

Ladakh: Restoring the Pivotal Status

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Although social change has never been uniquely a modern phenomenon, the magnitude of transformations that have occurred within the human associations in the recent times has been quite unprecedented. As we approach the end of the 20th century, the usual dichotomy between tradition and modernity seems to have almost disappeared. The new phenomenon of globalisation and the rapid incorporation of virtually every part of the world into one single economic and political community have challenged the old and traditional social theories. The process of modernisation, industrialisation, urbanisation, communication and the rapid economic growth achieved through technological innovations have not only broken the isolation of the remotest and backward human settlements but have also brought many of the marginal societies and peripheral regions into the global mainstream.

Ladakh and its society had always represented one such case of complex and archaic civilization and perhaps one of the last surviving traditional human civilizations that has begun to come under the impact of complex forces of modernisation and development. This paper attempts to highlight the impact of modernity on the traditional society of Ladakh. While making an attempt to analyse the new trends of social change in the region, the paper offers certain suggestions as a way of prescription for Ladakh's development in a futuristic perspective.

Traditional Features

The fundamental features of Ladakhi society are borne out of its geographical location as one of the highest altitude regions in the world. Through centuries the people in this region made their living while adapting themselves to most hostile environmental encapsulations. The geographical constraints of high topography, low precipitation, low temperature etc., had inevitably set the limit of human activities. The subsistence they extracted out of this environment had been an unique experience, so far as the optimum utilisation of delicate and inelastic physical environment is concerned.

The main features of traditional Ladakhi economy were:

1. Small economic units (highly dependent on the availability of water) with limited productive capacity.
2. Limitation of transportation
3. Lack of diversity in major resources.

Social Relations

The above mentioned economic characteristics inevitably set the pattern of their social relations which became rather indispensable in many ways. Firstly, both individual family units and groups and a subsistence production. Secondly, the lack of diversity in resources (as everyone produced the same thing) limited the scope for excess production and internal exchange. Thirdly, the lack of transportation and storage problems discouraged any surplus production. As a result, the unit of consumption corresponded to the production unit. Consequently, they led to evolution of a value system, which were less commercial but more personal in nature. The sharing of mutual problems were a matter of moral obligation often accompanied with a strong feeling of solidarity.

Interestingly, the linkages between social and economic process in Ladakh were inextricably mixed with the political and religious institutions, forming functional units at three levels.

1. Gyalpo or petty feudal structure as political institution
2. Gompa or monastery as religious institution.
3. Khangpa or polygamous family as socio-economic institution.

A triangular relationship among these institutions provided a functional social mechanism in Ladakh, which survived until recent times. The relationship between Gyalpo and Khangpa was known as Chunpa. Since the economic production was based on small and independent units, the political power was swayed not through resources, but through tributes in the form of services of subjects to the ruling class. In other words the Chunpa relationship required a family to send one male member to the service of the Gyalpo. Similarly, a Khangpa was also required to send one male member, normally the youngest son in the family to monastery in order to become a Lama. Although the practice of sending children to monastery was more prevalent among the economically poorer families, as it offered a good out-let for upward mobility as well as for material gains, the rich also used the monastery as a good channel for the redistribution of wealth as well as to acquire spiritual merits. The combined effect of these relationships and the constraints posed by the environment had resulted in the practice of having all the male members concentrated in one joint family, generally sharing a common wife – what has come to be known as polyandry. In Ladakh it functioned as a unique social mechanism, where in one male labour remained out, generally for trade purposes, and one male member worked for the ruler. In other words, it had to face not only economic but also political pressures, resulting in such families migrating to the area outside the jurisdiction of that ruler. Therefore, polyandry was a product of as well as a mechanism to deal with the environmental and non-environmental constraints.

The Process of Change

Ladakhi society is passing through a period of transition in its ethos and culture. Its tradition and institutions are being challenged by the forces of modernity, bringing inevitable social change through the process of innovation, which are getting reflected in variation, and cultural borrowing. These changes are seen in social acceptance, selective elimination and integration. Although in the case of Ladakh these changes have proved to be very adaptive and progressive, some of its own indigenous social and cultural values are likely to dwindle and disappear soon.

In the contemporary times, there have been four important points of development, which have had far reaching implications for Ladakhi society, in its transformation from a backward agrarian society into modern one.

1. If modernization is the central tendency of our times, political integration and democratization are the basic keys to such modernization in the developing societies all over the world. In the case of Ladakh this process started at the time, when Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah democratically integrated Ladakh into the State of Jammu and Kashmir in the early 1950s. The new institutions based on democratic ideals along with efficient land reforms programme had obliterated much of the traditional social and economic mechanisms and given way to rapid and progressive social transformation. The new institutions not only liberated the Ladakhis politically but also economically and socially. Polyandry is no longer practised in Ladakh. Lamaism is also on decline. The formation of nuclear families and diversification of economies are the new trends in Ladakh.
2. The second important landmark change in Ladakh came about with the induction of massive defence expenditure owing to the Sino-Indian conflict in early 1960s. Although Ladakh missed the initial two five years plans initiated by the government, expenditure related to military infrastructure compensated for the short falls. Defence became a catalyst for change and it has become a key factor in the entire process of socio-economic development in Ladakh. Much of the military investment there is associated with the external threats from China and Pakistan. But it is interesting to note that the security threat has stimulated economic growth in the region. In fact, if one is to defend the argument that “defence leads to development”, the case of Ladakh could become a glaring example of that thesis. Not only have the military and strategic imperatives broken Ladakh’s geographical isolation but also begun to act as a modernising influence. Thanks to the Border Roads Organisation, Ladakh was made accessible to the forces of change and development in the early 1960s. The subsequent construction of the airport in Leh has further accelerated the nature and speed of development process.

Without the military, the whole process of development and even the opportunities for technological introduction would have been delayed. The technological side of military requirement has run parallel to the actual and potential civil needs in Ladakh. Whether its military transport aircraft, engineering and logistic support system, and meteorological or even medical equipments system – they all have dual use for both military and civilian life. The significance of the military has to be seen in the context of generating alternatives to the old and traditional social practices such as polyandry and Lamaism which had begun to decline in the post-independence period. A large number of surplus labours available as a result of the breakdown of the polyandry-oriented extended families were absorbed into the military not only increased the window of opportunities especially in the service sector, but also diversified the marginal farm-based economic into a non-agrarian one. This impetus for economic change set off a process, which led to the transformation of the entire socio-economic mechanism with unprecedented implications for the modernisation of Ladakhi society. Through a spin-off effect, the military served not only as an agent of modernisation which generated scientific temper and economic awareness among the semi-educated Ladakhis but it also promoted upward social mobility among them. Much of the local recruitment is from middle and lower

income level families from the Stod, Jung, and Sham areas of Ladakh. It is in these areas that the changes have been brought about not only through the means of high employment opportunities but by the introduction of progressive ideas, encouraging the people to ignore the old social rigidities. A new social class is fast emerging which tends to challenge the traditional social hierarchy as well as the values. Besides, it also tends to break away from the traditional clan-based family of Phasia and Phaspoon to urban and nuclear family system.

Again it was not from a growth perspective of commercial or regional planning, but the institutionalisation of development-oriented establishment such as the Field Research Laboratory (FRL) of the DRDO, which has brought green revolution to Ladakh. Agriculture has been a big success largely fuelled by military-related endeavour. The role of the FRL has been catalytic and its trickle-down effect on Ladakhi agriculture has been immense, over the years. On the other hand, the armed forces have provided a ready market, for the local agricultural products, which in turn has raised the local income level.

The opening of the military hospital in Ladakh has had a tremendous impact on the improvement of health of the people. The investments made by Defence in other dual-use infrastructure have led to downstream development in sectors such as tourism.

3. The opening up of Ladakh to international tourism in the early 1970s was yet another watershed in its contemporary history. Over the years Ladakh has become one of the most preferred destinations for European tourists. Tourism has led to economic boom in Ladakh, improving the living standards of the people, enhancing the process of modernization and change. Much more than the commercial aspects, tourism has helped in the exposure of Ladakhi people and their culture to the world outside. The experiment of tourism in Ladakh has not been fully commercial in nature. Over the years interaction of Ladakhis with the people from outside has evolved a unique tradition in international relations. Unlike in other areas the relationship between the two has been introductory-humanistic in nature rather than being commercially oriented one. For many Europeans Ladakh has become a second home leading to even inter-marriages.
4. Another landmark development has been the conferment of Scheduled Tribe status on the people of Ladakh in the early 1980s. This new status will no doubt foster enormous socio-economic changes in Ladakh, but at the same time it increases the threat of getting assimilated into the majority mainstream culture. However, it is too early to foresee the long-term implications of this new status. The experience of other regions earlier brought under such schedule has shown that reservation policies fostered under-development rather than actual development.

Although there has been certain amount of negligence on the part of the government as far as the developmental aspect of Ladakh is concerned, the overall change in the case of Ladakh has been a success story in the post-independence period. The processes of democratisation, militarisation, as well as the external threat perception, their exposure to tourism etc. have had colossal modernising impact on Ladakhi society. How sustainable these changes should be is a matter of concern to the policy planners. New schemes and mechanism must be evolved to make these developments more viable and sustainable. While many of these changes have been brought about through

intervention from above; new methods and means should be adopted to push development from below.

Towards new Priorities

There are three thrust areas, which, if focused seriously, could transform Ladakh from a vital geo-strategic out-post to a prosperous geo-economic zone. Agriculture is one sector, which has been a great success in Ladakh. If soil and water management schemes are efficiently taken care of through technological intervention, with its rich alluvial soil, Ladakh has the potentials to become a major agricultural region, especially for vegetables and horticulture products. Because of the climatic conditions, Ladakh produces vegetables during summer months, which are greatly required in major north Indian cities. Similarly development in energy supply, particularly solar and wind energy, will spur local food processing ventures. It is time that Ladakh should be opened for both domestic and foreign investment, particularly in the processing sectors such as Pashmina wool, barely, butter, leather, meat, vegetable and fruit. The Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) should seriously think about opening a “Cold Arid Zone” agricultural research centre in Ladakh in collaboration with the Sher-e-Kashmir Agriculture University.

Tourism is the second area, which could become central to Ladakhi economic goal and plans. Few years ago no one could have even guessed that Ladakh’s barren and treacherous mountains would become an important source of foreign exchange earning for the country. Today, it is a reality that Ladakh is one of the top priority destination for international tourists. Potentials are enormous to further promote and expand tourism industry in the region. Generally Ladakh attracts two kinds of tourists. Its Buddhistic civilization attracts large amount of tourist flow from Japan and Europe. Secondly, its majestic landscape attracts lot of adventure tourists such as mountaineering expeditions, trekkers, rafters, etc. With the opening of new areas for international tourists, tourism business is expected to grow further.

One of the world’s magnificent lakes in the region, Pangong Tso is shared by both India and China, which has the potential to become the ultimate destination for both domestic and foreign visitors. Once a fierce battle field of Sino-Indian conflict in 1962, Changthang region of Ladakh could become an area of cooperation in promoting international tourism. The airport at Chushul near the Pangong Lake, abandoned since 1962 could be redeveloped for commercial services. Similarly, Nubra valley is a unique and remarkable amphitheatre of mountains as well as a rich Buddhist culture. In the longer run even the Siachen Glacier described as the Third Pole, now a hot battle field for Indian and Pakistani army, could become a major adventure tourist spot. Promotion of tourism could even entail fresh option for de-escalating armed conflict over the Siachen Glacier.

Ladakh can also become a popular destination for the domestic tourist market. The gradual improvement of relations between India and China will ultimately allow the opening up of Demchok border point which will facilitate millions of pilgrims to visit Mount Kailash via Ladakh by motorable road.

The time has also come now to restore Ladakh’s original status of an important pivot of trans-border trade. As mentioned earlier, border-trade had played a vital role in Ladakhi economy. With the easing of hostility with China, it should be possible now to revive the thriving trade

across the borders in Ladakh with the neighbouring Xinjiang and Tibet provinces of China. Since many of the outlying areas in Xinjiang and Tibet are not easily accessible from the Chinese manufacturing centres, goods and supplies are being transported for several thousand kilometres through difficult overland routes. However, these areas are easily accessible from the Indian side of the border. As it was the practice in the past Ladakh could become a useful transit centre for India's trade with many regions of China. Similarly, Ladakh also provides a convenient gateway for the country to have land access to Central Asian republics.

It is unlikely that peace will return to Afghanistan in the near future, which will enable us to have direct land access with Central Asia. Many in this country are also quite pessimistic about route via Iran. It is also worthwhile to explore the possibility of opening our borders in Ladakh for trans-national trade with China and Central Asia, as Central Asian states like Uzbekistan have signed several agreement with China for joint development of transnational railways and high-ways. The concept of Silk-Route is being revived to spur massive development in the region. With enormous changes occurring in that part of the world, India cannot remain isolated from the happenings in the Inner Asian world. As it is, Ladakh and Kashmir had been part of the old "Silk Route" circuit. Besides, a direct air service from Jammu and Kashmir with Central Asia will go as a positive political signal for countering Pakistani assertion in the region.

Over the years, Ladakh's geo-strategic importance has undergone drastic change, and as the Sino-Indian move towards border settlement progresses, the past imperatives will not hold importance any more. Yet, time has come now to change the old mind-set and act positively for broader peace, security prosperity and stability along the northern frontiers of our country.

The impetus for further modernization and change in Ladakh depends largely on how the development models and schemes are carried out on a more autonomous and balanced line. A study of the Ladakhi society should adapt itself to these transformations and should not only enrich the social sciences, but also be a significant contribution to policy planning in the country.