THE CONDITION OF THE ARGONS OF LEH

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The Argons are the offspring of marriages between Kashmiri traders and Ladakhi women, and their ancestors came to Ladakh in about the 17th century. They are Sunnis and differ from Buddhists not only in religion but also in history.[1] They settled in Leh and its surroundings, and are designated by Buddhists as *phyi-pa*, 'foreigners' or 'outsiders' (Dollfus 1995). The Argon–Buddhist relationship is still a politically sensitive matter, especially since the riots of 1989. I was a witness of these violent encounters, and this experience also motivated me to work on this subject. I will elaborate on this topic here only in its academic dimension. This article is based on interviews, informal talks, participant observation and literature sources, but not on quantitative data. The conclusions I will draw are preliminary, and reflect a theoretical standpoint. It is not my intention to give any political advice at all.

The paper concentrates exclusively on the Argons' relationships with the Buddhists.[2] It is a common belief among Ladakhis that these relationships were completely harmonious during the past, and that conflicts started for the first time in recent decades. I will try to find out if such a position is tenable by examining selected historical events. I shall compare different narratives, but do not intend to work with an essentialist approach. Furthermore, I shall investigate past and present relationships and networks within each community (*intra*-communal) as well as between the two communities (*inter*-communal) in order to see if there are possibilities to resolve ethnic conflict. This

[1] Shia communities also live in different parts of Ladakh, including Leh. For more details about Muslims in Ladakh, see Emmer (1999).

[2] Other authors have already written about this subject, although in a different context or from a different point of view: van Beek (1996), Brix Bertelsen (1996), André (1997).

paper will also contain a short overview of the present condition of the Argons.

Religion and ethnic identity

Firstly, I will briefly discuss the role of religion in the construction of collective identity. I will use the term *ethnicity* in a broader sense: I will include *religion* and will not differentiate between *communal* and *ethnic* labels. However, without going into details, I want to mention that there exists an academic debate about this subject. In principle, two standpoints have evolved: one accepting religion as a form of a collective 'ethnic' identity, and the other strictly against the use of religion as a tool for self-identification or for labelling a collective. I favour the first standpoint because it would otherwise be difficult to consider Argons as a distinct entity and to accept them as a minority. In the literature there are other examples of ethnic groups who define themselves exclusively by religion, for instance the Hui in China and the Bosnian Muslims (Friedman 1996). Religion becomes constitutive for such groups because other markers are less important and/or they are not shared by all members.

World religions have many things in common, but the mode of realising their aims can vary significantly. Spirituality and world-views guide the way in which life is moulded and what actions are undertaken or not. Different religions can also create different values and alternative cultural traits. In most cases of ethnic conflict, and this is also valid for Ladakh, the quarrel is not about religious dogma. Instead, religion became much more instrumentalized and politicized by distinct groups in the struggle for the political autonomy of Ladakh. Despite all discrepancies between different Buddhist schools and between Sunni and Shiites, only a rather rough and basic concept of collective identity is needed for operation on a collective base. For instance, to feel oneself to be a member of the Buddhist community, it is already sufficient to believe in the 'Three Jewels' (Gephardt and Waldenfels 1999). His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, has repeatedly emphasised the common values that exist amongst all Buddhist schools, including the Bon po.

Communal clashes – civil society

Brass (1991) and Breuilly (1993) explained the politically charged construction of ethnic identities in modernising societies as the result of the competition for control of—or access to—the resources of the state. The political machinations of elites can strongly influence the formation of boundaries between human collectives, a fact that clearly indicates that such boundaries are almost always not primordial or naturally endowed, but are constructed. They are not static and they have a dynamic flexibility: they are not established in one way for eternity. When politicians and political parties try to enhance the identification of members with a particular group or to press them into a hegemonic order, these strategies can result in ethnic tensions and conflicts containing an inherent potential for ethnic violence. Social scientists have focused their research on the role of elites in mobilising the masses and triggering riots, while they largely neglected the possibility of interventions by the non-elite public.

Different social science models for the explanation of ethnic and *inter*-ethnic violence exist (Brass 1997:7). In this article I will focus exclusively on the concept of Ashutosh Varshney (2001) and will try to find out if his model also works in the Ladakh case. Varshney did extensive research on ethnic violence between Hindus and Muslims in India, but not between Buddhists and Muslims. His major argument is that civil society[3] can counterbalance the machinations of the elites by using *inter*-communal networks to prevent or calm down ethnic violence. He emphasizes that successful prevention of communal violence requires ties between large parts of the population, the masses, and not only among the elite. The existence of local networks of civic engagement is essential for moderating tensions and peace-keeping between ethnic or communal groups. Typically, such networks consist of grassroots movements, associations, and unions. It is important that these organisations should consist of inter-ethnic civic ties which are able to crosscut intra-ethnic alliances. These organisations might stop agitators trying to spark ethnic violence,

[3] By 'civil society' Varshney (2001: 4) means "the part of our life that exists between the state on one hand and families on the other, that allows people to come together for a whole variety of public activities, and that is relatively independent of the state."

serve as a buffer when tensions between ethnic groups appear, and calm down the situation when eruptions of violence have already taken place.

History

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a complete overview of the history of Ladakh.[4] Instead, I will focus on selected points. The first, short-lived contacts with Islam emerged from visits by holy men and some attacks and conquests by the Sultans of Kashmir. Islam began to spread into Ladakh in association with long-distance trading at the beginning of the 17th century. Muslim merchants from Kashmir established a whole system of caravan routes and settled in different places, including Leh.

Some Ladakhi kings embraced Islam. In the 16th century King 'Jam dbyang rnam rgyal married the daughter—later called rGyal Khatun or Balti Princess—of the Muslim Sultan Ali Mir. This episode was both a good example of dynastic marriage politics, and also became a very romantic story, leaving room for different versions of the narrative. Other stories were far less romantic, such as, for instance, the marriage of King Tshe dbang rnam rgyal which happened in the second half of the 18th century. According to the *Ladvags rgyal rabs*, he married a second wife, a low-caste Muslim woman called Bibi (Francke 1926). The local population disliked her so much that in a rage a group of furious commoners and noble people nailed her to the gate of the bazaar and flogged her to death.

Because of the expansionistic tendencies of Ladakh in the 16/17th centuries, the empowerment of the 'Brug pa school, Ladakh's open support for Bhutan against Tibet and other, more worldly motives, the 5th Dalai Lama decided to send a Tibetan-Mongolian army against Ladakh. Only with the help of the Moghul army were the Ladakhis able to push back the invaders. This had significant consequences for the Ladakhis. The king had to convert to Islam and gave one of his sons as a hostage to the Moghul court. The peace treaty of Timosgang (1684) significantly reduced the territory of

[4] For historical overviews see Petech (1977; 1997), Nawang Tsering Shakspo (1993); Abdul Ghani Sheikh (1995).

Ladakh, sanctioned privileges for the Muslim traders and established the *lo phyag* mission from Leh to Lhasa. On the other side, the treaty did not hide the already existing religious differences.

The royal genealogies report little about Muslims and their relationship with the Buddhist population and the aristocracy. One piece of information from the *Ladvags rgyal rabs* reports that King bKra shis rnam rgyal tried to seize power over the Kashmiri traders and Ladakhi subjects by soft means as well as by the use of force and beatings.

Summarising the historical sources, social and economic ties remained mainly in the hands of the members of their own ethnic group. In contrast to this *intra*-group network, the relationships between the communities—the *inter*-group network—remained weak and was mainly restricted to the usual exchanges between neighbours. On the other hand, the Argons were able to benefit from an extended and elaborated network of traders in Kashmir, Tibet and Central Asia. This was important for them because they did not possess cultivable land, and had to rely completely on trading.

In the 20th century the long-distance trade with Tibet and Chinese Turkestan began to decline until it stopped completely in the 1950s, and the Argons had to find new forms of income. It is not surprising that the Argons were prominent among the first government employees and guesthouse owners in Ladakh. Significant changes took place during the transition from a feudal to a modern state. The Glancy Commission of 1931 sought representations from various communities of the state and was instrumental for the political organisations that were formed among Buddhists. On the other hand, it cemented the communal framework of politics. The relationship between the Dogras and the incarnation-lineage of Bakula, the *arhat* from the dGe lugs pa monastery Spituk, further reduced the influence of the Argons.

Modernisation

The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, and China's occupation of the Aksai Chin in the late 1950s and early 1960s, transformed Ladakh into a sensitive border region and cut through old relationships based on caravan trading.

The major threat to a harmonious Buddhist–Muslim relationship in the 20th century was the attempt to integrate local communities into larger regional and national entities—the federal state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)—resulting in the weakening of former social ties. When the projected homogenisation failed, local social groups became fragmented along religious lines as a reaction to socio-economic changes going hand in hand with modernisation. New job opportunities such as employment in the government or the army not only opened up alternatives to traditional professions such as being a farmer, monk or trader, but also created much more competition and brought into play personal connections and even corruption. Different opinions about the sense, the degree and speed of modernisation emerged, and found their way into local politics. The government of J&K came soon under suspicion of giving preference to Muslims during the allocation of jobs in Ladakh.

In 1989 communal clashes started, and the Argons became the target of some hard-line Buddhists, resulting in a campaign against them. Several people were killed during the riots, and local politicians were arrested. At about the same time, the Kashmir insurgency started. J&K was subjected to direct rule under a Governor appointed by the central government until 1995, resulting in a further complication of the Ladakh problem. The Argons had to suffer a social boycott imposed by the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) that was finally lifted only after several years. The Argons were initially excluded from Scheduled Tribe Status because they were seen by the officials as "interbreeds". The Ladakh Autonomous Hill District Development Council (LAHDC), a governmental measure to grant more rights to the local administration, was established in the year 1995. This instrument of local governance was fostered by the LBA, and was under the umbrella of Kushok Bakula. The Hill Council is not very popular among the Argons because they fear a lot of personal disadvantages.

Conclusions

During the Ladakhi monarchy, the Buddhist–Muslim relationship was more or less peaceful but not without tensions. Conflicts could be settled by the engagement of family members or neighbours. The

political organisation of communal groups started with the Glancy commission. Socio-economic changes and the erosion of traditional values caused by modernisation resulted in a rise in conflict potential and an eruption of ethnic violence.

Applying Varshney's model to the situation in Leh, the following conclusions can be drawn: several *intra*-communal networks can be identified in Leh, but large *inter*-communal organisations are absent. Civic engagement is mainly limited to help by neighbours. Another attempt to demonstrate consensus and to overcome communal feeling is shared attendance at religious rituals. Buddhists (and Argons) attended, for instance, the annual Shiite Ashura "festival" in Leh during Muharram (Pinault 2001:159), while Muslims listened to the speech of His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama in 2003. The presence of such guests is positive, but obviously not enough in itself to prevent or calm down agitations.

These observations seem to corroborate Varshney's finding that the density and quality of the inter-communal network is an important factor deciding how far it is possible to settle communal conflicts, or otherwise. In Ladakh the situation has always been complex: ethnic violence was often used as a smokescreen, while the real intention was to put the state government under pressure with the aim of winning more autonomy. It is therefore not certain how far Varshney's model would really work in Ladakh. Nevertheless, to the extent that they help facilitate substantive dialogue, the development of strong *inter*-communal civil society organisations could well serve to reduce tensions between communities.

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