



CULTURAL HERITAGE OF LADAKH IN RELATION TO ORAL TRADITIONS: FOLK SONGS AND FOLK DANCES

Dr. Pallavi Sharma

(Research Scholar)

Department of History

University of Jammu, 180006

Jammu, India

Postal Address: H. No. F-27, Behind A.G. Office, Shiv Nagar, Jammu, J&K, 180001.

Abstract: Ladakh as a region holds so many unique features that need to be highlighted beyond its boundaries. Its geographical conditions, historical development, political system and most importantly its cultural attributes are the centre of attraction. Culturally, it is a blend of aged old traditions and customs that provides a unique identity to the region in the form of beautiful monasteries, buildings, stupas, ruined castles, palaces, rock art, paintings and sculptures in general and more prominently through festivals, folklore, traditional songs, dances, dresses, ornaments, food, art, architecture, etc. These connote Ladakh as a land of diverse culture. In this paper, the popular cultural traditions based on folk songs and folk dances of Ladakh are discussed. The musical heritage and cultural legacy of the region is enthrallingly rich, vibrant and splendid. Through this paper, an attempt is being made to have a reflection of incredible, spectacular folk traditions of Ladakh.

Key words- Ladakh, Folk songs, Folk dances, Culture, Heritage.

I. Introduction

Ladakh is a land, unique in itself. It is bounded on all sides by the belt of majestic mountain ranges, exhibiting such a panoramic view that cannot be expressed in words. Stunningly arid mountains lend a vibrant colour to its serene vicinity that has engrossed its viewers. Its valleys resonance the calmness and stillness of the endless universe. An outstanding feature is the spiritual magnetism that is still intact in the form of the crown of the earliest culture which has been the focus for visitors, scholars, tourists, nature lovers, and adventurous people from all over the world. A person who visited Ladakh formerly wishes to visit it multiple times to allure the beauty of its nature, gain satisfaction and enjoy balance made by the divine nature and human realms. A ride to Ladakh is not just a roving out there, it's a pilgrimage within. It is a traveling around the exclusive terrain. In terms of culture, the region consists of rich treasure of folk songs and dances highlighting the characteristics features of the traditional society. Through these traditional elements, one can easily understand the social, religious and cultural life of inhabitants of Ladakh. These are composed in such a manner that a complete picture of Ladakh and its incredible cultural components can be visualized.

The significance of these traditional elements is inferred by the excitement of people of Ladakh who are always waiting for occasion where they can perform dances or sing songs. Every social and cultural occasion starts and concludes with folk songs. These songs are composed so beautifully that even a non-Ladakhi also gets attracted to them. The best performance can be seen on certain occasions such as religious ceremonies, community functions, family functions, marriages, harvest seasons, etc. when the singers and dancers dressed gracefully in their traditional costumes and presented their performance in front of gathering in an elegant manner. Everyone overwhelmed with such a beautiful cultural residing in the harsh and tough terrain.

It has been observed that most of the occasions are performed during winter season when the climatic conditions are very harsh and people has no work to do. During that time they spend their time in merry-making, organizing cultural function, fest, marriage ceremonies, etc. These songs and dances are part of such gathering. Since ancient time, as a part of oral traditions, these are passed orally from one generation to another through the ages and gain popularity in every generation. The folk songs mainly include the themes of worshippers, heroic song, love song, religious songs, wedding songs and the *trashipa* (bkra'shis'pa). All these songs have their own uniqueness; another para which is repetition of some earlier stanzas and revealed an exceptional character of the composition.

II. Folk Songs

The folk traditions of Ladakh represent a distinct set of oral literature rich in content in terms of both information and creativity. These are composed in harmony with the musical instruments *surna*, *dhaman*, etc. There are about 2000 folk songs published by Ladakh Cultural Academy in both print and audio forms. Earlier, individual authors like A. H. Francke, Tashi Rabgais and other research scholars have worked on the Ladakhi folk literature, which have been transmitted orally by past generations by singing them in social

gatherings or conscious learning from master to pupil. Interestingly, the nature of compositions changed with political transitions from traditional monarchy to the period of Dogra annexation of Ladakh in the 1840s and then in the modern context of Independent India. Extolling virtues of kings, queens, high priests and nature were central to the popular themes of the traditional folk songs, and when ruling system get changed, the songs became more and more romantic along with diversifying influences.

There are three hundred and sixty tunes which are designated as music for the gods (*lharna*). *Lharna* tunes are sub-divided into two categories. One meant for lamas and another for kings, ministers or for nobles. The popular musical instruments are the *daman* and *surna*, the *drunyen*, a flageolet, banjo (a string like instrument), a double piped flute (apricot/walnut) known as the *Lingbu gNis rags* and a single pipe flute (bamboo), daff (a thin drum covered ones with leather from one side) and *dinjang* (musical instrument). Every social and cultural event begins and ends with singing and dancing. Though the authors of Ladakh's songs are not known but the modern scholars have found that there are about 50 types and subtypes of folk songs. Prominent of these are discussed below:

Congregational Songs

Gjung glu songs belong to the ancient time period when Ladakh's dynasties were flourishing. The composition of these songs shows respectful and honoured behaviour towards rulers, renowned lamas and other dignitaries. In addition, these were sung to glorify the prestige of gompas and other similar religious places.

Drinking Songs

Chang glu represent the most renowned *chhang* drink of Ladakh. To keep the body warm in the harsh climatic conditions, it is drunk in large amount. Moreover, the people of Ladakh are fond of feast and there is no such occasion where *chhang* is not available. No occasions whether social or cultural is celebrated in absence of *chhang*. Hence, theme of these songs mostly revolve around *chhang*, about its preparation, its taste, its effect in a romantic way like a poet who talks about something which is very special and precious. In the same way, *chhang* is much loved beverage of every person in Ladakh.

Another significant feature of *chhang* is its consideration as the food of *bdud rtsi*, the god, therefore, songs are sung in praise of this God too. Alexander Cunningham has mentioned that on various occasions, people are feasting, drinking *chhang*, singing these songs and dance and enjoying till the time *chhang* is not finished. Sometimes under the influence of *chhang*, there is huge uproar while songs are sung and people get enthralled into it.

Farewell Songs

Trashipa is a dance-song sung by dancers during any cultural occasions. Each song has its own cultural significance. It is sung for the harmony, growth and affluence of the spectators.

Heroic Songs

Gying glu glorifies the courageous actions of soldiers. In olden days, these were sung to make people aware of the bravery and courage of their soldiers. On various community gathering and ceremonies, these songs are most recommended. These songs are also recorded into German and English languages.

Love Songs

Togs glu is a term used for love songs. Such songs are mostly played on words and satires. As these are considered as private songs; therefore, such songs were sung either in fields while working there or on mountains while grazing the cattle. Through these songs one can realize the feelings of emotion, love, happiness and expressions of separation, sorrow, meeting, indifference, complaint and many more. These songs are most popular among the youngsters, but now a days, present generations are not much familiar with this traditional composition.

Marriage Songs

Such songs are known as *Bagston gi-glu*. The inhabitants of Ladakh are always looking for marriage occasions and feasting as they just want an opportunity to sing, dance and enjoy. During these occasions, traditional marriage songs are sung by both bride's and groom's families. In addition to this, the relatives associated with both of them also sung the songs. To entertain and lead the gathering of marriage ceremony in ancient dress, singers called *Nyawopa* is well versed with all the different marriage song. He is the one who lead the group of dancers and singers and mesmerize the whole gathering by their performance.

Religious Songs

Chhos are devoted to the religious chief, places of religious significance, religious practices and religious philosophies as well as the lamas. Presently, these songs are not the part of oral tradition. These are written by scholars based on oral folk. These songs are based on the religious teachings which are composed in poetic form. Now, these songs are becoming popular and sung in school prayer as well. Because of the growing influence of Buddhism, these songs are becoming popular among masses. Through them, people are showing their respect for their religious faith.

Sarcastic Songs

Trig glu are also private songs as through these songs, the weakness of people is expressed. But in informal ceremonies, these songs are a part of humor among friends. They are delivered like question-answer between groups of male and female based on the ironic gestures, disloyalty of the beloved and care of lover, ridiculous thoughts and beliefs. Though these songs, a scenario of grand entertainment is created where mostly every person has become part of humorous theme.

III. Folk Dances

Dance is one of the most important components of heritage of Ladakh. There is no occasion without Ladakhi dance. People of Ladakh are always waiting for occasion to play music and dance. They inherited the ancient heritage of their forefathers proudly and popularize it among the present generation so that they also remembered the songs sung by their ancestors and dance in traditional styles. As far as Ladakh's dance is concerned, Ladakhis used to say that it is very simple and easy to learn and there is no need of any long preparation. Though, it seems simple to the audience at the same moment the movements are equally difficult. At the beginning, the dance moves are very slow, then it become fast as per the music and reached to the final stage and then at once slow down and conclude with paying homage to the audience. During dance, some kind of religious obligation is also performed showing the impact of Buddhist ideology on the inhabitants of Ladakh. Each dance began by paying reverence to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha known as Triple Jewel and has three stages. The movement of dance fastens with each stage. The first stage starts with paying respect, in second stage music starts and final stage only music with dance.

Folk dances are performed during all festive occasions viz religious festivals, seasonal fairs, marriages, child birth, welcome functions, etc. Dance is part and parcel of social and culture milieu of Ladakh. If a person is not able to perform folk dance, it is considered as social dishonor for Ladakhi Buddhists. In Ladakh, every happy occasion starts with *Lharna*, symbol of good sign and ends with *Tasluspa*, a dance to pray happiness and well being of all. The various types of dances are discussed in the following heads:

Female Dance

It is performed only by the females. In this dance, females wear woollen shawl called *Logor (Bok)*. Initially, the movement is slow and become fast as the music change. While dancing, females make a greeting to the viewers by striking their bangles (conch shell). In second step, the dancers make an indication of plucking flowers and present to holiness. Then, the movement become faster and ends like male dance.

Male Dance

This is a male dance known as *Pu-tse-tses* where females can also take part but only with males. In this dance, dancers carried 'scarf' on their shoulders. It is a three-step dance. The first step involves greeting of the dancers to the viewers, in second step, the music and the beat of drum get changed and the movements become very fast and reached to climax in the final step and then make a final greeting. In this performance, the most attractive dancer is one who will keep the body straight and have calmness in their appearance.

Kompa Sumtsegs

This is also known as three- step dance. It is performed mainly in Leh by both men and women. This is basically male dance but females can also take part. It is known as three steps dance because at first, the dances has three steps of the similar foot in time as per the tune of music, though initially the movement

become slow and in the next step its frequency increased and in the third and final step, the dance frequency reverted to normal two step dance.

Shon Dance

It was performed in honour of Kings. In this dance, the participants were from nine particular families and are generally females. It is the bequest of Ladakh's dynasty. The dance was performed at Leh palace on the celebration of New Year. Now-a-days, it is performed by people from all sections of society.

Khathok Chenmo

It is popularly known as the dance of nobility because in past, this is performed for the royal families of Ladakh on special occasions like religious festivals or New Year celebrations. The dancers were selected from prominent families of Ladakh. Earlier, musicians would not play the music unless and until, the person of high aristocracy will not dance. Presently, such restrictions are not visible.

Shondol Dance

On the final day of Losar festival, this dance is performed. In past, it is presented for the recreation of royal families and other dignitaries. The term *shondol* means breaking the line, as it allows dancers to take backward steps. While dancing in right and left direction, the dancers offered welcome gesture to special guests. This is presented by aristocratic members.

Koshen Dance

Koshen means brocade, a dress material. Therefore, this dance is associated with the Brocade dress. Earlier this dress was worn only during special occasions. In this dance, a particular tune was played by the musicians which is similar to that of tune presented for royal families of Leh and Stok villages. It is also performed on the occasion of New Year festival, at Leh Bazaar. Before the beginning of festival, horse race is organized. The dance is performed by the horse racers.

Loshon Dance

This dance is performed on the eve of harvest festival at Shey village near Ladakh. This is also called as harvest dance. The dance is presented since 10th century as a tribute to goddess Dorje Chenmo, the goddess of harvest, who is believed to take human form. The dancers danced in a circle by holding hands and move forwards and backwards while singing.

Nyawopa Dance

This is performed by the selected member of marriage party during the marriage ceremony. These selected dancers are called Nyawopa who major task is to sing and dance in the marriage occasions.

Spao Dance

This is warrior dance linked with Gesar. During this dance, the famous Gyalam Gesar epic based on life of Gesar's was recited. The dancers are armed with quiver, sword and bow & arrow while singing songs from this epic.

Chabskyan Dance

This dance is performed with a brass-jug full of *chhang* placed on the head of performer. A dance can perform only if the participants are confident enough to maintain equilibrium of pot on head. This dance concluded with the offering of *chhang* to the special guest.

Takshon Dance

It is performed by the members of noble family on the eve of New Year celebration. During ancient time, it is performed by the priest of the palace along with his equals in palace.

Jabro Dance

It is a Tibetan form of dance prevalent in Ladakh. In this dance, only the hands and foot movements are visible. The dancers are holding an instrument similar to violin with cap known as Tsering *Kil Khor*. In this dance, the movements are very fast that even the viewers were stunned to see the intimacy of the dancers.

Dances Associated with Religion: Ritual Dance Form

Ladakh is a place of several races who brought with them different religious practices. One of the most ancient and popular religious practice is Bon religion- a practice prevalent before the popularity of Buddhism. The study finds that this practice is borrowed from Tibet where it is followed as animist belief like Shamanism- a folk tradition. It is an orthodox practice as pre present age in which shamans having supernatural powers can beat the humans affected with evil supernatural spirits.

Chhams

This is the religious dance presented by monks on annual festival in large monasteries. According to Buddhist faith, this dance is meant to bless viewers and restrict calamities, depict success of truth over troubles, to please holiness and to seek tranquility and affluence in the planet. The rules of this dance have been stored in a book called "*Chhamik*". The dancers practice well before presentation to attain perfection.

Mask Dance

Mask dance has great religious significance indicating the deep influence of Bon tradition. It is presented along with a typical music during which two artists presented an inseparable ritualistic presentation. It began with a slow dance moment showing their reverence to holy lamas and then become fast and finally ends vigorously. This dance is prevalent upto 6th century purely under the influence of Bonism by wearing the

decorated masks of yak, deer and sheep. Later on, Bonism tradition of mask get mixed with folk dances wearing only the mask of white sheep indicating the Buddhist impact along with the socio-religious life of Ladakh. The masks are very symbolic in nature and are beautifully decorated and ornamented keeping in mind the effect of climatic conditions as well. The colours used to beautify the mask have great significance. The Red colour of mask signifies cleverness, courage and skillful strategy to win others. The Yellow colour mask means extreme knowledge and visionary personality. The mask of Green colour indicates accomplishment, meritorious being, compassion and moral values. The Blue colour mask signifies courage, boldness and valor. The Purple colour highlights extreme dislike and aggressive nature. The mask of Black colour means brutality and wildness against evil. The White colour mask symbolizes peace, prosperity and fortune. In this dance form, some Tantric deities are also presented. Goddess of Fortune and Vajra bearing blue mask are seated on the stage escorted by two more Goddess wearing dragon-headed mask and other wearing mask of lion-head.

It has been found that during some celebrations, dancers firstly sing song and then perform dance. The main dancer sings loudly *Yasha-O, Yasha*, to begin the performance. An interesting thing visible in dance is the social hierarchy such as aristocratic family member comes first in line, then the elder member of society in the dance group followed by social status of each dancer.

IV. Present Status Ladakhi Culture and Traditions

In this contemporary world, there is a growing impact of modernization on all sections of the society and Ladakh has no exception. There are very few Ladakhis who are well versed with their traditional songs and dance. Alex Gillespie in his book titled "*Becoming Others- From Social Interaction to Self Reflection*" mentioned the contemporary state of Ladakhis aged old traditions of folk songs and dance. In an appealing manner, he has described the present state of mind of Ladakhis towards their own culture. In past, Ladakhis rarely "watched" performances of their own culture. Whenever there is a cultural events, they all participated in dancing and singing. Today, there is more watching that participation and performance is displayed by professional dancers. Now, Ladakhis are also like the tourists who sit as audiences as tourists do and clap for their own cultural performance. They are appreciating their own culture like tourists. In addition, in such cultural fest, there is an announcer who explains the traditional songs of Ladakh both in regional Ladakhi language for local audience and in English for tourists. Through the commentaries of these announcers, it has been observed that Ladakhi announcer is educating their own Ladakhi people about their own culture and making explicable to Ladakhis why these tourists are paying for 'their' culture. In 2001, during Women Alliance, "Festival of Traditional Culture", a troupe of Ladakhi girls in traditional dresses sang a contemporary Ladakhi song which tourists understood it as regional traditional song. This is an initiative to preserve their Ladakhi culture. This is the time when Ladakhis are discussing with each other to preserve their culture, efforts are also put in which indicates the present status of culture, as time has come when not only tourist even the Ladakhis are telling each other to preserve their own culture. Ladakhis are 'lucky' to have such precious culture and 'they' should preserve it.

V. Conclusion

Ladakhi songs are simple in thought, content and performance revealing the simple and noble nature of Ladakhi people. Though living in harsh climatic condition, they are always smiling, fun-loving and adjusting according to their surroundings. Ladakh has rich treasure of folk songs and dances highlighting the characteristics features of its traditional society. Through the themes of songs, the qualities of different sections of the society, their economic conditions, their relationship with each other, etc. can be inferred. These songs and dances are also the means towards salvation. The study finds that the popularity of these traditional elements is more among the ancient inhabitants and through the ages, this folk lore is losing significance under the impact of modernization. It has now only limited to cultural fest or community occasion. Being oral in nature, it is important to note down these original melodies and preserve it for coming generations and keep the oral tradition of their ancestors alive forever. Though foremost steps in the preservation of Ladakhi culture should be taken by Ladakhis themselves, but it is not only the duty of the Ladakhis, even the tourists should show respect and responsible attitude to preserve Ladakh's rich and vibrant culture and tradition.

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