

THE DOCTORS FROM PATHANKOT

IN the course of my official duties I once had occasion to meet a deputation of unregistered medical practitioners of Punjab. These are men who carry on the trade in the countryside. They argued for the honour of being declared "Registered Medical Practitioners." The medical men present gave them dark looks and whispered in my ear: "Quacks". Some certainly looked to me more like butchers than men on a mission of mercy.

EFFECTIVE SERVICE

I wondered how they fared in the villages. Recently I had a chance to find out. I was on a visit to Lahaul. As we drove into Keylong, the district capital of some 1500 souls, we had to pass through what might be termed the local "High Street". In the middle of the "galli", on the parapet in front of a shop, I found two Sikhs seated on a piece of jute sacking. The older man, 45-ish, lean and sharp featured, had a thin flowing pepper-white beard, which gave him the look of a Chinese mandarin. His tightly bearded young companion was obviously an understudy.

Spread before them on a piece of cloth were the wares of their trade — plastic-framed reading glasses, dentures of every size, and pliers which could serve a motor mechanic as well as a dentist. A cloth banner on

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the wall behind proclaimed the services they could render to those afflicted with eye and teeth troubles. A fair number of Lahaul people stood around waiting their turn.

Walking around another day, I thought I might make their acquaintance. I went across and greeted them with a smile, which they took for gentle derision. I watched them at work. Their service was instantaneous and effective. A foot-ruler, on which was fixed a sliding magnifying glass of some kind, was balanced on the cheek bone of the patient "Dr" Makhan Singh peered at the eye through the glass. Slowly he moved it up and down. In a minute he had the focus.

TOOTH EXTRACTION

He read off the distance from the foot-ruler, looked into his bunch of ready-made reading glasses and balanced one on the man's nose. Such was his skill that he rarely needed to make a second selection. The patient was invariably pleased and went away mumbling benedictions on the doctor in Tibetan.

Watching him, I remembered how the Lama in Rudyard Kipling's "Kim" had praised before the Curator of the Lahore Museum

the Billaury glass spectacles given to him by a similar doctor.

The younger man, who seemed to have specialised in teeth extraction, was even more dramatic. He needed no anaesthetics to extract troublesome teeth. With a flick of his wrist, like a great cricketer who specialises in the late cut, he had the offending tooth out, and on the palm of his patient. No bloody and messy struggle between doctor and tooth, as often happens in dental clinics. It was all over in the twinkle of an eye.

MONA LISA SMILE

He did not believe in half measures either. If a few other teeth were given trouble, it was best to have them all out in one go. No patient, shown the shiny ivory dentures with 16 pearly teeth in each jaw set, could resist the offer. If, therefore, more and more Keylong men are now going around with Ronald Reagan smiles, it is "Dr" Salakhan Singh who is to be thanked.

I asked them where they came from. Shyly they confessed: "Pathankot". They came often, they said, to these high valleys, going from one place to the other, giving service to the people. Did they not find it difficult to find patients, considering that everywhere there were regular Government doctors now?

I asked. Makhan Singh smiled and shook his head: "Sarkari doctors," he said, "neither have the will to serve the people nor the skill."

"Was it worth their while financially"? I queried. He just smiled — the smile of satisfaction generally attributed to Mona Lisa.

On another day we travelled far up the valley towards the Baralacha Pass. The area had the complete desolation of the inner Himalayas, and one felt lonely even with a jeepful of companions. We went up to a high village sitting on a ridge opposite a giant snow peak. It was a kind of stark Shangri-la.

As we were coming back after a visit to a local family, what did I find on the long empty slope but our two Keylong doctors trudging along? We stopped to enquire what they were up to in those higher reaches of the valley. "Oh, we had some patients to see, up in Khangsar village," said "Dr" Makhan Singh.

QUACKS ?

With the wave of a hand they were gone in the long steady strides of men familiar with the mountains. I was impressed. While the churlish would call them quacks, I would prefer to say that I have met and known Doctors Makhan Singh and Salakhan Singh, Lahaul-waale.