



March 2020

Introduction | Religion and Social Change in Ladakh

John Bray

International Association for Ladakh Studies, john.bray@controlrisks.com

Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg

University of Copenhagen, elizawill@gmail.com

Rafał Beszterda

Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, rbeszterda@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Bray, John; Williams-Oerberg, Elizabeth; and Beszterda, Rafał. 2020. Introduction | Religion and Social Change in Ladakh. *HIMALAYA* 39(2).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol39/iss2/10>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.



Introduction | Religion and Social Change in Ladakh

Acknowledgements

The co-editors would like to express their appreciation to Mona Bhan, David Citrin, Scott Halliday and the wider HIMALAYA production team for their constant support in bringing this collection of essays to completion.

Introduction | Religion and Social Change in Ladakh

John Bray
Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg
Rafal Beszterda

This collection of essays brings fresh insights to the study of religion in Ladakh. It represents a joint project between *HIMALAYA* and the International Association for Ladakh Studies (IALS—www.ladakhstudies.org), and brings together both Ladakhi and international contributors. This is the first such collection to be published in the journal since *Ladakh: Contemporary Publics and Politics*, which appeared in Volume 32 (Demenge, Gupta, and Deboos 2012). Together, the essays highlight the diversity of Ladakhi religious experience and point to a common theme of social change, accelerating in the twentieth century, and still more in the twenty-first. Between them, they address questions both about Ladakh's historical record and its future.

At first glance—and in the popular imagination—Ladakh's location between the Himalaya and the Karakoram ranges suggests remoteness and isolation. It is true that within still-living memory the journey from Central Ladakh to Kashmir required a two-week march. However, a closer examination of Ladakh's history points not to isolation but to interconnectedness. For example, Janet Rizvi's general study of Ladakh carries the appropriate subtitle *Crossroads of High Asia* (1996). Her following book (1999) analysed Ladakh's *Trans-Himalayan Caravans* and the “merchant princes and peasant traders” who managed the region's commerce. A subsequent collection of essays on *Ladakhi Histories* (Bray 2005) emphasised the need for both local and regional perspectives, linking Ladakh not only with Tibet but also with Kashmir and Punjab, as well as the Central Asian polities to the north.

These interconnections have stimulated a variety of religious experience. Ladakh is well known for its Buddhist monasteries, which between them represent all the main Tibetan Buddhist schools (though not Bon). Buddhist beliefs have found expression in the work of both historical and contemporary artists (e.g., see Lo Bue 2005) as well as the daily observances of ordinary people, and they form a constant leitmotif both in traditional songs and in Ladakh's hybrid modern popular music culture (Dinnerstein 2013, 2018). Meanwhile, Ladakh's trading connections have also linked it with centres of Islamic culture in South and Central Asia. In Leh, the largest town of Ladakh, Muslims make up approximately half of the population. Most are Sunni but, as Rohit Singh (2018) has recently reminded us, there is also a significant Shia minority. In Kargil district in western Ladakh the majority of the inhabitants are Shia and many have drawn inspiration from co-religionists in Iraq and Iran when calling for social reform in their home region (Gupta 2014).

In recent times, Ladakh's religious diversity has extended further still. Since the late 19th century there has been a small but influential Christian community in central Ladakh, and this is affiliated with the Moravian Church, which has its origins in Central Europe (Beszterda 2014). Meanwhile, new economic opportunities have brought growing numbers of Hindus and Sikhs to the region. Many of these opportunities arise from tourism. At the same time, Ladakh's sensitive geopolitical situation between disputed borders with both Pakistan and China means that there is a

large military population whose presence has brought both social and economic impacts (Aggarwal and Bhan 2009).

Since Indian independence in 1947, the central political issue has been the nature of Ladakh's relationship with the wider Indian polity. In the mid-nineteenth century, Ladakh was incorporated into what was then the princely state of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) within Britain's Indian Empire. After 1947 J&K became one of the states of the Union of India, the only one with a Muslim majority. However, many Ladakhi Buddhists argued that Ladakh's distinct religious and cultural traditions justified a separate political status as a Union Territory (UT) administered from New Delhi. In 1989, the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) launched an agitation to demand UT status, arguing that Buddhist interests would be neglected as long as Ladakh was part of J&K. As a means of mobilising popular Buddhist opinion, they at the same time organised a 'social boycott' of all Muslims (van Beek and Bertlesen 1997, van Beek 2001). Ladakhi aspirations to local autonomy were satisfied in part with the establishment of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council in 1995, and this was followed by the setting up of a similar council in Kargil (Ladakh's second-largest town) in 2003. However, although the social boycott has long since been lifted, political tensions have contributed to a weakening of formerly close social relationships between Buddhists and Muslims (Smith 2013).

Meanwhile, just as our collection was reaching the final stages of editing, Ladakh was granted UT status with effect from 31 October 2019. At the same time it was detached from Jammu & Kashmir, which itself is now a UT. UT status raises a wide range of questions concerning the past and future nature of Ladakhi identity, and the extent to which individuals' primary affiliation is with particular religious communities or with the wider region of Ladakh.

Against this complex, constantly shifting background, our collection takes the varied manifestations of Ladakhi religion as a focal point through which to analyse historical and contemporary interconnections and processes of change. Together, the essays highlight the key point that—as a result of local creativity as well as regional interconnections—the religious roots of Ladakhi identity have always been diverse.

Georgios Halkias's essay comes first in chronological order. Through his analysis of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Buddhist manuscripts, he points to one aspect of Ladakh's religious and cultural connections with neighbouring regions. Many leading monasteries own beautifully crafted handwritten editions of the Kangyur (bKa' 'gyur), representing the words of the Buddha, as well as the Tengyur (bsTan 'gyur) commentaries. One outstand-

ing research question concerns the literary 'genealogy' of these texts and their possible affiliation with earlier versions in Central Tibet. Another key question concerns the scriptural workshops that produced them. We know the name of one leading calligrapher, a seventeenth-century nobleman called Namka Palgon (Nam mkha' dpal mgon) who served four Ladakhi kings. Other texts came from further afield. For example, the Kangyur in the royal palace of Stok was procured from Bhutan in the early eighteenth century. There is still a need—and an opportunity—for further, more systematic analysis of the materials used to produce the texts. Taken together, these manuscripts are emblematic both of the skills that were practiced within Ladakh, and of the region's connections with the wider world of Tibetan Buddhism.

The essay by John Bray, Martijn van Beek, Tsering Gonkatsang, and Phuntsog Wangchuk examines a more recent set of interconnections. In 1933 the Indian social activist, Buddhist monk, and traveler Rahul Sankrityayan worked with his Ladakhi colleague Tsetan Phuntsog to prepare a set of Tibetan-language (Bod yig) textbooks for use in Ladakhi schools. In several respects, the books represent a multilayered hybrid. The printed versions were produced by the Baptist Mission Press in Calcutta, using moveable type that had been designed by a German missionary, on the model of similar scripts to the ones described by Halkias, to print a Tibetan translation of the Christian Bible. Their contents included selections from Aesop's fables as well as Ladakhi folksongs, specially composed poems, a short piece praising the British empire, and the sayings of the Tibetan lama Sakyapa Pandita Kunga Gyaltzen (Sa skya paN+Di ta kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182-1251). Taken together, they represent a fresh affirmation of Ladakh's Buddhist inheritance using new techniques and materials. They also point to social and linguistic questions that are still not resolved. Historically, the Tibetan script has been associated with Buddhist literature: Muslims speak the same colloquial language as their Buddhist peers but have tended to write in Persian or Urdu. So is the written language only for Buddhists, or should it be accessible to members of other communities in Ladakh? And should the written language be literary Tibetan, or is it possible to develop a style that is closer to spoken Ladakhi?

Pascale Dollfus's essay offers a more personal perspective on the revival of religious traditions. Tsewang Dorje, a Ladakhi schoolteacher born in 1977, belongs to lineage of *manepa* (*ma ni pa*), lay religious practitioners who inculcated Buddhist values through story-telling and dramatic performances. These include the breaking-stone ceremony, an impressive ritual in which a rectangular stone is placed on a man's chest. The stone is then crushed by a

round boulder being thrown on top of it to destroy the demon that has taken up residence inside it. Tsewang Dorje's grandfather was the last Ladakhi *manepa* and he passed away in 1993 before he was able to pass on the tradition to his heirs. Now Tsewang Dorje is seeking the necessary training, which includes a year-long religious retreat, from practitioners in other regions. At the time of writing, it is still uncertain whether he will succeed. His story raises the question about how far it is possible for an individual to revive a popular religious tradition if the wider social environment is less supportive.

Tashi Lundup's essay turns to institutional Buddhism as represented by Lamayuru monastery, a well-known Drikung Kagyu ('Brigung bka' brgyud) establishment near the main road from Central Ladakh to Kashmir. Partly because of its location, as well as its dramatic surrounding landscape, Lamayuru is one of Ladakh's premier tourist destinations. Drawing on extensive ethnographic interviews, Tashi Lundup explores the tourists' interactions with local monks and villagers. The monks' responses reflect both 'religious' and 'mundane' perspectives. From a religious point of view, the tourists are fellow human beings and their presence in the monastery offers an opportunity to share Buddhist truths. However, the tourists also disrupt the daily life of the monastery, disturbing religious ceremonies and making it harder for the monks to perform their regular duties. Meanwhile, villagers visiting the monastery as part of their regular devotions are annoyed to find themselves redefined as exotic subjects for tourist photographs. Despite these frictions, monks and tourists have come to some sort of accommodation. The monastery benefits from tourist income, and some Western travelers who visited Lamayuru have established a long-term relationship with the establishment, even to the extent of embracing Buddhism.

Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg's essay shows how the Drukpa Kagyü ('Bruk pa bka' rgyud) school of Buddhism in Ladakh has adapted contemporary cultural forms to develop a new style of religious spectacle on a far greater scale than anything ever imagined by the *manepa*. In her analysis, the 'Naropa 2016' festival in Ladakh represents an encounter between Buddhism and Bollywood. Naropa (1016-1100 CE) was an Indian Buddhist scholar-saint who is widely revered in the Himalaya. The festival commemorated his millennial anniversary, and tens—perhaps hundreds—of thousands of people took part. In one of the key rituals, the Gyalwang Drukpa, the leader of the Drukpa Kagyüpa, ceremonially revealed a set of six bone ornaments that had been presented to Naropa through divine agency at the time of his enlightenment. Other leading figures at the festival included Bollywood celebrities whose evening concerts were one of the major attractions. As Williams-Oer-

berg points out, Tibetan Buddhism has historically been associated with spectacular performances, for example at the annual Great Prayer Festivals in Lhasa. However, on this occasion the spectacle took on new forms, including all the paraphernalia of modern mass-culture performance. She argues that the event should be seen as a form of 'counter-secularism' that is designed to attract a mass audience, and to demonstrate Drukpa Kagyü influence and participation in the so-called modern world.

Samina Rehman's essay continues with the theme of religious change, this time with reference to a group of Sunni Muslim women in Leh, emphasising their sense of agency as they explore new forms of religious expression. For centuries, Ladakhi Muslims have lived alongside their Buddhist neighbours and there is a long history of intermarriage between the two communities. However, in recent years there has been a trend towards the stricter observance of what is presented as a more orthodox version of Islam. As a marker of this heightened sense of religious identity, some Sunni Muslim women have taken to wearing veils. In an earlier essay published in *HIMALAYA*, Jacqueline Fewkes (2018) reported on interviews with three female *alima* (Islamic scholars) who had been among the first Ladakhi women to study in religious schools in the Indian plains. Here, Rehman develops a similar theme with her research on a broader group of women who are part of this new movement. She explores their motivations for adopting a more overt religious lifestyle including, for example, regular attendance at religious sermons. For them religion is a source of empowerment that has helped them negotiate their own space.

Finally, our collection of research papers is accompanied by two photo essays that are published online on the *HIMALAYA* website. The first is a vivid set of images taken by Elisa Read (1898-1986), a Swiss-born Christian missionary who served with the London-based Central Asian Mission between 1925 and 1945. From the late summer of 1927 until the following spring, Elisa spent several months in Ladakh, helping out in the Moravian Mission School. Shortly afterwards, she moved to Baltistan where she spent the major part of her missionary career, together with her husband Alfred Read. Her photographs include images of the Christian congregation in Leh, as well as a Buddhist monastic festival in nearby Spituk, a street scene in Kargil, and portraits of Balti villagers. They point to the cultural and religious diversity of the region, the challenges of mountain travel, and the hardships of daily life, while at the same time expressing a warm sense of shared humanity.

In 2007-2008, Marta Normington lived for almost a year at a small Buddhist nunnery in Karsha in Zanskar, teaching English at a local monastic school, and she is responsible

for the second photo-essay. Drawing on her skills as a photographer, she documented the daily life of teachers and students as they struggled with the complexities of the Tibetan script as well as English and sometimes Urdu. The faces of the pupils range from anxious concentration to joyful laughter and joking. The austerity of their surroundings is clear, but they have hope for the future.

We look forward to further research, including by younger Ladakhi scholars, on historical and contemporary interactions between Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and the Sikh tradition in Ladakh and across the wider region.

References

- Aggarwal, Ravina and Mona Bhan. 2009. Disarming Violence: Development, Democracy, and Security on the Borders of India. *Journal of Asian Studies* 68(2): 519-542.
- van Beek, Martijn. 2001. Beyond Identity Fetishism: 'Communal' Conflict in Ladakh and the Limits of Autonomy. *Cultural Anthropology* 15(4), 525-569. Washington: American Anthropology Association.
- van Beek, Martijn and Kristoffer Brix Bertelsen. 1997. No Present without Past: the 1989 Agitation in Ladakh. In *Recent Research on Ladakh* 7, edited by Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rätther, pp. 43-65. Ulmer Kulturanthropologische Schriften Band 8. Ulm: Abteilung Anthropologie, Universität Ulm.
- Beszterda, Rafal. 2014. *The Moravian Brethren and Himalayan Cultures*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Bray, John (ed.). 2005. *Ladakhi Histories: Local and Regional Perspectives*. Leiden: Brill.
- Demenge, Jonathan, Radhika Gupta, and Salomé Deboos (eds.). 2013. Ladakh: Contemporary Publics and Politics. *HIMALAYA* 32(1,2): 7-11.
- Dinnerstein, Noé. 2013. Ladakhi Lu: Songs, Cultural Representation and Hybridity in Little Tibet. *HIMALAYA* 32(1,2): 73-84.
- . 2018. Himalayan Hybridity and the Evolution of Ladakhi Popular Music. *HIMALAYA* 38(1): 94-112.
- Fewkes, Jacqueline H. 2018. Perspectives from the Field: Interviews with the Alima of Ladakh. *HIMALAYA* 38(2): 90-99.
- Gupta, Radhika. 2014. Experiments with Khomeini's Revolution in Kargil: Contemporary Shi'a Networks between India and West Asia. *Modern Asian Studies* 48(2): 331-339.
- Lo Bue, Erberto. 2005. Lives and Works of Traditional Buddhist Artists in 20th Century Ladakh. A Preliminary Account. In Bray (2005: 353-378).
- Rizvi, Janet. 1996. *Ladakh. Crossroads of High Asia*. Revised edition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rizvi, Janet. 1999. *Trans-Himalayan Caravans. Merchant Princes and Peasant Traders in Ladakh*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Singh, Rohit. 2018. Sanctifying Minority Status in the Himalayan Ummah: Eid al-Ghadeer Commemorations among the Shia in Leh, Ladakh. *HIMALAYA* 38(2): 76-89.
- Smith, Sara H. 2013. "In the Past, We Ate From One Plate": Memory and the Border in Leh, Ladakh. *Political Geography* 35: 47-59.