

POLITICAL EVOLUTION IN POST INDEPENDENCE LADAKH

Sonam Wangyal

Leh

I was brought up in a rural background. My family suffered great hardships in those days. Ever since my childhood, I can remember poor people around me who were the victims of the autocratic rule of the Dogra regime. They suffered untold miseries at the hands of unscrupulous money-lenders and the despotic Government officials posted in Ladakh. More than ninety percent of the population lived on agriculture, and the farmers had to feed the greedy government officials out of their hard-earned produce and money.

The district administrator, known as the Wazir, acted as the District Magistrate, Superintendent of Police, and Session Judge. In his absence, the Tehsildar exercised the same powers. The police came around the villages with princely pomp, involving innocent villagers in trumped up charges, and extorting money from them. Once, a police constable forced an innocent villager to lie on the ground. A big stone was placed on his back. The poor fellow was groaning and weeping under the heavy load of the stone, while the villagers watched him helplessly. For touring officials, the farmers had to provide ponies, which were rarely paid for. If the villagers asked for payment, they were often abused and beaten. They supplied butter, milk, firewood, vegetables and other local products, but they were not paid for these. There was harassment, victimization, and maltreatment by the landlords, village functionaries and the Government officials.

Following the harvest, the money lenders would go to the threshing grounds during the threshing to collect, with interest, the grains 'loaned' to the farmer earlier in the year. This extortion left very little for the poor farmer and his family to eat, and so after a fortnight or so, he had to go back to the money lender and the

landlords to beg for some more grain. It was not unknown for people to die of starvation, for instance at Igu. Many people had to fill their bellies with the leaves of vegetables, boiled in water and roasted on the fire. The money lenders were so cruel that they outraged the modesty of the young daughters in the presence of their parents.

Under the 'res' system, each family was forced to provide one man or a pony for riding or carrying the luggage of Government officials. On every station between Leh and Srinagar ponies, porters and supplies had to be kept throughout the year. At Leh, 50 ponies and 20 porters had to be available in the summer, and in winter, 30 ponies and a similar number of porters had to be retained. An identical number of ponies and porters were kept at Kargil. The same arrangements had to be made at all the stations between Leh and Srinagar. Mr. Shridhar Koul, who was the Inspector of Schools in Ladakh in the 1930s, in his book "Ladakh Through the Ages" writes that when the Wazir arrived in Leh on a transfer from Srinagar, he hired a total of 12 ponies for transport and baggage. However, at the end of his first tour of Leh, he moved his office to Skardo for the winter, and the number of ponies hired for his baggage was 24, while 12 more were hired for riding and the office records. Palanquins were used for the ladies and children, and hundreds of coolies were pressed into service without payment of any wages.

The visits of officials to the villages were feared and hated, and corruption was rampant. Occasionally, the grants earmarked for the repair of roads and buildings went straight into the pockets of the Wazir and Tehsildar. Tenants were ruthlessly exploited by the landlords. The farmers laboured under the burden of heavy debts; these were subject to extortionate rates of interest and compound interest, which meant that the farmers never cleared their principal debts. Referring to the conditions of the farmers of pre-Independence Ladakh, A. H. Sapru has observed:

"It would be difficult to imagine a country more ground down by the burden of debts than Ladakh, and the extraordinary feature is that in one of the poorest countries on the face of the earth, the rate of interest is the highest. It matters not who

the creditor is, whether he be a trader, farmer or priest, the rate of interest is 25% and the more astute the creditor is the more interest he does contrive to compound."

In the Ladakhi society of those days, the common Ladakhi had not enough to eat, and most of the people were half starved. I often contemplated helplessly about how to relieve the distress of the stricken people, and wished for a Messiah to come and rescue us.

In October 1947, Pakistan invaded Kashmir, reaching as far as Ladakh. To help defend the region, a volunteer force was raised under Shridhar Koul Dulu. He had embraced Buddhism, and had developed close relations with the Buddhists of Ladakh. He was the sole education officer in the Ladakh region at that time, and he exercised a great influence on the local population. He was one of the signatories to the Memorandum submitted by Ladakhis to the Glancy Commission, which was aimed at redressing regional inequalities.

I approached Shri Dulu and expressed my desire to join the volunteer force, which was known as the Home Guards. Military training was being given to the force. Shri Dulu inquired about my family and social background. In the course of our discussion, the problems of Ladakh were raised. He persuaded me to complete my education and to devote my life to the service of the oppressed people of Ladakh. I readily agreed with his advice, and Shri Dulu suggested that I proceed to Delhi for higher studies. He wrote a letter to Pandit Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India; thus Nehru came to know of the services being rendered by Shri Dulu in the cause of the defence of Ladakh.

It was the month of May, and I proceeded to Manali on foot, on my way to Delhi. The snowbound Rothang and Baralacha passes were not fully open, and I had to walk continuously for one week on snow. After 45 days, I reached Delhi, where I had to stay for a week in the refugee camp in the Birla Temple. Finally, I succeeded in getting an appointment with Pandit Ji. Also present in the Prime Minister's office were the late Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, the former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, and his colleague and freedom fighter Mirza Afzal Beg. I presented the letter of Shri

Dulu to the Prime Minister; he went through it and recommended a scholarship grant in my favour, to enable me to continue my studies.

Beg Sahib managed to send me to Srinagar by truck, where I was admitted to the S. P. High School. Two Ladakhi student, Mr. Tashi Rabgyas and Mr. Morup Gurmet, were also studying there. They were from rich families, but since I belonged to a poor family, it was impossible for me to subsist on the scholarship money, and I had to undergo various hardships in order to continue my studies.

At Srinagar, I met H. H. Kushok Bakula, the Head Lama of Spituk Monastery. He had embarked on a political career to serve the people of Ladakh in July 1949, when Pandit Nehru and Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah had visited Ladakh. Some Ladakhi representatives had requested them to persuade the young Head Lama to assume a political role in Ladakh, as they believed that he was the only person who could play a significant and effective role in this capacity. The Ven'ble Bakula was in need of an educated Ladakhi as his personal assistant. Shri Tashi Rabgyas, Morup Gurmet and I discussed in depth as to who should voluntarily give up their studies to work for the Ven'ble Bakula. Finally, I was chosen for the task. After taking my Matriculation Examination, I left for Leh to work with His Holiness. The Srinagar-Leh road was closed at the snow-bound Zoji La, and up to Drass the snow was deep on the ground. I crossed the pass with great difficulty, suffering from the cold.

That year, Ladakh had also experienced heavy snowfall, which had extensively damaged the crops; and the farmers were now on the verge of starvation. The imposition of high revenue taxes, and the callousness of the money lenders, had added to their sufferings. I had the opportunity to meet many people in Ladakh, and closely observed the plight of the village people. Though the country had been freed from the yoke of slavery, and independence had dawned, the people of Ladakh had not yet been fully delivered from the clutches of the money-lenders and landlords. The government officials continued to exploit the common people. I undertook an extensive tour of the villages, and saw the situation for myself. We awakened the consciousness of the people, who were overburdened with debt, and encouraged them to fight for their basic rights. We launched a vigorous campaign against the corrupt administration,

the money lenders, and other vested interests. The administration reacted with a vengeance; we were arrested several times and sentenced to imprisonment. Occasionally, I would get mercilessly beaten up for my convictions.

Ultimately, however, common sense prevailed upon the administration. Farmers were exempted from the exorbitant revenue tax, and the Government settled the debt and loan cases. I was nominated as a representative on behalf of the people to present their cases. About 500 registered cases and more than 1,000 cases were settled by negotiations between the concerned parties. Our leader, the Ven'ble Bakula, was pleased with my achievements, and advised the people to give me their support. I gained the full sympathy of the people, and was elected as District President, National Conference, Leh. Later on, the National Conference was dissolved, and the Congress Party was established, and I was unanimously elected the District President of the Party.

Now our party turned its attentions to other social problems. Our main objective was to raise the level of literacy, as only 5% of the population could read and write in terms of modern education. We urged the people to educate their children; the response was encouraging, and presently the rate of literacy is 30%.

In 1957, I was elected as a member of the Legislative Council of Jammu and Kashmir, and continued in this position until 1967. In that year, I contested the only seat of the Legislative Assembly, that of the Leh constituency, and was elected by a wide margin, defeating my nearest rival, the Head Lama of Thikse Monastery. Following this, I was inducted as a Minister of the State Cabinet. At this time, I was a household name, and enjoyed the support of the people. During the next elections, I was again chosen as a candidate by the party, and I again won the contest, defeating my nearest rival, Kushok Togdan, Head Lama of Phiyang Gompa.

During the two decades since Independence, Ladakh had made considerable progress in a number of fields. Scores of schools had been opened; Leh and Srinagar were linked by road; medical centres, dispensaries, handicraft centres, co-operative societies, cattle farms, veterinary hospitals, agricultural farms, and so on,

were established throughout the region. Power was provided through a diesel generator. However, Ladakh was still very backward, compared with the other two regions of the state, the Kashmir Valley and Jammu. The State Government appointed a Commission headed by an ex-Chief Justice of India, in order to redress these regional imbalances. In June 1968, one of the members paid a visit to Ladakh, and took the evidence of both officials and non-officials in Leh and Kargil; and the Ladakhi representatives argued forcefully that their legitimate regional aspirations had been ignored. Among the Commission's recommendations were the establishment of degree colleges at both Leh and Kargil; to improve electricity supplies; and to develop the transport infrastructure of the region.

Ladakh had also long deserved tribal status. People living in the North-East states and along the Himalayas had been declared Scheduled Tribes, but Ladakh had been ignored. In 1982, a campaign was launched in this regard, and I took an active part in the movement. Both the Muslims and Buddhists of Ladakh were involved. To help express the frustrations of the people against the indifference of the government towards this long-standing demand, I went on hunger strike for 16 days from the 15th to the 30th of January. In 1984, I again went on hunger strike, for five days. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, then the Prime Minister of India, visited Leh and assured us that Ladakh would be granted Scheduled Tribe Status. She asked me to withdraw my hunger strike, and offered me a glass of soft drink. On her return to Delhi, she announced the intention of the Government to grant ST Status to the people of Ladakh; however, this decision wasn't implemented until 1989.

Homelessness has also become a serious problem in Ladakh. As a reflection of the world wide phenomenon of people migrating from rural to urban areas, many people are coming from the villages to Leh to seek jobs, and so on. I formed an organisation called the 'Houseless Person's Association' to tackle this problem. I approached many people, including Dr. Farooq Abdullah, the former Chief Minister, as well as other concerned officers in the present State administration.

For three decades, Ladakhi Buddhists have also been demanding that Ladakh be declared a Union Territory. In the 1980s, the Ladakh Buddhist Association launched a renewed campaign to press this

demand. I was invited by the President of the L.B.A. to extend my support, and to join in the campaign. In the course of our talk, I learnt with dismay that the L.B.A. had plans to impose a social and economic boycott against the Muslim minority community as part of its agitation for Union Territory.

I opposed this outright, and told the President and others that the imposition of an economic and social boycott was in contravention of the spirit of our constitution, and our democratic and secular system of government. It was also against the traditions and ethos of Ladakhi life, which advocated religious tolerance and community. Moreover, it violated our religious tenets. We could not afford to mix religion with politics. I proposed to involve both Muslims and Buddhists in the movement, and I offered my services, saying that I would sit on dharna, and start a hunger strike. The Ladakh Buddhist Association did not agree with me. They were determined to isolate the Muslims, and to impose a social boycott against the community. That was a black day for me. The age-old good relations between the Buddhists and the Muslims had received a serious set-back. It was the beginning of the differences between us; further, the members of the L.B.A. did not hide their resentment against me.

Later, the L.B.A. switched its demands, and sought the granting of Autonomous Hill Council Status to Ladakh. I was in favour of involving both Muslims and Buddhists in the realisation of this objective, but the L.B.A. imposed a social and economic boycott against the Muslims. I was very glad when the L.B.A. lifted its social and economic boycott against the Muslims on December 25th, 1992, and sought the co-operation of the Muslims in achieving the goal of an Autonomous Hill Development Council. Better sense has finally prevailed; however, much damage has sadly been done to the traditionally amicable relations amongst the different communities of Ladakh; damage which has left a bitter legacy.