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Tilak Ranjan Bera. *Ladakh: A Glimpse of the Roof of the World.* Kolkata: Woodland Publishers, 2012. Illustrations. 253 pp. $133.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-81-906121-6-6.

Reviewed by Madhu Sarin (Psychoanalyst and independent scholar)
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Commissioned by Sumit Guha

There are some parts of the world that beg to be photographed. Ladakh is one such place. The strength of this book lies in its use of magnificent and graphic photographs that illuminate the region and its people during different times of year. Tibet has long retained a powerful hold on the Western imagination–with its remote location, high altitude terrain, nomadic peoples, and esoteric monastic traditions that married ancient magical practices with Buddhism. Perennially cut off and relatively inaccessible because of its geographical location, once China asserted its sovereignty over Tibet, the region became even harder to reach. Ladakh, now in India, was part of the Changthang plateau of Tibet. It remains one of the few parts of the world where the landscape and traditional way of life associated with Tibet continue to exist relatively unaltered. Ladakh lies at the northern extremity of India wedged amid a series of high Himalayan ranges and between two contested areas of geopolitical conflict–Pakistan-occupied Kashmir on the West and Akshai Chin on the East.

The author, Tilak Ranjan Bera, covers more ground pictorially and logistically than is usual in coffee-table books of this kind. His extensive and stunning photographs accompanied by lively, informative text vividly portray this part of the world. Lying along the ancient Silk Route, Ladakh is peopled by groups from Central Asia, Tibet, and India who still retain age-old Bon, Buddhist, and Islamic religious traditions. The author is a doctor by profession. His love for nature, landscape, and ethnography has led him to photograph and investigate many scenic parts of India. Readers are lucky that his interests drew him to the mountain deserts of Ladakh–his photographs are a compelling and mesmerizing tribute to the stark beauty of this region.

The book begins by providing a historical, geographical, and sociological background to Ladakh, and then it details the origins, history, and traditions of the different peoples who have made it their home. The book proceeds to document two of the road journeys to the capital of Ladakh, Leh, from India–Via Manali in Himachal Pradesh and Srinagar in Kashmir–both of which are considered among the most scenic and beautiful road journeys of all time or any place. The author then highlights and documents five distinct areas of Ladakh: Leh, the capital; Nubra, which lies along the Silk Route and is near the Siachen Glacier; Dan Hanu where people of Aryan descent continue to live; Suru, a particularly beautiful valley; and the remote area of Zanskar, which is an important living site of ancient Buddhism. There are two additional chapters, with one focusing on different Buddhist and Bon monasteries that dot the landscape and the country; and the other on the magnificent turquoise blue lakes of Ladakh along with the plant, bird, and animal life that surround them. Some additional short chapters and remarks on the personal meaning that the Himalayas and this remote region have for the author complete the book. Bera has painstakingly and brilliantly documented the stark, dramatic landscapes often likened to lunar moonscapes with startling rock formations, and has beautifully depicted variegated hues, dazzling turquoise blue lakes, the flora, the fauna, religious monuments, artifacts, rock carvings and buildings, and the different peoples who inhabit Ladakh.

The shortcomings of the book are similar to those of other coffee-table books. Bera does not include references to sources for historical, geographical, political, or anthropological information. The quality of the photographs and textual material whet the reader's curiosity in this amazing part of the world. The book entices the reader with the images and narrative it provides; its a pity that there are no references–because having entered Ladakh through Bera's mind and imagination, one would wish for further anchoring in fact and bibliography.

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