

1. Safeguard the Cultural Heritage of Ladakh

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ABSTRACT: Cultural and natural heritage is among the priceless and irreplaceable assets, not only of each nation, but of humanity as a whole. The loss, through deterioration or disappearance, of any of these most prized assets constitutes an impoverishment of heritage of all the people of the world. It tells us about the traditions, the beliefs and the achievements of a country and its people. Tourism is concentrated in the predominantly Buddhist settlements of the Indus Valley, of which the ancient capital and trading center of Leh. It is a land of rich culture, traditional knowledge and natural wonders. The strength of locals to tolerate the geographical and climatic extremities often leaves the visitors overcome with amazement. Visitors come to see a preindustrial culture, tour the Buddhist monasteries, and take in the dramatic mountain vistas. Over the years, Ladakh has gained popularity as a unique tourist destination. Mass tourism has acted as a powerful catalyst for change that is extremely challenging. Tourism has an enormous influence on the local economy, ecology and Society. The tourism economy is centered around Leh, and very little of the economic benefit of tourism accrues to the more than 90 percent of Ladakhis who live outside of this area. Within Leh the handful of Ladakhis who own large hotels benefit disproportionately. The openness and friendliness that Ladakhis have traditionally shown to visitors has been eroded by the commercialization of their culture and their understandable resentment toward the invading crowds. Theft, virtually unknown in traditional Ladakhi society, is now a common complaint among urban tourists and trekkers alike, and children now plague visitors for handouts. In the past few years, this unique culture has suffered great losses and indigenous communities, have included themselves in the fold of unchecked globalization, further damaging their cultural wealth. Tourism industry is crucial for Ladakh as a source of livelihood at the same time; it is posing a colossal threat to its cultural and environment legacy. No government or non-government organization can contribute to the conservation of the society without the participation of local communities.

Keywords: cultural Heritage, Mass tourism, Indigenous communities.

FULL TEXT:

An arid desert situated at a height of 3000-5000 meters above the sea level, Ladakh is perhaps one of the highest inhabited places on earth where Buddhism is still practiced in its pristine purity. For centuries it has also been at the crossroads of the trans-Asian trade. So, its cultural heritage is unique- a blend of Tibetan culture, indigenous traditions and influences from the ancient Buddhist region of Kashmir and Central Asia. Heritage tourism potentials have been given little attention in their development and promotion. The Buddhist influence on Ladakh culture started as early as the 7th century. And now, this faith has gained dominance in this entire region. All over Ladakh, ancient Buddhist rock engravings, even in the few areas dominated Muslims. One of the major highlights of culture of Leh Ladakh is the monasteries that you will find in almost every village. The other dominant faith that of Islam, finds a presence in the western areas of Ladakh. It is a land of rich culture, traditional knowledge and natural wonders. Mass tourism has acted as a powerful catalyst for change that is extremely challenging, unsustainable and seemingly irrevocable. Ladakh has received an overflow of appreciation and only a handful of criticism.

In the past few years, this unique culture has suffered great losses and the indigenous communities, intentionally or unintentionally, have included themselves in the fold of unchecked globalization, further damaging their cultural wealth. The damage, however, is not irreversible and the local communities themselves have taken a step forward to restore what has been lost and save what is vulnerable at the moment. The rise in the number of travelers increased the worries of people of Ladakh, leading to more frequent organizing of cultural gatherings. Along with the traditional forms of songs and dances, they chose theatre as a medium to reflect their issues. This caught the imagination of young generation. It gave the youngsters a platform not only to understand and appreciate their deep rooted culture but to put forth their own ideas, thus developing a better understanding within the community. It is really commendable to see how wisely, the culturally aware citizens in the region have found new and interesting ways to create an engaging space where people can share their experiences, keeping culture, tradition and nature as the background. One such trend, seen during the festive seasons, is where people from remote locations come to participate in the ethnic programs organized in the town and perform diverse rituals. People can see an amalgamation of various local cultures of Ladakh which also depicts the unity in diversity. This undoubtedly fascinates as well as helps develop a sense of responsibility among the community members to preserve this diversity. The enthralled groups visit the Gompas and other heritage sites together and organize discussions later on

how to maintain the serenity of these places. “We explore the hidden aspects of our historical places. Walking down the lanes of ancestral villages along with our grandparents and their friends help us to understand how this has changed since their youthful days.” This makes the ashamed feeling of how people have ignored their heritage, both cultural and natural. The task of local communities in conserving their heritage is not limited to imparting knowledge; they have, in fact, designed a sustainable frame work wherein they focus on strengthening the leadership quality in select members of the community who have it in them to the onerous task of protecting their common wealth.

Sustainable growth demands mutual exchange of ideas and this makes this community effort more influential. The elderly are open to new ideas and ventures. They accept feasible points and try to inculcate them in their traditional ideology, thus maintaining the unusual combination of the old and the new in their ancient heritage. The culture of Ladakh is facing a strong rejection from its own people. Environment, society, traditions and cultures: these have become the target of rapid changes. If the changes would have been gradual, the people of Ladakh could have prevented the erosion of their cultural heritage. The tourism industry is crucial for Ladakh as a source of livelihood. At the same time, it is posing a stupendous threat to its cultural and environmental legacy. One cannot entirely reject the importance of tourism industry in the economic stability of the region, nor can the natural and cultural ethnicity be compromised with. The situation demands a balanced solution. The answer to this lies in the warm hospitality offered by the people of Ladakh.

Challenges

- The prominent challenge is that there is a change in the culture of Ladakhis because they are changing from being traditional to modern.
- As local community are not take part in the conservation of preserving their culture. So, it becomes difficult for both government and non-government agencies to contribute to the conservation of the society without the participation of local communities.
- It is strange that despite Ladakh having such a rich heritage with its monasteries, sculptures, wall paintings and mani walls, the state Government has never bother to include any site in Ladakh in its list of protected structures. Ladakh's heritage was also facing a threat from changing climatic patterns and the pressures of development and tourism.
- In the past, artifacts like thankas, prayer flags, prayer wheels and jewellery had tremendous signficance and were highly revered. Today, they are produced for sale, and have all but lost their very essence. The traditional Ladakhi dress, Goncha, once made in

Ladakhi homes and most appropriate for the climatic conditions of the region, is barely ever worn by the youth.

- This has also intensely influenced the self-image of the community. A sense of inferiority permeates the youth who place a higher value on the western life style in terms of wealth and leisure in comparison to their traditional way of life; a way of life that truly reflects the perfect balance between cultural and natural heritage. The young now wishes to acquire a modernized and seemingly glamorized life complete with luxuries and technological gadgets. English has overtaken the ladakhi language.
- According to the Director, Archives, Archeology and Museums, accepted that there is no state protected in Ladakh. However, he added as their department doesn't have an archeological wing in Ladakh, they cannot protect any site nor include any in the list of protected sites at moment.

Conclusion

A balance can be maintained by creating a healthy foundation based on humanity; it is the responsibility of everyone involved with the tourism sector to make tourists aware of how valuable and special the local heritage really is. For those who love and visit Ladakh for the peace it offers, being sensitive to its importance in the lives of the people is the least they can do in return. The most crucial role in managing the change to protect the traditional wisdom and environment, heritage of Ladakh is presently being played by alarmed older generation. Young Ladakhis are easily influenced by the glamour of alien culture that overpowers the austerity of their own culture. The elders understand the significance of the cultural as well as the natural heritage and thus make sure that the pass on the wisdom to the young lot. There are many Government and non-government organizations offering information, support and a sense of pride to those who continue to live and work in Ladakh. Such initiatives need to be encouraged, for the Buddhist virtue of self-awareness alone can help the Ladakhis fight these cultural shifts. The fact at the ground level is that while the state government has ignored the protection and conservation of Ladakh's heritage, the ASI, NGOs from foreign countries and local NGOs have done a commendable job in preserving its cultural, religious and architectural heritage.

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