

LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER: In the cockpit of the world, an ancient people embrace the present while prizing their tradition

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JANE POYNTER PHOTOS

Masked monks at the Hemis Festival depict four of the eight forms of Buddha.

I was sitting on a rickety bench in Little Tibet, chatting, when a young woman stumbled into the room. Her sightless white eyes rolled in large sockets, underlined by protruding cheekbones and slack lips. As she bent to sit next to me, her scrawny frame grazed mine, and she sat on my left leg, feeling my face and arms to introduce herself.

Like almost any American would have been, I was repulsed and uncomfortable. But then she began to sing a lilting ballad, and the strength, control and emotion in her pitch-perfect voice filled the small kitchen, transfixing everyone.

Thukjay Dolma turned out to be one of the most famous singers in Ladakh, a remote patch of India perched high in the Himalayas, where a millennium-old culture struggles to survive. But Dolma's songs are not about old things and old ways. They are

about the importance of education, of saving the Ladakhi's sense of community and unique traditions, of the need to raise their standard of living and to meet environmental and social challenges.

That's Ladakh in a nutshell - one of the highest inhabited spots on earth, home to 200,000 people and a deep commitment to Tibetan Buddhism. But Ladakh is also a land that is struggling with modern dilemmas - lack of water, new cultures pouring in, the continual threat of religious strife, even how to handle the adventuresome tourists eager to visit this remote and gorgeous land. (Hint: bring cash. Ladakh doesn't do credit cards.)

Today, an influential core of Ladakhis is struggling to retain the best of traditional culture - community, art, and history - while embracing the many benefits development would bring. Tsering Samphel, Director of the oldest Non-Government Agency in Ladakh, the Leh Nutrition Project, puts it this way: "Change is no problem, it is inevitable. But community and values should not degrade, that is a challenge". They want prosperity, education, and a higher standard of living, but not at the cost of a way of life that has so far saved Ladakh from being sucked into the religious and cultural warfare that surrounds them on the borders of Pakistan, Afghanistan and China.

Whether or not they succeed in their struggles is important to all of us - and to every developing country around the globe.

One of the amazing things about Ladakh is just how remote it still is. It takes at least 48 hours and four flights to reach the capital city of Leh from the West Coast. Although Ladakh has been part of India since 1947, eight out of ten Ladakhis practice Tibetan Buddhism, which has flourished in this section of the Himalayas since the 10th century. The other 20 percent of inhabitants are Muslim.



Elder wears traditional dress.

Around 20,000 Ladakhis - 10 percent of the population - live in Leh. The rest inhabit villages and tiny hamlets with as few as three or four households, strewn across a rugged desert, cut off from the rest of the world by snow and ice during the eight-month long winter.

During the four months of summer, valleys turn green with the barley that Ladakhis have grown in these fields for over 1000 years, using the same primitive, but effective, technologies. Dzos, a cross between a yak and a cow, pull wooden ploughs and carry loads of manure to the fields from the family outhouses, each a two-storey breezy building with the facilities on the top floor, and manure collection on the ground floor. Narrow canals run alongside every field, turning grinding wheels to make flour. Nomadic tribes herd goats between pastures. Women spin yarn made from the fleece of goats and sheep.

Tsering Dorjay, President of Ladakh's only political party, recalls guiding the first foreigners allowed into the area in 1974. "In one village they were so scared that they did not come out. Everyone was hiding. They saw funny people."

For much of the last 50 years, it looked as if predominantly Hindu India would simply swallow this agrarian outpost whole. Schools taught in Hindi and Urdu, and the Ladakhi language was dying. Many young men left their farms and joined the Indian Army, which offered better salaries and benefits than any local employer. Subsidized rice flooded the markets from southern India, and cost less than locally grown barley.

Ladakhis came to believe that they were backward, their rich culture an embarrassing anachronism, as heavy as the turquoise studded heirloom headdresses worn by traditional brides.

But today, Ladakh is fighting back.

Surprisingly, tourism is proving to be one of the Ladakhis' most important weapons.

Buddhist devotees and the simply curious are pouring into the country. Guesthouses are springing up - Tsering Dorjay himself runs one. Internet cafes serve locals and foreigners. Monasteries are using donations from visitors to refurbish centuries-old buildings. This year Leh held the first exhibit of Thangkas, intricate religious paintings, created by local artists.

All the favorable attention is fueling a resurgence of the Ladakhi language, festivals and architecture. "It is compulsory that hotels be made in the traditional way, and people are building new homes with traditional architecture now," says Dorjay. The local radio station broadcasts in pure Ladakhi so the young are learning their native language undiluted by Hindi.

The Women's Alliance of Ladakh boasts members in almost every village and hamlet. The Alliance trains women in spinning, weaving and other handiwork to sell to eager tourists in Leh, and has helped women open restaurants serving traditional Ladakhi food. "It is the women who carry the tradition and the values. They are the ones that raise the children, and are left at home when the men go to find jobs in Leh or in the Army," says Dolma Tsering, Executive Director of the Alliance.

The Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh spearheaded revamping local schools make them more applicable to Ladakhi life. Young children learn in Ladakhi and English. They no longer read about elephants and camels prancing around Hindu temples that they have never seen, but of yaks and dzos cavorting in a Himalayan landscape.

Unfortunately, many Westerners who want to help Ladakh oppose most modernization. They view Ladakh with romantic eyes, and see only happy, peaceful people living a simple, ecologically sustainable life. Neighbors take turns watching over each other's cattle and donkeys; they help build each others' houses; young and old work, sing and dance together.

Some of these Western Non-Governmental Organizations fear that the independence that a cash economy brings will break the bonds of community that have

been the hallmark of Ladakhi culture. The International Society for Ecology and Culture, an NGO with headquarters in England, promotes what it calls "counter-development" in Ladakh. ISEC has done much to help the Ladakhi people, such as introducing solar heating. However, the group would not have done so "had not other less sustainable heating methods - like coal and oil - already begun to disrupt traditional practices," as Helena Norberg-Hodge, the NGO's founder, wrote in her acclaimed book, "Ancient Futures."

But Ladakhis like Tsering Dorjay say the romanticizers are wrong. They only see Ladakh in the summer. He describes winter, with families running out of food and going hungry, freezing winds howling through poorly insulated houses with little heat, no running water, and electricity for only an hour or two in the evenings.

Many Ladakhis suffered from the nutritional deficiencies of a diet made up mostly of barley, until the local Leh Nutrition Project taught farmers how to grow various vegetables. LNP has provided the nomadic tribes with smokeless stoves, replacing open fires in tents that caused rampant respiratory problems. Hydroelectricity now provides almost half the power. Glaciers are receding all over Ladakh, providing less water in the spring for irrigation. So, the Ladakhis are making artificial glaciers during the winter from the water that trickles from the shrinking natural glaciers. Ladakhis have also begun to gain political power, with the ultimate goal of forming their own state within India.

Whether traditional Ladakh survives these developments matters to all of us, even in the comfort of the United States. Cultures matter, and it matters when cultures die. Beyond the beauty and exotic adventures a Ladakh offers, we humans need cultural diversity as a storehouse of human resources, just as the earth needs species diversity as a bank of genetic material we can draw on to meet new challenges.

Although Western culture is sweeping the globe, here in the West we worry about loss of community, about social isolation, about children growing up without any strong sense of family and place. We desperately need to find ways to live together in a world where religion, suburbanization and social mobility are tearing us apart.

Ladakh has a lot to teach us. Even as Amnesty International reports that racial profiling in America has risen to one in nine people, mostly Muslims, Buddhist and Muslim Ladakhis live together in peace. When a deadly uprising exploded in Kashmir in the 1980s, it threatened to infect Ladakh. But the Buddhist live-and-let-live attitude won out, and the Muslim and Buddhist communities learned to get along.

On July 24, 2004, suspected Muslim militants opened fire on counter-insurgency police in a busy Kashmir market place, killing two policemen and wounding two civilians. But, 150 miles away in a Ladakh monastery, 15,000 Buddhists crowded on the roofs and in a tiny courtyard to celebrate the birthday of Padmasambhava, who brought Buddhism to the Tibetan plateau more than 1200 years ago. Many of the attendees arrived in taxis driven by Muslims. The chanting and swirling prayer wheels seemed a world away from the fighting just across the snow-capped mountains.