

## **Learning about our agricultural heritage**

**By Kunzang Deachen, Chozin Palmo and Jigmet Singge**

Harvesting marks the onset of autumn in many parts of Ladakh, where very few crops are grown due to the high-altitude cold desert conditions. The main cereal crops are barley and wheat, while other crops include local lentils, peas, and mustard seeds. The crops are grown in fields which are irrigated with glacier meltwater that feeds local streams through the summer. Harvesting is not just the process of gathering crops but the reaping of rewards for all the hard work carried out through the year. However, harvesting in contemporary times is very different from the past.

Earlier, harvesting was a shared communal activity with neighbours and relatives helping with all related activities. The family had to ensure that all guests and helpers were well fed. The day would start with a couple of hours of work followed by breakfast. Breakfast would generally be accompanied by a lot of laughter and storytelling as were all meals and tea breaks. After each meal the group would work in the fields again. Harvesting was done with hand-held sickles and every hand movement was followed with a beat of a traditional song. It was akin to a working picnic and social gathering.

The harvested crops were then tied in small bales with a special knot that is said to be similar to the knot on the waistband of the traditional dress, Sulma. The bales were then collected in one place for drying. After the crop had dried, the threshing was done with the help of animals. Every household had a special circular land earmarked with a pole in the centre where the animals, usually dZos, bulls, cows, or horses, would be tied and made to walk on the dried crop with the encouragement of various traditional threshing songs. This would dislodge the dried grains from the chaff. Threshing was followed by winnowing, which was done with the help of wind and a long handmade wooden rake. The winnowing was generally accompanied by music whistled by the people doing the work.

Nowadays, in some places the hand-held sickles have been replaced by portable chainsaw-like machines powered by gasoline. Neighbors and relatives have become busy and people now hire paid labourers for these tasks. The threshing is now done by a petrol-powered threshing machine.

Harvesting and other agricultural tasks are no longer shared community activities. Earlier, interdependence fostered cooperative social behaviour and helped create social harmony. The influx of money and machines have resulted in families becoming more independent from the rest of society for such labour-intensive activities. This in turn has led to the creation of a more individualistic society and an increasingly self-centred approach in Ladakhi society. However, some of the old traditions of harvesting are still practised in many villages. It is uncertain how long this will persist given the rapid pace of change everywhere. It is a major challenge for Ladakh to retain and revitalise these ecologically sustainable communal and reciprocal practices amidst various changes.

As part of Local Futures, we have been organising Volunteer for Harvesting events over the last few years. The participants include locals, travellers and students who help farmers in villages with various harvesting-related tasks. When travellers participate in these activities, they pay for their stay and food while also helping the hosts with harvesting. Otherwise, there are very few villagers around to help in harvesting as most people have migrated to urban areas. This is the result of the process of modernisation, which tends to encourage urbanisation especially for young people from rural areas.

Almost all the young members of families in rural Leh district are living in Leh town for their children's education or for jobs in the private and government sectors. This means that only elderly members of these families still live in the villages and oversee all household and farming activities. Many families have already left farming due to the lack of manpower required for these tasks. The families that are still practicing farming require help and support to continue. If not, in the coming years it will be difficult to sustain agriculture in Ladakh.

This is the reason why Local Futures started the Volunteer for Harvesting project. Even though the processes leading to the emptying of villages are complex and require much more systematic reflection and social action, this is one small effort to help farmers continue their work and maintain the viability of villages. In 2021, we organised the Volunteer for Harvesting event in Gya village. However, unlike previous years where many volunteers were foreign and domestic tourists, this year was different, as the group was composed of young Ladakhi students.

In Gya village, we were to help Acho Urgain, a progressive farmer. He has been experimenting with growing a variety of vegetables and practicing organic farming. Gya is about 80 km east of Leh and still practices old traditions of harvesting with comparatively less influence of modernity. Urgain is always happy to share his knowledge and experiences with people who visit him. During our time in the village, he motivated us to get up early in the morning around 6:30 am, which was a challenge since it is not very common these days for youth who have moved out of villages and into farming life. But Urgain is very forgiving and understanding of this, welcoming the late-risers to join in the field after he has begun working, or else assisting in carrying food from their house to the field. At the field, we worked according to our capability, some preferring cutting of grains, some preferring to bundle them up and some preferring to carry them to the designated place for threshing the grains to separate them from the straw. It was a meditative experience as we sang along with the family while cutting the grains, the song allowing one to be calm and slow while working to avoid any mental or physical stress.

One of the best moments of the entire experience was the warm and tasty food that we got to eat together in the field with lots of jokes and stories. After resting for a while, we would start working again with a few tea breaks in between until late evening.

After cleaning ourselves up, we all sat together chatting and sharing stories until we ate dinner made of all locally sourced ingredients. Finally, with minds at peace and tired bodies, we slept deeply in the vast quiet of the mountains.

A lot of us young Ladakhis are born and raised in urban areas such as Leh. As a result, they have little or no agrarian experience. In time, the practice of traditional harvesting is diminishing and tending towards modern technology. As machines consume less time, they have eroded the appreciation and acknowledgment of Ladakh's local culture. We believe this makes activities like the one we organise even more important.

This time, we had several members from Ladakh Students Welfare Society Delhi (LSWSD) who volunteered with us. For many of these students, this was the first time they had done farming work in a field. We discussed the effect of urban migration on villages, which will only worsen unless something is done to stop this trend. The villagers appreciated our enthusiasm for the work. They were very welcoming and patient in guiding us while working in the field. It helped us bond, understand and appreciate their lifestyle and understand the need to preserve traditional farming systems in Ladakh.

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