptions in Bhoti and a beautifully-carved stone image of the Buddha sitting in the *Dhayan* pose lay in the heap of *mantra*-inscribed stones of the *mani*-wall. Diminutive prayer-wheels had been enclosed at both ends of this wall so that a pedestrian passing either way could turn them and gather the bliss of prayers. You always pass this wall from the left and take off your cap while passing through the *Thakardwara*: that is the Buddhist way, the way of humility and respectful devotion. From this point onwards, these *mani-padme* walls are a common feature. Between Rarang and Jangi, a distance of seven miles, the road is crossed by gigantic granite rocks extending up and down the mountains for thousands of feet. There is hardly any rain from this point onwards. We were in Jangi by 1.15 p.m.

In the evening we went to see Jangi village. It had a wooden temple, dedicated to the local god. Nearby was the Buddhist Gompa, quite a magnificent structure with exquisitely carved stone panels and painted galleries depicting the story of the Enlightened One's struggle against temptation and evil. For a moment my imagination went back to those hundreds of selfless volunteers, the Bhikkus of the Buddha, who, centuries ago, must have hallowed these hills and valleys and filled the pure air with their sermons of love and light. Evening came and we returned to the camp. Rana, in our absence, had gone into the nearby jungle and shot a partridge (*chakor*), his first bag during this tour. He seemed happy and satisfied with this small, first inauguration, for he had untiringly carried his DBL gun all these days with the faith of a confirmed *shikari*. The gun was a gift from his late father and had seen about 40 years of service, ten years more than the age of its present master. With it Rana has already bagged leopards, bears and wild boars, in addition to partridges, snow-cocks and *kakkars*.

It was a difficult march the next day. The road was very narrow and full of risks. Tall rocks stood almost perpendicular and it was feared that a loose boulder might at any moment spell destruction to our train. In fact, such things were not uncommon on this particular portion of the route; accidents had taken place; people had lost their lives. The hills were mostly barren with a few *neoza chils* scattered here

and there. The spectacle was one of absolute bleakness although the sun shone brightly overhead. There was no drinking water at any point on the route ; we could eat only after we had completed our twelve-mile march and reached our destination, Kanam. The only relieving sight in this grey mountain wilderness was that of a beautiful, apple-cheeked maiden comfortably perched on a tree and knitting. Her herd of cows was grazing below on the slopes. 'An oasis in a desert', I said to Rana, the only member of the party with me at that time. After a short *tete-a-tete* with the 'oasis' we continued our march and reached Kanam at 10.15 a.m. It did not take me long to decide against a day's halt (earlier contemplated) at Kanam, for the Rest House was too small and accommodation the scantiest ; there was no drinking water, and fodder for mules would be in low supply. Hence, to Pooh the next station, the next day.

I woke up at 3.45 a.m. and blew my whistle to wake up the camp. Incidentally, this had been my practice all these days. Like the unpopular whistle of a company sergeant-major in an army camp, this was the first signal for my weary men to get up from their sweet slumber and be ready for the day's march. Morning tea over, we started for Pooh at 5 a.m. Kanam to Pooh is a distance of only 16 official miles but despite an early start and a good pace, the journey proved considerably rougher than we expected ; it was probably our roughest march so far. The road was often dangerously narrow ; the Sutlej flowed to the right far below us. The distance between us on the track and the Sutlej bed was several hundred feet and one wrong step could have led to disaster. It was a wilderness of bleak, barren, ash-grey precipices with a very hot and scorching sun overhead. We felt parched with thirst but there was no water anywhere. Minutes stretched and miles lengthened. Spur after spur of hill appeared. As we covered the distance up to one turning, panting and breathless, it showed another ahead. Especially trying were the last few miles when suddenly the hills around us changed their outlines and the ridges now were all sand and shingle. So was the road, and this sand and shingle burnt above us and under us in the scorching heat of a strong midday sun ; we were passing through a hill desert ! After wending our way through a Pass, flanked by sand-

dunes on either side, we came across a little spring from where water dripped slowly. We moistened our parched lips as best as we could and marched on. After crossing on a raft a small but flooded torrent, we reached the Pooh Rest House a little past noon.

As I entered the precincts of the Pooh Rest House (10,000 feet) I was greeted by its 75-year-old *chowkidar*. With a goatee and a thick tuft of matted locks flowing from under his embroidered fur cap, he looked just the devout Buddhist that he was. He told me he had visited Gaya (where stands the famous Bodhi Tree, the place of the Enlightened One's Enlightenment), Ayodhya (the birthplace of Lord Rama), Thuling Math (in Tibet) and the great lake, Manasarovar. To most of these places his wife had accompanied him. He related to me the popular legend about one of Lord Buddha's incarnations in this part of the land. The Lord took incarnation in the house of a poor man. When He grew up to boyhood He felt a stranger in the midst of these people whose language was strange to Him. Soon there came on the scene a Tibetan Lama, who gave Him the knowledge of the Tibetan Bhoti, and foretold that He would renounce the world at the age of 18, which He did when the destined hour came. Then He performed untold austerities and finally received enlightenment of the World, to be propagated among these illiterate hill dwellers. He established 108 Gompas (monasteries) including the one at Pooh, the legend concluded. All this had been thrust down my throat as I sat in a comfortable easy-chair in the verandah, waiting for the narrator to conclude so that I could ask for a glass of water. I drank two mugfuls of water after that.

We had had pretty stiff marches during the ten days of our continuous trek, and had enjoyed only a day's rest at Chini. The journey from Kanam to Pooh had been exacting. Accommodation in the Pooh Rest House was good and the water supply ample. So we decided on a day's halt much to the joy of all concerned.

I met Devichand, the very interesting headman of Pooh, who came to see me in the Rest House. A gay and burly, but worldly-wise and shrewd fellow, he was the local big wig, and combined in himself the functions of headman, *sarpanch*,

postmaster, businessman and banker. He knew Urdu and Persian and had a smattering of Sanskrit and English. Tibetan and the local dialects were, of course, his *forte* ; he was, in fact, a real man of parts for that part of our country. He told me that for many years he had worked as interpreter with various tourists and sahibs during their Tibetan travels. Of these, he made a special mention of that great Indologist, Professor Tucci. I spoke to Devichand of a book on the Tibetan saint Milarepa (1038-1112 A.D.) which I had read some time ago. He knew all about Yogi Milarepa and, in a way, quite impressed me when he said that Sidha Jechun Milarepa's *guru* was Lama Marpa, that Marpa's teacher was Naropa, a Kashmiri Pandit and of this latter, a Bengali *teli* (low-caste oil driller) Tilopa by name. He spoke of the perverted manners of some of the present-day Lamas, who had forgotten the teachings of the compassionate Buddha. When he was about to leave, we loaded his postmaster's bag with a lot of *dak*, for while I had been busy with him most others had utilized the time in writing letters home. The most prolific among the letter writers was Kaushal, who wrote a little essay home giving a report of our trek so far.

Earlier in the day, Rana had gone out with his gun in the company of the local doctor. He returned at about 3 p.m. with two items in his bag : a *chakor* and a *Ram-chakor* (snow-cock). I looked at them and thought, 'So attractive in their death, what beautiful creatures they must have been in life !' I decided that Kaul and I would have a good helping of sweet *khir* (rice and sweetened milk boiled together) as a substitute for the meat the others would enjoy at dinner, for he and I were vegetarians.

A second day's halt at Pooh became inevitable owing to the bad condition of the track ten miles beyond. The PWD Sectional Officer, Mr. Senapati, sent two gangs of labourers ahead to do the repairs. At about 9.45 a.m., a *tehsil* peon from Chini arrived to say that B Group was reaching Pooh that day. That was very happy news indeed ! In fact, I badly wanted to meet G.C. in order to discuss a few administrative points with him. Two members of his party arrived at 10.30 ; others poured in gradually. It was a joyful moment when friends clasped friends in warm handshakes and tight

embraces on the eve of completion of the second leg of their long trek (the first having been completed at Chini). Prem, when he arrived, looked dog-tired and woe-begone. He had a lot to say. I had left him behind at Simla with his own polling party in Group B on the request of the officer-in-charge of the party, much though I would have liked him to accompany me. By profession a stenotypist, Prem is an excellent photographer and most enthusiastic about his hobby. There is not a Kangra landscape which his camera has not captured.

It was about 3.15 p.m. when I heard G.C.'s familiar voice outside ; he was the last to arrive. Welcomes over, he sat in my room where we talked over cups of tea. He had not been getting our wireless messages (specially meant for his group).

'Do you mean you never heard our transmission at all ?' I asked incredulously.

'No', he said.

'But we did it regularly . . . every afternoon . . . 4 o'clock . . . the time we fixed . . . shouting . . . Hallo ! Hallo ! . . . This is for G. C. Sharma, this is for G. C. Sharma who is two stages behind. . . .'

I was surprised. His characteristic smile came to his lips and his eyes twinkled gently behind his spectacles as he said :

'Of course, we rarely switched on our set at the proper time !' We both laughed heartily then, and I felt immensely relieved.

As evening came we stirred out, G.C. and I and a few others, to look about the village. We went first to the Pooh Temple. Its dilapidated state shocked me. Its walls were full of paintings depicting the Buddha, Avalokiteshwar, the sage Milarepa, and Padmasambhava (honoured among the devout Tibetans as the second Buddha). There were small brass censers for burning incense. In a garret at the back was a gigantic copper prayer wheel. We were told that when the wheel completed one revolution and the bell on top of it tinkled, it was equivalent to a recitation of ten crores of *Mani-mantras* (*Om mani padme hum*), a most comfortable device for accumulating the bliss of volumes of prayer !

Then, headman Devichand took us to the neat, tidy house of Negi Darshan Chherring, unfortunate father of a girl who

had been murdered by a miscreant. Our host related the story with tears in his eyes. It had happened a year ago, when one day he and his wife were away in the fields. A police constable entered the house and tried to molest the girl. She resisted him and he threatened her. She seized an axe, but the man pulled it out of her hands and struck her a fatal blow. He was caught and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Much against my wish I had to halt at Pooh for the third day in succession. The road ahead was still bad. The PWD Sectional Officer assured me that all would be well after another day's work by the labourers. However, this enforced stay and idleness was irritating. My companions felt the same way. The note in my diary at the end of this day says: 'It was a day wasted'. The headman had promised G.C. a local folk dance in the afternoon and G.C. had insisted on my staying back. But the folk dance never came off. I lingered a little in Prem's company. As always, he was in search of 'faces' for his Agfa Isolette. He took me to the house of a Negi (a title given to respectable Rajputs). The Negi had at home a collection of about two hundred manuscripts and images of the Buddha. Things like that have always fascinated me, and I wanted to take some. He refused, however, to part with any and we sat and talked for a while. He also had a story to tell of one of his daughters. She was very beautiful; an Englishman fell in love with her and wanted to buy the girl. 'I refused', said the Negi with pride, 'for we do not sell human beings'. But the Sahib was too infatuated with the maiden's charms to leave the matter there. He insisted on having the girl; he wanted to marry her. 'So', said the Negi, 'I gave her away to the Sahib as a father gives away the hand of his daughter in marriage to a bridegroom. She is now living in England. This happened ten years ago.'

The next day we had to leave Pooh on our next stage of the journey.

All four of us—Rana, Kaushal, Kaul and I—left the Rest House at 6 a.m. We were expected to go only nine miles that day. After two miles, Rana shot a beautiful *chakor*. Once again we crossed the Sutlej to its left bank near the village of Dubling. The suspension bridge was a sight to see. It had a worn-out stone inscription bearing the name of Sir

Louis Dane, Lt.-Governor of the Punjab in the 'teens' of this century. From Pooh, the road gradually dips down to the bridge and from the bridge again it ascends to a height of 10,000 feet or more above sea level. The bridge crossed, Kaushal was suddenly inspired and for the rest of the march kept reciting half humorous, half serious verses in Urdu. I joined in, and it became a poetic dialogue, to the amusement of the others. We were in a happy mood.

Five miles farther up, Rana fired at another *chakor*, but the bird fell into a nullah and was lost. In spite of a long search by those interested in eating the poor thing for dinner, the bird could not be traced. Once again, the gorge of the Sutlej became narrower and deeper. From the north-west came roaring the Spiti River and poured its waters into the Sutlej. The point of confluence of the two rivers was not visible to us from where we were on the road. In front once again was the gorgeous panorama of silver-white, snow-covered ranges, high and mighty in their lofty, Tibetan solitude. How eternal they looked, and how ageless!

We had covered 135 miles from Rampur Bushehr since we had started from there on June 1. The final mile over, we were in Namgiah, the last Indian village on the Hindustan-Tibet Road. Shipki La (the Shipki Pass) is only about five miles further off. A dry nullah between two crests, called Kung Mada, forms the boundary between India and Tibet. The Hindustan-Tibet Road, however, runs up to the village of Shipki, a distance of ten miles from Namgiah. Shipki is in Tibetan territory. What a sense of far-awayness and finality it inspired in us to find ourselves at this terminus station on the long Hindustan-Tibet Road!

VII

TASHIGANG AND SUMRA

WE PITCHED our tents on the uneven shrubby premises of the Rest House at Namgiah. We had, so far, completed 135 miles on foot. Now our route lay north-west. We would bid good-bye to the Hindustan-Tibet Road (Namgiah being its terminus on the Indian side) and to the Sutlej River. We had been with the Sutlej now for about three weeks and it certainly seemed reluctant to part company with us. It was in no mood to allow us an easy crossing, not in any case, to our goods train. So immediately, in the company of a few others (including muleteers), I set out to examine the track beyond Namgiah. Apparently our three-day halt at Pooh had been unproductive. Probably the labourers engaged on repairs had not done well enough or perhaps the work was too much for them. Things really looked hopeless. The descent from the level of the village to the crossing point on the river below was very sudden, slippery and dangerous. The track had completely disappeared through erosion. Men and mules would have to slip down the stone and sand strewn-slope with great caution, for the roaring river yawned below. Reaching the river, I had a look at the bridge. The muleteers' verdict was immediate. 'Impossible, Sahib, impossible!' they said. Yes indeed, it did look impossible. The bridge was in a bad way; it was a poor apology for a bridge. On a big rock that stood in the middle of the river-bed had been put planks of wood (how many years ago, no one knows!) extending either way to the banks. There were gaps in between the planks which were broken at places and tilting sickeningly. They were only five feet wide, and had no railings whatsoever. Beyond the bridge, the extremely thin track looked equally hopeless as it ran snake-like across the face of a long chain of steep ridges over brittle sand and shingle. Our men and mules would not be able to negotiate this vital point until something was done to improve both the bridge and the track. I came back to the Rest House with my spirits drooping, my mind

burning with concerned for the morrow. The muleteers, more than ever before, cursed the moment they accepted the contract for this unusual trip.

A quick decision was needed. It was already June 14, and Tabo (in Spiti) was still 50 miles away. Both G. C. and myself had been appointed as Assistant Returning Officers for the Tribes Advisory Council Elections and, under the rules, the presence of one of us was essential at Tabo by 19 June to enable the candidates to file their nomination papers. So, in the evening, I sent a message through a special runner to G.C. (who was camping at Pooh) informing him of the situation and requesting him to reach Namgiah early next morning. In the meantime, I took a decision and chalked out my plan ; I would form my polling party and the wireless party into an advance team, arrange a few porters and start off speedily the next morning for Tabo (Spiti).

It was a big problem to arrange porters in such a short time. It vexed me till late at night when, thank God, a feasible arrangement suggested itself. The morning came bright and beautiful but I was still running about and rounding up porters. I must record my sense of appreciation of the herculean efforts of the headman of Namgiah. G.C. arrived at about 9.30 a.m. in response to my SOS. Over a cup of tea we discussed the situation and he completely agreed with the plan. So he stayed at Namgiah to arrange porters for the rest of the personnel to help them across the Sutlej Bridge, over the Tashigang Range and beyond. He accompanied my advance team up to the Bridge where we parted company. It was 11.40 a.m. now and, as I looked up, the high, bleak ridges of the 13,000-foot Tashigang Range stood above me and a very hot sun shone overhead in all its midday splendour. We were to climb the Tashigang Ranges, Rana and I together. Members of the wireless party had proceeded ahead a little earlier ; three members of my advance team had been left behind to start from Namgiah as soon as porters were arranged for them.

Admittedly, it was a very trying climb for that hour of the day. At intervals we would pause for a breath but the scorching sun beat mercilessly over our heads. There were no trees or bushes or any suggestion of shade. Sun-scorched, thirsty and

breathless we reached the Tashigang village at 2.5 p.m. and sat down to our lunch beside a spring of water. After half an hour, we once again resumed our climb up the steep range. We were climbing, climbing, climbing; winding round and round the rocky ridges on the broken, narrow track as the miles lengthened. We had started right from the base of the Tashigang range at the Namgiah Bridge, climbed eastward, then suddenly turned west for some miles and were now heading slightly north. We had to cover all this circuitous course to reach finally its topmost western ridge at 6 p.m. Down below, we saw a small valley with green terraces and rows of houses and, to cap it all, a beautiful lake ! That was the village of Nako, our destination. At the point where we stood was a huge rock inscribed with the familiar letters, *Om Mani Padme Hum Shri'* in the Bhoti script. Dipping down in sheer descent from our *Mani-Mantra* crest, our porters following us with their loads, we reached the village at 7 p.m. as the sun was setting behind the western snows. It was very refreshing to be in that little paradise of a hamlet after a day of strenuous trekking. The long shadows of the poplars on the still waters of the lake, the twilight glow on the aged, hoary brows of snow-capped mountain chains all around, lent an unearthly touch to the whole scene. Operator Daulat Ram began signalling his message.

I had just finished my 'brunch' at about 9.30 a.m. the next day when I looked up towards the *Mani-Mantra* Crest and saw three persons coming down. Throughout the night I had been thinking of the fate of those three members of my advance team who had been left behind at Namgiah with instructions to leave as soon as they got porters. Anything could happen ; anything might have happened. They arrived —Kaushal, Kaul and Patwari Gomatram—with woe-begone faces. They had a moving tale to tell ; they had started at about 3 p.m. from Namgiah with a porter, and four local donkeys as pack animals. The donkey's owner had overloaded his animals, succumbing, of course, to a little urge for more money. At the first dangerous spot, the Sutlej Bridge, the donkeys took fright. As they were being led across the bridge one by one, one of the animals gave its owner a powerful kick with its hind legs. It was only through the presence

of mind and courage of patwari Gomatram that the fellow was saved from falling headlong into the swirling current of the Sutlej. Night fell bleak and black after Tashigang village. They had to camp for the night under a big boulder on the Tashigang heights with nothing to eat and no bedding. They huddled together as best they could and kept vigil all night while insects bit them.

Acchar, my orderly, was away. I hurriedly repaired to the kitchen and, within fifteen minutes, tea and *parathas* were ready for my famished friends.

In the afternoon I went to see the village temple nearby. A very dirty old man was pulling at the string of the huge prayer-wheel and mumbling *'Om Mani Padme Hum'* like an automaton. An impressive clay image of the Amitabha Buddha and another of the Chaturbhuj Buddha with layers of accumulated dust spoke the story both of man's present neglect and ancient faith. Installed during the heyday of Buddhism's rise, they now indicated the appalling ignorance of their devotees. I spent the evening with Kharba Sahib, a local landlord and a man of some position as I was told, but with a dishevelled and grimy head of hair. His house had a shrine of its own full of paintings, images and manuscripts. He entertained us with *Chhang* and *Ara*. He was a good painter too and was copying out a painted cloth chart that had worn out. All the paintings on the tapestried chart were concerned with the story of the Great Buddha. With great reluctance he parted with a rare manuscript in golden letters. This was entitled 'Dorje Chodpa'.

Our mules, empty and unloaded, had arrived in the afternoon and the rascally muleteers were full of their usual ire against the hopelessness of the track. They whined and whimpered and grumbled against *kismet* when I told them about my decision to proceed the next day irrespective of the condition of the track. However, as a precaution, I made arrangements for a dozen porters.

The porters did come in handy the next morning. We had covered only two miles of our twelve-mile stage when the track disappeared again into a deep, broken ravine. Beyond the ravine was the steep spur of an eroded hill and, further up, were discernable the broken remnants of what must

once have been a track. I went ahead to look at the situation for myself. The porters would have to carry the luggage first through this hazardous portion and then at least for a mile beyond. The transhipment process began ; it lasted for about six hours. Imagine, six hours for one mile ! Mules, even when unloaded, had to be patiently led one by one across this dangerous place, for the ridge was perpendicular, the track was nowhere to be seen and the Spiti River to our left was not respectably far away either. Caution, patience, grit—all played their part in negotiating this portion of our route. The rest of the march, however, did not present any big problem. Over the beautiful Chango Pass (11,000 feet) we reached Chango village in the afternoon.

Immediately after Nako, I had noticed a complete change in the texture of hills around us. They were now brown, bare and shrubless. Their sturdy naked flanks had a simple, almost monk-like character of their own. They appeared to me like those austere, simple, shorn-headed *Bhikshus* of yore, whose footprints, ages after they travelled this land, are writ large on every stone and rock and track.

The very first sight of Chango was refreshing. With a lot of open space around, full of vast green fields irrigated by numerous *kuhls* and water channels, it looked like one of the many villages typical of my own Kangra Valley. At the entrance to the village, we were received by a constable from the local post of the Himachal Police. We lodged in a small hovel at the farther end of the village, and were busy till late at night packing our rations for three days, for we had come to a brief parting of ways with our mules. The track from Chango to the Sumra Rope Bridge over the Spiti River to Lari is very dangerous. The river must be crossed twice ; once over a broken plank bridge, and then over a precarious rope bridge. Evidently, no mules would be able to pass that way ! They would have to proceed along the right bank of the Spiti to the north-east of Chango village, pass through Tibetan territory via Samgzam for about seven miles, turn west and then enter Spiti. Once again, therefore, porters were the problem for the next three days.

The porters arrived very late. They were expected to carry our three days' rations, wireless equipment, our simplified

bedding and my important election papers (pertaining to the functions of Assistant Returning Officer) till our mules rejoined the main baggage train. From Chango, the next village, Shalkhar, is only four miles. The march from Chango to Shalkhar is along the left bank of the Spiti River. Standing at the top of the ridge from where you descend to the track along the slopes on the river bank, you have a wonderful view of Chango at your back. The village with its white-washed houses spreads all over the little valley. Before Shalkhar, the river is crossed over a ramshackle, railing-less plank bridge, tilting to one side and showing signs of nervousness when disturbed. We reached Shalkhar at about 9 o'clock in the morning. A police constable had accompanied us from Chango. We entrusted him the job of arranging fresh porters for Sumra, the next village.

It may well be asked why we had to change porters (or *begar* as it is locally called) after only four miles. The reason is worth mentioning. It is an unwritten law in this region as well as all over Spiti that porters from one village will, in no case, agree to carry loads beyond the next village; this would infringe the rights of the people of that village to avail themselves of the opportunity of earning their livelihood. It is a wonderful arrangement. Even if you insist (as we did in our ignorance) on the porters breaking this rule for the travellers' convenience, the answer will be a point-blank refusal. 'We are not greedy, Sahib', my Chango porters had said. This is surely a living example of 'equality of opportunity to all', a promise we have made to our people in the preamble to our great Constitution.

In the meantime, we went to see the local temple. It was a fortress-like building. There were two different temples side by side. One had a life-size image of Avalokiteshwar and the other that of the thousand-armed Buddha. The beautiful frescoes on the walls were in a lamentable state of decay. Tasselled cloth-hangings decorated the walls and pillars, but they were all covered in layers of dust. They were rare pieces and the paintings on them as minute in detail and execution as those of the well-known Kangra school of art. They spoke of better days and of the still better men who must have produced those masterpieces. Alas, they were now the sole

preserve of an unkempt priest who was sitting at the temple gate. Basking in the sun, this aged custodian was putting *Mani-Mantra* imprints on small pieces of cloth. These *mantra*-imprinted pieces of cloth are tied to long poles on buildings so that as they flutter in the wind, the wind carries the prayers inscribed on them to heaven. Thus do nature's own gusts of wind perform their 'unseen ministry' for the good of the faithful ones who are probably at that time busy drinking their *ara* or *chhang* in the gloom of their dingy dwellings. Here in the temple we were shown two cups made out of human skulls. These, we were told, were used only on rare ceremonial occasions for holy wine. What a hideous relic of wild tribal customs in the temple of the Prophet of Peace and Enlightenment, I mused!

We returned from the temple to where the porters were being arranged for us and found everything in confusion. There they were, the porters—and the loads and the yaks,—quarrelling and shouting for all they were worth. But of what they said we could not understand a syllable. It was a babel of voices. Gradually, I learnt that they were not shouting about any point at issue with us but about the load each would carry. These people decide such issues by means of the system of *ara*, as they call it. This consists of drawing lots by means of small three-inch sticks. Each man selects a stick; the leader shuffles them up and puts a stick on each load, thus assigning a load to the owner of each stick. Three whole hours were wasted this way. Eventually we started from Shalkaar at 10 a.m., then a little later sat down to our lunch by the side of a nullah before starting the stiff, long climb to the nearly 14,000-foot Dublang Rangla crest or the Sumra Jot. The sun was quite hot but the climb was nowhere as steep as the one at Tashigang before Nako. It was not, however, an easy affair.

It took us three hours to reach the top and we were delighted at the sight of abundant snow on the northern slopes. The Pass was snow-bound. Here we rested for a few minutes and took tea which we were carrying in our flasks. This brief respite over, we started down the thin snow-covered track on a long and hazardous descent to the Spiti River. Our porters, both men and women, with their *churoos* (yaks) went

skidding down the sheer descent with marvellous agility and speed. At a point in our headlong descent we sat down, all of us, and listened to an entertaining flute recital from the leader of the porters' team. At last we reached a low level spur on the river bank. Our legs were aching. Opposite, beyond the river, was a dry nullah dividing the boundary between Spiti (India) and Tibet. We were right on the Indo-Tibetan border; only the river intervened. On this side were our own hills, covered with their eternal snows, and opposite were those of Tibet clad in like garments of pure white. On the Tibetan side of the nullah is a small one-house village, called Kun. The patwari told me that the revenue from this village goes to Tabo (India) and Gartok (Tibet) every alternate year. Actually, I could not imagine how much revenue that single-cottage hamlet should be yielding. Slightly below Kun is another hamlet, called Yodi Digche.

After another two hours of a tiring trek along the right bank of the Spiti River over a two-foot wide, narrow, slippery track with little stones and pebbles raining down on us at times from the adjacent, wind-eroded ridges, we climbed up to the broad escarpment at whose feet a rashly-roaring torrent emptied itself into the Spiti waters. On this escarpment was Sumra, the last Himachal village. From the village of Sumra you cross the Spiti River to enter Spiti.

As darkness spread over the mighty hills, we repaired to a dark, dingy hovel (with a lot of dirt and litter about it) for our nightly sojourn. Asked if a better place was available, the curt headman only shook his head in an unceremonious 'no'. Here in this border village we noticed for the first time the barbarian, tribal touch in the very appearance of the people. There was, in the whole of Sumra, not a single person who could understand Hindustani; not even the headman who, from all appearances, looked a confirmed knave. He would not help us in any way. I asked him to arrange for fuel and *chhoo* (water). He only shook his head and chuckled. He demanded one rupee as rent for a small cooking utensil we had asked for. He quoted exorbitant rates for the *begar* we needed the next day, and wanted extra high charges for helping us across the *jhoola* (rope-bridge). For, did we not depend entirely on his mercy? Had we not to reach Tabo the next

day, June 19, without fail ? How could we do that without crossing the Spiti over the rope bridge whose golden key lay in the hands of this border village ? Neither coaxing nor threatening would subdue this obdurate headman. That we were proceeding on urgent Government duty did not affect him. '*Ham Sarkar ka admi hai*' (I am a Government official), I said. He replied, '*Begar karega, paisa lega*' (no service without money) ; and '*Sarkar idhar hai*' (here is the Government), pointing to his belly with a last fling of satire. In utter disgust I pushed him out of the room and banged the door after him.

Soon after, a very handsome and cheerful young Lama came to our hut. He too knew no Hindustani except *Jai Hind* and *achcha hai*. He partook of the hot tea we were sipping at the moment. Then he went off and sent the Head Lama to meet us who, in the custom of the land, respectfully bowed and presented us with two bottles of local wine, which I politely declined to accept. Instead, I gave him a small gift of biscuits and tea. This ceremonial meeting with the good-natured Lamas presented a vivid contrast to the discourteous behaviour of the locals and came, at the fag end of the day, as a welcome mental relief.

We were so near Spiti and yet so far. The Spiti River which separated us by the breadth of a few hundred feet from Spiti territory, looked an insurmountable obstacle in the face of the extremely non-co-operative attitude of those with whom lay the secret of sending us across the river. I had no time to lose ; I was duty-bound to reach Tabo the next day. Of this urgency I had failed to convince the Sumra headman. And so I went to sleep with a very uneasy mind on that night, our last in Himachal Pradesh territory. Would we be able to step into Spiti tomorrow ?

VIII

WE STEP INTO SPITI

JUNE 18 dawned bright and clear. After keeping us waiting a considerable time, the headman turned up, to ask if we really wanted to cross the rope bridge! He had cooled down, apparently, during the night. I, too, was in no mood to quarrel lest, after we had left, our succeeding parties should have further trouble. I agreed to pay Rs. 1-12 per head per load up to the next village. This included the charges for the *jhoola* crossing as well. Fortunately, the devil agreed to this proposal. We reached the rope bridge at 9 a.m. and almost all of us had the shock of our lives. Over the roaring and turbulent waters of the Spiti was stretched only a thick wire rope. To this would be attached an indigenous wooden pulley with ropes reaching to both banks; to this pulley would be tied baggage and men alike one by one and pulled across the span of the river to safety. 'What if the rope breaks or the pulley gives way?' some whispered. 'Back to Namgiah, into the Sutlej, and then to the Arabian Sea', I replied. As the rope-crossing process started with our luggage first, we paused for a few invigorating puffs at our cigarettes like men doomed to die.

It was a thrilling experience to be suspended by a wire over the swirling river for howsoever brief a period and to be pulled across to the safety of the other bank as part of the process which had ferried our luggage. The operation took about two hours till all of us were safely across and all shouted in unison, 'Lo, we are in Spiti; we are in Spiti.' Yes, we had now stepped into Spiti, the Land of the Lamas, our 'little Tibet!' The congratulations, handshakes and warm embraces that followed this much-awaited moment reflected a rare sense of joy in everyone. We had re-entered the Kangra district after three weeks of rambling in Himachal Pradesh territory. A brief drizzle greeted us as we set foot on Kangra soil, as if to remind us of our own Dharamsala with its average of more than 130 inches of annual rainfall.

We reached Lari Village at 12.45 p.m. Lari is the eastern-most village of Spiti from this approach. The welcome we received from our Police boys at Lari was, indeed, heart-warming. It was a very happy moment. Dharampal, Reader to the Nono Sahib (the titular chief of Spiti), was also there. Tea at the Police Post was welcome and refreshing as it had a great admixture of affection and joy at our safe arrival in Spiti. Lari is situated on a vast open stretch of land (three furlongs long and one and a half furlong wide) and locked in by hills on the north and the south. It appears to be a suitable place for an airstrip. With its proximity to the borders of both Himachal Pradesh and Western Tibet, it can be developed into a flourishing trade centre.

From Lari to Tabo is only two easy miles. Resuming our march at 2 p.m. we reached Tabo, my advance team's main objective, at 3.15 p.m. and were greeted by men and officials of the Tabo post. It was a very pleasant surprise for me to meet one of my old students, Jarnail Singh, in that little crowd. What a chance meeting and what a coincidence ! One of the privileges of being a teacher is that you can expect to meet your old students anywhere on earth, and the sense of gratification that such chance meetings afford is unique. First tea and then dinner were both sumptuous for such a far-flung place as Tabo. Jarnail Singh was bubbling with joy at this unexpected opprotunity of 'serving his *guru*', as he put it. Like a devoted Indian housewife, he prepared our dinner 'with his own hands'. Only we started it at the wrong end, taking the sweet dish first. Thus we were left with nothing at the end to counteract the chillies which turned out to be a little too strong. We were lodged in one of the kitchen rooms of the big Gompa (Monastery) at Tabo, accommodation in the hall of the monastery being forbidden to outsiders. We *were* outsiders in the sense of being unlike the local folk in dress, manners, language and appearance.

Earlier, immediately on my arrival, I had flashed the following message to my headquarters and to the Chief Electoral Officer in the State capital : 'REACHED FB FOUR IN TIME FOR NOMINATIONS WITH MY ADVANCE TEAM.'

I had arrived on due date at Tabo to perform the functions of Assistant Returning Officer till G.C.'s arrival. I had pub-

lished notice in Form I, as required under the rules. I went to sleep with a great feeling of satisfaction : the election machinery had been set in motion on due date at the time and schedule fixed for us by my Government. My Government's prestige was safe. I thanked God and my companions. It was our first night in Spiti, that land of the Lamas which is a name to conjure with.

Before I give you a resume of our activities during the nights and days that followed, it will not be out of place to mention a few other facts relevant to this narrative.

Various sources are quoted for the derivation of the name 'Spiti'. Locally pronounced 'Piti', it means, according to some, 'the middle land', so called because it is surrounded by lofty ranges on all sides and has on one side Tibet, on another Kashmir, and on the south the territories of the former Bushehr State. Others trace the name to one Ashwapati who ruled the territories of the present Pin Valley in the days of the Mahabharata. 'Ashwapati' literally means the 'lord of horses', and Pin, now as long ago, was famous for horses of good breed. I was told by a local Lama that great horse-shows and competitions used to be held in the Lidung plateau on the banks of the Spiti near the entrance to the Pin Valley. The competitions included horse races up to the difficult and inaccessible Passes (some over 20,000 feet) which lie on the high mountain walls that encircle Spiti. In course of time, 'the land of Ashwapati' became 'the land of Spiti'. The horse is still the chief means of transport and communication in this land.

Another tradition speaks of one Tibetan dacoit, Spiti Thakur by name, who, before the Sen Kings from Bengal came and established their sway over Kulu and Spiti in the time of Lodhis, used to operate in the upper reaches of the Kulu valley with his murderous gangs. This dacoit, Spiti Thakur, built two temples to the god Zambulu, one in Jagatsukh (near Manali) and the other in Hanse (Spiti).

For a very long time Spiti was a part of Tibet. In the eleventh century A.D., Lochav Rinchhan Zangbo (958 A.D.-1058 A.D.), a great Tibetan translator and yogi who, for twelve years, preached Buddhism at Khochar Nath in the Kailas-Manasarovar region, established two great monasteries at Spiti, one at Tabo and the other at Lalung. Mahapandit Ratnabhadra

is identical with Lochav Rinchhan Zangbo. When Raja Gulab Singh's great General, Zorawar Singh, annexed 'little Tibet' to the territories of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, Spiti also came under the sway of the Raja of Jammu and Kashmir. The mysterious Spiti Valley is therefore a very ancient land.

We were now in Tabo, one of Spiti's great and ancient villages. More than 10,000 feet above sea level, Tabo is a small but beautiful hamlet on the left bank of the Spiti River. Flanked on either side by lofty hills, brown and sunburnt, it is the seat of one of the most famous Buddhist gompas, regarded by many as only next to the Thuling Gompa in Tibet. It is a large *kacha* building made up of various blocks. A nine-foot high stone-cum-mud wall encases the whole structure on four sides. The principal block consists of the main temple and the art gallery. Another block houses a more than 20-foot high, beautifully painted and skilfully executed clay image of the Buddha sitting on a pedestal in the Updesha pose. It is a very impressive monument. In the inner court of the Gompa are small tomes or temples as numerous as those outside the main wall, too. Little *kuhls* (channels) from the nearby river make the supply of water ample. River water is stored in huge brass vessels at night for the mud in it to settle down by the morning so that it becomes fit for drinking.

The Tabo Gompa is the seat of about 50 Lamas in all. The present Head Lama, Samtan Dorje, is a learned man nearing his 'sixties. He is well-versed in the Buddhist scriptures found in Bhoti, the local dialect. Five feet tall, with a stocky figure, clean-shaven with small moustaches under a snub Mongoloid nose, he has a rough exterior. Samtan Dorje came to see me and showed me round the great monastery. He opened the big lock (of the type found all over Spiti) with a huge, one-foot long key and we entered the small door that led to the inner vestibule. This was a room with beautiful frescoes in bright colours depicting the Buddha and Hindu-Buddhist gods. To our right was another door which led into a still smaller room, forbidden to outsiders. It was the daily *puja* closet and the store for dresses and accoutrements of the Lama dancers. We entered the central hall of the Gompa and, dear God! I simply could not believe my eyes. It was such a refreshing sight with images of art all around. There

was, in front of me, the central shrine with the Buddha in the Padma pose, flanked on either side by two other celestial dignitaries (possibly Hindu gods). Around these, on pedestals one above the other, were smaller brass images of the Enlightened One. A beautiful gold-plaited urn contained a framed photograph of Lama Samtan Dorje's *guru* (teacher). I was able to converse with the Head Lama only through Munshi Dharampal (Nono Sahib's Reader), who was, at the moment, with me. He acted as the interpreter, being conversant with the local tongue as well as English, Hindi and Urdu. I was told that Samtan Dorjee, the Tabo Lama, and Kushak Bakula, the Head Lama of Ladakh (Kashmir), were disciples of the same *guru*. I saw multi-coloured tapestries hanging from the walls and along the columns and pillars in circular patterns. Exquisitely worked out paintings on cloth described the story of Prince Siddhartha and depicted the various incarnations of the Panchen Lama, all in the Updesha pose. I could only wonder at the skill of these great, anonymous painters.

On the walls of the central hall, too, were clay images and busts, a total of about fifty pieces. Here again was an admixture of Hindu and Buddhist myth : Shankar, Parvati, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Durga, Avalokiteshwara, Milarepa, Sariputta and Mahamoglana, all had found a niche in this assembly of gods and goddesses. In the back garret of the main shrine in this hall were life-size images of gods and demons. There were innumerable books and manuscripts stacked in high wooden racks. The Lama told me that they weighed five maunds and contained 108 books of the Great Work of the Lord. These sacred volumes had been hastily saved from ruin when once invaders had tried to burn the Gompa in which they were lying. Now, the texts are all mixed up and seem to need a great scholar to re-edit them. A big heap of hand-written leaves lay jumbled in a corner. I made the Tabo Lama pick up one and read it out. He read the text and explained the meaning to Dharampal who, in turn, explained it to me in Hindi. It related to the common religious theme : the mortality of the flesh and the immortality of the soul, the permanence of the beauty of the mind as distinguished from the transient attractions of exterior form.

This Gompa is neat and clean and very well-maintained. Samtan Dorje seems to take a keen interest in the upkeep of the monastery. Of course, he looked to me to convey to the Government his desire for a subsidy. It was an afternoon well spent in the midst of the beautiful relics of our ancient heritage.

As I stirred out of the precincts of the Gompa for an evening stroll, with a cold wind blowing, I saw G.C. coming up from the Lari side. We clung to each other in close embrace. His parties were due to arrive the next morning, he told me. We sat till late in the night playing cards, gossipping and smoking till sweet Morpheus lulled us to rest.

IX

THE DEVIL DANCE AND AFTER

HEAD LAMA Samtan Dorje had arranged a Lama Dance for June 22. It was called the Devil Dance, a name given to it by sophisticated outsiders. Fond of such folk performances, I was delighted at the opportunity to see this performance.

By 11.30 a.m. all the parties that had camped a few miles below Tabo the evening before had arrived. The Lamas of the Gompa, young and old, were busy making preparations for the dance. They set up their orchestra—drums, timbrels, bells, pipes and *narsimhas*, in the small verandah facing the courtyard, where the performance was to take place.

With the beat of drums, the ringing of the timbrels and the shrill bass of the *narsimhas* filling the air, the show began exactly at 1 p.m., the scheduled hour. There was a flourish of small drums and there now entered four masked Lamas moving in slow rhythm. The Head Lama, seated in the middle of the 'tuneful choir', provided music with the timbrels. When these four left the arena, four others came in. They wore strange-looking, horned masks and put in only a little more of movement in their steps than those of the first batch. When one batch left another took its place in the dancing ring, and thus, at intervals, dancers entered the ring and left. All the time the music was the same, the rhythm dull and without variety, and the dust they raised choked us in Tabo's rarefied atmosphere. The dancers themselves were sweating profusely in their thick masks and multi-coloured dance costumes. Apart from the local folk, men and women, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying this drab performance, the happiest were our cameramen and amateur photographers of whom we had a considerable number. For them the weather was 'fine', for the light was as 'wonderful' as they required for taking good pictures !

To afford a little rest and relief to the Lama dancers, a brief interval was allowed. This interval, however, was seized upon by the women to give two dance performances. They

sang as they danced in a circle with very rhythmic steps, hand in hand, and heads joined as they bent right or left. Alas! there was no orchestral accompaniment for their dance, and they sang as they performed the simple steps. Their leader, a very sweet-voiced old woman, exhibited an enthusiasm beyond her years and a liveliness of spirit that seemed to defy the furrows of Time on her brow. We had had, earlier in the day, a brief performance, of course informally, from a few of the girls led by this very Lady. Reverting from age to youth, I must mention another important member of this troupe. She was a very beautiful young maiden. Fair, red-cheeked, broad-featured and graceful, with a fuzzy fur cap on her head, she again and again reminded me of the portrait of an Uzbek danseuse.

The interval over, the Lama dance re-commenced with a larger cast and with a little more gusto than before. It was now a jumble of eerie-looking horned masqueraders, representing djinns, devils and good spirits. In the centre of the ring stood one representing the High Priest and the rest of the team was led by the Head Lama (who also wore a mask). They danced till 4.30 p.m. to the accompaniment of music from the orchestra in the verandah, and by then the wearied spectators, having lost all interest in the performance, had gradually trickled away. However, a few of us—lest the Lamas should consider the 'Sahibs' bad mannered—had stuck to our places in polite patience. I asked Dharampal to explain to me the gist of the entire performance, for I believed in all sincerity that its monotony apart, it was meant to convey something of the customs or beliefs of the Spitians to the onlookers. I was right; it represented the struggle of the common people against a tyrant king. The four dancers that had entered first represented four Brahmins (possibly the four Vedas as repositories of learning), or the intelligentsia who, more conscious than others of the whims of a tyrant King, determined to set him right. In the true tradition of Kautilya, that subtlest of Brahmin brains known to history, a conspiracy was planned and executed. The tyrant was killed and the populace rescued, thus bringing home to all refractory monarchs the lesson of the power of *vox populi*, and the law of the victory of Good over Evil.

Out of the four walls of the holy monastery for a breath of the cool evening breeze, I looked up at the high bare brown flanks of the Tabo Hills in front of me. But what were those white things moving in curves up yonder? They were the famous Nabus, winding their way up the tall ridges to their snow homes for the night. These graceful animals abound on the ridges between Tabo and Dangkhar and a good shikari never misses the opportunity of bagging one. They have speed and sprightliness and this enables them to go racing even over steep perpendicular ridges. I looked at the white specks of the Nabu herd for a long time till they were out of sight. My stay at Tabo had come to a close with the safe arrival of the rest of the personnel. Kuling (in the Pin Valley) was my destination now.

So on to Kuling tomorrow, lock, stock and barrel!

We made a late start in the morning because of a disconcerting discovery made the evening before. Our muleteers, out of sight during the two days' journey through Tibetan territory, had made good use of the opportunity to cheat us of about twelve seers of sugar and another costly item from our rations. Once or twice before I had received complaints of this nature and so I had been watching them. I was now convinced of their dishonesty, having had clear evidence of their trickery. Apart from our limited sugar supplies, it was the nature of the second item which they had stolen that made the discovery possible. Out of the 140 pieces that we had left in their charge only about 50 were now left in the tins. The mules could not have opened the lids and made short work of the hundred-odd sweet *pinnies*. G.C. being on the spot, I reported the matter to him. The muleteers denied it at first but eventually confessed and were ordered to pay the cost of twelve seers of sugar at Rs. 3.00 per seer. Another piece of evidence had shown that they had sold fifteen seers of sugar at Rs. 3.00 per seer the day before. As for the other item, I let them off with only a warning. Incidentally, these dishonest muleteers were from my own district in the Punjab and I was all the more ashamed of them.

We had hardly walked about two miles when, coming from the opposite direction and with his horse led by an orderly, an impressive middle-aged man dressed in the long cloak of

the Spitians met me. He greeted me with joined hands and an impressive *Jai Hind.* He was none other than the Tashi Nono (or the Deputy Nono). Nono Chhwang Topge is the old titular chief of Spiti and administers the land for the Government with powers of a third-class magistrate vested in him. He is assisted by the Tashi Nano and a Reader. The Nono knows no other language but his local Bhoti, but I found the Tashi Nono quite well-versed in Hindustani too.

The Spiti River, which had kept a little distance away from us for these two odd miles, now meandered right alongside our track. In fact, we were now walking over a dry portion of its bed and quite along the current itself, and we could feel the spray of the river. Now we began wading through its waters on the submerged track as we kept a close hold on the perpendicular hill-side on our right. After some knee-deep wading, we had to cross what by no stretch of imagination could be called a bridge. It was a shabby, wooden contraption stuck precariously along a side of the eroded abutment of the hill at an angle of 75 degrees while the turbid torrent of the Spiti boomed beneath. There could not be the remotest possibility of our mules, even unloaded, negotiating this point which, at its top, ended in a sharp narrow bend to the right. The situation seemed pretty disconcerting. After much deliberation, it was decided to divert our mules to another small track over the hill, which, of course, meant a detour of an additional two miles for them.

After a few yards, the track opened out as we entered the small valley which housed the village of Po. The day had declined and already a strong, cold wind had set in. Resting under the protection of a big boulder, we whiled away the time by playing cards. We had expected our goods train to catch up with us in an hour or two, but when no sign of the mules or muleteers had been seen till 5 p.m., I collected labour from the village and despatched them with my own men to help the goods train out of the difficulties which I felt sure had arisen. The sun had gone down behind the hills and darkness had come when I heard the noise of men's voices and mules' bells. Still, it took them a little time to reach the village for, as the last part of their ordeal, they had to cross two intervening *khuls* which had become flooded. Hill torr-

ents in Spiti are comparatively safe for fording early in the morning; their watery might multiplies as the snows melt with the advancing day. All was well with our brave quadrupeds, thank God! Although the muleteers had a difficult time, the helpers I had sent had come in handy at a particularly difficult moment.

In the extremely cold and strong wind that blew with a vengeance, we pitched our tents and lighted the hearth fire.

Po to Shichling, next morning, was a comparatively easy march without any problems. The valley widens out for the first few miles after Po and the track runs fairly wide. The tall hills recede a little on either side and the majestic Spiti flows in all the grandeur of its level expanse here. Then there is a straight climb over to a ridge to the right and the track once again winds along the hill slopes, but there are steep ascents and descents to make. We reached a small plateau with a lonely hut, a few green fields and a very charming spring. A small circular pond with its crystal-clear waters completed the picture. The whole scene with the panoramic snow peaks to the south appeared to be the work of a master painter. We sat near the tiny spring and the pond and drank in with greedy eyes the exquisiteness of the landscape. At the foot of the southern hills, and in the midst of an abundant growth of poplars and a little up the right bank of the Spiti, was the big village of Mane. In that village lives the Tashi Nono.

Walking at a very easy pace, in the company of Rana, Prem and Sub-Inspector Mange Ram, I was at the caravan's tail end, and this tail had stopped a little and ceased its wagging. Resuming our circuitous march, we presently found ourselves on the ridge above Shichling. We were delighted to see from there the camp already set up down below in the Spiti bed amid patches of green pasture land. Descending gradually to the river-bed by a narrow serpentine track, we were soon a part of the hum and gaiety of the camp. Tents had been pitched, kitchens and hearths improvised and hot tea was ready. The muleteers had let loose their Dalipos and Santis to graze. The golden red of the declining sun cast its hues over the high snow ranges all around us as little clouds of smoke from our wind-swept hearths mingled with the cold

evening air. Looking to the northeast I had my first view of the well-known Dangkhar Fort, (12760 feet) perched like a series of ant-hills on the high ridges above the main track. The wind that had raged furiously since midday relented by about 8 p.m. and it became quite still during the night.

X

PIN VALLEY

AT A height of 12,000 feet above sea level, with the Spiti River only a few yards away and a world of snows and glaciers above and around us, we woke to a very cold morning on June 25. The four parties that had marched together from Tabo were to part company today, each taking to the track for its respective station. Mine was bound for Kuling, a place far removed from the main track and in the interior of the Pin Valley.

Trudging through the river-bed for some distance we had again, at places, to wade through small by-currents of the main river, though this presented little difficulty. On the way we were accosted by a handsome Hessi woman of twenty asking if we would like to buy milk. Her family was camping near by. We jumped at the idea and enjoyed the luxury of mugfuls of hot sweet goats' milk which the woman boiled in our presence. She was an attractive woman with bewitching eyes, and she spoke fluent Hindustani.

The Hessi tribesmen of Spiti are traditional dancers and musicians. Local tradition speaks of two Princes of Ladakh (Kashmir) who, fed up with the guiles and machinations of their stepmother, left home in search of an honourable living. Having cultivated the arts of dancing and singing, they took to them as a profession, and the profession came to stay among their descendants as the only means of earning their bread. Thus came into being this tribe of wandering minstrels, the Hessis of Spiti.

Soon we reached a point where the dark, muddy waters of the Linguti River poured themselves into the dusty grey of the Spiti. The Linguti River has its source in a nearby 22,000-foot peak in the north-east. The crossing over the Linguti was provided by a precarious beam bridge without side-railings or proper foot-planks. As a forethought I had already hired porters for the better part of the track to the Pin Valley. They proved very helpful at this juncture. The mules were

unloaded and the porters carried the luggage across the Linguti bridge to safety. Re-loading the mules, we were again on the march and after a four mile trek reached the Atargu Bridge. It is a beautiful suspension bridge that spans the turbulent Spiti, and stands as a monument to British engineering, providing the one safe crossing over this main river of the valley. Here was our parting of the ways with the rest of our friends.

Once across the Atargu Bridge and you are *en route* to the Pin Valley. For the second time in a day our mules stood obstinate and intransigent, unwilling to go over even the suspension bridge. Once again they were unloaded; once again the porters carried the loads not only across the bridge but further off to a point of comparative safety, for the track immediately beyond the bridge was rather dangerous and narrow. It was only after a lot of coaxing on the part of their equally obstinate masters that the mules crossed the Atargu Bridge.

We were now on the right bank of the Spiti and had started a sort of a counter-march to reach the entrance to the Pin Valley. The track was only a foot wide at places and on the eroded remnants of hillsides along the river. Often we had to call halt to our caravan, and go ahead and use pick-axe and shovel to widen the track or make it safe for our mules. We were in constant dread of one or the other load toppling into the swift river which flowed on our left. After four miles of this tense ordeal we reached Pindoh, the mouth of the Pin Valley. It was a little further up, opposite to where the Linguti and the Spiti meet. Here at Pindoh it was another important tributary, the Pin River, which merged its emerald, foam-flecked floods into the Spiti as it rushed out of its narrow gorge to our right.

It was already 3 p.m. and the wind which had started blowing at about 11 o'clock in the morning had now become quite sharp; we felt it all the more as we were at the moment camping at the mouth of the Pin gorge opening into the vast expanse of the Spiti bed on all sides. To reach Kuling the same evening was out of the question. It was still eight miles away. However, I went about two furlongs ahead to examine the track. The results of my investigation were as disappointing

as before. The track was narrow and broken over bare hard rocks and then became very thin and brittle on the edge of the Pin current. It appeared beyond the skill of our mules to cope with this narrow entrance to the famous Pin Valley. So we decided that we should camp at Pindoh for the night and dispense with the mules till our return from Kuling after July 2. The entrance to the Pin Valley had flashed a 'no admission' warning to our goods train.

We pitched our tent in the teeth of a strong wind. We could only keep our canopy intact by tying its ropes to boulders, for pegs were of no avail. We fortified the insides with as many packages as possible to prevent dust and sand from blowing in. By about 9 p.m. the fury of the wind died down. Giving instructions to my men about the next day's programme, I retired to sleep in my tent.

I had deputed Patwari Gomat Ram, Rana and one of the Police boys to get up early while the stars were still visible, reach Kuling by sunrise and send porters from there. I woke them at 3.45 a.m. for their errand, and then dozed off once more in that sweetest hour of the morning. I got up again at 6 o'clock to find them still chattering in the kitchen. It was too bad; they had failed to take advantage of an early rise and, consequently, they would not be able to reach Kuling in time for the porters to be collected. For, in these villages, you cannot just put in a requisition for porters and get them in a trice. Most of them leave for distant hill-tops or pasture lands with herds of yaks and goats early in the morning and you cannot contact them except in the evening or in the small hours of the morning. Without a reminder from me, however, my friends were now seen leaving the camp as, peeping through a chink in our tent, we saw them enter the narrow mouth of the Pin gorge. Left behind were Kaushal, Kaul, my orderly, and myself.

The first batch of porters reported to me at 9 a.m. Fortunately our men had come across this group on the way and despatched them here. Things looked encouraging now. We loaded the five yaks that formed a part of this contingent and put them on the track to the Pin Valley. Achhar, the orderly, accompanied them. The second batch arrived two hours later. Leaving some unessential stores in the charge of

our muleteers (who were to stay behind at Pindoh for about a week till our return from the Pin Valley), we loaded the rest of our effects on this second batch of porters and, in their company, set off for Kuling. However, five packages of essential commodities were still left over for lack of porters. I instructed the muleteers to dispatch them after us with another batch of porters, whom we would be sending down soon.

We walked at an easy pace and were all along greeted by groups of labourers who were trying to do their best to repair and improve the track, because, in accordance with a letter from the Nono Shaib, a 'big Sahib' was coming that way in a day or so. 'Big Sahib' or no, the Nono's word was their command. They seemed to me a very happy lot, their faces beaming with unsullied, tribal mirth. I was also delighted at their mode of greeting us which was the usual joining of hands with a *namaste* or *Ram, Ram* and, occasionally, even a *Jai Hind.* Whereas the first two greetings made me conscious of their inalienable ties with India's past, the last one assured me that the present had not left them unmoved and that they were conversant with India's official mode of greeting in spite of their remoteness.

At one place, a labour gang was enjoying its well-deserved rest over a cup of tea. Here we halted for a brief while and were immediately disturbed by the innocent tears of a little girl, also a member of this gang. The elders in the crowd were quick to let us know the reason for the little one's tears. It is a custom with the Spitians that each carries his own drinking bowl in his long cloak ; no one uses another's vessel for drinking. The little girl, unfortunately, had forgotten her own cup at home and now, for lack of it, was unable to have her share of refreshing tea. No amount of coaxing on the part of her friends or elders would convince her of the harmlessness of using somebody else's cup in an emergency. Needless to say, the little girl did not have her tea and left the company of her friends all alone for the long trek home.

The entrance to the Pin Valley was very narrow at the mouth over hard rocky precipices bordering the Pin current. The prospect widened out a little after about a mile and a half into a scene of rare splendour. We could see thousands

of feet high snow-covered ridges on either side, with massed glaciers stretching right from the tops down to the river-bed, where their subterranean waters poured themselves into the Pin. We were walking over the river-bed with this scene of a wild, enchanting and awful grandeur to the right, the left, and above us. I had heard of the beauties of the Pin Valley and to be in their midst now was wonderful.

Three miles from Kuling we halted for a while ; it was afternoon, and Kaushal's magnum flask yielded refreshing hot tea to our mugs.

Like a shy maiden, unyielding at first but later surrendering to the demands of emotion, the Pin Valley now laid bare before our gaze the beauty of her majestic, snow-clad peaks, 'a kingdom for the glory of a God'. Bathed in the mellow splendour of an afternoon sun, the scene was one of unearthly grandeur, wherein the emerald-watered Pin flowed serpentine like nature's own necklace round the virgin valley, and the virgin stood serene and pure in all her silver wealth.

As we turned a bend to the right, we saw at the far end of the track a semi-circular level stretch of green jutting out like a heel from the leg of the main ridge. That was the spur that housed the village of Kuling, our destination. We passed by two other small villages on our way, Schilling and Chhiding. The village of Tangdi could be seen nestling on the opposite bank of the river to our left. Descending to the river-bed once again and walking about a furlong we climbed up to Kuling as the evening sun lingered on the western hills, as if eyeing curiously this cavalcade of strangers from the civilized world entering the forbidden precincts of this sequestered Spiti hamlet. The scene somehow reminded me of Tennyson's immortal lines in the *Lotus Eaters* :

In the afternoon they came unto a land
In which it seemed always afternoon. . . .
The charmed sunset linger'd low adown
In the red west ; through mountain clefts the dale
Was seen far inland.

The scene was alluring, the evening superb. We were welcomed by a group of headmen of the valley and the members

of our own advance party, the latter having arrived earlier in the day.

Arrangements for our lodgings had been made in the house of Nono's brother-in-law who, incidentally, belongs to this village. A large room with a kitchen had been put at our disposal. It did not take us long to make ourselves comfortable in that low-roofed, *kacha* house of the Nono.

As night came we repaired to the warmth of our quilts and blankets with the satisfaction of having reached our destination safe and sound exactly a month after our departure from our headquarters at Dharamsala. A mood of extreme humbleness in gratitude to Providence overtook me as I lay in my bed on the floor of my spacious room. My tongue lacked words to thank my God, and I do not remember how long I lay in that mood of mute prayerfulness till all-embalming sleep overpowered me and gathered me to her sweet blisses.

XI

THE WEEK AT KULING

THE WHOLE of Spiti is divided, for administrative purposes, into five parts or *Kothies* as they are called.
These are :

Kothi Totpa (the upper region)
Kothi Burji (the middle region)
Kothi Sham (the lower region)
Kothi Pin (the southern region)
Kothi Chhoji (the region for religious endowments or *Dharmarth*)

The Kothies of Totpa, Burji, Sham and Pin, pay land revenue to the provincial Government, but a big part of the revenues from Chhoji goes, in the form of produce, to various Gompas or monasteries for the maintenance of Lamas. Kuling is the chief village of the Pin Valley. At a height of more than 12,500 feet above sea level, it is situated on a small plateau over the left bank of the Pin River. A score or so of mud-built houses on an eminence make up the entire village at the foot of which spread fields in a half-circle of broad terraces bordering the river-bed. A few shady poplars grow here and there in small clusters outside the village. Barley, peas, and mustard are the only crops grown. Lofty snow-covered slopes look Kuling in the face and peer over it from all directions. You are even startled, sometimes, to hear the dreadful noise of an avalanche hurtling down the mighty slopes nearby. During my one week's stay there I noticed two avalanches on the glaciers above the opposite bank of the Pin River.

The first day of our halt at Kuling was bright and sunny and all of us had a nice warm bath, our first since Tabo. I thought of the rules of cleanliness (which, it is said, is next only to godliness) in relation to our present state. You have only to experience it to understand how much of dirt a constant trek like this in such an awfully cold country even in mid-

summer can heap on your physical frame. Wide-eyed I looked at my cotton vest now turned almost into a water proof canvas stuff. We were in a grand mood of relaxation and so spent most of the time lying snugly under our quilts. Sunder, one of my Police boys, proved to be an excellent cook and I must admit that breakfast, lunch and dinner were an enjoyable affair under his *bandobast*. We got a plentiful supply of curds and fresh milk (yak's milk) too. In this way our short stay at Kuling became almost a picnic.

The next day was cloudy with a light drizzle. A cold wind blew. Once again, our quilts and cards were the answer. On 29 June we strolled up and down the river-bed for a long time, whiling away our time. Our battery radio set, as usual, attracted all the villagers, making our camp the centre of everybody's interest. Thus our *thoolu* (for that was the name with which the locals had christened our radio set) served two purposes. On the one hand it put us in touch with the rest of the world for daily news and musical snatches ; on the other it brought the Spitians closer to us. Generally recalcitrant in the beginning, it would work well when properly tuned, and, incidentally, the only one whose magic hand could do this was its owner, Kaul. Curious Spitians would gape with bewilderment at the 'singing machine' and some would try to peep into its inside to spot the mysterious orchestra that lay hidden there.

We had promised the headman of Kungri village that we would pay a visit to the famous Pin Gompa in his village. Lunch over, we started on our two-mile walk to Kungri at about 12.15 p.m. *Kungri* (or Gang-ri) in Tibetan, means 'snow mountain'. How appropriate this name is for the little village which lay at the foot of lofty snow mountains ! The headman came half-way to receive us, and conducted us to the Gompa, which stands on the left bank of the Pin River and a little removed from the village itself. This monastery is one of the best in Spiti. In fact there are two Gompas here, an old and a new one. The Head Lama, I heard, was a man of outstanding ability and scholarship. We could not meet him for he was away. There were, however, quite a few young Lamas in the courtyard of the Gompa. They did not understand our language. My intense longing to have a heart-to-heart talk

with them could not be fulfilled, for want of a common tongue. They appeared to me like mute phantoms from a bygone age, the age of Buddhist glory, of Asoka and Tissa and Sanghamitra. The solitary exception in this bank of tongue tied ascetics was a saffron-robed, tallish Lama who could speak a little, just a little, Hindustani. Very eagerly he took us round the Gompa and, with some pride, told us of the part he had played in the upkeep of the monastery. He had constructed two retaining walls and planted a few poplars in an effort to check river erosion at the bank of the Gompa. The green young trees stood emblematic of that young Lama's hopes, as it were. I congratulated the man and asked him to continue planting trees.

The old monastery is entered by the usual narrow door leading through a dark, low passage, to the central hall or shrine. As in other Gompas, there was here too a profusion of wall paintings and clay images. Manuscripts lay stacked in wooden racks on all sides of the shrine. In a side-room was a large and beautiful ten-foot-high prayer wheel with its new copper sparkling in the dim light of skylight ventilation.

Adjacent to the old monastery was the new Gompa. It contained a central image, that of Tandupa (the Great Lord) or the Buddha, studded with precious stones and plaited with gold. The central image and the shrine were encased in attractive glass brought all the way from Simla. The frescoes on the walls were fresh and they were of the patterns I had now become familiar with. But there was one particular portrait which, though a common feature in all the picture galleries I had visited, had always escaped my comprehension. The Kungri Gompa had it too, and here I learnt that it was that of Demchhog and Dorje Phangmo clinging to each other in close embrace. Demchhog (or Demchhok) is the presiding diety of Kailas and, for that reason, is identical with Lord Shiva (whose abode is Kailas). Just as Shiva or Shankara represent supreme bliss so is the Tibetan's Demchhog the repository of all bliss. His divine consort or *yum* is the goddess Parvati or Tara or Shakti of Hindu mythology. Like the perfectly ideal union of Shiva and Shakti, symbolizing the unity of *Purush* and *Prakriti*, the portrait of Demchhog and Dorje Phangmo in eternal embrace represents the oneness of the male and the female primal powers.

The headman of Kungri insisted on our paying a visit, howsoever brief, to his house. So to the headman's house we went, the headman proudly leading the way. He entertained us with tea, not his own salted variety but the usual sweet tea to which we were used. I would have liked the salted one in the custom of the local people. We returned to our camp at about 4 p.m.

The first of July was entirely taken up with preparations for the next day, the day of all days, July 2, the 'reason why' of our trip to this land of the Lamas, for that was the day of the poll and we were on election duty! Voters started pouring in from the early hours of the morning; in fact many from far off places had arrived the night before. Like pilgrims bound by a sense of dutiful devotion, they had reached their place of pilgrimage well in time to be part of the ritual the next morning, that of initiating Spiti into democracy. What impressed me most about these folks was their spirit of joy on the day of the poll. As soon as they had cast their votes, they gathered outside the polling station and started a group dance. At first it was the men only and then the ladies, too, joined the band. The ladies' troupe was led by a tall middle-aged Lama. I could just make out the main burden of the melody to which they timed their steps; it was the slow, lingering and soothing strain of *Om Mane padme hum*, repeated over and over again. Evidently a religious dance, I concluded. A little *chhang-rin* (*bakhshish*, which probably they expected) encouraged them and so they danced and danced. For most of them it had been a day of relief from the daily routine of a humdrum life, a new experience, an occasion to see un-Spitian outsiders; for many others it had been a fun-fair meet, a gala day. Whatever it was, these unsophisticated folks appeared very happy and satisfied with the part they had played by exercising their right of franchise as free citizens of a young democracy. I must also record the fact that an average Spiti voter, even in this first experiment of democracy in that backward region, impressed me as more intelligent than an average voter of some of the more enlightened areas.

Our week-long halt at Kuling was now coming to a close. It must not, however, be imagined that we had simply been vegetating for these seven-odd days in our snug blankets and

quilts. In addition to our normal duties, we had not forgotten some elementary humanitarian deeds. For example, we almost exhausted our medical bag (which was quite full) by distributing medicines to the needy. Most people complained about the lack of medical facilities and I promised to convey their grievance to the Government. I found eye diseases very common there. It was probably due to the snow these people lived in. The headman of the Pin Valley brought his younger brother, who had dislocated his shoulder after a fall from his horse. I sent him to our Medical Officer, camping at Dangkhar, sixteen miles away on the main road. He was attended to, I am sure, with care and courtesy.

Generally speaking, the Spitians are sturdy, hale and hearty. Their physique is excellent in spite of the scanty food. Diseases so common in our civilized part of the world are unknown there. There is no hospital or health centre in the whole of Spiti just as there are no bazaars or shops. Local *vaids* or physicians are few, though I did meet two in the village of Kungri. In all emergencies, the people have to rely on the mystic cures of tantric Lamas. During leisure hours I mixed with the people, trying to talk to them about our Government and all that it was doing and proposed to do for their uplift, impressing on them the need for educating their children. One of the headmen brought before me his recalcitrant young son who had consistently refused to go to school. I tried to persuade the lad as he looked on in bewilderment. 'Look here', I said (as the boy was curiously eyeing my felt cap), 'you will become a sahib too and get a cap like this to put on your head if you read and go to school.' The boy smiled and his intransigence gave way, I think, then and there.

We relaxed completely on 3 July and quite believed that our rest was well-earned. The muleteers had been asked to report at Kuling on the 3rd, a good deal of the track, in the meantime having been repaired and rendered mule-worthy by the efforts of neighbouring villagers. For the one or two problem points still left over we engaged half a dozen porters to help carry loads at those spots. Our mules arrived in the afternoon. We were in our room when we heard the tinkling bells outside. We rushed out in a body to welcome, as it were, old friends.

Our election mission was over. Now we were to start on our return journey to our sweet homes in Kangra. Our return journey did not mean going over the already-trodden ground of our inward march to Spiti, but meant trekking over the second half of the complete circuit from Mandi-Simla-Rampur to Spiti via Kaza-Kunzum-Rohtang and Manali, to Mandi. That was our stipulated route ; that is, our inward march to Spiti and outward march from Spiti consisted of the two halves of a complete circle. We could, therefore, hope for further adventure and fun during the two weeks of trekking that still lay ahead of us.

The Spitian and his prayer wheel
Photo : Prem Sharma

The wireless team in action

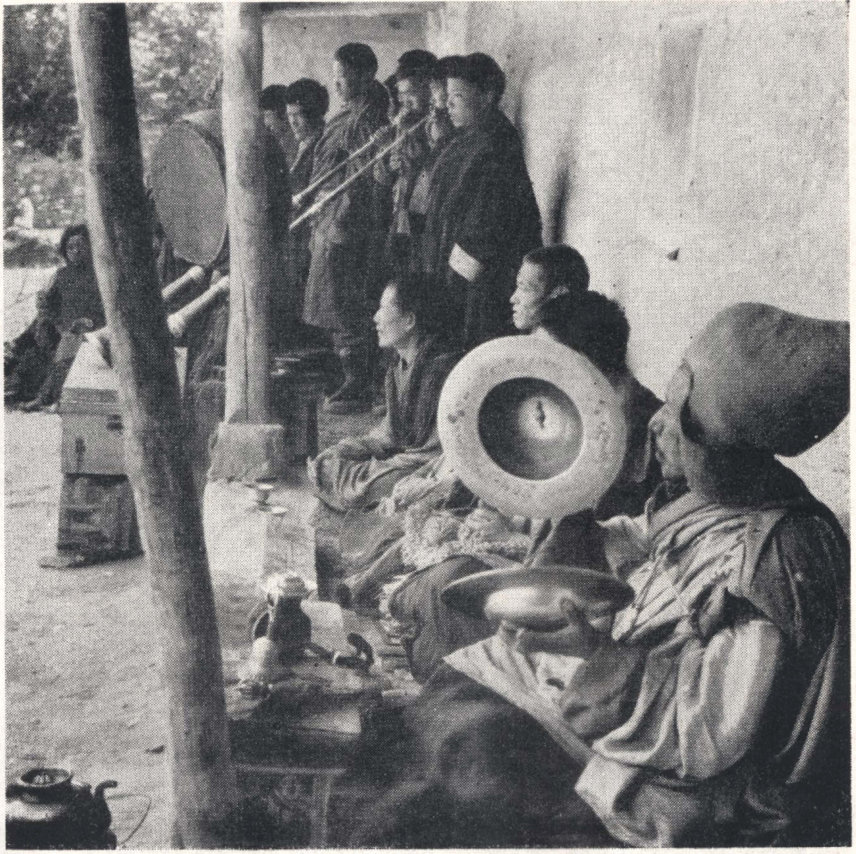
Photo : S. K. Kaul

The nervous plank bridge over the Spiti at Shalkhar

Photo : Parmananda Sharma

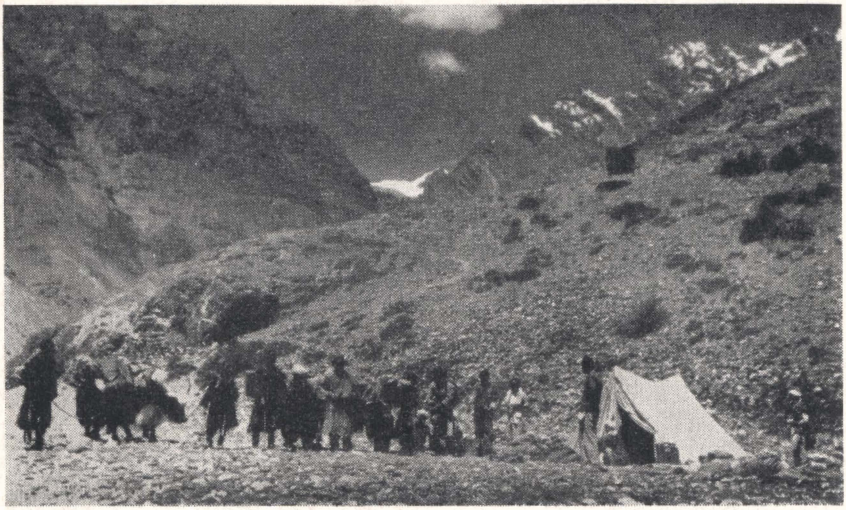
The author on the rope-bridge at Sumra

Photo : U. S. Rana



Orchestra for the Devil Dance. Head Lama of Tabo Gompa is in the right foreground
Photo : Prem Sharma

Group dance by Spiti women at Tabo Gompa
Photo : Prem Sharma



Pindoh, the narrow entrance to the Pin Gorge

Photo : Parmananda Sharma

Voters at Kuling (Pin Valley)

Photo : U. S. Rana

Kibar, the highest village

Photo : Prem Sharma

Right :
Spiti children enjoying the Thullo
Photo : Prem Sharma

Below:
To Rohtang from Gramphu
Photo : Prem Sharma

Photo :
Dogra Studio
Dharamsala

Personnel of Spiti parties photographed with Deputy Commissioner, Kangra, (sitting, centre chair)
On ground : J. Singh ; S. P. Sharda (movie cameraman)
On chairs, l. to r. : Jasbir Singh, Satpal Singh, author, N. Khosla (D.C.) G. C. Sharma (leader), K. S. Pathania, Bishan Dass Asi
Standing, 1st row : R. P. Khosla, Dharam Chand, Shiv Kumar, Ram Sondhi, U. S. Rana, J. Kaûshal, S. Kaul, Prem Sharma, Bidhi Chand, Jaidev
Standing, 2nd row : Hari, Walaite Ram, Harcharan, J. B. Lal, Ramesh Chander (wireless opr.), Daulat Ram (Head wireless opr.) Madan Lal, Milap Chand

XII

THE HIGHEST VILLAGE

JULY 4, American Independence Day ! And the day for us to march back. We bade farewell to Kuling and its warm-hearted people at 7.30 a.m. All the headmen of Pin Valley and a large number of villagers were present to see our caravan move off. The morning was bright, and brightly did the aged glaciers glitter on the tall mountain slopes. A week's friendship with them had meant a lot to me. I felt a pang when I cast a last lingering look on them, those mute witnesses of the Infinite. For ever and ever would they stand there with their crown of eternal snow and stare in ageless vigil over the beautiful Pin Valley.

Everything had gone according to plan and we walked on merrily at the head of our caravan of mules till we reached Pindoh with its granite ledges that formed the narrow entrance already referred to in this narrative. Earlier, our laden mules had not crossed this dangerous point. Now, in a sheer mood of hilarious derring-do, we decided not to unload the mules but to perform the miracle of putting them across as they were. The miracle did take place ; the mules crossed without mishap, thanks to the skill of the muleteers, the tenacity of the animals and our own good luck. But how quick and fast our hearts beat all the while during the entire process, as the swirling Pin flowed five feet below us to our right !

Between Pindoh and Atargu, too, we had a few anxious moments, for the track which edged on the Spiti was precariously thin and the rise in the river level (since we last met it) had caused fresh erosion obliterating the track completely at several points. It was 1 p.m. when we crossed the Atargu bridge. An indication of the fact that other parties had already gone ahead a little earlier was provided by their message written in chalk on the stone-slabs of the bridge tower. We were all happy to get this unexpected 'all's well' report about our friends. On the main track now, we were presently, bound for Lidung, a village only two miles ahead. Lidung was

soon reached after an easy, even an enjoyable walk. We were not very tired and so easily overcame the temptation to camp at that small green hamlet that was Lidung. We wanted to be as near Kaza as possible by evening so as to reach there early next morning and have a good day's halt before proceeding further. We passed through another beautiful village, Lara, on our way and, after two miles, came upon a good camping ground in the river bed. We decided to halt there for the night and the muleteers agreed as the site provided ample pasture land for their mules. It was already evening and we had covered fifteen miles from Kuling. Satpal Singh with his Dangkhar party was also camping there. Nearby was another tent, that of a Hessi family. They were a troupe of dancers, but alas! the chief artiste of the troupe, the reputed Dolma, was not there. Some of us had looked forward to the prospect of seeing her dance and had sped on from Lidung more on the strength of this hope than on our weary legs. Dolma's dance had been a special request by G.C., he having proceeded to Kaza a little earlier. However, a group of three others, did give a brief performance to extract some *bakhshish* from the campers.

As the sun went down behind the hills and the sounds of dance and drum ceased, our little camp looked forlorn. It was a cold night the stars twinkled brilliantly.

The cold was almost biting in the morning when, after hot mugs of tea, we resumed our march to Kaza. As we walked along the Spiti bed, the high hills to our right shut out the sunlight and warmth. It was with a feeling of envy that we looked on the opposite bank to our left and beyond, where the sunlight flooded the pastures and villages. At 8 a.m., when the village was still shaking off its slumbers, we were in Kaza, the capital of Spiti. Kaza is the seat of the titular chief's government, although the Nono himself resides in Kuling (Kaza), a nice little hamlet on the opposite bank of the Spiti River. It was a close fraternal embrace that locked me and G.C. together when we met. He was camping in the school building. Dolma, the Hessi dancer, was there too and she entertained us with a dance even before our Police Post personnel could entertain us with tea. Certainly, tea with *pakauras* was a treat. In an open space near the school we

pitched our tent, and set up our home, so to say.

At a height of more than 12,000 feet above sea level, Kaza is situated at the foot of a chain of steep ridges. With a population of about 250, it has a Government primary school with 24 scholars on its rolls. Kaza is known for its asbestos mine, a visit to which involves a stiff climb of a couple of miles. Unprofitable owing to lack of transport facilities, the mine has long since been abandoned.

Here at Kaza, I was met by Master Narbu Ram, one of the oldest school teachers in Spiti. A little over fifty, Narbu Ram is still hale and hearty and is a mine of information about local people and local culture. I had a very gay evening with him, in the company of Munshi Dharampal, Rana and Gomat Ram. Late at night while returning from Narbu Ram's place, we went into G.C.'s headquarters and partook of the fun and frolic and singing and dancing, thus shaking off the tedium of many long marches and preparing ourselves for the many more ahead.

Next morning we were all ready for the march when G.C.'s orderly came to inform us that his Sahib was not well and that he had been suffering from a severe stomach ache since last night. The cause was not difficult to discover: excess of *ara*. Our muleteers who were already loading the animals were ordered to stand 'as you were' and that indeed was a signal for 'no march' for all concerned. I was with G.C. for a long time. He became alright by midday and was at cards as usual in the afternoon.

Starting early from Kaza the next morning we could see the important village of Rangrik on the opposite bank of the Spiti River. A track branching off from the main one would lead you over a scanty, uneven bridge to the village which possesses the only middle school in Spiti. It has a population of about 300.

Two miles after Kaza we encountered the Shilla River. One of the important tributaries of the Spiti, it comes from the distant Shilla Peak (23,050 feet) to the north of Kaza. This was the first stream we were required to wade through. A well-known Sanskrit saying came to my mind: *Agre agre Brahaman striyah nadiyah vivarjitah*, (may the Brahmins lead except where women and streams are concerned). But

here were G.C. and I, both Brahmins, leading our men in this stream-crossing business. We took off our shoes, tucked our trousers up to our thighs and entered the icy flood. A sudden chill ran through our frames ; oh, how bitterly cold the waters were ! There were three channels to be crossed and the current in each was strong. The water was more than knee-deep. We were soon across but not without difficulty for at least some persons whom the very prospect of having to walk through the swirling currents had set a-tremble. The only casualty, however, was a walking stick which was washed away. It belonged to Prem, who had got nervous in the middle of the current, turned back in confusion and stumbled down, saving himself and his camera and paying with the stick. Thank God, it was only the stick and not the gentleman with the stick in his hand that became a part of the noisy waves. Dharmchand, carrying G.C.'s moneybag, just escaped the same fate. We waited for our goods train to arrive and resumed our march only when all the mules had been safely led across. The muleteers were really hard put to it.

Now the track was level for about two miles. We halted for an hour at Kye and had our lunch with mugfuls of *tara* (liquid curds) provided by the villagers. Kye is a small, beautiful village with a considerable area of cultivated land in front. The young barely crop in pure green waved its sheaves in terraced fields at the foot of the village in a semi-circular disc right down to the Spiti bed. The most important part of Kye is its ancient, famous monastery. The Kye Gompa is situated on a high hill above the village. It is a huge building with corridors and rooms rising from the lower reaches of the ridge to the uppermost in curves, giving the whole structure the appearance of a gigantic anthill. The monastery presents an inspiring view even from a distance when it suddenly meets your gaze after you have negotiated a bend on the road immediately before Kye. It is the seat of about 225 Lamas, being thus larger than any other Gompa in Spiti. Its library contains thousands of manuscripts in Bhoti.

Shortly after Kye we started the steep ascent to Kibar (or Khyi-par). The Spiti River parted company with us and our track now lay along the narrow but steep edge of the Kibar Nullah. The pattern of the hills and the circuitous

route above the nullah were reminiscent of the scenery along the deep Sutlej gorge near Namgiah. The steepness of the ascent brought back to my mind the not-too-easy climb to Treund for the Ilaqa Pass on the Dhauladhar range. It was a long, steep, eight-mile ascent that ended in a charming plateau. We were in sight of Kibar (13,400 feet), the highest village in Spiti Valley perched on a vast rocky stretch of land. The midday sun found us in the village. The grassy camping ground with a spring of clear waters facing the half-circle of village hutments was a tempting site. Even before our tents were up, we had switched on our *thuloo* in the open for the usual community listening programme. The local school-teacher was taking his class in the open air near by. The white-washed mud dwellings of Kibar shone placid and serene in the lingering light of the afternoon sun, and gently rustled the wind through the rich green harvest in the fields. The mules, their loads off their backs, were already winding their way to distant pastures. From Kibar a track branches off to Parangla (18,000 feet) for Tibet.

The wind blew hard with a sharp, benumbing nip in its fury. Chhetan Tandup, the schoolteacher, looked after us in many ways and brought us milk, curds and parched barley. Prem (whom I had now brought along with my group from Kaza) was not feeling well. He had been suffering from stomach ache for the last two days. Today it was very acute and he was awfully dispirited in consequence. The doctor's prescription had done little good. I was carrying an indigenous medicine, a sort of panacea for stomach ache. I gave Prem four pills in lukewarm water. It had its effect and soon he felt better. Another dose during the night and the ache was gone. Though a little gloomy still, he became fairly fit by morning and was able to ride the Munshi's horse to the next village.

The wind's fury had continued throughout the night and the morning dawned chilly and bitter. Over 13,000 feet above sea-level, even in early July, means bitter cold. An 11-mile stage was our destination today. It was a downward march from Kibar for about a mile and half till we found ourselves at the end of our descent, in a circumscribed, well-shaped ravine, a grey-coloured torrent of waters flowing peacefully

at its bottom. It looked like the bottom of a deep cup. The current was strong but not dangerous. Near the other end it was thigh-deep. This was the Parilungi stream which has its source in the well-known Parangla jot (18,000 feet). Some people took advantage of Dharampal's horse but not we. We took off our shoes and trousers and in our underwear waded through the current successfully. G.C. got on to the Munshi's horse and held its reins tight. Behind him sat Munshi Dharampal. Before descending into the water the animal shied ominously and hurled both its mounts down. Dharampal rose to his feet in a flash and caught burly Gian Chand in the safety of his tight arms, thus saving him from a sure headlong fall on to the rocks and into the nullah. He had exhibited rare presence of mind and his split-second initiative had saved us from a possible disaster. After a mile or so up along a smaller tributary of this nullah, we climbed to a mild spur and then stepped down to the Dumla village, lying in the open stretches of a narrow V-shaped valley. *Tara* (curds) was again procured and made a delightful lunch-time drink.

The respite at Dumla was, however, brief and the march soon resumed. Up the little knoll about Dumla there spread before us a scene of enchanting verdure as we entered a level grassy meadow. It stretched in front of us as far as the eye could see, parting the snow-covered slopes on either side for a distance of at least two miles. Its width varied from one to two furlongs. This place is called La Tarcha ; this is the Lagudarsi Pass. Traders from Western Tibet, Lahaul and Spiti gather here in the month of July and hold a big trade fair which, of course, had not come off this year owing to the unusual snowfall. La Tarcha was a real beauty spot and it is still one of my most beautiful memories. The scene of a score of black yaks grazing in the background of 21,000-foot high snow-crests was nothing if not romantic. For a long while I stood there, looking at that bewitching panorama, unearthly and rare. Could I but stand there for ages, mute but watching and brooding, and become a part of those hills, so quiet in their loftiness, so serene in their calm ?

As soon as we reached the end of that long and wonderful corridor, the gates closed ; the mountains converged and almost like a sudden change of scene on the screen when you are

watching a movie, the whole world before us had changed as by the touch of a magic wand. The Spiti River was again in sight and once again our track would run along its left bank. Nature's destructive hand had wrought the river-sides into exquisite specimens of structural art. Little shrines and temples, minarets, spirals, columns, colonnades, stood everywhere in the Spiti bed. Its water spread in hundreds of small channels and, from the eminence where we stood, it looked like the whole system of veins and arteries in the human body. The slopes of the hills were brown and placid-looking for a few furlongs and then changed into rough hard rock. They now appeared like nature's high fortresses, with their tier after tier of rock. Cataracts fell from the mountain tops, where snow was melting and was visible only on their level fringes like 'butter-lining on pastry', as young J.B. described it.

Before starting the ascent to Kioto we had to wade through the Lagudarsi stream as it came, noisily, from the north-east to join the Spiti. After some steep climbing we reached the level outskirts of Kioto (over 13,000 feet) a small village with a population of one hundred. At the foot of the big Kioto rocks in the midst of a confusion of gigantic boulders that lay all over, we set up our camp. The wind was already blowing cold but the good afternoon sun kept us warm. Back in the distance fluffy milk-white clouds rose above the snow-covered ranges, disintegrated, reformed and disappeared in the customary sport of the cloud-world over the blue Spiti skies.

XIII

TO KUNZUM PASS

GIAN SHARMA and I got up early under the light of the stars and started for Losar a little before 5 a.m. as our parties were to move out of Kioto a little later. It was a bitterly cold morning and the sky was cloudy. The clouds did not augur well for a day which promised to be difficult for another reason : we were to cross the Spiti River without the aid of the Atargu Bridge. Apprehensive but not dispirited would describe the state of our minds on the quiet, cold morning when we started for Losar.

Hardly a mile beyond Kioto we had to take off our shoes, tuck up our trousers and cross the knee-deep Tansmu stream which, even at that early sunless hour of the morning, was strong and young. The shivers that the freezing water gave us can be imagined. Through it, and we hit upon a level track for about two miles up to the village of Hanse. It was calm, so calm that I could say with Wordsworth : *Dear God, the very houses seem asleep* !

The only person who met us as we hurriedly brushed past the little huts was Patwari Sukh Sagar (a member of Jasbir Singh's party). He greeted us with a *Jai Hind* ! We had met after many days. Earlier, when his party used to be a part of my group he used to be one of its gayest members. Whenever he would enter my tent his usual greeting would be : *'Sab Sahiban ko Jai Hind'* (*Jai Hind* everybody). I had advised him to simplify his labours by shouting, *'Sab Sahiban ko ek hafte ke liay Jai Hind'* (*Jai Hind* everybody for a week). In fact, his likeable *Jai Hind* had now been heard after two weeks. At a height of more than 13,000 feet above sea-level, 16,000 feet high snow-capped peaks peer over the little village of Hanse. It has a Buddhist temple, reputed to be one of the oldest in Spiti.

After a two-hour march we came upon a thin, unused track which led to the *jhoola* or rope-bridge over the Spiti. The method of river-crossing had engaged our serious attention

on the evening before, and G.C. and I had discussed till late at night as to the safest method to tackle the Spiti. We had been met at Kioto by the *dak* runner who had come across the Rohtang and the Kunzam from Kulu-Manali for the first time in six months and was now bound for Kaza. He acquainted us with the comparative merits of the only two alternatives before us: cross over the *jhoola*, or through the current. This latter was possible at a point two miles from the *jhoola* and that, in fact, was also the crossing place for our mules. Here the Spiti is joined by the Shiti and the Kabzi *nullahs*, and it spreads over a vast bed dividing its torrent into smaller channels which, with a little courage and caution, are not difficult to manage. Gian and I decided to put our trust in the slightly safer hands of the rope bridge rather than in the swirling currents which looked treacherous. We wrote a message on a rock with chalk, put a long and prominent arrow-mark indicating the direction of our route to the *jhoola*, and ourselves descended to where the river was spanned by the swing. We would try it and, if found not too difficult, guide others to cross here. We sat down on a ledge about the *jhoola* for a smoke and surveyed the prospect in front of us. Dear God, what kind of a rope-bridge was this! And the rope, where was it? The whole contraption had been made out of long twines of juniper bush twisted to form ropes. A six-inch-thick rope ran the whole span of the river from end to end. A little higher, on either side, ran two parallel ropes which were connected with the base-rope by strings made of the same stuff.

Our pleasant puffs over, we resigned ourselves to the mercy of the *jhoola*, Gian in front and I following. As we held tight to the side ropes and proceeded inch by inch on the narrow base-rope, the whole mechanism swung under our weight and the Spiti boomed underneath. My heart was beating to the tune of '*Om Mane Padme Humhri*'. Once across we sat down to a pleasanter smoke now that the ordeal was over. We waited for half an hour across the *jhoola* till the rest of our comrades arrived and were through the business. Starting along the right bank of the Spiti now, the village of Losar was soon reached but not before we had waded through a fast-flowing nullah that drew its might from the melting snows

to our left. Losar presented a very neat and tidy appearance with its white washed mud houses and waving green barley in the fields. Over 13000 feet above sea level, Losar is the westernmost village of Spiti. My mind at once went back to the day we had entered its easternmost counterpart, the village of Lari. Lari to Losar had been a big adventure all these days. *Tara* (blown curd) and *dahi* (unblown curd) were again in plenty for our midday meal, but we could not expect to have any more of them for many days now because there would be no villages after Losar, no human habitation till we reached Koti beyond the Rohtang, a distance of half a hundred miles.

As our mules were crossing slightly higher up the river we were obliged to go three miles beyond Losar, turn south and camp for the night on ground a little ahead of Takcha camping site. Here, near Takcha, the full-fledged vastness of the Spiti River almost suddenly disappeared. We were now on the banks of the Lichtu, the main current of the Spiti which originates from the southern reaches of the Kunzum range. The Pitu from the north-west and the Kibjuna (or Kabzi nullah) from the north-east are the two tributaries that join it at Takcha to constitute the body proper of the Spiti River. This was our highest bivouac so far (14,500 feet) during our duty-march as missionaries of democracy. Snow lay all about our tents and the little Lichtu nullah flowed sweetly by.

The weather had cleared during the day and, Lord Indra be thanked, he had thought better of it. As I stood in the twilight of the evening, my blanket wrapped over my woollens, I mused over the whole scene like one in a trance. The tall hills with glaciers spreading down all the immense declivities of their slopes, limpid sheets of frozen water near our tents, thin wisps of smoke curling up from our kitchen, the tinkling of the mules' bells as they made short work of the strength-giving *niru* grass, the cadenced music of the brook that bubbled by—all this combined to make up a moment of rare splendour and enchantment.

My spell was suddenly broken when I was accosted by Patwari Gomat Ram and Munshi Dharmpal with the words, *'Achha Sahib, ham kal wapis jaiega'*. *'Hamara Admi?'* I

asked ; and Gomat Ram smiled with his usual scarlet blush. I always called him *'Hamara Admi'* (our own good fellow) and there was a story attached to it, which is like this : Gomat Ram had been working as a Patwari in Kulu. One British Sahib came as consolidation officer ; when Gomat Ram met the Sahib, the latter was a little struck by the young Patwari's looks, his ruddy cheeks and fair complexion and almost Scotch features, and being at pains to decide the Patwari's nationality asked : *'Tum hamara admi hai?'* ('Are you a kinsman ?'), to which Gomat Ram had politely replied, *'Nahin Janab, ham idhar ka hai'* ('No sir, I belong to this side').

We were nearing almost the end of our route in Spiti proper. Dharmpal, therefore, would go back to the Nono and Gomat Ram to his post at Kaza.

It was a very cloudy morning once again, punctuated by intermittent drizzles, when we broke camp and started for Shitikar Camp site, our last camp in Spiti. I am especially enchanted by snows, and the prospect of a trek over glaciers always thrills me. I do not pretend to be a mountaineer, but the Himalayas have a charm of their own and who would be so dull of soul as not to be affected by them ? Moreover, had I not formed a close kinship with them during weeks of trekking now and before. The Himalayas are nowhere at their beautiful best if not in Spiti. Takcha to Shitikar was one of our most pleasant marches and the few ascents of snow-covered slopes that came our way only added to the enjoyment of this brief march. It was just ten o'clock in the morning and the weather had improved considerably by then, when we were at Shitikar camping ground. The sun smiled brilliantly now, greeting us with all its warmth. We had half a mind to proceed further and cross the Kunzum but our mules arrived very late and when they arrived they were short by one. Till the missing mule had been traced by a rear-party of muleteers and brought up here, we could not leave. For the first time after Tabo all five parties were now together at Shitikar. Thus a big camp, comprising about 60 men and 112 mules, was in the offing ; we were in full strength. We celebrated this reunion with hot, sweet *halwa* which was contributed by our two parties, Gian's and mine.

We were camping not very far from the Kunzum La in the

midst of marvellously enchanting snow scenery. I spent the afternoon loafing about in the company of Prem and Rana on the nearby ridges while Gian played cards. We slipped into our beds in our near 15,000-foot high canvas perches on that coldest of nights to wake up to a still colder morning for our assault on the Kunzum La.

Getting up early at 4 a.m. to ensure an early start, we found the sky was again cloudy. A bitterly cold wind blew and water lay frozen into ice in the little pools and puddles about our tents. These layers of limpid glass-like ice cracked and crunched under our feet as we walked about busily, packing up our loads and loading the mules, myself all the while muttering the opening lines of Keats's *St. Agnes' Eve*: *Ah, bitter chill it was* ! . . . .

But I became suddenly conscious of the fact that we were in mid-July and not mid-January which had occasioned Keats's description of the cold. This was our coldest morning. We put on our warmest clothes, muffled our faces with woollen Balaclava caps and our eyes with sun-glasses and, looking forward to the prospect of a snow-trek, I changed my canvas ankle boots for the Army-pattern leather ones.

At 6 a.m. we marched off. Two furlongs ahead a not very uncomfortable torrent was crossed. Achhar, my orderly, slipped while crossing, and the kettle containing cooked *dal* for our midday meal emptied its contents into the flowing stream, much to our dismay.

A gradual ascent had already begun. We trudged on happily but warily as, sometimes, we sank into knee-deep snow or crunched its frozen sheets under our boots : *The ice was here, the ice was there ; The ice was all around.*

And oh, the splendid scene that now opened itself to our gaze ! As we approached the Pass, the panorama of snow-clad peaks stretched out in an endless chain with 21,000-foot high crests on the Kunzum Range raising their lofty crowns to the deep blue of a speckless sky. The Kunzum Pass itself is only a little over 15,300 feet high. It was reached after an hour's march from Shitikar. A *chhorten* of stones with numerous prayer-flags hung high on a mast marked the point, and in the gentle wind that blew, the prayers of the faithful ones inscribed on those fluttering bits of cloth, were

wafted to the great God in the heavens above! The high and mighty Shigri peaks could be seen right in front in all their grandeur. Once again we were as enthralled by the beauty of this scene as by that of many others we had witnessed before. It was a captivating sight and our cameras clicked right and left to capture all its elevating grandeur.

I have always been filled with a feeling of eternity at such places; a sense of timelessness and infinity that overpowers all my transitory fleeting self, making me a part of that enveloping vastness which, as it were, overwhelms my tiny soul as the ocean does a speck, a dot, a bubble! The Infinite stands before me in flesh and blood and I a part of It, a consummated eloquence that rests tongue-tied, vibrant but mute.

From the Pass there was a quick descent along a glacier-born torrent to the banks of the Chandra River. We came down the moraine over stone and slush and then turned left along the slopes of the glaciers that verged on the beautiful Chandra. We had started with the Beas and bade goodbye to it at Mandi; we had left the great Shatadru (Sutlej) at Namgiah after a two-week long companionship for the Spiti; we had shaken hands with the Pin before renewing our association with the Spiti River which had been our companion throughout our long march in this land of the Lamas; now we bade farewell to it at its source, the Kunzum Jot and began to woo the Chandra.

This portion of the route along snowy slopes presented serious difficulties for our mules. As a measure of forethought, we had engaged ten labourers from Losar and they had reported to our camp at Shitikar the evening before. This infantry section of sturdy Spitians proved very helpful. They cut the frozen masses of ice at dangerous hairpin bends and over steep slopes to widen the track, and provided a comparatively secure foothold for those most sure-footed of animals, our mules. There were quite a few awkward moments as an animal slipped or stumbled and the load hurtled down but, without any serious mishap, we reached the Batal *jhoola* (rope-bridge) at about 10.30. Yes, the Batal *jhoola*: our immediate help and headache, for here the Chandra was to be crossed over to its right bank. About 125 maunds of luggage was to be carried across the river in addition to half a hundred

men and 112 mules. How would the mules cross? This was the question that came again and again to our minds above the terrible roar of the Chandra floods, swirling, foam-flecked, furious! We had not anticipated so much trouble from the Chandra.

Standing on the left bank of this river we were on the last bits of Spiti territory, for across was Lahaul.

XIV

'OPERATION *JHOOLA*'

RIVER CROSSING in Spiti is one of the most hazardous experiences for the trekker. Even at places where the nominal facility of a rope-bridge is available, it only tends to add to the palpitation of the heart owing to its very precarious nature. But one has to cling to it as the drowning man clings to a straw. The rope-bridge over the Chandra was neither like the one at Losar nor that at Sumra. In fact, it had a more reassuring appearance than either of the two previous swings for the luxury of a rectangular cradle-like contraption attached to the pulley on the wire rope across the span of the river. But, as we were to discover later, this *jhoola* made the highest demands on our patience and endurance. This was so because, unlike the two previous occasions, our mules also had to cross the river at this very point. Our destinies were, therefore, linked as never before with our stolid beasts of burden.

'Operation *Jhoola*', as I later termed it, started at exactly 10-45 a.m. after we had had a hurried breakfast from our haversacks. Gian Sharma posted himself at the loading point and sent me across to the Batal side to take charge of the unloading end and set up the camp. He was still in Spiti while I had stepped into Lahaul, and the mighty Chandra flowed between. At an average, two to three maunds of load was sent in one trip and it took seven to eight minutes for the swing cradle to reach back to the loading point for the next assortment of baggage. It was tiring, nerve-racking boredom, the whole process; and the men on the ropes worked non-stop till 9 p.m. When the moon rose high above the Kunzum ridges, flooding the snow ranges with an ethereal light, at the places where we stood the tall ridges cast their long shadows over men, mules and baggage. The untiring porters pulling at the ropes like ceaseless automatons or galley slaves, the swing journeying back and forth as it plied over the gurgling flood, all this conjured up a scene of nocturnal activity, eerie and mystifying, wild and unearthly in a dream-world, as it

were, of mountains, snows, rivers, valleys, ghosts and spirits.

Almost the entire luggage of two parties had still been left over at the Kunzum end to be transported across the river. Of course tents, rations, beddings and ballot boxes had been put across. In the grounds of the so-called Rest House, 300 yards away, the camp had, in the meantime, been set up by those of us who were there. That 'Operation *Jhoola*' would have to be resumed the next morning was evident.

I was present at the Batal end to receive Gian Sharma in Lahaul territory when the swing brought him across, as a part of the last consignment, a little after 9 p.m. The experience must have provided him with a strange, terrifying thrill at that unearthly hour in a gloom-stricken moonlight, with the swing-cradle almost touching the waters.

My narrative of this awful day would not be complete without mentioning another operation that had continued along with the *jhoola* crossing; the crossing by our mules. Only thirty mules had been able to cross in spite of the best efforts of the muleteers. Oh, it was an awful day for the poor beasts! All avenues of a safe crossing for them had been looked for without success. There was no point up or down the river that could be termed 'safe'. A spot, however, half a mile downstream, was finally selected. Shorn of their packs and trappings, their smooth, strong bodies glistening in the light of the afternoon sun, the sturdy mules were collected at the spot selected as the fording point for them. In the midst of a lot of shouting, abusing and blessing, they were pushed into the river under a lathi-charge from all directions. The animals shied, strutted, jumped into the flood, but instantly retraced their steps to the safety of the bank. Again and again, their strength exhausted but desperation redoubled, the muleteers prodded the unfortunate mules till all the sticks were broken. The success achieved, alas, was so meagre; only 25 per cent of the mules were across and these stood shivering at the Batal bank like those others, less fortunate ones, who had not been able to cope with the cold, swift Chandra and turned back in midstream.

It had meant a moment of great anxiety for us when one of the animals had been completely outpowered by the breakers and washed downstream for half a mile beyond hope of recall

or rescue. All along the margin of the river we ran breathless. Luckily, the poor beast finally swam ashore at the point of a sudden bend in the river course. What miracle had made this possible no one knew; but it was enough for us that our friend, the mule, was not lost.

There was not a blade of grass that evening at Batal for our hungry and exhausted mules. We pooled the entire quantity of parched grams with us (totalling about 20 lbs.) and gave it to the muleteers for the mules! We repaired to our tents, our hearts heavy with the burden of the morrow when 'Operation *Jhoola*' would have to be resumed.

It was an extremely cloudy morning when we took up our duties on the swing at about 10 a.m. After three long hours we had said 'finis' to this process of transhipment of our luggage, the process that had commenced at about eleven in the morning the day before. And then began the most tiring and nerve-racking part of the day's job, helping the eighty-odd mules to swim through the Chandra.

A long rope was hauled by means of the swing to where the mules stood, leaving one end of the rope in the hands of the men on the Batal side. The rope tethered around a mule's neck, all that shouting and beating could do was done to launch the animal into the river. Once so launched it was tugged gently but firmly by rope-holders on the other bank till the animal willy-nilly swam downstream, submerged (with sometimes its long ears the only visible part of the body) and, accompanied by a lot of coaxing shouts from all of us, stepped on the pebbly bank shivering with cold, fear and exhaustion. The process was repeated as many times as the number of our animals till the fading tints of the evening sun saw us all back in our camp. This, in many respects, had been our most taxing experience and July 12 our hardest day. But we were thankful to Providence that all was well with both men and mules and that the ordeal had left us all unscathed.

It did not take Gian and myself long to decide in favour of a halt the next day at Batal in order to give our hungry and tired mules a rest before continuing our march ahead which was expected to be difficult. It remained cloudy throughout the day with an incessant but gentle drizzle. As expected,

it worsened into a complete downpour during the night. Starved and scared mules ran here and there in the confusion of the rain and dislodged tent-pegs, pulling down my tent, burying us beneath its wet rain-soaked blanket and making confusion worse confounded.

Earlier in the afternoon, Kaushal had received a postcard from his younger brother, Brij, the first and the last *dak* we ever received during our long trip. It had been posted at our Kaza address from where a police constable proceeding on leave home had brought it to be delivered to us here at Batal. Once again this postcard had linked us with civilization, once more had it made us slightly homesick. But soon all reminiscences vanished, all memories dimmed and we were overcome by that exclusiveness of mood which keeps one in the overbearing confines of one's immediate, present milieu. The strain of hazards and problems of a journey like the one in Spiti do not allow any extraneous thoughts, or even sweet recollections of the past, to enter the mind. I have it from experience that if any recollections of our near and dear ones ever perked up in our tired minds they were fleeting and ephemeral, for a sudden call to duty in respect of one problem or the other would put us face to face with stark hard reality, weaning us away from that 'inward eye which is the bliss of solitude.'

XV

SIGNS OF CIVILIZATION

BATAL to Chatru is twenty miles, a matter of a double stage. As we wanted to make up the loss of a day's extra halt at Batal, we decided to reach Chatru itself instead of halting midway at Chhota Dara.

When I woke up about four o'clock in the morning the weather god had a terrible frown on his face. An ominous blanket of thick, dark clouds covered the sky. It had rained intermittently during the night ; it was still drizzling in the morning when G.C., myself and a few others started from Batal at 6 a.m. Half an hour later, the rest of our comrades followed. We had said farewell to Spiti ; we were now walking in Lahaul territory. The Kunzum range forms the boundary between Lahaul and Spiti.

Our route, in the first instance, was entirely snow-bound. It was all a spectacle of frozen silver slopes around us. In between the mountains of ice flowed the great Chandra. We had to walk warily on a six-mile-long expanse of glaciers, avoiding crevices and layers of thin, transparent ice underneath which, at places had been water formed by the melting bottoms of glaciers roored and gurgled. It took us about four hours to cross this portion of the route. And then, there was a sudden, welcome change ! The track opened out into a well-marked jeepable road. We were on the Manali-Kaza road, proposed to be built by the Government in order to link the Nono's capital with the present-day road terminus of the vital Pathank-to-Kulu road. There was, however, still no end to the many glaciers that came our way. Some of them were from two to three furlongs in length but in no way serious impediments. As usual, I enjoyed this march immensely. When we reached Chhota Dara about midday it was raining in torrents.

Rana and myself sat down under the canopy of a boulder waiting for the fury of the rain to diminish and to allow Kaul and Kaushal to catch up with us. At about one o'clock we resumed the journey. It was still raining and the clouds were

dark but the road in front was good and level. G.C. had proceeded ahead a little earlier even before the mules had arrived at Chhota Dara. His reason had been obvious but only I knew it. He would not like to hear the usual grumbling of the muleteers who, we had learnt, had half a mind to stay at Chhota Dara for the night. I had myself heard the muleteers grumbling and looking for both the *Bara* Sharma Sahib (G.C.) and the '*Chhota* Sharma Sahib' (myself) to press their wish. Finding neither of the two Sahibs on the spot, they had proceeded further, muttering, *Mar-gaya* ('we are undone').

Three miles after Chhota Dara I was delighted to see a mile stone, a real P.W.D. milestone with the inscription: Chatru—7 miles. How glad I was to meet, after many long weeks, this solitary mark of civilization. Thank God, we were now within the orbit of Public Works Department mercies! This little stone assured us the miles ahead would be *pucca* road miles and not the unreliable, under-measured Spiti distances; we might not have to undertake hazardous river crossings, for there might be good bridges or culverts over torrents. Certainly our hopes were not belied in this respect. The track soon opened up into a beautiful valley where the lush green grass was a velvet carpet and the flowers so abundant that 'the sense faints picturing them'. The bare brown hills of Spiti had yielded place to the collyrium-black ridges of Lahaul Valley, wearing striped bands of green, yellow and violet, grass, moss and flowers. Cataracts and waterfalls were a frequent sight as they fell undulating from the high tops to the depths of the Chandra below. Once again my weary eyes were soothed to see Gaddi shepherds with their woolly flocks of sheep and goat and the first *mittar* (friend, the term of address for a Gaddi tribesman of the Kangra Hills) I met, I greeted him in his own *pahari* dialect of the Kangra Hills, and experienced a great thrill. These unsophisticated dwellers of the Dhauladhar Himalayan range are the most amiable people to be found anywhere in this world.

The road was fairly good and level for the better part of it, although we did have to cross a couple of glaciers *en route*. The view of snow-clad hills was enchanting. The gorge of the Chandra had become narrower and deeper with fortifica-

tions of solid steep hills on either side. The rain had stopped ; the clouds had scattered ; only an occasional 'daughter of the earth and water' sometimes sprinkled its tiny drizzle over us in a quick, passing sally. This otherwise easy and enjoyable march nearly became a tragic one. We narrowly escaped death twice when boulders hurtled down from adjacent hill-tops. This happened immediately before Chatru. At 4 p.m. we turned a bend on the road to climb to the Rest House at Chatru.

The camping ground was a level, velvety plateau above the main track and at the foot of massive black hills that border the Chandra gorge. The small Rest House was occupied by a young tourist couple (not Indian) who had permission to go as far as Kibar. It did not take long for our tents to perk up in the camping ground which was soon humming with activity. The evening was superb ; so, after a hot cup of tea, I went out for a little stroll in the company of Gian Sharma. Our stock of cigarettes had been getting depleted and I had allowed a ration of one cigarette for two or more smokers at a time. We had, thus, been able to eke out our quota till Chatru. During our evening stroll we came across a well-provisioned touring shop in a tent belonging to a Khampa trader. It was a pleasant surprise and cigarettes were our first purchase. Our stocks were once again replenished for the next few days when we would step back into the world of shops and stores and roads and vehicles. We went down to the suspension bridge over the Chandra and stood there for some time, watching it surge, swell and roar beneath us.

As I tumbled into bed, tired with the twenty-mile-long march of the day, I looked up at the sky through a hole in my tent. The clouds were still there but at places the stars were peeping out too. They gave me hope of a brighter day on the morrow and with that hope I fell asleep.

From Chatru to Gramphu is a distance of ten good miles. Gian and myself were the last to start on our march in the morning. One muleteer was missing with his mule. He had not reported to the camp the evening before. It took us a good bit of time to persuade one of the muleteers to go back, look for the refractory mule-driver and bring him and his mule along to Gramphu, the day's destination for the entire camp.

A very bright sun was in the sky when G.C. and myself left Chatru at 10.15 a.m. But what was that rumbling noise like distant thunder that filled the air ? We looked around, and lo ! above the opposite bank of the Chandra, we could see a whole mass of snow, stones and mud hurtling down. Crash . . . thud . . . and it fell into the waters of the great river. We had seen an awful avalanche !

We marched at an easy pace. On the way we halted two or three times for a brief rest, for some of the ascents were pretty stiff and the glaciers still numerous. But the panorama was exquisite with the Chandra flowing to our right, flanked by steep snow banks on either side ; at places, the snows on either side of the river met in tight embrace to form a snow-bridge over the foamy current, and a wonderful sight it was. As we approached Gramphu we saw the first tree after many weeks. I remember shouting in great delight : 'A tree, a tree,!' It was a poplar and, for a while, we sat under its delightful shade. Not long after we saw a number of young, *bhoj-patra* trees. Quite a few lay flat and lifeless, felled by the avalanche. Even as we neared Gramphu, the road still went steadily higher and higher. Evidently, we were approaching the outskirts of the northern slopes of the great Rohtang. All the men and mules had settled down comfortably by the time Gian, Prem and myself reached the camping grounds at Gramphu at 3 p.m. A number of Khampa traders' tents near our own added an impressive look to the whole camp, our last on the Chandra bank as also in Lahaul territory.

We had now been on the move for a month and a half ; we had travelled about 600 miles of which our trek had comprised close upon 300 very difficult miles. The days had been hard though enjoyable, the nights short but full of that warmth which teamwork and friendship lend to all moments of rest after a hard day's work. It had been an exacting routine to pitch our tents, set up hearths or light the stove and get ready for discharging all the functions of a housewife. Preparing tea, cooking food, cleaning utensils, packing and unpacking foodstuffs—all this went on together with each member putting in his share of work and lending his hand, a thing so essential in camp life. There was no distinction between the Sahib and the orderly or between member and member. All

ate the same fare, all shared the tents, all slept huddled together, all cleaned their own mugs and plates, and all enjoyed the luxury of a sweet dish whenever our ingenuity could manage one for our menu. We lived mostly on *dal* and chappaties : we were not carrying any dry fruit or vegetables. Rations were sometimes shared when a particular party fell short of any provisions. It had been, to be brief, an expedition characterized by team-spirit and camaraderie. I reflected over all this as I wandered out on a brief stroll in the vicinity of my camp.

The Chandra diverts its flow from Gramphu to the north to join the Bhaga at a place called Tandi, and the two then form the famous Chandrabhaga or Chenab, one of the five great and ancient rivers of the Punjab, round whose name are woven some of the most famous folk songs and romances of the 'land of the five rivers'. Once again the view of the near and distant snow peaks was magnificent ; once again the evening was bitterly cold and the wind blew hard around our camp at Gramphu.

XVI

ROHTANG PASS

THE WHOLE camp was astir at 3.30 a.m. to get ready for an early crossing of the much-dreaded Rohtang Pass. By 5.30 a.m. the camp had been wound up and the mules were being loaded. Lofty snow-covered cliffs stood all round in their awe-inspiring *samadhi*. It was so still that Time itself appeared transfixed :

The Stars with deep amaze
Stand transfixed in steadfast gaze,
Bending one way their precious influence,
And will not take their flight
For all the morning light.

MILTON

Only 13,400 feet above sea level, the Rohtang Pass does not boast of great heights. But it is, undoubtedly, one of the most hazardous Passes anywhere and, owing to the heavy toll of lives it has taken during the years, has an atmosphere of awe and fear woven round its name both in fact and fiction. It is known for its sudden blizzards and snowstorms which can overtake unwary trekkers any time after 11 a.m. on or near its crest. It is on record that 72 labourers returning from bridge construction work in Lahaul in 1862 were caught up in the fearful snowdrifts over the Pass and killed. This was a major tragedy. Minor ones happen frequently, and almost every year the Rohtang takes its toll of a few men or pack-animals or both.

We started the ascent from Gramphu at 6.30 a.m. in long, single file. We did not take to the road alignments but made a direct, steep short-cut and reached the top of the first ridge in about thirty minutes. Heretofore, we had not met much snow in this climb, but looking up from where we now stood, it was a different world that lay ahead of us. A rampart of sparkling white snow stood above us, endless, immeasurable. Layers

of snow buried the road under. A possible indication of the track to the crest was provided by stray footprints of the Khampa horses that had crossed to Gramphu the day before. Once again we defied the track to avoid its long, winding detour, and once again started the climb straight up. A very taxing exercise it was, but we enjoyed it. Especially breath-taking were the moments when chances between the stick and the slip were equally balanced. Each step required all the caution and care that our nerves could muster; we were climbing at an angle of 80 degrees. The sight of a horse's carcass lying in the snow looked ominous and set me thinking about the fate of the poor animal.

After the second ridge, the ascent to the top of the Pass was gradual and easy. The top was reached at 8.30 a.m. The view, both of the top and of the surrounding hills from the top, was wonderful. G.C. and myself had a pleasant smoke while our teams rested for a while. The weather was bright and the sunlit sky a vault of spotless blue. The time for the much-dreaded Rohtang winds was not yet. Nature had been kind to us so far and was kindest that day. The crest of the Pass is about a mile across a wonderful plateau but owing to tall cliffs on either side of the gap, the view is circumscribed. The over-19,000 foot Gephany peak and the Sonepani glacier cover the Lahaul ranges, lofty, snow-mantled, eternal. Slightly to the west of the Pass at a height of 14,000 feet is a famous lake called Dashair or Sarkund. Local belief attributes miraculous powers to its waters and it is said that any disease can be cured by a bath here. This belief has a legend attached to it and that revolves round the name of the great Moghul ruler of India, Akbar. The legend runs like this :

A beautiful daughter of Akbar the Great, born at Delhi, had a withered leg. When Akbar heard of the girl's infirmity, he called his astrologers and Pandits to find the reason for his child's misfortune. The pandits informed the Emperor that a mare had met its death by drowning in a sacred lake in the Himalayas, but that its left leg was sticking up out of the lake and that if this leg was submerged, the child would get well. So Akbar issued orders to the Governors of all his hill provinces to have a search made for this lake

and the drowned mare, and asked them, when they found it, to push the leg below water and inform him of the date and time of complete submergence. A search party eventually came to the Kulu Valley in search of such a glacial lake in the district. In its quest it climbed the Rohtang and hit upon Lake Sarkund. Here, on the 20th *Bhadon* (about the first week of September), they found the drowned mare partially submerged as foretold by the astrologers. They thrust the remaining led under water, noting the date and time. From that very moment, the child's withered leg began to heal and soon the child was quite well.

In a different version of this legend the heroine is a Hindu princess and not Akbar's daughter :

In a previous incarnation this Princess had been an esteemed mare belonging to a royal family and, when taken on a pilgrimage to Sarkung Lake was drowned in the Lake from which her body was never removed. The Naga gods of the lake were angry at this continued pollution by flesh of their sacred waters, and proclaimed a curse on the soul of the mare in its present incarnation. This curse, which descended on the princess, took the form of leprosy. Her father, the King, after consultation with his wise men, was informed of the origin of the curse, which was lifted immediately ; the remains of the mare were removed from the sacred water and the wrath of the Naga gods placated.

It was more or less a level walk on the Pass for about a mile though the snow was very slippery. The Beas Kund (the source of the Beas river on the Rohtang crest) was completely buried under snow. Except for a few stones nothing was visible. It was unusual for the Beas Kund at this time of the year to have such a heavy blanket of snow on it. Ordinarily, the Pass itself casts off its silver cloak by the time the rains start, but it had been a different affair this year. Nature had not kept to schedule and the late snows had disregarded their time-table.

Now began the descent, long and slippery along the southern slopes of the Rohtang. Afar in front, the happy valley of

Kulu lay spread with all its charms, beckoning to us to come down from our lofty pedestal into its own world of level expanses, shady groves and gay folk. We met a lot of traders' caravans going upward towards Lahaul, and it was always a problem to secure ourselves on the one-foot narrow and slippery track to allow the long procession of ponies and traders to pass. This continuous spell of snow-marching ended after we crossed the snow-bound Khuni Nullah (literally, bloody ravine) or the Rani Nullah. This ravine also is full of hazards for trekkers to and from Rohtang. An unfortunate, wrong step may hurl the traveller down to the abysmal depths of the nullah from where even the dead body may not be retrieved for months till the snows melt. Like the Rohtang itself it is usual for this nullah to take its yearly toll of victims. Hence, probably, its name of 'bloody ravine.'

After the Khuni Nullah, we had only scattered encounters with glaciers till we reached a place called Marhi. How delightful it was to suddenly bump against a nice little tea-shop at that level secluded spot at the foot of the great Pass. Naturally we had tea there and relaxed a little before resuming our descent into the Kulu Valley that lay stretched below us in all the majesty of its pine-clad hills and sequestered dales.

The descent from Marhi to Rahla has only one word to describe it, 'knee-breaking'. Having foregone the luxury of the long zig-zag road, a resort to short-cuts involved a great straining of our leg muscles and our shins and knees ached and trembled with the strain of the sheer, sharp descent when we reached Rahla on the Beas. At a solitary stone shack wedged into the side of a hill and named 'Frontier Hotel', we had our lunch and then stretched ourselves under the embalming shade of a big tree for a well-earned noonday nap. How big the tree was, how green its foliage, how sweet the music of the tiny current of the Beas still in its infancy! Acclimatized to an average altitude of more then 12,000 feet above sea-level during our ramblings in Spiti, Rahla even with its 8000 feet height seemed very warm. Indeed, what a difference! We were now a part of the Kulu Valey. We had left behind the great romantic world of snows and glaciers, of river crossings and rope-swings, of Dolmans, Tandups and Dorjes. The gates had, as it were, been shut on the fascinating

romance of far-flung hamlets and solitary gompas, yaks and *churoos*, and *chhang* and *ara*, with the crossing of the Rohtang, that mountain corridor on high which ushers the trekker in and out of Lahaul.

Crossing the Beas over a small wooden bridge, we marched along its left bank for about an hour to reach the commodious Koti Rest House at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Allotting accommodation to the other parties in the Rest House itself, G.C. and I pitched our tents on the lawns for the night.

The Koti Rest House, picturesquely situated on a small ridge overlooking a narrow valley, is a beautiful spot. The feeling that we were not far from Manali, the terminus for our long route marches, was more than comforting. We felt at home, completely at home. Already I could see many youngsters of our camp in trim array, their long two-month-old beards gone, their best clothes donned after a refreshing wash, and all of them ready to leave for a nice stroll on a Mall Road which, unfortunately, did not exist in Koti.

It was one of the most wonderful sunset scenes that I witnessed from Koti Rest House on that happy evening of July 16. The pattern of golden yellow, copper red and suave sombre grey that the beams of the setting sun wove on the western skies before 'the ball of fire' finally disappeared behind the hills, drawing back its widespread net of yellow rays like a fisherman at even-tide, appeared chimerical, unearthly in all its quick and transient splendour. The night brought a sudden array of rumbling black clouds and all the lamps on the star-bedecked dome were put out. A flash of lightning, a roar of thunder, and the first big drops of rain came tumbling down. We went to sleep in our tents with the rain strumming their weather-beaten sides.

XVII

LET US PRAY

OUR nearly 350-mile trek was to be rounded off today with the eight-mile walk from Koti to Manali, our last. Our feelings of exultation and joy can be well imagined when we woke up late in the morning, with no hurry to start off and with the take-it-easy leisureliness of Lotus Eaters. No more hurdles, no more risks, no more forced marches, no hazards, no nervous heart-beats; our time was ours. It is not surprising, therefore, that we took full advantage of a nearby stream to wash ourselves clean of all the grime and dirt that Spiti life had heaped on us. I had, like the rest, my first bath in three weeks, my last having been at Kuling (Pin Valley). At 10 a.m. we started from beautiful Koti for even more beautiful Manali, eight miles down the Beas. Like a victorious army, proud of its achievements and full of a unique sense of satisfaction which the fulfilment of an honest duty done well always engenders, we marched in trim formation, the presiding officers leading and the rest following, the Police contingent and the mule corps bringing up the rear.

Just below the Rest House we crossed the Beas over a wooden bridge which spans a deep narrow chasm through which the infant torrent flows. There is a very interesting tale in the ancient annals of Kulu connected with this bridge:

> During the reign of Nard Pal, fortieth ruler in the genealogical roll of Kulu chiefs, about 850 A.D., Chamba and Kulu were at war and the Chamba forces had advanced as far as Madan Kot, a village near the foot of the Rohtang Pass, where the Chamba king had built a fort. A peace treaty was eventually concluded but the Kulu people were not satisfied and wanted to get rid of the invaders. A social gathering was arranged to which all the Chamba soldiers were invited. The place selected for the feast, which was to be at night, was a Koti village on the left bank of the Beas. The river at this point flows through a deep gorge (about 160 feet)

which was spanned by two beams, set apart, and cross planks. Just before the feast was due to start two Kulu men removed the planks from the beams and replaced them with long grass. When the Chamba men arrived in the darkness each man, in trying to cross, fell into the gorge and many drowned before the trick was discovered by the drummers going down, when the sound of their drums ceased. Those who remained on the right bank turned and fled, but a large part of the Chamba force was destroyed.

Such stories of treacherous breach of faith are not uncommon in the annals of the Princely states whose number, in pre-Independence India, was near seven hundred. The hilly regions of Kangra and Himachal alone had more than fifty such principalities, big and small ; and, except for the brilliance of a ruler like Raja Sansar Chand Katoch here and there, they mainly thrived on mutual jealousies and narrow parochial policies. History will never forget india's steel Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel whose powerful surgeon's knife, the Instrument of Accession of Indian States, removed all these festering sores from the political map of India to make the country into a single unified whole.

For about two miles the road descends low along the deep gorge of the Beas and then it is a level stretch up to Manali. Slightly below the village of Vasishta we halted for about two hours to enable those who wished to do so to climb up to the holy Vasishta Kund and have a dip in its famous hot-water sulphur springs. There is a temple here dedicated to the stage Vasishta, one of the prime figures in ancient Hindu history and myth.

The association of the name of Sage Vasishta with the Vasishta Kund and the Vasishta Temple is, indeed, very significant. Classical mythology connects an extremely interesting anecdote about the Sage with the present name of the Beas River, which is the main river of this valley and has its source in the nearby Rohtang crest. It is said that King Kalmashpad, the ruler of Ayodhya, killed Vasishta's sons. Crazed with sorrow, the father decided to commit suicide. So he tied himself up with a rope and threw himself into a river. Fortunately, the rope loosened and Sage Vasistha was washed ashore to a

sandy dune in the river-bed. This incident of 'the breaking of ties' (*vi+pasha*, Skt.) gave to the river its original Sanskrit name of *Vipasha* (literally the 'unfettered one'). Our modern Beas and the Hyphasis or Bibasis of the Greek travellers is the same as Sage Vasishta's *Vipasha*.

Another story speaks of the same Sage's attempt to throw himself into the waters of a river called *Haim-vati* (of course this time without rope fetters). The Sage's spiritual vigour mingled with the turbulent flow of the river and made the current flow 'a hundred times speedier' (*Shat-dha drut.*, Skt.). *Shatadru*, thus, means the river 'flowing at top speed' or, with a slightly different interpretation, 'flowing in a hundred channels'. This incident gave to that river its name of *Shatadru*, as it is known in Sanskrit literature. It is identical with the Zaradrus of Ptolemy and the Hesudrus of Pliny.

Thus the two great rivers, the Beas and the Sutlej, owe their names to Rishi Vasishta. Whatever the veracity of these tales, it is not easy to disbelieve them or dismiss them as pure myths, for then we should be ignoring the evidence of the historical monuments of Vasishta Kund and Beas Kund.

By 2 p.m. the pilgrims of Vasishta Kund reported back and we resumed the march to Manali on a level, quiet and easy road. The bridges, culverts and nullahs (some of them dry) were beneath the notice of our caravan of men and mules who had become accustomed to the roaring torrents of Spiti. Three quarters of an hour later we crossed the Manali Bridge over the Beas to step into Manali. What a moment! What joy! A sense of humble gratefulness instantly overwhelmed me with the onrush of a flood. I stood still for a moment and all the rest of my friends stood likewise and I only said ' Let us pray'. My words, in fact, had given expression to everybody's instant and innermost emotion. So there we stood, a prayerful congregation, our eyes closed and heads bowed in inexpressible, silent gratitude to the Almighty. Then we opened our eyes and stepped forward, and a neat, de luxe motor bus went honking by over a bright metalled road. We were in the Manali baazar in front of the Civil Rest House. Almost like creatures from a distant planet, we strained our eyes and gasped and looked about us to attune our senses to the din and bustle of civilization. Curious people stared in

bewilderment at the strange specimens we looked in our two-month old, unkempt beards and the cavalcade of travel-worn mules that followed us. G. C. and I made ourselves comfortable in the Civil Rest House and the rest were billeted in the Tourists Aluminium Hut and the Information Centre building nearby.

Manali, it is believed, takes its name from the great Hindu law-giver, Manu. Over 6,000 feet above sea-level, it is the terminus of the 175-miles Pathankot-Manali road. Regarded as a 'must' for visitors to the Kulu Valley, it is a place full of scenic beauty and climatic charm. Apart from its orchards and forests it has, not very far from the main town, an ancient place of pilgrimage, the Hidimba temple. Erected on a small clearing of dense jungle and in an eerie setting of old giant deodars, the temple inspires a sense of strange supernatural awe when you visit it. According to an inscription on the doorway at the east side of this temple, it was found in 1553 A.D. by Raja Bahadur Singh, son of Raja Sidh Singh. The original temple, however, must have been founded many centuries earlier, for legend associates it with the memory of Hidimba (or Hidimbi), the sister of Hidimb, a demon who lived in southern forest of Varnavat, a city in which the Pandavas lived during their exile. This demon was killed by Bhima, one of the bravest of the Pandava brothers of Mahabharata fame. The demon's sister fell in love with the victorious killer of her brother and married him. Ghatotkach, the great warrior son of Bhima, was born to him from Hidimbi.

Manali had expanded and grown up since I had visited it last five years ago. It was buzzing with activity and presented the look of a busy transit camp for men and merchandise bound for Lahaul, Spiti and Tibet. I have said we were very, very happy, but I must confess, too, that there was a wet blanket over our spirits, a sense of forsakenness which oppressed Gian Sharma and myself more than anybody else. Both of us were in the same brittle mood and the reason was not far to seek. We had hoped that Mr. N. Khosla (Deputy Commissioner, Kangra) would be at Manali to receive his 'darling crack troops' on the culmination of their successful mission. In fact, he had promised this to us two months before on the

eve of our departure from headquarters. Nothing had happened to diminish his zeal in us and our work. So we missed his familiar welcome smile and it made our morale touch the lowest ebb out of a sense of injured pride and wounded hope. To be more accurate, no representative of the administration at all had reached Manali and, in fairness to our mood then, I must confess that we felt terribly belittled.

In an effort to revive our downcast spirits we left the Rest House for a stroll down the river along the Manali-Kulu road. On the way I was glad to meet an old friend, an aged deodar tree ! There it was standing on the roadside with its massive trunk (girth 25 feet) bearing the familiar inscription in white letters :

I am in my infancy,
May I crave thy clemency ?

After about two hours of fruitless loafing we returned to our comfortable beds in the Civil Rest House to spend our first night back in civilization.

XVIII

GOOD-BYE DOGIA DUNDUP

I WOULD like to switch this narrative back by about seven weeks and return, for a while, to the second day of our march along the Hindustan-Tibet Road. We were nearing the Paunda Rest House, our destination for the day, after a twenty-mile trek ; the sky was cloudy and the afternoon wet. We were on the steep climb to the Rest House when in he came to join our ranks, sniffing, running, wagging his tail. Strong, erect and medium-sized, he had a deep brown complexion with a sprinkling of white at the paws. His tail was a straight six-inch piece which had probably been clipped by his master long ago in the interests of beauty and symmetry. It was this diminutive tail of his that at once suggested to me a name for him and so he was christened 'Dogia Dundup' in the fashion of the names of the people to whom we were going in distant Spiti.

Dogia Dundup became a prominent member of our entourage from Paunda onwards. We had never expected him to stick with us after his native village, especially when we knew that he was a pet and not a stray vagabond. What was it that came to his mind ; what inspired him voluntarily to cast in his lot with ours ? It is said that when the Pandavas left for their journey to the Himalayas, a dog accompanied them, and when all except Yudhishtara had perished, the dog faithfully followed the latter to the last. I do not want to try and compare ourselves to the Pandavas, of course ! We were five parties ; of the five parties, the Dogia had the closest association with one, my party. The party consisted of five members ; of the five members the animal was fond of me and, more often than not, kept by my side. If he happened to start on the day's march earlier than I, he would always be found waiting for me at some spot or the other *en route*. It was only when I and my companions had caught up with him that the faithful Dundup would resume his journey.

It did not take Dundup long to become the darling of the

camp. All of us came to like him immensely. We gladly shared our rationed daily fare with him. Although we were travelling in very safe country where people never lock up their houses, Dundup, true to the traditions of his race, became the watch-dog of the camp. He knew every member of our camp and had a quick eye for spotting outsiders. I remember how many times he nearly pounced upon an intruder or seized at his clothes. His sharp bark always signalled the approach of some curious Spitian towards our camp and he had to be shouted at to be quietened down. Wherever we camped (unless, of course, it was in a pure wilderness) it was natural for the local inhabitants to gather around us in curious bewilderment and awe. But their quaint attire always provoked our Dundup, at least to a mild growl.

We had travelled far from our homes on Government behest to perform an onerous duty; he had volunteered to leave his home in obedience to some unknown power or a dictate of his conscience. But he proved to be a very gay dog. At Chini he went loafing and came back with a girl friend, a docile-looking, black-haired, unobtrusive little thing. She renounced her home in Chini to accompany Dogia Dundup and our caravan to Spiti. For the Dogia the days became happier and better in the company of 'Blackie', as we called his friend. Often it used to be a delight to watch their pranks, their running about and chasing each other, their sham quarrels and playful somersaults, their sniffing, growling and rushing after a common quarry like a lizard or a hedge-hog or a *chakor* that Rana had shot at.

Dundup was our pet, but Blackie somehow had never managed to evoke the same affection. I suppose she looked too sheepish and suppressed, and always walked cynical and indifferent with her head bowed awkwardly, unlike the Dogia who had a majestic gait. However, something happened at Sumra which made all of us fall head over heels in love with Blackie.

We had to cross into Spiti for the first time over the Rope Bridge at Sumra. The dogs refused to be tied and attached to the pulley over the wire rope. Dogia, especially, appeared at his wit's end and looked terribly unnerved by the sight of the roaring waters in front of him. His uneasiness was

apparent from the way he was whining and whimpering. Blackie was as calm as ever. Ultimately Achhar. my orderly, after he had been attached to the pulley for being carried across the rope, took the Dogia forcibly into his lap, coaxed and quietened him and the two were safely across to our joy. Blackie refused to be carried like that, and so when all of us had crossed (including our luggage), Dundup's girl friend was the only creature left on the Sumra bank and no one seemed to worry about her any more—not even the faithful Dundup ! We were enjoying a smoke before resuming our march to Lari ; Blackie stood on the opposite bank surveying the flooded river calmly. And then she suddenly leaped into the flood. The turbulent, noisy current washed her down, and the puny Blackie struggled bravely to swim to the bank. It was a life-and-death struggle between unequals, between the great Spiti with all its watery might and a little dog. We held our breath in suspense ; we waited for the outcome of the terrible duel. Finally Blackie won ! After struggling hard against the turbulent floods for a distance of one furlong, she had been able to swim ashore. Though entirely exhausted with the fight and shivering with cold, she came running in triump to where we were all waiting and, instantly, got a big *shabash* from everyone. Blackie had given proof of great endurance, courage and faithfulness. How crestfallen, how diminished in esteem, looked her big friend, the Dogia. After this incident, Blackie always received an extra *chappati* at meal-time from our kitchen.

Dundup was, however, a very good dog. It was a rule with him to come to our tent (where I and my party slept) every night and squeeze into a corner without disturbing anybody. Sometimes we tried to push him out and close the flaps against him, but no ; he was not to be put out. He never touched or even sniffed at any eatables or foodstuffs that lay in the tent and was always a contented sort. In brief, Dundup never proved a nuisance.

Dogia Dundup's doggedness was remarkable. He was an untiring and energetic trekker. Tracks that looked too dangerous to us never bothered him. All told, he shared about three hundred miles of a thrilling trek with us spreading over a period of about six weeks. When we had proceeded to the

narrow Pin Valley he had accompanied us, leaving his friend, Blackie, at Dungkhar Fort. She re-joined us on our return, once again to repeat her feat (near the Losar rope bridge) of swimming through the Spiti River. The Dogia had crossed the Tashi Gang range, the Sumra Jot, the Kunzum and the Rohtang with us. So he was with us when we reached Manali on July 17. Poor Blackie had not been seen after Takcha ; she probably returned to Losar in the company of Gomat Ram and Dharmpal.

On the morning of the 18th a requisitioned bus and a truck arrived at Manali after a lot of to-do on our part to make our arrival felt in the proper quarters. About two-third of the personnel reached Kulu, 24 miles from Manali down the Beas, by noon. Gian Sharma and myself reached Kulu late in the afternoon with the rest of our comrades in the second trip. The reception at Kulu was as cold as it could be. When we went to the *tahsil* building to deposit ballot boxes and other election material, it was locked. This happened although it was known to the authorities that we were due to arrive that afternoon, for a number of our parties had already reached Kulu earlier in the day. The Sub-Divisional Magistrate had to be contacted at his bungalow to get the *tahsil* building opened. So, when evening came and the tall deodars cast their long shadows on the beautiful, level Kulu maidan, the gloom of our spirits thickened and our mood, once again, became quite downcast. There had been no open arms at Manali to receive us, but now Kulu had shut its arms against us. The Sub-Divisional Magistrate did not care, even for ceremony's sake, to ask about our welfare or what arrangements were being made for us, for the night. As we retired for a night's sleep to the Tourists Aluminium Hut, I recited to Gian Sharma the opening verse of the third Canto of Kalidasa's *Kumarsambhava*, which says, 'To those in high offices of state the importance of their subordinates is a matter of judgement on grounds of selfish interest.' I must confess that what we felt was that with the successful completion of our mission and with no untoward mishap for the authorities to worry about, we had ceased to be of interest or importance to our superiors, who had once despatched us to Spiti with such ceremony and pomp.

In the evening Achhar, my orderly, came running to me and almost sobbed : 'Sahib, Dundup has gone mad ; he is foaming at the tongue and may die.'

I was shocked. 'Where is he ?' I asked.

'He has run away, he does not come when I call him', he replied woefully.

Well, probably the heat and stuffiness of that summer afternoon had been too much for our Dogia, I guessed. Used to a colder climate and higher altitudes he had not been able to cope with the change. It rained during the night.

The next morning we were getting ready to get into our busses for Dharmsala, when, lo ! there was our old friend, Dogia Dundup, as hale and hearty as ever. Having given him up as lost, his reappearance made us all very happy. The buses, by now, were ready to move, but Dundup refused to get in. He was forcibly lifted and thrust into my vehicle by Achhar ; but he was out of it the next moment. I shouted to him ; he recognized my voice, came in, but again jumped away and stood at a little distance off as if saying, 'Well, it is all over, our partnership.' We had to accept the parting, painful though it was. So our vehicles moved off and we shouted, 'Good-bye Dogia Dundup ; cheerio old pal !'

XIX

BACK TO THE PAVILION

FROM Kulu to Dharmsala is a tedious bus journey of 134 miles. It was a rainy evening when we returned to our beloved town at about 7 p.m. My friend, G. S. Mann, failed to recognize me in my thick beard (although he himself is a bearded Sikh) when I stepped down from the bus. We were diverted to the District Board Hall where a modest reception in the form of a tea party waited for us. Our friends and relatives held us tight in affectionate embrace. Their joy was boundless and so was ours. Alas! there was one whom all our inquisitiveness had failed to find in that assembly. He, of all persons, would have been the first to rush up to us. And, he was not to be seen anywhere. Our good O. P. Bhatia, the District Election Officer (a more, energetic officer than whom I have rarely seen) was forty miles away on some urgent duty. We missed him very much.

Deputy Commissioner Khosla soon arrived to congratulate 'the Spitians' and picked me out of the crowd (and out of my beard) with the ejaculation, 'I hope this is Professor Sharma!'

We were back in the pavilion.

XX

LOOKING BACK

SPITI rubs shoulders with Tibet and thus with China. More than half a century ago, a Mr. Barnes, writing about Spiti to the then British Government in India, referred to 'the political position of the country which is placed on the remote frontiers of our territory'. If ever those words were pregnant with meaning, they are today. India is a sovereign republic whose people have chosen the true democratic path; she needs to strengthen and consolidate the foundations of democracy from Kashmir to Cape Comorin and from Kathiawar to Kamrup. Alongside the process of political consolidation that has taken place since Independence, the cultural and emotional integration of her peoples has become necessary. This includes the reclamation of our backward regions and classes.

Administratively speaking, Spiti is a feudal relic. For a long time it remained a province of Ladakh, but because of its inaccessibility, the country was generally left to govern itself. The Ladakh Government used to send from Leh an officer called the *'Gar-pon'* (Governor). He would generally pay a visit at harvest time and then disappear, leaving the real administration to the 'Hereditary officers' of Spiti. They, in turn, were controlled by the Assembly of Headmen or the Parliament of *Gadpo-chenmo*.

Spiti came under British rule in 1846 with the cession of trans-Sutlej States after the First Sikh War. For the first three years the collection of land revenue from the area was assigned to one Mansukhdas, a Wazir of the Bushehr State. In 1849, Major Hay, Assistant Commissioner of Kulu, went to Spiti and took over charge from Mansukhdas. In 1864, Mr. Egerton, Deputy Commissioner of Kangra, toured Spiti and published an account of his impressions.

There has been little change in the administrative set-up since those days. The old titular chief, the Nono, still acts as a sort of local rajah, functioned every like a magistrate under

the Punjab Government. These powers of magisterial jurisdiction, it is interesting to note, were conferred on him as far back as 1878 under the Spiti Frontier Regulation Act of that year. He is empowered to try all offences except murder, and to punish by imposing fines. The present Nono, Chhawang Topge*, is a descendant of the old titular chief of Spiti. He now has authority to try only some of the less serious offences, such as theft, cattle-listing, abduction of women, assault, causing hurt, etc., and can inflict penalties of fines. For other offences, the Assistant Commissioner at Kulu dispenses justice. Sometimes the Nono has, it must be admitted, taken advantage of the natural inaccessibility of his domains to use his authority beyond the powers conferred on him by the Government. The ancient fort at Dangkhar became notorious for housing a cavernous dungeon which the Nono used as his prison. It contained a cell without doors, having only a small opening at the top through which the condemned were lowered. The prisoners' food was ordered to be provided by their complainants and accusers. Details of the treatment accorded to prisoners were obtained only when a party of high-ranking officers went on a trek to the Spiti Valley. Naturally, the disgusting practice was immediately ordered to be stopped.

If there is a case of murder, the body of the victim must be preserved in the snow until a medical officer from the district headquarters (about 270 miles away) in the Kangra Valley arrives for a *post mortem* examination. This involves, besides the delay, inconvenience to the Medical Officer who has to undergo all the rigours of a long trek to Kaza over high snow-bound passes. Proposals are now under way to open a separate Sub-Division at Spiti with Lara, a plateau near Kaza, as the headquarters of the Sub-Divisional Officer (Civil). A Medical Officer has also been posted recently to Kaza, and a Community Development Block is likely to be opened there under the charge of a Block Development Officer.

The Nono is assisted in his work by his reader, or *munshi*, who is appointed by the Deputy Commissioner of Kangra. Of late, two posts of the Punjab Armed Police to cover the

* He is dead now.

Spiti Valley have been established at two important villages. The postal season for this secluded land lasts, generally, from July to October-November, when long-overdue mail is carried over the Hamtah and the Kunzum Passes to the three post offices at Losar, Kaza and Dangkhar; the local school teachers act as postmasters at their respective stations.

As stated elsewhere in this book, Spiti is divided into five Kothi's. Each Kothi has its own headman or *nambardar*. He is called *Gadpo Chinmo* (the big headman). He, in turn, is assisted by village headmen who are called *Gadpo Chungun* (the little headmen). These latter collect the land revenue from the villagers and pass it on to the headman of their respective Kothi. The Kothi headman deposits the revenue collections with the Nono at Kaza. The headmen are men of character and integrity and wield great influence with the villagers. Like the Negi headmen in Himachal Pradesh, they are also in charge of *begar*, that is, they arrange for working parties of labourers or porters both for assistance to occasional trekkers and for constructing or repairing village roads and tracks. Both types of headmen receive a nominal remuneration for their services, the amount having been fixed by the Government under successive Land Settlements. It is paid both in cash and kind.

The first general elections in India after the dawn of Independence were held in 1952. The benefit of this first election could not be made available to the people of Spiti (as also adjacent Lahaul) due to many practical difficulties. The Government, however, felt that the people of the area should be progressively associated with the administration. It was for this reason that the Punjab Tribes Advisory Council was constituted for the areas of Lahaul and Spiti that very year. With 1957 came the second general elections in India. A hundred and ninety million people, the largest electorate in the world, went to the polls. Elections all over the country were completed by the end of March 1957 according to schedule, but the late snows completely sealed the Passes and kept Spiti closed to the outside world until May when, normally, the routes open up for traffic. Thus, when elections throughout the country were over, two Parliamentary seats for the Kangra District and two seats for the Punjab Legislative

Assembly from the Kulu Sub-Division of Kangra remained unfilled. Nature was adamant, but so was the Government. Spiti is, it is true, a far cry from Dharmsala, the district headquarters. Without dependable roads or means of transport and with the freakish moods of the weather gods, the whole scheme of conducting democratic elections in that difficult terrain needed to be meticulously planned. Staunch resolution to see the process of democracy through fortified the will of the Government and there followed all the necessary effort, planning, willingness and resolution to make the scheme a success.

Instead of the two-fold election such as was held in other parts of India (i.e., for the Vidhan Sabha and the Lok Sabha), Spiti had to have a three-fold one, because it had also to elect two members to the Punjab Tribes Advisory Council (PTAC). For this latter purpose (the PTAC election), the Spiti Valley was divided into the two constituencies of Pin and Chhoji. The total electorate numbered 2,500. Five prominent villages —Tabo (10,000 feet), Dangkhar (12,760 feet), Kuling (12,500 feet), Rangrik (12,000 feet), and Hanse (13,000 feet)—were selected as polling stations. Five polling parties, one for each of the five stations, were constituted and set out from the district headquarters as planned.

In the Spiti Valley itself, no preliminary arrangements for the voting could be made before the actual arrival of the polling parties; and when the parties arrived they found themselves in an incredibly strange land, in the midst of strange people, and, indeed, in a sort of a legendary world. None of the necessary preliminary arrangements for an election could be made in Spiti. We had, therefore, to use all our skill of improvisation. There were no tables, no cots, no stools or chairs, no planks or boards. But rules are rules and the specification laid down had to be adhered to. This was done.

All the usual excitement and tub-thumping that precedes an election was conspicuous by its absence. In fact, no candidate had reached anywhere near the boundries of Spiti. There were, therefore, no election speeches and no promises made by candidates to voters. How did they, in that case, exercise their choice ? How did they select the candidate or the symbol in whose favour they would cast their vote ? That is, indeed,

a pertinent question. I put it to a headman myself and I quote his reply here :

'We will do as the *Lama Guru* decides.'
'How will the *Lama Guru* decide ?' I inquired.
'The book will guide the *Lama Guru*.'

Yes, the Sacred Books were again the answer to their doubts and dilemmas. When the opportunity came for them to use their well-deserved right of vote, twenty per cent of the electorate turned up at the polling stations.

The process of casting a vote in a double-member constituency coupled with the election to a Parliamentary seat could be a pretty complex affair even for better-informed people, but a pleasant surprise was in store for me to find the unlettered and backward Spitian quite equal to it. It is a normal experience with voters in the plains that when they are issued a ballot paper they fold it before inserting it in the ballot box, an incorrect procedure. The Spiti voter, however, once the process was explained to him, never made this mistake. I was tempted to wander into a little psychological explanation of the whole affair. Is it that we, in the thick of our complex civilization, have an unconscious tendency towards twisting things, a sort of crooked round-aboutishness of habit, and is it that the honest, unsullied and guileless Spitian has still a mind free from all the quirks that the so-called unconscious mind of his enlightened brother is apt to contain ?

It is worthwhile, at the end, to take stock of the wider implications of the Spiti elections. The people of Spiti were unanimous in their choice of representatives to the Punjab Tribes Advisory Council. As many women as men went to the polls. The election contributed in a great measure towards making the local inhabitants politically conscious. It brought them into intimate contact with their more fortunate brethren who roamed in their midst for close upon two months. Humanitarian activities, whenever an opportunity came, were not forgotten. Free medical aid was provided to the sick and the suffering. The importance of hygiene and sanitation was brought home to these people,

who in a lifetime rarely enjoy the luxury of a bath. They were given more knowledge of the great country of which they are a part. They were told of the opportunities that are open to all of India's citizens as equal partners in the freedom that is and the prosperity that is to be. Efforts were made to explain to them the importance of educating their children. Their difficulties and problems were studied so that the experience gained could be used to help in bettering their lot.

Spiti is a beautiful valley and there is great scope for all-round development in the area. With the construction of the Khoksar-Kaza road via the Kunzum Pass, and the completion of a bridge over the Chandra River at Batal, it will not be difficult to give the people of Spiti some of the benefits of science, to teach them improved methods of farming, and to build up cottage industries to occupy them during their enforced leisure hours as well as to exploit the many natural resources of the area.

APPENDIX I

SPITI

AREA

Spiti is the north-eastern part of the Kulu sub-division of Punjab's largest district, Kangra. Kangra district has an area of nearly 10,000 square miles, of which the Kulu sub-division alone comprises 6,300 square miles; of this, the two far-flung regions of Lahaul and Spiti (that border on Tibet) cover an area of about 4,000 square miles. Spiti proper covers 2,931 square miles.

Spiti is situated between north-latitude 31°-42′ and 33°, and east longitude 77°-37′ and 78°-35′, beyond the high mountain chain of the Greater Himalayan Range, the Valley being at a mean height above sea level of over 12,000 feet. Because of its position in the inner Himalayas, it falls beyond the onslaught of the monsoons, which spend their fury in the higher reaches of the outer Himalayas. The climate is, therefore, dry but invigorating. The sun, at Spiti altitudes, shines brightly, even scorchingly, and the days are warm, sometimes hot. In sharp contrast, the nights are very cold. Strong winds blow furiously in the afternoon all over the Valley, but their fury calms down during the night and the mornings are usually calm.

Spiti Valley is locked in on all sides by lofty mountain chains and has, to its east, the areas of western Tibet; to the west, Lahaul and Kulu; to the north, Rubshu and Ladakh; and to the south, Himachal Pradesh territory.

RIVERS

The Spiti is the main river of the Valley. More impressive than the Sutlej in its expanse and grandeur, geography has relegated it to the status of a mere tributary of the better-known Sutlej, which comes from far-off Mansarovar. The Spiti has its source in the glaciers of the Kunzum range. It runs on its course for about 70 miles in Spiti proper, forming the boundary between Spiti and the former Rampur Bushehr State, from west to south-east. Then it enters Tibetan territory near the border village of Karat and after about twelve miles of straying into a foreign tract re-enters India at Sanjham (in Himachal Pradesh), where it turns directly south and joins the Sutlej at Namgiah, a couple of miles below the Shipki Pass. The Spiti has a large number of tributary streams that flow into it at various places in its ramblings through the valley. Soon after it starts from Kunzum, the Rikta stream from the south joins it with her reddish-brown waters. Three miles ahead, the Pagal nullah or the *Kala khud*, so called because of the black colour of its current, joins it from the south. Before it reaches Losar, the Kibjun and the Pinglung

streams from the north have already joined it. Two streams from the north join it near Hanse village. Beyond the village of Kioto another stream, the Taglung nullah, also from the north, pours itself into the Spiti. Another big torrent, called the Giundhi nullah, joins it from the south near Hull village. Before Kye, the Parilungbi stream from the Parang-la joins the Spiti. Between Kye and Kaza villages, a stream called the Schilla, coming from the Schilla peak in the north-east, meets the Spiti. Almost opposite this point, the Ratang nullah from the south also joins the Spiti. Near Kuling (Kaza) the Ola stream and then, a little further, the big Linguti River and the equally important Pin River at Pindoh join the Spiti. The Pin is almost as big a river as the Spiti itself and has its source in the 16000-foot high Bhabba Pass. Further ahead, the Choprang and the Mane nullahs, and the Po and the Tabo nullahs from the north, pour their waters into those of the Spiti.

The Pin River is the main stream of the Pin Valley and travels a course of 30 miles before joining the Spiti. The Geondhi and the Ratang nullahs also flow from the Pin side for a length of about 25 miles till they meet the main current. The Linguti has a length of 28 miles. The Spiti Valley, thus, has a network of rivers and streams spread over the whole of its area. 'In a nearly timberless country this narrowing of cross drainages on the main route is a great convenience for bridge-making.'

Except for the Atargu suspension bridge over the Spiti, there are no bridges over any of the streams or nullahs mentioned herein. The Atargu Bridge was built as far back as 1911. Rope bridges or *jhoolas* of different varieties do exist at places, but even they do not provide very safe crossings. Most of the streams have, therefore, to be forded. An early crossing is always helpful. It is extremely risky, if not impossible, to ford these racy hill torrents at midday or in the afternoon, because the melting snows make a terrific addition to their speed and the volume of water.

PASSES

(1) KUNZUM PASS (15,300 feet).

The Pass is about forty miles from Khoksar, the first village in Lahaul after crossing the Rohtang Pass (13,400 feet). The Chandra River is crossed over a rope-bridge at Batal for the ascent to the Kunzum Pass which leads into Spiti territory if the Manali-Rohtang-Chatru route is adopted.

(2) BHABBA PASS (16,000 feet).

It is about fifteen miles from the village of Moud in the western part of the Pin Valley. This Pass connects Spiti directly with the Wangtu Bridge over the Sutlej in Himachal Pradesh territory.

(3) PARANG LA (18,300 feet).

At a distance of twelve miles to the north of Kibar—(the highest village in Spiti), it leads into Rubshu Ladakh (Jammu and Kashmir territory). The ascent to this Pass starts right from Kibar itself.

(4) PIN PARVATI PASS (15,754 feet).

It is about thirty miles from the important village of Kuling in the

Pin Valley and connects Spiti with the Parvati Valley in Kulu.

(5) MANIRANG PASS (21,630 feet).

It is a difficult Pass which connects Spiti with Himachal territory. It is seldom attempted.

(6) TAGLING LA (18,000 feet). This Pass leads into Rubshu and Ladakh.

IMPORTANT VILLAGES

(1) LOSAR (13,382 feet).

Losar is the first village in Spiti from the western approach via Kunzum. Situated on the right bank of the Spiti River, it has a primary school and a population of about two hundred.

(2) HANSE (13,000 feet).

Eight miles from Losar up the Spiti River and on its left bank, it has a population of about two hundred and a primary school.

(3) KIOTO (13,200 feet).

Two miles from Hanse, it is a small village of about a hundred souls. The Kioto limestone of the geologist takes its name from this village.

(4) KIBAR (13,400 feet).

With a population of three hundred, it is the highest village in Spiti; it also has a primary school.

(5) KYE (12,400 feet).

Five miles from Kibar on the Spiti, this village is famous for its big monastery.

(6) RANGRIK (12,000 feet).

Situated on the right bank of the Spiti and with a population of about three hundred, it possesses the only middle school in the whole of the valley.

(7) KAZA (12,000 feet).

It is the headquarters of Spiti and has a primary school. The Nono holds his court here. The population is about two hundred and fifty.

(8) DANGKHAR (12,760 feet).

It is well-known for its medieval fort which, once upon a time, used to serve also as a prison in the days of titular chiefs who ruled Spiti. It has a primary school.

(9) MANE (12,100 feet).

It is a big village with two parts; Mane Gogma (upper Mane) and Mane Yogma (lower Mane). The two parts have a nullah in between and the total population is about three hundred and fifty. Mane is the only village possessing an abundant growth of trees, and so it supplies timber for buildings to most other villages in the valley.

(10) TABO (10,000 feet).

It is the seat of a very big and ancient monastery. It is the second village in Spiti from the eastern (Hindustan-Tibet Road) approach.

(11) LARI (10,000 feet).

Situated on the left bank of the Spiti River, it is the easternmost village and, therefore, the first as one crosses over the rope-bridge at Sumra for Spiti.

(12) KULING (12,500 feet).

Situated in the beautiful Pin Valley, it is at a distance of about twelve miles from the Atargu bridge on the main track.

CLIMATE: FLORA AND FAUNA

The climate of Spiti is cold and dry. The winter is very severe and, generally, lasts from the end of September to the beginning of May. It snows heavily, at times even up to ten feet deep. The summer lasts hardly three months. Even then the nights and the mornings are very cold. Overlying snow in the fields is made to melt by putting earth and stones on the frozen surface in order to make the tiny fields ready for sowing.

Barley, peas and mustard and, at some places, wheat and potatoes, are sown at the end of April and are ready for harvesting by September. Of course, unusual snow, avalanches, erosions and other calamities do often change the time-table completely. At places beyond Kaza, potatoes, carrots and salad are also grown.

There are no forests in Spiti. *Bhoj patra*, willow and poplar trees grow sparsely at some places, especially near habitations. A thorny shrub, found in abundance, is used as fuel wood and a large collection of such fuel in a house speaks for prosperity, for fuel wood in Spiti is rare. The *niru* grass in distant pasture-lands is said to be very nutritious for sheep and goats and is one of the attractions for Kangra's roving *gaddi* herdsmen to take their flocks to these regions annually for grazing. Here is a list of some of the flowers that grow in abundance in the Spiti Valley :

Daisies, violets, wild roses, buttercups, forget-me-nots, anemones, harebell, blue poppy, artemisia, iris, edelweiss, columbine, and many more.

The Spiti people are not *shikaris* in the sense that most hill people generally are. Ibex, *barhal, jhoral, nabu, snow-cock, chakor*, and sometimes snow leopards, can be found on the heights.

MINERAL WEALTH

A geologist friend, Dr. Rode, once remarked to me, 'one of my cherished ambitions is to visit Spiti ; it is the geologists' paradise.' Undoubtedly the Spiti hills afford 'an almost unbroken sequence of sedimentary deposits ranging from the cambrian to the cretaceous. The oldest beds are slates and quartzites ; the higher beds contain trilobites overlain by conglomerate, red quartzite limestone and marl with Silurian fossils (trilobites, corals etc.). The well-known Spiti shales are famous for their ammonites.' Guingul sandstone, chikam limestone and shales and Kioto limestone are pretty well known to students of geology.

Spiti is very rich in mineral wealth and experts have found evidence of the presence of iron, lead, silver, gypsum, antimony, asbestos and pottery clay in the hills. Centuries ago, Spiti was a big lake. Therefore,

marine fossils are not difficult to find with a little effort, especially near Hikam, Langja and the hills round Kaza.

THE PEOPLE

Population in Spiti is extremely sparse and women outnumber men in a total figure of a paltry five thousand. The Spitians, both men and women, are a good-natured people, hearty, and cheerful and hospitable to outsiders. They live in clean, flat-topped, white-washed houses with stacks of fuel wood (so rare there) on the roofs, but they themselves are unwashed. The evil of the *purdah* system is conspicuously absent and women go about their work bare-headed, their multi-braided, long hair hanging back in a tasselled pattern. Long hair from a yak's tail is sometimes used by women to give artificial length to the braids which have, at the bottom, a whole net-work of little stones and beads interwoven into them. Men, other than Lamas, tie their hair into a single braid as the women in our plains do.

TRIBES AND CASTES

In Spiti, in contrast to other parts of India, there are no caste distinctions and the terms used are descriptive of classes rather than castes. There are four noble families, the males of which are called 'Nono' and the females 'She-ma'; the hereditary *Wazir* is called Gyalpo. These families reside at Kuling (Kaza), Mane, Kuling (Pin), Gyungul (on the Linguti).

The Nono is the old titular chief. A Nono's daughter is called 'Jo-jo'. The Nono family generally marries into Ladakh if it can.

The people of Spiti, as at present, have three main castes; Rajputs, Lohars (artisans) and Hessis. Among the Rajputs some till their lands and are called zamindars (landlords); others are Lamas who live in the gompas on a subsistance provided by such lands as are reserved for the maintenance of monasteries.

The Spitians believe in the law of primogeniture and a patriarchal society. It is the eldest son who inherits the father's land and property. The rest of the sons have to enter a Lamasry (gompa) and remain celibates for life. When the eldest son grows up and gets married, his parents bequeath all their land and property to him and themselves live apart on a meagre sustenance from a field or two retained for their livelihood. Is this a relic of the Vanaprastha *ashram* of Hindu society? The son, at this stage, becomes *khang-chin* (the big householder) and the parents are reduced to the position of *khang-chung* (petty householders). The younger children (who have become Lamas) generally frequent only the *khang-chung*, that is, their retired parents' home. The younger sons have no right to marry. If any one transgresses the law, he is turned out of the monastery and is left in the world to fend for himself. Such persons are called *hing-chung*. Their children are not allowed to join the Lama brotherhood. If the eldest son dies, the next senior can take over both his brother's wife and the property. He would, however, have to pay a

nominal fee to his monastery when leaving it. The eldest daughter alone marries and inherits all the ornaments and jewellery of her mother. The others become *chomo* (nuns). Marriages in Spiti are of two types: the 'big marriage' and the 'little marriage'.

In the first type ('the big marriage'), the marriage party from the bridegroom's side goes to the bride's house but the bridegroom himself does not accompany the party. An arrow is sent along with the party to represent the bridegroom. All members of the marriage party ride on horseback as the Hessis play on the *shahnai* and the *lohar* on the drums. Reaching the bride's house, the arrow is married to the girl. The next day the marriage party, along with the bride, returns to the bridegroom's house. Here the bride and bridegroom are seated together and, to the chanting of texts from the holy books, the marriage ceremony is finalized in the midst of great feasting and dancing.

The 'little marriage' or *Gandharva Vivah* is the love marriage. In such cases, of course, there is no conventional procedure or ceremony; the boy and the girl just start living together and then celebrate it over a party with their friends.

Marriage is allowed only among equals. A *khang-chin* cannot marry a *hing-chung* girl. A Lohar can marry only a Lohar and a Hessi only a Hessi. A Rajput in doubtful intimacy with a Lohar or a Hessi woman is boycotted by society. Clothes once used by a Lohar or a Hessi are not fit for use by a Rajput. This seeming untouchability is redeemed by the fact that in matters of eating and drinking no such distinctions of caste are recognized.

Monogamy is the rule in Spiti, and a husband takes a second wife during the life time of his first only under exceptional circumstances. Polyandry is not practised except among the *dud thulpas* and the *buzhens*, the decendants of the monks of the Pin Valley, who take no vows of celibacy.

There is a recognized ceremony of divorce (*kudpa chadche*) which is sometimes used when both parties consent. Husband and wife hold the ends of a thread repeating meanwhile: 'One father and mother gave, another father and mother took away; as it was not our fate to agree, we separate with mutual goodwill'. The thread is burnt asunder. This ceremony always takes place before the Nono. After divorce, a woman is at liberty to marry whenever she pleases.

RELIGION

The people of Spiti profess the Buddhist faith and are guided by the Lamas in both their spiritual and temporal needs. This Buddhism is of the Tibetan variety. It is full of superstition and is deeply contaminated by the indigenous demonology of the mountains. The Lamaistic hierarchy is pretty well-rooted, although the Buddha did not believe in any monastic hierarchy and preached that all men are equal.

About the beginning of the 15th century, the Abbot of Galdan monastery in Tibet proclaimed himself the patriarch of the Lamaistic priesthood, and his successor of the Tashi monastery declared the Grand

Lamas to be the perpetual re-incarnations of one of the Bodhi-sattvas or semi-Buddhas. The fifth in succession founded the hierarchy of Dalai Lamas at Lhasa in 1640, and made himself master of the whole of Tibet. He assumed the title of Dalai Lama. Of the three ancient sects of Lamaism in Tibet, the most ancient is Nyingpa. Spiti gompas are full of paintings about the various *avataras* of the Dalai Lama. The Lamas of Pin Monastery are of the non-celibate Dunga sect. It is customary for the Lamas to go round from house to house collecting harvest alms in the form of grain. Each monastery sends out its inmates on these begging expeditions. Dressed in the robes of their particular sect, they stand in a row and chant certain verses, the burden of which is : 'We are men who have given up the world ; give us in charity, the means of life ; by so doing you will please God whose servants we are.'

LIBRARIES AND GOMPAS

Spiti's five famous gompas are :

Kye gompa :	It has about 225 lamas from 15 villages.
Thang-yud gompa :	It has about 80 lamas from 10 villages.
Dangkhar gompa :	It has about 100 lamas from 5 villages.
Tabo gompa :	It has about 25 lamas from 3 villages.
Kungri gompa :	It has 120 lamas from 9 villages.

All these gompas have *waqf* lands attached to them for their maintenance. Every village possesses its own little gompa or Buddha temple containing Buddhist scriptures and images exactly like those in the bigger monasteries.

Huge libraries in Spiti monasteries contain sacred books on Tibetan Buddhism in the Bhoti script. Roughly speaking, these books contain three sets of the holy texts :

(1) *Yum* : a set of 12-16 volumes containing the Buddha's sermons and teachings.
(2) *Kang Yur* : A set of 108 volumes containing translations of Lord Buddha's actual utterances on *nirvana* and *dharma*.
(3) *Tang Yur* : A set of 216 volumes containing teachings and discourses of famous Buddhists, saints and Sidhas in the form of stories, like the Jataka tales. It also includes works on grammar, astrology, and astronomy and many writings which are no longer extant in the original Sanskrit.

The *Yum* volumes weigh about 3½ maunds, the *Kang Yur* about 12 maunds and the *Tang Yur* about 25 maunds. The *Kang Yur* and the *Tang Yur* were printed for the first time about the beginning of the 18th century during the regime of the seventh Dalai Lama. It is said that if re-translated into Sanskrit the two works would come to about 20 lakhs of *shlokas*.

EDUCATION

Before Independence, Spiti had one middle school and two primary schools. The figures (as on July 1, 1957) stand at ten primary schools and one middle school with the prospect of a few more being raised to the middle standard. These are :

Village	*School*	*Students on roll*	*Average attendance*
Losar	Primary	22	21
Hanse	Primary	17	17
Kibar	Primary	36	32
Langja	Primary	33	30
Rangrik	Middle	81	77
Kaza	Primary	24	22
Lalung	Primary	33	27
Dangkhar	Primary	36	35
Mane	Primary	28	25
Kuling (Pin)	Primary	19	16
Sagnum	Primary	23	19

The only Spitian schoolteacher in the whole valley is Tashi Tandup, in the Kibar Primary school. All others are from adjacent Lahaul, except for Sanam Gyachhu Lama from Bushehr who has become a naturalized Spitian due to a long stay there. Four of Spiti's young men recently completed their teachers' training course at Kulu and are likely to take up work in the Valley. Members of the Nono family used to be sent to the Thang-yud monastery for their education in days of old ; the Nono's son, however, is now receiving education at the Government school, Kulu.

OM MANI PADME HUM

As with the Tibetans from whom they inherit their religion, the most

sacred *mantra* or text with the Spitians is *Om Mani Padme Hum*. This is on everybody's lips at all times of the day and in all types of situations and preoccupations. Sitting, resting, walking or working, all pious Buddhists (which all Spitians hope they are), chant, mumble or murmur the sacred formula for the good of their souls.

For the origin of this *mantra* they look to Avalokiteshwara through the grace of his divine father, Amitabh Buddha, the Great Enlightened One. The most plausible interpretation of this mantra is :

Om is the usual sacred suffix before every mantra, is in Vedic Hinduism.
Mani (jewel) symbolises *purush* or the spiritual element.
Padme (lotus) symbolises *Shakti* or *prakriti* (material power).
Hum is a Tantric suffix.
Hri at the end is sometimes added, which, it is said, stands for *hridaya* (Skt.) that is 'the heart'.

Pieced together the sacred mantra would mean :

O Jewel (of Creation) that is in the Lotus !

This *mantra* is to be meditated upon in the heart.

It is a universal inscription found here, there and everywhere in Spiti. It is inscribed, embossed or painted on walls, rocks, stone-slabs, monastery walls and flags. *Mani* walls at the entrance to villages, on the tops of passes, at camping grounds and the outskirts of holy monasteries are a common sight all over Spiti. This *mantra* is written several times on slips of paper which are kept in a small brass, silver or copper cylinder or *korlo*, which is rotated clockwise by all pious Buddhists. There are cylinders or prayer wheels driven by water-power. One like this was seen by us at Pooh. Small, handy prayer-wheels are carried by the pious Spitians for use even when at work or rest.

APPENDIX II

ROUTES TO SPITI AND OUR ITINERARY

The important routes that lead into the Spiti valley are :

Manali—Chatru-Batal (via the Rohtang Pass)
Manali-Chatru—Karcha (via the Hamta Pass)
Manali-Khoksar-Zingzingbar (via the Baralacha Pass)
Mandi-Simla-Rampur (via the Sumra Pass).

ROUTE NO. 1.

Starting from Manali, the bus terminus of the 200 mile Pathankote-Kulu road, it leads over the Rohtang Pass (13,400 feet) to Gramphu (at the foot of the northern slopes of the Rohtang). Turning right eastwards the route to Chatru (10 miles) is along the Chandra river. Crossing the suspension bridge at Chatru, Chhota Dara on the right bank of the Chandra is only 10 miles ahead. An equal distance beyond is Batal where the Chandra is again crossed over a rope-bridge. Now begins the ascent to Kunzum Pass (15,300 feet) which leads into Spiti territory. Losar, the first village, however, is still about 10 miles ahead on the right bank of the Spiti River.

ROUTE NO. 2.

This also takes off from Manali. Chatru (23 miles) is reached via Chika (13 miles from Manali) and, proceeding along the left bank of the Chandra, the Hamta Pass (15,000 feet) is crossed for Phuti Rooni, eight miles beyond. Nine miles after Phuti Rooni is Karcha and the Shigri Glacier is to be crossed. And then, the Kunzum is crossed for Losar.

ROUTE NO. 3.

This route is considered the most picturesque. Over the Rohtang Pass from Manali, it proceeds through the Lahaul Valley to Zingzingbar and thence to the 16,000 feet high Bara Lacha Pass on the ancient trade route to Ladakh and Tibet. From the Baralacha, a descent to Balamo (15,000 feet) is made for Spiti.

ROUTE NO. 4.

This route is the longest and also the safest, especially in a year of extraordinary snows as the one when our mission went to Spiti. It takes off from Simla along the Hindustan-Tibet Road ; 88 miles beyond Simla is Rampur Bushehr, the bus terminus. From Rampur onwards the

Hindustan-Tibet Road proceeds for 135 miles, along the narrow Sutlej gorge, up to Namgiah, the last Indian village. Turning north-west from Namgiah along a narrow, unmarked track over the Thasi Gong, Chango and Sumra Passes, the last Himachal Pradesh village, Sumra, is reached after another 44 miles. From Sumrah, a rope-bridge over the Spiti River conveys the traveller into Lari, Spiti's first village from this eastern approach.

This is the route that our expedition followed on its journey to Spiti; the return journey was made via route no. 1, thus combining the pleasures and thrills of both in one trip.

OUR ITINERARY

Date	*From*	*To*	*Mileage*	
May 27, 1957	Dharamsala	Mandi	91	Metalled-road; by bus.
May 28, 1957	Mandi	Simla	108	Kacha road, by bus.
May 29, 1957	*Halt at Simla*			
May 30, 1957	Simla	Rampur Bushehr	88	Hindustan-Tibet Road begins.
May 31, 1957	*Halt at Rampur*			
June 1, 1957	Rampur	Sarahan	24	Kacha road, on foot.
June 2, 1957	*Halt at Sarahan*			
June 3, 1957	Sarahan	Paunda	19	
June 4, 1957	Paunda	Urni	17	
June 5, 1957	Urni	Chini	14	
June 6, 1957	*Halt at Chini*			
June 7, 1957	Chini	Pangi	7	
June 8, 1957	Pangi	Jangi	14	

Date	*From*	*To*	*Mileage*	
June 9, 1957	Jangi	Kanam	12	
June 10, 1957	Kanam	Pooh	18	
June 11, 1957 June 12, 1957 June 13, 1957	*Halt at Pooh*			
June 14, 1957	Pooh	Namgiah	10	
June 15, 1957	Namgiah	Nako	14	Via Tashi Gang.
June 16, 1957	*Halt at Nako*			
June 17, 1957	Nako	Chango	14	Via Chango pass.
June 18, 1957	Chango	Shalkhar & Sumra	16	Via Sumra pass.
June 19, 1957	Sumra	Lari & Tabo	6	Over the rope bridge at Sumra.
June 20, 21, 22, 1957	*Halt at Tabo*			
June 23, 1957	Tabo	Po	6	
June 24, 1957	Po	Shiceling	8	
June 25, 1957	Shichling	Pindoh	8	
June 26, 1957	Pindoh	Kuling	8	Pin valley.
June 27, 28, 29, 30 & July 1, 2, 3, 1957	*Halt at Kuling*			
July 4, 1957	Kuling	Lara	18	
July 5, 1957	Lara	Kaza	3	

Date	*From*	*To*	*Mileage*	
July 6, 1957	*Halt at Kaza*			
July 7, 1957	Kaza	Kibar	8	Via Kye
July 8, 1957	Kibar	Kioto	11	
July 9, 1957	Kioto	Takcha	12	Via Hanse-Losar
July 10, 1957	Takcha	Shitikar	3	
July 11, 1957	Shitikar	Batal	8	Over the Kunzum pass.
July 12, 13, 1957	*Halt at Batal*			
July 14, 1957	Batal	Chatru	20	
July 15, 1957	Chatru	Gramphu	10	
July 16, 1957	Gramphu	Koti	11	Over the Rohtang pass.
July 17, 1957	Koti	Manali	7	
July 18, 1957	Manali	Kulu	24	by bus.
July 19, 1957	Kulu	Dharamsala	134	by bus.

APPENDIX III

Personnel of Spiti Polling Parties

LEADER

GIAN CHAND SHARMA
In charge of Group B and Presiding Officer for Tabo.

DEPUTY LEADER

PARMANANDA SHARMA
In charge of Group A and Presiding Officer for Kuling.

MEMBERS

SATPAL SINGH	Presiding Officer for Dangkhar
JASBIR SINGH	Presiding Officer for Hanse.
K. S. PATHANIA	Presiding Officer for Rangrik.
DHARM CHAND DEWAN	Polling officer for Tabo.
R. P. KHOSLA	,, ,, ,, ,,
J. B. LALL	,, ,, ,, ,,
DHARMPAL	,, ,, ,, ,,
UDHAM SINGH RANA	Polling Officer for Kuling.
JAGDISH Kaushal	,, ,, ,, ,,
SHIV K. KAUL	,, ,, ,, ,,
GOMAT RAM	,, ,, ,, ,,
PREM SHARMA	Polling Officer for Dangkhar.
SHIV KUMAR	,, ,, ,, ,,
HARCHARAN SINGH	,, ,, ,, ,,
MADAN LAL	,, ,, ,, ,,
WALAYTI RAM	Polling Officer for Hanse.
JOGINDER SINGH	,, ,, ,, ,,
RAM SONDHI	,, ,, ,, ,,
SUKH SAGAR	,, ,, ,, ,,
BIDHI CHAND	Polling Officer for Rangrik.
MILAP CHAND	,, ,, ,, ,,
JAI DEV SHARMA	,, ,, ,, ,,
AMAR CHAND	,, ,, ,, ,,

MEDICAL OFFICER

DR. DARSHAN SINGH KOCHHAR

MOVIE CAMERAMAN

S. P. SHARDA

WIRELESS PARTY

Daulat Ram Sharma
Ramesh Chander

POLICE CONTINGENT

Mange Ram Vasisht Asi
Bishan Dass Asi
H. C. Balwant Singh
H. C. Jagdish Ram
H. C. Gagan Singh
Constable Nawang Dorje
Constable Amar Prakash

ORDERLIES

Ram Saran
Achhar Singh
Aflatu Ram
Hari Chand
Karp Nargu
Bhagat Ram
Sant Ram (wireless)

INDEX

PARMANANDA SHARMA

BORN on 17 June 1924 in a small village near Jullunder, Parmananda Sharma had his early education in a village school. In 1943 he graduated with I class Honours in English Literature from the Punjab University and in 1945 took his M.A. in the same subject from Government College, Lahore.

A versatile writer in Hindi, Parmananda Sharma is the author of *Chhatrapati* and *Vairagi*. He has also published stories for children, plays and translations of *Vairajna Satak* (into Urdu) and the *Rubaiyat-e-Omar Khayyam* (into Punjabi).

At present a lecturer in English in the Punjab Education Department, his interests include dramatics, linguistics and mountaineering. In recognition of his work as the deputy leader of the expedition to Spiti, he was awarded a silver medal by the Election Commission.

TIBET DISAPPEARS

A Documentary History of Tibet's International Status, the Great Rebellion and Its Aftermath

CHANAKYA SEN

Chanakya Sen, who writes frequently on international problems in leading newspapers and periodicals has in this timely study collected together and classified, with explanatory notes, a mass of documents. This book, presenting all the three viewpoints—Tibetan, Chinese and Indian, is the most comprehensive and up-to-date account of recent developments in Tibet.

48s. 6d.

INDIA MEETS CHINA IN NEPAL

GIRILAL JAIN

Communism in China and Parliamentary Democracy in India are two great experiments, the outcome of which will decide the future not only of these countries but of all countries that are economically underdeveloped. The impact of these conflicting ideologies, these contrasting lines of development, is most keenly felt in Nepal. It is in Nepal that India meets China, not merely strategically but also as a rival in political and economic influence and it is this sensitive point of contact that Mr. Girilal Jain, an experienced journalist, studies in this book.

30s.

ASIA THROUGH ASIAN EYES (*For sale in India only*)

BALDOON DHINGRA

The book is an anthology of a new type, not a collection of unconnected, though entertaining, bits and pieces of folklore and philosophy. Each quotation fits into a pattern, and these, with the extracts from the Gita, the mystics of Islam, Confucius and Lao Tzu, survey the attitudes of Asians to such diverse things as politics and food, morals and medicines, proverbs and folk tales. From it emerges a living Asia, sometimes inexpressibly profound, at others light-hearted, witty, cunning, saturated with commonsense.

In the words of Sardar K. M. Panikkar, this unusual anthology is "something more comprehensive, more representative of the mind of Asia than anything that has so far been published."

ASIA PUBLISHING HOUSE
LONDON