

Holding to the Middle Path in Ladakh: Tibetan Plateau

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Abstract

Traditional Ladakhi culture, thriving in a brutal region of the Tibetan Plateau in the isolated northern corner of India, has struck a balance with the natural world and outlived many more complex and technologically sophisticated civilizations through a combination of practical conservation, strong communities and religious wisdom. This centuries-long history of sustainability is threatened by modernization and ill-suited development schemes. This article discusses the effects and local response to these recent pressures from the “outside world” and, in particular, the work of the International Society for Ecology and Culture/Ladakh Project, which has been an exceptionally successful model of “applied anthropology” that has never called itself applied anthropology.

“‘Change’ is ravaging Ladakh today. It came to us through different mediums and different sources, very distorted in shape and very manipulative in nature, whatsoever, it all emanated from the west, and today, ironically only you can bring us redemption.”

—Sonam (Soso) Dorje, from the text accompanying his 1995 photo exhibit in Leh, Ladakh

Life here is simple and hard and has been an extraordinary success for centuries. This must be one of the last places on the planet where land and people still flourish without the interference of industrial development. “Progress,” such as it is, has not yet found its way into many parts of Ladakh, hidden in the most remote corner of India on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. The consequence of that fact can be seen in the cheerful greeting you hear on a village path, in the smiling face of a farmer plowing a patch of rocky ground with his yak, or in the peaceful silence that lies like a blanket across the vast landscape.

Tourists from the industrialized world come to Ladakh by the thousands every summer, as if on some involuntary pilgrimage. They come for all the typical reasons—to collect photographs, souvenirs and adventures in this lost world of Tibetan Buddhism—but they come also to see a way of life that has become rare and precious in our modern world. It is a life of sanity and scale, the likes of which we future-shocked Westerners might never see at home.

After centuries of isolation in the upper Indus Valley – cut off from the outside world by lofty, snow-covered passes for most of the year—Ladakh has been inundated by a flood of modernization over the last two decades by way of new roads, an airstrip and the mindless panacea of economic development. Well-meaning tourists, the baffling alienation of an increasingly global economy, even American TV beamed in by satellite, all endanger

Ladakh’s traditional life. These forces threaten to turn Ladakh from what has been called the last Shangri-La into just another impoverished neighborhood in the technotopic global village. The fragile beauty of this high desert environment and the joyful Ladakhi spirit that endures even the long, brutal Himalayan winters, would surely not survive a head-long plunge into modernization, and a world in which culture and belief and nature have harmoniously coevolved could be lost forever.

But even as these overwhelming winds of change threaten the continuity of traditional life, they have also stirred an acute awareness of the perils of the modern world. In a response that is rare for developing areas around the world, many Ladakhis look with suspicion down the glittering modern path, and are struggling to protect their ancient and well-adapted way of life from these strange, corrosive influences.

Sustainability in Simplicity

Ladakhi people have persisted and prospered in the severe climate of the Tibetan Plateau for about two thousand years. The imposing barrier of the Himalayas blocks the southern monsoons, allowing less than four inches of precipitation each year. Lying between 10,000 and 14,000 feet in elevation, the agricultural fields get four months of growing season at best. It is a land of genuine scarcity where ecological efficiency is not a matter of fad or government legislation, but a simple

matter of survival. A pragmatic conservation ethic runs deep in Ladakhi history and culture.

With no trees to speak of in this high desert environment, Ladakhis collect yak and cattle dung to burn in traditional stoves. Hand-patted and sun-dried, yak pies have provided centuries of reliable, clean-burning fuel for cooking and keeping warm during the arctic-like winters. Human waste from simple composting toilets becomes fertilizer for the barley fields and vegetable gardens. Small groves of poplar trees are collectively cultivated along glacial streams to provide a supply of essential building material for each village. In this traditional world nothing is wasted: every scrap of clothing or wood or metal is used and reused in endless creative ways.

Helena Norberg-Hodge, a sympathetic foreigner who has pioneered sustainable development projects in Ladakh for the last 20 years, writes in her book, *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*, that this “frugality” is fundamental to the people’s prosperity and success:

Using limited resources in a careful way has nothing to do with miserliness; this is a frugality in its original meaning of ‘fruitfulness’: getting more out of little.

One key to Ladakhi success is a strong sense of community. People share their scarce resources and their labor in elaborate customs of community cooperation, without which their sizable barley fields could not be harvested and their graceful, multi-story homes could not be built.

In our village it was like that,” recalls Sonam Dolma, a family matriarch and director of the Women’s Alliance of Ladakh. “If you help others you will be helping the village, and we will all have enough.

This way of life is more than a helpless response to scarcity, it also reflects a basic Tibetan Buddhist philosophy which stresses austerity and the interconnected unity of everything in the universe. Tom Skurky, a psychology professor I met traveling in Ladakh, believes that the community of the natural world in which Ladakhis live is as important to their sense of belonging and personal identity as the community of people. In the traditional world, a person’s relationship with nature is based on the same moral obligations they

have toward other people. With this sense of belonging, something like polluting a stream from which drinking water comes is considered not just environmentally irresponsible, but a *sin* against nature. It is the simple ecological recognition that all things are interrelated and interdependent.

Through this combination of practical conservation, strong communities and religious wisdom, traditional Ladakhi culture has struck a balance with the natural world and outlived many more complex and “sophisticated” civilizations. Tsewang Dorjey, a young man who grew up in a rural village and now works on rural development projects for the Ladakh Ecological Development Group, explains, “You see, in many years back, when Ladakh was not open for the tourism ‘til 1974, the people were living in a sustainable way and they were not dependent upon the outside world.”

“Sustainability,” that fashionable buzzword of environmental rhetoric, meets the real world in the simplicity of Ladakhi life.

A Woman from Far Away

In 1974 Ladakh was opened to foreigners for the first time since the late 1940s. At the time it was an unknown corner of the Himalayas to most Westerners, which made it an automatic target for adventure travelers and an army of anthropologists and other researchers hoping to catch a glimpse of this lost world. It also quickly became fodder for a dizzying array of development projects.

Originally planning only a six-week stay, Helena Norberg-Hodge traveled to Ladakh and neighboring Zaskar in 1975 as part of a film crew from England. She was immediately smitten by the wild Tibetan Plateau landscape and the cheerful Ladakhi people, and she stayed. As a trained linguist, she became the first Westerner in this century to master the Ladakhi language and quickly came to appreciate the value of this unique culture.

Within three years of her first visit to Ladakh, Norberg-Hodge says she could already see many of the negative impacts on traditional Ladakhi culture from modernization and ill-conceived development schemes. For all their noble intentions of eradicating Third World poverty and increasing standards of living, conventional development projects around the world often backfire. A growing number of anthropologists, economists and

other development professionals have begun to see that by ignoring traditional local wisdom and force-feeding outlandish foreign projects, conventional development can unravel centuries of continuity and success. The results can include everything from deteriorating environmental health and loss of economic independence to loss of cultural self-esteem. Even formal education has caused problems to the traditional subsistence economy. Tashi Dawa, of the Nature and Environment Conservation Group of Ladakh, explains succinctly, "The more you are educated, the more you are far away from your farm." Growing numbers of tourists coming to Ladakh for the romance of an "untouched" culture only made it worse. Their appearance of infinite wealth and leisure time reinforced an idealized image of life in the industrialized world, spurring many younger Ladakhis to forsake tradition and embrace all things shiny and modern.

"It was all so evident," Norberg-Hodge says about those early days. "Almost every foreigner who came here said, 'What a paradise – what a pity it has to be destroyed.'"

Norberg-Hodge was not the first or last Westerner to feel a protective urge toward this enchanting world, but in 1978 she founded the Ladakh Project to do something about it. The project started out intending only to develop a handful of simple solar technologies as alternatives to the new fossil fuel-based technologies making their way into Ladakh. Solar technologies for heating and cooking seem an obvious and more sustainable way to go in a high desert, preindustrial environment, but many Ladakhis were being lured by convenience into a growing dependence on imported kerosene and propane. The appropriate technology program grew to include hydraulic ram pumps and micro-scale hydroelectric generators, all of the projects using local materials, local labor, and resisting fossil fuels and other technologies from beyond the mountains.

Eventually Norberg-Hodge had to confront what she realized was perhaps the greatest threat to traditional Ladakhi life: gloss, hype, and misinformation amounting to propaganda about modernization and development. This "development hoax," as she calls it, is what creates and sustains the momentum behind most conventional, Western-style development projects. Ladakhis and other people in the developing world are sold a bill of goods without ever learning about the long-term environmental, social and economic impacts. But those

of us who have been through it ought to know better, says Norberg-Hodge, and Ladakhis have a right to examine the whole picture. So she took it upon herself to fill the information gap through "counterdevelopment" education:

My main function was to provide more information about the Western world: how the West had exploited other economies, other cultures; how it had worked – bringing in schooling and forcing people to abandon their language; what the West meant for *us* – you know, DDT and asbestos – how we had had that presented to us as being wonderful and then found that there were side effects; how we had been told that petroleum was the only possibility. But here in Ladakh was another alternative.

The Ladakh Project started as a Western idea founded on somewhat abstract Western concepts – cultural preservation, sustainable development, the science of ecology – and, for the first few years, Norberg-Hodge and her Western associates dealt with local resistance that ranged from simple skepticism to outright hostility. Eventually her unrelenting message began to strike a chord with some Ladakhis. Sonam Dolma explained through a translator that "this woman from far away had such a sadness in her heart that Ladakhi culture will vanish. I thought that nobody from our own place, Ladakh, has talked about this, and I realized that she is right and we should obey her. I was very happy about this."

Norberg-Hodge admits that her motivations have not been entirely altruistic, but that she wanted to save Ladakh as an example of a sane and balanced way of life for her own reckless industrialized world that was growing precariously out of balance. "When I started this work, I wasn't trying to 'help' the Ladakhis, I was trying to help myself. Because I felt it was so vital to the planet as a whole to have living examples that it's possible to do things differently. It's just very frightening to me that, in a way, all the evidence is disappearing as people are made more dependent on McDonald's burgers and all this. No remnant anywhere left of a more diversified indigenous agriculture." She promotes these ideas in the West through a recent extension of the Ladakh Project called the International Society for Ecology and Culture. ISEC's daunting mission is to question and redefine the whole Western notion of "progress," which Norberg-Hodge believes

lies at the heart of modern predicaments from social maladies to global environmental problems.

Whatever her motivations, Norberg-Hodge's work has taken firm root in Ladakh. A slew of local NGOs, dealing with everything from development and education to environmental and health issues, is part of Norberg-Hodge's legacy. These organizations are successfully promoting solar and small-scale hydro technologies, increasing local food production through greenhouses and permaculture projects, discouraging the use of toxic agricultural chemicals, making public education more relevant to Ladakhi culture, and are working together to make the growing tourism industry more truly "eco." As a result of years of stubborn counterdevelopment work and a growing awareness about the perils of conventional development, Ladakhis are moving in more sustainable and locally appropriate directions at a point much earlier in the process than many other developing areas in the world.

Sonam Tundup, a friendly guesthouse proprietor and resident of a village near the capital town of Leh, says, "If there is modernization, it is good to show other ways, but we don't forget our Ladakhi culture. Why should we accept things that are harmful for my family, my culture?"

Today, *Helena Dolma*, as Norberg-Hodge is called in Ladakhi, is near legendary throughout the area. The story of the "woman from far away" is known even in the most remote villages and nomad camps.

In the Winter We Become Ladakhis Again

"In summer people are very busy. People have changed, they are modern. But in winter, you can see the actual Ladakh. People wear the proper dress, it's clean, and you can see only few tourists, and they also wear Ladakhi dress. In the winter we are very happy because we have many festivals. Ladakhis indeed will never change." Sonam Tundup told me this in response to a question about Ladakh's future. To me, his statement describes not only a strong sense of cultural identity, but a certain resiliency in Ladakhi culture that has made for its astonishing success.

At any community event you can witness the adaptive blending of the traditional with the modern—what anthropologists are fond of calling "change and continuity"—that Sonam Tundup describes. One sunny day along the banks of the Indus

River, amidst what looked and felt like an vast nomad encampment, I watched thousands of devout Ladakhis celebrating the birthday of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Another day I attended a Ladakhi wedding as the only Westerner among about 180 guests. Both events involved music and exuberant dancing from Western-style "disco" to traditional folk songs, and people's dress ranged similarly from designer clothing to traditional local costumes. The younger folks, sometimes sporting tight jeans and the latest hair styles, performed choreographed music video routines and exaggerated hip-thrusting disco moves to the cackling delight of the older generations. A few of the more outgoing elders, donning the traditional heavy woolen robes and great coats, were persuaded to join in. But when it came time for the traditional dances, *everyone*, no matter their age or hair style or clothing, knew the steps and happily joined in.

Many Westerners I talked with lamented the weird foreign influences of popular music and dance and Western monoculture in general, even as they inadvertently spread its influence. Looking at the effects of popularized Western culture in other parts of the world, there is plenty of cause for caution. Still, most of what I observed in Ladakh left me with a strong feeling of community solidarity and unambiguous cultural identity. At these public events people were simply having fun, affirming their identity in the celebration of culturally significant occasions, and weaving together the old with the new, just as people everywhere have always done.

The weaving of old with new also provides an effective way to deal with the unfortunate realities of modern rubbish. Along with all the other questionable results of "progress," a new variety of non-biodegradable plastics, metal alloys and glass have infiltrated most Ladakhi households. But the Ladakhi habit of frugal conservation applies even to seemingly useless garbage that we would toss without a thought here in our world of conspicuous consumption and waste: Tin cans have the ends cut off and become protection for sapling poplars against browsing livestock, and as the trees grow the cans slowly rust off into the ground. Glass bottles are buried upside down in rows to become exquisite garden boundaries. Plastic bottles are used and reused for sundry liquids until they fall to pieces. Old fabric and plastic bags block drafts in walls and roofs or are used as floor covering to keep the dust down. Paper is burned or becomes toilet paper for the composting toilets. Anything organic is feed for the

livestock. And every household has a stockpile of miscellaneous junk that might someday be useful for something. I learned, after asking stupidly of my hosts, “Where do I put the garbage?” that in most traditional households they have none.

The Ladakhi conservation ethic, borne of a land of scarcity and a sense of interconnectedness, makes our own efforts at “reducing, reusing and recycling” look pretty feeble. It is a powerful lesson for any of us from the over-consumptive industrialized world who choose to pay attention. More importantly for Ladakh, it is a clear example of adaptive Ladakhi tradition coming to grips with the practical realities of the modern world. In a careful blending of old with new, change with continuity, may lie the path to Ladakh’s future.

Tashi Rabgias, a well-known Buddhist scholar and poet in Ladakh, has written: “We now understand that excessive material development is not sustainable, often leading to ecological disasters, environmental degradation, and depletion of resources. For us, the solution lies in the wisdom of the Middle Path, avoiding any extremism. Increased production leads to thoughtless consumerism—that is one extreme. Rotting stagnation leads to poverty—another extreme. While we now know what sustainable development and renewable resources are, we have yet to find the appropriate technologies to realize them. However, we should be careful not to lose the sense of adaptation and flexibility which our ancestors showed so admirably in the past.”

The centuries have certainly shown the Ladakhi people to possess a sort of cultural genius for adaptation, and that ability might just carry them on through this bewildering and tumultuous modern age.

For more information contact:

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For specific information about some of the NGOs currently working in Ladakh:

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© Students Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh, PO Box 4, Leh, Ladakh 194101, INDIA

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Notes

1. Ernest Atencio is an anthropologist, writer, and environmental activist who spent the summer of 1995 completing an applied anthropology internship in Ladakh with The International Society for Ecology and Culture and the Ladakh Ecological Development Group. He would like to thank Helena Norberg-Hodge for helping arrange a very rich and unique experience in Ladakh, and too many Ladakhi friends to list here for their infinite friendliness and tolerance. Ernest Atencio currently tries to follow the Middle Path in his own homeland of northern New Mexico, where he works for Amigos Bravos, a river advocacy organization that focuses on rural environmental and social justice issues throughout the Río Grande watershed. Contact: Amigos Bravos—Friends of the Wild Rivers, PO Box 238, Taos, NM 87571; (505) 758-3874; e-mail: eatencio@taos.newmex.com; <http://www.newmex.com/amigosbravos>.