

Cultural Ethos of Kargil (Ladakh): Changes and Continuity

Mohd Mustafa Kamaal

M.Phil. Scholar, Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India

Abstract: Kargil, one of the district of Ladakh regions, has not been well studied as only cultural aspects of Leh district showcased. This piece of work is an exclusive endeavour to underscore the different dimensions of Kargil in context of historical changes and continuity. The society, polity, economy and culture of the region go on change from time to time. The cultural continuity runs in parallel with the cultural changes. It substantiates the facts that history is spiral process in which one witness continuous change with continuity.

Keywords: Purig, Zojila pass, Chadar road, Patrilocal marriages, Matrilocal marriages, Iron hoardings, Social Hierarchy, Low class, Yarkand, Khotan, Karakoram, Aryan race, Horse polo, Ka-ga script, Gandhara Art, Sculpture, Monastery, Mosque.

I. INTRODUCTION

Himalayan wall cut across by Zojila pass seems to have been designed by nature as a sharp line of demarcation between the valley of Kashmir and the region of Ladakh. Ladakh is characteristic for its wide spread lofty mountain ranges, that determine the course of rivers in one of the most elevated regions of the earth with extremely cold and dry climate. During winter, the rivers freeze and form natural roads like the world famous Chadar road¹. Drass is one of its coldest area that witness extreme sub-zero temperature like -60c in 1994 and is ranked the second coldest inhabited place of the world after Syberia. Ladakh has two districts, Leh and Kargil², both having similar kind of climate even if Kargil has the distinction of receiving heavy snowfall in winter on account of western disturbances. Given their barrenness populations in the two district have settled on and around rivers and waters channels where ever available. As such hamlets are scanty distributed thus guarantee for themselves substances on barely mostly which has been supported by wheat as following the support from the government both technical and physical. Economy also used to get support from trade as both Kargil and Leh were placed on the historical Silk Route that allowed caravan trade from India to Central Asia and vice-versa.

¹ A seasonal frozen river trek over Zaskar River of Kargil is situated at an altitude of 11,123 Ft height and stretching at a distance of 7 kms approx, connects Zaskar valley with Chilling village, on the road to Leh. This frozen river has been used for centuries trade and transportation and is most reliable in the month of February when the ice is most stable. This river tract is considered as world's one of the most exciting and adventurous route. On 17th of January 2015, it was stopped for tourist and the local travellers as soil erosion took place on the Phutkal river, the tributary of the river, somewhere between Shaday Sumdo and Shun leading to formation of huge lake which spread upto 15kms. Finally, on 16th of March, 2015 the blockaded river was opened to allow the river to flow again.

² In early days, Kargil as a whole was known by the name of Purig. There are different interpretations by different writer with regard to the application of the name. A.H Frencke maintained that it is the extorted form of original word Burig, the brave stock.² Another renowned historian Hasmatullah Khan in his treatise writes that it was derived from two root words pot and rigs, means Tibetan stocks and the general prospective is that the word Purig in local language means tube and rightly it signifies its tubular valley structures from all four directions. Now, the whole region it popularly known by the name of Kargil, distorted form of Gar-rkhil means stay anywhere. Once it used to be a transit camp for the caravans from Khotan, Yarkand, Leh, Skardu, Zaskar & Kashmir and vise-versa. With the passage of time due to its strategic location this place gained importance and popularity. The same placed is now the headquarter of one of the district of Ladakh that is Kargil, situated at latitude of 34°-35° north and longitude of 76°-78° east in the foothills of the greater Himalayas at a equidistance of 200 plus km from Srinagar, Leh and Zaskar. It comprises of 9 blocks and 125 villages. There are four rivers flowing through the district i.e Indus, Suru, Wakha, Shungo rivers to Pakistan.

II. CULTURAL ASPECT

A. *Social Hierarchy:*

Kargil is distinct from Leh on account of developed distinct cultural nodes, visible in the stratification of society on the basis of birth and occupation; both challenged by expanding education culture in the district. Change is inevitable, nevertheless education has not only removed backwardness and disease but also has led emancipation and freedom of thought. As such people in Kargil are not sticking to the earlier four-fold stratification of the society- like the one of Vedic era, even if that still exists in the region. As per that stratification here we find; Chho-Wazir, Mala-Lama, Sagyadpa and Mon-Garba that demarcated the people from each other, wherein:

Chho-Wazir were the ruling class of the society considered as socially elevated group. Their job was to defend their territory and provide security to their subjects. Kacho, the descendent of this ruling class, were entrusted with the duties of Zildars by Dogra rulers and after 1950 are given the duties of Nambardar of the concerned villages and still found in villages like Chiktan, Pashkum, Soth, Wakha and Mulbekh. Even if their social status is comparatively not so respectable as that of past, yet they prefix the term 'Kacho' to their names and often 'Wazir' is suffixed.

Mala-Lama belonged the priestly class responsible for performing religious duties like in marriages, birth ceremonies, death ceremonies, etc. They still retain their social status. Shiekhs, Mulanas and Aghas are the predominant components of this class today, acting as advisors or as Qazis solving disputes among the masses on the basis of Shari'a. Presently they even shifted to politics and thus mixing their religious role with governance on account of the support they generate from their followers.³

Sagyadpa were the agriculturalist, artisans and traders, like shopkeeper, iron smith, carpenter, cobbler, weaver, mason, etc. They have elevated their socio-economic condition and are seen almost in every government department holding key posts by dint of their education and merit.

Mon-Garba belonged to a class of musician and blacksmith working as drummers and blacksmiths. They were considered as inferior class and were treated with little respect, but not as that of ancient Hindu society, where Shudras required to serve the upper three classes and were ill treated as well. Here, Mon group used to sing in the Darbars, marriage occasions and other ritualistic occasions, as well as at the same time of polo games and used their profession for their livelihood. With the advent of Islam, they changed their life style shifted, their occupation to agriculture and other common means of livelihood. Apart from that concept of social equality and right to education also allowed them to change to seek jobs in government.

The class system was in fact not as rigid as that of Indian Verna system, social mobility was seen especially with advent of Islam, in certain cases one can see that a syed (priest) can be a labour, carpenter, contractor, shop keeper but vice-versa couldn't happen as labourer etc. was

not allowed to become a priest.⁴

Apart from that the society is divided on the basis of their religious faith; following Islam by the predominant group and Buddhism by others.

B. *Religion:*

In the 14th-15th century different religious scholars of Central Asia like Syed Ali Hamdani, Syed Mohd Norbakshah and Mir Shamsuddin Iraqi visited Kashmir for propagation of Islam. During their stay in Kashmir they converted large number of people to Islam. In Kargil it was first propagated and promulgated in Suru-Kartse by Chos Bom lday and rGyalbom lday who had embraced Islam during temporary stay in Kashmir in 1373 and brought some Muslim Ulemas to

³ We have good number of examples to substantiate the fact like Hujatul-Islam-wal muslimmen Shiekh Mohd Hussain Raisi, Hujatul-Islam-wal muslimmen Aga Syed Mujtaba concillor LAHDC, former MP Ladakh Syed Muhta Mehdi, Aga, Syed Baqir Rizvi(MLA) 2014 and many others.

⁴ Apart from this, servant class was another component which was in existence in past as can be discerned from the words Tson, Tsonmo etc in Purgi language. By giving reference of a rock inscription near Hanu village, district Leh, Frencke writes that a rock inscription is still shown as the edict of the king who released the Dards from forced labour. Moreover, a story of Hanu Dars runs as follows: "the Tibetan king, who considered the people of Hanu their subjects, ordered them to join the rest of the population in doing forced labour, the king was opposed by the old Dard, who told him that the Dards considered it beneath their dignity to be the slave of a king. But all means failed to make him do any work and at last he was condemned to be immured. When the wall reached up to his neck he was asked once more if he was ready to work, but still he refused, the wall was closed." Frencke writes. It is evident from the fact that forced labour was a part of earlier social set up.

this region and provided them permanent settlement at Mulbekh and constructed mosque there which was known by the name of Khachy Masjid⁵. Later on, Syed Nurbaksh on his way back to Baltistan proselytized the bulk of population of Kargil into Islam which subsequently came to be known as Norbaksh sect and constructed mosques as well.⁶

When Mir Shams ud Din Iraqi initiated his missionary programme to Kargil, Habib Chho the ruler of the region showed great respect to him. He succeeded in propagating of his thought and succeeded in converting Norbakhshia and Buddhist into Shia order of Islam on account of it Shiasm flourished in this region as in the rule of Konga Namgyal, in first half of 15th century, converted his son Thi Namgyal into Islam who invited Syed Mir Hashim from Srinagar for the religious propagation. Where after, it is believed Shiasm flourished in a very short period that predominate in the region. Shiekhs and Aagas spreading the message of Islam has given birth to Islamic calligraphy, Persian art, Arabic along with Persian language, domes, minarets and arches, the remarkable characteristic of Islamic art, Persian type of buildings in the form of mosques and Imam Bargahs and tombs that dot almost every nook and corner of the district presenting thus dominance of Islamic faith there. People throng these daily and on ritualistic occasions proclaiming their adherence to their faith, almost without change.

Before Islam, Buddhist faith prevailed in the region which is still practised by sizeable numbers in various pockets of the district. Even if there are divergent views on its inception in Ladakh but the fact remains that its tantric form is present in the region where Lamas and Chomos dominate the social order among the Buddhists of Ladakh. The custom of dedicating at least one boy and one girl of the family to the monasteries to lead the life of celibacy existed for centuries altogether. The men so dedicated become the Lamas and the women become Chomos. Every village of any importance has its monastery (Gompa) which stands on the highest available site and at some distance from the village. There are separate Gompas for the Chomos. The Lamas and Chomos reside in those Gompas which contain the usual appendages of Buddhist worship. Besides, there are found large number of sculptures of Buddha and Bodhisattvas carved at various sites and worshipped, as other monastic establishments like that of Kanika stupa at Zankar, statues of Bodhisattvas at Mulbekh, Tumail, Karchy and Drass. So far as the art and architecture is concerned, there is a long tradition of politico-cultural relation of Ladakh with the rest of neighboring states like that of Kashmir, Tibet and Baltistan and trading relations with Yarkand, Khotan, and Kashgar. Due to these relations art and architecture of the region was highly influenced. Kashmiri, Tibetan and Gandharan art is generally found in Buddhist monasteries (Gonpa) and Stupas (chorten) along with fresco paintings on the walls of monasteries, depicting Jataka stories of Buddha. Besides, in the monasteries bronze, copper and gold statues of Buddha and Bodhisattvas are found in good number as at Fotang at Bodkharbu and Wakha, the Karcha monastery at Zanskar, Mulbek monastery at Mulbekh and chorten (stupa) and many others. Rock carved sculptures of Matireya (future Buddha) of 6th -7th century CE are found in all the four directions of the region at Mulbek, Karchay, Tumail and Drass. Among these, the Sculpture at Mulbekh with height of 41m is the tallest ranked first in terms of height followed by at Karchy. Moreover, number of stupas of Kanika at Sani, Zanskar add grandeur to the Buddhist thought in the district.

Earlier to Buddhism there was prevalent Bon religious faith. A number of Bon religious remnants all over Ladakh, like Youn-drung gonpa⁷ or the monastery of mystic cross, Alters of Bon at several places, Bon-yul⁸ and many superstitious rituals and customs associated with the faith exist in the region. It is regarded that this faith spread from Tibet before the Buddhist faith became popular. They were called Pon chos or Bon chos or "the mystic cross", Frencke call them Ling chos. Its followers, called themselves Tirthakars, were atheistic in their principle, and believed in water spirit and were superstitious which is still traced in the existing society. In spite of pluralism in the belief system people of all walk used to, just a few years back, intermix in the social and religious ceremonies and entertain themselves by different means like singing of folk songs, dancing and drinking, etc. proclaiming hardly any difference between Buddhist and Muslim. Their custom and traditions were almost same. Both the communities used to have matrimonial relations that are now no more practised. Like it polyandry, one time common among Buddhist, has been abandoned, where in each family, the wife of

⁵ Usually, Kashmiris are known locally the name of Khachy. But, here it indicates the Sunni sect of Islam.

⁶ But it appeared paradoxical to find Shia Muslim almost outnumbering the Sunni sect, in spite of historical fact that it was the Sunni form Islam that was first introduced in this region, but it appeared paradoxical to find Shia Muslim almost outnumbering the Sunni form Islam that was first introduced in this region. A possible explanation is that in the past the ruling class of Skardu, Kharmang, Chelas, Purig etc, had Persian origin and Persia being the cradle of Shia sect of Islam, it was but natural that the country should in long run be dominated by the believers favoured by the rulers.

⁷ Presently, Lamayuru Gonpa at Lamayuru village on the way to Leh.

⁸ Bon yul means the village of Bon follower. Presently the same is name of a mohalla in village Shakar block Chiktan of Kargil district. It signifies the presence of bon follower in the region before Buddhism and Islam.

the eldest brother was shared by other brother as a common property. It was regarded as a principle to check the increase of the population as well as not to divide the insufficient agricultural land for its produce was not sufficient for its inhabitants. Now, it prevails only in minor pockets.

Dressing pattern seems to be influenced by religious thoughts at times, from the past as Buddhist and Muslim communities' in daily routine life in general and social or religious ceremonies in particular showed differences. The general pattern showed Goncha(long cloak), Tipee(head gear), Papu(shoes), Ltsakpa(Hairy back cover made of animal skin) in common use with bits of regional variations. The Goncha used to be White in color. A person with merron (dark red) colored seems to have been a respectable person in the society. Shoes were made up of cattle leather known as Papu, the superior one and the inferior one is known by the name of Kradpa.

Most of the time locally weaved woollen Goncha, piece of woollen laces, Skeraks over the Goncha and trousers, Sngamia or Dhorma of the same cloth formed the common dress. At times a piece of woollen cloth called Fingma or Fingtoh used around the legs to avoid the severe cold. Cap, Tipee was also used, knitted from the wool. Later on, clothes from other parts of country began to flourish in this region. Another interesting tradition we had in the very recent past was that unmarried girls used to wear white trouser indicating her virginity and her non responsibility of household activities. But, today one never finds such tradition. Although, the tradition of wearing Goncha, by a married lady in day to day life still continues.

In early 20th century the foreign traders like Yarkandis, Khotanis etc. through the historic Silk Route approached Kargil, which at that time became a transit camp for the caravans. The traders came via Karakoram pass to Leh from there to Kargil and then to Skardu and Kashmir. They brought new stuffs with them in this region like clothes of cotton and silk, rice and other basic amenities. The presence of large number of mercantile items and other artefacts of historic importance especially of Central Asia and British at Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum Kargil shows the economic awakening of the region in modern sense. The presence of high standard luxury items like opium, Gillette blade and branded soaps hints the long inland trade as well as their usage.

Customary laws are being followed by the people because of strong belief in Shia faith. Some of them were abandoned whereas some of them still continue. The criminal and civil disputes were settled according to traditional laws. It is said that if these laws couldn't solve the dispute the ruler of the region assembled the member of the village and unanimously found some solution to the pended case and the same solution used to become the customary law thereafter and in order to record the law, sometime the same were inscribed on the nearby rocks. If any time any case had to be solved then the reference of the said rock engraving was usually given. Evidence of the rock inscription have been found on the rock at Pashkum, known popularly by the name of Pashkum Brakbo rGya. The framed customary law couldn't be abolished neither by people of the region nor by any other one even ruler himself.⁹

Marriages were normally patriloc¹⁰ and matriloc¹¹. In both forms, the person who left parents house lost his /her right of the property of the parents where polyandry was not practiced property of the father after his death passed on to his elder son and the younger ones were given its share alone polyandry was practised among Buddhist. In case of having no offspring in the form of boy property went to daughter and the property right to daughter was limited.¹² They had the right only over their Stridana¹³. In case of no male heirs, female heir was given the property right. The same trend continues even today.

III. CONCLUSION

By analysing various material and cultural aspects of the past, one comes to the conclusion that Kargil being the part of historic Silk Route emerged as transit place for the caravans paved the way for exchange of ideas leading to transform the society in addition modern education brought in change that has led in the removal of earlier belief in the four-fold social stratification. Religious aspect of the region influenced the way of living as well as deep impact on the art and architecture of the region. Buddhism brought with it, Kashmiri, Tibato and Gandhara art, while Islam brought Persian, Indo-Islamic

⁹ Hasmatullah, Qadeem Ladakh,

¹⁰ In this kind of marriage the wife goes to live in the home of his husband.

¹¹ In this type of marriage the husband goes to live in the home of his wife.

¹² See Qadeem Ladakh, chapter Sadi biya for more detail study.

¹³ Property given to daughter at the time of marriage in the form of jewellerys, clothes, utensils etc.

Art. Today, one or other form of cultural modification and imitation is added. These are partly due to the cultural interactions with the other neighbouring regions and partly by the so-called modernization. Ladakh Festival is an attempt to showcase the rich cultural values of this hilly region. The rich cultural distinctiveness of the region merely confined to festivals only while day to day life is totally influenced by the exogenous culture.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alexander Cunningham, Ladakh: Its Physical, Statistical and Historical, Gulshan Publication, Srinagar, 1997.
- [2] Abdul Gani Shiekh, Reflection on Ladakh, Tibet and central Asia, Yasmin House, Leh Ladakh, 2010.
- [3] A.H. Frencke, History of Ladakh, Gulshan Publication, Srinagar, 2008.
- [4] A.H. Frencke, The Mysterious Land, New Delhi, 1978.
- [5] Amar Singh Chohan, Historical Study of Society & Culture in Dardistan and Ladakh, Atlantic publishers, New Delhi, 1983.
- [6] E.F. Knight, Where Three Empires Meet, Delhi, 1896.
- [7] Fraderick Drew, The Northern Barriers of India, Edward Stanford, 1877.
- [8] Fida Muhammad Khan Hassnian, Historic Kashmir, Srinagar, 2002.
- [9] Fida Muhammad Khan Hassnian, Ladakh the Moonland, Srinagar, 2012.
- [10] Hashmatulla Khan, Mukhtasar Tarikh-i-Jammu wa Kashmir, JK Publication, Jammu, 1992.
- [11] Jinha, Prem Singh Ladakh Himalaya; Past and Present, Ladakh, 2006.
- [12] Jinha, Prem Singh, The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh Himalaya, Kalpaz Publications, New Delhi, 2009
- [13] Janet Rizvi, Ladakh; Crossroads of High Asia, Oxford University Press, 1983.
- [14] Kacho Sikendar Khan Sikendar, Qadeem Ladakh, Aggarwal Press, New Delhi, 1983
- [15] Nawang Tsering Shakspo. A Cultural History of Ladakh, Ladakh, 2012.
- [16] Sanyukta Koshal, Ploughshares of Gods Ladakh; Land, Agriculture And Folk Traditions, Vol.I, Om Publication, New Delhi, 2001.
- [17] S.L. Shelli, Kashmir: History and Archaeology Through the Ages, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi 1993.
- [18] William Moor Croft and George Trebeck, Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and The Punjab, in Ladakh and Bokhara, Edited by H.H. Wilson. Vols 2, London, 1837