CHAPTER-II

ETHNIC COMPOSITION
OF LADAKH
Geographical Location:

Ladakh a vast sandy desert and an important part of the Jammu and Kashmir, is situated in the north of India between 32° 15 to 36° latitude and 75° 15 to 80° 15 longitude. It is also known as Kha-chan or the land of snow. Some call it Maryul, the roof of the World and others name it as the land of Lamas and Gompas. It is one of the highest land masses in the Indian sub-continent, with an altitude ranging between 3,350 and 5,485 meters above Sea level. It is bounded in North and East by China and in the North West by Gilgit and Sakrdu, in the West by Srinagar, Baramulla and Doda, while Punjab and Himachal Pradesh touch its Southern borders. It has an area of 97,872 square Kilometers (including 37,555 Sq. Kilometers ceased by China) forming 70 percent of the area of Jammu and Kashmir. It is cradled inside barren mountains of different hues and shades. According to 1981 census the area was sparsely populated by 1,35,000 inhabitants while as per the digest of statistics 1991-92 the population was 1,70,541. People live at an altitude of 12000 to 16000 feet above Sea level.

Ladakh was the largest district not only in Jammu and Kashmir but also in whole of the India till 1979, when state Government raised the number of Tehsils and districts throughout the state. Ladakh was also divided into two districts viz Leh and Kargil.

District Leh is bounded in North and East by China and in the South and South-West by Punjab and Himachal Pradesh respectively. Tehsil Kargil lies to its West ad Gilgit district and Frontier Areas to its North West. Leh is the
headquarter of the district and is divided into four administrative divisions of Nubra, Nyoma, Khalsi and Leh proper. It has total 113 villages. The district is inhabited by 89,474 persons as per the digest of statistics\(^1\). The district is predominantly inhabited by Buddhists with a small percentage of Muslims.

District Kargil is bounded in North by Gilgit, South by Punjab and Himachal, South West by Srinagar, Baramulla and in East by Leh district\(^4\) Kargil is the headquarter of district and is divided into four administrative divisions of Drass, Sankoo, Zanaskar, and Kargil proper. The district constitutes of 129 inhabited and 2 un-inhabited villages, extended over a geographical area of 14,036 square kilometers, populated by 81,067 persons with a density of 6 per square kilometer\(^5\).
PEOPLE

Ladakh

Aryans

Arghuns

Mongoloids

Dards

Mons (Buddhist)

Muslim Dards

Buddhist Dards (Brokpas)

Sunni Dards

Shia Dards

Balti (Shia Muslims)

Champas (Buddhist)

Bhots

Red Sect

Yellow Sect
The people of Ladakh are a mixture of Mongolian and the Aryan races. The Aryans who originally settled in the country, were the early people from Kashmir, Himachal and the Dards of Gilgit. The Mongolian stock is traced to Tibet from which country Shepherds and nomads came to the Plains of Ladakh to graze their flocks*. The description of different ethnic groups is as under.

1. **BHOTS:**

Bhots are the descendants of Mongolian race who have come to Ladakh from Tibet. They are the followers of Buddhism. Their main concentration is in district Leh and few areas of Zanskar.

Their physical features resemble with the Turanian family of China*. The cheek-bones are high, from them downwards the face rapidly narrows, the chin is small and usually retreats. The most persistent peculiarity is that of eyes, of which the outer corne are drawn out and the upper eyelids are overhung by a fold of skin above*. The nose is broad and flat, and generally much turned up, with wide nostrils. The hair is black, coarse, thick and usually straight. The beard is very scant*.

In stature the Bhots are short: Cunningham gives nearly 5 feet 2 inches as the height of men, and 4 feet 9 inches as that of women. The investigator is also agreeing with the author. Both sexes are strong and broad made.

Bhots are very conscious regarding the preservation of their culture and identity. Particularly the patronage of Ladakh Buddhist Association has united them by propagating the preservation of their type, language, culture etc.
disclosed by their President Tsering Narboo Lampa. Their exogamous character has changed into strict endogamy which depicts the level of ethnic consciousness. They are speaking in terms of “We” and “They”.

2. BALTIS

Baltis are of Mongolian stock and have come to Ladakh from Baltistan. They came originally from the South-East and East, where now live the great masses of Tibetans, and in their migration the most westerly point they reached was Rondu. The wave of Islam coming from the west here met them, to cause the conversion from Buddhism. The Baltis, therefore, are of quite the same stock as the Bhots, who have remained Buddhists.®

Inshort Baltis migrated first time from Western Tibet during 10th Century, latter they came along with Mirza Haider Dughlat, Ali Mir and Queen Gyal Khatun, and settled down in different portions of Ladakh.

Their physical characteristics are same as those of Bhots but the nose has not so depressed form as of Bhots nor are Baltis so scantily bearded.

The Baltis are scattered in both the districts of Ladakh, but predominantly they inhabit the Kargil and Sankoo blocks. All Baltis of Ladakh belong to the Shia Sect of Islam. There is among them yet another Sect division. A number of Baltis call themselves “Nur Bakhsh” which name (evidently taken from the name of some spiritual leader) implies a slight distinction from the ordinary Shia, but in great matters of difference between Sunni and Shia, the Nur Bakhsh are with latter.
Like Bhots, Baltis also believe in the Preservation of their own culture and identity. The Aghas and the Sheikhs (religious heads) are the main persons among Baltis who propagate the preservation of separate identity. Baltis are in contact with Dards on the one hand and Buddhist Tibetan (Bhots) on the other hand. So nodoubt these ethnic groups are geographically mixed, but even if the same village is divided between them, the Baltis keep themselves socially distinct.

3. DARDS:-

This is third major ethnic group of Ladakhi Society. Ethnologically Dards are of the Indo-Aryan Stock. Herodotus was the first to write about Dards. A.H. Francke maintains that the country of Gold digging ants mentioned by Herodotus is the land of present Dards on Indus. The religion of ancient Dards is reported to be a form of Buddhism which was prevalent in Gilgit at that time. At present all Dards are Muslims but belonging to both sects Shia and Sunni. The exact date of conversion to Islam is not known. However, Hazrat Mir Ali Hamdani, a great muslim saint known as Amir Kabir or Shah-i-Hamdan, had come to Kashmir from Iran via Leh for propagation of Islam in 13th century A.D. It was in his time that conversion took place. The other view is that Islam was introduced in Ladakh by Muslim rulers of Kashmir during 14th Century A.D. Sultan Shihab-ud-Din (1350-1375) of Shah Min dynasty in Kashmir invaded Ladakh and Baltistan and annexed both these regions to his dominion. Later Zan-ul-Abidin of Kashmir attacked Ladakh on 1451 and 1470 respectively, with the result Ladakhies were made to follow Islam. It was strengthened in Ladakh by Mongols in 1532 under the command of Mirza Haider and lastly by Nathu Shah the commander of Sikh regiment who annexed Gilgit and Astor.
Dards as they are today called do not claim themselves so. This is the name given by foreigners to different types of people living in Dardistan. Dard is actually from "Dade" which means wild and independent. Perhaps these Dards were the late-comers in Ladakh, that is why we find them residing on the upper reaches as compared to other Ladakhis in areas like Karkit, Chanigund etc.

The studies conducted by F.M. Hussnain (1980) reveal that Dards of Ladakh are the survivors of Alexander's troops, who were Aryans. These troops, after Alexander's death in Babilonia, got scattered in all areas, also reached to Gilgit and then to Ladakh. However, there is no substantial evidence to support the claim. Drew Frederic maintains that whether we judge from language or from physiognomy the conclusion is inevitable that the Dards are an Aryan race.

Physically Dards are very strong, tall, handsome. Their eyes are either brown or hazel and their hair is usually black.

Dards are conscious regarding their identity and feel that they are discriminated by Baltis at every front. They practise endogamy but not strictly. They only inhabit the Drass block of district Kargil and a very few families are settled in Kargil proper

4. **Brokpas:**

Brokpas are Dards but they have resisted conversion to Islam and are the
followers of Buddhism. Some have termed them nature worshipers because they have great reverence for sun, the stars and other elements of nature. But others feel that they were animists because their earlier places of worship were established under cover of rock with lots of skull, horns and bones of animals. To the Brokpa people, the sun is warmth-giving, a symbol of prosperity, vegetation and health. It is radiant, victorious, and glorious. The Moon is blissful, Wisdom-giving and lovely.

Brokpas are only settled in four villages of Ladakh, namely Da, Hanu, Darsik and Garkone. Brokpas are superstitious and believe in charms, talismans, Yantras and amulets. In any area of Ladakh Brokpas are identified by the horn caps decorated with rows of needles, coins, buttons and flowers, kept on their heads. Women decorate their hair with plaits, pearls and beads.

They like to rear Goat and sheep but dislike Cows. Both Cows and fowl are offensive to their Gods and as such they do not take eggs or drink milk. Instead they are fond of chang and grape wine.

Brokpas of Ladakh have retained their cultural identity and managed to remain almost unchanged over the centuries. Despite the influences of various cultures they have preserved their pristine purity, their age long cultural traditions, customs, rituals, and religious practices. Nodoubt, they practise polyandry at present also but at the same time it is a strict endogamous group. Francke while discussing the peculiarities of the Brokpa character maintains that these people have not yet lost their language and have withstood the tide of Tibetan culture that has swept over them. About the Brokpas of Da, Hanu he is of the
opinion that these people have neither embraced Islam nor accepted the Tibetan Lamaism whole heartedly. While as the investigator found that Brokpas are loosing their culture slowly and are influenced by the Buddhism of Leh. The Ladakh Buddhist Association is working hard to enfold them to the Buddhism.

5. Champas:

The Champas inhabit the higher areas of Ladakh like Nubra, Rupshu and dominate the changtang region. They are of same stock of Bhots and Baltis i.e. the Tibetan. They are most hardly and cheerful set of people. They live a nomadic life. Their lives are spent in tents, they stay for a month or two at a time on one spot, to graze their flocks and herds, and then move with them to suitable pastures. But at present the Champas are no more nomads in true sense. Their nomadic life is slowly giving a way to sedentary mode of living. Though the religion of Champas and Bhots is same but they don’t intermarry. Moreover, the young men of Champas don’t become Lamas. The ethnic group have preserved their identity despite the influences from various groups. They have representation in Ladakh Buddhist Association.

6. Mons:

Mons are Ladakhie speaking Buddhists and occupy the lowest status in the social stratification. A.H. Francke says that Mons were the first settlers and missionaries of Buddhism in Ladakh. He puts their arrival at least as far back as before the 1st or 3rd century B.C. According to S S. Girgin and Prof F M. Hussnain, in Tibetan language dictionary, Mon means different races and tribes who lived in between Indian plains and Tibet (Nepal, Bhutan Assam.
and Kullo) and have been living on hunting since unknown times and have Aryan features. They are very definite in their opinion that these people are not from Kashmir.

There are different views about the original home of Mons. According to Molvi-Hashmat-ullah Khan “the Mons arrived from Karja, and set up their dwellings at Gya and were ruled by Gya-pa Chow, one of the members of their community. The famous mythical king Kesar of Ladakh also belonged to Mon community. S.H. Ribbach opines that homeland of Mons was north west of India where from they migrated to Ladakh. Francke maintains that Ladakh also known as Maryal is actually Monyal (Mon Country).

Mons are not living in a particular locality or region but are found in clusters of one or more families in different villages. They live in close proximity of other Ladakhies. They are the lowest in social hierarchy almost at Par with the Sudras of Indian Plains. In social gatherings where people sit in lines the Mons followed by Bedas (another tribe) sit at the last end. Inspite of their low status they are in great demand. No social or religious function is complete without their presence. All the functions are inaugurated by the music played by Mons. It has been the only source of income for them for centuries. A small percentage of them is engaged in jobs other than music. As they get little respect from the rest of population, with the result many Mons either have left their musical profession or they don’t want to remain in touch with their old profession.

The ethnic group in general is very poor, living in small dingy and unhygienic apartments with very bad living condition. They face discrimination in
society at every point as one finds them never appointed at good jobs. The ethnic group is very conscious regarding their state of affairs and have formed associations for their upliftment.

7. **Arghuns:**

Ladakh had been an important station on the silk route where merchants exchanged their commodities. There had for long been a commercial link between Kashmir and Leh, and families of Kashmiri merchants had settled there. There had been a hybrid class brought into being by the intermarriage of these Kashmiris with women of Ladakh, who had been ready to turn Muslim in order to marry. The families born of Bhot women, the fathers being merchants of different races, are called Arghuns.

They are found in Leh town and in a few villages close to it. There are total 300-350 families of Arghuns. They are well established and dominate the trade and business in district Leh. Because of close proximity and small in number, it is a well-knit community having close relations. They have formed an association of Arghuns who are representing the community. All ethnic groups have been declared schedule Tribes in 1989 by the Government except Arghuns and now they are fighting for the discriminative approach of the government and has formed this association as revealed by the president of association.

Besides these ethnic groups there are few families of Be-Das (Buddhist as well as Muslims) who are beggars and carpenters. Garas another group, who are blacksmiths, are also found in villages of Ladakh. A number of Kashmiris have also settled in Drass and Matayan areas of Kargil. A very few families of Christians and Sikhs are also found in Ladakh.
References:


4. District Census Hand book; District Kargil -1981 pp 8


8. Ibid -252

9. Ibid -252

10. Ibid -220 227


15. Ibid, pp. 24


18. Ibid pp 179


21. Ibid- pp 31


25. Ibid. pp.168


27. Ibid pp. 30


29. Drew Frederic - Op cit pp 255

30. Francke A.H Op cit, pp 20


32. Khan Molvi Hashmat-ullah Tereek-i-Ladakh pp 230
   New Delhi  pp. 12

34. Francke A.H. The Mysterious Land, opcit pp. 26

35. Chohan Amar Singh- Historical Study of Society and Culture in Dardistan
President of Ladakh Buddhist Association Tsering Narboo Lampa in conversation with the researcher.

Thupstan chhewang - Chief Executive Councilor, Ladakhi Autonomous Hill Development Council.
Mons-playing the music.

Cheerful Champa women
Learning the culture: Bhote Women Dancing at a Festival.

Mon women serving at a function.
The Mon carrying the Drums.
A Group of Baltis.

Old Bhout Women at Work.