

Fifteen-year-old Tashi Dolma's drawing of her village shows a deep river canyon with sharp white mountains beyond and a huge red sun. On a plateau high above the river stands the village; square white houses with prayer flags strung along the sides of the flat roofs. The wind blows the prayers printed on the little coloured rectangles.

The river is frozen and men are hauling tree trunks up the ice. One man has fallen through — he's a tiny stick figure with his arms in the air. There's a bubble with Ladakhi expletives coming out of his mouth. His hat, a traditional model, tall like a stovepipe, has fallen off on the ice.

Just to be sure, all the essentials of life are labelled: "sky", "sun", "cloud", "house", "spring", "sea" (that's the river), "juniper tree" (that's sacred), "man" and "yak". The yak is flying in from the top left corner, a magic yak with his master Rinchen, coming to save the drowning man.

Tashi Dolma lives in a hostel in Leh, the only town in Ladakh and once a bustling staging post on the "silk route" to China. The Tsering Stobdan Memorial Hostel was founded by The Save The Children Fund in 1985 and is now supported jointly by the fund and the Indian Government. It is run by the Lion's Club of Leh.

Forty-five children live here and go to school in Leh. They all come from the remotest villages with no educational facilities beyond primary school, if that. There's a shortage in these remote areas of educated Ladakhi teachers and medical staff, and the hostel was established to fill the gap. It is hoped that children like Tashi Dolma will return one day to serve their own or other remote communities. Great emphasis is laid on presenting these home villages in a positive light and maintaining the children's contacts with them.

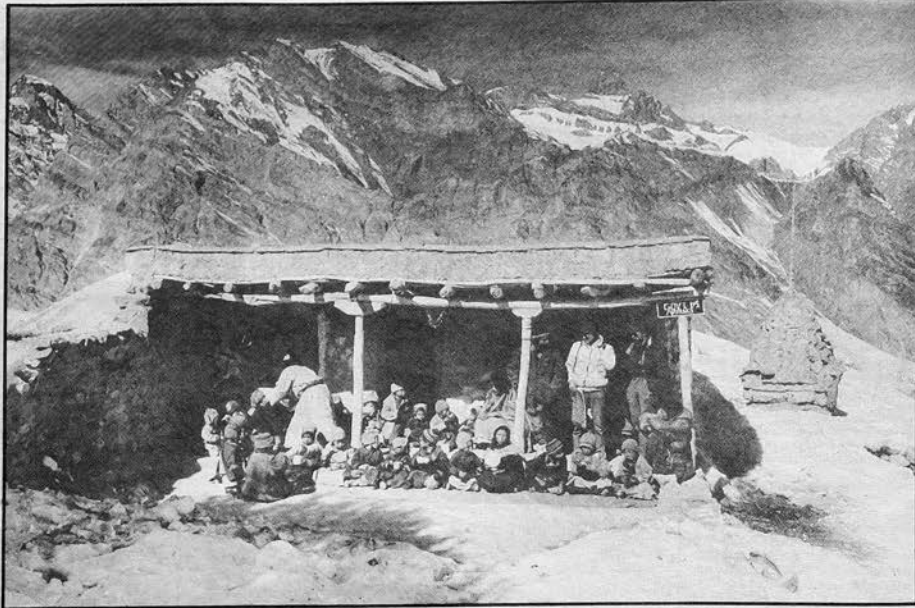
Remoteness is not the only problem. Most villages are subsistence communities, with villagers going hungry if they fail to harvest sufficient barley and peas. Many hands are needed to plough, irrigate, take animals up to the mountain pastures, harvest and thresh. Villagers often refuse to send children to school, or send only girls.

The curriculum is of dubious relevance to them, and terms are focused on the summer months when they need their children the most for agricultural work. School is a sacrifice.

Tashi's village, Nyeraks, is cut off by snow on a high, hazardous pass from October to June — a monk and his companion died two years ago trying to cross the pass in late winter. The mountains are bisected by a massive canyon, the canyon in Tashi's picture. No path, not even a precarious Ladakhi one, clings to the canyon walls. But in February and March the river freezes to become a highway. Caves are the truckstops. It takes a week, depending on conditions, to walk to Nyeraks on the ice from the nearest road.

It's no route for children, but a group from Leh Nutrition Project goes up it every winter to visit five villages under its care, including Nyeraks. The integrated rural development project, which is staffed and managed entirely by Ladakhis and funded by the SCF, holds clinics, vaccinates children, and discusses development projects for the coming year.

I met Tashi's father when we arrived in the village. He's a farmer, warm, courteous and



Nyeraks primary school

well-respected, who also makes shoes and saddles. Several years ago he took an elder son to Leh, found him somewhere to live, and enrolled him in a school. The son was educated and returned to Nyeraks to start the village primary school. The LNP paid the villagers to build it and it is now the best in the area.

Next stop on the LNP winter tour was the village of Linshott, famous for its ancient Buddhist monastery. Monasteries used to be the only source of learning. It is a large village of about 100 houses, with a medical aid centre servicing it and the outlying communities, including Nyeraks. The government medical assistant had travelled with us to the village — this was in February. He had taken up his post the previous May, stayed in the village about a week, then returned to his native Kashmir. The health department had somehow found him out — they can't regularly inspect such remote areas — and ordered him back.

There were problems when he arrived. The villagers were reluctant, possibly unable to set aside precious food and fuel for him. He did not seem overjoyed at being back, sharing neither common religion nor language — Ladakhi is a Tibetan dialect. We left him there after organizing horses to bring food from a nearby emergency store. He was away again the moment the path over the pass was open. It was a glaring example of why the Leh hostel is needed.

## High school

Tim Malyon explores education and community development in Ladakh, a remote Himalayan region bordering on Western Tibet

LNP regards education as crucial in helping Ladakhis influence the changes now affecting their land. Sir Robert folkes was LNP field director from 1978-84 and is now SCF regional adviser for South Asia: "Gandhi-ji made a remark once. He said 'I don't want my house to be a closed place. I want my house to be open to all the winds of the world, but I refuse to be blown away by any of them.'

"We have to build up this capacity of villagers to live in a changing world. One way of helping them understand the changes that are coming into Ladakh is by helping with education. An educated villager is a stronger villager, he is more aware vis-à-vis an outsider. Even if the education

is not immediately relevant to village life, it gives villagers a status and a self-confidence which is tremendously important."

Kaya is a pastoral village at the leading edge of change. A road is being blasted up a nearby valley, a road the villagers want. It will arrive in the next couple of years.

Fifteen-year-old Dorje Angdus lives in the Leh hostel, and has obviously thought about change: "I would like to go back to my village as a teacher," he says. "A teacher is someone who can help with all the village problems. If trucks and lorries come up to Kaya, it will be useful for transporting materials, which will save time. Food supplies will be easier to get. But we have a



Children are important to the family's livelihood, so sending them to school is a sacrifice

lot of wood in this valley. People will be able to sell more wood when the trucks come along the road — they may sell too much and finish off the trees quickly."

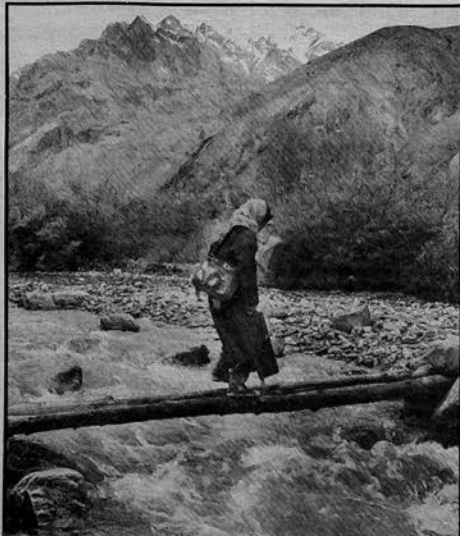
His definition of a teacher is also interesting. Every year since 1985 teachers from LNP villages have been invited to six-day camps to discuss development issues. Between them, the teachers and LNP have evolved a "supplementary curriculum" on development taught outside school hours: health, agriculture, lifestyle, change, education, decision-making.

The curriculum consists mainly of songs, popular traditional tunes with new words — in Ladakhi of course — and short dramas. These are eventually presented to the whole village. I saw two such presentations which were heartwarming, hilarious lessons in how learning can be both relevant and fun. It was adult-to-child, child-to-child and child-to-adult education at their best.

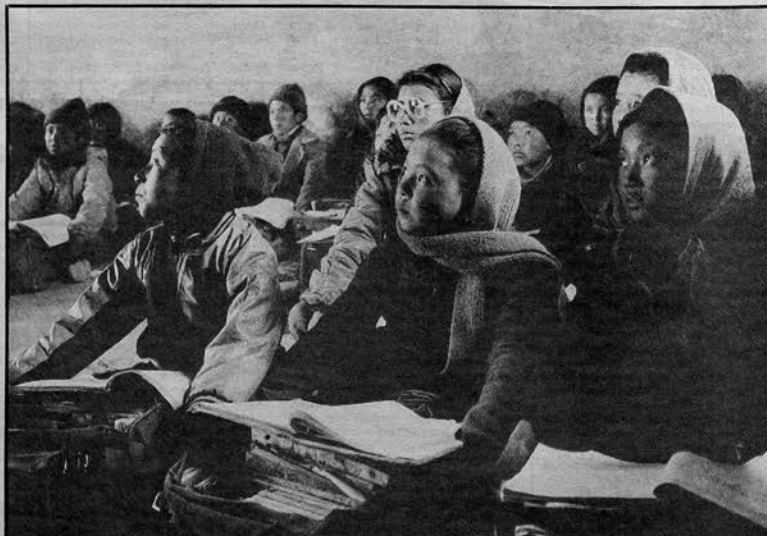
I can still hear one of the songs in little Lanze's clear high voice. She was perhaps nine-years-old, with a round brown Tibetan face and wearing a traditional maroon "goncha", a wraparound garment made of thick yak wool. She sung about how important it was to learn new things, such as the abc but also to respect the old, the *ka, kha, ga*, first three letters of the Tibetan alphabet. Each verse started with the same refrain, "yong, tugu, yong," meaning: "come, children, come".



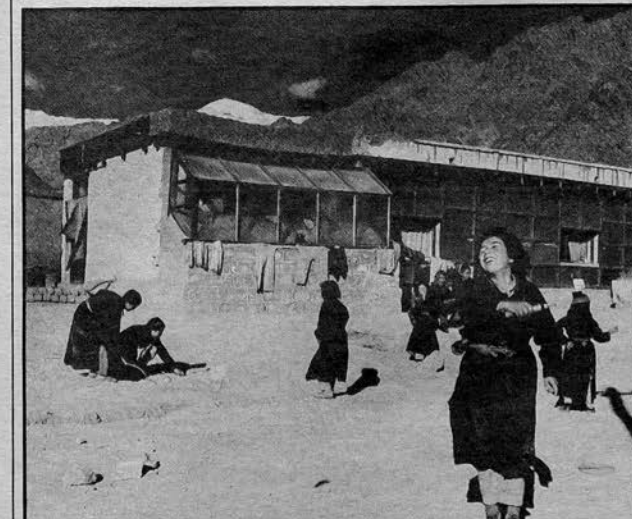
Forje Angdus: "a teacher is someone who can help with all the village problems"



This girl, and many of her classmates, must cross these tree trunks as a way to get to school. Crossing is impossible when the river is high.



Children in class: "an educated villager is a strong villager"



Pupils playing badminton outside the solar-heated Tsering Stobdan Memorial Hostel in Leh