

# LADAKH

## Crossroads of High Asia

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## Preface

This book is intended as a background and an introduction to a little-known corner of the Buddhist world, existing in isolation in India. After being closed to outsiders for thirty years, for military and strategic reasons, Ladakh was partly opened in 1974, and immediately became an important destination for the serious student of Buddhism and Tibetology. It also holds attractions for the lover of mountains, and the traveller who simply wants to extend his horizons; in addition it has become part of the Asian itinerary of footloose western youth.

In spite of its many features of interest, no comprehensive account of Ladakh has been published in English in the nine years since it was opened, and authentic and up-to-date information is hard to come by. I have written this book in an attempt to fill the gap. In it, I have tried to place on record some of the important facts about a part of the world which has been little studied up till now, and which has often been regarded as no more than an undifferentiated appendage of old Tibet. I believe, on the contrary, that Ladakh has its own vigorous social and cultural identity, of which the Tibetan tradition is only one component; and that it is important there should be an account of it before it is eroded by contact with the modern world. For the benefit of the visitor to Ladakh, I have also included some descriptions of places, particularly of the major *gompas*, or monasteries, within reach of Leh; and I should like to think that the book as a whole will give him some indications as to what he might keep his eyes open for, and help him to place what he sees in its historical and cultural setting.

I lay no claim to originality, much less to having conducted anything in the nature of research. Many of the facts about Ladakh are available to anyone with access to the literature of Buddhism, or of central Asian and Tibetan travel, and the rest to anyone who has been lucky enough, as I have, to live there for some years. These, taken together, are my qualifications to write



about Ladakh; of them, the second is of far greater importance. I lived for two years in Leh, and during that time formed a deep affection for the land and its people. My husband, Sayeed Rizvi, was Development Commissioner, or head of the district administration; as well as sharing my affection for Ladakh, he acquired in the line of business a wide knowledge of the country as it is today, a good deal of which rubbed off on me. This, and the fact that I was living there, going about and meeting the people (though not, to my regret, able to converse with them in their own tongue) gave me something of a 'feel' for Ladakh, whose physical, social and mental atmosphere I found deeply sympathetic.

In our day (1976-8) Ladakh was a single district, in area India's largest, in population one of its smallest. In June 1979 it was split in two, the town of Kargil becoming the headquarters of a district of the same name. Most of this book was written before the bifurcation took place; even now it is hard for me to think of Ladakh as more than a single district. Our home was in Leh, and it is central Ladakh, the core of the present Leh district, with which I am most familiar, and on which I have laid most emphasis. I could indeed have confined myself to the present Leh district; but to do that would be to omit all mention of some particularly interesting regions in Kargil district—Zanskar, one of Ladakh's most beautiful and isolated valleys; Da-Hanu, where the Buddhist Dards pursue a way of life unique in the world, and Shagkar-Chigtan, a nominally Muslim area rich in Buddhist survivals, and with a wealth of oral literature unsurpassed anywhere else. It would also be to ignore the underlying unity, historical, cultural and linguistic, which has for centuries bound the often sharply differentiated regions of the two districts together. Nevertheless, I am conscious that, not wishing to tread where I was unsure of my ground, I have not done justice to Kargil, and to that extent my picture of Ladakh is less than complete.

We are no longer in Ladakh; but Ladakh was an experience which has remained with us. A few of our Ladakhi friends, we hope and believe, have become friends for life; and for me the writing of this book, started before we left, has been a valuable means of preserving that experience, and keeping in touch with Ladakh.

Janet Rizvi



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## COLOUR

Confluence of the Indus and Zaskar rivers at Nyemo.

Leh bazaar.

Glacier in the Saser area.

The Saser-La .

Kitchen of a well-to-do Ladakhi family.

Two teapots of Chiling craftsmanship and a *mok-mok* steamer from Yarkand.

Archery at Skara.

Cheerful crowd gathered to watch the archery.

Dance ceremony at Stok Palace.

*Chorten*—near Hemis.

Outside the Idgah after prayers.

Muslims being fed after prayers on *Id-e-Milad-ul-Nabi*.

Budding lamas.

Image of Maitreya at Basgo.

*Om Mani Padme Hum*.

Vimdhaka and Dhritarashtra, Lords of the South and West.

Alchi—interior of *Dukhang*.

The Buddhist scriptures.

## BLACK AND WHITE

Lamayuru in its setting of tortured earth and rock.

Lamayuru—inside the village.

Just above Nyemo the solid rock has been blasted to let the road go through.

Namgyal Tsemo—the Peak of Victory above Leh.

The rarest birds in the world—a pair of Black Necked Cranes at Hanle.

Pashmina goats in Chang-Thang.

The Yarkand Trail.

Bactrian camels at Nubra.

Mon musicians.

Polo at Leh.

Old woman of Chang-Thang.

Women at a Shey gathering.

Alchi—exterior of the *Sum-tsek*.

Lamas in procession.



This is the first authoritative and readable study of Ladakh to offer a full account of the many facets of this fascinating mountain district of Jammu and Kashmir state.

Ladakh has been celebrated primarily as the last surviving outpost of Tibetan civilization, and its gompas, Ladakhi social organization, and the Ladakhi character have been observed largely in the context of the Tibetan-Buddhist influence on the region.

However, Ladakh offers much more to the critical observer, tourist or scholar. The author points out that nearly half the Ladakhis are Muslims, and here Islam and Buddhism have met and fused to form a unique and composite society. As it was situated at the crossroads of some of the important trade routes of old Asia, and was also the source of a highly-prized trade commodity, raw pashmina (the material of the Kashmiri shawl), Ladakh was open to cultural and economic influences from many directions.

Evidence of these influences—polo and archery, *chang* and butter tea, and other fascinating aspects of a highly individual syncretic society—are only part of the picture. Equally important is the author's observation of the resourcefulness and industry of the Ladakhi farmer and domestic householder, who have made an arid and inhospitable terrain the basis for a productive and ecologically sound agricultural economy.

While recognizing the need for change and development, the necessity for care in imposing 'improvements' on such a carefully balanced culture is an important concern. Similarly, tourism has both benefited and deeply damaged a society that was till recently ignorant of the cash culture of the modern industrialized world.

Ladakh has a rich oral tradition, of which very little is known to outsiders. Both the literature and artefacts were made accessible to the author through personal observation and relationships with her Ladakhi neighbours.

This is an important study, based on impeccable sources, comprehensive and accurate. It is written with feeling and personal knowledge about a people who may soon become as facelessly uniform as those in other parts of the world.