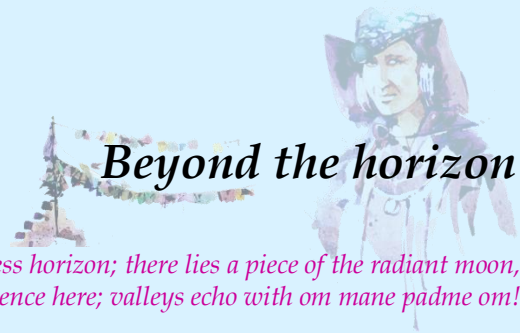




Beyond the horizon

*far away beyond the endless horizon; there lies a piece of the radiant moon,
holy whispers speak to silence here; valleys echo with om mane padme om!*

The intercom crackles to life, "Good morning ladies and gentlemen, this is Capt Namgyal from the flight deck. We are now cruising at 35000 feet above mean sea level, temperature outside is 55 deg. centigrade below zero. Our flight route is between longitude 77-78 degrees, we are flying over the 'Greater Himalayas.....'"

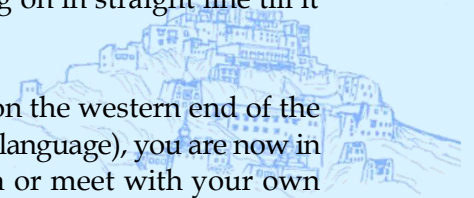
On land below a mega-spectacle is unfolding. An astonishing sight to behold for human eyes, a forty-five million years old splendour entrenched on land, the abode of Gods and genesis of the Hindu mythology and myths - the grandest phenomenons on planet Earth. Studded with thousands of snow-clad spires, craggy peaks, lofty summits, mammoth glaciers and mighty massifs, a world enshrouding phantom mysteries, bottomless crevasses, tearing winds, unending slopes and thundering avalanches, where only men of grit and daring could set their foot, unveils like an endless sea of snows without borders.

Anointed in eternal glory the majestic grandeur of greater-Himalayas slowly passes by underneath. Completely awestruck, "Its unbelievable!, my goddd, this is incredible" a young lady passenger exclaims marvelling at what she just witnessed through her window. The others passengers sit dazzled in wonder recovering from the soulful effects of the visual event.

Meanwhile on ground, ignoring the winds on his monastery's door, the middle-aged lama (Buddhist monk) in his dark maroon robe, steps out and looks up in the skies towards the approaching airplane. He wonders who amongst them would visit his monastery to pay reverence to the figurine of Padmashambava, the guru of Tantric Buddhism.

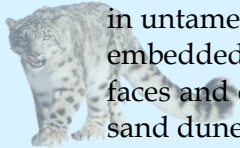
Once again the intercom crackles to life, "All cabin crew return to their stations to prepare for landing". The airplane begins its descend, view of the Indus river begins to get closer and the landscape starts to change into stark lunar like shades. Soon tiny patches of green poplars and willow trees start appearing. Some minutes later Capt Namgyal pulls back gently on his control-column and touches down on the runway of Kushok Bakula Rimpochee airport in Leh. Reversing his throttle to break the linear momentum of speed landing, he presses his feet skilfully on his rudder pedals to keep the airplane rolling on in straight line till it finally taxis to halt.

You have just landed at an altitude of 10,684 feet (3256 meters) on the western end of the Tibetan Plateau. "Julay" (pronounced joo-lay - means hello in Bhoti language), you are now in Ladakh (or Khapa-Chan). You may now redefine your isolation or meet with your own fantasy of Shangri-la or indulge in your rendezvous with divine. Once an independent Buddhist Kingdom, located on the crossroads of trade route between China and Middle East, it is often called 'Little Tibet'.



Its 59,144+ sq kms of geographical domain (nearly 1½ times the size of Bhutan), covers parts of Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges and the upper Indus river valley. A territory of amazing encounters, it is comparable to none other.

If you were to sit on Aladdin's magic-carpet (legendry flying-carpet fantasy) and were to wish for the discovery of Ladakh, this is what the good Djinn would do for you:



He would sail you over the sensational trans-Himalayan terrains, over chanting valleys, enchanting landscapes, silvery rivers, emerald lakes, dramatic gorges, engaging hamlets, fascinating wildlife including elusive Snow leopards, Urials, Chirus, wild Yaks grazing in untamed habitats. It would sail you over stunning peaks, icy glaciers, tall monasteries embedded on mountain slopes or perched on hill-tops, grand Buddhas carved into rock-faces and over Bactrian camels (double-humped camels) wandering around in whistling sand dunes.

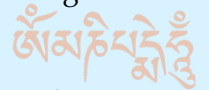


The Djinn would slowly take you over unimaginable sights and wonders, where women wear turquoise-stoned hats, churn yak milk to make butter-tea, eat tsampa from barley crop while men enact tantric mask dances in courtyards. He would point out for you the winding trekking routes, high passes and ancient wooden bridges across singing rivers, fluttering flags releasing mantras into winds, drums and trumpets playing in unknown monasteries, priceless mandalas and tankhas, tsug-den carpet weaving in blossoming apricot orchards and more. Maybe he would also give you the glimpses of our frontiers touching China and Pakistan, where our valiant soldiers stand alert 24x7 guarding our unique Land and its unmatched diversities.

Waving out to the ground engineers Capt Namgyal switches off his turbo engines as the passengers begin to move towards the exit door and into the unfathomable enigma of destination Ladakh.



Outside, near the arrival terminal door, an old Ladakhi lady with wrinkles of grace and wisdom on her innocent face awaits her Pilot son who is there only for a very short time before he takes the airplane back to New Delhi with his next set of passengers. She holds a rosary of beads in one hand and the tibetian prayer-wheel in the other and is chanting "Om mane padme om!"



Two days later, the young lady passenger, sends photos from her phone on whatsapp to her friends with a caption "This is ladakh - truly astounding....". A little boy with sunburnt nose and rosy cheeks, peeps out from behind a white gompa and smiles at her, "Joolay" he says shyly and rushes back to hide behind the Gompa.

- Neel Thakur (Author)