

March 2020

## The Sacred and the Secular: Exploring Mass Tourism Encounters at Lamayuru Monastery in Ladakh

Tashi Lundup

Govt. Eliezer Joldan Memorial College Leh Ladakh. India, tashilundup56@gmail.com

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

### Recommended Citation

Lundup, Tashi. 2020. The Sacred and the Secular: Exploring Mass Tourism Encounters at Lamayuru Monastery in Ladakh. *HIMALAYA* 39(2).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol39/iss2/14>



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

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

---

## The Sacred and the Secular: Exploring Mass Tourism Encounters at Lamayuru Monastery in Ladakh

### Acknowledgements

First and most importantly, the author would like to express sincere thanks to his supervisor Professor Susan Visvanathan, under whose guidance and expertise he completed this project. Secondly, the author's warmest thanks go to the monks and the people of Lamayuru for their cooperation and assistance during field work. The author wishes to extend his heartiest thanks to John Bray and Elizabeth Williams Øerberg, who undertook the arduous task of editing the text, and offered suggestions and comments. The author is also thankful to Khempo Sharap for the photograph. Likewise, he would like to thank his wife, Deskid Dolma, under whose companionship he completed this research.

# The Sacred and the Secular: Exploring Mass Tourism Encounters at Lamayuru Monastery in Ladakh

Tashi Lundup

This paper is an attempt to understand and conceptualize tourism and changing monastic space in Ladakh with special reference to the Lamayuru monastery. The study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach, drawing on participant observation as well as interviews with both monks and tourists. It shows how local monastic culture has been reconstructed as a marketable commodity for tourist consumption and explores the tensions that arise from the use of the same monastic space for both religious and secular purposes.

The monks' views in relation to the changing context of tourism at the Lamayuru monastery reflect a dual perspective, representing both 'religious' and 'mundane' worldviews. From a religious perspective, monks view tourists as fellow human beings who should be treated with compassion, and their visits to the monastery may offer an opportunity to share Buddhist truths. However, the inaccurate

information purveyed by tourist guides, and the irreverent behavior of the tourists themselves is often a source of irritation for the monks. Meanwhile, the elderly villagers who visit the monastery as part of their regular religious practice dislike being photographed by tourists. They fear that the tourists' 'inappropriate' dress and lack of respect may pollute the sacred aura of the monastery. Despite these tensions, tourism has become an integral part of both monastic administration and village life. Income from tourism has helped finance the restoration of wall paintings as well as the construction of new shrines. Furthermore, some of the foreign tourists who originally visited Lamayuru as tourists have been inspired to develop a long-term religious relationship with the monastery.

**Keywords:** Ladakh, tourism, religion, social change, pilgrimage, culture, commodification.

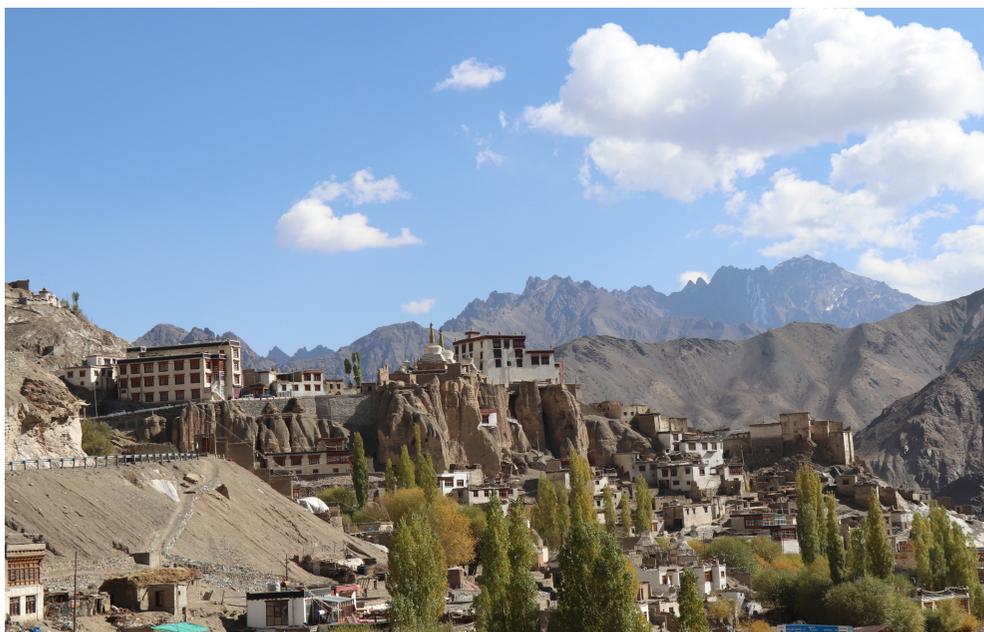


Figure 1. Lamayuru monastery and village. The main monastery is at the top of the cliff on the right-hand side. A new hotel, which is almost as large as the original monastery has been constructed to the left.

(Khempo Sharap, 2019)

## Introduction

Ladakh's monasteries are active and vital institutions that impart ethical and religious values to the local Buddhist population. However, the region is currently passing through a far-reaching social transition, both within its monastic communities and in society as a whole. Tourism has become a major instigator for social change. Thirty years ago, Vibha Sood (1990) observed that eight monasteries were classified as 'strongly frequented' and received more than 5,000 visitors annually. A further ten monasteries were visited by 1,000-5,000 tourists each year, whereas nine monasteries received less than 1,000 visitors. Since then, the frequency of visitors has increased substantially. At present, the average annual number of visitors is approximately 20,000 to 50,000 in monasteries near Leh.<sup>1</sup>

Ladakh's reputation as one of the last remaining bastions of Tibetan Buddhism is one of the main reasons for its popularity among travelers. However, the sheer number of tourists raises the question how far the monasteries and their surrounding communities can adapt to new social pressures. An understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between monks and tourists can therefore contribute to finding ways of sustaining the sacredness of the village religious sites that have become tourist attractions. In this paper, I discuss the kinds of tourists that are visiting Ladakhi Buddhist monasteries and explore their perceptions of sacred monastic spaces. At the same time, I examine the frequently ambiguous responses of the monks and the local villagers.

The main focus of the paper is on the Lamayuru (Tib. g.*Yung drung*) monastery which lies 125 km west of Leh on the main road to Srinagar. Lamayuru is affiliated with the Drikung Kagyu ('Brigung bka' brgyud) sect of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Its location near the road means that it is among the best-known monasteries to foreign travelers as well as to Ladakhi pilgrims. It is also famous for its spectacular natural landscape which, according to a series of writers since the 1970s, is said to resemble a 'moonland' [sic].<sup>3</sup> Lamayuru's history, location, and architecture all contribute to its popularity to foreign visitors, and I chose it as a case study because of its prominence in the contemporary tourism industry.

To set the context for my inquiries, I begin with a discussion of recent scholarly research on the impact of tourism on sacred space. I then present the findings of my interviews in Lamayuru where I followed a qualitative ethnographic approach. In order to obtain data from tourists, I adopted a 'corpus construction method': I interviewed 150 tourists, using both structured and unstructured interviews as well as group discussions, and discussed with them various topics, ranging from their reasons for visiting Lamayuru to their perceptions of the dynamics of Ladakhi culture. I also interviewed local people in relatively natural settings, asking them about the dynamics of social change that they have witnessed since the onset of increased tourism in Lamayuru since the 1970s. I followed a similar approach with the monks. Out of a total population of 117 households in Lamayuru, I interviewed 55 villagers as well as 25 monks in the course of a series of research visits between 2013 and 2014. The data was collected through a periodic visit to the field of about six months.

## Tourism and Monastic Space

The relationship between host and guest at religious places or sacred sites is well discussed within the domain of scholarly tourism literature (Pearce 1987). In many countries across the world, religious sites, sacred landscape, festivals, and rituals, are used by government officials and tourism industry as symbolic resources to attract tourists (Timothy and Boyd 2003). As a result, there is an overlapping and convergence between religious space and tourist space which Bremer (2001: 3) termed as ‘duality of place’. Monasteries in Ladakh are not an exception to this duality. Monks and other local residents mingle with tourists in the interior of monasteries and other sacred sites. Monks participate in the sacramental life of the monastic community, while tourists come to experience the monastic culture of the Tibetan form of Buddhism. This convergence of religious/sacred and tourist/secular space adds a complexity to traditional management practices at sacred sites where the focus has historically been on the needs of local pilgrims and worshippers rather than other types of visitors (Olsen 2010: 104).

However, now they have to cater for tourists from the plains of India and other countries as well. This transformation leads to a number of dilemmas and potential contradictions for the monastic administration. Rather than being solely focused on spirituality and rituals, the sites that they manage have now also become semi-secularized places of recreation, education and leisure.

Travelers are attracted to sites where the host community has made a space for an interaction with sacred, religious and spiritual power (Bremer 2006: 26). These places of worship also create a space for an interaction of local people with tourists—‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. In the case of monasteries in Ladakh, the sacredness sustained in the practices of Tibetan Buddhism appeals to a touristic sensibility in terms of aesthetics, history, and the exotic otherness of unfamiliar religious behavior. The tourists are the movers, the ones who see, the explorers, while the monks are confined to one place. However, through their interaction with the tourists, they are able to explore and become familiar with other places. Thus, the space of monasteries becomes simultaneously a place for religious practice and a place for cultural exchange.

Simultaneity of places creates parallel or overlapping sacred and touristic geographies. Both Buddhist adherents and non-adherents occupy the same space at the same time. Their respective practices and the resulting interpretations of its significance make the place distinct (Bremer 2006: 25). The stories, myths, and local narratives that have

been constructed to articulate and affix meaning to the place consolidate the bonds that both believers and tourists feel towards it. This temporally-constructed meaning becomes a symbolic identity that attracts tourists.

## Tourists or Pilgrims?

Before going into further detail, it is essential to be acquainted with the kinds of tourism that Lamayuru hosts. In tourism literature, we already have a body of constructed typologies by a range of scholars (e.g. Cohen 1979; Jafari 1987; MacCannell 1973; Smith 1989). The discourse about the typologies of tourism centers on three concepts: ‘pilgrimage tourism’, ‘secular tourism’, and ‘leisure tourism’. Pilgrimage tourism usually refers to travelers who undertake a long journey to religious sites around the world. Digance (2003: 36) mentions that in Europe the concept of pilgrimage is drawn from a medieval social movement which occurred between 500 and 1500 CE, a period when most travel was associated with either pilgrimage or trade. A similar observation would also apply to Tibet and Ladakh in earlier times.<sup>4</sup> Although the motivation for traveling was often embedded in religion, it offered a sense of temporary relief from a generally tough existence in agrarian-based societies. In fact, medieval pilgrimage is generally given as the first example of mass tourism as we know it today. However, by the end of the fifteenth century, the main motivation for pilgrimage in European society had changed from spirituality to curiosity, the desire to see new places (Sumption 1975).

MacCannell (1973, 1976, 1992), who is among the pioneer scholars of tourism, argues that “tourism is a type of pilgrimage”. Many individuals in contemporary societies aspire to explore places that are perceived as pristine and untouched in the hope of experiencing a more authentic and holistic reality in which their fragmented world is reunited (Allcock 1988; Cohen 1988). If we tend to make a distinction between secular tourists and pilgrim travelers, then we need to understand their inner aspirations. The difference is do with their motivations for travelling. Yet, it is difficult to demarcate distinctions in clear terms, because both spiritual motivations and ‘secular’ curiosity can exist simultaneously within a single individual. An examination of the ways in which tourism is evolving in the Himalaya will certainly reflect the interplay between these motivations. As will be seen, many of my tourist informants reported that they came to visit monasteries and other sacred places of Ladakh in search of an inner peace and to get away from what Norberg-Hodge (1997: 200) termed the ‘Western industrial mono-culture’.



Figure 2. Tourist photographing two boy-monks in the Lamayuru monastery courtyard.

(Tashi Lundup, 2019)

Here, tourism and pilgrimage are interpreted neither as opposed concepts nor even opposite ends of a spectrum, but rather as two axes in a theoretical model. In recent times, the popularization of the Himalayan region and the development of cultural tourism have been influential in drawing tourists to monasteries in Ladakh, including Lamayuru. Some Western tourists visit the monastery because—as Eliade (1959: 23) puts it—they deem the site as sacred, special or set apart from the mundane, everyday world. Although such tourists are not usually Buddhist adherents, they nonetheless tend to differentiate themselves from other types of tourists. However, such travelers cannot be categorized unequivocally either as pilgrims or as leisure tourists.

### Tourist Conceptions of Ladakhi Sacred Space

Bearing these differences in mind, I used open-ended questionnaires to interview tourists about their reasons for visiting the Lamayuru monastery, and to explore whether they were pilgrims or leisure travelers. Out of 150 tourists, 87 wrote “leisure and cultural exploration”; 39 wrote both “pilgrim” and “culture”; 14 wrote that they just reached Lamayuru by chance at the suggestion of their friends. Nine did not respond to the question. One unusual answer was: “It hardly matters to me whether I’m in church or in a Buddhist monastery. Whenever I go to these sacred sites, I just visualize my own God”. This respondent’s act of visiting any sacred space, he explained, always takes him back to his own faith. The sacredness of these other spaces gives impetus to his inner self to remember his own God.

Another question that I asked was: “How did you come to know about Ladakh?” Most of the tourists replied that they got to know about it from their friends and guide books, particularly the Lonely Planet guidebook, *Indian Himalaya*, wherein Ladakh is referred to as “the last Shangri-La” and one of the most remote regions in India (Mayhew 2000: 201). One of the tourists replied:

Everyone has their own ideal place where they want to go and spend some quality time. I also had this. I read guidebooks on Ladakh and talked to my friends who visited Leh a few years back; they told about the beauty of nature and simplicity of the people. When I came here, Leh appeared to be something more than I expected, it is an awesome experience and I want to visit more in future. (International tourist, interview, 17 July 2014)<sup>5</sup>

One of the most fascinating things about human beings is their capacity to idealize or imagine things before they experience them. Gillespie (2006: 167) has rightly pointed out that “Ideals are an important part of the mass mediated environment”. Ideals in this context refer to tourists’ aspiration for upcoming experiences and their imagination about the destination. Indeed, their choice of destination reflects their imagined ideal. These tourists are striving for some ideal experience, a possible future that they feel within their grasp. There is an analogy here with the tendency of an earlier generation of anthropologists to essentialize the cultures that they are studying and to fix them in particular places from which they cannot escape (Appadurai 1988).

Often tourists' conceptions of the ideal place where tourists aspire to visit can be very general. This is evident in several references to the *National Geographic* magazine in the interview and questionnaire data. Rather than mentioning any specific *National Geographic* article, the tourists used the magazine to symbolize a wider genre of the exotic. The images and guidebooks that objectify Ladakh and the remote regions of the Himalaya have been described as 'symbolic resources' (Gillespie 2006: 156) that help to attract tourists.

### Tourist Interactions

Particularly during the summer months, the Lamayuru monastery courtyard is filled with tourists. It therefore becomes an interesting space for the sociologist to observe the confluence of space between tourists (non-adherents) and local people (adherents). Local tourist guides become important mediators in this web of social interaction. The guide explains the history of the monastery to tourists, and monks are active observers who may be able to authenticate information and clarify any distortions.

Many tourists are influenced by romantic notions of Tibet and Ladakh as a 'Shangri-La', a name that derives from James Hilton's 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*, (Hilton 1933) and has been applied to Ladakh by a series of writers since the 1970s (e.g. Abercrombie 1978). Tourists, who travel to Ladakh looking for some instantiation of Shangri-La expect to find Buddhist villages and festivals, traditional communities, and happy peaceful people. What they actually find does not always conform to their expectations, and this stimulates many of the debates between tourists and the local guides. The following conversation between a foreign tour leader and the local guide within the courtyard of Lamayuru monastery is an example:

Tour leader: I read in my guidebook that there is a big and ancient drum in this monastery?

Local guide: Oh really! I never saw it before.

Tour leader: Since you are a guide, you should know.

Local guide: Well, I have been coming to this monastery for the last seven years. But I never heard or saw it before. Which book did you read?

Tour leader: I already informed the group about this, and I am sure there must be one.

Local guide: Ok, I will check with the monk then.

Monk: Who said that?

Dorje: My group leader read it in the book.

Local guide: I never saw it. Books always tell lies.

Tour leader: Well, it must be somewhere else in Ladakh if not in Lamayuru. OK! Tell us about the history of Lamayuru. (Overheard conversation, Lamayuru, July 2014)

The tour leader had never been to Ladakh before, yet she seemed to have more information about Ladakh than other tourists because she came as a tour leader. She expressed a sense of umbrage because her expectation of seeing a 'big and ancient drum' had not been fulfilled. Her construction of knowledge about Lamayuru monastery was rebutted. The relationship between monks and guides seemed perturbed within the monastic space. The monk who is the *komnyer* (*dkong nyer*, caretaker)<sup>6</sup> of the *Dukhang* (*'du khang*, main assembly hall) informed me that many guides are unacquainted with the history of the monastery and Buddhism, and therefore tend to communicate wrong information to tourists. For their part, the guides are often nervous when explaining to tourist groups in the presence of monks. A senior monk said:

Local (Ladakhi) and non-local (non-Ladakhi) guides come with their tourist groups. We expect the guides to at least be well-versed with the short history of this place and Buddhist philosophy. But, most of the time, they tend to distort the history as well as names of statues and places. They spread wrong information and distort the values of centuries-old traditions. (Monk, interview, Lamayuru, 13 July 2014)

The role of the guide has indeed become an important component of the tourism industry in situating what kinds of cultural attributes are communicated to the tourist. Within Lamayuru's monastic space the guide plays a dual role of being a local and at the same time part of a tourist group. When they interact with local people, they take the position of the tourist, conversely, a local position in relation to the tourist.

Traditionally, most of the monks used to leave the monastery during the daytime to perform rituals in the villages. Now they have to stay in the monastery due to the massive inflow of tourists. Every small and big hall in the monastery has a *komnyer*. His responsibility is to perform everyday rituals and serve as custodians to the temples. The most exciting place is the main assembly hall where monks congregate occasionally for prayers. Two monks have responsibility for the hall: it is the most sacred place and the central attraction to both adherents and non-adherents where one can still see the meditation cave of the Buddhist teacher Naropa (1016-1100 CE), who is said to have stayed in Lamayuru in the course of his wanderings

(Williams-Oerberg 2019). Sometimes the hall is packed with local pilgrims and the tourists, pilgrims searching for space to prostrate (*chagphula*, *phyag pu la*) and the tourists busy taking photos. When adherents prostrate, tourists immediately take photos. The *komnyer* of the assembly hall shared his views:

This *Dukhang* is so busy, especially for two months, that we hardly get time to go out. We try to tell tourists not to climb on monks' seats and touch sacred objects. But sometimes it is difficult to manage tourists as they come and sit on the *choktse* (*lchog rtse*, low Ladakhi table) where monks keep their *chos* (religious texts) and tea cups. If anyone sits on a *choktse* we regard it as extremely disrespectful. On the one hand, people worship monks and the sacred objects of the monastery. On the other hand, the tourism industry has reduced us as if we are here for them like a museum. Some tourists ask me to pose for a photograph, while holding the monastery keys in my hand. I do not like it at all. But I cannot refuse because they come [sic] so far to see us. (*Komnyer*, interview, Lamayuru, 27 June 2014)

The above statement reveals the complexity of monastic space impacted by the tourism industry. Sometimes, the diverse cultural background of tourists and pilgrims leads to a conflicting situation at the host site. However, it would be unjust to ascribe the tourists' behavior as faulty. We need to understand the individual's socio-cultural and historical background which plays a significant role in constructing perceptions. Nevertheless, the differing perceptions and cultural norms of the tourists jeopardize the subtle order of monastic culture. For instance, pointing one's finger at idols and statues of Buddha inside any temple in the monastery would be considered as a bad act by a local pilgrim because pointing one's finger is regarded as disrespectful.

Likewise, maintaining silence is one of the most important expected behaviors in a monastery. However, tourists make a noise and talk loudly even when prayers are going on inside the hall. Amidst the din of religious and touring crowds, the previous serenity of the space is compromised. In addition, many towering structures have been constructed nearby due to poor management and overuse of tourists' facilities. A hotel with 22 rooms has been erected within the complex of the monastery to accommodate tourists (see Figure 1). It was initially constructed to accommodate pilgrims coming from different villages during the annual Yuru-Kabgyad (*g. Yung drung bka' brgyad*) festival. However, in response to the inflow of tourists from further afield, the monastery management converted it for commercial purposes. As a result, the

monastery now entertains tourists by running restaurants, commercial shops, food stalls, etc. This duality of place directs many changes in the culture of monastic life, as now monks have to perform extra tasks, managing and running these establishments, while also spending time in the prayer hall to show it to visitors and perform their daily ritual obligations.

### Monks' Perceptions of Tourism

In order to understand the perceptions of monks and the impact of tourism on their way of thinking, I asked several questions revolving around two main concerns. First, what types of tourist do you think come to Lamayuru? Secondly, how do you perceive tourism and receiving tourists in your monastery?

I interviewed 25 monks using a random sampling method, including eight at the Dehradun Changchubling monastery in Uttarakhand, where many monks from the Lamayuru monastery were studying. The interviewees at Lamayuru had been living there between two and 25 years, and their ages ranged from 19 to over 80 years. The sample of the informants included junior monks who were on duty as the *komnyer* of the *Dukhang*; the *Chams-spon* (*cham dpon*, the monk who teaches the *cham* religious dance); the monk who sits at the ticketing counter to register visitors; a teacher who delivers Buddhist teachings to pilgrims and also teaches at the Central Institute for Buddhist Studies at Leh; a scholar of Buddhist philosophy; senior monks who are well aware of those who visit Lamayuru, and have had many opportunities to deal with visitors and observe their behavior; the store keeper who is responsible for managing the kitchen; and the *Rinpoche* (reincarnate monk) who is the incumbent head of the monastery.

The monks have their own typologies of tourists. They categorize visitors mostly in terms of their faith. First, the *nangpa* (*nang pa*, meaning 'insiders' or Buddhist adherents) are termed as *jalme* (*mjal mi*, pilgrims). *Jalme* is a local term that applies to Buddhist visitors including Ladakhis. Secondly, the modern non-Buddhist and secular or leisure tourists are known as *chisgyalpa* (*phyi rgyal pa*), a term that mostly applies to American and European tourists. The monks presume that all *chisgyalpa* are non-Buddhists and cannot be called pilgrims. The monks further categorize *chisgyalpa* into two types: *chugpo chisgyalpa* (*phyugpo phi rgyal pa*, rich tourists) and *chadpo chisgyalpa* (*chadpo phi rgyal pa*, poor tourists). Lastly, the word *gyagarpa* (*rgya gar pa*) refers to Indian tourists or Indians in general. In the last decade and a half, tourists from other parts of India have greatly increased in number, in part because of the Bollywood film *Three Idiots* (2009), which was partly made in Ladakh.

The monks think that it is their obligation to entertain *jalme* at any time. However, they have set a specific time for the other two types of tourists to visit the monastery. The monastery observes a strict division of labor in allocating duties especially during the tourist season. It is stated at the counter that tickets are available for tourists only from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. If tourists fail to visit on time, the monks would not entertain them, and close the door.

In the interviews, the monks recounted their daily interactions and conversations with tourists as well as observations of their behavior. One can notice that they have a dual perspective in their responses reflecting two worldviews: 'mundane' (secular) and 'religious' (Buddhist). Secular responses are the ones in which they understand the social phenomena through their cognitive construction of reality in an ordinary social situation. By contrast the religious view is how they understand phenomena from the perspective of Buddhism. For a Buddhist, the normative guidance of the religion stresses that all sentient beings (i.e. in Buddhist cosmology all those who sense, feel, and live in the realm of reincarnation) are equal and that all are made exclusively of the same four basic elements of all tangible things (soil, fire, water, and wind), regardless of apparent dissimilarities.

While responding to the questions, the monks always reflected on both mundane/secular and Buddhist perspectives. They often made it clear whether they were presenting one perspective or the other when expressing themselves. While responding to a question on his view on the kinds of tourists that visit Lamayuru, one elderly monk said, "From my understanding as a Buddhist they (tourists) are not different from us. There is no need to differentiate human beings, as we all are the same and equal no matter from where we have come from." He then continued, "From the secular perspective, most of the tourists who come here are not Buddhists. They usually come to see the monastic landscape, architecture and the people" (Monk, interview, Lamayuru, 21 July 2015).

Another monk, commented that "I perceive tourism as something which has become an imperative as it provides economic security to the monastery, but I as a Buddhist monk should not give prime importance to material things and money" (Monk, interview, Lamayuru, 21 July 2015). It is noteworthy that all the informants somehow reflected the basic Buddhist principles that were inculcated in them at the monastery.

Out of 25 monks, a few who see the world from a Buddhist perspective reflected that "the differences between tourists, local, black, white are secondary. What we need to understand is that each one of us possesses the seed of becoming a

Buddha (attaining Buddha-hood)". They typically expressed the view that there are no differences between people, as they all are sentient beings carrying 'Buddha seeds' (*sang rgyas kyi nus pa*). A 'Buddha-seed' is a metaphor for the Buddha-nature that every sentient being possesses, and it is meant to give everyone the potential to become, eventually, fully enlightened, that is a Buddha. However, the monk who was in charge of the main assembly hall expressed his sense of resentment with the local tour operators, guides, and tourism department. He made a statement from his mundane perspective or worldview:

Local people are losing their cultural and spiritual integrity. For instance, when guides come to the monastery with a tourist group, they hardly prostrate. Similarly, the travel agents in Leh are doing nothing for the monastery. They are earning a lot of money from tourism but never realizing that tourists are coming to Ladakh because of monasteries and the unique local culture. They hardly visit any monastery. If one is a true Buddhist one should first come to visit a monastery. Instead, they think that monks are just there to entertain their guests.

Tourists are innocent: they follow what guides and travel agents say. Of course, when safeguarding the halls, you have more conversations with tourists; it can be quite annoying when they misbehave, and you have to tell them not to do this and that. Also, we have less time to do the things that we want to do. People do not realize that whatever monasteries do is for the village, the people, and for world peace. These days it seems that monks are only responsible for the monastery. People should support monasteries as they used to do. Imagine how hard Ladakhi life was earlier, but during those days people were more generous than today. Too much material obsession is not a good sign, indicating that people tend to forget their religion. This is not a good sign for Ladakh. (Monk, interview, Lamayuru, 17 July 2015)

He is well aware of his role adaptation when giving a mundane response to the question. His statement implied that people are becoming more materialistic and tend to forget the role and significance of the monastery.

Some of the monks are of the view that external disturbances have no effect on their Buddhist mindset. On the other hand, others think that the intrusion of new ideas into the monastic space creates an intense competition within oneself. Nonetheless, most of the interviews revealed that monks perceive tourism positively because they see it as a way to impart to people more about Buddhism. It might be affecting their monastic life, but it

brings benefits to tourists, and to Buddhism as a whole. Visitors get an opportunity to think about the Buddhist way of life which inculcates love and compassion.

### Villagers' Responses

Even more than other monasteries, the Lamayuru monastery is 'home' for the elderly people of the village. They come to the monastery almost every day for *skora* (*skor ra*, circumambulation at a sacred site)<sup>7</sup> carrying *maneylagskor* (*ma ni lag skor*, prayer wheel) and *thagna* (*phreng ba*, rosary) in their hands. They often spend the whole day within the complex of the monastery and sometimes they also go up on the hill for *skora*. They repeatedly walk around the monastery clockwise. The purpose of walking around the monastery, stupas, *mane* walls, and other religious structures is to gain merit and for self-purification. They generally wear traditional Ladakhi dress: a *goncha* (*gon ches*, a long woolen coat worn by men) or *lokpa* (*slog pa*, a women's cape, made of goat's skin worn on their backs). Their reason for wearing Ladakhi dress while visiting the monastery is captured in a popular Ladakhi phrase *go-stongkang-jen la-man-dul* (*mgo strong rkang rjen la ma 'rgyul*) meaning "do not go around with bare foot and head". While visiting sacred sites, villagers—particularly those belonging to the older generations—observe a strict dress rule. They believe that inappropriate dress can pollute the aura of sacred sites. If anyone wears a short-sleeved shirt and shorts within the monastic compound, he or she would be fined by the monastery. They are of the view that, without wearing proper dress (i.e. traditional *goncha* and hat), one should not enter the monastery compound.

It seems that the faulty behavior of tourists, such as inappropriate or lax religious attitudes, has made a negative impression on villagers. As one informant explained:

These days members of the younger generation wear different clothes, exposing their body parts, and monasteries are witnessing different types of tourists who brought many things in Ladakh, polluting the deities and goddesses of our surroundings. Therefore, how can we expect rainfall and snow on time? (Villager, interview, Lamayuru, 19 June 2014)

This perception is very common among the elderly people in the village. Many villagers, especially elderly people, believe that the massive influx of tourists into the monastery is disturbing the sanctity of the monastic space. For example, a 73 year-old lady stated:

We come to monastery for *skora* but, when tourists see us, they immediately take our photos. Now,

the monastic surroundings have become so noisy and they are crowded for the whole day. (Villager, interview, Lamayuru, 17 June 2014)

She stated that her religious space was shrinking and she had become an object for tourists to be photographed. She clearly articulated her sense of resentment with this 'dual space' which is emerging from the influx of tourists within the monastic space at Lamayuru.

### The Tourist Gaze and Local Commodification

The interaction between tourist photographers and locals being photographed is a clearly identifiable genre that is reproduced, in various ways, across the world. Concepts in tourism research, such as Urry's (1990) 'tourist gaze', have tended to endow the tourist behind the camera with much power (e.g. Crawshaw and Urry 1997). The tourist gaze, objectified in the camera, is said to have the power to create a cultural revival (Bruner 2005: 119), commodify the local culture (Philip and Mercer 1999), and to stimulate new forms of self-consciousness amongst the local people (Tilley 1999). However, the photographer/photographed relationship is even more complex at Lamayuru. Villagers—particularly elderly people—come for circumambulation at the monastery on a regular basis. Tourists think that their traditional attire is interestingly exotic and instantly take photos. When the villagers resist the tourist, and insist on not being photographed, then often the guide would intervene and persuade them to pose for a photograph after all. One old monk told me that a tourist took his photograph many years previously, and he received the same photo in the form of postcard. He was very happy that he got it back and genuinely extended his appreciation to the one who took the photo and bothered to send it back to him. However, he was completely unaware of the fact that his image was being sold in the market.

In the initial phase of modern tourism in Ladakh in the 1970s and 1980s, locals entertained tourists out of their kindness and allowed them to take photographs. In return, tourists offered them money out of a sense of generosity. Therefore, it gradually became a trend that people started asking for money (*baksheesh*, tips) in return for having their photographs taken. However, asking for money for photographs is now seen as a problem for the Lamayuru monastery, and the issue has been raised in monastic meetings and in other tourism-related government offices, as well as by travel agents. Nevertheless, such practices are still prevalent.

As discussed above, places are not inherently sacred but become sacred over a period of time, through the presence of religious leaders, monks, and their followers.

Religious observance is therefore one of the most important elements in the construction of a place as sacred. In Lamayuru, local pilgrims in traditional attire have become part of the attraction by providing tourists with subjects for photographs. In response, they are now demanding money from tourists in return for posing and, in the process, they are becoming commoditized. While the tourist experiences something new and gains an insight into a different culture, this process can go too far if it makes for a seemingly fake or staged experience. One of the main drawbacks of cultural tourism is that it locks the host culture into a stage of development or even under-development to ensure a continuous flow of tourists. The challenge is how to find the appropriate balance between the two so that both locals and tourists can benefit. In Lamayuru it is still an open question how best to achieve this balance.

Graburn (1984) has written that functional religious forms are unlikely to become mass marketed tourist commodities. But Lamayuru's experience suggests this is not completely true, still less with regard to ritual goods. For instance, *thangka* (*thang ka*, religious paintings) depicting Tantric deities were traditionally commissioned on the recommendation of a lama on occasions such as the death of a relative or for meditation practice. They were not sold for profit. Today, *thangka* have become souvenirs for tourists who do not realize their religious importance. These ritual objects are now mass-produced and sold for profit.

On a related note, during the annual festival of the Lamayuru monastery, foreigners who pay entrance fees are given priority, and local pilgrims often do not seem to have any significance. Sometimes monks also show tourists particularly rare or beautiful *thangka*, statues, or ritual objects if they pay an additional fee. Discrimination against local people at festivals combined with the monks' new emphasis on their business activities has led to a decrease in villagers' sense of confidence and self-respect.

However, visits to monasteries and pilgrimage sites have become an increasingly significant part of the touring experience in Ladakh, and tourism is providing a new frame of reference for villagers to understand, and explain, sacred sites. This is partly linked to the evident appreciation of the tourists for sacred sites, and partly to the new incentives to represent 'Ladakhi culture' provided by tourism.

## Conclusion

This article has focused on the question how life at the Lamayuru monastery and village has adapted to co-exist with tourism. It shows how interactions between tourists and local people have led to the emergence of a new 'dual-

ity' of monastic space. This duality is one of the distinctive features of modern tourism: it has led to new possibilities and new tensions that will continue to evolve.

Tourists have left their impacts on the socio-cultural life of host communities across the world, but especially in developing countries and regions such as Ladakh, where local people often try to imitate and adopt the lifestyles of tourists from developed countries. The massive inflow of tourists into Lamayuru has upset its pace of life. As with any change, this phenomenon has had mixed impacts.

In certain cases, overexposure to mass culture has made a younger generation of monks averse to their own culture. Moreover, the benefits of economic development have been uneven. With commodification, tourists are served inauthentic culture, in the form of staged cultural shows. Meanwhile, tourism has served to lure traditional Ladakh to a modernity that focuses on materialism and the pursuit of tangible worldly benefits, such as the financial benefits of entertaining foreign guests, rather than spiritual endeavor. At times, tourism has helped instill a sense of pride among monks and the villagers but, as has been seen, the bleaker side of the coin is equally true, with local pilgrims often feeling that their interests are neglected at the expense of foreign visitors.

However, it would be wrong to argue that the impact of tourism has been entirely negative. Its positive impacts include economic benefits, as well as exposure to new ideas and better education opportunities. Moreover, Lamayuru has many rich sponsors who originally came as tourists and are sponsoring the restoration of wall paintings and stupas as well as the construction of new shrines. For instance, the Tserkarmo monastery in Temisgang (gTing mo sgang) village, which is affiliated with Lamayuru monastery, has recently built a huge stupa with a temple inside it: this cost tens of millions of rupees and was mostly funded by tourists who have connections with Lamayuru. The tourists' financial contributions have contributed to the protection and maintenance of religious infrastructure, and thus to the revival of sacred spaces that might otherwise have suffered from neglect.

Moreover, there are many tourists who have been influenced by the sacred aura of Lamayuru and developed a long-term relationship with the monastery. For instance, a decade and a half ago Joseph Housel from America, visited Lamayuru as a tourist.<sup>8</sup> His encounter with the monastery had a profound influence: he embraced Buddhism and was ordained by the late *Drupon* (*sGrub dpon*, yogi) Sonam Kunga, (the teacher of the Lamayuru Rinpoche, who passed away in 2014) whom he considers as his dharma teacher. He has also worked with Bakula Rangdol Neema Rinpoche<sup>9</sup>

on *cham* (religious dance) and produced valuable video cassettes of the whole Lamayuru *kabgyad* festival. He invited his teacher along with many other monks to Chicago, and they performed *cham* at different places in America. Although his teacher has passed away, his relationship with Lamayuru still continues.

Likewise, there are many other tourists who visited Lamayuru without prior knowledge, but who have retained a long-term connection with the monastery. Some young educated monks who are studying in Drikung Kagyud Institute in Dehradun are operating a 'Lamayuru Gonpa' Facebook page and this provides an interesting forum for discussion and comments by tourists and religious devotees who visited the monastery at different times and junctures. Many of them have visited Lamayuru more than five to six times, and clearly state in their posts and comments that their spirituality has been influenced by the sacred aura of the monastery. Lamayuru's overlapping sacred and touristic geographies are now extending into cyber-space.

**Tashi Lundup** (PhD, Centre for the Study of Social System/ School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2017) is currently teaching at Eliezer Joldan Memorial College, Leh, Ladakh, as an assistant professor in sociology. His specialization is in tourism and culture with special references to the Himalayan region.

**First and most importantly, the author would like to express sincere thanks to his supervisor Professor Susan Visvanathan, under whose guidance and expertise he completed this project. Secondly, the author's warmest thanks go to the monks and the people of Lamayuru for their cooperation and assistance during field work.**

**The author wishes to extend his heartiest thanks to John Bray and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg, who undertook the arduous task of editing the text, and offered suggestions and comments. The author is also thankful to Khempo Sharap for the photograph. Likewise, he would like to thank his wife, Deskid Dolma, under whose companionship he completed this research.**

---

## Endnotes

1. Information obtained from the Leh office of the Department of Tourism, Government of Jammu & Kashmir, in July 2019.
2. On the history and religious art of Lamayuru, see Petech (1979) and Blancke (2014). See also Herdick (1997) for a discussion of the space relations of traditional architecture in Lamayuru.
3. Early examples of the use of the term 'moonland' [sic] to describe Ladakh include Hassnain, Sumi, and Oki (1977) and Agarwal (1978).
4. On Tibetan pilgrimage, see—among others—Ekvall and Down (1987) and McKay (1998).
5. The interviews do not represent the unmediated voices of my respondents. Their words here are based on tape recordings and transformed through the act of writing.
6. On first mention of a Ladakhi word I offer a phonetic spelling, followed by the transliteration from the Tibetan script in brackets.
7. The principle behind circumambulation involves making a clear and conscious connection with something that is regarded as special. This is often a physical object but it could also be a person. In a religious context 'the thing' would be seen as especially related to or embodying the transcendent qualities to which the pilgrim aspires. In a more mundane situation one could go round a dwelling, say, as part of a blessing.

8. I interviewed him when he was visiting Lamayuru. He worked on monastic mask dance (*cham*) and has prepared 500 hours of videos on this topic.

9. He is considered as the finest *cham* dancer in many generations. While he claimed that he does not recall any steps from his previous lives, he learned seventy percent of the dances—that is more than fifteen hours of dancing—in less than three weeks.

---

## References

- Abercrombie, Thomas J. 1978. Ladakh the Last Shangrila. *National Geographic* 153(3): 332-359.
- Agarwal, A.C. (Ed). 1978. *The Moonland Ladakh*. Delhi: Nest and Wings.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1988. Putting Hierarchy in its Place. *Cultural Anthropology* 3(1): 36-49.
- Allcock, B. J. 1988. Tourism as a sacred journey. *Society and Leisure* 11(1): 33-48.
- Blancke, Kristin. 2014. Lamayuru (Ladakh)—Chenrezik Lhakang: The *Bar Do Thos Grol* Illustrated as Mural Painting. In *Art and Architecture in Ladakh*, edited by Erberto Lo Bue and John Bray, 298-276. Leiden: Brill.
- Bremer, S. T. 1991. *Bless with Tourists: The Border Lands of Religion and Tourism in San Antonio*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- . 2006. Sacred Space and Tourist Place. In *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journey*, edited by D.J. Timothy and H.A. Olsen. New York and London: Routledge.
- Bruner, E. M. 2005. *Culture on Tour*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Cohen, E. 1979. The Impact of Tourism on the Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand. *Internationales Asienforum* 10: 5-38.
- . 1984. Sociology of Tourism: Approach, Issues and Findings. *Annals Review of Sociology* 10: 373-392.
- . 1988. Authenticity and Commodification in Tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research* 15(3): 371-386.
- Crawshaw, Carol and John Urry. 1997. Tourism and the Photographic Eye. In *Touring Cultures: Transformations in Travel and Theory*, edited by C. Rojek and J. Urry, 176-195. London: Routledge.
- Digance, J. 2003. Pilgrimage at Contested Sites. *Annals of Tourism Research* 30(1): 145-159.
- Edelmann, Robert J. 1987. *The Psychology of Embarrassment*. New York: Wiley.
- Ekvall, Robert B. and James F. Down. 1987. *Tibetan Pilgrimage*. Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia & Africa.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harvest.
- Gillespie, Alex. 2006. Tourist Photography and the Reverse Gaze. *Ethos* 34(3): 343-366.
- Graburn, N.H.H. 1984. The Evolution of Tourist Arts. *Annals of Tourism Research* 11(3): 393-420.
- Hassnain, F.M., T.D. Sumi, and M. Oki. 1977. *Ladakh the Moonland*. New Delhi, Light and Life.
- Herdick, Reinhard. 1997. The Old Village Centre of Lamayuru in West Ladakh: an Analysis of Spatial Ordering of Architectural and Sociocultural Structures. In *Recent Research on Ladakh* 7. Edited by Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther, 203-234. Ulmer Kultur anthropologische Schriften Band 8. Ulm: Abteilung Anthropologie, Universität Ulm.
- Hilton, J. 1933. *Lost Horizon*. London: Macmillan.
- Jafari, J. 1987. Tourism Models: the Socio-cultural Aspects. *Tourism Management* 8: 151-159.
- MacCannell, D. 1973. Stage Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings. *The American Journal of Sociology* 79(3): 589-603.
- . 1976. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York: Schocken Books.
- . 1992. *Empty Meeting Grounds*, London: Routledge.
- Mayhew, Bradley. 2000. *Indian Himalaya*. A Travel Survival Kit. Melbourne: Lonely Planet.
- McKay, Alex. (Ed). 1998. *Pilgrimage in Tibet*. Richmond: Curzon.
- Norberg-Hodge, H. 1997. Social and Environmental Costs of the Global Economy: Lessons from Ladakh. In *Recent Research on Ladakh* 5, edited by Osmaston Henry and Nawang Tsering, 195-204. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Olsen, D, H. 2010. Pilgrims, Tourists and Max Weber's 'Ideal Types'. *Annals of Tourism Research* 37(3): 818-851.
- Pearce, G. Douglas. 1987. *Tourism Today: A Geographical Analysis*. London: Longman.
- Petech, Luciano. 1979. The 'Bri-gung-pa Sect in Western Tibet and Ladakh. In *Proceedings of the Csoma de Kőrös Memorial Symposium 1976*, edited by Louis Ligeti, 313-325. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.

Philip, J and D. Mercer. 1999. Commodification of Buddhism in Contemporary Burma. *Annals of Tourism Research* 26(1): 21-54.

Smith, Valene. 1989. *Host and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Sood, Vibha. "Tourism and its Impact on the SocioEconomic Setup of Ladakh." M.Phil. Dissertation. Jawarharlal Nehru University, Centre for the Study of Regional Development, 1990. Delhi.

Sumption, J. 1975. *Pilgrimage: An Image of Medieval Religion*. London: Faber and Faber.

Timothy, D.J. and Boyd, S.W. 2003. *Heritage Tourism*, Harlow: Prentice Hall.

Tilley, C. 1999. Performing Culture in the Global Village. *Critique of Anthropology* 17(1): 67-89.

Urry, John. 1990. *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage.

Williams-Oerberg, Elizabeth. 2019. When Buddhism Meets Bollywood: The Naropa 2016 Festival in Ladakh, India. *HIMALAYA* 39(2).