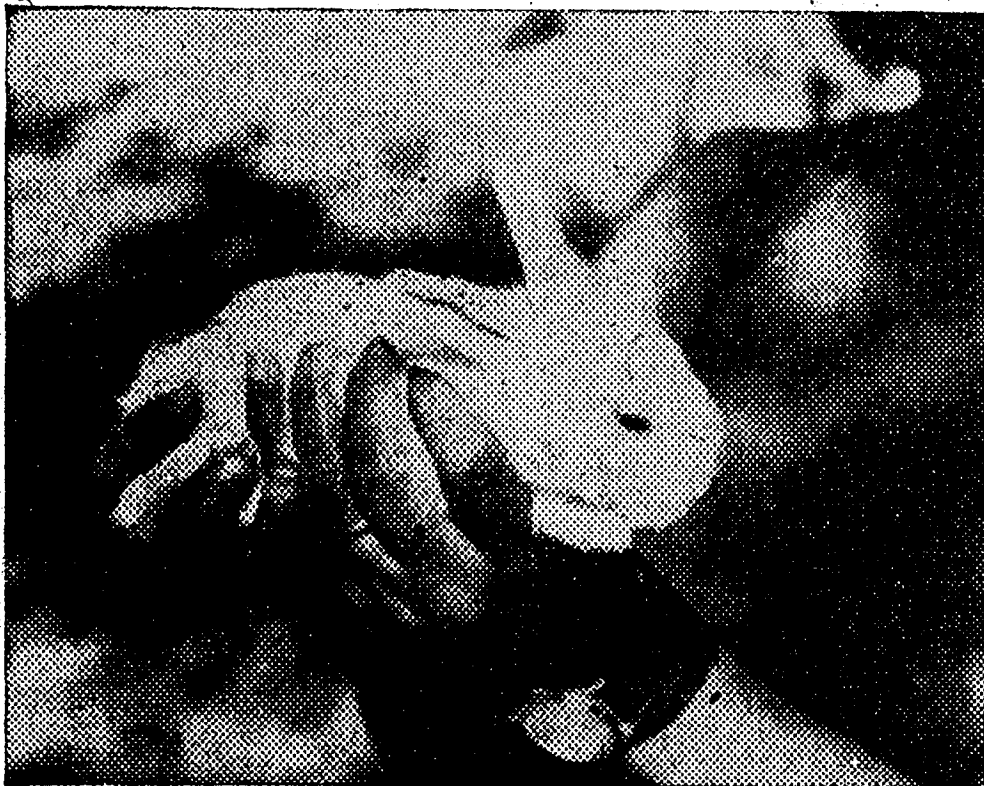




The Long, White Fur Of Angora Rabbit Down

A visit to the world's largest Angora farm, nestling by the Beas in the Kulu valley.

by HUGH and COLLEEN GANTZER



A young Angora rabbit. "It's fur is so light, so fluffy; it traps so much air that no heat can go out, no cold come in."

IN the sun-soaked Himalayan valley of Kulu, the gods come down every year for Dussera. And the apples hang red on crutch-supported trees. And, if you have the money and the inclination, you can clothe yourself in rabbit down.

We knew about the gods and we had heard about the apples, but our thoughts were on the distant, blueing hills of Manali when we drove down the die-straight road skirting the foaming Beas. Perception, however, is a strange thing. Nagging, half-formed images began to intrude. Something we had missed demanded attention. Did you see that? Yes. But what was it? A hotel? No. It looks more like a mill.... a factory.... a handicrafts centre. No, it's a farm, an unusual farm! Little chips of information

fell into place and formed an inchoate but insistent picture.

And so, when we returned from meeting the Banons of Manali, crossing the Rotang Pass and living in the austere grandeur of Lahaul, the images fell into place in our cartographic, travel writers' minds. It was a mill, a factory, a handicrafts centre and yes... indeed... a hotel. We turned left, off the die-straight road and drove into the International Angora Breeding Farm.

Under the shade-dappling trees the rows of rabbit hutches stand, while the Beas chortles at the edge of the farm and pretty Kulu girls flit like butterflies across the shade-patterned acres.

"I saw the rabbits for the first time in the London Zoo," Prem Gupta told us. "That was in '65 and my younger brother, Anil, had just completed a course in wool technology at Bradford. We decided to try our hand at Angora breeding in India."

We walked leisurely down the lanes of hutches while Prem Gupta touched lightly on the problems the little animals had given him at first. The home of the original Angora rabbits was probably in the high, cold, wildernesses of Turkey, and though there are no wild Angoras now, they still detest temperatures above 35 degrees centigrade and hated the journey out. Two of the five originally flown out, died on the journey. The journey and seventy three more were flown out from West Germany in 1967, but even so, it took a long time for them to adjust to Kulu (4,000 ft.).

Prem Gupta stopped at a hutch, reached in and pulled out a rabbit. It was only then that we realised how big they were: as large as a fairsized lap dog, our hands sank into the amazingly long, white fur while the rabbit lay docile, blinking its Alice-in-Wonderland eyes. "They weigh about three kilos and when you see one of them you'd hardly believe how small they are when they're born," Prem Gupta said.

The rabbit went back into its hutch and started nibbling food pellets busily. The Guptas make their own food pellets in Ludhiana, so the animals have no need to graze and snag their valuable fur. We recalled something we had read long ago. "Doesn't the male rabbit destroy the young?" we asked.

"He doesn't get near them," Gupta smiled. "Artificial insemination: we are the only commercial farm where artificial insemination is done on a large scale. Look, here's a nest of baby Angoras: the mother lines it with down from her own stomach."

Maternity Box

In the maternity box of a special ward, a mass of little Angoras lay cuddling together in sibling proximity. Born deaf, blind and hairless, they are completely dependent on their mother for the first three weeks but they are not weaned till they are six weeks old. And then they have an identifying number punched on their ears and are ready to lead an independent life in the willow-shaded farm.

A bird hopped in front of us, picked up a dropped food pellet, flew away. In the cages the Angoras nibbled busily, growing their soft, white fur for Mr. Gupta. Starting on the 75th day of their lives, and thereafter every 75 days, the Angoras are shorn of their fur by girls trained to use the swift hand shears. Each animal contributes 600 grams of soft wool every year to be spun, woven and knitted into warm, almost weightless, shawls, pullovers, scarves and cloth—very expensive, of course, but very elegant. We were impressed with the Kulu Angora shawls, woven by local women on cottage handloom and offered for sale at a little showroom at the gate of the farm.

A cold wind began to blow down from Manali, whispering the willows, shimmering the Beas, ruffling the fur of the busily chomping Angoras. We sipped hot coffee gratefully and spoke about the Gupta girls who go to Our Lady of the Snows convent and of their lonely life at the farm, out in the Beas-watered valley.

Success Story

"This is the world's largest Angora farm," Prem Gupta said, his breath coming in the chill air. "With 16,800 rabbits, we're way ahead of the second farm in Buenos Aires, Argentina—they have only 6,000 Angoras. So everyone thinks it's a great success story, but..." he stopped as one of his assistants came and said something. When he turned to us again he didn't elaborate on the 'but' and we didn't remind him. "They're fine little animals," he said cheerfully. "India used to import Angora wool from West Germany..." We thought of all those soft-focus movies featuring starry-eyed heroines in Simla, fluffy in Angora wool.... "but now we save as much as Rs. 50 lakhs in foreign exchange, much more perhaps. And then there's that export order of Rs. 92.14 lakhs...."

We thought of the hundreds of skiers on the snow-sparkling slopes of winter resorts the world over and of the eccentric Swiss doctor who had cornered us one day and enthused about the virtues of Angora wool. "It is so light, so fluffy, it traps so much air that no heat can go out, no cold come in. But... attend!..." because of electrostatic qualities the dampness is drawn out and so your blood, your skin, your muscles, they remain fighting fit. No cold, no sweat. Is good, eh?"

Clouds were gathering over Manali and the Beas had become steel-grey and quiet. The rabbits had stopped chomping and sat warm and electrostatically insulated in their Angora coats. We got up to leave, thanked Prem Gupta, and then a thought struck us.

Not For The Table

"You have a great many rabbits here," we said. "What do you do when they cease being productive? Rabbit stew?"

There was a moment of stillness and a cold light flicked over Mr. Gupta's sunglasses. "We're vegetarians," he said, softly. And then the sun broke through the clouds and he smiled. "Angora wool is so expensive that the rabbits pay for themselves to the very end. Our animals lead long and very contented lives in our farm. They go only when they have to."

He was still looking proudly over his Angora Farm when we drove out, heading for our next destination.

An Indian Turns American

(Continued from Page 1)

give her. Just as the thousand years of Muslim rule had at last begun to produce a common Hindu-Muslim culture, the British had arrived with new and totally unfamiliar concepts. While through the thousand years of a hard Muslim rule we had managed to keep our essential core, under the benign British we began to lose it and turn into a hotchpotch.

And so my thoughts oscillated—what I thought was not good for Maya had nothing wrong with it by itself, and what Maya should have in its place was unidentifiable and had really nothing better to offer.

When I broached the subject with Maya she reacted sharply. "Why, why should I change my school? I am happy, I have good friends, I am doing well at studies, the teaching is good. What have you against it?"

I said I had nothing against the school. It was a good school, she was doing well, and her friends were all nice.

"Then?"

"Maya, it isn't easy to explain, but I will try." I explained how I felt about her avid absorption of American culture, which was making her a product not fit for the Indian soil. She would thrive if she went to America like the other girls. But when she left school one day to return to the Indian environment she would have to readjust herself, and this readjustment would be more difficult and painful the longer it was postponed. She had gained much from her school, and these foundation years would prove useful to her, but she now needed an Indian orientation. She should move to a purely Indian school, such as the Maharani Gayatri Devi in Jaipur. This had originally been a school for the girls of the Rajput princely families, but was now under a new English principal a good public school for Indian girls.

Maya kept asking me what was the American culture she had assimilated that I objected to, and I did my best to convince her that I was not prejudiced, but the American ways—let us forget culture—she had assimilated were so different from our own ways that she would stand out like a foreigner. Perhaps in a country with its own well-de-

fined culture one could be bicultural, as many Europeans were. There were Dutchmen in Unilever as British as they were Dutch. But our case was different. Today our Indian culture, however one would define it, had not the strength to withstand something so dominating as American culture, and in Maya's case she had not yet found an Indian core.

While through the thousand years of Muslim rule we had managed to keep our essential core, under the benign British we began to lose it and turn into a hotchpotch.

Reluctantly she agreed to give the new school a trial. "As she was a little late for the term I took her myself by train to Jaipur. Something of a hedonist, she enjoyed the luxury of air-conditioned travelling as a start to a new life. She would be ahead of the other girls who had not had her experience of international surroundings. The principal, Miss Lutter, extended the unexpected courtesy of meeting Maya at the station. She had understood her predicament and went out of her way to put her at ease. I went to the hotel, and Maya with Miss Lutter to the school in her charming old Austin Seven.

Next evening I went there to take her out to dinner. Maya ran impatiently to the car. In a long red woollen coat, blue shirt and white salwar, and her dark brown pigtail plaited with black cords, she looked so different. She talked excitedly about the school, the different systems, and how the girls were awed by her experiences.

Maya stayed there three years and finished well, topping in Rajasthan in the Senior Cambridge examination. For this she got a gold medal, endowed by a local businessman, which she complained was water thin.

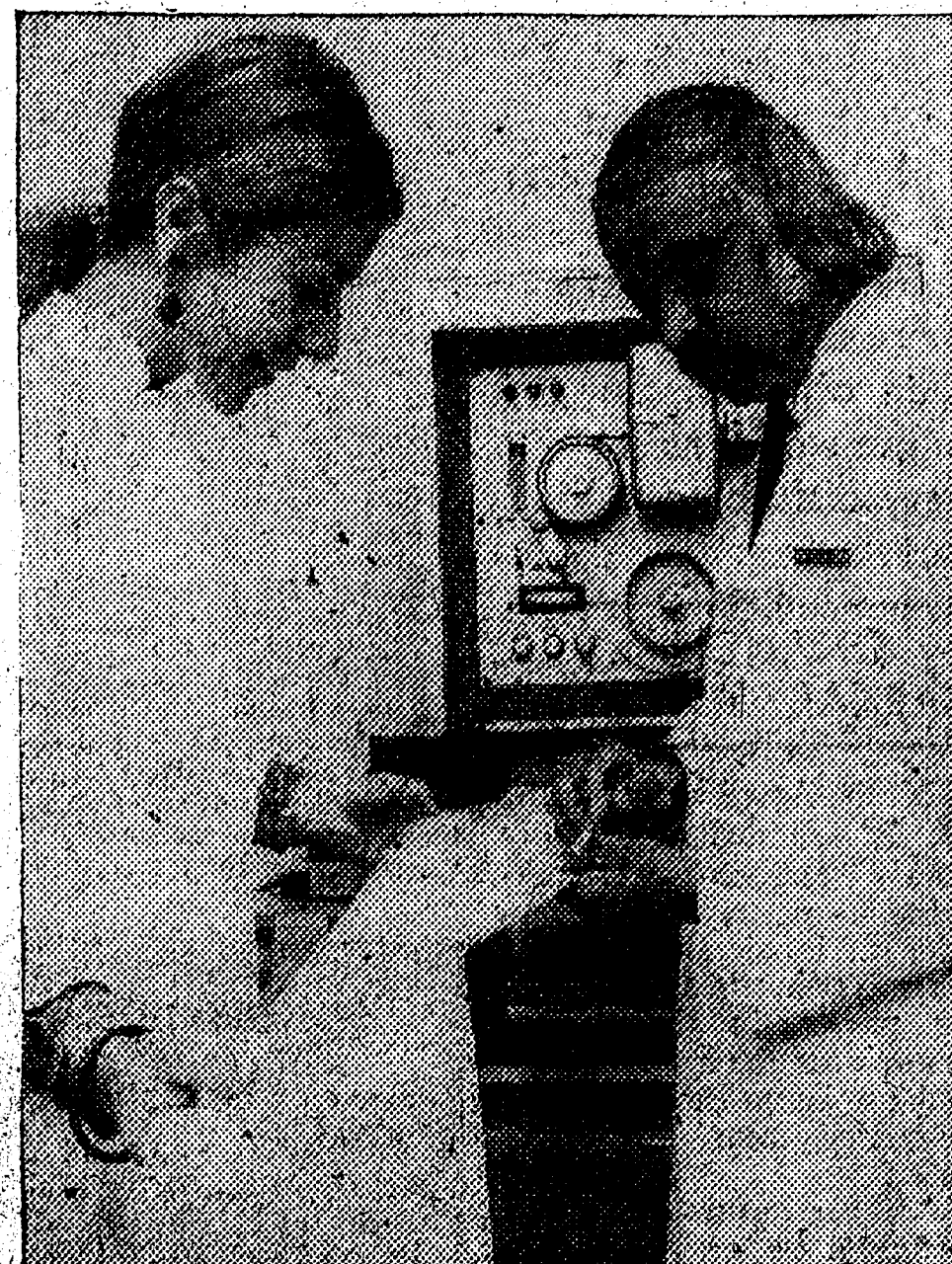
Twenty-five years later she wrote to me from Washington that, excellent though the schools were there, she wanted, in view of her own experience, to send her nine-year-old daughter Ayesha back to school in India. She felt it was the best thing to do.

With her brothers, Manu and Gautam, there was no such problem. They both went to Doon School at Dehra Dun, which had only Indian boys, and they grew as purely Indian boys of their kind. Maya after the college at Bombay married a Punjabi boy, as an interesting coincidence, from Gujarat; their home in fact had been in the next mohalla to ours. He worked with an American bank and later joined the World Bank in Washington. Manu after a commerce degree in Bombay went to London to do his articles for chartered accountancy, but quite unlike me, he did not like England at all. With hundreds and thousands of Indians now living in England, he detected a clear race prejudice, understandable but no more tolerable for that. Gautam joined the army in one of the old cavalry regiments. They both married Punjabi girls.

Thus one can see from Prakash Tandon's account that despite everything the Indianness of the Indians is too strong to give way even in America's melting pot. Unlike in Britain, they do not live in ghettos. But they hanker after Indian food. Even these among them who did not care much for Indian music, back home, fall for it there. Some of them get books and magazines from India to keep alive their interest in Indian languages and literature. And thousands of them return to the country to get married.

In different ways they are all affirming and asserting their identity. It may be difficult to define, as Mr. Tandon says. But it is there, alive and kicking. Indeed, it does not need to be defined or artificially protected to survive and prosper.

It may be an exaggeration to say that the more we change the more we stay the same. Mr. Tandon is a Punjabi at heart—there is something to this old saying.



THE SCIENTIFIC CHALLENGE OF THE WEST: An Indian biochemist with his German wife at Bonn University.



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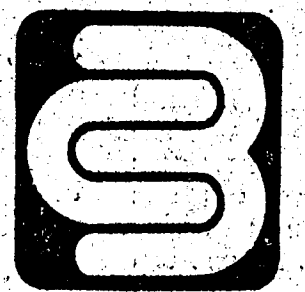
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