

The 16th Conference of the International Association for Ladakh Studies

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About sixty scholars from around the world met at the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg from 17-20 April to discuss recent research on Ladakh. The conference was organised by the Department of Geography at the SAI, the Heidelberg Center for Environment (HCE) and the International Association for Ladakh Studies (IALS). With a broad overarching theme, 'Society and Environment in Ladakh: Historical perspectives and recent dynamics', papers presented at the conference covered a wide range of topics, including history, political developments, cultural and climate change, public health, identity, the history of art and architecture, Buddhist studies, water management and livelihoods. The Ladakhi participants included representatives from local NGOs, the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council (LAHDC) Leh, and the Sonam Norbu Memorial (SNM) Hospital, as well as independent scholars. A particularly encouraging sign was the participation by a number of Ladakhi research students from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Jammu University.

After a welcome address by Prof. Dr. Hans Harder, the Executive Director of the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University, the IALS President John Bray and Dr Juliane Dame from the local organising committee gave introductory speeches. The sessions on the first day focused on urban development, climate change and water management, political change in a borderland region and livelihood strategies. Prof. Dr. Marcus Nüsser, head of the Department of Geography at SAI, then concluded the day's programme with a keynote presentation entitled 'Landscape Changes on a Himalayan Scale'. The day concluded with a reception at the South Asia Institute.

Day Two included sessions on Buddhist studies, historical perspectives, cultural change, identity and belonging, and ended with a visit to Heidelberg and its surroundings, including a local ecological micro-brewery, Klosterhof Neuburg. Here participants received a short introduction to the art of brewing and had the opportunity to taste the local brew before eating dinner at the brewery's restaurant.

Day Three comprised sessions on historical perspectives, history of art and architecture, and Ladakh and its neighbouring mountain regions. The Biennial General Meeting of the Association took place after the final session, and the day concluded with a conference buffet dinner at the SAI.

Sessions on Day Four included cultural change and contemporary society, health and society, and language and culture, as well as a closing ceremony and group photo opportunity.

Given the very wide range of topics and the diverse disciplinary and professional backgrounds of the more than eighty registered participants, it is difficult to draw any simple conclusions or discern any clear trend in Ladakh studies as a whole. The emergence of younger Ladakhi scholars, such as Konchok Paldan (JNU), Stanzin Namgail (Jammu University), Sumera Shafi (JNU) and Dr Padma Dolma (SNM Hospital), is arguably among the most important developments, especially as they include talented researchers pursuing higher degrees in the humanities and social sciences who are conducting research on issues that are vigorously debated in Ladakh itself.

Among the presentations that generated the most vigorous debate was one in the context of the second of two exceptionally rich sessions on the history of art and architecture. Rosario Rizzi presented on the radical reconstruction work by the organization Stupa Onlus on historical religious structures in Ladakh, such as the so-called Kanishka chorten in Zangskar. Images of the result of the work done on this chorten and elsewhere in collaboration with local people provoked strong reactions from some participants, particularly those with a professional interest in art history and archaeology. As one would expect, discussions did not lead to agreement, but they helped bring out some of the profound difficulties involved in working in this field.

Presentations by Andrea Butcher on the contemporary use of ritual strategies to prevent natural disasters, and by Elizabeth Williams-Ørberg and Sumera Shafi on Buddhism and Islam, respectively, as lived religions among Ladakhi students based outside Ladakh, illustrated the complexities of religious identity and practice among Ladakhis. Although it is a well-worn cliché that Ladakh is undergoing rapid change, papers by Radhika Gupta on marriage strategies in Kargil, and the panel on health and society, which included presentations on perceptions of health care quality by Jennifer Aengst, on suicide by Dr. Iqbal Ahmad, on obstetrics

and neonatal care at the Leh hospital by Kim Gutschow and Dr Padma Dolma, and on changing perceptions of disability in Ladakh by Karola Woods, illustrated in different ways the depth and pace of change and its profound impact on everyday lives in Ladakh.

Overall, the quality of papers and the research they reported was encouragingly high, discussions were characterised by openness and, at times, strong opinions. Once again the IALS, now into its fourth decade, has proved itself to be a relevant network that can bring together high-quality scholarship from the sciences and humanities, passionate engagement, and a shared concern about what is going on in the Western Himalaya. The IALS hopes to hold its 17th conference in Kargil in 2015.

The full programme and abstracts of papers presented at the 16th IALS Conference can be found at the website of the IALS: www.ladakhstudies.org