

MUSLIMS OF TIBET: PAST AND PRESENT

INTRODUCTION:

Tibetan Muslims are mostly the descendants of the Muslim merchants and traders of the neighbouring countries of Tibet who settled in Tibet between the 14th and the 17th centuries. The Muslim merchants visited Tibet in connection with trade, and later married Tibetan women, who adopted their religion. Their children adopted the Tibetan dialect and absorbed much of the Tibetan customs and traditions, at the same time followed the religion of their parents. There were about three thousand Muslims in the U-Tsang province and a substantial number in the Kokonor region of Amdo province before the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1949.

Origin Tibet was known to the Muslims from the earliest period of recorded history. The early Arab historians mentioned Tibet in their writings. Describing about Tibet and the Tibetan people, Al-Yaqubi, in his book, Kitab-UI-Buldan, writes, "Tibet is bigger in size than China. The Tibetan kingdom is strong and powerful. In the field of arts, Tibetan people compete well with the Chinese. They are brave and intelligent."

The Arabs had come into contact with the Tibetans in the eighth and the ninth centuries. The Abbasid ruler of Baghdad maintained relations with Tibet.

In the later years of King Trisong Detsen, the Tibetan power spread far and wide. The Arabian caliph, Harun-al-Rashid (786-809), aware of the spreading Tibetan power, allied himself with the Chinese in order to keep the Tibetans in check. But the Tibetan army continued to advance to the West. According to Al-Yaqubi, the Tibetans even besieged the capital of Transoxania, Samarkand. Later Al-Mamun, the second son of Harun-al-Rashid, came to an agreement with the Tibetan governor of Turkestan, who presented Al-Mamun a statue made of gold and precious stones, which was later sent to Mecca. Some trade relations were also established for it is said the Tibetans brought musk to the Muslim world.

ORIGIONS OF THE MUSLIMS OF TIBET:

Tibetan Muslims trace their origin from the immigrants from four main regions: Kashmir, Ladakh, China and Nepal. Islamic influence in Tibet also came from Persia and Turkestan.

Kashmir and Eastern Turkestan were the nearest Islamic regions bordering Tibet. It is said that Muslim merchants from Kashmir and Ladakh areas first entered Tibet around 12th century. At first, the trade was mainly confined to the border towns of western Tibet. Later, with the development of routes and protection of trade they received, the Muslim merchants extended their trade to the central Tibet. They carried their goods from Ladakh to Lhasa through the Mayum-la Pass. They brought woollen shawl and cloths, saffron, dried raisins and other fruits to Tibet. From Tibet, they procured wool, musk and salt.

The trade between Kashmir, Ladakh and Tibet continued for years. In the course of the trade, some Muslim merchants settled in different parts of Tibet. They opened their business enterprises in Tibet and also carried their trade with their own country.

It was under the patronage of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1616-1682), that the Muslims in Tibet acquired citizenship, and all accruing privileges and facilities accorded to citizens. They were provided land for mosque and burial place in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. The Muslims built the mosque and settled around it. With social interactions and intermarriages, and some emigrants from Kashmir and Ladakh, they grew in number, and thereby established the first Muslim community in Tibet.

During the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama, there was a conflict on the border between Ladakh and Tibet. The Tibetan troops, led by the military commander, Ganden Tsewang, defeated the Ladakhis. Deleg Namgyal, the ruler of Ladakh, appealed to the Mogul ruler of Kashmir for aid. Because of the possibility of the long drawn out campaign, Mipham Namgyal, the great incarnate Lama of Bhutan, mediated between the Ladakhi ruler and the Tibetan military commander. The Ladakhi ruler agreed to give up to Tibet the regions of Guge, Purang and Rudok, and to send triennial presents (Lochak) to Lhasa. A peace treaty was signed in 1684 at Tingmosgang which established a new regulations of trade between Ladakh and Tibet. The Ladakhis were given monopoly in wool trade in the Toe-ngari-Khorsum region of Tibet.

The Lochak, bearing gifts especially of saffron and cloth from Ladakh to Lhasa, reached Tibet at regular intervals. They were transported by the Muslim traders from Kashmir and Ladakh. In the second half of the 19th century, the famous Ladakhi merchant, Ghulam Rasul, held the monopoly of Lochak. Haji Mohammad Siddig, younger brother of Ghulam Rasul, led the Lochak Caravan more than half a dozen times.

The Lochak mission had always been an occasion for the Muslim merchants to renew friendship and arrange mutually profitable deals. Most of them were engaged in wool trading. Many Muslims, who had accompanied the Lochak caravan, later, settled in Tibet.

DOGRA-TIBET WAR, 1841:

In 1841, the Dogra army of Kashmir after defeating the Ladakhi forces, attacked Tibet. The army consisted of Dogras, Ladakhis and Muslims, and was led by Dogra General Wazir Zorawar Singh. Zorawar Singh's predominantly Dogra forces defeated the ill-equipped Tibetans and advanced up to Taklaxhar in Purang. As the winter approached, the Tibetan troops under the command of the council Minister, Kalon Pal-lhun, intensified their efforts and succeeded in driving the Dogra army out of Tibet. General Zorawar Singh was killed in the battle and about seven hundred Dogra soldiers were taken prisoner. Later, a temporary treaty was concluded at Leh between Kalon Pal-lhun's representative and Dewan Hari Chand of Kashmir. It was agreed that those prisoners wishing to return to their own country would be allowed to do so. But about two hundred Dogra, Ladakhi and Muslim prisoners elected to remain in Tibet. They were resettled in the warmer regions around Shigatse and Lhasa by the government. Many of them married Tibetan women. Under the influence of Kashmiri Muslims, many Dogra soldiers in

How DOGRA PRISONERS BECAME KARACHES ↑

Tibet embraced Islam and were called "Singpa Khache". It appears they were called so as many of them had the surname "Singh", which in Sanskrit means 'lion'. They were employed as labourers and cultivators by wealthy Tibetans. They are known to have introduced the cultivation of apricots, apples, grapes and peaches into the country.

THE NEPALI KASHMIRI MERCHANTS IN TIBET !

Prior to 1769, there were Muslim merchants from Kashmir who had settled in the valley of Nepal. They carried the trade with Tibet and India. They had trading relations with the Muslims settled in Tibet. But after the conquest of the Kathmandu valley by Prithvinarayan Shah in 1769, the Muslim merchants were driven out of Nepal. Some of them then emigrated to Tibet and settled there with the Muslims of Kashmiri and Ladakhi origin. Their descendants were referred to as Muslims of Nepali origin. With the conclusion of treaty between Tibet and Nepal in 1856, the Muslims in Tibet could resume their trade with Nepal and reached Patna in India through the valley of Nepal. They imported broadcloth, sugar, brasswork and Indian manufactured goods from Nepal and Patna.

There existed substantial number of Tibetan Muslims in the north-east of Tibet. But their exact number is not recorded. They were descendants of Muslim emigrants from Ningxia and other parts of China. The Chinese Muslims, who are known as Huis, settled in the eastern towns of Amdo province of Tibet in the 17th century. They married Tibetan women and raised their children as Muslims. They traded between Tibet and China in silk, porcelain and tea-bricks.

Siling(Sinning) , a town in the Amdo province, had become an important trading centre for the goods coming from China. The Muslims in Siling(Sinning) had established big stores from where they carried their trade to Lhasa. Later, some Muslims from Siling (Sinning) immigrated to Lhasa and formed a separate Muslim Community with their own mosque and burial place. They are known as Hobalinga among the Tibetans. They are called so as they first settled at a place called Hobalinga and were next in number to the Muslims of Kashmiri and Ladakhi origin in Lhasa.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Muslims are known as Khache among Tibetans because the earliest Muslim settlers to Tibet were from Kashmir which was known as Khache Yul to Tibetans. For generations, the Khaches figured prominently in Tibet's trade and commerce. They were free to set up commercial enterprises and were exempted from taxation. With these acquired privileges from the Government, their trade flourished in the major towns and cities like Lhasa, Shigatse, Tsethang and Siling. The Khaches travelled to the neighboring countries of Tibet and imported various commodities. George Bogle of British East India Company, who visited Tibet in 1774-75, met some Khache merchants in Tibet. According to him, "The natives of Kashmir, who like the Jews in Europe, or the Armenians in the Turkish empire, scatter themselves over the eastern Kingdoms of Asia, and carry on an extensive traffic between the distant parts of it, have formed establishments at Lhasa and all the principal towns in this country."

The Khaches led a reasonably free life in a Buddhist environment. They were able to preserve their community's identity while at the same time absorbing the Tibetan social and cultural

traditions. They elected a committee to look after their affairs. They built mosques and Madrasas (mosque schools) in Tibet. According to Heinrich Harrer, "In point of numbers, the Moslems form an appreciable part of the population of Lhasa. They have a mosque of their own and enjoy full freedom to practice their religion. Most of the Moslems have immigrated from India and have intermingled with the Tibetans."

The following are the Muslim institutions in Tibet before 1959:

Ponj Committee:

The Muslims in Tibet used to elect among themselves a five-men committee known as 'Ponj'. From among the Ponj, a leader-known as Mia to Muslims and Khache Gopa (Muslim headman) among non-Muslims - was elected. The Ponj looked after the interest of Muslims in Tibet, and represented the Muslim community to all the official ceremonies. The Tibetan government approved the formation of this committee and gave it a free hand to undertake its activities and to settle the affairs of Muslims independently, according to the Shariat Laws. It was also given the powers of honorary magistrate to settle all crimes and cases occurring among the Muslims. Those who were found guilty were punished by imposing monetary fines which were transferred to the fund for the maintenance of the park in which Muslims used to organise their functions and ceremonies.

At the time of Tibetan National uprising in Tibet in 1959, Haji Habibullah Shamo was a Khache Gopa and Haji Abdul Gani Thapsha, Abdul Qadir Jami, Rapse Hamidullah and Abdul Gani were the members of Ponj Committee. However, they all were arrested and imprisoned under various charges. Gulam Mohammad, Abdul Samad, Haji Tayyab, Rapse Abdul Qadir, Garusha Bhai Faidhullah and Haji Abdul Qadir Sheikh had also served as Kache Gopa.

Mosques:

The arrival of Muslims was followed by the construction of mosques in different parts of Tibet. The Fifth Dalai Lama provided land for the mosque. Before 1959, there were four mosques in the capital Lhasa, two in Shigatse, one in Tsethang and a few in Siling. Each mosque had a mosque committee who looked after their respective mosque. This committee, headed by the Imam of the mosque, arranged all the religious functions in a year.

Every year, the Muslims celebrated the two Eids with great pomp and show. The Eid prayers were offered at the mosques in the morning. Special feasts were prepared at home to which many Buddhist brethren and friends were invited.

Besides daily prayers, special prayers were also offered at the mosques for the whole night on the other religious occasions like Shabe-barat, Shabe-meraj, Shabe-qadr and Eid-Miladun-Nabi. During the month of Ramadan, the Muslims used to gather at the mosques for Iftar (feast for breaking fast) at the sunset which was arranged by the mosque committee. The mosques were maintained well and were the centres of the Muslims' social life in Tibet.

Madrasas (Mosque Schools):

As the Muslim community grew, Madrasas were set up in which children were taught about Islam, the Koran and the method of offering Namaz (prayers). Urdu language was also a part of the curriculum. There were two such Madrasas in Lhasa and one in Shigatse.

The Madarasas in Lhasa were Aghon-Sagang Madrasa and the Great Mosque's Madrasa. In the Madrasa, education was given free to all the children upto grade 5th. The expenses of the Madrasas were met from the donations collected among the Muslims. Every year, few elder Muslims used to take the responsibility to look after the Madrasas. They were known as "Mohtamim" (Rector) among the Muslims.

After finishing their studies in these Madrasas, students were sent to India to join Islamic institutes of higher learning such as Darul-Uloom in Deoband, Nadwatul Ulema in Lucknow and Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi. The annual report of Darul-Uloom for the year 1875 mention the presence of two foreign students there: a Burmese and a Tibetan. There were in all about 50 students who received their education from these institutions before 1959. Jamia Millia Islamia received its first batch of Tibetan students in 1945. They were Gulam Mohammad Singa, Ahmadullah Shahkuli and Gulam Mohammad Ganai.

Cemeteries:

Muslims in Tibet had their own burial place. They performed their funerals in the prescribed Islamic manner. There were two cemeteries around Lhasa: one at Gyanda Lingka about 12 km from Lhasa town and the other at Kygasha about 15km away. A portion of Gyanda Lingka was turned into a garden and this became the place where the Muslim community organised their major functions. Gyanda Lingka is said to contain unmarked graves believed to be those of foreigners who came to preach Islam to Tibet. Kygasha was mainly used by Muslims of Chinese origin. There was also a cemetery in Shigatse for the Muslims settled there. In addition to Lhasa and Shigatse, cemeteries and Madrasas were also found in other towns where Muslims were settled.

TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS:

For centuries Muslims lived very harmoniously with the Buddhist brethren. They had assimilated with the Tibetans but at the same time adhered to the Islamic principles in their dealings. They strictly observed the Islamic food taboos. They owned the slaughterhouses situated in a special quarter outside the Lingkor in Lhasa from where halal meat was supplied to all the Muslims. They performed their weddings and festivals in the prescribed Islamic manners. They travelled to Mecca via Bombay to perform haj and joined the Muslim Ummah during the time of pilgrimage. The elderly Muslims put white turbans on their head and wore a type of Chuba (traditional Tibetan dress) which is called Tsecham. The Muslim women used silk or thick cloth to cover their heads. There was no restrictions for the Muslims to perform their religious rites at any place in Tibet. Muslim religious leaders like Peer Purola, Mulvi Munshi Bashir Ahmad

and Haji Abdul Ghani Nangru were respected by all the Tibetans. They were noted for their erudition and scholarship.

CONTRIBUTION TO TIBETAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE:

Tibetan Muslims have made significant contribution to Tibetan culture particularly in the field of music. Nangma a popular classical music of Tibet, is said to have been brought to Tibet by Tibetan Muslims. In fact, the very term Nangma is believed to be a corruption of the Urdu word Nagma, meaning song. These high pitched musical songs, developed in Tibet around the turn of the century, were a craze in Lhasa with musical hits by Acha Izzat, Bhai Akbar-la and Gulam Mehdi on the lips of almost everyone. The violinist Bhai Mohi-ud-Din and the flutist Bhai Mohammad Iqbal were also wellknown among the people and were frequently invited by the dignitaries to perform in their houses. They also taught the musical arts to amateurs.

Muslim contribution is also found in the Tibetan literature. Around the mid-eighteenth century, a Tibetan Muslim, named Faidhullah (commonly known as Khache Phalu among the Tibetans), wrote a book of aphorism, Khache Phalu's Namthar (few words of advices from a Muslim) which attained a wide popularity in Tibet and have become part and parcel of common Tibetan expression. Khache Phalu was well-versed in Arabic, Persian and Urdu and studied Tibetan language. His book was based on three Persian classics: Gulestan, Bostan and Pantnama. Professor Dawa Norbu, who has translated Khache Phalu's Namthar into English, reviews the book in these words, "The whole work is a testimony to the astonishing degree to which the Muslims in Tibet achieved a working spiritual consensus with the Tibetan Buddhist society". He puts the value of Khache Phalu's work into two sphere: firstly as an anthropological world view of the Tibetan people; secondly as an Islamic interlude in Buddhist Tibet.

TIBETAN MUSLIMS UNDER THE CHINESE:

After the Tibetan National Uprising of 1959, His Holiness the Dalai Lama went into exile in India followed by a significant number of Tibetans. However, only few hundreds of Tibetan Muslims, residing in Lhasa and Shigatse, could go out of Tibet only a year later. In between they had to suffer extortion, terrorism and cruelty under the hands of Chinese occupation forces, like their fellow Tibetans. They lost all the facilities and privileges to carry their trade freely in the country. Their social, economic and religious life was totally disrupted. They saw no religious freedom. Their religious institutions like mosques and Madrasas were closed. They were not even allowed to carry out the last rites for their deads according to their religious traditions. They were banned to travel about in the country. Merchandise held by them were either frozen outright or purchased by the Chinese at arbitrary prices. They no longer saw any hope of trade across the Himalayas.

During this critical period, Tibetan Muslims organised themselves. They approached the Indian mission in Lhasa to claim for Indian citizenship, referring to their Kashmiri ancestry, to escape Chinese tyranny. Mr. P.N. Kaul was the head of the Indian mission then. At that time, the head of the Ponj of Tibetan Muslims was Haji Habibullah Shamo. He was, however, under Chinese

detention along with other leaders like Bhai Abdul Gani-la, Rapse Hamidullah, Abdul Ahad, Haji Abdul Qadir Jami and Haji Abdul Gani Thapsha under various charges. While Bhai Abdul Gani la was charged with putting up of anti-Chinese posters, Rapse Hamidullah was arrested on account of his connection with a senior Tibetan official. Bhai Abdul Gani la and Haji Abdul Gani Thapsha were imprisoned in Drapche prison and later both succumbed to torture and beatings in the prison. But nobody knows the fate of other persons.

The initial response of the Indian Government was Lukewarm. It said only those "whose permanent domicile remained in the state of Jammu and Kashmir and who visited India from time to time, whose parents or one of whose grandparents were born in undivided India, are potential citizens of India"; and it would only accept them. But some time later in 1959, the Indian Government suddenly came out with the statement that all Tibetan Muslims were Indian nationals, and started distributing among them application forms for Indian nationality.

Chinese ill-treatment of Tibetan Muslims continued. Chinese authorities duped Tibetan Muslims into selling their property to them in return for the freedom to emigrate to any Muslim country. Seeing this as a possible way of saving their religion and culture, many Tibetan Muslims parted with their property. But having acquired these property, Tibetan Muslims were not allowed to emigrate. Instead, restrictions were imposed, and social boycott declared. Nobody was allowed to sell food to Tibetan Muslims. Many old and weak Tibetan Muslims as well as children died of starvation.

TIBETAN MUSLIMS IN EXILE:

In late 1959, only few hundred Tibetan Muslims were able to cross over into India in the border towns of Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Gangtok. They gradually moved to Kashmir, their ancestral homeland, from 1961 to 1964. They were accommodated in three huge buildings at Idd-Gah in Srinagar. At that time His Holiness the Dalai lama had sent His representative to enquire about the conditions of Tibetan Muslims.

During the first two decades of their life in exile, Tibetan Muslims attempted to rebuild and re-organise themselves. Lack of proper guidance and leadership proved to be an obstacle in their development. Also, houses in Idd Gah was inadequate to meet the requirements of a growing family. In the process, Tibetan Muslims began to scatter, emigrating to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Nepal as well as moving to other parts in India in search of better opportunity. His Holiness the Dalai Lama continued to keep in touch with the situation of Tibetan Muslims. Knowing their problems, His Holiness during His visit to Srinagar in 1975, took up the matter with the Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir. He also encouraged the formation of the Tibetan Muslim Refugee Welfare Association. This Association began to chalk out projects for the economic and educational upliftment of Tibetan Muslims. With an initial financial assistance by His Holiness coupled with assistance received later from Tibet Fund, New York, a handicraft centre, a co-operative shop and school were established. A group of young Tibetan Muslims were given training in carpet making in Dharamsala.

The Association was able to get some land for resettlement. Saudi Arabia provided funds for the construction of 144 houses and a mosque in the new settlement. Construction was completed in 1985 and the houses distributed among the people. Not all people could be accommodated and some continued to reside in the old settlement.

There is a Tibetan Muslim Youth Association which plays an important role in social upliftment of the community. This youth association is in contact with the Tibetan Youth Congress. The Department of Health in Dharamsala has set up a primary health care centre to look after the medical needs of the settlers.

The total population of Tibetan Muslims outside Tibet is around 2000. Of them, 20 to 25 families live in Nepal, 20 in the Gulf countries and Turkey. Fifty families reside in Darjeeling - Kalimpong areas bordering Tibet in eastern India. Tibetan Muslims in Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Nepal have a joint Tibetan Muslim Welfare Association based in Kalimpong. During His Holiness the Dalai Lama's visit to Darjeeling in April 1993, Tibetan Muslims there, dressed in their traditional garments participated in a ceremony. There are around 1200 Tibetan Muslims in the New settlement in Srinagar consisting of 210 families.

Since the opening up of Tibet, some Tibetan Muslims outside Tibet have been able to visit the country while quite a few have also come out. It is impossible to make accurate estimate of Tibetan Muslims who are still in Tibet for obvious reasons. One thing is, however, certain. There are several thousand of them, the majority being in the Kokonor region of Amdo province. In 1980s, the Tibetan Muslims in Tibet could send six students to India to receive religious education from the Islamic institutes in India. Four of them have completed the education and returned to Tibet. They have now initiated to start a Madrasa to teach Koran to the children as well as to the youths who were born and brought up under the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Tibetan Muslims in exile have sent religious books for them.

CONCLUSION:

Tibetans in general have suffered greatly under Chinese occupation. Tibetan Muslims have undergone great mental and physical strain on account of their peculiar situation. They continue to look upon the world community particularly their Muslim brethren throughout the world to support peaceful solution of the Tibetan problem so that they, too, like their Tibetan Buddhist brethren, can return to their homeland.

Bonn, Germany

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