



Research Paper

Ladakh's Struggle for Scheduled Tribe Status and Socio-Political Change

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Abstract

The paper delves into Ladakh's complex history, tracing its earliest inhabitants and the intricate interplay of diverse ethnicities, faiths and cultures. Central to the narrative is the struggle for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, a protracted campaign driven by Ladakhi leaders seeking equitable treatment. It examines Ladakh's political evolution post-independence, from its erstwhile status as an independent kingdom to its integration into the Indian republic. The formation of the Ladakh Union Territory Front and the subsequent demand for Union Territory status reflect Ladakhis' quest for self-governance and recognition. Additionally, the article explores social changes in Ladakh, particularly in marriage customs, dietary habits and attire. The paper advocates for a nuanced understanding of Ladakh's rich cultural heritage and the imperative of safeguarding it amidst the tide of modernization. It calls for a balance between tradition and progress to ensure Ladakh's identity remains resilient in the face of evolving dynamics.

Keywords: Tribal Status, Culture, Struggle, Politics and Transformation

I. Background

Ladakh's history is a subject of intense debate regarding its earliest inhabitants. As stated earlier, the present population of Western Tibet is the result of a long process of blending of at least three distinct peoples, two of which are of Aryan stock, whilst one, which is numerically superior to the other two, is of Mongolian origin. The Aryan nations are: the Dards of Gilgit and the Mons of North India. The Mongolian is the Tibetan nation. The region comprises a multiplicity of races, faiths and cultures, a polyglot having a distinct identity. The population comprises different ethnic and sub-ethnic groups such as *Boto*, *Balti*, *Purigpa*, *Changpa*, *Gara*, *Beda*, *Mons*, *Brokpa*, *Argons*, *Rongpa*, *Stodpa*, *Shammas*, *Nubrapas* and *Zanskarpas*. For centuries, Ladakh was the nerve centre of the Central Asian trade adding another racial element to the population known as 'Argons' and eventually mixed up with that of the earlier settlers. Thus, Ladakh is populated by the intermingling of all these heterogeneous elements.

The popular names for tribes of India are: *Vanyajati* (castes of forest), *Vanvasi* (inhabitants of forest), *Pahari* (hill dwellers), *Adimjati* (original communities), *Adivasi* (first settlers), *Janjati* (folk people), *Anusuchit Janjati* (Scheduled Tribe) and so on. Among all these terms *Adivasi* is known most extensively and *Anusuchit Janjati* or Scheduled Tribe is the constitutional name covering all of them. According to the 2011 Census the Scheduled Tribes constitute 8.6 per cent (10.4 crore) of India's total population. The tribal population in Ladakh is more than 97 percent, it comprises a multiplicity of faiths, cultures and languages that has been developing for thousands of years and varies extensively from each others.

Since the time of the British in India the importance of tribal studies have been recognized, the initiatives taken by the British administration to study Hitherto Unknown, Less Advanced and Static Communities of India had inspired anthropologists and sociologists to take up the study of tribal societies. A range of scholars and researchers believes in providing a bird's eye view of tribal research in five tribal zones of India, but the unique tribes of Ladakh had been left unstudied and unknown to the outside world.

Scheduling of Tribes in Ladakh

The struggle for Ladakh's Scheduled Tribe status, stemming from cultural disparities with Kashmiris and historical discrimination, culminated in local leaders' push for autonomy. Despite post-independence initiatives to uplift tribal communities nationwide, Ladakh remained excluded, prompting a concentrated effort

for Scheduled Tribe recognition and Union Territory status. Although Ladakhis had been classified as “tribes” in 1901 Census, they were excluded from the list of Scheduled Tribes when the initial act of scheduling was carried out in the country. No reason however, was given for this omission. Beek writes that the subsequent use of the term ‘race’ and ‘caste’ instead of ‘tribe’ served the role in the Kashmir Census. In his words ‘by most measures and according to most observers ‘Ladakh is just not a tribal area’. Most Ladakhis, most of the time, would probably agree with this assessment, but that did not stop the leadership from pursuing Scheduled Tribe status’ (Beek, 2006, P. 122).

According to available records, in July 1949, Pandit Nehru extended the offer of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to Ladakh. However, this offer was said to be declined by Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, the then District President of the National Conference. Following this refusal, the issue of ST status faded from Ladakhi politics until the agitation of 1969. It wasn't until 1974 that the ST issue resurfaced, gaining momentum. However, it wasn't until 1980, with the establishment of the ‘All Ladakh Action Committee’ for Declaring Ladakh as Scheduled Tribe, that the demand for ST status became the focal point of Ladakhi aspirations. The cultural distinction from and feeling of discrimination in the hands of the State of J&K triggered this struggle since then. According to Beek, Demand for Scheduled Tribe status was reiterated in memorandum and during agitations, tribality never became dominant in political discourse and only in the 1980s did it become the primary demand from Ladakh (Beek, 2006, p. 120).

The All Ladakh Action Committee (ALAC) united Buddhist and Muslim representatives from Leh and Kargil districts, advocating for Ladakh's collective interests, transcending religious and regional divisions. In January 1981, the state government promised to recommend tribal status for Ladakh to the Central Government, with assurances from central leaders during their visits. However, the government's failure to fulfill this commitment led to the submission of multiple reminders through memorandum by the Ladakh Action Committee and local politicians to both the Central and State governments.

Fueled by public pressure, including hunger strikes and communal unrest, the government initiated the process to declare Ladakhis as Scheduled Tribes, leading to the classification of eight communities based on a mini-census in 1986-87. However, the delay in the official notification exacerbated tensions among the people.

In 1988, the Leh Youth Congress demanded Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, backed by the implicit threat of agitation. On October 7, 1989, the President promulgated the Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1989, granting ST status to Balti, Beda, Bot, Brokpa, Changpa, Gara, Mon, and Purigpa, excluding the Arghons due to perceived instability.

The Registrar General of India (RGI) classified the Gara, Beda, and Mon communities of Buddhists as tribes due to the absence of a caste system in Ladakh. However, despite this official classification, these communities still endure caste-like treatment, revealing the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the term 'tribe' in Ladakh. Pointing to the system of stratification in Ladakhi society K.S. Singh writes, the whole society is divided into a number of subgroups such as *Gyalpo* (the rulers), *Kahlon* (the ministers), *Mangriks* (farmers) and *Ringan* (lower occupation groups) in the order of hierarchy, which is well defined and is manifested in the seating arrangements made during public functions (Singh, 2003).

Basis for Demand of ST Status

Ladakhis advocated for Scheduled Tribe status primarily driven by political and economic considerations, as they believed that the State of Jammu and Kashmir did very little to alleviate the conditions of the tribals of Ladakh. This neglect, coupled with the age-old cleavage between Ladakh and the rest of the state, was one of the major factors that led to the demand for ST status. The Scheduled Tribe status offers an array of benefits, including reserved seats in elections, educational and government services as well as dedicated funds for the development of tribal regions. Schemes like the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), pioneered during the Fifth Plan period were perceived as vital avenues for the upliftment of tribal communities in India. The granting of Scheduled Tribe status was anticipated to deliver not only tangible material benefits, but it would also help them in getting separation from Jammu and Kashmir. However, while it brought about certain advantages, it did not fully realize the ultimate aspiration of complete detachment from Kashmir. However, the agitation that commenced in 1989, led to enactment of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils Act, 1995. This movement, spearheaded by Ladakhi leaders, aimed to secure greater political and administrative autonomy from the Jammu and Kashmir government, which was perceived as discriminatory towards Ladakh and the Buddhist community in particular.

Tribal Martyrs of Ladakh: Pre & Post Independence

The journey towards securing Scheduled Tribe status for Ladakh was riddled with obstacles, underscored by the profound sacrifices of brave souls who sacrificed their lives for this enduring cause. Among them, late Ven. Lobzang Tsondus of Liker village and Tashi Angchok of Saspol village made the ultimate sacrifice on January 24, 1981, during the fervent agitation for Scheduled Tribe Status for Ladakh. Their unwavering dedication to the cause embodies the deep-rooted aspirations of the Ladakhi people.

Former MLA Shri. Sonam Wangyal undertook two hunger strikes to amplify Ladakh's demand for Scheduled Tribe Status, catching the attention of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who intervened in 1984, promising the grant of ST Status. However, this promise remained unfulfilled until 1989, underscoring the persistence required for justice. Tragically, the struggle claimed further martyrs like Late Nawang Rinchen, Late Tsewang Dorjey, and Late Tsering Stobdan, who fell to gunfire while advocating for Union Territory (UT) status and Scheduled Tribe status on August 27, 1989, symbolizing the ongoing quest for justice and equality in Ladakh.

Furthermore, before India gained independence, the late Munshi Abdul Sattar stood as a solitary figure of freedom in Ladakh, drawing inspiration for the struggle during his frequent business voyages to bustling cities such as Lahore, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Delhi, Kolkata and Bombay. His contributions were pivotal, as he penned revolutionary articles in Urdu dailies across Northern India, fervently advocating for liberation. Despite his impactful writings, he faced vehement opposition from his state's ruler, resulting in the suppression of newspapers carrying his words and the outright ban of his book "*History of Western Tibet*" in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Undeterred, he maintained unwavering connections with fellow freedom fighters, particularly in Srinagar, persisting in publishing dissenting articles against the ruler's wishes.

In 1938, his unwavering commitment led to his apprehension and subsequent imprisonment for six months in Skardo prison. Along the journey to Skardo, he was met with overwhelming support from the people of Kargil, who volunteered to accompany him to his incarceration. Similarly, in Leh, he garnered solidarity from villagers disenchanted by enforced labor and oppressive land revenue assessments. His indomitable spirit and sacrifices did not go unnoticed. Recognizing his sacrifices, he was honored with the Tamra Patra award for Indian freedom fighters by Smt. Indira Gandhi in 1972.

Political History and Change

Historically, Ladakh enjoyed independence as a distinct entity, even before the advent of the kingdom system in the 10th century. Small chieftains, including the first *Mon* ruler *Gyapa-cho*, governed Ladakh. Prior to the kingdom system, Ladakh's political landscape was relatively tranquil, with local governance facilitated through the election of village leaders, thus averting political crises. The populace, spiritually inclined with modest material needs, lacked political ambition or competition. They focused on livelihood pursuits, embodying simplicity and peaceful disposition, exhibiting deep loyalty to their rulers. A notable instance of unity occurred when *Gyapa-cho* sought aid from Lachen Spalgigon of Tibet against warlike nomads from *Khotan* in the 10th century. Together, they vanquished the Khotan army, leading *Gyapa-cho* to cede uninhabited territory up to Khalatse as a token of gratitude to Skide Nyimagon. However, this gesture ultimately led to *Gyapa-cho's* downfall, resulting in his disappearance from Ladakh's political sphere.

Lachen Spalgigon the eldest son of Skide Nyimagon ruled Ladakh from the year 1000 to 1025 approximately. The gradual extinction of several *Cho* (chieftain) who were tribal chiefs commanding many villages brought the pre-settler tribal people under the control of later kings. From early 11th century to 19th century, for 834 years, thirty-two descendent kings of Spalgigon ruled the tribal people of Ladakh. It is indeed a long period for a dynasty (Rabgais, October, 2002). Indeed, Ladakh emerged as a significant independent kingdom during the 15th-16th century, characterized by a liberal governance approach. Successive kings facilitated religious, cultural and trade activities without hindrance, welcoming traders from diverse origins. This inclusive policy was appreciated widely in the entire kingdom.

The last king of Ladakh was Tsewang Rabtan. He was said to be a weak king. This was taken advantage of by Gulab Singh of Jammu who sent his forces under the command of Wazir Zorawar Singh to attack and invade Ladakh in 1834. As a result of the conquest of Zorawar Singh Ladakh lost its political freedom. The people suffered a lot during this period. Later, when Ladakh became a part of the Indian republic this proved to be a favourable factor helping people to enter the democratic system easily (Rabgais, 2004.). With this transition new kind of changes are seen among the people of Ladakh. During the Dogra rule, the religious lives of the people were not interfered with. The people were thus, spared the shock of abrupt changes and given an administration, which was infinitely better, than any they had known before (Kaul, 2004, P. 106). In 1846, Ladakh was incorporated into Jammu and Kashmir through the Treaty of Amritsar, subsequently administered by a Thanedar (later known as Wazir-i-Wazarat) from 1848 onwards. The Dogra Maharaja of

Jammu, likely motivated by the desire to control the profitable Pashmina trade, refrained from interfering in Ladakh's internal political affairs. Following the accession of the Dogra kingdom to India post-independence, Ladakh became a district within the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

After independence, Ladakh, especially the Buddhist remained relatively unnoticed by both central and state governments. However, in the past three decades, there has been a significant shift in Ladakh's political landscape. All major political parties in the region, including the National Conference, Indian National Congress, and Bhartiya Janata Party, dissolved in pursuit of the common goal of Union Territory status. This led to the formation of the Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF) as a regional party. But 'the uncertain nature of politics made people a little perplexed, when the Congress Party got restored in November 2004. Leaders in the newly formed Congress were of the opinion that Ladakh Union Territory Front was almost non-existent already, as there was no unanimity among the leaders in LUTF meetings. For them restoring Parties was the best way in a democratic set-up' (Rigzin, Jan-March, 2005). The renowned historian Tashi Rabgais expresses satisfaction with the multi dimensions of change observed since 1947. According to Tashi, 'as a result of the sound and favourable policy of the successive Governments of India, Ladakh is also speedily proceeding on the path of progress and development' (Rabgais, 2004, p. 8). However, former MP Thupstan Chhewang asserts Ladakhis endure pervasive discrimination despite being part of Jammu and Kashmir, feeling marginalized across all sectors. While acknowledging slight progress, he highlights persistent inequalities and minimal change.

Social Change in Ladakh

The tribal communities of Ladakh once thrived with distinct customs and social structures, yet the tide of change has gradually eroded many of these traditions. Among the notable shifts, the agricultural sector has witnessed marginalization, with the younger generation increasingly opting for non-agricultural occupations. This trend has led to the commercialization of cultural practices amidst the wave of modernization.

Marriage: Marriage customs among Ladakh's Buddhists encompass diverse practices, including fraternal polyandry and adoption for lineage continuity and social status. Unlike Hindu traditions, Buddhist marriages allow for easy dissolution, with no restriction on widow remarriage. However, strict prohibitions exist against close consanguineous marriages. Economic growth has spurred changes, such as a shift towards monogamy, abduction marriages and rising instances of inter-caste and inter-religious unions. Peissel points out that the custom known as '*khang-bu*', or 'little house', where by the elders of a family, as soon as the eldest son has reached the years of discretion, retire gracefully from participations in affairs and taking only enough of the property for their own sustenance, yield the headship of the family to him (Rizvi, 1983). Although rooted in tradition, practices of this phenomenon persist even today in the peripheral areas of Ladakh. While primogeniture was once the norm, equigeniture is now prevalent, reflecting a shift in inheritance practices. Notably, even nuns are allocated a portion of family estates in contemporary times.

Diet: The tribal people traditionally consumed "*sattu*", i.e., thick barley-cake, or of barley-meal, with a broth of turnips, to which are added a few peas and a seasoning of salt and pepper with occasional meat (Gazeteer, 1890). Nowadays, noticeable shifts in dietary preferences are evident. In numerous households, rice has replaced traditional staples such as *paba*, *zan* and *quee* for children's meals. Likewise, once prevalent Tibetan-origin beverages like salted butter tea and local liquor *Chhang* have diminished in popularity. On the one hand, there is an increase in liquor vendor licenses, whereas the consumption of traditional local liquor, which was once prized for its health benefits, is swiftly declining. These transformations pose a threat to the dietary culture of Ladakh.

Dress: The basic Ladakhi dress in keeping with the climatic conditions is warm and comfortable. The '*goncha*' is a long gown, usually made of homespun wool, is worn with differences in style, by both sexes and is their sole garment. The *Botos* who inhabit the upper northeast and *Stod* areas of Ladakh wear either red or brown '*gonchas*', but those located on the south-western part of Ladakh wear mostly white '*gonchas*'. Ladakhi women are fond of ornaments. The ladies either wear a '*gonda*' or the more elaborate '*perak*' as a headdress. The '*perak*' is clearly cherished heirloom handed down the generations by mother to their eldest daughters. Pearls form an integral part of Ladakhi women's jewellery (Bora, 2004).

The *Botos* believes that whatsoever situation come they will neither sell nor let to the '*perak*' gets misplaced. Both men and women wear in their waistcloths or girdle a *chakmak* (or leather case ornamented with brass, containing flint, steel, and tinder), and the men, besides, usually carry a knife or dagger in their girdles.

Likewise women carry a brass spoon, a convex brass mirror, and a case of coarse needles attached to their girdles (Cunningham, 1970). Yet today, it is increasingly common for men to forsake the traditional 'goncha' in favor of Western-style attire. However, the influx of modern influences has seen some youths gravitate towards extremism. This shift is evidenced by their adoption of Western attire, dietary preferences, festivals and habits such as smoking and alcohol consumption. Taking note of this trend late Kushok Bakula observed, 'The change in the attitude and behaviour among the *Botos* has saddened me. Ladakh is slowly losing touch with its past. It is extremely important to strike a balance between modernity and tradition' (Ladags Melong, 2003, p.19). Therefore, there is an urgent need to reconnect with the essence of Ladakh's cultural values and beliefs, safeguarding them against the allure of modern lifestyles.

Language: The language spoken in the region is Tibetan with local occasional variations of vocabulary from the standard language spoken in Lhasa. The script, as observed earlier, is modelled upon the *Devanagari* and the grammar follows the sutra-form of Panini (Kaul, 2004, P. 154). With the passage of time, the Bhoti language has undergone significant transformation with the influence of Islamic culture, as seen in the adoption of Persian and Urdu vocabulary. This linguistic evolution underscores the shifting cultural landscape. Presently, there is a growing recognition of language as a vital aspect of identity, prompting efforts to secure official recognition for the *Boti* language in the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution.

II. Conclusion

In conclusion, Ladakh's history epitomizes a rich tapestry of diverse ethnicities, cultures and faiths, from its earliest inhabitants to the modern era. The journey towards securing Scheduled Tribe status for Ladakh was marked by relentless advocacy and sacrifices, underscoring the Ladakhi people's deep-seated quest for justice and equality. Politically, Ladakh's evolution from an independent kingdom to a part of India has been accompanied by aspirations for autonomy, reflected in the struggle for Scheduled Tribe status and the establishment of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils. Socially, Ladakh has undergone changes in marriage customs, diet, dress and language due to modernization and external influences, posing challenges to the preservation of its cultural heritage.

The recognition of Ladakh's tribes as Scheduled Tribes in 1989 was a significant milestone, providing access to government schemes while highlighting ongoing struggles for equality. However, Ladakh continues to confront issues of discrimination and socio-economic disparities amidst rapid modernization. Overall, Ladakh's history exemplifies the resilience of its people in navigating through centuries of change while preserving their cultural identity. As Ladakh progresses, it faces the imperative of balancing modernity with heritage preservation, ensuring that future generations can cherish and celebrate the diversity and richness of Ladakhi culture.

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