



Gastronomy in Ladakh during Dogra Rule

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Ladakh ("land of high passes") is a region in Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir that currently extends from the Kunlun mountain range to the main Great Himalayas to the south, inhabited by people of Indo-Aryan and Tibetan descent. It is one of the most sparsely populated regions in Jammu and Kashmir and its culture and history are closely related to that of Tibet as it originally formed one of the provinces of that kingdom or according to L. Petech "Ladakh did not constitute an integral part of Tibetan state but must have been considered as a dependency, or even as a kind of colony"¹. The Dogra expedition for the conquest of Ladakh started in 1834². It came under Dogra rule and was incorporated into the state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846 due to the efforts of Gen. Zorawar Singh.

The territory of Ladakh is one of the most elevated regions of the earth. Its different valleys lie along the head-waters of Indus, the Sutluj, and the Chenab; and the joint effects of elevation and of isolation amidst snowy mountains produce perhaps the most singular climate in the world. Burning heat by day is succeeded by piercing cold at night, and everything is parched by extreme dryness of the air³. Agriculture is scanty in Ladakh due to cold climate, sandy land and absence of rains. Cunningham writes that the crops in Ladakh consisted of bearded and beardless barley, common wheat and buck wheat, peas, turnips and mustard⁴. Dietary habits and cooking is an important aspect of every culture which passes on from generation to generation. The staple food of Ladakh during Dogra rule was wheat, barley and grim. Grim was grown to the greatest extent⁵. Frederic Drew writes that "Grim is a hardy plant; it is cultivated even at the height of 15,000 feet ; this height indeed is exceptional; there is only one place at that altitude where it grows, about twelve acres being there sown with it; but at 13, 700 and 14000 feet there are villages dependent on

¹ S.D.S Charak, *Indian Conquest of the Himalayan territories*, Pathankot (Jammu), 1978, p.65.

² Ibid. 71.

³ Alexander Cunningham, *Ladakh : physical, stastical and Historical*, Srinagar, 1997, p. 17.

⁴ Ibid. p.220.

⁵ Sum. D. Tokan et al. , *Ladakh : The Moonland*, Delhi, 1975, p. 28.

its cultivation. At lower levels besides Grim, wheat was grown but a very little of it was consumed as it was mostly grown for the market for the consumption of people in the towns and for merchants⁶. The barley meal made from grim was either made into broth⁷ or dough⁸ which was taken with butter milk⁹. It could also be drunk warm¹⁰. In Gilgit people took coarse grains, vegetables and meat¹¹. Due to scarcity of food in Hunza, a man on rising would eat nothing but would go straight to his fields. About 9 O' clock he would return and take bread and vegetables, with milk, butter milk or meat and in the evening he had the same as in the morning. Children ate four meals daily. Women during confinement, and sick persons generally were made to consume as much as one seer of ghee (clarified butter) per day¹². An ordinary middle class man would breakfast on butter-tea and small breads, raised with leaven called *kambir*; at mid-day they would have more tea, and perhaps chapattis with sauce of vegetables, mixed with butter milk, while in the evening, tea may or may not be served again with flour kneaded into a paste in some form or the other, and mixed with meat well stewed in a broth¹³. Besides these food stuffs fruits like mulberries, apricots etc. and dry meat and fish were also involved in their diet. Wheat flour and rice were taken only when available. Apricots were eaten fresh as well as dry. After their fruit was taken, it was customary to crack the stones and eat the kernels. Much oil was extracted from the kernels¹⁴. Rice was not grown in Ladakh. Maize had been tried in garden but without much success¹⁵. In winter all classes stored meat and meat was taken every day, but at night only but in summers in Hunza region a piece of meat was taken once in ten days¹⁶. Alexander Cunningham writes "Meat is seldom tasted by poor classes except on occasion of rejoicing, at a birth or marriage"¹⁷. Dry mutton called *Nishallo* was stocked to be taken in winter¹⁸. Fish was commonly taken but the members of upper classes did not eat it on the ground that its smell was offensive¹⁹. Since the occupation of Ladakh by Dogras, Yak's flesh was no longer to be had in Northern Ladakh²⁰. When a dron or feast was made, the meat off course, prepared as a very tasty curry to be eaten with rice, the meat being first fried with plenty of cooking-butter and onions, then stirred for hours till it was really tender in a well

⁶ Frederic Drew, *The Jummoo and Kashmir Territories: A geographical account*, Jammu, 1999, p.246.

⁷ In Ladakhi language this is called *namtuk*.

⁸ *Kholak* in Ladakhi language.

⁹ M.L Kapur; *Social and Economic History of Jammu and Kashmir*, Delhi, 1992, p-83.

¹⁰ Op.cit. Frederic Drew, p. 247.

¹¹ Op. cit. M. L Kapur, p.84.

¹² Amar Singh Chohan, *Historical Study of Society and Culture in Dardistan and Ladakh*, 1, New Delhi, 1983, p. 47

¹³ A. Reeve Heber & Kathleen M. Heber, *Himalayan Tibet and Ladakh*, New Delhi, 1976, p. 118.

¹⁴ Op.cit. M.L kapur, p.84.

¹⁵ Op.cit. Frederic Drew, p. 247.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 48.

¹⁷ Op.cit. Alexander Cunningham, p. 303.

¹⁸ Op. cit. M. L Kapur, p. 84.

¹⁹ Ibid. 84.

²⁰ Amar Singh Chohan, *Economic Conditions in the frontier territories of Jammu and Kashmir under Dogras*, New Delhi, 1994, p. 119.

flavoured sauce with plenty of vegetables. The rice was served, piled up in enormous plates, each of which two or three guests would attack, unless they had brought their own normal sized-plates. The grander ones would eat with small spoons, the man's being a different shape from the woman's, as the latter was double, the second tiny receptacle at one end being for a child. It was not etiquette to finish up what was on the plate. In most cases it would be impossible; the mother especially had to take a large portion home for rest of the family. At a very grand feast, proceedings used to begin with *gyatug*, a dish of long vermicelli-like strips of flour-paste over which mincemeat and made into delicious little dumplings, called *mok mok*, or well-flavoured and rolled up in sausages, which was eaten with rice – infact in a rich house, after plates of rice were served, many kinds of subsidiary dishes were handed down with meat done up in different ways, sauces and vegetables, For a *dron* (feast) an experienced cook was hired to take charge of all culinary operations²¹. At a very grand feast, proceedings used to begin with *gyatug*, a dish of long vermicelli-like strips of flour-paste over which mincemeat and made into delicious little dumplings, called *mok mok*, or well-flavoured and rolled up in sausages, which was eaten with rice²². Another dish which is still famous in Ladakh was *thukpa* made by boiling pices of meat, some vegetables and dumplings of wheat or grim in water²³. The better class of Ladakh's used to wash their face and hands before eating. The Buddhists also perform his particular kind of grace before meals. A Buddhist took a little of his flour in hand and it was thrown away for the gods. Then he used to dip his ring-finger and thumb into their tea or *chhang* (beer) and used to flip a taste of that away for their benefit too. He used the ring finger as it was considered as the cleanest of his digits, for a man according to them was born with this finger in his nose. If a sheep was killed for meal, he was supposed to offer up a bit of its heart, kidney, liver and every part of its flesh to his god. The staple drink was tea. The tea leaves were imported from china via Tibet. Butter and salt tea were shaken in a wooden barrel before use²⁴. Tea was drunk two to three times a day by upper classes. Wheat cakes were eaten with it in the morning either plain or with butter and sugar²⁵. Poor could seldom afford tea²⁶. Tea leaves were boiled three times to prepare the drink. After the third boiling, the cooking vessel which then contained only a small quantity of strained liquid, besides the leaves, was filled again to brim with hot water. The liquid was allowed to simmer for some more time and then the leaves were strained off. The contents were next emptied into a big wooden churn. Butter was added to the product and finally it was churned up with a little salt and perhaps soda also. Thus prepared tea was taken with barley meal. The people of Gilgit took tea abundantly²⁷. Feasts

²¹ Op.cit. A. Reeve Heber & Kathleen M. Heber, p. 117.

²² Op. cit. Sumi. D. Tokan et al. p. 29.

²³ Shridhar Koul & H.N Koul, *Ladakh through ages*, 1992 rept. 1995, p.156.

²⁴ Op. cit. Sumi. D. Tokan et al. p. 29.

²⁵ Op.cit. Alaxander Cunnigham, p. 304.

²⁶ Op.cit. Frederic Drew, p. 246.

²⁷ Op.cit. M.L Kapur, p. 84.

always begun with taking butter tea²⁸. Tea was imported from Lhasa and also from Yarkhand which was of finer quality. Prem Singh Jina quotes Moorcraft who says, “The next article of importance in trade of Ladakh is tea, the consumption of which in the country is very considerable but which is also exported in large quantity to Kahmir. The teas of china are chiefly brought through Lassa (Lhasa), but some of the finer kinds are imported by way of Yarkand. They are brought in square masses or lumps, consisting of leaves firmly compacted as if they had been wetted, and in that case forcibly compressed, they are covered with coarse yellow paper stamped with seal in Chinese characters and packed in the raw skins of yaks, the hair inwards and the joints neatly secured by a sewing of thongs. Each block called “*Dom*” by Kashmiris and “*Ponkch*” by the *Lassans* (Lhasans), weighs about four Delhi sers, or less than eight pounds. The green is sold usually at the wholesale price of three rupees and the retail price is nearly double”²⁹.

There was a strange custom of burying ghee in the ground for five or more years. It was said to improve with time. The buried ghee was brought out at weddings, funerals and other important occasions. It was also used as medicine³⁰. A store people took “*bhota*”, or boiled rice (imported) as additional item of diet³¹. A kind of intoxicating liquor called Chhang which was made from grim was also consumed. It was having a disagreeable sour smell like that of bad beer and a thick appearance like a dirty gruel. It was distilled and a clear spirit something like whiskey with villainous flavour was obtained³². The Ladakhis often used to remark that it was much easier for them to go without food than without Chhang³³. Frederic Drew writes that through the Maharaja’s (Ranbir Singh) territories generally the making and drinking of intoxicating liquors was forbidden and an order was passed that forbade the drinking of *chhang*. But on representations of Ladakhis that it had been the beverage of their nation from time immemorial and that it would be impossible to endure the cold of their climate without it, they were allowed the malt-liquor; but the restriction over the spirit however remained³⁴. This shows that Chhang had become an important component of their diet. Roasted grim flour (*sattu*) was used while taking tea or drinking Chhang³⁵. There was lucrative trade between India and Central Asia through Ladakh and Kashmir and this left a distinct impression on society and economy. The passage of trade through Ladakh and Kashmir influenced the dress, food and drinking habits of its people. Chinese brick tea was imported from Lhasa and Yarkand was largely consumed within Ladakh and part of this tea was also sent to

²⁸ Op. cit. A. Reeve Heber & Kathleen M. Heber, p. 117.

²⁹ Prem Singh Jina, *Ladakh : Past and Present*, New Delhi, 2000, p.327.

³⁰ Op.cit. M.L Kapur, p. 84.

³¹ Op.cit. Amar Singh Chohan, *Economic Conditions in the frontier territories of Jammu and Kashmir under Dogras*, p.114.

³² Op.cit. Alaxander Cunnigham, p. 304.

³³ Op. cit. Amar Singh Chohan, *Economic Conditions in the frontier territories of Jammu and Kashmir under Dogras*, p. 120.

³⁴ Op. cit Frederic Drew, p. 246.

³⁵ Op. cit. M. L Kapur, p. 83

Kashmir. More than 16000 maunds of this tea valued about 22 lakh rupees were brought to Ladakh between 1867 to 1912. Similarly, Yarkandi *Pilau* (rice cooked with meat and spices) became an important addition to Ladakhi cuisine. The use of steamed dumpling of meat locally called *mok mok* also became common in Ladakh³⁶. Smoking was also done. Besides using hookah they had ingenious method of smoking. They prepared small mound of earth and made a hole with their fingers at the top of it. A lateral tunnel was then bored with a small stick. Through this tunnel, they drew the smoke, kneeling down and applying their lips to the hole³⁷. Tobacco consumption was enormous in Ladakh. It was annually imported in Ladakh from Yarkand and the annual supply was about 4000 maunds in 1846. The average price of tobacco at Leh was one rupee per seer and the value of whole import was Rs.64000 in 1846. Like tobacco *charas* or *bhang* was also in great demand in India. Annually about 500 maunds of it was imported from Yarkand and it valued 24000 rupees. Sixty percent of imported *bhang* was consumed in Ladakh and rest was further exported to neighbouring countries. Such huge consumption might be due to the presence of Indian traders, Dogras. etc. Thus a good income was generated by import of these commodities. Among articles exported from India via Ladakh to Yarkand was opium besides other commodities like turmeric cardamom and ginger³⁸. Shridhar Koul and H.N Koul, mention about some Ladakhi ways of having food as “Ladakhis convert some eatables into flour like parched grim so that preparing meal becomes easy by avoiding an elaborate process. Different varieties of legumes and beans are likewise roasted and ground into flour. The flour of pea is mixed with grim flour. Sour apricots dried and powdered and dissolved in water make a tart and refreshing drink in summer days when a weary march under hot sun makes traveller uncomfortably thirsty. Sour apricots soaked overnight and then squeezing moisture out of them and drinking the resulting mixture in the morning helps to clear bowels and stimulates digestive system”³⁹.

Thus it can be concluded that, Ladakh which is truly described as high altitude cold- arid desert with unfavourable and hostile climatic conditions. In order to cope up with these conditions, its people evolved different ways to make human habitation easier. One of the ways was the evolution of traditional foods which played an important role in withstanding the harsh climatic conditions. For example the use of *chhang* was probably to withstand extreme cold. The use of tea in abundance must also be for the reason to withstand extreme cold. Ladakhis convert some eatables into flour like parched grim so that preparing meal becomes easy by avoiding an elaborate process. Some refreshing drinks prepared from apricots drunk in summer days when a weary march under hot sun makes traveller uncomfortably thirsty. The trade relationship between Ladakh and Tibet under Dogras was responsible for

³⁶ Devendra Kaushik, Eurasian Vision, Delhi, 2003, p. 172.

³⁷ Op. cit. M. L Kapur, p. 83.

³⁸ Op.cit. Prem Singh Jina, pp. 304, 305, 322.

³⁹ Op.cit. Shridhar Koul & H.N Koul, p.156.

strengthening cultural ties between people of Ladakh and Tibet. The *Kashmiris*, *Baltis*, *Ladakhis* and *Tibetans* relished same food and drinking habits. Brick tea, *sattu* and apricots formed favourite diet of these people. These food items are still cherished by the people of Ladakh. Thus with such dietary habits Ladakhis have been described as one of the hardiest races.