

IN CONVERSATION WITH SONAM WANGCHUK

BY TRISHYA SCREWVALA



On September 19th 2014, New Acropolis invited educationist and environmentalist Sonam Wangchuk for a conversation about his work in Ladakh, to shed light on what drives his choices and actions. Sonam is the person that inspired the protagonist Phunsuk Wangdu in Chetan Bhagat's, 3 Idiots. His life and work truly reflect that of a philosopher; someone driven by the needs of others, over his own.

Although he graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering, his academic training took a back seat when he discovered that the graduation rate among students of Standard 10 in Ladakh was an appalling 5%. He learnt that one of the reasons for this was that the medium of instruction in Ladakhi schools was Urdu, which although spoken widely in Kashmir, is not the native language in the region of Ladakh. Furthermore, Standard 10 board exams were administered in English, even though it was not introduced into the curriculum until Standard 8. Prior to Sonam's efforts, Ladakhi children were often ridiculed as being unserious, while teachers were uninterested. In reality, however,

the system itself was faulty. Sonam explains, "I believe that until and unless we do some justice to our Government schools where the whole of India except for a few study, we wont, as a nation, get anywhere...my effort has been to bring some parity, do some justice to this educational mess in Government schools."

Over the last 25 years, Sonam created Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), to tackle the complex issue of education reform. He has worked with the



Sonam Wangchuk

Government to build teacher capacity and revise textbooks to align to the culture, climate, geography and language of the Ladakhis. Sonam quickly realized, however, that change at the policy level lay in the sustained support and participation of the people. He stressed the need to make people take ownership of the schools as a priority. "In a democracy, when peoples' priorities change, is when the system changes."

Three H's of SECMOL: Bright Head Skilled Hands Kind Heart

Speaking of his vision, Sonam jokes, SECMOL "is very different in that the qualification [for admission] is that you have to have failed...and then we try to make leaders out of them. Failures to Leaders." Sonam goes on to explain, "I see two important roles of education in a society. The first, a very basic one, is to help people fend for themselves, obtain basic necessities of life...and then to reach higher potentials within and actualize your own potentials...but I'm sad to say that today we are not even fulfilling the first one." Instead of focusing on the 3 R's of education (reading, writing, arithmetic), Sonam introduces the 3 H's SECMOL chooses as areas of development for their students. The first focus area is a bright Head, which is where the modern education systems usually end. The second, skilled Hands, because education needs to be hands-on and practical. The third, a kind Heart, because ultimately this is what makes us human.

Eventually, Sonam was able to apply his engineering expertise within his dream of reviving the Ladakhi education system. "In minus

twenty [degrees], buildings are minus ten...things were freezing inside the classroom...[Children] can't even bend their fingers, how could they be expressing what they hardly learnt?" he laments.

So he designed school buildings, made of earth, and heated by the use of passive solar power. His philosophy behind maintaining a fourteen-degree classroom atmosphere during winter was particularly inspiring. "Fourteen [degrees] is not at...global comfort levels, but we don't believe in that. We believe in the middle path. We don't want our houses to be sub zero like most of the village houses are, but then we don't also want them to be plus twenty-two and twenty-four [degrees] inside, like the Americans would have, for which they burn all the fuel that is for generations, in this one generation...you can achieve dignified comfort without costing the Earth," he affirms, "We don't mind putting on a pull over or a jacket [inside]!"

Sonam's innovations are characterized by his ability to use the laws of nature as an inherent part of his design. As someone who evidently shares a very deep connection with nature, his ability to use technology in harmony with his surroundings is a rare gift in today's age. He chooses to use "passive" solutions, which are simple and highly cost effective. Instead of relying on expensive solar panels and other heavy equipment, for example, common sense solutions like orienting homes to face the south (in the Northern hemisphere), and using appropriate raw materials, are simple solutions that enable maximum sunlight exposure in winter, minimum exposure in summer, and allow energy to be stored effectively.

"I'm very concerned at this stage about what is becoming of our earth and our cities," he shares





Yaron Barzilay, Sonam Wangchuk, Dilip Jain, Ubai Husein

with seriousness. Put off by the Mumbai traffic he continues, "It was an ordeal getting here this evening through nerve wracking two hours of driving." He calculated, "In an active life of say 50 years...you're spending 6 years in the traffic! What life is that?"

Sonam sheds light on the change of mindset so necessary in our times: "We, in India, we talk a lot of Ahimsa...but I feel the definition of Himsa has changed during these 2,000 years," he explains. "Today Himsa is not happening by letting a fly die or killing a goat...today the biggest Himsa is not even happening with guns and knives. It's happening with our lifestyles. We talk of killing one or two animals, our life in the 21st century is making species after species wipe out of this earth. That's Mahahimsa!"

At the close of the evening, when asked about how he overcame obstacles, Sonam replies with the simplicity yet perceptiveness we had grown accustomed to: "Whenever a door closes, there are several that open...but you have to have the balance of mind to look for those." He goes on to say, "I've always been very grateful for my problems...each time they opened even bigger opportunities." He continues, "What is life without

problems? It is like cricket without wickets or volleyball without a net...these are what makes the game interesting!" ★★★

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