

Europeans Travellers' Account on Ladakh: A Brief Analysis of the Socio-Economic Aspects in the 19th Century

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Abstract

The regional history of Ladakh has been brought about by the historians in various aspects so far. The European travellers' assessment about Ladakh has been interpreted in this article while emphasizing the socio-economy of the region in the 19th century. The major historical trend in the region so far has been the 'Aryan tribes' residing mainly in the Dha-Hanu and Darchiks villages of Ladakh. The major European travellers who came to Ladakh in the 19th century were Alexander Cunningham, William Moorcroft, A.H. Francke and others who left a vast account and it has been a useful source to know the region in historical sense. The economic situation of Ladakh as a country then in the mid 19th century has been influenced by the Dogras and the British rule which had a great impact on the trade relations and several changes occurred in economical aspects of the region. Ladakh has been mostly under Buddhist monarchic rule in the early 19th century before the Dogra invasion. This study focuses on the socio-economic changes witnessed as a result of the Dogra and British administration in Ladakh during the 19th century specially the second half of this century. The ancient trade routes highlight the historical, economic, religious and cultural significance of the region. Ladakh had both internal and external divisions of trade which was carried on large scale along the several trade routes in the Northern Himalayan region

Keywords: Ladakh, Aryan, Dogra, Trade route, Trade relations, Cultural significance, Internal and external trade

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Ladakh has been called by several names, the most common being Ladakh, or in Tibetan language as *La-dwags*, the land of many passes. Earlier, it was also called "*Maryul*" or lowland or Red land¹. The most striking feature in the physical aspect of Ladakh is the parallelism of its mountain ranges, which stretch through the country from the south-east to north-west. Land being the most primary resource for economy was not much fertile in Ladakh due to several reasons as the huge mountains block the humid air carrying moisture as a result very less rainfall occur here and much snowfall in winters. The trade aspects of the region is famous for the silk and wool shawls from then and is still practiced which has a huge demand in both national and international market.

The location of Ladakh being a strategic one in the Central Asian region was used for various purposes by the different section of the society such as it was served to carry Buddhist art from India to Central Asia and other centers on the silk route². The major routes that the European travellers followed were different and such routes were later gradually followed by the local travellers in order to go for distant trade beyond the region.

The travellers such as Alexander Cunningham and Moorcroft have presented a huge account about Ladakh and its surrounding places which also highlights the main idea behind their travel to the region. The British interest in Ladakh was directly linked to its interest in the Central Asian affairs from the 1840s onwards. The internal trade was carried out between the sub-regions of Ladakh i.e., Sham, Nubra, Zaskar and Changthang whereas the external trade was carried out with the neighbouring countries of Jammu, Kashmir, Baltistan, Rudok, Tibet, Yarkhand (now in China) and British India. The domestic trade was carried throughout the year whereas the external trade was hampered due to heavy snowfall during winter season. The major means of trade exchange was barter system along with the usage of money in rare cases. Besides the local people, the authorities of local kingdom and the Gompas were directly or indirectly involved in such trade activities to much extent.

Among the various travellers which have visited Ladakh in the 19th century, Cunningham and Moorcroft are the two travellers being focused in this piece of study in order to keep the article brief and to the point. Cunningham has in his historical account on Ladakh have touched a vast number of areas of which socio-economic aspect is one of them. The major focus being kept on the land and trade routes over the period of 19th century, Cunningham has overemphasized the Buddhist as synonymous to whole Ladakh while forgetting the Muslim population of western Ladakh. The society as projected by Cunningham was a pastoralist and had trade relation with the neighbouring countries which signify their socio-cultural values to great extent when relooked on these themes in a broad historical perspective. The traditional society then has many changes to see along with some continuation in its socio-economic aspects. The period which Cunningham has emphasized in his study brought to light many historical narratives of Ladakh which helps in understanding the society and its relation with other peripheral areas in the Himalayan region.

Trade and commerce had developed as additional economic channels by the late 19th century. The focus towards the trade emerged in the border regions such as Baltistan, Yarkhand, Tibet, Lahoul and Spiti where

exchange in several items started among the petty traders which grabbed the attention of the locals towards trade in internal and external goods which further led to barter and money exchange gradually by the early nineteenth century. The economic transition in the 19th century is analysed by the local production and trade relations among various provinces define their broad veins which helps in understanding the local cultural exchanges along with the trading communities.

The “Aryan” tribes (Mons and Dards) or “Brokpas” gradually exchanged agricultural practices with the nomadic Tibetan of *Changthang* and increased the stock. This is how the varied aspect of the agriculture got started in the valley since the Tibetan dynastic rule shifting it over to the generation with the passage of time. The occupation of agriculture was the mainstay of the population of Ladakh economy. The people used to do farming for self subsistence and hardly any surplus production was available to them. The people involved in this profession were women, men, and even children signifying that whole part of the society were engaged into agricultural practices. The *Mons* and *Dards* had a significant role in boosting agriculture in Leh district. The art of cultivation passed on from generation to generation while working on the same field. One of the chief characteristics of the economy of Ladakh before 19th century was thus subsistence form of agriculture³. The *Gyalpo* during the late eighteenth century made his focus towards agriculture and provide support to the masses to cultivate crops suitable in their region accordingly. The state intervention do helped in bringing few changes in cultivation which at later stage increased the surplus of some crops such as barley, which was traded for salt in Chang-Thang.

The variation in the cropping pattern was due to sharing of farming knowledge among the various communities which came together as a result of trade. The records of Cunningham during 1847 shows various productions of Ladakh categorized as animal, vegetable and mineral productions. It was a period of transitional change in the economic society at the beginning of 19th century as the participation of people in the local handicraft and manufacturing was growing due to certain forces instigating its initiation from several areas in Ladakh. The technological changes witnessed during the pre-modern period in Ladakh have reflected various changes in the life of people. Traders and merchants from other provinces helped in sharing the ideas regarding the agricultural practices, crops pattern, ingredients used in the fields and so on.

The British government indirectly through various travellers and officials tried to gain information and intelligence from the region in order to get share in the shawl wool trade and tried to manipulate the economical situation through various means.

Manufacturing as an economic activity was also an important one in Ladakh. Some manufacturing activity was found in the early 19th century which gradually grew along with trade relations. Moorcroft specifies about the shawl manufacture of Kashmir which was usually brought from Leh loaded on horse at a cost of rupees thirty per load⁴. Moorcroft mentions about the quality of wool suitable for manufacturing of shawls which was usually been exported to nearby places of Ladakh as external trade.

The major manufacturing works in Ladakh in which people engaged into was basically weaving, craft works, carpentry and wood carving which is still practiced in different manner in the contemporary time along with the accumulation of technology available so far. The hair of the goat and sheep was utilized to manufacture blankets, tents, coarse sacking, and ropes for home consumption. Thus livelihood was also based mostly on the work of cottage industry which produced several items for local use as well as tradable sometimes with the caravan merchants.

Trade in the first quarter of the nineteenth century started with several neighbouring places but the volume and direction of it was limited to internal trade than external one. The complex trade routes were travelled by the travellers as well as the traders and merchants which was tedious and exhaustive. Both agricultural and manufacturing goods were traded in the region. Moorcroft places the commerce of Ladakh into some blur picture by stating that Ladakh was of no great value or interest as affects the produce or consumption of the country itself. Moorcroft further mentions that the central situation of Ladakh was chief consideration for it becomes a great thoroughfare as an active commercial intercourse between Tibet, Turkistan, China, land even Russia on one hand, and Kashmir, the Panjab, and the plains of Hindustan on the other⁵.

The structure of taxes collected by the *Gyalpo*'s rule till the Dogra conquest was different in nature. The taxes that were collected from the region were from the dwellings and not on the lands during *Gyalpo*'s rule because the land could not produce sufficiently and established revenue from such land was unavailable. Earlier the king was also an important trader and custom duty formed major part of his income. There was a tariff duty applied on the import and export of wool merchandise known as *Shogam*. The revenue attained from such merchandise was called *Thob-thang*⁶. The local names of taxes were *Khral*, *Sha*, or *Thang*.

There were several routes which connect Ladakh to Kashmir, Tibet, Kashgar, Yarkhand and Khotan. Thus the travellers followed several routes to reach Ladakh. Many of them were lead by the local explorers which the European travellers have mentioned in the record. The Tibet route to Leh was among the important route that led to many trade transactions in the second half of 19th century. Sven Hedin followed this route when he travelled from Leh to Tibet in 1906⁷. The eastern route from Leh through Chang-Thang area near Pangong Lake

connected it to Tibet city of Lhasa. Traders had to traverse mountain passes to reach their destination which mostly subjected to weather conditions. With the passage of time the triangular trade prospects in the Himalayan region improved as a result of increased participations of traders and merchants from surrounding places.

According to the travellers' account, most of the products of trade were from other provinces which were brought and stocked at Leh for further export. The raw materials for warm clothes were produced by the tribal peoples of the Chang-Thang region from the sheep and goats by rearing their wool and hairs respectively. Ladakh manufacturing includes the productions of coarse woolen clothes, blankets, carpets which were made by the machines setup by the Moravian Missionaries in the late 19th century in Leh.

The society of Ladakh is a unique social melting pot and has an ethnic composition of Bhots, Baltis, Dards, Brokpas, Champas, Mons and Arghuns spread over different areas of the region since long time. The nature of the society in the past was primitive where traditional methods and techniques were used in the daily activities of agriculture as well as small scale industry. It is known from the existing sources that different races in Ladakh have its own unique place in history as most of the original features are retained till now among the tribal population as cultural identity. The society in the 19th century Ladakh has definitely been nurtured by several external as well as internal forces through the ages. The major factors influencing the society had been the influx of ethnic people such as Mons and Dards from the Central Asian region and Gilgit region and the Sikhs and Dogras from Jammu and Kashmir province. These migrants got settled here and merged into the society without inheriting the local social attributes and sustained many traits of their own culture.

Polygamy and polyandry was another major feature of the society of Ladakh which along with time lose its significance and has confined to miniscule proportions of the population today among the *Bhots* population in the remote areas alone. Ladakh is not only diverse in its ethnic structure but also has linguistic diversity too where people speak most of the language orally without having a script. Cunningham has too witnessed the polyandry type of marriage in the society. Furthermore, the people of Ladakh in several villages had a huge longevity to live to the ages of till seventy, eighty and ninety. The population of Leh constitutes of Tibetans, Kashmiris, and mixed race from the women of local residents and Kashmiris termed as *Arghuns* while Kargil inhabitants were mainly Baltis and Buddhists⁸. The sorts of work which the Kashmiris did were of butchers, cooks, and petty retailers.

The chief feature to be taken into consideration about the major tribes of Ladakh such as Mons and Dards was that it preserved its language for such a long period of time. The Dards of Dras and Dha are especially noted for their certain traits which have from time to time faced several challenges from the social forces. The former got wholly converted to Islam and the latter remained in their original form without embracing the existing religions of the region⁹. The tribal populations were limited to Dha, Hanu, Darchiks, Garkon areas of Ladakh as of now in the contemporary period. The observations made by European travellers in Ladakh during the period of 19th century at various time intervals need a special emphasis to look into its broad aspects so that the transitional changes between each quarters of the concerned period is analysed closely from the travellers' point and to relatively see how society progressed over a long time span.

The dress code for the male and female were almost same with minor differences only. Due to severity of climate most of the time woolen clothes are worn by the inhabitants. There were also few differences in clothing among the poor class and the influential ones¹⁰. The person who afford wore a European broadcloth gown lined with lamb's wool and also flowered chintz while the inferior classes wore mantles (gown) of sheep skins with the wool inwards. The dress of the Ladakhis was simple and mostly woolen, coarse and thick, home-made cloth. The dress of men also had several variations in its outlook. They did not wear too many ornaments like women did.

Though the society was mostly patriarchal in nature but the position of women according to Frederic Drew were little different from that of native India. Women had a great liberty in the society of Ladakh¹¹. Moorcroft brings a positive picture of women in the society of Ladakh by citing that they had much freedom and choice of work depending on their will and use their leisure time in productive domestic works.

Cunningham also has mentioned about women status but mostly of Buddhist centered view. Women of Ladakh were strong enough that they work in parallel to their counterpart in field as well as domestic household works. Most of them remained aloof from education due to responsibility of household works and early motherhood responsibilities. On the contrary the darker side of the position of women was the custom of polyandry and polygamy. They exchanged their cultural aspects and the emigrants imbibed many of the indigenous social attributes. Thus cultural exchange as followed by trade exchanges gradually declined as the main routes of trade were closed due to partition.

The Dards and the Mons tribe of Ladakh settled themselves in a remote village of Leh and Kargil which has still preserved their century old cultural ethos and linguistics styles without any change so far. The travellers' have mentioned about the tribes of Dha and Hanu in their account and clarifies their presence in the region and was also responsible for farming in the region. The continuity and change in the social and cultural traits of Ladakh during the 19th century according to the existing sources gives a clear picture of the society of Ladakh

which has been re-examined in a broad perspective of the major travellers.

Conclusion

Ladakh in the 19th century when observed from the travellers account has brought many shades of pictures into the mind of scholars. It has been seen that the narrative drawn from such account project a blur picture of Ladakh especially the Kargil province which is somehow missing in the document of the European travellers. When it comes to trade, it is known from the oral sources that Kargil was the mainstay for trade merchants as a centre for trade dealings among the local inhabitants while doing internal trade. The old local market still exists there known as *Apo Bazar*. Trade activities act as a great source of connecting people and places during the period of 19th century which led to the gathering of much people in Leh town for the purposes of exchanges of goods and services with the other places of Central Asia, Tibet, plains of Hindustan and Kashmir.

The society of Ladakh has been through the ages influenced by influx of several ethnic people from Central Asia, Gilgit, Kashmir provinces which brought several traits in the society along with the cultural assimilation and brought a new diversity to Ladakh. Thus in the 19th century new groups of people that added to the population of Ladakh due to the trade and commercial activities were Sikh, Kashmiris, British and Dogra which led to the increase in population and languages too. The continuity of trade and socio-cultural life largely resulted into new elements of society which gave a wide range of social attributes in Ladakh as a whole. The focus of the trade in Ladakh region was mainly the shawl wool trade and tea which gradually went on additions of several other items like dry fruits, grocery and carpets to some extent.

Endnotes

¹ Alexander Cunningham, *Ladakh, Physical, Statistical and Historical*, London: W. H. Allen, New Delhi: Sagar Publication, 1854, pp. 18-19

² Abdul Ghani Sheikh, Ladakh and its Neighbours: Past and Present,” In John Bray and Nawang Tsering Shaksपो (eds.), *Recent Research on Ladakh 2007*, Leh Ladakh 2007,p.11

³ Alexander Cunningham, *Ladak:Physical, Statistical and Historical*, London: W. H. Allen, New Delhi: Sagar Publication, 1854,p.219

⁴ W. Moorcroft and George Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and Punjab; Ladakh and Kashmir; Pashawar, Kabul, Kunduz and Bokhara, from 1819-1825, Vol.1*. Sagar Publications: New Delhi, 1841,p.166

⁵ Ibid., p. 340

⁶ Alexander Cunningham, *Ladakh: Physical, Statistical and Historical*,London: W.H. Allen, New Delhi: Sagar Publication, 1854, p. 268.

⁷ Sven Hedin, *Trans-Himalaya, Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet, Volume I* (London: Macmillan AndCo; Limited) 1909, pp. 64-70.

⁸ W. Moorcroft and George Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and Punjab; Ladakh and Kashmir; Pashawar, Kabul, Kunduz and Bokhara,from(1819-1825). Vol. 1*.Sagar Publications: New Delhi, 1841,p.320

⁹ A. H. Francke, *A History of Ladakh*. Sterling Publisher Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi.pp.67-68

¹⁰ W. Moorcroft and George Trebeck. *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and Punjab; Ladakh and Kashmir; Pashawar, Kabul, Kunduz and Bokhara,from(1819-1825). Vol. 1*.Sagar Publications: New Delhi, 1841,p.323

¹¹ Frederic Drew, *The Jammoo and Kashmir Territories*, Oriental Publishers Delhi.1875,pp.250-53

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