



Negotiating Modernity: Youth, Technology, Culture and Identity in Leh District.

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ABSTRACT

The study was undertaken to capture the dynamic of cultural change among the Buddhist youth of Leh due to ever growing influence of mass media. The form and nature of change, no doubt, become very complex in our times due many external factors and forces. Modernity, as theoretical framework and conceptual tool to understand and explain the phenomena of social and structural change visualizing for a progressive society, becomes central theme of the study. It is well known fact that, despite material transformation, certain core cherished values are widely been acknowledged in the project of modernity, particularly the questions of culture in modern society. During the course of this study, concepts like modernity, culture, mass media has been tested in the field area of Leh to explain how these factors shaped the mind and imagination as a new phenomenon for Ladakhi youth.

Keywords: *Modernity, Youth, Media, Culture.*

Introduction:

Communicative action with the advancement of technology manifested in the form of mass media is one of the conditions to make society modern. While placing particular section and geographical location of society, this study probed into the question of how the youth in Leh, in the state of Jammu and Kashmir negotiated with the project of modernity due to multiple pull and push factor in our times.

Theorizing Modernity

Social scientists have dealt with the project of modernity as a theoretical construct to explain, understand and equally transform the societies the way people collectively think and act for a desirable social change and progress. Cohen and Kennedy, (2000) traced the emergence of modernity back to the 17th Century and the dawn of the revolutionary age of Enlightenment. Conspicuously, founding fathers of sociology including Comte, Durkheim, Marx and Weber also inherited the idea about basic characteristics of modernity to investigate the nature and character of modern society. It is hoped that by effectively illustrating the



fundamental character of modernity, the essentialities and widespread of the concept could be revealed as relevant to the sociologists (Macionis and Plummer, 2008)ⁱ. Industrialized society encountered an unparalleled shift in social life leading to a loss of traditional values, change in working patterns as a result, a more impersonal, individualistic way of life encompasses daily social life of individuals (Kivisto, 2004). Craib, (1997) informs that the Industrial Revolution effected industries through increased productive capacity deploying a new division of labour, most notably within factories. Economically, it has resulted in the loss of family as a of primary productive unit as the work under industrialization is taking place outside the home thereby ushering a new age of individualism. Subsequently, growth of urbanization rose on ever-larger towns and cities by destabilizing village settings and traditional community life (Craib, 1997). Thus, social life was forced to evolve as a result of scientific and technological advancements, which paved the way for a capitalist system to flourish in much of the world (Macionis and Plummer, 2008). Moreover, the use of nuclear power and electronic communication eventually transformed the world irreversibly and the domination of computer technology has shrunked the space of world as a community (Macionis and Plummer, 2008). Notably Beck, (1992), a contemporary sociologist argues that industrialism has ultimately brought new ‘risks’ to society posing serious threat on social life and environment thus emphasizes why sociologists are keen to study the enduring ramifications of modernity (Beck 1992).

“India, is not so much modern as they are Westoxicated”, a phrase first coined by Iranian intellectual, Jalal-e-Ahmad. Westoxicated people are not westernized in its truest sense (Gupta, 2000). Modernity, for Gupta (2004), is not just about technology and contemporary artifacts. Modernity, he asserts, means dignity of the individual, adherence to universalistic norms, elevation of individual achievement over privileges or disprivileges of both, and accountability in public life (Gupta, 2000). Pathak, (2006) critically proclaimed, “The substantive adaptation to modernization should be distinguished from modernization per se since in all likelihood, not for a long time to come (perhaps never), anywhere in the world shall we have a fully modern society” (Pathak, 2006). Thus, for Pathak, reflexivity and self-realization are the major criterion for modernity in any particular society. The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character (Giddens, 1990). Today, the global economy is powered by persistent persuasion of ever ending markets and profits leading to exploitation of resources. This brings



in undesired monetary and psychological pressures and pushing individuals toward a blind consumerism. Tele-communication services enable the global economies to map the entire world as its market, linking people globally and whetting their appetites for information and material wants and needs, creating multiplicity of consumers (Palmer, 2002). The motto of the complex modern industrialized society is economic growth for the betterment of mankind. Advertising agencies and media in this regard, are telling people what to do, what to be as modern, civilized and rich (Norberg, 1991).

Modernity and Media

David Frisby notes, modernity consists in a mode of experiencing the world in a particular way that corresponds to our inner responses in life. The external world corresponds to our inner world and the fleeting, fragmentary and contradictory moments of our external life are all incorporated into inner life (cited in Salerno, 2003). Roger, (1965) asserts that modernizing of society requires mass-media (Roger, 1965). Thompson suggested that if we wish to understand the nature and institutional characteristics of modernity in modern societies and the life conditions created by them then we must give a central role to the development of communication media and their impact (Thompson. 1995). Modernism sensorially perceives world as unique in character. The modern period perceives development of technologies are so designed to extend and store the material of human sensation and communication ushering to transmit messages through telegraph, telephone, radio, and television, to record sounds thorough phonograph and to sight through photograph and cinema. These development of technologies and storages reveals a new contingency of individual perception and memory. The developed technologies are in turn, absorbed into modernism (Armstrong, 2005).

Media, Youth and Culture

These modern technological devices play an important role in providing links with the outside world, both real and imagined, and allow people to transcend their everyday lives. Similarly, media has become a pervasive presence in the lives of youth and enables them to access elements of the ‘young upwardly mobile professional individuals (*yuppie*) culture from urban India and the West. Technology thus enables youth to transcend geo-political and social boundaries to explore other cultures. Till few decades back, Ladakh was primarily an agrarian in character and economically a subsistence society. The introduction and growth of a market economy especially tourism, modern communication technology, media, and education have accelerated considerable changes. These have each contributed in shaping a distinct form of



modernity in the lives of inhabitants especially the youth (15-29 years, India) of Ladakh. Incontestably, youth constitute one of the important segments of society. Most advanced technologies of media play a pivotal role in producing and reproducing images, information and knowledge about the world, which becomes the cognitive life styles of people, most specifically the younger generations throughout the world. The technologies help produce and enhance awareness of ideas in other parts of the world however, resulting in a creation of digital divide between generations. Modernity is perhaps best epitomised by mass media, such as television, internet, cinemas, and phones that are shaping lifestyles in Ladakhi youth today. As a result, traditional folk arts that Ladakhis cherished, have now been replaced by digital music at social events both as a status symbol as well as a mark of modernity. At the same time, the advent of media has also created spaces for new representations of traditions and identities. Indigenous folk songs are constantly being filmed and produced devising advanced technologies. The craze for Hindi and English films are ever increasing amongst the youth of Leh-Ladakh (Bhasin, 2006).

Cultural expressions such as contemporary music provide glimpses of how cultural identity is engaging with modernity through media technologies. Observably, the cultural experience of young people is a hybrid of many different elements as young Ladakhis are not limited by their parents' experiences and memories but are also flexible and dynamic. Youth of Leh are found both promoters and protectors of cultural change. It has observed that that they employ different strategies to balance their aspiration for modern lifestyles with their desire to preserve their traditions. They experience a constant struggle to embody a contemporary Ladakhi identity that incorporates socially and economically valued attributes of modernity and tradition. It's thus not surprising that television channels and glossy magazines are very popular amongst youth in Leh as they allow them to access to impetus of modern lifestyles in urban India and the West. The consumption of mass media provides a powerful channel to imagine 'other' and 'future' lives.

As Leh town has become more integrated with technological networks, youth are able to access images and information from around the world, which shapes their aspiration for consumerist lifestyles along with awareness of brands and products. Consumer culture is related to what numerous contemporary thinkers refer to as material culture. It reveals that material culture is not only about material objects and things but the values assigned to them, the patterns of cultural consumption of particular objects such as laptops as a marker of yuppie



culture, functionality, aesthetics and expenses. This further strengthens the idea of Western culture as modern. Besides technology, young Ladakhis also physically travel to places outside Ladakh to access education and employment opportunities. The young students are situated at an interface between Ladakh, India, and global cultures, which they navigate linguistically by switching linguistic code between Ladakhi, Hindi, and English (Dinnerstein, 2012). These young urban Ladakhis parallelly experience traditional Ladakhi culture, urban Indian culture and cosmopolitan modern cultures, which often leads to insecurity and identity crisis. The other widely expressed way of coming to groups with our lack of true modernity is to say that there are “multiple modernities” and that the Indian variety is just another expression of modernity (Gupta, 2000).

In most studies on modernity, youth serve as flag-bearers of modernity and this observed, seems to be true in Leh too, where they have evolved bi-cultural identities incorporating local and global values. As youth of Ladakh travel outside the region more frequently, their cross-cultural interactions and adoption of new traits has increased. In this context, education is an important factor, as those with higher education are more likely to challenge existing social values and assert their individual preferences. Thus, these changes amongst youth are strongly influenced by access to opportunities and material constraints. This implies that if other youth were able to access similar educational opportunities without material constraints, they too would exhibit views similar to those of youth from higher socio-economic groups.

Besides the proliferation of mass media in Leh district due to the technological development how such change made up youth whose cultural life was organized by Buddhist social order is another aspect of this study. My study on Buddhist youth in Leh also points to certain parallels between the Buddhist philosophy and core values of modernity, such as rationality, equality, freedom and compassion which are entrenched deep in their minds. It thus suggests that Buddhist youth in Leh, are able to relate the values of their traditional society and modernity. Communication technologies on the other hand have intensified cultural changes in language, food habits, dress and tastes, which are anchored by ideas of modernity. The experiences of these Ladakhi youth offer important insights, learning and values to understand the idea of modernity and how it shapes change in societies, given that every society, in its own cultural milieu, has something to offer to the project of modernity.

Conclusion



Global culture has deeply influenced young population throughout the country. Growing awareness about global brands and consumption of products mediated through technology has drastically changed the perceptions of youth in Ladakh. Dynamics of cultural experiences of youth from Leh district are not limited by immediate experiences and memory, they are gradually evolving through a state of cultural hybridity due to structural changes ushered by impetuses of modernization and media. The differences in attitude appear to be more a function of material and cognitive opportunity than of choice. When opportunity is available youth are brought back to step with global trends. They are exposed to modern mediating gadgets which has led them be a part of global culture. Considerable attitudinal and behavioural changes have been observed amongst the youth of the district. If youth in the West are generally regarded as flag bearers of modernity, here too they seem to have evolved a bi-cultural identity having elements of both local and global identity.

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