

Tracing the Cultural Identity of Mons: The Earliest Inhabitants of Ladakh

Dr. Pallavi Sharma

Assistant Professor

Department of History

School of social Sciences

Cluster University of Jammu, Jammu, J&K

Abstract: The Mons, recognized as one of the earliest inhabitants of Ladakh, India, represent a foundational element of the region's cultural and historical tapestry. This paper traces the cultural identity of the Mon community through an interdisciplinary analysis of archaeological findings and historical records. Originating from northern India, particularly Kullu, the Mons contributed significantly to Ladakh's early settlement, introducing agricultural practices, irrigation systems, and cultural traditions that shaped the region's socio-economic landscape. The study examines their integration with other groups, such as the Dards and Tibetans, and the impact of Buddhism on their identity. Contemporary challenges, including globalization and environmental changes, threaten the preservation of Mons cultural heritage. By synthesizing ethnographic and material evidence, this paper highlights the Mons' enduring legacy and proposes strategies for safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Mons, Ladakh, Early Inhabitants, Cultural Identity, Buddhism, Globalization.

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I. Introduction

Ladakh is the highest elevated region of India having complex geographical features. The high barren mountains have created harsh climatic conditions which are responsible for inadequate resources and limited population. As the ice age get over and the glaciers has attained the life sustaining features such as vegetation and the forest cover, these high mountains and valleys started pulling the nomadic tribes from nearby areas. Therefore, in terms of inhabitants, it is the earliest occupied region in the world as various ancient tribes migrated from different neighbouring regions and settle here. Initially, these migrants were nomads; with the passage of time they adopted agricultural ways of life, established settlements and follow certain rituals and folk traditions. Various stone tools, artefacts, sculptures, paintings presented on boulders, stones, rocks shelters, caves, walls etc. are the testimonials of the ancient culture. The archeological excavations of early settled areas informed about the cultural remains and their characteristic features regarding the primitive society. While correlating these evidences with written sources, a reliable description is available describing the ancient culture and their earliest followers. But in absence of chronological details, the available information is fragmented.

In the first phase, the migrants came from the south of Ladakh. Most of the historians are of the view that these early wanderers were the Mons belonging to one of the early Aryan race who was forced to migrate to the Shivalik hills by the other more powerful Aryan group to gain control of Indo-Gangetic plains. As a result, these Mons find the foothills of Himalayas (the Lahul-Spiti region) a suitable place to live in.ⁱ Later they came to Ladakh from mid-Himalayan sections of Kullu (Karjan) and occupied the upper Ladakh during ancient time.ⁱⁱ With the passage of time, and getting familiar with the foreign land, Mons became chief element of the society. Though they were not able to attain the status of the rulers of the occupied land, being the initiation of primitive political system instead form an important agricultural community and have respectable status in the society. When Dards and Tibetan nomads/Mongls migrated into Ladakh, because of their aggressive nature, Mons reconciled to a lower status.ⁱⁱⁱ

Origin of Mons

The term Mons was devised by the Tibetan speaking peoples. In the Tibetan language, it means the 'valley dwellers' who confined to those nomadic groups who were residing in the Himalayas.^{iv} In other view, Mons originally called as the inhabitants of country of Manus (Desi-si-manus) lying between Kulu and Lahul. Abidin believes that Manus will be Monhali (Manali). It is observed that some tribes of Aryans origin migrated from Kulu, Manali, Lahul and Spiti into Ladakh and settled down in upper Kashmir.^v Some scholars state that

Mons are the original inhabitants of Ladakh. They are the Aryan and settled before the arrival of the Tibetans and Dards. They come from Karja in Himachal Pradesh and set up their dwellings in Ladakh.^{vi} Gergan believes that the Mons were of Austro-Asiatic origin.^{vii}

According to Tibetan chronicles, Zang-zung is home of Mons which comprised of Indus valley along with its tributaries up to Dardistan. In early days of Zang-zung, there was no ruler and there were small independent republics under the rule of Magspons. From the term Magspons, the present name of the tribe Mon is derived-

Magspons ≥ Maspon; Maspon ≥ Maon; Maon ≥ Mon.^{viii}

Tibetans put forwards another statement highlighting their aboriginal character. Accordingly, the aboriginal tribes of Ladakh were known as Mons, who settled at the north of Tibet, an area covered with dense forest and high mountains. Chinese historians believe that barbarians of the north Tibet settled at the borders of Tibet and West Asia were Mons. From the above discussion, it is understood that Mons was neither the descendants of Kashmiri or Tibetan. They made special distinction with their own identity among the nomads and settled on the upper side of Kashmir in Zangskar.^{ix}

Views of Different Scholars about Mons

The profound exponent of genesis of Mons in Ladakh is A.H. Francke who mentioned in detail about the origin and historical development of Mons.

According to Francke, Mons comes to spread Buddhism in Ladakh.^x Francke mentioned that they spread their settlements mostly to each village of Western Tibetan. They were mainly grouped as musicians or carpenters and were reduced to low status indicating that they came from another country and subjugated by the Tibetans in the past. But the actual origin of the Mons is difficult to find out as Dards migrated to this land when Mons were well settled. Dards were followed by the Central Tibetans, which causes the decline of the Mons. The migration process was so hasty that it is not so easy to highlight their nature of settlements but in case of Zangskar, the features of the Mons are still intact as it had never been occupied by Dards. Francke visited Zangskar in order to predict the real origin of Mons, from where he get to know that in past, Zangskar was completely occupied by Mons and afterwards it was occupied by Tibetans and became a Tibetan country until recaptured by Mons. Francke stated that presently, Indians including Dogras or Kashmiris are designated as Mons and if Indians were Mons then maybe those Mons who captured the area in past were from Indian origin. The inscription belonging to 200 B.C. written in Brahmi testifies that during ancient time Western Tibet was once settled by ancient Indians.^{xi} Therefore, the study finds that as per Francke's observation Mons were the native people of Ladakh who traced their origin since ancient time and were threatened by the immigrants and reduced to mere figurative.

Hassanian and Gergan has critically evaluated Francke's interpretation about Mons. They appreciated that Francke was certain that Mons belong to Aryan race of Indus valley and inhabited Ladakh before the Dards and the Tibetans entered and settle down, but the major drawback of Francke is not to prove who the Mons were? Therefore, Hassanian and Gergan on the basis of Tibetan dictionaries has asserted that Mons is a common name for dissimilar countries and tribes as Kiratai. (means those wandering groups who constantly walks on the extreme boundaries) and commonly as Hindu, who inhabited the region amid Tibet and Indian plains such as Assam, Bhutan, Kulu and Nepal. In addition, their bodily characteristics are also identical to Aryans. Another important information regarding Mons is availed through the foundational structures build by them in past such as Mon-gyi-Chhod-rten (stupas), Mon-Mkhar (castle), Mon-zhin (fields), Mon-dur (graves) etc. found in different locations extended upto Pamirs in north, Ma-Yum-La in East, Gilgit region in west, Lahul, Spiti, Zangskar in south. All these formed the extent of the ancient Kingdom of Zunzan(Zhangzhung/Zang-zung) which was in existence in remote past. However, Gergan has illustrated that language is an important source that provides the details of the lineage of Mons. Various inscriptions and art work have been found in stones that represent ancient Tibetan, Brahmi or Gupta script belonging to Buddhist art remains that highlighted the impact of the people of upper Indus valley irrespective of Kashmiris. Another important outcome of the study is that Mons is not descendants of Kashmiri but belong to distinct race. It is estimated from Mons specification that if they belong to Kashmir then they will not add on name of Kirah or Kir mlechhas to their ancestor, the Kashmiris. Thus, it is interpreted that Mons belong to ancient Aryan race who were compelled to move in the upper Indus valley by the another wave of Aryans.^{xii}

Petech too has critical attitude towards the Mons of Ladakh. He designated them as low caste musicians and artists, and not convinced with Francke, who considered them as remnants of the ancient people who were annexed and reduced to low status by Dardi attackers. The Mons had left many ancient constructions of anonymous origin but they lost their prominence when the Western Tibet people generalized all the non-Tibetan tribes. They did not give any importance to the Mons buildings and just referred them as of foreign origin of ancient ages stating no relation with Mons.^{xiii}

Another important remark was put forward by Herber, highlighting about the important characteristics of Mons. Accordingly, it is the time when Indian Buddhist followers were visiting in different part of the sub-continent to spread the doctrine of their faith. Some reached Western Himalayas and established the ideology of their faith. These Buddhists come from India directly and not through Tibet and thus, the descendants of these Buddhist followers was called Mons, who populated some extent of this land but still, possess their own characteristics.^{xiv} At present, the population of Mons barely falls between 5% to 10%. Although their cultural and religious feeling were observed in almost every region of Ladakh in the form of religious stupas (Moni-Chorten), graves (Moni-Rongkhan), cultivable lands (Moni-Jing), forts (Moni-Khar) and many more.^{xv}

However, the local traditions do not fully support the views of these researchers, i.e the Mons were the teachers of Buddhism, Mons as ruler of Ladakh. The most acceptable view is that Mons are Aryans and had migrated from Lahul, Spiti and Kajra to Ladakh. It is also held that they inhabited Ladakh before the arrival of Buddhism and believed in the Bon tradition, the original religion of Ladakh and Tibet.

Mons- the Architect of Political System

Mons has been described as the rulers of Ladakh. When Mons arrived Ladakh, they set up their government, the seat of which is situated at village rGya the ruler was called Gyalpa cho who was also a member of Mon group.^{xvi}

His empire includes villages of Sakti, Rong, Shyok, Durbug and Tanche, All these areas were inhabited by Mons and the areas extending from Marchelang to Khalatse remained unoccupied till fourth quarter of the tenth century.^{xvii} The leader/ruler of the society was called as *Gyelpo* (*Gyalpo*); i.e. the Emperor and the Queen was called as *Gyelmo* (*gyalmo*). Till 7th century, this region was politically fabricated under separate *Gyalpos*. This indicates the beginning of political system under the leadership of *Gyalpo*. This system continued till 7th century A.D. under which the entire region is divided among different ethnic communities under *Gyalpo*.^{xviii}

By the end of tenth century, Khotanese nomads attacked Mons frequently for economic as well as political gains. To handle such attacks, *Gyalpo* constructed a fort in Shyok. But large force of Khotanese overcome the Mons. These forces after subduing the Mons returned to Khotan taking valuable goods and large number of prisoners. As soon as Mons found opportunity, they raided the outpost of nomads again. To take revenge, the Khotanese again headed towards Maryul (the loe land) which later designated as Ladakh. The then *Gyalpo*, move towards Skilde Neemagon, the ruler of Purang to support him against the Khotan's attack as he alone could not resist against the huge army of Khotan. The combined forces of *Gyalpo* and Neemagon successfully forced Khotanese to surrender. As a reward, the Mons' *Gyalpo* gave the unpopulated areas below Marchelang including Leh, Shey, Thikse, Chhuchut, and area upto Khalatse to the King of Purang. The King developed Shey as the center of operations. With the passage of time, Neemagon became the ruler of entire Maryul and Gyalpo was restricted to position of Kalon (i.e. the governor of district).^{xix} This was the beginning of Tibetan rule in entire Maryul by Skilde Neemagon.^{xx} Gergan said that Leh was also the seat of Mons King.^{xxi}

Cultural Identity of Mons

Mons, the subcultural group of Ladakh,^{xxii} are simple, cool and cultured race. They are good musicians and craftsmen. In the 10th century A.D; they limited themselves to Zangskar valley. When Mongols established their empire in Ladakh, they invited Mons from Zangskar and gave them land to settle in central Ladakh. In return, Mons have to sing songs and play music for them.^{xxiii} Lonpo, Kalons and head Lamas of Ladakhi monasteries also invited Mons in their respective regions. In this way, Mons spread throughout in Ladakh.^{xxiv} Culturally, Mons characterized by their contributions to agriculture, craftsmanship, and religious syncretism, shaped by their interactions with other groups and the region's harsh environment.

Physical Appearance: Mons have a long or medium head, narrow face, prominent and narrow nose, well-formed nose bridge, cheek bones not prominent like Mongolian, eyes well formed, are right angle to nose, well-formed eye-lids, well stretched and not small. They are fair or wheat or dark-skinned having dark and soft hair. In case of males, beard fully developed, body medium or tall. Due to their physical appearance and characters, Mons settlements in Spiti, Swat and Pamir regions in higher Himalayan belts show resemblance to Aryans of Kulu and Manali region.^{xxv}

Agricultural Innovations and Settlement Patterns: The Mons are instrumental in transforming Ladakh's barren landscape into cultivable land through advanced irrigation techniques and agricultural practices.^{xxvi} Unlike the nomadic Tibetan Bhots, who relied on pastoralism, the Mons settled near rivers and streams, developing sophisticated canal systems to irrigate barley, wheat, and apricot fields. Archaeological evidence from sites like Choglamsar reveals remnants of ancient irrigation channels, attributed to Mon ingenuity. These innovations not only sustained the Mon population but also laid the foundation for Ladakh's agrarian economy. The Mons' settlements, concentrated along the Indus and Zangskar valleys, were strategically located near fertile

lands and water sources.^{xxvii} Their villages, such as those near Leh and Kargil, featured stone and mud-brick architecture, reflecting adaptation to the cold desert climate. Rock carvings depicting agricultural scenes and animal motifs, such as the kiang (wild sheep), suggest the Mons' deep connection to their environment and their role as early cultivators.

Music and Dance: Mons very much fond of music and dance. They brought their musical instruments from Indian plains. These include Daff, Daman, Surna.^{xxviii} In any ceremonial occasions or marriage or story-telling, Mons musicians are always prepared for the entertainment.^{xxix} In present day Ladakh, Mons acted as the official musicians of the villages providing music on festive occasions. In the winter months, when there is no work in the fields, these Mons musicians chant traditional epics of the mythological legends of The *Ling Kesar*. Their musical traditions, preserved in folk songs and performances, were integral to communal gatherings and festivals. These songs, often sung in the Ladakhi language, narrate stories of migration, agricultural life, and spiritual beliefs, reflecting the Mons' Indo-Aryan heritage. The integration of Mon music into Buddhist festivals, such as Hemis Tsechu, highlights their cultural adaptability and syncretism.

Craftsmanship and Material Culture: The Mons was renowned for their skills as carpenters, masons and contributing significantly to Ladakh's material culture (Jerath, 1995). Archaeological findings, including pottery and tools from Neolithic sites, indicate their expertise in crafting utilitarian and decorative object. The Mons' construction of castles and irrigation systems, as noted by many scholars underscores their role as builders of Ladakh's early infrastructure. The Mons constructions or atleast the patron of artist who constructed many of the sculptures, castles graves etc. that are found in various parts of Ladakh, most notably in Zangskar, for example *Gyalba rigs langa*- a life-size sculpture of five figures of Buddha in deep relief, Mons-graves (*Mon-dur*), Mons-chorten (*Mon-gyi-chod-rten*), Mons-mani walls (*Mon-gyi-mani*), Mons-field (*Mons-zhim*), Mons-castle (*Mons-gyi-mkhar*)

Mons are called as great builders and artisans.^{xxx} Various ruins such as ruined castle of rGya, the ancient palace of Sakti and Chemri village referred to as the construction of Mons.^{xxxi} Francke also mentioned about various ruins of Zangskar as remnants of Mons civilization.^{xxxii} In Chamba, a famous statue of Maitreya twenty-five feet high and carved in hard rock at Sanku and Mulbekh are the master pieces of Mons civilization.^{xxxiii}

Besides one Kanika Chorten is found in Sani village near Kanika monastery. This chorten was built during the 1st or 2nd century A.D. From these structural remnants, it is evident that Mons were great builders and followers of Buddhism. In 2nd century A.D. when Khushan king sent 500 Buddhists missionaries to Tibet for the propagation of Buddhism there, they passed through Zangskar, as the route from Kashmir to Tibet via Zangskar was the shortest route. In Zangskar, these Buddhist were warmly welcomed by the Mons. Later they constructed Kanika chorten with a square basement, upon which hemispherical elongated dome was made. On the dome, an inverted pyramidal component with wooden 'chattravali' was finally made in Gandhar style.^{xxxiv}

Religious Syncretism and Cultural Exchange: According to one view, Mons original home was Zhangzhung. The natives of this region were followers of Bon tradition. Therefore, initially some Mons practiced the Bon religion, characterized by animistic beliefs and nature worship. With the spread of Buddhism in the 2nd century CE, the Mons gradually adopted Buddhist practices and contributing to the construction of early monasteries. However, they retained elements of their pre-Buddhist beliefs, such as reverence for natural elements, which blended with Buddhist rituals.^{xxxv} The Mons' interactions with Dards and Tibetans facilitated cultural exchange, evident in their adoption of Tibetan-style architecture and religious iconography. For example, monasteries like Alchi, attributed to Mons craftsmanship, feature murals and sculptures that combine Indo-Aryan and Tibetan motifs. This syncretism underscores the Mons's role as mediators of cultural traditions in Ladakh's multicultural landscape.

Buddhist Followers: During King Asoka's period, various Buddhist Missionaries were sent to Yarkhand, Kashmir and other Himalayan regions.^{xxxvi} This time Indian Buddhism was manifesting a keen missionary spirit and spreading its doctrine and enlightenment far and wide. Mons in Himalayan region, particularly Ladakh, Zangskar valley, Indian Buddhism got stronghold. The missionaries on medical tour to the neighbouring province of Zangskar, found a village where almost every fourth man wore the yellow saffron robe of the down country Buddhist priest. These descendants of these early missionaries were called Mons are plentiful in numbers and remain distinct from the original inhabitants.^{xxxvii} However, it is observed that a Mons cannot normally become lama, a status considered very holy and highly revered in Buddhist society of Ladakh. There were two Mons lamas but due to social discrimination and lower status, they migrated to Himachal Pradesh.^{xxxviii}

Marriage: Mons is an endogamous group. The rule of endogamy is to be followed always. There are no incidences of love marriage outside their social group. Marriages are performed within their own social groups.

Mons in Contemporary Society

As far as social structure of the Mons is concerned, they are very much aware about their low social position in the society. They were mostly musicians and plays music during festivals and marriage ceremonies. Presently, they were treated as lower caste people in the society and get little respect by the rest of population. As a result many Mons either have left their musical profession or they do not want to remain in touch with their old profession.^{xxxix} It is found that they do not want to be addressed as Mons. In the villages in or around Leh, it is not easy to locate Mons families because they are called as 'artists' and not Mons. They are struggling hard to achieve a respectable status in the society. Now they are sending their children to schools to provide education and elders are trying to get jobs. Because of this profession they were consider lower in status and feel inferior as compared to other social groups. Due to social discrimination, they are leaving their traditional profession of musicians resulting in the reduction of number of trained traditional musicians.^{xl}

Few years ago, Mons made an effort to bring a change in the attitude of the Ladakhi Buddhists towards them. When H.H.Dalai Lama (the 14th Incarnation) visited Leh, representative groups of Mons and other groups met Him and presented their problems of social discrimination. In response, the Highness when addressing the gathering suggested them to prevent people to continue their bad attitude to Mons and other social groups. But all these efforts prove useless so far and there is no change in the attitude of the Common Ladakhi Buddhists towards them.^{xli}

Moreover, Mons and other social groups of Ladakh are very well aware of their social and cultural identity. They demand to be declared them as a Scheduled Tribe which was accepted by the government in 1989. This achievement resulted due to the efforts of the local politics of Ladakh which act as a catalyst resulting in infrastructural, agricultural social and economic development as a whole.^{xlii}

Moreover, Mons' cultural identity faces significant threats from globalization also. The designation of Ladakh as a Union Territory in 2019 has accelerated modernization, including infrastructure development and tourism, which threaten traditional Mons practices.^{xliii} The influx of global cultural streams led to a decline in the use of the Mons local language which is a source of their traditional Mons music. As younger generations is already paying less attention to their native culture due to social differences, and another major threat to local tradition of Mons is the advent of Tourism. While tourism is economically beneficial but often pose threat to Mons culture, reducing festivals and crafts to tourist attractions only.

Therefore, preserving the Mons' cultural identity is the need of the hour. It requires collaborative efforts from government, NGOs, and the community. Following strategies should be incorporated for their preservation and popularizing their traditions which will help them to attain a respectable status in the society. These are:

Cultural Documentation: Recording Mons oral traditions, songs, and other cultural practices through digital archives can ensure their preservation in an effective manner.

Educational Reforms: The absence of Ladakhi language in school curricula poses a significant threat to Mons linguistic heritage.^{xliv} Younger Mons increasingly adopts Hindi and English, diminishing the intergenerational transmission of oral traditions and folk songs. Educational disparities, particularly in remote Mons villages, limit access to culturally relevant education, further eroding their identity. Integrating the Ladakhi language and Mons history into school curricula can foster cultural pride among younger generations.

Sustainable Tourism: Promoting community-led tourism initiatives that highlight authentic Mons practices can generate economic benefits while preserving cultural integrity.

Environmental Conservation: Ladakh's ecosystem is prone to flash floods and landslides, endangering Mons settlements and agricultural practices. The 2010 and 2015 flash floods caused significant damage to irrigation channels and farmlands, disrupting the Mons' traditional livelihood. Climate change further exacerbates these challenges, threatening the sustainability of Mon agricultural systems. Therefore, strengthening disaster risk reduction measures, such as early warning systems, can protect Mons settlements and agricultural infrastructure. Future research should focus on excavating additional Mons sites to uncover artifacts and settlements, providing deeper insights into their material culture. Comparative studies with other Ladakhi tribes, such as the Dards and Changpa, can further illuminate shared and distinct cultural traits and provide identity to Mons.

II. Conclusion

The Mons, as one of Ladakh's earliest inhabitants, have left an indelible mark on the region's cultural, agricultural, and artistic landscape. Their contributions to irrigation, craftsmanship, and religious syncretism highlight their role as foundational architects of Ladakh's multicultural identity. Archaeological evidence confirms their Indo-Aryan origins and long-term presence, while historical interactions with Dards and Tibetans underscore their adaptability. However, globalization, environmental challenges, and educational shifts threaten the preservation of Mons cultural heritage. By advocating for documentation, educational reforms, and sustainable practices, this study emphasizes the urgency of safeguarding the Mons' legacy. Their story is a

testament to the resilience of indigenous communities in navigating cultural and environmental challenges, offering lessons for global cultural preservation efforts.

End Notes:

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