Ladakh Diary: Changing Climate

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The Changthang region in eastern Ladakh, continuation of the Tibetan plateau is home to the nomadic tribe Changpa who have been rearing livestock for centuries. Studies on their traditional way of life have shown a highly sustainable grazing system and a life in tune with nature. ‘Goba’ or the village head’s decisions were followed without question and it was he who decided where livestock were to graze and when the group needed to move to another pasture land. Grazing areas were demarcated and any livestock found grazing outside that area was fined per animal. This ensured that an area was not overgrazed and it was allowed to regenerate. Groups would camp near water bodies, not too near to avoid polluting them. The tents would face east so as to receive the morning sun. Since the hearth is considered sacred, they would move camps mostly at night, so that the hearth was not open to outside eyes.

Even now a large number of communities all across India live a nature-based life. But this aspect is all the more prominent and deeply rooted in a harsh environment like Ladakh. Life here has evolved keeping in mind the scarcity of natural resources and communities have thrived and self sustained despite nature’s limited resources. Not only that, respect for nature and other forms of life is a way of life here and so is the understanding that humans are just a part of a larger whole. There are many practices which defines this sustainability and understanding, the lifestyle of the Changpas being just one of them. The presence of Army, urbanization, tourism and a western system of education has led to massive changes in Ladakh’s social fabric over the last few decades with the younger generation moving away from traditional livelihood practices and opting for jobs outside their villages and people losing their deeper connect with nature and sustainable practices. These changes will start reflecting on the use, misuse or overuse of these natural resources sooner or later. But what will hit them the hardest in future is not something of their own making but created by us people from the plains.
The effects of climate change are right at the doorstep and being a fragile ecology the changes are stark. Ask anybody across Ladakh – from Leh to remote villages – everybody will tell you how the weather is warming up. Snow as precipitation is decreasing and glaciers are melting. Monsoon which was defined by drizzle like rain for a few weeks has now changed to heavy to very heavy rainfall in short bursts and dry periods after that. Being a mudslide prone region, these changes increase the risk of more mudslides like the one that happened in 2010. The cycle of farming and storing up for the severe winters will get affected. Water will get more scarce and high altitude pastures which are dependent on snow fall will decrease affecting wildlife and livestock alike. How this will affect the ecology of the region as a whole and humans and wildlife in particular is yet to be seen.

What saddens me greatly is that this magnificent place, its people and wildlife will end up suffering the most even though their contribution to the problem is the least. All because of the never ending greed, lack of respect for others and nature that defines life of the people in the plains and which is threatening to overtake Ladakh at some point in time. Despite the changes, I firmly believe that with their inherent sense of connect with nature and ability to self sustain, Ladakh will take a longer while to give in to the western concept of development unlike the other Himalayan states of Himachal and Uttarakhand. But if and when Ladakh totally switches over to that side, will be the time I lose all hope for my planet Earth.

First published on the author's blog

Unfamiliar Lines