

## HOW LADAKHI MUST BE WRITTEN. POSTULATES REGARDING THE CODIFICATION OF WRITTEN LADAKHI, ITS DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

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This text involves a debate surrounding the language of the Ladakh region of India. The Ladakhi language has long since been written in accordance with classical Tibetan grammar. This paper stresses the need for it to be written in accordance with spoken Ladakhi style. This postulate is drawn from the personal research of the author and other researchers in the field. It does not undermine the importance of the classical Tibetan language, which has had a huge influence on the Buddhist population of Ladakh. The paper seeks to propose that the script be made accessible to all Ladakhis, irrespective of their faith. It also points to the differences between Ladakhi and Tibetan languages, resulting in a proposal that Ladakhis should first be made to read and write in the language they speak and subsequently introduced to the classical style.

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Artykuł dotyczy debaty wokół języka Ladakhu w Indiach. Język ladakhijski od dawna zapisywany jest zgodnie z klasyczną gramatyką tybetańską. W niniejszym artykule podkreślono potrzebę jego zapisania zgodnie z mówionym językiem ladakhijskim. Ten postulat wynika z osobistych badań autorki i innych badaczy zagadnienia. Nie podważa się tutaj znaczenia klasycznego języka tybetańskiego, który miał ogromny wpływ na buddyjską ludność Ladakhu. Autorka artykułu proponuje, aby pismo stało się dostępne dla wszystkich Ladakhijczyków, niezależnie od ich wyznania. Wskazuje również na różnice między językami ladakhijskim i tybetańskim. Rezultatem tego jest propozycja, aby Ladakhijczycy najpierw mogli uczyć się czytania i pisanie w języku, w którym mówią, a następnie dopiero w klasycznym tybetańskim.

**K e y w o r d s:** Ladakh, Ladakhi language, identity.

Being the medium through which people communicate their feelings and the cord which connects them with one another, **language** is of utmost significance in human life. It is acquired from the people around us and generally a child learns his/her first words from his/her mother; hence the first language that a person acquires and gains mastery of is also referred to as that person's mother tongue. It is also known that a person who has a strong foundation in his/her first language finds it easier to learn other languages. A simple reason for this lies in the fact that someone who knows

the structure of the first language will easier understand the structure and functioning of the new language.

The Ladakhi and Tibetan languages belong to the Tibeto-Burmese branch of the Sino-Tibetan language group. They are said to have originated from the old Tibetan language also known as Proto Tibetan. Ladakh has a long history of cultural and political relations with Tibet and has looked up to Tibet for centuries especially in terms of its spiritual needs at least until the political situation in Tibet changed in the late 1950s. This has resulted in the classical Tibetan language having had a huge impact on Ladakhi because of its function as a rich Buddhist literature repository. It has preserved for centuries these texts, many of which have disappeared from their original languages of Pali and Sanskrit. Ladakhi has since the beginning been written in accordance with the ancient Tibetan style and grammar. The people of this region have evolved with an understanding that their identity is closely connected to classical Tibetan especially its script. Buddhist texts written in the classical are part and parcel of every Buddhist household's prayer room in Ladakh. Understandable then is how strongly they relate their collective identity with it.

The religious significance attached to it has however deterred people from attempting to write in accordance with their own tongue. Today the position of Ladakhi is what the linguists call 'diglossic.' There is a huge gap in the way people in Ladakh speak and write. This situation has made reading and writing the privilege of a few who have undergone rigorous training in learning the classical Tibetan language and its style of writing. The majority have to content themselves with reading the texts without actually understanding their meaning. The debate surrounding the language issue in Ladakh is a serious one considering the fact that it is seen to be intertwined with religious faith.

The hesitancy on people's part to write Ladakhi has taken strong hold, so much so that for a section of society today it is unacceptable that any changes be made to the classical style. It is looked upon as a grave disregard of classical Tibetan. Those who hold the view that colloquial Ladakhi is a threat to the classical put forward the argument that if people started writing in a simplified style, it would lessen their desire to learn the rich texts available in the classical and exacerbate their neglect. Another argument is that classical Tibetan is the common literary language of the entire Himalayan region and hence this language has huge potential and reach unlike Ladakhi which is spoken by a small population. Within Ladakh many dialects of Ladakhi exist and thus choosing a single language for the entire region would prove a difficult task.

In this regard those who support the idea that Ladakhi should be written according to its own grammar and style argue that if it is difficult for people within Ladakh to understand each other's dialects then how can they be expected to understand a language which remains unspoken anywhere in Ladakh at all. Yet another argument is that the only people who can actually read and write classical Tibetan are those who

have undergone proper training to do so, including religious heads, Buddhist scholars and Tibetan language specialists.

For centuries, it has been the case that even ordinary people, who are only literate in Ladakhi have been reading from scriptures they do not understand. If these texts were in their own language they would be in a position to grasp the meaning of these texts more easily. In addition, it has been argued that discouraging people from writing in their local vernacular not only further removes them from their own roots but also from the profound knowledge which is to be found in their much treasured Classical Tibetan. This deprives the people of Ladakh of vast opportunities that they may avail of in expressing themselves in their own language. In the long run this threatens to put their identity as Ladakhis at risk.

Schools in Ladakh teach the Ladakhi script (writing and reading letters and signs) at primary level but the content of the texts is mostly in the classical Tibetan style and grammar. This makes it difficult for pupils to grasp which language they are actually learning. The content gives the impression of being Ladakhi because of the similarity of lexicon to the local language to an extent but in terms of style and grammar it is largely Tibetan. It seems, however, that the situation is slightly improving, because attempts are being made to bring the written language closer to its spoken, lively variety. Ladakhi and Tibetan share a common historical and cultural heritage and to a certain extent lexicon including the use of honorific terms. However, they differ in their phonology, style and grammar. The case markers in the two languages are different as is the usage of the final particles. Differences are also observable in verb form-usage, plural particles and lexicon as well. On a phonological level, Tibetan is different from Ladakhi as Tibetan tends not to pronounce initial consonant clusters. The end sound/s/ which is present in many dialects of Ladakh, especially in the Balti, Purig, Sham and Leh varieties, is missing in Tibetan. What needs to be mentioned in this context is that although these sounds are more or less missing in the Zaskar and upper Ladakh dialects. Most people of these regions understand the Leh dialect which is generally accepted in Ladakh as the standard Ladakhi. It is used in public speeches, the local station of All India Radio and in plays, modern songs and also local films.

Unlike Ladakhi, modern or colloquial Tibetan is used by Tibetans for both spoken and written purposes and is rich in written literature which is not the case with Ladakhi, which instead has a rich oral literature. If the colloquial Tibetan of today is compared with the Ladakhi language, it will be found that the average Tibetan youth takes greater pride in his or her language. It is interesting to note that the problem of understanding classical Tibetan language is one that is faced by Tibetans also. Similar to the Ladakhi people, they also cannot understand the classical texts, although born as Tibetans. They have to learn separately, consecutively or simultaneously, of their own language (modern Tibetan) and classical one. Thus, it seems hard to expect

a Ladakhi child to write in the classical style (Tibetan) before being taught to write in his/her own mother tongue.

The language issue has also affected the overall development of generations of Ladakh by negatively impacting on their sense of belonging and identity. It is a known fact that the mother tongue helps children in their overall personal, emotional, social and intellectual development and when not permitted from learning and writing in the mother tongue children are affected on all these fronts. Ladakhis take great pride in their culture, but they do not realize that language is the basis on which their culture stands, and without giving their language its due importance their culture stands a great risk of collapsing sooner rather than later.

A number of short stories, songs and poems can be found written in simple Ladakhi but when it comes to more sophisticated forms of literature such as novels there is a long way to go. The debate surrounding the Ladakhi language again is hugely responsible for this state of affairs.

During his stay in Ladakh, the German scholar and missionary August Hermann Francke worked on the Ladakhi language. He tried experimenting with a simple style of writing which was not acceptable and criticized by many. The story of the epic king Gesar, presented by Ladakhi bards and written by Francke (2000) in a simple Ladakhi dialect is an example of the way literature could progress in Ladakh if there were not so many hurdles surrounding this style of writing. The rich folk literature of this Himalayan region is crying out to be written down and this could be a path new writers of Ladakh could pursue. If they are written in the classical style the whole charm of the original is lost. Therefore it is important to put these into writing for the benefit of present and future generations alike.

It is worth observing that today a lot of Ladakhi Buddhist youth are showing a keen interest in the rich philosophical and logical teachings of Buddhism but to comprehend them they are turning not to classical Tibetan but to English. The readily availability of important texts in English, makes this easier for them. The difficulty in learning classical Tibetan and the lack of knowledge of their own language can be blamed for this. The children and youth of Ladakh today are fast drifting away from their language and the practice of discouraging them from using their own language in written form has only further removed them from developing any interest in preserving either their own spoken language or classical Tibetan. This is a matter of grave concern as Ladakhis have already begun to lose faith in their language. Today in Ladakh it is more likely to see a child speaking fluent Hindi than in Ladakhi language.

The association of Tibetan script with Buddhism seems to have kept the huge Muslim population of Ladakh away from it. As long as the script is seen as sacred people are bound to keep their distance from it. This has harmed both the script and language as their reach is further limited to even smaller sections of society. If written Ladakhi were to become the norm in Ladakh, it is possible that in the future more and more

people might become inclined to learn the script and also classical Tibetan. In this scenario, even the large Muslim community might embrace the language and script as a common heritage of the entire region. This could mean a huge boost to the art and literature of the region, both in Ladakhi and classical Tibetan. Bringing the Tibetan script out of the ambit of religion would greatly benefit both Ladakh and its people.

In regards to learning a language movement from the easier to the difficult is required. For the Ladakhis, learning Ladakhi would, undoubtedly, assist in learning Tibetan. In this regard it would seem a good idea that children in Ladakh in their initial years in school be taught to read and write in their own mother tongue. Once they have mastered the basics of Ladakhi they would be in a better position to learn the structure of the relatively complex classical Tibetan and thus students keen to pursue study of the classical would find it much easier to do so at this stage. A person's mother tongue equates to the foundation stone on which personality is gradually built upon. It is hence in the best interests of society to encourage its people to use their own language and to make it compulsory as the medium of instruction at the primary level of education. Writing the language in accordance with the way a person speaks however, must not be permitted to descend into a state of anarchy where each person writes the way he/she wants. Standardization of language is required. In the case under discussion the Leh dialect is more or less considered to be the standard language of Ladakh and is understood easily by people of all parts of the region.

Many writers in Ladakh have attempted writing in a simple Ladakhi style employing its grammar in the process. Initially, such attempts were met with strong resistance from a section who saw it as a threat to classical Tibetan. People have written poems, stories and even one or two novels in this style in the recent past, and translations of some religious texts have also been undertaken which were met with even stronger resistance.

## CONCLUSION

In order to put Ladakh on the global map, more than possessing good weather and a picturesque landscape is needed. Much more important is protecting its culture and language for their own sake, for the sake of Ladakh's unique identity and for the sake of coming generations. It is not enough to take pride in one's culture because with this comes the responsibility of working towards keeping it alive, and saving the language could be a way of achieving this.

Language is a transformable communication tool and a platform for self-expression. It is the property of its speakers and they are entitled to use it for their own benefits. The clearing away of confusion between classical Tibetan, spoken Tibetan and spoken Ladakhi is very important for the present and future of these three languages used in Ladakh.

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