The dreary, cold winter morning in Leh comes alive with a riot of colours and the pleasant sound of sacred chants. The ringing of bells signals ceremony and the drum announces the imminent ritual, the gongs proclaim the forthcoming festival and the 'wooden fish' (wooden percussion instrument) keeps rhythm with the guttural chants of the Buddhist monks that resonate from the Leh Palace. It is a time to purge and purify the town, a time to lure all the evil spirits and burn them down.

The Buddhist fest

Attired in their best Ladakhi traditional costume, thousands of people from the nearby valleys of Leh gather to celebrate the Dosmoche, the Buddhist festival of the 'scapegoat' that falls in the second half of February. It is a unique annual celebration by the Buddhists of the Vajrayana School.

Comfortably perching on the rocks and boulders around the courtyard of the Leh Palace, people gather to witness the monks in vibrant coloured clothes, wearing formidable masks made of wood and mud to perform the sacred mask dance known as the Chams, depicting stories from the Buddhist Scriptures.

The monks, on the first day fashion a hideous human effigy, a 'sthorma' (the scapegoat) out of dough and simultaneously create 'Tomas' sculptures made from barley and butter. A wooden mast made from colourful threads, decorated with paper streamers and religious symbols, designed by the monks of the Thakthok Monastery is erected in the centre of the crowded town. This is believed to hold the evil in captive.

On the second day, after a preliminary offering to the Gods in the Palace Chambers, the monks carry the Sthorma and the Tomas to the centre of the town to be burnt. The procession consists of folk musicians, monks playing their traditional instruments, monastic priests donning masks and other holy gurus chanting prayers to ward off the evil spirits.

All the Tomas and the Sthorma are disjointed and thrown into a bonfire. These are the 'scapegoat's that entice the hungry ghosts, symbols of eternal starvation and greed. The demons and devils of the past year follow them and are annihilated in the fire. The wooden mast with threads is ripped apart and thrown into the blaze.

Gaudy gambling dens, food counters, roadside traders selling an assortment of wares like clothes, footwear, trinkets and spices in the centre of the town add to the excitement of this festive celebration.

Besides Leh, the Dosmoche that is fixed according to the Tibetan Lunar Calendar is celebrated with equal élan in the monasteries of Likir in Lower Ladakh and Deskit in the Nubra Valley.

Hidden in the Himalayas

When the valley comes alive

The Dosmoche festival is celebrated to purify the town by burning down evil spirits.

J. RAMANAN & VRINDA RAMANAN

Festive cheer: The Sthorma ‘scapegoat’ getting ready to be burnt. (Below) The scape-goat being taken in a procession through Leh Bazaar.

The writers are ace photographers known for their travelogues.