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Preserving Identity Through Discourse in a Changing Ladakh

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Shadow Of The Himalayas:

Preserving Identity Through Discourse in a Changing Ladakh

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Image: a cairn built by tourists by Pangong Tso

Abstract

Situated in the rain shadow of the Himalayas, Ladakh is a vast high altitude desert. Its looming mountains, rocky vistas, crystalline lakes, and unique indigenous culture makes Ladakh not only a favorite destination for adventurers, thrill seekers, and camera toters of all types, but also marks it as one of the most ecologically fragile areas in the world. However, Ladakh has only been open for tourism since 1974. Prior to then, the region was fairly isolated, open to travellers only a few months of the year, when the high, icy passes melted enough to let trade through. In the time since then, tourism has increased from less than a thousand people, mostly foreigners, to nearly 250,000 people, primarily domestic tourists, arriving in 2017. Tourism, interconnectivity, and development have had immense consequences for Ladakh's environment and society. Prior to 1974, Ladakh was almost completely self-sufficient; now, tourism is replacing agriculture as the main component of Ladakh's GDP. Additionally, effects of global climate change threaten the region's livelihood and water supply.

In this ISP, I explore identity and resilience in the face of change from the perspective of Ladakhis and tourists. How does tourism and interconnectivity affect the environment and the culture, and what kinds of narratives do Ladakhis create about these changes? How do the ideas of "tradition" and "ecology" intersect with Ladakhi identity, and how are they mobilized as antithetical to change? How do tourist relate to Ladakh, and how does this relationship affect Ladakhis? Through twenty-five interviews and the lens of discourse analysis and environmental anthropology, I show that, despite change, Ladakhi identity persists.

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Introduction

The first thing I noticed when I arrived in Ladakh were the streets, stretching like cobwebs from the Main Bazaar, on which almost every shop, restaurant, and motorbike rental were closed, sealed tightly behind industrial garage doors. The further you moved away from the Main Bazaar, the more like a ghost town Leh appeared. Over the course of my month in Leh, I watched the garage doors open one by one; workers arriving from other parts of India, armed with cans of paint and varnish, gradually set about to wake the city up from its winter slumber. Every day, a different section of the city came to life, jostled awake by the Indian and Malaysian tourists who seemed to increase in numbers exponentially every day, sending sparks of life to Leh's tourist heart, the Main Bazaar, and pumping rupees through the sleepy crimson side streets.

Over the last century, Ladakh, and its capital city, Leh, has grown and changed immensely. Many of the Ladakhis I spoke to, as well as Ladakhi scholars, construct a dichotomous narrative of Ladakhi history: a Before and an After; a Now and a Back Then¹. Without nuance, the recent history of Ladakh can be summed up in two distinct phases: before 1974, when Ladakh was relatively isolated from the rest of the country, and after 1974, when roads were constructed and tourists began visiting the land of high passes.

Ladakh was only opened for tourist forty four years ago. Until then, the district lacked roads connecting it to the rest of India and to the larger world. Up to 1974, for this reason, Ladakh was self-sufficient. Its people survived only on the vegetables and cereals they could grow and the animals they raised; they wore only they could make and treated their illnesses with only what existed in the world around them -- at least, that's the story I've been told.

Tourism came to the isolated Himalayan district in 1974, bringing with it a cash economy, flush toilets, plastic water bottles, taxi cabs, and all the sex and violence of the West. The unstoppable flow of progress, of modernization, of globalization had finally, thirty years after India's independence, reached Ladakh.

Development, which I use in this paper to refer to the socio-economic changes that are at least outwardly intended to increase the standard of living in an area, has coursed through Ladakh like water for a burst dam. Interconnectivity has brought the world to Ladakh and Ladakh to the world. Tourism, which I will attempt to focus on in this paper, although it cannot truly be separated from development and interconnectivity, has drastically Ladakhi ways of life, especially in the most frequented tourist destination. As a result of these three major factors, among of course many

¹ Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures: Learning From Ladakh*

others, the environment and society of Ladakh is very different now than it was forty years ago.

People reveal the way they construct the world in the way that they speak. In this exploration of culture and change, I investigate the way that people cope with and construct a changing world with a focus on discourse analysis but through a holistic lens, to show that Ladakh defies grand narratives, existing, instead, as it perceived by the people who interact with it.

In the first and second sections, I give an overview of the historical context and existing grand narratives surrounding Ladakh. The third section describes the way in which my interlocutors characterize Ladakhi culture, as well as the way its changing, in order to understand how they are individually and regionally affected by such changes. In the fourth section, I outline the environmental issues that Ladakhis face, and provide a few examples of initiatives designed to overcome them, paying special attention to the narratives that they function upon. Having the context of change, the fifth section explores who people blame for the negative consequences of such changes, as well as who people think ought to fix it, and how.



Yaks in Changtang

A Brief History of Ladakh

The area referred to as Ladakh comprises a wide and distinct variety of people from Kashmir to China. It lies in a disputed region, its borders being the subject of conflict between both India and Pakistan, and India and China. Inhabited by just over fifty percent Tibetan Buddhists and just under fifty percent Muslims, Ladakh is a multifaith, multiethnic, and multicultural (though sparsely populated) region in the Indian state Jammu and Kashmir. The region of Ladakh contains two districts, Leh and Kargil, both of which have their own Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on Leh district because I did my research there, but several of my informants are from Kargil district.

Lying between Tibet, India, and Central Asia, Ladakh was situated at the crosspoints of several Asian trade routes for much of its history². Now, it's a focal point for tourism, receiving tourists from all areas of the world to trek, explore, and see its renowned and unique natural and cultural beauty. With tourism came development, roads, imported food and clothing.

Although trade had always been a part of Ladakh's economy, bringing outsiders and foreign objects, Ladakh has never been as connected to the rest of the world as it has now. Traders only came during certain parts of the year, when the high passes were free of snow, but with airplanes and modern technology outsiders and external goods now come to Ladakh throughout the year³.

Climate change, tourism, development, and culture change are fully intertwined in Ladakh. The narratives people construct about themselves and their world are informed by these changes, as well as the historical context that Ladakh is situated in. [pic of Ladakh]

² Interview with Lhamo

³ Interview with Dowa

The Loudest Voices

Early in my research, I was discussing tourism with another guest at my guesthouse, a Canadian in his early sixties named John who had been spending the last three months travelling. I told him I wanted to study how tourism affects Ladakhis. He told me “it destroys them”⁴.

I wasn't surprised to hear his opinion -- after all, it wasn't far off from the narrative that Norberg-Hodge presented in 1991 regarding the havoc she perceived globalization and development to wreak on “traditional” Ladakhi society. Illustrating how “modernization” -- the trend towards a universal (and Euroamerican-centric) version of progress -- gives rise to violence, poverty, and the ultimate breakdown of Ladakhi culture, Norberg-Hodge creates a strong, threatening narrative in order to show the necessity of returning to Ladakh's roots and creating a sustainable model of development appropriate for the region. Such a narrative is alluring: when problems can be analyzed so neatly and solutions can be presented so clearly the effects and opinions can radiate out through time and persist more than twenty-five years later. However, Ladakh has added to her narrative, spun it, Ladakh-ified it. At the same time, it remains perhaps the most cited work on Ladakh, and is therefore an important voice to analyze in exploring the discourse on Ladakh.

The presence of numerous non-governmental organizations throughout Ladakh, several of which were founded by Norberg-Hodge, attests to the persisting focus on cultural and environmental issues by Ladakhis and non-Ladakhis alike. Organizations like Ladakh Environmental Development Group (LEDeG), Ladakh Environment and Health Organization (LEHO), and The Snow Leopard Conservancy aim to balance the human and ecological, supporting sustainable development initiatives and eco-tourism. Other organizations, like Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO), the Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation, and the Leh Old Town Initiative aim to preserve Ladakhi culture, history, and heritage for coming generations. Efforts for both environmental and cultural preservation, which, due to the historical sustenance agricultural economy of the region truly cannot be separated, index a concern that the environment and the culture are threatened.

A documentary film, *The Song Collector*, adds to the media discourse on Ladakh. Part history of a man and his family, part social commentary, *The Song Collector* “explores the uneasy relationship between culture and development and ultimately offers a new vision, inspired by the Buddhist concept of the ‘middle path’, that seeks to find a lasting coexistence between tradition and modernization.”⁵ Less extreme than

⁴ Interview with John

⁵ *The Song Collector*, directed by Erik Koto (2016).

Norberg-Hodge's narrative, *The Song Collector* still offers a strong narrative of cultural give and take rather than of cultural destruction.

Helena Norberg-Hodge and the team behind *The Song Collector* are vital voices to analyze when discussing discourse surrounding the change that is occurring in Ladakh because they both offer strong, clear narratives that counterpose the nuanced, sometimes contradictory narratives of actual people. Norberg-Hodge and *The Song Collector* illustrate how narratives can be mobilized for specific effects, but the people I spoke to illustrate how narratives can be more than just tools of change and reveal a great amount about the individual and their community.



Leh Main Bazaar

Culture and Change

Change is not new in the Land of High Passes, but rapid, globalizing change is. Ladakh has only been open to tourists for forty-four years. Tourism and a large Indian Army presence have brought fast-paced development, demographic change, and interconnectivity to the region⁶. Even though I arrived in Leh when tourism had already been enmeshed in Ladakhi culture for decades, the mingling of the old and the new, the blending of the Ladakhi, Indian, and Euroamerican, made it clear that tourism has changed many aspects of life in Ladakh. Cultural and ecological change as a result of tourism are difficult to separate, and narratively they are characterized in similar ways.

Ladakh isn't a small place. Covering 117,000 square kilometers and composed of more than 270,000 people, Ladakh has many cultural variations⁷. However, as a tourist, there is one variation consistently presented to me: the image of the happy, carefree, agricultural people wearing square hats and long jackets, whose utopian society built upon interdependence and sharing is threatened by the specters of globalization, development, and tourism. But Ladakh does not have a homogenous, perfectly idealized culture and society, and it is not in danger of being assimilated into a hulking global monoculture, although it is changing. Instead, Ladakhis preserve their culture through change, adapting to the circumstances.

"Traditional" Ladakhi Culture

I put "traditional" in quotes because Ladakh does not have one culture, and because culture is constantly changing.⁸ However, nearly everyone I spoke to gave me a similar account of "traditional Ladakhi culture". Most people mentioned the food, the clothes, the language, and the social, interdependent basis of society.

Traditionally, according to Tsering, Ladakhis only ate what they grew in their fields or raised in the pasture. Now, people eat Maggi Noodles, an instant noodle that is fast and unhealthy, and sometimes don't even bother to cook it first. Naturally, this is detrimental to one's health⁹. Food is linked to cultivation, which, when it still exists, can be contaminated by chemical fertilizers and pesticides, disrupting again the traditional food supply¹⁰. Additionally, food experienced by tourists in homestays is often not Ladakhi -- instead, it is something Indian or less expensive, because that's what the tourist is expecting anyway¹¹.

⁶ Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures*

⁷ New World Encyclopedia, "Ladakh". 22 July 2014. <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ladakh>

⁸ Interview with Dolma

⁹ Interview with Tsering

¹⁰ Interview with Dorjee

¹¹ Interview with Tsering

Clothing is also homemade. Employees of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council have to wear traditional dress one day a week. An employee of the LAHDC reported to me that traditional clothing, which is long and woollen, keeps one warm much better, and modern clothing causes people to get sick more¹². However, another man told me that traditional dress, which is very long, is difficult to work in, so people wear Indian or Euroamerican clothes because they are more functional, especially when doing agriculture or other labor¹³.

In school, children now learn Hindi and English in addition to Ladakhi, which is a Tibeto-Burman language that uses the same script as Tibetan. As a result, children and young adults speak a mix of Hindi, English, and Ladakhi, sometimes not even knowing the Ladakhi word for something because they exclusively use Hindi or English to refer to it. Additionally, there is no Ladakhi language newspaper in Leh. Because of this, some people are concerned that the language is disappearing.¹⁴

When I asked about “traditional Ladakhi culture”, however, what was most stressed was always the social aspect. When I was interviewing a woman in her mid-twenties who works at an ecological NGO, one of her coworkers wanted to add to her description of Ladakhi culture, which had mostly included the traditional food and dress:

Tell her about our, you know, our marriage ceremonies are like a community-based activity, not a family based activity. The responsibility of the food, everything, everything, is done by our neighbors, the community. You don’t pay anything from your pocket.¹⁵

Apparently, he really wanted to make sure that I knew about the interdependent aspect of Ladakhi culture, stressing the idea that not only families but also neighbors and entire communities care for each other.

Helena Norberg-Hodge presents a similar account of her perception of “traditional Ladakhi culture”, based on what she observed and spoke to people about no earlier than when she first arrived in 1975¹⁶. Her overall impressions of Ladakhis and their culture centers around an idea of personal and interpersonal happiness, or “joie de vivre”, stemming from social interdependence and community self-sufficiency:

The Ladakhis relationships to others and to their surroundings have helped nurture a sense of inner calm and contentedness... Contentment comes from feeling and understanding yourself to be part of the flow of life, relaxing and moving with it¹⁷.

¹² Interview with Tashi

¹³ Interview with Norbu

¹⁴ Interview with Tsering

¹⁵ Interview with Fatima

¹⁶ Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures*, 61.

¹⁷ Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures*, 60

This idea, certainly romanticized by Norberg-Hodge, is prevalent in local discourse as well. Twenty-seven years after her monograph was published, I received similar answers from all manners of people in Ladakh.

Ahmed, a volunteer who had been with one environmental NGO from the beginning, summarized what traditional Ladakhi culture involved:

At that time, every Ladakhi used to eat all local dishes. Every Ladakhi would speak mostly Ladakhi in their houses -- pure Ladakhi. Most of Ladakhi women and men would wear Ladakhi dresses. And also, you know, we had a lot of traditions of communal harmony, cooperation.¹⁸

Here are the themes that keep appearing, situated in time with only a vague “at that time”. By using “at that time”, Ahmed gives his narration a fairly specific ending, in that the era he describes is over by now, but it lacks a beginning, giving it a sort of timelessness and creating a story that could extend as far back as one can imagine.

Ahmed continues by describing the traditional cooperation that would occur in the villages.

We were farmers, but it was not done by my family, you know. People used to work together. When there’s a harvesting in my farmland, all that group of people will come and do the harvesting -- well, then clearly I have to feed them lunch, and next time it’s their turn: there’s a fixed date, today is mine, tomorrow’s yours. It was so beautiful, so good.¹⁹

By describing the ritualistic aspect of sharing labor, Ahmed anchors the idea of “communal harmony” in concrete experience, giving me a romantic vision of timeless Ladakhi village life. He also ties Ladakhi’s connection to the environment with a society experiencing communal harmony, creating a pastoral image that, like the nursery rhyme “Little Boy Blue”, invokes a sense of easiness and peacefulness not generally associated with the hard labor of agriculture work.

Even foreign tourists have a similar idea of traditional Ladakhi culture. One of the English girls I spoke to mentioned that, although you could see things changing, the traditional way of life was still evident as well:

The traditions are still there, which is nice -- you just hope it doesn’t become too modern... Like en all sitting in a circle, like smoking, drinking chai, a very, very relaxed way of life. At the temple, earlier, so many people going up to do their puja...²⁰

In her narration of what she believes Ladakhi traditions are, Ellie makes it clear that she romanticizes Ladakhi “tradition”. When she says “you just hope it doesn’t become too modern,” she expresses that she believes this way of life is the right way of life, at least

¹⁸ Interview with Ahmed

¹⁹ Interview with Ahmed

²⁰ Interview with Ellie

for Ladakhis. Ellie describes their way of life as “very, very relaxed,” which is similar to the narratives told to me by Ladakhis involving the golden days of happiness and interdependence, but also serves to erase all the difficulties they might face. Ellie, like other tourists, sees a manicured version of Ladakhi life.

On the other hand, Dorjee, an employee of an arts and culture NGO based in Leh, provided me with a concrete example of communal harmony and collaboration based on agriculture and livelihood.

We have water distribution systems, it was called *chupon*... On April 15th, water guards, or water protectors, or water lords, sometimes fifteen or twelve of them, they go on 15th of April upstream, there's a temple. The temple of [inaudible]. He was believed to be the guardian of water by the lay people. So, on the 15th of April they go to put the diverted water back into the main stream, after a ritual. And, one by one, they redistribute the water, through different channels -- streams. And they guard the water points, so that no people steal the water.

Because in the center of Leh there's [always] a water shortage.

Dorjee's narrative is striking because it complicates the idea of a society where everyone is happy sharing with each other. The institution of the *chupon* shows that, because of a historical shortage of resources, a religious-civic system was necessary in order to maintain the peace in an interdependent society. Rather than Ladakhi “communal harmony” being completely natural, then, it is clear that, like in any other society, it was necessary to develop systems to ensure equilibrium²¹. Here, Dorjee manages to both ratify the idea of communal harmony present in the dominant discourse on traditional Ladakhi culture, and refute the idealization that everything was easy and simple before the tourists came.

Existence and Identity

In addition to the idealization of Ladakhi culture, there appeared to be a widespread concern that Ladakhi culture was disappearing. In Leh, for example, one woman who works at a rural education NGO believes that, because of Ladakh's economic reliance on tourism, young adults don't learn methods of agriculture, a skill deeply embedded in traditional Ladakhi experience, and they don't leave the city, so they never learn the specific culture of rural villages.²²

Tsering, in keeping with the dominant narrative I previously discussed, suggests Ladakhi people used to be different -- they used to share with each other, they used to help each other. For example, when someone ate around other people, it was considered polite to offer everyone a bit. However, tourists don't share -- they happily eat in front of other people and don't even offer to let anyone else try their food.

²¹ Interview with Dorjee

²² Interview with Pema

Because Ladakhis see tourists, especially foreign tourists, who they believe are rich and want to emulate, engage in this behavior, they too stop sharing. According to Tsering, this is one -- though far from the only -- reason that Ladakhi culture is changing.²³

Many of the people I spoke to brought up urbanization and out-migration as a major cause of culture change. Tourism is a major part of the regional economy -- one of my interlocutors told me 60% of the regional gross domestic product is a result of tourism -- although a majority of the income generated from tourism remains in Leh and the rest only benefits other tourist destinations, like Pangong Tso and areas in Nubra Valley.²⁴ Due to the concentration of wealth in only a select few areas of Ladakh, people from rural villages migrate to Leh or to other parts of India, where they can make significantly more money than they can in agriculture. In 1981, 8,700 Ladakhis in Leh district lived in towns, while in 2001, the number had risen to 27,500, bringing the urbanization level of Leh district from 12.7% to 25.4%.²⁵ Dorjee attributes this urbanization to a rise of materialism brought by tourism. In his opinion, tourism showed previously agricultural people how to make money, and they wanted to make more, so they moved to cities.²⁶ Similarly, Dhondup categorizes tourism as a very easy way of earning money, especially in contrast to agriculture, which requires a lot of hard work²⁷. As a result of this materialization and urbanization according to Dorjee, “the communal bondings are breaking away²⁸.”

Even beyond cultural change, there are people who believe Ladakhis are actively forgetting their own culture. Dhondup, who is involved with an organization whose goal is to educate Ladakhis on their cultural heritage, believes that it is necessary to preserve the “rich cultural heritage of the Himalayas” both for tourists, who bring income when they come to see it, but also for coming generations²⁹. Dhondup believes that people are forgetting their cultural heritage, which results in the destruction of “tangible and intangible” heritage sites.³⁰ As an example, Dhondup cites the loss of numerous traditional kitchen utensils:

What had happened is, you know, in our traditional houses we have beautiful, ancient utensils. So, ten years ago, business people from outside came to Ladakh, they went to every family, and sometimes they just give plastic jar or plastic pots, and they would take away the ancient utensils. Because here,

²³ Interview with Tsering

²⁴ Interview with Rani

²⁵ Sarah K Goodall, “Rural-to-Urban Migration and URbanization in Leh, Ladakh,” Aug 2004.

²⁶ Interview with Dorjee

²⁷ Interview with Dhondup

²⁸ Interview with Dorjee

²⁹ Interview with Dhondup

³⁰ Interview with Dhondup

people, when they see something new, they are attracted to the new things. So they gave away the old things.³¹

In his example, Dhondup illustrates the way in which he believes Ladakhis reject tradition in favor of newness. Perhaps, when Dhondup says “people, when they see something new, they are attracted to the new things,” he is also going beyond concrete objects and referring to the way in which he perceives Ladakhis to be forgetting their traditional values and societies in favor of Euroamerican or Indian inspired -- that is, external -- identities. By casting the external, here taking the character of business people lacking morals, as negative, Dhondup effectively shows the importance of maintaining Ladakhi culture in contrast to external pressures.

Indeed, Dhondup is not the only one to use the conflict between internal and external as a device in narrative. Tsering relayed to me a story expressing a similar concept, though this time focused on food:

There was incident, there was a lady in Ladakh, we are making a huge rumor right now so I don't know [laughs], she never eats any local food, she's eating only Maggi noodles and Coca-cola, and she died [laughs]. Because its unhealthy food, it's very bad!³²

Here, Tsering is careful to say that this might be a rumor, but she thinks I should hear it anyway. In the story, the woman never eats any local food, so Maggi noodles and Coca-cola, both of which are from outside Ladakh, are the villains, and the woman is presented as a victim who should have known well enough to eat local food -- then she wouldn't have died. Additionally, by saying “we are making a huge rumor”, Tsering linguistically enlists me in the narrative, making me as well as her responsible for any negative or positive that the telling of the story causes -- though, obviously, she expects a positive outcome or she wouldn't have told it. In this story, Tsering juxtaposes the local and the external, creating a sort of fable where the moral is “local is good, foreign is bad”.

This kind of modern day fable telling, combined with the dominant discourse that Ladakhi “traditional” culture is rooted in “communal harmony” and community self-sufficiency resulting in a fairly ideal society serve construct an exaggerated narrative of opposition -- Ladakh versus the outside. Through exaggeration and opposition, my interlocutors ensure that Ladakhi culture, in some form, persists.

Ladakh is changing rapidly. With increasing tourism, interconnectivity, and “western”-style development, people's identities feel threatened, and narratives are constructed to cope with change. In order to deal with the extreme changes in Ladakh, some of which threaten even the existence of a separate people known as “Ladakhi”, people begin to cling more tightly onto their identities. In doing so, they exaggerate

³¹ Ibid.

³² Interview with Tsering

themselves, as well as the aspects of the world they perceive as threats. Narratives like Dhondup's and Tsering's illustrate this effect, as well as its function as a rhetorical instrument capable of acting in pedagogical stories.

Making It Ours

In my previous examples of discourse about cultural change, change, and therefore the tourism and interconnectivity it is thought to result from, is regarded as negative. However, not everyone rejects change and interconnectivity completely, and some people even believe that tourism can be a positive force on Ladakhi culture. This kind of rhetoric, which regards tourism in a more positive light, is characteristic of younger Ladakhis and is indicative of their more flexible definitions of what it means to be Ladakhi

Several people I spoke to believed that tourists could help preserve Ladakhi culture. With his NGO, for example, Dhondup provides heritage talks and tours of the Old Town to tourists, "so that they can understand the importance of our culture and heritage," so they understand the issues in Ladakh, and so that they have respect for the culture.³³ Similarly, Dorjee also organizes heritage walks and culture talks for tourists. As a result, people have paid more serious attention to the Old Town and keeping the area clean.³⁴ Additionally, Dhondup believes that when tourists come to specific areas or pay attention to aspects of Ladakhi culture, it alerts the local people that those aspects are important and should be preserved.³⁵ Lhamo, who works in a museum in Leh, indicated that she enjoyed speaking to tourists about Ladakh and Ladakhi culture -- it made her feel happy, and proud to be Ladakhi³⁶.

Others suggested that the cultural exchange between tourists and Ladakhis, occurring especially when tourists go to more rural, less visited areas, can be beneficial for all parties involved. An Indian woman who works for a rural education NGO believes that voluntourists have no negative effects on culture in the villages they go to. Instead she believes they generate income for villages away from the usual tourist circuit, reducing the chance of out-migration. Additionally, she believes the opportunity to work with people allows them to "live the life of a Ladakhi" -- something they can't experience as a regular tourist, but also something that would help the preservation of Ladakhi culture.³⁷

These examples of tourism preserving culture are slightly rarer than examples of tourism damaging culture, however, in the discourse I experienced. In these cases, the

³³ Interview with Dhondup

³⁴ Interview with Dorjee

³⁵ Interview with Dhondup

³⁶ Interview with Lhamo

³⁷ Interview with Akshiti

divide between external and internal becomes blurred and cooperative rather than exaggerated and oppositional.

Even though people were less likely to speak about the positive effects of tourism, many Ladakhis -- especially younger ones -- spoke about the ways they incorporated external culture into their Ladakhi identity. Younger Ladakhis, who often went to University in Delhi or elsewhere in India, were open about the ways they had adapted Indian, Euroamerican, and Ladakhi culture -- and how that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

One woman, working at the same NGO as Dorjee, discussed with me the subtleties of Ladakhi identity:

There's a very rigid notion of what it means to be Ladakhi... When you are at home, certain things are categorized as good or bad -- it's very black and white, the grey area is not discussed. Even when I grew up I never discussed about sexuality with my parents. The way we see things, in my experience, is very limited, it's not very complex.³⁸

Dolma starts by critiquing the way Ladakhis characterize being Ladakhi by invoking the nuance of human experience. Because she uses the word "we" here, and discusses her own experience, it is clear Dolma is referring to Ladakhi society as well as potentially humanity in general. Dolma continues by saying:

But human interactions are very complex.³⁹

In this one sentence, Dolma widens her narrative to apply definitively to all of humanity. She returns again to discussing Ladakhi society, but the wider application remains.

So I think, the general idea of Ladakhis being polite, Ladakhis being humble, that stereotype kind of breaks when you are away from home -- because when you are at home, you don't really need to use harshness, don't need to fight with another person. But the idea of having compassion, having respect, I think those are the things I'm talking about when I talk about Ladakhi -- not Ladakhi values, personal values. And that's what doesn't change.⁴⁰

Dolma captures here the essence of culture, values, personality -- that they are not static, but situational, changing to fit the occasion, but, perhaps, anchored in something more intangible, more stable, though also not static. In doing so, she critiques not only the way Ladakhis think about being Ladakhi, but also the way in which the larger world perceives Ladakhi culture. By specifying that what she is referring is not Ladakhi values, but personal values, she once again relates the regional context of Ladakh to a global scale, breaking the barriers between the Ladakhi and the Other, the internal and the external. In doing so, she does not erase Ladakhi identity. Instead, she illustrates that

³⁸ Interview with Dolma

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Ladakhi identity, and the personal values one learns in Ladakh, can continue to exist outside of Ladakh, even if this identity is different than it would be in Ladakh. Likewise, Ladakhi identity can continue existing within Ladakh, even if it is influenced by the outside.

The Middle Path

My positionality as essentially a tourist who asks a lot of questions may have influenced the way that Ladakhis described “traditional Ladakhi culture” to me, as may have the fact that I even asked about it. No one wants to make their heritage look bad in the eyes of outsiders, and the fact that Ladakhi culture is changing provides an opportunity to represent and idealize it in narrative -- or, to discursively change it, and adapt external culture to fit it.

Dhondup is involved in an organization that works to preserve Ladakhi culture and to re-educate Ladakhis in the way of their own culture.

So what my NGO does, we do a lot of awareness programs, a lot of heritage education for school children and also programs for the village communities, even the monk communities, just to teach them the value of our own heritage.

We cannot stop modernization, but on the other hand we have to preserve our own cultural heritage.⁴¹

By describing his NGO as preserving cultural heritage while also acknowledging the fact that modernization cannot be stopped, Dhondup illustrates more of a middle ground between the two narrative strategies I explored earlier -- the exaggerated, oppositional strategy, and the adaptational strategy. Perhaps, then, Dhondup’s description is a more accurate characterization of how Ladakh is generally adapting to the fast paced change it faces: unable (and unwilling) to stop modernization, Ladakh externalizes the internal and internalizes the external. That is, while Ladakhi identities change, influenced by India, America, Europe, Thailand, or wherever, the image of “traditional” Ladakh as an interdependent, self-sufficient, premodern utopia is projected out into the world. In this way, Ladakhis discursively preserve their identity while at the same time adapting to change on their own terms.

Flush Toilets and Other Fanciful Tales

⁴¹ Interview with Dhondup

Just as the culture is ecological, the ecology is cultural. As tourism and interconnectivity bring hundreds of thousands of people to Ladakh, the population must find a way to cope with environmental damage that all the fast cars bring. One method, harnessed by people working for environmental preservation, is to draw a parallel between threats to traditional culture and threats to traditional ecology. In this way, a narrative which further reinforces the sense of a traditional society deeply connected with the environment is created.

Environmental Change

Tourism, development, and global climate change combine to create a triple threat to Ladakh's fragile environment. In fact, all but three of my interlocutors agreed that climate change or water shortage would be the biggest challenge Ladakh would have to face in its future.

In my investigations, I realized that environmental damage from tourism is twofold: firstly, there is the direct consequences of specific tourists, ones who feed the wildlife or throw their plastic wrappers out the window; secondly, there is the indirect environmental consequences that all but a few tourists cause, no matter how environmentally conscious they are. The select few tourists who, through knowledge or sheer accident, end up at a hostel where they use composting toilets and eat all locally grown food still contribute to environmental change in the region through transportation, unless they walked into Ladakh.

The direct consequences of tourists is fairly straightforward. Some tourists, for whatever reason, litter, feed wild dogs, or drive jeeps into shallow parts of the lakes⁴². Though there is disagreement about who exactly these tourists are (which will be addressed in the next section), several of the people I spoke to suggested tourist education campaigns would be effective in addressing these issues⁴³.

However, the more indirect consequences of tourism -- that is, the consequences resulting from the very existence of tourists, no matter whether or not they litter -- would be more complicated to address. The fact that tourism exists, and is a viable economic option, has caused cultural change which will continue to impact the environment for years to come⁴⁴. For example, because agriculture is no longer the main source of income for Ladakhis, and tourism is considered to be an easier way to earn money⁴⁵, people have moved away from agriculture and into tourism. This shift from agriculture to tourism has corresponded to a shift from villages to Leh, and, within Leh, a movement of building guesthouses on agricultural fields.

⁴² Interview with Nyima

⁴³ Interview with Tashi

⁴⁴ Interview with Fatima

⁴⁵ Interview with Dhondup

Another effect of tourism that occurs regardless of the tourist is unsustainable water usage. Guesthouses, all of which have flush toilets, tap into the groundwater to supply the water needs of their guests⁴⁶. Flush toilets, which use significantly more water than their traditional counterpart, the composting toilet, not only arrived with tourism, but also act as a status symbol, according to one woman who works at an environmental NGO.⁴⁷

The use of water also puts a strain on the glaciers, which the region depends on for water. This issue is compounded by the fact that Ladakh receives significantly less snow than it did twenty years ago -- where, according to my interlocutors, Leh district received between 50 and 100 cm of snow a winter, in the last two years no snow has stayed on long enough to accumulate -- so the glaciers, which are necessary for irrigation and drinking water due to the limited rainfall in the region, are not recharged during the winter as they would have been historically⁴⁸.

At the same time, Ladakh has been receiving more rain during the summer. Until 2006, Ladakh was never affected by the monsoon. Norbu, who works for an NGO aiming to deal with climate change in Ladakh, compared the natural balance between the Himalayas and the monsoon to a battle: prior to 2006, the snow-covered Himalayas were as powerful as the monsoon, so “no one wins, no one loses”⁴⁹. However, as the snow and glaciers in the Himalayas melt, the monsoon becomes more powerful -- and makes the journey across the Himalayas into Ladakh. As a result, Ladakh experiences erratic rainfall in the summer. As a desert, Ladakh has little vegetation and its soil is loose, so even small amounts of rainfall can cause flash floods, devastating the landscape and people.⁵⁰

Initiatives

People are not standing by and letting climate change run its course in Ladakh. Many environmental non-governmental organizations are based in Ladakh, working to increase sustainable development, innovate methods to combat climate change, and educate Ladakhis and tourists. Notably, several movement harness ideas about traditional Ladakhi culture and religion to mobilize for change.

One such organization, Go Green, Go Organic, works both to literally and figuratively “green” Ladakh through supporting tree planting and organic initiatives. I spoke to one man who donates his time, money, and energy to the organization. He describes the mission of the organization:

⁴⁶ Interview with Norbu

⁴⁷ Interview with Fatima

⁴⁸ Interview with Fatima; interview with Nyima; Interview with Norbu

⁴⁹ Interview with Norbu

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Living is very important. Because, in Leh now, it is not living. It's artificial. The real living, villages are living. They have the Dharma. The Dharma of soil, the Dharma of art, the Dharma of water. You know, water is changing like this, rotation like this. This is very important. So the Go Green concept is the Dharma of soil, Dharma of art, Dharma of water, because you recycle everything you know, there is no more waste of anything. And you know, everywhere, Dharma is there.⁵¹

Through correlating tradition, religion, and ecology, Norbu establishes a definition of Ladakhi culture which is intimately tied to the land, and a definition of ecology which is deeply connected to Ladakhi culture. Norbu's idea of traditional Ladakhi culture is similar to the dominant narrative discussed in the last section in its "ideal" nature, which he illustrates when he describes the villages as the ones really living. He invokes a threat to tradition by juxtaposing the villages to Leh, where, because people aren't living the traditional lifestyle, they aren't really living. Through parallelism of the threat to the land and the threat to the culture, Norbu implies that his organization, his mobilization of Dharma, can be used to address both the cultural and environmental threat. In this way, he mobilizes both tradition and ecology in order to accomplish his goals.

The striking aspect of Go Green, Go Organic is that it completely relies on local volunteers and contributions. Its ideology, based in the Buddhist idea of dharma, focuses on the cyclical nature of existence. Applied to environmentalism, that means reusing everything and minimizing waste. According to the man I spoke to, the dharma of the soil and water is something people in the villages already know, so they are more than happy to assist with tree planting through contributing their labor and resources. Go Green provides for its volunteers only lunch and motivation. On one day, earth day, more than 1000 volunteers showed up to plant. Over the course of the year, the organization and its volunteers plant 400,000 trees⁵². The environmental goal behind the tree planting initiative is to minimize erosion and flash flooding that occurs because of rain, as well as to increase the amount of groundwater. Theoretically, the layout of the tree plantations and irrigation systems should slow water down, provide shade to prevent evaporation, and ultimately recharge groundwater -- but I spoke to another researcher, who told me that environmental scientists had not confirmed the efficacy of the system⁵³. Go Green does effectively mobilize tradition for environmental support, even if the science behind the system may not be sound.

Another environmentalist innovation harnesses tradition to achieve its goals. The Ice Stupa, located on the grounds of Phyang Monastery, uses technology claimed to have been invented in Ladakh to harness water during the winter and create an artificial

⁵¹ Interview with Norbu

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Interview with Andy

glacier. The melting glacier is used to irrigate fields during April, May, and June, before the melt water from natural glaciers becomes available for irrigation. Chetsang Rinpoche is associated with and supports the project, but, according to my interlocutors, does not fund it⁵⁴. The name of the project, its location at Phyang Monestary, and its association with one of the heads of the Kagyu school of Buddhism, serve to implicate Buddhism in environmentalism. Like Go Green, this implication seems to be rooted in actual belief while also serving to increase support for the project. At the same time, the association it creates between Buddhism and environmentalism once again creates a lasting impression of a people who live deeply connected to the environment.



Leh viewed from above

⁵⁴ Interview with Andy

Whose Fault Is It Anyway?

When I arrived in Leh in mid-April, the tourist season hadn't quite started yet. Despite this, I still heard Mandarin or Thai nearly everywhere I went, and the amount of white people in every cafe gradually increased through my time in Leh.

Last year, according to an employee of the tourism department in the Local Hill Development Council, around 270,000 tourists came to Ladakh -- that's almost double the population of the entire district of Leh⁵⁵. Naturally, as explored in the previous section, an influx of this many people has consequences on the environment, especially when that environment is located in the rain shadow of the Himalayas and is already dealing with consequences from global climate change. My interlocutors agree upon many of the effects of tourism and development, but they disagree on who exactly is responsible for these effects. Identity as well as preservation both play a role in assigning responsibility through narrative.

Dichotomizing tourism

The tourists that come to Ladakh can be divided into several groups, depending on who you talk to. There are the adventure tourists, who come to conquer Ladakh's mighty mountains. Some tourists go because their friends are going or have gone, looking for a nice vacation, some pretty photographs, and a way to get away from the daily grind. Finally, there are the tourists that come to see Ladakh's *real* beauty -- the physical beauty of the landscape, the villages, and monasteries, but also the beauty of the culture -- the mask dances, the colorful long dresses, and the traditional interdependent lifestyle. The first and third type of tourist is generally a foreigner, from Europe, America, or another part of Asia. The second tourist, the "everyone else is going so I will too" tourist, tends to be domestic -- from elsewhere in India.⁵⁶

Most people I spoke to constructed a dichotomy in terms of tourism, between the foreign and the domestic. Rani, a woman from Uttar Pradesh who has spent the last eight years working for a social fund in Leh, believes that Indian tourists are more destination tourists, while foreign tourists come to see the cultural aspects of Ladakh.⁵⁷ One man told me that the "problems came with Indian tourists" -- according to him, tourism wasn't an issue until 2008, when domestic tourists came to Ladakh in mass numbers⁵⁸. He blames the amount of Indian tourists on the film "3 Idiots", but other

⁵⁵ Interview with Tashi

⁵⁶ Interview with Fatima

⁵⁷ Interview with Rani

⁵⁸ Interview with Tashi

interlocutors told me that many Bollywood movies had been made on location in Ladakh, showcasing the region's natural beauty.⁵⁹

The impact of Bollywood movies in the region is obvious. At Pangong Tso, the site of “3 Idiots”, I was greeted by a throng of domestic tourists taking pictures as soon as the lake came into sight. On the shore stood a decommissioned scooter that had been featured in the movie, and a sign advertising rates to have your photo taken with it. Later, our share taxi, along with several others, stopped at a small estuary just off the road -- another scene of “3 Idiots”. Reportedly, life around Pangong Tso has changed dramatically in the ten years since the movie was released: small lakeside towns like Spangmik have erupted with guesthouses, homestays, and “glamping” sites to cater to the needs and desires of so many tourists.⁶⁰ In my short walk down the shore, I did spot a broken beer can and a few discarded plastic wrappers. At the same time, agriculture fields and livestock pens remain a common sight in the village, and, perhaps due to the lake's status as a sacred area, it remains crystalline and untouched by swimming tourists.



Pangong Tso just before sunset

The Ladakhis and foreign tourists I spoke to believe that domestic tourists have a more negative effect on the environment and culture than foreign tourists. Foremost,

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Interview with Nyima

domestic tourists are said to litter more because of cultural factors. Both Ladakhis and foreign tourists told me that Indian tourists care less about their environment than foreign tourists, who, because they are more “well-educated” or have come farther specifically to interact with the landscape, rather than to just photograph it, litter less often. An employee of the tourism department in the local government attributes cultural change to a low education level, generally associated with domestic tourists. For example, according to him, domestic tourists are more demanding than foreign tourists, and the luxuries they demand, like flush toilets and Indian food, eventually become ingrained in and even replace Ladakhi culture.⁶¹

Two employees of the regional office of a national grant-giving organization had a short argument about the difference between foreign and domestic tourists during our conversation. When I first brought up the subject of tourism and the environment, Stanzin, a native Ladakhi from a small village to the southwest of Leh, suggested that domestic tourists are less environmentally conscious than foreign tourists because of cultural “upbringing” -- cleanliness is associated with the body, so an unclean environment is less important to them, although Stanzin believes that this is changing. Stanzin told me that “When [domestic tourists] come, like with their families, you only have to give them two things: plenty of things to eat, and then a nice room and a TV. So that’s the only thing that they need. And then after eating they just throw the trash from the car.” Foreigners, on the other hand, because of their upbringing, have “more civil sense” and are more conscious and respectful to the culture and environment⁶². His colleague, Rani, who is originally from northern India but has lived in Leh for the past eight years, quickly clarifies that although foreigners don’t litter, Indians aren’t the only ones who throw trash outside-- locals are quite often guilty of it too.⁶³

Ten minutes later in the conversation, I ask a question about the presence of flush toilets in Leh, where historically dry composting toilets were more common. Rani immediately told me that the transition to flush toilets occurred with and because of the commencement of tourism in the region. Stanzin agreed, adding that Indian tourists put more pressure on guesthouses to have flush toilets. Rani, in response, told him to “stop saying that” and that foreign tourists also wanted flush toilets. She stated, “The point is that the flush toilets came in when the tourists started coming in. Whether they were Indian tourists or foreign tourists, it doesn’t matter. The flush toilets came in *when* the tourists came in.”⁶⁴

The tendency of Stanzin to blame issues on Indian tourists and Rani’s defensiveness is indicative of a wider pattern. Foreign tourists, including tourists from

⁶¹ Interview with Tashi

⁶² Interview with Stanzin

⁶³ Interview with Rani

⁶⁴ Interview with Rani

other Asian countries, like China, Malaysia, and Thailand, are widely believed to be responsible, even beneficial to the local economy, culture, and ecology. For example, “voluntourists”, or tourists who go to areas to volunteer with local populations, are utilized by several NGOs, like 17000 ft Foundation, Snow Leopard Conservancy, and the Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh, or SECMOL. The pictures on Snow Leopard Conservancy’s volunteer page feature primarily white, happy people in trekking gear.⁶⁵ SECMOL requires a deposit for room and board from domestic volunteers that they don’t require from foreign volunteers, citing the fact that in 2013, forty domestic volunteers came and thirty-three who said they would didn’t.⁶⁶ The website provides no similar statistics for foreign volunteers. The narrative link between voluntourists and foreigners versus Indians is therefore evident in the rhetoric used on promotional material, as well as the discourse that casts foreign tourists as more interested in culture and local people than domestic tourists.

Indeed, nearly everyone I spoke to had something to say about the difference between domestic and foreign tourists. One Ladakhi I spoke to who is involved with numerous cultural and environmental organizations acknowledged the difference between foreign and domestic tourists, said:

Tourists, they are really educated, they are really sensitive about the environment, but the domestic tourists -- not all domestic tourists -- but there are some domestic tourists, who are irresponsible and don’t respect the nature and all, but they are really few actually.⁶⁷

Additionally, he referred to foreign tourists as simply “tourists”, providing a modifier only for “domestic” tourists. This also points to the fact that foreign tourists are seen as the “real” tourist, the original tourist -- the positive tourist -- even though he later acknowledges that the irresponsible domestic tourists “are really few”. By asserting that some domestic tourists are irresponsible, even though he twice clarifies that not *all* domestic tourists are irresponsible, he displays a bit of cognitive dissonance and a stubborn insistence to associate domestic tourists with irresponsibility and lack of respect.

Even foreign tourists themselves have beliefs about the dichotomy between foreign and domestic tourists. Adeline, a backpacker from France, told me that she had noticed domestic tourists are less interested in nature and go places via taxi or rented car more often. These tourists, doing what she calls “consuming tourism”, only get a “superficial” view of Ladakh. While some foreigners may fall into the category of being

⁶⁵ Snow Leopard Conservancy India, “Why Choose Us.” <http://snowleopardindia.org/why-choose-us.php>

⁶⁶SECMOL, “Volunteering.” <https://secmol.org/get-involved/volunteering/>

⁶⁷ Interview with Dhondup

“consuming”, she has believes foreigners, on the other hand, might generally be more interested in trekking, temples and other cultural landmarks⁶⁸

At the same time that I was observing the narrative dichotomy between foreign and domestic tourists, I found very little concrete evidence to back it up. In my three weeks in Ladakh, I only saw one person litter -- a Kashmiri shopkeeper. Of course, trash on the streets attests to the fact that people are littering, but the culprits are unclear. The Indian and foreign tourists I spoke to all said they would carry their trash with them if a trash can was not available. Even if domestic tourists *do* litter more than foreign tourists, foreign tourists still are not innocent of environmental damage: as I discussed earlier, large influxes of people, concentrated in only several areas in the region, has ramifications on the environment, economy, and development of the region regardless of who they are.

The sweeping generalizations made by several of my Ladakhi interlocutors and the racialized distinction between scenic/luxury tourists and adventure/culture tourists appeared on the surface to accurately describe the differences between types of tourists in Ladakh, but on further observation and discussion clearly erases the existence of a not insignificant number of tourists that do not fit into such an established dichotomy. Many domestic tourists are interested in Ladakhi culture and cognizant of the environment, and many foreign tourists, only interested in the picturesque valleys and challenging mountains, quite frankly don't care about Ladakhi culture.

For example, I spoke with two people from the south of India who came together to Ladakh to volunteer with an environmental NGO. They did the stereotypical Indian tourist activities, like visiting Pangong Tso and otherwise not spending a lot of time outside of Leh, but they also devoted a good deal of their time to helping the Leh-based NGO organize sustainable development projects. They came to Leh because they wanted to see more of the country, but they decided to volunteer because they wanted a deep experience of Leh, rather than the cursory experience one gets when they devote their journey to seeing the sites and trying the food.

Other domestic tourists, though not volunteering, expressed a similar desire to not only visit Pangong, snap some pictures and upload them to Facebook, but to also gain a deeper understanding of life in this sparsely populated area of their own country. Certainly, I met a few who had come to Leh for a holiday -- one had exams the next week and wanted to relax and study before they began, and a family spent most of the time in their guesthouse room. However, I also met two Indian tourists who were heading to Nubra to trek and several in Hemis monastery museum admiring the artefacts.

⁶⁸ Interview with Adeline

On the other hand, Western tourists aren't always as culturally or environmentally sensitive as they are portrayed. Numerous times, I witnessed Europeans or Americans berating service staff. Once in the afternoon at a coffeeshop/bookshop hybrid, a woman with a British accent was attempting to buy a map from a teenager who clearly didn't speak much English. As she lost her patience, her sentences became shorter and louder (but no slower). Apparently in a hurry, she had already called the boy over from the coffee he was making to help her, and the entire three minute interaction she spent telling him that she had someone to meet, if he could just be faster.

Tsering, a tour guide based in Leh, reported that she often would bring trash left by trekking groups back down the trail, only to return the next week only to find, to her extreme frustration, that trekking groups had left entirely new piles of trash at their campsites. In this case, it is the trekking tourists, typically associated with foreigners in the dialogue, that are creating pollution⁶⁹.

Domestic, Foe-mestic

After exploring the constructed difference between foreign and domestic tourists in dialogue, I had many questions. Their preference for foreign tourists is clearly established through the words my interlocutors used to describe domestic tourists. One man told me the problems started when domestic tourists started coming, in 2008, creating a parallelism between "problems" and "Indians". Several told me that domestic tourists were less educated -- "less educated" is a moralizing word that covers all aspects of a person's life, where "knowing less about ecology" is not and refers only to one discrete subject. Although most of my interlocutors followed their generalizing statement with a "well, not every Indian tourist", several left their original generalizations unmodified. Why, where "western culture" is presented as the threat to indigineous societies experiencing sudden booms of tourism and development, do Ladakhis seem to like foreign tourists more than domestic tourists? And why do the Ladakhis I spoke to report such a difference in types of tourists if they ultimately don't have very different impacts on the environment of the region? Earlier, I showed that one narrative response to culture change is to exaggerate the positive qualities of one's own culture and set it in opposition to exaggerated negative qualities of the perceived threat. This case is not so different.

As I was told, domestic tourists really only started coming to Ladakh in large numbers in the past ten years.⁷⁰ Before then, foreign tourists had been coming to Ladakh for more than thirty years. Additionally, an increase in domestic tourism occurred roughly at the same as an increase in tourism in general: in 2008, 74,334 tourists are recorded as entering Ladakh, where last year nearly 250,000 tourists

⁶⁹ Interview with Tsering

⁷⁰ Interview with Tashi

arrived.^{71 72} Perhaps, then, because an increase in domestic tourists is associated with an increase in tourists in general, which naturally, as discussed, does have effects on the region, the negative consequences of large amounts of tourists are associated with the characteristics of a particular group of tourists. After all, Ladakh had thirty years to adjust to smaller amount of mostly foreign tourists before the sudden increase. When the number of tourists drastically increased, it is logical to blame the consequences not on the numbers but on the new factor in the tourist equation: the domestic tourists.

If Ladakhis feel that it is the type and not only the number of tourists threatens their culture and environment, it also makes sense that they would engage in narrative strategies that create an opposition between foreign tourists, who at this point have been a part of the Ladakhi economy and way of life for many years, and domestic tourists, who seem to threaten that way of life.

Taking Responsibility

On the other hand, not everyone notices the litter strewn through every street besides the Main Bazaar. Three girls from the United Kingdom, travelling for a few months before they began University, reported that they found Leh to be so clean. Accordingly, they believe that Ladakhis really care about their environment. Although in the Main Bazaar, there are red trash cans every ten or so meters, and signs along the street and on taxi cabs encourage you to “keep Ladakh clean”, the idea that Ladakhis are “strict about recycling”, as the girls reported, is interesting, considering Ladakh has no recycling program at all^{73,74}. However, the girls are not unaware of their effect on Ladakh’s environment: although they misidentified the trash bins in the Main Bazaar as recycling bins, they realized that the sheer amount of bottled water they drank would have an ecological impact regardless. At the same time, they were of course hesitant to fully condemn their presence as it affected the environment, figuring that the money they spent as tourists would be used for the environment⁷⁵. In this way, they justify their presence, even in the midst of causing environmental damage.

Tourists are not the only ones that believe they could actually help the environment. Tanzin, a representative for an environmental NGO, suggested that it is important for tourists to visit scenic areas in Ladakh. When tourists go to places of natural beauty, it alerts the local people that, because of income from tourists or that it’s simply “an important place”, they should preserve the area⁷⁶. Additionally,

⁷¹Vladimiro Pellicciardi, "Tourism Traffic Volumes in Leh District: An Overview," (2010).

⁷² Interview with Tashi

⁷³ Interview with Abby

⁷⁴ Reach Ladakh, "Preserve Ladakh Environment: You Can Help!"
<http://www.reachladakh.com/preserve-ladakh-environment.php>

⁷⁵ Interview with Abby

⁷⁶ Interview with Tanzin

“voluntourists”, through devoting their time to environmental initiatives in Ladakh, may also benefit the environment, but, as I discussed earlier, there are so many unintentional effects of tourism, like water usage and sewage-based pollution, that it is difficult to say if anyone is doing more good than harm.

While the idea that money from tourism helps the environment may be true to a certain extent, for example as the three English girls all paid 400 rupees as an environment fee for their permit to Pangong Tso⁷⁷, several people I spoke to blamed environmental damage on the money brought in from tourism. Stanzin, who works at a national grant-giving organization in Leh, told me that “Even if [Ladakhis] live behind trash in the backyard, they don’t care. Tourism is good as long as money is coming.”⁷⁸

Tanzin, who works at an environmental NGO, expressed a similar sentiment. When I asked if awareness campaigns might be a solution to the issues he brought up regarding an increase of guest houses on agricultural land, overuse of water in guesthouses, and sewage and waste polluting the land, he told me

It is not because of unaware or anything, the people who are very aware. But still, they want money, you know. So it is very difficult to make them understand unless there is a law in place. And we can only make awareness, we cannot force a law or something. But you don’t need awareness, they are *very aware*, but intentionally they are doing it to earn money, so this is very bad.⁷⁹

Here, Tanzin suggests that people, specifically guesthouse owners, are completely aware of the damage they are causing to the environment, but they don’t care because their practices bring in money from tourists. He therefore shifts the blame from tourists -- specifically foreign tourists, as he later acknowledges the destruction caused by littering domestic tourists -- onto local Ladakhis.

Dhondup, who is involved in multiple NGOs and sustainability projects, is more obvious about shifting the blame for environmental damage away from tourists and onto Ladakhis. Acknowledging that he has a different outlook than many other people, Dhondup told me:

I always feel that it is the responsibility of our own local people, how we cope with the tourism, and also in how we protect the environment, so it’s our responsibility. If we have many tourists, we need facilities also. So, I don’t think there is much problem because of tourists.⁸⁰

Dhondup believes Ladakhis are responsible for the environmental damage, even if they are not the ones who have the most direct environmental impact. However, unlike Tanzin, Dhondup also believes that awareness and educational campaigns would be

⁷⁷Leh Ladakh India, “Innerline Permits in Ladakh”. <https://www.lehladakhindia.com/innerline-permits/>

⁷⁸ Interview with Stanzin

⁷⁹ Interview with Tanzin

⁸⁰ Interview with Dhondup

effective in encouraging Ladakhis to both care more about the environment and to know the means with which to be more environmentally friendly.

Tsering agrees with him. In terms of dealing with how tourism impacts the environment, she believes that “Ladakhi do care about the environment, but they cannot think about this kind of solution. We have to educate them, we have to inform them.”⁸¹ Even though Tsering is from Ladakh, she separates herself from the rest of Ladakhis in this quote by grouping herself with the “we” that needs to do the educating and referring to Ladakhis as the “them” that has to be educated.

Tanzin and Tsering use this same rhetoric of separating themselves from the rest of Ladakh, who litters and doesn’t know how to handle tourists, but Dhondup groups himself in with other Ladakhis, implying that he also has a direct responsibility to the environment -- not just a pedagogical or advocative one. Although Tanzin and Tsering certainly do engage in activities that directly benefit the environment, for example Tsering reports bringing trash from other trekking groups down when she leads a trek, their narrative strategy serves to remove urgency from their role as citizens who care for the environment. In doing so, both construct a world where they can reasonably justify the continued status of extreme levels of tourism as a fundamental part of the Ladakhi economy and world. Instead of acting to reduce tourism, develop alternative economies, or work with their communities to cope with tourism, Tsering reduces her role to traditional pedagogy and Tanzin, who doesn’t believe even pedagogy is effective, removes himself from any dialogical solution. Dhondup, in contrast, establishes his role through narrative as firmly situated in the affected community, the community that must mobilize, and the home-grown leader who works with his own community to, as Paulo Freire suggests in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, effectively create and disseminate knowledge.^{82 83}

The significance of the differences in the way Tanzin, Tsering, and Dhondup narratively construct their own roles in the ecology of Ladakh lies in the separation or combination respectively of their self with the rest of Ladakh. By acting as pedagogue or non-agent, rather than as collaborator, Tsering and Tanzin to different degrees refute the dominant narrative of a traditional Ladakhi culture that lives in harmony with the environment and with each other. Tsering creates a new narrative where environmental and cultural change has already escalated to such a degree that Ladakhis are no longer equipped to handle it, and by suggesting that she is, she casts herself as separate from other Ladakhis. Tanzin, on the other hand, completely refutes the idea that harnessing

⁸¹ Interview with Tsering

⁸² Interview with Dhondup

⁸³ Paulo Freire, “*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*” (1973)

“traditional” Ladakhi ecological consciousness could be effective, because, at this point, the people who are causing environmental damage just don’t care.⁸⁴

In terms of the future, who people blame for environmental and cultural damage and why will be important because it will inform the way in which people address the damage. On the other hand, blame-making in the present is also significant, because it reveals how people think about the world and community they belong to. Additionally, blame inevitably leads to responsibility, and, as Tanzin, Tsering, and Dhondup show, responsibility-making also reveals information about culture and belonging.

⁸⁴ Interview with Tanzin

Conclusion

“Things are changing without an applied mind.”⁸⁵

That’s what one man who had devoted his life to addressing environmental issues in Ladakh told me. His assessment is morbid and pessimistic, but, even more, it implies that Ladakhis have a passive role in their own society; they are being changed, rather than doing the changing. By removing the agency of the people who the change most affects, this narrative guarantees a fatalistic, destructive outcome. On the other hand, it is clear from the many Ladakhis I spoke to that they are not passive objects, but are acting for themselves, for their communities, and for the way they perceive the world.

Ladakhis are also not passive objects in terms of their own identity. As much as Helena Norberg-Hodge attempted to define “traditional Ladakhi society”, Ladakhis do speak for themselves, and let their actions speak loudly as well. Ladakh is not being swallowed up by a global mono-culture; instead, Ladakh is redefining itself and the global. Using discursive strategies, Ladakhis illustrate their agency, strength, and independence. Laboring under the “demon of time”⁸⁶, waiting for the glaciers to melt, and the colonizers to annex is not what Ladakh does, did, or will do.

Even though Ladakh is in the shadow of the Himalayas, it is not in the shadow of history.



Shanti Stupa, overlooking Leh

⁸⁵ Interview with Ahmed

⁸⁶ Interview with Norbu

Appendix: Methodology

In total, I spent twenty-two days in Ladakh: twenty in Leh, and two in Pangong Tso. My interviews were conducted entirely in English, which was not a huge issue because the tourism economy ensured that many people do speak English, but it did mean that I was unable to interview many elderly people or people mostly involved in agriculture. Interviews were semi-structured, with a list of questions, some the same for everyone and some tailored for specific people, but I always ended up asking additional questions based on what my interlocutors said. I interviewed a total of twenty-seven people, with one group of three and two groups of two. Five interlocutors were tourists, one was an ex-patriot living and working in Ladakh, two were from other areas of India, and the rest were from Ladakh or Jammu and Kashmir. A small amount of research was conducted through observation in the Main Bazaar. All names and identifying information has been changed to protect the identity of interlocutors. All interlocutors were given an oral informed consent summary approved by the LRB.

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