



CONTEMPORARY LADAKH COMMUNAL DIVIDE IN KARGIL & LEH

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Ladakh consisting of two districts Kargil and Leh predominantly follows two major religions: Buddhism and Islam. In Leh district, majority of people are followers of Buddhism with a small number of Muslims, Hindus and Christians. In Kargil district majority follow Islam with a small number of Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs.

Traditionally Ladakhi people are renowned for their honesty, simplicity, and peace loving nature. Their glorious past reveals their unique cultural identity, religious tolerance, goodwill and inter-religious marriage. Inter-religious marriage was common until the 1970s. (Ganhar & Ganhar 1956, pp.10-11) The people of Kargil and Leh have social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic

similarities; historically the two districts Kargil and Leh had a commercial and social relationship.

However, since the early 1980s the traditional bonding and communal harmony dramatically changed due to many incidents of communal clashes. Along with the gap of mistrust, doubt and suspicion between the two communities of Ladakh had started to grow.

This essay addresses two issues. The first issue is related to the causes and events of communalism in the two districts of Ladakh after the early 70s. The questions which need to be answered in this respect include: Whether Kargil and Leh have acute social and political differences? Do the people of Kargil and Leh have separate identity to achieve separate social, economic and political goals for their respective districts?

Second issue that the essay focuses is on the implications of communal violence

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Views expressed are author's own.



on the socio-cultural relations of Kargil and Leh in the two districts of Ladakh.

I COMMUNALISM IN LADAKH A CHRONOLOGICAL MAPPING

Communalism today, is a serious threat to Ladakh. It can destroy traditional and social harmony and become a menace to the unity of Ladakhi people and unleash force of barbarism, as it did recently in Zaskar and earlier in Leh and Kargil. Communalism in Leh and Kargil has been occurring for the last forty years. It has become a major electoral issue in Ladakh since the 1970s - various political leaders made communalism a tool for vote bank.

After the early 70s, a big gap was created in the relations between Muslims and Buddhists of Ladakh. The underlying causes of the conflict in Ladakh are largely political and economic and not religious as such. Romesh Bhattacharji, in his recent book wrote (2012) , "The gap between Buddhist and Muslims sections of population is widening by the day, creating disharmony between two communities." Romesh has given detailed account of the rise of Buddhist virulent communalism in Leh in particular.

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There are many factors which directly or indirectly invoke communal practices between Buddhists and Muslims of Leh and Kargil. They include the following:

The root of communal divide is, largely political, they have an underlying political dimension. Religion in Ladakh is, as elsewhere, often used as a mobilization tool by politicians, both Muslims as well as Buddhists, which leads to suspicion between the two communities. A large number of political leaders appear to have a very negative image of other communities and their religions. These understandings, in turn, are contested by some of their co-religionists, who seek, in their own ways to promote better, relations between the communities (Sikand, Yoginder : 2010)

Some observers believe Ladakh's tourist dollar fuelled prosperity has a good deal to do with its current communal problems. Much of the inflow consists of visitors seeking salvation through Tibetan Buddhism and Leh elites have little reason to market Kargil's Shia tradition instead. (Praveen, Swami: 2004).

The LBA (Ladakh Buddhist Association) demand for the trifurcation of state on essentially communal lines was wrongly welcomed by the RSS (Rashtriya Savayamsewak Sangh) and the BJP (Bhartiya Janta Party) who are said to have close links with the LBA, seeing it as an ally against Muslims. (Yoginder Sikand 2010).

Sharing one MP has made the two districts, Leh and Kargil up against each other, and religious sentiment play a major role, a trump card for the political parties in the fray. In the last four decades, Ladakh has turned into a hostile state of power rivalry not so much a state level as within the region, this has fragmented the region. Stanzin Dawa, a noted scholar lamented that recent politics in Leh lacks clarity of

purpose, vision and morality. It is highly inflammatory and encourages fragmentation in the name of parties, sects, castes, region and damaging rather than developing Ladakh.

Since the early sixties, the differences between Kargil Muslims and Leh Buddhists became inevitable as paltry incidents of stoning of mosques and desecration of Buddhist flags started taking place. (Harish Thakur 2008)

In 1979, Ladakh was divided into two separate districts - Leh and Kargil. The Zaskar valley of Buddhist majority area was retained in Kargil district for administrative purpose, which apprehended the Buddhist of Zaskar. After the creation of Kargil district the poison of blame game started between the two communities that Kargil created on communal basis.

The Muslims of Kargil defend the creation of district because of its faraway geographical location from Buddhist dominated area of Leh. The Buddhists of Zaskar feel they are discriminated against by the majority Muslim population in the district of Kargil. Buddhists in Zaskar complain about the lack of government services to them from Kargil, just as the ones in Leh complain about the discrimination by the Muslim Government of the state of Jammu & Kashmir in Srinagar. Mr. P. Namgayal, MP from Ladakh stated in the Lok Sabha, that Sheikh Abdullah's government's bifurcation of Ladakh into Buddhist Leh and Kargil Muslim districts washed off the centuries old cohesiveness and secular image of the region. (Kaul 1992. pp- 263).

A minor incident that took place in Zaskar on 1 September 1980 assumed serious proportions. The trouble arose when the people of Karsha village demanded the retention of a diesel generator brought to the village during His Holiness Dalai Lama's visit. The

The older generation consider 1989 as a turning point between Buddhist and Muslim relations in Ladakh. A scuffle between a Buddhist youth and four Muslims in Leh on July 1989 set off a big protest in Leh. This incident resulted in clashes in Leh town, which later spread to other parts of Leh district. There was police firing and some protesters were killed.

resistance offered by the villagers for retention of generator resulted in police firing and indiscriminate lathi charge. When the generator was forcefully withdrawn, people's demand for the judicial inquiry probe into police atrocities was not conceded.

People alleged that the police atrocities were a part of conspiracy hatched by district authorities in collaboration with the high rank politicians of Kashmir to suppress the voice of the people of Zaskar raised earlier against the ill-treatment and lack of development facilities. (Kaul: 1992, pp.268-9). However, in the process the political leaders of the two communities engaged behind the scene to politicize the issue for a selfish political interest, which escalated the tension. Some fundamentalists belonging to both the communities had waited for such an opportunity to blow up communalism in the region. In era of 80s in Kargil, the minority Buddhists claimed the ruins of monastery in Kargil town, near general hospital; they desired to renovate the monastery into a new one. However, on the other side, majority Muslims opposed their claims; since then, the place and ruins was declared disputed by authorities and till now remains unsolved.

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between a Buddhist youth and four Muslims in Leh on July 1989 set off a big protest in Leh. This incident resulted in clashes in Leh town, which later spread to other parts of Leh district. There was police firing and some protesters were killed. (Sikand, Yoginder 2010). After the violence, partial damage had been done to the properties of the famous Hemis Monastery.

During the same year in many villages of Leh, some Muslims were forcefully converted into Buddhist fold and a heavy loss was suffered by Muslims in Buddhist dominated region of Leh. (Kaul 1992, pp. 304-305). All these communal strains reached a climax in 1989, when the LBA (Ladakh Buddhist Association) first initiated a dangerous social and commercial boycott movement for three years vis-à-vis the Muslims which strained the centuries old communal harmony between the two communities. (Kaul, pp.310-311).

However, the situation was different in Kargil. The communal boycott was not observed, though both the communities reside in close proximity in many places, and majority of them are Muslims. If only the majority community of Leh district had shown some patience and tolerance on that fateful day, the social environment of Ladakh would have been completely different today.

Early 1990s also witnessed the demand of Union Territory and Autonomous Hill

Development Council by the Buddhists of Leh, in the name of Ladakh, without consulting the political and religious leaders of Kargil. This intensified doubts and suspicions in the minds of the latter.

In February 2006 there were more tensions between the two communities, when some miscreants allegedly desecrated the Holy Quran in Bodh Kharbo village near national highway towards Leh. (Balraj, Puri, 2006). Desecration of the Holy Quran increased the violence in Kargil where many shops and properties of Buddhists were damaged.

On the other side Shia men who had gathered at Leh's Imambara for Muharram procession began to force shops in the city bazaar to shut down. Stones were thrown at Muharram procession in Leh during the same month, where Muslims' own houses were set on fire in the hamlet of Horzey. Shia retaliation came soon. Leh police man Padam Dorjey lost an eye after a protester lashed out at his face with a sharp tipped iron chain. In Kargil, a mob set ablaze the official residence of Deputy Superintendent of Police P. Sonam. For the first time troops from the Indian army and ITBP (Indian Tibetan Border Police) were called to enforce curfew in Leh and Kargil. (Praveen Swami 2006).

The issue of two languages, Urdu and Bodhi between the respective communities and the allegation of Buddhists that the imposition of Urdu language in schools and other institutions of Buddhists by state government in Kargil and Leh increased the divide further. This issue was blown out of proportion by some narrow-minded people.

On the other side Bodhi language has been a traditional and cultural language of Ladakhi. Still there is a misunderstanding in some sections of

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Muslims in Kargil; their contention is Bodhi language and its script belong to the Buddhists. They deliberately tried to derecognize the language in Kargil district.

Contrary to popular perception, Ladakh is not a Buddhist majority area. Buddhists and Muslims are about half each in the district of Leh and in Kargil district the Muslims are in majority. (Nicheketa 2002). Unfortunately some writers distorted historical facts which increased suspicion between the Muslims and Buddhists to some extent. They had written many books on the history of Ladakh without discussing even a single chapter about Kargil. Kargil was even removed from the map of Ladakh, thus presenting a distorted version of Ladakh history. This ignorance gave a wrong signal to the people of Kargil, especially among the educated youths.

The policies of Central and State Governments further escalated communal feelings in the region. Discriminatory policies were pursued by successive central Governments against Kargil in the recruitment of Ladakh Scouts, despite their sacrifices in the wars against Pakistan in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999.

The number of youths from Kargil in Ladakh scouts is very minimal, despite their readiness to join the Indian army. However, from Leh, thousands of youths have been joining every year. This step-motherly treatment with the youths of Kargil has always been a popular agenda and the demands of political parties of Kargil have been without any success.

There has been a baseless allegation and false propaganda spread by some Buddhist communal leaders against the traditionally patriotic people of Kargil, by saying that Muslims of Kargil are the supporters of Pakistan military. This has

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been resented by the people of Kargil. This misinformation is always a tool for opportunists to divide the communities on communal lines.

Two separate demands of the people of Kargil and Leh from Central Government, Kargil for Greater Ladakh and Leh for Union Territory distanced the people of Ladakh on ideological lines. The lack of political support by the leaders of Kargil to the Buddhists of Leh to highlight the demand, to include the Bodhi language in the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution.

Also, the State and district authorities are yet to consider the two decade old demand of political representation to minority Muslims in Zaskar valley of Kargil district; this has made the minority Muslims in this region totally isolated.

At the social level, secret inter-religious marriages among the youth of both the communities give a fundamentalist a chance to disturb the peace and harmony in the Ladakh region. The LBA (Ladakh Buddhist Association) presented a memorandum to the central government in 1999. It points out that between 1992 and 1999, 24 Buddhist girls from Leh were converted to Islam and mostly taken to Kargil.

Recently in 2012, relations between the two communities turned serious in the Zaskar valley, when 23 people of

Garba and Beda caste were considered low among the Buddhists embraced Islam. A communal riot followed the above; houses of the minorities were damaged, cash looted from shops and property worth thousands of rupees was destroyed. Though the converts tried to convince everyone from administration to religious and social groups that their change of faith was voluntary and free from any pressure or allurements, the Buddhists were adamant over the issue (PG Rasool 2012)

II IMPLICATIONS OF COMMUNALISM IN LADAKH

The implication of communal tensions are far reaching. Because of successive communal riots and tensions, the traditional bonding, cooperation and goodwill among the Muslims and Buddhists of Ladakh has been vanishing gradually. Hypocrisy, enmity, doubts and misunderstanding against each other has increased among the students, political leaders, and even the common people of the Leh and Kargil.

Big projects like Zojila tunnel, Zaskar-Manali road, Central University for Ladakh, Skardu-Kargil road, Suru valley power project, Leh-Zaskar road, international status for Leh airport and the upgradation of Kargil airport - all of

which could have benefited both the people of Kargil and Leh, today are mired in uncertainty. All these are due to ego clashes, lack of cooperation and misunderstanding among the political representatives of both the districts.

The social and cultural ties between the Leh and Kargil could have been better today. There are numerous important Buddhist historical sites in Kargil district, for example the colossal rock statue of the Materiya Buddha in Mulbekh, Lankerchey and Karcheykhar villages. The importance of these sites has declined due to animosity and communal attitudes of the district authorities and these invaluable heritage loses its core importance.

Jammu and Kashmir regions have their respective divisional commissioners for administrative purposes. However Ladakh, in spite of it being disconnected with the rest of India due to heavy snow falls, is unable to achieve divisional status. It could not materialize mainly because of the lack of proper coordination and commitment amongst the leaders of Kargil and Leh.

The centuries old culture of Buddhist Amchi oracle and treatment is in the verge of collapse in Muslim dominated areas in Kargil, due to non-cooperation between the two communities. The Amchi medicine and treatment was once the backbone of local treatment. This gap created a huge loss for the common people of Kargil, whose ancestors had been trusting Amchi medicine and treatment for centuries for curing various diseases. It is obviously a bad news for the common people of Kargil.

III CONCLUSION

After the interpretation and discussion

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of the dim facts of Ladakh region, it is the foremost duty of all Ladakhis, especially political leaders and religious representatives to show resilience and kind-heartedness to accommodate each other's viewpoint in a democratic country like India.

Youths of both Kargil and Leh should come together on a common platform to debate, discuss and argue on various developmental and other issues, so that the doubts could be cleared.

Consultative and advisory council to discuss the unresolved and various outstanding issues for the common interest of Kargil and Leh is the need of the hour.

Students and youths should come forward for the preservation and protection of the cultural heritages of Ladakh. To maintain and sustain the communal harmony, cooperation and mutual understanding, goodwill and tolerance should be encouraged.

The respective Autonomous Hill Development Councils, Student associations, Youth wings, Religious organizations, Members of civil societies, Senior citizens, Intellectuals, Writers and Political leaders should come forward to address communalism forever.

The need of the hour is to defeat the communalists and bring the change to restore the unique and glorious cultural identity of Ladakh region. Both the LAHDC (Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council) of Kargil and Leh can develop common minimum development programmes.

Cooperation between the two will help them to develop a goal and vision for whole Ladakh.

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