

THE IMPACT OF BALTI CULTURE IN JAMMU & KASHMIR AND BEYOND

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Different communities living alongside one another are often affected by each other's language, literature and culture. Although the Balti population in Jammu & Kashmir state is not even a tenth of a million, Balti art, culture and language have made a significant impact.

Rinchen Shah

Kashmir has always been renowned as a paradise on earth and its snow-touching hills, ravines, towering deodars and other trees such as poplars and chinars have inspired travellers to visit the valley. The charm of the valley attracted rulers and princes from outside. Some achieved their goal while others succumbed to the hardships of the mountainous terrain en route.

Among the successful rulers who reached the valley was Rinchen Shah who, according to the *Tarikh-i-Hassan*, came via Gagan Geir Sonamarg and briefly ruled Kashmir at the beginning of 14th century AD (Gagan Geir is an area on the Srinagar-Ladakh road. It is covered by snow for at least five months of the year). In the Balti/Ladakhi language 'Rinchen' means 'priceless', 'unparalleled' or 'above every status', and Hashmatullah Khan (1939), the author of *Tarikh Jammun, Kashmir, Laddakh aur Baltistan*, believes that Rinchen Shah was a prince of Ladakh.¹

Balti influence on language and place names

The people of Baltistan were Buddhists before the advent of Islam. Although there were certain points of difference between Tibetans,

¹ For a recent discussion of Rinchen's possible Ladakhi, Tibetan or Hor-pa identity see: Robert Vitali (2005). "Some Conjectures on Change and Instability in the One Hundred Years of Darkness in the History of La Dwags." In *Ladakhi Histories. Local and Regional Perspectives*, pp. 97-123. Edited by John Bray. Leiden: Brill. Ed.

Ladakhis and Baltis, they share a common linguistic and cultural heritage. For example, the Indus river rises in the vicinity of Lake Mansarowar. Tibetans believe the Indus comes from 'the lion's mouth', and not only Tibetans but also Ladakhis and Baltis call it 'Singhe Khe Babs' in their language. This is one example of the impact of Tibetan civilization on Balti culture.

In ancient times Baltistan lay on one of the trade routes from Kashmir to Central Asia. Essential commodities were brought to Baltistan by this route, and this is the reason why black pepper is known as 'Kashmiri Mrich' in Baltistan.

Partly because of the difficulties of travel, many Kashmiri and Balti people settled in towns such as Khotan, Kashgar, Yarkand in Central Asia, and married local women, resulting in an amalgamation of cultures and languages. Their children were known as 'Arghoon', a Balti word meaning 'mixed race'. There are many instances of such families even today. Fitrat Gilani, a well-known Kashmiri saint and poet, who passed away seven years ago, had a second family in Yarkand which still survives.

In the Kashmir valley Baltis are known as 'Botas' and the localities where they lived still bear names such as Bota Kadal, Bota Shah Mohalla, Bota Kulan, Bota Choawni and Bota Raja Mohalla. The name of the river Jhelum is a combination of two words belonging to the Balti, and Kashmiri languages: Jhe/Joye means 'canal' or 'stream' in Kashmiri, while and Lum means 'road' or 'passage' in Balti. Jhelum therefore means the 'passage of the stream'.

Shopian is a historic town in the Valley which was once known as 'Batu'. 'Shopian' once again is the combination of two words: 'Chhu' meaning water in Balti, and 'Payeen' meaning 'downwards': we can say that the name means the 'area of the flowing water'. In the vicinity of the famous Hindu shrine Mata Khirbhawani next to Mansbal Lake there is a village called Ahthang. This is a pure Balti word meaning 'vast area'. Other place names with '-thang' are found in Baltistan and Ladakh, for example Changthang, Beyangthang etc. Similarly, Karakoram is a Turkish word, meaning 'black hill'. Siachen, the name of the famous glacier, derives from an amalgamation of Persian and Balti words, each meaning 'wild rose'.

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The names of many other items likewise point to links with Baltis or their culture. There is a particular type of willow called 'Bota Veer'. The best quality apricots are called 'Bota Tcher' and the fragrant 'Reihan' seeds are called 'Bota Beber'.

Polo

The game of Polo originated in Baltistan and has now reached the remotest parts of the world. It was called *Chogaan* and the writer Prem Chand has written a famous novel, *Chogaan Hasti*. Chogaan was a popular game in the hilly areas of Punjab. In the great Mughal Emperor Babur's times this game was at its peak and enjoyed royal patronage.

In 1840 the Dogras invaded Baltistan under the command of Zorawar Singh, and Baltistan's Makpon Rajas were sent into exile, first to Kishtiwari and then to other parts of J&K state. Despite having lost their lands, they continued to play polo wherever they lived, and that is why that there are many polo *maidans* (polo grounds) in J&K. In Srinagar, the Rajas played polo in Lal Chowk and Bota Kadal. As some of the exiled Rajas lived in Tral they also played Polo there. Even today there is a vast meadow known as Hal-e-Marg (polo in Kashmiri is called 'hal'). A grand polo tournament was played in Delhi on the occasion of the coronation of George V of Great Britain, and the exiled Rajas of Baltistan and Gilgit also participated with enthusiasm.

Balti migration

In the course of time, there were further migrations from Baltistan, and now there are many villages in Kashmir where Baltis live in large numbers. These include Dalgate, Bandipora, Wusan, Bota Kulan, Kathidarwaza, Panier Jagir Tral and Sofipora in Pahalgam district. The Baltis living there mingle with the local people, and sit and eat together besides sharing their joys and sorrows. Baltis have laid some impressions on the life and behaviour of the people. In the Tibetan Colony at Idgah, Srinagar, the small-scale restaurants run by Tibetans serve Balti Dishes, and these are becoming popular among the masses. Non-Tibetan and Non-Baltis consume 'mokmok' and thukpa with much pleasure.

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Conclusion

Nobody can deny the impact of Baltis on the different spheres of life within J&K and beyond. I recently devised and produced a five-part documentary under the title “Balti in the Mirror of Reality”, and tried to make an exposition of the impact and remains of the Balti tradition and culture. The documentary was well-received, and the authorities gave it a certificate of merit, showing that the colourful culture of Baltis still retains a widespread appeal.

Bibliography

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