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Recent Research on Ladakh: an Introductory Survey

John Bray

In the last 25 years, the north-west Indian region of Ladakh has attracted intense interest from researchers representing a wide range of nationalities and disciplines. Like Tibet, Ladakh lies to the north of the main Himalayan range, but it belongs politically to the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Until 1834 it was an independent kingdom, and it is one of the few remaining Buddhist regions which has retained a degree of social and religious continuity, despite political upheavals in neighbouring Tibet. However, nearly half of the region's population are Muslims, and recent research has pointed to cultural influences from the regions to the south and west as well as from Tibet. As the title of one of the best general surveys points out (Rizvi 1996), Ladakh lies at the 'crossroads of high Asia.'

Western scholarship on Ladakh falls into two distinct phases. From the mid-nineteenth century until Indian independence in 1947, the region came under colonial influence; and British officials and German missionaries contributed a number of important studies. This phase came to an end after independence. Ladakh adjoins disputed international boundaries both to the east and to the west, and in 1948 a Pakistani army came close to capturing Leh, the regional capital. The region again became a theatre of conflict with China in 1962-63, and there were two further wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971. Most foreigners were barred from entering Ladakh because of its geo-strategic sensitivity.

However, in 1974, the Indian authorities re-opened Leh and the Indus valley to outsiders, and this new accessibility led to the second phase of Western scholarship on Ladakh. David Snellgrove and Tadeusz Skorupski wrote an early survey of Ladakh's cultural heritage, focusing particularly on Alchi monastery (1977, 1980). Other younger scholars from a variety of disciplines and nationalities followed, and in 1981 Detlef Kantowsky and Reinhard Sander organised a conference on Ladakh in Konstanz (Germany). This resulted in the first of a series of collections of research papers (**RROL 1**). Four years later in 1985 Patrick Kaplanian and Claude Dendaletché organised a follow-up conference in Pau (**LHOEE**); and a third took place in Herrnhut, in the then German Democratic Republic in 1987 (**WGFN**).

At the Herrnhut conference Henry Osmaston of Bristol University formally proposed the establishment of the International Association of Ladakh Studies (IALS). Subsequent conferences were organised under the auspices of the IALS in Bristol (1989); London (1992); Leh Ladakh, (1993); Bonn (1995); and Aarhus, Denmark (1997). The proceedings of all these conferences have been published or are in press (see **RROLS 4-8**), and the next conference is due to take place in Ladakh in 1999. The IALS publishes a newsletter, *Ladakh Studies*, and actively promotes contacts between Western and Ladakhi or other Indian scholars.

The only bibliography specifically devoted to Ladakh is Bray (1988), and much new material has appeared since it came out. To date six bibliographic supplements have been published in *Ladakh Studies*, and these include more than 400 new items. This article is intended to serve as a concise introduction to the main themes of current research. It cites what is designed to be a representative sample of recent work, as well as the most important older texts, but makes no claim to be comprehensive.

CLASSICAL TRADITIONS

Indigenous Learning

Tibetan Buddhism has traditionally placed great importance on scholarship, and monasteries were the main sources of learning for monks, and to a lesser extent, for Buddhist lay people. Ladakh's Spituk monastery maintained a residence (*khang mtshan*) in the great Tibetan monastery of Tashi Lhunpo, and the more scholarly Ladakhi monks went there and to other parts of Tibet for higher education and meditation training. Meanwhile, ordinary people commonly travelled to the great pilgrimage sites of Tibet. From a religious point of view, Ladakh was very much part of the wider world of Tibetan Buddhism.

Historically, the dominant written language in Ladakh was classical Tibetan, the language of the Buddhist scriptures. The indigenous literary tradition concentrated on religious works, but these have often included a strong historical element. Examples include the biographies (*rnam thar*) of major religious figures

such as the eighteenth century Zangskari saint, Nawang Tsering (*Grub-chen Ngag-dbang Tshe-ring*, 1736-1794), who has been studied by a contemporary namesake (Nawang Tsering 1979). Other works recorded the region's political history. The most notable is the *La dvags rgyal rabs*, a royal chronicle which was probably first compiled in the seventeenth century, and continued as far as the nineteenth.

Meanwhile, for ordinary Ladakhis, one of the main sources of traditional wisdom has come not from written texts, but from the oral tradition. Ladakh has its own version of the Kesar saga, which is well known in Tibet and Mongolia, as well as a rich variety of folk-stories and songs. In recent years many of the folk-songs have been compiled and published by the local branch of the Jammu & Kashmir Cultural Academy (1970-1994).

Despite the region's large Muslim population, few significant pre-20th century Urdu and Persian texts referring to Ladakh have come to light. Among the most important is the *Tarikh-i-Rashidi* (Ross 1895), the memoirs of a Moghul military leader who invaded Ladakh in the sixteenth century.

Western Perspectives

The first Westerner to leave a detailed account of his travels in Ladakh was the Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri, who travelled through Ladakh on his way to Lhasa in 1715. However, his writings were not published in Italian until the late nineteenth century, and the first English edition did not appear until later still (Desideri 1931). Partly as a result, Desideri is much less known than William Moorcroft, a British veterinary surgeon who spent several months in the region between 1820 and 1822. Moorcroft was an astute commentator both on Ladakh's economic potential—he was particularly interested in the potential of the trans-Himalayan wool trade—and on local political intrigues. His fame in Ladakh studies rests partly on his own writings: an edited version of his travel reports was published after his death (Moorcroft and Trebeck 1837). He made a further significant contribution by persuading the Hungarian scholar Alexander Csoma de Körös to take up the study of the Tibetan language. With the help of Sanggye Phuntsog (*Sangs rgyas Phun tshogs*), Csoma later published the first reliable Tibetan-English dictionary (1834).

In 1834 Ladakh was invaded by a Dogra army from Jammu, and in 1846 it was formally incorporated into the Indian princely state of Jammu and Kashmir within the British empire. British officials did not administer Ladakh directly, but from 1867 a British Joint Commissioner spent the summer months in Leh, the capital of the region. British officials wrote, supervised or inspired a series of gazetteers and censuses beginning with Cunningham's *Ladak* (1854) and continuing with—among others—Drew's *Jummoo and Kashmir Territories* (1875). In the early twentieth

century Hashmatullah Khan, an Indian official who served in the Jammu and Kashmir administration, wrote a detailed Urdu-language history of the region (1939).

However, the most important academic contributions during the British period came not from officials but from Moravian missionaries. H.A. Jaeschke compiled a pioneering *Tibetan Dictionary-English Dictionary* (1881), which paid special attention to local linguistic variations. A.H. Francke, who worked in Ladakh and Lahul from 1896 to 1908, published the text of the *La dvags rgyal rabs* (1926), as well as a series of articles and books on Ladakhi history, rock inscriptions, folk stories and religious beliefs. Francke subsequently became the first professor of Tibetan at Berlin University. Walravens and Taube have recently published an extended bibliography (1992) listing more than 200 of his publications, as well as unpublished papers which are scattered across a series of archives in Germany and abroad.

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

General Surveys

Among contemporary authors, Janet Rizvi has written the best introductory survey for non-specialists (1996). Kaplanian's introduction to Ladakh (1981) remains useful, although it needs to be updated in the light of new research. Crook and Osmaston (1994) have produced an important collaborative work on the local economy, culture and religion of the Zangskar valley. This is a multi-disciplinary study based on fieldwork conducted by British and Indian scholars in the early 1980s, before the construction of the valley's first motor road.

Historical Research

The best single source for the early history of Ladakh remains Petch (1977), which draws on the *La dvags rgyal rabs*, as well as a large range of other Tibetan-language sources. Important recent publications include Vitali (1997), which breaks new ground in the study of the neighbouring regions of West Tibet between the 10th and 15th centuries. In the field of art history, Roger Goepper (1996) has produced a detailed, illustrated study of the 12th century wall-paintings in Alchi monastery. Neil Howard has contributed a series of studies of the ruined forts of the Indus valley and Zangskar (e.g. 1995), while Peter Schwieger (e.g. 1996) has filled in gaps in the 18th century history of Ladakh.

Turning to the 19th and 20th centuries, C.L. Datta (1975) remains one of the most useful surveys, based largely on British official sources, of the Dogra conquest of Ladakh. Using similar sources, Kulbushan Warikoo (e.g. 1995) and Janet Rizvi (e.g. 1997) have written a series of studies on Ladakh's trade relations with neighbouring countries; while John Bray (e.g. 1994) has discussed the history of the Moravian mission. Kristoffer Brix Bertelsen (1997) has filled an important gap by researching the history of the Young

Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), founded in 1934, and its successor organisation, the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA). He has drawn an analogy with the 'Protestant Buddhism' of Sri Lanka.

Religious Studies and Village Life

Many Western scholars continue to pay particular attention to Ladakh's Buddhist heritage. John Crook has made a special study of Zangskari yogins from the Drukpa Kagyupa ('*Brug pa bka'rgyud pa*) tradition, and his findings are published in Crook and Osmaston (1994) and Crook and Low (1996). Grimshaw (1983) and Gutschow (1997) have focused on Buddhist nunneries, looking at the way that they fit into their wider local communities.

Western anthropology has tended to distinguish between the 'Great Tradition' of classical Tibetan Buddhism as practised by educated monks; and the villagers' 'Little Tradition' whose characteristics include an emphasis on the role of local deities. Mills (1997) challenges this division on the basis of recent fieldwork in and around Lingshed monastery: he argues that the two traditions, far from being separate, form part of an integrated whole.

The different varieties of local deity and their sub-categories have received attention from Patrick Kaplanian (e.g. 1995) and Isabelle Riaboff (e.g. 1997). Among others, these include: the *lha*, who encompass many varieties of protector deity; the *lhu* who are often associated with water and the subterranean regions; and the *btsan* demons. In Ladakh there is a long tradition of local oracles (*lha mo*, *lha pa*) who are thought to be possessed by *lha*. Sophie Day (1990) and Amelie Schenk (1993) have studied the lives and working practices of these oracles, showing how they are first initiated into their callings.

All researchers emphasise the extent to which religious observances are woven into the everyday agricultural and social practices of Ladakhi villagers. Pascale Dollfus (1989) provides a detailed case study from the Lower Ladakhi village of Hemis Shupkachen. Henry Osmaston has made a particular study of Zangskari agriculture, drawing on his own experience running a Somerset dairy farm, and his findings are included in Osmaston and Crook (1994). He concludes that Zangskari farming is much more efficient than outsiders might expect, and this needs to be taken into account when attempts are made to 'modernise' the region's agriculture.

By comparison with Buddhism, Islam has so far received much less attention—particularly from Western scholars. However, Abdul Ghani Sheikh (e.g. 1995) has written a series of studies on the history of Ladakhi Muslims since the arrival of Islam more than 600 years ago. Several anthropologists are now turning their attention to Muslim areas. Having first worked in Buddhist villages in the Indus valley, Nicky Grist (1997) has been conducting field research in the Suru

area, and David Pinault (forthcoming) has provided a valuable study of the Shia Muslims' Muhurram festival in Leh.

Relations between the two religions have often been problematic. However, using a case study from the Nubra valley, Smriti Srinivas (1996) shows how Buddhists and Muslims often cooperate closely at the village level. Nawang Tsering Shakspo (1995) discusses a similar theme illustrated by traditional practices in the village of Khuksho. Despite differing notions of dietary cleanliness, Buddhists and Muslims shared meals together: they tied special threads to distinguish *halal* meat from 'Buddhist' meat cooked in the same pot.

Against this background, Ravina Aggarwal (1996) and other writers have rightly emphasised the diversity of Ladakhi culture. As Mark Trewin (1990) points out, Ladakhi music reflects the influence of the regions to the west and south as well as Tibet, and the same is true of other aspects of the region's cultural inheritance.

Modern Ladakhi Writing

One of the basic problems underlying modern Ladakhi writing has been the lack of a generally accepted written version of the spoken language: the classical Tibetan written language differs from the Ladakhi colloquial, much as Italian differs from Latin. There have been various attempts to bring the written language closer to spoken Ladakhi but, with a few exceptions, the style of writing in Ladakhi/Tibetan remains distinctly literary, and few lay people are confident of writing it to a high standard. Meanwhile, Muslims traditionally prefer to write in Urdu, while in more recent times members of both communities have written extensively in English.

Joseph Gergan (1878-1946), a Ladakhi colleague of the Moravian missionary A.H. Francke, helped translate the Bible into Tibetan. He was also the first Ladakhi to write a critical history of his homeland, although this was not published until long after his death (1978). Tashi Rabgyas, the foremost contemporary Ladakhi lay scholar, has written another history (1984) in Tibetan/Ladakhi; and Kacho Sikander Khan has written an Urdu-language history of Ladakh (1987) which draws heavily on Hashmatullah Khan (1939). Nawang Tsering Shakspo and Abdul Ghani Sheikh have written a series of books and articles, in Ladakhi and Urdu respectively. Together with other Ladakhis they have taken part in several of the IALS conferences both in Ladakh and abroad.

Since the 1970s the Leh branch of the Jammu and Kashmir Cultural Academy has produced local publications in both Ladakhi and Urdu. Abdul Ghani Sheikh has emerged as one of the most popular Urdu short story writers. In the 1990s a local magazine, the *Ladags Melong* has appeared. This is partly written in English and partly in Ladakhi, and is intended to appeal to both local people and an international audience.

Modern Development and its Political Consequences

The impact of modern economic and social development is both complex and controversial. Helena Norberg-Hodge emphasises the socially and ecologically harmonious aspects of Ladakhi tradition, and the title of her book **Ancient Futures** (1991) is intended to suggest that the Ladakhi past offers hopeful lessons for the future—both in Ladakh itself and more widely. Some local observers have a less romantic view. For example, Sonam Wangyal (1997) stresses the hardship and exploitation of life in Ladakh before 1947. Many Ladakhis have embraced with enthusiasm the new employment opportunities offered by the army and other forms of Indian government service, as well as other new economic sectors such as tourism. This has prompted vigorous debate—in the pages of **Ladags Melong** among other places—on the extent to which it is possible to maintain Ladakhi tradition while also enjoying the fruits of economic development.

Economic competition appears to have been one of the factors behind increasing Buddhist/Muslim tensions in Leh during the 1970s and 1980s. These reached a climax in the 1989 agitation when the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) spearheaded a campaign for Ladakh to become a Union Territory, directly administered by New Delhi rather than by the Jammu and Kashmir government. The LBA enforced a boycott of Muslim businesses, an unhappy contrast with Ladakh's previous record of inter-communal cooperation. However, van Beek and Bertelsen (1997) point out that the 1989 agitation was the consequence of a long period of growing alienation—and political manoeuvring by Buddhist leaders—rather than a storm which burst out of an otherwise cloudless sky. Since 1995 Ladakh has had its own Hill Council within Jammu and Kashmir, but the politics of Ladakhi identity remain complex (van Beek 1997), and it remains to be seen whether this compromise will prove a lasting solution to the region's problems.

WIDER PERSPECTIVES

Despite the breadth and variety of recent research on Ladakh, much remains to be done. First, there are geographical and thematic gaps. So far, the Buddhist regions of the Indus Valley and Zangskar have received most attention from researchers: there has been much less work on the Muslim-dominated areas of Kargil district and the Suru Valley, or on the nomadic inhabitants of the Changthang Plateau. In the field of history, there is still no non-partisan modern history of Ladakh, although van Beek and Bertelsen have made important steps in this direction; and much of the earlier history of the region remains obscure. The libraries and archives of the Buddhist monasteries may well yield further documents of great religious and historical interest.

Secondly, comparisons with other areas need to be developed. Among others, Crook and Osmaston (1994),

as well as Dollfus (1989), include comparisons with Tibet, and Samuel (1993) includes a short section on Ladakh in his survey of Buddhism in Tibetan societies. However, there is still scope for further and deeper comparison not only with other parts of the Buddhist Himalaya, but also with the regions which now make up northern Pakistan.

A third area for development is collaboration between Ladakhi and Western scholars. There is a long history of such collaboration, starting with Csoma de Körös and Sanggye Phuntsog in the 1830s and continuing, via A.H. Francke and Joseph Gergan in the earlier part of the twentieth century, to the present day. There are now plans to establish an Institute of Ladakh Studies in Leh, with a branch in Kargil, and this is intended to ensure that Ladakhis are aware of—and participate in—current research on their homeland.

The final area, which goes beyond mere academic research, concerns the future of Ladakhi culture - or cultures. Against a background of rapid social and economic change, it is implausible to talk of simply 'preserving' Ladakhi culture unaltered. As ever, the question is how to select the best of both the old and the new. Researchers from India and abroad will hope to provide a body of knowledge which will help guide this selection. Naturally, the final choices will be made by the Ladakhis themselves.

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