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Mohd Sharif & Rajeev Kumar Singh

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Contemporary politics in Ladakh: contestations and identity construction

Mohd Sharif  and Rajeev Kumar Singh 

Department of Political Science, Central University of Haryana, Mahendergarh, India

ABSTRACT

Ladakh, with a population of around 3 lakhs, is known for its significant socio-religious diversity, with nearly equal proportions of Buddhists and Muslims. In Ladakh, the primary determinants of identity, namely, region, language, and tribality, are overtly divided along religious lines despite their overlap. This paper reviews the politics of identity and outcomes in Ladakh from the late first half of the twentieth century to the second decade of the twenty-first century to understand how external forces and internal shifting ties and needs within and between Buddhists and Muslims have shaped Ladakhi identity. Furthermore, the article analyses the evolution of Ladakhi identity throughout history, its current state, and its potential future trajectory, particularly in light of the socio-political changes that have occurred in the region since 2019. I conducted this analysis using interviews as a research method, seeking to address gaps in existing literature specific to this period in the region. This paper is part of my doctoral research, in which I analysed and demonstrated the ongoing evolution and transformation of factors that influence collective Ladakhi identity. The interviews were conducted with 20 community activists in 2023, taking into account the religious, cultural, and spatial plurality of the region.

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Introduction

Ladakh has been a meeting point for various civilizations and peoples throughout history, contributing to the formation of the Ladakhi culture (Bray, 2005). However, due to the diverse religious makeup of Ladakh, a shared identity has been difficult to establish. Modern social changes in Ladakh have further complicated the task of creating a unified national identity. In the past, Ladakhis primarily identified themselves with their village, valleys, and perhaps their monastery rather than with Ladakh as a whole. Both Muslim merchants and Buddhist monks did not have a unified Ladakhi identity, not due to their traditionalism, but because they were too international, with trade and blood ties to Kashmir, Kashgar, and Lhasa. Similarly, Buddhist monks identified with their counterparts in Tibet (Bray, 1991). Since late colonial and early post-independence India, Ladakhis' sense of identity has been influenced by religion, sub-region, and ancestry, shaping their politics until the 2019 bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir and the

creation of the Union Territory of Ladakh. This does not mean that Buddhists and Muslims of Ladakh lacked a common identity, but rather that the religious aspect of Ladakhi identity was less prominent. Instead, they defined their identity using language and culture while practicing religion within their personal domain (Shafi, 2013). In contemporary times, Ladakhi identity has been overshadowed by religious disagreements and intolerance between Muslims and Buddhists. The linguistic, cultural, and historical differences between Muslims and Buddhists are clearly evident in the process of identity formation among Ladakhis. This identity formation has shown that collective Ladakhi identity is not only disputed but also the source of ruptures that have developed in contemporary times and might further divide Ladakhi society. Thus, identity politics in Ladakh harmed peace. Identifying electoral politics as a primary cause of Ladakhi identity decline in his paper, Dawa (2007) mentioned that,

First, a gradual fragmentation of our society because of ballot box politics. So now we are no longer 'Ladakhis.' We are Buddhist or Muslim, Shamma or Stodpa, Shia or Sunni, Kagyudpa or Gelugpa, even Congress-pa or N.C.-pa' said Professor Siddiq Wahid in an interview given to the Ladakh Times. The dehumanized paradigm of modern development has broken the traditional culture of peace in Ladakh. (Dawa, 2007, p. 4)

The Ladakhi identity has also been interpreted as the result of a series of political convergences in the region since the 16th, and especially since the 19th centuries. These events have altered human geography and established political, social, and economic stability. In his work, Siddiq (2001) combined real-life stories and historical studies to illustrate how history has impacted Ladakh's terrain. Both his personal narratives and historical evidence highlighted the effects of political convergences in the region since the 1940s, such as strict Chinese assertion at its western borders, the British exit from the partitioned Indian subcontinent, and China's annexation of Tibet in 1950 (Siddiq, 2001). Professor Siddiq's childhood anecdotes, when Ladakh was spiritually and commercially connected to Tibet and China, along with his father's suggestion to join the merchant marine after the closure of these overland ties, provide important insights into understanding the shift in culture and the identity loss in Ladakh (Siddiq, 2001). Thus, this perspective on Ladakhi identity complicates identification because it suggests that Ladakh, as a society, must halt political convergence if it wants to prevent permanent separation from its geography for the sake of abstract homogeneity. From the mid-nineteenth century, Ladakh was ruled by Maharaja Gulab Singh, who made it a British subject until the mid-twentieth century. In the mid-twentieth century, when the British left and the Indian subcontinent was partitioned, the then Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, Hari Singh, ceded his kingdom, including Ladakh, to India. Ladakhis started to define Ladakhi identity as devoid of linguistic commonality or cultural heritage identification under the democratic republic of India. Religious polarization overwhelmed other aspects of identity in Ladakh. Majority and minority politics under representative democracy intensified the communalization of identity in Ladakh, resulting in communal conflicts and a 1989 Buddhist-Muslim social boycott. The politics of language, sub-regionalism, ethnicity, party politics, and religious factionalism further fractured Ladakh and harmed its imagined collective identity. Thus, Ladakhi identity formation has been shaped by outside factors and their changing demands. Ladakh became a union territory in October 2019 after Ladakhi Buddhists argued that its religion and culture warranted a

separate governmental entity. The union territory status raises important questions about Ladakhi identity's past and future, as well as whether people will identify with their religious identity or with a broader identity based on religious coexistence.

The past

The society of the present-day union territory of Ladakh has a long, varied, and complicated past. Thus, it becomes imperative to provide a detailed account of its people and land from the beginning, which has developed throughout time to create the current union territory of Ladakh in the union of India. This account will shed light on how Ladakhi identity has developed over time due to various stages of migration and the convergence of many ethnicities in ancient and medieval times. It will also explain how socio-economic changes in contemporary Ladakh have significantly influenced the shared Ladakhi identity of today. Several names given by both indigenous and foreign literature have been used to describe the region in and around the present-day union territory of Ladakh. The Ladakhi royal chronicle '*La-dvags-rgyal rabs*', named Ladakh as *La-dvags*, or 'Land of High Passes'. Moreover, Ladakh was initially known as *Mar-yul*, which in some literature translates to 'Low Land'. There is scholarly debate on when Ladakh began to be referred to as *La-dvags* rather than *Mar-yul* and to what extent the kingdom of *Mar-yul* exactly existed (Peteck, 1977; Tenpa, 2022). Furthermore, there are several identifications of Ladakh in Persian writings from the 14th–16th centuries. In his memoirs *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, Mirza Haider Dughlat referred to the entire Ladakh as Tibet. He identified Marlol as the capital region of Ladakh, the current Kargil district as 'Tibet-Balti', and Baltistan (now part of Pakistan) as *Balti*. Later, Mughal sources referred to Baltistan as *Tibet-i-Khurd*, or Little Tibet, and Ladakh as *Tibet-i-Buzur*, or *Tibet-Kalan*, Great Tibet (Ali, 2023; Mohammed, 2005). According to Bray (2005), Ladakh can refer to either the town of Leh in the Indus Valley or the entire Kargil and Leh districts, including Suru, Shyok, Nubra, the Rupshu plateau, and Zaskar valleys. Ladakh's current territorial identity spans from Pakistan-occupied Gilgit Baltistan in the northwest to Chinese-occupied Eastern Ladakh in the east, and it borders Himachal Pradesh's Lahul and Spiti districts in the south and China's Xinjiang in the north. Human settlement and ethnic diversity in Ladakh began with the Mon and Dard populations of mixed Indo-Aryan tribes, who were later dominated and partially engulfed by Tibeto-Mongoloid tribes (Dewan, 2017; Francke, 1907, 1977; Thakur, 2023a). Despite this, the progression of Tibetan settlements and the establishment of a pre-Tibetan Dard era remain disputed and continue to be a subject of debate among researchers and historians (Bray, 2005; Dewan, 2017; Peteck, 1977).

Socio-religious plurality

The current formal categorization of the population in the Union Territory of Ladakh into eight separate scheduled tribes, namely Balti, Beda, Bot/Boto, Brokpa/Drokpa/Dard/Shin, Changpa, Garra, Mon, and Purigpa in 1989 demonstrates that the present demographic makeup of Ladakh is the result of a long assimilation of different ethnic groups. However, the Arghon population residing in and around Leh was not officially recognized as a distinct ethnic group due to their mixed heritage as descendants of Muslim merchants from adjacent areas and indigenous Ladakhis, which is considered to be a factor

contributing to their lack of cohesion as a community. In contrast, I am of the opinion that the Arghon tribe should be granted the status of a Scheduled Tribe and recognized as one of the major tribes of Ladakh. This is due to the fact that, like all other tribes in Ladakh, the Argon are the result of human relations in the past. Furthermore, the Gujjar and Bakarwal tribes of Jammu and Kashmir and the Gaddi and Sipi tribes of Himachal Pradesh can be legally recognized as tribes in Ladakh, despite the fact that they have no connection to Ladakh. Conversely, the Argons, who share matrilineal relations with other Ladakhis and play a significant role in the flow of man and material along the silk route in these regions, have a strong case for claiming Scheduled tribe status. In present-day Ladakh, the majority of people practise Buddhism and Islam, with a smaller portion adhering to Christianity. The arrival of all these main religions in Ladakh happened gradually and chronologically. The establishment of Buddhism in Ladakh is said to have originated during the reign of Kushana king Kanishka-I. The exact beginning of Buddhism in the area is a subject of contention due to the few archaeological remains and lack of recorded evidence from this early period. Scholars mostly agree that Buddhism flourished in the area when the Tibetans gained power in 663 AD and reached its peak with the support of the Ladakhi Kingdom (Bray, 2005; Luczanits, 2005; Petech, 1977). Contrary to Buddhism, the genesis of Islam in the area is well-documented. Confirmed by historians, Islam spread in Ladakh through various means, such as commerce, treaties, and royal intermarriages (Bray, 2005; Fewkes & Khan, 2005; Sheikh, 1995). According to Ladakhi traditions, Islamic preachers also played a role in propagating Islam in the area. The earliest conversions in Baltistan and Ladakh are attributed to Mir Syed Ali Hamadani (1385), who is credited with establishing a mosque at Shey near Leh city (Khan, 1939; Khan, 1987). However, Holzwarth (1997) has challenged this view by presenting evidence that Shams ud-Din Iraqi, a follower of the Noorbakshi tradition, was actually the first recorded Islamic preacher to disseminate early Islamic ideas and convert people in Baltistan, which later extended to Purig (Bray, 2013; Holzwarth, 1997). In addition to this, the area has also seen the emergence of Christianity in the recent past. Since the late nineteenth century, a small but thriving Christian community has arisen in central Ladakh. This group belongs to the Moravian church, which originated in Central Europe (Beszterda, 2014; Bray et al., 2020).

Politics of identity and electoral outcomes in Ladakh

The rise of identity politics in Ladakh is mainly driven by electoral concerns, resulting in greater uncertainty and dynamism during elections. Consequently, identity politics exerts a substantial influence on electoral politics, thereby politicizing the nature of the community as well. In addition to the active participation of national parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) in elections, regional parties, religious organizations (such as Ladakh Buddhist Association or LBA, Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust or IKMT, Anjuman-i-Jamiatul Ulema Isna Asharia Kargil or AJUIAK, and Anjuman-i-Imamia) and civic groups (like Apex Body Leh and Kargil Democratic Alliance) hold considerable sway in contemporary Ladakh. Furthermore, the unique demographic composition of Ladakh, with a predominantly Buddhist population in Leh and a mainly Muslim population in Kargil, underscores how even slight demographic variations can significantly influence electoral politics, shaping policy decisions and outcomes.

Ladakh was less isolated in the pre-modern era than in the modern age, beginning in the late nineteenth century even Western travelers frequently documented the ‘cosmopolitan’ character of Ladakhi society in their writings. Nevertheless, there are a variety of viewpoints that suggest the intersection of Ladakh and modernity. From a certain standpoint, the arrival of modernity in Ladakh is generally considered to have occurred in the 1970s, when the region was made officially accessible to people from outside. This increased visibility led to a flourishing tourist industry and increased academic interest in Ladakh among Western and Indian researchers and adventure tourists. However, some argue that modernity arrived in Ladakh in the 1930s, when the people of Ladakh were exposed to contemporary socio-political endeavors. In the 1930s, the Kashmir Raj Bodhi Maha Sabha (KRBMS) was founded by neo-Buddhist pandits to advocate for the Buddhist population of Ladakh. The Ladakh Buddhist Education Society (LBES) was established in 1933, with writer-activist Rahula Sankrityayana playing a significant role. However, LBES was dissolved in 1938 and replaced by the Young Man’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), which continued to involve Kashmiri pandits until India gained independence (Van Beek, 2004). The communal partition of the Indian subcontinent in Ladakh had a more subdued influence in relation to other places on the mainland. Nonetheless, it was marked by a nuanced, ambiguous, and sceptical atmosphere. The Ladakhi Buddhist community underwent a restructuring process, transitioning from the Young Men’s Buddhist Association to the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA). This change aimed to prioritize efforts in enhancing literacy rates, addressing social problems within the community, and lobbying for autonomy from the former Jammu and Kashmir state (Van Beek, 2004). Consequently, soon after gaining independence, LBA demonstrated their commitment to their goals in both theory and practice. In 1949, the president of LBA formally expressed Ladakh’s unique identity in all aspects by submitting a memorandum to Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India. A passage from the memorandum states:

We are a separate nation by all tests – race, language, religion, culture ... The right to self-determination claimed by us cannot be claimed with equal force by the people of Baltistan ... populated by Muslims, as they are connected by ties of religion with the majority community in Jammu and Kashmir, nor by the people of Gilgit ... whom not only identity of religion but of race as well bind to the majority community of Jammu and Kashmir. (Brix Bertelsen, 1997, p. 148; Gergan, 2021; Van Beek & Brix Bertelsen, 1997, p. 52)

The Buddhists of Ladakh expressed their unique culture and political-administrative challenges in managing the province. This led to a desire for autonomy from erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir, which was heightened in 1950 when the first budget of Jammu and Kashmir under the Sheikh Abdullah administration overlooked Ladakh, despite it making up 60% of the undivided territory. Bakula, the sole representative of Ladakh, highlighted this issue in the assembly by stating, ‘Read the Budget statement from one end to the other, you will not find Ladakh mentioned even once’ (Kaul & Kaul, 1992). Furthermore, the lack of a distinct Ladakh plan until 1961, along with the inaccurate portrayal of its demographics as a Muslim-majority region by a prominent Kashmiri politician, heightened the suspicions and anxieties of Buddhists regarding the government’s intentions towards them. Similar to the first administration led by Sheikh Abdullah, all following state governments showed full indifference towards the demands of Ladakhi Buddhists for autonomy and

permanent separation, except for a few concessions related to development and governance (Behera, 2000). In the 1960s, the demand for regional autonomy in Ladakh started to gain external support from groups like Jan Sang and the national opposition party, Bharatiya Janata Party. Other right-wing Hindu national organizations, such as Vishwa Hindu Parishad, also joined the fray (Van Beek, 2004). Before 2019, the context of autonomy and union territory demands in Ladakh included the promotion of religious and cultural identity by Buddhist leaders. It was marked by a physical altercation between certain Muslim youths and a Buddhist individual in the Leh market. This incident subsequently resulted in the social and economic boycott of Muslims in Ladakh by the LBA in 1989. The local Ladakhi older generations referred to this event as a pivotal milestone in redefining the communal bonds between Muslims and Buddhists in Ladakh (Hussain, 2013).

The quest for Scheduled Tribe status, granted in 1989, and the formation of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council in 1992 brought together all Ladakhis, including Buddhists and Muslims, as well as the Kargilpa and Lehpa regions, in a united effort to address the unstable situation (Kaul & Kaul, 1992). After LBA ended its boycott in 1992, it and LMA (Ladakh Muslim Association) formed a 'Coordination Committee' to represent diverse socio-religious groups. This committee's main goal was to urge the government to quickly implement Scheduled Tribe status and the Hill Council arrangement. The endorsement of Scheduled Tribe status to Muslim Arghons by LBA further improved communal harmony (Kaul & Kaul, 1992; Van Beek, 1998). The government's efforts to accommodate the aspirations of both Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh have improved their relationship, somewhat normalizing communal relations. Yet, Ladakhi Buddhists still did not view these concessions as a final solution to their desire for union territory status and separation from Jammu and Kashmir (Van Beek, 1999). In 2002, the Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF) was formed when all party district units, two state legislature members, and the Thiksey Rinpoche Rajya Sabha member from Ladakh resigned. They aimed to participate in the state election and better promote their cause. Leh Muslims also supported LUTF by not nominating a candidate. In the same election, Islamia School Kargil (ISK) and Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust (IKMT) formed an alliance to advocate for regional interests, which included the creation of a hill development council for Kargil and a 'regional council' for Ladakh (Van Beek, 2004). In 2003, the state government established a Hill Council for the Kargil district, demonstrating India's ongoing efforts to provide political autonomy for culturally and geographically marginalized tribes, yet the demand for a 'Regional Council' was not realized (Bhan, 2009).

Since gaining independence, Ladakh has strived for union territory status and separation from Jammu and Kashmir. However, these demands have not been widely supported, as mixed feelings about the development exist. LBA's radicalism and affiliations with foreign forces have hindered the popularity and inclusivity of these demands (Van Beek, 2004). The BJP's stance on Ladakh was evident due to its strong opposition to the policies of the Congress government in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. The party also showed unwavering support for the demands of the Ladakhi Buddhist community, based on the region's unique socio-cultural identity, the need for a tailored approach to development, and, most importantly, the strategic significance of Ladakh for national security. It is worth noting that the region has already experienced significant conflicts with China in 1962 and with Pakistan in 1948 and 1999. In 2019, the Union Government led by Narendra Modi officially designated Ladakh as a union territory,

separating it from Jammu and Kashmir. Due to the BJP's consistent support for Ladakhis' desire to have union territory status, it emerged victorious in the Ladakh parliamentary seat in both the 2014 and 2019 general elections. Since 2015, the BJP has also gained control over the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) Leh administration. This move is noteworthy since the BJP faced considerable challenges in securing a single seat in council elections when it was established in the 1990s. Likewise, regional parties and the INC had a strong position in both the assembly and parliamentary seats in the area. Hence, the party's support of Ladakhi ambitions not only helped it secure a majority in the Leh council but also resulted in a significant increase in their membership after 2019, particularly in the predominantly Muslim area of Kargil. This has consequently brought about a change in the political landscape of Ladakh, introducing new and complex dynamics.

Internal contestations

The implementation of contemporary socio-political and administrative changes in Ladakh resulted in the transformation of its traditionally peaceful and diverse society into a fractured and unstable one. This led to divisions based on religion, ethnicity, region, and language. However, this does not mean one is idealizing the past or condemning the present. Rather, it demonstrates how contemporary interconnected factors such as communal politics, electoral politics, and party politics have shaped the particular internal socio-political goals of Ladakhi Buddhists and Muslims. The popular conception of Ladakhi collective identity was established by the expression of their unique desires influenced by external communal factors informed by religion. Even though Ladakhis were classified into different tribal identities, communal identification nonetheless remained real and was unavoidably reinforced by language, region, and electoral politics, in addition to tribal identity itself. Since India gained independence, the entire Buddhist population in Ladakh has been mobilized geographically, demographically, religiously and even linguistically to establish a Buddhist Ladakh, marginalized under the Muslim-dominated state government. This has ignored the entire Muslim population of the region due to their perceived loyalty to Kashmiri Muslims. Strained religious ties in Ladakh can be attributed to various factors, including the decision by the Jammu and Kashmir administration to split the district into two districts in 1979, Kargil with a Muslim majority and Leh with a Buddhist majority. This has added an overlapping regional dimension to the existing differences. The growing disparities between Buddhists and Muslims, along with external support for their political ambitions, have led to tension. In 1989, the Buddhist community in Ladakh implemented a social and economic boycott, starting with Muslims in Leh city. This boycott soon spread to the entire Muslims in the region and escalated because of communal violence. In this context, Bray's (2007) remarks are understandable when he stated, 'The YMBA was the precursor of today's Ladakh Buddhist Association, and its formation was the beginning of a process whereby affirmations of Ladakh's Buddhist identity became one of the main perhaps the main vehicles of political expression.' Even the members of LBA were well aware of the use of religion, as one of its leaders stated, 'We had to use religion to create a sustained movement' (Bray, 2007; Van Beek & Brix Bertelsen, 1997). Researchers have placed this transformation within the broader context of the sectarian structure of politics in India

rather than attributing it to internal cognitive processes (Bray, 2005; Wilson Smith, 2015). The communal disturbance in 1989 resulted in the politicization of intermarriage and other links between Buddhists and Muslims. This also eventually led to the gradual establishment of religious boundaries in people's daily lives. Smith (2009) demonstrated how boundary disputes and vulnerability have led to the symbolic territorial importance of both human bodies and the built environment in Ladakh (Smith, 2009). Consequently, in present-day Ladakh, both Muslims and Buddhists strongly condemn intermarriage. This is not just to prevent the disruption of cultural, religious, and moral borders but also to reduce potential sources of communal problems (Aengst, 2014; Aggarwal, 2004; Smith, 2009; Van Beek, 2000, 2004). In Ladakh, Buddhists strongly express their views on this informal accord, frequently organizing demonstrations due to their demographic and religious vulnerability, in contrast to Muslims. Ladakhi Buddhists have attributed cultural significance to newly emerging sexual practices, possibly as a means to preserve their religious identity and maintain their numerical majority in Ladakh. In this context, the act of 'dating' is considered taboo, intermarriage between Buddhists and Muslims is seen as a form of cultural betrayal, and the monitoring of vulnerable groups, such as Buddhists, elites, and students, for moral transgressions is viewed as virtuous (Aengst, 2014).

Furthermore, there was an overtly religious component to the linguistic divide between Muslims and Buddhists. Tibetan, along with regional variants like Ladakhi (also known as Bhoti or Bodhi), Balti, and Purgi-skad, is now the primary language spoken by most Ladakhis. Due to its association with Tibetan Buddhism, the original script of the written language, known as *Chos skad* or the 'language of religion' was abandoned by Muslims in Baltistan and Ladakh (Thakur, 2015; Zeisler, 2005). Instead, they chose to use Urdu as their writing system, which utilizes Persian characters. The language politics in Ladakh also brought to light the existing divisions within the Buddhist community regarding the identification of language in Ladakh. This issue was raised by Shaksपो (2021) in his article, 'Language Politics in Indian Himalaya' which challenges the idea of Ladakhi as Bhoti or Bodhi. According to him, this kind of thinking 'cannot catalyse to bring the Buddhist population of the Himalayas on a single platform, it can only divide.' He suggests that the Tibetan language, which contains the words for both the Kahgyur and Stangyur canons of Buddhism, is the key to uniting the Buddhists of the Himalayan region. Shaksपो appears to be advocating for a more inclusive version of the language, referring to it as 'Ladakhi'. This might be because, as he mentioned at the beginning of his paper, the Shia Muslim population of Kargil identifies themselves as Purig-pa, meaning 'people of Tibetan', and their language is Purgi-skad or 'Tibetan language' (Shaksपो, 2021).

The Kargil district, predominantly inhabited by Muslims, is characterized by a significant division based on identity. This division can be traced back to three doctrinal conflicts within the global Shia community, as explained by Gupta (2014). These conflicts eventually became contentious between two religious organizations: the IKMT Kargil and ISK. Consequently, these organizations have used this difference to establish their distinct identities at the local level (Gupta, 2014). Grist (1998) also discovered a similar pattern in Suru Valley, where she recognized two Shia factions known as Gongma-pa and Yokma-pa. The entire population of the area was found to be within these factions (Grist, 1998). Therefore, both in Kargil and Suru Valley, the factional identity

plays a vital role in shaping people's political orientations, even though some of them claim to be apolitical. Furthermore, the continued separation of historically and socially marginalized communities such as Beda, Mon, and Garra, despite repeated religious calls for unity (Dajon, 2022; Thakur, 2023a, 2023b), as well as the emergence of new social conditions among the nomadic Changpa community (Chaudhuri, 2000; Goodall, 2016), have the potential to strengthen and introduce fresh dynamics to the already existing divisions based on identity, particularly within Buddhism and the broader region of Ladakh. Similarly, studies have documented the formation and heightened expression of identity among the Brokpa/Drokpa group, which is considered peripheral or less prominent in contemporary discussions about Ladakh (Bhan, 2006, 2009).

Construction of shared Ladakhi identity

In 2019, the political developments and restructuring of Ladakh's position within the union of India led to a shift in its identity politics. This altered the ongoing divisive politics of identification and resulted in the emergence of a unifying identity emphasizing shared concerns for the environment and culture (Chowdhary, 2023). The Ladakhi identity is shaped by commonalities in their shared history, including ancient human migration and trade, conflicts, treaties, and matrimonial alliances within and between Gilgit, Baltistan, Purig (Kargil), and La dawgs (Leh), as well as their shared experiences of foreign colonization by the Dogras and the British (Jina, 2024). Additionally, Baltis, Purigpa, Bot/Boto, and Changpas share a linguistic heritage and substantial oral history, encompassing notable legends such as Kesar Saga, Ithoq Lhamo/Nurboo Zangpo, and Api Tso. These legends played a crucial role in influencing the way of life in the region throughout the Bonism era (Khan, 1939; Khan, 1987). Respect for and fidelity to pre-Islamic and pre-Buddhist Bon practices coexisted with tolerance of each other's modern religions as Ladakh developed into a multi-religious society. Ladakhi identity is also deeply rooted in shared challenges, such as enduring the extreme weather, managing complex irrigation systems, and establishing and maintaining institutions like family and lineage, (Mann, 2002) as well as traditional associations such as Phaspun (A small cluster of houses that provide mutual assistance and support to one another in practical and routine matters). The advent of electoral politics, however, shattered this tradition owing to the possibility and dread of domination, marginalization, and the commercialization of all aspects of life in the region. The popular identity of Ladakh, which was previously defined by its distinction as a Buddhist region in contrast to the Muslim majority of Jammu and Kashmir, is now undergoing a transformation. This transformation involves the construction of a collective Ladakhi identity that includes both the indigenous Muslim and Buddhist populations. Despite the communal and social faultlines in the Ladakhi identity in popular discourse, the multi-dimensional nature of identity assertion transformed it into a collective identity encompassing all Ladakhis, including Kargilpa, Lehpa, Buddhists, and Muslims. In this collective identity construction, they emphasized on the shared history, culture, and environment in relation to their others in the country.

I, came across this phenomenon during an interview with one of my respondents. He argued that Ladakh has been labeled as the 'Land of Lamas', meaning land of monks, to this day. He elaborated on the reasons why it should be referred to otherwise. This interview excerpt contains his exact response,

Just like how Ladakh is called a 'Land of Lamas'¹, equal efforts should be made to promote Ladakh as a 'Land of Aghas'.² That will bring on the fore Ladakh's true identity which has not been done till now. (Anonymous, Personal Interview, October 30, 2023)³

The current expression of Ladakhi identity has been significantly influenced by the need to adapt to the changing internal dynamics between Muslims and Buddhists, as well as the evolving political landscape within India. Consequently, Ladakhis have deliberately positioned the mainstream Indian identity as 'other' to their own. This sentiment is evident in their concerns about the region's new union territory status, which have defined Ladakh's political agenda since 2019. Key demands include inclusion in the sixth schedule, statehood status, employment reservation, and land preservation. During my discussions with local residents, the pressing need to address problems such as ecological degradation, religious conversions, appropriation of culture by outsiders, and uncontrolled industrialization became apparent as part of efforts to safeguard Ladakhi culture and heritage. Reflecting on pre-2019 contentious politics centered around religion and highlighting the possibility of socio-cultural values to resolve conflicts, as well as identifying alternative means to maintain diversity and peace among Ladakhis, many of the respondents noted that,

Identity politics is a common phenomenon across the world and more so in India. Ladakh is no exception to that. It is not commonly admitted but all the major religious institutions (whether it is the Gonpa Association or the Muslim religious institution) all of them have had a huge role in the political history of Ladakh.

The socio-cultural values of both the Muslims and the Bodhs of Ladakh have more common streaks than differences, however, religion plays a major role in determining one's identity in Ladakh. Therefore, a Muslim from Leh will have his/her allegiance more to Kargil and similarly a Buddhist from Kargil will weigh more towards Leh. I would not say socio-cultural values would address the religious contestation effectively (although it can mitigate the tension to some degree) but what really matters is that the Buddhists and the Muslims have a common fear of losing Ladakh's identity, especially post 2019 and therefore, when there is an external threat, the inner conflicts take a back seat and in effect it creates more space for mutual co-existence. A marriage of convenience of sorts.

There is an organization known as IFBD (Inter-faith Dialogue) which has conducted many conferences in which people from all walks of life in Ladakh participated and discussed the differences/issues in Ladakh. I found it to be quite effective. The coming together of Apex and the KDA is another good example. (Anonymous, Group Interview, November 10, 11, 12, 2023)⁴

In these accounts, we can see how religion continues to shape identity and how the fear of external threats unites Ladakhis in establishing a common identity. When discussing the shared cultural identity of the union territory, many of the people whom I interviewed emphasized their shared origins and the common customs and social norms across communities. They expressed a desire for a shared platform where political and religious entities can come together and connect based on their shared bond. For example, the collaboration between the Apex body Leh and the Kargil Democratic Alliance has facilitated connections between Leh and Kargil, fostering a sense of shared identity between the Buddhists and the Muslims. As an interviewer, I acknowledge my own prejudices and preconceptions. Upon careful examination of both the spoken words and the moments of silence from the respondents, I discerned that most of the people I interviewed were reluctant to recall historical conflicts amongst them. Moreover, they were

cautious in emphasizing the evolution of a collective Ladakhi identity to address their current political and social needs.

Leadership has played a significant role in shaping the Ladakhi identity both historically and in present times. Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, the first leader from Ladakh to serve in former Jammu and Kashmir's constituent assembly, later as an MLA in the state legislature, and the first to represent Ladakh in the Parliament, made pioneering contributions. His selfless and inclusive vision for the development of Ladakh, despite sometimes disregarding his own party's interests at state and national levels, earned him the title 'The Modern Architect of Ladakh'. His legacy set a path for future leaders to follow in advancing the interests of Ladakh. This approach extended beyond politics to encompass social, religious, and cultural aspects, uniting leaders and activists in reinstating Ladakh's unique and shared identity. In this context, the movements of all socio-political and religious groups in Leh and Kargil, the Apex Body Leh and Kargil Democratic Alliance, and the campaign by Magsaysay Awardee and socio-environmental activist Sonam Wangchuk to include Ladakh in the Sixth Schedule and achieve statehood status hold significant importance.

Conclusion

The construction of shared identity/collective identity of 'Ladakhis' as manifestly asserted carries various faultlines both in term of religion and region. These faultlines many times overshadows this constructed/shared identity and the recent discord over the construction of the Buddhist temple in Kargil led the resurfacing of these divides. Also, it draws criticism not only for the Kargilis but also towards their organization like LBA. Inter-religious marriages, which have historically been a source of tension between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Ladakh, have also come to light. Although the issue has not escalated into a major disagreement this time, it has shed light on underlying problems. The effort to establish a collective Ladakhi identity in the post-2019 political landscape has encountered another significant divisive factor, the 2024 Lok Sabha general election. Electoral disagreements have surfaced not only between Leh and Kargil but also within these regions, exposing latent religious and regional divides. Despite these tensions, the joint alliance between Leh and Kargil, centered on their shared four-point agenda for Ladakh, appears relatively intact. Nevertheless, these developments have caused some strain, and the long-term impact on the relationship between the Apex Body Leh and the Kargil Democratic Alliance remains uncertain. Whether their construction of a shared identity can endure Ladakh's historical divisions along religious and regional lines remains crucial.

Furthermore, Ladakhis no longer identify uniformly on their regionality, except when addressing outsiders or articulating demands to the government. Within the Union Territory, the populace is fragmented into ethnic sub-regions such as Lehpa, Kargilpa, Changthangpa, Nubrapa, Shampa, Drasspa, and Surupa, rather than being collectively recognized as Ladakhspa. Additionally, individuals have been mobilized and organized through religious entities, including the Ladakh Buddhist Association and Ladakh Gonpa Association in Leh, as well as the Imam Khomeini Memorial Trust and Islamia School Kargil in Kargil, significantly influencing electoral outcomes in both local and general elections. It can also be perceived from the other way round. These sub-regional disparities frequently align with suspicion of governmental inequality. The recent

establishment of five new districts in Ladakh in August 2024, out of the existing two districts, Drass and Zaskar in Kargil, while Sham, Changthang, and Nubra in Leh were created, has faced criticism from both civil societies and religious organizations in Kargil for excluding other deserving regions. Ongoing demands for district recognition persist in areas such as Sankoo, Chiktan, and Aryan Valley.

Based on the thorough examination of various aspects of identity construction and contestation in Ladakh, I am of the firm conviction that identities are constructed, celebrated and forgotten. Consequently, I believe that Ladakhis should construct and celebrate their identities while preserving the important aspects and avoiding the overemphasis of others in order to maintain the strong cooperative elements that have been present for centuries. The choice of religion is and should be kept as a personal domain. It should not be made a community or public domain. In the case of Ladakh, the majority of the contestations had arisen from inter-faith marriages and conversion practices. Although it has been reduced, the choice of religion and marriage should not be morally policed.

A significant contention in contemporary Ladakh is the recognition of the Bhoti or Ladakhi language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and its designation as the official language of the Union Territory. In my view, prior to this issue evolving into a conflict between Buddhists and Muslims or Leh and Kargil, a committee should be established to address the situation, with representatives from all language communities and linguistic experts for deliberation. Therefore, it is imperative that individuals strive to unify as Ladakhspas and organize and mobilize through tribality and other undervalued aspects of their identity that have the potential to materialize them as Ladakhis, rather than focussing solely on the glorification of their religious and regional identities.

Notes

1. 'Lama' is the local name for Buddhist monks. Due to Ladakh's considerable population of Tibetan Buddhism and huge number of monasteries as well as Monks and Nuns Ladakh has been popularly known as Land of Lamas.
2. 'Agha' is a title of respect or honor used in various parts of the Middle-East and Central Asia, specifically in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. It is often used to refer to a high-ranking officer, nobleman, or a civilian or military officer. It can also mean landlord or master in certain contexts. In Ladakh the term is used to denote the descendants of the last Islamic Prophet Mohammad PBUH, who are also known as Syeds.
3. Personal information was maintained anonymously at the interviewee's discretion.
4. A group interview was conducted with 20 individuals from Ladakh, representing various tribal backgrounds and including adherents of both Buddhism and Islam, hailing from different regions of Ladakh. Interviewees decided to keep the confidentiality of their personal informations.

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ORCID

Mohd Sharif  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4545-1326>

Rajeev Kumar Singh  <http://orcid.org/0009-0006-0809-4680>

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