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Secret lives of Brok-Pa Aryans in Kargil

There are about 1,000 descendants of these pure Aryans, who live scattered around Gilgit, Hunza, Kargil and Leh. They are nature worshippers and believe in Brog-Pa traditions and celebrate the Bononah (Nature) festival and are strict vegans.

By Murli Menon

I spent one week to study the secret lives of these pure Aryans living at Kargil in October 2004. I maintained a detailed diary of my visit and would like to share the experience I had with one of the most fascinating tribes of India. My destinations were the villages of Dah and Beema (pronounced Beema) in Leh district and the villages of Garkun and Darchik in Kargil district. I planned to trek and visit the most inaccessible pockets of these villages and spend quality time with this historic tribe. Being a strict vegan and practitioner of ZenNLP meditations, I decided to meditate and chant regularly during my uphill sojourn.

We rose early and started our jeep safari at 7:00 a.m. The journey was as pleasurable as the destination. The 130 km drive along the Indus took us through the villages of Khalatse (pronounced Khalsi), Dumkhar, Skurbuchan, Achinathang and Hanuthang. We crossed several high peaks before reaching Beema (14,350 feet). Every photograph we clicked en route resembled a picture postcard. We played soothing music for relaxation throughout this seven hour drive over rugged terrain. The first glimpse of the Indus from miles away was a divine and spiritual experience. A speck of light blue amidst sand dunes, rocks and stone. It resembled a stream nestling in the palm of Nature's hand. The closer we got to the river, the more beautiful it looked. We finally arrived at Beema. The ice cold bath on the turbulent waters of this river steeped in history, calmed my body, mind and soul. The tranquility experienced while meditating on its banks, on a bed of round pebbles resembling marbles was indescribable.

There is a self-imposed prohibition in these Brok-Pa (Ladakhi word for Aryan or white skin) villages. The sarpanch had empowered the women to ensure that no alcohol was brought from Leh by locals, tourists or outsiders. After a thorough frisking of my bag by three women resembling Greek goddesses, they let me enter the PWD guest house. Here I met my first Aryan, the chowkidar named Sonam Thondup. He knew a smattering of Hindi and



The author with one of the Aryans, and his photographs of others.

through a combination of sign language, body language, eye movements and facial expressions, I tried to create rapport with this hostile Aryan, who told me that my visit to Dah in September was not welcome. I was the only occupant of the guest house and I handed over my inner line permit and letter from the collector Mr. Satish Nehru to Thondup. After settling in my room, I went out but found few shops. The view from my room was picturesque and the gurgle of the Indus like music.

The next morning, I was summoned to the sarpanch's house for a purification ritual. I had to trek 10 km over mountain streams, rock and stone to reach his house in Laisthiang village. Thondup had sent two tough looking escorts who accompanied me to the top. It took us almost two hours to reach. The landscape began to change and a canopy of green could be seen. Walnut and apricot trees stretched across the horizon and the fields were full of grain, ready to be harvested.

I found out later that the staple food of these Aryans was barley, grown in these terraced fields and irrigated by the mountain streams that rush to meet the Indus flowing below. The ascent was rather steep and the altitude nearly 17,000 feet. I kept replenishing my body fluids by drinking lots of natural mineral water from the countless streams that crossed on our way.

Presently there are about 1000 descendants of these pure Aryans, who live scattered around Gilgit, Hunza, Kargil and Leh. They are nature worshippers and believe in Brog-pa

traditions and celebrate the Bononah (Nature) festival and are strict vegans. These pure Aryans observe taboos against cows and hens and do not eat their flesh, eggs or consume milk or milk products. Hens and cows are not kept.

This minuscule community bars both their men and women from marrying non-Aryans and polygamy and polyandry are common. Couples who do not conceive are free to choose other partners. 80% Aryans marry in their own villages, while 20% marry in neighboring villages. They worship the Juniper tree (Cilgi Deuha). Two 500 years old Juniper trees crown the village of Dah, where the tri-annual Bononah festival is held on a full moon night during October. They symbolically draw energy from these ancient Juniper trees by hugging them after a ceremonial dance. They also respect the swastika symbol (clockwise) and Om.

The trek to Dah from Beema to visit the sacred juniper groves took us three hours. It was a dangerous trek, as we crossed several craggy peaks, holding on to tiny crevices to haul ourselves up. We could hear gunfire across the Indo-POK border. My inner line permit was checked at the army post. I hugged the ancient juniper trees to soak in their energy.

The energy aura of these trees was phenomenal giving you a new vigour in each and every cell of your body.

I then visited a few of the elderly Aryans. They still observe their taboos of intoxicating substances, milk, eggs and meat. I shared a meal with them consisting of barley rotis, lettuce, roast-

ed potatoes, spring onions, boiled cauliflower and wild mint. Women cooked in an open hearth.

The next week, I trekked to the other Aryan villages including Baldes, Samit, Garkun, Darchik and Hanu. The population of these Brok-pa Aryans could not be more than a few thousand. Surprisingly, they have maintained their racial purity over 5000 years and continue to practise nature worship in one of the most hostile terrains at altitudes above 15000 feet, subsisting on a vegan diet. Music and dance are a way of life for these Aryans. Both men and women wear colorful traditional costumes, decorating their hair with colorful flowers and are full of joie de vivre. They live in harmony with nature, are cheerful and stress free in spite of living in small rock shelters.

Both men and women trek long distances. Almonds, apricots and walnuts are part of their diet along with endless cups of black tea fortified with barley flour. The weather in September is pleasantly cold, though temperatures in January can plummet to minus 20 degrees C.

There are an unusually large number of Aryans above the age of 70. Many of them are active even at 90. Their most striking feature is their looks. Their blue eyes, aristocratic noses, round eyes, fair complexion and flawless skin, made them ethnically distinct from Ladakhis or Kashmiris. They restrict their contact with the outside world and are happy in their isolated existence. Married women braid their hair, which makes them resemble Greeks. Some of the families I stayed with include

Misken Soman, Shirin Konshkit, Tsering Dolma, Sonam Dolma, Sonam Lamo, Tashi Panma, Tsering Chospel, Chewen Dolma, Tsering Nurbu and Tsering Jorphel. One of the ladies I photographed at Dah could be mistaken for a German tourist. She was blonde, had blonde eyebrows, high cheek bones, rotund face and unmistakable German features.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the lives of these Aryans is a belief in prophecies and the recording of dreams. Most elderly Aryans, meet in the morning at the Juniper grove and discuss their dreams as if nature was communicating to them through the language of dreams.

The fresh mountain air, the crystal clear water of the mountain streams, the nutritious vegan diet, trance music, chanting, dream ceremonies and tree worship could be responsible for the survival of this minuscule community, living in an Himalayan Shangri-La.

One of the Aryan folk songs (creation myths) sung at the Bononah festival is translated as follows: In the beginning there was water all over the earth and some of it froze. Dust settled on this patch of ice. Later, a small patch of grass appeared on the frozen patch and soon, a juniper tree sprouted from the earth. The whole universe was created by Chag (Fire), Ser (Water) and Yun (Earth).

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