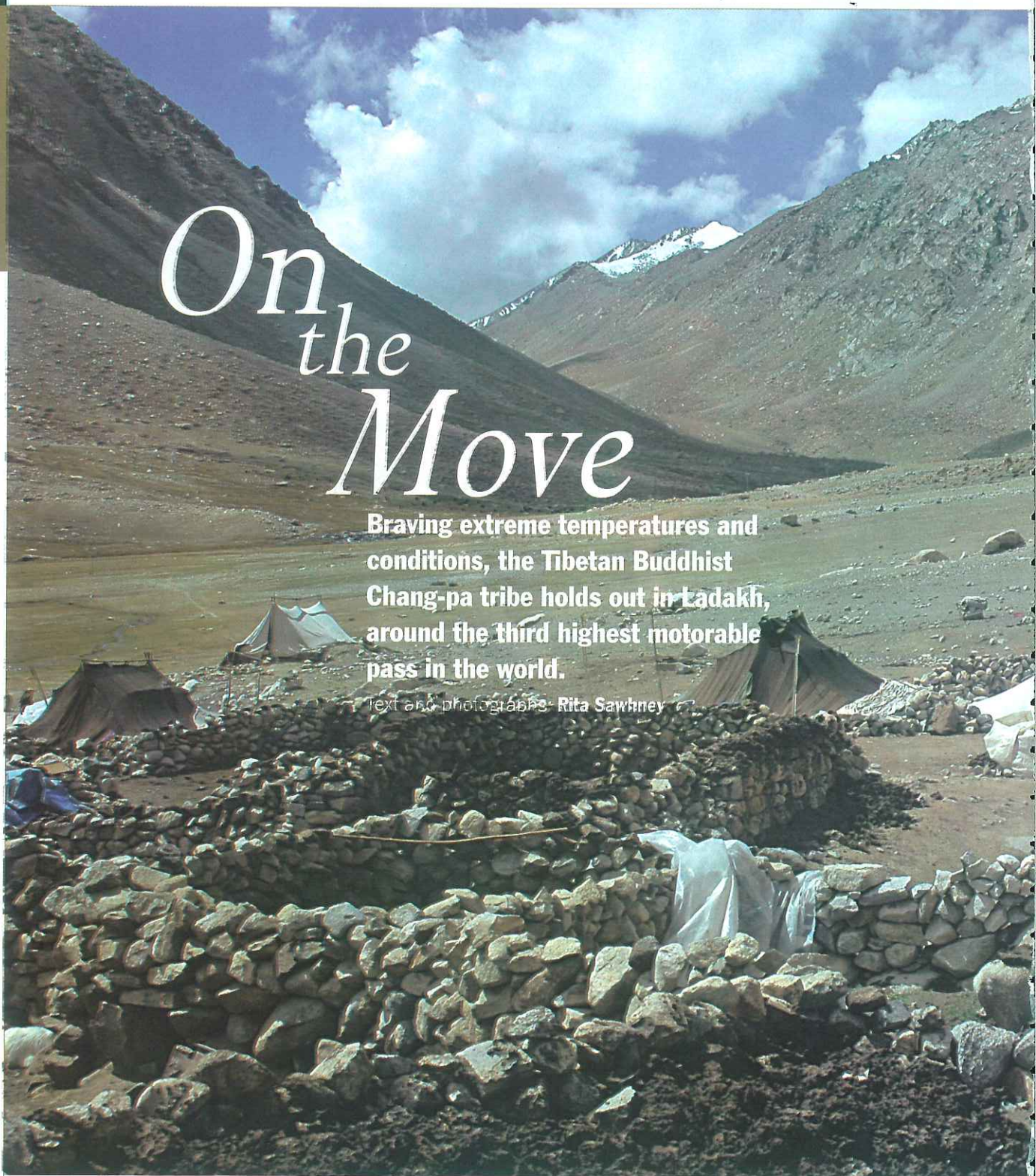


On the Move

Braving extreme temperatures and conditions, the Tibetan Buddhist Chang-pa tribe holds out in Ladakh, around the third highest motorable pass in the world.

Text and photographs: Rita Sawhney



MY LUNGS ARE bursting with the effort to pull in oxygen from the rarified air and a high altitude headache is starting to throb and hold my head in its deadly vice. Chang-La the third highest

ABOVE: A nomadic camp seamlessly merging with the starkness.

motorable pass in the world is barely five km away. Totally blending into the landscape, a group of camera-shy Tibetan snowcocks scurry up the scree slope, as the car negotiates the 17,800ft climb. The Ladakh landscape is devoid of any vegetation; even a sparse blade of grass is not discernable and it makes me wonder what the

goats and yaks feed on. The average elevation of Ladakh is 11,500ft; where barren landscapes stretch for miles in shades of chocolate and caramel, transporting one to another realm. Sun bleached monasteries cling to rock faces. There's cultivation wherever an algid stream happens to flow from craggy heights to alluvial soil near the

THE NOMADS ARE FRIENDLY TIBETAN BUDDHISTS WHO SHIFT LOCATION, MOVING OFTEN, TO NEW PASTURES TO MAKE HOMES IN DESOLATE, REMOTE SURROUNDINGS.

in these open highlands. I see one sunning itself on a rock, covered with snow that fell the night before. The Chang-La pass at 17,800ft is a rugged forsaken place, but the views are just spectacular, embracing 360 degrees on both sides. At 16,500ft I finally come across yak wool tents (*yurts*) near a lake and rejoice to eventually have found the nomadic tribe... the Chang-pa.

I stop at a small establishment of *rebos* (tents) and a mixed herd of yaks and goats. My guide, Dolma, tells me, "The nomads are friendly Tibetan Buddhists and come winter they shift location, moving often, to new pastures to make homes in desolate, remote surroundings. They herd their mountain goats and yaks and go in search of fodder at high altitudes. Braving extreme temperatures, they move from pasture to pasture, to feed their herd of goats and yaks that provide them with all that is necessary for their existence. The north goat that yields the best pashmina is reared at altitudes of 12,000ft and above. This really soft, fine wool comes from the underfleece of baby goats is often bartered for basic necessities." Each family selects separate grazing pastures for their flocks that range from 12,000 to 17,000ft. As their life is tough and survival depends on finding new pastures, future generations are turning to different vocations and the tribe will probably become extinct in the years to come.

Survival instincts

My guide calls out to them in Ladakhi and two shy girls emerge from the warm yak wool tents to offer us



village. I pass a shepherd, his wrinkled face shining with mirth as he explains that an ibex has joined his herd of goats. "I found him, when he was tiny, he had been abandoned by his mother and I brought him up on goat's milk. Now he thinks he is one of them," says the goatherd. The singled out, bewildered ibex poses for pictures. At

the base of the mountain pass I see yaks feeding near a skein of streams and I know that this is an indication of the whereabouts of the nomads.

No man's land

We are looking for nomads just over the pass, instead we find furry marmots that also make their home

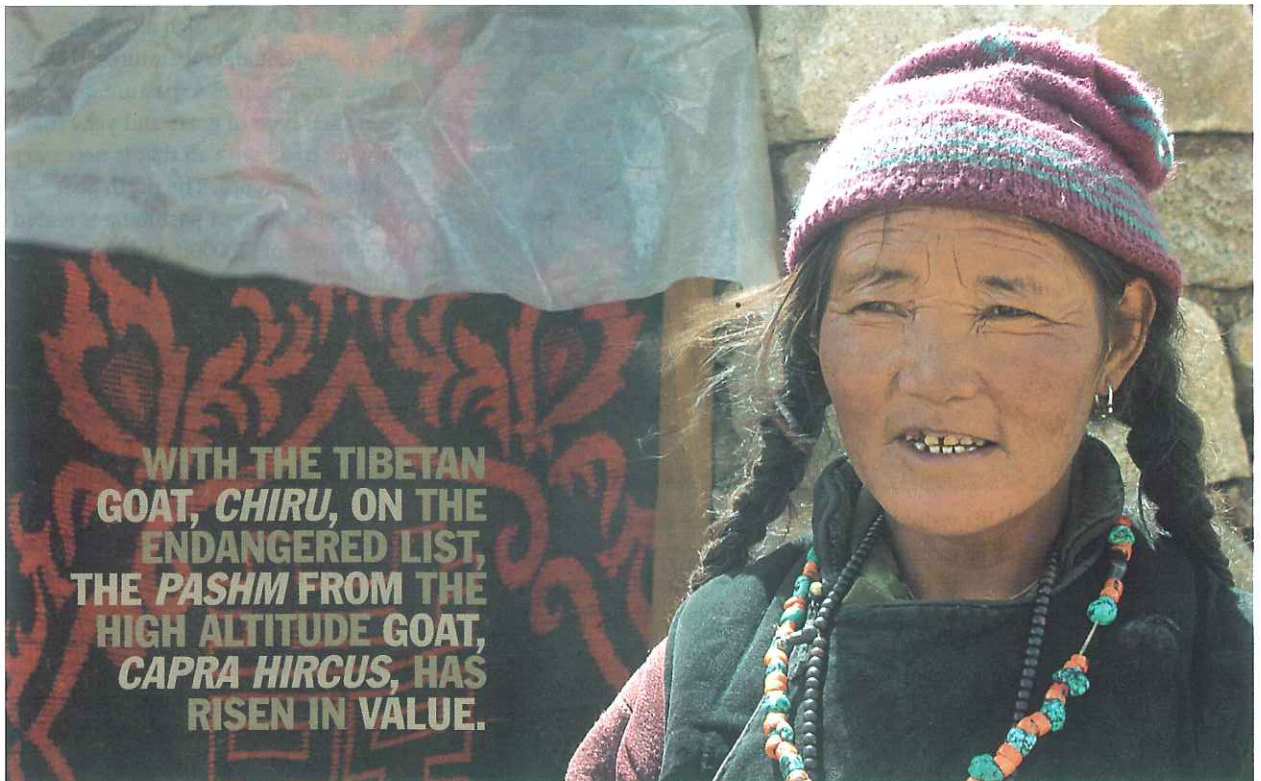


ABOVE: A cherubic nomad milking a yak for sustenance.
BELOW: Beaten by harsh conditions, but not out.

churpi (yak cheese), yak butter and yogurt. I enter the 15x20ft yak hair tent; it is abrasive to the touch. The interior is small yet neat, the utensils are stacked neatly on a table and a

roaring yak dung fire throws pungent white smoke out of an opening at the top of the tent. An elderly woman dressed in traditional robes and felt shoes with turned up toes offers me yogurt and butter tea. I succumb to the offer of yogurt, as it is served

in small Chinese porcelain bowls, sprinkled with *tsampa* (roasted barley powder) and looks most appetizing. On request, a woman strums on a guitar-like instrument and sings in a plaintive high-pitched voice, an endearing song telling us of green



WITH THE TIBETAN GOAT, *CHIRU*, ON THE ENDANGERED LIST, THE PASHM FROM THE HIGH ALTITUDE GOAT, *CAPRA HIRCUS*, HAS RISEN IN VALUE.

THE LADAKH LANDSCAPE IS DEVOID OF ANY VEGETATION; EVEN A SPARSE BLADE OF GRASS IS NOT DISCERNABLE.

pastures that lie hidden. They've tasted prosperity when this was part of the caravan route and yak products were exchanged for precious metals, but with borders closed between China and Tibet, the nomads are restricted to hawking their goods only in Leh, the capital of Ladakh.

Their simplicity and beauty is endearing and language proves to be no barrier. I communicate with sign language, as the common thread of humanity binds us together. They are reluctant to sell us some cheese and butter, insisting we have it for free. Next morning, I get to try my hand at

Yak herders search for fodder at high altitudes; braving extreme temperatures, they move from pasture to pasture.

milking the *dri* (female yak); innocuous as she is, her size is still daunting. Another nomadic girl, churning yak butter in a large goat skin, offers us salt butter tea. I take one sip and politely refuse the rest, due to the rancid taste. After sunset, when the herds are back safely in the compound, the men unwind with *chang*, a locally brewed barley beer. I enjoy the taste and the heady feeling.

I learn from my guide that the government is sending teachers to educate the nomads. These teachers are supposed to follow them wherever their search for new pastures takes them, consequently braving the inclement weather and conditions along with the nomads.

Woolly magic

The famous *pashm*, also known as cashmere comes from the high altitude plateaus of eastern and central Ladakh where it is produced. Here, in Ladakh and more so in Kashmir, the matted oily mass of goat underfleece is transformed into luxurious shawls known and loved all over the world.

These nomads part with this wool, for a fraction of the price that the end product actually sells for. Most of the precious wool is taken by Kashmiri traders who are willing to pay a higher price for the *pashm*, as their women can do 120 counts per minute as opposed to the usual 45 counts. With machines having taken over to a large extent, handspun is still unbeatable and more popular.

The headman with a fancy hat explained, "With the Tibetan goat, *Chiru*, on the endangered list, the *pashm* from the high altitude goat *Capra hircus* has risen in value. The government and a few NGOs are helping us to regain our status." I admire the ethos of the nomads and their persevering determination and strong will.

Back in Leh, I buy some exquisite shawls at a fraction of the price I would have paid in Delhi. The soft wool caresses my cheek with its warm touch and I say a silent prayer with a promise to help the simple nomads in whichever way I can, in this serene land of beautiful people. ☪

