

## A Socio-Religious and Cultural Profile of Ladakh

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### Abstract

Ladakh, a remote and strategically significant region in north-western India, serves as a historical and cultural bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, and Tibet. This paper explores Ladakh's geographical isolation, ancient history, and vibrant cultural profile, emphasizing its role along the Silk Route. Drawing on archaeological evidence, historical chronicles, and contemporary scholarship, it examines the impacts of trade, invasions, and religious exchanges on Ladakh's society. Key themes include the spread of Buddhism and Islam, the influence of the Namgyal dynasty, and interactions with Mughal emperors. The literature review highlights foundational works by scholars such as Alexander Cunningham, A.H. Francke, and Luciano Petech. By integrating geographical, historical, and cultural analyses, this study underscores Ladakh's enduring legacy as a conduit for economic, religious, and cultural syncretism in the Himalayan region. The paper concludes with reflections on Ladakh's contemporary relevance amid globalization and environmental challenges.

**Keywords:** Ladakh, Himalayas, Culture, Central Asia

### Introduction

Ladakh, often referred to as the "Land of High Passes," is a union territory in north western India renowned for its stark landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and pivotal role in trans-Himalayan trade. Hemmed in by towering mountains, including the Karakoram, Zaskar, and Himalayan ranges, Ladakh's geographical isolation has shaped its history and society, fostering a unique blend of Indo-Tibetan influences. Strategically positioned, it shares borders with Pakistan to the northwest, China to the north and east, and Indian states like Jammu and Kashmir to the west and Himachal Pradesh to the south. This location has made Ladakh a crossroads for traders, invaders, and missionaries, particularly along the ancient Silk Route, which facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and religions.

The region Ladakh doesn't have that much important chronicle sources, as a supplement we need to rely on the neighboring sources of Tibet and Kashmir. The missionaries and travellers who visited Ladakh have played a vital role in the historiography of Ladakh, they wrote about the happenings in the region as they noticed from their own eyes. Pioneer among them were the Moravian missionaries Dr. Karl Marx and A. H. Francke along with along Alexander Cunningham. Cunningham's "Ladakh Physical, Statistical and Historical." The author examines the history of each and every region of Ladakh, where he visited. This work is very important source to study on Ladakh, the scholarships on Ladakh highly used this book. Dr Karl Marx's "Three Documents relating to the History of Ladakh: Tibetan Text, Translation, and Notes." Janet Razvi's work "Ladakh Crossroads of High Asia" points out that the only shortcoming of pioneer scholars especially Francke on Ladakh is the usage of much more local sources and not referring for the other contemporary sources. La Dvags Rgyal Rabs (Royal Genealogy of Ladakh), this anonymous Chronicle is the only single most indigenous source based on the Namgyal dynasty (1500-1835 CE) and their genealogy. It is purely written in Bodhi (the classical Tibetan language), latter on this primary source was translated from Tibetan to English by various scholars like A. H. Francke and H. W. Thomas "Antiquities of Indian Tibet: Texts and Translations... The Chronicles of Ladakh and Minor Chronicles" and Luciano Petech "A Study on the Chronicles of Ladakh" Luciano Petech's magnum opus on Ladakh is

“The Kingdom of Ladakh”. This work has important value in the historiography of Ladakh because the author like the pioneer scholars doesn’t only rely upon the Ladakhi sources but also referred the Tibetan and other contemporary sources, which makes his work a good chronological of events that occurred in the history of Ladakh. Shridhar Kaul and H. N. Kaul’s work “Ladakh Through the Ages Towards a New Identity”, deals with the history of Ladakh from the very beginning when the region was considered as no man’s area, elaborately talks about the coming and settlement of various religions in the region, depicted a detailed geographical profile of the region, struggle between kingdoms, gives extensive information about the rulers and their genealogy who ruled over Ladakh, Islamization of Ladakh, impacts of Dogra attack on Ladakh, the diplomatic relation of Ladakh with the other princely states like Gilgit, Baltistan, Tibet etc., the cultural, social structure and architectural history of Ladakh particularly of the Buddhists who ruled over Ladakh for centuries. Jacqueline H. Fewkes’s work “Trade and Contemporary Society along the Silk Road, An ethno-history of Ladakh,” is an important source to know about the connection of Ladakh with silk route and its surrounded areas. This work is totally based on the primary sources taken from the Khan archives, these archive files dealing particularly with the trading and guild systems of Kargil and Leh. John Bray’s Islam in Ladakh (Readings on Islam in Ladakh: Local, Regional, and International Perspectives), highlights the importance of Ladakh when Silk Route was passing through the region, talks about the religious and cultural believes and its origins. The work mainly focusses on the historiography of Ladakh, from the very beginning to the 19th century. It is a literature survey on Ladakh, in this work the author gives brief information about all the scholarships on Ladakh which are completed till now and examines the political and cultural impacts of Baltistan and Kashmir on Ladakh.

### **Geographical Profile**

Hemmed in by mountains on every side, the area of Ladakh is geographically isolated from other regions of India. Strategically it is an important part of Northern India because of sharing its borders with Pakistan and China. The boundaries of Ladakh surrounded by China in the North, Baltistan in the North-West, Kashmir in the west, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab to its South and Tibet on its East. The whole region is mostly rocky mountainous and barren.

### **Historical Background**

The ancient history of Ladakh is less known due to lack of authentic evidence. We cannot make a definite authentication due to lack of data in the area. Based on archaeological sources and petroglyphs, very few areas of Ladakh have been studied by historians. Upinder Singh highlights the two important Neolithic sites of Ladakh-Giak and Kiari; Radiocarbon dating reveals that these Neolithic sites are belonging to the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE.<sup>1</sup> During the ancient period, like other kingdoms of Northern India, the Dards and Mons of Ladakh indulged in the continuous warfare to the control and possession of cultivable lands and cattle. Sultan Sikandar (1369-1413 AD) was among the powerful sultans of Kashmir. He was a very great patron of learning and highly respected the scholars of his time, resulting in the influx of scholars from Persia and Central Asia to his court. Among them, a large number of Sayyids and scholars under the banner of Mir Mohammad Hamdani entered in Kashmir. Sultan himself became a murid of Mir Hamdani. The Sultan also conquered Ladakh, and the impact of his rule over Ladakh led to the spread of Islamic preaching in the region. Mir Hamdani visited Tibet, Baltistan, and Ladakh to preach Islam and he also built Khanqahs<sup>2</sup> there.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> (Singh, 2008, p. 159).

<sup>2</sup> Hospices for Sufi travellers and disciples.

<sup>3</sup> (Sheikh B. A., 2013)

The sage Kalhana referred to Ladakhis as Bhauttas.<sup>4</sup> Sultan Zain-Ul-Abideen (1420-1470) was the most powerful king of Kashmir, under which the suzerainty of Kashmir re-established over Baltistan and Ladakh.<sup>5</sup> In 1532 Mirzā Ḥaidar Dughlat, the renowned author of *Tarikh-i Rāshidī* attacked Ladakh and Baltistan. After subjugating these areas, Haider used these troops to serve him as guide and attack on Kashmir, as he was not familiar with the arduous passes of Ladakh and Kashmir. After Ḥaidar's death, Ladakh became again an autonomous kingdom ruled by different princes, but at the centre, it was Namgyal dynasty who ruled from 1500 to 1835. In the chronicles of Mughals, Ladakh is known as "little" or "great" Tibet. The Mughals never neglected Ladakh, as they were well aware of the commercial importance of the kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

From the feudatory of Ladakh, they used to take the fine wool shawls as tribute. In 1634 CE when the shawls from Ladakh stopped to send as a tribute, Shah Jahan sent forces to help the king of Ladakh to help the chief of Iskardo after that the sending of shawls as tribute remains continue.<sup>7</sup> During the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb sent military aid to Ladakh to fight against the Tibetan invaders, after this skirmish a tripartite treaty was signed between Ladakh, Kashmir, and Tibet viz; the Treaty of Timisgong in 1684. This treaty allowed the Kashmiri traders right to free access in the area of Changthang region of Ladakh for the trade of pashmina wool. Kashmir got virtual power over the precious wool of Ladakh after this treaty. In 1834 Zorawar Singh the governor of Gulab Singh annexed Ladakh, and it became an integral part of Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Silk Route and its Impacts on Ladakh**

Based on archaeological sources, the significances of Silk Road through Ladakh and its importance also highlighted. The term Silk Road may not be a suitable word for this route because not only silk trade but also other commodities such as perfumes, spices, precious stones, metals, cotton, art objects, etc. carried between Asia and Europe through this route. Silk as being one of the main commodities which carried out through this route, therefore it used by many writers as silk route. The silk route travelled from China to Eastern Europe.<sup>9</sup> It was passing from Khotan and Kashgar via Ladakh. Fewkes's work is an important source to know about the connection of Ladakh with silk route and its surrounded areas. She assembled the archival evidence consisted of important documents like personal memos, business letters, registered letter envelopes, money order receipts, export permits, account books, and telegram receipts. The language used for the archival papers are Urdu, English, Persian, Bodhi or Bhoti<sup>10</sup> and Uighur.<sup>11</sup> The writing style of Urdu was in Patwari style, which makes it hard to decipher for the readers. The perception of trade through Ladakh was mainly based on Pashmina wool and salt. Due to the connectivity of Ladakh with the Silk Route, religions like Buddhism, Christian and Islam gradually find its roots in the kingdom of Ladakh. According to archaeological sources, Buddhism flourished in Ladakh as a monastic institution in the fifth century. Islam flourished in Ladakh in the seventh or eighth century after Buddhism. Abdul Ghani Sheikh was the among the Ladakhi scholars who have worked on the coming of Islam in Ladakh.<sup>12</sup> In the tenth century, the original ideology of Buddhism has reached in Ladakh under the Buddhist scholar

<sup>4</sup> (Paemu, 1969, p. 228)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 390

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 20

<sup>7</sup> (Zutshi, 2003, pp. 217)

<sup>8</sup> (Sheikh A. H., 2015, p. 9)

<sup>9</sup> (Fewkes, 2008)

<sup>10</sup> A version of classical Tibetan language, widely spoken by the Buddhists and Christians of Ladakh

<sup>11</sup> A Turkic language.

<sup>12</sup> (Fewkes, 2008) pp.40

Lotsava Rinchen-b Zangpo of Western Tibet who visited and preached Buddhism in Ladakh when he was going back from Kashmir to home. Ladakh being an important part of Silk route served as to carry out the Buddhist art and culture from India to Central Asia and other areas which were connected with this route.<sup>13</sup> The religious missionaries of Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian used the same route to propagate their own religion which also impacted on Ladakh. To the Muslims, it was very easy to travel Mecca for Hajj and Umrah by using this route.<sup>14</sup> The impact of these missionaries and invasions from the mighty neighbours changed the religion and culture of Ladakh in totality. It is corollary is seen today as Ladakh has the ardent followers of Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

### Cultural Profile

The culture of Ladakh is cosmopolitan; it is the Indo-Tibetan culture which is highly followed by the majority people of the region. Maximum people of the region belong to the Mongolian race with few places are dominated by the descendants of the Aryan Mons, Tibetans, Dards and Baltis in its distinctive physiognomy, culture, and language. Annual festivals like masked dance festivals in Leh, archery and polo in Kargil are an important part of the culture of Ladakh. Food consumed by the people has much in common with the Tibetan and Mongolian food, the most common foods being taken by the people are thukpa,<sup>16</sup> noodle soup, roasted barley flour called Satu.<sup>17</sup> Kehwa (mainly preferred in winter) is a traditional green tea with spices and walnut, also consumed by the people of Kashmir. Chang<sup>18</sup> is the most favourable drink of Buddhist people in Ladakh. There is no prohibition in taking of this drink, and it served on all joy and sorrow occasions by the Buddhists. Traditional garments include gonchas of velvet, choga,<sup>19</sup> waistcoats, long boots, rhnating (local cap), etc. are very important as people prefer to wear it on any occasions or in winter. During festivals and celebrations, women adorned with gold and silver ornaments and headgears. The building structures are highly influenced by Indian, Tibetan, and Islamic architecture, with beautifully decorated by the soft-wood. The structures of Mosques and Imam-barahs are highly influenced by the Persian architectural style.

### Conclusion

Ladakh's geographical isolation has paradoxically made it a vibrant crossroads of cultures, shaped by the Silk Route's economic and religious exchanges. From Neolithic origins to Namgyal rule and Mughal interactions, its history reflects resilience amid invasions and trade. The cultural profile, encompassing festivals, cuisine, attire, and architecture embodies syncretic Indo-Tibetan traditions, enriched by Buddhism, Islam, and beyond. Scholarship from Cunningham to Petech has illuminated these facets, though further research on pre-historic and environmental impacts is needed. In a globalized world, Ladakh's heritage faces challenges from climate change and tourism, yet it remains a testament to cultural adaptability and harmony. Preserving this legacy requires sustainable development, ensuring Ladakh's role as a bridge between past and future.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp.42

<sup>14</sup> (Dolma, 2017, pp. 8)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp. 8-9

<sup>16</sup> Prepared by mixing of wheat flour with meat and local spices.

<sup>17</sup> Used to prepare many traditional foods like papaa, khulak.

<sup>18</sup> A locally prepared beer from barley.

<sup>19</sup> A heavy and long fine cloak made of local wool, mostly preferred to wear in winter and on the occasion of festivals



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