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Contemporary Publics and Politics in Ladakh

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CONTEMPORARY PUBLICS AND POLITICS IN LADAKH

Ever since Ladakh opened to outsiders from the 1970s, it has been a popular destination for Westerners in search of the last Shangri-La, adventure tourists, and back-packers. More recently, especially since the release of the Bollywood movie *Three Idiots* in 2009 that was partly shot in the region, an Indian middle class whose travel aspirations are boosted by a new prosperity and the extension of low cost-flights has also begun to flock there. Although it is quickly transforming into a mass tourism destination, the region is still considered exotic. A quick glimpse into contemporary travelogues and travel literature reveals a regurgitation of an older, historical perception of Ladakh as an apolitical, a-historical Himalayan kingdom where time has stood still. It is seen as a place of tremendous beauty, isolated, and Tibetan, as geographically limited, and truly Buddhist. Take for example this excerpt (Nalley 2011):

Ladakh, in the Himalayan high desert of northern India, is a spiritual, lost-in-time-feeling place that quiets visitors and turns them inward. [...] This is a place so saturated in Tibetan Buddhism that even Leh's tiny, anarchic plane terminal—Kushok Bakula Rinpoche Airport—is named for the lama of the nearby Spituk Monastery.

Such observations obscure the fact that for Ladakh, venerable Kushok Bakula was as much a political as a religious figure and it is probably to the first role that the Leh Airport refers to.

Yet for other visitors, mainly those who have been visiting Ladakh over the years, the place has already fallen from the Shangri-la it once was. Witness to its rapid transformation in the last couple of decades, they tend to bemoan the effects of globalization, the impact of what is often perceived as an ugly Hindu-western modernity and cultural and religious threats

to a civilization under siege, of which the (nearly four centuries old) mosque in Leh bazaar is sometimes seen as an embodiment. Such paradoxical depictions of the region call for a critical re-examination of contemporary Ladakh.

Eschewing the “tradition”–“modern” dichotomy, which continues to dominate much analysis of the region, this collection of articles has been brought together under the title *Contemporary publics and politics*. Recognizing that “All major social forces have precursors, precedents, analogues, and sources in the past” (Appadurai 1996: 2), we seek to undertake an archaeological analysis of modernity to more deeply probe the region as a “space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (Ibid.: 4), a place that harbours a “plurality of imagined worlds” (Ibid.: 5). This conceptualization breaks away from what Appadurai has termed a “largely pretheoretical” conception of modernity that presupposes “a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present” (Ibid.: 3).¹ In order to reflect the multiple realities, some consistent and peaceful, others conflicting, but always in engagement with each other that best convey contemporary Ladakh, we deploy “public” in the plural. Building on critiques of Habermas that widen his early conceptualization of the public sphere, we refer to “publics” not just as discursive domains but wider spaces where concerns of identity formation (Fraser 1997) and related contestations play out and are expressed in different socio-cultural and religious idioms, imagery, and debate.

When people in Ladakh refer to the modern era it is generally to the post-independence period. However, this publication mainly builds upon scholarship on the “modern” era of Ladakh that started in 1974, when the region opened to foreign visitors, triggering a vast amount of academic research. Early scholarship on the region appeared

1. Although we are arguing against a break from the past, it is not to suggest an “ancient futures” scenario.

in the form of intense and predominantly apolitical monographs that were largely influenced both by the nature of research being conducted in other parts of the Himalayas and classical anthropology. These covered diverse topics ranging from agriculture, household organization, marriage, rituals and oracles to monks and nuns and pastoralists (e.g. Kaplanian 1981, Day 1989, Dollfus 1989, Phylactou 1989, Crook and Osmaston 1994, Jina 1996, Pandit 1997, Mills 2003).

In the “modern” era, social, economic, political and environmental forces that have contributed to changes in Ladakh are numerous; this modest editorial does not pretend to be exhaustive.² One may think, for instance, of geopolitics, the closing of the Western and Eastern borders and the increased presence of the army; the spread of the postcolonial administration and the advance of the modernization project, associated with infrastructure development, new market forces, schooling, agricultural change, food rations, and the deep socio-economic and demographic changes these have all triggered. As suggested in the introduction, tourism is another powerful vector of change. Along with new information and communication technologies and the influence of medias, tourism is often credited with contributing to the expansion of a new consumerist culture and changing values.³ Over the last decade, new environmental factors—diminishing snowfalls, increased temperatures, droughts, melting glaciers, locust invasions, and extreme weather events that can be linked to climate change—have also played a major role in shaping the region. In the last years only, one may recall the devastating floods of summer 2006, and the cloudbursts of August 6th, 2010 that claimed the lives of more than 250 people all over Ladakh. A more recent manifestation has been the unprecedented snowfalls this winter, which caused the death of more than 25,000 pashmina goats, further threatening the fragile existence of the nomadic populations of Changthang. All these factors have been powerful drivers, and are dealt within this issue.

During the last three decades, Ladakh has also seen the rise of communal tension and politics between its Buddhist and Muslim inhabitants.⁴ The politics of representation deployed by the struggle for autonomy in the 1980s led to a social boycott of Muslims from 1989 to 1992 by the Ladakh Buddhist Association and riots in 1989. This became a turning point in the history of the region sowing an ongoing bitterness between the two communities (see van Beek 1996, 2001 and Aggarwal 2004). More than any others, this force

2. For a broad overview of the role and impact of these different factors, see Rizvi 1996.

3. The relatively rapid changes that took place since 1974 and the present have also served to inspire and trigger a powerful post-development discourse (see Norberg-Hodge 2000) and movement, through NGOs and civil society.

4. The population of Ladakh could be roughly equally divided between Buddhists and Muslims along with a small percentage of Hindus and Christians.

has considerably marked society and politics in Ladakh, and no less than four of the following articles illuminate contemporary manifestations of communal politics and Buddhist-Muslim relations.

In her analysis of academic and popular literature on the Himalayas until the late 80s and early 1990s, Grist rightly points out that “Ladakh . . . divides the two major academic regions in the Himalayas, each of which has its own distinct Anthropology.” On the one hand are scholars who have focused on the Eastern Himalaya and the Tibetan plateau (some of their major concerns being Buddhism, and Hinduism for the Nepali scholars) and on the other are those who have studied the Western Himalaya/Karakorum, with a focus on ethnicity and conflict with regard to segmentary lineage systems (Grist 1998: 41-42). From another perspective, Ladakh also cuts across other academic boundaries, for the region brings together Tibetan-Buddhist and Indo-Islamic cultural spheres. The co-mingling as well as tension between these plays out in different ways in the contemporary publics and politics in Ladakh.

Most of the early studies of the region were of Buddhist Ladakh displaying a Tibeto-centric tilt that came to be critiqued later, especially in the work of Grist (1998), van Beek (1996) and Aggarwal (1993, 2004). By the mid-1990s, scholarship on Ladakh began to straddle and encompass the academic divides seen in Himalayan studies by focusing on non-traditional ethnographic subjects that were more explicitly political in nature, and also expanded beyond Buddhist Ladakh. Nichola Grist’s work (1998) was seminal for its focus on the Suru Valley in Kargil; Ravina Aggarwal and Smriti Srinivas studied mixed Buddhist-Muslim villages (Srinivas 1998, Aggarwal 2004). Martijn van Beek (1996) and Kristoffer Bertelsen (1996) offered an analysis of what may be now considered the history of the rise of contemporary communal politics in Ladakh with their work on the agitation for struggle for autonomy from the administration of Jammu & Kashmir state and the ensuing politics of representation. This literature quickly expanded to encompass a fresh and a more critical analysis of traditional ethnographic subjects such as Kim Gutschow’s work on a nunnery in Ladakh (2004), Fernanda Pirie’s study of the maintenance of peace and order on a village level (2002), and Mona Bhan’s (2006) thesis on the Brogpas living in Kargil district. Besides individual books, monographs and journal articles, a comprehensive overview of this body of work can be found in two edited volumes, *Ladakhi Histories* (Bray 2005) and *Modern Ladakh* (van Beek and Pirie 2008). These add to the scholarship contained in the proceedings of the biennial conferences of the International Association of Ladakh Studies (IALS). The idea of this special issue of *Himalaya* was borne at the last conference in 2011 held in Leh. It offers a selection of articles from what might be considered the next generation or spurt of academic scholarship on Ladakh that has emerged in the last few years. Following the trend in Ladakh studies, this collection of articles is resolutely contemporary and political

in nature, and focuses on ongoing process of social change and construction of identities. This work further expands the study of the region geographically, historically and thematically. The seven studies span the main sub-regions of Ladakh—Leh, Nubra, Zaskar, Kargil, and Changtang—to cover the different forces that contribute to shaping the publics and politics of contemporary Ladakh.

John Bray offers an overview of the literature on the Muslims of Ladakh, who had tended to be neglected in early Ladakh Studies, a point made by van Beek and Pirie (van Beek and Pirie 2008). Through an exploration of the literature on Ladakh from the 16th century to the present, his article provides a broad overview of different sources on the region (historical, western, local, modern) in different languages. He makes the important point, which tends to be lost sight of in readings of contemporary communal politics in Ladakh, that the history of Buddhism and Islam are entwined and must be read as such to understand the region. Bray's article provides an invaluable intellectual contribution to Ladakh studies, for those interested in the history and place of Islam in Ladakh, from its introduction in the region in the fourteenth century, to present day relationships with Buddhist communities.

In the past, locality took precedence over religious affiliation in defining identity. Today, iterations of region and religion too are entwined and together shape contemporary publics and politics in Ladakh. The next two articles by Jennifer Aengst and Salome Deboos further probe communal politics and Muslim-Buddhist relations in the region, but through new lenses. Aengst's article investigates the politics of fertility, shaped by reciprocal perceptions and vulnerabilities of Muslims and Buddhists in Leh, Kargil and the Nubra Valley. Her ethnography explores the controversial issue of family planning, the ambivalence between religious and political discourses and practice, and the way these interact with identity politics and impact the life of women in Ladakh. It shows that politics is not confined to the realm of the public, but impacts the private, familial, intimate sphere too. Aengst demonstrates how, through the production of two reproductive subjects—the “hyper-fertile Muslim woman” and the “vulnerable Buddhist,” population discourses concur with the instrumentalization of reproduction and the objectification of the woman's body.

Salome Deboos's article points to the importance of paying attention to speech acts, which articulate iterations of identity in Zaskar. Recent events in Zangskar, where a curfew was imposed on the population in October 2012, following mass riots triggered by the conversion of members of low caste Buddhist families to Islam, make Deboos's article particularly topical. Linking these events to longer trends in Zaskar, the article focuses on how religious tensions are diffused and confessional peace maintained in Zaskar, in the face of the threat of communalism and further feared radicalization.

The enhanced focus on Muslims in these three articles

is further complemented by Radhika Gupta's work on the Shi'as in Kargil. Departing from a focus on high politics, she examines the cultural production of a contemporary Kargili identity that brings together regional and religious affiliations. Through an ethnographic description of a journey undertaken with a group of Kargili cultural activists from Leh to Kargil she highlights the increasing cultural consciousness in Kargil of their Ladakhi identity that in no way diminishes their religious ethos.

Travel and mobility have been intrinsic not just for the representation of Ladakh by outsiders, but to the lives of people in the region. People have always travelled, whether for trade, pilgrimage, or pastoralism. Yet changes keep occurring in routes and patterns of mobilities.⁵ Jonathan Demenge's article makes an important contribution to our conceptual thinking on mobility. By looking at the social construction of isolation and practices of mobility, he rethinks these notions through a discussion of the politics of road construction. Paradoxically, even as Ladakh and Ladakhi villages are becoming more accessible, they continue to be perceived as isolated. His work is also important for its focus on non-Ladakhis, notably migrant workers and road construction workers, a topic treated in more details elsewhere (Demenge 2009, 2011).

If—as Demenge argues—mobility is the norm among Ladakhis, it is more especially the case for the nomadic pastoralist populations of Changthang studied by Pascale Dollfus. Focusing on the nomadic community of Kharnak, she traces their origin through historical sources. Dollfus challenges the theory that presents nomadic pastoralism as an evolutionary stage in human history, which precedes sedentarization and agriculture. Instead, she postulates that the people of Kharnak were in fact agro-pastoralists practicing transhumance “which shifted from a form of mobile herding to a nomadic way of life.” She describes their socio-ecological system, and shows that their “territory is not a static and bounded entity [but] changes over time depending on natural hazards . . . demographic growth [and] in response to political events.” As Dollfus reminds us, change has always occurred, but the dramatic transformation processes she describes, which often lead to the sedentarization of Kharnakpas, are without precedent, both in speed and in magnitude.

While actual physical journeying of some sort within Ladakh shape the analyses of the articles by Gupta, Demenge and Dollfus, it is a metaphorical foray into the world of musical production that links the region back to

5. As van Beek and Pirie write in *Modern Ladakh*: “It is ironic that it is with the coming of better communications to Ladakh, as a whole, and its more secure integration into the rest of Jammu and Kashmir and India through the road and air links with Srinagar, Jammu and Delhi, that the old routes should, effectively, have been abandoned. Ladakh's former links with the regions to the south and west, like Paldar, have, as a consequence, practically been cut” (2008: 15).

Greater Tibet and mainland India that forms the subject of Noe Dinnerstein's piece. Contemporary Ladakhi publics are particularly striking for the vibrant endeavors being undertaken by Ladakhis themselves in the preservation of cultural heritage and representation of their identity in modern genres such as film and music. Dinnerstein's article examines "transformation in social representation" through repertoires of song through time. He also offers examples to show how musical influences from Muslim West Asia were combined with Buddhist texts to produce a genre of art songs in Leh's court in the seventeenth century. Both Dinnerstein and Gupta's articles show that despite increasing communal polarization, a "Ladakhi" identity continues to remain important. History and "tradition" are evoked in particular ways in order to assert Ladakhiness. This lends insight into discourses of culture and tradition that are circulating in contemporary Ladakh.

Beyond the differences in scope and topics, all articles in this issue use a multidisciplinary approach that links social, cultural, historical, political and environmental factors. We hope that these articles will contribute to the existing scholarship on the region and offer some new directions for research not only within Ladakh but also more widely in the Himalayas and beyond in the spirit of comparative knowledge generation.

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MAP OF LADAKH. CARTOGRAPHY: EA RASMUSSEN, MOESGAARD MUSEUM/
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THE KASHMIR REGION, SHOWING LADAKH. CARTOGRAPHY: EA RASMUSSEN, MOESGAARD MUSEUM/
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