

10th IALS COLLOQUIUM REPORT, OXFORD 2001

The 10th conference of the International Association of Ladakh Studies (IALS) took place in the congenial surroundings of Mansfield College, Oxford. Its success can be gauged by the wide range of participants and papers: more than 70 people from 11 countries came to listen to a total of 36 papers on subjects ranging from theatre to nomads, pre-1947 trade, nuns' education, and the village politics of Ladakh.

The first Recent Research on Ladakh conference took place in Konstanz (Germany) in 1981, and the IALS was formerly established in 1987 after the third colloquium in Herrnhut (in the then East Germany). Twenty years on, it is gratifying to find as much life as ever in the field of Ladakh studies - with new avenues for research still opening up. We were particularly pleased to welcome both veteran and younger participants from South Asia, including 11 from Ladakh itself and one from Baltistan.

This year we chose a broad regional theme, encouraging paper-givers to present their topics in a wider perspective rather than looking at Ladakh in isolation. Participants responded in a variety of different ways. Some papers were explicitly comparative. Others focussed on Ladakh's political and economic links with its neighbours. Still others discussed specific aspects of the cultural and economic life of neighbouring regions such as Spiti, Paldar and Baltistan. In a short review, it is difficult to give full justice to the richness of the topics: the following is a selection of some of the main themes.

After introductory talks by John Bray and Clare Harris (the two conference convenors), Abdul Ghani Sheikh gave an overview of Ladakh's historical links with its neighbours. Abdul Ghani Sheikh is renowned in Ladakh for his fiction as well as his historical research. His paper was followed by the official launch of his latest book, *Forsaking Paradise, a collection of short stories* translated by from the Urdu by Ravina Aggarwal.

Philip Denwood continued the comparative theme with a discussion of Ladakh's linguistic links with eastern and north-eastern Tibet. He suggested that these could be partially explained by migrations of people across regions in northern Tibet which may have been more accessible in earlier times before the process of desertification set in.

Ladakh's trade relations with neighbouring regions in India and Central Asia emerged as a key topic in several papers. Jacqueline Fewkes and Abdul Nasir Khan told of their researches on a set of trade records from the first half of the 20th century. The documents had been kept in private ownership, and were written in a variety of different languages and scripts, reflecting the diverse international nature of Ladakh's commercial contacts. Even more graphically, Gulzar Hussain Munshi showed slides of trade goods which had been lying forgotten in a store in Kargil since the closure of the Central Asian trade in the 1940s. He hopes that these will eventually be put on display in a Kargil museum.

In recent years a number of Indian and international scholars have been working in the nomadic regions of Changthang. Recent reports have been mixed. On the one hand we now know more of the nomad's way of life. On the other, we are more aware of the economic and social pressures they face. Ajit Chaudhuri discussed the Changpas' social system and governance, while Sarah Goodall presented a paper on the pressures on nomads to leave Changthang for a more settled life in and around Leh. Alka Sabharwal analysed the Changpas' trade relations with settled communities in Zaskar, Lahul and Spiti.

The pressures of modernity came up in several ways. Thierry Dodin gave an overview of the ways that Buddhist institutions had responded to social and political change in the 19th and 20th centuries. Ani Palmo, a practising nun, gave an insider's view of the contemporary educational needs of Ladakhi nuns. Emily Hyde compared the impact of tourism on Ladakh and Nepal. Gitanjali Chaturvedi reviewed the key issues in contemporary Ladakhi politics. More painfully, Kaneez Fatima gave us a frontline report on the impact of the 1999 Kargil war on development in her home region.

One of the challenges facing modern Ladakh is the preservation of its many ancient monuments. Reinhard Sander gave an overview of the dilemmas and challenges of architectural conservation. Sunder Paul discussed the Archaeological Survey of India's restoration work on the Tisseru Stupa, near Leh. The restoration project raises the question how far one can or should go in restoring a monument whose original design remains uncertain.

Other papers focussed on different aspects of history and biography, anthropology, medicine, material culture and ritual, theatre and performance. We look forward to sharing all these with a wider audience in the conference proceedings.

Stephen Brigdale and Patrick Sutherland complemented the various papers with photographic exhibitions of Ladakh and Spiti, and these were on display in the entrance hall and registration areas.

We benefited from Oxford hospitality in several different ways within Mansfield and beyond. After the opening session on Friday 10th September, we moved to a reception at the Pitt Rivers Museum, where Clare Harris had set up an exhibition of Ladakh photographs taken by Col RCF Schomberg in 1947. On the Saturday evening, we sat down to a formal dinner in the college dining hall. Immediately before and after the conference, there were guided tours of the Himalayan material in the Bodleian Library, and the Pitt Rivers and Ashmolean Museums.

We had first discussed plans for the Oxford conference in 1998, and the late Michael Aris - who was then at St Antony's College - promised his support. Sadly, Michael died in March 1999. We are therefore all the more grateful for financial support from the Michael Aris Memorial Trust for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, which was set up in his memory. We feel sure that Michael would have approved of the colloquium

We also received financial and other support from the British Academy, the Society for South Asian Studies, the Oxford University Committee for South Asian Studies, the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford. We thank all these organisations for helping make the conference possible.

Finally, we all owe particular thanks to Clare Harris, who did so much to co-ordinate the conference planning in Oxford itself; to Francesca Merritt (IALS treasurer); and the to staff of Mansfield College. Without their hard work, the conference truly would have been impossible.

John Bray