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**Culture Matters: Developing Ladakhi
Education on the Margins of India**

by GROVEWELL associate

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Culture Matters: Developing Ladakhi Education on the Margins of India

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ISBN: 1 900 795 17 5

Paper Price: £5 inc. postage and packing

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ABSTRACT

This study explores understandings, experiences, and constructions of ‘culture’ in relation to education and development in Ladakh, a Himalayan area in north-western India. Discussion draws on five months fieldwork divided between two teaching placements. I worked with a Ladakhi development initiative established to reform the education system and sustain Ladakhi culture, and in two rural government schools.

‘Culture’, a core theme in anthropology is central to India’s constitution, conspicuous in Ladakhi development negotiations, and variably present in everyday discourse. My own interaction with parties interested in the education-‘culture’-development scene in Ladakh exposed multifarious translations of ‘culture’. I argue that ‘culture’ must be understood as a temporally, spatially and individually situated interpretation or representation. Analysis must simultaneously take into account wider socio-political, historical and economic processes.

A theoretical over-focus on bounded localities concretises ‘culture’ into a distinct domain - an available paradigm for use in government policies. ‘Culture’, as inscribed within government agenda, is a concept which can then be appropriated by Ladakhis in making heterogeneous claims for resources and rights. Promotion of ‘a culture’ can obscure other voices, and may induce regional introspection, stagnation, resistance, or intolerance. Thus reified, ‘culture’ may subvert educational potentials which move towards people’s increased capabilities, greater interaction in society and the broadening of their horizons.