



Research Paper

## Tracing the Evolution of Hegemonic Ladakhi Identity: Insights from the Ladakh Buddhist Association's History

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**Abstract:** This research paper delves into the intricate process of identity formation in Ladakh, a region nestled amidst the highest mountain chains in the world. Historically regarded as a part of 'ethnographic Tibet', Ladakh has witnessed significant socio-political transformations, particularly following its integration into the Jammu and Kashmir State. This paper explores how the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) emerged as a pivotal force in shaping Ladakhi identity, with Buddhism as its cornerstone. Through an analysis of historical documents, academic literature, and socio-political contexts, this paper highlights the LBA's role in asserting Ladakh's distinct Buddhist identity amidst perceived threats to its culture, economy, and religion. By examining narratives of Ladakh's ancient history, political merger, and socio-religious dynamics, this paper offers insights into the complexities of identity construction in a region marked by geographical isolation and historical contingencies.

**Keywords:** Ladakh, Buddhist identity, Ladakh Buddhist Association, Jammu and Kashmir, identity formation, ethnicity, religion, culture

*In the northern India, on top of the mountains, lies my birthplace Ladakh,  
This land like a lotus flower is colourful, complete and whole.  
Look at the happiness it brings. Come together my beloved villages,  
In this thoughtful land all these colours have blended together,  
Don't say that I am a non-believer (Muslim) and he is a believer (Buddhist).  
We are all brothers.*

*Please come together, shoulder to shoulder, Hand-in-hand, and walk the path of development.*

These lines are from a traditional folk song sung by Padma Shri Morup Namgyal<sup>1</sup>, in 1964, which speaks of the evil of mixing religion and politics. Contrary to the exhortations of this song, the history of Ladakh in post independent India attests to the importance of religion in both the society and the politics of Ladakh. Membership of a religion based organization has had a close connection with visibility in the political arena. Consider the following facts: Rigzin Jora, who is at present the head of the Indian National Congress in Jammu and Kashmir legislative assembly; was a minister with the previous National Conference-Congress government; and was a former secretary of the Ladakh Buddhist Association. Thupstan Tsewang, nephew of the legendary Bakula Rinpoche, and the present member of Lok Sabha representing Ladakh, is a former president of the Ladakh Buddhist Association. Dr. Sonam Dawa Lonpo, former Chief Executive Councillor of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (Leh), is also a former president of Ladakh Buddhist Association. The former MLA from Nubra, Deldan Namgyal, was president of Ladakh Student Association, Chandigarh. Student Associations in Jammu, Dehradun, and Chandigarh are affiliated to the Ladakh Buddhist Association. Students from Ladakh, who study in various cities in India like Jammu, Dehradun, Delhi, and Chandigarh, form their respective organisations on religious lines. Ladakhis, who are not Buddhists, are not allowed to be a member of these organisations. A similar process can be seen in Kargil district too. The MLA from Kargil, Kaga Asgar Karbalai, is from the Imam Khomeni Memorial Trust which is based on the Shia school of thought.

<sup>1</sup>Morup Namgyal is a Ladakhi folk singer and street activist from 1960's. He is a founding member of first Buddhist based private School in Leh (Lamdon model School). He has a collection of Ladakhi folk songs sang during ancient times which is coming out in print. The above song is taken from the documentary "The Song Collector" on Morup Namgyal by Erik Koto in 2016.

Alongwith this trust, the Islamia School (Kargil), represent the other school of thought in Kargil. Both schools of thought participate in the elections to the Hill Council based in Kargil. The vital role played by the religion based associations, in the political arena, has been made possible because of their role in articulating distinct conceptions of Ladakhi identity. Although, these associations were earlier confined to the social and cultural domains, but have since become key players in all spheres of Ladakhi society, economy, and politics. Religion is a key factor, which must be taken into account for any understanding of modern Ladakhi society, and its politics.

This chapter examines the role played by the preeminent Buddhist organization in Ladakh, the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), in Ladakhi society, and its politics. It draws out the components of Ladakhi identity, as articulated by the LBA, and relates them to the popular construction of Ladakh, both as a society and as a region, as etched out in the introductory chapter. The close coherence between the popular perception of Ladakh, by non Ladakhis – both Indian and foreign – as well as the dominant presence of LBA members and leaders in the political institutions of Ladakh, (as members of the Legislative Assembly, councilors in the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh and members of the Lok Sabha) attests to the success of the LBA in forming a distinct Ladakhi identity. The chapter begins with a brief historical background on the formation of the LBA. It will then show how elements of history, and culture are appropriated and interpreted by the LBA to construct a Ladakhi identity in opposition to that of the other regions of the Jammu and Kashmir state. It will draw attention to the context in which such a construction has taken place, and will enquire into the shifts in the identity formation as well as the political and cultural strategies adopted by the LBA.

### **Brief Historical Background of Ladakh Buddhist Association**

The first formal Buddhist representation in Jammu and Kashmir was in the year 1931, during the Glancy commission. The delegation which claimed to be ‘representing’ the Buddhists of Kashmir comprised of four men – SonamNorbu, ShridharKaul, ShridharBhat, and S.N. Dhar. SonamNorbu, the only Ladakhi member in the delegation, and was a college student at the time. The delegation submitted their memorandum under the name of ‘Kashmir Raj Bodhi Maha Sabha’ (KRBMS). According to Martjin Van Beek (1996), this delegation was received due to the communal nature of the colonial State (1996, p. 28). Kashmir Raj Bodhi Maha Sabha had no formal linkages with Ladakhi Buddhists other than the membership of SonamNorbu, who had no religious affiliation during his college years in Jammu. One of the problems in writing the history of the LBA is the paucity of documentation of the early years. Martjin Van Beek (1998) and ShridharKaul (1992) have to some extent documented the early history of LBA. The claims of KRBMS as the legitimate representative of the Buddhist Community of Jammu and Kashmir was bolstered by them obtaining a desired status through a proclamation issued by StagtsangRaspa, head of the Hemis Monastery (Van Beek, 1998, pp. 214-219).

The beginning of the political organization of Buddhists in Ladakh was with the formation of the Ladakh Buddhist Education Society in 1934, which was succeeded by the Young Men’s Buddhist Association in 1938. The early activities of Young Men’s Buddhist Association were concerned with sponsoring of religious festivals, education, and organizing village dramas against social evils like alcohol consumption especially of the local variety (Chang which is a barley based alcohol locally distilled) and polyandry.

During the 1940’s the association had limited interaction with the wider world. The most important initiative of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association was the proposal for a law banning the practice of polyandry, and changing inheritance law so that every male offspring would inherit an equal share of the landholdings of their ancestral household (Van Beek, 1998, pp. 225-229). They secured the passing of the Abolition of Polyandrous Marriage Act in 1941 by the Jammu and Kashmir State (Bertelsen, 1997). It was significant that polyandry was identified as a social evil, as it points to the gendered nature of the articulation of Ladakhi Buddhist identity. Berselten argues that the Kashmir Raj Bodhi Maha Sabha and Young Men’s Buddhist Association shared the view that there was a gradual shift in the demographic composition of Ladakh in favour of Muslims. This representation of ‘demographic anxieties’ was the first collective representation made on behalf of a large segment of the people of Ladakh (Buddhist) and subsequently it laid the foundation for the practice of identification in Ladakh along religious lines (1997, pp. 67-68).

It is to be noted that presidents of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association were from the elite class of Ladakh. The first president was Raja JigmetDradul, who was the erstwhile king of Ladakh stationed in Stok Palace. He left the president’s post when he became the member of the Praja Sabha in 1939. The post was subsequently occupied by Kalon CheewangRigzin, who later on will be seen as having played an important role in formation of a distinct Buddhist identity of Ladakh region.

In 1949, the Young Men’s Buddhist Association changed its name to the present Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA). From 1949 to 1957 Kalon CheewangRigzin was the President of the Association. We do find an evolving nature of the Buddhist assertion through the study of the Association. The nomination of Bakula Rinpoche (Rinpoche is a Bodhisattva, who reincarnates again and again for the betterment of the people) in 1951 to the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly, who was the spiritual head of the yellow sect of Tibetan

Buddhism and the head of the Spituk Monastery, inaugurated the role of Ladakh Buddhist Association in the political affairs of not only Ladakh, but also in the state of Jammu and Kashmir and at the level of the national politics. Ladakh Buddhist Association has consistently claimed itself as the “sole representative of the Buddhist community of Ladakh” in all its activities, as seen in all the documents it issues and the representations it sends to various institutions and in its pronouncements in the media.

At present, the Ladakh Buddhist Association has two subordinate wings within it, one being the Ladakh Buddhist Association Youth, Leh (NangpayZhaunuTsogspa) and Ladakh Buddhist Association Women. It has one branch in Zaskar region, which has been vocal against the Muslims of Zaskar. The association in its Constitution formulates its main objectives as under:

- A- To promote and preserve the religious and cultural traditions of Ladakh.
- B- To disseminate and promote the teachings of Buddhism.
- C- To organize symposia and seminars and to run centres interested in promoting the aims and objectives of the association.
- D- To acquire, hold and dispose of property in a lawful manner and to construct, improve, alter, demolish, repair and maintain any building or buildings for the purposes of the association.
- E- To eradicate social evils prevailing among the Buddhists.
- F- To open, maintain and develop industries, hotels, shops, monasteries, gardens and farms.
- G- To promote the Bodhi language.
- H- To subscribe to, or become member of or to cooperate with any other organizations, institutions or Associations having objects wholly or in part similar to those of this Association and to aid and assist any existing institution in such manner as the working committee may deem fit (LBA n.d.).

### **Ladakh as Essentially Buddhist**

The academic debates on Ladakh emphasize its seclusion in terms of its geographical position: it is a region ‘encircled by the highest mountain chains in the world’ (Rizvi, 1983; Crook and Osmanton, 1994, p. 25). This has resulted in Ladakh getting introduced as the ‘Crossroad of High Asia’, ‘a borderland’, ‘a vulnerable strategic tract for India’, ‘Little Tibet’ etc. The birth of the Indian nation state, Ladakh becoming a part of the Jammu and Kashmir State, the Indian State’s programme of social and economic development, and the opening up of the Ladakh region to tourism in 1974 have all influenced the process of Ladakhi identity formation. Amidst these events, the Ladakh Buddhist Association emerged as the foremost and most powerful organization in Ladakh on the question of the Ladakhi identity construction.

The LBA always viewed Ladakh as a bastion of Tibetan Buddhism. The fear of Kashmir dominance led to the core emphasis being laid on Buddhism as a marker of Ladakhi people and the region as well. This gave them a sense of protection in the face of the restructuring of power in Jammu and Kashmir from Dogra rule to a democratic form of Government. LBA understood the new centre of power in Jammu and Kashmir as belonging to Muslims, which in their eyes posed a threat to Ladakh’s culture, economy, and religion. The self-assertion by LBA excludes the Muslim population of the Ladakh region. Ladakhi Buddhists instead claimed to be a distinct community as seen in one of the earliest documents of the LBA. The following is an extract from a memorandum submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru by the LBA in 1949 by CheewangRigzin, then President of LBA:

We are a separate nation by all the test-: race, language, religion, culture determining nationality. The only link connecting us with the other people of the state being the bond of common ruler. If the Indian National Congress could persuade itself to recognize: the Muslims of India as a separate nation although they had so much in common with the other elements of the Indian population, the government of India should have no hesitation in recognition what is patent and scout revertible fact in our case. The right of self-determination claimed by us cannot lie claimed with equal force by the people of Baltistan including Skardu the parts of Kargil tehsils predominantly peopled by Muslims, as they are connected by ties of religion with the majority community in Jammu and Kashmir (LBA 1949, p. 1).

As seen in this extract, the Muslims of Kargil are excluded from the definition of a Ladakhi given that they share religion with the majority community in Kashmir, and a reference is also made to the Partition of British India, which recognized Muslims as forming a distinct nation. The acceptance of Partition by the Congress thus is evoked by the LBA to deny Muslims any part of Ladakhi identity.

Ladakh is generally regarded as a part of ‘ethnographic Tibet’, a large area encompassing parts of China, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Pakistan, in which a major part of the population is ethnically Tibetan, and shares numerous aspects of culture, language, social organization, and religion (Bell, 1924, pp. 2-8; Samuel, 1993). Many studies on Ladakh have tried to analyze Ladakh through the prism of Tibet by analyzing the historic, religious, and social processes found in the region with reference to Tibetan religion and culture (Francke, 1991; Shaksपो, 2010; &Gutschow, 2006). This analysis of Ladakh with reference to Tibetan religion and culture became a basis on which Ladakhi identity was shaped by the Ladakh Buddhist Association.

Ladakh Buddhist Association takes into account the ancient history of the Ladakh Kingdom. For them “Ladakh was once an independent kingdom, the political history dates back to 930 A.D. . . . Ladakh’s merger with Jammu and Kashmir didn’t form any natural cohesion and proved to be a folly throughout” (LBA, 2000a, p. 1). From the very outset the LBA views Ladakh’s political merger with Jammu and Kashmir as a ‘historical mistake’ which ‘did not constitute any natural cohesion’ and how ‘except for the Dogra’s suzerainty as a commonality, Ladakh is fundamentally different from Kashmir’ (LBA, 2000a, p. 1). They give emphasis to Ladakh once being an independent Himalayan Kingdom, which was and is, fundamentally different from Kashmir in all respect of culture- ethnic, religious, and linguistic. For the Ladakh Buddhist Association, the Jammu and Kashmir State never formed a natural geopolitical entity; rather it had “no other bond of cohesion than the fact of Maharaja’s rule, no simple name for it exists” (LBA, 2000a, p. 2). This served the basis on which a distinct Buddhist identity of the region was presented by the LBA.

LBA views the history of modern Ladakh as the history of emergence and assertion of nationalism and integration with modern India. Nationalism remained a dominant political creed, and it became a rallying point among Ladakhis during India’s wars with Pakistan and China in 1948, 1962, 1965, 1971, and 1999. They claim that Buddhists have always stood for national unity and integrity of the country. Thus, while Partition is seen as an acceptance of Muslims as a distinct nation, the Ladakh Buddhist Association links Ladakhi identity with the wider Indian identity by claiming Buddhism as essentially Indian. They state that Ladakhi identity is linked culturally and religiously with India. Emphasis is given on the introduction of Buddhism in Ladakh. The Indian nation is seen as having an obligation toward Ladakh as:

Tibet is a cultural daughter of India and we of lesser Tibet seek the bosom of that gracious mother to receive more nutrients for growth to our full stature in every way. She has given us that we prize above all other things- our religion and culture...the Asoka wheel on her flag-symbol of goodwill for all humanity and her concern for cultural children calls us irresistibly. Will the great mother refuse to take to her arms one of the weakest and most forlorn and distressed children; a child whom filial love impels to respond to the call?(LBA,1949, p.6).

The interlinking of Ladakhi identity with that of India has positioned Ladakh as a region which is last sanctuary of Buddhism, and that India is obliged to recognize the region as essentially Buddhist in nature, having a culture which is homogeneous (Buddhist). Cultural homogenization demands the binary of ‘we’ versus ‘them’ or ‘insiders’ versus ‘outsiders’. The outsiders according to the Ladakh Buddhist Association are simultaneously Kashmiris in particular and Muslims in general.

### **Understanding of Region**

Ladakh Buddhist Association has come to view Ladakh as a ‘backward region’ which is in need of government support. LBA gives more emphasis to the role of the central government than that of state government for the development of Ladakh. This perception was consolidated among the Ladakhis when economic, religious and cultural links with Central Asia, Tibet and Baltistan came to an end with Ladakh’s incorporation with the Union of India. This incorporation brought about a new standard of modernity and development, which made Ladakhi leaders perceive their region and people as marginalized (Van Beek 2000: 535-536). Bakula Rimpoche, in his famous speech delivered during the discussion of the budget in the J&K state assembly in 1952, alleged intentional negligence of Ladakh region by the state government. In his speech he states that the budget does not mention Ladakh even once, and not a single paisa is proposed to be spent on Ladakh. Below is an extract from the speech:

If you look at this budget estimate from end to the other end, no mention of Ladakh is found anywhere in it... the government seems to have decided not to spend even a single paisa in this area. Our area is remote, far flung from and cut off from the other areas of the state. Even its own parts are remote from one another as there is tremendous paucity of roads and tracks. At the present moment, the world is moving towards a delicate situation, when independence and self-determination is being promoted all over and these ideas have found a place in people’s thinking and aspirations. To expect that the people of Ladakh can remain unaffected and unaware of these global and regional movements and will continue to act and present themselves as deaf and dumb and without expectations is unreasonable. When for other people self-expression and aspirations for progress are considered virtues, why is it that the same does not hold true for Ladakhis and that when they try to express their needs and desires a doubtful eye is cast on them? (As quoted in Shakspe, 2010, p. 121).

In 1949, when India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, proposed categorizing Ladakh as a ‘backward region’ and listing Ladakhi people under the other Scheduled Tribe category, this was rejected by the then Ladakhi leader Bakula Rimpoche. For Bakula Rimpoche acceptance of the proposal would imply a “degrading status for the population of Ladakh” (Van Beek, 2000, p. 539). The argument for rejecting the proposal was that Ladakh had the potential to develop on its own. This argument was later rejected by younger leaders of Ladakh Buddhist Association. In the late 1960’s, Ladakh witnessed the beginning of a movement demanding inclusion of Ladakhis in the ‘Scheduled Tribe’ category. Younger leaders of the Ladakh Buddhist

Association understood the benefits associated with reservation especially as they had been educated outside Ladakh. In 1981, during the agitation for demand of Scheduled Tribe status to Ladakh region, Ladakh Buddhist Association mobilized the youth of Leh. In this agitative phase of the movement, two lives were lost. This loss of lives in the agitation acted as a catalyst for further differentiating Ladakhi Buddhists from other communities. For the younger generation of Ladakhi Buddhists, the ‘Martyr traditional Archery Cup’ (See Image 1), organized by the youth wing of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, acts as a reminder of the contribution of Ladakh Buddhist Association in procuring Scheduled Tribe status to Ladakh. Scheduled Tribe status to Ladakh was granted in 1989. Thus, we see that while the self-perception of backwardness and marginalization was shared by the Ladakhi leaders right from the inception of independent India, the demand for a reserved category status was initially rejected but later became a central demand of the LBA. The demand for ST status however did base itself on the understanding of the region and its people as backward, requiring specific measures from the central government.

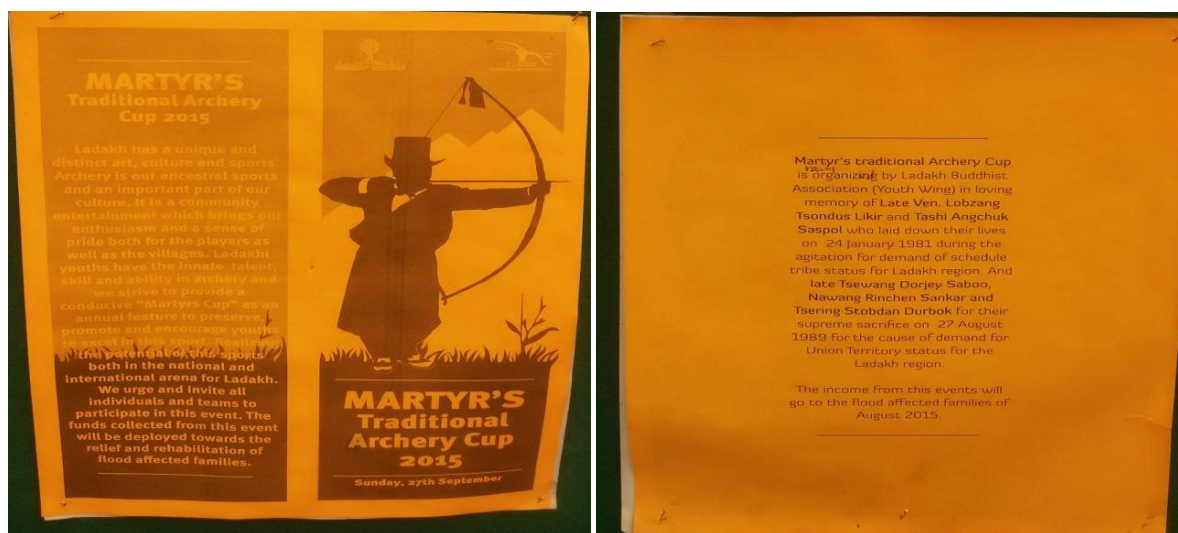


Image 1: A pamphlet of Martyr's Traditional Archery Cup (Thinles Photo Collection 2015).

Ladakh witnessed a massive attack in 1962 launched by Chinese forces. This was resisted by young Ladakhi men, and jawans under the leadership of Indian Army. Ladakhis proudly claim that although “many had to give their lives to defend the country, not a single inch of Ladakh was ceded by the Chinese” (Rabgais, 1989, p. 56). The massive Chinese aggression led to sudden suspension of the ancient link between Ladakh and Tibet. An Iron Curtain of sorts was placed on the Ladakh border with Tibet. The frontier which had been open for thousands of years was now under the control of the armed forces. The second and third attack on Ladakh, was in the year of 1965 and 1971. These attacks brought about an end to the trade link between Kargil and Gilgit, and the route from Nubra to Central Asia. The impact of these attacks was that on the one hand, they sharpened the link between Ladakh and India as ancient trade, and cultural links were discontinued and came to be perceived as threats, while on the other hand they re-emphasised the need for modernization of Ladakh for the Ladakhi people. As noted by Rabgais, these continued foreign onslaughts “help us understand why Ladakh need to be modernized” (1994, p. 5). Ladakh was the target of the expansionist ambitions of both China and Pakistan, and their aggression was felt throughout the length and breadth of India. One of the effects of these hostilities was the increasing number of young Ladakhis choosing military as a profession (Rabgais, 1994, pp. 2-17). The vastness of the region demanded high availability of military personnel, who had local knowledge of the topography.

Another grievance of the Ladakhis that LBA articulated was that the neglect of Ladakh, by the J&K state, continued despite Ladakh constituting a major portion of Jammu and Kashmir territory. This neglect was not only in terms of budgetary allocation, but Ladakh was seen as being marginalized in terms of political representation too, both in the state legislative assembly and parliament. Hence, the demand emerged that representation to these institutions must be done on geographical basis, and funds too should be allotted in terms of geographical size and not on population basis. “We are demanding Union Territory to Ladakh with Legislative Assembly as a part of it. It will help in increasing people’s participation in the development of the region and fund can be procure from the centre (Dorjey, personal communication, June 15, 2015). Eventually, it led to the demand for autonomy and the need for an autonomous federational institution in Ladakh.

The discourse of marginalization takes a specific communal form in the articulation of the LBA. LBA claims that historically the Buddhist community has been open to other communities, but their present poverty

and backwardness has led to a misuse of this openness. Other communities, they claim, cite this very backwardness as a reason to lure Buddhists to their religion, and this they allege has led to conversions. An official of the Ladakh Buddhist Association asserted that: “Historically Buddhists have allowed Islam and Christianity to be propagated in Ladakh. They could not convert the regional people as they were fully in favour of Buddhism” (2015). Despite this assertion of the commitment of Buddhists to their religion, the LBA articulates anxiety over the demographic transformation of Ladakh. They allege that a Buddhist majority region is slowly getting transformed due to the high influx of “Muslims from Kargil and elsewhere from the state. This trend of increase in Muslim population and systematic reduction of Buddhists in their own land, reminds them of the mass exodus of Hindu Kashmiri Pandits, Christians from the Valley” (LBA, 2014). By drawing a comparison with Kashmiri Pandits, the LBA not only seeks to sharpen the fear psychosis within Ladakh, but also appeal to the larger Indian public. Not only do they link this demographic anxiety with the threat of disturbance to regional imbalance, but also invoke the threat to national security by appealing to the larger Indian public on this ground. Another evidence cited by the LBA, to make their case of being discriminated against by the state government with the demographic implications of this discrimination, is the allegation that the J&K state government has been denying Ladakhi Buddhists their rights by favoring only Muslims, when it comes to employment in state institution. We can see how in the discourse of the LBA, neglect of Ladakh as a region is equated with the marginalization of Buddhists, both politically and economically, and hence eventually threatening their very cultural existence.

In the past decade, Ladakh has become a major tourist destination, and the peak summer season sees an overflow of tourists. As we have seen in the introduction chapter, local travel agencies sell two main attractions to the tourists – the monasteries and nature treks – in and around the Ladakh region. Monasteries are at the centre of the cultural showcasing of Ladakh, such that visiting at least a few monasteries are a must in any tourist itinerary. For monastery tours, travel agencies tend to provide a monastery guide, who helps in translating the tradition and interpreting the iconography especially the statues of Buddha and Bodhisattvas, and the paintings in the monastery premises. This job of the guide is available in a significant number, given that the tourism has emerged as a key source of income for Ladakhis. Prior to 2000, Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists were all able to get the job of a monastery guide. In the year 2000, the LBA opposed this and sought to make non-Buddhists ineligible for the job of monastery guide. It argued that there was a fear that non-Buddhists are not equipped to inform tourists about Buddhist traditions, and hence there was a danger of them being blasphemous. This became a fresh site for conflict between the communities, wherein the Ladakh Buddhist Association accused Muslims of trying to erase or belittle the rich history of Buddhism in Ladakh, and pollute the sacred space of Ladakhi Buddhists. Monasteries thus became a sacred space in which Muslims, it was declared, are not entitled to enter. In keeping with its agenda to prevent non-Buddhists, especially Muslims, from becoming a guide, the LBA started an entrance exam for becoming a monastery guide, and only Buddhists of the region were eligible to take the exam and hence eligible to apply for the post.

The Ladakh region is dotted with monasteries, Chorten (Stupa), and prayer flags. However, LBA has been very vocal in the allegation that Muslims are in the process of eradicating Ladakhi cultural identity, by consciously neglecting the role of Buddhist community in Ladakh. In addition to restricting Muslims from jobs related to Buddhist monasteries, LBA has alleged that Muslims are trying to form a new Ladakhi identity, by going on a construction spree of mosques. They also cite the construction of a new Central Asian Museum, as evidence of an attempt to erase Buddhism. Thus, two strategies are simultaneously adopted by the LBA: One, by restricting a prime source of employment on religious lines, the LBA is not only denying that Buddhism is a common heritage for all Ladakhi people, it claims that Buddhism is the only heritage of Ladakh; Second, it claims that the key marker of Ladakhi identity, i.e. Buddhism, is under threat due to what they allege is rampant construction of mosques. To make such a claim, they also deny the significance of the historical link between Central Asia and Ladakh, since this link is seen only through the religious lens.

The successive governments of the state have provided Land for the construction of Mosques all over Ladakh and have given no government Land to the Buddhist community in terms of commercial or Religious. These Mosques are funded by outsiders who have continuously been communal in nature (LBA,2006).

The LBA secretary argued:

We don't get any land in Kargil for setting up a monastery for Buddhist community and the old monasteries in ruins are not renovated by the administration. Leh, despite being a Buddhist majority region, has only one small monastery in Leh city compared to Muslims who have constructed around 16 to 18 Mosques in and around Leh city (Dawa, Personal Interview, June 24, 2016).

Their allegation assumes that the mosques, that are being constructed, are all new, and that monasteries on the other hand, are all old and part of the heritage. The campaign against mosques, is a part of the broader campaign related to the imagined threat of a demographic shift in the religious composition of Ladakhi people. LBA leaders and members, constantly allege that Muslims are covertly increasing their population in an essentially Buddhist majority region. This immediately links to the other constant refrain of LBA, which is the

immediate need to increase the Buddhist population in Leh, and prevent what is seen as an influx of Muslim grooms in Leh region. This LBA argument is similar to the concepts of Homeland, Fatherland, and Motherland which is a part of the Hindu Nationalist rhetoric, as has been documented by the studies of organizations that comprise the Hindu Right Wing in India (Jaffrelot, 1996). The LBA discourse thus bears affinity with the anti-Muslim discourse of Hindu nationalism, in which Muslims are intrinsically suspect when it comes to nationalist sentiments. As one prominent scholar of Ladakh pointed out in an interview to me: “Muslim cannot be loyal to the region as they can settle anywhere in the world due to their numerical strength” (Achuk, personal communication, July 17, 2016). Thus, Buddhist vulnerability is seen as accentuated because of the suspect loyalties of Muslims. LBA has made mosque construction, and thus any kind of assertion of religion by Muslims, as evidence which justifies the fear of cultural erasure for Buddhists. In doing this, LBA underlines that only Buddhists have a right to the region, since the land itself is claimed to be essentially Buddhist.

### **Relation with Kashmir**

Since independence, the central political issue in Ladakh has been its relationship with Jammu and Kashmir. Already in the 1950’s, Ladakhis were beginning to complain of ‘step-motherly’ treatment from the Jammu and Kashmir government, which they argued, neglected them unfairly. In order to assert a distinct identity, Ladakh Buddhist Association seeks to highlight that Ladakh history is old and glorious is its own right, and here they draw attention to the distinctness of the Ladakh kingdom, and its incompatibility with the broader region of Jammu and Kashmir. For them:

Ladakh was once an independent kingdom, the political history dates back to 930 A.D... Ladakh’s merger with Jammu and Kashmir didn’t form any natural cohesion and proved to be a folly throughout (LBA, 2000a, p. 1).

From the very outset, the LBA views Ladakh’s political merger with Jammu and Kashmir as a ‘historical mistake’, which “did not constitute any natural cohesion except for the Dogra’s suzerainty as a commonality, Ladakh is fundamentally different from Kashmir” (LBA, 2000a,p. 1). They argue that Ladakh was once an independent Himalayan kingdom, which was and is fundamentally different from Kashmir in all aspects of culture – ethnicity, religion, and language. For the Ladakh Buddhist Association, the Jammu and Kashmir State never formed a natural geopolitical entity; rather it had “no other bond of cohesion than the fact of Maharaja’s rule, no simple name for it exists” (LBA, 2000a, p. 2). Further, LBA blames successive governments of the state for having adopted a policy of discrimination towards Ladakh, which includes marginalizing Ladakh’s historical, religious, and cultural identity. LBA builds an image of Ladakh, as oppressed through political domination of Kashmiris, with help from Ladakhi Muslims despite being a distinct culture and region. The history of Ladakh, once independent from Jammu and Kashmir and the material available to claim about it, have a bearing on the resolution of Indo-China border disputes. The history of Ladakh is used by the Indian state, with regard to its boundary dispute with China, to show that the occupied territory by China in Ladakh are in essence have been part of independent Ladakh (Fisher, 1963).

This complaint regarding Ladakh’s neglect, also pertains to the political and electoral situation in Ladakh in the decades after independence. Bakula Rinpoche, was accommodated with the portfolio of Ladakh Affairs in the J&K ministry of Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad in 1953. From 1957 onwards, elections were held for the Jammu and Kashmir state legislative assembly. The first election to the legislative assembly seat of Ladakh, witnessed no opposition to the candidature of Bakula Rinpoche. During the second legislative assembly election in 1962, Bakula Rinpoche was challenged by an independent Tsering Phunstog, who was part of a splinter group within the Congress party. This election also witnessed the rise of Thiksey Rinpoche, as a challenger to the hold of Bakula Rinpoche. The challenge of Thiksey Rinpoche, who was member of the Democratic National Conference party, led to resentment in some circles of Buddhist population. During this time the Congress Party, led by Bakula Rinpoche and Sonam Wangyal, were all powerful, and there was no effective opposition (Rinpoche 2016, p. 27), and opposing views to them were shunned by society. It is believed that an attempt on the Thiksey Rinpoche’s life was a consequence of this, and the attack is attributed to the Thiksey Monastery administration monks. Bakula Rinpoche visited Thiksey Monastery, and managed an agreement that Thiksey Rinpoche would not to stand as the Democratic National Conference Candidate, and instead support Sonam Wangyal from the Congress Party (Rinpoche, 2016, p. 46).

In 1964, Ghulam Mohammed Sadiq assumed the post of Prime minister of Jammu and Kashmir. He sought people who had allegiance to Kashmir, and realized that Bakula Rinpoche held more allegiance to the Government of India; this led to a misunderstanding between them. 1969 saw the beginning of agitational politics in Ladakh, as an agitation committee, headed by Togdan Rinpoche<sup>2</sup>, was formed to protest against discrimination by state government. The issues taken by the committee were:

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<sup>2</sup>Togdan Rinpoche is the spiritual head of the Drikung Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism in Ladakh. He later on became the head of National Conference division of Ladakh. He was a nominated Member of Legislative

- a- Denial of ministerial berths to elected members from Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir Government especially as even the Ladakh Affairs portfolio was given to a non-Ladakhi.
- b- Low allocation of funds to the region.
- c- Rehabilitation of Tibetan refugees who entered Ladakh in 1959.
- d- Construction of rest houses for Buddhists in Kargil on their existing land in Kargil town and
- e- Arrangements for teaching local language in schools (Shakspo, 2017, p. 6).

This agitation led to the formation of Ganjendragadkar commission, whose chairman was Bakula Rinpoche. The state government established 'Ladakh Development Board', but the board ceased to exist with the end of the term of board members. The agitation led to allocation of land to Tibetans in Choglamsar and Agling. SonamWangyal, was given a ministerial berth in the state cabinet.

In 1973, BalrajMadhok, former President of Bharatiya Jan Sangh, in a press conference said that "Ladakh should be separated from the State and be made a Union Territory in the interest of national security and wider national interest of the Nation" (Van Beek, 1996, p. 179). This resulted in a press conference in Delhi by Lama Lobzang<sup>3</sup>, who formally made the demand for Union Territory status for Ladakh which eventually became a central issue in Ladakh politics.

Since Ladakh comprised a vast territory, it was divided into two districts – Kargil and Leh, for the sake of convenience in administration in 1979. This bifurcation of Ladakh district, was seen by Ladakh Buddhist Association as bifurcation of territory based on religious lines (Van Beek 2000:175). This led to the growing regional resentment between residents of Kargil and Leh. Ladakh Buddhist Association viewed this bifurcation by the Sheikh Abdullah led government, as a conspiracy to marginalize the Buddhists of Ladakh. They resented the allotment of Zaskar to Kargil district, and alleged that it was an attempt to destroy Buddhists unity. Till today, the loss of Zaskar region is a source of resentment for LBA.

State government showed the division as an administrative convenience but their actual plot was to marginalize Buddhists. See how no Zaskarpa has been elected to the legislative assembly, Muslims from the Sanku region are always elected who have no affinity with Zaskar populace (S. Phunchok, personal communication, August 21, 2016).

State institutions are viewed, as having played an important role in perpetuating the acts of violence by the Muslim minority in Leh. LBA alleged that prior to 1989, state institution neglected the grievances of the local Buddhist majority population. No cases were filed against Muslims, even in atrocities like rape and violence (S. Choppel, personal communication, June 16, 2015). Ladakhis are understood to be peaceful and non-violent people. This, according to LBA, is due to Buddhist philosophy. The reason why the movement for Union Territory status was peaceful, is understood by the LBA, as a consequence of Ladakhis being against taking of arms, and their preference of non-violent means to achieve their goals (Kushok Bakula, Sept 22, 1989). Ladakh Buddhist Association claims that the entire movement for regional autonomy has been peaceful and democratic throughout. This discourse was used by the Ladakh Buddhist Association to garner support from the wider Indian public and intelligentsia. It juxtaposed the peaceful nature of the Ladakhi Buddhists, against the alleged violence of Muslims. In fact, it claims that the demand for regional autonomy was not only the desire of the Buddhist community, but also a result of the treatment that the community has faced at the hands of the Muslims. According to Ladakh Buddhist Association:

Muslims are violent in nature and the Buddhist community has continuously faced intimidation and attacks from Muslims; the regional autonomy agitation in 1989 was the culmination of Muslim atrocities from the time of Indian independence (T. Dorjay, personal communication, June 26, 2015).

This has paved the way for making the regional autonomy issue, a decisive marker of Ladakhi identity. Those people who oppose regional autonomy for Ladakh are thereby declared the "fifth agent" of the state. The regional autonomy movement has used various tactics to silence any dissent. The Muslim community who was against regional autonomy was subjected to social boycott. The social boycott known as *me lenchulen chad pa* (No water and fire relations), meant that any family or individual will not have any social, economic, or cultural relationship with those individuals who are boycotted. This social boycott tactic has shattered families which had members, and relatives from both Muslim and Buddhist religions. One of the executive members of the

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Council of Jammu and Kashmir and was later elevated to Minister of State for Ladakh Affairs and Planning in the cabinet of Dr. Farooq Abdullah led Government in Jammu and Kashmir (1996-2002).

<sup>3</sup>Lama Lobzang was the founding general secretary of Ladakh Buddha Vihara in Delhi (1963-86). He became a negotiator on behalf of LBA during the 1970's with the central government. He later became a member of the High-Power Panel on Minorities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker section under the Ministry of Home affairs (1980-83). The panel was replaced in 1984 to form the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and Lama Lobzang was made a member (non-statutory) of the Commission from 1984-1992.



Ladakh Buddhist Association justified the social boycott, as a way of silencing dissent, but he further states that the social boycott was operational only during the agitation period. Becky Norman, Co-Director of Students Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), while speaking about the agitation and subsequent social boycott in 1989 states that:

We had to take along Muslim students for buying groceries and vegetables for the students as most of the vegetable vendors in Leh Bazaar were Kashmiri Muslims and grocery vendors were Ladakhi Muslims; Buddhist students could not buy from these shops as they were compelled to boycott all Muslim enterprises (B. Norman, personal communication, June 17, 2016).

While on my field work in Padum, I witnessed this tactic of social boycott still in use in the Zaskar region. In Zaskar, Buddhists are made to buy groceries only from those shops, which have the Buddhist flag flying above the shop. Any Buddhist who buys from any other shop is reprimanded and look down upon.

On July 18, 1989, the Ladakh Buddhist Association held a general meeting at ChokhangVihara at Leh and adopted the following resolution:

We the Buddhist of Ladakh, assembled here at this Historic ChokhangVihara, Leh on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the fifth month of Buddhist calendar, do hereby resolve and adopt as under: -

a- That on 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1989 a mob consisting of some Sunni Muslims and Kashmiris attacked and tried to cause damage to the ChokhangVihara by throwing explosives inside the premises of the Vihara.

b- That no action has so far been taken by the State Government against Kashmiris and other miscreants.

c- That the State Law and Order machinery having failed to protect lives and properties of the Buddhist living in Srinagar, where from the Buddhist students and families are forced to flee to Ladakh or Jammu.

d- Realizing that Ladakh has always been treated as a colony and Ladakhis as a third citizen of Jammu and Kashmir State and accordingly, Ladakh having been neglected in every sphere of life socially, politically and economically. We firmly resolve to launch a movement for an alternative administrative setup wherein the ethnic, cultural and traditional identity of Ladakhis is safeguarded and that alternative is in declaring Ladakh as a Union Territory.

Therefore, this gathering, consisting of representatives from all over Ladakh, do, hereby, resolve that we shall not rest in peace until Ladakh is declared a Union Territory (LBA, Resolution, 19 July 1989).

The resolution makes clear the role of the Ladakh Buddhist Association in the launch of the movement, and of LBA's claim to being the representative of the Buddhists of Ladakh. While LBA does claim that it seeks to defend the interest of all Ladakhis, it does not include the Sunni community as Ladakhi. For the vast majority of Shia Muslims in Ladakh, LBA has kept open the door to join the agitation. The Shia majority in Kargil did not participate in the LBA led autonomy movement, as they argued for sustaining peace in the Kashmir Valley.

The key role played by LBA can be further seen, when we look at the publications of that period which includes posters and pamphlets, as well as the public statements issued under the name of Ladakh People's Movement for Union Territory Status (LPMUT). The prime target in these "publications were invariably Kashmiris, and these were alleged to have 'indoctrinated' local Sunni Muslims" (Van Beek, 2000, p. 311). This strategy was used when Kashmir was witnessing a period of armed resistance, and that movement was gathering momentum in Kashmir. A spokesperson for the LPMUT, in a press conference in Delhi, linked seasonal traders from Kashmir, mostly vegetable and souvenir sellers, as bringing "the secessionist culture of the valley into this strategically important region of the State" (Hindustan times, August 8, 1989). This position of LBA strengthened its ability to gain sympathy of not only Central authorities, but also wide sections of the media.

The agitation of 1989 led to the establishment of Hill Development Councils in both Leh (1995) and Kargil (2001). The failure of the agitation in achieving Union Territory status to Ladakh, brought about a discord between the older and younger members of the Association. RigzinJora, then Secretary of Ladakh Buddhist Association, in an interview pointed out to the "skepticism, gloom, and despondency among the educated youth with regard to announcement of Autonomous Hill Council for Ladakh" (Ladags'sMelong, 1994, p 11), who have since become critical of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, as the "Hill Development councils do not recognize the legitimate desires of a minority with a distinct identity" (Van Beek, 2000). The members of Ladakh Buddhist Association, who were spearheading the agitation of 1989, were chosen to head the Hill Development Council under the banner of Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUFT) after the establishment of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council in Leh.

Kargil politician Haji Asgar Ali, popularly known as Karbalai, during a discussion in Kargil on "*Union Territory Status vs. Greater Ladakh*" (Karbalai 2011) complains about the bias of media, and the Leh Hill Council members in marginalizing Kargil. He states:

Media tends to show Ladakh with the Leh district. While reporting on Hill Council of both districts, Leh Hill council is reported as Ladakh Hill Council and Kargil as Kargil Hill Council. When in actual both Hill councils are known by Ladakh Hill Council. During 26<sup>th</sup> January and 15<sup>th</sup> August celebration, the Chief

Executive Council of Leh Hill Council uses the term 'Ladakh' while boasting of achievement of the Council, which is not right (Karbalai, 2011).

He further argues for the need to struggle, for what he calls a Greater Ladakh, instead of Union Territory Status. However, Karbalai understands "Greater Ladakh" differently from the "Greater Ladakh" as envisioned by the LBA. According to Karbalai, "Greater Ladakh consists of the traditional Ladakh Wazirat territories of Leh, Kargil, Zangskar, Baltistan and Gilgit" (Karbalai, 2011). While on the other hand, some members of the LBA, consider "Greater Ladakh" to comprise of the Buddhist majority regions in Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. The Kargil notion of Greater Ladakh challenges this very notion of LBA, by including regions which have historically been associated with Ladakh. Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust's<sup>4</sup> 'GreaterLadakh', is not based on religion; on the other hand, LBA's is based on religion.

The official stand of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, with regard to regional autonomy for Ladakh, is that the Union Territory status should be granted to a Ladakh, comprising both Leh and Kargil districts. KaDawa, General Secretary of Ladakh Buddhist Association, acknowledges the limited political space that Ladakh has as a part of Jammu and Kashmir. He states that the Ladakh region, has only four members in the Legislative assembly and only one Member of Parliament, and "thus we have limited numerical strength in the power structure and population wise in Jammu and Kashmir". In 2002, Tsering Samphel, President of Ladakh Buddhist Association, stated that the Ladakh Buddhist Association is in favour of revoking Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which confers a special status to Jammu and Kashmir, and reverting to 1953 status quo. According to Ladakh Buddhist Association, this "will allow the reorganization of the state" (Ladag'sMelogs, 2002, p. 7). There is a tacit understanding of the need for a "Greater Ladakh" among some of the Ladakh Buddhist Association members. "Greater Ladakh", according to them, will constitute Buddhist majority areas. In their view, historically Lahaul – Spiti, and Kinnaur have been part of the Ladakh Wazirat and hence must be part of the "Greater Ladakh", but they neglect those regions of Ladakh Wazirat which are at present in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. The difference in the imagination of Greater Ladakh will be taken up in the coming chapters, but what is clear from the discourse of the LBA is that primacy is given to religious composition of the people, rather than to geographical or historical considerations alone. Those regions of Himachal Pradesh which are associated with Buddhism, thus are seen as having a common history and identity with Ladakh, rather than the other regions of the present J&K state and the territory under POK. The attempt is clearly to present Buddhism as a uniting force not only in the contemporary situation, but also as a unifying entity in the past as well. In the process, LBA presents a specific reading of sub-continental history, where it privileges present religious identity to other processes and events in history.

The success of the LBA strategy, with regard to regional autonomy struggle, despite the disappointment of the younger members of LBA, led to similar demands in Zanskar by the Zanskar Buddhist Youth Association (ZBYA). In July 1995, the ZBYA pasted posters in the *bazaar* of Leh, announcing the closure of Zanskar to all tourists. The poster listed four demands of the Zanskar Buddhist Youth Association in *Kashmir Times* 1995:

- 1- District Status for Zanskar;
- 2- Construction of a road linking Padum with Leh;
- 3- A separate Assembly constituency for Zanskar;
- 4- A sub-Hill Council for Zangskar (Kashmir Times, 1995).

The delimitation of Zanskar and Kargil legislative assembly constituency, resulted in boycott of Hill Council elections by people of Zanskar. In 1989, the legislative constituency of Zanskar was merged with Suru-Kartse region, which is dominated by Muslims, and areas such as Rangdum and Parcharik, which are Buddhist dominated area were put in the Kargil constituency. This was seen as a conspiracy to prevent any Buddhist community candidate from winning the MLA seat by the Zanskar Buddhist Youth Association (Ladag'sMelong, 2003, p. 16).

The State Regional Autonomy report of 2002 was received as a form of discrimination of the Leh region by the Ladakh Buddhist Association. Dr. Tsering Samphel, then President of Ladakh Buddhist Association, organized a rally in the Leh Polo-ground against the state government report.

We opposed that draconian report as it tried to demarcate the boundary between Leh and Kargil district. Indus river was proposed as boundary between the two districts which in reality was providing larger land to Kargil. One of the audience even urinated in public on the Report (T. Samphel, personal communication, June 26, 2016).

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<sup>4</sup>Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust was founded in 1989. The trust is a socio-religious organization. The trust is in the memory of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution of 1979. AsgarKarbalai is the founding member of the Trust.

Two major elections – Lok Sabha and State legislative assembly – in 2014 caused a major political upheaval in Ladakh. The demand for Union Territory status, for Ladakh occupied an important space in both election campaigns. NitinGadkari, of the BJP who, is currently Union Minister, at a victory rally at the Polo-ground on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2014, promised to deliver “UT within six months”, but on 12<sup>th</sup> August of the same year, Prime Minister NarendraModi did not make any mention of UT demand in his speeches in Leh and Kargil. Rather his address was about renaming Jammu and Kashmir state to Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh to reflect the complete identity of the state (Stawa, June 2015, pp.10-11). This in reality marks an approach to the existing psychological distance created by the discourse of religious associations, between the ideas of ‘Ladakh’ and ‘Jammu and Kashmir’.

In conclusion, Ladakh's identity formation is a complex interplay of historical legacies, socio-cultural dynamics, and contemporary challenges. The role of Buddhism, the influence of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, and the region's historical context are central to understanding the nuances of Ladakhi identity. Moving forward, it is essential to recognize the diverse identities within Ladakh and engage in inclusive dialogues that foster mutual understanding and cooperation.

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