

KEE, Tabo, and Dankhar are among the important Buddhist monasteries, locally known as Gompas, which have lifted the desolate valley of Spiti, situated on the Indo-Tibetan borders, to the artistic status of a "Himalayan Ajanta."

The Monastery of Kee on top of a hill, just ten kms from the valley headquarters of Kaza, is highly impressive both as a treasure house of art and as a seat of learning.

Dankhar Gompa, midway between the road-heads of Kaza and Sumdoh, is an architect's delight. One wonders how this magnificent structure was built at such a height (above 13,000 ft) and on a location where soil erosion is at its worst.

However, the pride place goes to Tabo which presents a picture of sheer beauty amidst utter desolation. The eight Tabo temples can be attributed to Rin Chen-Sang-po. An inscription inside the central temple testifies to the creation of the temples around 996-1008 AD.

The unique features of this temple are the life-size stucco images of the Vajra-Dhatu Mandala. Tabo stands as a three-dimensional Mandala. The central deity is Vairocava in his fourfold form and surrounding him, on the walls, are the tutelary deities which dwell in the Vajra-Dhatu Mandala. At the far end of the temple, beyond Vairocava, is the image of Amitabha symbolising the supreme transcendence the unity the five Dhyani Buddhas.

All around the walls are fres-



Kee Monastery (Spiti Valley).

HIMALAYAN 'AJANTA'

coes telling the story of the Bodhisattva-prince Nar-sang and also the life of Sakya Muni or Gautama Buddha.

Standing there in the bleak and barren valleys of the Western Himalaya are the rare legacies of an age of creativity. The need to preserve them in their present state is urgent and but for the recent decision of the Archaeological Department to declare Tabo as a protected monument, this part of the great Indian heritage would have been lost for ever. Mud had started pouring down the walls obliterating many of the miniature paintings. Besides, cracks had appeared in most of the painted walls. Since the construction of the buildings was done entirely in mud and timber, it cannot be expected to hold out against the ravages of time and weather for long.

What is required at the moment is to record in detail—by photographs, drawings and copies of the inscriptions—the present state of all the frescoes and statues. This task is so big that the Himachal Pradesh Government cannot possibly undertake it without substantial assistance. With the sanction of the 80-km. road linking Kaza with Sumdoh on the Hindustan-Tibet road, the number of visitors to these temples is going to increase. Along with this, the number of thefts of antiques and frescoes is going to increase too. Unless both the State and Central Governments act now to counteract this future threat, India will lose some of its most valuable treasures.

The Kee monastery was probably built in the early eighteenth century, to replace a monastery at Ran-

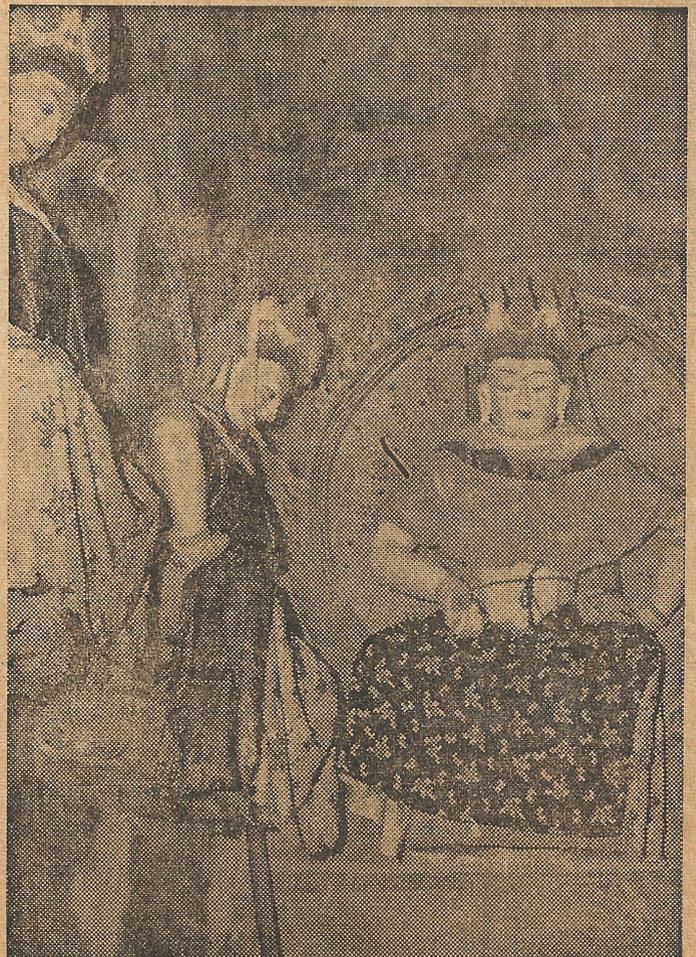
rik which had been founded in the eleventh century and then destroyed 600 years later by invaders from Ladakh. A few broken walls and relics on an isolated hill above Ranrik testify to the existence of the older monastery.

Spiti was always a weak buffer state between powerful and ambitious neighbours. The rulers of Ladakh, Western Tibet and the Punjab kingdoms all invaded Spiti at one time or the other. The Kee Monastery withstood the invasions of the eighteenth century well, for the monks took away the most precious tapestries and ornaments when they fled to the hills. However, during the Dogra invasion of 1834, Kee suffered grievously from fire, though once again the movables were saved by the timely flight of the monks.

Perched on a rocky spire, Kee presents the formidable front of a castle standing guard. It offers a wonderful view up and down the valley.

There is hardly any uniformity or order in the layout of Kee Gompa. Monks' cells are huddled together haphazardly on such ledges as the pinnacle offers. Winding steps, worn out with use, lead up to the topmost buildings. The atmosphere of unconscious worship which pervades the Spiti valley is strongest up there.

Half covering the books and the walls are the hangings, the thankas—the oldest and most beautiful of all Kee's relics. They are among Kee's last remaining links with the golden age of Western Tibetan art. Many of them date back over 300 years.



Buddha in Tabo Monastery.