

# Glimpses of Ladakh in Kashmir's History Till 1563 A.D.

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## Abstract

This paper explores the historical relationship between Ladakh and Kashmir up to 1563 A.D., highlighting the complex dynamics of political subjugation, cultural exchange, military conflict, and economic interdependence. Drawing primarily from Kashmiri sources due to the scarcity of Ladakhi records, the study traces early matrimonial alliances, such as that of King Meghavahana, and significant episodes including the reign of Rinchana, the first Muslim Sultan of Kashmir of Ladakhi origin. It examines successive efforts by the Shahmiri and Chak dynasties to make Ladakh a tributary state, particularly under rulers like Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin. While often brought under Kashmiri control, Ladakh repeatedly reasserted its independence during periods of Kashmiri weakness. The paper also analyzes trade relations centered around Leh and Srinagar, which served as vital transit hubs in the trans-Himalayan network, and notes the diffusion of Buddhism, Islam, and cultural practices such as polo between the two regions. The study concludes that Ladakh, despite periodic subordination, maintained a distinct identity shaped by continuous interaction with Kashmir—emerging as both a cultural bridge and a contested frontier.

## INTRODUCTION

It was a common phenomenon throughout history that superior powers, in order to extend their empires, often tried to annex weaker neighbouring states—either by military force or through political coercion. Sometimes, weaker states willingly accepted the sovereignty of a superior power. Ladakh, which means “Land of Passes,” lies to the northeast of Kashmir<sup>1</sup>. The Zojila Pass is the gateway through which both Ladakh and Kashmir maintained relations since ancient times<sup>2</sup>. Due to this geographical link, it would not be wrong to assume that political, cultural, commercial, and social contacts existed between these two regions.

This research aims to highlight the nature of their relations and their conclusions up to 1563 A.D. Due to the paucity of primary material from Ladakhi sources, Kashmiri sources have been used abundantly for this study.

## CONTENT

During the rule of Hindu kings in Kashmir, the specific policy adopted towards Ladakh is not clearly known from available sources. The first reference of contact between Kashmir and Ladakh goes back to the reign of King Meghavahana, who ruled Kashmir in the 6th century

A.D. He married Amrit Prabha, a Ladakhi princess and the daughter of Stonpa, the ruler of Ladakh. Amrit Prabha's father established a Stupa and a monastery (Lostaunpa) in Kashmir<sup>3</sup>.

The second reference of Ladakh is found in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, which mentions a war in 1320 A.D.

between the Baltis and the Ladakhis, where Ladakh was defeated and their chief, Lha-Chen Dngos Grab, was killed. His son, Rinchana, fled to Kashmir via the Zojila Pass during the reign of Raja Suhadeva (1301–1320 A.D.) to save his life. Raja Suhadeva granted Rinchana a *jagir* at Gagangir village. Later, Rinchana gained strength, defeated Suhadeva, and became the ruler of Kashmir (1320–1323 A.D.). He embraced Islam, making him the first Muslim Sultan of Kashmir—an important historical instance of a Ladakhi Buddhist becoming the Sultan<sup>4</sup>.

Whether Sultan Rinchana conquered Ladakh is not clear from contemporary sources. After his death, a Hindu king named Udyandeva ruled Kashmir (1323–1338 A.D.). *Rajatarangini* mentions that Kashmir fell victim to Turko-Mongol invasions during his reign, and the king fled to Ladakh<sup>5</sup>. This flight suggests that Ladakh was possibly part of the Kashmir kingdom at that time.

In 1339 A.D., Sultan Shahmir founded the Shahmiri dynasty, the first Muslim dynasty of Kashmir. All the sultans of this dynasty tried to make Ladakh a tributary state under Kashmir. Sultan Shahabuddin (1354–1373 A.D.) was the first among them to conquer Ladakh and made it a tributary state under Kashmir.<sup>6</sup>

Under Sultan Sikandar (1389–1413 A.D.), the ruler of Ladakh stopped paying tribute and revolted. Sultan Sikandar, a strong ruler, led an expedition and reconquered Ladakh, again reducing it to a tributary state<sup>7</sup>. It continued to remain so under his successors.

From 1420 to 1470 A.D., Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin ruled Kashmir. He acquired some land for his private farm in Ladakh, indicating not only political control but also a sense of security in that region.<sup>8</sup> Srivara mentions that Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin was well-versed in the Ladakhi language.<sup>9</sup>

According to *Baharistan-i-Shahi*, during his reign, the ruler of Kashghar attempted to capture Ladakh and Baltistan.<sup>10</sup> The Sultan acted, partly out of concern for national security and partly to protect Kashmir's feudatory regions. While on his way to Ladakh, he addressed his troops in Lar Pargana, boosting their morale.<sup>11</sup>

Persian sources describe a bloody battle at the village of Sheh in Ladakh between the forces of Kashmir and Kashghar. Kashmir's forces were commanded by Mir Hasan Baihaki, who played a key role in the campaign.<sup>12</sup> Jonaraja notes that the Sultan was victorious in the battle in *Shayadesa* and even saved a golden image of the Buddha from the Yavanas (Kashghari forces).<sup>13</sup>

N.K. Zutshi, in his book *Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin of Kashmir*, writes that the Sultan went so far as to save the image of the Buddha in a foreign land (Ladakh) from Muslim soldiers of Kashghar.<sup>14</sup> *Baharistan-i-shahi* gives a detailed account of the battle of Sheh and tells about the casualties on both sides as heavy.<sup>15</sup> Though Ladakhi sources do not corroborate this expedition directly, two references are significant. First, they attribute the expedition to King Blo-gros-mchog-Idan (1440–1470 A.D.) expedition to Guge and mention the seizure of booty.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, the king's brother, named Drungpa Ali, is referenced. It is possible that Drungpa Ali married a Muslim woman related to Zain-ul-Abidin or was taken to Kashmir as a hostage and converted to Islam.<sup>17</sup>

Jonaraja further notes that the Kashmiri troops destroyed the Ladakhi town of Mulbe, looted the treasury, and terrorized the inhabitants of Bhauttas in the state of terror. It is therefore evident that due to rebellious attitude, Ladakh was reduced to submission with a heavy hand. To ensure future compliance, they may have brought the king's brother to Kashmir, where he converted to Islam. Thus, the northeast frontier of Kashmir was secured by bringing the mountain kingdoms of Ladakh and Baltistan under tributary status and a constant vigil was placed in the region.<sup>18</sup>

The successors of Zain-ul-Abidin kept Ladakh under control, but under weaker rulers, Ladakh again

asserted independence. In 1532 A.D., when Nazuk Shah was the Sultan of Kashmir, Mirza Haider Dughlat, commander of Sultan Abu Said Khan of Kashghar, conquered Ladakh.<sup>19</sup> He also occupied Kashmir. According to *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, Mirza Haider Dughlat conquered Baltistan and Ladakh in 1548 A.D., once again making Ladakh a tributary of Kashmir.<sup>20</sup> He ruled Kashmir from 1540 to 1551 A.D.

In the later years of Mirza's reign, the ruler of Ladakh stopped paying tribute and became independent. The revolt in Ladakh was one of the main causes of Mirza's downfall.<sup>21</sup> After his death, some Mughal soldiers attempted to return via Ladakh but were killed by the turbulent tribes of the region.

In 1554 A.D., during the reign of Ibrahim Shah, the Ladakhis resumed plundering raids into the Kashmir Valley and stopped paying tribute. Therefore, Ibrahim Shah sent Daulat Chak to lead an expedition against Ladakh.<sup>22</sup> The Ladakhis sued for peace and submitted. According to Firishta and Nizamuddin, the ruler of Ladakh sent 3,000 horses, 500 pieces of *fattu* (a heavy woolen fabric made of sheep's wool), 100 sheep, and 30 yaks as a token of peace.<sup>23</sup>

Under the weak successors of the Shahmiri Sultans, Ladakh again asserted independence. After the fall of this dynasty, Sultan Ghazi Shah founded the Chak dynasty in 1556 A.D. and became its first ruler. He subjugated Ladakh and forced its ruler to pay regular tribute.<sup>24</sup> In 1562 A.D., when the ruler of Ladakh stopped paying tribute, Sultan Ghazi Shah launched an expedition. He advanced to Lar and sent his son, Ahmad Chak, with Fath Chak and other Amirs to punish the Ladakhi ruler. Fath Chak was killed and Prince Ahmad returned in disgrace.<sup>25</sup> In 1563 A.D., Ghazi Shah himself undertook an expedition, but due to old age, he had to abandon the campaign. After him, none of the Chak rulers attempted to conquer Ladakh, which remained independent thereafter.<sup>26</sup>

Besides being a tributary of Kashmir, Ladakh also maintained trade relations with Kashmir Valley. Srinagar and Leh were important centers of *caravan* trade, with Afghan and Indian merchants exchanging goods with Chinese and Central Asian traders at Leh. Leh served as a transit hub for *caravans* traveling to and from China, Tibet, and Central Asia. Ladakh supplied borax and shawl wool to Kashmir in exchange for shawls, food, gold, daily-use commodities, shoes, and gold and silver ornaments. The shawl industry in Kashmir relied heavily on shawl wool from Ladakh, Tibet, and Yarkand. Woolen cloth and salt were also imported from Ladakh and Tibet.

Cultural contact between Kashmir and Ladakh also dates back to ancient times. The quinquennial ceremony, first observed during the reign of Ashoka (who ruled over Kashmir), was later celebrated in Ladakh with great pomp and splendor.<sup>27</sup>

Buddhism spread into Ladakh and Tibet via Kashmir, primarily through 500 Kashmiri Buddhist monks.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Islam also spread in Ladakh through Kashmir. Among outdoor games, polo was introduced to Kashmir from Ladakh and became popular among Sultans and nobles.<sup>29</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The historical relationship between Ladakh and Kashmir up to 1563 A.D. reveals a complex interplay of political domination, cultural exchange, military conflict, and economic interdependence. From early matrimonial alliances and shared religious developments to periods of conquest, rebellion, and tribute, Ladakh was never entirely isolated from the political currents of the Kashmir Valley. Although often treated as a tributary state, Ladakh periodically reasserted its independence whenever central authority in Kashmir weakened. The repeated attempts by various Kashmiri dynasties—including the Shahmiris, the Chaks, and rulers like Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin—to integrate Ladakh into their sphere reflect the region's strategic and economic importance. Moreover, the robust trade routes linking Leh with Central Asia and

the Kashmir Valley facilitated not only the exchange of goods but also ideas, religions, and customs. This enduring interaction helped shape the socio-cultural landscape of both regions. By 1563 A.D., Ladakh had emerged with a distinct identity, occasionally subordinate but never completely absorbed—a frontier region that was both a partner in commerce and a point of contention in the politics of medieval Kashmir.

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