

## The Pressure to Modernise

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Why do traditional societies break down upon their first sustained contact with the modern world? The easy answer is that Western culture is intrinsically preferable—that blue jeans are simply better than homespun robes, the nuclear family better than the extended family.

My own view is very different. I believe that the most important reason for the breakdown of traditional cultures is the *psychological* pressure to modernise. I have come to this conclusion through almost two decades of close contact with the people of Ladakh, or 'Little Tibet'.

Much of the critique of conventional development has focused on the political and economic forces that foist modernisation on unprepared cultures, while the psychological side is largely neglected. And yet no one can deny the profound impact of glamourised Western images on the minds of young people who reject their own culture in favour of the 'American Dream'. Rambo and Barbie Dolls are making their way to the most remote corners of the world, with distasteful results.

This paper discusses some of the less obvious and insidious ways in which modernisation is carried to traditional cultures. I focus on the impact of the media, advertising and tourism, as well as the effects of

Western-style education and economic models. Although most of my examples are drawn from Ladakh, virtually identical pressures are affecting people throughout the developing world.

### **The modern world comes to Ladakh**

Ladakh is a high-altitude desert on the Tibetan Plateau in northernmost India. To all outward appearances, it is a wild and inhospitable place. In summer the land is parched and dry; in winter it is frozen solid by a fierce unrelenting cold. Harsh and barren, Ladakh's landforms have often been described as a 'moonscape'.

Almost nothing grows wild—not the smallest shrub, hardly a blade of grass. Even time seems to stand still, suspended on the thin air. Yet here, in one of the highest, driest and coldest inhabited places on earth, the Ladakhis have for a thousand years not only survived, but prospered. Out of barren desert they have carved verdant oases—terraced fields of barley, wheat, apples, apricots and vegetables, irrigated with glacial meltwater brought many miles through stone-lined channels. Using little more than stone-age technologies and the scant resources at hand, the Ladakhis have established a remarkably rich culture, one which met not only their material wants, but their psychological and spiritual needs as well.

Until 1962, Ladakh remained almost totally isolated from the forces of modernisation. In that year, however, in response to the conflict in Tibet, a road was built by the Indian Army to link the region with the rest of the country. With it came not only new consumer items

and a government bureaucracy, but a first misleading impression of the world outside. Then, in 1975, the region was opened up to foreign tourists, and the process of 'development' began in earnest.

Speaking the language fluently from my first year in Ladakh, I have been able to observe almost as an insider the effect of these changes on the Ladakhis' perception of themselves. Within the space of a little more than a decade, feelings of pride gave way to what can best be described as a 'cultural inferiority complex'. In the modern sector today, most young Ladakhis—the teenage boys in particular—are ashamed of their cultural roots and desperate to appear modern.

## **Tourism**

When tourism first began in Ladakh, it was as though people from another planet suddenly descended on the region. Looking at the modern world from something of a Ladakhi perspective, I became aware how much more successful our culture looks from the outside than we experience it on the inside.

Each day many tourists would spend as much as a hundred dollars—an amount roughly equivalent to someone spending fifty thousand dollars a day in America. In the traditional subsistence economy, money played a minor role, and was used primarily for luxuries—jewelry, silver, and gold. Basic needs—food, clothing and shelter—were provided for without money. The labour one needed was free of charge, part of an intricate web of human relationships.

Ladakhis did not realise that money played a completely different role for the foreigners, that back home they needed it to survive, that food, clothing and shelter all cost money—a lot of money. Compared to these strangers, they suddenly felt poor.

This new attitude contrasted dramatically with the Ladakhis' earlier self-confidence. In 1975, I was shown around the remote village of Hemis Shukpachan by a young Ladakhi named Tsewang. It seemed to me that all the houses we saw were especially large and beautiful. I asked Tsewang to show me the houses where the poor people lived. Tsewang looked perplexed a moment, then responded, 'We don't have any poor people here.'

Eight years later I overheard Tsewang talking to some tourists. 'If you could only help us Ladakhis,' he was saying, 'we're so poor.'

Besides giving the illusion that all Westerners are multi-millionaires, tourism and Western media images also help perpetuate another myth about modern life—that we never work. It looks as though our technologies do the work for us. In industrial society today, we actually spend *more* hours working than people in rural, agrarian economies. But that is not how it looks to the Ladakhis. For them, work is physical work: ploughing, walking, carrying things. A person sitting behind the wheel of a car or pushing buttons on a typewriter doesn't appear to be working.

One day I spent ten hours writing letters. I was exhausted, stressed, and had a headache. That evening, when I complained about being

tired because of having worked so hard, the Ladakhi family I was staying with laughed; they thought I was joking. In their eyes I had not been working. I had been sitting in front of a table, nice and clean, no sweat on my brow, pushing a pen across a piece of paper. This was not work.

## **Media images**

Development has brought not only tourism, but also Western and Indian films and, more recently, television. Together they provide overwhelming images of luxury and power. There are countless tools and magical gadgets. And there are machines—machines to take pictures, machines to tell the time, machines to make fire, to travel from one place to another, to talk with someone far away. Machines can do everything for you; it's no wonder the tourists look so clean and have such soft, white hands.

Media images focus on the rich, the beautiful, and the brave, whose lives are endless action and glamour. For young Ladakhis, the picture is irresistible. It is an overwhelmingly exciting version of an urban 'American Dream', with an emphasis on speed, youthfulness, super-cleanliness, beauty, fashion and competitiveness. 'Progress' is also stressed: humans dominate nature, while technological change is embraced at all costs.

In contrast to these utopian images from another culture, village life seems primitive, silly and inefficient. The one-dimensional view of modern life becomes a slap in the face. Young Ladakhis—who are

asked by their parents to choose a way of life that involves working in the fields and getting their hands dirty for very little or no money—feel ashamed of their own culture. Traditional Ladakh seems absurd compared with the world of the tourists and film heroes.

This same pattern is being repeated in rural areas all over the South, where millions of young people believe modern Western culture to be far superior to their own. This is not surprising: looking as they do from the outside, all they can see is the material side of the modern world—the side in which Western culture excels. They cannot so readily see the social or psychological dimensions—the stress, the loneliness, the fear of growing old. Nor can they see environmental decay, inflation, or unemployment. On the other hand, they know their own culture inside out, including all its limitations and imperfections.

In Ladakh and elsewhere in the South, the sudden influx of Western influences has caused some people—particularly the young men—to develop feelings of inferiority. They reject their own culture wholesale, and at the same time eagerly embrace the new one. They rush after the symbols of modernity: sunglasses, Walkmans and blue jeans—not because they find those jeans more attractive or comfortable, but because they are symbols of modern life.

Modern symbols have also contributed to an increase in aggression in Ladakh. Young boys now see violence glamourised on the screen. From Western-style films, they can easily get the impression that if they want to be modern, they should smoke one cigarette after another, get a fast car, and race through the countryside shooting

people left and right!

It has been painful for me to see the changes in young Ladakhi friends. Of course they don't all turn violent, but they do become angry and less secure. I have seen a gentle culture change—a culture in which men, even young men, were not in the slightest bit ashamed to cuddle a baby or to be loving and soft with their grandmothers.

### **Western-style education**

No one can deny the value of real education—the widening and enrichment of knowledge. But today in the Third World, education has become something quite different. It isolates children from their culture and from nature, training them instead to become narrow specialists in a Westernised urban environment. This process has been particularly striking in Ladakh, where modern schooling acts almost as a blindfold, preventing children from seeing the very context in which they live. They leave school unable to use their own resources, unable to function in their own world.

With the exception of religious training in the monasteries, Ladakh's traditional culture had no separate process called 'education'.

Instead, education was the product of a person's intimate relationship with their community and their ecosystem. Children learned from grandparents, family and friends, and from the natural world.

Helping with the sowing, for instance, they would learn that on one

side of the village it was a little warmer, on the other side a little colder. From their own experience children would come to distinguish between different strains of barley and the specific growing conditions each strain preferred. They learned to recognise even the tiniest wild plant and how to use it, and how to pick out a particular animal on a faraway mountain slope. They learned about connection, process, and change, about the intricate web of fluctuating relationships in the natural world around them.

For generation after generation, Ladakhis grew up learning how to provide themselves with clothing and shelter; how to make shoes out of yak skin and robes from the wool of sheep; how to build houses out of mud and stone. Education was location-specific and nurtured an intimate relationship with the living world. It gave children an intuitive awareness that allowed them, as they grew older, to use resources in an effective and sustainable way.

None of that knowledge is provided in the modern school. Children are trained to become specialists in a technological, rather than an ecological, society. School is a place to forget traditional skills, and worse, to look down on them.

Western education first came to Ladakhi villages in the 1970s. Today there are about two hundred schools. The basic curriculum is a poor imitation of that taught in other parts of India, which itself is an imitation of British education. There is almost nothing Ladakhi about it.

Once, while visiting a classroom in the capital, Leh, I saw a drawing

in a textbook of a child's bedroom that could have been in London or New York. It showed a pile of neatly folded handkerchiefs on a four-poster bed and gave instructions as to which drawer of the vanity unit to keep them in. Many other schoolbooks were equally absurd and inappropriate. For homework in one class, pupils were supposed to figure out the angle of incidence that the Leaning Tower of Pisa makes with the ground. Another time they were struggling with an English translation of *The Iliad*.

Most of the skills Ladakhi children learn in school will never be of real use to them. In essence, they receive an inferior version of an education appropriate for a New Yorker. They learn from books written by people who have never set foot in Ladakh, who know nothing about growing barley at 12,000 feet or about making houses out of sun-dried bricks.

This situation is not unique to Ladakh. In every corner of the world today, the process called 'education' is based on the same assumptions and the same Eurocentric model. The focus is on faraway facts and figures, on 'universal' knowledge. The books propagate information that is meant to be appropriate for the entire planet. But since only a kind of knowledge that is far removed from specific ecosystems and cultures can be universally applicable, what children learn is essentially synthetic, divorced from the living context. If they go on to higher education, they may learn about building houses, but these houses will be of concrete and steel, the universal box. So too, if they study agriculture, they will learn about industrial farming: chemical fertilisers and pesticides, large machinery and hybrid seeds. The Western educational system is

making us all poorer by teaching people around the world to use the same industrial resources, ignoring those of their own environment. In this way education is creating artificial scarcity and inducing competition.

In Ladakh and elsewhere, modern education not only ignores local resources, but worse still, robs children of their self-esteem. Everything in school promotes the Western model and, as a direct consequence, makes children think of themselves and their traditions as inferior.

A few years ago, Ladakhi schoolchildren were asked to imagine their region in the year 2000. A little girl wrote, 'Before 1974, Ladakh was not known to the world. People were uncivilised. There was a smile on every face. They don't need money. Whatever they had was enough for them.' In another essay a child wrote, 'They sing their own songs like they feel disgrace, but they sing English and Hindi songs with great interest... But in these days we find that maximum people and persons didn't wear our own dress, like feeling disgrace.'

Education pulls people away from agriculture into the city, where they become dependent on the money economy. Traditionally there was no such thing as unemployment. But in the modern sector there is now intense competition for a very limited number of paying jobs, principally in the government. As a result, unemployment is already a serious problem.

Modern education has brought some obvious benefits, like

improvement in the literacy rate. It has also enabled the Ladakhis to be more informed about the forces at play in the world outside. In so doing, however, it has divided Ladakhis from each other and the land and put them on the lowest rung of the global economic ladder.

### **Local economy vs. global economy**

In the past individual Ladakhis had real power, since political and economic units were small and each person was able to deal directly with the other members of the community. Today, 'development' is hooking people into ever-larger units. In political terms, each Ladakhi has become one of 800 million, and, as part of the global economy, one of several billion.

In the traditional economy, everyone knew they had to depend directly on family, friends and neighbours. But in the new economic system, one's political and economic interactions take a detour via an anonymous bureaucracy. The fabric of local interdependence is disintegrating as the distance between people increases.

So too are traditional levels of tolerance and cooperation. This is particularly true in the villages near Leh, where disputes and acrimony within close-knit communities and even families have dramatically increased in the last few years. I have even seen heated arguments over the allocation of irrigation water, a procedure that had previously been managed smoothly within a cooperative framework.

As mutual aid is replaced by a dependence on faraway forces, people begin to feel powerless to make decisions over their own lives. At all levels, passivity, even apathy, is setting in; people are abdicating personal responsibility. In the traditional village, for example, repairing irrigation canals was a task shared by the whole community. As soon as a channel developed a leak, groups of people would start working away with shovels patching it up. Now people see this as the government's responsibility, and will let a channel go on leaking until the job is done for them. The more the government does for the villagers, the less they feel inclined to help themselves.

In the process, Ladakhis are starting to change their perception of the past. In the early days, people would tell me there had never been hunger in Ladakh. I kept hearing the expression *tungbos zabos*: 'enough to drink, enough to eat'. Now, particularly in the modern sector, people can be heard saying, 'Development is essential; in the past we couldn't manage, we didn't have enough.'

The cultural centralisation that occurs through the media is also contributing to this passivity, as well as to a growing insecurity. Traditionally, village life included lots of dancing, singing and theatre. People of all ages joined in. In a group sitting around the fire, even toddlers would dance, with the help of older siblings or friends. Everyone knew how to sing, to act, to play music. Now that the radio has come to Ladakh, people do not need to sing their own songs or tell their own stories. Instead, they can sit and listen to the best singer, the best storyteller. But the result is that people become inhibited and self-conscious. They are no longer comparing themselves to neighbours and friends, who are real people—some

better at singing but perhaps not so good at dancing—and one is never as good as the stars on the radio. Community ties are also broken when people sit passively listening to the very best rather than making music or dancing together.

### **Artificial needs**

Before the changes brought by tourism and modernisation, the Ladakhis were self-sufficient, psychologically as well as materially. There was no desire for the sort of development that later came to be seen as a 'need'. Time and again, when I asked people about the changes that were coming they showed no great interest in being modernised; sometimes they were even suspicious. In remote areas, when a road was about to be built, people at best felt ambivalent about the prospect. The same was true of electricity. I remember distinctly how, in 1975, people in Stagmo village laughed about the fuss that was being made to bring electric lights to neighbouring villages. They thought it was a joke that so much effort and money was spent on what they took to be a ludicrous gain: 'Is it worth all that bother just to have that thing dangling from your ceiling?'

Two years ago, when I arrived in the same village to meet the council, the first thing they said to me was, 'Why do you bother to come to our backward village where we live in the dark?' They said it jokingly, but it was obvious they were ashamed of the fact they did not have electricity.

Before people's sense of self-respect and self-worth had been

shaken, they did not need electricity to prove they were civilised. But within a short period the forces of development so undermined people's self-esteem that not only electricity, but Punjabi rice and plastic have become needs. I have seen people proudly wear wristwatches they cannot read and for which they have no use. And as the desire to appear modern grows, people are rejecting their own culture. Even the traditional foods are no longer a source of pride. Now when I'm a guest in a village, people apologise if they serve *ngamphe* instead of instant noodles.

Surprisingly, perhaps, modernisation in Ladakh is also leading to a loss of individuality. As people become self-conscious and insecure, they feel pressure to conform, to live up to the idealised images—to the American Dream. By contrast, in the traditional village, where everyone wears the same clothes and looks the same to the casual observer, there seems to be more freedom to relax and be who you really are. As part of a close-knit community, people feel secure enough to be themselves.

As local economic and political ties are broken, the people around you become more and more anonymous. At the same time, life speeds up and mobility increases, making even familiar relations more superficial and brief. The connections between people are reduced largely to externals. A person comes to be identified with what they have rather than what they are, and disappear behind their clothes and other belongings.

## **A people divided**

Perhaps the most tragic of all the changes I have observed in Ladakh is the vicious circle in which individual insecurity contributes to a weakening of family and community ties, which in turn further shakes individual self-esteem. Consumerism plays a central role in this whole process, since emotional insecurity contributes to a hunger for material status symbols. The need for recognition and acceptance fuels the drive to acquire possessions—possessions that will make you somebody. Ultimately, this is a far more important motivating force than a fascination for the things themselves.

It is heartbreaking to see people buying things to be admired, respected, and ultimately loved, when in fact the effect is almost inevitably the opposite. The individual with the new shiny car is set apart, and this furthers the need to be accepted. A cycle is set in motion in which people become more and more divided from themselves and from one another.

I've seen people divided from one another in many ways. A gap is developing between young and old, male and female, rich and poor, Buddhist and Muslim. The newly created division between modern, educated expert and illiterate, 'backward' farmer is perhaps the biggest of all. Modernised inhabitants of Leh have more in common with someone from Delhi or Calcutta than with their own relatives who have remained on the land, and they tend to look down on anyone less modern. Some children living in the modern sector are now so distanced from their parents and grandparents that they don't even speak the same language. Educated in Urdu and English, they are losing mastery of their native tongue.

Around the world, another consequence of development is that the men leave their families in the rural sector to earn money in the modern economy. The men become part of the technologically based life outside the home and are seen as the only productive members of society. In Ladakh, the roles of male and female are becoming increasingly polarised as their work becomes more differentiated.

Women become invisible shadows. They do not earn money for their work, so they are no longer seen as 'productive'. Their work is not included as part of the Gross National Product. In government statistics, the 10% or so of Ladakhis who work in the modern sector are listed according to their occupations; the other 90%—housewives and traditional farmers—are lumped together as 'non-workers'. Farmers and women are coming to be viewed as inferior, and they themselves are developing feelings of insecurity and inadequacy.

Over the years I have seen the strong, outgoing women of Ladakh being replaced by a new generation—women who are unsure of themselves and extremely concerned with their appearance. Traditionally, the way a woman looked was important, but her capabilities—including tolerance and social skills—were much more appreciated.

Despite their new dominant role, men also clearly suffer as a result of the breakdown of family and community ties. Among other things, they are deprived of contact with children. When they are young, the new macho image prevents them from showing any affection, while in later life as fathers, their work keeps them away

from home.

### **Breaking the bonds between young and old**

In the traditional culture children benefited not only from continuous contact with both mother and father, but also from a way of life in which different age groups constantly interacted. It was quite natural for older children to feel a sense of responsibility for the younger ones. A younger child in turn looked up with respect and admiration, seeking to imitate the older ones. Growing up was a natural, non-competitive learning process.

Now children are split into different age groups at school. This sort of leveling has a very destructive effect. By artificially creating social units in which everyone is the same age, the ability of children to help and to learn from each other is greatly reduced. Instead, conditions for competition are automatically created, because each child is put under pressure to be just as good as the next one. In a group of ten children of quite different ages, there will naturally be much more cooperation than in a group of ten twelve-year-olds.

The division into different age groups is not limited to school. Now there is a tendency to spend time exclusively with one's peers. As a result, a mutual intolerance between young and old has emerged. Young children nowadays have less and less contact with their grandparents, who often remain behind in the village. Living with many traditional families over the years, I have witnessed the depth of the bond between children and their grandparents. It is clearly a

natural relationship, with a very different dimension from that between parent and child. To sever this connection is a profound tragedy.

Similar pressures contribute to the breakdown of the traditional family. The Western model of the nuclear family is now seen as the norm, and Ladakhis are beginning to feel ashamed about their traditional practice of polyandry, one of the cultural controls on population growth. As young people reject the old family structure in favour of monogamy, the population is rising significantly. At the same time, monastic life is losing its status, and the number of celibate monks and nuns is decreasing. This too contributes to population increase.

### **Ethnic conflict**

Interestingly, a number of Ladakhis have linked the rise in birth rates to the advent of modern democracy. 'Power is a question of votes' is a current slogan, meaning that in the modern sector, the larger your group, the greater your access to power. Competition for jobs and political representation within the new centralised structures is increasingly dividing Ladakhis. Ethnic and religious differences have taken on a political dimension, causing bitterness and envy on a scale hitherto unknown.

This new rivalry is one of the most painful divisions that I have seen in Ladakh. Ironically, it has grown in proportion to the decline of traditional religious devotion. When I first arrived, I was struck by

the mutual respect and cooperation between Buddhists and Muslims. But within the last few years, growing competition has actually culminated in violence. Earlier there had been individual cases of friction, but the first time I noticed any signs of group tension was in 1986, when I heard Ladakhi friends starting to define people according to whether they were Buddhist or Muslim. In the following years, there were signs here and there that all was not well, but no one was prepared for what happened in the summer of 1989, when fighting suddenly broke out between the two groups. There were major disturbances in Leh bazaar, four people were shot dead by police, and much of Ladakh was placed under curfew.

Since then, open confrontation has died down, but mistrust and prejudice on both sides continue to mar relations. For a people unused to violence and discord, this has been a traumatic experience. One Muslim woman could have been speaking for all Ladakhis when she tearfully told me, 'These events have torn my family apart. Some of them are Buddhists, some are Muslims, and now they are not even speaking to each other.'

The immediate cause of the disturbances was the growing perception among the Buddhists that the Muslim-dominated state government was discriminating against them in favour of the local Muslim population. The Muslims for their part were becoming anxious that as a minority group they had to defend their interests in the face of political assertiveness by the Buddhist majority.

However, the underlying reasons for the violence are much more far-reaching. What is happening in Ladakh is not an isolated

phenomenon. The tensions between the Muslims of Kashmir and the Hindu-dominated central government in Delhi, the Hindus and the Buddhist government in Bhutan, and the Buddhists and the Hindu government in Nepal, along with countless similar disturbances around the world, are, I believe, all connected to the same underlying cause. The present development model is intensely centralising, pulling diverse peoples from rural areas into large urban centres and placing power and decision-making in the hands of a few. In these centres, job opportunities are scarce, community ties are broken, and competition increases dramatically. Young men in particular, who have been educated for jobs in the modern sector, find themselves engaged in a competitive struggle for survival. In this situation, any religious or ethnic differences quite naturally become exaggerated and distorted. In addition, the group in power inevitably has a tendency to favour its own kind, while the rest often suffer discrimination.

Most people believe that ethnic conflict is an inevitable consequence of differing cultural and religious traditions. In the South, there is an awareness that modernisation is exacerbating tensions; but people generally conclude that this is a temporary phase on the road to 'progress', a phase that will only end once development has erased cultural differences and created a totally secular society. On the other hand, Westerners attribute overt religious and ethnic strife to the liberating influence of democracy. Conflict, they assume, always smoldered beneath the surface, and only the heavy lid of government repression kept it from bursting into flame.

It is easy to understand why people lay the blame at the feet of

tradition rather than modernity. Certainly ethnic friction is a phenomenon which predates colonialism and modernisation. But after nearly two decades of firsthand experience on the Indian subcontinent, I am convinced that 'development' not only exacerbates tensions but in many cases actually creates them. As I have pointed out, development causes artificial scarcity, which inevitably leads to greater competition. Just as importantly, it puts pressure on people to conform to a standard Western ideal—blonde, blue-eyed, beautiful and rich—that is impossibly out of reach.

Striving for such an ideal means rejecting one's own culture and roots—in effect, denying one's own identity. The inevitable result is alienation, resentment and anger. I am convinced that much of the violence and fundamentalism in the world today is a product of this process. In the industrialised world we are becoming increasingly aware of the impact of glamorous media and advertising images on individual self-esteem—resulting in problems that range from eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia, to violence over high-priced and 'prestigious' sneakers and other articles of clothing. In the South, where the gulf between reality and the Western ideal is so much wider, the psychological impacts are that much more severe.

### **Comparing the old with the new**

There were many real problems in the traditional society and development does bring some real improvements. However, when one examines the fundamentally important relationships—to the land, to other people, and to oneself—development takes on a different

light. Viewed from this perspective, the differences between the old and the new become stark and disturbing. It becomes clear that the traditional nature-based society, with all its flaws and limitations, was more sustainable, both socially and environmentally. It was the result of a dialogue between human beings and their surroundings, a continuing coevolution that meant that—over two thousand years of trial and error—the culture kept changing. Ladakh's traditional Buddhist worldview emphasised change, but change within a framework of compassion and a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all phenomena.

The old culture reflected fundamental human needs while respecting natural limits. And it worked. It worked for nature, and it worked for people. The various connecting relationships in the traditional system were mutually reinforcing, and encouraged harmony and stability. Most importantly of all, having seen my friends change so dramatically, I have no doubt that the bonds and responsibilities of the traditional society, far from being a burden, offered a profound sense of security, which seems to be a prerequisite for inner peace and contentedness. I am convinced that people were significantly happier before development than they are today. And what criteria for judging a society could be more important: in social terms, the well-being of the people; in environmental terms, sustainability.

By comparison, the new Ladakh scores very poorly when judged by these criteria. The modern culture is producing an array of environmental problems that, if unchecked, will lead to irreversible decline; socially, it is leading to the breakdown of community and the undermining of personal identity.

At my lectures in Europe and North America, people often ask the same question. Having seen pictures of the wide uninhibited smiles of the Ladakhis and the beauty of the traditional art, architecture and landscape contrasted with the meanness and spiritual poverty of the modern sector, they say, 'How can the Ladakhis possibly want to give up their traditional way of life? They must want the change, there must have been some flaw in the traditional culture that makes them want to abandon it. It can't have been that good.'

It is easy to understand why people make such assumptions. Had I not spoken the language fluently in my first year in Ladakh, had I not been lucky enough to live closely with the Ladakhi people, I would almost certainly thought the same way. But the Ladakhis I lived with were content; they were not dissatisfied with their lives. I remember how shocked they used to be when I told them that in my country, many people were so unhappy that they had to see a doctor. Their mouths would drop open, and they would stare in disbelief. It was beyond their experience. A sense of deep-rooted contentedness was something they took for granted.

If the Ladakhis had been eager to adopt another culture, they could easily have done so. Leh was for centuries a centre of trans-Asian trade. The Ladakhis themselves traveled both as pilgrims and traders, and were exposed to a variety of foreign influences. In many instances they absorbed the materials and practices of other cultures, and used them to enhance their own. But it was never a question of adopting another culture wholesale. If someone from China came to Leh, the result was not that the young suddenly

wanted to put on Chinese hats, eat only Chinese food, and speak the Chinese language.

As I have tried to show, the pressures that lead to the breakdown of a culture are many and varied. But the most important elements have to do with the psychological pressures that create a sense of cultural inferiority and the fact that people cannot have an overview of what is happening to them as they stand in the middle of the development process. Modernisation is not perceived as a threat to the culture. The individual changes that come along usually look like unconditional improvements; there is no way of anticipating their negative long-term consequences, and people have almost no information about the impact development has had in other parts of the world. It is only in looking back that any destructive effects become obvious.

By now, most Ladakhis deem development necessary. And although the traditional society compares so favourably with the new, it was of course not perfect; there was certainly room for improvement.

But does development have to mean destruction? I do not believe so. I am convinced that the Ladakhis and other traditional peoples could raise their standard of living without sacrificing the sort of social and ecological balance that they have enjoyed for centuries. To do so, however, they would need to maintain their self-respect and self-reliance. They would need to build on their own ancient foundations rather than tearing them down, as is the way of conventional development.

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