



A mule train crossing the Rohtang Pass (13,000 ft.), gateway to Lahaul—Spiti District.

Land Of Perpetual Sunshine

BY M. S. GILL

In September 1962, Spiti burst upon the national scene with a tragic drama, involving over 2,000 people—men and women engaged in the vital task of connecting this remote area with the rest of the country, and now trapped by the fickle gods of rain and snow. Day by day, hour by hour, the country followed this gripping battle of man against the elements. Finally the gods relented, perhaps out of respect for the grim determination of these men and women to live.

But even this accident has been of some indirect benefit. Spiti is now known. Till recently even the people of Punjab were not much aware of this important part of their State. Thanks to the press, today every Indian knows something of Spiti.

The September accident has however painted Spiti in the wrong colours and tones—dark, sombre, pitiless, forbidding. This is not so. Spiti is a land of perpetual sunshine, brilliant colours and hues, inhabited by a happy and simple people.

Spiti (pronounced Pitti) is completely hemmed in by lofty mountain ranges of an average height of 18,000 feet or more from Lahul in the west, Tibet in the east, Himachal Pradesh in the south and Ladakh in the north. The Spiti river rises near the Kunzam La at an elevation of 16,000 feet and flows in a south-easterly direction till it joins the Sutlej in Himachal. The average height of the Valley is over 11,000 feet and all around are peaks of 20,000 feet or more, the highest being a little over 23,000 ft.

Fascinating Sights

The average width of the valley is a little over a mile. The river has cut a deep and wide bed down the middle of the valley by intense erosion and now the river banks are 300 to 500 feet high. These banks have been eroded in a most fascinating way. Since there is very little rain and the snow melts gently, the ground on these slopes has melted away leaving huge slabs suspended on fantastically shaped pillars and arches. These formations are perhaps the most fascinating sight in Spiti, and I believe can be seen nowhere else.

Spiti is of great interest to students of Geology. Volume XXXVI of the Memoirs of the Geological Survey tells the story of the great primeval sea, called the Tethys, which stretched over Spiti in days when it lay on the northern shore of India. We are told there how this water was at first not connected with the Palaeozoic sea of Europe, but later spread westwards to that Continent; how the floor of the sea in Spiti rose and fell, the changes between shallow and deep water deposits being clearly traceable. Finally came



Spiti women have an unusual hair style. The pigtails are held by a turquoise-studded clip. The tails sometimes hang as far down as the knees. The turquoise stone on the forehead of this girl shows that she is unmarried.

the great upheaval, due to which the oldest deposits, which were at one time 20,000 ft. below the bottom of the sea, were carried up till they appeared in places at higher altitudes than the most recent marine systems.

The geological importance of Spiti lies in the fact that there is an almost unbroken series of marine deposits, dating from the earliest era in which animal life is known to have occurred on the earth to one of the latest geological periods.

The mountaineer will find plenty to challenge him in Spiti Peaks of every shape and size up to a height of 23,000 ft. are found in this area. Most are unclimbed and un-named. The Spiti

mountains have two points to recommend them. The valley is beyond the reach of the monsoons and has clear sunny weather all the year around. With the opening up of the valley, the base camp can be reached in a matter of days from Manali. Spiti is for those who cannot afford the big expensive expeditions of Nepal. It is for the individual mountaineer.

The Gompas or monasteries of Spiti are fascinating. There are five main ones besides a host of smaller ones. The Kye Gompa with over 200 'yellow hat' monks, and its location on a commanding ridge is the most spectacular.

Fairies' Handiwork

The Kye monastery has a rich store of books, statues and 'thankas', many of them salvaged from the old Rangrik monastery. Its 'thankas' are beautiful, many of them the product of the 16th century, the last great period of Tibetan art. The monastery also has a superb collection of heavy silk costumes and dancing masks.

According to local traditions, the oldest and the most sacred Gompa is at Tabo, lower down the valley. It is reputed to have been built by fairies. Some of the murals in this Gompa are beautifully executed and some figures have a remarkable resemblance to the Ajanta frescos.

Today Spiti is undergoing a rapid change. Hospitals and schools have been built, 'kuhls' constructed for irrigation, and

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roads to connect this valley with the rest of the State. Boys and girls are given scholarships to study in Dharmasala and Chandigarh. The Government is determined to make up for the legacy of indifference to the fate of the Spitiens.

There is plenty for the geologist, the mountaineer and the art historian but what of the common tourist with no particular bent of mind for any of these pursuits? For him there are the mountains with their yellow, ochre, chocolate, brown and myriad of other tints changing with every play of the sun; the fluted banks, columns and arches along the Spiti river like the remains of some unknown Pompeii; the Gompas with their treasures of arts, their dances, and their weird music floating down the valley of an evening; and of course the cheerful, friendly and simple men and women of Spiti who live in this fascinating but bitter land—a land where in spite of men's best efforts Nature reigns supreme.