

Being Down-to-Earth - from a Ladakh Diary

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During the time of the great continental drift in the Early Cretaceous period (130-125 million years ago), the land mass that is now the Indian peninsula thrust into Asia creating the Himalayas. The region where it hit the Asian land mass is none other than Ladakh, which resulted in its unique geography and ecology. Ladakh lies within four key mountain ranges - Zaskar, Ladakh, Greater Himalayan and the Karakoram ranges - and traveling across the region, one can observe the amazing and different rock and mountain formations. Strangely shaped and brightly coloured mountain ranges, the presence of perfectly round shaped pebbles and sea-shells in the surroundings of a village called Lato speaks volume of this violent geological past. Ladakh's wildlife is also a mix of species found in the vast Tibetan plateau in the east and the high mountains of Karakoram in the north-west. Living in such high altitude and harsh conditions, the people of ancient Ladakh practiced animism and spirit worship, some tenets of which have got blended with Buddhism that is practiced today by most people here. Perhaps it is due to the harsh living conditions or perhaps their religious beliefs, but Ladakhis are one of the most helpful and hospitable people in the entire country. If you ever get lost and stray into a village here, you will not only find a warm hearth but an overdose of food and tea to eat and drink despite the fact that livelihood is mostly subsistence-based (agriculture and livestock) and other amenities don't come by so easily. Quite a few systems have evolved in Ladakh which are community-based and driven. During the time of harvesting, families form groups and help harvest each other's crops. Though people are slowly moving away to the use of modern machineries and/ or hiring outside labour especially those from Bihar and Nepal (daily wage rates in Ladakh are one of the highest in India), this system is still found in pockets or interiors. Another effective system of controlling and managing the use of water for irrigation for the entire village is the system of

churpun or water-lords. A water-lord is selected by the village for the whole year and this role or position is rotated till all families in a village are covered. The responsibility of this person is to see that all the fields and houses get water systematically for their use. The glacial or spring water, which is the source of water here is made to flow through canals or streams and controlled and kept clean by the water-lord.

Phaspun

(brotherhood) is yet another system of communities working together where traditional groups are formed in a village to help each other during funerals or weddings. Work is divided between all the members of the group so that the concerned family is not overloaded with chores. During my stay in Ladakh, I saw how this worked when each family in a hamlet or area around Leh had to send one person as help for a wedding.



photo: Bipasha M

A Ladakhi woman in a village serving lunch to

her neighbours who had come to help her with the harvest And these are just some of the community-based traditional systems that I got to know of, perhaps many more exists. Even though urbanization is slowly but surely reaching all corners of Ladakh, these systems have endured in most regions. The strength of these systems can be seen from the fact that people still follow them in Leh, which is almost like a city now. Whether in future they will stay or not is yet to be seen. But something tells me they will. Life under the spirits of the high mountains and the eternal blue skies is very different and so are the hearts of the people here. Despite the changes, they will remain strongly inter-woven. And I as an adrift bystander from the plains, feel blessed by the same spirits of these high mountains that I was able to be a part of this distinct life. First published on the author's blog

Unfamiliar Lines