

RIS Discussion Papers

The Changthang Borderlands
of Ladakh:
A Preliminary Inquiry

Siddiq Wahid

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About the Author

Siddiq Wahid's field of study is medieval Inner Asian and Tibetan History. He received his Masters and PhD from Harvard University in the field of Inner Asian and Altaic Studies. Until recently he was the Director of the UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Institute of Kashmir Studies. Before that he was the Founding Vice Chancellor of Islamic University in Kashmir and the Majaharaj Gulab Singh Chair Professor, University of Jammu. He also taught and lectured widely in the US, South Asia and Europe in medieval Central Asian and Tibetan history.

In the last eighteen years he has been an activist for peace building in Kashmir, participated in several Track II initiatives on the Kashmir conflict and lectured on it in India, Pakistan, Europe, the Middle East and the United States. He writes frequently on the politics of J&K State.

Dr. Wahid is currently completing a history of the composite State of Jammu & Kashmir between 1835 and 1947 (forthcoming 2015), a monograph on Islam in the Tibetan-speaking world (forthcoming 2014) and finalising his translation of the great Tibeto-Himalayan epic of the Gling Kesar. He is on the University Court of Central University of Jammu, the Executive Council of Central University of Kashmir and on the board of several other professional bodies.

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Foreword

The Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) has been engaged in studies of border infrastructure, border trade and cross-border connectivity. In the course of our work in these areas, we have become aware of the critical importance of involving our citizens residing in border areas as key stakeholders in issues relating to the development of these areas as well as to ensure the security of our frontiers. We found that in recent years there have been few studies focused on the different ethnic, tribal and migrant groups inhabiting our border regions, the impact of modernization on their livelihoods and their way of life and how they have been impacted by the increasing “securitization” of our borders. In order to encourage the change of focus, RIS was fortunate to be able to call upon Dr. Sidiq Wahid a well-known scholar, historian and social scientist from Jammu and Kashmir, to undertake a preliminary study of the Changthang region of Ladakh. Dr. Wahid visited the area personally and has recorded his insightful impressions in a travelogue format. He has also made some very keen observations on the societal and economic changes brought about among the ethnic communities of the region, both as a result of the promotion of tourism as well as the significant presence of our security forces, charged with guarding our sensitive frontiers with China.

RIS is proud to present Dr. Wahid’s Study and his recommendations in the form of a Discussion Paper. It is our hope that this Paper will encourage more detailed studies of India’s frontiers, from the perspective of our citizens who have been the true sentinels of our border regions through millennia.

Shyam Saran

The Changthang Borderlands of Ladakh: A Preliminary Inquiry

Siddiq Wahid

This paper is the result of an eight-day visit to the Changthang in October 2013. It is, as will become clear presently, in a way an ‘accidental paper’ emerging from the intent to focus on the needs of the nomadic and settled communities of the area in the face of reported border incidents. The study follows a period of brief but intensive interaction with the frontier peoples. The initial plan was to spend eleven days in the region and included a visit to the Chumur area. However, a lack of clarity as to whether a civilian would be permitted to go to Chumur (even if it be a local Ladakhi) and the wealth of information from the areas that I was already present in – Nyoma, Hanle, Khuyul and Demchok – resulted in my stay being shortened by three days. As will be apparent from this study, India’s eastern boundary with China’s Tibet is a work that needs separate and considerably more attention. In that context, this note should be considered a preliminary investigation for the purpose of identifying the questions that are important to the land and its peoples.

In the interests of ease of communication, the paper is divided into six sections of varied length with headings that are self-explanatory: Introduction; A Summary Historical Context; Understanding Borders in a Theoretical Context; Narrative of a Preliminary Journey; Some Broad Recommendations; and Conclusion.

I. Introduction

The primary objective of my brief foray into the Changthang (or “northern plains”) of the Ladakh frontier area was to collect preliminary information for a larger study on the effects of modernity on Ladakh generally and among religious, vocational and regional communities within Ladakh.

What, for example, are the relevant questions surrounding the effects of “modernity” in the Changthang? Is it less affected by modernity than the other parts of Ladakh given that it is difficult of access, a high altitude desert and sparsely inhabited? Is the effect of modernity on the Changthang less important because of its presumed demographic (as opposed to territorial) inconsequentiality? What is the current status of the relationship between the pastoral and the settled populations of Ladakh? In the larger picture, how have the changes in Ladakh affected the sociology and political economy of Jammu and Kashmir State, of which it is a part?

In the context of the more comprehensive work – to be completed by the end of 2014 – this paper is a digression, albeit an important one, on a subject that emerged as a result of my recent visit. The Changthang is a borderland representing India’s point of territorial contact with China’s Tibet. Off late these contacts have been contentious, even adversarial. This has had its own consequences for the settled, pastoralist and nomadic populations on both sides of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). It is the dynamics of this reality that asserted itself during my visit. Specifically, it quickly became apparent that the lack of consideration given by successive governments in New Delhi to the management of *spaces* and *interests* of the peoples living on India’s borders is a source of frustration for the local population and, indeed, is rapidly alienating them. There is a need to stem this trend not just for reasons of national security but first and above all for the sake of the people of Ladakh. This essay is intended to address this dimension of the relationship between “border” and “core”, “periphery” and “center”.

II. A Summary Historical Context

To understand the palpable disaffection of the population of the Changthang borderlands, it is important to have an overview of the key markers in Ladakh’s recent history. The modern period in the history of Ladakh begins, arguably, with the conquest by the Dogra Raja (later Maharaja)

Gulab Singh of the then independent and sovereign kingdom of Ladakh between 1834 and 1842. The conquest of Baltistan and Ladakh by Gulab Singh's formidable general, Zorawar Singh, who was killed in a late campaign headed towards the Central Tibetan capital of Lhasa, was a precursor to the birth of the State of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846. The long term effect of the Dogra conquest brought this trans-Himalayan state firmly within the sphere of influence of 19th century British India and so of South Asia.

This is also to say that the creation of the J&K State came at a time when the rivalry between Imperial Britain, Tsarist Russia and Qing China was in full swing. Popularly described as “the Great Game”, the term is a reference to 19th century great power activity centered on the knot of lands between the mountain complexes of the Hindukush, the Pamirs, the Karakoram, and the Himalayas. It was a time when they were being defined by a combination of political gamesmanship, colonial cartography and geo-political engineering. In many ways this process was yet to be completed for the Himalayan region by the time the British withdrew from South Asia. Although this last assertion is a topic for a separate discussion, it manifested itself in several ways, two of which merit a brief discussion in the context of this paper.

First, the Himalayan map-making exercises tended to isolate the lands they encompassed. The purported geographical “remoteness” of these lands – including Ladakh – was not “natural” to them; nor was their isolation a self-imposed preference. For centuries the region had been a crossroad of thriving trade and cultural interaction. The difference at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was the radical changes in transport and communication: they allowed capitals as far away as London, Beijing and St. Petersburg to attempt to control these outlier regions by drawing imaginary lines of possession.

For mid-20th century South Asia, a second consequence of the Great Game was that it resulted in the post-colonial successor states

inheriting a lack of definition of the boundaries separating the various small principalities and the larger states. Unlike in Africa and the Middle East, the greater powers had not finished drawing the lines of possession, so to speak, in these mountainous regions. They had only recently become familiar with them through exploration and were still on unfamiliar ground by the end of the World War II and rapid decolonisation. So with the creation of the newly independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947, Ladakh continued to be perceived in the paradigm of the Great Game rivalry.

For the first fifteen years after the British exit from India, Ladakh continued to remain firmly isolated (barring the 1947-48 war with Pakistan) in true 19th century Great Game style. In part, this was because the intricate business of state-consolidation in the subcontinent was the task at hand. Indeed it was in that line of duty that another Asian giant, the People's Republic of China, was also consolidating itself after its re-birth as a modern state in the same years. The PRC's territorial consolidation involved attaching itself firmly to its westernmost claims to Xinjiang. It was then that Ladakh entered direct Indian consciousness as China annexed the Aksai Chin resulting in the *post facto* Sino-Indian war of 1962. The fifty years since the 1962 war are crucial to our understanding the present situation at the Line of Actual Control.

Four distinct periods can be identified in the fifty years between 1962 and the present in Ladakh. The first period of Ladakh's late modernity took place between 1962 and 1974. It was a period when Ladakh, as part of J&K, began to be fully incorporated into the Westphalian-model Indian state. Ladakhis slowly became aware of their "new" status as information filtered from the townships into the countryside, an ongoing process of conceptual "translation" that could arguably be said to be in progress even now. But in the Indian population's imagination, there was still little or no awareness about the *peoples* of Ladakh. The same could be said of the Indian political elite and many experts of its history and culture

who continued to be largely uninformed about Ladakh for many years. Modern India's first real awareness of the land was therefore military in nature with an exclusively national security (or territorial) sensibility, as opposed to a "people" sensibility.

A greater awareness about Ladakh came about a dozen years later, in 1974, and for different reasons. One, was a successful campaign by Ladakhis for alternate economic opportunity through the introduction of domestic and international tourism into the region. The period after 1974 arguably marks the second phase in Ladakh's late modernity. This development was the first time in a century and a half that this trans-Himalayan district of the J&K State emerged from its isolation from regional politics. It rapidly became a popular tourist destination also because it represented an enclave of Tibetan civilisation in ethnicity, language and culture to which foreign, and a little later domestic, visitors flocked. The tourists saw it as the next best thing to being in political or territorial Tibet. As a result of this event the economy of Ladakh between 1974 and 1990 was transformed by a considerable injection of new cash, new contacts and new ideas. No less important was a newfound self-consciousness among its citizens about Ladakhi history, culture and values.

With tourism, the land and the people were rapidly introduced to modern ideas and institutions, not to mention a well-informed localised political discourse. More importantly, the transformation happened at a pace that is difficult to imagine for societies that have seen change at a more gradual pace. The phenomenon of the late arrival of modernity on frontiers has its unique consequences for the peoples it visits, a discussion that is outside the scope of this paper. However, these effects become starkly apparent when we analyse the outcomes of the wholesale introduction of new ideas, the pace of change and the understandably selective adoption of ideas by the people it influences. Ladakhis from 1962 to the present were, and are, no exception to this

rule. The experience of tourism was, for all practical purposes, Ladakh's introduction to modernity in the multi-dimensional and intensified sense of that word. So when modernity did "arrive", it did so with the haste of a dam-burst waiting to happen.

The decade after 1990 – marking the third period of its late modernity – saw Ladakh take to "globalisation" with aplomb. It began to connect directly not only with South Asia but with West Asia and even North America in all aspects of life. Politically, by holding protest marches against the second Iraq War, for example. Economically, the tourism industry provided young Ladakhis to access the world with freedom that was unimaginable a mere decade earlier. Social relationships were radically transformed, some of it breaking down within Ladakh and some in relation to its neighborhood. Ladakh was also introduced to a new kind of politics – that of ethnic and religious identity – initiated in the wake of globalisation. In part as a result of all this, relations between its Buddhist and other religious communities deteriorated. With respect to its position within the Jammu & Kashmir neighborhood, it became somewhat of a "balancer" of political opinion and position in the conflict ridden State.

The period between 2001 and today represents the fourth period in Ladakh's recent history. It is marked by an intensification of modernity which takes many forms. For example, immediately after the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, when the United States was looking to establish a base for its war against "terror" in Afghanistan, Ladakh came to center-stage as rumors began circulating of New Delhi reportedly considering a base in northern Ladakh to facilitate the NATO response to "9/11". Yet another, and different, aspect of Ladakh's globalisation is its growing proximity – and awareness of territorial contiguity – to China's economy in the form of the availability of goods manufactured in that country. A third aspect of intensified modernity is that of large numbers of youth leaving Ladakh to pursue higher education and, although to a

lesser extent, employment. All this represents, albeit in a tangential way, Ladakh's reintroduction to yet another phase in its development as the rest of the globe searches for a "new world order".

The reactions to modernity are not distributed evenly or similarly among the various communities in Ladakh. From a confessional point of view Buddhist and Muslim reactions have been different, as has that of the Ladakhi Christians. Regionally, Kargil has been slower to adopt new methods in comparison to Leh. The former was reluctant, for example, to assert its autonomy by adopting the Hill Council model of governance for a full decade after Leh District. In the Changthang itself, the reaction of the transhumnant pastoralists (*drokpa*) has differed from those of the nomads (*rebopa*). Within settled populations the response has been different between those of merchants and of agriculturalists. In this essay, I address the questions surrounding the pastoralist and nomad populations, with a specific focus on their perceptions of their own "security" against an assertive People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

In this context there are fundamental questions that need further investigation but are temporarily only assumed as a result of anecdotal conversations during the field visit. Some of these questions are: in the wake of such rapid change, what are the differing aspirations of the peoples of Ladakh, including those living in the Changthang? What are their immediate aspirations as citizens and pastoralists? How has the relationship between the grazing and settled populations of Ladakh changed? And if these relationships have changed, what have they been? What is the local perception of the divide between their "traditional" and "modern" ways of life? What do the youth of the Changthang aspire to and how do they see their own future and that of the land? What are some of the livelihood possibilities for the peoples of the Changthang?

This paper attempts to create a frame of reference for answers to these questions with an eye to a broader study. However, the immediate

purpose of this essay is to describe the tide of frustration and alienation among Ladakh's frontier populations and make some initial policy recommendations to address them if the borders are to be "secured" in the full sense of that term.

III. Understanding Borders in a Theoretical Frame

[T]he Great Wall of China or Hadrian's Wall in Britain was not a boundary in the modern sense but rather a self-imposed limit designed to prevent the empire's unraveling through overextension, just as a hem is used as a finish for the raw edge of a garment.

--Thomas Barfield in *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 2010, Princeton

Territorial borders and the lives of peoples living along it are by definition in a state of flux in normal times, at least in comparison to the lives of peoples who live closer to a state's center of power. When the border is periodically contested by diplomatic assertiveness, border skirmishes and in times of war – there is instability. The LAC is precisely such a line. These contestations tend to focus on boundary lines in the imagination of the ruling elite of a state. This perspective monitors the lines, reports infringements and curtails movements that seem to threaten the 'sacredness' of the line. It is a top-down approach, focused on "lines" with the debate between rival states attenuating to the chronicled rights of possession over a given territory. To argue over it, both sides come armed with evidence confirming their stand.

A second, softer and historically more sensitive attitude, to addressing borders is through a closer understanding of the linkages that bind the peoples living within a state and, more importantly, *across its borders*, particularly in the Wesphalian model and post-colonial states in which hardened lines have often divided ethnicities, cultures and even nations. In such cases the borders are comparatively more open, with discussion, albeit still elitist in nature, centering on how to manage the "spaces" in the domains of economics, trade and transport.

My journey to the Changthang highlighted the importance of a third approach to contested borders; namely, an anthropological one that is sensitive to experience of and encounters with border peoples *within a state*. This relationship could be characterized as a *dialogic* one between “center”, or even concentric circles of administrative and political space (see below), and the “periphery”. It results in securing borders based not so much on the concept of territorial possession but on knowledge of shared ways of life and histories of the people who have lived along and across borders for centuries. Such a methodology goes beyond that of mere *territorial acquisitiveness* or even geo-political *space management* by states. It can build a foundational relationship between, precisely, the concentric circles of political space just mentioned: the administrative blocks, districts, provinces, the regional states and, finally, the center of power in the Westphalian-model state. The provisional recommendations that follow are based on the latter thinking, although without prejudice to the territorial and historical approaches to security. In any case, the three approaches are not mutually exclusive, although the order of priority could be debated.

By way of a preface to the section on some very broad recommendations that follows, three factors need stating. First: that there is a problem at the border. From this flows the question of what the problem at the border is? In answering this question, let me begin with a disclaimer. Even as an academic who has had an interest in “border studies” for some time now, a Ladakhi with claims to some knowledge about it and a citizen of the J&K State who is politically aware of its importance, this was my first visit to the Changthang. What struck me most is how disconnected the data on the peoples inhabiting the borderlands seem to be. As a logical result, our lack of information about the border was palpable as were the hazards it poses for the future of the people at the border, of Ladakh regionally and also of J&K and the Indian state. In this context, the problem is the combination of a vacuum in our knowledge about the land and the peoples on the borders. It has

resulted in a lack of policy direction on the building of infrastructure or even the deployment of the armed forces, let alone understanding the border inhabitants.

However, and this brings me to the second point, I make haste to say that this note does not address questions of infrastructure, such as roads, availability of electricity, water or consumer goods. Even less does it address security issues such as the deployment of troops along the border. These involve questions of prioritization, finance, Center-State relations, relationships of local and provincial governance and military tactics. Rather, I concentrate on the voices of the residents of the border and their immediate experiences to initiate a much needed dialogic atmosphere about the future of the region – even more than hasty prescriptions – in the interest of the local, by which I mean the border-dwelling, population. This dialogue is needed if the “raw edge of the garment” (in this case the *goncha*, or traditional Ladakhi robe) is to be prevented from “unraveling”, to cite the instructive passage at the start of this section.

The third point to be borne in mind is that the subject of “border studies”, or even the limited topic of sensitivity towards residents of borderlands, is a broad and emerging discipline. This essay and its recommendations are not intended to address this larger subject to any appreciable extent. What it is designed to address is what became apparent during my trip; that the immediate concern of the citizens of the Changthang border is the impact on their lives of the recent assertiveness of PRC, or more specifically the PLA, on the definition of the LAC between China and India along the Himalayan massif. The pattern of behavior of the PLA has been to harass the civilian residents of the frontier between Ladakh and China’s Tibet, while being careful to avoid an escalation of military engagement with Indian troops. What has made matters worse for Ladakhi border-dwelling civilians is their perception that Indian military personnel are more concerned with “maintaining

the peace” and in their eagerness to do this, burden citizens on the Ladakhi side of the LAC with further restrictions and even prosecution, thereby literally squeezing them, with immediate consequences on their livelihoods.

An apt illustration of this phenomenon is an incident reported in December of 2013. Three Ladakhi residents of Karzok had crossed the border in search of horses that had strayed into the Chinese side. The PLA apprehended and questioned them. On ascertaining that the three were not spies they were fined a “grazing tax” by the PLA, given warm clothing and allowed to return. However, on the Indian side of the LAC they were promptly arrested, charge-sheeted under an arcane statute called the “Egress and Ingress Movement Control Ordinance” | (E & IMCO), their new clothes confiscated and then released on bail a day or two later, presumably to be tried over an extended period and after protracted argument. (See Hindustan Times, Jammu Edition, December 18th, 2013). The question of which side has treated the three citizens of India better is arguably a moot one that is tempered by the statement of our guide Jigmed in the travel narrative provided above!

IV. Narrative of a Preliminary Journey

This portion of the paper is a narrative of my journey to the Changthang. It is an impressionistic journal with some allusions to historical and anthropological information where relevant. Flowing from this section are some theoretical frames of reference for how the border regions have been addressed in the past, which is then followed by some recommendations towards a discussion of the immediate future for the area. I was accompanied on the journey – at my request – by my friend, Kunal Batra, who, apart from his professional contributions, as a painter and a photographer, of the Himalayas is also familiar with the western Himalayas from his earlier involvement in adventure tourism. My aim in requesting him to accompany me was in the hope of his taking some photographs of the landscape and wildlife of the region.

Mr. Batra, however, was restricted in his movements (he could not accompany me beyond a certain point) because he is not a “local” and in fact had to surrender his camera to the police picket at Loma, for “security” reasons, until our return journey.

The first part of the journey was an eight-hour drive that brought us to Hanle. We were accompanied by a driver from Khuyul in the Changthang. During the drive, and without straying from the main route, we came across approximately twenty-four *bharal* or “Blue Sheep”, numerous *kyang* or Wild Ass, large numbers of Brahmini Ducks and at least nine Black Necked Cranes. Such sightings are a wildlife enthusiast’s delight, because all these animals and birds are either unique to the Himalayas or extremely difficult to sight, especially the Black Necked Crane which is also an endangered species. Specialists from all over the world travel to various parts of the Tibetan plateau in search of just a glimpse of this rare bird.

Once in Hanle, we were lodged in the substantial “guest house” of a local entrepreneur who has been catering to tourists for the last two years. His wife, who actually runs the place, informed us that in 2012 the guest house had catered one hundred and fifty Indian tourists. In 2013 that count had risen to about three hundred tourists. A brief glance at the “register of visitors” required by the authorities told us that a sizeable number of the tourists were from as far away as, predictably, Kolkata. We arrived in Hanle late in the afternoon and owing to the altitude did not do much, despite the tantalizing view of the Government astronomical observatory within a twenty minute drive from our guest house, preferring to remain healthy for the following few days of anticipated hectic activity.

The next morning we left to meet with nomads for Bong-nag, a specific spot within a larger area known as Dikyu and close to the LAC. Had we come a few days earlier, we would have in all likelihood encountered these transhumant pastoralists in Hanle, where they were

camped for a few weeks between the late fall and early winter. By the time we arrived, however, they had already left to pasture their animals. We were accompanied on this part of the journey by a young man named Jigmed from Hanle, who is a Chang-pa – “a northern [plains] dweller”. He told us that he had been a guide for the ITBP since 2009 but that he was no longer engaged by them. He was approximately twenty-six years old and had studied up to class six.

Once we arrived at Bong-nag we encountered an encampment of six nomad families. The animals had already been taken to pasture, with seven older members of the families left behind to care for the camp. In speaking with them, it was apparent that the dialect of Tibetan they spoke is different from both Ladakhi and Central Tibetan. I am fluent in both, but had difficulty understanding them and had to rely on Jigmed to do some translating for me. During the interview they told us that between the six families they owned about three hundred animals. When asked how many families shared their pasturelands, they said there were about thirty families who pastured in the Dikyu area. During the conversation they indicated that this number did not include the few families who were “not locals”; this, interestingly, was an allusion to families from the Chinese side of the LAC who had “escaped” (it was not clear when) to this side. Significantly, the conversant indicated that these people were now regretting their decision to come to this side as they were finding that things on this side of the line “were not as good that they had been led to believe”.

When I asked one of the nomads directly whether they at times crossed the border in order to graze their animals or for any other reason, he replied in the negative, saying “why would we want to?” However, Jigmed later told us that this was not true and that they do cross over. He said they were being circumspect because for the past year or so there had been strictures from this side of the LAC against it and that the army scolded them even if they came close to the border. Jigmed said that apart

from pushing their animals to graze across the LAC, they also traded across it. In continuing the conversation with the nomads I asked them what kind of help they needed from the government that would better their lives. They replied: “warm clothes and warm shoes”. Interestingly, they did not ask for anything substantive such as grain for their own consumption or animal fodder, although some prompting caused them to suggest the need for “extra rations”.

Another question I asked the nomads was whether they still practiced what is known as “*shey-mar*”. This was a system of well to do settled families purchasing animals – usually yak, but sparingly also *dzo* and sheep – and giving them to the care of the nomads for the year. The latter would be bound to bring the butter, cheese and, on occasion, wool from these animals to the households. It was a relationship of trust; the caring family was trusted to be fair while benefiting from it themselves, but if the animals died for any reason, there were no questions asked. I was told that the practice is no longer extant. If business is about relationships, the loss of this represents a break in the chain of association between nomad and settled populations. In this context, it would be interesting to study the nature of the current relationship between the nomad and settled communities and how it works in the domain of the *pashmina* business. During the journey to Bong-nag and back Jigmed, our guide, began to warm up to us and soon told us of his encounters with personnel of the PLA. When our driver asked him how he found them to be in their behavior, Jigmed replied without hesitation: “Better than ours!” When I asked him to clarify what he meant, he said “They at least talk to us and sometimes give us a cup of tea.” In contrast, “our soldiers”, he told us, tend to be high-handed and make demands of us, including sharp interrogation of nomads if they went too close to the LAC. This was in contrast, Jigmed told us, to the practice of the PLA; they apparently encourage nomads on their side of the line to cross over and graze on this side. (A recurring take-away from this trip was that the security and military personnel need to be much more sensitive to

the sentiments, perspectives and concerns of the local population. It is needed to dispel the perception that the security forces are not “people friendly”.) Jigmed also told us that the Chinese readily accept Indian currency and that they trade it at a ratio of Rs. 5 to 1 RMB. The journey to Bong-nag and back took about seven hours, including a picnic lunch in a spot where we found the wind to be less cutting!

The next morning, I visited the home of one of the members of Hanle’s *panchayat* in the hope of a conversation with him. However he had left earlier in the morning to pasture his animals. I spent a little time talking with his wife, who was grinding barley with a hand-mill. In looking around their one-room hutment, it seemed that all the crockery that was displayed above the hearth was of Chinese make. She confirmed this on inquiry. When asked where she had bought it, she responded that she did not know specifically, but that it was from the nomads.

Before leaving Hanle, we had a meeting with one of the village’s school teachers, Gombo Dorje. (I did not ask him, but his name indicates that he is probably from the Changthang himself.) He had been educated at Loyola College in Andhra Pradesh and in Baroda, where he received a master’s degree. He was very articulate and quite *au fait* with world events. He had a litany of thoughts to offer about the condition of the land and the people. To wit:

1. The Chinese are constantly shouting at us to go back, that this is “Chinese territory”. We shout back, but not the army! The army here tends to be conservative in their reactions.
2. We need to build up our infrastructure, especially in Demchok. The Chinese facilities for “their nomads” are excellent, in contrast to ours dwellings which are pitiful in comparison. The Chinese have intensified their surveillance by building observation towers in the past year.

3. We have 21 students in this school (the government primary school where he taught). They give us Rs. 3 per meal, which is hardly enough.
4. For education to improve, we need *both teachers and students* to be exposed to the ambience of a learning environment, even if it be in schools in Leh, Srinagar and Jammu. This is absent as of now, so what can we expect.
5. Parents also do not give priority to education for their children here; they are not focused on it.
6. When I inquired how much he is paid in his job, he replied “approximately Rs. 21,000/- ”

After this interview, we continued on our way to Khuyul, first backtracking to Loma. There we were greeted by a local retired army *jawan*, who immediately sent for someone whom he thought we ought to meet. As we waited, he made arrangements for us to be served tea. The person was Mr. Rigzin Thangay. As it happens, he is the *sarpanch* of Khuyul and turned out to be a local celebrity and a very colorful figure, but also equally informative. He had worked for one of India’s intelligence agencies and had been across the LAC for several years. Lately, in May of 2013, he said he travelled to Delhi to participate in a panel discussion at the behest of Ladakh’s BJP chapter and under the sponsorship of the India Foundation. (I asked Mr. Thangay if I could identify him when I wrote about my trip and he said he had no objection to my doing so.)

Mr. Thangay was unequivocal in his criticism of how the borders were being managed and the local population being treated. I list below the salient features of his narrative to questions that I asked him:

1. He was both vocal and specific in his assertions about the lack of sensitivity on the part of the security personnel towards

the local population. He was at the same time objective and without malice, adding weight to his argument. He could also, when asked, be very specific as to what he meant, giving his assertions significant credibility. For example, he termed our security forces assertive when it came to dealing with the local population, but circumspect when addressing the question of PLA assertiveness along the LAC.

2. The perception was that the security forces, he said, do not trust the locals. He said that they need to take into consideration their experiences in their encounters with the Chinese and incorporate these into any response.
3. On our side of the LAC there appears to be little or no coordination among GREF, BRO and the PWD, retarding even the somewhat lacklustre attempts at infrastructure development. On the Chinese side, “I have seen them dig three to four feet into the ground [when they build their roads]”.
4. The ITBP, he said, interrogate us prejudicially when we travel from the Changthang to Leh and back. At times they even confiscate items, such as thermos bottles and light bulbs, that we buy in Leh because they have “Made in China” written on them.

The next morning we were to drive to Demchok. At my request Mr. Thangay agreed to accompany me. At it happened, the Goba, or Headman, of Demchok, Mr Tsering Joldan, was visiting Khuyul. At my request, Mr. Joldan too very kindly accompanied us to Demchok. We had another conversation before our departure and he repeated some of Mr. Thangay’s assertions, adding some of his own. These were as follows:

1. Demchok is on the frontline. However, very few people, including even our Ladakhi politicians, come to see the ground in Demchok. (On my return journey to Leh a couple of days later we passed a long line of about thirty government

vehicles, led by the Minister of Urban Development in the J&K Government, Mr. Ngawang Rigzin Jora headed, we were told, for Khuyul and Demchok.)

2. As you will see when we go to Demchok, I have attempted to build a road from the village to its summer pasture grounds. I did this out of NREGA funds. But I can only do so much with such scarce funding. For example, the army pays Rs. 435/- and Rs. 350/- per day as high and low wages respectively. In contrast, NREGA sanctions only Rs. 130/- per day. Who is going to work for us when there is such disparity?
3. The Chinese are claiming territory up to Loma Bend, but on our side the security personnel do not let us construct anything in the area contested by the Chinese! That is a huge area.
4. The horses of the ITBP compete with our horses for grazing grounds. We lose much in this, as they have many horses.
5. Lately the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council officials have come here and told us that we will not be allowed to move to Leh. With the Chinese doing what they are doing, our security personnel restricting us and the Hill Council confining us even further, we are being squeezed from all sides! If this is going to continue, then who can blame us if we want to leave Demchok and move down to Khuyul. Why should we stay here?

Once we arrived in Demchok, Mr. Joldan was at pains to show us the considerably better homes that the PLA had built for the nomads on the other side of the LAC, just below the “Zorawar Fort”, currently occupied by the PLA. He also convinced me that I should travel along the “road” (actually no more than a wide track as it turned out) which he had supervised the construction of with the NREGA funds. We did this. Along the way he pointed to the remains of a corral that some villagers had built for their animals. It had been dismantled by the PLA who

had come across the LAC when there was no one there. The track is approximately fourteen kilometers in length. Until we arrived at about the ten kilometer mark there was no sign of activity on the Chinese side. However, as we came to that mark we saw puffs of dust behind us at some distance on the other side of the LAC. It was kicked up by two Chinese military vehicles, which reached the pasture grounds at the same time as us, although they had started much later.

The two vehicles halted opposite us across a ravine and about fifteen personnel – several of them armed with guns – got off. We were five individuals, including the driver. The PLA soldiers then began walking closer to us and unfurled a large red banner. It was too far for me to read what it said, but the writing on it was in English. According to Mr. Thangay and Mr. Joldan, the banners exhorted us with the message, “India push back. India go home.” The Chinese party was surveying us with binoculars and a smaller party of them started to walk down into the ravine separating us.

When I asked my companions, half jokingly, if the soldiers on the other side would shoot at us, they said that that had never happened and then added, half seriously: “At most they will beat up on you a little.” I immediately suggested that it was best that we leave! The PLA soldiers also got into their vehicles and drove parallel to us on the other side. On the return trip along the same road, we saw a group of the Indian army soldiers patrolling on our side, apparently by way of a routine response to the action of the Chinese. When we came to the army post that regulates movement on this side of the LAC, one of the *jawans* manning it rushed up to us and asked, “Did you have any interaction with the Chinese patrol?” clearly implying that he was hoping not. When I asked my companions why the soldier seemed worried that we may have interacted with the Chinese soldiers, that came the answer: “Because he does not trust us; and it would mean a lot of paperwork for him if we had interacted with the patrol.”

When we were returning to Nyoma from Demchok we were asked for a ride by Karma Zangpo, a resident of Muth, a village near Nyoma. He had come to Khuyul for a family wedding. With him too, the “high handedness” of the ITBP found some articulation. By way of illustration, he pointed to a few people defecating on the riverside. He lamented that this was improper and that the people living downstream had objected to it. When I pointed out to him that a case of two or three such would hardly make a difference, he argued that it was infrequent now because it was cold, but that in the warmer months the practice was wide-spread.

A little further on, we came to the plains of Dumchele, which is a popular grazing area for five or six of the villages surrounding it. Dumchele has for some years now been a trading post between residents on this side of the LAC and the Chinese side. The PLA has set up a military post at its edge near a hillock and apparently encourages this trade. This is done with some intensity for a few days in late November or early December. I asked Mr. Zangpo if he had ever come to the grazing fields of Dumchele during the winter market fair. He replied that he had, although not very regularly. He then told us about some of the items, other than the usual consumer goods, that were traded (smuggled?) at Dumchele during this market festival. He mentioned tiger bones, tiger skins, rhino horns and sandalwood. He said that the Chinese buy these items enthusiastically from the “Tibetans” who bring them there. Mr. Zangpo knew that this was an illegal activity as he was aware that the Ladakh police have been of late very active in stemming this trade and had made several arrests.

The Dumchele valley-plain is also along the route of the east-west trade and tribute missions between Ladakh and Tibet after the late seventeenth century. I was aware that it was somewhere on this plain that these missions – until 1942 when the last of the tribute missions was undertaken and trading began to wane because of political developments in Republican China and Xinjiang – turned off towards Gartok, which

was an official point of entry and exit between Ladakh and Tibet. Mr. Zangpo was aware of this and immediately pointed out the gorge into which the missions turned off during their journeys.

On reaching Nyoma, which is the administrative “Block Headquarters”, we stopped for the night. The village is on an alluvial fan, dominated by a late 18th century palace and monastery combination. It was built by King of Ladakh in the 1680s. (This is an interesting, if improbable, date because it was around this time that Tibet had invaded Ladakh and the latter, on losing ground, had sought assistance from the Mughal Governor of Kashmir). Nyoma is in a picturesque setting with a commanding view of the valley. The palace-monastery holds an annual festival in early November which is usually attended by large numbers of people from the surrounding villages. In a conversation with our home-stay host he indicated that there was also a fort on the plain of the valley which is equally picturesque.

Our journey concluded with this stop-over in Nyoma. We then returned to Leh.

V. Some Broad Recommendations

The broad recommendations below need to be further broken down and discussed by the current administrations, a detailed schedule of implementation drawn up and specialized personnel recruited for implementation. As such, this essay should be treated as a longish discussion paper for consideration among a group of local border-dwellers, local LAHDC members, military and paramilitary personnel, state authorities and central government administrators.

The following are some recommendations that seemed to suggest themselves in Changthang.

- **Creating a knowledge base** – In many ways, the above-described problem of the Changthang is not unique to Ladakh and applies to the

entire Himalayan frontier. So there is a need to create a knowledge base on it specifically and the Himalaya in general. It is a common problem throughout the Indian Himalayas that the lacuna of information and knowledge about it has alienated vast tracts of this virtual cornucopia of enclaves of ethnicities, languages, literatures, religions and cultures from the so-called mainstream. The first recommendation is that select institutions of higher education be encouraged to establish Himalayan Studies programmes that include departments of natural sciences (including geology, ecology, biology and environmental studies) and social sciences (including anthropology, history, politics and sociology). A start could perhaps be made by introducing Himalayan Studies in such universities as the Central Universities in Srinagar, Jammu, Dharamsala, Gangtok and Itanagar. It may be productive for these institutions to form a consortium; on the one hand to avoid duplication and redundancy, but more importantly for optimum benefit from the studies by the individual universities. It would go a long way in furthering our knowledge through this important field of “area studies”.

- **Supporting studies on the anthropology, ecology and environment of Changthang** – Within Ladakh, already a culturally and environmentally fragile zone, Changthang represents a different level of fragility, not least of political vulnerability. In this context, through the instruments of universities, colleges and even schools, regional, national and international research on the social anthropology, environment and history of the Changthang should be permitted, encouraged and publicised to add to our storehouse of knowledge on this important region of the trans-Himalaya.

- **Primary and secondary education** – For the medium term, primary and secondary education needs to be considerably strengthened. When I asked the nomads what they wanted for their children, they expressed disillusionment and skepticism with the public school system and seemed resigned to their children not being educated, spelling a tragic state of

mind. At the same time, they took pains to point out that there were some private schools that were successful but that they were unable to admit their children into them. This latter was a reference to Tibetan Children's Village schools (TCV) which are popular and successful. In this context, I should mention that before going to the Changthang I met with the Prime Minister of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala. He spoke about the CTA's activities in Ladakh, indicating that they were happy with the success of their schools there. He specifically mentioned a few schools in the Changthang (there is one in Hanle) and said that in making it and others like it a success, he felt that the Tibetan's were "repaying" India for hosting the Tibetan refugee community. This, he said, was being done because in teaching the children of the Ladakhi border communities, including the nomads, about their roots in Tibetan language, culture and religion, they were securing the borders for India. The TCVs may be a good model to follow; but regardless, it is critical that special attention be given to primary and secondary education in this region. It would go a long way in making them feel wanted and a part of the larger entity to which they belong.

- **Mining indigenous tradition and building local pride** – There is a wealth of traditional knowledge available in the Changthang. Foremost in this might be the local medical system based on Tibetan traditions, which has been recognized internationally. This is practiced by the *amchi*. The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), I was told, supports them and there is a special wing at the Government Hospital in Nyoma, the Block Headquarters, dedicated to them. However, the three or four *amchi* in Hanle, according to Gombu Dorje, the school teacher, are languishing. At any rate, the medical system of the *amchi* could be given a major boost in proactive research and dissemination. Related to this is the cultivation of specialty medicinal herbs that grow in the region. The low volume and high returns from this could be a force in commerce for the locals and for Ladakh as a whole.

In a related activity, there is a need to build confidence in the local population. One feature of the militarisation of a region, as is the case in Ladakh, is that the sheer force – financial, human resource and authoritarian – of the military tends to contrast the neat structures of the army against those of the local structures. In Khuyul, for example, the government Guest House we stayed in was in a pitiable state; it was dirty, virtually unmanned and minus any infrastructure including water or electricity. To ensure that such places were kept up properly would not only be welcome on the part of the villagers, but also encourage government and other officials to visit these places or at least not be averse to visiting them. Similarly, displaying properly spelled Ladakhi place names on sign boards, milestones and even in army or para-military encampments (perhaps first in the Bodhi script) would go a long way in making the people of the region feel included and sense that their distinctive culture is recognized and respected.

- **Encouraging international tourism** – It was a pleasant surprise that domestic tourism to the region is permitted. However, there is some ambiguity as to who the “competent authority” to give such permissions is; this should be notified properly. In this regard, Mr. Tsering Joldan, the Goba of Demchok, vehemently asserted that government needs to do away with the “inner line” permit and allow tourists to come all the way up to the border. This would be amongst the strongest of my recommendations. To allow tourists, domestic and foreign, to visit the forward areas is in many ways to confirm possession. For China to bring tourists up to the border is time consuming, expensive and needs dedicated interest. The relative proximity of the Changthang to Leh, which continues to be a popular tourist destination, gives India the advantage of asserting itself on the border in more innovative ways. While doing away with all travel restrictions may need more administrative versatility than can be expected, if there is clarity about who the “competent authorities” are and the process become transparent, the Changthang could become

a very successful destination for special interest wildlife tours to jeep safaris that roam the grazing grounds of the nomads.

As stated at the outset, the above is a preliminary study. However, it is enough of one to help us decipher some of the basic problems of this important borderland. In large part these need to be gleaned by inference from my conversations with the residents of the Changthang. One of the problems with a visit as short as mine is the difficulty for the people with whom one speaks to warm up to the conversation, although the fact that I could speak the language and had colleagues who could vouch for me was helpful in breaking down barriers. Another methodological problem was the confusion that prevails as to which areas one could visit (even as a Ladakhi) and which not. There is also some ambiguity as to who the “competent authorities” to grant permission to travel freely in the area are. None of these methodological glitches, however, proved to be any real obstacle for the length and scope of purpose of this visit.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to add three subjective observations to the ones that I have already made. Firstly, there is obviously a trust deficit between the local population and the security forces (army and para-military personnel). In my opinion this is not necessarily a deep problem and can be addressed with some simple and logical additions to the training of personnel: for example, briefs to new security personnel arrivals that sensitize them to the Ladakhi customs and culture. Another training feature might be some instructions on the basic background of the reasons as to why they are stationed in the area so that they can adjust their thinking accordingly during their tour of duty in the area. Such steps would go a long way in closing the trust deficit that can otherwise exacerbate, as seems to be already happening.

Secondly, there is a conspicuous lack of coordination between infrastructure development projects such as road building between

intra-government agencies like GREF, BRO and PWD. Indeed, there appears to be some confusion also as to whether the LAC falls within the jurisdiction of the military or the paramilitary command. Such confusions in perception or practice, if they exist, need to be ironed out as soon as possible because the absence of it only adds to the lack of reasonable transparency in important aspects of governance in Ladakh.

Thirdly, the narratives cited above – and some not cited – made it plain that there is an element of corruption that has set in at the borderland. For both the obvious reasons and others pertaining to borderland sensitivities, this needs to be addressed without delay.

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