

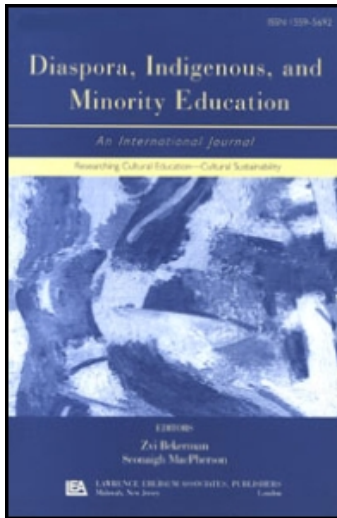
This article was downloaded by: [Canadian Research Knowledge Network]

On: 7 November 2008

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 789956502]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t775653636>

## The Green Primitives of the Himalayas Revisited

Tashi Tsering<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability, University of British Columbia,

Online Publication Date: 01 October 2008

**To cite this Article** Tsering, Tashi(2008)'The Green Primitives of the Himalayas Revisited',*Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*,2:4,295 — 301

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/15595690802352838

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15595690802352838>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

---

## PERSPECTIVES AND PROGRAM STUDIES

---

# The Green Primitives of the Himalayas Revisited

Tashi Tsering

*Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability  
University of British Columbia*

In environmentalist discourse, there is often an assumption that certain non-industrial peoples, usually called “traditional” or “indigenous” live in more “harmonious” relations with nature. The general argument is that instead of treating these communities as “backward” or “uncivilized,” the modern world has much to learn from them in terms of living with the environment. Helena Norberg-Hodge’s *Ancient Futures* is an influential book that has defined the ecological culture of Tibetan Buddhist peoples. In this essay, *Ancient Futures* is juxtaposed in the light of a critical framework called Agrarian Environments presented in a collection of essays edited by Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan (2000).

One of the most powerful books that define the ecological culture of Tibetan Buddhist people of Ladakh is Helena Norberg-Hodge’s (1991) *Ancient Futures: Learning From Ladakh*. The central assumption of *Ancient Futures* is that certain Indigenous peoples and cultures, exemplified in this case by Ladakhi people and their Tibetan Buddhist culture, lived in harmony with nature before its “collision” with Western-style economic development. The moral of the book is that the modern industrial world, portrayed as the force responsible for environmental degradation, such as anthropogenic climate change, has much to learn from these ancient cultures about living sustainably with the environment. Such assumptions

---

Correspondence should be addressed to Tashi Tsering, Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability, The University of British Columbia, Aquatic Ecosystem Research Laboratory, 429-2202 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z4. E-mail: [tsering@interchange.ubc.ca](mailto:tsering@interchange.ubc.ca)

are not only becoming popular among environmentalists but also among local people—in this case, the Ladakhis and the Tibetans.

Tesi Environmental Awareness Movement (2007), a Tibetan nongovernmental organization in India dedicated to environmental education with a mission to “revive the ecological consciousness of the Tibetan people,” screened a film version of the book with the same title, *Ancient Futures*, to mark 2007 Earth Day. During the summer in Ladakh, when the economic and social life is most vibrant, the film *Ancient Futures* is screened daily (except Sundays) by the Ladakh Ecological Development Group. The screenings help educate hundreds of tourists every year about how a once “stress- and trash-free” Ladakh is now becoming increasingly competitive and polluted due to tourism and globalization. A Swiss tourist, who had watched the film, felt compelled by guilt to address “Why Tourists Choose Ladakh?” to a local newspaper (Morgane, 2007). Elsewhere, I too have quoted Parajuli (1998, p. 7) and argued that Tibetans are a “people who have developed a respectful use of the natural resources and consequently a commitment to creating and preserving a technology that interacts with local ecosystems in a sustainable manner” (Tsering, 2006, p. 46).

This special issue of *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* on ecological sustainability, culture, and education offers a platform to re-examine such popular and essentialist notions of Ladakhi and Tibetan Buddhist ecological culture in the light of pertinent critical scholarly debates. In traditional contexts, do the Tibetans, the Ladakhis, the Nepalese, and other *Pahari* (literal translation, “of the mountains”) people of the Himalayas really not harm their local ecology? What are the foundations of the assumption that these “traditional” societies and cultures are inherently non-destructive toward nature? What follows is a re-examination of *Ancient Futures* (Norberg-Hodge, 1991) juxtaposed in the light of a collection of essays called *Agrarian Environments*, edited by Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan (2000).

*Agrarian Environments* (Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000) as a framework of critical study emphasizes the historical and political dynamics of resource use, control, and conflict *within* communities in terms of castes, gender, and class conflicts, and how these relations deal with the forces of environment, market, tourism, and state. In other words, *Agrarian Environments* challenges the perception of certain traditional communities as isolated and static cultural and ecological units on which outside forces, such as the market, impinge. This framework argues that outside forces are an integral part of the construction and constitution of the “inside” or “the local.” *Agrarian Environments* forms a part of a larger postmodern research approach in anthropology that emphasizes the dynamic flux between the two vantage points from which culture can be perceived: the emic and the etic (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, pp. 77–110).

Before we embark on a critical re-examination of *Ancient Futures* (Norberg-Hodge, 1991), it is important to acknowledge that this classic work represents an

important evidential case study that culture emerges out of ecology in non-industrial and pre-modern societies. In other words, the author provided evidence that traditional Ladakhi culture and customs were adapted and, hence, well-suited to their marginal ecosystem. This is an important case study to contrast the extremes of today's world of economic and scientific prowess in which human beings have created, for example, a high consumption, densely populated city like Las Vegas in the middle of a desert! The size and location of villages in the Western Himalayan deserts were indeed determined by ecological constraints—principally, the availability of water. However, to overlook the dynamics of social relations that may be changing precisely because of environment-related conflicts and negotiations is a major methodological oversight of *Ancient Futures*. It is arguable that such oversight discounts the Indigenous view as either unsophisticated or irrelevant. Thus, I argue that Norberg-Hodge's arguments are based on the assumptions of green primitivism without proper historical and regional contextualization.

### GREEN PRIMITIVISM

The first set of flaws in the arguments presented in *Ancient Futures* (Norberg-Hodge, 1991) arises from theoretical assumptions of green primitivism. These green primitivist assumptions concern the idealization of Ladakh's traditional way of life as harmonious within the community (pp. 45–71) and with nature (pp. 19–36). By idealizing tradition, the modern is contrasted and portrayed in a negative light. The second set of assumptions portrays Ladakhi people as having an understanding of the environment from which the world should learn (p. 5). Although such assumptions are now increasingly challenged (Ellen, 1986), influential scholars, including India's very own Vandhana Shiva, champion such views. Many of these scholars hold parallel eco-feminist assumptions; Norberg-Hodge, for example, presented pre-modern societies as feminine and more knowledgeable of, and harmonious with, nature. They present the modern as masculine, less respectful of, and more violent toward, nature.

Norberg-Hodge also alluded to a notion that Ladakh's Tibetan Buddhist culture has endowed the society with a moral ethic and social organization that is feminine and ecological. Although the book does not provide any balanced information or analysis to support such notions, it is appropriate to ask why the Buddhist culture of Ladakhis, or the Tibetan people in general for that matter, seem to lose their ecological or feminine nature when they are exposed to the Western economy. Perhaps it is not the Buddhist culture that has made the Ladakhis or the Tibetans an "ecological people" as much as it is the lack of penetration by economic globalization.

Although there is a strong appeal to protecting traditional stress- and trash-free societies from being swallowed by industrial monoculture, common sense tells us that every human society must have elements of conflict. *Agrarian Environments* (Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000), in contrast, challenges us to probe into the dynamics of resource use, control, and conflict within the community in terms of castes, gender, and class conflicts, and how these relations deal with the forces of market and state to demonstrate that “social units or user groups that are deigned ‘original’ or ‘natural’ in environmental rhetoric (and legitimate stewards of local resources) are often products of conflicted histories and organized around the principle of exclusion rather than inclusion” (Gidwani, 2000, pp. 218–219). By analyzing the flux and dynamics of farming societies and their relation with nature, as well as markets and urban centers, to appreciate hidden contradictions, the *Agrarian Environments* framework warns against polarizing categories, such as feminine versus masculine treatment of nature and Indigenous versus Western knowledge concerning the environment.

In one chapter in *Agrarian Environments* (Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000), for example, Guha (2000) tests the validity of traditional harmonious societies as stewards of local resources by analyzing historical documents relating to a Maharashtrian village in the 18th century, a period before the influence of the West and the modern state. Guha found that not only did the villagers need to exploit markets for their survival, there were different competing powers (rulers and classes of society) that instituted different regimes to control the commons and significant differences in the ability of villagers to protect grain stores and standing crops from peril—from weather as well as from the rulers. Guha concluded that “any understanding of natural resource management that is based on the assumption that these were handled by static little communities inhabiting a static universe far removed from the state and the market is fundamentally flawed” (p. 145).

## HISTORICAL AND REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The target audience of *Ancient Futures* is undoubtedly a Western one because Norberg-Hodge’s (1991) agenda is to protect Ladakh from an irreversible collision with Western economic forces and ideals. By contrasting a static and “harmonious” description of pre-tourism (mid-1970s) Buddhist Ladakh to a “divided” and “confused” contemporary Ladakh caused by influences from the West (money, greed, and Barbie and Rambo role models), Norberg-Hodge overlooks the region’s own political and economic history. Thus, the Norberg-Hodge’s arguments spring from certain inaccuracies due to lack of regional knowledge and poor historical contextualization.

It is odd that Norberg-Hodge (1991) is set on protecting the Ladakhi subsistence way of life from the global economy while ignoring the more immediate and pervasive Indian political economy. Ladakh is a region within the political and economic jurisdiction of one of the largest developing countries in the world: India. Norberg-Hodge found Ladakh isolated and unaffected by global economic forces in the mid-1970s because the region was shut off by India. The region is now open and is undergoing profound changes precisely because Indian policy-makers in New Delhi have decided it is in the interest of their political economy. One must also bear in mind that Ladakh has been intruded by the Indian military with their road construction projects, military establishments, and army recruitment campaigns.

Ladakh is a strategically important region for India, located between Pakistan and Tibet (China). Owing to this fact, the region has always had a significant military presence, especially during the period when Ladakh was closed to outside world—an important historical fact that is overlooked by Norberg-Hodge (1991). Not only is Ladakh's tourism dependent on the geo-strategic stability of the region, the Indian army also provides a source of livelihood more stable than the 4-month tourist season—through the income of Ladakhi sons serving in the army. The arrival of the army also brought cash and new consumers to the region, turning Ladakh from a historical trade intermediary to an end market (Fewkes & Khan, 2005, p. 330). Aggarwal (2004) demonstrated how contemporary Ladakhi cultural performances like state festivals, popular films, and rites of passage ceremonies become arenas for shaping political identity and “border subjectivity.”

The geo-strategic and geo-economic changes transpiring in Ladakh are comparable in some ways to those happening in (central) Tibet. Both regions are closely controlled by their respective central governments (New Delhi and Beijing), who orchestrate the rate and extent of military and foreign influence in the area. State influence, backed by the implicit threat of military force, is a more important, institutionalized, and tangible variable that affects Ladakh than the broad and vague analytical subject of Norberg-Hodge's (1991) critique: Western economic ideals. That the author has overlooked fundamental political realities, such as lack of autonomy (see “The Agitation” in Aggarwal, 2004), and has instead chosen to focus on cultural differences between the West and Ladakh, or issues such as lack of information about the “development hoax,” arguably demonstrate that the agenda of the book is more to “counter development” than to preserve Ladakh's traditional way of life.

## CONCLUSION

A growing body of critical scholarship cautions us against encounters between polarized imaginings such as “the West” and “traditional communities.” Such

idealized imaginings tend to overemphasize differences in a world of interconnected and interdependent spaces and overlook the relation both between these geographically distinct societies and the relations of conflict within these imaginings (Springer, 89–90). *Ancient Futures* (Norberg-Hodge, 1991) tells a story of such a collision between a bounded harmonious community of Ladakh and the globalizing forces of the West. In this otherwise insightful and powerful study, the author also fails to appreciate one of the most important realities of the region—its political history.

In addition to the theoretical and historical weaknesses of *Ancient Futures* (Norberg-Hodge, 1991), an ironic fact should be noted here that although the author emphatically celebrates Ladakhi culture and opposes development, all advocates of green primitivism share the same framework as development advocates. By essentializing contemporary Ladakh as “ancient,” which is only a slight play of semantics from those who view such cultures as “primitive,” and by debating whether certain lifestyles should be brought into the cutting edge of modernity or left behind, one affirms evolutionary and linear time and compares societies as if on a scale of developmental evolution (Skaria 2000).

## REFERENCES

- Aggarwal, R. (2004). *Beyond lines of control: Performance and politics on the disputed borders of Ladakh, India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Agrawal, A., & Sivaramakrishnan, K. (Eds.). (2000). *Agrarian environments*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ellen, R. F. (1986). What Black Elk left unsaid: On the illusory images of green primitivism. *Anthropology Today*, 2(6), 8–12.
- Fewkes, J., & Khan, A. N. (2005). Social networks and transnational trade in early 20th century Ladakh. In J. Bray (Ed.), *Ladakhi histories: Local and regional perspectives* (pp. 321–334). Boston: Brill.
- Gidwani, V. (2000). Labored landscapes: Agro-ecological change in central Gujarat, India. In A. Agrawal & K. Sivaramakrishnan (Eds.), *Agrarian environments* (pp. 216–247). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Guha, S. (2000). Economic rent and natural resource: Commons and conflicts in premodern India. In A. Agrawal & K. Sivaramakrishnan (Eds.), *Agrarian environments* (pp. 132–146). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Marcus, G., & Fischer, M. (1986). *Anthropology as cultural critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Morgane. (2007, July 24). Why tourists choose Ladakh? *Magpie*.
- Norberg-Hodge, H. (1991). *Ancient futures: Learning from Ladakh*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Parajuli, P. (1998). How can four trees make a jungle? *Terra Nova: Nature and Culture*, 3(3), 15–31.
- Skaria, A. (2000). Cathecting the natural. In A. Agrawal & K. Sivaramakrishnan (Eds.), *Agrarian environments* (pp. 265–276). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Springer, J. (2000). State power and agricultural transformations in Tamil Nadu. In A. Agrawal & K. Sivaramakrishnan (Eds.), *Agrarian environments* (pp. 86–106). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Tesi Environmental Awareness Movement. (2007, April 22). *Press release: TEAM celebrates Earth Day at the Mevon Tsuglag Peton School*. Retrieved November 19, 2007, from [http://www.ecotibet.org/news/2007/press\\_releases\\_2007\\_Earth\\_Day.html](http://www.ecotibet.org/news/2007/press_releases_2007_Earth_Day.html)

Tsering, T. (2006). A Tibetan perspective on development and globalization. *Himalaya*, 24(1/2), 43–50.

---

Tashi Tsering is a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia. His research seeks to understand agrarian change in the Western Himalayas with a focus on irrigation and climate change.