

Top People

**HIMALAYAN
WONDERLAND: M.S. Gill
Vikas. Rs. 25.**

WHEN Dr. Hooker compiled his **Himalayan Journals** about a century back, his travelogues bore the impression of an odyssey on which rarely any of his readers could hope to embark. There is a similar aura of exploration in M. S. Gill's account of a people, deep in the northern highlands which still remain to most of us terra incognita.

An administrative assignment in the Lahaul-Spiti valley saw his involvement with the highly tradition-ridden and intricate life of the people there. A deep impact of the occult and the supernatural on the religious and mundane aspects of life is apparent from his accounts. The people have myths about almost all natural occurrences, convictions which have never been corroded by any rational outlook. There are interesting legends about the formation of Chandra and Bhaga valleys. The evolution of Rohtang Pass is also ascribed to a massive geophysical upheaval contrived by Lord Shiva.

Lahaul emerges as a valley infested with spirits and demons, both malevolent and benevolent. God appears in different human and animal guises to check on the people's devotion to Him. Storms and avalanches are considered to be the elements of divine wrath. We find lamas predicting death and people trying to forestall tragedy by following the prescribed practices. **Chaang** (country liquor) and **sattu** are not only popular, but the Gods are also propitiated by them.

The most interesting phenomenon is the **Rolance**, the revival of the dead under the impact of evil spirits which, it is believed, try to occupy the dead body. There are cases even of living persons possessed by spirits and calling for exorcism through occult practices. The persistence of such beliefs occupies most of Gill's book, but at no place does he proceed to enquire into the enigmatic occurrences.

For a sociologist there is enough to demand his attention. The customs relating to

marriage and the institution of polyandry present some sort of an anti-climax in an interesting description. Kidnapping of girls is often a prelude to marriage. But the common sharing of a wife by the husband's brothers shuts out the matrimonial chances of a majority of girls, and women outnumber the males in the society. The wife's supremacy often drives out her husband's sisters who either go abegging or languish in monasteries as reluctant nuns.

For all his animated descrip-

tion of avalanches, gales, gorges and high cliffs, Gill's attempt to enliven his account of his risky trekkings and experiences in below-zero temperature sometimes gives over to an over-wrought style. This is perhaps due to the repeated changes in the draft between his travels and the publication of the book. Nevertheless, it is an interesting survey of an area of which so little has been written in the past.

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