Whither Ladakh Education?

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Education in Ladakh was dominated for a long time by religion, as King Tashi Namgyal had ordained that each family had to send at least one male child to the monastery. Education in the modern sense has really only taken off in the last two decades. Under the State government’s education policy every small village, even those with only five or six families, boasts of a primary school, while bigger villages may have five or six schools each, including a middle and high school. Also in the remotest areas, like Changthang in the east, Turtugin in the north-west, and Zangskar in the south, schools have been started by the state government, enabling students to receive education without having to leave their region. However, for a broader view of the present educational situation in the Leh district, a look at the various factors affecting it will be helpful. These factors can be called the four P’s: players, presumptions, problems, and possibilities.

Players: institutions, authorities, and organisations

The main players are the educational institutions, which shape and mould the students from an early age. In Ladakh, there are several different types of educational institutions.

First, there are four Central government operated schools, all located around Leh. These include the Kendriya Vidyalaya, the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, the Jawahar Navodaya Village, and the Tibetan Children’s Village. All these schools follow the Central Board of School Education (CBSE) curriculum which has a separate syllabus and a related exam system which is recognised throughout India.

Secondly, there are State run schools. These are the institutions with the broadest base among Ladakhis, as there are 261 such schools scattered in the remotest areas. These include 3 higher-secondary schools, 24 high schools, 51 middle schools, and 136 primary schools, which cater to 10,120 students, according to J&K State Board of Education figures for 1995-96.

Thirdly, five private schools are located in and near Leh city. These are the Lamdon Model School, the Moravian Mission School, the Islamia School, the Imamia School, and the Mahabodhi School. In all, approximately 4000 students study in these institutions. In addition to these, there are some individually owned private schools that opened up in Leh in the past four or five years, covering some 800 students.

Another set of players in the field of education are the non-governmental organisations, such as SECMOL (Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh), LEDeG (Ladakh Ecological Development Group), LNP (Leh Nutrition Project), and LEHO (Ladakh Environment and Health Organisation). LNP, for example, sponsors children from remote villages to enable them to study in Leh, pays teachers to take additional classes during the winter vacation, provides furniture and building materials to a few selected schools, and provides study materials to needy students. The Lion’s Club in Leh has opened a co-educational hostel which accommodates forty-five students from the remotest areas of Ladakh. These students are given free boarding and lodging and are sent to private schools in Leh until the completion of their education.

SECMOL has been directly involved in improving the quality of education in government schools. They have initiated Operation New Hope (ONH), a scheme which seeks to incorporate the modern education system into the Ladakhi way of thinking. They educate government teachers how to teach students at various levels so as to minimise the burden of learning on the students, such as the need to learn a foreign language like English. Other NGOs regularly organise awareness programmes on environment and Ladakhi culture and heritage, for example through essay and drawing competitions, debates, dramas, dances, and songs.

Presumptions: everyone needs modern education

The first school in Ladakh was started by the Moravian missionaries in 1886. In 1889 the Wazir of Kashmir issued an order that families with more than one child were to send at least one pupil to school. The syllabus covered Urdu, Tibetan, English, geography, nature study, and arithmetic. In its early years the Moravian Mission School received patronage from the Maharaja of Kashmir, who wanted local Ladakhis eventually to take on the responsibilities of revenue officers and minor officials, thus reducing the need to send officials from Jammu and/or Kashmir.

After Independence, the Indian government introduced the National Education Policy, implementation of which was mandatory, and the Central
School Board Policy, which leaves states free to follow their state school syllabus and policy.

The present system of education is geared towards degrees which only qualify students for some very specific jobs, and as it happens, there are only very few of these jobs available. Modern education has little relation to Ladakh's agriculture-based society, yet, receiving such a modern education is considered progressive. At the same time, however, the traditional education system is gradually becoming obsolete. For example, far fewer students than in the past opt for a religious education in the monasteries. Similarly, the amchi system of medicine is being sidelined in favour of modern medical training and practice. Traditional farming practices that use natural fertilising methods are giving way to the increased use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides which are harmful to health and the productivity of the land.

Overall, there is a need for traditional systems to be brought into the mainstream, as well as for a greater emphasis on vocational training to provide alternatives for those students who do not wish, or cannot, pursue higher modern education.

The problems

There are several serious problems that plague the government schools. First, schools are opened rather randomly in different areas in response to political pressures. This raises doubts about the fairness and efficiency of resource allocation. Secondly, in the appointment of teachers, social contacts play a very significant role. Frequently candidates with higher qualifications are ignored, while the less qualified ones are hired. Although tenure officially is not supposed to exceed two years, sometimes transfers to the remote areas are revoked and certain teachers are allowed to stay in city schools for many years.

Copying and other forms of cheating are routine during State Board exams, where examining officials, school inspectors and other high officials tend to turn a blind eye to these illegal and unfair practices. In order to claim the annual scholarship allowance, which ranges from Rs.475 to Rs.1800 depending on one's village of origin — which must be at least 5 kilometres away — fake residence certificates are produced. In addition, the misappropriation of funds and misuse of educational aids are not uncommon. Students are commonly deprived even of proper school furniture, and audio-visual aids are often missing.

An important factor in the persistence of these problems is the apathetic attitude of education officers. For example, the Chief Education Officer for Leh is usually an outsider who is sent here on duty for a period of two years. The CEO usually resides at his post and is, unfortunately, more concerned with a good, non-controversial report, than with sincerely seeking an all out implementation of the educational programme. The haphazard placement of teachers further exacerbates the problems. A post-graduate, for example, may be deputed to teach primary school students, while a mere matriculate may have to teach middle school students. A key problem in any government school is the lack of immediate accountability. Even when the government wants to take action against teachers the impact is often negative, as the drawn out judicial process and frequent victory of defaulters make a mockery of the whole system.

A peculiar problem is that students have to learn two foreign languages besides the Tibetan language. English is compulsory, and students must choose between Urdu and Hindi in the higher classes. Paradoxically, the student who with difficulty has mastered his own language now needs to cope with two strange languages in which he is also expected to become proficient. Government policy allows students to study their subjects through Urdu as the language of instruction until 8th class. Then, abruptly, all teaching and examinations are conducted in English in all subjects. It is hardly surprising that the results of the state exams for the 10th and 12th classes show a dismal performance of 1% passed candidates, and even 0% is not unknown.

Widespread illiteracy among parents and a misguided emphasis at home on 'modern' education are important factors in students' poor performance at school. Teachers' lack of dedication further aggravates the problem. One can gauge the quality of local government school education by the fact that these teachers send their own children to private schools in the city. Although government teachers may be better qualified than some private school teachers, they are unable to produce even a fraction of the examination result.

Tuition fees are a growing problem in Ladakhi society. There is fierce competition among parents to secure tutorials for their children in various subjects, thus the problem is further exacerbated. For many ordinary people, tuition fees are becoming unaffordable.

Students face additional disadvantages when teachers are transferred at odd times of the year, often sent to remote areas. Another such oddity is that all headmasters are obliged to attend a monthly meeting with the CEO at Leh, a journey that can easily take ten days for those living in remote areas if passes and roads are inaccessible. Again, during the peak study season,
teachers are often sent on training courses, resulting in further losses of critical study time for the students.

The public education system in Ladakh is highly dependent on non-local teachers from Jammu and Kashmir, but these are generally unwilling to work in Leh even for the usual two years of tenure because of the cold, harsh climate, isolation from other parts of the state, and the general lack of common facilities.

The presumption that all Ladakhis need a ‘modern’ education and that the traditional systems of education are simply obsolete poses a problem in its own right. A closed mind, set on a one-track approach to education, forms a major obstacle to the development of a more beneficial approach to education in Ladakh. Admittedly neither the government nor the NGOs have devised an education system that can serve the people best. I submit that we should not claim at this stage to have found solutions to the question of Ladakh’s education, but that we still need to investigate and experiment with possibilities of different kinds, in order to come up with a specially targeted package for each of Ladakh’s isolated village communities. This is necessary since Ladakh does not consist of, as some would have us believe, a uniform geographical and linguistic social mass.

The possibilities

The possibilities that I set forth are my personal suggestions and intended for further discussion:

First, a watchdog body should be instituted to monitor the induction and transfer of teachers, with the primary function of checking the rampant corruption in Ladakh’s education system. In order to increase its effectiveness this body could be given legislative powers, such as to suspend, transfer or withhold the increment of erring persons.

Second, an independent, qualified body should conduct a demographic survey and geographical analysis of the college structure in the district. This report should be the sole basis for the opening of new educational institutions, so as to counter the negative political considerations that commonly influence the selection and upgrading of school sites.

Third, while scholarships should continue to be offered, they should be phased out gradually. When school facilities open up in a given area or village, student scholarships should either be discontinued or reduced dra-

Fourth, tuition fees for private tutoring are a necessary evil at this stage in Ladakh, but the situation should be improved for the benefit of students. One could, for example, promote tutoring by non-teaching, educated residents. Monetary incentives for such persons to come forward could be provided by the government. Such a measure could help to reduce or even eliminate what has aptly been called ‘tuition terror’ in Leh. Also, tuition and school fees can be incorporated into the salary of the teacher. One headmaster has already effectively used this method in his village high school.

Fifth, the appointment of top level education officials in Ladakh should be the prerogative of a high-level citizens education committee composed of eminent, educated citizens, government officials, representatives of NGOs, etc.

Sixth, the lack of trained teachers may be remedied by amending certain laws of the state. Private schools, for example, have very effectively used army officers’ wives for their senior school teaching staff requirements. The government schools might be able to follow a similar method, of course with all the safeguards that would be required in implementing such a system.

Seventh, the problem of multiple languages is an issue that has to be solved soon at the national level. States, facing increasing pressure from their electorates, are becoming increasingly parochial in their language policy. English is an ‘indispensable’ language for most employment and most exams, but we have to rethink the place of regional languages in Ladakh. Perhaps we should channel students according to their ability to learn a certain language; some grasp Ladakhi Tibetan more easily, while others would — perhaps because of their home environment — prefer Hindi or Urdu.

In spite of this grim situation, I am sure that the time will come soon when education in Ladakh will have improved to such an extent that we, Ladakhis, will reap practical benefits from it.1

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