

BUDDHISM AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY IN LADAKH

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Even today, a Buddhist atmosphere can be experienced everywhere in Ladakh. Buddhist monasteries, monuments and Buddhist monks are visible everywhere. Almost every village in Ladakh has its own monastery, with monks residing in them to fulfil the religious needs of the lay devotees. Religious activities are deeply embedded in Ladakhi public life.

The most obvious and outstanding features of Buddhist society in Ladakh is the tremendous devotion to the Sangha. There are two main reasons: first, the monks are the most trusted teachers, guides and friends of the people. Monks intervene at critical moments and settle disputes—even in political affairs. Secondly, monks are even more helpful in the next world. Generally, men and women are more anxious about their security and welfare in the next life than this one. It is the monk, and no one else, who can help them there. Merit (*punna*) is the investment that ensures security in the next world.

However, the whole environment in Ladakh is now changing rapidly, and it is a real challenge for Buddhist monks to adjust. As we step into the 21st century, the world is advancing with rapid competitive scientific technological developments, including in Ladakh. For example, H.N. Kaul (1998:51) states that:

The massive popularity of television and glossy magazines of all varieties have inculcated in Ladakhi youth a longing for the rich Indian urban and European life-styles.

According to him, the youth of Ladakh are drawing away from the traditional way of life. In this modern society, the traditional beliefs which have supported early Buddhism are gradually threatened.

A worrying symptom of change is that many young monks are choosing to disrobe and leave their monasteries. Today, monastic

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education is not limited to canonical texts. Many monks are interested in following job-oriented subjects. It is quite natural that the curriculum should change with the development of modern Ladakhi society. However, monks have become so busy with their studies and examinations, that there is hardly any time for them to participate in monastic activities and practice meditation

The close relationship that existed between the monastery and the village in the past is declining. Young people seldom participate in religious activities in monasteries or even in their own houses. Many Buddhist doctrines are subtle and difficult to comprehend. Today, people do not seem to have enough time to learn Buddhist doctrines and to participate in religious activities.

One of the serious problems that Ladakhis face today is pollution of the environment. Even in beautiful Ladakh, pollution is becoming a major problem, especially in places like Leh. Water pollution, air pollution and sound pollution: all these pollutions are caused by our mental pollution.

However, today's developments and changes are not a threat to Buddhism because Buddhism can accept ever-changing phenomena (*Anicca*). Also, we cannot hinder the development of technology simply to save traditional social values. Many traditional values are based on myths, beliefs and superstition. Not only technology but also social values have to be reviewed pragmatically and contextually.

It remains the duty of the present generation and the coming ones to preserve and strengthen the achievements of the past against the corrosive forces of a materialist age, and to work devotedly so that the Buddha's message of wisdom and compassion may take still firmer and deeper roots in Ladakh, and also to spread its beneficial influence over the world.