

Ladakh - sometimes known as 'Little Tibet' - is an ancient kingdom in north-west India, bordering Pakistan and the People's Republic of China. Ladakh has two administrative Districts: Leh (majority Buddhist) and Kargil (predominantly Muslim).

The Leh Valley lies at an altitude of about 3,500m and the surrounding mountains rise to over 6,000m. The area is remote: the main road linking Ladakh with the rest of India is cut off by snow for 6 months or more each year. This is a high-altitude desert environment where water is precious. Agriculture and human settlements depend on water from snow melt, which flows towards the Indus River.

Traditionally, most Ladakhis were subsistence farmers growing mainly barley and vegetables, or they were nomads tending goats and yaks. The opening of a road in the 1960s linking Ladakh with the plains brought large numbers of army personnel and the spread of the Indian civil administration.

The private sector is small, comprising mainly seasonal, tourism-related activities. There are few substantial companies and few enterprise role models among the Buddhist community. The main aim in life for many young Ladakhis is to obtain government employment, even though few such jobs are available.

Challenges

Water. Climate change is affecting weather patterns. Glaciers are receding. Some villages are forced to move when adjacent permafrost ice melts and disappears. Water supply in the main town of Leh could become acute. There is no mains sewerage treatment system and water courses are becoming polluted. Finding solutions will require leadership, knowledge and skills, political will and technology.

Uncontrolled urbanisation. Many nomads from the Tibetan plateau have sold their animals and moved to town; more are likely to follow in future. Many nomads end up in precarious situations as unskilled labourers seeking day-work. Many young people from rural villages are turning their backs on the land and the ways of their parents and seek 'a better life' as a trekking guide or taxi driver in town. The resulting urbanisation is unplanned and lacks basic infrastructure.

Cultural erosion. Ladakh is one of the last remaining places on this planet where indigenous Tibetan Buddhist culture and spiritual traditions survive in a free society. That culture is under threat from many directions. Television brings Hindi movies, plus Japanese and American cartoons. Indian and international tourists come to visit and flaunt their material wealth. Meanwhile, many heritage buildings and artefacts are decaying due to lack of resources. Fast foods are imported and contribute to declining health standards.

Knowledge & skills gaps. The government education system is present across Ladakh and coverage is theoretically close to 100%. However, the system relies heavily on rote-learning rather than thinking and understanding and, for various reasons, the majority of students in Leh District fail the matriculation examination. For those who do pass (age 16+), poor teaching and inappropriate careers advice lead many students to go on to study subjects that are not linked to livelihoods, aggravate youth unemployment, create frustration and risk social unrest. Science and mathematics are particularly weak in Ladakh, and the analytical skills required to address urgent problems such as climate change, water supply, pollution, urbanisation, youth unemployment and healthcare are largely missing.

Livelihoods and youth unemployment. The Ladakhi economy is highly dependent on budgetary funds from the Union and State Governments, via the army and the civil administration. A key to future self-reliance and self-esteem lies in the creation of economically-viable jobs in Ladakh. There *are* economic opportunities, but support is needed to engender entrepreneurial mindsets, create role models, mentor young people to stand on their own economic feet, and make available micro-finance and management skills.

"The idea of having a modern school which lays equal emphasis on the importance of preserving the valuable aspects of a traditional culture is very encouraging. I feel that Ladakh, sometimes known as 'Little Tibet', provides an ideal location to develop this idea. I have always believed in giving equal importance to both modern, scientific knowledge and traditional Buddhist culture."

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama
Patron, Drukpa Trust

The Druk White Lotus Initiative

The Druk White Lotus campus is located in the village of Shey, about 30 minutes' drive from the main town of Leh. In 1992, Shey villagers requested help from their spiritual leader to develop a school offering higher quality, modern education. Now, 17 years later, over 500 students are being educated on the campus, including more than 150 from remote areas.

Why is Druk White Lotus special?

- The initiative is anchored in Ladakhi culture: it is managed by local people and is conducted under the personal guidance of one of Ladakh's main spiritual leaders, His Holiness Gyalwang Drukpa (www.drukpa.org). The school is particularly strong in teaching Bothi language (Ladakhi, which uses Tibetan script).
- The school offers an education that grounds students firmly in their own culture and equips them to thrive in the modern world. Students learn Bothi, English and Hindi languages; they learn science in the laboratories, study creative arts, and learn life & livelihood skills, including team work, presentation skills, leadership and problem solving through formal and co-curricular activities.
- Beyond class 10 (age 16+), the focus will be initially on commerce, enterprise and job creation, possibly through a new 'Shey Enterprise College'. Beyond that, the aim is to offer high quality science courses at Senior Secondary level (age 16-18).
- The project serves the particular needs of disadvantaged, remote area families who face many difficulties in their lives.
- Druk White Lotus is a beacon of world-class ecological design. The Nursery & Infant Courtyard won a World Architecture Award in 2002 for **'Best Green Building in the World.'** The campus makes extensive use of passive solar energy and is almost energy self-sufficient. Architects and engineers from Arup Associates design to the highest international standards combining smart ideas with local materials. Their skill was recognised recently through an award for **'Inspiring Design' by the British Council for School Environments.**
- A **'Living Traditions'** heritage project based on the campus includes conservation of traditional artefacts, creation of a Cultural Archive, and hosting a spiritual community of nuns from the Drukpa Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.

Support for the next stage of the journey

A great deal has been achieved, but still the challenges are numerous and pressing. Educating young people takes years of sensitive, careful nurturing and needs resources: people, expertise, money and love. Druk White Lotus is a non-profit, fee-paying school and operates a balanced budget.

Over £1.3/€1.5/US\$2.0 million have been invested to complete Nursery & Infant, Junior, Science and Administration 'Courtyards'; Residences 1-3; Kitchen & Dining Hall; and the ground floor of the future Auditorium/Library.

Funds are still needed to develop the Teachers' Resource Centre, open branch schools, offer scholarships and sponsorships to needy families, and complete facilities on the Shey campus including: Secondary and Senior Secondary Schools, more residential accommodation, Dining Hall extension, Auditorium/Library, Sports Pavilion and extension of the Solar Energy System.

Druk White Lotus School

Shey, Ladakh,
Jammu & Kashmir, India
Tel: +91 1982 267 255
info.dpki@gmail.com

International Enquiries

Rachel Glynn
London, England
Tel: +44 20 8468 1339
info@dwls.org

Carrie Lee
Santa Monica CA, USA
Tel: +1 310 663 6807
carrie@drukpa.org

www.dwls.org

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Jullay - Thank you