

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG BALTI TRIBE OF LADAKH

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ABSTRACT:-

In the contemporary world there are many tribal groups which are located in remote and inaccessible terrains and are still attached to their traditional ways of life. Their strong association with their culture does not mean that there is no change in their culture or they have no culture contact with other tribal groups inhabiting in their surrounding areas and outside world. Balti is one such tribe of Ladakh which is distinct from other tribal groups of Ladakh in terms of their art, culture, literature, language, dress pattern, eating habits, etc. Historically, geographically and ethnically Balti tribe belongs to Baltistan, which is presently under illegal occupation of Pakistan. At different intervals of history, Baltis have been encountered by different set of belief systems, linguistic and cultural groups under different rulers which resulted into changes in their art, culture, language and other aspects of life. The partition of erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir during Indo-Pak war of 1947-48 led to division of Baltis across Line of Control. Because of this division majority of Baltis left in Baltistan and few villages left in Ladakh. Baltis outnumbered in Ladakh represents complex network of intercultural interactions with other tribal groups that further led to changes in their socio-culture lives. Additionally, the cultural contact of Baltis with outside world through tourism in Ladakh and migration of Baltis out of Ladakh due to several reasons accelerated the process culture change due to culture contact. Only recently the Balti cultural and linguistic experts have become conscious of the fact and negotiating their cultural identity in relation to the accelerating processes of inter-cultural interactions with other tribes and outside world. Therefore, the present paper aims at studying culture change among Balti tribe of Ladakh. It also examines the process of identity construction among Baltis of Ladakh as a result of culture change.

Keywords- Tribe, identity, construction, culture change, Balti.

INTRODUCTION

Change is the law of nature. Every society undergoes the process of change over the period of time. Culture contact is an irresistible factor of change. When change takes place in a particular social group due to culture contact with others, it invites the attention of its members who work for the preservation of their identity by the process of identity construction. Tribe is one such category which undergoes the process of identity construction due to acculturation and intercultural relations with other social groups. Culture change has been occurred among Balti tribe due to culture contact with other cultural and religious groups over the period of time. As a result Balti culture, religion, language and literature have undergone changes. The spread of Islam in Baltistan, division of erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir due to Line of Control, inter-cultural relations with other tribal groups of Ladakh and interaction with outside world are the main causes of socio-culture changes among Baltis. Due to Line of Control, Baltis remained outnumbered in Ladakh and were involved in inter-cultural interactions with other tribal groups like Purigpa, Dard Shins, Brokpas, etc. the frequent interaction with Kashmir also caused influence of Kashmiri culture on their dressing and food habits in few Balti villages in Kargil district of Ladakh. Now-a-days, Kashmiri *wazwan* has become famous in marriage and other ceremonies.

In the recent past, Baltis became aware of these changes and perceived it as threat to Balti identity. Therefore, they have been making attempts to construct Balti identity and working for promotion of Balti art, culture, language and literature. Keeping in consideration the above narrated facts, the present paper aims at studying culture change among Balti tribe of Ladakh. To resist culture change, Baltis started the process of identity construction. Therefore, the paper also examines the process of identity construction among Balti tribe of Ladakh. The paper is based on both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The area of study of the present research is Union Territory of Ladakh. The non-participant observation and personal interview technique have

been employed to collect primary data from the field. Sources of secondary data include books, journals, photographs, census reports, etc.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Historically, Baltistan has been ruled by different rulers. The available historical records showed that Palolashai rulers of Baltistan ruled Ladakh and Gilgit too from 5th century to 727 AD. Balti dynasty was formerly under the rulers who bore the title of *Gyalpo* which means ruler or king. The *Gyalpos* of Balti trace their descent from a *Fakir* who married the daughter and only child of the reigning *Gyalpo*. In the 13th century, Ibrahim Shah usurped the sovereignty of Baltistan and founded *Maqpon* dynasty. The term *Maqpon* in Tibetan means *Commander-in-Chief* (Biddulph, 1880). The Maqpon dynasty ruled over Baltistan approximately for 700 years. During its rule, the rulers of Maqpon extended their territory from Baltistan to Gilgit Agency, Chitral and Ladakh. In the year 1842, Zorawar Singh, the Chief Commander of Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu invaded Baltistan with the help of Mohammad Shah, the eldest son of reigning ruler who was disinherited by Sultan. With this Zorawar Singh annexed both Baltistan and Ladakh to *Dogra* State of Jammu. Zorawar Singh made Mohammad Shah as the Sultan of Baltistan but left a *Dogra* Garrison to support his authority (Panikkar, 1930). On 16th March, 1846 Treaty of Amritsar was signed between Gulab Singh and British. With the signing of this treaty, Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh became single political entity as the princely State of Jammu and Kashmir under its ruler Maharaja Gulab Singh. In 1947 Pakistan attacked the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. On 22nd October, 1947 Maharaja Hari Singh acceded to Dominion of India. In 1949 July when ceasefire was declared, Gilgit-Baltistan came under the illegal control of Pakistan which is called as Pakistan occupied Territories of Ladakh.

CONCEPTUALISING THE TERM *IDENTITY*

The term *identity* refers to the reflective self-concept or image that each person obtains from family, gender, cultural, ethnic, and individual socialization processes, at both the social identity and the personal identity level. Each person has primary personal identities that include attributes that are associated with a sense of self in comparison with those of others (Bennett, 2015). Identity is people's source of meaning and experience. As Calhoun writes, "We know of no people without names, no languages or culture in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made...Self-knowledge-always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery-is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others". Identity is the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute over other sources of meaning. In general sense Identity is defined with the help of sameness and difference. Sameness focuses on the 'Self' of identity whereas the 'difference on the 'others' of identity. This perception helps to distinguish one group from another and stratifies the society. To have an identity, a thing must have features that are both relevant and enduring (Bhargava, 2002).

In this context Baltis of Ladakh because of their sameness and difference from others tribal groups form distinct Balti identity on the basis of different attributes like art, culture, language, ethnicity, religion, region, etc.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG BALTIS OF LADAKH

Identity refers to the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes (Castells, 2010). Identities are sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through a process of individuation (Giddens, 1991). Identity has two major categories namely individual identity and collective identity. Identity of individual person is called as individual identity. On the other hand, identity that is created by conscious section of a social group on the basis of characteristics which are common among all the persons of the group despite many characteristics in which they may differ from each other is collective identity. Collective identity is also called as social identity. The present paper focuses on collective identity among Balti tribe of Ladakh. Therefore, collective or social identity is constructed through the processes of interaction and day today interaction with local and wider society. The processes of identity construction are greatly influenced by the social, economic, political, and cultural institutional engagements of society; get negotiated with historical and lived-in experiences of the people in society; and get interconnected with varieties of social collectivities (SinghaRoy, 2018).

The identity construction among Baltis in Ladakh is influenced by historical, social, cultural, and political factors. The Baltis of Baltistan were follower of Bonism which has many traits of Hinduism. Later Baltis became Buddhist in 4th century AD and were again converted to Muslims in 13th century. But still Baltis practice many features of Bonism, Buddhism and Hinduism. The partition of erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir in Indo-Pak war of 1947-48 divided Baltis across Line of Control. Majority of Baltis left in Baltistan and three villages of Baltis namely Hardass, Karkitchoo and Latoos which were part of Baltistan are now part of Kargil district of Ladakh. In the 1971 Indo-Pak war few more Balti villages like Turtuk and Tyakshi were captured by Indian forces (M. Saddiq, personal communication, September 17, 2020). In the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, Baltis were socially, educationally, economically and politically marginalized by Kashmir centric leadership. After continuous struggle, protests, representations and deliberations, it was only in 1989 that Baltis were given scheduled tribe status along with seven other tribes of Ladakh (S. H. Kaleem, personal communication September 19, 2020). The grant of Scheduled tribe status to Baltis in 1989 provided opportunities in jobs and professional education. For this, young Baltis move to other parts of India where culture contact takes place which bring changes in the lifestyles of Baltis in many ways. When these Baltis come back to their homeland, they carry different pattern of culture change along with (M. A. Skith, personal communication, September 19, 2020). When Ladakh was opened for tourists in 1970s, Balti people started interaction with outside world. This interaction also resulted into socio-cultural changes among them.

Moreover, Baltis are influenced by the processes of modernization and globalization. In the era of modernization and globalization modern means of communication, transportation, technological innovations, digital technology, etc. have also shaped the lives of Balti tribe. All these factors of culture contact and inter-cultural interactions altered the Balti culture manifolds. In the past few years Baltis have become conscious of resultant changes and have been actively engaged in culture preservation and identity construction. They have been organizing different cultural and literary activities to promote and preserve their art, culture, language and literature. Different organizations, cultural groups and literary societies have been working in this regard both in Leh and Kargil districts of Ladakh.

ATTRIBUTES OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG BALTI TRIBE OF LADAKH

The process of identity construction among Baltis is based on different attributes. These attributes include culture, language, religion, region, cultural symbols, etc.

CULTURE

In his book *Primitive Culture*, Tylor (1871) defines culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. According to Pratt (2005), Culture is an important factor in shaping identity. Cultural identity is a shared culture, a sort of collective “one true self” which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common (Hall, 1990).

The Balti art, language, dress, food, folk songs, folk dances, birth ceremonies, death rituals, etc. together forms the reservoir of Balti culture. In some villages, little or major changes have been occurred in all these aspects and in some Balti villages Baltis have still retained their cultural heritage. In the present era every part of the world has been affected by globalisation and modernisation to some extent. Moreover, the information and communication technology has also revolutionised every village and every city. Under such circumstances also, many Baltis have been successful in maintaining Balti culture to great extent. It has been observed that the Baltis of Latoos village in Kargil district, Turtuk and Tyakshi villages in Leh district are still practising traditional customs, rites and rituals. They have retained Balti folk which is clearly represented in their dress, food habits, marriage ceremonies, birth rites, death rituals, festivals and several other occasions.

Balti Culture and Literary Meet

Balti activists organises culture and literary meets to promote Balti culture and literature on wider scale. In this regard Ladakh Academy of Art Culture and Languages have been organising different cultural programmes and literary activities in promoting Balti art, culture, tradition, folk, language and literature. In the year 2018, Cultural Academy organised two days Balti Literary and Cultural Festival on 3rd and 4th August, 2018 in Higher Secondary School, Turtuk at Nubra valley of Leh district. The festival

organised different cultural performances representing Balti folk songs and dances (F. Abass, personal communication, September 19, 2020).



Balti Folk Dance

Source: Ladakh Academy of Art, Culture and Languages



Balti Arrow Dance

Source: Ladakh Academy of Art, Culture and Languages

In August, 2019, *Gram Panchayat Turtuk* through *Youth Society Turtuk* and *Turtuk Polo Club and Cultural Movement* in collaboration with Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata organized two days workshop on the theme ‘Significance of Balti History, Culture and Identity in India Today’. In this workshop detailed discussions were held on history and culture of Baltis who originally belong to Baltistan. The workshop also discussed in length the identity construction among Baltis in the present digital world at global level.

On 27th October, 2020, LAACL in collaboration with the Youth of Latoo Village organized day long Balti cultural and literary meet at Latoo village in Kargil district. In this meet more than thirty writers, poets and folk artists participated. The meet aims at giving impetus to the art of poetry, preparation of research-oriented papers on different aspects of Balti culture and literature, short story writing. Balti poets, writers and folk singers presented their fresh cultural and literary endeavours also. Many poets including Bashir Ahmad Wafa, Akhone Muhammad Ali, Subeor Muhammad Ali Ashour, Sibte Hassan Kaleem, Fazil Abbass, Ashraf Ali Sagar, Ahsan Ali Rozi, Ghulam Nabi Skith recited poetries. Muhammad Sadiq Hardassi and Fazil Abbass presented their research-oriented papers on the topic *Balti Culture and Literature-An Overview* and *Balti Language and Script* (M. Saddiq, personal communication, May 19, 2020).

Prominent Balti poet, Akhone Asgar Ali Basharat presided over the literary sessions. Besides this, folk singers and musicians including Sadiq Ali Ashour, Fatima Nissa, Ghulam Muhammad Ashiq Hussain Muhammad Abbass Skith and others gave their performances (S. H. Kaleem, personal communication, May 19, 2020).



Muhammad Saddiq presenting research paper in Day Long Balti Cultural and Literary Meet

Source: Ladakh Academy of Art, Culture and Languages

LANGUAGE

Language is an inseparable part of human society. It is a mean by which the members of a society communicate. It plays a singular role in the process identity construction because it is through language individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others. Language has emerged as an instrumental determinant of identity construction in multi-cultural and multi-lingual society like Ladakh. Language is not just a medium of communication but also instrumental in the formation of cultural subjectivity in Baltis. It is through language, the indigenous narratives, oral traditions, life stories are communicated from generation to generation. Therefore, language is considered as an important attribute of identity construction among Baltis of Ladakh. In the 17th century Balti language has been heavily influenced by Persian literature to such an extent that Balti language has been deviated from its original script called as *Yige*. But Buddhists called it as *Bhoti*. But in the recent past Baltis have become conscious of eroding Balti language and are making continuous efforts for promoting Balti language and reviving its original script. Fazil Abbas from Turtuk is one of the experts of *Yige/Bhoti* script. He stressed that Baltis, in course of time, have lost their script. In the absence of *Yige*, Baltis are using Persian script for Balti language and literature. But Buddhists of Ladakh have preserved *Yige/Bhoti*. In the recent years Baltis and Buddhists have been organising workshops to revive *Yige/Bhoti*. Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Leh organised one such workshop in February 2020.

Besides this many Balti writers have been engaged in promoting Balti language by their literary works. Akhun Asgar Ali Basharat has written and compiled many books on social, cultural, religious and political aspects of Baltis (A.A.A. Basharat, personal communication, Spetember 20, 2020). Muhammad Saddiq Hardassi, Bashir Ahmad Wafa, Ghulam Nabi Skith, Ashraf Ali Sagar, Sibte Hassan Kaleem and others have also enriched Balti literature with their poetic and literary compositions.

Ladakh Literature Festival is another platform being used by Balti artists, writers and poets to promote Balti language and present their literary endeavours in-terms of Balti *ghazals*, *nazams*, *shayari* etc. *Mushaira Mehfilms* are organised on different occasions like cultural festivals, *Navroz*, *Losar*, marriages and other family functions. In these *mehfilms*, Balti poets recite *ghazals* and *shayari* (M. Abass, personal communication, Spetember 19, 2020).

REGIONAL IDENTITY

When identity is defined in terms of particular region it is called as regional identity. Like the national identity, regional identity implies a territorial and a population base. Individuals or groups share a regional identity if they refer to the region as a place or institution where they reside or actually belong to. Regional identity can either be considered as equal to the national identity or being perceived as subordinated to the national identity (Archiles and Marti, 2001). Regional identity can be equally regarded as imagined identities and as constructed as that of national identity. It is constructed by the regional population. It is not necessary that people have been born and grown up in the region. Likewise the Baltis of Ladakh have common identity of Ladakhis. But along with Ladakhis they have imagined identity of belonging to Baltistan historically and culturally. In 1947-48, though many Baltis were separated from their families and relatives but still they form an imagined association with their relatives and family members in Baltistan.

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

In the present context, the religious identity of Baltis of Ladakh shows that Baltis are follower of Islam. The religious history of Baltis is transitory from Bonism to Buddhism and later from Buddhism to Islam. The earlier form of religion of the people of Baltistan was Bonism which is called as *poon* in Tibetan. Bonism has many traits of Hinduism. A follower of *Bon* is called as *Bon pa*. Like Hinduism, Bon philosophy believes that universe consists of three realms- heaven, earth and lower world (Francke, 1995). Later, with the spread of Buddhism, Baltis accepted certain forms from Buddhism. Buddhism entered Baltistan prior to 4th century AD by the emigrants from Dardistan, Kulu and Tibet (Hassnain, 1973). When Islam was spread in Kashmir and its neighbouring regions, Baltis were the first who converted to Muslims (Francke, 1995). The Islam was introduced in Baltistan by Syed Ali Hamdani (Aabedi, 2009). After Shah Hamdan his nephew Syed Mohammad Noor Baksh entered Baltistan in 1435-1445 AD and most of the people of Baltistan and Kargil became followers of Noorbakshia sect under his influence (Gupta, 2014). Three decades after Syed Mohammad Noor Baksh, Meer Shams-ud-din Araqi served the doctrine of Shia faith of Islam in Kashmir, Kargil and Baltistan (Aabedi, 2009). Presently all Baltis living in Ladakh and other parts of India are follower of Islam.

BALTI SPORTS

Balti traditional sports like archery and polo are important part of Balti culture. Earlier polo matches were played on different festivals in every Balti village in Ladakh accompanied by Balti folk dances and music on traditional instruments called as *Surna* (flute) and *Daman* (drum). But with the passage of time this sport has lost its significant as there are no grounds available in many villages due to land under cultivation. But Baltis of Turtuk have made polo alive till date. They play polo matches on different occasions like Navroz, Eid, etc. (F. Abass, personal communication, September 19, 2020).



Baltis Playing Polo at Turtuk on the Eve of Navroz

Source: Nargis Khatoon



Surna (Flute), Source: M. A. Skith



Traditional Daman (Drum), Source: M. A. Skith

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

In the present environment, one cannot think of identity without considering information and communication technologies (ICTs). ICTs have altogether changed the backdrop against which identity is constructed; they have reframed the generalized others and the “generalized elsewheres” from which the self takes its cues. Meyrowitz was among the first who fully explored the link between ICTs and identity. For him, ICTs are weakening the connections between physical and social “place” (Meyrowitz, 1989).

In Balti society, collective identities are often constructed through new media also called as social media. For the last decade, social media sites are extensively used by Baltis in weakening the physical place by social place to establish link with Baltis living in Baltistan and other parts of the globe. This way, ICTs have been playing instrumental role in identity construction in the digital world. Baltis are making extensive use of social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc. to construct Balti identity. Using social media platforms, Baltis are not only connected across the Line of Control but also among the Baltis who are scattered across the globe thereby constructing Balti identity at global level (S. Fatima, personal communication, September 21, 2020). Many social media accounts of Balti activists have surname as BALTI. It has been observed that many young Balti artists share different shades of Balti culture on their accounts to promote Balti culture on wider scale. Through social media divided families are once again connected. Baltis of Ladakh, Baltistan and other parts of world have been sharing their folk, cultural and literary compositions globally.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from above discussion that different factors have influenced art, culture, language, literature, dress and food of Baltis due to culture contact with other social-cultural and religious groups over the period of time. In the recent past, when Baltis activists became aware of the socio-cultural changes in Balti tribe, the process of identity construction began among Baltis. Therefore, the study discussed how, Balti cultural and linguistic experts have been constructing Balti identity by organizing different cultural and literary festivals, meets, etc. It has been studied that culture, language, ethnicity, region and religion are the important attributes of

identity construction among Baltis of Ladakh. In the process of identity construction Ladakh Academy of Art, Culture and Languages provides platform to Baltis for promotion of their culture and language. Many Balti activists have formed different socio-cultural and literary organizations to promote and preserve Balti identity. In this digital world the young Balti activists are making extensive use of social media platforms to construct Balti identity at global level.

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