

14th IALS CONFERENCE REPORT, LEH 2009

The 14th IALS conference took place in Leh from 16th to 19th July. This was the fourth IALS conference to be held in Leh, and the first in the Grand Dragon Hotel. As with similar events in the past, it was notable for the diversity of the participants' national and academic backgrounds and its relaxed atmosphere, combined with stimulating discussions both inside the conference rooms and on the fringes.

More than 60 papers were presented at the conference by a wide range of scholars who between them represented Ladakh and other parts of India as well as Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, the UK and the US.

The number of papers and the variety of topics is an indicator of the continuing health of Ladakh studies, and the creativity of scholars working in the area. One of the most encouraging features of the conference was the large number of papers by younger as well as more experienced Ladakhi scholars. Shri Ghulam Hassan Khan, Ladakh's Member of Parliament, also mentioned the need to encourage younger Ladakhi scholars when he briefly attended the conference on the third day.

Keynote address

The keynote address was by Salman Haidar, the grandson of Hasmatullah Khan who served in Ladakh as a Jammu & Kashmir government official in the early years of the 20th century, and was the author of *Tārīkh Jammūn, Kashmīr, Laddākh aur Baltistān* (Lucknow 1939).

Mr Haidar is himself a distinguished former diplomat. His postings included a stint as Indian Ambassador to Bhutan from 1980 to 1983 and, during his visit to Ladakh, he was particularly keen to visit Stagna monastery because of its historic links with the Drukpa Kagyupa sect in Bhutan. Mr Haidar's other postings included periods as Indian Deputy High Commissioner (1987-1991) and High Commissioner to the UK (1998), Ambassador to China (1991-92), and Foreign Secretary (1995-1997). He mentioned that he had previously visited Ladakh for a series of briefings before leaving for China, and had been given a 'warm reception' by the local Tibetan community who mistook him for the Chinese ambassador to India.

In his address, Mr Haidar discussed his grandfather's work in Ladakh, and his affection for the region. Hashmatullah Khan's history remains an important source both because of its extensive use of oral tradition – much of which is now lost - as well as documentary records. He had become a personal friend of the Italian scholar Giotto Dainelli, who first visited Ladakh in 1909, and had visited him in Italy after completing the *hajj*. In retirement, he passed on his reminiscences of Ladakh to his grandchildren. Hashmatullah's personal legacy in Ladakh includes the construction of an irrigation canal in Kargil which still exists.

Papers

The conference programme, below (and the abstracts on the website) give an idea of the breadth of contemporary Ladakh Studies. For the first time the conference was arranged in parallel sessions, thus allowing more time for discussion, but also

presenting many of us with difficult choices as we often had to decide between two equally exciting sessions.

As in previous conferences, History of Art was well represented with sessions on Alchi, Buddhist Art, Restoration and Planning. On 17th July, the CIBS welcomed us to lunch at their Choglamsar campus, and we were able to view a selection of excellent photographs of Alchi, which have been displayed in an exhibition in New Delhi, and are shortly to be exhibited in Mumbai. The restoration and conservation of Ladakh's art, architecture and material culture likewise remains an important theme.

Other aspects of Ladakhi religious, social and political heritage were discussed in two panels on history, and a third on Buddhist nuns. The origin and concept of 'Bhoti' was reviewed in the language panel, and a session on anthropology/ethnography looked at topics ranging from sacred trees to monastic dance and the cultural significance of Pa-ta Gonbo in the Nubra valley.

Ladakh's natural environment and contemporary health issues were discussed in a series of panels on wildlife, food diversity and resource management, climate change and women's health. These served as a reminder that Ladakhi culture itself rests on distinctive and at times fragile ecological foundations.

Decisions on how to manage the Ladakhi environment impinge on contemporary politics and social change. Current political and development issues were discussed in a series of panels on politics and on development, media, education and tourism

Films

This was one of the first IALS conferences that included a number of films as part of the conference programme. The films were either shown grouped together under themes, interspersed with relevant papers or stand-alone screenings. In recent years many Ladakhis have become actively involved in acting and film production, and there is now a small but dynamic local film industry in Ladakh. Some of the more popular films that have emerged are 'Delwa' (directed by Dorjay Wangchuk Mogol and T Angdu Lonpo) and 'Migchu' (Zangpo Sakti and Stanzin Gya).

Most of the films screened were documentary and covered topics such as the status of Buddhist nuns ('Shadow of Buddha', Heather Kessinger, 2009), climate change and the impact of globalization ('Living With Change - Voices from Ladakh', World Wildlife Foundation, 2009 and 'Taming the Dragon', Robert ffolkes and Namgyal Thangthong, 2009). One film – 'The Culture of Here' (Abdul Nasir Khan, 2007) – focused on Ladakh's trading history and material culture. Others were from the genre of docu-drama: 'Das Alte Ladakh' ('The Old Ladakh', Clemens Kuby, 1986), 'Thin Ice' (Håkan Berthas, 2007) and 'Behind the Ice Wall' (Peter Getzels and Harriet Gordon, 1995). Two films screened were commercial cinema – 'Frozen' (Shivajee Chandrabhushan, 2007) and 'Las Del' (Dorjey Wangchuk and Wangdus Saspol).

The film screening began with an introduction to films in Ladakh by Ravina Aggarwal, who looked at the impact of both Bollywood and Hollywood films on the region and discussed Ladakh's nascent film industry. All the films were presented by their directors or actors (depending on who was present) and screenings were followed by fruitful discussions.

Dinner and cultural programme

On 16th July the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (CIBS) generously hosted a dinner for conference participants at the Grand Dragon Hotel. The evening began with Morup Namgyal, Ladakh's foremost singer, song-writer and dramatist, reciting some songs for the group. This was followed by a performance of Ladakhi dance and music presented by the Leh branch of the Jammu & Kashmir Cultural Academy. The Academy's performance provided a stimulating and pleasurable reminder of the diversity of Ladakh's contemporary culture. The evening was graced by the presence of Leh's District Commissioner, Shri Ajit Kumar Sahu, and the Chief Executive Councillor of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Shri Chhering Dorje.

As noted above, the CIBS also arranged a lunch for conference participants on the second day of the conference.

General meeting

The IALS General Meeting took place in two sessions: the first on the opening day of the conference introduced the proposed revised IALS constitution. The second session, which took place on the final day, provided for discussions of future plans as well as elections to the Executive and Advisory Committees (see separate reports on the meeting and on the constitution).

The main part of the conference concluded with a dinner at Leh's renowned 'Tibetan Kitchen' on the evening of 18th July.

Excursions

On 19th July, conference participants had a choice between two excursions. The first was led by the Tibet Heritage Foundation, and involved a walking tour of the Old Town of Leh. Our guides gave a detailed explanation both of the past history of the town and of contemporary efforts to restore its ancient buildings, and adapt them to modern uses.

The second tour was led by Dr Phuntsog Dorje, and involved a short coach trip outside Leh. Phuntsog began by explaining the iconography of the well-known rock sculpture below the gonpa and castle in Shey, and then took us to the ruins of the former Nyarma monastery on the far side of Thikse.

A third trip was organised by Dr Tsering Phuntsog to Leh's Pashmina processing plant to see the process of cleaning and carding the fibre.

Acknowledgements

Many people came together to help make the conference a success and we are thankful to all of them for their support. The first is Dr Nawang Tsering and CIBS for agreeing to collaborate with IALS for the conference. We are grateful to Chhering Dorje, Chief Executive Councillor, for supporting our application for funding to the State Tourism Department and to the latter for agreeing to support us. For his help in Leh we are thankful to Nisar Hussain, Assistant Director Tourism, as well as to Saleem Beg, former Director General Tourism, for his very helpful advice.

We would like to thank the J & K Cultural Academy, especially Nawang Shakspo, the Director of the Academy's Leh office, for arranging the cultural programme on the first night of the conference. To the management and staff at the Grand Dragon Hotel we are most appreciative of the good facilities they offered us, their hospitality and attentiveness to satisfy all our demands. We are also thankful to those who helped us organise the post conference trips, mainly Tibet Heritage Foundation, Phuntsog Dorje and Dr Tsering Phuntsog. To Wangchuk Fargo we are thankful for the use of his office in the days leading up to the conference and for help organising accommodation and transport.

To members in the IALS committee we would like to acknowledge the support and help of Francesca Merritt, Tashi Morup and Ghani Sheikh. We couldn't have done it without them. We thank Ravina Aggarwal and Kim Gutschow, who joined the President and Secretary on the Review Committee, for their hard work in going through all the abstracts; and Kaneez Fathima for encouraging women from the college in Kargil to attend. We are indebted to Sunetro Ghosal for much practical help and support at many levels.

We look forward to seeing as many of you as possible in Aberdeen in 2011.

Julley.

Monisha Ahmed and John Bray