

Celebrating Nas report

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The *Nas* festival banner outside the venue. Photo credit: Alex Jensen.

Summary

Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation, Snow leopard Conservancy India Trust, Local Futures and Kalpavriksh organised a two-day festival on Nas (Barley) at the Himalayan Institute of Archaeology and Allied Science Centre, Ranbirpur, on September 17 and 18. The festival theme was *Nas*, or barley, as it is the central food grain of Ladakh. Moreover, *Ngamphay*, roasted barley flour, occupies a core place in Ladakhi dietary, cultural and ritual activities.

The two-day event comprised diverse activities, including open food stalls, music performances, rituals, film and a photo exhibition. Further, many panel discussions on

various food and agriculture themes were held. People came in large numbers to listen to eco-socialist and seed conservation Debal Deb, philosopher Anup Dhar, environmentalist Ashish Kothari, farmer Urgain Gya, artist Morup Namgyal, and young women entrepreneurs like Sonam Angmo, Rigzen Yangdol, Tsetan Dolma and other key players in the agricultural world from Ladakh and other parts of India. Debates on the changes in agriculture followed the panel discussions.

The *Nas* festival also had workshop sessions on Ladakhi baskets and pottery making. Baskets called *tsepo* are made of twigs and bushes. The basket was used extensively in agricultural activities to ferry harvested crops. Moreover, the craft of making pots (called *pungpa*) is connected with the farming world because Ladakhis used pots to store the barley grain, barley brew and more. The guests and speakers got hands-on learning experience of *tsepo* and *pungpa*. The artists presented their experiences and showcased their know-how. They talked about the current state of their profession and explored ways to preserve their craft.



Children participating in craft making workshop. Photo credit: Ashish Kothari.

The reasons for the need to celebrate and revalorise the main food grain are located in the context of considerable change in agricultural practices and dietary habits due to the

availability of rice from ration depots (PDS) and packaged food in the market. Some changes in farming practices are co-related to lack of nutrition in food, although the PDS and the market may have fulfilled caloric requirements. In addition, due to long-distance food transportation from outside, black carbon emissions contribute to the fast melting of glaciers.

As a follow-up to a Vikalp Sangam on Food and Agriculture organised in September 2021, the *Nas* jamboree aimed to sustain *Nas* and create awareness about the crop. The sustenance of *Nas* is essential to recuperate the loss of a self-reliant food production system across Ladakh.

Vikalp Sangam is a national process to bring together alternative initiatives for sustainability, justice, and equality in various fields and sectors. It has held three confluences in Ladakh, bringing together community representatives, NGOs, Council members and government officials for discussions and action on sustainable alternatives for Ladakh.

This revalorisation of *Nas* is a small baby step for our homeland, Ladakh's social and ecological well-being.

The details of the program

The program began at 8:30 am on the 17th of September. Tsering Sonam, a folk singer and traditional knowledge holder, inaugurated the ceremony by performing the traditional *chod* ritual. Sonam invoked the importance of barley and agriculture to the mountains, water, glaciers, land, and the spirits of the land in the ritual.



Tsering Sonam performing the *chod* ritual. Tashi Morup, on the left, officiating the ceremony. Photo credit: Alex Jensen.

The special guests for the event had already arrived before the *chod* ritual. The list of special guests included councillor Thiksay Stanzin Chosphele, traditional head (*goba*) of Ranbirpur village Tsewang Norbu, Sarpanch Zakir Hussain, Vice Sarpanch Tsepel Choswang, women wing President of Ladakh Buddhist Association Yangchan Dolma, Ladakh Buddhist Association vice President Tsering Dolkar, Immania women wing President Nasreen Maryam, Immania women wing vice President Marzaya Bano, Moin-ul-Islam Kosar Lasu and others.

By the time Tsering Sonam finished the ritual, the woman association (*Ama tsogpa*) of Chuchot village had set up their food stall and had quickly prepared breakfast. *Ama tsogpa* provided the guests, co-organisers, and volunteers with the traditional breakfast of *nungme tsodma* (radish) and *kolak*. One crucial fact about *kolak*, made of roasted barley flour, is that each individual has to prepare their *kolak*. The recipe is as simple as it gets. It is prepared in a traditional bowl called *gormo*, where the barley flour is mixed with butter tea to prepare semi-solid clumps. This semi-solid roasted barley is called *kolak*. Radish is one of the most common vegetables that tastes fantastic with *kolak*. While it is a typical breakfast for most Ladakhis, the guests and volunteers who are not from Ladakh were struggling very hard to make *kolak*. As such, co-organisers and volunteers demonstrated how *kolak* is prepared. The serving of the traditional breakfast of Ladakh made a very symbolic gesture. It was symbolic because, generally, at public events in Ladakh, local food is not served. It is more common to find basmati rice, rotis, rajma, shahi paneer etc., than a basic Ladakhi food like *kolak*. So although the non-Ladakhis were struggling to make *kolak*, it powerfully conveyed that Ladakhi food could also be served at public gatherings.



Guests making *kolak*. Photo credit: Ashish Kothari.

With the stomach filled with nutritious and heavy *kolak* and radish, the event moved inside the Himalayan Institute of Archaeology and Allied Sciences (HIAAS) conference hall. The four co-organising NGOs, Ladakh Art and Media Organization (LAMO), Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT), Kalpavriksh and Local Futures, begin the two-day Jamboree by introducing their organisations and the event. Broadly, three points came out of the introductions:

1. The revalorisation of Barley or Ladakhi food has become essential to reconnect the *Ladakhpas* to their land.
2. Conservation of the central food grain barley has become essential to conserve traditional agroecological knowledge and practices.
3. That consumption of food grown in the region has become essential to spur the localisation of the economy. By localisation, the idea is to fulfil the need for food as much as possible from nearby spaces rather than from distant land.
4. The rejuvenation of local agricultural practices is also related to waste reduction and health improvement, as it has repeatedly been shown that local food is more nutritious than packaged food available in the market.

To give a direction to the upcoming two-day intense discussion and fun about barley in Ladakh, philosopher Anup Dhar took us through the philosophical angle on progress, agriculture and indigenous worldviews. Dhar showed that in conventional thinking, academics had defined rural and agricultural communities and practices as undeveloped, superstitious and premodern. Such definition of communities practising agriculture, Dhar asserted, led to looking down on agricultural-based communities. As such, the biased description of agriculture communities and rural people creates space to argue that such communities must be moved by development discourse out of their traditional livelihood.



Dr Anup Dhar during his talk. On the left is Padma Rigzin, who translated Dr Dhar's talk. Photo Credit: Alex Jensen

With the cautionary philosophical note that reminded the people gathered at the festival not to look at agriculture as a premodern and pre-urban practice, the next session discussed the importance of barley and agriculture in Ladakh. Dr Namgail moderated the session, and the speakers were Tashi Namgyal, Urgain Phuntsog and Dr Sonam Spalzin. Tashi Namgyal is a seed conservationist and local fruit, nut and foodgrain seller. Urgain Phuntsog is an agropastoralist from Gya village. Dr Spalzin is an archaeologist. The discussion was vibrant and illuminating. Tashi Namgyal highlighted that in the present time that *Nas* has become unimportant. He also stressed the various ways *Nas* consumption (in roasted form, sprout form) are increasingly becoming not known to younger generation of Ladakhis. He also reminded the audience that some varieties, such as *nasnak*, are on the verge of extinction. In addition, ways to consume barley differently – like *staabs* and *bangpe* – are becoming less and less known to the younger generation. Urgain stressed that in the large region of Ladakh, where the eastern side is predominantly pastoralist and where the western side is settled agriculturalist, *Nas* grown and consumed in the entire area is the connecting thread that

transcends both the religious divide in Ladakh and geographical distance. Dr Spalzin showed that barley was one of the first crops to be grown by humans on the planet. She described where archaeological evidence was found in the Indian subcontinent in the Neolithic phase.



From the left, Dr Sonam Spalzin, Urgain Phuntsog, Tashi Namgyal and Dr Tsewand Namgail, the moderator.
Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari.

In the next session, we move towards the present time from the Neolithic time to pick the brain of famous eco-socialist and rice seed conservationist Dr Debal Deb. Dr Deb spoke about his experience in seed preservation and the need for a critical rethinking of the dominant development paradigm that works against small farmer agroecology in India. He shared his experience and knowledge to help the conservation of varieties of crops in Ladakh like barley, buckwheat and millets. Dr Deb stressed that three pillars are essential to protect the small farmer's agroecology. Pillar number one is that there should be zero external input like hybrid seeds, fertilisers, chemicals, etc. The second pillar is that there should be biodiversity, by which he meant that there should be genetic and seed diversity. The last pillar is the psychological one, where there should be a sense of self-sufficiency.



Dr Debal Deb during his talk. Phot credit: Ashish Kothari

Although Dr Deb urged the listeners to have a sense of sufficiency, the time clicked 1:00 pm. Moreover, the Chuchot women's association, Anjuman-e-Immania women's wing, and Anjuman-moin-ul-Islam women's wing had set up their stalls and prepared lunch. In addition, two restaurants, De Khambir and Solja had already been there. They had already been preparing food for lunch just outside the conference room. The smell of delicious Ladakhi cuisine being prepared was coming roaringly into the conference hall.



Chuchot village women association preparing lunch. Photo credit: Ashish Kothari

Solja Cafe, a Ladakhi cuisine restaurant, had opened one of the stalls. Spalzes Angmo, the proprietor of Solja, had prepared *Chantuk*, a barley-based dish. *Chantuk* is prepared with grounded barley grain (or sometimes whole grain) boiled in vegetable soup. De Khambir, another Ladakhi food restaurant, offered Khambir sandwiches. Khambir is the traditional bread of Ladakhi made out of fermented dough. The Chuchot group had cooked vegetable momos. Anjuman-e-Immania women's wing had made *chutagi*, wheat flour pasta cooked in mutton soup. They also served *thapu*, a dish whose soup base is apricot or walnut. Anjuman-moin-ul-Islam prepared mutton momos and palau.

The variety of local food available at the festival amazed the guests and co-organisers alike. People were trying different things. People were sitting in groups discussing the food. The food servers constantly described the food preparation process and where the local ingredients were sourced. People were sitting in groups, sharing their meals and discussing food. There were people taking photos of food and uploading them on social media.

It would have been a challenging task to sit through an intense discussion on the importance of agriculture after having heavy sumptuous local meals. So we move towards more light and entertaining aspects of food and Agriculture. As such, we came to focus on singing and storytelling. First, we had Sonam Angdus and Tsering Sonam's session on folk singing. The two singers sang many Ladakhi *junghu* (folk songs) that revolved around agriculture. Jigmet Singge moderated a small discussion. Both the folksingers highlighted the connection between food, agriculture and song. One of the folk songs sung on the occasion that must be mentioned here is titled "*sTemdel napa*." This song highlights the interconnection of numerous factors that determines the present state. By interconnection of numerous factors, I mean, drawing on the theme of the song, the coming together of the sky, the clouds, the sun, the moon, stars, glaciers, lakes, pastures, wildlife, other life forms, domestic animals, the palace, the houses and so on and on. According to the song, these factors and elements make the present time fortunate and auspicious.



From the right: Tsering Sonam, Sonam Angdus, Jigmet Singge, the moderator, and Dr Anup Dhar during the folk song session. Photo credit: Ashish Kothari

The auspicious songs were followed by auspicious stories (as if we could separate the two). To narrate the stories, Padmashri Morup Namgyal graced the occasion. Namgyal told the story of the first part of the Kaser saga. It broadly deals with the initial part of the birth of Kesar, the mythical hero. Although Kesar's tale deals with the heroism of the lead character, it was relevant for the food festival because the initial part of the story captures the agricultural

practices. The story begins with two elderly couples going to till their land and getting a bumper harvest of barley. Later in the question and answer session, the audience asked Namgyal why the story is essential for Ladakhi culture and agriculture. He said that stories mentioned names of wild grasses, flowers, agricultural practices, types of crops grown, food consumed, wild animals, and domestic animals. This is why stories like this should be cared for by Ladakhis.

Day 2

The second day of the event began at 9:30 am. The opening was marked by the practical question of *how* to revive barley and other vital crops like millets and buckwheat. Dr Tsewang Namgail moderated this session. Before the session was opened for discussion, Dr Namgail gave a small presentation on various crops of Ladakh like barley, types of millets (Foxtail [*cha*] and Proscio [*tse tse*]) and buckwheat (*bronak* and *brokar*). This presentation was given to foreground the kind of crops grown in Ladakh. Millets and buckwheat are mainly cultivated in low-altitude sub-regions (lower Indus basin) of Ladakh, like Sham and Kargil. As such, even Ladakhis from the upper Indus basin are sometimes unaware that crops like millets and buckwheat are grown in the region. Hence the presentation on Ladakh's various crops was addressed to the non-Ladakhis and the natives. After the short presentation, the panellists, Dr Debal Deb, Skarma Gurmet and Sonam Angmo, a young farmer, took the stage for an engaging discussion.



From the left: Dr Tsewang Namgail, Dr Debal Deb, Sonam Angmo and Skarma Gurmet. Photo credit: Ashish Kothari.

One of the common denominators that evolved from the discussion is that Ladakhi food should be made famous and fashionable. Sonam Angmo stressed this point. The rationale behind this call is to make Ladakhi food popular to remove its stigma of “backwardness”. The stigma, in some quarters, has led to looking down on local food. Secondly, the panellists concurred that NGOs should promote less known crops like buckwheat and millets within Ladakh as they are highly nutritious. Skarma Gurmet, who also lives in Japan, highlighted how the Japanese, who are regular consumers of buckwheat, show that buckwheat grown in Ladakh is more tasty and nutritious than that produced in Japan. Skarma mentioned that Japanese had funded projects reviving agricultural practices around buckwheat in Ladakh. The projects demonstrated that buckwheat could be successfully cultivated in high-altitude villages like Sabu and Sakti. The context is that traditionally the crop is grown in low-altitude areas like Sham and Turtuk. Dr Deb highlighted that to sustain the cultivation of any crop, one of the main tasks is to identify the different species and varieties within each species.

From the search to revive the cultivation of traditional crops, we move towards a talk by Dr Nordon Otzer on Health, Nutrition and Food. Dr Otzer is an ENT surgeon, a social worker and a prominent Ladakhi. He concentrated on the current situation where diseases like diabetes, hypertension and cancer could be co-related to rapid changes in food habits in Ladakh. In particular, he emphasised that extensive use of plastic packaged food imported from outside and carbonated drinks spurt the above lifestyle diseases. He warned that cures for lifestyle diseases are not in the hospital but agricultural fields and our kitchens. The audience also asked several questions to Dr Otzer regarding the negative effect of carbonated drinks and the role of barley brew, called *chang*, in maintaining the microbes in the body.



Dr Nordon Otzer during his talk. Photo credit: Alex Jensen.

The scary scene of the negative side effect of packaged food and the rapid change in food habits in Ladakh was followed by a talk by Ashish Kothari on the control of food by the community. By control, I mean the possibility to grow and consume what is naturally good for us. This control could also be defined as food sovereignty. To explain the idea of food

sovereignty, Kothari differentiated it from food security. Food security is about ensuring access to food, irrespective of who (or which MNC), how and where it was produced. In contrast, food sovereignty is where local communities possess complete control over all aspects related to food--- the seeds, the land, the water, the knowledge and so on. Only with control over all elements can the farmers be genuinely independent, Kothari added. This also suggests, Kothari said, that localisation of agricultural systems and exchange become *sin qua non*. Among the many examples that Kothari showed to the audience is that of the Deccan Development Society. This society formed by 5000 Dalit woman farmers in Telangana brought about a small revolution by going into agroecological practices, which brought back 70-80 varieties of their rice and millets. Due to this, the Dalit women have become self-sufficient with food. Thus, as Kothari emphasised, not only do they have food for their families, but they also possess control of the fundamental aspects of agriculture beyond the dependence on government and corporations.

Then a documentary made by Angchuk of LAMO was screened. The documentary showed the entire process of traditionally cultivating and processing barley. It captures the process from preparing manure to the threshing of the harvested crop of barley. The documentary also emphasises the use of drought animals like *Dzo* and age-old community practices of sharing labour among neighbours and villagers. It also showed singing practices revolving around agriculture. The screening gave rise to several questions and an intense discussion. Angchuk, who was also present at the event, responded to the question and was applauded for his outstanding work documenting the traditional – but rapidly fading – farming process in Ladakh.

After the documentary on farming, we first broke up for lunch, which was a repeat of the day. Similar to day one, there were several mouth-watering Ladakhi dishes on offer.



People getting lunch. Photo credit: Ashish Kothari

With their stomach full, the guests and the listeners were waiting for another treat. This treat was an inspirational discussion with food and agriculture entrepreneurs from Ladakh. The panel consisted of Dolma, Sonam Angmo, Rigzen Yangdol, Tsetan Dorje and Thinless Nurbo. Shrishtee Bajpai of Kalpavriksh, one of the co-organising NGOs, moderated the session. The main points that emerged from the discussion were as follow. One is the need to fulfil Ladakh's demand first rather than exporting agricultural and food products outside. Two, Ladakhis should respect small entrepreneurs' work in Ladakhi society. The focus and idealisation of only government jobs need to be rethought. Three, that family support to help in entrepreneurial adventures should also be stressed, especially for women entrepreneurs. Fourthly, training in how to start and operationalise the business idea should also be not ignored.



The session with young entrepreneurs. Photo credit: Ashish Kothari.

A talk by agricultural artisans followed the food entrepreneurs' experience and journey. Tsering Norbu, the basketmaker and Rigzin Namgyal, the potter, shared their experiences and knowledge. They also explained the process of making their art to the community. Norbu informed the audience that the younger generation lacks interest in learning the art of basket-making in Ladakh. He also highlighted that he does not get a space in the main market to sell his crafts. On the other hand, Namgyal stressed that he has been working with nongovernmental organisations to revive the art. In other words, collaboration with a nongovernmental organisation is essential in restoring the craft.



Tsering Norbu, the basketmaker and Rigzin Namgyal, the potter sharing their experience. Photo credit: Alex Jensen.

On another tangent, during the two-day festival, Tsering Norbu and Rigzin Namgyal, the artisans, set up a space near the food stalls to show the craft's process. Also, people actively took a hand on experience of making baskets and pots from them. In particular, this was a big hit among the children who came to the *Nas* festival. Beyond the live display of traditional knowledge practices, there was a puppet show performed by Tushar and his fantastic team of volunteers, Shruthi and Anjali. The show was about the importance of traditional Ladakhi food and the dangers of junk food. The puppet show – like the craft-making stalls – was a hit among the children .



Guests immersed in the workshop on pottery/clay arts. Photo credit: Alex Jensen

Later, the organisers conducted an auction of the two baskets and various pottery artefacts that Norbu and Namgyal prepared. There was intense bidding by those present there as if superstar cricketer like Virat Kohli was up for auction in the Indian Premier League. The co-organisers garnered around ₹2800 for the auction money from the auction.

After the talk with the artisans, the event had come to an end. Singge gave a vote of thanks to everyone involved in making the event a success, including various women's wings of the religious organisations, the host, the villagers and the village leaders. They were offered the traditional *khatak* (scarf) and thanked profusely.