Economic Conditions in Ladakh during the Dogra Period

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Although Ladakh is characterised by a harsh climate and rugged topography, Ladakhis have learnt to live in this adverse environment and to face the challenges posed by nature. The fact that Ladakhis have generally been regarded as a contented people, living a frugal life, attests to the success of their adaptation through modes of dress, farming, and social practices such as polyandry and primogeniture. Trade with Kashmir, Turkestan and Tibet — 15 days, one month and three months' journey away, respectively — has ensured the provision of a significant portion of local needs and wants. Given the distances involved and the isolation of the region during the long winters, Ladakhis were careful to preserve the necessities of daily life, using their resources sparingly.

During the Gyalpo's rule Ladakh had no permanent army and hence there was no military expenditure. In the event of war, each family had to provide a warrior (who had to supply his own weapons) and a horse or a man to carry the rations of the warrior. History tells that since there was little surplus in Ladakh, invading armies would retreat quickly with their booty, as local production could not sustain such an army. The Dogras, too, retained only a very small force in Ladakh after they had suppressed the local freedom struggle.

For centuries the limitations posed by the hostile environment were accentuated by the repression imposed on the common people by a self-centred aristocracy and greedy officials. However, in the past three decades, Ladakhi society has undergone a tremendous change. People are well-off economically. Their needs have increased considerably, and the increase in consumption has been matched by their purchasing capacity. In pre-independence Ladakh, the number of shops in the town of Leh was no more than two hundred, and no shops existed outside Kargil and Leh. According to the archives, in 1888, during the governorship of Pandit Radha Kishen Kaul, 130...
shops remained open from July to October, while two-thirds would shut down after the departure of the traders. According to Labour Department records, there are now two thousand shops in Leh alone, and more shops can be found in all villages throughout the region.

Agriculture has always been the backbone of the Ladakhi economy and the majority of the population were farmers. Many proverbs reflect the significance of land in social life. For example, 'to take a bride by pretending that tetres is his main field'. Tetres was the largest field belonging to the King of Ladakh, which now is part of Leh bazaar. The affluence of a man was determined by the extent of the cultivatable land he possessed. Nowadays, this perception has changed. The three or four landlords in Leh who used to lend grain to needy farmers have been relegated to the background, while owners of big hotels and shops which are rented-out in the main market, as well as government contractors, are considered rich. In recent years as new ways of earning a living have opened up, many villagers have migrated to Leh in search of greener pastures, and agriculture has therefore received a setback. But in spite of these developments, agriculture continues to be the mainstay of the Ladakhi economy and the majority of the population is still connected to the soil.

The total area of Ladakh is 58,321 sq. km., but economic activity is limited to an area of 620 sq. km, and only 250 are under cultivation. Janet Rizvi (1983) wrote:

A mere 210 sq. km are left under crops, vegetables or fruit, thus the pressure of the population on the cultivated area is very great — about 525 per sq. km. This includes the population of the two towns Leh and Kargil and the nomadic population of Changthang.

According to revenue records, the total cropped area in Leh district in 1983-84 was 10,270 hectares, while the net area sown was 9,990. In Kargil district the total cropped area was 11,950 hectares. Landholdings are generally small, and the area under double cropping was a mere 280 hectares. Since then, this area may have shrinked further, as each year new residences, guesthouses and hotels spring up on cultivatable land. During the Dogra period, when the population was less than half what it is now, the total cropped area in Leh district was 8,043 hectares as per a survey conducted by A.N. Sapru, then tehsildar of Leh.

Many Ladakhis depend on foodstuffs provided by the Government at subsidised rates. At present, more than one-hundred-thousand quintals of rice and wheat are imported annually into Leh district alone. The same quantity is supplied to Kargil district. A network of ration stores has been set up throughout the region for the distribution of rations to consumers. Three hundred metric tons of butter are imported, a value of three crore rupees annually. It is said that per-capita, butter consumption in Leh is the highest in India.

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of the people of Ladakh. After 67 years of occupation the first primary school was opened at Leh and a teacher appointed. In 1908 it was upgraded to Middle Class and a second teacher was added. In 1909, the total expenditure on salaries of officials was Rs. 9,166, while Rs. 6,000 was received as revenue from Leh town alone.

Very little is known about the economic conditions of the people of Ladakh in the Gyalpo’s period. The government of Ladakh was a mild form of despotism under the Gyalpo’s rule. His actual power was much curbed by the authority of the monastic establishment, the aristocracy and officials. The common people were subjected to discrimination and economic exploitation. Some powerful rulers, however, had the upper hand on the aristocracy and a few of them worked for the well-being of their subjects.

The gyalrams or chronicles of Ladakh tell that in the 17th century, Gyalpo Jamyang Namgyal tried three times to equalise rich and poor. Following a defeat at the hand of the Baltis, the Gyalpo said, ‘I will employ any means at my disposal towards the propagation of the religion of Buddha. But as the religion of Buddha is entirely dependent on the people for its propagation, I will on my part relieve them from taxation and will treat them like my own children.’

Father Antonio de Andrade, a Jesuit from Portugal, visited Ladakh during the reign of Jamyang Namgyal. He observed that the people of Ladakh were economically well off. Oral tradition, passed from generation to generation, indicates that the aristocracy considered themselves superior to commoners. They wore dyed clothes, while ordinary people were restricted to plain cloth. The nobility also monopolised the use of foreign materials such as satin, brocade and velvet. The common people had to shave their hair on the front of the head, while the aristocracy kept long hair.

Officials in the Dogra period, however, were worse. The history of the Dogra period is replete with instances of harrassment, maltreatment, and victimisation of people by the officials. Shridhar Kaul writes in *Ladakh Through the Ages* that in Zangskar the years were counted good or bad according to number of visits by officials. Officials implicated people in false cases, fleeced them, and outraged the modesty of their women. The payment of land revenue was an ordeal. Apart from the payment of the tax, farmers had to satisfy the personal greed of the officials. People were consequently extremely wary of officials. British Captain Knight visited Sangku village in 1860 and writes that people were very scared at the sight of a stranger on account of the maltreatment of the population by the Dogra army. Upon seeing him, women would flee from their houses, carrying their children, and would disappear behind rocks and bushes. The men had already fled earlier. Traders, too, suffered under the high duties that were levied by the Dogras. In 1715 Father Ippolito Desideri and Father Freyre mention the greed of the customs officials who always needed to be appeased with presents of tobacco.

Forced labour constituted another heavy economic burden. The Dogra administration introduced the res system by which a village or group of villages was bound to supply transport for certain stages on certain roads for any passing official. At Leh and Kargil fifty horses and twenty coolies had to be kept ready in summer, and twenty horses and thirty coolies in winter. Each house had to supply a man and animal to fulfil the begar carriage obligation. The Gyalpo and nobles, as well as the Dogra authorities would issue travellers with a pass known as lamyig or parwana, which entitled them to demand begar services and to buy supplies from the villages they passed through. William Moorcroft reports that aristocrats and the heads of villages abused the system and made money by providing begar facilities to traders.

Food supplies in Ladakh appear to have been insufficient. Moorcroft reports in 1820 that grain was imported from Kashmir, Punjab and the provinces south of the Himalaya. Alexander Cunningham confirms this in 1847, writing that Ladakh required food imports. According to his calculations the average daily consumption of food per head was 8 chhatak or half a pound, while the available production was not more than 7 chhatak, leading to an annual shortfall of 24 seers per person. At the rate of 16 seers per rupee, this would require grain imports worth Rs. 2,47,500. However, at the same time, some flour was exported to Western Tibet. Ladakhi traders bartered flour for wool, pashmina and salt. There is no official record of the quantity of flour, but according to the Ladakhi trader Haji Mohd. Sidiq, about 1000 quintals of flour was exported to Tibet, while thousands of maunds of wool, pashmina and salt were imported to Ladakh. Some grain was also sold to Turki merchants as fodder for their pack animals.

**British interventions**

In the course of the 19th century, British India started to interfere in the affairs of Jammu and Kashmir. In view of the region’s strategic position the Viceroy — against the wishes of Maharaja Ranbir Singh — appointed an officer, Dr. Cayley, as British Joint Commissioner in Ladakh. His duty was to supervise the trade relations of Ladakh with Turkestan and to keep watch on the movements of the Russian military across the border. The Maharaja protested that the appointment constituted interference in the internal affairs of the State and sent a delegation headed by his heir-apparent to Lahore to
convey his displeasure to the British Governor of Punjab. However, the delegation was told that the orders of the Viceroy were final and would not be changed.

In 1870 a commercial treaty was concluded between the British government and the Maharaja. By this treaty, the British obtained full rights to control economic and trade relations with Turkestan. Earlier, the Maharaja had abolished all levies and duties charged on British products. Now, the British asked him to reduce duties in general, and the British Resident in Kashmir recommended the abolition of begar, but the Maharaja declined. Arthur Brinkman writes that the Maharaja was unable to control his officers in Ladakh and that consequently it was not unreasonable to suppose that he was likewise unable to control them in Kashmir. D.N. Dhar sums up the Dogra period in these words: 'Dogra rule in Kashmir and Ladakh presents a unique basket of the worst form of feudal exploitation, seeds of modernism and the birth of people's revolt against economic exploitation.'

With respect to the maltreatment of traders, the British Deputy Commissioner of Kangra wrote: 'Throughout my journey I heard but one story of the oppressions of the Maharaja government in Ladakh, the avaricious and grasping character of the ruler himself and the corruptness of all his people in authority.' Traders appreciated the British intervention and the grievances of the traders were redressed to a considerable extent. On account of British policy, the volume of trade increased considerably.

A few Dogra governors in Ladakh carried out welfare work and won the hearts of the people. Mehta Mangal (1860) was one of them. He was an efficient officer who carried out the settlement work in the entire Ladakh region and reformed the system of revenue collection. He built settlements for the landless and homeless people and built homes for them. He provided them with agricultural implements and seeds, launched a vigorous campaign to plant poplar and willow trees, and built resthouses on the pony tracks to Srinagar, Tibet, and Manali. In addition, he introduced postal service in Ladakh and opened a pathshala at Leh where Sanskrit was taught.

William Johnson, a British citizen who served as Dogra Governor of Ladakh, had the canals built that irrigate the plain of Ulethogpo, and laid out gardens at different places. He reformed the system of land settlement introduced by Mehta Mangal, built an inn for Balti traders at Leh, and was prompted to judge legality of cases. When Johnson was to be transferred, Ladakhis approached Ranbir Singh with the request to cancel the order, noting in their petition that under the administration of Frederic Drew and William Johnson as Wazirs of Ladakh, the people of the region had been happy and had prospered. However, at a later date a Ladakhi delegation called on the Maharaja and requested his transfer, accusing him of immorality and causing offense to the religious sensibilities of the Buddhists.

**Farmers' living standards**

Debts constituted a major burden for farmers during the Dogra period, and moneylenders treated them as bonded labourers. A.N. Sapru, a tehsildar of Leh who conducted an economic survey in 1941, observed:

It would be difficult to imagine a country more ground down by the burden of debts than Ladakh and the extraordinary feature is that in one of the poorest countries on the face of the earth, the rate of interest is the highest.

Interest rates were 25% per annum and on account of compound interest, it went up to 50% for three to four months. A farmer was born in debt, lived in debt, and died in debt.

A story tells that a man from Sakti village once bought a torch on loan from a money-lender at Leh. His failure to repay the loan led to an accumulation of interest, causing him ultimately to surrender his field to the moneylender. The field is known as bijli zhing or torch field in the village.

The Ladakhi debtor reminds one of the carefree Mr. Micawber portrayed in David Copperfield by the great novelist Charles Dickens, and the money-lender of the ancient Jew Shylock immortalised by Shakespeare.

Even the government charged 25% interest on grain supplied on loan. During the tenure of Sapru it was reduced to 12% and later still to 6%. There was extreme poverty in the villages. In the words of one observer:

A few handfuls of parched grain flour mixed with water or tea made up their usual diet; a pinch of salt, a few vegetables were a luxury and, as far as a little rice, it would be heaven itself. As for his attire, a long gown, greasy and dirt-laden and tattered, very often reduced to rags — one gown might last a lifetime or more — did duty for full dress, summer & winter.

The gown also served as bedding. Older Ladakhis remember that a needy person from villages like Chhushot or Thikse would go on foot carrying a gunny bag all the way to the remote villages from Panamik and Lamayuru to borrow grain from the government stores there. He would consume half of the grain himself before reaching home. The summer months, when stocks
were depleted and the harvest not yet in, were particularly difficult and people would sometimes cut the barley before it was ripe. Gradually, vegetables would replace flour in the daily diet, as expressed in the proverb ‘half one’s food vegetables and half one’s food patches of clothes’. The sixth month of the Tibetan calendar, which is generally falls in July was the hardest: ‘July is the time when flies collect around your mouth. It is the time to say, “what shall I eat”, and not “what shall I wear”. And spring days grow longer and longer and mother’s bread becomes smaller and smaller’. Such proverbs are mirrors reflecting the conditions of life. Immediately after the harvest, creditors would visit the threshing grounds and take away with interest the grain provided on loan. Within two months the farmer would be back at the door of the lenders to beg for another loan of grain. This vicious circle was never broken until some years after the independence of India, when many debts were settled or cancelled at the initiative of the State government.

The problem of unemployment was also very acute, as there were few avenues for earning a living. Trade, as noted above, was largely monopolised by non-Ladakhis. Getting a job in a government department was quite an uphill task. The total number of employees was not more than one hundred in the entire region. The late Munshi Abdul Sattar, lone freedom fighter from Ladakh, told me in an interview that even peons were brought to Leh from Kashmir and Jammu. Sven Hedin, the Swedish explorer required twenty-five pony men and porters, cooks, helpers, for his central Asian expedition in 1907. In his book Transhimalaya he writes that the entire population of Leh town was ready to serve him in that difficult and long expedition. Sixty-three year old Abdul Gafur, an experienced caravaneer implored Hedin to include him in the caravan. ‘My children will die from starvation this winter if I am not employed’, he reportedly told Hedin.

In response to growing discontent among the people of Kashmir and Ladakh, the Glancy Commission was instituted in 1931 by Maharaja Hari Singh to look into the grievances of the people of the different regions of the state. The Kashmir Raj Bodhi Mahasabha, a newly established religious and political organisation of Ladakhi Buddhists and neo-Buddhists of the Kashmir valley, submitted a representation followed by a detailed memorandum highlighting the economic problems of the Buddhists. With the exception of the appointment of an Assistant Inspector of schools, the opening of some new schools, and the nomination of two Ladakhi Buddhists to the state council (Praja Sabha), the autocratic government of Jammu and Kashmir did not undertake any concrete steps to develop the area or address the grievances of the people.

Contemporary developments

Today, the people of Ladakh are politically conscious, socially alert, and by and large economically well-off. Thanks to improved medical facilities and sanitation the average life-span has increased. Literacy rates have risen to fifty percent. Hundreds of Ladakhis have bought land in cities like Jammu, Delhi, Srinagar, and Dehra Dun for the construction of residences, some of which have already been built. Thousands of Ladakhis are working in defence and civil services. Yet, in view of the growing numbers of Ladakhis pursuing modern education at higher levels, it is likely that the problem of unemployment will become acute in the future. The topography and transport situation are not conducive to industry. The dairy and poultry industries have also seen little development, leading to a shortage of milk and eggs in the region. People routinely use tinned or powdered milk imported from the plains, while eggs are mostly imported from Kashmir.

Although Ladakh has its own traditional handicrafts, such as shawl weaving, wood carving, thanka painting, pottery, and carpet work, few craftsmen are inclined to pursue their vocation because of the lack of raw materials and proper marketing, as well as inadequate earnings. An ordinary labourer earns considerably more than a skilled craftsman. Although there are many handicraft centres where training is imparted, the trainees tend to join merely for the sake of the stipend paid by the government. Having completed their training, they commonly change to more remunerative jobs.

Ladakhis are a hardy race, but easy money has made them easy-going, as government and welfare agencies spend large amounts of money on the development of Ladakh. A Naga intellectual, Kiren Wati, writes of his own people’s experience that ‘the process of people becoming non-productive was sped up by the generosity of the government in pumping in money with a lasting negative effect’. This statement must also, perhaps, be applied to the Ladakhi situation.

Bibliography


