

## **15th IALS Conference. Report.**

The 15th Conference was held at the Sherab Tshogs-Khang Hall of Lamdon Model Senior Secondary School, Leh, from 19 to 21 August 2011.

For various reasons, this conference was on a more modest scale than some recent ones. The principal reason was the decision, not taken till the previous March, to hold the event in Leh rather than in Aberdeen, Scotland, as originally planned. This decision, in turn, was forced on us by the effects of the world-wide recession on the UK economy, and the consequent failure of the Aberdeen Conference Convener, Martin Mills, to raise the funding that alone would have made possible the participation of Ladakhi researchers. By March 2011 it was too late to apply for funding locally; in the event, of the total expenses of the conference amounting to Rs 1,23,882, Rs 86,000 or 69.4% were met from participants' conference fees, and the balance by withdrawal from the Association's reserves.

In a short span of five months, and under a certain feeling of financial constraint, the Leh members under the able leadership of Sonam Wangchok, at that time Ladakh Liaison Officer on the Executive Committee, rose to the occasion magnificently. The arrangements they made could hardly have been bettered, and the Association owes them, particularly Sonam, a debt of gratitude. We are also extremely grateful to the Principal and Management of the Lamdon Model Senior Secondary School for putting their fine hall at our disposal, and providing free of cost the necessary PA and computer facilities.

Due to the change in venue, the conference was deprived of the participation of several international members who had tailored their programme for summer 2011 to attendance in Aberdeen. On the other hand, others whose research commitments in Ladakh would have prevented their coming to Aberdeen were able to be present. You win some, you lose some.

Other reasons for the relatively small numbers were a concurrent conference at the Central Institute for Buddhist Studies at Choglamsar, and the fact that the conference took place during Ramzan, which made it difficult for many of our Muslim members, especially those from Kargil, to attend. They were greatly missed. However, a total of 73 members, about half of them new ones, registered for the event, and at no session was the attendance less than about forty.

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The inaugural session started with the observance of one minute's silence as a mark of respect to the memory of those who died in two recent tragedies in Ladakh: the floods of 6 August 2010 and the bus accident on the Leh–Manali road, barely a week before the conference.

John Bray's welcome speech was followed by an inspirational address from the keynote speaker, Jigmet Takpa, Conservator of Forests and Wildlife, Ladakh region, and Director of the Ladakh Renewable Energy Development Agency. Despite the fact that Ladakh's wildlife includes representatives of a large proportion of the world's mountain mammal species, there is little or no history of people-animal conflict, since the Ladakhi conservation model recognizes that man, domestic livestock and wildlife are all

dependent on the same resources. While Ladakh's dependence on glacier-melt for water makes it vulnerable to climate-change, it has enormous potential for renewable energy, and the ongoing initiative to develop this is sure to reduce the region's carbon footprint, and contribute to achieving the vision of making Ladakh a model society by 2025. Jigmet Takpa-le concluded his address with a power-point presentation illustrating the richness of Ladakh's wildlife, including not only mammals but also insects, birds and plants.

The Chief Guest, Sonam Dorje, Executive Councillor for Agriculture in the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh, expressed appreciation for the efforts of the IALS in encouraging research which could benefit the region, and pledged the Council's support for the Association.

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The academic sessions suffered somewhat from an unusual number of no-shows—scholars whose papers had been accepted, and whose place in the programme had been reserved, but who simply failed to turn up without informing the organizers. This necessarily involved a certain rearrangement of the programme, but we were grateful to three scholars—Wolfgang Heusgen, Helmut Tauscher and Noé Dinnerstein—who volunteered to read papers at short notice to plug some of the gaps (see below for the list of papers actually presented).

Sessions 2 to 7 were devoted to the conference theme, 'Responding to Climate, Biodiversity and Resource Changes in Ladakh and elsewhere in the Western Himalaya'. Session 2 focussed on the catastrophe of 6 August 2010. Harjit Singh suggested that, as temperatures rise on the Indian plains, the monsoon clouds are forced upwards, and enabled to cross the barrier of the Great Himalaya, resulting in the increase in summer precipitation which reached disastrous proportions that particular day. Both he and Ritesh Arya stressed that (in Ritesh's words) floods are a natural phenomenon, but the damage they do is man-made. When Ladakh's population was much less than it is now, and factors including modern education and the influx of outsiders had not yet eroded traditional knowledge, human settlement avoided flood-prone areas, so that floods and mudslides, while they might damage fields and standing crops, caused minimal loss of human life. Today we see houses built in dry nala beds, which inevitably become the target of floods; and even dwellings damaged or destroyed last year are being reconstructed in exactly the same positions as before. One of the most interesting suggestions was that mani walls, which most people consider as having no more than religious significance, were actually designed by the Ladakhi forefathers as flood- and mud-breaks. Among the suggestions the two speakers made for the avoidance of such a catastrophe in future were: construct only in geological safe areas; construct new 'mani' walls above new habitations for their protection; and plant trees along the nalas. Tashi Morup gave us an account of the damage to fields, and the rehabilitation initiatives taken by the Hill Council, which is drafting a disaster management policy; while Rinchen Dolma focussed on the human dimensions of the tragedy and its mental-health implications.

In the next session, Dorjey Angchuk gave a fascinating account of traditional methods of weather forecasting practised in Ladakh; while Blaise Humbert-Droz admitted that all across-the-board planning to protect biodiversity in Chang-thang had fallen woefully

short in its objective, and proposed a more modest and possibly achievable strategy of focussing on particular sites and affording them strict protection. Shafiq Matin's presentation on geo-spatial mapping of biodiversity was notable as being one of only two papers relating specifically to the Kargil district. Wild mushrooms in Ladakh?

Unexpected but true, we were informed by young Ladakhi researcher Konchok Dorje; and the growing numbers in which they are found may well indicate an increasing humidity that is one aspect of climate change.

Coming to the built environment, Deldan Angmo gave a graphic description of the restoration of the Mangyu temple complex; and suggested that the Euro-centric guidelines for conservation at present in place need to be modified by the development of guidelines that take the specific conditions of Ladakh into account. Wolfgang Heusgen's presentation took us to the Wanla temple and the conservation work done there. Hubert Feiglstorfer showed us that when we talk of 'earthen architecture' we are referring not to a single obsolescent material fit only for the poor, but to a complex of many different styles, techniques, and even materials, each of which has huge contemporary potential and needs to be studied on its own merits. One of the most revealing aspects of Sharon Sonam's paper on the haphazard supply and use of water in the Old Town of Leh was her description of the social relationships that develop as heterogeneous groups of people gather round the public water-taps every morning.

Further social responses to change were explored by Jonathan Demenge in his illuminating description of how villagers, contractors and engineers negotiate the alignment of a road through a village, often using characteristic Ladakhi strategies of conflict-avoidance; and Salomé Deboos who showed how societal fault-lines opening in Zangskar are less between the Buddhist and Muslim communities than between the older and younger generations. Franz Fardin gave us a description of change in Chitkul, the last Indian village in Upper Kinnaur where the processes of Sankritization have been under way since 1962. Rebecca Norman traced the ways in which the Ladakhi language is changing, as the Leh dialect more and more becomes the standard version at the expense of local variants; while at the same time she has noticed the infiltration of an increasing number of loan-words from English and Urdu, often used instead of perfectly functional Ladakhi words. Although presented later in the programme, in the session on Islam, Radhika Gupta's paper on Kargil fitted perfectly into the 'social responses' theme. Her analysis described how the Shia community, especially its women, negotiate the conflicting pressures of modernity on the one hand and the imperative of being a good Muslim on the other. Equally pertinent was Abeer Gupta's photographic exploration of how, from Turtuk to Trespon, in mosques and imambaras the vernacular architecture tends to be replaced by international Islamic styles, though local detailing is often incorporated.

Aspects of Buddhist culture were highlighted by Nawang Tsering Shakspo's recounting of the life of Lama Tsultrim Nyima, best known as the founder of Ri-dzong Gompa, but a reformer in all sorts of other ways; and Professor Helmut Tauscher's comparison of manuscript Kanjurs found at Hemis and Basgo. Bettina Zeisler gave us a fascinating analysis of how the sacred 'swastika' concept of mountain and river seems to have shifted east from the Pamirs and the rivers of Central Asia to Kailash and the rivers of India and Tibet. Sacred Buddhist sites were described by Abbas Kazmi—the Buddha

Rock at Skardu, Baltistan (paper read by Tashi IDawa); and by Thupstan Norboo—the Lotsawa temple at Alchi-Brog, ‘a hidden treasure on the verge of extinction’. Noé Dinnerstein gave us a riveting account of *zhunglu*, the nearest thing Ladakh has to a classical form of music, a corpus of songs in a sophisticated literary language and employing complex musical structures and rhythms, developed at the court of the Namgyal kings from the 17th to the 19th centuries.

In addition to the papers by Radhika Gupta and Abeer Gupta, the session on Islam included Abdul Ghani Sheikh’s introduction to the new Central Asian Museum in Leh; and Zain-ul-Aabedin’s history of the migration of the Balti community into the Leh district, especially Chushot. Unexpectedly, this connected with the conference theme, to the extent that the first migration seems to have occurred, in the mid 15th century, after the village and fields of Khapalu were destroyed by a devastating flood in the Shayok river.

The academic part of the conference ended with papers by John Bray and Roberto Vitali on the legendary Christian scholar, the Rev. Joseph Gergan, a key figure in the team that translated the Bible into Tibetan. He was also a historian of distinction, his historical work concentrating on Ladakh and western Tibet; but unfortunately the major book, *Bla dwags rgyal rabs ’chi med gter*, has not yet been translated into any Western language.

We are grateful to all the presenters of papers for heeding our request to limit their presentations to 20 minutes, so as to allow time for discussion. Some of the interventions from the floor were as illuminating as the papers themselves, and the ensuing discussions were never less than lively.

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As always, the Biennial General Meeting of the Association was held during the conference. A separate report is submitted with this one.

The conference dinner was at the High-Life Restaurant, Fort Road, on the evening of 21 August, a convivial way of relaxing after our intellectual labours of the previous days. On 22 August twenty of the conference participants piled into a bus and sped down the Indus to Saspol. Just beyond the village a precarious road took them to the foot of the hillside where are situated a series of caves, whose painted walls indicate that at some stage they were used for Buddhist worship. The scramble up the hill was a challenge for the elderly among us, but with the support, where necessary, of stalwart young Ladakhi scholars-turned-mountaineers we all made it to the caves. Most of us continued up to the summit of the ridge, where the walls of a fort, abandoned these 500 years, stand mute testimony to the durability and strength that rammed-earth construction can exhibit. At the invitation of Sonam Wangchuk SECMOL, we had lunch at his brother’s resort a little further down the Indus at Uley Tokpo. A memorable outing, and a fitting way to end an intellectually challenging and enjoyable conference.

## **List of papers actually presented**

### ***Session 2. The Catastrophe of August 2010***

**Janet Rizvi, independent scholar, Gurgaon, India.** Introduction: Unusual weather events in Ladakh, historical and anecdotal.

**Professor Harjit Singh, Centre for the Study of Regional Development, School of Social Sciences-1, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.** Leh Tragedy of August 2010—Some Lessons for Future Development and Probable Implications of Climate Change.

**Ritesh Arya, hydrogeologist and groundwater consultant, Panchkula, India.** 5Aug 2010, Flooding in Ladakh: A mega geological event of the century in the history of Himalayas.

**Tashi Morup, Project Director, LAMO (Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation), Leh.** Flash floods' debris over agricultural lands and challenges before LAHDC Leh to deal with the socio-economic consequences of this.

**Rinchen Dolma, Editor, Reach Ladakh.** Flash Flood in Ladakh, 2010: A Lesson in Impermanence.

***Sessions 3 and 4 (combined due to dropouts). Weather, Climate and Glaciers and Natural Resource Management in a Time of Change***

**Dorje Angchok, Scientist, DIHAR (Defence Institute of High Altitude Research), Leh.** Traditional Mathematical Theories Of Rainfall Prediction Through *Lotho*: As Practiced In Ladakh.

**Blaise Humbert-Droz, independent scholar, Switzerland.** Responding to tourism explosion, extreme weather events and biodiversity loss in Ladakh's Chang Thang: a proposed site-specific approach for conservation.

**V.S. Chitale, CORAL, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, West Bengal, et al.** Geospatial approach for biodiversity conservation and planning in the part of Ladakh (presented by S. Matin).

**Konchok Dorje, PhD. Candidate, Department of Botany, University of Jammu, et al.** Some Wild Mushrooms Of Cold Desert Of Ladakh.

***Session 5. Social Responses to Change 1***

**Deldan Angmo, Senior Conservation Architect, INTACH, Delhi.** Changes in climate, rainfall and biodiversity have had a dramatic impact on human habitation, resource use and the prospects for cultural and economic development in the area and its environs.

**Hubert Feiglstorfer, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, Austria.** Realizing traditions in earthen architecture. *Analyses of earthen building material of the Western Himalaya.*

**Sharon Sonam, Research Fellow and Projects Officer, LAMO (Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation), Leh.** Looking at Water in Old Town, Leh.

***Session 6. Social Responses to Change 2***

**Jonathan Demenge, PhD candidate, Institute of Development Studies University of Sussex, UK.** Villagers, engineers, contractors and the politics of road construction.

**Dr. Salomé Deboos, Institut of Ethnology, University of Münster, Germany.** Challenging changes but still One Community (Zanskar)?

**Franz Fardin, Laboratory of Social Dynamics and Spatial Recomposition (CNRS/UMR 7533), Geography Department, University of Paris.** Changes in

natural and socio-cultural environments in Western Himalaya: the example of Chhitkul (3450 m, Kinnaur, H.P.).

**Sessions 7 and 8 (combined due to dropouts) *Social Responses to Change 3 and Buddhist Monasticism***

**Wolfgang Heusgen, Professor, Graz University of Technology, Austria**

. Conservation of Wanla Temple. (Professor Heusgen kindly presented his paper at short notice.)

**Rebecca Norman, independent scholar, Leh.** Language change observed while collecting data for a dictionary of Ladakhi.

**Nawang Tsering Shakspo, independent scholar, Leh.** Lama Tsultrim Nyima (1796-1872): Legendary Scholar and Reformer.

**Professor Helmut Tauscher, University of Vienna.** The Kanjurs of Hemis and Basgo. (Professor Tauscher kindly presented his paper at short notice.)

**Session 9. *Buddhist Culture and Art***

**Bettina Zeisler, University of Tuebingen, Germany.** The transferred sacral geography of Mt Meru (Kailash).

**Abbas Kazmi, independent scholar, Skardu, Pakistan.** Buddha Rock (Mandala Carving-Skardu). (Paper presented by Tashi IDawa.)

**Dr. Thupstan Norboo Research Associate, J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, Leh.** Lotsava temple of Alchi-Brog, a hidden treasure at the verge of its extinction.

**Noé Dinnerstein, City University of New York.** *Zhunglu* of Ladakh. (Mr Dinnerstein kindly presented his paper at short notice.)

**Sessions 10 and 11 (combined due to dropouts). *Islam in Ladakh and Baltipa and Purigpa***

**Abeer Gupta, independent scholar, Srinagar, India.** The culture of Islam in Ladakh.

**Abdul Ghani Sheikh, independent scholar, Leh, India.** Central Asian Museum, Leh.

**Radhika Gupta, D Phil (Oxon.).** Discourses and spaces of piety in Kargil.

**Zain-ul-Aabedin, Retired Principal, Govt Boys Higher Senior Secondary School Leh.** The Causes for Arrival of the Balti Muslims in Leh.

**Session 12. *Joseph Gergan***

**John Bray, independent scholar, Kumamoto, Japan.** Joseph Gergan: Ladakh's Pioneering Pastor, Translator and Historian.

**Roberto Vitali, Amnye Machen Institute, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, India.** A treasure truly eternal: in praise of Joseph Gergan's *Bla dwags rgyal rabs 'chi med gter*.