



Inter-community relations in Ladakh through the ages till now

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Abstract

The present study seeks to analyse the inter-communal relationship between Muslims and Buddhists in Ladakh through the ages till now. The relationship between the Buddhists and Muslims had remained cordial till 19th century. For many centuries both the communities had been living in harmony. There was no any communal conflict between them. Inter-religious marriages were common between the two communities. However, after independence the communal harmony and traditional bonding, which was shared by the two communities, dramatically changed. Religion and politics clearly have interacted in Ladakh since independence. The underlying organization of formal politics was along the communal lines. The political leaders used religion and played their part in spreading communalism to put pressure on the state government to accept the Ladakhi demands.

Keywords: inter-community relations, Ladakh

Introduction

Ladakh consists of two districts, Kargil and Leh. The district of Kargil is predominantly inhabited by Muslims with a Buddhist minority in Zaskar valley. Leh district is inhabited by a Buddhist majority with some Muslims in a few villages and towns of Leh. Muslims are further divided into Shias (*Balti*) and Sunnis (*Argon*) with Shia Muslims constituting majority in Ladakh. Buddhists and Muslims are equal in number while Christians form one per cent of the total population of Ladakh. Religion has been a very important factor determining the socio-cultural and political pulse of the people. In Ladakh, religion plays a very significant role in the life of the people. It is believed that Buddhism first penetrated into Ladakh from Kashmir and it was introduced into Ladakh during the reign of Ashoka^[1]. It is said that the first contacts with Islam in Ladakh resulted from visits of a Sufi saint, Sayyid Ali Hamadani who visited Kashmir three times. During the course of his second visit to Kashmir in 1349 A.D., he visited Ladakh and Baltistan also and possibly converted some people Ladakh to Islam. The mosque at Shey village in Leh District called Shah Hamdan Mosque is the first mosque in Ladakh which was founded by Sayyid Ali Hamdani^[2]. The spread of Islam in Ladakh is said to have further hastened when the Ladakhi Buddhist King Jamiang Namgyal married Gyal Khatoon, a daughter of a Shia King of Baltistan, in the 16th century. As a result of the marital connection with Baltistan, it is assumed that several hundred Shia Muslims from Baltistan migrated to Ladakh and permanently settled in the region.

Inter-communal relations till 19th century

If we look at the inter-community relations after the advent of Islam in Ladakh, the relationship between these two communities was cordial. The Muslim and the Buddhist communities coexisted peacefully for centuries. Although the cognizance of adhering to their religious systems remained strong, Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh shared a broad similar culture. The local Muslims spoke the same language and wore the same dress as their Buddhist

counterparts and their food habits were also same. The whole community including Buddhists and Muslims would gather to celebrate wedding ceremonies, dancing, singing and eating together. Both the communities would visit each other's house during the time of Losar (the Ladakhi Buddhist New Year festival) and Eid. In Kuksho village in Kargil District, both Muslims and Buddhists lived in the same families, practised mixed religion combining elements of both the Buddhism and the Islam and had mixed names^[3]. In several villages, the Muslims would often visit Buddhist oracles and healers called *Lah-pa* (male) and *Lhamo* (female) for the cure, and the Buddhists would visit Muslim *pirs* called *Akhon* to seek healing and for a cure. The Buddhist monk and the *Akhon* of the village had equal respect and trust of the villagers. The Buddhists used to attend the Shia mourning rituals at the occasion of Muharram likewise at the time of Losar, the Buddhist King used to take a large procession in the Leh main market and it was customary that the Buddhist commander of the cavalry of the king would visit the Sunni Mosque in the Leh market to offer oil for the lamps in the mosque and seek blessings of cleric for the king^[4]. All major religious festivals celebrated in Buddhist monasteries were attended with so much enthusiasm by the Buddhists as well as the Muslims alike. There is a Muslim influence on the Ladakhi folk music. Similarly, the mosque and *imambaras* of Ladakh are fine examples of local Ladakhi architecture. Inter-religious marriages among the Muslims and the Buddhists in Ladakh was common. Inter-religious marriages were practiced often independently by the members of aristocratic families as well as commoners. If we look at the historical accounts, there were countless wars fought between the Ladakhi Buddhist rulers and the Shia Muslim kings of Baltistan but these wars did not create any resentment among the people of different communities of Ladakh and they co-existed peacefully for many centuries and had a friendly relationship with each other. Jamyang Namgyal, who ruled Ladakh in 17th century, married Gyal Khatoon, the daughter of the Shia ruler of Baltistan and she

did not convert to Buddhism after her marriage with a Buddhist King and practiced Islam throughout her life. Later many other Buddhist rulers also married Muslim princesses from Baltistan. At the same time if we talk about common people, apart from the royal families, intermarriages between the Muslims and Buddhists of Ladakh were very common and they followed the example of religious tolerance set by their rulers ^[5].

Changing times and transitioning relationships

Ladakh's history as an independent kingdom came to an end in 1834 when it was occupied by the forces of Raja Gulab Singh who was a feudatory of the Sikh ruler, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. By 1842 Gulab Singh and his commander Zorawar Singh had completely established Dogra authority over the region. In 1846, after skillfully aligning himself with the British during the First Anglo-Sikh War, Gulab Singh became the first Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, including Ladakh. The Dogra invasion was proved disastrous for the monasteries of Ladakh as they lost their main source of political support as earlier the monasteries received patronage from Kings and the economic condition of people of Ladakh was so miserable that the population as a whole was impoverished during the Dogra period because of high taxes imposed by the state. In Kashmir, from late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, discontentment began to emerge among Muslims against the Dogra rule. Since Muslim population of the State was facing poverty and persecution at the hands of Dogra rulers, communal organisations began to emerge in both the region of Jammu and Kashmir. Communal clashes broke out between Hindus and Muslims in 1931-32. Due to the serious communal riots between Muslims and Hindus, a commission was set up called, Glancy Commission in 1932 to look over the living conditions of the people of the kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir including the Wazarat of Ladakh, and to suggest political and administrative reforms for the kingdom ^[6].

The Ladakh Educational Society (LBES) was established in 1932 and the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) in 1934 and their establishment is regarded as an important development in the local history of Buddhism. Both organisations were mainly inspired by Kashmiri neo-Buddhist intellectuals who had converted to Buddhism from Hinduism and believed that they had a mission to modernise Buddhism. The Ladakh Educational Society diligently started representing Ladakhi interests before the Dogra government in the form of memorandums demanding educational reforms in Ladakh. Their efforts were successful in bringing official recognition to the Buddhist community of Ladakh by the Maharaja's administration. Only Buddhist Community was constituted as backward community and other deprived communities existing in Ladakh were completely overlooked. The neo-Buddhists successfully presented Ladakh, by and large a Buddhist area before the Glancy Commission. Throughout the final report of the Commission, therefore, Ladakh came to be used as synonymous with Buddhist. As, the Muslims of Ladakh did not enjoy the same kind of backing from outside as their Buddhist counterpart, their case remained unrepresented. The representation of Ladakh along the communal lines for Ladakhi Buddhists before the commission gave rise to the communalisation of politics in Ladakh ^[7].

In 1947, at the time of partition of India, Ladakh was made a part of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir to be administered from Srinagar. It is claimed that at the time of Pakistani incursion Muslims were unwilling to guard Ladakh. But Muslim version asserts that both the Muslims and Buddhists together participated in guarding Ladakh. At the time of independence, the Buddhist leaders expressed their desire for merging Ladakh directly with India and not with the state of Kashmir. Their demand, however, was not met and Ladakh became a part of Jammu and Kashmir.

Since independence the most important political issue in Ladakh has been Ladakh's relationship with Jammu and Kashmir. Since 1950s, Ladakhi Buddhist leaders had started complaining about the neglectful attitude of the Jammu and Kashmir government towards them. This led to the demands for Union territory status from 1970s onwards, whereby Ladakh would be governed directly by Central Government. This debate has often had a communal tinge as Buddhist leaders of Ladakh always claimed that the Muslim domination of Jammu and Kashmir has been the main reason for alleged negligence of Ladakhi Buddhists by the state government and Muslims have been benefiting distinctively from private sector development in the tourism industry.

While the fundamental organisation of formal politics was along the communal lines, there was no much use of the communal card for many years, until it was briefly played in 1969, on account of short-lived agitation. The 1969 communal riots and agitation for greater autonomy marked the beginning of communalisation of Ladakhi politics. In Sabu village, few kilometers from Leh, there was a family in which the husband was a Muslim and the wife was a Buddhist and they had a son and a daughter. After the death of the father, the family had a property dispute, which took a communal turn as the brother followed the mother's religion which was Buddhism, while the sister followed the father's religion which was Islam. The brother claimed his rights on the stable of the disputed building by hoisting Buddhist prayer flags, or *tarchuks*, on 15 March 1969. The next day, he found these prayer flags lying on the ground. It was said that the prayer flags were removed by his Muslim stepsister. The Buddhist brother approached Ladakh Buddhist Association alleging that his Muslim relatives had insulted the religious symbol. Buddhist leaders made offensive speeches on the sensitive issue of forced conversion to Islam, sacrilege of religious symbols by Muslims and forced on the need to unite against Muslims of Ladakh and the State government. This lasted for two months and was the first agitation by Buddhists against the Muslims and the State government. Protest was carried out in Leh on March 25 in response to this incident. State properties were destroyed and the Muslim houses and mosques were attacked by Buddhist protesters on 3 April 1969. A social and economic boycott of the Muslim community was declared by Buddhists ^[8]. The event of 1969 was a turning point in the Ladakhi politics as it set a precedence of using communal agitation to put pressure on the State and Central government to accept Ladakhi demands. This communal agitation created huge division among the Ladakhi people along religious line. The Ladakhi students studying outside Ladakh also got divided along religious line after the agitation of 1969.

In 1979, State Government bifurcated Ladakh into two

districts - Leh and Kargil as Ladakh District was considered to be too large, so it was difficult to be handled by a single district administration. Under this bifurcation, Zangskar, a predominantly Buddhist area, was not included in the Leh district. The move triggered a mass resentment amongst the leaders of Leh. Buddhist leaders of Leh accused the State Government for its move to divide the people of Ladakh on communal line by bifurcating the region into two districts^[9]. They allege that state government always favoured Ladakhi Muslim population and bifurcation was the state government's evil plan to divide the people of Ladakh on communal basis and to give benefit to the Muslim people. However, in Kargil, the move was welcomed as there was growing feeling that Kargil was given the same step-motherly treatment by Leh, as Leh claimed to suffer at the hands of the State Government.

The agitation of 1989 is considered as the turning point between the Buddhist and the Muslim relations in Ladakh. There was a minor incident of the manhandling of a Buddhist youth by some Muslim youths in Leh market in July 1989. This minor incident escalated into a violent agitation for Union Territory (U.T.) status. The agitation soon took the form of communal riots. Bomb were hurled, youth from both side of the community clashed, mob attacked police and Muslims and many houses were burnt. In Buddhist majority villages, Muslim families were given warning to either convert to Buddhism or leave the village. The State Government sent Jammu and Kashmir Armed Police Force from Srinagar to bring the situation under control and the riots were forcibly checked by the administration. Violence reached its high point when three Buddhist agitators were shot dead in police firing on 24th August. The Ladakh Buddhist Association declared a complete social and economic boycott of Muslims of Leh in August 1989^[10]. The boycott strained the centuries old communal harmony between the two communities and caused much bitterness among the Muslims. However, in Shia dominated Kargil the situation was different. There was no any violent reaction against the Buddhists of Kargil and both the community resided in close proximity and displayed maturity during the crisis.

The social and economic boycott imposed on the Muslims of the Leh District by the Buddhists was finally lifted in November 1993 when negotiations about the Hill Council status came into a concrete phase. As a reaction to the agitation of 1989, a large part (up to 95%) of Ladakh's population achieved Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. With this measure the request of the Jammu and Kashmir Government for an end of the tensions between Buddhists and Muslims as necessary prerequisite for granting the Hill Council status seemed to have been fulfilled. On 9 May 1995 the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Councils Act was passed. The relationship between the Buddhists and Muslims, although officially normalised, the agitation had created rift between both religious groups deep inside the people.

In February 2006, after a gap of over 15 years, Ladakh again experienced a communal tension between the two communities when some miscreants allegedly desecrated the Holy Quran in Bodh Karbo village near national highway towards Leh. A mob from the village Khangral attacked Buddhist homes, sparking off a series of communal attacks and counterattacks. In Leh, some Shia men who gathered in Leh's Imam Bara for a Muharram procession

began to force shopkeepers to shut down their shops. One shop keeper who did not close his shop was attacked and shoes stored in his shop were thrown on the street. One of them ended up outside the door of the office of the LBA, where a prayer meeting was under way. Next morning some Buddhists gathered in Leh to avenge the supposed insult to their faith. The mob attacked and seriously injured a Muslim policeman. Stones were thrown at Muharram processions in Leh. For the first time troops from the Indian army and Indian Tibetan Border Police were called to enforce curfew in Leh and Kargil^[11].

The tension between the Muslims and the Buddhists continued despite all the efforts to resolve them. At the local level, Kargil was against the Union Territory status to Ladakh for fear of being dominated by the Buddhists. People of Kargil always wanted to be a part of Jammu and Kashmir. They always complained of step motherly treatment by the Leh administration. They claim that they are more connected to Srinagar for trade, and commerce, as well as politically. The Buddhists of Leh feel that they are dominated by the Muslims of Kashmir and Muslims of Kargil feel the same discrimination in the hands of Buddhists of Leh.

Again in 2012, relations between the two communities turned serious in the Zangskar valley in Kargil, when 26 people from the families of Beda and Gara caste, who were considered lower castes among the Buddhist community, embraced Islam. In the immediate reaction, a communal riot followed; houses of the minorities were damaged, property worth thousands of rupees were destroyed. Authorities imposed curfew restrictions in Zangskar^[12]. The Buddhist majority enforced a strike and started social boycott of the converts which is being practiced till date.

The issue of forceful conversion of Buddhist girls to Islam was always raised by the Buddhist leaders. They accused the Muslim boys of forcefully converting or luring the Buddhist girls into marriage. But the Muslims always denied the allegation saying that inter-marriages take place on the basis of love and claims that Muslim girls also marry Buddhist boys.

Tension simmered in Ladakh in September 2017 over allegations of forced conversions of Buddhist girls to Islam. It started when a 30 years old Buddhist woman married a Shia man from Kargil after conversion to Islam. The LBA suspects that the conversion and the marriage may have been conducted under pressure. The LBA issued a deadline for people from Kargil to leave the Leh town within a stipulated time. Some Kargilies were beaten and forced to leave the place. The woman wrote to Mehbooba Mufti, the then Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, stating that she married to the man by her own choice. Meanwhile, the Jammu and Kashmir high court has directed authorities not to harass the couple following a statement by the Buddhist woman before the court^[13].

It is interesting to note that many writers see the land of Ladakh as consisting of only Buddhist population. They refer Ladakh as the "Buddhist Ladakh". They fail to recognise a heterogeneous society and present Ladakh as a Buddhist land. This concept of Buddhist Ladakh was used by Buddhist leaders to mobilize Buddhist people against Muslim population of Ladakh during their struggle against the Kashmir Government. But Ladakhi Muslims claim themselves to be indigenous natives of Ladakh like the

Buddhists, on the ground that they were local inhabitants of Ladakh, who converted to Islam around sixteenth century, under the influence of many saints who visited the place. By virtue of this fact, they challenge the “exclusively Buddhist” concept of Ladakh and Ladakhi identity and lay their equal claim to it.

Conclusion

The underlying causes of the conflict between the two communities of Ladakh are mainly political and economic and not religious as such. The political leaders of both the communities used religion as a tool for political gains. The Buddhist minority of Kargil and Muslim minority of Leh both have their own grievances against the majority population. Similarly, marginalised district of Kargil feel the same discrimination in the hands of Leh. These grievances need to be urgently addressed to restore communal harmony in the region.

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