

INTERPLAY OF RELIGION & POLITICS IN LADAKH

Lobzang Chosdup*

ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to analyse the interplay of religion and politics in Ladakh. The region of Ladakh has been influenced by two major religions, Islam and Buddhism. The paper focuses only on the role of Buddhist Monasteries in politics and does not deal with the role Islam plays in the politics of Ladakh. At the outset, it analyses the role of religion in politics ever since Ladakh was politically integrated under the new structures and institutions of the Jammu and Kashmir state following overthrowing of monarchical form of government. Further, the history of participation of religious leaders in the political processes has been delineated. These leaders also articulated the regional aspirations of Ladakh. It examines the role of Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) in the politics of Ladakh, how secular leaders have used religious organisation like LBA for vote bank politics, personal interests and communal agendas. It looks into how the post-Lama leaders used religious sentiments for political interests and power during elections. Lastly, the paper argues about the changing role of religion in politics, the emergence of confrontation between politicians and monks as well as change of LBA's role from politics to more religious and social work.

Keywords: Autonomy, Bakula Rinpoche, culture, democratisation, identity, Ladakh Hill Council, LBA, religion, sectarianism, secularism.

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of nation-state as a sole political organisation, political institutions and processes has been secularised by separating temporal and spiritual aspects. Before nation-states, religion played decisive role both in public and private affairs of individuals. In the western world, Church assumed this role and influenced every aspect of society and state. During medieval period, kings were the only sources of authority projected as directly derived from God. Unquestioning obligation and obedience of the masses were the prevailing charac-

*Lobzang Chosdup is a PhD student at Centre for South Asian Studies, School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi, India.

teristics. With times, all these prevalent practices changed and transformed from absolutism or feudalism to liberalism or democracy. Belief in rationality and reason began to challenge the orthodox belief and power of the kings. Consequently, democracy and constitutionalism was established in most of the western world, later adopted by newly independent countries in 20th and early 21st century. Nevertheless, despite the separation of religion from politics, the former continues to play significant role in politics in many parts of the world particularly in the South Asian and West Asian Countries.

India has diverse religion, culture and language. Freedom fighters and Constituent Assembly members adopted secularism as one of the ideals for governance of an independent India. Secularism being a western concept has been modified to suit India and hence the meaning of Indian secularism differs in both theory and practice. The Constitution of India defines India as a secular country while recognising the existence of various religions. The major religions of India are Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Christianity. Despite India being a secular state constitutionally, religion plays significant role in shaping and influencing the local, regional and national politics and more often India's external relations. Therefore, post-independent politics of India has been characterised by the relationship between religion and politics. Religion plays important role in state politics, e.g. Sikhism in politics of Punjab, Hindu and Muslim confrontational politics in the state of Jammu & Kashmir etc. Thus, like state and national politics, religion is a significant factor at meso or regional level. In Ladakh, where both Buddhist and Muslim communities live in close interaction, religion plays a major role in politics.

POLITICS OF LADAKH WITH KASHMIR: ROLE OF HEAD LAMAS

Despite being a part of J&K state, Ladakh has played no significant role in internal political dimension and external political dimension; it has been deliberately marginalised and ignored by national and regional political forces of Jammu & Kashmir. However, from the beginning Ladakh put its own perspective by claiming that the region is different from the state geographically, culturally and religion-wise. Politically, it has played a vital role by demanding autonomy and separation from the state within the framework of Indian constitution for the Ladakh region. But the moot question to be addressed in this paper is the influence of religion in politics of Ladakh. Several queries need to be explored as to why did Head Lamas (reincarnate monks) participate in the politics?

Variegated politics of Ladakh is not immune from religious influences. Important head monk always played key role since independence of India or after the restructuring of J&K state under the Kashmiri leader, Sheikh Abdullah. Nevertheless, the role of Buddhist head monks and their participation in politics of Ladakh was more by default than by choice. There could be different reasons for the participation of Lamas in the politics of Ladakh. It could be due to the lack of secular leadership during those times who could manage whatever the political capital required from Ladakh at the initial stage. It could also be because of the fact that Kashmiri leadership found it convenient to use the Lamas for political manipulation in order to retain their hold on Ladakh politics. Nonetheless, the role of spiritual leaders in politics has been highly appreciated and deeply acknowledged by people at large. Historically, like the Tibetan politics, religion has been the most important determinant of identity, culture and way

of life for the people of Ladakh particularly the Buddhist community.

One could imagine the difficulty they had to go through to be in politics keeping in mind the dominance of Kashmir-centric political leaders, institution and structures of the state. However, it is clear that the monks were able to project Ladakh's regional identity more successfully within J&K politics. For example, the tallest leader Kushok Bakula, despite his limitations on several fronts, was able to uphold Ladakh's regional interests more vociferously even under those difficult political circumstances and Kashmir's monopoly. Under his leadership, Schedule Tribe status, Ministry of Ladakh Affairs and other regional issues were articulated strongly and clearly. As a result, Kashmiri leaders promoted other lamas to challenge Bakula's popularity as well as supported leaders from Kargil in order to counter Buddhist leaders of Leh. Nevertheless, these religious heads had not only protected the interests of religion (*Chos*) but also politics (*Srid*) of Ladakh region during those times.

During the initial phase, rather than appealing on religious sentiments, religious leaders themselves actively participated in politics of Ladakh. The people did not challenge monks' legitimacy and leadership in politics and the reason could be their high status in monasteries and society. Interesting features during those times were political confrontation between the Bakula versus other head lamas instigated by the Kashmiri leaders. The leaders from Kashmir not only divided the monk leaders of Ladakh but also divided Leh and Kargil on religious basis. Hence paving a way for communalisation of politics of Ladakh and emergence of other leaders and active participation of organised religious bodies like the LBA.

POLITICS OF LADAKH AND ROLE OF LBA

Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) has played an important role in the politics of Ladakh. Its origin can be traced back to the communal division of Jammu & Kashmir between Muslims and Kashmir's Hindu Pandit community. It was formed at the instigation of Kashmiri Pandits in order to preserve cultural and religious identity of Buddhist community of Ladakh from the cultural penetration of Kashmiri Muslims. The LBA depended upon its Buddhist identity to protect the interests of Ladakh against Kashmir. In the processes, it organised different movements, demonstration and protests demanding Union Territory (UT) status for Ladakh. It had regularly presented memoranda to the central government. While demanding autonomy and the UT status for Ladakh on religious lines, it communalised the political character of Ladakh. Leaders from Kargil suspected the majoritarian politics led by LBA and in response demanded Greater Ladakh instead of supporting the demand for a UT. Apart from being a religious organisation, LBA has been active as a political organisation as well. It has become platform for the young leaders to join politics and most of the leaders of LBA have become politicians. Majority of the present leaders of Ladakh particularly Buddhist had long association with LBA. The LBA, therefore, has played an important role in shaping the political discourse of Ladakh.

LBA has also played significant social and religious role for the benefit of the Buddhist community. It organises religious teachings, observes Buddhist occasions and initiates social gathering like Losar (New Year). Despite all these, it has been criticised for communal practices, moral policing against the younger generation and creating problems for social

harmony. As per teachings of the Buddha, a Buddhist or a Buddhist organisation must adhere to the concept of non-violence and compassion. On the contrary, LBA despite being a religious organisation practices communalism and moral policing to "protect" the Buddhist community's interests. It does not allow inter-religious marriage and girls marrying non-Buddhists are boycotted socially. Some have criticised it for associating with Hindutva forces like RSS and the VHP.

RELIGION AND POLITICS: POST-LAHDC

LBA as a platform for communal politics resulted into emergence of new leaders. They emerged from large mobilisation for movement demanding separate political status and communal tension in Leh.

After the establishment of the Hill Council, an autonomous body particularly known as the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), politics of Leh-Ladakh came under these new leaders. Under their leadership, interplay of religion and politics emerged in different forms. During this period, the head lamas like Bakula Rinpoche retired after serving as an Ambassador to Mongolia and other head lamas did not take interests in politics. As a result, these new leaders began to use religious sentiments as well as head lamas and monasteries for political gains indirectly. With the passing of time, somehow these leaders have reached a consensus to fight for the larger cause of Ladakh by forming Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF). This unity among the leaders stood as an example of peaceful coexistence and social harmony within the region. It might have been due to the understanding that political processes of Ladakh did not require religion for political mileage and personal interests at least in the region. Nevertheless, priorities of leader's interests overshadowed the larger interests of region resulting into political degeneration in Ladakh. With the dominance of new leaders of regional political scene, religion again became significant factor for influencing the political activities of region. They began to use not only religious sentiments and head lamas but also diverted state and central government schemes to the monasteries in different villages. Providing funds to monasteries became new political development in the politics of Ladakh as monasteries are attached with peoples' religious sentiments. Instead of articulating regional issues against the Kashmir valley, sub-regional issues within Leh and Leh-Kargil began to dominate the political discourse of Ladakh.

There is no regional leader as such in Ladakh today, instead many sub-regional leaders have emerged both in Leh and Kargil particularly through communal platforms and due to indirect use of religious institutions. Rather, these leaders have formed strong linkages with religious institutions both in Kargil and Leh for their respective power politics. During current period, instead of directly participating in electoral fray or politics, political leaders use Rinpoches and clergy for election campaigns as star campaigners to buy and get votes from public and consolidate their hold. They even surreptitiously used high religious lamas including Tibetan refugee lamas for meeting their political ends. Thus, many witnessed political funding of monasteries instead of schools and hospitals by political leaders. Religious institutions were rampantly allowed to grab public land instead of allocating for developmental purposes. Therefore, the use of religion for negative and narrow political purpose has been a new phenomenon for all the negative consequences for Ladakh during this period.

From this understanding, none of the contemporary leaders seems to be pursuing the regional interests. Instead, they used the popular slogan of UT movement and even the Hill Council structure for individual growth and interests. They invariably sold off regional interests for personal interest to be in power, into the power structure in Srinagar or in the Parliament. The irony has been that the use of religion got more intense when political affairs came under the sway of the neo-elitists of Ladakh and secular and modern educated leaders. They are, in fact, able to manipulate religious forces much shrewdly than head lamas or other previous leaders. As a result, politicisation of religious institutions has inevitably led to both communalization and sectarianization of Ladakh. It is becoming a serious problem that could threaten the basic social fabric of Ladakh and would lead to serious confrontation between religion and politics in the political landscape of Ladakh as well.

CHANGING DYNAMICS

Hitherto the relationship between religion and politics in Ladakh has been like give and take. When there were no secular leaders, people whole heartedly acknowledged the head lamas' role in politics to serve regional interests. After the emergence of new leaders, use of religion and head lamas continued for political gains and in return, leaders funded monasteries. This kind of equation was maintained between these secular and religious forces. Now this equation begins to change by asserting each other interests. This phase is dealt with the changing dynamics of relationship between religion and politics in Ladakh.

The recent political development in Ladakh has seen the emergence of BJP. The BJP won both Hill Council election and Parliamentary seat of Ladakh for the first time in the political history of Ladakh. One can argue that the reason for the emergence of this force supported by locals is due to the failure of the then secular ruling party and representatives of Ladakh. However, it is also the result of clash of interests among the newly emerged leaders. As a result of it, the agenda hitherto at state level propagated by LBA has been overtaken by the BJP, transcending communal character of Ladakh within sub-regional and regional to national level. The current MP of Ladakh after his first term as MP remained under hibernation for long until he introduced the BJP in Ladakh by joining it. He claimed that UT for Ladakh could be achieved under the BJP regime or party which supports for the trifurcation of the state and abrogation of Article 370 dealing with the state of Jammu & Kashmir and Centre.

Introduction of BJP in Leh and its challenge to the congress leaders of Hill Council and others had implication on the working of LBA because of its long association with Congress leaders in power in the Council. However, LBA continues to support the UT movement and other political issues of Ladakh. Compared to its earlier role, it has now shifted its emphasis from politics to social and religious welfare of the Buddhist community. It organises different religious teaching of different sects in the region. One important development clearly shows that with the emergence of BJP in Ladakh, LBA has lost its long association with the RSS and the BJP. The other negative upheaval in the region of Ladakh is the emergence of sectarianism among the Buddhist sects, a prevalent practice in the politics of Tibet. It has influenced and created divisions of politics and in the society of Ladakh. On sectarian basis, people started voting the candidates during elections. The LBA was directly responsible for sowing the seed of sectarian rift when it took one-sided approach to the visit by Karmapa Thaye Dorje last year.

However, the head lamas, as said above, are not engaged directly in politics of Ladakh after secular politicians emerged on the political scene of Ladakh. They are now more engaged in religious teachings and environmental issues rather than political issues. These are clearly seen from the activities of Gyalwang Drukpa Rinpoche and H.H. Digung Skyabgon Chechang Rinpoche. However, they are not born in Ladakh but based in Ladakh, so they are different from Bakula, Tokdan and Thiksay Rinpoches. The hitherto relations between religion and politics of Ladakh are slowly changing for different reasons. It is no doubt that the monasteries of Ladakh are traditionally rich compared to other institutions in terms of philosophy, wealth and property. Opening of tourism sector in Ladakh region has further increased importance and wealth of monasteries. In fact, most of the western tourists are attracted by these rich heritages of monasteries and Buddhist philosophy. Today, many young Rinpoches are acquiring modern education and outlook and they are able to create much more impact on the society than perhaps the monks in the past were able to do. The recent holding of the mega event "*Naropa 2016*" by the Hemis monastery signified the emergence of monks and nuns. The process, it seems, is challenging to the newly emerged and established political leaders or politicians of Leh-Ladakh. Political leader or Chief Executive Councillor (CEC) skipping inaugural occasion of Naropa festival particularly could be designed to undermine or not to give importance to monasteries or head lamas. As a result, after the end of Naropa event, Hemis monks protested against the CEC for not receiving Gyalwang Drukpa Rinpoche properly. Many political leaders hitherto against each other for power came along with the LBA on a single platform by organising a press conference to condemn the protest by Hemis Monastery monks against the CEC declaring that attack on CEC is attack on hard-earned LAHDC or democracy in Ladakh. This stand off between the monks of Hemis Monastery and CEC is one of the manifestations of emerging power struggle.

Insecurity is emerging among the incumbent political leaders because of increasing popularity of monasteries and new breed of emergent Ladakhi head lamas. For instance, Thuksey Rinpoche born in Changthang, is increasingly getting popular among the public who is capable of taking reign of LBA or even can contest for elections in future. The popularity of upcoming and dynamic young Thuksey Rinpoche, who is able to capture the popular imagination of the people as he is qualified spiritually, intellectually and economically with his support base coming from Ladakh's richest Hemis Monastery. Surely, there may be another force working behind to project Thuksey Rinpoche as the future leader of Ladakh. Therefore, these shrewd secular political actors and the LBA might have seen the opportunity to exploit the Hemis-CEC rift by showing solidarity with the CEC albeit in the name of saving LAHDC to discredit the upcoming Monk-leader and his monastery. The point is that with increasing trend of emergence of young head lamas and monasteries, leaders of Ladakh are uniting to protect the temple of democracy and secularism. This is an interesting phase of religion and politics in Ladakh and there is a need to wait for the time to unfold things. Will these young lamas support the secular leaders during the election as star campaigner or will they themselves directly participate in politics remains to be seen in future particularly after the *Naropa Event 2016*?

CONCLUSION

Religion as an instrument for political gain is against the principle of secularism. Ladakh having had no leadership among laymen compelled the head lamas, having people's acceptance, to join politics. However, they articulated the regional aspirations and interests more precisely than the present secular and educated leaders of Ladakh but at the same time created a sense of religious-minority sentiments among the non-Buddhist community of Ladakh. Today's Ladakh having different dynamic leaders need to focus on the regional issues not based on religion but on development of region or Ladakh as a whole. It is the need of the time for Ladakh to choose regional interests over religious sentiments that divides the region for individual gains. Therefore, for secularization of politics of Ladakh and maintaining independent domain between politics and religion, certain points and measures can be adopted by the respective stakeholders. Primarily, with separation of respective aspects, each domain has to play its own role to maintain social harmony and peaceful coexistence. The head lamas or monasteries need to focus on the religious teachings and maintain neutrality during election processes rather than influencing or campaigning for particular leaders. Buddhism is increasing its popularity across the globe for its philosophy and non-violence and followers are increasing particularly in western countries. Therefore, monasteries of Ladakh or head lamas would have greater role to contribute for maintenance of peace and harmony in the world rather than participating in politics for creating division and spreading hatred. Young head lamas are popular because of their dedication to the community and Ladakh. They are educated both in modern education and traditional Buddhist philosophy. The decision to join politics among them is their choice and right. However, instead of joining and influencing politics, they must engage themselves in religious teachings and other social work which would create secular character and environment for the society of Ladakh and also will help gain confidence among the non-Buddhist communities in Ladakh. Confidence and consensus are need of the hour to realize the demand for a separate political entity like UT for Ladakh. Therefore, in order to maintain social fabric and ethics in the society of Ladakh, organized body like LBA need to stop taking political position or becoming a platform for the established or the budding politicians. Instead, it has to focus more on social and religious development of Ladakh by helping the needy people and repairing the religious structures which have lost its forms and shapes. The active participation of LBA in politics not only divide Ladakh between Leh and Kargil but also create sectarianism by taking implicit or explicit stand on different religious sects within Leh. Therefore, each stakeholder performing its own duty hopefully would benefit the region of Ladakh in terms of development, prosperity and peaceful coexistence.

REFERENCES

1. Aggarwal, Ravina (2004). *Beyond Lines of Controls: Performance and Politics on the Disputed Borders of Ladakh, India*, Durham: Duke University Press.
2. Behera, Navnita Chadha (2000). *State, Identity and Violence: Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh*, New Delhi: Manoha.
3. The Outlook India (2010). *Ladakhi Party Joins BJP to bolster UT status demand*, [Online:

- Web] Accessed on 10 December 2016, URL : <http://www.outlookindia.com/newswire/story/ladakh-party-joins-bjp-to-bolster-ut-status-demand/693711>
4. Morup, Tashi (2010). *Understanding the Transformation in Ladakh: Issues, Threats and Early Warnings*, [Online: Web] Accessed on 20 December 2016, URL: http://www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/IB151-BPCR-Tashi.pdf.
 5. Stobdan, P (2016). *Emerging Flash points in the Himalaya*, [Online: Web] Accessed on 20 November 2016 URL: http://www.idsa.in/system/files/issuebrief/ib_himalaya-flash-point-pstobdan.pdf.
 6. Chosjor, Sonam (2009). *Beyond Kashmir: Understanding Ladakh and its Politics*, *Epilogue* Vol.3(8):20-29, Aug.2009.
 7. Chosjos, Sonam (2014). *UT Ladakh: Empty Rattling?* [Online: Web] Accessed on 15 December 2016 URL: <http://www.dailyexcelsior.com/ut-ladakh-empty-rattling/>
 8. The Kashmir Post (30 Dec. 2015). *Leh council turns to RSS for UT demand*[Online: Web] Accessed on 15 November 2016 URL: <http://kashmirpost.org/2015/12/30/leh-council-turns-to-rss-for-ut-demand/>
 9. The Daily Excelsior (2016). *Hill Council is temple of Ladakh don't tarnish image: leaders*, <http://www.dailyexcelsior.com/hill-council-temple-ladakh-dont-tarnish-image-leaders/>
 10. Pillalamarri, Akhilesh (2014) *What is the BJP's Ladakh Strategy?* <http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/what-is-the-bjps-ladakh-strategy/>
 11. Wahid, Siddiq (2013) *Ladakh: Politics and Governance*, [Online: Web] Accessed on 20 November 2016, URL: <http://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/gk-magazine/ladakh-politics-and-governance/151455.html>