

A Malayali in Moonland

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THE name, Moonland tourist bungalow, my home at Leh for three weeks, summed up the landscape — large tracts of barren land, craggy rocks and mountains. A chilly morning greeted me. Endless cups of warm black tea, prepared by Mohammed Rasool, the caretaker of the JKTDC tourist bungalow, was the nectar I needed during my stay in Ladakh.

I kept insisting I was a vegetarian and did not consume milk or milk products. The Ladakhi's immediate question was, "Are you an Aryan?" When I replied I was from Kerala, Rasool told me that on the border between Leh and Kargil, there were a handful of villages where Aryans called the Brok-Pa lived. They did not rear cows or hens or consume milk. Neither did they eat eggs, fish or meat. As these villages were surrounded by barren hills and at heights of over 15,000 feet, very few outsiders visited the Brok-Pa.

I decided to spend a week studying the secret lives of the Aryans. My destinations were the villages of Dah and Beema in Leh district and Garkun and Darchik in Kargil district.

We started our jeep safari at 7:00 am. The 130 km seven-hour drive over rugged terrain took us through the villages of Khalatse, Dumkhar, Skurbuchan, Achinathang and Hanuthang. We crossed several high peaks before reaching Beema, located at 14,350 feet.

The first glimpse of the Indus resembled a speck of light blue amid sand dunes, rocks and stone. The ice cold bath in the turbulent waters of this river calmed my body, mind and soul. The tranquillity experienced while meditating on a bed of round pebbles near the banks of the Indus cannot be described in words.

A group of women checked my bags as I got down from my vehicle. There is a self-imposed prohibition in these villages. The sarpanch had authorised the women to ensure no alcohol was brought from Leh by locals, tourists or outsiders. After frisking my bag thoroughly the three women, resembling Greek Goddesses, let me enter the PWD guest-house. Here I met my first Aryan, Sonam Thondup the *chowkidar*. He knew a smattering of Hindi. Through sign language, body language, eye movements and facial expressions, I tried to create rapport with this hostile Aryan, who told me, in no uncertain terms, that my visit to Dah was not welcome. I was the only occupant of the PWD guest-house. I handed over my inner line permit and letter from the collector Satish Nehru, to Thondup. He reluctantly gave me the keys. The PWD guest-house at Beema is located on the banks of the Indus. The gurgling sound of the river was soothing music to my ears.

The next morning, I was summoned to the sarpanch's house for a purification ritual. I had to trek 10 km over mountain streams, rocks and stones to reach his house. Thondup sent two tough looking escorts. It took us almost two hours to reach Laisthiang — the sarpanch's village. Walnut and apricot trees stretched across the horizon and the fields were full of grain. I later found out that the staple food of the Aryans was barley, grown on terraced fields and irrigated by mountain streams. The ascent was steep and the altitude nearly 17,000 feet. I kept drinking lots of natural mineral water from the countless streams that criss-crossed our way.

We reached the hut of the sarpanch atop a hill. Women peeled apricots in his garden. Some of them were breaking apricot seeds to remove almonds. Hundreds of fresh walnuts lay on the floor. I resisted the impulse to pick up some.

Two old women came out of the hut with burning roots of an unidentified tree in their hands (I later learnt it was a juniper tree). I chanted the gayatri mantra silently. I was about to experience the cleansing ritual of the Aryans. This was mandatory for all outsiders who entered their village. The old women, started chanting in unison and the eldest one

brought the juniper smoke close to my face and symbolically waved it across my body.

Later I met the sarpanch, Angmo. His wife poured me a cup of black tea, which I relished. Angmo put some barley flour in my tea. I told them about my being a strict vegetarian and that I wanted to know more about their food habits, music, dance and culture. The NLP had begun to work. The sarpanch issued instructions to my escort to take me to all the neighbouring villages and introduce me to the orthodox Aryans.

About 1000 descendants of these Aryans, whose history can be traced back 5000 years, still live around Gilgit, Hunza, Kargil and Leh. They are nature worshippers and celebrate the Bononah or Nature Festival. They worship the juniper tree (*Cilgi Deuha*). Two 500-year-old Juniper trees crown the village of Dah, which is the venue of the Bononah festival, held on a full moon night in October once every three years. The Aryans draw energy from these ancient Juniper trees by hugging them after a ceremonial dance.

This minuscule community bars marriage to non-Aryans to maintain their racial purity. Polygamy and polyandry is common. Couples who do not conceive are free to choose other partners. About 80% of Aryans marry within their villages while 20% choose a mate from neighbouring villages.



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In the wee hours of the morning I trekked three hours to Dah to visit the sacred juniper groves. My escort was Tsewang Nurbu. It was a dangerous trek. We crossed craggy peaks, hanging on to tiny crevices for support. We could hear sounds of gunfire across the Indo-POK border. I chanted continuously throughout this hair-raising experience.

We reached the ancient juniper trees by noon. I hugged the trees to soak in their energy.

The energy aura of these trees was phenomenal. The Brok-Pa worship trees and observe a strict taboo against tree felling. I then visited a few elderly Aryans. I shared a meal with these humble villagers. It consisted of jo (barley) rotis baked in an earthen oven, lettuce leaves, roasted potatoes, spring onions, boiled cauliflower and wild mint. Women cooked in an open hearth, burning fallen twigs, collected from the trees in their courtyard. The simple meal was fresh and tasty. We serve a similar raw diet at our ZeNLP based corporate stress management workshops.

There is an unusually large number of Brok-Pa above the age of 70. Many elderly Aryans are active even at the age of 90. The most striking feature of these people is their looks. Their blue eyes, aristocratic noses, round eyes, fair complexion and flawless skin make them ethnically distinct from Ladakhis or Kashmiris. The Brok-Pa have

restricted their contact with the outside world and are happy with their isolated existence. Married women braid their hair, which makes them look Greek.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Brok-Pa is a belief in prophecies and recording of dreams. Most elderly members meet in the morning at the juniper grove and discuss their dreams as if nature was communicating to them.

In ZeNLP terms, the Brok-Pa programme their body through exercise, mind through music and soul through prayer. Their way of life is in harmony with nature and could explain the survival of this minuscule community, living in a Himalayan Shangri-La practising their ancient religion over centuries of isolation.

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Footnote: NLP: Neuro linguistic programming. ZeNLP: Zen neuro linguistic programming.