

Film Review
Ranjita Biswas

The Shepherdess of the Glaciers:
Walking with the Shepherdess



We read about the hard life in Ladakh's high Himalayan region. We come to know about the nomadic lives of the shepherds who move around with their sheep which produce the highly prized Pashmina and Yak wool. But how is the life of this community, how do they survive in this hostile region? In the documentary *The Shepherdess of the Glaciers* we take a visual journey into their lives through the lens of Stanzin Dorjai, award-winning director from Ladakh. Dorjai himself belongs to the shepherd community and hence his story is authentic to the core.

The protagonist of the documentary is Dorjai's own sister Tsering. She spends months alone in the high altitudes tending to her flock of sheep. You walk with

her on snow-bound treks, sometimes through valley with streams in summer to get off the ticks on the sheep's skin through a good wash. Or look at how the newborns are carried back to the village on horseback by keeping them ensconced in pockets stitched into blankets with only their heads popping out.

The radio is Tsering's only companion in the evenings as she cooks her meal in ramshackle hut and listens to transmissions by AIR; this is her way of keeping up with the 'news'. Yet when she talks of her life in the mountains, you find she does not crib at all but takes her arduous life philosophically. When she returns to the village, she is back as a loving aunt and a member of the community.

The film is not only about Tsering but about a way of life, of a community which have stuck together for hundreds of years with their skill as shepherds and their beliefs and sense of community living. For a city-born or not familiar with the terrain and lifestyle, it almost seems like a Shangri-La one always imagines. But of course it is not that idyllic. They also live a life of danger to earn a livelihood. Tsering herself talks about leopard attacks on her flock and how she had fended off the animal, sometimes finding the kids killed and so a loss for her income.

The film also questions some incongruities. When Tsering sits with her nephew and goes through the school book (she is illiterate herself) she asks, is there anything about Ladakh in the book? The little boy says no. A book that is recommended for schools in Ladakh does not have anything about the land?



Indeed, as the film gives a glimpse of a life-style which thrives in a terrain that is part of our country, in moments like these, the question is bound to hover in Tsering's mind.

Interview

Dorjai's film has won numerous awards at international film festivals like, the Grand Prize, Banff International Film Festival (2016), Best Director, Mountain International Film Festival Autrans (2016), Grand Prize, Aaint Etienne, Festival

Curieux Voyageurs (2016), Best Documentary Award, Grand Prize Cinematheque montage (2016), to name a few.

Dorjai broke into the international documentary film scenario in 2008 with *Living with Change* made for the World Wildlife Fund about how global warming was affecting Ladakh. He has also made three feature films. One of them, *Behind the Mirror*, looks at contemporary France through the eyes of a Ladakhi.

Dorjai was in Kolkata recently where his films were screened at different venues.

Did you always want to be a filmmaker?

Never. As I grew up in village Gya, 70 km from Leh near the famous salt water lake TsoKar, my friends were wolves, snow leopards, marmots and eagles. I accompanied my sister often on the same terrain as you see in the film. Till the age of 13, I had not seen a film or television programme.

Then how did it come about?

With help of a local scholar I came to Leh to enroll in a school. But the turning point came when I was selected as a campus resident at the Students Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL). This alternative school is brainchild of the legendary Sonam Wangchuk (widely reported to be the inspiration behind the Aamir Khan character in *3 Idiots*). Once I was introduced to the moving images I knew it was my calling.

In 2006, I founded my own production unit the 'Himalayan Film House'. Through it, I produce local music recordings, videos, feature films, and documentaries collaborating with various Indian and international filmmakers.

Where did you learn the craft?

I never went to a formal film school but learnt hand-on under the tutelage of well-known documentary filmmaker Rahul Ranadive from Mumbai and Christiane Mordelet of Sweden. The film I made with her, *Jungwa, the Broken Balance* on the 2010 unusual flash flood in Ladakh was screened at the Paris Climate Summit, 2015. The unprecedented deluge was blamed on the ill effect of climate change.

What triggered your plan of making a film on your own sister?

I was travelling in a first class compartment of a train to Leon in France, courtesy my producers; otherwise I couldn't afford it. There were high profile people travelling too, among them a well-known model. She asked me from where I was and I told her about Ladakh. A conversation ensued with others in the compartment too. They were curious and I told them about our way of life, about my sister who spent months in the high mountains alone for months to look after her flock. They were captivated but expressed doubts how she could be happy doing what she was doing. It seemed to them it was unreal in this fast-paced life. I then thought I must capture these real stories for posterity, lest a people and a certain lifestyle, disappear forever. Many young people in our region now look for jobs and don't want to take up the age-old profession of shepherds.



I also feel strongly that indigenous knowledge has not been documented scientifically in our country. Researchers in the field, and those who implement projects, should look into it, whether in Ladakh or in North East, or anywhere else in the country where there is a rich resource to delve into.

How was the shooting done in the tough landscape?

I had to brave temperatures of -32 °C, heavy snowfall and carry a 30 kg load of film equipment at an altitude of 16,000 feet. Then there was the problem of battery running out. I had to load them in my special jacket holding them close to my body to keep them warm. Sometimes, I got up at dawn in the freezing cold to set up the camera. But while trying to shoot, I found my sister was walking to a different direction and I had to run to catch up with her. It took more than three years to complete the film as I wanted to catch the different seasons in the region, and the activities of sheep-rearing, from birth of kids to shearing of wool, the whole process.

Did Tsering ever travel beyond Ladakh?

People in France, where the film was screened in international film festivals, were captivated by her story. So they wanted to meet her. Quite reluctantly she agreed, language was a problem, of course, but I was there. And you know what she did there? On the podium, she sang a Ladakhi song, charming everyone.

Another thing I want to share, my sister didn't want any monetary benefit for herself but requested me if I and my well-wishers could build proper shelters for shepherds during periods when they have to stay for months in the hostile terrain. This is our way of life, our community's philosophy of helping each other.

What is your next venture?

I am making a film on the Gobi desert, focusing on another nomadic way of life, in Mongolia. The shooting is almost over. You know, when people from the plains come to Ladakh and complain that it's so cold, I wonder often, what's the big deal? But in the Gobi desert I knew what being real cold means.

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