

A comprehensive coverage of *Sngo lha* or *Mendok rgyaspa*: the ethnic flower festival of Ladakh, India

Abstract

The current study aims to give a comprehensive review of the ethnic flower festival of Ladakh, India. In light of modernization and religious restrictions, this time-tested tradition has been abandoned or practiced on a limited scale and thus needs to be revived on a priority basis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among the organizers (19) and prominent villagers (42) and at the same time, previously documented resources (76) were searched. This festival marks the celebration of a special event when the barren landscapes of Ladakh transform into a vibrant tapestry of colors. This festival offers a unique glimpse into the rich traditions and customs of the local populace and also highlights the resilience and unity of its residents. This festival comes out to be helpful in sustainability of this remotest region of the world in terms of culture, tradition, environment, economy and holistic development. It will help to boost the tourism industry in Ladakh. The importance of this festival that have previously been overlooked becomes a centre of stage for future researches. Very few studies have been documented and the current study is one of them that empirically assesses various aspects of this traditional festival.

Keywords: Flower festival, *Sngo lha*, *Mendok rgyaspa*, *Mendok stanmo*, *Paba*, Ladakh

Introduction

Nestled amidst the breathtaking landscapes of the Ladakh region, a flower festival stands as a remarkable celebration of nature's beauty and cultural heritage. Known by *sngo lha*, *mendok rgyaspa*, or *mendok stanmo* in the local dialect, all nomenclatures address to the common traditional flower festival. The Buddhists use the word *sngo lha* or *mendok stanmo* while Muslims use *mendok rgyaspa*. *Sngo lha* or *mendok rgyaspa* is celebrated in June whereas the *mendok stanmo* is celebrated in the month of July-August every year. Held annually, this vibrant festival offers a unique glimpse into the rich traditions and customs of the local people. With its kaleidoscope of colors, fragrant blooms, and engaging activities, this festival has become a significant event that not only celebrates the region's floral diversity but also highlights the resilience and unity of its residents. Traditional dishes are served among the attendees and the participants dress themselves in traditional attire during the festival. Among the Buddhist community, special songs and dances, use of alcohol, prayer to local deities, etc., and among the Muslim community, offering flowers on graves, distribution of traditional dishes, recitation of special prayers and holy Quran, etc. are common. Youth of the villages used to go to the mountains to bring flowers and upon their return, all the villagers gathered to receive them. The current study intends to contribute to the repository of literature about the role of this ethnic festival as a potential candidate for the conservation and revival of traditional knowledge systems.

Study area

The study area is confined to Bagh-e-Khomeini, Kukshow, Darchiks, and Mulbekh villages of Kargil district and Phyang village and Nubra valley of Leh district of Ladakh region. The geographical coordinates of Leh district are 32° to 36°N and 75° to 80°E with an elevation ranging from 2900 to 5800 m amsl and that of Kargil district are 30° to 35°N and 75° to 77°E with an elevation ranging from 2400 to 7010 m amsl. Ladakh region covers an area of 59,146 km² (Humbert and Dawa, 2004).

Methodology

The current investigation involves the collection of data from primary and secondary sources. The collection of primary data has been done by interviewing the organizers (19) and villagers (42) of the study area and observation method. Since the target areas were scattered along with thinly populated factor, it was difficult to reach out a each and every one for the collection of a large sample size. The

secondary data has been collected from various journals, books, magazines, online articles, and social media platforms (72). Frequent visits to the libraries, monasteries, folk singers, historians, etc. was ensured for the authenticity and support of the feedbacks obtained through the drafted questionnaires. The study highlights an overview of the lone flower festival of Ladakh, its ways of celebration, folk songs and prayers associated, and its importance in maintaining nature's beauty, reviving traditional cuisines, cultural sustainability, regional unity, tourism development, and community engagement.

Results and discussion

Sngo lha

The word '*sngo lha*' is rooted in the green colour, *sngonpo* (Dollfus, 2015), which corresponds to the greenery of the grass and fields and *lha* means God. This event marks the arrival of spring when the barren landscapes of Ladakh transform into a vibrant tapestry of colors as wild flowers bloom across the valleys and meadows. It is celebrated in areas of Ladakh that are of *dard* origin or ruled by *dard* kings (Ladakhi Lens, 2023). *Dard* or *brokpa* is one of the prominent tribes of Ladakh. It is believed to be a residual culture of Bonism which prevails before Islam and Buddhism came to Ladakh which corresponded to Old Aryan beliefs (Dewan, 2012). Celebrated over three days, boys especially born in Tiger Year (*Stak-lo*) go to the mountains to collect flowers where they spend the night, while bachelor girls born in Sheep Year (*Lug-lo*) also collect flowers from fields and make garlands to offer to the village god. At the dawn of the first day of this festival, the boys bring the flowers to a place where the festival is to be held (Fig. 1). While descending the hill with flowers arranged on sticks, *chak-shing*, they enchant *habe habe habe*. They pass through the fields while crushing the standing crops under their feet. It is believed that the trampled crops would be bounteous in the coming season (Francke, 1900). The people and their guests gather at *changrah*, an open ground, to receive the flower people. Each of the youths carries a tall pole in his hand with thickly wound garlands of alpine flowers. From some distance, one can sense the sweet and intoxicating fragrance of the flowers. The youth perform skillful round dances with the long poles (Francke *et al.* 1902, Wilson-Smith, 2015). The boys also make bouquets for their lovers. In Buddhist villages, the villagers celebrate this festival with *chang* (local beer), music, and dance dressed in traditional attire. Young boys, girls, adults, and guests dance turn-wise. Afterward, the flowers are taken to the local monastery where the youths are served with food and drink by the monks (Francke *et al.* 1902). The villagers who are outside the village return to their respective villages on this occasion. On the morning of this very day, a goat is offered to the village deity (Phuntsog, 2021) locally called *sngo lha rigu*. Brokpa beliefs include appeasement of evil spirits and forces, *lha* and *lhamo*, by the sacrifice of animals for the betterment of the community (Bhasin, 2008). '*Lha*' means a god '*lhamo*' means a goddess in the local dialect (Kaul, 2014). The blood of a sacrificed goat has special purifying powers (Parkes, 1987). A purification ceremony locally called *sangs* has now replaced the traditional animal sacrifice which was described as anti-Buddhist practice by religious heads. The villagers eat curds, butter, *kholaq*, and meat. After this, all the animals are led to the mountains for grazing. The humans avail the dairy products in return for the animals getting pasture (Phuntsog, 1999). The remaining days are celebrated with songs, music, and dance. The events are held under the supervision of *lha rdags*, the guardian of the village deity. Khan (1987) writes that *sngo lha* resembles the *Sheenu-Bozahoo* spring festival of Gilgit, the capital of Baltistan, Pakistan, where apart from merry-making, people use the occasion to pray for a good crop.

Mendok rgyaspa

The word '*mendok*' means flower and '*rgyaspa*' corresponds to grand in local dialect. Thus, it is the grand celebration of a flower festival. When the Islamic religion came to Ladakh, particularly in Kargil, the practice of this festival changed. The use of *mendok rgyaspa* instead of *sngo lha* reflects the translation of this regional tradition into Islamic imaginaries (Gupta, 2022). The shift in nomenclature is because of some practices associated with Buddhist ethos such as singing, dancing, drinking alcohol, venerating spirits, etc. The celebration is now specified on Thursday or Friday as these days are

considered to be sacred in Islam as compared to other days of the week. Flowers plucked from fields or mountains are offered on the graves of their ancestors and relatives. At the cemetery men, women and children spread flower petals collected in wicker baskets. This is followed by the recitation of special prayers (*fatiha*) and verses from the holy Quran in memory of the deceased (Fig. 2) (Peaceful Ladakh News, 2023). The selected chapters from the noble Quran such as Surah Al-Fatiha, Surah Al-Ikhlās, Surah An-Nas, Surah Al-Falaq, Surah Al-Kafirun, Surah Al-Qadr, Ayat Al-Kursi, Surah Yasin and many more are recited. Different types of traditional dishes prepared at home are distributed as alms (*sadqa*) at the graveyard or an open space (Zain, 2023). *Sadqa* is generally offered in Islam to fulfill a wish or to avert a misfortune. It is a ritual of thanksgiving and celebration of the festival without singing, dancing, and beer consumption to keep with Islamic injunctions. These practices are prohibited in Islam. However, in the recent past, the celebration of this very festival has been discouraged by religious clerics terming it as out of Islamic culture (Gupta, 2022). Despite that, it is currently celebrated in Phyang village of Leh district (News UT Ladakh, 2023) and some parts of Kargil district among the Muslims particularly the dominating *Shia* sect of Islam. This age-old traditional festival was celebrated as a grand celebration at Pashkum village of Kargil district this year of 15th of June, 2024 by Purig Cultural and Literary Society (PCLS) Kargil, in collaboration with the villagers of Pashkum (Ladakh Express, 2024). The same organization celebrated the festival at Kartse Khar in 2023. Prominent personalities, literary figures, historians, senior citizens of Kargil and villagers of Pashkum village, students from various schools of Pashkum, volunteer groups among others attended the programme. Speeches, poetry recitation, asking meanings of idioms and phrases, cultural exhibitions were main attractions of the festival.

Mendok stanmo

It is somewhat similar to *sngo lha*, but is celebrated in the month of August among the non-dard Buddhist community of Kargil district and Nubra valley of Leh district. The word '*mendok*' means flower and '*stanmo*' corresponds to a festival in the local dialect. It is celebrated for two days. In the early morning, the flowers plucked by youth from mountains and fields are arranged on sticks. The elders sing a special traditional song while the youth dance with the flower sticks (Tentenpa Vlog, 2023) (Fig. 3).

Sngo lha of Kuksho village

The traditional flower festival of Kuksho village is very famous among all. In Kuksho village of Kargil district, according to Shakspo (1995), Muslims and Buddhists used to organize *sngo lha* festival jointly and participated by all villagers. The inhabitants celebrate this festival in the spring season when the valley is in full bloom with wild roses. Several days before the beginning of the festival, eighteen young boys, especially those born in Tiger Year go to the mountains where they spend the night to collect flowers. Similarly, eighteen young girls born in Sheep Year also collect flowers from nearby areas and make garlands to offer to the village god. They collect the rare flowers endemic to the region, which comprise of Himalayan poppy, Himalayan rose and Persian rose (Jishtu, 2021, Jishtu *et al.* 2022). Garlands out of Himalayan rose and Persian yellow rose flowers are made. The Himalayan poppy is the main flower of the festival. This flower is highly fragrant and is burnt in with juniper twigs. The admixture is believed to be auspicious and is burnt to purify the surroundings. Besides, the branches of willow and wheat from the field are collected and all these are then presented as offerings to the local deity. After making collections, these girls return down the hill slopes. Accompanied by the villagers and the local village band, singing and dancing merrily they proceed towards the common place of worship in the village. The religious ceremony is held while chanting of the Lamas. The offerings are meant to fulfill their aspirations as well as for the peace and prosperity of the village. The villagers dressed in traditional dresses gather at a specific location on the festival day. The *lha-rdak* recites *lha-gsol* while offering libation where names of various village gods such as Chomo of Fokar, Chomo of Hagnis, Yagra Chomo of Domkhar, Daknak Chomo of Khaltse, Lhamo of Dargo, Zangldan of Hanu,

Zangnam of Skubuchan, Stakpa Lhachen of Kuksho, etc. are lauded. The *lha-rdag* of a village is the caretaker of the gods, belongs to the *Rus-cen* lineage, and owns the hereditary responsibility of servicing the village deity. He sacrifices animals on behalf of the villagers and attains elevated status in the village. Folk songs in honor of gods, folk dances while holding flowers in hands, eating delicious foods, drinking of local beer, *chang* are some of the specialties that follow the *lha-gsol* ceremony. It is interesting to note that, married women are not allowed to offer flowers or are even not allowed to the particular birch tree where the village deity is believed to be resided. Similarly, a newly engaged girl offers her last *sngo lha* prayers for the prosperity of herself, her new home, her village, and her village god. However, with time, this old-aged tradition is badly affected by external religious influences. The Muslims of the village have now disassociated themselves and participate in the traditional festivals as spectators only (Sheikh, 2010, News UT Ladakh, 2023). People from surrounding villages also participate in this festival of Kuksho village.

Mendok Stanmo of Mulbekh village

In Buddhist-dominated villages of the Kargil district *viz.* Wakha, Mulbekh, Fokar, Shargole, etc. a similar festival is held in the month of August every year which is locally referred to as *Mendok Stanmo* (Angmo *et al.* 2022, Ladakh Frontier News, 2023, Tentenpa Vlog, 2023). It is generally celebrated on the 15th day of the 6th month (*Tukpe chonga*) of the Tibetan calendar (Tsering, 2022, Sompal580, 2023). The festival celebrated at Mulbekh is a special one. This festival is celebrated at the famous 9th-century rock-carved Buddha Maitreya statue (*Chamba* statue) of Mulbekh for 2-3 days. The prayer flag-changing ceremony is the specialty of this festival where an old villager climbs the statue without ropes or harnesses, and barefoot to change the prayer flags (Fig. 4) (Tsenam, 2023). The event witnesses a massive local as well as tourist gathering (Sayannath, 2021). Special prayers are performed by the head lama followed by a flower dance. All the sticks arranged with flowers are then kept on the feet of the statue. During this festival participants are entertained through songs, dances, games, etc. Food stalls serve local dishes.

Mendok stanmo of Nubra valley

In Nubra, collected flowers are worn on heads. Similarities between the flowers are believed to be friends (*chuspun*) or marriage pairs (Won India, 2021). Dressed in traditional dresses all the villagers sing, dance, eat, and drink during the event.

Folk songs

Folk songs are one of the main parts of this festival along with other important activities associated. These songs belong to the *zung lu* (public song) category of the Ladakhi folk songs. Among the three categories, the other two are *ngal tsol lu* (labor song) and *ging lu* (Gesar epic song) (Gyaltzen and Wangmo, 2021). The folk songs are recorded and published by Francke, *et al.* (1902). Among the various folk songs of Baltistan, the song related to the flower festival, *mindok hltanmo* is a famous one (Samreen, 2013). Before the partition of India in 1947, Baltistan and Ladakh were under one wazarat (district) of the state of Jammu and Kashmir (Proceedings, Punjab History Conference, 1968).

Some special folk songs related to the flower festival are elaborated below:

This song in the local dialect is taken from YouTube posted by Lhasal (2021):

Transliterated Ladakhi language	Translation in English
<i>Zhan tang skarma dzombe zhak la mendok stanmo la ho</i>	: This day is the day of Star <i>Dzomba</i> , hey flower festival.
<i>Skarma dzomba sharve zhak la mendok stanmo la ho</i>	: The day of the rising of star <i>Dzomba</i> , hey flower festival.
<i>Mendok stanmo kang la jung la mendok stanmo la ho</i>	: From where the flower festival started, hey flower festival?

<i>Spadum tsase ldumra na jung la mendok stanmo la ho</i>	: It started from the flower garden of Ldumra ¹ , hey flower festival.
<i>Majing chonmoe dru lakshik la mendok stanmo la ho</i>	: The crop of the big field be good, hey flower festival.
<i>Olthang chonmoe lu lakshik la mendok stanmo la ho</i>	: The fodder of the big lucern field be good, hey flower festival.
<i>Mendokpa gyoksa stanmopa gyoks la mendok stanmo lay</i>	: The flower bearers reach first or the artists reach first, hey flower festival?
<i>Mendokpa gyoksa stanmopa gyoks la serchen stanmo lay</i>	: The flower bearers reach first or the artists reach first, hey <i>Serchen</i> ² festival?
<i>Mendokpa gyoksna shabashik molang mendok stanmo lay</i>	: If the flower bearers reach first say well done, hey flower festival.
<i>Stanmopa gyoksna shabashik molang serchen stanmo lay</i>	: If the artists reach first say well done, hey <i>Serchen</i> festival.

This folk song in the local dialect is documented by Khan (1987):

Transliterated Purgi language	Translation in English
<i>Mendok stanmoe chi senmo, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: What is the attraction of the festival, hey flower festival?
<i>Spang ponari yol chatet, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: The blossoming of <i>Spang ponar</i> ³ , hey flower festival.
<i>Siya na serpoe khabu yaset, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: The opening of the bud of a golden rose, hey flower festival.
<i>Ajang pi gojing tar chana, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: The crushing of the uncle's nearby field, hey flower festival.
<i>Majing chonmoe lu lyakshik, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: The crop of the big field be good, hey flower festival.
<i>Olthang chonmoe lu lyaqshik, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: The fodder of the big lucern field be good, hey flower festival.
<i>Siya na marpoe khabu yaset, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: The opening of the bud of red rose, hey flower festival.
<i>Mendokpa gyoksa stanmopa gyoks, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: The flower bearers reach first or the artists reach first, hey flower festival?
<i>Mendokpa gyoksna shabashik tong, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: If the flower bearers reach first say well done, hey flower festival.
<i>Stanmopa gyoksna serchem zhik khyong, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: If the artists reach first bring a <i>Serchen</i> , hey flower festival.
<i>Mendok stanmo ga na bing, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: From where the flower festival started, hey flower festival?
<i>Mendok stanmo shar na bing, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: It started from the east, hey flower festival.
<i>Mendok stanmoe chi senmo, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: What is the attraction of the festival, hey flower festival?
<i>Mendok stanmoe rstes senmo, mendok stanmo ho</i>	: It is the dance of the festival, hey flower festival.

The lines from the folk song documented by Francke, *et al.* (1902) are described as

Transliterated Ladakhi language	Translation in English
<i>Jak nang skarma dzomse yod, mentok stanmo lay</i>	: This is the day of the constellation of the stars, the flower show, hurrah!
<i>Skarma gyal stok sharwe jak yodh, mentok stanmo lay</i>	: It is the day of the finest of the lunar mansions, the flower show, hurrah!

- Yar ngoye chonga gangwe jak, mentok stanmo lay* : It is the 15th when the first half of the month is fall, the flower show, hurrah!
- Mentok stanmo gang na shaks, mentok stanmo lay* : From where do you bring these showy flowers? the flower show, hurrah! (First Party)
- Mentok stanmo shar na shaks, mentok stanmo lay* : These showy flowers we bring from the East, the flower show, hurrah! (Second Party)
- Shar-e-skad cha chin ta duk, mentok stanmo lay* : What news do you bring from the East? the flower-show, hurrah! (First Party)
- Gyalpoe bur-mok thonpo du, mentok stanmo lay k* : There the king's helmet is very high, the flower show, hurrah! (Second Party)
- Mentok stanmo gang na yongs, mentok stanmo lay* : From where do you bring these showy flowers? the flower-show, hurrah! (First Party)
- Mentok stanmo lho na yongs, mentok stanmo lay* : These showy flowers we bring from the South, the flower show, hurrah! (Second Party)

While quoting the lines of an informant about *sngo lha* festival, Agarwal (2004) writes:

A hundred boys born in the Tiger Year gather fragrant *chondol* flowers.

A hundred girls born in the Sheep Year gather rose buds.

In the valley below, *sngo lha* is coming.

In the fields above, *srub lha* is coming.

But what rises in the sky?

Let long-tailed comets rise.

What takes birth in the earth?

Let leaves of poison take birth.

Poetry

The poetry associated with *mendok rgyaspa*, composed and recited by Kacho Isfindar Khan is telecast by Ladakh Express (2024):

Transliterated Purgi language

- Thonmo lago gun la yas pi de lilo gun ta yari shashdea* : The flowers that bloom on high passes are Your blessings
- La lungba la yas pi de lilo gun ta yari shashdea* : The flowers that bloom in valleys are Your blessings
- Smuli thakpa skyangin dulbi de chumik gun ta yari shasdea* : The springs that flow like silver ropes are Your blessings
- Rhi na lungba khete yotpi trijim gun ta yari shasdea* : The fragrances of flowers that spread across the mountains and valleys are Your blessings

Translation in English

Important Quranic chapters

The Quranic chapters that are recited by everyone during *mendok rgyaspa* festival on the graves of their deceased family members, relatives, and friends are discussed as⁴:

Surah Al-Fatiha (Wikipedia, Al-Fatiha, 2023)

Transliterated Arabic language

Translation in English

<i>Bismi l-lahi r-raḥmani r-raḥim</i>	:	In the name of God, the most compassionate, the most merciful
<i>Alḥamdu lil-lahi rab-bi l-alamin</i>	:	All praise is for God - Lord of all worlds
<i>Ar-raḥmani r-raḥim</i>	:	the most compassionate, most merciful
<i>Maliki yawmi d-ddn</i>	:	Owner of the Day of Judgement
<i>Iy-yaka na budu wa iy-yaka nasta 'in</i>	:	You, alone, we worship and You, alone, we ask for help
<i>Ihdina ṣ-ṣiraṭa l-mustaqim</i>	:	Guide us along the straight path
<i>Ṣiraṭa l-ladhina an amta alayhim, ḡhayri l-maḡḥḍubi alayhim wala ḡ-ḡal-lin</i>	:	the path of those You have blessed, not those You are displeased with, or those who are astray.

Surah Al-Ikhlās (Wikipedia, Al-Ikhlās, 2023)

Transliterated Arabic language	Translation in English
<i>Bismi l-lahi r-raḥmani r-raḥim</i>	: In the name of God, the most compassionate, the most merciful
<i>Qul huwa l-lahu aḡad</i>	: Say: He is Allah, the Only
<i>allahu s-samad</i>	: Allah, the Eternal, Absolute
<i>Lam yalid walam yulad</i>	: He begetteth not, nor is He begotten
<i>Walam yaku n-lahu kufu an aḡad</i>	: And there is none like unto Him

Surah Al-Qadr (Wikipedia, Al-Qadr, 2023)

Transliterated Arabic language	Translation in English
<i>Bismi l-lahi r-raḥmani r-raḥim</i>	: In the name of God, the most compassionate, the most merciful
<i>In-na anzalnahu fi lailatil qadr</i>	: Verily we sent down the Qur'an in the night of al Qadr.
<i>Wama adraka ma lailatul qadr</i>	: And what shall make thee understand how excellent the night of al Qadr is?
<i>Laila tul qadri khairu m-min alfi Shahar</i>	: The night of al Qadr is better than a thousand months.
<i>Tana z-zalul malaikatu wa r-roohu fiha biizni ra b-bihi m-min ku l-li amr</i>	: Therein do the angels descend, and the spirit of Gabriel also, by the permission of their Lord, with his decrees concerning every matter.
<i>Salaamun hiya ha t-ta matlail fajr</i>	: It is peace until the rising of the morning

Importance of the Flower Festival

Blossoming Beauty

One of the most captivating aspects of this age-old flower festival is the stunning display of flowers that adorn the region. The region remains barren throughout the winter because there is no vegetation due to the harsh climatic conditions. Ladakh's arid landscape undergoes a miraculous transformation as vibrant petals and lush greenery blanket the region during the festival. The native flowers of Ladakh, including the iconic Himalayan poppy, Rhododendron, Edelweiss, and various species of wild roses, create a mesmerizing tapestry of colors that captivate the senses.

Traditional Cuisine

Ethnic foods are expressions of the culture, history, and lifestyle of a particular region (Hussain *et al.*, 2022a; Hussain and Kanwar, 2022). A delectable array of local dishes allows villagers to savor the flavors of their region. Traditional Ladakhi and Balti delicacies are prepared using locally sourced ingredients, providing a culinary journey through the region's gastronomic heritage. The various

traditional dishes of Ladakh are *Paba/Papa*, *Chu-tagi/Chu-taki*, *Skyu*, *Thukpa*, *Mok-mok*, *Timoq*, *Tagi-khmabir/Tagi-skyuchuks*, *Tagi-thaltak*, *Tagi-buskuruk*, *Tagi-sramo*, *Chang*, *Araq*, *Cha-khante/Chanamkeen*, *Cha-khunak*, *Kholaq*, *Pheymar*, *Khura*, *Kiseer/Tain-tain*, *Tapu/Prapu*, *Tsabskhur*, *Yoza/Yos*, *Popot*, *Azoq*, *Skien*, *Gyuma*, *Nang*, *Sri*, *Oma/Orjen*, *Zho/Oma*, *Tara/Darba*, *Churpe*, *Labo*, *Churku*, *Mar*, *Fating*, *Chuli*, etc. The traditional foods of Ladakh have tremendous health benefits along with good nutritional attributes (Hussain *et al.*, 2022b). Society is moving towards fast-food, ready-to-eat, and ready-to-cook systems under the ages of modernization thus tasting the local dishes less frequently. *Mendok rgyaspa* or *sngo lha* festival along with the *mamani* festival provide an opportunity for the locals as well as the tourists to enjoy the flavor of the local delicacies. *Mamani* is an ethnic food festival that is celebrated annually by both Muslim and Buddhist communities in Ladakh and Baltistan (a region separated from Ladakh during the Partition of 1947, now in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir) (Hussain *et al.*, 2023).

Cultural Extravaganza

The cultural significance of the festival is deeply intertwined with the region's Bonism-inspired traditions. The Ladakhi people believe the flower festival is an occasion for spiritual renewal and community bonding. Beyond the floral spectacle, the *mendok rgyaspa* or *sngo lha* or *mendok stanmo* festival is an occasion for the Ladakhi people to showcase their vibrant cultural heritage. Traditional music and dance performances take center stage, filling the air with melodious tunes and graceful movements that reflect the spirit of the region. These performances are a reflection of Ladakh's diverse cultural influences, blending Tibetan, and Central Asian elements.

Unity and Community Spirit

This flower festival is more than just a celebration of nature and culture; it serves as a unifying force for the people of Ladakh. In a region where the harsh climatic conditions have shaped a resilient community, the festival acts as a symbol of collective strength and perseverance. It fosters a sense of belonging among the residents and encourages a spirit of cooperation and solidarity.

Promotion of Tourism and Cultural Exchange

In recent years, this ethnic festival has garnered increasing attention from tourists, scholars, and cultural enthusiasts from around the world. The festival has become a unique platform for cultural exchange, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in Ladakhi traditions and interact with the local population. This exchange of ideas and perspectives fosters a deeper understanding of Ladakh's cultural heritage and strengthens bonds between different communities. The increased tourism also provides economic opportunities for the region, boosting local businesses, and hospitality services, and promoting sustainable tourism practices.

Community Engagement and Conservation

Beyond the festivities, this festival also serves as a platform to promote environmental awareness and conservation efforts. Recognizing the fragile ecosystem of the Ladakh and Himalayan regions, the festival emphasizes the importance of sustainable practices and the need to protect the natural beauty that draws visitors from around the world.

Conclusion

The *mendok rgyaspa* or *sngo lha* or *mendok stanmo* flower festival of Ladakh is an extraordinary celebration that encapsulates the beauty, spirituality, and unity of the Ladakhi people. With its rich historical roots, colorful floral displays, captivating performances, and emphasis on cultural preservation, the festival has evolved into a significant cultural event that not only brings joy and inspiration to the locals but also invites outsiders to partake in the magic of Ladakh's traditions. Thus, the revival of this diminishing old tradition has been strongly felt at this stage. All the stakeholders, including villagers, government organizations, non-government organizations, religious heads, tourist

agencies, historians, etc. should join hands to promote this festival to enhance sustainability in terms of culture, tradition, environment, and profitability for the locals.

Notes

1. Ldumra is the traditional name of Nubra which means “Valley of Flowers”. It is administered as a sub-division in Leh district of Ladakh region and its inhabited areas form a tri-armed valley cut by the mighty Shayok and Nubra rivers.
2. A big golden colored flower
3. Name of a flower in local dialect
4. Generally, Surah Al-Fatiha and Surah Al-Qadr are recited once whereas Surah Al-Ikhlās is recited thrice

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Fig. 1: Villagers bringing flowers during *sngo lha*
Photo credit: Vaneet Jitshu



Fig. 2: Offering flowers and prayers at cemetery during *mendok rgyaspa*



Fig. 3: Performing flower dance during *mendok stanmo*



Fig. 4: Prayer flag changing ceremony at *Chamba* statue, Mulbekh

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