The ethnic flower festival of Ladakh: A comprehensive coverage of *Sngo lha* or *Mendok rgyaspa*

Abstract

The current study provides a comprehensive coverage of the *Sngo lha* or *Mendok rgyaspa*, the ethnic flower festival of Ladakh, India, a remote, high-altitude region known for its unique cultural traditions. In the face of modernization and religious restrictions, this time-tested festival has been abandoned or practiced on a limited scale, necessitating urgent efforts to revive it. Using a qualitative, ethnographic approach, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 festival organizers and 42 prominent villagers, complemented by a review of 76 previously documented resources. The findings reveal how this annual celebration marks a transformative moment when Ladakh's barren landscapes blossom into a vibrant tapestry of colors, offering a unique glimpse into the region's rich traditions and the resilience of its residents. The study underscores the festival's multifaceted benefits, including its contributions to the sustainability of Ladakh's culture, environment, economy, and holistic development. Additionally, the research highlights how reviving this overlooked tradition could provide a significant boost to the region's tourism industry. As one of the few empirical studies documenting this festival, the current work lays the foundation for future research that can further explore the cultural, environmental, and socioeconomic dimensions of this endangered community practice.

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 km^2 (Humbert and Dawa, 2004). Ladakh is bordered by Tibet (China) to the east, the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh to the south, both Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Gilgit-Baltistan to the west, and the southwest corner of Xinjiang (China) across the Karakoram Pass in the far north. As per the 2011 census, Ladakh region constitutes 242 villages with a population of 274,289. Ladakh region is characterized by extreme climatic conditions such as intensive sunlight, fluctuating temperature, high evaporation rate and strong winds (Hussain *et al*., 2022a). The region remains landlocked from the

UNDER PEER REVIEW

outside world due to heavy snowfall over high mountains during the winter for about five months a year.

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.

Mendok rgyaspa

UNDER PEER REVIEW

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-Ikhlas, 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 (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

UNDER PEER REVIEW

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 Fokar and Mulbekh villages**

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*)*. It is generally celebrated on the 15th day of the 6th month (*Tukpe chonga*) of the Tibetan calendar (Sompal580, 2023). In Fokar village, on the day of the festival, the unmarried boys and girls used to offer all kinds of flowers to their territorial god. The boys decorate the flower into the stick, which already cut into four parts on the top of the stick, so that the flower can easily put on the stick, locally known as *chashing*. The girls hung the garlands of the flowers over the stick, which is known as *patta*. It is carried in a group of three to five girls. Later it is offered to the various gonpas (Junglay, 2007). 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). 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.

Similar festivals in other parts of the world

Similar festivals are also celebrated in other parts of the world particularly in Pakistan which was once a part of Indian Sub-continent by the Dards or Aryans. Khan (1987) writes that *sngo lha* resembles the *Sheenu-Bozanoo* spring festival of Gilgit, the capital of Baltistan, Pakistan, where apart from merry-making, people use the occasion to pray for a good crop. Ali and Chawla (2019), reported a similar festival known as *Joshi* (also called as *Zoshi*) celebrated in Chitral district of Khyber Pakhtunwa, Pakistan in the month of May to welcome the spring by the *Kalasha* (of Indo-Aryan race) community. The first preparing phase of *Joshi* festival consists of ten days. The shepherds live in goat-houses and do not visit their homes for nine days. During the very days the shepherds clean the goat-sheds and all

UNDER PEER REVIEW

utensils. The people start storing milk in barns before ten days when elders of the community announce the dates for the festival. After the first phase of the festival, young boys and girls fetch yellow flowers (Sophora Mollis) from the pastures and branches of walnut to decorate their houses, doorways, walls and also decorate barns and the *Jestak han,* the temple of *Jestak*. Practically, this is the first day of the festival. On the said day, the collected milk is distributed among the fellow tribes on the day of festival. The ceremony of distributing and drinking the milk is called *chirik pipi*. On the first day, men visit the shrine of *Shingmou*, they clean it, decorate it with new branches and offer some dried mulberries and walnuts to the shrine. During the *Joshi* festival the *Kalasha* women sing the melodic songs and dance on the beats of the drums. Some songs are sung in the praise of *Dramui* who was believed to be a great hunter in past days, while some songs represent affections and love. Second phase of *Joshi* represents the religious climax of respective festival. Many sacrifices are offered to *Mahandeo* deity and the Kalasha people pray for welfare of the community. With the start of second phase, celebrations of the festivals begin. During the second phase of the festival a ceremony called *gulprik* is celebrated in which all those babies who born after the last *Joshi* are brought to highlands in each village with their mothers. They all are allowed to go even the most sacred place of the *Kalasha*; goat sheds or barns and an *onjesta suda* (a virgin boy) throws milk on them as a ritual to purify them. In this way in fact all the babies become the part of the *Kalasha* tribe. At the end of the celebration, the *Kalasha* elders sing the songs and dance. The girls enjoy the *Cha*, an up-tempo dance in which groups of girls clasp each other's shoulders and dance in spinning circles. *Joshi*'s third stage is celebrated for two days in the valleys. Different types of songs are sung and dances are performed during these two days. The songs attributed to love, tragedies and wars are sung by the community. The songs of Joshi festival reflect themes ranging from *Kalasha* history to romance. At the last day of the festival, elders sing *Gatch*, a very secret song, and all participants wave branches of walnut and they pray for abundance of milk of goats. *Kalasha*s believe that fairies come to participate in this ritual and they also wave walnut branches.

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) (Gyaltsen 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
Zhan tang skarma dzombe zhak la mendok stanmo la ho	:	This day is the day of Star *Dzomba*, hey flower festival.
Skarma dzomba sharve zhak la mendok stanmo la ho	:	The day of the rising of star *Dzomba*, hey flower festival.
Mendok stanmo kang la jung la mendok stanmo la ho	:	From where the flower festival started, hey flower festival?
Spadum tsase ldumra na jung la mendok stanmo la ho	:	It started from the flower garden of Ldumra[1], hey flower festival.
Majing chonmoe dru lakshik la mendok stanmo la ho	:	The crop of the big field be good, hey flower festival.
Olthang chonmoe lu lakshik la mendok stanmo la ho	:	The fodder of the big lucern field be good, hey flower festival.
Mendokpa gyoksa stanmopa gyoks la mendok stanmo lay	:	The flower bearers reach first or the artists reach first, hey flower festival?

UNDER PEER REVIEW

Mendokpa gyoksa stanmopa gyoks la serchen stanmo lay	:	The flower bearers reach first or the artists reach first, hey *Serchen*[2] festival?
Mendokpa gyoksna shabashik molang mendok stanmo lay	:	If the flower bearers reach first say well done, hey flower festival.
Stanmopa gyoksna shabashik molang serchen stanmo lay	:	If the artists reach first say well done, hey *Serchen* festival.

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

Transliterated Purgi language		**Translation in English**
Mendok stanmoe chi senmo, mendok stanmo ho	:	What is the attraction of the festival, hey flower festival?
Spang ponari yol chatet, mendok stanmo ho	:	The blossoming of *Spang ponar*[3], hey flower festival.
Siya na serpoe khabu yaset, mendok stanmo ho	:	The opening of the bud of a golden rose, hey flower festival.
Ajang pi gojing tar chana, mendok stanmo ho	:	The crushing of the uncle's nearby field, hey flower festival.
Majing chonmoe lu lyakshik, mendok stanmo ho	:	The crop of the big field be good, hey flower festival.
Olthang chonmoe lu lyaqshik, mendok stanmo ho	:	The fodder of the big lucern field be good, hey flower festival.
Siya na marpoe khabu yaset, mendok stanmo ho	:	The opening of the bud of red rose, hey flower festival.
Mendokpa gyoksa stanmopa gyoks, mendok stanmo ho	:	The flower bearers reach first or the artists reach first, hey flower festival?
Mendokpa gyoksna shabashik tong, mendok stanmo ho	:	If the flower bearers reach first say well done, hey flower festival.
Stanmopa gyoksna serchem zhik khyong, mendok stanmo ho	:	If the artists reach first bring a *Serchen*, hey flower festival.
Mendok stanmo ga na bing, mendok stanmo ho	:	From where the flower festival started, hey flower festival?
Mendok stanmo shar na bing, mendok stanmo ho	:	It started from the east, hey flower festival.
Mendok stanmoe chi senmo, mendok stanmo ho	:	What is the attraction of the festival, hey flower festival?
Mendok stanmoe rstes senmo, mendok stanmo ho	:	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**
Jak nang skarma dzomse yod, mentok stanmo lay	:	This is the day of the constellation of the stars, the flower show, hurrah!
Skarma gyal stok sharwe jak yodh, mentok stanmo lay	:	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)

UNDER PEER REVIEW

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		Translation in English
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

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 as[4]:

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

Transliterated Arabic language		Translation in English
Bismi l-lahi r-raḥmani r-raḥim	:	In the name of God, the most compassionate, the most merciful
Alḥamdu lil-lahi rab-bi l-alamin	:	All praise is for God - Lord of all worlds
Ar-raḥmani r-raḥim	:	the most compassionate, most merciful
Maliki yawmi d-ddn	:	Owner of the Day of Judgement
Iy-yaka na budu wa iy-yaka nasta'in	:	You, alone, we worship and You, alone, we ask for help
Ihdina ṣ-ṣiraṭa l-mustaqim	:	Guide us along the straight path

UNDER PEER REVIEW

Ṣiraṭa l-ladhina an amta alayhim, ghayri l-maghḍubi alayhim wala ḍ-ḍal-lin	:	the path of those You have blessed, not those You are displeased with, or those who are astray.

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

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

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

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

UNDER PEER REVIEW

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. This study addresses an important gap in the literature and offers valuable insights for reviving and preserving this significant cultural practice. The manuscript can also make a valuable contribution to the understanding and preservation of cultural heritage in the face of modernization, a critical concern for scholars, policymakers, and development practitioners working in diverse cultural contexts around the world. The study also helps in balancing economic, institutional, and contextual Considerations.

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.

UNDER PEER REVIEW

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-Ikhlas is recited thrice

References

Aggarwal, R. 2004. "Observing rituals." In *Beyond Lines of Control: Performance and politics on the disputed Borders of Ladakh, India*, 87-92. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ali, M.K. and Chawla, M.I. 2019. Socio-cultural life of the Kalasha people of Chitral: a study of the festivals. Pakistan Vision20(2): 42-57.

Angmo, K. 2022. Tuggpay Chona (Mentok stanmo) flower festival mulbekh Kargil Ladakh. Accessed 07 July 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFYCy6pBs_k.

Bhasin, V. 2008. "Social change, religion and medicine among Brokpas of Ladakh." *Studies on Ethno-Medicine* 2(2), 77-102.

Dewan, P. 2012. "Snola/Minduk stanmo: The festival of flowers. In *Amazing Ladakh: Travel, trekking, religion, culture, wildlife, almost everything about Leh, Kargil, Zanskar, Siachen*, 275-276 New Delhi: Manas, Publications.

Dollfus, P. 2015. "Perceiving, naming and using colours in Ladakh." *Tibet Journal* 261-280. ffhal-03026493.

Francke, A. H. 1900. "Missionsreise in der nordlichen Umgegend von Kalatse mit Besuch des Erntefestes in Skyurbutschan." *Missionsblatt der Brüdergemeine* 64(4): 105-112.

Francke, A.H., Ribbach, S., and Shawe, E. 1902. "Ladakhi Songs." *Indian Antiquary* 31: 87-106; 304-311.

Gyaltsen, T., and Wangmo, K. 2021. "Ladakhi *zung glu*: the fabulous folk songs and ancient poetries of Ladakh." *Journal of Modern Thamizh Res*earch 9(4), 1932-1939.

Gupta, R. 2022. "Mendok Rgyaspa." In *Freedom in Captivity* 143-146. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Humbert-Droz, B., and Dawa, S. 2004. "*Biodiversity of Ladakh: Strategy and Action Plan*." New Delhi: Sampark.

Hussain, A., Ahmad, S. R., and Kanwar, M. S. 2022a. "Characterization of Ladakhi *churpe* enriched with apricot and spinach." *Indian Journal of Dairy Sci*ence 75(3): 215-224. https://doi.org/10.33785/IJDS.2022.v75i03.003

Hussain, A. and Kanwar, M. S. 2022. "Changes in nutritional behavior of Ladakhi *churpe* supplemented with apricot and spinach during storage." Journal of Animal Research. 12(1), 155-165.https://doi.org/10.30954/2277-940X.01.2022.23

Hussain, A., Spaldon, S., and Tundup, P. 2022b. "Traditional food systems of Changthang, Ladakh." *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge* 21(3), 625-636.

UNDER PEER REVIEW

Hussain, A., Hussain, N., and Hussain, S. 2023. "Understanding the importance of food festivals: the case of *Mamani*, the ethnic food festival of Ladakh, India." *Current Science* 125(1), 73-78.

Jishtu, V. 2021. "Snola-Traditional festival of flowers from remote Kargil region of Ladakh." Accessed 06 September 2023. https://hillpost.in/2021/10/snola-traditional-festival-of-flowers-from-remote-kargil-region-of ladakh/116586/.

Jishtu, V., Chauhan, A., and Bano, H. 2022. "Ethnomedicinal and ceremonial plants of Kukshow- veiled village of the Trans-Himalayan Cold Desert of Ladakh." *Journal of Plant Research* 20(2), 180-189. https://doi.org/10.31266/bdpr.v20i2.57037.

Junglay, S. 2007. Fokar in the kingdom of Purig. In *Recent Research on Ladakh, 2007.* Eds. by John Bray and Nawang Tsering Shakspo. International Association for Ladakh Studies and J & K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, Leh-Ladakh.

Kaul, P. 2014. "Garkun-Darchiks: A colourful innocence." In *Ladakh-my journeys up, down and across* 41-73, New Delhi: Ansh Publications and Distributers.

Khan, K. S. 1987. "Snola." In *Qadim Ladakh-tarikh-wa-tamaddun* 585-587, Leh Ladakh: Kacho Publishers.

Ladakh Frontier News. 2023. "Tookpe Chonga festival celebrated in village Mulbekh UT Ladakh." Accessed on 07 July 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qom8UOHmr90.

Ladakhi Lens. 2023. "Festival of Flowers in Ladakh, Mendok Yaspa." Accessed 05 July 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQ_dkbD9UAs.

Ladakh Express. 2024. "PCLS hosts cultural and literary seminar at Zgang Pashkum to celebrate Mendoq rGyaspa". Accessed 17 June 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWutjJdWe84

Lhasal, S. 2021. "Ladakhi folk song, mentok stanmo." Accessed 11 October 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kgSHHlpSp0.

News UT Ladakh. 2023. "Offering flowers at graveyard at Phyang." Accessed 05 July 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbsyEzaQk2o.

Parkes, P. 1987. "Livestock symbolism and pastoral ideology among the Kafirs of the Hindu Kush." *Man* (*N.S*) 22:270-293.

Peaceful Ladakh News. 2023. "Flower Festival are celebrating Mindok hRgyaspa celebrated by Muslims in Kargil Bagi Khomaini." Accessed 05 July 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzYj3UJoe9c&t=7s.

Phuntsog, S. 2021. "The culture of the dards." Accessed on 06 September 2023. https://ladakhstudies553872937.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/4.3.sonam-phuntsog.dards_.pdf.

Phuntsog, S. 1999. "Hanu village: a symbol of resistance." In *Ladakh: culture, history, and development between Himalaya and Karakoram. Recent Research on Ladakh 8.* Eds. by Martin van Beek, Kristoffer Brix Bertelsen and Poul Pedersen, 380. Denmark: Aarhus University Press.

Proceedings, Punjab History Conference. 1968. Punjabi University.

Samreen, A. 2013. "Folksongs: The Real Portrayal of Baltistan's Culture. *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture* 34(2):121-138.

Sayannath. 2021. "Mulbekh Festival- The Super Human." Accessed 06 September 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFxsv17s86Y.

UNDER PEER REVIEW

Shakspo, N. T. 1995. "The significance of Kuksho in the cultural history of Ladakh." In *Recent Research on Ladakh 4 & 5: Proceedings of the Fourth and Fifth International Colloquia on Ladakh*, School of Oriental and African Studies, 181-187. University of London.

Sheikh, A. G. 2010. "Transformation of Kuksho village." In *Reflections on Ladakh, Tibet and Central Asia*, 226-233. New Delhi: Skyline Publications Pvt. Ltd,.

Sompal580. 2023. "Flowers festival at Wakha." Accessed 07 July 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=hfWffm1XhcQ.

Wikipedia, Al-Fatiha. 2023. Accessed 14 October 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Fatiha.

Wikipedia, Al-Ikhlas. 2023. Accessed 14 October 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Ikhlas.

Wikipedia, Al-Qadr (Surah). 2023. Accessed 14 October 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Qadr_(surah).

Wilson-Smith, H. 2015. "More Religious and Less Moral: The Changing Face of Religious Coexistence in Ladakh." 2225. Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection.

Won India. 2021. "Festivals and ceremonies of Ladakh by Padamshri Morup Namgyal @Ladakh Eco Guide Training 2020." Accessed 12 October 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHb9Gykd51Q&t=1451s.

Zain, A. 2023. "Mendoq yaspa (festival of flowers) celebrated in Skamboo Kargil Ladakh." Accessed 05 July 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_gcB724dKU.

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

UNDER PEER REVIEW