

Leh Declaration on Biodiverse, Organic and Climate Resilient Himalaya to Meet SDG's

The Himalaya, Roof of the World supports nearly half of humanity. These mighty snow-clad mountains are also known as snow abode and third pole, since they are the third largest body of snow on our planet after the Antarctic and Arctic. Himalaya is provider of natural resources and environmental services such as water, soil, biodiversity, energy and climate regulation as well as unique cultural and spiritual heritage. The entire Himalayan mountains are considered as sacred and are the home for different religions.

The Himalaya has a profound effect on the climate of the Indian subcontinent and the Tibetan plateau. It prevents frigid, dry Arctic winds from blowing south into the subcontinent, which keeps South Asia much warmer than corresponding temperate regions in the other continents. It also forms a barrier for the monsoon winds, keeping them from traveling northwards, and causing heavy rainfall in the Terai region. The Himalaya is also believed to play an important part in the formation of Central Asian deserts such as the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts.

Ladakh is ecologically a unique part of the Himalaya and the world. It straddles the Himalayan and Karakorum mountain ranges and the upper Indus river valley. Ladakh is a place where earth and sky seem to meet and it looks like the roof of the world. In spite of being high altitude desert it has evolved sophisticated, sustainable farming systems and a rich culture. Agriculture in Ladakh had been quite sustainable in the past. The traditional Ladakhi farming methods are capable of producing crop yields comparable to industrial chemical intensive agriculture. However, the chemical fertilizers with huge subsidy from the government are now being applied by the farmers in the region in hope of more production. Environmentalists have expressed their concern that the shift in the farming system from traditional organic farming to the chemical farming will upset the ecological and social balance of the area.

While the Himalaya and Ladakh shape the climate of Asia, climate change driven by fossil fuel use over 200 years of industrialization is now changing the climate in the Himalaya and Ladakh, threatening the very survival of mountain communities who have lived sustainably over millennia as well as the biodiversity they have co-evolved with.

For the past few years, Ladakh has seen unusually mild winters and low snowfall. At one hand where glaciers are receding at an alarming rate, natural disasters especially related to the climate change are increasing on the other. Being a cold desert, Ladakh does not receive heavy rainfall, yet climate change has brought climate disasters to Ladakh, such as the floods in Nubra and Leh valley in the year 2006 and cloud burst of Leh in 2010 that washed away 200 people, the climate tragedy is still fresh in people's mind. Disaster of Uttarakhand in 2013 is another example of the extreme even related to climate change.

Keeping in view the uniqueness of the region both in terms of climate as well as diversity, the Autonomous Hill Council of Ladakh is taking steps to promote organic farming and preserve its rich socio-cultural, and biological diversity.

While the world comes to the Himalaya for spirituality, tourism, nature's beauty and seeking peace, a non-sustainable model of development is creating a pressure on young people to abandon their homes, communities, cultures. Biodiverse organic sustainable climate resilient Himalaya will promote sustainable livelihoods for the youth and help provide a sense of rootedness.

Ladakh is governed by an autonomous Hill council, within the state of Jammu & Kashmir of the Northern India. Ladakh has also taken steps towards becoming chemical free region during past few years.

Sikkim in the able and visionary leadership of Sri Pawan Chamling, Honorable CM, has gone ahead in this regard and became first organic state of India. Honorable Chief Minister also agreed to become Ambassador for "Mission Organic Himalaya", launched by Navdanya in 2017 on the eve on Birthday of Mahatma Gandhi to make this a reality by 2030.

So today on 6th of August, Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council join hands with the government of Sikkim, Navdanya and LEHO in Mission Organic Himalaya by 2030 to Conserve biodiversity, create climate resilience and renew the relationship of humans with the earth and all species in accordance with our ancient cultures which are also culture of the future. This transition will also contribute to SDG goal for 2030.

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