



## CONTEMPORARY LADAKH EVOLVING INDIGENOUS & QUALITY EDUCATION

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Education cannot be defined it is something which transcends the plain of general understanding. What the forefathers taught on surviving the extreme cold during winters in Ladakh, was not the outcome of a modern education but based on their traditional and practical knowledge which they passed on to generations. It is where multiple rivers and streams of knowledge converge and accumulate into a vast ocean of knowledge. It should be used as a powerful instrument of social, economic and political change.

Health, employment and education are top three priorities in terms of aspirations relating to development. Educational strategy must therefore be decentralised and diversified so that each and every individual gets a chance to improve their

social conditions and avail the opportunity of education. Thus Education is both the product of society and an instrument for bringing about further change. It contributes towards economic growth by inventing new methods and promoting their use.

Education should not be grasped as just reading and writing but it must be related to overall development of an individual. Though achieving 100% literacy in a country like India would be difficult, continuous effort will show its results.

Significance of education is much greater today. It is true that India has made significant gains in education since independence, however a lot still remains to be achieved. Most educational development has taken place in urban and other favourable areas. Ladakh, which occupies the eastern most part of Jammu and Kashmir State, is typical of such areas which are inhabited by simple communities and have a hostile environment which act as a barrier for enhancing educational facilities.

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*Views expressed are author's own.*



Leh is one of the districts of Ladakh where still many loopholes are found in the education system needing immediate attention for the development of the society. Leh has the opportunity to knock out the issues and problems related to the education through Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC ) from the very foundation and can set an example to the world for achieving the best quality education in the most difficult terrain of the world.

## I EDUCATION SYSTEM IN LEH: AN INTRODUCTION

Leh with the population of about 147,104 has a literacy rate of 80.48% which put the district on the 3rd rank in the state in terms of literacy. The male and female literacy rate in Leh is 89.39% and 64.52% respectively whereas the average literacy rate of rural and urban areas is 71.79% and 91.31% respectively (census 2011).

Though in terms of population Leh has sufficient numbers of schools which include 335 government schools, 37 private schools it has a lack of institutions for higher education as it has only one college, one polytechnic and one ITI. The facts and figures of education facilities in Leh seem to be a great achievement on the part of the government for the development and socio economic progress but one needs to rethink and analyse the ground reality of the education system in Leh.

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It is unfortunate that many people use the term literacy and education synonymously. Literacy means being able to read and write while education means to acquire knowledge to enhance one's ability to reason and make sound judgement. In academic terms, education is not conterminous with schooling, the institutionalized strand of education.

### The SECMOL Initiative

Ladakhi students, however, usually mean basic literacy (as directly related to formal schooling) (Mellor, 2001). The presumption that Leh has not achieved much in the last decade or so would be wrong as it is lot better than rest of the districts of the state and India as a whole. Much of its appreciation can be attributed to the SECMOL (Student Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh) an NGO founded by Sonam Wangchuk in 1988.

In its 20-year journey SECMOL did tremendous work in the educational sector and for that purpose it launched Operation New Hope (ONH) in 1994. The ONH aimed to renovate the primary education system in the government schools in Ladakh especially to tackle the roots of the problem of educational failure and to reform the education system mainly in the remote areas.

The ONH left no stone unturned in reforming the education system in Leh which they mainly achieved through forming Village Education Committees (VECs). The VECs train teachers in creative, child centric and activity based teaching methods in order to make schooling less painful and more joyful for children. It also contextualised quality primary education through developing localised school text books and teaching/ learning materials for primary schools in Ladakh.

SECMOL did laudable work in reforming the educational system in Leh before its forced closure in 2007. However, the SECMOL through ONH did impart quality

education equally accessible to all children in Ladakh irrespective of their physical location and economic status.

### LAHDC and Education

The unaccomplished goal of SECMOL was and is somewhat carried on by the LAHDC which was formed in 1995. It is a self governing body which works at the grassroots level for the development and progress of the society. One cannot neglect the work done by LAHDC for spreading and imparting education to every remote corner of Leh and achieving the literacy rate to such an extent.

### Rehbar-e-Talim

The introduction of Rehbar-e-talim (ReTs) by the state is also a positive effort toward improving the education scenario although it is not showing results. One needs to analyse the ground reality; only quantitative measures do not work. There has to be a focus more on the qualitative aspect as well. Establishing schools, recruiting more teachers, having more number of children do not fulfill the criteria for good education; one must look what happens within the classroom.

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lead a quality life.

Quality education involves critical thinking, learning to work with others and work independently. It also provides skills necessary to deal with things, processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools and skilful assessments to facilitate learning and reduce disparities. It includes an outcome that encompasses knowledge, skills and attitudes, and is linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.

A starting point to find the factors that explain quality education in a population are student characteristics, appropriate resources available to them and the context in which these resources are provided. Now the differences between the quantitative and qualitative aspect of education can be easily stated.

Leh has numerous schools but they do not fulfill the criteria for a quality education. Students face multiple challenges and problems when they pursue higher education because they were not conditioned to quality education. This modern Indian education system had been a British legacy.

The current education system in Ladakh does not give much importance to learning rather they manufacture students by making them pass the examination; this is leading to degradation of education in Leh. The very

## II UNDERSTANDING THE LIMITATIONS OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM OF LEH

What is meant by quality education? Is it just preparing a student to pass with high percentage or more than that? Literally it is more than that as the main aim of education is to prepare and develop the child physically, mentally and spiritually to

essence of education is being lost. In today's system the quality of education is not given much importance. There have been instances of manipulation by a section within the Education Department to show a better picture, wherein the ground reality was totally different.

The limitations and lacunae existing in the education sector in Leh is nothing but a result of the negligence both from the government and the community. If the people of Leh want their children to have the ability to go beyond the notion of learning to read and write, they must stress on the quality of education for it not only improves the learning but also develops skills to face the challenges. These prevailing limitations must be eradicated or overcome in order to have an overall development of the individual or society.

Many factors in Leh deprive the students of quality education, foremost being the medium of instruction. Leh, having a different dialect and language altogether, cannot match the alien language when they are taught in the classrooms from the primary level. The children face difficulty in associating the things written in their books with the things in their environment which encourages rote learning right from the beginning. As time passes they start reading and writing in Urdu and Hindi about the world.

They chant about the Taj Mahal and learn about other wonders of the world but learn nothing about the palace of Leh. They chant about how atoms of

hydrogen and oxygen combine to form a molecule but read nothing about how a Ladakh farm is watered with melting ice from the glaciers through proper channels. This affects the students' life in the long term.

Accessibility is another major issue which needs to be addressed immediately. The dropout rates in the schools is one of the results related to the problem of accessibility. Students have to cover distances of an average of 4km in most of the rural areas which demotivate them from going to school. They become reluctant to attend the school which results in an increase in dropout rates and a decrease in retention rates.

Additionally, harsh environment dictates its own terms on the school education in Leh, as small children facing fierce cold going to school, demands specific arrangement, which is another essential area that needs to be addressed by the policy makers. Distance from school, that is physical accessibility, has a unique dimension in Leh and other regions of Ladakh, owing to the harsh climate and rugged topography.

Policy design and schemes for quality education for the plain areas of India is for obvious reasons not suitable for the development of school infrastructure in Ladakh, therefore schemes like SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan), EFA (Education For All), RTE (Right To Education) etc, must have suitable approach accordingly, to achieve the desired aims and results.

Infrastructure is another such area which needs to be catered to. Lack of proper infrastructure also played a major role in affecting the quality of education. There are a number of schools which do not have sufficient number of class rooms for the number of classes being conducted. Many schools having higher classes above 8th do not even have a proper library or a science lab and in some schools that have these facilities they are not well maintained. These are basic requirements in educational institutions for

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students to have better understanding of what is being taught in the classrooms. In many schools lack of toilet facilities have demotivated students from going to classes while some schools have toilet facilities for both boys and girls.

During winters when the temperature drops the attendance in classes also drops which means that cold climate becomes an obstacle for the students that cannot be overcome because no special facility has been provided for the extreme winters that is experienced during the months of November and December. It has been found that many of the government schools run on the funding from various NGOs and other sources while government functionaries take a back seat and ignore the situation.

Another major problem is lack of comprehensibility among students in various courses. Logically, this is the failure of the teacher and the inadequate methods of teaching, which has a serious repercussion on the retention rate. Literature has been loud in depicting the fact that the lack of interest and poor quality leads to increase in dropout rates. This is the result of non-comprehensibility particularly faced by students in Leh. This problem is also associated with the problem of medium of instruction and infrastructure as well. This shows that all these problems are interlinked with each other and a proper solution to one can solve other issues to some extent.

Teacher absenteeism and lack of constructive learning in schools is yet another disincentive for the parents to send their child to school. Teacher training and commitment play a basic role in educational development and in the functioning of schools. Both these attributes are lacking in the teachers of Leh as the teachers are not well qualified on the one hand and they are not committed to their jobs on the other. The transfer of the teachers every two or three years to remote areas of Leh make them unaccustomed to the new environment as a result they remain mostly absent from

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their jobs. This happens more with non – Ladakhi teachers than the local ones. Though local teachers have better rapport with the village people and have contributed significantly towards education, many of them do not have proper training and education. This results in the degradation of learning of the students and the education system of the society.

Neglect of government schools by community, letting them shut down, deliberately making them inefficient, dysfunctional, has made the environment conducive for mushrooming private schools. The latter are not reliable in terms of consistency in financial source and management.

Giving an overriding importance to the private schools at the cost of government school is not a healthy sign for long term goal. According to DRC 2007-08, there are roughly 2 primary schools in every village of Leh district; however, 11 percent of the total 220 primary schools (both govt & private) have only one classroom, which reflects the defeat of the very purpose of the grading system, (1st-5th) all learning in one class room. Only 62 percent of the primary schools have toilet facilities and 47 percent have drinking water facilities which reflect the gross inadequacy of basic facilities, more importantly teaching- learning materials are lacking in many schools.

When compared to other districts of J&K, like Samba, Kathua, where these facilities

are available in all the schools Leh is lagging far behind (Reach Ladakh).

Absence of proper teaching method or teaching aid add to the poor quality of education system where the students cannot comprehend the subjects easily hence they perform poorly in annual exams. The limited view of teaching as presentation of knowledge no longer fits with current understandings of how and what students learn. Teaching styles in many places, however, remain traditional, teacher-centred and fairly rigid or even authoritarian.

All these major loopholes or the lack of quality education can be attributed to the policy makers and the government for not giving enough attention on these issues rather they are ignored instead literary figures which fail to show the quality aspect are displayed. Academic achievement is often used as an indicator of school quality because it is easily measurable using standardized tests, while other outcomes may be more complex and less tangible.

Mismanagement on the part of the government fail to motivate the parents or community to give attention to these issues related to the education of their children and suggest some changes in the system. The singular lack of policy for a sound education system in Leh is a persistent problem for the youth and the entire region. Students lose connection with their culture and traditional values which give rise to identity crisis.

Persistent negligence from the administration paved way for the tuition and coaching culture in Leh like other parts of the country. Such culture flourishing clearly shows the inadequacy in the education sector of the society where failure of schooling is compensated by the coaching classes. This creates economic burden on the underprivileged section of the society whose income standard cannot afford such extra classes.

We have to look into the matter of why such tuition classes are required rather than supporting it. In order to have an effective and sound education system one has to rise beyond the limitations and must look for an appropriate and quality education system in Leh.

There is also a need for an inclusive education system where the differently abled could study with the able ones which has been never addressed by the state effectively. Some initiatives have been taken by NGOs like the Hill Council and came up with Chushot Yokma as a model village where the school initiated some inclusive practices, whereby the teachers, disabled children and their peers worked towards creating an enabling environment.

Village mobilisation and involvement of Village Education Committee is the need of the hour to play proactive roles for better inclusive education. To increase equality education such issues should not be forgotten.

*For higher education Leh has only one college and that too with limited course options. This is a major reason that compels the youth to seek education in other parts of the country where they face problems of acceptance and identity.*

### III

#### NEED TO EVOLVE QUALITY EDUCATION SYSTEM

Quality education cannot be judged by the academic achievement or pass percentage of the schools but one must go beyond all these judgemental ideas and see the overall development of an individual both in the short term as well as long term. Rote learning should be discouraged from the initial stage of learning itself and such education should be imparted which helps students build on prior knowledge to develop attitudes, beliefs and cognitive skills as well as expand their knowledge base.

The prevailing education system in Leh only manufactures students increasing the literacy rate but the deeper aspect tells somewhat a different tale. Students are not prepared for further competition which they would face in higher studies in different parts of the world.

Communication skills like debates, poem recitation, and elocution are only names in theory as they are not practiced, writing skills like organising essay competition, story writing is not encouraged making students vulnerable in various competitions later in life. There are numerous such examples which are absent in the education system which results in students of Leh lagging far behind in speaking and communication skills as compared to the students from other schools.

There is a major need to change the existing education system and to bring on quality education through improving infrastructure by including good libraries and laboratories and more classrooms. A serious thought is necessary on inculcating the education through local medium of instruction rather than alien languages like Urdu or English.

Communicative and mental skills improve with the mother tongue. The focus should not only be in the number of enrolments but retention also must be considered to

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assess the quality of education. Some extra efforts are needed from the government to look into the matter of recruiting teachers who are well trained, well qualified and who have the skills of teaching methods and aids.

Communities should be motivated, especially Village Education Committee, to analyse the schools periodically for its proper functioning. The responsibility for imparting quality education not only falls on teachers but parents should also seek equal contribution and become key decision makers in the educational journey of their child.

In Leh parents, being illiterate, remain unaware about what is happening within the class room. Many of them are not bothered per se and hardly any voice is raised for improving the quality and accountability of elementary education. Since they belong to the better off households, they tend to remain indifferent and would rather send their children to schools outside the province than demand from the non-existent school community. Also on the other hand parents are not perceived as necessary in a child's learning, but are ignorant clients of school services with no right to seek redressal. Undermining all these aspects of education could degrade the education system further in Leh which would make society vulnerable to changing time and situation.

There is complete apathy to educational reforms at every level. Whole education

sector is under the vicious cycle of blame game. The parents blame the teachers, the teachers blame the system and the system blames the regulators, so goes on the vicious cycle.

The desperate need of the villagers to provide quality education to their children often leads to their sending off their wards outside Leh, thus estranging them from their families, culture and villages. Children in their adolescence face numerous challenges both mental and physical making them vulnerable to many situations when they go outside Leh. Most of them fall prey to the hard competition making them uncertain about their future thinking that if education is means to an end and the end being a profession, they would end up taking low paying tourism centric jobs that are learnt better on the job than confined within the four walls of a classroom.

Education is still not a fundamental right in Leh as right to education (RTE) has not been implemented in the state because of the different constitution. The Jammu and Kashmir school education act needs to be strengthened for effective results. The quality of education provided by the government system remains in question. There are also frequent allegations of government schools being riddled with absenteeism and mismanagement and appointments are based on political convenience.

Leh is desperately in need of school administrators who are managers of creativity and change who would overcome the challenges and develop quality education. To overcome certain loopholes the government is planning to increase the pay scale of ReTs teacher's up to Rs4000 in order to make them more dedicated towards their profession. Aside from this in order to improve the quality of education state government sanctioned centres of Kashmir University both in Leh

and Kargil so that students can have better options to go into various fields. One degree college has also been approved in Nubra valley for higher studies. The demand of the hour is to consider various aspects related to education like learning by practice, learning form environment, developing skills and many other qualities which will make education in Leh much better than its current state.

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