

## Tar Village\* Winter Camp, 2024 – Report written by Caitlin Thurrell\*\* for the Canadian-Himalayan Association for Innovation (CHAI)

This year (2023) the Ladakhi New Year fell nine days before the winter solstice. All over Ladakh, families gathered together in their villages to celebrate and keep ceremony together. In Tar village, these opportunities have grown rarer overtime, and sometimes it seems like the first few days of the new year is the only time that the whole village can meet together. Last year, the conversation was all about the plans to build a road up the canyon to the village. This year was different; as the *Tarpa*, the villagers, all came together, our minds turned towards creating a beautiful opportunity for the children during school break.



Tar Village, ~3200m



Village meeting to discuss the camp

Urgyan Thostop, a Tar youth, had spent the last year studying at the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), where he not only learned to play hockey, but also the discipline of building and maintaining an ice rink. Urgyan brought two of his good friends from SECMOL to Tar for the Losar celebrations, and they generously stayed for the long, dark effort of making ice.



The ice-making team arrives! Urgyen (middle) with friends from SECMOL, and villagers

We began to build our rink while Tar was still full of eager hands and strong backs. Our initial location was a small field next to the stream. It was more level than many fields; we dug down to the frost line on the upper end, moved earth from there to the lower end, and thought—hoped—we could make the rest up by building ice. For three nights, we woke up at two-hour intervals to carry buckets from the stream—a strong, laughing team of Urgyan and his friends, Caitlin and Jason (Thurrell) and young villagers home

for Losar who were swept up in the excitement. But after the third night, as we entered the shortest days of the year, it became clear that our progress was too slow; we would never level the rink by the time the camp was set to start.

When we started again from scratch, it turned out to be the second day of the new year, which is thought to be an auspicious time for beginnings. This time we chose a much smaller site, farther from the stream but with an easier path to the water. The sun struck there for more hours of the day, and the ground was drier and less frozen. Instructed by our first attempt, we leveled the area as carefully as we could before putting down the first water.



Creating a border



Leveling the site



It takes a village. Check out the hose!

The *goba*, headman, offered his electric pump, which worked just long enough to move the hundreds of gallons of water needed to saturate the newly flattened earth. We left it alone to freeze hard that first night; then the electricity flickered out for many days, and we lifted our buckets once again.

More Tarpa left to visit relatives in other villages, and Jason went to Leh to welcome our foreign volunteers. The three teenagers and Caitlin continued on with the ice-making, cold and tired with many nighttime watches but buoyed by the success of the quickly forming ice.

The day before the camp was to begin, Jason returned to Tar with Dave, Linda, Armonie, from USA, and two suitcases full of donated skates. Families arrived from Leh throughout the afternoon, and the young people gathered to carry all the elements of an outdoor kitchen to one of the central fields that was protected by good fences from wandering cows. By that evening the rink had reached full thickness, with a beautiful, even surface. We were ready.



The rink is ready, and tea is served!



Some of the donated skates from USA

Many of Tar's children spend most of their time in Leh, and while some are already friends or relatives, many had never met before. Over the next weeks we watched this group of young people from age 4 to 16 come together into a community of rambunctious energy, kindness, joy, and mutual care. They formed into three groups of mixed ages, older children stepping into the roles of helpers and leaders as naturally as breathing. Each group was named for one of the great mountains that encircles the village: Sipskang Lu, Gundum Drak, and Drak Khar. It was a joy to hear young voices shouting these names against the echoes of the cliffs; it had been a long time since the mountains heard their names on the tongues of children.

We all gathered each morning on a field called Upper Red Willow, just as the sun crossed the southern ridge and rose on the village, warm on our cold faces and hands. As the camp continued the light began to return, little by little, sun rising a minute or two earlier each day. In the morning circle we moved our bodies, played a game in English, sang Ladakhi folk songs, and talked through the shape of the day. Every morning circle ended with five minutes of introspection, an opportunity for the children to think about the day to come, set some good intentions, offer thanks, and watch their breathing.



After morning circle, children rotated between ice skating, English language instruction, and handicrafts. The handicrafts group gathered in the sunny spot by the prayer wheel in the center of the village. Each student began to carve a spoon of willow, cutting and splitting a piece of wood with Caitlin before beginning work with a knife and palm gouge. They worked with impressive focus and seriousness, learning safety with blade tools as well as the character and qualities of wood. Over ten days, each person was able to bring a project fully to completion. Dadul, the oldest student, finished his spoon quickly; he found an old knife blade in his family's house, and asked Caitlin to teach him how to make a new handle and sheath. Elders often come to the prayer wheel in the winter to sit and spin wool, or just talk in the sun, and they liked to watch the children work. As more and more spoons were completed, we turned to other projects; Caitlin scraped and worked a sheep hide with some of the students, while several of the village aunties taught another group to spin. Acho Tsewang demonstrated shaping the wooden spindle with a *stebo*, adze, perhaps the most important tool in Ladakhi woodworking. He said he had been using a *stebo* from the time he was six or seven.



Learning to spin wool with elders



Cutting the wood



A beautiful spoon!



Scraping a sheep hide

Jason and Linda taught the English class, focusing on songs, games, and conversation practice with native speakers. The main goal was to overcome the self-consciousness so many Ladakhis feel about English speaking, which is itself such a barrier to language acquisition. Sometimes older students would break into a separate group, where they requested to practice reading an English translation of a book by the Dalai Lama. Joyful, applied language learning bore good fruit, and by the end of the session all of the students were much more at ease expressing themselves out loud in English. For the last session of each day, Jason went to teach the older generation a class of basic English for hosting guests. Although they were even shier and more self-conscious than the children, the adults grew more comfortable over the weeks and were able to offer tea and food, and answer simple questions that tourists commonly ask.

The rink captured every student's mind and heart. Only two or three children had ever skated before, and from the first day, when just standing up was a heroic effort, all of them made astonishing progress.



All ages learning to skate

In addition to Dave and Armonie—a constant presence at the ice, tying laces until their fingers were raw—we were fortunate to have several Ladakhi coaches as special guests. Acho Angchuk Norbu came early in the camp, offering the children the example of his grace on skates, and the American volunteers shared helpful exercises and drills for beginners.

Later Ka Abdul Kaliq from Health Inc. visited for several days, bringing his great patience and expertise as a teacher and coach, as well as a donation of twenty left-handed sticks! By that time, the students were comfortable enough on skates to begin learning the basics of stick handling, and loved the challenge of hockey drills.

Our teenage ice-makers returned for the last days of the camp, after facilitating another camp in Palongle in the Changthang region. The children were thrilled to have their adopted older brothers with them again! After skating each day, the students all worked together to sweep and water the ice, treating the effort of carrying heavy buckets in pairs as a game.



Kaliq en route to Tar



A well-used, and maintained rink, without a Zamboni!



Mastering some cool new moves.

After the morning sessions, the whole village came together for lunch. By the time the children arrived, the rest of the village were assembled, chatting, spinning, knitting, and drinking tea in the sun. The outdoor kitchen became a truly beautiful gathering space, with brightly-colored cloth walls protecting us from the wind, and rugs spread for everyone to sit together in a circle on the earth. Each day two households cooked together in rotation, taking turns to feed the community. After lunch each day, we brought the *daman*, drums, and for the next two hours practiced traditional Ladakhi song and dance, with the young fathers of the village taking turns keeping the beat. Everyone in Tar learned three *zhunglu*, folk songs, as well as practicing the essential dances needed for weddings and other ceremonies.



The table is set!



Learning a zhunglu from the Changthang with Tashi

Whoever was interested had the chance to play the drums, learning the complex rhythms that accompany the songs and dances. We made music until the sun passed behind the ridge and the temperature dropped, and the children left for an hour of free time and games— or stayed behind, crowded around the *daman*.



Learning daman basics.

After games, children went home to drink tea and warm up, then gathered again for an evening study hall. Almost everyone brought significant homework from their schools for the winter break, and we crowded together into Lhundup Dorje's large kitchen to study math, science, and reading at their different levels. The evening session culminated in an activity that came to be known as "shake, shake," which, to our surprise, the students begged for each night, chanting and clapping their hands. We put slips of paper with every student's name in a silver *sgurmo*, then shook them up and picked three at random. The selected students would stand up to give a short talk

in English. For the younger ones, it was a simple introduction, while older ones spoke on a topic of their choice. At the end, they answered questions from the other children. We watched them grow more comfortable with each other and more confident in themselves -dread at being selected transformed to excitement as time went on. The day closed with one more folk song and another five minutes of introspection, students settling (mostly) into silence to reflect on the day and their efforts. For the last two minutes of introspection, we followed a simple guided meditation on compassion that Lhundup Dorje offered: wishing happiness and freedom from suffering first for ourselves, then our families, our villagers, all the humans and other sentient beings in our country, our continent, and then the entire world.

Twice, we went with all of the students up into the mountains around Tar. The first time we took the small herd of sheep and goats remaining in the village to the winter grazing lands on the side of Sipskyan Lu. Several of the young boys were eager to be *rardzi*, shepherds, but their efforts startled the sheep and drove them high up onto the cliffs. With patience, careful action, and some good climbing by Dadul, they managed to bring the herd back down and learn some important lessons about working effectively with animals.



Teens on their trek with Acho Rigzin

Our second journey led us up into the valleys stretching beyond Tar to the south and west, beyond our home in the *gongma*, the upper village. We stopped for a picnic lunch with the younger children on an open sunny plain at the confluence of two valleys. Some worked together to boil tea over a fire and served it to everyone; others ran up and down the scree slopes like young ibex. Jigmet Skalzang found an old ibex skull with enormous horns, and carried it down triumphantly. The older students, led by Acho Rigzin, left us and climbed all the way to a high ridge, where they



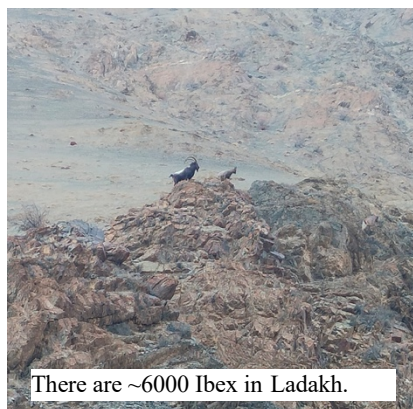
Making tea for everyone

could see down the Indus as far as Khaltse and beyond. We watched them for a long time, smaller than ants on the high slope, until they finally disappeared among the rocks. It was a tremendous challenge for some of them, and a delight for others. They all came down as the afternoon light began to fade, tired, exuberant and incredibly proud. We offered them hot water for sweet coffee when they reached our home and sat outside together, hearing stories in the last of the light.

Much of the magic of the camp happened between activities when children slid down the frozen stream on small pieces of metal or plastic—the original Ladakhi skate, and helped their families with chores. There was also an impromptu chess intensive, as they played game after game with Dave and Jason in the evenings around the fire before dinner!



In the last days of this first winter camp, Ka Tsewang Namgyal, director of the Snow Leopard Conservancy, India came to visit with his son Otzer and nephew Jigmet, a young wildlife photographer. That evening the whole community gathered in Konchok's chansa for dinner, and sang and danced late into the night. In addition to being a gifted naturalist and protector of wild land, Ka Namgyal also sings beautifully and plays the *lingbu*, Ladakhi flute. Jigmet, too, brought many gifts, playing the *daman* with tremendous power and facility; it felt in many ways like a master class, which the village had practiced well to receive.



There are ~6000 Ibex in Ladakh.

The next morning after a brief sleep, Tar's older teenagers and young adults gathered in the cold dark to set out snow leopard spotting. We walked up the valley that leads towards Ursi La with Ka Namgyal in the first light, finding frequent, recent signs; some urine trails were fresh enough that the scent still lingered, only two days old at the most. After a long walk we stopped to drink tea, learn about some of the plants and animals of the broader region, and about the habits of the snow leopards. Returning down towards the village, we watched a herd of 30-40 ibex cross the valley and stand together on the slope across the way from us. Among them were several powerful adult males, larger than full-grown white-tail bucks in North America, and far more muscular. We watched them for a long time, amazed by their movements, the way they seem able to travel directly up sheer cliffs.

As we neared the village Ka Namgyal said, smiling, "Well, we didn't see a snow leopard, but a snow leopard certainly saw us."

Returning from our long chilly walk to warm sunlight and breakfast, we found the children in *kos*, traditional dress, all bustling and making preparations for their performance. I felt a profound mix of joy and sorrow, so happy for everything that had come to pass so far, and unprepared for it to end. The celebrations went on through the afternoon, with drama, songs, dances, and speeches. After lunch a freezing wind blew down the valley, and the children ran over to the ice for one final skate in their formal clothes. The young men brought the *daman*, and the rink became a gorgeous chaos.



One of many wonderful performances at the Talent Show



A star is born!



Village musicians

Many families left the next morning, and the village grew quieter. With fewer children, time became more spacious. Our daily schedule relaxed into an intuitive flow of work, study, and play; we opened the ice while the sun shone on it, played games, taught English, and moved with the energy and desires of the children who remained.



At last, the day came for our volunteers to depart. All the children still in Tar brought *kataks* (white silk scarves) and gifts of apricots and bread for travel. They saw us off down to the foot of the village, singing Tashi Papches—the traditional closing song, and everyone’s favorite of the *zhunglu* we learned—at the top of their lungs.





We thought we were offering a youth camp, but as the weeks passed it became clear that this project was a gift for, and from, every person in the village. The healthiest communities keep the well-being of their children at the center. Vital to this, however, is everyone else gathering around them. We can't know what will come in the years that follow, but we finished this camp with a different feeling of hope and possibility than we have felt before. Maybe, in the end, many families will continue to choose Leh and the amenities and opportunities they feel it offers. But perhaps many will also choose Tar, and another generation of life may take shape here.



Julley!!

**CHAI was thrilled to help support this inaugural winter camp in Tar, 2023 – 24!**

\*Tar is a small village in Ladakh with 12 families and approximately 80 individuals. Most of the villagers are agro-pastoralists. At this time there is no road to Tar; it is a 1.5 hour walk from the nearest road. \*\*Many thanks to Caitlin and Jason Thurrell, for bringing this camp to life in cooperation with Tar villagers. Caitlin and Jason have lived in Tar on and off since 2015. Learn more about life in Tar on their website: <https://ladakhfarm.blog>.

**Photo credits:** Caitlin Thurrell, Rigzin Dak, Cynthia Hunt.