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# Balancing the Local and the Global: Understanding Alternative Education in Modern Ladakh

Hannah Ryde  
*Tufts University*

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Balancing the Local and the Global:  
Understanding Alternative Education in Modern Ladakh



Ryde, Hannah

Academic Advisor: Onians, Isabelle  
Senior Faculty Advisor: Decler, Hubert  
Project Advisor: Cox Suarez, Stephanie

Tufts University  
Anthropology and Environmental Studies

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Cover photograph by Hannah Ryde. Foundation student Padma Angmo mixes clay during work hour.

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## Abstract

For nearly thirty years, the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) has addressed the shortcomings of the education system in Ladakh (*la dwags*), a mountainous region under the rain-shadow of the Himalayan Range in Jammu and Kashmir State of Northern India, through education reform in government schools and the creation of alternative education programs. These programs attempt to support students who have failed in, and been failed by, the Ladakhi government education system and are designed to fill in gaps in the curricula of mainstream schools through supplemental academics and skill-based learning, while simultaneously building confidence and competence. This project explores the pedagogy of the programs at SECMOL's Phey campus, on their own terms and through comparison with other institutions, and attempts to understand how students, volunteers, and staff experience and perceive alternative education. Furthermore, this project studies the ways in which SECMOL impacts its students both during their time at the Phey campus and afterwards. In doing so, this project analyzes both the value and shortcomings of SECMOL's programs. Ultimately, this project aims to understand what alternative education means in modern Ladakh, where many youth are caught between the traditional, agricultural lifestyle and increasing urbanization and globalization.

This project is based on a month-long study in and around Leh, primarily at SECMOL's Phey campus, where I resided and conducted fieldwork during the month of April 2016. The fieldwork included twenty-one formal interviews (see Appendix C) and many informal conversations with stakeholders in education in Ladakh. This paper also draws on sixty-three responses to two different questionnaires (see Appendix B) I created about education at SECMOL, fifty-four of which were completed by SECMOL students and nine of which were completed by volunteers, and is further supported by my participation in various aspects of daily life at the Phey campus.

## Introduction: A Brief History of Government Education in Ladakh

Widespread formal, Westernized education<sup>1</sup> is a relatively new concept in Ladakh; it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that attending school became possible and common among Ladakhi children of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Prior to the late nineteenth century, as most Ladakhis were subsistence farmers, children provided necessary help in farm work. Thus, education for the majority of Ladakhi youth consisted of informal instruction in traditional agricultural techniques from those around them (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 110-111). The youth who did receive more formal education were either members of the social elite or studied in the religious context of Buddhist monasteries or Muslim *maktabs*<sup>2</sup>. British rule over India, which from 1858 to 1919 included control over Indian education, did little to provide education to underserved populations and instead further entrenched the trend of only the urban elite having access to formal education. Additionally, British rule caused the English language to be assigned great value and understood as necessary in applying for prestigious jobs, and therefore it became a necessary part of schooling (Richard 2015, 37-39).

Although the first government school opened in Leh, the capital of Ladakh's Leh district, in 1892, formal educational opportunities did not reach rural villages until the 1970s (Richard 2015, 41; Norberg-Hodge 1991, 111). Furthermore, even once children in remote districts had gained access to formal education, the rural government schools and the broader public education system were clearly flawed. Firstly, Ladakhi schools were not managed by Ladakhis themselves but rather by the Jammu and Kashmir state government, which meant that those in charge had little stake in government schools and knew little about the region they were responsible for educating. Although students spoke Ladakhi at home, Urdu, the state language of Jammu and Kashmir, was the medium of instruction through Class VIII (Richard 2015, 50). Yet, the Class X state exams were written in English, so in secondary school the principal language changed to English and if students were to pass their Class X exams, they had to only two years to master a language to which they had limited prior exposure (Richard 2015, 51). Unsurprisingly, the failure rate for Ladakhis on these state exams was very high; in 1988, 95% of Ladakhi students failed their Class X exams (SECMOL). Additionally, teachers were under-qualified and, as per government stipulation, rotated between schools every two years, creating a lack of continuity for both students and teachers. Finally, community members were largely uninformed of what their right to a government education promised and thus did little to change the system (SECMOL).

In response to these problems, a group of young, educated Ladakhi youth formed the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) in 1988 (Mingle 2003). Their aim, according to Sonam Wangchuk, one of the founders, was to “[take] care of the mass

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<sup>1</sup> Formal, Westernized education implies education characterized by secular, classroom-based study of academic subjects such as mathematics, science, and the humanities (Richard 2015, 36).

<sup>2</sup> A *maktab* is a Muslim religious primary school.

failure [of government education] in Ladakh” (Wangchuk 2016). By separating the blame for the poor results from the students themselves, and instead analyzing the inadequacies of the education system, SECMOL set out to identify the shortcomings of education in Ladakh and implement realistic solutions. Under the title “Operation New Hope,” the non-profit organization, in collaboration with the Leh District Education Department, undertook a significant endeavor, attempting to implement English as the medium of instruction from primary school onwards, create textbooks that were culturally relevant to Ladakhi children, encourage Ladakhis to form Village Education Communities to oversee the functioning of village schools, and improve teacher training (SECMOL). They were largely successful in achieving reform goals and developing a sentiment of education as extremely important for Ladakhi youth, although they were unable to discontinue the practice of government teachers rotating between schools. Moreover, the implementation of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils in 1995, which gave Ladakhis more control over the government policies which affect them, has allowed for greater Ladakhi input in their own schools (Richard 2015, 55). In 2007, Leh Deputy Commissioner M.K. Dwivedi filed allegations against Sonam Wangchuk, accusing him of “anti-national connections” and “land-grabbing” and imposed Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code on SECMOL, which prohibited the organization from holding gatherings and publishing material (SECMOL). These tensions led to SECMOL’s exit from its partnership with the government sector, and since then, SECMOL has focused primarily on educational programs at its Phey campus, which are funded through grants, a partnership with the Future Earth Network, a Swedish organization that promotes sustainable development, and nominal student fees which cover room and board.

Today, education is considered a priority in most Ladakhi families. Government subsidized food rations and increasing urbanization mean that fewer children work in the fields rather than attending school (Richard 2015, 57). Although education has and is improving across the region, greater emphasis on education is reinforcing a divide between the wealthy, urban elite and rural farmers. Private school enrollment is increasing as greater numbers of parents are willing to pay for formal education; today nearly half of Ladakh’s students study in private schools (Richard 2015, 68-69). Test results for Class X exams have increased significantly with 72% of students in government schools passing the state exams in 2015 and over 90% of private school students consistently passing the same exams (Office of the Chief Education Officer 2016; Richard 2015, 67). Ultimately, despite education reform and the higher value of school in the Ladakhi conscience, significant problems in the Ladakhi education system persist, particularly for poor and low-caste children and youth who live in rural areas.



Photograph by Hannah Ryde. The dining hall at SECMOL's Phey campus.



Photograph by Hannah Ryde. SECMOL students on a field trip to the ice stupas in Phyang.

## **The Landscape of the Alternative Institute: SECMOL's Efforts in Context**

Alongside the Indus River in the village of Phey, about eighteen kilometers from Leh, an area that was once empty and flat has been converted into a space for alternative living and learning. The campus is surrounded by tan, gravelly mountains and snow-covered peaks. Tall, straight willow trees line the dusty driveway. Several buildings subtly dot the landscape, mostly camouflaging due to the color and texture they share with their surroundings, although large glass windows rimmed with black paint and sheets of plastic stretched over wooden frames stick out. The architecture of the buildings reflects the values of the organization: community, environmental responsibility, and attention to traditional Ladakhi culture.

The rammed earth buildings include a classroom building that doubles as the girls hostel, a dining hall that also houses many of the boys, a kitchen with fourteen attached cell rooms for staff and long-term volunteers, several Ladakhi dry composting toilets, and a cow shed. All of the buildings are heated with passive solar energy and various other solar instruments, such as large, round concave disks that direct sunlight into a stove and a homemade solar water heater built by students, punctuate the dry expanse.

SECMOL's Phey campus, also known as the SECMOL Alternative Institute, which was constructed beginning in 1994, is a space for educational practices that seek to fill in the gaps of mainstream schools (Mingle 2003). As an extension of SECMOL's education reform, the Phey campus allows SECMOL's ideas to be applied outside of the government sector through various alternative and experiential approaches to academic subjects and vocational skills. Over the past twenty years, the Phey campus has hosted thousands of Ladakhis, ranging from secondary school students to adults, attending solar energy and rammed earth construction workshops, teacher and villager trainings, youth camps, and academic programs. This paper will focus specifically on two programs, the annual Foundation Year course and SECMOL's hostel for college students, and the ways in which they implement alternative education and how these programs are experienced by those involved.

## SECMOL's Pedagogy: A Curriculum of Filling in the Gaps

Both Foundation Year and the college hostel seek to supplement the education Ladakhi children receive today in a system characterized by rote memorization, limited student participation, and significant emphasis on standardized testing. The vast majority of SECMOL students are from rural, agricultural villages and grew up studying in government schools. Therefore, prior to arriving at SECMOL, most students have had very little practice with spoken English and are unaccustomed to critical thinking or considering their own opinions in an academic setting (Norman 2016).

Foundation Year represents SECMOL's desire to support those who have been "rejected by the [government school] system" (Wangchuk 2016). The current program evolved out of an earlier residential program at the Phey campus which focused specifically on training students who had passed their exams to become government teachers. Becky Norman, an American member of the SECMOL staff who first became involved in the organization as a volunteer English teacher in the 1990s, has spent the last two decades developing and implementing SECMOL's "grand plans," including the establishment of the Foundation Year program. According to Norman, the idea for the year-long course arose from the observations that the students of its predecessor program often lacked the necessary base for further studies despite having passed their exams and only half of them actually followed through on their promise of becoming government teachers (Norman 2016). Thus, in 1999, SECMOL decided it would be more beneficial to focus on providing a course of comprehensive general knowledge to students who had failed and discontinued the practice of having students agree to become government teachers upon completing the program. In this way, the program could reach more students, as the majority of Ladakhis were still failing their exams at this time, and allow students whose sense of possibility had been widened through participation to pursue jobs outside of the government sector (Norman 2016). Today the Foundation Year program aims to simultaneously equip students with the academic basics they need for success in further schooling, teach them relevant skills and cultural practices, and instill positive habits and values in the students. According to Sonam Wangchuk, every aspect of the curriculum is aimed at "bring[ing] confidence to what [the students] already know and are" (Wangchuk 2016).

Konchok Norgay, SECMOL's managing director who was also Foundation student himself, characterizes Foundation students as "eager to learn new things" and "hungry about knowledge" (Norgay 2016). The Foundation students in the 2016-2017 "batch,"<sup>3</sup> ranged in age from sixteen to twenty. As Foundation Year is primarily known and advertised as an option for those who have failed their Class X exams, despite the program's myriad other features and its lack of focus specifically on exams, over half of the Foundation students had failed their Class X exams and preparing to retake their exams was at least part of their motivation in joining the Foundation Year program (Norman 2016). The remaining Foundation students had either passed their Class

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<sup>3</sup> At SECMOL, each cohort is referred to as a "batch."

X exams or dropped out of school, and came to SECMOL to build a better base for future studies or because they were drawn to SECMOL's model of alternative education. During the selection process, which involves both a written application and an interview, the SECMOL staff emphasize that exam preparation is not a key emphasis of Foundation Year (Norman 2016). According to Becky Norman, students are given priority if they are remembered in a positive light from a SECMOL youth camp, if they are from an underrepresented part of Ladakh or an underrepresented religious group, or if they are in a poor social or economic position, such as low-caste or parentless. Among the 2016-2017 Foundation students, the vast majority were from small, rural villages and most had attended government schools prior to enrolling in the Alternative Institute. The students were almost exclusively Buddhist and from Leh District, although there was one Muslim student from Kargil District. Most Foundation students reported choosing to attend SECMOL to learn English and gain confidence, but also mentioned the desire to take on new responsibilities and learn about solar energy, agriculture, and eco-friendly practices.

Like the Foundation students, SECMOL's college students are predominantly from families and villages that depend on agriculture and most of their educational backgrounds included government schools. The college students living at the Phey campus for the 2016 school year ranged from sixteen years old to twenty-three years old. Half of the college students had previously participated in Foundation Year and decided to live at the campus during their further studies. Similar to the Foundation students, most of the college students expressed that improving their English and becoming more confident were key factors in their decisions to stay in the SECMOL hostel during their three years of college. Many college students also articulated that the development of morals and personal characteristics were motivation behind their enrollment.

SECMOL's college students, who are also called senior students, attend Eliezer Joldan Memorial College in Leh during the school week and participate in campus activities in the evenings and on Sundays. Therefore, they have a unique college experience, characterized by a mix of mainstream and alternative pedagogies. According to Konchok Norgay, the SECMOL hostel benefits college students by giving them the "opportunity to see the relation between the academic... and... real life" (Norgay 2016). By living at the Phey campus, college students are able to supplement the academics of college studies with extra English practice, additional educational and extracurricular activities, and the responsibility of caring for the campus and supporting the younger students through acting as role models and assisting them in their studies.



Photograph by Hannah Ryde. Foundation student Thinlay Zangmo milking during job time.

## A Typical Day on SECMOL Time

Students wake up daily at 6:30 a.m. SECMOL time<sup>4</sup> for morning exercise, which is followed by a talk from Sonam Wangchuk or Konchok Norgay. These talks encourage students to consider their potential and offer advice for moral behavior and meaningful learning. Following the talk, the students take part in several minutes of introspection, a secular practice during which they are expected to close their eyes, maintain silence, and reflect on themselves and the day ahead. Many students told me that these talks were their favorite aspect of SECMOL and that they tried to embody the qualities and ideas they learned from Sonam Wangchuk and Konchok Norgay throughout the day. Rigzin Yangdol, a current college student, recalled that because she valued introspection so much, she continued her practice of self-evaluation on her own during the two years between her Foundation Year and her enrollment at the Phey campus as a college student. Every day, several students are assigned to assist the SECMOL cook in preparing breakfast instead of attending the morning activities. During meals, students typically share bowls and plates with one another. This behavior stems from the frequently emphasized concept of SECMOL as a family rather than a lack of dishes. One student who was low-caste viewed this practice as a way of countering discrimination; members of higher castes generally will not touch food that has been touched by individuals of lower castes, therefore, sharing plates is a means of actualizing a community that values and performs a unique sense of equality.

After breakfast, the college students take SECMOL's bus into Leh and the Foundation students begin classes. During classes, the Foundation students are usually split into two groups of sixteen and seventeen, "Section A" and "Section B." The schedule of classes changes throughout the year, but during the month of April 2016, Foundation students' daily schedule included English conversation class, special class, English grammar class, mathematics, creativity class, and Ladakhi language, the majority of which are taught by volunteers. During English conversation class, students speak with volunteers in small groups or one-on-one about various topics chosen by the volunteers or students, such as climate change, the future, friends, or religion. Once a week the topic is open and each group decides for themselves what they would like to discuss. Additionally, students and volunteers sometimes debrief activities that they took part in together, such as field trips or watching films, or play games that involve speaking English, such as twenty questions. Out of the thirty-three Foundation students who filled out a questionnaire (see Appendix B) about their experience as a SECMOL student, twenty-nine of them, or 88%, referred to conversation class as a positive component of Foundation Year and every single one of them mentioned English as a key aspect of their experience thus far. Similarly, 90% of the twenty-one college students who answered the same questions included studying English as a favorite part of their experience at the Alternative Institute, or something that will influence them in the future. Special class typically consists of a volunteer sharing a skill with the students. The focus and teacher of special class changes frequently, and during the month I was at SECMOL,

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<sup>4</sup> SECMOL follows the daylight savings schedule in an attempt to maximize hours of sunlight. Therefore, for half of the year, SECMOL time is one hour ahead of India time.

special class included such varying topics included South Indian dance, drawing, reading English books, outdoor games, and English and Hindi songs.

Both the English grammar class and the mathematics class are more structured than conversation or special class, and both are taught by volunteers. English class is taught by a volunteer with teaching experience and mathematics class is typically delegated to a domestic volunteer who is familiar with the Indian exam system (G 2016). Although the practice of entrusting volunteers with these classes lessens the workload of the staff, it also causes the curriculum to be somewhat disjointed. Ishwarya G, who had recently received her Bachelor of Education degree and had also completed a course in teaching English known as CELTA, taught English during her two month stay at SECMOL, which included the first half of April. When she left, the students were without an English teacher for a week between her departure and the arrival of the next volunteer with relevant experience. The turnover of volunteer teachers not only leads to gaps in the Foundation Year timetable, but also disrupts the continuity of material presented, and thus likely hinders learning (G 2016).

During creativity class students are supposed to work on their own projects; however, this class seemed to be given limited attention by both students and staff. Rather than utilizing the time for innovative endeavors, students often used this time for self-study or rest. The Ladakhi language class is taught by staff member Becky Norman and offers students the unique opportunity to study spoken and written colloquial Ladakhi, which is not typically included in the curricula of mainstream Ladakhi schools.

In the morning, while one section of Foundation students attends English class, the other section takes part in various tasks around the campus during “work hour.” Interspersed throughout the day are two tea breaks, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. At 1:30 p.m., students, volunteers, and staff eat lunch on the roof of the kitchen or inside the dining hall, depending on the weather. Immediately after lunch, students have free time, during which many students bathe or wash their clothes, since by early afternoon the sun has warmed both the water in the solar-powered heater and the air to a comfortable temperature. In the afternoon, an hour is set aside for students to complete their daily jobs, although in the case of the students charged with running the school store, rotating the mirrored disks of the solar stove, and caring for the three campus cows, jobs are carried out throughout the day. Daily games hour, which lasts from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m., offers students a chance to engage in sports of their choice, including archery, table tennis, and volleyball.

The college bus returns in the mid- to late afternoon, which allows time for the college students to participate in their own conversation class right before dinner, which runs in the same way as the Foundation students’ class, although the topics tend to be more advanced. During dinner, students sit in rows on either sides of narrow strips of fabric laid on the floor, which serve as tables. Each evening, two or three students present short speeches that they have prepared about topics of their choice. Foundation students present in Ladakhi, while college students present in English and also translate the Foundation students’ speeches into English. Following

the speeches, other students are expected to engage with the topic through asking questions. Every night, students listen to the local news in Ladakhi on the Leh station of All India Radio as it is played simultaneously from two stereos placed at opposite ends of the dining hall. Students, volunteers, and staff sing a Ladakhi folk song in unison and a new song is introduced every few weeks. Dinner finishes with several minutes of introspection, a silent period of time for students, volunteers, and staff to reflect on their day. Dinner introspection is taken quite seriously; one evening, a few students were assigned to wash the dishes of every single person because they had laughed during introspection. Each day closes with an evening activity, which vary from dance parties to documentary film screenings to preparation for academic presentations.

### **Teaching and Practicing Responsibility**

SECMOL clearly aims to instill a sense of responsibility in its students through placing the maintenance of the Phey campus in their control. Foundation students participate in work hour on a daily basis, while college students contribute to the campus through two hours of work a week, and each student is assigned a specific job, which they carry out for two months between rotations. Work hour tasks range from farm work to meal preparation to the construction of new campus buildings. Student jobs include running the school store, caring for the campus cows, sorting trash and recycling, cleaning student hostels, and welcoming guests to the campus. When asked about their experience at SECMOL in a questionnaire (see Appendix B), twelve out of the thirty-three Foundation students who responded mentioned the word responsibility as their reason for attending, a feature of SECMOL that they like, the most important thing they had learned at SECMOL, or a way in which they imagine SECMOL influencing them in the future. Additionally, in response to the same questions, of the same thirty-three students, twenty-one mentioned work hour and thirteen mentioned jobs, two programs that promote student responsibility.

While for some students this responsibility was merely something required of them, others internalized this responsibility and applied it to other parts of their lives. For example, when I asked a Foundation student a question about Buddhism that she was unable to answer, she promised to tell me later. The next day, she sought me out to tell me the answer, and informed me that she had asked a staff member for the answer. Furthermore, when I mentioned to a college student that I had noticed her encouraging Foundation students to speak up during dinner activity, she explained that because the Foundation students were younger than her, it was her duty to support them. Moreover, when I asked college students what should be improved about SECMOL, several of them responded with suggestions about students working harder to improve themselves and taking advantage of all that SECMOL has to offer. Granted, these answers were in all likelihood formed due to a miscommunication, however, it is compelling that students believe that the responsibility for a better SECMOL is in their hands.



Photograph by Hannah Ryde. Foundation students Stanzin Lamo (left) and Deachen Dolkar during conversation class.

## **The Relationship Between Farming and Schooling**

In Ladakh, modern education has, in a sense, removed rural children from their historical classroom: the fields. Most of the students at SECMOL come from families of farmers, yet many of them have limited knowledge about farm work. As emphasis on formal education has increased, parents have encouraged their children to concentrate on their studies rather than take part in farm work. A former Foundation student, Stanzin Punchok, explained that although both of his parents were farmers, he had known very little about agriculture prior to enrolling at SECMOL since his parents had insisted that he prioritized his studies above all else, including participation in farm work. Similarly, Disket Dolker, a current college student, recalled her parents telling her that farming was “not for [her]” (Dolker 2016). She believed that most parents do not “understand that farming is a very big education,” and thus do not emphasize the participation of children in farm work, which leads to Ladakhi youth of today knowing far less about agriculture than previous generations, despite living on the same farm land (Dolker 2016).

Furthermore, many students are sent away from home for better educational opportunities at residential schools and private schools in Leh. As villages in Ladakh tend to be small and spread out, there are only forty-seven government secondary schools in Leh district, and only fourteen of those schools enroll students through Class XI and XII. Therefore, many students are required to live in hostels far from their homes in order to study beyond primary school, with some students leaving their villages for residential schools even during primary school. Furthermore, several students explained to me that although they did not usually live in hostels due to the proximity of their schools to their homes, they spent the two or three months leading up to state exams living at the hostel so that increased time could be devoted to study. Thus, both parents and the school system often present agriculture and education as mutually exclusive.

Although the lack of a practical agricultural education can be interpreted as an acceptable cultural shift due to the possibilities urbanization and increased education have created for working in government, private, or non-profit sectors, at the same time as diversifying jobs, modernization has created Ladakhis with higher levels of education and greater competition for jobs. Additionally, most SECMOL students will inherit farm land; thus, the skills students learn through their jobs and work hour are important and relevant.

The majority of the students at SECMOL, as well as the students I spoke with from private schools in Leh, had ambitions of highly respected careers, including doctors, lawyers, and government teachers. Almost without exception, students claimed that their parents would support them in any career they choose, yet, when I prompted them to consider how their parents would respond if they desired a job with a low status, it became clear that the supposed unconditional support was actually quite conditional and depended wholly on the perceived prestige of the work. Until recently, government jobs were the only white collar option in Ladakh; therefore, most educated Ladakhis hoped for a government job and parents tended to push their educated children towards such distinguished careers, however, today the number of government job applicants enormously exceeds job openings (Norman 2016). Nonetheless, several students at

SECMOL reported that it is often perceived as a waste for educated youth to return to their villages to farm family land.

SECMOL calls this notion of agriculture work as inferior into question and aims to teach its students to give “every profession... its own due respect,” thus exposing them to a “greater sense of possibility of what they can do in life” (Norgay 2016; Norman 2016). This emphasis on the diversity of both possible and meaningful work clearly impacted some students; several SECMOL students informed me of plans to farm in their future. College student Disket Dolker explained her detailed plan for implementing organic agriculture in her village, Tangtse, and her intentions of selling her products first in the local and national markets with the goal of eventually expanding to the international market (Dolker 2016). Tsetan Dorjay, a Foundation student who “found [his] interest in... traditional farming [and] ancient<sup>5</sup> Ladakh” at SECMOL also intends to pursue agriculture with the goal of becoming the “best traditional farmer” (Dorjay 2016). Furthermore, when I asked a group of students from local private schools who were attending a ten-day youth camp<sup>6</sup> how food would be produced if they all followed through with their plans to work in the government sector and explained how a similar demographic shift in the United States has led to large-scale, unsustainable industrial agriculture, three students stared back at me, while one remarked that she had never considered this dilemma and now felt the need to consider farming her family’s land.

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<sup>5</sup> After watching the film “Ancient Futures,” based on Helena Norberg-Hodge’s book by the same title, which compares the “traditional” Ladakhi lifestyle with modern Ladakh and depicts Ladakh before it was opened to outsiders as “ancient,” the students began to refer to pre-1974 Ladakh as “ancient.”

<sup>6</sup> SECMOL hosts several youth camps throughout the year for students from other schools. These ten- and fifteen-day camps are designed to share the opportunities at SECMOL with a greater number of students and supplement the academic curricula of government and private schools.



Photograph by Hannah Ryde. Foundation students during work hour.



Photograph by Hannah Ryde. Foundation student Thinlay Zangmo draws herself giving a speech.

## Combining a Culturally Relevant Education with an Emphasis on Cultural Exchange

In keeping with the ‘C’ in its acronym, SECMOL emphasizes Ladakhi culture in ways that the majority of Ladakh schools do not. In most schools, students are taught primarily in English from a young age, although Hindi and Ladakhi are often used to reinforce certain points (Angchuk 2016). Students typically study an additional language and usually have a choice between Hindi, Urdu, or Bodhi (*bod yig*), a formal mix of modern Ladakhi and classical Tibetan which is not synonymous with colloquial Ladakhi (Richard 2015, 61; Norman 2012, vii). The history of Ladakh is rarely prioritized and local skills are generally not taught (P. Yangdol 2016). Finally, although at both government and private schools students participate in occasional performances which include Ladakhi songs and dances, very little time is assigned specifically to studying the culture of students, implying that academics grounded in externally-developed pedagogies hold much more value than local practices. By existing within the context of Ladakh and because students and staff are almost predominantly Ladakhi, schools in Ladakh are inherently culturally Ladakhi and it would be incorrect to say that Ladakhi schools are not spaces where Ladakhi culture is practiced and even taught; however, there is little intention on the part of most schools to teach about the region of Ladakh or the language and practices of its people.

At SECMOL’s Phey campus, Ladakhi culture is practiced both implicitly and explicitly. Both because the Alternative Institute, like any other school in Ladakh, cannot be separated from its locale and the accompanying culture, and because conscious efforts are made to create a school that is culturally relevant to its students, Ladakhi culture is deeply imbedded campus life. It is important to note that as culture is an ever-evolving concept, many aspects of life at the Phey campus can be understood as culturally Ladakh, although for quite different reasons. In a concrete sense, SECMOL’s academic curriculum includes both Ladakhi history and Ladakhi language. The inclusion of the latter of these courses is especially significant, because in other Ladakhi schools, students never have the opportunity to study their native language in its colloquial, contemporary form. Written Ladakhi is seen as somewhat controversial due to the script it shares with Tibetan, which is associated with Buddhist texts, and English is prioritized based on its widespread global use (Butcher 2013, 96). Sonam Angchuk, an English lecturer at the Government Girls Higher Secondary School in Leh suggested that students “forget” about their own language while in school, and instead concentrate on English. This notion of English as an all-important academic language was apparent when I asked several SECMOL students to write their names in Ladakhi and some responded that they were “bad” at Ladakhi, although those same students did not hesitate when writing their names in English.

Students also prepare and consume meals that are commonly eaten in Ladakh, including traditional dishes like *skyu* (*skyu*) and *kholak* (*kho lag*), as well as food that has been incorporated into the Ladakhi diet but is not historically Ladakhi, such as rice and lentils (Richard 2015, 57). Daily dinner activities include listening to Ladakhi news on the radio and singing Ladakhi folk songs collectively. By engaging in farm work, students are exposed to, sometimes for the first time, agricultural techniques that have proved effective in the high altitude and dry climate that characterizes the region (Rizvi 1996, 35). Finally, students live and study with peers from

all over Ladakh, which introduces them to a more comprehensive understanding of the region and its people.

At the same time, the programs at the Alternative Institute also emphasize cultural exchange and an expanded world view. SECMOL relies on English-speaking volunteers from other parts of India and foreign countries, who live at the Phey campus for a minimum of three weeks, to run daily conversation classes and share skills and knowledge with the Foundation students. Many of the topics discussed in conversation class, such as school, clothing, and jobs, encourage both students and volunteers to talk about cultural practices and norms, thus highlighting both similarities and differences. As Malin Linderoth, a Swedish volunteer who has spent two winters at SECMOL and now serves as the volunteer coordinator, put it, by interacting with volunteers, students are able to “see ‘outside their Ladakhi box’” (Linderoth 2016). Students insisted that through talking with volunteers, they become more comfortable with speaking in English and more confident in their abilities to interact with foreigners, which is especially important in modern Ladakh since many people earn a living in the tourist industry. Consistent with SECMOL’s emphasis on exchange, volunteers also described being impacted by their time at the Phey campus. Volunteers reported that working at SECMOL taught them to live in a simpler way by being more frugal or less invested in technology, gave them clarity on their professional interests and personal values, and provided them with new knowledge and experiences. Becky Norman also praised the volunteer model, arguing that speaking is the most effective way to learn a language and that the frequent turnover of volunteers allows students to constantly meet new people and repeatedly practice introductory conversations. In an ever-globalizing world, volunteers provide a valuable source of insight into the world beyond Ladakh at a campus that is fairly isolated due to its location, limited telephone service, and lack of internet.

Nonetheless, the reliance on volunteers presents several problems. Firstly, most volunteers have little to no training in the subjects and topics they teach about. According to Konchok Norgay, SECMOL could be more professional and of a higher quality if the organization hired more teachers rather than “handing over everything to the volunteers” (Norgay 2016). In addition, the frequent turnover of volunteers can be somewhat disruptive and limits the potential for “creat[ing] meaningful connections” (Pauchet 2016). Finally, the some volunteers are fairly unengaged in the Phey campus and seem to add very little to the SECMOL community. Perhaps this is because volunteers pay to stay at SECMOL, and thus do not necessarily feel obligated to do more than the minimum asked of them, or perhaps it is due to the relative flexibility of the requirements of volunteers.



Photograph by Hannah Ryde. Foundation student Stanzin Yountan washes a window during work hour.



Photograph by Hannah Ryde. Volunteer Alix Pauchet (right) teaches drawing to Foundation students Sonam Chosdon (left) and Tsering Namgail during special class.

## **Understanding SECMOL as an Alternative: Brief Notes on Other Educational Institutions**

Besides SECMOL's Foundation Year, several other programs exist for students who have failed their Class X exams. The majority of these institutions, commonly referred to as "tuitions," are privately run and offer supplemental classes that are geared specifically towards readying students to re-sit their exams, generally for a fee (Richard 2015, 63). In addition, some government schools also offer tuition, typically free of charge, to students who have failed. At the Government Girls Higher Secondary School in Leh, students who fail their Class X exams are sometimes permitted to attend classes and meet one-on-one with teachers during recess as they prepare to retake the state exams (Dorje Namgial 2016).

After two years as a SECMOL Foundation student and three attempts at her Class X exams, Kunzang Dolker decided to enroll in Efterskole, or After School, an all-girls, residential exam preparation program based on a Danish program by the same name (Efterskole Welfare Society 2002). In several respects, After School appears quite similar to Foundation Year. The campus is located in Phyang, just a few kilometers from SECMOL's Phey campus. After School also enrolls a small number of students; in April 2016, fourteen girls attended After School (Dolker 2016). The students at both institutions are a similar age and most share the desire to pass their Class X exams as a motivation for attending their respective programs.

However, the two are fundamentally different institutions. While SECMOL's Alternative Institute prides itself on the relevant, holistic education it provides to its students, After School focuses exclusively on exam preparation. Every day at the Phey campus is busy, almost to the point of being overcrowded, and includes a wide range of academics and extracurriculars, while students at After School take courses only in the subjects they have previously failed and have many hours of free time, which they are expected to occupy with studying (Dolker 2016). The atmospheres of the two institutions are also completely divergent; while SECMOL emphasizes community and positive relationships between students, volunteers, and staff, which in turn creates an environment that encourages and supports students, at After School the teachers are reportedly strict and intimidating (Dolker 2016). Finally, Kunzang considered SECMOL a "second home," yet, she confessed that she intends to leave After School upon finishing her exams rather than completing the program (Dolker 2016).

## **Good Leaders and Good Followers: The Impact of SECMOL on its Students**

At the Phey campus, there is a significant amount of emphasis on the future. In conversation class, students and volunteers frequently discuss their own futures, as well as the future of Ladakh and the world at large. Students often asked about my “aim” or “ambition” and I quickly began to do the same, realizing it was a topic students were eager to talk about. When I inquired about how SECMOL would influence them in the future, many students mentioned an increase in confidence and more fluent English as projected impacts of their time at the Phey campus. In addition, many students, especially those enrolled in college, suggested that due to their time at SECMOL, not only they be well-prepared for further schooling and careers, but they will also be improved as people. College student Thinles Dorjey claimed that SECMOL shows its students the “right path of... life,” while his peer Stanzin Dolkar expressed her belief that studying at the Phey campus makes it “easy” for students to “find [a] good life” (Dorjey 2016; Dolkar 2016). Furthermore, by encouraging its students to see the value in a variety of different careers, SECMOL opens students up to considering a broader range of careers. As Tsetan Dolma, a college student, articulated, because of SECMOL she will “be [an] educated person” without the need to run after a “government job or money” (Dolma 2016).

Upon completing their time at the Alternative Institute, many students leave Ladakh to pursue higher education as the options in Ladakh are quite limited; Eliezer Joldan Memorial College is the only college in the region and there are no universities in Ladakh. At colleges and institutions in other parts of India, SECMOL students tend to befriend one another, even if they are from different batches and “always say its because they have the same values” (Norman 2016). Furthermore, according to Konchok Norgay, and in keeping with the impacts students expect for themselves in the future, “SECMOL students are known to have good confidence and do something good for... society” (Norgay 2016). Thinlas Chorol, a member of the first Foundation Year batch in 1999, attributed the success of her professional career to the confidence she gained from her time at the Phey campus. In describing her path to starting her own travel agency, she explained that although she was rejected from several travel companies, a firm belief in her own competence allowed her to persist and eventually create her own company to prove her capabilities (Chorol 2016).

Participation in Foundation Year and the college hostel also influences how students understand education. Thinlas Chorol recalled that after her time as a Foundation student, she hated mainstream education, often fought with her teachers about their lack of commitment and teaching methods, and once discussed the corruption of government education in a school speech (Chorol 2016). Upon completing their Foundation Year, Stanzin Punchok and Tsewang Norphel enrolled in Swaraj University, an alternative institution in Rajasthan, India. During Swaraj University’s two-year program, students design their own hands-on, project-based curriculum and alternate between internships with mentors in personal areas of interest and debriefing their experiences with their peers and teachers (Norphel 2016). Both students cited their appreciation of SECMOL’s alternative model as inspiring them to attend another institution that encouraged student responsibility and learning practical skills; however, because “Ladakhis like to work with

their hands,” and Swaraj University placed too much emphasis on discussing what the students learned for their liking, they both left and returned to the Phey campus in order to carry out several construction projects (Punchok 2016). Participation in programs at SECMOL’s Alternative Institute allows students to witness a different style of education, which often leaves them disillusioned with mainstream education when they continue studies elsewhere. However, SECMOL ideally also equips its students with the confidence and sense of responsibility to make the most out of their education either through diligent and disciplined work or activism.

Based on twelve years as a student and staff member at SECMOL, Konchok Norgay estimated that 10 to 20% of students at the Alternative Institute are changed in a dramatic way by their time there, adding that those relatively few students motivate the rest to act on what they have learned at the Phey campus (Norgay 2016). Ultimately, SECMOL instills in its students the confidence and initiative to act as thoughtful, effective leaders while also teaching them how to listen and cooperate, and thus be “good followers” when it is required of them (Norgay 2016).



Photograph by Hannah Ryde. View of Leh from Leh Palace.



Photograph by Hannah Ryde. The main building at SECMOL's Phey campus.

## **Conclusion: The Dilemma for Modern Ladakhi Youth, and Finding Middle Ground**

A clear tension exists between the desire to preserve traditional Ladakhi practices and the simultaneous notion that only through dramatic cultural change can Ladakhis participate in the modern world. With increasing economic transactions between Ladakh and other parts of India, greater numbers of Ladakhis are able to pursue formal education and consider work outside of the agricultural sector. For many youth, this broadening of possibilities is exciting and parents often encourage their children to pursue careers other than farming, especially prestigious government jobs. However, the number of government jobs cannot accommodate the growing population of young, educated Ladakhis, which leads to an increasingly competitive job market (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 114). Furthermore, in order to feed a growing society, agricultural practices that have been refined over centuries specifically for the high, dry climate of Ladakh must be sustained or a complete restructuring of the food system will inevitably occur, either in an intentional manner or out of necessity.

This conflict between the “traditional” and the “modern” is quite visible in the students at the Phey campus. Countless students told me how much they enjoyed work hour and their campus jobs, with several students even describing acquiring agricultural skills and knowledge as the most important aspect of the Alternative Institute’s curriculum. While only a small minority of students related plans to become farmers, students frequently explained that an education that includes agricultural techniques had given them a useful set of skills for a practical and feasible back-up career. Furthermore, many SECMOL students expressed that they enjoy and value learning about various components of their culture that are perceived as traditional. Yet, the most commonly suggested improvement for Foundation Year from the students was the inclusion of a computer class. Additionally, SECMOL students viewed learning English as a priority and truly prized their increasing ability to communicate in this far-reaching language. The majority of SECMOL students valued interacting with foreigners and several were considering working in the tourism industry. Most students reported a desire for a successful career, and were attracted to mainstream higher education by its promise of making them competitive job applicants. Tashi Tsering, a current college student, epitomized the tensions between the “old” and the “new” that face SECMOL students today by suggesting that the Alternative Institute devote more time to learning about information technology, while also expressing that when he leaves the Phey campus, he will “feel proud because [he will] know [his] culture and traditions” (Tsering 2016).

As Konchok Norgay considered the betterment of SECMOL, he expressed the need for maintaining a balance between “preparing [students] for the future” and “keeping the root [of the programs] in doing farming and agriculture work because that is something that feeds you food, makes you alive, [and] makes you happy” (Norgay 2016). Because Ladakh is “hook[ed]... into ever larger political and economic units” an education based exclusively in agricultural techniques is not a realistic option for modern Ladakhi youth (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 123). On the other hand, an education that is divorced from its physical, political, and social context, no matter how well it conveys the knowledge and tools necessary for modern careers, lacks meaning

and does little to encourage student engagement and ownership. Rather, an education that is at once “location-specific” and global, is best, as it encourages students to think on both a tangible local scale and an abstract global level.

By developing useful habits and characteristics such as confidence, responsibility, and initiative, as well as practicing hands-on skills that are grounded in the local context of the Phey campus, SECMOL students learn in a concrete way, which prepares them to apply their knowledge and abilities on a broader scale. At the same time, through considering abstract ideas and gaining insight into other parts of the world through intercultural exchange, SECMOL students are able to develop a new perspective on their immediate surroundings. In this way, SECMOL’s programs prepare students for a Ladakh that is characterized by the coexistence of centuries-old agricultural practices and cultural roots as well as an increasingly educated, technology-savvy, and cosmopolitan population. By equipping its students with a sense of moral behavior, knowledge about both the modern world and “ancient” Ladakh, and skills in agricultural and academic fields, the Alternative Institute allows students to make their own choices regarding what sort of lifestyle to pursue and prepares them to be successful in a variety of settings.

## Suggestions for Further Research

It would be valuable to study the influence of the army on Ladakhi youth. As Ladakh is a border area, there is a strong military presence. Many SECMOL students I spoke with had parents in the army and several expressed interest in joining in the future. Furthermore, the army maintains many schools throughout the region, some of which are highly competitive, and also holds camps for children. Therefore, the army is often part of the life of a Ladakhi child from a young age and likely plays a role in the development and worldview of many youth.

Another interesting topic would be climate change, and environmental issues in general, in Ladakh. Along with the rest of the world, there are noticeable affects of global warming throughout the region. Warmer temperatures are increasing rainfall, which is especially problematic in Ladakh since many homes have rammed earth roofs, which are not designed to withstand significant amounts of water (Rizvi 1996, 142). Additionally, melting glaciers are causing water shortages and threatening agricultural productivity. SECMOL founder Sonam Wangchuk has designed an artificial glacier, known as the ice stupa due to its resemblance to the religious symbol, to counter this problem. Furthermore, several SECMOL students have started construction companies that specialize in rammed earth and passive solar techniques.

Helena Norberg-Hodge's book Ancient Futures discusses the shifts she noticed in Ladakh between 1974, when the region was opened to tourists, and 1991, when the book was published. She romanticizes the traditional, agricultural Ladakhi lifestyle, praising it for being efficient, characterized by contentedness, and essentially without flaws, and describes development in Ladakh in an almost exclusively negative light, barely considering the potential benefits of development, such as increased literacy and a lower rate of infant mortality. It would be useful to carry out a contemporary study of the issues she explores and report on more recent successes and failures of development. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate how her book, film, and presence are perceived by Ladakhis.

It would also be worthwhile to study the politics of language in school. The primary medium of instruction in all government and private schools in Ladakh is English, while the native language of most students, Ladakhi, is not taught in its modern, colloquial form. Moreover, there is controversy surrounding the use of written Ladakhi, as it shares its alphabet with Tibetan, and is often viewed as a Buddhist script, not to be used for casual, secular writing. During SECMOL's education reform, SECMOL published a variety of reading material in colloquial Ladakhi in an attempt to encourage everyday use of written Ladakhi, but that has largely been discontinued. Furthermore, it seems as though the multiple languages used by Ladakhi students are very compartmentalized; each language seems to have its particular function. A project that investigated the usage of Ladakhi, English, Hindi, and Urdu in Ladakhi schools would provide an interesting vantage point for exploring education in Ladakh.



Photograph by Tundup Angmo. The author, Hannah Ryde (right), with Foundation students (from left to right) Tsering Namgial, Stanzin Ladol, and Stanzin Yountan in Phyang.



Photograph by Namgyal Lhamo. The author, Hannah Ryde, milking during job time.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Methods

I conducted the field research for this project in Ladakh over the course of April 2016. I spent three weeks living at SECMOL's Phey campus and studying the pedagogy and culture of the school through both participant observation and non-participant observation. While there, I engaged in both academic and extracurricular components of daily life. I participated in three daily English conversation classes, helped with meal preparation, assisted students during self-study, and joined students in maintaining the campus. I also attended daily activities, including classes, meals, and student performances. Throughout my time at the Alternative Institute, I spoke informally with students, volunteers, and staff, and also conducted a series of more formal interviews (see Appendix C) with members of the SECMOL community as well as government officials, employees of government schools, and students of other educational institutions. Additionally, I created questionnaires (see Appendix B) to gauge how students and volunteers view SECMOL and used the results to analyze broad patterns in opinion and interpretation. I explained each question on the questionnaire in English to the students in a group setting. Question 6 (see Appendix B) proved difficult for many of the Foundation students to understand, so one of the college students translated it into Ladakhi. Following the explanation of the questions, the students completed the questionnaires individually in English. The volunteers completed the questionnaires individually and on their own time. I also obtained quantitative data about exam results from the Office of the Chief Education Officer in Leh. Finally, I used photography as a means of documenting the daily routine of the students, volunteers, and staff.

Verbal consent was obtained from all participants in this study. The vast majority of SECMOL students were over eighteen years old, however, several were under eighteen. As most of the students live far from the Phey campus, all of the students live on campus and do not regularly see their families. For this reason, I obtained consent for this study from the staff of SECMOL, the *in loco parentis* of the students, rather than from their parents themselves, in addition to consent from the students.

A limitation to this study is that the students speak English with varying degrees of fluency; therefore, some students were able to provide much clearer and more comprehensive answers than others. All of the students at SECMOL are studying English as their second, third, or fourth language, and although the majority of students were able to communicate information and opinions about SECMOL, there were miscommunications during the course of my fieldwork and the depth of conversations and interviews was sometimes compromised by the language barrier.

Moreover, the month I spent at the Phey campus was at the beginning of the school year. The Foundation students were in their second month of school and the college students arrived on April 1st, the same day I did, although some of them had previously spent time at the Alternative Institute. Therefore, many of the students were only able to reflect on a relatively short period of time at the Phey campus and a small portion of the experiences they will have over the

course of the year. Conducting similar research later in the school year would allow students to draw on a greater amount of experience.

## Appendix B: Questionnaires

### SECMOL Student Questionnaire

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Village \_\_\_\_\_

I am a: Foundation Student   College Student   College Student (and former Foundation Student)

- 1) Why did you come to SECMOL?
- 2) What do you like about SECMOL?
- 3) What is the best part of being a student at SECMOL?
- 4) What is the most important thing you have learned at SECMOL?
- 5) What parts of SECMOL should be changed or improved?
- 6) How will SECMOL influence you in the future?

### SECMOL Volunteer Questionnaire

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Home town/nationality \_\_\_\_\_

Duration of stay \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) How did you hear about SECMOL?
- 2) Why did you come to SECMOL?
- 3) What is the value of SECMOL? What is the value of alternative education in general?
- 4) What impact does SECMOL have on its students?
- 5) What do you like most about SECMOL? What does SECMOL do well?
- 6) In what ways could SECMOL be improved?
- 7) How has your time at SECMOL impacted you? Will your experience here influence your future, and if so, how?
- 8) What do you think about the constant turnover of volunteers?
- 9) Do you have any other experience in alternative education? If so, please describe.

## Appendix C: Oral Sources

*Name. Date of interview. Location of interview. Profession of interviewee.*

Stanzin Punchok. April 5, 2016. SECMOL Campus, Phey, Ladakh. Former SECMOL student.

Rigzin Yangdol. April 10, 2016. SECMOL Campus, Phey, Ladakh. SECMOL College student.

Paldan Tondup. April 11, 2016. Office of the Chief Education Officer, Leh, Ladakh. Zonal Education Officer (Durbuk).

Tsering Wangdus. April 11, 2016. Office of the Chief Education Officer, Leh, Ladakh. Lecturer.

Disket Dolker. April 11, 2016. Leh, Ladakh. SECMOL College student.

Gwenaële Bouchard. April 12, 2016. Phyang, Ladakh. SECMOL volunteer.

Skalzung Phuntsog. April 13, 2016. SECMOL Campus, Phey, Ladakh. SECMOL Foundation Year student.

Deachen Angmo. April 14, 2016. SECMOL Campus, Phey, Ladakh. Centralized Residential School (Tharuk) student.

Sonam Chosdon. April 14, 2016. SECMOL Campus, Phey, Ladakh. SECMOL Foundation Year student.

Padma Yangdol. April 14, 2016. SECMOL Campus, Phey, Ladakh. SOS Tibetan Children's Village School (Choglamsar) student.

Ishwarya G. April 15, 2016. SECMOL Campus, Phey, Ladakh. SECMOL volunteer.

Sonam Dorje Namgial. April 16, 2016, April 18, 2016. Government Girls Higher Secondary School, Leh, Ladakh. School Principal.

Kunzang Dolkar. April 16, 2016. SECMOL Campus, Phey, Ladakh. Former SECMOL student.

Tsewang Norphel. April 17, 2016. SECMOL Campus, Phey, Ladakh. Former SECMOL student.

Sonam Angchuk. April 18, 2016. Government Girls Higher Secondary School, Leh, Ladakh. Lecturer.

Konchok Norgay. April 18, 2016. SECMOL Campus, Phey, Ladakh. SECMOL staff.

Sonam Wangchuk. April 21, 2016. Phyang Community Hall, Phyang, Ladakh. SECMOL director.

Rebecca Norman. April 23, 2016. SECMOL Campus, Phey, Ladakh. SECMOL staff.

Thinlas Chorol. April 24, 2016. Ladakhi Women's Travel Company, Leh, Ladakh. Travel agent.

Kunzes Dolma. April 24, 2016. Ladakhi Women's Travel Company, Leh, Ladakh. Travel agent.

#### Appendix D: Contact Information for Future SIT Students

Becky Norman, SECMOL staff and SIT alum:

[beckyladakh@gmail.com](mailto:beckyladakh@gmail.com)  
+91 9622990020, +91 9419299020

Paldan Tondup, Zonal Education Officer (Durbak):

[paldantondup@gmail.com](mailto:paldantondup@gmail.com)  
+91 9419219398

Sonam Dorje Namgial, GGHSS Principal:

[sdnamgial@yahoo.in](mailto:sdnamgial@yahoo.in)  
+91 9419178469

Thinlas Chorol, Ladakhi Women's Travel Company:

[ladakhiwomenstc@gmail.com](mailto:ladakhiwomenstc@gmail.com)  
+91 9469158137, +91 1982257973

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- Stanzin Dolkar, college student.  
Tashi Tsering, college student.  
Thinles Dorjey, college student.  
Tsetan Dolma, college student.

Tsetan Dorjay, Foundation student.

SECMOL volunteers. Questionnaires created by Hannah Ryde and completed by volunteers on April 22, 2016.

Malin Linderoth, volunteer coordinator.

Alix Pauchet, volunteer.

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