

## LADAKH NOTES

I like going to the Himalayas. The love affair started, in 1961, when I trained at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling, under Tenzing and his nephew, Nawang Gombu. I continued this, with a stint, as Deputy Commissioner, Lahaul-Spiti, under the great Punjab Chief Minister, Kairon. A February winter crossing, of the Rohtang Pass, remains a precious memory. Two years ago, we went to Leh, and on to the Nubra Valley, across the 18,500 ft high Khardung-la. We were amazed at the vast Siachen-Nubra Valley, going down to Turtuk, the border, with the other Kashmir.

Last week, we went again to Leh. The one hour flight from Delhi, is itself an experience, not to be forgotten. We sat on the left behind the cockpit, so as to gaze in wonder, and awe, at the mighty peaks, all the way to the Karakoram range. K-2, Nanga Parbat, and the numerous 8000 mtr plus, peaks of the Baltoro Glacier, Concordia, could all be glimpsed in the morning sun from the East. The only equivalent, to this great experience, is a morning flight in clear winter, from Delhi via Kathmandu, to Bhutan. Again sitting on the left, one can count all the great Himalayan Peaks, Everest, Lhotse, Numpse, Nanda Devi, Kanchanjunga, and many many more, as one flies west to east. Leh, itself is a delight. The plane does some remarkable loops, over the green, poplar studded Indus Valley, before landing.

We spent four days in the Valley. The old Leh of the explorers of the nineteenth century, is still a fascinating enclave of narrow lanes, and three story traditional mud houses, cool in the summer, and warm in the winter. But the town has expanded, a great deal on the slopes along the Indus. Most of the expansion, is of the army construction, since '62. The recent Kargil affair has led to a further rapid expansion, of the cantonment. All that is necessary and welcome. But, a point has to be made, of the civilian requirements. As in Delhi, the national capital, the armed forces have rapidly taken up all the available land. I wish somebody had also worried about, the civilian public's requirements and aspirations. Some well designed civil colonies should have been marked out in part of the land, to allow the expanding population, a chance, to build houses and commercial establishments. There is a Ladakh Development Council,

who are struggling for civil needs, but I would like to see more concern, by others, for a well planned and designed expansion of the city. I held discussions with all segments, of Leh Society & interests; the tour operators, the sportspersons of all games, political people, and Raja Namgyal of Stok, the traditional ruler of Ladakh. The Council and those interested in winter sports had marked out some government land, for a winter sports stadium, for which they asked my help. They were upset that suddenly the land had been staked out by the army, for further expansion. I hope this will be resolved, to the satisfaction of the local people.

There is a great enthusiasm, for sports and I am determined to fuel it. Soon after taking over, I sanctioned 2.5 lakh rupees, for the traditional Polo Tournament, which I saw. I had learnt with surprise, some months back, that in January-February, the Leh people hold an Ice Hockey Tournament, in which a large number of local teams participate. What is more, the Canadian Embassy, goes from Delhi, and don't mind being beaten, by the locals. The Embassy has been helping the Ice Hockey, Leh Club. Skating is also popular. I sanctioned them Rs 2.5 lakhs for the Tournament, and hope to go myself in February, for the Finals. I have also decided to fix a permanent annual grant for Polo and Ice Hockey, in Leh, so that there is life after me. Other sports requirements will also be taken care of. A girl of 12, in the Moravian School, Ms Padma Chorol, is an outstanding figure skater, with potential. We will give her a two year scholarship. Another, girl Tsering Ladol, from the remote Chumathang area, on the Tibet border has climbed Mt Everest, with the Army. She too, will be honoured. Due to the height Leh youngsters, have stamina, far in excess of those in the plains. We are going to try them for Athletics, and assist them in any way, we can.

We visited the villages of Matho and Saboo, green glacier fed oasis. Poplars every where, and well built Ladakhi mud houses. Barley and wheat harvest, stacks were in each field, lush red apples on the trees. It was all the mellow autumn fruitfulness of Keats. September is the season, to visit the valley. Another day, we dined with Raja Namgyal, and his charming wife, in his 200 years old Castle, which he has restored beautifully, sitting in the moon-light, lighting up the whole valley, with the reflection from the snows, all around. The Raja has done tremendous work, in preserving the heritage of Ladakh, restoring monasteries, and setting up a fine museum, in his castle.

Stok and the Castle, below the 20,000 ft high stok-kangri peak, is a must for any visitor. I had long discussions, with the Agriculture officers, and the DC. I suggested that they look at Lahaul, where in '63-64, in the old Punjab, we introduced, the growing of seed-potatoes, for the country. Lahaul is rich because of this introduction. I believe, the Leh Valley people can compete with Lahaul, and earn a great deal. I also suggested that they should go in for organic foods, in that valley, of pure crystal air, and they could market this in Delhi, for a great profit.

The Moravian Mission, that came to Lahaul, and Ladakh at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, still continues, great service to education. The school is more than a 100 years old. They maintain an ancient grove of poplars, and willows, around some historic graves. To mention only one, Ferdinand Stoliczka, who died at a young age, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, beyond Leh, did remarkable work on the geology of the Himalayas, and other scientific researches. The British Government put up an obelisk in his memory. Moorcraft, who came here in 1825, after visiting Ranjit Singh, lived for a year, before his death, in a garden nearby. Countless are the explorers, of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who all passed through Leh. It is a place of the 'great game', and who knows, which Desi James Bond one might run into, in a shadowy lane, under the old palace, on the high ridge.

Dr Manohar Singh Gill