



er was soothing music to the ears.

The next morning, one had to report at the sarpanch's house for a purification ritual. This called for a 10-km trek over mountain streams, rock and stone. Thondup sent along two tough looking escorts. It took us almost two hours to reach Lais-thiang — the sarpanch's village.

The landscape began to change and a canopy of green could be seen. Walnut and apricot trees stretched across the horizon and the fields were full of grain, ready to be harvested. The staple food is barley, grown in terraced fields and irrigated by the mountain streams that rush to meet the Indus flowing below. The ascent was rather steep and the altitude nearly 17,000 ft. One kept replenishing body fluids by drinking the natural mineral water of the mountain streams.

There are about 1,000 descendants of the Aryan tribes and they live scattered around Gilgit, Hunza, Kargil and Leh. Being nature worshippers, they celebrate the Bononah (nature) festival and are strict vegans, which means they are not only strictly vegetarian but also don't consume milk or milk products. This minuscule community bars both men and women from marrying non-Aryans, and polygamy and polyandry is common. Couples who do not conceive are free to choose other partners to give them a better chance of producing an offspring. Nearly 80 per cent of them marry in their own villages, while 20 per cent marry from neighbouring villages.

Two 500-year-old Juniper trees (Cilgi Deuha) crown the village of Dah, which is the venue of the tri-annual Bononah festival (held on a full moon night during October). The tribes symbolically draw energy from the ancient Juniper trees by hugging them after a ceremonial dance. They also worship the swastika symbol (clockwise) and the 'Om' (symbolising energy).

The trek to Dah from Beema took us three hours. It was a dangerous trek, as we crossed several craggy peaks, holding on to tiny crevices to haul ourselves up. We could hear gunfire across the Indo-PoK border. My inner line permit was checked at the army post. One wrong step on this arduous trek could have proved fatal.

We reached the ancient juniper trees by noon and hugged the trees to soak in their energy. After spending several hours in this picturesque place, it was time to visit some of the elderly Aryans. We

shared a meal that consisted of *jo* (barley) *roti* baked in an earthen oven, lettuce leaves, roasted potato, spring onion, boiled cauliflower and wild mint. Women cooked in an open hearth, burning fallen twig collected from the trees in their courtyard. There is a strict taboo against tree felling. The simple meal was fresh and extremely tasty. The following week the trek continued into the villages of Baldes, Samit, Garkun, Darchik and Hanu. The few thousand Brok-pa Aryans have over 5,000 years lived in these hostile terrain at 15,000 ft altitude, subsisting on a vegan diet.

Music and dance are a way of life for them. Both men and women wear colourful costume, decorating their hair with flowers, and are full of *joi de vivre*. They live in harmony with nature, and are cheerful and stress-free despite living in small rock shelters. They trek long distances.

Almond, apricot and walnut form part of the diet along with endless cups of black tea fortified with barley flour.

The weather in September is pleasantly cold, though temperatures in January can plummet to -20 degrees Celsius. There are an unusually large number of Aryans above 70 years. Many are active even at 90.

Their striking features include blue eyes, aristocratic noses, fair complexion and flawless skin. They appear ethnically distinct from Ladakhis or Kashmiris. They do not marry outsiders and restrict their contact with the outside world, seemingly happy in their isolated existence. Married women braid their hair, which gives them a resemblance to Greeks. One of the women photographed at Dah could have easily been mistaken for a German tourist. She was blonde and had high cheekbones, rotund face and unmistakable German features.

The Aryan tribes believe in prophecies and the recording of dreams. Most of the elderly Aryans meet in the morning at the Juniper grove and discuss their dreams. One of their folk songs sung at the Bononah festival is translated as follows:

*In the beginning there was water all over the earth and some of it froze. Dust settled on this patch of ice. Later, a small patch of grass appeared on the frozen patch and, soon, a juniper tree sprouted from the earth. The whole universe was created by Chag (fire), Ser (water) and Yun (earth). ■*

Picture by the author

# A secret the Himalayas hold

A trek in the Himalayan regions  
of Kargil and Leh... in search  
of the secret lives of a tribe  
that prides itself on being  
racially pure Aryan.

**Murli Menon**

**W**e were headed to the villages of Dah and Beema (pronounced Beama) in Leh district and Garkun and Darchik in Kargil district, and the intention was to spend a week studying the secret lives of a tribe of pure Aryans. Some of the more inaccessible pockets could be reached only through trekking.

We rose early and started our jeep safari at 7 a.m. The 130-km drive passed through the villages of Khalatse (pronounced Khalsi), Dumkhar, Skurbuchan, Achinathang and Hanuthang. We crossed several high peaks before reaching Beema (14,350 ft). Every photograph clicked en route resembled a picture postcard and the seven-hour drive over rugged terrain was made listening to some soothing music.

The first glimpse of the Indus, from miles away, was a near-spiritual experience. A speck of light blue amidst sand dunes, rock and stone. A stream nestling in Nature's palm. We finally arrived at Beema and took an ice-cold bath in the turbulent waters of this river steeped in

history. The tranquility experienced while meditating on its banks, on a bed of round pebbles, is indescribable.

A group of women checked one's bags on alighting from the vehicle. There is a self-imposed prohibition in these Brok-Pa (Ladakhi word for Aryan or white skin) villages. The sarpanch had asked the womenfolk to ensure that no alcohol entered the village. After a thorough frisking of the luggage, the three women, resembling Greek goddesses, allowed entry into the PWD guesthouse. The *chowkidar*, named Sonam Thondup, was an Aryan who knew a smattering of Hindi. Through a combination of sign and body language, one tried to develop a rapport with the hostile *chowkidar*, who made it plain that my visit to Dah was not welcome.

On seeing the inner line permit and letter from the collector, Satish Nehru, Thondup reluctantly gave me the guesthouse keys. There were no other occupants. The guesthouse is on the banks of the Indus and the view from the room was picturesque. The gurgling of the riv-

