

Political unrest in Ladakh Buddhist's main victims

Some radical elements within LUTF may take advantage of the situation and give new dimension to the dormant sentiment in the mind of Ladakhi Buddhists. Clearly Leh is heading for more turbulence in the coming days.

By G L Jalali

Ladakh is the remotest part of J&K state, mostly inhabited by the Buddhists who have close religious and cultural affinity with the Tibetan Buddhists situated at the highest altitude, Ladakh is generally called the "Roof of the World". It is surrounded on all sides by rugged mountains which cut it off from the rest of the country. Its total area is about 32,000 square miles and total population is about two lakhs, majority of whom are the Buddhists. During Muslim rule, a good number of Ladakhi Buddhists were forcibly converted to Islam. So, at present a large number of these neo-converted Muslims live in Ladakh and Kargil districts. Kargil, which was part of Ladakh district, was separated to constitute a predominantly Shia district for political reasons in early seventies.

Ladakh, on all counts, is the most backward part of India where majority of the Ladakh Buddhists earn their livelihood by rearing Yaks and cultivating a kind of barley known as "Grim" in their fields. They mostly remain engrossed in religion and performing religious rituals. Their life remains centered round monasteries called Gompas. Their art and learning is concentrated in the Gompas which remain under the control of a local Lama who is both religious and temporal head of the local people.

The population remains static because certain social customs like "Polyandry and dedication of girls and boys to monasteries that act as an oasis in a veritable desert". The Buddhist population in Ladakh is further reduced by slow conversion to Islam through allurements and inter-marriages with Balti and Kashmiri Muslim employees and businessmen who serve or carry on business in Ladakh. There is a strong network of Muslim Tabligi organizations in Ladakh. The offspring of these inter-religious marriages are known as Arghuns who adopt Islam in the Long run.

Situated at an altitude of eleven thousand feet above sea level, Leh is the main town of Ladakh district. It used to be the seat of Ladakhi kings. The strong of the merger of Ladakh with J&K state is the most romantic and fascinating chapter of the chequered history of J&K state. The credit for working out this miracle goes to Wazir Zorawar Singh. In 1834, Maharaja Gulab Singh decided to extend his sway to Ladakh and Baltistan. He entrusted this task to his military commander Wazir Zorawar Singh. The latter led six

military expeditions into Ladakh between 1834 and 1841. The route followed by Zorawar Singh was through Kishtwar, Padar and Zaskar. He conquered both the kingdoms of Ladakh and Balistan and added them to the territory under Gulab Singh. Immediately after the return of Zorawar Singh, Ladakhis rose in revolt against the Dogra ruler. A new army was sent from Jammu under the command of Dewan Hari Chand. The rebellion was suppressed with iron hand. The treaty of 1942 settled the boundary between Ladakh and Tibet.

Before the tribal invasion of Kashmir in 1947 Leh "was the centre of trade between Indian and central Asia". "Caravans Laden with silk, rugs and tea used to pour into Leh from distant Kashgar and Yarkand. These goods were exchanged here for sugar, cloth and other general merchandises from India. But since absorption of Central Asian states into China and Russia, this trade has virtually stopped. But the strategic importance of Leh as a connecting link with newly liberated Central Asian state remains". A part of Ladakh was overrun by the tribal raiders from Pakistan in 1947. Pakistan through proxy tribal raid managed to occupy Askardu and Gilgit which formed a part of Ladakh district governed by Maharaja's government. In this brutal raid many Buddhist monasteries were razed to the ground. In 1962 war China grabbed a large chunk of Ladakh district. It still remains under the Chinese occupation. Indian Air Force thwarted the Pakistani attempt to occupy Ladakh district. A high altitude airport in Leh was established. Since then Ladakhi Buddhists have a high opinion of India and try their utmost to forge closer political relations with India which evokes a strong reaction from Kashmiri ruling parties.

Their main demand for a union territory status is often opposed by the state government. Now there has been general political awakening among the economically backward Ladakhi Buddhists. In this venture late Late Kaushak Bakula, the head Lama of Ladakh, played a historical role. He served as minister in the State Cabinet. He was elected to the Parliament in sixties. In mid seventies he served as Indian ambassador in Mangolia. He worked hard to modernize economically backward Ladakh. It was through his efforts that ministry for Ladakh affairs was created to solve some problems relating to the economic backwardness of this remotest part of J&K state.

Though microscopic religious minority in J&K state, the Ladakh Buddhists have won "the national laurels be it Padma or Arjun awards in greater proportion than any other segment of population. It was feasible because of their hard work in a tough milieu, firm commitment to patriotism and peaceful co-existence" (The Daily Excelsior, May 20). The Ladakh's unlike any other ethnic group in India, zealously guard their hoary culture and ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity. The Ladakhis do not lock their houses. The main reason is that no thefts do occur in their area. The Ladakhi Buddhists are generally most truthful folk. The crime rate in their province is the lowest one for violence of any kind is anathema to their ethnic culture.

There are two main highways that link Ladakh to J & K state and other parts of India. One is via Kargil and Sonamarg that remains snow-bound from October to April. It is opened after snow is cleared from the Zogelia pass. The second highway is via Manali that directly connects it with Himachal Pradesh and neighboring Punjab. Of late it has been put on the air route; it has daily flights from Delhi and Srinagar twice a week. Even during winter season helicopter service from Srinagar to Kargil has been started to the convenience of the people. Leh has come to occupy place in the tourist map of India. It has become Tourist Destination No 1 both for Indian and foreign tourists. Time is not far off when Ladakh will surpass Kashmir Valley in tourism.

Gifted as it is with the natural beauty, Ladakh faces a deep political crisis which is the reflection of messy political scenario in the Valley. It may be recalled that Ladakhi Buddhists have affinity with the Congress and Nehru-Gandhi family. When the Valley was overtaken by the Islamic terrorism, Ladakh remained immune from this curse. Even prominent Shia leaders of Kargil denounced terrorism and appealed to the Hurriyat leaders to shun violence. Ladakhis are by nature peace-loving people. In late seventies they launched a peaceful agitation against the state government, demanding union territory status for Ladakh. The main provocation came after Kargil was separated from Leh by the state government. Ladakhi Buddhists felt themselves insecure under the state government which followed pro-Valley and anti-Ladakh policy that created cleavage between Ladakhi Buddhists and Kashmiri Muslims. Their agitation could not gather any momentum because the central government showed cold shoulder to the agitators. However, they were persuaded by the Congress government at the centre to withdraw the agitation over Union territory status demand. This demand was opposed tooth and nail by the state government.

An average Ladakhi Buddhist felt that with the disappearance of the Dogra rule Ladakh's interests would be best served by joining and becoming a part of the national mainstream. They have no liking for Valley-centered political parties. With the expansion of education in Ladakh district and Islamic terrorism gaining ground allow the Valley, the elite Buddhist section felt that Ladakh as a whole will be further isolated and thrown deep into the dust bin of economic backwardness. All the educated Buddhists closed their ranks and rallied under the banner of Ladakh Buddhist Association. This newly formed socio-political body was led by Mr.Thupstan Chhewang. Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) launched a peaceful agitation for attaining Union territory status for Ladakh.

Recent political developments have aggravated deep-rooted political crisis in Ladakh. In 1989 parliamentary elections, veteran Buddhist leader P. Namgyal was chosen Congress candidate to contest elections. Namgyal was defeated by proxy-National Conference candidate Mohammad Hassan. Although National Conference disowned Hassan as their candidate, yet he was openly supported by National Conference which is a coalition partner of the Congress at the state level. Hassan posed as an independent candidate, having no links whatsoever with National Conference. National Conference did not officially suspend Hassan from the party. That shows the double standard of National Conference and to throw dust into the eyes of Ladakhi Buddhists.

Namgyal lost by a narrow margin of five thousand votes. Muslim voters in Leh over overwhelmingly voted for Hassan, while Namgyal was Buddhists first choice. This messy political development has resulted in the communalization of politics in Ladakh which was once known for communal harmony. In 1996, he again contested the election to avenge his defeat. But he was again defeated due to polarization of votes on communal lines. In 1996 LBA was able to secure minor political gain. Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LADC), a self-governing apparatus, came into being with the approval of the state Government. Mr. Thupstan Chhewang had the honor of becoming its first Chairman. In 2002 another momentous political parties-big or small-merged their identities to form Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF). The candidates nominated by the Front were "unanimously elected to both the Assembly seats in Leh district that year". The BJP which had succeeded in making inroads in the district was "first to pull out of the conglomeration" because the Front was apparently Pro Congress. In 2004 Congress also pulled out of the conglomeration because Front was allegedly championing the cause of the Buddhists alone. Without taking the local M.P into confidence "a handful of leaders revived the district unit. Two prominent leaders of the LUTF, Mr. Chhewang and Mr. Chering Dorjay, joined the Congress, incurring the wrath of local Buddhists. Congress played a political trick; both Dorjay and his colleague were declared Congress candidates for two Assembly seats from Leh in 2002. "They were edged out by the unanimous LUTF nominee Rigin Jora and Pinto Narboo respectively" (Excelsior May 20). The Congress party in Ladakh was riven with dissension. Central Leadership made no serious effort to rejuvenate the party in this remotest part of India. It ignored the historic ties the party had forged with the Ladakhi Buddhists. Ignored by the Congress LUTF joined the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance just to save its existence.

In the recent Parliamentary election, Mohammad Hasan, who contested as an independent candidate, defeated the Congress candidate Namgyal. Namgyal was overtly supported by National Conference which is the coalition partner of the state government led by Omar Abdullah. The fact of the matter is that Hassan was proxy National Conference Candidate. Bulk of the Muslim voters in Ladakh district voted for Hassan. Central Congress leadership has taken note of this development. Hassan has been formally admitted to the National Conference by the N.C. President Dr. Farooq Abdullah. With the inclusion of Hassan, National Conference has four MPs in Lok Sabha. The relations between the two coalition partners have been strained. As regards the immediate fallout of this political development, politics in Leh has been communalized and Ladakhi Buddhists feel themselves cheated and isolated. Within Leh itself LUTF dominated LHDC is a house divided. The best course for the local Buddhist leaders is to sit across the table and resolve their differences. Some radical elements within LUTF may take advantage of the situation and give new dimension to the dormant sentiment present in the mind of Ladakhi Buddhists who are the main victims of injustice at the hands of Kashmiri leaders. Clearly Leh is heading for more turbulence in the coming days