

General Article by Dr. W. Kaelz.

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Supreme is the fascination that the Himalayas exercise upon the human mind. Before the terrific majesty of these stupendous peaks is understood in full, the song of the Prophet: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help."

In the center of the Western Chain of these mountains, two miles above the Sea, lies the little province of Lahul. Its varied people, their curious customs and beliefs and many languages, the wealth of plants and their medicinal uses, the bracing climate and unrivalled scenery, have always intrigued the traveler's interest. On this account the biological exploration of Lahul was the first item on the research program of Urusvati, Himalayan Research Institute, of the Roerich Museum.

Though politically a part of the Kangra District, Lahul has no affinities with the tempered area below. The Western Himalayas rise in snow-capped ridges to hem it in, and only through the valley of the joined Bhaga-Chandra Rivers that flow north to join the mighty Indus is nature's gateway into this secluded land. But man, ever impatient of nature's barriers, has scaled the jagged fastnesses and through the misty years, across the lofty Bara Lacha and the dreaded Rothang, the stream of trade and warfare has come into the land.

In early July our caravan, too, left the monsoon-washed valley of the Beas and joined the countless herds that in endless stream poured across the Rothang Pass into the freshening pastures of Lahul. The Rothang Pass is 13,000

ft. above the sea. As Passes go, the ascent is easy, and yet only in Summer may a safe crossing be made. When the vengeful Paldan Ihamo who dwells near the Sacred Lake on its summit and lets loose from her bag of plagues, blasts to destroy the trespasser who ventures too early or too late, only then is she at rest. The tales are many of great suffering incurred and of reckless lives that have been lost (at one breath 160 men were once blown away) and hordes and hordes of sheep and goats have been buried in untimely snows.

But in July the Pass is a peaceful garden. Scented purple iris, yellow buttercups, pink and white primroses, purple, yellow, and white anemones crowd one another to cover the ground, and exquisite lavender rhododendrons fill the ravines that are sheltered from Winter's blasts. Little streams from the melting snows rustle down to quickly join the noisy young Beas that rises in a spring at the crest of the Pass. The glorious meadows are made brighter still by the variegated, ribbon-strewn tents of migrating nomads, returning from their Winter sojourn on the warm plains below. On the upward path the sheep move slowly, irresistibly forward, led by a guardian dog, safe in his iron collar to battle with the marauding leopard, and followed by the blanketed shepherd, stuffed with kids and lambs too weak for the strenuous trek. Our Caravan disturbs in no way the predestined march. We push through the crowded creatures and the stream moves on.

At the top of the Pass a Buddhist Shrine with fluttering rags and paper prayers proclaims the customs of a new land. In seclusion the Buddhist religion has lingered in these valleys, revived and refreshed by constant intercourse with the fount at Lhasa; but

the practices are not according to the doctrines of the Great Teacher nor yet in accord with those of the Great Living Head in the Holy City of the East. Hindu forms of worship, and superstition and rites that have descended from times when the mountains were young, are interwoven with the degenerated observances of the Buddhism of to-day. The fire dance, devil exorcation, snake worship, the famous Devil Dance, have nothing to do with the Buddhist Religion, but are reminiscent of the lore of the Red Man, far across the Sea.

The descent from the Pass is rapid, and the view soon opens onto the gorge of the angry Chandra, swollen and milky from the melting snows of Spiti. Across the range that divides them from their berth flows the Sister Stream, the Bhaga. The Chandra's course in Lahul is some 22 miles, that of the Bhaga over 30, but beyond 20 miles settlement ceases, and united they flow 15 miles till the boundary that separates Lahul from the raja-governed State of Chamba. The narrow valley of these rivers constitutes Lahul. Steep-walled, for the most part, over long stretches the valley affords no arable land. Now here, now there, the gorge opens and in a few places fields are terraced up the slopes to a distance of 2 or 3 miles. But all level ground cannot be utilized for cultivation. There may be no water or the elevation may be too great. The Summer rainfall is so slight that all crops are watered from the icy streams that descend from the upper snows. The snowfall is heavy so that snow lingers long; then on the heights and above 11,000 feet the season is too short for crops to mature. The valley floor is of less than 10,000 feet elevation only near the Chamba border and the encircling mountains rise in peaks of more than 20,000 ft.

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Glaciers fill the bottoms of the tributary valleys and the eternal snow rests on the lofty crests. In the Glaciers dwell, as the Lahuli believes, dragons that in fair weather sleep in crevices beneath the ice, but in storm rise to the clouds and the thunder is their voice.

Up to the very borders of the perennial snows extends the carpet of vegetation. Everywhere plant life succeeds the melting snow, and in June fresh green and bright colors bedeck the earth. Even from the crevices of the cliffs hang clusters of showy flowers and over the bare rocks creep the painted lichens. Trees are rare, but here and there on western and sometimes southern slopes there is a grove of pine or birch, while on the opposite drier slope in the Bhaga Valley there are stretches of cedar.

Old friends from home we find among the flowers. Rosebushes laden with fragrant pink or golden blooms dot the hillsides, and near the snow a dainty white one grows. Fragrant yellow sweetpeas, lavender orchids, purple asters, blue forgetmenots, pink salvia, white carrots and anemones transform the hayfields into a brilliant scented garden. Purple and yellow thistles, white chickweeds, pink smartweeds and other familiar outcasts of the plant world crowd the edges of the fields and luxuriant golden marsh. Marigolds and lavender mint mark the course of streams.

And up to the mountain tops ascends the floral profusion: Strawberries, geraniums, buttercups, forgetmenots, iris, royal blue and pink flowering onions, papery everlastings, lacy pinks, delicate columbines begin outside of man's domains and join in the grandest floral display of all on the meadows beside the snow. Salmon pink primroses interspersed with lavender iris on the level stretches

follow hard on the retreating snow and on the slopes flaunt royal purple, lavender, white primroses, bright blue Delphinians and gentians, musk-scented aconite, green orchids, green-brown spotted lilies, the manyhued Pedicularis, the gorgeous blue poppy. In sheltered places grow a few honeysuckles and mountain ash. Tiny millows, an inch high, fragrant juniper, and sweet-scented lemon-colored rhododendrons flourish far and wide.

The plants are useful too. More than 60 of the Medicinal plants of the Tibetan Pharmacopœia are found on the roster of the Lahuli census, for like the human population, the plants too have their strongest affinities with the East. The renowned Ephedra here is of particular quality and much has been gathered for market. The virtues of the other Tibetan medicines are not yet known to the West and the purple-robed lamas alone make useful their healing powers.

And long is the list of plants whose uses are known to the common people. Sedges are converted into the open-work shoes that the Lahuli wears summer and winter. The seeds of two wild parsleys and the root of another, a goosefoot, three mints and an onion make fragrant spices. All blooms are used to adorn the altars and the festive Lahuli is never without flowers in his hat. The everlastings, the yellow clove, the buttercup, the strung petals of the Yellow Rose and the French Marigold that is cultivated in every garden are dried for Winter ornament. No less than 20 plants supply the Lahuli food. With this abundance of Nature's vegetable garden, the Lahuli is spared the trouble of planting one, and only here and there an enterprising native supplements the free supply with a small plantation of cabbages, radishes and turnips.

Young wild carrots stewed in peppermint, dandelion greens and boiled sorrel, clover blossoms, wild buckwheat leaves, lily shoots, young thistles, pinks, wild parsley are all on the bill of fare.

The vegetation is esteemed by animals as well, and by fall every particle is cropped to the ground. Only two plants are spared-- the iris, and a bright pink buckwheat, but after the frosts have come, the iris too, is approved and vanishes. Thousands of domestic animals are fed each year on the pastures of Lahul. Some 100,000 head, mammal sheep and goats come annually across the Rothang to graze and pay a half a cent a head for the privilege.

The wild animal population is poor. The Tangras or ibex, a huge goat with heavy horns 3 ft. long and more, is the only important game animal. In summer the ibex flee before the Shepherd's herds to the inaccessible peaks, and not until fall and winter, do they descend to make the most of the scanty leavings of the domestic herds. The pursuit of the ibex is the hunterman's favorite sport, and only a good mountaineer and a better shot can bag one. The musk deer whose scent is so highly prized by the perfumers of the Occident occurs among shrubs and forest here and there, and a red bear occasionally makes known his presence by plundering a buckwheat field. The snow leopard roams the hills in summer and feeds on horses and other cattle that come his way. He is always elusive but in winter when the snow drives him to the valleys, sometimes one or two are killed. Smaller fur-bearers are rare. The fox and the marten have been nearly exterminated because of their valuable fur, and the little conies, weasels, mice and shrews that close the list, do not often cross the paths of men.

Of birds, only a few species are common. A huge wary grouse with a dozen names and a loud musical whistle, lives with the ibex and gives alarm at even the distant approach of man. Below in the fields abounds another grouse, the Chikare. At harvest the flocks descend on the grain fields and the Lahulis make wild haste to bring their grain under cover. In spring, hordes of bath blue and white pigeons join the Chikares on the newly sown fields and the despair of the sower becomes the delight of his small son, who is stationed with stones and a picnic lunch to drive off the devouring swarms. A brown finch from the peaks comes down in flocks in the fall and gives warning, the Lahulis say, that winter is at hand. There are other birds that are not so gregarious: finches, shukes, wrens, thrushes, creepers, chickadees, wagtails, grosbeaks, hawks, and finally, the giant vultures that sailing high, keep watch for some unlucky goat to slip from the cliff or to fall victim to a boulder dislodged by a comrade above. Of such a mishap no trace remains. Bones too large to be swallowed whole are carried aloft and dropped for seduction on the rocks below. Unequaled are these great birds in power and grace of flight, and as with motionless wings they soar above peaks, the mind perceives in greater force the majesty and grandeur of the hills.

Such are the features of the little province in which dwell some 10,000 people, scattered in villages along less than 60 miles of river bank. In each section the appearance and customs of the inhabitants and also their language differ. Five languages are spoken, three of them peculiar to the country, and the count does not include English and Urdu, the official languages of the Indian Empire. The Chandra Valley and the village of Kyelang have each a peculiar tongue. In the rest of the Bhaga Valley

Tibetan is spoken and in the valley of the united rivers to the boundary, the language is Partan. The blacksmiths of all the districts have a peculiar tongue, and not a word of it is understood by any of the higher castes. Tibetan, as in all of Central Asia, is here too the medium of communication and every intelligent Lahuli can speak it.

The inhabitants live by sheepraising, agriculture and by trade. Commerce, is in the main, traffic in wool and salt, which on the backs of sheep are brought from Tibet. There is no variety of crops: barley, wheat, buckwheat, two kinds of peas, and potatoes complete the register, and, with the flesh of an occasional sheep or goat, support a vigorous population.

Work begins in the fields in early May when the spotted thrush returns from the South. Then the churrus are harnessed and the fields are got ready to sow. The churru is the sturdy descendant of a cow, and a yak, and is commoner than either of its parents. The females give better milk than a cow and more milk than a yak. The male churrus are used for the ploughing. A horse never does any work in the fields, and in some parts of Lahul never does any sort of domestic work, wood even, being carried on human backs. The men plough and sow; the women tend the crops; but both work at the harvest. By the end of September all the crops have been carried home on the harvesters' backs, and the cattle have come down from the hills, for heavy snows may suddenly fall.

Polyandry is the common marriage system of the masses; the wife of the oldest brother takes his younger brothers into the bargain. Thus the father's tiny fields are not divided and the population of the crowded land is not increased. There are more than twenty-five monasteries and many lamas but, the lamas are not celibate.



The Lahuli men are in no way tied down by the marriage institution. On the contrary a wife is an important asset in Lahul. Now the fortunate husband goes off about his business across the Pass for from six months to two years, and knows that the little wife back home will plant and harvest the crops and feed the cattle. So capable are the women, that many men stay at home not more than a few weeks in the year, and there is no comment from the neighbors. Often the women leave home too, and join the men in spending the winter across the Rothang, where on account of their strength and willingness - whatever work there is, is given them to do.

Thus are the country and its people. Nowhere in the world is there such a mine of untrapped riches for the Scientist, be his interests what they may, and nowhere have nature and man produced a happier setting for his labors.