

Examining the Functioning of Ladakh Buddhist Association within the Context of Trilateral Regional Dispute between China, India and Pakistan

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This study has no aim to hurt any ideological or social segment but purely based on academic purposes.

Abstract

When Medina Tenour Whiteman was writing her book entitled “The Invisible Muslim: Journeys Through Whiteness and Islam”, she could never imagine that Ladakh would gain strategic importance in the global politics one day. Majority of social sciences students across the globe came to know about Ladakh in 2019 when Chinese troops started invasion of almost 100-kilometer area by pushing back the Indian troops from the region. At that time, demographic structure of Ladakh comprised of pro-Pakistani, pro-Indian and pro-Chinese communities. As the region largely consists of Buddhist population following Tibetan Buddhism, this study investigates the role of Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) in between the described three communities. Similarly, study also examines how LBA’s pro-Indian stance is not only creating a huge religious rift between Ladakhi Buddhists and Ladakhi Muslims, but coercing majority of non-LBA Buddhist population to seek its future with either China or Pakistan.

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Introduction

Social sciences academia leaves a huge confusion for research scholars when academic romanticism is exhibited by the idealists. The same is the case with Medina Tenour Whiteman. Her book “The Invisible Muslim: Journeys Through Whiteness and Islam” can cause increment in the ratio of tourists visiting

Ladakh but she did not touch actual crucial invisibility in Ladakh. By reading her book, research scholars find;

- Muslims in Ladakh are very kind, they welcome every tourist, and they are experiencing inter-faith harmony under the Indian patronage.
- Ladakhi and Kashmir Muslims have been associated with Ladakhi Muslims through marital relations, and the region is now experiencing joint Buddhist-Muslim generation at large.
- Turkish cuisines are very common in the region. Not only Muslims but Buddhists are found of Turkish coffee and other Turkish dishes.
- As Ladakhi Muslims are inspired from Iranian version of Shia-Twelve Islam (also called pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih Shia Islam), they celebrate Iranian new year festival Norouz every year. And, during such celebration, Ladakhi Buddhists also participate in Muslims' religious and/or socio-cultural activities.

However, her book hides what has been existed in Ladakh since 1989. This is the historical fact that both communities were living together in a romantic or idealist environment in Ladakh since centuries while, Ladakhi Buddhists always found Pakistan as their final destination along with Ladakhi or Kashmiri Muslims. As this inter-faith harmony was not bearable for Indian military and political elite, they tried to install artificial differences among them. As a result, when Kashmiri Muslims started freedom movement in 1989, Indian intelligence agencies started backing LBA.

This study, therefore, investigate the role of Ladakh Buddhist Association in examining the reasons of rift between Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh. Similarly, this study also looks at the current status of LBA when majority of Ladakhi Buddhists have been fed up from the pro-Indian stance of LBA, and they want to keep distance from LBA's anti-Muslims, anti-Pakistan and/or anti-Chinese activities.

Ladakh Buddhist Association

Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) is an almost 90 years old Buddhist organization formed in Ladakh. It was instituted by King Jigmet Dadul Namgyal, Kalon Bankapa Morup Gyaltsan, Kalon Tsewang Rigzin and Munshi Sonam Tsewang. As Ladakh along with the other geographically associated territories like Leh and Aksai Chin are considered the mainland for Tibetan Buddhism for centuries, the formation of this organization shows how much the founders of this organization were concerned for the welfare and betterment of the local Buddhist population (LBA, 2023).

Objectives of LBA

The prime objective of forming BLA was;

- 1) To look after the Buddhist interests,
- 2) Bring social reforms in Ladakhi-Buddhist society,
- 3) To preserve Ladakhi-Buddhist art, and,
- 4) To promote and protect the local language (LBA, 2023).

Functioning of LBA

Along with the central body, there are Youth Wing and Women's Wing in LBA. Moreover, it has also the branches in each village that mean to address local issues and look after the welfare of the Ladakhi-Buddhist community (LBA, 2023).

At the same time, LBA has unit branch offices in the outreach representing a cluster of villages. These units help and function closely with the local community heads and their own village representatives as well as their women and youth groups within the units' jurisdictions (LBA, 2023).

Post-1947 History of LBA

Following the Indian illegal occupation of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947 and then requesting the United Nations for protecting the status quo until the plebiscite for determining the final disposition of the state between India and Pakistan; the President of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, Chewang Rigzin wrote to the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru regarding requesting various constitutional and political accommodations (Dollfus, 1995). He argued that;

“Ladakh was a separate nation by all tests, such as race, language and culture, and had a right to self-determination. Therefore, Ladakh should be governed directly by the Government of India or merged with Jammu or East Punjab” (Dollfus, 1995).

However, Nehru directed him not to highlight “separatist demands” as they might weaken India's occupation of Jammu and Kashmir in the United Nations. He also feared Pakistan and China as “both must never realize this fact. Neither LBA must raise this point in future nor Indian politicians should favor any such dream or proposal” (Dollfus, 1995).

After this, LBA turned only to seeking regional autonomy within the Indian-occupied State of Jammu and Kashmir. However, the nature of their demands had changed, such as;

- 1) The Ministry for Ladakh Affairs must be headed by a Ladakhi MLA, and,
- 2) Ladakh must have adequate representation in the legislature and civil service regarding receiving development funds for roads and bridges (Dollfus, 1995).

There were various other demands but, many of them were opposed by the Kargil Action Committee (KAC) in Kargil. Thus, LBA's demand for regional autonomy was rejected in the 1980s because it did not have support in Kargil. Many regional researchers also find religion as the major cause of this difference. As the majority of KAC members are considered as pro-Indian Muslims having businesses in Mumbai and Delhi, LBA units' representatives call them the federation-funded or RAW-backed elements against locals' hope for either plebiscite or merging with Pakistan/China (Vohra, 1982).

Later on in 1989, when Kashmiri Muslims started the freedom movement in the valley, Ladakhi Buddhists had been convinced for looking their future with Pakistan. At that time, KAC was exposed when it tried to create differences among Kashmiri freedom fighters and Ladakhi Buddhists as raising slogans about Ladakh's autonomy on communal bases. KAC became successful when it triggered the Buddhists-Muslims riots in Leh on the propagated issue of communal-based autonomy. These riots encouraged Ladakh police to crack down against the Muslim population with huge human rights abuses. As a result, LBA soon

coerced to leave Kashmiri Muslims and raised the demand for Ladakh as the Union territory within the dominion of India (Smith, 2009).

Since then, LBA boycotted Ladakhi Muslims for the sake of joining Pakistan as a future destination. Likewise, they opted for a separate perspective for local developmental projects without any reason but only to oppose local Muslim leadership. Moreover, they started threatening the local Muslim population just because of their majority in the region (Bonta, 2014). In result;

- 1) The gap between Ladakhi Muslims and Ladakhi Buddhists became higher (Bonta, 2014).
- 2) Artificially installed differences from the Indian intelligence agency RAW had created huge diversity among both communities regarding determining their future. If Ladakhi Muslims were seeking amalgamation of Ladakh with Pakistan, LBA was demanding the region to be a Union Territory of India (Bonta, 2014).
- 3) Their perspective on regional developments had also been changed. LBA always tried to differ from Muslims' perspective in any case whether a project was generally beneficial for both of them (Bonta, 2014).
- 4) In such a tussle, the common public was suffering. They had been fed up with the pro-Pakistan stance of Ladakhi Muslim leadership and the pro-Indian stance of LBA leadership (Bonta, 2014).
- 5) As Buddhists were the majority in the region, they disowned both political stances and again favored either a separate identity or amalgamation with China (Bonta, 2014).
- 6) By looking at this critical situation, the Indian government agreed on creating an "Autonomous Hill Council for Ladakh" (AHCL) (LAHDC, 2023).

In early 2000, LBA representatives blamed state governments of Jammu and Kashmir for backing Ladakhi Muslims in the region, arguing that "many Buddhist women were taken forcibly from their home villages and forced to convert to Islam". Local LBA Units also claimed that such forceful conversions are being happened under the supervision of the state government (Shakir, 2021).

Scholars and investigators note that the LBA has been associated with the Hindu extremist organization RSS and its political wing BJP (Bharati Janta Party). Some facts also indicate their affiliation with some other Hindu nationalist groups since 1989. According to Martijn van Beek, Hindu extremist organizations want to involve Ladakhi Buddhists with them for two reasons;

- They want to undermine the international worth of the Kashmir dispute (Beek, 1998).
- They want to create further distance between the Tibetan Buddhists and Ladakhi Buddhists (Beek, 1998).

For him, India has also a fear of China, and this is two sorts of fear;

- Followers of Tibetan Buddhism in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Tibet (China) can demand a separate homeland. As China will never tolerate any such activity, they can further demand to form a theocratic state consisting of the territories of Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh (Beek, 1998).
- As China calls Tibet and somewhat Ladakh as its historical parts, it can occupy Indian-occupied areas of Ladakh when it will find harmonious sentiments among Ladakhi Buddhists for China (Beek, 1998).

Current Role of LBA between China, India and Pakistan

Although LBA has no threat from China or Pakistan, its sponsorship from RAW has demoralized its worthy activities among the Ladakhi Buddhists too. The majority of Ladakhi Buddhists do not rely on LBA's units' representatives in their villages. As LBA has now only two missions a) to oppose Pakistan and b) to work opposite Ladakhi and Kashmiri Muslims; the majority of the Buddhist population in the region does not claim its affiliation with LBA. Hence, Ladakh has become an indirect subject between only the two; China and Pakistan (Tarapore, 2021).

When Pakistan exhibited its political map on August 15, 2019, it showed Ladakh as the joint subject between China and Pakistan. Then-foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said that "the future of Ladakh would be decided through the dialogue between Pakistan and China when the Kashmir dispute will be resolved". On the other hand, the recent Chinese occupation of major Ladakh territory has reemerged the hope among non-LBA Ladakhi Buddhists to amalgamate with China and with their socio-religious fellows in Tibet (Kiani, 2023).

Therefore, this study concludes that sponsorship of LBA by Indian intelligence agencies against Kashmiri and Ladakhi Muslims could not be successful, and India has lost its grip over the respective territory culturally, psychologically, politically and socially.

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