

Trekking in the wild

We were dead tired and no sight was as pleasing as that of young Dolma running down the mountainside to greet us. It was past 6 p.m., and we had been trekking to Rumbak village since ten that morning. There was no sign of any village on the route that we had taken.

All along we kept wondering if we would ever reach our destination, and towards late evening we even started to make plans about spending the night outdoors. "That huge rock may shield us from cold winds," said a friend. "Yes, and we may run short of food, but the stream will give us all the icy water we want!" said another.

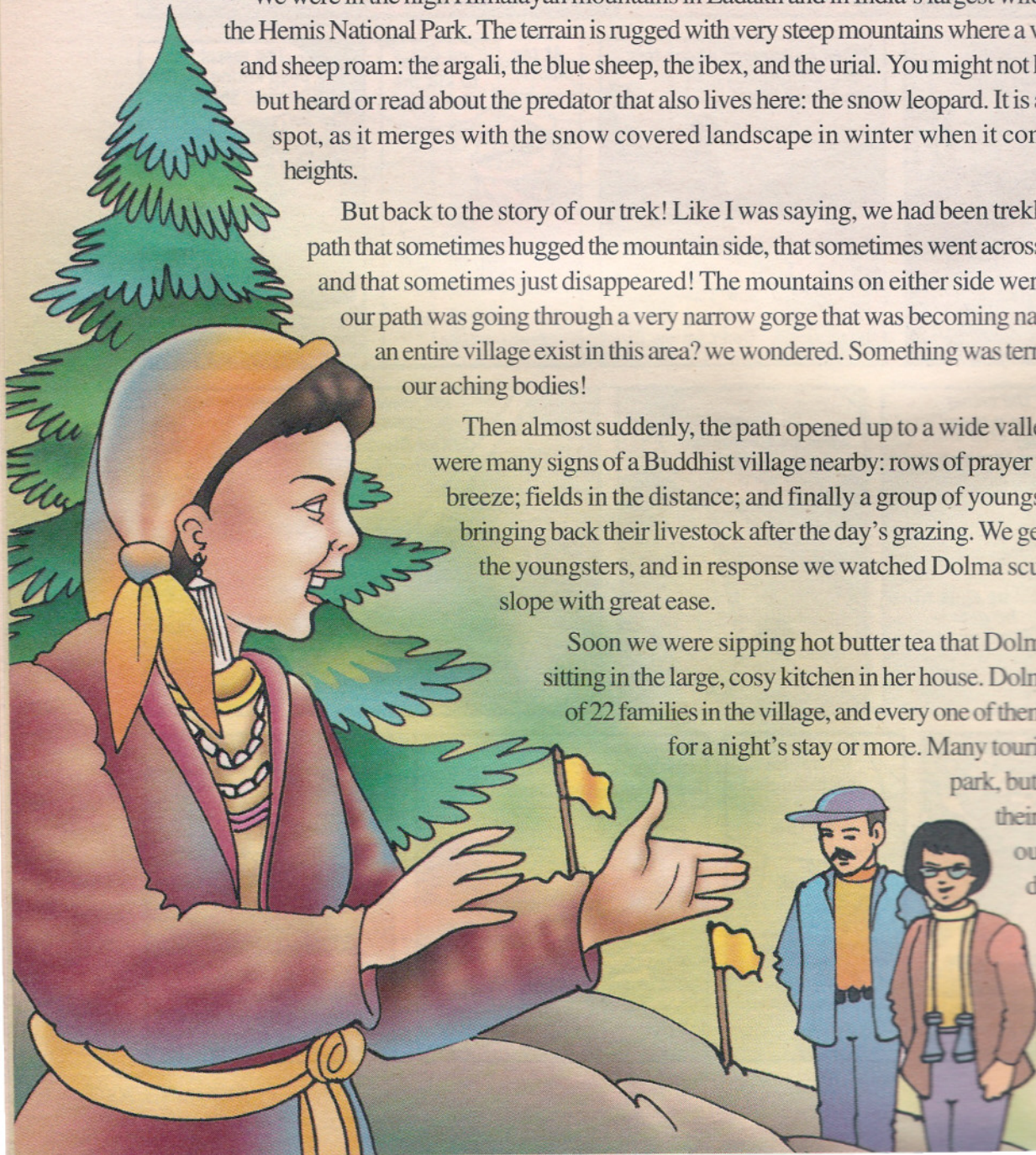
We were in the high Himalayan mountains in Ladakh and in India's largest wildlife protected area: the Hemis National Park. The terrain is rugged with very steep mountains where a variety of wild goats and sheep roam: the argali, the blue sheep, the ibex, and the urial. You might not have heard of them, but heard or read about the predator that also lives here: the snow leopard. It is a difficult animal to spot, as it merges with the snow covered landscape in winter when it comes down to lower heights.

But back to the story of our trek! Like I was saying, we had been trekking on this narrow path that sometimes hugged the mountain side, that sometimes went across a bubbling stream, and that sometimes just disappeared! The mountains on either side were closing in, and so our path was going through a very narrow gorge that was becoming narrower! How could an entire village exist in this area? we wondered. Something was terribly wrong, besides our aching bodies!

Then almost suddenly, the path opened up to a wide valley below, and there were many signs of a Buddhist village nearby: rows of prayer flags fluttered in the breeze; fields in the distance; and finally a group of youngsters in the distance bringing back their livestock after the day's grazing. We gesticulated wildly to the youngsters, and in response we watched Dolma scurry down the steep slope with great ease.

Soon we were sipping hot butter tea that Dolma had made for us, sitting in the large, cosy kitchen in her house. Dolma's family was one of 22 families in the village, and every one of them welcomed tourists for a night's stay or more. Many tourists trek through the

park, but most of them carry their own tents and sleep outdoors. What they do not realize is the opportunity that they miss out on to learn about the Ladakhi way of



life. We watched butter tea (a decoction of black tea into which a generous amount of butter is churned) being made in a large cylindrical vessel, ate Ladakhi dishes like *skew* and *thukpa* with Dolma's family, learned how they prepare for winter by drying food items and storing fuel wood and, above all, experienced the generous and warm spirit that Ladakhi hospitality is endowed with. We stayed with Dolma's family for two days. We learned how each family in Rumbak earns about four thousand rupees a year on an average from tourism. The amount might seem small to you, but do remember that the tourist season is short and coincides with the warm summer months between June and August. Besides such offers of home-stays (as they are called in tourism lingo), the villagers also offer tired trekkers some food and drink from a small café that they take turns to manage.

What makes such activities really heartening is the fact that a small proportion of all earnings through tourism is put aside in a special fund which is used by the villagers for work related to preserving their environment. A year ago, the local people of Rumbak undertook a clean up of all the garbage that the trekkers had left behind. Sacks of garbage were carried out of the national park on hired ponies.

This little action on the part of the villagers speaks volumes. When local people are allowed to get some earning from the tourism activities of the natural area where they live (the national park in this case), their commitment to protect the area increases. When outsiders earn all the tourist revenue from an area, through tourist lodges or hotels that they build or through tourist packages that they offer, then commitment to the wildlife and to other natural resources is usually weak.

Our stay in Rumbak was enriched by a day trek that we did to a nearby pass. We were accompanied by two youth of the village who had just finished a 'nature guides' training programme conducted by a local non-governmental organization. The young girls came armed with their field notes and helped us identify many species of wild plants, including the Rhubarb from which an ointment is made for pain in the joints. I had seen these tubes in our medicine shops, but never realized that its origins were in a wild plant!

The nature guides function offers another avenue for income generation to local communities from tourism. And what better way to learn about a place than spend time with people who have lived their entire lives in the area!

The grand finale to our trip was the sighting of wild sheep! We were excited at the sighting of these creatures who so nimbly scale such heights. Many, many months later, well after my return to Pune where I live, I received a card from Dolma! It made me sit back and wonder if more trekkers had used her home-stay offer and that of her village, whether they had hired the services of the nature guides and whether they had stopped by in their café for a refreshment. Only time will tell where these efforts will lead, but in the meantime you and I have an important role to play....next time you travel out to scenic places, look for people like Dolma and support their cause.

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