

# Attitude Sickness

*The perils of development have finally reached Leh, says*  
MUNEEZA NAQVI. *Photographs by* JITENDER GUPTA

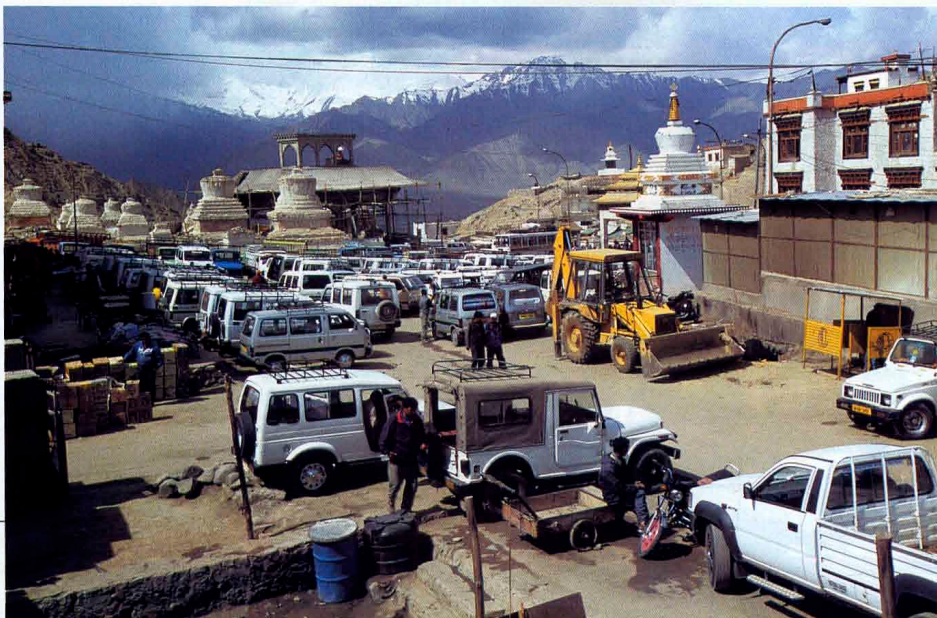
**M**y walking companion tells me that there was a time when polo ponies cantered through Leh's Main Bazaar. He remembers walking past the old city gates built to protect this once-

proud capital of an independent kingdom. "When Pandit Nehru visited in the 1950s he watched a polo match right here." Today you'll find mostly STD booths, souvenir shops and the occasional speeding army jeep. And the Leh Abdul Ghani Sheikh describes sounds like a story from a hundred years ago. It's not that difficult to weave your own exotic fairytale around Leh. It begins with the thrill of the spectacular views of the Greater Himalayan and Zaskar ranges from the airplane—all bleak and spartan and yet breathtaking. And if you're visiting in the middle of the short tourist season, chances are you've left the blistering mid-40s heat of the plains behind. Plus the thin, rarefied air. You could be forgiven flights of fancy.

Crowded taxi stand in Leh; and garbage dump in Old Leh (right)

But Ghani Sheikh has spent practically his entire life in this town and I know better than to think that the vivid pictures he paints of the town he grew up in are part of an old man's yearning for the past. Tourist brochures describe all of Ladakh with the usual worn-out clichés. 'Roof of the World', 'Kingdom of Light', 'Little Tibet' and so on. But the fact is that people who care are already throwing about worrisome words like 'dreadlocks', 'Manali', and 'backpacker haven'. And like any other culture suddenly coming face to face with the shocking amount of easy lucre that tourism can bring in, Leh is a town that is struggling to cope.

This is a town that only barely came into any real contact with the outside world in the 1960s when the Indian government flooded the area with troops who, because of the continuing Chinese and Pakistani border conflicts, have never left.



In the mid-1960s, Ladakh's isolation was broken once and for all with the construction of a trans-Himalayan road linking it to the subcontinent. Then things really began to change. The Indian government worked at seriously drawing Ladakh into the framework of the national economy. In 1974, the region was opened up to foreign tourism. From a grand total of 527 tourists (27 Indians and 500 foreigners) in 1974, there's been a gigantic leap to over 35,000 travellers in 2004.

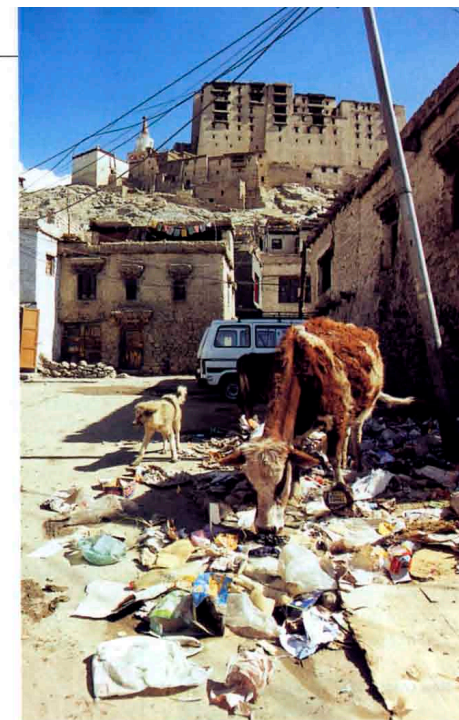
The army, the tourists and the Indian government have combined to subject Leh (and the rest of Ladakh) to the biggest change that it has ever seen. Local people who were initially hired for road construction later switched over to working in and running an endless number of hotels and guesthouses. Agriculture slipped to the background, and as a cash-based economy developed, consumption patterns began to change as well.

Development is always a complicated concept to put into practice and nowhere is this more apparent than here. Like in so many beautiful places in the world, tourism is Leh's biggest problem and also the source of its newfound prosperity.

Wander down the Main Bazaar or Fort Road past 'German' bakeries, Kashmiri carpet shops, more trekking agencies than there are people. Development here has meant that as of last year there were nearly 300 officially registered hotels or guesthouses—the bulk are concrete nightmares oddly at variance with the old-style mud and brick structures around them. A total of 4,500 beds in a town with a population that hovers around 30,000. And while the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council is beginning to make the necessary polite noises about preserving some semblance of local architecture, the council's new office (currently under construction) is more suited to a galaxy far, far away than it is to Leh.

As Leh grows in all sorts of unplanned ways, a shift is also taking place in the once-agrarian villages of the rest of Ladakh. Subsidised supplies of wheat and rice have led to a shift in agricultural patterns and more and more poor villagers drift into Leh drawn to the promise of tourist dollars. Mercifully the weather isn't conducive to slums but a whole rash of ugly government housing is creeping up on the borders of the town to house this growing population. Urban planning is an alien concept (though a town planner from Jammu was expected to visit in June) and Leh has no infrastructure in place to support this influx. The result is evident—the rubbish piles that are everywhere on the streets drift into the little streams that people once used to drink from. It doesn't help that there is only just the barest minimum of staff available—25 people at the last count—to help keep the city clean.

Water supplies are the next obvious cause for concern. It's possibly the only town in the country where there is no organised system of water distribution to private homes. Public taps and streams are the source of water for most people. Traditionally Ladakhis used compost or dry toilets and respected the limited water available. Tourists don't quite



**Tourism is Leh's biggest problem—the number of tourists has gone up from a grand total of 527 in 1974 to over 35,000 in 2004**

share that feeling and hotels and almost all new buildings in Leh now build western-style flush toilets. Because there is no sewage system in place there's a genuine fear of the leakage from cesspits contaminating the ground water.

The most worrying part of unplanned development in Leh is the utter neglect of its old town. The area just below the looming Leh Palace consists of a group of historic and traditional houses and the area makes up Leh's old town. The city walls that Ghani Sheikh had described for me once protected the oldest area, and stupas marked the important entry points. As the city gained wealth from its strategic position at the crossroads of trade routes between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, the rich local families built grand homes and some of these structures still stand today. Ghani Sheikh points out Munshi House to me as we walk through the winding lane that leads off the bazaar, past the old bakeries and up to the Leh Palace. Comparisons are made with the architect-

tural style of Lhasa and Leh is often described as the world's best-preserved historic Tibetan city.

But the walk up is a sad event. The lack of water, poor sanitation and overcrowding means that through the summer months much of the old town resembles an open sewer. Most old homes have been abandoned either because of the filth or the fact that it's easier to make money by moving into newer parts of the city. Through these dilapidated old homes you can make your way to what was once the old mosque. This Tibetan-style structure is now an abandoned ruin, but if you look inside you'll find the remains of the pulpit. The windows are traditional low wooden ones and the mosque was painted in the Buddhist style without the use of any animal or human motif. The newer Indo-Islamic style mosque with its out-of-place towers and minarets seems to have upstaged the traditional little mosque completely.

But as tradition and what passes off as modernity clash, there is hope yet for Leh. And despite the current state of disrepair in the old town, it is here that one feels that there is much to be hopeful for. Having collected several beer cans and plastic bags on my way, when I finally huff and puff all the way up to the monastery near the Leh Palace, I find a small group of dedicated workers lovingly restoring a mural with Zen-like patience. ●

New construction underway at the Main Market

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## CAMPAIGN

Luckily for Leh, it's not too late and there are several dedicated local and foreign conservationists working to protect its unique culture and architecture.

Of the several NGOs at work here, the **Tibet Heritage Fund** (THF) is notable for the many initiatives it's taken to preserve the Old Town. Since 2003, when they first set up office here, THF co-director Andre Alexander has conducted a feasibility study and identified and documented 100 historic buildings, and compiled a social profile of the occupants. They have completed a pilot restoration of the 17th-century Guru Lhakhang. Among the other projects they are working on currently are the restoration of the Chamba Lhakhang (c. 1440), as well as creating a model conservation street in the Stagopilog neighbourhood. Here they are planning on restoring four historic residential buildings, and providing drainage, improving sanitation and paving the street with natural stones (rather than concrete slates used until now). The more crucial long-term project involves training young Ladakhis in wall painting, conservation, surveying and traditional crafts. There are

more details of their work (and an interactive map of the old town) on their website, [www.tibetheritagefund.org](http://www.tibetheritagefund.org)

The **Namgyal Institute for Research on Ladakhi Art and Culture** (NIRLAC) was set up by Ladakh's former ruling family, to work towards the conservation of Ladakh's cultural heritage. Their conservation programme, which started in 2000, has been working with monastic and village communities to develop a sustainable method of conservation for the region.

Other NGOs active in the region include the **Ladakh Ecological Development Group** which works to promote ecological and sustainable development programmes which blend with the traditional culture. These include information, education, handicraft, agriculture and cultural preservation activities.

**Student Educational Cultural Movement of Ladakh** (SEC-MOL) was founded by some returning Ladakhi university students and their programmes include interaction with young people and local students. They publish a monthly news magazine called the *Ladags Melong*.