Catalysing change in Ladakh

Helena Norberg-Hodge

When I first visited Ladakh in 1975, life in the villages was still based on the same foundations it had been for centuries, evolving in its own environments, according to its own traditional Buddhist principles. In the past, the region was protected from both colonialism and Western-style ‘development’ by its lack of resources, inhospitable climate, and inaccessibility. Change came slowly, allowing for adaptation from within.

One of the first things that struck me about Ladakh was the wide, uninhibited smiles of the women, who moved about freely, joking and speaking with men in an open and unselfconscious way. Though young girls may have appeared shy, women generally exhibited great self-confidence, strength of character, and dignity. Traditionally, most significant for the status of women in Ladakh was the fact that the informal sector of society, with women at the centre, played a much larger role than the formal sector. The focus of the economy was the household; almost all important decisions had to do with basic needs and were settled at this level. The public sphere, in which men tended to be leaders, had far less significance than it does in the industrialised world.

Since about 1974, however, external economic, political and cultural forces have descended on the Ladakhis like an avalanche, bringing massive and rapid disruption of all aspects of the traditional culture. Like so many other cultures exposed to the centralised global economy, Ladakh has become ever more dependent on distant centres of production and consumption. As local economic and political ties have been broken, Ladakhis have become estranged from one another. As the speed of life and mobility have increased, familiar relationships have become more superficial and transient. Villagers have come to be identified with what they have rather than with who they are. As a result of these changes, I have seen the strong, outgoing women of Ladakh being replaced by a new, alienated generation, unsure of themselves and extremely concerned with their appearance. Traditionally, the way a woman looked was important, but her capabilities, including tolerance and social skills, were much more appreciated.

In opposition to these trends, there is now a growing movement at work to restore and promote traditional culture in Ladakh. We at the International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC) have been working with an increasing number of non-governmental organisations and Ladakhi leaders to restore respect for Ladakhi culture and to counter the avalanche of forces that have led to a loss of self-respect among Ladakhis. One of these organisations is the Women’s Alliance of Ladakh (WAL), which has gained considerable reputation for its work in promoting and preserving the cultural and spiritual foundations of Ladakhi culture. WAL encourages members to retain their cultural identity by challenging the claims of ‘progress’. Groups of women from different regions of Ladakh come together to discuss the impact of ‘development’, their feelings about current trends, and their ideas about Ladakh’s future. They talk about how communities and families are being broken down by the psychological pressures of advertising, television, and tourism; about the greed and envy that are now separating people; and about the women who have stopped spinning because it has come to be seen as ‘backward’.

Ladakhi women have been greatly strengthened by the opportunity to join with others to discuss these issues. Many now have renewed pride in being farmers, and in providing for their families.

The women of Ladakh are both willing and able to take direct, collective action to resist the forces that beset Ladakhi culture. A “No TV Day” has been organised, as well as a demonstration that managed to reverse a rule prohibiting the sale of women’s vegetables in the central bazaar. In 1998, the WAL organised a tour of twelve villages in order to discuss the kind of future Ladakhi women wanted for their children, and to speak as a collective voice to influence more effectively the policies of both village leadership and the government. A further objective of the tour was to exchange local goods and to raise awareness about the need for the continued replanting of local crop varieties in the face of persistent government pressure to use “Green Revolution” technologies. As the tour moved from village to village, the group steadily grew in size, as women in each village responded to its message.

All of WAL’s efforts, we believe, have had much positive impact on different sectors of Ladakhi society. These efforts have helped fuel a mounting dialogue among members of the community about appropriate paths toward the future and have had, at their core, women working for change for women.

Helena Norberg-Hodge, ISEC, see page 33.

For more information on the impact of modernisation on the traditional societies of Ladakh and the initiatives supported by ISEC to rebuild self-respect and self-reliance:
- Women’s Alliance for Ladakh, Chubi, Leh, J & K, India, 194101 India
Catalysing change. Every chemical reaction on earth, from digesting food to powering a car requires a catalysis. We use man-made catalyses in industry, which can have far reaching consequences, even 21 August 2014. By Adam Drew. Every biological chemical process in the universe would be impossibly slow without an enzyme, a biological catalyst, to facilitate it and speed things along. Even the seemingly simple processes of digestion and processing sugar would literally take millions of years without the enzymes present in our digestive tracts and cells. As well as naturally occurring catalysts, we also use them in industries. Numerous manufacturing processes use man-made catalysts on vast scales, even with our limited understanding of how they work. While Ladakh may tactically serve the political objectives of Beijing, India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi is no pushover. It is the third largest market after the US and ASEAN, and could even be the key to economic revival of China. The fact is after the construction of strategic Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road in eastern Ladakh and rapid construction of strategic roads in both the middle and eastern sector, it is China that is concerned about India’s military objectives. At present, both sides are matching on the ground, whether it is Galwan valley or Pangong Tso lake and are constantly talking to each other through institutionalised diplomatic and military channels. Ladakh is a province in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir sandwiched between the Kunlun mountain range in the north and the main Great Himalayas to the south. Inhabited by people of Indo-Aryan and Tibetan descent, the region stands as one of the most sparsely populated regions in Kashmir. A remarkable region for many reasons, Ladakh is an area that has its own unique history, culture, and traditions, yet has been caught between the major powers of the area, China, India, Afghanistan, Tibet and The region of Ladakh, the cold desert in the high Himalayas in India is one of many places of subtle ecological balance and it is at the forefront of climate change impacts. The ecosystem and life in the region are affected by unforeseen changes like droughts, flash floods and a myriad of other climatic imbalances. This film highlights some of these issues faced by the region and the efforts made towards climate change adaptation by organisations as well as foresighted individuals from the region. Film produced in collaboration with SEEDS India. Climate change is changing the landscape of Ladakh. The snowfall has come down significantly in the last couple of decades and the glacier is melting at a higher rate putting the lives of farmers here at risk, Chewang Norphel called the glacier man for creating artificial glaciers in Ladakh to tide over the water shortage for irrigation told The Hindu. However there is no scientific data to indicate the extent of climate change in this region. The Snow and Avalanche Study Establishment (SASE), an institute under the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has recently initiated a project to assess the extent of the glacier melt.