

LADISHAH: A KASHMIRI SATIRICAL FOLK GENRE AND ORAL HISTORICAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

Ladishah is a Kashmiri satirical ballad form in which a single itinerant performer sings improvised, topical verses with rhythmic accompaniment, blending humor, criticism, and narrative. Emerging between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the socio-political turmoil of Kashmir, Ladishah functions simultaneously as folk poetry, street theatre, and oral journalism. This paper examines Ladishah as a composite folk genre by analysing its etymology, historical evolution, performance conventions, thematic concerns, and its role as an alternative historical discourse. Drawing on Kashmiri scholarship (Farooq Fayaz, Zareef Ahmad Zareef, Nishat Ansari) and on selected Ladishah texts, the study argues that Ladishah operates as “creative criticism” that articulates the grievances, anxieties, and humour of Kashmiri society, particularly under conditions of colonial, feudal, and authoritarian rule.

Keywords: *Ladishah, Culture, Bhands, Poetic, Folk, Heritage*

INTRODUCTION

Ladishah (also spelled Ladi Shah or Laddi Shah) is a street-theatre-like musical narrative from Kashmir in which a lone performer sings satirical or allegorical compositions in a fixed style, rhythm, and tone of irony. The performance, the poetic genre, and the performer himself are all referred to by the same term “Ladishah”, indicating a fusion of persona, form, and function in this tradition. Early Ladishah compositions commented on political authority, economic hardship, and the erosion of social values, while simultaneously entertaining audiences in villages, fields, and courtyards. As a folk form rooted in orality and improvisation, Ladishah offers a critical window into Kashmiri popular consciousness, particularly in periods when literacy was low and access to formal channels of expression was limited.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary research methodology informed by folklore studies, oral history, performance studies, and ethnomusicology. The research is descriptive and analytical in nature, based on the examination of documented Ladishah texts, song lyrics, musical structures, and performance conventions. Secondary sources such as books, journal articles, theses, and archival materials are used to trace the historical development and socio-cultural context of the genre. Textual and performance analysis are employed to explore themes of satire, social critique, and oral narration, while a comparative approach situates Ladishah within broader folk and narrative traditions. The study relies on critical synthesis of existing literature rather than primary fieldwork, interpreting Ladishah as an alternative oral historical discourse reflecting popular consciousness and social experience.

ETYMOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The term “Ladishah” is commonly understood as a compound of two elements: Ladi (or Ladi/Ladiy) and Shah. In Kashmiri, Ladi denotes a “line,” “row,” or “sequence,” suggesting an ordered, linear arrangement of verses or satirical remarks delivered in rhythmic succession. Shah is an honorific that became associated with the term after the establishment of Muslim rule in Kashmir and is used in rural contexts also for folk performers such as Bhands or Dums. Zareef Ahmad Zareef (noted poet and historian of Kashmir) emphasizes the semantic root of “Ladi” as “row or line,” arguing that “Shah” was added later as a title during Muslim rule and that, despite being largely illiterate, Ladishah performers were “the best describers of history,” functioning as popular historians. By contrast, some scholars, including Nishat Ansari, deny that Ladishah is a contribution of folk literature, while Dr. Farooq Fayaz firmly categorizes it within the domain of folk literature and regards it as an independent genre. Fayaz reads

Ladishah as slightly akin to the Urdu form Shahr-āshob, a satirical, lamenting ballad that voices public grievances and offers psychological consolation to subjugated populations.

Thus, conceptually, Ladishah is: - A “Performer” (the Ladishah artist) , A “Performance” (the act of singing and narrating), A “Literary Genre” (a recognizable folk-poetic form) This triadic identity renders Ladishah a mixed genre situated between literature, music, and theatre.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

1. Emergence in Socio-political Crisis

Most historical and folkloristic studies place the emergence of Ladishah in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, within the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. This period was marked by successive regimes, natural calamities, and the regulation of feudal governance that frequently lacked accountability to local populations. Dr. Farooq Fayaz associates the crystallisation of Ladishah with an era of increasing floods, droughts, and famines, when ordinary Kashmiris encountered both ecological disaster and political oppression. In this context, Ladishah's satirical songs on calamities, shortages, and administrative failures became a form of “creative criticism” and emotional relief.

2. Oral Narratives of Origin

One influential account maintains that the first Ladishah was a fakir from Lari (also spelled Ler) village in Pulwama, belonging to the Shah lineage, known locally as the “Shah of Lari”. The genre is said to have taken its name from this figure, thereby acquiring both geographic and genealogical roots. Another narrative relates Ladishah to a legendary king, Mukunda, who had unusually large ears hidden by a massive turban. The royal barber, sworn to secrecy, is identified as Ladishah in folklore; he eventually reveals the secret through a public song, thereby using satire to expose the vulnerability of power. This story symbolically encodes Ladishah's role as a truth-teller who operates through allegory and ridicule. A further perspective links Ladishah to the Mongol general Dulucha's invasion of Kashmir in the fourteenth century and the subsequent introduction of new cultural practices. In this view, the practice of travelling singers commenting humorously on social and political issues, especially during harvest seasons in exchange for food, is seen as a precursor or early form of Ladishah. Moreover, Ladishah is deeply connected with Bhand Pather, Kashmir's traditional folk theatre. During costume-change intervals in Bhand performances, a Ladishah artist often entertained the audience with satirical songs, suggesting that Ladishah emerged as a liminal interlude within a larger theatrical ecology.

POETIC, MUSICAL, AND PERFORMATIVE STRUCTURE

Ladishah is primarily an oral poetic form in which verses often originate from unknown or anonymous poets and are frequently adapted, modified, or newly improvised by each performer. The genre is defined by brief, standalone songs that center on one main idea, using repeated melodies and rhythms that make them simple to learn, recall, and perform.

Its language is simple, direct, and colloquial, ensuring comprehension by largely non-literate rural audiences. Ladishah mixes humor and satire with occasional tragic notes, often weaving these contrasting elements together in a single performance, which makes it engaging as well as reflective. Many scholars point out that the true originality and appeal of Ladishah come from its oral nature; when it is written down, much of its impact is lost because meaning depends heavily on performance, voice, gestures, and interaction with the audience.

MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT AND RHYTHM

From a musical perspective, Ladishah relies on one repeated melody that carries most of the verses, creating a stable melodic structure. Its unique rhythm comes from an iron rod fitted with metal rings, called the Dehra (previously known in some areas as Trum-trum or Dukhad), which is played in sync with the vocals. While light melodies may occasionally be incorporated, the primary focus remains on the text, rhythm, and delivery rather than on complex melodic structures. The percussion not only provides



musical support but also functions as a performative prop, accentuating satire, marking transitions, and drawing attention to key lines in the performance. Ladishah is a satirical song form that mirrors social conditions. While it entertains and provokes laughter, it also offers sharp commentary on the ruling system. Performers usually move in groups, carrying an iron instrument called the *dhukar* or *dhukru*, about 1–1.5 meters long, with metal rings attached to it. They travel from village to village, often visiting other communities during harvest season to earn a living. As satirists, they improvise songs on the spot, addressing social issues and both minor and major evils. Their performances are humorous and engaging, yet carry an underlying bitterness and critique.

Ladishah Song:

The First time when Aeroplane came to Kashmir, few satirical verses were composed:

Text:

Hawayi Jahaz Aav Mulke Kashmir

Yemov Vuchh Temov Koar Toab Taqseer.

Meaning: The aeroplane comes to Kashmir for the first time. Anyone who saw it made a hue and cry: Nothing bad was done by Jamal and Kammal who came out to see the aeroplane, because everyone came out from the house to see it. Whoever saw it, made a hue and cry. The plane went circular like an eagle. Whoever saw it, made a hue and cry. Much noise was created by the plane and the ears got hurt by the noise. Whoever saw it, made a hue and cry about it. The song depicts the reaction of the public in Kashmir, on seeing the aeroplane for the first time.

Musical Notation:

X			O		
1	2	3	4	5	6
Pa	Sa	Sa	Pa	Sa	Sa
Ha	Wa	Yi	Ja	haz	Aav
7	8	9	10	11	12
Pa	Sa	Sa	Sa	-	-
Mul	Ke	kash	mir	-	-
1	2	3	4	5	6
Pa	Sa	Sa	Pa	Sa	Sa
Ye	mo	vuch	Te	mov	kor
7	8	9	10	11	12
Pa	Sa	Sa	Sa	-	-
Toa	Bu	Taq	seer	-	-

The verses of Ladishah are sung or composed in a typical rhythmic pattern comprising of 12 beats in which the text is composed in the 10 beats and the last 2 beats are kept for the silence.

PERFORMANCE CONVENTIONS AND COSTUME

A Ladishah performer typically wears a long white Pheran, white pajama, and a white turban or traditional Kashmiri cap, often with a cloth draped over the right shoulder and straw slippers made from dried paddy. They carry the Dehra and use it actively, striking the rings to produce a metallic, rhythmic sound that complements the singing. The performer usually maintains a serious or even stern facial expression, with the humor of the performance arising from the text and its ironic contrast with the performer's gravity. Historically, Ladishah artists traveled from village to village, performing in fields—especially paddy fields—courtyards, lanes, and playgrounds. After the performance, villagers would show their appreciation and provide remuneration in the form of rice or grain, often collected in a special bag slung over the performer's shoulder.



POLITICAL SATIRE AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Ladishah is a concise form of satirical song that functions as a powerful medium of political satire and social critique, offering sharp commentary on a wide range of economic, cultural, constitutional, and political issues. Through wit and irony, Ladishah reflects periods of political instability and frequent changes in leadership, while also addressing economic crises such as shortages of essential commodities like salt and grain. It captures the social transformations introduced by modern technology and state-sponsored schemes, highlighting both their promises and contradictions. Most importantly, Ladishah gives voice to the everyday hardships experienced by common people living under feudal or colonial systems, using satire to expose inequality, administrative failure, and social injustice, thereby serving as an important historical and cultural record of popular resistance and public consciousness.

For example, a famous Ladishah on the arrival of the first airplane over Kashmir captures public awe and anxiety through humor. Another, known as “Noonik-Sokan” (the story of salt), comments on the hardships caused by Pakistan’s stoppage of salt supplies to Kashmir after the 1947 standstill agreement, and the subsequent delay before Indian supplies resumed. Your text also cites Ladishah verses on subsidised rice from Punjab and on the introduction of cheap bus services in Srinagar, which humorously critique new infrastructural changes and their unintended consequences. These examples illustrate how Ladishah transforms contemporary events into folk commentary, effectively functioning as a walking news-sheet.

LADISHAH AS CREATIVE CRITICISM AND ORAL HISTORY

Some scholars characterize Ladishah as a “classical character” of Kashmiri literature and an advocate of “constructive criticism,” noting that the performer employed satire to sing against the atrocities of rulers and articulate popular resistance. Scholars of folklore and oral history further interpret Ladishah as a form of folk historical discourse that documents events, public sentiments, and popular interpretations often absent from written archives. At the same time, Ladishah functions as a mediating voice between rulers and subjects, conveying collective grievances in a coded yet publicly intelligible manner. It also serves as a psychological outlet, providing laughter and emotional relief amid conditions of material deprivation and political stress. Owing to their topical nature and their engagement with specific historical incidents—such as political coups, economic blockades, and the introduction of technological novelties—Ladishah compositions constitute a valuable corpus for reconstructing popular responses to social and historical change.

COMPARATIVE AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

From a comparative perspective, Ladishah exhibits significant structural and functional affinities with a range of analogous performative traditions. Within Kashmir, it is closely associated with Bhand Pather, as employ satire, mime, and music to critique structures of power and social authority. Across India, Ladishah parallels traditions such as the Powada of Maharashtra and certain narrative forms of Kirtan, which similarly combine didactic intent with musical storytelling. In a broader global context, Ladishah resembles the roles historically performed by medieval European minstrels or West African griots, which blended entertainment with social commentary and the narration of historical experience. Theoretically, Ladishah may be examined through multiple analytical frameworks, including performance studies, which emphasize its dependence on context, audience interaction, and embodied presence; subaltern historiography, which views it as an alternative archive preserving marginalized voices and responses to dominant power; and ethnomusicology, which understands it as a musical-oral tradition in which melody, rhythm, and text together generate situated social meaning. Taken together, these perspectives position Ladishah not merely as a form of aesthetic entertainment, but as a dynamic mode of cultural production and political communication.

DECLINE, TRANSFORMATION, AND REVIVAL

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century developments such as urbanisation, the expansion of mass media, and changing patterns of entertainment have contributed to the decline of traditional Ladishah performances. The growth of radio, television, and digital media reduced the everyday presence of itinerant village performers, resulting in a weakening of oral transmission. Despite this decline, contemporary Kashmiri youth and cultural

activists have explored new forms of Ladishah by adapting it to recorded media, social platforms, and staged performances, often revising its content to address present-day political and social issues. Intellectuals such as Zareef Ahmad Zareef emphasize that an authentic Ladishah performer must possess strong command over language, a sound understanding of history and politics, and the ability to convey serious ideas through satire. At the same time, cultural organizations, academic departments, and individual scholars are engaged in archiving Ladishah texts, recording elder performers, and advocating its inclusion in educational curricula and cultural policy, recognizing it as an important element of Kashmir's intangible cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

Ladishah is a composite Kashmiri folk genre that brings together oral poetry, music, and performance to form a distinctive and influential medium of social critique and historical memory. Emerging in periods marked by political subjugation, economic hardship, and social uncertainty, Ladishah developed as a one-man travelling theatre in which a single performer used satire, humour, and song to engage audiences. While engaging and entertaining audiences, the performer simultaneously expressed the grievances, concerns, and everyday realities of Kashmiri society, often commenting on issues such as economic hardship, and social transformation.

The etymology, historical development, and performative conventions of Ladishah point to a tradition deeply rooted in orality, improvisation, and active community participation, where meaning was shaped through live interaction between performer and audience.

As contemporary scholarship in folklore and oral history increasingly acknowledges, Ladishah operates as an alternative form of historical discourse that captures popular emotions, critiques, and interpretations of events that are frequently missing from official or written records. Through its topical and responsive nature, Ladishah preserves the voices of ordinary people and reflects how communities understood and responded to political authority and social transformation. In the present era, the revitalisation of Ladishah through systematic documentation, academic study, pedagogical inclusion, and creative adaptation has become especially important. Such efforts are essential not only for preserving an important element of Kashmiri intangible cultural heritage but also for sustaining a living tradition of public satire, social awareness, and constructive criticism that continues to hold relevance in contemporary Kashmiri society.

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