

Tribes of Ladakh, Major Tribes, Culture, Lifestyle & Traditions

August 11, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



Ladakh is not only known for its high mountains, monasteries and beautiful landscapes. It is also home to several **tribal communities with distinct languages, traditions, occupations and ways of life**. Living in one of the world's harshest high-altitude environments, these communities have developed unique ways to adapt to cold weather, limited vegetation and difficult terrain.

The major Scheduled Tribe communities of Ladakh include **Balti, Beda, Bot/Boto, Brokpa/Drokpa/Dard/Shin, Changpa, Garra, Mon and Purigpa**. The 2011 Census recorded **2,18,193 Scheduled Tribe people in Ladakh**, while the Ministry of Tribal Affairs places Ladakh's ST population at about **79.5% of its population** based on Census 2011.

Major Tribes of Ladakh

Ladakh is home to several **Scheduled Tribe communities**, each with its own language, traditions, occupations and cultural practices. The major communities officially listed for Ladakh include **Balti, Beda, Bot/Boto, Brokpa/Drokpa/Dard/Shin, Changpa, Garra, Mon and Purigpa**.

1. Changpa

The **Changpa** are traditionally **semi-nomadic pastoralists** mainly found in the **Changthang region of eastern Ladakh**. Their lifestyle is closely connected with livestock, high-altitude pastures and the production of **Pashmina wool**.

- **Major region:** Changthang, eastern Ladakh
- **Traditional occupation: Pastoralism and livestock rearing**
- They rear **Changthangi goats, sheep, yaks and horses**.
- They are especially famous for producing **high-quality Pashmina wool**.
- Many families traditionally move seasonally in search of **grazing pastures and water**.
- Their traditional portable tents are known as **Rebo**.
- Their lifestyle is closely adapted to the **cold and dry high-altitude environment**.
- **Pashmina production** remains an important source of livelihood for Changpa pastoralists.

2. Brokpa

The **Brokpa**, also known as **Drokpa, Dard or Shin**, are an important tribal community associated with the **Dha-Hanu region of Ladakh**. They are known for their distinctive cultural traditions, traditional dress and strong **Dardic heritage**.

- **Major region:** Dha, Hanu, Garkone and Darchik areas
- **Traditional occupations: Agriculture, livestock rearing and horticulture**
- The community has a distinct **Dardic linguistic and cultural heritage**.
- Brokpa villages are often associated with the area popularly known as the **Aryan Valley**.
- They are known for their colourful **traditional dress and jewellery**.
- Women traditionally wear distinctive floral **headgear**, which is an important cultural symbol.
- **Folk songs, dances and festivals** help preserve their traditional identity.
- Their settled lifestyle differs from the more mobile pastoral lifestyle of the Changpa.

3. Bot or Boto

The **Bot/Boto** are one of the important tribal communities of Ladakh and are closely associated with the region's **traditional Ladakhi Buddhist and agrarian culture**. Their way of life has historically centred around settled villages, farming and livestock.

- **Major region:** Leh and other parts of Ladakh
- **Religion:** Predominantly **Tibetan Buddhism**
- **Traditional occupations: Agriculture and animal husbandry**
- They traditionally cultivate crops such as **barley, wheat and peas**.
- Livestock provides important products such as **milk, meat and wool**.
- Their cultural life is closely connected with **Buddhist monasteries and festivals**.
- Traditional **Ladakhi architecture, food, clothing and folk traditions** are important parts of their cultural identity.

- The community represents an important part of the **settled agrarian society of Ladakh**.

4. Balti

The **Balti** are an important tribal community mainly associated with **Kargil and the western parts of Ladakh**. They have a distinctive language and cultural identity shaped by the historical connections of Ladakh with **Tibet, Central Asia and the Himalayan region**.

- **Major region:** Kargil and surrounding areas
- **Religion:** Predominantly **Islam**
- **Language:** **Balti**
- **Traditional occupations:** **Agriculture, horticulture, livestock rearing and trade**
- Fruit cultivation and **horticulture** are important in several Balti settlements.
- The community has a rich tradition of **folk music, food, clothing and cultural practices**.
- **Balti cuisine** reflects the region's mountain environment and historical cultural connections.
- Their language and traditions form an important part of **Kargil's cultural diversity**.

5. Purigpa

The **Purigpa** are traditionally associated with the **Purig region of Kargil**. They have a distinct cultural identity and speak **Purgi**, a language widely used in the region.

- **Major region:** Purig and Kargil areas
- **Religion:** Predominantly **Islam**
- **Language:** **Purgi**
- **Traditional occupations:** **Agriculture, livestock rearing and local trade**
- Farming is supported by the relatively fertile valleys of the **Purig region**.
- The community has historically maintained cultural links with **Tibet and Central Asia**.
- **Folk songs, traditional food, clothing and local customs** form an important part of Purigpa culture.
- The Purigpa community contributes significantly to the **cultural heritage of Kargil**.

6. Mon

The **Mon** are a traditional community of Ladakh associated historically with **skilled crafts and occupational activities**. Historical accounts of Ladakh mention Mon settlements in different parts of the region.

- **Major region:** Different parts of Ladakh
- **Traditional occupations:** **Craftsmanship and skilled occupations**
- They have historically been associated with **carpentry, music and other traditional skills**.
- Their skills were important in traditional village economies.
- **Woodwork and craftsmanship** were particularly useful in constructing houses and making household items.
- The community reflects the importance of **traditional occupational groups** in Ladakhi society.

- Modern education and changing employment patterns have gradually transformed many traditional occupations.

7. Beda

The **Beda** are traditionally associated with **music, performing arts and entertainment** in Ladakhi society. Their contribution is particularly important to the region's folk and cultural traditions.

- **Major occupation: Music and performing arts**
- Traditionally performed at **festivals, celebrations and community gatherings**.
- They helped preserve **folk songs, music and oral traditions**.
- Traditional musical performances formed an important part of local social events.
- Their cultural role demonstrates the importance of **occupational communities in Ladakhi society**.
- Modernisation has changed many traditional occupations, but their historical contribution remains an important part of **Ladakh's cultural heritage**.

8. Garra

The **Garra** are traditionally associated with **blacksmithing and metalworking**. Their skills were important in traditional Ladakhi villages, where locally produced and repaired tools were essential for agriculture and everyday life.

- **Traditional occupation: Blacksmithing and metalworking**
- They traditionally made and repaired **agricultural tools and household implements**.
- Their skills supported farming and other local occupations.
- **Metal craftsmanship** was an important traditional skill in rural Ladakh.
- The Garra represent the role of **traditional artisans** in Ladakh's village economy.
- Modern tools and manufactured products have reduced the dependence on some traditional metalworking practices.
- Preserving such skills is important for maintaining **Ladakh's traditional craft heritage**.

Government Schemes and Initiatives for Tribal Communities

The government has introduced various **welfare, livelihood, education and development initiatives** to improve the socio-economic conditions of tribal communities in Ladakh while also supporting their **traditional livelihoods, culture and heritage**.

- **Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP):** Focuses on directing development resources towards **Scheduled Tribe communities** and improving their access to education, healthcare, infrastructure and livelihood opportunities.
- **Pashmina Development Initiatives:** Special attention is given to **Changpa pastoralists** through support for **Pashmina goat rearing, animal health, breeding, processing and market access**.
- **Ladakh Pashmina Development Board:** The board aims to strengthen the **Pashmina value chain** and improve income opportunities for pastoral communities involved in Pashmina production.

- **Production-Based Incentives for Pashmina Herders:** Financial incentives have been introduced to encourage **Pashmina production** and provide better returns to local herders.
- **Tribal Welfare and Education Support:** Government programmes support **scholarships, hostels, educational facilities and skill development** for students belonging to Scheduled Tribes.
- **Healthcare and Basic Infrastructure:** Development efforts focus on improving **healthcare, roads, drinking water, electricity and connectivity** in remote tribal settlements.
- **Livelihood and Skill Development:** Tribal communities are encouraged to develop **handicrafts, handlooms, tourism, agriculture, horticulture and other income-generating activities**.
- **Support for Traditional Crafts:** Initiatives promote **Ladakhi handicrafts, weaving, wool products and traditional skills**, helping artisans preserve their cultural heritage while generating income.
- **Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** Tribal women and rural communities are encouraged to form **Self-Help Groups** to improve financial independence, entrepreneurship and access to livelihood opportunities.
- **Cultural Preservation:** Government programmes also focus on protecting **tribal languages, traditional knowledge, folk arts, crafts and cultural practices** while integrating communities into modern development.

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/tribes-of-ladakh/>

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