



## LAHUL-SPITI

### Lamas and Legends

**HIMALAYAN WONDERLAND**  
(Travels in Lahul-Spiti) by  
Manohar Singh Gill (Vikas;  
Rs 25)

LAHUL-SPITI is a remote Himalayan valley near the Tibetan border. Though administratively one, they are geographically separate entities. Lahul lies in the north-west beyond the great Himalayan divide, which thus separates it from the district of Kulu. Spiti (pronounced *Piti*) has a population of about 3,000 on an area of approximately 3,000 square miles of mountains, glaciers and high valleys—a square mile to every citizen. Being mountain country, her history has been “mountain oriented” in countless ways. Living is hard. There is very little fuel, no fresh fruits or vegetables.

*Himalayan Wonderland* is an account by Manohar Singh Gill, a former Under Secretary of Labour in the Punjab Secretariat, who was posted as Deputy Commissioner in these enchanting and exotic valleys. “The steepest places have at all times been the asylum of liberty,” wrote Baron de Trott in the 18th century. The call of the mountains is irresistible to people with a yen for adventure—as Prime Minister Indira Gandhi herself confesses in her Foreword. Longing for the great peace of the boundless horizons of Lahul-Spiti, the author accepted the posting with alacrity (“for once pleasure turned out to be my duty”).

Before the reorganisation of the Punjab in November 1966 (now the district forms part of Himachal Pradesh), the Punjab Government did much to improve the lot of these tribal folk. All this in sharp contrast to its administration under the British, when the valley was left to the whimsical charge of the local Baron. Now the district is being developed. The author's inten-

tion is to record something about the valley as it was, before time-honoured traditions and social values crumble.

With great detail, M. S. Gill describes lamas lined up to receive the brand-new Deputy Commissioner to the lusty music of *gyadungs* and *gelings* (trumpet and pipe instruments). We learn of butter tea, *sattu* (Lahul's most popular food item), *Chortens* (Buddhist stupa built to house the remains of a famous lama) and how to fashion a musical instrument with the thigh-bone of a woman. We are told about the disappearing faith of the lamas, the *Dzeetha Damburgya* prayers, the dazzling festival of Halda, very much akin to our Divali, and the Gotsi (thanksgiving) festival. We read about the mountain women, sturdy and smiling, glossier than any fruit; the prevailing practice of polyandry in Lahul spiced with some interesting case-histories.

Like this one for example. Tanzin of Gumrang had a very much older brother who got married. As a child, Tanzin was suckled by his brother's wife. When he grew up, he took her as his wife and fathered children by her. The author describes why this rigid polyandrous custom has an economic rationale.

The best moments in *Wonderland* are three chapters dedicated to the myriad recondite legends and weird beliefs of the tribal folk—*joginis*, spirits, demons, *devtas* and *mantras* abound; the most cabalistic of them is *ro-*

*lance*, the rising of the dead (*ro* means “corpse”; *lance* “to rise”). Once again spruced up with examples. This time verging on the grisly and macabre. The area (Lahul-Spiti), other than a mountaineer's, also seems to be a necromancer's or a sorcerer's delight.

At many stages of the book, the author, apparently stimulated by the romance of the mountains, erupts into poetic verse to describe the glaciers. This lavish eulogy jars. One such chapter, “Winter Vignettes”, is purposeless. Maybe someone should have told him that there is no time for cosmic reflections. But then, if James Hilton can attempt to immortalise Shangri-la, why not M. S. Gill with Lahul-Spiti?

The book is free from literary judgments; instead we get quotes from *Kim* (Kipling), *Horatio* (*Hamlet*) and Keats. On the whole pleasantly readable, *Wonderland*, with delusions of grandeur and with some superb pictures, is an interesting work. If certain unnecessary portions could have been omitted, a more compact version would make this an important work.

As is generally the case, the weight of years sits heavily on authors, trenching, riving and raddling. What seems to be a magnificent piece of inspired prose to the writer might be a “helluva bore” to the reader. The writer's best friend is his pair of scissors. In his advice to a young writer, Hemmingway wrote: “The more bloody good stuff you cut out, the more bloody good

your novel will be...” M. S. Gill need have no qualms about doing some dextrous scissoring.

Ramesh Chandran

## On Indian Sculpture

“Masterpieces of Indian Sculpture” by C. Sivaramamurti; National Museum New Delhi. Price Rs. 15

The Director of the National Museum, New Delhi, must be congratulated on bringing out this excellent and, considering the illustrations it contains, reasonably priced brochure highlighting some of the sculpture in the museum.

His introduction and notes are commendably brief and to the point. Those tempted by it to visit the museum to see these sculptures for themselves will certainly appreciate them better than they would perhaps otherwise have done. Most of us need a certain amount of unobtrusive guidance to get the full flavour of classical Indian sculpture. The long tradition behind it and the nature of the forms it takes in response to that tradition require to be recalled. This Mr Sivaramamurti has done admirably.

The plates are good enough for this purpose, but one cannot say that they are inspired, like some of Brunier's or Madanjeet Singh's. Mr Sivaramamurti's eminence as a scholar and an authority in his particular field of studies is well known. It would have been remarkable had he been equally gifted not only in aesthetic appreciation but in the art of communicating it to others. I do not think that he is noticeably successful in the latter. He would have been well advised to have left his readers to form their own opinion on the charm and the beauty of the figures depicted in his plates. His laudatory epithets about them smack too much of high-powered salesmanship that overreaches itself. Titling the brochure *Masterpieces of Indian Sculpture* was in itself a sufficient indication of the response expected towards them.

The choice of the 10th Century Chola bronze, Kaliya Krishna, for the cover is a brilliant one. In its sober black, white and cream setting, it stands out as the very embodiment of what the title of the brochure invites us to look for. The Government of India Press, Faridabad, also deserves to be commended for their fine printing work.

Badr-ud-Din Tyabji



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