



CONTEMPORARY LADAKH CULTURE, COMMODIFICATION AND TOURISM

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With the growing interest among Western tourists to visit the Himalayas, Ladakh is not an exception which is one of the most preserved Himalayan Buddhist cultures. Also the mountain terrain is the right spot for adventurous activities ranging from mountaineering, rafting, trekking and snow skating. Tourists, especially from Europe visit the region in the summer months. In fact, Ladakh is one of the most popular destinations in India for adventurous tourists. This is where tourism industry makes its mark prominently.

In 1974, the Government of India decided to open up different parts of Ladakh to the rest of the world. Though Ladakh has never been an isolated place in the past, between 1948 and 1974 it was geographically and politically closed to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, it has

its own advantages of keeping military maneuvers along the Indo-Pakistan cease-fire line and the Chinese frontier a secret, a motive still invoked today to justify the maintenance of strict military control over the North of the Srinagar-Kargil-Leh route and the road from Leh to East.

Government's principal incentive for opening up the region was to prevent internal migration aimed at augmenting the civilian population in the area. The main vision of the central government is to keep young Ladakhis at home and also try to provide the spark for permanent migration from overpopulated regions in Ladakh. From the Kashmiri point of view, those people who are professionally engaged in tourism perceived it as a great economic opportunity, as the people in Ladakh are quite unfamiliar with this profession. The new 'virgin' land of Ladakh was thrown open to international tourism. Initially, merchants from Kashmir seemed quite appealing, but they soon realized that the business was formed among the great entrepreneurial families in Srinagar.

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Views expressed are author's own.



The local people of Ladakh had no choice but to take the idea into consideration. Ladakhi elders faced a steady stream of much deplored and sometimes permanent outmigration, as young people left to study or take up salaried posts elsewhere in India.

Furthermore, the changes in the mentality of those who returned were troubling. Rooted in the land and tradition, the elders were desperately seeking a solution to strengthen the local economy, rendered precarious by the loss of caravan trade. Although there is no evidence indicating that the local population was consulted in the decision making process, it is extremely likely that the Buddhist clergy was kept informed by the religious representative in the political apparatus, and it can be assumed that they were fairly favourable to plans to open Ladakh.

The fear of seeing new-comers disturb the political, cultural, and social order could not outweigh the prospect of new profits to compensate the losses incurred since the end of caravan trade (Singh 1993).

I COMMODIFICATION OF CULTURE & THE SEARCH FOR A CULTURAL IDENTITY IN LADAKH

Developing tourism raises the complex question of 'cultural preservation'. When does culture need to be protected? how can it be 'preserved'? What is authenticity? How to judge what is 'authentic' and what is not? For who is it

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important, and why?

In order to reflect on those questions it is necessary to understand the question of when did a Ladakhi feel the need to preserve their culture? Why did the Ladakhi culture become the object of preservation efforts, as well as product to be bought and sold in the global tourism market?

The question of preservation of culture rises only when there is danger of losing it. As Professor Gillespie rightly argues "Ladakhi as a possessor of unique culture is a very recent construction" there is no evidence for self-reflective discourse among Ladakhis as a possessor of unique culture before the arrival of tourists. This 'self possessor of unique culture' does not reflect in Galwan's (1923) writings, in accounts of the history of Ladakh (Franke, Koul, & Koul) or in the early Ladakhi political discourse.

Before Ladakh became a part of independent India, it was an independent kingdom. The memorandum for the repeated calls for an autonomy from the State Government of Jammu and Kashmir, makes the self reflective awareness of the Ladakhi as a possessor of 'unique culture' clearly evident. For instance, during the early political agitation occurred in 1930 and the 1960s, the main reason of discontent among the Ladakhis was 'backwardness'. They were agitated about development, nowhere there was any mention to preserve the Ladakhi culture. However, during the recent agitations for more autonomy, there is a sudden emergence of 'Ladakhi culture' as an important symbolic resource arguing for autonomy.

Consider the following statement of demands, made by Ladakhi nationalists, during agitations in 1989:

Ladakh is not just another backward region of the country. It is a region with a unique culture, typical geo-climatic conditions and a distinctive socio-economic

order, besides being a sensitive border region.... In demanding Union Territory, Ladakh's primary concern is to protect its identity. Under Kashmir's rule Ladakh has suffered enormous cultural onslaught from fundamentalist organizations of the valley. (Beek & Bertelsen, cited in Alex, 2006)

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The question is where does this new reflective awareness of Ladakh's 'unique culture' come from? Outside influence leads Ladakhis to think in terms of culture which is different from other two regions. It also posts challenges to Ladakhi cultural brokers with the massive influx of tourists in the region. The arrival of tourists increased from 525 in 1974 to approximately 1,50,000 in 2012, and the question of preservation of culture and identity are evident among the locals.

II THE TOURIST SEARCH FOR AN AUTHENTIC LADAKH

To understand the notion of 'authenticity' it would be meaningful to ask to what extent cultural products 'made up' for the sake of tourists are 'authentic'.

Contemporary anthropologists seem to agree that 'culture' is inherently 'constructed' or 'invented'. Consequently, upholding the notion of 'inauthentic' versus 'authentic' cultural representations would be reverting to essentialism. The key questions that have been raised in this essay are related to the issue of authenticity and commodification. How is a place made real in contemporary Ladakh? Does tourism result in deterioration of 'cultural

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meaning' and produce 'pseudo-communities'?

Tourism has encouraged debates in Ladakh about the characteristics of 'culture' and how this culture might best and most accurately be presented to tourists. The issue of authenticity basically starts with the tourist's quest for authenticity in the host culture. Tourism became a quest for authenticity to be found in primitive societies. Tourism also provided a new opportunity to represent their 'culture'. The government officials and tourism developers are actively taking advantage of these new opportunities to 'revive Ladakhi culture' and reinvent Ladakhi identity and culture in much more positive terms than has been in previous decades.

Why do people leave the so called 'first world' to spend leisure time in 'undeveloped region'? Most of them leave western industrial nations to non-developed 'backward region' to spend their holidays. Some scholars argue that in the western industrial nations, development and growth have become ends in themselves. They no longer adapt to the primary human needs, but rather to the wishes of a consumer society that needs to detour more and more in order to survive. This inflated entity has taken a self-destructive dimension and has created an ever-increasing feeling of saturation.

Most of the tourists visit to experience traditional communities remote from the

so called modern world. Thus, it is not surprising that the main concern of the tourists is to evaluate whether Ladakh or particularly a Ladakhi is traditional or modern. The debates focus on how materialistic, spiritual, peaceful, authentic, remote and content Ladakhis are. What is evident across all these debates is an opposition between the traditional Ladakhi (authentic Ladakhi) for tourists and the modern Ladakhi (young Ladakhi, unauthentic). The role of tourists is usually confined to lure Ladakhis away from their 'natural' state, and toward modernity. By bringing money into Ladakh, tourism is seen to foster greed and materialism.

Tourists are very much concerned with the real traditional Ladakh as they classify Ladakhi as either traditional (that is preserving their culture) or desirous of being modern (that is, imitating tourist and greedy of tourist money). Such distinction is seen as useful for tourists. They want to encounter the former and avoid the later. They have invested time and money to travel to encounter traditional and not modern people. Accordingly tourists respect the lives of traditional Ladakhis, while scorning the modern.

One of the most prominent view among tourists is that Ladakhis should preserve their culture and they also admit that failure to do so is something very bad. In fact, Ladakhis are changing from being traditional to modern. It is not the right of any tourist to judge the loss of tradition and culture. The idea of Ladakhis losing their culture is 'very problematic'

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because of the fact that culture is not static and not something that can be lost. Rather they can only ever be subject to change.

In the world of change, Ladakhi society is not an exception. Centuries old traditions are being replaced by the mass western culture. In this context, Helena argues that "the monasteries and frescoes will be nothing more than dead relics of the past". It is happening already, but for the moment, the basic foundation remains. Of course, Ladakh must change, it would be unrealistic and romantic to think otherwise.

Discussing 'authentic Ladakhi culture' is about how culture might best and most accurately be presented to tourists rather than its ontological concern. This is a pragmatic argument. Authenticity here is simply a question of accurate representation and of fulfilling essential requirements. Kolas argues that, 'it is taken for granted that what is represented is a showcase, what you see is therefore exactly what you get'. The question of authenticity, according to this argument, is seen less important as compared with the question of 'good' intent and purposes. But it does not mean that the notion of authenticity is irrelevant. It is still relevant in tourism studies to understand one's history and culture, representation of others or past.

The promotion of Tibetan Buddhist Culture is evident in Ladakh, in fact, Buddhism belongs to the whole world. If local people promoting this culture for the purpose of good and the development of local community, then it may be justifiable, however, if they use this culture for the purpose of making money, then it would not be right.

Development of tourism in the region also provided opportunities to represent their vision of Ladakh. The Government of Jammu and Kashmir state and Central Government propagated a view of Ladakh as a unique and exotic place. The authentic Ladakh sought by western

tourists is a place 'unspoiled' by the presence of modern infrastructure. This sort of authentic Ladakh is found in remote rural villages, particularly at the monasteries and other sites. If the tourists are demanding the 'authentic' and 'underdeveloped' minorities by showcasing their 'primitive and exotic' lifestyle, there may be inherent contradictions between the authenticity sought by the tourists and the modernity sought by the locals. Such contradictions represent a challenge to the Ladakhi cultural brokers.

The West may not understand the needs of the people here, but rather want to preserve Ladakh as a place of their dream destination, a place where people can live without any disturbance from the outside world, with no development whatsoever. In the present age, this is not possible and it would not be in the real interest of the people of Ladakh because they in fact need some kind of economic development.

Most of the tourists visit Ladakh in order to experience authentic Ladakhi culture. The issue of authenticity is of prime importance to the tourists, but rather it has never been issue for Ladakhi cultural brokers. Nevertheless, it is an exaggeration to consider that Ladakhis are not familiar with the notion of authenticity. They also seek authentic objects from tourists, but their understanding is object oriented, for example, those people who are engaged in tourist business are concerned with the notion about whether gifts received from tourists such as Ray-Ban sunglasses, North Face clothing and Salomon hiking boots, are genuine and authentic. Western commodities rather than cheap Indian and Chinese replicas. However, Ladakhis do not realize the need to use the authentic within the local cultural discourse.

On the other hand, the tourists are concerned with the authenticity. The meeting of authentic Ladakhi is very

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important for them and it is quite justifiable as they came all the way to Ladakh to see authentic Ladakhi people, but not young generation who is already being influenced by the western way of life in terms of dressing sense, food habits and language etc.

It is also worrying for some Ladakhis that everything is commodified, now people come to know about the value of money, with this they are losing the actual essence of their own culture. All those villages which are affected by tourists are completely changed, for example, inviting people and offering tea, is one of the symbols of Ladakhi culture. The intervention of money is perceived as being a destroyer of authenticity for tourists. Now people started to attach money even to the tea which was once a symbol of Ladakhi culture. Today, the notion of 'being offered tea by Ladakhi, in the spirit of friendship (rather than money), is the symbol of an authentic encounter'.

There are two aspects of culture which can be commodified, that is material and non-material culture. The commodification of non-material culture is viewed as more dangerous to society than that of material culture.

Those cultural aspects which is the central attraction to tourists are always prone to commodification. So what are those things which attracts tourists to come to Ladakh. What is the image of Ladakh as tourists destination? The main source of

attraction to the tourists in Ladakh is mostly culture and landscape. It is not uncommon for any tourists destinations to use culture and landscape to attract tourists.

Most define culture in terms of material, such as traditional dress 'goncha', and 'pearak'. Even when people tend to preserve culture they always impose on villagers to wear traditional dress 'goncha' on different occasions. These are elements of culture which is not that dangerous for society even if there is a change. Culture has to change according to the time and space. Change is an inevitable part of society, in fact, every aspect of society is in constant state of change. That is how the whole notion of museum come into being to review how human civilization has evolved. There is no reason to become fetish on culture. When some elements of culture become out of date then it always goes to museum to represent that stage of society.

The Ladakhi culture is not all about traditional dresses and dances but also about the social values, people's beliefs, faith, compassionate heart, innocence, integrity etc. These are non material culture which are far more important than the material culture. Tourism has a potential to commoditize those values through attaching material values to it. Nevertheless, Ladakh comparatively is more successful in preserving those values than any other tourists destinations in India. At this stage, Ladakhi society is in a rapid state of transition because of

tourism. It is almost impossible to stop this change. Here is indeed a need for proper direction. In fact, Ladakhi cultural brokers and tourism developers can play an important role in preserving those elements of culture that are relevant and important within the context of development.

Thus, the positive aspect of tourism needs to be strengthened. All tourist destinations have to pay a price due to negative impacts. But, certainly, it is impossible to revert a society to an earlier state, because societies and cultures change all the time. Here, sociologists or social scientists can play an important role through sensitizing people about these changes and suggesting ways to maximize positive aspect of tourism while minimizing its negative influences.

The question how culture is commodified in Ladakh is also important. In most cases, culture is staged to satisfy tourists in order to create an income for host populations. It is therefore commodified. Cohen (1988) defined the process of commodification (Commoditization) as the "process by which things (and activities) come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value, in a context of trade, thereby becoming goods (and services)". This process of culture is not without consequences, which have been repeatedly discussed in the academic literature.

Relying on culture and selling it for tourist consumption makes it a commodity. Examining the construction of 'Ladakhi culture' reveals that it is comprised largely of the things that tourists photograph. It is as if whatever tourist photography has becomes 'culture' for the Ladakhis. The traditional dress, the dances, the monasteries and the religious paintings are all fundamental to "Ladakhi culture" (Gillespie, 2006). By commodifying local culture through attaching economic value to cultural heritage, it loses its value in local communities.

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Traditional dress and dances are among the most attractive elements of Ladakhi culture. Here, it would be too cynical to think of the emerging discourse of Ladakhi culture as fake. However, cultural commodification is occurring through two ways direct and indirect. Objects of culture, such as sculptures, paintings and articles of daily use are being sold to tourists. Traditional artifacts such as thangkhas, jewellery, prayer flags and prayer wheels are now produced mainly for the shops and even imported. Though lately the process came to be controlled by the Ladakh Buddhist Association, there are still a number of shops selling those cultural objects to tourists at very high prices. Indirectly, culture can be commoditized through the lives of host communities and through creation of the tourist experience, the so-called pseudo-event.

The second one is always viewed as more a threat for the locals than the other. Cultural commodification leads to long term, gradual change in society's values, beliefs and cultural practices. This sort of cultural change is actually caused by tourists' demand, for instance, host society is dependent on tourist consumption and there will come a situation where the host society becomes culturally dependent on the tourists generating country (Sharpley 1994).

III COMMODIFICATION OF RELIGION

Ladakh has tremendous potential for cultural and religious attractions. It was mentioned by Ahluwalia that 64 percent of tourists come primarily to experience the Tibetan religion and observe their culture. Buddhism prevails in various regions and visitors come despite unusual natural conditions. The main reason behind this is that, what they get there, they don't get anywhere else. It is only in Ladakh that the purest form of Tibetan Buddhism is still practiced. Even in Tibet, religious activities and influences are curbed (Ahluwalia 1998).

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Monasteries are sacred spaces and are also living spaces swollen with ceremonies. In a sense that monasteries represent an expanded version of a Ladakhi house hold. But with the influx of tourism in the region, monasteries by receiving visitors, have now come to entertain tourists by opening restaurants, shops, food stalls, hotels, etc. The customs of the monastic life have changed to a large extent, as now monks have to manage and run these establishments, as well as stay in the praying hall to show it to the visitors, while traditionally the monks leave the monastery to perform rituals in the villages.

For example during the festival of Hemis monastery, tourists who pay money are given priority, and local pilgrims often do not have any significance. Sometimes monks also show tourists, paying an additional fee, particularly rare or beautiful thangkhas, statues, or ritual objects. Helena rightly argues that "the monasteries and frescoes will be nothing more than dead relics of the past". Monasteries' landscape are changing with the changing attitude of monks.

Discrimination against local people at feasts and the monk's business activities have led to decrease in confidence and respect. Faulty behaviour of tourists, such as inappropriate clothing or lax religious attitude, have even made a negative impression on Ladakhis. The influx of new ideas and new possibilities to earn money has also created a recruiting problem for the monasteries. To extend the short

tourist season from June to September, traditional festivals have been moved and are now carried out to attract tourists against their seasonal and occasional significance. The development of tourism has also caused the creation of superficial cultural images and events that have no historical or cultural roots, such as the Ladakh Festival brought to life by the Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department in an effort to extend the tourist season

CONCLUSION

The interaction between tourists and local people goes on at a certain level without losing the actual meaning, context and significant of the culture. Ironically, this is the authentic culture of host society as they have been the actual context which are created by their ancestors and are integral part of their culture.

Authentic culture is not something which is prepared for the tourists, rather more natural that existed from time immemorial. It came to light that in due course of time things will change with the changing attitude of local people. In order to satisfy tourists' demand, host society present their culture out of context and significance. While tourists have new experiences and it offers them insight into different cultures, it can also go too far if it makes for a seemingly fake and staged experience for tourists. The notion of authenticity comes from the commodification of culture, when host society is commodified tourists experience inauthentic culture. Therefore, host society present inauthentic culture which tourists believe is authentic. Similarly, if an authentic culture is presented by the host, tourists sometimes perceive it to be inauthentic.

It becomes clear that commodification of culture and religion is an integral part of tourism with both positive and negative

consequences for both tourists and local people. It is apparent that it lead to reviving of local culture through protecting and maintaining indigenous history and culture. So far in Ladakh only material culture is changed and commodified, but still basic foundation remains, of course Ladakh must change, it would be unrealistic and romantic to think otherwise.

This paper is not comprehensive but it can be taken as a starting point to proceed further in exploring more and more about the other untouched and unexplored areas of tourism in Ladakh as well as in the rest of India.

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