

## Gender, Modernisation, and Change in Ladakh

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This essay examines how Ladakh's modernisation is affecting the household structure, and, specifically, women's lives. It is based on fieldwork undertaken in 1995 and 1996, and relies heavily on interviews with women.<sup>1</sup> While women's experiences of modernisation varied, the majority of participants in subsistence agriculture report their work burden is increasing with the shifts in male labour to paid employment, and the extraction of children through formal education. While women's work is increasing, their perceived contribution is decreasing, diminishing their bargaining power and access to household resources. As changes in the socioeconomic system threaten the traditional hierarchy, patriarchal controls over gender and age groups are being reasserted through new gender norms.

### Theoretical background

This analysis of how gender relations are changing as Ladakh's subsistence economy gives way to a 'modern' market economy is informed by a feminist reconstruction of development and in particular gender and development theory (GAD). GAD was deemed the most appropriate theoretical underpinning for this research because of its focus on the social construction of gender roles and the resulting systematic position of women in secondary roles. Gender differences are, as Papanek puts it, one of 'those marks of difference among categories of persons that govern the allocation of power,

authority, and resources'.<sup>2</sup> Gender, though, is but one of many such 'fault lines' which together with class, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. form a matrix of socially constructed differences that inform the workings of gender both spatially and temporally. Postmodernism's influence on GAD theory helps to avoid essentialising the category woman by legitimising the experience of women marginalised along sites of difference.

Gender, as I use it here, refers to a system of culturally constructed identities; a process whereby individuals born into biological categories of male and female become the social categories of men and women by acquiring local interpretations of masculinity and femininity.<sup>3</sup> Gender is a particular type of knowledge constructed within discourses — thus the dominant discourse has unequal power in shaping gender and gender relations, but other constructions of gender still exist in varying levels of resistance.

The many diverse paradigms in the social sciences are all contingent on assumptions about the nature of social reality and knowledge. Herein, knowledge is understood as being socially constructed through social interactions. Hence everyone has knowledge but because different people experience the world differently they have different types of knowledge. Power differentials have led to a monopoly over knowledge production and control. As Spender (1981) notes, 'constructing explanations of the world is a human activity. And yet knowledge production has been organised in a way that excludes many people from ever participating as either producers or subjects of knowledge'.<sup>4</sup>

Feminist scholars needed to research women's individual contextual accounts to fill large gaps in knowledge. The absence of many women's perspectives in past research accounts was not simply a result of oversight but women's knowledge, 'had been suppressed, trivialised, ignored, or reduced to the status of gossip and folk wisdom by dominant research traditions institutionalised in academic settings and in scientific disciplines'.<sup>5</sup>

Feminist standpoint theorists assert that more encompassing and less distorted images of both the 'position' of women and of gender relations can be derived by starting from women's actual lives. This exercise does not only produce opinion, but also knowledge which is nonetheless socially situated.

1. Special thanks and recognition go to my research assistant Phuntsog Angmo for her help throughout the research process and to Sonam Angmo who worked as my interpreter in the early stages of the research. I extend my gratitude to the women of the villages who paired their hospitality and smiles with dignity and grace; I cherish these friendships.

2. Papanek 1990: 163.

3. Kabeer 1991, cited in Parpart 1993: 450.

4. Cited in Kirby and McKenna 1989: 95.

5. Anderson et al., 1990: 96.

Knowledge of the world, according to such an epistemology, comes through being in the world and struggling against oppression of all forms.<sup>6</sup> The challenge, then, is to continue to see the systemic nature of modernisation's impact on gender roles in Ladakh, while simultaneously seeing a diverse and heterogenous 'women' instead of a monolithic one.

### Methodological considerations

Feminist methodology must be consistent with feminist theory. As Kirby and McKenna assert, 'choosing a method for a piece of research is a political choice. When you choose a certain method you adopt a particular way of seeing and constructing the world which may prevent you from knowing it any other way'.<sup>7</sup> There is no one feminist methodology or set of accepted methods.<sup>8</sup> Instead of aiming for a ubiquitous or innocent truth, 'feminism must work to constitute itself as the most inclusive possible knowledge community and its knowledge as a perpetual unfolding or developmental process'.<sup>9</sup>

The researcher cannot be removed from the process of acquiring knowledge as that knowledge will inevitably be shaped by her assumptions and interests. I am a white, university educated woman in my twenties. I was raised mainly in North America, in a middle class family of mixed European roots. While this information certainly does not fully capture or express my lenses for seeing the world, all of these factors have contributed to my consciousness and must certainly affect my conclusions in ways that I may be unaware of, but may be readily apparent to persons grounded in dissimilar contexts.

In addition to archival and printed information, primary data were gathered (over nine months in 1995 and 1996) using a mix of research methods including participant observation, surveys, and personal narratives/interviews. I engaged two women as my research assistants/interpreters. Participants were approached through my assistants' kin links. Sixty-five people were interviewed. The majority of research participants were women, from villages near Leh, Buddhist, engaged in subsistence agriculture, and over the age of thirty. The research focused on the roles, activities, and status

6. Walter 1995.

7. 1989: 64.

8. See Reinharz 1992; Maguire 1987; Mies 1991; Billson 1991; Cancian 1991.

9. Stivers 1993: 34.

of women in their domestic, cultural, and community contexts. Details of the division of labour and access to resources were collected in a survey targeting male and female activities. However, 'a story restricted to action and things is incomplete'.<sup>10</sup> For example, I wanted to learn not only how the marriage ceremony occurred but also whether it was exciting or frightening, whether the bride was willing or coerced, whether she was happy or despairing. I was aware that since cooperation is essential to survival, and recognition that shares are unequally distributed could break down this cooperation, women may suppress their own knowledge of inequality<sup>11</sup> creating public and private accounts. Public accounts usually fit the dominant ideology or present the person interviewed in a good light. Private accounts may be more personal. This conceptualisation proved quite useful in understanding accounts which otherwise may have seemed inconsistent. Often the different accounts are conflicting but that does not mean that one or other is any less 'true' or important than the other.<sup>12</sup>

Focusing on individual accounts recognises that 'each human being occupies a legitimate position from which to experience, interpret, and constitute the world' and the demand that 'those who have been objectified now be able to define themselves, to tell their own stories'.<sup>13</sup> Collecting such accounts aids in what Mies calls the 'collective conscientisation of women' by enabling them to subjectively appropriate their history to make their past struggles, sufferings, and dreams, their own.<sup>14</sup> Finally, grounding research in women's actual experience can help to avoid the arrogance and distortion of interpreting from the outside.<sup>15</sup>

The stories I have been told are real knowledge. They are knowledge derived from living and struggling in the world. Combined, they create an account, which although certainly only a partial one, is shaped from the life stories of Ladakhi women. The following sections comprise some of the hypotheses emerging from my understanding of this account.

10. Anderson et al., 1990: 98.

11. Wilson 1991.

12. Ibid. 1991: 32.

13. Stivers 1993: 34.

14. Mies 1993: 42.

15. Billson 1991.

## Analysis

Gender roles have created both opportunities and constraints for Ladakhi women in the modernisation process. The ability to capture gains from modernisation and attitudes towards the process varied widely according to participant's age, gender, socio-economic status, location, and education — reflecting both the role and importance of different social cleavages, as well as women's agency roles. Still, commonalities in many of the participants' experiences point to the importance of a gender based analysis. Modernisation occurs and is shaped in societies defined and organised along gender lines. Further this process seems to be structuring Ladakhi society even more divisively along gender cleavages.

Modernisation can change the structure of the household and may impact upon its ability to meet members' needs. Sen's cooperative conflict approach (1990) was used to deconstruct the household and explore unequal exchange and exploitation among family members.<sup>16</sup> Examples of inequalities were common in participants' households. In the case of women and men, the fact that women often agree with these practices, and that inequalities do not appear to foster great resentments or break down the friendly association and cooperation amongst them, points to the importance of a holistic understanding of power. For example, one participant, Padma worked in the same government office as her husband. She told of having to return home immediately after work to do all of the household tasks and childcare while her husband would 'roam about with his friends'. She expressed no obvious anger or resentment towards her husband and seemed quite resigned to this division of labour which effectively left her with little or no leisure time. In this situation, while presenting the husband as the oppressor and the wife as the passive victim would be simplistic, it would also be simplistic to present the unequal access to leisure time according to gender as coincidence.

Resources and power are not always evenly distributed since although 'there are many cooperative outcomes (beneficial to all the parties concerned, compared with non-cooperation)' the 'different parties have strictly conflicting interests in the choice among the set of efficient cooperative arrangements'.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, we cannot assume that relations are egalitarian but must question

16. See also Evans 1991; Wilson 1991; Young 1992; Roberts 1991.

17. Wilson 1991: 31.

the extent to which they involve different and possibly unequal obligations, rights, power and control.

## Marriage

The GAD approach involves rejecting the public/private dichotomy that so often has been used to undervalue the work of women and entering the so-called 'private sphere' of the family to understand women's access to power.<sup>18</sup> Once the preferred marital form in Ladakh, fraternal polyandry is now on the decline (especially around Leh). My research substantiated Crook and Shakya's (1994) contention that Ladakhis have started to speak ill of polyandry. As Sonam noted: 'polyandry is not good. It is a big shame... Today if we see polyandry, we treat it as bad manners, and it is not in our religion also.' Polyandry is perceived as primitive or uncivilised by many Ladakhis. The shame attached to polyandry seems primarily associated with the non-monogamous sex in such a union. As one participant noted, 'a man would no longer want to pair with his brother's wife'. Further, polyandry is also now considered to be counter to Buddhism. This situation creates embarrassment and shame among women living in polyandrous unions. However, many accounts of polyandry — whether from women in such marriages or their children and/or other relatives — indicate that the system has many benefits, such as increased family security and companionship. The public discourse in Ladakh used to be that polyandry was good, but this has now been reversed. A conflict has thereby been created, because the experience and private account of many who live in polyandrous relationships does not correspond to the *new* public discourse,

Another example of mismatched accounts is regarding the position of unmarried women. On the surface there is no great stigma to being unmarried. Such women often call themselves, and are considered, Chomos (Buddhist nuns) although most have no religious training (itself a reflection of a religious structure that despite having a monastery in almost every Ladakhi village has very few nunneries). Today these women are often treated as little more than unpaid family labour and many have to work as general labourers for income. They do not enjoy the position or privileges of their male counterparts, nor do they have the same income-earning opportunities. Thus, the public discourse in Ladakh is that unmarried women are equal in status to married women and that Buddhist nuns are equal in status

18. Rathgeber, 1990: 494.

to Buddhist monks, but the experiences of many — and hence the 'private' opinion of many, would suggest that this is not actually the case. In both cases the dominant account obscures some of the systematic power imbalances along gender lines.

Participants' average age at marriage was eighteen but there was a considerable range in marital age. The majority of marriages were arranged by the couple's parents although there seem to have always been a significant number of 'love' marriages. Love marriages continue to occur but there has not been a radical shift towards them and perhaps even the opposite. Many Ladakhi women are forced into marriage by their parents who may exert varying degrees of pressure. Some are even 'stolen' or coerced into marriage by the potential groom and his entourage; this generally happens if the woman is spending time away from her parental home. Such ploys have the effect of curtailing women's mobility.

Some families will not permit certain female family members to travel unchaperoned whether it be for pleasure, education, or employment. Generally this restriction is a new site of difference between men and women, as in the past travel was more difficult and the reasons for travel (e.g. marital and religious ceremonies) ensured the participation of both men and women. Modernisation has both made travel easier as well as bringing new reasons for travel (e.g. buying goods, education, paid employment, and entertainment). While many women are travelling more, particularly for educational purposes, a number of participants suggested that perceived 'threats' to unchaperoned women are curtailing their mobility. These threats appear to be associated with notions of women as being 'pure' — a norm of womanhood that does not seem indigenous to Ladakh but is becoming more prevalent. Under Ladakh's new norms a woman's purity now has to be protected. This 'protection' may take the form of restricting women to the domestic sphere. For example, one participant's husband restricts her from walking unchaperoned in Leh for fear that she be propositioned by strange men. A number of participants indicated that this was not uncommon, particularly for Muslim women. This process of cloistering isolates women from the larger community and reflects the growing emphasis on outside constructions of gender, found in, among other things, Indian movies, television serials, and magazines. The growing acceptance that an inappropriate comment can harm or 'spoil' a woman seems to be becoming internalised by many women, particularly younger more urban women, who indicate they often feel shy and uncertain outside of the home, especially when alone. At the same time as emergent gender norms are curtailing Ladakhi women's mobility, men are travelling more. This further reinforces

a growing polarity in gender norms that portray women as being traditional and tied to the home while men are modern and worldly.

To develop a more encompassing understanding of women's experiences, we need to go behind the veil of outwardly conforming activity to understand what particular behaviour means to her.<sup>19</sup> The use of multiple methods and qualitative interviews gave me the opportunity to ask people directly: How did it feel? What did it mean? Finding out about women's actual lives deepens the critique of existing knowledge by documenting the inadequacy of past assumptions. For example, Mann (1988) assumed that the reason a Ladakhi bride (unlike grooms) did not have to express her consent for a polyandrous marriage was because she must consider her position more secure with more husbands. However, when I asked women to explain how they felt about the marriage process, the fear, powerlessness, and unhappiness they described suggests weaknesses in past accounts of their high status and privilege. Many Ladakhi women experience great difficulty upon first marrying; they report that the separation from their family is traumatic and that their work burden increases. Perhaps not surprisingly, some young women expressed little desire to marry — a few insisting that they would remain single. The choice of remaining single, may reflect the increasing difference in the levels of authority among household members, particularly amongst those who earn money and those who do not. An uneducated woman entering the home of her in-laws would traditionally have had less authority than many other family members because of her age and newcomer status. Now, however, this situation may be exacerbated by her lack of earning potential. The perceived value of her contribution to agricultural and household tasks is lessening and with it her authority, decision-making power, and access to resources.

Women in *magpa* unions report less difficulties in marriage than their *bagma* counterparts. In *bagma* unions the woman moves into the groom's parental home and in *magpa* unions the male joins the woman's parental home. Women who remain in their parental home are not forced to make as widespread changes as those who marry into another home. Further, they retain the authority and status that they have built up over the years through their household contributions and their closeness to the household head. This study corresponds with Reis' (1983) claims that the position of women in *magpa* unions is better than that of women in *bagma* marriages. The difference in the experience of women in the two marriage structures indicates how

19. Anderson et al. 1988: 97.

socio-cultural differences can lead to a variety of responses to similar processes of change.

Divorce, while relatively uncommon in Ladakh, does occur, as does separation and desertion. In the cases encountered in this study, if the women had children, they were pressured by relatives and friends to remain married, even if subject to cruel or brutal treatment. If they had no children divorce is generally socially acceptable and both spouses were free to remarry. However, again, while the dominant account is that both may remarry, among participants the male was more likely to remarry. Most women who divorced or separated became dependent on their families for support or had to work as general labourers if this support was not forthcoming. No such participants received any form of personal or child support from their estranged or former husbands. Women who are not heiresses and thus leave their family home upon marriage, may be more likely to encounter oppressive conditions than women who remain in the parental home. While in the past divorced or separated women were not seen as being 'spoiled' by their marital relations, today attitudes may be slowly shifting towards outside gender norms that focus on notions of purity as the womanly ideal. Thus, a divorced woman may be increasingly facing a social stigma which, although not as paralysing or encompassing as in many societies, may curtail her chances for remarriage.

### **Motherhood and reproduction**

Another structure within the household shaping women's lives, is their role as mothers and their experiences of reproductive labour. Many women continue to have relatively large families but especially in and around Leh more women are choosing smaller families. In the villages, larger families are an advantage for agricultural tasks (although increasingly less so as children spend more time in formal education), while in Leh, large families can be a financial burden and if both parents work out of the home, childcare can be a problem. In all such cases among participants, women were dependent on the unpaid childcare provided by female relatives. Modern methods of birth control and abortion are now available to married women in Ladakh and many women are making use of these options. Even so, Ladakh's population is growing, reflecting reductions in mortality achieved through Western medicine, as well as the decline in polyandry and the resulting increase in the number of married women.

All married female participants either had children or said they were physically unable to do so. About half of the married women had four or

more children (ranging up to eleven) while half had one to three children. These are the number of surviving children. One woman had ten children, eight of which died as infants. Other women spoke of three, four, and five children who had not survived past early childhood. The few women who had difficulty in becoming pregnant or carrying a child to term expressed sadness about their situation and those around them seemed to pity them. While married women increasingly have access to family planning, strong socialisation for childbearing seems to have prevented the option of remaining intentionally childless.

### **Division of labour in agriculture**

The division of labour within households is often set along gender and/or age lines, although other lines of stratification may also affect its complexion. The division of labour creates certain forms of interdependence within the household and between households, but this interdependence is not necessarily reciprocal or of equal benefit to all members.<sup>20</sup> The increasing shift to nuclear households has had different implications on women's work burdens. For women in paid employment the shift out of the extended family may reduce their work but it may also impact upon their reliance on the extended family for unpaid childcare. For the majority of women (who farm) the shift can further reduce the amount of labour available for agricultural tasks — thus increasing their work. Unequal divisions of power maintain unequal divisions of labour, often creating a circle whereby women are relegated to undervalued work, while the fact that they perform this undervalued work reinforces notions of their lesser contribution.

A faster rate of change in actual living conditions than that of the dominant ideology may result in a serious mismatch between women's lives and their life accounts. This was observed most markedly in a survey on the division of labour. While most participants claimed that there was no division of labour along gender lines in Ladakh (the public discourse) a breakdown of work in each household showed very distinct divisions according to gender (the private account). Once a fairly evenly shared vocation in Ladakh, agriculture is increasingly becoming women's work. The mundane, repetitive, jobs such as spreading dung, weeding, and animal care, were almost exclusively done by women, although there is no social basis for this division. The survey substantiated studies elsewhere showing that the

20. Evans 1991.

most onerous and tedious jobs are passed from the members of dominating groups to the persons over whom they have control.<sup>21</sup>

Women are increasingly becoming associated with farming. Further many participants associate their gender identity with farming. Dolma, among many others, assumes the work of farming is an understood component of womanhood when she notes: 'the difficulty of being a woman is mostly the hard work in the field and all that'. This association makes sense considering that so many women now bear the brunt of agricultural work with their husbands in paid employment and their children in school. Additionally, many women perceive the gender based denial of education as having relegated them to agricultural work.

### Access to paid employment

'Bargaining power' for access to resources is often based on the 'perceived contribution' of household members, a combination of 'the actual ability to earn income or to bring valued resources into the household' and 'the value given to that contribution by other household members'.<sup>22</sup> Perceived contribution is shaped by notions of what is important — increasingly with the shift towards materialism, money is seen as paramount. Rigzin, for example, claimed, 'without money there is nothing'. Thus people with paid work are perceived as making greater household contributions than other household members.

In Ladakh, with growing numbers of men entering the paid workforce, women's contributions to both productive and reproductive labour are becoming under-rated. This reinforces perceptions that men provide the main inputs to the family and should thus determine resource allocation. 'Perceived contribution' is not necessarily correlated with the amount of time expended in working both inside and outside of the household. Time allocation studies indicate that women often do 'astonishingly large amounts of work' even when their economic contribution is considered relatively small; perceived contribution appears to be more a factor of the amount of cash earned rather than time and effort expended.<sup>23</sup> In addition to cultural perceptions undervaluing their economic input, most women are constrained from making equal cash contributions to their households by lower levels of

21. Boserup 1990; Morvariadi 1992.

22. Young 1991: 155.

23. Sen 1990: 139-40.

education and training, concentration in poorly paid jobs or economic sectors, social stereotypes and other barriers to employment and promotion, and intermittent and atypical workforce participation.

Generally, women's lower perceived contribution relative to men diminishes their bargaining power and could partly explain the dominant patterns of male control over household income. Most participants indicated that the decisions in the home were made by the male head, especially in all decisions related to finances. Men were responsible for making all large purchases and sales, while women occasionally had control over household purchases such as food. Many women said that when they need something they go to the male household head who may either purchase it for them or give them the funds. Their ability to get the resources they need, therefore, becomes dependent on their relationship to the male head.

The equation of paid jobs with wealth, and wealth with status, has seemed to diminish the value of subsistence work. Hence there appears to be a growing rift between paid and unpaid workers — this itself often creating a hierarchal situation between men and women. As Norberg-Hodge (1991) has suggested, the shift of male labour over to paid employment does appear to be having a polarising effect on gender relations. As Tsetan (one of my informants) said, 'I am an uneducated woman so I have to work from morning to night and my life is very dependent on the man'. Although she says she enjoys working in the fields, she notes, 'I feel very unhappy that my parents didn't send me to school, and I am jealous when I see my husband go to the office'.

Labour in Ladakh is differentiated by a number of factors. Those women having access to paid employment in Ladakh tend to be relatively better educated and often have parents who had formal education. The closer the family to a bigger centre the more access they have to schools and employment. Like their female counterparts, educated men from the regions surrounding Leh also have increased access to paid work. However, there are also jobs for uneducated men (particularly in the army and tourism industries) and, because their mobility is not as restricted as that of women, men can also travel from more remote regions to find work. Although many Ladakhi women are obtaining educational credentials, they are not entering the paid workforce in the same numbers as men and they are not usually found in the higher echelons of organisations. Thus, in addition to cultural perceptions undervaluing their economic input, most women in Ladakh are constrained from making equal cash contributions to their households.

Some women earn money by selling their produce in the Leh Bazaar; this is co-opted at times by men when prices are high. Similarly, some women

sell their produce to distributors (male) who in turn sell in bulk and at higher prices. Other paid employment available to uneducated women includes working in crafting industries such as carpet weaving or as a general labourer. These jobs are low paid and low status and tend to be characterised by long hours, repetitious and often physically difficult tasks.

Labour in Ladakh also appears to be shaped by the traditional authority of men in the public sphere and women in the household. Existing and emergent gender ideologies shape women's access to authority and power in particular societies by shaping their daily opportunities and constraints. Certain jobs (notably doctor, nurse, and teacher) are often cited as being appropriate jobs for women, perhaps reflecting their similarity to household duties. These jobs require a great deal of schooling. Still, those women who manage to surmount obstacles to their employment, and obtain 'suitable' jobs face a different set of difficulties. Many are separated from their children and husband for extended periods of time or have a double work burden of household and paid employment. As women extend their domestic responsibilities to include the provision of cash, other members of the household are not sharing the household tasks as one might assume. Indeed the work burden of participants in these jobs is very high. Still such jobs are considered both easier and more prestigious than farming and certainly of general labour. Women's access to resources and authority seemed to increase with such jobs; they were much more likely to report control over decision-making and finances than other participants. Because these women make money, their perceived contribution is higher and they have more say in the allocation of resources in the household.

### Education

The ability of a woman to get paid employment through education is often presented as a path to women's equality. As Diskit said, 'girls are now also working and earning money like men; that is why women are equal'. In the past it was common for girls (especially the eldest daughter) to be kept from school or withdrawn early. Spalzes noted:

all three of us sisters didn't go to school, and our brothers they all went to school ... people used to think that education was not so important for girls. Everyone thought that we had to do our work properly so they didn't send us to school, they got us to look after the house and look after the cattle.

Many participants regretted their perceived lack of education and most of

them seemed adamant that their children should be educated as the path to a 'luxury life'. However, some families continue to keep their daughters out of school, primarily based on the tradition that the eldest daughter is assured of marrying out of the household. Although education may give her more authority or status in the new home, her parental home (especially her mother) bears the cost of her education by not having her labour. This highlights how the traditional social structure affects the structuring of the modernisation process. Conversely, in cases where the daughter is the heiress and will bring in a husband, educating her may be seen a good household investment.

In the short term, high hopes for the benefits of education are overshadowed by an ineffective public school system. Further, faith that education brings equal access to paid employment ignores all of the other barriers to such access. Considering the limited opportunity of most women to obtain paid work, using this approach as a starting point for equality is problematic. Additionally, it seems unlikely that there will ever be enough paid jobs to employ all matriculates — potentially leading to high unemployment, depression and migration. Finally, structuring equality in this way undermines the value of the agricultural and unpaid work done by the majority of Ladakhis.

In Ladakh, a growing hierarchy is developing between the educated and uneducated. This social cleavage can create a rift between mothers and children as age becomes less important as a mark of authority than education. Many women work extremely long hours in their homes and fields while (especially in Leh) their husbands and children sit and watch television, waiting to be served their evening meal. Some children in Leh will now only do their traditional tasks (such as fetching water) if they are paid for it. Still, some children, particularly in the villages, continue to provide a substantial amount of labour to the household. Overall, daughters were said to do more work than sons but this varied according to various factors including the age of the children.

The growing value placed on education and, especially, paid employment reflects the shift to materialism. By their own accounts, women have certainly benefited from many of the changes brought via modernisation including: improved transit, communications, and access to health care. Participants also indicated that they desire and enjoy many of the products of this material culture such as food, clothing, and television. Views on particular changes seem to be a matter of personal choice and, to some degree, conscientisation. Modernisation is having a profound sociological impact on Ladakhis. It goes beyond changing labour to reassessing what is important



and restructuring society along these lines. Money is increasingly seen as important, shifting power towards those who have it. Further, modernisation is changing norms about social constructs such as family structure and gender roles.

### Modernisation and social change

Among other things, modernisation encourages a shift towards materialism and individualism as well as reshaping gender norms and hierarchies. A postmodern feminist perspective, while accepting the importance of economic development, does not accept a complete or uncritical transition to the modern.<sup>24</sup> In Ladakh, new gender norms seem to further undermine women's status and authority as decision-makers (subsequently lowering their access to resources) even while their work burden increases.

Generally, the benefits participants described from the shift to a money economy are material, i.e., good or enough food and clothing, consumer goods, money; while the negatives tend to be a loss in values, i.e., elimination of certain cultural traditions, less neighbourly ties and affection, more competition, and the devaluation or commodification of cultural artifacts. For example, Tsering reflected:

The life of my mother and grandparents was better than now because even though they didn't have good food to eat and good clothes to wear, their minds were happy. But now people have everything. They have food to eat and clothes to wear, but their minds are a little bit disturbed. They don't have time and their life is full of tension.

Participants often used examples of food and dress to illustrate change in Ladakh. A number of participants welcomed these changes while others were concerned about the health ramifications of shifts in food and clothing. One dominant theme which arose from the discussions of shifting styles was the idea that they represent a rejection of 'tradition' and 'culture.' Some participants felt that young Ladakhis were 'just copying' from foreign tourists, Indian films, and television. While this trend was generally accepted in young men it was often not accepted in women. Digzin, for example, said, 'the Ladakhi girls are getting too fashionable ... if we do this we can lose our culture and traditions'.

The growing association of women with tradition (which is recreated into

a much more conservative structure), and men with modernity, can be highlighted with an example from Alchi. There, married women are forced to wear their traditional garments in order to prevent crop-loss and water problems. A carpenter in the village said, 'If women don't wear traditional clothing the Gods will be angry and will dry up the water ... men are superior so it doesn't matter [for them]'. Originally this rule was enforced through beatings and later through fines. Punishment for disobeying these strictures were rationalised by recreating Buddhist tradition to include women's traditional garments as sacred and/or women wearing modern clothes as profane. In order to justify such restrictions on women while not forcing men to wear their traditional Goncha, men have to be reconceptualised as being superior (under Buddhism) to women. Control over the means of production directly influences the direction of this emerging patriarchy. Dominant groups, with their command over knowledge, political power, literary and religious traditions, are uniquely positioned to reshape tradition and ideology to their advantage.

The importance of traits including beauty, chastity, and subservience seem to be more critical for women today than in the past. A number of young women indicated that they were very concerned about their clothing and physical appearance. Further, based on recollections and written accounts of the past<sup>25</sup> it does seem as though Ladakhi society is becoming more conservative and restrictive towards women. Such shifts may be the result of imported Indian and Western gender role images and/or may reflect male insecurity in the face of modernisation and a subsequent desire to enforce control, or power over, members of society with less power. Young Ladakhi girls' extreme concern about their appearance and weight, for example, may reflect the former, while the fines on clothing in Alchi may reflect the latter. The transformation in values accompanying modernisation seems to have created a vacuum in ideals for both men and women. There are signs that this vacuum is being filled with outside divergent gender stereotypes such as earning potential, power, aggression, and domination for men, and beauty, purity and submissiveness for women. However, when situated within an understanding of knowledge and ideology as sites of resistance, it is clear that the shift is by no means complete or pre-determined. The tension between traditional and emergent gender roles is very pronounced in Ladakh. Many women (and men) reject outside stereotypes and gender norms, as well as other introductions.

24. Parpart 1993.

25. Mann 1988; Norberg-Hodge 1991.



The ways in which Ladakhi women are actively shaping their relations and creating their own opportunities is essential for understanding the way in which power is resisted. Notions that capitalism destroys women's traditional rights and economic autonomy in relation to men can simplify the impact of capitalism by romanticising traditional societies and ignoring the ways in which individuals and groups contribute to and modify patterns of development. As Stølen<sup>26</sup> notes, there are a variety of responses to similar processes of change. People create, react to, and change the development process; they are active subjects, capable of processing their experiences and creating coping strategies even under extremely oppressive conditions. This perspective highlights the relationship between structure and agency.<sup>27</sup> Women are active shapers of their lives, whether they exploit new opportunities or resist them, and whether they succeed in their pursuits or not. The agency role was seen at an individual level among many participants; for example, in women resisting marriage and mothers who were serving more Ladakhi foods. At a group level, it was evidenced by the work of the Women's Alliance (of LEDeG), through which a number of participants were struggling to protect certain aspects of traditional culture. Participants were not simply passive experiencers of modernisation but rather, actively shaped themselves and their surroundings; in so doing they shaped their experience of change. Without dismissing what may at times be overwhelming constraints of exploitation and subordination, the changes occurring in Ladakh need to be understood within a framework of women's active negotiation of a position in all spheres of life.

### Conclusion

The relative absence of differentiation of labour along gender lines could partially explain past accounts of gender equality in Ladakh vis-a-vis other regions. However, through the introduction of paid employment, modernisation is altering the division of labour. Women's centrality in the household or informal sector, once a site of power, is increasingly becoming a site of marginalisation. Gender differentials appear to be widening with the expansion of 'modern' or capitalist forms of production,<sup>28</sup> instead of decreasing with economic growth as predicted by earlier theories. Studies

26. Stølen, 1991.

27. See for example Walter 1995; Stølen 1991; Scott 1985; Huizer 1981.

28. Mazumdar and Sharma 1990.

carried out around the world list as impacts of modernisation: 'inadequate access of women to resources ...devaluing of unpaid work ...low wages in insecure jobs' and 'male control of women's sexuality'.<sup>29</sup> The way the dominance and control of traditional patriarchal structures have been consolidated and expanded as Ladakh has modernised is distressingly familiar. While the experience of modernisation varied greatly among participants, the majority of women in subsistence agriculture report that their work burden is increasing with shifts in male labour to paid employment, and the extraction of children for education. The expansion of capitalism creates a hierarchy between market and subsistence production, concentrating women in subsistence production where their labour is devalued. While women's work is increasing, their perceived input is decreasing, diminishing their bargaining power and access to household resources. For those women with access to paid employment, issues of childcare and the double workday are as problematic in Ladakh as in most regions of the world.

When the traditional hierarchy is threatened by changes in the socio-economic system its members try to reassert their strength through patriarchal controls over gender and age groups.<sup>30</sup> This domination was noticed in Ladakh in the new norms governing gender roles. Women's mobility is becoming restricted to the home where their traditional decision-making power is being curtailed. They are becoming more subject to ideals of beauty and domesticity. Women are becoming linked with tradition and they are being pressured to remain traditional (itself being redefined as much more restrictive or conservative vis-a-vis women than historical accounts would suggest). The use of religion or cultural revivalism is a common tool for this reaction which 'manipulates peoples' faiths and sense of cultural or intellectual identities to restore the powers of patriarchy and hierarchy in new forms.<sup>31</sup> Thus the emergent patriarchal structures in Ladakh reflect a combination of hierarchies. This evolution is occurring from the inside through existing structures of inequality, religious and cultural revivalism and revisionism. It is also being introduced from the outside through capitalist penetration and certain aspects of modernisation such as stereotyped media images of women and contact with outsiders.

In order to avoid essentialising women, each woman's life story needs to be situated in its specific social and historical setting. However, participants'

29. Tinker 1990: 12.

30. Boserup 1990.

31. Mazumdar 1990: 191.

accounts suggest that, very generally, modernisation has increased women's workload, diminished their mobility, curtailed their decision-making and access to resources, and subjected them to restrictive and foreign gender norms and ideals. These hypotheses, derived from women's actual lives, can help to illuminate Ladakhi women's experiences and can hopefully serve as a starting point to critically examine the widespread gender dimensions of modernisation in Ladakh.

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## Yangthang in West Ladakh: An Analysis of the Economic and Socio-Cultural Structure of a Village and Its Relation to Its Monastery

*Reinhard Herdick*

The small village of Yangthang (*Yang thang*) is situated in western Ladakh. From Uletokpo (*u lu grog po*) on the Indus River it takes approximately three hours to ascend on foot northwards up a side valley. Yangthang's close connection with the Geluk pa monastery, Ridzong (*dGe lugs pa dgon pa ri rdzong*) is responsible for some very specific socio-economic features which are discussed in this article under sections 2 and 3. The special relation between the monastery and the village is covered in section 4.<sup>1</sup>

A summary is given in section 5. The thematic focus of this essay will be on architecture and local planning and development, the former being dealt with at greater length in section 1.

### 1. Architecture

#### *The present-day village*

Yangthang may be seen in its present form in Fig. 2 and in the photo (Fig. 1). Its densely built houses with their flat roofs cover a rectangle of 45 x 90 m. The size of the village is defined by the number of 'main houses'; in Yangthang, the smallest possible social unit for local customary forms of organisation was the decisive factor (see below). The buildings consist of a ground floor and upper floor, though in places along slopes there may be two upper floors. This local method of construction, in keeping with the arid climate, makes use of clay and wood, and features outer battered walls made of clay. The walls of houses at the edge of the village present a picture of joint compactness. The need to defend oneself or simply discourage intrusion may have been of concern at one time. The centre of the rectangle is