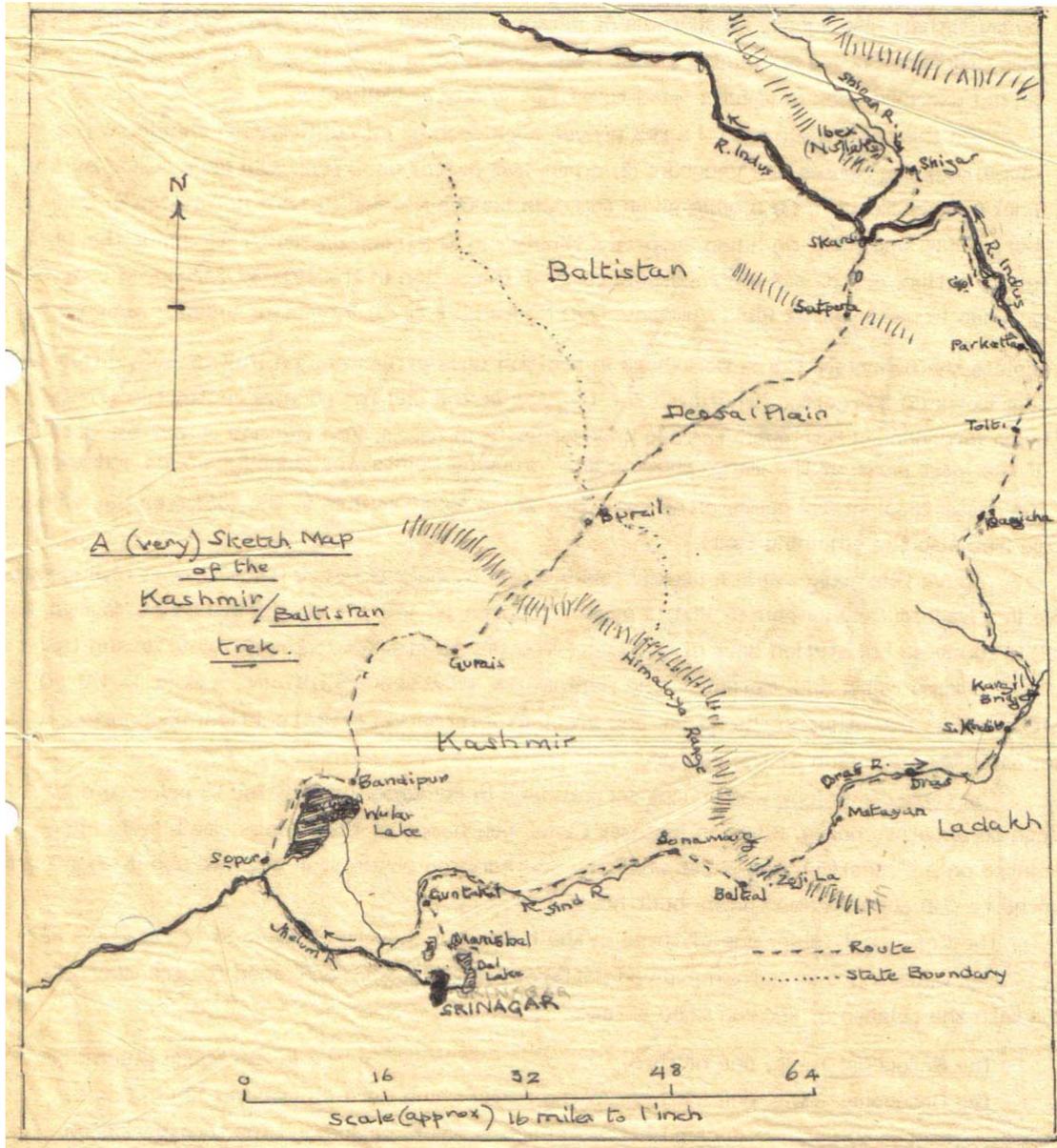


LADAKH

1st April to 30th June 1926



Ladakh, its principal town Leh, is the easternmost province or region of Kashmir, sometimes described as Western Tibet. The Lamas here wear red robes whereas in Tibet they are yellow (if the new Chinese regime has not obliterated them). I had planned to go there the previous year and had left much of my equipment with my agent in Srinagar, Moh'd Bāpa, on my return from Baltistan in 1925.

I set out on April 1st from Spltoi camp where we were engaged on bridge substitution, taking a lift on the local 'beer' vanette to Manzai, our permanent station in Waziristan. I spent the night there in the brigade mess, and was dismayed to find no cash available, a

commodity useless during the past few weeks but now essential, until with luck the O.C. of the mountain battery, one Teesdale, lent me Rs30 to see me to Rawalpindi.

'Bubs' Angwin, of my batch, met me at crack of dawn at Pindi station on the 3rd, and as arranged, deposited my baggage in the hired car which was to take me to Srinagar. After breakfasting at the club and cashing a cheque there with the secretary, followed by some shopping, I departed around 11.30. There was a thick mist beyond Murree which turned to rain at Domel, making it necessary to spend the night at Gārhi dak bungalow, a night of heavy thunderstorms. The wet weather persisted through to Srinagar, and the consequent landslips delayed arrival there until 6.15. The game office had closed. I put up at Nedou's Hotel and walked thence to Moh'd Bāba's on the band (see my previous notice about pronouncing 'a' in Indian words) only to be told that 7 of the 8 Ovis Ammon blocks had already been allotted. So I immediately sent a note by peon to the Game Office to establish a priority for my claim. I forthwith ordered stores and next morning learned that luck had attended my stratagem.

I was however in need of some dental treatment, and in fact this kept me kicking my heels around the town till Wednesday 7th. Besides my Ovis Ammon block I was given a pass for the Chang-Chen-Mo for Tibetan gazelle, which I was, alas, unable to use owing to the unduly long time it was to take finding my Ovis Ammon. After a bug-bitten restless night in the dak bungalow in Kishti I reached Gāndabal at 9.15 on the 8th where I joined my shikāri and camp staff which had been sent there in advance to prepare transport in readiness for immediate departure. I encountered there an old acquaintance in the 5/11th Sikhs, a disappointed man whose application for Ladakh had arrived too late and having therefore to change his plans completely. We walked together as far as the suspension bridge between S. Kharbu and Kargil where our ways parted, he to follow my last year's route to Baltistan.

A detailed description of the route thus far is otiose since it is identical with last year's to Baltistan. Nevertheless it is worth noting the climatic differences. The earlier month of April meant snow in abundance involving laborious plodding through it as from the gorge on the Srinagar side of Sōnamarg to beyond the Zōji Lā, and the risk of avalanches during the warmth of daylight sunshine made it essential to begin the trek over the pass from Bāltal at 5.30 am before dawn. Breakfasting at 9.15 on the far side I found a crisp layer of ice had formed between the shell and the albumen of my hard boiled egg. (Such are some of the inconsequential details which impress themselves on the memory.) The snow gradually dwindled as we proceeded, and five miles beyond Drās there was none.

After my companion had left me I strode a further 5 miles beside the River Suru where I branched right through open cultivated country as far as Kargil, a small town with a bazaar.

Next day (the 17th) entailed walking 12 miles to Mulbekh between 07:00 and 3:00 o'clock, crossing the Suru River and traversing plateaus to reach the Wakha River. This flows amid fields and villages before entering a narrow gorge between precipices which finally opened out again at Shargol. Mulbekh boasts an impressive lāmāsary on the cliff above it and the dak bungalow is sited out of sight of the village.

On the 18th, soon after leaving Mulbekh, I came upon a colossal standing Buddha carved on the face of a vertical rock to the left of the road. A mile beyond this the track swung left from the Wakha River to begin a steady climb up a dry watercourse between shale slopes to cross the Namika Lā at 13,000 feet. Thence we descended another similar watercourse to the Sangalumah River where we turned right upstream through a broad valley containing Waziristan-type irrigated 'kachis'.

I here came across the first of innumerable 'chortens', square-based pagoda-shaped and whitewashed; said to contain the stamped moulds made from the ashes of cremated lāmas. There were also samples of Māni walls soon to become commonplace, many about 7ft high, up to 100 yards long, with a flattish pent top covered with flat stone slabs

contributed by all and sundry, each engraved in the local calligraphy with the prayer "Om māni padmi hun" (the final 'n' pronounced in French nasal style), which can be interpreted as 'O God in the Jewel of the Lotus'. Woe to anyone blasphemous enough to pass a Māni wall on the lefthand side: a minus mark on the scale of merit towards Nirvana. Merit towards the desired end can however be enhanced by the mechanical repetition of the Māni prayer from flags emblazoned with it fluttering in the wind, in miniature waterwheels, or swung manually while walking, a shaft serving as axle to a small circular box to which a miniature weight is attached on a chain. Only such Ladākhis who have travelled into India will ever have encountered wheels applied to vehicles. Transport is restricted to coolis and pack animals.

The Ladākhi's clothing is possibly derived from Chinese tradition, but is perhaps unique in its application. Long ankle-length woollen smocks; for men kept double-breasted by long woollen cummerbunds wound around the waist which serve as pockets to carry small portable possessions such as the metal-lined wooden bowls from which they drink their green brick tea, flavoured with rancid butter. Across their smocks women drape, from over one shoulder and pinned(?) under the opposite armpit, either a cloth or a skin over-mantel. Boots are soft and ankle high. However, most unusual are the headdresses. Men wear skin hats on their oily pigtailed heads fitted with pointed flaps to either side twisted at an angle up or down according to the prevailing mood or circumstance. The crowns are roughly cylindrical but less high than were the old European silk 'toppers'. The women more spectacularly cover their heads with a 'perāg' made of red cloth with numerous rough turquoise discs stitched to them. They begin in a horizontal line at eyebrow level; swell slightly over the head, and taper behind to a point near the waist. Silver ornaments often dangle from them. The hair beneath is plaited into numbers of narrow ropes spread at regular intervals across their backs. And stitched(?) to their hair beside each ear is a black flap (of skin or wool?) which stick out like butterfly wings above the shoulders; each a rough semicircle of about 6" radius. I hope for their sakes that these contrivances are laundered periodically.

Having today spent an hour over tiffin I reached Kharbu at 1.30.

Monday the 19th was bitterly cold. Off at 7.30, I proceeded up-river until the path bore left up a ravine when a blinding snowstorm all but obliterated the view. After crossing the Fōtu Lā at 13,446 ft I arrived at the fairy-like little township of Lāmayuru which is dominated by a big lāmāsary on top of a precipice behind and above it.

The path thence next day led down a precipitously enclosed gorge to reach the Indus after 8 miles. The Indus is crossed by a suspension bridge about half-an-hour's march to the east, i.e. upstream, and after yet 8 more miles I came to Dumkar, scenically dull, where we pitched camp for the first time this trip. Until now it had always been in a dak bungalow. On the morrow we transferred to another site 5 miles up the Dukar River to reconnoitre the area for sharpu, but to no effect.

On the Thursday we climbed a loose shale slope to the NE to a ridge overlooking a valley behind which was a hefty mountain. From there we went SE across snow on a 1/1 slope to another viewpoint, but we drew blank again. Snow obscured the view as we huddled around a fire for an hour before returning to camp in the early afternoon.

We planned for the morrow to cross the ridge to the next village while the baggage proceeded by the Indus plain. At 8.30 we saw about 20 sharpu, 3 with horns legitimately long for shooting, but conditions prohibited any approach until 1:00 when we made some insufficient progress, so at 4.45 we elected to pitch camp in the village, by when I was afflicted by a sore throat and a running nose.

On Saturday (24th) we spotted the same herd at 7:30 and froze like waxworks until it seemed expedient to proceed and eventually to find ourselves within range at 2:30. I aimed the cartridge misfired and the click of the bolt scattered them. Returning to camp I fired three practice shots with complete success.

We made a wide counter-clockwise sweep next morning only to find the herd at 12:30 way up in front, but trying to approach it out of sight,, we found that it had drifted down into the valley below. We rushed top speed downhill but too late. Again we froze stock still. As soon as we deemed it expedient we dashed to intercept them, but it was too late; the quarry was now half a mile off and drifting still further away. We returned disconsolately to camp arriving at 5:30 by when I had added a sore heel to the sore throat.

The throat gave me a sleepless night, so I remained in camp and wrote a note to the medical missionary at nearby Kalchi requesting throat medicine, to which he kindly responded with Melloids and a gargle, and that evening came with a colleague to see me.

Tuesday (27th) was a cold day spent searching for sharpu way up into ibex type country but we saw only small specimens. So deciding to waste no more time we departed the next day for Nurla, 14 miles away. The road passed the missionary, Padre Burrough's house in Kalchi. I spent the morning there and was invited to partake of a splendid English lunch, and I met there Mr and Mrs Kunick from the Moravian Mission at Leh.

Thursday we made another 14 miles to Suspul through a dull sandy landscape with intermittent brown undulations, the road running roughly parallel with the Indus, and passed several groups of red lāmas. From there next day, branching left away from the river, we eventually descended through a series of villages to Nimu after 11 miles of tough sandy walking.

We reached Leh on May 1st, a calendar month after my departure from Splitoi. It was another tough 18 mile march, the road lying well north of the Indus, rose, then debauched on to an at first gritty, then shingly plain. The loose sand from Pituk onwards made for particularly tough walking. One enters Leh through a narrow passage in the town wall to find oneself in a broad street, to one side of which is a row of lombardy poplars sheltering bazaar shops. I was informed that polo used to be played here. If so it must be very different from the European version of the game, which is known to have derived from an Asiatic one. Behind the town and slightly north east of it a big lāmāsary stands above a vertical cliff overlooking a shelving plain whereon are numerous māni-walls arid chortens. Awaiting me, as requested in Srinagar, were letters from home including one from Andrew Montague Browne.

Sunday (2nd) was spent photographing and replying to yesterday's (nail. Most unfortunately one of the film packs that I was using proved defective. Each sheet in a pack was attached to a paper strip which, when pulled, transferred the film after exposure from the front to the back of the pack. In this instance the paper strip had become detached from the first film so that, unknown to me, every exposure had been taken on it, and my snapshots of Leh are thus disappointingly few. I also visited the Moravian Mission, there to obtain relief for my throat infection, where I met an old German, resident here since 1898 with but two furloughs home. He upraided me for wearing a woollen muffler, and declared that a bare neck like his whatever the weather was the best way to avoid a sore throat. However, he did provide me with some aspirin and pastilles. (I have since then followed his advice.)

So on Monday (3rd) having obtained a pass from the Tahsildar, and after changing about Rs200 notes for cash, with which to pay for cooli and animal transport, we parted late from Leh for the 8 miles trek to Göleb Bāgh. The sandy track crossed a broad valley behind a row of villages after crossing by bridge to the south bank of the Indus 4 miles from Leh.

Next day having passed Shushōt where cultivation seems to peter out, a narrower and more stony stretch of the Indus valley brought us to Marsalang, 12 miles in all.

Thence it was 12 miles to Upshi where we turned right away from the Indus up a narrow gorge to reach Miru by 2:30, having 2¼ hours at tiffin en route. Here cultivation resumes and we watched busy villagers, both sexes, adults and children, sowing the seed. They concentrated on one field at a time singing as they toiled.

On the 6th, Thursday, we continued up the gorge to Lātho where the landscape opens into downs, the remnants of snow persisting in the river bed. And then came Gya where we discarded the pack ponies hired in Leh, because the high altitudes would have defeated them, and took 8 local yaks instead. Perhaps they were yaks as they resembled the yaks displayed in picture books. On the other hand I have since read or heard that they were probably 'zhos', a cross between yaks and domesticated cattle; pure yaks being considered too wild for transport usage. I cannot adjudicate. We arrived at what the map describes as Shagrot at noon too featureless to deserve any name; but further on where the 1/1,000,000 map is marked Tiarnak, which the yak owners called Shagrot, we stopped for the night after enjoying sunshine all day

Quitting so-called Shagrot at 8:00 we reached the 17,500 ft Tagalung La at 10:45. The snow there proved too treacherous to negotiate, so we climbed about 500ft to a ridge beside it before descending to a nomad's campsite in the so-called Zāra valley. The Zāra riverbed was bone dry but a valley beside it yielded a trickle of water. The apparent drought was blamed on the unusual paucity of snow the previous winter. We saw many hares and some kyang, the name for a wild beast faintly resembling a miniature mule.

On Sunday (9th) we awoke to find a snow-covered landscape. Although snug enough in my eiderdown fleabag and blankets, my sponge was frozen stiff, which phenomenon was repeated nightly throughout my three weeks on the More Plain, which is shown on the map to exceed 15,000ft elevation throughout its length. I sometimes woke in the night breathless, and soon learned, where possible, to follow contours rather to cross them at right angles. The More Plain extending about 16 miles North-South (and averaging more than a mile in width, formed the spine of my ammon block. It was flat and flanked by rolling downs somewhat in shape like Salisbury Plain magnified. Craggy mountains were to be seen in the far distance. These downs are grazing land for Ovis Ammon, a wild sheep whose rams mature to become about twelve hands high at the withers: this despite the seeming sparseness of the grass. Their massive horns curl forwards each side of the skull and can measure well over 40" around the 'diameter', even though they are all inevitably well blunted at the tips from butting during the rutting season.

Sharpu, already mentioned, inhabit lower elevations, are much smaller animals, as are burrhel whose horns spring more horizontally from the head with the tips curling backwards.

There is no timber hereabouts and my staff made daily collections of kyang dung to fuel the camp fire, and never was a cooked hot meal in the evenings however untoward the climatic conditions.

To resume the narrative: The baggage followed the Zāra valley while I was led to one flank crossing two dry valleys to the third one where flowed another trickle of drinkable water. We reconnoitered for game finding only 2 small buffhel, 4 ammon nāpu (ewes), 5 kyang (not game), and many marmot holes.

Next morning (10th) two of the staff searched yesterday's ground and reported only 2 small nāpu, so the shikari and I made a counterclockwise chakka from the confluence of the Zāra and Rukcha rivers, up a subsidiary valley and back to camp over several ridges spotting in the distance 8 mardin (rams). There was plenty of water in the plain nearby where duck abounded, a big yellow variety, white headed, and with black-tipped wings.

It snowed all the morning of the 11th, but it cleared for the afternoon. We marched via Sangtha to Pogmor. Both are shown on the map as villages but they were deserted. Here we found an ample water supply. We saw only hares and kyang on the way.

Every kind of weather assailed us during the next two days. Eventually a brief break enabled us to get out and we spotted 9 mardin all too small to shoot. It was too cold to eat tiffin and in the resumed cloud-cover we had considerable difficulty in finding the camp site again.

The plan on the lovely morning of the 14th was for the shikari and I to scour the hills to the SE of the camp while the tiffin cooli sorted out those to the NE. After trekking about 6 miles crossing several ridges, suddenly at 11:15 a snowstorm reduced visibility to 150 yards. Having achieved the next ridge we huddled around a kyang dung fire until 2:00 when the tiffin cooli somehow found us, and, owing to the persistent snow, I left with him for camp.

We descended to the plain and kept the hills to our right hand in view, which involved diverting into several valleys, so that we did not reach camp until 5:15, just half an hour before the shikari.

After another snowbound morning the shikari spent the afternoon spying out the land beyond our reach yesterday but found nothing. I spent the day writing letters.

The next few days were boringly monotonous. The quickly changing weather persisted and we moved camp regularly with no game being spotted. At last on Tuesday (25th), a really fabulous day based on one of our previous camp sites, I collected an ammon carrying a 43" horn. Unlike ibex, last year's quarry, ammon, a sheep, is edible, so retaining the skull and the head and neck skins for preservation, the carcass was apportioned as between camp staff and our transport drivers. We had not lacked for food since we were last able to buy any, but the ammon provided a very appetising interlude.

On the morrow we found another 5 good ammon in the middle of a flat plain, and thus unapproachable, but on Thursday there were 9 about 1½ miles up the nallah in which we were camped. The shikari reported them so we set off at once. Alas, they must have heard our approach scattering immediately. Later after tiffin we found yesterday's herd again and at 5:00. I shot my second good head. The rest of the herd seemed bewildered and remained standing about, even closing in within 100 yards of us, and they did not disperse wildly as we descended to collect the kill. With two heads the legal limit we could do nought but watch them.

We hoped to find gazelle in Fridays sunshine and high wind, but only females were available. That night it snowed again so we decided to quit the ammon block without delay. We left the block in the direction of Gya, and I could guess that we were taking a short cut over the Kiameri Lā. The route involved several steep climbs and drops and we were on the go till after 5:00.

We continued down yesterday's nallah on Sunday (30th) joining the Gya River near Shagrot. During tiffin at Gya skylarks sang and the fields were green with young crops. We were certainly weary when we reached Mire (13,000ft) at 4:00, but glad of a warmer evening and night: and we saw a wolf.

Sleeping late on Monday made an excuse for a day's rest, and I sent the dak cooli to Leh with no less than six letters to post, and hopeful that he might return with some dak for me. Could it have been the days rest which induced Sultana, the khansama, to feel feverish, and Mohd Khan, the shikari, weary on the morrow when we saw four unshootable sharpu and watched a mustard-coloured fox chasing a hare?

On Thursday (3rd June switching campsite about a mile and searching a nallah west of Chagdo we found nothing apart from a tail-less rat (some kind of guinea pig, I wonder?) Descending further towards the Indus on the morrow we saw one shootable burrhel head amongst a bevy of smaller ones, but no practicable means of approach. However after another futile day Sunday (6th) brought mist over the mountains which evolved into sporadic snow falls, but in spite of them I bagged my 2 permitted burrhel in the afternoon, and inadvertently wounded a third, and that led us a futile but terrific dance over ibex-like crags to catch up with it, delaying our return to camp until after nightfall at 7:45. A further endeavour next, sunny, morning also failed when the blood trail petered out on stony ground that yielded no tracks. Local villagers searching more widely were equally unsuccessful.

Tuesday (8th) found us once more in fertile country around the village of Musho dominated by a big lamasery. Wednesday was hot and climbing about the fiendishly loose gravel hills in the neighbourhood proved a waste of time. However the dak cooli, back from Leh, brought a letter from home forecasting a general strike in the UK on the 3rd and 4th inst. Then, hurrah! a repeat expedition on the Thursday yielded my two permitted sharpu. The second was only wounded by my first shot, but luckily it succumbed to the second.

We were back in Leh on Saturday (12th). A survey party left the dak bungalow as we arrived, and new arrivals the same day included a RAMC major and his wife, an Italian Lloyd Trestino (?) Countess with her Bombay manager, and a French woman artist - incipient tourism. I had tea and dinner in civilised circumstances with the Kunicks (the Moravian missionary and his wife).

I shall not detail the march back to Srinagar. To avoid any chance of overstaying my leave we marched double stages involving some 20 miles each day: tough going, and in view of my Khansama's continued weakness I granted him a daily pony. Before crossing the Indus on the 15th, I spent two hours with Padre Burroughs at Khalatse. He was curious about the possibility of installing a hydraulic ram to provide irrigation from the river.

When the frosts cease, dak bungalows are notoriously bug-ridden so I nightly had my tent pitched and in my camp bed I remained scatheless.

I recrossed the Zōji Lā to reach Sonamarg about 7:15pm on the 20th, arriving soaked by persistent rain. The pass was in a filthy state, and perforce the late arrival had to involve staying in the dak bungalow. We spent two days resting there, I in my tent writing letters while it poured with rain outside. It took us only from Wednesday to Friday in hot sunshine to arrive back in Srinagar where I engaged a room in Nedous Hotel. The cost of the trip in loose cash, excluding the hotel and Mohd Bāba's bill, was Rs886. I can find no records of the rest.

OBITER DICTA

I recall that the UK mail awaiting me in Srinager included a roll of slim news-sheets, such as were printed (privately?) for public information during the recent general strike. Although I had been warned as to its possibility this was the first that I knew of its actuality, and my first reaction as "Gosh, let's keep things in proportion and remember the millions of square miles of the planet completely untrammelled by such strictly local catastrophes."

Half a century on and all is changed. Technology ensures instant worldwide awareness of every trouble however local. Ladākh in any case must be completely transformed following the Chinese invasion in the 1960's. To counter their attack in Ladākh Indian troops were flown in and maintained from the air. Now there is an airport at Leh, not merely for defence purposes, but admitting tourists as well. There is also a motor road replacing the old cooli/pony track, so that at long last the ladākhis have become accustomed to wheel traffic, and they are doubtless by now corrupted absolutely by alien commercialism and western influences.

Incidentally, evidence of such corruption was displayed in a fairly recently published press photograph which disclosed wrist watches peeping below the sleeves on more than one of the Ladākhi male wrists.

I know nothing about the route taken by the road linking the Pakistan and Chinese Republics. It may, or may not, have impinged upon Baltistan. If it did, then the similar repercussions on its inhabitants will have rendered them equally unrecognisable to anyone like me who knew them in the inter-war years.

