

DISCRIMINATION IN LADAKHI SOCIETY

A Study of Mons & Bedas of Ladakh

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Summary

This paper describes the Mons and Bedas as cultural groups of Ladakh, their history in brief, and their position in the whole of Ladakhi society; they form approximately 2% of the total Ladakhi population. Mons and Bedas are Buddhists as well as Muslims and they are found in nearly all the villages of Ladakh, excluding Changthang and Zanskar. They are recognised as the professional musicians of Ladakh but are considered the lowest in the social hierarchy of Ladakhi society. This paper is based upon the research conducted for a M.Phil project entitled *Mons of Ladakh - an Ethnographic study*.

Mons and Bedas are two sub-cultural groups of Ladakh. It was stated in a recent report that the total population of Mons in Leh District is 873. They are all Buddhists and form 1.17% of the total population of Ladakh. Bedas are 319 in number. They are Buddhist as well as Muslims¹ and form 0.43% of the total population of Leh District. Mons and Bedas are the traditional musicians of Ladakh. We find a few odd families of Mons in each Ladakhi village.²

The term 'Mon' has been used for 'water dwellers' in the Tibetan language³. According to one view, the Mons are the original inhabitants of Ladakh. They are Aryan and settled there before the arrival of the Tibetans and the Dards. They are believed to have come from Karja in Himachal Pradesh and set up their dwellings in Ladakh⁴. S.S Gergan believes that the Mon or Rman people were of Austro-Asiatic origin.⁵ The other view is that the Mons had come to Ladakh to spread Buddhism⁶.

1. Tribal Census of Ladakh. 1991 Registrar Gen. of India. Report received through Supt. Archives, Leh, Ladakh.
2. Ribbach, S.H. 1940 *Drogpa Namgyal*. Repr. 1986, transl. John Bray as *Culture and Society in Ladakh*. Ess Ess. Pub. New Delhi. p.108.
3. Snellgrove, D. L. & T. Skorupski 1977, 1980 *Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*. Vikas Pub. New Delhi. Index.
4. Khan Hashmatullah Lucknowee. 1939 *Tareekhi-Jammu-wa-Maftoohati Maharaja Gulab Singh*. Lucknow. p.69.
5. Gergan, S.S. 1980 "Ladakh, the Land of Gumpas". In *Heritage of Kashmir*. Ed. Husnain, F.M. p.49.
6. Francke, A.H. 1981 *A History of Ladakh*. Summit Publishing, New Delhi. p.25.

Mons have been described as the rulers of Ladakh. It is opined that when the Mons arrived in Ladakh, they set up their government, the seat of which was at the village of Rgya and the ruler was called Gyapa cho who was also a member of the Mon group⁷. S.S.Gergan maintains that Leh was also the seat of the Mon king⁸. Mons have been called the great builders and artisans⁹. Various ruins such as the ruined castle of Rgya, the ancient palace of Sakti and Chemri villages, have been referred to as the constructions of Mons¹⁰. Francke writes that the various ruins of Zanskar, are remnants of the Mon civilization¹¹. The famous statue of Chamba (Maitreya) which is twenty five feet high and carved in hard rock at Sanku and Mulbekh, are believed to be master pieces of Mon civilization¹². However, the local traditions do not fully support the views of these researchers. The view that the Mons were the teachers of Buddhism, is not at all accepted by these traditions. Also the view that the Mons have ruled in any part of Ladakh is dismissed. It is however maintained that the Mons are Aryans and had migrated from Lahul, Spiti and Karja to Ladakh. It is also held that they inhabited Ladakh before the arrival of Buddhism there and they believed in Bon, the original religion of Tibet and Ladakh.

The word 'Beda' is derived from the Tibetan words *Be* and *da*. *Be* refers to separately and *da* means reside. So, Beda means to live separately. The local traditions maintain that the Bedas were the inhabitants of Lahul and had migrated to Ladakh, a long time after the Mons. All Muslim musicians are called Bedas. Muslim Bedas differ from Buddhist Bedas in many respects. They have permanent homes like the Mons; whereas Buddhist Bedas are wandering minstrels¹³. The Muslim Bedas own some land to give them subsistence; whereas the Buddhist Bedas sole means of livelihood is playing music. They go from door to door and beat their drums in front of houses and get a plate of flour and money in return¹⁴. The Muslim Bedas are believed to be descendants of a group of musicians (Kharmons), who came to Ladakh, with the Rgyal Khatoon of King Jamyang Namgyal of Ladakh

7. Khan Mashmatullah. op. cit. p.230.

8. Gergan, S.S. op. cit. p.150.

9. Ibid.

10. Kacho Sikander A. Khan. 1986 *Tareekhi-wa-Tamadu ni Ladakh*. KACHO, published Leh, Ladakh. p 94.

11. Francke, A.H. 1973 *Ladakh the mysterious land*. Cosmo Publishing. New Delhi. p.23.

12. Gergan, S.S. op. cit. p 160.

13. Shaksपो, N. Tsering. *Songs from the Himalayas*. Ladakh Ecological Development Group, Leh, Ladakh. p.7.

14. Ibid.

from Skardu¹⁵.

The Mons and the Bedas are of great importance in Ladakhi Buddhist society. If you want to hear of the brave actions of king Kesar, it is the Mon musician who will tell you about them. If you have to arrange a wedding or any sort of entertainment, you must not omit to call the Mon drummer to sustain the enthusiasm of your guests, by beating his queer little kettledrum¹⁶. They are wanted at every social, religious and cultural function. No such function can take place in their absence.

In spite of all this, the Mons and the Bedas are the most despised people in the Ladakhi society. Common Ladakhis can not give any clarification to this lower social position of the Mons and Bedas. Francke believed that the Mons belonged to a nation different from Tibet and were conquered by the Tibetans and dominated, which lowered their social position¹⁷. There is a local tradition about the reason for the low social position of these people. According to this tradition, it is believed that before the arrival of Buddhism in Ladakh, the Mons were hunters and butchers. They continued these professions even after the spread of Buddhism. As Buddhism considers hunting and butchery vicious, hence the Mons too were considered low and vicious. Some local people regard their low economic position as the cause of their low social status.

There are some traditions observed by Ladakhi Buddhists to keep the social distance between a Mon and a non-Mon, which shows the social status of a Mon in Ladakhi society.

1. In any traditional gathering, whether it is social or religious, the seating arrangement follows a more or less rigid hierarchy, dependent upon the social status of the people there. They sit in a line with the terminal end of the line occupied by the Beda followed by the Mon.

2. The other people seated there have matting provided to sit on by the host, but no such matting is provided for a Mon or a Beda.

3. All the guests there with the exception of the Mon and the Beda are provided by the host with a cup, spoon etc. The Mons and Bedas have to bring their own.

4. All other persons seated there are provided with a small table called *tchok-tse* in front, on which to place the cups and the food.

15. Rizvi, Janet 1989 *Ladakh: crossroads of High Asia*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

16. Heber, A.R. & K.M. 1977 *In Himalayan Tibet and Ladakh*. Ess Ess Publications, New Delhi. p.24.

17. Ribbach, S.H. op. cit. p.108.

The Mons and the Bedas are strictly endogamous groups. The rule of endogamy is to be followed always. There is no incidence of any love marriage between a Mon or Beda and Bota. It is due to the fact that if a Bota marries a Mon or a Beda, he loses his own status in society. A Mon or a Beda cannot normally become a lama (i.e.a Buddhist priest) a status considered very holy and highly revered in the Buddhist society of Ladakh. However, there are two Mon Lamas, but due to social discrimination, they have migrated to Himachal Pradesh¹⁸.

The case is entirely different for the Muslims of Ladakh. In Leh, the Muslim Bedas are on a par in status with the other Muslims but with some restrictions on inter-caste marriages. In Kargil district there is no such restriction, and we find Muslim Mons in the villages of Sakar, Chikthan, Fokar and Tambis, sometimes even having the same *phaspun*¹⁹ as non-Mons. These Mon families are holding very good positions in their villages, unlike their co-group at Leh.

Now as far as the social structural consciousness among the Mons and Bedas is concerned, they are very conscious of their low status in the society. This awareness is more among the Mons than the Bedas. Hence most of the Mons do not like to be addressed as Mons. On visiting villages in and around Leh, it is difficult to locate Mon families. People do not refer to them as Mons but as 'artists'.

The question now arises as to whether they make any effort to change their social position. Certainly they do struggle to achieve this. As observed, they do send their children to schools to provide them with education and then they succeed in getting regular salaried jobs²⁰. They are trying in this way to abandon their traditional profession of musician.

The Mons and the Bedas made a collective effort some years ago to bring about a change in the attitude of the Ladakhi Buddhists towards them. When H.H. The Dalai Lama (14th. Incarnation) visited Leh, a representative group of Mons and Bedas met him and presented their problem of social discrimination against them by the Ladakhi Buddhists. In response, His Highness, when addressing the audience, forbade people to continue their bad attitude to the Mons and Bedas.

All these efforts have proved useless so far and there has been no change in the attitude of the common Ladakhi Buddhist towards the Mons and the Bedas.

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18. Rinpoche K. Tukdan, in response to this point, said at the Sixth Colloquium that these two lamas had been sent by him to Himachal.
 19. *Phaspun* is a traditional social organisation at village level. It is a group of several families who cooperate in social activities
 20. Shaksपो, N.Tsering. op. cit. p.9.