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# Frontier: The Making of the Northern and Eastern Border in Ladakh From 1834 to the Present

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Frontier: The Making of the Northern and Eastern Border in Ladakh from 1834 to the Present

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## **Abstract**

Ladakh, despite popular myths of an isolated Himalayan kingdom, has been a land built on trade and regional connections with India to the south, Tibet to the east, and Central Asia to the north. By participating in these social, political, and economic networks, Ladakh was able to amass a rich collection of cultural influences from many far-flung locales. Historically many of these regional interactions have been defined by the physical terrain, which mountain ranges divided Ladakh from other areas, which passes where open and when they were traversable. Even the political boundaries before the partition of India were loosely defined by local governors, mountain-tops and enterprising bandits. What British administrators and later Indian ones did not understand was that Ladakh was not a border state, but a gateway to the rich economies of Tibet and Central Asia and that trade created a flow of ideas that created the contemporary Ladakhi culture of the time. However, since the partition of India and the closing of the border with Chinese Tibet, Ladakh's boundaries have been decided by governments in Delhi, Islamabad and Beijing and often are far divorced from conditions on the ground. This paper will seek to understand how these boundaries developed and how they affect Ladakh today.

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## **Introduction**

On September 24, 1820 a 53 year old employee of the British East India Company entered Leh. William Moorcroft was a veterinarian, the co-founder of the first veterinary college in Britain and a holder of four patents on horseshoes. With the permission of the East India Company's Political and Secret Department, Moorcroft was on a seven year journey to Bukhara, in present day Turkestan, to acquire the legendary Turkoman horses which Marco Polo said could travel a hundred miles a day for weeks. However, upon reaching Leh, Moorcroft's objective changed. In the bazaar there, Moorcroft heard rumors of Russian traders who had entered Ladakh through the Karakoram passes from Central Asia. Moorcroft, whose potential as an explorer for El Co<sup>1</sup> was originally recognized when he served in the Westminster Volunteer Calvary during the Napoleonic Wars, was scared that Russians could easily invade Leh and use the city as a base to invade Kashmir and eventually India. This was the time of the Great Game, a series of geopolitical games played between Britain and Russia to build influence in the Orient, and paranoia of Russian intentions ran rampant. (Choudhury 1996)

Moorcroft realized both the political and economic importance of Ladakh as a conduit between Western Tibet, Central Asia, and India, then controlled by the British East India Company. Moorcroft took the initiative to write up a treaty where Ladakh would pledge allegiance to British in exchange for allowing free trade through the region between India and Turkestan. The hope was that this treaty would open up Central Asia to trade with British India in exchange for British protection against Kashmiri invaders from the West. However, Moorcroft neither had the authority or the mandate from the East India company to propose such a treaty.

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<sup>1</sup> A common nickname for the British East India Company

Additionally in order for the trade treaty to be effective it would require support from Chinese controlled Turkestan, which would not even let Moorcroft across the border on a fact finding expedition. Moorcroft's treaty was rejected and Moorcroft died a broken man of fever on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1825.<sup>2</sup> His prediction that Ladakh would be invaded from the West by Kashmiri armies came true less than 20 years later and the British would spend decades trying to undo the damage that they had done by rejecting Moorcroft's treaty. (Choudhury 1996)

Although unsuccessful, Moorcroft's episode reveals the complicated and diverse interests that played out historically in the geopolitics of Ladakh. Because Ladakh connects the Northwest frontier of India with the Karakoram and passes that lead to Central Asia, it always has been a strategic area to those in power in the area. Moorcroft was also a harbinger of things to come. A procession of British explorers, soldiers and political agents were to come to Ladakh following Moorcroft's dream of creating a fortress where the British could assert power over Central Asian trade. These men, like most who were seeking to make their fortune in India, were younger sons of noble families who were too poor to provide landed estates to them.<sup>3</sup> (Allen 2001) These Western explorers who were able to travel so freely across the mountain passes are a

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<sup>2</sup> There are some contrary accounts that have Moorcroft faking his death, escaping to Lhasa for 12 years, only to be assassinated on his way back to India.

<sup>3</sup> It was dangerous to be involved in the exploration and politics of frontier in those days. Rudyard Kipling wrote the poem Arithmetic on the Frontier about men like Moorcroft.

A scrimmage in a Border station-  
A canter down some dark defile  
Two thousand pounds of education  
Drops to a ten-rupee jezail  
The Crammer's Boast, the Squadron's Pride.  
Shot like a rabbit in a ride!

counterpoint to life today, where one needs to register for an Inner Line Permit upon even getting close to border areas.

This paper will focus on the development of the political border on the north and east sides of Ladakh since 1834, the year when General Zorawar Singh led the army of the Dogra Empire down through the source of the Suru to conquer Ladakh and incorporate it into the state of Jammu and Kashmir. From that year on, Ladakh would no longer constitute an independent political entity, but a region with its fate inextricably tied to its role as a trans-Himalayan and Karakoram frontier.<sup>4</sup>

### **Part I: Before the Border**

*Over the highest motorable road today at Khardung La. The trip was amazingly fast. We left from Leh at 9:30am and made it to Disket by lunchtime. To think that this trip used to take four days. Only 140km more to Turtuk.*

Transcribed Field Notes, 16NOV2010

An old Ladakhi traveling song that used to be sung by traders plying the summer Karakoram route goes something like this:

The sun rose from the east,  
The warm sun of the east.

May the warm rays of the sun,  
Give warmth to the fatherland.

May the beautiful light of the moon,  
Give light to the centre of Chuchot.

On this auspicious day,  
I, the boy, left home on tour.

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<sup>4</sup> For a visual representation of the border, refer to Appendix 1 on page 47



On the advice of the astrologer,  
I, Ali, left home on tour.

When I reach the top of the Khardung Pass,  
I was able to see the fatherland.

From the top of the Khardung Pass,  
I could see the thousand houses of Chuchot.

When I reached the top of the Saser La,  
The horse began to neigh.

And I understood the horse's feelings,  
For it recalled the good grass of Chuchot.

(Shakspo, An Insight Into Ladakh 1993)

This song highlights the pertinent details of traveling in the ranges surrounding Ladakh. Before undertaking a trip, regardless of whether you are a Buddhist or Muslim, you have to consult the local astrologer to determine which date is auspicious for your trip to start. You have to worry about keeping in the sun, the only source of warmth in what is basically a high altitude desert. You have to worry about getting your animals to pasture otherwise their bones as well as yours will be joining the bleached skeletons that mark the Karakoram routes to Turkestan. Jean Fairley, a historian of the region, wrote:

*Nothing grows along the Karakoram route and the traveler must carry all the food he needs for himself and his beasts. Pack animals overloaded with trading goods at the expense of fodder have died in this pass in their millions. Never once until we reached the plains were we out of sight of skeletons.*  
(Jamwal and Thangspa 2003)

One thing you notice very quickly. It is cold, very cold on the top of Khardung pass. So cold that you will see Indian Army soldiers who despite wearing expedition down parkas and Scarpa mountain boots move constantly to stand in the sun, like some subculture of ancient light-

worshippers. It takes multiple cups of the complimentary sugary black Kashmiri tea that they dispense at the Army-run canteen before your fingers begin to regain movement.

If you looked beyond the smiles of the soldiers, who are gregarious at the site of some company at their deserted post, you see something that the travelers of yesteryear did not have to deal with. Before the creation of the Indian state, due to the difficulty of enforcing a frontier where every mountain valley was potentially an entrance, there was no official border.

(Choudhury 1996) It mattered little to the local powerbrokers at which exact mountaintop Ladakh ended and some other place began. Any traveler with a few sturdy animals and the courage to undertake the risks of the journey could travel back and forth. (Cunningham 1854) And they did, bringing luxury goods as well as ideas into Ladakh. In the present day, we had no such option. Our movement was being regulated by the government machinery of the Inner Line, a legal demarcation that states that any outsider traveling within 50 miles of the disputed border needs a permit to enter.

When my traveling partner and I stopped at the top of the Khardung Pass in the middle of a November afternoon, our horse was an Indian-made Tata Sumo Grande sport utility vehicle. Our astrologer was the Jammu and Kashmir District Magistrate who issued us a permit specifying the exact 7 days that we could spend in the Inner Line Area. What had not changed for us modern day travelers was the cold. At 18,830 feet the temperature is 8 degrees Celsius colder than Leh, the capital city of Ladakh, and you get winded if you walk too fast because of the lack of oxygen. As I walked around the small Buddhist chorten, a pile of stones that declared *Lha Gyalo!*, victory to the gods, ducking under the hundreds of lines of prayer flags and khatag scarves tied around it, I tried to imagine the old traders who moved much of Ladakh's wealth over this pass loaded on yaks, donkeys, sheep, and for the really poor, their own backs.

Ladakh is the gateway to India, and the Nubra valley in the northeast of the region (which is actually two valleys that follow the path of the Shyok River and its tributary the Nubra River) is the gateway to Ladakh. The Karakoram pass at the north end leads to Xinjiang, Chinese Turkestan, and from there you can go to places with romantic names like Kashgar and Yarkand, places that inspire visions of bearded men travelling in caravan with swords and pistols ever watchful for bandits, bringing all kinds of exotic goods to far-flung bazaars and oasis towns. The place at the south foot of the Karakoram pass is called Daulat Beg Oldi, after an old Yarkandi trader was caught in a blizzard there and died with all his goods and animals. (Rinchen and Verma 1998) It also leads to the Siachen Glacier, where India is involved in an undeclared shooting war with its neighbor Pakistan. (Jamwal and Thangspa 2003)

My own aim was not any of these places but the Balti village of Turtuk, only 6 kilometers from the Line of Control, the unofficial border between India and Pakistani occupied Kashmir. Along with three other villages that were liberated from Pakistani control in 1971 by Indian forces during the War for Bangladeshi independence, Turtuk is close enough to the Line of Control to see Pakistani military positions.

### **The Splendid Trade**

Panamik in the Nubra valley is most famous for its free hot springs. If you go at night when the air is cold, you can see the steaming water flow out of the ground at fissures in the hill, and there are bathhouses at the edge of town for both locals and visitors. However, outside Panamik is something even more intriguing, a site that points to its historic place of the great trade routes of the past.

There is a rockfall across the river from the town, called the Ensa complex because of the nearby monastery. On the rocks, there are numerous rock carvings dating from as far back as the 6th century. (Rivzi, Ladakh: Crossroads of High Asia 1998) These carvings depict ibexes, yak, sheep and other animals that used to be local to the valley. There are hunting scenes, pictures of men riding horses, and one stone seems to depict an archery contest between mounted riders. Some of the carvings are facing the bottom of the hill, some are sideways, and some are upside down, giving one a disorienting feeling when one walks along the hill looking at them. The most obvious thing about these carvings is that there are so many of them. In a 5 by 5 meter area that my travelling partner and I mapped out, a site that seemed typical of the Ensa Complex site, we found 19 distinct carvings on 14 different rocks.

In the Ensa complex, besides the scenes that can be attributed to local carvers, there are quite a few intriguing carvings of masks. These oval-shaped masks with two small eyeholes are often adorned either on the top and bottom or the left and right by triangle motifs. These masks are definitely not local. A. H. Francke the founder of the Moravian Mission school in Leh as well as a prolific anthropologist of ancient Ladakh, states that these masks were drawn by traders with Siberian origin. (Jina 1995) At other sites across Ladakh, crosses carved in the 6<sup>th</sup> century by Nestorian Christians from Samarkand, Urdu poems by traders from Turkestan, and pictures with Hellenistic elements left by Alexander the Great's invading armies can also be found. (Jamwal and Thangspa 2003) Nawang Tsering Shakspo, former director of the Jammu and Kashmir Academy in Leh, hypothesizes because earlier travelers did not have vehicles but had to travel across unforgiving terrain on foot, had time to produce often skilled and artistic carvings along their routes. (Shakspo 2010) Sites like the Ensa Complex became canvases for travelers who had

come from hundreds of miles away, much like the graffiti of today in highway restrooms, where passing wayfarers will carve their initials.

What do sites like the Ensa complex mean? It is hard evidence that trade has been happening in Ladakh for a long time and that some of the region's earliest influences came from traders bringing goods in from the outside. While the origins of the trade across the Karakoram can only be speculated upon using archeological evidence, British explorer Alexander Cunningham, provided a picture of what the trade was like in his book *Ladak: Physical, Statistical, and Historical*.

According to Cunningham, "Ladakh's trade in its home produce was on no great consequence. Its main source of wealth was the north-south transit trade which passed through its territory." The vast majority of this trade was in pashm, or shawl wool from goats. Shawl wool came from the nomads of Western Tibet and passed through Ladakhi middlemen and then on to Kashmiri weavers, eventually becoming famous Kashmiri shawl which was renowned for its warmth and its trademark: the ability to be pulled through a wedding ring. This trade was especially lucrative to Ladakhi traders because the Treaty of Tingmosgang which concluded the war between Ladakh and Tibet in 1684 gave Ladakhi merchants a monopoly in all the shawl wool produced in Rudok district of Western Tibet. (Cunningham 1854)

What Cunningham also discovered was that this trade was not straightforward. Instead there existed a "complex web of gifts and tributes in existence." These relationships were based off of more than economic profit, but instead represented a religious, historical and cultural system of obligations between different places in order to create livable conditions in a land where there was low productivity in the soil and climate. For example, Cunningham detailed a small town called Bashahr, which was under British protection in an area named Spiti to the

immediate south of Ladakh. The Raja of Bashahr received a tribute of woolen cloth from Peri, a Ladakhi village under control of the Dogra empire of Jammu and Kashmir. Bashahr also received another tribute, a small annual sum of money from the village of Gheo in Tibet. This same Raja, however, also had to send presents to the Tibetan governor of the trading town of Gartok in West Tibet, but received presents in return every time a new Raja was crowned. (Cunningham 1854)

There is said to be a basic human need to trade one thing for another. This urge seems to have been healthily present in Ladakh, as pashm shawl wool from goats in the Changtang, sheep wool, salt, barley, dried apricots, and manufactured goods from India circled their way around the mountains creating social networks between Ladakh and far-flung places. With these goods and caravans would come the ideas that created Ladakhi society. (Rivzi, *Trans-Himalayan Caravans: Merchant Princes and Peasant Traders in Ladakh* 2000)

### **The Dogra Invasion**

However, not only trade goods came over the Himalayan passes. In 1834, Gulab Singh, the Dogra Maharaja of neighboring Jammu and Kashmir, decided to invade Ladakh. He had two reasons: money and power. First he wanted to control the wealthy pashm trade, over which Ladakhi merchants had the traditional monopoly<sup>5</sup>. (Choudhury 1996) His second reason was more political. Gulab Singh was then a vassal of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh<sup>6</sup> of the Punjab. The Dogra Maharaja suspected that that Sikh power was weaker than it appeared and he wanted to be

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<sup>5</sup> Granted in the Tingmosgang Treaty between China, Tibet and Ladakh in 1684

<sup>6</sup> Singh is a surname taken by Sikhs that means "lion".

the local ruler with the most land when the Sikh Confederacy fell apart. For these reasons, Gulab Singh sent his most able general, Zorawar Singh with 1000 troops<sup>7</sup> to conquer Ladakh. After crushing defeats due in large part to General Zorawar Singh's military skill, the *Gyalpo*, or King of Ladakh, sued for peace and agreed to pay a 50,000 rupee war indemnity and a 20,000 rupee annual tribute to Maharaja Gulab Singh, becoming a vassal of the Dogra ruler. (Anand 2006) In three subsequent expeditions ending in 1839, Zorawar Singh subdued Ladakhi resistance, replaced Gyalpos who were convicted of intriguing against the Dogra regime, and effectively relegated the monarch of Ladakh to the position of a figurehead at the royal palace at Stok. Until 1947, Ladakh would a feudatory of Dogra rule and since then has been irrevocably connected to the fate of the Jammu and Kashmir state. (Anand 2006)

Gulab Singh was a shrewd politician. When differences between the Darbar (the Sikh court) in Lahore and the British East India Company's government led to the Anglo-Sikh War in 1845, Gulab Singh, even though he belonged to the Sikh Confederacy, told his forces not to attack the British, a ploy calculated to "earn the gratitude of British diplomats."<sup>8</sup>(Choudhury 1996) On March 9, 1846, at the Treaty of Lahore which ended the war, the Sikhs could not pay the war indemnity of 250,000 rupees demanded by the British. Instead they ceded Jammu and Kashmir to the British, who turned around and sold the country to Maharaja Gulab Singh, for the

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<sup>7</sup> There are differing opinions as to how many soldiers Zorawar Singh brought with him when he invaded Ladakh. The estimates range from 800 to 5000, but the main point is that the Dogras were probably outnumbered at every battle that they found against the Ladakhis, and were victorious mainly due to Zorawar's skill.

<sup>8</sup>In a telling example of Maharaja Gulab Singh's admiration of the British, he once asked British Political Agent Henry Lawrence what caused the British to always triumph in battle. Lawrence replied with the then fashionable acronym IHS, which was the Greek form for Jesus, Savior of men. So impressed was the Maharaja, that he had them stamped on the silver rupees minted in Kashmir.

token price of 75,000 rupees. Notoriously known as the “Sale Deed of Kashmir”, the Treaty of Amritsar which granted Gulab Singh control of Jammu and Kashmir was controversial.

At that time, the great Urdu poet Dr. Mohammed Iqbal of India wrote:

*Their fields, their crops, their streams,  
Even the peasant in the vale;  
They sold, they sold all, alas!  
How cheap was the sale.*  
(Anand 2006)

Even on the British side, explorer Captain Alexander Cunningham wrote that “the transaction scarcely seems worthy of the British name and greatness.” (Anand 2006) However, this transaction must be viewed in the lens of the time, and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was common for the British to recognize total autocracy belonging to the rulers of the princely states. The Company wanted a buffer state on its Northwest frontier, and the Maharaja Gulab Singh seemed like a worthy ally. Despite contemporary claims that say that Gulab’s reward was totally out of proportion with the services that he provided during the Anglo-Sikh war, the British “did what was necessary to stabilize the situation in Northwest India.” The nearest British base was over 300 miles away at Ferozpur with no communications to Ladakh. (Choudhury 1996)

The outcome to these two events, the Dogra invasions and the creation of an independent Jammu and Kashmir state, meant that now Ladakh’s fate was tied to the future of the Jammu and Kashmir state and thereby to the future of the rest of the Indian subcontinent. Whereas before “the mountainous character of the country and the paucity of communications prevented the growth of anything like a common sentiment of nationality,” the political subjugation of Ladakh to the Dogras of Jammu and Kashmir is the beginning of a trend of Ladakh being controlled by foreign powers. (The Research Institute of India 1950)



## The Last Shangri-La

In 1946, National Geographic magazine sent a French woman named LaFugie to Ladakh to write an article on what they titled “The Last Shangri-La”. LaFugie was both a photographer and an artist, both of these were the principle ways that she got local people to feel at ease with her. The article has numerous pictures: LaFugie standing in a safari jacket and topi among hundreds of monks studying at Hemis, LaFugie bundled up riding a yak over the Khardung pass into Nubra, LaFugie with a Ladakhi peasant woman wearing the tradition *perag*, a local head gear with lines of studded semi-precious turquoise. LaFugie also included many talented and vibrant watercolors of those aspects of Ladakhi life that she found novel: a polyandrous wife cooking for her three hungry husbands<sup>9</sup>, monks with “death”s head” masks performing at the festival at Hemis monastery, two elderly pilgrims sitting on the steps of the Leh palace spinning prayer wheels. These pictures as well as Laurie”s witty anecdotes about travelling in exoctic Asian countries (her government was hesitant to issue her a passport when they found out where she wanted to go as a single woman) were published in the magazine in May 1949, after the partition of India and the incorporation of Ladakh into the Indian nation. LaFugie”s pictures are among taken in a pre-India Ladakh. (LaFugie 1949)

LaFugie shot one black and white photograph for the May 1949 issue that intrigued me above all others. It is a roof-level view into the courtyard of a resthouse for traders preparing for or recovering from the perilous Karakoram route to Kashgar. The courtyard is full of pack animals with porters who are unloading their saddlebags. A group of 5 soldiers in bus driver caps

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<sup>9</sup> LaFugie was very taken aback by the fact that the child called his real father “Uncle” because his biological father was one of the younger brothers in the polyandrous marriage.

and mandarin collars stand stiffly in their Sam Browne belts on a balcony above the scene, obviously posed for the picture. They are the security force for the caravan, as the route could sometimes be plagued by bandits hoping to rip off the rich caravans traversing through. Not only does this prove that the caravan route was still being used in the mid-forties, a closer look at the picture shows something even more interesting. (LaFugie 1949)

If you look closely at the picture, at what the porters are unloading, you will see that it is not pashm, nor barely, nor any of the traditional goods that you expect would have been making its way across this tributary of the Silk Route. Instead, the porters are untying giant American-made tires, two per beast. These are the kind of tires that go on 3-ton all-terrain military trucks. LaFugie's caption states that these are American-made war supplies headed for Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist Government in China, going to prop up Chiang Kai-Shek's side in the war with the Communists. And if you look more closely at the soldiers, the fact that the uniforms are of a Germanic cut, but the faces are Asian strikes you.<sup>10</sup> They are Chiang Kai-Shek's National Revolutionary Army, safeguarding the valuable supplies as they make their way from a port in India, through Ladakh and Turkestan on pack animals, finally to the war front in the Chinese heartland. It is interesting to note that Indian soldiers did not come to Ladakh until October 1947. It seems that soldiers from the national Chinese Army preceded Indian soldiers in Ladakh by a year.

The Burma road was closed, and since World War II was over, the Allied pilots were not flying supplies to Chiang Kai-Shek over the Burma Hump. (LaFugie 1949) There were only

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<sup>10</sup> The National Revolutionary Army was trained in the 1920s largely by German military advisors and maintained many Prussian military traditions into the 1940s.

donkeys and horses and yaks and porters slogging the needed wheels to the Nationalist Army. Ladakh was the crossroads and the only way to get supplies overland to fighting taking place in Turkestan. This picture is important because it shows the last gasps of an ancient trade route leading through Ladakh. After Chiang Kai Shek lost the war and was forced to flee to Taiwan, and Mao Zedong declared the People's Republic of China on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1949. From then on, the development of the three countries surrounding Ladakh (India, Pakistan, and China) would cause this trading route would steadily be replaced with an enforced border.

## **Part II: Creating the Border**

*We ended up at the officer's mess, where they turned us back the way we came. We were really lost at this point. We were walking away into the dark when a soldier ran toward us with a rifle. The "rifle" turned out to be a stick. He gave it to us and told us to watch out for the dogs "that like to bite" who apparently got to run around within the base biting innocents with impunity. Great, so now we were walking around post of the Siachen Eagles and the Ladakhi Scouts in the dark holding a bagged parachute that looked like a bomb and a stick that looked like a rifle surrounded by dogs "that like to bite". Surrounded by sentries "that like to shoot."*

Transcribed Field Notes, 17NOV2010

I was lost, stumbling around in the dark on a military base very close to international flashpoint.

The situation started because I got the hare-brained idea of wanting to buy an Indian parachute. Before the airfield was built at Thoise, about 50km into the west section of the valley, the only way to bring supplies in for fighting forces while the pass was closed for the winter was to air drop supplies. Because of this, everywhere in Ladakh you can find old Army ration-drop parachutes that have been repurposed by locals as tents, supply sheds, wood pile coverings, and in one case, the entire patio of a outdoor restaurant is made of cut up parachutes.

Still, there is no way to buy one in a store, especially for a foreigner. Most of the parachutes are brought to villages by young Ladakhi porters, who work in the army because being a porter on Siachen and on the Turtuk border can be a lucrative if dangerous job. A fast porter can earn up to 30,000 rupees a month. (Rigzen 205)The porters then make a little extra money on the side by selling these parachutes to locals for various uses. Because they are a stout canvas, they are very useful in a region where cotton products are scarce.<sup>11</sup>

In Hunder, a village famous for its camels and sand dunes, I visited Gonbo at the camping ground he owns because I heard that he might have a parachute available. All the tents were packed up since the official tourist season was over. I saw that Gonbo had an old Army parachute draping over his log pile and I tried to buy it in hopes of using it for a tent. Gonbo would not sell for any price. I was so insistent on wanting to purchase it that Gonbo finally relented and told me that I could stay with his friend Ibrahim in Turtuk village, if I need a place to stay that bad. He even offered to pay for my stay and wrote a letter to his friend Ibrahim, asking him to put me up for a few nights.

Dejected at the lack of a parachute, I walked outside and came upon two men filling potholes in the dirt road. On a whim, I asked if they knew where one could buy a parachute. One of the men asked me how much I wanted to pay. He was the owner of the Himalayan View guesthouse and wanted to sell his old white parachute so he could try to buy a red one, which was "more attractive". He used the parachutes to make a shaded tent for his guests in the summer.

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<sup>11</sup> We found a tailor in Leh who made us suits and overcoats. Although the fabric shops in the bazaar had a wide variety of woolens, cotton cloth that was high quality was not available, especially as the traffic was declining on the road from Srinigar due to the winter.

The red parachutes are used for the last load to be pushed off an plane during a supply drop and are much rarer. He sold his parachute to me for an extraorbitant price.

Buying the parachute and having to carry it slowed down my progress for the day and it was dark by the time I reached Partapur. The town is located down the hill from the highway and in the night air; the "Om Mani Padme Hum" mantra could be heard in the quiet of the road. Because of the mantra playing, I assumed that a gompa was down the hill and maybe the monks would be willing to let me stay there.

I humped the parachute downhill, crossed a stream and came upon a small gompa where you could see a couple men praying in the lit-up interior. A soldier who could speak English ran up to me, and breathlessly informed me that I had accidentally broken into an Army base. He expressed surprise that the sentries guarding the base had not tried to stop me or shoot at me.<sup>12</sup> He then glanced down at the Indian Army parachute (something I was not supposed to have) that I was carrying and asked what it was.

“A tent,” I replied emphatically.

If you want any evidence of the large presence of the Indian Army in Ladakh, wandering around Partapur at night is the perfect place to be. The original village is completely engulfed by military bases, an Army goodwill school that provides free education to children in the village, and an Army-sponsored women’s empowerment center. These social programs are all part of Operation Sambhavana which means goodwill, and are the Army’s attempt to provide infrastructure that will buy the loyalty of the local population. The truth is that Partapur is too

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<sup>12</sup> I am not aware of the procedure in India, but here the American procedure is that a sentry will yell out a challenge, which somebody legitimately entering the base would know the password response to. If the response was incorrect, the sentry would be clear to shoot.

important not to have the local civilians on your side. During the wars in 1947 and 1948, it was the headquarters of all the Indian military units deployed in forward positions in the Nubra valley. It still is the headquarters for some very important strategic units and positions: the airfield at Thoise<sup>13</sup>, the contested border with Pakistan at Thang, a regiment of the Ladakhi Scouts, the Nubra Scouts, and the Siachen Eagles, whose job it is to patrol the highest battlefield on earth. The village is so integral to the defense plan of Ladakh that the Nubra valley is called the Partapur Sector in military lingo. It was a village defined by the soldiers, arms, and equipment that are based there. All the jobs, money and development comes from the Army and even the pineapple jam that is served with breakfast in Partapur is marked *For Defense Use Only*. In a way, it is an allegory for Ladakh which has 30,000 soldiers compared to its 150,000 civilians. (Rigzen 205)

## **Partition**

There are two apocryphal stories about the first Dakota airplane that the Indian Air Force landed in Leh in 1948. The first is that the Ladakhis, who had seen airplanes flying over during World War II, brought grass to feed what they believed was a famished beast at the end of a long journey. The second legend is that upon seeing jeeps being unloaded from the cargo bay of the Dakota, a Ladakhi father told his son that the jeeps were babies, who would eventually sprout wings and be able to fly like their mother. (Sheikh 2010)

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<sup>13</sup> It is said that in order for the first plane to land at the Thoise airfield, Chewang Rinchen, then a Lieutenant in the J+K Militia had to enlist volunteers with chang, the locally brewed beer, who ended up having to mark the runway with bones of animals and people that died along the old trade routes.



One of the first Dakota aircraft landing in Leh in August 1948. *Courtesy of Ladakh Hall of Fame*

Before the partition of 1947, Ladakh had never had any form of wheeled transportation, much less aircraft. Although the wheel had been traditionally used both for prayer wheels and turning water mills, the mountainous terrain had made the wheel useless for transportation. Like many other advancements to come to Ladakh, it was war that brought the airplane. The aircraft that landed in Leh in August 1948 was holding one company of the 2/8 Gorkha rifles, part of a force hastily sent to prevent the province of Jammu and Kashmir from falling into the hands of irregular Pakistani invaders. (Rinchen and Verma 1998)

On August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1947 the country of Pakistan was created, drawn up by the departing British. The next day, on the 15<sup>th</sup>, India gained independence. (Akbar 1999) It was the argument

over which country owned the green valley of Kashmir that dragged Ladakh into war, the first in a series of three with Pakistan where Ladakh became a flashpoint over territorial claims between the two countries. The events of 1947 and 1948 would define Ladakh's significance in geopolitics and create the Line of Control, a political feature of the land that has had wide-ranging effects ever since.

Under Lord Mountbatten's plan to partition India, the 625 princely states which had not been under direct rule by British government had three options: they could accede to India, Pakistan or choose to remain independent. However, Britain given up any responsibility for the security of the region when India and Pakistan became independent. The state of Jammu and Kashmir long had a tradition of being politically independent of the rest of the subcontinent, starting with the Dogra rule of Gulab Singh. The Maharaja at the time of partition, Hari Singh, chose to stay independent. However, Pashtuns from Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province supported by the Gilgit Scouts, a paramilitary force from the Northern part of Jammu and Kashmir who rebelled against the state, invaded the Kashmir in October of 1947, with hopes to set up a puppet government that would accede to Pakistan.<sup>14</sup> The Maharaja, seeing his state's defense forces crumple very quickly under the assault hastily asked for Indian military aid. India's government accepted on one condition, that the Maharaja accede his state to India. The signed accession document was carried down in a military convoy and since October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1947, Jammu and Kashmir has been a province of India, an argument point between the two countries. (Akbar 1999)

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<sup>14</sup> There is actually a lot of controversy over what the original intent of the Gilgit Scout was. Some historians contend that they were not trying to join the region to Pakistan but instead attempting to create an independent state of Kashmir that would not be ruled by the Hindu dynasty of Hari Singh.



The 1947-1948 war created much of the northern border of Ladakh today. The Line of Control that extends from the Siachen glacier at the tip of the Nubra valley to just north of Kargil in the West of Ladakh is a border has very little to do with ethnic differences or mutual animosity between people living in the immediate area on either side of the border. Instead, it is kind of an arbitrary line, created by drawing a mark between the final Indian and Pakistani positions when the United Nations mandated a ceasefire on December 31, 1948. (Khan 2006)

The government-run District Library in Leh is located a five minute walk from the main bazaar. The assistant librarian , Tina, is a garrulous lady about 5 feet tall who, once she learns what type of information you are seeking, is quick to recommend books. <sup>15</sup> When she learned that I was researching the history of the border, she put down a duct-taped book in front of me. It was the wartime memoirs of her father Chewang Rinchen, who retired as a Colonel in the Indian Army.

Nowhere in recent Ladakh is there a more dramatic story that Chewang Rinchen's. Rinchen was born in Sumur in the Nubra Valley and grew up on a steady diet of hero stories about the exploits of his great-grandfather, the Tiger of Sumur, a title granted by the King of Ladakh in 1830 in recognition for service fighting invaders from Turkestan. Rinchen grew up on stories of his great-grandfather as well as those told by Jammu and Kashmir State force officers who would come to Sumur to share their experiences in World War I and II. With the partition of and the coming of the invading Gilgit scouts in 1947, it is only natural that Rinchen would volunteer to defend his home. (Rinchen and Verma 1998)

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<sup>15</sup> Tina assumes an instant familiarity. When she heard that we were travelling to Nubra, she commissioned us to bring a frozen chicken to her sister Sonam Dolkar, the headmistress of the Government High School in Hunder. Her sister was supposed to help us find a place to spend the night. My one and only firsthand experience of trans-Himalayan trade.

There was a laughably small amount of men defending Jammu and Kashmir from invasion in 1947. These State Defense forces were basically border guards, who immediately crumpled in the first week after the beginning of the invasion. The government began to organize local citizens to join in the defense of Ladakh. Rinchen, upon hearing a speech by the Nubra magistrate, was the first to volunteer for the newly formed Nubra guard. After 10 days of training with the Jammu and Kashmir State forces he was sent back to his home town of Sumur to raise a volunteer force. He trained them for 3 days. (Rinchen and Verma 1998)

Pakistani invaders were moving east across the Nubra Valley and had advanced to a hill named Lama House, which was overlooking the cliff-perching village of Hundiri. Rinchen and his *Nunnus* (Ladakhi for little brother, what Rinchen called his soldiers) apparently climbed to a hill position higher than Lama House, rappelled down a cliff face, and caught the Pakistani soldiers smoking from a hookah. After a bayonet charge that sent the defenders fleeing, Rinchen's Nubra volunteers were tasked with defending Lama House. Rinchen and his 35 *Nunnus* held Lama House for a month and a half against a numerically superior Pakistani force, creating enough time for reinforcements to arrive to the region from India. (Rinchen and Verma 1998)

While this paper focuses on the effect of political borders which are determined by decisions made by leaders outside Ladakh, Rinchen's story serves as a reminder that Ladakhis were not passive recipients of the geopolitics of outside powers. Instead, Ladakhis such as Rinchen served an integral role in making the border what it is today, either as soldiers, politicians, or businessmen.

## **The Roads of Man**

*On many a mountain road lashed by snow, wind and rain... some members of the Border Roads Task Force, who in their hour of trial, were not found wanting, who stayed with their machines in a desperate attempt to save it as it hurtled to destruction thousands of feet below in some lonely, rocky gorge. They could have jumped by they did not because the attitude of the driver to his machine in these task forces is akin to that of a naval captain to his ship.*

-Plaque in the Border Roads exhibit in the Ladakh Hall of Fame

Babu Tharchin is the old school of road building in Ladakh, a veritable rock star of a time when improved surface jeepable roads were replacing the goat tracks that had preceded them. Babu's day was before the giant machine of Indian infrastructure had been brought to bear in Ladakh and most of the work still had to be done locally at a state level. Today, he has white hair, a bent posture, and blue veins lining his cheeks, but still had a youthful vigor, and had no trouble climbing up the stairs leading me to his modest apartment when I went to interview him at the Omasila Hotel, which he owns.<sup>16</sup> In the old days, he was employed by the Jammu and Kashmir Public Works Department, a state level organization dating back to the day of the Maharaja. He had no formal education in surveying but learned how to do exploratory surveys, draw cross-sections, calculate blast-cutting, plan the road stages, and studying the composition of soil on the job directly from the executive engineer. At every stage of the road, Tharchin would walk in of foot and decide where the road was to be built, marking it with engineer tape. You could say that the road followed Tharchin. (Tharchin 2010)

Tharchin is most famous for the years 1962 to 1973, when he was the supervising surveyor for the initial construction of the Khardung Pass, the highest motorable road in the

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<sup>16</sup> In Ladakh, never make the mistake of confusing a hotel with a guesthouse. A guesthouse is a room with a bed that costs between 100-200Rs. a night per head. A hotel costs considerably more at about 1000-2000Rs. per night per room. I was quickly correct when I asked a local for the location of the Omasila *guesthouse*.

world to replace a pony track that had traditionally take two hard days of walking to traverse on foot. The first road was completely built by hand.<sup>17</sup> Without modern earthmoving equipment, locally contracted crews from poor villages all over Ladakh hand dug the road with shovels and pickaxes. One can see the descendents of these laborers working on road maintenance projects even today. They are always bent over, with even old women carrying heavy rocks or swinging shovels. Yet when you pass them on the way to somewhere else, they always manage the time for a smile and a wave. Babu oversaw the transition from gunpowder to gelatin (plastic explosive) for blasting a level road surface through the mountains. Gunpowder had been dangerous and a large amount had to be carried up on the backs of porters. The gelatin made the going easier. Tharchin maintains that the progress of the road building was slow not because the engineering was difficult at such a high altitude, or because of the difficulties of making a road without backhoes and bulldozers, but because the slow trickle of money only allowed work to be done sporadically. At some points the construction had to stop entirely because the budget had been reappropriated or was not timely in coming. (Tharchin 2010)

Despite the dangers and hardships, Tharchin remembers the decade he spent building the Khardung Pass as a heady time. It was an egalitarian environment with the laborers, engineers, and surveyors living together in tents at high altitude job sites. It was impossible to do work in the winter, so it could only be done in the summer, and Tharchin recalls an almost picnic atmosphere between 100 and 200 workers who were on the job at any given time. These workers were mostly Ladakhi, though some came from Kargil and Tibet. . He would always answer

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<sup>17</sup> There is a current dispute within the Border Roads Organization over the employment of these laborers. Because they are only employed up to 179 days at most, they are not eligible for most unemployment benefits under India's Industrial Dispute Act. Yet these laborers sometime face dangerous conditions.

questions into the challenges he face while building the road with the stoic reply of “nothing was difficult”. Eventually the civilian Jammu and Kashmir State Public Works Department handed Khardung Pass over to the Indian Army in 1973. It had taken 11 years to build. (Tharchin 2010).

Compared to the Public Works Department who lost no workers killed in their construction of the road over Khardung La, the Indian Army 201 Engineer Regiment, and the Madras Sappers, lost 15 men when they sought to upgrade the road to paved asphalt. There is a memorial on top of the pass that greets every traveler, a solemn reminder of the sacrifice that India has paid for faster travel in Ladakh.

The headquarters of the 16th Border Roads Task Force (BRTF), located 9km from Leh along National Highway 1D, is far more visually impressive than Babu Tharchin’s modest apartment. It is located on a the mountain and chorten of the BRTF’s unit insignia is arranged 100m long and wide on the side of the rocky hill face overlooking the base, which is marked by the standard accoutrements of military stations all of over the world: tin-roofed barracks, painted stones, neat block-lettered signs, and oil barrels sitting side to side in a fuel depot shadowed by olive green 3-ton trucks awaiting repairs. The scene is a visual comparison of how the road building philosophy evolved from Babu Tharchin’s manual labor teams to a concentrated effort by the army and the Indian central government to pave the way into Ladakh.

Today, all strategic roads in Ladakh, including the Khardung Pass are assigned to the 16<sup>th</sup> BRTF along with its sister unit, the 7<sup>th</sup> BRTF. These two task forces fall under the Border Roads Organization (BRO), a civil and military organization that builds and maintains roads in border regions on India and friendly countries including Myanmar and Afghanistan. The organization is made up of an even split between the Indian Army Corps of Engineers and civilian staff, mostly engineers hired out of university and graduate schools, called the General Reserve Engineer

Force (GREF). BRO currently has 13 projects, including Project HIMANK, the moniker for the maintenance of strategic roads in Ladakh, which is considered one of the most important. (Thang 2010)

I showed up unannounced at the gate of the 16<sup>th</sup> BRTF base and tried to explain my interest in research to the bored sentry, who eventually just got frustrated at the language divide and just waved me in. At the headquarters building a young officer, after getting over his suspicion patted me down for weapons, then ushered me through a wire-framed glass door stamped 2nd-in-command, 16th BRTF. There I met S. Letchin Thong, apparently the 15th man to hold that position, as evidenced by the plaque behind his desk. He was a middle aged man with dark skin and waxed black hair dressed in a civilian down jacket. He did not look Ladakhi.

As a sepoy brought in black tea, Mr. Thang explained that he had helped build border roads in different regions for the past 15 years after graduating from Dibrugarh University in Assam with a graduate degree in civil engineering. When asked about Ladakh, Thang, who had been in the region for 8 months, stated that it was a good place to visit but a harsh place to live, because of the low oxygen, the cold, and the searing sun. Thang also had equally strong opinions about the benefits that building roads would bring to isolated regions on the India border such as Ladakh. He saw his job as building transportation routes and lines of communication where there were none before, integrating them into the Indian nation that don't have transportation or lines of communication with the rest of the country. Thang believed strongly that in order to "improve the socioeconomic activities of remote villages" they would need to be integrated into Indian society to a greater degree. (Thang 2010)

Despite doing the same job, Babu Tharchin and Letchin Thang represent two different schools of thought. Tharchin grew up in Ladakh, has ties to the area, and is retired in Leh,

owning a guesthouse. Thang is posted to Ladakh and the 16<sup>th</sup> Border Roads Task Force for a period of 2 years, after which another engineer from the plains will come and take his place. While Tharchin represents the local, the latest line in Ladakhis who sought to find a better and less risky way to move across a mountainous country, Thang represents a trend that was crucial in the development of the border. The greater influence that the Indian government wielded in Ladakh, the more closed off Ladakh would be from anywhere else but India.

As young army lieutenant was tasked to walk me off the 16<sup>th</sup> Border Roads Task Force base.

Upon finding out that my parents were from China, the man smiled, “Hey, we're neighbors.”

I replied asking if that was a good thing.

He did not bother to respond.

### **Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai**

*Every single man of this company was found dead in his trench with several bullet or splinter wounds. The 2-inch mortar man died with a bomb still in his hand. The medical orderly had a syringe and bandage in his hand when the Chinese bullet hit him.*

-Ladakh Hall of Fame

Major C.S. Tawar of the Indian Army was posted on the Chusul airstrip in 1962 when the invasion happened. The Chinese had been building posts encroaching on Indian territory to protect the Xingjiang-Tibet highway that they had built on the high barren plateau of Aksai Chin. The newest Chinese post was only two miles away from the airfield. Upon finding out that the Chinese had been offering friendship while secretly building an illegal highway and fortifying what was legally Indian territory, Indian enacted the Forward Policy. The Forward Policy

involved building an adjacent Indian fort facing each Chinese position in a move to block the Chinese from resupplying their posts. The Indians mistakenly believed that this would pressure the Chinese to leave. They also mistakenly believed that the Chinese would avoid any armed confrontations. (Garrett 1993)

Major Tawar recalls the scene:

*Chinese loudspeakers had been telling us that we were on their land and must leave peacefully. They didn't want any trouble they said. They want to be our friends. Then they started shelling us*

India was totally unprepared for Chinese invasion. The Chinese fought with automatic weapons and heavy artillery while many Indian soldiers were still using Lee Enfield bolt-action rifles, rifles that had been modern in 1898 when they were introduced but woefully inadequate for modern war. Additionally many of the Indian posts had as few as five soldiers manning them, positions that were more for show than to resist any determined invasion. (Garrett 1993)

Indian Prime Minister Nehru claimed that India had been betrayed by Chinese offers of friendship. That may have been true, but there had been indications that China had been planning the massive operation to seize Aksai Chin by force for a long time. Even before 1954, Chinese maps claimed all of Ladakh north of the Indus River valley. The stories of border clashes between Indian and Chinese forces were numerous enough to “fill eight volumes of white papers.” An Indian patrol that had been sent in 1958 to determine the extent of Chinese infiltration into the Aksai Chin plateau was captured by Chinese troops. Before the Chinese unilaterally declared a ceasefire, India had lost more than 2000 square kilometers of land in Ladakh. (Garrett 1993)



1962 marked the year when Ladakh became a fortress. The location had always been considered strategic by the Indian government, who was suspicious of Pakistani designs, but the Chinese invasion convinced the government of the need to begin building infrastructure in the area, otherwise Ladakh would be lost to either the Chinese or the Pakistanis. After the Sino-Indian war, British and American military aid poured into Ladakh. New modern weapons were flown into the Leh airport on U.S. Air Force C-130 transports. Concrete and rebar were laid for new military barracks. The military was in Ladakh for the long haul. (Garrett 1993)

I met once with the Senior Administrative Officer for Project HIMANK, a Colonel in the Indian Army. Although he was from Assam, the Colonel had deployed to Ladakh 5 times in his occupation a parachute commando and had seen action 1987 on the Siachen Glacier in Operation Meghdoot<sup>18</sup> and in 1999 on Tiger Hill in the Kargil War. Colonel R.S. spoke in the epithets of a career soldier, meaning that he was not very forthcoming on the details. Everytime I asked about something, he stonewalled, saying that the information was classified and that he did not have the authority to give it to a foreign national. He would talk freely on the career track of Indian Army officers, or how harsh Ladakh's harsh climate, saying that it can get down to negative 60 degrees on the Siachen glacier, so I used this tack to open him up. I found that the “Forward Policy” operations to build Indian posts adjacent to Chinese ones had continued even after the Sino-Indian War. In fact, they had even gone on in the late 1980s, when Colonel R.S., a company commander at the time, was tasked with driving a Chinese garrison back over to the Chinese side of the Line of Actual Control, the ceasefire line created in 1962.

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<sup>18</sup> Operation Meghdoot is said to have given India the superior hand on the Siachen glacier. Since 1987 Pakistan has been trying to take back these heights but to no avail. As if the case often times in war, there is no substitute for having the high ground, even if you have to suffer frostbite from holding it.

The Colonel was not very optimistic about the relations between the 3 countries improving anytime soon. During our interview, he stated without prompting that he did not think relations were improving between India and Pakistan. He explained that the casualties in Ladakh were remaining constant even though there were more negotiations to stabilize the situation. He said that it was because of the aggressive policies of the neighboring countries were responsible for the confrontations that lead to these casualties. Despite the hopes for peace, it does not look like the border issues will be solved anytime soon.

### **Part III: After the Border**

*It was morning. Our cheap rented room had no insulation, just plywood walls and no curtain on the east facing window. Both the cold and the sunlight streaming in did their part to wake me up. I walked out and asked the landlord where the toilet was. He gestured vaguely at the rocky field adjoining the highway. Anywhere. When I got back to the room, my traveling partner was awake. I looked at him and asked, "Do you think we're going to get arrested today?" When do you wake up and have to ask a question like that?*

-Transcribed Field Notes 21NOV2010

I had messed up. I had overstayed my Inner Line Permit, a document that gave me seven days to wander the northern Nubra and Shyok valleys of Ladakh. To go anywhere within 50km of the disputed border in Ladakh you need to apply for a permit from the Jammu and Kashmir District magistrate. They only last for 7 days and if you want to extend them you have to endure the inconvenience of going all the way back to Leh. I had tried to get my permit extended at the Jammu and Kashmir Police Station in Disket at the mouth of the valley, but to no avail. The police officers there, none of whom bothered to put on their official uniforms, were all more interested in smoking their bidis, cheap leaf-rolled cigarettes with no filter, than helping me extend my permit. The officer in charge gave me

an apologetic look, shrugging as if to say he would help if he could, but did not have the authority. I heard a phrase that I would hear traveling in Ladakh many times.

“Not possible.”<sup>19</sup>

I chanced to ask what would happen if I simply overstayed the Inner Line permit. The officer assured me that I would undoubtedly be arrested at one of the border posts on the way from Disket to Leh, either at North Pullu or South Pullu, which are both 20km downhill from the Khardung Pass. Angry at the inability of the incompetent local officials to help me with a trivial paperwork request, I decided to push my time as far as it could go. The day I was supposed to leave, I tried to get out of the valley too late, only to find that Indian Army closes the pass out of the Nubra valley promptly at 5pm, not letting any more traffic through. No vehicles out. I was overstaying my permit.

This was the common theme in my experience doing fieldwork in the border areas. While the people were suspicious at first, they always seemed to warm up to me very quickly once they understood what I was doing in the valley and why despite being a Westerner, I was too poor to afford my own vehicle, driver, and a nights stay in a respectable guesthouse. All it usually took was a “loptog yin” or a “biddhyarthi ho” and they would understand that I was a poor student making my way around the country. The only impediments to travel were the government, suspicious of foreigners wandering around the sensitive border areas. I was always compensated for the inhospitableness of the terrain

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<sup>19</sup> I grew to hate this phrase. Many people apparently learned that this phrase will stop most tourists from pressing the point. A lot of times I found that “not possible” just meant “I don’t understand what you’re asking me.”

around me by the warmth of the people of in welcoming visitors. It was only the official measures that hindered travel.

### **Journey to the West**

*Ibrahim, Plz help bear of this child. They are my friend. Your fri. Gonbo.*

-Letter of safe passage, 19NOV2010

We arrived in Turtuk on November 18<sup>th</sup>, with the modern form of a letter of safe passage. Our friend Gonbo in Hunder, had come through for us, and we were on Ibrahim's doorstep in Turtuk.

This letter was all we had to go off of. We needed a place to stay because earlier we had been intercepted by the officer in charge of the Jammu and Kashmir State Police in Turtuk. He got out of his white Maruti Gypsy<sup>20</sup>, shook our hands, and asked for our Inner Line permit. We only had one copy left at this point and beseeched him not to take it. Instead he smiled and told us we could pick it up at the police station the next day.

The police officer then called a man who happened to be walking by. He told the man, who was Ibrahim's neighbor to take us to Ibrahim's house, and that he would be responsible for making sure that we made it and did not try any funny business. The man turned out to be Ibrahim's neighbor and he quickly led us up the path. The traditional area of Turtuk is laid out on a plateau above the river valley and it is only in recent years that land has been cleared next to the river to provide farm land for the poorer families of the village. On the walk up to the plateau,

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<sup>20</sup> The Maruti Gypsy is the ubiquitous government four wheel drive vehicle in Ladakh, kind of like the HMMVW in the United States. The military, military police, and J+K State police all use them. They look like they are made of stamped tin and plastic and will fly apart on the first bump. Still, they are surprisingly tough.

the neighbor pointed to a mountain highlighted by the setting sun and said “Pakistan”. The man however, would not tell us his name, probably because he was worried of trouble from the police if anything came of us.

I was initially worried about what Ibrahim would think of two random strangers who had wandered up to his house in the middle of the night, but once he heard that we had been recommended by Gonbo, his demeanor quickly changed, and he made arrangements to put us up in the TV room of his well appointed house.<sup>21</sup>

Culturally Turtuk is not Ladakh, it is Baltistan. Baltistan is the northern neighbor of Ladakh and at one time, both these areas were independent kingdoms until they were both conquered by Zorawar Singh and incorporated into the Dogra Empire. You have heard of Baltistan if you have read Greg Mortenson’s *Three Cups of Tea* about building girl’s schools in rural Pakistan. If you have read mountaineering accounts of climbing K2, the second tallest mountain in the world, that is also Baltistan.<sup>22</sup>

Ibrahim is the Agricultural Officer in the employ of the Jammu and Kashmir State government for the west side of the Nubra valley. For the past few years, he has been working to help the villages in the Nubra valley adopt new modern farming methods, and introducing new crops such as buckwheat, broccoli and cauliflower.<sup>23</sup> Even though he comes from a family of

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<sup>21</sup> For my fellow carnivorous visitors of Ladakh, I would highly recommend at least one homestay with a Ladakhi Muslim family. While it is doubtful in any Buddhist household that you will be served meat except in the dead of winter, at Ibrahim’s we got to dine on goat and mutton.

<sup>22</sup> From Turtuk you can see one of the Trango Towers, another one of the tallest mountains in the world and an international mountaineering destination.

<sup>23</sup> When asked about the introduction of the new vegetables, Ibrahim maintains that only old people and women were having trouble adapting to the new tastes.

agriculturalists that has lived on the same land in Turtuk for as long as can be remembered, he is the essence of modernity and change in these parts. Ask him and he will talk enthusiastically about how with his new advancements, villagers in Turtuk are able to get two harvests of buckwheat off their meager land a year, a big development for an agricultural society. Ibrahim's family is also building the first general store in the village, and when not working at his government job, he can be found supervising the construction, lamenting how nails and sheets of plywood seem to double in price by the time they get from Leh to the far reaches of Turtuk. Ibrahim owns one of the two diesel powered threshing machines in the village. (Ibrahim 2010)

In a village that is a great majority Sufi Muslim, Ibrahim's family has the honor of claiming the first hajji in the village. In 1944, while World War II was raging in Asia as well as elsewhere, Ibrahim's grandfather made the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, something that all Muslims must do if able. The trip was harder than it is now in the days of frequent flier miles, airport lounges, and plush hotels. To get to Saudi Arabia then, Ibrahim's grandfather had to walk with pack animals across the Digar Pass to Leh, and then over the Rohtang Pass to Manali, then to Shimla. There was a one year wait at Shimla, so that the necessary paperwork could be done. Saudi visas and permission to exit India during wartime were needed. Ibrahim's grandfather waited. After a year, the necessary authorizations came. From Shimla one could take a 2 day carriage trip to the train station. The train would go to Mumbai. From Mumbai, a ship across the Indian Ocean and landing at Jeddah. From Jeddah, he joined a caravan of other pilgrims and finally reached the holy city of Mecca. The trip took three years. (Ibrahim 2010)

Ibrahim's parents had a much easier time when they made the hajj in 1999. By then, Khardung Pass was allowing regular car traffic through, and it was only 100 rupees to take the bus to Leh. From Leh, a short hour flight to Delhi, a layover and another flight to Riyadh. A

puddle jump to Mecca. The vast changes in how wealthy Muslim Ladakhis make the hajj has shown how drastically the transportation has improved.<sup>24</sup> Still, what has not changed is that making the hajj from such a remote area takes money, and it takes time and influence to get the visas to leave a sensitive border area where the government watches its citizens closely. When asked if one day too, he aspired to make the hajj, Ibrahim replied that if one day he had excess money that did not affect his family's livelihood, he would one day also travel to Mecca.

(Ibrahim 2010)

However, Ibrahim's cheery disposition and his plans for the future belie a much deeper family tragedy, one that has been repeated hundreds of times. Ibrahim has a brother that he has never seen before. In 1971, during the war for Bangladeshi independence Indian forces "liberated" a group of four villages in Baltistan from the control of Pakistan: Turtuk, Tyakshi, Thang and Pachathang. There they found people who had been born after the 1947 partition in Pakistan, who had been educated in Pakistan schools. As a majority Muslim town, people in Turtuk worried about what fate would befall them in a primarily Hindu Indian system. (Ibrahim 2010)

Today most of the residents of Turtuk are happy to be part of India, and realize the gains from India's relatively stronger economy. However, Ibrahim's brother, who was studying in Skardu when the villages were liberated in 1971, has not been allowed back. He has never met his younger brothers. In order to call Pakistan, Ibrahim has to leave Jammu and Kashmir state

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<sup>24</sup> To further demonstrate how much transportation has improved, the heavy plush blanket that Ibrahim gave me for sleeping was brought back by his parents from Saudi Arabia when they were there for their pilgrimage. Transportation has obviously improved enough from guarding every ounce that could be used for food or profitable trade supplies to being able to bring back a blanket that must weigh at least 5 kg. How they managed to find such a heavy blanket in Saudi Arabia, I have no idea.

and call from Himachel Pradesh or another province on India. Ironically, calls from Pakistan can be picked up in Turtuk village, but calls out cannot be made. (Ibrahim 2010) Even though there is a road leading right up to the border, and you can see Pakistani positions from the windows of Ibrahim's house, he cannot go to Baltistan and his brother cannot come to visit Leh.

In his short story *Two Nations, One Story* Abdul Ghani Sheikh also talks about the pain of losing a family member to the Ladakh-Baltistan split. In the story he details what his elder brother had to go through to visit Leh. Sheikh's brother was working with the local Wazir, the governor of Ladakh appointed by the Dogra dynasty in Skardu, the summer capital of the Ladakh district of Jammu and Kashmir during the partition. Within two days of partition of the invasion of the Gilgit Scouts in 1947, the border was shut down, and no one was allowed across. Eventually, after the war, letters could go back and forth between the border, but Sheikh found it faster to give his letters to Europeans tourists. Letters mailed from Germany or Holland or the U.K. would arrive in Baltistan faster than sending them from Leh, which is only one day's drive away. (Sheikh, *Forsaking Paradise* 2003)

To visit Ladakh, Sheikh's brother had to go to Islamabad to request a passport and an Indian visa. He had to wait for a few months. Then a flight to Delhi, then a long train ride to Jammu, and a flight to Leh. Even though Sheikh says that "racially, culturally, and linguistically, the people of Baltistan and Ladakh are one" the border is an immutable fact that has divided hundreds of families on either side of the border. (Sheikh, *Forsaking Paradise* 2003)

### **Sneaking Across**

Tashi Tundup sells fake North Face ski jackets, camp stoves, Casio watches and other trekking equipment at his stall in the northwest corner of the Tibetan Refugee market. Tashi



looks to be about forty but yearly undertakes an occupation that would cause much younger men to blanch.

Currently, the only legal border crossing between India is at Sikkim where legitimate trade traffic can pass. (Norman 2010) However, in the winter, when the Chinese soldiers who have been posted from the lowlands are huddled in their shelters, laying low from the bleak cold of the Aksai Chin plateau, Tashi and other Tibetan refugees will follow the Indus River, now frozen to where it reaches the border with China and cross over to the Tibetan town of Dumtzing. (Tundup 2010) Here trade that has not been officially recognized by either China or India takes place. Animals, milk, and barley are traded for Chinese commodities: crockery, heavy plush blankets and stainless steel tools. While the vast majority of Chinese goods sold within India and in Ladakh come through Nepal, some of the pots and pans that are sitting in Leh market came on animals in the winter from the town of Dumtzing. (Norman 2010)

Indian newspapers still have not got quite the hang of spelling the town's name. So any mention in newspapers that comes with a name Domztele, or Dumtzele or any other mishmash of letters that approximates the pronunciation of the town is referring to the small group of Ladakhis and Tibetan refugees that sneak across the border to Chinese-controlled territory. Even though there is officially no trade flowing through the town, there is a Chinese customs post there to collect duties on the goods traveling over the border. Because of the semi-legality of the whole venture, the border guards are free to make up whatever rules they wish and these rules are changing all the time. For example, at one point the rule was each trader could bring four animal loads of goods into Tibet and four loads out. However, the next year, the allowable amount was measured in kilograms and many traders' goods got seized with no recourse to getting them back. (Norman 2010)

This absurd situation of a trickle of small time Ladakhi and Tibetan refugee traders moving goods across the border demonstrates how important the trade is to the vitality of Ladakh. It even takes place when it is illegal and requires trekking down the frozen Indus River and dodging Chinese border guards. However, this venture is so profitable that Tibetan refugees from Choglamsar, a suburb of the capital city of Leh, are willing to take the chance with forged Chinese passports, and the risk of prison in Chinese jails in the hope that they will be able to slip through once again. Even though the border has become much more stringently patrolled since the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Tashi still plans to attempt the crossing this year. (Tundup 2010)

### **Cartographic Aggression**

If you take a map of India, the Northwest frontier is largely a work of fiction. In fact every map will recognize that fact and include a caption under the title saying “borders may not be accurate”. This disconnect between what it says on paper and what flags are flying above the hardened bunkers on lonely mountains is due to the political impossibility for India to give up the land that was captured in war by Pakistan and China. The land that the Gilgit scouts captured in 1947 and 1948 is called Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, not Pakistan. When Pakistan gave 6470 square kilometers of Hunza to China in a friendship treaty, India protested that Pakistan had no right to cede what was legally Indian Territory.<sup>25</sup> (Akbar 1999)The same arguments pop up with the Chinese occupied Aksai Chin plateau, which is important to the Chinese because it is the site

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<sup>25</sup> India also claims that Pakistan is practicing “touristic” aggression by inviting serious climbers to Skardu, which is the staging village for K2 and many other mountains in the Baltistan area. India is so concerned about this that the Army has organized a climbing team specifically to tackle peaks that are in disputed areas and to plant Indian flags on them.

of the highway connecting the Tibetan Autonomous Region to Xinjiang, Chinese controlled Turkestan. (Akbar 1999)

India feels profoundly betrayed by the international community in the Jammu and Kashmir issue. Despite having recognized Pakistan's sovereignty and respecting the Line of Control as well as the international border, geopolitics has caused it to get the short end of the stick. Indians accuse the U.S. government of supplying Pakistan with superior weapons during the Cold War because Pakistan was a U.S. ally during the Cold War and a current partner in the Global War on Terror. Additionally India claims that United States committed an act of "cartographic aggression" in which some 1964 U.S. Army maps showed parcels of land on the Siachen Glacier that were actually Indian controlled to be in Pakistan. (Garrett 1993)

This is one of the reasons that the Jammu and Kashmir issue is so complicated and hard to solve. It is not a local issue, but a strategic concern between three powers all with armies within the world's top ten largest, and nuclear weapons besides, as well as more than a quarter of the world's population. Mahavir Tyagi, a former Indian Deputy Minister of Defense once stated "my head is bald, but it does not mean that someone has the right to occupy it." Even though Ladakh is "mountainous, inaccessible, barren, and desolate, and not of much use to the nation economically, should not detract from its importance from the point of view of security". This is India's view and why it has hung tenaciously for more than half a century to what most outsiders would call a wasteland. (Akbar 1999)

The current battle is on the Siachen Glacier. Every couple hours in Leh, if you look up, you can see military helicopters buzzing north with supplies as the roads still are not sufficiently built up to supply all the needs of the troops on the glacier, or headed south to the airport, evacuating casualties. The choppers belong to the 114 Helicopter Unit, the "Siachen Pioneers."

The glacier is a rough environment for a man, much less a helicopter, and when Russian test pilots visited the unit in the 60s to see how the Russian made aircraft were holding up, they commented that the Indian pilots either did not care about the limits of their machine or about death. The test pilots refused to fly on sorties going to the Siachen. (Garrett 1993) The danger is that the Siachen is filled with crevasses and inhospitable terrain, meaning there is nowhere to make to forced landing if needed. The helipads go up to an altitude over 20,500feet, which is a height at which a helicopter is liable to just fall out of the sky, its rotors not getting enough lift. The unit's motto is "We do the difficult as routine, the impossible may take a bit longer." (Akbar 1999)

Called the highest battleground in the world, the Siachen glacier is an expensive border for Indian to maintain, supposedly at a cost of more than 40 million rupees per day on each side. The expense is not just in facing possible Pakistani invaders, but in taking Indian soldiers, many of them used to the hot plains of the Punjab and Bihar, and placing them in an environment where it is not possible to change clothes or play cards without getting frostbite, let alone wash or shave. It is a common epithet that the environment, not the Pakistanis is the biggest danger on the Siachen. Soldiers from other parts of India only receive 10 days of training and acclimatization before being sent to the highest battlefield in the world. (Jamwal and Thangspa 2003)

Despite having occupied the commanding Saltoro Heights in 1984, there are still regular reports of firing on the 76km long glacier. The Indian side is much harder to maintain, as the Pakistani side has lower elevation and three major road systems leading to within 20 km of their positions facing the Saltoro. The war continues. (S. 2010)

#### **Part IV: Conclusion**

Borders shape and define us. Supposedly they keep the good people in and the bad people out. The common saying is that good fences make good neighbors which means that as long as who owns what is clearly defined there should be no problems. In Ladakh, this theory does not work precisely because there is no agreement over what part of the region is controlled by India, Pakistan and China. The three neighbors in Ladakh can not decide where to put such a fence, much less have the technical capability of erecting a giant fence across the Karakoram. Right, now however war is playing that role. The fighting is stopping people from traveling across the Karakoram. In Ladakh, it is easy to see how a legal distinction is played out on a vast scale in the mountains that divide India, Pakistani occupied Kashmir, and China.

The first section of this paper seeks to show that Ladakh was a product of the influences which traveled back and forth across the Karakoram and Greater Himalaya. Along with pashm, silks, barley, salt, and British-made goods from India, Ladakh developed a cultural milieu that was neither completely Tibetan, or Dogra, or India, or Kashmiri. As a man like Ibrahim from the village of Turtuk demonstrates, a Sufi Muslim who speaks Urdu, Ladakhi, and English, who works in the Indian government as well as at home on the farm, Ladakh has always been an amalgam of different cultural influences. Anyone with the capital and the daring to try to make it over the Karakoram pass or the Saser pass or the Zoji pass or the Rohtang pass would bring something to Ladakh.

The second section of the paper describes why this is no longer the case. It chronicles how the border was created, making Ladakh no longer a waystation in a complicated system of Central Asian trade, but instead a dead end. With its incorporation into the Jammu and Kashmir State under the Dogra Maharaja Gulab Singh and its increased militarization in response to the

and the threat of Pakistani and Chinese invasion, things that used to travel through Ladakh have stopped flowing through, only in. Even though Ladakh is not an economically important or historically integral part of India, trucks, troops, and ammunition continue to be shipped by air and road into this region because of its importance as a fortress, a high ground overlooking the gateway into India from other Central Asian powers.

The third and final section of the paper seeks to address how the physical reality of what life is like in a border state. A country that used to depend on trade for its livelihood now subsists on smallholder agriculture, government money, contracting for the military, and tourism. Families have been split, loved ones who had the misfortune of being in Baltistan during partition are now living parallel lives only a few kilometers away from their loved ones, but never allowed to see each other. Additionally, Ladakh's survival as an economically viable and prosperous region is in doubt if the border is not in some way opened up. The fact that Ladakhis and Tibetan refugees are willing to take the risk of trekking across frozen rivers in the winter and evading Chinese border guards only to be mistreated by customs officers on the other side is evidence enough that trade is the only sustainable way to growth and development.

In conclusion, I saw in Ladakh a case study of what happens when the borders that were primarily defined physically by which mountains and passes you could traverse in certain parts of the year are transformed into borders that are defined politically, by central governments that are many miles away from Ladakh. Trade is stifled, families are split and one can no longer find in the main bazaar the exotic things from far away that used to be sold there. The fact is that these borders will most likely not go away soon, and so until there is a mutual opening up between the three nations involved, Ladakhis will continue to live under the shadow of the border.

## Methodology

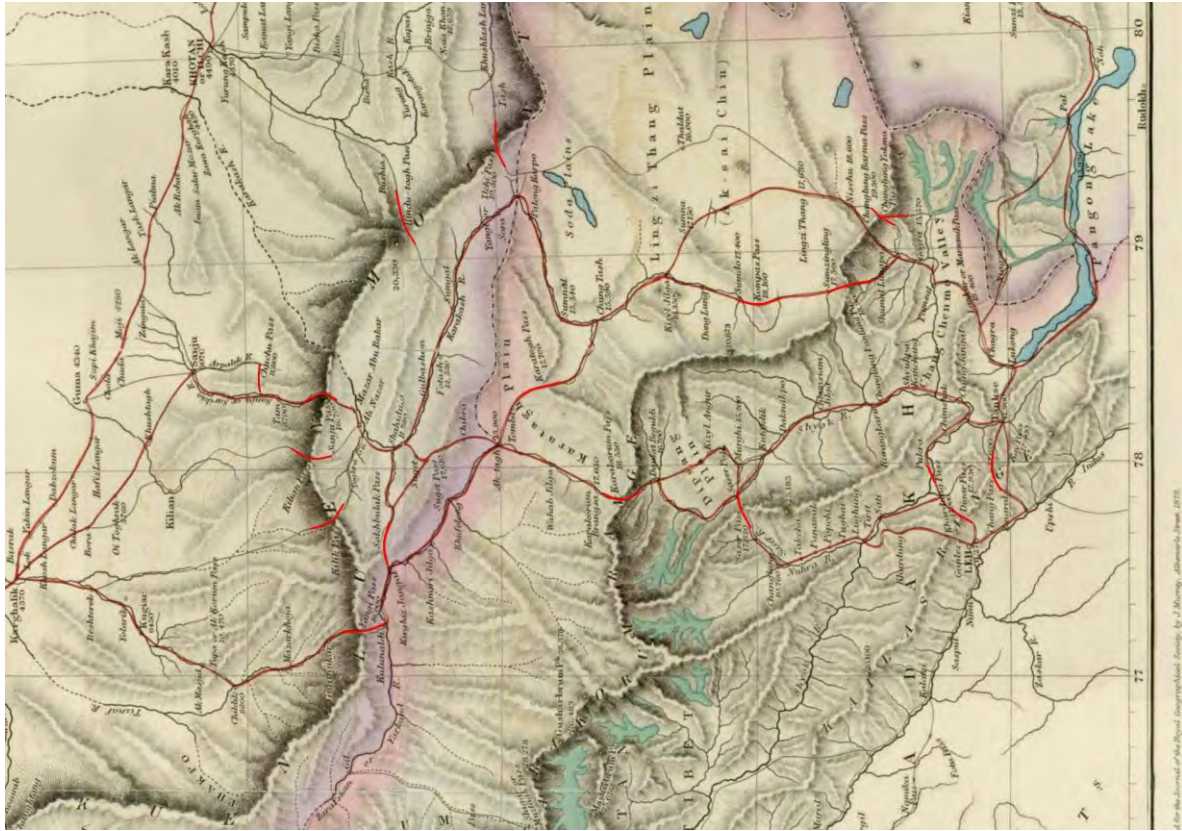
Cold, tired, hungry and vulnerable. As my research involved the border, it necessitated spending time in Inner Line areas and sportingly flouting regulations regarding how close foreigners could be allowed to the places that people fought. By going to these areas, I had to place myself at the mercy of the Ladakhis whose doors I knocked on every night in search of a place to stay, I was able to make connections and hear stories that I would not have otherwise heard. I had very little food and very little money. I



can only say that my trust in the people's legendary hospitality was rewarded and that they gave me far more ideas for my research than I had the resources to pursue. All the information in this paper is from a mix of textual sources as well as interviews with Ladakhis in a position to be influenced by the border. All sources gave verbal consent for their words to be used in this paper and I freely made the text available so that sources could see how their words were being portrayed. Of course, all informants were given veto power over whether or not any of their content could be used in the paper and its presentation.



**Appendix 1: 1873 Jammu and Kashmir Map Compared to Current Day Jammu and Kashmir Map**





## **Suggestions for Future Research**

- The Argun community: These are the descendants are Yarkandi traders who married Ladakhi women and settled in Ladakh. The Argun adopted many Ladakhi customs but lived in separate communities. Ask Abdul Ghani Sheikh at the Yasmin Hotel.
- Turtuk: I regretfully only got a few days to spend in Turtuk, but a whole ISP could be done about the village and its transition from Pakistan to India. Ibrahim, the local Agricultural Officer is a good contact there. Additionally Bogdan village on the way to Turtuk is much less visited by Western tourists. My traveling partner and I were among the first Western tourists to visit. An ethnography of these two villages in the context of contemporary India would be fascinating.
- Military Roads: I originally wanted to focus my project on the strategic roads constructed by the military. I found out very quickly that the information was classified. However, Col. R.K. Shukla of Project HIMANK stated there might be a way to get permission from the U.S. Consulate in Jammu, and then the Army would agree to release the specifics.

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