

## **RETHINKING TOURISM IN LADAKH: MODELS FOR SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH**

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Tourism plays a big part of our lives in Ladakh with multiple links with society, culture, environment and economy. The recent controversy between the All Ladakh Tour Operators Association (ALTOA) and the Bangalore-based travel company India Hikes highlighted the need for regulation of the tourism sector. Unless regulated, the current model of tourism will tear Ladakh's social fabric and culture, while causing irreversible damage to its environment. This is not to suggest that tourism in Ladakh is completely un-regulated and un-managed but the current model does have many weaknesses, especially in terms of sustainability.

Ladakh has been attracting visitors and scholars for several centuries. The region has never really been isolated as it served as an important hub for trade between South Asia, Central Asia and Tibet and later as a theatre for the geopolitical schemes of the British, Russian and Chinese empires. This changed with the redrawing of boundaries and the end of the trade in the 1940s Ladakh became a part of independent India in 1947 and was closed for visitors soon after. The current model of tourism dates back to 1974, when the region was once again opened for visitors. One reason for opening the region was to generate revenue, especially foreign exchange, by a model of tourism based on experiencing the region's unique culture, history and ecology. In the following years, Ladakh has seen a large inflow of tourists with official figures for 2013 showing a 300-fold increase from 1974.

Ladakh's biggest attraction remains its people, environment and cultural antiquity. The culture and traditions of the region, however, have been influenced by modern mass tourism over the last few years. Locals, for instance, tend to imitate and adopt the lifestyles of tourists who serve as important agents of change and modernity. The main challenge here is for Ladakhi society to engage with modernity, while still retaining its cultural and social integrity.

In the current model tourism provide livelihood options and access to modernity on the one hand, while eroding the foundations of Ladakhi society on the other. Thus, we see rampant commercialization and commodification of culture, religion and identity in Ladakh today. Even tourists have started to question the authenticity of present-day Ladakhi culture and artifacts and in many parts of Ladakh, youth are becoming averse to their own heritage. Moreover, the benefits of tourism are unevenly distributed, which is creating and increasing social gaps between different sections of society. By and large, it's the elite and upper classes that have reaped the benefits of tourism, while those in the lower strata are relegated to menial tasks. The latter are rarely treated well by tourists or even by local Ladakhi businesspeople. This model of tourism has also intensified gender inequality in the region, with males dominating the sector and having better

access to resources. This brings us back to the question of regulating tourism. No one agency can impose regulation on the sector and each interest group needs to play a role. While the tourism sector is made up of many different stake-holders, the government and travel agencies are two important ones that need some discussion.

### *The role of government*

The government plays a very important role in managing tourism and the authority to impose regulatory mechanisms. The government's efforts to achieve socio-economic development through community participation have produced mixed results so far. Tourism has certainly contributed to the socio-economic development of the region. It has provided a range of employment opportunities for local residents, including guides, cooks, transport operators, hotel and restaurant owners. It has also provided the resources and impetus for the growth of service-related enterprises in Ladakh, though these are largely restricted to urban areas. Here, the government can play an important role by formulating a more inclusive policy framework that supports indigenous crafts and participation from different strata of society. Further, it can also provide different forms of support and incentives to residents of rural areas, which will enable them to participate in tourism.

Unemployment in Ladakh is a major challenge. While tourism has addressed it to an extent, many tourism-related businesses in Ladakh, like souvenir shops, are owned and operated by non-locals. Similarly, many Ladakhi tour operators prefer employing non-local staff either for the skills they offer or for economic reasons. In this context, there is an urgent need to integrate various challenges faced by the region and the potential of tourism to address them. In the absence of such regulatory mechanisms, the current model of tourism will erode Ladakh's social integrity and cause irreversible damage to its culture and ecology. This was evident even in the recent conflict between India Hikes and ALTOA, where the government seemed to be largely absent. Had regulations and enforcement mechanisms been in place, the issue may have never arisen or been resolved quickly.

The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils (LAHDC) in Leh and Kargil have considerable authority in setting the direction for such a policy. Here one does not need to start from scratch as there are many existing models being used in different parts of the world, which could provide some important insights. For instance, Bhutan is often cited as an example of successful regulation of tourism. Bhutan and Ladakh were both opened to tourism in 1974. Ladakh opted for the mass tourism model. The Royal Government of Bhutan however, was sensitive to the potential impacts of unrestricted flow of tourists on its environment and culture. As a result, it adopted a pragmatic high-value, low-volume model of tourism, where it imposed control on the type and number of tourism from the very start. This model obviously cannot be replicated in Ladakh as it is part of a large and diverse country with many different challenges. However, the model still offers some important lessons on regulating tourism, by focusing on the 'carrying capacity' of natural and social resources. This approach exposes the limitations of the current model in Ladakh, which is allowed to override its long-standing values and norms. Ladakh has several traditional mechanisms and institutions to protect nature and culture. However, these mechanisms are gradually being lost today. It is important that policy makers strengthen these practices. The one area in which the current model

of tourism has been successful is in increasing the inflow of tourists as it remains focused on numbers. It is thus important that in addition to creating a regulatory policy, the government also needs to create a monitoring system that will provide inputs on the impacts of tourism. This data will help fine-tune policy regulations in response to different impacts.

#### Travel Agencies

There are more than 350 travel agencies registered in Ladakh and they play a central role in the tourism sector by serving as a link between different service providers. On the one hand, this makes them accountable for tourism-related impacts in the region. On the other hand, travel agencies can also serve as a key element in any strategy to regulate tourism. In the current model, travel agencies in Ladakh enjoy relatively more freedom than in other models. In Bhutan, for instance, the government fixes the price for different tourism activities. This lack of monitoring and regulations on the activities of travel agencies is a key issue. Travel agents change their prices to lure more tourists from other areas. This has led to the advent of 'cheap tourism' in Ladakh. Further, films like *3 Idiots* have made Ladakh a popular destination and further intensified mass tourism in the region. Large travel companies like MakeMyTrip have tied up with local agents to cash in on this demand, without being accountable for the impact of their activities on the region. The negative impacts of this model are already becoming evident in popular tourist spots, especially in terms of environmental damage and resistance from local residents.

Also, the operations of most Ladakhi travel agencies are largely confined to Leh. As a result, they provide support in Leh, while other larger agencies take most of the profit. There is thus a more intensive scramble to increase numbers that will generate the necessary profits for local agents. Some Ladakhi travel agents have started to change this equation and set up offices in Delhi and other locations. Their effort is to become the principal agent handling the entire package for tourists and not just be sub-contractors for the Ladakh component. This way, they are able to focus on smaller groups, while still generating the anticipated revenue.

At the other end of the process, travel agents can make efforts to link up with local residents in different regions to supply specific supplies to tourists. This will help tap the surplus products of different regions and allow local residents to directly benefit from tourism in their areas, rather than through profit-driven intermediaries.

#### *Some recommendations on regulating tourism in Ladakh:*

1. Ladakh needs an urgent policy intervention to regulate tourism. This requires consultations with various stake-holders and interest groups to ensure accountability along with checks and balances.
2. The main objective of the regulation must be to maintain the integrity of the environment and cultural resources of Ladakh, while also distributing the resources generated by tourism.
3. In addition to a regulation mechanism, there is also a need for more efficient monitoring mechanisms that will generate data on the impacts of tourism.

4. The government needs to serve as a bridge to ensure equal participation by residents in rural areas, especially youth.
5. Presently, there are no provisions in Ladakh to train professionals in management of tourism. As a result, Ladakhis lack the skills needed to operate hotels and restaurants and resorts. Here the government can collaborate with local agencies to develop such an institute to train people in different aspects of tourism management. By building capacity, it will help reduce unemployment in the region.
6. The regulations must also extend to certifying and licensing tourist guides. This will ensure that all guides have undergone basic training to minimize the cultural and environmental impacts of tourism.

Thus, a new Ladakhi model of tourism needs to be developed, which is based on a partnership between government, industry, tourists and local residents. The participation of residents will ensure accountability and sustainability of tourism. It will also help re-distribute the benefits of tourism in response to its impacts. This way the interests of each group—local communities, travel agencies and the government—can be interlinked to create a more environmentally and culturally sustainable model of tourism.

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