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Ladakh Under the Dogra Administration from 1846-1947: A Retrospective

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the intricate historical narrative of Ladakh during the Dogra period, spanning from 1846 to 1947. Through a descriptive analysis of primary and secondary sources, it examines the profound political and socio-economic changes that characterised this era. Politically, Ladakh underwent a significant shift as it transitioned from indigenous governance structures to the Dogra rule following the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846. The imposition of Dogra authority brought about administrative reforms, altering the governance landscape of the region. Socio-economically, the period witnessed transformations in land tenure systems, trade routes, and socio-cultural dynamics, reflecting the influence of Dogra policies and external forces. This article provides insights into the complexities of power dynamics, socio-economic structures, and cultural interactions during the Dogra rule in Ladakh, shedding light on a crucial yet understudied aspect of regional history.

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Introduction

Ladakh is undoubtedly a land of contrast; a land where both barrenness and fertility constitute the main characteristics of the region, oases and deserts surround the valleys, where agriculturists and nomads combine to develop the economic system, where Islam and Buddhism have coalesced to shape

the attitude of the people.[1] The region has been an important avenue of commerce, where various people of the Asiatic mainland, mainly the Indians, the central Asians, and the Kashmiris frequently met to exchange merchandise like shawls, silks, woollen textiles, medicine, and spices and acted as a vital link in the inter-regional trade network of the Trans-Himalayas in the nineteenth and the first half of twentieth centuries. This land of mysterious phenomena, functioning as a vital link in the exchange system, attracted people, the conquerors, expeditionists, explorers, and missionaries who over time influenced its history immensely. The Tibetans, the Indians, the Dards, and the Kashmiris came to settle here at different periods of history. The history of Ladakh is replete with information about these movements, conquests, and changes brought about by various people who entered the region on several occasions to secure peace, power, and profit.

Delving into the brief history of Ladakh, it is observed that from the late seventh or early eighth century until AD 842, it was part of the Tibetan empire. From the mid-tenth century until 1834, Ladakh was an independent kingdom, reaching its peak in the mid-seventeenth century when it extended as far as western Tibet.[2] By the end of its reign as an independent kingdom, Ladakh's territory roughly matched today's Leh and Kargil districts, with the addition of Spiti. In 1834, Ladakh was invaded by the army of Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu and lost its independence in 1842. Four years later, it became part of the newly formed princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), under British control within the Indian empire till 1947. Since India's independence in 1947, Ladakh has been part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. However, in 2019, following a significant political change, Ladakh became a separate union territory after J&K was divided into two union territories.[3]

This study undertakes a brief study of the political and socio-economic conditions that prevailed in a century of rule under the Dogra administration from 1846-1947. From 1834 to 1846, was a crucial time in Ladakh's history as it signified the end of its independent despotic kings of Ladakh. The era also saw intense conflict among its participants. People resisted the invaders but were unable to withstand the formidable Dogra force. The Dogra seized Ladakh in 1834, although the state was not officially annexed until 1842. Between 1834 and 1846, Ladakh was nominally under the authority of the Sikh Maharaja,

[1] Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1909

[2] For the history of the kingdom of Ladakh, the dates of L. Pettech (1977, The Kingdom of Ladakh, c. 950-1842 A.D., Rome), while they differ from those given by P.N.K. Bamzai (1962, A History of Kashmir, Delhi), S.S. Charak (1980, History and Culture of Himalayan States, vol. 5, New Delhi); A.H. Francke (1926, Antiquities of Indian Tibet, Part 2: The Chronicles of Ladakh and Minor Chronicles, Calcutta) are used.

[3] The Gazette of India, PART II—Section-1, August, 2019

but Raja Gulab Singh effectively controlled its administration and claimed all the rights and domains of the Ladakhi ruler.[4] The latter half of the nineteenth century and early half of the twentieth century have largely impacted the political and socio-economic conditions of Ladakh.

The British influence in the region has also acted as a catalyst to the change in the society be it social, economic or political aspects. In the nineteenth century as well as before it, European travellers to the region left a huge literary account that helped in understanding the society from their perspective. The British officer Cunningham provides a detailed study on the reminiscences of Mehta Basti Ram.[5] William Moorcroft[6] and George Trebeck highlight the society and religion during their visit in the first quarter of the nineteenth century with the help of Mir Ezzatullah who was again a Dogra official. Francke records the reminiscences of a second eyewitness, a veteran of the wars who was still living in Khaltse some 60 years later. Datta has drawn on British archives to give detailed assessments of the wider diplomatic aspects of the Dogra invasion.[7] Neil Howard has reviewed the military aspects of Zorawar Singh's campaign.[8]

At the start of the nineteenth century, Ladakh was governed by the Namgyal dynasty, which had asserted its control over the area. Yet, surrounding countries often contested this authority, resulting in times of instability and bloodshed. Cunningham's records illuminate the power struggles and changing alliances that defined Ladakh's political landscape. Cunningham's art highlights the British invasion of Ladakh in 1841. The British intervention sought to gain control over key regions and exert influence in the region, aligning with the wider geopolitical goals of the British Empire in Central Asia. In 1846 after the Treaty of Amritsar[9], the Ladakh kingdom was integrated under the Dogra domain, centered in the neighbouring kingdom of Jammu. Thereafter it lost its complete Independence and remained as a province known as "Ladakh Wazarat", which included the region of Baltistan (now in Pakistan). The

[4] C.L. Datta, *Ladakh and Western Himalayan Politics: 1819-1848*, Delhi, 1973, p. 38

[5] Alexander Cunnigham, Ladakh, 1854, 332-354. Mehta Basti Ram was one of the principal lieutenants of Zorawar Singh, the military general of Maharaja Gulab Singh of Jammu.

[6] Willam Moorcroft and George Trebeck, Travels in Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and Punjab, 2 Vols. Delhi, 1989; William Moorcroft, famous British traveler, and Company Agent in Central Asia.

[7] C.L. Datta, *General Zorawar Singh: His Life and Achievements in Ladakh, Baltistan and Tibet*, Deep and Deep Publications, New Delhi, 1984, p. 29. Also see, C.L. Datta, Ladakh and Western Himalayan Politics: 1819-1848, Delhi, 1973, p. 38.

[8] Neil Howard, 'Military aspects of the Dogra Conquest of Ladakh 1834-1839', In Osmaston and Denwood, 1995; 349-361

[9] A. G. Sheikh, Reflection on Ladakh, Tibet and Central Asia, New Delhi: Skyline Publication, 2010, pp.139-141

Dogras ruled Ladakh for a century till India's Independence in 1947. After British participation, Ladakh's political environment saw further changes, as the territory became a focal point of competition among British India, Tibet, and other surrounding nations. Cunningham's thorough study offers significant insights into the diplomatic strategies and power conflicts that followed, shedding light on the intricate network of alliances and rivalries that shaped Ladakh's political landscape at that time.

In delving into the annexation of Ladakh by the Dogras, it is imperative to grasp the intricate political dynamics prevalent across the broader western Himalayan region during the early 19th century. This epoch witnessed the emergence of three dominant powers exerting influence in the area. Firstly, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, following his successful annexation of Kashmir in 1819, exercised control over Ladakh, exacting tribute and enjoying trade privileges akin to those previously held by the erstwhile rulers of Kashmir, namely the Afghans and the Mughals. Concurrently, Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu, albeit a vassal of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, wielded authority over the Jammu hills and Kishtwar, territories contiguous to Ladakh. In contrast, the English administration held sway over the hilly expanse lying between the rivers Kali and Sutlej. Notably, each of these powers harboured vested interests in the commercial prospects offered by Ladakh and its adjoining western Tibetan territories, with the trade prospects in Pashmina or shawl wool constituting a pivotal facet of economic activity. Given the seminal role of the shawl wool trade in shaping the political trajectory of Ladakh, a cursory examination of its significance is warranted. The wool trade has played an important role in the history of Ladakh and has been the most important article of trade during the nineteenth – twentieth centuries.

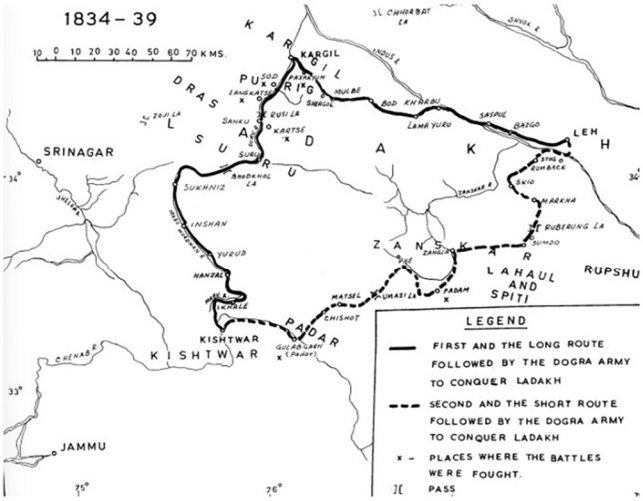
In 1834, Gulab Singh sent his most skilled commander, Zorawar Singh Kahluria, along with 4,000 infantry soldiers to capture the region lying between Jammu and the Tibetan border. Zora-war marched his army from Kishtwar into the region of Purig. Initially, the Ladakhis were caught off guard and did not resist. However, on August 16, 1834, the Dogras triumphed over an army of around 5,000 soldiers led by the Bhotia chieftain, Mangal, at Sankoo.[10] Zorawar captured Kartse, the capital city of Purig, and after a month of respite, built a fort and stationed troops there.[11] The invaders then proceeded down the Suru River valley and beat the Ladakhis at Pashkyum. The local chief escaped to the Fort of Sod. The next day, Zorawar sent his deputy, Mehta Basti Ram, with 500 soldiers to pursue him. The chief and the Sod garrison capitulated.

[10] Luciano Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, 1977, p. 139

[11] Huttenback, R. A. 'Gulab Singh and the Creation of the Dogra State of Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh'. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *20*(4), 1961, 477–488. https://doi.org/10.2307/2049956

The war front between Ladakh and the Dogra forces was unmatched when it came to the usage of weapons. The Dogra forces were militarily skilled forces of Maharaj Gulab Singh under Military General Zorawar Singh. The Dogras had cannons as weapons which the Ladakhis had never seen before in any wars so far. The troops of the Dogra army were well-trained and better-equipped than the Ladakhi tribals coming to war for the first time.

Fig 1.



Route followed by the Dogra Army in the military campaign in Ladakh (1834-39)

Fig 2.

(Source: Fig 1: Rabiya Aamir, Policy Perspectives, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2020), pp. 83-104;
Fig 2: Saudeptendu Ray, *Vivekananda International Foundation* (2) March 22, 2024)

The Ladakhis even approached the political agents of the British in Shimla and Ludhiana as well as Sir Henry Fane, the British Commander in Chief once the Dogra invaded. However, the Ladakhis were not aware of the treaty of 1809 agreement Anglo-Sikh whereby Ranjit Singh had the liberty to expand beyond river Sutlej and territories across the east.

Wazir Zorawar Singh travelled via Kishtwar to reach Suru Valley.[12] At Suru, Zorawar encounter ed first opposition from the Ladakhi troops. The military campaign in Ladakh was conducted at heights above 12,000 feet above sea level.[13] Quickly recruited and put under the leadership of a young

[12] Cunningham, *Ladakh, Physical, Statistical and Historical*, Srinagar, 1997, p. 331.
[13] Saudeptendu Ray, *Vivekananda International Foundation* (2) March 22, 2024

clergyman from Stog.[14] The Ladakhi army, using traditional combat tactics, was unable to withstand the more experienced Dogra army, which used modern warfare strategies.[15] After the casualties of around thirty individuals and several injuries, the Ladakhi army had to retreat to Shergol. The Dogras captured the fort of Suru, strengthening their control over the region. The neighbouring nations were annexed, and taxes were imposed on all villages, with each farmer required to pay four rupees. New Kardars were assigned to oversee Dogra holdings in significant areas like Kargil and Dras. The fleeing Ladakhi army, accompanied by reinforcements supplied by the Ladakhi monarch, met once again with the Dogra force near Pashkyum. Unfortunately, the Ladakhi army lost their commander Stog Kalon, which demoralized them and caused them to flee from the conflict. The Dogras pursued the withdrawing army and captured the stronghold of Sod, taking around 600 soldiers as prisoners.[16]

War was waged to collect the outstanding compensation of Rs. 13,000 and Tshe-dpal was replaced as Gyalpo by a more compliant cousin, Moru-pa Tadsi or Lumbu. The former monarch escaped with his son to the British-protected territory of Bashahr. Zorawar built a fort near Leh and appointed Dalel Singh to lead the garrison. He thereafter went back to Jammu with Moru-pa Tadsi's son and many other captives to guarantee the new Gyalpo's proper conduct.[17] In 1901 frontier district was abolished and Ladakh Wazarat was created consisting of Leh, Kargil and Skardu tehsils.[18] Zanskar was attached to the Kishtwar region of Jammu before but in the late 19th century it was incorporated into Ladakh by the Dogra administration. Ladakh after the Dogra campaign and British paramountcy lost its political authority once and for all but the king of Ladakh was allowed to keep the estate in a small village in Stok. The king has just attained a ritual and social celebration in Leh.[19]

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Leh was a period of consolidation of trade in the central Asian trade route between Punjab, Kashmir and Turkistan/Xinjiang. The traders in the region of Ladakh played a significant role in the early manifestation of globalization by introducing international trade goods such as synthetic dyes to the Ladakh market. In the early years of the twentieth

[14] Gergan, Joseph. *Bla-dvags rgyal-rabs chi-met-gtsug*. (Translated as *The Royal Chronicle of Ladakh*). pp. 36–37.
[15] A.H. Franke, Baltistan and Ladakh: A History, *Lok Virsa*, Islamabad, 1986, p. 111.
[16] Alexander Cunningham, Ladakh, Physical, Statistical and Historical, 1854, pp. 332-333.
[17] A. N. Sapru, *The Building of the Jammu and Kashmir State-Being the Achievement of Maharaja Gulab Singh* (Lahore, Punjab Record Office, 1931), pp. 23-28.
[18] A. G. Sheikh, 2010, pp. 166-169
[19] Ribbach Samuel, Society and Culture in Ladakh, New Delhi: Ess Ess Publications, 1986, pp. 120-130.

century, the management of the *lo-phyag*[20] mission was dominated by the Shangara and Radhu families, the former being Buddhist and the latter a Muslim.[21] The Kiraikash transporters in Dras, Kargil, Nubra and Leh encouraged their children to work for the same family employees from one generation to another. The income for the people from transporting made a crucial difference to the families that otherwise lived on the margins of subsistence.[22] The early twentieth century saw a permanent community of Kargil porters in Shimla, while in winter many young people from Purig (Kargil) worked in Jammu and Punjab and some belonging to Zanskar worked in Kullu-Manali.

The lucrative export trade of Pashmina to Bushahr, Rampur, was checked by Zorawar Singh and took stringent action against the traders and executed them while several others were imprisoned for violating the diktat of Dogra. The British warned Zorawar for such nasty action against the petty traders and told to mend his ways regarding the traders of Rampur and Ladakh. There was a phenomenal rise in trade in the volume of the Central Asia trade and Ladakh frontiers provinces in the first decade of the twentieth century. The last trade caravan via Kulu-Leh trade route was never used in 1949 and until the construction of Leh-Manali Highway motor road in 1990.

Society in Ladakh during the period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was largely diverse and consisted of Muslims and Buddhists along with a minority of trading merchants class migrated from the plains of India, Skardu and Kashmir. The Spread of religious ideas in both Islam and Buddhism grew in the two regions of Ladakh namely Kargil and Leh over the period. Ladakh has also witnessed the western Missionary activities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which made a significant contribution in education, scholarship and health dispensaries. A.H. Francke came to Ladakh in 1896 as one of the Moravian missionary scholars. Francke's linguistic research led him to the study of the region's history using both manuscripts and oral accounts of the past.[23] The education system established then is still an influential source of learning in the Leh society only while the missionary activities in Kargil are not visible so far. The prevailing narrative indicates that the Dogras engaged in

[20] Every three years, a Ladakh mission (between Leh-Lhasa) known as the *Lopchak* (*Lo-phyag*) would travel in the reverse direction, again with 200 animal loads of trading goods. On the outward journey, these included dried apricots and cloth. On the return journey, the main item was tea, as well as luxury goods such as silk brocade. The Mission was established according to the *treaty of Tingmosang* in 1684.

[21] Janet Rizvi, *Trans-Himalayan Caravans: Merchants Princes and Peasants Traders in Ladakh*, New Delhi: OUP, 1999. pp.159-181.

[22] Ibid., 309-320

[23] John Bray, 'Locating Ladakh History', *Ladakh Histories: Local and Regional Perspectives*, Boston: Leiden, 2005, Vol (9), 3-25.

efforts to convert the indigenous community, alongside missionary endeavours aimed at altering their religious beliefs. However, these attempts proved unsuccessful, as the local populace remained firmly rooted in their pre-existing faiths of Islam and Buddhism.

The final years of the Dogra regime saw the beginnings of the Buddhist reform movement, influenced by the Buddhist convert from Kashmir Shridhar Kaul. In 1933 a small Ladakhi group formed an educational society and this was followed by the Young Mens Buddhist Association in 1938. This association was the precursor of the formation of the Ladakh Buddhist Association in contemporary Ladakh politics. Skardu and Leh towns became hubs of social and cultural activities. Leh was a symbol of composite culture in the whole region. Sub-post offices were established in both stations in 1875 and a primary school in each place in 1892. Some Baltis served in the state posts in these towns. In 1941 the population of the town was 3372 as per the census records while that of Skardu was 2537 and Gilgit was 4671. Today these towns have grown to a much higher extent in the contemporary times. Poverty and restlessness in the society during the Dogra rule were also growing at the same time. The regime enforced a beggar system of forced labour as well as a Res[24] system in the area. Ladakh after the Dogra campaign and British paramountcy lost its political authority once and for all but the king of Ladakh was allowed to keep the estate in a small village in Stok. The king has just attained a ritual and social celebration in Leh.[25]

Ladakh's economy relied on a mix of farming, herding, and trade. Positioned along the trade route connecting Central Asia and South Asia, Ladakh benefited from its strategic location as a hub for trade across the trans-Himalayan region. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ladakh actively traded with Central Asia, facilitating the exchange of diverse goods. Trade relations with Skardu-Baltistan and Tibet led to increasing relations among the cross-border region of the provinces in the trans-Himalayan region. It was due to the trade relations that several Balti and Dard people from the northwest region and a few Tibetans, Sikhs and Hindu merchants came and settled in Ladakh gradually. Ladakhi exports included shawl wool, animal skins, ibex horn products, stone utensils, and various other

[24] It was a system by which a village or group of villages was bound to supply transport and food for certain stages on certain roads in turn. They were rarely paid for such services, particularly the food they provided for the government officials. This burden was heavy and added to the poverty of the people and the conditions were worse in the Baltistan region than in Ladakh under the Dogra. This observation in given by Hashmatullah Khan a contemporary official in 1939, *Tarike-e- Jammu* in Urdu.

[25] Ribbach Samuel, Society and Culture in Ladakh, New Delhi: Ess Ess Publications, 1986, pp. 120-130.

goods, while imports from Central Asia included spices, dry fruits, dyes, textiles, carpets, and porcelain. Tea, primarily from China and Tibet, played a significant role in Ladakh's trade with Central Asia.

Additionally, Ladakh's renowned Pashmina wool was highly sought after in Central Asia for its quality. Horses from Central Asia were also valued in Ladakh for transport and military purposes. Furthermore, Ladakh served as a vital source of salt for trade caravans travelling through the arid regions of Central Asia. According to the travellers' account, most of the products of trade were from other provinces which were brought and stocked at Leh for further export. The raw materials for warm clothes were produced by the tribal peoples of the Chang-Thang region from the sheep and goats by rearing their wool and hairs respectively. Ladakh manufacturing includes the production of coarse woollen clothes, blankets, and carpets which were made by the machines set up by the Moravian Missionaries in the late 19th century in Leh.

Conclusion

The Dogra conquest of Ladakh in the mid-19th century ushered in a period of significant transformation. While the initial period was marked by disruptions to traditional trade routes and the imposition of new taxes, the Dogra administration also brought about notable improvements. A centralized administrative system replaced the existing local governance structures and the despotic rule of the Namgyal dynasty, leading to progress in infrastructure. Roads and bridges were constructed, enhancing connectivity between Ladakh and the rest of the Dogra kingdom. However, maintaining control over this remote and strategically important region presented significant challenges for the Dogra administration.

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