

TRANSFORMATION OF KUKSHO VILLAGE

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Until recently many non-Ladakhis have written that in Ladakh both Muslims and Buddhists live together under a single roof. In my living memory such a society existed in Kuksho, a village in Kargil district 143km from Leh. The residents of the village observed mixed traditions derived from both Buddhism and Islam, and many had mixed personal names.

I was curious to see this village many years ago. In 1967, Sonam Phuntsog, a teacher from Achinathang accompanied me to Kuksho at my request. He had been there earlier and was familiar with the customs and culture of the village.

In those days the village was not connected to a road. We had to cross a steep pass on foot between the Buddhist-populated village of Ledo and the village of Kuksho. The track was narrow and slippery, and it took about four hours to reach the village. I was fascinated by the beauty of the village, and a snow-clad peak was visible from a long distance.

We learnt that there were 45 households in the village. Of these, seven families were Buddhist; one was Muslim; and the remaining 37 households practised a mixed religion. Seven Buddhist families were under the profound influence of Islam. They buried their dead bodies in the same manner as the Muslims. The mode of living of the sole Muslim family was similar to the Buddhists. The eldest member of the family had a pigtail and wore ear-rings. The daughter-in-law wore a *perak*, the headgear used by Buddhist women.

Most of the men of the 37 families had combined Buddhist and Muslim names, such as Rahim Tsering, Ali Tashi and Namgyal Musa. The eldest brother of the family received a Muslim name, but almost all the women had Buddhist names. In the wake of a serious illness of

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a child, on the advice of a priest, the parents would change the name of the child from a Buddhist to a Muslim one and vice versa. The Muslims belonged to the Shia sect.

All the villagers came together to celebrate Id, Muharram and Losar (the New Year festival for Buddhists). At Muharram the Buddhists joined the Muslims and, reciting the elegy, beat their chests in remembrance of the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain, the grandson of the prophet Mohammed, and his loyal companions at Karbala in Iraq. We were told that both communities occasionally recited their religious scriptures under the same roof.

On the festival of Id a *maulvi* would lead the prayers and the next day, in violation of the injunctions of religion, the members of both communities took lots of *chang* (the local beer). Formerly, according to hearsay, in a mixed family household, meat was prepared in the same pot and an identification mark was put on the *halal* meat for the Muslims.

The village had a primary school but there were only three students. The teacher came from Kargil. Very few officials visited the village. Only one official, a *Naib Tehsilder*, had visited Kuksho within living memory.

“How long have you been practising this combined religion?” I asked a group of villagers. They replied that an aged man, Tsering, was able to provide the information. Tsering was not available, so we asked Mahdi Ali, an elder of the village. Mahdi Ali pondered on our question, and then consulted in a whisper with the others present.

To remove his misunderstanding, I said: “Every one is free to practise his own belief in our democratic set-up. We have not come here with any ulterior motive. We are interested in your customs, beliefs and mode of living, and we have come here to observe them ourselves. There are many people in Ladakh and outside Ladakh who appreciate your traditions.”

Mahdi Ali was convinced and after some reluctance he said, “In ancient times a saint came here who founded this religion. He had a staff in his hand and he planted it there, and it grew into a big tree.” He pointed towards an old birch tree in the valley below the village. Mahdi Ali told me that the people did not use the wood of that tree for

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fuel or any other purpose. "If we cut the tree, calamity will befall on us," he said.

Mahdi Ali and his companions explained that any change in the social customs and religious rituals would infuriate their gods, and result in catastrophe in the village. The people in the next hamlet, Drabo, stopped their practices, and as a result there was a drought that severely damaged their crops. Consequently, they have revived and resumed the old practices. Mahdi Ali said that they were being pressurised into giving up their age-old traditions, but they would not succumb. We learnt that the Muslim and the Buddhist clergy from Kargil and Leh occasionally visited Kuksho. Sometimes they were invited by the villagers to perform certain religious rites.

Mahdi Ali had maintained a beard like a Muslim. However, Buddhist religious flags were fluttering on the roof-top of his house. When I asked him about his personal beliefs, he told me that he had faith in both Islam and Buddhism. "I take wine but, as for meat, I only eat *halal* meat," he said.

We contacted some more villagers. A middle-aged man, Ghulam Ali, had five sons. All of them professed Buddhism, but at least two of them had Muslim names. When I questioned them, it transpired that they and other villagers had very little knowledge either of Buddhism or of Islam.

Another person, Mohammed Kazim, had two sons. One was a monk and was meditating somewhere in isolation at that time. The other had performed *haj*, and was known as '*haji*' in the village. He occasionally served as a musician in the village festivals. The strange aspect of their relationship was that the two brothers shared a polyandrous marriage.

During our short stay in the village, I felt that the people of Kuksho were very cheerful, jolly and lively. We experienced spontaneous laughter, teasing remarks and wit. The village teacher, who had long contacts with the residents of Kuksho confirmed that the people of the village were a very cheerful lot, adding that they often held song and dance parties.

The people of Kuksho had great faith in the healing power of the oracles and in witchcraft, and obtained exorcising charms from the village priest. Unlike in many villages of Ladakh, there was no caste

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system in the village. Elderly people were held in high esteem, irrespective of their religious beliefs.

We returned to the village a little before sunset. Some women were working in the fields in the low-lying valley. In reply to their query, we explained the reasons for our visit to the village. One young woman said that they were proud of their culture.

While descending from the pass we met a man. Sonam Phuntsog introduced him to me and said, "He is Ali, a Muslim from Kuksho". Ali seemed entirely Buddhist in his demeanour and style. He had been to the surrounding villages to collect donations for the construction of a gumpa in Kuksho. The degree of tolerance and co-operation was so high in those days.

Later, I wrote an article about my observations at Kuksho, and this appeared in *Hamara Adab*, an Urdu journal of the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art and Culture, Srinagar. Since the journal did not come to Ladakh, no one came to know about my article. After a couple of years I included some extracts of my article in my novel *Woh Zamana* (That World Gone By) which provoked reactions from some people. Word reached Kuksho, and the villagers were warned not to talk with strangers.

A person from Kuksho who had a shop at Leh was the object of ridicule. One day, irritated by people's teasing, he conveyed to me through one of my close relatives that I had disgraced their village. He asked me to withdraw the book from the market immediately, or else he would prosecute me in the court. I was a bit scared. However, I pointed out to him that my book was based on facts and the traditions of Kuksho were known to everyone. If he sued me, the proceedings could be prolonged, and judgement would be delayed. As a media person, I might publish the proceedings in the newspapers, and Kuksho would be more exposed. Then he did not proceed against me.

Gradually, some youths came out from the village to seek work in other parts of Ladakh. Some joined the defence establishment as labourers and settled permanently near Leh. These people were exposed to the outside world. When they returned to the village, they persuaded their kith and kin to shed their age-old customs and religious traditions. Buddhist and Muslim clerics had already launched a campaign for change and, inevitably, this began to take place.

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In September 1977, the Buddhist and the Muslim joint families unanimously decided to split. Following the separation, a Muslim family did not participate in the marriage ceremony of a Buddhist household. Muslim women, on the advice of the clergy, decided to give up the *perak* and wear a *dupata* instead, but it took some time before this was implemented.

Following the separation, people stopped eating together. However, close relatives continued to participate in each other's social ceremonies such as weddings, funerals and child-birth. At such events, Muslims used to send a person from their community in advance to prepare the food. Previously, when a Muslim cleric had asked Muslims to stop the practice of eating together, the Buddhists had protested strongly.

In 1988, twenty years after my visit, Nawang Tsering Shakspo visited Kuksho with Sonam Phuntsog. The relations between the two communities were already strained. Muslims no longer participated in festivals, and attended only as spectators. They were gradually disassociating themselves from village customs. However they continued to pay their respects to the village god. Nawang Tsering presented a paper at the IALS Colloquium in Bristol based on his observations and interviews, and this later appeared in the conference proceedings.¹

Mohammed Hussain, a 70 year-old Muslim of the village, told him that until recently one could see members of both communities living together under a single roof. The people of the village had been very liberal in their religious beliefs. Intermarriages between Buddhists and Muslims were therefore common, and he felt that this brought people closer to each other rather than causing conflict.

Mohammed Hussain, who had been headman when he was younger, was sad at the non-participation of Muslims in the festivals. I quote from Nawang Tsering Shakspo's article:

Looking back, Mohammed Hussain said that Muslims and Buddhists used to organise Sngo Lha and other festivals jointly and the whole village would take

¹ Nawang Tsering Shakspo. 1995. "The Significance of Khuksho in the Cultural History of Ladakh." In *Recent Research on Ladakh* 4&5:181-187. Edited by Henry Osmaston and Philip Denwood. London: SOAS/New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

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part in all the festivities. But now, with a grim expression on his face, he said that the good old days were over and he believed that external influences were gradually eroding the old traditions.

With the passage of time, further changes took place. In 1989, at the invitation of some young people, Dr Ravina Aggarwal visited Kuksho. Sonam Phuntsog was also with her on that visit. A young man told Dr. Ravina, “Ghani Sheikh and Nawang Tsering Shakspo have projected our village wrongfully. See for yourself. Do you find here what they have written?” He was right. The old Kuksho had changed considerably.

Leh district was in the grip of agitation at that time. The Buddhists had imposed a social and economic boycott against the Muslims. This had had its repercussions in Kuksho. There was a semblance of a social boycott between the two communities. The wind of change was blowing hard and it was tinged with communal overtones. That year the Muslims did not turn up at the festival. Some of them sheepishly peered through the windows of their houses.

Some of the youth of the village reprimanded Sonam Phuntsog for bringing strangers to their village and warned him not to bring anyone again. They said, “Tell them not to write about our village. We will write ourselves.” A section of the youth of the village objected to Dr. Ravina Aggarwal’s visit.

In the 1990s a public address system was introduced to the village. The Mosque was equipped with one. It has been reported that one year a Buddhist festival coincided with the Muslim Ashura Muharram. The Buddhists were celebrating and nearby the Muslims were observing Ashura Muharram. Both events were noisy and performed without any consideration for the sentiments of the other.

Until 1980, members of both communities contributed jointly to the construction of the gompa and the mosque. There is no cohesion between them these days. The cultural groups of both communities visit Kargil separately on alternate years to present programmes for the Ladakh festival, which is organised by the tourism department of the Jammu & Kashmir government.

The population of Kuksho is evenly divided between Muslims and Buddhists. There are 24 Buddhist families and 20 Muslim families in Kuksho proper. Including the adjacent hamlets of Dargo

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and Pachari, the total population is 626. The stagnation in the population is due to the mass migration of villagers to Leh and Kargil. About 50% of the people live outside the village, according to some villagers.

The present Imam of Kuksho Mosque has received theological education in Iraq and has been deputed by a leading Muslim Anjuman of Kargil. Now Muslims perform Haj and Ziarat. A head Lama visits the village annually and blesses the devotees.

The primary school of the village has been upgraded to a middle school. A redeeming feature is that people are educating their children irrespective of gender. The well-to-do families have admitted their children to private schools in Leh and Kargil, and have sent them to Jammu and Srinagar for higher studies. Until 1967, the village had not produced a single government employee. Now there are a lot of employees belonging to Kuksho who are working in different parts of Ladakh.

Kuksho traditions are part of our common heritage. One cannot hide facts and deny history. The traditions of Kuksho were not confined to Kuksho alone. A similar society existed earlier in many villages of Purig. According to Kacho Sikander Khan, people received mixed Muslim and Buddhist names in Chiktan and Sot.

Dr Ravina Aggarwal has mentioned the statement of one Master Karim of Achinathang who recalled his father telling him of a time when Islam was not so pervasive. Back in the region of Kharbu, from where he had emigrated, they would celebrate festivals with much dancing and singing with the Buddhists. They even had a unique way of practising Id, during which the villagers served beer called *Id-chang*.

Even in Leh, Muslims took Id-chang when celebrating Id. A Muslim of Leh told me that his father had found clay vessels in their house in which *chang* had been brewed by his ancestors. The young people of Kuksho should gain an insight into the history of Ladakh. The tragedy is that the extraordinary traditional harmony between the Muslims and the Buddhists of Kuksho is being eroded, and this is painful to well-wishers of this unique village.