LADAKH: AN ANCIENT TRADE ROUTE OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

“What Port Said is to the Suez Canal, Leh is to the Central Asian Trade Road.” R.L. Kennion (A British Joint Commissioner in Ladakh).

Ladakh, the land of passes, surrounded by the gigantic mountain walls is a sparsely populated region of Jammu and Kashmir. Its natural scenic beauty and high passes which witnessed the ancient trade fair that continued for centuries has enabled to attract people from different corners of the world and contemporary it has become one of the top most destinations among the tourists. Ladakh being an Independent Kingdom in the ancient times had always remained a target in the eyes of its powerful neighbours. Lured by the ancient Ladakhi caravan route and Pashmina trade, it was often on the conquest list of the powerful neighbouring regions who wanted to have their control over it. This ancient trade route was of great importance to this geographically isolated region as it served as a source of considerable revenue for the state and its people and also served as a channel to exchange cordial conjugal and cultural relations for centuries. Thus, this route highlights the historical, economic, religious and cultural significance of the ancient time.

Key Words: Cultural exchange, End of trade relations, International Trade and Local Trade.

INTRODUCTION

Ladakh which lies in the northern part of Indian Himalayan remained as an isolated region for the centuries. It is a land of many passes that can be derived from its very term La-dwags, which in the contemporary time is most commonly pronounced and spelt as Ladakh. The term La-dwags is a Tibetan word of which “La” means Pass and “dwags” means the owner of the passes. In the ancient times, it was also called as Maryul or Mangyul on the pretext of it being a land of many races. Likewise, Ladakh has been known by many alternative names, like “it is called as Central Asian Diamond on account of its location in important trade route;

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Moon land on account of its resemblance to Lunar surface; Hermit Kingdom on account of its stony silence and surroundings ideal for Lamas to enter hermitage.²

Ladakh once an Independent Kingdom occupies a significant and strategic position, bordering on Baltistan (now in Pakistan) in the north-west, Tibet in the east, Xinjiang (now part of China) in the north, Kashmir in the west and Himachal Pradesh and Punjab to the south. In the olden times, traders from the neighbouring countries used to come on a trade mission to Leh and turned it into a trading market where all the goods like silk, rice, sugar, spices, tea, apricot, barley etc. were either exchange through barter system or sell it for a currency. In the course of time, this trading mission not only promoted the economic activity rather it also led to cultural exchanges between these countries, the impact of which can be seen in their day to day spoken language and culture.

Being located on a strategic location, Ladakh apart from being served as a trade route, it was also used by different sections of society to serve their different purpose. Like, it was served as a channel to carry Buddhist art from India to Central Asia and other centres on the silk routes.³ The religious missionaries (Buddhist, Muslim and Christian) used it to promote their religion and there too came the pilgrims who found it easier to reach Mecca through Kashmir and India than heading directly west across Central Asia.⁴ Above all, often, Ladakh became a victim of invasions from its powerful neighbours and all these had a paramount impact on the Ladakhi culture and society as a result of which today, the population of Ladakh consists of Buddhist, Muslim (both Shia and Sunni) and Christianity. This historical trade route via Ladakh was an economic enterprise and at the same time a system of multiple social networks linking people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds to facilitate trade transitions and to create new possibilities for economic gain.⁵

Trade in Ladakh was carried out in two divisions internal and external trade. The internal trade was carried out between the sub-regions of Ladakh i.e., Sham, Nubra, Zanskar, and

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Changthang and the external was carried out with the neighbouring countries of Jammu, Kashmir, Baltistan, Rudok, Tibet, Kullu, Bishahir, Yarkand now in China and British India. Ladakh’s political fate had often been affected by this trade activities as the foreign invaders always wanted to have their control over it.

DOMESTIC TRADE
Ladakh with Leh as its capital, today is divided into sub-regions namely Sham (Lower Ladakh), Stod (Upper Ladakh), Zhung (Central Ladakh), Nubra, Changthang and Zanskar and each of these regions are famous for their own unique merchandise like, Sham is known for its dried fruits like apricot, apple, walnut etc, Upper Ladakh which is Stod is known for local bricks made of mud, willow and poplars, Nubra is also known for various fruits and is called as the land of flower, Changthang is known for Pashmina wool and Zanskar is known for local butter and cheese.

Ladakh had its own version of trade throughout the history by which they satisfy their basic necessities. The domestic trade was carried throughout the year and it was mainly conducted by the means of barter system, where, money was used in a very limited portion. This internal trade was carried out by local inhabitants where they were engaged in exchange of both local as well as the imported products which they bought or bartered from foreign trade. However, besides the local people, the authorities from Ladakh Kingdom and Gompas were also directly or indirectly involved in their own way.

The local trade which was carried within Ladakh between Sham, Nubra, Zanskar and Changthang villages mostly dealt with the local goods where they bartered their merchandise with each other. Like, the people of Changthang exchanged their merchandise of salt for barley with Zanskar, thereafter, the Zanskaris after keeping sufficient amount for their own personal use further carried out to exchange it with the goods of another particular place. So, in this manner it kept on going one after another with many more local places. Mainly the people of sham area were engaged in this trading business and earned their living. The traders from this area of Ladakh dominated the Pashmina trade with Chang-thang and the most important source of wealth in Ladakh was from trade or from transportation of foreign goods from one country to another through their own territory.  

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The whole journey of trade was done on foot as there were no means of road and transport, the traders along with their loaded caravan of donkey, horses, yak, dzo and sometimes even on sheep, used to set out on their long journey in a large group. Since, it was a long distance journey, the trading goes on with almost every villages they encounter along their journey. Their journey goes in a very entertaining way as on every halt they cook, drink and get themselves entertained by singing and dancing.

Trade with Skardu (now in Pakistan) which under the Dogra regime, formed one of the tehsils of Ladakh, was similar in nature to that of trade carried out between Leh and its sub regions as the road remained open throughout the year. It was mainly passed through two channels: Leh-Indus Valley-Skardu and Leh-Nubra-chorbat Khapulu. The trade between these two regions mainly consists of products like apricots, apricot kernel, almonds, grapes, butter and cooking clay pot etc. which they sell or barter to the other commodities of their usage. Thus, this way the basic necessities of daily life were mostly fulfilled through trade.

Unlike other neighbours of Ladakh, Skardu (Baltistan) has more deeper connection with Ladakh, they are not only bounded by the trade relation, rather they are like a members of a family sharing similar historical, political, cultural, geographical and climatic conditions and have been alienated by the exigencies of time.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Geographically, Ladakh is isolated by the huge mountain walls and difficult terrain but despite of all the natural hindrances, it always remained as an important channel of economic exchange and served as a meeting place of different nationalities. The traders of Central Asian countries, Tibet, Punjab, Kashmir, Kulu Kangra (Himachal Pradesh) and Baltistan converged at Leh and bartered their goods. Five trade routes led westward, northward and southward to and from Leh. Of these, the Leh-Kulu and Leh-Srinagar roads were the two major caravan routes for the Central Asian trade with the Northern Indian Plains. Amritsar and Hoshiarpur in Punjab were important centres for the Central Asian trade.

The indigenous product of Ladakh could not avail much value to its economy, but the only commodity that added to the wealth of Ladakh was the Pashmina, the fine wool of

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7Ibid.
9Ibid, p. 147.
goat, produced in the remote region of Rupshu, Rudok and Chang-thang. It was this product that fascinated the powerful neighbours to have their control over the polity of Ladakh. This product tempted Maharaja Gulab Singh, the Raja of Jammu, to undertake the conquest of Ladakh in 1834. The other indigenous commodities found in different districts of Ladakh were sulphur, borax, sheep wool and dried fruits that added little to the country’s annual income.

The foreign trade was carried through diverse routes. From Leh to Yarkhand, the caravan traders followed two different routes: *Zamistan* and *Tabistan* of which the former was used as the winter route and the later as summer. Apart from these two, another route followed by the caravan merchants was through Aksai Chin that passed through *Chang Chenmo* valley. The distance from Leh to Yarkand by the *Zamistani* route was 530 miles; by the *Tabistani* 480 miles, while by the *Chang Chenmo* route it was 507 miles.10

In official records, goods coming from Chinese Turkistan and Tibet were called ‘imports’ and goods coming from Punjab were called ‘exports’.11 Goods from Central Asia and Tibet consisted of tea, salt, charas, shawl wool, cloth, carpets, silk, sugar, coral, turquoise, tobacco, brocade, animal hides etc., while the goods from Punjab and north Indian plains like Kullu and Kashmir mostly consisted of rice, dates, sugar, honey, ghee, grain, spices, opium, herbs, shoes, pearls, Indian dyes, utensils, cotton cloths, saffron, girdle, religious scriptures etc., The traders weighed their item in Balti, Man, Seer, Khal and Sor of which the Khal was the universal measuring unit of all kinds of heavy produce. The smallest was sor or sormo.12

**TRADE BETWEEN LADAKH AND TIBET**

Trade between Ladakh and Tibet mainly consisted of products such as tea, salt and pashmina which is called *lena* in Ladakhi. As tea and salt formed one of the main source of livelihood of Ladakhi people, the trade of these two articles were carried out in bulks. This trade system between Ladakh and Tibet was later carried through two missions called *Lopchak* and *Chapa*, established under the ‘Treaty of Tingmosgang 1684.’ This treaty was concluded between Mughal, Ladakh and Tibet under which Kashmir gained a virtual monopoly over the

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precious wool of Pashmina. Simultaneously, this mission also gave rise to a number of lesser missions. The major monasteries sent half religious and half commercial mission to Tibet. According to this treaty, a Lopchak Mission will go from Leh to Lhasa once in every three years. The King of Ladakh was to send offerings like gold, saffron and textiles to Buddhist Tibet for the Smon-lam festival and for the blessings of Dalai Lama. In return, the Tibetan government sent an annual caravan from Lhasa to Leh, popularly known as Cha-pa mission or tea man as the mission used to come with loads of tea.

Other than that, this treaty gave Ladakh a special position in carrying out all the trade activities according to which it was decided that, Ladakh was to occupy a front-line position between Buddhists and non-Buddhist countries and in return of which, the king of Ladakh out of regard for the doctrine of Buddha must not allow an army from India to proceed to an attack on Tibet. The Kashmiri traders who wanted to deal in pashminahad to halt at a place called Spituk in Ladakh from where the trade will be further carried forward by the Ladakhi Lo-pchak representative and after exchanging the goods, the Lo-pchak would returned back with the exchanged goods which they had to resell it to the Kashmiri traders who were being stationed at Spituk.

In fact, the trade relation between the two regions is an old one and it goes back to as early as mid-seventh century, when the Tibetan nomads and the Aryan tribes (Mons and Dards) were engaged in exchanging grains for animal’s products. Gradually, the Tibetan nomads of Chang-thang probably inter-married with the Mon and Dard population and allowed a trading or bartering system to develop between the two groups of people. Hence, this trade continued to develop until the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1960 which proved to be the turning point in the history of Tibet.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

The trade activities that carried out over the centuries not only enhanced the Ladakhi economy rather it also left its imprint over the Ladakhi culture which has now evolved into a unique culture of its own. The region has its unique historical, cultural, political and strategic importance right from the past to present day. Today, Ladakhicuture is a blend of three indigenous culture i.e., Mons, Dards and Mongolian of Tibetan origin lying beyond its borders.

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14 Ibid, p. 22.
The traders from different countries over a period of time while coming on their business trip got married with the local women and settled here. One such community is the Argon community, the hybrid of Kashmiri traders and Ladakhi women and are called as Phy-i-pa which in Ladakhi means the outsider or foreigner. They form the core of the Sunni community in and around Leh.\(^{17}\) According to Ladakhi oral tradition, 'Jam-dbyang-nam-gyal, the King of Ladakh, in the 17th century, granted land to Kashmiri Muslim traders known as mKhar-phyog-pa or ‘court traders’ to settle in Leh, and they received special trade privileges in return for their services to the royal family. Their family networks extended to Rudok, Lhasa and Yarkand as well as Kashmir.\(^{18}\)

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Arghons produced several distinguished adventurers and enterprising travellers who accompanied European expeditionists to Central Asia and Tibet as caravan leaders, interpreters, guides and porters. Among the Ladakhi adventurers Galwan Rasul, Mohammad Issa and Qalam Rasul are worth mentioning.\(^{19}\) Galwan Rasul also pen down his life adventures in a book called “Servants of Sahibs.”

Discussing the relation of Ladakh with Central Asia, Abdul Ghani Sheikh, a Ladakhi historian, in his book ‘Reflections on Ladakh, Tibet and Central Asia’ mentioned that:

“In the days of trade relations with Central Asia, many Ladakhis used to speak Turkish languages, particularly the residents of Leh, and the villagers of the Nubra valley on the Leh-Yarkhand road. Some literate people also learned Persian. Some Turkish words have found their way into Ladakhi language, and are still used today. For example, Sarag turman is a Turkish word for ‘carrot’, and shapos means quilt. There are no equivalent words in Ladakhi. Similarly, the words qualin, risham, samosa, pulao, roghan josh, goshtaba, kapaq, eharoq, and pepaq are originally from Central Asia”.

Besides Central Asia, the Ladakhi vocabulary also contains Turkish, Chinese, Kashmiri, Punjabi and Urdu words which are used in their daily life.

On the eastern front, Tibet has a paramount impact on Ladakhi culture, language, and literature, mode of living and religion of the region. Tibet and Ladakh shared a lot in common. First of all, Ladakh and Tibet shared the same lineage of Yar-lung dynasty from early Tibetan kingdom. Secondly, Ladakh’s religious and spiritual ties with Buddhist Tibet is

\(^{17}\) John Bray, Ladakhi Histories Local and Regional Perspectives, Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2011, p. 14


a centuries old in which they developed a monastic institution and established all the major and several sub-sects of Tibetan Buddhism into Ladakh.

Thirdly, in terms of language, Ladakhi language is a dialect of western Tibetan and have the same script that belongs to Tibeto-Burman family. Apart from these, Ladakh and Tibet because of its similar geographical structure and weather, shared a same staple food i.e., tsampa which is prepared by barley flour and consumed butter tea in a large quantity. They have similar local drink called chang that is prepared by fermented barley. The traditional dress of both Tibet and Ladakh is called as goncha that is being worn by the male members though the female goncha of Ladakhi is different from the Tibetan female traditional dress called chuba.

END OF TRADE RELATIONS

With the demarcation of the international boundaries and political development, disputes over the borderland became more frequent, the economic and cultural ties between Ladakh and neighbouring countries came to a standstill. Thus, this trade that worth millions ceased with the Pakistani invasion in 1948 and the subsequent communist takeover in China as a result of which Ladakh’s economy received a body blow. On the eastern front, trade with western Tibet in salt, food grains, and pashm remained abrupt till the 1950s, tailing off after the Chinese occupation of Tibet and finally coming to an end about 1960. But there were no private caravans to Lhasa after the early 1930s, and the last Lo-pchak set off from Leh in 1945. The last Tibetan representative from Lhasa came to Leh in August 1950. Since then, both China and Pakistan has been claiming its authority over Ladakh and frequently tried to disturb bordering lands. Consequently, today, Ladakh has become a vulnerable area bounded by Pakistan in the west and China in the east.

CONCLUSION

Thus, we can conclude this paper by saying that, Ladakh because of its strategic location, obtained a significant status both in its history as well as in the contemporary period. The trade activities continued to profit the Ladakhi economy throughout its history. Though most of the commodities that being traded was not the product of Ladakh but demand of professional poneymen known as Kiraiyakash in the field of transport and service all along

the routes were one of the main source of income. Today, after 69 years of Independence, when all the border trade activities are ceased, efforts are being made between China and India to open up these trade routes to encourage cross-border trade which will not only boost the economic system but it will also promote pilgrimage to the Kailash Mansarovar Lake which remained one of the holy places among the Buddhist.

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