

6. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Editorial introduction

Since Indian independence in 1947 the Ladakhi political debate has been dominated by questions concerning the region's relationship with Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). From the 1950s onwards a series of Ladakhi leaders have complained that J&K governments have neglected Ladakh, prompting demands for the region to become a Union Territory under the direct administration of the union government in New Delhi. This demand has at times led to communal frictions as Buddhist leaders claimed that local Muslims received preferential treatment from the J&K authorities. In 1989 these political tensions spilled over into violent demonstrations in Leh.

Local tensions appeared to be resolved, at least temporarily, by the emergence of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) in 1995. Kargil followed with its own Kargil Autonomous Hill Development Council (KAHDC) in 2003. As their names suggest the two councils have a degree of local autonomy, while still remaining within J&K. However, the demand for Union Territory status has persisted, and this led to the formation in 2002 of the Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF), supported by both Buddhists and Muslims. Questions about Ladakh's future political status continue to provoke vigorous debate.

Sat Paul Sahni writes as a veteran observer, having been associated with Ladakh for more than half a century. He draws a contrast between the region's present situation and its plight in 1948 when Pakistani invaders came close to capturing Leh. Ladakh's present achievements—including an extensive transport and energy infrastructure and a substantial proportion of educated people—would scarcely have been imaginable 50 or 60 years ago.

Abdul Ghani Sheikh focuses on the village of Kuksho in Kargil district. Kuksho has a mixed Buddhist and Muslim population, and in former times villagers jointly celebrated the festivals of both religions.

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It was common to find members of either faith in the same family, and some even had 'mixed' personal names. However, in 1977 Buddhist and Muslim joint families decided to split. Since then, people have stopped eating together, and relations between the communities are much more strained. Lamenting this development, Abdul Ghani Sheikh argues that Kuksho traditions are part of Ladakh's common heritage.

Pushp Saraf returns to a broader regional focus with his analysis of Buddhist politics since the late 1980s. As a journalist during this period he witnessed the political agitation spearheaded by the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), and the emergence of the LAHDC in 1995. While sympathetic to the LBA's concerns, he points out that religion cannot be the 'sole force to hold people together'. Ladakh's political leaders have achieved many of their immediate objectives and need to be aware of the hazards of power politics.

Gerhard Emmer focuses on the Argons, who represent the descendants of Kashmiri traders and Ladakhi women, and their relationship with the Buddhist community. His analysis draws on the work of Ashutosh Varshney, a US-based social scientist who researched mixed Hindu-Muslim communities that successfully resisted communal violence during periods when other Indian towns with similar demographics succumbed to rioting. Varshney pointed to the vital peace-building role of civil society organisations with members from both communities. Applying this line of enquiry to Ladakh, Emmer offers a broad historical review, and argues that the region has lacked these cross-communal civil society organisations.

Journalistic accounts of the 1999 'Kargil war' have tended to ignore the perspective of local people. *Mohammad Raza Abbassi* offers a valuable corrective with a moving eyewitness account of the impact of the Pakistani shellings on ordinary people in Kargil.

Finally, *Gitanjali Chaturvedi* returns to a discussion of the LUTF, noting that it originally drew on both Muslim and Buddhist support, and discussing the prospects for political secularism in Ladakh. Since she wrote her paper in 2003, the LUTF has suffered from serious splits. History moves on, but the key points in her analysis still apply.

Editors