

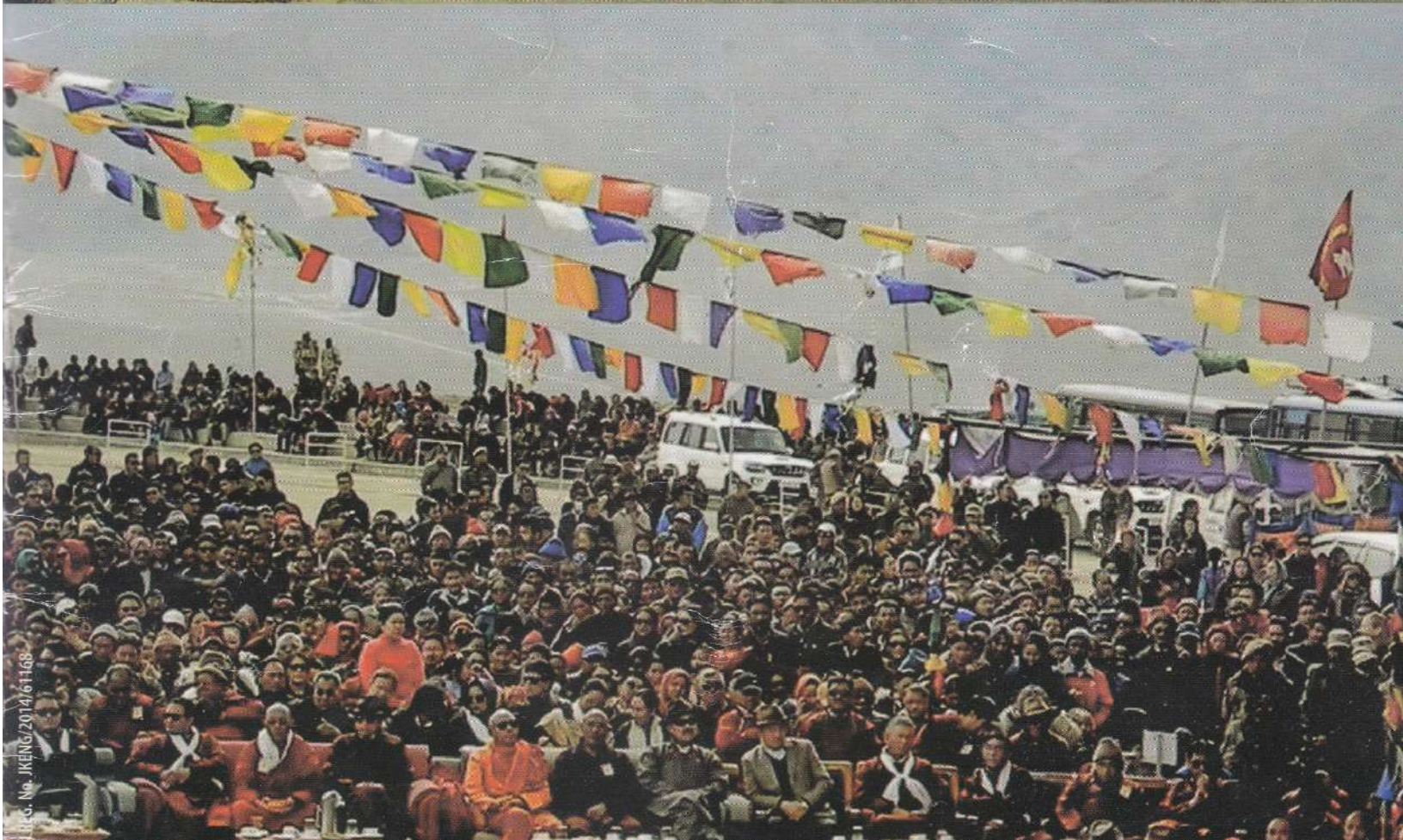
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Welcome to Ladakh UT

How do we reconcile differences, fears?





# Understanding change in Leh's urban-scape

By Intekhab Alam, Nazir Din and Maithily Velangi

**L**ike other human settlements, Ladakh too has experienced modernisation and urban development. This process has led to disparity between new developments and traditional settlements. We are observing new ideas, globalised materials, modern techniques and globally-accepted ways of urban planning using a grid-iron base and assuming the land is a blank slate.

In Ladakh, communities that were tied together through shared activities such as farming, cultural beliefs and social interactions have lost their sense of unity. Agricultural activities were organised around seasons and climate. The daily routine of the family revolved around farming. Also, the family never farmed alone. Neighbours, relatives and community members would always help each other to complete various farming activities. Similarly, community members and relatives would always come together for social events and for important decisions. This ensured that the community remained tight-knit.

However, various government policies have made people dependent on subsidised imports to meet their basic requirements without needing to farm. The

process of modernisation opened up other occupational opportunities and facilitated economic progress amongst Ladakhis while also detaching them from traditional practices.

The tourism industry continues to grow at a rapid pace. Over the last few years, the number of tourists visiting Ladakh each year has exceeded the local population. This boom has resulted in people transforming their households and farms into homestays, hotels, and restaurants. There are many new hotels and guest houses being constructed each year, especially in Leh. Many of these establishments are lavish and use new technologies to meet the needs of tourists. There are reports of tour operators following unethical practices by putting pressure on residents to meet various demands made by tourists. The competition is so intense that people are forced to either meet these demands or lose the business. This poses a grave risk to a community that has become increasingly dependent on tourism for sustenance at the cost of farming.

In this context, we organised a workshop in Leh this summer to study and discuss the impact of tourism on this mountain settlement. Our study focussed on themes such as architecture, demographics, public spaces and streetscapes, and infrastructural services. Each group was comprised of architecture students from various institutes in India. They were encouraged to pick a theme and study its relevance in the delineated area to understand current trends and identify issues. The students were also asked to

develop proposals to resolve and address issues that emerged in their study area.

The historic old town area at the base of Leh Palace was documented for its salient features and challenges. New developments that are now shaping the landscape were also studied using the same thematic approach to compare old and new trends. This study revealed many aspects related to social and cultural loss along with architectural changes in the new developments.

At the conclusion of the workshop, the students were asked to interpret disassociations and problems arising from these changes and developments. They were encouraged to identify issues and provide policy solutions and design guidelines.

A brief summary of the findings of the study is listed below.

**Architecture:** This theme explored climate-responsive techniques of construction, including details that contribute to the urban aesthetic of private and public spaces that constitute Leh's urban fabric. The most significant finding was that new developments have lost the built-unbuilt relations these communities traditionally had with space.

**Demographics:** This study focussed on people and culture that anchored social relations, which in turn influenced the evolution of urban spaces through choices made for individual house plans. In addition, a distinct social structure was identified that are assumed to reflect hierarchies of space and the lay of Leh's urban landscape.

**Public spaces and streetscapes:** The public spaces and

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streets in the old town area are vibrant and busy. They cater to different sections of people and remain inclusive. However, the new developments lack public gathering spaces. The need for social interactions seems to have taken a back seat in new developments. The major challenge faced by the old town area is the loss of character of streetscapes due to large hoardings installed by lodges and restaurants to attract tourists. These boards overshadowed traditional shingtsak and façades of the older sections of the settlement. There is need for policies to standardise these hoardings to integrate them with the streetscape while also maintaining the character of the place.

**Infrastructural services:** Infrastructure and services play a significant role in the well-being of any urban space. As populations grow, there is greater demand and supply of various services. The old Leh area hinted at a lack of adequate service lines,

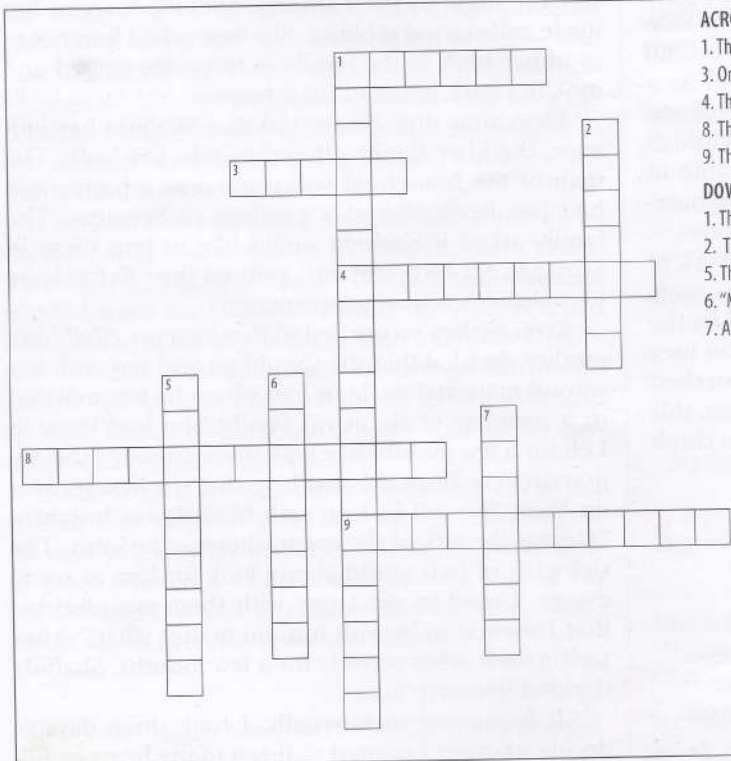
be it water supply or sewage and drainage. The dry toilets are slowly being converted into regular water toilets but the infrastructure required for the latter is still lacking. This problem is compounded by the fact that the lanes in the area are very narrow. This prevents vehicles from reaching these houses to clear the soak pits. Similarly, the older settlements are facing major problems related to water supply. The storm-water drains that run along the lanes are open and clogged with garbage. This has resulted in creating a very un-hygienic condition for living. However, in the newly developed areas, this problem has been resolved to a large extent by providing relevant infrastructure.

Like the rest of the country, garbage disposal remains a major issue in this area. People do not segregate wet and dry waste effectively. Since this is a high altitude cold desert, bio-degradation processes take longer than the plains. Thus, most of the waste generat-

ed is being transported out of Leh town, which leads to more pollution. Furthermore, a large number of tourists frequent the place leading to generation of garbage volumes that exceed current handling capacity.

The mitigation strategies proposed for the challenges identified in the area focussed on the need to balance top-down approaches to planning with bottom-up approaches. While the Hill Council is implementing policies to maintain the sanctity of this section of Leh town, there is an urgent need to also understand the importance of conserving the cultural landscapes and traditional practices of local residents. Many organisations are currently working towards creating awareness in this regard by engaging with youth. In our opinion, this effort needs to reach a larger audience, including residents outside, tourists, and a floating population, across Leh town and not remain limited to the people living in this section. ■

## Crossword 066



### ACROSS

1. This 'fiery' film remains one of the most popular Hindi films (6)
3. One of Leh's most popular films to date (5)
4. The young Ladakhi actor who is starting to make waves (5,4)
8. This is one of Kargil's more popular films (7,5)
9. The doyen of theatre in Ladakh (6,5)

### DOWN

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ remains one of the most iconic prison-break films (9,10)
2. This Avengers' film is the highest grossing film to date (7)
5. The \_\_\_\_\_ is famous for "...an offer that can't be refused" (9)
6. "May the force be with you" (4,4)
7. A fictional love story based on a ship that sank (7)

### Crossword 065 solution

