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Khen Rinpoche's Land

This newsletter provides you with good basic information about the setting, history, and culture of Ladakh, a high-mountain region in far northern India, where Khen Rinpoche's Siddhartha School is located. The newsletter also gives you information on the Siddhartha School and Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, effective and important projects blessed with Khen Rinpoche's interest and leadership. We hope this will motivate you to appreciate them more and to make a generous donation to projects where your dollar has vastly more purchasing power than it could have in the US. Thank you.

The High Valley of Ladakh, Northernmost India

In your imagination, picture a remote and isolated valley, where most days have at least a few hours of crystal-clear sky and clear high altitude air. Vast stretches of land gently slope to the foothills and then the abrupt peaks of two of the world's great mountain ranges (the Himalaya and the Karakoram), dwarfing Colorado's altitude or ruggedness. Sunrises and sunsets can seem miraculously dramatic and serene, with vast billowy clouds softly hugging the mountains as pink and yellow seem to come deep within the clouds. Romance fills the local history, and you can easily picture camel caravans bringing goods across the dusty panoramas of the fabled Silk Road. The land is peacefully isolated, because of impassable rivers and mountain trails too narrow to hold the large marauding armies which devastated the lowlands further south. Communities are small, and people know one another reasonably well. This means cooperation and character can be more important than income, and the stresses of competitive social climbing are relatively rare. A common local culture and language makes religious hostility uncommon. The culture is partly matriarchal, with women's rights well established (benefitting members of both sexes and their children). Partly because few resources and opportunities to exploit one another exist, and partly because of cultural habits, the region is free of the glaring poverty or income maldistribution which plagues more "civilized" areas—gaudy hotels and Mercedes Benzes are unknown while beggars, crippling poverty, or garbage-laden streets seem rare. Time and happiness seem common, rather than forming rare quantities to be desperately clung to. Saturated with prayer flags, the land also seems permeated by the peace and beauty of Tibetan Buddhist thought—it is hard to find a stretch of land without several Tulkus, or reborn Lamas, somewhere within your range of vision. You might consider this a prototype for Shangri-La, and indeed a similar region actually was the basis for this novel, but we are describing the very real region of Ladakh, in far northern India.

This is the land where Khen Rinpoche lives and administers the Siddhartha School. In an area where competitiveness is relatively rare, graduates from this school have scored some of the highest standardized testing performance of any school in northern Indian. Siddhartha emphasizes preserving and defending the unique culture of the valley even as its graduates find places in universities and boarding schools in the rest of modern India, an emerging technological power.

Nevertheless … not far below this charmingly beautiful surface, not all is paradise, and life for the Siddhartha students (and the Ladakhis) is challenging in ways seldom known by Americans. The absence of

exploitable resources (like minerals or farmland) means nearly all exports and imports must be expensively transported by air or over a long and treacherous road. The beautiful clouds can turn into a fog dense enough to block air traffic for days, and roads are often blocked for weeks by snowfall or rockslides. Until recently, communications and isolation were major problems, and so was public health—meaning a high infant mortality, unpredictable epidemics, and a short lifespan. Because energy resources are scarce, many still depend on indoor burning of dung or charcoal, which brings coronary and respiratory diseases. The enviable lack of social stresses and competitiveness can translate into a stunning lack of opportunity for those who are intellectually or socially gifted, and lack of stressors can also bring some difficulties in managing unforeseen situations. The Tibetan culture and subsistence economy may provide stability, character development, and relative peace, but their adaptability to modern society remains a question mark, especially since Ladakhis are so distinct from ethnic groups found in India. Local groups are generally cohesive and non-exploitive, but the political administrative region is large, so non-local groups can be a source of exploitation (for example, there is considerable feeling that non-Ladakhi groups in the regional capital wield more than their fair share of government influence and receive more than their fair share of assistance). Modern warfare has changed the isolation, and the Indian Army has a major presence because Ladakh is so close to China and Pakistan (not always the friendliest of neighbors). One of the world's great rivers (the Indus) flows through the valley, but the water rights for this river are contested by downstream users, heavy silt makes hydroelectric power impractical, and steep valleys make the zone of cultivability narrow. The same dry climate that brings the magnificent panoramas also brings frequent lung-choking dust storms, while the high elevation that provides such magnificently clear air brings brief summers, a short tourist season, and just four months to grow subsistence crops. Climate change now causes devastating seasonal monsoons in an area where the infrastructure and buildings have assumed a perpetual dryness, and the World Monuments Funds rates the region among its 100 most endangered sites.

In short—all is not paradise in Paradise. Rinpoche and his students need our support!!

An Overview of the Region Surrounding Rinpoche's School in Ladakh

Khen Rinpoche oversees the Siddartha School in the village of Stok, in the far northern region of India called Ladakh, just south of the town of Leh. Leh, with about 27,000 people, is one of the few fairly large towns in Ladakh and the major commercial center and location of most regional services. Although Stok is only about 20 miles from Leh, driving conditions require about an hour to make the journey, and since motor fuel is in short supply, commuting between villages and Leh is challenging. In contrast to central India, Ladakh is sparsely populated with about 7 people per square mile (about a fifth that of Colorado). For most of its history, the independent lifestyle of Ladakh's isolated villagers and family farmers have served them well, but global interdependence means demand for education has far outstripped traditional methods of providing it. Well over ¾ of Ladakh's population lives in isolated villages with poor road or trail conditions, so boarding schools are common in the area and the Siddartha School has provided a cost-effective and necessary service. Ladakh is also one of the world's highest populated regions, with an average height over 10,000' (Stok is at the same approximate altitude as Leadville, Colorado).

Until recently, most villagers lived on subsistence farming, herding, and trading (mainly with Tibet). The closure of trade routes with Tibet, and the arrival of the "modern world," revolutionized Ladakh, and today, about 50% of the economy in the Leh Valley region comes from tourism, supplanted by military and government spending. The traditional staples of Ladakh's exports have been agricultural products (notably apples, barley, and apricots) and woolen goods (Ladakh's high mountain regions produce some of the world's finest and most costly wool, especially from pashmina goats), but these traditional income sources now form a relatively small part of the local GDP.

Early History

Ladakh's altitude and isolation result from some of the most geologically energetic forces in the world. About 40 million years ago, the Indian tectonic plate and the Eurasian landmass collided violently at the border of a shallow sea (careful travelers can find fossil ammonites on the slopes of the Himalayas and Zanskar mountains). You can see millions of years of time revealed in magnificent layers easily visible from the sides of mountain roads. The vast Himalayas still grow about two inches per year and major earthquakes testify to the earth's continuing activity. The region of Ladakh near Stok normally receives less than 4" of precipitation per year and temperatures normally range from 0 to 100°F.

Ladakh's geography and harshness have kept it fairly isolated from major migrations, and just three major ethnic groups arrived during its early history. Tibetan nomads, called Chang-pa, settled well before modern history began and maintained their nomadic patterns from the earliest times until today. Other Tibetans migrated into Ladakh over the centuries after Tibet became a dominant force in regional culture. The north Indian Mon people may have emigrated as part of a missionary effort by Emperor Ashoka, around 250 BC, and not only brought early Buddhism, but also a more settled lifestyle centered around the learning centers that Buddhism required. The Dards, a warrior group of Indo-Aryan people who shared the Buddhist religion, came less peacefully from the southwest shortly after the Mons arrived. As China and Tibet vied for control of the neighboring regions, a series of minor kingdoms and dynasties ruled the Ladakhi region for several centuries, including the most famous one, the Namgyal ("victorious") Dynasty (even today, many Ladakhis are named Namgyal). This dynasty kept the region fairly autonomous for many years. Ladakh was one of the major routes through which the fabled Silk Road passed, although few people ever traveled the entire length of the Road since it was more a series of mountain trails than an actual road. Merchants needed to send goods in several relays because terrain and altitude variations required a wide variety of pack animals and made any single caravan impractical. Even today, the Khardung La Pass, at nearly 17,000', is the world's highest motorable road (several local passes are nearly as high).

By the 9th Century AD, Tibet had replaced the Indian or Chinese regions as the main cultural influence in Ladakh. The Moslem invasions, which decimated much of the Indian region, had little effect on Ladakh. An alliance of a Kashmiri Moslem army, Tibetan invaders, and native Ladakhi dissidents did cause establishment of the Moslem religion around the time of the early Namgyal Dynasty in the 16th Century, but this was considerably more peaceful than Islamic establishment in lands to the south. Ladakh had been spared major invasions, and although it enjoyed long periods of stability, internal princely feuding and intrigues often managed to bring the usual share of politically-motivated turbulence and bloodshed into the area. In 1834, a modern army from Punjab and Kashmir invaded and conquered Ladakh, which then became part of Jammu and Kashmir province in 1846 (this helps explain modern resentment between Kashmiris and Ladakhis). The British Empire affected Ladakh very little, although Younghusband's famous Tibetan expedition passed through the borders.

History Since Independence

Ladakh was mercifully spared nearly all the extreme Hindu-Muslim violence which plagued the border areas after India's partition and independence in 1947. Shortly after Independence, a Pakistani army briefly invaded, and fighting nearly reached the Stok area (home of the Siddhartha School). During the Indo-Pakistani Wars of 1965 and 1971, the Jammu and Kashmir areas saw combat and even today, the Line of Control which divides far northern Pakistan and India remains tenuous. A large Indian military presence in Ladakh helps deter invaders and to maintain the mountain roads. Pakistan freely admits sending terrorist groups across its borders with India, but Ladakh has remained stable.

Sadly, relations between the Ladakhis and China were affected by the Communist takeover and subsequent invasion of Tibet. Because of geography, Tibet was Ladakh's most important trading partner, and the invasion completely closed trade routes which had been open for centuries. In 1962, China invaded and seized much of largely uninhabited northeast Ladakh, and subsequently used this land to build a

highway connecting Sinkiang to Tibet and then to Pakistan, an ally of China. Despite China's major economic growth, few Ladakhis appear to want unification with China, but Chinese claims to Tibet and all things Tibetan has Ladakhis worried about the future. I noticed that when I asked about the border with China on two occasions, I was quickly informed the border was with Tibet, not China.

Fortunately, as the Tibet-Ladakh border closed, tourism emerged as a significant factor in the Ladakhi economy. Many trekkers and rafters from all over the world now enjoy the incredible, unique, windswept beauty of Ladakh, and travelers have vast choices of magnificent itineraries. Although it is dangerous, many experienced bikers consider the road from Ladakh to the Indian towns of Srinagar or Manali the world's most spectacular road trip. For trekkers, "homestays," or overnight accommodations at the homes of local families, are far more charming and ecologically sensitive than camping with tents. For several reasons, only Ladakhi natives can buy land or build a house in Ladakh, and this limits the potential for all the disruption that vacation homes can bring. Over the past several years, as the Indian economy has grown, Indian tourists have begun replacing European and American ones as major sources of revenue (alas, they are said not to tip as well). Ladakhis appear proud of their unique culture, and tourists can easily enjoy a colorful evening watching traditional dancers or observing an elaborate Buddhist ceremony after an arduous mountain excursion. Native Ladakhis have transferred their abilities to navigate rugged terrain and to provide hospitality to travelers, and Ladakhi tour guides are found all over India.

Because of the altitude, wildlife is scarce, although Ladakh has three protected wildlife sanctuaries. Visitors have a chance to spot animals and plants unique to extreme high altitudes (such as the snow leopard, the Tibetan grey wolf, the blue sheep, the Tibetan argali sheep (the world's largest wild sheep), the endangered Tibetan antelope (used to make the contraband wool known as *shahtoosh*), the black-necked crane, and the Himalayan griffon vulture. Past the narrow irrigated zone, few plants exist beside isolated patches of scrub grass and the land becomes a lifeless mountain desert.

Buddhism in Ladakh: An Overview

Buddhism has been the region's major religion since it was introduced over 2000 years ago, although, of course, it was subject to the inevitable changes in popular or royal favor and the evolution of many sectarian reforms. Once Tibet dominated Ladakhi culture, around the 7th Century, the earlier forms of Buddhism were completely replaced by Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism (which also included many elements of the prior Bon religion). Guru Padmasambhava, among the most significant figures in Tibetan Buddhism, reportedly visited Ladakh on his famous mission to re-establish the religion in Tibet. Ladakh is now among the few places where an indigenous Tibetan culture survives largely free from political control and both "Yellow Hat" and "Red Hat" sects coexist (the two differ in some details of religious doctrine, although these distinctions are generally less important now than in the past). Ladakh has hundreds of colorful monasteries (gompas) and ruins, and vast numbers of small chortens (stupas), prayer flags, prayer wheels, and "mani walls" made of flat stones with carved mantras. Major monasteries and learning centers include Hemis, Thikse, Spituk, and Lamayuru—each one impressive, and each one architecturally and religiously unique. Alchi, an externally unimposing monastery founded in the 11th Century, is a unique cultural center with some of the world's best collections of Buddhist wall murals, many done in a style predating Tibetan influence. Monasteries were frequently established in relatively deserted areas, far from major population centers, which reflects the value placed on isolation and quiet as prerequisites for higher learning. Stok (where Rinpoche's Siddhartha School is located) also has a museum formed from a well-preserved 19th Century palace. Until recently, monasteries controlled educational functions, and because government-run schools are often poorly funded and qualitatively indifferent, religious-run schools still form an active part of the educational system (so Rinpoche's Siddhartha School reflects a long tradition). Foreign Buddhist communities, mainly in East Asia and Europe, have provided welcome, necessary, and generous funds to help maintain the Buddhist schools and monasteries. Many visitors are astonished to discover how much their money can provide.

The Siddhartha School

Khen Rinpoche established the Siddhartha School (grades K–10) in 1995 as an alternative to government schools which were excluding local culture from their standardized curriculum, and which were experiencing a high (70+%) failure rate for Ladakhi students who wanted to pursue further schooling. The school focused on teaching both traditional Tibetan and Ladakhi cultures, and giving students a well-rounded education which could serve them if they decided to attend colleges outside Ladakh. Although it was a private school, an early decision was made not to turn away students for lack of funding. This meant the school could educate children who needed it the most, but also meant it would depend on outside funding. Expenses are low and the entire operating budget for the year, for this school of over 200 students, is $55,000 US per year—a figure which seems impossibly low in the US.

Despite the low operating cost, the school meets remarkable standards and donors have been well rewarded with excellence. When it began, the Ladakhi pass rate for the state-standardized annual exam given at the conclusion of Grade 10 was just 7%. In 2008 and 2009 the graduating classes passed at a 100% rate, and two children achieved the highest score ever achieved in the region. Siddhartha maintains modern science and computer labs in addition to teaching the children the ancient Tibetan language (they also learn English, Hindi, and Ladakhi), and acts as a standard to help other schools teaching traditional cultures within the region and throughout India.

Future priorities include improved internet capability, construction of a suitable auditorium, and expansion of the health clinic. Further information on sponsoring a child, for general donations, or about the school and the region can be found at siddharthaschool.org and siddharthaschoolproject.wordpress.com. The Siddartha School Project is a registered US charity and donations are eligible for tax exemption according to US tax policy.

Tashi Lhunpo Monastery

India has generously allowed the establishment of Tibetan exile monasteries and many are named after their spiritual predecessors in Tibet; Tashi Lhunpo follows this pattern. The first Dalai Lama founded the original Tashi Lhunpo in 1447 as the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama (the "Tashi"), the second spiritually-ranking person to the Dalai Lama among the Gelukpa ("Yellow Hat") Order. This monastery once hosted 5000 monks, and was architecturally distinguished by its chapels on the monastery roof and the Sutra Hall which held several thousand hand-carved printing blocks. It was sacked by Gurkha invaders in 1791, disbanded by the imperial Chinese government in 1960, partially destroyed by the Red Guards in 1966, and rebuilt by the Chinese government in 1989 as a tourist attraction with a few resident monks. In 1972 H. H. the Dalai Lama re-established Tashi Lhunpo as a monastery-in-exile in the south Indian state of Karnataka, and while it remains among the poorest of the Tibetan exile monasteries, its restoration to prominence is among the Dalai Lama's goals. At the Dalai Lama's personal request, Khen Rinpoche was installed as Head Abbot (representing the Panchen Lama) in 2005.

Bibliography

Books: Nicholas Eakins, *Ladakh—the Complete Guide* and *Ladakh: A Photographic Journey;* Andrew Harvey, *A Journey in Ladakh;* Cynthia Hunt, *The Magic Mountain (film);* Nawang Tsering*, Alchi: The Living Heritage of Ladakh;* Helena Norberg-Hodge*, Ancient Futures.* Matthieu Ricard and Olivier Follmi have excellent photographic books on the Buddhist Himalayas (which feature Ladakh). Those fortunate enough to visit Leh may have access to the Ladakh Bookshop, one of India's best small bookstores and the source of many photo books and maps I have found nowhere else.

Websites: tashilhunpo.org, yamatreks.com, localfutures.org/ladakh-project, Wikipedia-travel and Wikipedia, health-inc.org, siddharthaschool.org

This newsletter was provided courtesy of Victor Bradford.