

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AN ETHNIC FESTIVAL SAKHA-DAFANGS AMONG THE PURIGPA TRIBE OF THE SHAKAR-CHIKTAN BLOCK OF KARGIL DISTRICT (LADAKH)

Author's Name: Imtiyaz Ali Kharpa

Affiliation: Ph.D Research Scholar , Department of Sociology, Panjab University, Chandigarh, Punjab, India

Email: imkharpa@gmail.com

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Abstract

Festivals are an important aspect of any culture because they foster a sense of belonging and solidarity among its members. The Sakha-Dafangs festival was formerly one of the most well-known in the Kargil district, but as time passed, people didn't have enough time to celebrate it, and passed down to future generations. However, in the area of my research, one village (Chiktan) has preserved the Sakha-Dafangs' essence among the people, and they used to celebrate it with zeal and excitement. The subject of this event, which takes place during the last week of February and the first week of March, is dedicated to the arrival of spring in the countryside. The festival's name consists of two words: Sakha and Dafangs. Sakha has two meanings: one is to celebrate the occasion with traditional folk songs and folk dances, and the other is to plough the Sakha Sjing (community field) at the start of the spring season. Sa means land or field, and kha means mouth, so it literally means "opening the mouth of the field." The Dafangs, which means archery, used to have an archery competition in their traditional method to greet the spring season and bid farewell to the cold and chilly winter season.

Keywords: Sakha-Dafangs, folksongs, folkdances, Purigpa, Shakar-Chiktan, Kargil.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AREA

The Ladakh region was part of the Jammu and Kashmir till the abrogation of Art 370 and 35 A, with special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. After the abrogation of Art 370, the central government makes the bifurcation of the Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories, i.e. the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and Union Territory of Ladakh. In the Ladakh region, there are two districts namely, Kargil and Leh. From the route of Kashmir, the Kargil district will be the first entry of the Ladakh region and from the Manali of Himachal Pradesh; the first entry of Ladakh is the Leh district.

In the Kargil district, there are 4 subdivisions, 7 Tehsil, 15 blocks, 98 Panchayat and 130 villages. For this study, I have taken one of the villages of Kargil district i.e. Chiktan village which falls under the Shakar-Chiktan block.

There are several tribes that live in the Kargil district. Balti, Broqpa (Shina and Dard), and Purigpa are the tribes' names. The Balti tribe hails from Skardu Baltistan, whereas the Broqpa hail from Gilgit and the Purigpa hail from Tibet's Purang valley. Their style of life has certain parallels, as they embrace the same form of religion from the beginning, from animism to Buddhism, and also from Buddhism to Islam, despite their origins in separate countries. In modern times, we can see a blending of two religions, namely Buddhism and Islam, as well as certain Animist traits.

METHODOLOGY

This is an ethnographic study, and I've been on the fieldwork for six days to attend the festival. I took careful notes on what I saw on the field and also took part in the festival as a participant observer. I questioned numerous informants on the cultural importance of this festival for my investigation into the age-old tradition. The festival's ethical perspective is presented here with my best effort and the assistance of the informants.

SAKHA-DAFANGS FESTIVAL

The Sakha-Dafangs celebration is well-known throughout the Purig region, particularly in the Shakar-Chiktan block. The festival's theme is connected to the arrival of spring and the conclusion of the harsh winter in the region. Every year, the festival takes place in the last week of February or the first week of March. There are two ethnic words in the festival's name: Sakha and Dafangs. The first word, 'Sakha,' has two meanings: first, it refers to the process of celebrating the spring season with folk music, and second, it refers to the plough opening the mouth of the agricultural field (Sa means land and Kha means mouth), etymologically it refers to the plough opening the mouth of the land. The second word is 'Dafangs,' which refers to archery. In their customary fashion, the local people used to organize an archery game competition inside their various communities to celebrate the arrival of spring and bid farewell to the cold winter.

Sakha refers to entertainment, such as music, dances, and horse polo, whereas dafangs refers to the archery game. This celebration lasted for six days, with the first three days dedicated to the Sakha and the next three days dedicated to archery. The villagers congregated in the centre of town, where all of the events took place, and the people performed traditional songs and dances. Following the completion of the Sakha, the public begins a three-day archery competition. The day of the Archery game was used to fix by the Akhun of the village, one day before the actual day of the match the villagers gathered for the for making the team (*Mraksdo tangma zeray*). The arrows of the players were arranged in the queue for the making of the team. After queuing the arrows of the villagers, the arrow of the Cho, Sgopa and Mala are taken out from bunches of the arrows and these three-person become the captain of the team (in archery game language it is known as commander). Following the captain's selection, a boy with both living parents (*Pha-Ma Schangkhan*) is chosen from the audience. He selects three arrows from the bunch and places them one by one in the three captains' team. In this manner, he picked all of the arrows until they were complete; completing the creation of the teams and making them ready to begin the archery game. There was a mechanism in place for planning the feast till the archery game was completed. Each participant invites their respective companions to the feast one by one. The Sgopa will prepare a feast for his partner, the Cho and Mala, on the first day of the game, and other players who are on the Sgopa's team must prepare a feast for their respective partners. The Mala group and all of their respective players organize a feast for their respective partners on the second day, while the Cho team and all of their players organize a feast for their respective partners on the third day. In this type of feast, not only the layers are asked to eat, but also the family's closest relatives in the village, the sister or daughter who married in another village, the son in law, and the grandsons and granddaughters.

On the last day of the contest, the Chaga is placed in the first round, followed by the head of the goat, the lungs of the goat, the stomach of the goat, the fifth and sixth rounds, and the right and left thigh of the goat. The reason for putting the animal parts there is to keep ill omens out of civilization.

Those who hit portions of the animals succeed in distributing those parts among them once the game is completed. However, with a comprehensive understanding of Islam's rules and regulations, these kinds of customs are abandoned. The Melong is finally placed on the spot to complete the goal. The Melong is female jewellery that is worn by society's females. Now it's a question of who will bring the Melong on the last day. Those who marry the following year are the ones who bring the Melong on this occasion. However, the Melong provider should be at the top of the social ladder. If a commoner marries during the season, then the Cho family marries as well. The Cho family would then bring the Melong for the occasion. If there are marriages within the Cho family lineage, the Melong will be provided by the Cho who is older. Cho Pa, Yokma Pa, and Goshak Pa, the three principal families, will furnish the Melong for the occasion. If the marriage occurs in a commoner family, their social position will be determined, and if they all belong to the same strata, a lottery system will be used to determine who would receive the Melong. The person who hits the Melong will offer a male cow or yak as a sacrifice, and the flesh will be distributed among the community.

The ladies do everything they can to pollute the Melong (*bomo sak ees thunma tanget chuk*) so that it will not be broken down by the male. It was the idea that the Melong's destruction is a source of humiliation for females and pride for males, and vice versa. The mother of one of my friends told me about her father's targeting of the Melong. The father brings a large yak to the location and sacrifices it in exchange for success in locating the Melong. The yak's meat was dispersed among the locals.

I attended the Sakha-Dafangs' festival in Chiktan village in the year 2020, which took place from the 28th of February to the 4th of March. I was at Khardoong Mohallah on the 27th of February, and on that night I went to the mosque to read the evening Salah. After the nimaz, everyone in the hamlet forms a circle around the Mosque's local heating system (Bukhari), and one person begins writing down the names of the players in the Mohallah. When I inquired about the type of list they are preparing, one individual informed me that the team will be formed tomorrow, and each Mohallah must provide a list of the amount of members from their respective Mohallah. Each Mohallah is responsible for hosting the archery game each year; the archery event in 2020 was hosted by the Khardoong Mohallah of the Chiktan village. The following day, on the 28th of February, the host Mohallah arranged for tea and snacks in the large field just beneath the Chiktan palace, and the entire community gathered there around 11 a.m. More than a hundred people had met to prepare the team and the formation of the partners. I noticed that the team's composition differed from that of earlier days, as I had been told by the informants, as I described in the third paragraph. There were four teams in total: Thuwachay Mohallah, Zgang Mohallah, Khardoong Mohallah, and Kukerchay Mohallah. Each mohallah has its own commander (captain), with Abdul Hamid from the Thuwachay mohallah, Haji Hassan from Zgang Mohallah, Mohd Shafi from Khardoong Mohallah, and Feroz Ahmad from Kukerchay Mohallah as the commanders. The names of each Mohallahs players are then written down one by one on a small piece of paper. In this manner, the four boxes with the names of the participants are prepared, and the players' partners are chosen using the lottery technique. A minor child is chosen from the audience to collect the chit from each box one by one. In this method, a team of four players is prepared to hurl the arrow as opposition and score points for their respective sides on the day of the archery game.

Following the creation of the partners, another task to complete was the selection of a person to be

in charge of the construction of the heap of earth with the targets on it (locally known as pane), its maintenance, and the collection of the arrows from the point after the participants had thrown them. The auction was held to determine who would be the arrow collector (locally known as Dalenpa). One member in the audience yelled loudly that he would take 5000 rupees to become the *Dalenpa*, and the committee does its hardest to arrange the *Dalenpa* with the smallest amount of money possible. As a result, a man named Mohd Rahim agreed to accept 3400 rupees in exchange for becoming the *Dalenpa*. Now it is the *Dalenpa's* responsibility to maintain the target and bring the players arrows from the heap of earth after the players of one team have completed their tasks, so that the heap of soil (Pane) and the target are clear for the players of the next team. The *Dalenpa* must carry out his responsibilities until the game, which will last five days, is completed. The target is positioned on a half-moon-shaped mound of earth. A cylindrical ring with a diameter of 5 to 6 centimeters, known locally as Kildir, is erected in the centre of this heap of soil. In the centre of this cylindrical ring, a little cylindrical form made of wood with a diameter of 1.5 to 2 centimeters is known as Chaga, and a very small cylindrical form made of wood with a diameter of 1.5 to 2 centimeters is known as Zair. If the player hits his target inside the Kildir, he will receive one point; if he hits it on the Chaga, he will receive two points; and if he hits it on the Zair, he will receive nine points. If a person was successful in locating the Zair, he would sacrifice a goat or sheep and distribute it among the people.

The system of the feast given for their respective partners begins on the first day of the game. One Mohallahs players planned a feast for their separate partners (*Zdo*). The participants were welcomed to a feast from their respective partners on the first day of the game, at 8 a.m. The Thuwachay Mohallah hosted the first day of the game, and all of its players invited their respective partners from the other three Mohallahs, namely the Zgang, Khardoong, and Kukerchay Mohallah teams. If there are three participants in one household, each player should make an invitation to their respective partners from the opponent teams. In another sense, one may say that on this specific day, nearly every Mohallah house is organizing a feast. The feast party was divided into 3 parts, each with a different cuisine for the guests to eat. There was tea and cookies in the first section, apricot soup and local roti or fried meat (Chuli-fating or Kaanti) in the second section, and rice with meat cuisine in the third section. After the feast, all of the participants must proceed to the archery ground. The game begins with the religious person or Mala (religious work performance) of the village reciting lines from the Holy Quran. The archery game begins after the reciting of the lines is completed. Each team competed in five rounds (locally known as five Dashaal) throughout the day. One by one, the players of each Mohallah arrive and fire their arrows at the target, hoping to get a point for their respective teams. According to a source, in the past, partners from opposing teams would gather together and throw their arrows at the target, resulting in pair competition. However, presently, one Mohallah completes their turn first, followed by another Mohallah, and so on. At 12.30 p.m., after each team's first or second round of play, the game is paused for the recital of the Nimaz. Following the Nimaz, the third round begins, followed by a lunch break. Mohallah, the host, had made arrangements for lunch (Khardoong Mohallah). After lunch, the last two rounds were played, bringing the first day of the game to a close. For four days in a row, the feast and archery game were conducted in the same manner. The score which is scored by the respective teams was determined after the fourth day of the game. With 245 points, the Khardoong Mohallah took first place, followed by the Thuwachay Mohallah in second place with 153 points, Kukerchay Mohallah in third place with 131 points, and the Zgang Mohallah in fourth

place with 111 points. The winning team received a monetary prize determined by a committee member. The Sakha-Dafangs festival is held every year in the same way, and each Mohallah takes turns hosting the festival.

The cultural and traditional method of the Sakha-Dafangs Dafangs festival was witnessed on the fifth day of the festival. As we previously discussed, this community had ties to the animism culture. On the fifth day, all of the players dress up as much as they can in traditional garb. On the last day of the festival, the entire community, including women, girls, and the elderly, would gather. On this day, the aim point is substituted by representations of goat or sheep body parts. According to the source, in the past, a goat or sheep was slaughtered specifically for this celebration. The bodily parts of one goat were separated from the main body after it was slaughtered. The head, lungs, stomach, right and left thigh of the goat or sheep were the most commonly used body parts in the game. One by one, those bodily pieces were placed on the soil heap (Pane). Following that, all of the players on the respective teams made their mark on it. Those who succeed in capturing those bodily parts must distribute the meat among themselves. When I asked the Shakar and Chiktan village informants about the tradition of this kind of activity, they stated it is a sacrifice to protect the village from evil omens. However, as they gain a better knowledge of Islam's worldview, they gradually abandon such actions, believing that they were disrespectful to the edible products. So, in order to keep the history of this kind of behaviour alive, they used to place a picture of the goat's body parts on the heap of earth to serve as a target. Those who were successful in identifying the photographs of body parts received cash rewards, just as they did in the past when they were given those body parts to share.

The traditional mirror (locally known as Melong) is provided to place the image of the goat's body part on the heap of soil to target it, following the tradition of putting the image of the goat's body part on the heap of soil to target it. The responsibility for bringing the Melong rests with the family whose home the season's last marriage took place. Because his son was married at the conclusion of the season, Haji Hassan Ali was in charge of bringing the Melong to the 2020 festival celebration. The Melong was placed on a plate with the Local roti and covered with a white cloth before being presented to the expert and shown to the senior members to double-check its authenticity. After being examined for uniqueness, it is wrapped in a white cloth and prepared to be placed on a heap of earth for the players to target. According to Purigies tradition, if the players are successful in targeting the Melong, the males win, and if they are not successful in hitting the Melong, the ladies win. So, to protect the Melong from being targeted, women used to go over it or place something above it that would dirty it, making it impossible for men to target it owing to its impurity. However, such activities of contaminating the Melong are no longer acceptable, and I did not witness such practices while attending the event.

The putting of the Melong is the last part of the Archery game, and after that, the festival's archery game festival comes to an end. The game of targeting on the Melong begins with two to three players, but the prerequisite is that the players' parents must be living (Pha-Ma Schangkhan). It is a type of kindness to begin the game of targeting on the Melong by a fortune person. The players that successfully hit the target on the Melong will be awarded a large sum of money, and they must also throw a party for the entire village, either in the form of a feast or by sacrificing a goat or sheep and distributing the flesh to the people. Sheikh Ahmad (Maulvi of the Khardoong Mohallah) and

Zakir Hussain, a teenage boy of roughly 15 years old, were the only two players in the 2020 Archery Festival to hit their target on the Melong. Following the completion of the entire process, all of the players proceeded to Zakir Husain's family's dinner party.

CONCLUDING REMARK

The Sakha-Dafangs festival is on the verge of extinction, but thanks to the love and affection of the people of Chiktan hamlet, they are doing everything they can to keep the festival's sacredness and history alive. The most appealing aspect of this celebration is that it also displays animistic behaviors, which represents the group's historical relationship with animism. The game depicts social cohesion, and this type of festivity is becoming a focal point for local unity.

PICTORIAL GLIMPSE OF THE FESTIVAL



The chit for the lottery method to determine the partners of four players from each team is being prepared by the respective teams.



The outside circle of the local point for archery competition is known as kildir (one point), the small wooden circle is known as Chaga (two points), and the small cylindrical point in the centre of Chaga is known as Zair (Nine Points).



The image of a goat's head is placed on the point to create a target, symbolizing the ancient system of putting the goat's head on the point.



The image of a goat's pair of lungs placed on the point to construct a target on it to represent the ancient system of lung putting.



The expert examines the Melong (traditional mirror) to ensure its authenticity.



Melong is covered in white garments by an expert after it has been checked for authenticity, and it is now ready to be targeted.



An old man in traditional attire targeting on the point

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