

Understanding the importance of food festivals: the case of *Mamani*, the ethnic food festival of Ladakh, India

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The present study aims to give a comprehensive picture of *Mamani*, the sole ethnic food festival of Ladakh, India. A total of 40 people, selected at random, were involved in the interviews and discussions after receiving their prior consent. The annual *Mamani* festival promotes the preparation and consumption of traditional Ladakhi foods. It indicates the end of the harsher part of the winter season and is also considered a tribune for showcasing the communal and social harmony of the region. This festival will boost winter tourism in Ladakh. It will also be a helpful tool in the introduction of local foods at Anganwadi centres and schools. In light of modernization, this time-tradition that has started to fade needs to be revived on priority.

Keywords: Ethnic food festival, *fating*, *Mamani*, *tsab-skhur*.

LADAKH, a trans-Himalayan union territory of India since the ancient period has an extraordinary relationship with nature. The natives enjoy every season of the year with great zeal and enthusiasm. Ladakh is known for its harsh winters with average temperatures ranging between -20°C and -30°C . To cope with this period, several festivals are being celebrated in its twin districts, i.e. Leh and Kargil. Another reason for celebrating festivals in the winter is due to the people becoming free from all farming activities as farming is only possible during the summer season. One such festival is *Mamani*, an ethnic food festival that is celebrated by both Muslim and Buddhist communities in Ladakh. It is currently celebrated in majority of the blocks of Kargil district and Skurbuchan block of Leh district. It is also celebrated in Kargil and Leh cities by the inhabitants of these areas. Currently it is also celebrated in Bilargo, Brolmo and Skilma villages of Baltistan (a region in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir). The festival is not associated with either Buddhism or Islam, the two prominent religions of Ladakh, but is still practiced as a tradition. The annual *Mamani* festival promotes the preparation and consumption of tra-

ditional Ladakhi foods, whose nutritional value and social importance have been tested by generations over centuries. It also marks the end of winter and the beginning of the spring season. As per the local calendar, 21 January is the end of the *Mamani* month, locally known as *byaroq lza* which is regarded as the end of the harsher part of the winter. Traditionally, it was celebrated on that very date, but after Islam came to these lands, Muslims celebrated it on Friday or Thursday before or after the particular date.

To the best of our knowledge, no prior comprehensive study about this traditional festival has been done. This can be understood by the fact that very limited documented resources related to it are available in the public domain. Thus, the current study intends to contribute to the repository of literature about ethnic festivals by focusing on the role of this food festival as a potential candidate for the conservation and revival of traditional knowledge systems.

Methodology

Study area

Ladakh region, the study area (Figure 1), is administratively divided into Leh and Kargil districts. Leh is situated approximately between 32° – 36°N and 75° – 80°E and Kargil



Figure 1. Map of Ladakh showing *Mamani* celebrating areas.

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Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the informants ($n = 40$)

Characteristics	Males ($n = 30$)	Females ($n = 10$)	Total ($n = 40$)	Percentage
Age (in years)				
50–60	9	2	11	27.5
60–70	21	8	29	72.5
Marital status				
Single	0	0	0	0
Married	14	2	16	40
Divorced	4	1	5	12.5
Widowed	12	7	19	47.5
Occupation				
Farmer	19	2	21	52.5
House wife	0	7	7	17.5
Employed	2	0	2	5
Retired	9	1	10	25
Educational level				
Illiterate	9	1	10	25
Read and write	17	8	25	62.5
Primary	4	1	5	12.5

is situated between 30°–35°N and 75°–77°E with elevations ranging from 2900 to 5800 m and 2400 to 7010 m above mean sea level respectively. The region covers an area of 59,146 km² (ref. 1). Ladakh is bordered by Tibet (China) to the east, the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh to the south, both Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Gilgit-Baltistan to the west, and the southwest corner of Xinjiang (China) across the Karakoram Pass in the far north. As per the 2011 census, Ladakh region constitutes 242 villages with a population of 274,289. Ladakh region is characterized by extreme climatic conditions such as intensive sunlight, fluctuating temperature, high evaporation rate and strong winds². The region remains landlocked from the outside world due to heavy snowfall over high mountains during the winter for about five months a year.

Data collection and documentation

The study was carried out during 2021–22 adopting quantitative research that uses participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques. A total of 40 people, selected at random, were involved in the interviews and discussions after receiving their prior consent. The interviews were conducted through face-to-face interactions, recorded audio and video clips, and telephonic conversations with village heads (*Goba* or *Sarpanch*), knowledgeable adults, and elderly people. The local Ladakhi dialect was used for the study. The socio-demographic characteristics of informants are given in Table 1.

Results and discussion

What is Mamani?

Scientific journals, edited books, and other scientific databases were consulted to understand the festival. However, limited data could be extracted from the sources.

According to Khan³, *Mamani* is celebrated on 21 January every year and continues for 3–4 days. This festival is related to the *Dard* or *Brokpa* tribe, which marked the beginning of the Baniyan ethnic group. Heads of sheep and goats are eaten with *kiseer*. In some villages in Purig such as Shakar and Chiktan, children play *chaku* (skating) on snow, while in some other villages, there is a tradition of snatching meat called *shamthen*. All the villagers, whether they are adults, elderly or children used to snatch the cooked head meat of animals brought from their homes which caused a loud noise.

According to Shakspe⁴, on the 3rd day of the 12th month, the villagers of Kuksho village organize the *Mamani* festival. It is celebrated with great enthusiasm in all the villages on the left bank of the Indus from Khaltse up to Baltistan. In conjunction with this festival, the villagers organize feasts for close relatives and make food offerings to the deceased.

In Dha-Hanu there is a winter festival, *Mamani*, being celebrated on 19 December, which is specifically dedicated to the ancestors⁵. Special foods are offered and oil lamps are lit at *munal* (a place where some pieces of bones of the dead are kept after cremation)⁶ decorated with juniper branches. Special prayers are also recited separately by the Lama (religious head) at each *munal* followed by singing songs in praise of their ancestors⁷.

Mamani is generally held during the coldest period of the winter between 21 December and 21 January, known as *Chilai Kalan* in the Kashmiri language. A goat or sheep is slaughtered, and such feasts are generally held for the easy passage of harsh winter⁸.

According to Aggarwal⁹, *Mamani* is a festival of *Brokpa* origin that is held to honor the ancestors. In Khaltse village of Leh district, *Mamani* feast used to be held beside *mamani mchod-rten*, a row of shrines. This denotes a mixture of Buddhist and *Brokpa* beliefs. During the communal violence that prevailed in 1989–1990, the *mamani* festival was projected as irreligious some by Islamic clerics of

Kargil district and Buddhist clerics of Leh district. They claimed it as a religious remnant of the Bonism. But according to Khan³, *mamani* is held to pay homage to the founders of *Baniyan* tribe of Gilgit and the first *Brokpa* leader, Melo.

The observations obtained upon interviewing the respondents are discussed as follows.

The actual meaning of the word '*mamani*' is unknown, but an informant told that it might be derived from a Purgi word '*mangmo*' which means 'a lot', as on this occasion, a lot of dishes are being prepared for distribution purposes (Figure 2). People in villages prepare traditional dishes and serve them to all the other villagers at a specific place called *changra* or at any open area. One can see the impact of Tibetan and Persian influence on these dishes, which indicates their historical importance. The duration of the festival is 2–3 days. It begins with *tamani* which takes place on the night of the first day of celebration, where there is lighting at the graveyard following the distribution of food, *tsangma* or *phut*. On the next day at dawn, *maqsoomi mamani* in memory of deceased children of the family takes place by lighting a fire in the courtyard of every household followed by the distribution of food and recitation of special prayers *fateha*. *Maqsoom* is the distorted version of the Urdu word '*masoom*' which means 'sinless' usually applicable to children. A small amount of food is spread over the fields/soil for the hibernating insects that are about to become active. *Soma mamani* in memory of the recent death of a family member takes place on the same day. On this day, a gift of every dish is sent to the house of those girls or boys who are married outside and could not join the family. Others visit their paternal house for a wish, which is known as *mamani chak*, and a large bread *druk* is given to carry with them. All the domesticated animals are also fully fed on this day. In due course, various changes happened in celebrations, however, several Buddhist and Muslim communities in Ladakh still offer charity, organize special prayers for their deceased ones and prepare traditional dishes. On this day, children in Changchik locality used to go door-to-door to collect gifts and money and



Figure 2. Varieties of dishes during *Mamani*.

later in the evening, they organize a gathering called *Issun*¹⁰. In other villages, children roam the whole village while calling *richu* and organize a feast in the evening with the collected money which is called *gron* in the local language.

History

The history of the celebration of this festival in Ladakh predates the introduction of Buddhism at the time of Bonism. At that time, people used to worship spirits called *Lha* and *Lhu* and the tradition was that, whatever dish, one prepares at his/her home, had to bring out some quantity of each item on this day in the name of the dead spirit. It is said that this festival was started in the Stakche village of Shakar-Chiktan. Over time, its celebration spread to Purig, Baltistan and Ladakh without any caste or religion⁴.

Another aspect of this festival is that Balti-Maqpon-Cho, the king of Baltistan and Purig-Sultan-Cho, the king of Purig decided to remove poverty from the region and for this, they started this festival. The poor could get enough food for the winter as the rich brought more food, which was distributed equally among all. Due to the cold winter, these foods could be preserved for a long time, and some for the whole winter period.

Earlier, the merchants from Skardu (now in Pakistan) used to come to Ladakh to buy fodder (usually straw), especially in winter and return to their home for *mamani*. This reveals that it was also celebrated in the Baltistan area (Pakistan), a part of Ladakh (India), before 1947.

Ways of celebration

Although the way of celebration of *Mamani* is almost common yet there are some dissimilarities in the way of celebration among different regions.

In Chiktan block, preparations especially the cooking of different types of foods take place 2 to 3 days before *Mamani*. The poor families used to collect the raw materials well in time before the festival. On the very day, women clean the traditional wooden shelf, *lchangs* at dawn and put some marks, *phethik* on it with wheat flour. It is the traditional way to decorate the living room on this day. Later, the mother or woman head of the family distributes special bread, *titon* smeared with molten animal fat (*tsil*), to all the family members. People with fire sticks gather at the graveyard for the recitation of special prayers, *fateha* for their deceased ones. Then there is a call to bring upon all types of cooked foods. In the evening the village mosques and all the rooms of the houses are illuminated with traditional lamps while taking the names of ancestors. This practice is called *shamsten*. Elite families invite friends, relatives and farm laborers for a special dinner called *gochaks* which goes on for several days on a turn basis in villages or localities with more holdings. Head of sheep and goats are cooked as a special dish and served with hot

papa. Most of the families kill these animals for both *Mamani* and *Losar*, Ladakhi New Year. The girls or boys married outside, *bustrings* are invited and are given large, special bread, *druk* or *mamani taki* to carry with them. They return to their respective places after performing the *fateha*. Some of the breads are so large that they need rope to carry. This *druk* is then cut with an axe *stebo*, into small pieces to put in *thukpa* and it lasts for several days. This special dish is called *druk-thuk*. Each variety of dishes arranged on a large plate, *sder*, are also given to them.

In Aryan villages, like Garkon and Darchiks and other Buddhist-dominated villages of Ladakh, the distribution of food take place at the crematorium. A small piece from all types of foods brought for distribution is thrown at the cremation house while taking the names of all the deceased family members. Then the varieties of dishes and locally prepared beer, *chang* are distributed. The unconsumed foods are either left to carry with the poor or put on large boulders but are not taken home.

In Poyen, *Mamani* starts on Tuesday with the cooking of *popot*. On Wednesday, *bustrings* are invited and served with *tsabskhur* and mustard oil. They are given *druk* to carry with them. The main festival is celebrated on Thursday compulsorily. Mustard oil is brought from the local market called *mamani tel*. The foods to be distributed are brought at *imam bara* of the locality. Every household brings a *druk*, a big one by the rich and a small one by the poor. These breads are then separated, as one for local mosque, *masjid*, one for *imam bara*, and one each for all nine *akhon* families. The remaining *druk* are distributed first among the beggars and then among the people present at *changra*. In the evening, *maqsoom takiphru* according to the number of children present in a family are delivered to neighbours and relatives.

In Gongma Kargil and Lankore areas, people recite the *Quran* in *masjid* and distribute food in *imam bara*. Local people collectively organize this event for several days on a turn basis. The celebration also takes place in every house.

In Changchik, in the early morning, children visit door-to-door singing *jak chigi mamani chuli mari yar, gokskili ka seri choto haso, jak zangmo la haso skal zangmo la haso* which means 'mamani and apricot hair oil on the head, last only for one day, welcome the noble day, welcome the noble era'. Money and *mamani* food are given to them.

In Gargardo village, in the evening of *mamani* day, the village women visit the river and pour some water in memory of their ancestors and then carry some water to their respective homes.

The people of Chiktan block of Kargil district who are settled in Leh city also celebrate *mamani* at a locality called Chiktandong. The arrangements are done based on contributions made by each family. Foods are distributed among the participants followed by special prayers *fateha* made for their ancestors.

Nowadays people of Kargil migrate out of the region during winters to the plains of the country to escape the

harsh winter. A large section of the student population also migrates outside the region for studies. There they celebrate *mamani* despite being away from home.

Special dishes prepared during Mamani festival

Some traditional dishes are specially prepared during the festival which are listed in Table 2 and shown in Figure 3.

Steps being taken towards its revival

Over the last few years, the celebration of *mamani* had started to fade though many communities still celebrate it. In 2016, Kargil-based cultural and social activist, Anayat Ali Shotopa organized a formal celebration in Kargil town with many of his relatives and friends. It is considered a leading step towards the revival of this traditional festival. In 2018, the Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation, a Ladakh-based NGO formally took over responsibilities to hold this festival at different locations with Anayat Ali Shotopa providing the necessary leadership required to bring people together. Since then, it has been celebrated at block level all over Kargil district with various NGOs involved in collaboration with Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Kargil. After the grant of Union Territory status to Ladakh in 2019, *mamani* is being celebrated as a mega event in Kargil district with food stalls, cultural shows, VIP visits, etc. Members of both the Muslim and Buddhist communities participate in the festival. The food stalls exhibit different types of traditional cuisines, crockery items, handicraft items and agricultural implements brought by women groups from different villages (Figure 4). Live demonstrations of traditional skills such as spinning and knitting are shown by women wearing traditional dresses. The cultural dances of different ethnic groups of Kargil such as balti, purgi, shina and dardi are also presented during the programme.

Role in the holistic development of the region

Mamani is not just a festival but a platform for showcasing regional harmony. It is being celebrated at present with the active involvement of all the stakeholders in the Kargil district. It thus facilitates communal harmony for which Ladakh is known, as members of both Buddhist and Muslim communities equally participate in this festival. People from different villages with different cultures participate which also strengthens social harmony in the region. Food festivals are considered a large part of the food tourism industry, which uses these festivals and regional cuisine to support the tourism industry of a particular region. Since *Mamani* provides a platform to display different types of cuisines, farm implements and cultural shows, it can help to boost winter tourism in Ladakh in general and Kargil

Table 2. Special dishes prepared during *Mamani* festival

Local name	Description
<i>Tsabskhur</i> (Figure 3 a)	The bread prepared from the flour (germinated wheat grains after drying are ground into flour known as <i>tsabs</i>) is called as <i>tsabskhur</i> . It is somewhat sweet in taste and eaten with cooking oil or local butter.
<i>Popot</i> (Figure 3 b)	It is a thick salty soup containing a mixture of wheat, barley and local pea grains and meat pieces of animal legs (sheep or goat). It is served hot.
<i>Marzan</i> (Figure 3 c)	It is the combination of <i>papa</i> (thick consistency dish made up of a mixture of roasted barley and pea flour) and molten butter and eaten hot.
<i>Gosha-sugu</i> (Figure 3 d)	Meat obtained from head and legs of small animals like sheep and goat is known as <i>gosha</i> and <i>sugu</i> respectively. The cooked meat pieces with broth are eaten hot with <i>papa</i> or bread or as such.
<i>Poli/Kiseer</i> (Figure 3 e)	A dosa-type dish which is prepared by spreading a paste from buckwheat flour with salt and spices on a hot flat stone. It is eaten as such or with tea and <i>chutney</i> .
<i>Prapu</i> (Figure 3 f)	A thick consistent pasty dish having cap-shaped wheat dumplings containing apricot kernel paste. It is tastier when served cold.
<i>Azoq</i> (Figure 3 g)	Deep fried small bread made from leavened whole wheat flour.
<i>Skin</i>	It is an ibex-shaped bakery product that is prepared from wheat flour. <i>Skin</i> is the local name for ibex. It is eaten as such or with tea, curry, curd, buttermilk, etc.
<i>Chu-taki</i> (Figure 3 h)	It is a boat-shaped wheat dumpling cooked in meat curry with spices and salt. There should be enough watery portions in it as indicated by the name as <i>chu</i> means water ¹¹ .
<i>Khura</i> (Figure 3 i)	Thin rolls of wheat dough like that of noodles are arranged together and fried in oil. It is somewhat crispy in texture and eaten as such or with local tea. Salt or sugar can be added for palatability.
<i>Fating</i> (Figure 3 j)	Apricot is generally dried either under open sun or dehydrated with the help of solar dryers ¹² . Superior quality apricot variety, <i>Halman</i> is usually dried and is locally known as <i>fating</i> ¹³ .

**Figure 3.** Special dishes prepared during the *mamani* festival: *a*, *Tsabskhur*; *b*, *Popot*; *c*, *Marzan*; *d*, *Gosha-sugu*; *e*, *Kiseer*; *f*, *Prapu*; *g*, *Azoq*; *h*, *Chu-taki*; *i*, *Khura*; *j*, *Fating*.



Figure 4. Different types of exhibits.

district in particular. Kargil is not yet explored for the tourism industry as compared to Leh district, and events like this could take it at par with the latter. *Mamani* can also play an important role in the health of children. The idea of introducing of local food items at Anganwadi centres under integrated child development services (ICDS) scheme and at schools under mid-day meal scheme can ensure a healthy diet for children. This can also remove the growing menace of junk food culture among children.

Conclusion

Mamani is not just a food festival but a display of traditional and cultural values which are at the dying stage. Such festivals play a significant role in connecting people with their heritage and ancestral legacy. It educates local communities about the importance of reviving traditional values, lifestyles and cuisines. This festival could be a major source of attraction for tourists to Ladakh in general and Kargil district in particular, which is yet to be explored. Its revival will also help in reducing the greenhouse gases that are emitted during the transportation of non-local commodities from outside Ladakh. Future research could consider quantitative approaches to explore the role of *Mamani* from the perspectives of various stakeholders such as visitors, tourist agencies, restaurants and food producers.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. The authors thank all the informants from both Leh and Kargil districts of Ladakh, for sharing their valuable information. Special thanks are due to Abdul Hussain, Pargyu, Hassan Khan, Shakar, Tsering Gyalson, Garkon and Abdul Hussain, Hagnis for helpful discussions.

Received 30 November 2022; revised accepted 17 March 2023

doi: 10.18520/cs/v125/i1/73-78