From Mountain to Metro: Food, Geography and the Psychological Experience of Ladakhi and Tibetan Migrants in Delhi

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Abstract

In this report, I explore the migration of Ladakhi and Tibetan individuals from the mountains of Ladakh to the metropolitan city of Delhi, with a focus on food, geographical change and the psychological effects of relocation. Drawing on interviews I conducted during my internship with Anand Foundation including a detailed conversation with the manager of Ladakh Bhawan in Delhi and my own observations in sites such as Majnu ka Tilla and university spaces, I examine how migrants negotiate the cultural differences, cultural exchange and their identity in everyday lives.

I treat food as a cultural text, an embodied archive of memories, belongingness and adaptation. Historically shaped by ecological constraints and Ladakh's position along Silk Road routes, the Ladakhi and Tibetan cuisines have been designed primarily for warmth, energy and survival. In Delhi's warmer climate and masala-rich food culture, these culinary traditions face a form of transformation, modification and hybridisation. Throughout this report, I argue that migration does not lead only to cultural loss or total assimilation. Instead, it produces a dynamic process of selective continuity and adaptive reinvention, in which Ladakhi and Tibetan migrants renegotiate their identity between the mountain and the metro, tradition and modernity, and community accountability and individual freedom.

Introduction

Background and Context

I approach this topic as a student and surveyor who has listened to Ladakhi and Tibetan migrants discussing their lives in Delhi. During my internship with Anand Foundation, I had the opportunity to speak with young migrants, community members and the manager of Ladakh Bhawan. These conversations, along with my own observations, form the backbone of this report.

Ladakh, especially Leh and its surrounding areas, is a high-altitude cold desert. Mountains, sparse vegetation, river valleys and monasteries dominate the landscape. The long winters, short summers, and limited agricultural season shape everyday life in very concrete ways. People plan around the cold, around the snow and around limited growing cycles. Social life is highly integrated where individual roles and family legacies are woven together. There is constant awareness that one's actions are visible to family, neighbours and village networks.

Delhi, where I conducted this study, is almost the opposite in environmental and social terms. It is hot, humid in the monsoon and heavily polluted. The population density, traffic and noise create cognitive fatigue. At the same time, Delhi offers many opportunities: universities, coaching centres, jobs, NGOs, government offices, and a dense, diverse cultural life. For Ladakhi and Tibetan migrants, this movement from the mountains to the metro is not just a change of address; it is a radical shift in environmental, social, and psychological conditions.

In my interviews, people repeatedly described Ladakh as familiar, calm and "chill," a place where they feel safe and rooted. Delhi, in contrast, was described as overwhelming, polluted and noisy, but also as a space of individual autonomy and professional prospect. It is this tension between the emotional security of Ladakh and the freedom and aspiration of Delhi that I explore in this report, with special attention to food, geography and the mind.

Rationale of the Study

I chose this topic because I realised that much of the existing discussion around Ladakh and Tibetan communities in India focuses on geopolitics, border issues, religion or tourism. There is less attention to the everyday lives of Ladakhi and Tibetan migrants who move to Indian metropolitan cities like Delhi, especially regarding food practices, mental health, and the subtle processes of identity negotiation.

During my internship, I noticed that people were very eager to talk about what they eat, how they feel in Delhi's environment and how they see themselves changing over time. I also noticed that institutions like Ladakh Bhawan and spaces like Majnu ka Tilla play an important mediating role between "home" and "city," but they are rarely analysed in depth from the perspectives of cultural adaptation and food.

This report is my attempt to bring together these observations, interviews and reflections into a coherent narrative written from my own perspective as a researcher in the field. I focus on three interlinked dimensions:

1. Food as a medium of memory, identity and adaptation.
2. Geographical change from high-altitude Ladakh to metropolitan Delhi and its psychological impact.
3. The way cultural exchange between Ladakh and Delhi is shaped by asymmetrical power, primarily through consumer culture and urban norms.

By writing in the first person, I also want to acknowledge my own position and involvement in this study. I am not an outside, neutral observer; I am someone who listened, asked questions, formed impressions and made choices about what to highlight and how to interpret it.

Theoretical Framework

Acculturation theory

Acculturation theory is a vital theory that puts this research in an important direction as the theory explains the psychological and cultural changes occurring when individuals from different cultures engage in prolonged, first hand contact.

According to this theory, migrants may assimilate, separate, integrate and marginalize. From the narratives I encountered during the fieldwork, the migrants were integrating with their identities. Integration occurs when individuals are able to adopt the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture while maintaining their culture of origin. Integration leads to, and is often synonymous with biculturalism.

The migrants from Ladakh and Tibet didn't fully abandon their cultural practices, habits, or their food preferences. Meanwhile, they actively engage with the re-invention of self that host culture offers. They experiment within fashion, consumerism, and adopt urban practices.

This suggests that their identity formation isn't a linear movement but a balance between multiple cultural systems.

Cultural hybridity and the Third Space

Cultural hybridity theory developed by Homi K. Bhabha. The theory explained that culture is never pure or static, it is fluid and constantly evolving. Cultures according to the thesis creates a "Third Space", where meanings are negotiated, reinterpreted and reshaped. In this space, authenticity becomes fluid rather than static.

This idea is particularly relevant to my observation related to exchange between the culinary practices. Traditional dishes like Skyu and Thukpa are modified with additional spices or ingredients to suit the urban tastes. At first glance, this may seem as a loss of identity, but as Bhabha claims, these adaptations can be seen as hybrid creations emerging from encounters between Himalayan food traditions and Delhi's masala-rich culture. The absence of "pure" Ladakhi cuisine in Delhi does not necessarily signify cultural erosion. Rather, it reflects a dynamic negotiation that allows cultural practices to remain socially and economically available.

Place Attachment and Environmental Identity

The strong emotional attachment expressed by the migrants could be understood through the theory of Place Attachment and Environmental Psychology. Scholars like Harold Proshansky and Irwin Altman argue that individuals form deep bonds with physical environments. These bonds contribute to place identity- the way in which physical landscapes become integrated into one's sense of self.

During the interviews, Ladakh was repeatedly described as "calm", "slow" and "emotionally secure". Features like mountains, clean air, and familiar climate aren't just landscapes but a part of how individuals understood who they were. The discomfort expressed regarding Delhi's pollutants, noise, and crowds reflects more than just physical irritation. It signals a disruption of environmental identity.

Cultural Capital and the Urban "Glow Up"

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of Cultural Capital helps explain the influence of Delhi's consumer culture on the migrants from Ladakh. Bourdieu argues that social mobility and recognition often depend on acquiring certain tastes, styles, and behaviours. These forms of "Glow-Up" including language fluency, fashion and lifestyles practices- function as markers of legitimacy and success.

Migrants entering Delhi are exposed to new standards of presentation shaped by social media, branding and urban aesthetic. Adopting these forms of cultural capital may enhance their social acceptance and opportunity within the city. However, it can also generate pressure, self surveillance and a sense of inadequacy. Through Bourdieu's lens, consumer transformation isn't merely personal choice but a part of broader social acceptance in which urban norms hold symbolic dominance.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives allow me to conceptualise migration from Ladakh to Delhi as a multidimensional process. Rather than viewing migration as a cultural loss or simple assimilation, these frameworks suggest that it is an ongoing negotiation shaped by agency, constraint, memory, and aspiration. They provide the analytical foundation for interpreting the interviews and observation that follows in the report.

Historical and Cultural Foundations

Ladakh, the Silk Road and Functional Food

When I started reading about Ladakh and talking to people, one thing became obvious: Ladakh has always been more connected than it is often portrayed. Historically, Ladakh lay on essential trade routes connecting Tibet, Central Asia, Kashmir and the Indian plains. Merchants and caravans travelled through this region, exchanging wool, salt, grain, tea and other goods. Along with goods, they also exchanged stories, religious ideas and food techniques.

This trading history is vital for understanding Ladakhi food. Food here has never been about luxury or elaborate indulgence. It has always been about function: warmth, energy and survival. In my interviews, people described how traders needed food that would "fuel their energy" on long journeys through harsh climates. Dishes like skyu, thukpa, tsampa and butter tea are built around this need. Skyu is mainly made of barley and wheat, with thick, doughy pieces that are filling and warming. Thukpa is a noodle soup with vegetables or meat, cooked for warmth and nutrition.Butter tea (gur gur cha) is salty and fatty, made using butter and tea, and is meant to keep the body warm and energised in extreme cold. Tsampa, made with roasted barley flour, is portable and can be devoured with tea. The flavours of these dishes are relatively mild and "bland" compared to Delhi's street food, but that blandness is a result of rational choices: limited spices, scarce fuel, and the physiological needs of people living and working at high altitudes.

I also learnt about Ladakhi agriculture through conversations and background reading. Despite the harsh climate, Ladakhis grow their own vegetables and fruits using hardy crops and greenhouse techniques. People spoke about cultivating cabbage, wheat, carrots, apricots and even watermelon.

I heard about schools inspired by Sonam Wangchuk, where children grow their own apples and other produce. These stories highlighted for me a culture of self-sufficiency and ecological adaptation that is very different from Delhi's dependence on complex supply chains and consumer markets.

Tibetan Influence and Shared Himalayan Cultures

Ladakh is deeply influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and by broader Tibetan cultural practices. Monasteries, stupas, prayer flags, religious festivals and language all reflect these connections. Historically, Tibetan Buddhism grew through interaction with Indian monastic centres like Nalanda. Over the centuries, texts, teachers, and ideas have circulated between the Indian and Tibetan regions.

In Ladakh, this results in a layered cultural identity that is both Indian and Himalayan/Tibetan. Many people I spoke to took this for granted; they do not experience these identities as mutually exclusive. Instead, their everyday lives are a mix of local Ladakhi customs, Tibetan Buddhist practices and Indian national frameworks.

Ladakhi and Tibetan Presence in Delhi

Ladakhi and Tibetan presence in Delhi is also part of a longer historical and political story. After 1959, Delhi became one of the centres of Tibetan refugee settlement, especially in Majnu ka Tilla, which is now well known as a Tibetan market and residential area. Meanwhile, Ladakhi students and traders have increasingly come to Delhi for education, employment, and business, especially as higher education and government jobs have become more central to upward mobility.

Ladakh Bhawan in Delhi is one of the key institutions that represent Ladakh in the capital. It provides accommodation, administrative services and a kind of symbolic “home” for Ladakhis visiting or living in Delhi. My interview with the manager of Ladakh Bhawan became a crucial part of this project because it revealed how even an institution meant to represent Ladakhi culture must constantly adapt to Delhi’s conditions and expectations.

(market in ladakh)

(Traditional Ladakhi jewelry reflecting family legacies)

Relocating: My Fieldwork and the Urban Encounter

My Experience as a Researcher

As a researcher and intern, I moved back and forth between reading about Ladakh, visiting sites in Delhi and listening to people's stories. I conducted interviews in Ladakh Bhawan, and informal spaces such as cafés and hostels. I also spent time in Majnu ka Tilla, walking through its lanes and observing how Tibetan and Himalayan food and culture are presented to a mixed audience of migrants, tourists, and Delhi residents.

In each of these settings, I tried to pay attention not just to what people said, but to how they said it, when they hesitated, when their voices became emotional, and how their body language changed when they spoke about "home" versus "Delhi."

Delhi as Anonymity and Freedom

One of the strongest themes that emerged from my interviews was the contrast between Ladakh's social structure and Delhi's anonymity. People repeatedly told me that Ladakh is a place where "everyone knows everyone." The large geographic spaces and smaller population create a dense social network in which actions are visible, and reputations matter. In Ladakh, the close-knit nature of society creates a profound sense of interconnectedness. Because the community is so integrated, there is a shared understanding of responsibility and mutual respect. This environment encourages individuals to move through the world with a deep awareness of their family's legacy and their role within the social fabric.

In Delhi, this familiarity disappears. The manager of Ladakh Bhawan described Delhi as a place where the scale of the population allows individuals to live with much greater personal freedom. Here, one can walk down the street without being recognised, explore new relationships, dress differently or experiment with different lifestyles without immediate judgement from elders or neighbours. Youth, in particular, are attracted to this anonymity.

At the same time, this anonymity is double-edged. Some of the people I spoke to also described feeling like navigating in a sea of strangers. They appreciated the

freedom but also missed the security of being known. I noticed that many migrants recreated smaller, informal networks in Delhi through relatives, friends, student associations or religious groups to rebuild some of that lost sense of community.

Ladakh as Emotional Anchor

Through my interviews, I came to see Ladakh as an emotional anchor for newcomers in Delhi. When people spoke about Ladakh, their tone often softened. They described the landscape,mountains, rivers, monasteries,as if these features were part of their own identity. One interviewee called Ladakh “slow” and “chill” and said very clearly that for her, “Ladakh is better.”
This preference was not a naïve romanticisation; she also understood the limitations in Ladakh regarding education and job opportunities. But emotionally, she felt that Ladakh gave her a sense of security that Delhi could never match. The familiar climate, the slower pace of life, the known faces and the embeddedness in a community all contributed to this feeling.

The manager of Ladakh Bhawan added another interesting layer. He told me that Ladakh is more self-sufficient, with people growing their own food and meeting their own needs. In Delhi, by contrast, people become dependent on others and on service systems. He also said that the cold in Ladakh, which might seem harsh to outsiders, is actually better and even a “guilty pleasure” for those who grew up there. This idea that the harsh climate can be comforting because it is familiar stayed with me and made me reflect on how deeply geography is tied to our sense of self.

Discrimination, Language and Social Visibility

In many of my conversations, people brought up experiences of discrimination in Delhi. One interviewee told me that she has been stared at and called “chinki,” a slur commonly directed at people from Northeast India and the Himalayan regions. She also mentioned that Hindi was her second language, which made specific interactions more difficult. There is a clear sense that Ladakhi and Tibetan migrants are often seen as “outsiders” in their own country, judged by their appearance and accent.

The student experience is defined by a shift in visibility, escaping the internal gaze of a close-knit community only to be met by the external gaze of urban prejudice. This creates a state of ‘conflicted freedom’, where the liberty of the city is constantly weighed against the discomfort of being racially targeted in the crowd.

I also noticed that these experiences influence how people move through the city. Some avoid certain areas, especially at night or during festivals. Others seek out spaces like Majnu ka Tilla or Ladakh Bhawan where they feel more protected and recognised.

Student Migration Experiences: Freshers, Professors, and the Transition Period

Migration as Lived Experience: Expanding Human Archive

The interview at the Ladakh Bhawan gave me an institutional perspective on Ladakhi migration, so I went ahead and tried to understand what the transition feels more on a personal level in the eyes of a young person coming to the contrasting world.

To do this, I spoke informally with the first-year student as well as the professors. These conversations enlightened me to understand two different types of encounters that students have when they first arrive.

Freshers spoke about the immediate shock while arriving in Delhi which was accompanied by the confusion in navigating the urban hustle environment, and the emotional weight of leaving their familiar place. Professors, on the other hand, described the pattern where they observed over time, how students gradually adapted to the city and how their identities shifted during their years in the university.

These perspectives helped me to be aware of how migration is also something that is lived and negotiated in everyday life, through friendships, foods and the small routines that slowly makes the city more familiar.

The First- Semester Shift: From Mountain Calm to Metro Chaos

One of the most striking things that I heard from freshers was how intense the first few months in Delhi can feel. Several students described what I can describe as the “first semester shift”, a sudden transition from the calm environment of the mountains to the chaotic yet charming metropolitan city.

Students often evoked different facts like environmental, landscape, culture and people's contrast between the two places. For the newcomers, Delhi sounded like a

city that never rests, always buzzing with some kind of madness with corners full of young minds like theirs. From the golden dust in the summers to the soft grey veil that the city is under in the winters makes them feel like being caught in a tempest of plenty. For people who grew up in the quiet sun kissed mountains and timeless tradition, Delhi was a whole another puzzle for them to figure out.

Another theme that appeared in these conversations was the feeling of being visible in the ways in which they weren't used to. Even though Delhi is a massive city where people often expect anonymity, Ladakhi and Tibetan students frequently felt that they stood out because of their physical features or accent. But their youthful spirit didn't take these comments to heart, and made playful banters out of those to learn and live their life in peace. One student told me " I don't let the comments get through me every time, overthinking will make me unhappy. I prefer to make good friends, and not everyone is like that."

These narratives reveal that migration isn't just about leaving your nest, it is also about a profound transformation that an individual goes through. Beyond the pursuit of opportunities, the initial stages of adjustment and vulnerability serves as a catalyst of resilience, turning discomfort into a sense of belonging and strength.

Hangout Spaces and the Search for Familiarity:

In response to these challenges, many students actively look for places where they feel more comfortable and understood. During the conversations, several locations were mentioned as spaces where Ladakhi and Tibetan students gather, relax, and reconnect with elements to their culture.

Majnu ka Tilla or MKT, was one of the most frequently mentioned places. While walking through the narrow lanes of MKT feels different from the surrounding city. It is filled with cafes, small shops and unspoken stories of people. For many students, visiting this area creates a small sense of familiarity within the inundated city.

Sometimes the space is not even a famous location. It can simply be a corner of a hostel, a favorite table in the canteen or a particular tree in the campus. These small places slowly become a space for students where they relax and slow down.

(lane of Majnu ka Tila)

Food as Cultural Memory, Adaptation and Negotiation

What I Heard About Ladakhi Food

Almost every interview I conducted eventually turned to food. People were very eager to talk about what they grew up eating and how different it is from Delhi's food. One participant told me that Ladakhi food is "more nutrition-based" and explained how, historically, traders needed food that would fuel them as they moved along the Silk Road. She mentioned skyu, thukpa, and barley-based dishes, emphasising that these foods were simple yet highly functional, especially in winter, when warmth is critical. She explained that Ladakhi food uses few spices and emphasises boiled preparations. The dishes rely on barley, wheat, vegetables grown locally and dairy products. This is not food designed for visual presentation or intense flavour; it is food designed to keep the body going in extreme conditions.

She also pointed out that local Ladakhi flavours are often considered "bland" by mainland Indian tourists accustomed to masala-rich food.
Interestingly, she said that foreign tourists tend to be better travellers because they are more conscious and less dismissive of local food. Mainland visitors, according to her, are more likely to reject Ladakhi food outright or demand something spicy and familiar.

My Interview at Ladakh Bhawan: No “Authentic” Cuisine

My interview at Ladakh Bhawan was particularly revealing regarding food. I went in assuming that Ladakh Bhawan would be a place where one could find “authentic” Ladakhi cuisine in Delhi. Instead, the manager told me very clearly that there is no purely authentic Ladakhi cuisine available in the market, even at Ladakh Bhawan.

He explained that traditional Ladakhi food is designed for extreme cold, with minimal spices and a focus on boiled, high-energy dishes. In Delhi’s warmer climate and within its masala-rich food culture, such dishes are neither popular nor practical. People in Delhi, including many Ladakhi migrants who have adjusted their tastes, prefer spicier food more aligned with North Indian or Indo-Chinese flavours.

As a result, the food served in Ladakh Bhawan and in many other “Himalayan” or Tibetan restaurants in Delhi is modified. More spices are added, ingredients like ajinomoto may be used, and traditional recipes are adapted to suit urban tastes. The manager spoke of food being “mixed” and “infused,” reflecting the hybrid nature of almost everything served in the city.

At first, I saw this as a loss of authenticity. But as I reflected more, I started to see it as a form of negotiation. The manager himself framed it this way. For him, the absence of fully authentic Ladakhi food in Delhi is not a sign that Ladakhi culture is disappearing. Instead, it shows that culture is constantly being reshaped to remain functional and acceptable in new environments. In this view, authenticity is not a fixed essence in the recipe; it lies in the ongoing connection between people, memories, places and food, even when the ingredients and flavours change.

(many Tibetan refugees start small stalls selling different Indo-Tibetan food for a living)

Food, Memory and Emotional Survival

Throughout my fieldwork, I saw how food functions as a bridge between Ladakh and Delhi. Cooking traditional dishes in Delhi,however adapted,becomes a way for migrants to recall home and recreate it temporarily in their kitchens. The smell of butter tea, the texture of barley, the act of making thukpa on a cold Delhi evening: all of these become rituals that anchor people emotionally.

For many, the transition to Delhi is navigated through the kitchen. People told me that carrying ingredients from Ladakh to Delhi, such as roasted barley or dried fruits as an act of emotional preservation, offered comfort during high-stress periods like exams.

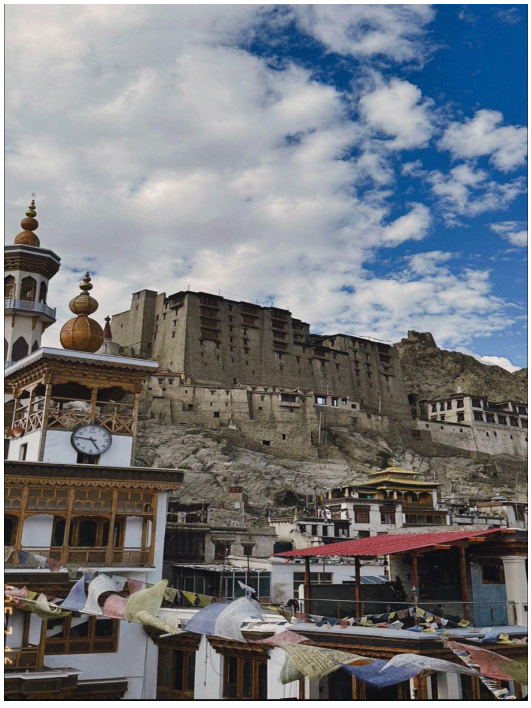
At the same time, many migrants also adopt Delhi's food habits,eating more street food, fast food and restaurant meals. This adoption is partly practical (time, money, availability) and partly symbolic 'tasting' of urban life. What emerges is a layered diet in which traditional and urban foods coexist,and occasionally merge.

Geographical Change and Psychological Effects

Environmental Shock: Pollution, Crowds and Noise

The transition from Ladakh's pristine to Delhi's 'saturated' landscape is marked by a profound sensory shock. The physical environment emerged as a primary source of discomfort. One participant said that Delhi's polluted air irritates her throat and that she has difficulty breathing at times. Another mentioned that the crowds are overwhelmed by the relentless noise and public scrutiny. These experiences are not just minor inconveniences; they have real psychological effects. One student described this feeling as " losing my edge to the room." This reflects how the environment makes her feel numb.

Coming from a place where the air is clear, the sky is visible, and the soundscape is relatively quiet, migrants suddenly find themselves in an environment saturated with dust, smoke, horns and human voices. The persistent sensory pressure often manifests as chronic stress and fatigue, leading to emotional and physical exhaustion. The interview reveals that a 'sense of belonging' is deeply tied to one's physical surroundings. When the environment feels hostile to the senses, it becomes difficult for migrants to forge an emotional connection to the city.



Learning the City and Finding Meaning

Despite these challenges, I also saw how migrants slowly learned to navigate Delhi. One interviewee talked about roaming around the city, visiting historical places and becoming interested in the stories behind monuments, who built them, why and in which period. Hearing this made me realise that learning the city's history and geography can make it feel more meaningful and less alien.
Using the metro, finding affordable eateries, identifying safe neighbourhoods and locating community spaces are all skills that migrants gradually acquire. These skills turn the city from an overwhelming mass into a set of familiar routes and landmarks. I saw this learning process as an essential form of psychological adaptation: the more people can map the city mentally and emotionally, the less threatening it feels.

Consumer Culture, Aspiration and the Pressure to Change

"Glow Up" and the Urban Gaze

One of the most powerful insights I gained during my interview with the Ladakh Bhawan manager was about consumer culture. He told me that Delhi's consumer culture is very real and very influential. In Ladakh, people lead simpler, more needs-based lives. They buy things when they need them, and the emphasis is on function rather than display.

In Delhi, however, exposure to brands, fashion, influencers, and social media creates constant pressure to consume and present oneself in a certain way. The manager said that greed increases here, and there is a strong need to look presentable and modern. He mentioned that when Ladakhis come to Delhi, there is an expectation that they will have a "glow up",that they will start dressing more stylishly, looking more polished, and embodying a specific urban aesthetic. This expectation does not come only from Delhi; it also comes from peers and relatives back home, who see Delhi as a place where one should transform. People who return to Ladakh without visible signs of this transformation may be judged as unsuccessful or lacking ambition.

Listening to him, I understood how consumer culture is a key mechanism through which Delhi exerts influence on Ladakhi migrants. It shapes their aspirations, sense of self-worth, and daily practices. It also deepens the asymmetry in cultural exchange: while Ladakhi values of simplicity and self-sufficiency do not significantly reshape Delhi, Delhi's consumerist values permeate Ladakhi migrant communities and even Ladakh itself through tourism and media.

Influencers, Tourism and the Changing Face of Ladakh

The manager also spoke to me about how social media influencers and films have changed Ladakh's image. He felt that influencers "restrict" Ladakh by focusing on a few famous locations and ignoring many others. For example, he mentioned that Ladakh has cherry-blossom-like beauty in the form of apricot flowers near Zanskar, but very few people know about it. Instead, tourist traffic gets concentrated in already overcrowded spots.

He was critical of the way mass tourism, driven by movies and social media, has led to environmental degradation. He said that many mainland tourists make places dirty and show little respect for nature, whereas foreign travellers are often more conscious and careful.

This conversation made me see the migration story from another angle. It is not just Ladakhis who go to Delhi, and change; Delhi and the rest of India also come to Ladakh through tourism and media, changing Ladakh's environment and culture. Migrants in Delhi, therefore, are caught between a homeland that is itself transforming under external pressures and a city that demands adaptation and consumption.

Identity Negotiation and Mental Health

Living in Between

As I listened to people speak about their lives, I realised that most Ladakhi and Tibetan migrants in Delhi live in an in-between space. They are no longer fully embedded in Ladakh's social and environmental structures, but they are not fully part of Delhi's mainstream either. They must constantly navigate between languages (Ladakhi, Tibetan, Hindi, English), between food habits, between ways of dressing and between value systems.

Some of them embrace this bicultural or even multicultural identity. They enjoy being able to switch between worlds, to be Ladakhi at home or at Ladakh Bhawan, and "Delhi-like" at university or at work. Others experience this as exhausting or confusing, especially when they feel judged from both sides,by traditional expectations back home and by urban expectations in the city.

Emotional Costs and Coping Strategies

The emotional costs of this negotiation show up in subtle ways: homesickness, anxiety, feelings of not belonging, and worries about "losing" their language or culture. At the same time, migrants also develop coping strategies. They build supportive friendships, join student associations, participate in religious and cultural events, cook familiar food and visit Ladakh when possible.

In the interviews, I did not always ask direct questions about mental health, but it was present in many of the narratives. People spoke about stress, about being overwhelmed, about feeling judged or stared at. Yet they also spoke of excitement, pride in their adaptability, and hope for the future. I came to see mental health here as something that is constantly in flux, shaped by daily experiences of acceptance, discrimination, success and failure.

Asymmetrical Cultural Exchange: My Interpretation

After spending time on this project, my overall interpretation is that the cultural exchange between Ladakh and Delhi is significantly asymmetrical. Delhi

influences Ladakhi migrants far more than Ladakhi migrants influence Delhi. This is visible in food, language, consumer habits, fashion, and even in how Ladakh itself is represented and consumed through tourism and media.

However, I do not see this process only as a story of domination or loss. I also see resilience, creativity, and agency in how migrants respond. They adapt their food, but they also carry ingredients from home. They change their clothes, but they still tell their friends stories about Ladakh. They learn Hindi and English, but they also speak Ladakhi or Tibetan among themselves. They navigate Delhi's crowds and pollution, but they still dream of mountains and clear skies.

Ladakhi identity in Delhi, as I understand it, is not erased but transformed. It emerges as a flexible, negotiated identity that moves between tradition and modernity, community accountability and individual freedom. My report is an attempt to honour this complexity and to show that migration is not just a movement on the map but a continuous reworking of who people are and how they belong.

Effects on the heart of India

Cultural Exchange in terms of academia

Universities in the heart of Delhi become sites of significant Ladakhi cultural presence. Student associations, Ladakhi cultural festivals, and informal food-sharing practices have introduced thousands of Delhi students to Ladakhi traditions. The annual Losar celebrations (Ladakhi New Year), Hemis festival screenings, and thangka art exhibitions have entered the consciousness of students who might otherwise never have encountered these traditions.

Importantly, these exchanges are not one-directional. Young Ladakhis in Delhi have absorbed elements of Delhi's urban youth culture, its music, fashion, activism, and social media fluency and brought these back into their community practices. The result is a hybrid cultural expression that belongs entirely to neither Leh nor Delhi, but is authentically the product of both.

Initiatives by community spaces like the Tibet house, providing lectures, programmes and special workshops also contribute to the facilitation to cultural exchange between the two. By organising conferences, exhibitions, film screening, and festivals they guide the youngsters on topics like philosophy, art, literature, and bear witness to the evolving heritage of the Tibetan people.

These kinds of acts focus on encouraging cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and explore the relationship between various communities.

Effect on the culinary landscape of India’s heart

Delhi's culinary identity has historically been anchored in the robust traditions of North Indian cuisine, Punjabi dhabas, and Mughlai establishments, as well as the rich, spice-forward cooking of the Indo-Gangetic belt. For decades, this remained the dominant register of the city's food culture, with other regional cuisines occupying peripheral or specialised spaces.

However, over the past two decades, there has been a discernible shift in this culinary orientation. Changing migration patterns, a growing appetite among urban

youth for cultural novelty, and the rise of food as a form of social identity have collectively pushed Delhi's palate toward cuisines it had previously overlooked. Among the most significant of these emerging presences is Himalayan cuisine and, within it, the Ladakhi food tradition.

Restaurants and community eateries run by Ladakhi and Tibetan residents, concentrated in areas such as Majnu Ka Tila and Paharganj, have transitioned from being community-specific spaces to becoming sought-after destinations for a broader Delhi audience. Food journalists, culinary researchers, and mainstream consumers have begun engaging with dishes such as thukpa, skyu, and momo not merely as novelties but as legitimate culinary expressions deserving serious attention.

This shift is significant beyond the gastronomic. It represents a broader reorientation in how Delhi understands its own diversity, a gradual recognition that the city's food culture need not be defined exclusively by its Mughal and Punjabi inheritance, but can accommodate and be enriched by the quieter, slower, and equally ancient food traditions arriving from the Himalayas.

(embodied archive of memories)

Conclusion

Writing this report in the first person has made me very aware that I am part of the story I am telling. I chose what to ask, whom to listen to and what to emphasise. My position as a student and intern also shaped what people shared with me and how much they trusted me.

Through this process, I have come to see migration from Ladakh to Delhi as a deeply layered experience. It is about leaving behind a harsh but beloved landscape and entering a city full of possibilities but also of pressures. It is about food that transforms from functional, climate-responsive dishes into hybrid urban cuisine. It is about bodies that move from clean, thin air into polluted, noisy streets. It is about minds that hold multiple languages, memories and aspirations at once.

Most importantly, it is about people who refuse to be reduced to simple categories like “traditional” or “modern,” “rural” or “urban.” The Ladakhi and Tibetan migrants I spoke to are constantly negotiating, adapting and reinventing themselves. They are not passive recipients of Delhi’s influence; they are active agents, making choices within constraints.

I hope that this report not only documents their experiences but also invites readers, including policy-makers, educators and urban residents, to think more carefully about the conditions under which migrants live and the kinds of support they need. Recognising the importance of food, geography and psychological well-being is essential for building a more empathetic and inclusive understanding of internal migration in India.