

## **STATUS OF WOMEN OF LADAKH: MISSIONARY PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Abstract**

Ladakh, nestled between Himalayas, is inhabited by a mixture of three ethnic groups: Tibetan, Dards and Mons, with people following Buddhism and Islam. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century German Moravian missionaries entered Ladakh to spread the gospel of Jesus. The missionaries, apart from preaching the gospel, undertook numbers of humanitarian activities, and one of their significant contributions was focusing on the welfare of the women. Ladakh, has long been considered an egalitarian society, where both men and women enjoyed similar status; however, missionary records present a different perspective. Thus, the paper explores the status of women in Ladakh from a missionary perspective.

Ladakh, a land considered remote in both time and space, is a high altitude desert located between the mighty glaciers of Karakoram and the Great Himalayas. The people of Ladakh are believed to be a mixture of three races of Tibetans, Dards and Mons. The Dards, believed to be the descendants of the Aryans came to Ladakh from Gilgit (Jina, 2006, p.93).and are among the earliest to reach the area to establish settlements. The term 'Mon' refers to the people who came from the regions of Himachal Pradesh and performed activities associated with music, carpentry and masonry. The third race i.e. the Tibetan stock, are believed to be of Mongolian origin, they came through Tibet and slowly overpowered the Mons and the Dards. Alexander Cunningham uses the term Botis or Bhotiyas for them and considers them to be "an offshoot of the great Mongolian race"(Cunningham, 1970, p.290). Politically a part of India, it once included the regions of Baltistan, Zaskar, Lahaul, Spiti, Ngari, Rudok, Guge, Nubra Valley and Aksai Chin. Culturally the region possesses much resemblance to Tibet due to its geographical proximity as well as their shared history. Religiously, the population of the region practices Buddhism, Islam and Christianity.

Buddhism as a religion is said to have arrived in Ladakh via Kashmir. The people of Ladakh were followers of Bon religion prior to the arrival of Buddhism which is believed to be the indigenous religion of Tibet. The introduction and spread of Islam in the region is associated with a number of events such as the beginning of Muslim rule in Kashmir by the first half of the fourteenth century, invasions by Sultans of Kashmir in alliance with the Mughal Empire and through migration and conversion. The spread of Christianity in Ladakh is wholly attributed to the German Moravian Missionaries who arrived in the region in the second half of the nineteenth century and gained converts among the locals.

The diversity of the region in terms of its topography, ethnicity and religion resulted in the creation of a society that is unique and shaped by thoughts and ideas which catered to the eclectic demands of the region. It is generally held that the Ladakhi society is an egalitarian one and disparities on the line of gender is absent. The view is more appropriate when one beholds the

Buddhists of the region. Janet Rizvi mentions that one of the characteristic features of the Buddhist Ladakh is the high status and complete emancipation enjoyed by the women of the region.( Rizvi, p.4). The Early travelers who traversed through the region also expressed similar views and were struck by the uninhibited behavior of the female gender. Whereas they observed that the females of the Muslim households were not entitled to the same and lived a more restricted life.

Over the years a number of articles have come forward and researches have been carried out that challenge the long held view of an egalitarian Ladakhi society. It is most often asserted that the status of women in the region is better when compared with the rest of the country, however, it cannot be implied that Ladakhi society is free of gender biases and women are emancipated. An interesting perspective in this arena is that of the Moravian Missionaries.

The German Moravian missionaries with their arrival in the region of Ladakh undertook a number of humanitarian activities apart from their primary aim of proselytizing the people of the region. One of the important contributions on the part of the missionaries was the welfare of the women. The missionaries also undertook the task of regularly journaling and sending reports, letters to the mission headquarter. These records serve as an important source to reconstruct the history of the region and throw ample light on the status of women of Ladakh during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

The missionary wife Mrs. Weber in a letter dated 31<sup>st</sup> August, 1892, Leh, talks about the beginning of a “mission to women” a Zenana at Leh. As a part of this initiative she regularly visited non-Christian houses as well as Christian houses.( *Periodical Accounts*, Second Century, Vol. I, No. 12, December 1892, p.628.) She describes the condition of the women in most cases to be sad. Communicating with the local women regarding religion has been described as the most difficult as they were not able to understand anything except for children, fields and cattle. (Periodical Accounts, December 1896, p.203) Whereas at the same time the women were also aware of their backwardness which can be ascertained from the comments, “as stupid as oxen” (Schneider, 1891, p. 25) and “For us women there is no Religion” (Periodical Accounts, December 1892, p.630), that they made about themselves. The visits of the missionary wife to the houses were often looked upon as a respite to them from their daily routine. However, to the missionary wives it was extremely burdensome to simultaneously carry out household chores, taking care of the orphans and the Zenana work. Hence the missionary Marx requested the Mission Board for deputing lady missionaries to carry forward the Zenana work. He wrote, “It would be a great advance if we could add to our staff a lady missionary, unfettered by household duties and family cares, and so free to develop and cultivate friendly intercourse with the female contingent of the community around.” (Periodical Accounts, September 1891, p. 342) So, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century lady missionaries started arriving in Ladakh. They were single unmarried lady Moravian missionaries who were primarily recruited to devote attention and influence upon the women folk of Ladakh. A new house in the mission compound was also built for their residence and the house was named the ‘Single Sisters House’.

The primary aim of the Zenana work was to reach the women and engage into conversation with them. It was observed that gaining contacts with Muslim women was a hard task as they were

often confined to the four walls of the house and led a secluded life (Periodical Accounts, December 1892, p. 628) whereas at the same time engaging into conversation with Buddhist women regarding religion has been described as extremely difficult.

An insight into the status of Muslim women can be drawn from an instance when the missionary doctor was called by a Mohammedan man to his home as several children were ill. The doctor observed that the sick children were surrounded by men, as in normal circumstances a sick child is tended by a woman. It was because in the presence of the missionary Doctor the women were not allowed to come out and attend them. Allowing women out in the open was regarded beyond the custom. (Illustrated Record of Missionary Work, July 1916, p. 102) Another instance of lower status of women can be ascertained from the fact when the missionary doctor, Heiber, asked a Muslim man about the number of Muslims in Leh. The doctor expressed his surprise as the number uttered by the man was very low. So, Dr. Heiber asked whether it included women, the reply was, "No, we don't count them." (Illustrated Record of Missionary Work, May 1915, p. 67) The grim reality that women were not even counted as members of the community reflects the condition and status of women in the society. The missionaries further narrated that it was deemed offensive to ask a Muslim man about his wife and they viewed women as nothing but merely mother to their children. (Illustrated Records of Missionary Work, July 1916, p.102)

If the condition of the Muslim women was grim the plight of the Buddhist women was also not high. The Buddhist women owing to their unawareness and ignorance regarding their own religion could not comprehend the conversation carried by the lady missionary about religion, Christianity in particular. They could only understand material things and intangibles such as ideas and abstract notions were incomprehensible to them. (Periodical Accounts, June 1998, p. 490) However, the Zenana work was looked upon as a promising branch of missionary work by the lady missionaries. It progressed with time and more and more doors were opened to the lady missionaries.

As the missionaries were struck by the grim reality of the plight of women, it occurred that providing education would help bring improvement in their condition. The missionaries are credited for being the pioneers in providing modern education not only to the women but to the people of Ladakh. They opened girls' schools at Leh and Kalatse for Buddhist and Muslim girls. (Periodical Accounts, March 1913, p. 488) The Girls school was established in the year 1911 and a kindergarten in 1913. (Illustrated Record of Missionary Work, August 1916, p. 118) They were taught singing, Tibetan reading, arithmetic, and drilling. Apart from formal education at the school the missionary wives also taught the girls to knit. The first knitting school was opened in Kyelang by the missionary Sisters and subsequently at Poo and Leh. (Periodical Accounts, 1861, p. 322) The knitting school was not only attended by girls but women also and they were first taught to knit socks and gloves in German style (Heyde, 2005, p.275) which became quite popular and even practiced today in the Himalayan regions of Himachal and Ladakh. It is mentioned throughout the periodicals that the girls attended the knitting classes regularly as it often resulted in material gains by selling the finished product. Most of the products were sold to the people of the British Army. (Heyde, 2005, p.275) A remarkable feature of the knitting school was its cleanliness and all

the women here were taught the importance of keeping their hands clean and washing them frequently. The people of Ladakh generally displayed an untidy look and rarely did they take bath due to the harsh climate.

The art of handicraft proved to be of immense benefit to the women and their families. In the situation of a financial crisis the women were able to help their families by selling the products that she had learned to knit at the Zenana. It offered them a chance to contribute economically in the operation of their household. As financial independence is the key to gain liberation from any sort of oppression, it offered the women a sense of independence and importance in the society.

An expansion of the knitting class was achieved in the form of an Industrial School at Leh. Here they produced blankets, carpets, shawls and homespun cloth with the use of new modern, improved handlooms. The establishment resulted in offering employment opportunities to spinners and provided training to weave on improved handlooms. Owing to the abundant and cheap availability of wool it proved to be more cost efficient and high in quality. They promoted the use of natural dyes made of vegetable roots which further enhanced the quality of products as the colour lasted longer. The blankets provided the perfect warmth needed in the high altitudes and the carpets made of pure wool using natural dyes were of finer quality. (Illustrated Record of Missionary Work, September 1939, p.70)

The Industrial School gained much popularity and produced in large quantities homespun shawls, blankets and carpets. With the success of the school, 'Leh Spinners Association' was formed to co-operatively capture the wool market for the locals that had been under the control as well as exploited by the traders from the plains of India. (Periodical Accounts, June 1941, p. 6) During the Second World War the school supplied blankets and socks to the Indian Red Cross Society and also contributed towards the prisoner of war funds. (Periodical Accounts, June 1941, p.15) In this way the people living in the far flung areas of the Himalaya also made their contribution towards the war efforts.

#### Conclusion

The status of women of Ladakh according to the missionaries during the course of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries was grim and low. In order to bring improvement in their condition the missionaries undertook a number of activities that brought upon good results. In the sphere of education it was a Christian Lady who became the first headmistress of the later opened government girls school. The art of knitting taught by the lady missionaries became quite popular in the entire Himalayan belt and socks and gloves knit in the German style is even carried out by women of the region on a large scale.

Hence, the contribution of the missionaries to bring about improvement and change in the status of women is not often recognized. It was them who laid the foundations and access to education to the women of the region.

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