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Monisha Ahmed
Oxford University

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From Benaras to Leh - the trade and use of silk-brocade

by
Monisha Ahmed

A weaver in Benaras sits at his pit loom meticulously creating a textile piece of Mahakala, the god of protection for Buddhists.

A lama at the festival ('*cham*) at Hemis monastery performs the religious dance, the Mahakala image on his apron (*pang-kheb*) gazing out at the devotees as he pirouettes around the courtyard.

The two descriptions given above demonstrate the beginning and end of the journey of silk-brocades from Benaras to Leh. This paper looks at the historical context of the trade in silk-brocades from Benaras to Leh, and discusses how this trade first started. It presents how these fabrics are made in Benaras and discusses their various uses in Ladakh. Finally, it examines the contemporary status of the trade and the continued importance of silk-brocades in the lives of Buddhist Ladakhis.

Silk-brocade in Ladakh

Ladakh lies embedded in the mountains of the Karakoram in the north-west, the Himalaya in the south-west, and the Trans-Himalaya at its core. From the tenth century the Namgyal dynasty ruled over Ladakh, till the country was annexed by Zorawar Singh in 1834 and came under the jurisdiction of the Dogras, the Hindu rulers of Jammu. Ladakh was ruled by the Dogras up to 1947, and was never directly governed by the British. After India's independence, Ladakh became a part of the north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The two main towns of Ladakh are Leh and Kargil. Buddhist Ladakhis are concentrated in Leh District,¹ Muslims in Kargil District.²

Lying at the crossroads of high Asia, Ladakh was situated squarely between some of the great mercantile towns of south and central Asia (Rizvi 1983: 75). Trade flourished there, from the time the Namgyal dynasty was established in Ladakh to modern times. Silk-brocades were among the most prestigious of textiles that entered Ladakh through trade.³ The high cost of these fabrics made them luxury textiles. As symbols of status their use was restricted to the royal family, nobility and the clergy.

¹ The Mahayana school of Buddhism is practiced in Ladakh. For a distinction between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism see Gombrich (1971: 15).

² The Muslim community consists largely of Shi'as with a Sunni minority.

³ Other high-prestige textiles were single-colored silk fabric, cotton cloths, and wool carpets.

In the Ladakhi language the word for silk-brocades is *gos-chen*; Tibetans call it *gya-ser*.⁴ I use the word brocade here as a trade name and in a generalized sense use it to refer to richly patterned silk fabric characterized by the use of gold and silver thread. In a more specific context I use it to refer to a silk fabric that is patterned with discontinuous supplementary wefts, usually but not always with gold and silver threads. The fabric is patterned with Buddhist symbols such as the eight lucky signs, the thunder-bolt and the bell, dragons, clouds, and lotus flowers.

The most important use of the silk-brocades was in the religious world of the monastery. Here, these fabrics were used for altar and seat coverings, canopies (*u-lep*), door hangings (*cheb-le*), and pillar covers (*ka-phen*). They were also used as mountings for *thang-kas* (scroll paintings), and for making the patchwork pieces in an appliqué *thang-ka*. The fabrics were used to make robes worn by the lamas at monastic festivals (*'cham*), as well as edging for their hats and boots.

In the secular world brocade was used to make robes (the *sul-ma* for women and the *gos* for men), capes (*sbog*), and hats (*ti-bi*). While hats were worn on a daily basis, the robes and capes were generally worn on special occasions such as weddings or religious ceremonies. The common people who could not afford to make entire robes out of brocade would use just a little bit to embellish their garments. They would stitch a narrow strip of brocade on to the cuffs of their sleeves or the slits of their robes, or they would use it to make the Chinese collar of the male robe. In fact, during the reign of the Namgyal dynasty the common people were not allowed to extensively use or wear these brocaded textiles.⁵ But gradually, after the powers vested in the royal family declined, common people who could afford to buy these luxury textiles also began wearing them.

Early evidence of trade in silk-brocades

There is no recorded evidence that indicates when exactly this trade first started in Ladakh, though it was almost certainly some time after the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty in the tenth century. In the absence of written information, paintings on monastery walls and ceilings become a source of information regarding the historical development of textiles in Ladakh. Further, they can give an indication of the mode of dress, particularly from the style shown in representations of the donors who commissioned the work, but also, to a lesser extent in that of the deities, as artists were free to follow the fashions and modes prevalent at that time.

Some of the earliest examples can be drawn from the three-storey Sumstek at Alchi, one of the oldest monastery complexes in Ladakh dating from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. On

⁴ The Tibetan word *gya-ser* is also used by the weavers and dealers of the fabric in Benaras.

⁵ It was the same in Tibet, where imported materials were luxury goods and used as marks of rank by both the clergy and aristocracy (Reynolds 1981:7).

first impression, the ceiling of the Sumstek looks as though it is covered by real textiles.⁶ The ceilings of the ground and first floor of the Sumstek are divided into forty-eight panels. The panels reproduce textiles of various techniques of manufacture, some of which were produced in Ladakh others that came in through trade, such as brocade.⁷ The painted textiles seem very specific and realistic, and it is possible that they were used by the royalty and nobility of Ladakh at the time when Alchi was being built and decorated. It is also assumed that they are based on actual textiles available in Ladakh or at least seen by the artists in the eleventh century and later, as the weaving and dyeing techniques have been realistically represented by the painters who decorated the wooden panels (Goepper 1996: 225). The textile patterns which cover the ceilings are also shown on royal garments in the wall portraits in the Sumstek, providing confirmation that these reproductions of textiles are not a figment of the painters imagination, but that they were in actual use. These monuments are also early evidence of the adaption of the secular garments of royalty and wealth into the spiritual realm of Buddhism (Reynolds 1997: 122).

Another example of the use of brocade comes from the monastery of Sankar, near Leh, built in the fifteenth century, demonstrating the importance of the fabric in religious life. In the upper verandah of the monastery, there are a series of stylized paintings illustrating the rules of monastic life (Snellgrove and Skorupski 1977: 109). One of the panels depicts the possessions permitted to a monk, which were laid down by Sakyamuni Buddha. These include: boots edged with brocade, rugs to sit on, two white towels, robes and wraps or shawls made from brocade fabric, a staff, an alms bowl and a filter for straining living organisms from water in order to avoid taking life. While the painting is new, the thoughts behind it are not as they were laid down by Sakyamuni Buddha many centuries ago. It could also be a painting that has been redone or touched up over the years. Monks in Ladakh continue to use brocaded fabric at the annual festivals held at their monasteries and other religious events.

Trade in Ladakh: 16th to 20th century

Leh, as well as Kargil, were important trading posts on a network of regional and international routes as they lay at a vantage point for trade routes from Northern India (mainly Kashmir and Punjab), Tibet, China, Russia, and Central Asia (largely Yarkand, Kashgar, and Khotan). The traders that came to Ladakh brought with them carpets, felt, bales of cotton and silk fabric, brocade, silk thread, porcelain, turquoise and coral stones, gold, dyes and medicines, amongst a host of other commodities and luxury goods. Some of this merchandise they traded in Ladakh

⁶ “The copying of textiles in paint on the ceilings may derive from the custom of fixing actual pieces of cloth under the ceilings of Ladakhi buildings, partly as embellishment but also for the practical reason of preventing dust or mud particles of the ceiling construction from falling into the rooms below” (Goepper 1996: 225). This practice continues to be followed in most homes in Ladakh today.

⁷ Amongst the textiles that were made in Ladakh, a few panels clearly evoke the technique of tie-resist dyeing (*thig-ma*). This comparatively simple technique is still used in parts of Ladakh.

itself, and the rest they either carried with them on their further journeys or sold to traders who took it to other places to sell.

“Though Ladakh was off the line of the classical Silk Route, the Leh-Yarkand trail represented one of the Silk Route feeders and silk was an important commodity of the trans-Karakoram trade in both directions” (Rizvi 1999: 19). Silk yarn would come from Yarkand to be woven in the Punjab, and silk from India (including brocade from Benaras) would be exported to Central Asia. As the trade passed through Ladakh, some of this silk was sold there as well.

Apart from the earlier evidence shown in monastic paintings of textiles that entered Ladakh through trade, we do know that from at least the sixteenth century and definitely during the seventeenth century when the first trade treaties were signed, the trade routes were firmly established. In the first part of the seventeenth century, the king Senge Namgyal shifted the royal residence from Shey to Leh. The nine-storey palace that looks over the northern end of the town of Leh was built at this time. Senge Namgyal did this because he found Leh more advantageous than Shey as a capital mainly because it lay at a vantage point for the trade routes that were passing through Ladakh.

The Treaty of Tingmosgang was one of the first treaties signed between Ladakh and Tibet in 1684, after the conclusion of the Tibeto-Ladakhi-Mughal war.⁸ Under this treaty it was agreed that the Tibetan authorities would supply their entire wool and pashmina to Ladakh, who in turn would supply this along with their indigenous produce to Kashmir (Petech 1977: 75-77). Under the same treaty, two missions were set up: the Lopchak and the Chaba. The Lopchak was a biannual mission that went from Leh to Lhasa, under which the King of Ladakh would send a variety of gifts, which were offerings to the Dalai Lama for his protective blessings and to Tibet for the salutation of the New Year (Bray 1991: 117, Ahmed 1968: 354). The Chaba was the annual trade caravan from Lhasa to Leh which carried with it two hundred animal-loads of tea (Bray 1990: 78). It specified that nowhere but via Ladakh shall rectangular tea-bricks from Tibet be sent (Marx 1894: 97).

Much of the long distance trade between Tibet and Ladakh was based on and around these two missions. The Lopchak was led by a representative of the King's, who was usually exempt from taxes for taking on the responsibility of leading the mission. Apart from the items specified by the mission he was also allowed to carry his own merchandise for sale in Tibet and in turn bring merchandise back from Tibet for sale in Ladakh. In addition, the

⁸ In 1684 relations between Ladakh and Lhasa were increasingly hostile, and further acerbated when Ladakh intervened in a quarrel between Tibet and Bhutan, supporting the latter, resulting in the fifth Dalai Lama declaring war on Ladakh (Petech 1977: 70-71). The Ladakhi King, Deldan Namgyal, lacking the strength to fight the Tibetans asked for and obtained the intervention of Ibrahim Khan, the Mughal Governor of Kashmir, who succeeded in stopping the Tibetan advance (ibid: 74). Though this action did not bring Ladakh directly under Mughal rule it did however, make Ladakh compliant to the Mughal Empire.

leader of the mission would be accompanied by several private traders who were allowed to conduct their own business alongside his.

One of the items of this trade between Ladakh and Tibet was silk-brocade that came from China. It was brought to Ladakh by traders on either the Lopchak or Chaba missions. Lamas, who went to Lhasa to study, would also bring back pieces of brocade for their monastery when they returned to Ladakh. Most of the brocade came as unstitched fabric, but some of it also came as stitched robes or on boots. For instance, traders would bring the *chu-ba* - the sleeve-less ankle-length robe worn by Tibetan women. The *chu-bas* would be so large that the Ladakhi women were able to redesign them into their *sul-ma*, which is also an ankle-length robe but it has long-sleeves and gathers around the waist. For the sleeves, they would attach similar fabric of the same color and pattern.

Some of the first references to the trade in brocade are found in Moorcroft's journals. Both William Moorcroft and George Trebeck worked for the East India Company and went to Ladakh in 1820, on route to Yarkand, where they spent two years. During their stay in Leh, Chinese brocade was among the merchandise they saw arriving on the caravans there (1841: 322-6). Leh's two wealthiest mercantile families were the Radhu and the Shangara, and at some point or the other members of these families had been the leaders of the king's Lopchak mission. Examples of Chinese brocade traded from Tibet to Ladakh can still be seen in Ladakh among the collections of members of the Radhu and Shangara families, as well as traders who accompanied the leader of the Lopchak mission. This practice continued right till the first part of the twentieth century.

The trade in brocade from Benaras

At the same time as Chinese brocade was available in the market in Ladakh, brocade was also being imported from Benaras along the trade routes entering the region from Kashmir and the Punjab. However, the brocade from Benaras differed from its Chinese counterpart in that it was not patterned with Buddhist symbols. In addition it was not called by the Ladakhi word *gos-chen*, but was referred to by the Urdu word *kinkhwab*.

Kinkhwab, which literally means 'little dreams', is a variety of woven brocade which was popular in the Mughal courts (Kumar 1999: 313). Like *gos-chen*, *kinkhwab* was also a luxury textile and used primarily by the royal family and nobility of Ladakh. But unlike *gos-chen*, it was rarely used in the monasteries. Similar to the use of *gos-chen* mentioned earlier, *kinkhwab* was also used to make women's robes and capes, edge the collar of a man's robe or the slits of a woman's dress. As it was devoid of Buddhist symbols the fabric was, quite predictably, more popular with the Muslim population of Ladakh amongst which examples of *kinkhwab* can still be found.

References to the trade in brocade from Benaras are given in Moorcroft (1841: 325). Brocade from Benaras also figures in later trade reports of the nineteenth century (Government of Punjab Report 1862: ccix, Aitchison 1874: 219). Some of the reports differentiate between the varieties of silk entering Ladakh (i.e. Benaras brocade or *kinkhwab*, silk); others do not (Rizvi, personal communication, October 2002).

The introduction of *gos-chen* in Benaras

In the first part of the nineteenth century *gos-chen* was not made in Benaras. But sometime around the middle of the nineteenth century weavers in Benaras began to reproduce the Chinese brocade with its Buddhist motifs and patterns. They began to supply this fabric to Ladakh and other Buddhist countries such as Tibet and Bhutan, thereby breaking China's monopoly. There are many explanations given on how this *gos-chen* or brocade for the Buddhist market first began to be made in Benaras.⁹

The first account given is that Tibetan traders came to Benaras, which by the nineteenth century was already a well-established weaving center for brocades. In fact it was India's main brocade weaving center. The Tibetans knew that *kinkhwab* was being woven in Benaras and thought that if the weavers could weave that fabric then it should not be too difficult for them to weave *gos-chen* (or *gya-ser* as it was called by the Tibetans). The Tibetans carried some samples of the Chinese brocade with them and asked the weavers in Benaras if they could make similar fabric. The reason given for the Tibetans doing this is that they were finding the Chinese brocade very expensive and wanted to look for alternative sources to meet their demand.¹⁰

The second version is that traders from the Marwari community, who come from Rajasthan and are well-known in India for their business acumen, who were settled in Kalimpong, which was a large commercial market on the trade route between India and Tibet, took the samples of *gos-chen* to Benaras. Some people in Benaras said it was not Marwari traders but Nepali traders, also living in Kalimpong, who brought the first samples to Benaras. Or traders from Benaras, who had a presence in the market in Kalimpong, brought a sample back with them to see if they could replicate it.

The actual version of what happened may never really be known but what we do know is that the weavers in Benaras were amenable to weaving and reproducing the samples of Chinese brocade fabrics that were shown to them. If they had been reluctant or opposed to it in anyway *gos-chen* may never have been woven in Benaras. Haji Kasim and Haji Mohammad Ishaque were two brothers from one of the first families in Benaras who started weaving this *gos-chen* or brocade fabric.¹¹ Members of the family, whose business now goes under the name of Kasim,

⁹ Most of this information is based on oral sources, mainly from families living in Benaras whose forefathers were involved in initiating this trade.

¹⁰ In the Buddhist world of the Himalayas the Tibetans probably used the most silk-brocades. For instance, "... brocades, ... were always in demand by Tibetans for their formal dress, because in the administration every officer of rank, even if he were not very highly placed, had to wear this official dress" (Radhu 1997: 193).

¹¹ The family was already well-known for their *kinkhwab* - in 1885 they received a first class medal at the Lucknow exhibition from the British government, and in 1886 at the Colonial and Indian exhibition in London they received a medal for their fine *kinkhwab* from Prince Edward. Both medals are still in the family's possession.

recalled that though there was opposition from the clergy at weaving another faith's religious fabric this did not stop them from weaving *gos-chen*. "It filled our stomachs then and still does," said Haseen Ahmed, who today looks after most of the Kasim's *gos-chen* business.¹²

As it turned out, the Ladakhis, Tibetans, and people from other Buddhist countries preferred the brocade that was made in Benaras. The main reason for this was that it was cheaper. One of the explanations given for the reduced price was that labor was cheaper in Benaras as compared to China. Another reason for their partiality towards *gos-chen* from Benaras was that the quality of the gold was better. Yet another explanation given was that the fabric was better quality, it was thicker.

Whatever the reasons, Benaras brocades or *gos-chens* gradually gained popularity in the Buddhist world of Ladakh. Traders started to bring *gos-chen* to Ladakh from Benaras on the old established trade routes: coming from Kashmir or the Punjab. It also came from Lhasa via Kalimpong. What is interesting is that many shop-owners in Ladakh, as well as other Ladakhis, continued to believe that this fabric was coming from China, few knew that it was actually being made in Benaras.¹³ As the quantities of *gos-chen* from Benaras increased in the market in Ladakh, that of *kinkhwab* fell. Traders saw *gos-chen* as being more lucrative a business as compared to the *kinkhwab* and so focused on that instead.

The trade in brocade from Benaras – after 1947

After India's independence most of the international trade routes into Ladakh closed. The last Lopchak Mission from Leh to Lhasa went in 1944.¹⁴ Members of the Radhu and Shangara family, who were once very avidly involved in trade, turned to other occupations or moved out of Ladakh. Traders from Kashmir and Punjab, whose main purpose had been to trade with Central Asia also stopped making the journey to Ladakh. While some brocade still came via Tibet, this trade also stopped by the early 1960s.

But the demand for brocade in Ladakh did not cease. Without the support of the Kashmiri and Punjabi traders or the large trading families of Ladakh, the nobility and clergy of Ladakh turned to alternate sources for their brocade. They as well as the shopkeepers in Leh bazaar, turned directly to the suppliers in Benaras. It was the same for the dealers in Benaras

¹² Interview with Haseen Ahmed, 13th August 2002, Benaras.

¹³ Tashi Challi, who first opened his shop in Leh in the early 1950s said that he always thought that the *gos-chen* was coming from China as that was what the Tibetan traders who brought the fabric to Leh told them. It was only when he visited Kalimpong in 1960 that he found out that the fabric was being made in Benaras. He then started ordering the brocade directly from Benaras (Interview with Tashi Challi, 3rd July 2002, Leh).

¹⁴ Abdul Wahid Radhu accompanied his uncle, who was the leader of the second last Lopchak mission in 1942, and recalls how the two of them realized at that time that the end of the traditional caravan traffic between Ladakh and Tibet had begun (1997: 176).

who without the Tibetan, Kashmiri, or Punjabi traders to carry their brocade to Ladakh had to turn directly to the monasteries and shopkeepers in Ladakh.

Brocade dealers from Benaras, or their agents, now visit Ladakh in the summer carrying samples of their brocade with them. They do the rounds of the main cloth-shops in the market in Leh, as well as the surrounding monasteries, and show them samples of their brocade. They give them the rates and take orders. They may also go to Kargil if they think it is necessary, but as less brocade is used in Kargil as compared to Leh most of them do not make the trip to Kargil. They also collect any outstanding payments that might be there from the previous year's orders. They then return to Benaras where they execute their orders, and then send the fabric to Ladakh. Most of the fabric now goes as parcels, which are mailed out to Ladakh and reach there by air or road.

If the dealers from Benaras are unable to go to Leh for some reason, the shopkeepers in Leh, as well as the monks, also send letters placing their orders with the suppliers in Benaras or they phone them; phone calls are more common now days. They do not need to see the samples because each fabric has its own name and particular design - the only thing they have to specify is the color and the quantity.¹⁵ Over the years, the changes in the designs and color palette of *gos-chen* fabric have been minimal, and while the weavers in Benaras attempt to make changes they then find that the fabric usually does not sell. The Buddhist Ladakhis, and particularly the clergy, want the same designs and colors to be repeated. They state that this is their religious fabric and so it cannot be altered.

The process in Benaras

Once the suppliers have taken their orders in Ladakh they return to Benaras to execute them. While weaving is done throughout Benaras, Pili Kothi is the area where these particular types of brocade are made. Almost everyone who lives in this area is involved in weaving in some way or the other.

Signboards, written in English and Tibetan script, guide customers to the shops in Pili Kothi. The main dealers in this fabric have their showrooms, and homes, in Pili Kothi. They also have looms in small rooms around the area, but a vast majority of their looms are in villages around Benaras. It is largely the more costly brocades, especially those that are made using real gold thread, that are woven in Pili Kothi. This is so that the fabric is woven under the dealers' direct supervision to avoid pilfering of the gold thread. Also the brocade pieces, which have more complicated patterns and designs, such as the Mahakala image mentioned in the beginning of this paper, are made in Pili Kothi.

¹⁵ Brocade is measured using the *kha* and not the meter. The *kha* refers to a square, the size of which is determined by the width of the fabric woven on the loom. This can vary from 60 to 70 centimeters.

The weaving is done on a pitloom with a Jacquard mechanism, which uses punched cards for the pattern.¹⁶ Men are engaged in the weaving as well as the preparatory stages such as drawing the graph of the design, making the punch cards, bleaching and dyeing the silk threads. Women are involved in the preparation of the yarns for weaving. They twist the spun yarns to make a strengthened multi-ply yarn suitable for weaving, and then reel the silk threads on to the shuttles for the weaver.

A large amount of the brocade that is made in Benaras today is not pure. Most of it is made with artificial silk or synthetic fibers such as polyester, nylon, and viscose. This keeps the price of the fabric low, making it more affordable for a larger number of people. The pure fabric is mainly made for the clergy, and generally on the receipt of a confirmed order. Otherwise the cost is too exorbitant for both the supplier and customer to bear.

Continued importance of brocade in Ladakh

The trade in brocade continues to flourish in Ladakh, and today almost all the brocade in the market in Ladakh comes from Benaras. The use of brocade is also no longer confined to the clergy and affluent Ladakhis, though they are the only ones who can afford to buy the pure silk fabric. Most of the population is able to afford the synthetic mixes, which are very popular now days and extensively used. In fact, no bride's wedding attire is complete if she does not have a brocade cape (*gos-chen sbog*). Cheap imitations made from synthetic fabrics come from China and are also widely available, but the Ladakhis prefer the Benaras brocade. They say that compared to the brocade that comes from Benaras, the Chinese variety is not as good quality and the fabric is thinner.

In Benaras as well, the making of this brocade is very viable commercial activity. Most of the brocade that is made there is supplied not only to Buddhist communities in India and to the Himalayan Buddhist countries neighboring India but also exported to all countries that have followers of the Buddhist faith such as Southeast Asia, America, and England. The only time production dropped in Benaras was in the early 1960s when the Chinese occupied Tibet. As a result of the uncertainty in the market at this time a lot of the main weaving centers switched over from weaving brocade to weaving saris. As the Tibetans were their main customers, many of them thought it was the end of brocade and they changed their looms and destroyed their graphs and punch cards. Though the Kasim family also turned to weaving saris they held on to their looms and patterns and continued weaving the brocade, though on a smaller scale. Once the Tibetans were settled again and had new monasteries to build, the demand rose tremendously. Naturally, the Kasims had the advantage because they had not stopped weaving the brocade. Today, they are the largest suppliers of the fabric to the Buddhist world, but

¹⁶ Initially the *naksha* drawloom was used; its complex mechanisms enabled weavers to create sinuous floral patterns in brocade (Kumar 1999: 313). First the pattern was sketched on to mica and then transferred by a *nakshaband* (pattern maker) onto a thread module (the *naksha*). The *naksha* was hung above the loom and attached to the warp threads. By lifting the attached threads, the corresponding pattern was created by weaving the patterning weft threads into the warp.

because of the increase in business many weavers who had stopped weaving this fabric in the 1960s, have resumed it.

Probably as a tribute to the past, members of the Kasim family frame and hang the original samples of the brocade that were brought to Benaras in their offices and shops. These are reverentially displayed alongside embroidered pieces of 'Allah' and pictures of them presenting brocade to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. They also acknowledge, with pride, the Dalai Lama's words when he introduced them at a gathering by saying, "These are the people who make the fabric of our religion."

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