

CHILLING REALITY

All developing countries face the challenge of balancing tradition and commerce.

Tim Malyon describes the brassworkers of Chilling village in Ladakh, Tibet and talks to Sir Robert ffolkes, Field Director of Save The Children Fund in Ladakh from 1978-1984, about the role which craftwork might play in the region's future



Sandwiched between Kashmir and Tibet, Ladakh is a formerly independent Buddhist kingdom, now part of India. The landscape is harsh Himalayan desert, with most of the villages inaccessible to wheeled transport and inhabited by people of Tibetan ancestry. The Save The Children Fund has been working in Ladakh since 1978. Alongside medical, nutritional and agricultural programmes, promotion of local craftwork is becoming an increasingly important part of its work. The intent is to assist villagers in generating extra income within their own isolated agricultural communities, and thus stave off urban population drift.

Metalworkers were imported into Ladakh during the seventeenth century from Nepal to assist in an extensive monastic building programme. Some settled and were given land in Chilling (Tibetan: "valley of the outsiders"). Since then it has been the foremost Ladakhi village where brass, copper, silver and gold are worked. The site was certainly not chosen for its accessibility, but rather for its relatively abundant wood supply to fire the forges in a land where trees are scarce. In winter, the only way to the village while the mountain passes are closed is up the frozen Zaskar River.

This was my route last year, spending one night in a snowstorm on a sandbank by the river.



All night the ice shifted and cracked, sounding much like a busy artillery range. Reaching Chilling next morning was a considerable relief, and a magical experience. From the ten forges around the village rang out the constant tap of hammers on metal, echoing off the bare mountains.

Chilling charcoal-fired forges are made from dried mud and stone, with goatskin bellows. Teapots, chang (beer) pots, ladles, spoons, cups and cup-tops are the main products, all of brass or copper, some with silver and gold ornamentation. The village also adheres to the purpose for which it was founded, the forging of ornaments for many of Ladakh's Buddhist monasteries, among them, silver chortens and decorated conch shells for calling the monks to prayer.

Brass and copper are shaped by the traditional method of repeated hammering and heating, on an iron anvil. To produce the more complicated shapes, particularly those required in teapot mak-



ing, the craftsmen (it is only men who are metalworkers, despite the relatively emancipated position of women in Ladakhi society) use a mixture of burned plastic and sugar to make a mould which hardens when cool. I was unable to discover what moulding materials preceded this ingenious recycling method. Solders are made from mixtures of silver, brass and lead shavings.

Some dies are used to produce standard patterns in silver and gold, as for instance on the front of the chang pot. The majority of delicate tracery, however, is hammered out with a variety of punches. Calipers and compasses are sometimes used, but more often the craftsman works by eye, wielding his many shapes and sizes of hammer with the swift assurance born of long practice and generations of skill. The gift is usually handed down from father to son, both working opposite one another at the forge.

Raw materials, iron for the tools, sheets of copper and brass, are purchased in the capital, Leh, and brought to Chilling on the backs of animals and people. The metal reaches Leh by lorry from the Indian plain below, on the only public road into Ladakh. This is closed by snow for six months of the year.

Traditionally, pots were made to order, and the person ordering the pot would also provide the raw materials. If many pots were required, the

Above L to R: hammering out a chang pot; chang pot; teapot by Mémé-lé, base of pot holds hot coals to keep tea warm.

Opposite page: top, Mémé-lé in his forge, the oldest and best brassmaker in Chilling.

Below: family life, women spin while father cooks using Chilling-made ladle



craftsman would actually set up his forge where they were needed, his transport, food and drink being liberally provided by the buyer. This system still functions between richer Ladakhis and the best Chilling craftspeople. Until 1949, moreover, when the last packtrains left Leh for Lhasa and China, the old silk road merchants would bring in the raw metals and take out finished pots. Even in Lhasa, Tibet, which boasted a flourishing metalwork industry, Chilling teapots were particularly prized. Today, tourists are beginning to replace the old silk road demand, and Chilling brassworkers are producing a small number of pots, without orders, for sale in the Leh bazaar. Local requirements, however, still occupy a large part of their time, including orders from the tiny kingdom of Zanskar, some fifty miles upriver from Chilling.

Chilling is a relatively prosperous village, self-sufficient in the staple crops of barley, wheat and peas. Sheep and goats provide some dairy products and wool; brasswork a trading surplus. It is this which enables the village to weather lean agricultural years. An obvious sign of Chilling's prosperity is glass in the windows of many houses, hardly a luxury when winter temperatures can drop to minus thirty degrees centigrade. Many neighbouring villages, without income from craftwork, are suffering hardship during lean years. Save The Children's task is to help these villages remain viable, self-supporting communities.

My second visit to Chilling took place last year in the company of Sir Robert ffolkes, Save The Children Fund field director in Ladakh from 1978 to July 1984. He has earned trust in Ladakh from a people who are by nature suspicious of outside aid. Insistence on hiring an entirely Ladakhi staff, appointing area managers with an intimate personal knowledge of local conditions, and only instituting projects after local consultation and consent have been largely responsible for winning him this trust.

"Ladakhi villages have to be by their nature tight cooperative communities," Sir Robert explained. "If, for instance, a water irrigation channel goes through three farms, and one of the farmers must go and earn money in Leh, rather than mend his share of the water channels, then he, his family and the whole village suffer. So what must be done in any sort of small-scale development in Ladakh is increase opportunities for earning money in the village. I feel very strongly that if you don't encourage the village to be an entity, then you will be faced with all the problems found on the south side of the Himalayas, where villages can simply no longer sustain their populations."

In villages on the southern Himalayan slopes, much of the male population has emigrated to cities like Delhi, washing floors, working in tea-shops, and sending money back to their village, "a remittance economy." "So I think there is the scope for producing many more craft items in villages, and I think it can only be for the good of the village. There is still a market for the traditional things. People would rather have a traditional teapot than a non-traditional one, if they

can afford it. And it is much better for the community spirit of the village, for the cohesiveness of village society, if people are doing things at home, than if they have to go away and do things elsewhere."

Under Sir Robert ffolkes, and now his successor, Sandy Macauley, Save The Children has been considering how to widen craftwork to areas of need. If they succeed, they may be avoiding crises of food production in the future, and helping villages remain basically independent. The problems in achieving this goal, as Sir Robert sees them, are "skills, raw materials, tools for new workers and expanded outlets."

Skills, he feels, can be easily organised. "We are talking about small communities so informal training on an apprenticeship basis can work perfectly well." To tackle the problems of raw materials and loans, the Indian Government last year made loans available to newly-trained Ladakhis in order that they could equip themselves. The system, however, was badly supervised. Some villagers with whom I spoke hardly realised for what they were being given money, sometimes up to 3,000 rupees (£200), and repayment terms were harsh. The Save The Children Fund are stepping in to ease the financial situation, and will use their extensive organisation in the area to provide proper supervision of training, loans and raw materials.

It is marketing which requires most attention. As Sir Robert ffolkes explained, "people waste an awful lot of time hanging around Leh trying to sell things. The cost in terms of time wasted and just existing in Leh is very high indeed." Having invested in the raw materials, and spent four or five days making a chang pot, perhaps two weeks making a tea-pot, villagers cannot afford the time, especially when there is agricultural work to be done, waiting in Leh for a sale.

He therefore envisages some form of brassworkers' cooperative, "which can guarantee to take the product off the maker as soon as he arrives in Leh. We wouldn't run it, and I'm not sure we could directly put up money for it, although I expect we could find the money from somewhere. We could however provide some coordination, that's the main thing."

Once established, the cooperative would have to perform a delicate balancing act. "Either the whole production might be taken up by the tourist trade," Sir Robert ffolkes surmised, "in which case local people might find themselves priced out of the market; or the prices might drop, simply because there was more on the market. It would be quite difficult to get the balance right." Given the present supply shortfall, however, where there is insufficient production even to meet local demand, as well as future control of the industry by Ladakhis themselves, Sir Robert feels optimistic for the future.

He also informed me that All India Handicrafts has expressed an interest in marketing Ladakhi goods outside the region and abroad. With a producers' cooperative securely established, this would open up exciting new trade possibilities.

Brasswork is not the only craft which could be exploited for the local benefit in Ladakh. Barrel-making and textiles offer further scope. From the high plateau of Eastern Ladakh, for instance, comes pashmina wool that is now woven in Kashmir into so-called Kashmiri shawls. If action is now taken to promote local crafts, and control of these crafts is retained within Ladakh, then more villages may eat well, avoid emigration, and fit glass to their windows.



Main picture: children in Sumda Chung, a village poorer than Chilling, receive food from Save The Children Fund; their village may benefit from brassmaking. Opposite page, top to bottom: spinning wool; soldering handle onto a ladle; spinning; a pack train carries brass products from Chilling on the 3-day journey to Leh