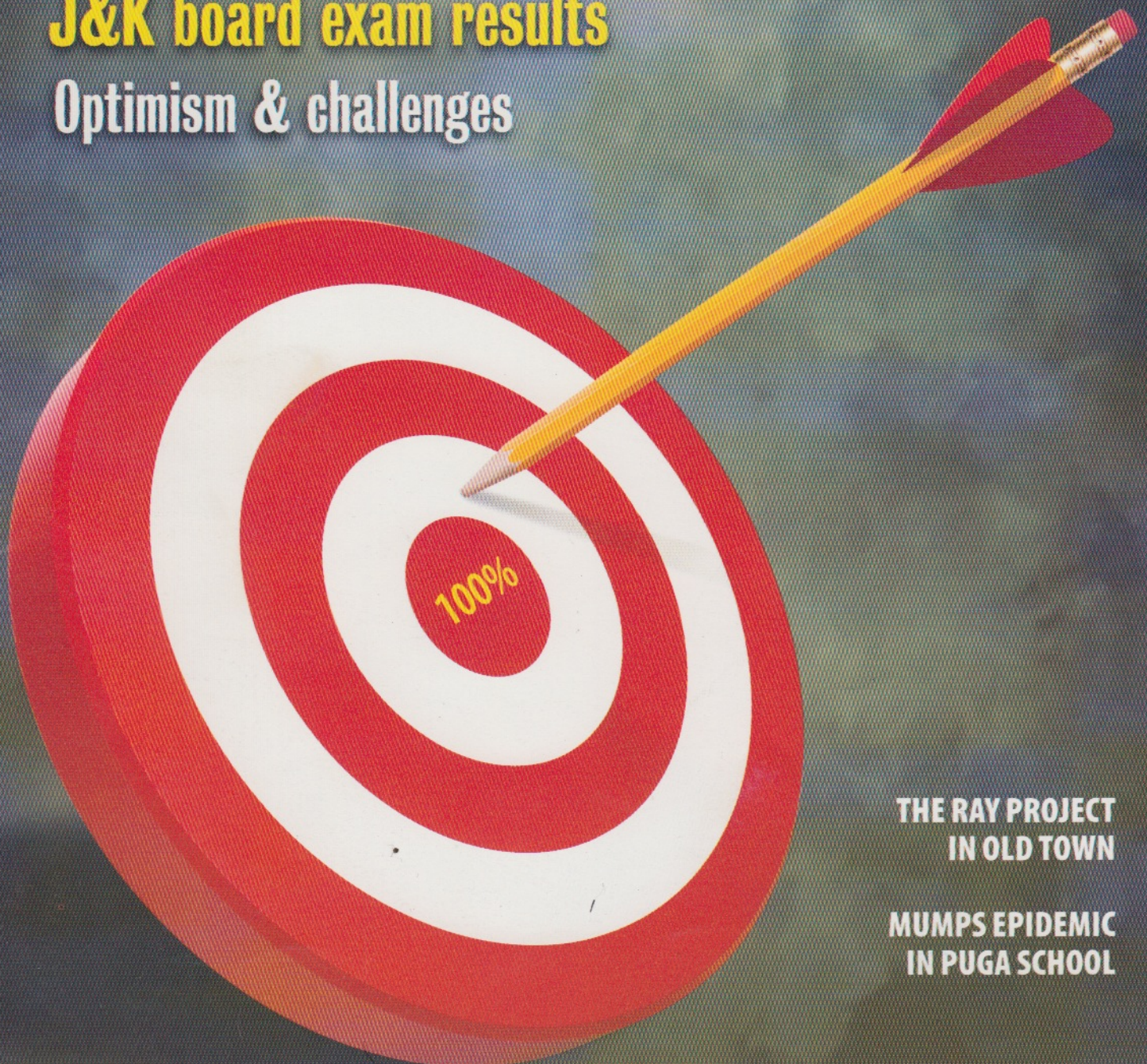


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VOL. 2 - ISSUE 7 - JULY 2015

J&K board exam results **Optimism & challenges**



**THE RAY PROJECT
IN OLD TOWN**

**MUMPS EPIDEMIC
IN PUGA SCHOOL**

Letter

Old town is a living heritage

Dear Editor,

Apropos the anonymous letter entitled "RAY of doom for old town, Leh" published in the June 2014 issue (vol 2, issue 6). First of all, it is against the general norms of journalism to publish an anonymous letter. This letter caused serious hurt to residents of old town for casting a wrong picture of the RAY project in old town. It exposes the intention of causing hindrances in the execution of the project thereby referring to some legal obligation. The project is being implemented in consultation with residents, who are descendents of families that have been living in the area for centuries. The old town is a living town and cannot be conserved like a museum.

In the RAY project, outer structures are being built using local materials with traditional architectural heritage designs with the added precaution of using a little

cement in the foundation, which will remain hidden. No cement is being used in the roofing, flooring, pillars etc, which are being built, in consultation with the residents, by using traditional materials such as ballis and taloo. There are several old buildings in the area that have been restored using traditional techniques. These serve as the guiding force for the present project. The coming heritage zone will be a full-fledged township with all the necessary amenities of water supply, sewerage and lighting systems, where there will be traditional buildings, which will ensure a happy and prosperous lifestyle for the families who will continue living here for several generations to come.

Tsewang Dorje

President, Skyangos Goksum
Mohalla Welfare Society, Skyangos
Goksum Leh
On behalf of old town residents

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your letter and clarification on different aspects of the project and the importance of old town to its residents.

You raised a very valid concern about the letter being anonymous. In this regard, allow me to clarify that we have a legal responsibility to ensure that all the letters we carry are from real people. We, thus, cross-checked the identity of all the signatories of the abovementioned letter and withheld their names on request. This is an accepted practice, if the author(s) are able to justify and substantiate their request.

However, we apologise if the letter hurt any sentiments. We published the letter in an effort to encourage public discussion between different points of view.

Editor

Questions about careers and courses?

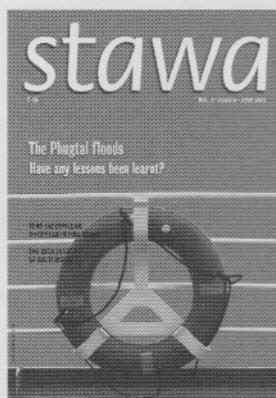
Are you looking for information on specific careers or courses? We might be able to help. Do send us your questions and we will try to find some answers.

You can send us your questions by post or email and don't forget to include your full contact details, including your full name (including house name), postal address, phone number and email ID (if available). We will publish the responses in the magazine as it may interest other readers too. Please indicate if you do not want us to disclose your identity.

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Corrections



In the June 2015 issue (vol. 2, issue 6), we carried Rinchen Dolkar's review of the art exhibition thread by thread by Baptist Coelho (pages 12-13). In this review, we did not mention that the exhibition was curated by Monisha Ahmed, executive director, Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation. We apologise for this lapse.

In the same issue, we did not acknowledge the contribution of Spalzin Angmo in suggesting the idea for crossword 013 and doing the necessary research to develop it. We apologise for this lapse.

From the editor

De-coding the exam results

The board exam results for 2015 have been declared. The pass percentage for the 10th and 12th exams continues to improve. Many people are justifiably thrilled with the performance of government schools in Ladakh. In this issue, Tsering Dolkar and Shotopa speak with the two people who are leading the whole process in Leh and Kargil, who share their experiences and views on the current challenges and future prospects for the education system.

Returning to pass percentage, one could argue that the numbers are a good measure of the performance of the education system and the process of governance in which it is entrenched. One could also argue that the pass percentage is a poor reflection of the actual education that students are acquiring in school. Well, students are neither inanimate goods being churned out from the production chain, nor are they isolated individuals. The pass percentage numbers are important as a reflection of the learning and evaluation process. However, they alone cannot provide an accurate reflection of learning. The voices of friends who are able to recite whole paragraphs from their 8th standard text books even two decades later, illustrates the limits of these numbers.

However, the present education system cannot simply be wished away or transformed overnight but can definitely be improved. Despite its many imperfections, the system has time and again produced great visionaries—in this issue Abdul Ghani

Sheikh pays tribute to one such person, who was also his teacher: Eliezer Joldan. His (Eliezer Joldan's) views on the education system are tempered by experience and remain very insightful. Despite his ambivalence to the way the system was structured, Eliezer Joldan dedicated his entire working life to it.

Debating heritage

The idea of 'heritage' can have many different meanings and be deeply contested by different groups. This is evident in the intensity with which various views and opinions are expressed in Fatima Ashraf Barcha's article on the RAY project in Leh's old town. The article gives voice to a diversity of viewpoints, while pointing out overlapping themes and contradictions.

The words of Goba Tsewang Dorje possibly serve as a good starting point to make the dialogue more constructive: "We cannot make a museum out of all the residential houses." This challenges the idea of heritage as something to be 'preserved' and instead points to the fact that old town—with its close-knit families, historic buildings and evocative paths—is part of a living community that is constantly changing. It has already survived decades of neglect and apathy and is now the object of increased interest. This is a welcome sign but more public dialogues between different interpretations of 'heritage' might help temper the potential negative impacts of the proposed changes. It may even turn out, and it's not entirely unlikely, that

there are less 'differences' and more 'agreements' in the various opinions on the issue.

Other discussions

This issue also reports on an epidemic of mumps at the Puga Residential School in Changthang. Tsering Dolkar investigates this epidemic to understand why the infection spread so rapidly amongst the students at the school and what efforts are now being taken to prevent such outbreaks. Kacho Asfandiyar Khan describes the intricate beliefs and practices that make the month of Ramadan so important to Islam. Tsewang Rigzin underlines the dangers of the seemingly benign Khardong-la to argue for a tunnel below the pass and the need for alternate routes to connect Nubra more closely with the rest of the district. Hajira Bano Balkhang traces the origins and meanings of the two festivals dedicated to the Indus river: Singge Khababs and Sindhu Darshan. Finally, this issue also includes reports about a festival and exhibition dedicated to the legacy of the Silk Route trade, the celebration of International Yoga Day and a seminar on rights and litigation.

Lastly, this issue has largely been shaped by Tsering Dolkar and Tsering Stobdan who planned and executed it, with the able support of several other people.

We hope you find this issue relevant and look forward to your feedback and suggestions.

Sunetro Ghosal

RAY project in old town: A golden opportunity?

By Fatima Ashraf Barcha

In the 17th century, King Sengge Namgyal shifted his capital to Leh in view of its position along trade routes to Central Asia, Kashmir and the South Asian plains. Here he built the nine-storey royal residence, the Lechen Palkhar or Leh Palace, at the base of Tsemo hill. The palace towers over old town, whose residents were mostly employed by in the royal court. The original residents still have ancestral homes in the area, some of which are as old as the palace or even older. Old town is the last surviving example of Tibeto-Himalayan cultural heritage, as similar townships in Lhasa, Khotan and Yarkand have been demolished. Old town was recognised as an endangered site by the World Monuments Fund in 2008. However, this historic neighbourhood and the needs of its residents have been neglected for several decades.

In 1982, Leh palace was declared a national monument by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Following the Ancient Monument and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act Amendment, 2010, parts of old town fall within the 100m prohibited zone with a further 200m being the regulatory zone. As a result, any construction and change in this area requires clearance from ASI. At the same time, old town is also home to many families, many of whom have lived here for several

generations. Unfortunately, no serious measures have been taken to develop proper civic amenities in the area, which has worsened its condition. This neglect is a collective failure of various parties, including Leh Hill Council, which is responsible for providing necessary facilities to residents while also preserving its heritage value; NGOs, many of which are working to preserve the area's heritage value and improve the lives of its residents and the ASI, which is responsible for maintaining the heritage value of old town. Thus, the major challenge for old town is to conserve its heritage value, while providing various amenities, opportunities and facilities for its residents.

Over the last few decades, the lack of amenities in old town have led to many families moving to other parts of Leh and renting out their ancestral home to migrant labourers. Tourists do venture through old town but few realise the centuries of history buried under layers of neglect and filth. Other residents have responded by replacing damaged houses with new concrete structures. While this has been a practical solution, it erodes heritage value of their home and the area. With some notable exceptions, neither the government nor NGOs have met the aspirations and needs of residents, while helping them to preserve the heritage value of the area.

Revitalising old town

Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) and Ladakh Art and Media Organisa-

tion (LAMO) are two NGOs that work in old town and have offices in conserved historical houses. THF is located in Lakrook house and has been working for the last decade through its Leh Old Town Initiative (LOTI) to restore buildings (Sofi House, Yarkandi House, Nouchung House and Gotal House), pave alleyways, build drains and conduct heritage walks. LAMO is housed in the Munshi-Gyao house and works with residents to document, research and understand the neighbourhood, while also holding exhibitions, workshops and projects.

More recently, the Leh Hill Council has also initiated efforts to address the challenges faced by the residents of old town. Chief Executive Councillor of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh, Rigzin Spalbar explained, "The aesthetic condition of old town has been degrading for many decades. There have been no serious initiatives to improve the living conditions in these neighbourhoods. The Rajiv Awaz Yojna (RAY) project was implemented in 2012 to improve the civic amenities in old town, while preserving its heritage value." RAY is a slum improvement project under the Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India. While old town is not a slum, the project was adapted to develop civic amenities in old town. The project covers five areas of old town: Kharyok, Manekhang, Stalam, Stago Philog and Lobding. It involves construction of new houses on empty plots of 22m x 25m, restoration of old houses,

■ Fatima Ashraf Barcha is currently pursuing an MA in history



Community Hall being constructed within RAY scheme



The house being built under the RAY project 151m from the palace

construction of toilets and provision of amenities like water supply, electricity, street lights, sewerage, drainage and solid waste management systems.

The project is overseen by a monitoring committee that includes community representatives, LOTI, Tehsildar, Leh, ex-

ecutive engineers for roads and buildings, public health engineering and from the power development department and RAY representatives. The committee is chaired by the administrator of Municipal Committee, Leh. The engineering departments in Leh are the executing agency for the

project but do not have a conservation architect in their rank. The project's efforts to improve civic conditions in old town are acknowledged by everyone, while concerns have been voiced about its work on local houses.

At the start of the project several meetings were held between different stakeholders to discuss the project and how it should tackle the challenges of old town. In an effort to preserve the heritage value of the area, the hill council involved LOTI and LAMO in the initial survey to identify historic houses that needed attention. Administrator, Municipal Committee, Leh, Dr. Zahida Bano said that some residents complained that the survey had missed some houses. In response to these complaints the monitoring committee decided to reassess the survey. The final survey constitutes 73 houses divided into three categories: Category A for houses in very dilapidated condition that owners cannot afford to rebuild, Category B for houses that require major repair and category C for houses that require minor repairs. The stakeholders, it seems, have failed to reach a consensus on ways to balance heritage conservation and modern developments.

Dr. Zahida Bano acknowledged that Category A houses are being reconstructed, with the consent of owners, in the 22m x 25 m plan with the use of cement and brick and Ladakhi architectural elements like, *shingsag*, *taloo* and *shalkalak*. According to the Central Public Work Department's *Handbook of Conservation of Heritage Building*, "Conservation" means all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its historical and/or architectural and/or aesthetic and/or cultural significance and includes maintenance, preservation, restoration, reconstruction and adoption or a combination of more than one of these." The RAY project plans for Category A houses does not adhere to this definition of conservation.

However, community representatives Ama Chocho, Mohammad Siddique and Goba Tsewang

Dorje said the community is happy with the project as it will uplift old town. Tsewang Dorje said, "We cannot make a museum out of all the residential houses. Families that live here want traditional-cum-modern houses in keeping with their present needs. Everyone says that Kharyok should be developed as a tourist spot but fail to understand the difficult living conditions in the winter. The RAY project takes these issues into account and provides civic amenities. That is why residents are very enthusiastic about the project."

Mr Mohammad Siddique emphasised the importance of conserving old architectural buildings for future generations. He added that with this in mind, a decision was taken at one of the project meetings that only repairs but no reconstruction will be done for houses in the 200m zone of Leh palace, while those severely damaged outside this zone would be rebuilt.

However, the RAY project has started constructing a concrete house within the regulatory zone with token elements of Ladakhi architecture. Interestingly, several other houses in the neighbourhood have also been built with cement by their owners, with no action by ASI or offers for support from NGOs or anyone else. If no one challenged these private houses, it's important to ask why the RAY project's plans are being targeted.

LOTI welcomed the project's plan to provide civic amenities but questioned its approach for heritage conservation, which seemed limited to token elements of Ladakhi architecture rather than protecting its material and structural integrity. Programme director and architect at THF and LOTI, Yutaka Hirako said, "In the process of restoration, we are like doctors. The same medicine will not work for all patients as they have different needs. Similarly, we need to check the condition of each house before proceeding with restoration or repair. Heritage conservation starts with respecting what exists and making efforts to protect it."

Similarly projects director at LAMO, Tashi Morup said, "It will be a great loss if owners continue to demolish their ancestral homes to build concrete houses. Besides its cultural importance, a heritage house also has commercial value that can be tapped. We owe it our future generations to protect our architectural traditions and culture."

Mr Spalbar acknowledged the importance of these issues but said the concerns are unfounded. He said, "LOTI and LAMO have been doing commendable work on heritage preservation and meeting some of the aspirations of residents in old town. In fact, we relaxed the strict guidelines of RAY to involve LOTI as an advisor. They [NGOs] are worried that this project will compromise the heritage value of the area. I can assure everyone that this is simply not true. The project is focussed on providing civic amenities, but it's important that issues like this are discussed and clarified. If there are concerns about the government's plans, people must take the initiative to write and meet the concerned person to clarify issues." He added that residents of old town have been taken into confidence for the RAY project, which is meant to meet their needs.

The issue of contention seems to be the project's approach to heritage conservation of old houses. NGOs argue that modernity and heritage can coexist with a little more thought and effort. The onus remains with the owners of these houses to decide the fate of their heritage, while also meeting their present needs. However, it is important that owners have access to information, resources and support on ways to optimise the value of their ancestral homes while also integrating modern amenities. Similarly, when restoration is not possible, it's important to retain the old characteristics of the house to ensure that the heritage value of the area is conserved while also providing residents with necessary amenities.

Some of the disagreements also seem to come from communication gaps between different groups. According to Goba Tsewang Dorje, LOTI did not attend many meetings related to the project and that it would sometimes organise meetings without involving community representatives. On its part, LOTI denied organising meetings without representatives. They did, however, admit to not attending a RAY project meeting as their suggestions have constantly been ignored.

Thus, everyone seems to agree on the need to improve civic amenities in old town but disagree on how to simultaneously preserve its value as a living heritage town. ASI remains a central agency in this task but unfortunately refused to comment. However, speaking on the condition of anonymity, sources said that ASI is responsible for preventing unauthorised construction and certifying changes in these areas. They added that ASI's concerns about the current changes in old town, including the RAY project, have been voiced in a letter to the deputy commissioner, Leh. They added that the RAY project has yet to receive the necessary permits from the competent authorities in Srinagar. Dr Zahida Bano confirmed that the permit was awaited and the project was working outside the regulatory zone—though one of the houses being reconstructed is 151m from the palace and within the regulatory zone.

The earlier neglect of old town now seems to be replaced with increased interest but little coordination between different stakeholders. This lack of coordination and communication may not only erode the heritage value of the area but also leave deep fissures and bitterness in its wake. The residents must be a central part of any process in which government agencies and NGOs need to work together to resolve concerns and aspirations. Then, the RAY project may actually transform into a golden opportunity rather than an arena for disagreements. ■