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 industrialised world.

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 (ISSE) 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
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Defence

China changes stance, wants de-escalation before disengagement in Ladakh. India disagrees.

De-escalation before disengagement could give China an advantage as it can move troops back much faster than India due to its better infrastructure. This is a change in Beijing’s position from what the two sides had discussed in February, it is learnt. New Delhi, however, is insisting on disengagement from the remaining friction areas along the disputed Himalayan frontier first. These were part of proposals exchanged between the two sides at the 11th round of Corps Commander level talks held last week, sources in the security establishment said. Days after India and China agreed not to engage in escalatory behaviour along the Line of Actual Control, New Delhi said that the "way ahead will be to refrain from making any attempts to unilaterally change the status quo while the two sides continue their discussions to achieve complete disengagement in all friction areas," The Indian Express reports. Pointing out that the Senior Commanders "met after a period of nearly 50 days," India’s Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Anurag Srivastava was quoted by the Indian daily as saying that the two sides have also decided to have the next meeting of External Affairs Ministers after the next round of Corps Commanders’ talks.

State-owned exploration company Oil & Natural Gas (ONGC) plans to establish its maiden geothermal field development project in Ladakh, India. ONGC plans to conduct the field development in three phases, the first of which involves exploratory-cum-production drilling of wells up to 500 meters in depth and setting up of a pilot plant of up to 1 MW power capacity, according to a Monday statement. Price (INR): ₹99.65, Change: ₹2.00, Percent Change: +2.05%. Emotions are all around us in the office, and it’s important for leaders to understand how to harness them to cultivate productivity and positive relationships. In this course, Britt Andreatta shares how to boost your emotional quotient (EQ) to better lead teams, work with peers, and manage up. Learn what emotional intelligence is and how it factors in at work, and discover concrete techniques for raising your own EQ. This includes perceiving yourself accurately, exercising emotional self-control, understanding and managing your triggers, and developing empathy. Then, turn those lessons a