

Opinion

Mores of Ladakh, Baltistan and Dardistan

S. Mukhtar

The northern region of Jammu and Kashmir is now sliced amongst India and Pakistan and China, with Baltistan, now falling to the west of Ladakh, lying partly in Pakistan and partly in China, and Dardistan lying to the north-west of Baltistan and now divided between Pakistan and India. The social values and mores prevalent in the region make us alive to the ways of living of the primitive communities existing therein.

Coming to Ladakhi Buddhist culture, the Buddhist females of Ladakh thoroughly practices the custom of marrying incoming outsiders. Many of them married the Turkish merchants coming from the direction of Yaqand (now in Chinese Turkistan or Sinkiang), and many more married the Kashmiri merchants settled in Ladakh. To facilitate such mono-androus marriage, such a female would readily be a convert to the religion of her husband.

Later, they indulged in the custom of entering into courtship with sepoy of the Dogra kings of Jammu, Gulab Singh, who in 1834 annexed Ladakh to his kingdom. Custom had it that the offsprings from these courtships were labelled *Ghulamzadas*, that is to say “born of slaves”, and that was because of the impression that those sepoy were slaves of the Dogra king. Custom had it again that these Ghulamzadas were provided their daily meals by the Dogra Government in return for their labour. However, in 1871 the Dogra king ordered their liberation.

Marriage

For centuries polyandry was in practice among the Buddhists in Ladakh, i.e. all the sons of a Ladakhi Buddhist family would share a common wife. A Ladakhi Buddhist girl would be married to the eldest son of a Buddhist family and she would be the common wife to that boy and all his brothers. Even she could have, and in many cases had, her additional husband(s) from outside the family. Such polyandry prevailed among the Champas of Rupshu (or Rukshu) in the southeastern end of Ladakh, and among the Buddhists of Dardistan and of Baltistan also.

Inheritance

Apart from this, the sons in the household would enjoy in common their family estate too. The sons, they would have had, because of polyandry, would be from a common mother but from several (even up to five) fathers, often from the same household. When the sons would receive the first child from their common wife, the grandfather(s) and grandmother – often not much beyond middle age though – would retire from active life. They would go, taking some little food and one of two head of cattle, into a small annexe of the house, and retain for themselves a small fraction of their land for this subsistence. The rest of the estate thenceforth belonged to the eldest son who was

the legal father of the new child. And that son, upon the death of his father(s) and mother, would inherit all the belongings.

Funeral Rites

The Buddhists of Ladakh burn their dead. But before cremation the descendants would, over many days (the higher the rank of the deceased the greater would be the number of days), go on treating their relatives and friends to sumptuous feasts round the corpse, with the corpse being kept in a sitting position.

The Buddhists of Dardistan also burn their dead; but they would stow their burnt bones into holes, usually dug out on cliffs, plugging the mouths of the holes with stones.

The Muslims of Astor (in Dardistan) also used to burn their dead. But since Nathu Shah, a Muslim and a Sayyid and a Sikh commander, reached Astor (probably in 1842), those Muslims learnt to bury their dead; yet they would, in order to save the undestroyed corpse from wild animals around, keep for some time a fire burning by (or around) the grave.

Practice of cow-hating

The Shins also observe some peculiar customs. The Shins constitute the highest of the four Muslim castes in the predominantly Muslim Dardistan. Some misled mullahs showed them a cow for a pig. Consequently, they would, unlike all other Muslims, abhor the cow, not drink its milk nor make and take any products therefrom, nor even burn cow-dung as fuel. In order to avoid the calf from touching their body, they would put the calf to the udder with, say, a forked stick. In spite of that all, they would keep some cattle for ploughing purposes, avoiding, as far as possible, all possible bodily contact with them. All these customs in respect of the cow were practised by all the Buddhists of Dardistan also. Similarly, the Shins of Dashkin, 13 miles south of Astor, would not eat fowls nor touch them for some ill-informed mullah had told them that the hen is the earthly version of the kite. For some similar inhibitions, these people would not cultivate tobacco and red pepper. The Molai and Shia sects of Muslims of Dardistan would drink wine; the Sunnis would not.

The Buddhists of Dardistan would purify themselves on feast-days, and whenever they thought purification was necessary, by a bath, not of water, but of 'holy' smoke coming from twigs of pencil-cedar burnt for the purpose. Here they were very much like the villagers of Garkon (in Ladakh) who claim to be the purest Aryans living and who would never take a bath.

Drinking Habits

From time immemorial the custom of heartily serving chang to every incomer has prevailed on the Ladakhis. Chang is the Ladakhis' light beer tasting like a "cross between home-brewed beer and farmhouse cider"; it is made without hops, though in the past it was sometimes made with a plant from Baltistan used instead. Ladakh has known the use and the making of hard liquors also, but their use was sometimes proscribed by law and sometimes restricted by custom.

The Ladakhis are excellent mountaineers. At the summit of every mountain pass they would build a cairn and crown it with horns of wild sheep and ibex and other animals all in a heap down the centre of which were planted some boughs to which was fastened a flag with a holy word or text imprinted on it.

Practice of Spreading of Earth

The customs accompanying the collecting and the spreading of earth in Zanskar, lying to the south west of Leh, the capital town of Ladakh, are unique indeed. Here, spring and summer and autumn together last little more than five months, and very severe winter takes on for the rest of the year. During summer and autumn the people collect and store considerable quantities of earth in their houses. As the people are busy at such work, chanters customarily celebrate hymns in appeal to gods to avoid too severe a wrath in the approaching winter. When spring advances and the very thick pall of snow begins to melt the people spread a layer of earth over so that it absorbs the sun's heat and thus helps in melting of the snow. Sometimes it snows again when a fresh layer of earth needs to be spread over, and that way there may have to be spread, three or four layers of earth, to help the snow finally melt away. And every spring, the disappearance of the snow is customarily celebrated by generous offerings to the deities, singing in choruses, and wild dances to the accompaniment of horrible music.

Lamaism

The Buddhists of Ladakh practised the convention of making one of the elder boys of every large family a lama. After receiving his primary education in any local lamasery, the boy would be sent to Lhasa for his advanced studies, where he would be finally ordained. The lama would go with his head shaven and sometimes hatted, and his body uncovered or clothed in a gown or choga dyed red or yellow – the two colours denoting two sets. The lamas live in lamaseries, along with the nuns, and are said to live a sexless life. Every vihara has two head lamas, the one the spiritual head, the other the temporal head known as Chagzot, with many more, sometimes with many more, sometimes hundreds, lamas under them.

A lama often carries a small prayer-cylinder. That is a cylinder, with a vertical axis, that can be rotated by a lever arrangement. On the inner side of the cylinder is pasted a sheet of paper with holy names written thereon. The lama, using the lever-arrangement, sometimes continuously, rotates the drum. The holy names rotate thereby, which to the lama is one of the ways of worship. Large prayer –cylinders for such worship by the Buddhists are provided at the entrance of every lamasery or on all sides of an annexed courtyard.

Inside every vihara is the image-room housing images of Buddha (*Sakya Thubba* he is called here) or of some Buddhist gods or of some apotheosized lamas, all in metal or gilt or gaudily painted clay. Customarily, the instruments of worship in the room are many – bells, lamps, sceptres, emblems, bags of grain, and bowls of butter, the last consumed by a constantly burning wick. Custom bars all women, even the attached nuns, from entering into the image-room. The lamas, by custom, receive, for sustaining themselves and hospitality to travellers, a good portion of every harvest of the peasantry.

The Buddhists of Dardistan would take their religion easy and not train up their young men to be lamas; so was true of the Champas also who, additionally, would not intermarry with the Ladakhis. The Champas are Buddhists and they lead a nomadic life on the upland valleys, sometimes concentrating mainly on Rupshu or Rukshu, with Karzok as its headquarters, where their number once was only 500 souls on 4000 sq. miles.

The Game of Polo

Polo has prevailed as a popular game in the region spread from Leh on the south-east to the Gilgit Valley on the north-east, in the Chitral Valley, in Dardistan, and, above all, in Baltistan. It has been the national game of Baltistan where rajas and wazirs (ministers) were thoroughly brought up through training to play the game.

By convention, music would accompany each game, and it would be wild with every rush; the band would strike up in sign of each victory; the goals would be changed at each games; and, no breathing-time would be allowed. The winners on horseback would victoriously march and collect in front of the musicians playing the local song, which says: See the conquering hero comes. Dismounting. They would wildly dance to music now almost horrible. The losers meanwhile would keep slunk off to a corner.

Dances

The convention of monastic dances has gone deep into reflexes of the Buddhists of Ladakh. These dances, with considerable myth and legend behind them, are done at several prominent viharas, according to the Tibetan calender. The most prominent of them is performed on the occasion of the Great Leh Festival (sle dus-mo che) falling on the 28th and 29th of the 12 Tibetan month.

The divinities shown in these dances are Shugdan, Dharmaraja (Dam-can Chos rgyal) and his wives, two fierce goddesses, besides an interesting group of gods, goddesses, Nagas, Yakshas, Maras, and Rakshasa of the Hindu mythology. Under the force of custom, no such dance is complete without Buddhist females playing some goddesses and hundreds of them more devotionally applauding the pageant.

Practice of Slavery

The convention in respect of slavery and slave trade, which for a long time prevailed in several divisions of Dardistan, were indeed unparalleled. The 'republics' of Darel, Tangir, Gor, Thalicha, Chilas, Koli, and Palus would keep captives of war as slaves but not deal in them. The rajas of Hunza, Yasin (Lshkoman or Chatakun included), Chitral and Mastuj, and the Mir (prince) of Badakhshan would openly deal in slaves. Their buyers were, generally, merchants from Badakhshan. These rajas made good money from sale of slaves, very usually captives of war but sometimes their defaulting subjects also; who hence passed their levies as exiles or slaves in Badakhshan or in Turkistan. And they used the money for running the affairs of their kingdoms.

Democratic Practices

The 'republics' of Dardistan, most probably having no written constitution though, had democratic conventions and customs. Each had a general assembly called Sigas which, when called together by beat of drum, was to be attended by all men but not women. If even a single man would object to a policy it would not be carried out and the assembly would adjourn. It would sit again after convincing the objector or modifying the proposals and seek a unanimous vote failing which it would adjourn again to meet only if the objections could be fully remedied.

The executive consisted of five or six *Joshteroes* (equivalent of Ministers) chosen and replaced by the assembly and they could enforce their decisions and policies only with the absolute consent of that body.

In a large republic, however, every village had its own Sigas and Johsteroes to settle its particular affairs. But the general policy of the 'republic' was formulated at a meeting of the Joshteroes of all villages and approved and adopted by the parliament of all the Sigases together. If all the Sigases could not agree on one policy, each village was free to pursue its own provided that such a course did not sever the bond of relationship among them.

Mores die hard; and it is particularly true of them in these areas where Time has moved but at a snail's pace and they live largely in primitive communes with their age-old habits and manners.

Courtesy:
The Kashmir Times (Jammu)
August 2, 1998