



## CONTEMPORARY LADAKH IDENTIFYING THE “OTHER” IN BUDDHIST-MUSLIM TRANSFORMATIVE RELATIONS

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Changes in the relationship of major subdivisions of a society are reflected in the development of active scholarly analysis of those changes. The ongoing transformations in the Ladakhi society have also attracted certain amount of attention from scholars from within and outside the area. Currently there is a select list of material for one to be able to evaluate the trajectory of social change in Ladakh and also to identify the causative factors for such change. In that direction this paper seeks to specify the process of identity formation amongst the Ladakhis by emphasizing how the differential circumstances faced by the locals has led them to approximate religion as the prime identity marker.

Through the illustration of Ladakh's experience, this essay seeks to argue that

identity being a fluid concept is often misappropriated by a certain section of the society for the furtherance of their interests. It is the age old congenial inter-communal networks that face the brunt of such maneuverings leading to irrevocable transformations in the everyday relations.

This essay is mainly based on available literature and keen observations made as a native of Ladakh. The conclusions are preliminary in nature and aimed at the possibility of bringing out a theoretical standpoint through the use of empirical data.

### WHO IS THE OTHER?

This essay does not aim at identifying the other but in contrast it is an attempt to illustrate the complexity involved in doing just that!

Identity is a fluid concept and there are multiple identities which an individual can approximate based on various circumstances. This applies to the case of Ladakh wherein any attempt to label the society in terms of primordial identities

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*Views expressed are author's own.*



leads to a very parochial understanding of what it means to be a Ladakhi.

Ladakh with its rich history and culture has temporal and spatial dimensions which have led to the build-up of a diverse social composition in the region. It boasts of a social structure with multiple ethnicities largely documented to have lived in harmony over a long period of time. Moreover with the globalization wherein change has become the only constant, it becomes difficult to classify the society based on a particularistic character; acknowledging and accepting pluralism is essential to maintaining peace and stability in society.

Before getting into the details of the Ladakhi case one needs to take into consideration the various stances that scholars take on the idea or concept of identity.

The essentialist perspective of the concept understands it as a coherent attribute which more or less remains the same throughout an individual's life. Contrarily constructivists take an exception on such a conception and lay emphasis on how identity is invented or constructed to varying degrees. Following Freud's theory of identification the psycho-dynamic theorists particularly Erik Erikson (1963) in his book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, approached identity as a process linked to the individual as well as the society/community, where he came up with the notion of identity crisis as a phase of confusion occurring due to the lost

sense of personal sameness and historical continuity. In the realm of sociology, identity can be located in theories of symbolic interactionism specifically in the theory of 'self' discussed by G.H Mead (1962). In the later works of Erving Goffman (1959) and Peter Berger (1974) identity is explicitly termed as 'socially bestowed and socially transformed'. Michael Foucault's (1979) work *Discipline and Punish* brought in a whole new aspect to the concept of identity, i.e. considering individuals as inhabiting multiple identities and how these interact with each other. In modern sociology there is no consensus on the concept of self/identity as some see it as occurring out of the process of socialization, while others argue that in a modern world with an increasing sense of individuality, people are more likely to self-actualize. The afore-mentioned theoretical perspectives clearly show that conceptualization of identity is difficult and consequently leads to obscurities when applied to societal classifications.

By laying out the process of identity formation among the Ladakhis this essay aims to show how identity is not just a contentious concept but also that it can lead to the breach of societal balance when misused.

## I LADAKH: COPING WITH WINDS OF CHANGE

Geographically and historically, Ladakh has been very distinct from other regions of the Indian nation state. Though there has been a steady flow of outsiders into the Ladakhi terrain from Tibet, Xinjiang, and Central Asia amongst others, it has for the major part of its existence been cut off from the world outside its immediate contact.

However, after its borders were opened to the outside world in the late 1970's, the influx of travelers, mainly foreigners, film makers and researchers interested in Ladakh has led to the revelation of interesting facts about Ladakh's

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landscape and its people. As a result, today there exists a sizeable amount of literature on various aspects of Ladakh. Consequently these works provide a foundation on which this essay is based.

Administratively, Ladakh is believed to have lost its status as an independent kingdom in the 1840's when the Dogra rulers conquered its territories. As a result of the Treaty of Accession signed by the Maharaja Hari Singh, Ladakh automatically became absorbed into the Indian nation state and thereafter Ladakh has remained a part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Though at the time of its inclusion into India Ladakh represented a single district, in 1979 it was divided into two districts Leh and Kargil. At present each of these two districts are headed by their respective autonomous hill councils which work as a decentralized form of partial self-governance in the area.

The strategic location of Ladakh which led to sporadic conquests from its neighboring areas has not only affected its political situation but also molded its social composition. The blending of ethnicities due to the flow of different people over time has shaped the present constitution of Ladakhis. Though there are conflicting views on the question of who the first settlers of Ladakh were, there seems to be a consensus that the Mons, Dards and the Tibetans were among the first to inhabit the region.

In contemporary Ladakh, the Tibetan influence is prominent in the central and eastern parts; on moving westwards towards the town of Leh and the nearby villages the Mongoloid features are visible with some element of Indo-Aryan traits. Most of them follow the Buddhist faith and form almost half the population of the entire Ladakh region. However there are a small number of practitioners of Islam in the Leh district who belong to the Balti and Arghon communities.

The Arghons who are mostly confined to the Leh town and a few nearby villages

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are believed to be the descendants of the traders and merchants who mainly came from Kashmir or parts of Central Asia such as Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan etc in the 17th century.

The western part is largely inhabited by the Balti tribe, who share a common heritage with the Tibetans and the rest of the Ladakhis in terms of language and culture. The Arghons are practitioners of Sunni Islam and the Baltis mainly follow Shia Islam. Apart from the Sunni and Shia communities, Islam is represented by the Nurbhakshia community, who are small in number but have a stronghold in the border areas of Turtuk and Bogdang in the northern reaches of Ladakh (Rizvi, 1996; Sheikh, 2007).

The spatial spread of the two major religious communities of Buddhists and Muslims clearly reflects that the regions close to Tibet have chosen to remain Buddhist while the western part having borne the influx of the Muslim traders and preachers seems to have taken to Islam. The Arghons who mainly came as traders also seemed to have purposefully settled around the commercial hub of Leh. However it must be acknowledged that there are areas of mixed population as well and many scholars point to the prevalence of a composite history wherein the Buddhists and Muslims are believed to have shared a syncretic culture.

Scholars such as the Ladakhi historian Abdul Ghani Sheikh, Nawang Tshering

Shakspo, and Ravina Aggarwal illustrate their view through examples of mixed customs drawn from both the faiths in various areas across Ladakh such as Khuksho, Achinathang and Purig. They also emphasize that these are not isolated cases and that such coalesced lifestyles could have possibly been a common practice amongst the Ladakhis.

The fact that the triennial Lopchak mission which consisted of offerings for the Dalai Lama on the occasion of New Year or mon lam was often carried out by Muslim families particularly the Radhu or Khwaja family of Leh is also indicative of the deep religious understanding or tolerance that existed in those times. This is not to suggest that there were absolutely no distinctions between the Buddhists and Muslims in the past, but the differences that were there in terms of religious beliefs and practices were not so pronounced. The commonality in culture more or less overshadowed those differences. Moreover, religion in the past was practiced within the personal domain and the dissimilarities in faith did not override the Ladakhi identity based on a common linguistic and cultural heritage.

However if we were to visit Ladakh now, we would not be able to find the same level of harmony amongst its present inhabitants, for since the past few decades Ladakh has witnessed an ever widening crevice along religious lines.

The Ladakhi society now is permeated by inter-religious hostilities which sporadically take the shape of violent clashes. A case

in point being the 1989 communal riots of Leh that led to a major clash and sparked off a rupture being replayed continuously through the occurrence of similar or at least recognizable communal disturbances.

Similarly in the most recent communal outbreak it was reported that after 26 members of 6 families residing in Padum and Zangla of Zaskar region converted from Buddhism to Islam, there were immediate reactions by the Buddhists who called for a strike and boycott of the converted families. The pressure that was exerted on the new converts is believed to have impelled one of the families from Zangla to revert back to Buddhism. Soon after there were widespread tensions and violent clashes which forced the government to impose curfew in the region. (Economic Times Bureau, Oct 24, 2012)

Likewise there are instantaneous reactions to any such incidents marked with violence or by a social boycott of the 'other' community. The loudspeaker competitions between gompas and masjids or the marking of public places with particular religious symbols such as flags - all point to a voracious attempt at bringing to the fore the emphasis on distinct religious identities. Each incident of a supposed 'discretion' such as inter-religious marriage or conversion is seen from the apprehensive view of a diminishing stronghold especially in relation to the number of constituents for each community, otherwise known as a game of numbers.

The Buddhists blame the Muslims for astutely trying to outnumber them through mechanisms such as encouraging Muslim youth to marry Ladakhi Buddhist women or through forced conversion of Buddhists into Islam. There have even been vague accusations suggesting that Muslims intentionally opt to forgo family planning initiatives with the objective of increasing the Muslim population in the region.

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Similarly Muslims particularly in Leh accuse the majoritarian Buddhist population of resorting to violence in matters of inter-religious marriages or underline their under-representation or neglect in local politics. The occasions where Muslim-owned taxis, shops or hotels are boycotted are fairly common.

Similarly in Kargil district where the Muslims are in majority, there seems to be a grievance amongst its miniscule Buddhist population against what they perceive as majoritarian authority with minimal representation of Buddhists in politics and a feeling of disrespect for their faith among the Muslims of the region. Thus the Ladakhi identity has gradually taken shape in the form of Boto, Balti and Kache communities. The clear emphasis being on the geographic and religious differences, thus a Boto is someone close to Poth (Tibet in Ladakhi), Balti means someone from Baltistan or a Shia Muslim and Kache stands for Kashmiri or Sunni Muslims implying the 'outsider' notion on the two latter communities (Sara Smith, 2009).

## II

### COMMUNAL DIVIDE: IDENTIFYING THE CAUSATIVE FACTORS

The dynamics of change in Ladakh can be attributed to several internal and exogenous influences each of which plays in to synchronize the process of transformative identity formation. The present atmosphere in Ladakh is such that religion serves as the primary basis of identification amongst the locals.

Religion as a social phenomenon plays a pivotal role in the construction of collective identity and may often serve as an essentialist understanding to one's identity or a sense of belonging to a community. However, it must be underscored that ethnic conflicts in most cases are not based on doctrinal altercations. As religion does not play an isolated role in bringing about societal change, it is invariably supplemented by parameters such as politics or economics.

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The instrumental use of religion in politics, for example, can lead to the politicization of religion and consequently result in communal riots or clashes.

In Ladakh, there has been a slow transformation beginning from the period during the monarchy where the Buddhist-Muslim ties were peaceful with discords being sorted primarily at the familial or neighborly levels. Around the time of India's independence there arose political organizations in Ladakh which were aligned along religious lines.

The Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) was also a result of such communal groups created after the Glancy Commission reports. (see van Beek, 1996; Kaul, Sridhar & H. N. Kaul, 1992) No sooner had Ladakh been absorbed into the Indian nation state than a Memorandum (1949) was passed by the LBA stating their grievances with the state government and their intention of coming under direct rule of the central government.

A deeper look at the particulars of the memorandum shows how the Ladakhis led by the political leaders 'imagined' the Ladakhi community to be distinct from the people of the other parts of the state. There seems to be a delineation of the Ladakhi identity on the basis of ethnic characteristics with the specific emphasis placed on the Buddhist identity. The crucial point here is to figure out under what context such imaginings take place and how such 'perceived' notions of identity actually come to represent

people in the socio-political realm.

There seems to have been a widespread belief amongst the people in Ladakh, that despite its secular claims the Indian political system particularly the state government in Kashmir acted on communal lines. This conviction among the people of Ladakh is what van Beek believes has led to the consequent trend of relying on communalistic strategies throughout political affairs in Ladakh. (Van Beek, 2000:528)

The developments that led to the transformation of the Ladakhi identity are largely understood as the implication of exogenous factors such as the imposition of centralised administrative structures and a political system that increasingly appropriates the use of as a strategical maneuver. However, as Paul Brass (1997) cautions 'villagers', or in this case Ladakhi Buddhists, should not be regarded as innocent victims of exogenous communalist forces. Local level politics as elucidated by van Beek (2000) involved the representation of the plight of the Ladakhis in communal terms. Therefore the unfolding of the whole process of identity formulation amongst the people of Ladakh has been a gradual process affected not only by external forces but also by the shifting needs within the Ladakhi community itself.

Local agencies, particularly the political elite, thus played an important role in the communalization of the movement for secession from Kashmir but at the same time it needs to be viewed within the

context of larger national politics.

The discontentment with the state government over time has led to separatist sentiments among the Ladakhis and a demand for a Union Territory (UT) status, a demand which till date finds resonance during election campaigns. The demand for 'UT' as it came to be known in common parlance was reiterated several times at the center, however in citing 'security interests' the demand was turned down consecutively.

The debate surrounding the UT status which primarily deals with devolution of power has also acquired a communal hue. Bray (2007) explains that 'this debate has often had a communal tinge with Ladakhi Buddhists claiming that the reason for their neglect has been the Muslims' domination of J&K, while their own separate religious identity offers one of the prime justifications for separate political status'. (Bray, 2007, p.6)

Moreover, though there is strong demand for the UT status among the Buddhists of Ladakh, the support from the people of Kargil is not of the same intensity. This marked difference in demands among the different religious communities is representative of the fact that the people belonging to the same geographical space under similar conditions and needs may appropriate separate identifications. This ambiguity in identity formation arises out of specific social, economic and political processes prevalent within the society at a particular time period.

Beek (2000, p. 540) clearly elucidates the 'shifting tastes in the imaginings' of the leaders in Ladakh ever since it became a part of India until present times. He thus states that the 1960s saw a rise in demand for a NEFA type administration in Ladakh, which coincided with the Indian Government's attempt to quell the stir in the north eastern regions.

The 1970s also saw the beginnings of the plea for the declaration of Ladakh as a Union Territory (UT) which would bring it

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under direct control of New Delhi. Then around the late 1970s, the Indian political sphere was encompassed by Mandalization with the focus of the Ladakhi leadership also shifting towards an assertion for Scheduled Tribe status. Enticed by the benefits that would be available to them; the leaders tried to capitalize on the situation and started making demands for the inclusion of Ladakhis amongst the Scheduled Tribes.

Later in the 1980s, taking inspiration from the Darjeeling Hill council, the demands moved onto the establishment of an autonomous hill council in the region. (Aggarwal, 2004, p. 540) These shifting trends in demands were also complimented with changing ties among the Buddhist and Muslim political elite who used religion as a mechanism to maneuver their political gains even to the extent of what van Beek calls 'normalization of communalism'.

Ladakh's integration into India also transformed the region from a trading zone to one which served as a strategic borderland with massive military presence. Secondly the region also got incorporated into nation building process as a whole. The economic development that the government attempted to bring about in the area supplemented by the new links that Ladakh formed with the rest of the world brought about deep seated changes. The whole process of integration of local communities such as Ladakh into larger national regional and national entities caused the weakening of former social ties.

Thus Buddhists and Muslims who boasted of a syncretic culture gradually came to be threatened. Gerhard Emmer (2007) in her article on the condition of the Argons of Leh argues that once the homogenization project started by the State failed, local social groups started fragmenting along religious lines. She also believes that the changes in the socio-economic structure due to the inflow of modernization added on to the already weakening social ties. So, on the one

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hand, the government was blamed for favoring Muslims in the allocation of governmental jobs, while on the other, new job opportunities such as in the army and the tourism sector did give the Ladakhi people options apart from the conventional professions such as agriculture, animal husbandry and trade.

At the same time, the opening up of the vast array of opportunities also created immense competition and ill feelings among the various groups that came to compete for their place in the market. These rivalries on the economic front slowly made its way to local politics, which perpetuated the ever widening gap among the people of Ladakh, ultimately leading to conflict-like situations. Similarly exposure to media and education led to an urge to reinstate the distinct identity or sense of belongingness through mechanisms such as the preservation of the 'purity' of religious beliefs and practices. Thus it is the 'ordinary' Ladakhi who suffers in the end due to the breach in the age old ties with neighbors and kin belonging to separate religious groups.

## CONCLUSION

Clearly Ladakh is a region in flux where rampant developments in the diverse spheres have led to changing patterns in the societal structure. In such societies there is a need felt by the locals to appropriate an identity from which they can gain a sense of belonging. The Ladakhis in this case have mostly resorted

to emphasize their religious identity. The conflicts that ensued were never conflicts over the right to assert one's ethnic or cultural identity, but were based on competing claims to rights such as employment, welfare and political influence. Such a process is detrimental to the peace, stability and development of the region for important issues get sidelined in the fervor of religious identification. The example of the recent Zaskar riots points to the fact that due to the overemphasis on the religious differences amongst the two groups other parameters of social exclusion such as caste based discrimination are being totally ignored. The furor over what the Buddhists of Zaskar believe to be 'forced conversions' is putting a smokescreen over important issues that need to be immediately addressed. Even to this day the people considered to be belonging to the lower section of the Ladakhi society such as Mons, Bedas and Garas are treated differentially. For example, during weddings they are made to sit separately towards the far end of the seating space. In Kargil also the Aghas and the Kachos are seen as belonging to a different stratum altogether even though the basic tenet of Islam is against any such form of discrimination.

These trends seem to be a problem faced by multi-ethnic societies where cultural elements needed to adjust to a changing world are lost to the machinations of a certain section of the society. The ongoing research in this area gives hope that questions and issues related to identity will be examined well so as to find possible solutions to such problems. Above all it is the masses that need to find a voice of their own and use their agency to spread and strengthen inter-communal networks to build a society without religious divides. Thus it becomes necessary for people to stop identifying the other and instead focus on shared

cultural heritage and commonalities in language and aspirations to identify or relate to each other.

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