

Three Idiots: People, Perspectives, Place

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Summary

Using GIS, this research in Leh, India, focuses on contested perceptions of the local area – particularly the differences in how locals and tourists view the landscape. Within the framework of tourism and globalisation, similarities and differences in perceptions of the local area can be seen, therein allowing for a more detailed understanding of the town of Leh – one involving vague concepts such as that of home and place attachment, and moves beyond demarcated geographical boundaries.

KEYWORDS: Place, Perceptions, Vagueness, Development, GIS

1. Introduction

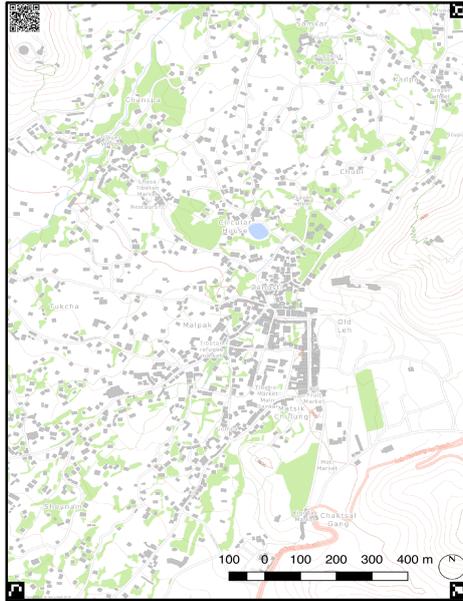
After the release of the internationally and locally acclaimed Bollywood movie, *Three Idiots*, which was partly filmed in the Ladakh region located in the Northern part of India, there has been a marked increase of tourism in Leh (Demenge et al., 2013). Attitudes to the surge in tourism were divided: some maintain that the place still possess the exoticism that underpins its tourism; others lament that the imminence of globalisation and tourists have eroded its charm; yet others celebrate the fact that the thriving tourist industry has resulted in positive economic benefits. Essentially, Ladakh has become a contested space (Appadurai, 1996), in which different *people* have different *perceptions* towards the *place*. Applying this to the town of Leh, the capital of Ladakh, this project will unpack how two different groups of people – tourists and locals – perceive and attach value to the local area. In particular, it seeks to find out where people like going to in Leh, and why they go to those places. It will also address how perceptions of Leh have changed over the years, and therein tease out notions of home and place attachment.

2. Methodology

This research was map-based – using Paper2GIS – and supplemented with semi-structured interviews with tourists and locals. We asked our participants questions pertaining to their everyday use of places (eg. Where in Leh do you frequent? Where in Leh do you enjoy/ like going to?) and asked them to mark those places on a hard-copy map (**Figure 1**), which we provided them with in order to overcome issues in data collection arising from computer illiteracy or poor network connections (Huck et al., 2014).

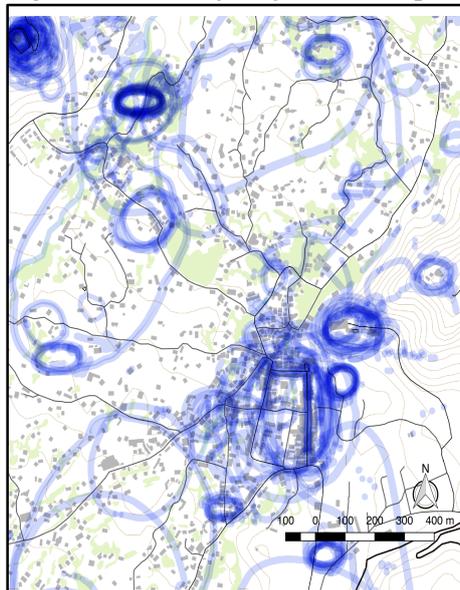
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Figure 1: Empty map provided to participants



The participants' drawings and annotations on the maps were then automatically digitised to GIS layers by the Paper2GIS software and loaded into QGIS for examination. An area map indicating the popular places by the darkness and intensity of the area shaded is then shown (**Figure 2**). Visual data collected from maps and the data gathered from interviews were compared to get a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of place perceptions in Leh.

Figure 2: Drawings digitised in Paper2GIS



3. Results

There are 4 main places that our participants like going to: Shanti Stupa, Changspa, the Main Market, and Leh Palace. Interestingly, these places were mentioned unanimously, tourist and locals alike. Whereas our visual data reveal *where* our participants like to visit in Leh, our interviews reveal *why* as well as *how they perceive Leh*.

Tourists' perception of Leh is one that is 'alive'. Tourism in Leh has increased, especially in the

motorcycle industry, as non-locals seek to travel into and across Ladakh, stopping by Pangong Lake, like in the *Three Idiots* movie (#197, male). Tourists also perceive Leh as an exciting place of cultural novelty: Leh market is “different from European markets; it is colourful and has lots of [different] people” (#64, female). Contrarily, locals view Leh as a “dead place” where they engage in mundane work (#6, male) with little rest time (#2, male). Further, some locals were compelled to visit only out of necessity (to buy groceries or run errands), and will usually want to return home as soon as possible (#62, female).

4. Discussion: where is home, truly?

Perceptions of Leh have spatial variations as well as temporal variations, evolving over time in concomitance with development and rising tourism in Leh. By comparing the different spatial-temporal perceptions between locals and tourists, we can elicit critical discussions on place attachment and notions of home.

Inequalities personal mobilities and wealth between tourists and locals are revealed. Following the rising income levels of tourists and the development of the Ladakh region (Demenge et al., 2013), tourists are increasingly seeing Leh merely as a gateway into Ladakh for holiday trips (#14, male) – trips of luxury that locals cannot afford, and those who can choose not to go in order to avoid the towering presence of tourists (#63, male). Moreover, as tourists spend money in Leh, it displays the wealth inequality between them and the locals who, for instance, do not eat out [in restaurants] with the “posh” tourists because [they] feel excluded (#6, male).

Feelings of estrangement and exclusion at ‘home’ thus begs the question of what it truly means to be at home. Indeed, it is not a place within a demarcated geographical boundary (Montello et al., 2003), but is a place where one feels the warmth of relationships, ease and freedom of movement, and autonomy over personal space (Seamon 1979; Windsong, 2010). From another perspective, it is where one is physically and socio-emotionally attached to the community (Anderson, 2006), and the people (Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001).

Thus, unfamiliar forces of tourism and urban development have eroded the familiarity of the locals in Leh, resulting in physical and emotional detachment in a place they call ‘home’. Leh is now littered with the homeless who are unable to afford the rising cost of living brought about by developments in the area (#199, male), and has become too busy and crowded for one to feel safe (#85, female). Moreover, poor management of this change has caused Leh to experience problems of sanitation, pollution, and traffic congestion (#3, male).

5. Conclusion

Beyond contrasting views of the landscape, the preservation of the rich history and heritage of Leh is also constantly being challenged by pressures to upgrade and undergo gentrification in the name of development (Pirie and van Beek, 2008). Findings from our research has shown the popular places in Leh as well as how the area is being perceived. With this data, the local government can – and should – seek to better balance cultural preservation, tourism, and development in its agenda. This research has provided a snapshot of Leh at present, but Leh is constantly being produced and reproduced by its locals and tourists. Indeed, how it situates itself in the future to negotiate the dynamic forces of tourism and development while preserving its cultural richness and place attachment of the locals remains to be seen. The brevity of this research reveals but a glimpse of the academic potential of Paper2GIS, which is still in its infancy, and is still undergoing developments. To cement the usefulness of this software in geographical research, similar projects can be undertaken in the future, in other areas that differ in size, culture, and demography to Leh.

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7. Biography

Ervine is currently a final year BA (Hons) Geography student at the University of Manchester, UK. Though keen in anything geography-related, he is inclined towards political geography, economic geography, urban geography, and socio-cultural geography.

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