

Living dangerously in Lahaul Spiti

by Manohar Singh Gill

While M. S. Gill writes of the hazards of life in this Himachal area, struck by a disastrous avalanche recently, in the article below Mr Sunderlal Bahuguna, leader of the Chipko movement in Uttarakhand, UP, warns of the mounting dangers to the eco-system of the Himalayan region.

THE heavy snowfall in the Lahaul Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh has once again put this area in the national headlines. Helicopters are flying in and out of these valleys, on missions of mercy, perhaps loaded, less with supplies and more with V.I.P.s anxious to get into the news. On such occasions, everybody must make an "aerial survey". Sipping hot coffee and munching sandwiches, supplied so kindly by the Air Force, one is able on such occasions to peer out of the windows at the landscape below and murmur gentle words of sympathy to one's companion. How this helps the chaps on the ground, be they stuck in the middle of a Ganges flood or the mountains of snow in Lahaul, it is difficult to fathom.

This is not the first time Lahaul has been in the news. These high valleys in the inner Himalayas are subject to sharp vagaries of the weather. Gazetteers show that in the early September of 1976, more than 70 labourers returning to Manali from Lahaul, were frozen to death on top of the Rohtang Pass. This Pass of 13,000 ft. is placed like a funnel between the inner and the outer Himalayas. The winds on top are, therefore, demon-like and men have been known to freeze in their blast, even in summer. The month of September generally produces a freak spell of weather in these hills, often leading to fairly heavy snowfalls.

In 1963, I was the Deputy Commissioner of these valleys. I had, in the second week of September, gone on a long visit to the Spiti Valley, walking beyond Kaza, to the border with Tibet. As luck would have it, on the 18th morning I left Kaza and motored all day. By the time I reached Keylong in the late evening, it had begun to snow. It continued to do so heavily, for the next few days. The Kunzam Pass connecting Spiti was closed and so was the Rohtang Pass. Trapped between these, on the Lahaul side, were many thousands of Tibetan labourers, with families and children, who would have normally retired to Manali two weeks later. The new fallen snow avalanched in many places along the Chandra River and swept unprepared Tibetan families into the river. A number of deaths were caused in this manner. The labour started trekking back towards the

Rohtang Pass in order to get across to Manali. The snow on top of Rohtang lay many feet deep and the road was closed for the winter. It was difficult for these people, who were ill-prepared in terms of clothes and equipment, to get across the Pass in such weather.

Since communication between Keylong and the rest of the valley had broken down, I got the news only a few days later when runners could get through. It was no longer possible to motor from Keylong to Khaksar at the foot of the Rohtang Pass. My S.P. and I had to walk the whole day, covering more than 30 Kms. We got to Khaksar in a minor snow storm late at night. There was considerable chaos among the labour camping in the open, with poor medical assistance and food-stocks. Many were beginning to develop snow blindness due to the intense glare.

It took us some days to organise a proper camp. We also began to move people, slowly, across the Pass. Apart from the labour, shepherds of Kangra who graze their flocks in Lahaul in summer on the high pastures below the glaciers, were also trapped. Thousands of sheep unable to wade through the snow, died on the Rohtang. Here and there, one could see caravans of mules frozen in grotesque postures. There were even the odd bodies of people who had been buried in an attempt to cross to safety.

In those days we had no helipads in the area and, in fact, the Air Force had hardly any helicopters. My sole link with Chandigarh, the State capital, was by a wireless set over which I continued to get meaningless and unnecessary exhortations and instructions from officials and Ministers of all Departments. They could, of course, be of no help. The valley was under a constant cloud and one could hear the odd transport air-craft trying to fly over to give the V.I.P.s a look. We could hear but not see the planes.

Some newspapers talked of glaciers having fallen, including the Bara Shigri. This was all incorrect, for glaciers do not fall in this manner. All that had happened was that a heavy unseasonal snowfall had caught a lot of people unprepared on the wrong side of the pass. After some days, we got everything in order and those who were to go to Manali crossed the pass. A week later, I was ready to go back to Keylong. The weather had cleared and there was warm autumn sunshine. I was looking forward to the prospect of a brisk walk back to Keylong. Suddenly, we heard the drone of an aeroplane. Soon a Dakota came over, circled once or twice, and then began to drop a vast number of parachutes. A few fell in the river, most others were recovered. We had got the supplies at long last. It was another matter that we no longer needed them!

The current tragedy also is being reported and dealt with in similar fashion. It appears to me that there has been indeed, a very heavy snowfall, which has almost buried the houses up to the top. In the narrow valleys of Lahaul, such a snowfall is bound to produce avalanches, leading to casualties. Unfortunately, the record fall



A resident of Lahaul Spiti clearing the snow from the roof of his house.

of snow, over the period March 2 to 6, produced avalanches even on slopes which were normally considered safe. According to reports, houses in a number of villages have been swept away by avalanches, leading to many deaths. The famous monastery of Gemur is said to be no more. The list of villages that have suffered is so familiar that my heart goes out to those who are facing this tragedy.

The Lahaul winters, barring a few spells of bad weather leading to heavy snowfalls, are full of sunshine and clear skies. When the snow comes it continues for many days and I remember all of us waiting anxiously for it to end. It tries the patience a great deal and being kept cooped up inside a house is no pleasure. At the end of a snowfall the snow lies as much as a couple of feet thick on the flat roofs. The people have to clear it immediately and they do so with flat, wooden spades cutting the still soft snow into vast pine apple cakes, and throwing it into the streets below. It used to be a sight seeing the whole village on the roofs clearing snow after a heavy fall. During the winter, people do travel about the valley, provided the weather is fair.

I remember when, during that winter, I went out on a tour

towards Udaipur. We had barely reached the first village, when a very heavy snowfall caught us. We spent the day waiting in a house at Tandi and finally when the snowfall continued, we decided to walk back to Keylong rather than be trapped there. There was the risk of being caught in an avalanche on the way but if one lives in those valleys one lives with such hazards.

The impression of Lahaul from all this would appear to be of a very cruel landscape. It is not so. May will bring the melting of snows, the sowing of the crops after the ceremonial blessing of the land by the Lamas and the flowering of wild roses of every hue on the hill-sides. The summer landscape with the greenery below in the valleys and the snow peaks above is difficult to forget, ever perhaps. The climate is bracing, and if one has a desire to climb mountains, Lahaul is the place. The villages are at 9000 to 10,000 feet within a few miles of the glaciers, leading to peaks of 20,000 ft or more. The weather in the summer is clear, for the monsoon cannot cross the Great Himalayan Divide. One can, therefore, climb and hike all

through from May to September. If one wants to go for a holiday, Lahaul is the place. Gen Bruce the pioneer who led the first expeditions to Everest, discovered this long ago and spent a whole summer in Lahaul, in 1912, with his wife and some friends. While the lady stayed at Keylong in a house which is still there the men climbed a large number of peaks. Bruce and his wife have left a charming account in their book 'Koolu and Lahaul'.

The people are friendly, cheerful and enterprising. They are great traders, and have made considerable money from the caravan routes of the mountains. Many have now settled in Kulu and go to Lahaul only in the summer. Most of them follow Buddhism and the monasteries and the dances in the summers are worth seeing. Lahaul is undoubtedly a Himalayan Wonderland worth a visit by those who love the crisp air of the high mountains and a bit of adventure. I hope the recent events will at least bring this beautiful part of our country to the notice of more Indians.

Mr M. S. Gill, IAS, is the author of two books on the region covered in this article.

