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## The Road to Lingshed: Manufactured Isolation and Experienced Mobility in Ladakh

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## The Road to Lingshed: Manufactured Isolation and Experienced Mobility in Ladakh

### Acknowledgements

1: Nyerges, Endrew (1997), *The ecology of practice: studies of food crop production in Sub-Saharan West Africa* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach). 2: Swyngedouw, Erik (2003), 'Modernity and the Production of the Spanish Waterscape, 1890-1930', in Karl S. Zimmerer and Thomas J. Bassett (eds.), *Political Ecology: An Integrative Approach to Geography and Environment-Development Studies* (New York: The Guilford Press).

## THE ROAD TO LINGSHED: MANUFACTURED ISOLATION AND EXPERIENCED MOBILITY IN LADAKH

The article deals with the political ecology of road construction in Ladakh, North India. It considers the way humans exploit and transform the environment through social and political arrangements and for purposes that are socially and culturally mediated (Nyerges 1997). Roads — as “socationature,” part social, part natural (Swyngedouw 2003 following Lefebvre) — are an integral part of this environment; and roads in turn affect people, influence the way they move, and what they do. The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ladakh between 2006 and 2009 along the future Zaskar Highway, a trans-Himalayan road that has been under construction for more than three decades. Based on the experience of the people of Lingshed — a village situated three day walk away from the road — I look at the symbolic dimensions of roads, explore the formidable mobility of Lingshedpas, and examine the relationship between roads, isolation and mobility. How are mobility and isolation experienced in the absence of road? What are the effects of roads in a remote Himalayan village? I argue that both isolation and mobility are experienced in Lingshed, but a notion of isolation is intentionally and unintentionally manufactured in order to build the case for road construction. I attempt to dissociate manufactured aspects of isolation from experienced ones, and show how they differ.

“You’ve come to Lingshed to study roads? Then here it is!” said Karma ironically. It seemed surreal to find this unconnected portion of dirt track here in Lingshed, a remote village of Ladakh, a three-day walk and several passes away from where the last road ended. It would take years to connect this portion of road to the network, and by that time, it would probably have to be rebuilt, as the slim dirt track would have been erased by wind, snow, and rain. But the road was there, flanked by a remote side of the valley outside the village in such an undesirable place that it seemed unlikely anybody would ever use it.

What was the rationale and utility of such a road? What was its history? Why was it built there, and how was it decided? This article deals with the politics of road construction in Ladakh. It considers the way humans exploit and transform the environment through social and political arrangements and for purposes that are socially and culturally mediated (Nyerges 1997). Roads—as “socationature”, part social, part natural (Swyngedouw 2003 following Lefebvre)—are an integral part of this environment; and roads in turn affect people and influence the way they move and what they do. In this article I

look at the symbolic dimensions of roads expressed through perceptions of isolation and mobility. How are mobility and isolation experienced in the absence of roads? What are the effects of roads in a remote Himalayan village? I argue that both isolation and mobility are experienced in off-road villages, but a notion of isolation is intentionally and unintentionally manufactured in order to build the case for road construction. I attempt to delineate manufactured aspects of isolation from experienced ones and show how they differ. The first section explores the political and symbolic dimensions of roads. The second section questions the links between roads, mobility and isolation. The third section digs into practices of mobility, while the fourth one looks at the manufacture of isolation in Lingshed. The last section concludes on the impacts of roads on mobility.

### SYMBOLIC ASPECTS OF ROADS

Lingshed is situated in the district of Leh, Ladakh, in the North of the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), at an elevation of 3600 to 4000 metres above

sea level.<sup>1</sup> According to official statistics, the village consists of 154 households and 758 inhabitants. It is situated 92 km away from the end of the nearest road, 116 km away from the local administrative centre Khaltse and its police station, and 216 km away from the district hospital, college, pharmacy, fire station, court, and district headquarter in Leh town (LAHDC Leh 2007a: 13-8). Lingshed's physical location, away from any kind of facilities and administrative centre and many days' walk from the road, undeniably qualifies it as a "remote" village.<sup>2</sup>

Given the physical location of the village, the less than four kilometre long dirt track mentioned in the introduction seemed an aberration. It had been built during the summer of 2007 by a contractor with the help of a handful of Nepali workers. Some said its trajectory had been decided by the villagers, some said it had been decided by the Councillor, and its scattered shape testified to the contested nature of the operation. After more enquiries, I was told that since some funds were available and people wanted a road more than anything else, the money was spent on "a road" yet everyone I talked to found it strange, and many felt the road had been given to them "like a candy to a child." When I walked on the road, the villagers warned me that it did not lead anywhere, and during the four months I spent in Lingshed I never saw anyone using it.

There will be a day, some say, when this dirt track will be linked to the road network, since two roads are slowly being built towards the village. The first one is the 42-kilometre-long Photoksar road, which will later be extended by another 55 km to Lingshed.<sup>3</sup> It was started more than a decade ago by the Public Work Department (PWD) but was severely delayed due to shortage of funds; disagreements between villagers, engineers and contractors; short working seasons, and procedural irregularities. The second road is the Zaskar Highway or Chadar road,<sup>4</sup> a 292 km long trans-Himalayan road named after the region it crosses and the river it follows. Its construction has been going on for 30 or 40 years. Nobody knows precisely when the construction started – since the PWD archives "accidentally" burnt in 2005<sup>5</sup> – but engineers in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, think it must have been between 1971 and 1979. Following the Kargil war with Pakistan (1999), the construction of the Zaskar Highway was handed over to the Border Roads Organisation (BRO). The road, the trajectory of which follows the steep and narrow

gorge of the Zaskar River and crosses the 5,060-metre-high Shingo La, currently provides work to around 1,200 road builders, mostly migrants from the plains of India and Nepal. It can be estimated that 40 percent of the road has been cut so far, and predictions regarding its likely date of completion vary: from ten years according to BRO, to 50 years according to local engineers and villagers. This long gestation period ironically seems to deepen people's desire for the road rather than produce a sense of cynicism or hopelessness, so that the construction of roads to Lingshed is met with a lot of hope, and the three kilometres of unconnected dirt track in the village somehow embodies these expectations.

Roads are not only an infrastructure. For states and people alike, roads are charged with potent symbolism, and a limited incursion in the road literature illustrates this point. Roads can be symbols of prestige, modernity, development, change (Skafte 1986), or "objects of both fascination and terror" that have "material and iconic dimensions" (Masquelier 2002: 831). Roads are considered a "modern infrastructure" (Kreutzman 1993: 38), and are "the signature of modern India", as advertised by the Department of Roads and Transport in national brochures and magazines in 2007. They can be symbols of freedom, independence, and unity, or symbols of struggle; they are associated with the exercise of state power (Trankell 1992, Scott 1998), and can be cast in terms of control versus resistance (Wilson 2004). As Ispahani writes, "Routes are the means for the centralization of the state, for the distribution of resources, [...] for the movement of ideas, transmitting what has been called the 'iconography' of the state, the dominant culture and ideology of the political center [sic], to its peripheries" (Ispahani 1989: 5). Roads can make visible the otherwise intangible, whether it is the state (Harvey 2005), or "distant processes of globalization and postsocialism" (Dalakoglou 2010: 133), to cite only a few examples.

Roads are not neutral spaces either, because they are embedded within existing political struggles and aspirations. The construction of the Chadar road for instance is linked to struggles defined by communalism and demands for autonomy (Gutschow 2004). Ladakh consists of two districts, Leh and Kargil, which were carved out of a single district in 1979; the division was made for administrative reasons but several sources in Ladakh attribute it to communalism as Kargil is mainly Muslim (Shia) while Leh is predominantly Buddhist. Communalism does not reflect "a primordial split between Buddhists and Muslims" (ibid.: 32): it has been instrumentalized by political leaders in order to mobilise masses, hide social divisions within religious groups, and at the same time conceal lines of cooperation and co-existence between communities (van Beek 2001). Such strategies have made of communalism a dominant component of Ladakhi politics, and it is in this context that roads have come to be perceived and understood. In Chilling, a village along the road, I was told that the Chadar road had been sanctioned by the J&K state government in the 1970s, but was later

1. The elevation of the lowest house is 3600m while that of the highest one is 4000m.

2. Although the term does not carry any official connotation, it was often used by officials to characterise the village along with the associated term of "backward," a point that I develop further in the course of the article.

3. This was the situation in 2008. In 2010, the road reached Photoksar.

4. The River Zaskar is locally known as "Chadar" when it is covered by ice and used as a walking route to and out of the region in winter.

5. Many in Leh believe the fire was intentional and aimed at destroying evidence of corruption.

cancelled by a member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Srinagar. Zaskar—which is mainly Buddhist—is administered by Kargil but if a road to Zaskar were constructed from Leh, it is thought that Zaskar might then come under Leh's jurisdiction. At the same time, a road was being constructed from Kargil to Padum, the capital of Zaskar.<sup>6</sup> The construction of two concurrent roads to Padum was seen as a struggle for influence between Leh and Kargil. Still today, as the Chadar road is under construction, some in Zaskar fear that the state government will again oppose it. As an engineer in Padum put it, "Srinagar doesn't want Zaskar to be connected to Leh, because of political influence, cultural influence, and so on. They prefer Zaskar to be isolated, and attached to Kargil." The Zaskar road remains eminently political.

The Zaskar and Photoksar roads are also perceived differently by trekkers who travel the region. Tourists who walk through Lingshed in summer often candidly question the need for a road, which they see as "the end of a civilization". In December 2007, the central government's minister of tourism, passing on concerns by travel agents, asked the chief minister of J&K to reconsider the construction of the Chadar road, a project that would "endanger a vast stretch of wilderness" and "a virtual paradise for adventure tourists" (Bajeli-Datt 2007). As the councillor of Lingshed constituency wrote in his reply to the minister, the road is "a right", and is necessary "for the benefits for the remotest and [most] backward [villages] in the entire region of Ladakh [sic]" (personal communication, 14 January 2008). Whereas trekkers and travel agents perceive roads as spoiling a wild, traditional, natural, and pristine environment, those living in remote mountain regions like Ladakh associate them with development, and progress. Hence people's collective struggle for the construction of the road often ends up as a struggle over the symbolic meaning of the road.

## ROADS, MOBILITY AND ISOLATION

Roads are also associated with mobility, and their absence with isolation. "They are immobile material entities yet they draw attention to mobility" (Harvey 2005: 131), and for many in remote and rural regions, roads are symbols of mobility. A corollary of this is that "isolation" and lack of mobility are often inferred from the absence of roads. For instance, Barwell writes about sub-Saharan Africa that "in the more typical rural areas, people lack mobility [...] because they depend primarily on travel on foot" (1996: 20). In Nepal, Rawat and Sharma write that "In upland areas the road network [...] provides the only mode of transport and communication", as if transport and communication did not exist in the absence of roads (1997: 117). In India, the National Rural Roads Development Committee has declared its objective as setting "villages free from the handicap of

isolation and deprivation of accessibility" (Ministry of Rural Development and Planning Commission 2006: 94). Yet, what these accounts tend to forget is that mobility takes place even in the absence of roads, and that "isolation" and "mobility" are hardly ontologically given and objectifiable concepts, but highly subjective and experiential.

Isolation is a particularly critical and ambiguous concept. In absolute terms it designates a state of separation between persons or groups. In the transport literature, the concept of "isolation" is often used in more relative terms: "If a rural area cannot be easily reached, if people [...] cannot easily travel, if the flow of goods and services in and out of that area is physically difficult, unreliable or expensive [...] these are characteristics of isolation" (Njenga and Davis 2003: 221-2). So "isolation" emerges as a vague, highly subjective, and flexible concept, which would apply to both on-road and off-road locations. Isolation is also multidimensional, contingent, and relational: it is about experiencing and being experienced, imagining and being imagined (Wilson 2004).

Historically, Ladakh became "marginal" and "isolated" with its inclusion as a border district of India and the closing of its borders with Pakistan in 1947 and Tibet in 1949. From being the centre of trans-Himalayan caravan trade, an important tributary of the Silk Road, and the "Crossroads of High Asia" as it once was (Rizvi 1996), Ladakh slipped into the margins and became remote, "isolated," and "backward" (LAHDC Leh 2005). Incidentally, it is more or less in the same period of time – between 1954 and 1962 – that the first road to Ladakh was constructed. So at the same time as the first road was built, Ladakh became "isolated."

The ambiguity of the concept is also embodied by the situation of Lingshed. The village is on the margin of Ladakh, itself on the margin of India. It is the last village in Leh district before Zaskar and is remote from any administrative centre. At the same time, Lingshed is also central and connected: its monastery and centralised school attracts pilgrims and children from the whole region and Zaskar. It also falls on one of the most popular Ladakhi trekking circuits, and Lingshed is a hub for NGOs, with more than 15 of them working on different aspects ranging from renewable energies, to the nunnery, nutrition, *amchi* medicine, health, and education. Taking a more decentralised point of view, Lingshed constitutes a center in its own way. At a time when two to three weeks were necessary to cover the distance separating Leh from Srinagar or Manali, it is unlikely that Lingshedpas<sup>7</sup> felt particularly isolated from Leh or the rest of Ladakh. However, now that Leh is only a day's drive from Srinagar and a 1.5-hour-flight from Delhi, and because Lingshedpas are in contact with foreigners who travel from the other side of the world and live in a society where hyper-mobility has become the norm, isolation is relatively more likely to be felt: "Against the backdrop of a slow and sedentary society [...] the Utopia of acceleration

6. The Kargil-Padum road was completed in 1980 and now provides access to Zaskar for four months a year.

7. The suffix *pa* designates an "inhabitant of" in Ladakhi.

could appear as the signal of a bright new world" (Sachs 1999, 201). Also the increasing intrusion of the state in local affairs has induced a change in referential: once marginal, regional capitals like Jammu, Srinagar, or Leh have become central, while Lingshed has slipped into the margins.

Isolation is a social construct. By analogy with Mehta's work on scarcity (2005), one could differentiate two aspects of isolation: experienced and manufactured ones. Experienced aspects of isolation (or scarcity) are grounded in people's experiences whereas manufactured ones refer to "myths", "received wisdom", and "narratives", and tend to present isolation as natural and universal (ibid.: 239). Isolation is experienced by Lingshedpas but the way in which it is experienced certainly differs from the popular or technical discourse that tends to manufacture isolation, take it for granted, or instrumentalise it. Moreover, manufactured aspects of isolation tend to obstruct the way Lingshedpas experience mobility and deal with isolation on a daily basis. In the rest of this article, I draw on my experience and journeys in Ladakh to illustrate how mobility and isolation are experienced and manufactured in Lingshed.

## MOBILITY IN LINGSHED

The travel to Lingshed is certainly strenuous, physically tiring, and time-consuming, making it difficult for people in a weak condition; but in most cases the absence of roads does not seem to preclude mobility, rather the contrary. Elders, women and children do travel less than men, but so is the case in on-road locations (see Demenge 2011). For women, this is largely explained by the socioeconomic division of tasks along gender lines, as "needs for travels are shaped by socially constructed obligations on productive and reproductive duties" (deGrassi 2005: 55). Men in Ladakh are the "itinerant element" in the household (Dollfus 1989: 147), whereas women are responsible for domestic chores and looking after the household, fields, and animals. Young children undertake the journey on their parent's back, while elders and disabled people could travel on horseback; the government provides a helicopter lift free of charge for medical emergencies. One can meet a large number of people on the trails linking the different off-road villages in Ladakh. People travel to and from Lingshed for all sorts of reasons: to see a *rinpoche*; begin a pilgrimage or visit a *gonpa* (monastery); register their children at a school; carry rations or gas cylinders; go to the hospital in Leh; contract a loan or fulfil administrative duties; sell hay, *torma* (potentilla roots), or *churpe* (dried cheese) in town; bring back cooking utensils, furniture, consumption goods, radio, TVs, DVD players, loudspeakers, and wooden pillars or huge *mane*; work as guides, horsemen, or cooks with trekkers; find work in Leh; or visit relatives. There always seems to be intense traffic: villagers of all ages and conditions, tourists, *lamas*, nuns, children, and migrant workers. There are many reasons that drive people onto paths, and despite the absence of roads they appear extremely mobile.

Through a participatory session<sup>8</sup> conducted in Lingshed in November 2007, I have attempted to represent the journeys undertaken by Lingshedpas over a whole year (see figure 1). The number and diversity of journeys is impressive. Lingshedpas' mobility patterns are characterised by a great density and complexity of trails that radiate around Lingshed and link the village to several destinations. The

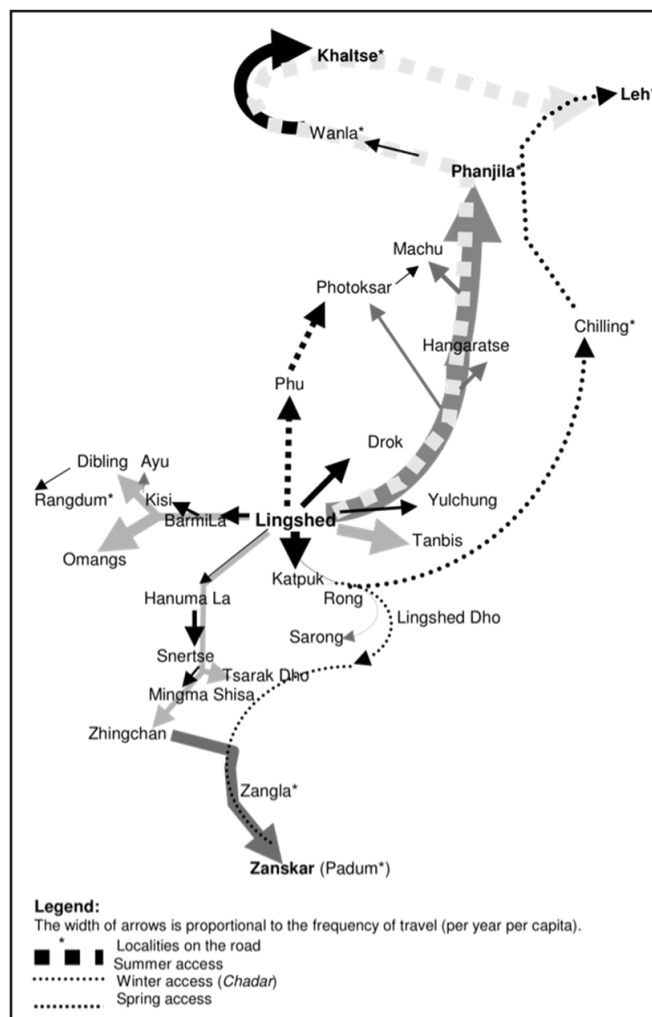


FIGURE 1. SCHEMATIC MAP OF MOVEMENTS IN LINGSHED.

MAP: JONATHAN DEMENGE.

most travelled destinations are Phanjila (6.4 journeys/capita/year), Leh (4.9), Khaltse (4.2), Padum (3.8) in Zanskar, and Omangs and Tanbis (3.8 each). The four first destinations all represent three- to four-day journeys each way, while Omangs and Tanbis are one day's walk away. Interestingly,

8. These participatory sessions were part of the research techniques I used during my fieldwork, carried out between August 2006 and February 2008, as I was researching "the political ecology of road construction in Ladakh" for my doctoral thesis. In Lingshed, 25 villagers took part in several activities, such as building daily and yearly activity profiles, food matrixes, and institutions and movement maps, re-enacting road negotiations and holding focus group discussions. Altogether, I stayed and travelled several times to Lingshed: in July and August 2004; in August 2007 and from October 2007 to January 2008.





FIGURE 2. MEETING TRAVELLERS AND SHARING CHANG ON THE WAY TO LINGSHED. PHOTO: JONATHAN DEMENGÉ

different ways are used to reach these destinations since many access routes are seasonal. The main access routes are across the passes. In late autumn or the beginning of winter, snowfall makes the route impassable until early spring. In December or January, the Zaskar River freezes and the Chadar becomes the only access route to Chilling and Leh in the north, to Padum in the south, or to reach pastures and forests south of Lingshed. In February/March, the Chadar melts and becomes impassable and a third way to go to Leh is used: through Phu and Photoksar. This third way becomes difficult in turn when temperatures rise and the main access route across the Singge La is again used. Hence, isolation is seasonal and time-bound. The flow of people coming to and leaving the village is nearly constant: it would slow down in winter, but it would barely ever stop. The timing between early snowfalls and the formation and melting of the Chadar can result in the region becoming physically isolated for a few weeks in early and late winter, times when access to Lingshed is possible only by helicopter and hence reserved for emergencies. However, except for these two specific periods of time, in absolute terms Lingshed is not physically isolated.

Also, walking cannot not be reduced to its simplest function: moving from one point to the other. It is a truly social activity, embedded in cultural codes and practices. In Ladakh, the journey often starts and ends with a visit to the monastery, making offerings of money and *kataks* (white scarves) to deities and *lamas*, partly as a way of asking for protection during the journey, both from the physical and

spiritual realms (Pirie 2002). The *onpo* (astrologer) may be consulted before undertaking a hazardous journey (Crowden 1994), and dignitaries such as teachers or medical doctors are offered *chang* before undertaking their own journey. When walking, trajectories are determined by physical obstacles as well as the religious symbols and monuments scattered across the landscape that have to be skirted around clockwise: *mane*, *mani walls*, *chortens*, *rig sum gonpos*, and other religious constructions. Lingshedpas rarely walk alone: this might be dictated by security or practical reasons – such as helping each other to carry loads, fetch wood and dung for fire, and cook during halts – but also by the fact that a walking trip is something enjoyable that is better appreciated in good company, and made even more enjoyable by carrying and consuming better-than-ordinary food and drinks – *chang*, *arak*, rum, and whiskey – that are generously shared among travellers.

Travelling and walking are also instrumental in maintaining physical and social networks, and people seize every opportunity to visit relatives and acquaintances en route, sometimes making long detours. Travelling allows people to maintain reciprocal relationships and carry information and messages from village to village. Similarly, meeting people on the way nearly always leads to a halt right on the spot: every encounter is an occasion to share food, *chang*, or *arak*, as somebody always seems to have a bottle ready for the occasion, and men a cup in the bands

of their *goncha*<sup>9</sup> to be filled (see figure 2). Just like roads, paths are also “stretched-out places where intersecting social relations cluster and adhere” (Wilson 2004: 529). Moving is instrumental in keeping routeways open, and securing routes and rights of way (ibid.: 539). Travelling and walking is also a social activity. It certainly reduces the time available for other activities, but a more qualitative assessment of travelling time reveals that time is not “wasted” (Barwell 1996: 1-2). In Ladakh, it is often spent praying and reciting mantras, an activity that Ladakhi Buddhists carry out whether or not they are travelling, and that is primordial in the “Buddhist economy of merit” in which both lay people and monastics “consciously pursue merit and purification in order to achieve a better rebirth” (Gutschow 2004: 7).

The case of Lingshed suggests the existence of a real culture of mobility. As a Ladakhi proverb says: “A man does not know where he will die and where he will be burnt”, referring to the high mobility of men in Ladakh (Dollfus 1989: 148).<sup>10</sup> Just like travelling and journeys figure among favourite topics of conversation and are even present in greetings among Tamang communities in Nepal (Molesworth 2001), in Ladakh, the notion of mobility itself is strongly embedded in cultural idioms and practices. In Lingshed, the traditional *Juley!* (Hello!) is systematically followed or replaced by the question *Skyot-at le?* (So, have you come?), with an always simulated surprise; people ask *Karu skyot?* (Where are you going?) or *Gana skyot?* (Where are you coming from?) every time somebody is spotted walking in or around the village or passing by a house, even though the answer is nearly often known. People’s movements are closely monitored, and the glass room originally made to keep warm during winter days — but often oriented more towards the rest of the village than towards the sun — makes an excellent panopticon from which people’s movements are inevitably scrutinized and commented on.

This culture of mobility seems doubled by an “intimate knowledge” of the place in which people live (Crowden 1994: 291). The landscape is inhabited by people’s social world, cultural meanings, stories, and memories (Dollfus and Labbal 2003). As an elder villager of Achinathang once said, “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”, pointing to the strong interconnection between people and their place (in Aggarwal 2004: 61). People rarely have names for the mountains surrounding them, but “mountain passes [are] named and known, bearing testimony to the importance of travel and the connection of landscape with social life” (ibid.: 61). Personal and collective histories linked to specific places are common when travelling to and from Lingshed, and are

constantly re-enacted and updated: “I will always remember this place”, once said my friend Yangphel, on our way out of Lingshed. “It will remind me of you, and every time I come here I will remember you and the good time we had together. I remember every place where I have had a good time”. In Ladakh, people do not just “pass through” the landscape but physically and cognitively appropriate the landscape they live and move in as part of their culture of mobility.

Hence, to sum up, Lingshedpas tend to be exceptionally mobile, and except for relatively short periods of time in early and late winter, the village is not physically isolated. Further evidence would show that Lingshed is not insulated from institutional, organisational, cultural, and material transformations that contribute to reshaping the village and its people, and that Lingshedpas are not self-sufficient but highly integrated into different socioeconomic networks through which goods, people, and money transit, and from which the village derives a significant part of its resources. Lingshedpas are confronted with issues linked to paucity and seasonality of livelihoods, difficulties that are partially linked to Lingshed’s distance from administrative centres and markets but that are not solely due to “isolation” or to the absence of road: these are shared by on-road locations as well. Based on the experience of mobility in Lingshed, the village may be remote, but it is difficult to maintain that the village is “isolated.”

## MANUFACTURING ISOLATION

A couple of years ago, I discovered on the webpage of an NGO a compelling testimony written by a Lingshedpa who managed to attract considerable funds to the village.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, it strongly emphasised Lingshed’s lack of road, its remoteness and difficulties of accessibility, but it described Lingshed in terms I could not recognise. Lingshed was presented as “one of the poorest and most isolated areas in India” and isolation was the cause of all sorts of ills. Most information was wrong or strongly distorted in order to produce the grimmest image possible:

Lingshed is one of the most remote areas of the Ladakh region of Northern India. [...] Unfortunately, the Lingshed area is also one of the poorest and most isolated areas in India. Almost all the people are poor and their standard of living is very low. There is no electricity or communications or modern health and sanitation services. The situation is made worse by the fact that there are no roads for motor vehicles leading to the Lingshed area. [...] Moreover, the trip to Lingshed from the closest village of Wanla takes four or five

9. The standard Ladakhi woollen coat.

10. Note that the saying applies only to men, not women. Long-distance mobility is highly gendered, both on-road and off-road.

11. (Geshe-Ngagwang-Jangchup Unknown year). Interestingly, the story of is reminiscent of those depicted by Norberg-Hodge (2000) or Rahnama (1992) in their work on the psychological aspects of poverty.



days under the best conditions, and the winter snows close the roads and passes entirely for six months of every year. [...] The soil is weak and the growing season is very short, the local farmers work hard for limited crop yields and the people suffer greatly from starvation and malnutrition. As a result of their poverty and isolation, the people of Lingshed desperately need nutritious food, agriculture to improve crop production, forestry science to supply fuel for cooking and heating, not to mention the most basic necessities of modern life, such as electricity, medical supplies, and so forth. [...] In the entire Lingshed area there is no hospital, clinic, or resident doctor or nurse versed in western medicine. There are doctors of Tibetan medicine in the area [...] But due to the prevailing poverty, the people for the most part cannot afford the services of these doctors [...]. Many people, young and old, die in Lingshed due to these deplorable conditions.

Why are off-road locations associated with a lack of mobility, inaccessibility, and isolation? Why is Lingshed presented by authorities as “backward”, “underdeveloped”, and “virtually living in isolation” (Government of J&K 1996: 8) rather than simply remote? And why, as the previous example illustrates, do Lingshedpas buy into this rhetoric? I now turn to manufactured aspects of isolation, to show that isolation is not a fixed and given attribute but can be fluctuating, manipulated, historically contingent, and constructed. Lingshed may be geographically remote, but by depicting a region or village as isolated, and by linking all problems to isolation, one suggests that it needs a road, and that the road will solve all its problems.

Isolation can be thought of as a “central organizing concept [that] presupposes a central, unquestioned value, with respect to which the different legitimate positions may be arrayed” (Ferguson 1994: xiii). Building on the concepts of power, knowledge, and discourse (an argument derived from Foucault), Ferguson argues that development institutions generate a discourse in which an object of knowledge is constructed, thus creating “a structure of knowledge around that object” and that “interventions are then organised on the basis of this structure of knowledge” (ibid.: xiv). A complex reality is simplified in order to justify a specific intervention. The same process seems to be at work here, since depicting villages such as Lingshed as “isolated” and “backward” builds the case for road construction. Roads are built to increase “connectivity and mobility” (World Bank n.d.: 3), to “unlock the isolation experienced by many populations” (Njenga and Davis 2003: 221), or “to set villages free from the handicap of isolation and deprivation of accessibility” (Ministry of Rural Development and Planning Commission 2006: 94). The fact is that labelling a village or region as isolated or even

inaccessible rather than remote strongly suggests that what it needs is a road.<sup>12</sup>

How Ladakh became tribal and backward provides a fruitful illustration of the process. In Ladakh, development programs implemented by the Government of India have been largely based on the popular perception of Ladakh as backward and underdeveloped, and of Ladakhis as “tribal” (Aggarwal 2004). And indeed, in 1989 eight groups totalling 89 percent of Ladakh’s population were officially recognised as Schedule Tribes (ST).<sup>13</sup> However, as Aggarwal writes, “Ladakhis had become ‘tribal’ [...] not through some fixed and traditional identity, but after lengthy petitions and political negotiations” to access benefits and reservations accruing to special categories of caste and tribe (ibid.: 11). At the same time, “by conferring tribal status, the Indian state simultaneously rendered border subjects ‘backward’ and justified its territorial hold on them” (ibid.: 41). Tribal identity was both superimposed and claimed by Ladakhis, and the people constructed as an object of knowledge in order to build the case for intervention.

Interestingly, notions of “isolation” and “backwardness” are tightly linked. In sub-Saharan Africa, off-road populations are often construed as “bush people” (Porter 2002). Ladakh is depicted as both “isolated” and “backward”, and the further one moves away from Leh and from the road, the more people become “backward.” Hence, Lingshed is often referred to as “the most backward area in Ladakh” while “backwardness” is also claimed by villagers of Lingshed (*Daily Excelsior* 17 January 2007), in a process involving “the fusion of inward- and outward-looking perspectives” (Mehta 2005: 184). Comparison with the outside leads to the creation of “narratives of [...] misery and backwardness” while “outsiders also reinforce the narrative that [the area] is a very backward area that needs help from outside” (ibid.). The process is both internal and external, voluntary and unintended.

In fact, different processes seem at work in the construction of isolation and backwardness in Lingshed. One can identify three: (1) the imposition of a label by outsiders, (2) auto-categorisation in relation to the outside world, and (3) the conscious instrumentalization and politicization of isolation. In Lingshed, visitors, NGOs, and government officials involuntarily encourage the construction of isolation and backwardness: few government officials ever visit the village, and if they do, it is often by helicopter. Journalists depict the region as “one of the most isolated areas in the

12. Interestingly, the term “isolated” seems more compelling than “remote”. A village that is “isolated” will cease to be so when a road is built; a village that is “remote” will remain remote even after the road has been built.

13. The eight groups—Balti, Beda, Bot, Drokpa, Changpa, Gara, Mon, and Purigpa—draw loosely on non-exclusive and often overlapping racial, regional, and caste criteria that artificially fix identities and negate their fluidity. Those excluded were largely Argons or Sunni Muslims, descendants of migrants and merchants from Yarkand and Kashmir who had lived there for generations.

world” (Suri 25 August 2002). Tourists walk to Lingshed precisely because they perceive it as isolated, while NGOs and volunteers carry in their projects the same vision of poverty, isolation, and backwardness: armed with money and good intentions, they declare they want to “free this region from its isolation” (Tibetan Development Fund *Undated*).

Isolation is also constructed by people native to the region, but whose education qualifies them to be “the voice of the rural people [...] otherwise [...] innocent and voiceless” (Angchuk 2006). The same view prevailed in a discourse prepared by a teacher for the coming (by helicopter) of the Dalai Lama to Lingshed in August 2007, when he presented the region as “a remote and inaccessible area of Ladakh, having lagged behind in every modern development [*sic*]” For the same event, the traditional Ladakhi costume was imposed: it was a wonderful sight, it certainly was a mark of respect for estimable guests, but it also perpetuated the image of a village “untouched by modernity”: traditional for some, backward for others.

Whereas these processes contribute to the construction of isolation in a diffuse and unintentional way, other coordinated ones build on the purposive instrumentalization of isolation and backwardness. For instance, road construction agencies depict Lingshed as isolated to justify road construction through the mechanism already identified. In a funding request to the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECF), the Public Works Department (PWD) describes the region of Lingshed as “possibly the most backward and underdeveloped in the district”, where

people are “virtually living in isolation” in order to build the case for the Chadar road (Government of J&K 1996: 8). The purposive construction of isolation is also echoed by “narratives of misery and backwardness” within the village. For instance, in 2004 visitors were welcomed by a banner at the entrance to the village presenting it as “remote and underprivileged”; and in November 2007, a day after my arrival, a neighbour handed me an old, stained handwritten letter that said that they were a poor and backward family and crucially needed clothes and money (although as my stay progressed, Lingshedpas were more inclined to display wealth and generosity than poverty). Yet, the best illustration of the institutionalisation of backwardness and isolation is provided by the narrative previously cited, which presents Lingshed as “one of the poorest and most isolated areas in India.” This grim, caricatured, and almost naive depiction of Lingshed – which would be rejected by Lingshedpas themselves – provides a powerful example of the “narrative of misery”. It illustrates how the notion of isolation is consciously manufactured and utilised, and a complex reality simplified and constructed into an object of knowledge – a poor, remote, backward, and isolated Lingshed – to build the case for intervention. The same narrative is used to justify road construction.

## CONCLUSION: ROADS AND MOBILITY

Throughout this article, I have focussed on the ambiguous relationship between roads, isolation and mobility. Based on the case of Lingshed, I have argued that both mobility and

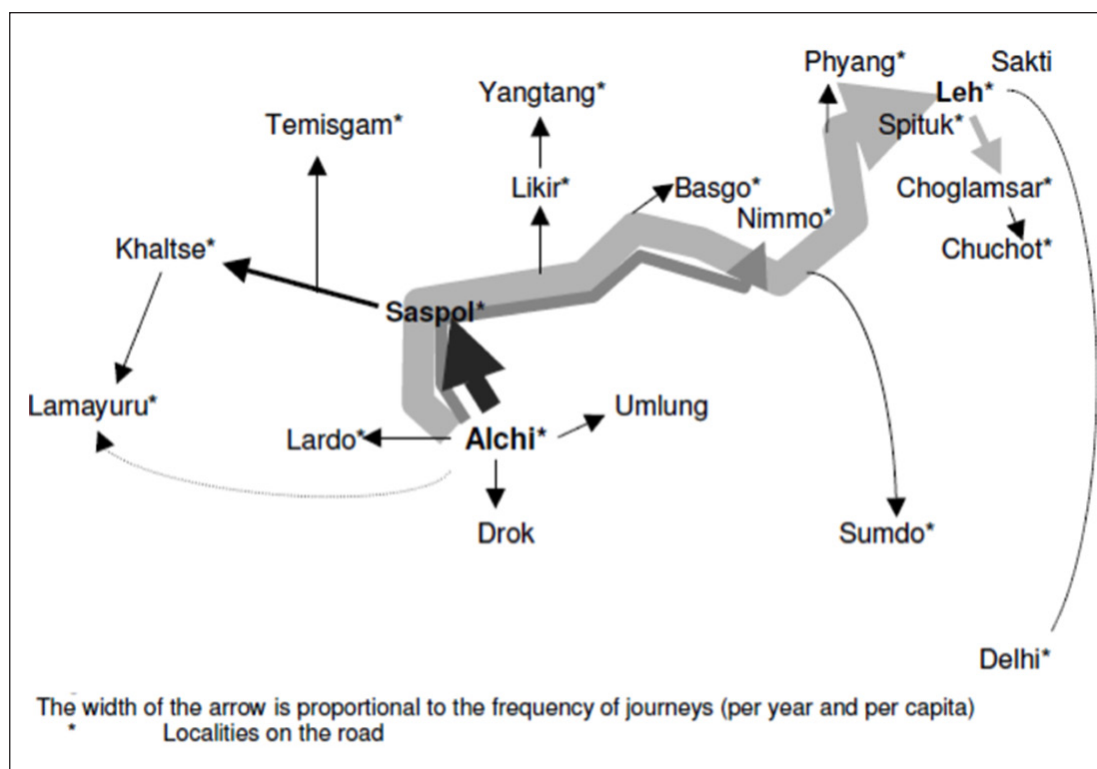


FIGURE 3: SCHEMATIC MAP OF MOVEMENTS IN ALCHI. MAP: JONATHAN DEMENGE

isolation are experienced in off-road villages, but the way they are experienced differs from the way they are depicted in the literature and in official and popular accounts. Off-road villages are often less isolated and their populations more mobile than one would assume.

Do roads increase mobility, and are populations of on-road villages more mobile than those of off-road villages? In Ladakh, evidence tends to prove the contrary. A similar exercise as the one conducted in Lingshed was conducted in Alchi, a village connected to the Leh-Srinagar Highway, approximately 60 km downstream of the Indus River on the West of Leh (see figure 3). Whereas the total number of journeys is 52.7 per capita per year in Lingshed for the male population, it is only 17.9 in Alchi (Demenge 2012: 255). On average, men in Alchi travel three times less than Lingshedpas, and distances are also significantly lower. Mobility patterns are also fewer and relatively simpler, since the immense majority of journeys take place on the main road linking Alchi to Leh, and many destinations that used to be visited in the past are not visited anymore: roads canalise movements. Hence, the results strongly suggest that people's mobility would be higher in off-road than in on-road locations, and that roads would decrease rather than increase mobility.

These results may appear counter-intuitive, yet there is a logical explanation. Patterns of mobility do not depend on the existence of a road, but on mobility needs, which are defined by people's livelihoods, use of resources, consumption needs, family obligations, and are also socially determined. In Lingshed, destinations and journeys are often associated with a particular resource or activity: trading, trekking, grazing yaks or goats and sheep, or gathering wood. Imported items, such as goods, food, and rations, must be transported. Productive activities such as herding or gathering resources over an extensive area involve considerable journeys, as do livelihood activities linked to trekking and tourism. These activities are also gendered and defined along generational lines, so that on the average young men travel more than elders, women and children.<sup>14</sup> When people need to travel, they do it, whether there is a road or not. By comparison, in Alchi, resources, food, gas, rations and tourists arrive by road, and the rest can all be found in one place, the market town, which also happens to be the administrative centre and provides jobs and livelihoods. Hence mobility needs are fewer. As roads affect mobility needs, they tend to decrease people's mobility. The impacts of roads are complex and indirect. Moreover, since road access is weather dependent and is affected by landslides and snowfalls, it results in villages being isolated for part of the year.

Finally, I have argued that manufactured aspects of isolation have to be distinguished from the experienced ones.

14. Although it depends on the purpose of journeys: in Ladakh, most administrative or work related journeys are done by men, while journeys linked to social obligations are undertaken by women. The road has only a limited impact on that.

By arguing that, I do not mean that off-road populations do not deserve a road, or that roads should not be built. I simply call for a critical understanding of the situation of off-road villages and of the consequences of roads, which are more often assumed than assessed. The construction of isolation builds the case for the construction of roads, but it conceals the way mountain people deal with isolation, mobility, and connectedness, and it participates in the creation of a culture of suffering. It also conceals the real issues experienced by rural populations, which may require other or additional remedies than the construction of a road.

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