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Traversing the Fragile Landscape: Eco-Concerns in the Travel Narratives on Ladakh

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Abstract

Travel narratives on Ladakh often move beyond the mere depiction of its landscape and culture heritage. To confront pressing concerns of environmental sustainability, numerous travelogues on Ladakh draw attention to the fragile ecological balance of this high-altitude desert and the growing pressures from globalization, mass tourism and climate change. The select works highlights the how traditional systems that were sustainable and more efficient are increasingly threatened modern infrastructure and consumer models of growth. By situating the region's transformation within both local and universal contexts, these travelogues urge readers to reconsider the meaning of progress and recognize the ethical imperative of aligning development with ecological cultural preservation.

Keywords: Ladakh, Travel Narrative, Environment, Global warming, Tourism,

The greatest threat to the planet in the contemporary world is global warming and climate crisis. Global warming is a global phenomenon that has infiltrated every corner of the world devouring environments that sustained millions of living organisms for centuries. From the glaciers of Antarctica to the dry mountains of Ladakh, every section of the earth is under the influence of climate crisis.

Climate change and its impact have emerged as a major concern in travel narratives on Ladakh. These writings often describe the changing topography of the region with

shrinking glaciers and changing weather patterns. One of the significant issues discussed in these writings is the transformation the region is witnessing. The writers, through their writings, are trying to attract the common people's attention towards the issue of climate change that is affecting the region on a mass scale.

It has been more than 50 years since the imaginary wall of Ladakh was withdrawn, marking the end of more than two decades of post-independence isolation. Over these 50 years, Ladakh has undergone a spectacular

transformation, which includes both positive and negative. The opening of the region paved new opportunities for the isolated region, simultaneously killing the golden goose. This boosted the economy of the region, but at the same time accumulated tons of problems like environmental degradation, overcrowding, increased waste material and stress on the existing limited resources.

The issues of the environment and climate change are a global concern. With the rise in the number of outsiders and in pursuit of modernity, Ladakh has undergone a remarkable transformation. This change influences every aspect of society, that is environment, tradition and culture. By delving into ecological issues and examining the relationship between human activity and natural world, these travelogues provide a rich insightful reading experience.

Global warming and the environment are significant issues in contemporary travel writings on Ladakh. Writers have frequently explored issues such as urbanization, exploitation of land and ecological decline. Most of these writers highlight the growing ecological pressures, caused by climate change, over-tourism and infrastructural expansion. Each summer, Ladakh witnesses an influx of thousands of tourists and the unchecked rise in tourism has become a central concern in these travelogues. Many writers draw attention to how the growing number of hotels, vehicles and adventure pursuits strain the region's scarce resources. Issues such as plastic pollution, inadequate sewage management, and dwindling water supplies are repeatedly emphasized in these reflective travel narratives.

With the rise in the number of outsiders, the region saw a significant transformation on every level. The enormous increase in the number of visitors has led to the construction of hotels on a massive scale to accommodate the guests, which adds significant pressure on the environment. The small town of Leh had 219 registered hotels, but in 2022, the number rose to

800, and each hotel relies on underground water for its consumption (Down to Earth). The unregulated flow and the increase in tourism started causing severe damage to the resources. With the addition of hotels, the practice of agriculture and agricultural lands has been witnessed decreasing drastically.

Stacey Burton, in her book *Travel Narrative and the Ends of Modernity*, argues that in the 20th century, travel narratives started exploring cultural transformation and the consequences of modernity and geopolitical events. With more frontiers charted and the globe rendered more accessible than ever, travel writing moved beyond the pursuit of the unknown. Instead, it shifted towards observing and interpreting the landscape, culture, and ecosystems being altered under the pressure of globalisation. This information became a significant concern in travel writing. "Travel writing found a new purpose of as a means of observing modernity's effects" (Burton 85). Travel writings on Ladakh in the same manner focus on the impact of modernisation and the cultural transformation that was taking place in the region. Modern narratives on Ladakh significantly deal with the radical transformation the region is witnessing from globalisation, modernity and the rising number of tourists. Janet Rizvi notes, "the balance with the natural environment, which is the basic characteristic of Ladakhi life, is today threatened by the forces of change and so-called progress which no ancient society, brought face to face with the modern world, can hope to escape" (173).

Ancient Futures by Helena offers an insight into Ladakh's tryst with modernity. The book offers the impact of globalisation on traditional societies. It explores how the traditional Ladakhi society, which thrived for centuries in the confines of the Himalayas, began to crumble with the invasion of modernity, globalisation and foreign influences. The influence of the outsiders was numerous and multifaceted, which was witnessed in the

traditions, living standards, behavioural patterns, ways of thinking and most importantly, the impact it had on the environment. Helena attributes this transition to the rise of tourism in the region. Tourism remains one of the major contributors to the region's development, with a significant impact. Ash and Turner observe:

Tourism is an invasion outwards from the highly developed metropolitan centres into the 'uncivilized' peripheries. It destroys uncomprehendingly and unintentionally, since one cannot impute malice to millions of people or even to thousands of businessmen and entrepreneurs. . . As a mass movement of people, tourism deserves to be regarded with suspicion and disquiet, if not outright dread. (Holden 68)

Similarly, in the same manner, Helena laments the transition of Ladakh from a serene environment to urban chaos.

Over the last sixteen years, I have watched this village turn into an urban sprawl. Soulless, cell-like "housing colonies" have eaten into the green fields and spread into the dusty desert, punctuated not by trees but by electricity poles. Flaking paint, rusting metal, broken glass, and discarded plastic rubbish are now part of the scenery; billboards advertise cigarettes and powdered milk (156).

The new Ladakh finds itself at the crossroads of the dilemma between the growing economy and the rising environmental concerns. The winter (icy) mountains that used to welcome the sun started receding with increasing pressure. The increased pressure from the rising number of visitors and the changing lifestyle started making a great impact on the region's diverse landscape. While the snow over the mountain peaks is receding at a great pace, the empty

deserts are turning into mountains of dumpsites.

Numerous travellers have shown their fascination with the new and transforming Ladakh. Hella Naura, while travelling in Ladakh, describes how the old, isolated and mysterious Ladakh does not exist anymore. As she says,

Getting by taxi to my guesthouse, I had already noticed that Leh could not be what I expected. For untouched nature and silence, I should have come twenty years earlier. As it was now seemingly very contagious, construction boom fever seemed to have hit Leh not less than it has many places worldwide, be they Asia, Europe or the U.S. (25)

Hella Naura is shocked to see how Ladakh is no longer what she had expected; on the contrary, it has become just like any other major city in the world with foreign influences. She emphasises how the future of Ladakh is determined by the ideology of progress that goes against its traditional lifestyle and fragile ecosystem. Andrew Harvey, in a similar manner, observes the disintegration of society. In his book, *A Journey in Ladakh*, Andrew Harvey reflects on the impact of globalisation, and its impact on the region. Romesh Bhattacharji explains how Leh is crowded, with thousands of tourists coming from all over the world. Pico Iyer also talks about how signs of modernity were visible everywhere, overtaking the region. During his visit in 2008, Pico Iyer noticed how the region was undergoing a transition.

Its temples that mock gravity, its khaki-colored stretches of emptiness with small white Buddhist stupas above them, even the tree-lined walks out of Leh were more beautiful than almost anything I'd seen in Bhutan or Tibet itself. And yet, all of us eager to sample such wonders have brought a new restlessness to the people of Ladakh, who now fill Leh's narrow streets with construction cranes and

revving Suzukis and realize that their future lies in a packaging – or even an abandoning – of their past. (Iyer 2008).

Multitudes of travellers and, more particularly, environmentalist have shown their concern for the region in recent times. In addition to global warming, the abrupt rise in the number of travellers to the region during the short period of summer has become a great factor in the transition of the region. According to Janet Rizvi, there are two major factors that is responsible for the transformation of the region: one is the newly established connection between Ladakh and the outside world, and the second is the pursuit of modern technology to achieve development (173). The pursuit of modern technology led the local population to give up on their centuries-old traditions. This further development made the region completely dependent upon the outside world

According to Andrew Holden, “tourism remained largely immune from environmental criticism” (Holden 67). However, under the guise of an eco-friendly industry, tourism was destroying nature in a subtle and slow manner. “During the 1970s, questions about the environmental impacts of tourism began to be raised more widely, as tourism expanded into new geographical areas and the negative effects of its development became more obvious” (67). Nevertheless, according to Laurence Buell, the discourse of environment and eco-criticism is not a new phenomenon but has its roots in antiquity. Be it in individual thought or institutional beliefs, the subject of environment has always existed in one form or the other. Lawrence Buell quotes Raymond Williams, the notable critic, who “concerned himself much more with the actualities of environmental history and landscape transformation” (Buell 14).

As concerns for the environment from tourism was taking place, Ladakh started opening its arms for tourism, unintentionally and unknowingly inviting disaster from the

industry. This was all due to the lack of planning and proper management. As the world started to become more aware and conscious about environmental hazards, “predictions in the report of pollution, resource depletion raised public consciousness over environmental issues” (Holden 67). Despite this growing sensitivity to environmental concern, Ladakh’s developmental trajectory remained out of step with sustainable approaches.

Helena starts recognising troubling patterns in the region and the surroundings at the very early stage of tourism. Although terms like global warming and the greenhouse effect were not as popular as today for the isolated Ladakh, the book anticipates it in the 1970s, which is becoming a reality. The book envisages the region’s future that is crumbling down from various sections. Helena focuses on the struggle of the traditional culture of Ladakh and its resistance to modernity and technology. Helena’s motivation for writing this book is an attempt to grasp the then-present situation of the region and the future possibilities that might result in the region. Helena anticipates the potential consequences of the impact of the rising number of outsiders. The book goes beyond merely discussing the environment; it urges us to connect with it, comprehend its significance, and take responsibility for the shared future it sustains.

Helena offers a stark portrayal of how human actions, particularly the pursuit of modernity, can cause irreversible harm to the environment. The book reveals how the pursuit of modernity was transforming the region on a great scale. Her narrative draws attention to how development, when adopted without reflection, frequently disregards the ecological imbalance embedded in traditional systems of living. What may appear as a sign of progress actually threatens the region’s ecological balance. For Helena, this is a metaphor for disregard of nature on a larger scale; it symbolizes humanity’s broader neglect of nature, where convenience and the illusion of

advancement override long-term ecological stability.

At its core, *Ancient Futures* illustrates how Ladakh is heading to a more disastrous path in pursuit of modernity. A region that was once known for its traditional way of life is under threat from global warming and human encroachment. The impacts of modernity are not only limited to the environment but on the people as well. Helena emphasises that these environmental changes are not isolated events but are connected to a broader global pattern of ecological disruption shaped by historical exploitation and contemporary negligence. The book's title is significant because it references to the past that holds the key to a sustainable future.

At the heart of the book is Helena's message that no region is safe until and unless we don't act and resist. Climate change and global warming are becoming a reality and shaping the lives of people even in the farthest corners of the world. The degradation of the environment is one of the major challenges the world is currently facing. Ladakh, with its vast barren landscape the greatest threat it faces is from human interference, which has remained free from human intervention for thousands of centuries. Ladakh face a constant threat from climate change and the rising number of tourists, making the region highly vulnerable. Yet it also has the power to resist this catastrophe through its traditional ways of living.

Romesh Bhattacharji, in his book *Ladakh: Changing, yet Unchanged*, illustrates how Ladakh is a new victim of climate change and the rising number of tourists and how it is undergoing rapid transformation in the pursuit of modernity. Just like Helena, Bhattacharji describes the region's tryst with modernity and the transition the region was witnessing. Bhattacharji attributes this transition to the tourism industry, which has exploded over the last two decades. Bhattacharji's concern for

Ladakh resonates strongly with Paul Fussell's distinction between the explorer, the traveller and the tourist. As a traveller, he engages deeply with the culture, sensitive to its traditions, spirituality and fragile ecology while simultaneously critiquing the changes ushered in by modernity. His observation on the rising mass tourism mirrors Fussell's characterization of the tourist, whose fleeting encounters with place often emphasise spectacle over genuine understanding. For Bhattacharji, the real challenge facing Ladakh lies in the commodification of the place that brings an unchecked influx of tourists, leading to the destabilisation of its ecological balance.

Bhattacharji condemns the establishment of pseudo-places to attract more and more tourists. The tourism industry has seen a boom, which has given rise to a number of pseudo-places across the region. Bhattacharji gives the example of Magnetic Hill and Gurudwara Pathar Sahab as such places that came into existence recently. A frequent traveller to Ladakh, Bhattacharji criticises the commodification of the places with magnifying boards to entice tourists, which didn't exist in the 80s. Bhattacharji regards these activities as unnecessary and unwanted.

Both writers show how the rise in the number of visitors affects the region severely. Both travelled during the 1970s when Ladakh was in oblivion of modernity and development. They also illustrate the innocence of the region before the arrival of modernity. Helena spent 16 years in the region studying and witnessing the transition of the region from a traditional village to a modern society. While Romesh Bhattacharji, who travels frequently to the region, sees a different Ladakh every time he visits. Both writers, through their writing, show concern for the region in their own way. Helena focuses on all social, cultural and environmental change, while on the other hand, Bhattacharji focuses on both environment and the deculturization of the region. Bhattacharji is also critical of the

renaming of the regional names with Hindi names.

Both Helena and Bhattacharji show their concern with the growing number of travellers the region hosts every year. With the overcrowding of famous spots and adventure treks, there is also an exponential rise in the waste left behind, which is becoming a huge problem. Given the limited resources that can sustain a limited number of people, the overcrowding has become a huge problem that puts heavy pressure on the region. The impact on the region is not just an environmental issue but an existential threat as well.

These travelogues are crucial in understanding the transition of Ladakh, particularly the change that started with the arrival of outsiders, which forced Ladakh to pursue modernity. The fall in the number of local dry toilets was a result of the rise in the number of outsiders. Moreover, in order to meet the demands of outsiders, flush toilets started replacing the local ones. However, unlike the traditional dry toilet, the modern one poses an environmental threat with its excessive use of water and the sludge that comes out of it. On the other hand, the local dry toilet is simpler and eco-friendly, where the human waste is used in the field. With the fall in the number of dry toilets and the rise of flush toilets, replacing them is one of the primary concerns that needs to be tackled. Given the situation of the region, dry toilets have been in use for centuries in the dry region. Helena observes the rising problem of the modern toilet:

“Human waste, for instance, is no longer used to nourish the land; instead, it is becoming a problem, as scarce resources must be diverted in order to process it. As flush lavatories are built, energy is needed to raise precious water onto rooftops, so that gallons of it can be flushed away into miles of pipe and septic tanks. In the crowded conditions of Leh, leaking tanks have become a major source

of contamination and have contributed to the recent increase in the incidence of hepatitis and other water-borne diseases.” (158)

The statement visualizes the slow violence that has penetrated the region. From the opening of the paragraph, it shows how things are becoming a problem in the new Ladakh. It also reveals an insidious environmental crisis, the depletion of its underground water reserves. This discharge also contaminates the remaining underground water. The water system in Ladakh has always been delicate. Relying heavily on the snow, glacial meltwater is the main source that feeds its streams, rivers and underground water. Numerous studies also reveal the shrinking underground water due to excessive consumption for maintenance and construction. Hotels and guesthouses are fitted with flush toilets, showers and washing machines that use tons of water every day. It is completely unsustainable. In addition to meeting the demands, there is unregulated water extraction from the underground, depleting its already scarce reserves.

Slow Violence in Ladakh is influencing the region from all directions, from retreating glaciers, contaminated underground water, shrinking underground water and environmental degradation. The impact of global warming has become more obvious in recent years, according to various studies. The rise in the number of tourists adds to the severe implications of climate change. A recent study of climate change and its impact by the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology in Ladakh found that one of the largest glaciers in Ladakh is retreating at a much faster rate than earlier. The study found out that the melting of the glacier could form three glacial lakes, increasing the risk to the region of glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF). According to the report, the melting rate of glaciers has risen to 20 meters a year as compared to the earlier pace of 5 meters a year. These studies also reflect how the region

that barely sustains the local population is threatened with large concerns for its well-being of its people, agriculture and livelihood. The tale of this glacier is the fate of every other glacier in the Himalayas.

Conclusion

The contemporary travel narratives on Ladakh often highlight the fragility of the landscape. Writers and travellers describe not only the breathtaking vistas but also the subtle signs of environmental stress – melting glaciers, shrinking streams, and the increased occurrence of flash floods. Due to its physical and environmental sensitivity, it is prone to detrimental changes. Travel writing, with its ability to connect readers emotionally to distant places, plays a crucial role in raising awareness about these challenges. By highlighting these concerns, travel writing encourages responsible exploration and a deeper understanding of our collective responsibility towards nature, and especially fragile environments like Ladakh.

The growing presence of eco-concerns in travel narratives on Ladakh reflects a broader shift in how we think about travel and its impact on fragile environments. Once known as an isolated region in oblivion of modernity and development now lies at the frontlines of climate change and environmental degradation. As the world grapples with the crisis of climate change and the loss of biodiversity, the story of Ladakh serve as a poignant reminder of sustainable travel. The challenge for both writers and travellers is to tread carefully on the high passes, leaving the region as magnificent and resilient as it has been for centuries.

The travel narratives on Ladakh serve as both a celebration of its sublime landscapes and a cautionary tale about their fragility. They compel readers to rethink the impact of their travel choices and consider the broader implications of their actions. As Ladakh navigates the pressures of modernization and environmental change, these narratives play a crucial role in fostering a deeper appreciation of

the region and a collective sense of responsibility for its preservation. Ladakh's battle with the climate change and global warming is emblematic of the broader struggle the world is facing today. The melting glaciers, changing weather pattern and the crumbling ecosystem of the region stands a poignant reminder of the immediate and urgent need to act. With every passing day, the planet is collapsing with the overburden of the Anthropocene activities. The time to address the issue of climate crisis is now, not just for a particular region but also for the entire planet.

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