

Landscape of Resistance: A case of Cultural Landscape of Turtuk, Ladakh

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Abstract— The village of Turtuk is the last major settlement of India before the Line of Control beyond which lies the Gilgit-Baltistan Region. Once a major stop along the Silk Route, Turtuk used to be part of PoK (Pakistan occupied Kashmir) until it was occupied by the Indian Army in 1971. This Muslim village, in a Buddhist realm within a Hindu majority country is what gives the village a mystical feel. Surrounded by the Karakoram ranges and divided by the glacial stream, the village shows immense dependence on these landscape features.

Having a very dramatic history, the 2400 population of people have somehow managed to resist technology and other lifestyle altering global transformations. Open to tourists only from 2010, the locals here prefer seclusion, but are more than happy to see tourists as it brings to the village good economy. The people of Turtuk appear to have created a self-sustaining existence which is in complete harmony with their surroundings, whilst adhering to traditions that have been passed down by generations.

This paper will explore the wisdom that is inherent in the traditional practices of the village of Turtuk. From the stone made fridges to Apricot and Buckwheat plantations, these cultural landscapes resonate the distinct character of people of Turtuk. Also, one need's to learn how this village despite the changing conditions across other villages of India, still manages to retain its unique identity. The aim of the paper will be to develop baseline knowledge of the physical and social characteristics.

Keywords— Turtuk, Ladakh, Cultural Landscape

I. PAPER

A. Premise

"We are inheritors of a rural civilization. The vastness of our country, the vastness of the population, the situation and the climate of the country have, in my opinion, destined it for a rural civilization. Its defects are well known but not one of them is irremediable. To uproot it and substitute for it an urban civilization seems to me an impossibility, unless we are prepared by some drastic means to reduce the population from three hundred million to three or say even thirty. I can therefore suggest remedies on the assumption that we must perpetuate the present rural civilization and endeavor to rid it of its acknowledged defects. This can only be done if the youth of the country will settle down to village life. And if they will do this they must reconstruct their life and pass every day of their vacation in the villages surrounding their colleges or high schools and those who have finished their education or

are not receiving any should think of settling down in villages." Gandhi ji

(Young India, 7-11-1929; 42:108.)

As per the 2011 Census of India only 31% of people live in urban areas, the rest 69% are still rural. This rural population is enriched with traditional landscape values and meaning overtime. Their rural landscape practices were for a very long time respecting the environment they live in, Landscape here comprises both physical forms and cultural symbols, meanings and values. Because of this associative values, the concept of cultural landscape has become a major object of interest in planning, conservation, recreation, agricultural sciences and humanities. In this paper, the village of Turtuk will be projected as a settlement that has retained its essence due to its very intense cultural and landscape context, where the people are actually the guardian of the landscape.

B. Introduction to Turtuk

1) *History*: Turtuk used to be inhabited by an Aryan tribe called 'Brokpa' centuries ago whose ruined fort can be still found in the mountain of the village. Then around 7 -8 centuries ago, two warriors, named Chuli and Yangdrung of supposedly central Asian origin came to turtuk and killed the King. Eventually most of the people fled to the other side of the mountain which are known as *Dah, Hanu, Biama, Garkon,* and *Darchik*. *Chuli* and *Yangdrung* then started living in Turtuk. Right now, there are few families who are actual decedents of them, *Ashoor* family being one of descendent of Yangdrung. With time, people from different areas came to Turtuk in search of work, trade or other reasons and later got settled in Turtuk. That's the reason Turtuk has so many variations racially. The religion followed by the Brokpa people is not known yet. But Chuli and Yangdrung were Bon follower. The people of Turtuk practiced Bon religion until the arrival of the famous Iranian poet and prominent Muslim scholar, Ameer Kabeer Syed Ali Hamadani in the 15th century who converted most of the population to Noorbakshi Islam, and soon became dominant. Balti is a Tibetic languagespoken in the Baltistan region. It is quite different from Standard Tibetan. Many sounds of Old Tibetan that were lost in Standard Tibetan are retained in the Balti language. It also has a simple pitch accent system only in multi-syllabic words while Standard Tibetan has a complex and distinct pitch system that includes tone contour. The cultural heritage of

Baltis are rich, beautiful and unique and it manifests in local traditions, music and local dress. The dress plays a central role in identity of a person. Traditional clothing of the region is influenced by local culture, geography and weather.



Figure 1 – The Turtuk Palace of Yabgo Dynasty

2) *Topography and Geography*: Turtuk is a small village in the north-eastern part of Ladakh. It is sandwiched between two majestic mountain ranges of the world viz. the Himalaya on one side and the Karakoram on the other side beside the banks of Shyok River. Turtuk was under Pakistan control until the war of 1971, after which India gained control of this strategic area. Though Turtuk is now politically in Ladakh province, but geographically, linguistically and culturally Turtuk is a part of the Baltistan region and is one among four such villages in India, the other being Tyakshi, Chalunkha and Thang.

The Karakoram is a large mountain range spanning the borders between Pakistan, India and China, located in the regions of Gilgit/Balistan area of Pakistan, Ladakh area of India and Xinjiang area of China. In the 500km of its length, its home to the highest concentration of peaks which are over 8000m in height. In midst of all the peaks lies Turtuk which is on an elevation of 3001m with dry sandy plains irrigated by the Shyok River.

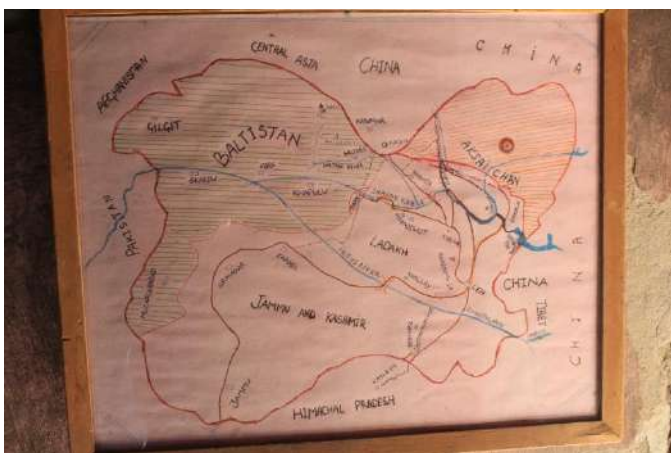


Figure 2 – Map showing the location of Baltistan region and Turtuk



Figure 3 – Shyok river to the right

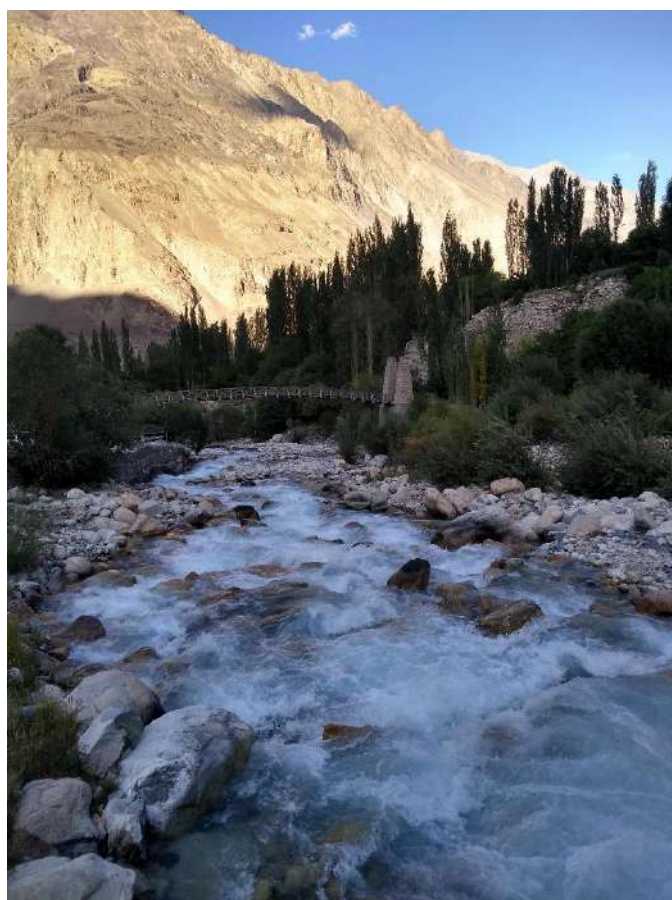


Figure 4 – Turlok Lungpa stream that divides Turtuk into Youl and Faroul

Turtuk forms the northern boundary of the Karakoram ranges and is interposed by the Shyok River which separates the range from the Himalayan range. Observing four seasons viz. winter (Nov-Mar), spring (Apr-May), summer (Jun-Aug) and autumn (Sep-Oct), Turtuk compared to Leh, receives more precipitation with an annual average of 50-70mm. Therefore the cropping season is also more, starting from early March till mid-October. The winds are fairly humid moving in northwesterly direction having very high velocity during mid-day that turn to gentle breeze by day-end. Due to the harsh climate and low temperatures the number and type of vegetation is very limited. Certain areas near the riverbank are

quite fertile and hence only certain agricultural crops and plants are grown.

3) *Settlement*: In Turtuk, nucleated village type of settlements in which houses are very close to each other and various activities are centralized under the influence of common way of life. It is said that in the early period men folk used to go away for labour, leaving behind women and children, therefore the house are closely attached so that the women could share their sorrows and difficulty together. Also just like any village in India, one will find a Chaupal known as 'Changra' which is surrounded by trees. People from the locality sit under the shade of these trees just for gossip and consultation on day to day matters, taking decisions in social and cultural interest of their village. It is a place where disputes are disposed of and frame of action is evolved for administrative matter of the village. In the past, elders of the village frequented Changra to spend their leisure hours and shared routine work. They also congregated here before and after polo completions, playing special tunes on the flute. The reference of this area is seen in a lot of Balti languages.

The architecture of Turtuk is mostly in brickwork with an average height of 6ft with small doors and windows due to the severity of the climate. Old houses consist of the first floor with six to seven rooms namely – karma, rafsal (guest room used for gatherings on special occasions such as eid), norlhas, taqrah, zod (store room), Balti. Half the height of the rooms are generally underground. The direction of the Qibla is particularly taken into account while laying the foundation of a house. In earlier houses, there was no custom of providing bathroom, rather there were particular streams that served as bathing places with rampart around them for the purpose of privacy and seclusion. Roofs of the houses serve many purposes, one of which is storing the firewood and dung and the other is drying of apricot, mulberry and other fruits and vegetables.

Turtuk is a village in the north –eastern part of Ladakh. It is sandwiched between two majestic mountain ranges of the world, viz the Himalaya and the Karakoram on the banks of the Shyok River. Turtuk was under Pakistan's control until 1971, after which India gained control of this strategic area. Though Turtuk is now politically in Ladakh province, but geographically, linguistically and culturally Turtuk is a part of the Baltistan Region and is one among four villages in India, the other three being *Tyakshi*, *Chalunkha* and *Thang*. It is predominantly a Muslim Village, and residents speak Balti language. Turtuk is the last outpost in India after which *Gilgit-*

Baltistan

begins.



Figure 5 – Buckwheat plantation at Turtuk-Faroul



Figure 6 – Changra outside old mosque at Turtuk-Youl



Figure 7 – Apricots drying on the roof

C. Learnings

There are various reasons why Turtuk is being considered as Landscape of Resistance, which are enumerated below:

- 1) The combination of its difficult terrain and harsh climatic conditions.
- 2) Its location is critical as one has to cross the world's highest pass.
- 3) The fact that it's the last village of the country located on the India-Pakistan border.
- 4) Globalization and tourism has not affected the region as it has just opened up for tourists.

Despite the above reasons Turtuk, through its local wisdom has managed to survive independently and prosperously so.

D. Conclusion

The concept of cultural landscape not only as a physical expression of human resource use over time and space but are also a reflection of human beliefs and values which is very useful since it is wide-ranging and multidisciplinary. After understanding the landscape of Turtuk, we are highly motivated to understand the rural communities of our country which have so much potential for future research.

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