

All Life is an Oasis – voice-over – the time-code hasn't been fine-tuned in all instances

0108

Tsering Namgial says he is 55. His Indian passport says he is four years younger. So he will have to work a little longer. Which is one of the many things Tsering laughs about.

0124 - - 0144 out

Whenever I visited Tsering's family in the past years, a strong wind of change was blowing through their village in the north of India. About 500 people live here at 13000 feet above sea-level and in a radically different time / setting - one foot, so to speak, still in Stone Age.

0154 - - out 0213

Tsering and his wife Dolma have three daughters. Following tradition the eldest helps at home. The youngest goes to school in the (far-off) city to join the middle sister (studying) at university - on the other side of the Himalayas.

0241 or later

After fetching springwater Tsering offers Buddha fresh water, too - if there is time.

His village is in Ladakh - literally "the land of the mountain passes" - India's territory north of the Himalayas. Cut off from the monsoon by these mountains, Ladakh gets as little precipitation as any other desert.

0329

All life in Ladakh is an oasis made by man. So prayers ask not for rain but (for) sunshine, to melt what is left of the glaciers receding because of global warming. Sunshine to fill the channels of life so that the barley can ripen in just four months. Not even half a percent of Ladakh's 60,000 square kilometres is under crops / is being cultivated.

0423

Working as a teacher a village away, Tsering is seldom at home. Anyhow, apart from ploughing, women and children do most of the fieldwork, mainly watering and weeding. In the past, the men would leave their fields to go caravan-trading, whereas some now work as pony-drivers for trekking-groups.

0512

Mustard or rape is sown in between the barley as feed / fodder for the dairy cattle.

0536

The local bread - made without any yeast - is the Indian chapatti. Politically and economically, Ladakh is a part of India. Culturally, it has remained more Tibetan than Tibet itself - with no Beijing to interfere.

0655

Every morning, the goats are driven to grazing grounds in the high mountains. The little feed there is near the village is reserved for the cows and the dzo-mo, a hybrid between a yak and a cow. During summer, the male yaks roam the high altitudes all by themselves. (Their main task is impregnating the cows.)

0718 - out 0744

Crop and animal husbandry are perfectly integrated and depend on one another. Apart from meat, dairy products and wool, cattle manure is an essential raw / animal product, fertilizing fields and heating homes. Mustard and rape turn into dung and milk. Milk and dung are turned into fire and butter.

0802

Is it true, Tsering asked, that people in the West pay to use machines that produce nothing at all simply to work out (their bodies)? Many of those machines are set up in factories no longer used because (the) production was outsourced, for instance, to India.

0829

The kitchen is the main room. Families live around the hearth and also sleep there during five months of harsh but also idle winter. Most ceilings are black from the smoke of cooking fires. So easy access to propane-gas means a double benefit: healthwise and because it leaves more manure for fertilizing.

0858

Parched barley flour is the staple food of the entire Tibetan plateau; mixed with yoghurt it is a typical late breakfast and salted butter-tea makes a perfect drink for this climate.

0922

Making a hand-full of butter takes more time than watching this film. Two years later Dolma laughs about the new machine, which churns the same amount of milk into, well, less butter. (Progress must be elsewhere.)

1105

Around 90 children are taught locally, in eight compulsory classes. In their song the children pray for peace and happiness for all beings, for good guidance from their teachers and fair attention for themselves (- that all sentient beings have peace and be happy, that their teachers give them good guidance ...)

1130

Angmo, Tsering's eldest went to school here and will inherit all of the parental land. In the meantime she got married - to a soldier in the Indian army, warding off Pakistan along a 500mile line-of-control All of which greatly worries Buddhist Tsering.

1155

Phuntsog, the youngest, will soon return to her school in the city - by bus.

1220

The village had always been the center of the world. It took 18 years of work and waiting and only 29 kilometres of rugged gravel road to show the village its true place: nearly nowhere in the world. (After XYZ, they knew better.) But there's no need anymore to carry gas-bottles up the valley for three hours apiece.

1254

The village-astrologer returns from the city. He is worried that building the road and the bridge may have unsettled earth- and water-spirits - but does use the bus himself.

His commentary is subtle: „All of this takes us into the capital in three hours instead of three days. But our lives will be shorter.“

1415

Ladakh's capital Leh offers more than the villagers could know and therefore desire. For a few hours, there is unreliable electricity. For two months, there are tourists from all over the world. Drinking water comes in lorries / trucks. The soldiers come in body bags from the Pakistani border.

1617

Phuntsog's tuition here is higher than her father's salary as a village-teacher.

1742 -- out 1820

The only jobs in Ladakh are with the army, the administration or in a very small services sector. Language skills are essential. State schools favour Urdu, the official language of the administration. So from all over Northern India, Urdu-speaking teachers are sent to Ladakhi villages where they don't (want to be, also because they don't) understand their pupils' mother-tongue.

Higher education and employment in the tourist industry require English. Only private schools (like this one) use English as (the?) medium of instruction.

1901 - out 1925

Learning by rote or „chanting“ is a method used all over India. It often doesn't take a teacher at all. Real learning would take real teachers. The few textbooks relevant to Ladakh were designed by NGOs and foreign volunteers.

1955 (for non-English-speakers only)

The headmaster of the village school comes from the capital and - for want of qualified staff - teaches most of the subjects himself.

2020

India's educational initiative is named „Operation Blackboard“ - what trickled down to the villages is not educators or equipment but a free mid-day meal. Because that buys votes more quickly? The only hunger in Ladakh is for better education and more (political) recognition.

2100

The only other villagers chanting are the nuns of the small nunnery of the „Perfect Island“. We owe them all of the solar electricity that went into this film - and some of the peace of mind behind it. Three nuns only live here normally, but throughout history / historically more people have lived in monasteries here in Ladakh than in any other corner of the world. It was Ladakh's way of coping with the scarcity of the land. The eldest child gets it all, like Angmo; the youngest chooses - or has to choose - a celibate, monastic life. Not so Phuntsog. She will study more secular scripts - and laughs about the foreigner who goes to the monastery at least every other day, to charge his batteries.

2530

Traditional Ladakh had no roads and hence no use for vertical wheels but employed lying wheels by the thousands: some for milling the barley and many more for prayers for the benefit of all beings.

2623

Here in the village, the onset of the Machine Age took place more than 230 years after the steam-engine was invented. The new road and new job situations brought the first machine to the village: a tiny diesel-powered threshing machine hired by Tsering and some neighbours. Paid labour away from the village made the rental necessary as well as financially possible.

2820

Farmland is so scarce that some threshing grounds are prepared in the harvested fields.

3103

The machine threshes in three days what used to take three weeks plus the hands and yaks of all neighbours and that great Ladakhi spirit of co-operation.

After some envy in the fall, the entrepreneurs harvested some derision during winter, when the fine chaff the machine produced caused cattle-stomachs to cramp. This is something even Tsering doesn't shake off with a laugh.

3132

The majority of the villagers keeps winnowing in the old way. Will it keep paying to wait for the wind?

3202

Ladakh has been hailed / praised as the equivalent of Mahatma „Gandhi's Utopia, the ideal he believed had existed only in the agrarian villages of ancient India“ (Helena Norberg-Hodge), combining or uniting stone-age simplicity and the sustainability the western world likes to talk about. (Anyhow) The village celebrated Gandhi's birthday with a gas-lit night-threshing.

3240

In terms of grain yield and quality the area could compete with high input farming in the West. While European agrotechnicians marvel, Tsering keeps praising the harvest.

3320

Before the milling streams freeze, enough grain has to be washed, roasted and milled.

3414

Traditionally, every adult male wove. Farming his plot and weaving for other villagers, Tsering's neighbour Tashi is midway between self-sufficiency and paid labour away from home.

3435

Tashi comments: „Nobody stays home in the summer, everybody runs after money, and with tourism even the mules and donkeys have no time to eat.“

During the short two-month season more and more trekking-groups pass through the village each year. However they keep having their tents put up and most of the profit is kept away from the village.

3600

Spinning is done by both men and women, whereas twining is done by a few women with the necessary equipment.

Finis