

Mon, Ladakh

The tiny Mon ethnic group of Jammu and Kashmir in northern India is one of the smallest Buddhist groups in the world, yet it has had a large and influential role in history.

The Indian government only recognized the Mon as a Scheduled Tribe in 1989, so no figure was given for them at the time of the 1981 census. The researcher R R S Prasad, however, has estimated a 1998 population of 700 Mon people.¹ They live in Ladakh and Kargil districts of Jammu and Kashmir, in villages along the banks of the Indus River. The area inhabited by the Ladakh Mon is extreme, with temperatures plummeting to minus 20 degrees in the winter and severe snowstorms blocking roads and tracks for weeks at a time.

The Mon are renowned as flute players and musicians. They move about in tandem with the similar Beda tribe. The Ladakhi seem to treat the Mon as a kind of low musician caste. While they utilize their services and appreciate their musical talents, most Ladakhi would not consider to 'eat the food or drink the water touched by them'.² The Ladakh Mon 'play the flute and provide music to all those who engage their service on festive and religious occasions, and for this they get an annual payment of grain from all peasant families after the harvest. . . . During dance performances on the occasion of marriage, they play the flute and drums and are paid with money and gifts. During the sowing of crops, they sing *goru* songs and are paid for this too. After the harvest, the Mon visit the houses of the Ladakhi to provide *larango* music and are offered grain and salt. . . . They also perform music on the occasion of childbirth.'³

The Mon of Ladakh are not related at all to the identically

named Mon of Southeast Asia. While members of this latter group speak a language from the Austro-Asiatic linguistic family, the Ladakh Mon language is part of the Indo-European family.

Despite their tiny size, the Ladakh Mon are an ancient people who played a major role in the history of this part of the Himalayas,⁴ as is evident from the rock carvings and ruins still known as Mon-castles. They are representatives of Aryan people who intermingled with the people of Mongoloid origin.¹⁵ Wahid Saddiq explains that the term 'Mon' is found in many locations throughout the Himalayas 'and is generally applied to valley dwellers by the Tibetan speaking peoples. The Ladakhi Mon, who were earlier agriculturists, appear to have been important members of society. Today, however, they have been relegated to a low status in Ladakh social system, and are members of the *rignun* or low class.¹⁶

All Ladakh Mon believe in Tibetan Buddhism. They call in lamas to officiate at special occasions such as births, deaths and marriages. The major Buddhist festivals

celebrated by the Ladakh Mon are the Losar and Purnima.

There are no known Christians among the 700 Ladakh Mon. Despite their distinctive culture, history and language, they have never appeared on Christian lists of unreached people groups in India, so few believers are even aware of their existence.



Julian Hawken



Overview of the Ladakh Mon

Other Names: Mon

Population Sources:

700 in India (1998, R R S Prasad)

Language: Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Northwestern Zone, Dardic, Shina

Dialects: 0

Professing Buddhists: 100%

Practising Buddhists: 70%

Christians: 0%

Scripture: none

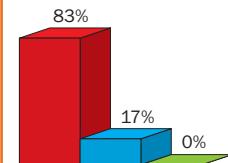
Jesus film: none

Gospel Recordings: none

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: none

Status of Evangelization



A = Have never heard the gospel
B = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians
C = Are adherents to some form of Christianity