

SUNDAY READING

THE OTHER PUNJAB

THIS is not the only Punjab there is. There is another one — the original one — that lies some thousands of miles away in the Northwest, across a series of mountain ranges.

The historian has always known about it.

The people of Punjab, a mixture of Aryan, Hun and Sythian, came long long ago from Central Asia, either as refugees or as colonisers.

Both roles are familiar to us to this day. Col. Todd, the man who wrote "The Annals of Rajasthan," told Maharaja Dalip Singh, then in exile in England, that the lovely lasses of the country of Kent, south of London, were none but his long lost cousins.

He argued thus: The original home of the Jats of the Punjab lies in the Caucasus.

One group migrated to the Punjab, another went westwards and settled in Denmark. The Danish invasion of Britain took a part of this group to Kent, where they settled and live to this day.

I do not know how the Maharaja reacted to this argument but I have certainly never hesitated to claim kin with our long lost Danish relatives, whenever the opportunity has arisen.

Last year I had visited the Caucasus. We were a delegation from the Indian co-operative movement visiting that of the Soviet Union. We hailed from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Punjab.

After a day in Moscow, we flew south to the city of Krasnodar in the Caucasus region. In Moscow our welcome had been correct, formal and polite. We were after all just one more delegation — hundreds come every day.

For the men of Krasnodar we were their cousins come visiting. Maybe they had read Col. Todd. We landed in the evening, after flying over a typical flat-tish, canal-crisscrossed landscape, so similar to that of our Punjab.

We were met with flowers, hugs, smiles and laughter — the loud open guffaws of the Punjabi.

Driven to the hotel we were given half an hour to change, and then marched to the biggest banquet I have ever been to.

We sat on a balcony overlooking the public restaurant.

The Russians love to offer and drink toasts. The men of Krasnodar were no exception. Only they were better at it than any Russians I have known.

They drank to the mighty Indian people, the great Indian leader the co-operatives of India the delegation, and, each and every one of us.

The requirements of a toast-are rather rigid: A long speech, followed by an invitation to drain to the sediment a brimming cup of vodka. Sincerity is seen in an upturned glass:

Courtesy requires each toast to be answered. We did our best, but it was a losing battle.

I always prided myself, on being able to keep up with my village cousins in Amritsar. There too, surprisingly, the requirements are similar. Sharing a single glass, you drain it, take a bite from an onion to get rid of the bitter taste, and pass the glass to the next man. Etiquette

demands that you keep up with the assembly. I must confess in Krasnodar we of the second Punjab just did not measure up to

The high street had motor lanes on either end, and a delightful tram service in the middle, masked between two rows

busy doing "godi" under a sultry sky. As in our Punjab, men and women worked side by side. Driving back we saw an imp-

He was a veteran of the second World War and I had seen many of these warriors back home.

Many years back I had a Sikh driver in the Education Department. The spit image and double of Sardar Lachhman Singh Gill, he surprisingly had the same bold temperament.

To ride with him to Delhi was an experience.

Any vehicle ahead of him was a personal affront.

He would press his front bumper to the unfortunate man's tail, and then give him the double horn.

By the time he had passed them, they were nervous wrecks for life.

In the beginning I saw the foolishness of his ways, and thought I should put an end to them.

But then the Jat in me got the better of my saner self.

What would Sarwan Singh say, I asked myself? Sahib is scared.

So I took a double insurance, said goodbye to my dear ones with genuine moisture in the eyes each time we went on tour, and hung on to the back seat as we rocked our way to Delhi, half the time on two wheels. I survived.

Sarwan Singh, of course, continues to flourish. While I have gone grey, perhaps with fear. Sarwan is full of beans and I suspect itching to pass the next car on the road.

Though I forbore to ask personal questions, I was sure my Krasnodar driver, Yuri, was Sarwan's first cousin.

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By the second day we felt as if we had been there all our lives. Everywhere we were enveloped in an atmosphere of warm hospitality.

We went to the Black Sea. On the way we were shown a co-operative restaurant. It was the excuse for a meal of vast proportions. I suggested that we were getting late for the sea. One more toast, they said.

When we did get to the beach there was the second car with the vodka and the ice, just in case one needed a pick-me-up between swims.

At a city vegetable market a pleasantly tipsy old man was determined that I should share a bottle of wine with him.

The turban of course was the real attraction.

At a supermarket a lady presented me with a book.

Not to be outdone, I gave her a little peck on the cheek, much to the delight of the shoppers collected there.

We too had taken little gifts, handicrafts, toys and other little knickknacks. These were highly appreciated. But if ever I go again, I will carry Indian music records. How they love them! Was this too a link between our past and theirs, I wondered? I do not know why we ever need an ambassador for Moscow as long as we have Raj Kapoor with us. They simply adore him. In the midst of a solemn, boring discussion about co-operatives, someone would insist on asking about Nargis-Raj Kapoor!

Our three days in Krasnodar seemed like three years. Everything was so familiar. But it was time to go. Our hosts were heartbroken.

There simply had to be a proper farewell lunch. Since the plane for Leningrad was at 8 p.m. it could go on all afternoon. It did! Around six after many sentimental toasts, we

romptu vegetable market by the road side. In the collecting farms, people are allowed an acre or two of personal kitchen garden, the produce of which are free to sell. There were baskets of lovely tomatoes, cucumbers and other usual summer vegetables.

Our driver too reminded me of home.

To say that he drove fast would be the understatement of the year.

When I twitted him about it, my companions laughed. You haven't seen what he is like after a few vodkas, they said.

Well, I didn't really need to. I knew the type only too well.



A bashful Krasnodar beauty



How shall we hoe this one? A typical Krasnodar landscape

the stamina of the men of the first. Gracefully we conceded defeat. If ever I have to go to Krasnodar again, I shall take leave and go into serious training in my Amritsar village.

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July in Krasnodar is like July in Punjab — warm, humid and sultry. A bit of cloud in the sky masking a hot bright sun. In fact, weather-wise too we might have been in Punjab.

Men wore cotton bushshirts and sandals; the women bright flowered skirts. The city is like Chandigarh, wide open boulevards with lots of trees.



A grandmother who is not afraid to work.



Selling onions and tomatoes by the road.

left for the airport, all riding a single large van.

In true Punjabi style, our hosts decided to sing us some of their native folk songs.

Passing motorists were not the least surprised.

Bottling up emotions may be the way of Europeans, but it certainly is not that of the men of Krasnodar.

At the airport the manager of Aeroflot was waiting.

A glass of wine in the private lounge, he begged. I protested.

He would not take no for an answer. How could we pass his airport without sipping a drink with him, he argued.

At eight our hosts walked us

all the way to the plane. We had to wait a while in the warm night air while the local passengers mounted the plane.

The chairman of the local co-operatives hugged me with genuine emotion, slapped my back and said with true feeling: "Mr. Gill, we have failed in our hospitality. I should have liked to lay a table right here under the plane wing for one last toast."

Reeling under the fumes of the thousand and odd that I had drunk, I thanked my maker for his oversight.

The public hugging and back-slapping of a visitor, the show of emotion and the bravado of a last drink, were the responses of a Punjabi and not those of a Nordic European

As we mounted the gangway our friends shouted half in fun, half in earnest: "Stay another day, you will not find this hospitality in Leningrad. They do not know what warmth of heart is."

As the plane rumbled down the runway, I threw a tired smile in the direction of my friend and escort, Ivanovich, or Ivan the Terrible, as I christened him. He smiled back and patted a mysterious bulging bag that was tucked between his toes.

"A couple of bottles of wine to while away the long flight," he said with a straight face. Our Krasnodar friends had been good Punjabi hosts to the last.

—Manohar Singh Gill