

LADAKH'S CULTURAL HERITAGE: ITS UNIQUE FESTIVALS AND DANCES

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ABSTRACT

Ladakh the land of lamas and gompas is unique in its culture, religion, ethnicity and topography. Different valleys and rivers in Ladakh create it into smaller sub-regions each having its own exclusive identity. These sub-regions reflect the varied dialects and customs collectively knitted into a unique ethnic cluster. While mentioning Ladakh's rich cultural heritage, one cannot remain silent about the outlandish festivals of the snowland. The festivals and dances of Ladakh on different occasions are the first choice of every traveler or researcher to visit Ladakh. The festivals of Ladakh reflect in-depth relationship with dances of Ladakh which add charm to the festivals. These festivals exhibit highly choreographed dances accompanied with mystic music, colorful dresses and unique facial masks to mark the celebration.

The paper has tried to highlight the famous festivals of Ladakh like Hemis, Losar, Sindu Darshan, Matho Nagrang and others whose importance is visible not only in Ladakh but in India's rich cultural heritage. The paper also studies the dances of the Ladakh like: Cham-mask dance, Jabro dances, Drugpa-Rches which beautify the glorious Ladakh festivals.

KEYWORDS: Ladakh, culture, heritage, festivals, dances.

INTRODUCTION

Ladakh or 'The small Tibet' is a disagreeable mountainous desert of unique wild beauty set in the projected peaks of the western Himalaya on the north-east border of India. The unique land of Ladakh popularly known as the 'The land of lamas, gompas and monasteries sometimes has the influence of Buddhism and Tibetan culture. It is popular belief that Buddhism was introduced there during the time of king Ashoka who is said to have built first Buddhist temple in Suru valley. Ladakh has attracted travelers from ancient times and still continues to do so. It is a fabulous land with most interesting geography, history and customs. In spite of its extreme weather conditions, long distances and inadequate means of communication, Ladakh has always been a place of gay festivals and crowded fair. Most of the festivals no, doubt, revolve round religious themes. In these festivals of Ladakh dance form an important part. In order to have the complete picture of the Ladakhi culture it is best to visit Ladakh in the festival seasons. These festival seasons are the first choice of the every visitor or researcher to visit Ladakh. Most of the festivals which are celebrated in this region are annual monastic festivals and comprise of

dances and dramas in gompas performed by the lamas or monks. Dance in these festivals represents the inseparable relation between the two. The monks in dances wear comic marks, colorful dresses representing the different aspects of their religion, culture and ethnicity.

In the words of a non-Ladakhi writer, “Any occasion is good for feasting and dancing. Someone born into a family in the village? The chhang flows. The whole village is fed. Someone getting married? The formalities are prolonged so that the feasting can continue...The main idea is merry-making. At work, the people whistle and sing song of epic heroes and religious here”. Fairs and festivals in Ladakhi region have a deep-rooted social impact. They provide opportunities for the people to interact and to enjoy. Due to heavy snowfall in the winter season, most of the people have relatively more idle time on their hands and hence most of the Gompas or monasteries choose this time for their annual festivals though there are summer festivals too. Lamas dressed in colorful robes and masks perform dance dramas and mimes that often symbolize the victory of the good over evil and other aspects of the religion. These festivals serve as occasions to celebrate and participate in merry-making activities such as dance, music, shopping and feasting. Invariably every Ladakhi village, according to its size, has a big or small gompa (monastery). It is both religious and temporal institution, and has, in capacity, fostered dances and music. Dances by the folk, to the accompaniment of music, whether pertaining to religious observances or special family occasions like births and marriages, are important elements in the life-style of the gay Ladakhis.

Festivals of Ladakh

Ladakh has a very rich culture which is displayed in the many festivals held there. In Ladakh every occasion, whether it is a marriage ceremony, birth, harvesting, commemoration of head lamas, losar, etc. is marked by feasting, dancing, singing of folksongs that forms an important part of its living heritage. In Ladakh most of the festivals are celebrated in winter but some of the festivals are celebrated in summer also.. The exuberance, gaiety, colorful and pageantry associated with these festivals make them great occasions of rejoicing and joy. People belonging to other religions also mix freely with Buddhists and enjoy dancing in their festivals.

Monastic festivals are the distinct characteristic of Ladakhi Culture which is celebrated with great pomp and fervor. The people from various parts of Ladakh spare time to witness the celebrations of monastic dance-drama. The monastic festivals are held to commemorate the founding of a monastery, the birthday of its patron saint or the major events associated with the evolution of Tibetan Buddhism. The festivals involve dances performed by monks or lamas wearing colorful silk garments, and different facial masks which are appealing to the spectators. The head lama of the monastery initiates the rites to begin the festival. Almost every gompa observes a special festival associated with some outstanding event in the history of Buddhism in Tibet or with some legend forming part of the religious tradition of Ladakh or even with some occult demonstration. But some of the festivals are national in character and the gompas as such have nothing to do with them. It has been noticed that the whole festivals of Ladakh can be divided into two broad categories: the annual monastic and the non-monastic or the New Year’s festivals. Now the festivals are becoming sources of entertainment among foreigners and thus encouraging tourism in Ladakh. Important festivals of Ladakh are:

Dosmochey

Dosmochey is celebrated in Leh (Leh Palace), Liker (Lower Ladakh) and Deskit (Nubra valley) monasteries in February. The most famous among all is Leh Dosmochey, which is celebrated for two days in the courtyards of the Leh palace. The monks from different monasteries perform the Chams every year turn by turn. The festival takes place in the end and starting of the Tibetan New Year. The monks of Takthok monastery prepares the offering with Thread crosses which binds all the evil, hungry ghosts and guard against natural disaster in the coming year. On the second day of the festival, the offerings are taken out of the town in a procession and burn it while people whistle to chase away the evil spirits.

Matho Nagrang

Matho Nagrang is celebrated on the 15th day of the first month of Tibetan calendar, at Matho monastery, the only monastery of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism. During these two days of festival two monks (oracles) of the monastery wearing colorful dresses and masks make a public appearance in their full spiritual form. These monks mediate in complete isolation for a state of trance and invoking the spirits of deities. They run over the high rise ramparts of the monastery, jump from one balcony to another and execute number of acrobatic feats. People from far off places come to seek answers about their future.

Yuru Kabyat

It is a two day festival which comes in the month of July in lamayuru monastery at 125 km from Leh. Monks like other monastic festivals perform mark dances offerings prayers to get rid of disasters and bring peace. It is said that once the whole valley was under water when Nimagon (a holy man) prayed "May and monastery be founded in this place". Then he had offerings to the Naga serpent spirits and the water of lake drained out. The grains of can offered to the water spirits which grey into the shape of a yung-dung (Swastika). Later on a monastery called yung-dung gompa was found there. These days the monastery is suffering from lack of funds and visitors who visit the place donate money that make the repairs and living expenses of 200 lamas.

Hemis Festival

Hemis festival is one of the most important festivals of Ladakh. It is a two day festival that takes place at Hemis monastery and falls in month of June or July. This festival is celebrated to commemorate the birth of Guru Padamasambhava, founder of the tantric Buddhism in Tibet and believed to save locals from the wrath of demons. The sacred dance drama of the life and mission is performed wearing facial masks and colorful brocades robes. Every twelve years a huge thangka (painting of Guru Padamasambhava) of about four storey is hung in the courtyard of monastery along with other thangkass. During this festival people can buy different handicrafts also displayed at stalls by locals.

Sindhu Darshan

Festival Sindhu Darshan is a three-day festival from 1st to 3rd June celebrated in Shey Manla around 8 km from Leh on the bank of Indus river. For the first time this festival was organized in Oct-1997 by the Ministry of tourism and culture as a symbol of unity, communal harmony and national integration. It promotes River Sindhu (or Indus) originating from the Mansarovar in Tibet as a symbol of communal harmony and peaceful co-existence of myriad of cultures in India. With the aim to promote tourism in Ladakh it also pays honour to brave soldiers of India who sacrificed their lives fighting with enemies at SIA-CHIN, Kargil and other strategic points of war. In this festival artists from different parts of the country perform traditional dances and people from all religions, castes and regions gather to form the glory of the festival. This festival showcases performing arts of India and one of the rituals of the festival involves mingling of the waters of other mighty rivers of India in the Sindhu River. Various groups bring these waters from different states in India in the earthen pots, which are then immersed into the Sindhu River.

Ladakh Festival

It is a major event organized every year by the J&K Tourism Department, in collaboration with the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council from 1st to 15th September. Its main objective is to revive and promote Ladakh's centuries-old culture, traditions and folk heritage of Ladakh. The best part of this festival is the inaugural function which features a spectacular procession in which various cultural troupes and contingents participate in traditional costumes, singing songs and performing various kinds of dances to the tune of the traditional orchestra. At the Polo ground, where the procession terminates, the participants break into a variety of folk and popular dances, presenting the best samples of the region's performing arts. The inaugural ceremony takes place at Leh on a large scale in which various cultural troupes from different parts of Ladakh participate. Folk dances and music are some of the important features of the festival. Besides folk dances and music there are polo contests, archery contests, wedding celebrations and mask dances that add to the festivities of the Ladakh. The final carnival parade that passes through Leh is worth watching.

Among the regular programmes, the most colourful and interesting are the village archery festivals held in selected villages in and around Leh in which every villager ceremonially participates. Every male participant is expected to try his skill with the bow and arrow in alternate rounds of archery and dancing while the ladies have to join in as many rounds of the mandatory folk dances. Other programmes of the festival include a series of evening musical concerts, mask dances by lamas of selected monasteries, mock marriage ceremonies complete with all the associated traditions, Thangka & Handicraft Exhibitions, Polo matches, and many more events.

Losar

Losar, 'The New Year Day' is the most well known festival of the Buddhists. Losar is the Tibetan word comprising of 'Lo' signifies 'year' and 'sar' signifies 'new'. This festival falls on December of every year and is celebrated all over Ladakh. The Losar celebration is followed by

Galdan Namchat, the birth anniversary of Tsogkha Pa who introduced Gelukpa school of order. The celebrations are spread over a period of fifteen days. During Namchat people lighten their houses, monasteries and mountains and make offerings to bring prosperity in coming year. The festival lasts for a month during which Gods, deities, ancestors and even the animals are fed. In some villages there is a tradition of making old men and women from snow. All family members, children and youth get together to celebrate it. If anyone is missing they keep a cup filled with tea by his or her name. Two dances are specially associated with Losar- Shon-dance and Koshen-dance.

Ladakh Harvest Festival

The festival usually starts from 1st September and lasts till September 15th. It is a colourful celebration of the rich cultural diversity of Ladakh's people. The weeks long festivities are held all over the region. Music, theatre, polo, archery and wedding ceremonies are performed daily along with mask and folk dances, with the final carnival parade passing through the streets of Leh. This festival is a kaleidoscope of the Ladakhi culture showcasing the blending of Central Asian, Tibetan and North Indian cultures and the art and handicrafts of the region.

Other Festivals of Ladakh: -

Lamayuru Festival

Every year on the 17th and 18th day of the 5th month of Tibetan lunar calendar, Lamayuru Festival is held. The festival is celebrated with the sacred mask dance performances along with the rituals of expressing a votive offering is observed.

Tak-Tok Festival: Tak-Tok festival is celebrated at cave Gumpa of Tak-Tok. It is among the major festivals of Ladakh. Celebrated in summer, it is yet another tourist attraction. The festival is celebrated with fanfare and locals from far-flung areas storm the place on the occasion.

Phiyang Festival: During this festival, apart from sacred dance and other performances the main attraction is the exhibition of the thangka, which unlike Hemis occurs every year. The festival is held in the months of July-August.

Gustor Festival at Hiksey, Spituk and Karsha: Thiksey, Spituk and Karsha are the venues for the famous Gustor festival that takes place during different months of the year. The two daylong celebration of the festival marks the victory of the good over the evil.

Stok Guru Tsechu: Held in February, Stok Guru Tsechu festival is celebrated by the monks of Spituk and Stok monastery. Two oracles appear during the festival, who in real are the laymen prepared by the monks to accept the spirits of the deities.

Calendar of Festivals of Ladakh

Names of the Festival	Venue	2011	2012	2013
Spitok Gustor	Spituk	JAN 31,FEB 01	JAN 21,22	JAN 9,10
Dosmoche	Leh ,Likir & Deskit Monasteries	MAR 2,3	FEB 19,20	FEB 8,9
Stok Guru Tse-Cue	Stok Monastery	MAR 14,15	Mar 2,3	FEB 19,20
Matho Nagrang	Matho Monastery	MAR 18,19	Mar 7,8	FEB 24,25
Buddha Purnima	Leh	JUNE 15	MAY 4	MAY 25
Hemis TSE-CHU	Hemis Monastery	JUL 10,11	JUN 29,30	JUN 18,19
Yuru Kabgyat (Lamayuru)	Lamayuru Monastery	JUN 29,30	JUNE 16,17	JUN 5,6
Zanskar Karsha Gustor	Karsha Monastery	JUL 28,29	JUL 16,17	JUL 6,7
Ph-Yang Tsedup (Phyang)	Phyang Monastery	JUL 28,29	JUL 16,17	JUL 6,7
Korzok Gustor (Tsomoriri Lake)	Korzok Monastery	AUG 2,3	JUL 22,23	JUL 11,12
Dak-Thok Tse-Chu	Dakthok Monastery	AUG 8,9	JUL 28,29	JUL 18,19
Sant Naro Nasjal (Zangskar)	Sani Monastery, Zanskar	AUG 12,13	AUG 1,2	JUL 21,22
Shachukul Gustor	Shachukul Monastery	JUL 18,19	JUL 5,6	JUN 25,26
Thiksay Gustor	Thiksey Monastery	NOV 13,14	NOV 1,2	NOV 20,21
Chemrey Angchok	Chemrey Monastery	NOV 23,24	NOV 11,12	NOV 30, DEC 01

Galdan Namchot	All Over Ladakh	DEC 20	DEC 8	DEC. 27
Losar	All over Ladakh	DEC 25	DEC 14	JAN=20 02

Dances of Ladakh

Dances of Ladakh are another interesting feature of Ladhakhi culture. These are very colorful and majestic too. Dance is the breath of the life of the people of Ladakh and is an indispensable item of all festivals. All great religious festivals are observed through the medium of dance. In Ladakh there are many traditional dances which are performed on different occasion to keep the tradition alive. The folk dances are performed with a gusto and abandon to the tune of drums and 'shahnai' (pipe). The slow and gentle movements of these dances are very well complemented by the richness of jeweled 'Peraks', Silver ornaments and rich music. There are many traditional dances in India's Ladakh region. Every village has either a dance of its own or the custom of performing ancient steps and rhythms on special occasions to keep traditions alive. These dances include two-steps dance, three-steps dance and mixed dance, in which both men and women. In Ladakh men, women, old and young, priest all take part in dancing. The main dances performed on the different occasion in Ladakh are:-

Jabro Dance

The Jabro dance of Ladakh is performed by the nomadic people of Tibetan origin living in hilly areas of the region like Changtheng. This dance is performed with singing to celebrate New Year called Losar accompanied by DaMians- it is six stringed instrument, a little like guitar. The Jabro dance is based on the theme of struggle of good over evil.

Drugpa Rches

Drugpa Rches is a dance performed by the vegetarian dwellers of Dras and Gorkhan areas of Ladakh who are of Aryan origin and is named for the fact they were originally Drugpas or nomads. In this dance men and women adorned with silver ornaments and flowers dance to the sound of Damman - a pair of kettledrums named 'Fo' and 'Mo' (being the two genders) played with little sticks called 'Damshing' and with 'Fo' having a hole in the base that permits the addition of water to lower the sound – and Surna: a wind instrument that produces a droned chord.

Cham Dance

Cham or mask dance is highly choreographed sacred Buddhist dance exclusively performed by lamas. Lamas dance on mystic music played with its manifestation of Gods by awe-some masks. These masks are usually used by trained lamas when they give dance performances at the annual functions of the monasteries. Masks are made up of clay mixed with cotton painted black with natural colors polished silver and gold. Dancers wear brocades of different colors like red,

blue, green, yellow, etc. Dancers also hold ayudhas such as dagger, spear, bells, vajra, skill and damrus in hands symbolizing the destruction of evil spirits.

Bagston Rches

Bagstonrches is the Ladakh dance of wedding that goes on for weeks. Both bride and groom join in the dance which is also usually performed to the accompaniment of the Damman and Surna. The wedding dances are usually performed in tune with the songs, accompanied by the harmonious tunes of Surna and Damman musical instruments, which are played with these dances

Other Dances of Ladakh: -

Yak Dance: The Theme of This Unique and amazing dance is that two men donning the skins of the Yak, dance with gentle and rhythmic movements. The Yak sits, jumps, turns over and runs in a circle but all the actions are perfectly synchronized. A milkmaid comes and she is ignored by the Yak, and then comes the milkman striking the lash. He controls the Yak and takes it away.

Tukhatanmo: In the [Zanskar](#) and Bakhamul area, the seasonal dance Tukhstanmo is performed. It is a flower dance and is quite popular in the Nubra valley areas too. When new blossoms come, the blooming flower bunches are offered to the deity accompanied with songs and dance.

Shon Dance: The Shon dance once had royal patronage and was performed in the places on every festive occasion. The various songs in the dance add music richness to it. It is the dance of 'Mons' and is now performed only in the remote parts of Ladakh.

The Surahi Dance: The Surahi dance - "Chang Rches" is almost extinct now. In this dance the dancers used to carry pots of Chang - the local brew, on their heads and danced.

The Koshan Dance: The Koshan dance is popular dance performed in [Leh](#). A peculiarity about this dance is that it is performed while riding horses and the leader of the horsemen is called "Landak".

It can be analysed that Ladakh is known for its rich Buddhist culture and its different cultural aspects can be seen in its numerous fairs and festivals celebrated throughout the year. Ladakh's actual culture is reflected in its unique festivals and dances which in real sense a rich cultural heritage not only of Ladakh but also of entire India. It is praise worthy to said that in the modern era of globalization too the unquittous culture of Ladakh has strong ties with its unique tradition, rituals and customs. It has been noted that monasteries in Ladakh celebrate their annual festivals every year not only for the welfare of Ladakhi people, but also they arrange the festivals for the welfare of all living beings of the world. The best time to visit Ladakh is during its festive season, especially during winters. Festivals of Ladakh are best way to have a glimpse of Ladakhi culture. The number of fairs and festivals that takes place in Leh - zanskar Ladakh region and during this festive season, Ladakh becomes alive when people from different walks of life participate to celebrate and enjoy the festive spirit. It can be interpreted that whatever may be the

event or festival in Ladakh, the glory of their rich cultural heritage attracts the people not only of India but all over the globe to see their beauty and charm.

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