System of Taxation and Revenue Administration in Ladakh Region During the Dogra Period

dominated the district of Kargil. The region maintained relations with its neighbours. For example, during Aurangzeb's reign, the Ladakhi King who was helped by the Mughals against the Tartars (Mongols) professed Islam. The Raja henceforth, took the name Aqabat Mahmud Khan and a Mosque was erected at Leh. Ladakh was also to pay revenue to the Mughal governor of Kashmir.[2] When the Afghans took control of Kashmir, they collected the tribute also. The Sikhs too exacted the tribute from Ladakh.

The old independent kingdom of Ladakh was ruled by a local king who held the titles like *Gyalpo* (King), *Gyalpo-chenpo* (Great King), and *Chos-rgyal-chenpo* (Great king ruling according to the law of religion). It was mild despotism as mentioned by Moorcroft and Cunningham. The social hierarchy in Ladakh had the Gyalpo at the top. The categories included; the *Gyalpo* (nobility), *Sku-drags* (Nobility), *Dmang rigs* (commoners), and the *Rigs-ngan* (outcaste).[3] In addition to this, other classes like the *amchi, onpo,* and *lha-pa* who was religious expert held a special status in the Ladakhi society. Under the Dogras a new class of people came into existence. They were known as the *Gulamzadaas.* They were the children born to the Dogra soldiers and the Ladakhi women. It was the responsibility of the state to feed the Ghulamzadas. In return, they served the state by offering labour.[4]

In this social hierarchy, the Buddhist clergy held a respectable place as teachers. The clergy did not hold any administrative posts and remained aloof from the political order. There were several posts for the proper functioning of the government and were hereditary. The administrative machinery consisted of the local chiefs who collected revenue, administered their respective regions, and rendered military service to the state. In the outer-lying areas of Ladakh, there were semi Independent feudal chiefs. Luciano Petech has given details about the local feudal chiefs like the chief of Pashkum, the chief of Drass and Suru, and the chief of Sod. These feudal chiefs were styled as *Jo* (lord) and were different from the Gyalpo title.[5]

The administration of the Ladakh kingdom was divided into three categories of officials with the village-level officials at the bottom. Ladakh under the rule of the Gyalpo was divided into several village provinces (*Yul* in Ladakh). These village-level provinces were governed by local chiefs. These included the village elders (*rgan-mi*). About four to five elders from every village were chosen to look into the local affairs. One of them was designated as the village head (*Go-ba*). The first and second-grade officials were from the nobility (*Sku-drag*). In the nobility, there were the regional governors at the local level who were known as the *Blon-po.* Their title was also hereditary. The Blon-pos did not get a regular salary but were assigned *bar-lig* (small jagirs) which they managed on their own with the help of villagers.[6] They had no control beyond their given bar-lig. They also received the first crop harvested and the first *chang* (beer).

Among the various blon-pos, the *Kah-lon* was chosen. The Kah-lon acted as the prime minister of the region. Kah-lon was directly subordinate to the king and looked after administrative affairs. Every official below him was

directly responsible to the Kah-lon. The apparent power of the Kah-lon was absolute but his real power was curbed by partial independence of petty chiefs such as the Jos and district Blon-pos.[7] The office of the Kah-lon was hereditary and was restricted to one member of a family. The deputy to the Kah-lons was known as *no-no Kah-lon.* He belonged to the nobility who administered the kingdom in political matters. Also, there were other officials like court officials, revenue officials, and judicial officials.

The court officials of the Khar (Palace) were in direct attendance of the king. The court consisted of various officials. The court was headed by the King and the subordinate officers. They were responsible for the maintenance and guarding of the palace. They included the *Khar-pon* or the commander of the fort or the master of the castle. The Khar-pon maintained order in the court and looked after the internal matters of the court. This post of the Khar-pon was usually occupied by *dman-rigs* class who belonged to the lower caste.[8] Other officials included the *Gzim-pon,* who acted as the speaker of the king in public gatherings. The *Gner-pa* held the charge of stores of foods and grains. The *Sin-pon* (Sin, wood in Ladakh) procured and stored wood from different regions for winter. Ladakh did not have a regular standing army of its own. Every house had to render military service to the state when it was required. The soldiers in Ladakh were known as *rmakmi.* They were placed directly under the *mak-pon* or the commander in chief.

The barter system was prevalent in Ladakh and money did not play a vital role in the economy of Ladakh. The people of Ladakh did not pay taxes in the form of money to the state. They rendered military and domestic service. They also paid taxes in kind to support the king.[9] The revenue administration was headed by an official known as the *Chag-sod.* The main source of revenue was a tax on property (*Khral*) and duty on merchandise (*shogam*).[10] The Khral tax was levied on property and not on land as Ladakh was not an agriculturally rich area. But the region played a key role in the trade network that took place through Ladakh, and therefore the Shogam tax was applied to it. Together all this revenue collected was known as *Thob-thang.* The Khral tax was paid partly in silver/cash (*Nul-Khral*) and partly in kind (*Bru-Khal*) to the revenue collector. The poorer families who were not able to pay either in kind or in cash were obliged to do labour or *Ulag* through a compulsory porterage to the state. Nicola Grist used the term Begar for this compulsory porterage that was applied to the Ladakhis.[11] At the local level, providing labour services was a part of the regular help to the neighbours. This *ulag* may be identified with the present *mi-lag* which is still practiced in the villages of Ladakh. In the villages of Ladakh, family households were divided into the main house (*Khang-chen*) where the head of the family lived, and the subordinate house (*Khang-chun*) where relatives and those dependent on the main house lived. The Begar system as a tax system was levied on the main house (*Khang-chen*).[12] The Begar system was also prevalent during the Dogra period.

There is an incident related to the Khral tax levied on the Brogpas/Dards

of Ladakh. The Brogpas during the sixteenth century refused to pay the Khral tax. Following this, the Brogpa representative named Tho-shali was bricked alive in a stone wall. The rock inscription in Hanu carries a Tho-shali inscription celebrating his martyrdom. Because of this incident, the Brogpas were exempted from the Khral tax until 1842.[13] It was only after the Dogra invasion that the Brogpas were required to pay the khral. There is a popular proverb that still is used in the Brogpa region:

'Khee ya sgal met, Brogpa Khral met'

This proverb means that the way a dog cannot be made a transport animal; similarly the *Brogpas* can never be forced to do *Khral*. This constituted the single recorded event about the Ladakhi's resistance towards forced labour during the old Kingdom. The tax (khral) on house holdings during the last year of the Ladakh Kingdom as per Cunningham was divided between high-family holdings and low-family holdings:[14]

Table-1

Families	**Tax** (in Rs)	**Total** (Rs)
400 large families (Khang Chen)	7	2800
1,600 middle families	3 and half	5600
16,000 small families	1 and half	2800
Total 18,000 families		36,400

Family holdings and tax paid, *source, Cunningham*, (1854).

Besides, these 18,000 houses paying tax, four thousand houses were obliged to offer their services to the monasteries, and one thousand houses were to offer their services to royal family members. In addition to this, the king had a village of about two thousand houses. Therefore the total number of households that existed during the last year of the Kingdom was 24,000. The tax included the broker charge, which was levied on middlemen who dealt in transactions with foreign as well as domestic traders in Leh city. Other sources of revenue included the presents that were offered to the King by the officials like the Lonpos and Kahlons. The gross revenue of Ladakh during the last years of the native rulers as estimated by Cunningham was:[15]

Table-2

Tax	**Value** (Rs.)
House tax	30,000
Customs	18,000
Tax on brokers	5,700
Presents	5,000
Total	**58,700**

Gross revenue of Ladakh under native ruler through tax, *source, Cunningham (1854)*

During the old kingdom of Ladakh, the King held direct authority over the

region with the help of officials under him. With the invasion of the Dogras, Ladakh lost its independence and was reduced to a mere province of the Dogras. The Dogra rule of administration changed the old pattern of administration. The king of Ladakh was reduced to a jagir holder in Stok.

The newly acquired province of Ladakh was placed under a *wazir* who resided in Jammu and the *naib-wazir* who resided in Leh. These officials were directly placed under the Maharaja in matters of revenue, administration, and justice. The province of Ladakh was divided into different districts, each placed under a *thanedar.* The new areas of Ladakh under thanedar were Kargil, Drass, Suru, Nubra, and Leh. These five thanedars were independent of each other and were directly under the Maharaja of Jammu. The principal of them was the thanedar of Leh. After several rebellions that took place, Maharaja Gulab Singh set up different garrisons with substantial infantry stationed at quarters in Leh, Kargil, Drass, and Khalatse. Every village was placed under a specific *lumberdar* (village head). He dealt with traders who entered Ladakh. The lumberdars provided coolies, load carrier animals and other necessities.[16] It may be pertinent to add that women in Ladakh also possessed the power of becoming the village head.

The revenue of Ladakh acquired by the Dogras was similar to the one acquired by the old kingdom. The tax was levied on house holdings and brokers. In addition to this, Dogras included monasteries in the taxation system. The gross revenue from Ladakh in the initial years of the Dogra rule in Ladakh as estimated by the Cunningham was:[17]

Table-3

Tax	**Value** (Rs.)
Tax on Houses	45,000
Customs	18,000
Tax on Brokers	5,700
Presents	5,000
Monasteries	6,300
Total	**80,500**

Gross revenue from Ladakh during the initial years of Dogra rule through tax, *source Cunningham (1854)*

The total number of houses that paid tax during the Dogras was the same under the native rule, despite the population decline. This was because of the inclusion of the royal village into tax-paying households. The revenue under the Dogras increased because of the inclusion of the monasteries, which were exempted from paying tax under the natives.

The Dogra invasion brought wrath to the *Gonpas* of Ladakh. They looted and destroyed a large number of monasteries. Despite facing destruction, the monasteries remained an influential institution. They were endowed with much fertile land in the country. Only about 1/6th of the produce had to be paid as tax to the state. E F Knight in 1891-92, mentioned that, when it was proposed to increase the revenue to be paid by the monasteries, the country

came to the brink of a revolution.[18] The Hemis gonpa in Leh was the only monastery that was spared by the Dogras and a guard was posted to look after it. This was because the Hemis chief promised a regular supply to the Dogras. Hemis land was carefully cultivated. The land was given to zamindars of the monastery on *the Metayer* system.[19] One-half of the produce was handed to Lamas, and the tenants were exempted from Begar and taxation.

The Dogra rule resulted in a decrease in population in the initial years. The war along with the consequent high taxes resulted in people fleeing from the region. The population of 15000 Ladakhis perished between 1834 and 1842. About 9000 Lamas fled Ladakh and took shelter in monasteries in Lhasa and about 1000 Muslims fled to Baltistan.[20] The total decrease of the population as estimated by Cunningham in 1846-47 is given below:

Table-4

Factors affecting population	**Number of Persons**
Smallpox in 1834	14,000
Emigration of Lamas	9,000
War fatalities	15,000
Emigration of Muslims	1,000
Total decrease	40,000
Moorcroft Census	165,000

Decrease in population in the year 1821-1846, *Source Cunningham (1854)*

In the initial years of the Dogra rule, the hardships of the Ladakhi people increased. As is recorded by the Moravian missionaries, Heyde and Pagell who travelled to Ladakh in 1855, a large number of Ladakhis fled to British regions to escape Gulab Singh's excessive taxes.[21] The change of administration from the native ruler to the Dogras caused dissatisfaction only among the upper class:[22]

> *'The upper class lost all their power and benefits which were guaranteed during the old kingdom. While for the lower class, this change of government had been a decided benefit, although they may now directly a large amount than formerly to the state yet they indirectly paid less sum because the other duties paid to districts kahlon and other local chief were abolished.'*

The land revenue collected from the Ladakhi families and farmers contributed towards the income of the Dogra rule. This revenue was collected by the officials known as *Kardars.* The system of the revenue exaction on the local people was high due to which some farmers migrated from Ladakh to other places like Baltistan. Also, the manner of the extraction of the land revenue was harsh. The government authorities (Kardars) travelled to villages to collect land revenue. They did not pay for commodities like chicken, eggs, firewood, flour, or for wages for carriage and riding of horses during the journey. Therefore, the Dogras in Ladakh exploited the Ladakhis.

Under Basti Ram who was the wazir of Ladakh during Gulab Singh, revenue extraction from farmers was divided into three different categories. The rich peasants paid 7 Rs, the medium peasants who possessed half of the portion paid 3 Rs and 8 Annas, while the poor peasants either paid 1 Rs and 13 Annas or provided free porterage to the king.[23]

During the reign of the second Maharaja of Jammu, Maharaja Ranbir Singh (1857-1883) some reforms in the revenue system were made. These included the abolition of imposing a tax on the villages. The new wazir of Ladakh, Mangal Singh prepared a new list of the peasants and they were taxed accordingly. The taxes on great peasants and big houses (*Khang-chen*) were fixed at Rs.7 and 11 Annas, on the middle peasants with half share of the field was fixed at Rs. 3, 5 Annas, and 3 Paisa, and those who held a quarter share of land were charged a tax of Rs. 1 15 Annas 3 Paisa.[24]

Therefore, under Ranbir Singh, the tax on households and peasants was increased. Several other taxes in kind were also imposed. These included taxes on food items and winter necessities. For example, 20 *bre* of wheat, 5 *seer* of butter, and 20 seer of tar wood for winter was imposed. Tar wood brought from Tar village in Gsam had to be paid annually as tax.[25]

Comparison of annual Bu-khral (tax in kind) up to 1883 and 1884 onwards is given as:

Table-5

Articles	**Quantity up to 1883**			**Quantity 1884 onwards**		
	Mans	-	seers	Mans	-	seers
Wheat	2510	-	29	2639	-	3
Butter	282	-	14	275	-	25
Tar Wood	837	-	54	985	-	29

Tax in Kinds collected for the year up to 1883 and from 1884, onwards. *Source, Franke, (1926)*

The Maharaja increased the *Nul-khral* (in money), while tax in kind (Bu-khral) was decreased. The money tax of sixty-one villages from 1850 to 1860 amounted to Rs. 26,942, and 3 annas and 2 paisa while in 1884, it increased to Rs. 44,340 5 annas 2 paisa.[26] The taxes were heavily levied on the Ladakhis. As a result, the Monastery Lamas and the people of Ladakh appealed to decrease one or two annas from every rupee of the tax. However, instead of conceding to their demands, the Maharaja increased it by four annas.[27] Under the subsequent ruler, Maharaja Pratap Singh (1886-1925), a rigorous taxation system was imposed. The amount of revenue extracted from the Ladakhis increased manifold. A grazing tax was levied on sheep and goats.[28] The grazing tax was harsh and was a source of grievance for the Ladakhi people. The high grazing tax resulted into a decline in the domestication of animals. This consequently decreased the number of livestock. It was only in 1901 that the British settlement commissioner made note of this. He merged the grazing tax into main *Jamas* in some regions and while at others, he completely abolished the grazing tax.[29]

immediately and also be made illegal and punishable.[38]

Trade Duties

Ladakh became an important trade transit point in the vast trans-Himalayan trade network. Various caravans carrying different commodities from the Indian plains of Punjab passed through Ladakh, and vice versa. These commodities were subjected to trade duties according to the amount of the item. In the initial years of the Dogra rule, Maharaja Gulab Singh imposed trade duties on the commodities that passed through Ladakh. The following tables show the different duties levied by the Maharaja government.[39]

Table-9

Article	Duty per maund			Rs.
	Rs.	A.	p.	
Shawl wool	0	8	0	2000
Tea	0	2	0	2000
Charas	2	4	0	1,125
Tobacco	0	4	0	1000
Opium	2	8	0	1250
Brocades	0	8	0	200
Spices	0	15	0	100
Sugar candy	1	4	0	–

Duty on Imports from Chinese territories. *Source, (1911), Administration Reports. Leh Archive*

These duties levied on various commodities amounted to the revenue of the Maharaja of Jammu. Other charges levied included brokerage or *Dalali*. This Dalali was originally an independent and voluntary transaction between the merchants and the broker. The Dogra rule brought it under the sole control of the government and fixed an amount to be paid to the broker.[40] This amounted to one-eighth of all goods sold.

There were different dues levied by the officials in Leh. These included the *chungi* tax, *Nuzar batti*, and *Chalan* by the thanedar of Leh. Therefore, in the 1860s, the customs dues extracted from the traders increased. This rigorous taxation system was also challenged by the British. The total tax on the items in the year 1867 is shown below.[41]

Table-10

Item	Ratepermaund		
Opium	Rs.	A.	P
Custom duties	2	8	0
Chungi	0	13	2
Nuzar batti	12	7	6
Challan by Thanedar Leh	2	8	0
Total	18	4	8
Custom duties	1	4	0
Chungi	0	1	7

Challan	0	5	2
Total	3	2	9

Custom dues including the other taxes on the item in the year 1867. *Source, Saxena (2006)*

The tax extracted from the traders was high as compared to the initial years. It was in the 1860s that the British appointed officials in Ladakh. To inhibit the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir's role and interests in the political affairs of the unstable eastern Turkestan, an officer on special duty Dr. Cayley was posted in 1867 in Leh. Besides political purposes, the post of Dr. Cayley also had an economic purpose. The trade between India and Central Asia through Maharaja's kingdom included a large number of British traders. The Maharaja's officials levied heavy duty and exploited the traders. Therefore the British commissioner in Srinagar and the Dogra government fixed a transit duty of 5% on goods going to Leh. This was collected under the supervision of the officer on special duty. His duty was to check that the packed goods not used in Leh should not pay one fraction more than 5 percent to the government officials. If opened in Leh or sold any portion in Leh, then a duty of 8% on higher goods and 12 and a half percent on other articles would be levied.[42] But various instances falsify Maharaja's promise of the tariff plan of 5% to be levied on the traders. The table highlights the increase and decrease of duty levied on goods.[43]

Table-11

Name of the Trader	Item	Duty realised formerly			Duty to be Realised According to the tariff			A reduction made by the Govt.			Duty now Realised		
		Rs.	A.	P.	Rs.	A.	P.	Rs.	A.	P.	Rs.	A.	P.
Noora	Sugar	1	4	0	0	9	6	0	10	6	1	4	0
Nicka	Misree	1	4	0	0	9	6	0	10	6	1	4	0
Goonga	Goor misree	1	4	0	0	2	3	1	1	9	1	4	0
Hussain	Misree	1	4	0	0	9	6	0	10	6	1	4	0
Deen Mohd	Misree	1	4	0	0	9	6	0	10	6	1	4	0

Statement of increase and decrease of duty levied on goods in Leh. *Source, NAI*

The officials of the Dogra government in Leh levied duties on the traders as per the former rate. A new arrangement came into effect in 1870 when a treaty was signed between the BJC and the Maharaja of Jammu. Before this treaty, the Maharaja to encourage trade with Central Asia abolished various customs duties levied in Leh such as the Chungi and Nuzar Batti.

The treaty of 1870 was explicitly drawn on the purpose of encouraging trade with Central Asia. The treaty included the creation of the BJC office to supervise the trade through Ladakh. An official named Reynold was deputed

to survey the roads from Kullu to Leh and beyond Leh.[44] The BJC stayed in Leh from May to the end of November and in the absence of the BJC all cases were handled by the wazir of Ladakh.

The treaty of 1870 removed all taxes on imports in Ladakh or through Ladakh to other regions. In return, the British agreed to abolish the export duty on the Kashmir shawl and to refund the customs duties levied on all goods imported from British territories to Kashmir whether for consumption or to Central Asia. The British as well as the Dogras of Jammu were keen for increasing the Trans-Karakoram trade. For this purpose, all the traders passing through Ladakh were exempted from any trade duties. The assistant resident of Kashmir in Leh reported in 1892 that for the period from 1860 to 1885, no duties were charged to the traders. The Dogra ruler decided to impose a duty on the merchandise imported into Leh or along the road between Leh and Drass. Various traders complained that the state should have issued a notification before this. The BJC in a letter mentioned that the order did not apply to packed goods. The duty would be imposed on goods disposed of and used for consumption in Ladakh.[45] Therefore, items consumed in Ladakh were taxed after a gap of twenty-five years. The taxes were sometimes high. There are instances of the traders complaining to the wazir of Ladakh in 1893 about taxes that were being imposed on wool and phooli (soda used in brewing tea in Ladakh). A duty of Rs. 1 per maund on phooli was being imposed as against 8 annas which were imposed earlier. Traders were forced to sign bonds with the state undertaking that their goods would not be sold in Ladakh. A registration office was set up in Leh for this purpose. Trade from and through Ladakh for the Dogra and the British government was a profitable business in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

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