

Traditional Dresses, Textile and Ornaments of Ladakh: An Overview

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Abstract:

Traditions are significant part of a society. It carries an ancestral legacy and helps to maintain continuity between different generations, providing a remarkable identity to its followers. The essential traditional elements of a society consists of dresses, ornaments, jewellery, folksong, folkdance, language, art, architecture, rituals and rites, religious practice, heritage sites and monuments, etc. All these together give an exclusive identity to its followers representing a particular community. Through these cultural symbols, one can have a thorough understanding of cultural life of the community. In Ladakh, instead of its tough environmental conditions and high splendid peaks, the people of Ladakh have nested a vibrant and rich culture, attracting travelers since ages to admire its outlandish tradition. No culture survives in absence of its upholder. Therefore, the importance of cultural life of Ladakh is incomplete without description of its inhabitants. Residing in tough terrain, the people of Ladakh have preserved their ancient culture and glorify it at global level as well. They still follow their aged old customs and traditions and feel proud in their ancestral legacy which is highly visible during festive occasions and celebrations. During these celebrations, Ladakh's people dressed themselves completely in traditional attire heavily adorned with jewellery, which is the centre of attraction, representing the whole Ladakh. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to highlight the traditional costumes of Ladakh, the practice of weaving and textile and its present status. This paper also discusses the changes brought by the new forces of globalization that are now shaping our times and what they mean for the cultural life of Ladakh and its people.

Keywords: Ladakh, Traditional, Dresses, Weaving, Textile, Ornaments.

Introduction

Ladakh is the highest elevated region in the world. It is a kaleidoscope of nature's extremes. From the high mountain peaks to cold desert's sand dunes, temperatures in minus to sweltering sun- all have represented a unique blend of nature which made travelers overwhelmed and flabbergasted. The remarkable feature is the people who inhabited in such a tough terrain. Though surrounded by the dry, bare rocks of granite and dry landscape, the people of Ladakh are always smiling and welcoming. Their modesty, tolerable nature and belief in the supernatural forces make them adaptable in these extreme climatic conditions. Such climatic conditions are one of the reasons which make Ladakh an isolated land, separated from the rest of the world. Owing to these reasons, the land and the people are able to maintain a unique culture; less influenced by the modernization and globalization of contemporary world. Till the time Ladakh remained closed to the outside world, the interference of the tourists,

travelers and scholars was limited. Only after 1974 when Ladakh was opened to the outer world, the lovers of Ladakh find a great opportunity to reach their destination and explore it. Thus, for centuries, Ladakh was able to preserve its past tradition and culture. They are still enrooted to their ancestral values and customs. Their food, dresses, ornaments, language, art, architecture, celebrations, etc. all have reflection of past. As far as Ladakh's people are concerned, both males and females are equally contributing in highlighting their traditions and customs at regional, national and global level. The first reflection of Ladakh that comes to one's mind is their smiling faces, small bright eyes and stunted growth reflecting their character of submissiveness, boldness and freedom of following their traditional culture and values which are inherited pompously by them since the ages and are still alive among them.

However, if we analyze the process of growth and development of present society, i.e. from primitive living to the modern ways of high-tech age, the living conditions have changed. Westernization and modernization has intervened the personal life of every individual. There is a race for the survival of the fittest. This long span of many centuries between these two extremes, the primitive and modern has affected individual in all aspect whether their food habits, clothing, language, professional life, etc. Somehow, there are many communities which are trying to follow both extremes hand in hand. Similar is the case of Ladakh. No doubt from ancient time till modern age, there are lots of changes introduced in day to day life of the common people of Ladakh. Impact of institutionalization, development activities and globalization are changing their traditional ways of life, however their excellence is to follow their traditional life along with these changes as both development and traditions are equally important for their survival. Hence, in this paper the traditional costumes and the practice of weaving are discussed.

Weaving and Textile

The costumes not only provide means to clad an individual, but to do so tastefully according to the aesthetic sensibility. These costumes typified ethnological and racial characters of the people, defined their socio-economic and occupational status and reflected their mental make-up. Thus, the choice of dress material, the way it has been used and the manner in which one dresses oneself became the index of one's overall personality. It is said that the costumes and ornaments are the index of the character of an individual or a given society to which they belong to or we can say that man is judged by the manner he dressed.

Although the formulation for manufacturing of clothes/dresses has taken enormous stride, the basic source for raw material has remained the same i.e. animals and plants. Animal sources include silk, wool, feather, leather, etc. and vegetal sources are cotton, jute, hemsps, etc. Of course, synthetic yarn, of which our ancestors have no knowledge at all, has been an addition of our times. With enormous formulation, forms and varieties of raw material now available to the modern man, his range of dresses, costumes, jewellery, ornaments, etc. has also undergone radical transformation from the primitive improvisation to hand-crafted material and further to the modern readymade products.

In contemporary and fashionable world, everyone wants to look good, have the best of the resources, fit into the best attire, adorned in the best jewellery that will compliment them best. Though modernization is at par but still traditional practices have not lost their significance. During traditional festivals or other family occasions or community celebrations, the most awaited moment is dressing in traditional attire followed by folksongs and folkdance. Similarly, Ladakh's society is popular throughout

the world because of its beautiful traditional attire which is the reflection of their exceptional regional identity.

In Ladakh, clothing has also undergone changes. The use of jeans, shirts is commonly visible. The young generation is now feeling comfortable in western wears as compared to local dresses, but they have not completely lost taste for local clothing. During cultural gathering and regional festivals, traditional dresses are highly recommended. And the way of making traditional clothes is also traditional to maximum extent. In Ladakh, the practice of weaving is in existence since ages. An important legend is associated with the practice of weaving. It is said that the tradition of weaving and textile in Ladakh is as old as the mythological epic of King Kesar. According to legend, the wife of Kesar, namely Duguma, considered as goddess (Iha-mo), used to weave during ancient times. Her loom still exists somewhere in mountains and she also weaves. There is a popular saying that she weaves one row in a year and when her fabric finished, the world will vanish. However, the historical significance of tradition of weaving is lacking. As during ancient times, the people used bark of trees, leaves, skin of animals for making clothes. With the passage of time they learnt the art of weaving and adopted a unique textile style highlighting its physical environmental conditions along with social, economical and cultural aspect. The variety of fabric ranged from the highly prestigious garments made from factory to the simple homemade textile which is produced locally from Pashmina and woollen material. The unique feature of weaving is that the majority of the weavers are male known as thagskan and they use thagsha for weaving. Women were not allowed to weave. It is believed that if women weave the fabric, their hands will burn or mountains may fall down or may become infertile. In totality, male weavers are more but at village level, few weavers are available and they move from one village to other either to weave or to collect wool. The woollen cloth usually weaved by men is known as nambu. There are varieties of clothes produced of which sulma (female robe) and gos (male robe) are important and mostly woven in single colour and before stitching, it is dyed in maroon or brown colour. Throughout Ladakh, males are the professional tailors who stitch clothes, robes, gown, hats and boots.

Textile production and weaving is still prevalent in Ladakh but the practice has changes to maximum extent. Many synthetic fabrics like nylon, polysters and commercial dyes are available in market. Moreover, in this age of fashion and modernization, it is little difficult to prevent external intervention, development initiatives and tourism promotion. Therefore, these local weavers need to materialize innovative ideas taken from their natural environment, stimulating the imagination and improvisation of these weavers. Textile, thus, created passes through a life cycle from being novel and fashionable to becoming traditional, thereby ensuring their entry into a new era of traditionalization. In short, tradition is a part of modernity that brings local fashion into wider dynamics. Thus, despite the changes in the weaving tradition, it is still important part of people of Ladakh. Woven clothes have great significance, as these are presented as offerings or gifts to secular or sacred places. These are considered as a silent store-house of information as they carried the legacy quietly from one generation to another.

Although, the weavers in Ladakh are producing both regular wear dresses as well as beautifully designed dresses which are mostly visible during family occasions and community gathering are discussed in the following paragraphs. In addition to that another important weaving item includes Prayer flags and Thangkas paintings. The prayer flags which are spiritually important are plain in their style whereas the Thangkas paintings are brightly coloured and full of images and symbols. These are

the traditional symbol of Ladakhi's Buddhist faith. Along with traditional costumes, these flags and paintings are world famous popularizing the regional culture of Ladakh at global level.

Different Varieties of Traditional Dresses and Ornaments

Clothing in a traditional way is one of the significant aspects of all societies. It plays an important role in the cultural identity of the region and holds significant value for member of the society. In addition to beauty, clothes provide protection against changing climatic conditions. Similarly, Ladakh's dresses are designed in such a way, as it provides beauty and protection from the harsh climate especially during chilled winters. Ladakh's have different types of dresses depending upon the occasion and climate. Generally, Ladakhis wear long woollen coats mostly of deep brown colour indicating the aged old tradition of garment making, coloured in natural dye in Himalayan monastery. On contrary, during festive occasions, the beauty of their dress is the centre of attraction and they proudly carry them as ancestral legacy. In addition, they have special ornaments and headgear made of turquoise, jade, stones, jewellery arranged with excellent workmanship and quality. Silversmith of Ladakh made jewellery in a typical local design. Every woman in Ladakh is seen heavily jewelled, especially on festive occasion. Mostly they wear Goncha (long woollen robe), the traditional Ladakh's garment, worn by both men and women. In addition, women also wear bok (goat skin cape) and hat (for both) or perak (woman's turquoise headpiece). These attires reflect the centuries old traditions and cultural identity; thereby showing respect to their ancestral tradition by wearing them. Following paragraphs provide details about traditional dresses and ornaments.

Goncha and Sulma

The costumes of Ladakh are unique and peculiar, owing to its harsh weather. The important is Goncha, the national dress of Ladakhis. It is a gown like outfit worn day and night. There are varieties of Goncha based on the type of fabrics used for its preparation and the occasions during which they are worn such as white woollen Goncha for lower strata whereas upper strata wear deep crimson Goncha and for the formal occasion there are synthetic Goncha or black velvet having silver gleam of piping at the border and collar and cummerbund of shocking pink. The Goncha of females is called Sulma a full skirt, gathered into small pleats, secured with bright coloured silk-sash waistline or skeyraks along with Goncha.

It is the 'national dress' and it looks very pleasing to watch the people of Ladakh wearing goncha. It is the sole garment and under it nothing is worn. According to Drew, goncha is an enveloping woollen coat meant for both the sexes in a different way. Goncha worn by males is very stylish and distinct from that of females which is less stylish. It is basically a long dressing gown. With the help of attached string (a strip made up of cloth) the goncha is tight near the waist with sheyraks.

Perak

Another remarkable and eye-catching traditional component of Ladakh's attire is the Perak (Headdress). It is the key item of women's dress prevalent in various communities of Ladakh from Kailash valley to different provinces of Tibet. There is a lot of variation in the shape, size, accessories, number of turquoise lines and even the nomenclature of Perak. The popular name for the headdress is perak (padrag or pad sbrags) which means 'lotus cover'. In Central Ladakh, the headdress (perak) begins from forehead in the shape of serpent's hood and then track midway on to the back. In Lower Ladakh (Sham

area), perak is known as yudan (g-yu gdan) which means turquoise spread. In the northern-eastern plateau of Changthang, the perak is known as gar leb. It is flat at the apex. In Western Ladakh, an area Wakha-Mulbekh, a jewel studded cap having turquoise lined tail, shorter than the one on a central Ladakh's perak.

It is said that the formal outfit of women is incomplete until it is complimented by Perak. It is a long piece of leather covered with the red cloth starting from the forehead down the waist back. The front part is in the shape of cobra head. There are two stiff ear-flaps (nag lan) made from black lamb skin or woollen lappets covered with brocades and edged with fur. The entire headdress is covered with the systematic arrangements of uncut turquoise. The largest stones are in the centre and the smaller ones are contracting at the sides. Corals are mixed together at irregular intervals. A jeweled amulet (gau) made of silver or gold inlaid with semi precious stones highlighted the rows of turquoise. This entire outfit is fastened over the chute, a hairpiece consisting of woollen braids that are gathered together at the ends with tassels. It is also held in place by silver chains. The significance of perak is like a 'Mangal Sutra' in the Hindu Community. It is said that Ladakhi woman wore her luck on her head in the form of perak.

Economically, headdress has great significant. It is a source of wealth for the Ladakh's family and an important source of financial support for the Ladakhi women. It is said that they are actually carrying their fortune on their heads. It is a symbol of power and prestige. A headdress with seven or more lines acts as a status symbol in Leh whereas the headdress with five rows has importance in outlying villages. Headdress is a popular commodity in Ladakh that increased the allure of a girl as a potential marriage partner. Parents have invested their resources in collecting ornaments and pieces of turquoise and coral for the making of headdress for their daughters. It become heirloom, passed from mother to daughter. Mostly the eldest daughter in a family inherited the materialistic things from their parents at the time of her marriage along with the mother's headdress. After handing over the ancestral headdress then the older women made a headdress of single line of turquoise and if there are more daughters, the new headdresses will be prepared for them.

Presently, headdress is an icon of "traditional" Ladakh representing its unique and vibrant culture. Its significance can be understood better from the representation of women with headdress in national commerce, on stamp covers and even the gates of military sites. Several village communities have made it mandatory for the women to wear headdress during major festivals and celebrations to represent their culture and if someone try to refuse to do so, fine will be charged on them. This contentious practice is not an obligation but an attempt to popularize the Ladakh's regional identity and the cultural legacy in the fast changing modernized world.

Gonda

The Ladakhi women either wear perak or gonda as headdress. It is like a top hat with the front brim cut away over the forehead and the protruding sides resembles elf-like ears. It is usually covered with silk and brocade or velvet and is embroidered in silver or gold thread.

Tsaru

Another important item worn along with perak is Tsaru. It looks like elephant ear and is mostly black in colour. It is made of lamb skin with starched cotton as a basic constituent. In addition to this, some fine

cloth roofed with hairy skin is required to give final shape. Within these layers of cloths, pads are used to give proper shape to the garment.

Chogas

A gown made from wool of white sheep, having wide sleeves, tight near waist with the help of sash. This is the dress of Lamas of Ladakh and it is easy to recognize them by this dress. As per sect of Lama, they coloured it either yellow or red.

Yogar and Lukpa

It is a status symbol of Ladakh's women and is also known as lokpa. It is made up of goat-skin or sheep-skin with no embroidery. It is a soft stuff taken around the shoulder around the back to tie basket which in-turn used to carry goods and small babies also. It protects them from extreme climatic conditions and in turn also protects the goncha as they usually carry heavy loads on their back. So, it was necessity in the past to wear such dresses but now-a-days, it is worn only as a part of traditional dress. This also reflects the woman simplicity. The longer the hair, expensive it is. Yogar is also worn like Lukpa but there is a minor difference between them i.e. Yogar is made up of sheep skin as it is usually worn by people of Changthang area, being colder, skin of sheep is used in place of skin of goat. A beautiful designed yogar is called bok.

Tipi or Tibi

Tipi is a kind of Ladakh hat (in Bhodi language) mostly wore among the Buddhist community. In their daily routine or everyday functions, the people of Ladakh wore hat and on special occasion, the hats of women replaced by perak (headdresses). The hats worn by women are made of silk and are bright and colourful.

Kagu

This term is used for necklace, made of gold and precious stones like emerald, turquoise, pearls, etc. Sometimes precious stones of big size are used, to make it more attractive and costly. The size of stones used in Kagu determines the economic status of the bearer.

Pabu

Pabu are the shoes made of woven yak hair and wool. The sole is made of either sheep skin or goat skin. To make shoes beautiful, bright colours are used for dye and made embroidery called Paboor. As these are made of skin and hair of animals, they are very warm. Earlier, yak leather was used for the sole of pabu and worn occasionally by women dancers. At present, instead of yak leather, ordinary leather is used to make sole of the shoe.

Kau

It is hexagonal or octagonal golden amulet forming an important part of Ladakhi's women jewellery. It is a long pendant made of precious stones and pearls pema-lab-tse is a play on its design, which emulates butterfly. It is mainly worn by Buddhist women. It is known for its feminine and delicate quality.

Gau

A jewelled amulet (gau) made of gold or silver having semi-precious stones highlighted the rows of turquoise. This complete setup is fixed firmly over the chuti, artificial long hairs.

Docha

It is a long gold plated silver strip. It is worn below the waist upto calf-muscle. Being made of gold and silver, it is dressed only by wealthy ladies.

Jugin

Jugin is a traditional attire of the Muslims communities adorn especially on their wedding day. It is the replacement of Perak. It consists of a block of gold with tassel of pearls hanging from her forehead, followed by a beautifully designed see-through drape with embroidery which covers the face and back of the women. On another occasion, the Muslim women wear a plain cloth to cover their head following the principles and beliefs of Islam.

Aalong

It is an ear-ring made by using gold and precious stones and pearls.

Tunglak

It is a bracelet made of shell known as 'Tunglak'. It is necessary for women to wear it while dressing in their traditional attire. While greeting the dignitaries by saying "Jooley", women wearing these bracelets, strikes it three times to show their respect with ineffable charm and grace.

Khatags

In case of marriage, the parents of proposed bridegroom went to the house of proposed bride along with few things like chhang, khatags and money and formally ask for the hand of the proposed bride. After getting consent from the girl's parents, then ceremony is planned. At the time of marriage of the eldest brother, the younger brothers are offered khatags and after the acceptance of these ceremonial scarves, the younger brothers are declared as husbands of the woman i.e. co-husbands of the common wife. These khatags are used in every occasion from birth to death including marriage. Due to its use in every occasion or ceremony, it is also called ceremonial scarf.

Foreign Influence on the Traditional Costumes of Ladakh

In every part of social life, one can find the influence of the outside world, therefore, Ladakh has no exception. Perak, the traditional, indigenous dress of Ladakh reflect some foreign features. Though, it is unusual to woman of Tibet. Chinese Tibetan Perak is inferior to the Ladakh's Perak in terms of quality. Woman of Ladakh invested most of her savings in the turquoise of her Perak. Some outside influence is also visible in men's attire. The men wear an elongated pigtail, along with flattish nose and small eyes, they appear like Chinese.

As Perak is considered the mark of royalty among Ladakh's women, in the same way, women pertains to noble family of central Tibet were also recognized by their luxurious Patruk made of precious things. The other important component of dress is the Goncha which is influenced by the Chinese. The best one is heavily made of Chinese silk.

Another important traditional dress worn by Ladakhi lady is Chuba, a sleeveless and graceful reveals the impact of Tibet and is known as Tibetan gown.

Contemporary Status

In this modernized world, Ladakh's dresses under gone change. The forces of modernization, globalization and the world of internet have changed the lifestyle in each and every corner of the world and Ladakh has no exception. No society can develop if it remains static, so change is compulsory for their growth and development, but one cannot judge the pace of the change. Moreover, societies themselves provide stimulus as well as barriers for change. Continuity and change go hand in hand. In this process of change, the most easily effected area is the material culture followed by social organization. In case of Ladakh, people go according to the change in order to make their survival possible. Both exogenous and endogenous elements are responsible for the changing Ladakh's society. Keeping in mind the topography and the climatic factor, certain development initiatives were taken-up by the government both at regional level and national level to make the life of common people easy and resourceful. The appreciating fact is that along with changes, the people of Ladakh are still enrooted to their culture. They are still following their ancestor's legacy, ancient traditions and culture, popularizing their heritage among present generations and preserving it for the future one. An event held in 2019, on the concluding day of the ongoing Buddhist carnival Naropa festival near Hemis Monastery in which a group of 408 women dressed in traditional attire, performed a unique dance known as Shondol dance, which is recorded in the 'Guinness Book of World Records' as the largest Ladakhi dance dressed in traditional costumes is an important example of the representation of Ladakhi culture at global level.

Conclusion

The people of Ladakh are simple in their living and satisfied with the limited resources. The harsh climatic conditions has forced them to adapt as such and thereby developed a culture which is primitive as well as unique and vibrant. Their dresses, jewellery and the way these are made, all are exclusively unique. Due to the coming of the travelers and the growing impact of globalization many new elements entered Ladakh, impacting a lot on their basic necessities resulting in a competing behaviour with its traditional lifestyle. Earlier these people wore traditional dresses and ornaments regularly and if they move out of their house, it is compulsory to wear traditional dresses, but now such dresses and ornaments are found during occasions. Presently, comfortable western wear are part of routine dresses, but it does not mean that they have forgotten their traditions under the influence of modernization. Within the changing conditions, they are still preserving their past culture that is reflected during all kinds of celebrations either in family or at community level. The dresses, ornaments etc. all are the reflections of the past that are an important component of such events. Presently, Ladakh is advancing with the developments taking place in the modern times as it is the need of the hour, but the uniqueness is the adherence of people of Ladakh to their traditional costumes and rituals.

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