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## **Declaration**

I, Megumi Kimura, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature.....

Date.....

*To Rejoy, who has always encouraged me  
and showed me the hidden beauty of India...*

## Acknowledgement

As an inexperienced researcher, this dissertation has been a big learning process. I had to clear several hurdles along the way and am grateful to all the people who supported me, either directly or indirectly, to complete this thesis.

I would like to officially acknowledge the collaboration of the Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO) in conducting this research project, especially Dr. Monisha Ahmed, Tashi Morup and Tsering Chonzom. LAMO is a public charitable trust established to articulate an alternative vision for the arts and media in Ladakh. It carries out outreach programs, research, workshops and exhibitions that showcase Ladakh's material and visual culture, performing arts and literature at their Center located in two historical houses (Munshi and Gyao) in Old Town. As part of its work, LAMO has initiated 'The Neighbourhood Project – Old Town Leh' in 2010, to document several aspects of Old Town and the communities that reside in it as well as various social, cultural, and economic processes of change. This research is contextualised within this project. It thus forms a part of LAMO's larger engagement with Old Town and its dialogues between different actors, including the local development body, Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh (LAHDC-L). Hopefully, this thesis will add to the current understanding of change in Old Town and provide insights that help formulate more meaningful policies to protect the area as a living heritage rather than a relic.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Darley Kjosavik and Sunetro Ghosal, for their guidance and for not giving up on me, till the very end. Especially Sunetro, who guided me to the study topic and introduced me to LAMO. Without his invaluable support, this journey may have never taken off. His deep insight into Ladakh has inspired me in many ways.

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Lastly, I will never forget the kindness of all the lovely people in Maney Khang and Leh, who sat with me and shared many cups of *chai* along with their personal stories!

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores how the history and on-going changes in the region are shaping the social and physical landscape of Leh Old Town, Ladakh in northern India. Historically, Old Town was the capital of the Ladakhi kingdom and an important transit point for caravans on the trans-Himalayan trade. Despite its historical and cultural importance of the area, many houses in the area are now ruined and its physical condition has declined to a ‘slum-like’ state. Further, the town’s development authority is discussing a plan to construct a road through this area to mitigate the town’s worsening traffic.

This paper looks beyond the aesthetic and physical appeal of the area and also its heritage value. It attempts to understand the social dynamics and perceptions that represent Old Town today. The study is based on primary qualitative data drawn from different groups and communities that use the area and secondary data drawn from the literature. Through these methods, the study argues that the past is present in the future, for the landscape of Old Town is a result of dynamic political, economic and social processes, which the region has experienced in the past centuries.

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# 1. Introduction

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## A. Background of the study: Old Ladakhi Proverb



Figure 1 Leh Palace and the old town below (Source: P. van de Haar. 2008)

*"Khar-Yog ga Khangpa, Zing-Yog ga Zhing"*

- *House below the palace, field below the water reservoir*

This is an old proverb that I encountered in Leh, the ancient capital of the former Ladakh kingdom, and presently marks India's northern frontier. While the proverb seems like a riddle at first glance, it implies that "unless a man has a house below the palace and agricultural field next to a reservoir, he is not eligible to get married in Leh town" (Morup, pers. comm.)

The palace refers to Leh palace (Figure 1), the former residence of the royal family. The proverb indicates that access and proximity to the palace was as important as access to water is to farmers.

In an agricultural society like Ladakh, which receives very little precipitation, access to irrigation channel is crucial.

Today, the area below the palace is called Old Town. Contrary to what the proverb suggests, the Old Town I observed did not seem even remotely important despite being directly below the palace. Instead I observed that several houses are ruined and trash is scattered along the path that leads to the palace. The steep, unpaved, and winding path is covered by bricks and rocks. It seems only curious tourists and residents, still living in the area use this path. I found this puzzling but intriguing. The proverb provided me a glimpse into the past, when this part of Leh was a very different place.

This research traces the changes in this part of Leh town, from a past when it was the capital of a kingdom to its current slum-like state. There has been very little critical discussion in the literature on the evolution of Leh over the centuries. To date, the drastic transformation from the seat of power to the current decay of Old Town has not been addressed in the existing literature.

This knowledge gap serves as the starting point of this research. The study investigates the current state of Old Town in the context of historical changes, which include ecological, social, economic and political factors. It draws on current literature on the history, of Ladakh at large and Leh in specific, to piece together different interpretations and dimensions of these historical processes of change. The analysis is carried out in the context of theoretical approaches that dwell on the ‘meaning of landscape’, which assume that space acquires meaning through people’s experience and activities in it.

## ***B. Problem statement***

Ladakh has undergone tremendous political, economic and social changes over the last few centuries: from being a kingdom, to becoming a part of a democratic nation-state as a geo-strategically important frontier region, where India manages contested claims with its neighbors (Pakistan and China) and a popular tourist destination that attracts thousands of visitors every year.

This research traces these processes of change from which the role and the meaning of Old Town emerges. While the palace stands above old town, like a relic of the past, the town that grew along its base has been reduced from a vibrant power center to a crumbling back alley and is largely occupied by migrant workers. Furthermore, there are plans to build a road through the area as part of the town's development project. Despite its historical importance, Old Town today is a largely neglected and undervalued neighborhood in Leh.

However, these changes did not occur overnight and Old Town has changed gradually over the last centuries as part of larger historical changes in the region and also through people's daily activities. At the same time, these changes in Old Town have not been documented or critically discussed in the current literature.

### ***C. Main Objectives and Research Question***

In an effort to fill this knowledge gap, this thesis explores the processes of social change in Ladakh, which have transformed the meaning and value of urban landscape of historical Leh Old Town over the past centuries. These are framed into specific questions:

1. What meanings emerge for Old Town in different historical periods?  
(or what does the landscape of Old Town represent?)
2. How did the relationship between people and the place changed?
  - What kind of experiences and interests were observed?
  - What was the role of the trade in Leh (politically, economically and culturally)?
  - How did the people's livelihood change?
  - How did the different stakeholders negotiate with the changes?

#### ***D. Outline of the Thesis***

The next chapter provides a brief geographical and historical description of the study area, Old Town, Leh, Ladakh.

The third chapter presents the theoretical framework, ‘meaning of landscape’, which will be used to respond to the above research questions. The central assumption is that while landscape and space have a physical reality, they are experienced through social and cultural practices.

The fourth focuses on the methodological framework used for this research. The chapter also includes a discussion of ethical issues and the limitation of the study with regard to the data collection.

The fifth and the main chapter will present the analysis and discussion. This chapter is divided into three different time periods: Kingdom period, Dogra/British rule and India’s independence onwards. The kingdom period covers the period from 10<sup>th</sup> century to 1842, when Ladakh lost its political independence. However, the discussion will mainly focus on the 17th century, when Leh assumed a central role in the kingdom. The Dogra/British rule lasted from 1842 to 1947, which was a critical transitional period for Old Town. Finally, the discussion will focus on the period from India’s independence to present-day (1947 onwards). The first two periods provide the historical context and background, while the third period explores their impact on current perceptions and practices. The analysis and discussions focuses on the dominant narratives for each time period, which are structured around three main factors i.e. political, economic and social.

Finally, the last chapter concludes the thesis by summarizing its main arguments in relation to the research objectives and the theoretical framework.

## 2. Study Area

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This study is centered on Old Town, the historical part of Leh, Ladakh in India. To understand the essential historical and geographical context of this area, the chapter introduces basic features and brief historical background of Ladakh. Then, it will narrow its focus on Leh, Old Town and Maney Khang, the specific study site where the data collection was conducted in June, July and September, 2012.

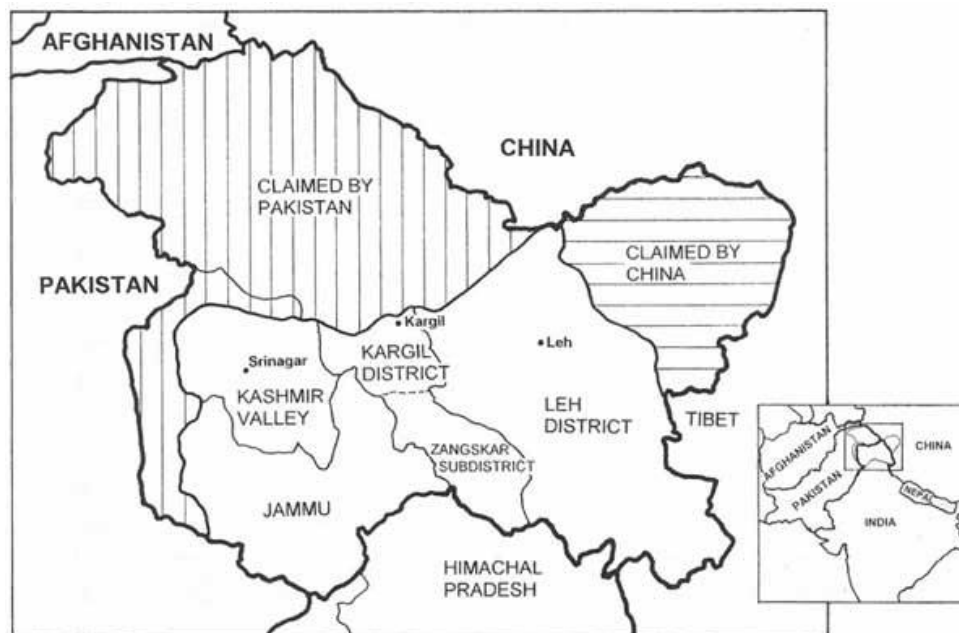


Figure 2 Map of Jammu and Kashmir region. (Source: Dollfus, 2007)  
Ladakh comprises of Leh and Kargil district

### ***A. Ladakh***

#### *Basic features*

Ladakh covers the eastern half of Jammu and Kashmir, India's northernmost state (Figure 2). The region borders Tibet Autonomous Region in the east, Xinjiang province in the northeast and the Northern Areas of Pakistan in northwest (Figure 2). It lies in the western edge of the Tibetan plateau and spans the parallel lines of the Great Himalaya range, Zangskar range, Ladakh range and Karakoram range.

Located in the high altitude zone in the rain shadow of the Himalayas, the region's topography is often characterized as 'Cold Desert' by extremely dry climate and stark mountain surfaces. Most parts of Ladakh are altitudes above 3,000m above mean sea level (Rizvi, 1983), which makes the region one of the highest and coldest inhabited places on the planet (Thsangspa, 2011, p69). The total area of Ladakh is 86,904 sq km, (Source: Ministry of Home affairs, 2013). At the same time, the total population of the region is 290,492 (Source: census 2011). The small population in this vast area means that Ladakh has one of the lowest population densities in India today (Thsangspa, 2011).

Ladakh is divided into two districts; Leh and Kargil. The district headquarters, Leh and Kargil, are the also the only large towns in Ladakh, while most of the rural populations live in smaller villages scattered across both districts. Since India's independence in 1947, Ladakh became part of India under the administration of Jammu and Kashmir state.

Linguistically, various dialects of 'Ladakhi' are spoken in different parts of the region and are related to Tibetan from the Sino-Tibetan language family. The region has two main religious communities: Buddhism and Islam. Today, in Leh district, roughly 80% of the population is Buddhist, with followers of various sects of Islam and tiny pockets of Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs living in and around Leh town. Similarly, the Shia sect of Islam forms the largest community in Kargil district, with the remaining population belonging to other sects and religions, especially Buddhism. By and large, the population of Muslims and Buddhists are roughly equal (with internal differences) and form the two dominant communities in the region.

The main access to the region is either by road or by air. Today, there are daily bus services to Leh from Srinagar (via Kargil) and Manali during the summer months. Also, Leh has the only civilian airport in the whole region for civilian purpose, with plans to expand the current airport in Kargil town. Every year, heavy snow fall in the winter shuts the road connections with Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh till late spring-early summer. This physically isolates the region for 6-7 months of the year, with civilian and military aircrafts providing the only connection with the outside world.

## *Historical Back Ground*

Ladakh became an independent political unit as a kingdom around 950 CE after the collapse of Tibetan empire. The founder of the kingdom was Nyima-Gon, who is reported to be a “legitimate representative of the ancient Tibetan royal house” (Rizvi, 1983, p39). Smaller kingdoms were loosely ruled under its suzerain. From 15<sup>th</sup> century, the separated kingdoms were reunited by the new dynasty of Namgyal (victorious) family, which was the second, and last, dynasty to rule Ladakh (Rizvi, 1983). The discussion relevant to this research evolves from the 17<sup>th</sup> century after one of Ladakh’s most powerful kings shifted the kingdom’s capital to Leh. Historically, Ladakh gained its importance from its strategic location at the crossroads of trans-Himalayan caravan trade routes.

Ladakh maintained its independent status until the Dogra<sup>1</sup> invasion which meant to gain control over the pashm trade, the raw material for pashmina. This invasion resulted in the end of the kingdom after nine centuries in 1835 (Sheik, 2010). When the Dogras gained control of Kashmir, both Ladakh and neighboring Baltistan became subjects of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir (Rizvi, 1999). The Dogras ruled Ladakh for 112 years till India’s independence in 1947, although the British did interfere with some aspects of governance in Ladakh during this period (ibid.).

### ***B. Leh***

Leh became a capital of Ladakh kingdom in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century when King Sengge Namgyal shifted the capital from Shey, 15 km away. Historically, Leh was an important stopover for the traditional trans-Himalayan trade. Because of this trade, during the Dogra and British occupation in the region, Leh was a site of operation at the Great Game and the contest between the Maharaja and the British over the pashm trade.

Since 1990, both Leh and Kargil received a semi-autonomous status from the Indian government. Consequently, the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) was established in

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<sup>1</sup> Dogra is an ethnic community of predominantly Hindus from Jammu district.

both districts, which concerns local governance issues, development and tourism among other issues.

Leh town is the district headquarter and the main tourist hub in the region. Its population is estimated to be 45,671 (Source: census 2011), which inflates several times during the summer months with the inflow of tourists and seasonal migrants. The town has an airport, a hospital, schools, markets, police station, post office, bank and hotels etc.

### *C. Leh Old Town and Maney Khang*

The focus of the study is the historical area of Leh, which is familiarly called Old Town today and made up of several neighborhoods. The area clusters below Leh Palace, which was built during the 17th century. Today, it is located near the town center, close to the Main Bazaar, the main street where shops, post office, bank and restaurants are concentrated.

Old Town was once the seat of the kingdom and retains cultural heritages structures from this period in the form of Buddhist monasteries, mosques, polo ground and old *stupas* etc. Today, however, many residents have moved out of the area to live in more spacious places outside Old Town. After the years of neglect, several houses in Old Town are severely damaged and the general condition of the area has deteriorated.

The area remains socially complex with its history of trade, regional politics and recent changes. To access the social complexity of Leh Old Town and to obtain a closer insight to historical narratives and current changes, this study focuses on one part of Old Town, “Maney Khang”.

Maney Khang means "*Stupa House*". The name derives from the two stupas (Buddhist structure) established in the center of the area. A local elder mentioned that it was built by the King Sengge Namgyal approximately 350-years-ago. The two stupas still stand at the same spot, while other structures around the old town have since been reconstructed.

The main reason for choosing Maney Khang is that it is located at the entrance of Old Town, adjoins the main market and functions as the only commercial space in Old Town. Thus, it is one of the liveliest and dynamic areas in Old Town and also symbolizes a borderland between



different eras, places and activities. Its mix of old mud-brick and new concrete buildings suggest that change has been most dramatic in this part of Old Town.

At the time of field research, there were 34 small shops and restaurants/café. Of these, 14 are run by locals and 18 by individuals from outside Ladakh. Most of them are mainly catering to local customers along with other customers like labours and tourist. Two cafés in the area are run by non-government organizations (Tibetan Heritage Fund and Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation) and cater mostly to tourists.

Maney Khang remains lively, attracting mostly locals but also used by tourists who pass through it on their way to Leh Palace and labourers who hang around to solicit daily work. Despite its historical importance, this area is largely neglected today with old structures being demolished or simply abandoned. At the same time, modern concrete buildings are being built every year in newer part of Leh to accommodate the growing influx of tourists and migrants workers. Today, this construction boom also impacts Old Town through development projects and a shortage of space.

### **3, Theoretical Framework: Meaning of the Landscape**

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#### **A. *What is landscape?***

The study looks at the conceptual and physical landscape of Leh Old Town. The term ‘landscape’ generally refers to “the visible features of an area of land” (Oxford Dictionary, 2013). The visible features of landscape are “often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal” (ibid.), such as ‘a beautiful coastal landscape’ or ‘a bleak urban landscape’. This is the common understanding of the term ‘landscape’.

Landscape is also an analytical concept, which is far more complex. From a positivist perspective, landscape is a passive and neutral entity which simply lies ‘out there’. Mitchell (2002) describes this physical and passive feature of landscape as “the background”, which is a passive setting in which various actions and events occur. Thus, “it is generally the ‘overlooked’, not the ‘looked at’” (ibid, p7). In this view, landscape is merely a layout of ‘visible’ objects. However, this perspective focuses only on those aspects of landscape, which are tangible, visible, measureable and physically exists ‘out there’. Thus in this view, a landscape is seen simply a physical aesthetic feature, a location or merely a background for our activities.

#### **B. *Social/Cultural Aspect of Landscape: Meaning of Landscape***

In contrast, social constructionist recognizes both the physical qualities of a landscape, as well as the social and cultural processes through which a landscape is experienced and changed. These perspectives assume that landscape is created through social processes (Schwandt, 2003, cited in Andrews, 2012). This research explores these dimensions, especially the social and cultural processes that give meaning to landscape. Unlike the positivistic view, which assumes nature to be an objective fact (Burr, 1995), social constructionist asserts “social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors” (Bryman, 2008, p19).

In this view, even a landscape which lies ‘out there’ is understood and perceived through socially constructed values. Thus, in contemporary social research, place/landscapes are conceived as a

subjective and dynamic concept (Masuda and Garvin, 2008, Ingold 1993). For example, Olsen (2008) argues that “a landscape is a physical reality a person relates to emotionally from experiences there and associations to earlier experiences” (p300). This means that we look at the physical landscape, consciously or subconsciously, through cultural, social, historical and emotional filters. In other words, there is a physical landscape out there, which we can never know except through these filters.

However, what kind of ‘experience’ influences these perspectives? Bender (2004) suggests that we experience the land differently according to our “social, political, economic relations” (p246) within which we conduct our daily life. It means that, daily interactions between people and the physicality of space shape particular experiences. This research focuses on how these relations and the factors influence our specific experiences of the land.

Thus, landscape is not merely a physical reality but a complex interaction of different factors and processes, including “social memory, identity, and sense of place” (Miewald and McCann, 2004, p1047). However, as a result of the complex interaction, landscape acquires meanings and the acquired meanings have implications on how a space is physically used, treated and changed. These ‘meanings of landscape/place’ are of central importance for this research.

To build on this point further, Bjerkli (2010) argues, “landscapes are constituted as meaningful entities through events. However, different experiences, interests or agendas make the same landscape evolve with different meaning” (p221). In this sense, the same space can contain multiple landscapes (ibid.). This means that a same landscape can mean differently from one person to another according to the context and his/her personal or social experience/memory/agenda. Borrowing an example from Bjerkli (ibid.), a nomad following his herd experiences the landscape very differently from the tourist following the same trail. As this example suggests, landscapes emerge from people’s relationships with the land. Thus, it is important to note that the above mentioned experiences, interests and agendas are the key to understanding the different meanings of landscape.

Only when these meanings become common property, can landscape become a tool to achieve a specific or shared end. As Cresswell (2004) claims, landscape is “a site of meaning as well as a tool used by powerful groups to manipulate present and future action” (cited in Masuda and Garvin, 2008, p112). Thus we also have to be also aware that a landscape and its meanings might bear political implications.

This acquisition of meaning is a continuous process as the meanings evolve through time and over generations. Adam (1998) also points out the transitional nature of landscape as a concept: “the landscape tells—or rather is—a story, ‘a chronicle of life and dwelling’. It enfolds the lives and the times of predecessors who, over the generations, moved around in it and played their part in its formation” (p54, cited in Ingold, 2000). This implies that a landscape is an accumulation of many generations who have dwelt or worked to collect meaning from the space. Thus, landscape is not merely socially constructed meanings but it is constituted through the actual work or tasks that people who live and act in it. Ingold (1993), calls such aspect of landscape as “task space”. Therefore, the landscape is never complete but is “perpetually under construction” (p162).

Hence, landscape produces, reproduces and transforms its meanings as the result of “governmental and local politics, land use, human priorities, experience, and values” (Lundberg, 2008, p347). Although these meanings are intangible, they have very tangible implications on the given landscape. Ingold (1993) further suggests us to accept both “landscape as neutral; backdrop of human activities” and the “particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space” (p152) to understand a social reality.

### *C. Summary*

To summarize, the study sets out by acknowledging the below aspects of landscape:

1. A landscape is both physical and social/cultural entity.
2. It is a result of the complex interaction of social memory, identity, and sense of place.
3. A landscape acquires meanings through experience and interest (social, political, economic).
4. A landscape is constantly being experienced and hence these meanings continue to evolve.
5. Changing meanings have implication on the physical space.

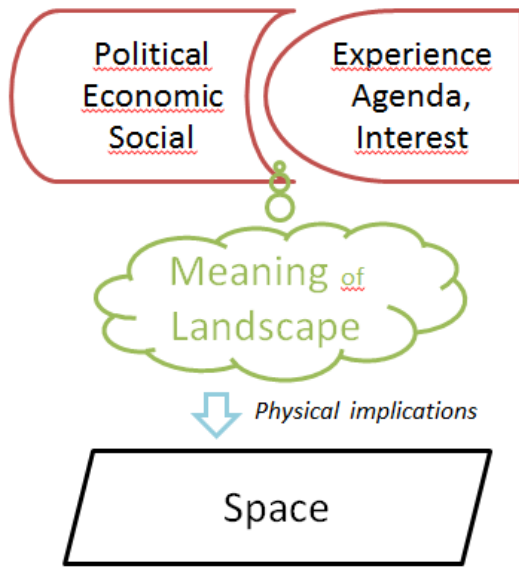


Figure 3 Interaction between meaning of landscape and physical space

activities that have produced the landscape observed today in Old Town.

This research will operationalise this theoretical framework through a structured process. First, it will identify relevant factors that influence the people’s experiences and activities on the land in each period, especially in three important areas: political, economic and social contexts (See Bender 1992 for a discussion on the importance these factors in understanding landscape change). Secondly, the study will look into how these experiences and activities are producing meanings and how these meanings are negotiated by different groups. Finally, the study will collate and discuss these meaning and its impact on the physical space. Through these processes, the theoretical framework will help us to unfold how perceived reality is constructed as a form of landscape by underlined meanings.

The appreciation of the transient and dynamic nature of landscape would explain the interaction between meaning of landscape and physical space (Figure 3). Such understanding will be useful to explore the complexity of Ladakh society and its relations to a specific landscape. Furthermore, contemporary meanings need to be understood in the context of their historic, which is integrated within this framework.

Thus, the study will use on this framework to explore how meaning of Old Town has emerged though different periods, factors that have influenced and

## 4, Methodology

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This chapter provides a description of the methods used for data collection and analysis. It also addresses the limitation and ethical consideration of the study.

### *Qualitative research*

The focus of this study is the transformation of the meaning of the landscape of Leh Old Town. The orientation of the study in relation to theory is inductive, which aims to generate theory as a result of the study. The nature of the study requires careful historical examination and in-depth research of the area and people in order to capture subtle meaning and feeling contained in the data. Thus, the research strategy uses a qualitative approach that dwells on meaning, context and change. It is based on the assumption that these processes are dynamic and influenced by various factors (Limb & Dwyer, 2001).

This study uses both secondary and primary sources of data. Secondary data were collected basically from published literatures and academic papers relevant to the study area and the theoretical framework. Much of the historical narratives are drawn from the literatures and official government records. The primary data was generated through field work in Leh-Ladakh. The main methods were interviews and participant observation, which will be introduced in the following subsections.

### *Interviews*

Interview is a research method in which researcher and participants “produce knowledge” through “conversational relation” which is “contextual, linguistic, narrative and pragmatic” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p17). This provides data to meet the objectives of this study. As a form of interview, both semi-structured and unstructured interviews were employed for data collection. Semi structured interviews is where “a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered. But interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply” (Bryman, 2008, p438). In

this study, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 30 shopkeepers in the study area (the main person of each shop). This method was used in the primary stage of the data collection to understand their background and the nature of the business. In the later stage I was able to establish closer relations with some of them who became the ‘key informants’ and contributed much of the in-depth narratives.

Also unstructured interviews were held with relevant individuals, namely local residents (including key-informants), NGO workers, scholars and tourists in addition to the shopkeepers in Old Town. Unstructured interview is where the interviewee can respond freely. According to Burgess (1984), unstructured interview is “very similar to in character to a conversation” (cited in Bryman, 2008, p438). To respect the natural setting, many interviews were also conducted as informal conversations. One video chat (Skype) interview was also conducted with a foreign mountaineer who resides abroad but is familiar with the study area over long periods.

### *Participant Observation*

Participant observation is a method where “the researcher immerses in a social setting for an extended period of time, observing behavior, listening to conversations between others and with the fieldworker and asking questions” (Bryman, 2008, p402) To utilize this method, it was required to be regarded as ‘insider’, rather than an ‘outsider’ in order to maintain the natural setting. For this reason, I preferred to present myself as a ‘student’ rather than a ‘researcher’, which has the certain connotation of an observer from outside rather than trying to learn something from them or as a part of them. By and large participants were friendly and generally curious why a Japanese student came to the area everyday to chat with them and ask around the place where other tourists simply pass by. Yet it required certain amount of time and effort to establish myself as part of them and to extract intimate stories.

### *Limitation of the study and ethical consideration*

The research started out as ethnography, to study livelihood of small commercial establishment in the area. However, as I conducted the field study, I found something deeper in relation to the

current social complexity and the history of the place. The nature of qualitative strategy justifies this change of direction and allows the study to “weave back and forth between the data and theory” (Bryman, 2008, p9) because the purpose of the research is to generate data cumulatively in response to the research questions rather than prove or disprove a hypothesis (grounded theory).

The biggest challenge in conducting data collection was time and language. As the study area is only open for short periods during the summer months in a year, the data collection was compressed in two months. While some respondents were able to communicate in English, many preferred the local language (Ladakhi) or Hindi. Although the language barrier was compensated through the use of a local interpreter, it cannot replicate direct communication. Also, due to the presence of local interpreter, the conversation tended to be too official and unnatural which caused people not to talk about their inner feeling. As a result, I prefer to talk to people in my limited Hindi and used the interpreter when necessary, which was a challenge. For the same reason, I did not use the recorder but took interview notes. Also, as the data were largely based on people’s memory and perception, sometimes, these are often contradictory or obscure, which needed to be analyzed in a context.

Lastly, as an ethical consideration, oral informed consent was taken by the participants especially in the first round of semi-structured interviews. Participants were informed who I am and what the purpose of the interview is. In the meantime, in some occasions it was proven difficult to collect the informed consent especially in some unstructured interviews which occurred in a natural setting more as a conversation. Bryman (2008) also notes this point “In ethnographic research....ensuring that absolutely everyone has the opportunity for informed consent is not practicable, because it would be extremely disruptive in everyday contexts” (p121). Due to this difficulty, the study chose to keep the names of the participants in the study area anonymous. Instead their comments are cited only by status, gender and age. However, some relevant individuals such as local scholar/historians, NGO officer who agreed to be named are cited by their names.



## 5. Analysis and Discussion

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### 5 – 1. Kingdom period (10<sup>th</sup> century till 1834)

#### A. Political Context

##### A.1 Lehigh as a seat of the Ladakh kingdom



Figure 4 Leh, capital of Ladakh ca. 1857 (Source: Schlagintweit)

*Lé, the capital of Ladakh...is built at the foot and on the slope of some low hills, forming the northern boundary of the valley, and separated by sandy plain about two miles broad from the [Indus] river. It is enclosed by a wall, furnished at intervals with conical and square towers and extending on either side to the summit of the hills. It is approached by a double line of the sacred structure or manis ... and houses scattered over the plain without the walls on either hand. [Inside the town,] The streets are disposed without any order, and form a most intricate labyrinth, and the houses are built contiguously, and run into each other so strangely, that form without it is difficult to determine the extent of each mansion. The number [of houses] scarcely exceeded five hundreds. ...the most considerable building in Lé is*

*the palace of Raja, which has a front of two hundred and fifty feet and is of several stories in height, forming a conspicuous object on the approach to the city.*

*- William Moorcroft, Leh 1821. (1841, p316-7)*

This is the landscape of Leh Town in the time of the *Gyapos* (kings of Ladakh), when Leh had served as the capital of the kingdom for just over two centuries (since the 17<sup>th</sup> century). Although Moorcroft, an employee of British East India Company, arrived in Leh towards the end of the dynasty, other early European travelers' description of the town largely correspond with his account. Houses were spread on the hill side at the foot of the palace, forming a small town surrounded by the walls. This was the town of Leh (Figure 4), which is now called Old Town.

The palace, which Moorcroft pointed out, was built by Sengge Namgyal (1616-1642AD), "Ladakh's greatest ruler" (Thangspa, 2011, p28) when he shifted the capital of the kingdom to Leh in 17<sup>th</sup> century. The palace was the symbol of the king's power, while also serving as the residence of the royal family and the administrative headquarter from which the king and his ministers governed the kingdom. According to Tashi Rabgyas<sup>2</sup>, the palace was "the biggest and the most magnificent building in whole Ladakh and across Himalaya at the time". The palace is an important clue to the importance of Leh in the social, economic and political functioning of the Ladakhi kingdom.

Under the reign of King Sengge Namgyal, the boundary of the kingdom extended as far as western Tibet to the east and Purig (present-day Kargil district) to the west (Figure 5). This period is regarded as the "Golden Age of Ladakh" (Fewkes, 2009, p54; Thangspa, 2011, p28). During this period, the kings of Ladakh enjoyed a position of "considerable status and honor" (Petech, 1977) with the kingdom's political power was largely concentrated in the king and his ministers (Rizvi, 1999) who were concentrated around the palace.

Despite its glory, the kingdom' was also subjected to a series of invasions and political interference by the foreign powers. Throughout its history, the kingdom had unstable relations with its powerful neighbors; Kashmir to the west, Tibet to the east and Central Asian kingdoms

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<sup>2</sup> Tashi Rabgyas - a philosopher and contemporary Ladakhi scholar, who also served as Information Officer in Leh (interview note)

to the north. Due to the political instability with the neighboring region, as noted by Moorcroft, Leh town was surrounded by high fortification walls. According to local informants, the entry to the town was limited through the three gates: *Stago Gongma*, *Stago Barma*, and *Stago Yokma*. These terms are used to refer to different parts of a village. The name of the gates possibly signified the level of the access to the core of the town, which is locally known as *Skyanos Gogsum* or ‘Three Gates’. The area is further divided into smaller neighborhoods called *mohalla* (neighborhood).

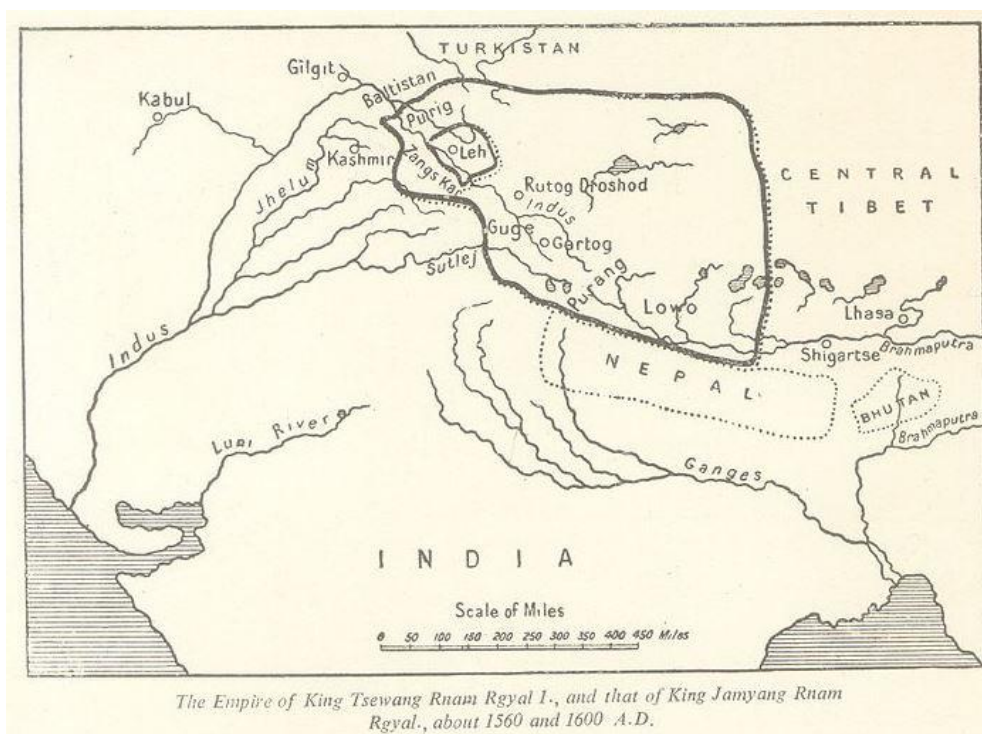


Figure 5 The empire of King Tsewang Rnam Rgyal I., and that of King Jamyang Rnam Rgyal., about 1560 and 1600 A.D. Source: A History of Western Tibet by A.H. Francke, 1907 republished as A History of Ladakh)

Each *Mohalla* in Old Town inherits the historical meaning and stories from king’s time, such as *Maney Khang* means ‘stupa house’, *Kharyok* indicates ‘below the palace’, *Stalam* is ‘horse way’, and *Lobding* is ‘fallen leaves’. The peripheral parts of the town located outside of the fortification wall, *Stagho Philog* means ‘outside the gate’. In *Chute Rantak* (water mill), there was a water-powered mill to grind barley, with the water flowing into the fields, which lay beyond. All the other areas found in Leh town today, including Main Bazaar, Karzu and Changspa did not exist in this period.

The town's political importance was marked by the presence of aristocracy in Leh. During the kingdom period, most of the ruling class of Ladakh resided in Leh Town with the aristocracy and nobility making up 3% of the town's population (Fewkes, 2009, p54). Their residence clustered below the palace, the area called *Kharyok* or 'below the palace'. Large houses were built in this area for important officials and ministers, as well as the richest merchant families in Ladakh. Apart from the royal family and aristocracy, Leh was also home to the people who worked for the royal family such as horsemen, tailors, jewelers, musicians and artisans. And they were also given the high status and title such as "*Khar-Mon* (palace musicians)" (Rizvi, 1983, p140).

Moorcroft noted that some houses '*scattered...without the walls on either hand*', while a local elder claims that the "*king did not allow his people to build their house out of the gates*" (male, 88-year-old). This discrepancy of the information suggests that the town wall might have physically represented a social demarcation between those who were seen as the 'king's people', or insiders, and others. While those who were affiliated with the royal family had a house inside the town wall, 'the others' might have been located outside.

For example, as discussed later, the serais (rest houses) for traders were located outside the wall. Similarly, the workshops for blacksmith were also located outside of the walled town at Zangsti, "where copper was hit" (Sheikh, 2010). Traditionally blacksmith is the work of '*Mons*' who are originally "migrants till they got assimilated into the local populace" (Bodhi, 2010, p33) and they are "socially regarded as being inferior status" (Rizvi, 1983, p117). These groups were possibly regarded as 'outsiders' who did not have political or social tie with the royal family. Rabgyas echoes this description:

*"In the past, Ladakh was a small kingdom and Leh was a small town. For the town's security, houses were built around the palace and the gates were closed after the sunset. So, during the night, outsiders could not enter the town and the town was very safe"* (interview note).

These narratives around the palace and town wall/gates suggest that the physical proximity of one's residence to the palace implied a closer affiliation to the power of the king. The palace was a physical representation of the king's power, authority and high social status. As the "Golden

Age of Ladakh” and the local proverb illustrate, the power of the king was attached to people’s experience in the glorious kingdom and its independent political status.

## ***B. Economic Context***

The economic condition of the people in Ladakh during the kingdom is largely unknown (Sheikh, 2010, p55). However, Sheikh (ibid.) claims that it was a “mild form of despotism” where power and wealth were largely concentrated in the hands of the king and his ministers. Moorcroft (1841) mentions that “there is not much wealth in the country” but the available resources are fairly equally distributed among the people and “the great body of people are in easy and comfortable circumstances” (p 320). According to him, people did not pay tax in cash, although they were obliged to supply the king and his governors with “fuel, milk, butter, tea, grass for his cattle, servants for his person, and labours in his fields” (ibid.), which was enough burden to the society based on agriculture and farming. People’s livelihood was supplemented by the regional trade (Dawa, 1994) which made the town an important trading hub apart from its administrative capital.

### **B.1 Agriculture - base of Ladakhi economy**

It is believed that Dards, early dwellers in Ladakh, had developed an irrigation system in the region (Tiwari and Gupta, 2008) and Ladakhi have lived off the land despite the harsh condition in the high mountains. Farmers grow mainly barley, which has historically been the staple diet in Ladakh or turnip, apricot and apple according to the altitude of their land. Thus, agriculture has been the base of the Ladakhi economy and a majority of the population was in agriculture, especially in lower Ladakh (Dawa, 1994). An extensive irrigation system was installed also in Leh town by the Dards in earlier age (Tiwari and Gupta, 2008) and large agricultural fields were laid out around the walled town.

Since agriculture was such a vital part of Ladakhi livelihood, the size of the land and access to irrigation facilities, were directly linked with one’s prosperity and social status. The second part of the proverb “field below the water reservoir” implies the importance of the proximity of one’s

field to a water channel. Sheikh (2010) also asserts that the affluence of a man was determined by the extent of the cultivatable land he possessed.

Because of the importance that agriculture held in the social-economic life of Ladakh, the power of the king was also evident here too. Oral tradition and the literature both mention that the royal family possessed the largest, and possibly the most productive, field in the area where Main Bazaar is located today. Several local informants mentioned the following proverb which illustrates this point further: “*to take a bride, pretend that tetres is his main field*”. *Tetres* was the largest field belonging to the King of Ladakh (also mentioned in Sheikh, 2010, p53) and was directly connected to the irrigation tank in *Chute Rantak* (water mill), which ensured a steady supply of water.

The king’s significant role in socio-economically important agricultural activity is embodied in a form of ritual tradition called *Saka*, which takes places in Leh in every March before fields are ploughed. In this ritual, Dzogs (hybrids of yak and cow) with ploughs are taken seven times around Leh palace and the areas where the king’s fields were located (Tiwari and Gupta, 2008). Sheikh confirms that the ritual continues till today though in a smaller scale, while in the past it was patronized by the king (Sheik, pers. comm.).

These proverbs and local practice around the agriculture also illustrate how the landscape of Leh was shaped around the power of the king, and extended beyond the political sphere to the economic and social life of Ladakh.

## B.2 The Regional Trade

Although agriculture engaged the majority of population, in Ladakh, the arable land is limited especially in higher altitudes where nomadic pastoralism is the dominant form of livelihood. These communities are called *Changpas* and depend largely on their livestock, which includes sheep, yak, changra goats (source of pashmina) and horses in the Changthang area of eastern Ladakh. Thus, the altitudinal variations had a strong impact on local ecology and livelihoods. As a result, the lower elevation agricultural areas and the high altitude plateau had evolved an interdependence in their livelihoods strategies (Dawa, 1994). The mutual dependence between the areas turned both farmers and herdsmen into “subsistence traders” (Rizvi, 1999). Local traders carried their surplus and the commodities which they have obtained from other area to barter

with other essential commodities. Thus, lower Ladakh supplied barley and apricot, while salt and wool came from high plateau areas. For these small scale traders from villages, trade was “the only mean to bridge the gap between starvation and subsistence” (Rizvi, 1999). At the same time, many of these traders, especially from Sham (lower Ladakh) also used these interconnections to generate profits. For the Changpas, trade was the lifeline to obtain the food grain and other necessities. Over the years, this barter system was established as a local trade network across the kingdom and beyond.

Thus, despite the difficult terrain, a network of trade routes had developed and crisscrossed Ladakh, with a variety of goods passing through the region. Apart from these small scale local traders, large scale and long distance trading caravans were also passing through the region. These expeditions were carried out in the form of caravan which was funded by wealthy town based merchants and foreign traders who had the capital and network to operate months’ long journey to cover hundreds of mile across the Himalayas. The origin of the caravan trade is unknown, yet according to Rizvi, “there is evidence that traders may have been passing Ladakh as early as the ninth century” (Rizvi, 1983, p75).

Unlike the local small scale traders who have mainly carried essential commodities out of necessity, the trans-Himalayan caravans carried non-essential commodities of high value. For example, fine pashm wool, salt, China silks, tea cups, carpets, paper and musk were imported from Tibet. Coarse cotton goods from eastern Turkestan, saffron and rice from Kashmir, and apricots and barley from Baltistan passed to Tibet through Ladakh (Tiwari and Gupta, 2008). While small scale traders have supplemented the rural livelihood, according to Rizvi (1999), long distance caravan trade across Himalaya has functioned as the backbone of urban economy.

Portuguese merchant Diogo d’Almeida, the first recorded European visitor who reached Ladakh in the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century, reported “the importance of the trade in the life of Ladakh at this time, as always” (d’Almeida, cited in Rizvi, 1983, p48). In later years, according to the English diplomat Alexander Cunningham (1854), the kingdom’s revenue was largely dependent on trade. He claims that the region’s direct income came from the import and export duties paid by the traders. Also indirectly, the trade enriched the region since most part of the transportation of

goods on the important routes, between Central Asia and Kashmir was operated by Ladakhis and involved many hands along the way. Also Cunningham (1854) claims that the king was the most important trader in Ladakh.

### B.3 Lehigh as a trade hub



Figure 6 Traditional trade routes and lines of communication in the Silk Road trade network. Source: Kreutzmann, 2013. Lehigh and main trading counterparts additionally marked by the author.

Lehigh was located at geographical crossroad that included seven major trading routes from Kashmir, Tibet, Central Asia and Punjab. The town's physical centrality for trade turned Lehigh into an essential trading hub where people, goods and wealth had gathered.

One of the important trade routes was across the Karakoram Pass that facilitated trade between India and Yarkand in Sinkiang (presently the Chinese province of Xinjiang) in Central Asia (Figure 6). Because of this trade, Ladakh was drawn into the transcontinental Silk Route trading networks that connected it to South Asia, Central Asia and Europe. Although the actual Silk Route did not pass through Ladakh, the trans-Karakoram route represented one of the main Silk



Route “feeders” and indeed silk was one of the important commodities passing through the area (Rizvi, 1999).

Over the years, this trade also attracted the attention of others including the Mughals, the Dogras, the British and the Russians. Easy access to the Karakoram Pass was the very reason King Sengge had chosen Leh as his new capital, as it is located at the foot of Khardung-la, the main summer route to Sinkiang via the Karakoram Pass (Rizvi, 1983). Although the former capital Shey was more strategically located, the king chose the economic advantage of Leh over Shey (Rizvi, 1999). In this sense, the caravan trade was the town’s very “raison-d’être” (ibid., p11).

Knight (1893) also wrote that Leh was conveniently located between India and Central Asia, where traders exchanged their goods. Traders from Central Asia rarely proceeded south beyond Leh, while hardly any Indian traders went further north beyond the town. Leh was an important staging point from either direction. Before traders commenced a homeward journey, usually they spent 1-2 months in Leh to recover from the weary journey and to restock supplies.

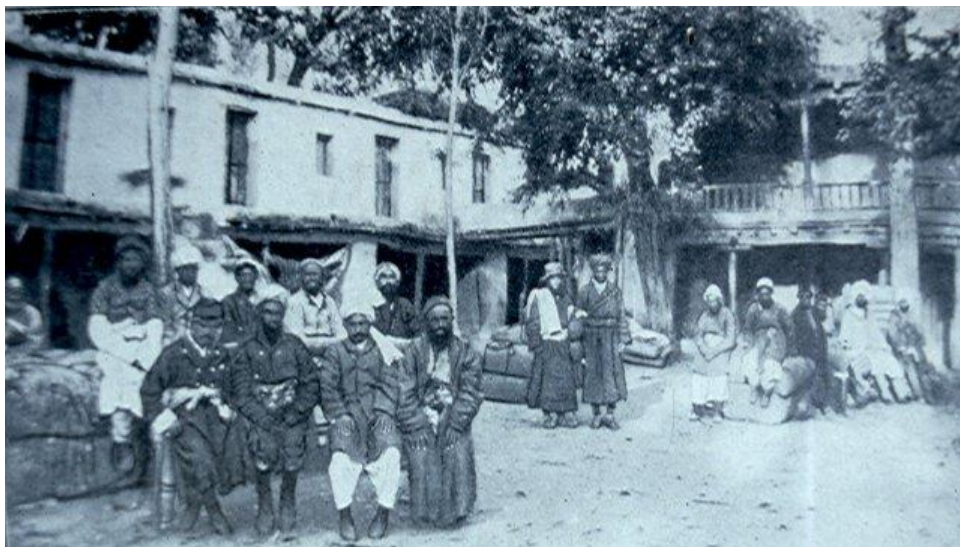


Figure 7 Interior of a Sarai 1918 (Source: Crump, 1919)

To accommodate these traders in Leh, there were facilities called *serais* (Figure 7). Serai was not only a guest house and storage but also a market place where the traders met, assessed the quality of goods, negotiated price and guarded valuable products. According to Fewkes (2009), “it was the economic and social center of traders in north Indian and Central Asian trading towns” (p88). None of these serais are present today but there used to be at least three of them in Leh (ibid.).

Local informants confirm that the former serais were located in one of the current parking lots at Zangsti near Main Bazaar, another near the current police station and next to the water tank in Chute Rantak; all of which are located near Old Town but outside its ‘walls’. This is probably because Old Town did not have enough space to accommodate caravans with large number of packed animals with loads. Also because the town gates closed after sunset and outsiders were not allowed after the sunset, the serais for traders were mainly established outside the gates. Although their accommodation may have located outside, Monisha Ahmed<sup>3</sup> confirms the presence of the traders in and around the walled town:

*“I think the trade took place inside and outside the town walls. The area in front of Jamma Masjid was known to be one area where traders sat and sold their wares. Even if the main market isn't what we know it as today the trade still took place in the area. Trade also took place in the serais ... and also directly from the homes of some of the large traders in Leh” (pers. comm.)*

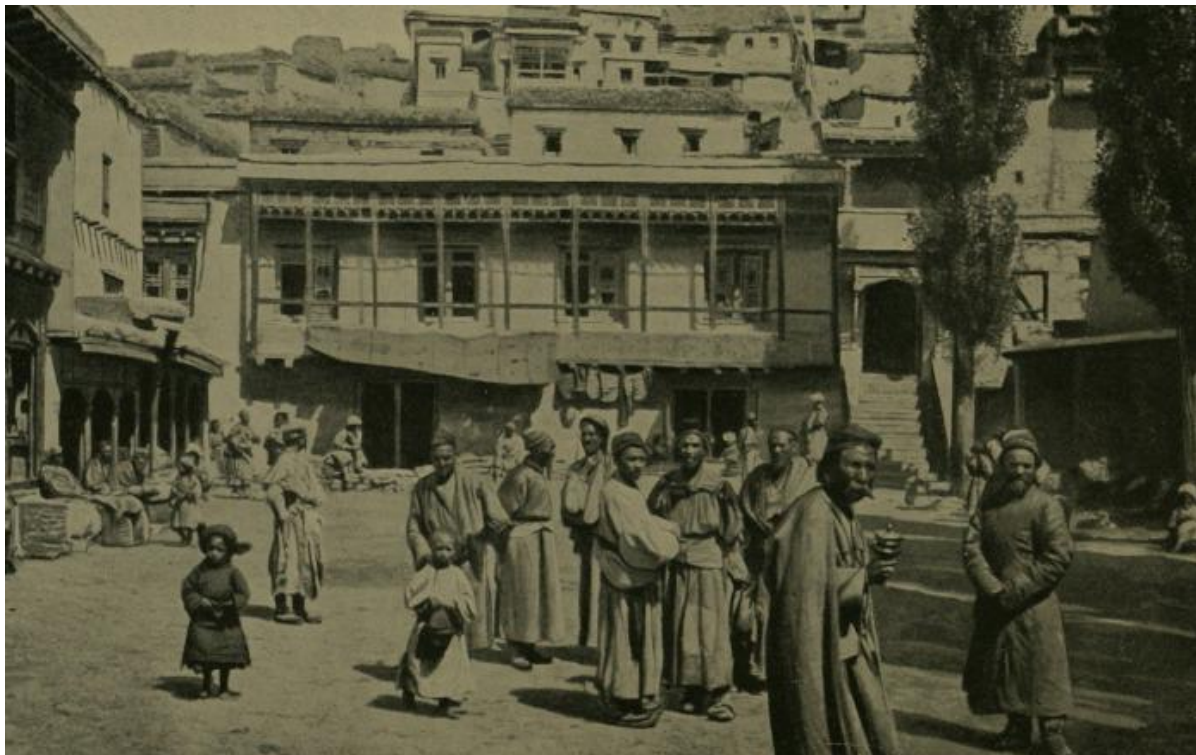


Figure 8 Main Square in front of Jamma Masjid. Goods were traded here during the kingdom period. (source:de Lacoste 1909). The Masjid in traditional Ladakhi architectural style built during 17<sup>th</sup> century is today reconstructed to new concrete structure.

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<sup>3</sup> Monisha Ahmed is the co-founder of Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO) and an author.

Thus, as shown above, Leh was a regional hub—at the crossroads—of the trans-Himalaya trade network on which livelihood of many depended. And the area around today’s Old Town was the bustle market place where goods from different regions were exchanged. Indeed, the town’s physical centrality in this trade network locates Leh at the economic and social center of the kingdom. Apart from the king’s power, the importance of the trade had also defied the people’s relationship with the town.

### *C. Socio-Cultural Context*

Culture and social life in Ladakh have largely evolved around religion. However, there was a close tie between the king of Ladakh, religious institutions and trade. As a result, the king and trade also had substantial impact on religious communities and cultural development of the region. The presence of the king and trade in Leh town made it a ‘cosmopolitan social center’, which nourished Ladakhi culture and economy.

Especially in 17<sup>th</sup> century, under the patronage of King Sengge Namgyal, the Buddhist monasteries prospered. “Golden Age of Ladakh” was not only in its political sense but also it also applied to religion in Ladakh, especially Buddhism. During this period, Islam also arrived in the region via political, economic and social channels. Ever since, Ladakhi culture had developed through the generations of integration between Tibetan Buddhism and Islam. In the following subsections, the study explores the two main religious communities in the area: Buddhist and Muslims and how they influenced the cosmopolitan nature of Ladakhi culture.

#### C.1 Buddhism in Ladakh

Since Ladakhi kingdom was founded by members of the Tibetan royal family, Ladakh was “while politically independent, subordinate to Tibet in religion, and the culture that is dependent on religion” (Rizvi, 1983, p40). Since then, Ladakh had close cultural and religious (Buddhism) tie with Tibet till the Chinese invasion of Tibet and territorial dispute between India and China in 1962.

However, Buddhism did not arrive in the region from Tibet. The origin of Buddhism in the region can be traced back to a time before the Ladakhi kingdom. Rizvi (1983) suggests that Buddhism came to Ladakh from the plains of India through Kashmir, perhaps as early as first or second century. However, in the subsequent period, Hindu and later Mughal force largely eradicated Buddhism in the plains of the Indian subcontinent and Kashmir. As a result, Ladakh turned to Tibet instead of developing its own form of Buddhism and was integrated into the larger Tibetan religious and cultural empire. (ibid.)

However, while head temples were located in Tibet and Tibet continued to give cultural and political influence in the region, Buddhism in Ladakh flourished under the protection and patronage of the successive kings. Especially during the 16th and 17th century, in the peak of Namgyal dynasty, Buddhism flourished in Ladakh.

Since the king played an important role in Ladakh's religious affairs, as Italian Jesuit priest, Desideri wrote in 1715, Leh was "the capital of both the king and the chief lama of this kingdom" (Desideri, 1937, p78). To illustrate the close tie between monasteries and king's power, there was a series of incarnation of lama [high level monk] who served as "king's principal spiritual advisor" (Bray, 2005, p10) and monks generally occupied high position in the society. During this time, under the guidance and the supervision of the lamas, the kings established many important monasteries (*gompa*) along the Indus river "including Hemis, Chemre and Tashi Gong" (Fewkes, 2009, p54; Shakspe, 1999).

The close affiliation between monasteries and the king was also demonstrated in the annual festivals in Leh town. The festivities are big social occasions in the otherwise frugal lifestyle of Ladakh and they are usually organized along religious themes. The biggest festivals for Buddhist are *Losar* (Buddhist New Year) and *Dosmoche*. During these festivities, aristocratic families and head lamas were invited by the king to the palace and various programs such as dances and horse races were organized around the palace (Rizvi, 1999). These festivals added color to the life in Ladakh and highlighted the importance of this area for the Buddhist community.

## C. 2 Buddhist Monasteries and trade

As a result of the political influence enjoyed by the Buddhist clergy, some of the big monasteries were also major actors in trade. Especially *Lo-pchak*, “one of the ceremonial quasi-religious missions” (Rizvi, 1983, p159) was the main long-distance trade between Ladakh and Tibet. The mission was to pay the tribute and respect from the king of Ladakh to Dalai Lama in Lhasa as a token of their friendship (Rizvi, 1983). In this trading mission, all the facilities were arranged by Tibetan government, including portorage.

The privileges and the resulting profits made this event a good opportunity for traders. While the royal family and the big monasteries sponsored the missions, the management was done by the Leh-based trading families. Although officially *Lo-pchak* was a religious mission, its conduct was not restricted to Buddhist and prominent Leh-based Muslim trading families were also known to have lead the mission (Rizvi, 1983; Sheikh, 2010). In return, annual *Zhung-tsong* carried tea from Lhasa to Leh and equal facilities were prepared in Ladakh for Tibetan traders. The missions lasted till the middle of the 20th century when the Dalai Lama escaped to India in the wake of the Chinese invasion of Tibet.

While the exchange of these missions between the two capitals was at least initially religious and political, they “formed the basis of commercial relationship between Leh and Lhasa” (Rizvi, 1999, p20). Thus, the monastery’s involvement in the regional trade and its complication in the political affairs also promoted the overall importance of Leh in the regional politics, as well as in the economic and social life of Ladakh.

### C.3 Islam in Ladakh

While Buddhism flourished in the region under the king’s patronage, trade and regional politics brought Islam to Ladakh. While Buddhism remains an important religious group, Ladakhi Muslims have also played an essential part in the cultural development of Ladakh.

As discussed in the Study Area chapter, today Muslims compose approximately half of the population in Ladakh as a whole. Majority of them live in the Kargil district and mostly belong to Shia sect, while a relatively smaller group live in and around Leh. In Leh district, there is also

a small group of Sunni Muslim, who live in Leh town as well as some surrounding villages. Many of these Leh-based Muslims are descendants of traders from Kashmir and Central Asia and make a small pocket of Sunni community in this Buddhist heartland. Though minority, their presence has also constituted an integral part Leh society for generations.

Significant Muslim migration to Leh took place since 17<sup>th</sup> century, after the father of Sengge Namgyal, King Jamyang Namgyal's married to a Muslim princess, Gyal Khatun, from Baltistan (Figure 5) as part of a political settlement (Sheikh, 2010; Thangspa, 2011). The young princess was accompanied by a large number of attendants namely maids, artisans, traders, tailors and musicians. Today, their descendants are settled in Chushot and Shey village near Leh town (Thangspa, 2011). These Balti Muslim were known to have contributed cultural and technical development to Ladakh through the introduction of musical instrument, water mills and their carpentry skill (Mohammad and Zubdavi, 2009).

According to the oral tradition, King Jamgyang Namgyal also granted lands in Leh to seven Kashmiri Muslim traders (Sheikh, 2010). These traders were called *Khar Tsong* or 'Court Traders' and enjoyed the high status and special trade privileges in return for the services to the royal family during the kingdom era. The king also invited men from Kashmir to Leh to perform 'specific tasks' such as 'translator, ambassador to Tibet', 'to strike coins, or as a butcher' (Sheikh, 2010). The social status of these Muslims was "by and large equivalent to the nobles of the Buddhist community" (Sheikh, 2010).

During this period, a number of Islamic structures were established in Leh town. In 16<sup>th</sup> century, Gyal Khatun built the first Mosque in Leh, following her marriage with King Jamyang Namgyal (Sheikh, 2010). In the following century, Sengge is said to have given a small piece of land in near Old Town to Muslim traders to build the first public mosque, *Tshas Soma* or 'new garden' (Sheikh, 2010). His son, King Deldan established the biggest mosque in Leh, Jamma Masjid (Figure 8) to improve relations with the Mughals (Rizvi, 1999; Fewkes, 2009; Sheikh, 2010).

While majority of Buddhist population were engaged in agriculture, these Muslim population were given other tasks. Through their works and religious practice, both communities in Ladakh have contributed in the region's cultural development.

#### C.4 Arghon Community

Apart from the Muslim population mentioned above, many Muslim traders came to Leh from Kashmir and Central Asia. Desideri in 1715 reports "A number of merchants from Kashmir engaged in the wool trade live in this kingdom and they are allowed to have mosques and openly to hold their religion" (1937, p37). Some of these traders married local Buddhist women and settled in Leh permanently. Their descendants are called Arghons and formed a prominent trading community that represents a cosmopolitan feature of Leh town.

A group of Muslim elders who participated in the interviews in Maney Khang identified themselves as Arghons (or Arghun). During the interview in the goldsmith shop in the area where Muslim elders daily get together for gossip, one informant claimed, "We (four Muslim elders including the goldsmith) are all Arghons here!" (male, 84-year-old) and explained that they were also traders when they were young. The other informants explained that Arghons means "Ladakhi Muslims who were involved in the trade" (male, 30-years-old). More specifically, Arghons are the children of Muslim traders from Kashmir or Central Asia, who have come to Ladakh and married local Buddhist women (Fewkes, 2009). According to Sheikh (2010), the Arghons are generally Sunni Muslims and the term 'Arghon' is a Mongol word literally means "mixed". Fewkes (2009) argues that Arghon is a "socially constructed category" (p74) or a denomination of one identity group rather than an ethnic group since their forefathers have different origins. Fewkes claims that their identity does not accept the classic category of ethnic identification. Instead, Arghon is identified by "their international kinship and participation in larger socio-economic systems" (ibid, p79). Their kinships and the trading networks "stretched across the Himalayan and Karakoram regions to Lhasa, Kathmandu, Kalimpong, Yarkand and Khotan" (Bray, 2005). Over centuries, Arghons formed a prominent Muslim trading community till the end of the trade in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century the British Joint Commissioner Captain H. Ramsay described “*The Arghons as a rule have no land, and they therefore have to keep their wits about them to earn their bread*” (1890, cited in Sheikh, 2010, p74). The land here means the agricultural fields for cultivation. As their fathers were merchants from elsewhere, Arghons had no farm land to inherit in Ladakh. Instead, they were almost by birth defined as traders and inherited the trans-regional trading networks beyond Ladakh. Thus, most of them were from Leh town and surround areas.

Even without land, the Arghons occupied a relatively high social status and over the years they have established themselves as “cosmopolitan elite” (Fewkes, 2009, p113) through the involvement in the caravan trade, ownership and usage of the rare and luxurious commodities and accessibility to broader social and political trends. As cosmopolitan elites, many of them are multilingual and literate. The eldest Muslim ex-trader in Maney Khang claims “*I leant English in middle school. I can speak not only Ladakhi, Hindi, English, but also Kashmiri, Urdu and Farsi.*” (male, 88-year-old) This Arghons community is ‘today among the most influential and respectable citizens of Leh...’ (Rizvi, 1983, p117).

Today, most of the properties in Maney Khang in Old Town are owned by Arghons or their descendants including the above-mentioned goldsmith. The same elder explained “*175 years ago, my grandfather has built this shop. It was a tailoring shop for leather products. When the trade has ceased, I have also done tailoring, I made uniforms for the Indian Army*“. All the local informants confirmed that this shop was the only shop in Old Town before.

Thus, these Arghons in Maney Khang today are the living testimony of cosmopolitan character of Leh from the time of the kingdom and caravan trade. Although half a century passed since the last caravan passed Leh, the presence of Arghon ex-trader and their properties in Old Town remind us that Leh was once an important cross road of trans-Himalaya trade and economic center of former Ladakh kingdom. At the same time, their presence also testifies the socio-cultural importance of the trade and how it facilitated to integrate people and culture in the region. As Knight (1893) wrote, Arghons are the result of intermarriage in which “Buddhist and Mohamedans have mutually modified each other’s peculiar customs and have yielded to each other’s prejudices” (p178).



After many generations' integration, Ladakhi Muslim and their way of life are not so different from the one of Buddhist. One local Muslim resident claims "In Ladakh, Buddhist and Muslim share almost same culture, costume, language, only we believe in different God." There are a number of examples of such cultural integration in and around Old Town.

The most significant example in Leh from this period is the palace itself. Though built in a Tibetan style, according to Sheikh (2010), the main designer of this palace was known to be a Balti Muslim carpenter. The architecture of Jamma Masjid, built around 1666 by Deldan Namgyal (the son of Sennge) in front of the Old Town was also known as the mixed style of Tibetan, Ladakhi and Central Asia, until it was reconstructed in 1990s. Not only the architecture, but also the typical Ladakhi costume, *Goncha*, worn by the elders or on special occasions today is similar to one worn in Central Asia rather than Tibet. There are several other examples of the cultural influences from Tibet, Kashmir and Central Asia in Ladakhi social life, especially in its cuisine, music and language (cf Sheikh 2010).

To conclude, Arghons and many cultural relics testify, Leh Old Town was the 'cosmopolitan social center' where the king's political power and the vibrant trading activities facilitated a dynamic intermixing of cultures. This cosmopolitan landscape of Old Town became the foundation of the diversity of cultures that are represented in Leh even today.

#### ***D. Economic, political and social implication of Pashmina trade***

As shown above, Ladakhi polity, economy and social life are closely interconnected to each other. Especially the importance of the trade in the region is such that the trade became not only a matter of economic issue but also had a significant political and social impact. Before concluding this chapter and move on to the next era, the trade in pashm which was a politically crucial commodity of this time illustrates the complexity.

Among the luxurious commodities the caravans carried, *pashm*, the raw pashmina wool was an essential item to the “Kashmir’s multi-crore<sup>4</sup> shawl industry” (Rizvi, 1999, p20). Pashm was mainly produced from Changra goats in Changthang<sup>5</sup> in western Tibet and eastern Ladakh. Well-to-do Leh-based families held estates and large number of goats in these areas. From there, mainly Leh based Muslim traders were involved in the transportation of pashm to Leh (Rizvi, 1999) where they sold it to the Kashmiri traders. Thus pashm trade contributed to the creation of considerable wealth of town-based merchants and prosperity of urban economy in Leh and Srinagar. Due to such economic significance of pashm, its trade became “for centuries, commercial as well as political” (Rizvi, 1999) issue which shaped Ladakh’s relationship with Kashmir and kingdom’s fate as a political entity as shown in the following.

In 1639, King Sengge marched into Purig (Figure 5) in the west to recover the lost part of the kingdom but was defeated in the face of Mughal force. Subsequently, Mughal emperor claimed suzerainty over Ladakh and demanded the tribute through Kashmir (Kashmir was under Mughal rule then). Instead, according to the French traveler Francois Bernier (1665), Sengge closed the trade route from Kashmir entirely and this embargo lasted up to 1663 (cited in Rizvi, 1999, p53)<sup>6</sup>. Ironically, this turned out to be a decisive damage on its own economy as Ladakh was largely dependent on the trade. The decline of kingdom’s fortune in the following century might vouch for Bernier’s account (ibid.).

Two decades after Sengge’s death, his son King Deldan was forced to improve the political relationship with the Mughal via Kashmir. The embargo was lifted and the trade resumed between the two parties under the condition that Ladakh would pay the tribute and establish a mosque in Leh to promote Islam. King agreed and Jamma Masjid (Figure 8) was established in 1667 just outside Maney Khang gate. In the meantime, in 1679, Tibetan and Mongol joint army marched into Ladakh from the east. Ladakh could barely defend against the joint force and Deldan appealed to the Mughals for support. Eventually, with the help of Mughal, this war with Tibet was ended through the Treaty of Tingmosgang (1684) which defined the border between

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<sup>4</sup> One crore=ten million

<sup>5</sup> There are two Changthangs, which are contiguous: one is the much larger plateau in western Tibet and the other is the smaller high elevation steppe region of eastern Ladakh.

<sup>6</sup> According to Rizvi (1999), Bernier is the only source of this information but if this is true, the king must have intended to use the pashm trade as a political tool to avenge his loss.

Ladakh and Tibet. However, this political treaty, at the same time forced King Deldan to convert to Islam and commit Ladakh's suzerainty under Mughal. Above all, this treaty is critical in its political and economic sense as it forced Ladakh to give Kashmir a monopoly of the purchase of pashm under the pressure of Mughal. Under this treaty, only Muslim traders from specific families based in Leh and Spituk were allowed to go to Changthang and western Tibet to collect pashm (Rizvi, 1983). This monopoly must have facilitated more Kashmiri traders to travel to Leh and overall favored to Muslim population in the area.

A series of the events, starting from the ban on the trade with Srinagar to subsequent Kashmiri monopoly over pashm had proved the importance of this commodity for Ladakh by damaging its economy for a great deal. But it was not only a matter of economic loss. Kashmir monopoly over pashm, according to Rizvi, "put an end to Ladakh's independence in the real sense" (Rizvi, 1983, p56). As shown in the next chapter, this monopoly over pashm had a decisive effect on the kingdom's political destiny and the town's role. In this regard, the critical importance of the trade in pashm in the regional politics had at the same time highlighted the importance of the Leh as a capital and a crossroad for trade. Furthermore, this importance of pashm also had a decisive impact on the different meanings of Old Town.

### *E. Meaning of Old Town*

As shown in the above narratives, during the kingdom period, the core of Leh Town (present day Old Town) has politically, socially and physically situated at the intersection of different agendas and activities. The interaction between these agendas, experiences and sense of place produced different meanings to the landscape of Leh Town such as 'center of political power', 'trading hub' and 'cosmopolitan social center' (Figure 9). This was the original landscape of Leh as a seat of Ladakhi kingdom and starting point of the study, which will be disintegrated from its physical form in the following time period.

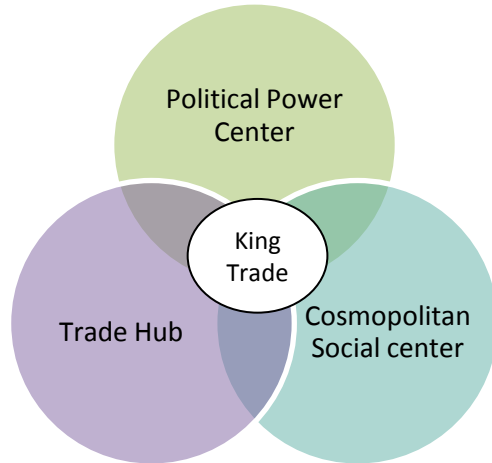


Figure 9: Old Town as political, economic and social center.  
 These meanings evolved around the king's power and the trade

First of all, during this time period, politically people experienced the glory of the kingdom and enjoyed independent status. Despite a series of foreign invasions, the town wall was a source of physical and social security. Central to these experiences was the power of the successive Ladakhi kings, which was physically represented by the palace and his large landholdings. In the meantime, the king's political authority was also linked to social status. Such socio-political experiences formed a meaning of this landscape as 'center of political power'. As discussed earlier, such meaning was materialized by the town wall, physical proximity to the palace or even by rituals around the agriculture.

Secondly, the vibrant activities of traders and merchants formed the landscape of Leh Town as 'trade hub'. The significance of trade to the regional politics and local economy reinforced this perception which was largely shared throughout the kingdom and beyond. From the king, foreign traders and wealthy merchants to local farmers, nearly everyone's economic agenda and experience in Leh town was related to the regional trade. This meaning is well demonstrated by the presence of serais around the town walls and trade caravans. At the same time, the town's very *raison d'être* as a capital is originated by this meaning of the town as a trade hub.

Finally, as discussed above, the king's political power and trade made Leh not only a political and economic capital of the kingdom but also a lively social center. Because of their presence in Leh, the town was also an intersection of religions and cultures; mainly Buddhism and Islam.

Under the king's protection, Buddhism flourished and Leh became the heartland for Ladakhi Buddhism. At the same time, the implication of the regional politics and foreign traders brought Islam to the region. Both cultures blended in and developed a dynamic cosmopolitan culture in Leh. As a local elder says, Leh was a "home to Buddhist and Muslim alike" (male, 88-year-old). Thus, from political and economic landscape, its meaning was further evolved to a 'cosmopolitan social center'. Many remnants and the Arghon community in the area today reflect that this area was once actively used as a social center.

As shown in the narratives around the pashm, Ladakhi polity, trade and religious life were closely interwoven to each other. However, the key factors that intersect to influence/create these meanings were mainly king's power which was physically spaced around Leh Palace and the town's geographic advantage as the trade crossroad (Figure 9). The king was the source of political power, social status and religious prosperity in the region during this time period. It was his interest in the Karakoram trade which declared Leh a capital of the kingdom. However, the trade which was the source of kingdom's revenue, defined Ladakh's political and economic fortunes and alliances with neighboring regions. On the other hand, political and economic implication with the neighboring regions catalyzed the development of Ladakhi culture.

The numbers of examples given in the narratives are not only to provide evidence of how important the king and trade were to the region at that time. It was also to demonstrate how these socio-political and economic factors work on the meaning and use of space. However, these processes are not linear or necessary causal relation. Instead, they are constantly emerging as different processes and factors interact.

Thus, the meaning of landscape of Old Town Leh during this era was represented by the power of the king, its role in the trans-Himalayan trade and as a centre for the development of Ladakhi culture. Accordingly, the area was lived and used actively by various sections of the society. Thus, the town flourished as it was central to the political, social and economic processes in Ladakh, which will drastically alter in the following time periods.

## 5 – 2. Dogra conquest and British occupation (1834 – 1947)

### A. *Political Context*

#### A.1 Age of Imperialism and the Great Game

*As one approaches this important city, the capital of Western Tibet and Western Buddhism, it presents a really imposing appearance. Towering above all the groves and houses stand the massive palace of the deposed Gyalpos, or Rajahs of Ladakh, with many irregular storeys and lofty, inleaning walls, and with giant chortens containing the ashes of kings surrounding it. Higher up, on the crags behind, is the gompa, and behind all rises a mighty snow-covered mountain-range, across which lead the road into Turkestan and Tibet [...] We rode up to the city, passed through the walls by a small wicket-gate, and found ourselves at the head of the Bazaar, which has been built since the Dogra conquest – a long, broad street, such as Srinagar cannot boast, bordered by the shops of the merchants, and with the great white palace rising conspicuously at the further end. The passing through this wicket into the bazaar is a sudden burst from the wilds into civilization.*

*– E.F. Knight. Leh in 1891. (1893, P.173 - 177)*

From the above account, it seems the town's landscape has not changed much since the account written by Moorcroft over 70 years earlier. Except by the time Knight reached Leh in 1893, the owner of the palace had been deposed and the Dogras had laid out the Bazaar, which he described as “a sudden burst from the wilds into civilization”.

The backdrop of this time period is ‘Age of Imperialism’, which was characterized by the worldwide territorial conquests by imperial powers. As shown in (Figure 10), the Great Game — as the shadow games between competing imperial powers of Britain and Russia was called—was playing out in the Himalayan region and Central Asia in the 19th Century. As a result, this period is also marked by visitors like English journalist Knight. Other travelers included British colonial governors, researchers, explorers and German Moravians missionaries (Rizvi, 1983). As a result,

Ladakh and neighboring region started appearing on the world map. Many of these visitors documented their travels in the form of books, government papers, reports, journals and diaries, besides drawings and photographs. These provided information about the regional trade and Ladakhi society that was largely unknown otherwise (Rizvi, 1983). Their records provide glimpses into the Great Game, the formation of boundaries in the high mountain area and the use of trade as active political tool, especially to gather intelligence.



Figure 10 Consolidation of British and Russian spheres of influence at the time of the Anglo Russian Convention (1907) (Source: H. Kreutzman, 1997) Main Trading routes from Leh are added by the author.

However, it was not the imperial powers, which ended the Ladakhi kingdom. Instead, it was the raja of Jammu and his desire for the profit from pashm trade. The following section explores the process through which Ladakh was transformed from an independent kingdom to become a part of the Jammu and Kashmir kingdom and embedded into imperial politics

## A.2 The Dogra Conquest

In 1834, Dogra ruler of Jammu, Raja Gulab Singh sent an army to conquer Ladakh and western Tibet (Rizvi, 1983). Raja Gulab Singh's interest in these areas was to gain a control over the pashmina trade from western Tibet to Srinagar via Ladakh. The well-trained Dogra army with advanced artilleries easily captured Ladakh, despites some pockets of initial resistance. After taking Ladakh, the Dogra army continued to western Tibet to establish control over the entire region that supplied pashm to Kashmir. However, the Dogra army was eventually defeated by the Tibetans. In 1842, the war between Dogra and Tibet was ended by the Treaty of Leh, which "officially recognized the Dogras as legitimate rulers of Ladakh, [and] ratified the borders as fixed from ancient time" (Rizvi, 1983, p66). By this treaty, Ladakh formally lost its independent status and was subjected to the rule of Jammu thereafter.

In the meantime, south Asia was part of the British colonial Empire. Under the British imperial policy, regional kingdoms were allowed to function as 'princely states' as part of British India. After the first Anglo-Sikh war (1846) ended with a British victory, Gulab Singh purchased Kashmir (including Ladakh and Baltistan) from the British and combined Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh as a single kingdom (Rizvi, 1983). As the ruler of this new state, the British granted Gulab Singh the title of first Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, the largest princely state in British India. While the Gulab Singh formally acknowledged British authority, he was enjoyed considerable autonomy within his state.

### A.3 Double colonialism and site of contestation

However, political threat from Russia in Sinkiang or east Turkestan (current Xinjiang) soon led the British to recognize the geopolitical importance of Ladakh (Rizvi, 1983). The British hoped to use the Karakoram trade through Ladakh to establish friendly relations with the Sinkiang regime and also to collect intelligence about Russian activities in the region. They sent out large scale diplomatic missions from Leh. However, the trade was suffering from the heavy taxes levied by the Dogra kingdom. In order to improve this situation, a British officer was appointed in 1867 despite protests by the maharaja for interfering in state affairs (Jina, 1994; Fewkes,



2009). The officer was in charge of looking out the political situation in the neighboring region and ensuring that the maharaja did not have full control over the trade with Central Asia.

Also, the trade in pashm, as discussed in the previous chapter, provoked subtle political contests between the Dogras and the British. While the Dogras' main interest in Ladakh was monopoly over the pashm trade, British were trying to break this monopoly by encouraging a direct trade route between British India and Tibet through present day Himachal Pradesh, which would bypass the Maharaja's territory altogether. Thus, Ladakh was under a form of "double colonialism" in this time period (Bray, 2006): the direct rulers of Ladakh were the Dogras, who were under the authority of the British, despite their contestations over various issues.

Thus, the Dogra conquest and subsequent British intervention drew Ladakh into the wider context of international imperial politics. According to Rizvi (1983), for Ladakh this overturn of the power was a "violent collision with the outside world" (p67). The series of events were significant to Ladakh and its people as it uncoupled them from its past and realigned its future firmly with India, through Jammu and Kashmir (ibid.).

All this changes took place in three short decades. The shift of power changed the role of Leh from being the seat of kingdom to a site for the "power struggle of the Great Game" (Fewkes, 2009, p56) and political contestation between the Dogras and the British.

#### A.4 Town's expansion and Advent of Main Bazaar

The Ladakhi king, the royal family and the ministers lost their political authority and power when the Dogras extended their control over Ladakh through the Treaty of Leh in 1842. Subsequently the royal family were moved from Leh Palace and given a residence in Stok, 15km south of Leh on the far side of the Indus, where the family lives to this day. After the departure of the loyal family, Leh palace lost its political importance and was physically abandoned for many years. While many of the local elite remained in their position in the governance system, their actual power and social status was much weakened. (Michaud, 1996: Fewkes, 2009)

The change in regime also had an impact on the meaning of Skyanos Gogsum, which made up Leh till this period, and its physical outlay. After the conquest, the Dogras initiated the town's expansion beyond its existing boundaries marked by the town wall. First, a new irrigation system was laid out in the outskirts of the town (near the airport today). Also as a new security measure, the Dogra army constructed Zorawar fort, after their chief commander Zorawar Singh.

As a result, residents slowly started moving out and building houses in more spacious areas outside the town wall. The expansion of the town was marked by the gradual demolition of these walls. British army officer, Lt Col Torrens who visited Leh in 1862 found that "the town wall was low in many places, half-demolished in others and in a state of ruin. Instead, plantation of poplar trees surrounded the town on all sides" (Sheikh, 2010, p31).

As part of these changes, the Dogra constructed the Main Bazaar (Figure 11) in Leh. This Bazaar was on the former king's vast field in front of the town wall. At the end of Main Bazaar, the Dogras also established new town gates, where their officers registered the arrivals of caravans and their loads.

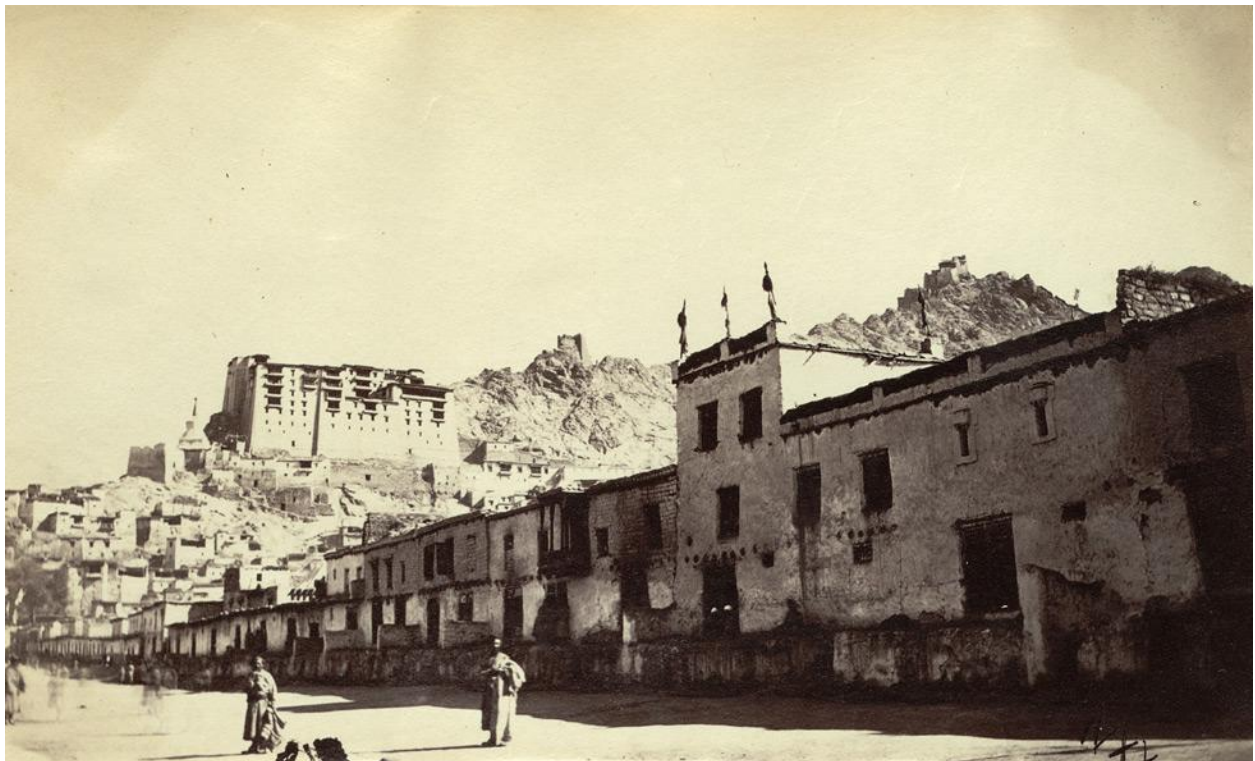


Figure 11 Photograph of Main Bazaar taken by Edward Francis Chapman in 1873. The view looks across the bazaar towards the Leh Palace in the distance. (Source: British National Library).

For British officers posted in Leh for decades later, Main Bazaar was not only a trading spot but also a listening post to collect information about the movements of the Russians in Central Asia (Sheikh, 2010). Thus, various moves of the Great Game and the contest between the Maharaja and the British over the pashm trade were both taking place in the Main Bazaar. These events indicate that the original part of town had gradually lost its political importance.

These shifts were marked and to a large extent driven by several factors: regime change, advent of Main Bazaar, the loss of the social, economic and political importance of the palace. Thus, the town started to expand beyond its historic, political and social boundaries. As a result, the meaning of original part of the town was transformed from a political nerve centre to a mere remnant of a former ruler, and gradually, the original part of the town became 'Old Town' as newer areas were developed.

## ***B. Economic Context***

### **B.1 Economic Deprivation under Dogra regime**

Despite this political upheaval and change in regime, the basic economic structure remained dependent on agriculture, farming and trade. Despite the political turmoil, the regional trade continued as the Dogra conquest of Ladakh was actually driven by the ambition to control the pashm trade that passed through Ladakh. According to Rizvi (1999), the motivation of this invasion was "at least as much commercial as political" (p19). Maharaja's aim was to maximize his wealth and power through the control of profitable trade in pashm which come from western Tibet though Leh (ibid.).

Yet, it was a difficult time for Ladakh. Different authors report the economic deprivation of Ladakh by the Dogras (Sheikh, 2010; Pirie, 2007; Rizvi, 1983). While previously, the kings and his ministers had largely kept kingdom's wealth for themselves, under the Dogra, it seems the situation did not improve, if not worsened. Both farmers and traders suffered from the high tax imposed by the Maharaja, including trade duties and land revenue (Sheikh, 2010; Rizvi, 1983). The abuse of forced labor such as *begar* (van Beek, 2005) and *res* (Sheikh, 2010) by the officials

was another economic burden. The combined revenue from the land taxes and trade customs imposed by Maharaja was considerable sum (Shiekh, 2010). The profit was sent to the Maharaja in Kashmir and officials posted in Ladakh also enriched themselves through bribes and personal involvement in trade. However, according to Sheikh (2010), despite the substantial profit made in the region, it was hardly returned as welfare for the local population.

However, soon after the appointment of an officer in 1870, the British made the Maharaja remove all trade duties on the Karakoram trade (Bray, 2005; Rizvi, 1999), which led to its gradual recovery in Ladakh. By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the trade was flourishing again and Leh was recognized as an important “entrepôt” (Fewkes, 2009) in the regional trade which had a significant impact on the economy and geopolitics of the time in the Himalayan hill region and beyond.

## B.2 Leh Main Bazaar as a new economic center

Once Main Bazaar was constructed, trading activities were almost entirely centered on it. In 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, a variety of goods including textile, spices, synthetic dye, cannabis and tobacco etc. were traded in the Leh Main Bazaar on their way to Central Asia or to British India (Fewkes, 2009; Rizvi, 1999). The shift of economic focus to Main Bazaar was evident by the presence of shops there.

As Knight noted earlier, Main Bazaar was “bordered by the shops of the merchants” by this time. According to the local elders, traditionally trade was largely based on a barter system. Prior to the Dogra period, it appears that the concept of ‘shop’ and cash payment were almost non-existent in Ladakh. After the Main Bazaar’s establishment, it seems, the presence of ‘store/shop’ make their appearance in the records although barter system was still common. Since then till 20<sup>th</sup> century, shops were present only in Main Bazaar in Leh. According to an elderly informant (male, 88-year-old), in 1920, there were only 15 shops in Leh and none of which was run by local Ladakhi. Instead these first shops in Leh were run mostly by Punjabi merchant who have settled in Leh. Even in 1947, at the time of Indian Independence, according to another elderly shop keeper “there were only a few Punjabi shop and 7 or 8 small Ladakhi shops in Main Bazaar

before the vehicles came to Leh<sup>7</sup>” (male, 80-year-old). These accounts agree that Main Bazaar has been the economic center of Leh ever since it was laid out by the Dogras.

Depredated of its political and economic importance, Old Town was now purely a residential area. According to the local residents, there was only one tailor shop in entire Old Town up until 1970s (Figure 12). The shop belonged to the grandfather of the eldest informant in Maney Khang. He claims,

*“Maharaja Gulab Singh brought Muslims from Kashmir. My grandfather was one of them. ... 175 years ago, grandfather has built this shop. Before there was no other shop in Maney Khang except my grandfather’s tailor shop”* (male, 88-years-old).

As Rizvi claims (1999), the presence of the trade was responsible “not only for the prosperity of Leh as an entrepôt, but also for the way the town had developed” (p209). In this sense, to Old Town, the advent of Main Bazaar was the decisive turning point. The development of Main Bazaar resulted in diminishing the central role which Old Town used to play in political and economic sphere, which also redefined its social role.



Figure 12 The oldest shop in Maney Khang, built by the grandfather of the informant. Name of the area derived from the right hand stupa ca. 350 years old. Behind above is Leh palace. Photo: author

<sup>7</sup> Pandit Radha Kishen, an administrator of Ladakh wrote “between 1883 and 1887 that the number of shops was 130, of which 50 remained open all year around. The remainders were open only during the months of July, August and September” (Sheikh, 2010). This discrepancy between the official records and people’s memory is probably because the former may have included different establishments than the shop local people refer to.

### *C. Social Context*

The arrival of caravans was not only an economic activity but also a lively social event for Leh. As Main Bazaar became the new economic center, naturally people, goods and information all gathered in the Bazaar. As a result, town's social activities moved almost entirely from Old Town to Main Bazaar, except the annual Buddhist festivals that still take place in Old Town.

#### C.1 Main Bazaar as Cosmopolitan Center

The sight of foreign traders, European visitors and their interaction with the local population added spice to Leh Main Bazaar as a cosmopolitan social spot. Such multi-cultural character of Leh Bazaar is evident in the below quote from Knight again. His description provides us the vivid picture of lively and colorful sight of Leh Main Bazaar in the heyday of the trans-Himalayan caravan trade.

*“At this time there is such a motley collection of types and various costumes, and such a babble of different languages, at it would not be easy to find elsewhere. [...] Leh is therefore a very cosmopolitan city, even in the dead season, for there are resident merchants and others of various races and creeds. Small as is the permanent population, at least four languages are in common use here—Hindustani, Tibetan, Turki and Kashmiri—while several others are spoken”* (Knight, 1905, p177. Also cited in Fewkes, 2009, p53).

As this account illustrates, social attention followed the economic shift from Old Town to Main Bazaar. Together with the foreign traders, explorers and surveyors, Leh Bazaar accommodated different religious communities in one street. New Buddhist monastery (Chokhang Gompa, early 20th century), Shia Imambara Mosque, Hindu temple as well as German Moravian missionary school dispensary (1887) were all established in Main Bazaar in this period. In summary, “everything in Leh centers around the bazaar” (Sheikh, 1999, p36). For example, one of the major social events was a game of polo, which was played in the Main Bazaar instead of the polo

ground established by King Sengge, till the current polo ground was laid out in 1885 (Rizvi, 1983).

The impact of the regional trade in changing meaning and use of the place is still evident in Main Bazaar even today after many years has passed since the end of the caravan trade. The vegetable sellers, women from nearby villages with their baskets full of fresh carrot, radish, apricots, apples etc., occupying one corner of the Main Market and making lively social sight. Rizvi (1999) speculates, “Surely they are the successors—some perhaps actually the daughters and granddaughters—of the women who used to supply alfalfa for the horses of the caravans chaffering with Yarkandi merchants in broken Turki” (p267).

The shift of social attention is also marked by European travelers in Leh. Earlier, it was the palace that occupied the attention of visitors to Leh. However, Fewkes claims that by this time, the attention of European travelers in Leh had shifted to Leh Main Bazaar as “most accounts by Europeans in Ladakh during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century make a point about strong impression on their memory of Ladakh of the Leh Bazaar...A survey of travelogue literature shows a surprising number of illustrations of the Leh bazaar” (Fewkes, 2009, p52).

As these narratives show, the development of Main Bazaar as the center of the new Leh had an impact on the social role and meaning of Old Town. With Main Bazaar taking central stage in most spheres, Old Town was slowly pushed to the margins of its political, economic and social life. While it was largely a residential area, with the departure of the king, residents (especially Buddhist farmers) also started moving out of cramped Old Town to more spacious areas in Leh. In the meantime, the study has found out that a group of *Arghons*, a Muslim trading community and “cosmopolitan elite” (Fewkes, 2009, p103), has kept their properties in the lower area of Old Town, Maney Khang in the proximity to the main Sunni Mosque, Jamma Masjid and to Main Bazaar. Even today, many properties in Maney Khang, both old buildings and new concrete buildings, are owned by this community.

#### *D. New meaning of Old Town*

It was the town's geographic advantage in regional trade and its profitability which highlighted the importance of Leh during the King's period. Ironically, it was also the regional trade that attracted the Dogra's invasion and their establishment of Main Bazaar, which eventually deprived Old Town of its political, economic and also social importance.

As shown in the previous chapter, as a social center, Old Town was the hub of different activities and processes in Ladakh. Thus, the place was used by different groups from the royal family to traders and farmers. This meaning was composed of the complex social fabric woven around the king and the importance of the trade.

However, in the face of Dogra invasion, Old Town's political importance waned. During this time period, the king moved out of the palace, people experienced the loss of independence and economic deprivation imposed by the new ruler. Leh became a politically and geographically peripheral town and the site of power struggle over control of trade. In the meantime, due to the economic policies implemented by the Dogras, the caravan trade remained important but diminished. It took an intervention by the British to revitalize trade activities in Leh town.

This period marked the outward shift of political and trading activities from Old Town. With the king's departure, people's relationship with the land changed and deprived Old Town of its main source of importance. The newly established Main Bazaar became the economic and social center of Leh. As a result, the landscape of former political power center was transformed to a remnant for bygone era and former power.

This change of meanings was reflected in physical space too. While many religious places and shops were established in Main Bazaar, the ancient town wall was demolished and residents started moving out and settling in areas beyond.

The shift of economic and social center from Old Town to Main Bazaar marked a transfer of power from the king to the new rulers, the Dogas and the British. At the same time, this transition of the meaning marked an important shift in the history of Old Town.



### **5 - 3. Indian independence to contemporary period (1947 onwards)**

#### ***A. Political Context***

##### *Background: Change of governance and Ladakh as a geo-strategic frontier*

The beginning of new era in Ladakh began with the independence of India. The event terminated 112 years of the Dogra occupation in the region and incorporated it within the Indian nation-state. This period is characterized by rapid changes in the geo-political, economic and social processes in Ladakh, which is described and discussed in the chapter.

At the time of the independence, at the national level, former princely states including the state of Jammu and Kashmir were merged into the new nation and local maharajas lost their political authority. However, the process of the takeover was not simple as independence heralded the Partition of British India into two different nations: India and Pakistan. The event was shadowed by communal discord between Hindus and Muslims. Consequently, the process was marked by political instability, large scale violence, massacres and immigration of over 14 million in both sides of the new border and resulting in “one of the largest and most rapid population exchanges in human history” (Bharadwaj, Khwaja and Mian, 2008, p1).

When it came to the largest princely state, Jammu and Kashmir, the situation was especially controversial because the state’s dominant population was Muslim while its Maharaja was Hindu. The state of Jammu and Kashmir (which included Ladakh), in theory, could join either side or remain independent due to its key geographic location (Bharadwaj, Khwaja and Mian, 2008). While Maharaja Hari Singh was hoping to remain independent, Pakistan sent forces to annex Kashmir. Eventually the Maharaja signed the agreement to become a part of India in order to receive military aid against the Pakistani forces. Such political complication at the time of the Partition was the beginning of the prolonged conflict over Kashmir (cf. Schofield, 2010). In the following decades, at least three wars and numerous violent clashes were inflicted along the Line of Control (LOC in Figure 13) which is now a de facto border between the Indian side of Kashmir and the Pakistan side.



Figure 13 Map of Jammu and Kashmir State and neighboring regions (texts added by the author, Source: University of Texas map library - India Political map 2001)

Ladakh was incorporated into the Indian nation-state as part of Jammu and Kashmir State. Although Ladakh was attached to adjoining Kashmir for administration, it has been less politically volatile and largely peaceful. However, in 1999, there was a large scale armed conflict between India and Pakistan in Kargil, in western Ladakh (Rizvi, 1983; Bhan, 2009). This incident was an international flashpoint as India and Pakistan had both declared themselves to be nuclear powers in the previous year (Frey, 2006). Eventually the war ended when Pakistani forces pulled back from the areas it had occupied on the Indian side of the LOC in Kargil district. Yet, tensions remain around the border zone in Kashmir and Ladakh even today.

In the meantime, on the eastern frontier, India was dealing with another territorial dispute with China over the sovereignty of Aksai Chin region. This region is claimed by India to be a part of Ladakh while China argues it is in their territory (Figure 13, earlier called Sinkiang and east

Turkestan). India and China have been unable to agree on the exact demarcation of their 3000 km border line in the Himalayan region. One of the key issues is an important road which connects Tibet and Xinjiang cross over Aksai Chin (Figure 13), which is claimed by both, China and India. China's construction of this road was one of the triggers that escalated into the Sino-Indian war in 1962 (Rizvi, 1983). Although direct military combat ceased, India claims that over 37,000 square kilometers of Jammu and Kashmir continues to be illegally occupied by China (Thangspa, 2011).

As a consequence of these territorial disputes, the borders between India and Pakistan and China remain closed. At the same time, suddenly Ladakh found itself as a strategic frontier of India. Furthermore, due to its geo-strategic importance and political tension along the borders, the Ladakh region remained closed to non-local civilians from 1947 till 1974.

These events mark a dramatic political shift in Ladakh's relations with its neighbouring areas and its place in larger geostrategic calculations. Through this shift of governance, Ladakh has transformed from a peripheral area of the Dogra kingdom to a strategic frontier region of Indian nation. This political shift and security scenario had fundamental economic and social implications for the region.

### ***B. Economic context: End of the regional trade and new avenues***

Economically, Ladakh's incorporation into India and the subsequent closure of the international borders resulted in the end of the centuries-old trans-Himalaya caravan trade. However, Rizvi (1999) claims that even without such radical political upheaval and physical formation of the border, "there was no way for the traditional caravan to survive" (p262). The development of road and railway connection in early 20<sup>th</sup> century in India anyway diminished the demand for the caravan trade.

While a majority of the rural population continued to be engaged in agriculture and farming, the trans-Himalayan trade came to halt as a result of these geopolitical changes. As a result, the region lost one of the important economic pillars. However, as an integral part of Indian nation,

soon other avenues opened up: namely Indian army, government development projects and tourism, which are explained in details in the following subsections.

### B.1 Indian Army

As a consequence of territorial disputes with Pakistan and China, Ladakh started receiving intense attention from Indian security agencies, especially the Indian Army. Military camps were set up across Ladakh and the army recruited large numbers of the local population either as officers or as transporters (Bhan, 2009). Today the army is one of the favored occupations among the young males, for its incentives such as “decent monthly salary of up to INR 6000<sup>8</sup> [(approximately EUR 72)] in addition to pension benefits” (ibid., p140).

Apart from the employment opportunities, the strategic priority also facilitated an improvement of basic infrastructure in the region, especially transportation and communication. Following the construction of Leh-Srinagar Highway in 1962, which reduced the journey between the two towns from 16 days on horseback to less than a day by vehicle, efforts are underway to connect the entire region by a network of roads (Rizvi, 1999). Since the national highway has connected Leh and Srinagar, the road started bringing people, goods, and further infrastructure projects into Leh and the rest of Ladakh. The first airport was established just outside Leh town. While this was initially for military use, it was later also opened for commercial services to carry civilians and goods. These military-oriented infrastructure projects required manpower, and laborers were hired both in and outside of Ladakh (Demenge, 2009).

As a result, the presence of the Indian army became an essential factor of the post-Independence Ladakh economy and in-migration pattern through employment, infrastructure projects and the modern transportation.

### B.2 Government of India and public services

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<sup>8</sup> Rs. 100 = approximately 1.2 euro as of December, 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013

Prior to independence, much of the revenue generated in Ladakh was hardly ever returned to the society either under the king's rule or Dogra regime (Sheikh, 2010). As discussed in the previous chapters, the profit from Ladakh was absorbed first by the king and his ministers and later by the Dogra rulers. After independence, on the contrary, the region's strategic importance and the road connections facilitated various government interventions in the region in the form of development projects, employments and government subsidiaries.

Today, as a part of a democratic nation, Ladakh has been incorporated into the Government of India's extensive development plan (Dawa, 1997). While the government mainly focuses on infrastructure and communication, it also launched various development projects in "agriculture, animal husbandry, irrigation schemes and hydro-electric" (Dawa, 1997, p369) in the region. Along with the development projects, the government departments hired locals as clerks, teachers, hospital workers and etc. Today, public sector (in local term 'government job') is the most preferred work by the local population and "there can hardly be a family that has not at least one member earning a government salary [in Ladakh]" (Rizvi, 1999, p273).

At the same time, while the formation of the border closed the traditional supply chain, the road facilitated transportation of food grain and other products from the plains. Subsequently the government opened ration shops, which sells these products at highly subsidized rates (Rizvi, 1999). These government interventions boosted the standard of living for the local population even in remote villages. One of the economic initiatives by the government was the promotion of tourism in the area.

### B.3 Arrival of Tourism

After nearly three decades of restrictions, parts of Ladakh were re-opened for visitors in 1974. Simultaneously, as a part of economic strategy, the Indian government also started promoting Ladakh as a tourism destination. As a result, the region's cultural heritage and the Himalayan landscape started attracting tourists from all over the world. The improvements in infrastructure and transportation also facilitated their arrival. Since then, tourism became one of the key economic pillars of the region, along with the army and the Indian government.

A majority of the tourists visits Ladakh in the short summer months (mid-May to mid-September). With transportation infrastructure concentrated around Leh, it soon became the main hub for tourists visiting Ladakh. The number of tourist has increased from 527 in 1974 when the region was re-opened to 16,573 in 1996 (Dawa, 1997) and in 2011 stood at 182,000 visitors (Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Office, Leh cited in Akhtar and Gondhalekar, 2013).

To accommodate the increasing number of tourists, hundreds of guest houses were built in Leh along with other hospitality establishments. As of 2010, the district has 122 hotels and 274 guest houses, mostly concentrated in Leh town (Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Office, Leh cited in Akhtar and Gondhalekar, 2013). In this sense, the town was transformed from the trade crossroad to a sort of ‘tourist crossroad’, where tourists arrive, acclimatize and organize their excursions.

The impact of tourism to the local economy is noteworthy. At present roughly 25% of Leh district’s population is involved in this sector directly or indirectly (LAHDC-L, 2005) and occupies around 50% of the local GDP (Chatterjee, Kohli and Singh, cited in Pellicciardi, 2010) but the benefits of the tourism industry are still concentrated mostly in and around Leh town (Pellicciardi, 2010).

The remarkable growth of tourism industry is evident in the following comment of a foreign mountaineer (male, 79-year-old) who has been visiting Leh since 1974 more than 20 times,

*“When I came to Ladakh for the first time in 1974, on the very day Ladakh was opened, there was neither a guest house nor a restaurant in Leh, let alone a souvenir shop. Guest could stay only in the government quarter or home stay in the local people’s residence. Only after 2 or 3 years, guest houses started opening in Leh and every year the numbers multiplied”.*

Thus, the economic impact caused by the end of caravan trade was compensated by the combined effect of the large-scale military presence, government projects and advent of tourism.

Some like Rizvi (1983) argue that Ladakhi people are experiencing a kind of wealth that they could not acquire through the caravan trade, which has made it even wealthier than the regions in the Indian plains, in terms of average economic income (p.72).

### *C. Social context – change in lifestyle and value*

The series of changes in political and economic contexts had profound impacts on the society of Ladakh. Especially the urban Leh Town was the epicenter of the subsequent social changes, which redefined the lifestyle of people and the essential value in the society. For example, earlier, as discussed in the previous chapter, the affluence of man was measured by the holdings of agricultural field. However, Sheikh (2010) argues that this is no longer the case in Leh today. A handful of landlord families who used to lend grains to needy farmers have been relegated, while instead, owners of hotels and shops in Main Bazaar as well as government contractors are considered 'rich'. Behind such changes, different factors are working at its mechanism.

First of all, the formation of the border, the secession of trade and the following government interventions in the area integrated Ladakh into India physically, economically and socially (Rizvi, 1983). This seems to have had a substantial effect in terms of the cultural influence of India which rapidly 'Indianized' the local society. The Indianization in Ladakh was further accelerated after the opening of the region by the inflow of Indian tourists and workers. The foreign mountaineer observed the change over the last decades and claims "*I see more and more Indian people and Indian food, cloths etc. Before [in 1974] more people were wearing Ladakhi cloth and it was more like Tibetan*".

At the same time, the region's centuries-old links with Tibet were cut off after the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1949 (Rizvi, 1983). Some of these ties were renewed after the Dalai Lama and senior lamas exiled to India in 1959. However, the institutional links between monasteries were weakened by this severance (ibid.). According to Rizvi (ibid.), the cultural separation from Tibet occurred just before the region's re-opening, which has heralded social and cultural changes in the area (p73). The influence of this cut-off has intensified a closer political and economic integration with a 'modern' nation state.

In addition, it was not only the influx of Indian culture and technology into Ladakh but also the reverse, with increasing number of residents travelling to the plains. A local resident in Leh mentioned that young Ladakhis go to Indian cities to pursue higher education. Also, many Ladakhis, especially from Leh town, own houses in Indian cities like “Jammu, Delhi, Srinagar and Dehra Dun” (Sheikh, 2010) and spend the winters outside Ladakh. These Ladakhis are also important agents of change in addition to the non-local actors.

Furthermore, advent of tourism opened up the region to the outside world much beyond the scale of traditional trading sphere and the Dogra/British regional empire. While previously there were a limited number of traders, officers and visitors from outside, today during the summer season, Leh is filled with tourists. Inevitably, they bring their moral, ethical and material preferences, especially ideas and objects that characterises ‘modernity’.

On a positive side, the alternative livelihood options, various government supports/subsidiaries and improved infrastructures have enriched Ladakh economically and materially, which raised the overall living standard in the region. According to one elder who knows the time of pre-independence, “*it was [economically] difficult during the British time*” (male, 88-year-old). Also Rizvi wrote “Life is a lot easier now than in the time of the trade” (1999, p271). This is echoed by the foreign mountaineer who claims that it is difficult not to notice that people in Leh today are materially better off. He has emphasized that the ownership of electronic products and cars have remarkably increased in Leh in the last four decades.

In the meantime, critics warn the alarming speed of the social change and inflow of tourists in the region. On one hand, the presence of outsiders is not a new phenomenon in Ladakh. As far as Leh is concerned, there had always been traders from other regions. Yet, although there is similarity between the traders and today’s tourists in terms of the inflow of outsiders in the region, Rizvi points out that the contemporary tourists do not share the “the basic congruence in values and lifestyles” (Rizvi, 1999, p266) which was largely shared between Ladakhis and traders in the past and their numbers were far less than the current tourists.



According to Dawa (1997), Leh's summer population inflates substantially because of the massive inflow of tourists, migrant workers, army officials and rural Ladakhi population to Leh in search of employment. In 2011, an estimated 180,000 tourists visited Leh district, which has a population of 147,104 (Gov. of India Census 2011). Thus the overall impact of outsiders in Leh is beyond comparison from the time of trade. On the other hand, tourist season in Ladakh is short. As soon as the summer season is over, tourists and tourism-related facilities disappear from Leh until the next year. As a result, the population gap during the summer and winter is "as dramatic as the temperature of the region which goes up to 30 °C in summer and goes down to -30 °C in winter" (LAHDC-L, 2011). Thus, while traders came to Leh even during the winter, there is no continuity in today's tourism industry.

Fewkes (2009) and Dawa (1997) argue that while historical trade opened the region to extra-regional markets, tourism also trapped Ladakh in reverse relations, making it increasingly dependent on products from the plains and tourism. These concerns are also voiced by a local shopkeeper.

*"Today, political and economic problems in the world affect the business via tourist. A crisis in Europe reduces the number of tourists and reduces my business. So, business is sometimes good but sometimes bad. But eventually God will help me"*  
(male, 64-year-old).

His concern towards the dependency of Ladakhi economy on tourism and its volatility expresses the powerlessness over his livelihood which depends on something beyond his control.

Rapid urbanization and massive inflow of outsiders give tremendous pressure on limited resource in Leh and the surrounding area. Inevitably, Leh has to rely on the subsidies in terms of food supplies as local production cannot support the inflated population and demand for a wider variety of food. The combined effect of such social changes has impacted social values and the Ladakhi way of life. Dawa (1997) argues that government social welfare, subsidies "virtually destroyed self-reliance, sustainability and even-self-respect" (P376).

As Ladakh becomes increasingly dependent on the outside world and tourists, the demand for infrastructure/construction projects have intensified, which has also resulted in a growing influx of migrants. The following subsection will discuss the ‘seasonal migrant’ before focusing on Old Town.

### C.1 Seasonal migrant workers<sup>9</sup>

As discussed in the kingdom era, the region has accepted the migrant workers since the time of the kingdom. Historically, Ladakhi kings encouraged the in-migration of skilled workers from different regions like “Nepal and Kashmir, especially the Doda region” (Bodhi, 2010, p33). Today, migrants in Leh area come from the similar places like Nepal, parts of north India (Kashmir, Jammu, Doda, Punjab) and Tibet etc. However, in today’s context, migrant workers arrive in Leh in the summer to fill the need for certain skills and manpower in the new economic structure (ibid.).

According to Bodhi (2010), the type of jobs occupied by migrants play two supplementary roles in Ladakh. On one hand, migrant workers occupy a variety of skilled tasks that locals do not take up; such as haircut, milkman, butcher, cobbler, and carpenter etc. This study identified these skilled labourers as ‘entrepreneurs’ or ‘shops keepers’. On the other hand, majority of migrant workers in Ladakh are employed as unskilled/semi-skilled ‘wage laborers’ in the field of road construction, masons, and agriculture.

In the summer, the Border Roads Organization (BRO) is always in need of laborers for the construction/maintenance of roads in the region. Due to the high demand in the area, wages in Ladakh are much higher compare to other parts of India (Bodhi, 2010). Many of them come to Leh from economically less privileged places such as Jharkhand, Bihar and Jammu.

One plausible explanation to explain this phenomenon, as explained by respondents, is that local people do not need to take up these manual works since more profitable jobs in government,

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<sup>9</sup> According to Bodhi (2010, p43) “As in any census data, the [comprehensive] number of the moving migrant population [in Leh district] is not available...”However, at least 4,200 were officially registered in Leh area in 2008 : 3000 at Asst. Labour Commissioner’s (Leh town) and 1,200 for the Himank Project.

army and tourism require locals today. Also Tashi Morup, Projects Director of LAMO, explained that manual labours are socially looked down and the young Ladakhis do not choose occupations like barber and plumber as they attach “social stigma” to it (Morup, pers.comm.). While barber is an “uncool” (local resident, male, 26-year-old) job, driving a jeep for tourists is more looked upon because owning and driving vehicle is still seen something exclusive in the social memory, especially since vehicles arrived in the region only 40 years ago. As a result, the basic services are largely depending on the outsiders who come all the way to Leh from their hometowns to seek for the better income and less competition in Leh.

As seen above, the presence of seasonal migrant workers in Leh reflects many different phenomena in and around Ladakh, such as the region’s growing dependency on the ‘outside’ world, its historical link with today’s migrant workers and underlying social stigma. Behind these issues, we tend to overlook difficult life of seasonal migrants and their undermined social status (cf. Demenger 2009).

Thus, social changes due to the shift of governance, direct encounter with the world, technological and economic advancement have reshaped the lifestyle and value systems in the region. The transformation was especially remarkable in and around the urban center of Leh. In such drastic social changes, new meanings emerged in Old Town and reflected upon its physical space as shown in the following.

#### *D. Emergence of New Meaning of Old Town*

The new political, economic and social relations revised the people’s experience of Old Town and reshaped what it meant for different groups of the society. The study identified three different perceptions from different groups which occupy Leh town today. Firstly, in local residents’ perspective, Old Town’s outmoded amenities are interpreted as remnant of the old and inconvenient lifestyle in contrast to the desirable life they depict. Secondly, in tourists’ perspective, Old Town is understood as a domain for locals and migrants, in contrast to the touristic part of the town. Finally, on the contrary to these two perceptions, on-going conservation movement presents Old Town as a cultural heritage.

However, these distinctive aspects of Old Town involve multiple interests and factors that overlap and contradict. As shown in the following subsections, such agendas and factors constantly negotiate each other and continue to evolve both cultural and physical aspect of Old Town.

#### D.1 Old Town as a relic of the past



Figure 14 : Satellite view of Leh Town (Source Google map at <https://maps.google.com> as of Nov 2013)

In the light of the rapid urbanization, due to the seasonal migration and growing number of tourists, the central part of Leh became more expensive and less spacious. As a result, the town stretched outwards and the town's central functions such as the Hill Council (LAHDC-L: local governmental body) office, town's only petro pump, central post office, school and hospital etc. are clustered in the southern end of the town towards the airport (Figure 14). Local informants confirm that the area beyond Old Town and Main Bazaar used to be largely agricultural field

until a few decades ago, and is now rapidly being converted to roads and buildings (Figure 14). The following local resident's remark illustrates the tremendous speed of the physical changes in Leh town: *"Yes, I have observed a whole lot of change. And I can tell you that in the next 5 years, Leh will still change a lot"* (male, 28-year-Old).

The change was not only about the expansion of the town, but it also affected significantly the original part of the town, i.e. Old Town. After the king left the palace and the Dogra expanded the town, slowly residents who could afford it, started moving outside of the congested Old Town to more spacious areas. While this process was gradual through the 100 years of Dogra rule, it was remarkably accelerated in the post-independence period, especially after 1974, when Ladakh was opened for tourists. As a result, many old houses in Old Town were abandoned and ruined.

These residents left Old Town mostly because of the lack of space and basic facilities: mainly running water/sewage and car access. As first and foremost reason, the lack of sewage system and an access to drinking water were pointed out as problems in Old Town by almost all the respondents like the following comment:

*"The problem in Old Town is water and sewage system. Unlike in a village, we cannot take water from the stream. Also old Ladakhi style toilet does not suit in a city. It cost 5,000-7,000Rs to clean up. So people can clean up only once in a year. People's lifestyle has also changed. These owners have 2 choices: Either to change the whole thing or to move out. Eventually most of Ladakhi house owners rent out the place and they themselves stay outside of Old Town where they can get better facilities. Only 10% owners actually inhabit in their house in Old Town today<sup>10</sup>"* (male, 50-year-old).

As this informant explains, there is no swage system in Old Town. The traditional system in Ladakh was to use a dry compostable style toilet, which is still common in the region. This

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<sup>10</sup> This comment is inconsistent with the figure given by the Tibetan Heritage Fund (THF) which says "Over 60% of all buildings in the old town are inhabited by the owners, either exclusively or with some rooms rented out" (THF, n.d.). They also add, "10% of all buildings are vacant, often in very dilapidated condition. Only a quarter of buildings in the old town are in good or very good condition, while over 50% of all buildings are in poor to bad condition" (ibid.).

system is suitable in a water scarce area like Ladakh, which also generated valuable compost for use in their agricultural fields. In the case of Leh today, because much of the adjacent field was transformed to houses to accommodate a growing population, this type of traditional system became increasingly inconvenient. While new houses started to use the flush toilet, to install this type of toilet requires infrastructure projects which did not happen in Old Town due to the lack of incentives and difficulty.

As for an access to drinking water, the situation was very different before the rapid urbanization. A local elder explains: “*Back then, the population was small and the water was very clean in the stream. I could drink water just from this ditch, which is unthinkable today. As you see, it’s very dirty*” (male, 81-year-old). Thus, today, the residents and the shops in Old Town collect water supply from the common tap in Maney Khang or purchase from ‘water cart man’.

Another important reason is the limited vehicular access in Old Town. Because of the narrow and unpaved path, car entry is limited to only the lower part of Old Town where hardly one car can pass (Figure 15). While local elders all agree that there was no vehicle in the region before 1960s except the military jeeps, today many depend on a car especially around the Leh town. Between 1994 till 2012, a total of 8,502 vehicles (commercial/non-commercial) were registered

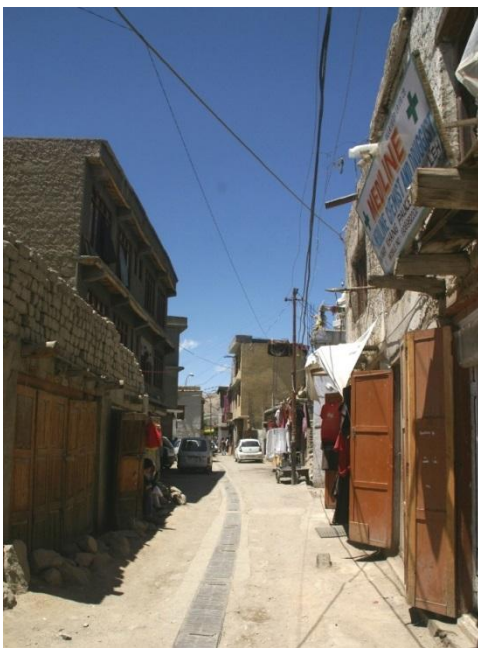


Figure 15: Narrow and unpaved path through Maney Khang (Photo: author)

in Leh district (Motor Vehicle Dept.; Leh cited in LAHDC-L handbook). Consequently, the limited car access is also seen as a great disadvantage for a contemporary or ‘modern’ lifestyle.

After the road was built in the region in 1960s, trucks started carrying materials and workers into Leh to construct new buildings. While in Old Town, infrastructure projects did not progress because of the narrow path and the ancient town gates which prevented car entry. Eventually the gates were demolished, though no one remembers the actual date. While some local residents claim that the gate was demolished during the



1970s, some says that it was the beginning of 2000s and there is no written record to confirm any of these claims. Probably the destruction took place gradually, and a part of the gate might have been left until the beginning of 2000s. Nevertheless, as the town expanded, the gates, as markers of the town's boundary, became insignificant to local population. They became a mere relic of the past and in some cases an obstacle to the development of the town.

As these narratives demonstrate, due to the change of lifestyle in the urban center Leh, lack of these modern technologies became serious problems. This change of lifestyle transformed people's sense of the place from the symbol of prosperity to the inconvenient place which curbed the contemporary urban lifestyle.

This changed meaning is reflected on the value of the place. While previously, the meaning of the place was valued for the social status which embodied through its proximity to the king and his palace, today, the social value is reflected in its monetary valuations of the place, i.e. the annual rent, which is based on the property price. According to local shop keepers and property owners, the rent for a shop space of approximately 16 sq m in Maney Khang would cost INR. 40,000/year or season (the rent is usually fixed on a yearly basis while many shops use the space only for 5 to 7 months in the summer season) while the same space on Main Bazaar would cost minimum INR.100,000/year. Although both places are located in close proximity, the rent in Old Town, therefore, is 2.5 times cheaper as compared to the Main Bazaar.

This changing meaning and the devaluation of Old Town are reflected on the usage of space in Maney Khang. According to local informants, people used to refer to Maney Khang, the entrance to the Old Town (Figure 14) as '*Changali*' or 'beer lane' because local Buddhist women used to sell *chang*, local beer made of barley, in a corridor behind Maney Khang to supplement their income before tourism arrived in the town. According to these informants, *Changali* is a derogatory term used by locals, which further underlines the social disapproval and the resulting dilapidated state of Old Town. Although this practice ceased when the government banned the unauthorized sale of alcohol, however, the name '*Changali*' remains in use, embedded within the negative perception of the area.

Thus, the contemporary lifestyle changed the people's experience from the land. Today Old Town is more associated with the legacy of the past which was remembered and imagined as 'simple yet difficult'. One local elderly resident of Old Town recalls that previously, people could go out without locking the door and are generally more content, at the same time food was never abundant and winter without heating system was cold (male, 88-year-old). Such personal experience might be also associated with the landscape of Old Town. From this perspective, Old Town seems to have failed to meet people's changing aspiration and expectation from the future and is reduced to a relic of a forgotten past.

## D.2 Old Town as local and migrant backyard



Figure 16 Today, Leh Main Bazaar in summer. It is filled with many shops, people and cars. (Photo: author)

Today Leh town is filled up by hundreds of tourism related facilities, namely guest house, restaurant, souvenir shop, travel agent, rental bike agent, cyber café and book shop etc. These facilities are especially concentrated in the central part of the town such as Main Bazaar (Figure 16), Fort Road and Changspa (Figure 14), which are popular with tourists during the summer season.



Although Old Town is located close to the town center, it has surprisingly few facilities for tourists. As of 2013, there were only seven guest houses and merely three souvenir shops for tourists in entire Old Town and two café run by local NGOs. Instead, shops in Old Town mainly provide non-touristic services namely grocery store, shoe repair, haircut, gold smith, mobile phone service and tailor etc. These shops mainly cater to Ladakhis and migrant workers who live here in the summer months.

These shops are concentrated in Maney Khang (Figure 17), which is adjoined to the Main Bazaar and the liveliest part of Old Town. While this area was a residential place like the rest of Old Town before 1990s, today it includes 33 small shops/restaurants and functions as “the only commercial area in Old Town” (Morup, pers. comm.). Because of the small pocket of local shops in the middle of the touristic town center, tourists see this area as a place primarily for locals in contrast to touristic part of the town.

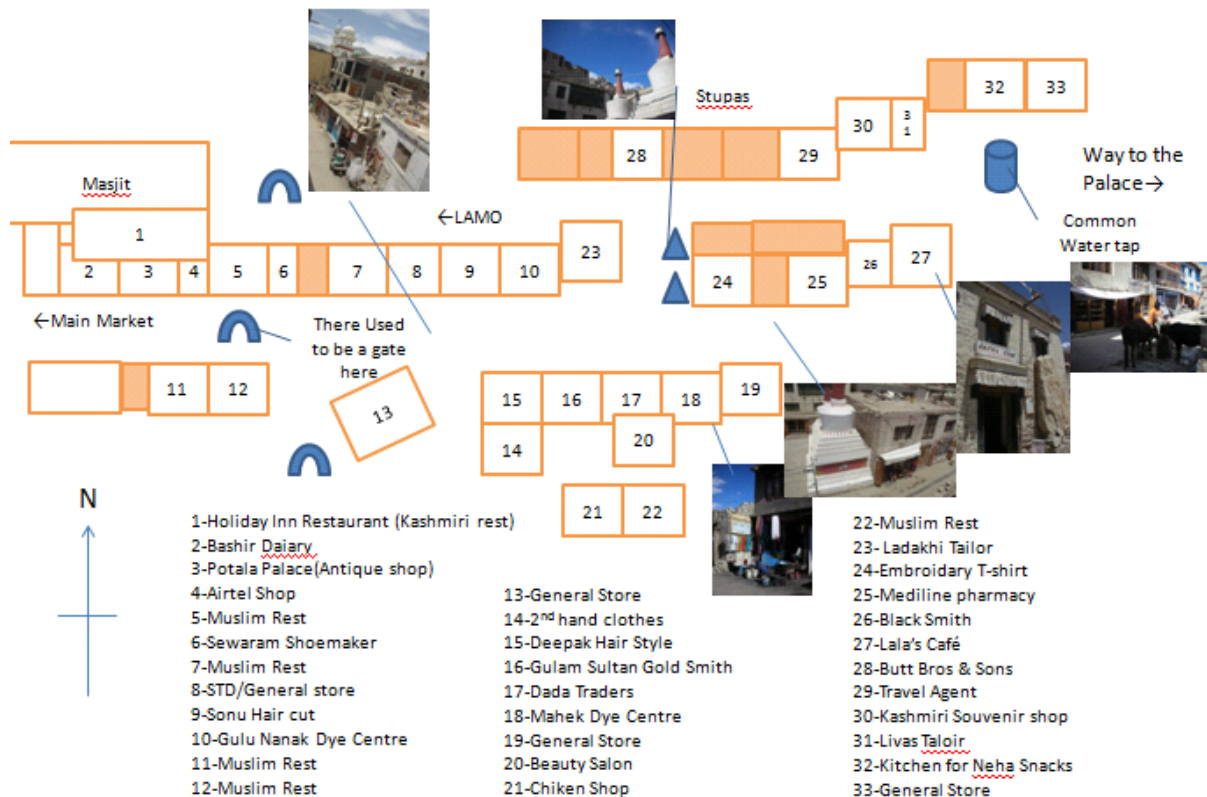


Figure 17 Maney Khang Area Map as of 2012, September (Made by the author)

This leads us to a further question: why did Old Town not become a touristic place like Main Bazaar and other areas in the first place? There are several answers to this question. On the one hand, Fewkes (2009) points out the “the legacy of trade” (2009, p154) on the contemporary tourism industry in Ladakh. According to Fewkes (2009), “one of the first hotels to cater to tourist in Leh was [...] one that had initially catered to the visiting merchants [...] after the closure of the trading borders” (p155). Thus, when the region was reopened for tourism, some of the former serais which were located out of Old Town were converted to tourist facilities. Similarly, sons of traders were the first ones who found the business opportunities in this new industry since they enjoyed the advantage of speaking several languages and were part of wider social and economic networks (ibid.). On the other hand, after the Dogra occupation and king’s departure, because of the limited space and the advent of spacious Main Bazaar, Old Town had already lost its social and economic importance. Even when Leh was an important stopover for the traders, the traders had stayed around Old Town rather than inside. The modified meaning and the structural limitations of space in Old Town meant that it was not actively used to create accommodations for tourists either. This is evident in the experience of tourists interviewed. One explained:

*“I stayed in multiple places [in Leh], but never Old Town since the places were either full, expensive or terrible. Terrible as in dark and not very inviting compared to other places I could get for the same money. But I suppose that's a bit inherent in an area that old”* (male, 24-year-old)

These shifts also mark the consolidation of the perception of Old Town as ‘old’ in terms of space, facilities and social meaning, in contrast with the ‘new’ and ‘modern’ facilities being developed in other parts of the ‘new town’. While both domestic (Indian) and international tourists appreciate traditional Ladakhi culture, locals perceived that they still expect ‘modern’ facilities such as flush toilet, running water and hot shower, which are currently lacking in Old Town. The following remark of a foreign tourist who came back to Leh after his one week stay in Changthang illustrates this point: *“Ah! Hot shower at last! It was beautiful up there and home stay was authentic experience but I craved for a hot shower, you know”* (Male, 34-year-old)

Thus, in the tourist crossroad Leh, it is not surprising that very few tourists actually use and stay in Old Town.

On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that the poor facility in the area is an effect rather than a cause of the lack of tourism in the area: because of the lack of tourists in the area, property owners in Old Town and the local authorities have little incentive to invest either in their property or the water supply in the area. As the study has observed, tourists do pass through Old Town as they make their way to the palace. However, they do not stay long because there are only few facilities to fill their agendas in Old Town. Lack of interest in Old Town is evident in the following comment of the foreign mountaineer: *“I went to have a walk in Old Town but I usually avoid because there is nothing particularly to do or to see there. Rather it’s dirty and the small paths are confusing.”* Due to the lack of place of interest, this led to tourists to prefer the Main Bazaar and other touristic areas for their stay in Leh.

Either way, such perception of tourists also explains the low rent of the area. One shopkeeper claims that the rent is more expensive in Main Bazaar because there are many tourists in Main Bazaar during the summer. The tourist-oriented businesses may require higher capital investment but they can expect higher turnover during the short period in summer.

Thus, high rent allowed only Kashmiri business community (and also a few Punjabi) who have the necessary capital, and Leh-based merchants who inherited the property, to run businesses in Main Bazaar. Because of their social asset and the nature of businesses, nearly all of them are able to communicate with foreign tourists in English. On the other hand, individual entrepreneurs without large capital investment capacity, such as migrants including Ladakhi from villages, tend to have local customer-oriented services which make more modest turnover. Naturally they are pushed out to Maney Khang, which provides ‘cheap rent’ yet convenient location because of its physical proximity to the Main Bazaar. Such trend might explain ‘legacy of trade’ which was argued by Fewkes.

While tourists seldom stay in Old Town, Maney Khang provides not only the commercial place but also cheaper accommodation (Rs. 500 - Rs. 1500/month) for the migrants especially the

shopkeepers<sup>11</sup> who cannot afford elsewhere in the town center (room rent on Fort road would cost Rs. 2,000/month). Thus for migrant workers, Old Town is a practical place and a temporal home where they stay during the summer season for work. Such use of the area by migrant workers also composes the perception of the area as a space for locals and migrants rather than for tourists.

Thus, the meaning of Old Town is the result of the interaction of different factors, such as the historical legacy of trade, lack of ‘modern’ facilities, absence of tourists and the influx of migrants. This is reflected not only on the types of commercial activities in the area, but also on the property value and demography of the shopkeepers and residents.

### D.3 Old Town as a Cultural Heritage

Since the region was opened up for outsiders, many concrete ‘modern’ buildings were built to accommodate the growing summer population. While the gate which prevented the car entry was seen as the obstacle to the development of the area from one perspective, from another it was a saving grace that spared Old Town the unplanned construction boom that characterized other parts of Leh. This perspective is mostly held by heritage conservation organizations.

For example, the Archeological Survey of India purchased the palace from the former royal family and commenced the restoration project in 1995 (Raul and Tshangspa, 2009). Since the king’s departure, the palace was largely neglected and its form severely damaged. Today, large parts of the palace have been restored through conservation work and are open to visitors as one of the national cultural heritage. In 2003, the road to the palace was connected and further facilitated the visit of tourists (ibid.). Due to such growing awareness of its heritage value, Old Town was enlisted as one of the 100 most endangered sites by World Monuments Fund (WMF) (WMF, 2008).

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<sup>11</sup> According to Bodhi (2010), overall migrants mainly stay in the following places in and around Leh: Sakti, Bus stand, Stalam and pologround. (p66, Table 5.3) the rent varies between Rs. 100 – 200 (/person and many migrants are sharing a room with several people, p80).

Since the last 10 years, local/international NGOs such as Tibetan Heritage Fund (THF), Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO) and Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation (HCHF) are also working to preserve the local cultural heritages in Old Town. These NGOs have strengthened the heritage perception by restoring the damaged houses. Lonpo House and Munshi house, which belonged to important ministers in the king's court and are located just below the palace, have now been restored and used as an office by these NGOs. Apart from conservation of old buildings, THF also runs a café in one of the restored buildings in Maney Khang Area, paved a path way and laid out a drainage in the area. J&K Government also sponsored the inauguration of 'Central Asian Museum' in Old Town, as 'the first proper museum in Leh' to showcase the region's history as a crossroad to the visitors. The museum is "Designed in the shape of Tibetan-Ladakhi fortress tower, with a contemporary edge" (Greater Kashmir, Aug 24, 2011). Recently, HCHF has also opened a "Heritage Café" in Lonpo House, while LAMO holds exhibitions and workshops in Munshi house to revive the living art forms and history of the area.

As a result, in spite of the earlier 'local backyard' perception, Old Town now acquired another meaning as a 'cultural heritage'. This perception draws on the original landscape of Old Town when Leh was a seat of the kingdom and hub of the regional trading network.

However, after the town's ancient gate was demolished, according to a local resident, the winding path in Maney Khang was straightened and widened in order for traffic to pass during the 1990s (male, 35-year-old). Following the reconstruction of the Jamma Masjid in front of Maney Khang from traditional Ladakhi style to the current minaret style in concrete structure (Figure 18), most of the old buildings in Maney Khang along the main thoroughfare were replaced by the concrete multi storied buildings for use as commercial spaces.



Figure 18 : Jamma Masjid at the head of Main Bazaar and next to Maney Khang after the reconstruction to Minaret style (Source: hotels in Leh)

After the destruction of old houses, as far as Maney Khang is concerned, it is hard to call this area a heritage except the old stupas built by King Senge Namgyal in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 12). Today this area is “a curious mix of new cement houses coming up alongside the historic but now crumbling ones connected by a tangle of old and new pathways” (LAMO, 2010). At the same time, the parts of Old Town that escaped destruction is “falling apart” (LAHDC-L, 2005, p30). Thus, Old Town has been in a state of limbo. It is neither entirely a heritage nor a town’s contemporary landscape. This ambiguous state left the area in neglect. One local resident claims:

*“In Old Town there are many religious places, gompas. Even one big Buddhist Festival ‘Dosmoche’ takes place in Old Town. Every year, so many tourists visit Leh. 90% of tourist takes this way to go to the palace. Only 10% actually takes a car to get there. Yet government does not do anything to improve this area” (male, 28-year-old).*





Figure 19 Area around the common water tap in Maney Khang where people are taking drinking water, washing clothes and hair. The office of the informant below is located just in front of this area and others also pointed out the untidiness of

As this informant claims, while showcased as cultural heritage, the physical state of Old Town is in decline due to the years of neglect. To reflect the current physical state Old Town, one of the Ladakhi tenant in Maney Khang claims: *“This office is a temporary office. We have been here for last 3 seasons but we will move to Fort Road next year. It is too dirty here and we can’t receive executive guests in this neighborhood”* (male, 34-year-old). Such remarks illustrate the Old Town as an underdeveloped, untidy or run-down neighborhood, which backs up the first perception of the Old Town as inconvenient place. Like this informant pointed out, there is a pile of garbage on the corner of the street which stray dogs and cows are digging into, the half ruined old houses are abandoned and rubbles are scattered (Figure 19).

The deteriorated state of Old Town is also addressed as a part of town's housing problem by the local development authority, Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh (LAHDC):

*“The lack of housing facilities is another big gap in the infrastructural make-up of Leh and many residents have to live in shanty-like slums for want of better options ... Even basic recreation facilities and civic amenities (such as shopping complexes, clubs, parks and open spaces) are lacking for Leh's residents”*(LAHDC-L, 2005, p30).

In contrast to the ‘historical heritage’ view, from the town's development authority's perspective, the area turns into “slum”. This view is shared by the first local's perception which sees Old Town as backward, dirty and inconvenient place. These narratives show the incompatibility of the two meanings of the landscape: relic of an old lifestyle and heritage.

In the context of these contrasting perceptions, the hill council (LAHDC-L) proposed a plan to construct a road through Old Town. The outline is mentioned in the town's development plan ‘Ladakh 2025 Vision Document’ initiated by LAHDC. The plan is to widen and pave the road through Maney Khang and Old Town and to connect to the main road in order to make Main Bazaar a vehicle-free zone for pedestrians (Vision 2025). It aims to mitigate the town's worsening traffic due to the increased number of cars in Leh and further facilitate the tourism in Main Bazaar by diverting the traffic through Old Town.

From the authority's point of view, the road connection will also provide the area a scope of infrastructure development and improvement of land utilization (Vision 2025). While the Vision does not state exactly where it plans to bypass the road, there is hardly any option but to penetrate the Old Town. According to local property owners in Maney Khang, the negotiation of the compensation has already begun.

A J&K local news article reports this on-going project:

*“Leh, Sept 14-Tourism Minister Nawang Rigzin Jora [...] instructed the concerned agency to start construction work of two vital link roads in upper and lower Skyonos-Gogsum [(core of Old Town)] within weeks time. For this purpose, the*



*funds would be provided under Tourism Development scheme, he added. [...] At Skyanos-Gogsum, the people demanded for immediate construction of internal roads, footpaths, improvement of drainage system, regular removal of garbage, availability of adequate drinking water and development of community centre. Jora announced Rs. five lakhs<sup>12</sup> for development of park and also announced to provide Rs. 1.50 lakh for constructing the Community Hall” (early TIMES, 9/14/2009).*

The news report claims that local residents are impatiently demanding the road connection through the area. Other issues in the area are also addressed<sup>13</sup> and some funds were available but road connection seems to be the utmost priority here.

However, even the hill council is also not a monolithic unit but represent different interests. In the Vision Document, for example, the road plan is proposed while a concern is expressed about Old Town’s heritage value. Thus, on the one hand there is a clear push to address the traffic problem in the town by developing old town, while on the other hand there is a also the move to preserve the heritage value of the area.

Interestingly, there was another discussion over the construction of the road from Leh across the Karakorum pass over 100 years ago during the British rule. However, Knight wrote that local merchants refused the proposal as “a good road would bring more merchants here, goods become cheaper, and the profits would be consequently less” (1893, p174). This was the case when merchants could earn a living more leisurely without an intensive competition one would find among the shops in Leh Main Bazaar today.

However, the time is different now. Demenge (2012) claims that “roads are not only an infrastructure” (p52) but both for population and the authority, “roads can be symbols of prestige, modernity, development, change” (cited in Demenge, 2012). Thus, for local Leh citizens and the development body, the road is not only a commodity which facilitates the contemporary lifestyle but it is a symbol which represent what Leh ought to be in the future.

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<sup>12</sup> 1 lakh = 100,000. Rs.5 lakhs = approx. 6000 euro

<sup>13</sup> 3 years later when this field research was conducted, none of these were materialized.

On the other hand, despite these offers, local property owners' reactions to the plan have been rather ambiguous and sometimes even counter-intuitive. Some see the plan as positive due to business opportunities and probable increase of the property price, which is logical and expected. However, it is interesting that other owners are very concerned that this would result in the loss of their ancestral heritage and also of their childhood memories. This concern is shared by the NGOs who are clearly against the plan because the road would destroy the cultural heritage of the area. From these perspectives, the current state of Old Town is already threatened by the physical destruction of a material heritage. Thus, the entry of vehicle will destroy whatever is left in the area. A worker of THF laments the reconstructions of old buildings which have already taken places in Maney Khang: "*We started working in Leh from 2003, if we were here little earlier, we could have saved the gates and this area...*" (Local THF staff).

This dilemma and responses to the road plan articulate the contestations between different meanings of Old Town, which reflect the different relations people and communities have with this space and the processes of change. These contestations are evident not only between communities and individuals but also within the different interests of individuals. For instance, one respondent highlighted: "*The government's road making plan is good for business perspective. But personally I do not like it. If it ever realizes, I will probably move out of here*" (male, 28-year-old).

However, either as conservation or development, the discussion does not seem to include the seasonal migrant who are also one of the active users and main stakeholders in the area. Because migrant shopkeepers do not share the social memory, cultural interest and the long term prospect of the development in the area, they are largely excluded. In the meantime, if the plan is materialized, the road construction will most probably increase the rent which will surely affect the presence of the seasonal migrants in the area.

Rather than seen as one of the stake holders, the migrants are seen as a part the problem in terms of the physical deterioration in the area. The previous Ladakhi tenant further explains:

*“The problem in this area is lack of community feeling and lack of understanding. Especially this area is occupied mostly by tenants from outside. They do not care about keeping this place neat. No one gives a shit. No one takes a collective action to maintain this place and there is no communal service inside the Old Town”* (male, 34-year-old).

According to this informant, because those who physically occupy the area are mostly tenants from outside, they have neither enough cultural understanding nor long term interest in the area but are more interested in instant financial profit. One migrant shopkeeper’s comment vouches for this observation: *“I am here purely for business. I like the peaceful atmosphere but there is nothing else here”* (male, 35-year-old). This opinion is shared by most of the migrant shopkeepers in Maney Khang. Although many of them are married and have family, none of the respondents (migrants) are able to bring their family<sup>14</sup> with them. The reasons include the fact that they remain migrants in Ladakh, the lack of housing, limited access to various facilities like schooling and cultural difference. They work intensively during the summer months and leave for other work through the other seasons. Because there is no continuity in these seasonal businesses, it seems deep cultural understanding and sense of home never takes root among the migrants. Lack of cultural understanding of the migrants was evident from the fact that very few of these tenants learn Ladakhi (language) even though they have been coming to Leh for over 10 or even 30 years. One migrant shopkeeper says he has never been to the Leh Palace which he has looked at everyday from his shop in Maney Khang for the last 20 years.

From the heritage perspectives, it is ironic that Old Town, which was the seat of the Ladakhi king and center of Ladakhi culture for centuries, is now primarily occupied by migrant workers whose main interest in the area is its ‘cheap rent’. These migrants are not considered as a part of Ladakhi culture but their presence in the area is an effect the rapid urbanization and development processes, which does not accord with the heritage landscape.

From the local’s perspectives, untidiness and backwardness of Old Town are associated with the ‘social stigma’ which contemporary Ladakhi youth attach to manual workers and their work

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<sup>14</sup> Further details about the life of migrant workers in Ladakh are mentioned by Demenge (2009) and Bodhi (2010)

which are taken up by the migrant labourers. Although unsaid, the low status of migrants also indirectly constructs the current perception of the Old Town because the area has many migrants who are engaged with these manual works which Ladakhi people are unwilling to take.

Such social stigma attached to the Old Town through migrants is manifested in the way they share and use space. The usage of the public place, the town's first and only cinema hall in Old Town illustrate this point. According to the local youth, "*Today almost everyone has a TV at home. So locals never go to the cinema hall, it's for the laborers from Bihar and Nepal*" (male, 26-year-old). The cinema is one of a few entertainments in Leh for the migrant labourers away from home. It seems, however, local people do not prefer to use this place because of the high presence of migrants.

These narratives demonstrate the new perception of old landscape as a cultural heritage and underlying subtle contestation over the agenda of future Old Town and social exclusion of migrants in the area. The issue here is that a lack of cultural integration and migrants' low social status seem to prevent them to participate in the discussion over the future of Old Town. Instead of representing one of the stakeholders of the area, they are rather representing the ambiguous status of Old Town between the two contested agendas: heritage conservation and development project.

#### *E. The landscape of Old Town, past and present*

The original landscape of Old Town was conceptually formed during the reign of the powerful king, Sengge Namgyal. It was the social and physical expression of the king's political and economic power, the vitality of trans-Himalaya trade and the cosmopolitan profile of the town. The town not only occupied an important place in regional politics, but also served as a vibrant economic and social hub for the kingdom. The kingdom was governed from here and traders, town people and vendors exchanged their goods and cultures in this place. However, this landscape changed during the Dogra rule when the town was expanded. Once the kingdom lost its political independence and the king left the palace, its meaning also faded away and its landscape was diminished to a relic of its former power. As the area was no longer used for trade

and many residents moved out, Old Town was replaced by the spacious Main Bazaar as the hub of social, political and economic activities in Leh.

After the independence of India, Ladakh underwent further dramatic changes, which engaged with its past in different ways: the kingdom and the former trans-Himalayan trade now exist only in texts, living memory of elders and the physical structures of Old Town. Thus, the landscape of Old Town no longer represents the power of the king or the economic importance of trade. However, in the contemporary scenario, Old Town is again at the intersection of the agendas of different groups of society, i.e. local residents, tourists, seasonal migrants, NGOs and the local development authority. At the same time, because their experience and agendas (interests) differ significantly, each group has their own interpretation of Old Town. As a result, “different parallel landscapes in space and time” (Bjerkli, 2010, p234) emerged from Old Town (Figure 20).

First of all, from the local’s perspective, Old Town’s landscape evokes a sense of inconvenience because the area lacks infrastructures to facilitate contemporary lifestyle. Such lifestyle relies on means like road and water connection. The lack of such facilities and crumbling old houses are associated with the memory of old lifestyle and hardship which the region experienced before the recent economic boom. Such experience and prospect of the better future produced the image of Old Town as ‘a relic of old lifestyle’.

At the same time, lack of facilities in the area plays a role on another landscape in Old Town. Due to the ‘inconvenience’ of lacking car access and water connection, the area has very small number of hotels/guest houses to accommodate tourists compared to the newer section of the town. Yet due to the proximity to the Main Bazaar and its cheap rent, a pocket of commercial establishments for locals have converged at the entrance of Old Town. Because of the contrast from touristic Main Bazaar to local shops, tourists see the landscape of Old Town as a ‘backyard for locals and migrant workers’ (Figure 20).

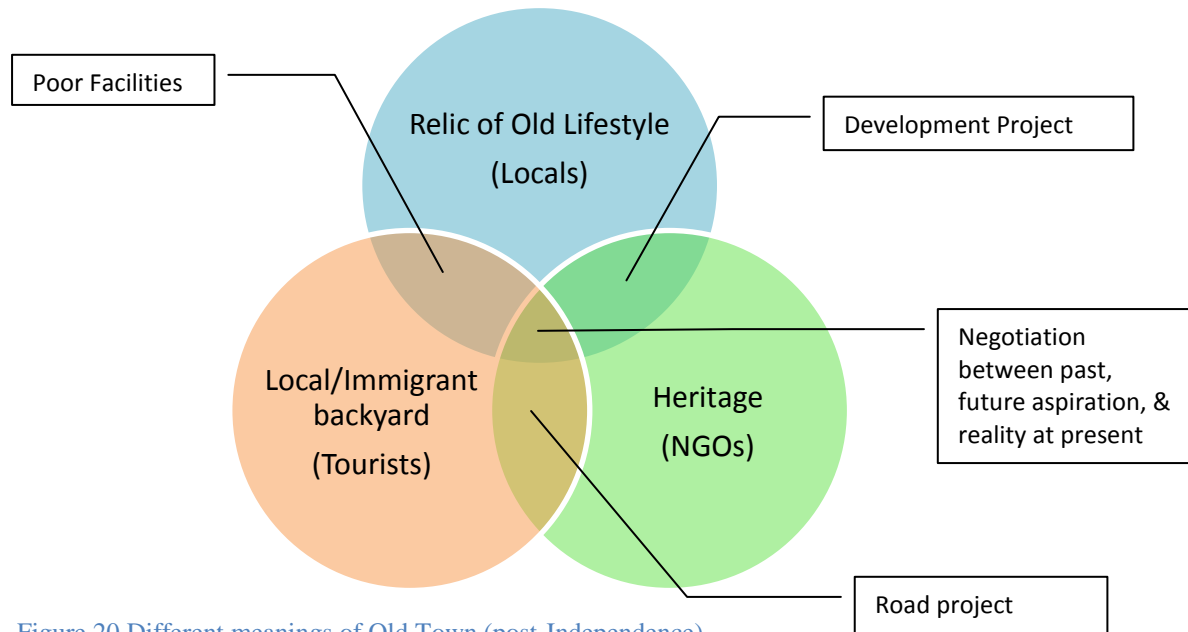


Figure 20 Different meanings of Old Town (post-Independence)

The study observed how these meanings are reflected in the use of space in Maney Khang. During the day, some tourists pass through as they walk up to the palace and take pictures. However, many of them do not stay long in Maney Khang as there is hardly anything to attract them in Old Town, except possibly the cafés run by THF or HCHF and the exhibitions and workshops held by LAMO. On the other hand, particularly in the morning and late afternoon, shops in Maney Khang are busy with local customers. Also, in the early morning and after dark, migrant workers hang around in Many Khang drinking tea, buying cigarettes or recharging their mobile phone, before and after their daily work. These migrant workers are there because their daily pick-up point before they go to work is at the square in front of Jamma Masjid, right in front of Maney Khang (Figure 21). To cater to these customers, seven Muslim restaurants<sup>15</sup> occupy the entrance area of Old Town. The owners of these restaurants are also migrants. They claim that their customers are mainly laborers and locals but seldom tourists. While tourists hardly come to these ‘Muslim restaurants’ in Maney Khang, during this study, no migrant worker was observed in the above mentioned heritage café in Old Town, which is favored by local youth from Leh and tourists. This observation suggests that each group is performing a particular practice of meaning, which is derived from the meaning of the landscape they attach to the area.

<sup>15</sup> Restaurants run by Muslim owner and cooks. Inside decollated with Islamic prayer.



Figure 21 : Morning pick up of waged labours in front of Jamma Masjid and Maney Khang (Photo: Author)

This can be also explained by the change in the people's relationship with the land due to the change in circumstances. As discussed in the theory chapter, "social, political, economic relations" of the daily life changes our experience of the land. In the past, people are socially, politically and economically bounded to Old Town when the area was still the seat of the kingdom and hub of the caravan trade. Residents started moving out of Old Town after the king left the palace and the Dogras constructed a fort elsewhere as a new security measure. People no longer stayed inside the congested Old Town and preferred more spacious areas closer to their agricultural field. Also, earlier typically Buddhists were predominantly engaged with agriculture, while Muslims took up trades and other occupation. Due to the change in economic structure after the independence, the former social structure changed. Today, many Leh-based Buddhists no longer rely on agriculture for their livelihood but on the income from government job or tourism. Similarly Arghons, the prominent trading community in Leh, while they are still forming an influential community in the town (Rizvi, 1999), there are no longer traders. These change in social structure also affected people's relationship with Old Town. While Buddhists

moved out of Old Town, according to local informants, these Arghons purchased the properties in Maney Khang near the mosque. Earlier they were known as ‘landless’, however today, they became landlords by renting shop spaces in Maney Khang.

However, as already demonstrated in the earlier discussion, these processes are seldom clear cut but comprise of a complex web of factors interacting and evolving. In the case of Old Town, either directly or indirectly, intricate dynamics such as memory, value and space are changing the meaning and physical landscape of Old Town. For example, the physical decay of Old Town can be traced back to the loss of the original meaning of the place at the end of dynasty. After the king left the palace, the limited space in Old Town drove out residence and traders. However, what followed after was a downward spiral of decay of Old Town (Figure 22). After the owners moved out, many of the houses were abandoned and neglected. Because of the neglect, the area failed to attract income from tourism. The combined effect of both limited facility and income from tourism caused to decrease the property value thus rent of the area. Consequently, the ‘cheap rent’ attracted the migrant manual workers who cater to local people. These manual workers are considered a lower section of the society and associated with the deteriorated physical state of Old Town. To make a matter worse, the financial devaluation of the area further discouraged the owners and town’s authority to invest in the area and makes a vicious circle.

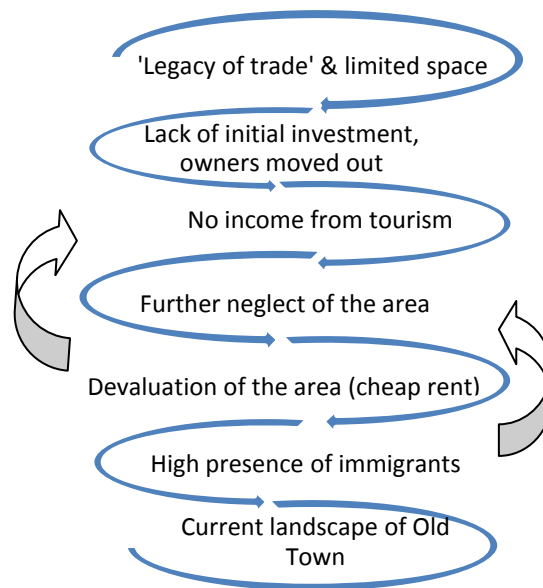


Figure 22: Downward spiral behind the current decay of Old Town



As a result, Old Town, once a proud capital of the kingdom and the cosmopolitan social center, now provides cheap accommodation to migrants who occupy the lower section of the society. While long ago, under the king's reign, the physical proximity to the palace indicated one's high social status, today it is linked with 'social stigma' which is attached to the work of migrants. Similarly, although the town walls and gates are now demolished, the meaning of 'inside' and 'outside' signified are reversed today. While previously, the inhabitants outside the gates were socially excluded group of the society, today, inside the 'Skyanos Gogsum', the core of Old Town, is inhabited and actively used by socially-excluded migrant workers as a result of this meaning process.

In order to break such a vicious cycle, a series of conservation projects have given a new perception to Old Town as a heritage (Figure 20). In contrast to the first two meanings, local NGOs and other conservation projects excavate, reproduce and re-present the Old Town's original meanings which were buried in rubbles and ruins of once magnificent houses of aristocrats. This perspective draws on the old landscape Old Town as ancient capital and trading crossroad but with different consequence. Mainly, the revival of ancient landscape is oriented to promote the traditional Ladakhi culture and its awareness of the local populace. For example, THF's work in paving paths and making drainage were highly appreciated by locals, while LAMO's neighborhood initiative targets Old Town residents including migrant workers to record the history of Old Town.

However, it also urges tourists to share this perception because of tourists possess substantial financial influence over the local economy. The restored palace, for example, started earning Rs. 300,000 – 500,000 annually (Paul and Dawa, 2009). The former house of the king's chief minister is now converted to 'Heritage Café' and marketed towards the tourists seeking for 'traditional' local experience. The newly opened museum in Old Town is also expected to attract the tourists to the area. As Bender wrote "imagining the past is profitable" (Bender, 1992, p268), to be conserved as a heritage, Old Town is expected to generate income in the new economic structure.

On the other hand, while Old Town symbolizes a cultural heritage, in reality many local residents have left the area and have little incentive to invest in the maintenance of their old houses. As a result of this neglect, the physical state of Old town is declined. For the residents of Leh town as a whole who seek a comfortable lifestyle, Old Town's 'heritage value' is next to irrelevant.

The discussion surround the road project reflects a contestation over how the landscape of Old Town ought to be presented. The road plan in Old Town is expected to improve the infrastructure as well as the commercial prospects for the area and hence property value. Thus, this plan also seeks to break the vicious cycle in which Old Town is stuck today. But this will be achieved only by changing the physical profile of the area, which could lead to further changes in its meaning and physical features as people might redevelop the area. Consequently, the road connection will surely change the dynamic of Old Town and further accelerate the replacement of old houses and erosion of historical significance of the area, which are already underway. Thus, it seems the agenda of both projects correspond to each other in terms of saving Old Town from ruination, but in opposite consequences.

The focal point of this discussion between development project and heritage conservation is the local's living standard and effect on tourism. However, in this discussion, one of the stake holders who physically occupy the space, seasonal migrants, are left behind because they do not fit in the frame of 'traditional Ladakh'. On the other hand, the consequences of the either project will directly affect them or their work in the area.

This lead to a further question: To whom does the Old Town's landscape belong? As Cresswell (2004) pointed out, landscape can be "a site of meaning as well as a tool used by powerful groups to manipulate present and future action". In the historical context, for example, pashm, the commodity which changed the fate of Ladakh as a political unit was the important agenda for the Dogras or the British to intervene in Ladakhi polity. In today's context, tourism might replace the importance of the pashm at that time in Leh. The pressure of the increasing population also directs the authority's agenda to develop Old Town. The threatened traditional Ladakhi culture in the face of modernization also forms NGOs' and other organization's agenda

in Old Town. However, it seems, immigrants have fallen out of the interest of these group who has a power to influence the ‘present and future action’ of Old Town. While local authority whose view should reflect the population of Leh understands Old Town as a place to be developed, NGOs and some local residences claims Old Town has to be conserved. However either view does not assimilate the presence of migrant workers in the area.

Demenge (2009) use the example of road construction to explain how migrants are excluded in the social sphere even as they supplement the unpopular part of the work in Ladakh. Migrants are building roads which are not for themselves but for the development of Ladakh, however their presence and their contribution are “*largely absent from local histories and consciousness*” (P8). In Maney Khang, the migrant workers are also assisting the local people’s daily life or development of the region through their work, however, this fact is largely overlooked because of their low social status as migrants.

However, as Ingold (2010) suggested, landscape is an accumulation of past generation and work of current generation whoever dwell or work on. This point is rightly illustrated in the following example:

*“We can learn the name of the king who built the great castle, but we do not know the name of the labour who actually built the ancient bridge or a farmer who cultivated the farm...The memories of anonymous ancestors are there in front of us”* (Ingold, 2010).

Thus, even though migrants form a marginal part of the society and their work largely depreciated, in this study, migrants are not insignificant. Their presence, works and everyday practices in the area are also a consequence and a process of landscape.

Lastly, there is constant negotiation between different factors over the physical representation of Old Town (Figure 20). As Miewald and McCann (2004) claims, “place is a complex interaction of attachment to social memory, identity, and sense of place” (p1047 cited in Masuda and Garvin, 2008), the emerged different meaning of Old Town are the result and the process of negotiation

between the legacy of the past, aspiration for the future, and the everyday practice and work of the people.

As the narratives above show, the landscape of Old Town evolved different meanings over times through events and people's daily activities. Yet acquisition of meanings is not a linear process and rarely occurs overnight. Rather it is a subtle but complicated and dynamic process as it often involves many actors with different agendas based on the different political, economic and social context. Thus, the acquired meanings are also not clear-cut but often overlap and contradict to each other. Consequently, landscape reflects the complex nature of human society where different factors such as history, memory, and agenda act upon each other and evolve the meaning.

## **6. Conclusion - returning to the proverb**

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This study set off with a tiny clue left in the old proverb. As the proverb suggests, in Ladakh, there is a strong interconnection between people and their place. According to Demenge (2012), “people do not just ‘pass through’ the landscape but physically and cognitively appropriate the landscape they live and move in [...]” (p56). In the words of one elderly Ladakhi villager, “[In Ladakh,] every place has a history that can be revealed through metaphor, story, and song. To understand people, one must know their place [...]. To understand places, one must know the people they are composed of” (Aggarwal, 2004, p61).

From the time of the king to Dogra occupation, independence of India and to present-day, Leh Old Town has witnessed a drastic socio-political transformation in its history. Today, although the landscape of Old Town is largely ‘overlooked’, it is more than a ‘background’ of local activities or a back alley of the busy Main Bazaar. What we discovered behind these changing landscapes of Old Town was way beyond the worn out history of this small neighborhood. It reflects the larger political dynamics of fluctuating fortune of the kingdom, colonial movement in the Great Game and India’s international territorial dispute. The landscape also revealed the important role Ladakh had played in the centuries’ long standing trans-continent commercial network where goods, culture, religion and race were exchanged. Finally, it demonstrated how all these different factors are interconnected in the complex web of society. Thus, the landscape of Old Town is a result of dynamic political, economic, ecological and social processes, which the region has experienced in the past centuries. In this landscape, stories of countless number of people who were involved are present.

This study discusses how the history and current social changes are responsible to the contemporary landscape of Old Town. However, it is not only about the aesthetic scenery or threatened cultural heritage in the area. It is also about history, people, the land and how they interact with each other through different processes to produce meaning. Through the landscape of Old Town, this study aims to record something, namely the memory of the kingdom and the trade, struggle of migrant workers, and social dynamic which are reflected in the contemporary landscape of Old Town. Hopefully, this study will provide a starting entry point for future research into the interaction between meanings and processes in spaces like Old Town.

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