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## **The Cultural Synthesis in Ladakh**

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Ladakh was an independent kingdom, generally oriented in its sympathies towards Tibet. One often reads in general histories that Ladakh was formerly part of Tibet. Used in a broad cultural sense the term Tibet covers a far wider territory than was ever subject to the Dalai Lama's administration in Lhasa.

In the eastern Tibet there were several independent principalities, over which the Chinese claimed and were generally acknowledged by interested western government to exercise a far more direct control than they exercised in central Tibet. To the south, the kingdom of Bhutan maintained its political independence of the Dalai Lama's regime ever since its inception in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless Bhutan belongs to the Tibetan cultural world. Other southern fringe territories, clearly Tibetan in culture, have since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century become part of Nepal. (Snellgrove, D and Skorupski, T 1977). Ladakh, the most western of Tibetan Buddhist lands, has never been subject to the Dalai Lamas's government in Lhasa. Prior to 1642 when the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama became the first Dalai Lama to exercise political power, the most powerful potentate in central Tibet was the king of the Tibetan province of Tsang. In those times under the greatest of the Ladakhi kings, Senge Namgyal c. 1570-1642, the frontiers of Ladakh extended up to the boundaries of Tsang and included Himalayan areas which have since fallen to India and Nepal. (Snellgrove, D and Skorupski, T 1977). Ladakh was then a powerful kingdom and it was not subject to any other part of Tibet. The existing population of western Tibet in the result of a long process of blending of at least three district peoples, two of which are of Aryan stock, and the remaining one, which is numerically superior to the other two, is of Mongolian origin. The Aryan nations are the Dards of Gilgit and the Mons of the North India perhaps from Kashmir. The Mongolian is the Tibetan nation.

By about 1000 AD Tibetan language and culture became all pervasive throughout Ladakh and even further west throughout Baltistan, which in the mid 8thg century became the western outpost of a Great Tibetan empire. Ladakh does not seem to have been affected by this general Tibetan cultural penetration until the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but since then a western dialect of Tibetan has become the regular language of the people of Ladakh. The rulers of Kashmir forcibly converted the Baltis to Islam at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but the Balti language, which is also a Tibetan dialect, continues to bear witness to the earlier Tibetan connection. (Snellgrove, D and Skorupski, T 1977).

From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards Ladakh has been open to Muslim penetration. Later in 1683, the Mughals assisted the Ladakhis in driving from their country a Tibeto-Mongol army

whose onslaught marked the beginning of the end for Ladakh as an independent kingdom. However, the final destroyers of Ladakh's independence were the Hindu rulers of Jammu, who invaded in 1834. Under the Hindu domination, the Muslims of Kashmir and the Buddhists of Ladakh continued to live peacefully together.

### **Buddhist - Muslim Cultural Confluence**

The Buddhist culture remains typical of Ladakh. Even where it has been largely affected in the Muslim areas, no higher Islamic culture has come to take its place rather both have co-existed or in some places intermingled and evolved as an exclusive cultural heritage of Ladakh. It is the Buddhist culture and mainly Tibetan Buddhist culture that is all pervasive. It is pleasant to relate that personal relations between the Buddhist and the Muslims have been good and intermarriage was a usual thing. Lack of caste consciousness in Ladakh has rendered social intercourse far easier between Buddhists and Muslims, than has ever been possible elsewhere in India between the Hindus and the Muslims.

Ladakh has always occupied an ambivalent position between India and Tibet. In its cultural impact Tibetan pressure has been extraordinarily uniform. From the point of view of language it has provided Ladakh with a western Tibetan dialect, which despite influences from the Indian side, is still generally spoken to this day by Ladakhi Muslims as much by the Buddhists. As for literature, the regular styles of literary Tibetan have remained current in Ladakh from the 10<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As for religion, several of the orders of the Tibetan Buddhism are represented in Ladakh and there has never been anything resembling a separate Ladakhi Buddhist church. Tibetan cultural influence has been uniform simply because Tibetan civilization on the whole had become remarkably uniform largely as a result of its determined adherence to certain forms of Buddhist religion. On the other hand there have been some marked contrast cultural influences in accordance with the kind of religion and the kind of language and culture that prevailed in Kashmir and Ladakh's closest neighbor on the Indian side.

With the establishment of a Muslim dynasty in Kashmir very different influences began to penetrate into Ladakh. Even under its Hindu rulers, when Buddhism and Hinduism existed side by side in Kashmir, cultural influences from neighbouring Muslims lands, especially Persia and western Central Asia must already have been present. An indication of this is the type of Buddhist art found in Alchi that was largely carried out by the Buddhist craftsmen from Kashmir. However, after the political triumph of Islam in Kashmir in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist and Hindu art simply ceased to exist except for a few temples left in ruins. Thus there is no Kashmiri painting of the Hindu - Buddhist period which might be compared with what still exists in Alchi. It would seem certain, however, that from this time onwards cultural influences were less readily accepted from Kashmir by the Buddhists of Ladakh who now turned for help to Tibet, where Buddhism in all its aspects, doctrinal administrative and artistic, was already a flourishing concern. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards Ladakh had to submit to Muslim raids and to a steadily increasing conversion to Islam, which moved from the west to the east of the region. Thus the western part of Ladakh

up to Mulbek is almost entirely Muslim. These Ladakhi Muslims continues for the most part to speak their western Tibetan dialect whereas the Tibetan literature has disappeared together with the Buddhist religion. Their sacred texts are written in Arabic together with which they have adopted Urdu as their every day written language. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Mughal emperor became the protagonist of the Ladakhi king against the great Tibetan invasion and efforts were made not for the first time, to turn the Ladakhi king into a Muslim. It was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Kashmir, together with Ladakh was taken over by the Hindu rulers of the state of Jammu, the Tibetan political pressure began to ease in Ladakh. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Muslim names first appeared among the Buddhist names in recorded history. The name of one of the sons of king Lotos Chhogdan was Tongpa Ali. The Dard chief Bhagdar Skyab's eldest son was called Ali-du-Skya and his daughter was known as Khatun according to an inscription. (Sheikh, A.G 2010). Nawang Tsering Shakspo also mentions two writers from Baltistan namely Ghulam Hassan Lobsang and Mohammad Hassnain Singay Tsering who have adopted Tibetan names. (Shakspo, N.T 2012). This clearly expresses their affinity with Ladakh and Tibetan culture. One such interesting name is Chandan Ali Singge, a Balti Muslim who was the main architect of the Palace at Leh. The Palace at Leh was constructed by King Singge Namgyal in the first part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Ethnically, Baltis and Ladakhis have descended from the same stock, both being a blend of the Aryan, Mongol, Mon and Tibetan races. According to a survey conducted by Alexander Cunningham in 1846, the average height of Ladakhis and Baltis is about the same. Both share by and large, an identical culture, food habits, language and dress. Many of the features of daily life such as the crafts of weaving, wood carving, metal working, the grinding of grains in water mills and so on are carried on in a similar fashion in both the areas. The major difference is that of religion: the people of Baltistan are Muslims while the majority of Ladakhis are Buddhists. The history of Buddhist presence in Baltistan is as old as the history of the present form of Buddhism in Ladakh. It extends as far as the great Buddhist Saint Padmasambhava who is worshipped as the second Buddha by the followers of Mahayana form of Buddhism.

Economically, Ladakh had close ties with Baltistan and there were a number of trade routes between the two. All these trade routes were extensively used, as Ladakh was a great Central Asian trading centre. The Baltis would make frequent visits to Leh and Kargil to exchange their trading products especially the dried apricots, nuts and butter for wool, and salt and cotton cloth from Ladakhi traders, which they procured from Punjab. As the trade developed, many Muslim traders mainly from Kashmir, Central Asia and even from Afghanistan and from some other parts of India came to Ladakh for trade. Many of them married Ladakhi Buddhist women and settled in Ladakh permanently. Their off springs are called Arghons and are generally *Sunni* Muslims. These types of marriages exhibit cultural synthesis of the two communities to a great extent. The Ladakhi Buddhist women and the Arghon Muslims adapt to each other's way of life. The man keeps his religion and the woman is converted to Islam. The man adopts the food habits, dress, culture and language of his wife. Their children never try to learn the language of their father.

Linguistically, according to the tradition, Tibetan used to be the common language amongst the Baltis, Puriks, Zanskaris, Changpas and the people of Central Ladakh. However, when the Baltis converted to Islam, they lost contact with the Tibetan script, a process which history tells us had occurred as early as 10<sup>th</sup> century. They have, though, continued to use the Tibetan language in speech although they refer to their language as Balti. It is interesting to note that among the Tibetan speaking people Baltis have preserved have a dialect which is believed to be the one closest to classical Tibetan their pronunciation is so clear that they express in a particular manner, every particle used in the construction of syllabus and words. It is also worth noting that while the Balti dialect has been preserved in written form in Arabic script, the later actually lacks certain vowel sounds necessary to accurately transcribe and pronounce Balti.

### **The Ladakh - Baltistan Connection**

It is assumed that the present day Shia population of Ladakh migrated from the Balti town of Skardu, when the Ladakhi King Jamyang Namgyal married the only daughter of Chief Ali Mir of Skardu in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The marriage took place after Jamyang Namgyal's ill-fated military ventures towards Chiktan around the year 1600. He was heavily defeated by the force s of Ali Mir and captured. He was released only after he had been married to Gyal Khatun. Later Gyal Khatun gave birth to the famous Ladakhi Sengge Namgyal. According to a Ladakhi tradition the two popular musical instruments- the *daman* and the *surna* were brought to Ladakh from Baltistan in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the company of the marriage party of Gyal Khatun. The marriage party of queen Khatun was accompanied by the multitude of Muslim maids and a band of musicians. Gyal Khatun remained faithful to Islam all her life and she had mosque built in Hunder, Leh and Basgo, whereas the Ladakhi dynasty continued to follow Buddhism. The Muslim musicians settled at Leh and Phyang village and their status was elevated to *Kharmon*, or royal musicians. Several thousand Balti Muslims are thought to have migrated from Baltistan and Purig to Chuchot and Shey villages of Ladakh during the reign of king Jamyang Namgyal. According to oral tradition, King Jamyang Namgyal also granted land at Leh to seven Kashmiri Muslim traders who received special trade privileges in return for their services to the royal family. Some Muslims were invited to Ladakh by the Ladakhi kings to perform particular tasks like S.S. Gergan says that to write the king's personal correspondence with the Mughal governors of Kashmir a prominent Muslim from Kashmir was invited. The Buddhist culture remains typical of Ladakh. In some Muslim dominated areas, the Buddhist culture has largely been effaced or wiped out but still no higher culture has come to take its place. The village mosque was mostly simple adaptations of normal flat roofed stone and mud Tibetan style houses. The domes and minarets were rare in Ladakh region. The mosque at Shey is one such example. The original building had no dome but in the early 1970s the wooden dome from the Tsas Soma mosque, which remained abandoned for quite some time was added in the centre of the roof. The mosque also had no minarets, but a small one has been placed on the gate in 2001. One of the mosques built at Basgo by Gyal Khaton exhibits the style of Ladakhi architecture. The mosque existed in the royal palace, but unfortunately it does not exist now.



However, the mosque has been converted into a deity room of the monastery, but the earlier structure and architectural style still remains intact. It is Buddhist culture and mainly Tibetan Buddhist culture that is all pervasive and even in the main mosque at Leh the most precious relics at the staff and the boots of Lama Stagstang Raspa, first hierarch of the Hemis monastery. This mosque at Leh was founded by a royal decree in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as the most favoured religious establishment in Ladakh (Snellgrove, D and Skorupski, T 1977). Before its recent rebuilding, the architecture of the mosque was a mixture of Tibetan, Central Asian and Ladkahi styles. The earlier structure of the mosque did not have a tomb. As a result of the Balti influence, Ladakhi traditional music continues Tibetan vocal traditions with an Indo-Persian instrumental style (Trewin, Mark 1990). Polo is the favourite sport in Ladakh and was introduced by the Baltis.

Polo is a Balti word meaning round thing or ball. Some authorities say that king Singge Namgyal brought polo to Ladakh early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and that it was he who laid out the first royal polo ground in Murtse Garden, below Leh. Some attribute its introduction to early Aryans who migrated to Ladakh from Gilgit and settled here. Others say that it was brought by the colony of Baltis settled at Chuchot village near Leh. The king of Ladakh patronized polo games and it is said that one king lost an eye while playing polo. Polo grounds have been built in many villages and some of these are in good conditions even now, with polo still being played on them (Sheikh, A.G 2010). Mentioning the attachment of the people of Ladakh to polo during the last century, Frederic Drew, the British Dogra administrator in Leh, wrote in the 1870's, the people are passionately fond of the game; those of rank look on the playing of it as one of the chief objects for which they were sent into the world; but not to them is the pursuit confined; all who can get a pony to mount join in it, and the poorest enter thoroughly into the spirit of it, the children from an early age get their eye and hand in accord by practicing it on foot, plying indeed the ordinary hockey of our country. The Balti style of polo continues to be played in Ladakh and every year a polo tournament is held in Leh even today.

### **The Cultural Synthesis**

The Muslims and Buddhists of Ladakh have lived together under a single roof. These two communities exhibit a beautiful cultural synthesis in their own way. They observe mixed traditions derived from both Buddhism and Islam. They also had mixed personal names. Abdul Ghani Sheikh in his book Reflections on Ladakh, Tibet and Central Asia writes about a curious culture practiced in Kuksho village of Ladakh. He noticed in Kuksho village that the people there practiced a mixed religion. The Buddhist families buried their dead in the same manner as the Muslims. The mode of living of the Muslims was similar to the Buddhists. The eldest member of the family had a pigtail and wore ear rings. The daughter-in-law wore a *perak*, the headgear worn by the Buddhist women. The men of this village also exhibited the combined Buddhist and Muslim names, such as Rahim Tsering, Ali Tashi and Namgyal Musa. Formerly, according to tittle-tattle, in a mixed family household, meat was prepared in the same pot and an identification mark was put on the *halal* meat for the Muslims. Though the Muslims restricted to *halal* meat but they consumed the *chhang* or the

local beverage in their everyday lives. All the villagers of this village came together to celebrate Id, Muharram and Losar. Both the communities even occasionally recited their religious scriptures under the same roof. According to an oral source, the Buddhist women who were married in the Muslim families would openly brew *chhang* in the Muslim household.

This co-operation and the tolerance, which the people had amongst themselves, gradually deteriorated. This is clearly stated by Nawang Tsering Shakspo when he visited the village of Kuksho in 1988 almost about 20 years later Abdul Ghani Sheikh paid his visit. Shakspo in his book 'A Cultural History of Ladakh' writes about the mixed Buddhist and Muslim tradition which was once too strong but with the passage of time the relations between the two communities have strained. Muslims no longer participated in festivals and attended only as spectators. They were gradually disassociating themselves from village customs. However, they continued to pay their respect to the village God. It was until recently one could see members of both communities living together under a single roof. The people of the village had been very liberal in their religious beliefs. Intermarriages between Buddhist and Muslims were common, which brought people closer to each other rather than causing conflicts. With the passage of time all these traditions had changed. The two communities separated each other from the customs and traditions of each other and the extra-ordinary traditional harmony between the two is now eroded.

Over the centuries Ladakh's relationship with neighbouring countries has had a profound impact on its mode of living. Baltistan has greatly influenced Ladakh, their similar histories and geographical situations have produced similar cultures, which are interwoven in the society of Ladakh. The influence of Tibet is also seen in many areas including art, language, architecture, music, literature, medicine, astrology etc., the paramount influence being on the religious tradition. However, with the passage of time Ladakh evolved its own unique culture.

Ladakh has served as a channel of diverse cultural ideologies between the major cultural areas lying beyond its borders. Over the centuries Buddhism and Islam mutually influenced each other and members of each community were often affiliated in the service of Ladakh. The Lopchak Mission to Lhasa was an example of this interdependency. The mission was directed by a Muslim and it carried the official homage to the Dalai Lama from the Ladakhi Buddhists who recognized him as their supreme spiritual authority (Sheikh, A.G 2010).

### **Conclusion**

As is evident, Ladakh is situated in the Himalayan corridor has seen migrants, traders, missionaries and peasants passing through since ages. The Buddhist cultural and religious influences from the east very soon met with the western Muslim penetration of Muslim faiths into Ladakh. Only with some minor conflicts throughout history, the two religious and cultural contrasting traits intermingled with some exemplary cases as is evident in Kuksho village. This cultural synthesis over a period of time has evolved to a degree that many of the cultural traditions of the Buddhist and the Muslims has not only become a common factor of Ladakhi society but also a unique one not seen elsewhere in any Himalayan kingdom. This unique tradition can be seen in a wide variety of social fabrics like

their customs, manners, attitudes and practices relating to births and deaths, festivals, music, dance, architectural styles etc. this cultural synthesis of the two major faiths in the land was primarily because of the environmental factors. The land in its isolation and harsh environmental conditions kept the people restricted to earn their livelihood. Meeting ones end was more of a concern during those days than fighting to conserve ones own culture and religion. There was no scope for clash to maintain ones identity rather thinking about a square meal for a day was a matter of utmost concern during those days of limited resources and poverty. Thus it was the process of acculturation between the Buddhist and the Muslims, which helped in the evolution of the composite and unique culture in this part of the western Himalayas.

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