

## REVIEW: *RECENT RESEARCH ON LADAKH 2009*

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Monisha Ahmed and John Bray (eds). 2009. *Recent Research on Ladakh 2009: Papers from the 12<sup>th</sup> Colloquium of the International Association for Ladakh Studies, Kargil*. Leh: International Association for Ladakh Studies. 183pp, illustrations. (paper 450INR).

Although strategic interests between India, China, and Pakistan bring the region of Leh-Ladakh into the news, this area has otherwise been largely neglected by mainstream scholarship. The limited knowledge we have gathered is mostly from colonial government records and European travelers. The gazettes of local kings are also very helpful, but provide an incomplete record of the region. There is, however, a growing interest in this region among scholars of Himalayan culture and its indigenous residents, who meet at regular intervals to discuss cultural transitions taking place in this area. The book under review is a late but important contribution to a new literature on Ladakh's culture – a collection of papers from the 12<sup>th</sup> colloquium of the International Association for Ladakh Studies (IALS) held in Kargil from the twelfth to the fifteenth of July 2005.

This latest volume on Ladakh, entitled *Recent Research on Ladakh 2009* is edited by Monisha Ahmed and John Bray, and offers contributions by Ladakhi and other scholars. The papers in this volume focus on Ladakhi history, art, culture, architecture, language, customs, and mythology from early Balti settlement to travelers' tales. The twenty essays discuss diverse topics from the restoration of heritage sites to the state of language and environment in this region. The papers focus as much on the past as the present, while also reflecting concerns for Ladakh's future. They also focus on Kargil District, which entered the limelight only after a brief war there

between India and Pakistan in 1999, and the neighboring region of Baltistan, once administered together with Ladakh, but now part of Pakistan.

Abdul Ghani Sheikh, a veteran writer of Ladakh, examines historical travelers and government officials who passed through the region during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He focuses on their candid remarks on the places they visited and their comments on the idiosyncrasies they witnessed in the life of people in Kargil and surrounding areas.

Nawang Tsering Shakspo discusses the nostalgia people in Balistan have towards the Tibetan script (*yi ge*) and their efforts to revive it.

Syed Bahadur Ali Salik and Nasir Hussain Munshi explore Balti folksongs, music, and dance, and voice concerns for the future of regional performing arts.

Ghulam Hassan Hasni looks at common proverbs found in both Balistan and Ladakh and discusses their similarities and common origin.

Bettina Zeisler analyses the evolution of Ladakhi and Balti languages.

The assembled texts in this volume are an eclectic mix of issues involving Ladakh's history and cultural transformation. Over the last twenty years, the influence of globalization has been such that the Ladakhi people and their culture have changed greatly, and the people now face the common dilemma of choosing between tradition and modernity. The culture gap between younger and older generations is discussed extensively in this volume (e.g., Monisha Ahmad's contribution, "Why Are the Rupshupa Leaving the Changthang?"<sup>1</sup>).

Radhika Gupta provides a vivid description of Asad Ashura, an indigenous festival in Kargil District marking the martyrdom of Imam Hussein.

In "Military Masculinities", Mona Bhan looks at the changing social attitudes of the Brogpa community after the Kargil war, which

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<sup>1</sup> Changthang is a small region in lower Ladakh.

center on the recruitment of army personnel in the war's aftermath and the shift in Brogpa male identity from shepherd to soldier.

Other contributions in this volume include Asfandiyar Khan's study of Kesar (Ge sar) epic origins by examining references to the story in Mongolia, Tibet, Central Asia, and Ladakh. His comparison of characters in the Kesar epic with those mentioned in the myths of the *Avesta*, the sacred book of the Mazdaiyan, or Zoroastrianism faith of Persia, reveals parallels between the cult of Kesar and Zoroastrianism.

Sheikh Mohammad Jawad Zubdavi discusses the history of Balti settlement in the Indus Valley that neighbors Leh.

Jigar Mohammad's chapter looks at Ladakh relations with the Mughals during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Bray, current president of IALS, sheds new light on the practices of Begar, a form of corvée labor, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a comparative study of labor exploitation by local governments in state economic activities.

Reference to material culture is sparse in this volume, with the exception of Lo Bue's essay on the sixteenth century school of Buddhist painting in Ladakh. Partly because of Ladakh's location between Kashmir and Tibet, scholars have always surmised that it never developed an indigenous painting style. However, Lo Bue explores a local tradition of painting that emerged in Ladakh after the introduction of Islam in Kashmir in the fourteenth century and before the Tibetan art forms gained predominance in Ladakh.

In addition to Ghani Sheikh's essay on historical travelers, Prince Peter is singled out by two European scholars, Pedersen and Howard, who discuss his journey from Manali to Serchu. The authors describe in detail the background and circumstances of Prince Peter's famous study of polyandry in Ladakh. At the same time they also criticize his lack of attention to historical sites, such as the Thakur of Tinnan's fort palace.

Fortunately for Leh, this palace (Lachen Spal-khar), is being restored, a process detailed by Sunder Paul and Tashi Ldawa. They outline the work that the Archaeological Survey of India has carried out in restoring the palace building and the methods they have used.

The last four chapters have a shared concern with the state of the environment in Changthang and the plight of its residents, the Changpa. Monisha Ahmed looks at the migration of the Changpa from Rupshu to Leh and its surrounding areas.

Tashi Morup, Richard Lee, and Blaise Humbert-Droz all consider environmental degradation taking place there – an alarm bell for the region. These essays on Ladakh's environmental degradation must be taken seriously by policy makers in the backdrop of recent natural disaster in the Kedarnath and Badrinath regions of Uttarakhand. The threat to Ladakh's biodiversity is clearly pointed out by Humbert-Droz, who also provides suggestions regarding how to preserve it.

Lee points out that the region is witnessing ecological imbalance due to increased human activities and calls on neighboring countries in the region, including India and China, to halt further damage to this region by controlling any further military construction.

This volume sheds light on various aspects of Ladakhi culture and its historical transformation in the era of globalization. Given the wide range of authors and subjects in this volume, it is difficult for readers to find a common message. Furthermore, the volume would have been more informative had the authors included more references in their individual papers.

Nevertheless, the book has established guidelines on the basis of which a comprehensive study of a diverse Ladakhi culture might proceed. This volume provides brief introductions to specific aspects of Ladakhi culture, including language, which will be very useful for those who are new to this field and want to explore it further. Such studies are important, for example, because of the limited knowledge we have of the region's role as an important juncture on the Silk Road, which will hopefully be a focus of future research. However, due to the physical and political obstructions to working in the region, opportunities for more in-depth research are limited. We can only wait until the region is demilitarized, restored to peace, and a new peaceful political environment emerges, to produce much more comprehensive work on Ladakh.

The International Association for Ladakh Studies (IALS) has done a commendable job by organizing conferences and supporting scholars, as evidenced by this volume. It is a valuable contribution to the growing field of Himalayan Studies and deserves a place in the library of students of Ladakh.