

KANWALJIT SINGH OF LAHAUL

MANY years ago I was posted as Deputy Commissioner of Lahaul-Spiti. I fell in love with these inner Himalayan valleys and their fascinating people. Over the years, whenever opportunity occurred, I have tried to visit the area and spend some time in this remote Shangri-la. Last month I made yet another visit to Lahaul.

Mr Partap Singh Kairon had in 1960 set up Lahaul-Spiti as a separate district. He developed a passionate interest in the uplift of the area. Young officers were posted there and given a free hand. Mr Kairon invariably backed them against the more conservative opinions of older men. Though asthmatic, he travelled regularly to these valleys to see things for himself. In the process he often dragged along unwilling Ministers and bureaucrats, hoping to ignite in them an interest in the plight of these remote people.

Much was achieved during his regime in the way of roads, water kuhls, schools, dispensaries and agriculture. I liked to think that I too had contributed my bit in this effort. My recent visit showed how insignificant had been my effort at that time. It was given to a colleague to transform the economy of Lahaul by a single dramatic decision.

In my time "kuth" was the commercial

crop of Lahaul, but it had already got into trouble. The souring of relations with the Chinese had closed the export market. We tried desperately for alternative markets, but there were no takers. Nobody knew where the solution lay.

Kanwaljit Singh Bains was posted as Deputy Commissioner in Lahaul in 1965. Hailing from Jullundur, and being familiar with potato cultivation, he straightway saw the pos-

By MANOHAR SINGH GILL

sibility of introducing the crop in the high valleys of Lahaul. Immediately he invited nine of the best Jullundur farmers to tour the valley and advise him. Seed was imported from Kufri.

Accompanied by his Tehsildar—a Mr Sandhu—he went from one remote village to another, persuading at least one farmer to try a potato patch. People were reluctant, but Kanwaljit persisted.

The results were simply unbelievable. The rich sandy soil of Lahaul, and the clean bac-

teria-free atmosphere, were ideal for growing the best seed potatoes. The Lahaul season too—May to September—was just right for producing a seed crop to be sold to the plains in time for the winter sowing.

Kanwaljit stayed for two seasons—1965 and 1966—but in that period he had demonstrated to the Lahauls that their future lay in the potato crop. The Lahaul people are as energetic and as willing to take to new ideas as the Punjabis. Once they had seen the economic benefits, they never looked back. "Kuth" was everywhere replaced by potatoes.

Travelling in the valley at the end of September, I found all roads choked with trucks trying to bring the massive crop to Manali before the first snows fell and closed the Rohtang. It was difficult to meet anyone since the entire population was in the fields digging out potatoes with yak-pulled ploughs. The roadsides were choked with potato bags. The Deputy Commissioner's main job in September is to ensure the safe evacuation of the crop to the plains before the pass closes for the winter.

I asked for an estimate of the crop. On average it was worth Rs 2 crore a year. For a population of barely 20,000 this gives an income of Rs 1,000 for every man, woman and child per annum. People have become

rich from the crop, and now even these high remote valleys boast of four privately owned tractors. Every barren flat above the river has been cultivated.

The Lahaul people have not forgotten their benefactor. Even though it is 15 years since Kanwaljit was in the district, they all remember him. Sometimes I was mistaken for him. I did not mind the mistake. It was an unearned tribute. If ever he goes back, he can be sure of an affectionate welcome. I do not know of his standing in Punjab, but I am sure he could even win elective office from Lahaul.

The German Moravian Mission had served Lahaul for many decades before Independence and made a remarkable contribution to its development. They introduced the growing of vegetables, the knitting of socks and pullovers, improved housing and the heating systems, and the growing of willows. They also brought "kuth" from Kashmir to Lahaul. Thirty years after their going it fell to Kanwaljit's lot to better the economic condition of the area by a single dramatic decision.

It is given to few Ministers or administrators to be the harbingers of such prosperity in an area. Kanwaljit is one such fortunate man. I am full of envy and admiration.