



SNAPSHOTS FROM THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

"During the winter it's very cold, down to -40°C , and one night a group of villagers came to see us. They were trying to get some Indian Government loans and grants in order to buy some Yak, goats and agricultural things. Unfortunately, bureaucracy dictated that they have photographs on their application forms. It was an interesting challenge." Thus started Tim Malyon's most extraordinary but satisfying assignment to date.

Tim Malyon was travelling with Save the Children Fund through Ladakh, a small province sandwiched between Kashmir and Tibet, in north-west India. He continues the story.

"To have photographs done, the villagers would have to go to Leh, the one and only town in Ladakh. There were more than one hundred of them doing the scheme and it would cost them at least 100 Rupees each - that's six or seven hundred pounds for the whole community. That's an enormous sum in an agricultural community where money is a very scarce commodity.

"As a photographer you spend your life watching people, you don't actually participate in things very much. Your job is to observe and for a change I really fancied doing something that was of an immediate and direct benefit to them.

"So I fixed a date when they would come in from the outlying villages and I went to Leh to talk to the bank manager who was dealing with their forms. He



In the small frozen province of Ladakh, high up in the Himalayas between Kashmir and Tibet, a group of villagers were in urgent need of some government grants and had come up against an enormous obstacle. Tim Malyon and his contact sheets came to the rescue

needed pictures larger than 35mm and because I obviously didn't have an enlarger I decided to shoot on 120 film and make contact sheets. Luckily I had a medium format camera with me.

"So, first I had to scour the shops for 120 film and eventually managed to find some of East German origin. Then I hunted around for all the necessary darkroom hardware. At the end of the day I'd got together some dishes, one film tank which held two spirals, an old jam thermometer and an array of chemicals all in plain brown paper bags. I was told what was fix and what was developer and was advised some very rough times and dilutions. Finally I picked up a red safe-light, some single-weight Indian Agfa paper and a coke stove for warming up frozen water. We loaded the whole lot into a Jeep and set off back up the mountain to the village."

That was the easy bit. The road to the village ran up a very steep track littered with sharp stones and prone to severe landslides. As it turned out, the landslide that ultimately halted their journey was the least of the hazards.

"We got one puncture and mended that. Then we got a second one and mended that. Finally, we were blocked by a landslide just as we got our third puncture. We didn't have another spare tyre anyway so we took everything out of the Jeep, carried what we could, and walked the rest of the way in total darkness.



Eventually we got to the village and went straight to bed."

Next day all the inhabitants of the outlying villages began arriving as Malyon went on to the roof of the house he was staying in.

"Because the light is incredibly sharp and contrasty I knew I wouldn't be able to contact contrasty negatives properly so I stuck a white sheet up in the shade as a background cloth, along with a reflector.

"I started taking pictures and it was a real sausage machine job made all the more tricky because the camera I was using, a Plaubel Makina, was not designed for close-up work and the depth of field was horrendously small. It also packed up just before we got to the end, which really pissed me off!

"Anyhow, we started about ten in the morning and by one in the afternoon I was ready to prepare the darkroom. Ladakhi houses are made from mud bricks so they're amazingly dusty, but we managed to cover the floor and put in the coke stove. We powered the safelight from a generator and got a couple of high paraffin stoves going in the passage outside.

"Then all the kids started to get the water from the stream. I could only process two films at a time and I didn't have that much developer so I had to keep re-using it. The first film was processed for 5 minutes at 20°C, but by the end I was running for 10 minutes at 25°C; it was a bit soupy.

"By eight in the evening I'd finished all the developing and hung the films up to dry. By this time the darkroom was absolutely lethal. There were the coke fumes from the stove, paraffin fumes from the passage and developer and fixer fumes. By the time I'd finished I was as high as a kite - literally reeling.

"Then I started contacting and that was wonderful. It was like the first contact of the first print you ever make as a photographer - tremendously exciting because I wasn't really sure whether it would all work. When the first contact came up it was great! To make the exposures I used a Metz flashgun on half power.



The grandmother who sat on the prints to flatten them

"The whole print washing procedure was very 'unwashed'. We washed them in buckets of water brought by the children and then hung the contacts on a line to dry.

"When the prints were reasonably dry to the touch I put them between two sheets of card and an old lady and her grandson sat on them at the back of the darkroom until they were flat. I felt like an old-fashioned alchemist producing these things. I finished the contacting about 3.30am and went to bed. The following morning we cut out each individual photograph and attached them to the application forms.

"The villagers offered to kill a chicken for us to eat, as a sign of their gratitude, which was amazing because chickens are very rare. Even an egg is a big, big luxury so to offer to actually kill a chicken was wonderful. We

declined the offer, but I was very moved".

But was the chaotic effort all worth it?

"The bank manager was very chuffed with the photographs and came to see me when we got back to Leh, and he told me that the villagers had now got their grants."

Tim Malyon is currently in the middle of broadcasting four 10 minute programmes about his travels in Ladakh. Called 'Snapshots from the roof of the World - Radio photographs of Ladakh', the last two can be heard between 11.50am and 12 noon on Radio 4, 24th and 31st May. An exhibition of the photographs opens at The School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London, Malet Street, London WC1 on 1st June.