

FRONTLINE

ENVIRONMENT

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LADAKH

Despair and hope on the Roof of the World

TEXT PHOTOGRAPHS BY ASHISH KOTHARI


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Haphazard development, unregulated tourism and rapidly changing consumer habits are ruining Ladakh. But there are signs of hope as the local people are working quietly towards sustaining, reviving and reconstructing Ladakhi society in ways that could bring back some harmony between humans and nature. Text & photographs by ASHISH KOTHARI

“IT boasts the highest motorable road, the highest pass, and many other ‘highs’, but it is now also the highest garbage dump in the world.”

My heart sank when I heard these words and saw images of a beautiful landscape ruined by a horrendous open mountain of plastic and other refuse. I was in Leh, the largest town in the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir, listening to a presentation by Sonam Wangchuk, iconic educationist and activist, technological innovator and one of the inspirations behind the brilliant Phunsukh Wangdu alias “Rancho” played by Aamir Khan in the Hindi film *3 Idiots*. Wangchuk was speaking at a session of the Vikalp Sangam (“Alternatives Confluence”), a gathering of people working on various issues concerning Ladakh, in Leh on July 20-24. A host of Ladakhis, besides Wangchuk, bemoaned the fact that a society very much in tune with its natural surrounds until just a couple of decades ago was now groaning under the impact of haphazard “development”, unregulated tourism and rapidly changing consumer habits. Ladakh is a vast, wondrous land —its enormous plateaus and lofty mountains traversed by rivers such as the mighty Indus and the Zaskar; its high-altitude-hardened pastoralists still very much the people of the earth; and its far-flung villages eking out a living by growing barley and smilingly surviving -40° Celsius temperatures.

From Leh, striking out in various directions, you can cross some of the highest motorable passes in the world and marvel at the ever-changing colours of what from a distance seem to be just barren, brown hillsides. Huge herds of sheep and goats appear like specks on the horizon, and you wonder what they survive on for almost nothing seems to grow on these immense areas of rock and sand. Every once in a while, you will see wildlife: a herd of kiang, or the Tibetan wild ass; marmots popping in and out of holes in grassy-stony fields; and the beautiful and rare black-necked crane feeding peacefully in the marshy grassland. In the background, nestled proudly on hilltops across much of Leh district, the occasional magnificent gonpa, or monastery, and much more frequently sighted chortens and stupas, all reminders that this is predominantly a Buddhist society. Going into Kargil district, one comes across mosques and other signs of Islamic culture. Nature and culture have coexisted in this region for centuries, or had until a few decades ago when it was opened up for tourism and development in a big way. Much of what came in the name of development was what New Delhi and Srinagar were dictating with little regard for the ecological and cultural peculiarities of Ladakh. With revenues being a major attraction, little thought was given to regulating tourism.

Still, the area was either not so well-known to the Indian tourist or was not considered particularly safe. Not until *3 Idiots* happened in 2010. Viewers saw the incredible Pangong Tso (lake) in the film, and suddenly, tourist numbers more than doubled to over 1.5 lakh a year. Tour operators offered packages that included a trip to where Aamir Khan had presumably stood or walked near the lake or where certain parts of the film were shot. Several “*3 Idiots*” cafes and many luxury camping sites, mostly run by people from other parts of India, have come up near the lake.

This rapid increase in tourism has meant a host of problems: increased vehicular traffic and the consequent pollution, visitors dropping litter without caring about what they are leaving behind as long as they have their “I-stood-where-Aamir-stood” selfie,

disturbance of wildlife (including feeding wild marmots, which is illegal), and a cultural invasion. The long-term impact of these problems can only be glimpsed at now. A study in 2011 showed that around 30,000 plastic water bottles were dumped in the town every day. Leh is now experiencing traffic jams and accidents, and pollution and dust levels are high enough to cause respiratory problems in children.

There has been an explosion in building construction as every second person seems to be setting up a guest house or a hotel. Many builders are switching from traditional building material to cement and concrete, necessarily brought from outside, and ruining the aesthetic beauty of the town. Several of these hotels offer flush toilets, using precious water and causing pollution to water sources, although dry toilets work very well in Ladakh's conditions. Public transport is poor and private vehicles rule the streets.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Ladakh shared these and other problems facing the region at the Vikalp Sangam, organised by Pune/Delhi-based Kalpavriksh along with the Students' Educational Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG), the Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO), and the Snow Leopard Conservancy-India Trust (SLC-IT). The idea was to focus on solutions and alternatives. And so, we heard of the many sources of hope, the quiet work of sustaining, reviving and reconstructing Ladakhi society in ways that could bring back some harmony between humans and nature, albeit in new forms to suit the changing times.

Signs of hope

The SECMOL is a learning institution meant for class X dropouts. It provides them with vocational and conceptual orientation to help build in them the confidence and capacity to face life and find meaningful occupations. Its campus, located on the banks of the Indus outside Leh, is an inspiring model of an ecologically sustainable, relatively self-reliant and culturally rooted institution. Its passive solar construction enables its use in the dead of winter without any extra internal heating.

The LEDeG, one of the oldest NGOs in the region, also works on solar energy solutions, as also on locally relevant livelihoods based on craft, processed foods and ecologically sensitive products. Its founder, Helena Norberg-Hodge, is a globally known crusader for localised, meaningful economies whose purpose is to meet human needs and aspirations, not to make the rich richer.

The LAMO promotes an alternative vision for the arts and the media. Its centre in Leh comprises restored historical houses, which are now used for organising exhibitions, performances, workshops and other such activities.

The SLC-IT and the Mysore-based Nature Conservation Foundation work on various wildlife conservation issues, such as reducing animal-human conflicts. They have successfully stopped or reduced retaliatory killings of snow leopards and wolves by devising safer livestock-holding conditions and facilitating alternative livelihoods such as tourism homestays. They have also produced conservation education handbooks that make teaching much more locally relevant than the textbooks coming from outside Ladakh.

The People's Action Group for Inclusion and Rights (PAGIR) is an organisation of disabled people working on advocacy for dignified inclusion of the disabled in all aspects of Ladakhi society and creating ecologically relevant livelihood options such as making products from waste materials.

Eco-friendly initiatives

Dzomsa and Ladakhi Fine Foods are establishments in the Leh market promoting organic, wholesome foods and eco-friendly products and providing options for refilling water bottles rather than buying new ones. Increasingly, Leh's shops are veering towards providing eco-friendly products, perhaps seeing that these are favoured by many tourists (especially foreign).

The Women's Alliance of Ladakh has taken up several issues of women's empowerment and welfare and is instrumental in ensuring that the ban on polythene bags is effective. Leh was the first town in India to ban polybags. As is the case in many other cities, the ban would have been ineffective had it not been for the women who periodically inspected the shops with the help of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council in order to ensure that goods were not supplied in polybags.

Several organisations and government departments have promoted rural homestays. Handled well, this provides the best way to ensure meaningful tourism with maximum benefits to the local people rather than to outside tour operators. Another interesting ecotourism initiative is the Ladakhi Women's Travel Company, an all-woman professional body that organises treks.

Alternative media are emerging as a strong force to carry frank stories about what Ladakh and Ladakhis are going through. *Stawa* and *Ladakh Phoniya* are magazines brought out by civil society. The Himalayan Film House, started by Stanzin Dorjai (himself a product of SECMOL), has produced some telling works, such as the award-winning *Jungwa: The Broken Balance*, on climate change, the environment and Buddhism.

Blocked vision

A decade ago, Ladakhis produced a remarkable Vision Document, remarkable not only because it is perhaps one of the few such documents for a district or region in India but also because it has an integrated ecological, economic and cultural perspective. It stresses, for instance, ecological sustainability as a central principle, local skill-based employment generation (through craft and homestay-based tourism) rather than big industrialisation, educational reform to make schooling and college more culturally rooted and relevant, decentralised renewable energy rather than big conventional power plants, and urgent tackling of waste.

Unfortunately, the Vision Document, though endorsed by the government (and released by the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh), appears to have remained largely unimplemented. Tsewang Rigzin, an active Councillor and a participant of the Vikalp Sangam, was particularly concerned about this. Among the stumbling blocks mentioned was the fact that the Hill Council was autonomous only on paper; it had little effective financial and legal power relative to the Jammu and Kashmir government and departmental priorities were set elsewhere. Participants at the Sangam decided to issue a strong recommendation for the revival of the Vision Document, its review for missing or weak elements, and its urgent implementation. They also made a set of other recommendations on issues relating to water management, tourism, governance, waste, rural and urban infrastructure, livelihoods, food, health, learning and education, farming and pastoralism, and social inclusion.

An interesting possibility is to propose Ladakh (as a whole or large parts of it) as a World Heritage site for both its natural and cultural

features. But this needs to be done after wide consultation and by ensuring that Ladakhi people drive it from the stage of proposal to that of implementation. Any top-down imposition of such a status could backfire.

There is also a need for a serious discussion on how Ladakh can be made truly autonomous. Culturally and ecologically distinct regions such as Ladakh (another glaring example being Kutch in Gujarat) were subsumed under larger States during State formation, with political and economic power vesting elsewhere. This historical mistake must be rectified through means that are acceptable to the Ladakhis.

Some of the most innovative initiatives on learning, energy, conservation and livelihoods are found in Ladakh, and these can provide lessons to the rest of India. In turn, though, the rest of India needs to be sensitive to the region's ecological and cultural vulnerabilities, offer collaborations of mutual learning, and lobby with the State and Central governments for space and support to enable a future appropriate for Ladakh's unique identity.

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