

# Desert winds of change: High-Altitude Ladakh's responses to a global challenge

By

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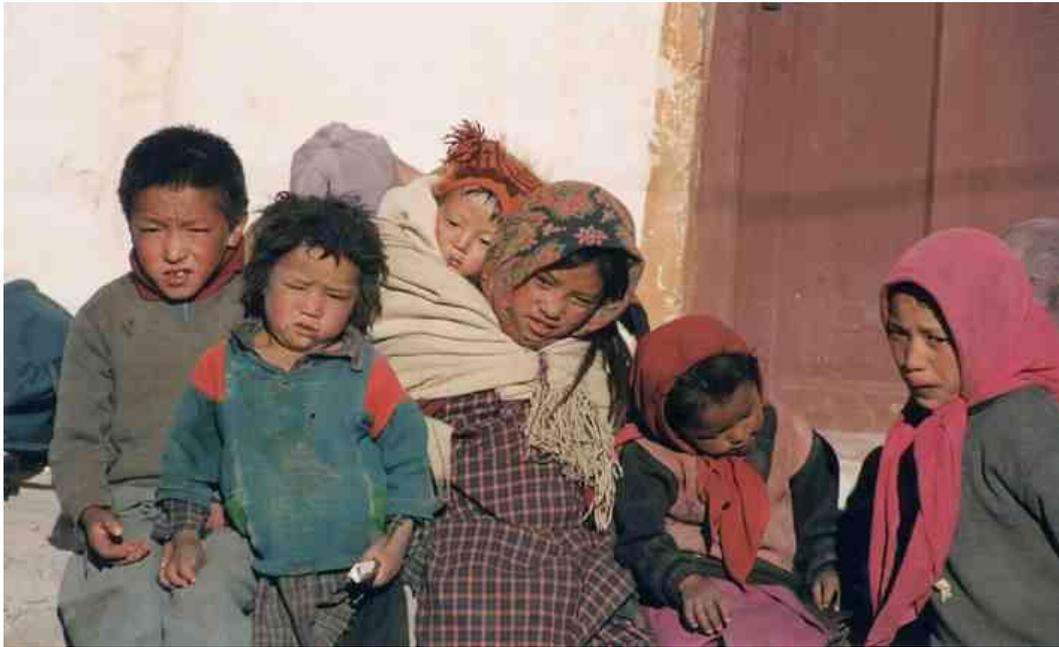
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*Ó A Boaron*

## Abstract

*This paper is written in the capacity of the author as a volunteer at the Stok Palace Museum of Royal Relics in Ladakh in 2002, and discusses some of the changes that Ladakh has been exposed to in recent decades. Changes resulting from an increased contact with the outside world have caused disruptions to the traditional lifestyle and cultural practices in Ladakh. The paper gives an insight into some of the initiatives that Ladakhis have devised to deal with these changes, and explores the present and future role of the Stok Palace Museum of Royal Relics and the Namgyal Institute for Research on Ladakhi Art and Culture as agents for the preservation of the cultural heritage of Ladakh and the shaping of a strong community identity.*

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## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary world, cultural traditions are disappearing as the drive towards cultural globalisation and homogenisation seems relentless. Facing these problems, museums need to make a statement to not only "collect artefacts and document lifeways before those cultures or memories of them disappear. The greater goal is for museums to play a role in the conservation of those cultures, to actually help those cultures survive in the contemporary world" (Kurin, 1991: 317).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the conference theme using the example of the community of Ladakh in the Indian Himalayas, whose traditional lifestyle has been exposed to rapid changes in the past three decades. The paper will first give a background on Ladakh's cultural traditions, and then describe changes that have occurred due to increased contact with

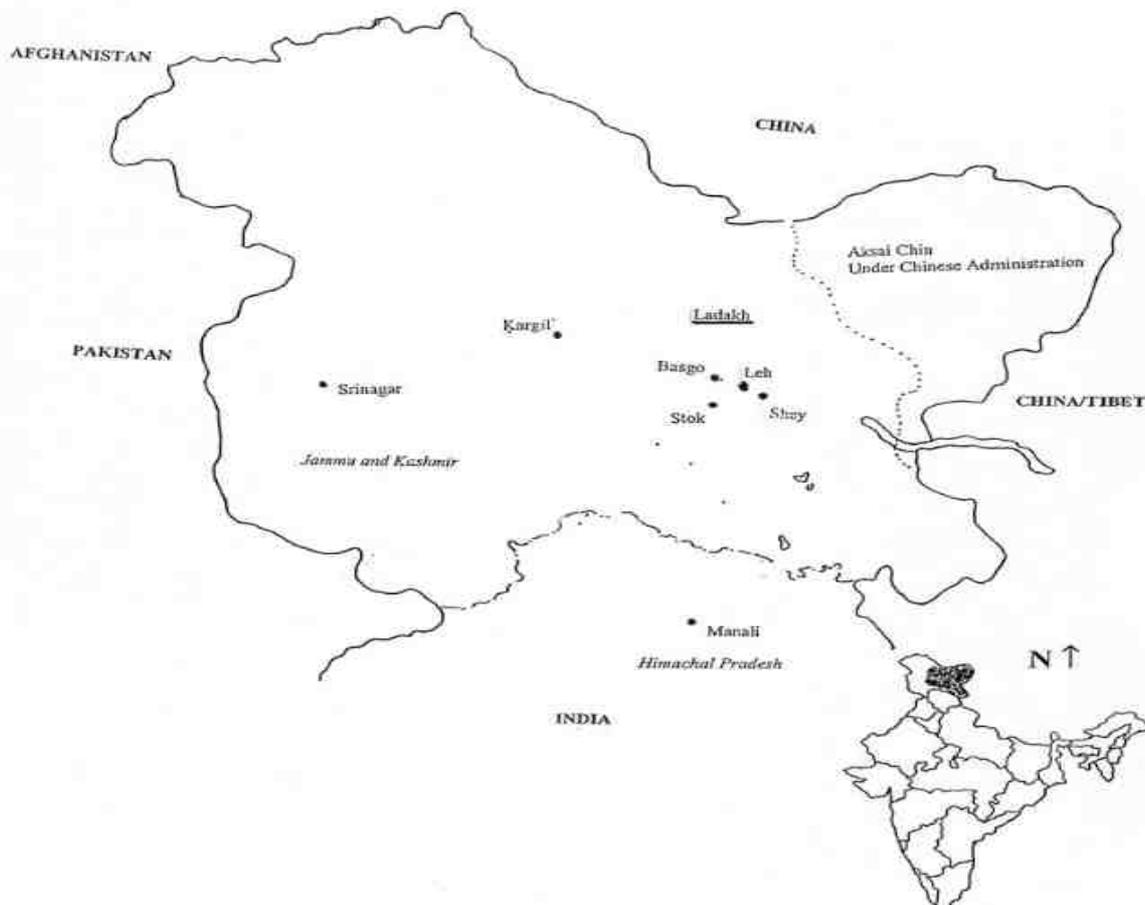
the outside world, significantly contributing to the disruption of traditional life and the deterioration of traditional cultural practices. It will then outline local initiatives put in place by the Ladakhis to respond to such changes in an effort to revive their sustainable traditional lifestyle. Finally, the Stok Palace Museum of Royal Relics and the Namgyal Institute for Research on Ladakhi Art and Culture will be introduced as major players in the preservation of Ladakh's cultural heritage, and it will be argued that in the future they can play a greater role as agents for promoting cultural cohesion and shaping community identity in Ladakh.

This paper does not systematically review available literature, or offer concrete solutions or an action plan. It is rather an introduction to some of the challenges Ladakh is facing, and how the Ladakhi community is responding to these challenges, and reflects on observations made during a short voluntary project carried out at the Stok Palace Museum of Royal Relics by the author in 2002.

## 2. Background to Ladakh

Ladakh is a semi-autonomous region situated in the North-Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The area is divided into the two districts of Kargil and Leh, and has a total population of approximately 150 000. The Kargil District is mainly inhabited by Muslims, while the Leh District discussed in this paper has mainly Buddhist inhabitants. Ladakh comprises 59 000 km<sup>2</sup> and has one of the lowest population densities in the world. Lying in the rain-shadow of the Himalayas, this high altitude desert is characterised by a rugged landscape of mountain ranges rising up to 6500m. Ladakh is governed by its harsh climatic conditions. While its short summers scorch the land with temperatures of up to 40° C, its long winters bring harsh conditions with temperatures falling as low as -40° C.

The region is often referred to as "Little Tibet", as its language, art, architecture, and customs reflect a strong Tibetan influence that have resulted from ancient trade relations with Tibet. However, Ladakh was never part of Tibet but an independent kingdom, ruled by the Namgyal dynasty, which can be traced back to 975 AD. The Namgyals ruled Ladakh until 1834 when the region was invaded by Hindu Dogras under Maharaja Gulab. After the Indo-Pakistan war of 1947, Ladakh became part of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Today, the Royal Namgyal family has no more actual ruling power, but is highly respected in Ladakh. Its members play an active role as local representatives and make constant efforts to promote the region and its place within India. Due to India's ongoing conflict with Pakistan, the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950s and their occupation of the Aksai Chin region in 1962, Ladakh is today situated in one of the most sensitive and strategic areas of the subcontinent (Norberg-Hodge, 1991: 10) (Plate 2).



*Plate 2: Map of Ladakh. This map is not up to scale.*

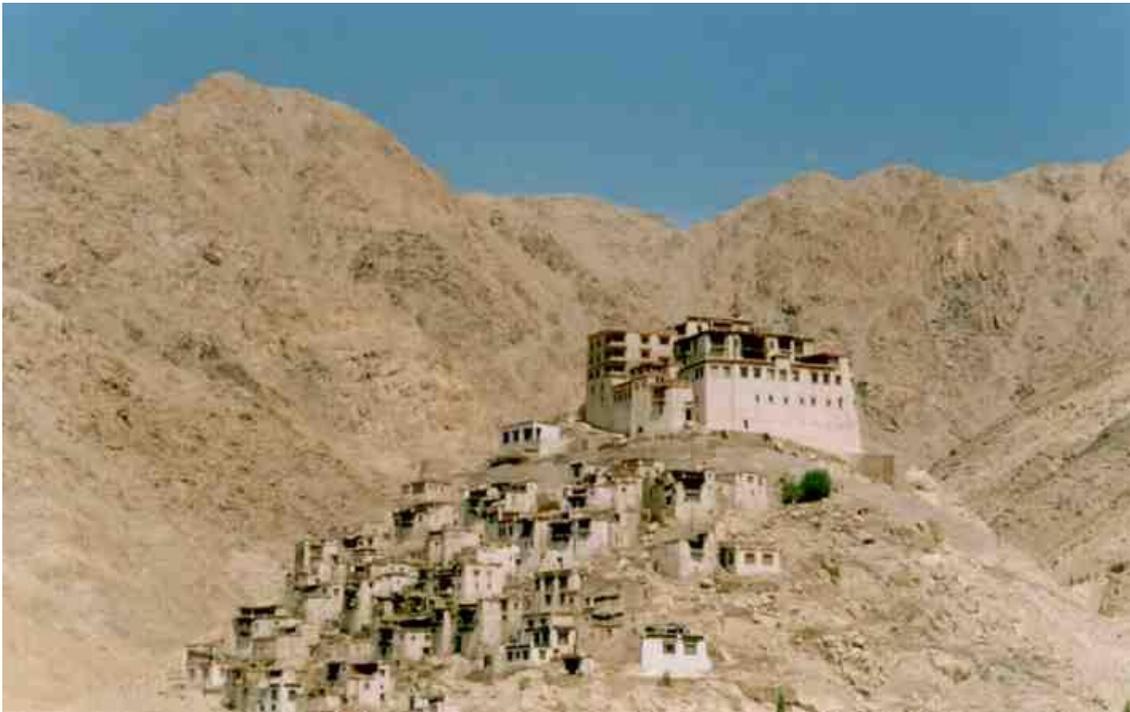
Traditionally, most Ladakhis are self-sufficient farmers living in small villages scattered in the river valleys, where water coming from the melted snow and ice of the mountains can be accessed through the elaborate channels of an irrigation system the Ladakhis have maintained for generations (Plate 3). Cultivated land is limited, and owned by individual farmers or by the Buddhist monasteries called *gompas*. At an altitude of above 3000m and with a short growing season, production of barley and other types of wheat as well as potatoes, turnips and peas is limited to self-consumption and a small surplus for exchange with traders through a bartering system. Ladakhis to a great extent depend on animal husbandry of sheep, goats, donkeys, horses, cows, yaks and dzos for their supply of dung used as fuel, transport, labour, wool, and milk. While in the summer the Ladakhis are preoccupied in the fields, the long winters are concentrated on the production of wool products, and are filled with festivals and religious events.



*Ó A Boaron*

*Plate 3: A typical village view showing cultivated fields amidst steep mountains.*

Ladakh's social structure has evolved due to its environmental and economic conditions. The polyandrous system of marriage, for example, was traditionally practiced to satisfy the "economic necessities of the environment" (Crook and Sakya, 1983: 213). In a traditional Buddhist Ladakhi family, the oldest son would marry and his younger brothers would become co-husbands of his wife, provided they did not become monks. The property was passed on from father to the oldest son, and in this way, polyandry regulated not only the growth rate of the population in a land with minimal carrying capacity but also the division of property and wealth.



*Ó V Kredler*

*Plate 4: The monastery overlooking the village Chemrey.*

The Buddhist monastery or *gumpa* as a religious institution plays a vital role in Ladakh's social structure. Most villages have a *gumpa* as the central institution of the village (Plate 4). Conventionally, the younger sons of a family often join a monastery at an early age to devote their lives to religious study and commit themselves to the monastery. Monks play an important role in the local economy as well as cultural, educational and political activities (Singh, 1993: 242). Traditionally, there is a reciprocal relationship between the monastery and the villagers. The monks provide religious services to the villagers and additionally produce religious objects, clothing or medicine, and help with agricultural duties during the annual production cycle. The monasteries ensure the support of non-producers such as the sick, elderly and children with surplus produce (Grimshaw, 1983).

Buddhist religious practices, brought from India to Tibet by Guru Rinpoche, permeate all aspects of Ladakhi life. Most village houses are filled with Buddhist religious objects and symbols. A family chapel can be found in most houses. It is often the most elaborate and expensive part of the house and is filled with religious texts, rugs, *thangkas* and other treasures passed on from generation to generation (Norberg-Hodge, 1991: 34). From daily prayers to annual festivals, the year is shaped by religious beliefs and practices. Throughout the year, the monasteries are hosts of important religious ceremonies, festivals and rituals involving days or weeks of ritual and prayer carried out by the villagers and visitors who assemble at the village monasteries (Norberg-Hodge, 1991: 78-80) (Plate 5).



*Ó A Boaron*

*Plate 5: The ritual of making a sand-mandala at Thikse monastery. The mandala is destroyed shortly after completion to signify the impermanence of life.*

### **3. Globalisation and change**

As with many other long-established traditional societies, Ladakhi society has evolved over centuries through a process of frequent refinement as a response to the existing climatic and environmental conditions (Rizvi, 1998: 173). But radical changes have occurred recently through contact with the outside world and the influences of globalisation, bringing with it Western models of modernisation and development. "Globalisation is the buzz word of our time" (Logan, 2002: 2) and can be described as a mechanism tying people the world over to one system:

"...It refers to the complex pattern of interconnections and interdependencies that have arisen in the late-modern world. Globalisation is heavy with implications for all spheres of social existence – the economic, the political, the environmental, as well as the cultural" (Tomlinson, 1999: 25).

It has been argued that the process of globalisation often results in cultural globalisation, or the change from traditional cultural practices to a more Western consumer-orientated culture (Logan, 2001, 2002, Norberg-Hodge, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1996). While many have made clear that globalisation is not an entirely external and homogenising process, but rather a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon (Rigg, 2003, Logan, 1997, Tomlinson 1999), it is evident that "Western cultural practices and institutions still remain firmly in the driving seat of global cultural development" (Tomlinson, 1999: 24), and assert a strong influence on many traditional communities.

Logan explains that due to globalisation, "social structures and political institutions...are changing in response to the global spread of industry and communication technologies and to the commodification of products and wage labour" (Logan, 1997: 2). He refers to changes in work practices, leisure possibilities, fashion and aesthetic taste, and the choice of available consumer goods. He argues that, through a clash between local lifestyles and global influences, traditional communities often feel "dis-embedded", or disconnected, from their environment and organisational processes around them. They sense that they are not in control of their own destiny as they are being drawn into a global system that changes the pace of their daily lives. However complex the implications of the globalisation process, it is this factor of change that is most significant here. As argued by Toffler (1970) in his book *Future Shock*, rapid and uncontrolled change leads to disorientation and the loss of values and identity, and can have devastating effects on people unprepared for it.

Over the last three decades, rapid changes have occurred in Ladakh at an alarming rate. Several factors have caused these changes. In 1962, the Indian Army built a road to link Ladakh to India in order to protect the region from incursions of China and Pakistan. Previously disconnected, Ladakh can now be reached mainly through routes from Srinagar in the West of Jammu and Kashmir or from Manali, in the North of Himachal Pradesh (see Plate 2). An airport in Leh has also been put into place. Access to this transport system has resulted in new economic opportunities and significant changes in Ladakhi social life. The demand for workforce by the Indian Army to maintain newly developed shops, service stations and hospitals has introduced a cash economy and replaced the traditional bartering system and culture of reciprocity. Government

development policies introduced at the time have brought about the development of Western-style infrastructure such as a hydroelectric power plant, as well as Western-style medicine and education curricula, which have been criticised as gearing Ladakhis towards becoming "citizens of the consumer world" (Crook, 1994: 814).

Additionally, by the 1960s the traditional polyandry system of marriage had declined, since legislation passed by the Jammu and Kashmir government in the 1950s had rendered it illegal (Singh, 1993: 244). Due to this legislation, and Western values transmitted by the new education system, polyandrous practices became uncommon to the extent that now "polyandry is perceived as primitive or uncivilised by many Ladakhis" (Hay, 1999: 179). This has resulted in changes in the division of land and has brought about more nuclear family structures, which proves more efficient for Ladakhis, who prefer and have access to paid employment in Leh and commute from the surrounding villages or even rent a room in the capital (Hay, 1999: 182). According to Hay (1999) and Mann (2002: 261), a decline in polyandrous structures has also lead to a decreased status of the Ladakhi woman, and a more dominant role of the male.

Changes dramatically intensified when the Indian government opened up Ladakh to tourism in 1974. Starting with less than 500 tourists in 1974, the number of tourists attracted by the rich and unspoilt Buddhist heritage and Ladakh's natural features ideal for trekking, rose to almost 15 000 a year by 1984 (Norberg-Hodge, 1991: 93). The total of number of international and domestic tourists expected to visit in 2003 is 20-30 000 (India Times, 2003). To deal with the growing tourist influx, an infrastructure of guesthouses, restaurants and shops have been built. Those businesses are often run by Kashmiris and other non-Ladakhis, attracted from other parts of India by the economic opportunity. The high demand for agricultural products has not only lead to the imports of food but also to changes in land use (Singh Jina, 1993: 158). Traditional cultural artefacts such as thangkas, jewellery, prayer flags and prayer wheels, are now produced mainly for the shops, and even imported from outside Ladakh (Hay, 1999: 188). To extend the short tourist season from June to September, traditional festivals have been moved and are now carried out to attract tourists, having lost a great deal of their seasonal and occasional significance. Notable here is the Ladakh Festival organised by the Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department in September to attract visitors to the area at the end of the season.

The in Leh developing urban environment previously unknown to Ladakh has brought about an increased level of aggression and crime due to the wish of Ladakhis and other Indians to succeed in the tourist business and earn money to enjoy Western consumer goods. During the peak tourist season many young Ladakhis travel to Leh from the surrounding villages to seek employment in hotels, restaurants, Internet cafes and as tour guides and porters. This not only takes away the young people from the fields at the time their labour is most needed (Rizvi: 1998: 196), it also has created a young, wage earning middle class of Ladakhis rejecting their old fashioned ways of life in favour of the Western lifestyle (Crook, 1994: 812). Increased contact with Western tourists and the media promoting "overwhelming images of luxury and power" (Norberg-Hodge, 1991: 96) has brought about a wish among young Ladakhis to live a glamourised Western lifestyle. The Ladakhi lifestyle of working in the fields for little or no money seems primitive. Young Ladakhis often feel inferior, and ashamed of their culture.

This feeling of inferiority and "the pressure to modernise" (Norberg-Hodge, 1992) has led to a strong rejection of the Ladakhi culture and a loss of cultural identity among many Ladakhis. These new influences have contributed in many ways to the degradation of the fragile environment of Ladakh and the breakdown of traditional village, family, and monastery life, as well as ethnic conflict between Buddhist and Muslims (Mann, 2002). Taking into account the above factors it seems that traditional Ladakhi society and their sustainable lifestyle are in danger of disappearing due to a great deal of exposure to contemporary Western ways.

#### **4. Local response: 'Counter-development' and local community initiatives**

Although contact with Western culture is on the increase, local initiatives have ensured that now, Ladakh is known as a place responsive to the rapid changes it has been exposed to, and active "in retaining its Tibetan Buddhist culture and the delicate balance of its fragile ecosystem" (Lonely Planet, 2001: 294). In Ladakh, an alternative development model took hold in the mid-1970s initiated by the linguist and environmentalist Helena Norberg-Hodge, who since then has done extensive work in Ladakh to promote ecological and cultural sustainable development.

Development as part of the modernisation process in the past has meant transforming a traditional society into a society similar to nations of the Western world. Many have accused traditional development thinking for the negative effects that have resulted from attempts to modernise "primitive" communities using a Western model, supported by international organisations such as the World Bank, assuming Western value-systems and institutions and measured mainly by economic growth (Logan, 2001: 26). But more recently there has been a shift to incorporate different worldviews, cultural practices, and traditional knowledge into development strategies (Skelton and Allen, 1999, Fink 2003). Rather than measuring human welfare in purely economic terms, it is now deemed essential to enhance and maintain local values and traditions through the protection and preservation of cultural heritage in order to assure sustainability of "dis-embedded" societies, and to enable "local people to assert greater control over their local spaces" (Logan, 1997: 2).

Forerunning these considerations by over two decades, Norberg-Hodge initiated a model called *counter-development*, aimed at a shift from "globalisation to localisation" in order to counter further loss of traditional values and create lasting

solutions in Ladakh. This has meant the establishment of "small, local initiatives that are as diverse as the cultures and environments in which they take place" (Norberg-Hodge, 1996: 6). The concept of counter –development has sought to promote indigenous, self-reliant methods supporting ecological and cultural diversity and applying local resources and knowledge (Norberg-Hodge, 1991: 163). Norberg-Hodge founded the Ladakh Project, which later became the International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC), providing locals with information concerning development issues and helping Ladakhis to explore locally more viable solutions (ISEC, 2003). This has triggered the foundation of a variety of Ladakhi organisations.

In 1978, the first Ladakhi non-governmental organisation, the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG) was formed to develop small-scale renewable energy projects such as building solar greenhouses and installing solar water heaters, cookers and room-heating systems. Such alternative energy projects are now widely accepted in Ladakh (Plate 6). The Women’s Alliance was founded in 1994 to raise the status of women in Ladakh. Activities organised by the Women’s Alliance today include annual festivals celebrating traditional craft techniques such as spinning and weaving, clean-up campaigns to raise awareness of environmental pollution, and ‘No TV-weeks’.



*Ó A Boaron*

*Plate 6: Morning prayers next to a now familiar part of Ladakh’s landscape: Solar panels.*

Founded by young Ladakhis in 1988, the Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), aims at rendering the government education system more effective and relevant to the community (Rizvi, 1998: 189). Non-governmental organisations from all over the world are now attracted to Ladakh to help with and learn from these local efforts.

## **5. Representing community identity: A challenge for the Stok Palace Museum of Royal Relics and NIRLAC**

In the light of these local movements, the Royal family of Ladakh has been very active in its efforts to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of Ladakh. In 1980, the Namgyal family opened the Stok Palace Museum of Royal Relics to showcase the family collection of Royal relics and document the history of the family dynasty. Stok Palace, the residence of the Royal family, was built by Ladakhi craftsmen in 1822 using traditional sun-dried mud-bricks. It has 80 rooms spread over four levels and an internal courtyard with a *tarchen* or prayer-flagpole, signifying the presence of religious scriptures within the palace (Norberg-Hodge, 1991: 79). The courtyard is of significant religious meaning and annual religious festivals are held at the palace. The features of the palace strongly represent the traditional Tibetan architecture typical for Ladakh (Plate 7).



*Ó V Kredler*

*Plate 7: A reminder of modernisation: Stok Palace with the new 'TV Tower' in the background.*

The Stok Palace Museum currently consists of four rooms within the palace, displaying fascinating religious objects such as a set of 35 *thangkas*, or religious cloth paintings, the King's and Queen's crowns and sacred Buddhist scriptures. The Queen's crown, or *perag*, is intricately pieced with 400 turquoise stones. The palace contains two chapels maintained by a resident monk, who together with monks from the village monastery periodically carries out the worship service *puja*. A rich variety of *puja* instruments such as bells, dorjes and cymbals as well as masks used by monks for other rituals are exhibited in the museum. More secular objects such as quivers, arrows, guns, swords and shields as well as government seals and coins are reminders of issues of warfare and administration in the once powerful kingdom of Ladakh.

An object of great significance is a sword with its blade twisted into a knot. It is said to be associated with the immense powers of King Tashi Namgyal (1532-1560), during whose reign the region was particularly powerful. Items of personal day to day use such as jewellery, ornaments, costume, and teapots can be found as well as trade objects from China and Tibet. A variety of historic photographs are displayed depicting members of the Royal family dressed in traditional costume and attending traditional functions. Parts of the palace exhibit intricate religious wall paintings.

The exhibition currently is one where the artefact is of primary importance. The objects are displayed in velvet-lined glass cases and cabinets. There are few hand-written English labels giving the names and sometimes dates of some objects. The museum is land-marked as a tourist attraction of the area, and visits to Stok Palace are incorporated into the tours of monasteries and other important sights that are organised from Leh in the summer season. The museum therefore primarily exists to represent the legacy of Ladakh and the status of the once powerful Ladakhi kingdom and its rulers. The museum exhibition, by showcasing visually impressive objects, encourages respect and admiration of Ladakhi material culture, evokes wonder and curiosity, and communicates to the visitor "a sense of quality, meaning and importance" (Clifford, 1991: 225).

In 1987, the Indian National Trust for Art and Culture (INTACH) established a basic catalogue for most of the objects in the museum, and in its report made suggestions for possible extensions of the museum previously envisaged by the King of Ladakh. INTACH identified the establishment of the Stok Palace Museum as a significant step to "open up" Stok and make a "broader move to document and preserve the cultural heritage of the Buddhist culture of the Western Himalayas" (INTACH, 1987). The Royal family makes a constant effort to maintain and raise the profile of the museum.

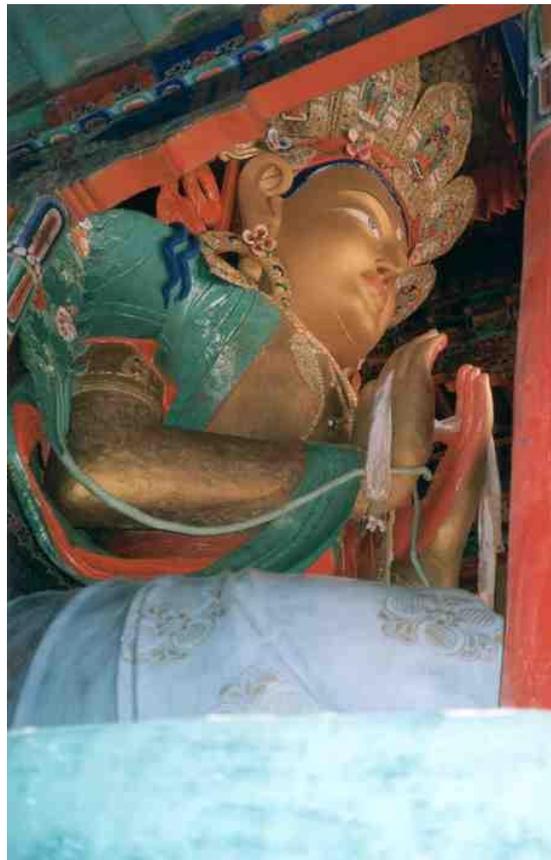
Some visitors have in the past asserted the wish for more explanations to the meaning of the objects in the museum and the meaning of the Royal family in a wider context. In this capacity, the author of this paper during a short project made recommendations to improve display and interpretation in the museum. To make the exhibition more meaningful to overseas and domestic tourists, it was suggested that the objects be grouped into the four rooms under interpretive themes. Making use of interpretive labels, this was intended to better contextualise the role of the Royal family in the past and present, and explain aspects of palace and cultural life and the history of Ladakh. When implemented, these changes are hoped to further enhance the understanding and acknowledgement of Ladakhi culture by the visitor. The option of extensions to the museum and the establishment of a documentation centre or cultural centre was recommended, as

previously considered by the King of Ladakh and INTACH.

In addition to the Stok Palace Museum, in 1985 the Royal family established the Namgyal Institute for Research on Ladakhi Art and Culture (NIRLAC). Now working under the auspices of the Queen Mother and King of Ladakh, as well as an advisory panel of cultural heritage professionals, NIRLAC has coordinated key activities aiding cultural heritage preservation in the area. Established as a charitable organisation with the remit to promote art, culture and literature in Ladakh, the society's aims and objectives are "to foster a spirit of goodwill and harmony, and to promote understanding of Ladakhi culture" and to "preserve and restore the unique artistic heritage of monasteries, palaces, forts, gompas, manuscripts, icons and scrolls" (NIRLAC, no date) (Plate 8). It further aims to encourage appropriate cultural heritage management in the area and to set up a documentation centre as well as a library and archives on the arts, crafts and history of the region. NIRLAC also conducts seminars, exhibitions and festivals. To further promote an understanding of Ladakhi culture and its fragile environment, it works to encourage the establishment of educational institutions and special centres for the benefit of less privileged members of society. NIRLAC also "proposes to conduct training programmes in conservation, preservation and management to ensure the sustainability of all its programmes" (NIRLAC, no date), and to involve the local community in all aspects of its work.

In 1999, the institute organised an exhibition of the thangka collection owned by the Royal family in collaboration with the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in New Delhi. The organisation of a Japanese Film Festival and the making available of donations to provide children of underprivileged families with schooling, are other activities that have been carried out by NIRLAC.

More recently, NIRLAC has worked on a variety of projects to aid cultural heritage preservation in the area. In May 2001, NIRLAC hosted the workshop *Cultural landscapes of Ladakh*, which brought together about 60 participants from local organisations such as the Buddhist society to international establishments such as UNESCO. Management strategies to preserve Ladakh's cultural heritage through defining heritage zones and values were suggested, and issues such as income generation and employment opportunities as well as the revitalisation of traditional practices and the organisation of training initiatives were discussed (UNESCO Delhi, 2003). At present, NIRLAC is undertaking several restoration programmes in Ladakh's temples, and runs a thangka documentation programme in many of Ladakh's monasteries. Moreover, a training programme for young Ladakhis to prepare historic building inventories is being planned (Tara Sharma, NIRLAC, personal communication 20/03/2003 and 16/05/2003).



*Ó V Kredler*

*Plate8: A large statue of Buddha at Thikse monastery – An example of Ladakh's rich cultural heritage NIRLAC seeks to preserve with its programmes.*

NIRLAC's programmes aiming at the revitalisation of traditional skills and knowledge are significantly contributing to

local awareness of the importance of the preservation of heritage as elements from the past that today provide Ladakhis with a sense of identity. But the Stok Palace Museum of Royal Relics also displays an immense potential to be an agent of making relevant and meaningful traditional values and cultural practices, not only to create a greater appreciation of Ladakhi culture among overseas and domestic visitors, but also to help "re-embed" Ladakhis within their traditional lifestyles and underpin local identity, and so assure sustainability for the future.

Indeed, a need for museums to expand their role in the community and create reciprocal relationships to act as a forum for different perspectives has been acknowledged (Mudenda, 2002). Museums can play a role not only in the preservation of the material culture of a community; rather, they can be a focus for the community and be attuned to its interests, needs and problems. In this way, communities can participate in their heritage preservation as the museum represents their living culture (O'Neil, 1991). Local groups can participate in the work of a local museum in many ways, for example in the form of advisory groups, or to help with the organisation of an exhibition or an activity to reflect an insider's interpretation of local culture, art or history (Houlihan, 1991: 206). Local groups themselves can initiate projects or the establishment of cultural centres as forums for representation and articulation of their cultural identity (Karp, 1991: 12, 15), and to counter dominant voices (Durrans, 1988: 153).

There are many examples of how museums and cultural centres have helped in affirming the identity of their communities, and local groups that have used museums to bring attention to their cause. Fuller explains the process of the establishment of a community museum by the Ak-Chin, a group of Native American Indians who live in the Sonoran Desert in Southern Arizona. Similar to the Ladakhi experience, the cultural traditions that sustained the Ak-Chin community were in danger of disappearing due to rapid changes brought about by economic development. They established a community museum "to hold discussions and create exhibitions about issues of common concern" and to ask new questions, research facts, communicate ideas and defend positions and to act upon local knowledge to define present challenges (Fuller, 1992: 332). Clifford (1991), in the context of North-West Canadian indigenous communities has further described the role of tribal museums as centres that seek to represent local viewpoints and experiences and so deal with current struggles. More recently, the Tjibaou Cultural Centre was opened as a cultural development tool adapted to the needs of the indigenous Kanak community of the French colony of New Caledonia to achieve cultural recognition and shape a new cultural identity to aid in the process of achieving political and cultural autonomy (Kassarherou, 1998).

In Ladakh, the Stok Palace Museum and NIRLAC could help with the ongoing process of interpreting "local meanings, memories and reinvented histories" in similar ways (Clifford, 1991: 233). Events and exhibitions organised by local groups could interpret the existing collection from the view of the village people, as well as address contemporary issues and challenges and be used by the community to assert their local identity. The museum could become a "tool for the economic, social, and political growth and development of the society from which it springs" (Fuller, 1992: 328). The Stok Palace Museum could extend its role to initiating a broader movement among Ladakhis to care for their cultural heritage and traditions. An extended cultural or documentation centre could use "a combination of archives, audiovisual materials, theatre productions, language retention programmes, genealogy tracing, and basic education classes", as well as initiate oral history collecting or the organisation of discussion groups, festivities and arts and crafts workshops for young people, to become a participatory forum for the celebration of local tradition. This would give the Ladakhis a great deal of control of how their heritage is represented and provide an opportunity, especially among young Ladakhis, to shape a stronger community identity and regain pride in local cultural traditions. Complementing the work of other local organisations and initiatives, this would provide an ideal environment to deal with challenges brought about by an increased contact with the outside world and achieve a greater balance between modern development and traditional skills and knowledge.

Stok Palace is faced with numerous challenges regarding the fragile conditions of the building and its setting as the residence of the Royal family. The museum collection has not yet been fully documented or assessed, and the lack of funding for permanent staff to care for the collection and deal with museum administrative and maintenance issues provides an obstacle to further development. However, NIRLAC's remit to promote and support the establishment of institutions with a special focus on "nurturing the cultural legacy of Ladakh" (NIRLAC, no date), and the strong vision and commitment of the Royal family of Ladakh, show enormous potential for the Stok Palace Museum or an extended cultural centre to fulfil a more community-focused role in the future.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has introduced Ladakh and outlined some of the challenges the Ladakhi community faces due to rapid changes resulting from an increased contact with the outside world. Some of the effects of such changes have been described and Ladakhi measures to counter the changes have been outlined. Two key players in the preservation of the cultural heritage of Ladakh, the Stok Palace Museum of Royal Relics and NIRLAC, have been introduced. Their possible future role has been suggested to be not only conservers of Ladakhi culture, but also agents to represent and extend Ladakhi culture by facilitating the shaping of a strong cultural identity. Using the example of the community of Ladakh, the paper has not introduced new concepts or given concrete solutions, but shown that, as the pace of change increases and cultural traditions are in danger of disappearing due to globalising forces, the role of museums as arenas for cultural representation and as "vehicles for community empowerment" (Fuller, 1992) becomes increasingly important.

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