

Ladakh. A Glimpse of the Roof of the World

By Tilak Ranjan Bera, with a foreword by Omar Abdullah, Chief Minister of Jammu & Kashmir.

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Reviewed by John Bray

Tilak Ranjan Bera is a medical doctor who has previously published on Nicobar, the Andaman Islands and Goa. He first visited Ladakh in 1985 and has returned there on a series of visits in more recent years. This illustrated book presents his findings and observations. In a series of disclaimers in the preface, Bera says that he is neither a 'photographer nor a writer'. This is a clear case of false modesty: the photographs are excellent and the book is overall produced to a high standard.

A Glimpse of the Roof of the World is divided into twelve chapters. It starts by introducing the rugged terrain, the peoples of the region, and the road from Kashmir to Leh, the largest town in Ladakh. It then looks more closely at Leh itself ('the melting pot of Ladakh') before examining a selection of the most notable Buddhist monasteries ('the goldmines of wisdom'). Six chapters follow on selected regions of Ladakh: Nubra, Dah, Hanu, Suru, Zaskar, and the lakes in the east of the region near the border with Tibet. The book concludes with an 'Adieu', illustrated by pictures taken from the plane leaving Ladakh, and a final set of reflections on 'the Mystic Godland'.

The wonders of the Ladakhi landscape are the first and most enduring impression conveyed by the book. Bera's most recent visits to the region evidently took place during the spring and early summer. This is the season when the green of the village oases, sustained by glacial streams, contrasts most vividly with the browns and ochres of the mountain deserts that surround them. Bera rejoices in the wild flowers of the Suru valley and in the fauna of the entire region, ranging from magpies to snow partridges, redstarts, blue sheep (*bharal*), marmots and wild asses (*kiang*).

Bera has an eye—and a lens—for the picturesque and the 'traditional'. In that respect his book is a contemporary Indian successor to travel volumes on Ladakh by earlier generations of Western writers, with titles such as *The Road to Lamaland* (M.L.A. Gompertz, 1926) and in *In the World's*

Attic (Maria Henrietta Sands, 1931). His view is that of a romanticising outsider in which the past is seen as good and even divine, almost without qualification.

Nevertheless, contemporary developments intrude at several different levels. The 'Destination Ladakh' chapter includes photographs of memorials to Indian soldiers killed in the 1947/1948 conflict and the 1999 Kargil war. On pages 38 and 39 he touches on the effects of climate change, and includes vivid images of the damage caused by the 'flash flood' of August 2010. On page 61 we see an official notice referring to a 'protected monument'—an ancient rock carving showing ibexes, hunters and war scenes—only to discover that the rock itself was destroyed during road building operations. On page 245 we learn—and see for ourselves—that Changpa nomads make tents of yak wool, but also of discarded parachutes.

The accompanying text offers a basic introduction to the history and culture of the region: this is helpful in setting the context, but the details need to be treated with care. For example, the 'Treaty Road' from Kashmir to Ladakh was given its name not because of an agreement between the rulers of Ladakh and Kashmir, as we read on page 49, but as a consequence of the 1870 Commercial Treaty between the British and the Maharaja of Jammu & Kashmir. The Dalai Lama's formal relinquishment of his political responsibilities in 2011, which is discussed on page 123, is indeed a significant event in Tibetan history. However, Ladakh was in any case never subject to the Dalai Lama's political authority, and it is questionable whether the resignation truly amounts to a 'total change in the basic philosophy of Buddhism' as the author suggests.

These details do not detract from the visual impact of the book. Bera does not claim to be writing a scholarly analysis. Instead, he promises us a 'glimpse' of Ladakh. He delivers.