

LEARNING FROM LADAKH

Helena Norberg-Hodge

Learning from Ladakh is the subtitle of Helena Norberg-Hodge's book *Ancient Futures*. She feels that Western society has much to learn from the traditional style of life of the Himalayan people of Ladakh, which she first visited in 1975. In the first part of the book, under 'Tradition', she describes the agricultural cycle of the society, the relationships between members of the community, their attitudes to health and illness, and their religious beliefs (the Ladakhis are Buddhists). All through she stresses the 'joie de vivre' that seemed to pervade the whole community, despite its harsh environmental setting and lack of material comforts. It is difficult to excerpt from this book, which illustrates so well the main thesis of our own anthology. We have chosen to reproduce here Chapter 4, 'We Have to Live Together', which depicts how people in a society at peace with itself and with nature relate to each other, and how tolerance and harmony are held as supreme values.

The second part of the book, entitled 'Change' recounts a sad story. It describes how, over the last two decades, external forces have descended on Ladakh like an avalanche, causing massive and rapid disruption of the society, especially in the capital, Leh. The process of change started in the mid-1970s, when the Indian Government opened up the region to tourism, and to development – which, of course, means Western-style development. Roads, energy, medicine and education have undoubtedly brought some benefits to the Ladakhis – but at what cost! Part Three, 'Looking Ahead', consists of the most searing indictment of development and its impact on the Ladakhis. The author contrasts the vernacular Ladakh, where people had no notion of poverty, to the emerging one, where the new economic paradigms have introduced modernized poverty, and where the breakdown of the old community ties and values is causing irreversible damage.

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the International Society for Ecology and Culture (21 Victoria Square, Clifton, Bristol BS8 4ES, UK) to promote discussion of the social and environmental impact of economic development and globalization.

'WE HAVE TO LIVE TOGETHER'

Even a man with a hundred horses may need to ask another for a whip.

Ladakhi saying

'Why can't you give us a room? We'll pay a reasonable price.' Angchuk and Dolma looked down, indicating that they were not going to change their minds. 'You talk to Ngawang', they repeated. 'But we're already renting rooms from him, and it's getting quite noisy. There's no reason why we should rent yet another one from him.' 'You're staying with Ngawang now, and he might be offended if we offer you a room.' 'I'm sure he wouldn't be so unfair! Please go ahead and give us a room, won't you?' 'Talk to him first – we have to live together.' I was spending the summer of 1983 with a team of professors doing socio-ecological research in the village of Tongde in Zanskar. After a month or so, some of them felt the need for an extra room for quiet study. Since the house where we were staying was full of young and boisterous children, we thought we would ask the neighbours. At first I felt annoyed at Angchuk and Dolma's stubborn refusal. To me, with my emphasis on individual rights, this seemed so unfair. But their reaction, 'We have to live together', made me think. It seemed that to the Ladakhis the overriding issue was coexistence. It was more important to keep good relations with your neighbour than to earn some money.

Another time, Sonam and his neighbour had asked the carpenter to make some window frames; they were both building extensions to their houses. When the carpenter was finished, he brought all the frames to the neighbour. A few days later, I went with Sonam to collect them. Some were missing; his neighbour had used more than he had ordered. This was a considerable inconvenience to Sonam since he could do no further construction work until the frames were in place, and it was going to take several weeks to have new ones made. Yet he showed no signs of resentment or anger. When I suggested to him that his neighbour had behaved badly, he simply said, 'Maybe he needed them more urgently than I did.' 'Aren't you going to ask for an explanation?' I asked. Sonam just smiled and shrugged his shoulders. 'Chi choen?' ('What's the point?'). 'Anyway, we have to live together.'

A concern not to offend or upset one another is deeply rooted in Ladakhi society; people avoid situations that might lead to friction or conflict. When someone transgresses this unwritten law, as in the case of Sonam's neighbour, extreme tolerance is the response. And yet concern for community does not

have the oppressive effect on the individual that one might have imagined. On the contrary, I am now convinced that being a part of a close-knit community provides a profound sense of security.

In traditional Ladakh, aggression of any sort is exceptionally rare – rare enough to say that it is virtually nonexistent. If you ask a Ladakhi to tell you about the last fight he can remember, you are likely to get mischievous answers like ‘I’m always beating up my neighbour. Only yesterday, I tied him to a tree and cut both his ears off.’ Should you get a serious answer, you will be told that there has been no fighting in the village in living memory. Even arguments are rare. I have hardly ever seen anything more than mild disagreement in the traditional villages – certainly nothing compared with what you find in the West. Do the Ladakhis conceal or repress their feelings?

I asked Sonam once, ‘Don’t you have arguments? We do in the West all the time.’ He thought for a minute. ‘Not in the villages, no – well, very, very seldom, anyway.’ ‘How do you manage it?’ I asked. He laughed. ‘What a funny question. We just live with each other, that’s all.’ ‘So what happens if two people disagree – say, about the boundaries of their land?’ ‘They’ll talk about it, of course, and discuss it. What would you expect them to do?’ I didn’t reply.

One means of ensuring a lack of friction in traditional Ladakhi society is something I call the ‘spontaneous intermediary’. As soon as any sort of difference arises between two parties, a third party is there to act as arbiter. Whatever the circumstances, whoever is involved, an intermediary always seems to be on hand. It happens automatically, without any prompting; the intermediary is not consciously sought and can be anyone who happens to be around; it might be an older sister, or a neighbor, or just a passing stranger. I have seen the process function even with young children. I remember watching a five-year-old settling a squabble between two of his friends in this way. They listened to him willingly. The feeling that peace is better than conflict is so deeply ingrained that people turn automatically to a third party.

This mechanism prevents problems from arising in the first place. The spontaneous intermediary, it seems, is always around in any context that might possibly lead to conflict. If two people are involved in trade, for example, they can be sure that someone will be there to help them strike a deal. This way they avoid the possibility of direct confrontation. In most situations, the parties already know one another, but if someone unknown to the others intervenes, it is not seen as meddling – the help will be welcomed.

One spring I was traveling on a truck from Kargil to Zanskar. Since snow still covered the road, the journey was taking longer than usual, but though it was rough and uncomfortable, I was enjoying the experience. It was fascinating observing our driver. He was exceptionally large and burly for a Ladakhi and had become a bit of a hero in the short time since the road had been built. Everywhere along the way, people knew him. Travelling up and down the road every few weeks, he had become an important personage in

the eyes of the villagers – sending messages, delivering parcels and carrying passengers.

He had brought a sack of rice, for which he wanted some of the famous creamy Zanskari butter. As he approached an old woman, a large crowd gathered around. Suddenly a young boy no more than twelve years old was taking charge. He was telling this King of the Road how much to expect, what was reasonable. The whole affair lasted fifteen minutes, the driver and the old woman bartering through the young lad, never directly with each other. It seemed incongruous, this big tough man meekly following the advice of a boy half his size, yet so appropriate.

Traditional Ladakhi villages are run democratically, and, with few exceptions, every family owns its own land. Disparities in wealth are minimal. About 95 per cent of the population belong to what one might call a middle class. The remainder is split more or less evenly between an aristocracy and a lower class. This latter group is made up primarily of Mons, the early settlers of Ladakh, who are usually carpenters and blacksmiths. Their low status is attributed to the fact that extracting metals from the earth is thought to anger the spirits. Differences between these three classes exist, but they do not give rise to social tension. In contrast to European social boundaries, the classes interact on a day-to-day basis. It would not be unusual to see a Mon, for instance, joking with a member of the royal family.

Since every farmer is almost completely self-sufficient, and thus largely independent, there is little need for communal decision-making; each household essentially works its own land with its own resources. Many activities that would otherwise require the whole village to sit down and draw up plans – like the painting of the village monastery or arrangements for *Losar* (New Year) – have been worked out many generations ago and are now done by rotation. Nonetheless, sometimes matters have to be decided on a village level. Larger villages are divided up into *chutsos*, or groups of ten houses, each of which has at least one representative on the village council. This body meets periodically throughout the year and is presided over by the *goba*, or village head.

The *goba* is usually appointed by rotation. If the whole village wants to keep him on, he may hold his position for many years, but otherwise after a year or so the job will pass on to another householder. One of the *goba*’s jobs is to act as adjudicator. Though arguments are unusual, from time to time some differences of opinion arise that need settling.

Visiting the *goba* is a relaxed occasion, with little formality. Often the parties involved sit in the kitchen and discuss the problem together with the help of a little tea or *chang* (a kind of beer made from barley). I have spent a lot of time in the house of Paljor, the *goba* in the village of Tongde, listening as he helped to settle disputes. Since my research in Tongde focused on child-rearing practices, I would often sit in the kitchen with Paljor’s wife, Tsering, who had just had a baby. People would come in from time to time to talk to Paljor.

Once two villagers, Namgyal and Chospel, came to the house with a problem. Namgyal started telling us what had happened: 'My horse, Rompo, got loose this morning. I had tied her to a big stone while I went in to talk to Norbu about his broken plough. I don't know how she got loose, but somehow she did.' 'I saw her from my rooftop', Chospel continued. 'She was munching away at my barley; she had already chewed off a whole corner of the field. I threw a stone to scare her off, but then I saw her fall; I must have hurt her.'

Throwing stones, often with a yak-hair sling, is the way in which Ladakhis usually keep their animals under control, and they can throw with astonishing accuracy. I have seen them control whole flocks of sheep nearly half a mile away with a few deftly placed stones. But this time, Chospel's aim had been off, and he had hit the horse just below the knee, injuring her leg. Who should compensate whom? And for how much? Although the horse's injury was more serious than the loss of the barley, Namgyal was guilty of an offence that could not be overlooked. To protect their crops, Ladakhis have agreed on strict rules about stray animals, and each village has someone, called a *lorapa*, specially appointed to catch them and collect a fine from the owner. After much discussion, the three men decided that no compensation was necessary either way. As Paljor told Namgyal: 'Hurting Rompo's leg was an accident, and you were careless in letting her go loose.'

Before coming to Ladakh, I had always thought that the best judges were the ones who were in no way connected with the individuals they were judging; maintaining this neutrality and distance, it seemed, was the only way of administering real justice. Perhaps it is, when you are talking about a society on the scale of our own. But, having lived in Ladakh for many years, I have had to change my mind. Though no system of justice can be perfect, none is more effective than one that is based on small, close-knit communities and that allows people to settle their problems at a grassroots level, by discussion among themselves. I have learned that when the people settling disputes are intimately acquainted with the parties involved, their judgement is not prejudiced; on the contrary, this very closeness helps them to make fairer and sounder decisions. Not only do smaller units allow for a more human form of justice, they also help prevent the sort of conflict that is so much a part of larger communities.

In fact, the more time I spent in Ladakh, the more I came to realize the importance of scale. At first, I sought to explain the Ladakhis' laughter and absence of anger or stress in terms of their values and religion. These did, no doubt, play an important role. But gradually I became aware that the external structures shaping the society, scale in particular, were just as important. They had a profound effect on the individual and in turn reinforced his or her beliefs and values. Since villages are rarely larger than a hundred houses, the scale of life is such that people can directly experience their mutual interdependence. They have an overview and can comprehend the structures

Popular Traditions of Frugality

Popular traditions of frugality were not ideologies, they were living practices. They were the way the ordinary women and men carried out their daily lives and taught their children to follow them. That all this should have been discarded overnight was a grievous loss, and grievously we are paying for it. To want to re-evaluate and revalue these traditions has nothing to do with a desire to return, to inflict a life of penny-pinching misery and privation upon the people. It is rather to wish to restore a sense of balance against the celebration of waste, the sanctification of the superfluous. That we have developed a capacity to see this as normal, even as essential, is an indication of immeasurable losses; loss of judgement and discrimination among them.

Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook, *Revolt Against Change: Towards a Conserving Radicalism*, Vintage, London, 1993, p. 78.

and networks of which they are a part, seeing the effects of their actions and thus feeling a sense of responsibility. And because their actions are more visible to others, they are more easily held accountable.

Economic and political interactions are almost always face to face; buyer and seller have a personal connection, a connection that discourages carelessness or deceit. As a result, corruption or abuse of power is very rare. Smaller scale also limits the amount of power vested in one individual. What a difference between the president of a nation-state and the *goba* in a Ladakhi village: one has power over several millions of people whom he will never meet and who will never have the opportunity to speak to him; the other coordinates the affairs of a few hundred people whom he knows intimately, and who interact with him on a daily basis.

In the traditional Ladakhi village, people have much control over their own lives. To a very great extent they make their own decisions rather than being at the mercy of faraway, inflexible bureaucracies and fluctuating markets. The human scale allows for spontaneous decision-making and action based on the needs of the particular context. There is no need for rigid legislation: instead, each situation brings forth a new response.

Ladakhis have been fortunate enough to inherit a society in which the good of the individual is not in conflict with that of the whole community; one person's gain is not another person's loss. From family and neighbours to members of other villages and even strangers, Ladakhis are aware that helping others is in their own interest. A high yield for one farmer does not entail a low yield for another. Mutual aid, rather than competition, shapes the economy. It is, in other words, a synergistic society.

Co-operation is formalized in a number of social institutions. Among the most important is the *paspun*. Every family in the village belongs to a group

of households that help each other out at the time of birth, marriage and death. The group consists of between four and twelve households, sometimes from different villages. Generally they share the same household god, who is believed to protect the families from harm and disease. At New Year, offerings are made to the god at a small shrine on the roof of each house. The *paspun* is most active at the time of a funeral. After death, the body is kept in the family house until the day of cremation (usually a week or so later), but the family does not need to touch it. The *paspun* members have the responsibility to wash and prepare the body; from the moment of death until the body has been totally consumed by fire, it is they who arrange most of the work so that the relatives are spared unnecessary distress.

A monk comes to read from the *Bardo Thodol*, the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, for the period before the funeral. The consciousness of the dead person is told of experiences in the afterlife and urged not to be afraid of demons, but to turn instead toward the pure white light, the 'clear light of the void'.

On the day of the cremation, hundreds of people gather at the house, bringing the customary gifts of bread and barley flour. The relatives of the deceased, in particular the women, sit in the kitchen wailing the mourning chant over and over between tears: '*Tussi loma, tussi loma ...*' ('Like falling autumn leaves, the leaves of time'). Neighbours and friends file past, expressing sympathy: '*Tserka macho*' ('Don't be sad'). The sounds of the monks' music and chanting fill the house.

The first funeral I attended was in the village of Stok, when a friend's grandfather died. Just after midday we were served a meal. The *paspun* members were in a sense acting as hosts. When they were not stirring the giant thirty-gallon pots of butter tea, we could see them dashing around with plates of food in their hands, making sure everyone was served. In the early afternoon, while the women stayed behind at the house, the monks led the funeral procession to the cremation site. Wearing brightly coloured brocade and tall headdresses with thick black fringes hanging down over their eyes, they emerged from the chapel with a great flurry of drums and shawms. They walked slowly through the fields toward the edge of the village. Behind them came the *paspun*: four men carrying the body on a litter, with the others bringing wood for the fire. After them followed a long line of male friends and relatives. As the monks performed the 'burning of offerings' beside the small clay oven, the *paspun* alone remained with them, tending the fire.

The *paspun*, just like the *chutso*, brings a sense of belonging to an intimate group that remains together for life, united by a common purpose. In traditional Ladakhi society, people have special links not only with their own family and immediate neighbours, but with households scattered throughout the entire region as well. Again, human scale allows for flexibility. If, for instance, a *paspun* member happens to be in the middle of the harvest or some other crucial work when a funeral is to take place, no unbending rule says that he must drop his work and go. If he cannot be there, he may talk with other

paspun members and make arrangements for someone else to take his place.

Much farming work is shared, either by the whole community or by smaller subgroups like the *chutso*. During the harvest, for instance, farmers help one another to gather their crops. This works well since fields ripen at different times even in the same village. With everyone working together, the harvest can be gathered in quickly as soon as it is ripe. *Bes*, as shared work of this sort is called, often incorporates more than one village, and the reasons for it are not always purely economic. Some farmers will stagger the harvest, even when two fields are ripe at the same time, just so they can work together. You almost never see people harvesting alone; instead, you find groups of men, women and children all together in the fields – always with constant laughter and song.

Rares (literally, 'goat turn') is the communal shepherding of animals. It is not necessary for someone from each household to go up to the mountains with the animals every single day; instead one or two people take all the sheep and goats from several households and leave everyone else free to do other work.

Private property is also shared. The small stone houses up at the *phu* (grazing land), though owned by one household, will be used by many, usually in exchange for some work, or milk or cheese. In the same way, the water mills used for grinding grain are available to everyone. If you do not own one yourself, you can make arrangements to use someone else's; and only in late autumn, when water is very scarce and everyone is trying to grind as much grain as possible for winter, might you compensate the owner with some of the ground flour.

At the busiest times of the agricultural year, farm tools and draft animals are shared. Especially at the time of sowing – when the earth is finally ready after the long winter and farmers must work hard to prepare the fields – families pool their resources to enable everything to be done as quickly as possible. Again this practice is sufficiently formalized to have a name, *lhangsde*, but within this formal structure, too, a high degree of flexibility is possible.

Once I was in the village of Sakti at sowing time. Two households had an arrangement whereby they shared animals, plough and labour for the few days before sowing could start. Their neighbour, Sonam Tsering, who was not a part of the group, was ploughing his own fields when one of his *dzo* (a hybrid between the local cow and a yak) sat down and refused to work any longer. I thought at first that it was just being stubborn, but Tsering told me that the animal was ill and that he feared it was serious. Just as we were sitting at the edge of the field wondering what to do, the farmer from next door came by and without a moment's hesitation offered his own help as well as the help of the others in his *lhangsde* group. That evening, after they had finished their own work, they all came over to Tsering's fields with their *dzo*. As always, they sang as they worked, and long after dark, when I could no longer see them, I could still hear their song.