

## **TIBETAN MUSLIMS OF KASHMIRI ORIGIN IN TIBET**

Tibet an autonomous region of China and also known as “the Roof the world” is the traditional homeland of the Tibetans. Tibetan people, like all other nations have their own distinct culture, language, religion and history. The religion of the majority of the Tibetan people is Buddhism and their whole culture revolves around it.

Most of the power of the theocratic Tibet rested with the Dalia Lama and the Panchen Lama who are considered the manifestations of the Buddha. The Dalai Lama has sovereign authority over the spiritual and administrative affairs whereas the Panchen Lama occupies the second position after the Dalai Lama.

### **Islam in Tibet:**

Although there is no clear record as to how Muslims reached Tibet. By the year 1959 when China finally invaded and took full control of Tibet, there were around 130 Kashmiri Tibetan Muslim families settled in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. The Kashmiri Tibetan Muslims were known as Khache and Kashmir was known as Khache Yul, Yul meaning country. Thus, the Kasmiri Tibetan Muslims reciding in Lhasa were known as “Lhasa Khache”.

The Tibetan Muslims lived in the three main regions of Tibet, namely Lhasa, Shikazi and Tsetang. According to Mr. T.W. Arnold in his book “Preaching of Islam”, Islam mainly reached Tibet through the Kashmiri merchants.

Settlements of such merchants who married Tibetan women who reverted to Islam were found in Lhasa and other towns of Shikazi and Tsetang, but Islam also came from Iran and the Chinese province of Yunan. Arab historians like Yakut Al-Hamawi, Ibn Khaldun and Mohammad Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari mentioned Tibet in their writings. The advent of Islam can be traced to the reign of caliph Umar Bin Abdul Aziz (717-772) when according to Abu Jafar Mohammad Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, a famous Arab historian, a delegation from Tibet came to the court of Al Jarah Ibn Abdullah Al Hakami, the governor of Khurasan, and requested that an Islamic preacher be sent to their country. So Salah Bin Abdullah Al-Hanafi was deputed to Tibet.

Thus Arabs had very strong trade relations with Tibet and besides other articles, they bought Tibetan ornaments and Tibetan musk. The Arab historian Yakut Al-Hamawi states that the Tibetan musk was much superior in quality than the Chinese musk. The Tibetan Muslims trace their origin to four main regions, China, Kashmir, Ladakh and Nepal. Islamic influence in Tibet also came from Persia and Turkistan. Thus we could find in Tibet, Tibetan Muslims of Chinese, Kashmiri, Ladakhi and Nepali lineage, all having their own separate distinct identities but sharing many things in common like the Tibetan language, food habits and the Islamic religion.

**Muslims in the Seventeenth Century Tibet under the Fifth Dalai Lama [Nawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617-1682)]:**

Tibetan Muslims gained direct aid from the central Tibetan government after the fifth Dalai Lama ascended to power and granted them support in the form of exemptions, land grants and entitlements. The Lhasa Khache enjoyed the tax exempt status which allowed them to use their surplus income for their community's well-being. They were also not expected to bow before Lamas or other dignitaries, nor were they required to remove their head coverings in front of such figures, and they were excused from restrictions from eating meat during Buddhist holy months.<sup>1</sup>

The Tibetan government in the seventeenth century provided land on which the Lhasa Khache built a Mosque, park, Madrasa and cemetery. The Fifth Dalai Lama also gave a written document with his own seal and signature stating that the Muslim settlers were outsiders and granting them the above concessions and privileges. The ensuing Tibetan Governments fully honoured the decree in letter and spirit.

The generosity shown to the Tibetan Muslims by the fifth Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government may also have been because of the vital role they played. The Tibetan Muslims were well connected to the ruling elite of Lhasa and had very candid relations with them, often serving as emissaries for the government in their dealings with foreign powers, thereby facilitating internal trade and normalizing relations at times of war.

For example: in the treaty of 1684 after the Tibet-Ladakh-Mughal war of 1679-1664. Ladakh had to send a Triennial tribute of saffron, shawls and other goods to the Dalai

Lama as part of the trade Caravan called Lopchag. The Khwaja a prominent Muslim family in Lhasa, managed and organized these exchanges.<sup>2</sup> Regarding China, the Lhasa Khache leaders were called in 1909 to arbitrate disputes with the Qing dynasty.<sup>3</sup> Sometime around (1774-1775), the Tibetan Muslims met the first British Trade Mission to Tibet and pledged to George Boget (1746-1781), the leader of the envoy, that Lhasa would work with them to develop trade between Bengal & Tibet.<sup>4</sup> Shortly before the Gorkha invasion of Tibet in 1788, the Panchan Lama sent two Tibetan Muslims as envoys to Calcutta to solicit aid from the governor general against the Gorkha King.<sup>5</sup>

The Lhasa Khache and the Gandan Palace of the Fifth Dalai Lama, thus formed a symbiotic relationship. The Muslims relied on support and patronage from the central government to successfully conduct their business as well as to preserve and practice Islam. The Gandan Palace in turn relied on the Tibetan Muslims to enhance the secular legitimacy of the state through trade, commerce and diplomacy.

#### **The Panj and Administrative Affairs:**

The Lhasa Khache had their own self-governance unit, the Panj, which monitored administrative affairs of the community. This group consisted of five officials, elected to serve for three years after the final election results were approved by the Tibetan government through the Kashag office.<sup>6</sup> Once in office, members worked without pay, governing civic affairs and acting as intermediaries to the Lhasa government on behalf local Tibetan Muslims. The Panj mediated internal disputes by enforcing a legal system based on local interpretations of Islamic law. Being prestigious members of Lhasa's elite, they received invitations to major public events at the Dalai Lama's Potala Palace, where they were seated amongst the aristocrats.<sup>7</sup>

The Panj members were elected on the basis of their righteousness, piety, wisdom and also their commitment to social work. They were highly respected and held in high honour. These honourable gentlemen strove to uphold the community's Islamic identity and were very sincere and concerned about the welfare of the people.

During the local festivals they would dress in white fez caps and Kashmiri shawls. The Mian or the chairman of the Panj committee was given the honour that was equivalent to the higher officials in the Tibetan Government.<sup>8</sup>

**Burial Grounds:**

There were two burial grounds around Lhasa. One at Gyanda Khang and the other at Kyagasha. At Gyanda Khang besides the burial ground there were two Mosques and a park with a small stream passing through it. All the Muslim community's functions were held there and people would also picnic there. I have personally seen graves believed to be of the earliest Muslims missionaries.

**Mosques in Tibet:**

There were seven Mosques in Tibet, two in Shikaze, one in Tsetang and four in Lhasa. In Lhasa the mosque in Thembugang was known as the *Bara Masjid* or the big Mosque. This was in the area where Muslims of Chinese origin were in majority, the second smaller Mosque or the Chota Masjid was in the area where the Muslims of Kashmiri origin were in majority. There were two mosques in Gyandagang. All these Mosques were well maintained and centers of Muslim activities.

**Educational Institution:**

There were two Madarasas in Tibet, one in the Small Mosque and the other in Aghor Sagha. In the Madarasa in the small Mosque the Imam himself taught Quran and basic Urdu language. In the other Madarasa at Aghor Sagha the children learnt Quran, Urdu, Tibetan language and basic arithmetic. The main teacher was Abdul Wahab. The children were taught the basics of Islam in the Urdu Language. The children after completing their education at the Madarasa, were sent in a considerable number to India to study in premier Islamic Institutions of higher learning such as Darul Uloom in Deoband, Nadwatul Ulema in Lucknow, Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi (now a central university) and the Aligarh Muslim University in Aligarh. The children of the weaker section were sponsored from the community funds.

Sending the children to India was not easy as it would take about 20 days on horse/mule through difficult and dangerous terrain engaging numerous mountains and mountain passes. Also the climate in India was extremely hot and children would be away for a long period. The education was mainly for religious learning. As regards education, Lhasa Khache community stands out for their sacrifices and far sightedness. They were also very aware and connected with the Muslim world outside. My grandfather Late Haji Karimullah Shamoo told me that the Muslims

mourned the fall of the Ottoman caliphate in Turkey in 1922. They would also send money for the needy to Saudi Arabia at the time of Annual Hajj.

### **Tibetan Muslim and the Buddhist Culture:**

The Tibetan Muslims under the over whelming majority of Buddhist Tibetans absorbed some of the Tibetan culture but they preserved and maintained their own distinct Islamic belief, culture and practice. Although they spoke the Tibetan language, they incorporated into the Tibetan language, Islamic terminologies like Iman, Tawakkul, Takwa, Akkhirah etc., in its original Arabic form, so that the actual Islamic concept may be understood. The Tibetan Muslims spoke the sweetest and the most refined Lhasa dialect. Although the food constituted of Tibetan and Chinese cuisine, the menu on special occasions like Marriage, Eid-ul-Azha and Eid-ul-Fitr, consisted of Mughal and other Muslim dishes like Pulao, Sewai and Saalan. Although the Muslims wore Tibetan dresses, the ladies never opted for sleeveless designs and covered their arms and head. The length of the dresses of the male Muslims were longer than the non-Muslims. On special occasions the male Muslims wore turbans and Chubba (Tibetan dress) of Kashmiri Design. The males also wore Kashmiri shawls over their shoulders. The houses were also decorated in the Tibetan styles but with Islamic identities. The Muslims also wore typical Kashmiri caps known as Kara Kuli by the more affluent and sozini by others. The Tibetan Muslims shared the same culture as the Tibetans but discarded all that was un-Islamic and very intelligently made changes wherever possible. Hence, the Tibetan Muslims very wisely and peacefully co-existed with the non-Muslims without raising any reactions, hostility and apprehension. The Tibetan Muslims had high regard for their Muslim saints and held Urs to commemorate the dead saints. They would visit the graves of the dead saints and the relatives to recite Fatiha especially on the morning of Eid-ul-Azha.

### **Cultural Contribution:**

The Tibetan Muslims made several important contributions to the Tibetan society. The Muslims spoke a very refined Tibetan dialect full of respect which reflected a higher intellectual and moral culture. This became the language of the nobles and the elites. The Muslims had a significant contribution to the music of Tibet. They introduced the Naghma, a form of classical music from India. Some well known musicians were Mohiuddin, Mohammad Iqbal and Lute player, Acha Izzat.<sup>9</sup> These

musicians were a great craze and they frequently performed at functions for nobles and the aristocrats. But the most important contribution was the translation of Gulistan and Bostan of Sheikh Sadi from Persia into the Tibetan language by Faizullah. The translation was known as Khache Phalu in Tibetan. According to most of the Tibetan historians, Khache Phalu was written by a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Tibetan Muslims Scholar by the name of Faizullah, this was a condensed Tibetan translation of the Persian Poem Gulistan Bostan and Pantanama.<sup>10</sup> Even the Muslims greatly benefited from this book since there was not a single Islamic literature in the Tibetan language and most of the Muslims did not know any other language well. They made use of the book to teach the Muslim children about Islamic values. Since the translation was in a poetic language, taught moral values and the art of successful living, it was widely accepted and extensively quoted by both the communities. Also the language used was the refined language spoken by the Muslims and greatly liked by the Non-Muslims.

Another big contribution of the Muslims was in the field of commerce. They totally controlled central Tibet economy. The Tibetan Muslims were basically tradesmen and carried on their business very efficiently. They facilitated the flow of goods between Tibet and South Asia via either the Lopchag from Ladakh or the Nepalese trade route.<sup>11</sup> From Tibet they bought wool, musk, salt and medicinal herbs which they exchanged in India for shawls, cloth, saffron, dry fruits, jewellery, medicinal herbs and gold. They thus provided markets abroad, for Tibetan products while importing both essential commodities for locals and exotic luxury goods for the Lhasa urban elite. Such items could be purchased at large stores in Lhasa, often managed by Muslim women, while their husbands set off on trade expeditions. Tibetan women were known to have strong say in commercial matters.<sup>12</sup> Because of these enterprises many Muslims accumulated considerable wealth and held tremendous prestige in the city. When French missionary Evariste Regis Huc travelled to Lhasa in 1846 he observed that the Tibetan Muslims were the richest merchants in Lhasa, and were so influential in money matters that one would always find a Persian character on Tibetan Coins.<sup>13</sup> This wealth & prominence elevated some Muslims to the same social status as the Lhasa aristocrats. Thus, when they walked down the street, ordinary bystanders moved aside to let them pass, sticking out their tongues as a sign of respect – a custom commonly used to greet the aristocrats.<sup>14</sup>

It is said that printing press, similar to that of India was introduced by a Muslim family who continued working in a printing press in Delhi. It is also said that coin minting was started with help of some Muslim family who learnt the method from India. Mr. Sheikh Hafizullah and Mr. Hamidullah Rabser had knowledge of telegraph and so they worked in the post and telegraph office in the 1950s.<sup>15</sup>

### **Hijrah:**

After the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, life for the Tibetan Muslims under the new Chinese Communist Government of Mao Tzetong became very difficult. The government gradually shut down all the Mosques in Lhasa and banned all religious practices and activities. They also carried out numerous programs to indoctrinate people with communism. Thus, the Tibetan Muslims were finally left with no option but to make hijrah to Kashmir, their ancestral land to save their Islam. But it was not so easy and the Muslims had to struggle a lot and even had to sacrifice their lives. The Chinese Government would not let the Muslims leave Tibet insisting that they were Tibetan and thus governed by the Chinese law. But the Muslims were consistent in their demand to leave China. The Chinese government used force and arrested many people including all the five members of the Panj. And to break the Hijrah movement, the Chinese Government applied every pressure that they could think of, but the Muslims did not yield and approached the Indian government through the good office of Mr. P.N. Kaul, the then consulate general of India in Lhasa. After a prolonged struggle a communication opened up between Jawarhar Lal Nehru the Prime Minister of India and Chow-en-Lai the Prime Minister of China. The Indian government in the mean time prepared a white paper saying that the Kashmiri Muslims in Tibet are of Kashmiri origin and thus Indian citizens. And prepared a list of 120 Kashmiri Muslim Families. Ultimately the Chinese Government had to allow the Kashmiri Muslims to leave. The Hijrah movement of the whole community was successful because of the sincerity and steadfastness of the Muslim leaders. None of them compromised with the Chinese government, and all of the five Panj committee members namely 1. Haji Habibullah Shamoo (Chairman, Mian), 2. Haji Abdul Qadir Singpa, 3. Haji Abdul Ghani Thapsha. 4. Mr. Abdul Ghani Sheikh, 5. Mr. Ahmadullah Masli along with others were sent to jail under various false charges of instigating the community and got shahadah in the jail. May Allah accept their Shahadah and grant them Jannah, Amen!

**Nationality Issue:**

The Chinese government's contention as stated in the letter of the 17<sup>th</sup> July 1959 from the foreign bureau in Lhasa was that the Kashmiri Muslims were subject to the jurisdiction of Tibetan courts, that the selection of the Panj was confirmed by the Dalai Lama, that they recognized the fifth Dalai Lama and further that they sometimes fought alongside the Tibetan forces.

But even if these assertions were accepted they would not by themselves constitute conclusive evidence regarding the Chinese/Tibetan nationality.

Under international law, foreigners are subject to the jurisdiction of local courts and even the affairs of foreigners maybe supervised by the local authorities. It appears that those of the Kashmiri Muslims who rendered military service, did so under compulsion and that the majority did not voluntarily accept such an obligation.

The fact that some may have paid homage to the fifth Dalai Lama may be no more than courtesy to the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibet region of Lhasa. The fact that some Kashmiri Muslims travelled on Chinese certificates does not necessarily mean that they repudiated their claim to the Indian citizenship. It may be mentioned that instances have occurred during the last few years in which Chinese check-posts harassed and placed difficulties in the way of Indian traders and others carrying Indian trading and registration certificates when on their way to India. It may also be mentioned that not with-standing any paper which these Muslims may have carried for entry into India, they almost invariably travelled from India to Makka on Haj as Indian nationals in special Indian pilgrim ships and not as foreigners through normal shipping services.

On the other hand traditional evidence indicates that Kashmiri Muslims have throughout maintained their separate identity. They were exempt from poll tax and compulsory levies or work which was prescribed for the Tibetans. Though they were tried by Tibetan courts, any fine levied on the Kashmiri Muslims were returned to the community in recognition of their status as foreign nationals.

During 1912 Sino Tibetan conflict the Kashmiri Muslims were actually provided with white flags to indicate that they were foreigners and neutral in the conflict. That these

people wished to maintain their connection with India is also evident from the fact that nearly 100 boys of this community were studying in India.

### **Repatriation to India:**

So, in 1960, the Hijrah movement became a success and the repatriation of the Lhasa Khache started, and about 120 families reached Kalimpong in India and were welcomed by a delegation led by former minister Shri. Gulzari Lal Nanda to assess the needs and find ways to re-settle them. But as the Kashmiri Tibetan Muslim leadership was completely wiped out, the community faced a lot of hardships on their arrival in India. They lacked direction, and although in their Hijrah from Tibet they were united and focused, after they reached Kalimpong in India they lost unanimity. Thus, when the government of India offered them numerous places as option for their settlement and also wanted to draw up a plan for their proper rehabilitation, the Lhasa Khache could not avail the opportunities as they lacked proper guidance. However, when most of the people opted to go to Kashmir, their ancestral homeland the government of India offered them free conveyance and put them up in 3 buildings in Eidgah, in Srinagar. But the buildings lacked proper sanitation and accommodation. The Muslims finding themselves in a totally new environment and deeply bruised from the shock of the loss of the leaders and the other members of the community who were also imprisoned, the arduous ordeal of their migration, displacement, sufferings under the cultural revolution in Tibet and horrible sights of their fellow Buddhists being dehumanized and mistreated by the Mao Tsetong government of China and deep worry of their future, totally at a loss. It wasn't easy as they were totally dislodged from their sound economic and social position in Tibet.

### **A New Beginning:**

To make a living and rebuild their lives they had to restart from the scratch. Many people who were once wealthy businessmen of Lhasa now found themselves exhibiting their goods on the footpaths and going door to door to sell their products, but they still struggled hard and even their women folk knitted sweaters at home to make ends meet.

The Dalai Lama and his government in exile also did their best to help the community. They offered scholarships, opened up a medical clinic, gave funds for a

school, accepted students free of cost in the Central Schools for Tibetans, opened up a handicraft centre, a cooperative shop and also gave training in carpet making in Dharamshala. The Dalai Lama also requested the late Sheikh Abdullah the Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir to take proper care of the Kashmiri Tibetan Muslims. Hence some land was allotted by the Sheikh Abdullah government in Kashmir and with the help of Saudi Arabia, 144 houses and a Mosque was built. The Dalai Lama was deeply concerned about the well being of the Tibetan Muslims and also visited them several times in Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Srinagar in Kashmir to lend a helping hand and offer moral support. The Tibetan government has always been in the forefront to help the Tibetan Muslims.

Gradually the Tibetan Muslims healed their deep wounds and organized themselves. Many of them contributed to the overall development of the community with sincerity and selflessness. Now, with all the hard work and honest living and by the Grace of Allah, the community in Srinagar are getting back on their feet and have a good school of their own up to the higher secondary education.

In Kalimpong and Darjeeling, even though they were left for themselves they did fairly better and are now pretty well established with good school education for their children and livelihood for themselves. Even the community in Nepal is doing pretty well.

Presently the Tibetan Muslims are about 350 families in Kashmir, 25 families in Kalimpong and Darjeeling, 60 families in Kathmandu in Nepal and 50 families in the rest of the world.

The Tibetan Muslim people are hardworking, they are simple, honest and down to earth. They are very co-operative, very resilient and friendly, but at the same time, they have a lot of self-pride and never cheat people or do anything to spoil their name. All of this is reflected in their day today lives, and they have only Allah to thank for their success story. All the Kashmiri Tibetan Muslims in Kashmir, Nepal Kalimpong and Darjeeling and the world over are Alhamdulillah held in high esteem by the local people.

### **Turkey And Higher Education:**

The first generation of Tibetan Muslim Muhajirs could not put much emphasis on the education of their children as their first priority was earning their livelihood, providing shelter for their family members and adjusting themselves in the new environment. But in the second generation by Allah's grace they have more than ninety five percent literacy rate and they now have quite a few doctors, engineers, teachers as well as people in the various government administrative services.

Few Tibetan Muslims went abroad to study in different countries especially America, England and Taiwan but due to the better opportunities and better quality of life most of them married locally and did not return.

But if given the opportunity Turkey would be the best option for higher education both in terms of quality of education, the culture affinity, preserving ones Islamic identity and maintaining community links.

The opportunity to study in Turkey would provide the students with exposure to a rich cultural diversity minus its negative impact. Turkey is now emerging as an international destination for higher education. The students have much to learn from the soft and good nature of the Turkish nation, their commitment for islam, their glorious past history and their dynamism. It would thus enrich the lives of the children in many ways.

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