

OLD RELIGIONS, NEW IDENTITIES AND CONFLICTING VALUES IN LADAKH

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INTRODUCTION	1
1. DISCOURSES ON VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT IN THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST TRADITION	1
2. RELIGIONS AND POLITICS AT THE CENTRAL ASIAN CROSSROADS.....	2
THE LADAKHI KINGDOM (C.950-1842 AD).....	3
CHALLENGE AND ACCOMMODATION DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD	5
INDEPENDENCE, PARTITION AND BUDDHIST 'NATIONHOOD'	5
3. THE POLITICS OF LADAKHI IDENTITY	6
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE.....	6
THE 1989 AGITATION AND THE 'SOCIAL BOYCOTT'.....	7
HILL COUNCIL STATUS	8
ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE.....	8
4. RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY LADAKH: COMPETING CENTRIFUGAL FORCES?....	9
PROTECTING, RESTORING OR REINVENTING BUDDHISM?.....	9
DIVIDED BY A COMMON LANGUAGE.....	100
ISLAMIC ORTHODOXIES.....	111
KUKSHO: A PARADIGM OF RELIGIOUS DISHARMONY?	111
CONSULTING THE 'ORACLE': A SIGN OF LOCAL STRESS?	122
THE INVENTED TRADITIONS OF INDIAN NATIONHOOD	133
5. CONFLICT OR COLLABORATION?	14
REFERENCES	FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.5

INTRODUCTION

Ladakh's geographical location at the western end of the Tibetan plateau and the northernmost point of the modern Indian state places it far from the other case studies discussed in this conference. Nevertheless, it exemplifies many of the same paradoxes, contradictions and dilemmas in the interplay between religion, politics and economic development.

The international image of Ladakh—propagated by the Indian National Tourist Board as well as by Western romantics—has been that it remains a haven of tranquillity and even, in the clichéd phrasing of the *National Geographic*, 'the last Shangri-la' (Abercrombie 1977). It is certainly true that Ladakh has been spared internal violent conflict on anything like the scale of Kashmir, Punjab, Assam, southern Thailand or the Burmese border regions. However, it is also true that there has been a recent history of fiercely competing economic and political interests, and that these internal rivalries have often been expressed at least partly in religious terms, pitting the region's Buddhists against its Sunni and Shia Muslim minorities. At the height of a Buddhist-led agitation in 1989, firing by the security forces led to at least three deaths. This death toll may be low by national and international standards, but it serves as a reminder that the region's tranquillity can by no means be taken for granted. Ladakh is part of the modern world.

This discussion paper reviews the role of religion in Ladakh's political and social evolution. It begins with a brief set of comments on the violence and conflict in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition before presenting a historical overview of the interplay between Buddhism and Islam. The third part of the paper reviews contemporary political and developmental challenges, and the fourth analyses the 'centrifugal forces' of contemporary Ladakh.

The paper draws on the author's personal observations from repeated visits to Ladakh since 1979, including a year's residence in 1980. In addition, and even more importantly, it has benefited from the insights of a wide range of Ladakhi and international scholars, particularly colleagues in the International Association of Ladakh Studies (IALS).

1. DISCOURSES ON VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT IN THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST TRADITION

The history of Buddhism in Tibet, Ladakh and neighbouring regions exemplifies one of the central paradoxes discussed in this conference. Like the Theravada tradition, Mahayana Buddhism promotes compassion to all sentient beings. However, in actual historic practice, both lay leaders and monks have frequently sponsored violence—both within and between rival polities—in defence of their political and religious interests. This is a complex topic and, for the purposes of this discussion, I will cite only a few examples.

The first is the history of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso (*Ngag dbang blo bzang gya mtsho*, 1617-1682), who was one of the central figures of Tibetan history and—among other achievements—was responsible for the construction of the Potala palace in Lhasa. In a discussion on "Orientalism and aspects of violence in the Tibetan tradition," Elliot Sperling (2001:318) points out that the Dalai Lama sanctioned violence to suppress a rebellion in the central Tibetan province of Tsang in early 1660, expressing his imprecations in harshly poetic terms:

[Of those in] the band of enemies who have despoiled the duties entrusted to them:

Make the male lines like trees that have had their roots cut;

Make the female lines like brooks that have dried up in winter;

Make the children and grandchildren like eggs smashed against rocks;
Make the servants and followers like heaps of grass consumed by fire;
Make their dominion like a lamp whose oil has been exhausted;
In short, annihilate any traces of them, even their names.¹

The Fifth Dalai Lama played a leading role in a series of conflicts not only within Central Tibet but also between Tibet and the neighbouring regions of Bhutan and Ladakh, both of which were affiliated with the rival Drugpa (*'brug pa*) school of Buddhism rather than his own Gelugpa (*dge lugs pa*) tradition.

However, while Buddhist leaders have frequently sponsored military conflict, they have also been conciliators. Michael Aris (1994) drew on this record in an article on the history of conflict and conciliation in traditional Bhutan, highlighting the role that Buddhist leaders had played as mediators. Aris's paper combines scholarly analysis with courteous diplomacy: he clearly hoped that these historic precedents would serve as models for contemporary Bhutanese leaders struggling to resolve their country's 'southern problem' over the tensions between indigenous Bhutanese and descendants of Nepali migrants.

The present Fourteenth Dalai Lama is renowned for his espousal of pacifist ideals, even in the face of Chinese aggression. As Sperling (2001) observes, the Dalai Lama has drawn explicitly on Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of *ahimsa* in the formulation of his pacifism, and not solely on Tibetan Buddhist doctrine as he received it. Sperling makes this point in support of his argument at last some aspects of Tibetan Buddhist pacifism are 'modern' rather than 'traditional', and that today's historians need to take care not to read contemporary preoccupations back into the past.

Be that as it may, the tensions between religious principle, the demands of practical politics and—it may be said—human weakness are a constant theme of the history of Tibet and neighbouring regions. Taking a broad view, based on years of study, Aris (1997:12) offers this overall assessment:

When rationalism and scepticism have had their way with the records we are still left with the astonishing resilience of the bodhisattva ideal that provided the inspiration behind so many of the human institutions of Tibet and its diverse forms of rule and succession. As often as the ideal seems to wither and decay, so does it reassert itself in the accounts of individual lives and institutions. Founded on the solid rock of public and private morality and on the conviction that the relief of human suffering is both essential and attainable, the same exemplar found many highly convincing expressions in Tibetan history.

In summary, it is not hard to find examples where actual political and social practice has fallen far short of religious ideals. However, these same ideals have nevertheless remained a source of inspiration that has found concrete expression in Tibetan religious and political institutions and in the lives of individual Tibetans. The next section focuses in greater detail on the same interplay between religion, politics and human ambition in the history of Ladakh.

2. RELIGIONS AND POLITICS AT THE CENTRAL ASIAN CROSSROADS

Ladakh lies—in the words of Janet Rizvi (1983)—at the 'crossroads of High Asia'. As will be

¹ One is reminded of Psalm 137 vv.8-9: O Babylon, Babylon the destroyer, happy the man who repays you for all that you did for us! Happy is he who shall seize your children and dash them against the rock.

seen, the Ladakhi kingdom clearly was founded on a Tibetan Buddhist model and in that sense can be said to be a variant of a wider 'universal' tradition. At a parochial level, villagers sought to propitiate 'spirits of place' following religious practices that may in part have been influenced by pre-Buddhist, pre-Islamic traditions shared with the regions now in northern Pakistan. Meanwhile, Ladakh traded both with the Chinese Turkestan (now more widely known as Xinjiang), and with Kashmir and the plains of India. A substantial proportion of the population—now nearly half the total—were follows of either Shia or Sunni Islam.

Both historically and in the present day, Ladakhi religion and politics have therefore been the product of an interplay between local, regional, and supra-regional influences. Seen from one point of view, Ladakh lies on the periphery of the Tibetan, Indian and Central Asia worlds. From another perspective, it lies at the centre of a complex vortex of competing influences. This section reviews the historical roots of contemporary Ladakhi religious politics.

The Ladakhi kingdom (c.950-1842 AD)

Buddhism provided the ideological basis for the Ladakhi monarchy.² The Ladakhi kings claimed direct descent from the ancient Tibetan kings, and their most important duty was to serve as protectors of the Buddhist *dharma* (Schwieger 1997; 1998:88-99). In that respect their status was comparable with their Buddhist counterparts in Southeast Asia.

At a local level, the kings played an important ritual role, for example by initiating the first ploughing in spring (Ribbach 1986:120-130). Ladakh's agricultural survival depends on a complicated network of small-scale irrigation canals drawing on melted glacier water, and a recent study argues that the control and management of this system was provided an additional basis for royal authority (Labbal 2001). Again, this thesis suggests analogies with Southeast and East Asian polities.

The kings spent lavishly as patrons and supporters of Buddhist monasteries both in Ladakh and in the regions that now form part of western Tibet (and which came under Ladakhi political authority for part of the 16th and 17th centuries. However, while senior lamas had considerable influence over matters of state, they never exercised direct political authority in the same way as their counterparts in central Tibet.

In its size and internal political structure, Ladakh resembled other Buddhist kingdoms such as Mustang, Sikkim and, to a lesser extent, Bhutan on Tibet's southern borders, as well as Derge and Dartsemdo (Tachienlu) to the east. At the same time, it was already coming into contact with the political, social and ideological manifestations of Islam, and from the 16th century onwards had to cope with the potential military threat from Mughal forces. In 1663, the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb visited Kashmir and threatened Ladakh with invasion. King bDe-Idan-rnam-rgyal sent an embassy to Kashmir to forestall war: he was forced to promise to build a mosque in Leh (the capital of Ladakh), to read the *khutba* in the name of the emperor, to issue coins with Aurangzeb's insignia, and to send an annual tribute. From now on, Ladakh had to cope with potential political and military pressures both from India/Kashmir and from the rising power of the 5th Dalai Lama in Central Tibet.

These pressures reached a climax of sorts in the Ladakh-Tibet-Mughal war of 1679-84. In 1679 the Fifth Dalai Lama ordered a military invasion of Ladakh, ostensibly because of the

² The most authoritative overall study of the Ladakhi monarchy is Petech (1977). For a review of recent historical writing, see Bray (2005).

latter's support for Bhutan which likewise had been in conflict with Tibet (Schuh 1983), and possibly also because he wanted to control the Western Tibetan trade routes. As the leader of the Tibetan forces, the Dalai Lama chose Galdan Tsewang Palzangpo (*Dga' Idan Tshe dbang dpal bzang po*), a senior Buddhist monk from Tashi Lhunpo. According to an 18th century Tibetan biography, Galden Tsewang initially hesitated to accept a military command because of his scruples as a devout Buddhist against shedding blood (Petech 1947:174). He nevertheless proved to be a competent and successful general, compelling the Ladakhi forces to retreat deep into their own territory.

In desperation, Ladakh called on assistance from the Mughal governor of Kashmir, who forced the Tibetans back from the then Ladakhi capital in Basgo. According to Galden Tsewang's biography, he was able to enlist extra supernatural resources to prevent the Mughals pressing further into Tibet. Working from afar, the Dalai Lama invoked magic tricks and witchcraft, causing the Mughals to be seized by panic and flee. Petech (1947:186) offers the more prosaic explanation that the Mughals pulled back because they had achieved their main objectives, and had benefited from a substantial bribe paid by a Tibetan.

The king of Ladakh had to pay the price for Mughal assistance by signing a 1683 agreement promising to adopt Islam under the name 'Āqibat Maḥmūd Khān and granting Kashmir a monopoly of the lucrative wool trade from western Tibet. The 1684 treaty with Tibet proved equally onerous. Ladakh had to cede control of what is now Western Tibet, and undertook to send the triennial *lo-phyag* mission to Lhasa with a prescribed set of offerings to be submitted in time for the New Year festivities.

The Ladakh-Tibet-Mughal war itself and the subsequent settlement illustrate the interweaving of religious, political and economic interests. Religious scruples did not prevent the Dalai Lama from making war or – ultimately – dissuade Galden Tsewang from obeying orders. The kings of Ladakh had to make formal submission to Mughal authority by adopting Islam, although, with one partial 18th century exception, it seems that none of them ever formally practised the religion. Part of Lhasa's motive in seeking the 1684 settlement – onerous though it was – may have been a wish to avoid pushing Buddhist Ladakh too far into the hands of the Mughals. If so, the settlement proved largely successful. Ladakh continued to engage with Kashmir/India, particularly through the crucially important trade in shawl wool, but for the most part remained within the religious and political orbit of Tibet.

Alongside its continuing links with Tibet, Ladakh's contacts with the Islamic world steadily increased. There were—and still are—two Muslim communities. Most Sunnis are descendants of Kashmiri traders whose forebears settled in Ladakh from the the 17th century onwards. The leading figures of the Sunni community enjoyed a high social and economic status as officially designated 'court traders' in the service of the Ladakhi kings, while also performing other specialist roles such as managing the kings' Persian correspondence or minting coins. Several Kashmiri families married locally, and the mixed-race community that they founded are known as the *Argons*. The Argons' family trading networks stretched across the Himalayan and Karakoram regions to Lhasa, Kathmandu, Kalimpong, Yarkand and Khotan.

The Shia community was and is concentrated in western Ladakh in the Purig region as well as the neighbouring region of Baltistan, which now forms part of Pakistan's northern areas. However, there are also substantial Shia communities in Leh and nearby villages in the Indus valley and, again, many of these date back to the 17th century. The Buddhists are a clear majority in Leh district but in Leh town the Buddhists and the combined Muslim populations are roughly the same size.

Challenge and accommodation during the colonial period

Ladakh's history as an independent came to an end in 1834 when it was invaded by the forces of Raja Gulab Singh who was himself a feudatory of the Sikh ruler Maharajah Ranjit Singh. By 1842 Gulab Singh had conclusively established his authority over the region, and in 1846, after skilfully aligning himself with the British during the First Sikh War, he became the first Maharaja of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), including Ladakh.

Between 1846 and 1947, Ladakh therefore endured a form of 'double colonialism'. The first layer of authority was the J&K administration. However, J&K was itself a princely state within the Indian Empire, and therefore subject to British oversight. From 1870 onwards, successive British Joint Commissioners spent the summer months in Leh, ostensibly to supervise the Central Asian Trade but also to monitor political developments. The Ladakhi kings—or 'ex-kings' as they were now widely known—continued to enjoy a high social status but played no formal political role and, by comparison, with the past, their financial resources were limited.

The initial impact of the Dogra invasion was disastrous for the monasteries in that they lost their main source of political patronage, and the population as a whole was severely impoverished because of high taxes imposed by the J&K state. However, in the course of the 19th century, senior lamas managed to establish contacts with the Maharaja's court, and many of the old historic connections with Tibet—for example the practice of sending younger monks to Tibetan monasteries for higher education—continued as before.

One agent of change was the Moravian mission (*Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine*). Moravian missionaries first visited Ladakh in 1855; they established a mission station in the neighbouring region of Lahul in 1856; and managed to establish a mission station in Leh itself in 1885. The missionaries ran a dispensary and a small local hospital and a school.

An important development in the local history of Buddhism was the founding of the Ladakh Buddhist Education Society (LBES) in 1934 and the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) in 1938 (Bertelsen 1997a,b). Both organisations were in large measure inspired by Kashmiri neo-Buddhists—intellectuals who had come to Buddhism through a process of personal discovery rather than family affiliation—and believed that they had a mission to 'modernise' Buddhism. Among other things they challenged the traditional practice of polyandry, arguing that it weakened the Buddhist community by reducing the population. The Kashmiri neo-Buddhists brought Ladakh into contact with the Calcutta-based Mahabodhi Society

The YMBA was the precursor of today's Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), and its formation was the beginning of a process whereby affirmations of Ladakh's Buddhist identity became one of the main—perhaps *the* main—vehicles of political expression

Independence, partition and Buddhist 'nationhood'

The independence of India and Pakistan in August 1947 was overshadowed by the the traumas of partition. The case of J&K—and therefore of Ladakh—was all the more complicated because a Hindu ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, ruled a Muslim-majority state. Initially, the Maharaja may have hoped for outright independence from either India or Pakistan, but in October 1947—in circumstances which are still a source of dispute—he signed the Instrument of Accession to India. Pakistani irregular forces invaded the Kashmir Valley. A parallel group from Gilgit quickly captured Skardu (Baltistan) and marched on Leh. Indian reinforcements sent by air to a hastily constructed airfield succeeded in defending Leh. The ceasefire line imposed in January 1949 has cut off Ladakh and Baltistan from each other ever since.

Once the military situation became more settled, it remained to negotiate an internal political accommodation, and this raised the question of the future political status of Ladakh. Chhewag Rigzin Kalon, the head of one of Leh's leading families, stated in a memorandum to Indian Prime Minister Jawarharlal Nehru in May 1949:

We [‘the people of Ladakh’] have given most anxious thought to this grave problem and after mature deliberation arrived at the decision that we should merge straightaway with India.

He went on to say:

We are a separate nation by all tests—race, language, religion, culture—determining nationality. The only link connecting us with the other people of the State being the bond of a common ruler. If the Indian National Congress could persuade itself to recognise the Muslims of India as a separate nation although they had so much in common with the other elements of the India population the Government of India should have no hesitation in recognising what is patent and incontrovertible fact in our case (Brix Bertelsen 1997b, citing Madhok 1992).

In the event, Ladakh remained a part of J&K. However, the affirmation that Ladakhis constitute a separate nation defined by religion, among other markers, continues to have contemporary resonance.

3. THE POLITICS OF LADAKHI IDENTITY

Since independence the central political issue in Ladakh has been the region's relationship with J&K. Already in the 1950s, Ladakhis were beginning to complain of ‘step-motherly treatment’ from the J&K government which, they argued, neglected them unfairly. From the 1970s onwards, this led to demands for Union Territory status—often summarised simply as ‘UT’—whereby Ladakh would be administered direct from New Delhi. This debate has often had a communal tinge with Ladakh Buddhists claiming that the reason for their neglect has been the Muslims' domination of J&K, while their own separate religious identity offers one of the prime justifications for separate political status.

Any discussion of contemporary religious developments in Ladakh has to be set in the context of rapid—and still accelerating—social and economic change. This section therefore begins with an overview of recent social trends, before turning to political developments.

Economic and social change

In the 60 years since independence, the greatest single factor making for social change has been the military presence. The total numbers of troops stationed in Ladakh is not publicly reported, but they are certainly in the tens of thousands. The armed forces provide new opportunities for employment, and serve as a market for Ladakhi agricultural produce.

The armed forces initiated major improvements in the transport network. Previously, it took an average of weeks to travel on foot from Leh to Kashmir, and the passes were closed in winter. As noted above, the first air strip near Leh was laid out in 1948, making it possible to bring in military reinforcements against the Pakistanis by air. The army also was responsible for the construction of the motor road from Srinagar via Kargil to Leh in the early 1960s, although the link to Kashmir is still blocked by snow in winter. Another motor road now links Leh with Himachal Pradesh.

The second major economic influence is tourism. In 1974 Ladakh was opened up to foreign tourists, having been closed since the 1950s because of the region's status as strategically sensitive area. The numbers of tourists—mainly foreigners at first—rose to some 25,000 a year by 1988 before declining in 1989 and the early 1990s. Since then, numbers have risen

again, and the main 'season' from mid-July to mid-September has become a period of intense economic activity.

Education remains a contested area. Most villages now have state primary schools, but the standards in the state sector are generally agreed to be low, and there has been a proliferation of private schools, many of which have religious affiliations. In Leh these include the Lamdon School, run by a Buddhist association, the Moravian Mission School and the Islammiya School. Leh now has its own Degree College. However, thousands of Ladakhi students study in Srinagar, Jammu, Delhi and other cities on the plains. Despite the widely acknowledged limitations of the state primary sector, Ladakh can now boast of its own highly educated elite, including a handful who have studied at foreign universities.

New opportunities in tourism have reduced the importance of the state as an avenue of economic and social advancement. Nevertheless, many Ladakhis still look to the state to provide solutions to problems such as high levels of educated unemployment even though its capacity to provide such solutions is clearly declining.

The struggle for state benefits and other resources underlies the political debate. Buddhist have argued that the Muslim dominance of J&K is the prime reason for Ladakh's alleged neglect by the state government. They have also contended Muslims benefit disproportionately from private sector development in the tourism industry.

The 1989 agitation and the 'social boycott'

Religion and politics clearly have interacted in Ladakh since independence. In the late 1940s and early 1950s Kushok Bakula, an incarnate lama who had been educated in Lhasa, became Ladakh's spokesman in the J&K Legislative Assembly, and subsequently its MP in the Lok Sabha (the national parliament in New Delhi). At the same time, it is fair to say that there was never a single Buddhist view: Bakula's political leadership was challenged at various points in the 1960s and early 1970s, including by rival incarnations based in Likir and Phyang monasteries.

By the late 1970s, Bakula had begun to play a less prominent role in local politics, serving first on a federal government commission for religious minorities and then as the Indian ambassador in Mongolia (where he played a prominent role in the revival of Buddhism after the collapse of communism, another story entirely...).

Meanwhile, in Ladakh a younger generation of Buddhist leaders took up the demand for Union Territory (UT) status. In 1989, a series of scuffles between Buddhist and Muslim youth (in the course of which one prominent Buddhist youth leader reportedly was beaten up), prompted Buddhist-led demonstrations against perceived injustice and highlighting the demand for UT. It was in the course of one of these demonstrations that firing by the security forces caused three deaths.

The Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), which spearheaded the agitation, then imposed a 'social boycott' on all Muslims. The boycott applied both to personal contacts and to commercial relationships. 'Buddhist' establishments (which for these purposes included those owned by Hindus) were identified by shop signs written in the Tibetan script as well as in English. Muslim shop signs were written in Urdu and English.

In employing such tactics, the LBA was explicitly 'instrumentalising' religion. As one leader explained, "We had to use religion to create a sustained movement" (van Beek & Bertelsen 1997:54). The Dalai Lama reportedly wrote to express his concern: his letter was never answered. The LBA enforced its boycott through a set of defined punishments which included

finer for minor offences, and a beating for major ones. Privately, many Buddhists expressed distaste for these strategies: publicly few were prepared to defy the LBA's demands.

The inspiration for the LBA's sectarian approach clearly did not come from a study of the Buddhist scriptures, but rather from an observation of the communal idiom of Indian politics. It was always misleading in that it represented the Buddhist community as far more united than it actually has been (there are significant divisions on both class and regional lines). It also prevented – at least for a time – the possibility of collaboration with local Muslims who might have shared a common interest in the devolution of power from the J&K administration in Srinagar and Jammu.

Hill Council status

The LBA lifted its social boycott in 1993. Two years later, in 1995, the Indian national and state authorities reached what appeared to be a viable compromise by agreeing to set up a Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) centred on Leh District, and in 2003 a similar council was set up in Kargil. Both districts remain part of J&K, but have a degree of internal autonomy in planning and budget administration. Membership of the councils is by election.

The establishment of the hill councils have of course by no means led to an 'end of history' in Ladakh's political evolution. In the period immediately before and after the establishment of the LAHDC, there was something of rapprochement between Buddhist and Muslim leaders, and representatives of both communities sat on the first LAHDC. In the late 1990s tensions flared up again (an aural manifestation of the tensions was a 'loudspeaker competition' between the muezzin call for prayer in Leh's *Jama Masjid* and Buddhist chants broadcast from a Buddhist temple on the opposite side of the street).

In 2002 there appeared to be a merging of interests when representatives of several different political groups combined to form the Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF). However, the LUTF has since fallen apart. The underlying factors appear to include internal tensions within the Buddhist community, as well as between Buddhists and Muslims.

Ecological challenges and the future

Before leaving the theme of political and social change, it is worth briefly reviewing emerging environmental issues in Ladakh.

Ladakh's rapid economic development inevitably has been accompanied by an array of ecological problems. Leh bazaar now suffers from its own variety of air pollution. It is not just that there are more cars than before: the problem is compounded by the fact that the combustion of motor fuel does not work as efficiently at high altitude, and emissions of exhaust fumes are therefore full of unconsumed carbon particles. An extensive concrete 'housing colony' sprawls to the south of the bazaar, and is largely dependent on water supplies brought in by truck. The traditional network of canals and water channels drawing on melted glacier water still survives, but there are increasing concerns about pollution (Tiwari and Gupta 2007).

Ladakh also suffers from the vagaries of climate change: there is more summer rainfall than before, but less snow in winter. The retreat of the glaciers raises questions about the long term viability of water supplies depending on melted glacial water.

4. RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY LADAKH: COMPETING CENTRIFUGAL FORCES?

Environmental problems will affect all communities—Buddhists, Muslims and others alike. Finding solutions will require a unified rather than a sectarian approach and, for the purposes of this conference, one of the key questions is how far religion and religious activism can assist this process. So far the auguries are from promising.

Protecting, restoring or reinventing Buddhism?

These political, social and economic developments inevitably have had an impact on the way that Buddhism has been practised and perceived in Ladakh? But has this impact been positive or negative?

Different observers no doubt would draw up different assessments in their personal balance sheets, but the starting point is typically a perception that traditional Buddhist values are under threat. Indeed one sometimes hears echoes of the 'double minority syndrome' found in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka the Sinhalese may form the majority at the national level but, from a regional perspective, they are no more than a small minority. In Ladakh, the scale of the Buddhist majority is any case narrower than in Sri Lanka. Ladakh borders on Chinese-occupied Tibet, Pakistani-occupied Baltistan, and insurgent-infested Kashmir. Seen from this perspective, how can Buddhists not feel a sense of vulnerability?

Geopolitical uncertainties are compounded by the impact of social change. Young men who might once have become monks now have many other life-opportunities to choose from, and traditional Buddhist festivals now have to compete with the lure of Bollywood. The presence of large numbers of obviously wealthy foreign tourists stimulates dreams of modern gadgets and unlimited wealth. So, the argument goes, the old simple but contented way of life is fast disappearing.

However, there are other factors that should be added to the balance sheet. Tourism may be associated with alien cultural values, but what have the tourists come to see? Ladakh's most distinctive features are not mountains but monasteries. At least some younger Ladakhis may view their cultural heritage with greater respect because of the interest that it generates abroad. Moreover, the tourist dollar and – these days – the tourist rupee has brought a source of income which has been used to restore monasteries and to create new religious works of art constructed in the old style, such as Thikse monastery's Maitreya image which was inaugurated in 1980.

While Ladakh has been cut off from its traditional religious links with Tibet, it has been able to establish new links with Tibetan exile centres of learning in India, for example the reconstituted Tashi Lhunpo monastery in Karnataka. No previous Dalai Lama had ever visited Ladakh: the present Dalai Lama has done so on several occasions, starting in 1977, as have many other senior Tibetan incarnations. In some respects, Ladakh is in closer contact with the 'great tradition' of Tibetan Buddhism than they were in the past.

The Dalai Lama's visits to Ladakh have raised some interesting challenges. Although Tibetan Buddhism does not have a caste system analogous to that found in Hinduism, there is a pronounced social structure with caste-like features in some Buddhist societies. In Ladakh the Mons who traditionally have been responsible for playing music at weddings and similar occasions are considered to be of low status, so that – for example – they are not expected to intermarry with families of higher rank. During one of his earlier visits, the Dalai Lama made a point of personally banging a Mon drum to demonstrate that these 'traditional' social divisions had no place in Buddhism. Similarly, the Dalai Lama did not visit Ladakh during the years that the social boycott of the Muslim community was in force and, as discussed above, let it be

known that he did not approve of it.

Another recent development – starting in the 1930s but more prominent now – has been increased contact with Buddhists belonging to the Theravada traditions. There is now a Mahabodhi Centre in Ladakh. This was founded by a Ladakhi Theravadin monk, a former soldier, and includes a small hospital, a students' hostel and a meditation centre catering primarily for foreign visitors.

Divided by a common language

All indigenous inhabitants of the region speak a variety of Ladakhi yet, at least as far as the written version is concerned, it is even more true of them than of the British and Americans (in Winston Churchill's well-known phrase) that they are "divided by a common language". In this case the sources of division are explicitly religious.

Ladakhi speech differs from the language of Central Tibet as much as English differs from German: when the Dalai Lama comes to Ladakh he needs an interpreter. However, historically the two regions have used the same written language, a variety of classical Tibetan which has played a similar role in Tibet and neighbouring regions to Latin in mediaeval Europe. This language is known as *chos skad*, the 'language of religion', and the religion in question is of course the *Dharma* of Tibetan Buddhism. *Chos skad* is the language of the scriptures, and therefore has acquired a sacred status in and of itself.

Acquiring competence in *chos skad* is a significant challenge not only because of the extent to which it differs from the spoken language but also because of its complicated spelling and grammatical rules, which date back to the 9th century (Zeisler 2005). It is not uncommon to find highly educated Buddhists, who have attained a degree of fluency in reading but who nonetheless express reservations about their own writing skills. Meanwhile, Muslims have tended to write in Urdu (which uses the Persian script). Moravian missionaries working with Ladakhi Christian scholars translated the Bible into a modified version of *chos skad* (Bray 1990). However, most members of the small Ladakhi Christian congregations find it easier to read the Bible in Urdu, Hindi or Ladakhi, having become accustomed to those languages in the Indian school system.

Alongside their *chos-skad* translations, the Moravians experimented with Ladakhi translations of the Gospel of St Mark, thus turning *phal skad*, the colloquial language, into a written language. In the early 1950s, Elijah Tsetan Phuntsog, a highly educated Christian convert, experimented with a modified spelling system more appropriate to the writing of *phal skad* (Bray 1994). However, local Buddhists regarded his proposed reforms as a form of linguistic religious subversion. After a series of demonstrations, Phuntsog was forced to resign from his local government post as *tehsildar*, and his reforms never took root.

More recently, SECMOL (a local NGO) has experimented with written *phal skad* in a bilingual English/Ladakhi magazine *La dvags me long/Mirror of Ladakh*. SECMOL argues that promoting colloquial Ladakhi, written in a style that is easily accessible to all sections of the community, is the best means of promoting literacy in the Tibetan script and—in the long run—of preventing the language dieing out altogether (Zeisler 2006). The senior Buddhist intelligentsia has denounced this initiative, arguing that it will cut off Ladakhis from access to the Buddhist scriptures, and hinder their communications with the wider Tibetan Buddhist world. The fierceness of these arguments and related controversies has forced *Me long* to suspend publication on several occasions.

The Shia and Sunni Muslim communities have for the most part remained neutral in what amounts to an internal Buddhist debate. However, Muhammad Omar Gutu Nadvi the former

Maulvi of the Leh *Jama Masjid* has for several years been working with Konchok Pande, a senior Buddhist monk, to translate extracts from the Quran into Ladakhi *phal skad* (Nadvi 2007). This is a notable ecumenical initiative: Konchok Pande is one of the most skilled *chos skad* grammarians in Ladakh but, for someone of his background, is unusual in favouring the use of the colloquial language. His colleague the *Maulvi* makes a point of emphasising the common interests of humanity arguing that

It is the first and foremost requirement for peaceful co-existence, and for joining hands for noble causes such as serving the motherland and humanity, that the followers of different religions must acquire necessary knowledge about one another (Nadvi 2007: 248).

Acquiring such knowledge requires a shared linguistic understanding. So far, however, this understanding is far from having been achieved.

Islamic orthodoxies

Meanwhile, Ladakhi Muslims are – even more than in the past – looking to external sources of religious inspiration and financial support. There are fewer research studies of Ladakhi Islam than of Buddhism, but Grist (1998, 2005) offers some examples from the Suru valley in Kargil district. She reported that in recent decades there had been an increasing emphasis on more ‘orthodox’ practice among Shia clerics in the Suru valley (Kargil district), and she cited as an example their attempts to discourage the playing of musical instruments at weddings and other celebrations. Similarly, polo which had earlier been popular in the region, was no longer played, and most Muslims no longer drink alcohol.

Part of the background to this heightened orthodoxy has been increased contact with the main centres of Shia learning in Iran and Iraq. According to Grist, the banning of practices considered contrary to Islam increased after 1974 when foreign Shia clerics were expelled from Iraq, and this meant that large numbers of Iraqi-trained religious specialists were forced to return to their homelands. Despite this expulsion, local Shia leaders have continued to travel to Iran and Iraq for religious training. In the Kargil bazaar it is common to see shops and tea-houses named after Najaf, the Iraqi Shia religious centre.

A taste for music, polo and indeed alcohol consumption at festival times has in the past been part of the common cultural heritage of both Muslims and Buddhists. Now this is no longer so.

Kuksho: a paradigm of religious disharmony?

The pressures of the two competing religious orthodoxies—Buddhist and Muslim—are exemplified by the recent history of Kuksho, a remote village 143km east of Leh. Kuksho is in the Purig region centring on Kargil which is now mainly Muslim but has substantial Buddhist minorities, particularly in the east of the district. Even today there are many villages with mixed Muslim and Buddhist populations, and among them Kuksho has often been spoken of as a model of inter-religious harmony.

In a recent article, the Ladakhi scholar Abdul Ghani Sheikh (2007) recalled his first visit to Kuksho in 1967, and discussed the changes that have taken place since then. In 1967 there were 45 households in the village. Of these, seven families were Buddhist; one was Muslim; and the remaining 37 households practised a mixed religion. As Ghani Sheikh recalls:

Most of the men of the 37 families had combined Buddhist and Muslim names, such as Rahim Tsering, Ali Tashi and Namgyal Musa. The eldest brother of the family received a Muslim name, but almost all the women had Buddhist names. In the wake of a serious illness

of a child, on the advice of a priest, the parents would change the name of the child from a Buddhist to a Muslim one and vice versa... Formerly, according to hearsay, in a mixed family household, meat was prepared in the same pot and an identification mark was put on the *halal* meat for the Muslims.

Ghani Sheikh subsequently praised Kuksho's spirit of inter-religious co-operation first in an article and then in a novel. However, the villagers did not welcome these references. A Kuksho man living in Leh complained that he had been ridiculed by his colleagues, and threatened Ghani Sheikh with a court case. The story of the last 40 years—as also reflected in reports by Shakspe (1995) and Aggarwal (2004) is one of increased contact with the outside world, and increased polarisation at the local level.

There are now 24 Buddhist families and 20 Muslim families. An Imam trained in Iraq leads the Muslim community while a Buddhist monk visits from outside. Members of the two communities no longer take part in each other's festivals as in the past, and nor do they contribute to funds for each other's religious buildings. About half of the population no longer lives permanently in the village having migrated to Leh and other regions in search of work. Ghani Sheikh concludes his article by lamenting that the tragedy that "the extraordinary traditional harmony between the Muslims and the Buddhists of Kuksho is being eroded", a situation that is naturally "painful to well-wishers of this unique village."

The Kuksho story highlights several themes of Ladakh's recent history. In the past the village was isolated and, no doubt, relatively impoverished. However, within recent memory, there was a high degree of cooperation between the followers of the two religions. More recently, there have been new opportunities for economic advancement. However, there has also been a greater emphasis on formal adherence to 'pure' religious practices and this pulled the two communities apart.

As recounted by Ghani Sheikh the Kuksho story has a fable-like quality, and closer analysis would no draw out greater complexities, but the trends that he describes ring true, and arguably serve as a kind of paradigm of recent developments in Ladakh.

Consulting the 'oracle': a sign of local stress?

Ladakhi 'oracles' – locally known as *lha mo* (female) and *lha pa* (male) have long been part of the fabric of local society. The oracles believe that they are possessed by local spirits (*lha*) who can then use their supernatural powers to heal the sick or to reveal the future.

Notwithstanding recent trends, here has been an ecumenical aspect to oracle practice in that while the majority of people consulting them are Buddhists, they also have a significant number of Muslim clients. There have even been cases of *lha* possessing Muslims, who then have to consult a Buddhist lama for guidance on how to deal with the phenomenon.

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of *lha mos* and *lha pas* and Kressing (2003), drawing on earlier work by Kuhn (1988), Day (1989, 1990) Schenk (1993, 1994) and others, argues that this proliferation is a sign of social stress. One popular explanation for the increase is that the *lha* (deities) from Tibet no longer have access to human oracles in their original homeland, and have therefore moved to Ladakh.

At the same time, both local sources and external analysts such as Kressing himself argue that people are more likely to turn to oracles at a time of disorienting social change. For example, Kressing (2003:13) cites a monk from Spituk monastery who says that people consult oracles because they are more likely to be "psychologically down", while an *am chi* (a practitioner of Tibetan medicine) suggested that there was an "epidemic" of emotional

disturbances.

The oracles may be able to provide answers to personal problems, but they are unlikely to be able to offer much guidance on the wider political and social problems now confronting Ladakh.

The invented traditions of Indian nationhood

At the other end of the social spectrum Indian government authorities and politicians are trying to promote a sense of national unity, and some recent initiatives have had a quasi-religious flavour.

The Sindhu Darshan festival is notable example of a contemporary 'invented tradition' glorifying Indian national unity. 'Sindhu' is the Sanskrit name for the river Indus, which rises in Tibet and flows through Ladakh before entering Pakistan-controlled territory in Baltistan and then turning south to Punjab and Sind. The first Sindhu Darshan ceremony took place in 1997 at the initiative of L.K. Advani, a senior leader of the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who is himself of Sindhi origin and therefore felt a personal affinity with the Indus, but had only recently realised that a section of the river still flowed through Indian territory. The ceremony involved a quasi-religious ceremony at a specially erected *ghat* on the banks of the Indus, and was supposedly conceived as a celebration of Indian national unity.

The prominence of the Sindhu Darshan festival has declined since the BJP lost power at the national level in 2004, but the Indian government continues to promote it as an annual tourist attraction. The official website summarises the purposes of the festival as follows:

Sindhu is divine. In the beginning was the word. The first recorded word was the Veda. The earliest mention of this great river is in the Vedas. The Sindhu -- the cradle of Indian civilization -- finds its most dramatic description in the Rig Veda (c. 1500 BC)....

The "Sindhu Darshan" or Sindhu festival aims at projecting the Indus as a symbol of India's unity and communal harmony. Whilst promoting tourism to this area, this festivals is also a symbolic salute to the brave soldiers of India.

Being a truly National Integration Programme, the reception is jointly conducted by the Ladakh Buddhist Association, Shia majlis, Sunni Anjuman, Christian Moravian Church, Hindu Trust and Sikh Gurudwara Prabhandak Committee.....³

Local Buddhists view the quasi-Hindu symbolism of the festival with a degree of scepticism, and even anxiety because it appears to imply an attempt to incorporate Ladakh and Ladakhi Buddhism into a wider Hindu agenda (van Beek 2004). Ladakhis are pragmatic enough to welcome the tourist income from *tamashas* such as the Sindhu Darshan, but it is doubtful whether many of them take the festival's claim to serve as a symbol of national and religious unity at face value.

5. CONFLICT OR COLLABORATION?

Reviewing the broad span of Ladakhi history, it is clear that—echoing the words of the conference 'manifesto'—there have been many 'layers of religious involvement'. In the Ladakhi kingdom, religion provided a source of legitimacy for the Ladakhi monarchy. Rival Buddhist armies fought one another; the Fifth Dalai Lama invoked magic powers—or possibly

³ http://www.tourisminindia.com/fest_prog/sindhudarshan.htm

bribery—against his Mughal opponents; no doubt armed forces on all sides called on divine or spiritual assistance to advance their endeavours.

More recently, religion has played a variety of roles in Ladakh. In an echo of the communal political tactics employed elsewhere in India, Ladakhi Buddhist politicians have used religion to mobilise their supporters and, during the social boycott of the 1990s, defined their Muslim opponents by their religious affiliation rather than social status or political views. In some respects, the fact that both Buddhists and Muslims belong to ‘global’ traditions, and therefore look outside Ladakh for their ultimate sources, of inspiration means that religion has played a ‘centrifugal’ role, pulling their adherents apart rather than bringing them together. The *smorgasbord* approach to religious symbolism adopted by the inventors of the Sindhu Darshan festival can hardly be taken as a serious attempt at ecumenical engagement. All in all, it is difficult to contest the view that religion has more often played a divisive than a unifying role in contemporary Ladakh, and that in doing so it has contributed to social tensions—and ultimately to conflict—rather than alleviating it.

And yet, one is reluctant to conclude on quite such a depressing note. As the conference notes also emphasise, the scriptural traditions of all the major faiths underline the importance of peacefulness rather than conflict. In Ladakh’s case—and perhaps in India a whole—the fact that so many varieties of religious faith are represented mean that it is hard for any single manifestation or manipulation of religion to dominate indefinitely.

Despite the strains of recent years, most Ladakhis still hold to the ideal of inter-religious, inter-communal harmony. In the light of recent history one may question whether the past was quite as harmonious as it is represented in the popular imagination. Nevertheless, the *ideal*—regardless of the historical reality—still persists.

Finding solutions to the problems such as the environmental challenges that Ladakh now faces will require technical expertise, a high degree of diplomatic skill and local engagement. It is a commonplace to suggest that ‘ultimately all politics is local’: one can perhaps add that ultimately all religious practice is local as well. Ladakh—and the world—needs religious leaders who can ‘instrumentalise’ their own traditions for local peacebuilding rather than conflict.

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