

A TREK IN LADAKH AND ZANSKAR

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FOR THE last two days we had been confined to our seats in the bus. We were comfortable, enjoying the scenery which was totally different from anything we had seen before. The end of the road was Leh. Travellers had once to face a month-long journey, but we now did it in just two days; and there are many who, of course, today prefer to fly.

Leh itself bears the signs of the past and the scars of the present. One is struck by the barrenness, brown but colourful. The moonlight is reflected on the barren slopes, which makes it an unforgettable sight. The cool air is arid and lacks oxygen. You can see the mixture of cultures, Buddhist and Muslim. The features of the people vary from Mongolian to Aryan. We feel we are in the Trans-Himalaya. We visit the Moravian Christian Mission Church (1885), now barely furnished. There is a graveyard of travellers who came across from the north and south. One particular monument is for Dr Ferdinand Stoliczka.¹ He was a naturalist and geologist attached to the Central Asia Mission of Sir Thomas Douglas Forsyth and died at 'Malgo' (Murgo) on 19 July 1874. The marble tower on the outskirts of Leh is erected in his memory. When we visited it, a few Indian Army personnel were surrounding it, engaged in some kind of an exercise. This is the second fact that one notices. Since the 1962 war with the Chinese, the Indian Army in this region has been reinforced heavily and one finds army personnel everywhere. Their needs, quite understandably, have first priority and everything else is secondary. This reality, however inevitable it may seem, has taken its own toll. What was started for defence, has been further consolidated by tourism. In the streets of Leh, you will find tourists everywhere. At small Tibetan restaurants, expensive hotels, or buying recently manufactured 'antiques' in the streets at exorbitant prices. All the monasteries charge their visitors entrance fees for 'maintenance'. I used to think that charging an entrance fee for a visit to the house of the Divine Presence was against the tenets of Buddhism. But that is no longer the case and all these realities are here to stay. Some of the popular monasteries are anything but a pleasure to visit. This is irrespective of their cultural heritage, which is certainly unique. But then Leh has for ages been a meeting place of the caravans from Yarkand, Tibet, Kashmir and Kulu. Perhaps, in the modern context, the phenomenon has been extended to a meeting of cultures from the West and the East. It remains to be seen how the Ladakhis absorb this recent exposure. Only time can tell.

The word that greets you at Leh is *Jule*. An expression of hallo,

1. A bird is named after him, 'Stoliczka's Bush Chat'.

thank you, *namaste* and goodbye combined. As we became acquainted with the local people we were to hear it again and again. We were told that now Ladakh has 'increased' rainfall, from about 4 inches in the past to 5 inches now! Ladakhis declare that the Nubra valley is the most beautiful in the area with thick 'forests'. We looked for these forests till someone pointed out a growth of shrubs about a foot high, about a quarter of a mile away! One can see a group of poplar trees miles away and they fence these shrubs and tend them like children. At Leh we could not find any porters who would carry loads, which is unlike what one meets with in the other parts of Himalaya. This was confirmed all along the trek, particularly as this is a period of the warmest weather and the scarce human population was busy harvesting and preparing for the long and severe winter. And what a winter it must be with temperatures falling to -40°C and all the lakes and rivers frozen, including the mighty Indus. Everything, rain, water, vegetation, food, humans is scarce here. A traveller looks with admiration at the people who have lived for centuries in such a terrain. The geography and climate of an area constitutes the permanent basis for its history and culture. 'The land is so barren and the passes so high that only the best friends or fiercest enemies would want to visit us', says a Ladakhi proverb. Ladakh has had its share of the latter and now it is flooded with the former.

Bhupesh and I reached Leh on 21 July 1980. Having spent a weekend climbing at Gulmarg for acclimatization, we were put to minimal discomfort. But all along, right till here, we were firmly denied the permits which one must possess to go north of Leh. The sympathetic approach of the officials here made it possible for us to obtain these. I would say we were just lucky.

After five days we were on a truck on the road to the Nubra valley. We left at 4.00 a.m. and had the pleasure of waking up the sentry at South Polu to check our permits. I am not sure whether he was too sleepy or could not read English but we were through without any excitement or delay.

It was the most bumpy ride ever. Particularly after crossing Khardung La (18,360 ft), we had a terrible time. Our driver celebrated this crossing of the highest motorable road in the world by opening a bottle of rum. He had cause to celebrate! The northern side was covered with ice and at one point the road cut through a hanging glacier. We had all to get down and push the loaded truck to help it pass. All along this eventful journey, the truck climbed 7000 ft and then descended 8000 ft in ten hours.

The *pièce de résistance* of the journey was a rich Ladakhi lady who sat next to Bhupesh. She was wearing a giant hat, *perak*, with those big ear flaps and turquoises which one sees on the postcards. 'A lady wearing a helicopter on the head!' (courtesy Indian Army). But fortunately you cannot smell them on a postcard. Unwashed for a lifetime, and oiled with yak butter, it was a test of endurance to sit through by her side. We met the Shyok river at Khalsar and ahead crossed the suspension bridge to land up at Sumur, at the entrance of

the Nubra valley. Our battered hips and backs were most grateful when this journey ended.

Along the Nubra

We spent the next four days walking around the Nubra valley, mostly on roads. Sumur to Panamik (18 km) and Sasoma (15 km) was a pleasurable trek in the mornings and an oven in the afternoons. Gompas at Sumur and opposite Panamik were worth a visit. We camped near the only house at Sasoma. The owner regaled us with many tales from the past. He had visited Yarkand and Khotan several times: perhaps one of the last few of that generation. The stories of those caravans and hardships of the route were amazing. 'Nothing is known of the men who, centuries ago, first ventured across this monstrous wilderness, in search of trade or conquest. It is easier to imagine the toil, hardship and frustration, they must have endured than to understand what inspired them, the courage and tenacity to discover a way.'¹ From Sasoma to the north lay the Siachen glacier drained by the Nubra river. To the east wound up that famous Central Asia Trade Route or the 'Skeleton Trail' to Saser La² and Karakoram Pass. The spirit was willing but alas those 'permits' put a full stop here. Anyway, though it closed the door, it certainly left a large window open.

We returned back to Phukpoche. With a porter we left for a seven-day outing to the western base of Saser Kangri (25,170 ft), a route followed by the earlier expeditions. The snout of the South and North Phukpoche glaciers was two days away. But the route passed over a deep and narrow gorge. The famous Rishi Gorge would appear a walk-over compared to certain sections here. Overhanging rocks, or loose scree with the Phukpoche nala always rushing underneath, was not exactly an enjoyable route. We camped on a little green patch.

On the first day we climbed a higher point of a ridge to get a panoramic view of both the glaciers. In the northwest, the Saltoro range dominated by Saltoro Kangri (25,400 ft) was visible. Lashi (20,550 ft) was to our north. Saser Kangri remained hidden by a nearby peak.

On 5 August we proceeded along the left lateral moraine of the South Phukpoche glacier for about 4 km and till 18,500 ft. From here we could get a complete panoramic view of Saser Kangri I (25,170 ft), II (24,590 ft), and IV ('Cloud Peak') 24,330 ft. It was a most imposing sight and the drop from the summits to the glacier was sheer and with many overhanging blocks. This was the best and highest panorama in the Indian part of the Karakoram.

Within a day we were washing ourselves in the hot springs at Panamik. An army truck dropped us at Dishkit beyond the confluence of the Nubra and Shyok. The monastery here is particularly noteworthy and luckily unspoiled. We could see a few of those famous double-humped camels of Central Asia. The poor creatures are now carrying stones for the local builders.

1. *That Untravelled World*, by Eric Sipton, p. 144.
2. See article in the present issue.—Ed.

Along the Shyok

At Khalsar we failed to get any porters or mule for the next part of our trek. So the evening of 10 August saw the two of us marching along the Shyok, eastwards, with heavy packs. Plain after plain of stony waste and, hopping over boulders, we trekked for two days to Aghyam (10,500 ft). From here we turned south along the Lazum Lungpa. Offers of even exorbitant rates to carry our luggage were rejected by the villagers who favoured looking after their harvest. Evidently one cannot eat paper or coins during a six-month winter! Luckily that night at Tangyar, Dorjee and his female donkey were ready to accompany us. Breathing a sigh of relief, we marched off to Nebuk La (17,850 ft). It was a long but easy ascent which afforded a far distant view of Chogolisa (25,148 ft) and Masherbrum (25,660 ft). On the other side we dropped to Itching. The next morning we had to defend the honour of our donkey from the local population which was considerably happy at the female company. We were forced to be chivalrous for if left alone, our carrier would have thrown off the luggage to defend herself with her hind-legs. Reaching Darbuk and Tangtse was great fun to say the least.

Along the Pangong

We enjoyed two days of 'fauji company'. A truck took us to Lukung on the shores of the Pangong lake. I have never seen a better site. The crystal clear saltish water shone in many shades of blue depending upon its depth. It literally changed shades with the sunlight. With the backdrop of mountains of various hues and colours, it was a sight for the gods. At about 14,000 ft, the air was cool even in this, the warmest month of Ladakh. 'The lake is about 4 km wide on an average and at least 136 km long. The extent of the known portion is, therefore, upwards of 250 square miles (400 sq km), or about the same size as the holy lake of Mansarovar.'¹

Only about a fourth is in India — till it takes an easterly turn and disappears into Chinese territory. Towards the east, it is supposed to have sweet water. With its rare black-necked cranes and other birds, it is a sight beyond one's wildest imagination. But alas it is also 'sensitive', some of the opposite bank being controlled by the Chinese. We trekked along the bank but, even with so much water around, there was still no drinking water available for long distances. The villages of Man and Merak with the backdrop of the snowy peaks of the Pangong range offered a grand view. Sipping chang, we met a party of traders from Lahul. For generations they have been visiting this region loaded with goods which are locally required. In return they carry back gems, stones, hides and wool, a kind of barter or exchange. Even where modern transport is available, they continue the trade on mules, exactly like their forefathers. Perhaps, one of last examples of caravaning!

Towards the southern end lay Chushul. It is a historic site, both

1. *Ladak*, by Alexander Cunningham, p. 137.

in the ancient and modern context. Being on the Tibetan trade route from Rudok in Tibet, it played a prominent part in Zorawarsingh's Tibetan campaigns in the 1840s. And, in 1962, during the Chinese-Indian war it witnessed plenty of action. With its height of 14,300 ft, it also boasts of having the 'highest post office' in the world. After a sojourn there we returned to Tangtse. A visit to Sachukul Gomba from here was rewarding. The Lama, who at the start willingly opened the lower sanctum, inquired whether we had received fresh supplies in the canteen. When he learned to his horror that we are not big 'bosses' from the army, he emphatically declared that the keys of the other sections were lost! On 19 August we left by truck for Leh across Chang La (17,800 ft). On the way at the Shey Monastery we saw a group of thoroughly bored tourists witnessing the Lama dance. Even with my scanty knowledge I could see that it was anything but graceful or a genuine dance. But, strictly speaking, dollars are dollars! And who cares? We were back at Leh.

To Padam

We spent two days of rest and completed the formalities. For the last long trek across Zanskar we reached Lamayuru monastery, half way on the road to Kargil. The route we were to follow was a popular one. This time we had two Nepali porters with us. The first week of trekking was to lead us to Padam, the heart of Zanskar.

But unfortunately 'Jule' here is followed by 'Kharu' (Give me food). From the smallest kid to the richest wedding party we encountered, all had the same question. Foreign chocolates and tins had a special taste, particularly if it is all free! The attitude did not stem from poverty. For a stay in any house or food of any kind one has to pay exorbitant sums. The cultural pollution is here at its worst. As for the 'other' kind of pollution, a coloured wrapper or toilet paper shines out in the barren hills.

But all these apart the trek was certainly beautiful and striking. The narrow gorges and rushing torrents made excellent company. From Wanla to Hanupatta we passed through a narrow gorge. Ahead the route goes over Sir Sir La (16,320 ft) and Shingi La (16,600 ft) to cross the Zanskar river and enter Zanskar proper. Nerak La (15,966 ft) and Namatse La (14,530 ft) offered the most magnificent gorges with towers of scree and balancing stones. Zangla was the first village of importance on the way. We met the Gyalpo (landlord), a kindly elder. On the way to Karsha Gomba we had to cross the river on one of those rope bridges for which Zanskar is famous. It was certainly very scary as the dilapidated bridge swung vigorously, with cold rushing torrent beneath.

Padam is the administrative headquarters of the valley. It is situated at the southeastern end of a central valley. Many snow peaks surround it. Now it is linked with a 240 km motorable road with Kargil. That brings those challenging peaks within a day's distance from the road-head. In future, this otherwise dull village could afford many climbing opportunities. Zanskar can boast a significant historical past. It

was always frequented by various travellers and climbers. They came over from Shingo La (Himachal Pradesh), Pensi La (Kargil), Umasi La (Kishtwar) or from Ladakh following many routes. The period of the exploration of the Zaskar and Ladakh mountains is certainly over. 'No Pardah in (on) Padam'¹ ever.

To Kishtwar

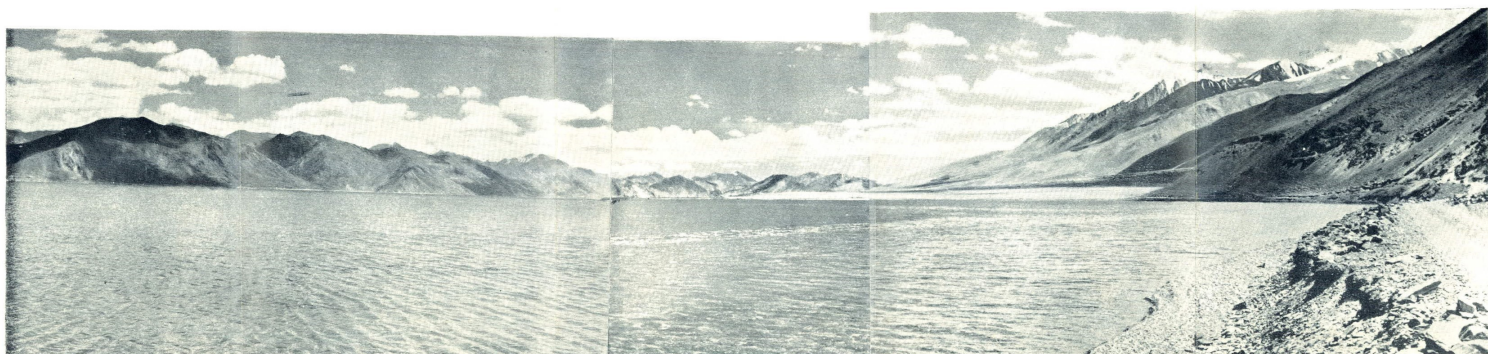
On 31 August in a fierce sandstorm we reached Sani Gompa. The last leg of our journey was over Umasi La and out of Ladakh and Zaskar to enter Padar in the south. From Sani we proceeded to Ating, leaving the motorable road at the Tungri bridge. After about 2 km, we turned south to Zumkul Gompa. With one more camp at Garera, we were on the way to Umasi La (17,370 ft). A long walk on icy slopes and a steep snow climb at the end tired our porters so much that they refused to go ahead. As a result, we were forced to stay 300 ft below the pass on 3 September. A cold affair indeed! The southern side was also snowbound and the route rather tricky, circumventing an icefall. A final Jule to Ladakh and by evening we were amidst grass, birch-trees and flowers. A grand feeling after six weeks in dry Ladakh. It is not surprising that travellers, after months of journey on the sandy Central Asian plains and Ladakh, on entering Kashmir, declare it to be a heaven on earth. Perhaps it is this contrast that creates the atmosphere of paradise. The next two days (to Machail, Chishot and Athauli in Padar) were sheer delight. A variety of forest, flowers and greenery made up for all those 'dry days'. Gulabgadh, an open fort surrounded by rivers on three sides, was the seat of Gulab Singh, the first Maharaja, of Kashmir. In Padar, the fusion of cultures was most striking. Up to Machail the population was Buddhist, under the Zaskari influence. As we went south to meet the Chandrabhaga (Chenab) flowing from Lahul-Pangi, a distinct Hindu population greeted us. Ahead towards Kishtwar, the Muslim and Kashmiri influence took over. Their interaction, always peaceful, was noteworthy.

At long last a bus ride from Galahar to the dak bungalow of Kishtwar. The fame of its Khansama whetted our appetites further. A tiring bus journey to Jammu and we were on our way home!

Members: Harish Kapadia and Bhupesh Ashar.

Area: In Ladakh: to Nubra valley, Saser Kangri base, Nebuk La and Pangong Lake. In Zaskar: from Lamayuru over Shingi La to Padam over Umasi La to Padar, Kishtwar. 520 km trek over 10 passes.

1. See book of the same title by Antonia Deacock, 1952.



PANORAMA D. Pangong Tso from Lukung. Looking towards Chustul. Pangong range on the right.

Article 22

Photo: Harish Kapadia

Saser Kangri IV
"Cloud Peak"
(54,230 ft) (16515 m)

Saser Kangri I
(52,170 ft) (15982 m)

Phuksa Peak
(51,000 ft) (15546 m)

Divide Peak

Peaks on S Phuckpo (2) — Sakang Lungpa glaciers divide



South Phuckpo glacier (1)

PANORAMA C. Saser Kangri group from South Phuckpo glacier, Nubra valley, Ladakh.

Article 22

Photo: Harish Kapadia

South Phuckpo glacier (2)

(See *Panorama H.J.*, Vol. XIV, opp. page 11 and 14)



34. 6000 ft unclimbed S Face of Saser Kangri I. *Article 24*

Photo: Harish Kapadia



35. Shingi La (background) northern entrance to Zaskar. Chocho Bori La in foreground. On left unclimbed rocky peak 19,440 ft.

Article 20

Photos: Harish Kapadia



36. Unique rock and sand formations in gorge near Namtse La, Zaskar.