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A Knowledge Centre for Ladakh

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Introduction

Jammu and Kashmir have wondeful natural resources and a unique set of arts and crafts. In order to harness the resources to its fullest, we need to develop these sectors with the continuous aid and support of relevant knowledge. Ladakh could undertake a pilot project to manage its resources with help of a Knowledge Centre. The Knowledge Centre would be a place to share and access our collective understanding of our economy, culture, natural and human resource management. The Knowledge Centre could prove an integration system and corroboration engine to facilitate an evolving knowledge-driven society. The Knowledge Centre wuld annotate, filter and gather the collective knowledge and experience of individuals and organizations across the globe. The system would facilitate personal access to relevant ideas.

The reason for considering Ladakh for pilot project are that it has a unique set of arts, very famous for its tourist attractions. Some of the cultivated fruits are unique, and the region comprises only two districts and launching a well-managed Knowledge Centre would be much easier for a pilot project.

The areas in which knowledge centre can boost the overall development Ladakh region are:

- Education
- Digitization of Valuable Buddhist Literature
- Agriculture
- Horticulture
- Medicinal Plants
- Tourism
- Handicrafts and
- Conservation of Environment and Culture

Education

According to the 2001 census, the overall literacy rate in Leh District is 62% and 58% in Kargil District (Education for All, 2001). The figures are quite encouraging given the lack of development in past and needed to be improved further. The Knowledge Centre could play a vital role, providing counselling

services to the students in choosing a profession and fields of knowledge. The counselling could be done both by In-house experts or inviting experts from different parts of India. The counselling can increase the core competence of the region and also act as facilitating centre for getting admission in different professional and academic colleges of state and India. This is necessary because there are no professional colleges available in Ladakh and their contact with rest of India is low. The region remains cut-off for months from rest of the world. This service could transform the education sector and improve the human resources of the region.

Digitization of Valuable Buddhist Literature:

Ladakh has 67 big Buddhist monasteries (Kaul and Kaul, 1992). These monasteries (like *Hemis Gompa, Namgyal Tsemo Gompa, Sankar gompa and Thiksey Monastery*, etc.) are famous for their religious and heritage value and preserve some of the oldest manuscripts, which has great religious and archaeological value. The job of Knowledge Centre would be to digitize these valuable treasures for posterity. This effort may attract more religious pilgrims, lovers of archaeology, and researchers from across the globe and thereby strengthen the economy of the region. Ladakh could share its valuable heritage across the globe without losing the heritage assets. The effort may help researchers have deeper understanding of Buddhism and shed some new light on this great religion.

Agriculture

Ladakh region is spread out on an area of 86,904 km² (Census 2001) .Though most of its area is considered unfit for cultivation, there is tremendous space for development of agriculture on the unused fertile land. The job of the Knowledge Centre would be identify the areas and provide counselling to its owners about the possible crops (such as resh vegetables, onions and potatoes) that could be grown on the land which yields better crop and have a market in nearby areas or outside the state. This could prove very beneficial for the general public and has the potential to make Ladakh self reliant in agriculture. This is imperative given the most areas of Ladakh remain cut off from rest of the state during winter.

Horticulture

Ladakh is famous for its fruits especially apricots and berries (Seabuckthorn) and are underexploited fruit crops of the region, which have immense industrial importance because of their nutritional value. The Knowledge Centre could improve the production and qualities of these fruits by transferring knowledge from areas that have shown great improvements, such as Turkey. The Knowledge Centre would acquire know-how from countries like Turkey and pass it on to farmers. It could also help local farmers establish processing units to extract squash, nectar, jam, sauce, pickles, etc., from these fruits with expert advice and looking for possible links with prospectus companies. The Knowledge centre could give wide publicity to the horticulture produce of the area and also act as a link between the farmer and the market, thereby earning some revenue for running the Centre smoothly.

Medicinal Plants

According to WHO estimates, herbs and herbal products are an integral part of most of the traditional and alternative systems of medicines worldwide. In developed countries like Belgium (31%), USA (42%), Australia (48%), France

(49%), Canada (70%), of the population use traditional and alternative remedies at least once for health care. therefore the market for medicinal plants is always going to be there. Ladakh has abundant number of plants with medicinal value (such as *Achillea millefolium*, *Bunium persicum*, *Caparis spinosa*, *Carum carvi*, *Dactylorhiza hatagirea*, *Hippophae rhamnoides*, *Medicago sativa*, *Mentha longifolia*, *Ocimum basilicum*, *Origanum vulgare*, *Rheum webbianum*, *Rhodiola imbricata*, *Rosa webbiana*, *Saussurea lappa*, etc.) that may help to develop the economy of the state further. The Knowledge Centre may disseminate suitable methods of propagation to the farmers and arrange expert advice for commercial cultivation and act as link between the market and the farmers. The effort will definitely increase the production and provide better market to the produce.

Pashmina

Pashmina wool, raw material for some of the finest shawls, derived from Changthangi Goats. Ladakh produces around 30, 000 kg of Pashmina fibre annually which is harvested from about 0.15 million Changthangi goats. Almost 90% of the population of the Changthang area survives on the income from goats and sheep, which is nearly $ 8.4 million annually. Ladakh produces more than 80% of the total pashmina yield of the country (Bhattacharya, et al. 2004). The job of the Knowledge Centre would be to make efforts to raise the production by getting expert advice and inviting research project for improvement in the quality of the wool. And secondly explore the possibilities of the better market.

Handicrafts

Ladakh though may not have a range of crafts like Kashmir, but it has its own distinction. Some of the well known crafts are basket weaving, metal work and painting. Painting is very famous among ladakhies and visiting tourists. Every fourth person in Ladakh does paintings. Therefore a task of the Knowledge Centre would be to sharpen the skills of local artists in these crafts by providing information and skills. Such an endeavour may improve the arts and crafts of the region and could also help the region's economy.

Tourism

Tourism is a mainstay of state economy, but Ladakh has the distinction of being first choice among foreign visitors. The landscape of the region is peerless. The tourism potential is very high. The role of the Knowledge Centre would be two fold

- To acquaint people about thepreferences of tourists from different countries and provide a welcoming atmosphere (without changing its own cultural identity). To achieve this, the Knowledge Centre could disseminate customized information regarding the cultures of different people who visit the region.
- To launch a well thought-out Internet campaign regarding the tourist potential of the region with in-depth details of various amenities available in Ladakh. In addition, the Knowledge Centre would have 24X7 online help available to potential tourist by replying their queries.

This would prove a treasure to the economy of the region and state as a whole.

Conservation of Environment and Culture

As we have already discussed, Ladakh is a distinctive place in its landscape and culture. Globalization can have negative effects on local culture and environment. The uniqueness of Ladakh culture and environment drives tourists to this region and the need of the hour is to preserve the uniqueness of the region that makes it popular with tourists. Otherwise it will become just another place. The task of the Knowledge Centre would be to invigorate cultural and environmental consciousness by conducting seminars, workshops, and disseminating relevant information.

Conclusion

Development of a Knowledge Centre is essential, in view of the global economy that relies on customised knowledge products; hence, the name "knowledge economy." Therefore, the proposed Knowledge Centre may usher Ladakh into new era of development and prosperity. At the same time, it could bring the Ladakh region into the knowledge society.

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