

Muslims of Leh and Ladakh: An Ethnographic Study

Ali Muhammad Rather*

*Ali Muhammad Rather is a research scholar in the Centre for Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar.

Ladakh is inhabited by a plurality of ethnic groups who have migrated to the region from the adjoining areas. The main population in Ladakh is of the Mongoloid stock, which originated from Tibet[1]. Then, there are Dards (or Brokpas) who are said to have come from Dardistan[2] (Gilgit region). Thirdly there are Mons, who are believed to have come from the Northern region of India (Himachal Pradesh)[3]. The Dards and Mons are believed to be Aryans.

The Mongoloid people who constitute the majority of the population in the region are predominantly Buddhists. They follow the Tibetan form of Buddhism or Lamaism. Prior to the coming of Buddhism they were believers of Bonism (bon-chos). Dards of Ladakh (Leh district) are also Buddhists practising some rituals of Bonism, as well. Muslims are found only in a few central places and in Nubra valley.

The first Buddhist noble who converted to Islam was Gyalpo Rinchan, in 1319 A.d.,[4] not in Ladakh but in Kashmir, where he was made the king after Shah Deva (1301-20 AD.) He accepted the faith through Syed Shaff-ud-Din alias Bulbul Shah (R.A.) and was renamed as Sader-u-din. This event laid the foundation of Islam in Kashmir. However, this event had no impact upon Ladakh for Sader-ud-Din had least connection with his home place, after he came to Kashmir.

Mir Syed Ali Hamdani, came to Kashmir in 1305 A.D. He is considered to be the real founder of Islam in Kashmir. It is also said that he passed through Ladakh, while he was on his way to Kashmir[5]. But whether he devoted himself to the job of spreading the faith in the Ladakh region is not yet confirmed by any source. Doubts are raised even about his visit to Ladakh. Even if he visited Ladakh, some persons might have accepted Islam as their faith, but it did not bring about any significant change in the overall belief pattern of the Ladakh Buddhists. It has been the peculiarity of Ladakh Buddhists not to accept a foreign faith, until it is officially imposed upon them. It was the case with Buddhism also. Buddhism was introduced there in 400 A.D. but it did not flourish there until King Shron Tsam Sgambo, in about 629 A.D., accepted it[6]. Even then it was not accepted in its chaste form, and it was largely practised in the form of Lamaism, as mentioned above.

The Historical Setting

In the history of Ladakh, Tongpa Ali is mentioned as the pseudo-Muslim name of a prince, who was the son of King Lde (Gros Mehog Idan 1440-47 A.D.). As assumed by Franckie, he was probably the son of a Muslim queen of King Lde, who, as per this assumption, was married to him after Sultan Zain ul Abidin's expedition to Ladakh[7]. Cunningham assumes the introduction of Islam to Baltistan during the reign of Sultan Sikander Shah (1380-1400 A.D.) of Kashmir[8].

However, it is an accepted fact that Islam in Baltistan was introduced by Mir Shams-ud-Din Iraqi in 1501 A.D[9]. So far as Purik (Kargil) is concerned, which has always been considered a part of Ladakh, Islam came there from Baltistan. It was in 1560 A.D. that princes of Kargil, Chakthan and Karse, accepted Islam during the reign of King Jamyang Namgail (1500-90 A.D.) and during that period, Islam became the state religion there[10]. During this period, Balti King Gazi Yabgo Sher Ali Khan attacked Ladakh; he defeated and imprisoned Jamyang Namgail, the then ruler of Ladakh. The Balti king, perhaps to attract Jamyang Namgail to Islam, gave his daughter Gyal Khatun in marriage to him[11]. Along with Gyal Khatun came a large number of her (Balti) servants[12]. They included musicians (referred to as Kharmons) and other professionals. They were made to settle in a village called Fiang, just 14 kilometers from the Leh town. This was, perhaps, the first Muslim settlement in Buddhist Ladakh.

During the Mongol invasion of Ladakh during the reign of King Deleg (1640-1680), the Mughals, upon his request, sent their army from Kashmir to defend the country from invaders. King Deleg was made to accept Islamic faith and his Islamic name was Akbar Muhammad Khan[13]. According to Franckie, Ladakhi chronicles do not support his view. However, Hashmat-ul-Lah Khan also mentions that the king was made to deliver 'Khutba' in the name of the Mughal King[14]. It was after this period that Kashmiri traders began to settle in Ladakh. And a mosque was erected at Leh to commemorate this royal conversion[15].

Hence, it can be asserted that Muslims in Ladakh (present Leh district) arrived firstly from Baltistan and secondly from Kashmir. In addition to it many families of Puriks (from Kargil) either came as traders, artisans etc. or as preachers and settled, there. Many mullahs (called Akoons) who presently live in Ladakh, claim to be originally from Kargil. Also there are many Muslims in Ladakh, who were originally Buddhist. We even find many Buddhist families in certain villages, who were originally Muslims from Baltistan and, due to one reason or another, have changed their faith.

In short, Muslims in Ladakh are mainly Baltis (from Baltistan), Puriks (from Kargil), Botas (from Ladakh itself) and Arguans (from Kashmir). In addition to it there are many Muslims, referred to as Bedas. Muslims do not inhabit the peripheral areas of the Leh district excepting Nurba, for peripheral villages of Nubra valley have been seized from POK in 1971 India-Pakistan war and these villages are having hundred percent Muslim population. The Muslims in Nubra are said to have settled there during the reign of Tashed bang-nam-gryal (Shebung Namgyal, 1560-1590 A.D.)[16]. The Muslim populated villages in addition to Nubra valley are found at Leh town, Sabu (6 kms from Leh), Chushoot (10 kms from Leh), Thiksay (10 kms from Leh), Shai (16 kms from Leh) and Fiang (15 kms from Leh). However, some Muslim families of Bedas were found in distant villages as well. They worked there as Gumpa or village musicians. Recently, Buddhist-Muslim conflict and subsequent social boycott compelled the Muslims to leave their residential places and migrate to Leh town. In addition to it we do find traces of Muslim inhabitation at some other distant villages such as Alchi, 78 kms from Leh, (site of ancient Buddhist monuments along the Indus). There is a Muslim graveyard and revenue record also shows the presence of Muslims there, prior to 1947. It is reported that some of them converted to the Buddhist faith and some were killed during communal riots and may be some others migrated to other villages of Ladakh. The total population of Muslims in Ladakh in 1981 was 15% of the total population of the district[17].

The Present Study

The present paper is based upon the socio-cultural study of village Fiang. This village, as mentioned above, is probably the first place in Buddhist Ladakh, where Muslims from Baltistan settled. The village comprises both Buddhists as well as Muslims and among Muslims we do find Shi'ite as well as Sunnite Muslims. The data for the study have been collected by employing a questionnaire, as also on the basis of participant observation of the Muslim population of village Fiang.

The population of the Muslim inhabitants of the village, as per survey conducted in April 1997 was 500 persons. They live in four village-lets out of 10 village-lets of the Fiang village, which is spread over an area of 6 sq. kilometers. The Muslim populated village-lets are Chutgo, Thangnak, Chulichan and Flunce.

As per the traditions of Ladakh, each family or group of families in a locality is recognised by a family names generally descend from the position held in the King's court. However, among Muslims, the family names do not exactly correspond to the traditions of Ladakh Buddhists. The families among the Muslims in the population under study are:

- (1) Zampura (2) Gyalpongpa (3) Thangnakpa (4) Zur (5) Thangpa (6) Thyat Khang (7) Laganpa (8) Kayzur (9) Lothyat (10) Khangchyn (11) Khangstak pa (12) Chusas pa (13) bawoopa (14) Flunce pa (15) Shankh pa (16) Banaras pa (17) Sotoo (18) Muna (19) Saichan.

These family names seek to reflect different characteristics of the family, physical surroundings of dwelling etc., such as Zamzir pa – residing near the bridge, Gyalpogang – living near king's wall (A hill in Fiang), Fluence pa- residing at the top of village, Saichan – place having excess of thorny shrubs etc.

Social Organisation

Each of the parent family mentioned above is divided into smaller families, which are mostly disintegrated in structure and only 12 % of them are joint families. The disintegrated families comprise husband, wife and unmarried husband, wife and unmarried children. The families are mostly monogamous with only 10% cases found to be polygamous. Several families collectively form a phaspun (clan). Traditionally speaking, phaspun is a group of families bound together on the basis of blood relationship. They usually co-operate in the social activities relating to death, birth and marriage ceremonies. They are required to make arrangement for food and other essentials for a bereaved family in which somebody dies. At the time of marriage within phaspun, they arrange for the celebration of marriage party together and also provide financial assistance to the family in the form of grains etc.

The formal organisation among these peoples are meant solely for religions purposes. There is a village level organisation which makes arrangement for (i) the celebration of Muharram – martyrdom ceremony of Hazrat Imam Hussain (A.S.); (ii) the maintenance of local mosques and Imam Baras. The committee also arranges the holding of yearly celebration of Majlis Asad in the

month of Leo of Zodiac, for the martyrdom of Hazrati Hussain occurred in Muharram, which in that very year was in the Leo period of the Zodiac. On that day arrangement of food for the mourners from outside the village is made by this local committee. The Committee is working under the leadership of the local Sheikh (a mullah educated from Najaf, Iraq). The said Sheikh monitors the religious activities of the people.

Economy

The locality is completely rural in structure and setting. Mostly, all the families are basically engaged in agricultural activities. Average cultivable land holding per household was found to be 8 acres. Certain families possessed only one acre of cultivable land. Overall there were 75 acres. All the persons engaged in non-agricultural activities were partly farmers. They were found engaged in non-agricultural activities as well, during off-seasons. The crops raised in the village were wheat, millet, pea, potatoes and several other vegetables. In addition to these locally grown cereals and vegetables, rice is also consumed, which they get through the civil supplies department.

The non-agricultural activities of the people include government (both state and central) jobs. In the state government sector 80% of the working population work in different departments such as Education Department as teachers, Rural Development Department as medical assistants, Co-operative department as supervisors and inspectors, Police Department as sepoyees and also as low grade employees in Revenue department, Works department etc. In all, 91% of the populations are employed in these categories. In the central government department they mostly work in defence sector, as sepoyees in Ladakh scouts and as civil employees, labourers, drivers etc in Military Engineering service.

The other forms of occupation include petty trading i.e. shopkeepers etc. Five persons are engaged in this activity and that involves elderly persons, who are unable to work as labourers.

Women also participate in the economic activities. They have a major share in the agricultural activities. They perform all agricultural works except ploughing. Unlike Buddhist women, they do not work as labourers in defence etc.

Formal Education

Literacy rate of Leh district as per the report of the Directorate of Economics and Statistics in 1981 was 26%. In case of the population under study, the position was not very satisfactory. The education level was as follows, in 1997.

Post graduate	Nil
Graduate	Nil
Under graduate	15
Matriculates	25
Under-matriculates	53

99% of the children in the age group of 6-14 attend elementary schools, which include both girls and boys, and same is the case with children at the high school level. However, only 7 students attend higher secondary level schools and only 5 students study at degree level.

The number of under-matriculate youths is high due to the fact that there is low standard of education in the local schools. So most of the unsuccessful students in the matriculation generally prefer to work, in defence as labourers etc. The girls generally give up education after failing at the matriculation level and some also due to early marriages. Low presence in the post-matriculate classes is also mostly due to the fact that most of them take up some employment or other after matriculation.

Marriage

Marriages are mostly monogamous in nature and polygynous ones are quite exceptional. No restriction is found in inter-sect (Shia-Sunni) marriages, in the whole of Ladakh. Cross-cultural marriages (between Buddhists and Muslims) are not permitted now, which were previously very common. Mostly, Buddhist girls marry Muslim boys and marriage of Muslim girls with Buddhist boys is a rare phenomenon. It may be due to the fact that polyandrous marriages, which are prevalent among Buddhists, resulted in high percentage of unmarried girls among Buddhists, who tend to elope with Muslim boys. This form of marriage often led to communal riots in Leh during the past decade and later, this was banned by the Ladakh Buddhists' Association. However, there are still some cases of inter-religious marriage. One Muslim youth of the village Fiang was seen to have married a Buddhist girl from the same village. The Buddhists of the locality greatly resisted this marriage. The youth was handed over to the police and later the court gave the decision in favour of the Muslim youth but still the girl was not allowed to go to her husband's place. As per the report of the body, the girl had already accepted Islam and renamed herself as Nargis Bano.

Legally, the age of marriage has been fixed at 21 years for boys and 18 years for girls. However, in many instances, girls below the age of 18 years are put in marriage. Marriages are fixed either through parents' consent or by children's own choice. In most cases, second one leads to elopement. In case of elopement, the girl's parents demand bride price to accept the relation. When a girl elopes with a boy, the boy's parents, after a few days, send his uncle (maternal) and some other person, along with tea (leaves) and ask the girl's parents to accept the new relation. As a rule, the girl's parents do not accept it. They are required to attend them again after few days and generally on the second trip the gift of tea is accepted but only after they agree to pay some money as bride price. The bride price varies from family to family, depending upon the social status of the girl's parents and economic position of the boy's family. After the acceptance, the bride and groom are invited by girl's family.

In marriage not much festivity is found among these people. There is no musical entertainment for guests. Simple feasts are served to the guests who come to fetch the bride. There is no tradition of the groom going to bride's house. It is the function of Nyopas, (guests who go to the bride's home) who are led by a Tashispa (chief guest). The Nyopas include maternal uncle and the mullah. Tashispa carries a long stick with coloured cloth tugged at the top. The Nyopas while entering the bride's village are served tea (local salty tea) by the relatives and neighbours of the bride and the uncle (accompanying the Nyopas) is required to pay certain amount of money to them. It is to be

mentioned here that among Buddhists, *Chang* (locally brewed liquor) is served instead of tea. Nyopas and Tashispas wear a special dress among the Buddhists. There is also a group of Mons accompanying them and the Nyopas dance at every point, when they are served *Chang*. There is nothing like that among the Muslims. However, they (the Shia Muslims) recite Quranic verses called *Salvat* on Prophet and his progeny in the home of the bride as well as the groom.

Religious Activities

In the population under study, 90% are Shia (Imamia Shia) Muslims and others are Sunni Muslims. The observance of religious rituals such as Namaze is not regular among the youth. There are two mosques but attendance in daily prayers is very thin. However, people, young and old, are regular fast observers during Ramzaan. Congregational prayers in the village are not held except on a few occasions in a year. Firstly, whenever any religious scholar (Alim) from outside the locality is invited and secondly on the eve of *Majlis Asad*. On the eve of the Ids (*Id-ul-Azha* and *Id-ul-Fiter*), the Id prayers are organised under the leadership of the local mullah. The local mullah is also a well-versed scholar educated from *Najaf-ul-Ashraf* (Iraq). Presently one more person, son of a Sheikh (mullah) who recently expired, is studying religious sciences at Qum in Iran. The people of this village have great expectations of religious reforms from him.

There is no religious *Maktab* (part time theology and Quran teaching centre) at the moment. But in 1994 one such centre had been established by *Tanzeem-ul-Makatib Kashmir*, which did not approve of his appointment as a teacher of theological matters. None of the local elders tried to get a suitable teacher for the *Maktab*, though many were available there. It is strange that none volunteered his services for the job. This is probably due to their diminishing interest in religious education.

However, Muharram (martyrdom ceremony of the Prophet's grandson *Harzrat Imam Hussain, A.S.*) is commemorated with great enthusiasm. Starting from the first of Muharram up to the 20th day on *Safar-u-Muzaffer* mourning, ceremonies are organised in the local *Imambara*. On the tenth of Muharram, a grand procession is organised at the capital town *Leh*, in which, people from the surrounding villages participate. Mourners from the village, young and old, men and women, assemble in the *Imam Bara* at *Leh*, on the night of 9th Muharram. Both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims participate in the ceremony of 10th Muharram (*Ashura*). The Muharram ceremony is celebrated with *Maryhya* and *Nowah* (mourning verse) and in the procession; chest beating with fists and chains/blades has been a common practice. However, Sunni Muslims do not perform such acts, as is practised by Shi'ite Muslims the world over.

Conclusion

The Muslims in Ladakh are either of the Tibetan origin like the Buddhists or from Kashmir, who have settled there because of business ties with Ladakh. The social life of these people is governed by the inter-relationship between the traditional social norms and Islamic values. The age-long cultural ties with the Buddhist brethren were broken down by recent political developments, which has been really unfortunate in the history of Ladakh. The educational backwardness among these people is of great concern. In spite of being declared scheduled tribes, they are unfortunate enough not to reap its advantages. Though their economic position is sound, they are unable to compete

with the neighbouring Buddhists, who hold prestigious posts as they go on getting job easily with low level of education, they would not concentrate on higher education. The superfluous religious practices and rituals are useless enough to profit them in true religious sense. It can be concluded therefore that these people are religiously and educationally backward.

References

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 4. Gylpo Rinchen was son of Gyualpo Nurup Gon (1290-1340), who was the son of Lhachen Ngrub (1300-1325), son of Jospal (1275-1300 A.D.) Franckie. *History of Ladakh*, p.67.
 5. Syed Ashraf Ali, *Mir Syed Ali Hamdani*, Srinagar, Gulshan Publishers.
 6. Franckie op-cit p.58.
 7. Ibid., p.1.
 8. Ibid.
 9. Harderi, Akbar (ed.), *Baharistan-I-Shahi*, Budgam Anjumani Shareem, p. 68.
 10. Franckie, op-cit pp. 92-93.
 11. Ibid.
 12. Janet, Rizvi (1985), *Ladakh, Crossroad of Asia*, Bombay, Oxford University Press.
 13. Franckie mentions that Lamas deliberately destroyed the tablets, which recorded any such events, Franckie.op-cit.
 14. Hashmat-ul-Khan (1939) *Tareekhi Jammu wa Ryasati Maftoohati Maharaja Gulab Singh, M. Taj Bahadur*, Lucknow.
 15. Franckie, op.cit p.109.
 16. This was as per the agreement with the Mughals that four Kashmiris were to live permanently in Ladakh so as to procure wool (Pashmina) from upper Ladakh and sell it to Kashmiri traders coming to Ladakh. So Pashmina trade became monopoly of Kashmiris and their monopoly continues up to present days.
 17. *Census of India*, 1981.
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