



SIGNIFICANCE OF WOOL TRADE IN THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMICAL DEVELOPMENT OF LADAKH.

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Abstract:

Ladakh, a region in the northern India, has history that is connected with Trans-Himalayan trade. The region was at the nodal point of whole complex trade routes. These routes paved way for exchanges of ideas and commodities. One of the most significant articles that shaped the region's political and economic history was the wool trade. Such was the significance of wool trade that every authority fought for the monopoly of this trade. The major invasions that Ladakh faced from its neighbours were because of their interest in the wool trade.

Index Terms- Ladakh, Wool Trade, Kashmir, Tibet.

Introduction:

Surrounded by mountains on every side, the area of Ladakh is often geographically defined in relation to its surroundings. The history of the region abounds in the stories of people's movements from one region to another. Such movements often result in the exchange of religious ideas, cultures and commodities. Alexander Cunningham has rightly remarked that Ladakh's relation with surrounding states, were chiefly confined to

political and commercial ties with Central Asia and Kashmir and to the Religious and cultural connections with Tibet.¹

In this article, I refer to Ladakh in a manner quite different from its contemporary usage. Today Ladakh region includes the two political districts of Leh and Kargil, a Union Territory in India. However, the contemporary definition fails to capture the complexities of the region's history. Needless to say that Ladakh, due to its shifting alliances with the neighboring regions has had profound impacts on its entity. Different historical conjunctures have different stories for the region. It can well be said that the region has been part of a number of political entities in the course of its history. In fact the shifts in Ladakh's boundaries can be explained alongside the enormous cultural, political and social intercourses the region had with its neighbours.² From around the 16th century onwards, the region included a number of distinct areas, including the fairly populous main Indus valley, the more remote Zangskar, Lahaul and Spiti³ to the south, Aksai Chin⁴ and Ngari, including the Rudok region and Guge in the east, the Nubra valleys to the north, Baltistan⁵, Kargil and Suru Valley in the west. Ladakh lost its independence in 1842, when the Dogras annexed it to the state of Jammu. The Chronicle of Ladakh (*La dvags rgyal rabs*⁶), meaning the Royal Chronicle of the Kings of Ladakh recorded that this boundary was traditional and well known.

¹ Alexander Cunningham, *Ladakh- Physical, Statistical and Historical*, Asian Education Services, New Delhi, 1998, p. 261.

² John Bray, (edt.) *Ladakhi Histories, Regional and Local perspective*, Brill, Leiden- Boston, 2005, p. 1.

³ When in 1846, Gulab Singh became the Maharaja of Jammu , Kashmir and Ladakh, the British Government retained control of Lahul, which has been conquered by the Sikhs in 1840-41, and Spiti which had previously been under the nominal control of Ladakh.

⁴ The Aksai Chin is in the vicinity of Karakoram pass on the India-China border, illegally grabbed by the China in a military incursion carried out by China in 1962. Since then the international line of actual control was drawn with Aksai Chin firmly as Chinese territory.

⁵ Baltistan and Skardu area, presently under Pakistani rule and entirely Muslim, used to be included in what is geographically referred to as Ladakh. Before partition, Baltistan was one of the districts of Ladakh. Skardo was the winter capital of Ladakh while Leh was the summer capital. People of Baltistan and Ladakh speak very similar languages closely related to Tibetan.

⁶ *La- dvags –gyal- rabs* (Royal chronicle of Ladakh) is one of the well-known chronicles of Ladakh. It forms the major source for the study of the History of Ladakh. I have used the edited and translated version of *La dvags Gyal rabs* by A.H. Franke in his *Antiquities of Indian Tibet-2*, both the Tibetan script and the translated part has been used. Hereafter referred to as Ladakh Chronicle or will be written as LdGr.

Ladakh is known as the cross road of High Asia, as it was the main point of a whole complex of trade routes. These routes were frequented by the merchants who actually were enrolled in trade. Though number of articles was exchanged through these routes, here in this article, I will majorly focus on the wool trade. Wool trade played an important role in the political and economical development of the region.

Wool: An important trading article.

The goat wool or Pashmina was the most important article of the trade between Ladakh, Tibet, Kashmir and Yarkand. Ladakh imported wool from the Western Tibet, which was the real source of it, and were sold to the Kashmiri merchants. Kashmir shawl industry was the main source of economy its economy till the 19th century. In the words of G.J Alder, the most important commodity passing through Ladakh was the fine under-wool of the sheep and goat used in the manufacture of Kashmir shawls, coming not from eastern Turkistan but from the lofty uplands of Western Tibet and monopolised almost exclusively by the Kashmir weavers. Infact he believes that, it was this valuable commodity which first attracted the attention of the British to the commercial possibilities of the far north.⁷

As rightly said by Janet Rizvi, the pashmina trade was a matter of critical importance to both Kashmir and Ladakh in the economic sense. Pashmina, the soft warm undercoat grown in the bitter cold of the trans-Himalayan winter by a particular breed of domestic goat, was and is the raw material for Kashmir's shawl industry, as such it represented not only the origin of a large portion of the revenue of successive government of Kashmir, but also the livelihood of a vast number of craftspeople, spinners, weavers, rafugars (semi-stitchers), pattern drawers, dyers and others, most of whose skills were specific to the processing of pashm wool into shawl.⁸ Apart from the famous shawl, wool was used for the manufacturing of other items. It is knitted into heavy blankets, caps, dresses and carpets which are used by the Ladakh people to protect themselves from the unbearable winter chilling cold.

The manufacture of Shawls reached its zenith during the Mughal Period (1586-1750 A.D.). They were produced on a large scale and exported. Mughal Emperors were lovers of art and beauty and they extended their full patronage to shawl manufacture. The number of looms engaged in shawl manufacture increased from 2000 at the beginning of the Mughal period to 40,000 during the reign of Jahangir. Akbar was fond of shawls and he took personal interest in their manufacturing. The following principal kind of Shawls were manufactured during the Mughal period.

⁷ G. J. Alder, *British India's Northern Frontier 1865-1895: A study in Imperial Policy*, Longman, London, 1963, p. 15.

⁸ Janet Rizvi, *Trans-Himalayan Caravans: Merchants Princes and Peasants Traders in Ladakh*, p. 51.

1. Tus-Asel with grey colour inkling to red, some shawls and a perfectly white color.

These excelled in lightness, warmth and softness.

2. Safed Alcheh also called Tarehdar

3. Zardozy, Gulabetun, Keshdeh and Culgha were Akbars's inventions

4. Long piece of shawls called James.⁹

During the Afghan Rule (1759-1819) the industry improved as they also found of Shawls. But they introduced a system of taxation, known as Dag. Shawl which ultimately resulted in the exploitation of the shawl weavers and the decline of the industry during and after the Afghan and the Sikh Rule. About the types of wool, Bernier writes that, there are two kinds of fine wool of Ladakh, the first from the sheep and the second from the touz (Tibetan Antelope).¹⁰ The raw wool was extracted from under fleece of the goats reared in the high elevated areas of Western Tibet, and the 'toosh' or 'tus', often referred to as 'asali' or genuine 'tus', a fibre even softer than the ordinary Pashim having a considerable commercial value, is extracted primarily from the Chiru or the Tibetan Antelope. It was the trade of pashmina wool, which formed the most important links that Ladakh had with her neighbours for centuries. Mughals sources have vast information about the wool trade. Bernier, reports that Ladakh had been an important trade route between Kashmir and China, and mentions musk, crystals, jade, and wool of Ladakh as important trade goods.

The pashmina business attracted Ladakh to outsiders. One clause of the Treaty of Temisgham 1684 was on wool. The main reason for the Dogra conquest of Ladakh In 1834 was pashmina trade. The Reason for the appointment of British Joint commissioner in 1867 in Leh was also related to the wool trade. Many travellers have described in detail about the shawl wool trade between Ladakh and Kashmir and it is been described as the most important article of trade. In 1870 a commercial treaty has been signed between the British government and the Maharaja of J&K.

Mirza Haider, also has invaded Ladakh in 1532, has also mention about the nomads (Changpas) of eastern Ladakh (Changthang) being engaged in some barter system with the neighbouring regions. Talking about the way of life of Champas, he writes:

“The champa, or nomads, use sheeps exclusively, as beast of burden. The sheep carry, perhaps, twelve statute man. They harness them with pack-saddles, halters, and girths; they place the load upon the sheep, and except when necessary, never take it off. In the winter they descend towards the western and southern slopes

⁹ Abdul Hamid Malik, Shawl Industry article in *Cherry Tree*. November, 2013. <https://thecherrytree.in/shawl-industry-evolution-by-prof-abdul-hamid>.

¹⁰ Bernier Francois, *Travels in the Mughal Empire AD 1656- 1668*, pp. 402-403.

toward Hindustan- taking with them wares of Khitai, salt, cloth of goat's hair, zedoary, kutas (yaks), gold, and shawls, which are Tibetan goods".¹¹

So during the 16th century, the wool was exported to the other regions as mentioned by Mirza, though he used the word Shawls by which he surely meant wool.

Other Mughal sources like, Ain-i-Akbari, Bernier's Travels in the Mogul Empire and tuzuk i jahangiri, have mention about the shawl, but most of them does not talk about the wool trade. Bernier who was in Kashmir with Aurangzeb had some idea about the wool trade, as he says that the Ladakh has stopped the passage of caravans from Kashmir to pass through it since Shah Jahan's time¹². Again we know from Mughal sources that the passage was opened again for the trade during the time of Aurangzeb, and since then Ladakh's role as supplier of the shawl wool came into the forefront. Even Jahangir was very much aware of the Ladakh's economic importance, as he has mentioned in his autobiography that the best-quality wool for Kashmiri shawls came from Tibet and Ladakh, and that the goat, which produced the shawl wool, was peculiar to Tibet.¹³

By the late 17th century, the trade in shawl wool had become a matter of such importance as to be the subject of the most significant clause of the, Treaty of Timosgang in 1684, following the Tibeto Mongol war with Ladakh, and which define Ladakh's relations with Tibet on one hand and Kashmir on the other, for the next century and a half.¹⁴ As explained in the previous chapter the treaty proved to be highly profitable for the Kashmir as they got the monopoly over the pashmina wool produced in Ladakh and also from the provinces of Western Tibet. And this monopoly continued till the 19th century even after Kashmir faced many political changes, passing from the Mughals, then to the Afghans and finally to the Sikh. The importance of shawl wool could also be understood from the fact that A Kashmiri shawl always constituted as one of most important item, whenever Sikhs or Dogras present tribute or gifts to the British.

Western travellers like, Moorcroft who visited Ladakh in 1812 A.D. has mentioned about the wool trade saying that it is the most important article of trade of Ladakh. He further adds that the source of wool lies in the western Tibet, that is Rudhok, Changthang and a small quantity from Ladakh itself, and it is supplied to Kashmir. Mentioning about the wool Trade with Kashmir he writes.

¹¹ Mirza Haider Dughlat, *The Tarikh-i-Rashidi of Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat. A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia*, tr. E. Denison Ross and ed. Ney Elais, Low Marston, London, 1895, p. 408.

¹² Bernier Francois, *Travels in the Mughal Empire AD 1656- 1668*, p. 426.

¹³ Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i Jahahgiri*, tr. Alexander Rogers ed.. H. Beveridge. Delhi, p. 148.

¹⁴ Janet Rizvi, *Trans-Himalayan Caravans: Merchants Princes and Peasants Traders in Ladakh*, p. 53.

“About eight hundred loads are annually exported to Kashmir, to which country, by ancient custom and engagements, the export is exclusively confined, and all attempts to convey it to other countries are punished by confiscation”¹⁵

Moorcroft even visited Gartok and Mansarovar, mainly to know about the main source of the wool trade and to investigate the possibilities of the British government to trade in shawl goods, which he thought would be carried with Russia through the Countries like Yarkhand and Bokhara and if possible to establish a shawl industry either there or in Great Britain itself. He has discussed in details about the whole process of shawl manufacture, and his figures of annual import of Pashm into Kashmir in early 1820's between 120,000 and 240,000 pounds or, 54545 and 109,091 kilograms, and the import of 'asli tus' seldom amounted to more than 15 bales amounting to little less than 1000 pounds or about 445 kilograms. Moorcroft also observes the expense of transport from Leh to Kashmir to be rupees 33 per horse load, duties collected in both Ladakh and Kashmir amounts to Rupees 95 per horse load. The rate varied depending on the quality of wools, dark wool was charged half of the duty on the white wool and 'asali tus' paid double the duty charged on the white wool.¹⁶

Alexander Cunningham, also writes that the principle article of Ladakhi trade between Chinese provinces and India is shawl-wool, of which about 3,200 maunds are annually sold to the Kashmiris, and an equal quantity of the traders of Nurpur, Rampur, Amritsar and Ludiana. Of this, some 2,400 maunds are the produce of the country, and the remainder, amounting to 4,000 maunds, or 128,000 Ib., is obtained from Chang-Thang and Ruthog. As the average value of shawl wool in Ladak is two rupees per seer, or one rupee per Ib., the total value of the annual import of shawl wool is Rs. 1, 28,000.¹⁷ Janet Rizvi has computed the following table on the basis of Cunningham's estimate on the export of shawl wool from Ladakh to Kashmir in 1847.

¹⁵ William Moorcroft and Trebeck, George., *Travels in Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and Punjab*, p. 347.

¹⁶ William and Trebeck, George., *Travels in Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and Punjab*, pp. 164-184.

¹⁷ Alexander Cunningham, *Ladakh, Physical, Statistical and Historical*, p. 244.

ESTIMATE OF THE EXPORT OF SHAWL WOOL FROM LADAKH TO KASHMIR IN 1847

	Small maunds	= lb	= kg	Value Rs.	Rate of maund Import (Rs.)	duty per Export (Rs.)	Value of duty Rs.
Pashm produced in							
Ladakh	2,400	76,800	34,809	76,800			
W.Tibet	4,000	128,000	58,182	128,000	8 as.		2,000
Yarkand	(875)	(28,000)	12,727	28,000	2.4 as		(2,100)
Total	7,275	232,800	105,818	232,800			4,100
Pashm exported to							
Kashmir	3,200	102,400	46,545	102,400		8 as.	1,600
Punjab	3,200	102,400	46,545	102,400		12 as.	1,400
Total	6,400	204,800	93,090	204,800			3000
					Grand Total		8,100

Rizvi, Trans Himalayan Caravans, p.284 .Export of wool from Ladakh, Kashmir and Punjab.

Conclusion

The wool trade has played an important role in the history of Ladakh. It was the most important article of the trade between Ladakh and the neighbouring regions. It was the wool trade which attracted Ladakh to the outsiders, the importance of the wool trade lies in the fact that it formed one of the important clause of the Treaty of Timisgham of 1684. According to the treaty the Kashmiri merchants got the monopoly over the wool produced in Ladakh and also from the provinces of Western Tibet. It had led to the major political changes and also has contributed in the economical growth of the region.

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