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A Road Much Travelled

Harish Kapadia

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

- Robert Frost

(‘The Road Not Taken’ is a poem by Robert Frost, published in 1916 in his collection Mountain Interval. It is the first poem in the volume. The title is often misremembered as ‘The Road Less Traveled’, from the penultimate line: ‘I took the one less traveled by’.)

Kim looked through binoculars. He was awestruck and said to his companion Lama:

“Surely the Gods live here!” said Kim beaten down by silence and appalling sweep and dispersal of the cloud-shadows after rain. “This is no place for men.”

The wise Lama lowered his binoculars and quietly said, ‘Look down a little. Tourists also live here. This is a place for men too!’

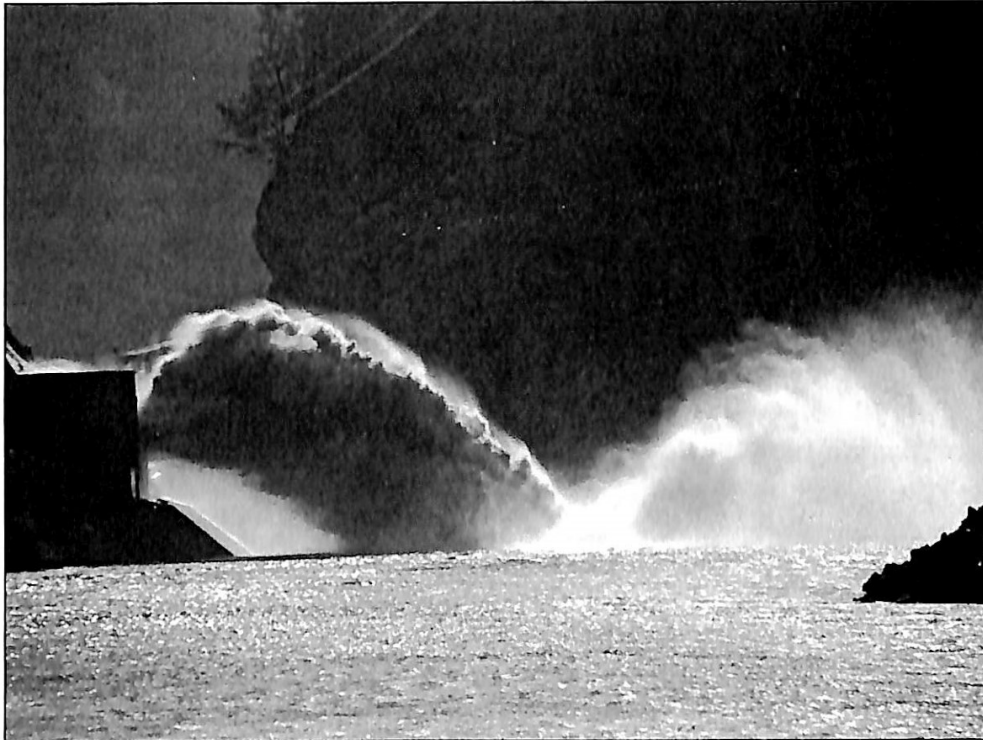
“Who goes to the Hills goes to his mother.” They had crossed the Siwaliks and half tropical Doon, left Mussoorie behind them and headed north along the narrow hill-roads. Day after day they struck deeper into the huddled mountains, and day after day Kim watched lama return to a man’s strength.¹

This is what Rudyard Kipling writes in his legendary novel *Kim*. Kim, a young boy, travels on the Hindustan-Tibet road, going through much hardship and finally reaches the present-day border between India and China. The route was through Shimla and Kinnaur. Travelling on the road in 2008 I wondered what Kim and the wise Lama would have seen today. I have been visiting Spiti and Kinnaur since 1983. Even 25 years ago this was the road ‘Less travelled by’, but today it is the road much travelled on, may be much too travelled.

1. *Kim*, by Rudyard Kipling. (Macmillan and co, London, 1901)

On the Road with Kim (if he were travelling today)

Kim spent a day at Shimla. He found it too expensive to get a decent hotel room - it was peak tourist season after all. They hired a taxi and drove to Narkanda and descended to banks of the now turbulent Satluj. Passing hot and very crowded Rampur-Bushahr they were soon passing Zhakri village.



26. The Satluj emerging from a tunnel, back to its course. (Harish Kapadia)

‘What is this?’, Lama exclaimed. ‘The Satluj has disappeared; its entire course is dry. Look all the stones in its bed can be seen.’ Confused and shocked they halted the taxi at Jyuri for a tea break. ‘Nothing to worry, this is not curse of God as you say. This is because of the Naptha-Zhakri project. From Naptha village up stream, the Satluj has been diverted through tunnels into the mountain side. After running its course inside, where large generators are set up, water is released back to the original course of the river at Zkakri. Inside the mountain, at several stages electricity is generated. This is one of the largest power projects in the Himachal state, entirely undertaken by Indian engineers.’ All along the route, instead of wilderness and rocks Kim observed a two-lane highway, large colonies of residential buildings for the engineers and several taxis parked at every junction.

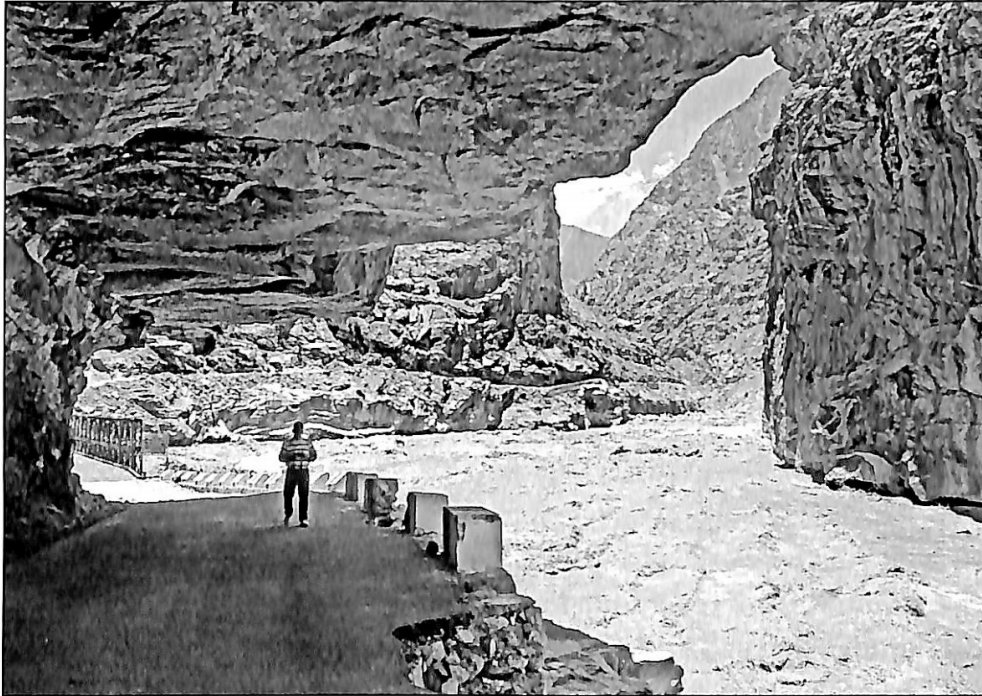
“Air and water are good, and people are devout enough, but the food is very bad,” Kim growled; “and we walk (rather drive) as though we were mad - or English.”

‘We have to rush to Kalpa to find a good hotel’, wise Lama advised. Soon they were settled in one of the many hotels in this crowded town. They spent a lovely evening with many Indian tourists, enjoying the view of Kinnaur-Kailash range while sipping expensive beer. They were careful to observe and note everything for that was their main mission - spying for the British empire. Next day, starting early, they visited the Kanam monastery located in the first major valley in the west. It was a steep ascent to the village - but no problem - a fair-weather road now leads to the village, in fact into every major side valley. Csoma de Koros, the Hungarian scholar had spent many months in seclusion and quiet at Kanam. He has deposited many priceless books at *Kangyur* (library) nearby. As Kim spent few moments there, admiring the view, three trucks arrived with their usual pollution and noise. They were soon loaded with apples for transporting to markets at Chandigadh. This export has brought much prosperity to the area.

Their permits were checked at Jangi check post. Foreigners are required to be in groups of four persons to obtain a permit from officials at Kalpa/Rekong Peo. Kim could have been denied entry but Lama knew the check post officer and took him aside to do the needful - after all Kim, though an English boy, looked like an Indian. They were nearing the climax of their journey. Ahead of Pooh, at Khab, the Satluj enters India from Tibet. At this point the Spiti river joins the Satluj. Kim and Lama climbed up from the Khab bridge, again by taxi of course, to reach Namgya, the last village on the Indian side. They could see the Tibetan plateau, but they were not allowed to proceed as they did not possess the ‘Trader’s Pass’ required to go to Tibet even temporarily. But they had made their observations by now, as demanded by Huree Babu and the mission was complete. Not to arouse suspicions of the forces there, they decided to play volleyball with the troops that evening. And we leave them there as they enjoy the game!

From Khab the road ahead is seen to be believed. High rocks have been blasted and the road passes under several overhanging cliffs. But the view down into the valley of the Satluj is exceedingly gloomy and oppressive; and on seeing it another traveller, Andrew Wislon wrote:

‘this is Valley of the Shadow of Death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me...’² Behold, what is that procession in the valley of death? Suddenly in front of us 11 taxis appeared, driving down from Spiti. This was group of foreigners on a Jeep Safari from Leh to Shimla via Spiti! They had pack-lunches, attendants and expensive cameras which they immediately flashed seeing the terrific cliffs and the Satluj. How civilised we thought.³



28. Meeting of the Satluj and the Spiti rivers at Khab. (Harish Kapadia)

On the road with Marco Pallis

The road climbed up in loops, known as the Kah loops after the village at the top. Nako was the highest village and had the only hotel en route. We had sumptuous meal of *dal-bhat*. The hotel owner was friendly and pointed out a small lake in front. This is where Marco Pallis had camped in 1933. ‘They could not drink Coke, as my hotel was not started then’, he said with a chuckle. Theirs was a two-member team from England - Marco Pallis and Charles Warren - who had travelled in many valleys in Sikkim, Gangotri and Kinnaur. They made

2. *Abode of Snow*, by Andrew Wilson, (first published 1855) Reprint, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, 1979 p. 84.

3. Andrew Wilson, a preacher and expert on Buddhism, started explaining the tenets of religion to the tourists. He was stopped immediately as the tourists were in a hurry and were looking for ‘instant *Nirvana*’ only.

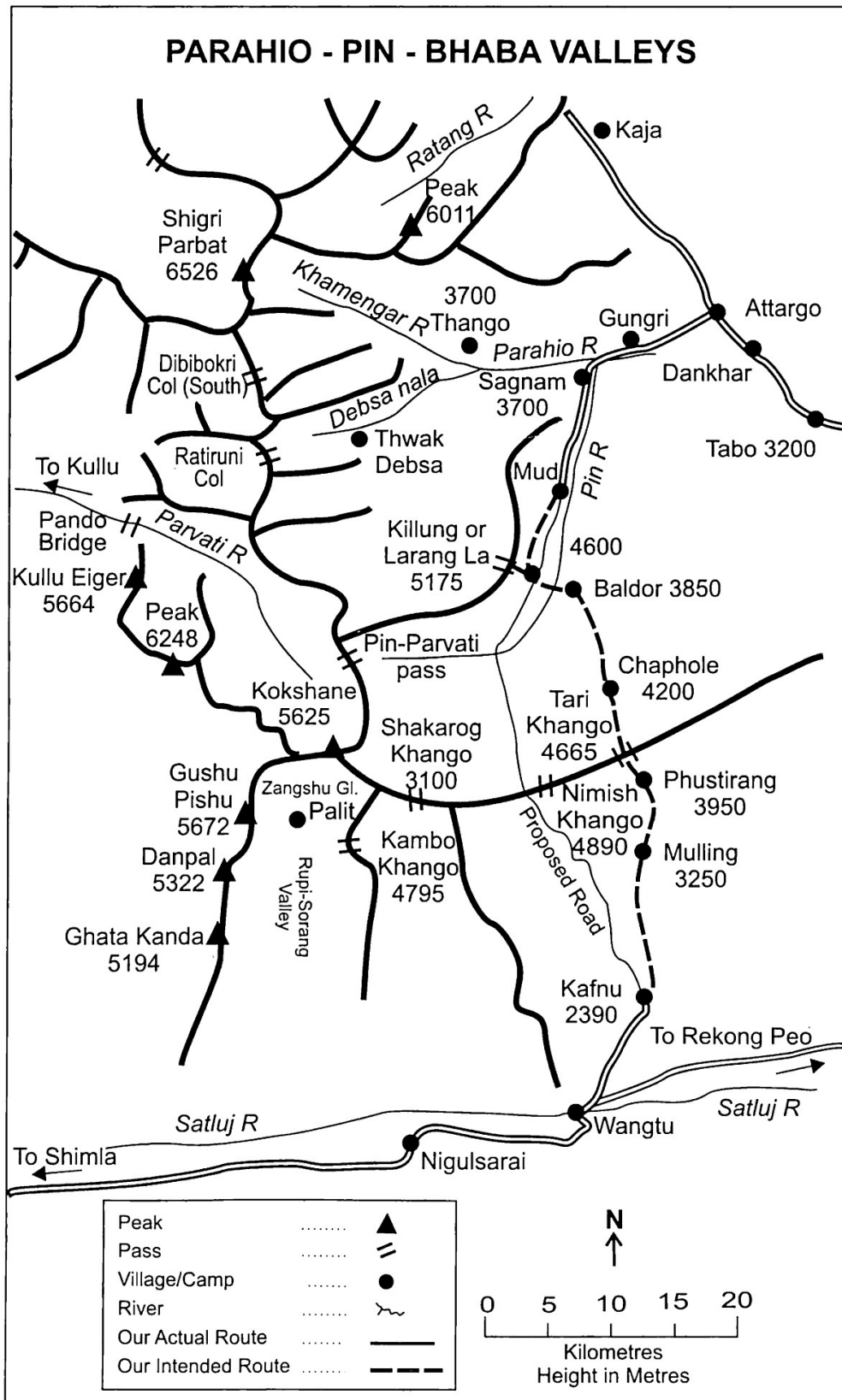
the first ascent of Leo Pargial from Nako.⁴ They visited the Khunnu and Labrang villages on their way up. These villages have relations with Spiti, and are known for their artistic works in silver. Marco Pallis had met a jeweller at Labrang who hailed from Sugnam. He showed them rare pieces of art in silver. Today, observations by Pallis on such artistry sound very true: 'The extinction, under the pressure of the modern industrialism that is overrunning the Orient, must be regarded as a social, no less than an artistic, disaster.'

Soon we were at a point which *unluckily* has not changed, at least for last 30 years since I was first here. The Malling nala landslide blocked the road. In fact during all my visits here I had to cross this nala at different points, always on foot, to catch another transport on the opposite side. Road builders have not been able to conquer the force of Malling nala in the summer. But life goes on in these parts and by evening we were at Chango rest house. Though freshly constructed, it was at a vantage point and Pallis had stayed here.

Staying in those (rest) houses, we gained additional enjoyment from being able to have regular chamber music every evening, playing viols, treble and alto, which had accompanied us so far without our having found an opportunity for using them. ... It often happened that, unperceived by us, little group of porters would gather quietly around us and listen intently. They formed a perfect audience, unobtrusive yet seeming to possess the true faculty for listening. ... We could not help recalling the words of Thomas Mace, in *Musick's Monument*. In the last chapter he speculates on the method of communication that will be used by members of the diverse nationalities there assembled. There must, so he argues, be a common language intelligible to all mankind and the only known language that fulfils that condition is music. (*Pallis, p. 64*)

Leaving Chango we drove the final 30 kilometres to Tabo, our first halt in Spiti. Near the bifurcation at Sumdo, a road climbed up to Kaurik, another major crossing point into Tibet as the Pare chu flows in to meet the Spiti river. In June 1945, H. Paider and L. Schmaderer had returned to Spiti from Tibet, where like Heinrich Harrer, they had escaped from

4. *Peaks and Lamas*, by Marco Pallis. (Cassell, London, 1939)



the British prison at Dehra Dun. On their return, not knowing that the Second World War was over, they decided to travel up the valley to Spiti, past Sumdo. It was somewhere in this area that Schmaderer was murdered as he travelled alone after making some purchases. His cash was seen and that tempted a rogue to kill him, the first such crime committed in Spiti after many decades. How he would have wished that there were roads and shops to buy provisions as are today!⁵

Tabo, a 1000-year old monastery that contains several paintings, is a unique place. Now there are guest houses, hotels and government rest houses. Luckily Tabo and its beautiful paintings were not destroyed by invaders as it was always considered to be part of the powerful kingdom of Rampur-Bushahr.

On the road with Braham

After visiting the Dankhar monastery, former capital of Spiti, we approached Kaja. Visiting Spiti in 1955, T H Braham had ended his chapter with a question: 'In recent years Lahul and Spiti have been closed. One is left wondering what changes will have taken place in those forbidden areas once there is sufficient stability on the borders for resumption of further travel.'⁶ In 1993 the inner line restrictions were lifted giving a free access to Spiti. Road from Manali across Kunzum la is covered in hours, instead of days as Braham took. The traffic is heavy as this forms the part of the circuit and much supplies reach Kaja during summer months. There are many shops, mostly owned by people from the plains, and bazaar is well stocked with Indian goods, hotels and a German Bakery.

Braham had written about comments from his team member:

Hey's comments on the country were always refreshing; after a sleepless night encamped outside a Spiti village, bothered at all hours by the chatter and curiosity of the local population impounding around our camp, he peered bleary-eyed out of his tent and muttered, 'Can you imagine seven years in Tibet?'
(*Braham, p. 109*)

Today he could have easily spent many months here, staying at

5. 'Tabo: A Mountaineer's Destiny', p. 57, *Spiti Adventures in the Trans-Himalaya*, by Harish Kapadia (Indus Publishing Co, New Delhi, 1996)

6. *Himalayan Odyssey*, by Trevor Braham. (George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1974)

good hotels and with notorious Israeli tourists in the next room! In winter, if he was sick, a helicopter could have been hired on payment to get him to civilisation.

Braham had walked up to Langja, a beautiful village at the base of Chau Chau Kang Nilda (then know as Guan Nilda) in 1955. Now he could hire a taxi and drive up to Langja! Today Kibber (known as the highest inhabited village) and Langja are popular places to drive to and it is common to see several taxis visiting the place that Braham had climbed to. Braham today would stay at a local Guest House which served pizzas, beer and many varieties of cuisine. Watch television and in the evening, a Spiti troupe would present a local dance in honour of Braham's party. During the next few days they would climb the summit, with tourists observing them through a telescope. They could observe Shilla peak from the summit. Confirming their position through GPS, they would measure the height of Shilla and would be excited to find that it was far lower than thought at first.⁷ As they returned to Langja, Braham would immediately rush for his luggage, flash a mobile and convey this news to the Alpine Club! Yes Spiti is covered by mobile towers all along and higher you go, better a reception you get.

At Ki monastery lamas reciting prayers in the courtyard were busy talking on mobile. Many youngsters, who are pressured to enter monastic life as per local traditions, now run away. They cannot remain there without mobiles and Direct-to-Home television which broadcasts 60 channels! Monasteries now have a rule, imposing a fine of Rs. 25,000 for each child who runs away. Families pay the fine and employ child in tourist industry! In the face of multiple choices in life and its temptations, prayers and ascetic life have little chance.

On the road to future

We were now acclimatised, having seen Spiti through the eyes of some of the early explorers and as a tourist would see it today. It was

7. Shilla peak was climbed by an unknown khalasi of Survey of India in 1860. The height of the peak was calculated to be 23,064 ft and thus this was the highest peak climbed till then. This record remained till 1907 when Dr Longstaff climbed Trisul at 23,360 ft. Later J.O.M. Roberts (1952) and T H Braham and Sir Peter Holmes (1955) suggested a much lower height for Shilla after their observations from nearby Chau Chau Kang Nilda peak. In modern survey Shilla's height is established as 20,120 ft (6132 m) and the legend demolished. See *Spiti Adventures in the Trans-Himalaya*, by Harish Kapadia (Indus Publishing Co, New Delhi, 1996) p. 85 for full details.

time to do some hard work. We travelled to Sagnam, a large village and now connected by road from Kaja. With roads leading in all directions from here, especially one to Kinnaur, this village is heading for status of a town very soon. We were approached by a young boy Tashi, who had *khotas* (sturdy donkeys), which carry loads. In Spiti it is only Yaks and *khotas* that carry luggage, men are not used to load-carrying and mules/horses are only for riding. Tashi was a graduate (Bachelor of Arts) from the Kullu University but had no qualms about following the *khotas* which was the only earning opportunity his family would have.

Our aim was to go south in the Parahio valley and then follow the Killung valley in the east which leads to a pass of the same name. It descends to the Larang valley which would lead us to Kinnaur. It was named Killung-Larang la after both valleys on each side.

We proceeded along the Parahio river to Thidim, crossing the river on an iron-basket on a single wire bridge. Camping at Thango we could see the Killung nala in flood. Our worst fears were confirmed when a shepherd passed our camp and informed us that this river valley could be crossed only at a great risk and that too by Yaks, not *khotas*. Moreover the crossing of the Parahio here was on a wire bridge which has no basket and one had to tie a harness and pull across. It was prudent to return to Sagnam, which we did via Kah village on the left bank. The view of Ratang Dru from here was stunning.⁸

We reached Mud by taxi (14 km from Sagnam) and our *khotas* caught up by evening. Our aim was to approach the pass from the other side, the Larang valley (where we would have landed had we crossed the pass). A walk of 8 km on the proposed motor road brought us to the entrance of the Larang valley, which we ascended from a high route, exposed at many places. By evening we were settled at foot of the pass at a rather uncomfortable camp. Three of us reached Larang la after a strenuous five-hour climb. The view of Shigri Parvat on the northwest was a major compensation while several unknown mountains of various heights surrounded us. Our return from the camp was quick as we followed the nala which was snow bound. Continuing further we camped at Baldar, where we had to leave the road, under construction, to Bhaba valley.

8. Ratang Dru, named after the famous peak in the Alps, is a stunning 5960 m peak, near the on Pin-Ratang valley divide. It was first climbed by Sir Peter Holmes, Trevor Braham and Rinzing in 1955.

We were at the junction of three valleys; the western valley led to the Pin-Parvati pass to Kullu, the southwestern valley led to Bhaba pass. The motor road goes up this broad valley and is ready till the foot of the pass. The third valley, which we followed, was going south and across the Tari Khango.



30. Trail in the Parahio valley. (Harish Kapadia)



29. Crossing the Parahio at Thidim. (Harish Kapadia)

Crossing Tari Khango⁹ was a long grind with no difficulties and once we descended we were in paradise, especially after the barren valleys of Spiti. Camping at beautiful grazing grounds of Phustirang and Mulling we were distressed to see dirty camp sites and garbage left by uncaring trekkers. In two days we were at Kafnu where we met the road coming in from the Kinnaur valley. The Bhaba valley is thickly wooded, beautiful and is a part of the Pin-Bhaba National park. The road to Spiti has to travel about 30 km in this valley to link up with the Pin valley and Spiti. As much of the road will cut through the wooded area, permission to build it has not been forthcoming. People of Spiti and Kinnaur want this road desperately. With fuel prices rising, they point out, it makes economic sense to build the road, which will reduce the distance to Kaja by almost 115 km. The local produce can reach Chandigadh markets in a day which will be beneficial for the local economy. The local villagers voted out a legislator who was against building the road (for other political reasons - not to protect the environment!) and new representative has promised to fulfil the wishes of the people. It is a classic conflict; men vs environment, with issues

9. Locals call this 'Bhaba pass' as till the road is ready this is the pass used for going to the Bhaba valley. This pass is Tari Khango as per map and the Bhaba pass is further west. See *Exploring Kinnaur & Spiti in the trans-Himalaya*. By Sanan, Deepak & Swadi, Dhanu. (Indus Publishing Co, New Delhi, 1998.)

of politics, democracy and protection of nature intertwined. Soon one more less travelled road will become a much travelled road.

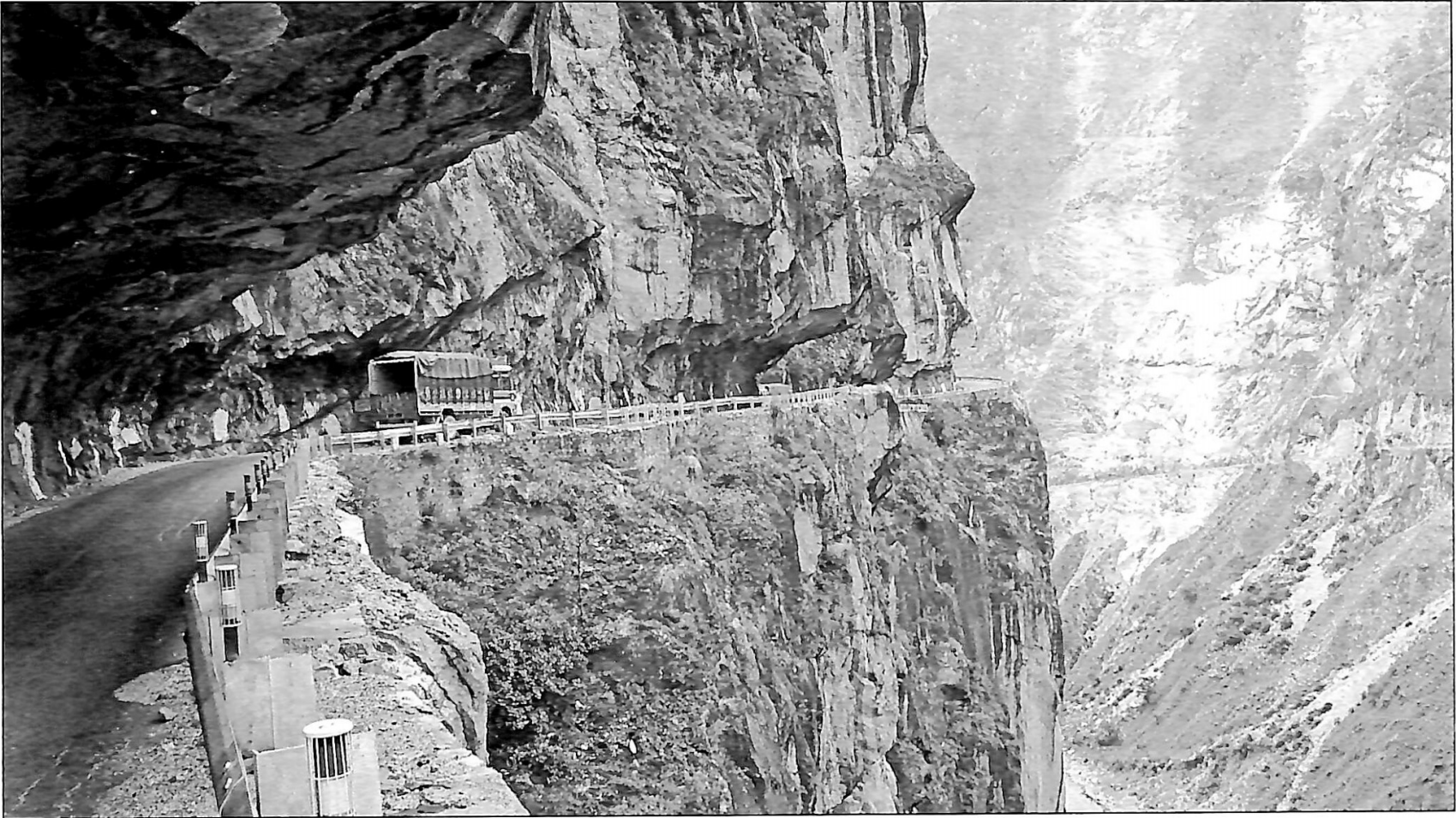
Kim, Marco Pallis and Trevor Braham - all would see that the major changes in Kinnaur and Spiti have been brought by roads which are much travelled. In a way, they facilitate visits to this remote land and bring comfort and prosperity to its people. The question is, will they increase the attraction of this area or take away from it?

The Himalayan germ, once caught, works inside like a relapsing fever; it is ever biding its time before breaking out again with renewed virulence. Dr. Longstaff had warned us when we set out, "Once a man has found the road, he can never keep away for long." "It is certain you will return," had declared Professor Tucci, over supper, that evening at Namgya: to which I could only answer "Amen" in all sincerity. (Pallis, 102-103)

Summary:

A trek in Spiti, observing the changes and development through eyes of earlier explorers.

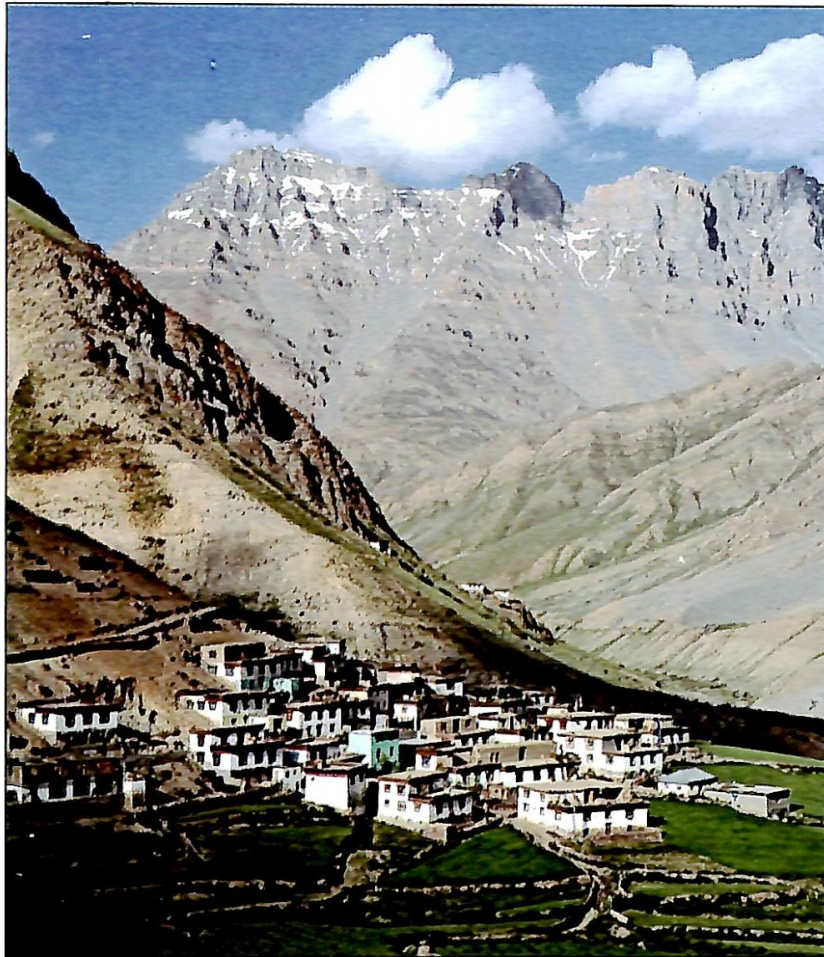
Members: Harish Kapadia, Atul Rawal and Sanjay Kapadia



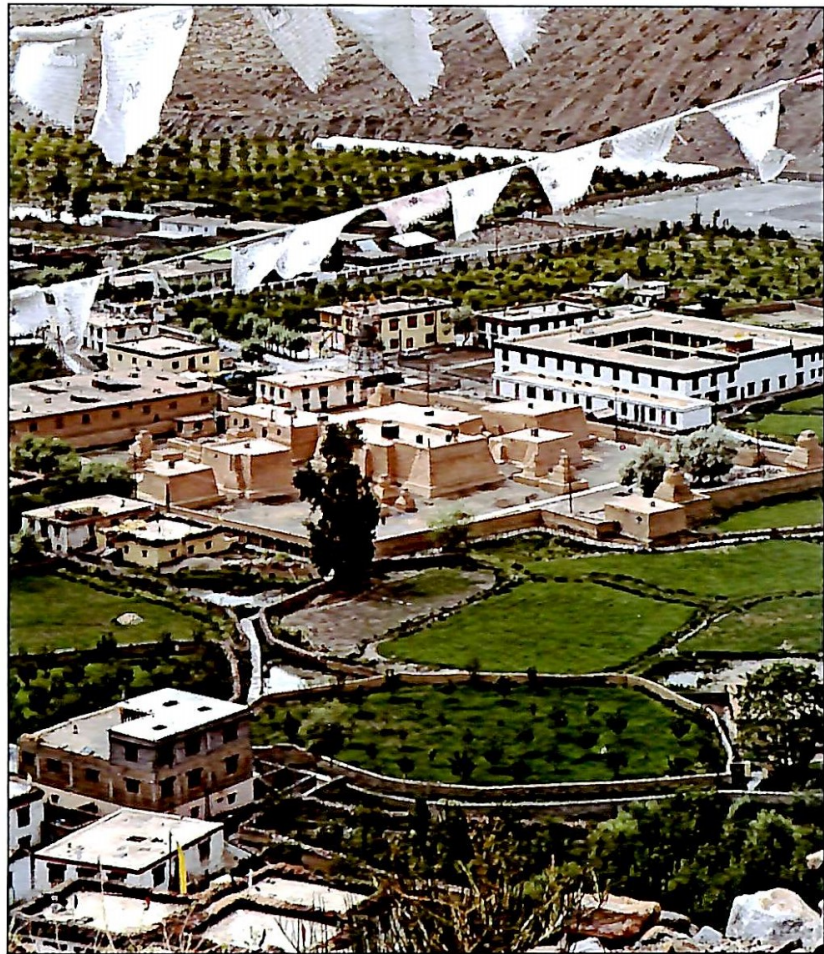
27. Road through the Satluj gorge. (Harish Kapadia)



16. Ratang Dru from Koh village. (Harish Kapadia)



17. Mud village, Pin valley, Spiti. (Harish Kapadia)



18. 1000 year old Tabo monastery. (Harish Kapadia)