

Tshering Dorje, my Lahaul-Spiti brother

MANOHAR SINGH GILL

IN 1959, the Chinese suddenly attacked an Indian police patrol in Ladakh. Chief Minister Partap Singh Kairon immediately created a border district beyond Manali, across the Rohtang Pass (13,050 feet). We had to walk over the Pass and all over this mountain district of two valleys, Lahaul and Spiti, 6,000 square miles of high mountains and glaciers, with a population of about 20,000. Having done mountaineering training with Tenzing, the Everest hero, I volunteered as Deputy Commissioner in 1961.

I was about 26 years of age. When I arrived in Kullu, I was met by a man of my age, from the Keylong district office. Tshering Dorje was tall, square-faced like a Tibetan and always sported an absurd Lenin-type 'peak' cap. Like hill people, he was always smiling. He was to be my Bhoti teacher, as the government thought we needed to learn the language. But everyone spoke Hindustani of a kind and he effectively became my ADC.

I wanted to write something of my experiences, so Dorje and I went to every festival, every prayer, and even funerals. Dorje explained to me the ceremonies and I took avid notes. These became my book, *Himalayan Wonderland*. As Deputy Commissioner, for once my pleasure became my duty. There were no files to clear, and in the long winter, we only had a 'kutcha' police wireless contact with Chandigarh. Dorje was full of humour, perpetually laughing.

Once, in winter, I took him down for a week's trek to Udaipur in the Chandra-Bagha valley — which becomes the Chenab when it leaves the hills. Another time, we made a quick visit to Spiti, across Kunzum Pass (15,500 feet). Walking most of the way to Kaza, we walked all



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the way to Kaurik, on the Tibet frontier, spending only a night on the way. We were both fit, and I could match Dorje stride for stride. In February, I walked all over Keylong village, while he explained to me Losar, the Tibetan New Year. The heavily bejewelled girls, the Chhang to drink... the culture was unique. In mid-February, I took it into my head to cross the heavily snowed Rohtang with a group of locals who used to bring our 'dak' from Manali. At that time, in 1961, there were no telephone connections. Dorje was always game. We travelled for a week, through the totally snowed in Lahaul valley, climbed to Rohtang at great risk, climbed down to the other side, and walked all the way to Manali.

In 1963, I came away from Lahaul and

in 1966, Punjab was trifurcated, and all the mountain areas went to Himachal Pradesh. We became strangers. I got married, but in later years, my wife and I continued to go to Lahaul. Bhoti Master was always waiting. I kept in touch with Dorje and Lahaul-Spiti.

As Agriculture Secretary, I sent lots of funds for the development of these valleys. I did the same as Sports Minister to encourage trekking and mountaineering. With the new cellphone technology, I was in touch with Dorje almost every other day. From ADC, he became my brother of a kind. I visited him at his home in Guskiar village in the valley and his second home, high on a Kullu mountain.

As an MP, I gave funds to programmes in the Lahaul and Kullu valleys on his suggestions, by changing the rules. Normally, MPLAD Fund is given in your own state. Dorje was my life-long bond with Lahaul-Spiti, and I used to say to him that it must be some *karma*, and I was sure to be reborn as a Lama in a Lahaul monastery. He always agreed.

I always joked that we should go together. Sadly, he left suddenly a few days ago, a victim of coronavirus.

As a young man, Dorje had spent a number of years in a monastery in Tibet. He came back to Lahaul, married and had a family. He was a very learned man, not only in the Buddhist scriptures but also in Sanskrit and Hindu culture. He was widely respected in the hills and by scholars in the West. He wrote considerably and had easy access to the Dalai Lama. His going is a great loss and will leave a void in the hill culture. We had planned to go together to Lahaul through 'Atal Tunnel', for the building of which we worked over long years. I will still go, but without him. Every hill and peak will carry for me a memory of Tshering Dorje.