

SUNDAY READING

THE ROAD TO XANADU

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A general view of Leh, with the Raja's palace in the background.



The Indus Valley — north of Leh.



Hippies in Leh Bazar.

dale? Where indeed is Xanadu with its "sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice"?

Sitting on the northern edge of Chandigarh, looking out over the Shiwaliks and the cloud-crowned outer ramparts of the Himalayas, it is hard to realise that this paradise is only 50 minutes flying time away. The journey itself is an experience. Within minutes of takeoff, you are over the hills. In a single panorama, one can take in all the hill stations set up on the outer spurs of the Himalayas by the British. A little later, one is over the Valley of the gods. And a view is granted to mere mortals which is the privilege of the immortals.

As the plane floats over the Rongtang pass, it is possible to take in, in a single sweep, the Kulu Valley with its green forest-clad hills and the Chandra and Bhaga valleys of Lahaul, with their stark grandeur of the bare inner Himalayas. In a single magic moment, I was able to see my entire former district. Every village stood in its allotted place on the mountainside. Each snow peak I saw as an eagle, in its totality and wholeness. So clear was the atmosphere that I marked the path of each rock, as it rolled down the silken flanks of the mountain through virgin snow untouched by man.

Once past Lahaul, we flew over a forest of snow-tipped spears. A thousand mountain peaks reached out to touch the silver bird we flew in. One felt almost a sensual pleasure in the nearness of death. The horizon was a bevy of beauties. Mountains, one more beautiful than the other, stretched away into the distant blue. As we approached the Indus valley, Nanga Parbat towered in forbidding splendour away to the west. The broad valley of the Indus came into view. The plane lost height rapidly, barely grazing the jagged tips of mountains of sand and bare rock. After two tight loops, it roared past a monastery clinging to a hillside, and came to rest at the Leh airport.

Leh has been, and perhaps still remains, the gateway to Central Asia. During Ranjit Singh's rule and before it traded with Yarkand, Kohistan, Bokhara — names full of romance and history. Its fabled pashmina trade brought Ranjit's general Zorawar here in 1834. His mud fort still serves today's army as barracks and storehouse. The lure of pashmina took Zorawar further west towards Rudok in western Tibet in 1841, resulting in death and disaster. Moorcraft and Cunningham too came here in search of the same pashmina trade for the British and hopes for the army. Both ended up writing detailed and fascinating accounts of this obscure land.

The town is largely as it always was — a caravansarai for the intrepid men going north over the Karakoram Pass. The Raja's palace — alas, abandoned now — towers over the only bazaar like a miniature Potala. Zorawar Singh had banished the king to a village across the Indus. The widow of the last king, a lady from a well known family of Lahaul, still lives there. The palace is crumbling. It will be a pity if it is allowed to. A building of beauty and architectural value, it could be a museum of Central Asian art, or even a hotel for the thousands of European tourists flocking to the valley. The palace gives character to Leh. Without it, it will be just another nondescript inner Himalayan town — something like Kargil.

The bazaar no longer has a Central Asian flavour. It is now on the world map of the hippies. Leh is the in thing, man! They sit at tea shops or saunter about the village lanes. I have seen girls trudging the long mountain miles in search of monasteries and moksha. The bright sun or the rarefied atmosphere does not seem to bother them.

I talked to a Yankee at a tea-shop. How did he like Leh? I asked. "It is different from New York, isn't it?" he answered with a smile.

I conceded it was somewhat so. Did he have any problem travelling outside Leh? I queried.

"Look man, the police here are stupid. They always are, aren't they? If I slip the man a tenner, I can go where I please."

Long ago, in the days of Kipling, Leh had been a spy town, full of romantic possibilities. Hurry Baboo and Kim might have come here in search of Russian spies of the Czar. I wonder how "the great game" is being played now.

We motored down the broad Indus Valley to visit Leh's monasteries. Here Father Indus is generous and gentle. He meanders lazily down the broad open sweep of the valley, breaking into numerous streams in wayward playfulness. His zealous aspect of a mighty powerful giant he reserves for his later

barley fields, cutting and gathering in the harvest. The melodious singing of the reapers floated down the valley. In how many fields did I spy Wordsworth's solitary highland lass? Leh is a land of contrasts. Where there is water, the harvest is unbelievable. Have you seen a "gobi" of 15 kilos, a carrot of five, and an onion of almost two? I have, at the army's research farm. Elsewhere it is a cold Himalayan desert — all rock and sand. The land is rich but thirsty. Water makes all the difference. No wonder the villages lie all along the friendly banks of the Indus. I walked down to its banks to dip my hands in its ice cool waters. I could say now that I had truly drunk of the five rivers of Punjab.

But the people of Leh do not live by bread alone. In fact they live with their gods. Every village has its mount Meru domi-

cliff. In its gloomy interior sits a 20-metre-high bronze Buddha, in solitary contemplation. His eyes turned inwards, a lotus in his upturned palm, he is of this world but not in it. The crumbling walls of the sanctuary carry wall frescoes of great value. Standing on the airy balcony of the dying palace, looking out over the rich golden Indus Valley, I pictured myself a former king of Ladakh. It wasn't a bad life.

Driving further down the valley, I spied another gumpa high up on a ridge. It looked splendid in its loneliness. But as we turned the corner and came around to the other side, a fantastic sight met our eyes. The monastery of Thikse covers a whole mountain slope. The cells of the monks sweep up the slope in serrated ranks till the eye catches the white painted



A beautiful "chorten" at the entrance to Leh town



A view of Thikse monastery.

journey through Gilgit and Skardu, where he rushes through narrow gorges, battering down the very flanks of the mighty Himalayas. To the Leh valley he gives rich sustenance. September is harvest time, and the people were in the golden

main shrine with its prayer flags and golden flag poles. We simply stood and gazed in awe at this magnificent sight — the autumn golds of the valley with the white peasant's cottages, the gumpa on the hillside and the snows behind. The whole magic

scene was heightened by the singing of the peasants at their harvest and by the music that floated down from the monastery as the monks sat at prayer. My guide told me that long ago the then Prime Minister, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, had come once and sat a long long time simply contemplating this remarkable scene. We did the same. It seemed a long way indeed from Chandigarh.

Ever since I read James Hilton's "Shangrila," I wanted it possible to see this fabled place. I knew it must exist outside Hilton's imagination. At long last I have found it. Himis monastery, the premier gumpa of Ladakh, is obviously the setting of Hilton's book. Tucked away in a barren gorge, it escaped the invader simply because it was so well hidden. We crossed the river and leaped up a vast slope, the result of some long forgotten glacier from the earth's youth. There was not a soul in sight, nor a speck of life — bird or mammal. It had the loneliness of a moonscape. We zig-zagged up the slope. Suddenly we found a narrow opening in the rock wall. Inside, the gorge widened a bit. As we travelled up on the loops of a new road, we came across peasants harvesting barley in fields watered by a stream that came down the gorge. Higher still, hidden behind a forest of willows, we found the Himis Gumpa. It is as old as the times of Guru Nanak. I was told the very oldest part of the monastery is still further up the gorge and is used by senior monks for long bouts of penance. Those who have read the book or seen the picture that came out recently, will see the resemblance. Shangrila too was a monastery hidden away from prying eyes, in the heart of the Himalayas. There too, the lower parts of the valley were used by lay folks to grow food for themselves and the monks. The monastery sat in solitary splendour on the upper ridges.

We were taken around the gumpa. Over the centuries, buildings had been piled on each other in an apparent confusion which gave the totality a pleasing architectural mass. The inside was full of priceless treasures — thankas, wall murals, bronzes, and Buddhas of great beauty. Unless they are looked after, some will crumble and others will find their way to Europe via the visitors. The dollar is already the god of the valley. Before each Buddha, I found dollar notes given by tourists displayed with great pride. No one saw the incongruity.

The monks were at lunch. Seated around low tables in the main chapel, below the watchful eyes of a giant Buddha statue and served by little acolytes, they ate like men of the spirit — with restraint. They might have been Cambridge dons had wine too been served. The little disciples wandered around the hall dragging giant brass kettles, full of butter tea. Having finished the meal, they droned a prayer — it was in Tibetan instead of Latin — and off they went to their cells to read, write, pray, doze, and perchance to dream of Shangrila.

I went to call on the high lama. As in Shangrila, we went through numerous mysterious corridors till we were ushered into a warm, rug-lined study full of books. His Holiness has come from Tibet. A teacher of great learning, he is the guru of the current head of the Red Hat sect. I sat at his feet for an hour, learning from his vast knowledge through an interpreter. It seemed like minutes. With his calm and serene presence, he swept my fevered anxieties away. But one remained. He saw my knitted brow and asked gently.

"Why are you not at peace with yourself?"

"Transfers. Your Holiness. I have nightmares about them."

He smiled benignly and looked deep into my eyes. I felt a wave of ineffable peace and happiness wash over me. Then he leaped over and whispered a magic formula into my ear. I made my obeisance and came lightly down the hill, for I now know the answer to the mighty problem of transfers in March, 1978.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river,
ran
Through caverns measureless to
man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile

ground,
With walls and towers were
girdled round;
And here were gardens bright
with sinuous rills
Where blossomed many an in-
cense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient

as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of
greenery.
S. T. COLERIDGE
WHERE is this fabled land,
with its sacred river,
"meandering with a mazy
motion through wood and