CHAPTER V

THE CLOTHING, ORNAMENTS AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF THE LADAKHIS

Ladakh is “for the most part a desert of bare crags and granite dust, with vast arid tablelands of high elevation, a land where there are no forests or pastures”. Ladakh has often been termed as the roof of the world, where people live at an elevation of 12,000 to 16,000 feet above sea level. These areas are among the loftiest inhabited areas of the world.

Besides its popular name ‘Ladakh’, the land is also known as ‘Maryul’—the red land, ‘Kha Chen Pa’ or snow land. The well-known Chinese traveller Fa-Hian (400 A.D.) called it ‘Kie Chha’ whereas the other equally well-known Chinese traveller, Huang Tsang (640 A.D.) called it ‘Mao-Lo-Pbo.’

Lying between 32.15 to 36 Latitude and 75.15 to 80.15 Longitude. Ladakh is bounded in the north and east by China, in the north-west by Gilgit and Skardu; Baramulla, Srinagar, Anantnag, and Doda Districts lie in its west, while the Punjab and Himachal Pradesh touch its southern borders.

History

Ladakh’s earliest inhabitants were the nomads who grazed their yaks on the high, windswept pastures. The first settlements along the upper Indus were established by Mons, the Buddhist pilgrims on their way from India to Mt. Kailash in Tibet. The Dards who today live downstream of Khalsi, are the last peoples who followed the Mons. In the 9th century Ladakh’s influence extended beyond the Indus Valley and during this time many forts and palaces were constructed. In the late 14th
century a Tibetan pilgrim, Tsongkhapa, introduced to Ladakh a Buddhist order headed by the first Dalai Lama. The new order, known as Gelugpa, flourished and led to the founding of gompas at Tikse, Likir and Spituk. In the ensuing year, Balti-Kashmiri armies launched various attacks against Ladakh which in the 16th century fell subject to the rule of Ali Mir of Baltistan. But its fortunes were revived under the rule of Singe Namgyal (1570-1642) who, in addition to territorial gains, established Leh as his capital and constructed a palace there. Soon Ladakhi forces were called on to face a combined Mongol-Tibetan army and help was sought from the Kashmir governor. After the conflict with Tibetan forces, trade relations resumed and Leh was able to re-establish its influence over Zanskar and further south to Lahaul and Spiti. Ladakh’s fortunes changed again in the 1830s when the Dogra army from Jammu invaded Ladakh and exiled the King to Stok. The Dogras were led by the general Zorawar Singh, who was appointed by the first maharaja of Kashmir, Gulab Singh.

Ladakh became an integral part of the maharaja’s vast state in 1846 and remained under the control of Jammu&Kashmir after independence until some administrative autonomy was granted in 1995.

People

The demographic profile of the Ladakh region “comprises a multiplicity of races, faiths and cultures, a polyglot population having a distinctive identity, but in combination with others forming a symphony of indescribable charm and melody.”

The people of Ladakh are a mixture of various human races. The present day Ladakhis claim that they are the descendants of a blended race of Mons of north India, the Dards of Baltistan and the Mongols of Central Asia.
The demographic profile of Ladakh which emerged from intermingling of all these heterogeneous elements can thus be classified under some broad divisions.

(a) Botos

In a broad categorisation, most sections of Botos belong to the Mongoloid race, though, an overwhelming majority of them are Buddhists. Some of them are converted Shias and Christians who originally professed Buddhism. The Shias and Christians, however, continue to share some of the customs and practices of their Buddhist forefathers. Wilhelm Hedge, the first Christian missionary described their “slit-eyes, protruding cheekbones, smooth black hair and brown skin” as typical Mongolian features.

The Botos comprise seven tribes though ethnically they belong to the same stock. All these tribes speak the same language commonly known as Ladakhi though Buddhist prefers to call it Bodhi. Local variations in some words and pronunciation are, however, there. The Botos of central Leh are comparatively progressive, vocal and more politically conscious than other groups and form the core of the Buddhist population. The bulk of the educated class belongs to this group. A brief description of the seven Boto groups is given below:7

(i) Changpas

The Tibetan nomads known as Changpas inhabit the extensive Changtang plateau, part of which lies within the Tibetan territory and part within the Kashmir State. It is on this plateau that the boundaries of Kashmir and Tibet meet and it is on this account that this region commands vital strategic importance. Its altitude is above 13,000 ft and forbids the growth of any tree or vegetation except grass. On the vast grassy expanse of the plateau, the Changpas rear flocks of sheep and goat
and herds of yak which are guarded by sturdy mastiffs. The goat, native to this area, bears the famous Pashmina wool which is its major economic asset. The people live in tents diligently occupied in milking their flock, turning the milk into butter, making ropes and mats of yak and goat hair or telling their beads. They live a nomadic life, moving from pasture to pasture according to a fixed schedule always remaining exposed to the scorching heat of the cloudless summer day and the bitter cold of winter, their tents being the only shelter from the inclemencies of weather.8

(ii) Rongpas

These people inhabit the area in the east of Leh along the Indus river and are comparatively less backward than the Changpas. The low altitude of their habitat is conducive to agricultural activity. By profession the Rongpas are cattle breeders.9

(iii) Stodpas

The people belonging to this ethnic group inhabit the area around Leh. Their main occupation is agriculture. They grow wheat, peas and vegetables. Besides the predominant Buddhist element of the Stodpa population, this ethnic group comprises a few thousand Shias and Christians who originally professed Buddhist faith, as mentioned above.

(iv) Shammas

These people are of the same ethnic stock as the Stodpas. Agricultural activities and growing apricots are their main source of sustenance. Some of the Shammas live in higher villages namely Kanji, Lingshet and Fotoksa, rear cattle and grow barley in good weather.

(v) Nubrapas

These people inhabit the well-known Nubra valley in the north of Leh bordering China and Tibet on the north-east and Pakistan occupied Kashmir in the north-west. The famous Khardong pass over which runs
the highest road in the world, separates the valley from Leh. The Nubrapas are predominantly Buddhists and engaged in agriculture.

**(vi) Mons**

Mons emigrated from the areas around Kullu, profess Buddhism but occupy a lower status in the class structure of the Ladakhi Boto society and are found all over Ladakh. They are musicians and drummers by profession.

**(vii) Zanskarpas**

The Zanskarpas are primarily Buddhist except for a few hundred Muslim ‘Argon’ at Padam, the headquarters of Zanskar.

**(b) Dards**

The Dards who are outside the Boto stock trace their descent to the Dards of Chilas in Gilgit whose ancestors emigrated to Ladakh centuries ago under pressure of persecution in their original home. The Dards are divided into two distinct entitles.

**(i) Brokpas**

The Brokpas are a proud and sturdy people who to this day retain their Aryan features even after their settlement in Ladakh. They trace their descent to the Dards of Chilas in Gilgit and through the centuries they have preserved some of the unusual customs their ancestors had brought with them. They profess the Sunni faith and in religious practices maintain their distinctiveness from other Muslim sects found in the region. They have remained endogamous and their Aryan features distinguish them clearly from their Balti neighbours.

**(ii) Drokpas**

This distinct ethnic group of the Buddhist community comprises the Drokpas of Da-Hanu and Darchiks and Garkan villages lying in the northwest of Leh district. Their, forefathers, anxious to preserve their
cultural identity, migrated in times long past to these parts when circumstances in their home in Dardistan made it impossible for them to stick to their native land and retain their Buddhist faith. Although professing the same faith and governed by the same social system as the Buddhist community in the east, they have retained some of their original customs and are easily distinguishable from the other groups by their Aryan looks and certain striking features of their costume as are the Brokpas.

(c) Baltis

The Baltis belong to the racial type which is the product of the admixture of Dard and Mongolian blood. They live in Baltistan and in the district of Kargil and profess the Shia sect of Islam.

(d) Purigpas

The main source of sustenance of these people is agriculture and their rate of literacy is very low. Their dialect is a mixture of Bodhi and Balti and they live in mud houses and wear home-spun raw wool dress.

Religion

The people of Ladakh region profess three religions namely Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. The Buddhists and Muslims are almost in equal numbers—the Leh district being predominantly Buddhist and the Kargil district predominantly Shia Muslims. The third constituent of the population i.e. the Christians are only about in number 150 are highly educated usually and thus have a higher social standing.
Clothing

The clothing of Ladakhi people is peculiar and picturesque. These to an extent seem to have been influenced by primitive belief in the worship of snake, sun, moon and other objects believed to have magical powers of warding off evil spirits.\textsuperscript{11}

As mentioned before, there are various groups and sub-groups among the Ladakhi people, thus their clothing and ornaments are also different in patterns and designs. Since the Boto comprise the largest group, a study of Ladakhi clothing and ornaments is derived from these people.

Due to the severe climate of the region, the clothes are mainly worn, to protect the body from heat and cold. Thus the choice of material seems to have been designed to meet the requirements of extreme climate while retaining the specific societal requirements. Earlier the Ladakhi people made their clothes themselves by using wool available locally especially sheep wool, as it is thick and warm, and eminently suited for the cold climate.\textsuperscript{12} Usually both men and women wear a headgear, a robe, a girdle, a pair of trouser, and a pair of woollen shoes. However, the women also strap a furry goatskin on their backs.

A simple headgear called \textit{Gonda}, is a locally fabricated high hat. It is made of wool, while the costlier Gondas are in silk and embroidered with dragons or floral designs. Both Buddhist men and women, but among the Muslims, only the women, wear the Gonda. Men usually wear a brown Gonda, while the women wear blue. (Figure 5.1, p. 190)
Figure 5.1 The Gondas of both Ladakhi men and women.

For special occasions, a great majority of women delight in wearing a special form of headgear called Perak. This headgear is considered the most attractive and expensive item of a woman’s outfit, which has over the years become a status symbol and an indicator of a family’s prosperity and social standing. A Perak comprises a long strip of leather running down the back of a woman’s neck to a pointed end above the waist. The front side starting from just above the bridge of the nose, is also pointed as the strip of leather is meant to represent and look like an infuriated cobra about to strike. The front of this unique headgear is usually ornamented with fine precious stones or gold. The precious Peraks have a cornelian studded on the crown of the head and the tail hanging down the back is often sewn with amulets of silver and gold, the rest of it being studded with turquoises. (Figures 5.2 to 5.4, p. 191-192)
Figure 5.2 The Perak which is ornamented with fine precious gold on the front.

Figure 5.3 The fine precious gold.
Flanking the Perak on either side of the head are flaps of yak wool originally only intended to protect the ears from cold blasts but now forming an indispensable adjunct of conventional headgear. Originally there were no earflaps but as one of the Queens of Ladakh used to get earaches probably due to exposure to biting winter chill, the earflaps were added to the Perak. The ladies of the court had to fall in line with this new fashion which was eventually adopted by the entire womenfolk. (Figures 5.5 to 5.6, p. 193)
Figure 5.5 The earflaps.

Figure 5.6 The earflaps are worn on the head before wearing Perak.
The Perak seems to be the most expensive and attractive object of the female costume. These days most of the Peraks are heirloom as the mother hands over her Perak to the eldest daughter as a wedding gift.

The sable used earlier for the earflaps instead of lamb skin had to be discontinued due to its non-availability as it came from Yarkand which is now a part of China. The use of Perak is being gradually discontinued, as the materials needed for its preparation are not easily available. For this reason and for convenience, women usually wear the top hat instead of Perak.

Both men and women wear a robe called **Goncha**, is made of sheep wool. The Gonchas worn by men and women are identical. The only difference being that the females'robe is more ornate and has embroidered borders. (Figures 5.7 to 5.8, p. 194-195)

![Figure 5.7 The Goncha worn by men.](image)
Figure 5.8 The Goncha worn by women.

Usually men from the lower social strata are dressed in white Goncha while those from the upper strata wear a deep crimson one. This gown like outfit worn day and night comprises the national dress though the Indian mainland and European dresses are also being now patronized. However, for formal occasions, the Ladakhi elite may also use synthetic Goncha or those made of black velvet. (Figures 5.9 to 5.11, p. 195-196)

Figure 5.9 An old Ladakhi man with his crimson Goncha.
Figure 5.10 An old Ladakhi woman with her Goncha.

Figure 5.11 A young Ladakhi woman wearing synthetic Goncha.
Women have furry goatskins strapped to their backs. This article of clothing is called **Yogur**. It was originally intended to prevent soiling of their dresses while carrying back-loads. It has now become an integral part of the female dress. A back not covered with a goatskin is considered indecent if the woman is to appear in public. Today it can be seen that the synthetic Yogur is worn by young women once again. (Figures 5.12 to 5.13, p. 197)

**Figure 5.12** Women have furry goatskins strapped to their backs.

**Figure 5.13** The synthetic Yogur.
Both men and women also tie a cloth girdle called **Kerak**, of various colours around their robes to fasten them to the waist providing a smart look to the outfit. Today the young Ladakhi women can be seen wearing synthetic Kerak. (Figures 5.14 to 5.15, p. 199)

Earlier both men and women would keep in their waist-clothes or girdles a Chakmak (a leather case ornamented with brass, containing flint, steel, and tinder), and the men, would also, usually carry a knife or dagger in their girdles. The women would also carry a brass spoon, a plate, a convex brass mirror, and a case of coarse needles attached to their girdles. This is considered a vestigial survival from the time when they used to roam, as nomadic people and had to carry these items so as to be prepared to make their habitat wherever necessary.

The pair of trousers worn by both men and women is called **Chakstan**. It is a narrow trouser of sheep wool. In Kargil and Baltistan, these trousers are white in the case of virgins and black in the case of married women.

Today both men and women like to wear synthetic trousers, which can be readily procured from the city market. (Figure 5.16, p. 200)

The footgear is called **Pabu**. It is a multi-coloured boot, made of sheep wool, with soles of yak skin, which turn up all round and are sewn to the felt. The upper part of the felt boot is open in the front and is allowed to fall over. There is no difference between the men and the women's boots. (Figure 5.17, p. 200)
Figure 5.14 The cloth girdle.

Figure 5.15 The synthetic girdle.
Figure 5.16 The synthetic trousers.

Figure 5.17 The shoes of both Ladakhis.
Ornaments

The people of Ladakh are very fond of ornaments. These ornaments are treasured family possessions and are handed down through successive generations as heirlooms. Today these ornaments have become the most valuable property of families. The ornaments worn by women are fabulous. All classes of women wear, besides, a profusion of necklaces, made of cornelian, turquoise, or amber, massive ornaments of silver, gold, and brass, studded with turquoise. In the old times, even men, particularly in the countryside, wear some ornaments under their robes. The Buddhist males used to wear earrings, bangles, necklaces of coral encrusted with semi precious stones of various colours while the richer classes wore gold earrings. These days the people in the urban areas use less of ornaments while those in rural areas still wear ornaments, though sometimes they may be made of faux metals. The ornaments are produced by professional goldsmiths. There are some villages in the countryside which produce ornaments for commercial purposes. These are usually made of cheaper materials.

The women usually wear earrings, necklace, and neck-chain. The earrings are fashioned out of multiple strands of pearls, turquoise and garnets. Sometimes a gold chain is also looped over the ear. The necklace of the Ladakhi women has two designs: the first is called Gaycha and the second Storgus. The Gaycha is a strand of turquoise and garnets, with a fine precious gold pendant studded with turquoise suspended on the necklace, while the Storgus is made of multiple strands of pearls with a gold butterfly forming the centre. The women also wear silver chains which are of two types. The Sundi is a multiple strand of silver on which delicate designs are made. This ornament is usually made to hang on the left side of the chest of the wearer. The other type of silver ornament is
called a **Docha**, once again, composed of several strands of silver, worn hanging from the waist. (Figures 5.18 to 5.22, p. 202-204)

Figure 5.18 The multiple strands of pearl earrings.
Figure 5.19 The Gaycha.

Figure 5.20 The Storgus.
Figure 5.21 The Sundi.

Figure 5.22 The Docha.
The Ladakhis are extremely fond of music. The best example of Ladakh's composite culture is its music and dances. All social activities are accompanied by music, whether it is the sport of polo, archery, a religious ritual, or any other social event. Appropriate music sets the mood and the pace on all such occasions. However, a marked difference can be seen between religious and secular traditions of Ladakhi music. The music played in the monasteries (Figure 5.23, p. 205) for worship or the lama dances follows essentially the Tibetan pattern, while the secular music seems to have been influenced from Central Asian.

In ancient times the Ladakhi people had only one musical instrument, **Kinchang**, the drum, which used to be played only for religious purposes such as the offering of food to the gods. But a number of instruments have been added over a period of time.

Figure 5.23 A monastery in Ladakh.
The musical instruments of the Ladakhis can be classified into three main groups: the wind instruments, the string instruments, and the percussion instruments. A few musical instruments are commonly used for both the religious and secular music but the function of a larger number of them is clearly assigned.

The wind instruments, the largest group, comprise shawm, flute, horn, and trumpet. The shawm is called Surna. It is a double reed instrument, originally made of wood, with seven finger holes on the front and one for the thumb on the backside, and about 21 inches in length. Surnas are used for both secular and religious purposes. But for monasteries the instrument is made elaborate by encrustation gold and brass on the body. (Figures 5.24 to 5.25, p. 207)

The instrument can be divided into three components: the mouthpiece called Puri, made of wood or brass, 3.5 inches in length, with a double reed called Pipi, which is made of willow wood, and is one inch in length. The body made of apricot wood is 12 inches in length. The bell called Tso, made of brass or copper, is 5 inches in diameter, and 7 inches in length.

The musician develops a method of continuous playing by inhaling through the nose and storing the breath in the cheeks while at the same time expelling the air through the instrument with the mouth. The result is a long, unbroken melody while playing. (Figure 5.26, p. 208)
Figure 5.24 Sumas.

Figure 5.25 Sumas used in monasteries.
There is another wind instrument called the \textit{Stagling}. It is a type of a reed flute, about 12 inches in length. It is made of apricot wood, with a mouthpiece but is composed of two pipes joined together. Each pipe has seven finger holes on the front and one on the backside. The instrument is used in secular music to play the melody of the songs. (Figure 5.27, p. 208)
The horn is called **Ragtum**, and it seems to be a very striking instrument. It is a long horn resembling a telescope which “groans” deeply when played. This instrument is used only in monasteries. It can be sometimes 10 feet or more in length, with a 10 inch diameter of the bell. The instrument has two parts and the upper part can slide down into the lower part when it is unplayed. The instrument is made of copper and sometimes decorated with the painting of a dragon. (Figure 5.28, p. 209)

![Figure 5.28 The Ragtum in a monastery.](image-url)
A trumpet is called **Kangling**. It is made of copper, with 15 inches in length, and a 1.5 inch diameter of the bell. Kangling is used in ceremonial and religious functions in the same way as the fanfare of western music. (Figures 5.29 to 5.30, p. 210)

**Figure 5.29** The Kangling.

**Figure 5.30** A lama playing Kangling.
The Ladakhis have only one string instrument, the lute. It is called Damyan. The words Dam means "sweet", and Yan means "voice", therefore, Damyan means "Sweet-voice". The Damyan is derived from a Tibetan musical instrument used by Tibetan opera singers, called Manepa.\textsuperscript{20} The Damyan is used only for secular music.

Damyan is made of willow wood, is 31 inches in length, and has six strings. It is a kind of a lute and played either with a plectrum or a bow. A plectrum, made of hard wood, is held with the thumb and index finger of the right hand, is moved back and forth across the strings to set them in motion. The instrument can be divided into three parts: the head, the neck, and the soundbox. Six strings of horsetail are attached to each tuning peck at the head, which are fastened along the neck and passed over the bridge, which is placed at approximately the middle of the front side of the sound box, through the bottom of the sound box. The soundbox is oval-shaped, about 6 inches in diameter, covered with goatskin.

The head of Damyan is either shaped as the head of a horse or as a parrot. The Ladakhi people believe that Tangthong Gyalpo, a Tibetan opera singer, was the first person to design the neck of Damyan into the head of the horse. Even though there is no story or legend about the fashioning of the neck of Damyan as a parrot, it is possible that the shape of the bird was chosen as it is considered auspicious and gifted with a clear voice.\textsuperscript{21}(Figures 5.31 to 5.32, p. 212)
The **Dramalu** is a small sandglass drum shaped with two equal heads, made of sheepskin, about 3.5 inches in diameter. The body is made of hard wood. The instrument is used to mark the pause between chants or services. (Figures 5.35 to 5.36, p. 215)
Figure 5.35 The Dramaru.

Figure 5.36 A lama playing Dramaru.
The kettledrum called **Daman**, is a powerful barrel shaped drum, and is found in various sizes. The heads of the larger drum are made of yak skin while goatskin is used for small sizes. The body of the drum is made of copper or brass. (Figure 5.37, p. 216)

Usually the musicians play two drums: male and female. The female drum is tuned into high pitch while the male drum is tuned into low pitch by putting some water through a small hole at the bottom of the drum (Figure 5.38, p. 217), and then closing the hole by using a piece of wood, so that the pitch of the sound would lower itself.

The musicians play the drum with two drumsticks, made of willow wood. Usually the male drum is put on the left side and female on the right side of the player. (Figure 5.39, p. 217)
Figure 5.38 A small hole at the bottom of the male drum.

Figure 5.39 A Ladakhi musician playing Damans.
Dab is a shallow frame drum with one head. It is believed that the instrument originated from Iran, where its prototype was called Dabri. But there is no evidence as to how and when the instrument traveled to Ladakh.

Every Ladakhi family has this instrument in their households including the people who live in the villages in remote mountainous region. In their villages the musicians sing and are accompanied by this instrument. (Figures 5.40, p. 218)

Figure 5.40 A Ladakhi musician playing Dab.

A pair of medium size cymbals is called Bookuchain. It is made of brass, about 12 inches in diameter. Each cymbal has a cord fastened through a hole in the top of the boss. The instruments are used only in religious purposes, and are found in varying sizes. These cymbals often signal the beginning and end of a chant or services. The small cymbal, with its high piercing tone, is used to call hungry ghosts particularly during funeral ceremonies. (Figures 5.41 to 5.42, p. 219)
Figure 5.41 The Bookuchain.

Figure 5.42 Lamas playing Bookuchain during festival.
Reference and Notes

Documents


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