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Ladakh, kingdom of sustainable development?

Protecting the natural environment to protect identity

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Abstract: With some 15,000 km² of protected areas, Ladakh has become synonymous with biodiversity protection in India. Specific regulations have been drawn up for the region to ensure preservation of the natural environment. Local officials who contested the principles of India's hard law have benefited from the initiatives of numerous NGOs and have developed an alternative model for protecting the environment. Certain large emblematic mammals like the snow leopard have

enabled the legitimisation of a policy that is based on the participation of local inhabitants rather than on their eviction to areas outside the sanctuaries. The protected areas have thus become an element of a Ladakhi identity project that distinguishes the region with respect to Kashmiri regional power.

Keywords: Ladakh, protected areas, controversy, innovation, NGO.

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In establishing its protected areas, India introduced a particularly coercive law, often referred to as hard law given that it is based on isolationist principles that consider human activities as predatory and therefore incompatible with the preservation of biodiversity. This was reflected in the expropriation of populations living within the national parks and the imprisonment of those failing to respect the law. However, alternative models of protection have developed in certain regions such as Ladakh based on the integration of local populations rather than their eviction. Ladakh, part of Jammu and Kashmir state in the north of India, comprises the districts of Kargil and Leh, which are among the most extensive and least populated areas of India¹. The district of Leh, thanks to its very low population density (less than 2 inhabitants per km²), was seen as an ideal area for the conservation of Himalayan biodiversity as early as 1981 when the first high-altitude national park, Hemis National Park was created (the highest peak, Stok Kangri, reaches 6,137 metres). In 1990, it became the largest national park of

¹ Ladakh was divided into two districts in 1979. In the west, the Kargil district is 80.4% Muslim, covers some 14,036 km² and had a population of 119,703 in 2001. In the east, the district of Leh is 77.3% Buddhist, theoretically covers some 82,665 km², of which 32,555 km² are under Chinese control, and had a population of 117,232 in 2001.

South Asia with an area of 4,400 km². This first initiative was followed by the creation of several other natural reserves that brought the total protected area in Ladakh to more than 15,000 km². However, the wildlife department has been reluctant to divulge the exact limits of these protected areas, particularly those of the national park even though it is not situated near the national borders but well within the area controlled by Indian state authorities and is the site of several projects and activities conducted by numerous NGOs.

The situation in Ladakh can be better understood in the light of two major influences. On the one hand, local populations and particularly the political elite are hostile to any coercive legislation from Kashmiri authorities, which they consider illegitimate and harmful. On the other, since 1974 Ladakhis have benefited from the attention of foreigners wishing to support them in promoting ecologically responsible development. It is therefore of interest to study the creation of Ladakh's protected areas against a backdrop of controversial national standards in a region where NGOs have embarked on numerous environmental preservation projects. Would Ladakhi demands for greater recognition of their identity make it possible to negotiate a special regime encouraging local initiatives that in the long term might result in an innovative model for the protection of biodiversity?

The good fortune and the misfortunes of Ladakhi protected areas

In the 19th century, during the Dogra conquest that ended the autonomy of the Buddhist kingdom of Ladakh, the region's biosphere was considered to be rich and big game was abundant in this vast Himalayan high-altitude desert. At the end of the 19th century, when the kingdom was under English trusteeship, the Maharaja of Jammu created hunting reserves, which was considered a first step in the regulation of wildlife levels by an outside power (MacDonald, 2005). At the beginning of the 20th century, these areas became recreational preserves for Europeans and rich Indians wanting to trophy hunt (Adair, 1899). With independence, the war with Pakistan to the west and China to the east accelerated the destruction of biodiversity and in particular the disappearance of large mammals. Armies and local populations both supplemented their daily food supplies with the hunting of any available game². Certain formerly widespread animal species were decimated and are henceforth considered endangered species

² Today, these practices are normally prohibited but the hierarchy finds it very difficult to control isolated men in high positions. Several efforts to make Indian military personnel more aware of the situation have increased the respect of protected areas by the army, at least in times of peace. However, labourers from Bihar working on the construction of numerous roads would not hesitate, it is said, to kill local fauna such as marmots for food.

(Tibetan wolf, wild yak, Tibetan gazelle). They sought refuge in the most deserted areas, at the highest altitudes (Fox et al, 1991, 1994).

It was not until 1972 that the Indian state decided to introduce legislation on nature conservation, legislation that was taken up again in 1978 and promulgated at the scale of Jammu and Kashmir state, then amended several times until 2002. The state's policy was manifest in more concrete terms in 1981 with the creation of Hemis National Park in the south of Leh district, on the left bank of the Indus river. From an initial area of some 600 km², the park was then extended with two additions to bring the total area to 4,400 km². In addition, several natural reserves were created first in continuity with the small colonial hunting reserves, then to preserve the specific wetland habitats of the plateau of Chang Thang, covering more than 4,000 km², and the glacier of Karakoram over an area of 5,000 km²³. Current protection measures concern some 15,000 km² or close to 15% of the territory, making Ladakh the region with the greatest extent of protected areas in the whole of India (Dawa and Humbert-Droz, 2004).

Figure 1. Ladakhi protected areas and tourism

³ The Karakoram reserve is the subject of both ecological and political issues given its border situation that has made it the highest battlefield in the world. Today, numerous scientists would like to see the area demilitarised and made into a trans-border peace park.

A number of differences appeared, however, between the plans of federal authorities and implementation at the local level. Thus the map of protected areas prepared by the GIS unit of the Wildlife Institute of India proposed creating the Tso Kar-Tso Moriri National Park, named after two high-altitude lakes in the south-east of Ladakh (Dawa and Humbert-Droz, 2004). Home to some remarkable birdlife, including colonies of black-necked cranes (*grus nigrocollis*) and bar-headed geese (*Anser Indicus*), this area provides an example of how the high Tibetan plateau has helped enrich the diversity of the network of Indian national parks. However, the Wildlife Institute divides the Chang Thang natural reserve into two separate parts on either side of the Indus. The southern part is an extension of the Tso Kar-Tso Moriri National Park, while the northern part includes the shores of Lake Pangong. Finally, the natural reserves have become more numerous, particularly in the Kargil district, where areas have been established on the basis of their populations of large mammals (ibex, urial, argali or mountain sheep, baral or Himalayan blue sheep, Tibetan antelope, kiang or Tibetan wild ass, wild yak, snow leopard). Today, protected areas cover more than 40% of the Ladakh territory controlled by India.

In this context, the regional wildlife warden⁴, responsible for protected areas under the guardianship of the department of forests for the Leh district, does not want the national parks to be extended, preferring instead the extension of the natural reserves. In fact, he refuses to expropriate the local population while at the same time being ready to intervene throughout Ladakh to protect biodiversity. He protects the 1,600 inhabitants of the Markha valley living in the heart of Hemis National Park against any coercive measures and is thus opposed to India's hard law, which he considers ineffective and unjust. He joins in the criticism of the national legislation that has been supported in India by experts and academics for several years (Kothari et al, 1996, Bhagwati, 1997). In Ladakh, this position is legitimised by the local political context. For the wildlife warden, expropriation would certainly lead to violent conflict between the administration and the public. He puts forward the argument that the inhabitants concerned, who are all Buddhists, would interpret their eviction from their lands as a malicious and humiliating act perpetrated by Muslim Kashmiri authority. The very active Youth Bouddhist Association would immediately exploit the conflict to reinforce its demands to proclaim Ladakh a territory of the Union and obtain its definitive separation from Kashmir. In addition, the wildlife warden, a Ladakhi Buddhist himself, knows that he would certainly lose all credibility with his community and that his position would be threatened. He therefore prefers to support projects throughout Ladakh with a view to ensuring a more general protection of biodiversity instead of focusing on a few sanctuary areas⁵.

⁴ These comments represent a summary of a series of long interviews conducted in July-August 2009 with Jigmet Takpa, regional wildlife warden in Leh.

⁵ A debate is underway among experts and NGOs on the possibility of setting up Ladakh as a biosphere reserve.

The role of the NGOs: innovation and lobbying

From 1974, when Ladakh was reopened to foreigners, tourists began visiting the area along with university researchers, who together helped make it a world observation site. The latter group enjoyed a special relationship with the Ladakhis, a situation which explains the refusal of anthropologists and ecologists to criminalize them, despite being motivated primarily by the need to protect certain specific species. They envisaged Ladakh as an area naturally preserved by its inhabitants and therefore suitable for the implementation of innovative projects making transition possible from a traditional society to an ecologically responsible one.

Thus, zoologist Rodney Jackson came to observe the Himalayan snow leopards in 1976. He decided to draw up protective measures for this emblematic species, eventually creating the Snow Leopard Conservancy (SLC) NGO, in which the Leh section is one of the most active. Awareness programmes are accompanied by livestock protection measures (special enclosures, delimitation of areas used by livestock outside the territories of the snow leopard) and a plan to develop ecotourism through the training of specialised local guides, the creation of “parachute-cafés”⁶ and the promotion of village tourism based on homestay accommodation.

About the same time, anthropologist Helena Norbert-Hodge became involved in a movement that resulted in the “Ladakh project” in 1980, then later in today’s Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG). She mobilised local stakeholders, national government offices and above all numerous international engineers to generalise the use of renewable energy resources in Ladakh. In addition, she founded the Women’s Alliance of Ladakh (WAL) which addressed the question of development by women. The association has an extremely powerful network of local sections in about 100 villages, numbering more than 6,000 women. The WAL carries out environmental awareness programmes that have succeeded in banning the use of plastic bags in Ladakh and, more especially, it supports Ladakhi agriculture through the marketing of local produce by joining the international Slowfood movement for the defence of agricultural and gastronomic diversity.

These first initiatives met with a favourable reception from the local political and intellectual elite who set up associations before the area was opened up internationally. Certain of these associations linked environment and cultural identity, like the emblematic Ladakh Amchi and Astro Sabha (LAAS), founded in 1971. It brought together traditional herbalist doctors, designated by the term amchis, so that they could be recognised as official non-allopathic doctors by the

⁶ These cafés are sheltered under parachute canopies purchased at a modest price from the Indian army.

government. The protection of biodiversity would ensure the continuation of local therapeutic practices.

Within a few years, Ladakh became a hot spot of international aid and attracted numerous NGOs that considered the valley to be an area conducive to the development of their actions. Numerous small NGOs decided to sponsor a village, while other bigger NGOs set up one of their branches in Ladakh. Thus, in 1998, Nomad Recherche et Soutien International (RSI), after having intervened in Cambodia, decided to support the Ladakhi amchis. In 1999, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) responded to the requests of ecologist Blaise Humbert-Droz to participate in the preservation of birdlife around the Tso Kar and Tso Moriri lakes and succeeded in getting lake Tso Moriri classified as a Ramsar site in 2002.

Although their offices are concentrated in Leh, these NGOs have gradually integrated all of Ladakh, becoming successively involved in the different valleys, even the most remote like that of Zaskar. They encourage the creation of local associations, either in the form of sections that are part of international associations, or in the form of independent committees or village associations. In addition, they mobilise every social category. After initially using young graduates from the urban elite, they involved people from the tourism profession, agencies located in Leh, and local guides in offering ecotours and spreading ecofriendly types of organisation to encourage the development of environmentally friendly tourism practices. The SLC and WWF distribute numerous posters praising Ladakh's biodiversity and emphasizing the importance of big game. This has been well received by the most isolated rural populations that benefit from numerous micro projects, some of which have really improved local living conditions, as in the case of solar panels, greenhouses and training in tourism hospitality services.

Lastly, these NGOs have provided an important boost to Ladakhi identity by citing the region as an example of an alternative model of development that is both realistic and effective. Gradually they have acquired recognition by the Indian state, which, after an administrative survey, has allowed them to access international funding from international organisations and bilateral cooperation services.

Convincing the population and institutions to set up an alternative model for protected areas

Through their activism, the NGOs acquired a central position in the debate on environmental protection. Their constant lobbying was instrumental in reaching a new consensus on the need for spatial justice and the possibility of building a way of life together encompassing all forms of the living environment. All the representatives of interested parties are convinced that conservation cannot be limited to the setting up of sanctuaries, even on a large scale, particularly for big

game that do not respect administrative limits in the wild. In the field, every observer has noted the increased pressure on natural resources associated with the growth of tourism. Trekking is modifying practices through its use of multiple convoys of horses to transport bivouac equipment. Pack animals are left free to graze near the camps, creating veritable overgrazing black spots⁷. Shepherds are thus forced to move their cattle to other pastures and even the large grazing wild animals can experience difficulties in obtaining food, particularly at altitudes where the plant cover is sparse. Snow leopards, the ultimate predators, thus find themselves directly or indirectly in contact with domestic herds, either because the latter are seeking food at higher altitudes or because the leopards, faced with declining numbers of their normal prey, are obliged to hunt closer to inhabited areas. Imposing protected areas in this context runs the risk of accelerating the spatial decline in biodiversity without ensuring the reproduction of endangered species in sanctuary areas. Finally, the different populations are not immune to the arrival of a particularly destructive animal, as was the case with a brown bear at Nieraq in July 2009. Such a situation suggests the need to implement an overall strategy by refusing any administrative limits that would break up the Ladakh region, with the exception of the urban areas such as Leh or Kargil. The SLC aims to preserve every area where the leopards are currently found, while the LAAS defends the creation of very extensive reserves of high-altitude medicinal plants in order to maintain the greatest possible biodiversity.

To prepare the ground for the acceptance of such measures (Depraz, 2008), actors in favour of preservation have based their action on an ideological assumption. They have no hesitation in using religious references, insisting on the idea that Buddhists, unlike Muslims, naturally respect every form of life, thus maintaining biodiversity as part of their culture. Hence, choosing to set up protected areas essentially in the district of Leh, which is 77.4% Buddhist, is no longer an exercise in the use of coercive authority but rather the recognition of qualities in the local identity that are valued on a world scale. This argument, albeit challenged by certain Buddhist intellectuals in Leh (Satterfield, 2009), legitimises conservative policies. It enables outside threats to be stigmatised: the army, tourists, and particularly the domestic tourists, the gatherers of Dharamsala supplying the Tibetan refugees, the amchis, and even Muslim poachers.

For the wildlife department, and more especially the present regional warden, the political activism of the NGOs represents an opportunity to develop measures. Firstly, he has supported NGO projects by setting up special partnerships with them in the absence of access to sufficient funds elsewhere. Then gradually he has adopted the most efficient projects and reproduced them in other areas with the help of more substantial national funding. Thus he re-appropriated the Snow Leopard Conservancy initiative in 2006 by organising,

⁷ The crossings of the Markha valley and the Zaskar valley, and the link between the Tso Kar and Tso Moriri lakes, are the most threatened routes.

together with the NGO, an international workshop on the protection of the snow leopard. On the strength of local experience and international mobilisation, he obtained the transposition of specific national programmes reserved for the tiger or elephant to the local area for the snow leopard. The Ministry of the Environment and Forests drew up the Snow Leopard Project backed by a fund of five billion roupies⁸ for five years, for the five Himalayan Indian States where the animal is present today (Anon, 2008). The ministry thus recognises the need to undertake action with communities both within and outside the protected areas. The wildlife warden in Leh has considerable resources at his disposal to reproduce on a larger scale the most promising initiatives of the different NGOs present in Ladakh. He is generalising homestays in Hemis National Park, as well as in the Nubra valley and near Lake Pangong. He is also responsible for the promotion of renewable energy sources with LEDeG and is developing community restaurants with the WAL. Finally, in the very heart of Leh, opposite the Main Bazar, he is supervising a vast worksite which in 2010 will be home to a nature conservation house where all the village associations involved in eco-development will be present and given the opportunity to enter into direct contact with a potential 75,000 tourists who visit Ladakh each year. At the national scale, he acts as a pioneer of participative policies, often referred to now as community-based wildlife preservation. Participation is perhaps better understood in terms of compensation. The methods of protection remain the prerogative of foreign experts, while local populations are above all associated with development projects aimed at compensating them for losses incurred in relation to the protection of certain areas or the damage caused by certain predators.

National and international organisations alike have praised the implementation of such projects. Thus, the WWF, which is first and foremost responsible for putting its seal of approval on actions by acting as a moral guarantor, showcases Ladakh by listing in its publications all the initiatives in which it has participated. Since 2007, the Leh section has wanted to set itself up as a reference for all the Himalayas in the context of a transnational programme concerning Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan and China. Ladakh is thus promoted as a model at the scale of India, the Himalayas, and finally the world. This new-found glory has given rise to local struggles for recognition, particularly between the wildlife warden and the Ladakhi manager of the SLC. The warden reproaches the SLC official for seeking media coverage for modest actions in order to preserve his status, whereas the warden's own department is far more active on a larger scale. The quarrel was exacerbated by the publication in 2008 of a small children's book, presented as being based on reality, in which the authorities intervene following an attack on a sheepfold by a snow leopard (Padmanabhan, 2008). The hero in the book is a child who had been made aware of the snow leopard issue by the NGO

⁸ In India, the accounting unit is the crore and not the billion. The amount was therefore 500 crore roupies, corresponding to about 74.5 million Euros in 2008.

and who defends the animal against the wrath of the sheep breeders who want to kill it. For his part, the wildlife warden shows a video taken by members of his department who were present when the attack took place. He insists on the good nature of the villagers when the animal is captured before being removed to a place well away from any dwellings. He accuses the NGO of creating fiction to justify its role while at the same time giving a negative image of the local communities, when in fact these communities are quite willing to participate in protecting the species, particularly since they are sure to be generously compensated. Indeed, the warden has at this disposal the means to make good any losses incurred by victims, proposing numerous compensatory measures, whether they be to improve the daily lives of the local population or to create new income-generating activities.

Photo 1. Entrance of Changthang natural reserve

Photo 2. Pangong lake, Spangmik village

This dynamic policy does not mean that there are now no longer any environmental unknowns. The rapid development of Ladakh as a tourist destination, especially for domestic tourists, has put new pressures on the environment. In 2008, the region attracted more than 75,000 tourists as opposed to 28,393 in 2003. The town of Leh has undergone unprecedented growth in cars and hotels, with the latter encroaching on irrigated agricultural land. Despite the preparation of a land-use plan, no authority has been willing to restrict this heaven-sent bounty. On the contrary, the authorities have congratulated themselves on the development of high-quality facilities and the construction of two new three-star hotels. In addition, certain places have become the destinations of special excursions, particularly the shores of the Tso Moriri, Tso Kar and Pangong lakes. Increasing visitor flows have exacerbated waste problems and impacted on bird-nesting areas, thus threatening the biodiversity of the birdlife present (Morup, 2009; Humbert-Droz, 2009). The strategy of the wildlife warden to encourage the development of accommodation facilities in local homes (homestays) or campsites managed by the local communities has not always been well received. Thus in 2008, a property developer who wanted to build a luxury hotel on the shores of Lake Pangong succeeded in setting the local population against the wildlife department by spreading false information in the form of rumours that the incumbent administration wanted to prohibit pastoral farming and was ready to

expropriate certain inhabitants with a view to protecting big game⁹. For several weeks, the inhabitants blocked the road leading to the lake, while at the same time making threats to the wildlife warden. In 2009, the warden managed to defuse the conflict by proposing a substantial project of interest to all inhabitants, the homestay programme. This provided a means of separating the interests of the local population from those of the rich developers. This temporary crisis illustrates the increasing pressure on biodiversity protection exerted by new economic interests. It is even in danger of jeopardising, at any moment, the precious balance that has been built up by certain actors.

Conclusion

Ladakh, and particularly the district of Leh, is gradually becoming an immense protected area that will integrate and involve local inhabitants by providing them with new development prospects, linking together environmental protection, traditional activities and tourism. This situation is the result of the coming together of a local society characterised by vague political desires for autonomy, and therefore little inclined to implement national legislation, and western NGOs intent on developing projects bearing the stamp of sustainable development. The acceptance of protection policies is thus linked to a process of identity and territorial recognition with respect to Kashmir, providing an opportunity to claim special status within India. Numerous initiatives to protect biodiversity have enabled Ladakh to set itself up as a model at the national and even international scale.

This project has only been made possible, however, by the fact that the NGOs have been able to translate generally accepted world values into local reality by offering concrete development opportunities. The innovative capacity of NGOs has been passed on by the regional wildlife warden who has taken up and further implemented the most promising initiatives.

It is important, however, to put this somewhat idyllic situation into perspective. The situation has developed at a moment when economic and tourism pressure is still moderate at the scale of Ladakh, but there are now some areas of friction appearing between the opportunity for mass tourism development and the multiplication of protected areas. A new debate is taking shape: Should a few areas like Leh and the extremity of the lakes be sacrificed to tourism and urbanisation in order to continue preserving Ladakh as a whole?

Translation: Brian Keogh.

⁹ While the managers of the Lunkung tourist site where the said hotel was to be built were explaining the economic reasons behind the struggle with the government, the inhabitants of Spangmik hamlet, 7 km to the east, remained persuaded that the administration had wanted to evict them before it finally stepped down.

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