

The Ladakh Cloudburst: An Eyewitness Account

Josh Schrei – 13 August 2010

I'm writing this from Leh, where a single night of mudslides and floods has caused untold devastation all across the land of Ladakh. While the media have reported fairly extensively on the situation, it is impossible to grasp the scale of the destruction, for this is a vast land, and literally no town or village in the Ladakh range has been unaffected. The death toll, when all is said and done, will be over 1,000. The toll on Ladakh's future -- given the sheer scope of the destruction -- is unimaginable. It is something I have never seen, and certainly nothing I expected when I decided to come here this summer for the first time.

As someone who has spent many years fighting for freedom for the Tibetan people, the opportunity to spend a month in Ladakh doing village homestays and trekking was a truly exciting one. I had traveled extensively in Nepal, had been to Tibet in 1989, had spent some time in Dharamsala, but never had I experienced a free Tibetan society that had never known occupation or exile. In Tibet, my movements had been highly restricted. I could never talk openly to Tibetans, or stay in their homes. And I had noticed, as most travelers to Tibet do, the impacts that occupation has had on the people themselves. Even then, there was a restrictive fear that permeated all interactions with Tibetan people. And though their exuberance would of course still shine through, it was clouded by years under the oppressor's boot.

Exile carries with it its own burden, and while exiled Tibetans live in free societies around the globe and enjoy the benefits of free movement and free expression, there is a weight that hangs over them as well -- the conscious and subconscious feeling that they are not where they are supposed to be.

One of the first things I noticed in Ladakh -- other than the unexpectedly huge number of tourist shops in Leh and the phenomenal Indian military presence -- was the lack of emotional burden on the people. As I ventured out into rural farming villages, idyllically green valleys set in stark canyons below high white peaks, I found Tibetan people... just being themselves. Surely this freedom -- to be oneself -- is the most basic freedom of all. How can the people of Tibet not have this most basic of rights?

A week after I arrived in Ladakh I went to Pangong Tso, a crystal turquoise lake that sits at 4,300 meters on the Changthang plateau. Once I crossed the high Chang La pass I knew I was geographically and culturally in Tibet. Nomads tents dotted majestic river valleys where horses and yaks grazed. The dress was unmistakably Tibetan, the language, a mix of Ladakhi and Tibetan which became more Tibetan the further east we ventured. At Pangong, one can look across the lake over the border into Tibet. Staring across that brief body of water that separates freedom from occupation, one can't help but wonder at the nature of borders. What arbitrary line is it that divides the free from the unfree? Does the water of the lake know where India stops and "China" begins? Culturally, historically, and geographically, Changthang is neither Indian nor Chinese. It is Tibetan, 100%

I returned from Pangong to Leh to find something rather unusual. It had been raining there, which it almost never does. Ladakh is a desert, absolutely dry and free of vegetation, the lush river valleys fed entirely by Himalayan snowmelt. The monsoon weather of the Indian subcontinent is blocked by the vast wall of mountains to the south. For there to be successive

days of rain was almost unheard of. I asked my guesthouse owner about it, and he was unequivocal in his answer. "It never does this. Global warming."

The night of August 5th I had dinner with a group of Indian travelers — an architect, a documentary filmmaker, and their friends from Mumbai who I had befriended the day before. We sat at KCs restaurant and talked long into the night about Hindu myths and 90s grunge music — common loves for both parties. As we began getting into some pretty deep conversation about the Shiva Puranas and the many tales of this very unpredictable God, the drizzle that had been steadily falling for an hour or so suddenly became an absolute deluge.

The storm lasted an hour — sustained rain and hail and lightning with no let up at all. My friends and I sat at KCs, speaking of Shiva's awesome feats, as the storm unleashed itself — the sound was of a hundred million ball bearings falling on metal, and lightning ripped across the sky like constant static along a black wool quilt. It was quite a storm.

In one hour, the land of Ladakh was forever changed. This vast country shifted. Every valley in the Ladakh range of the Himalaya saw high mountains dislodge themselves downwards. Tragically, the way Ladakh is constructed, every village clings to a river valley of mountain snowmelt, and when these mountains dislodge themselves downwards, there are people living underneath.

The next morning I heard from my guesthouse owner that there had been "some problem" at the bus station from the rain. Instinctively, I grabbed my camera and headed down. As I went, rumors grew of the scale of the "problem." One person along the route said that the Leh bus station was "gone."

Yes, the bus station was gone. A vast river of mud and rock had torn through central Leh, ripping apart houses, demolishing shops, flattening structures to the ground. Buses were tossed about like toys, slammed up against buildings, wedged under trucks, flattened and twisted in incomprehensible shapes. As I walked down the length of the slide, I realized that it was far more than the bus station. The cascade extended all the way down the valley, 2 miles or more, and much of lower Leh was, well, utterly ruined. I saw a schoolyard buried under 8 feet of mud, its basketball hoops just managing to peer over the top of the slide. I saw bloated cows tossed about, and one lonely, dazed donkey, wandering through the wreckage, covered in dried mud and bleating sadly, perhaps just to hear the sound of his own voice. And yes, I saw bodies. Leh hospital was quickly lined with them. Bulldozers lifted splayed-limbed victims out of heaps and heaps of mud.

The first day, as I helped dig out houses and people formed rough lines to remove rubble from their shops and homes, rumors started coming in. It wasn't just Leh. It was Shabu. It was Phyang. It was Shey. It was Neemu. It was Choglamsar, the Tibetan refugee community 5 miles from Leh. I asked about Choglamsar. I was told it was "finished."

As news came in, the people of Leh were increasingly shaky. Nothing like this had ever happened in their living memory,,, nothing. At the slightest hint of rain, people would head running for the hills, lining the barren ridges like colorfully clad ants waiting to be swept away by greater forces. That afternoon, someone shouted: "Water is coming!" sending crowds into a frenzy. At night, 1,000 people huddled at the Shanti stupa, built high on a rock promontory above Leh, everyone frightened. Yet amid the fear, in that darkest night, songs leapt upwards. Tibetan women sang folk songs. An Israeli tourist brought a guitar. The

melodic murmurs of "Om mani padme hum" and "Country Road" tinged that dark night with utter sweetness.

Over the next four days, I helped out wherever and whenever I could, in ever widening circles around Leh. I helped dig out Leh Hospital, where a Ladakhi Army Officer — Captain D. Tsewang — seemingly impressed with my enthusiasm gave me harder and harder tasks, humorously barking: "Are you tired now?" each step of the way, to which I replied: "No, sir!" and kept at it. In two days, we managed to clear the entire bottom floor of Leh Hospital, a seemingly impossible task on first view.

The next day I went to Choglamsar, where another river of mud and rock had come down from the mountain and continued down the main road, causing incomprehensible devastation. As I write this, at least 500 are still missing in Choglamsar alone. I searched out a friend of mine's relatives, beaming when I finally found them safe. They served me tea and biscuits. I dug out a man's ruined house, pickaxing through rubble for an hour to finally find a single tin box that survived underneath the mud and collapsed brick. We wedged our picks underneath the box and worked it out slowly. It spilled open and his precious possessions fell out. At the top, a small photo album, inscribed in silver cursive with the words: "*Lovely Memories.*"

At that point, I had seen rivers of devastation, I had seen bodies of women and children, I had seen people wailing over lost loved ones... but something about seeing that photo album, something about helping this one poor man tear apart the mud and brick that had filled his one small house, only to rescue a small book of "*Lovely Memories*".... Well, that's when I finally cried.

Yesterday, I went to Phyang, where if things had gone a bit differently I would have been the night it all went down. Phyang was a glimpse into the incredible power of this universe. Half the village was perfectly intact and eerily peaceful, cows still lazily grazing, barley fields gleaming in the sun. The other half was... gone. There was simply no trace of it, no trace of the two story houses and the farms... or the families. The whole thing was swallowed by a 30 foot wall of mud and stone. As we began the daunting task of digging for bodies, one couldn't help but wonder... why had the storm spared one house and not the other? Why did I make the decision not to come here that night? What great hand casts the dice that determine these fates?

In an hour, a whole land can shift, a whole people's future change forever. Ladakh, rich off of tourist dollars and the prosperity of its farming villages had seen unprecedented economic development over the last ten years. Now, all of that is gone. I cannot overemphasize the scale of the destruction... the lives lost are just the beginning. The Ladakhi people will be rebuilding for a very long time.

When something like this happens in a Buddhist land such as Ladakh, one cannot help but wonder at the karma of it all -- the karma of the Tibetan people, who've suffered more than their share over the past 60 years, the karma of of the people whose homes were spared vs. those who were swept away, and then, my own personal karma, to finally be a free traveler in a free Tibetan land, only to arrive in time for the greatest disaster this land has ever known. One thing I do know, it seems to be my karma to help the Tibetan people, even when I least expect to do so. That is a karma I readily embrace, it is my honor to do so however and wherever I can.