CHAPTER NINE

URBAN PROCESSES AND POLITICAL CHANGE

The social and moral order maintained in the village of Photoksar, to which the practices of conflict resolution I have described here are oriented, is defined by an implicit sense of a sacred social community. This community, I have suggested, is itself maintained by patterns of equality, which serve to counteract tendencies towards hierarchy. The containment and resolution of conflict within the village, as well as safeguarding and preserving that sacred social space, can be seen as part of a larger pattern of deference and distance towards the religious and political centres in the region. This explains the measure of autonomy maintained by the villagers against the powerful influence of kings, religious forces and development projects. It also, I would suggest, helps to make sense of the dynamics of order found in the urban centre, Leh.

The attitudes to conflict and dispute resolution that I have described in Photoksar are found widely throughout Ladakh. The importance of settling disputes locally was expressed to me repeatedly by members of different villages, Ladakhi NGO officers and urban dwellers. Informants were always able to give me examples of disputes that had been settled through the mediation of family and neighbours or at the instigation of the goba or village meeting. Such informal procedures even extend into the socially fluid atmosphere of modern Leh, where concepts of legal rights are widely accepted but the authority of the Indian legal system impinges only very lightly on legal practices.

The educated classes are familiar with the political and legal arena of the Indian state and those who find work with NGOs quickly become adept at using the language of international development, with its emphasis on ‘child rights’, ‘women’s rights’, ‘the right to education’ and so on. Nevertheless, when it comes to their own disputes, such language quickly becomes muted. One of the major sources of conflict in the urban centres of Ladakh, particularly Leh, is now land. With the new economy have come a great many employment and economic opportunities. Government jobs, in particular, are secure, well paid and sought after, but there are also some who take their chances in business, and others, particularly from the Chang Tang, who simply come to work as labourers, hoping to escape the hardships of life in the remoter areas (Goodall 2004). Leh has, in consequence, become a target for migration.
There has been considerable development on what was previously waste land because property is in short supply and the older, irrigated areas of Leh, where houses have the potential for gardens and can be turned into guest-houses have become particularly valuable. As a result, children of Leh families are keen to share in their household’s property and have become conscious of their inheritance rights. Even daughters insist on their shares, especially if they marry a man from outside the capital. In general, property is the most common cause of serious conflict here, accounting for the greatest number of civil court cases. As one Leh resident put it, ‘formerly people did not care about boundaries but now the slightest dispute is liable to end up in court’. I came across more than one case in which a dispute between two children had resulted in long-standing, unresolved animosity between their respective, immediate families.

This, in turn, has resulted in the gradual acceptance of the ideology of individual property, as enshrined in the State laws, in social obligations, as it still is in Photoksar and many other villages. However, it is still rare to hear people talking in terms of their ‘rights’ to land. Tinles Angmo, a Ladakhi lawyer based in Leh, told me that members of the older generation often insist that the elder son should still receive a larger share. The unease with which many Ladakhis regard the changes in the nature of their property relations is illustrated by the case of Rinchen, a man from Nubra now working as a teacher in Leh. His father was a khardar and a member of an aristocratic family in Sabu, a village close to Leh. However, his father had abandoned his first wife and daughter to marry a Nubra girl as a makpa. The Nubra girl’s family were lonpos so finding a suitable husband for her had been difficult, Rinchen explained. They had had five children, including my informant. Since he was working in Leh, Rinchen wanted to establish a house there and had asked his half-sister for a share of the Sabu property. She had refused so he had brought a case in court which had, ultimately, been successful. However, he narrated his story to me with some embarrassment and was anxious to stress the fact that he had not been greedy for land. He genuinely needed it for his family to live on, he emphasised, and it would have been wrong if he had sold it. Having won the case he had returned half his entitlement to his sister and they had re-established good relations. In Nubra, by contrast, his family khangba’s land had not been divided yet. His mother was still alive and she would not like it; she tells her sons to stay together and would regard a division of the land as a sign that they were going to fight, he explained.