
INDIA-PAKISTAN CROSS-CULTURAL CONNECTIVITY: THE *BALTIS* OF LADAKH AND BALTISTAN

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The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 divided many 'Border States', particularly the region near Line of Control (LoC) consequently dividing thousands of families across the LoC. When it comes to literature on the Indo-Pak partition, most eminently Kashmir and Punjab finds a mention. However, there is rarely any reference to Ladakh and Baltistan and the divided families across the Himalayan region between India and Pakistan. The partition and subsequently the marking of the LoC on 01 January 1949 separated Ladakh and Baltistan on a permanent basis. It is pertinent to mention that the northernmost village of Turtuk in the Nubra Valley of Ladakh that shares borders with Kaphlu district of Baltistan came under the Indian control only after the Indo-Pak War of 1971 fought to liberate East-Pakistan (*now Bangladesh*). Hence partition along with the wars of 1947-48 (*also known as first Kashmir war*) and 1971 had a huge impact on Ladakh and Baltistan and caused division and separation of Balti families across the LoC in Ladakh.

This paper is an attempt to explore the cultural/historical linkages between Ladakh and Baltistan and introduce the Balti account in the larger India-Pakistan mainstream narrative. It argues that if the border routes (Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Jammu-Sialkot) of erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir despite being a conflict region can be open for people-to-people diplomacy (P2P), then why not the routes between Ladakh and Baltistan (Kargil-Skardu & Turtuk-Kaphlu)? Ladakh and Baltistan are the most peaceful regions in India and Pakistan and the Balti people on both sides of the border have been demanding the opening of these old trade routes, once part of the Silk Route. The paper also alludes to the writer's first hand experience of travelling to these border villages in both India and Pakistan, especially her personal journey to Baltistan in 2017 to

reunite her late grandfather Haji Abdul Hamid from Zanskar with the other half of his family in Sermik village of Skardu. It has to be noted that his father, late Habibullah crossed the border from Kargil to Baltistan in 1948, and it was my late grandfather's last wish to say a prayer at his *mazzar* (graveyard) in Sermik.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE *Baltis* IN THE FRAMEWORK OF INDO-PAK HISTORY

Since partition, India and Pakistan have been involved in various conflicts ranging from water sharing to border demarcation, and have fought three full wars and a half in the year 1999. Amid the conflict and crisis, there have also been numerous attempts to improve the relationship. The revival of the Composite Dialogue process in 2004 was instrumental in changing the state-centric to a more people-centric narrative of the relationship, thereby encouraging cross Line of Control (LoC) connectivity between the two nations. Border routes were opened mainly in the state of Jammu and Kashmir to give impetus to the cross-border connectivity and to facilitate a measure to unite the divided families across the LoC. However, the Union Territory of Ladakh which is strategically significant for India, bordering Pakistan in the west and China in the east has been left out from the larger narrative of the Indo-Pak cross-border connectivity and the economic and psychological benefits of the cross-border openings. It hosts the Siachen Glacier, which is considered the highest battle field in the world and was witness to three major Indo-Pak Wars (1948, 1971, 1999 Kargil War).

After remaining an independent kingdom for a long time, mostly under Tibetan influence, Ladakh was invaded and annexed into the Sikh Empire by Zorawar Singh, a general of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1834. The Ladakhi people were unhappy with the foreign invasion and planned a rebellion against the Sikhs in 1842. The movement was crushed and due to its proximity to Kashmir and simplify its rule, the Dogras incorporated Ladakh (including Baltistan) into the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Ladakh and Baltistan became part of the *Ladakh Wazarat* with three tehsils based in Leh, Kargil and Skardu under the Dogra rule, with a governor known as the *Wazir-e-Wazarat* to administer each one. However, with partition and coming up of the LoC, the whole region got divided into two parts with Kargil and Leh remaining on the Indian side and Baltistan on the other side of LoC with Pakistan. As mentioned above Turtuk was taken

by the Indian army during the war of 1971 from Pakistan, which displaced and separated many families over night without any prior warning. The last village Thang (as seen in image 1) in Turtuk is just stone's throw away from Frono village of Kaphlu district on the other side of border, while the Batalik sector in Kargil is in close proximity to Karmang district in Baltistan. These borderland villages in Ladakh and Baltistan form what I call as the 'Balti-belt' that share a strong historical, cultural and emotional connect irrespective of the permanent lines that divide them physically.



Image 1: Last village Thang on Indian side in Turtuk, 2018.

The Balti People

The *Baltis* are a distinct community whose ancestors migrated from Baltistan to Kargil and Leh or Kargil/Leh to Baltistan before the partition. The Baltis in the present situation are populated around the Batalik sector of Kargil, Turtuk village in Leh and are sparsely settled in many areas of Drass, Kargil and Zaskar valley. The major Balti-belt is around the India-Pakistan border in Ladakh as represented by dots in the map (image 2). By no means the word Balti in this article is used for religious representation, it is used to indicate the ethnicity of these divided families living across the border of Ladakh and Baltistan and is effected by the partition of India and Pakistan (they can be Shia, Sunni or Noorbakshia). On the Indian side, the Baltis of Turtuk mostly follow Noorbakshia¹ branch of Islam, in Kargil they are mostly Shias and in Drass and Zaskar these divided families follow the Sunni branch of Islam. On the other side in Pakistan while majority of the Baltis follow the Noorbakshia faith there are Shia and Sunni Muslim Baltis too scattered around the different districts

of the region.



Image 2: Depicting the 'Balti-belt' near India-Pakistan border in Ladakh.
(Credit: Suhail Lone).

Even after many years of separation and isolation, what has not changed is the common culture and emotional yearning for the other across both sides of the border. People in Kargil and Baltistan adhere strongly to the *Balti-adab* (mannerism) which makes them distinct from the rest of the population. The language spoken by the people in Kargil and Baltistan is also known as the Balti dialogue and as compared to the other language *Purig-pa*² used by Muslims in Ladakh, the Balti speaking population is more and, therefore, Balti as a language has found its place in the eighth schedule of the constitution of Jammu and Kashmir. Radhika Gupta in her article *Poetics and Politics of Borderland Dwelling: Baltis in Kargil* noted that *Balti* has been accorded official recognition as one of the eight regional languages through its inclusion in the eighth schedule of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir constitution. This is based on the pre-colonial 1941 census linguistic enumeration based on population numbers. She further added that considering Baltistan and Kargil, there were a greater number of *Balti* speakers compared to

Purigi, which has not been included in the eighth schedule. Despite the *Baltis* being a minority in numerical terms today, their language has constitutional status³. Kargil and Turtuk have the highest number of *Balti* speaking population, and the highest number of divided family ratio compared to the rest of Ladakh.

Personal Anecdote

My interest in highlighting the stories of the divided families from Ladakh and Baltistan is a personal one, as I too belong to one such family from Zanskar that have faced the brunt of separation maximised by the India-Pakistan Conflict. Through this account I intent to generalize the pain of separation of the families across the Balti Belt.



Image 3. Family reunion at Shangri-La resort, Skardu. Myself and my late grandfather with his relatives from Baltistan.

In 1948 with the India-Pakistan ceasefire after the first Kashmir war, a group of men from Zanskar travelled to Kargil with the Pakistani soldiers who had reached Zanskar during the war. They crossed into Pakistan via the Kargil-Skardu route on a temporary basis and with a hope to return back to Zanskar some day. But with closure of the border and coming up of the permanent Line of Control on 01 January 1949, their hopes and dreams to come back to India to their families were shattered and broken forever. One of them was my great-grandfather, Haji Habibullah who left behind his family of four that included my grandfather who was only 11 years at the time of his departure. They later came to be known as *Padum*

party in Baltistan, most of them joined the Pakistani army and got settled in different parts of the region, mainly in Sermik Village in Karmang district near Kargil border, which is three hours' drive from Skardu. It is interesting to note that these men were Sunni Muslims from Zanskar but married women for Noorbakshia faith, settled on their lands and hence their other family in Baltistan follow this faith till date, while the family of origin adheres to Sunni branch of Islam. Interestingly one family that traces its origin to Zanskar continues to adhere to the Sunni faith till now co-existing with the majority Noorbakshia village of Sermik and have also maintained a family mosque for their use.



Image 4. *Sermik Village, Skardu 2017.*

My great grandfather married for the second time and settled on his wife's land in Sermik, he had two sons and one daughter and died on 17 December 1987. Through his whole life, he yearned to return to Zanskar and meet his first family. On this side my late-grandfather kept dreaming to visit Pakistan and meet his father but his death crushed his hopes. He connected to his father through letters and photos till he was alive and they were sent through Haji pilgrims from Zanskar who received it from pilgrims from Baltistan in Saudi Arabia. Normally this is how the divided families receive/exchange gifts across the border in Ladakh and Baltistan.



Image 5. *Late Grandfather welcomed at a relative's home in Shigar district, 2017.*

My late grandfather narrated stories of partition to me since a young age and that deeply impacted me throughout my childhood and adult life. His only wish was to cross the border for one last time, meet his half-brothers and other relatives in Sermik and say prayers at his father's grave in Sermik. This opportunity came in 2017 when I was able to secure a visa for late grandfather, then 85 years old and my parents after much hurdles to visit Islamabad and ultimately to Baltistan. However it took us a week of wait, persuasion and pleading with people of power in Islamabad before they finally granted us permission to visit Baltistan on humanitarian grounds. The journey from Islamabad to Sermik passing through Murree, KPK, and Babusar top was emotional and *deja vu*, it felt like we were travelling from Jammu to Ladakh, with similar geography and culture. The whole Zanskar community that day descended to Sermik village to welcome my grandfather and us, who were the second family in these whole years to manage a visit to Baltistan. He said his prayers at his father's grave that was proudly marked as Habibullah from Padum-Zanskar. It was during our visit to Baltistan that it was revealed how proud they feel that their ancestors came from Zanskar in India and how they have preserved a small Zanskar community in Baltistan. Although most of the men that were originally the *Padum party* are no more, but this Padum community despite the border have kept alive an emotional connection with the land of their ancestors in Ladakh.



Image 6. My late grandfather saying prayer at his father's grave in Sermik, 2017.

During this trip, I had a first-hand experience of this *Balti* culture on the other side of the border. Skardu, the main town is very much like Kargil town and the *Balti*-Bazar in Skardu is a replica of the *Balti*-Bazar in Kargil, both of which date to the time of Silk Route trade. Similar language, culture and food habits helped me mingle easily with my relatives and the people of Baltistan. It was found that an important aspect that keeps the *Baltis* on both sides of the border connected is *Balti* music. Abbas Anand, a famous *Balti* singer in Sermik is so popular in Ladakh for his songs and style of singing that my cousins in India requested me to meet him and record his songs on the cell phone, which I did. Abbas is a big fan of Dev Anand, the Indian yesteryears actor that he added Anand as his second name. The *Balti* singers of Ladakh, like Faizal Ashoor, Shireen Fatima of Turtuk, are very popular in Baltistan, especially among the youth.



Image 7. With famous *Balti* Singer, Abbas Anand in Sermik 2017.

Despite the influence of Urdu in Baltistan, the *Baltis* take pride of their past and have tried to preserve the old *Balti* culture, which also has glimpses of Buddhist influence. For example, they are reviving the original *Balti* written in Tibetan script and are educating the youth about various cultures from the past shared in common with Ladakh. One of the traditions still prevalent is the celebration of *Losar* (New Year) along with Ladakh and Tibet. But it is interesting to note that during the celebrations which are called *Jashn-e-Mephang*⁴ in Baltistan they still use fire as part of celebrations and perform a special dance with sticks lighted with fire. This tradition has slowly died down in Ladakh but is still prevalent in Baltistan indicating their will to hold on to the shared past.

CROSS-BORDER CONNECTIVITY: DEMAND FOR OPENING BORDER-ROUTES

The opening of the Uri-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawlakote routes in Kashmir and Jammu, respectively have proved to a great extent that the cross-border routes have the potential to alleviate emotional alienation, especially between families divided by the borders. However, in the larger narrative of cross-LoC connectivity, Ladakh region has been totally neglected. India looks at Kashmir more through the prism of security and defends the region from outside threat through the prism of its massive security structure. However, despite the volatility of the situation in Kashmir, its borders are open for trade and humanitarian exchange. On the other hand, Ladakh, which is portrayed as the most peaceful region, having amicable relations between army and people, has not been brought into the map of the cross-LoC connectivity.

Historically, the all-weather Kargil-Skardu (connecting Kargil in India and Skardu in Pakistan) and Turtuk-Khaplu road (connecting Turtuk in India and Khaplu in Baltistan) was a jugular of intra-regional trade on which the local economy was heavily dependent. The India-Pakistan war of 1948 resulted in the closure of this historic route dividing the *Balti-land* into Kargil (India) and Baltistan (Pakistan). The people of Kargil and Turtuk have been demanding the opening of the Kargil-Skardu and the Turtuk-Khaplu road based on the larger cross-LoC connectivity project between India and Pakistan. This route has the potential to become an important trade and tourism link, which can also bring a respite to the divided families of this mountainous region.

Moreover, it is argued that if Kashmir being a conflict zone can have

routes open for trade with Pakistan, why the same parameter does not apply to Ladakh, which is otherwise considered to be a peaceful place. Also, the link to Kashmir is under snow for half the year, this route delinks what is otherwise an all-weather tourist destination to the climactic undesirables of weather patterns in Kashmir. As a result, the seasonal unemployment that Kashmir suffers from, is unwittingly imposed on the Kargil region, which need not be the case. The routes in Ladakh connecting Pakistan can be an alternative all-weather road, which can keep the region accessible through the long winter months and strategically provide India with rapid access to Central Asia.



Image 8. On way to Turtuk, last village on Indian side of Border in Ladakh 2018.

As trade between India and Pakistan is carried out in a third country, significant revenues are lost, profit margins are reduced, and costs go up. Several studies indicate the existence of large smuggling based black market in the region. Formalisation of direct trade by eliminating these undesirable aspects can bring an immediate improvement to the quality of life in the region. These studies also aim to underline that formalising this trade carries the potential of increasing governmental income, which can strengthen the local economy by providing the impetus for further growth, independent of what happens in the Kashmir valley.

The origin of the cross-LoC connectivity can be traced to the ceasefire between India and Pakistan in 2003. In the following year, series of negotiations between the two countries coupled with a meeting between the then Prime Minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and then President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf at the side-lines of the 2004 SAARC Summit

in Pakistan took place. This had set the stage for the commencement of the cross-LoC interactions. It needs to be underlined here that the demand for the opening of the cross-LoC routes from both sides were based on humanitarian grounds citing the plight of the people on both sides of the LoC. The following years 2005 and 2006 witnessed the opening of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road (connecting the people of Kashmir to Pakistan) and Poonch-Rawalakote road (linking Jammu to Pakistan). "In 2006 the understanding was reached between India and Pakistan to start cross-LoC trade in selected primary products of Kashmiri origin. The Foreign Ministers of both countries met on May 21, 2008, to discuss new and existing Kashmir-specific Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), and agreed to increase the frequency of Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakote Bus services and allow intra-Kashmir trade and truck services"⁵.

The opening of the routes was well received by people, especially by the business community across the LoC, which looked at it as the beginning of the trans-LoC trade. There was a common understanding that the opening of these routes would bring economic prosperity. Most importantly, it was envisaged to bridge the gap between the people of India and Pakistan that would help reduce tension by strengthening the peace process. "The *Karvan-e-Aman*, which brings together families from both sides of Kashmir is momentous for the divided families and enables families separated since 1947 to unite. The cross-LoC connectivity has opened up immense possibilities for cooperation between the two sides of Kashmir"⁶. Similarly, the *Rah-e-Aman* facilitates the meeting of divided families and cross-LoC trade in the Jammu sector. However, it needs to be underlined here that there is one more region in the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir, i.e. Ladakh that has roots in the India-Pakistan partition and thus needs attention from the government. As Haider Ali Askary, rightly points out this disparity when he writes, "Lot has been said and written about the divided families in the Kashmir and Jammu regions. As a result of which the two governments initiated the Uri-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakot bus services. However, thousands of divided families in Ladakh region (particularly Kargil) and Gilgit-Baltistan remained unnoticed."⁷

Despite the potential of cross-LoC routes (Kargil-Skardu, Turtuk-Skardu) and the repeated demands by locals to open these routes, there have been no efforts by the government to connect this region to the larger cross-LoC narrative. Ravina Agarwal in her book, *Beyond Lines of Control*:

Performance and Politics on the Disputed Border of Ladakh, eloquently brought out the reason why the state is only looked through the prism of Kashmir while sidelining Ladakh region. She wrote, "Kashmir was the popular abbreviation for the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The name of Ladakh, the state's largest region, did not feature anywhere on our maps"⁸. This can be one reason why the partition and divided families are only considered as an issue of the Kashmir valley and there is hardly any knowledge among masses about the divided families of this mountainous region.

Historically, the all-weather Kargil-Skardu route was one of the most important routes through which many traders and artists travelled all the way from Tibet to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Being on the way at almost a junction point, this region served as the important purpose of trade and stay⁹. The events following partition, specifically the India-Pakistan war of 1947-48 resulted in the closure of this historic route isolating Baltistan from its natural linkages to the outside world. Ladakh has many families divided across the border, most of them concentrated in various border villages of Kargil, Zaskar and Turtuk in Leh. But unlike the divided families in Kashmir and Jammu, they do not have immediate access to their relatives across the LoC. For a person from Kargil, to visit Gilgit-Baltistan, they must travel from Kargil to Delhi for visa and to Amritsar/Wagah and to Islamabad and Skardu. "The distance between Kargil district and Gilgit-Baltistan is less than 200 km and it takes approximately five hours while the distance they need to travel to meet each other is approximately 3,000 km"¹⁰.

Kargil is historically, geographically and culturally more connected and similar to Baltistan than the Kashmir valley. The deep-rooted *Balti* culture keeps the people of Kargil and Baltistan emotionally connected even after so many years of partition. "Haji Abdul Hamid, a native of Zaskar symbolises this. In 1948 the retreating Pakistan Army, which had occupied the Zaskar heights took many locals and settled them in Skardu. As a result of tight travel restrictions, they can only meet in Saudi Arabia or Iran during pilgrimages. Since the *Baltis* do not identify with the Kashmiri culture, the alleviation of *Balti* concerns significantly reduces the scope of what is referred to as the "Kashmir Issue" taking the wind further away from the sails of this monolith construction"¹¹.

The road from Skardu to Kargil via Srinagar is almost a stretch of 1,700 km, while, at the same time, Skardu is a 173 km or a five to six hours drive from Kargil. The entire route is, at present, suitable for four-wheeled

vehicles and may need some widening for a small stretch of about half a kilometre near the Line of Control¹². The utility of the Kargil-Skardu road also lies in its durability in winter months. At present, there is only one pass Zoji-La (NH1), which connects the Ladakh region on the Indian side with the rest of the world. But this lifeline is cut-off for more than six months in winters due to heavy snowfall and people spend their lives in isolation especially in Kargil (Leh has aerial connectivity from Srinagar, Jammu and Delhi).

The opening of the Kargil-Skardu link has the potential of increasing the inflow of tourists manifold. "At a time when the government sector is shrinking and unemployment is rampant, tourism could possess much-unemployed youth in its fold on both sides. It would also revive the traditional route for movement of trade and commerce, connecting many neighbouring regions, which were the case until 1947"¹³. In addition, the reopening of the road would also give direct access to the numerous shrines and religious monuments for the Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims who deem them to be sacred.

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and Kargil have extensive tourism potential, especially adventure tourism, like trekking, mountain biking, river rafting among others. In addition, there are several routes suitable for high altitude jeep safaris. The exploitation of these depends on open circuits with several contingencies and shorter access routes, which are cut off by the border as of now. Leaders of the Hill Development Council in Kargil have demanded a Greater Ladakh, which would include Gilgit, Skardu and Baltistan precisely because the local economic development is being held hostage to events in Kashmir even though the underlying causes are completely divorced from the more contentious issues there. This card if played right can be the first step towards the pacification, if not the solution of the Kashmir problem.

Consolidating a road that intercepts the Karakoram Highway is critically important in times of war, for rapidly severing this link has been deeply detrimental to India's security. Moreover, such a road can provide rapid access to Central Asia, should either of two extremities eventuate—the collapse of Pakistan or rapid warming of India-Pakistan ties.

CONCLUSION

With the recent creation of Ladakh as a new Union Territory and the opening of the Kartarpur corridor, the Balti people of Ladakh and Baltistan

are hopeful that things might now change. Even if not the full routes, then perhaps a Kartarpur-like Ladakh corridor that would enable divided families to meet up at a particular point on the border¹⁴. A similar demand has also been seen in Baltistan, where social media was abuzz with the idea following the opening of the Kartarpur corridor.

Additionally, there is the potential for a religious corridor for the Baltis just like the Kartarpur corridor for the Sikhs, although not much is known about this in either Ladakh or Baltistan. In the Batalik district of Kargil near the India-Pakistan border stands the *ziyarat* (tomb) of Sheikh Ali, which is known locally as the Brolmo Sheikh Ali Ziyarat and is revered equally by the people of Kargil and Baltistan. One of the interviewees during my field trip to Pakistan expressed her feelings by saying: "When we look at the *ziyarat* we feel like we are touching it, while at the same time knowing that our relatives are also on the other side brings satisfaction as well as tears". She also told me how every time she goes down to the river (Indus) flowing from Ladakh into Baltistan she has a sip, knowing it has touched the soil where her great-grandfather lies. It should be noted that this *ziyarat* is regularly thronged by people in Kargil, especially those who have a relative in Baltistan. Hence, whether knowingly or not, this place has become a point of convergence and a meeting point for Balti people on both sides of the border; emotionally, if not physically.

The *Baltis* of Ladakh and Baltistan look with great hope towards their respective governments for opening up their border routes for P2P as well trade. It will serve multipurpose, first, it will help the reunion of divided families, second, it will bring prosperity to their region through trade and most importantly it will reduce the distance and cost of travel between Ladakh and Baltistan. It is an irony that even though Kargil is just three hours' drive from Karmang, people from Kargil have to travel all the way around from Delhi-Amritsar-Lahore-Islamabad-KP crossing the Babusar top into Baltistan, which takes more than a week. Ladakh is considered a peaceful place and tourists throng the place in search of Buddha and peace. On the other hand, Kashmir is a declared conflict zone but still, its border is open with Pakistan for trade and people's moment. Why this different yardstick to treat the people of Valley and Ladakh? The *Baltis* in Ladakh and those who have divided families have lots of hope that one day these border routes will be opened and that they will be able to reconnect with the other side. The *Baltis* in Baltistan have more hope from these border routes.

There is a need to organise more conferences in Ladakh and invite

the *Balti* people from Baltistan and make them feel part of the *Baltis* in India. Also, the *Baltis* in Dehradun who are originally from Baltistan must be brought into the common *Balti* fold in Ladakh and should be granted the right to land. Instead of focusing overall India-Pakistan dialogue over Kashmir, there is a need to bring Ladakh into the picture by highlighting the issue of *Baltis* on both sides of the border. Connectivity along this Himalayan region can be a great confidence building measure between India and Pakistan.

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