

# **Finding Solace in Festivals: An Inquiry into the Buddhists' Traditions of Leh-Ladakh**

Stanzin Yangdol

Department of History, Faculty of Social Sciences, Panjab University, Chandigarh

## **Abstract**

The present study seeks to enquire, 'Finding solace in festivals: An inquiry into the Buddhists' traditions of Leh-Ladakh. The Leh district of Ladakh located in Jammu and Kashmir State is thought to be one among the entire Himalayan region where Buddhism is blooming in an unprecedented scale and it continues to be a living faith influencing every aspect of its followers. Similarly, the geographical setting of Ladakh has also exercised a profound impact on the lives of the Ladakhis and it cannot be overlooked. Due to the enforced inclement weather embracing very cold temperature touching up to -40 degree Celsius, winter is relatively an idle season for Ladakhis. However, the colourful mosaic of Ladakh's festivals mainly lined up in winter not only forms an integral part of the land but also it serves as an excuse for social and convivial gathering. In this paper, attempt is made to identify and examine the main festivals of Buddhists and its purpose in the lives of the Ladakhis.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Leh-Ladakh, Festivals, Losar, Tradition, Mask Dance.

## **I. Introduction**

Leh-Ladakh situated in the northern most part of Jammu and Kashmir State is associated with Kashmir valley through the Zojila (3529 M) pass and forms a part of the outer Himalayas. Having an altitude between 2900 M to 5900 M, it is regarded as one of the most elevated regions of the earth with the mountains oriented in parallel chains. It lies roughly between 32-36 North latitude and 76-79 East longitude. Owing to its geographical setting, it endures a harsh climate. There are considerable daily and seasonal extremes of temperature and very marked differences at any time of year between sun and shade temperatures. Winters here are severely hard-hearted

with the temperature sinking down to (-) 40 degree Celsius at places. The landscape is largely arid and the rainfall remains scanty (District Census Handbook, Census of India, 1981).

During the course of its history, the region was conspicuously influenced to a large extent by its bordering states such as Kashmir, Tibet and China which defied the region time and again in order to enhance their respective territory. The different cultures have thus left a distinct imprint on it, and contain a great variety of races, with differing customs and creed (Petech, 1977). The unique topography, soil, climate, rainfall, language and even the social customs of the people makes it more diverse and vibrant. Presently, Leh district of Ladakh which is predominantly inhabited by Buddhists continues to be an important abode of Buddhism and gives its people a distinct cultural identity.

The standard life here is dictated in consonance with the prevailing climatic condition of the region. Noticeably, agriculture is the key source of livelihood supplemented to a large extent by animal husbandry. Like other parts of the State, more than 80% of the populations rely on agriculture; however, agriculture operations being confined mainly to river valleys are feasible only during the summer. The activities of the people generally come to a rest once the winter season descends. By and large, even the new sorts of economic pursuits brought by the so-called current 'development' and 'modernization' come to a complete halt. Helena Norberg-Hodge, a linguist and the first westerner in modern times to master the Ladakhi language duly remarks:

“Remarkably Ladakhis only work, really work, for four months of the year. In the eight winter months, they must cook, feed the animals, and carry water, but work is minimal. Most of the winter is spent at festivals and parties. Even during summer, hardly a week passes without a major festival or celebration of one sort or another, while in winter the celebration is almost non-stop” (Hodge, 1992).

Snellgrove (1977) reiterates this fact as he remarks that because of the enforced economic idleness, people have ample time for social and religious activities. The festivals that are mainly spread right through the winters validate the fact that people devote their time in organizing and participating in the events. The close and prolonged relations between Ladakh and Tibet long ago have established a dynamic cultural identity which undoubtedly is apparent from the vibrant festivals that commences in a row. A majority of festivals observed here has two aspects-religious and secular. The religious aspects include a visit to a monastery to offer butter lamps,

ceremonial scarves, or money; to show veneration through prostration; to burn juniper, whose fragrant smoke is an offering to the gods; and to witness a monastic dance-drama in different *gompas* (monasteries) being performed by the monks or *lamas*. In fact, the monastic dance performed in each monastery of Ladakh is entirely thought to be an import from Tibet. While the secular aspects of the celebration mainly comprise of dancing, feasting, merry-making, drinking and singing of the folksongs by the people leading to an immense joy and simultaneously, forming an integral part of Buddhist's living heritage (Kaul, 1992).

## II. Losar

Among the most elaborate and major festivals, mention may be made of *Losar* which marks the beginning of the New Year. *Losar* is derived from two words, i.e., *Lo* which means 'year' and *Sar* which means 'new'. For the Buddhist community of Ladakh, the occasion is deemed to be an immense joy, happiness and harmony. Generally, the celebration is followed by *Gah-dan Nam ch'od*, the birth and death anniversary of *Tsong kha-pa*<sup>1</sup> which according to the Tibetan Lunar calendar falls on the twenty-fifth day of the tenth month. On the occasion of *Gah-dan Nam ch'od*, people generally pay visit to their respective monastery to make offerings and seek the blessings. At some monasteries, idol image of *Tsong kha pa*, is carried out in the procession by the *lamas* (monks) with great pomp and grandeur followed by prayer recitation to sanctify the occasion. At the end of the day, the event is marked by lighting of traditional *chodme* (butter lamps) on the roof of houses, palaces and monasteries as a symbol of admiration and salutation.

A legendary tale associated with the celebration of *Losar* festival apprises us of the fact that, for a very long time the Tibetans, the Ladakhis, and probably the other people of Himalayan culture had a common *Losar* day and date. However, Ladakhi King Jamyang Namgyal (1595-1616) has decided to alter the date of *Losar* two months prior to the Tibetan *Losar*, so as to enable him to celebrate the occasion with his folks before he advanced to a war against the Baltistan forces. Since then, it has become a tradition among the people to celebrate the occasion in accordance with it. *Losar* holds an immense significance in the lives of the local Buddhist and is celebrated every year in the eleventh month of the Tibetan lunar calendar i.e. two months ahead of the Tibetan *Losar*. During *Losar* one can witness a range of cultural events, ancient rituals and traditional performances in a row.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tsong kha-pa*, who introduced *Gelug pa* school of order in Tibetan Buddhism.

The occasion is deemed as an opportunity for the people to truly engage in the mythological aspect of *Losar* who actually admire the ancient traditions and customs passed on to them by their predecessors. It is believed that the thrill of the ceremonies is doubled when the occasion is collectively celebrated under one roof with family members, relatives and friends. It is pertinent to mention here that, if any member fails to join with other members of the family, the latter get their cups filled in their absence with tea and butter is smeared on the rims of the cup in their name as per the ritual. The fervor with which people engaged in celebrating and relishing the festive spirit may possibly gauge from the Sven Hedin (1909) travelogue, '*Trans-Himalayan*' that records:

“The Losar is therefore an extraordinarily popular feast, which for quite fifteen days draws the labourer from his work, the herdsman from his yaks, and the merchant from his counter; a season of joy and pleasure, of feasting and dancing; a time for praying and receiving visits, and of giving and receiving presents; when the houses and temples are swept and garnished, and the best clothes and ornaments are taken out of the trunks; when friends gather to drink together in their apartments” (Hedin, 1909).

The customary practice is to light hundreds and thousands of earthen lamps, called *chodme*. Altars and stages are usually set in advance and decorated with hundreds of butter lamps which are diligently placed in and around the dwellings including courtyards, verandas, roof tops and wall fence. Such lamps are then lit in the evening thereby making the entire region savoring under the radiance of *Chodme* light. The tradition of lights associated with *Losar* celebrations is undoubtedly an expression of the victory of good over evil.

On twenty-nine day of the tenth month people generally have *Guthuk* (porridge) for dinner. *Guthuk* as the name implies, *Gu* means 'nine' and *thuk* means 'porridge' is cooked with nine different items hidden into dough balls, like dry cheese, peas, onion, chilli, charcoal, radish, salt etc. as per the general tradition. From the twenty fifth to twenty ninth day of the Tibetan Lunar calendar no social function is held as such, however, all engage in feasting privately. On the thirtieth day, last day of the passing year the evil forces are expelled through various rituals. Yet again, as per the tradition the little lamps (*chodme*) are lit in the evening. Soon after the sunset all peep from their houses to see if the *Meto*, fire procession has started or not. Having ascertained

that, all emerge with their kindled sticks along with a *Kal Jor*<sup>2</sup> at the thoroughfare to take part in the procession. After that, a small quantity of beer is sprinkled over the *Meto*, and each person forehead is smeared with small pieces of *Yar* (butter) affix on the rims of *Kal jor* for the purpose. In the end the procession culminates with the throwing of all kindled sticks on the ground thereby bidding adieu to the passing year and cheerfully welcoming the New Year. *Meto* symbolizes the driving away of the evil spirits and as such through the ritual of *Meto* evil spirits are supposed to be expelled.

On the first day of the eleventh month, people exchange greetings with each other by saying, “*Losar La Tashi Deleks*” (congratulations). Knowing the fact that, the celebration was primarily a family affair until the first day of eleventh month; people eagerly wait for the day to approach so that they can feasts with their friends and relations. As a part of tradition, each household prepares a range of offerings which are then beautifully placed on the kitchen shelf. The following items of offerings usually comprises of a dough effigy of an ibex (*Skyin*) as auspicious symbol, the *Pe-Pud* (parched barley flour) filled in a wooden bowl, *Nang mchod* (a vessel of beer) and *Chu Pud* (a pair of seven bowls of water). However, these whole set of offerings are then kept on the shelf for few days depending on the particular family. To procure good luck in the forthcoming days the doors and walls of the kitchen are spotted with barley flour by the male member of the family.

Besides, the members of the household partake of *Thab-Zan*, a large dish of parched barley dough, in the middle of which a hollow is made to receive the mustard oil which is poured into it. This large cake of dough is then divided into four equals parts, one part (*Thab La Rgyal Mo*), being placed on the earth stove (*Thab*) as an offering to the god of hearth, one part (*Mag Dung Rgya Mo*) stuck on a large horizontal beam in the apartment, and one piece (*Sgo Tag Rgya Mo*) stuck on the lintel of the front door of the house. When performing this rite the house-holder says:

*Nangi pera chila ma kher*  
*Chi logi pe ra nang la khyong*

“Don’t carry confidential news outside,  
but bring popular gossip inside the house” (Asboe, 1938).

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<sup>2</sup> *Kal jor* a pot of beer on the rims of which a butter impression called *Yar* is smeared.

The fourth quarter of the dough cake is reserved for consumption of the family. One of the unique practices is that some members from each family proceed to their respective cremation sites to share meals to their deceased spirits as a part of offering. A portion from each meal that is generally consumed within the family such as breads, parched barley, meat, tea, bear and other delicacies is placed on a slab of stone in front of the *Spur Khang* (cremating oven) in their name. The remainder of the stuff is then distributed among the members of the relation. People also pay tribute to their respective *Lhato* (the oracle) of the family in general and that of the community in particular and with a bottle of *chang* (local beer), *khatak*<sup>3</sup>, a branch of juniper (*shukpa*), apricot oil (*chodme*) etc and in the end renews the old juniper from the *Lhato* with a fresh one.

Hereafter, the actual feasting and social gathering starts incessantly and lasts for quite a few days. Friends, relations and neighbours become super busy in receiving and feeding the guests who may come to greet them. While visiting each other's house, the ritual is to carry along a bottle of beer smeared with butter, *khatak* and some local breads or biscuits as a piece of good fortune. Besides, they also pay visit to the respective holy shrines, stupas and monasteries to present '*khatak*' to the deities and seek the blessings of the Lord. The *Losar* fest not only provides the right aura for grand celebrations but gathers the loved ones under the same roof to double the joy of the ceremonies. However, things are changing with time. The festivities which used to be celebrated in an elaborate manner are no longer celebrated in the same way. Earlier, the celebration of the *Losar* which used to last for the months feasting with family and relations are now becoming concise and compact in nature. In the former times, state ceremonies used to take place and people gather in large number for watching events such as polo, archery-competition and traditional dances. The decorative lights, candles of different colours and shapes etc, available in the market have partially replaced the use of traditional 'earthen lamps'. However, in the wake of modernization, understanding the importance of upholding the unique traditions, efforts are being made by Ladakh Buddhist Association wing to retrieve the lost glory of customs associated with the *Losar*. The performers from distinct villages are invited to perform and showcase their traditional way of celebrating the *Losar* at Leh. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm with which the festivals were and are celebrated by people remains more or less the same.

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<sup>3</sup> *Khatak*, a holy ceremonial white scarf used frequently on auspicious occasions as a mark of respect.

### III. Sacred Mask Dances Or *Chams*

Reference of the first sacred mask dance in Tibetan Buddhism is believed to have initiated during the reign of King *Trisong Detsan's* rule in 8th century A.D. But this fact is not corroborated with historical evidence. The more accepted view is that it started in 1023 A.D. during the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet. With the passage of time every school of Mahayana Buddhism in Tibet and Ladakh accepted and prompted the tantric dances as an integral part of the religion. Since the twelfth century, monks from Ladakh travelled to Central Tibet for pursuing higher studies in its monasteries which remained in vogue until the Chinese invaded Tibet and closed its borders in 1949 (Hanna, 1988). Tibet being the cradle of religious sustenance for the Buddhists of Leh Ladakh in all its religious matters has eventually ceased to exist and since then Ladakh has been independently functioning in its religious matters. However, today the performance of traditional sacred mask dances that gained fame throughout the world has endured intact and continues to be an integral part of the monastery. Moreover, the glory of these sacred dances is that they form a part of living tradition. The following monastic festivals are conducted in the region:

**Table 1.** Showing the lists of Monastic festivals in Leh.

S.NO	NAME OF FESTIVALS	PLACE	MONTH	NO. OF DAYS
1.	<i>Tsechu</i>	Hemis	June	2
2.	<i>Angchok</i>	Chemray	November	2
3.	<i>Gustor</i>	Thiksay	January	2
4.	<i>Nakrang</i>	Matho	February	2
5.	<i>Dosmochay</i>	Leh	February	2
6.	<i>Angchok</i>	Taktak	February	2
7.	<i>Kabgyat</i>	Lamayuru	December	2
8.	<i>Tseruk</i>	Phyang	February	2
9.	<i>Guru Tse-Chu</i>	Stok	February	2
10.	<i>Shey Shubla</i>	Stok	July	2
11.	<i>Shey Rulo</i>	Shey	March	2
12.	<i>Gustor</i>	Spituk	December	2
13.	<i>Dosmochay</i>	Lukhil, Leh	February	2

**Source:** *Gazetteer of India, Jammu and Kashmir State, Ladakh Region, n.d.*

The sacred mask dances are performed by the *lamas* (monks) during the religious service offering ceremonies at all the major monasteries in order to commemorate the birth of the founder as well as exponents of the Buddhist sects. Traditionally, the *lamas* performing mask-dance must go for retreat a month before the actual performance in which they undergo rigorous meditation to invoke deity through the chanting of the *mantras*. The process of establishment of close relation with the particular deity culminates with the *lama* identifying himself with a deity. The performer's intention is to 'benefit others by displaying the qualities and appearance of the protector deities and to attain the state of non-dual existence in which he recognizes that the nature of his own mind is identical with the space like, primordial mind of the deity. Some of the dances created are based on spontaneous visions of inspired practitioners (Hanna, 1988).

During the annual festivals of these particular monasteries, the basic teachings of Vajrayana Buddhism are generally portrayed to the public in theatrical form and on the last day an effigy which is supposed to be the enemy of all people—the ego—is ceremoniously discarded. Important features of *chams* include meditation, dance movement, *mudra*, *mantra* (repetition of sacred syllables), music, costume, masks and ritual implements. Principally, the masks and costumes worn by monks during festival are personification of various meditative and protective deities. In the similar vein, L Austine Waddell (1974) remarks that, "The *lamas* reserve to themselves the exclusive right to act in "the mystery play", with its manifestations of the gods and demons, wearing awe-inspiring masks, etc., while they relegate to lay actors the sacred dramas, illustrating the former births of Buddha and other saints, in the *Jatakas*" (Waddell, 1974). The customary attire which instantly caught the eyes of the spectators comprises of precious silk brocade, large wide-brimmed black hats, high boots and apron made of human bones are reserved exclusively for the monastic festivals.

The sacred dances actually commence from the *Gonkhang*, the room dedicated to the protector divinities in major monasteries where all the performers in their respected costumes assemble to stage the dance. The whole play is then performed in the courtyard of the monastery one after another with solemn movements of their legs and hands as prescribed in the rules. The chief instruments played while performing sacred dances by the monks are long horn (*dungchen*), oboes (*gyaling*), drums (*nga*), cymbals (*silnyen \ bubjal*), shinbone trumpets (*kangling*), conch

shells (*dung*), skull-drums (*damaru*), and bells (*drilbu* and *dorje*) (Kaul, 1992). E F Knight (1895) who has observed the festival of Hemis during his visit writes:

For a time Spirits of Evil ruled supreme in the arena. The variously-masked figures flocked in, troop after troop—oxen-headed and serpent-headed devils; three- eyed monsters with projecting fangs, their heads crowned with tiaras of human skulls; lamas painted and masked to represent skeletons; dragon-faced fiends, naked save for tiger-skins about their loins; and many others. Sometimes they appeared to be taunting and terrifying the stray souls of men—grim shapes who fled hither and thither among their tormentors, waving their arms and wailing miserably, souls who had not obtained Nirvana, and yet who had no incarnation (Knight, 1895).

An important highlight of these monastic festivals is the unveiling of two to three storeys long *Thongdrel* (a huge painting imprinted on a silk cloth) for the public display. The rare *Thongdrel* considered to be an immense spiritual value for all the sentient beings is unfurl only once a year. In fact, the sanctity of *Thongdrel* is such that, it can liberate the observer from all sins by mere glimpse. Therefore, devotees from all over the country in order to attain the spiritual blessings make special efforts to attend so that they can purify themselves from the sins and the influence of evil spirits. Besides, the festivals furnish an opportunity to the locals to set up different stalls in the outskirts of the monastery thereby creating a cheerful atmosphere all around. The occasion seems to be a favourable chance for the small traders to cater their needs by engaging in some business transactions.

All the monastic festivals conducted in particular *gompas* (monasteries) generally lasts for two days. On the last day, the dances conclude with the devastation of the devil, which is personified by an *stormas* (sacrificial ritual figures or effigy) moulded out of dough for the purpose is taken out from the monastery and ceremonially cast away into the desert or burnt. The Buddhist texts describe that the *stormas* represent the images of deities like *Mahakala* and *Heruka* and an offering of *storma* or cake is actually intended as a meal for spirits and devils. The different shapes of *storma* represent the images of deities, whereas the effigies of animals, birds, camels, and men represent the spirit of evils which become the followers of the main deities taken out for disposal. Before disposing of the *storma*, the tantric master invites the principal deity of *Mahakala* and *Heruka*, to desecrate the body, speech and forces of evil spirits from the mind. By the spiritual powers, the deities bring the spirits of evils and absorb them into their own effigies.

At the time of putting them into fire, the tantric master transforms the souls of evil spirits into higher realms and the remains of the bodies are offered to the fire deity. Similarly, when this act is over, the masters request the deities to revert back to their own bodies in the pure land. The *storma* which represents the deity becomes the existence without the essence of the deity and then is offered to the fire. The general belief is that, sacred masks dances serve as a constant reminder to its followers about the evil spirits that hover around human beings and to do good to combat them effectively. But whether the evil spirits exist in the real and rational world is highly questionable and equally questionable are the elaborate religious ceremonies and rituals observed in Leh-Ladakh to ward away the fear of the evil spirits.

#### IV. Conclusion

After discussing the course and significance of the aforementioned festivals, it may be assumed that they represent the age old cultural heritage of the Buddhists. The festivals celebrated in Leh-Ladakh are significant in bringing vibrancy into the lives of Ladakhis during the long winter months. Moreover, the festivals provide the local people an opportunity for socializing, trading and entertainment. In the accelerating tempo of modern world, the sacred dance which organizes once a year for the spiritual benefit and well-being of all sentient beings remain an important element of every Buddhist monastery even today. Besides bringing religious merit to the people, they provide an opportunity to them to divert attention from a hectic and sometimes a monotonous daily routine of life and strengthen the spirit of unity, brotherhood among people of various walks of life. These days festivals particularly the sacred mask dances have become source of attraction for tourists, both domestic as well as foreign because of its unique cultural tradition. It is palpable to mention here that the performances of monastic festivals as well as the customary *Losar* celebration have somewhat manage to endured the external influences in maintaining their originality and such a trend is laudable in a traditional society in Ladakh.

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Ladakh is often referred to as the Land of Buddhism. The monasteries are an integral part of Ladakh's culture and traditions. Scores of chortens, fluttering prayer flags and Mani stones can be seen in every nook and corner of Ladakh protecting the land from the atrocities of nature. Spituk Gumpa. Photo: [bit.ly/1Mvqxkd](https://bit.ly/1Mvqxkd). Located at a distance of 8 km. from Leh, Spituk Gumpa is an impressive monastery that dates back to the 11th century. Main prayer hall houses the deity of Lord Buddha. Antique Thangkas paintings, arms, ancient festival masks are a must-see in the monastery. Find more information about the Places to visit, Things to do, Hotels, Restaurants and Places to eat in Ladakh at Times of India Travel. It is not for without any reason that Leh Ladakh trip is rated as one of the most sought-after road trips on Earth. In case you are in a mood to fully explore the oh-so-beautiful destination, try to plan a trip during the festive season. Ladakh actually comes alive during festivals and you will actually be able to not only explore the place, but also be a part of their culture and tradition. [prev](#)[Slideshows](#)[next](#)[Slideshows](#). ThinkStock Photos. Leh Ladakh is one of the most visited places in India - This place can also be called the paradise of the Indian continent with its glorifying picturesque landscape and scenic views that never fail to mesmerize the visitors with its allure. Leh-Ladakh! The highest settlement in India in the northernmost state of Jammu And Kashmir is one scenic beauty that has been on every traveler's bucket list. India is the country of diverse culture and every culture has their own festivals to celebrate and enjoy in their own way. Similarly, Leh-Ladakh, has its own bunch of festivals and the localities