



The threshing floor at Kargiakh (foreground) — yaks are tethered to the post to walk in slow circles over the barley stalks.



A wall painting outside the Lingshett temple. The carved and painted wooden roof pillar at right is typical of temples and altar rooms in large houses.



Lingshett Gumpa, a monastery of about 60 monks. Their day begins around 4.00am with chanting, which continues at frequent intervals through the day. The longest chant, in the late afternoon, lasts over three hours, ending with 15 minutes of seemingly spontaneous harmonic improvisation.



# Walking the silk road

From India and Nepal, a new five-part documentary series, looks at the various nations in the north of the subcontinent. New Zealander Kevin Makin walked with photographer Tim Malyon through India's remote Ladakh province across the Himalayas' southern ridge, and discovered a land of community spirit, self-sufficiency — and blocked ears.

IN 1976 the Indian Government opened up to foreign visitors the province of Ladakh, situated east of Kashmir in the northernmost part of India, hard against the mountainous north-east frontier with China. Leh, the provincial capital, is reached by a two-day bus journey from Srinagar in Kashmir proper, over a road constructed by the Indian Army in the early 70s. Ladakh's isolation seems secure, though, since winter snows on the high Himalayan passes (some over 4000m above sea level) keep the road closed from November to June, and the only alternative to the road is an arduous two or three weeks' trek.

Travel within Ladakh is still largely on foot, with pack trains of yaks or mules for goods. The foot trails are well established (the old China-Europe silk route passes through Leh), and the Ladakhis are prodigious travellers, covering huge distances on foot for pilgrimage or commerce. Several older men I met had walked as youths into China's Sinkiang province across the forbidding northern ridge of the Great Himalaya. As in old Tibet proper, there is a strong tradition of hospitality to strangers and travellers.

In 1978 I walked with Tim Malyon from Lamayuru, a monastery on the Srinagar-Leh road, into the valley of Zaskar River (a tributary of the Indus) and across the southern ridge of the Great Himalaya Range through the Shingo pass (6000m), descending through the Himalayan foothills into the cedar and thuja forests of Himachal Pradesh. The walk covered about 375km and took a month.

Until our final descent into India proper, we were never below altitudes of about 3500m. Vegetation was extremely sparse; human settlements were limited to the alluvial fans of snow-fed streams joining the Zaskar River. These tiny patches of soil were intricately terraced and ditch-irrigated so that every available scrap of soil could be planted in barley, the staple crop.

After harvesting, the barley is roasted whole and ground into a flour known as tsampa. Tsampa is carried by all travellers; since the grain is cooked, it requires only mixing with water or (more usually) tea, to make an instant if not especially palatable meal.

On arrival in any settlement, secular or monastic, we were invariably greeted with endless bowls of tsampa.

marchai (tea with salt and butter beaten into it in a churn) and tsampa. Tsampa, butter and yogurt — made from yak or goat milk — are the mainstays of the Ladakhi diet.

The people were welcoming but reserved and quite uncurious about us — their main interest was in our medicine. We cleaned out innumerable blocked ears, performing minor miracles with cotton wool on the end of a matchstick, and applied antiseptic for just about any other ailment.

Communication was restricted to sign language and a few words of Urdu. Ladakhi is a dialect of Tibetan; the monasteries in which we stayed were Tibetan Buddhist, acknowledging the exiled Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader.

During our visit the people were very busy — the brief summer is their only growing season and crops must be harvested and all possible supplies preserved and stored for the eight or nine months of winter. We met some villagers tending their flocks on high summer pastures. Those who stayed behind in the villages would work until late into moonlit nights, harvesting and threshing to the accom-

paniment of rhythmical work chants.

For all the hardship of their existence, the Ladakhis are extremely cheerful, with none of the envy of foreigners that taints travel elsewhere in Asia. They have the dignity of complete self-sufficiency; providing for all their needs — food, shelter and clothing — by their own labour and with their own limited local resources. Although their settlements are widely scattered, there is a strong community spirit amongst them, so that trails and essential bridges, even those several days' walking from any settlement, are soundly built and well maintained without the intervention of any government authority.

With adequate preparation, the trek we made could be undertaken by any reasonably fit person. We employed no guides, carried extensive supplies in our backpacks, and obtained some food en route. We lived mainly on tsampa for the last 10 days, with no apparent ill effects apart from constant and unshakable fantasies about crepes Suzette and chocolate eclairs.

FROM INDIA AND NEPAL,  
Mondays on TWO 10.30pm.



This man's basket, carried on his back, is used to collect scraps of wood or dung for fuel.



It took over two hours to buy a small quantity of butter from this friendly but extremely dignified gentleman.