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Willow Hoins

Field Observation 4

Honors India Study Abroad

1. What have you observed,
2. What was your initial reaction to what you observed
3. What have you learned about what you observed to try to understand and contextualize it further
4. Any final insights or understandings

During the field visit, we started off with a friendly introduction into Padma, Padma, and Rigzin's backgrounds and ancestry. We foolishly introduced Rigzin to a game of my cow, which she took full advantage of and demolished us; however, for the game, you have to find graveyards along the way to kill other people's cows, and she waited until she saw some of the most unique burial markers so that she might have an advantage. That came with learning the melding of the cultures and religions in Ladakh. Our conversations broadened from degrees, life pursuits, inspirations, and traditional herbal knowledge to the state of the villages and mixing of cultures. Everything we spoke about though, we seemed to learn covertly. As we walked through a 12th century university or clambered up hillsides in search of rhubarb, we observed fields of intimately placed and intertwined rock markers, half built rooms, and dying transplants of trees. When we asked what they were, Rigzin and Padma casually explained how it's to mark the land so that the government won't take it. We asked if it happens a lot, and they didn't so much have an answer. "It's been happening forever," was all they could remember. The government, turns out, is a thinly veiled word not for bureaucracy and public works projects, but for military. They told us stories of where their grandmothers had foraged and the plants they told of to the young and curious Padma and Rigzin, and explained how we simply cannot go there anymore, how the plant no longer exists, and the land has been bulldozed. Another discussion began on spirituality and practice, but shortly branched into the unravelling events from one of our expeditions. Coming back from somewhere deep in Hemis National Park, we found ourselves collecting rose-hips along a roadside and swapping tales of childhood pranks and gifts that somehow formed the women we were today. A truck drove by on the road above, blasting information about a protest regarding an inter religion marriage between a buddhist woman and a muslim man. That evening, we were told of the newfound weariness of muslims in Ladakh. Most of the feelings seem to emerge anecdotally: watching a friend go through forced conversion, only to be sent away and return to find out her husband had remarried and her children were "no longer hers." But behind each of these stories we

learned statistics as well. We were told that the muslim population in Ladakh used to be just 3%, and a largely nomadic group at that— migrating from Pakistan and neighboring Kashmir in the summers, and leaving in the winters. Now the population is closer to 60%, pushing a fear for a loss of Ladakhi culture. In reality, the statistics more closely resemble less than 2% to a now 46% of the population. Regardless, they've seen their world change so much since the first plane landed here in 1948. Padma spoke of how they thought it was a bird and came out in droves with barley to feed it— a kind moment that captures so much of the warmth Ladakh has shown us. But their world changed even more so once the borders were open to tourism in the 70's, and they've watched mass youth migration away, the almost full abandonment of community subsistence farming, and millions of other easing, but rapid revolutions and devolutions. I think that is part of a longer reflection for understanding for me. The issues that strike me are not necessarily the issues Padma, Rigzin, Padma, Sonam, Jorden, Satan, and others face as they look to shape the change making in Ladakh. I think that's why Preethi's work is fascinating, as well. To have such passion for change is a notion I can empathize with, but to navigate how to dictate that change as a *complete* outsider is a journey with vastly more nuances and self-traps. I am beyond grateful to have shared this time with Nima Goos Goos and Ladakh Basket, to have my questions entertained, my heart pulled, and my stomach full; and I am so excited to see how they shape the world around them going forward.