Letter from Ladakh
or
What's Up Ladakh?

By Karl Vetas

Snow is already filling the passes high above Ladakh, silently sealing it in a wintry cocoon where it will incubate for nine months before the sun defrosts the land and initiates its re-birth. Yet, its Nature-imposed isolation is only one of many oppressors in its eternal struggle to maintain an identify. From earliest times, the stoic/heroic inhabitants of this aerial island crushed between the Himalayan and Karakoram ranges in northern India have been assailed by invaders geologic, political, climatic, and touristic that would have reduced a lesser people to penury or wiped them out altogether.

Take its formation as a geologic entity. It is more than a metaphor to suggest that it is an island, it is a literal fact. Geologists contend that when Gaia's jigsaw tectonic plates floating in the Sea of Tethys began to break apart, Ladakh was an island caught in the collision course between the Indian sub-continent and Asia. Sandwiched between the two, Ladakh was lifted high into the air, and then rent by seismic upwelling that transformed sea bottom into towering ranges that, like honeycombs, embraced dozens of deep valleys. To reach the principal valley holding Leh, the capital, one must cross the 17,582-foot Taglangla Pass. Reaching the next valley north, the Nubra, requires driving a wretched track through the Khardungla Pass which, at 18,380 feet, ranks as the world's highest motorable road.

Geologic upheavals also provided Ladakh with infertile marine scrabble for its use as farm land. To add to its misfortune, its setting in the lee of the Himalaya deprived it of the monsoon rains which shower fertile India. These two factors have combined to ensure a hard life for the few inhabitants hardy enough to eke a living from unforgiving land, and ingenious enough to coerce stingy Nature to serve it as best it could.

Standing on the valley floor, it is hard to conclude that Ladakh is anything but an arid moonscape; tan soil rising to buff dirt mountains melding into the white snow and from there into a cobalt sky unhazed by moisture. Its 130,000 people inhabit an area of 96,701 sq. km., giving it a population density of only 0.74 people per sq. km.; even Mongolia and north African desert republics have higher densities.

Even these figures do not convey its desolation since its people can live only in those small oases fed by glacial rivulets that coarse down the mountains and into the Indus River which cuts through Ladakh's heart. Nearly 25,000, or 20 percent, of those people live in the capital city of Leh which sits at 11,000 feet elevation.

Leh is a created town, the handiwork of its farmers who have channeled the snowmelt into dozens of canals which water the town. They give it its greenness, nourish its wheat and barley crops, vegetable gardens, and its trees. As one walks the dirt roads through the town, one crosses a canal every hundred feet or so; without them the town would cease to exist. This fact is rammed home when one surveys the valley from its rim; where the irrigation's reach ends, the desert begins. The dozens of life-preserving patches of green that characterize the district are mere dots separated by vast expanses of dun earth. In truth, it would be more accurate to call Ladakh an archipelago of oases in a sea of dust.

The region was first explored by nomadic Khampas from eastern Tibet. Even they did not stay permanently, but pitched tents on stream banks to watch their yak herds, the only animal other than Bactrian camels capable of surviving on these plateaus. The nomads shared the valleys with Drukpas (a.k.a. Dards), pockets of whom still exist in some of the lesser valleys. Their Mediterranean features and bacchanalian fertility festivals suggest possible descent from Alexander's Macedonian army that marched to the banks of the Indus in the third century. Faced with the prospect of re-crossing the Persian deserts to return home, many soldiers elected to stay and farm. Ladakh's isolated valleys must have seemed much like the city-states compartmentalized by the mountains of their native Greece.

It was the Buddhist Mons from India who, in the 8th century, established settlements along the Indus River. The Buddhism they professed was the Lamanist form practiced in Tibet with whom they enjoyed a close association until the middle of this century. Ladakh's people look Tibetan and the culture they follow is heavily influenced by its neighbor. This is evident in everything from scores of *gompas* (Tibetan monasteries) that hug the hillsides and house purple-robed monks to its language and even *gur-gur*, the so-called "yak butter tea" concocted from green tea, salt, yak butter, and boiling water mixed in a churn.

Ladakh's early wealth came from its position astride the trade routes branching from the Silk Road. Indian goods were carried by yak from Leh over the Karakoram Pass to Yarkand and Kashgar in far western China. Trade with Central Asia ceased only in 1947 when India closed its northern borders.

The early arrivals were succeeded by waves of peoples intent, not on trade, but on occupation, notably India and the Islamic states to the west, all of whom are still fighting for control over it. The fortress looking down from Leh's Peak of Victory, was built in the 16th century to commemorate the successful repulsion of Balti-Kashmir armies. But Ladakh's wealth lured them back and in the 1840s, they triumphed over Ladakh's army, deposing its royal family and sending it into exile at Stok, south of the Indus. In 1846, it officially was incorporated into the princely state of Kashmir.

Today, it is still a political pawn. When the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1951, and again in 1959, they simply cut off a chunk of Ladakh for themselves, billeting troops to make it a fait accompli. Border troubles were the reason India declared Ladakh off-limits to outsiders until 1974. It is in defense against a possible Chinese invasion and its tangle with Pakistan over who should rule Kashmir, that the Indian army is stationed in Ladakh, an occupation that has cost the Indian government one million dollars a day since 1988.

Like Kashmir, Ladakh doesn't seek alliance with anyone and would much prefer that everyone's army march home and leave it in peace to shape its own destiny. Officially it is a district in the Indian state of Kashmir and Jammu, a fact underscored by a huge army detachment camped on the Leh's outskirts. The military presence is understated but omnipresent. Each day, one can hear soldiers shouting in cadence as they maintain military preparedness. Live rounds shatter the peace of the valley as soldiers practice marksmanship.

And then there is the clandestine surveillance by security forces. Indian newspaper stories reporting the arrest of "six persons accused of contemplating meeting with militants" suggest that no one is safe. In Leh Airport, departing visitors are subjected to no fewer than seven security checks, that, among other things, require them to remove and surrender all batteries from cameras, flashlights and others, on the assumption that they could be used to trigger bombs.

With the soldiers and with the influx of Kashmiri Muslim businessmen--who destroyed their own tourism industry through sectarian violence--Buddhist Ladakhis have virtually ceded all control over their political and commercial affairs, leaving them to farm and operate tourist hostels. The presence of the two foreign forces is underscored each day when the Indians rend the air with reveille at 4:30 a.m., and, at the mosque dominating the town square, the muezzin announces the day's first prayers.

In the past two years, Ladakhis have begun to call for a measure of autonomy, focussing their ire on the fact that school lessons are taught in Hindi and English and focus on Indian affairs rather than local issues. A Leh-based magazine, "Ladags Melong", published in English and Ladakhi, has been outspoken in calling for greater local participation in the district's affairs. In response, Indian authorities have begun relaxing some of the strictures and involving Ladakhis in political matters, but it is a long way from the independence many would like to see established.

But even with control over its own politics and economy, the Ladakhis would have a tough time. The principal invader, the cold, is unrelenting in its attacks. The Ladakhi growing season is limited to a few summer months; for the rest of its food and fuel, it must rely on caravans of trucks trundling into

the valleys from India. So severe is the winter cold, that pigs, chickens, ducks, buffaloes, and cows find it impossible to survive; eggs must be transported overland from India. Ladakhis have been able to provide themselves with milk by crossing yaks and cows to produce dzos, but it isn't enough to feed a growing population. Thus, when the passes open on July 1 (even then, aided by Indian bulldozers that cut through 30-foot-high drifts), until they are closed by snowfalls in mid-October, Ladakhis make the proverbial hay that will keep them through nine months of winter, packing into only three months what those in more clement climes have 12 months to accomplish.

It is the latest set of invaders--tourists--who earn them the cash to pay for the imported goods they consume. These tourists, however, disrupt the local economy, corrupt the culture, and threaten the carrying capacity of the limited land the Ladakhis possess. To extend that capacity, a non-profit Ecology Center has been established to experiment with environmentally-friendly processes like greenhouses to grow winter crops, and dry toilets that do not contaminate the groundwater. Even that is not enough. The blessing is that tourists cannot stand the cold and are there only for four months.

In the end, it is the Ladakhis who provide the softening touches to the harsh landscape. Despite their difficult existence, they accept their lot with Buddhist detachment and smiles for the stranger. With each other, as with outsiders, they exchange a cheery ”Jule" with everyone they pass on the street, an all-purpose word meaning "hello, goodbye, please, thank you." They are generous in their hospitality and gentle in their demeanor, factors which have endeared them to visitors from other lands.

But now the tourists and the Kashmiris are leaving, driven away by the bitter winter cold. Like Russians, Ladahi's will retreat floor by floor, room by room, driven back by the cold until they huddle around a fire in a single room. Here, they will enjoy a measure of autonomy and bind their cultural community together, unhindered by outsiders. Until the hot July sun melts the walls and permits a fresh wave of intruders to flood their valley.

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