

ANCIENT FUTURES

LEARNING
FROM
LADAKH



Helena Norberg-Hodge

FOREWORD BY H.H. THE DALAI LAMA • INTRODUCTION BY PETER MATTHIESSEN

Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh

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The swiftly evolving socioeconomic life of Ladakh, whose people struggle to balance growth and technology with cultural values, offers crucial lessons in sustainable development. This gripping portrait of the western Himalayan land known as “Little Tibet” moves from the author’s first visit to idyllic, nonindustrial Ladakh in 1974 to the present, tracking profound changes as the region was opened to foreign tourists, Western goods and technologies, and pressures for economic growth. These changes in turn brought generational conflict, unemployment, inflation, environmental damage, and threats to the traditional way of life. Appalled by these negative impacts, the author helped establish the Ladakh Project (later renamed the International Society for Ecology and Culture) to seek sustainable solutions that preserve cultural integrity and environmental health, while addressing the Ladakhis’ hunger for modernization. This model undertaking effectively combines educational programs for all social levels with the design, demonstration, and promotion of appropriate technologies such as solar heating and small-scale hydro power.

Examining how modernization changes the way people live and think, Norberg-Hodge challenges us to redefine our concepts of “development” and “progress.” Above all, *Ancient Futures* stresses the need to carry traditional wisdom into the future—our urgent task as a global community.

Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh Details

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From Reader Review Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh for online ebook

Tanushree Vyas says

An extremely insightful book about Little Tibet. The author systematically progresses from describing the Ladakhi culture, economy and the Ladakhi way of life to shedding light on how a self sustained economy has undergone rapid transformation with the advent of modernisation and development.

I wouldn't hesitate in stating how beautifully the author has described and articulated the scenic beauty of Ladakh, its rich cultural tradition and its people, so much so, that my urge to travel to Ladakh and Leh has taken root only after I started reading this, and seems to be growing in intensity with each passing day.

Helena's work here compels us to reconsider our obsession and preoccupation with development and modernization, for she argues that the one directional, eurocentric idea of progress is but just one of the many other different ways of living our lives. Charting the course of change in the Ladakhi society as a result of such 'development', the book ends on a hopeful note, putting forth some better, ecologically sustainable ways (here, specifically initiatives undertaken in Ladakh itself) of striving towards progress and betterment.

Anastasia says

I fell in love with the Ladakhi way of life in the first part of this book. It was so elating to read about a place where "there is neither waste nor pollution, a society in which crime is virtually nonexistent, communities are healthy and strong, and a teenage boy is never embarrassed to be gentle and affectionate with his mother or grandmother." As I read about the wonderful dwellings that were both beautiful and perfectly suited to the environment, the way families naturally helped each other in working each other's fields and sharing in respective joys and sorrows, how the people made everything they needed with their own hands, reused every scrap, their food and clothing was by its very nature organic and unpolluted and despite (or, because) of all this hard work they had plenty of leisure time, integrated between the generations and were healthy and strong well into their old age... one thought was running through my head: "I've finally found a utopia!"

This notion was crushed by the second part, because the book is just as much about the change brought to Ladakh by international development, modelled after the Western promise of success. In reality, what it brought was poverty, pollution, isolation, crime, depression, distrust and lack.

The author writes in the epilogue: "I have become convinced that we need to decentralize our political and economic structures and broaden our approach to knowledge if we are to find our way to a more balanced and sane society." I am convinced, too. Perhaps I was a believer before I ever picked up the book and Helena Norberg-Hodge just put words to my ideals, backed up by research and first-hand experience. However, I certainly gleaned a lot of depth into the process of Westernizing and centralizing development from this keen study.

I highlighted many passages and will consider the suggested reading list for my future book adventures. Here are a few phrases that really hit home:

"Mainstream Western thinkers from Adam Smith to Freud and today's academics tend to universalize what is in fact Western or industrial experience. Explicitly or implicitly, they assume that the traits they describe are a manifestation of human nature, rather than a product of industrial culture. This tendency to generalize from

Western experience becomes almost inevitable as Western culture reaches out from Europe and North America to influence all the earth's people."

"Development is all too often a euphemism for exploitation, a new colonialism. The forces of development and modernization have pulled most people away from a sure subsistence and got them to chase after an illusion, only to fall flat on their faces, materially impoverished and psychologically disoriented. A majority are turned into slum dwellers--having left the land and their local economy to end up in the shadow of an urban dream that can never be realized."

"Development planners can pretend that everyone will be able to live like a New Yorker as long as they ignore the fact that natural resources are limited. There has been a long-standing debate on this point between economists and environmentalists. Economists and technical optimists assume that we will be able to invent our way out of any resource shortage, that science will somehow stretch the earth's bounty ad infinitum. Such a view is a denial of the fact that the natural world has limits that are beyond our power to change and conveniently circumvents the need for a redistribution of wealth. A change in the global economy is not necessary if you believe there will always be more and more to go around. The peoples of the Third World have only to get "educated" and step into the global market to one day live exactly as their big brothers in the industrialized countries."

This is a book with a very certain point of view, but rather than being a demonizing or anguished piece, it's a call to see "progress" for what it truly is and choose for yourself, perhaps joining in promoting a return to ancient values that depend on the inter-connectedness of human beings with each other and the natural world.

Donna Andrews says

Great book. This just shows that there might be other ways of living. The question is whether the subsistence "happy" lifestyle is really what these people want. Is it condescending to say that we can see they were happier before? Worth reading, and even more worth discussing. How can we embrace technological advances without destroying who we are?

Chitvan Chamadia says

I wouldn't agree with everything that the book has to offer, also because the author didn't really spend the winters in the region. Nonetheless the book is thorough and has made some very logical arguments. I especially found the traditional child rearing practices and the psychological changes of Ladakhis very informative. It's answered a lot of questions related with rethinking 'development', and at the same time raised some more. Would recommend the book to anyone who wants to understand the changes 'development' can bring about to a culture.

Jisu Sin says

The Ladakh lived their own lives despite its harsh and quite isolated location. Many people can say they're

'uncivilized' but I think it's not appropriate. I mean, they have a lot of things that we, who are so called 'people living in civilized cultures', should learn from. We've been forgotten lots of precious things while hurrying to develop. I think it's time to slow down and look back.

Sean says

"Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh" by Helena Norberg-Hodge is a book that explores the idea of progress, technological evolution, and the loss of community and culture that seems so essential to modernity. Norberg-Hodge, a linguist, worked with traditional communities in Ladakh, a remote region in Northern India, in the 1970s. Part One of the book documents the traditional life of the people there and how they lived a life attuned to their environments. The people were not wealthy but on the whole, they were happier, healthier, and lived more rich and fulfilling lives. Part Two documents the opening of Ladakh to modernization and the severe, deleterious effects this process had on the people and the environment. Reading this book makes you question the very notion of modernity - is environmental, social, and cultural destruction a side effect or its main feature? It also shows the fragility of culture. The book ends on a slightly optimistic note as it shows how ordinary Ladakhis are striving to preserve much of their culture that has been lost in the march towards progress. I have an interest in anti-modern thinkers or development critique and this book is one of the main texts of both movements. The book is pretty damning of its critique and I think it should be read widely.

Kristin says

This is a great book, would recommend to anyone interested in changing cultures. Beautifully written.

Gwen says

The Ladakh people, due to their harsh, remote location in Northern India, preserved their traditional sustenance economy well into the 1970s. This book is an amazing view of what life is like untouched by Western "civilization", and it's made me look at so many things differently: family relationships, child rearing, food preparation, waste disposal, free time, basically everything in our lives. Is it easy to romanticize such a traditional, simple culture? Yes. Were they truly more happy than we are? Oh yes.

J. Williams says

Note that the author never stayed there through the winter.

Will says

Published in 1991, and mostly about the 15 or so years prior, this book is still pretty relevant as cultural observations about the advantages and disadvantages of a traditional way of life getting "modernized." I'm

really curious what the author would write now, after 15+ more years of development, both about the Ladakhi culture and the West's continued capitalist progress and the recent/current huge green movement.

Josephine Ensign says

To me this book read like yet another white person exoticsizing and romanticizing indigenous cultures. I stuck with it though hoping to find some nuggets of new ideas, but I didn't. Disappointing but I'm still glad I read it since it seems to be a 'new classic' among environmentalists.

Melinda says

This book and film is so inspiring to me... beautiful.

Lee says

One of the most incredible surveys of this culture i have read. One of the best cultural surveys i have ever read period. She discusses the lives of these people, and also interprets development issues in a very insightful way. I go back to it and read bits over and over again.

Anthony says

Helena Norbert-Hodge, recipient of the Right Livelihood Award, founded the International Society for Ecology and Culture which is a UK-US based NGO. This book profiles the lives of Ladakhi families, a primarily agriculturally-based people living in the Himalayas of north India, and most closely related to the Tibetans and Bhutanese. Norbert-Hodge's struggle is to help in the cultural preservation of Ladakhi heritage, a society that has increasingly grown vulnerable to the attractions and magnetism of a globalization which has set thousands of Western backpackers in their main city of Leh every summer. Ladakhis practice semi-organic, subsistence farming and are recognized for minimal environmental impact their lifestyle imposes.

Neelza Angmo says

A must read for those exploring the meaning and practice of sustainability. Travel to Ladakh to learn how this ingenious community survives -20 degrees and below. The book is also a good reflection on present day tourism into the region and the growing pains of the community as it adapts to rapid changes.
