

Fresh from the Arabian Desert, Mohammed Asad visits the hill country of northern India, which he finds more to his taste than the effete Indian plain.

# Himalayan HOLIDAY

By MOHAMMED ASAD

Translated from the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*  
Zürich German-Language Daily

I STOOD sadly in the old bazaar of Lahore and wondered why it was that Indians, in their everyday life, seemed like empty, meaningless husks driven by the wind. I was standing in that narrow street which runs from the Delhi gate to the centre of the old city. I saw two rows of tiny shops only three feet high, mere niches, in which merchants were squatting among their wares, as they do in so many other Eastern cities. I watched a thick stream of people going steadily by in both directions, pushing and jostling each other and crying out. There were porters, ox carts, two-wheeled tongas, a changing mass of clothes and faces and colors, of men and women. But, hard as I tried, I could not make them assume a definite form as a whole. They were like a lot of bright colors that have been mixed together till they form an empty, lifeless gray.

Through the arch of a gateway that

spanned the bazaar I could see portions of the old mosque, a mighty monument built three hundred years ago by a prosperous minister who had been richly rewarded by his sovereign. A wonderful blending and harmony of colors, glazed tiles fitting together to form a mosaic, a whole great wall of colored tiles designed in perfect rhythm—how remote that all is from the India of to-day. Perhaps the people themselves felt this painful contradiction and wished to conceal it, for they have built a row of shops diagonally in front of the mosque. Sweets and sour milk and cream are sold, public cooks work for little money—and Wazir Khan's mosque dares to reveal only a fraction of its splendor to the passer-by. For though it belongs to the past it is a living reality.

But the life of present-day India is like a moon that reflects the sunlight

of our imagination and memory yet sheds no light of its own. It has no character if, apart from moral considerations, we mean by character a certain sum of definite, clearly outlined characteristics. Or is, perhaps, the India of to-day an amorphous cosmos, big with future fulfillment because it is so wretched and so infinitely large?

## II

As it was beginning to grow dusk an Indian friend came along and seized my hand. 'I know a singer,' he said, 'whom I want you to hear this very evening.' I went with him. Whenever I am oppressed by India's vagueness and remoteness from life, I shall always think of that wonderful woman; for what I saw was vitality incarnate.

We found her in a carpeted room among musicians with cymbals, noisy drums, and marvelously shaped guitars. She sang, and her voice was deep and of good tone, but that was incidental. She was wearing the most beautiful kind of Indian feminine attire: wide trousers of blue brocade embroidered with gold, a lilac-colored tunic with flowing sleeves, and over her head and shoulders a true Benares veil delicately woven of red and gold threads. But even that was unimportant compared to the tranquil, unconventional reality of her bearing and gestures.

She was not what one would usually call pretty, for she had prominent cheek bones and a somewhat too wide nose. But her eyes had that rare, perfect almond shape which is seen only in the mountainous regions of Asia. And, as a matter of fact, she belonged to the Perni race, one of

those nomadic peoples of enigmatic origin that roam the plateaus of northernmost India. Her brow was low but broad and well-formed, and her mouth was red and quivering, filled with deep knowledge and even greater hope, as if it were forever thinking of all the intoxication, all the bitterness, and all the sensual pleasure of past and future days. It was not intellectual knowledge or memory, not thought, but *being*, a continuous living in the present. But the strangest thing about her was doubtless her hands, long, narrow, aristocratic hands full of soft strength and with secret, panicky motions, hands that never became enervated, even in sleep, and that never lost their inner radiance. And as I look back I could almost swear that a real light radiated, with infinite tenderness, from the white skin of her fingers.

A curious Platonic friendship arose between this lady and myself. For my part, I felt astonishment at anything so perfect; and as for her, though it sounds almost ludicrous to say so, she was impressed by the fact that I was a hadji—one who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca—and that, moreover, I lived in Medina, near the Prophet's grave. For although women singers in India are more than broad-minded in regard to their moral standards, those of them who are Mohammedan feel an unusually strong interest in everything pertaining to religion. They begin the day by reciting a portion of the Koran; they fast during the month of Ramadan—and at the same time they view the lack of harmony between their life and their faith with a kind of melancholy resignation. But it may perhaps be said that although they are often dissipated they

are never depraved—and only hardened Pharisees will deny that such a distinction exists or that, although they live as dancing girls, they have retained a feminine attitude.

She sang and also danced a little, though it was not really dancing but merely walking around and moving her arms and feet. Her silver anklets jingled, and she stared into space out of the depths of her great, black almond eyes. Then she sank wearily into some cushions against the wall, and her shell-colored hands lay to either side of her on the dark carpet. My friend asked her where she had been born, and she answered: 'My father was a musician. We went from city to city, wherever there was an annual fair. My mother bore me at the fair in Kulu, while the Hindus were holding their Dusserah festival. Then she died, because it was so cold there. My father told me later that they buried her while the Hindus were dancing around their gods and drinking rice liquor on the meadow near by, and Father wept bitterly because there was no one to read aloud from the Koran over his dead wife.'

I asked where Kulu was, but she did not know exactly; it was somewhere in the mountains beyond Kangra.

### III

Thus it happened that the name 'Kulu' swam into my ken, and I heard the fifes and drums and the singing of men dancing about gold and silver idols in a cold mountain valley with meadows and fir trees and clear, biting air. I began to long for Kulu. That same evening I opened a map when I got home, and there I found it—a town and district in the

Himalayas on the edge of the Punjab, not far from the Tibetan border. Thither we should go. And the Dusserah festival was only a few days off.

We changed trains by night at Pathankot and left the plains of the Punjab for good and all. A narrow-gauge line took us through the valley of Kangra at the break of dawn, and we got our first foretaste of the Himalayas: crests of hills rising dark against the reddening sky, cool and green with their woods, sloping fields, and tea plantations; here and there a mountain brook, rushing over water-worn stones. In the forenoon we entered rocky country and the railroad had to make many turns. And then the little town of Kangra, from which the valley takes its name, came into view. Widely scattered houses buried in foliage up to their slate-covered roofs and above, on the top of a solitary hill, the ruins of the old fort of Nagarkot. Many hundred years ago it was considered impregnable and in troublous times it offered the princes of northern India a place of certain refuge. Great quantities of idols ornamented with the most costly jewels also stood here. But the time came when Mahmud of Ghazni, one of the great figures of the Mohammedan Middle Ages, arrived here to destroy all idols in honor of the only God and to break the power of those who worshiped them. He took the fort at the first attack. It is told that on their return home from this expedition his soldiers sold by the bushel in the market place of Ghazni the jewels they had seized. The slaves who had been brought back from the plains and hills of India brought scarcely eight silver pieces a head.

The railroad did not continue much further and the mountains were already growing pretty high. I got out at the village of Joginder Nagar. There was a narrow bazaar street with shops on both sides and the houses had wooden verandas and balconies and gabled roofs, like Swiss chalets. The odor in the street was like that of mountain villages all over the world—an odor of fresh wood and cow stables, of milk and untanned leather, and the cool fragrance of trees. There were two ways to get to Kulu—one, a footpath over the Bhabu Pass that would take three days; the other, a roundabout route through Mandi, one day by mail truck.

Mandi is the capital of the semi-independent native state of the same name on the western edge of the Himalayas, a lovely little spot of mountains and foaming streams, narrow streets going up and down hill between rows of houses from which pretty women in voluminous colored skirts issue forth. There are also small, very old temples with high, steep domes and tiny half-open courtyards in which one can see a strangely formed god or a bronze cow, the face always turned inward toward the holy shrine.

This place reminds one of the happy homecoming in a fairy tale, for it radiates peace and security and does not give out a single false tone. The houses are simple and unpretentious, indeed, almost tasteless, and the streets wind in and out, accommodating themselves to the hills between which the town is suspended. But that is precisely what is impressive about Mandi, for not one of its architectural structures claims to be

anything in itself but simply adjusts itself to the requirements of the countryside, that is, to reality. If the long quadrangular market place above stretches out in a barely perceptible slope, that is solely because only here and only to this extent was there a level space on the top of a hill. And the shops, surmounted by a row of little wooden turrets, which surround the market place on three sides are like the rim of a basin that protects and holds in its contents. Behind them on three sides the hill declines, falling down like a green tablecloth with many folds. The folds are narrow, shaded, winding streets that run downhill to the Beas River on the north, and the embroidery on the hem of the tablecloth consists of countless old stone temples, carved into bizarre forms and crowned with conical or oval domes. They stand on the edge of the river, which is considered holy, and from their dim depths the statues of gods watch the eternal water rushing by. There is Ganesa, with the elephant's head, and ten-armed Durga, and many others whose names are unknown to the foreigner.

When I saw Mandi for the first time at twilight yesterday, now concealed and now revealed by the many windings of our road, when I saw its houses climbing upward from the edge of the river among bushes and trees, while here and there lights sparkled from their windows, I forgot my grudge against the India of the plains, against its vagueness and remoteness from life. Mandi seemed like a justification, like one of those few righteous beings for whose sake God, as ancient scriptures tell, was ready to pardon an entire guilty people.

## IV

The morning we left Mandi was clear as glass. No shadow lay on the clean expanse of thickly wooded mountains. The world had drunk its fill of the silence of the night and day was now speaking with all its cheerful clamor. A little bell was tinkling in a Hindu temple on the bank of the Beas River. Women were singing in the rice fields that sloped downward in terraces toward the water.

The Himalayas began with dense mountains and deep valleys. The mountains were covered with trees and their slopes were softly rounded. Streams purred through the valleys. After the Indian plain, after the cheerless, endless landscape that lacks the freedom of the Asiatic steppes as well as the majesty of the desert and merely yields daily bread in return for hard labor, after this Indian plain it was really a revelation to climb the rising Himalayas. For hours our automobile continued high above the river, winding upwards through the mountains as the landscape became steadily more wild, more lofty, and more still. The rice fields disappeared. The gently rounded mountains were often transformed into precipitous walls that held the foaming river in their grip, and the road ahead of us kept growing narrower and more tortuous. We had reached the pass between Mandi and the valley of Kulu.

Then the landscape gradually flattened. The mountains lost their unassailable steepness and descended on both sides of the river. They became rounded again, and again their rocky nakedness became covered with turf and trees. The valley opened out into

an extensive plateau with meadows and lovely forests, and then for the first time in many years I saw fir trees, dark green, towering fir trees full of mysteries and memories. And the years that I had spent in the desert and in torrid solitude grew dim and vanished while other years rose up and called to me with long-forgotten voices. And I recognized in the sudden momentary contraction of my heart that my life had hung between two worlds without a home in either. But when I recovered my senses I understood that my sensations were due entirely to this strange country of India, which is so curious that it is almost unreal, a world between worlds without a home in either, a country that is neither East nor West.

The first village in the Kulu valley lay before us. Houses with sharply sloping slate roofs were sunk between tea plantations. Wild-eyed shepherds were driving a great herd of sheep. They had come from the mountains bordering on Tibet and were moving toward the plain in order to escape the Himalayan winter. While our chauffeur stopped for water and gasoline I walked over to a group of shepherds who were eating their midday meal by the roadside. I spoke to them in my broken Hindustani, but they did not understand me. Their home was far from here in Ladakh. They wore short, shirtlike jackets made of coarse, light-gray wool and had sandals strapped to their feet. Their long hair was disheveled and their faces looked as if they had been cast in dark metal. One of them offered me a wooden bowl of milk. I drank it and saw over the rim the dark eyes of a boy regarding me.

These eyes had that placid apathy which those of newborn animals often have. They were warm and amazingly round. Never had I seen such eyes in the Indian lowlands, where the children have keen perceptions and seem to be born old.

And there was Kulu. At first I could see only a wide meadow where many people were busy setting up little shops and tents and carrying beams and planks here and there. The keeper of an eating house was building an earthen oven. Merchants from Chinese Turkestan were unpacking great bundles of carpets. But behind the confusion on the festive plain rose a wall of silence in the form of thousands of Himalayan fir trees that rose to an inconceivable height against a background of mountain and sky. They were as wonderful and as even in their growth as the colonnades of some old temple.

A few houses stood near the field where the preparations for the festival were under way—a post office, a school, an inn for travelers, and a few other public buildings. But the real Kulu was invisible. I first discovered it in the late afternoon as I was wandering among the shops of the so-called lower bazaar. I saw a narrow street that suddenly ran up a steep hill and then disappeared in a series of curves. Here Kulu began. In ancient times they had built the little town over the crest of a hill and had walled it in. Now the walls have disappeared and Kulu hangs like a pair of saddlebags on both sides of the eminence. The only road climbs one side and descends the other, running like a ravine between little old houses with wooden façades that have shops downstairs and upstairs carved,

smoke-stained verandas. There is a great stillness in this street, which is so narrow that two people in opposite windows could shake hands with each other. Life has been confined to a miniature framework by reason of the almost other-worldly remoteness and self-sufficiency of this little town. All the people keep silent. The shopkeepers sit motionless and cross-legged in their shops, where the products of European factories are offered for sale side by side with dusty curios from upper Asia.

The people here have waxen faces. They are quite different from the noisy, laughing peasant girls and young fellows in the new lower bazaar or the people in the meadow. They lead a secluded life like figures in some abandoned marionette show. Many of the men wear the yellow mark of the Brahman on their faces, the mark of the highest caste of the thrice-born, and the women here have a quiet, aristocratic bearing. They do not talk loudly or laugh and their faces are of a dull whiteness and possess a remarkably appealing and at the same time piquant beauty, bordering on coldness yet at the same time revealing the smouldering fire lurking in their hearts. I caught a low, wordless whispering in the air every time these women passed. They wore colored shawls and silk kerchiefs and almost always walked in groups. Their eyes looked straight ahead.

Is the atmosphere of Kulu a charm or a curse? I cannot definitely say, for the change from the fir trees in the valley and the unconstrained hilarity of the peasants to this forgotten, remote mountain village was too sharp, too unreal, for my sensations to be translated into words.

## V

A dim, vaulted gateway brought me into an open, grassy square surrounded by some buildings that were taller and better constructed than the others I had seen. They were the palace of the Rajah of Kulu, to-day rajah in name only and no longer enjoying even the appearance of power. His ancestors ruled over Kulu, Lahul, and Spiti, and a large part of the principality of Chamba in the northwest. They kept in constant communication with the Dalai Lama of Tibet, and even the government of the Celestial Empire considered itself obliged to accept occasional presents from the ruler of Kulu and to give presents in return, since the chief trade routes from Tibet and Chinese Turkestan to India meet at Kulu. In the middle of the last century the British conquered Kulu and added it to the Indian Empire, and the man who is now allowed to call himself the Rajah of Kulu hardly differs from many of the other great landed proprietors of India. Nevertheless, the people of Kulu still pay him the same honors that their ancestors paid to his ancestor. Hence the Rajah must have a palace, even though it costs more to maintain than all the other local expenditures put together.

From the high plateau in front of the palace I surveyed the houses of Kulu, which stood in irregular groups on both sides of the mountain. Unlike the villages and towns of the plains, they gave a very strong impression of cleanliness. Every house was surrounded by a little paved courtyard. Thousands and thousands of yellow ears of corn were laid out to dry on the slate roofs. Poppies were growing in

front of the windows, and big rose-bushes were in bloom.

As evening approached I decided that I had better start making my way back, for I had taken a room at the inn. I saw another narrow gateway leading from the palace square toward the cluster of houses around the bazaar and took this route. However, it turned out not to be a path at all but a little walled court with a door at the rear, and over the door curious figures of idols cut in stone—women with many arms, gods with the heads of elephants, obscene embraces between the sexes. Obviously it was a temple. The door was ajar. I looked in through the dim light. Nobody was there and I could not resist the temptation to enter, although non-Hindus are strictly forbidden to enter Hindu temples. What light there was came in through the half-open door and through a long, narrow window that extended up to the roof. Outside the sun was setting.

I had difficulty in distinguishing the details. The room was small and the low roof was made of blackened, carved deodar logs. A few silver and copper lamps hung from the ceiling on chains, but they were not lit. At the further end of the room stood a kind of altar. It was a single block of wood in the shape of a pyramid, all four sides of which were decorated with the silver masks of gods. In front of it was a shallow stone vessel half full of oil, out of the middle of which rose a perpendicular, polished stone about a foot long. It was apparently made of black marble and was about as thick as a child's arm. This was the *linga*, the phallic symbol of Hindu mythology, the sign of fertility and rebirth.

I was surprised to find a linga temple here in the Himalayas and wanted to open the door wider in order to look at the room more closely, but I suddenly heard voices outside. It would have been more than embarrassing for me to be found here in the temple, me, an unbeliever, an unclean person whose mere presence in the house of the gods would defile it for many days. Therefore I quickly drew back inside the temple and squeezed myself into a narrow alcove on the right, behind the pyramid. A big barrel of oil, which I supposed was the holy oil for the temple lamp, protected me from sight if I made myself small enough.

An old man entered. I saw his face as he lit the lamps. He had the Brahman sign on his forehead and was obviously a priest of this temple, though his clothes did not differ in the smallest detail from the usual Kulu garments. After he had lit the lights he opened the door a little wider and a young woman appeared. She held her head low and listened to the words of the priest, who spoke to her in a half whisper, urgently, as if in warning.

What on earth was going to happen to me, I wondered. I looked sharply about and discovered to my relief a small door in the back of the alcove. It was held shut on the inside by a wooden bolt and led, as I could see through the cracks, to the open stretch of grass in front of the palace. At that moment nobody was out there. The way for my exit was clear. I had pulled the bolt slowly when I heard the other door creak on its hinges. I looked sharply over the edge of the barrel and saw the young woman alone in the room in front of

the linga. The priest had gone and shut the door behind him.

I waited. In the flickering light of the oil lamp I saw the woman's face. It was sad and anxious. She stood for a while with folded hands in front of the linga and then slowly began undoing the buckles on her clothes. She threw off the shawl that hid her face and then with slow, dawdling motions took off all the rest of her clothes until she stood naked and shivering in the temple. Then she knelt down before the linga, and I understood. She was barren and was praying to the god of her belief for a child. She dipped the ends of her fingers in the holy oil of the stone basin, rubbed it over the linga and then on her own forehead, breasts, and hips. When she had done this she threw herself face downwards and beat her forehead repeatedly on the stone floor. And as she lay there a slight shudder passed over her shoulders and I heard a suppressed sound of weeping. Such weeping I had never heard in my life before. It was so full of despair, helplessness, and misery that my blood ran cold. For the greatest misfortune that can befall a Hindu woman is not to have a child that can perform the holy rites after her death and thus make rebirth possible.

I could not bear this weeping any longer. Gently I opened the little door and slipped out, and at the same moment the woman in the temple let out a sob of heartrending despair. Panic seized my heart. I ran with tremendous strides, as if I were being pursued, across the grassy surface of the empty square, on which the harvest moon was casting its first pale light.

The Oxford Union Society voted at a recent debate against fighting 'for King and Country.' Here is a London editorial on the subject and a report from the Union's undergraduate president. The episode indicates that England's oldest university has gone pacifist.

# Oxford Goes LEFT

A TALE OF  
HORROR

## I. 'YELLOW COWARDS'

From the *Week-end Review*, London Independent Weekly of the Right

WE CULL the flower of language that adorns the head of this article from the elegant garlands of abuse that have decked the columns of the press in honor of the undergraduates of Oxford University, who the other evening carried a motion in the Union by 275 votes to 153 to the effect 'that this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country.' To gather a representative selection would make a pretty if somewhat cumbersome nosegay. Seldom can the language of the gutter have been more freely applied by defenders of the established order to that order's gilded youth. Instead of pausing to consider the precise meaning of the vote, one paper after another rushed

into print with expletives. It did n't really happen. Or, alternatively, if it did happen, it was n't fair. The voting was n't representative; the undergraduates did n't mean what they said. Or, alternatively, if they did mean what they said they were cads. Nothing was too bad for them; even the Honorable Quintin Hogg was hauled into service for the attack.

*The Times* was at its characteristic best. The Union 'is in no sense representative of the University (despite [ominous thought for the future!] the eminent persons in every generation who have used it as a training ground for Parliament)'; it has 'always been liable to fall into the hands of a little clique of cranks.' We wish we had the