

BUDDHIST POLITICAL ACTIVISM AFTER 1988

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My first acquaintance with Leh came through friends who were my classfellows in Srinagar's Sri Pratap College. They were simple, hard-working students, quick to take umbrage at any offensive remark against the Buddhist community. Many of them stayed in the hostel and were good fighters. I particularly remember Chering Dorjay—tall, slim and fighting-fit. He was the scourge of those who dared to harass him. We lost touch for years, as all of us pursued different vocations.

One day in the late 1980s, when I was a Delhi-based political correspondent of the *Indian Express*, Sonam Norboo Sapurkapa, another friend from college days, walked into our office, and asked me to arrange a meeting with Arun Shourie, who was the editor of the newspaper. Sonam said important developments were taking place in Leh and he wanted to discuss them with Mr Shourie. After arranging the meeting, I went back to work: one of my assignments at that time was to prepare the dummy for the newspaper's international edition.

After a few minutes, Mr Shourie stepped out of his office, with Sonam in tow, and asked me whether I could go to Leh. He was quite concerned because of the information given to him by Sonam. I was taken aback because I had till then resisted any move to report on J&K, my home state. In fact, I had preferred postings in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan rather than in Srinagar and Jammu, despite my coverage of the historic 1983 Assembly elections in Jammu, which saw the circulation of the then newly-established Chandigarh edition of the newspaper sky-rocket in the region.

However, the late 1980s were opening up new challenges for journalists in J&K. While the Buddhists of Leh were up in arms against the State Government, terrorism was gaining a foothold in the Kashmir Valley. Militants were also striking at will in the Jammu region at that time. I replied to Mr Shourie that I was prepared to go

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and would appreciate it if at the same time I was also allowed to report on the situation in the Valley and the Jammu regions. He immediately agreed. This was the beginning of an association with Ladakh that continues till today.

Since then, I have been a witness to the anger, anguish and frustration of my Buddhist friends. I have seen them fighting for the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), and then finally realise their dream after a long-drawn struggle. Their original demand was for Union Territory status as they would like to be directly administered by the Centre. They have at times scaled down their demand because it is generally believed that the division of J&K would harm the national interest.

Now that their animosity towards the State Government, led by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, has virtually disappeared, they should be content with having their own regional council as well as a role in the governance of the State. Hopes have risen for the first time that, if the rulers in Srinagar are sympathetic, they could help overcome the sense of loss of political empowerment prevailing in remote areas.

Basically the struggle of the Leh Buddhists has been to prevent the erosion of Buddhism in their sparsely-populated vast district. In the process, what appears to have taken over is the zeal for political power, and this needs to be deftly balanced with their primary objective if there is to be a lasting impact for the better future of Leh, J&K and the country as a whole.

The scenario after integration

For long after J&K integrated with the Indian Union in October 1947, Kushok Bakula symbolised the identity and aspirations of the people of Leh. He gained a towering stature, and his access to Jawaharlal Nehru seemed to help easy recognition of Leh as a unique land of Buddhism and historic, imposing monasteries. As long as he was active, he continued to occupy an important political position, first in the State Government and subsequently as ambassador to Mongolia.

The painful fact nevertheless remains that Chief Ministers of J&K (earlier the elected leaders of J&K were known as prime ministers) did not give sufficient attention to Leh. Syed Mir Qasim's much-publicised visit to Leh was prompted as the discontent among

the Leh Buddhists started surfacing and climaxed into their raising the demand for Union Territory Status.

In the 1970s, it seems that the people of Leh were not unanimous in seeking their separation from J&K. Lama Lobzang raised the demand for Union Territory status, but quite a few others—including former State minister Sonam Wangyal—opposed the idea and wanted to retain the political and geographical integrity of the State. The demand for UT status gained momentum later as the apathy of the State Government became acute, and young Buddhists took over the struggle in Leh.

Genesis of struggle: violent at times

My exposure to Leh has enlightened me about the ethnic, religious, regional and cultural divide between the three regions of J&K. It is regrettable that for a long spell after J&K's integration with the Indian Union, the political leadership of the State was unable to meet the ethnic and regional aspirations of the people.

A new beginning has been made by the present J&K government led by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed Government: it has not only accorded due status to the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) but also given a sense of political empowerment to the region by according one of its young leaders, Rigzin Jora, the status of a state cabinet minister. It is time now for the Buddhists to respond to the emerging situation in the State and work to strengthen its unity and integration. I will revert to that later.

First, I will deal with the situation that I have seen in Leh during the last 15 years. I am a firm believer that it is the responsibility of every State to protect its minorities while maintaining its secular character. Leh is the sole preserve of the Buddhism in J&K. Of course, history shows that the Kashmir Valley was also all-Buddhist at one time before it opted for Islam in what is said to have been a peaceful religious transition. With its grand monasteries, Leh represents a national asset that needs to be preserved in its full glory.

In the late 1980s, a significant number of the Buddhist youth of Leh had returned to their homes after studying in the national capital and elsewhere in the country. Their exposure to the outside world had made them increasingly conscious of their identity. They also had

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first-hand experience of how people elsewhere in the country lived and made contributions for the betterment of their society. Educated and well-informed, they were agitated because of allegations of the forced conversion of their poor women in their home district to Islam. At another level, they were angry that their share in the state government jobs was not in proportion to their population, and claimed that they were being made to play a secondary role in all walks of life. The Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) has recorded facts and figures in its campaign literature. I need not repeat them. However, to quote one example of the LBA's anger, an LBA statement in March 1990 reads:

Today the people of Ladakh realise that the gentleness and tolerance inherent in their age-old culture are being mistaken for cowardice and helplessness. They have finally launched a movement, not against any religious community as a whole, but against the root cause of all the feuds and problems in Leh—the Kashmir Government, the source of all the evils.

In the post-Independence period, we have been reduced to the status of slaves in our own homeland. The impact of the oppressive rule unleashed by the Kashmir Government over us has obliterated our cultural and social ethos ... The Islamic fundamentalists and zealots have been encouraged by the State government to carry out a relentless campaign of conversion. By using monetary power and fraudulent propaganda means they have converted hundreds of Buddhist girls to Islam. Underlying the conversion campaign is the design to Islamise Ladakh and to consolidate the Valley based on separatist and secessionist politics.

The LBA became the focal point of the religious-political activity with Thupstan Chhewang as its leader. Chering Dorjay, Rigzin Jora and Rigzin Spalbar have been among LBA's new, angry faces. It was under the banner of the LBA that the movement picked up in momentum and thousands of local people—a huge number considering that the total population of Leh is less than 100,000—took to the streets demanding Union Territory status. Their anger was directed against the 'Kashmiri Muslim rulers' based in Srinagar. They blamed the State Government for all their problems, even while reaffirming their faith in the unity of India and swearing by Indian nationalism.

The movement clearly had communal overtones as well, and climaxed into the revival of the demand for the Union Territory status. After all, one of its stated objectives was to save the Buddhists from

the onslaught of Islam which, according to the LBA, had state patronage. It was strange that the State Government did nothing to remove or dilute this feeling among the Buddhists.

The Farooq Abdullah Government, it needs to be noted, appeared determined to undermine the authority and influence of the LBA. For long it did not have any Buddhist in its Ministry. When it later picked up Buddhist representatives as ministers after the LAHDC had come into being, it created an impression that it was bent upon dividing the Buddhist movement; as it just ignored the popular leaders.

There was violence at times with the small town of Leh and thinly-populated villages around it witnessing bomb blasts. There were clashes also between the Buddhists and the Muslims. Leh gained wide attention and the situation in the district caused concern in New Delhi. It was not, however, a separatist movement such as was being witnessed at that time in the nearby Kashmir Valley or in the North-East. That was a cause of comfort for the national leadership even while it was grappling with the intensity of angry feelings in Leh.

In fact, all through their struggle, the young Buddhist leaders made it a point to reiterate their commitment to their country, swearing by it even as they sought to be de-linked from J&K. Their patriotic fervour at a critical juncture for the Indian nation won them many friends across the political spectrum. The sympathy for their distinct identity grew as a result.

The LBA's movement progressed well. Only once could it be criticised for playing the communal card in the worst possible manner. This was when the young Buddhist leaders decided to resort to the social and economic boycott of the members of the Muslim community. This made the movement purely Buddhist, and left aghast even those who had shared the concerns of its leaders. The LBA wisely withdrew its decision as otherwise it would have been guilty of pursuing the same pernicious practice of which it was accusing the State Government and the practitioners of Islam.

Only once the LBA's stir had turned against the Central government—that, too, briefly. It was when the Leh people were annoyed because of the inordinate delay in meeting their demand for a separate hill council by the Central Government. Slogans were

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shouted for the first time in the main bazaar of Leh against the then Prime Minister. I distinctly remember the local legend, Col Rinchen, anxiously walking around in the lounge of the Leh airport expressing his anguish over the slogans against the Prime Minister. Basically an apolitical figure, he was not appreciative of any move to question the authority of the Indian Government.

The constitution of the LAHDC in 1995 satisfied local aspirations. It was a major achievement of the Buddhist youth. It also formally recognised for the first time the fact that there existed distinct ethnic, regional and religious identities in J&K which needed to be treated with due care and respect.

The Leh movement brought to the fore the reality that the territory consisted of human beings, and not merely dry but beautiful mountains, richly-endowed monasteries and the Indus river.

Unfortunately, however, during the movement, Leh and Kargil, otherwise inseparable twins of the Ladakh region, drifted apart. The defeat of veteran Congress leader P.Namgyal, who is a deeply secular person and is widely admired for his integrity, in two successive Lok Sabha elections at the hands of little-known rivals sharpened this divide. This has been an unfortunate fall-out of the LBA movement. Leaders of the movement initially tried to establish links with their counterparts in Kargil to forge a common cause of Union Territory for the entire region but they did not quite succeed.

The present scene

The Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) has now changed its role and restricted itself to social and religious activities. Political activity is left to the Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF) and its representatives in the State Assembly.

The formation of the LUTF marks a step forward in the movement for the distinct identity of the region. It evolved after political parties in the region decided to dissolve their identities and withdrew their candidates for the 2002 Assembly elections deciding, instead, to facilitate unanimous elections. The unopposed entry of Rigzin Jora and Pinto Norboo into the State Assembly indicated a rare resolve and unity and the subsequent induction of the former in the Cabinet heightened this feeling.

The present coalition government in the State, led by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, has played a meaningful role to adequately accommodate the Leh Buddhists' desire for political empowerment. It is now for the leaders of Leh to acknowledge and play their role in strengthening the unity and integrity of the State.

Now they have the opportunity to prove that they would treat the other regions with the same care and respect with which they have been treated. The LAHDC enables them to directly address the local grievances and work for the welfare of the region. As partners in the coalition government in the State, they can play a greater role for strengthening the unity and integrity of J&K as part of the Indian Union. The fact that leaders of the Kashmir Valley have not lived up to expectations in the past so far as inter-regional harmony is concerned does not mean that the leaders of the other regions—particularly Leh—should behave likewise now that they have been properly and honourably accommodated in the state apparatus.

I am of the firm view that the integrity of J&K needs to be protected at all costs. While each region should be fairly treated, it should also exhibit a sense of involvement for the collective well-being and prosperity. No other state reflects unity in diversity as much as J&K and, therefore, it has often been called 'mini India'. Leh should contribute towards strengthening this view.

The experience of the Kashmir Valley during the last 15 years can be an eye-opener for those who think that they can survive in isolation. Even those in the secessionist camp in the Valley regret having ignored Jammu and Ladakh, as a result of which they can never claim themselves to be the representatives of the entire State; it is another matter that their space in the Valley, too, has shrunk. 'One region, one religion' thus might be a good parochial slogan to whip up local sentiment. In reality, however, it would be a retrograde measure that could spell isolation for those who raise it. Ultimately, success is measured in terms of political power, human dignity and mutual respect that a movement yields for its intended beneficiaries.

Looking ahead

At this stage, leaders of the LBA and LUTF should be satisfied with having achieved their immediate objectives. At the same time,

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however, a word of caution is necessary for them. They would do well to remember that power politics takes its own toll. It brings into play the individual egos and preferences. They must, therefore, use the power structure for the furtherance of their reformist role and economic well-being of their people. Certain evils are inherent in power structure. They can only be checked by those in power honouring the sensibilities of those who have been left out because the space on the top is limited.

There is always a younger generation watching the steps of its seniors. Nobody would know it better than the present generation of young Buddhist leaders. Lest their actions evoke the suspicion of the upcoming generation, they should ensure that not only they act as instruments of public service through the LAHDC and the State Government but that their actions are also transparent.

The formation of the LUTF notwithstanding, it is difficult to believe that political parties would give up their activities easily in Leh. Congress for years has been a reckonable force in the region. Winds at national level also swept across Leh with the formation of the Janata Party in 1977. Clearly, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been eyeing Leh for quite some time and already has a unit functioning there, whatever its present influence may be. Political processes are part of a throbbing democracy and Leh certainly can't be immune from their influences.

Apart from national parties, the National Conference, which is the premier political outfit of the State, has always had some links with Leh. The gradual emergence of the People's Democratic Party as a credible alternative in the Valley and the sympathetic face it has put up towards the Leh Buddhists should also yield it support base in Leh should it so desire.

Religion can be a binding influence but it can't be the sole force to hold people together. We know this from our experience in our State, and in the country as a whole as well as the neighbouring nations. Ultimately, what an intelligent individual seeks is dignified survival. The Leh movement was motivated by that feeling. Whether it is weakened or further strengthened in the future depends upon how its leaders behave now that they have a role to play in the power structure.