

sensitive to the possibility that indigenous concepts have complex valence and meanings that are impossible to pre-assume or pre-judge in terms of their application on the ground. Approaches that place Buddhist philosophical and literary traditions at the heart of an explanatory or descriptive methodology for looking at social and religious forms in Tibet, are in grave danger of ignoring the fact that such traditions are themselves embedded in a social context. Whilst it is obvious that Buddhist discourses are of axial importance in understanding Buddhist societies, we must be fully aware of the place those discourses have within those societies. If we are not then we risk privileging what we believe to be a Buddhist -emic understanding over what is actually understood as being so by Tibetans on the ground, in the place we are looking at.

Western analysts must be prepared to allow specific ethnography to determine conclusions on relations between Buddhist orthodoxy and localised practices, rather than assuming that a single picture (that either divides society into distinct traditions, or seeks to integrate them into a single unit) will suffice *a priori* for all circumstances.<sup>30</sup>

30. For a discussion of this issue with reference to Chinese popular religion, see Catherine Bell, "Religion and Chinese Culture: Towards an Assessment of 'Popular Religion'", in *History of Religions*, 29, 1989-1990. I would also like to thank Dr. Jonathan Spencer and Dr. Nick Tapp, both of Edinburgh University, for their contributions and advice on both the theory and writing of this article.

## LADAKH: A MICRO-MINORITY COMMUNITY

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In order to explain the concerns and needs of minorities, concerns that are evident in India as well as elsewhere, it is necessary to first take a step back and consider the process of global change that characterises the contemporary period of world history. On the one hand the end of the cold war has brought hope of a new era of global peace and stability, of prosperity and co-operation; however, on the other hand, we have also seen a rapid growth of sub-national and regional conflict, often dubbed as "ethnic" conflict by observers in the post-Cold War era. In general, there has been a reassertion by various sub-national groups of their rights, needs and demands. This trend of fragmentation and subnational conflict has left politicians and academics puzzled.... Why, in spite of sometimes more than a century of nation-building, did minorities suddenly re-emerge so rapidly and often violently onto the national and international scene? Obviously, there cannot be one answer to explain the many different movements, but we can identify some basic problems that are shared by many groups both at home and abroad.

The deepening of India's involvement in the global economy has brought many new challenges to our politicians and businessmen, as well as to our workers. Similarly, the integration of minorities into cash economies, and national political and cultural frames, has posed significant problem and challenges for these minorities. For example, we Ladakhis never considered ourselves as a "minority" until we became part of Jammu and Kashmir. Indeed, until that time, we were a proud, independent and vibrant society, an ancient culture. However, just as many national leaders now express concern over the effects of the onslaught of the foreign media, fashions, images, morals and money on our sovereignty and culture, in the same way minorities now experience the influx of "outside" influences, both national and foreign. In fact, we minorities often face a double threat, both from global influences, as well as from well-meant but



ill-informed attempts at development. A major problem is the lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of the administrators of the conditions and needs of minorities.

While we rethink the position of the nation at the global level, we must also consider what we mean by the "nation". In a democracy like India, the nation never simply exists. The nation only exists by virtue of the will of the people. While this definition emphasises the democratic nature of the nation, it also points towards its inherent instability. The process of nation-building is never finished, but the nation must forever be renewed, reconstituted, reformed. However, until quite recently, it was generally thought that the world's nations were all moving along one path towards "modernity"; obviously, the rich, developed nations considered themselves to be the endpoint of this movement, the culmination of modernisation. All other nations, or so it was thought, would naturally and necessarily follow their trajectories. While alternative models of modernisation, such as the Marxist and Nehruvian ones, challenged this particular conception, they shared the vision of modernisation as a gradual trend towards a common endpoint, a process of homogenisation that not only takes place at a global level among nations, but also internally through the integration of minorities. This homogenisation applies in many spheres, such as the economy and education. One nation, one economy, one system of education....

It would be grossly unfair to doubt the sincerity and dedication of our nation's founders in their commitment to the interests of all sections of the population. And yet, it must be stressed that from the perspective of minorities there are some fundamental problems inherent in such a centralised and standardised approach to development. I would like to outline some of these key problems, and offer some suggestions. My goal is to contribute to a reforging of the nation on the basis of a democratic respect for the diversity of values amongst our population. Such an approach, based on our traditional values of democracy, tolerance and solidarity, will foster a nation that will be better able to deal with the new challenges facing us in the coming century.

From the perspective of minorities, problems can be distinguished in three general areas: economic, socio-cultural and political. Economi-

cally, there is a problem of the (often rapid) displacement of the local economy by "modern" economic forms. This is often exacerbated by the influx of "outsiders". For instance, in the case of Ladakh, the large number of outside entrepreneurs limits the opportunities for Ladakhis, while driving up prices of local shops and other commercial establishments. Many other disruptive processes are taking place, in spite of the well-meant efforts of local, state and central planners and administrators. The overall result of these processes is a significant, often dramatic decline in self-sufficiency, and, consequently, an increased dependence on outside assistance, the application of which is often beyond local control. At the same time, there are severe obstacles to access to the modern sector of the economy. In other words, the traditional systems are fast becoming redundant, while the new ones are not easily available. It is no surprise that all this often leads to disenchantment among the local population; and this is what is happening in the micro-society that is Ladakh.

Socio-culturally, the threats to micro-minorities are perhaps more immediately visible to outsiders. Ladakh has suffered its share of social evils. Outside influences have led to the abandonment of traditional values, and the new values are not suited to our condition. The result has not been, as modernisation theorists would suggest, a happy adoption of so-called modern values, but, instead, a deep feeling of insecurity and anxiety, which often expresses itself in social evils. In some respects Ladakh has been fortunate in that its isolated location prevented it from getting total exposure to outside influences. However, even here, the imposition of Urdu language and other related school curricula has repressed the natural creativity of the people. Further, if we look elsewhere - at, for example, Lahaul and Spiti, which were part of Ladakh until their incorporation into British India under the Treaty of Amritsar - we can witness the full impact of social change. Here, local youths have begun using Hindi names in order to fit in with the majority of the population. Hence, Tsering Dorje will now introduce himself as "Rahul" and more likely than not, he will be unable to speak his native language. And don't be mistaken: this is not a sign of progress, of a voluntary or natural acceptance of mainstream or superior cultural values; instead, it is a sign of danger, because "Rahul" will not find himself accepted by mainstream society, and



he will no longer fit in with his own people either. "Rahul" is lost and his frustration may well lead him to reject the nation and culture which, in his eyes, has no place for him.

Connected to both of these issues are the political consequences for minorities of incorporation into the nation. For many minorities, especially the numerically small ones, it is difficult to identify with the politicians who are supposed to represent them at the State and Central levels of government. For example Ladakh, in spite of its geographical size, has only one representative each for Kargil and Leh districts out of the total of 76 representatives in the State Legislative Assembly; a representation that is, of course, entirely meaningless. While historically there has been a better understanding of Ladakh's situation at the Central level, this cannot be considered a sufficient substitute for meaningful local administrative power. Thus, since Independence in 1947, Ladakhis have carried out a number of agitations demanding autonomy and self rule. Underlying those demands was the desire of the people of Ladakh to become part of mainstream national life. I would like to emphasize here that the long-standing demand of the Ladakhis was finally resolved recently when the Government agreed to set up an Autonomous Hill Development Council for Ladakh. In fact, this was the fulfillment of a promise made by Shri Rajiv Gandhi in 1989. It is to be hoped that Ladakhis will now feel much more a part of the nation, as they will now be able to exercise much more of a direct influence on the administrative process. At the same time, though, there also remain concerns, because in the context of the Kashmir issue, it is only rarely taken into account that the State of Jammu and Kashmir encompasses a lot more than just the Valley.

As mentioned above, many of the problems of minorities, and the tension between minorities and the authorities, are the result of a lack of understanding and knowledge of the specific conditions and needs of the minorities. Hence, a first general principle must be to promote better communications between local, State and Central levels of administration. Until the present, the attitude of many administrators has been one of benign paternalism; local opinions, inputs and participation have often been token, rather than substantial. This situation has got to change. In general, a devolution of power to the local level is required. Participation is, in the long run,

more important than protection. Unless minorities can participate in the decision making processes that affect their lives, they will feel that they are being left at the mercy of the forces of change that threaten their ways of life. With regard to the specific problems of minority regions such as Ladakh, a promising solution is underway with the institution of the Autonomous Hill Development Council. I am sure that such a body will not only help to improve the flow of information to and from the various levels of Government, but will also bring about a greater responsiveness of the administration to the needs of the people. As a result, people will feel that they are more effectively represented, and consequently will feel more that they are equal citizens of India.

Of course, such a devolution of power requires a radical change in attitude amongst large sections of the political and bureaucratic establishment, which are not generally accustomed to vocal and assertive minorities. More specifically, we must learn to accept such assertions, not as expressions of a lack of patriotism or even communalism, but rather as expressions of genuine and mature citizenship and a desire to participate in the building of the nation. We need to accept that just as there is more than one way to reach Delhi, and that there are many ways to fulfill the various aspirations of our diverse population. Centralised, standardised solutions will not, cannot, work in all instances.

Apart from such political and administrative changes, greater sensitivity is required with regard to the protection of minorities and the promotion of their cultures. The loss of cultural and linguistic diversity is a tragedy, as with it are lost the accumulated knowledge and experience of centuries. It is precisely this diversity that has made India such a unique and great nation.