



Politics of Travel Writing on Ladakh: A Critical Exclusion of Kargil

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Abstract

Up till 1980, Ladakh was a single district and then it was divided into two districts. This paper focuses on Ladakh's Kargil district, which has found little space whenever Ladakh is represented or written about in academic as well as in travel books. The paper brings to fore how many writers either dismiss Kargil in their travel narratives, or merely represent it as a region outside Ladakh's boundary or it is compared with the people and religion of Leh and deemed as inferior by the foreign writers.

Keywords: Kargil, Ladakh, Culture, Religion, Region

Introduction

Ladakh is a region situated at the western edge of the Tibetan Plateau. It is a mountainous desert located at altitudes ranging from 9,000 to 25,000 feet. Earlier, the region was a part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, on August 5, 2019, Ladakh was declared as a separate Union Territory without legislation by the Government of India. In the year 1979, Ladakh was divided into two districts namely, Leh and Kargil. This paper focuses on Ladakh's Kargil district, which has found little space whenever Ladakh is represented or written about in academic as well as in travel books. Though many writers mention Kargil in their travel narratives, but it is either represented as a region outside Ladakh's boundary or it is compared with the people and religion of Leh and deemed as inferior by the foreign writers.

Ladakh is known for its high mountains, barren lands, Buddhism, monasteries, festivals and its unique tradition and culture. The place sees a good number of tourists and visitors every year. It is one of the most-visited places in India after the year 1972. Kargil and Leh are the two districts. While Kargil is

dominated by Muslims, primarily Shia Islam, Leh is dominated by Buddhist population. The culture and language of both the districts are same, however, some rituals and traditions are different due to difference in religion.

Earlier, the people of Kargil were Buddhists. Since fourteenth century, Islam began to spread in Ladakh region and a large number of people converted to Islam. Therefore, the culture of the Muslims started to differ from the culture of the Buddhist community. The tradition of drinking *chang* (local beverage), marriage rituals, death rituals, and festivals underwent a drastic change. People stopped drinking local alcoholic beverages, monasteries were abandoned and people started building *masjids* and *imambaras*.¹ The social hierarchies, which were prevalent before the advent of Islam, began to decline. The Muslims started sending their children to Iraq and Iran for religious teachings rather than sending them to Tibet. The dead began to be buried and people began reciting the *Quran*. The clerics of Muslims replaced monks and nuns. The polyandry system was abandoned. The Ladakhi script was also abandoned by the people of Kargil and Baltistan in exchange for the Arabic alphabet.

Ladakh is known by many names given by foreign writers such as, “The Crossroads of High Asia”, “The Land of Gods and Humans”, “The Last Shangri-La”, “Little Tibet”, “The Land of Lamas and Monasteries” and “The Buddhist Land”. It is evident from these names that Ladakh is known for its high altitude, mighty mountains, and the religion of Buddhism. However, the fact is that around 46 per cent of Ladakh’s population is Muslim (2011 census). However, the name ‘Ladakh’, for many non-native writers, represents only one religious community and region. The academics and writers did not pay adequate attention to the other places, communities, and religions of Ladakh except for Leh and Buddhism. Due to the continuous representation of Leh as Ladakh, the region Kargil is further alienated from Ladakh, whereas Leh on the other hand is considered as the cultural and religious hub of the region. Thus,

the whole region of Ladakh is appropriated by a single identity and culture. The Buddhist identity and the influence of Tibet on the culture of Ladakh have overshadowed Kargil and its religion, culture, and identity. With time, Leh has become synonymous with Ladakh, with tourists, visitors, and travellers considering Leh as Ladakh and Kargil as something outside the territorial jurisdiction of the region.

The writers always look at Ladakh as Little Lhasa and anything not associated with Tibet is not even considered Ladakhi. D.S. Lopez, in his book *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, has pointed out that in the past, the academics (like the writers and explorers) were also the prisoners of Shangri-La. They only described places, cultures, and people who have some connection with Buddhism and Tibet. Writers like Van Beek and Raveena Aggarwal also share the same view that a distinct Tibeto-centric tilt can be seen in Ladakh studies.

There are two main reasons for the exclusion of Kargil from the representation of Ladakh. First, the foreign writers represented Ladakh from a single point of view in their travel narratives and academic write-ups. If they mentioned something about the region Kargil and its culture, they depicted it as a foreign culture, deemed inferior to the culture and religion of Leh. The foreign writers wanted to create the impression that the Buddhists of Ladakh are the natives of the region and Muslims do not belong to the land. In this regard Nichola Grist, in the article “Muslims of Tibet”, writes, “Quite unintentionally the impression has been given that “real” Ladakhis are Buddhists and that Muslims and Muslim practices are imposters in their land” (59).

A second reason for the exclusion of Kargil is the active participation of Buddhists in all political affairs of Ladakh as compared to the Muslims. The Buddhists of Ladakh remained politically active and participated in all political affairs at the state level as well as the national level. In the year 1931, Maharaja Hari Singh appointed a commission, Glancy Commission,² to look after the grievances of all the

communities of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. On November 13, 1931, when the first commission was summoned, a few Kashmiri Pundits who had been converted to Buddhism raised their voice for Ladakh as no one from Ladakh was present on that day. The neo-Buddhists were the members of an organization called the 'Kashmir-Raj Bodhi Maha Sabha' (Bertelsen 131).

The 1931 representation of Ladakh did not bring immediate recognition to the region. The neo-Buddhists of Kashmir joined hands with the Hemis Monastery and formed a committee known as Ladakh Buddhist Educational Society (LBES) around 1932-33.³ The committee prepared a memorandum in September 1933 and submitted it to the Maharaja's government in which matters of education were taken up. Five requests were put forth in the memorandum: reading of Urdu up to Class V should be made optional in Ladakh; special scholarships for Buddhist students; appointment of a Buddhist District Assistant Inspector of Schools; appointment of a Sanskrit teacher in Leh Middle School; Bodhi (Tibetan) language teachers to be brought to Ladakh, if necessary from outside (Bertelsen 137-138). The committee later also demanded a ban on the polyandry system, property inheritance law and ban on alcohol consumption. The Buddhists of Ladakh achieved all the primary demands from the state government by the 1960s. The act of ban on polyandry was passed in 1941 by the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. After a short period, in 1943, the property inheritance issue was also resolved. Earlier, all the properties were inherited by the eldest son of the family, after 1943 each son has a right to an equal share in their father's property.

The Buddhists of Ladakh did not join Muslims in the political and social welfare of the region. From the very beginning, they continuously represented Ladakh as a Buddhist place distinct from other areas of the J&K state in respect of religion, culture and tradition. This representation gave an identity to Ladakh. The people who did not visit Ladakh started

to perceive Ladakh as a Buddhist region. In this regard, Kristoffer Brix Bertelsen states that the government officials of J&K thought of Ladakh as a Buddhist land even though all people are not Buddhists. He further writes:

To be a Ladakhi is to be Buddhist, according to Government perception, and neither Pundit neo-Buddhists, nor their counterparts in Ladakh would have had any reason to contest this assertion which fitted their diverse interests very well. Hence, a host of ostensibly objective and unambiguous representations of Ladakh came to be entertained by a small but powerful number of Buddhists in Ladakh. (146)

Ladakhi Buddhists' struggle for identity became successful due to the active participation of Kashmiri Buddhists like Pundit Shridhar Kaul. He had embraced Buddhism after completing his studies for a Bachelor of Teaching degree in Benares around 1910 and remained an active voice representing the Ladakhi Buddhists in the capital of the state. Jamphel Sheyan, in his article "Shridhar Kaul and Ladakh's UT Discourse", says that Kaul played an important role in the propagation of communal politics of Ladakh. Kaul perceives Muslims as outsiders and enemies of "Buddhist".⁴ The Ladakhi Buddhists, after the succession of LBES, formed another committee, "Young Buddhist Association of Ladakh" (YMBA) which later became LBA (Ladakh Buddhist Association). YMBA remained concerned with political, social, educational, and religious issues of the region and from time to time they submitted memorandums to the Maharaja.

The Buddhists of Leh not only represented themselves as pure Ladakhis, but they also suggested that Kargil was not a part of Ladakh because of the religious differences between the two regions, and that Kargil has religious ties with Kashmir. Without any negotiation with the people of Kargil, the memorandum, submitted to the Maharaja and Indian Prime Minister, contained three demands: the Maharaja can maintain

direct rule over Ladakh, it should be merged with Jammu as a separate administrative unit and the region should be permitted to join East Punjab (later Himachal Pradesh).⁵ However, the Maharaja never responded to the demand of the Buddhist people of Ladakh.

After the first war between India and Pakistan, YMBA president Chewang Rigzin Kalon, submitted another memorandum on May 4, 1949 to the then PM, Jawaharlal Nehru: "We are a separate nation by all the tests - race, language, religion, culture - determining nationality. The only link connecting us with the other people of the State being the bond of a common ruler. If the Indian National Congress could persuade itself to recognize the Muslims of India as a separate nation although they had so much in common with the other elements of the Indian population, the Government of India should have no hesitation in recognizing what is patent and incontrovertible fact in our case" (qtd. in Beek 38).

The president made sure that he was representing the Buddhists of Ladakh. He in his memorandum demanded that the other part of Ladakh can be merged with the Muslim majority Kashmir. He further writes:

The right to self-determination claimed by us cannot be claimed with equal force by the people of Baltistan including Skardu and parts of Kargil Tehsils predominantly peopled by Muslims, as they are connected by ties of religion with the majority community in Jammu & Kashmir, nor by the people of Gilgit who came under Dogra rule through conquest after the annexation of Kashmir and whom not only the identity of religion but of race as well bind to the major community of Jammu & Kashmir (qtd. in Beek 39).

The president, on the basis of religion, considered the people of Kargil as outsiders. Kargil never got a chance to represent itself at state and national levels, nor were they aware

of the commissions like the Galancy commission and the continuous representation of Ladakh as a Buddhist place, because most of the people at that time were uneducated. When the first commission was summoned in Srinagar city of Kashmir by the king Maharaja Hari Sing in the year 1930, no one from Kashmir informed the Ladakhi people. However, the Buddhists got some recognition due to the neo-Buddhists in Kashmir who represented Ladakhi Buddhist on their behalf. The Kashmiri Muslims not only remained silent on the issue, they did not inform the Kargili people about the event either. On one hand, the Buddhists were thinking that the Muslims of Ladakh have political as well as religious ties with Kashmir, on the other hand, the Kashmiri people did not raise a single voice for the Muslims of Ladakh. The political as well as the social committees of the Buddhist people of Ladakh played the communal card for their representation as well as to meet their demands. Kargil was always subjugated by both the people of Ladakh as well as the writers and academicians.

Subjugation of Kargil under War Discourse

The only thing Kargil is known for is the war of 1999. Though several wars have been fought in Kargil before 1999, the wars of 1948, 1965, and 1971 are unknown to the rest of the nation. The war of 1999 became famous throughout the nation due to media coverage and the active participation of journalists and writers. After remaining oblivious to the nation since the Independence of India, Kargil got a chance to represent itself on the national platform. But unfortunately, the war discourses overshadowed the identity of Kargil, The war was supposed to bring Kargil under the limelight and consequently reveal its own culture and identity. On the contrary, it overshadowed the cultural aspects and literary production of the region. Though the war of 1999 brought light to this part of India, it has overshadowed its identity in many ways.

Many scholars, writers, filmmakers, documentarians, media persons produced a discourse of war about the region. All these forms of writings and representations have given the

place an identity of 'war zone' or 'war place'. The discourse of war has not only overshadowed the culture and literature of Kargil, but it also curtailed the visitors to the place as the region was perceived as unsafe. The Partition of India had a great impact on the social, economic, and cultural aspects of the Kargil region as well. The significant trade route between Ladakh and Skardu was sealed forever in 1947. The sudden sealing of the border left people on both sides shattered as both the governments did not allow the people to come back to their respective places. Radhika Gupta, in her article "Poetics and Politics of Borderland Dwelling: Baltis in Kargil", writes that the people of Kargil were unaware of the Partition. They realized this when the Indian army repulsed the Gilgit scouts from Pakistan in May 1948. The Partition and the sealing of borders did not bring any calamity to the indigenous people of Ladakh, unlike the case of Punjab and Bengal. The condition in the border areas of Ladakh remained static as they were not even aware that India has been divided into two countries and a new country named Pakistan has been formed.

After the Partition, the area of Gilgit and Baltistan came under the province of Pakistan, while the area of Kargil and Leh came under the province of India (Gupta 43-50). People from both the regions left on one side or the other side of the Line of Control suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of the border separated from their close kins and ancestral lands. Many narratives and stories of Partition remained relatively understudied in comparison to the Partition refugees. The Partition of Kargil and Baltistan remained understudied as historians never paid adequate attention to analyze this remote part of India after the partition. Willem Van Schendel in this regard states that emphasis should be given to the unwritten and unheard stories of the Partition to understand the social lives of the regions of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In the article "Writing Through partition: Making a Living in the Bengal Borderlands", he writes:

Other parts of that landscapes, however, are still in the shadows, we must explore them if we are to make sense of how to partition shaped social life in South Asia in the second half of the twentieth century. What lies between the mountains and the lake? What was happening in the foothills, on the plains, the rivers, and their banks? How did ordinary people experience the macro-political event of state fragmentation? And how did their actions influence the shape of post-Partition societies? (394)

The pangs of separation, the cultural, religious, linguistic, and political ties between Baltistan and Kargil remained unknown to the world till the twenty-first century. As Ladakh and Baltistan share the same religious, linguistic and cultural traits, many people from Baltistan were living in different areas of Ladakh especially in Kargil for business purposes and employment. Some people were living in different areas of Baltistan for their livelihood. The sudden sealing of the boundaries between India and Pakistan separated many families. Someone's parents remained in Pakistan, while some were not able to meet their sons and daughters as they remained in India. Some had to divorce their wives knowing the fact that they will never meet in their lives. This dimension of the Partition has been left uncovered by historians and writers.

It was the war of 1999 that brought some recognition to Kargil. Despite that, the Government of India did not pay any attention to the demands of the natives of Kargil. After the war, however, both the countries started to negotiate about peace. The first and foremost agreement was to cease the fire on the line of actual control (L.O.C). On February 16, 2005, during the Indian External Affairs Minister K. Natwar Singh's meeting with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf at Rawalpindi, a peace agreement between the two nations was drawn out and its contents included: Commencing the Thar Express train service, opening respective consulates in the cities of Mumbai and Karachi, and most importantly, starting an intra-Kashmir bus

service between Srinagar in J&K and Muzaffarabad in AJK (Azad J&K). The bus service was termed as the “mother of all confidence-building measures” and pronounced as “a step towards bridging the divide in Kashmir”. It was heralded as a “humanitarian measure”, which did not affect the positions of India and Pakistan in the conflict (Shekhawat and Debidatta 29-30).

The Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road was the first intra-Kashmir route to open on May 7, 2005. On June 20, 2006, another intra-Kashmir route between Poonch in J&K and Rawalakote in AJK, was opened. Poonch, which was partitioned during the first war in Kashmir, had also witnessed the large-scale division of families. The decision to open the route was taken after deliberations between India and Pakistan in New Delhi in May 2006 (32).

Far away from the city of Srinagar, in the mountain terrains, the people of Kargil were also waiting for the opening of the Kargil-Skardu Road. On the other side of the border, the people of Baltistan were also expecting the same from their government. The Kargil-Skardu route has immense humanitarian significance as the Kargil region has a large number of divided families in villages perched in difficult mountain terrains. The tragic stories of separation, yearning for a reunion, and a peace bus to fulfil this dream remain a significant part of the local discourse, which has failed to find an audience at the national and international level.

The Demand for UT and its Consequences

Since the Independence of India in 1947, Ladakhis were demanding Union Territory status for Ladakh. This demand gained momentum in 1964 when Kushok Bakula Rinpoche demanded NEFA-type central administration for Ladakh. It was during the 1989 unrest in the valley of Kashmir, where Kashmiris were demanding freedom from India, that the Buddhist people of Ladakh pushed their demand for the status of union territory from the central government. The Ladakhis

had two reasons for this demand: first, as the future of Kashmir was uncertain at that time, the Buddhists of Ladakh were afraid that if Kashmir attained independence they had to be with the Kashmiris which they never wanted and second, Ladakh was always discriminated by Kashmir in every aspect, for example, the government jobs, funding for the development of the region, etc. The Kashmiri people not only discriminated the Buddhists, the Muslims of Kargil also suffered.

The Kargilies also wanted to send Kashmiris out from Ladakh, because Kashmiris had complete control over all the major economic activities in the region. In this regard, LPMUT (Ladakh People Movement for Union Territory) spokesman said at a press conference in Delhi that “excluding Sunni Muslims with terrorist connections, all other communities supported their agitation.” He particularly referred to the Kargil area dominated by the Shia Muslims. “The Shia Muslims are also aggrieved against the domination of the Sunni settlers from Kashmir who has complete control over all the major economic activities” (qtd. in Beek 41). However, the Shias of Kargil were not against the local Sunni Muslims of Leh district of Ladakh. In this regard, a memorandum in a form of a booklet has been published by the “Kargil District Action Committee” headed by Aga Syed Hussain ul Musavi in October 1989. The booklet challenges many claims of LBA, such as representing Ladakh as only a Buddhist region, misleading the outsiders about the identity of the Argon family of Leh and the Muslims of Ladakh.

LBA always claimed that the Buddhist religion and culture is the real identity of Ladakh while other religions like Muslims and Christians are new religions in the region. Answering the claim of LBA, the booklet quoting the book *Ladakh Chronicles* claims that the earliest ‘Balti’ (Shia Muslim) settlement had come into being when King Jamyang Namgyal of Ladakh (16th Century) had invited seven Muslim traders from Kashmir to become his ‘Khar-Chog-Pa’ or palace traders. And in consequence of the Tibeto-Mongol invasion of Ladakh in 1681,

the Ladakhi King built the famous Leh Mosque and he had briefly converted to Islam (Beek 42).

Kargil remained oblivious to the nation even after the Independence of India. Kargilis were not aware till May 1948 that they belong to India, when the Indian army pushed back the Pakistani troops from Kargil. Neither Kargil was represented in the Glancy Commission in 1932 nor did the people of Kargil demand anything from the state government of Imperial and Independent India. Kargilis also remained silent on the demand of Union Territory status for Ladakh. Being a Muslim dominated region, Buddhists of Ladakh did not pay attention to the region of Kargil as they claim that Ladakh belongs to Buddhists. The Muslims of Kashmir, unlike the Kashmiri Buddhists, did not raise a voice for the Muslims of Kargil. Moreover, Kargilis wanted to remain with India and at the same time, they did not want a separate state because they believed that India is a secular country, and a state should not be divided on communal lines.

After incessant demands of the Buddhists of Ladakh, the government of India finally granted Ladakh a status of separate union territory on August 5, 2019 which became effective in October 2019. This announcement brought the news of the abrogation of article 370 and 35 A of the Constitution of India. The people of Ladakh reacted differently to this news. The community of Leh welcomed this decision with an open heart while people of Kargil resented this move and went down the road of protest. However, the people of Kargil were represented as happy and contented, the places like Wakha, Aryan valley, Mulbekh etc., were represented as the main places of Kargil by the MP of Ladakh. He took the names of places in which Buddhists people are residing. Ignoring the rest 80 per cent of the population, the national audience believed in him.

Kargil has been in the shadows not only in the eyes of local politicians and travel writers but was never recognized by central government. The tableau show in the grand celebration

of the 75th Republic Day of the nation in 2021, Ladakh made its debut for the first time in the Republic parade. The tableau represented the Buddhist religion and its culture in the region. The religious and cultural heritage of Muslims of Ladakh were ignored. Reporting the event, Basharat Masood writes in *The Indian Express*, “Kargil Ignored in first Ladakh Tableau: Chief of Hill Council”, “The first tableau of Ladakh will depict the Thiksey Monastery in Leh and the Indian Astronomical Observatory in Hanle and Kargil feels ignored.”

There was not even a single mention of the Muslim community in the tableau. Ladakh was represented as a place where Buddhists reside and have a distinct identity and culture. The distinct identity and culture refer to the religion and culture of Buddhism. The representation of Ladakh in the tableau was based on religion. Statistically speaking, the Muslim community are the dominant community in Ladakh, yet there was not a sign of Islam in the representation of Ladakh in the ‘Republic Day’ parade. President of Islamia School Kargil talking with *Kashmir Observer* said that they are going to celebrate Republic Day celebration separately as a mark of protest against the administration for ignoring Kargil in the tableau to be displayed in New Delhi (Javeed). Some local politicians have raised their voice against the one-sided representation of Ladakh on a national level. But this criticism vanished after an interview on local news channels. No one seems to be aware or concerned about the intentional alienation of the majority of the population of Ladakh. A few tried to highlight the skewed portrayal but ran of ears before it could become a matter of national concern as it should be.

A subtle yet mainstream political propaganda is in play and has rooted its hold to the smallest government-owned bodies in the state of Ladakh. A religious thread has always been used against the Muslim community for as long as we can recall. As a result, the perception of Muslims is hugely misinterpreted as a community that has a knack for violence, unrest and terrorism. Which in return plays out well for both the right-wing

dominated centre as well as minorities of Ladakh, i.e. Buddhist community.

On January 26, 2021, an incident took place wherein a bomb went off near the Embassy of Israel. While talking with the Aaj Tak news channel, a former IB officer T.S. Tanwar in a debate claimed that one of the prime suspects is a militant from Ladakh from a Shia community, a member of Hizb-ul-Momineen which is a terrorist organisation. This type of baseless and illogical claims have been narrated in mainstream media to give an identity to Ladakhi Muslims as anti-nationals. No action has been taken so far by the Government of India on the statement of the former officer nor has an agitation in Ladakh seen so far by the local masses. However, a delegation of Anjuman-e Imamia Leh Ladakh visited AGD of Ladakh to look into the matter of the allegation of the army officer. They condemned the statement and urged ADG Ladakh to take notice of the unwarranted statement of the officer and book him under the law for appropriate action. A local news channel *Ladakh Times* in this regard writes on February 5, the president of Islamia School Kargil held a press conference condemning the illogical statement of the IB officer.⁶

‘Othering’ of Kargil in Travelogues

Kargil had been successively neglected by the travel writers over the years. Reading these travelogues, one gets to know that it is not just a region or a place that is neglected; rather it is the religion that has been dismissed since the beginning of travel writing on Ladakh.

Kargil was one of the most significant destinations on the famous Silk Route. However, there is a negligible mention of Kargil in the trade literature on Ladakh, Tibet, and Central Asia. Except for the transportation work undertaken by the people of the Drass-Kargil belt between Leh and Srinagar, there is no other reference of Kargil. Archival reports of the British Joint Commissioner to Ladakh on trade are concerned mostly with issues of carriage; taxes, levies, and trade-routes, and no distinct

mention of Kargil or its people can be found in trade literature.⁷ Kargil is not as popular as Leh in the literature and travel accounts of Ladakh.

The writers who described Kargil in their narratives always presented it in comparison to other places like Tibet, Leh, etc. The famous explorer and writer William Moorcroft during his stay in Ladakh from 1819 to 1825 have mentioned the Suru region of Kargil in his narrative. He writes:

From Sankho we ascended the Nakpo Chu (black water) along its right bank, a little more than a mile, to the village and lands of Stak-pa... The tilled lands were extensive, and laid out in slopes, but not supported by walls, and in general, the cultivation was unusually slovenly for Tibet. (Moorcroft and Trebeck 32)

Moorcroft's impressions appear to be tainted by constant comparison with what he expected to find in a "Tibetan area". He holds the view that the people of Drass are the most dishonest race in Ladakh. He compares the Muslims of Drass with the Tibetans and finds the upper class intolerant and the lower class dissolute and unprincipled. He does not find any character among the Tibetans who follows the faith of Buddha in the vicinity of Drass (43- 44).

The foreign writers always depicted the inhabitants of Kargil especially Muslims as inhuman, primitive, envious, and arrogant as compared to the people of Leh who are still Buddhist. Dainelli in his accounts of travel states that Ladakh is a poor region as it lies at high altitudes with severe climate. However, the people of Leh are lively and happy. The people are not envious and arrogant as there is an equality of economy. While talking about the people of Kargil, he writes that the people are not like the people of Leh. He states that "perhaps, once upon a time, the Baltis (Muslims) were also like this (like the Buddhists, happy and contented), but they are certainly not so long; now they are wretched and gloomy, colourless and

taciturn since they adopted together with Islam, social conditions are so different that they may be said to be quite the opposite of those in Ladakh” (Dainelli 247-8).⁸ Similarly, Captain Knight, while on his way back from Leh, describes the local people of Pashkum (Kargil) in his narrative. Knight holds the view that the males are uncultivated and dirty to the extreme and the females are even worse than the males (Knight 151).

The writers who visited Ladakh in the post-colonial period also depicted Kargil as primitive and dark. John Da Silva, J.F.N. Wedge and C. Hamilton visited Ladakh in the 1980s. They have described Kargil as a dark place. In the article, “The Society’s Tour to Kashmir and Ladakh”, they write:

After Kargil, the road bends south and as the sun has not yet risen over the mountains, we travelled the next twenty-five miles in shadow. The dwellings by the roadside had an untidy and furtive appearance and the few women we saw turned away, covering their faces. Our last glimpse was of a tiny mosque with a golden dome in the darkened fields before we emerged into the sunlight at Mulbekh and saw a Buddhist monastery high on the hill to our left... It seemed that we emerged metaphorically as well as actually, out of darkness into light. (Da Silva et al. 49)

Andrew Harvey who visited Ladakh in the early 1980s depicts Kargil in the same way as his oriental fellows. While travelling to Leh from Srinagar, he had to stay at Kargil for one night which he considers a penance and mortification. He holds the view that the hotels of Kargil are the dirtiest room with fleas and excrement. He finds one tattered mattress with no bed. All the shops in the market are filled with a photo of Muslims’ Prophet and he calls the picture “Muslim Prophet Boxer”. Harvey has the view that the Buddhists of Leh do not like Kargilis. A Ladakhi Buddhist friend told him in Leh that whenever a Buddhist hates anyone in Leh, he prays that he would be reborn in Kargil (18).

Harvey is discouraging the readers from visiting Kargil by depicting the unhygienic condition of the hotel. By his description, it seems that he stayed in a 'D' class hotel which offers rooms at the cheapest price. There were many other luxurious and comfortable hotels in Kargil in the 1980s, but like a biased writer, Harvey generalizes the town without understanding the peculiarities of his position. His depiction of Kargil is based on the idea that as the people are Muslims, the whole area is not civilized. He very smartly involves the people of Leh in presenting his opinion about Kargil as a worthless place by quoting an opinion of a native of Leh about Kargil. Harvey's reference to "Muslim boxer photo" in every shop is not factually correct, as no Muslim has a photo of their Prophet Mohammad. He might be referring to the photo of the American famous boxer Mohammad Ali who is not considered a prophet by any Muslim in the world.

As discussed earlier, Lopez believes that travel writers and academics are prisoners of Shangri-La, in this regard Marco Pallis is one of them. In the book, *Peaks and Lamas*, he states that he is in love with the culture and religion of Tibet as he had been there before visiting Ladakh. Afterwards, he travelled to Ladakh to experience the Tibetan way of living in the region. Upon reaching Kargil, he met a Tibetan woman in the town. Without writing about the region and its indigenous people, he narrates a story of escape of the woman from Tibet and the woman's arrival in Kargil (227). On his way to Leh, he keeps telling his readers that he is heading towards 'Ladakh'. It seems that he is oblivious of the fact that he entered the boundary of Ladakh a week ago. Like others, he also considers Kargil as a place outside Ladakh. Pallis further writes:

We walked towards our camp, at the far end of Kargil, where the Ladakh road starts. We felt excited by the prospect of re-entering a Tibetan country the next day... We had been waiting for those moments to put into execution the long-cherished plan of adopting, as far as

possible, the Tibetan way of living, both concerning food, dress, and personal habits. (227)

Marco Pallis considers Mulbekh as the gateway to Ladakh, which could be true as Mulbekh is the last village in Ladakh from Leh and the first village from Kargil side on the national highway where Buddhists are in majority. On reaching Mulbekh, he changes his attire and wears *goncha* (traditional Ladakhi dress). He is of the view that the people of Mulbekh are slightly fairer and hygienic as compared to the people in Kargil. He mentions, “A gay crowd of villagers was gathered round, their cheerful faces made a pleasant change from the dour looks of the Purig people” (234). He considers the Buddhist of Mulbekh as Ladakhi and the Muslims of Kargil as Purig. However, the whole region of Kargil including Mulbekh is called Purig. It is not a region merely based on religion, but the whole district of Kargil is known as Purig which comprises Mulbekh as one of its villages. Muslims and Buddhists are residing in the area for centuries.

Conclusion

Despite being a part of Ladakh, Kargil is strategically removed from the academic map of Ladakh. Due to continuous usage of Leh for Ladakh, Leh now has become synonymous to Ladakh. Due to less description of Kargil and its culture and identity in travel writings and non-fictional books, it remained oblivious for the national audience. With the academics and the travel writers, the media also played a crucial role for representing Kargil as a war zone. Today, when we type ‘Kargil’ in the search bar of Google, the result shows the war of 1999, books written on war and strategies used in the war. There are no results for Kargil without the war tag. If we search Ladakh in the Google bar, the result shows the places of Leh and the news of Leh district. There is more research to be done on the region to study in depth about the religion, culture and identity of the region and the reason of being neglected by travellers, writers, academicians and mainstream media.

Endnotes

1. Imambara is a religious place where Muslims gather to celebrate Eids and Muharram.
2. The commission of enquiry, known as Glancy Commission, after the name of its Chairman, Bertram J. Glancy, who was a senior official on deputation from the Government of India, began its work in 1931.
3. Hemis Monastery is one of the famous monasteries in district Leh of Ladakh. Once in every 12 years, the monks of the monastery unfurl the monumental Guru Padmasambhava Thangka. There is also a museum in which the ancient and historical objects are kept. For more info. See *Forever Ladakh* by Norzin.
4. The article was published in August 2020 in 'Stawa' which is a magazine published monthly. To read the full article see: <https://stawa.org/shridhar-kaul-and-ladakhs-ut-discourse/>
5. The 1947-memorandum is summed up in a later memorandum dated 4 May 1949, an excerpt of which is reproduced in "MADHOK B. Kashmir: The Storm Center of the World." Houston: A. Ghosh, 1992, pp. 1909-19.
6. 'Ladakh Times' is a freelance electronic media in Ladakh.
7. For more information see, "Reports and Diaries of Dr. Henry Cayley, Jt. Commissioner, Ladakh, between 1868 – 1873; Foreign & Political." National Archives, Delhi.
8. 'Balti' is an ethnic race of Ladakh. Most of the Baltis are found in Baltistan which now lies in Pakistan after the Partition. The village Karkith Choo and Hardas of Kargil consist of Balti races. Buddhists in Leh generically refer to all Ladakhi Shia Muslims as Baltis, (a euphemism for outsider) and Muslims in general as 'chipa' (etymologically derived from the opposite of 'nangpa', denoting insiders).

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