

Role of *amchi* and *onpo* in Ladakhi society; past, present, and future

Padma Gurmet

“Ladakh” popularly known as little Tibet in the west has been the custodian of Tibetan art and culture for centuries. Five major and five minor Tibetan arts and sciences have been popularly practiced in Ladakh since ages. Being historically, culturally and geographically close to each other Ladakh and Tibet has always been in touch throughout the history. Until Chinese occupation of Tibet, it used to be the higher study center for Ladakhi students. Besides religion *Amchi* (Tibetan- sMan, English- medicine) and *Onpo* (Tibetan- rTsis, English- astrology/astronomy) studies used to be the favorite subjects of the students due to its high social and religious acceptance. There are still some Tibet-trained *Amchis* and *Onpos* are practicing in Ladakh.

Amchi (Practitioner of Tibetan medicine) and *Onpo* (Practitioner of Tibetan Astrology) have been a major part of day-to-day social and spiritual life of Ladakhi society. Every major village and hamlet has been having an *Amchi* and *Onpo* of their own since ages. They were well respected in the society as *skutak* (higher class) and their place in social gatherings is always after the *lama* (monk). The villagers used to offer crops during harvesting time and free labor every year to the *Amchi* and *Onpo* family for their services. It was therefore being an *Amchi* or *Onpo* has been matter of great dignity in Ladakhi society. It takes several years to become a skillful *Amchi* or *Onpo*, which includes hard theoretical and practical trainings. In Ladakh generally *Amchi* and *Onpos* are trained through *rGudpa* (lineage) system in families. After finishing their training the new *Amchi* has to give an exam in front of entire community in presence of few expert *Amchis* in a ceremony called *rtsa-mkrid*. Good knowledge of Buddhism and *Onpo* (Astrology) is also very important requirement for a qualified *Amchi*.

The services of *Amchi* medicine have always been significant for the people of Ladakh. Before the 1960s *Amchi* used to be the only health care facility for the people and even after the introduction of modern medicine with all government support it cannot replace *Amchi* system in many parts of Ladakh till now. *Amchis* have not only social respect but also spiritual respect as the representatives of *Sangyas-sManla* (Medicine Buddha) and their services for ailing beings are priceless. Besides treating the patients as doctor of the village *Amchis* and *Onpos* are most learned and resourceful persons of the village and many times they are village headmen (*Goba*). The relation between *Amchi* and patients is always cordial, according to Ladakhi tradition *Amchi* never ask for cost for their medicine and services, whatever the patient wish or afford they can offer and even most of the time it goes without any price.

The role of an *Onpo* in Ladakhi society starts with the birth of new baby and its service will be required throughout life till the cremation of the body. It is considered necessary to visit an *Onpo* when the child is a new born to prepare the complete life prediction of the baby (*Skai-skar*), which states the major difficulties and disease in life, marital status, number of children, financial status, time and mode of death etc. Every major event in Ladakhi life and society like sowing, harvesting, marriage, entering a new house, religious ceremonies and so on, is fixed with the consultation of an *Onpo*.

Till now the role of an *Amchi* and *Onpo* is very active in Ladakh, but with time and modernity things are rapidly changing with some positive and negative effects. The traditional *Amchi* practice is replacing with formal *Amchi* clinics and Institutional trainings. The renowned village *Amchis* prefer to practice in urban areas with formal clinics, the personal relation between *Amchi* and patient is gradually losing and *Amchis* started charging for their medicine and services. The training of *Onpo* can be also obtained from formal Institutions. The traditional *Onpos* are now preparing calendars with elaborate paintings and pocket diary with astrological predictions.

The biggest setback for the survival of these traditions in the coming generations is the lack of interest in young educated people in absences of good Government job opportunities. Most of the ancient *Amchi* and *Onpo* families have already lost their family tradition and are only left with the family names. However little efforts have been taken by the *Amchi* leaders and some *Amchis* have been given some Govt. support. Unfortunately, it is not enough for survival of this tradition unless it gets proper support from national and international communities. This paper will focus on above issues in light of author's experiences and discussion with Ladakhi *Amchis* and *Onpos*